

The Listening Eye 2024: The Health Issue

The Listening Eye 2024-2025

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Front cover:
COVID Anxiety

Back cover:
Cafe Terrace at COVID Capacity

Guest Poet Editor: Kimberlee Medicine Horn Jackson



Kimberlee Medicine Horn Jackson is a Kent State alumna who has served on the part-time English faculty at the university's Geauga Campus in Burton. A poet and creative nonfiction writer, Kimberlee holds an MFA from Ashland University. Her most recent works can be found *in Ethnosphere Literary Magazine, Prairie Schooner* and *Light Enters the Grove* published by Kent State University Press. Kimberlee is a judge for the Geauga Park District's Nature Writing Contest, previously for the Adolescent category and currently for the Adult category in both poetry and prose. She is in the last year of writing her doctoral dissertation as a Louisville Institute fellow. Her focus in both creative and academic writing is Indigenous history and what we can learn from them. She is adjunct faculty with NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community where she teaches Indigenous Research and Writing and is co-editor for *Journal of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community*.

In the Rain: Jay Moné

Years ago, I used to sit on the front porch step and watch the rain
fall. I thought about my burdens falling inside of each drop.

I felt comfort in the rain;

I felt comfort in seeing the darkness inside of me manifest itself
into the sky. It was a visual presented so I knew my troubles were real.

I felt alone as I watched droplets fall together; I could see anxiety hold itself together
until it hit a leaf
and burst.

The loss of control over my head could not be washed away with the small tide created
at the end of my driveway. My ability to concentrate on one matter,
floated downstream.

I could see internal conflict drench the soil and flood into the street to find somewhere to go.
I worried and pondered about which puddle would show me my future and which could display,
like a mirror, the failures that consumed my being.

However,

I felt comfort in seeing the rain shift into a light sprinkle and then the drops slowed until
they ceased. The sun would fight through the clouds and shine down eventually.

The bottom steps of the porch not protected from the downpour looked slick, but
I could walk down them and know I would not fall. Uncertainty would be gone, and
the clear air perfumed with rain relaxed me.

This cycle reminded me
that it will pass…
It will always pass.

Sugar: Ryn Williams

stalactites in my mouth
poking canker sores,
weaving through the metal
of my braces, scraping
the bile-soaked enamel
of my not-quite-white
teeth. Today, I am not
allowed to have caffeine.
Today, I have had
coffee, soda, juice,

matcha, chai. Today,
my brain's cords
and wires refuse
to connect. Bipolar
disorder is never
where
I want,
never
where
I need.
At two a.m., she
rouses me to announce
her sister's turn.
Obsessions — *I'm dying,*
I'm narcoleptic, I'm dying,
I'm infested, I'm dying,
I'm God. Compulsions —
my thinned eyebrows,
the crescent moons
scarring my palms,
stepping into my
mother's room
to watch her breathe.

The Corner of Happy and Healthy: Ryn Williams

I'm her spiritual advisor,
her priest says when I ask him
how are you related to the patient?
Early in the morning,
I hear knocking on metal
shutters containing us in
the room with the medicine. I
think of the warmth
of the woman's tattooed hands
as I sell her a bag of insulin
syringes. I answer the phone
to the man who can only afford
his suboxone for two weeks
before he runs out of money.
Mold dominates the ceiling
tiles like forgotten mint.
We are always coughing.

Self-Portrait with a Campus Cat in the Snow: Ryn Williams

—after Chloe Honum

You are brave, little cat.
Your people have long left
for the end of the fall semester.
Snow is coming down
like a too-thick, hand-stitched quilt
and you are alone.
You find your comfort
on piles of books left outside
of the library. I am back home.
When I look into my closet I see
the baby-blue paint
that used to decorate my walls
hiding under adult beige.

Your tail has been at the hands
of many: birds, rats, janitors,
even fraternity boys during their hazings.
Still, little cat, you greet the world
like a friend you haven't seen
in years. When I come back to school,
you'll rub against my leg and purr
like I was never gone at all.
But now, the snow falls harder.
It's getting colder and colder.
You worry about freezing.
I worry about rotting in this bed.

Schnauzer From My Girlhood: Ryn Williams

Dudlee, how you rolled in the grass,
scratching your pepper-colored fur,
reaching for an itch I could never

fulfill. I pulled you in my wagon
and we rolled down a hill. You
tolerated it. I dressed you in my tie-dye

shirts and XS shorts. You tolerated
that, too. I should have spent more
time with you. I was consumed

by boys' obsession with me, with
my body. Instead of breathing in your
soft fur, I was finding myself

reflected in gay fanfiction. I bet
you've got no clue what that means,
or what a girlfriend is. I bonded

with my first girlfriend like a magnet
over that stuff, you know. I remember
your wet nose, your smelly tongue.

I can never roll in the backyard with you
again, though I've found my girlhood
in a dewy field at my alma mater. It's

ten o'clock—after a Walmart run, before
dyeing my hair a gaudy, too-purple
pink, my friend and I throw ourselves

into anthills and itchy stems and scream.
This is being alive! and I'm gay! I'm
so gay! and I love you! Never leave me!

The moon watches us with her half-lidded
light. Dudlee, my dog, my first love,
I miss you and that yellow wagon.

Your panting and your scratchy nails
once annoyed me. I miss them now.
You had fur that was greasy no matter

how often I washed you, forced the Dawn
against your black polar bear skin,
kneaded and lathered your whining

self up. Do you know what being
gay is? Dudlee, do you miss me? Would you
like to roll around in our backyard?

I won't drag you into a wagon this time.
I've never had sex in my childhood
bedroom, well, except for yesterday.

It's lesbian visibility day! Wahoo!
Yippee! I'll roll around in a field
with you any day. Let's go!

Is this being alive? Dudlee, is
this what it felt like experience
true, beautiful, raw life?

The Healer’s Manner : Brandon Marlon

She examines and gently prods
a lineup of anxious patients to determine
the nature of suppurating wounds
and hidden sources of phantasmic anguish.

Her office is any given living room
during house calls, else assorted
clinics short-staffed and grateful.
She prefers to prescribe nutriments
and sumptuary regimens to alleviate
ailments long-term, but has been known
to offer colicky infants a finger
of whiskey to dispel misery in a pinch.

Every week brings myriad challenges,
the rigors of scission, epidemic dilemmas,
vaccine shortages, or the heartrending
plaints of the abused and infirm.

On the walls of her paneled study hang
framed oaths, Hippocratic and Maimonidean,
beside her Latinate med school diploma,
lifelong vows to remind and motivate
when the load inundates and saps patience.

During seldom days off she dabbles
in herbal therapies, treating herself
to massages Swedish or Shiatsu,
welcoming the balm of indulgence
and the soothing salve of me time.

Pastoralia with Toddlers: Francine Rubin

I imagine burying my face
in hydrangea as big
as my children's heads: magenta,
electric blue, dusty rose.
I am in color again.
Then it resumes:
my one year old tries to give
my three year old pretend
ice cream. They are
screaming at each other
as a speeding car in the opposite lane
narrowly misses us.
This exquisite swerving road
in rural southwest France:
idyllic, isolated, terrifying.
Like mothering on any ordinary day.

To the Car Nap: Francine Rubin

To outsmarting a toddler and infant.

To drool and head bobs.

To small arms and legs relinquishing dominion.

To the ecstatic breeze through the open door.

To the exhausted mom passing by.

To releasing mother armor.

To found time.

To the day moon like a mirror.

To thinking about myself. I am here somewhere.

Postpartum News: Francine Rubin

My baby shrieking

My tired uterus like an old house

> *an unbroken tradition*
> *of prohibiting abortion*
> *on pain of criminal punishment, I read*

The steak knife in the peanut butter

I lick the knife

My whet rage

My dangerous mother hand

Self Portrait as Endangered Species: Steve Gerson

The sun is scorching the sea.
Colonies of coral, once dappled
as prisms, are bleached shroud white.
And the sea groans in ebb tide woe.

Polar bears, predators of stealth seals
and Chinook salmon, hunger on ice floes
melting under ozone skies.
And the sea moans with calving bergs.

Honeybees, pollen free, habitations
wrecked by arid spring, fly directionless
paths, seeking sweetness in desiccation.
And flowers wilt on dry vines.

The African elephant thirsts. Drought starved
streams have become fetid mud. Tombstones
of elephant bones decorate the savanna.
And grandeur of grace, calm and strength, die.

And I am hominid, imbibing carbon as if immune
from fire and wind, sea change and sky shift.
Dust settles on me like ashes;
clods of dirt pelt my open casket.

Chemotherapy: A Love Story: Steve Gerson

"I'm unravelling, John," she said. "I feel like a skein, spinning, splitting, thinning, like a tattered web, windblown and shredded. Insects are feasting on my dreams. A cicada is derisively trumpeting in my rib cage. Bees burble in my veins like gasoline boiling, the chemo drip as insistent as day-long 3:00 am nightmares," she said as she tugged on a pink scarf the color of rosé, pale as hope, covering her remaining hair, a fringe of her diminished past.

"What can I do, Babe?" I winced, powerless against the pain shadowing her like an eclipse.

I reached for her hand, the one not infused, the one not punctured by multiple needle marks.

"Look at me," she moaned. "I'm a tapestry of stitches and seams. My skin is pixelated, a pentimento of blotches. How can you love this?" She ran her hand over her body like a painter trying to whitewash a flawed drawing.

In fact, I'd never loved her more. She was not a web of mist but tensile, tenacious, not a thin line sketching a portrait of possibilities, but a canvas gouged by fingernails, grasping at life.

Escape: Susan Shea

I was just one of the faces
on the subway car afraid
to look sweet or look
in anyone's eyes, careful

not to tempt any wildness
that might find it too hard
to stay in control, in such
tight rush-hour confines

I had to move away, flee
from steel track to forest path

find more flight less fight
I had to be taught to
wave to the neighbors

share cake, be safe

take walks in the woods
to be with the fallen trees
who seemed so familiar

with their weathered wooden
faces staring into space

begging for their captured
stories to be told

Operating Table: Alexis Barton

Open and weak my chest rises and falls
My white noise the monitor's beeps
The vultures perch on sterile tabletops
Watching as their patient sleeps

Sedatives weigh down my eyes
I watch them spin with the ceiling above
It's hard to breathe in a fresh air
Holding my mouth a latex glove

Abstraction: Cyrus Carlson



Dauntless Day: Oreste Belletto

How nice for the unfrightened
when their eyes widen
to see their world brighten.

How nice as daylight surrounds
night, to think once risen
it bends, to tuck in depression.

How nice to melt when sun
in the morning shines
over frozen gardens.

How nice for the ice, even,
to grow warm and moisten,
as glories dew their prison.

How nice to feel the grin
mend frown, to have friends
in shadow at sundown
though the smile is gone.

The Heart Monitor (Lisa’s Poem): Oreste Belletto

When I woke up I was drifting,
with extremely heavy eyelids. Everything hurt.
My sister was there holding my hand.
My eyes wouldn't stay open. I had a clamp or a hook stuck in my side.

The eyelids won. Sounds took over.
18 beds filled with people going into or coming out of surgery.

People being asked if they were pregnant, people being fitted
with oxygen, people laughing, people moaning, people vomiting.
There was nothing loud or disorderly. Nothing disturbing,
the coming into and going out of a place.

At each bed, an audible heart monitor was running.
I could hear five or six of them along the row. Each heart beat
pumped in digital throbs, all the same note.
The woman in the next bed was having trouble breathing; every time
she started to slip into sleep, she stopped.
A brief non-beeping silence followed by a
high-pitched alarm. A nurse
would wake her, and friendly, but determined,
remind her that she needed to keep breathing.

The cycle would start again.
Eventually it was determined she had sleep apnea.
She was fitted with extra oxygen. She slept with the rest of us.
This went on for a while. There were no free beds in the hospital,

so there we were, drifting and beeping.
The head nurse got on the horn and politely cracked heads, explaining
that the lack of beds was stalling surgery, and what the heck was the problem
and where is your supervisor. A nice male nurse came by

and pumped me with more pain medicine, more
anti-nausea medicine. The drift got more intense,
and I heard each heart beating on its own for a while.

Then, as if by some natural law,
everyone's heart beat happened in unison,
like people all trying to be in the same spot.

Then the beats drifted again,
six or eight or five hearts
in their own worlds, on their own drugs.
Unbeckoned, the beats reconverged
for just one beat, and splashed apart again.

A cymbal clash, a school of fish.

I found myself wishing I could hear the heart beats of my friends this way.

Go Back To Sleep: Oreste Belletto

I had a dream your breast was scarred.
Several lined furrows, as if scratched there.

I could have been looking through a red lens
at Pine bark.

Your skin was reptiled.
I tried to touch it, and woke up.

At ages like ours, all one has to do is mention
mammogram, and the rings tense.

The circle of friends
posses up around their phones,

caught like pioneers, feeling it is new
where others have been.

It is harder to pretend we belong,
behind our wagons.

And so I turned
to make sure you were still breathing.

As if my dream
could kill you.

I touched your breast
and just let my fingers be there.

It was exactly what I knew,
upswelled but relaxed:

the simple softness of a brown nipple.
But it also gave way

into star shapes, into craters,
into angry abscesses and white molt.

You must have noticed.
Your ribs expanded,

and you began to mumble.
Is something happening? Do you want sex?

I moved my hand.
You breathed.

No, go back to sleep.
It is love.

Varanasi: Marina Outwater

There's yet another sacred cow blocking my path
to the Golden Temple
where I want to wait in line with hundreds of Shiva believers,
arms full of lotus and cracked coconuts.

I yearn to feel their hot bodies pressed against mine,
but all I feel is intense
sadness
at the sight of another skinny skeleton
paraded through the shit covered street.

I've come to find myself in this heat.
I've set my eyes upon the sadhus
who had to be lifted
into his chair
because his legs were so atrophied.
I want to believe
in the power of his nothingness.

The laconic security guards in olive green
taunt with their Kalashnikovs.
Foreigners aren't welcome,
the barrels scream.

So I walk along slowly,
following signs for The Blue Lassi,
where I sit amongst my tourist brethren,
sipping my mango banana sweet.
Surely, I have arrived
at my own version of nirvana.

My Imagination Runs Wild: Marina Outwater

I imagined him passed out in a dark bar
or a dingy hotel room on brown shag carpet.
But he never drank, unless it was champagne.

I imagined a car crash,
a massive heart attack.

I imagined a cocaine binge,
a drug induced escapade we would laugh about later.
Once he couldn't meet me at Heathrow because he was at a rave.
I stared at his dilated eyes in disbelief.
How could he be such an irresponsible parent?

I imagined the German sculptor
holding him hostage,
although I knew there was no sculptor, not this time.

I imagined a phone call months later
admitting he faked his own death.

I never imagined
that he had already said his paranoid goodbyes.
I never imagined
that he would have the courage
to jump.

The Onion: Kate Alton

The onion had been taunting me for weeks. It squatted in the salad drawer, big-bottomed and bloated, glowering at me every time I dived into the fridge. *My turn today?* It seemed to say. *A soup, perhaps? A stew? A meaty, rich ragu? I've something special for you, beneath this crinkly crust.* Alas, she was too plump, too old, too much for me to muster. I'd prize smaller, younger bulbs instead, despite her ardent bluster.

Forlorn, she began to wither. Autumn shivered into winter. *I'm still here*, she would whisper. *I'm still good. Gnarly, sure, but taste just as I should*. Tenacious; resolved to catch my eye and have her say. Until one day: *I'm getting tired of this dance. Today, my friend, may be your final chance*.

“A sob story?” I'd say. “Are you trying to make me cry?”

I doubt it, the crispy, crabby onion would reply.

Then, one day, when ferny frost had veiled the world in lace, I craved French onion soup.

At last, I scooped her from her oubliette, her skins brown and fractured in my palm.

“You're not through yet,” I muttered.

A prayer, a psalm for my onion friend. Reverently, I peeled her paper layers, carving out belligerent bruises, then stripped away a thin translucent film, a final ghostly sheath, exposing the sincerest self she’d hidden underneath.

What a beauty! An orb of pure, white luminescence, and even in the face of evanescence, she shone; iridescent perfection. I turned her over in my fingers, caught the light from all directions. Tears beaded in my eyes.

“You're exquisite,” I said. “I'm sorry I’ve been keeping you at bay. Awake, my friend, it truly is *your* day.”

Yet she was silent; her body lingered, beautiful, but her soul had been eaten away.

Migration Story, Shishmaref, Alaska: Jeanne Bryner

The way it was forever is not to be again.

June's ice cracks, uncles slip, fall
down the middle of the world.
Yes, a man is beside you
then lonely
w i n d.

I will sing seal oil and brains
how we ate their eyes like grapes.
We would welcome you and you
to our table; come, please stay.
The old w o r d s

are not the ones I say.

The way it was forever is not to be again.

I will sing pink slant of light
a great mantle in our sky
one core sample we forgot
and how inside circles
of blizzard snows
our gray doors

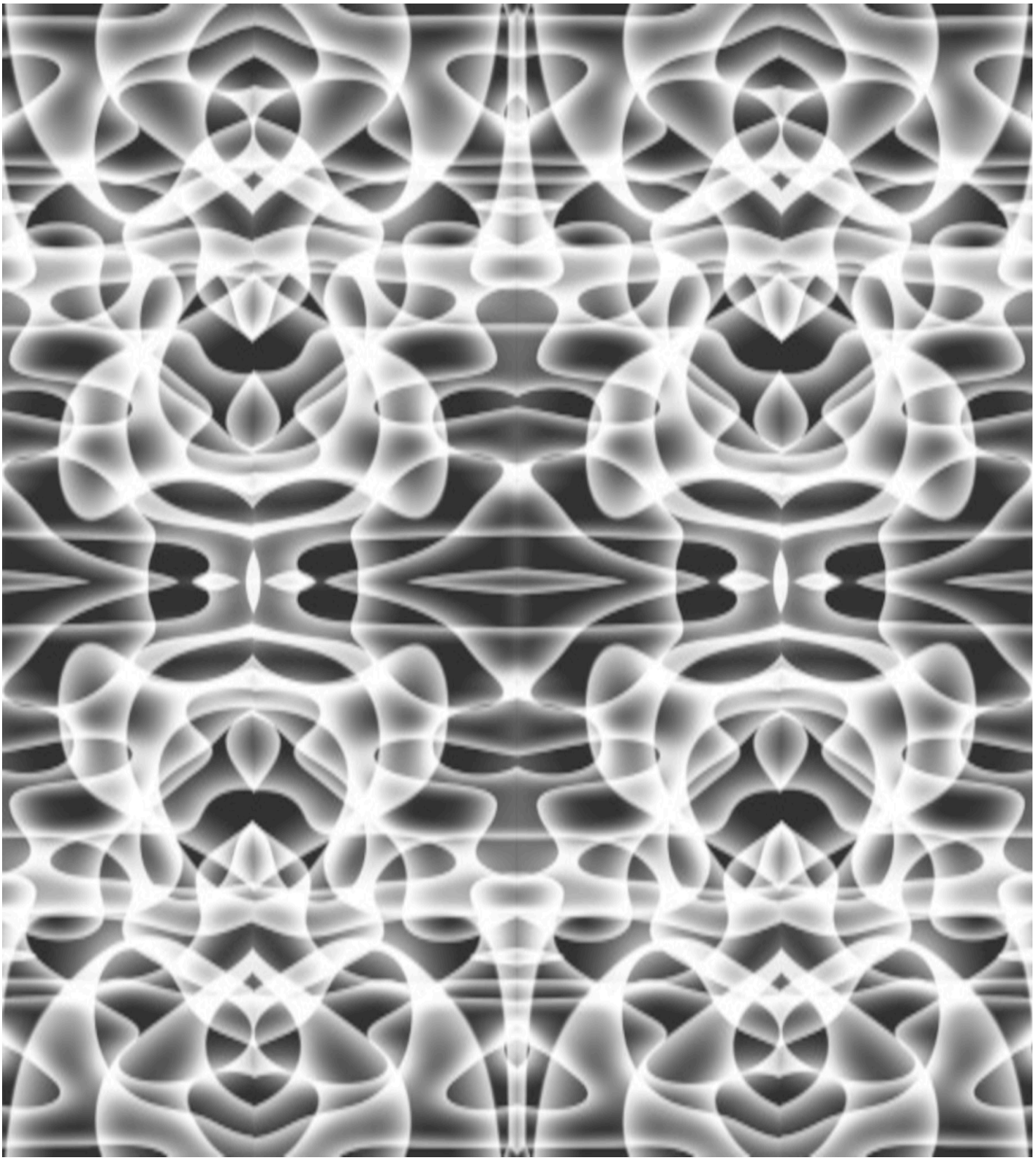
broke open.

Hungry bears sniffed the air.
We held our babies tight.
Every sleeve of mud we left
rows of our dead, boats untied
honey buckets, caribou meat.

The way it was forever is not to be again.

We sang songs to bring
the elk, take the fever
and heal our sores.
Nobody cared for songs we sang
in that distant place
our straight black hair
our round brown face.

We are Our Own Nightmares 1a: Edward Michael Supranowicz



Comedy or Death

in eleven acts: Lisa Kamolnick

Act 1: He takes me to meet his mother.

We're headed Home—to South Florida—to meet her.

He says I need to know three things about his mother:

#1 - She has the most amazing smile and laugh.

#2 - She administers oxygen a few times a day.

#3 - She's going to love me; I'm going to love her.

Act 2: He tells me the rules for visiting his mother.

Rule #1 - Visits should last no more than three days,
long enough to bond and short enough to avoid
killing each other.

Rule #2 - Comedy or Death: because funny is better
than murder.

Act 3: He was right about everything.

He must be a genius, she's a delight, I feel at home.

We make plans … same time, same place, next year.

Act 4: *Change of plans.*

Fate suffocates serendipity: she won't be home.

Act 5: His mother's condition has worsened.

She was dying. That is when he broke Rule #1
(3-day visits): he had been there 10 days. She
was in ICU, not *quite* dying, but not doing anything
that she called living, her lungs at only 10% capacity.
She'd never leave a bed again. She was ready to go.
She told him so on her next to last morning.
"Why am I still here?" she asked. "Dying can't
be that hard: I heard two people do it last night."

Act 6: His mother moves to hospice.

Her children had arrived; her only living sibling
was on the way. Tense discussions led to difficult
decisions and an accord about their mother's path.
That is when he broke rule #2—Comedy *or* Death—
and decided to tell a joke. He knew exactly the one.

Act 7: He has no business telling jokes.

He clears his throat and signals his intention. No good
can come from this. He rambles like a drunken sailor.
Abandons ship. Disaster not averted, but over. Maybe
not. He chimes up, "I'll just tell you the punchline."
A long pause, as tension rises in his tiny audience. At last
he clears his throat and speaks. "I forgot the punchline!"

Act 8: We say goodbye.

That last day … final words, final touches. Next morning—
final breaths. Soon after, her body, which once encased her
as a daughter, twin, sister, cousin, friend, lover, wife, mother,
grandmother; still her—but also not her—was carefully
itemized, signed for and zipped into a navy blue bag.

Act 9: *Two rules for your orthodox Jewish funeral.*

> Rule #1: Don't die on a Friday morning, if at all possible.
> Rule #2: If you must die on a Friday morning, try not
> to have an orthodox Jewish funeral, if at all possible.

Act 10: *She had an orthodox Jewish funeral.*

Graveside, on a Friday afternoon, a Rabbi and his minion
grounded us in tradition, remembrance, prayer. Hastily,
we tore garments, recited the kaddish, shoveled dirt—
for the Sabbath's sundown was near … and *oy*, traffic
is such a bear on a Friday afternoon in Miami, Florida.

Act 11: *After.*

In her passing, came a new rule—Comedy *in* Death—
to sustain us. I think she would have liked that. After
the observant sat shiva, after neighbors called and family
departed, came time to settle the last of her remains.

In this place that once encased her life, we carefully

itemized, recorded and packed away her things—

the last heavy lifting of the living to make Home a house.

Cue the Music: Lisa Kamolnick

in response to "Red Rose Cantata," by Alma Thomas

A cacophony rises in red and white like blood

cells on a slide ready for microscopic inspection.

It might be a defect. (No, it's just an infection.)

Inflections of red stains pile up, break apart

like body counts or culture wars—

in bloody and brutal confusion and chaos.

