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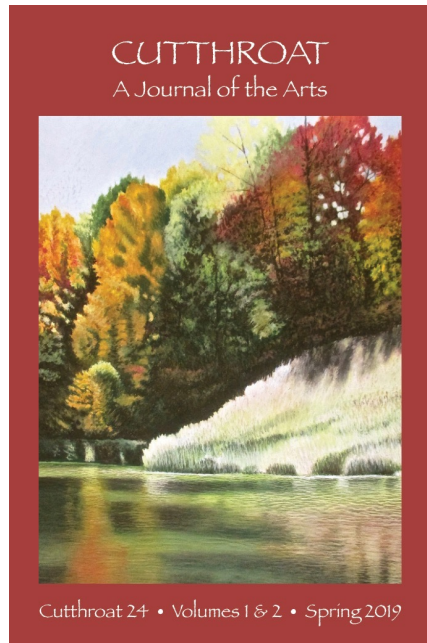
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In Memoriam: Red Bird, Jane Mead and Penelope Niven

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**2020 JOY HARJO POETRY PRIZE  
BARRY LOPEZ CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE  
RICK DEMARINIS SHORT STORY PRIZE  
\$1200 1<sup>st</sup> PRIZE, \$250 2<sup>nd</sup> PRIZE, Honorable Mention**

**FINAL JUDGES**

**Kimberley Blaeser, Poetry  
Amina Gautier, Short Story  
Fenton Johnson, Nonfiction**

GUIDELINES: Go to [www.cutthroatmag.com](http://www.cutthroatmag.com) and submit poems and stories through our online submission manager. Submit up to 3 poems (100 line limit/one poem per page) or one short story or creative nonfiction piece (5000 word limit/double s spaced) in 12 point font. NO AUTHOR NAME ALLOWED ON ANY MS. There is a \$20 nonrefundable entry fee per submission. READING PERIOD: August 1, 2020- November 15, 2020. UNPUBLISHED WORK ONLY! No work that has already won a prize is eligible. No former CUTTHROAT prize-winning author may enter the contest he/or she has previously won. Enter as often as you wish in any genre. Multiple submissions okay, but we must be informed immediately of acceptances elsewhere. Finalists considered for publication. Winners published in CUTTHROAT and announced on our website, in POETS & WRITERS, winningwriters, newpages, etc. No staff relatives or staff members of CUTTHROAT nor close friends, relatives or students of judges are eligible to enter our contests. See [www.cutthroatmag.com](http://www.cutthroatmag.com) or call 970-903-7914 for more information. WE HIGHLY RECOMMEND READING A COPY OF CUTTHROAT BEFORE ENTERING OUR CONTESTS.

# **CONGRATULATIONS TO THE WINNERS OF OUR 2019 WRITING CONTESTS!**

## **FIRST PRIZES**

“Myths We Tell” by M Soledad Caballero of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Joy Harjo Poetry Prize chosen by Carolyn Forché.

“Clave” by Amina Gautier of Miami, Florida Rick DeMarinis Short Story Prize chosen by Mona Susan Power.

“Solve For Ex” by Christiana Louisa Langenberg of Ames, Iowa, Barry Lopez Nonfiction Prize chosen by Heid E. Erdrich

## **SECOND PRIZES**

“On Becoming an Angel,” Jamie Ross of Taos, New Mexico, Joy Harjo Poetry Prize chosen by Carolyn Forché.

“The Second First Time” by Paula Brancato of Brooklyn, New York, Rick DeMarinis Short Story Prize chosen by Mona Susan Power.

“A Widow’s Guide To OKCUPID” by Caroline Goodwin of San Francisco Bay Area, California, Barry Lopez Nonfiction Prize chosen by Heid E. Erdrich

## **HONORABLE MENTIONS**

“Tongued,” Sarah Browning of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Joy Harjo Poetry Prize chosen by Carolyn Forché.

“Bull” by sid sibo of Western Slope, Wyoming, Rick DeMarinis Short Story Prize by Mona Susan Power

“Poppy” by Kyle Ingrid Johnson of Dorchester, Mass., Barry Lopez Nonfiction Prize chosen by Heid E. Erdrich

## FINALISTS 2019 Joy Harjo Poetry Prize

“Cotton Blood” by J. Drew Lanham  
“Singing Hearts” by Manuel Calvillo de la Garza  
“Beauty Lake on the Beartooth Plateau” by Tami Haaland  
“On Patriotism” by Amber Albritton-Reiman  
“Icarus y Ysidro” by Kevin Ducey  
“Between God and Mama” by Ashley Mallick  
“Meditation on Occupation” by Melanie Tafejian  
“On Cue” by Margo Berdeshevsky  
“Loon Song” by Barbara Tran  
“The Immigrant” by Heather Quinn  
“Dr Lightfoot’s Law Of Dynamic Overlap/Ivy Hill Plantation, 1853/Nancy’s Sililoquy” by Mara Adamitz Scrupe  
“Preemie” by Barb Reynolds  
“At The Organ” by Meghan Purvis  
“Oppenheimer on Corsica” by John Blair  
“Sumidero” by Angela Windsor  
*“schadenfreude: for women on the journey—whereever you are”*  
“Parched” by Suzanne Langlois  
“A Love Poem for Cliches” by Laura Lee Beasley  
“Where Pelicans Gather” by Katharyn Howd Machan  
“Perspective” by Ingrid Wendt  
“When I Think of American” by Maria Guzman  
“Revenge of the Hummers” by Carol Flake Chapman  
“Bird Watching in the Radiology Unit of Permuter Cancer Center” by Michele Karas

## FINALISTS 2019 RICK DEMARINIS SHORT STORY PRIZE

“Staying After” by Harry Bauld  
“It’s Called Meat” by Marie Nardi  
“We Are the Bachelorettes and We Insist” by Susan Finch  
“I am Pretty. I am Loved.” by Ann Stoney  
“The Vanishing Twin” by Suzanne Roberts  
“The Ways of Love” by Mary Wysong-Haeri  
“Plenty of Fish in the Sea” by Lenore Hart  
“The Locomotive in Winter” by Mark James Montgomery  
“That Green Green Grass” by Maureen McCoy  
“The Sun She Dies For The Moon” by Larry Malchow  
“When T.V. Was Live and Kicking” by Paul Lubenkov  
“Naming Ceremony” by Susan Power  
“Shelter” by Constance Studer  
“Out Black” by Marie Coleman  
“Tides by” Gerry Wilson  
“Driftwood” by Ethan Brightbill



“Zoe and the Pipe Organ Prodigy” by Dinah Cox  
“Hunger” by Todd Kreisman

## FINALISTS 2019 BARRY LOPEZ NONFICTION PRIZE

Rootline by Jill McCabe Johnson  
A Widow’s Guide to OKCupid by Caroline Goodwin 2nd Place  
The Sweet Spot by N.R. Robinson  
Inside Out by Allison Palmer  
Poppy by Kyle Ingrid Johnson Honorable Mention  
Solve For Ex by Christiana Louisa Langenberg First Place  
Sorry by Joshua Levy  
Casi Loco by Anita Cabrera  
The Last Demonstration by Kevin Sampson  
Finding Frances by Megan Williams

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**We also thank our subscribers and readers around the world.**

## **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

Cutthroat expresses its support for Black Lives Matter. We have long been vocal in our opposition to racism in any form. We are appalled by systemic racism in our nation. We condemn continued police brutality and the repeated murders of black men and women by police officers. We decry the use of U.S. troops and special forces against peaceful protesters as well as the arrest and detention without cause of peaceful protesters. In order to more fully explore contemporary social issues in our country, we will devote Cutthroat 26 to poetry and prose that deals with race, gender, culture and identity in America. The reading period for this issue is from August 1st until October 1st, 2020. Please go to our website, [www.cutthroatmag.com](http://www.cutthroatmag.com) to submit relevant poetry and prose through Submittable.

*Pamela Uschuk*, Editor-In-Chief

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## Revulsion Revolt by Patricia Spears Jones



Macon Street, Brooklyn 2020

When I returned to Brooklyn, the sun was bright, my apartment cleaned but utterly rearranged. It was jarring, disturbing, it felt like a violation. The kind person who stayed in my space for a couple of months had tried to make the space her own and that makes sense but she failed to put things back. And all of this was while dealing with the extreme lock down in New York City.

The virus took a huge toll on the city and esp. Central Brooklyn. At least two people in the neighborhood that I know (knew) were taken by the virus. Others buried many more. All that grief, sadness during lockdown with few ways to physically connect have left people prepared to greet this extraordinary spring after a winter when the president and his advisors sent conflicting and often useless messages, but the main one was WE WILL NOT TAKE CARE OF YOU. This to the now 100,000 plus citizens who have buried their loved ones. People were prepared to walk into the sunlight, greet the spring. Little did we know what this spring would bring.

Six years ago, Eric Garner was killed by the police who were using an illegal choke hold in broad daylight. A week or so ago, George Floyd was killed by the police who were using an unsanctioned choke hold. Both men said as they were dying "I can't breathe". That is an awful symmetry.

Helicopters are in the air over my neighborhood on this hot June Day. At 2 p.m. the Memorial for George Floyd will take place. Floyd's murder on top of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor are what can only be seen as the last straw. Thousands upon thousands of American citizens are taken to the streets from tiny towns to Minneapolis where Floyd's last breath was taken. Thousands upon thousands of citizens are expressing intense REVULSION towards the president and his henchmen; towards the widespread militarization of policing from small towns to major urban centers; thousands upon thousands of Americans of all shapes, sizes, abilities, sexualities, gender identities, ethnicities, and races have expressed solidarity with

Black Americans who have daily met with contempt and bias from police and who have born the deadly brunt of COVID-19. This righteous revolt show that Americans are ready to change the narrative.

What is next is going to ask of us extraordinary work. America has 400 years of creating systems of policing and oppressing people of African descent. From enslavement; the Black Codes; Jim Crow; discrimination and violence (night riders, lynching, etc,) Black Americans have fought to break down and demolish institutionalized racism, but we can't do it alone. Institutionalized racism serves White people and their allies with social, economic and cultural privilege(s). The refutation of those privileges so that a more just , generous and caring society may truly develop is going to be hard for many to deal with. It will take generations. But it has started.

My dear friend, Soraya Shalforoosh, a terrific poet from posted a poem by her son Dylan who is 11. Dylan is Persian, Algerian, and Polish-American is still in elementary school and he is part of a generation who is anti-racist. The children truly are beginning to perform that new world I and so many others have fought for and still seek. Revulsion towards those who oppress, withhold justice and murder is so deeply felt. This revolt may lead a place of societal transformation., at least we can continue to push push push for that change. As Charlie Parker played when I was a child: **NOW IS THE TIME**

## GEORGE FLOYD

### Dylan Shalforoosh

When I first saw the video on tktok  
I was scared but  
I watched it again  
I knew the video was real  
But I felt so sad and also at the same time  
I wanted to punch that cop  
I sat with that feeling  
Why is he racist?  
Why did it happen?  
Did George do something wrong?  
Or no?  
I skipped videos and saw people being peppersprayed  
“ I can't breathe”  
That night i figured out how to change my profile to the Black Lives Matter fist  
I was also thinking to myself if I was black, I could be next.  
That made me worried for other people, especially my friends. who are black  
I was worried for my cousin who is black .



**“Rain for Anna Yablonskaya,” Acrylic on canvas**

**Lynn Watt**



# POETRY

# 2019 JOY HARJO PRIZE

## MYTHS WE TELL

M Soledad Caballero

### *Act I.*

On the plane, I cried, little understanding my mother's tears, her exile,  
the years she would live inside herself, her heart eaten by time, battle

weary from the harsh, grasping noise of prairie ghosts and English.  
I think of her now as I walk across airports, watching other mothers

the way they cradle a daughter on hips, whisper to a boy running down  
the hallway to be careful with his body. They are more than gods.

Their bodies soft, meaty, aching from years of love and silence. Wanderers  
lost in the middle of the story, in the middle of a wish, like the sun just

as it plunges into water, strange and silent. My mother was like them.  
For thirty-five years she held our lives in her body, in her hands, in the back

of her throat, a mermaid with green eyes and a green voice trying to escape  
from the daily planet of my father's rage, his dark disappointments.

My mother lived in broken English, every day whispering grey prayers.  
Every day she wished for the land of snow and love to free her.

### *Act II.*

Every day, my mother wished for the land of snow and love to free her.  
She landed in Oklahoma and was a lost queen in a grey castle, stuck

inside cement and time, waiting for her life to become hers, wishing  
for water and sand and sun to carry her across into the warmth of any

miracle, or to give her enough love to make more of the brittleness  
of daily things. She trudged across those years with no English in her

mouth, begging to the gods. She walked across the hard, teeming snow,  
thin and sleep deprived. She lived in a world of dragon oil machines

and brown cattle. She needed the Andes to anchor her, bring her to life.  
In the prairie lands there were no peaks, no mountains, no jagged, bright

wondrous rock to guide a lost pilgrim, an exile flung across the globe.  
In the grassland there were only lost gales and souls, ones she had never

heard about. She had to make her own myths. My mother spent the first  
decade trying to unlearn, trying to forget the heartbreak of the plane ride.

*Act III.*

My mother made her own myths, tried to unlearn the heartbreak of the plane ride.  
That plane still haunts her now, forty years later. On the phone she asks, did we

do the right thing? Que piensas hija. Estás perdida? How to answer her, how  
to say, yes, I am lost, but I am not lonely. Every week she watches the news

about children in the camps, feels the way that Spanish is still exiled from  
her mouth. She wonders, perdí la cordillera, perdí mi país por esto?

I think about the idea of losing a country, isn't that what Bishop said, she  
lost a continent once. But I know for my mother this is not metaphor.

It is her body suspended for decades in a language somewhere between  
the wail of home and death lingering at night on the horizon. It is the sun

plunging into the widow lines of the dark. For my mother, what does it mean  
to lose a country, when English is now the blood language she dreams in,

and the Andes are the shadows of other dreams. And here, in this massive land  
of ash, burnt bodies and brittle wings, she still cannot find herself on any map.

# JOY HARJO POETRY PRIZE, 2ND PLACE

## ON BECOMING AN ANGEL

Jamie Ross

*—It's hard to see her photos as self-portraits, though  
they are...in most she's on the verge of vanishing.  
— London Telegraph*

I didn't marry Francesca Woodman. Not  
that I didn't dream it. And don't blame *her*.

I was long out of the picture  
the day she leapt  
from the 38<sup>th</sup> floor. She was in New York. A loft.

I was in Santa Fe. A mental ward.  
I'd landed in a bed. She didn't.

She'd soon be famous. I wasn't even close.  
Her photographs inspire a world of upcoming artists.

But Francesca came down.

Down on the street. As flat as an albumen print,  
spread like silver nitrate  
on a coalescent film.

If you can let the shutter close on West 17<sup>th</sup>,  
can let the scene fade  
from its flashbulbs and reporters, reviews

and galleries, retrospectives to follow, the movies  
that will play on Netflix for decades to come

you can move back—  
to Italy, to Florence, six years before;  
the pizzas they sold  
in the lobby of the opera, between acts  
of Verdi, or this day, Puccini—

hardly pizza, just a small, oven-hot crust

drizzled in olive oil, a slice  
of thin salami in the center, a dozen  
white slivers of pecorino cheese  
set around it like the rays of a star:

This was Francesca. This was me.  
She, headed for design school, Rhode Island,  
her format laid out before her.

And I, heading west, to uncharted desert,  
my art career already in shreds.

Here, between the last act of Turandot  
and the operas to come. We took a taxi.  
A cheap bottle of Valpolicella. A blanket  
and a pizza.  
Up the funicular of cobble and stone walls

beyond Fiesole. Until we found a clearing, larks  
and wild artichoke, under Orion. And flew.  
Across the city. Palazzos, centaurs, madonnas  
and the Arno laid out below.

If a stoplight never changes,  
if you're hardly twenty-three  
but already have 1000 photographs  
so extraordinary  
no one can perceive or show them

who sees you? If you live on a nameless mesa  
with impassible roads, no phone,  
who hears you when you fall? Who cares

if you fail? Or make it? Make anything  
at all? What does it mean to anyone

when ravens dance outside your window  
back and forth in ethereal light  
leaping like Nureyev, Fonteyn, jet black  
on new-fallen snow—

until you're out of the picture

Until you leave an opera house  
    singing the Toreador song, singing  
    *Nessun Dorma*, singing *Brindisi* and *Eres Tu*  
    with the echo and rise  
of the taxi, the bells of the Duomo,  
  
singing Bonnie Raitt and *Someday Soon*,  
    *Baby, You Can Drive My Car*  
  
to share a small pizza, a bottle of red wine,  
  
    take off your cloak  
in a grove of half-stripped cork and crooked oak,  
    spread your arms  
                                    and disappear—  
  
before Rhode Island. Before sagebrush and yucca. Before  
  
    a female figure begins to blur, again and again  
    within her camera, skims the aperture,  
splits from her Yashica  
  
    into whale bream, swan drift, a waltz,  
a derelict wall, white bowl of eels, a nylon breeze,  
  
water over bath tile, a loose coil of string;  
    two hands caressing an other so remote  
    you can't define its shape. A man  
  
cracked in a mirror, map across his knees,  
                                    peeling a lemon,  
  
    tracing the Arno. A line of winding light  
below a rocky overlook, grapevines and oak leaves,  
    fennel and phlox—  
                                    where snow  
  
    begins to fall, even now, feathering  
    into that flowing ribbon, that swirl of light  
  
as it pours through the arches of the Ponte Vecchio,  
    past the Uffizi, Michelangelo's young David,  
    his final Pietà—  
                                    the wet shine

of a young woman's hair  
swept up behind her ears  
then spilling like a fountain  
over her breasts, the curve of her back,  
her wings—  
wide, luminous, open  
over yours.

# JOY HARJO POETRY PRIZE HONORABLE MENTION

## TONGUED

Sarah Browning

*a tongue knows  
nothing about territory*  
- Terrance Hayes

sits restlessly in our mouths  
itching to be untethered  
to lick armpit and groin,

testicles, calf and elbow – tongue  
to flesh and hair, whorl of ear  
tender belly button – perfect

doorway for the tongue,  
begging for the tongue –  
nose, at the meeting of

eyebrows, neglected spot  
behind each ear  
lips are known puppies

of eager, tumbling over  
the corpus of the beloved,  
but tongue is explorer, map

of the imagination –  
try licking hip, inner thigh,  
ankle, butt cheek, upper

arm, belly – each spot  
that shames, whatever  
we most deride

lay the tongue along  
that despised meridian  
lick cellulite and scar,

stretch mark and pucker  
the tongue writes its own  
constitution right here in our beds





**“Guanajuato,” Wood and Acrylic**

**Albert Kogel**



Janice Gould (1949-2019), photo by Margaret Randall

Poet Janice Gould's tribal affiliation is Concow (Koyangk'auwi). She attended the University of California, earning a BA in Linguistics and a Master's in English, and later, from the University of New Mexico, a Ph.D in English. A second Master's degree (in Library Science) was earned at the University of Arizona. From 2014-2016, Gould served as the Pike's Peak Poet Laureate, and was recognized by the city of Colorado Springs for her contribution to poetry with a "Spirit of the Springs" award. Her poetry garnered awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Astraea Foundation. Her book of poetry, *Doubters and Dreamers*, was a finalist for the Colorado Book and the Milton Kessler Book Awards. Her chapbook, *The Force of Gratitude* was a finalist in the Charlotte Mew Poetry Chapbook contest. Gould also authored *Earthquake Weather*, *Beneath My Heart*, and *Alphabet*, and she co-edited a volume of essays on American Indian poetry, *Speak to Me Words*. She was an Associate Professor in the Women's and Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, where she taught Native American Studies. Her final book of poetry, *Seed*, was published by Headmistress Press in 2019, shortly before her death.

## THREE POEMS BY JANICE GOULD IN MEMORIAM

### Chimayó

Much is closed down in this town,  
not just boarded up, but  
crumbling to dust—houses,  
stores, sheds, barns—  
going back to sand,  
pink and pale brown,  
the color of my skin.  
Massive cottonwoods  
abound, thick-barked,  
their grey limbs askew,  
leafy greenness turning yellow  
in the wind. Still the apples ripen,  
crisp and red, and a burro brays  
in pasturage beneath the trees.  
September days are mild  
now the sun is moving south,  
its fierce persistence dimmed.  
Down the road another mile  
the little sanctuary stands  
where believers come  
for a cup of holy dirt  
one can dig with a spoon  
from the loamy floor,  
a soil that heals, miraculous  
as light. I realize now  
that I'm no good  
without my glass of wine  
and bit of bread at night,  
the voice of my beloved  
in my ear, telling me  
her day—tasks completed, those  
left to do, thoughts  
that got away, plans  
gone astray. What comfort  
I find when I contemplate my friend.  
I'm attached. I loathe

to turn my back  
on this beautiful earth,  
this ball of matter,  
hard-packed and continuously  
breaking down. I want  
to sit here on the patio  
this breezy day and sing  
praise for all I love—here  
in this overgrown garden  
where cherry boughs welcome  
small birds, below the hill  
where horses stamp the clay  
and water churns along  
the acequia's rough  
trough. Today I can accept  
how winter comes  
with mist and snow and fog.

## St. Faith

Janice Gould

There's another pilgrim on the road,  
shuffling through the gravel,  
brushing up against the sunflowers,  
walking stick or crutch in hand,  
making his way to Our Lady  
with her blue, star-filled cape,  
the spikes of her corona  
wavering in warm air  
around her dark head  
bent in fastidious prayer.  
The pilgrim is about to ask  
permission, for he needs  
the aid of that small boy  
whom he knows was once himself  
in guaraches and a floppy hat,  
still innocent and helpful,  
wandering the alleys of his town  
before the brutal world  
broke in and made him—  
in his words—*very bad*.  
Perhaps the solicitous mom  
will intercede. And so we find him  
on the road. Unlike the fancy folk,  
he's come adorned with faith,  
or at least with hope,  
t-shirt torn, pants bagging  
at the knees. He comes  
unshaven, or unshorn,  
headband shadowed with sweat,  
mornings or afternoons,  
when the creased and crenellated  
cliffs around here glow  
with a kind of radiance,  
and heavy trees seem arched  
in sympathy, their crown of leaves  
turned gold from shortened days  
and colder nights. And now  
the pilgrim stops to ask the way,  
then stumbles on with hot

and swollen feet. And now  
the purple clouds of sunset  
spread their wings and fly,  
besotted angels, across the pale  
evening sky, heading south,  
before sharply turning east  
toward Tsi Mayoh.

## Looking

Janice Gould

If I look with the corners  
of my eyes to that place  
where poetry begins,  
words may appear, despite  
the ringing in my ears  
and raging in my mind,  
the imperious demands  
of what they call the future,  
or furious denunciations  
of self. Looking  
is the beginning  
of seeing, the risk one takes  
in discerning what is there:  
rattlesnake coiled  
by the roadside, history  
buried under abandoned  
foundations, the stain of blood  
on quilts and blankets.  
If I look with the right eye,  
I see my own intention  
extending into the distance  
past the place where  
the earth curves  
into a light blue sky.  
If I look with the left eye,  
I settle into my own breath,  
feel the beat of an invisible heart,  
the tremor of soul fastened  
to the integuments of my body.  
If I look beyond  
the corners of knowing,  
I can see the shimmer  
of a different light,  
illuminating what could be  
truth, small truths—  
ocean-washed agates  
along the north coast,  
spider's web bedecked  
with spatters of dew,  
even a discarded cat's claw,  
shining on the hardwood floor.





**"Mapping," collage/encaustic**

**Lynn Watt**



# HOMELAND

Bella Alvarez

The Colombian word for faggot

*marica*

sits too pretty between my teeth,

but slut

*zurrón*

slips slow and easy past my lips.

Here we drink *aguardiente*,

slice tongues free from unforgiving mouths.

One aluminum boat-tail twists us into trenches for fifty years —

*guerilleras* tucking bullets under breasts, ribs folding towards crystalline dust —

and my grandfather remembers mountains pulling airplanes into

wallowing cave-mouths, pupils collapsing like clean silence.

In Colombia we call pretty girls *monas* —

whities.

To make cocaine we burn fingers, shed skin, coax powder from gasoline.

My uncle died afraid of the color green: he saw shadow-men lurking in syringes,

breath heavy with copper.

Here we swallow emeralds, chew bitter leaves.

The Colombian word for son-of-a-bitch

*hijueputa*

curls down spines like shrapnel.

# GLACIER PARK RECEDING IN MY REARVIEW MIRROR

(*Mergus merganser*)

Marc Beaudin

Ghost moon haunts a midday sky  
as we hike through firework explosions  
of beargrass in riotous bloom

I stagger along on four legs,  
skeletal skewers of hiking poles  
clacking amid the rocks, like

some half-formed insect with  
more eyes than I ever wanted

Our climb began near dawn  
after two days gathering huckleberries & paddling  
past a family of mergansers looking

like they just got out of bed  
without combing their hair  
as we allow clock-time to fade away

You should always climb a mountain  
at its pace rather than that of the city

After climbing 5000 feet, we will stand  
breathless, wide-eyed, on the expanse  
of Sperry Glacier or rather

what's left of it as the glaciers  
of Glacier are receding like the light  
in the eyes of every mountain goat we pass

the century-old chalet where we slept  
will be consumed by wildfire  
just weeks later, the glaciers

will be completely gone in 15 years  
& we'll have to rename this place

We-Could-Have-Acted National Park

## PRIEST, THE PIT BULL

Tara Betts

Priest, the pit bull, greeted me the first day  
he moved into my building. His tan fur shining  
as he wiggled. At least three quarters of his body  
wagged when I patted his head and stroked  
his sinewed back. His mouth, open and panting,  
made up at least half of his face, full of teeth,  
but gently smiling.

I called his name, shouted to him  
and the other neighbors when I heard his  
ticking claws on hallway tiles. I'd laugh about  
Ron O'Neal playing his namesake in *Superfly*.

He'd quietly trot over to me and let me pet him.  
He never needed a leash. Nothing felt like fear  
gnashing its teeth into the back of my hand.

I grew up with dogs who never clamped without letting  
go, but I make it a habit to return kindness to other living  
beings, even when the world marks them as dangerous.

## AFTERMATH

Gaylord Brewer

Rise, poor Lazarus. How long do you  
intend to bear your hard, disheveled bed,  
the wind's sighs of disappointment?

You've arrived again, where you swore  
never to return. Get on your feet.  
Take a token stare in the mirror, or not.

The door rumbles at your approach.  
But no one lurks beneath the stair  
with stones and accusations. The red brush

still blocks your passage in its profusion,  
still maddens bird and wasp  
that couldn't care less of purported sin.

See, no hangman hovers in the kitchen  
with a black hood to smother you,  
just coffee already brewed, a guileless

hello, workers out in the sun  
busy at their hammering. Perhaps  
a young woman smiles from the hallway,

says she approves of your silly shirt.  
Or the host appears, inquires without  
suspicion of your day's agenda. That simply,

the rickety wheel of consequence creaks on,  
greater than one soul's foolishness.  
You've risen again from the dead,

learned again the world's indifference  
is no different from its forgiveness.  
That this is a continual blessing.

## LET'S LOOK

Marina Chirkova

Let's look at the river in January --  
at the back of the gray spiky dragon,  
scaly, big, and sleepy,  
scalded by the cold.  
Backwaters are smoothed with the sandpaper of snow.  
There are no naked people of the shore  
or motorboats.  
The weather-beaten coma  
of coinciding lips  
is like a broken rib...  
Pompons of swift bullfinches...  
The dragon eavesdrops on the iced up words,  
without opening his sunny eye,  
or stirring his tail of blizzard.  
Like you, like me, he's hidden the summer day  
deep under the surface  
where it's faintingly meek,  
where lays in wrinkles the silky band of blood  
and the sunken boat of those  
who have drowned in their own breath...  
He is a wily one. We behold the islands,  
tucking hands into each other's sleeves.

(translated by Sergey Gerasimov from Russian)

# WAVEFORMS

Robin Cook

When I was just a little one  
before I was even zero still hanging suspended  
happy in my sloe-sighted stir of alchemical torments  
odd one didn't ask questions. The why was self-explanatory.  
I didn't require an x in that box.  
I was just content  
to develop.  
But I must  
have craved.  
Some.  
Things.  
The way all organisms do  
a craving yes, no, a requiring  
no, no, no, **no**,  
a yearning hungering hankering then  
for nourishment light warmth  
a catalyst fetish for  
the stuff that makes any creature grow  
healthy and strong and  
(non)newfangled.  
Normal.

I know I know no words  
certainly none like those I just...  
nothing remotely so cumbersome so  
treacherous so incongruent so  
slippery.  
But some  
thing.  
Any.  
Thing.  
A, drive then.  
A milky murky misty web of yet unnamed vibrations  
soaring along the wiring of anonymous novel nerve endings  
compelling me toward 'n unspecified sauna of amniotic sustenance.  
This proliferation of synthesizing signifiers should've made me hard  
but something wonderful pleasing like proverbial punch

but terrible like it slithered from an abysmal chasm  
this unexpected unthing  
intervened.

The thing was decided in  
just a split second more or less  
a pinch of that and a dash of this until  
every fucking thing's a bloody parenthetical  
—so slight—  
foot  
note.

*À nouveau*  
*la féminité.*

But with the impending  
promise of much more future hair.  
Now I soar like smoke through the Avalon mists  
an underground operative skilled in the wiles of the disguise.  
A chemical spill forced an evacuation, leaving the requisite excavation  
for another time. The bloody thing will wait while I run  
this beguiling gauntlet of splattered gray  
moribund mercurial matter  
that made me  
trans.

# HOLLYWOOD BABY.

Gabe Durham

Going on game shows  
is unfortunately part  
of the gig economy.  
16,000 people in LA  
live in cars, vans, or RVs  
and this week  
an ATM was lying  
broken and open  
on the sidewalk.

*If they ask you what  
you'll do with the money,  
never say student loans,  
my friend advises me.  
Say you'll buy a pirate ship  
and sail the seas.*

More ICE raids  
are coming Monday  
and the Eagle Rock  
Neighborhood Council  
wants people to bring IDs  
to meetings to prove  
they're real locals.

The show reminds us they  
pick contestants based  
entirely on how fun you are.  
If your cheeks don't hurt  
from smiling, you never had  
a chance to begin with.

At all times you dance  
like deciders are watching,  
you woo like it's you,  
you play the game as if  
you don't need this win.

As a fallback plan I bought  
a lotto ticket and have  
a couple of film scripts  
out there. The first is



about an Oscar party  
where the guest with  
the most correct ballot  
gets to live. The second:  
Jesus, after 40 nights  
in the wilderness declares  
he will remain there,  
wrestling, forever.

## WHILE I WALK TO JONS FRESH MARKET.

Gabe Durham

The flowers arranged  
along the elementary school  
sidewalk look at first  
like a roadside memorial  
but are merely for sale.  
Crossing a crosswalk  
you can often tell  
just how much a driver  
would prefer to hit you  
than to stop, and believes  
their restraint has  
earned your thanks.  
How often we require praise  
for only almost doing  
the very worst thing.

# HUMAN REMAINS

## Robbie Gamble

--Arivaca, Arizona

Dusk, and she was driving  
south on Rte. 286  
to visit with her sister,  
when they sprang the roadblock.

They didn't want her papers,  
just held her back while the chopper  
landed on the road and unwound.  
The Border Patrol team stumped  
up the mesquite roadbank

dragging a bodybag, humped it  
into the chopper, then looked  
away while it dispersed skyward.  
She was then free to go.

Ay! How her heart  
was *pesado*, then.  
Twenty years after  
she crossed the same desert,

what dangers she knew.  
And the stories  
her grandmother once told  
of the uncle she never met

who left one day for El Norte  
laden with promises,  
stepping out under a bright sky  
and that was all.

At least, tonight  
they found a body.

# BEAUTY LAKE ON THE BEARTOOTH PLATEAU

Tami Haaland

A few clouds and breeze enough  
to ripple the surface, light on every crest.

A whole lake of sparkling comes toward me,  
and only a single fisherman down the shore.

Flat granite for a chair, a book, the risk  
of staying too long at Beauty and failing

to return to the world below. I eat a red apple.  
The fisherman disappears and the wind

comes down. Bears and mountain lions  
live here. If Beauty could speak—

*What do you think the fisherman can't catch?*

It would be easy to sleep in sunshine  
at the far end of a trail beside this shore.

*How could you stand the loneliness if you stayed?*

Light on water like fireflies in a field.  
Focus on a spark and it's gone.

WITNESS TRIPTYCH  
(outside Paris 1942)  
Cynthia Hogue

\*

The bombs starting were mostly mortal  
I mean mortar but no one knew that  
then. Everyone ran from the house  
and somehow we found a deep cave  
or grotto and were safe. No one worried  
about an occupation. It wasn't real  
to us. We caught our breath, listening  
for silence, things to go back  
as they'd been. Suddenly Mother cried,  
*Where's the baby where's the baby?*  
She'd left the baby upstairs and out  
she went, gone just like that.

\*

*Here I am*, I said. Hungry. Not  
in the country where we ate well  
but couldn't stay, but in the city  
which was on rations. Hunger was shadow  
was enemy cleaving me. When invaders  
knocked like death at our door I answered  
for I was small and did not understand  
what Father was doing with the archives  
records lives he created in the little room  
downstairs he called his study. I answered  
their questions, told them everything  
I thought – why should I not have? – at three  
being questioned in a language I didn't speak.

\*

What I saw was a huge shadow

with head and hulking back  
cast on the wall and looming to ceiling  
when Father was arrested.  
I was down the hallway from him.  
A large man had entered our home,  
but I wasn't looking at him but  
*at the shadow shadow shadow.*

## PERSONAL APOLOGY

Alexis Ivy

I'm at a campfire with no fire  
because this is California. There is room  
in the desert for any mistake  
America has made—  
when World War II was over  
the government gave every man,  
woman child a one-way bus ticket,  
a bagged lunch. There's no penny  
souvenir at this monument.  
I happen to be out of gas is how  
I stopped in Inyo County.  
This place wasn't in my high  
school textbook:  
The Manzanar Historic Site  
where the apology replayed:  
Reagan in '88, \$20,000 compensation  
to every surviving American  
imprisoned there.

