

MEAT FOR TEA

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THE VALLEY REVIEW

YELLOW



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

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This issue is dedicated to the loving memory of Jane Yolen and Dr. Bruce Tull.

- 4 Guest Salutation with Peter Tacy
- 5 The Song of Telemakhos
Peter Tacy
- 6 Moving To Senior Housing
Peter Tacy
- 7 The Meaty Interview with Steven Seidenberg
- 8 Charism
Shaun Coon
- 9 In Memory of Bruce Tull
Ed O'Connell
- 10 In Memory of Bruce Tull
José Ayerve
- 11 In Memory of Bruce Tull
Thane Thomsen
- 12 In Memory of Bruce Tull
Jim Armenti
- 13 Plot
Matt Jasper
- 14 Umbra
Matt Jasper
- 15 Skyline Inspiration
Susan Pollet
- 16 At Risk & Lakeside Lunch
David R. Solheim
- 17 Salvage
Michael Washburn
- 28 The Manipulator
Camellia Paul
- 29 She Had to Say She Hated Us if it Said So in the Script
Gerald Yelle
- 30 Matriarchy
Gerald Yelle
- 31 People Keep Talking About Beatnik Poems...
Doug Anderson
- 32 Submission
Doug Anderson
- 33 And Still & Sunshone Windows
David P. Miller
- 34 Ariadne's Island
Alissa Simon
- 35 Composite Crustose Bronchioles
Alissa Simon
- 36 The Street Rollers of Yellow
Robert Zott
- 40 Belly Buttons
Martin Elster & Joan Axelrod-Contrada
- 41 Illegal Aliens on a Yellow Moon
Martin Elster & Joan Axelrod-Contrada
- 42 Had I Been Born a Boy
Chrissy Howland
- 44 Ambiguous Loss
Michael Tillyer
- 45 Art
Pia Long
- 46 Well, Actually (A Watery Folk Tale)
Pia Long
- 52 The Ten Stages of Love (a One-Act Play)
Mark Sbani
- 74 Things That Go Boom in the Dark
Richard Wayne Horton
- 76 Add Yellow: Instructions for a Tornado
& Prairie Sketchbook
Skyler Lovelace
- 77 November in New England & Peaches in August
Ed Meek
- 78 The Mountain People & The Dregs of Winter
Jacob Chapman
- 79 Dream Girl & Sun-Maid
Denise Duhamel
- 80 Under the Yellow Sun by the Irish Sea:
Failure at Carrick-a-Rede
Kaila Schwartz
- 81 Beach Rules
Andrew Shelffo
- 82 Love and Bats
Andrew Shelffo
- 84 Slashes of Sunlight
Janina Aza Karpinska
- 85 8
Scott Ferry
- 86 16
Scott Ferry
- 87 Flying Home via Chicago & Sundress
CL Bledsoe
- 88 Sandwiched
Niles Reddick
- 90 My Close Personal Relationship with Donna Tartt
Mark Wish
- 92 Things I Could Say to My Pro-Fascism Relatives
Mark Wish
- 93 Jute
Louise Kertesz
- 94 Art
David S. Morley
- 95 Scorched
Barbara Edler
- 96 The Archive of Forgotten Things
John Dennis
- 99 You Think This is a Joke
Stewart Rudy
- 102 I Am an Old House
Trisha Leigh Shufelt
- 103 Original Sin & A Relentless Stalker
Diane Funston
- 104 Exposition of the Holy Eucharist
& What is This If Not Limbo
Ruth Saxey-Reese
- 105 All The Tender Things
B. Fulton Jennes
- 106 Better Living through Butter & The Color of Velocity
Barbara Krasner
- 107 Art
David S. Morley
- 108 Yellow Moon, Why Do You Frighten Me So?
Joanna C. Migdal
- 108 The Girl with Yellow Eyes
David Blumenfeld
- 109 Platform No. Want
Sushanth Shyamsundar
- 112 Plates & Lottery
Acacio Barros
- 113 Entrepreneurs with Trowels
Ellen Gerneaux Woods
- 114 Inspiration Point
Ellen Gerneaux Woods
- 115 Activation
Cindy Rinne
- 116 A Flammable Heaven
Cindy Rinne
- 117 Pipe Dreams
David S. Morley
- 118 Yellow Will Be Fashionable for Summer Clothes
Margaret Taylor-Uilizio
- 119 No Parking on the Yellow Line
Margaret Taylor-Uilizio
- 120 A Yearning for Bananas
Taria Karillian
- 123 Lavender Chamomile
Shirley J. Brewer
- 124 Therapy 101: Playing With Words
Shirley J. Brewer
- 125 In Celebration of Dandelions
Katy Z. Allen
- 126 Little Yellow Flowers
Katy Z. Allen
- 127 Ketamine
Dayanna Almeda
- 128 Contributors' Notes

Guest Salutation with Peter Tacy

A Salutation for Jane Yolen

The first words spoken by Jane Yolen on the occasion of running into any of her many, very many literary friends and acquaintances (myself included) were always the same: “what are you writing?”

The weather, our health, our love lives, and all the other ups and downs of everyone’s days got no similar priority — because, for Jane, the act of writing was utterly central to the joy of living, and she naturally assumed that it had to be the same for all of us.

Those of us who shared with Jane a passion for messing about with words — and for story-telling — understood what was happening. She had asked us because she cared for us in a way that went well beyond ordinary friendship and mentorship, and verged into a sort of collegiality — and something more. And, of course, we cared right back, deeply.