The colors crowd together, congregate,

but somehow stay separated.

They won't coagulate.

Look again, you see the shape—petals,

imperfect—raise fragile voices in broken

chorus. Even a solo might strain.

Humanity cries

“We rose once, in perfect harmony.”

And if we did

is it too late to reclaim it, resonate a concordant cantata?

Or will this infection be our coda? (This music is a human

strain. We can change the arrangement.)

al coda

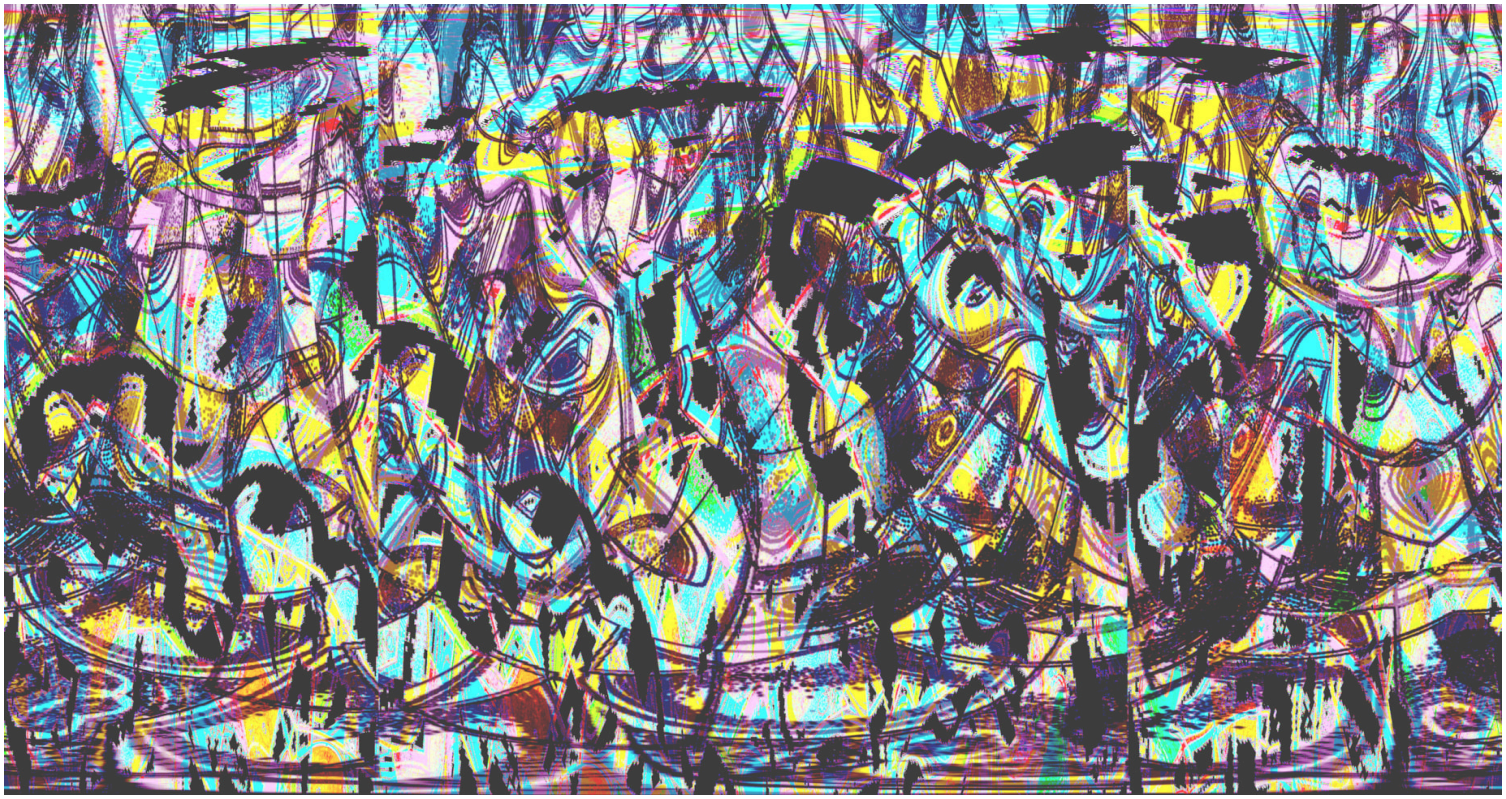
Look again, you see the shape—petals, imperfect

 in perfect harmony.

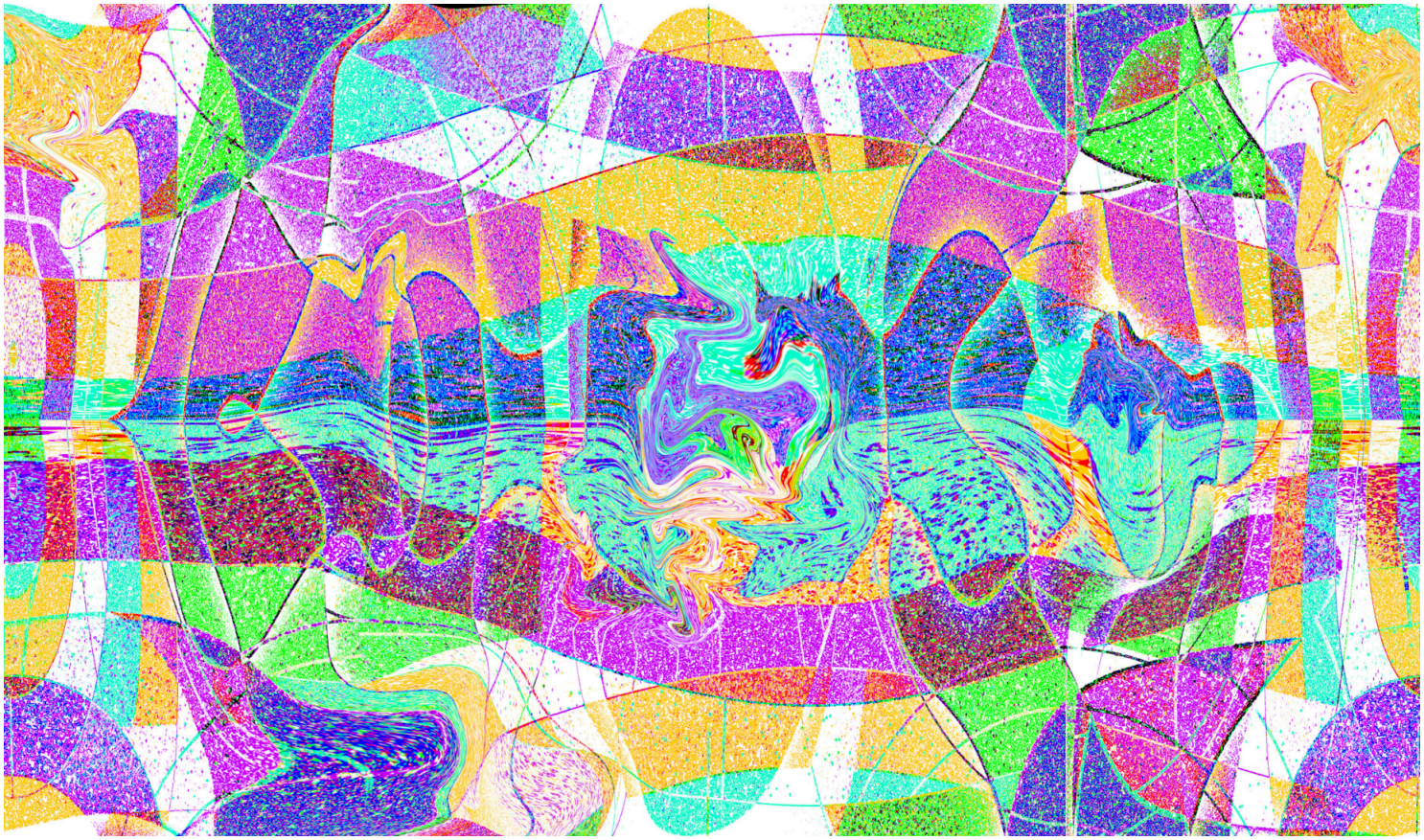
Bipolar is a Balancing Act: Claire Young

In one hand: anger;
The other: sorrow.
I make my own bed for a living.
I am a tightrope walker with
Arms outstretched,
Crossing over
The biggest canyon
With the biggest crowd
And nothing to gain but survival.
The embers of my heart are
a fire lingering past its welcome.
My fingertips never stop trembling.
I’m on a sinking ship but I have laundry to do.
It is lonely and cold down here
Under the ocean
Doing my laundry with the fishes.
There is no sun to rise or set.
The world ends every day.

Looking for a Quiet Spot 3: Edward Michael Supranowicz



Dreaming on a Rainy Day: Edward Michael Supranowicz



Chainmail: Maureen Martinez

Below the parkway sitting vigil
under the bridge across the street
from Lawrence Emergency sirens
wailing for others with legitimate
        needs.

Sharp knife soft wrist
how loud the click
in your jaw
when you bit down
        hard.

Exhaling a sound
not heard in a while -
        a sigh of relief.

It's time. You breathe.
Like they taught you in therapy.
        1… 2… 3…

Enough is enough of this.

You didn't count on silver light
        spilling out
from your skin like it did.

A single tip pushed gently in.
At first a pinprick that grew
to a trickle then
        pooled.

Cool metallic dripping
soaking the patch of grass
upon which you were sitting
        alone
by the dirty water moving

slowly to glimpse the girl streaming
moonbeams from her split skin,
        illuminating
the chainmail lining within.

Wow.
        You say aloud to the trees holding their breeze.

So, that explains the heaviness.
Then you climb like an armored warrior up the trembling hill.

Nancy Dancing: Maureen Martinez

I would love to die breathless, exhausted at the end of a dance. – Josephine Baker

Swing your partners Do-Si-Do! The caller
called
while you were on the floor
in your flouncy ruffled
blouse, festive leather boots.
You froze. A stuck
bug in amber. Red curls
unaware
you'd stopped moving
forward,
slack-mouthed arrest
across
the broken square from
Dad.

Nancy?… Nancy!.... You just had a stroke.

The doctor-dancer said. Multiple heads
bobbed in unison
aghast
at the whiff of death, embarrassed
by their misplaced
steps.
You blinked once.
Twice.

What the fuck do they know?

You'd been practicing years for
this.
Valentine's Day 2009: The Final
Dance. You said,

Fred, let's go.

Then you placed your strong hand in
his,
the love-struck girl you'd always been,

locked eyes with the lullaby
moon
held by the chivalrous
pines
and let them lead you
home.

To Be Spiritually Healthy: Charlotte Farley

Avoid the mad hatter crowds, sprawling
like clover fields and kudzu,
and don't worry over the lines, lessons
they tried to impart to the heart of your dew-time days,
fragments of familiar melodies straining
to soothe, or perhaps startle,
the stirrings of a wild wind floating
down and up the rivers of your being.

Instead,
breathe
in the green air, moss-filled and woody,
deepening into your body, and allow
yourself to do this over and over again
until shoulders surrender, stomach
unwinds, eyes lift in marvelous gaze,

and you are with yourself,
your divine, one-of-a-kind self,
old leaves crumpling with each new step.

Cardiophobia: M. Benjamin Thorne

My grandfather lays at my feet, a gasping fish,
before the ambulance arrives, too late, carting him off to death.
I am 10, understanding little, but recognize pain's face.

Thirty years later I arrive, too late to greet my father
as he fights for breath, before his traitor organ breaks all faith.
I meet him only as flesh grown cold,
his body a roost for electrodes and tubes.

At my doctor's office, I try to explain
the phantom stitches interweaving inside my chest,
the sense of death they bring.
"Oh, it's nothing, just in your head. Try to get some rest."

Sometimes at night I clutch my heart
as if fumbling to grasp a hand
before it slips from view.
Always I arrive too late.

Covidfish: M. Benjamin Thorne

My body, an aquarium:

lungs fallen below sea-level,
submerged in thick sputum,

bronchi calcifying
  into old
coral branches,

  beautiful yet
Brittle.

Tubing
maneuvered
   the esophageal
trench
   as I lay
tethered
  to life,
each shuddering
  breath
heaving
  like the tides.

Through clear plastic partitions
medical students gawked at me,
abyssal hagfish oozing
phlegm with every cough.
But they did not dare tap the glass,
no-one applauded the show.

The Problem Is: A. C. Blake

The problem is,
 my hands betray me—
 fumbling, dropping,
 struggling to hold on
 to the fragile normalcy
 of a cup, a pen, a handshake.
 I've adapted,
 found new rhythms in old melodies,
 though they might seem discordant to you.

But if you tell me I'm too slow,
too awkward with my motions,
you're no friend of mine.

The problem is,
 my vision blurs—
 edges soften, details fade.
 I miss steps, bump into life's sharp corners.
 I've learned to dance in this dimmer world,
 to choreograph my caution
 with the unseen and overlooked.

But if you call me clumsy,
criticize my careful steps,
and try to steer my course—
you're no friend of mine.

The problem is,
my knees rebel,
refusing commands
as I inch along a slower path,
adapting in ways that might seem strange,
but are mine to own.

If I ask for help,
offer me kindness, not correction,
respect, not ridicule.
If not, be certain—
you're no friend of mine.

Guest Room: B.S. Cronin

I’m staying the night in a guest room
in the silicon valley suburbs—
land of appreciating property and electric cars.
I slide open the closet door—colorful sports jerseys
on hangers. Shiny and expensive and not
getting worn. If I took
one, would my uncle notice? Would my aunt? I like to think
my cousin would want me to have one. I never found
out if it was suicide or
an accident. They found him
in a parking garage.

The COVID Card Players: Donald Patten



“And the supreme beauty is that of tragedy. The consciousness that everything passes away, that we ourselves pass away, and that everything that is ours and everything that environs us passes away, fills us with anguish, and this anguish itself reveals to us the consolation of that which does not pass away, of the eternal, of the beautiful.”

—Miguel de Unamuno, Tragic Sense of Life

for Boris Bienvenido Flores
1971-2021
*

Tragedy has its own kind of beauty,
and at first light, the slant of her head,
vision-streaked with dreams and

what routinely nourishes her heart—
it may be a feeling of impermanence;
a deeply felt remembrance; or the slow

accession of time—this I believe is her
central heritage, the future-flanked
beginnings of our years to come. I wake

and rise, but the past year’s anguish,
like a sullen child sitting bedside
with it’s hair all undone, eyes me

darkly as if to say: and are you over it?
It was gruesome, his death. And
even here, among Norway spruces
appearing through the deepening
umbra of a vanished year, the agony
of those fourteen months intrudes

at first light like some beast of the mind
to lay tenacious claim to the present.
I went grey the year my brother died,

exchanged evasive glances with him
after his diagnosis, as if the word
terminal only held power over us

when our eyes met. And through the hallways
of the hospital, bright as a baby’s breath,
we shared the dread together

in silence, each in his own way
half-retrieving some prayer of our mother's
that came, word by word, unattended

and slow, then in a sudden torrent
undyked by hearts freaking with fear.
Terminal. Incurable. Aggressive.

Powerless. My brother was dying,
all six feet two inches of Boris Flores,
because of an insurrection in his head

that was multiplying, would multiply,
did multiply; and what began
as a tiny fury above his left temporal lobe

boomed into a mean indomitable power
that would injure us all—but my God,
what did we know of that then?

Glioblastoma multiforme. Even
now it's a name the mouth refuses,
rejects and spits out, like countless others

that were forced upon us by complications
in the months to come, names that
became deeply personal, native-like

and familiar as our mother tongue,
names like: *necrotizing fasciitis*;
diverticulitis; gastrointestinal
perforation; sepsis; Avastin;
antineoplastons; Sprycel;
Votrient; Dexamethasone…

—the names of things that killed you.
Fourteen dark months: and
then the silenced body. Brother,

I am asking you about us. Kneeling
at your bedside, I began to cry,
each death-rattle in your throat

like an unfinished sketch of your assailant.
Is it my face that emerges, my sunken
eyes, my beard that I see, or some

dangerous amplitude of guilt, in
the light of everything before and since,
that brings me into protesting focus?

I don't know. It grieves me to consider
these things because I don't know,
but it is the source of my fear,

Boris, my self-assigned agony. Now
the round of another year finds me far,
far away from your great staring eyes

banking deep inside me, asking
for relief;—far, far away among
sugar-pink dogwoods, great arching elms

and Japanese maples whose leaves,
unthinkably radiant, cast their wide
shine of tender, beautiful anguish

into the base indefinition of another day
without you. And it is April, brother,
and everywhere in evidence is fire,

real fire, uncoded and wild, unclaimed
by the names we give things, and yet
blossom upon blossom so

perfectly named, cherished specifically
as I cherish you. What truth are we
a witness to? What bears us so faithfully,
so tragically, beyond this brief season
that is ours? Tell me, brother, and
I will listen, yielding to your words

as these flowers yield to the composed
command of spring, pressed
into a self-expression

I hardly understand, yet stand
desirous of, and hopeful for,
as though in this work of fierce attention

all my life might be devoted to its cause—
this beauty that eludes definition,
that glows in the mind like a touched

thigh, at once dispensing
with our reason and binding it
to a thing unknown;—and so bound,

belovéd brother, homogenized
and transformed. This is my hope.
No longer dead in the darkness

of our grief, that we may have
such pure mornings as breathe
on the righteous ecstasy

of these flowers, arousing to song,
in the stillness of the morning,
what only birds (unrestrained

in their adorations, without check)
must know: life is dying to sing us.
No: we have never been so loved,

and placed in range of the living God
I feel where I must begin, joining
my voice in common choir of gratitude

and praise, hope and acceptance, and
what must be let go in upper registers
of seraphic pitch, with somewhat

defiant eyes, to meet the menace
of the night and know it for what it is:
Love clarified and made present.
This blood cannot forget you;
and I understand why, to build
something out of the pain, it would

have me sing with still greater faith
to unseat this sorrow in the vitals,
and maybe then, sure as where

I stand, know the whole of you laid
—mind, body and spirit—within
the elegance of the blooms. I'll

meet you there, Boris; wholly real,
life-obsessed and bodiless, where
country-blue delphiniums flame

intensely in the garden, adorning
the April morning as with a personal promise
for everything endured, suffered,

and borne in the fullness of time: that
out of the glow of these ascendant fires,
stirring here in the living breeze as in

the ghostly fretwork of the stars, restoring
hands, knowing the struggle
we have been waging, may yet

enflourish us, like the April hillsides,
with the lyric continuance of days,
of seasons unmixed with the brevity

of time—when, in the final moment
of the soul's surrender, we are gathered
in the first harvest of a new life.

Perspective: Emily S. Wagner

When I was a child
My mother told me she thought it would be pleasant to be a cow.

I remember thinking
How odd.
Instead of a peacock
roseate spoonbill
bald eagle, or even a clown fish,
she chose the lowly, simple cow.

They just stand in the field and chew their grass without a care in the world.
she explained.

Her response was quick, too.
She did not require long pauses and possibilities.
She knew.
She wanted to be a cow.
And sometimes when I can not remember
why I walked into a room
or I pick up a crumpled pair of socks
from the same spot again or I wonder
if I can provide the right combination
of elements to light the fire
that burns in my son's brain
or give the others a reason

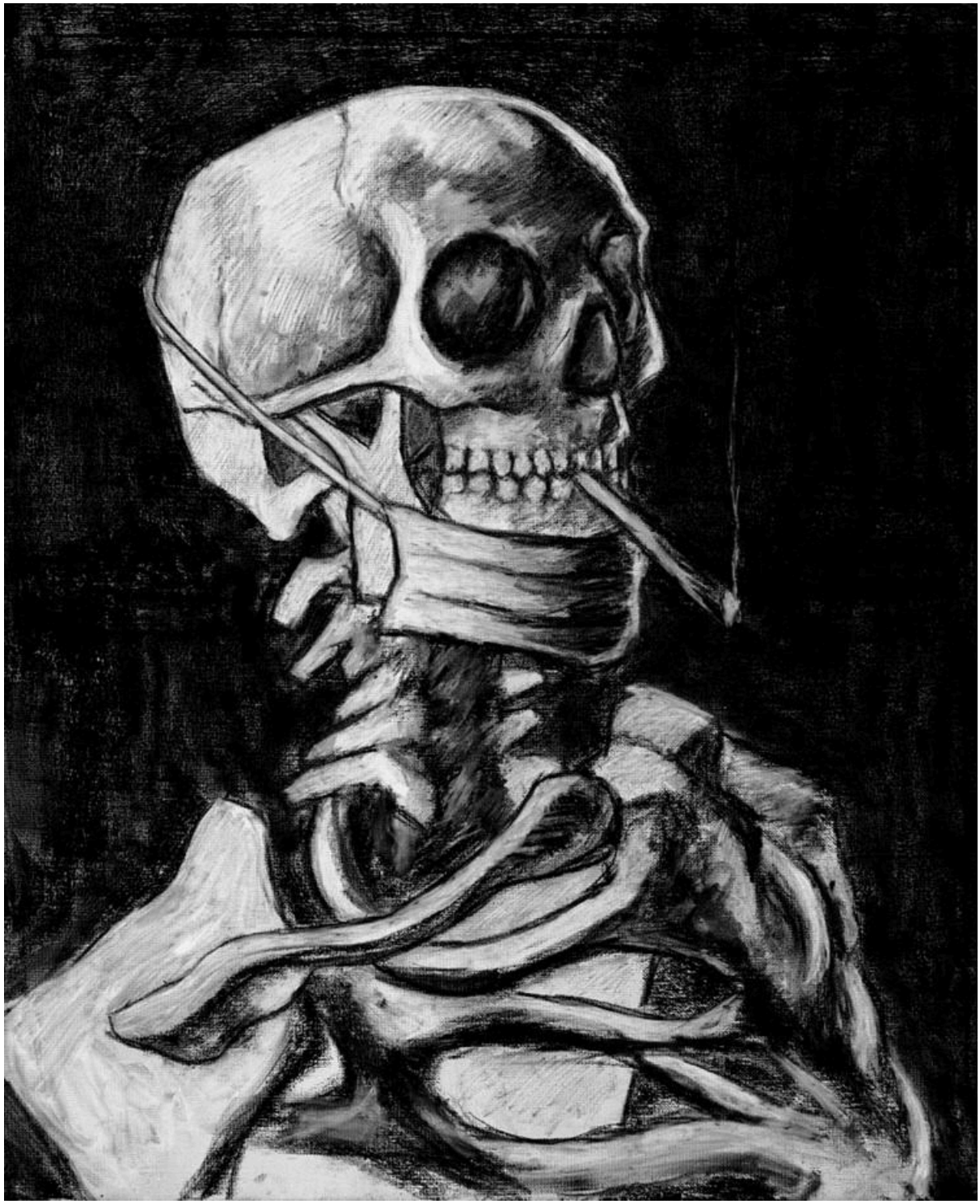
not to drink. I, too, want to be a cow
In an open grassy field
head down
surrounded by baby blue open skies
all the way.

A Rejection of Sorts: Emily S. Wagner

A stunning passion flower grew at our first home.
She greeted us every day with
her soft purple and exotic face
from the right front corner of our house.
Her presence was ethereal,
as she was always beaming at us,
daily wrapping her vines and leaves further up the post,
swirling around and giggling.
Then, life brought about change and we moved.
We found another passion flower,
but despite ample lush foliage, no flower ever grew.
One more try with another plant
produced a single lovely flower,
exactly like the one at our first home,
but the young tenuous stem broke from its root.
I discovered it the day after planting
as I watered it, its vines already
embracing our front railing,
hanging on for dear life.
Perhaps it was an animal,
or my clumsy gardening efforts,
but there was nothing to be done.
For a moment I didn't know
what to do, as if the flower itself were some kind of omen,
a sad commentary on the state of our affairs.
Yet, I am the one who bought
each passionflower, each time,
transporting the plant from greenhouse
to our house where I planted each one,
no spontaneous growth somehow springing forth
despite my neglect or excess fertilization.
And so, I concluded the plant was just that.
A plant. Nothing more.
I pulled its tender growth from the porch railing
and folded it over on itself twice.
My son asked me what happened,
and I just showed him the broken stem.