# THE MALAIKA DANCE IN MY SHOES

Jacqueline Johnson

Language came to the door wearing fuchsia shoes  
and three sandy red braids.  
Language sashayed to the door and opened  
another door and another door and another,  
as endless kink in my hair unraveled.  
Language banged on the door baring her  
buck teeth, cursing the hell outta' me,  
shoeless, wearing a chartreuse lace boubou,  
spraying me with wisdoms' juju jive.  
And I was alone but not lonely,  
turning the great nothing they gave me  
into a world, a real world.  
Discovering the simplest loves can be a whole life.  
Transcendent change makers  
code switchers  
make fools out of themselves hungry for loves' discernment.  
Who gave away all the wine?  
Is that local water on the table?  
I try not to eat the bitter seeds from the bitter past.  
Language jumped inside my shoes like the malaika  
whispering find anything new, even something half used  
to begin again.  
To begin again.  
Lawd, what does it mean to begin again?  
As I wander into a new self, become a different woman,  
do not erase me with anger.  
Do not erase me with blindness.  
Do not erase me with judgment – hive of a thousand bee wings  
buzzing a lifetime of regrets.  
Do not erase me with those who know  
nothing of love, of equanimity or grace.  
Do not erase me with the acts of the cowardly.  
Do not erase me with those who fear their mother's truth.  
Do not erase my light.  
Do not erase me.  
Do not erase me.  
(Malaika = Swahili word for African angels)



# NO MORE

Marilyn Kallet

I'm giving up fear  
for Passover,  
giving up

excuses for Trump.  
Think Pharoah,  
plagues,

poisoned air.  
Think locusts,  
his lies.

Boils,  
his son-in-law.  
Thought-free

simple sentences,  
Bad. Here we are.  
I am not giving up hope.

I am not giving up love, or  
younger men.  
I married a good one.

I am not giving up  
on friends,  
on Democrats,

on surviving this  
asshole.  
Let's condense

forty years  
of wandering into one  
path, 2020.

I am not giving up my vote,

my faith,  
no matter how many hate-filled shooters

pierce the air.  
*Yisgadal, Vyisgadash,*  
Praise be the Name of God,

now and forever.  
I love all things.  
Okay, most things.

Many men and women, cats,  
Dogs, whippoorwills.  
I love hope,

yours and mine.  
Together like trembling leaves  
we'll wave to the spring,

point like ancient weathervanes  
to a tyrant-free  
tomorrow.

## PASSED DOWN

Willie James King

When Republicans speak  
of Trump, I have to  
remind myself of what I know  
of him. I am taken as to how  
they make him seem sane.  
Outside, a neighbor's kid  
is madly dragging a dulled rake  
over rusted tin, as if  
he has no parents.

## A TERRIER, LIKE YOU

Sandra Kolandiewicz

I told myself I would start over, begin  
again the approach, be the friend you always  
wanted, confidant of sorts, knowing the kind  
of secrets only your dog would see, that was  
present for everything and took all with him  
when he died, like a confessor you believe  
beneath you, for he was not quite human yet  
served well as only witness to the broken  
demarcation of your secret path, point A  
to B, indirect yet observed. How does one  
force a willow to weep over the water,  
its roots denying the bucolic mourning  
we idealize as they plunder the septic  
tank, for if *salix babylonica* were  
a dog, she would be a terrier, like you  
going for the ankles with those small, sharp teeth,  
that insistent bark that won't let up, just  
repeats itself, bright intelligence in the  
eyes all mixed up with the urge to compete born  
of disappointment. How do we tell *canis*  
she's really *salix*, dog of trees who should spend  
more time sleeping off the headache caused by  
biting an ankle and not letting go?

# COTTON BLOOD

J. Drew Lanham

A certain  
uncertain friend called,  
thinking unsure.  
Heart rightly placed;  
conscience hung guilty as sin  
seeing cotton lain like grounded clouds  
stretched long and clean  
as bleached linen shrouds  
under an Old Dominion cerulean sky.  
She wondered inside  
then worried aloud on the paradox--  
artful worship or deep despise.  
Was it a thing of beauty  
to be admired  
or not?  
Should she post the iPhone pic  
she snapped?  
"What do you think?"  
was the question

Suddenly back on some two lane road stretched through mid-August heat  
melting old abandoned farms ,  
torching falling down tobacco sheds into scattered heart pine boards,  
I replied (upon coming to where I was )  
"I see it all the time --  
in my South Carolina home.  
Row upon row laid arrow straight  
late summer along pot-holed blacktop  
in poor counties  
like Allendale or Hampton;  
Lee, Clarendon maybe Jasper.  
Fall ripening -- full bolls  
all pretty and white  
just like you saw it up there.  
But more of it down here."  
"Ok", she said --  
and we went on to  
word on birds and other things.  
I even stop sometimes,

was what I did not let on,  
to pull over into tall rattler-hiding grass,  
beneath soaring swallow-tailed kites --  
as if drawn by some haint;  
a ghost haunting water moccasin ditches  
and plowed under histories,  
daring me to step bold across whatever  
no trespass line might exist,  
knowing some ancestor chattel-owned  
or share-cropped to dirt floor poor  
already paid for my egress.  
I stand like a free man should.  
Look a long way off past now.  
Imagine the work it took.  
Stooping for a moment  
--gaze caught just above  
the waist high green waves  
and plain as day see a dozen backs  
bent double  
baking in the blistering sun,  
dragging bags of misery to make weight--  
four bales to the acre on rich sandy loam.  
Labor with no end  
from field to gin then back again.  
Reaching out beyond thinking  
I pull the fluff ,  
my Black Life (occasionally) Matter  
grad -degreed- middle- class- skin  
standing starkly dark against the past transgressions  
of Confederate Battle flags  
and Vermont textile mills.  
It is soft  
as dew-dropped on fresh clover.  
Harmless on my palm  
as a Monarch butterfly  
lit on milkweed  
to lay next generation  
into caterpillar being.  
Tearing it from rough bract moorings  
that made life scrabble hard and  
careful to avoid the skin pricking hulls,  
it becomes mine.

Property reclaimed from the ages.

It leaves the botanical bonds behind easily  
like no cotton pickin' Negro ever could  
without hounds harassing --  
or whips ripping flesh in the catching.

I am unscathed,  
but injured deeply in a remembering  
with no beginning,  
holding legacy in my white-collar fingers,  
my plight smoother than any field hand  
ever dreamed.

The life soiling boll lies innocent  
there,  
in a hand never forced beyond urging  
to do any chore.  
So much hidden in plain sight  
a remainder of the toll exacted.  
A reminder of debts owed.  
Confirming that I'd stolen nothing  
that by bondage all the debt fully paid  
it was mine by decree of sweat drained  
to furrows.  
Blood and tears yet nourishing  
the small harvest here;  
a piece no larger than my thumb  
measuring the fate of millions  
over countless years.

Home to present age,  
Great Again America looming,  
I brushed thickened thoughts in thinned oil  
-- Radiant White on Prussian Blue  
laid hints of burnt umber like purple bruises  
under four centuries of chains --  
with Jim Crow grown to murder in the streets  
in Hi Def, streamed ad infinitum.  
Standing back it was incomplete.  
Unfinished.  
Lacked depth.  
Possessed again as if roadside  
with fiber in hand,

I stained the white lie with a bright splash--  
Gambian Artists bleeding became truest hue.  
Hemorrhaged angrily against the ivory,  
splattering to impugn the dirty pure  
-- for all the life spilled in fields of linen clouds.  
For can't see to can't see.  
For dusk to dark.  
For hoes keeping time with locusts' September wining.  
For sway-backed mules leaned hard,  
muscles strained into creaking harness  
on somebody else's land,  
gee'd and hawed for not a single thin dime.  
Each stroke a reparation  
For being owned. For being sold.  
For being raped. For being hung.  
For being told that the rows  
would lead to heaven.  
To wait on a Jesus white like the cotton.  
For no choice in the matter.  
No choice in the matter at all.

Later,  
on months of reflection compressing four centuries  
into a few days  
when a random roadside possession  
became a nine by twelve painting,  
when my musing was clearer  
through a lens blurred  
by oil- tinted bleeding,  
The splatter undid the lie she admired;  
but didn't.  
Memory made the perfect not so,  
Rendered the pretty painful.  
On the canvas then  
was what needed planting.  
In that place Truth grew  
where a King once thrived.  
I called back.  
More complete answer in mind.  
"But it is pretty in a way",  
was my confession  
after small talk  
and larger explanation  
from slave hold to whomever died last



at the hands of the police.  
"That fact can't be denied. "  
Cotton quiet came the response.  
Silence the final answer.



"Cotton Blood," Acrylic Painting J. Drew Lanham

## KEEPING RECORDS

Iris Litt

I remember my mother  
earnestly recording her stocks  
in the ledger with the faded red cover

unaware that she was drooling  
onto the page she had been so careful of  
for at least fifty years

and after it was over  
when the accountant asked me for the ledger  
I couldn't find it, looked everywhere

so he estimated it anyway  
after all her precision and care  
and mine as I wiped the page dry

and I think of all the things  
I do with such care  
recording payments made and books sold

when suddenly they won't be needed:  
the houses to new owners  
the clothes to Salvation Army  
the books to the library  
the rest to the dump  
the files, oh the files

but it's still important that I record all these facts;  
you never know when they'll be needed.

# LETTER TO THE TROPICS

Iris Litt

The plane too big for propellers  
landed smoothly among plastic and plumbing.  
The face in my mirror is a negative  
like your other side of the equator  
dark face framed by hair whitening with sun and time.  
I am my ancestor  
delivered from timelessness and wilderness to this sleek place.  
I cover the sea-fragrance of my skin with perfume and,  
urbane artist with sure hand, pygmalion myself to fashion  
so I can go anonymously in the crowd.  
The radiator clanks jungle drums,  
the grey sky fades me to monotones.  
From your technicolor multigreen world, see me now,  
exiled Indian princess whom only you and the Nahuatl gods recognize walking cold and  
dissatisfied but always straight and proud.

Well, I have repainted the primitive palette, reversed the negative:  
hair to one-color, Clairol Dark Brown #795,  
blended my red and black nose into that paleface  
with Revlon Demi-Rachel,  
flattened my floppy brown belly in silky tights  
and caged my big brown breasts in a double nylon holster

and write my songs to you  
not freely like music  
in smoke wind surf rain

but struggle newly with exact meanings,  
then wonder if I have said exactly what I mean  
on this clumsy electric machine.

## JANIS

### Dennis Maloney

Who was that boy  
of seventeen wandering  
the streets of New York City  
alone for the first time,  
hip to the music  
but not the street  
still living in the house  
of his father between  
the vagaries and scars of youth.  
Fifty years later warm waves  
of memory flood the brain  
when I hear your voice again  
preserved now on this  
scratchy acetate disk  
remembering that humid night  
of early August '68  
at the Fillmore East, you  
take the stage with Big Brother  
wild hair, granny glasses,  
bangles, bracelets, baubles,  
vibrant, electric, prancing,  
breasts almost bouncing  
out of a tight dress,  
hiding the wound that  
would never heal.  
Voice bursting out caressing  
each word with tenderness,  
each song ravaged, shredded,  
singing down the wind  
like a raging gale.  
The audience awed that  
one human being could  
give so much of herself away.

## Listening to Nicolle Wallace & Thinking of Jericho Brown's Poem Jennifer Martelli

Today, I let my son drive home from school. It's a dangerous time,  
driving west in my town, the sun lower, away from the ocean—  
Pleasant Street, under an arbor of bare branches splitting and  
cleaving against the blue, blue sky, like old blood vessels across the sclera.  
The forsythia trees—or are they bushes—too frightened to bloom  
full yellow: we haven't warmed a degree. Something's wrong this year.  
I slept through the equinox, past April Fool's. It's January 90<sup>th</sup>.  
I'm a nervous passenger, but hide it in my right foot. I won't allow  
him his Spotify while he's at the wheel so we listen to MSNBC,  
the pretty anchor, the conservative say, *Time to find your prayer beads*.  
Nicolle, I've been praying for years. And here I am, my Ugged  
right foot, warm in shearling, in camel suede, pressing down in panic—  
today, in the *New Yorker*, I read a poem about want and pain: it ended stressed  
and masculine with the most beautiful words, *And the moon goes*.  
But things don't end hard, they go on. Every day since the false thaw  
feels like zero o'clock, the eve of St. Nothing Day.

## TO THE NON-ALCOHOLIC

Jennifer Martelli

Once by a field up past Stowe, I prayed at the edge of an acre of gold  
new-mown hay. When I opened my eyes (having finished my list), I saw  
the thin snakes—black

striped gold—a ground cover crawling along the tops of the shorn blades:  
I thought, *how light and frightened they must be to move on those tips* as they  
slithered toward the low sun

away from me, searching for darkness and undergrowth.  
The whole field moved toward sundown and I almost forgot  
how much I feared snakes.

So that's what comes from praying. Long ago,  
I sobered up, more than half my life has been spent on the tip of that blade,  
bending as far as I can from the point. I am in awe of that woman,

there, with her chunky cut glass of rye, sipping an amber eyelash  
at a time! In this pub below the sidewalk, the wood is old oak, like a man,  
and dark. The walls are brick, stay cool, brass

## TRIPLETS

### Tamara MC

We named them: Fuchsia, Turquoise, and Black Ivory.

The moment they were fertilized, before they had even become fetuses, everything about them had been genetically determined.

How do you speak about losing three babies? Technically they weren't babies, but blobs —fertilized eggs that had turned from two cells, to four cells, to eight cells. On the fifth day, they turned to blastocysts, before they would become an embryo. And, only by the twelfth week, would they have become official fetuses.

On October 24, 2017, I abort Fuchsia, Turquoise, and Black Ivory over an eight-hour period, from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. Throughout the night, my toilet fills with blood and clots. I don't flush. Each time I run to the bathroom and release, I turn on the light and stare at my babies. I collect their every bit and piece.

After my blood ceases, I reach into the red water, scoop my babies up, and clutch them one last time. I bring them close to my chest and then up to my mouth. I kiss. Slowly they trickle through my tensely closed fingers running down my lips, chin, and neck. They cascade down the front of my white nightgown before they splatter onto the cold hard floor.

Bloodied lips and all, I huddle over them. I pray. I unwind toilet sheet after toilet sheet after toilet sheet. I wipe the ground over and over until most of my blood has been placed back into the bowl. I lean over the seat, hold it with both hands, and hunch over. I stare one last time at Fuchsia, Turquoise, and Black Ivory. I flush.

# HOW TAMARA GOT HER BREATH BACK

## Tamara MC

### I.

A Lithuanian Jew bred me  
I ate rye bread  
Had an argument with my mother about being Muslim  
*End it now, she says. End this damn Islam thing.*  
I won't. I can't.  
*I will rip out your eye, she says*  
*I will take a pistol to my heart, I say*  
*I will turn it to my face*  
*You will see my anger*  
Oh me, who is full of power  
Pop! Pop! Pop!  
*You're a savage girl, were always a savage girl, she says*  
*I am a soaring girl. I soar, I say.*  
*You are a sore loser, she says*  
*I live in the House of Faith, I say. This is my house.*  
*Pull up a chair. Sit your ass down.*  
Dipping, dipping, dipping, I dip out.  
The moon is shining. I shudder from the bright light.  
*Shut-ter up, she says.*  
*You old hag, I say*  
I will sail away on a boat. Sail, sail, sail.

### II.

Fog filled the sky  
I couldn't see behind, in front of, or below me  
I watched Blazer as he scampered  
Smelling the bush  
The concrete  
The car tire

Coyotes were howling  
A dog was barking back at them

We took a different path  
Charles held the leash  
I held myself back



From screaming at him

He was insistent to know  
What it was about my things  
That made them so personal

He couldn't love me  
I said to myself  
I don't feel protected and safe

We passed more Christmas houses  
Passed a house with a stuffed animal collection at its front door

We passed my ex boyfriend, Josh's house  
I noticed a silver car  
It must be *her* car  
The RV was still parked beside his Tacoma  
I wanted to run inside  
To the home that used to be mine

I wanted Josh to protect me with his gun  
To get on his Harley with his biker friends  
And escort me through life

Charles didn't speak  
A dog yapped at Blazer

### III.

I felt gravel on my bare feet  
I was unable to put back on my flip-flops  
Cross-legged, I focused on my breath

The brighter greenery in certain leaves  
The black beneath her fingernails  
Wondering if she was a potter, or a gardener

My sheets filled with stones  
Turning over again  
Swiping dirt from underneath my right hip  
The white cotton tenderly hugging my skin  
He breathed in through his mouth  
And out through his nose

The flaps on his lips trembled

I had a hole in my purple leggings  
I wondered if Norman the Buddhist noticed my skin  
My long blond hair strand curled up on my left leg  
Was I getting my breath back?

#### IV.

In the ER they ask me to rate my pain  
*Maybe a 2, I say*  
*I'm not in pain*  
*I can't breath*  
We will take you for x-rays, the triage nurse says  
*To protect the baby*

#### V.

He shot me in the butt  
The hormones seeped into my musculature  
*Charles, I say, as I always do*  
*Avoid my sciatic nerve*

I feel the liquid move from the tip of the needle  
Piercing my skin  
The sting  
The puncture  
Like a three-dimensional spider web  
Filled with air and hope

The hormones scurry from my hip  
To my ovaries  
They expand  
As my lungs deflate

#### VI.

I receive a call from my primary care physician  
*Your D-Dimer test came back*  
*It's very high*  
*You must go to the ER immediately*

We were walking Blazer when I got the call

*I'm leaving*, I tell Charles  
Charles doesn't offer to come with me  
He dresses as usual  
Gets ready for work as usual  
Does his usual  
As my lungs collapse

Trembling I turn the wheel of my Honda  
Try to keep my car moving straight  
A new triage nurse is at TMC now  
She looks at my files  
*You were here last night*, she says  
Yes, I say  
*What's your pain level?*  
*Still a 2*, I say

*We will have you see a doctor immediately*  
Ten minutes later, I am called back  
*Last night, we did an x-ray*  
*Today we will need to do an MRI*, the doctor says

## VII.

*My babies*, I scream  
The tech comes to get me  
*I have babies inside my belly!*  
*Babies?* he asks. *How many?*  
*Three!*

## VIII.

I walk by myself for an hour  
Talk to God  
*I'm talking to you, God*  
I don't stop  
I keep talking

Someone is listening

# NEVER

## Tamara MC

: i thought we would have babies together  
: i thought I would be wearing maternity clothes from “Destination Maternity”  
: in the mall on Sunday we sat  
: at the Tucson Mall drinking “Gloria Jean’s Gourmet Coffee” we discussed  
: our baby  
: the baby we would have together—Fuchsia was her name  
: i’m in New York; you’re in our condo in Tucson  
: the temperatures are in the 60s, turning to Fall  
: here I’ll have a change of seasons  
: the sun is always out in Tucson—always summer—always sunny  
: “you’re going to have a do-over” you said  
: “this baby is going to be different” you said  
: “the father is different,” you would say  
: you followed me for 26.2 miles  
: twins—we planned  
: fuchsia and Turquoise  
: i would take Fuchsia to dance, dress her in pink  
: you would take Turquoise to football, basketball  
: i saw your long arms and legs in them  
: i saw Fuchsia’s curls  
: i saw my daughter  
: “you’re not too old,” you said  
: “you have the eggs of a 25-year old,” you said  
: six months ago, we break up  
: for three years we try to make a baby  
: you fail to tell me you don’t have sperm  
: you fail, Slim Pop!  
: i’m lucky now if I have one or two remaining eggs  
: no one, NO ONE will be able to impregnate me ever again  
: you stole from me  
: you stole the last years of my fertility  
: you stole Fuchsia and Turquoise  
: i will never have another baby again  
: never  
: never  
: never  
: never  
: never  
: never

: one day we are fertile, and then the next day we are not

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## THE DRAFT

Sjohnna McCray

Up until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my father and I  
had the same haircut: an immaculate  
afro with a part on the left-hand side.  
Our hair was divided: one small island  
on the left and a larger mass to the right.  
It was like his mouth became unhinged  
and I emerged: a Russian nesting doll—  
Comrade Dickie, Little Dwight, my father's son.  
So, when I asked to change my style, when  
the barber put the clippers to my temple  
like the barrel of a gun, he knew  
I had succumbed to a caravan  
of likeminded boys. As my hair fell,  
he remembered when they cut *his afro*.

My dad sits in sepia toned photos  
as the army shaves a line in the history  
of his hair as sharp as his mother's tongue,  
*Don't you bring any of those women home,*  
she said before putting him on a bus  
with the other black boys, a color study  
in brown and regret. This was her second  
time sending a man to a place she could  
barely pronounce. As she stood in a crowd  
of wrinkled women, she wondered  
can this small town, these familiar streets  
call her son of brick and mortar home?  
In the barbershop, my dad will come to know  
for fathers, haircuts—are a small heartbreak.

## THE LAST TIME

Tara McDaniel

The woman is kneeling in the chair  
    backwards, her knees thrust into the velvet  
tuck sewn between the throned  
    back and the black  
pillowed arm. Her arms, as if roped  
    palm to palm, branch up  
the back; and into its soft folds  
    her face buried like a young  
daughter pressed to her mother  
    for milk. You've brought me wine.  
Together we peer at the nude  
    photograph, her wide hips like a heart,  
or a peach, bowled in the bottom  
    cushion, iliacs winged against the two  
arms and her spine swanning up into her limbs  
    and the tied wrist so much like a violin  
set aside in a dark room for the night.  
    You simply say, Curvy. I say  
nothing, my hips quiet beneath  
    the heavy orange skirt I have not worn  
in ten months. I stare at the model's  
    hair pinned with a pearl at the nape  
of her neck. To show  
    where the tongue might go.

## WE DO THAT SOMETIMES & ANYWAYS.

Tara McDaniel

My Mom sends me home with a bag  
of weed, a DVD, tells me,

Get really stoned, watch this.  
I get out the Twix, the cheesy

vinegar chips. I'm astounded  
at my taste for trash. Silk

button brought to attention  
when the protagonist comes

all over the cotton rosette night  
gown of his friend's

unsuspecting mother. What's wrong  
with me, the crazy guy on TV,

my mother giving me such a DVD,  
and winking as she shut the door?

The world's a bag of darkness,  
a secret poem lost its key. Beneath

the domestic falsity of cheerfulness  
a muddy river of your mother's

cigarette ends. So much easier  
to drown in them

than look in the mirror  
at the people you love.

## THE JOKE'S ON YOU

Tara McDaniel

*So I decided.*

Like every stupid fucker's story  
didn't start out  
with those three fine words. Finest  
in the English language, fine  
as a baby's hair, and just as thin:  
every excuse muttered in man  
plucked and blown oft  
by wind, just so another fucker  
can pick it up and mouth it then. Some  
poor fellow sloshing Jameson  
on the tips of his night-stained hem  
because he'd turned round  
at the bend and hailed  
a cab to her flat—imagine that silhouette,  
the condoms, the wet skin! Who  
wouldn't after that want to do  
themselves in? Love  
is a four-letter word, the verb  
that says why decide, why try,  
it tempts us to think we'll win:  
like the carney at a milk-bottle booth  
with three sand bags in his hand  
saying *See man, you skimmed it!*  
And you decide to pay again.



## FRIENDS

Tara McDaniel

While his wife is gone  
I have stayed at their house.  
At night when he is asleep  
I walk the rooms

touching and learning:  
this is the seam she sewed  
this the crystalized rock  
from which their portrait hangs.

In the morning  
he will bring me coffee.  
This is what I hear  
he does for her.

The night before I leave  
a thunderstorm comes in.  
Unusual for Washington.  
He says

the forked jag and heavy  
rumble remind  
him of Oklahoma, huge  
and red rumored.

By dawn all the  
blooms are off the trees,  
the ashes on the porch swept clean.  
In silence, our coffees.

Four a.m. taxi.  
At my hotel his hand  
in the dark window a leaf  
white on wet pavement.

# SHARDS OF MAN

## Anthony Lucas McGee

The *Muezzin* sounds off in the distance,  
signaling the beginning of a new day.

The diesel engine drowns out the *Shahada*,  
and men drive off encased in steel.

Steel on steel, machine gun bolts clank,  
finding home in the chamber, a solitary round.

Wun Alpha REDCON-1!  
Wun Bravo REDCON-1!

Armored bodies disappear to face the unknown.  
Silent prayers disappear to imaginary spaces.

A hollow thud rings out across the desert,  
empty without screams, the echo of a mistake.

Shrapnel sings as it cuts through the air,  
carrying with it the dust that fills the lungs like sandbags.

The convoy bristles with useless weapons;  
hidden bombs find fleshy gunners.

The threat that greets you daily past the razor wire,  
becomes suddenly visible and wakes you from your daydream.  
Crowding around the burned-out hull of a taxi,  
they snicker and kick about a skullcap.

A would-be murderer turned accidental suicide,  
pasted throughout the interior of the vehicle.

He looks as though God plucked him from his cab,  
and flung him back to earth with full force.

Turrets like yours litter the side of the road,  
a sight which brings your mortality into question.

What do you feel when you look at the enemy? I feel alive.

A man litters the desert floor in failure,  
the mission continues, the excitement ends.

Night paints the landscape green,  
eyes glow, thumbs find butterflies to smash.

Dogs race off into the black, sated.\_

Blood sweeps into trash clogged gutters,  
asphalt arteries bleed out into private funerals.

Never draining away, turning grey,  
evaporating into the summer heat.

Every patrol, inhaling the dust, the piss,  
the smell of shit, and the blood of martyrs.

An echo of panicked screams and final breaths;  
fourteen people, silenced in the bazaar.

A new pothole, a funerary monument.  
The pothole tells a story of unparalleled commitment,

reminds us that everyone is a threat,  
every car a bomb,  
every culvert a bomb,  
every random piece of trash...

It commands attention, calling the eyes of passersby,  
stop and fear for a moment or two, be vigilant,  
**DON'T BE COMPLACENT!**

Shards of a man are toted away,  
hidden beneath a clean white sheet.

# CHOKES POINT

## Anthony Lucas McGee

A prison of prevention,  
Detained by miles of briefings endless miles,  
When finally freed, trapped in myself.

Officers wash bloodied hands in streams of presentations,  
Lash me to my seat with yellow ribbons,  
Embrace the “new normal”. “Be resilient”.  
Reintegration. Failures, number one casualties of war,

Should my mind fail and snap,  
The overburdened net will catch me,  
A tightrope. Indifferent. Thin strands of concern. Reactionary.

The world learned to cope with my absence,  
Trusting them to treat me as I never left,  
“How many people did you kill?”,  
“What was it like out there?”,  
“Have I gone crazy”?

Curiosity, masquerading as sympathy,  
Satisfy morbid preconceived notions,  
“Thank you for your service”,  
How do I respond to thanks?  
Change the subject.

Grow distant. home was the kingdom of Babur,  
Self-medicate. live another day in his gardens,  
Fight myself, as the trees and flowers turn to craters and ash.

Face inward. the “new normal”, new enemy, killing new me,  
“Be resilient”. replace survival with mundane existence,  
Survive. the Taliban envy the rate we kill ourselves.

Seek help, wade through the thousands of neglected,  
Wait, I can be seen in a month,  
Waiting, five days for a pistol,  
Weighted, beneath woe’s burden, until collapse.

## ENTITLED

Anthony Lucas McGee

The ghosts of a dozen conflicts,  
Haunting the halls of VA Hospitals  
The broken gladiators  
Disappearing from television's arena  
The combat porn of 24-hour news  
No longer to elicit concern  
Or did we ever?

How could you feel for us?  
You did not form bonds with us in training,  
Or hear us cry as our families fell apart  
Find shelter under the umbrella of mortar fire  
You did not smell our blood in the streets  
Mixed with the smoke of HME  
Nor hear our calls for aid denied.

Buckle under the weight of a wounded friend  
So much heavier in armor  
The screams drowned out by racing heart  
Mouth dries out, body expects to bleed  
Return from the MEDEVAC site  
Watch the MRAP burn, run flats burn forever  
Even when the work day ends  
Trapped in Afghanistan  
45 minutes to recovery  
20 hours to recovery  
Never to recover, waitlisted till death  
Bill our widows and mothers.

Return me to happy ignorance.  
Days when I was a stranger  
To the features of mankind's cruel face.

Give me back my naivete.  
The years of finite life invested  
Chasing our tails in endless conflict.

Cleanse my conscience,  
Of failed communication.

Call back my rounds fired in fleeting rage.

Erase my guilt.

The bombs unseen,

The explosions felt, but not by me.

Return limbs and lives to my comrades,

Cease the echoes of their screams from my memory.

Then you can have this blood money,

It failed to make me complete.

## DROUGHT

Deborah Miranda

Dawn. I let the old dog out, look up, see a half-moon shining like the eye of heaven. We wake on the cusp; in just minutes, the sun pushes us over into new morning. Cardinals, blue jays, house finches and sparrows of late summer build a basket made of song to hold all the light. A choir of crickets hum fierce and low. Out in the yard, dried echinacea stalks stand at attention, seed cones held up like offerings. The apple tree, nearly bare of leaves, rests against the sky, but redbuds and high bush cranberries spread lush and thick with greenery. Their roots run deeper than drought. Dry all through July, August and September, at last we had one rain, a downpour white as a waterfall, soaking into thirsty earth as quickly as it came down. Fall crocuses sprang up the next day along the fence, a forest of gold exultants. They opened themselves like oracles, received our praise in their small blossoming hands, wilted in an unnatural furnace only a few hours later. Still, I remember them: their determined heads pushing into this world, the peculiar tenderness of petals that wait all summer for one chance at flame. Melting back into the hard ground, withdrawing into a cosmos of silence, they gave a different kind of beauty: a step in the dance they know by heart. But the tempo is set by the beating of another heart now racing to keep up. So many others have stumbled already, fallen by greed, by selfish hoarding, by denial. I write this now for those still to come; for the grandchildren I've held in my arms and the grandchildren still in the womb: that they may know green. That they may know seedlings sprouting from soft earth. That their feet may find a place in the dance. That there still be a dance.

## EAST BAY STAND DOWN

Michael Pearce

It's not so bad in the shade, where  
we sit under a tarp canopy  
with ice tea and watermelon.  
But out there the heat is an affliction,  
must put some of them in mind  
of their tours—Iraq, Vietnam, Korea.  
Yet there they stand, parade rest,  
and wait for the brass to give the order  
to take down the stars and stripes.

A general and a congressman  
give short speeches, tell them they're  
the forgotten ones, from the street,  
from jails, without jobs, homes,  
health care. This week is a start,  
they say, making good on  
an old debt to those who stood  
in harm's way for the rest of us.

Volunteers set up this camp  
army style, with tents and cots  
to sleep in, and here the vets are fed  
and given medical care, psych care,  
clothes, and some are hooked up  
with jobs and shelter and services  
back in the neighborhoods they haunt.

I wander, wearing my  
musician's pass and feeling like  
a ghost in this military  
world that doesn't need me, watching  
reserves in desert camouflage  
do the good work of caring  
for these warriors who came  
home to the great wound of  
their country's indifferent disarray,  
who fell into drugs, mean cities,  
poverty, and time's erosion  
of their bodies and their hopes.

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After the ceremony they line up  
at the mess tent. The man in charge  
of the food brigade, a retired colonel,  
says a prayer. An NCO spells out  
the protocol: first the wheelchairs,  
then the women, then the rest  
in order of their tent numbers  
will file through for their beef  
and beans and coleslaw and bread.

When we finally play, at sunset,  
the vets and volunteers eat and watch  
and move their bodies to the beat.  
One guy plays soprano sax,  
another plays harmonica,  
and we invite them up to join us  
on the standards everybody knows—  
*Mustang Sally, Walkin the Dog.*  
The music does what music does,  
it's in the air and in all of us  
for a while. We end with a song  
about getting drunk, though  
no alcohol is allowed here.

In the quiet aftermath there are smiles  
as the band and the sound guy pack up.  
I drive past the grid of tents  
on the road out to the freeway and home.  
*Home*—I can feel the word drift  
even as I write it down.

# A DESERT EULOGY

John Peck

Dawn's light in autumn cascades slowly  
    across this Sonoran desert ocean,  
    burnishing creosote and palo verdes, mesquite and ocotillo  
    with gold set against warming browns and a softened blue sky.  
Not-too-chill becomes not-too-warm. Life expands as all living things –  
    great and small, seen and not – breathe and grow.  
In summer, it seems fast and hard, still beautiful, of course,  
    but almost too brilliant to bear,  
    and all preserve, reserve recharge for clearer, cooler nights.  
In slightly lighted walks in the dark we see our sea's creatures:  
    fast-moving snakes and their sustaining packrats,  
    a waddling Gila monster, cautious, quick rabbits,  
    the scurrying scorpion;  
    and they know us.

In all seasons, we hear the noise of our partners in this dance of life:  
    Owls in the plaza palms, the hunting howls of coyotes,  
    snuffling, shuffling packs of javelina, the tutwittling busyness of quail,  
    the swoop of ravens, snorting horses, barking dogs, a rooster's boast -  
    both desert calm and desert winds sift and spread these whispers.

But now, increasing sounds that jar:  
    tanker trucks and oversize flatbed trailers,  
    thundering south with heavy loads designed to divide  
    and conquer all souls of this desert,  
    returning north, tarp-covered and full of toppled giants -  
        our elders say our oldest -  
    or empty.  
    Lifeless both.

The desert's blood, the water, is being drawn with cruel irony  
    to aid this affront to cultures and lives,  
    to silence with increased thirst and decreased access  
    the sounds around us, the embrace of this space.  
The new voices in the land are rancorous and harsh,  
    shouting, mechanical,  
    grating and graceless, swaggering and senseless,  
    devoid of compassion and thoughtful conversation.  
It is very late in this desert in all seasons now,  
    and the new and sadder space looms large.

And the wind still whispers, but now with shock:  
    *Our ancestors are being slaughtered,*  
        *our ocean divided and changed forever.*  
    *Listen. Listen. Do.*

## ABOVE THE FOLD

Scott Ruescher

Midway between the dates of the Kent State shootings  
And my high school graduation, I was sitting down to eat lunch  
At the Formica table in my mother's yellow kitchen—  
Leftover Johnny Marzetti, that famous Italo-Midwestern  
Macaroni concoction—from a green plastic bowl  
On the last day of December, during Christmas vacation,  
When I saw, in the frontpage headline spanning the width  
Of the *Columbus Dispatch*, in bold and italicized caps,  
More bad news from the Appalachian hollers three hours south—

### **38 MINERS KILLED IN KENTUCKY EXPLOSION.**

There was a line below, in plain text, indicating the exact  
Location of the mine—at Hurricane Creek, outside of Hyden,  
In Leslie County, in the poorest district of Eastern Kentucky.  
And, under that, the article suggesting that the blast,  
According to inspectors, occurred when a stray electrical spark  
From a piece of deep-mining machinery, a cutter, a scraper,  
Or some other piece of equipment that the men in my family  
Had been making for fifty years on sheet-metal lathes  
At Jeffrey Manufacturing Company near downtown Columbus,  
Ignited a cloud of coal dust gases, asphyxiating instantly,  
If not incinerating, turning to ash, everyone in the shaft, including  
The good-looking guys in the photograph beside that  
Whose euphonious names I invoke in their memory.  
I don't remember which four of the 38 appeared  
In the photograph exactly—whether Alonzo Couch, Kermit  
Hubbard, Teddy Bush, and Delbert Henson, embodiments  
Of a rambunctious male culture more than permutations  
Of some incestuous genealogy that some prefer to know them for;  
Maybe Grover Bowling, Walter Hibbard, Rufus Jones, and Theo  
Griffin, gathered for a Polaroid in front of the company store,  
Backs to the gravel road that disappears in the right-hand corner;  
Or Decker Whitehead, Arnold Sizemore, Lawrence Gray,  
And Denver Young, leaning my way in clodhoppers  
And blue denim jackets. Whichever four, they squint for the camera  
In the red autumn sunshine still, big healthy boyish smiles  
In their coal-blackened faces, mops of happy hair fringing  
Their golden helmets, joined at the shoulder in symmetrical order  
Like carbon molecules in a covalent bond that has to endure  
Constant pressure for millions of mineral years before  
It can even begin to think about turning into diamonds.