Jane’s departure has left a big hole in a climate of interconnection that she created, a climate that flourished around her, especially here in the Valley, for seven decades. For some of us, that “climate” was at least as important an achievement of Jane’s as her several hundred published books and heaps of awards could ever be. It helped us to believe in ourselves and enjoy and achieve. Whether it can persist without her is going to be a big question. Our lives will be poorer if the answer is negative.

One difference for me was that this routine began so long ago — in 1958, when we were both undergraduates and each longed to find just one friend who loved writing as much as we did. Her questioning of me never stopped, though, even when my answer was evasive (or worse) as was too often the case for decades. The question just kept being asked — even later on, when Jane became too ill to write herself.

So, dear reader, here again is Jane’s question: what are you writing? Answer, please! ...Your reply is “nothing, yet”? Well, there’s more of this day left, isn’t there? Put your butt in your chair and a song in your heart and get going! We’re all waiting.

Peter



the song of telemakhos

Peter Tacy

When I was younger
I thought it was *my* story, of
how my days of longing
ended. How I'd stood
aft, where I'd seen my father
standing, as he sailed away...

Or how I found him
and how my powerlessness
to defend home, kin,
and mother from debauchery
ended – as we two, now one,
father and reclaimed son,
slew them! We killed them all...we
cleansed our home with blood –
washed the floors, tables,
long dining benches, and
even the limestone walls
with blood. Their blood.

But that is his story.

The years passed.
I learned to rule. I learned
how unforgiving grief can be,
even if grief is for the unforgivable.
I found that lives protected
and love requited matter more
than any man's adventure. I learned
the hardness of hatred
and the legacy of vengeance. And
I learned about the cost of justice.
You see, having grown up fatherless,
without a ruler to emulate,
I learned the truth about ruling
on the job.

Those lessons saved me. They saved
my sons, my daughters, my wife,
and my people. But they were
bitter lessons. They led me to a
bitter fate...to forever lie
outside *the story*; to be son
of a canny voyager who wrecked
monsters and shipmates equally;
a mere footnote to his epic.

But now – now I know the truth
is indeed mine, and not my father's.
Yet how can my truth be the story?

Within these walls
my grandsons read of him, not me.
They live in peace, but study war;
learn that leaving home on a fool's errand,
summoned by another man's vengeance
is grand, virtuous, even sane; that
abandoning the beloved to survive or perish
as heartlessly as capricious gods
abandoned blameless Andromache –
heiress to a throne, then slave and concubine –
either – at a toss – as mere token
in a game of men and gods –
is the mark of a man we call hero.
Chancing us to such a fate, my father set forth.
And long afterward, a great singer set
his story, not mine.

My lesson is here...
but who will teach it? Who will sing it?

A quiet heroism begets a small poetry.



moving to senior housing

Peter Tacy

It's time.

I look at furniture, cookware,
books, clothing
to be left, as if the seasons
were summoning them to be shed
from a life made solitary;
they're now disposable.
These empty rooms will
only hold memories.

It's time.

The boxes have been packed.
Each holds objects
with remembered
connotations, now ties
from me to...no one.
No value resides there now.
The boxes will be given away
before the movers come.

It's time.

A few things will be taken,
like grave furnishings
for the as-yet living, chosen
to make the good-byes
feel final and significant.
Each has a tag affixed, a
sort of benediction
signaling "not yet".

It's time.

Crushed by the weight of air
atop me, laboring
to go on breathing, I want
to say "it's a reculer
pour mieux sauter moment";
a pause before a new beginning.
Doubting it is, but still alive,
I take the needed step.

It's time.



150 Pleasant St., Easthampton, MA
between Abandoned Building and New City breweries

the meaty interview with Steven Seidenberg

What's your favorite color?

I don't have a favorite color, not an inclination or disinclination of any kind, neither in my wardrobe nor in the perceptual field. Color is relational, after all—coupled with its complement, any color yields a sense of clarity and distinction that can alternate between repulsive intensity and beguiling radiance. As a visual artist, and a photographer in particular, I approach color as a tool, a means to manipulate the viewer.

What's your favorite animal?

I am most interested in other primates, in particular homo sapiens.

If you could choose to fly or to be invisible, which would it be and why?

My sole criterion for choosing is how well such an ability would help me escape annoying interactions with the aforementioned primates, both those in which I'm a participant and those merely overheard. For this purpose, flight seems a more expedient means of decampment, where invisibility would only serve to elude direct address.

Are you happy and, if not, why?

Situationally on and off, but happy is not the goal. I'm driven, and that seems enough.

What book/s are you reading at the moment?

I'm always reading many books at once. Books I've picked up in the past week: the poems of Andrea Zanzotto, John Wieners, and Edouard Glissant; Glissant's *Faulkner Mississippi*; a couple of books by Catherine Malabou—*Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* and *The Future of Hegel*; Boris Groys' *Alexandre Kojève: An Intellectual Biography*, and Kojève's *Atheism*; Hegel's *Theory of Intelligibility* by Rocco Zambrano; *The Ghost of Memory* by William Harris.

What are you currently listening to?

Sarah Davachi, *The Head as Form'd in the Crier's Choir*; Akira Kosemura, *In the Dark Woods*

How old were you when it became clear you were a writer? a photographer? a philosopher?

Has it become clear? I do those things, but I exceed them, and insofar as I think my efforts as a maker successful, the artifacts thereby produced exceed me in turn.

If you could invite six people, living or dead, to your ideal dinner party, whom would you invite?