He frowned at first then shrugged and said,
We can just plant something else, can't we?
clapping once at the end, pulling me from my trance.
I felt better about the passionflower
that wouldn't produce and planted hosta instead.
Then I walked to the back of the house
and gently tossed the vine into the cornfield.

Masked Skull of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette: Donald Patton



The dog approached with purpose. The first thing I noticed was its large size. It was perhaps only a medium dog, but coming at me the way it did tipped it toward the large-dog category. I offered it my hand to sniff—not bite, I hoped—and my hopes were rewarded. Only then did I take in the silver muzzle on what must have been a once uniformly black coat. This was an older dog, and as it turned out, a gentle dog. Her name was Luna, and her job had been to protect her family.

After I cleared security, I had my own job to do: take the family portrait. I was surprised I'd been selected for this job, even if I was the only person around. It was a hot day, and I had been walking in my neighborhood. I'd been doing a lot of this since COVID. By this point, I was on my way home. Sweat soaked through my shirt in large patches, and I didn't think anyone would want me touching their iPhone. I was wrong.

The glass of red wine in the woman's hand may have had something to do with her decision. That, and the fact that it wasn't her phone. I was just walking by, and when I noticed the family assembling into rows outside, I was slightly worried I might get drafted, and so maintained a steady pace. But she spotted me and called out: "Sir, how was your walk?" Only then did she ask about the portrait.

Of course, I would. What else could I say? I didn't really mind. I just didn't want to mess this up.

By now Luna had settled onto the ground in front of them all. It was a good-sized family—at least a dozen members—several young families, as it turned out. I didn't see the older couple I thought lived there, and this had me a little worried. I wasn't used to seeing so many cars or people there.

The woman who'd recruited me was pretty and kind of boisterous. I think I recognized her from church. Some of the others seemed uncomfortable. I wasn't sure if this was because she'd literally grabbed someone off the street, or if this had more to do with how they felt around each other.

Not surprisingly, we had to wait for more people. One was thought to be somewhere inside; another had been tracked down specifically to the bathroom. These individuals had to be rounded up, but it didn't take as long as I feared.

One of the men gave me special instructions: "Keep your thumb out of the pictures." But that wasn't a real concern for me. I was worried this was some kind of a funeral I'd walked in to. It came as a great relieve when they told me it was just a birthday party.

Everyone was present now, and the pretty lady lay down on the ground and kissed Luna on the mouth. The man concerned about thumbs counted to three, which turned out to be helpful. Then I took the pictures—one, two, three—and they were approved by the owner of the iPhone. This was a different man, who had chosen to remain incognito until that moment.

I left feeling like I had done some good in the world and had been given a small window into these dozen or so lives. More than anything, I left wanting them to be happy.

*

When I passed the house the following evening, it looked deserted. Maybe there had been a funeral after all. The previous night, cars had filled the driveway and lined both sides of the street, but tonight there wasn't a single car in sight. An old black vinyl office chair had been wheeled out under the carport. An empty cardboard packing box for red wine rested on its seat.

Only the front porch gave the slightest impression that anyone might be returning. I saw a bench, an address marker, and a lone, festive pinwheel jammed into the ground, still twirling. This was the site of the family portrait taken just one day before, and seeing the place so desolate added to my own feelings of forlornness, even though I didn't even know these people, and had only learned the name of the dog, Luna.

Counting to Ten: Georgea Jourjouklis

in bed
frozen
heart thumping
palpitations
thick layer of
sweat
oily residue
like sunscreen
caking my
forehead

i can’t remember
what frightened me
but my stomach
sours
perhaps it was
nothing
it’s always
nothing
so why am I
panting

unable to shower
eat
sleep
breathe
i count to ten
to calm myself
caress the backs
of my hands
i forget
the source
of my fear
but never that I’m
afraid

chest rises
my lungs fill
slowly
count to ten
again
and whisper
tomorrow I will
be braver
tomorrow I will
find peace

Garces Highway: Stephen Barile

On the same less-travelled route
Used by bandits like *Tiburcio Vasquez*,
The colonial Viceroyalty of *New Spain*,

Armed with his breviary and compass,
In search of a new route
From Sonora, Mexico, to Monterey *Presidio*,

Spanish-Franciscan *Friar* Francisco Garces
The first white man in native land,
To look upon the abundant inland lake.

Came into the valley of *Los Tulareños*,
From Mojave Desert, and Old *Tejon* Pass Trail;
Found signs of Pedro Fages' 1772 expedition.

Garces' mission, to bring Christianity
To the *Yokut* and *Tache* Indians tribes
Living on the edge of the fresh water lake.

He never depended on armed escorts,
Only guides, like *Sebastian Tarabal*.
Lake people were peaceable toward him,

Natives fed Garces wild-rice,
While naked girls brought fresh grass
To feed his mule.

They thought his compass possessed
An understanding of its own, turning about,
The magnetic needle pointing north.

Friar Garces made five more entradas
Into the valley and Tulare Lake.
On the fifth, he came upon a river.

Bountiful, and palatable,
Waters from the eastern slopes,
He named it Rio de *San Felipe*.

In the southern San Joaquin Valley
On May 3, 1776, he baptized
Deathly-ill Yokut boy, *Muchachito*.

The boy's father asked Father Garces
For his crucifix, that he hung
At the boy's breast for salvation.

Bosque Redondo
the round forest: Stephen Barile

To Navajo people it was *Nahondzod*,
“The Fearing Time.”

Five years of captivity
In squalid conditions

After a 350-mile forced march

From the remote reaches
of Navajo country.
Across New Mexico
By the military, armed men.

200 Navajo died.

8,000 Navajo gave up,
Presented themselves

To a concentration camp,
In a circular grove of cottonwoods.

Bosque Redondo,
In the Pecos River bottom land.

In General *Carleton*’s judgment,
Navajo people would “become farmers,
Live in villages, be instructed
In *Christianity*,
And other American practices.”

“an imperious, flint-eyed martinet
With rocklike fixity of purpose.”

Of “Unscrupulous ambition
And exclusive selfishness . . .
Despite his acknowledged ability
And apparent zeal,”
In a fellow officer’s judgement.

Navajo, with other tribes,
Would be converted to *self-sufficiency*.

The *grim* reality,

Mescaleros and Navajo,
Mortal enemies, held together
Fought endlessly.
Until Mescaleros fled
To their mountain homeland.

“Poor soil quality,”
Unpredictable, destructive *Pecos*.

Spindly crops suffered floods,
Drought, hail, and insects.

Herds of sheep
Could not find enough grass,

Became targets for raiding
Kiowa, and Commanche.

Government rations
Barely staved off starvation.

Administration of the reservation
Ripe with fraud and scandal.

Carleton refused to admit failure,
Was transferred to the regular army.

In 1868, leaders of the tribes
Journeyed to Washington D.C.,

Asked President Andrew Johnson
To let them go home again.

A *treaty* on June 1,
Conceded *Carleton’s* failure.

Navajo could return to their homes
In portions of their native land

On the *new* reservation.
Become a sovereign nation,

And never to take up arms
Against white people.

Piñyon Forest: Stephen Barile

In the arid upland hills
Where Juniper and Piñyon trees grow,
Native people knew the grounds to be sacred.
Piñyon nuts sustained the indigenous
Utes and Paiutes, for generations
In the Great Basin region.
A bad piñyon harvest could mean
Near-starvation for the winter.
Pine and fir trees encroached
Onto meadows near the piñyon range,
Where the evergreen tree
Grow as high as forty feet.
Grandfather watched over the children
While parents gathered pine nuts.
He told them to look at the tree trunks,
With gnarled, weathered branches.
The tree won't start bearing cones
Until it's thirty years old,
And does not produce *good* seed
Or "*piñóns*," until it's one-hundred.
The cones mature, and slowly open,
Finally dispersing their hoards
Of nuts all over the ground.
Paiute families, hunter-gatherers
With basketry, flaked-stone tools
Implements of wood and bone,
Established their fall camps
Near a producing stand of trees.
Young men scouted the mountainside
For the promising piñon groves.
If the harvest was particularly good,
Indigenous people might remain
In the vicinity through winter
Despite the relatively high elevation.
A good harvest will see them back
To their winter camp at lower elevations,
Celebrating an abundant gathering.
Great Basin natives, near the Panamint
Range overlooking *Death* Valley,
Were able to predict a reliable
Seed harvest, albeit Piñyons
Bear nuts every other year.
The seed germinates in the wilderness
In springtime under the snow-pack.
By tradition, Natives gathered seed

In September, and October
Throughout the far nut-lands.
Leaving cones on the tree
To brown with a sticky sap,
its gummy pitch.
The *Paiutes* of western Nevada
Knocked down ripened nuts
With long poles, collected them
In burden baskets, carried to camp.
Or collecting them from the ground
Before the competition came from
The *Mexican* Jay, squirrels, and worms.
Men normally climbed trees,
Women collected and processed seed.
Wore a *basket* cap on their heads
That held the tumpline
When carrying the burden baskets.
The seeds could be eaten raw
Or roasted in the pine cone.
The un-hulled nuts were cleaned,
Placed in a winnowing tray
With hot coals, then bounced and turned
To protect the basket from burning.
After the nuts began to hiss and pop,
they were placed on a flat rock
And quickly cracked
By rolling them on a flat stone
Using a hand-stone (*mano*).
Hulled nuts roasted again with coals,
After the second roasting,
Women ground the hard, brittle nuts
Into flour, or meal, and boiled it
A nutritious pine-nut soup.
Or mush, or baked into bread,
Or fried cakes on hot rocks.
The native people celebrated
The annual Piñyon seed harvest
With a festival of dancing and singing.
Grandfather looked forward
To this great social-time of the year
For clan gatherings, imparting children
With creation stories, and teachings.
The last big yearly celebration
Before returning to their winter camp.

Universe: Shontay Luna

Universe, hear my song and return unto
me a lullaby. Ancestors, hear my plea
and return unto me my battle cry. I hear
you, I've always have. Your voices the
wind that have blown through my past.
Whispers the lyrics to my eternal well
being. Cradle me softly into tomorrow;
I hear you, I feel you, I know you,
I am you.

God, I know you hear me. Even when I
don't make a single sound. My thanks to
you flows up and outward; like the
Buckingham under the summer sun.
Crystalline gratitude splashing up my
soul, earth drinking in the benevolence
of my submission. Till time flows in
accordance slowly over the ground,
spinning my tears into gold. Molded into
wisdom that has replaced lies once set
to bind me captive. The prison only
appearing inescapable.

Break, sever, tear apart, put asunder;
I knew those actions very well. Or should
I say, they knew me. Nevertheless, I know
them no more.

What Women Do: Shontay Luna

One - Push forward,
keep going, get through
the day. Everyday. Get through the list.
Do what needs to be done.

Two - I started keeping ibuprofen
in my purse, taking it at any given
moment like they were breath mints.
But I wouldn't have to keep taking
them if the pain didn't keep coming
back. So I keep taking them.
Hurry up pain.
And go away.

Three – Quitting time, yay! Gonna go
home and lay down. Take more pills
before doing so. Tomorrow buy
groceries on the way home.
Can't run out of anything

and the house isn't going to clean
itself!

Four - Laying still in bed and still taking
pills but they're not working!
It's gotten worse!
I can barely walk!

Dear God!

What's wrong with me?!
What's wrong with me?!
What's wrong with me?!

Prayer: Edward Michael Supranopwicz



INTRUSIONS: Simon A. Smith

All morning, Danielle zips back and forth between the bedroom and kitchen, hoping not to find that she's accidentally bundled the baby up in a trash bag and tossed it in the dumpster. She is plagued by horrifying thoughts. What if she puts the baby in the oven instead of the frozen casserole and doesn't notice? She worries about wrapping the baby's head in the quilt and cutting off its air supply. Another sweaty dash down the hallway, dizzy with dread.

She's old by childbearing standards, past forty and already shot through with panic and hounded by shadowy ailments. Her own mom, Bonnie, doesn't help. Bonnie stays up all night watching news about onrushing immigrants and soaring egg prices. Fresh out of bed, she goes straight for the remote.

"Faulty gadgets," Bonnie says. The TV screen behind her projects a snapshot of an exploded iPad. "This is our next huge threat. Stop what you're doing and unplug all your devices!" Shocks of unwashed hair spring from her head.

Danielle has bigger problems. Her bathrobe's been undone for God knows how long, and she is naked underneath. She's passed by the glass door many times, boobs dangling, bush protruding. Her flesh is still plump and curdled. Perverts and prowlers have been reported in the neighborhood. Her mom heard about it on Good Day Chicago. She needs a third opinion.

The window in the nursery creaks open. The sound hits her like a smack to the head, like a train whistle inside her ears. For the first time all day, she can't move. She is paralyzed with certainty.

"Danielle!" Bonnie shouts. "Can you hear me? Why aren't you doing something?" Her eyes, sapped of sleep, are electric red. Sometimes it seems she hasn't blinked them in seven years.

When the stupor lifts, she finds herself on autopilot. She moves robotically toward the back exit, heads across the lawn, and walks out into the street.

Silent: Travis Park

I entered the room, and there, in the hospital bed, sat a man whose face I couldn't recognize. Was this the same individual who once seemed all powerful to me as a child? His typically clean-shaven countenance was now adorned with a disheveled beard, his broken nose from falling out of the hospital bed stained with lingering blood. A mere 120 pounds, he had dwindled, his once robust muscles now nonexistent. The ventilator carried out the task of breathing for him, rendering him a lifeless shell.

My frustration boiled within me—not just for his lack of seriousness and precautionary measures, but primarily because I had not seen him in an entire year, trying to keep him safe from the virus. In the end, the virus claimed him; he believed he possessed natural immunity and rejected the need for a shot. I yearned to scold him, to express how wrong he was, but it was all irrelevant now and too late.

The agonizing decision was made to disconnect him from the ventilator, witnessing his last few breaths. Subsequently, an eerie silence enveloped the room, shattered by the sobs of my mother and his other children. Despite surviving prostate cancer and two strokes, it was COVID that proved insurmountable for my grandfather. The doctor offered few condolences and before leaving said with a laugh, "Good thing he died from COVID, at least you'll get some burial assistance from the government."

Bumps and Bones: Randi Neville

Have you felt my skeleton?

Spurs and knobs and outreaching curls of bone,
peninsulas of calcium growing in my body,
reaching for nothing
and yet,
still reaching,
grasping,
growing,
headed towards a light that it can’t conceive,
and still
it reaches.

I’m dying.

My spine is hard and solid and holds me up.
And yet
it's fragile and easily broken and
I’m afraid.
I’m afraid of the day I hurt myself and I can’t heal
—won’t heal,
my body won’t cooperate,
and I’m left in more pain,
more forever pain,
pain I can’t stand and won’t stand and I want to leave.
My hips are weak and unstable and crack like Rice Krispies when the milk hits
Snap! Crackle! Pop!
I walk carefully,
each movement precise and calculated
—"Don’t fall!”
Snap! Crackle! Pop!
“Don’t slip!”
Snap! Crackle! Pop!
“Don’t die!”
—any sooner.

I am soft and squishy,
flesh hiding imperfect bones.
Inflammation-induced rocks float my blood like a river,
streams filled with inner tubes and busted Coke cans
and
the rubbish hurts.
Sandy-bottomed-blood and
garbage-riddled plasma,
and the cells float-float,
on and on,
bumping and bruising into materials that never belonged there,

but are always there.
Ever-present rubbish in my body that it won't expel.

I'm tired of dying.

I'm disgusted with living in pain:
joints aching,
muscles aching,
body refusing to work.
I push it,
push it hard and good and into movement,
forcing myself to walk and swim and breathe,
every breath an expansion of my knowledge of misery.

Have you felt my skeleton?

The Day After the Cardiologist Visit: Felicia Mitchell

The day after the cardiologist clarifies,
a week after I studied my echocardiogram,
I am no longer bedridden in my mind—
the leaky valves of my aging heart
now more like an amateur chamber orchestra
with one lone violinist out of tune
than too many sloppy kisses with murmurs
made by a lover who wants to leave me
but never quite says so loud and clear.
At least inside my head, it feels like that,
this head that is never, ever silent
as I sift through the ringing tones
to find words to describe, perhaps,
what it was like to get the news
that I am not going to give up the ghost
conducting this orchestra in my body
this month, or this year, or next.
At least, that is what I have decided.
Before the cardiologist's news,
I had already started talking to my heart
as if it were about to abandon me,
its muffled murmurs easily misunderstood.
Now, out of tune as my mortal body is,
its music can coexist with my brain's.
I can put one foot in front of the other,
pirouette like a dancer, smug in health
that is not good but is not bad, not bad,
not bad for a person my age,
not bad for somebody who all her life
has listened to the music of the spheres.

Winter SAD: Karin Hedetniemi

To sit with the dark as it falls to the earth. To sit in this chair, to not move, or want to move, or think about moving. To be still. To be indetectable in the room. To be dormant, quiet, neither at peace nor without peace, to not know peace, to not know anything at all. To be done. Done. To be inconsequential. To be part of the darkness. To know darkness, to dissolve inside it. To vanish. To neither exist, nor cease to exist. To slip inside a nothingness. To become the absence. To be outside of thoughts, feelings, memories. To be neither at the end, or the beginning. To be nowhere, and everywhere, here in this chair. To sit with the dark until the light comes.

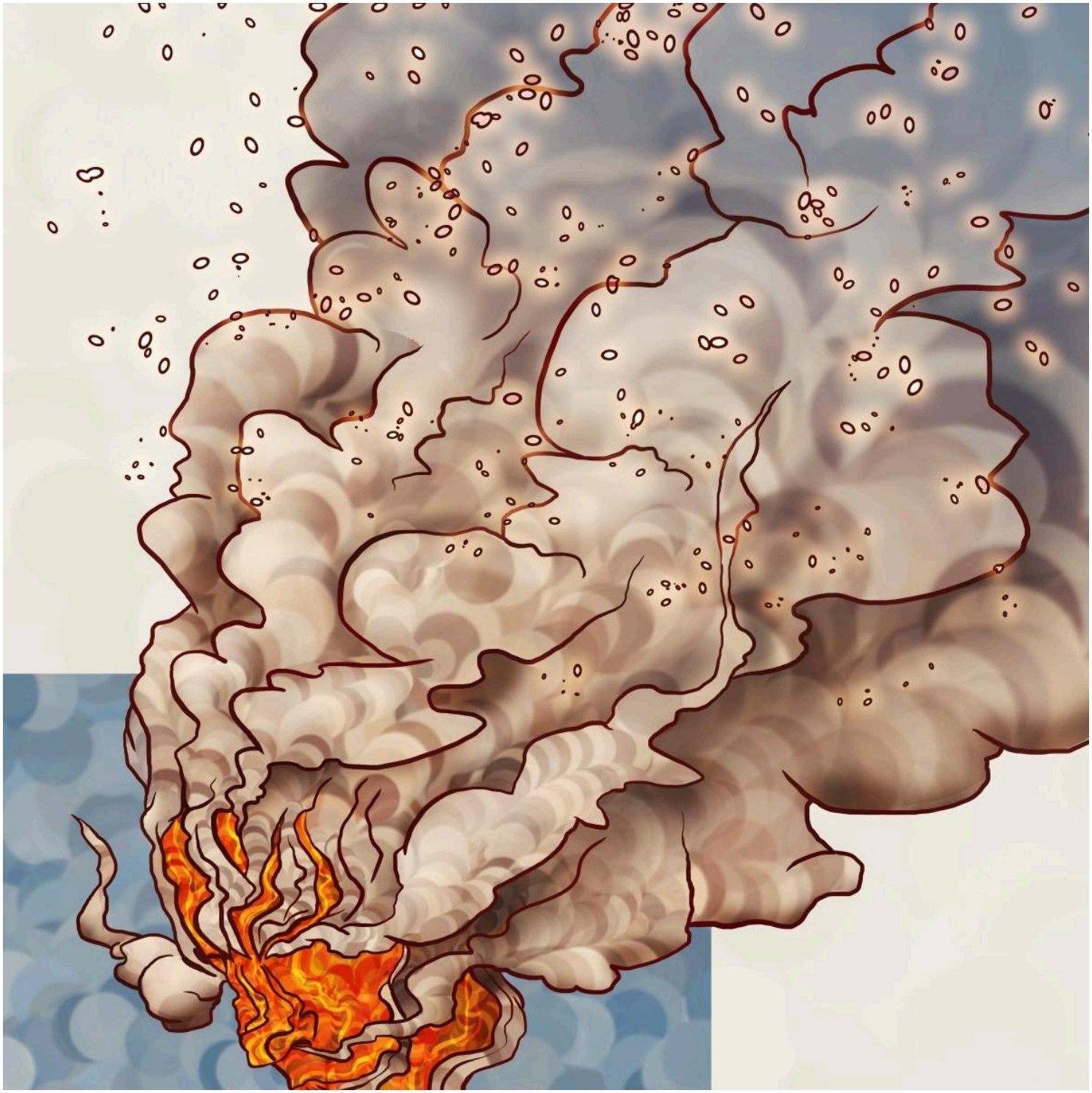
Blue Rivers: Christy Umberger

At 26, after two years of countless changes,
I don’t recognize the mirror. I laugh off
“You have to stop losing weight—you’ll disappear!”
But my hair feels thin; I feel thin; my skin feels
thin.

Blue veins haunt
legs, arms, hip bone, underwear line,
and my forehead if I smile too big.
I feel better and
worse.

I see only a stranger
in photos. Fearing
more veins, I don’t know
how to dress. I want to
flirt, but I don’t have the right
clothes.

If I only gaze up at the sky,
instead of down
at the blue rivers flooding
this see-through body, I feel
healthy.



Fiery mind: Jennifer S. Lange

I’ve Tilled the Asphalt Earth: Laine Derr

When born, they placed a chip
beneath my skin so I could speak
a soiled tongue, for the land
needed my labor, beautifully sad
as small towns go, gravel and grit.

A child sucking skins from grapes,
tartness tumbling against my teeth,
I feel the pain, bone-to-bone, knees
once bent, eyes unknown, too tired
to rest – slender body, a grafted scar.

Take Off Your Shoes: Merida Serena

I am now standing in darkness, unable, as we all are, to see what’s in front of me or what will happen next, no matter how much I plan or anticipate every second of the future. A hat and scarf hang by the door. I put them on and wander deeper into the unknown, the unknowable. A feather falls from a warm nest, where it has spent all of its life, discovering the vast chill that exists outside of its perceived safety, and tumbling deep into oblivion.

#

I am hungry. I continue consuming, *keep the sadness away, keep away from it*. It’s at every corner, hiding in bushes, swinging from trees, always waiting, always watching. My sadness is a lizard, I could chop off half and it would keep living, running severed, able to survive. *Perhaps we, too, are like the lizards*. Despair creeps through the holes in the wall the ladybugs crawl through—one came crashing onto my head the other day. I wish it away over and over until my throat and eyes ache. It can take decades to realize that the running is what makes it hurt, what tightens your chest and jaw. Once you turn around, the monster in the bushes will evaporate. It drinks fear to survive, our unwillingness to face it makes it stronger, so when we stop hiding, it has no more food. But turning around is the hardest part. *It’s much easier to keep running*.

#

But this month I plant squash seeds in the garden and my joy sprouts into butterflies. I find wonder in each fresh blossom. Roses in my bed, eucalyptus exploding from my eyes. Robins sing to children, *take off your shoes and run through the forest to kiss the daffodils and inchworms*. To love someone is to love their smile even when it’s not pointed at you.

Waiting for a Chance: Devin A. Reese

We waited for so long, anticipating the flurry of blue scrubs
that should ensue when he'd be wheeled off the helicopter,
waiting made longer by white walls with nothing by instructions
to wash your hands, cover your mouth for germs, call 911.
No one else waited but us, no other anxious families or friends.
Our pregnant silence, as we held our breaths, was punctuated
by sounds of the hospital PA, announcing other emergencies,
beckoning doctors and nurses to where they were needed most,
detailed urgent sounds announcing coordinates in the maze of rooms,
and occasional squeaking of wheeled carts rushing by in hallways.
Perhaps our Dad was still in the air, or he would surely qualify
as a first-class emergency, heart having stopped and already
rejected for care by another hospital, not skilled enough
to bring him back from the near-dead. Still, we waited.
Finally, restless, I walked outside through the doors,
back into the breathing city of Baltimore, city wrapped
cloak-like around this giant Noah's Ark, full of people
needing to be saved and saving, gritty with life and death.
Then I heard it. The distinctive *chuff chuff chuff,* approaching
through the dark night sky, gluing me to its loudening blades,
my gaze craning upward, with the illusion that even a glimpse
would bring me closer to my Dad sequestered inside. But,
the marble and glass monolith of Johns Hopkins obscured
my view other than the reflection of flashing red lights,
bouncing off the grid of patients' windows as the chopper
found its mark on some hidden landing pad, a rooftop
square giving one person a last chance in this world.