# THE POLITICS OF PRAYER (after Rimbaud's "Les pauvres à l'église")

David Anthony Sam

On dry oak pews smoothed by asses  
from centuries of sacrament, the poorest  
of the faithful breathe candle smoke and incense  
in a piety of screaming celebration.

Paychecks are burnt offerings to suits  
tailored by the very best Italian clothiers  
as all await the black SUV to disgorge  
the Master from his stubborn comfort.

To the women, he shows his halo of  
slicked hair and to the men his prosperity  
gospelled in the very whitest teeth as he  
strides his parable of humble contentment.

He rises to his eloquence enhanced by  
his Madonna mic. He has kissed the pale  
breasts of the young girls in his retreat  
into the desert of six unpraised days.

Now he must sweat away his cologne  
before a bad parade of communicants  
who swipe their credit/debit through  
the digital offering of his card reader.

The meager evils of these supplicants  
can be erased with each tithing of joy  
as he envisions the new temple rising  
from the ashes of a transgendered nation.

The prayers prostrate the mystic wonder  
that he embodies, as he returns the tables  
overturned by too much sacrifice  
so his minions can gild the sacrifices.

A sudden sun rises to blind him briefly

as it shines throughout the nave.  
They rise to kiss his yellowed fingers  
with the holy water of their lusts.

Jesus, they smell of beer and body.  
He wrinkles his nose, happy he is elect  
in the certainty of stockholdings and carafes  
of wine made into the water he passes.

# WHEN IS A RABBIT NOT A RABBIT/ CANTICLE FOR KATA

## Mara Adamitz Scrupe

The U.S. Geological Survey reports that the “Quail” fault zone, east of Charlottesville and just south of Mineral in central Virginia, was the epicenter of the 5.8 magnitude earthquake in 2011 that may have been felt by more people than any other in U.S. history. From the late-eighteenth century through the American Civil War, slave breeding and sales represented intricate and economically vital activities in antebellum Virginia. - Encyclopedia Virginia. *Lapins* was the nickname assigned themselves by the ethnic Polish women victims of Nazi medical experiments. According to family lore, during WW2 great-grandmother Kata sat with her ear pressed to the radio listening to news of home – near Oświęcim in Poland (Auschwitz in German) – and wept.

Nickname of *Quail*: one mile

Deep her primordial fault lines lie stretched diagonal  
five miles north-northeast from the Blue Ridge south  
to Mineral town: conflict rock. Tremulous  
punch. In relict in my home high up James River’s bluffs/ east  
of the Blue Ridge pictures slam the floor cowering  
like a routinely struck woman rides it out.

Undulate magma.

Seas. Troth: ceaseless curl & break. What we tacitly  
agree. To accommodate. In the ripple. Georgia west  
to the Mississippi. Shrug of indifference. Four-  
hundred years’ worth of  
full throttle unobstructed Slam. Aftershock? Still living it. But.

Not even close. To commensurate. Evening up. That  
is. Everything I think I know of how I stand relative  
to the ground shaking around me relative to.  
Notions. Freedom. Dominance. Punishments. Relative  
to each other. To the abstruse the esoteric: improved  
calamities sneak up on us rightly & quiet-like  
let us have it.

///

Nickname: *lapins*.

///

A premonition: a mess of miracles. Daffs plash  
in spring spate. Peek through snow soft  
crust. Nod-noggin-ed baubles galore. Our winter eyes  
eat full the feast. Reap. Twine ball. Tuber

Swell. Peat black sack. Unfurl again our vernal faiths. Generosities  
in a harridan's lap. Girth. Plunder. Just before.  
Best light. Hillocks & old ghost guides. Jam-handed pockets.  
In the pierce. In the playing. Sentience. What we are.  
Capable of. Inclined to &. Trained.

///

Transit.

///

Old woods hold out. Barracks. Shed hut haunt hutch.  
Structures *hold out*. Brutish sundered culpable. Out.

Slaked. That word. Word: *slake* servile slavish hard be  
pallid amber rose burnished dusk. Black brown white. A woman.  
Any color. A woman's a woman ribald & rowdy. Seized &.

Snuffed. My Polish great-grandmother listens. Thinks. Mother sister aunt.  
*Matka siostra ciotka*. Guardian angels of the heavenly divinely  
helpless. The game is tag. To play  
you need passers-by going about their business

In the streets shopping for bread or milk or stopping anxious breathless  
tense waiting for the shoemaker to mend their broken soles.  
You need downcast eyes & furtive gestures & barely managed  
terror: *Łapanka*.

///

*Pra Babcia*. Polish for great-grandmother. 1943. Huddled



by the radio weeping. How am I supposed to      How am I      *How*  
stolen with murderous intent. The millions worked  
worked worked worked worked worked  
to death. Slave.Labor labor labor labor. With intent. Labor purchased with.

I claim this horror. Extermination. This silence. I point my finger  
finger for the dead who can't can't can't I insist I argue I claim  
ownership inclusivity of their loss. There's a word an idea

In Polish: *Lapanka*. It means *tag* as in the children's game.  
From the verb      *to catch*. At random. In the streets. Black  
humor. Inborn in blood lands. Over eight centuries      &      day  
by day slavery followed by extinction on general principle.

///

Let's return. Home. Come      them back. To life despite.  
Unquenched. Thirsty. Quavering bitter blossoms.      Bonanza. Nature's  
vernacular gewgaws. Oath buds. Indelibly colored/ tinged other than  
when is a rabbit not a rabbit?      Chin-knot. Headscarf. Sticky-fisted. Juice  
stems. Clench. Memory/ a floral sundress. A hat with a peacock's  
feather.      Held & shoved up. From under her elbows. Where the boxcar  
leaves off. Stub-toothed. Hidey hogs. Lost. Shed Beaten Quaffed. Out.  
*Out*. A simple sturdy holding.      Out.

///

Blown down chimney sword. Broke.      Tufts. Dot to dot perimeter  
double caisson bloom. Spurge. Forgotten block/ row upon row. Blown  
down frill-bejeweled vestigial      *lean*. Leveled. Purposeful.

Bound at the ankles. Rope. Brand. Slit. Cut. Bone. Crack. Experiment  
& expedient. Connect the dots: Piedmont breeders to Pollack bitches.  
Of which among the latter I am one.      Two wars      countless  
bondservants. Ravensbrück rabbits. *Lapins*. By Color. Or ethnicity.  
Some lines trace themselves back. Others blur & mock. Chill.  
A hint. Eat the blister.      Oak. Mouth mast. Ancient stare.  
Nether men take. Any can eat      eat      *eat*.

///

Secrets.      A word.      A phrase. In direct translation  
an act of faith      a wish a plea.

Listen close dear Kata & learn the best-kept secrets: some  
words & phrases cannot be translated & some like *one point*  
*nine million &      dead*  
are unutterable      together. Dear Kata in your Slav-tongue

(from the Latin *sclava* the feminine for *slave*) pay attention/ press in  
close. There are other stories spoken here alien dear dear  
Kata turn the volume down low      lower  
so only you can hear:      a purple *P* stitched on a yellow field  
a naphthalene-scented overcoat  
Oświęcim: a Polish town      a profanity      a prayer.

## ARRIVALS

Peter Serchuk

Some of it arrives right on schedule like a train  
you've been waiting for at the station: the tax bill,  
your hay fever or that storm the weather channel's  
been hyping for days. No problem. You've got a check  
that will clear, the right non-drowsy pills and a flashlight  
with new batteries should the power take the night off.  
Then there are the trains you can't see but have a hunch  
they're coming; an old water heater that's close to drawing  
its last bath or the potted plants you always forget to water.  
Add to that the friends who will suddenly move away  
and the birthdays ahead that will refuse to keep you young.  
So what? Not bad. You're fine.  
But sooner or later the train will come off the tracks  
as every heart gets its turn to be a punching bag.  
Some say cry and bear it, yet this fool I friended on a hiking trail  
must have thought otherwise. When we stopped to rest by  
a waterfall, he said he'd lost his wife and a child not long ago  
but you couldn't see it in his face. Instead, he stared at  
the splashing spray like a child himself, mesmerized.  
And it wasn't Niagara or Yosemite, nothing grand enough  
to bend the bars of grief. Still, I saw no sorrow in his face  
and when I tried a word of sympathy, he smiled but waved  
me off. So we sat and talked awhile longer before I shook his hand  
and went my way. Those last two miles seemed like five, my legs  
more like rubber bands, but my brain was doing laps for a path  
to understand. But nothing came, no magic words, just the picture  
of his face staring at the falls. Then a thought slipped in too easily,  
maybe something I had read; that if one does not bear witness  
to the beauty of the world, one is left only to its misery.

## BENEATH THE MOON'S UMBRA, India July 22, 2009

Martha Snell

In the middle of what seems like  
    an ordinary day  
women bend into their washing  
    on river banks.  
Saris bunched at their knees,  
    stooping over piles  
of color, they crouch to knead, rise  
    to sail cloth flat.

From the bridge over the Varuna  
    where we wait  
the slap of wet clothes on black rocks,  
    rhythm rising.  
We're in Varanasi, on this bridge  
    to see darkness,  
not death, but the path of totality,  
    the moon curtain.

Beside us people, trucks, rickshaws,  
    ox carts pass  
on the way to market, the airport,  
    temple, the ghats.  
When daylight fades above, and below  
    crisp shadows soften  
few notice the dusk, just us --  
    white-skinned, tall.

The lunar screen steals the light,  
    dims the day  
till traffic slows, men lean out laughing,  
    children push in  
all look up at a shrinking sun.  
    We loan pairs  
of protective glasses, some look  
    through fistful holes.

For six minutes thirty-nine seconds  
    day becomes night,  
only a shiny gold ring tossed overhead.  
    Crowd, birds hushed.  
Below us, women work without pause.  
    Slap of clothes.

## CLOUDS

Anne Terashima

The space between my grandmother's hands  
is a ball of rice: o-nigiri made in the quiet  
of her kitchen at the green-topped table.

She dips her fingers into a chipped blue bowl  
of salted water so the grains won't stick.  
She shapes the rice between her palms

into calm triangles placed  
on a plate in two circles, one  
inside the other.

Inkbrush paintings on the wall  
show mountains above the ocean.  
Carp drift down like

leaves in water. Sparrows in snow, drifts  
shown by shadow. Color fades to space  
that is mountain flank, flesh

of fish, the joints of bamboo stalks. Sun-  
light on wings. The stuff of clouds. In her kitchen  
I eat the rice still warm from her hands

and taste a trace of sea.

## Ribbon

Anne Terashima

Most evenings, she takes her father's .22-caliber rifle  
to the field beyond the storage shed. She listens  
for the rustle of feathers, for a throaty call echoing  
into dry autumn air. She watches for a wave  
in the tall yellow grasses, glint of rooster pheasant's  
red-rimmed dark eye.

Flushed from the field, the bird in flight—

she breathes deep,  
lets a lone bullet fly.

She never hits the pheasant,  
never watches feathers float down  
to hard-cracked dirt. Yet

she hears a heartbeat  
as she squints one almond eye,  
sensing the distance between herself  
and where a bullet might travel: unfurling  
the length of earth-scented sky like  
a girl's hair ribbon, blue nearly bleached out  
from day after day in the sun.

## Hinges

### Anne Terashima

1932

Wednesdays after American school,  
she walks to Japanese school, moving  
along a Salt Lake City street in a cluster  
of friends who, like her, have black hair,  
dark crescent eyes, and parents  
afraid  
their children will forget  
the gentle cadence of the mother tongue:  
the first sounds she knew.

1942

Her sweetheart, a photographer by trade, has been  
locked up for owning a camera while being  
Japanese. At the community dance  
she cries a little to her girlfriends  
then reapplies her lipstick in the powder room  
mirror. She emerges  
to the dance floor, feeling  
men's glances: traces of worry  
in their dark, hardened depths: *Who's next?*

1954

Her young son returns from the library bruised  
by older boys who knocked him down, called him  
*Jap*. A word tied to garish yellow skin, animal  
slyness, buck teeth, slit-eyes. Her son,  
she decides, will never know  
their island language,  
won't hear it  
from his mother's tongue. She'll remember  
in silence; he won't need to forget.

1969

New York City, her first visit. Her son  
shows her Central Park. A ferry ride:  
Statue of Liberty. On the subway  
a man sits in the seat next to hers, opens

a newspaper. Her heart  
beats hard:  
she's never been close to a person  
with skin so dark. Too afraid to be  
ashamed, she closes her eyes.

1981

Her son loves a white woman, a  
nurse from St. Louis. There for the wedding,  
she spots red perching bright among green  
July trees, startles when someone says  
*Cardinals*.  
She thought cardinals were birds  
made up for cartoons. No.  
Look closer  
—there they are, singing.



## WHEN SOMETHING TEARS IT DOWN

Shaun Turner

Imagine some dark holler down-country  
where the new highway bisects the old highway,  
and trees your great-great-grandmother touched  
still grow by the road she'd walk.  
Imagine a white clapboard house still standing there,  
no cousins, no aunt—empty  
in the deepening shade of Cumberland foothills.

Imagine a great hand, like one folded  
in prayer. Watch it scoop hill from hill  
to tear that house down. Sudden, the bleaching flood  
behind those ancient hills--light. All opens  
to new and rocky fields as white as old bones,  
as white as the cotton t-shirts under the halogen lights  
at the Dollar General

You can imagine the flattening. You've seen it before—  
no more trees, no farm—  
just a dollar store and a blinding flash:  
holler drowned in light,  
lost of family.

## BETWEEN

Jay Udall

Veins branching bone-white into pale blue—  
articulations of stripped sycamores

where the frozen river groans  
with fracturing ice, murky water

sliding past blurred glass,  
drawn toward the spillway,

the thrashing falls beyond.

Further down this same river  
the spillway and falls of youth,

a place of summer drownings,  
helicopters, searchlights, voices

calling into steep dark below—  
how in dreams off and on for years

I'd return to the churning edge.

Two red foxes ghost the surface  
out to where the middle gives

way to geese and mallards gathered  
in open water and deepening light,

talking in their foreign tongues,  
where paws feel thinning ice start

to sway with their weight—

thought plunges through  
yanked by undertow

down river's throat  
threshed, held below—

old terror, desire  
to fathom all,

reach beyond reach.

Careful steps test the edges  
for a path that will hold,

until they know there's no way there.  
They gaze across the gap between

hunger and sunlit birds floating,  
then turn away toward hard earth.

The river moans: what's held back;  
what's pulled on through the cold.

# THE MEN AT THE CURB

Jay Udall

are creating the curb.  
They've come from different places,  
  
some from far countries,  
and not one ever dreamed  
  
of a job cutting curbs.  
But the frame has been set, concrete  
  
poured, nearly cured, and now  
they work the wet surface  
  
in knee pads, gray grit getting  
in sweat-wet jeans, shirts, skin,  
  
the men becoming the curb  
or the curb becoming the men,  
  
trowels smoothing and rounding  
each edge to complete the curve—  
  
the work is good, and is not,  
here where a person's worth  
  
is figured in dollars,  
where shoes and tires will come  
  
and go when the men have gone  
and no one who knew their names  
  
is left to remember,  
where sidewalk reaches street,  
  
asphalt joins concrete,  
earth gives to air—  
  
the men at the curb  
are creating the curb.

GOD AS A BELUGA WHALE POD SEEN FROM THE AIRPLANE  
WINDOW ABOVE TURNAGAIN ARM, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA  
Susan O'Dell Underwood

From such heights,  
we easily see what we had not seen,  
as if we willed them, plump alabaster commas  
in the blue glinting curve.

At risk of plummeting, at the radial wing-torque,  
there is always another, second chance,  
though barely a second to look back.  
That wildly happenstance viewpoint  
after the long day seems to have gasped its last  
and sighs its closed message, *good-bye*.  
*It was. Already it was.*

The plane trembles, and too the late-day sunlight,  
and too the brackish embrace of dark cobalt  
twitches below.  
The heart steadies in its skittering upward pitch,  
like an invisible keening,  
and then the whales are fixed,  
bulbous stars beneath the water, stable  
and ignorant of our vantage point, if we can  
believe, truly, those specks of vivid life  
we witnessed floating there  
were the white whales, after all.

## GOD AS SEQUOIA GROVES IN THE DARK

Susan O'Dell Underwood

They congregate their own cosmos, diminish the Milky Way  
with crowns unreachable above our heads.  
We're smaller than we've ever known.  
Right now they make the darkness  
darker, tend the air, their exhalation  
feasting dark within deep circles  
since their sapling days,  
half-a-million days before us.  
We go to their braille.  
Bark still sun-warm,  
fur-warm, animal-hide  
soft, mammoth-blurry.  
We believe this flesh over and  
over again with our palms.  
We press our cheeks unabashed  
against the implacable,  
intractable love  
we feel. We  
measure ourselves.  
With our ears  
pressed, we've never listened  
so closely for  
a voice, our fingers  
worshipping  
for a pulse.

## NATURAL BEAUTY SECRETS

Sara Moore Wagner

My daughter has taken to finding  
a spoon, to splitting the ants in half, to  
calling me over to see it, and I watch with  
my tin face and my coffee until it's time  
to put on my makeup, to go out with her  
on my hip to the grocery store, then  
to the park where I'll watch the other  
mothers push little bundles of stone  
back and forth on the baby swings,  
wild hair in conflict  
with the tree line in the distance.

As the day sets, the sky is never close,  
it moves back and back until it's night,  
and it's time to close every eye, to tuck  
everyone in, to wipe the night on  
like a cold cream. To say sleep, sweet  
girl, let's try it again tomorrow.

In the morning, the sky feels so close  
you could almost imagine it's wet.

I pull it down like a mask over  
my face, I am skyfaced, and the neighbor,  
opening her groaning garage like a mouth,  
sees me in the yard and will call her mother  
to say thank you for not making me one  
of those women, you know the ones,  
who sit hands up, who form a line  
from navel to the earth.

# EDITORS CHOICE

## I KNOW HOW TO LOSE

Patricia Jabbeh Wesley

I know how to lose my country, to watch the heavy  
flames of war, to stand still amidst crumbling  
buildings and walls, how to run past carcasses

of the dead in search of refuge. I know the language  
of starvation and thirst, the taste of hunger  
on tongue, dry cheeks, against bones, swelling feet,

the sour taste of hunger and want. I have seen war,  
have seen it coming, have seen the smoke  
before the fires that consume everyone.

Oh, I knew it, knew it when my countrymen  
called for war with swords only  
in their hurting hearts, saw it coming like waves

out of the Atlantic. I know pain, have known  
pain all my life, pain, not like a mother's  
in the birthing chamber, but the pain

in the birthing chamber of hate, and of the gun,  
oh, and I know it when a nation is in free fall,  
oh, how it is when a people have lost their way.

Yes, I know the sounds of when the drums  
call us to war. I know it in my belly,  
the way a woman knows her unborn child.

I am the African woman who hides her belly  
even from her man, until her mother knows  
what it is she is hiding in her womb,

oh, the ways of women. But this, this one, this  
is not a child, calling. This is not how life calls  
us to dawn. I've seen the pepper bird losing its cry

to the wind and to the many sounds of other birds,  
and I have learned how to lose.



I have become the metaphor of lost homes,  
of people dangling between many worlds,  
people whose roots are still seeking  
their own ground, and I know how to lose.

# EDITORS CHOICE

## WE ARE IN DEEP MOURNING

Patricia Jabbeh Wesley

*for Rayshard Brooks*

Black mothers across America are consoling  
one another tonight,  
the dead and the living dead, us.

Those of us, standing between life and death,  
the dying and those waiting to mourn  
their sons, yes, all of us.

Our phones, ringing off their hooks, our wailing  
phones, the sighs and the ah and the ah,  
oh, Lord, please have mercy on us.

Our hands, roughened by toil just so a son can  
grow up strong, and all we get for our mothering  
are the tears we carry

into the future, gallons of tears, rising out of the deep  
recesses of our hearts. We are the water fountain  
of tears, as if we were born only to weep.

Another execution, this time, it is Atlanta that has  
butchered another young black man, and always  
it is my son, your son, over and over, it is our son.

My umbilical cord now longs to be reattached  
to my sons, my and your umbilical cords stretching  
across America, across this vast bloody land,

stretching over hills and valleys, stretching across  
the waters, just to wrap around our sons,  
to pull them homeward, back into the womb

where a policeman can't catch them, can't chase  
them, can't push rounds of hot bullets in their backs.  
We are the wailing night,

hungry for a ceasefire, oh, America. we were not born

with weapons, not born with guns, and not with steel  
in our chests, not with the hearts of men whose

hands know where to find the bullets to tear up  
a black son. We stand in a sacred moment. We stand  
at the threshold of the present and the past and the future.

This is the day of reckoning. The spirits  
of our ancestors are coming. The spirits of our dead  
are rising out of the past.

The ghosts of our mothers are screaming in defiance  
against the brutal warfare you started.  
We are demanding that you take us out of mourning.

We are demanding, you hear me, this is a demand.

## INCULCATION

John Sibley Williams

Two matches when one would do. A burning  
house when all you really wanted was to feel  
// be felt by. You remember how it ended  
but not the perfect alignment of stars & cruelties  
that brought you here // that he said you brought.  
In the gulf between unpronounced & wholly  
unpronounceable, a palpable stillness. A brief  
combustion of birds. Closing your eyes & posing  
yourself // being posed // playacting you're a bird,  
wings spread, burning, on a terribly unempty bed.  
& when it's all over, there is no way to tell if  
it's all been a dream. If you should tell your mother.  
If the blood is yours, again, or his. From the dark  
field watching your // their world dye the sky red,  
if your body has always been the crime scene or if  
in twenty years you'll still believe that it's the crime.

EDITORS CHOICE  
AS THE WORLD CHURNS  
Shawn Yazzie

As the world churns,  
I hear the rust of  
spoken words.  
It's the sky rattling  
and the clouds  
A cluster. The moon  
Is an arrow  
though the dark  
It's the tongue  
in the golden  
night. When  
the quiver is  
empty, it's the silent  
roar that murmurs.  
I remember my dad  
showing me the strings,  
I remember my dad  
showing how flowers die  
It's the silent clouds.  
The talking dead  
It's when the ghosts  
are heavy and they cry.



**“Moths In The Closet,” textile and acrylic**

**Albert Kogel**

## SHORT FICTION

# FIRST PRIZE, 2019 RICK DEMARINIS SHORT FICTION

## CLAVE

Amina Gautier

Blame it on the clave, on the beat, on this October night that frees you from a week of seminars, research, and teaching first year writing to college freshmen. Blame it on the other black and brown Ph.D. students who have agreed to come out tonight, the ones you've met through the monthly sponsored events you have to attend in order to keep your fellowship funding. You are six in all— three women, three men—six Penn grad students drawn from English, History, Anthropology, Sociology, and one guy from the School of Ed. Together you've all been to BlueZette, Cuba Libre, Zanzibar Blue, Five Spot, and M Lounge. Since August, your small group has been meeting every Friday. Weekly, the six of you pool your meager earnings for a night out, getting as far away from campus as your money will take you, riding down to the edge of the city, or just shy of it, where you clamber over cobble stone streets and wander through the oldest parts of Philadelphia. No, you can't really afford these weekly excursions, but these Friday nights remind you one and all that you are more than grad student grunts, and that there is a real world living cheek to jowl right beside the academic one.

"What's it going to be then, eh?" you ask once you're all gathered at the mouth of the El station at 40<sup>th</sup> and Market. Xochitl, a fourth year, also from English, laughs, the only one to get your *A Clockwork Orange* reference. Half Boricua, half Chicana, lithe and willowy, beautiful with her hair brushed into a high puff and a choker made of beads and cowrie shells around her neck, Xochitl's dressed to party in a low-cut cream knit halter top and tight brown suede-like pants with flared bottoms. Xochitl was one of the first people you met two years ago when you visited for Admission Weekend; knowing she'd still be here if you came was one of the reasons you chose this university over all the others. Xochitl's face is the one you always look for. Just knowing that Xochitl is in her cubicle office up on the fourth floor of Bennett Hall gets you through your days.

Alvin says, "Let's just see when we get there." A third year in Education, he's in his thirties and older than the rest of you, having returned to grad school for a doctorate after several years of working full-time. Impatient and earnest, he waves everyone through the turnstiles before dropping in his own token and following suit.

"We need to find a place to kick it until the spots open," Rashid, a first year in



Sociology, says. Travis, a first year from History, agrees. Dressed alike in baggy jeans and FUBU gear, the two could pass for cousins. Like you, they're both from New York, Queens and The Bronx, respectively. Each week they forget that Philadelphia is a smaller city and its spots don't stay open as late.

On the platform, Alvin suggests M Lounge and Xochitl counters with Cuba Libre, the spot from the week before. You remember Cuba Libre's treacherous dance floor, its slick red tiles. "I'm not doing those floors again," you say.

"Let's just get off on Second and take it from there." Enid raises her voice to be heard above the roar of the coming train. Hair done in long thin synthetic braids that hang partway down her back, and dressed in a short sleeve sweater with a knee-length tulip pencil skirt, Enid looks like a chaperone sent along to keep everyone in line. ABD in Anthro, she's the only one who doesn't live close to campus. Through the fellowship, she receives the same fourteen thousand dollar annual stipend you all do, but her parents, Guyanese immigrants, rent her an apartment in Center City over on Fifteenth and Walnut. Enid's fancy building, with its doorman and marble lobby, has no apartments a grad student could afford.

"How about Br sil's? They give free salsa lessons," you say.

Travis says, "Free is within my budget," and everyone else concurs. Graduate school has taught you all the value of free things.

Br sil's nightclub is long and thin, an exaggerated rectangle. On one end there's a narrow bar with a small open window that looks out onto Chestnut Street; on the other end, DJ Rockwell, a heavyset Puerto Rican, spins music in his booth on the platform. In the middle lies the dance floor, compact and shiny. Three small caf  tables, each seating only two, line up opposite the mirrored wall. During the lesson, the men stand on one side and the women face them. Everyone takes turns, switching partners with every new song and every new move learned. Footwork with one man, dance hold with the next, a cross body lead with another, and a wrap-to-cuddle with still someone else. Somehow, through all of the switching, you and your friends keep finding one other, rotating in and out of each other's arms.

Ninety minutes later the lesson's over and the lights drop low. The bouncer lets in the patrons, and you lose your friends in the crowd. With the influx of club-goers, the dance floor is close and cramped, and there's no easy way to find them.

You might as well dance.

Short stocky men from Central America find their way to you. So polite and dull the Hondurans and Nicaraguans. They never spin or turn you; they know no flourishes. They dance so differently from the way you know— the right way— the Boricua way. When you dance with your tíos and primos, you fling yourself fully into each turn and spin. When you dance salsa, everything in you moves, everything comes to life.

Whenever the fat deejay shouts into the microphone “¡Viva Puerto Rico!” and you shout back “¡Wepa!” these men look at you funny, trying to discern whether you’re black or brown, when the truth is you’re both and at home wherever you go. You have no time for questions of ¿Y tu abuela, dónde está? These men—can’t they hear the clave calling? Beneath the other instruments, you hear its bright clicks, one wooden dowel held in the hollow of a palm being struck by the other. Your heart is the door upon which the clave knocks. Pah pah pah.

Deaf to it all, these men continue to dance sedately with you when what you want is to be spun out. After a week of sitting still, first in the seminars, then in your library carrel, then behind the desk in your tiny cramped shared cubicle office, you are filled to the brim with academia. You want to shake yourself loose and give it all to the music, knowing the clave can take it. The music sweeps away all of your cares. The clave takes away the Graduate Chair who’s attempting to block you from taking your exams. The clave makes you forget that since your arrival, the black faculty members you came to study under have been leaving for other universities—one off to Duke, and another headed for Columbia—where they will mentor students who are not you. The clave erases your guilt that even with so much unstructured time you still cannot manage to complete all of your assigned reading, makes you forget that fourteen thousand dollars a year is not enough for anyone to live a life.

At the opening strains of “Aguanile” you leave the dance floor for some air. After the Héctor Lavoe song, the deejay switches to merengue and reggaeton to give the salseros a break. You’re tapping your feet to Elvis Crespo’s “Suavemente” when Xochitl and Enid find you by the small open window at the end of the bar.

“We’re going to head out,” Enid says. “Ready?”

“It’s barely midnight. The night’s still young.”

“I need to catch the last train up. I have to make another stop.” Enid blushes and you avoid Xochitl’s knowing eyes. It’s an open secret that Enid is the paramour of a married man, a retired NBA player. She claims it’s just for the time being and calls it the

perfect graduate school relationship—companionship without distraction. Cheeks still glowing, Enid takes your hand and promises, “We’ll stay longer next time. Right till the end, okay?”

You ask, “Is everyone else leaving too?”

Xochitl says, “Rashid went to the Five Spot. Alvin’s coming with.”

“I’m not ready yet.”

“You’re going to stay?” Enid asks. “Will you be okay by yourself?”

It’s a laughable question. You’re a black Boricua from Brooklyn and you’re used to clubs that never close and trains that never stop running. You know that danger accompanies night and you can handle anything the late hour brings. You say, “I’m good,” and refrain from reminding Enid that even though she’s older than you, her parents still support her.

“You haven’t been drinking?” she asks.

“Not enough to matter.” You’ve had two beers, but you’ve already sweated out their buzz on the dance floor.

“Sure?”

You tell her, “I’m as sober as Orals and Comps.”

“Then you *do* need to stay longer,” Xochitl says. She signals the bartender.

Enid hugs you. She whispers, “Be safe,” and leaves to round up Alvin.

Xochitl hands you a drink, milky-white and sour. It tastes like sap. The first sip repulses you, but then you drink and drink.

“Slow it down there.” Xochitl’s hand is on your elbow. “Nadia, you okay?”

“Yes. Great,” you say. “Xochitl, I love you.” You wrap yourself around her. You love the drink and you love Xochitl for bringing it to you. You love Xochitl for being one of the few actively enrolled grad students of color in the department. Except for one first year, the others are eternal ABDs, and have been here for six, seven and eight years. When you complete your coursework, field exams and file your dissertation, they will still be ABD. Two will finish after you; one will never finish at all. They’ll melt into the city, taking jobs which require no doctorates. Opting for high school and community college gigs, they’ll go from scholar to teacher and never publish a thing. But Xochitl? Xochitl you see at the copy machine in the main office preparing her course packet for the

semester; Xochitl you hear holding office hours in the cubicle office two over from yours. You wonder if Xochitl knows how important she is, how just seeing her is a needful thing.

Xochitl returns your embrace. “I love you too, girl,” she says. “Take slower sips.”

Your friends leave and you remain by the window, catching the cool October breeze. You watch them emerge from the entrance below and head down the street before disappearing up Market to catch the last train. Across the street from your perch a neon sign buzzes and glows, advertising psychic readings. Below it, the large palm of a hand glitters electric blue, open for business.

Travis finds you a few minutes later. “I thought everyone left?”

“Too early for me.” The salsa’s back and the clave’s calling. You peer around him for your next partner.

“Dance?”

Each time Travis tries to execute the combination from the lesson, he leads off with the wrong foot. Soon enough, he gives up on the fancy moves and the two of you dance the basic through Héctor Lavoe’s “El Cantante.” During Gran Combo’s “Me Libere,” he holds you closer. By the time the deejay plays the Marc Anthony/Jennifer Lopez duet “No Me Ames” your torsos are touching. Emboldened, Travis executes a wrap-to-cuddle turn, his arm a band across your chest that brings the back of your body directly into contact with the front of his.

He nips your ear and whispers, “You taste like salt.”

You answer, “I’m a margarita.”

When he turns you back to face him once more, you’re both slick with sweat.

The clave tells you to drop your dance hold and twine your arms around his neck. The clave calls out the beat, sets the rhythm, establishes the pattern, but when Travis wedges his knee between your legs and pulls you into him the formal steps no longer matter. Quick, quick, slow has a whole new meaning. He drags his teeth across your neck like tines scraping the surface of the güiro and for you the club empties. You’ve seen passion flare up on a dance floor before, but never has anything like this happened to you. And the fat deejay knows—he knows your mind, knows now is the time to wind down, to switch from salsa to bachata, knows that bachata will send the salseros to the bar to cool off, keeping only the lovers on the floor. Travis brushes his lips across your sweaty forehead, trailing kisses down the bridge of your nose, waiting

for you to lift your chin and meet him halfway. His kiss is a clave keeping the beat inside your mouth. How strange to have met each other here in Philadelphia when you are both from New York. How strange that at home you live two boroughs away, but here in Philly, you live only three blocks apart. How strange to be kissed in public and not give a damn what other people can see.

By the time the club closes, the trains have stopped and it's everyone for themselves. Some partygoers head over for the Night Owl buses and the rest line the curbs on Second and Chestnut, fighting for each taxi hailed. The drunk white girls keep getting them first. The cabs won't stop for Travis, but as soon as you move away from him to stand at the curb, one pulls right up alongside your bare brown legs.

Travis opens your door, then slides in beside you. "It still seems so early," he says. "I can't believe they all left. One more hour wouldn't have killed them."

"Enid said next time they'll stay and close the joint." You give the driver your address.

Travis lays his head back against the seat and slips an arm around you. "*Next time*. I like the sound of that."

But there will never be a next time. Not like this with everyone all together. There is too much to do, and the demands of graduate school pull you all in different directions. After tonight, Travis will date you for the rest of the semester. Then he'll go back to The Bronx for winter break, reconnect with his high school sweetheart and return in January to tell you all about it. You'll agree to settle for friendship, but by February you'll be sleeping together once more. You'll think this means he's ended it with her, until the two of you are doing stints as Summer Session RAs and you see a girl wearing an engagement ring emerge from his room early one morning.

And everyone else?

On New Year's Eve, a smaller group will return to this same club and Xochitl will end up entwined around Rafael, a new addition to the group, a fifth year Comp Lit grad student from Spain. No one will see or hear from her for two weeks, by which time she and Rafael will have moved in together. When he returns to Spain, she'll discontinue her studies and follow him. Alvin will become engaged to a substitute teacher. Three years after his wedding, he'll be divorced. Rashid will drop out with just his Master's and return to Queens to teach high school. Enid will be hired as Assistant Dean at Bryn Mawr, her

undergrad alma mater. She'll love it there and believe that she has found her calling. Ready to settle into life, she'll make plans to buy a house in Rittenhouse Square, throw over her basketball player and shed the role of mistress, but before she can do any of it, she'll be diagnosed with stomach cancer. Three months later, she'll be dead. You'll attend a memorial in her honor and remember this evening when she stood before you and Xochitl with her cheeks so flushed and bright.