I just don't think this way, being without interest in the personhood, as it were, of those whose work I admire, and I have neither knowledge of nor curiosity about celebrity. But I have a couple of friends who died when I was young, a few other friends who died the past decade, and my parents, also deceased. I miss them all, but it would be a terrible dinner party. I'd be in tears, and they'd be at odds.

Tell us about some of your upcoming projects (here engage in shameless self-promotion)

I continue to promote my most recent book *Coda* (Omniawn, 2025), which was also published in Portuguese translation by Quiasmo in the Spring. My 2018 book *plain sight* will be published in Italian translation by Il Verri this fall, as will a new collection of photographs, *Kanazawa Vacancy*, by Chin Music Press. Working out details for a couple of shows in the next year, in Lisbon, LA, and a few other places.

charism

Shaun Coon

With smile plastered,
the priest finishes reading the
prescribed daily pericope,
puts away the lectionary,
and commands his eromenos, errr, altarboy
with gesture and mere glance.
(This scene: played out a thousand times each Lord's Day
across the commonwealth of Massachusetts)
Incense, begotten by three swings of the thurible,
floats lofty, lazily, in the air,
descending, will sting the lucky eyes of the first pews of the most faithful.
each tiny mote, each speck,
reminding the truly devout of their unworthiness.

Before he turned his back on these, his children,
prior to intoning the offertorium chant over the monstrance,
he stepped through automatic anaphora and epiclesis
and gazed out upon this foster flock of mostly Italians and Irish,
his mien construable from afar as solemnity.
Closer, it clearly presents as imprecation. For their depredations.
For their spiritual impecunity. Only he could make for them the oblation.

Before he turned away for the intoning, he
was struck in the eye by a beam of sunlight streaming through the stained glass
He'd been able to put aside his needs for the entirety of the hour of mass.

There but for the grace went I,
but for the grace of my family attending different churches weekly.



in memory of bruce tull

Ed O'Connell

I'm not sure how to write about Bruce.

By the time I moved to Northampton in the early 1990s, Bruce's kitchen table was already modestly famous, part of the lore of the legendary Scud Mountain Boys, then at their incendiary peak. That table has been justly celebrated and written into history by none other than David Berman, who referred to Bruce as "the guitarist's guitarist" in the liner notes to the band's Pine Box album. I am aware as I write this that this is hallowed ground, and I want to tread lightly, because the chronology of my own involvement is necessarily blurry, and I will not be able to speak to the level of musicianship Bruce carried so effortlessly with anything like the proper precision, but I was honored to have a seat at that table for many post-last-call, small-hour sessions as guitars were passed around, whiskey was poured, and stories, jokes, and songs all swirled together with the smoke, laughter, and occasional tears that bound together the close-knit loosely affiliated band of outlaws that comprised the pre-dawn shift on Woodmont Rd.

He and I were both alumni of Green Street Cafe. Shortly after he moved to Oklahoma, he wrote me a message with what appeared to be a question about one of the dishes on the menu. He was looking for the recipe for the chicken breast with apples and hazelnuts we used to serve in the fall. We served it over Yolanda pasta in a marsala sauce. As flattered as I was that he would ask me, I realized about halfway through reading it that the question itself had already become so specific I was going to have to update the apparently vague approximation I'd been carrying around in my head and calling a recipe. Did you know there's a controversy over how airline chicken breast got its name? Bruce did. The level of detail with which he catalogued the world was astonishing. It was impossible to hang out with him for any length of time and not learn something.

Now that he's gone I realize I always thought I was going to see him again. Yes, just like in the song.

Bruce was a man of odd postures. He could stand or sit for great lengths of time in positions that were troubling even to behold. One of the many photos that have circulated since he passed is a shot of him taken from an angle that captures him working behind the bar. He is bent over with his chin resting on the palm of one hand, his elbow supporting the full weight of his head and upper torso, leaned forward in rapt attention with his legs crossed behind him in a manner that would unnerve any honest chiropractor. I think he was capable of this because of the intensity of his brain.

It is for other people, the real world-class musicians with whom Bruce regularly played, and for those who were around when the Scud Mountain Boys were simply called the Scuds, to testify to the depth of his musicianship. I can only tell the part that is mine to tell, but I loved Bruce, and I miss him.



in memory of bruce tull

José Ayerve

Standing by the booth closest to the window-framed stage of the Baystate Hotel, smoking a cigarette and gently fidgeting with the mixing board, Bruce Tull would shake his head up and down, like a bob, but sometimes only slightly. In between sets, he would sprinkle a conversation with several *yuh's* before chiming in with an observation or a fact —something worth knowing. He might even pay you a well-timed complement, pulling you out of your own head and grounding you in the present. When Bruce first heard me sing, he generously compared my voice to Paul Westerberg's and not to that of some famous Irish guy with a rasp. I think it's one of my favorite complements that I have ever received, and I thank him for it.

I also thank him for my amp, a VOX AC-15 with two-10" speakers (instead of the far more common one-12" speaker). Mine is a British model adapted to a 120V current. Bruce picked it out and presented me with it in Northampton circa 2000; it was a gift from the music community, one that I cherish with all my heart.

I don't mean to make these words about me; to inject myself into the memories of this man that some of us got to know and love during our tenure in the Pioneer Valley. It's just a reflection of how I experienced my time with Bruce. I loved the guy, everyone who knew him loved him. The Northampton Music Scene lost a real gem when Bruce died, even though Bruce had moved back to his home state of Oklahoma many years before his very recent passing. I regret not having done more to keep in touch with him.