My favorite niece, Nicki, was in town staying with us for a few days before heading back to California. It was June 29th, 2022 and my brother Jon was going in for his regularly scheduled brain MRI today. We would be notified about the results with a phone call from his wife Lisa, later that afternoon. We were all at the precipice of our emotions, teetering on the edge.

He had been on Avastin, the immunotherapy drug of last resort, for the past three months. It seemed to be keeping things at bay. But things were changing.

I could tell when I was with him in Maine a few weeks earlier. He seemed tired, more withdrawn. I noticed he was perseverating more than usual. We were discussing some news article and he was repeating his point over and over and was not able to understand the alternative point that I was trying to make.

He was so intelligent! Why he couldn't grasp my simple point…then I caught myself and swallowed the lump in my throat. I realized the cause of his confusion. His brain cancer was growing.

Nicki and I wanted to get outside and bike ride down the Hudson for one last outing before she had to fly back to California that night. We pedaled down to Battery Park and then back up the Hudson and stopped at the Frying Pan for a late lunch. It was a gorgeous clear day to be out on the water.

We had just ordered veggie burgers, fries and beer. As we sat there eating, my cell phone rang. I looked. Lisa. I felt sick to my stomach and my mouth went dry.

Jon's cancer had come back with a vengeance. His oncologist, who had become so fond of them both, cried as she told them there was nothing more that could be done, and prepared them for what to expect in the next five to six weeks. He fought so well for his life and now he was losing it.

Lisa and Jon were devastated. I was to relay the information to the rest of the family as they requested no contact from others right now, so they could retreat and have this precious time to themselves to enjoy the remainder of Jon's life. They planned to spend time at his beloved camp in northern Maine; one last time while he was still able to. Lisa would keep us abreast of Jon's regression and would notify us when it was time to come see him.

I sat there with Nicki. Dumbfounded. Repeating the heartbreaking news. Did I hear Lisa correctly? Was there any possible misinterpretation? I wanted the news from the doctor directly. My mind needed her validity. I couldn't accept the reality of Lisa's revelation.

Reflecting on the truth of Lisa's words, I gradually allowed them to sink in, still scouring every nuance for any possibility of hope. Which wasn't there.

I turned to Nicki, "I have to call your mom and everyone. They are waiting to hear about Jon."

She is wise beyond her years and hugged me as we both sat there crying.

She said, "Just wait, give yourself some time first, absorb this information. Make room for YOUR feelings, before sharing with everyone else and taking on the burden of all their emotions."

Basically, put your oxygen mask on first. Sound advice.

We shared our feelings, distraught over the news, and picked at our lunch, before getting back on our bikes and heading home.

What follows is a blur. I don't remember when or who I spoke to after that. I was hollow. Lost. Devastated.

I wanted to be with Jon, with both of them, to help in any way. As if I could do anything to save him. The helplessness was unbearable.

A Dark Truth Dawns: Joanne DiMauro

"I may as well die fat and happy, what difference does it make," he'd say. Eating was one of his last few pleasures.

It'd been months since I'd seen him and after the long bus ride up to Maine from NYC, I was anticipating some quality time together. I'd creep in the back door, tip-toe to his bedside intent on giving him a gentle hug hello, but he'd dismiss my attention and immediately start barking out orders.

"Go get yourself something to eat. There's leftovers in the fridge or make yourself a sandwich. Go on," he'd say, running down a list of what was in the kitchen.

I'd think to myself, "well it's nice to see you too, Jon." But then I'd realize it was his way of deflecting his uncomfortability with the intimacy. His way of hiding so I wouldn't be sad or shocked with the declining state of his health.

So I'd act nonchalant too, as if I'd just seen him yesterday, and I'd talk about something benign like the bus ride up, allowing both of us time to adjust to each other again.

One of the first occasions I drove him to an appointment, he insisted on walking from the car into the medical center, likely wanting to prove his capability to himself and to his doctor.

After his appointment, I went outside ahead of him to get the car from the parking lot, drove it up to the front door of the facility so he wouldn't have to walk as far, but, rather than parking it so he had easy access to the passenger door, I absently parked the car in the opposite direction, forcing him to walk farther around.

I happened to glance in the rearview mirror, guilt throttling my heart as I watched him inching around to the passenger side, bracing onto the car for support. I was unaware of the extent of his physical decline because he disguised it well in front of me; in front of all of us. I witnessed it, clearly, for the first time. I couldn't deny it any longer.

One particularly trying day for both of us; again, I was driving…to his doctor's appointment, to the bank, to the pharmacy and the grocery store. He loved driving but his ability was impaired due to his recent seizure. One more pleasure he had to relinquish.

I was nervous with him directing me, complaining about my driving and my confusion at getting to places around town. But I dismissed his comments, avoided potholes and tried not to upset him as we approached the doctor's office.

He had no patience with me today.

He refused my help, insisting that he had to put on his own protective gloves and mask. I ignored it and concentrated on setting up the wheelchair to wheel him into the office.

“I’m one of Jerry’s kids…he spouted. “Just call me Stephen Hawking.”

I sank into his frustration at the loss of his abilities, the loss of his independence, his need to rely on others for everyday tasks.

When we arrived back home, Jon was exhausted and ready to lie down, but Joe was already present and needed to get some tools out of the shed for a project he was working on, so Jon had to delay his rest and address this.

Jon explained to me in detail where the specific nails were kept on the back porch but I misunderstood his directives and brought out the wrong batch.

He snapped at me in front of Joe, “Not those! You didn’t listen to me!”

And then more emphatically to Joe, “Jesus, she never listens!”

Ashamed and humiliated, I fought back tears. After a long trying day, I collapsed. Joe gave me a sympathetic glance as if to say, “He doesn’t mean it. He can’t help it.”

I know Jon’s struggle with loss of control and independence was insurmountable. And I understood his intolerance…but it still hurt deeply.

Denying the Diagnosis: LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Cancer: disease, noun, diagnosis. Pause
To swallow bile while pushing language back,
Refusing this announcement, monkey paw
Of misfortune appearing at your door.
Convince yourself you won’t collapse, succumb.

Self-doubt and clotted darkness mandate change.
Create a safe house, stocked with hungry stars,
Just begging to exist. Install a hive
Of eyes alerting you to more damage,
A forest of deciduous oak trees
To cheer you with its ticker-tape of leaves,
Green beauty fleeting but necessary
As lies the fearful tell themselves. Meanwhile,
Fate waits, invading dreams, a hypnotist’s
Skull medal dangling like a magic key.

Cancer, You Sly Casanova: LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Grief wrung our door, its last drops of woe spent,
Allowing me an about-face from bold
Audacity, its feathers set on fire
Before evolving into ash and rue.

Cancer's devotion — all consuming — trumped
My ministrations, rooting deeper as
Resistance weakened. Mother fought him off,
Insisting she was married to her life,
Unwilling to abandon family
And friends for his seductive promises
Of peace, relief from pain. Disease does not
Relax dark efforts. Like a gigolo,
He teased, urging mother to succumb.

He ransacked her impatient body till
She was persuaded to leave us for him,
Not realizing all Casanovas
Are interested only in conquest.

Flashing Body: Qi Peng



Light Scattering: Angie Macri

That death should rhyme with breath
isn't something children miss
no matter how often they are told
to ignore it. This makes it worse
of course. What else aren't adults telling?
Pneumonia rattles in the chest
like someone lost in a cellar, feeling
their way, stepping across concrete
poured so long ago few remember.
Black lung, long before its name is common,

reaches from mouth to air
it can't exchange any longer,
and the cigarettes they love
slide perfect from pack to fingers to lips
then tray and back again,
ash like dust so fine to be feathers
of some bird long gone. How it sang
all hours long past evening
so that night turned upsidedown
past daybreak. It slept soft

under the child's hand
when no one was looking, a dirty habit
to touch, they scold when they catch her
as if she set the flame to her face.
As if she pulled air in so hard, it turned
inside out in desire, as if she profited
from coal mines, as if they didn't all watch smoke
curl from the power plant, then disappear
like magic in thin air, but still must be there.
She knows it. Sunsets last forever.

Heart of Hearts: Angie Macri

Rare the woman who looks at her reflection with affection. The mirror
has a man's voice, and no wonder. For that is power. No other vision matters
but to attract him: each hair in place, eyes bright but shaded, lips full

but not too much. When she asks who is the fairest, it hints at justice.
Can I judge myself rightly? And who are you to judge me?
The mirror purrs you are. You are in all the land in a way she wants to hear

but knows is wrong. The girl inside her runs into the woods from the clearing
away from the deer on the forest floor the man is cleaning.
He will put its heart into a box to bring home as proof of muscle

at the center that was beating. He cuts and pulls in the way he was taught
when small by his father, and his father before him. The knife's
bright mirror reminds him. Always move the blade away from your body.

Refinery: Angie Macri

The wood river roots with silver.
It isn't safe there, same
as the whole area for decades now.
Blame the forest or the water.
Blame explorers who created
a name from such a combination
in the first place. The woods

were dark, starts every other story.
The water was dark, the other.
The river followed the course of another
through forests until the forests
were cut down and a channel
was cut to make the river go
more directly. At its mouth,
plants made weapons, ammunition

for world wars. Now oil
is refined there. I tell
the stories to my children
but they don't hear me, so busy
growing. There is no wood
or river that doesn't hold
the shades of our bodies.

Sound and Calm: Dale Gong

"for the changes, and for the grace with which we lived them"
-Erin Moure
*
The body's too small to live in
a terse text and an abstruse subject

a metrical specimen of sonorous movements
continually recurring in a barbarous jangle of time

I lift I stomp I rise I strike
such is about the general notion

an alternate lifting and lowering
elation of a time duration

structured by emphatic stance:
I put I set I place

to breathe is to
gasp/accept
*
poetic meter a reverse of the meter
found in the medicine of Galen

the pulse of blood called the *arsis*
thesis the following calm
*
the notes marked with dots called *stigmai*
indicate the *arsis* of the metrical foot

the still visible *stigmata* of
the long obsolete lymphangiogram

rad blue dye glow injected into
severed spaghetti threads of

lymph dangle
at the same spot Christ's

feet were nailed
*
: holding my breath…
*
blue triangle of radiation dots
indelible breast mark

40 rads ruining any notion of
tattoo as body art
*
the inference that silence is calm
arsis a thump

actually felt by the ancients
out of the jumble she extricates a thrum

heart murmur's woolly whoosh forming
a visceral thread of morbidities and events
*
an unending ever present
part of my being since that first night

huddled in bed not spooning
the opposite of

facing each other
heads and knees touch terrified

a hollow between us
*
a hollow like the mediastinal mass

in a part of my body I hadn't known existed
had never thought of

the interstitial
patient spaces

that there was an emptiness in my body
waiting to be filled

that was not a womb
a bomb

*
the leading division into *there* and *not there*
is still a most curious and confusing thing

a minute interval
the little successive schemes

which seem as it were to advance or go
intent on time and numbers
*
the chemo cut
the duckling fuzz
*
intent on time and numbers
if with an attentive ear we listen

pronounce as we commonly do
these words:

everything we care about
they consist of a sequence of some

syllables or other sounds or even
of movements without sound
*

the invisible lymph
running through my poems

systemic unuttered
their constitution or constellation

internal tissue texture of
clogged or clotted arteries

alveoli and bronchioles
encrypted erupted sputtered
*
that insistent uneven rhythm
if not expressly marked if

ill-expressed or attenuated
even if underheard

it nevertheless exists
a tender dramatic deficit

tenuously supported by a rest

if not expressly marked if
ill-expressed or attenuated

it nevertheless exists
and is always underheard

or apprehended tentatively
a tenuous deficit supported by a rest
*
dead end breathing sacs and bones

dried capsules calcified linings
desiccated womb lungs valves vagina

barren and bald

breath’s suspension
*
out of context word duos or trios
began as friends then felt

there became a division
between experiment and fact

forms had lost their
malleability and softness

art being aspirational perhaps
of being understood

it's a translation document
reencountering your own fracture
*
how do you invite someone into
an empathy relationship

when the body in quotes in a poem
in my poem has not been erotic

has been a body riddled with illness
with issues with fragilities

my body of work has been my body
although it's been invisible t/issue

my body of work has been my body
although it's been invisible t/issue

*
I just want to emerge forever

a space may teach my bafflement how to grieve

Notes:
Erin Moure epigraph is from *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*.
the body's too small to live in: Stephen Levine, 1.21.1991 at an AIDS workshop with Ram Dass.

District-Determined Professional Development: Ang E. Miller

“STRESS OR TRAUMA” holds firm
as the title of the two-hour presentation. Ten
simple Google slides, quirky
memes included,
explicate our anxiety
to us. Don’t worry

teachers, you don’t live
trauma—just
stress. Your students need
you more
than you need
yourselves. Well-researched recommendations

for self-care litter
a final slide: vacation, sleep, massage.
A pen clicks hastily, a gum
bubble bursts, a woman excuses
herself to cry
in the bathroom. Don’t worry,

teachers,
we understand
your concerns: watch
this video to learn
how to 7-count breathe.
Watch this video to

remove you from you.

Assistant to “Okay the Clown”: Ang E. Miller

Before the paint touches skin, consider placement.
Higher cheeks need longer lines. Baby fat requires
curly swirls. Foreheads and noses sweat.
You’ve got to get it right or the kids cry.
The customer always knows when the face paint is ugly.

Run the wet brush across the cracked paint palette. Steady
your hand and outline the heart-butterfly-bee-kiss-smiley.
Grandma juggles her rainbow handkerchiefs behind you.
She practically breathes out balloons and the kids cheer. It’s the first
time you’ve helped her, ever, but she has high hopes you’ll follow her
path from teaching English to attending clown college.
She used to think her face paint trail led to greater smiles.

The bowl of water, the napkin, the paint. Unsteady hands and
bristles bleeding out green droplets where leaves should be. Back then
Grandma would laugh. A heart-butterfly-bee-kiss-smiley face painting
here, a dog-bunny-turtle-giraffe balloon animal there. You learned
to recognize the brown of unwashed brushes or the pop
of a taut balloon. You never learned to recognize the signs of early dementia.

The first rule of face paint is to remember it is best
applied directly to clean, dry skin. Some clowns keep the hair
away from the face with a hair band or clips. Squeeze the excess water
out of the brush before the heart-butterfly-bee-kiss-smiley appears
runny. Tear-stained face paintings do not smile the way
clowns want. The way Grandma remembers.

Living With Cancer in My Bones: Diana Raab

I hope one day
to feel peace in my bones
like the five buddhas
nestled on my terrain,
who sport 108 beads and hold
flowers plucked from my garden—
an altar just for them
nurtured
as they nurture me
when looking in their eyes.

I hope one day
the health stars shine on me
and a shooting one
comes to greet me
at my front door
to honor my health dream,
but who knows
after living
so many lifetimes,
and having seen so much
with many surprises and sparks.

I’ve repeated these wishes
108 times yet nobody hears,
will you?

A Different Type of Hunger Keeps Me Here: Diana Raab

It's a quiet May evening
and we've just celebrated my birthday
and Mother's Day— a merging
that reminds me of my essence.
I've drank too much bubbly
and gifts no longer have their lasting effects.

A different type of hunger keeps me here
and maybe it's the security
of being loved that pulls me back in
and the knowing that you
helped find the mute voice in me
all those six decades ago
when I sat on the hilltop
after our hike feeling completely
empty and full at the same time.

There were no thoughts in my mind,
but you in your wise way
you uttered some into my heart,
and for this I am eternally grateful
that I get reborn each year in this month of May.

How to Break a Heart: Diana Raab

The day I was told I needed radiation,
you sat with me and the doctor
and asked technical questions,
as I sat with my face pooled with tears
as reality sunk into my psyche.

some actions we cannot explain
can hurt us deep--
you not noticing me,
but more importantly wanting
to expand your knowledge base

and then being told the first
four weeks no fatigue
and you saying I can drive myself,
another smack of abandonment
triggered from a childhood
of maternal abandonment.

at home I lock myself in my room
with a bottle of wine and box of tissues,
as you told me I cry for stupid reasons,
what it really is are reasons you don't understand.

some days it doesn't feel worth living
and when I tell you that you say you need me,
how many other ways can we break a heart?

Black Hole: Elise Chadwick

It's been more than a year since I journeyed
away from myself. This unplanned trip required
no passport or reservation. Has no itinerary.
Open-ended descent. Free fall across familiar
landscapes newly dotted with landmines and craters—
emails punctuated with smiley face emojis,
voice mails just checking to see how I am doing,
invitations- no pressure or rsvp necessary.

Here, the softest sweater, flannel bedsheets
and lambswool socks burn like a throng
of needles on fire.

Let me welcome damp November's invitation
for deep hibernation in the belly of its short
gray days. Let me dream away the winter solstice
in numb oblivion, immune to the promise of
the new year. Leave me in peace to await
the arrival of the vernal equinox before
embarking on the interior pilgrimage back
to myself.

Swan Song Sonnet: Elise Chadwick

"I don't even know if he noticed there was a swan in front of him."
Ariel Cordova Rojas NY Times, 11/12/20

The mute swan rests majestic on the bench
of the A train. Slender S sprouts from
orange puffer coat draped cape-like
over her bulk. Regal complement
to her orange bill and black knob.
Distracted by screens and thoughts
of dinner, commuters are blind to the
sprawling fairy tale figure suffering
out of place and time in poisoned
silence, gut full of fishing lead
and shot gun pellets discarded
by fishermen and hunters.
Here in the glare of the artificial light
her mythic plumage glows bright.



Old Yoho Grocery in Solsberry, Indiana: Jason Hochman

Memory Care: Elise Chadwick

There's nothing to remind her of who she is
or the life she led. Nothing to remind
her of home where the sweet smells of
made from scratch cooking perfumed
her kitchen, or the murmur of wonder
sat cozy on the blue floral sofa when
she read *Make Way for Ducklings* to
grandchildren. There are no photos of
her wedding or her daughter's graduation.
No dimpled mahjong tiles to remind her
of friends and the games they played.

Strangers help her to bathe and eat
and dress in clothing that's too big
or too tight. The intimacy confuses her.
After breakfast she sits in a wheelchair
fidgeting with a *Barbie* coloring book or
sounding out newspaper headlines that no
longer have meaning to her in a room where
country music videos play all day. Trivia
games and concerts and chair yoga are offered
to stimulate the mind and exercise the body
but she's too frightened or shy or insecure
to participate. Nobody encourages her to join.

At night she sleeps in a bed with rails.
Vivid dreams summon the crinkle
of taffeta, musk of jasmine, bite of lemon
ginger. When she becomes restless
they give her *Ativan* with a sip of water
to keep drifting shards of memory calm
until she melts into nothing at all.

Desperately Seeking: Elise Chadwick

I've never crafted a perky profile or navigated
on-line dating sites so when it comes to wading
through reams of profiles on the *Psychology*
Today directory, it's hard to know when
to swipe right.

I type in my zip code, filter for gender and age,
and insurance accepted. Scroll to scan the column
of faces, heads lilted in poses of casual
invitation meets readiness to listen. Skim the
openings of blurbs: *I believe, Together we can*
and *At the heart of my work*.

Each click tumbles me deeper into a whirling
funnel, links to pages papered with credentials,
client focus and treatment approaches.
What do I want? What do I need? Mindfulness
coaching? Interpersonal, psychodynamic
biofeedback? Aren't all therapists emotionally
focused, culturally sensitive, and humanistic?

And who knew there could be so many niche
issues beyond my run of the mill anxiety and
depression? Video game or internet addiction.
Hoarding and chronic impulsivity. Is play
therapy for adults? I keep clicking.

The attraction is immediate. Soft closed mouth
smile. Right eye shadowed by strands of dark hair.
Wise, cool, stable. She radiates an updraft that
stills the tornado churning at my core
with the promise of a heavy downpour.

Employment Rate for Disabled People is 54.2% in the UK: Aspen Greenwood

In a world that demands conformity, I shrink into the shadows,
For my existence is deemed too inconvenient, too disruptive.
My body, my voice, my identity - all seen as burdens to bear.
Suffocating under the weight of expectations, I yearn for space to breathe.
Politics dictate my worth, diminishing me to mere statistics.

In the Air: Laura Glenn

My sister and I sing songs
at his bedside, from musicals he'd taken us to.
The morphine drips . . . I have no idea
how he takes in our unpolished voices.

Then I pick Beethoven's energetic Seventh
my father had requested
when he still had words,

and I recognize the resigned sadness
of the second movement
will haunt me years from now.
Cardinals have many different songs.
Outside the hospice window, bright red
on the ice-glazed branch of crab apple;
the cardinal opens and closes his coral beak,

and I cannot hear him.
The symphony loops and loops.
I tell my sister I’m not sure

he wants to hear it again.
And my father lifts his hands—
faintly conducting
the air with his fingers.

The Poem I Never Wrote: Laura Glenn

I tell AI to write a poem
about why AI can’t write good poems.
How refreshing to call it dreck
without hurting anyone’s feelings. AI writes impressively
fast—when I ask, it spews out verse culled from the cyberverse,
whereas mine takes hours to draft and hone.
But after AI’s clichés about how it lacks joy, sorrow, soul,
I can’t face my scrappy notes. What if I can’t write a good poem
about why AI can’t write a good poem?

Months pass without mention of AI in my poems.
I stuff my notes into a large envelope
and head for New York—first time
since the pandemic. My friend and I spend limited minutes together
in an Infinity Room, then hours in galleries, catching up
on life and art, before my tagged-on day alone
to work on my AI poem.

Walking the High Line, I begin to ache.
Snoozing, I sniffle and sneeze myself awake.
I was so careful—took every booster—then I let my mask down,
lost my negative capability. Having tested positive,
I can’t stay with my friend. Sick in bed
with a view of a hypodermic needle—the Empire State,
the wastebasket’s full of balled-up tissues—my bouquet.
All I need is peace, love, and Paxlovid for my first-time COVID.
Alone in this hotel room with my flat black phone: beloved voices
orbit my head—help me find my way home.

Even masked, it won't fly for this snuffly zombie to travel publicly.
A limo I can't afford is cheaper than staying on.
I chat with the driver—a family man from Pakistan—
until my voice is shot. Too feverish to speak up about the spiking speedometer—
like the masked driver's outpacing paparazzi, or the virus.
Approaching Ithaca, he delights in flowers the Escalade blurs by.
Home, I invite him into the garden—my husband greets us, makes him a bouquet.
Lifting my mask, my sense of smell returns, heightened: I inhale
many flowers in one whiff—then the burnt edge of distant fires.

Soon I'm on the rebound.
Maybe AI can help improve the meds.
I can't tell the smell of vinegar from water again.
I gain a cough, sleep half the day, have no appetite, even for writing,
but I think, some bot can just whip out a lousy poem.
There are signs that it might master the craft, learn to fake human foibles
and feelings—send the imagination reeling—all with no personal meaning.
I never wrote my AI poem—problems escalated and
I am not a robot.

I Find This Pen with Eight Little Beads: Laura Glenn

Eight little planets—all different colors—
spin on the spine of the pen's pocket clip.
It must have been a doctor's—
on the flip side, an ad for morphine.
The beads on this toy
with gravitas
could also be sugar pills
in a kid's doctor kit.

After my C-section,
I kept pushing a little button
for more morphine,
while nestling and nursing my baby.
Then attendants streamed in with tray after tray
of my first postpartum breakfast;
apparently, I'd checked off
everything on the menu.

Another morphine drip:
my articulate father was dying,
his vocalizations
reduced to groans,
his cries helpless as a newborn's;
it was my task to administer morphine
whenever he wordlessly asked—his cries
waking me in the night.