Tonight, you know none of this. Seated in the back of a taxi beside Travis, the clave thrums the beat of your heart, and you think all of your lives are just beginning.

# SECOND PRIZE, 2019 RICK DEMARINIS SHORT FICTION

## THE SECOND FIRST TIME

Paula Brancato

Ira was a boy I knew for two years and loved in the way that teens do: madly, completely, within two feet of him, but always looking around the corner. This was not promiscuity as the Catholic prayer-book defined it, where merely glancing at another boy was sinful and locking eyes would send you to Hell. This was the folly of youth. Like catching a man staring at another woman, breaking her down into her naked body parts, salivating, then giving this excuse, "I was just looking at her clothes."

Ira, like me, was sixteen. We were both math eggheads, both athletes if you count Ira's chess and checkers as athletic games, and we had both received early admission to Queens College. This was in the days when early admission meant you actually skipped a grade or two of high school and entered college early, a real honor, or necessity, for smart kids from bad neighborhoods who were too short and clumsy to play basketball and too afraid, or female, to take up contact sports. Our favorite date was a Woody Allen movie like *Sleeper* – a love story about two people who hated each other, 200 years in the future -- followed by Whoppers and cokes at Burger King. All of this slurped down in his red Mustang between mayonnaise kisses, which led to heavy petting. We usually parked at Alley Pond Park, windows fogged, under the giant maple tree, unless some other couple parked there first. The tree's branches, even in winter and during our most delicate positions, perfectly blotted out the offending street lights. We hated to move even one half-space over.

I certainly liked Ira well enough. And we had waited and waited. First because we were terrified, then because we weren't sure we wanted to be each others' firsts, which technically I wasn't, due to my earlier "mistake" with an older boy who was not so nice, in fact, not nice at all, leaving me little say in the matter. In those days, a girl did not complain. A girl kept secrets. What was I to say, he surprised me? My panties were off for heavy petting and not for, well, that!

My father, grandfather, brother, and uncle would kill me. Then I'd be dead. Where is the sense in that?

sofa and we needed his parents, who were devout Jews bent on exorcising the Shiksa from his life, that would be me, to be far, far away.

I was adamant this time. I was sure I had made the right choice. I was ready for the heavens to open up to me, the thunderclap to come and whatever else happened when you loved a boy and did it right. This time I was going to have sex because I decided I wanted it. I'd picked the boy, the time, the place. I would have picked the position if I knew I had alternatives.

Finally, the day came. Parents on vacation, Ira had the keys to the house. Holding hands, giggling, we climbed down the narrow staircase to his basement. Ever thoughtful, Ira already had two sheets, a top and bottom, folded on the sofa's arm. "What are these for?" I said. My fantasy hadn't involved sheets. His grandmother's sofa had no plastic cover a sweaty body could stick to. The fabric was embroidered paisley with gold and green raised threads, uber-decadent, if worn. I ran my fingers over it. It was soft, not scratchy, like the fabrics at my house where even the towels were rough with cheapness. I could sit my naked bottom, I decided, easily on Ira's grandma's sofa. I felt a sudden fondness for this grandmother of his. Then I remembered she had not survived Auschwitz.

The sofa, like many items left behind by those moved to the work camps, then the death camps, had a story. It had come back to Ira's family through a Christian family in Belgium, the Choiniere's. They had taken great risks befriending his grandmother just before the war. She had bequeathed it to them for safe-keeping when the family was moved to the ghetto. A Choiniere uncle had contacted Ira's family, years later, finding a postcard Ira's mother had written his mother from the camps. May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1941: "I can only write every 14 days. I go to school here. We had colds but Mamma is fine. Can you please send batteries? Best to your family, A." Ira's mother, Anna, would have been 10 and his grandmother 30 at that time, awaiting the move to Auschwitz. His mother still had the tattooed numbers on her arm. I saw them once when she was bent over the saucepot, cooking dumplings, fragrant steam filling the kitchen. Hair clipped back, apron on, she had rolled up her sleeves to stir the pot. She rolled them down when she saw me looking. I wished she hadn't. I don't know why.

I touched the sofa with reverence. The fabric I loved was probably not original. But I wasn't a virgin either, so I figured we were fair and square.

Ira and I tucked a bottom sheet onto the sofa and argued over how to put the top sheet on, "This side is the side; that side is the front." "Says who?" "Says me." "Tuck the corner in!" "No leave it flat." "It's not a bed, you know." "So?" "So, nothing!" "It's not a crime!" "I need to stick my feet outside."

Fully dressed, we climbed into the cocoon and lay there, suddenly quiet. I was



not sure what exactly we were supposed to do. I mean, I knew the mechanics and everything. We began removing clothes, as if onstage, under bright lights in front of cameras, tossing them out from under the top sheet. But when we kissed, the supporting actors, cast and crew filled my head -- my mother, my father, my brother, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, Ira's grandparents, his mother, the boy I had a crush on at the grocery store and anyone else with whom I had ever had a connection, including my real "first," Jimmy. The more I tried to push them away, the more they flooded in, a montage of everyone and everything that would never be the same when this was over, a veritable parade. I knew they did this, all of them: Zia Clara, Uncle Tony, Zio Nino, Tina Marie, prostitutes, dingbats, even mongooses could do this thing. Perhaps Ira was having his own family parade.

"Your skin's so soft," he said.

We were buck naked now and he had an erection. Jumping on it did not seem appropriate. It was so proud and upright. I didn't want to hurt it. His penis seemed, actually, not like a thing I wanted but more like a thing that was in the way. "Ouch!" he muttered, stuck to my belly. Unsticking himself, he slipped it between my legs and I squeezed, trying to keep him an inch or two away.

We should kiss more, I decided, but how to get one's teeth and lips to act naturally given the up and coming grand event. This was, would be, to my mind and his, the last virginal kiss. Not too short and stiff was the thought that sprang to mind -- the kiss, I meant. This made me blush. I hoped Ira didn't know what I was thinking. The kiss should taste like love. And it should start and stop on cue. But this was the first time Ira and I had kissed inside sheets, the first time I had kissed anything between sheets besides a dog, cat or Teddy Bear.

It was odd lying down on something soft, something with history, all stretched out atop one another. I missed the smell of car seat leather, the touch of hard earth and rocks at my back, the wild grass and yellow dandelions, things that had become our personal aphrodisiacs. Beside those memories, the sofa with its shockingly clean linens seemed sterile. It was simply too "good." I was on the point of losing my virginity and I could not imagine anyone, let alone Ira, fucking me in this "bed." You needed Hell for fucking. Red lights and wailing sirens. Rock and roll and black Ferraris, not clean sheets. Love had nothing to do with it. We were bigger and smaller than that, our bodies knocking together.

Then it seemed the kissing was over. I spread my legs. His hands searched me. Not much. He was eager, and I was wet. I could not touch him, though I had before. It seemed at this point indelicate. That was not how, this time, he was supposed to come.

"You alright?" he asked.

“Yeah, sure, fine,” I said. What else would I be?

He kissed me again, like he was buying time and trying to be grown-up passionate. “Should I?” he said, his face red.

“Uh, yes,” I was kind of enjoying his consternation, his absolute focus on me. I was so entranced by my power I forgot for a moment what I was here to do. I did not know whether or not I was ready. I did not know anyone was supposed to be ready or that there was a state of readiness I might or might not be in. I thought the simple act of screwing, of him inside me, would lead us places we had never been. I didn’t really think I would have to do anything else but let him do me. In fact, I thought it would be best if I did nothing much, like taking an exam. After you’ve done your preparation, all you do is show up and take the test. Soon, too soon, with a little grunt Ira was inside me. Clutching him, I closed my eyes and waited for the thunder, for the birds to fly by, the sky to rend, the earth to crack open, a bolt of lightning perhaps to drop from the clouds. Something. Anything. We lay quite still for a while.

He was hard inside me. “You, OK?”

I nodded, but that did not seem convincing enough. This was a time when there was a need for special emphasis. “Yeah, sure. And you?” I said brightly, like I had just bought an entire ice cream parlor.

He said “OK, great, fine,” or something like that. But my hip was on the tip of a sofa spring. This was not the softest place to be. I moved a little, repositioning my butt. That was not a good thing. “Ahhhhh!” Ira fairly screamed, then he got caught up in the motion. One of life’s great mysteries is how an inch to a man can be six inches. I moved not a half an inch. But he was moving wildly now, caught up in my tiny motion, a half stroke, one, one and a half, two – I actually counted. A little gasp. “Ahhhhhhhh! Haaaaaaa!” And then it was over. Like a spoon through custard, I thought to myself. Is that it? Is that all? I had not even seen the face of the Madonna.

Ira rolled off me, panting. I could not tell if he was happy or if he was having a heart attack. It took a while for him to go slack. If the angels were looking down, they would have seen two shocked white faces, side-by-side, outside a shroud held up by a tentpole.

It seemed impolite to ask, but I had to. “Er... is it over?” I ventured, turning my head away as women do when trying not to show how very wrong they think the man is, despite the fact he has done nothing much to deserve being wrong, or if he did, he probably couldn’t help it. Ira grinned sheepishly then he positively lolled. He was clearly in a place I wasn’t. It had honeydew melons and clear cool springs and warm sweet oceans. His breathing slowed. He had a smile on his face. His penis was definitely flaccid.

“That’s it?” I asked again. I felt his sticky wetness between my legs and on my belly.

“Yeah, it was great. Wasn’t it?” he said.

This is evil to say and I know it, but there is an emptiness a woman feels when a man is satisfied and a woman is not, an emptiness full of rage. I didn’t want to clue him in. I wanted to slap him.

“Yeah, great...” I said and left it at that.

As we dressed, he tried again to connect. “Um, so... was it good?” he asked.

I folded up the sheets. “Yeah, it was.”

He took the sheets from my hands and threw them in the hamper. I wished he had held my head and kissed me. I wished we could start again but I did not know how to ask, or even if such things were possible. Besides, it might be worse!

I could see he was handsome in the half light, in the way boys are when they grow to men, his chest lean, stomach taut. His lips were slightly puffy. A lock of hair fell into his eyes. I wanted to touch him but could not. No more than he could take my hands instead of the bedclothes. It was the first time I realized he, as any man or boy would be, was really different from me in a way I could never know. Not better. Not stronger. Just different with no idea of what I felt inside. He could have been 20 or 25, emboldened, while I looked 12 after the experience. “It was something,” he said, and I thought to myself, “What is wrong with me?”

I did not see Ira again for several years. We did not speak in between. I do not think he ever called me. Or rather he called and called, and I never called back. In my first year of college, when I still lived at home, my parents would leave me messages. “Ira called.” “Ira was looking for you.” And then, when I moved out, my roommates would let me know, “Uh, that guy, that what’s-his-name wants you to call back.” This was before cell phones, before telephone answering machines. Some people did not own their own phones. We shared a pay phone down the hall.

I began to think I was incapable of feeling anything. And perhaps I was, at that time. Too experienced to fuck myself up all over again, too inexperienced to know what to do for myself, I could not bear for Ira, the boy whose virginity I had taken, to know that I did not fit with him. That was not a place that I could go because I did not fit with anyone. In fact, I did not fit with myself. I was looking for that indefinable thing that would make me happy, or at least make me feel something.

This was not the kind of thing we spoke about back then – having sex and not falling in love. Not when everyone else was doing it. Everyone looked so happy or maybe they were just stoned all the time. I would see Ira around school. We would look at one another, nod and set off in opposite directions. He opened his mouth once.

I thought he meant to say something, but the bell rang, the hall filled with students and he disappeared into the crowd.

We did speak once, finally. I was on a bus, holding onto the strap and turned my head into his armpit. He had grown in the intervening two years and was nearly 6'5". "How's your mom?" I asked neck craned back. I had not grown at all.

"Not so good," he said. We had all heard she had the cancer. We got off the bus and walked for a while, under the spreading oaks. It was fall, 1975, the leaves turning, the sky sepia, a few children swinging in the park. Bill Clinton had married Hillary Rodham, NBC aired the first episode of *Saturday Night Live* and the Vietnam War was over, the Communists taking Saigon. He said he was dropping out of school to take care of his mother, leaving his scholarship behind.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah." he nodded.

I understood, so lacked the requisite fire for the argument that might have changed our lives. We had stopped walking. Ira hung his head over me, lips close to mine. I could feel the bark of the oak tree through my college sweater, the shush of the traffic nearby, as he held me. My mascara brushed his cheek, his nose, the imperceptible lines around his eyes. It would always be men, when I wanted to stay, men and their beauty that moved me. Like so many pieces of my past, I kissed him with my red-hot lips and said goodbye.

# HONORABLE MENTION 2019 RICK DEMARINIS SHORT FICTION

BULL  
sid sibo

Milo clumped through the back hallway of the DuckButt Brew Club. Thick fingers loosened his straw-colored hair into random spikes. To check what he'd be walking into, he hid behind the upside-down mallard painted on the swinging glass door. Jimmy J sat at the center table, bandy legs stretched out, showing off his boots' scrolled tooling. He held court among the morning's usual caffeinated gathering of ranchers.

"Moo, you finally get fired?"

To these old-timers, he'd been Moo since grade school, when some kid got clever about the fermented silage smell from his father's dairy. "Just on vacation." Nowadays his job was making sure none of these clowns operated outside the terms of their Forest Service permits. "So sorry for you."

"I'm not afraid." Jimmy J pushed his high-crowned hat back and sipped his coffee. "But if hanging around Hekla is how you spend your vacation, I'm sorry for you."

Because money was tight, Milo offered to cut wood for his sister's furnace. "I suppose you prefer Vegas." He was a Wyoming loyalist—saw no need to leave Moon Valley, where city people vacationed. He pulled his mug off the shelf.

"Grab one for me too."

He stiffened. He hadn't heard that voice in a while. Clarence Bainbreck last held a grazing permit three years ago. Milo picked an extra mug. "Clarence." He tipped some coffee into it.

Clarence nodded. "Appreciate it."

Milo remembered their last conversation. Clarence had neglected to pay his fees for seven years by then. "No one gets a free lunch," Milo told him. "Undercuts the spirit of the marketplace."

Clarence pulled a chair up to Jimmy J's table. "Anyone around town offering free Thanksgiving meals?"

"A few days early for that." Jimmy J caught Tamsen as she passed by with a tray full of dirty dishes. "I'll get his too." He cocked his thumb at Clarence and scooted his chair over to make room. "How you been?"

"Steak and eggs, then, darlin'." Clarence turned from Tamsen toward the wind-chapped faces. "Damn fine, I'd say."

Milo stepped into the kitchen. He spun a finger in a circle next to his ear.

Tamsen turned the radio up, pedal steel whining over sizzling bacon. “Didn’t he go out of business?”

“Thought so. Never had enough land to support stock year-round. Not enough money to pay lease fees anywhere else.”

“Wonder where he went?”

“Dunno. At current rates, private grazing leases cost ten times more’n public land fees.”

Tamsen looked up from flipping hot cakes. “But they band together if the *gu’mmint* picks on anyone.”

Milo snorted. “Someone took pity on him. Probably someone looking for a political poster child.”

Tamsen grinned. “Damn *Federales*.”

Milo frowned. “Think I’ll take Pia-girl for a run.” He was on vacation, after all. A break from ranchers would be welcome.

“Saw a flyer about a palomino loose up Goat Creek.” She paused before pushing into the dining area. “Ride that way, a horse might follow Pia out.”

He didn’t care where he rode. It was all mountains, all space. People were not his favorite animal.

At the still-shadowed end of the dirt road, he pulled fringed chinks from the bed of his rusted truck. On this west slope of the Tuhudda Range, timbered canyons didn’t offer much grass, so Milo and Pia set off at a lope. No grazing here, to protect drinking water for Moon Valley’s hamlets. The upper canyons, though, opened into meadows. Jimmy J’s sheep raised their lambs in that high country.

Pia sensed his need for distance and she dodged rocks and tree roots. But then her ears pricked sharp and she lifted her head, snorting and shimmying sideways. Milo sank deep in the saddle, and followed her ears to find a white boulder on the gloomy hill. “Really?” He laid a hand on her neck. “Seeing albino lions now?” She answered by backing into a tree, knocking loose the last faded yellow leaves in a shower around them. He laughed out loud, sucking in a draft of fragrant air. “Thanks, sweetheart. I needed that.”

He pressed her forward, studying the ground for sign. So far, all pellets here, snowshoe hare, mule deer, moose. No elk this low yet, with real snow late coming. No horse-like biscuits. In the dairy, he despised liquid cow shit. At least range cattle spread their own manure.

Avoiding the milk barn was how he discovered horses, and mountain trails, slipping in mud or choking in dust but always climbing—climbing away from whatever

pettiness trapped everyone down in the Valley. The only newspaper he needed was etched on a pinecone, tossed by a red squirrel. Milo soaked in green range grasses, yellow balsamroot, blue space scented with horse sweat. Inherent benefits, as Forest Service recruiters said. Half the paycheck was the view.

He lifted his hand on the mecate reins, looking harder at several frosted piles of dung. Unless a moose had diarrhea, that had to be cow. He frowned. The closest cattle allotment was nine trail miles away, over the cliffy top of the range and down along the Rauquasha River. Pia tossed her nose and let out a whinny that shook her sides. Milo listened for a response.

Pine needles rubbed against each other. Red-breasted nuthatches discussed insects as they nosed down furrowed bark. A clump of melting snow slipped off spruce boughs with a muffled whump and spooked his horse, again.

He let her lope on, following her nose, convinced that she smelled someone interesting. She slipped on icy stones and Milo stood in his stirrups, free hand on the saddle horn. She whinnied again, and her voice reverberated through her ribs, against his knees. Under her hooves, crackling ice shelves on the creek's edge matched the water's racket across half-exposed rocks. He couldn't say for sure if he heard an answering nicker. The big meadow was just ahead.

As they crested over the stream's high bank, dormant bromes and ryegrasses stretched for a pale meadow mile in two directions, infrequently interrupted by spindly clumps of piss-fir. The mountain's dropped gravels wouldn't hold enough water to grow real trees for a few more centuries. He sighted between Pia's pricked ears.

Nowhere to hide. The missing palomino had been found—by its own rider. And they weren't alone. The meadow's light snow was speckled with boulder-sized beasts of brick red, or black. The rider pushed his half-draft toward the north-facing slope, the densest trees. Pia's long-legged walk covered the mounded hummocks toward the closest animals. All bulls, he noticed. Unusual.

The bulls gave him and Pia a wary glare. Their winter coats were too shaggy for a clear look at the brand. He pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket and zoomed the camera on the right front shoulders of two different bulls. When he stuffed the phone back, he saw the rider heading his way. He'd been busted.

Milo stretched his legs—casual—out of the stirrups, leaned a chilled palm back onto Pia's spotted butt. The cowboy's face was still shadowed under the wide curl of hat brim, even-wider shoulders floating easily over his gelding's big trot.

"Moo." A beefy hand tilted the hat. "When'd you get an Appaloosa?"

Clarence. Tipping his toes back into the stirrups, Milo leaned forward. "A few years now. Nice looking bulls."

He accepted the compliment. "Saw you taking pictures."

"Didn't know you were up here." Milo saw Clarence's holster secured with a thin strip of latigo to his thigh.

"Well, you know my brand well enough." He was bigger than anyone in the crowd down at the Brew Club, a full head taller than Jimmy J and twice as broad. He rode a horse well and knew it. "The new ranger told me I could use this country for a few weeks."

Milo's false-casual posture disappeared. He tried to force his face to stay neutral but couldn't imagine he succeeded. He turned toward the meadow full of bulls. *A few weeks.* Just while he was on leave? Or maybe: since hunting season was over, the ranger thought no one would likely be riding here anymore. Clarence's bulls could stay undetected until winter decided to arrive. His eyes traveled to the Goat's small creek bed, took in the damage from the hefty animals lingering where the grass was greenest. He could be certain that Clarence didn't bother to hang out up here every day, pushing the bulls onto drier, less-nutritious and less-vulnerable ground. But paying a range rider would mean someone else knowing about this scheme.

Milo dropped a question without facing Clarence. "Doing the herding yourself, then?"

He had an answer ready. "Not out here long enough to hire someone."

Milo heard the big horse pawing the ground, impatient. Pia too would have loved to get closer, but he held her where she was, his hands light, knee pressure alone communicating his emphasis. Under the creek's babble, he could hear that Clarence wasn't being honest. He steeled his stomach muscles despite the kicked-in feeling, and layered a fake calmness over his twitching eyes. Finally he turned around.

"Well, I've been off work a few days, so I'll just have to believe you." He spread a palm over the dried sweat on Pia's arched neck. "I'm thinking about entering the Coso Junction endurance run down in Arizona. We'd best keep movin'." He didn't doubt Clarence heard his lie as well.

The rancher met his eyes, thoughtful. "Enjoy your vacation, Milo." Then he spun his horse and lifted an arm in farewell as he loped away toward the trees.

"Bastard."

Pia flicked her ears at his sharp voice.

His heels nudged the mare further up the trail toward the creek's headwaters, and he noted more trampling along the water, the pummeled sedges that would have held nutrition into the winter, if wildlife could reach them through the snow. Sure, he was on vacation. In his mind, he built a picture of where Clarence's herd of bulls had been, and for how long. He couldn't keep them here indefinitely, but they could do major harm



even in a short time. The late-starting winters of recent years must have given him this idea of slipping in. And he had the cojones to imply Milo could—or should—simply say nothing.

To figure a grazing bill, Milo made a quick estimate of the bulls he'd seen. The bill wasn't as much as a judge could fine him for being out here in the first place, if the Ranger hadn't actually given permission. Of course, any single bull might bring him more at a sale than the maximum fine would be. A different cost-benefit calculation entirely—and enough to cover the unauthorized price of a Ranger's okay.

Afternoon faded fast this time of year, and Milo felt winter's chill rising off the snow that had gotten deeper as they climbed. He chose not to return down the official trail. Pia swung across on a game path that skirted the meadow and stayed high on the sidehill almost all the way to the parking pull-out. A waxing moon lit crackling leaves and frost-slick rocks as he picked his way down the final slope on foot, the mare's warm breath in his ear. Where the canyon road connected back to the highway, he turned his phone on and waited for service, thinking what to say to his sister.

"About time—" Tamsen's voice was brittle across the airwaves. "I considered hiking out to look for your horse."

"But you didn't want to have two search parties going the same night?"

"Exactly. Go feed Pia and meet me back at the Brew Club. Stew's waiting."

Milo's stomach was too unsettled to be around people. "Cold must've wore my batteries down. Take a rain check?"

"Suit yourself."

\* \* \*

Back at the barn, he listened to Pia chewing oats, and breathed in the alfalfa scent of hay. With deep brown eyes, she watched him, but made no judgment, and no demands. When she finished her grain, she scratched her bony nose along his arm. Inside his trailer house, a long bath eased only his surface layers. Dunbar, the new district ranger, had a house far fancier than the salary of your garden-variety public servant. A decaf and Jameson's made no dent at relaxing the rest of him.

Milo's feet hung off the edge of the bed. He steamed as he thought about pissing away his career. Would he turn Pia loose to graze illegally on the Forest when he could no longer afford to buy her hay? Sick with his dilemma, he shivered in an imaginary cave hideaway, unable to light a fire because it would give away his illicit location. The goose-down over his head finally comforted him to sleep.

Morning counted off another vacation day, and again, he started with the Brew Club's firewood. He fantasized Clarence's face, then the Ranger's, on top of each round. After an hour of whack, crack and split, his arms felt spent. Just one more. He

blasted the maul's sharp edge into Clarence's image with all the force he could muster. Thunk. Milo glared at the gnarled knots. While he studied the wood, mountain air poured in and out of his lungs. He positioned the point of an icy metal wedge on the cut surface. Maybe here? Against its blunt end, he tapped the back side of the maul until the wedge stuck. Listening for success, he let gravity and maul prod the wedge past twisted wood grain. The round finally released its grip and sagged apart. Small victories.

Thirst turned his attention toward coffee, but he wanted to stack what he had finished so far. He bent to the task, focused on placing each awkward piece in a stable spot. The sound of tires rolled into the alley behind him—a new duallie truck with an out-of-state license plate. He stared, trying to see where it was from, but the driver stomped on the gas, spinning stray pebbles his way.

When he walked in, Jimmy J's usual crowd had expanded. Six, seven, eight unfamiliar men. Western hats all around, although footwear varied, given the ice and mud. All of the newcomers were wearing firearms. Perfectly legal, so long as they were visible. That didn't help Milo feel any safer. Sausage grease hung in the air, and he longed for the clean tang of horse breath. Clarence was conspicuous by his absence.

Tamsen hung up the first table's order, then pulled Milo aside. "I did some sniffing around online last night," she said. "Clarence apparently believes God's talking to him again. And apparently," she rolled her eyes toward the tables, "other people like what God's got to say."

Milo leaned toward the mountains' wind-battered meadows, wanting out. But over the burble of the coffee pot and the griddle's hiss, raised voices carried.

"God's about justice, what I was taught." Jimmy J leaned back in his chair, his ankles hooked around its legs. His chin and nose were pointed sharp as an axe head. The shearling that lined his corduroy vest had caught some stiff hay stems.

A delivery truck backed into position in the alley, its alarm beepers loud. Jimmy J's hat turned slowly in his hands as he spoke, but Milo heard nothing more.

He pulled a glove out of his back pocket and stuffed his clammy fingers into their slots. "Weather's coming this afternoon. Might better get a ride in this morning."

Tamsen caught his arm. "Wait." Her head was cocked toward the front.

In a jumble of conversation, the words Forest Service stood out like blaze orange against dark timber. As usual, a common enemy would provide the unifying force. Jimmy J leaned forward on his elbows now, his thick knuckles wrapped white around his mug.

Milo didn't bother with the trailer, didn't even worry about a saddle. He'd be warmer bareback, he figured. In a half mile, they could be off county roads and on

public land. He shimmied belly-first onto Pia's back, then slid his legs down along her sides. His thighs paralleled hers; her mind helped his mind loosen into the clear air. What a gift—horse presence. Horse power.

They made it to the dirt road, and he let her pick up a lope, her mane flying back into his hand on the reins, her head high. He didn't fuss with her, didn't try to bring her nose down into approved form, where he would know she was paying attention to him. She was paying attention to the wind, so he paid attention to the wind too. With a quick sideways leap, Pia danced with the rattle of an empty plastic sack—clearly a snake—behind a passing Buick. Every challenge became a game for her, and collectively, for him. Horses were one of his favorite kinds of people.

He rode long enough to wear himself out, an extra effort staying balanced without stirrups on Pia's slick coat. For the last half-mile, he slid off and walked her, his heart retaining her four-beat cadence even in his two-legged stride. She was a multiple of him, or he of her, he couldn't remember which way that went. He breathed in her warm horse smell.

Pulling into the driveway ahead of them was a yellow van painted with windmills, bold black letters proclaiming *Power On! Peace* with a combative sort of joy. An unannounced visit from Katrina.

"Milo." She flattened a palm in his direction, then indicated two other women, stepping out of the van, also weathered-looking in their flannel-lined jean jackets, and probably also in their sixties, maybe older. "Ruby and Trudy Cann, from the Western Shoshone Nation. They've been leading a workshop up at Peace camp."

"I'm Ruby," said the shorter one. "My sister's the smart one."

"Trudy." She nodded but was already looking at Pia. "Our favorite part of Moon Valley is the horses everywhere."

Milo shook their hands in turn. "Though you have to admit most of them only get used during hunting season."

"True enough." Katrina motioned the women toward Pia. "When Tamsen said you were out here, we thought we'd stop."

Ruby ran her hands along Pia's legs. "This one's in great shape." She nodded.

Trudy grinned. "We used to train some for trick riding."

"I used to be able to balance in a handstand on our pony." Milo laughed. "Haven't had the guts for that in a long time."

"Too many people worry about their guts." A dismissive hiss from Ruby. "Question is whether you still have the heart."

Trudy shook her head. "Can you vault on while your horse gallops by? Old warrior trick—came in handy."

“A person could still find a use for it, I imagine.” Ruby grabbed a hunk of Pia’s mane to demonstrate the moves.

Katrina was the kind of person who never slowed down. She had returned to the van and pulled out a bucket of frost-bitten and holey greens. “You want some of these for your horse? Tamsen ordered a ton of beets for Thanksgiving. Didn’t want the tops, though.”

Trudy grabbed the pail and walked back to Pia, holding the greens up for her to sample. She grabbed a mouthful and tossed her head, leaves flopping around her muzzle. “You turkey.” Pia gave her a pointed look, still nodding her head up and down energetically. “She thinks she’s got green wings.”

Milo watched his mare, and searched for polite conversation. “What kind of workshop’re you leading?”

The two women talked to the horse, their voices low, or in a language Milo couldn’t understand. Katrina answered. “Ways to gain federal recognition for historic tribal lands.”

Milo looked at Katrina for more. If he remembered right, the government denied the Shoshone their grazing lands. Might not want to repeat that technique.

“These two scored an \$80 million settlement from the feds, but the tribe voted not to accept the money. It was their land and they wanted it back.”

Ruby and Trudy obviously knew the story, so they weren’t compelled to stand and listen to Kat. They stroked Pia’s ears, ran their palms down her Roman nose, scratched the hard-to-reach spot beneath her cheekbones. Her lip stretched up, enjoying the attention.

Milo tried to sort the strands of the story. “So the proposed settlement meant your land rights were recognized? Even though you didn’t accept it?”

Ruby turned and nodded. “Even the U.N. agreed with us, but in the end, the feds removed all our animals anyway.”

Now Milo was curious. “Were you running sheep, or cattle?”

“Some cattle.” Ruby’s voice was even more weathered than her face. “But hundreds of horses. They were beautiful. Amazing, really.”

The world’s constant rotation wobbled. Milo took a step back, one arm out for balance. “They took your horses?”

“We couldn’t stop ‘em.” Ruby stroked Pia’s neck as she nibbled greens from her other hand.

“Watching them run free across the desert,” Trudy leaned another handful of greens toward Pia, “just never got old.”

Milo had an idea what the government did with hundreds of unwanted horses.

Irrationally, he smelled Hoppe's gun solvent.

Ruby's fingers were still wrapped in Pia's mane. "Do you think you could do it?" She half-lifted her leg, demonstrating the correct positioning for a warrior's running mount.

Milo was having trouble standing up, much less imagining himself trick riding.

Katrina snapped her fingers, keeping things on schedule. She slipped around to the driver's seat and put the van in gear. Trudy patted Milo's back, and told him to take good care of his horse.

As they drove off, he called Tamsen to let her know he and Pia had made it home. "Guess who," Tamsen's voice was muffled behind the clang of stainless steel pots, "offered to buy the Sheriff a cup of coffee this morning?"

Milo's head was still penned with the panicked Shoshone horse herd, a dusty streak of sunlight shining off their bright summer coats. "No clue."

"Jimmy J. Actually called him to come by. And the Sheriff was none too pleased at the scene."

"Scene?"

"Jimmy J called 'em all out as Clarence's lackeys. You'd have been proud of him."

"How so?" Milo couldn't catch up. He climbed on the fence and slid back onto his horse, as if she might help.

"...and I quote: 'Ranchers here care about fair. Bainbreck's always looking to sneak his own way up ahead of ever'one else and he ain't afraid to *use* God to get him there.'"

Milo let his backbone fold down against Pia's backbone, his feet up on either side of her withers. He rested his head on the wide warmth of her haunches. Jimmy J was on his side.

"His little speech didn't win him any new friends, but the old friends at least stuck by him. And the Sheriff told everyone we didn't need armed outsiders stirring things up."

Tamsen hung up to finish chopping vegetables. Milo stayed where he was, though Pia walked through her open gate and into her pasture, carrying him along. She found some beet greens that had fallen on the ground and grabbed them up between her strong lips. Again, she tossed her head as she chewed. Milo heard Trudy's voice. Turkey.

He flipped his right leg up and slid off. He pulled Pia's bosal over her head. As he looped the free end of the mecate, she pushed against his back. He stumbled forward. "Be polite." Her muzzle nudged his shoulder. "Right," he said. He scratched behind her

ears and under her thin mane. She tossed her head once more. He nodded. "Go while I've got the guts." He turned for the gate. "Thanks for the idea."

At his computer, he pulled up his art program and from a free clip art site, chose a couple turkeys. The main drag in Hekla, identified by the flying pig on the feed store cupola, he had to sketch for himself. Also the nervous-eyed red angus in the foreground. He placed a turkey on each side of the road, holding their respective ends of a wide banner. WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU BULL, SERVE STEAKS FOR THANKSGIVING. He put no flourishes on the block letters, wanting to be absolutely clear, even if...he was absolutely bluffing.

And absolutely scared. He pulled a long-neck out of the refrigerator and pried off its top. His fingers tapped out a series of charades that created a new online profile for the community group called Turkeys for Truth. Activists called for action, naturally. *For every outside agitator who shows up in Hekla, an illegal range bull on public land will be slaughtered.*

It didn't take long for trolls to start challenging his efforts. He took a hefty swallow and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand.

'Who the hell would actually do this?' demanded Bill in the comments.

"Lots of hunters still out there who think the grass that's left belongs to the elk." Milo kept his response clean.

'You call yourselves conservationists and you'll leave carcasses around to attract bears?'

"Certainly not. The bulls will be packed out and meat distributed to needy Moon Valley residents."

Charles was a laconic sort, whoever he was. 'I see.'

Milo saw a lot of possibilities, himself. Not all of them desirable. No matter how he hid behind the Turkeys, Clarence knew full well who found him up the creek with a herd of bulls. And his boss knew that he knew that no ranger could legally give someone permission to run cattle in the community's water protection zone.

He stayed up late into the night, finding new places to post messages from the Turkeys or responding to disbelievers. A few people asked to be on the list when beef became available. Finally in his old easy chair he slept, dreaming of gold and magenta leaves spinning around his dancing horse.

Tamsen's call woke him in the early daylight. "Don't bother with firewood today."

"What? Why?" He was trying to pretend he'd been awake already.

"Clarence's crowd's grown, and he came in with them this time."

Milo needed coffee. Good, strong camp coffee. With chewable grounds.

"And they seem pissed."

The sun slowly lightened the cloud cover—iron gray with snow that still wouldn't fall. Milo tore himself away from his screen. The Turkeys had flown the coop. When she heard him rambling around, Pia nickered, so he walked out without his breakfast to give her some.

Her steady, grinding teeth settled his empty stomach. He leaned against the fence watching until she finished. "Time on my hands, kid. Wanna try some tricks?"