If you didn't know Bruce, I can try to describe him. He was nimble, flexible, a bit thin, and average in stature —maybe even slight. Charming, awkward, friendly, and welcoming, his brilliant mind was replete with information, especially when it came to gear and music. His knowledge, like his talent, was simply advanced. I tell you: it is an awesome thing to have made music with Bruce Tull, whether recording tracks for Lo Fine and Dennis Crommett, or trading tunes around his kitchen table with almost every musician in the Valley, in the wee hours of the morning after an eventful show. It is equally awesome to have been his friend, and an honor to have been his contemporary.

He and we are no longer inhabiting the same physical plane, but that doesn't mean he ceased to exist. I'll have conversations with him in my head from time to time, from now on. This is how I keep my loved ones alive well after they've transcended. In Bruce's case, I also get to listen to the glorious sounds he helped create. That's a very special thing.

Bruce was particularly good at using his pedal steel or Tele to exploit or punctuate the tension of a vocal melody or lyric. He could wield his instrument at once like a highlighter *and* a picture frame to underscore the context and set the scene. He was as gentle and as impactful as he needed to be, both in life and in music.



in memory of bruce tull

Thane Thomsen

I first met Bruce when my band, The Figments, was playing at the World War II Club in 1997. At the time I was playing my guitar through a small Park tube amp, which I miked and then ran through a big Heathkit amp. It was a ridiculous rig, and it made Bruce's head spin. I remember him standing, in this way he had with his legs splayed out at odd angles, watching the band, and it seemed his head was literally spinning, such was the intensity of his mannerisms. Talking to Bruce after the show, I was thrilled to be talking to the guitarist of the Scud Mountain Boys, who I loved but had yet to see perform. He would soon help to convince me that I should get a real amp.

Over the following years I would have the remarkable experience of becoming good friends with Bruce and playing music with him in the bands Lo Fine and Rehab Massachusetts and at late night sessions at his house on Woodmont Road, where the Scud Mountain Boys had rehearsed around his dining room table. Through that time he continued to influence my choices regarding musical equipment. He introduced me to the Nobels overdrive pedal a little over 25 years ago, and since then I've played few notes on the electric guitar without it. Not only was he always willing to help, but he carried with him a formidable depth and breadth of knowledge. He once said to me, not in regard to music but rather about mixing tobacco flavors, "I'm nothing if not thorough." I would ask about a specific guitar, and Bruce would include serial numbers in his answer, no cell phone necessary.

It would be hard to overstate how central Bruce was to the Northampton music scene through the 90s and until he moved back to Oklahoma to help take care of his dad around 2008. Besides playing in bands, he worked running sound and bartending at both the Baystate and Harry's. He was also regularly hosting late night music sessions at the Woodmont, where I was fortunate to see some of the area's best songwriters develop their songs sitting around the famed table, usually with Bruce playing along on pedal steel. I wasn't there the times that nationally known songwriters like Richard Buckner and Jason Molina stopped by, but I heard about the good times that ensued.

Bruce also recorded a bunch at the Woodmont. Certainly he was very fond of classic tube amps and analog recording, and I know that the Scud Mountain Boys recorded to tape at the Woodmont. But Bruce was also very pragmatic when recording. He told me that for some of the Scud Mountain Boy recordings he plugged his telecaster straight into the tape deck, which is unconventional for a tube amp guy. I was lucky to have Bruce play on an album I had written called Rehab Massachusetts. I was extra fortunate to have Bruce record a lot of the album at the Woodmont, which he did on a digital recorder. Bruce totally adjusted to the new technology and recorded an album, along with Mark Alan Miller, that sounds warm and intimate, like an analog recording.

Bruce pursued other interests besides music. Around the turn of the century, he completed his doctorate in economics at UMASS. His focus was the Springfield Armory, and to some extent, its role in the Union's victory in the Civil War. He seemed to know all there was to know about 19th century munitions. I felt fortunate to be able to learn about his dissertation and discuss other topics in economics with him. Bruce introduced me to the works of Thorstein Veblen, and we had a shared regard for the works of Karl Marx.

Toward the end of his tenure in the Valley, I wrote a song with Bruce. He was living in an apartment on Paquette Avenue, and I was living nearby on West Street. We started working on the song pretty late at night and finished most of it just before the sun was coming up. It was a genuine collaboration, and we split the writing of the lyrics, melody, and chord progressions equally across the board. Although it's hard for me to remember who wrote which parts, I do know that it was Dr. Bruce Tull who came up with some relatively academic, yet entirely appropriate, lyrics. The song, called Drunken Birds, was recorded for the album Goldwater the Second, and features Bruce playing lead acoustic guitar and bass. Although Bruce loved celebratory music, and he loved to two-step, his real passion was for mellow and heartbreakingly sad music. Drunken Birds is certainly a sad song, and in the wake of Bruce's death, it seems fitting to end this with some of the song's lyrics.