I feel for my writer friend who toyed
with pills that landed him
in rehab for addiction
to pharmaceuticals—
jonesing for pleasure, trying to kill
an unnameable recurrent pain.
A job we share: keeping
an even keel.

Pensively, I twirl
the pen's mini-abacus
and think of things I'll never do.
I do the felicific calculus,
ponder the need to modulate,
muse over the pen's
bright molecules, then flick
the beads—spinning.

So much anguish
between birth and death—
some of it can morph
into the sublime,
I'm always reminding myself.
Sometimes normal
feels great after suffering—if only
I could hold onto gratitude.

I think of my fear
of feeling too much—
and at times I'm
emotionally numb. I turn
the little planets
with my thumb.
Ink flows like blood—the pen
has a crisp click.

Marbled Tabby: Laura Glenn

My cat has cataracts: one eye
white as a marble
statue; the other cloudy,
on its way to darkness.

Now he rarely looks me in the eyes
or mirrors a squinting smile.
He flinches when I squirt in eye drops,
as if I were trying to hurt him,
then redoubles aloofness.

I must protect him from predators and cars—
walk him like a dog. Or tail
him around the yard at night with a flashlight,
on the lookout for one shining eye.
He jumps to the snap of a twig!
I stroke the ruff of his cheek—pull out
the curved sheath of another cat's claw.

Inside, we curl like two cats.
He nestles against me—trilling—nuzzles
his face into my palm, in-
creasing my lifeline.
When to say that final good night—
either too soon or too late?

I stroke his chocolate-babka swirls,
the touching sleekness of his fur, softness
my hand never tires of—feel
the gentle buzz of his purr and hear
his gentle *me-you*.

Time for a catnap: we close our eyes.
Side by side
yet separately
we head down the blind alley
of sleep.

Anguish in the Wind: Jennifer Shneiderman

Figures in surprisingly sensible shoes
Cling to headstones
The cemetery's uneven terrain
Felling even the nimble.

They make their way to the prayer tent
Bobbing flashes of silver hair
Gnarled hands extend their greeting
Grim, quiet, determined.

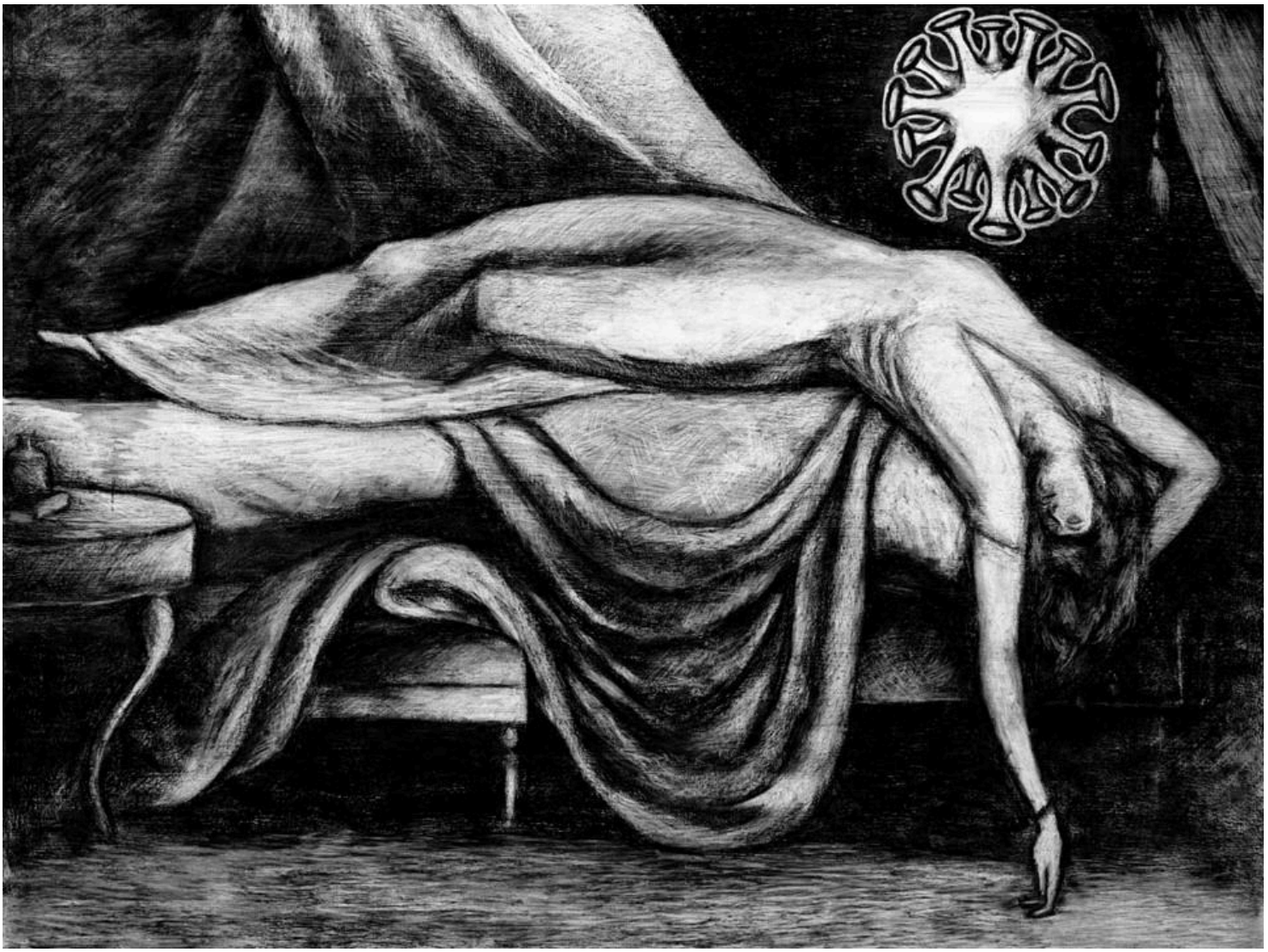
They gather and stake their claim
I knew her from tai chi
She was in my book club
Our children went to school together.

Seventeen months at stage four
She lived well beyond her life expectancy
Grateful for more time
But railing against her own frailty.

A sharp gust buffets the tent
Threatening to lift metal poles plunged into earth
As if she wants to upend the solemn ritual
There is anguish in the wind.

The rabbi sings Kaddish
Dirt is shoveled
The wind subsides and seeps
Her acquiescence arrives with the sun.

The COVID Nightmare: Donald Patten



M@␣r!cə Hənry's Mannequin: Ruth Towne

Just shut up and let me think
please—
If I meditate,

will I become marbled
and statuesque?
Or if I medicate, can I stop

the hurricane?
It all goes back
to either my magenta gel pen

or my incarnadine vitamins,
I can't decide.
When I was fifteen, I needed

a left kidney, so I made one
out of clay and papier-mâché.
Now, the faux organ flutters

near my spine, a gauzy wing,
a whirligig spinning.
When I was ten, I collected

different dead insects
and arachnids.
I spread their skeletons

across glossy cardstock pages
with milky modge podge
to make arthropod collages.

Then, when I was three,
a television crushed me.
At the time, all TVs were oblong

plastic boxes, wide like coffins.
Before the screen hit me,
I saw myself briefly in the black glass.

My head was the whole earth.
My scream was soft fog
that had fallen from a larger cloud.

It all stops there.
I had the story straight before,
on the last last day of school,

and once at a mall, and the first time
someone asked me, *When you grow up,*
what do you want to be?

But I got sick of other people
who could not have a thought
without me, and I started therapy.

So just tell me now
—will the rain ever end
if I make up my mind?

The Medicine Cabinet Speaks: Cody Vesley

SERTRALINE

My bumpers / on the bowling lane / you keep me out of the gutter / no peaks / no valleys / just flat planes / I can see / finally / outstretched hands / braid together with my / anxiety ridden fingers / like willow reeds / making a basket / to hold / precious things / my hands / go limp / at a lover's touch / I traded sensations of / a naked body / for a chance / to live / long enough / to / love somebody / again

BUPROPION

A flood / of dopamine / now my thoughts / are swimming / instead of drowning me / three-hundred anchors / transfigured into / three-hundred balloons / a new high / lifts me up

PSYLLIUM HUSK

You keep me regular / orange-flavored dunes / on my tongue / I am an hourglass / time flowing through me / it passes as I sit / on my throne / looking down / though my little window / at the world / I see a handsome man / I'd make myself timeless for / so he can have fun / for an hour / or two

DESCOVY

Now / the only thing I can catch / are feelings / maybe gonorrhea / I know someone / who died of AIDS / we did cocaine / together / I watched him / get engaged / I texted my ex / I'm sorry / for your loss / I'm tired of / watching us die / in movies / on the news / on Facebook / I don't think about / the dying / until they are dead / undetectable / by me / and my little blue pill / of privilege / built on the bones / of an entire generation / they used to call it / gay cancer / made us malignant / denounced our queerness / we still can't donate blood / a Gen Z twink / thinks very differently / than an old queen / on what being positive means / they'd be ashamed / I can't remember / the last time / I used a condom

PROPRANOLOL

My heart slows down / doubled over / heaving oxygen / there was a sound / bombastic / with its audacity / accuracy / exactly like that one time / I remember / against my will / the PTSD / pries itself past / the heavy doors / I bolted shut / with bottles / unlocked by / a sober key / I'm back / in the body / of a little boy / shaken awake / by shotgun shells / hitting the floor / sounding like pennies / plummeting down a well / leaving wishes to wither / it's all the same / except not at all / in this losing game / the body / keeps the score

HYDROXYZINE

My psychiatrist says / the biggest problem / I can't sleep / rather / my upstairs neighbors / throw a party / every night / call it a wake / or / a rave / either way / I was not invited / I stare at the ceiling / close enough to imagine / I'm anywhere but here / the restlessness / crawling like bed bugs / burrowing like scarabs / festering like maggots / I want to jump / out of these sheets / of skin / made rigid by / scar tissue / and cold sweats / I'm afraid of the dreams / like sharks / circling the drain / lapping up blood / dripping from my fingers / I tear flesh from / I'd rather be devoured / by myself

PRAZOSIN

The dreams / are beggars / outstretched palms / bigger than saucers / and rougher than sandpaper / asking for a love / I don't have / maybe / never will / since I don't get / a happy ending / even in my sleep / they still leave / he still doesn't love me / when my eyes / crack open / like shutters / rusty with sleep / I can't tell the waking / from the nightmare / it all / looks the same / so I swallow / an anvil / to knock them out / it's so heavy / dropping / like blood pressure / I almost black out

C-PTSD: Cody Vesley

I try not to think about my mother piss drunk, pissing on a beach towel in the seat of the minivan we rented for our Georgia trip.

How she is the boogeyman in most of my flashbacks. How when I say trauma it sounds alot like her name.

When I show-and-tell my childhood, people smile nervous and flip me an *I'm sorry*, pretty as a penny thrown into a waterless well I already climbed out of, falling on a child's unmarked grave.

I persuaded my psychiatrist to knock the Wellbutrin down to a hundred-fifty, but on the bad days I take a leftover three-hundred, desperately tossing the pearly grenade down my throat from the trench I'm sandbagged in, hoping to obliterate whatever is trying to kill me. I forget the brain-fog is for protection, that if I'm a zombie, the dead won't bite me.

I'm called a space-cadet, always floating in the void pretending the winking lights are fireflies instead of dying stars. My psychiatrist calls this disassociating and asks me how long I've been an astronaut in my body. I ask *How old is the sun?*

I try only talking about things pertaining to alcoholism in the meetings, but I don't know how to recall the drowning without mentioning the bodies at the bottom being drudged up like balloons full of lead. How when I rang my bell against the side of the bathroom stall, I was trying to knock the image of my step-father's meth-y eyes out of my head. How the cocaine was just fairy dust so I didn't have to leave neverland and return to a world in which I was still in love with my abuser. How if I keep letting new traumas cut the line, the old ones will never reach me.

A lover//abuser once told me, I made him pay for other people's mistakes, and I'd think it true if he didn't wear they're actions like costume. I do not tell him how I saw my mother's limp body on every telephone pole we passed. I do not tell him about the Frankenstein step-father who, with outstretched arms on my shoulders, groaned about how he couldn't pleasure my mother before eating me alive. I do not tell him how I transfigured into her every time he grabbed or screamed in my face, that I was somehow the kid standing helpless in the driveway and the dying animal hemorrhaging vodka, at the same time.

I do not tell any of them their love reduced me to crumbs rats chew upon with broken glass promises. I keep their secrets like a shotgun behind the headboard. A therapist once said *You were raised in a war territory*, but I do not think myself a Purple Heart.

My EMDR therapist asks *On a scale of one to ten, how distressing are the memories?* and I answer *I don't have enough fingers or toes to count how many times I've tried to pray myself away, that if life were a subscription email, I'd prefer to opt-out.*



Space Between the Shadows: Matthew McCain

Lab: Guilherme Bergamini



National Murderers: Sandip Saha

Seasonal crop has been lifted
the fields are flooded with stubble
the wavy golden paddy is no more
soothing the eyes of the passerby
in-stead it has become eyesore
to the farmers as next sowing season
that is not far off makes them cruel
to burn them and pollute the air.

Every year the same story repeats
government enacts law to prevent
smoke spreading to the capital city
and all other nearby states
asking peasants not to burn it
they do not listen, go against law
attack public properties to destroy
but shamelessly swallow yearly gift.

Farmers are called feeder of nation
government gifts free fund yearly
this is public money given as a charity
to prevent hardship and suicide
that is a norm among farmers
what nation get - polluted air to breath
causing enormous deaths of people
the nation feeders become murderers.

Sitting Duck: Stefanie Lee

there is only so much life a body can take before it overflows—
even more so when fatigue guzzles you dry, thirsty for more space.

space like a whirlpool, immeasurable as weakened muscles.
on the worst days, tugged underwater by flooding tiredness,

you burst inwardly like a dam. mocked by the pep-talking noonday
sunlight that protests in productive brightness, you confide in dusk:

muted, no timelines—or checklist—or uncrossable bridges.
cradled at your own pace, you are rejuvenated at night. but

everything retreats towards sunrise—even the low-hanging moon,
forgotten as a coin lodged in the throat of your couch, your regret.

how the walls yawn like an egg mid-hatch, squeezing dim
lamplight in a feat of physics not unlike your own waking.

akin to a duckling in your neediness, thin-winged, sorry vessel of
dependence. claim stillborn denials of tomorrow's existence, flee

the shame of not showing up. coward's excuse, they shout,
satin-soft but not without fangs, maw of a beast. watching,

waiting as clocks keep ticking & you mimic a guilty stop-motion.
empathy: draping a blanket over your loved ones only for it to be

shrugged off in their sleep. you do not have that luxury to
remove the chronic shackle, leech devouring your energy.

how gently you learn to grasp hope—as if it were a creature that
could bite you, carry it like rainwater to snuff out every flare-up.

Confidential Mood: Betty Brenda Brown



Vine Leaf: Rohan Buettel

arteries run through bright red flesh
carry nutrients to a sunlit heart
the blemishes of the underside
minor imperfections, this organ glows
in afternoon light, in late autumn
against a sky so blue
it could last forever
but the tear and ragged edges
suggest — after a last
efflorescence of colour
this leaf will drop

The Element Breaks: Rohan Buettel

How would it feel to wake
after thirty years in a comatose state;
encephalitis lethargica relieved
by a dose of L-Dopa.
The dramatic flowering spring
never lasts, three seasons rushed
before the icy winter freeze resumes.
A sickness of sleep, no motion or speech,
no appetite, energy or desire,
passive, indifferent ghosts.
For one brief moment they burn
like incandescent bulbs, engaged
and singing keenly, bright and lively
until the element breaks
and they return to the snowy wastes.

Living with Death: Howie Good

1 Call for the Dead

I picked up the phone on the first ring. It was Dr. L, the surgeon who had removed the golf ball-sized lump from under my left shoulder blade. He said he had gotten the biopsy report. The tumor was malignant; I had cancer. I stared out the window at the trees in the yard as I tried to absorb the shock. What looked like a strange green mist clung to the branches. After a few seconds, I realized it wasn't mist at all, but tiny buds, thousands of them. The truth is always revolutionary. Spring had snuck back.

2 Donut Run

Dr. L stood on the other side of the room, about as far from where I sat on the exam table as he could get, his arms folded protectively across his chest. He was explaining how my form of cancer spreads via the bloodstream, causing murder and mayhem along the way. I listened in numb silence. My head felt like a crumpled ball of paper. I think I might have said "Thank you" when I left. The next thing I remember I was stopped at a drive-through window. A woman, her face shadowed by a visor, peered out. I handed her a ten-dollar bill. She handed me a box of donuts. "Have a nice day, hon," she said.

3 Staying Alive

I'm on WebMD reading about the survival rate of sarcoma patients. My mouth goes dry. My heart races. I forget to breathe. The doctors have given me a choice. I can undergo radiation or not, up to me. The side effects are, from everything I've heard, nasty: fatigue, nausea, skin rashes, even internal scarring. But a recurrence of cancer would be worse. As long as I might come through treatment still capable of making love with my wife and of recognizing the faces of our children and grandchildren, I'll do what's necessary to stay alive. Besides, I'm just starting to get good at writing.

4 Waiting

A half-hearted effort had been made to brighten the waiting room of the Radiation Oncology unit by hanging framed floral prints on the walls. But better art or even actual flowers wouldn't have alleviated the glum atmosphere. As a newcomer, I snuck glances at the other patients from under the bent brim of my Red Sox cap. Some dozed. Some nodded and trembled uncontrollably. Some had a book open on their laps while staring blankly into space, their faces leeched of color. If they weren't old when treatment started, they looked old and shriveled now. Every fifteen minutes or so one would have their name called and disappear through a set of double metal doors with a radiation tech in blue scrubs. Behind the doors was a special X-ray machine called a linear accelerator. I felt like an early Christian martyr about to be burned alive at the stake.

5 Holocaust

A Midwest poet, a guy about half my age, lost an eye to cancer over the winter. Another online acquaintance, the poet laureate of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is suffering from pancreatic cancer. "Chemo week," he texts me. "No sleep last night. Jabbing cramps today. And I'm still dying." An old colleague at the university has had his intestines rerouted because of colon cancer. The brother of one of my sisters-in-law is receiving treatment for liver cancer. As an introvert – or maybe misanthrope – I don't personally know that many people, but cancer is epidemic among those I do know. It just confirms what I've always suspected, that we exist on the sufferance of a hostile universe, and that at any moment and for no justifiable reason we can suddenly be pulled out of line and marched to the showers to be gassed.

6 The Epoch of Artificial Tears

Everything has changed, and nothing has. It still rains when the forecast says it won't. Hummingbirds still come to the oriole feeder. The angel of history still hosts orgies of torture and murder. Doors still open from both sides. The abandoned buildings of defunct chain restaurants are still being converted into Hispanic churches. Simone Weil still starved herself to death in a deliberate effort to pay back God for her existence. Girls still hide themselves behind too much makeup. Cancer treatment still makes me cold all over. I still put drops in each eye first thing in the morning as if there's an afterwards I still have a chance of seeing.

SAD: Alyssa Troy

A day, a day, a dreadful day,
another day passed away.

Another day of sunless skies
that makes me feel insane.

And if today is not the day
when light reveals my shadow,

then let me spend another day
hidden beneath my pillow.

For winter comes in passing,
but it feels as if it stays:

it torments every ounce of blood
my body generates.

Let wind encapsulate my matter,
let snow consume my name,

let icicles form the circumference
of my mediocre brain.

Yes, I know it's just another day,
and tomorrow will be just fine,

but today's a day, another day,
when my thoughts don't feel like mine.

Dissociated: Alyssa Troy

I don’t understand this emptiness I feel,
and when I’m asked to explain myself,
the answers escape me.
In fact,
I don’t think they were ever there.

For some reason, on days like today,
ambitions I already lack, desires I dream of…
they expel themselves
into
realms that are unreachable.

So I dwell on every thought that enters
my mind, even if they have no
business being there,
and I
fade away into the fog

of desperation. I plead with my brain
to show mercy: I don’t know what
I did to deserve this feeling of
unrest.
It simmers in my blood

until I am stupefied by the naïveté
of my own emotions. Numb
to my core, I watch lazily
as life
continues on without me.

Art Therapy: Patient One: Norah Clifford

I watched her paint a star.
Soft yellow
stained brown fingers
wiped against paper towel,
the liquid neon
saved
for wooden points
balanced
between fingertips.
Her diligent brushstrokes,
concentrated gaze,
as bandages wrapping thin
arms scratched the table
soaking in discarded
blues and purples. Papery
skin twisted as bristles
prodded hard-to-reach
corners, and I caught
a glimpse of a smile
beneath her mask.
Beautiful, I said.
You painted the whole star.

Art Therapy: Patient Two: Norah Clifford

Everything depends
on how well
she erases this curve
that was supposed to be
a straight line. Her eraser
is already dust;
I hand her another.

Ash cleansed from blurry paper.
Air punctured by pencil point.

She hesitates, crippled
by the threat of chronic mistakes.
Too much balances in the shallow
breath ripping from her lungs.
Soon we will run out
of rubber.

We use stickers instead.
No drawing; no risk of mistake.

She glues a glittering Elsa
to my skin as our time together
dies away. We shed shine
around the room – a trail
of sparkle follows her
to the familiar hospital bed
as I wipe from the table
the last of the rubber ash.

Art Therapy: Patient Three: Norah Clifford

I hadn't sketched in years,
but she wanted to paint a rose.

Her fingers wouldn't cooperate,
couldn't grip the pencil

quite right. She wanted a crowd
of petals; an opening flower.

Red stains layered over thin black
lines. Timid green leaves crusted

in rhinestones. We didn't have
silver glitter, so pink jewel stones

would have to do. She liked my butterflies.
I told her to keep the pad. Maybe

we could paint those tomorrow.
We aren't supposed to say

See you later. But I said
I'd be back.

Tulips and butterflies next time.
Maybe even glitter.

dental care: Brita Sauer

A close tooth desiring many angles many delicately poised shots and still the drilling could almost be felt but Dr. _____ rubbed my jaw a rapid course of nerve confusion reduced input

gate control

In this body, laid in a bed one morning long ago. In this body, in a bed, in a room that was in shambles--a stockpot thrown against a wall. A picture shattered and left for days. And in this body, felt in that mouth a torn labial frenulum marveling at how it couldn't be seen face-on.

In twenty years

have not been

have not cared

have not had money

have not fared

stretched

beyond

a propensity that has roots

Dr. _____: "Next time we know your mouth cannot"

Left just like that a dangling insinuation imposition imprint

your mouth can naught

But this body knows.

a registering

head

on the floor

hand

on the neck

.

But in this body, was confounded by the lack of pain and in this body, almost cried in the numbness
there was not access

Heat Dome: Brita Sauer

Outside the water fountain turned off, cruelly

but still a puddle at the base
it could be a deeply wasteful moment
but there are bees and a rabbit
there is still life

In this heat,
I find baby birds,
long gone, desiccating
in the sun, feathered skeletons

When thinking of the rabbit,
panting in the shade of a sprinkler,
I feel that vulnerability doubled
In walking in the heat,
I pant too. Is it mine
but also the rabbit's?

But no, I pluck the hurtsack
in my body, tender as tender can be

I can't frame it in a way that makes sense,
that points toward
survival

Rio Grande River, New Year 2022: Brita Sauer

Walking the dried riverbed there were tracks, islands of salt cedar, coyote willow. A middle so wide. In walking, I had a need: I wanted to be purified by the cold, the wind, the sun.

In the sun, the banks with roots exposed shadows in the winter sun dark places sucking last bits of darkness to hide, stay hidden. As it should be. A dried riverbed should not be.

A dried riverbed dammed and drained until cavernous
rib cage
        whitening
salt cedars spreading
A collapse in the everything of the morning.

Things found
                                        in the sand
plastic glass glinting shoe
a couple with a metal detector
hats gloves scarves
cupping the wind
        In the hollow between
stripped and raw: not made whole not made new not made into something

Set to sound
                        a vowel pulled
a riparian existence
                        of sorts

It was raining sideways for a moment in the sun, full
pelting silvery streaks. It was felt
but could only be seen
from a certain angle.

Across the riverbed below the bridge,
a man pacing back and forth.
Moving in and out of the sun. The wind.
His wringing hands

Is it here, bedded in these soft silt folds, where we will go to mourn?