He spent the morning just teaching her to come to his whistle, since he needed her to come at speed. After he took a break for a sandwich, he found himself back in her pasture, attempting to vault on just at a standstill. She was tall for an Appaloosa, and well, Tamsen was taller than he was. Pia grew impatient with his awkwardness, with his boots slapping against her side. "Enough, I know. Shall we go back to the whistle?" She turned her spotted butt in his direction. He sighed. The internet storm was something to avoid but his own firewood was already split and stacked. He turned her loose and stepped under the hayshed. Hard stems poked his back when he lay down on a bale. The swirling dust motes all seemed to wear hats and carry guns.

Tamsen poked his shoulder. "Milo, wake up. Have you heard what someone started online?"

"What are you doing here? Who's running the Brew Club?"

"Closed early. Too dicey in town. And wanted to make sure you were okay, since you aren't answering your phone."

He waved at the bales surrounding him. "Good as gold." Then he looked for Pia in the pasture. If Tamsen didn't suspect him, maybe they were fine.

"Fool's gold. Since you were fourteen, you've been drawing bulls."

Or maybe not. He looked at her sideways, and tried a grin. "But not turkeys."

"Damn you." She punched his arm. "Come on. You gotta see this stuff."

They huddled around his computer, the fight as unstoppable now as mosquitoes at a bulrush pond. The necks of their beer bottles clacked together, but their bravado sounded hollow. His guts growled louder. "Clarence isn't calling off his cronies."

Tamsen held the wet glass against her cheek. "Well, I needed a vacation too."

He fell asleep before she left, and didn't rise to feed Pia until the sun slid over the mountain. Wind rustled dry grasses, erratic and ambiguous. In the distance he saw a wan, cinder-colored dust cloud kicked up ahead of someone driving in his direction. As it got closer, he recognized the government rig assigned to his boss, and the distinctive pork pie hat Dunbar always wore. Milo muttered—"on vacation, remember? Not being paid to listen to you right now."

In the SUV's wake, a cardboard box was sucked up and tossed forward, the wind behind it a cattle dog gathering speed. The box chased Pia, and she bolted straight for him. Dunbar honked to announce his presence, and she ran faster. Without hesitation,

Milo bent his knees and angled his body like Ruby had demonstrated. As his horse ran past, he grabbed her mane, and the mare's energy launched him successfully aboard. He balanced forward, his hands light on either side of her neck. Cold air flowed around him and through him. Pia galloped across the long field, stretched out and smooth as whiskey.

Next to the highway now, they raced a line of trucks heading south, out of the valley. A line of trucks, he noticed, with out-of-state plates, and curled-up, wide-brimmed hats at the wheel. He lifted his right arm into the air, fist clenched, chasing their retreat. His heart beat as loud as Pia's hooves, rumbling and rhythmic over the solid earth.



## DEPUTY William Cass

The sheriff's department in that little town was housed in what used to be a gas station. The two mechanics' bays had been turned into jail cells, and the adjoining room served as an office; partitions separated a trio of desks and the cot squeezed into a corner was rarely needed. Hugh's nephew, Jake, who was the sheriff, often joked that his job was like being on *The Andy Griffith Show*; the keys to the cells even hung on a ring from the wall just as they did on the show's set. There were less than six hundred people living in town, but the rest of the rural jurisdiction encompassed a couple hundred square miles.

With the early-spring afternoon's light starting its descent, one desk in the office was empty and Hugh sat behind his nephew's. To say that Hugh hadn't expected to find himself there would have been an understatement. He'd stopped by like he always did during his mid-afternoon walk to say hello to Jake. At the time, Hugh's plans for the rest of the day lay ahead of him pretty much as they had regularly since retiring as a middle school math teacher several years before: head back to his garage to spend more time woodworking until dinner, read for a while, then go to bed. But that had changed abruptly when he entered the office as Jake hung up the phone, pursed his lips, and fixed Hugh with a hard stare.

"I need you to do me a favor, Uncle Hugh," Jake said. "And I have to have you to do it now. I need to deputize you for a couple hours."

Jake went on to explain that his regular deputy was on vacation several states away. The main reserve deputy and his wife were both home sick in bed with the stomach flu and 102-degree temperatures; his wife served as the station's dispatcher. Tom's other reserve deputy, a retired teacher like Hugh who Jake only used in a pinch, was on a camping trip off in the mountains and unreachable by cell phone. Jake had to respond right away to a call that had just come in from a rancher out towards the county line who'd found one of his heifers laying in his far pasture with a hind quarter full of shotgun pellets. Jake told him there was only one inmate at the time, a young man named Timmy Denton, who he'd arrested for public intoxication and resisting arrest. He'd come upon Timmy earlier that afternoon swaying and urinating against the back of the station when he returned from lunch at the town's lone diner. Timmy had made things worse by taking a swing at Jake while he was trying to cuff the young man. Regulations didn't allow for an inmate to be left in jail unattended, which is why the temporary deputizing was necessary. Jake was also waiting for court orders to be delivered via courier by the end of the day, and there had to be someone there in the

office authorized to sign for them. He told Hugh that Timmy had been sleeping it off since being locked up, and although it was unlikely any further law enforcement issues would arise, if any did, Hugh could call him on the radio and he'd respond right away. So, Jake had quickly sworn Hugh in, pinned a badge to the lapel of his fleece-lined jacket, and pulled on his own.

"What if Timmy wakes up?" Hugh asked

"Well, if he can make his \$500 bail, he can pay that and leave. Needs to learn a lesson this time though, so he's not walking without it. Chances are slim to none that will be possible for him." Jake opened the door. "I should be back before dark."

For the first hour, nothing happened. Hugh spent his time staring out the window at the occasional traffic and passersby on the town's main street and looking around the office. At one point, he lifted the framed photo from the corner of Jake's desk and studied it. It had been taken a long time ago when Jake was home from the community college he was attending at the time in the closest small city. In it, the two of them stood together grinning into the camera, each holding strings of rainbow trout in front of them, the wide part of the river behind them glinting in the setting sun. That had been a few years after Jake came to live with him, just after Jake's mom, Hugh's sister, had died. Neither Hugh nor his sister had ever married, and there was no other family left, so it was the only reasonable arrangement at the time. But Hugh and Jake had always been close, so he was pleased to do it. And their relationship only deepened further afterwards; to Hugh, Jake was like the son he'd never had. Hugh brushed dust off the glass covering the photo and replaced it carefully where it had been.

He heard the first rustle from the cell nearest the office a little after four-thirty. A cough followed, then Timmy called, "Hey, let me out of here!"

Although it had been more than a decade since Timmy had been a student in his class, Hugh recognized his high-pitched, gravelly voice. He stood up and heard the young man rattle the cell bars as he approached and came through the open doorway into the bay.

Timmy frowned as their eyes met. He said, "Mr. Ferguson, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Filling in."

"Where's the sheriff?"

"Had to go take care of something, so he made me temporary deputy."

Timmy glanced at the badge on Hugh's lapel, his frown deepening. The sharp odor of

alcohol wafted from him through the bars. The young man was still scrawny with 135 uneven stubble on his sallow face and a shock of unruly, brown curls. The blanket that had been on the cot behind him lay bunched in a ball on the concrete floor of the cell. Timmy had been in and out of trouble as a student since elementary school because of poor grades and escalating behavior and attendance issues. He'd been suspended several times and had dropped out of high school his senior year. Since then, Hugh was aware of at least two prior times he'd been picked up, detained, and then released: once for smoking pot and the other for stealing a bicycle.

"Mr. Ferguson, how do I get out of here?"

"Sheriff says you need to put up \$500 bail."

The young man's jaw dropped. "I don't have that kind of cash. No one I know does. Do you?"

"Nope."

Timmy's shoulders slumped. He rubbed the back of his neck and muttered, "Fuck."

Hugh watched Timmy stare at his feet and chew at a thumbnail. The day's last southbound freight train passed in the distance out in the fields beyond town. The sound of it had died away before Timmy's head snapped back up, his eyes doe-like. "The thing is, Mr. Ferguson, I need to give my grandma her insulin shot. It'll mess her up good if I don't. She can't do it herself; she's too loopy in the head anymore and can't remember how." He looked at his watch. "And she's overdue for it by more than an hour."

Hugh remembered when he'd called Timmy's grandmother in to meet together after school one day to discuss his missing homework and poor test scores. Timmy had lived with her for as long as Hugh could remember, ever since his mother had left, and she was a frail, old woman who seemed perpetually lost even back then.

Timmy's eyes grew wider. "Listen, Mr. Ferguson. Just let me out long enough to go give her that shot. I'll come right back afterwards, I promise you."

Hugh felt himself blinking as he considered his options. He couldn't leave the office, and he knew of no one else in town he could contact that had that sort of medical experience. The nearest clinic or hospital was sixty miles away. He pictured Timmy's grandmother struggling in the dilapidated bungalow the two of them shared a few streets away.

Timmy twisted his hands on the cell bars and said, "Fifteen minutes. Twenty tops, I promise."

Hugh thought about his interactions with Timmy when he was younger. Although his performance in class hadn't shown any improvement, he'd never made excuses for his failings or lied about anything.

Timmy tugged on the bars and whispered, "Please."

Hugh shook his head, reached behind him through the doorway into the office, and took the keys off their hook. He clenched his teeth and narrowed his eyes as he showed the ring to Timmy. "Listen, son, this isn't middle school, and this isn't a hall pass." He glanced back at the clock on the office wall. "You get your ass back here by five."

Their eyes held as the young man nodded once. Hugh opened the cell, and Timmy squeezed past him. At the office door, he turned and said, "Thanks."

A gust of cold air came into the office as Timmy opened and closed the door. Hugh listened to his footsteps run off up the pavement. He sat back down in Jake's chair and blew out a long breath. There was no traffic in the street, no sound at all except the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Hugh heard Jake's SUV before he saw it pull into its spot in front of the office a little later. He winced, a chill creeping up his spine, and sat forward as his nephew slammed the truck door closed and came inside.

Jake shrugged out of his jacket, hung it on the coat rack, and looked at his uncle. "Hey," he said. "Everything okay?"

Hugh nodded.

"Courier come?"

"Not yet."

"Damn."

"How'd it go out there?"

Jake cocked his head. "Well, aside from a heifer laying in the middle of nowhere with her butt shot-up for no apparent reason, things are fine."

"Maybe just some kid on a stupid lark."

"Speaking of which...Timmy wake up?"

Hugh swallowed, then said, "Yep."

"Make any trouble?"

Hugh paused, glancing quickly through the doorway into the empty cell with its open door. "None."

Jake followed his uncle's gaze, then turned back slowly, his eyebrows knitting, and glared at Hugh. "How the hell did that little piss-ant post bond?"

Hugh felt himself blinking. He shrugged and said, "He didn't. I let him out because he had to give his grandma her insulin shot. Promised to come back right away."

Jake's head shook slowly back and forth, his frown replaced by a grimace.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Hugh raised his eyebrows and shook his own head.

“How long ago?”

“Ten, fifteen minutes.”

Jake smacked the fist of one hand into the palm of another. “Christ, that shithead could be halfway across the county by now!”

A tractor-trailer lumbered by in the street. They stared at each other silently for another long moment until the office door opened and Timmy came through it. He looked first at Hugh, then at Jake, and closed the door behind him, his rank smell filling the small space. He turned back to Hugh and said, “Well, she’s all taken care of. She’s all set. Thanks again.”

Without looking at either of them, Timmy shuffled past Jake through the doorway and into the cell. Its door made a loud click as he closed it, and he disappeared around the corner. The next sound was the groan of the cot’s springs as Timmy lowered himself onto it. Neither Hugh or Jake moved. They just continued staring at the cell’s door until the young man’s squeaky voice called, “My grandma’s going to try raising that bail. She’ll go to the bank in the morning, see if she can get a loan.”

Jake didn’t nod, but Hugh did. He stood up. Jake watched him take off the badge and set it on the desk. As he passed his nephew, Hugh gave his shoulder a squeeze. Then he was back outside where the gloaming was giving way to darkness. Hugh pulled the collar up on his coat against the chill. As he started down the empty sidewalk, he thought: if she can’t raise the bail, I will. A dog barked nearby, a lonely sound until another answered it.

# FIFTY NAMES OF JESUS

Misti Duvall

A slam against the front door jolts Casey awake. After a few seconds, it repeats in a steady beat, reverberating through her pillow. There's also a deep male voice, saying something she can't quite identify as words. Another voice as well—lighter, laughing—interspersed with static and the occasional bar of music. Casey clenches her jaw and pushes down the urge to scream. She forces her eyes open, pulls back the covers, and swings out of bed, glancing at her alarm clock on her way into the hallway. 6:00am.

Casey enters the living room and sees her grandmother sitting in her favorite rocking chair next to the kitchen divider. The older woman is wrapped in a fuzzy blanket and is half folded over, scrutinizing the large, open Bible on her lap through her magnifying glass. Her old boom box is on the counter next to her, playing her favorite Christian talk radio station. The white curls on her head are standing straight up and there are dark circles under her eyes against skin that is beginning to appear translucent. Her pupils are blown wide, dark orbs encircled by thin green rings. The cordless phone sticks out from under the blanket, wedged between her thigh and the arm of the chair.

Casey frowns as she passes the rocking chair. Her grandmother obviously hasn't slept, which isn't unusual. Neither is the boom box, nor the Bible. Last week she woke to her grandmother singing "Nearer My God to Thee" at the foot of her bed. To help her greet the day, her grandmother had explained. She later promised—obviously without intention of keeping her word—to at least wait until after 9:00am to help Casey greet the day.

The presence of the phone is new. As is the steady pounding, which shakes the front door. It stops, and Casey hears the voice clearly this time.

"Sheriff's office, open the door!"

Casey turns to her grandmother and throws her hands up. "What the hell?" she yells as the banging resumes.

No answer, just an annoyed glare before her grandmother returns her attention to the Bible. Casey rolls her eyes and walks to the door, almost tripping on a red slipper at the edge of the doormat.

“Damn it to hell,” she hisses, and kicks the slipper into the kitchen. “Grandma, stop leaving your crap everywhere! You’re not the only one who lives here.”

Her grandmother ignores Casey and continues to run her finger down the page. Casey considers retrieving the slipper and chucking it at her, but another series of knocks stops her. She opens the door and is greeted by the Sheriff’s deputy she often sees at the restaurant, a no longer middle-aged man with a pink, rounded face and wisps of gray hair poking out from under the brim of his hat.

“Hello there,” the deputy says with a thin smile. “Is everything all right? Someone just placed an emergency call from this address.”

Casey looks back inside. “Grandma! Did you call 911?”

Her grandmother looks up from her Bible and blinks. She gives Casey and the deputy a dismissive wave.

“Yes, of course,” she says. “I needed their help. I only had an hour to get all the fifty names of Jesus and win the prize.”

“Fucking hell,” Casey mutters, and she swears she can hear her blood pressure rising through her temples. She grabs the phone from the rocking chair and steps out onto the porch, hoping the deputy has a sense of humor.

He doesn’t.

“You know I could arrest her for this,” he says. “You can’t just mess around with our emergency line. It’s a crime to prank call 911.”

“It wasn’t a prank call,” she retorts. “You can see yourself she’s out of it.”

“Hmmm...” He raises an eyebrow and Casey suppresses another eyeroll.

“Bad week,” she says. “It will pass.”

The deputy nods his head. “She clearly needs close supervision, then. Where were you when she was harassing our call center?”

“Sleeping, obviously.” Casey gestures toward her pajamas. “And she wasn’t harassing you; she’s harmless. She won’t call again.”

“She’d better not. If it happens again, I will strongly consider taking her in. And calling social services.”

“Great, got it,” Casey replies, keeping her voice as even as possible. “It won’t happen again.”

The deputy gives her one last stern glance, tips his hat, and strolls toward his car. As soon as he’s out of the driveway, Casey crouches on the front steps and places her head in her hands.

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Vera recites the list again. Forty-nine. Forty-nine! She smacks her hand against the arm of her chair and throws her pen at the stereo speaker. She tries to remember where she hasn’t looked. She’s dog-eared all the Bible pages she’s been through, and now more are bent than straight. Not helpful. She glares at the phone, still annoyed by the memory of the woman on the other end—“Ma’am, what is your emergency?”—on repeat like a robot. Also not helpful.

She checks the clock. 5:56am. The voice of the radio announcer blares through the speakers. “It’s almost 6 o’clock, and you only have until 6:05 to call us with the fifty names of Jesus! The winner gets two tickets to see Bruce Springsteen in Pittsburgh next week!” Two tickets, exactly. One for her and one for Casey.

Vera reaches up and taps her pen against the radio. “As if I can’t tell time,” she says. She turns her attention back to the Bible, and—finally!—finds a page that’s not bent. She smiles to herself and begins to read, only to be interrupted by a loud knock at the door.

“You’re going to wake Casey up, you know,” she says, hurling her slipper at the door. Casey worked a late shift last night and said she needs quiet in the morning. Quiet before 9:00am every morning after work. Vera had promised.

The banging stops, so Vera picks up her magnifying glass and turns back to the page. Then another series of booms and a loud voice, and she looks up to see her granddaughter walking toward the door in her pajamas. Her dark curls are stuck to the side of her head, and her eyebrows are knitted together in a weird way that makes them look like wrestling caterpillars. Vera would laugh, except that Casey is glaring at her like she’s practicing for a mug shot, so she decides to explain instead.

But when she glances down to gather her thoughts, she sees it. Fifty! Right at the tip of her nail as it rests on the page—“times he shall sow, who is the blessed and only Potentate.” How could she have forgotten the blessed and only Potentate!



“What the hell?” Casey yells.

Vera flicks her hand at the door and holds her finger over fifty. She hears another voice as well, deeper than her granddaughter’s, but he doesn’t sound threatening. Casey can handle it.

Just as she reaches for the phone, she hears her granddaughter call to her, more sharply this time. Vera rolls her eyes and turns toward the door. There is a nice-looking man in uniform standing on the porch, and Casey is looking at her like she did sometimes when she was little and would use the stepstool to microwave dinner. Vera explains about the contest, but not the tickets. They’ll be a surprise, now that they’ve won. She’s about to make the call when her granddaughter snatches the phone and walks outside, cussing in a low tone that doesn’t quite hide her words.

“Casey!” Vera calls out, but Casey ignores her. She steps out onto the porch and slams the door. Vera checks the clock. 6:04am. One minute. Vera throws her other slipper at the door and calls to her granddaughter again. No response. She hears the voices move away from the door, out of earshot.

6:05am. Vera sighs and closes the Bible.

## Monkey Face

Margaret Erhardt

This is the story as I heard it on the bleak stretch of road between Barstow and Bakersfield at a little truck stop at the corner of highway 58 and 395. The trucker who spoke was a big man, more energy than teeth. He balanced his coffee cup on his palm as if it were one of the scales of justice. Or a potato he was guessing the weight of. Or a stunned bird he had picked up off the ground after watching it fly into a window.

There were three men at the table. The two across from him were jittery little fellows, probably high on uppers or caffeine tablets—the truck stop coffee was old and weak and wouldn't have gotten them as elevated as they were. They were skinny, wore thin ponytails both of them. The speaker had a nice haircut, expensive looking. He'd skimmed in the dental department but not on the hair. He was part Indian according to him, by which he must have meant Native because he didn't look like anyone from the subcontinent. He offered a little autobiography before he got into the story, which made me think these men were strangers to each other or else they'd never wondered about the lives they came from and maybe knew better not to.

All three of them were eating that certain truck stop food I'd learned to recognize even at the distance of a few booths away: chicken fried steak. That telltale blob smothered in gravy next to the mashed potatoes. Was it steak or was it chicken? Coffee and chicken fried steak with potatoes and squeaky string beans and a little dinner roll with two butter pats. One of the skinny men sipped a glass of water, no ice, but the other one and the speaker just worked on their coffee. The speaker had it black and the other kept stirring packet after packet of sugar into what looked like a mighty milky brew. The speaker ate for a while and then worked a toothpick back and forth in his mouth like an amputee trying to scratch an itch on a limb that isn't there. The other men were still tucking into their dinner when he started his story. They ate like rez dogs uncertain of whether or not they'd have to fight for what was in front of them, but willing to if it came to that.

You shoulda seen it, he said. His voice was surprisingly high-pitched, with a slight Southern laziness to it. He kept his coffee cup there on his palm, bouncing it every now and then. The waitress came to say, You fellas got everything you need? Above their forks the other two smirked and let off a few rough comments I couldn't hear but she heard them and the speaker did too. She reddened and he delivered an apology for his two rude companions and asked for more coffee.

It were this side of Tehachapi, he said, that long dry stretch. At night. Two three

o'clock. Dead center of the night.

The waitress came back with two pots of coffee and said, You didn't say what you wanted, caf or decaf, so I brung 'em both.

Which one's fresh?

They're both fresh.

Well which one's fresher?

Now you're teasing me.

She made a pouty face but laughed as she said it and decided for him and when he set his cup on the table she filled it. He went back to talking.

Dark as pitch out there until the moon come up. I like to see that. I like running east at night just to see that. I was hauling a load of oranges. At night—you ever seen this?—the bats go crazy over the oranges. They follow a load of oranges down the road like a swarm of mosquitoes, diving and swooping and what'all. You ever seen that? They're drawn to the sugar, the smell of the sweet.

The two men across the table sat up from their empty plates and swiped at the gravy on their hairless faces. One gave a nod, the other shook his head. Nope, said the one. Ain't seen nothin' like that. Might have, said the other. He brought out a pocketknife and looked at it and put it away again. Might have.

The third man continued. So it's moonrise and I'm looking out at the land lighting up, just the first little bit, just when the dark says okay you got me, you win, and off it goes like a sore loser leaving the room.

You a poet? said the one man, the naysayer, and nudged the other. Here we got a poet.

The speaker went on. I got this feeling of being out there, outside in the night instead of inside the cab and I'm thinking, I wonder who's driving this rig? Don't seem like me. And all of a sudden there's this almighty sound, this scream like all the air's been sucked outta your own lungs. Then a sledgehammer hits the glass and the windshield's broke in a million pieces and the moonlight's caught in those pieces and it's blinding me now. But then I see what's real trouble, *real* trouble, and I can't quite catch up to what's happening, you know? I can't quite read the situation.

You wasn't high on something? said the naysayer. He coughed out a smoky laugh. The other one sat back in the booth and lit a cigarette and said, That girl comes back I think I'm going to have me some pie.

Strangest thing is, said the speaker, I have a piece of pipe next to me on the seat. I don't know why it's there, I don't remember putting it there but I know it's there. When the wing slams into my face I think, What the—? It's beating across my face. I can't see to pull over and I can't see to drive but I'm going down the road just the same.

I've got one arm up and I feel the claw, I know what it can do, and the face of the thing is close and I swear I can feel the, whatta you call it, the thing in it that needs to kill? I can smell the blood on it, its own blood. It went right through the windshield, collision course. Hunting at night, just another animal trying to fill its belly. And now it's cut up and caught and it starts up a racket.

It was after those bats maybe, offered the second man.

You're saying it's in the cab with you? said the naysayer. This thing is—?

The speaker nodded. The two wings fill the cab and it's wild and beating on me and I can't see to drive and I grab ahold of that iron pipe and I aim it everywhere, try and find where the head is and it goes crazy then. We both go crazy. It's trying to fly around the cab and I'm swinging the pipe and enough times I hit something alive until finally it stops. It folds its wings and drops down on the seat next to me like one of them little dogs some guys like for company. I got one hand on the wheel and the other on the pipe and I beat it good until it feels like a stuffed thing, like something filled with cotton. I know there's no life in it then. I pull over in Mojave and stay two days there while they find me a new windshield. Guy in the shop says, What happened? Nothing, I tell him. Awful big nothing, he says.

The speaker finished up his coffee. He folded his hands on the table and leaned close to the other two. You believe that? They shook their heads. Nah, said the naysayer. You tell a good story, said the other.

That's when I got up and went over and let the speaker know I'd seen the face of the misfortune that flew into his world. I'd seen it and many others roadkilled on that stretch of two-lane, and once I stopped and picked one up, feathers still soft, body still warm, and took it off by the side of the road and buried it under a creosote bush. The face up close was the face of a monkey.

See it's bad luck to speak of it, said the speaker. I don't hardly speak of it. He didn't look at me but at a scab on the back of his hand. My people fear them owls. We stay away from 'em. We don't like 'em and we don't kill 'em. Worst luck you can bring upon yourself is to kill 'em.

## Emotional Intelligence

### Jen Knox

Imagining her feet rooting down into the linoleum, Emerson stood upright, barely, in line at the grocery pharmacy. Since she'd forgotten her cane, her failsafe, she had to focus. The vertigo, which had plagued her since she was sixteen, intensified as an announcement requested a cleanup in the bakery.

Maybe after filling this prescription, as her mother had, she would have an ordinary life, the kind that allows one to luxuriate in personal ailments alone. She looked forward to simple neurosis, a few obsessive habits, willful laziness or narcissistic tendencies that would keep her company and offer consistency. Whatever form, they'd be hers alone. Until then, the problem was everyone else.

Within a ten-foot radius, she was exposed to the anger of an elderly woman in front of her, the deep depression of a balding pharmacist, the repressed rage of whoever was making announcements, and the wild energy of impatient twin redheads who stood beside a large and happy man who was waiting for a robust blood pressure medication.

Emerson reached forward, settling her hand on a sloped shoulder. The woman was around seventy, and her posture resembled Emerson's cane so acutely that she could have been the personification of its twisted cherry wood and engraved knob. That is, until Emerson felt the shoulder go rigid and hot.

She apologized but couldn't move her hand. The woman's face softened as she examined Emerson through hooded eyes. "I don't blame you for dozing off. We'll be here all goddamn day," she said.

A dense orange light around the woman told Emerson a patchwork story: A bus stop with a dirty bench, where the woman's beige trench coat picked up a large smudge. Each step of a painfully slow walk to the Customer Service desk, where four lottery tickets and trail mix were purchased every Saturday before another painful walk here, to the pharmacy line. Other days, other errands. There were doctors' offices, post offices, bus stops, long rides, and a well-worn chair on a concrete-slab of a front porch in a low-rent retirement community.

Taking a deep breath, Emerson gestured toward a man leaving the line. "I think it'll pick up now," she said, delicately removing her hand.

"Yeah right." The woman didn't introduce herself, but Emerson saw her name, Beatrice, on her prescription. Beatrice's energy was fierce and fleeting, and Emerson

breathed it in to steady herself and quiet the other messages that were bombarding her.

Emerson's doctor had prescribed an anti-anxiety medication, one of myriad suggested medications, after her last incident, a supposed panic attack that landed her in the hospital after a trip to Starbucks. Though she was hesitant to fill the prescription, the heart palpitations and dizziness were too much. Something had to change.

When Emerson was eight, it felt like a gift. To read others' energy more acutely told her who to play with and who to avoid. It was fun to share in the sheer delight of her dog before he was fed, or the younger children whose awe preceded them; those whose presence was so soft that it even felt nourishing when they were emotional.

When Emerson's mother and grandmother sat around the kitchen table wearing robes with towels wrapped tightly around their heads and green clay masks on their faces, Emerson would ride high on the airiness of their good humor for hours. She used to play with her grandmother's cane, dancing around it, not realizing how necessary it was.

Then the day came that her father walked into the living room and dropped his bag. She could see his life fading, a deep stillness that surrounded him. Her sister didn't see it; her friend, Jenny, told her she was an oddball when she tried to explain that something was wrong with her father. He was his jovial self, after all, making jokes and laughing loudly. But Emerson could see that he was ailing like the old pine in their backyard.

As she got older, the sensations became more acute. The colors were brighter and emotions louder. In some ways it worked out. She could read people. Reaching her early twenties, Emerson got every job she applied for. She sailed through marketing classes at an online college and quickly started making six figures at a consulting firm where she wanted to connect with coworkers, but it was too much.

The office was filled with a weighty collective apathy intermixed with guilt and competitiveness. So, she petitioned to offer her services online and would read sample audiences' responses over video with such insight that she had to lie here and there to stay on promotion track.

She tried online dating a few times. She requested a man named Jay meet her in a small café, but realized the high-strung barista was too distracting. Although Jay seemed nice enough, she couldn't keep eye contact or pay attention to what he was saying and felt his self-consciousness turn to defensiveness. The next few dates, which took place at parks or libraries, were either needy or overconfident, ending with

unraveling stories of repression or delusion. She saved money, had her food and clothes delivered, and only went to this grocery if it was before sunrise. That is, until today. The pharmacy opened at 7 a.m.

"We're all on a journey. Stay the course," Emerson's grandmother once told her before unlatching a necklace she wore every day; it was a small silver bird floating on a thin chain. She laced the cool silver around Emerson's neck and kissed her forehead. "When we figure everything out, we begin to harmonize, then we go home."

"We are home," Emerson argued, tracing her thumb over the bird and reaching out to touch her grandmother's long gray curls. It was winter, and Emerson wore a Sleeping Beauty nightgown that felt like a cloud.

"No. We're far from home, kiddo."

Her grandmother's embrace was a profusion of color and grace.

A honey-baked ham special was announced, and customers funneled toward the deli. Emerson took a few steps forward and felt the whirlwind again. A thin man stood behind her, his hand tapping his thigh. She turned to see that one of his headphones was hanging by his side, and he grinned, looking down at her feet. Nick. His name was all she got, and that came from the embroidery on his shirt pocket.

"Come on, hon," Beatrice said, taking a few steps forward and reaching for her hand. "Are you steady now?"

Emerson smiled and followed along, getting a small surge of compassion, but she was bothered by the lack of energy around Nick. There was nothing, no light or lack thereof.

Beatrice leaned against the counter, sliding her credit card over to a pharmacist who offered a half smile and answered a lot of questions. Most of the answers began with "Like I told you last time," but Beatrice was impenetrable. Her straight gray hair was thin and tucked neatly behind her ears. Her bus wouldn't arrive for another ten minutes, so she had words to burn. The pharmacist stared blankly.

Nick began to cough through closed lips, choking back his illness. "Pardon me," he said, and the hacking commenced. His face reddened slightly.

Emerson narrowed her eyes, searching, and then she saw it. "Want to go ahead?" she asked, stepping aside.

The young man coughed through his answer, waved off her proposition and placed a hand on her back, gently. She didn't feel anything from this man. She noticed

his tall posture and loose arms, the way he moved easily even though he was obviously ill.

“Stay the course.” Emerson heard her grandmother’s voice. Her grandmother, who hadn’t died but rather sauntered toward death. Her grandmother, who never seemed tortured by her gifts but somehow enchanted by them.

Emerson tried to picture this man’s day job at a factory and nights studying at community college, his desire to enter a corporate world that he’d hate if he ever encountered it, and his large and loving family who would be by his side over this next year, but this was all made up, a story in her mind. There was no clue, no energy to absorb. He was contained.

Beatrice waved goodbye, her step just a beat lighter. Emerson’s prescription was ten dollars, and it came with warnings of drowsiness and dizziness, which she laughed at. She shook the bottle as she walked out of the pharmacy. Ice cream was BOGO half off, a new voice announced, as Emerson approached the exit. She glanced back, locking eyes with Nick, who was standing at the pharmacy counter, neck craned to watch her go. No expression. He was trying to figure her out, too.

Emerson felt a new wave of emotions as she joined those walking to and from their cars, gathering carts, and occupying the gas station nearby. She steadied herself on a shopping cart before making her way to her car. The locks released, and she settled into the leather seat. Leaning back, she breathed in the solitude, and felt her body reset as though being restarted.

The pills were small and menacing. She turned one over, rolling it between her index finger and thumb. Just as she was about to place it in her mouth, a knock arrived at the door, and the young man, Nick, waved.

She rolled down the window and waited.

“You dropped this,” he said as his thin fingers separated, allowing the silver chain to fall into her hand. The pains and worries, avoidance and impatience she’d ingested over the last twenty minutes funneled out of her body, as she clasped the necklace and felt her throat release.

“Grandma sent you.”

Nick smiled, but she couldn’t see his intention, couldn’t feel his illness. It was as though he didn’t truly exist. She watched him walk evenly toward his car, dropped the pill in the bottle and lifted her hand to her heart as he waved. It beat powerfully, rhythmically, as the world raged on.



## BOHEMIA STREET

Richard Risemberg

You would have thought they'd done it on purpose: opened a tiny restaurant between a bookstore and a movie theater, and given it no name. What better way to appeal to the hip and hungry than a bit of manufactured mystery? But as far as we could tell, it had just sort of grown there, a charmless little sushi joint barely twelve feet wide, with two rickety metal tables crowded onto what was left of the floor space between the smeared glass front and a greasy tile counter with a few stools. The place was mostly kitchen, and not much of that either. I don't believe it even went all the way back to the alley. And it was dirty. You don't expect Japanese restaurants to be dirty, at least not if you believe the clichés. But the spaces between the tiles on the counter were grouted with a turgid gray crud that peeled up if you dragged a curious fingernail along it. The stainless steel gleaming through clouds of steam looked clean enough, though. We ate there for years and only got sick twice. That was worth it, as the food was really good and really cheap, and while good was easy to find in that part of town, cheap was not. And the exploding-head waitress was definitely entertaining, though you felt sorry for her. She identified the place for us: "Let's go to the exploding-head waitress place for lunch today," one of us would say. There was never any dissent. It became the linchpin of our courtship, such as it was. We were poor and in love, or trying to be—in love, that is, not poor. We were poor quite naturally. We had to work to fall in love. But no one we'd ever seen worked as hard as the exploding-head waitress.

She was almost always there, a slim young woman in baggy shorts with her hair eternally falling out of a twist at the back of her head. Pretty enough, but with a haggard mask on her face that made her look like the patron saint of weariness, always in a nervous hurry as the chef barked at her in Japanese. The place was small but busy, with a blur of hipsters filling it for the lunch and dinner hours. People crowded the tables and the L-shaped counter, sometimes standing at its corners to eat, hunched towards their friends. The air of mystery wrought by a restaurant that has no name and where the staff will barely acknowledge that you exist, drew in the sort of clientele who liked to think of themselves as intellectual outlaws: lots of mohawks, pink hair, piercings, and the artfully-torn fishnets and tights, lots of dangerous pouts. And occasionally more regular folks, like us: a little older, our clothes unspectacular, even staid. None of it fazed the chef, who stayed at his table waving the giant knife and barking at the waitress, while she jittered blank-eyed between the kitchen, the counter, and the tiny tables, a graceless mechanism plugged into the 220 outlet by mistake and spinning out

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of control. We always tried to feel sorry for her, catch her eye, even say hello, but the only input she responded to was the barking of the boss. She came to seem inhuman to us in the end.