Damn the crooked wind
We all need our animus
The rest can be left behind
The letter is sealed and signed
But the address is spurious
You've always been so hard to find

What you want to see might not be your window
The birds have all flown away
What you want to say might not be that easy
The words get blown away



in memory of bruce tull

Jim Armenti

Bruce first came to a Yankee Rhythm Band show at the Hollywood in Bernardston MA sometime in the late 1980s to dance the two step. Being from OK, and a man of the people, he loved the whole scene and was soon coming to other venerated valley roadhouses, to dance, but eventually to bring along the Scuds who we invited on to the stage to perform 'Helen' and 'Photograph' to the surprise of the usual Saturday night crowd. Fun Times. Bruce came to DTS for guitar lessons for a few years in the early Scud days and mostly wanted to know guitar theory and the ways of the Texas Playboys. He was a fine interesting guy with a quick sense of humor and a bottomless curiosity. His quick laugh ended with a snorting intake on a regular basis, and if I picture him now, it's with a glass of bourbon, a cigarette, a guitar and a snort.



plot

Matt Jasper

Happens all the time, the little headstones—
they get this sense of freedom when lining up
to feed on the unmown grass of a world
that's forgotten to come Sundays
and lay wailing across them—
place floral sprays and bouquets, yet
remove heavenly tendrils of creeping ivy
from weathered inscriptions no one can decipher
even when the vines are scraped away.

His goal in life was to be so covered
by such profusions that he could not
be read. His mother would tuck him into bed
and he'd stiffen when she embraced him just
as in waking life he would recoil at anyone's touch—
even burst at the seams if someone drew near.
They'd have just skin and tiny bits of him
after the explosion so he'd evade the outstretched
arms and twist away into the cyclone

of wearing layer upon layer of clothing
or building little shelters for himself of wood,
sticks, corrugations of tin seeming
somewhat more permanent than when
he was five with cut cardboard box windows
and sills of flowers put on by his mom, who let him
do the rest—drawing rectangles that meant bricks
of the pig's house would not be blown down
until worn out by play and folded.

He might spin around as a clock chasing moments back
to when there was a dream of him moving among the dead
in a showroom where his job was to determine if a coffin
was in use or for sale by speaking into each one without looking.
His voice would either echo back empty or—if there was a corpse inside—
it would nod in an agreement felt yet unseen, to something he didn't know
he had sent over from this world to theirs because they absorbed his every
thought and word—refusing to reply so they could return to him
what they themselves had given him to say.



umbra

Matt Jasper

Each drawn and quartered thing
stands singing with its ringlets
of hair falling down to the drowned
world of rub-leg crickets violining
with their limbs instead of swordplay.

It's that way in the clearing of branches
lit by drops of night's dew that sparkle
back at the moon they have fallen beneath
claiming to be moon trees now and forever
if we can staunch the flow of moments

bringing what comes next—that her
landscape will scroll away to be devoured
by the rising sun, that we are over and done with
these uncertainties that made it easier to live
when greeted by creatures chirping back

at us from a profusion of blade grass
and litter strewn in the garden ruin half-
imagined, half-seen as the in-between
of dark and light making silvery
creatures of whorled field

and old bottles smashed—each balanced
with its counterpart of light defining
depths no one can return from until it is barely
noticed she has been spinning into arabesques
at each unclasping of our hands.





skyline inspiration
Susan Pollet

at risk

David R. Solheim

In adolescence and young adulthood
I played the board game with friends,
And we quickly learned the basic strategy:
Consolidate territory and pile up power at borders.

For the Americas say, Alaska, Greenland,
And Mexico or Brazil depending
Upon your stacks of armies.
In actuality three aggressors swagger.

One in Asia, One in Europe, and Felon Forty-Seven
In the Americas. He soon will have all he wants.
Oil reserves, rare earth, Caribbean bank accounts,
And islands of girls and golf courses.

In the world, as in the game,
There is no accounting for the deaths of war
Or the cruelties of the bullies' rumors of war.
The fate of the world rides on a roll of the dice.



lakeside lunch

David R. Solheim

As I finish my fish tacos
An osprey wings by
A fish in its talons
As if it were still
In the water
Swimming home.



salvage

Michael Washburn

Steve Rawls walked out of a liquor store after work and headed east on Sunset Boulevard under the hills where lights in the windows of the houses had begun to flicker on. As he shifted the parcel to his right arm, pondering his chances of ever moving out of his crummy flat on Highland into a halfway decent place, he noticed a woman walking in the opposite direction, toward the hills. Around twenty-eight, she had short blond hair, a figure he could not help noticing, but there was more to her. In her dark eyes flickered the light of a playful intelligence. When they got within twenty feet, she gave a smile that he thought could revive a corpse and strolled past him. His first thought was that she was a hooker. This was Hollywood. In the usual course of things, attractive women did not notice him at all. But he felt the woman had an air of undeflowered decency, like the daughter of an Iowa farmer who makes nests for kittens in a barn and has never heard of porn. As he turned to watch her walk further and further toward those hills, Steve grappled with the possibility that her smile had been a polite reflex. Then he forced himself to turn again and continue in the direction of North Highland.

Steve might never have given the woman another thought had he not spotted her a second time, coming out of the Highland Avenue subway station, then turning right on Hollywood Boulevard. Instead of crossing the street to avoid the crowds lining the Walk of Fame, she proceeded right toward them. He had just finished a solitary meal at the California Pizza Kitchen between the Walk of Fame and the Renaissance Marriott Hotel and had been about to turn east on Hollywood in the direction of a bar.

When he saw the woman, his impulse was to charge up to her and ask to have his impressions confirmed or denied: "Excuse me, miss, uh, are you a whore?"

Steve's reality was like a dream where you want to run but stand frozen. Then the thought that he would never see the woman again drove him up the boulevard after her, and she looked only faintly surprised when he made himself say, "They won't let you through there. They've got the red carpet out for Jennifer Aniston or somebody."

The woman studied the man with his eager, artless face and his hair like an early-career Kurt Russell's, dyed sandy blond.