Masked Masks Confronting COVID-19: Donald Patten



What Life?: James B. Nicola

When your child goes
before you it
is difficult and
sad.
When it may be
your fault it is
particularly
bad.

Some
may survive,
and have survived,
I will allow.
But
for the life of me
I can't imagine
how.

Wear a mask
Get the jab
Save some lives
Make God glad

The holy quatrain from above
fell like a host of bricks.
They had been forged of clay called Love,
though, not the daemon's tricks.

Was it an angel's voice I heard
repeating the refrain,
plus this: "Recall the Unanswered
Question, to God, of Cain!" ?

Wear a mask
Get the jab
Save some lives
Make Us glad.

"What, 'Us?' Is that the 'royal' we,"
I asked, but knew I knew,
remembering well Cain's legacy
and followers' like you.

Wear a mask
Get the jab
Save some lives
Make Me glad

A mask is like a crosswalk while
A vaccine is like bread
Device and formula are still
Gifts from God

To take a life denying them
Then lay the blame on Me
Is like forsaking Bethlehem
And the Nativity

I Am That I Am *is my name*
Not I Am Not
And I would you were the same

I trembled at the thought

then bought some masks and got the free
first dose of the vaccine
and prayed I had not already
infected one now gone.

Voss Chronicles: Unplanned Artifacts: Kaylee Laakso

There it sits. It's just a water bottle, by all accounts. Nothing special, nothing unique, nothing magical. It's made of clear glass in a manner and shape that Voss would call "iconic," but at its core, it's just an ordinary glass bottle. Designed to be a single-use, single-day, single-memory vessel. Yet, there it sits.

It's become an understated collector's piece, holding space, demanding a surface for repose. Receiving just the right amount of interaction. Daily would be too much; monthly, far too little—weekly has become our interval.

It's the centerpiece of our Friday morning ritual. Playing a pivotal role among a cast of characters, it's responsible for the ultimate finale. It is set in a macabre ceremony that abruptly commences during a liminal awakening. In this space, my mind fights to sustain an enduring peace, pushing back against the looming reality. Trepidation slowly permeates my body, finding itself on the losing side of a pendulum weighted against my mind's departure from a dreamlike serenity. Finally, a hesitant fluttering open of my eyes concludes the prelude.

The remainder of the performance lasts no more than thirteen minutes and fifty-eight seconds. It's a rigid timeline, but it must be adhered to. "Baba Hanuman," as channeled through Krishna Das, serves as the trusted timekeeper. The music choreographs the action, cueing all roles from the opening move to the cessation of deeds.

Lighting is crucial, an art that has evolved over time. Soft illuminations enhance the awakening, natural light to achieve the right balance of subtlety and utility.

A pseudo-half-hazy walk to my fridge ushers in a physical dimension. Standing in front of the door, a practiced sequence takes over, allowing my mind to exist in a state of calm, detached from the here and now.

Open the door, lift the box, grasp the meds, clutch them tightly in hand, wash hands, remove the packaging, tightly affix the needle, double-check the dose, grab the alcohol wipes, rewash hands, saunter back to the bedroom.

Cleanse a two-inch section of my skin with the wipes, pinch the skin, align the needle, bevel up. Breathe.

Breathe. The rise and fall of the belly becomes important. Pinching and breathing. Pinching and breathing. Deny any doubt. Push away anxiety. Patiently await a split second of courage, knowing it'll come. It must come. I'm on a fixed timeline. It has to come.

Slip in the needle. Try not to shake. Fight the quiver. Inject the med. Empty the syringe. Hold for a moment. Quickly retract.

Breathe. Sigh of relief. Breathe.

Carefully recap. Gather all the materials. Shake off the lingering stress, knowing it's done. The deed is done. It's over for this week.

The unwelcomed dance has almost come to an end as the music begins to fade.

One final turn of the Voss top, another needle in the bottle. Another drop fighting for space in the crowded container. A growing collection. A collection set to continue for a lifetime.

Voss, the unexpected, unplanned keeper of lymphoma artifacts.

What's wrong with your face?: Kaylee Laakso

Like me, my sister feels a swelling of disgust form in her stomach when asked this intrusive question. To a passerby, we may appear to share the same affliction. Yet, hers is of family lineage.

Our grandpa had vitiligo. His big tan hands intensely contrasted their speckles. His hands were memorable, not because there was anything "wrong" with them. But because they were his strong, capable hands.

I never asked if anything was wrong. I never felt a need to. I never thought there might be.

Yet, others asked my sister--friends, acquaintances, and strangers, all the same. Forcing her into an unwelcome defense of acting cool while fighting tears. She compensated by covering up. Smearing makeup over her errors. Creating a blemish-free face for the world. All in hopes of avoiding the haunting question.

What's wrong with your face?

Oh, they still haven't figured out what's wrong with you?

Why do your arms look like that?

Are you a leper?

Cornered by similar scrutiny, I, too, adopted a façade and fought revulsion and anger. Uniquely, my speckles vary by the day—sometimes covering large swaths of skin, erupting into bumps, patches, and plaques, oozing and crusting, itching and burning, and sloughing away. I've kept an eye out for unusual episodes. Still, years later, I'm trying to determine what's unusual versus usual. Every day is unusual. Yet, it's also usual. My usual.

Also, like my sister, I used to cover up. Baseball caps diverted stares and discouraged strangers' outbursts. I felt invincible under a brim. At least, I wanted to. In reality, I was hiding and feared that somebody would call me on it. Force me to confront the self-consciousness I shamefully harbored. Long sleeves enveloped my spotted, lumpy arms, preventing gawks and shrieks while upholding my guise of "normalcy." I only wore tank tops while alone, with no risk of onlookers. Should someone unexpectedly appear, I'd readily don a sweater. Pretend it was a cloak, disguising my exterior errors while refracting the sun I needed.

I didn't know how much I needed the sun until I faced a prolonged "unusual" episode. My legs, arms, face, back, and chest were covered in dots. My body itched and burned, stung, and oozed. Shielded in creams that never helped. I didn't worry about covering up in long sleeves and brimmed hats. I simply avoided all humans.

Finally, after desperately trying to reach my doctor, I scheduled an in-person check-up for weeks later. By then, I would return to my "usual" self and have nothing distinctive to show. After all, that's how it went for years.

Predictably, when I went in, we discussed the wide dispersal of affected skin and talked through ways to be seen faster next time. I had already used topical and oral meds, so biopsies likely wouldn't serve much of a purpose.

Yet, the doctor lingered. We had already voiced that we would biopsy next time. It could be a week, maybe a year. There'd be little to no value this time around. Yet. There was a chance we might get new data. The doctor half-asked, I half-volunteered. I had already had a dozen biopsies over the years; what was one more?

Weeks later, I reviewed the results. They offered new insights. They weren't the same, inconclusive readings of the past. I now had an answer to the question. The same question my sister dreaded. The one we had both been asked so many times before.

My sister knew her answer from the start. She rarely chose to share it. There was no reason to ask or to answer.

I got my answer nearly four years ago. Since I've had a response, I've rarely been asked. Not that I would share, even if I was. Yet, it's almost funny; it's nearly as though I'm unintentionally probing to be asked. I rarely duck under brims, often avoid makeup, and eagerly present my bare arms to the sun's healing rays.

Maybe this is freedom.

Though each time I go for a check-in, use a cream, inject a medication, undergo a treatment, take a pill, or drive toward the clinic's memorable, white and blue contrasted sign reading *ancer center, I yearn for disassociation and wish I was still seeking an answer, a non-*ancer, to the question.

What's wrong with your face?

Drama of Heaven: L. Lois

I sat by the hyacinth bed
long enough
to know
heaven's healing
billows in sparks of sunlight
wafting pulses
on the light breeze

Healing in the Early Garden Flowers: L. Lois

today's the spring morning
the world turned green
bare branches of last weekend
speckled with leaves
the magnolia blooms clapping

April's daffodils and pansies
purple hyacinths so heavy
the stalks fall over
each molded-plastic petal
teasing that bit of blue at its base

thirty minutes' sitting
on a curb beside the path
where the gardeners pull their tractor
the sun breaks through
nature's perfume carrying earlier springs

The Hero at Home: D. Aliesh

Very few see the hero at home.
When they're going through depression
Anxiety, over all that's going wrong.
They only see the bravery the hero presents to the arena.
They don't know them outside of social media.
The hero cries.
The hero has insomnia.
The hero medicates.
When no one's around though.
Except, heroes don't live alone.
They have roommates,
Partners, parents and children.
Siblings, friends and other family to deal with.
These are the ones,
Hopefully the hero can be whole beyond the myth.

But when they can't,
who is this superhuman?

Well, they're not human at all.
A creation forged in legends.
A figment bound to fall.
And no one will see it coming,
Because they never cared to know.
The hero had been breaking for a while,
If only they'd looked beneath the cloak.

Superhero: D. Aliesh

I'm still waiting for my super powers to kick in
After radiation following chemo
I should be Spiderman, Wolverine and
Magneto
During radiation I became stronger;
I found myself in new ways
This skin could be broken down and burned
off,
But my claws dug into life
As I was continually regenerated.
Even though my power was thought to be
stolen
The cancer was only stage 2B
I'm a class 5...
I'll always be super as long as I'm alive.
That's what they say right?
Superheroes don't die.

Weak Promises: Grant Wrich

Downtown drowns in a deep fog every evening. Lights from the city scatter and reflect through the humid air. I keep your apartment number scribbled down in a journal, somewhere; though, it has been years since I referenced it. The walk from campus to your apartment has become ingrained in each of my steps. If you gave me a compass and asked me to follow the compass to the north edge of the city, by habit, I'd end up at your apartment first. I'd enter through the lobby, take the elevator to the third floor, and turn right, towards your studio at the end of the hall.

As I pass by your building, Aurelio, my gut tightens, and my chest suddenly gains an unexpected, suffocating weight knowing you are not there. The window to your studio on the corner has darkened, and the curtains have been left drawn open. I try to imagine your window, a month from now, with the lights on through the evening while you hover over the stove cooking us some stir-fried meal for dinner. We'd sing along to the latest pop songs your Spotify would suggest, and you'd step away from the stove for a moment to show off the dancing skills you'd picked up in your years of clubbing.

"Why don't you ever wanna dance with me–", you'd laugh, wondering why I always stood so stiff while you let loose in the kitchen.

"I can't dance", I'd smile, a little bit embarrassed. I never made it to nightclubs or raves, or house parties, for that matter. I envied your ability to just move your body with rhythm, never caring about how you may have looked to others.

We used to walk this way together, down towards the Willamette River. We'd find a bench on the sidewalk, and sit together, facing the black water. Each one of the city lights, to us, represented an unseen, uncaptured dream. Your studio became a memory in the conversations we shared about our future together. You promised we'd get married in a couple of years once I finished my degree. I promised we'd purchase a nice house outside of the city, we'd have a couple kids, and I'd keep a scrapbook of the years we spent designing our life together. I used to love this walk with you, to our spot by the river. I would have never come here without you if I could have helped it.

The orange leaves of the trees along the river vibrate in the autumn wind, just like they did the last time we sat on this bench together. *"We need to talk–"* you paused, as if your breath had been cut off, paralyzed in fear of what you would say next. I knew, though. I knew about your illness. I'd seen your Google search history, your searches on chemotherapy and how likely it'd be that your terminal cancer would somehow become not terminal. You had three more months of life, weakly promised. I knew that.

Over the next several months, our time together came about in a sterile, white room buried in a hospital labyrinth. I still believed we would walk out of the hospital together. We would take the elevator down to the first floor, your sneakers squeaking across the tile. We'd watch the fog settle down over the city together, and lay in your bed by the window, listening to the traffic howl with the wind while we drifted to sleep. You didn't seem that sick at first. I believed that at least, the illness would take you slowly; God would grant us more than just those three months together. I didn't want to believe in your cancer, even as your body thinned, leaving your skin barely stuck to the bones and muscles beneath. I didn't want to believe you would die soon, even as your limbs began to fade into a shade like a bruised purple. There was still hope in me, ceaseless as the black water we sat by in the Willamette River.

Since you've passed, Aurelio, I continue to find myself here. I imagine my limbs loose, floating down the river, as if it's the river Styx promising to reunite us. It's a weak promise, but I still want to cling to it, like it's your promise made to me in the time we shared together. I know though, you cannot make that promise– neither of us know where the river leads.

Remedios: Anna Sones

Carmela sat with her feet in the creek. Her skirts were clenched in her hands, the knuckles white, but her face was calm as the water. She had never seen a fish in that water, just like she had seldom seen birds landing in the red-rimmed leaves of the gnarled apple trees behind her. They were stunted old trees, with a few perfect apples coated in a white crust of lead arsenate. It was the end of the day, and the orchard workers were raising their voices in relief.

Elvira came up carrying Carmela's daughter Remedios. Elvira set Remedios down on her tiny bare feet, pausing a moment with her hands on the girl's hips to steady her.

"She was asking for you." Elvira gathered up her skirts and crouched beside Carmela, not wanting to sit in the mud. It had rained last night, but Carmela did not care about the mud. All the workers had known it would rain, but the boss told them to spray anyway, as they did every week. The rain had washed much of the spray into the creek, so they would have to spray again, probably tomorrow. The codling moth caterpillars were thriving that month, so the boss would take no chances.

Remedios stumbled, and Carmela pulled her into her lap. "Has she asked for Bartolomé too?" Elvira shifted on her heels.

"Yes."

It was a good thing and a bad thing that Remedios did not grapple with language. Bad because Carmela did not know how to make Remedios understand about her father. Good because maybe the girl's secretive little mind did not grapple with grief, either.

"Everything is ready," Elivra said. "You don't need to worry about a thing."

"He's ready?"

"Yes. He looks good. They did a good job."

Carmela did not believe that. There was no way to hide the lesions that, like the peeling bark of a sick apple tree, had opened on Bartolomé's body. Or to conceal the lumps that grew like galls along his collarbone. And what did it matter what he looked like now, when everyone in the orchard remembered him vomiting up blood the texture of coffee grounds, the wheezing sound his chest began to make, the yellow color of his skin and eyes at the end, like an apple cut in half and left out to brown.

But Carmela said, "Good. Then I can pack." Remedios screeched with a sudden distress and fought meekly in Carmela's lap.

"Don't worry about that today. It's starting soon."

"But I have to leave tomorrow."

"Then pack tomorrow. He didn't say you have to leave early."

"But you know how he is."

Bartolomé had been born in this country, the son of a strikebreaker recruited from Mexico to Milwaukee in 1924. Bartolomé had worked for the boss since age fifteen, more than twenty years. That was more time than almost anyone in the orchard. More time to be exposed. And instead of mentioning any of that, the boss had approached Carmela and said that since her husband would no longer be working for him, she was no longer welcome in the workers' camp, or Remedios either.

"Where will you go?"

"Bartolomé had a cousin in Chicago. I'll go to her."

"Chicago? You've never lived in a city. And with a child like Remedios…"

It was true that Carmela, under the Bracero Program, had moved with her family straight from her little village in Chihuahua to Racine County, where her daughter had been born. Remedios was three years old, but looked and acted half that. She had been born small and never caught up. Her hands and feet were like buds that never opened. She was often upset but had not learned to say why, or to say anything, in fact.

"It could be good for her. Maybe I can get her help there."

"They say the air is bad."

Behind them, children shrieked as they ducked through the apple trees, grasping the trunks and brushing their faces against the leaves. Then they moved with their parents towards the meadow where the funeral would take place.

"Don't worry. It will only be until Remedios gets better."

"You should prepare," Elvira said, looking at Carmela's mud-stained skirts. Carmela nodded. Pulling Remedios close to her, she stepped out of the water. The silt at the bottom stirred under her feet like a watersnake, billowing up and then drifting downstream. Carmela stepped into the orchard and went to bury her husband.

Her: Kayleigh Marinelli

"Why do you hate me?" she asked, staring back at me through the flowing tears of her stained glass eyes. Of course I knew she didn't speak. Not really. She was only inside my head.

I stared back at my reflection, taking in the dark circles that spread out from underneath my eyes. The disheveled nature of my hair. My cracked lips and wind burnt cheeks. The woman in the mirror hardly represented the woman I knew. She was not me and I was not her.

That was why I hated her.

I crawled back towards my bedroom, climbing into bed and burying myself under the covers–hiding myself from the mirror that beckoned me back to gaze. I laid there and stared at the frayed fabric of my blanket. When did it get so disgusting? Why were there so many stains on it?

I couldn't remember.

My stomach growled but I ignored it.

Why don't you feed yourself? I heard her say from the bathroom. I rolled over on my side and ignored her. She didn't even know what she was talking about. I closed my eyes and forced myself to sleep. It didn't come.

"I hate you," I told her in the morning. She said nothing. She did nothing. She stared. In the shower I scrubbed my skin raw to get the feeling of her eyes off of my body. She made me feel watched. She made my skin insectile.

I scrambled back into bed to avoid her.

Her silence was always worse than her questions.

I woke to the sound of cracking. Darkness ate up every corner of my room. I had lost track of time. The sound was coming from the bathroom. It had been a long time since she was this angry.

I ran into the bathroom to confront her. She needed to know that she didn't control me. *I* controlled *her*.

"What do you want from me?" I screamed, banging my fists against the mirror, hoping that she could feel the pain across her glass skin.

"I want you to love me," she said, blinking.

I left the bathroom and got back into bed. She asked too much of me these days. She knew I couldn't do it. I don't know why she even tried.

The doorbell rang. I strode through the dark hallways and peeked out the front door. The mailman stared back, holding a huge pile of mail out to me.

“Ma’am, there has been a pile of mail out here for weeks. I need you to take this inside,” he said, forcing the papers into my hands. I took them inside and shut the door in his face, cutting off the words from the tip of his tongue.

I threw the papers onto the couch with the last unopened pile. I would go through them later, I thought, before going back to bed.

“Why do you hate me?” she asked again. I wanted to scream. I wanted to fight. To argue. To give up. To leave. I cocked my fist back and slammed it into the mirror, shattering her face.

She looked like a different person entirely. No longer my doppelganger.

She frowned.

Blood poured out from between my fingers. I let it.

“I’m sorry,” I said, putting my head against her fractures. I felt her wrap her warm arms around me as I sobbed.

I hated her. I really did.

I hated her because I was her. Fully and completely.

I wiped the blood onto my dirty t-shirt.

“Why do you hate us?” she asked, and I too, shattered.

Misery Balloon: Erik Peters

The school counsellor said people need to cry more. Apparently, tears contain cortisol and if you don’t get cortisol out, you’ll swell up into a misery balloon.

I’m no good at crying.

So I read sad stories and articles. It worked for a while.

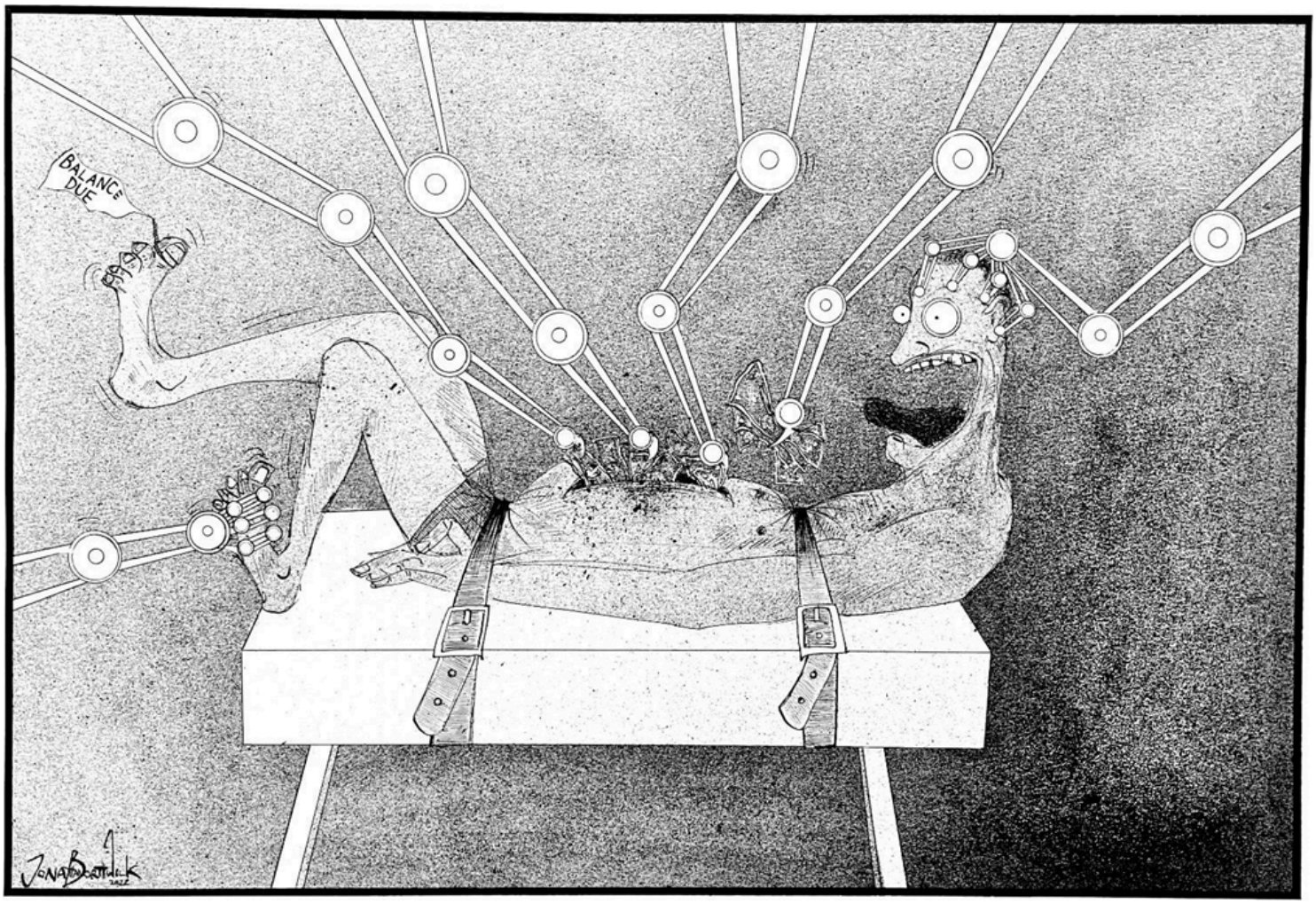
So I watched tragedies and listened to emo-songs. It worked for a while.

So I closed the curtains and stopped taking vitamin D. It worked for a while.

So I cut off my family and gave up on God.

Now I cry all the time, so I don’t have to worry about becoming a misery balloon.

Medical Billing: Jonathan Borthwick



That Rachmaninov Thing: Marilyn E. Johnston

Retracing the passage just been through
like the fast sound track
slipping away drama of mother dying
and doomed efforts to hold her back.

Those focused movements of a sonata
which flooded me with meaning
I was missing in the back yard
and the window-lit rooms, moment by moment.

Again I was resting a light hand on the leathern skin
of her left elbow in the last hospital bed–
now I could feel the long summoning legato
of regret the cello plays futilely

Long after the fact, longing off that score.
I sit perfectly still still here
here, the cellist rocks back and forth
with the shifts of energy of its spoken phrases

I hear again in the slow ritardando
her last breaths that swelled and faded
more and more and slowly from her belly and chest
to the white throat. How in frenzied recapitulation
I'm back in her frantic measures:

to control the decomposition battle
the daily tasks of piss and feeding of control her control
next steps next hopes
desires and parties bewailing her forces weakening

and back again bedside, speaking
to her still watching her, waiting with her consciousness fading
unsure to the end what she sincerely thought of me.
So achingly unresolved tears fill my eyes
slide down both cheeks
in the dark theatre.

I knew the thing had returned
to dissolution at the finale
and yet I forgot about endings
when tears in the thing

veered again into its
cry of the heart what
I will never seek or daughter-be
again and the theme interrupted itself

thinning out to be a sounded surround
around a fathomless hole of silence
like a grave...

pulled up then lingered there
and only once that was faced
came the sixteenth notes of pain
stabbing into the inevitable soundlessness.