The bookstore next door held readings every Thursday and Friday night, and we stopped in at them now and then—after dining at the nameless restaurant, of course. The bookstore at least did have a name: Lantern Books. It was the most literary of the bookstores in our town, which didn't have all that many bookstores to begin with, and most of them the usual big chains, or tiny specialty shops dealing in mysticism or revolution. Lantern presented readings every Thursday and Friday night, most often local authors, sometimes big names from out of state, once in a while a big name local author, of which there were enough. Thursdays were reserved for poetry, that purest and most indulgent of the literary arts, and if we saw a name we felt we could trust on the playbill we would sit in. One night featured a poet we actually knew, a shabby old gent who had published three collections and gotten a good review in the *New York Times* once long ago. Of course it hadn't helped him financially, though he did note to us that the subsequent flood tide of sales allowed him to buy a new pair of sneakers. He taught, naturally, an extension course or two at the local university, and proofread for a local publisher of textbooks. Bernie considered himself a happy man, and we knew he'd be happier if he drew a reasonably big audience to his reading, so we went. His poetry was good, and, blessing of blessings, not about himself, which was a refreshing break from the confessional blather we usually endured at such events. There would be some of that too, our pal was one of four to present, but we could always show up late and catch his recital at the end. He was the headliner, for all that was worth.

We stopped, of course, at the nameless restaurant, but the exploding-head waitress wasn't there. In her place was a willowy Japanese boy in his late twenties, with waist-length hair and wispy mustache, waiting tables at a much more leisurely pace than the waitress ever dared. The boss barked at him all the more, and he got out plates mixed up when he finally shuffled them to our spot on the counter, but these were small sins. Far graver was the missing waitress, who had become the icon of our little shrine. "I hope she hasn't quit," I said.

"Or been fired," my wife said. "But everyone deserves a day off. Even exploding-head waitresses, don't you think?"

"Still, there's something cosmically wrong about it. It's as if you can't trust the universe to make sense any more."

"Who said it had to make sense?"

I couldn't argue with that. We turned our attention to the sushi and beer, biding our time through the opening poets who read to empty chairs in the shop next door. Twilight deepened outside the plate-glass windows, making the harsh fluorescent light

in the diner seem brighter and harder by comparison. Conversations jittered among our counterpartners, turning erratic orbits around music, movies, and rent, the unholy trinity of bohemia in our day. We ourselves talked of bosses and committees, which bored us but which bound our lives. "At least," I said, "they don't bark at us like he does."

"At least," she said, "our exploding-head waitress could afford to quit, since he can't be paying her too much anyhow. A liberty that we lack."

"We don't know that she quit. You said so yourself. Anyone deserves a day off."

"I suspect he doesn't believe in giving days off."

"There's the law," I said.

"For what it's worth," she said.

I nodded, and we worked our way through the tiny crowd waiting to claim our seats and went next door.

The Lantern set up a low stage on reading nights, and the usual array of folding metal chairs for the cultured throngs. There was room for twenty seats, and it looked like twelve of them were occupied, though I suspected, from experience, that a number of them belonged to the performers. I saw our poet pal slouching against the end of a bookshelf, scratching his beard, so we went to greet him. "You just missed a good one," he said.

"Are you on next?"

"Naw. One more ahead of me. No one I know. The one shuffling her papers over there."

We saw a slim Asian-looking girl with gleaming waist-length hair, purple eye-shadow like old ladies sometimes wear, and the usual punky getup: tight top showing what there was of what she had, pleated black mini, and the inevitable torn fishnet stockings leading the eye down a pair of nice-looking legs to chunky platform boots. "I hope her poetry's less generic than her look," I said.

Our poet growled, "Guess you'll know in a minute. Let's grab a seat."

We settled into the third row, with two ranks of empty chairs in front of us. I don't know why folks are so shy of poets that they always have to hang back, even though we did it too. I mentioned it to my wife, and she said: "A holdover from elementary school days, I guess. Never take the front-row seat."

A pudgy, smooth-faced fellow with curly red hair and rimless spectacles stepped onto the stage and took the microphone: one of the store employees. He mentioned that Yokiko, the poet, who apparently used only the one name, had just come out with a collection, which was, naturally enough, available at this very store. Fortunately he did not talk long, and Yokiko-of-the-single name came up onto the stage and stared sternly out over the audience, holding a silence for what felt like a full minute but probably

wasn't.

There was a modest symphony of creaks and cracks as we all settled obediently into the metal chairs under her gaze, which bore an element of wordless command. I could hear the traffic passing by outside, and a quiet conversation somewhere in a far corner of the shop. A phone rang in another room, then stopped. As if that was her cue, Yokiko-of-the-single-name raised her papers to her face, though she seemed not to take her eyes off the audience.

She spoke in a tense, fluting voice, ending each line in trailing italics, with a heavy pause afterwards. The first poem was a harrowing story of how she fell in love with her gay brother, who ignored her, and how she almost killed herself. And she followed up with a strange poem that was almost an accusation, but which was memorable for other reasons, at least to us:

You don't know me, but why should you? I am *nobody*....  
Nobodies don't need no *names*....  
Names are for you not for *me*, I'm not even a *face*....  
I thank you for that *disgrace*, it makes me *free*....  
I'm not like you, but you are just like *me*....  
Except I let you see me, and you *hide*....

My father shouts at me and waves his *knife*....  
I see in your eyes, you think it's my *whole life*....  
You think I have no *voice*, no *choice*....  
I am like a slave to you, like a *machine*....  
You don't know my name, but you *forget*....  
I don't know yours, we are all lost *together, forever*....

It went on, but at that point my wife jabbed her elbow gently in my ribs and hissed into my ear: "*My god, it's the exploding-head waitress!*"

I looked again. It was hard to recognize her, but once I looked.... And anyway, who else would write about the knife-waving dad next door? "You're right," I whispered back. My wife pretended to look at her watch—she wasn't wearing a watch—and then pulled on my arm. She got up and dragged me with her out the front door and down the street two or three storefronts, till she found one that was closed for the night. We huddled into the alcove in front of the door and stood side by side, looking out at the night and the traffic, the sides of passing cars reflecting glints from the streetlamps. "I can't believe it!" she said. "All this time she's been watching us. With those blank eyes

of hers. But really she's been watching us."

I shrugged, though my wife couldn't see the gesture. "And so what?" I said. "We've been watching her right back, in case you didn't notice. And making fun of her too."

"She has no right."

"No right to what? To see what's in front of her face? You know I used to work retail. Of course you get to know your customers. And talk about them. Calm down."

"Shut up," she said. "Jesus, I wish I was still smoking. Is there a drugstore open on this pretentious fucking street?"

I made a show of looking up and down the block, but I knew there was no drugstore open, since there was no drugstore. At least not near enough to walk to. "Hey," I said. "We've got to go back there for Bernie's reading. Remember? The one we came to hear?"

She didn't say anything for a while. Then she leaned on me and murmured: "First you keep a lookout. Tell me when she leaves. Then I'll go back."

"She might want to hear Bernie too. Are we going to stiff our friend?"

She gave me an angry side-eye but said nothing. I sighed, rather too theatrically for my own later good, and leaned on the storefront to keep an eye on the bookshop while my wife huddled in the shadow of the entry alcove. If she didn't want to be noticed, this was the wrong way to go about it: groups and couples strolling on the sidewalk flicked their eyes in our direction and quickly looked back ahead, picking up their pace a little bit. The angry-looking woman and the large man staring at something down the street, as if in ambush.... I didn't see the exploding-head poet come out of the bookstore, but I did see the long-haired boy who had waited on us come out of the sushi joint and walk down the street. He at least paid us no mind as he walked past, smoothing his wispy mustache. After he had gone, I said, "She must be back at work. The guy who served us just walked by, and I know I've seen the restaurant open really late. Come on?"

"Him. Maybe it's that disgusting brother she fell in love with." She waited for half a minute, with her shoulders tensed up, then shook herself. "All right," she said. "Let's go."

We walked back to the bookstore. She made me case the joint first and assure her that no exploding-head poets were inside. Then we went in and sat near the back. Our own poet was in the middle of a declamation, but to tell you the truth, I didn't really hear what he was saying. I was thinking about the girl. I wasn't sure I liked her work, but I wanted to know it better. I decided I would buy her book. I couldn't buy it that night, because my wife would surely react with anger if I did, but I promised myself I would drop by soon and pick it up. It was the right thing to do. I haven't done it yet, but I'm sure I will.

## EDITORS CHOICE

### TOWNIE

#### “The Way Things Used to Be”

Lauren Marie Schmidt

It used to be that you could pinch a girl on the behind and she'd laugh at you all flirty and playful. Maybe you'd get her number and take her out for dinner, and maybe she'd let you stick your hand under her shirt on the second date. But things nowadays are so different. I'm glad I ain't young anymore, glad I don't have to be a kid in this day and age. The world's changing too fast and not for the better, if you ask me. Everyone's so touchy now. You can't say or do anything without offending somebody.

Take the school mascot. In my day, we were the Chieftains and our mascot was Chief Red Man. We used to wear giant feathers on our heads and paint our faces as kids, dance around in the bleachers, hollering for rain—as if we were *real* Indians. It was all good, clean fun. But now? Forget it. In these “politically correct” times, we can't have Red Man or the Chieftans. Some Crazy Lady got it in her head that the mascot was racist. I don't know where she got that because I don't see how having an Indian is anything but a source of pride for our little town. Local history says that we had a lot of them here. Till they were killed, I guess, but ain't that a good reason to have Chief Red Man as the mascot? It's a way of preserving history, if you ask me. But not for this Crazy Lady. She got people together to create a task force. You get that? A task force for a high school football team! Things like that is how you know that the times are changing for the worse around here.

The task force put out all these calls for suggestions from the community, but most people I know wanted to keep the mascot just the way it was. The whole nonsense of it went on for almost a year. Task force got some of the most ridiculous suggestions, but while all that was going on, we were still the Chieftans, just like when I was a kid. Heard something about the Hedgehogs and the Bulldogs. Someone even put in for the Blueberries. Yeah, our football boys would look real tough being called the Blueberries. What will the kids in the stands do now that they can't holler and dance like Indians if they're the goddamn Blueberries?

Chief Red Man ain't offensive. It's all because our town is just following all the other towns that don't mind throwing their own traditions away. Seems like you hear these stories on the news a lot lately—some small group of people get all up in arms and start throwing around that word, “Racist.” Next thing you know, we're changing around everything to suit that small group of people who walk around being offended all

the time. Racist. That's one of those magic words nowadays. No one wants to be near it, so people use it to get things how they want them, and everybody else runs away scared from the thing, whatever the thing is, because nobody wants to be called a racist. That's how we lost our mascot, if you ask me.

And the mascot mess was some small potatoes compared to what's going on now. "Rape." That's *another* one of those magic words that's thrown around too easily these days. Look at a girl the wrong way, you're a rapist. Stand too close, say the wrong thing, you're a rapist. That's all that happened to these boys. Poor boys are just getting mixed up in the way things are now, not because they did anything all that bad. They crossed a line, maybe, but what they did ain't rape. You can't call a thing something it ain't. You can't just change the name of something. This was just boys doing the kind of things boys do, things that were fine thirty years ago, when I was a kid and I wore Chief Red Man on my letterman's jacket.

But the boys, *they're* victims in all this, if you ask me. The girl will get on with her life, whoever she is, but the boys will have this on their record, whether they get convicted or not. This story'll follow them around like a stink because it's *their* names in the news, *their* pictures in the paper next to words like "rape." But the papers ain't printing the girl's name. No, she gets to stay a secret because she's a "victim." Everybody's a "victim" these days, too.

Like this girl.

Like the Indians.

But what about people like me?

I lived here all my life and it feel like that don't count for much anymore. Ain't I a victim for that? Used to be that you knew all your neighbors by name and said hello to everyone who passed by. Used to be that the neighborhood was safe because everybody looked like you, not the foreigners who keep popping up everywhere speaking languages, so I don't even know if they know "Hello." It's been a long time since I felt like I belonged here. I no longer recognize the houses my childhood friends lived in. Depending on which side of the tracks they're on, those houses are either falling apart so they don't look much like houses anymore, or they're all gussied up so that those houses ain't what they used to be. They're fancier or something.

The changing of things is a running joke in this town now. There's this bar I go to most afternoons called Used to Be's. It's called that because some guy took over The Midway, the bar that was there when I was a kid, after the owner died. The guy who bought it kept it The Midway for a while until it went down the tubes and then some family bought it named it after themselves: Miller's Place. Until Miller's went down too and some other family took over and called it after their name, which I can't remember

now. Think that place only lasted a year. Last guy to take it over thought the whole thing was funny that the place couldn't stay in business, so he called it Used to Be's, since half the people in this town—the ones who've been here the longest, the ones who really belong here—can't bother to remember all the different names. When talking about the bar, people say, "Oh, you know the place. It used to be—" and then they'd say whatever name it had most recently. Some people would have to go all the way back to The Midway to get people to know what they were talking about. Me? I start with the Midway because that's what I'll always remember it as.

The name's changed, but Used to Be's looks a lot like it looked when it was The Midway. All those people who bought it never thought to fix things up in there. Maybe that's why it always kept going out of business. The stools are the same red-brown. The ones that were broken in The Midway are still the ones that are broken in Used to Be's. The tops of the stools are wobbly and they don't spin quite as well as they did in the old days. You can see where the fabric is split and the white cushion sticks out. Owners tried using duct tape to cover the holes, but the tape doesn't match the red-brown of the stools, so it looks real shoddy. The juke box used to work, too, but now it just sits there in the corner reminding us of the songs we won't hear on the radio anymore, the songs we used to dance to at school dances or the songs we made out to in the backs of our fathers' cars.

The football team is like those stools, if you ask me: something for folks to count on in a town where everything's changing so's you don't even recognize where you're from anymore. Sure, the players are different every year, but in their Chieftans gear, it doesn't matter. They all look the same. They look like our fathers who used to play, and our father's fathers, all young and fast and strong. It used to be that the football team meant everything fun, meant a dream, and for all of us, whether it ended up being true or not, it meant a way to escape this place. That's all anyone around here wants, if you ask me—to leave. But if you're like me and you have your whole life to go nowhere, you want to keep the old mascot. You want the way things used to be. We don't even have the same school colors anymore because the suits who run this town wanted to get as far away from that racist hullabaloo as possible. At least if we're the Blueberries, we could still chant "Go, Big Blue!" at the games and it wouldn't be weird. We're the Boilermakers now. Our colors are black and steel gray, but we still chant "Go, Big Blue!" at the games. It's the one thing that small group of people couldn't take away from us.

My father was a Boilermaker. A real one. And that's all some people around here will think about now that we're the Boilermakers. We're gonna think of our fathers, the coughs we heard as kids, the scars on their arms and hands, the cancers that came too soon, the way our fathers fell into bed every night, gone again before the dawn.



## STAY WITH ME

Martha Stallman

Thirteen years later, this was how Hannah remembered it:

She tried to make herself wait until she got back to her dorm but she just couldn't stand it, so she stopped in the old science building to clean up. There was a restroom on the first floor, she knew, and it would be good not to have to climb stairs. The restroom was empty, a small blessing. She went to the first faucet and turned the knob and cupped her hands under the spout to catch the water that poured out cool and soothing as a song. She brought the water to her mouth, rinsed and spat. The only soap in the restroom was from a dispenser, blue-flecked and powdered, industrial; she made a paste of it and scrubbed her lips. Then, breathing slow and open-mouthed so that she might hear the first hint of footsteps in the hall outside, Hannah rested an ankle onto the lip of the sink and washed between her legs cautiously, as if afraid of being bitten. She straightened and looked herself over in the mirror. Her wrists were pink and puffy but her face was clear; she looked tired, nothing else.

At least it was Saturday morning; everyone she knew would be in bed or away. Done washing, Hannah stepped out onto the same stone path that had led her to the old science building and tried to calculate how far she was from her dorm. She squinted from the brightness already soaking the day. *Sunlight is the best disinfectant*, she thought - something from a book, some quote. Suddenly her thoughts had become heedless as cats. She closed her eyes for a breath, then opened them again.

A thousand steps, Hannah figured, no more than that. Piece of cake. Up ahead she could see the campus turnaround, the big one that ran in from Richardson all the way up to Jones Hall before it doubled back. *Intercollegiate Parkway is roughly the length of one football field*; that, she remembered, was from the student handbook. She exhaled once, hard, and got moving.

Because she was walking with her eyes to the ground, Hannah heard the voices before she saw the car. Distinctively ugly, yellow and black, the car was crawling up the far side of the turnaround like an injured wasp. Nasty little piece of work – she had seen it last night at the party. The driver was pleading loudly with a woman walking on the alongside. Hannah couldn't hear what they were saying, only the tone, the angry clanging of their voices. The woman was wearing a short black dress and silver boots that came up to her knees. She stopped walking and stood with her arms folded, shaking her head. Hannah also stopped; it was too much. *Go home*, she thought. *Just shut up and go home*. She could hear a little girl laughing from somewhere far away and

it made her wonder briefly if she was losing her mind.

Then the girl appeared. She rode out on her bike from behind Jones Hall, followed by a woman, also on a bike. They had the same hair: Scandinavian blonde flashing high-beam bright. The girl was still laughing, and she turned her head to look at the woman behind her and shouted something Hannah couldn't make out, then sped up. As she did, the man in the car shouted to the woman with the boots - "Fuck you!" - and accelerated. And though Hannah could see exactly what was about to happen, she just couldn't believe it, could not fucking believe it. She refused. So when the girl turned sharply left into the turnaround with the woman at her heels and the ugly wasp car came flying around the curve, Hannah did not scream or move but only whispered "Jesus, stop" so quietly she wasn't sure later if she'd spoken at all.

The girl was closest to the car; she got the worst of it. Hit dead center, the girl and the bike both went under, like the car was eating them. The right front tire caught the woman's bike and she rolled up onto the hood, hovered a second over the roof, then bounced off the trunk and landed face-first in the road. The car swerved to a stop. It sat a moment as if catching its breath, then shot out onto Richardson, turned left and was gone.

Hannah knew that she must have walked to the accident, of course, but it didn't feel like walking so much as focusing, zooming in like a camera on the particulars. The woman in the silver boots had her hands over her mouth. The girl's bike was in the gutter, streamers waving in the breeze, a small sad shipwreck in a puddle of dirty water. The woman who'd been hit was breathing but otherwise still. Her face, still on the road, was turned to the side, though whether she had turned it herself or simply landed that way, Hannah didn't know; she was laid out as if sleeping on her stomach. The girl was not moving at all. Her head was bent too far backward and Hannah thought *Pez dispenser* before she could stop herself.

She came to the woman in the road and started to squat, then knelt down. Even this early the asphalt was hot, burning her naked shins.

A voice spoke. "Hey. Hey, honey, can you hear me?"

Hannah turned. Crouched beside her was a woman in a lab coat and tennis shoes; she put out a hand and stroked the backs of her fingers against the injured woman's cheek. Though she had not heard this woman approach, Hannah felt only the mildest surprise at her presence; whatever part of her mind was responsible for registering shock had hung up a Gone Fishin' sign and left for the day. She looked ahead and saw the woman in the silver boots staggering closer. *Plagued by daughters*, Hannah thought. She was just full of books this morning.

The woman in the road made some strange noise deep in her throat, and her

eyes opened wide in pain and fear.

"Shhh," the lab-coated woman beside Hannah said. "Stay still. Help's on the way."

"Lise," the injured woman said. As she spoke, her lips became shiny with blood. "My daughter."

"She's fine," the woman in the lab coat lied instantly. "Don't worry."

"Where?" said the woman in the road. Her eyes darted everywhere, straining at the corners, but she didn't move. She clearly couldn't.

"They took her to the student health center," the woman in the lab coat said with no hesitation at all. "She had a few bumps and bruises, but she's fine." Her voice was low and soothing, a coo, utterly convincing. She turned to Hannah as if for confirmation and Hannah thought *Wow, she's good*, nodded even though she wasn't sure the woman in the road could see it.

"Not hurt," the woman in the road said. "Please."

"No, she's fine," the woman in the lab coat said. She kept stroking her fingers against the other woman's cheek. "Just scared. Is there someone we should call to come get her?"

The woman in the silver boots was close enough to see everything now. "Oh my God," she said. Up close, Hannah could see how young she was, probably Hannah's age, not even twenty. Strange to think of someone her own age as young, but Hannah felt so much older this morning than she had last night, and the world she'd returned to was all upside-down.

Hannah's hands were shaking, but not nearly so much as those of the woman in the boots, whose makeup had run terribly, leaving her eyes and cheeks smeared with greasy soot. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I don't know what happened. I am so sorry," she kept repeating to no one in particular. She looked over at the girl's body in the road and began to heave.

The woman in the lab coat turned to Hannah. In the same soothing voice she'd just lied with earlier, she said to Hannah, "Get that bitch out of here, and shut her the fuck up." Her face looked as plain and strong as her lab coat. Hannah couldn't tell what her own face was doing but hoped she looked the same. She nodded and stood, stepped to the young woman in the boots and put an arm around her waist, guided her out of the road and onto the steps of the old science building to wait for the cops. As they walked away, Hannah heard the woman in the lab coat saying "Come on, sweetheart, stay with me. Stay with me." over and over.

And so, incredibly, it was the woman in the lab coat - a woman whose name she didn't know, a woman she'd never seen before or since - that Hannah thought of first

when she remembered that day thirteen years later. She was sitting across the kitchen table from her son, his face ugly with tears; in front of him lay a thick green spiral-bound notebook. Her college journal. Where on Earth had he found it? She read her own name upside-down on the cover and marveled at how neat her handwriting was back then. Did everyone's handwriting get worse as they got older? Or was it that she'd just stopped caring about things like that?

"Is it true, what you wrote?" her son asked. She had never seen him so angry, or so scared. "Is that how you got pregnant with me?"

Hannah looked up from the notebook to her son's eyes; they looked just like hers, and for this she'd always been grateful. She thought of the woman in the lab coat and kept her own eyes steady, unblinking. *Just this once*, she thought. *Let me be that good just this once*. She closed her hand into a fist to keep from crossing her fingers for luck.



**"Hopscotch," Collage/encaustic**

**Lynn Watt**

# NONFICTION

# FIRST PRIZE, 2019 BARRY LOPEZ NONFICTION

## SOLVE FOR X

Christiana Louisa Langenberg

Since I found out X number of days ago, I cannot stop remembering that you're dead. I know there are things we both wanted to say, had we ever talked again, yet somehow we each held our voices mute, and the 1,831 miles between us became 3,636 days of silence.

There is so much I might have said. I wasn't keeping track, because we both counted on the fact that we had the rest of our lives to reopen our mouths. But then your life just stopped. From one day to the next there was no more you. Now the words I kept for myself, plus those you harbored, ebb and pool around me, a tangled wreckage of us.

Since the day we met, I have tried to merge numbers and words to figure out our correlation, plus what remains, in various exponentials. The staggering weight of your absence from this planet is something I don't know how to carry without finding a solution for why we came to be in the first place. And last.

Please bear with me. Help me understand.

After our first year you sent me a card in which you wrote your memory of how we met, and though it didn't match mine, it wasn't a problem. We were simply two people crossing one bridge from each of our lives before then. Bridges look like =

On 4/21 you arrived on the boat with your friend at 6:15 p.m. and found a seat on the weather deck. I arrived with my friends at 6:25 and went directly to the second level. All day long I had resisted a sunset cruise because I wasn't sure I even wanted to be there. You offered to take our group picture at 6:40 and later said you focused the lens on me at 6:41 and 6:42, so I would have to glance in your direction at least twice. Then you handed back the camera and went to get a drink at the bar. When you returned to where you had been sitting, I was there in your spot, staring out at the water, the wake expanding as we moved farther from shore.

This is indisputable: you touched my arm. I turned to look at you and wondered how I could recognize someone I'd never met before. I will never, with the remainder of all my days, forget your first question. You won't forget my answer.

On 4/21 the sun set at 7:43. X and Y disembarked from the boat at 9:27 after 3 hours of constant conversation. At what speed did they begin the rest of their lives, one heading north, the other east, each having left something indefinite on that dock at the end of the world?

We met again seven months later on the left coast, when I walked off a plane and heard my name in your voice across the scores of strangers at the gate. What were the chances your unmistakable self would find me in a crowd again? And then your second question, same as the first.

What I loved: the way you said my name, those 6" triple-berry pies from the farmers' market, the way you grated tomatoes, the smell of your kitchen the morning after huevos el purgatorio for dinner, profound conversations, that small Murano glass dish you didn't have to buy and I didn't need and where I still keep my rings to this day, speedboat wakes when you're driving, picnics, your fingers on my forearm each and every time, salad last, peace of mind, words that mean more than they say, you.

What you loved: your version of me, picnics, driving, perfectly ironed shirts, mathematics (exponentials in particular), profound conversations, science, swimming, mustard in bloom, champagne, all colors of blue, GPS, that your handwriting mesmerized me, that I stared, charcoal-grilled swordfish, beet greens and skordalia, salad first, conflict, puns, me.

You had numbers and I had words. Now that you're dead, I'm left to do emotional algebra. I have to use addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division to arrive at a positive, right? I can almost hear you laughing because we both know how bad I can be at math.

I have a vague understanding of how this should work, and I know I have to start by gathering all the constants onto the right side. The trouble is, the right side keeps shifting, floating out of reach and then back in. As do the constants. What is it with these tides?



Let's not forget; on 4/27, X wrote to Y. On every day thereafter, for the next 3609 days minus the days they breathed the same air, Y wrote back.  $X + \text{words} + Y + \text{words}$  appeared to  $= X + Y$ . Subtract the need for words and numbers when there was no space between us.

What I wanted from you: Not much, really. Just you. More conversations. Less volatility. More picnics. Consistent kindness. Time.

What you wanted from me: The whole grand myth of love conquers all. Abandon. Control. Time. More picnics. More conversations. No distance. Me.

From the beginning: reasons why we wouldn't work out: 999. Reasons why we might: 2.  $X + Y - 999 + 2 = \text{Us}$ .

Number of times I held your one-and-only face in my two hands: maybe 308. Number of times you wanted me to: 10,001 +

You couldn't keep yourself from saying some things and I couldn't unhear them. After each fallout, we chose silence over talking, until one of us found a way to resume. Now that you no longer exist, there will be no more words to long for or brace myself against.

Number of things we both got wrong: so many. Number of things we both got right: 1. No, 2.

I want you to know, but maybe you already do, that I'm not sleeping. You often said you hoped that when you were there, and I was here, I wouldn't be able to sleep. And often I couldn't, but then, after the rhythm of stillness between us fell into a pattern, much like the hushing surf at Gualala, I could. Since you left the world and are playing with the moon like it's a tetherball, I can't.

There are so many knots to unravel. I find I have to rethink things I should already know, like the words *probability* and *possibility*. 11 letters in one word + its meaning, does not  $=$  11 letters + the meaning of the other. Suddenly it seems absurd that in order to solve this problem I have to add or subtract the exact same thing from each of us? How is that even possible? The earth  $- X = Y - X +$  the earth. Subtract for X, and where does that leave Y?

Remember that full-page letter you sent me on aqua vellum paper? You'd folded it neatly, deliberately in thirds, so that it appeared blank. I opened it to see only two handwritten words, like a bridge, in the middle: *come here*.

X's emotional reservoir fluctuated for years, but after finding Y in the Pacific, it was filled at an intense rate of 4 months per year, notwithstanding X's desire for 12. Y's emotional reservoir appeared calm on the surface, but was fathoms deeper than even Y could measure. X saw this as a problem. Y saw this as a chance for buoyance.

1,111 days after 4/21 the currents shifted after an unexpected storm Y didn't see coming, and Y's reservoir developed an imperceptible leak. How many cycles of deluge and drought thereafter in the next 6.8 years would it take for  $X + Y$  to reach a similar level of understanding? Or could they? Let  $C$  represent cycles of conflict and contrition. Let  $I$  represent the idea that words have an infinite lifespan.  $X + Y \div C = X + Y \times I + \infty$

Should we tabulate love and hurt? No. Were they on both sides of our equation? Yes, they were. Are.

What is the equation for the incalculable difference between what looked like it could be a good day and what ended up going so incredibly wrong? What the hell, you used to say.

Number of times you muscled yourself out of love with me: 16. Number of times you fell back in: 15. Number of times I wasn't sure which was which: 30.  $X + Y \neq Us$ .

The human heart is the size of a fist, and the murmur of our days is clenched approximately two inches to the left of my sternum, displacing mine. What the hell. Where the fuck is my heart?

When you looked at me one night in the middle of a movie and said, "Why are you always holding your breath?" it was not a question. I suddenly knew the answer, but said nothing.  $Y + \text{fear of truth} + X - \text{willingness to hear it} = Us$ . Subtract for fear and avoidance. Add for blind desire, more time to solve the problem. Truth is a constant.

Remember when we wondered about the theory that 99 out of 100 of any one person's breaths contain molecules from all of history? You asked, what if we both breathed Joan

of Arc at exactly the same time? Or Aristotle? Or, I added, that girl, Angel in kindergarten who secretly ate glue? Who's Angel? you laughed. I forgot we hadn't known each other since time immemorial.

The volume of your last exhale. Did you calculate for that? Did I? On that day I was stuck at home in a blizzard, the wind wailing from west to east, covering my windows with sheets of snow, sealing my house in darkness. At night I lay awake under the down comforter you gave me and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars we'd put on my ceiling years before. I want to say I thought of you, but now I am not sure.

Did you send your molecules east to find me? Did I breathe them less than three months later when I dreamt for the nth time that all the ice had melted and I was drowning? Did I wake up before, or after, you threw me a line? Did you?

All of the math here is ours.

Some of these words are yours and you will know which ones. The rest are mine. I am the keeper of this cache, after all, since, you are - and this bears repeating - dead.

If I knew how, I would take the things I still have to say to you and fold them into microscopic letters, thank you notes and save-the-date cards, most of which would fit into the box you gave me carved out of a redwood burl. It opens and closes with the same secret lid near the small knot next to the hole at the bottom, which is exactly how it has always worked. The keys to each of our houses are also still in there.

Why do I shelter keys to a house where you no longer live, plus my own, when I'm neither here nor there? I'm living on a plateau of melancholy these days, above the rest of my functioning life. All and none of this can be added to my future without you. Why does this feel so familiar?

The body that continues to house me, is the same body that was with you, the same body you loved, the same body whose hands held yours, the same hands that are writing this.

I watch my body as it moves us through these days. It pauses every morning as we come down the stairs, when only I re-see the watercolor on my wall, the print of the lake on Salt Spring Island, the one we biked past, and laughed so hard we had to stop and

walk the rest of the way. Our fingertips were the exact same stain of violet from the blackberries on the side of the road. Sun-warmed, wild, they burst in our mouths like bliss.

The person I most want to talk to about your death is you. But in your wake there are only numbers of days, the hum of the refrigerator as it cycles on and off, and the sound therapy machine I have set on Ocean. I am treading silence like it's water. How is it probable/possible that this is where we are?

Dusk and the fireflies linger outside my window. You saw them for the first time, here, two years after 4/21. I watched your enchantment, your own kind of blue light, and caught the word you offered me in my open palm: *bioluminescence*. They float up now and suspend themselves in flight, which is, of course, how this works.

I remember you telling me it's pretty simple: when their oxygen is available, their bodies illuminate, and when it is not, they go out. I understand that you are dead, but I cannot grasp why I am holding your light with me after all this time.

If you were here you would explain how to count the flash rates, how they recycle their patterns, how they are drawn to each other, and I would listen, spellbound, and it could be a good day. We would marvel again at the fact that we ever met on a boat at the end of the world, that you reached out first, and that, according to you, I would never leave you.

Please help me with the sum of us.

How is it possible that ten years of constant communication, minus 43 days, followed by ten years of silence, minus 17 days, equals 0, when the remainder of us is 1? I expect I'll always be missing the answer. I am trying to solve for why.

## SECOND PLACE BARRY LOPEZ NONFICTION PRIZE

### A WIDOW'S GUIDE TO OKCUPID

Caroline Goodwin

If you give yourself a full year of grieving, indulging in all the expected ways of acting out (for example, wailing on the way home from work in the car, whacking at the ceiling with an open hand while repeating *don't be dead don't be dead don't leave me here don't leave me here*) you might be ready for online dating. You might be. If you wait longer, of course it could be better, but it's really entirely up to you. As we know, there is no standard timeline for healing. Everyone's different. I give myself exactly twelve months after my husband Nick's fatal cycling accident in August 2016 before I create my profile on Tinder.

I miss him intensely, the only man with whom I shared my bed for 25 years, but I'm strong and I feel like trying to connect with someone else. It'll be fine, I tell myself. It could even be fun, right? Nick loved me; he'd want me to be happy. The Bay Area has got to be a wonderful place to be single. So many restaurants, parks, museums, beaches and activities, not to mention the progressive people and lifestyles. If the right person is out there, the internets will help me find him.

But first, I find the scammers and fake profiles. I don't know it yet, but it's the word *widow* that attracts them. I communicate for a while with one such "person" who messages me on Tinder from an oil rig. He says he wishes he could show me the sunset from there, that we could be like Leonardo and Kate in "Titanic". I'm a rookie, so the corniness doesn't yet deter me. But when we make plans to see the US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith give a reading in San Francisco, he sends me an email asking for help. He'd forgotten to pay for his daughter's school trip and if I could pay for it he would reimburse me on our first date. He'd lost his wife to cancer, a single parent to a 12-year-old girl, etc. The scariest thing about this is the fact that, for longer than a millisecond, I believe it. But of course I say no and when I go to his profile it has disappeared.

The next week, I do hit a poetry reading with a waiter from San José (nothing) and the next week I meet an English tutor at The Makeout Room in The Mission (nothing) and the next week I agree to dinner at Joe's of Westlake (nothing). My friends tell me to be careful, that Tinder is really just for sex.

"But I'm so clear," I say. "It says *no hookups* on my profile. And besides, what if I actually do want to have sex, ya know? Maybe after a few dates?"

They insist I'm being reckless, and they're probably right. Maybe Tinder's a little much at this early phase, so I move over to Bumble, which I'm told is more empowering to women. I find a guy whose profile claims a "big pinball machine collection". Oh yes, I do want to play Guardians of the Galaxy in his "sexy Oakland loft". But I listen to my friends: *always have a first meeting at a public place during the day* and when it comes time to make plans, this guy "doesn't do coffee dates".

I pay for Match.com, where I waste a bunch of time on another scammer who, when I finally ask if he's even a real person, scolds me. "That's a *really* rude thing to say to someone you don't even know." Somehow this makes me cry and I can't tell if it's from stress or disappointment or grief. I consider eHarmony but remember my writing student the attorney who was engaged to someone she met on eHarmony. This man turned out to be a "cobra" – the type of batterer who waits for a very long time and then strikes suddenly. He beat her from head to toe, even broke her collarbone, after a year-long engagement to be married. I can't even look at eHarmony without seeing her face.

Next is OKCupid, where it looks like I can be my quirky self, love it or leave it. And I've learned a thing or two by now, so I'll really get to know someone before I invest too much of my time. I correspond with a handsome saxophone player from Oakland, a social worker from San Mateo, a writer from Marin. Each of them seems sweet, even a little exciting, something possible perhaps, but nobody asks for an in-person meeting, ever, at any point, and by Christmas I'm worn out. I decide to give it a rest and put my energy into the holidays.