"I'm trying to get to the pharmacy up the street," she replied in a voice that was wry, not as guarded as he might have expected.

"Say, I'm going that way," Steve said, indicating that he could forge a path through the crowds and she was welcome to follow. He began barreling through the throngs and turned his head to find the woman pressing close behind. Though the crowds were expecting one or another A-list star, they grudgingly shifted and buckled to allow the determined man and woman through to the far side of the pavilion before the studio, equidistant from the corner of Highland and the pharmacy. There came only a few rude comments before Steve and the woman emerged and stood gazing at each other.

Steve came out with it: "I think I saw you the other day."

"It's possible. I may not have noticed you amid all the aimless men."

They talked a bit. Her name was Rachel Getz, and she was not from anywhere in Iowa, but a town in central Texas called Brady. Rachel was anything but a whore. She came from a churchgoing family and still considered herself a Christian. She had avidly studied history and literature but on a practical level her studies had not helped much. When she was not making the rounds at the studios looking for work as an extra, she toiled as a secretary in the offices of a trucking firm on the edge of downtown. Once every few months, she made a trip back to Brady, and contrary to what you might think, she was honest with everyone about how things were going for her in L.A. *I have nothing at all to hide*, said the woman's eyes. *Zilch*.

She turned and walked into the pharmacy. Steve waited in the midday sun, feeling his heart thud under his t-shirt until she came out. The talk resumed. Steve did not refer to his day job, stressing instead the relationship he had begun with an obscure but ambitious director named Al Duchamp, thinking that to talk about one thing at the expense of another is not to lie. When Rachel turned back in the direction of the hills to the west, Steve mentioned a website that listed openings for various types of extras. Right now he could not recall the name of it.

"But, if you have time to meet up for a drink a bit later in the week, maybe between now and then it'll come to me."

"I'd be delighted."

Steve came away from the encounter with Rachel Getz's number and more confidence than he had ever felt.

He turned east on Hollywood and went to drink at a bar where his skin felt so thick as to be impervious to any gibes about his troubles. *Rachel*. All the women who had ever enticed Steve had Old Testament names.

After his shift the next day, Steve sped away from the UPS facility on Wilshire with a sense of triumphant expectation. He had summoned the courage to call Rachel Getz. She had agreed to meet him on Saturday night at an unassuming but perfectly nice café on Vermont Avenue. He had to help Rachel see he was not in a state of arrested development, plus it might help if he looked presentable. Steve swore to himself he would never mention video games, comics, graphic novels, or movies of any kind unless the director's name was François or Luis or Claude or something like that. He had a day and a half to brush up.

He swung into the parking lot behind his dingy apartment complex and walked up the peeling staircase reeking of puke to his flat. Inside, he cracked open a Coors, dropped onto the couch, then began to flip through one of the alt weeklies. The paper contained an ad for a reading at a bookstore the following week, by none other than *New York Times* bestselling author Jane Jeffrey, whom Steve had met through the obscure young director, Al Duchamp. As soon as Steve saw Jane's name accompanied by that title, he felt belittled. He knew that next to her, he was a tiny person, a nobody.

He set aside the weekly and flipped through the *L.A. Times*. In recent weeks, Steve, troubled by the accusation he was an *aimless man*, had thought about writing a letter to this paper conveying

his concern over what he saw as the inadequate defenses of the city's water supply. In Steve's view, the reservoirs needed to implement new, clever, prescient methods of protection and surveillance to thwart anyone bent on terrorism. Steve had measures in mind, but of course stating them in a letter to a paper would defeat their purpose. He let his attention wander. In the metro section, he found notices about parolees gunning down store clerks, firemen running away from fires they had underestimated.

Steve flipped through the rest of the paper. Ah, here was a page full of announcements. A young lawyer who graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton had just married a young Ph.D. candidate who graduated with honors from a school Steve had never heard of but knew was important. A money manager had married an associate professor, a pair of kids who both attended USC had tied the knot, on and on.

He got up and walked out of the dingy flat, down the stairwell with its fearsome reek, past the middle-aged black lady who sat on the steps smoking with never a look or word to anyone, out into the evening where he could lull himself into the illusion that the features of every attractive woman had the potential to morph into a look such as Rachel had given him that evening on Sunset.

No. That was wrong. Rachel had warmed to him in a set of highly particular circumstances, in a unique reaction to Steve and his idiosyncratic persona. To feel any other way would ruin the ineffable beauty of what must surely lie ahead. He ambled in the direction of MacArthur Park, where he could almost despise the chords of a guitar reaching his ears for blessing and canonizing what went on in the depths of the shade, in the patches of green bisected by the concrete paths.

There were a few couples about, Salvadoran families relaxing after work, as well as the usual boozers and runaways with track marks decorating their arms. Steve's ire often focused on kids of this variety, on their sense that their plight made the barriers of civilized discourse an imposition, so that shouting "Fuck you!" at a stranger was no more an outrage than the cries of a patient under the knife on an operating table.

He walked the circumference of the park a few times under the gaze of a few of the immigrant families and a handful of women in tight clothes, perched about one of the benches like witches around a steaming pot. Their eyes bore into him as he passed. These were seedy characters, he thought. Up ahead in the dusk, he thought he heard a man, white or a light-skinned Hispanic, whispering a call to passersby, "Smoke? Smoke?"

What did Rachel say about *aimless men*?

Steve strained his eyes to try to discern what was taking place between the dealer and one of the passersby. He began to move in their direction, quickening his pace ever so slightly. But as soon as Steve began to close the distance, the dealer vanished into the dusk and Steve knew those women in their hot pink blouses and zippered black skirts were sharing a good laugh.