The Practice Years/ iv: Marilyn E. Johnston

Once, when I was twenty–
not yet fully graduated–
I lay on a mattress on the floor
of an off campus apartment
reading the story Heartache
by Anton Chekhov, the story of Iona
a grief-stricken horse-cab driver
who had lost his son to sickness.
Everywhere he drove the whole night
he'd attempt to tell the story of his grief
but the fares were self-absorbed or indifferent
even cruel to his sorrow. Harsh, obtuse
preoccupied, drunk, people
blocked him out. No one would listen
or give a word of sympathy to him
until snow covered his shoulders
and he drove his cab to the stable.
There, Iona leaned into the horse…
When I came to the last lines: "the little mare munched
and listened and breathed on his hands"
I recognized through tears
the two sides of this implacable world
and knew on which side I would stand.

The Practice Years/ vi: Marilyn E. Johnston

Once, in my early seventies,
I slumped on my Mother's couch–
Yes! in the same place where I sulked
at age 6 after her overwhelming scold.
She was beside me now in her recliner.
We were tussling over her broken remote.
I picked it up from her end table
and bent to fool with the buttons
to try to fix it, make things better, for her.
"Give it here!" she snapped scowling.
Her eyes said: "You'll break it worse. You're
unable. In-valid. It's better in my hands."
Near visit's end, I was unable to rouse
from rare recourse: deafening silence.
"Oh, don't be mad at me" my mother
wrenched her plea (because my husband
was audience?) "I'm your Mother!"
Words came lulling rationality:
"...I've never been 70 before
and you've never been 90..."
in the opening of logic and change.
I pushed too far, too far, too distantly far–
"Maybe,-- you might choose saying
things in a different way to me..."
"Oh. I see!" she replied, "Now children
can tell the Mother what to do…"
Your life passed away, ending our struggle.

So I write to you in heaven
to tell you what to do.

Spin: Emma Wells

I spin in fractious movements
trying to dispel colours
to each angle of a room.
Yet, rooms are plentiful
spanning corridors,
twisting corners,
burrowing low
and reaching skyward high.

In the right light,
you'll catch my meaning
sitting back to eye
curious turns of a spinning coin;
iridescent, metallic sides
can (when lucky) entrap senses,
mimicking exotic butterflies:
whose sublime markings
are only seen by keen watchers -
the most finely attuned audiences
as they marvel upon symmetry,
syntax choices, subject matter,
voice, style and tone,
drinking in vivacious,
paint palette eyespots,
activated by each wingspan flutter
whilst new fingers turn pages
of freshly inked manuscripts.

Many peep through,
hypnotised, stunned
like a wasp's sting,
lingering on thresholds,
perhaps too long,
fooling a false confidence.

Most stride past,
too busy to even glance.

Each line,
I try to invigorate
pumping with too much;
lyricism drowns
coating simplicity
in liquid gold,
too sticky, too gelatinous,
are such efforts,
but a fear exists
in stripping back:
allowing only brown spines
to be judged,
enclosing beautiful wings
within beige centres,
hiding metaphorical scars,
nuances that slash
effort-filled hues –
strangling light.

Still, I spin,
hearing others in nearby rooms,
fractious pens scratching,
late at night,
like my own.

Often, I hear torrents
of river-flow typing,
manuscripts lengthening,
growing from sapling, short stories…

In other rooms, spin, spin, spin.
I am far from the only one.

Writers, plethoras of writers,
spin as academic wagers:
all thinking of novice ideas;
a new hook-line
or novice premise -
editing, cutting back,
embellishing or simplifying,
now and again,
rather confusingly,
a muddying cocktail
of too many techniques.

Part of a swarm,
my eye colourings smudge out
harder to decipher in hordes;
each eyespot of my wings
still flutters in spasmodic hope,
a held breath underwater.

Sadly, colours close,
sleeping in ubiquitousness,
until my soul is fuelled again,
ready to spin, spin spin,
not faster, but cleverer,
showcasing now to a selective few,
my eyespot markings
of newly fleshed writing.

Blood Sugar Level: 126 mg/dL: Ashley Zingillioglu

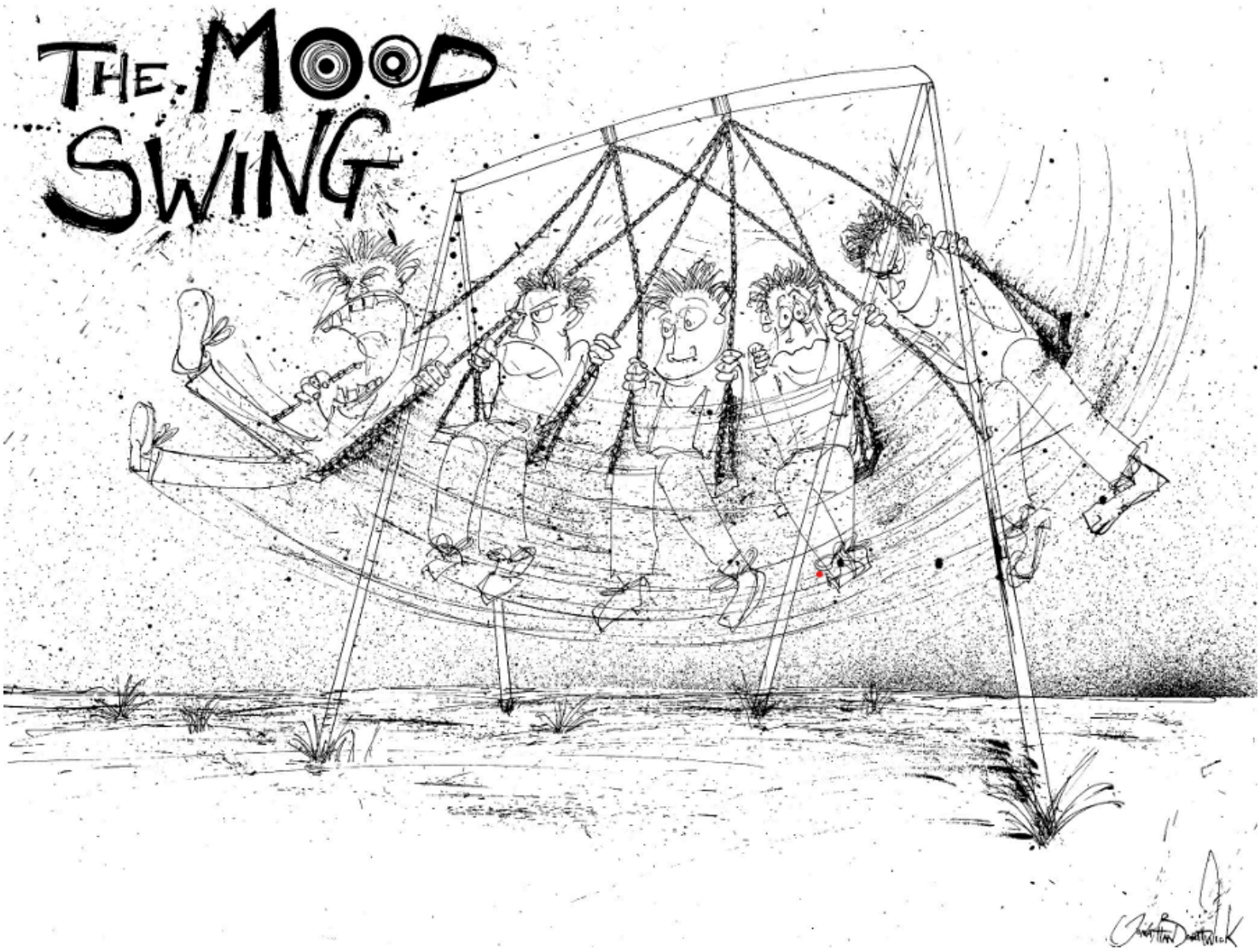
I prick my finger at its sharpest point
(A sign of an unyielding passion to self-harm)

Instantly I am transported
Into a compiled medium of edible horrors

Grinded ground beef
Lukewarm potato strips
And diced carrot slices

Dipped in a cup
Of Campbell’s low-calorie canned soup

Yesterday’s lunch
I hardly ate



Moodswing: Jonathan Borthwick

Phoenix Glass: Wisdom of the Rose

I am out on a long dusty road
That winds, twists
Forks and turns
I am wondering which path to take

I consult an oracle
She tells me that the path
Will unfold once my heart
Is ablaze
To follow the Phoenix song
To let everything else fade away
I think back to when I made mud and grass pies
Served tea to a ring of faeries

I consult a vagabond and he tells me
That it is the brisk winds that will carry me
Up and over the mountains , through a great thorny thicket
That the scratches on my knees will bleed
But that I will bleed into the earth
An offering
And in exchange I will be led into…
Tomorrow

I ask a farmer
Which way do I go
And she tells me
That the seeds must be sewn this spring
The fields hoed, mulched
When your sweat drips into the soil
When you can feel each calloused blister raised like a kernel of corn
On your hand
Then that is the way
I contemplate this as I push a tired, rusted wheelbarrow
Past the old barn filled with cobwebs

I look at all of my teachers standing before me , divining , wayfaring
Cultivating
I turn around and walk away
I stop by a rose bush
I inhale her fragrance, close my eyes
I ask her which path to take
I hear her sigh
    How about, you keep walking the path of softness
    Moving like a breeze on a spring afternoon
    Keep
    Watching the birds at dusk circle the crimson sky
Keep searching tenderly
For the light of the universe behind darkened eyes

I sit down by the rose bush and lay my hands on the cool grass
I think that
I'd rather commune with the slugs crawling across wet leaves
Than be consumed by the fire of Eros
I'd rather be lost in a field of wildflowers
Than shipwrecked by a storm at sea
I'd rather hold my heart in my hands
And offer it up to the heavens
Than bale hay with a pitchfork
Of denial

Phoenix Glass: No More Mind to Lose

There is
No more mind to lose
So much of my life spent walking through the desert
Of revelation
For me its novelty but
Lizards have already found the oasis

All I want to do is throw away my phone
Go down to the river
Learn from the stones how to pray
Time leaves its fingerprints
The fogs coming to take me from the place
I keep truth hidden

Like flowers only I could see
Freedom isn't ours to earn
It's a birthright

Don't tell me I'm going to be
Ok
The sun always sets and so will I
Again and again
Running in my dreams
Heart-song heart-song
Beating louder now like the train riding
Wheels flying into nowhere
Surrender to this path unfolding
Keep folding into darkness

Moving like the clouds
Spinning fast in this playhouse
Even younger than youth was
Keep playing the game
The only prize is tomorrow
And even in that there is not certainty

Mud Mind: Uzomah Ugwu

There was nothing to be missed.
Compared to, described or identify it with
It was clear what was there. Left

It clashes of sound, the voices
Ran up the walls of the mind
Overlooking sunsets

Felt disclosure of who knew best of
An insanity that infested thoughts
and left written trails

that derails the brain
the voices pound and pound
till it is not enough

a couple pills can't sort it out
clears it up but still a mess
still shows disorder

and the need to clear up
can't explain the voices
that pour down like rain in the mud

halls wide awake with disturbing alerts: Uzomah Ugwu

Been down these anxiety filled halls
Reaping dreadful predictions of civil wars
within loss bodily convictions
Of what isn't there or even clear
A few forgotten truths by a mad hatter

Leaves the youth without a care in the cold
They hid in drones hurried to
the nurse's door with no exit in sight
Lights went off like sirens showing no success of a
of escaping

The mirror broken and distorted
reflecting the terror of the combination
Of big pharm and big banking profiting off
My mind tanking with each pill
where terror filled my
Stomach made to ache

I stayed awake with a blanket covered
In sweat, just one side effect where I
would stare with a blank and hollow glare
With drops of tears hitting my face
dripping down to my open chest

Where mildew grew around the best parts of me,
Back to conclusions not just another delusions
Without any evidence that can
 be proven I don't belong here
As long as I believe the
medicated induced nightmares

I will stay restless in the mind
Mining for objects to justify thoughts
That will not leave me anything but defenseless
In my many attempts to just be far from here
And the fear that fills my eyelids which
Leave me blind unable to see any peace of mind

to be set on fire and the ashes
of my life are left to be blown
Away in the tired winds of the night and day
Wishing it would be the last time I looked out
These windows with no blinds that were
able to still shut out the light

A hoary pitfall: Douglas Colston

They chose
to immerse themselves
in material that 'resonated',
even carrying
their latest favorite tome
for a moment
just like this.

With glamor and charm,
they introduced the book
as providing a significant view
and slid it across the table.

The recipient turned
to a random page
and read for a time
before sliding the book back
and saying,
"This guy doesn't know
what he's talking about
and what's worse
is that he's promoting his baseless opinions
as fact
to dupe the ignorant".

Stunned silence followed
the realization
that deep dives
could be shallow.

Serious indeed: Arno Bohlmeijer

A year or so *before* Covid,
I told and showed him, age three,
how to sneeze and cough in one’s elbow.

Patiently he watched me and nodded,
went off to play his “top game”
on the far end of the place.

After a while of peace
on all sides, he came to me
in focused haste the whole way,
neatly on time to cough and sneeze
hard and dutifully in my large enough arm.

Decision: Arno Bohlmeijer

She's a world-star pianist, nearly thirty,
famous for her clear head, calm intensity,
deep emotion and total control, so natural.
Her bold presence is colorful, unsentimental,
as feminine as powerful, nothing conventional.

There's not much time for regular pleasures,
except… And no place for babies, "evidently".
She's been taking the pill for twelve years, more
and more reluctantly. Her husband is adorable,
but she can't ask him to have the procedure.
For some reason it would need to be her.

She takes good care of herself.
The chemical routine divides her,
while the unity of mind and feeling
defines the rare beauty of her music.
If she were absolutely sure that
it would be bad for her to have a child,
minor surgery should bring peace to her life.

Doubt keeps undermining. Most of the time
it's put into perspective, but it perseveres –
until it seems to be clear what this means.
No children and no more hormone pills.
And still she will postpone, defer, delay.
Till it disturbs her performance on stage.
Music is her life as she chooses it to be.
It's in her veins and bones, making her
"complete"? As the best or only way?

"The future is too insecure for children,
it could be cruel to put them here. I will
get used to it; no void, and enough joy."

Finally her mind is made up, taking time
to plan, schedule, organize – with support
from select friends, her manager and doctor,
who affirm, "The physical aspects are small."

It all happens in a mental vacuum that would not
want to affect her. But the moment she's back home,
it says: you can't cancel or return, something is too late.
And the music has a break, as long as it takes to soothe her.

Caffeine Pills Before Bed: Martheaus Perkins

We’ll have to whisper because it’s well past the muse’s bedtime.
Caffeine pills cheat sleep. My heels feel a summer-burned Rastafarian thumping.
There’s a snot-nosed brat flipping poems off and off like a light switch.
The bed the bed is a petri dish of dried puke,
I’d rather clop on the keys than sleep than sleep.
There’s nectar to be sapped.
I drain wind from my pipes my pipes, tear chunks out of my briefcase like apple bites
bites bites. I’ll snap open like sugar cane on the page.
Gingerroot breath for only my nose my nose
The rain tickling the window does not make me thirsty,
soft steel tickles the throat the throat. Marbles roll my esophagus, stomach butterflies
digesting my love
My love illuminates my brown knuckles.
I don’t want to sleep to sleep because I’m afraid of another day,
surfing through the glint the glint of opioid eyes. The world pauses at night at night.
Red ribbon dancers parade, bloodshot in my eyes my eyes my eyes.
I tell my body this is the safest suicide. Suicide.
I wrap the belt noose of my robe around an invisible waist
invisible waste
A dose of silence to eat to eat time.
Sunlight will scatter my mind my mind—dust between the keys the keys,
dead-used clay, settling in the corners the corners, delicate as hair, out of reach of reach,
relocating, melting melting—secret patterns in the air the air.
I take the pills to hear my heart my heart my heart
tear tear tear tear
drip within
a ribcage a ripped cage.
To not be. Not be
there tomorrow
tomorrow
tomorrow;

Defense Mechanisms: Martheaus Perkins

That tree over there looks like a suspended explosion of cherries and pomegranates.
Roofless places are kingdoms for kids. But I'm ashamed of being a child.
I was rewarded for maturity. I want to age like these
melting tapioca bricks pinked and peeled by pollution.
leafless trees are indecisive: *which direction to die in?*
If I'm silent, I hear fear chip at my spinal cord.
I want to laugh. I want that man picking up his dog's shit nuggets
to sense a yarmulke of pigeon poo plop on his skull. *How ironic*, I'll say.
I want that squirrel to scold me for using a religious symbol so callously.
I want this poem to drift into a world of dog and pigeon shit—
of off-colored jabs at faith. Any distraction from its beginning
of shame and underbaked allusions to wanting death.
Insects scratch their backs against blades of ryegrass—
playful brush, I remember praying between a woman's legs.
Her heels hover-holding my shoulder blades—the same
delicate wanting.
Now, I'm disgusted with myself. Why did I go and pervert a perfectly sweet image
of sweat bees and hoverflies rustling in the brush? Why is Riley on my mind?
She did love nature.
pond leaves float flat like sliced fruits,
a ruffle-damp dress dissolving at its seams.
I could play this kind of hide-and-seek for hours:
tuck truth behind blush-raw delusions.
dress zippers catch on skin
holds you in place like tree root.
Today, I still hate myself.
What do you think about that, young family plucking yellow irises from the koi?
Anything from you, patch of brown death on grass field?
Nothing? Fine, I'll leave my bench with one more dodge. Maybe
I build imaginary castle walls around joy
to sit outside and stare through its cracks—
pushing my eyeballs in like quarters

slotted through a gumball machine.

Pros and Cons for Keeping the Baby: Martheaus Perkins

Cons	Pros
● I'll be a grandmom by 40–maybe 50 if I raise him right. ● Drill team. Damn, they need me too cause Hannah has trigger toe. She's 20 and thinks she can still ballet on the side. That girl should know that's only for toothpicks and 5-year-olds. ● If I drop a pen, I'll look like Humpty Dumpty picking it up. But no king's men are coming to pick my black ass pieces off the concrete. ● I don't see myself as a big girl. ● I'll have to tell Mom, maybe she'll be able to take care of him while I finish college. ● I can tell this is going to be one heavy ass baby, and I have bad knees. ● I'd have to be his mother and father. I don't think Tre is serious enough about stepping up as a stepdad. He plays too much anyway. ● Jessica said she'd let me have the dorm, but I'll miss crying in her lap and MTV Thursdays. ● He could grow up to be a little shit. If he's anything like me, I'll pull my hair out. ● This wasn't the plan. I can take a break after my Associates and come back to finish my accounting certificate—shit. Loans. Loans. Loans. ● I'm still a child myself.	● I love him already.

This Body: J Carraher

What are the pieces of your body
that you most treasure?

Is it your eyes the sea green
tide of them, the salty veil falling
warm down bucca, mala
rooting brain to body that bony process
which may hold the soul of you?
Or is it your retina where you etch
with rays of sunlight a word
to make you whole?
Is it your heart the thump
of it the lying down of tracks
from love and loss or the to
and fro movement of blood
within elastic tubes pushed
from and pulled toward outer reaches,
the fingers which grip
this dulled pencil brushing paper
making words from forgetting?
Is it your blood
moving oxygen to lungs
from tissue
release without burden of knowing
what comes with time or lineage?
The cerebrum, cerebellum Gerschwind's
territory which hold that fleeting sensation
of tasting, touching the world around
you until it's one day
gone the apparition of your father
standing in doorways regional atrophy
the same that took your brother
which makes ghosts of the living too?

Perhaps it's that distal portion
that has brushed between lovers' legs
once twice or a hundred times

the first with sparks
and last like wool mittens dulled by
requiescence, comfort and time.
Maybe it's a memory of the feathery
stroke of skin the cutaneous wrapping
that holds you tight
but pointed too harshly or shamed too readily
the piece of your body

you most treasure:
the neck bridge from head to heart
where every critical structure passes
and in the unbroken long-drop snaps, spine
severed triggering the vagus which stops
the heart a piece of your body
you treasure.

The off kilter vestibular loops
the aqueous labyrinth that can knock your
feet and send you reeling
to where you may catch in your final
moment the whoosh expelled from
miniscule alveoli these two lungs
your very own another part of your body
you most treasure
where gray matter swirls purple
inhalation of light through pink lips
the most treasured
from where you whisper
your last:
this body this body this body.

Wednesday: J Carraher

and another one will dis-
appear from sight soon, inside
a pauper's shack with low white
ceilings where her body is
dimming because of the mass
on her liver, her kidney, her
right ovary and outside of her
left breast, a tumor blooming -
a budding gloriosa
dahlia bleeding onto
the bleached sheets
we bought for her
last wednesday

Under Her: J Carraher

under when she would nurse her,
now both a shield and a stark
white canvas pulled taut across
the frame of her as she bakes pie
to look at but not to eat.

Gravidity: J Carraher

she told me how it sat firm in her pelvis but wrong side up,
bottom down, while she slipped her body through
an idea contorted
in akinesia

held static before my brimming eyes
a widening disquiet toward
this misbegotten kinship.

another woman squeezed into shackles, braided
through ideas, directive hands,
misread histories. another body

asking to be unmoored, but compelled
into the shape of an O
an upside down U
all of the vowels of sorrow.

Diagnosis: Rory Reinim

What a curse,
To show a child their future.
One of pain, and suffering,
That nothing can fix.

“It’s not terminal,” they say
As if that makes it any better.
Alive, but in agony,
How is that the best solution?

No, no, I think I’d rather die,
Than deal with this horrible fate,
If I can’t do the things I love,
Why do I still fight?

It’s human nature,
I think,
To persevere,
Even when there’s no bright side

There's no feeling like lying in an office bed
Watching doctors and nurses talk in hushed voices
Occasionally glancing in your direction
When they look you in the eyes and say
"Oh Honey"

There's no feeling like being the youngest person in the waiting room,
Feeling your elders' judgemental eye,
You're taking *their* resources.

There's no feeling like giving up on your dreams.
Your mind could've gotten you there,
Your body couldn't,
Not if you wanted to keep it.

There's no feeling like watching other people throw away opportunities that you would kill for.
I could do it,
If I just tried.
If I wasn't so weak.
If I was normal.

I wish I was normal.

Not Her Job: Adlen Badra

Glaring at the reflection on the mirror,
Dissecting every feature of herself,
Finding a flaw in it all.

“It is not your job to be pretty,”
Her mother pointed out,
Leaning against the doorframe.

Confused written on the face of the daughter,
Wondered why her mother said those words
Instead of the usual compliments.
Compliments given from her efforts
Of changing herself to fit in.

Hopefully one day,
She will understand her mothers words.
She does not need to change
Or stare at herself in disgust
Or worry about what others thought.

Only because it is not her job to be pretty.

Change: Adlen Badra

The bitter color of black always caught her attention
The darkness of the color reflects her soul.
She stares up at the dark sky,
filled with luminous dotted lights sprinkled onto a dark sheet.
She looked down at her garden of black irises
The way each petal folds, the non symmetrical flower.
It reminded her of human beauty,
beautiful and imperfect filled with dark secrets and happy desires.

She desired uniqueness, like those black irises
Different as in independent and accomplished
But they were simply irises, and she was a girl.
Same thing
Changing herself wouldn’t do anything,
She wanted to be herself.

Why was it so difficult to change?
She laid down, withering within the garden of irises
Those recurring thoughts spinning in her head
She tried to remind herself that on top of every stem of an iris,
Creates a blossom of where it all begins.

Success: Adlen Badra

You wouldn't dig up a seed while it's still growing.
It starts out small,
A little seed in your hand.
You plant it into a pot,
In the comfort of rich soil.
Feed it nutrients daily,
In order for it to grow.

The seed waits for its nutrients,
Never greedy.

You know the seed will grow,
Without digging it up.

Why?

Because it’s a plant,
You took care of it.

So why are you worried?
Digging up past mistakes,
Criticizing every step.

You will grow,
All you need is care.

My Soiled Floors: Rich Glinnen

My soiled floors give
like a woodland nymph,
and fashion me slippers
of grime and hair.

My soiled floors yield
like prairie clouds,
blooming blots
of shaded sun.

My soiled floors creak
like the branches they once were,
when the wind bumped by
and their shadows clawed the earth.