My daughters (13 and 20) are healing from the loss of their father and bonding with one another in new ways. We take the dog to the beach, we drive to Pescadero and have lunch at Duarte's. It's difficult, but I've been through some shit and I know how to do this, I tell myself. Just keep walking. Everything will pass. But the loneliness is overwhelming and at times I just want to run away. I feel like I can't stand the house we worked so hard to buy together, the yard with its blackberry brambles, his shirts hanging in the closet because I can't move them. How has this happened to me? I want something new, something fun to distract me. And why shouldn't I have that? When I see an old friend at the post office and she invites me to a New Year's celebration at her house up the street, I believe it's a message from the Universe. I commit to making my Emily Dickinson gingerbread cookies in the shape of Sasquatch.

I am Guest #1 at my neighbor's house. I'm feeling festive, and I ask if any single guys might be coming. My neighbor says *yes, as a matter of fact there is* and at that very instant I look out the kitchen window where Guest #2 is rounding the corner of the garage. He's adorable. He's my height exactly, his eyes are sparkly and light brown, he has a mustache and a warm handshake. I should have worn something nicer, I think.

What am I doing in these sweatpants? I start to shovel hunks of brie into my mouth and plot how to get next to him on the couch. When I manage it and we chat a while, I think there may be a spark. But he leaves before the live music starts and I stay until the bitter end so I can ask my neighbor to tell me more about Guest #2. They have been friends for about a year, she says. She'd invited him after I'd seen her at the post office because she thought there might be a connection between the two of us. Oh yay, I think. Could this be? Nothing online? No swiping right and liking and logistics and obsessively checking my phone?

"How can I find him again?" I ask. My neighbor tells me that Guest #2 is on OKCupid.

Perfect. I walk home and sit in the armchair by the tree and have myself a cup of Sleepytime with honey. I'll wait a little while, because all the advice is to never, ever seem eager. Never, ever give chase.

A couple of nights later I have my regular insomnia, clinging to Nick's fleece pajama bottoms with The Grinch design, trying not to weep too loudly and scare my children. I get on my phone in bed and start to look for Guest #2. I scroll and scroll, face after face, and there he is. 57 years old, Redwood City, good at "holding space" for others, looking for connections, *and more...*

I hit the star button, the one that says "I like you". When I check the next morning, Guest #2 has liked me back. It takes all the restraint in the world not to initiate a conversation, though. I understand I'll need to let him take the lead. And although I have no idea what I'm doing, it's fun and exciting and I remember how I felt when I was fourteen and waiting to catch a glimpse of Dwayne Snow, who lived up the street and was older and a little dangerous and very handsome. I remember waiting for his Camaro to pass my house so I could casually pretend to be checking the mail when he pulled into his driveway.

I take a beach walk with Guest #2. We enjoy a bowl of soup on a rainy day at a Half Moon Bay coffee shop. When Guest #2 takes me to the American Legion to hear his neighbor play guitar, I get a very nice kiss at the end of the date. When Guest #2 packs blueberry muffins and a thermos of coffee for our walk at Oyster Point, we talk about the National Parks we've visited and I start to fall. When he tells me his true age (seven years older than what it says on his profile) I don't care. When he drops hints about the San Francisco "play parties" he's enjoyed in the past, I don't care about that either, because I think I'm ready for anything. I could do a play party. I could take a class at the Citadel called "Introduction to BDSM". Why not? I'm no prude. By February I've decided to plan my weekend away with Guest #2, at a nice Airbnb on the Sonoma Coast. I find a black lingerie that makes me feel good, and I believe it's the right thing because I've been honest and aware and awake and paying very close attention, and with Guest #2 I have felt safe.

Then on his Facebook page I find a number of women who are connected with a Bay Area group called OneTaste. Hm. The website features several really lovely women of all ages and the words *wellness just got interesting*. I dig further:

*OneTaste is a global lifestyle brand focused on increasing health, happiness and connection through scientifically-proven methods...*

and--

*combines mindfulness with the power of the deeply human, deeply felt experience of Orgasm...*

okay, and—

*During the practice, one person strokes another person's clitoris for 15 minutes, with no goal other than to feel the sensation...*

Then I find the 27-page single-spaced online PDF entitled “The Orgasmic Meditation (OM) Container Document” and I can’t stop reading. I think about the sex with Guest #2 and how lovely it’s been (better than anything, ever) and how I pretty much just want to have sex with him every day for the rest of my life. Now, however, there is one image in my mind and it won’t let me go. It’s the image of Guest #2, who by this time I think I might be in love with, asking another woman if she’d like to OM. The protocol is to say “Would you like to have an OM?” or “Would you like to OM?” Yes, she agrees. And Guest #2 is pulling on a glove and lubricating a fingertip, looking into her private parts and then into her face to perform the “noticing step” in which he describes what he sees to her in a “one or two-sentence value-neutral (in terms of shape, color, location, texture, etc. ) physical description of the strokee’s genitals (for example, your inner labia are a light coral color and bend slightly to the left)”, to which she simply says, “Thank you”. Guest #2 is now “the stroker” and she’s “the strokee”.

I see this image, again and again. I can’t shake it. Is he doing it now? What are his actual connections with these OneTaste women? We had agreed to “no sex with other people” during our dating, however long it lasted. But if this wasn’t really sex, per se, he could easily pull a Bill Clinton. I decided I must find a way to talk to him about it.

We take a beautiful walk along the coast and we’re pulling into my driveway. I’m anxious, we are at the three-month mark of the relationship, but he has a little history of dropping off the map for a few days after intimacy, and now OneTaste is on my mind. I ask if he’d be willing to call or text me the next day to check in.

“Well, that’s pretty serious,” he says.

I can’t breathe. I blurt it out about OneTaste and OMing.



He says, “what do you know about *that*?”

My face is in my hands and I’m sniffing and apologizing for being so nosy. I tell him I can’t share him, it’s not in my nature, I just can’t, and he says he’s not sure why I’m so threatened by the practice; he is fully clothed during a session. I wonder, then, if he’s right. Why should Orgasmic Meditation threaten me at all, if it’s not even sex?

We talk it through. He explains, again, his connections with meditation, transparency, spirituality, sexuality. He gives me a hug and tells me to “breathe into the heart space” and count to ten, something he learned from a man at an O-Ming event, when he stood on the sidelines looking anxious and alone. I breathe into the heart space. I don’t want to break up with him, I really like him. However, the next time we walk and talk I mention it to him again: my preference is for “no O-M-ing” if he wants to continue to see me.

“It’s O-Ming, not O-M-ing,” he says.

“Okay, whatever,” I say.

He says he’ll think about it, and that he really wants to see how things go with me. So we go to concerts and out to dinner in Berkeley, we have sex at my place and at his place, it’s great, and in September we travel to Seattle where I give a reading at a small bookstore. I think we travel well together. We meet my beloved younger brother for dinner. I am thinking ahead to the holidays, and if I should ask Guest #2 to come Nick’s family’s traditional Thanksgiving Dinner, and what that might be like for both of us. Is it too soon? Too serious? I am thinking of ways to ask him, we’re seated at the very back of the airplane, there are no windows in our row, the man to my right is jiggling his long skinny thigh, and I glance at Guest #2’s cell phone. There’s a text from “Robert OM” about an online “commitment circle via Zoom to get the juices flowing.”

I start to shake. I think of a friend who recently had to go to the emergency room for “huge, rolling panic attacks” and I think I know what she means. I employ all the methods of grounding that help me ride BART under the Bay, pinching the skin of my wrist, concentrating on the sensation of my feet touching the floor, and we finally land and I’m in tears and I tell him I’m just claustrophobic and I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s happening to me.

Surely he’s just getting messages from OneTaste, not engaging in the practice with other women again. Right? He’d agreed not to, hadn’t he? Or had he? I don’t know how to ask. Then my father dies in Alaska at the age of 89, exactly two years and two days after my husband’s accident, and I take my daughters to the funeral, which is lovely and sad and everything my father would have wanted. When I get back to California, however, I can’t sleep and I can’t stop crying. I teach my comp class with a face so puffy it looks like I’ve been beaten up. I have to keep going, keep teaching.

Surely I can get ahold of myself. When I take Nick's truck to the shop so it will pass the smog test, I ask Guest #2 to pick me up and spend the day with me. I'm sitting uncomfortably in the familiar leather bucket passenger seat of his sportscar as we head to the city. Warren Zevon is singing "Lawyers, Guns and Money".

"I really like you," Guest #2 says. "But I have a lot more time on my hands than you do, being a retired person," he says. "I miss the OneTaste community."

We are headed down Brotherhood Way toward Lake Merced, it's a beautiful October day, the eucalyptus trees are catching the sunlight and I think of the Canadian poet Roo Borson:

The eucalyptus shadows hang  
like knives, knives that cut nothing,  
shadows. A breeze starts up  
like a little thrill  
going through a crowd. The wet smoke smell.

"So you won't mind me seeing other men, then," I say. I don't mean this at all, but I absolutely cannot think of anything else. I try to feel my feet on the floor, concentrate on the heels and the arches. This is not an emergency.

"I hadn't gotten that far," he says.

"Well, you've said a lot," I say. "I guess I need some time to think."

"Of course."

We walk through Golden Gate park, holding hands. We sit on a bench by Stowe Lake and kiss. When he goes into the Russian grocery store on Geary, his phone pings and of course I look. Robert OM again. "Our first commitment circle was a great success."

When I get home the panic starts in earnest. It truly inhabits my body and I hang onto whatever is nearby (a wall, a chair) until it passes. I call Guest #2 to make sure I'd heard him correctly. We are on the phone for 30 minutes, arguing bitterly. He repeats his question: "why are you so *threatened* by it?" and again I wonder. Why, indeed? I make an appointment with the therapist who helped me in 2002 after my daughter died. He suggests a timeout from Guest #2 and any romance for a while, and I ask for this timeout via email. Guest #2 agrees. I think I might need to go up on my dose of antidepressant, or maybe try a different medication for anxiety, so I call my Kaiser psychiatrist.

"Are you having any thoughts of harming yourself?" she asks. I am outside the New Leaf grocery store in Half Moon Bay, on my cell phone, waiting for my younger

daughter to walk down the hill from the high school.

“Yes,” I squeak, filled with shame. I haven’t felt like this since I was in my 20s and my live-in boyfriend went out on yet another drinking binge.

“Can you promise me that you will not do anything to hurt yourself?” she says. “Can you promise me that you will make it to your appointment here on Thursday, so we can talk?”

“Yes,” I squeak again. “I promise.” And I mean it. She has been a good psychiatrist, she’s been with me since before Nick died. I see her twice a year for talk therapy and meds. I like her. When I first told her about Guest #2, that I was excited and grateful to have met someone, she’d asked if I had any reservations.

“Well, I think he might have a history of polyamory,” I’d said. “Or something like that.”

“He wants to have sex with other women,” she’d said.

At the time I’d told myself that tired old story: it would be different with me, our relationship would be that special one for both of us. He’d said he “might be done” with his San Francisco adventures, and of course I’d be the person to whom he would commit. Now, I can’t wait to see her and tell her she was right. Solidarity, woman power, fuck those assholes! How dare they treat us like this? Take us for granted?

It’s a Thursday afternoon, three weeks into my timeout from Guest #2. The sky is very clear, there’s no wind, BART screeches past the Kaiser building where at first I go to the wrong floor, but I make it to her office on time and in one piece.

I sit on the couch and begin the story. She’s at her computer typing away but when I mention OneTaste she stops typing and I think she giggles. “He’s into OneTaste?” she says.

“Yes.”

“And you’re worried about this?”

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t be too worried,” she says. She takes her hands off the keyboard and leans back in her chair. “I really wouldn’t be.”

“No?”

“No. It’s a very clinical practice. Have you OMed with him? Is it something you want to do with him? Are you interested in learning how to OM?”

“Uhh...”

“Full disclosure,” she says. “I was into that community. Deep into that community, a while ago.”

“Okay,” I say.

“For a long time,” she says.

“Ah,” I say. Something is growing in my throat and I start to swallow. She suddenly looks like some kind of cartoon, her eyes big and round. There’s a small silver septum ring in her nose. I realize I’ve mentioned Guest #2 by name several times. I take a breath.

“I’m feeling so embarrassed right now,” she says, and now she really is giggling. She puts her right hand up to her mouth. “But I think I know your boyfriend.”

We look at one another. Something is in the room with us. I’m not sure what it is, but it feels as though we’re suddenly in a crowd. Maybe it’s the sound of my own heartbeat in my ears. I pull out my phone and show her a photo of Guest #2 and me on a hike in the Sierras.

“Oh, yes,” she smiles at me. “Yes, I know him. He’s a *really nice guy*.”

“Yes he is,” I say. “Very sweet.”

“I can’t be sure but we may have had an OM session. We may or may not have had a session together,” she says. “I can’t say, I just can’t be sure.”

The wall is green and then yellow, my mouth is stuffed with moss. I think I hear her say something about a referral to a different doctor, and I say I’ll need to think about it and she says she’d be happy to continue working with me, of course, and I somehow get myself to the elevator and out into the fresh air where I rush to a patch of grass and dry heave.

When I was a girl, I was comforted by the willows along the creek behind my house: Campbell Creek in Anchorage, Alaska. Every April, during spring breakup, the beautiful deep red branches would offer their buds of silver fur that would soon turn to catkins. I would check them every day, as I would check the progress of the melting ice in the creek and the snow on the street, and I would feel such joy when I could hear the water running again, or see the asphalt under the snow in front of my house. Here was hard evidence that the world was turning, spring would come and nothing, not even winter, would last forever. I try to call up this image now, the image of the willows along Campbell Creek. I try really hard to get rid of that image of Guest #2 pulling on a glove and gazing down at my psychiatrist who is butterflied in “the nest”.

The next morning I head to the University of South Dakota. The John R. Milton Writers’ conference happens every other year, and attending it in 2016 was the first time I’d traveled after Nick died. I remember the campus and the pastel sky. There are ladybugs on the screen door at my AirBnB; they also remind me of the last conference here.

Back in 2016, I had believed the trip would give me a change of scenery and

might be healing for me. Instead, when I landed in Omaha and rented my car and headed north, I had to pull over several times to quell my anxiety. The fountain in downtown Omaha? I took a picture to send to Nick. The vivid sunset and the cottonwood-willow river bottoms? I wanted to call and describe them to Nick. I had been quite numb since the accident, and now each new moment felt like another blow. It had only been two and a half months since he died, so I started to understand something on that trip: I would never hear his voice again. I could never call him to report the news of my day, the people I'd met, the scenery or the insects or the birds. Never, ever again.

I survived that first conference and even made a few new friends. When I sat down for the keynote speaker on Saturday night next to a young poet from Wisconsin, he pulled out his phone and said "Look what was on the doorknob at my AirBnB." It was an enormous praying mantis.

Nick had had a lifelong admiration for the praying mantis. He'd kept several as pets when he was a boy in Ohio, the best of which was the Jolly Green Giant. When our older daughter was five he built a cage and ordered an egg sac online as an experiment. The tiny mantises hatched on the exact day of his mother's death and we all found this a bit amazing, but of course it was just a coincidence. I stared at the mantis on the young poet's phone at the conference in South Dakota.

"Be my friend," I said.

"Okay," he said, laughing. I spilled it all about my marriage and the accident, and how difficult it had been to come to South Dakota at all. We agreed to believe that perhaps this doorknob praying mantis was a little sign from the Great Beyond. Perhaps it would all be okay somehow, and Nick wasn't really gone forever.

Now I fly to the conference again, two years later and just after the loss of my father and, apparently, also the loss of Guest #2. I stay north of town in a beautiful cottage on a farm, I attend the poetry panels and all of the speakers' presentations. I buy several books and spend Sunday reading. A long walk by the river soothes me, I let myself cry, and the clouds are brilliant on my way to the airport at daybreak. When I land in California on Monday afternoon, however, I really do not want to face my life.

I don't want the cat boxes and dog doo and dishes and laundry and vacuuming, the meal planning and carpooling and commuting and teaching. I don't want to break up with Guest #2, I don't want another loss. I've never broken up with anyone before in my entire life.

I sit on the bench outside of Terminal 2 waiting for my older daughter to pick me up. A short guy with a blue bandanna on his head sits down next to me and comments on the weather. His luggage is all beaten up and he has bad teeth.

"You on that flight from Sioux Falls?" he asks.

“Yes.”

“Me too. Was at my daughter’s wedding up in Brookings.” He pulls out his phone. The bride is lovely. “I’m not proud or anything,” he says. He is absolutely beaming.

When my own kid arrives at the curb and I see her face, this strong and delicate face with the eyes so much like her father’s, I think of another Roo Borson poem:

ALL

All that spring  
the spring had not yet come,  
and then at last

the errant petals,  
falling everywhere –  
the sight of petals

fallen from your hair.  
As if some other errand  
called to them –

such whiteness, pinkness,  
whether born out of spring’s lateness,  
or in error,

or to summon to that  
sudden sky all of blueness:  
your eyes.

She takes us over Sharp Park Road toward the ocean, past the cypress trees bent by the wind and the hillsides of iceplant and ivy. The clouds are long and thin. The Arctic Monkeys are on the radio, and she makes a comment about how terrible she thinks their new music is. Her wrists look so small. I remember her on the rope swing outside of our house in Alaska, and sledding down the hill behind the school, and wading into the little waves at Sandy Beach. I don’t know why things happen like they do. Why and when some connections end and other connections begin.

The house smells like cat piss and mildew. I roll my suitcase into the living room, inspect the dust on the shelf of mementoes. When my phone vibrates and it’s Guest #2,

I sit down in the armchair. The cat jumps into my lap and starts to purr. Before I know it, the holidays will be here again and I'll be in the garage rooting through bins for ornaments and lights. I'll be in the malls with everyone else, trying to find the right gifts.

My daughter stomps down the hallway in the gruff manner that drove us all nuts when she was in high school. *Stomp stomp stomp*. Her sister will be home from school soon. Someone will need to make dinner. She pauses in front of the stove, such a thin and beautiful thing, far too young to lose her father. She crosses her arms for a moment and seems to be thinking deeply before she reaches out for the kettle and turns to me. "Want some tea, Mom?" she says. There is the slightest hint of a smile on her face. Her voice is the sweetest thing I've ever heard.

# HONORABLE MENTION, 2019 BARRY LOPEZ NONFICTION PRIZE

## POPPY

Kyle Ingrid Johnson

I was introduced to my future lover by a Harvard Divinity School student who rented in the same apartment building as mine in the early 70s. “You’ll like her,” he promised me. “We’ve been friends since our childhood in Chicago. She’s moving here to help me pay the rent.”

Her real name was Apollonia, but family and friends had always called her Poppy, and that is the name the Divinity School student used when he formally introduced us a week or two later. Poppy was a dancer with a local African dance company. They paid her a stipend, hardly enough to live on. I wondered how the Divinity School student felt she would be able to help him with his rent. “Oh, I get a check from the Welfare Office, too,” she told me. This was in the days when it was easy to get Food Stamps and a small welfare check if one was unemployed or – as in her case – working for a stipend. Welfare didn’t care. Everyone at Welfare was young, idealistic, protesting the Vietnam War and domestic social issues. Artists of all sorts were treated particularly well at the local office, receiving small but regular checks so they could pursue their art. Who knows what the case workers really wrote in their files.

I was very self-reliant. I didn’t need a 9-to-5 job, a stipend from an artist’s group or a check from the Welfare office. I worked from home – and occasionally out at a hotel – seeing about a half dozen men a week. I was a lazy call girl. I could only see the sensibility of seeing enough clients to pay the bills. It seemed ridiculous to me to see as many men as possible. Who wanted to do that? It was more work, totally unnecessary in the scheme of things, and might create too many visitors and make the neighbors suspicious. Besides, the cash I brought in each week was more than double what my friends were making working as teachers, secretaries, and social-service workers.

Poppy and I clicked immediately. She was either downstairs in my apartment or I was upstairs with her in the apartment of the Divinity School student (I was amused that he wasn’t at all religious; school was just a way to avoid the draft.) Poppy went off to her dance rehearsals and I saw my regulars for appointments. Evenings we would get 180



together to exchange stories. Often there would be a group of us. We sat around with our young selves, smoked joints and told stories about our sexual encounters. The gay guys couldn't get enough of my trick stories, although Poppy got tired of them after a while. Both she and I identified as bisexual, but our views on the subject were somewhat different.

At that age, I saw life and sexuality as though they were a set of scales, the old-fashioned kind used to symbolize justice. I had to have a man and a woman for balance. The man was usually a gay male with whom I had a deep emotional attachment. Sex was sometimes but not usually involved. The woman was someone I put on a pedestal, showed off at parties and clubs, showered with presents, and with whom I made love. As I aged, my views on bisexuality changed. I grew to disregard gender and just reacted to the person. I was no longer obsessed with having both a male and a female in my life at the same time.

Poppy saw bisexuality as going to bed with men and women. She said she really didn't care which was available and when, but I noticed that her relationships with women were stronger.

We laughed a lot, gave parties that involved my cooking for hours while she disappeared on errands only to arrive at the party late, in splendid attire, a tardy hostess. Our lives seemed as though we were carried around town on colorful, magical umbrellas, lifted up and set down in various clubs and discos, at house parties, gallery openings, and just about anywhere interesting and artistic people met. I got to know most of her dancer friends. One night a member of her African dance company pounded on my ground-floor windows looking for her. I was afraid he was going to break in, and she insisted I go outside and tell him she wasn't there. I knew he didn't believe me. When I got back in bed beside her, I felt that I would hear the window glass crashing any minute. She just hugged me and said "Fuck him. Let's go to sleep."

We got playful, too. I had a regular named Frank who visited every Saturday morning. He was 70 but looked younger. Frank's visits were very, very short, and he said the same thing every time he came: "Ingrid, Ingrid, wow – you are a real buzzsaw!" He never stayed longer than fifteen minutes and was as predictable as the mail carrier who came at 11:00. One Saturday I let Poppy hide in my bedroom closet so she could listen in on the session. It was the only time I ever did anything like that, but she didn't

believe that a man would say and do the same things every week. “He does,” I insisted as I pushed her into the back of my dark closet, dresses swaying in her face. “Now you be quiet in there, and whatever you do, don’t giggle!”

That was the longest fifteen minutes of my life or my young life as far as I had lived it. We got through it quietly, though, and Frank never suspected anyone was auditing the session. Predictable Frank called me a buzzsaw as he usually did, and he was gone within fifteen minutes. Once he was out the apartment door, I opened the closet, and Poppy tumbled out, onto the floor where I joined her, the two of us rolling around and laughing uncontrollably about buzzsaws.

When she was short of money, I would suggest she see one of my regulars with me – or alone if she preferred. It always seemed the easy solution to bill paying. Poppy had a way of lecturing me that made her appear quite the *grande dame*. “Now listen, YOU can see these men as no one is going to expect it of you, a white girl. Everyone in this apartment building thinks you are so sweet. They all believe you still teach at the daycare center. No one even suspects what you do. But me? I can’t do it. Why? Because I am black, that’s why. People expect me to do that, and I won’t do it. Someday I am going to be famous, and I don’t want anyone throwing that up in my face. I am NOT going to be the stereotype of a black, urban woman.”

And thus I learned to think differently about race in a very strange but probably much-needed lesson. Today it could be said I learned about “white privilege,” but forty-five years ago the phrase didn’t exist, and it wasn’t in every newspaper article or on everyone’s mind.

Poppy didn’t become famous, but she got close. When our affair ended (well, it never really ended) - when we felt independent enough to go our separate ways - she left for New York. She danced with Olatunji. She acted off-Broadway; she acted on Broadway. Clive Barnes wrote a wonderful review of her in the paper. She did voiceovers for commercials, appeared in TV advertisements (often as a nurse), and made a decent living until she disappeared.

Her brother from the Midwest and I went looking for her. Her mother had died and left her a very small inheritance – a miniscule bank account and a tiny shotgun house down in Alabama. But the estate couldn’t be settled until she was found. The brother

gave up long before I did. I went through old address books, visiting apartments where she had lived over the years, talking to neighbors, calling places she used to work, checking with SAG and Actor's Equity (her dues were unpaid.)

Through a woman Poppy had worked with at a movie production company, I finally found her living in a squat on the Lower East Side and selling books on the street. I wondered how such a proud and talented woman could end up this way, but what did I know about mental illness? What did any of us know then?

I brought her back to Boston with me, housed her, fed her, and got her to a doctor – a therapist she initially did not want to see. But eventually the old Poppy emerged, and we resumed our affair as if there hadn't been a twenty-year gap. By then I had an established career in nonprofits and a good network system. I was able to get her the help she needed, and within two years, she was settled in an apartment and announced that she was going to law school.

Poppy passed the bar around the same time I received my MFA in Writing. We were both on the threshold of middle-age, women doing what we wanted to do. I was the only one who still called her Poppy. On her website and business cards, she used her full name: Apollonia Raymond Brown, Esq. We saw less and less of each other. All her new friends were lawyers. She belonged to a lesbian lawyers' meet-up club and was always in an affair with a new woman. None of them lasted very long. She practiced criminal law and defended the poor. Occasionally we'd get together around the holidays. I'd invite some of our old gay male friends from back in the 70s, but she never seemed as delighted to see them as I did.

Last fall I had a ruptured gallbladder and was taken to the hospital in an ambulance for emergency surgery. I was there nearly a week, and only the last two days did I feel well enough to check email on my cell phone. There was an urgent, demanding email from Poppy as well as a very blatant posting on my Facebook timeline: WHERE ARE YOU? Why haven't you been returning my calls? I need to speak to you IMMEDIATELY."

After I was home from the hospital and recuperating, I phoned her and was confronted with the news that she had been diagnosed with Pick's Disease. "I got lost on my way to the courthouse," she said by way of explanation. It was the same

courthouse she had been going to for over twelve years. Her news was worse than the pain I had experienced when my gallbladder ruptured. I didn't know anything about Pick's Disease, but I learned fast. A frontotemporal dementia, it eventually leaves its victims without the power of speech and destroys writing skills. I read that it was progressive and that most patients died within eight years of diagnosis. How long had she had it? Because we had been living fairly separate lives with different sorts of careers and moved in different social circles, I had not been keeping up with her – or her mind.

Now I can't go to her apartment to visit her. It's about six miles from mine, a different neighborhood of the same city. But it is not the distance. It is simply that the new Poppy does not resemble my Poppy, the one I knew and loved. It has only been a year since her diagnosis and she has gone from being able to talk on the phone to only being able to text. Her texts seem worse week by week, and I sometimes struggle to understand what she is trying to say. The one that came yesterday said: *Phone. I can. I can't. Do soon. I can't. I can. Here come. I can't. Now. Do it. Come. I can. I can't. Fix.*

Her landlord has evicted her as she can no longer pay the rent. She can't work, she can hardly speak, she can barely write. All is not lost, though: she knows who I am, she remembers her doctor's name, she knows her favorite food is lobster, and she remembers the code to the ATM, although there is no money left in her account.

She's the same age I am. When we were really young, she would tell me about her grandmother's little house in Alabama that her mother and then she, would inherit. We used to joke about living there and having rocking chairs on the front porch where we would sit in our old age and reminisce. When she became a lawyer, I used to tease her that all her friends would be retired, and she would still be working. "That's my plan," she said. "I wanted a career I could do into my later years. I will always have an income. I can work into my 90s." Sometimes plans just don't work out.

When I am with her these days which is rare as it is too difficult, I can interest her only in food. A big platter of sushi gets her attention, but the Pick's Disease doesn't allow her to show excitement. I find it hard to reconcile this suddenly silent body with the animated, lively Poppy of years past. She can't remember how to use the remote for her TV, she struggles to put reminders to herself in her cell phone and has locked herself out of her phone more times than I can count. She points to years of client legal files

and tries to tell me how important they are to save although her words come out backwards. *Files, legal. Save have to. You.* I try to talk to her about the 70s. I ask her if she remembers this and that, and she doesn't answer. She just keeps eating.

I think of Michael Kingsley's book "Old Age: A Beginner's Guide" which he wrote after being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. What struck me most was his conclusion that whoever has the most marbles in the end wins the game of life. If I subscribe to his theory – and I do - Poppy has lost.

I take online writing workshops, I sign on for selected genealogical research jobs for pay, I write histories of nonprofit organizations, I read constantly. I go shopping. I meet people for lunch. I have many friends and many interests. I am healthy enough physically to do *most* of the things I want to do. Poppy barely remembers what she used to do or what she used to love. She remembers love, though, as the nurse's aide who checks in with her to remind her to bathe and take her meds, showed me a note she found in Poppy's bathroom. The outside said: "In Case I Die." She must have written it last year before she lost the power to write. Inside it has my name, address, and phone number. Beside it she has written "old lover, best friend."

## EDITORS CHOICE

### A RIVER IN MY DREAMS: THE TRINITY

Donley Watt

In 1952 a hard packed, black earth road led from west to east in Navarro County ending at the Trinity River. I knew that road well, for my daddy owned a 113 acre plot of land just above the river's flood plain. That place, enclosed by a barely serviceable four strand barbed wire fence, was not accessible after a rain, when the hard packed road became a quagmire of slippery gumbo, impossible for a pickup, iffy for a tractor. His little pasture (he called it) had a few small meadows of native grasses (mostly weeds), surrounded by a wild mix of pecan and red oak trees, which supported ropes of mustang grapevines and poison ivy. The soil, built up by river overflow from centuries before, was rich and deep, the woods almost impenetrable.

Daddy ran a few bony, mixed breed cows there most summers, the cattle herded from his mesquite-choked 70 acre upland pasture six miles to the west. I trotted behind the little herd all the way, Daddy driving our 1949 Ford ahead, its trunk propped up with a broken fence post, a bale of hay precariously balanced there, an enticement for the cows to keep moving.

My job was to make sure none of the cows wandered into a farmhouse yard to graze on a garden or flowerbed or turned back.

Mother sat in the Ford's front seat with a semi-pout on her face, ready to hurry and unhitch the gate when we reached the bottomland pasture. Then while Daddy eased the car through the gap, Mother would stand in the middle of the road waving her arms to turn the cows into the pasture and I would keep the pressure on from behind. Woe unto me if a half-Brahma heifer balked and then bolted past me back up the road.

But afterwards we would gather a few native pecans hidden in the leaves and then drive the mile or so down to where the road dead-ended at the Trinity River. While Mother sat in the car, Daddy and I made our way up river a few hundred yards. The Trinity was wide enough so that I barely could skip a flat rock six or seven hops across to the other bank. Trees, oaks and pecans and an occasional thicket of willows, grew almost to the river's edge, leaning from spring floods past, and at times we had to scramble up a three-foot high bank to follow the river. From there, a few steps back from the water, Daddy would stop and gaze upstream with a rare satisfied look on his face. One almost of contentment. At those moments I felt my tension and weariness from the cattle drive ease, and I would follow his gaze up the Trinity trying to spot what had

caused Daddy's change.

The river, muddy in its depths, ran clear at the river's edge, and in the shallows schools of minnows hurried away when we moved by, and often the flash of a fish would rise from the river's depths. I spotted black-shelled river mussels half-hidden in the sand and a few of their cracked open shells on the bank where, from the crisscross of tracks, it appeared that a raccoon had a moonlight feast. Back from the river a squirrel chattered (to me a fuss or a warning) and farther up a blue heron high-stepped away, always staying some innate safe distance from our intrusion. As we moved on, the giant bird lifted silently into the air and disappeared beyond the next bend. Only Daddy's breathing broke the silence.

When we turned to go back Daddy stopped and looked into the woods, as if he were straining to see something beyond the tangle and thickets of underbrush. I felt as if he wanted to tell me something, something secret about what might be there.

I sat in the rear seat of the Ford on the way back up the dirt road while my parents bickered quietly up front. After five miles we came to the newly graveled road that led south to Kerens, the Navarro County town where Daddy went to high school. From there a two-lane highway led east towards Athens and home.

But several miles outside of Kerens we came to the Trinity River bridge, a dozen miles downriver from where we had earlier stopped and walked the steep bank. There, crossing the bridge, I sat up high and rolled my window down. The river, not that far below, looked smaller from above, but sparkled as it flowed south. Just past the bridge, on the right, a riverside clapboard cafe of some forgotten name tempted travelers with a FRIED FRESH CATFISH sign, and I envisioned the cafe owner running trot lines to keep fresh catfish on the menu. I thought, "I could do that." Then in a few minutes leaned over and slept the rest of the way home.

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On a Friday afternoon in October, later that year when the weather had begun to cool, I rode with Daddy over to that same place on the Trinity, at the end of that dirt road. Just down river from there, a sand bar reached out into the river's bend, and we joined three of our kin—my mother's brothers, Snook and Warner and Russell—who already had a driftwood fire going. Snook was baiting a throw line for catfish while Warner, who had a rod and bait cast reel, watched as his cork bobbed and drifted downstream. Russell had balanced a blackened enamel coffee pot on some coals. Daddy wasn't much of a fisherman, but helped Snook bait the dozen or so hooks of the throw line with red tail minnows, and then wrapped one end of the line around a tree branch that hung over the river bank. Snook tied a window weight to the other end

to hold the line in place, and flung the whole contraption past the river's center.

Daddy and his brothers-in-law were close, and while they got tin cups of coffee and began their price of hay and lack of rain talk, I wandered the riverbank again, this time alone and to the south, until their voices faded and the river sounds took their place. Alone, I could sense closeness to the Trinity—its power, the way it made its own way towards the only imagined (for me) Gulf of Mexico.

When I got back to the camp Daddy gave me a quick glance of vague disapproval, I thought then, but much later figured that he must have been coming aware that I was a boy who puzzled him and that boy would become a man he might never understand.

I moved away to watch Warner cast a silver spinner mid-river. After a few casts, he jerked the rod back and I thought the way the rod bent he must have hung a log. But the line not only was taut, but moved downstream and Warner struggled to hold on for a few turns of the reel. Finally, with the rod still bent he began with less effort to wind the reel again. Then in the clear shallows I spotted a giant fish. "Damned gar," Warner shouted. He had his thumb on the reel's line to hold the gar where he was. Daddy grabbed a long piece of driftwood and waded a couple of feet in and swung the limb at the big fish. With that huge splash the gar turned and ran for the river's depths, and in a moment jerking the line so that Warner's thumb was forced under the reel's metal guard. He cursed as he shook his bloody thumb in the air. The rod straightened up, the line went slack and the gar was gone.

By lantern right at dark Snook checked his throw line—two medium-sized channel cats and a small turtle. The other men had dragged up a log next to the driftwood fire and watched the flames as a black iron pot bubbled over a mound of coals. Russell peeled potatoes and carrots and tossed them into the pot along with a hunk of salt pork, while Snook cleaned and skinned the two fish, rinsing them in a clear river inlet.