On the following morning Steve sat at a table at a public library, poring over newspapers, vowing to ensure that he wouldn't repeat the humiliations of dates where he had exposed his

ignorance of a state capital or who was chief justice of the Supreme Court. Would Rachel want to hear about Steve's ideas for shielding the reservoirs? He guessed not.

He would never forgive himself if he came off sounding like one of his drinking pals, someone who wanted to be a kid all his life. But he felt eminently unready to make a different kind of impression on the woman who, to his amazement, had agreed to meet him in person again. He read op-ed pieces, film, book, and theater reviews. None of the material gestated in an organic way like Steve's thoughts about the reservoirs.

Now Steve had an idea. He could mention this author he had heard about, Fitzgerald, who had died just before finishing a novel about Hollywood. He struggled to remember the title.
The Last Tycoon.

When it was nearly time to meet Rachel, Steve dabbed a bit of Paul Sebastian on his torso and armpits, the spots that drew the shrillest complaints from others at the gym where he worked out. He descended the stairs again past the silent black lady on the steps, went out and got into his Chevy, and drove west along Franklin until he hit Commonwealth.

He sped north toward the hills, past the parking lots and takeout joints on North Commonwealth until he nearly reached Ambrose, in an area utterly incomparable to the residential parts of Kansas City where Steve had lived up to his mid-twenties.

Here, the white of the mission churches was barely distinguishable from the white of the bungalows surmounted by deep brown or ochre shingles and flanked by sloping driveways where the owners left their gleaming Jaguars, Porsches, and Ferraris. The somnolent ancientness of cold gray stone, forever linked in Steve's mind with a mainline to God, here ceded its place to the sun, the daze that always came in the heady afternoon, the bright immaculateness of the palm-lined white where no doctrine had more weight than another.

No, you don't really believe that. If you did, your station in life wouldn't bother you a bit. Not one tiny bit.

You are an aimless man.

The café was up ahead on the left, a third of a mile from Price Street. With an anxious feeling, Steve eased his foot on the brake and slid in between a silver Ferrari and a red Citroën. Where usually he would have felt an animal satisfaction at the prospect of stuffing his face, a sensation only partially vitiated by loneliness, Steve was now aware of a faint nausea. He half expected his date had stood him up.

Rachel had not stood him up. He entered the café, turned left, saw her sitting at a round table with a cloth the hue of adulterated eggnog, smiling in the manner of that first contact on Sunset. She wore a black blouse with a diving neckline and a pair of light gray trousers and beige leather sandals. Her black purse hung on the chair by her right shoulder. For a moment the fear of messing up something important faded as he felt again that he might be the butt of a joke, that he might reach into that purse when Rachel got up to use the restroom, expecting to find a crucifix, but would instead pull out a dildo.

Don't force the words. They come when they come.

Steve fought back the urge to blurt out, *Rachel, did you know I have a professional relationship with a New York Times bestselling author?* He was aware of the punch those words packed.

Get it, Rachel? Immediacy. Importance. Relevance. But he knew that anything Rachel learned about him on this date must emerge as if by accident. He sat there across from the gorgeous blonde with her clipped hair and wry expression.

No one said anything. Agonizing seconds went by.

"I, uh . . . I believe it was Scott F. Fitzgerald who said that there are no part twos in American lives," Steve said.

Rachel looked bewildered. He tried again.

"Fitzgerald, you've heard of him?"

In Rachel's eyes was a faint suggestion she was about to say something, but let it pass. She nodded.

"I've thought about the meaning of that statement. It always seemed to me that Hollywood bears out the truth of it," he told Rachel, whose look he still couldn't fathom.

"Did you read *The Last Tycoon*?"

Oh my God, that novel! The one I was going to read but never got around to?

Steve shook his head.

"Well, Steve, I'm guessing you came across the line in a biography of Fitzgerald."

"Uh, yeah."

In reality, he remembered a scene in the movie *24 Hour Party People* where someone played by Steve Coogan quotes the line. Rachel was not done tormenting him.

"Which biography? The one by Bruccoli?"

Broccoli? How in fuck's name does broccoli write a biography?

Steve nodded again.

"You see, I've been thinking a lot about directors and show business ever since I landed a part in Al Duchamp's next movie. Al is friends with Jane Jeffrey. You know, the bestselling author."

She looked at him, went on gazing into his eyes as they ordered their food. He had to say something to Rachel.

"Uh, something in your expression is very—expressive."

She circled back to an earlier point:

“Fitzgerald had a long relationship with Hollywood, as I’m sure you know from Brucoli.”

“I’m never going to confuse Hollywood with a vegetable.”

“So what bearing does this have on Al Duchamp? Do you think he’s hell-bent on success and fame, Steve?”

“Oh, anyone can see that. He’s as ambitious as anyone, and he wants to be a cross-over between a popular director and an auteur, like Malick or Scorsese or someone.”

“And if he doesn’t pull it off in the first act, he doesn’t pull it off, period.”

“I have no doubt that he’s going to pull it off. He’s got this lady involved who’s a *New York Times* bestselling author—”

For the briefest moment, Steve felt uncertain without quite knowing why. Maybe if that’s what Jane was, her name alone should suffice to identify her? Never mind that no one had ever heard of Jane.

“—and she’s advising him and helping him with casting and publicity and such.”

“Well, Steve, that’s terrific. I won’t exactly be inventing the wheel if I tell you about the value of connections in this town.”