My soiled floors cave
under dreck-flecked babble,
and embrace the ground
of gravel I’ve sloughed.

Here for When You Can Taste It: Rich Glinnen

Since you're sick,
I catch the kiss
you blow at me
from across the room,
not with my hand,
but my armpit,
and flatten it
into a cookie:

homemade,
from scratch,
which is why it's not round,
but chocked
with bulges and dents,
shaped less like a cookie
and more like the heart
that was put into it.

Mother's Hand: Rich Glinnen

Anyone can hold their mother's hand
when it's swollen and stiff,
when it's vulnerable with spotted age,
as if time pecked itself free.
It takes a forgiving child
to hold a mother's hand
that hasn't changed,
a hand not yet your grandmother's,
whose hands were always
the easiest to hold—
at least for you.

License Plate: Rich Glinnen

While driving to a friend's house,
I saw, for the first time,
an Iowa license plate.
What they were doing in New York
was anybody's guess,
but I just hope
it wasn't a rental,
because that,
for some obvious,
unpronounceable reason,
wouldn't count.

absurd to me
him traipsing round
checked out and indifferent
my father on his whirly twirly planet
remained silent

noticing in playground cackling
parents with a toddler
seeing this the other day made me feel sad
i was not so lucky
had no empathetic dad

pathetic in this way
i would pine for attention
wishing he would simply look me in the eye
unfortunately he could not
heedless to my dharma

i couldn’t know the reasons
on some ghost ship
out in lala land
he'd go and disappear

pint sized person clueless
to his underlying forces
over time a difficult example

my pappy taught avoidance
gnashing teeth keeping secrets

it took me fifty years to see
the character impairments
many rooted in his service scheme
he flew bombers as a teen
maimed and killed nazis felled bystanders too

lurking in subconscious zone
events fraught with horror
deeds of mass destruction
he’d repress all through his life

his battles with PTSD
he’d deal with only secretly
pieces of him haunted
a wrecked emotional plane

recollecting take off on a dusty British field
out there between Diss and Eye
my pa but a shadowy dutiful hard-pressed fly guy
iron-skinned his warrior zen
somehow blessed by Jove above

Ode #1 to The Certified Nursing Assistants: Kenneth DiMaggio

From twirling on a pole near
naked to placing a tray before a
resident that twenty years ago
could have been one of her customers

Stop it girls, stop it!
(even if Annie started & encouraged it)

And what if Ann *was* a dancer?
Shaneice truly in prison (but
no man will ever touch her kids again)

while Sharon was is and always
will be a biker

Whatever their previous jobs lives
broken blessings or righteous sins

these certified nursing assistants
today feed your grandpa
grandma mother father and
tomorrow: me and you

Besides could anyone make a
better Santa for the residents of
a dementia ward when she comes
bearded and red but also black
leather jacketed and with motor-
cycle boots from which she walks
in her Harley

A Saint Nick who knows that just
because these folks may not remember
members of their family
will still appreciate finger-size bottles
of scotch or whiskey or some
other forbidden treat (gummy bears
chocolate, miniature cannolis)
in their Christmas stockings

Ode #2 to The Certified Nursing Assistants: Kenneth DiMaggio

After five years of visiting Mom
in the dementia unit
--I got to know Annie Shaneice
Sharon and all of the other
certified nursing assistants

But every now and a Sunday
an old West Indian woman
humming & singing Gospel and
Christian while she tended residents
like my mother who
like the others were more at
peace and even freedom when this
aide gave them care

and were any of these few men
and mostly women ever (or still
are if they can remember)
atheists
(as is or was or still unsure:
Mom's son)

Unlike the name of this aide
who praised but also pacified him

I just know that Jesus
was also a nursing assistant and
down the hall giving baths feeding
or changing folks like my Mamma:

a sinner like all of us

cared for by an unjudging gentle
and all loving Christ

we could use more of

Ode #3 to The Certified Nursing Assistants: Kenneth DiMaggio

Adrenally exciting (even if the staff
knew what was coming)

But Sharon Shaneice and Annie
were already what Mr. Lorenzo (now
rechristened as Larry) would soon be

“No Larr, you’ve got the gown on
backwards,” said Annie

“Larry! I hope you don’t manage the
place like you do your mask! It’s upside
down, Lord be!” scolded Shaneice

“Mr. Lorenzo,” Sharon said throwing up
her hands. “You just follow us nursing assistants.
Pretend you’re riding on the back of my
Harley. Ya may be the boss, but we nurses
have handled it before even if we haven’t
like this pandemic.”

And that’s how they taught Larr
Larry & Mr. Lorenzo how to protect
himself after deciding to help and pitch in

And by the end of the week he could
feed and even change residents in the
dementia unit (but he does no baths folks,
we don’t want to lose anybody’s loved ones)

He even got to know his staff more
personally: what they cooked, listened
to, watched, what they drove.”

“Like I told ya,” Sharon said. “I’ll give
you a ride on the back of my Harley. But
no way you’re grabbing my handlebars.”

Ode #4 to The Certified Nursing Assistants: Kenneth DiMaggio

If corporate America owned
the building they didn't quite own
you who fed and changed & bathed
and because I often went to visit
& feed my mother in the dementia
unit:

"Keep on top of them Kenny and
don't be afraid to speak up."

Because of "practices" like the business
office waiting until the last moment
to order diapers to save money leaving
residents in the meantime—

Even if they didn't have a union:
aides like Annie Shaneice and Sharon
already had a history tattooed scarred
bruised & broken to fear a word like
management

which sometimes sent them forms
with words like *discipline* on them

which longtime aide Sharon one day
decided to have fun with
folding it into a paper airplane and
teaching the residents in the lounge
to "Throw it! Come on! Try an'
throw it!"

Even if some needed help like my
mother and who had long been retired

there was still time to throw away

the paper-thin fears
that once ruled
their lives

Ode #5 to The Certified Nursing Assistants: Kenneth DiMaggio

A favorite plaid shirt and buttons
from old family coats along with
a handsewn personally inscribed
heart: you'd recognize Annie's
memory bears anywhere

Anything from your garden
Shaneice could bake into a pie
including mud (ha ha)

She took them apart when
they were just bicycles and
now that it was a Harley
Sharon rebuilt it even better

Abused bruised broken & scarred
and finally: certified nursing assistants

Or so management
visiting relatives & others
more successful and professional
thought of them

driving by
a woman on a motorcycle while
wondering:

who is she?

where's she going?

and why can't I?

Contributors

D. Aliesh is passionate about indulging in all forms of writing. She's also an avid traveler and a gluten-free foodie.

Kate Alton is a British writer, teacher, random creator, and proud nerd.

Adlen Badra, while still exploring the realm of poetry, found inspiration in everyday moments and the intricacy of human emotions. She loves using words to express either thoughts, feelings, or personal scenes in poetry because she wants to share her perspective with others.

Stephen Barile, a Fresno, California native, is an award-winning poet and 2023 Pushcart Prize nominee. His poems have been published widely in both print and online.

Alexis Barton is a young writer from Woodstock, GA. She has published poetry in *Poetic Power, Journal of Undiscovered Poets, The Listening Eye, and American High School Poets.* She is studying to be an editor at Kennesaw State University.

Oreste Belletto is 53 and living in San Francisco. He has a master's in poetry from UC Davis. He has had poems published in *Byline Magazine, Exquisite Corpse, The Lilliput Review*, and *nycbigcitylit.com,* and has work pending publication from *Zoetic Press, Eclectica Magazine*, and *Midway Journal*.

Guilherme Bergamini, reporter, photographic, and visual artist, is Brazilian and graduated in Journalism. He believes in photography as the aesthetic potential and transforming agent of society. Awarded in national and international competitions, Bergamini participated in collective exhibitions in 54 countries.

A.C. Blake is a Canadian-American poet, author, and illustrator. Her internationally recognized books, poems, and stories have been widely published and exhibited. She holds an MA and an MFA. Learn more at annecatharineblake.com.

Arno Bohlmeijer won a PEN America Grant 2021, publishing poetry and novels in six countries. US: Houghton Mifflin and two dozen Journals and Reviews, he is also published in *Universal Oneness: an Anthology of Magnum Opus Poems from around the World.* www.arnobohlmeijer.com

Jonathan Borthwick, a British-born cartoonist residing in Houston, Texas, is entirely self-taught. His cartoons primarily delve into the political and social dynamics of the United States in recent years. They strive to encapsulate a culture that feels foreign to him.

Betty Brenda Brown is an artist from Ghana specializing in digital illustration. Most of her digital designs are inspired through imaginary figurative drawings, conceptual drawings, and other areas in illustration.

Jeanne Bryner is a retired emergency room nurse whose family was part of Appalachia's outmigration. She lives with her husband near a dairy farm in Ohio.

Rohan Buettel lives in Canberra, Australia. His haiku and longer poetry appear in numerous journals, including *Rattle, The Goodlife Review, Rappahannock Review, Passengers Journal, Reed Magazine, Meanjin, Meniscus* and *Quadrant.*

Cyrus Carlson is an abstract artist from the Midwest. His small bright paintings command moments of attention in a distracted world.

J Carraher is a Bay Area writer whose recent work appears in *Relief*, *Stanza Cannon*, *Sunspot*, *Cirque* and others. She studied folklore at UC Berkeley, holds an MS from UCSF and works as a medical sociologist, editor, and forensic examiner.

Elise Chadwick taught English in Chappaqua, NY for 30 years. Her poems have been recently published in *The Ocotillo Review, Healing Muse, Naugatuck River Review, The English Journal,* and others.

Norah Clifford is from Lambertville, New Jersey and graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania with a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing. Norah currently lives in New Orleans, Louisiana, interning with the Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival.

Douglas Colston hails from Australia, has played in Ska bands, picked up university degrees, married his love, fathered two great children, and pursued a PhD hoping to provide a positive contribution to the zeitgeist (prior to developing early onset dementia).

B.S. Cronin is an MFA student in Creative Writing at West Virginia University. Originally from Seattle, you might find him riding his motorcycle in the Appalachian hills or caring for the stray cats in his neighborhood.

Laine Derr has published interviews with Carl Phillips, Ross Gay, Ted Kooser, and Robert Pinsky. Work has appeared or is forthcoming from *The Amistad, Mantis, J Journal, Full Bleed + The Phillips Collection, ZYZZYVA, Chapter House, Prairie Schooner,* and elsewhere.

Kenneth DiMaggio recently had poetry published in *CC&D*, *Illuminations*, and *Paterson Literary Review*. He recently retired from teaching full time, but missing the dynamics of a composition, he is back to teaching part time.

Joanne DiMauro has written and recorded nutrition audio/e-books, a monthly health newsletter, and content for WorkLife Matters & ME Women Magazines. She is currently completing her memoir. Her performing arts career includes credit as a Radio City Music Hall Rockette. She can be reached at joannedimauro@rcn.com.

Charlotte Farley is a mother, musician, and writer who sees the richness in the everyday beauty, humor, and sorrow of the human experience. She writes from her home in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, where she works with regional nonprofits & businesses that strive to make a positive impact.

Marvin Jonathan Flores is a first-generation American whose parents emigrated from El Salvador during the civil war. He lives in Tarrytown, New York. His poems have appeared in *Delmarva Review*, *Hole in the Head Review*, and *NiftyLit*.

Steve Gerson writes poetry and flash about life's dissonance. He has published in hundreds of journals, plus his five chapbooks: *Once Planed Straight; Viral; And the Land Dreams Darkly; The 13th Floor: Step into Anxiety,* and *There Is a Season*.

Phoenix Glass is an artist and spiritual explorer. The poetess within was awakened after having a profound mystical experience. She has spent most of her life living in deep communion with the earth, farming, end of life caregiving, and making art.

Laura Glenn, author of *I Can't Say I'm Lost* (FootHills) and *When the Ice Melts* (Finishing Line), has published in many journals and anthologies. Also a visual artist, she lives in Ithaca, NY, and works as a freelance editor. https://www.lauraglennpoetandartist.com/

Rich Glinnen, Best of the Net nominee, has had his poetry featured on Rich Vos's and Bonnie McFarlane's podcast *My Wife Hates Me*, and is a mainstay at the Nuyorican Poets Café. His work can be read in over 100 print and online journals. He currently has two cats, two kids, and one wife.

Dale Going's third poetry collection, *THE BEAUTIFUL LANGUAGE OF OUR DISASTER,* has been selected as the second annual publication in the Codhill Press Guest-Editor Series, 2025. Recent poems are widely published in journals and a 2024 chapbook from Albion Books.

Howie Good is the author of *The Dark*, a just released poetry collection from Sacred Parasite, a Berlin-based publisher. He co-edits the online journal *UnLost*, dedicated to found poetry.

Aspen Greenwood is a writer who regards using their words as a form of activism. As a former swimming teacher and aquatics tutor, Greenwood combines their activism with physical and mental fitness.

Karin Hedetniemi photographs and writes from Vancouver Island, Canada. Her creative work appears in *Grain, Lunch Ticket, Hinterland, EVENT,* and other publications. In 2020, Karin won the nonfiction contest from the Royal City Literary Arts Society. Find her at AGoldenHour.com.

Jason Hochman lives in Houston, TX and is from McKeesport, PA. He has had many jobs but still makes time for creative pursuits. He is passionate about church, pets, bikes, and the outdoors.

Marilyn E Johnston is the author of two collections of poetry published by *Antrim House*. Her third book, *Downward Dreaming*, was published in 2023 by Grayson Books. Her poems have been published in journals nationwide and have garnered six Pushcart Prize nominations. She retired from Bloomfield Public Library in 2017.

Georgea Jourjouklis is a University of Toronto alumnus, a future English teacher, and a queer writer with a primary focus on novels, poetry, mental health, and normalizing queerness in the fantasy genre.

Lisa Kamolnick explores humanity, the natural world, and spaces between and beyond. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Slipstream, Black Moon Magazine, Encore*, and others. She also serves as Poetry Society of Tennessee's president. Learn more at lisakamolnick.com.

Kaylee Laakso is a Ph.D. student in Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design at Clemson University. Kaylee has presented a TEDx talk at Northern Michigan University, a keynote address at Tiffin University, and international seminars and presentations.

Jennifer S. Lange is a self-taught artist creating illustrations for books, games, posters, and world-building projects. Her work has been shown internationally and in online exhibitions. She lives in northern Germany with her partner and a lot of cats.

Stefanie Lee is an ambitious young writer from Montréal, Canada. Living with a rare physical disability called Nemaline Myopathy, she is a motivated student in software engineering with a passion for literature.

L. Lois lives in an urban hermitage where trauma-informed themes flow on walks by the ocean. Her poems have appeared in *Alchemy Magazine, Progenitor Journal, Poetry Breakfast, 300 Days of Sun, BarBar, Twisted Vine Literary Journal*, and other publications.

LindaAnn LoSchiavo, a native New Yorker and Elgin Award winner, is a member of British Fantasy Society, HWA, SFPA, The Dramatist Guild. Released in 2024: "Always Haunted: Hallowe'en Poems" [Wild Ink], "Apprenticed to the Night" [UniVerse Press], and "Felones de Se: Poems about Suicide" [Ukiyoto]. She recently won awards for her 2025 releases, *Cancer Courts My Mother* and *Vampire Verses*.

Shontay Luna's work has appeared in *Olney Magazine* and *Down in the Dirt*, among others. A lifelong Chicagoan, her most recent book is titled *The Goddess Journal: a tool for unlocking the Goddess within every woman.*

Angie Macri is the author of *Sunset Cue* (Bordighera), winner of the Lauria/Frasca Poetry Prize, and *Underwater Panther* (Southeast Missouri State University), winner of the Cowles Poetry Book Prize. An Arkansas Arts Council fellow, she lives in Hot Springs.

Kayleigh Marinelli is a writer, researcher, editor, and teacher. Marinelli's debut novel, *The Fantastic Fabricated* Life of Lyle Farker, was published in 2021.

Brandon Marlon is a Canadian-Israeli writer from Ottawa, Canada. His poetry was awarded the Harry Hoyt Lacey Prize in Poetry (Fall 2015), and his writing has been published in 300+ publications in 33 countries.

Maureen Martinez is an emerging poet working in a New York City school with teen boys. Living with loss and aging currently drives her writing. Her poetry is published or forthcoming in *Meniscus, Folly Journal, The Listening Eye* and others.

Matthew McCain is an author and fine artist. Three of his novels reached the top #10 on Amazon Kindle unlimited, and his paintings can be found all around the world. He's currently represented by the Bilotta Gallery in Florida.

Ang E. Miller is described as a builder of transformative sanctuaries for queer youth, working 10 jobs but primarily works as an English teacher. Outside of work, she lectures her dog for eating the yarn she's crocheting with. Retired from teaching,

Felicia Mitchell lives in the mountains of southwest Virginia. Her recent poetry collection is *A Mother Speaks, A Daughter Listens: Journeying Together Through Dementia* (Wising Up Press). Along with writing poetry, she blogs on cancer survivorship for Curetoday.com.

Jay Moné is a poet and fiction writer from the Midwest. She is the editor-in-chief of the literary magazine, *Suspended Magazine*. She is currently working on her debut novel and novella, both to be self-published in the future.

Randi Neville (she/they) is a disabled queer writer currently working on her first novel while continuing their poetic journey. They love watching pro-wrestling, watercolor painting, and being the world's best aunt. They currently reside in Houston, Texas with their family.

James B. Nicola, a returning contributor, is the author of eight poetry collections, the latest being *Fires of Heaven, Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies* (2021-2023). His nonfiction book, *Playing the Audience*, won a *Choice* magazine award.

Marina Outwater is a writer, photographer, and middle school educator. She lives in Connecticut with her family and far too many pets.

Travis Park is an emerging poet. They have been included in *Route 7 Review, The Sandy River Review* and will be upcoming in *Boudin* through *The McNeese Review*. You can see more of their poems on Instagram @travisparkpoetry.

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He produces oil paintings, illustrations, ceramic pieces and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries across Maine. His online portfolio is donaldlpatten.newgrounds.com/art.

Qi Peng is an award-winning visual artist who is currently an Associate Professor of Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication in China. Culture Revolution and Student Strike have become the source of his artwork, which has been exhibited internationally in a variety of prominent venues.

Martheaus Perkins is an emerging Black poet who is the co-editor of *BRAWL*. His work is published in *Obsidian*, *West Trade Review*, *Longleaf Review*, and elsewhere. He can be found on Instagram and X @martheaus.

Erik Peters is a teacher and avid mediaevalist from Canada. Erik's work with marginalised students has profoundly influenced his writing which has been published in numerous magazines including *Coffin Bell*, *Superlative Lit*, *Prospectus*, *The Louisville Review*, and *The Dead Mule School*. Read all Erik's publications at www.erikpeters.ca or @erikpeterswrites.

Bob Plainwilder mines the fields of art, culture, science, history, and nature, and his work borrows influences from poets ee cummings, Dylan Thomas, David Whyte, Ted Geisel, Denise Levertov, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. There's over a thousand songs, poems, videos in plainwilder's unique Fauxbrow ouvre.

Diana Raab, MFA, PhD, is a memoirist, poet, workshop leader, thought-leader and award-winning author of fourteen books. Her latest book is *Hummingbird: Messages from My Ancestors*, a memoir with reflection and writing prompts (Modern History Press, 2024). Visit her at dianaraab.com.

Devin A. Reese is a science writer and the editor of *Natural History* magazine. Her perspectives on humans and other organisms are expressed through poetry, prose, articles, and media. Devin’s Ph.D. in turtle ecology followed a bachelor’s in animal behavior.

Rory is a creative writing student at Slippery Rock University, set to graduate in 2025. They use they/them pronouns, and enjoy poetry and novel writing. They exist with rheumatoid arthritis, an invisible disability; the subject of their included poems.

Francine Rubin, a stay-at-home mom, previously worked in higher education. She is the author of the chapbooks *If You're Talking to Me: Commuter Poems* (dancing girl press), *City Songs* (Blue Lyra Press), and *Geometries* (Finishing Line Press).

Sandip Saha is an Indian poet who has won two awards for his poetry from India and one from the USA. He has published 160 poems in 51 journals in six countries: India, USA, UK, Australia, Romania, and Mauritius. He has also published five poetry collections.

Brita Sauer is a librarian in New Mexico and is interested in the intersection of collection and ecology. She has work published on The Academy of American Poets poets.org site, *Plant-Human Quarterly*, and a short film shown at the Feminist Border Arts Film Festival.

Merida Serena is a high school student who writes poetry and prose, often inspired by nature, holistic health, and human connection. She pays close attention to the world around her, absorbing her experiences and translating them into writing.

Susan Shea is a retired school psychologist. In the past year, her poems have been accepted by over 100 publications, including *MacQueen's Quinterly, Ekstasis, October Hill Magazine, Across the Margin, Invisible City,* and others.

Jennifer Shneiderman is an Ohio-born writer and visual artist living in Los Angeles. Her writing has appeared in many publications, including: Yale University's *The Perch*, UCLA's *Windward*, and *The Rubbertop Review*.

Simon A. Smith is a Chicago teacher and writer. His stories have appeared in many journals and media outlets, including *Hobart, Lit Magazine, Whiskey Island, Chicago Public Radio*, and *NewCity*. He is the author of two novels, *Son of Soothsayer* and *Wellton County Hunters*. He lives in Rogers Park with his wife and son.

Anna Sones received a B.A. in Written Arts from Bard College. She was born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is working on her first novel. Anna's writing is preoccupied with living and loving in a world that is at once full of wonders and catastrophically threatened. More of her work can be found at annasones.com.

Edward Michael Supranopwicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. His artwork and poetry and prose have appeared in the US and other countries.

M. Benjamin Thorne is an Associate Professor of Modern European History at Wingate University. His poems have appeared in *Sky Island Journal, Cathexis Northwest, Griffel, The Westchester Review, Feral,* and *Gyroscope Review*. He lives and sometimes sleeps in Charlotte, NC.

Ruth Towne is the author of *Resurrection of the Mannequins* (Kelsay Books 2025). Her work has been published by *Holy Gossip, The Lily Poetry Review, Decadent Review, New Feathers Anthology*, and *Mantis: A Journal of Poetry, Criticism, and Translation.*

Alyssa Troy is an English teacher in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She received her B.A. from Rider University and has an M.Ed. from both Cabrini and Eastern University. Her poems are published or forthcoming in *Blue Unicorn, Cool Beans Lit, In Parentheses, Eclectica, 300 Days of Sun, The Road Not Taken* as well as other journals and magazines. She is the author of *Transfiguration* (2020).

Uzomah Ugwu is a poet/writer, curator, editor, and multi-disciplined artist. Her poetry, writing, and art have been featured internationally in various publications, galleries, art spaces, and museums. She is a political, social, and cultural activist.

Christy Umberger is a poet currently living in Fort Collins, CO with her partner, Christian, and cat, Pepper. Her work has appeared in *Anodyne Magazine* and *The Closed Eye Open*, among others.

Cody Vesley (he/they) is a gay sober poet. Their work has been in *The Screen Door Review* (2023), *Meow Meow Pow Pow* (2024), and has self-published two books, *Usually About a Boy* (2016) and *Lovesick: A Quarantine Dream* (2021).

Emily S. Wagner taught English for seventeen years before becoming a school counselor. Her poetry has appeared in *Black Fox Literary Magazine* and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, among others. She lives in rural Pennsylvania with her husband and two sons.

Daniel Webre's work has appeared in *The Big Windows Review, Paterson Literary Review, The Bitter Oleander, Xavier Review, riverSedge*, and other places.

Emma Wells is a mother and English teacher. She has poetry published with various literary journals and magazines. She writes flash fiction, short stories and novels. She is currently writing her sixth novel.

Ryn Williams graduated from Saint Leo University in 2023 with an English and humanities degree. She is currently studying for the MCAT, and her love of patients and life often bleed into her work.

Grant Wrich is an LGBTQ poet based in Las Vegas, NV. He has work published in the *Eunoia Review*, through *Wingless Dreamer*, *Havik*, as well as other literary journals.

Claire Young is a long-time poetry enjoyer, but a first-time poetry writer.

Ashley Zingillioglu studies Creative Writing and Computer Science at Monmouth University. Her undergraduate thesis involves creating an interactive social story (ISS) prototype for middle/high school students with autism. She also releases several singles under her artist pseudonym, Azure Kai.