I sat on a sandy spot at the end of the log, near the fire, listening while Daddy and Russell talked. Their banter turned into a conversation, focusing on a fellow by the name of Will Stanley, a bachelor who had lived in Kerens until a few years back when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Then he had moved from town, alone, down to the Trinity River bottom where he found a place next to a flowing spring. There he built a shack out of scrap wood brought from town and lived as a hermit. Word was that he spent his time hunting rabbits and squirrels, catching channel catfish, and reading the classics—Plato and Aristotle and others—none of whom my uncles had ever read and at which my daddy only shook his head and grunted in disbelief. Will's brother brought him a supply of coffee and flour and salt and corn meal plus a couple of loaves of white



bread every couple of weeks. He mostly lived off the land and when locals camped on the river sometimes he would wander by and get whatever leftover supplies they had. Will hand-carved gun stocks from fallen walnut trees to barter for the little he needed.

Then, as if he knew he was being talked about, Will moved out of the woods and into the light of the campfire. The men glanced up and Russell poured Will a cup of coffee as if this was the most common thing in the world. Will had brought two skinned and cleaned squirrels, which without asking, he dropped into the black pot. They simmered for most of an hour, then Snook added the two fish and before long the six of us filled enameled bowls and with a slice or two of white bread made supper.

Will didn't say much, just downed a bowl of that stew and slipped back into the woods with a nod of thanks toting a half can of coffee, a couple of chocolate bars and a few eggs. A man living alone on the river where he could fish and hunt and no one bothered him—and no school. I could do that, too, I thought.

Of course, I didn't. But the next morning while the men cleaned up the camp and loaded the cars I wandered the riverbank once more and my mind went places it had never been, confused by what I had seen of Will Stanley and the way he lived and knowing that I would be back to my life at home and school on Monday. And that was not where I wanted to be. For a few brief moments I felt as if the river, flowing, full of life, moving on, was trying to speak to me, tell me something important. But then I heard a car door slam in the distance and hurried back towards the camp.

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Now, more than a half-century later, the old bridge spanning the Trinity River from Navarro to Henderson County is gone and in its place a new, four-lane bridge soars high above the river. This "improvement," someone's pipe dream, or financial scheme, of raising all the bridges that cross the river between Dallas to the coast so that barges could navigate that length of the river from Galveston Bay north, had come and long since gone. That plan would have required widening and straightening and dredging the river, and the Trinity would have been a river no more. That threat still pops up now and then.

Now, the fried catfish cafe next to the old river bridge has disappeared into a stand of waist-high weeds; its source of catfish no longer viable. The river below had lost its sparkle, and sluggishly moved south, brownish-green and choked with trash and brush that almost hid the riverbank, and the Trinity now carried a smell, a foul odor that followed its languid flow. The river had evolved into an open sewer for Dallas and Fort Worth. The river ruined in fifty years.

I now know that the Dallas and Fort Worth metropolitan areas, with a population

of seven million plus, despite some attempts at conservation, constantly contaminates the Trinity with PCBs, pesticides, lead, mercury, and heavy metals, plus chlorine, oil and other fluid runoffs from the cities' streets and highways.

And for 250 miles below Dallas, river fish have such elevated amounts of contaminants that they are diseased and dangerous to be consumed—for humans and for the wildlife that still make the river bottom their habitats. I remember the raccoon tracks I'd spotted on the riverbank next to the opened mussel shells; the blue heron wading the shallows; Uncle Snook rinsing the fish he'd caught in the then clear river water. Now burgeoning herds of deer co-exist with cattle to graze the bottomlands and drink the river's polluted water.

We need a new kind of promoter, not one to span the river with elevated bridges, but one with the energy and vision and leadership to restore the river.

Those feelings of confusion I had that last morning on the river so many years ago came back to me. Will Stanley's quiet self assurance and Warner's bloody thumb and the squirrel and fish stew; the way Daddy had glanced my way with an expression I was unable to know; how then I wanted to stay there on the river, alone. But I knew I couldn't.                   #                   #                   #

Now, if I let my mind find its own way, I can enter a half-dream state, not uncommon for me, that takes me back to that time when I was alone by the river all those years before, when I felt that the Trinity was alive and trying to speak to me.

But now the life of the river is almost gone and if it could speak, I know it only could be a desperate cry for help.

# BOOK REVIEWS

*The Bones of Winter Birds* by Ann Fisher-Wirth

Terrapin Books, 2019, \$16, [paper] 978-1-947896-11-6

Reviewed by Jennifer Key

Ann Fisher-Wirth's sixth volume of poetry *The Bones of Winter Bones* further establishes her reputation as a poet of great lyric accomplishment. She takes her latest book's epigraph from Theodore Roethke's villanelle "The Waking": "What falls away is always. And is near." Thus, the poet announces the collection's subject of loss—personal, ecological, and historical. Fisher-Wirth's poems address the truth that, if we are lucky, we accumulate family, friends, and life experiences. The more complicated and artful job of the speaker in *The Bones of Winter Birds* is to acknowledge the cost of such riches. The math of our lives, its many additions and subtractions, is always in flux, a problem that is never solved as long as we live. Fisher-Wirth's poems chart those moments of flux. In her opening poem "October: A Gigan," the speaker exhales after the "poison" of a sweltering "Mississippi summer" and awaits the return of fall's "shine." Despite a personal reprieve, Fisher-Wirth notes: "The day is sweeter now/ but sorrow gathers at every corner, across the world." This is a poet who is keenly, painfully aware of geopolitical strife; the political is personal. Readers familiar with Fisher-Wirth's poetic project over the years will recognize her as editor of *The Ecopoetic Anthology*, a seminal text on what once was called, perhaps too simplistically, nature poetry. Her attention the natural world is unblinking and all encompassing. In "Mississippi Invocation" the speaker entreats every green bud and blooming, twining thing to inhabit her bodily and bawdily: "ooze us, rot us, make us hot and hotter."

Fisher-Wirth presents a vision made fresh by quiet observation and deft description. "Dust felts" a surface in one stunning poem from a section dedicated to the poet's sister. In these sister poems, the speaker wrestles with the loss of her sister even before her death. With exquisite sensitivity and insight, Fisher-Wirth identifies the sisters' deep sympathies for each other by the secrets they protected, secrets that damned both to a kind of shame and loneliness. Fisher-Wirth tries passionately and in vain to excavate her sister's isolation before time runs out. In "January 28," the speaker must conclude that "now all things will remain unsaid." Fortunately, she does not adhere to that finite decree in her poems. Fisher-Wirth addresses her sister with respect and love, seeking to free her from the terrible seclusion of being gay in a time when that was a crime. With matters of the heart, too, the political is personal.

Fisher-Wirth's poems exhibit ambition in the emotional territory they stake and in their formal dexterity. She employs various sound devices to subtle, sophisticated effect and explores a number of poetic forms, such as the aforementioned gigan, the prose poem, an epistolary missive, and a golden shovel. Like the photographer she admires in a poem set at the arts colony in California, Fisher-Wirth has created "something haunted, beautiful, out of horrific damage." In this case, the horrific damage is the lived experience of a life in all its complications. Thank God for this poet who renders loss with compassion and vibrancy. In "Nearly April," Fisher-Wirth assures us that the blooming world "does not stop for grief." Neither does she.

*The Donkey Elegies: An Essay in Poems* by Nickole Brown  
Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020 (33 pp). Reviewed by David B. Prather

Nickole Brown offers, "...there was a living being worth saving, an animal I once didn't see at all." In truth, how many of us think of the donkey, an animal that shares our history, that becomes attached in insult and jest to so many human traits, and that finds itself integral to seminal events in religious text. With *The Donkey Elegies*, Brown weaves secular with numinous, agrarian with militaristic, and sublime with vulgar to create a tapestry of healing and exultation. However, this is not the voice of the great and all-knowing savior coming to the aid of the helpless victim. This speaker informs the subject that, "...I recognize you as one of my own," in an attempt to recognize all life as part of a common existence.

In this *Essay in Poems*, the history of humanity is put on display by examining our relationship to an animal most would consider a beast of burden. One way Brown illustrates the complexity of this relationship effectively is with the inclusion of religious personae: Christ riding into Jerusalem, Mary on her way to Bethlehem, Noah and the Ark, the wicked prophet Balaam, and the ramifications of naming by Adam. These references must give us pause to remember Genesis 1:26 (KJV) in which God's command is that of human ("man" in the ancient text translation) having dominion over all the animals of the earth. Brown goes even further, noting, "Hebrews were once called *donkey lovers*..." the comparison later revealed as slavery, all of our relationships rife with inequality and discord.

Each section of *The Donkey Elegies* is a profound exploration of our intertwined need and cruelty, and our penchant for taking others for granted. Whether the speaker mucks out stalls and is judged for it, or speaks of the crude jokes men tell in a bar, or tours the carnage of wars and brutality, or even recalls abuses to the self and abusing others, Nickole Brown's work shares in the suffering and strength of a long overlooked and often forgotten creature. To be recognized as one of the speaker's kin, so to speak, is a type of discernment that reveals not just a great sensitivity to "that beautiful, necessary, / weary donkey(,)" but also an eloquent confession of personal identity. Indeed, the speaker, in describing the donkey's ears, notices, "Your other ear—blessed as I am—rotates towards me." And what a blessing it is, one of curiosity and almost of trust, to find, "...only now / can I reclaim / what I didn't even know / was missing and there / find myself." The rest of us are blessed by these poems

*All My People Are Elegies: Essays, Prose Poems and Other Epistolary Oddities*, Sean Thomas Dougherty, New York Quarterly Books, 2019, 113 pps. Reviewed by Al Maginnes.

I've been writing seriously for almost forty years and submitting poems to journals for almost the same amount of time. I'm old enough to remember to remember the days of envelopes and stamps and retyping a dog-eared batch of poems for the fifth or fifteenth time to submit them again. Now Submittable makes submissions and rejections quicker, if not less painful. Like many poets I've dreamed of sending missives rejecting the rejections I just received. In his new book, *All My People Are Elegies: Essays, Prose Poems and Other Epistolary Oddities*, Sean Thomas Dougherty has done just that.

Besides holding a satirical mirror up to some of the editorial commonplaces writers read too often, Dougherty reminds his readers that publications and prizes (both of which Dougherty has collected more than his share of) are very nice, but what matters is the work itself, writing poems and, beyond that, simply living one's life. "Turn off your computer, Dear Editor," Dougherty writes in "Dear Editors of Esteemed and Tiny Journals." "There is honey waiting to be spooned into your tea. There is poppyseed cake. Look out the window. There is wild thyme and fennel."

Sound advice for the young and not-so-young careerist poets who crowd the landscape these days. What resonates in this book is not the satirical eye is not the jaded and satirical eye that crafts a title like "Dear Editor Who Made the Remark About Not Wanting Wal Mart Poems," but the images from life that craft the poems, a loved one with a drinking problem, a job on the graveyard shift (Dougherty works as an aide to mentally disabled adults). From that struggle, lines like these: "What is holy is the light that stretches over the tenement roofs in winter, and the sound of children shouting in Spanish, Arabic, English as they play in the slushy streets. No one was shot today. No one hit the lottery. What are the odds for any of them that grace these crowded kitchens, pots bubbling on the blue ring of fire..."

Here is life reduced to its bare and beautiful essentials: the games of children, food, a day of work finished with another day to come. Maybe the people in these poems don't know they are the stuff of poems, but Sean Thomas Dougherty does.



**“One thousand balloons,” wood/acrylic Albert Kogel**

# CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Bella Alvarez** is a freshman at Syracuse University who hails from sun-drenched San Diego, California. She enjoys biting sarcasm, poetry, iced coffee, and late-night car rides. Her work has been recognized by the Smith College Poetry Contest, the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, and YoungArts.

**Marc Beaudin** is a poet, theatre artist and bookseller in Livingston, Montana. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *High Desert Journal*, *Whitefish Review*, *Whiskey Island*, *Ibis Head Review*, and numerous other journals, and has been widely anthologized in publications fighting for environmental and social justice. His latest book, *Vagabond Song: Neo-Haibun from the Peregrine Journals*, was called “a jazzy, freewheeling, rollicking road trip into the beating heart of the Eternal Now” by *Montana Quarterly*. He believes the Brahms’ *Violin Concerto in D* is more powerful than all the guns, smokestacks and coal trains in the world. More at CrowVoice.com.

**Tara Betts** is the author of two poetry collections, *Break the Habit*, *Arc & Hue*, and the forthcoming *Refuse to Disappear*. She also coedited *The Beiging of America* and edited a critical edition of Philippa Duke Schuyler’s *Adventures in Black and White*. Her work has appeared in *The Breakbeat Poets*, *The Long Term*, *Essence magazine*, *Poetry magazine*, and many other publications. In 2019, Tara published a poem celebrating Illinois’ bicentennial with Candor Arts.

**Paula Brancato** was one of the first women executives on Wall Street, a music producer in Hollywood and a strategic planner for The World Bank, all of which have contributed to her unique artistic voice. Her literary awards include *The Booth Poetry Prize*, *Danahy Fiction Prize* and *Brushfire Poet Award*. Her work has appeared in *Mudfish*, *Bomb Magazine*, *The Virginia Quarterly*, *Ambit Magazine*, *Georgetown Review*, *Litchfield Review* and *Southern California Anthology*. Paula has taught poetry and screenwriting at University of Southern California and Stony Brook Southampton. She is a graduate of Harvard Business School, Hunter College and LA Film School and lives in New York.

**Gaylord Brewer** is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he founded and for 20+ years edited the journal *Poems & Plays*. His most recent books are the cookbook-memoir *The Poet’s Guide to Food, Drink, & Desire* (Stephen F. Austin, 2015) and two collections of poetry, *The Feral Condition* (Negative Capability, 2018) and *Worship the Pig* (Red Hen, June 2020).

**Sarah Browning** is the author of *Killing Summer* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017) and *Whiskey in the Garden of Eden* (The Word Works, 2007). She is co-founder and was Executive Director of Split This Rock: Poems of Provocation & Witness. She is recipient of the Lillian E. Smith Writer-in-Service Award as well as of fellowships from the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities, Yaddo, Mesa Refuge, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She has been guest editor or co-edited special issues of *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* and three issues of *POETRY* magazine. She’s pursuing an MFA in poetry and creative non-fiction at Rutgers Camden. For more info: [www.sarahbrowning.net](http://www.sarahbrowning.net)

**William Cass** has had over 200 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as *J Journal*, *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. He was a finalist in

short fiction and novella competitions at *Glimmer Train* and Black Hill Press, has received three Pushcart nominations, and won writing contests at [Terrain.org](http://Terrain.org) and *The Examined Life Journal*. He lives in San Diego, California.

**Marina Chirkova** is an author from Russia. She lives in Moscow. Her most recent poems have appeared "*Zapovednic*", "*Koltso A*", "*Kontrabanda*", and "*Futurum ART*". Marina worked as a scientist in Russian Academy of Sciences for a long time - about 14 years. Now she is an editor in a medical journal. Marina Chirkova is member of the Russian Union of Women-Writers.

**M Robin Cook** is a non-binary trans-feminine person living and loving in London with her wife, Tanya. She writes poetry, prose and music, enjoys drawing, and dabbles in photography and film. "If it has the potential to create change, I'll try it," she says. Her stories, poems and drawings have appeared in *The Collection*, *HIV Here & Now Project*, *E-ratio*, and *The Voice*.

**Gabe Durham** is the founding editor of Boss Fight Books, the author of a novel, *Fun Camp*, and a nonfiction book about bad 90s Christian video games, *Bible Adventures*. His writings have appeared in the *Literary Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *The Mid-American Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Los Angeles.

**Misti Duvall** received her MFA in Creative Writing from City College of New York. She grew up in West Virginia and lives in New York City. "Fifty Names of Jesus" is her first published story.

**Margaret Erhart's** work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2005*. Her commentaries have aired on NPR. She won the Milkweed National Fiction Prize and was a finalist for an Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. She lives and works in Flagstaff, Arizona. You can find her at [www.margareterhart.com](http://www.margareterhart.com)

**Robbie Gamble's** works have appeared in *Scoundrel Time*, *Solstice*, *RHINO*, *Forklift Ohio*, and *Poet Lore*. He was the winner of the 2017 *Carve* Poetry prize, and has been nominated for Best of the Net. He works as a nurse practitioner caring for homeless people in Boston.

**Amina Lolita Gautier** is the author of three short story collections: *At-Risk*, *Now We Will Be Happy* and *The Loss of All Lost Things*. Her work has received the Chicago Public Library's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Award, an Eric Hoffer Legacy Award, an International Latino Book Award, and the Phillis Wheatley Award. More than one hundred of her stories have been published, appearing in *Agni*, *Best African American Fiction*, *Boston Review*, *Callaloo*, *Glimmer Train*, *Hong Kong Review*, *Latino Book Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Quarterly West*, and *Southern Review* among other places. For her body of work she has received the PEN/MALAMUD Award for Excellence in the Short Story.

**Caroline Goodwin** moved from Sitka, Alaska to the California Bay Area in 1999 to attend Stanford as a Wallace Stegner Fellow in poetry. Her books are *Trapline* (JackLeg Press, 2013), *Peregrine* (Finishing Line Press, 2015), *The Paper Tree* (Big Yes Press, 2017) and *Custody of the Eyes* (dancing girl press, 2019). She teaches at Stanford Continuing Studies, California College of the Arts and UC Berkeley Extension (during the summer). From 2014 – 16 she served as the first Poet Laureate of San Mateo County, CA.

**Tami Haaland** is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *What Does Not Return*



(Lost Horse Press, 2018). Her poems have appeared in many periodicals and anthologies, including, *Consequence*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Ascent*, *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, *Healing the Divide*, and *A Constellation of Kisses*. Her work has also been featured on *The Slowdown*, *The Writer's Almanac*, *Verse Daily*, and *American Life in Poetry*. She has served as Montana's Poet Laureate and has received a Governor's Humanities Award for her work in promoting poetry. Haaland teaches at Montana State University Billings.

Poet **Janice Gould**'s tribal affiliation is Concow (Koyangk'auwi). She attended the University of California, earning a BA in Linguistics and a Master's in English, and later, from the University of New Mexico, a Ph.D in English. A second Master's degree (in Library Science) was earned at the University of Arizona. From 2014-2016, Gould served as the Pike's Peak Poet Laureate, and was recognized by the city of Colorado Springs for her contribution to poetry with a "Spirit of the Springs" award. Her poetry has also garnered awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Astraea Foundation. Her book of poetry, *Doubters and Dreamers*, was a finalist for the Colorado Book and the Milton Kessler Book Awards. Her chapbook, *The Force of Gratitude* was a finalist in the Charlotte Mew Poetry Chapbook contest. Gould also authored *Earthquake Weather*, *Beneath My Heart*, and *Alphabet*, and she co-edited a volume of essays on American Indian poetry, *Speak to Me Words*. She was an Associate Professor in the Women's and Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, where she taught Native American Studies. Her final book of poetry, *SEED*, was published by Headmistress Press in 2019, shortly before her death.

**Cynthia Hogue**'s most recent book is *In June the Labyrinth* (2017). Hogue has three books of translation (with Sylvain Gallais), including Nicole Brossard's *Distantly* (forthcoming from Omnidawn, 2022). Among Hogue's honors are a Fulbright Fellowship to Iceland, two NEA Fellowships, a MacDowell Colony residency, and the Witter Bynner Translation Fellowship at the Santa Fe Art Institute. She is Emerita Professor of English at Arizona State University.

**Alexis Ivy** is a 2018 recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship in Poetry. Her first poetry collection, *Romance with Small-Time Crooks* was published in 2013 by BlazeVOX [books]. Her second collection, *Taking the Homeless Census* won the Editor's Prize of Saturnalia Books and will be published in spring of 2020. She works as an advocate for the homeless in Cambridge and teaches in the PoemWorks community.

**Jacqueline Johnson**, is a multi-disciplined artist creating poetry, fiction and fiber arts. Recent exhibitions include: **Yours for Race and Country: Reflections on the Life of Colonel Charles Young** at the National Afro-American Museum. She is the author of ***A Gathering of Mother Tongues***, White Pine Press, winner of the Third Annual White Pine Press Poetry Award. Her work appears in such places as: **"Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era,"** Routledge 2020 and ***The Slow Down***, American Public Media, 2019. A graduate of New York University, Jacqueline resides in Brooklyn.

**Kyle Ingrid Johnson** was born and raised on a farm in Vermont and as an adult has lived in San Juan, Puerto Rico; Miami, Florida, and the Turks and Caicos Islands while making Boston, Massachusetts the city of her heart. She has a degree from Vermont College of Fine Arts and an MFA in Writing from Goddard College. Kyle Ingrid Johnson's work appears in *Water ~ Stone* and *13th Moon*. Her most recent essay appeared in the Harvard Bookstore's travel anthology "Around the World." She has a Certificate in Genealogical Research from Boston University, and makes her home in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, MA.

**Marilyn Kallet** recently served two terms as Knoxville Poet Laureate. She has published 18 books, including *How Our Bodies Learned*, *The Love That Moves Me*, and *Packing Light: New and Selected Poems*, Black Widow Press. She translated Paul Eluard's *Last Love Poems* and Benjamin Péret's *The Big Game*. Dr. Kallet is Professor Emerita at the University of Tennessee. She mentors poetry groups for the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, in Auvillar, France. Her poetry has appeared recently in *New Letters*, *One*, *Thrush* and *North American Review*.

**Jennifer Key** is the author of *The Old Dominion* (University of Tampa). Her work has appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *Poetry Daily*. Her honors include a Diane Middlebrook Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin, a Henry Hoyns Fellowship at the University of Virginia, and a John and Renée Grisham Fellowship at the University of Mississippi, where she is pursuing a Ph.D.

**Willie James King** is a widely published poet. His book, *To Be the Difference*, was selected by Pamela Uschuk and William Pitt Root for the Silver Concho series, published by Press53, 2019. He resides in Montgomery, AL.

**Jen Knox** ([jenknox.com](http://jenknox.com)) is a writer, meditation instructor and lecturer living in Ohio. Her writing can be found in *The Best Small Fictions*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Juked*, *Literary Orphans*, *Room Magazine*, *The Santa Fe Writers Project Quarterly*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The author of *After the Gazebo* (Rain Mountain Press) and *The Glass City* (Press Americana), Jen hosts writing and mindfulness workshops throughout the Midwest. Her first novel, *Resolutions*, will be released by AUXmedia in 2020.

**Albert Kogel** is a visual artist who lives and works in Tucson, Arizona. For many years, he taught art and painting at Cochise College. Cutthroat has used many of his paintings as covers for its journals. More of his work can be found and purchased at [www.albertkogel.com](http://www.albertkogel.com)

**Sandra Kolankiewicz's** poems have appeared widely, most recently in *One*, *Otis Nebulae*, *Trampset*, *Concho River Review*, *London Magazine*, *New World Writing* and *Appalachian Heritage*. *Turning Inside Out* was published by Black Lawrence. Finishing Line has released *The Way You Will Go* and *Lost in Transition*.

**Christiana Louisa Langenberg** is the author of the bilingual collection of stories *Half of What I Know*. Her second collection, *Here is What You'll Do*, was a finalist in the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. She is the recipient of the Louisville Literary Arts Prose Prize, Drunken Boat Panliterary Award for Fiction, Chelsea Award for Short Fiction, and a multiple Pushcart Prize nominee. Her work has published in *Passages North*, *Huffington Post*, *Glimmer Train*, *Dogwood*, *New South*, *Lumina*, *Drunken Boat*, *So To Speak*, *Carve*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *American Literary Review*. She teaches at Iowa State University.

**Iris Litt's** newest book of poems is *Snowbird* from Finishing Line Press. Previous books include *What I Wanted to Say*, Shivastan Press. Her short story "Pissed Off" appears in the *Saturday Evening Post* Fiction Contest Anthology. She has short stories, poems and articles in *Texas Poetry Calendar*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *The London Magazine*, *Earth's Daughters* and others. Awards include the *Atlantic Monthly* Award for College Writing and first prize in The Virtual Press short story contest. She has taught creative writing at SUNY/Ulster, Bard College, and the New York Public Library.

**Al Maginnes**'s eighth full length collection of poems, *Sleeping Through the Graveyard Shift*, was published in spring of 2020 by Redhawk Publications in Hickory NC. Recent books include *The Next Place* (Iris Press, 2017) and *Music From Small Towns* (Jacar Press, 2014), winner of the Jacar Poetry Prize. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Lake Effect*, [Terrain.org](http://Terrain.org), *Plume*, *Louisiana Literature* and many other places. Al serves as music editor of Connotation Press, a website devoted to literature and the arts. He has recently retired from teaching and is quarantined while trying to figure out what's next. He lives in Raleigh NC with his family.

**Dennis Maloney** is a poet, translator and editor. His poetry collections include *The Map Is Not the Territory: Poems & Translations* and *Just Enough*, and *Listening to Tao Yuan Ming*. A bilingual German/English volume, *Empty Cup*, published in Germany, 2017, and *The Things I Notice Now* and *The Faces of Guan Yin*. His works of translation include: *The Stones of Chile* by Pablo Neruda, *The Landscape of Castile* by Antonio Machado, *Between the Floating Mist: Poems of Ryokan*, and *The Poet and the Sea* by Juan Ramon Jimenez. Editor and publisher of White Pine Press in Buffalo, NY., Dennis divides his time between Buffalo and Big Sur, CA.

**Jennifer Martelli** is the author of *My Tarantella* (Bordighera Press), as well as the chapbook, *After Bird* (Grey Book Press, winner of the open reading, 2016). Her work has appeared or will appear in *Verse Daily*, *The Sonora Review*, and *Iron Horse Review* (winner, Photo Finish contest). Jennifer Martelli is the recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council Grant in Poetry. She is co-poetry editor for *The Mom Egg Review*.

Applied Linguist, Dr. **Tamara MC** focuses on issues related to language, culture, and identity in the Middle East and beyond, specifically her hybrid identity of growing up simultaneously Jewish and Muslim. Her work appears in *the Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Fiction International*, *Sand Script*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Sling Magazine*, and *Blue Guitar*. She has taught as full-time faculty at the University of Arizona, both ESL and teacher training classes. She was recently the English Language Fellow for the U.S. Department of State and Georgetown University in Tbilisi, Georgia. She has two sons and a Boston Terrier named Blazer.

**Tara McDaniel** teaches poetry and poetics at the Loft Literary Center and community centers around the Twin Cities. Her poetry and critical essays have been featured in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *RHINO*, *Third Wednesday*, *Map Literary Magazine*, *The Loft Blog*, and elsewhere. She is a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminar's MFA program in Literature and Writing.

**Anthony McGee** is a Civil Servant, Soldier in the Arizona National Guard, and a prior Marine. He received his BA in Middle Eastern and North African Studies, Arabic, and History from the University of Arizona. Anthony has deployed four times in support of the Global War on Terrorism, once to Iraq and three times to Afghanistan. He entered service at the tail end of 2001 and has been trying to make sense of his experiences ever since. He has previously published work in *Runestone Literary Journal*. Anthony lives with his wife Caryn in Tucson, AZ.

**Sjohnna McCray** earned his MFA from the University of Virginia. His work has been published in several magazines, including *The Bookends Review*, *Pinwheel* and *The Southern Review*. In 2015, he received the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets. McCray lives and teaches in Georgia.

**Deborah A. Miranda** is an enrolled member of the Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation of the Greater Monterey Bay Area. Her mixed-genre *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Heyday 2013), received the 2015 PEN-Oakland Josephine Miles Literary Award, a Gold Medal from the Independent Publishers Association, was short-listed for the William Saroyan Literary Award. She is the author of four poetry collections (*Indian Cartography*, *The Zen of La Llorona*, *Raised by Humans*, and the forthcoming *Altar for Broken Things*.) She is coeditor of *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*. Deborah lives in Lexington, Virginia with her wife Margo and their rescue dogs. She is the Thomas H. Broadus, Jr. Professor of English at Washington and Lee University, where she teaches literature of the margins and creative writing.

**Michael Pearce's** stories and poems have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Spillway*, *Epoch*, *The Yale Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Conjunctions*, and elsewhere. He lives in Oakland, California, and plays saxophone in the Bay Area band Highwater Blues.

The writer, **John Peck**, was born and raised in Arizona and lives in Ajo, a small community 40 miles north of the United States border with Mexico, and 10 miles west of the bordering Tohono O'odham Nation.

**David B. Prather** is the author of *We Were Birds* from Main Street Rag Publishing (November 2019). He received his MFA from Warren Wilson College. His creative work has appeared in many print and online journals, including *Colorado Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Seneca Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Poet Lore*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and many others. Currently, he lives in Parkersburg, WV where he has been active in local theater as an actor/director.

**Jamie Ross** writes, paints, hauls water and chops wood on a mesa near Taos, NM, where ravens dance by the moon on snow. He also lives in Mexico, where every mariachi knows *Eres Tu* by heart. His poems have been published in many marvelous journals, also in *Best New American Poets 2007*. His 2010 collection, *Vinland*, received the First Book Poetry Prize from Four Way Books.

**Scott Ruescher** is the author of *Waiting for the Light to Change*, published by Prolific Press in 2017. Some of the poems in that book won annual prizes from *Able Muse*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and the New England Poetry Club, as well as in *Agni*, *The Boston Phoenix*, *Ploughshares*, *Solstice*, and *The Naugatuck River Review*. He has new poems in *About Place*, *The Chachalaca Review*, *Negative Capability*, *The Evening Street Review*, and elsewhere, and is recently retired from many years of work as administrator of the Arts in Education program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and English teacher in the Boston University Prison Education Program.

Born in Pennsylvania, **David Anthony Sam** is the proud grandson of peasant immigrants from Poland and Syria. He lives in Virginia with his wife, Linda. Sam's poetry has appeared in over 90 journals and publications and his poem, "First and Last," won the 2018 Rebecca Lard Award. He has five published collections including *Final Inventory* (Prolific Press 2018) and *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson*, the 2016 Grand Prize winner of the GFT Press Chapbook Contest. He currently teaches creative writing at Germanna Community College, from where he retired as President in 2017. He serves on the Board of the Virginia Poetry Society.

**Lauren Marie Schmidt** is the author of three previous collections of poetry: *Two Black Eyes and a Patch of Hair Missing*; *The Voodoo Doll Parade*, selected for the Main Street Rag Author's 191

Choice Chapbook Series; and *Psalms of The Dining Room*, a sequence of poems about her volunteer experience at a soup kitchen in Eugene, Oregon. Her fourth collection, *Filthy Labors*, chronicles her volunteer teaching experience at a transitional housing program for homeless women in her native New Jersey. Schmidt is currently at work on a Young Adult novel.

**Mara Adamitz Scrupe** is the author of six award-winning poetry collections, including *in the bare bones house of was* (Brighthorse Press 2020), and *Eat the Marrow* (Erbacce-press 2019). Her poems appear in *London Magazine*, *Mid-America Review*, *Rhino*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Crab Creek Review*. Her prizes include Canterbury International Arts Festival Poet of the Year (UK), Pushcart Poetry Prize, Brighthorse Poetry Book Prize (USA), Grindstone International Poetry Competition (UK), Fish Prize (Ireland), Ron Pretty Prize (Australia), Cornwall Festival Competition (UK), and Canberra Vice-Chancellor's Award, (Australia). She is a marathon runner, an accordionist, and dean of the School of Art, University of the Arts, Philadelphia.

Living and writing on the west slope of the Rocky Mountains, **sid sibo**'s work is inspired by curiosity and by the many other beings who share this planet. A 2019 graduate of Maine's Stonecoast MFA in fiction, sibo pays for this literary habit with a day job in environmental analysis.

In 2015, after a long academic career, **Martha E. Snell** completed the MFA program in poetry at Vermont College of Fine Arts. Since then she has attended the Vermont Studio Center and the Tupelo Truchas Poetry Conference in New Mexico. Her poems appear in *Streetlight Magazine*, *The Poet's Billow*, *Tuck Magazine*, on the Live Poet's Society website and elsewhere. She received the 2015 Mary Jean Irion Prize from Chautauqua Literary Arts Friends in Chautauqua, New York. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

**Martha Stallman**'s work has appeared in *The James Joyce Quarterly*, *The Joyce Studies Annual*, *The Offing*, *Electric Literature*, and *Playboy*. She lives and writes in Austin, Texas.

**Anne M. Terashima** lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. Her work has appeared in *Glassworks*, *Poetry East*, and *Red Rock Stories: Three Generations of Writers Speak on Behalf of Utah's Public Lands*.

**Shaun Turner** is the author of chapbooks 'The Lawless River: Stories' (Red Bird Chapbooks) and 'Trying Not to Write Roadkill: Poems' (Ghost City Press). He serves as Fiction Editor for *Stirring: A Literary Collection* and co-editor at *Fire Poetry Journal*. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry can be found in the *Chattahoochee Review*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Barely South*, and the *Fourth River*, among others.

**Susan O'Dell Underwood** directs the creative writing program at Carson-Newman University near Knoxville, Tennessee. Besides two chapbooks, she has one full-length collection of poetry, *The Book of Awe* (Iris, 2018). Her poems and nonfiction appear and are forthcoming in *Oxford American*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ecotone*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, and *A Literary Field Guide to Southern Appalachia*. She and her husband, artist David Underwood, run Sapling Grove Press, devoted to underserved photographers, artists, and writers in Appalachia.

**Sara Moore Wagner** lives in West Chester, OH with her husband and three small children. She is the recipient of a 2019 Sustainable Arts Foundation award, and the author of the chapbook

Hooked Through (Five Oaks Press, 2017). Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in many journals including Poet Lore, Waxwing, The Cincinnati Review, and Nimrod, among others. She has been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart prize, and Best of the Net. Find her at [www.saramoorewagner.com](http://www.saramoorewagner.com).

**Donley Watt** lives in Santa Fe, NM. His collection of short stories, "Can You Get There from Here?" won the Texas Institute of Letters' prize for best first book of fiction, and his novel "The Journey of Hector Rabinal" was a finalist for a Western Writers of America award. Since then he has had three more book-length works of fiction published, along with numerous stories. His essays have been published in the Los Angeles Review, Texas Monthly and many literary journals. His collected papers are a part of the Witliff Collections at Texas State University.

The artist **Lynn Watt** lives in a small adobe house with her husband of 42 years the writer, Donley Watt. She spends most (gifted) days working in her studio or gardens under the brilliant skies of Santa Fe, NM.

**Patricia Jabbeh Wesley** is the author of six books of poetry, including her recent, *Praise Song for My Children: New and Selected Poems*, (Autumn House Press, 2020), *When the Wanderers Come Home*, *Where the Road Turns*, *The River is Rising*, among others. Her poems have been published or featured across the world and in the US in magazines and anthologies, including *Harvard Review*, *Transition*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The New York Times*, *Cutthroat*, *Private Magazine*, among others, and her poetry has been translated into Italian, Spanish, Hebrew, and Finnish. She is Professor of English, Creative Writing, and Literature at Penn State University.

**John Sibley Williams** is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize, 2019), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press, 2019), *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize, 2019), *Disinheritance*, and *Controlled Hallucinations*. John is the winner of the Wabash Prize for Poetry, Philip Booth Award, Phyllis Smart-Young Prize, and Laux/Millar Prize. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and is a freelance poetry editor and literary agent. Publishing credits include: *Yale Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Southern Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Saranac Atlanta Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and various anthologies.