“Oh, yes. Connections. Although personally I’ve just always had this—”

What’s the word? Come on, come on, I know the word. COME ON!

“—this intuitive sense about people.”

Finally Rachel smiled. They both knew of a recent example of this intuition, and Steve’s earnest manner seemed to mitigate the horrendousness of the cliché.

The waiter brought Rachel’s salad and Steve’s chicken pot pie.

“Do you have an agent, Steve?”

Steve almost blew bits of crust all over his date. He finished chewing, as he had drilled himself to do, then said:

“The closest thing I have to an agent—”

Just in time, he checked himself, thought about what she should and shouldn’t know. How long and hard Steve had trained himself in advance of this date to think about what he wanted to say, to do justice to it without quite saying it.

"I value the independence that comes from making my own connections and signing my own deals."

She nodded thoughtfully. Steve seized the opportunity to ask her about her work. By her own account she was in a dry spell, living from paycheck to paycheck, and before they ordered dessert Steve had formulated another idea that might draw her closer to him than ever.

"Have you ever eaten at Amarone in West Hollywood? That real classy Italian place? I'd love to take you there."

"Well, that's awfully kind of you, Steve. But this makes for kind of a good segue to something that's been bothering me a little. It's not that I think you're desperate to impress me or that you're trying to cover up some superficiality of shallowness in your character. But honestly, I'm having trouble seeing how you fit into a larger context or struggle."

"Struggle? I don't understand."

"If we were living in a different time, maybe the lines would be clearer. Maybe I could more easily classify you as a hoplite or a *barbaroi*, a *populare* or an *optimate*, a serf or a boyar, a cavalier or a roundhead, a Jacobin or an aristocrat. Or could I? I don't know. I really don't. Right now—can I be honest with you? Right now you strike me as fit for being a video store clerk who eagerly tells customers that, unlike the other place down there street, here the videos are lined up with their spines facing outward, not their fronts. You know, they're not pretending to offer more movies than they really do."

Her casual erudition left him nearly speechless. He wondered how a girl from Brady, Texas, knew all those terms and could cut him to bits like this.

"Rachel, look. I really think—"

"I'm sorry, Steve. I don't know where all that came from. You've been truly kind to me. At this point I just don't know whether I can see you again. I don't know."

"I was going to say, I really think we should start over. You know, like we just sat down."

For the remainder of the evening they engaged in pleasant if superficial chat.

Since moving into his dingy apartment in the MacArthur Park neighborhood, Steve had been lonely. He was acutely aware of how young women found something seedy about him, as if he were a porn actor, as if his coarse looks and down-home demeanor triggered their built-in scumbag detector and they gave him a wide berth on the street or in bars. Even as he entered a time of life when others got married, became homeowners, settled down, Steve had never managed to cultivate relations with a woman for long. Back home in Kansas City, his flings with Anne Davis and Susie Hutchins went nowhere at all.

But now he knew Rachel.

One evening, while sitting in his flat near MacArthur Park, surrounded by that antique of antiques, a VCR player, and used furniture, Steve chanced to look out his window in the direction

of downtown. How often he found something soothing about the red lights of the radio towers blinking, blinking. But when it came to cleaning up the 'hood, they had a long way to go.

Steve put on his windbreaker, left the building, and headed down to the park where he so often strolled when not in the mood for the bar down on Pico. To be sure, the park had come far since the years when every day brought a gang shooting, then a retaliatory killing. Measured in numbers, crime had vanished faster here than elsewhere in the nation, in keeping with the spirit of the new age championed by the mayor.

When Steve pulled up the zipper of his windbreaker, the object in the holster sewn into the windbreaker, a Colt .45 with a checkered ivory grip, pressed tight against his left armpit. In his front pockets were a cell phone, a tiny spiral notebook.

All was quiet in the park. An Ecuadorian woman with a boy and girl hugging her thighs smiled at Steve as they passed in the dusk, and a muttering wino sat clutching a brown paper bag on one of the benches on the path leading to the lake at the park's center.

Steve scanned the approaches to the lake and the darkening areas under the palms on the far side of the benches, sauntered down to the promenade ringing the lake, and then to the path beyond, where he continued until he had crossed the diameter of the park. Then he stood breathing the cool air, straining his ears for a few moments. A breeze ruffled his hair. Again he inhaled deeply.

Am I really an aimless man?

He started back. The chords of a guitar and a few words in Spanish came to him through the breeze. As he passed by the bench where the vagrant sat with his bottle wrapped in a paper bag, Steve heard the bum make a plea for a handout. When Steve failed to reply, there came muffled curses.

At moments such as this one, Steve felt himself slip out of his current setting and back to a restaurant in Kansas City years ago. Whenever he went into a building, any building, he thought about what he would do if the place were burning down, how he would pull people to safety before the fire melted their skin. On the occasion to which his mind kept circling back, there was nothing so dramatic as a fire, but the waitress, a new girl, kept messing up, forgetting orders or which table they were for. Steve's older sister was about to say something to the waitress but their father took her hand, squeezed it so hard she jumped, and whispered in an acid voice, "I will not have you behaving outrageously, *insulting someone in public.*"

Now in the present, those words returned. Breathing deeply, Steve felt an impulse begin to stir in his breast, then subside and fade completely away as the bum turned to a blur in the space behind him.

Nothing was going on in this park. He left at the same point where he had entered, then crossed the street, slid behind the wheel of his blue Chevy Impala, and drove to La Cienega Boulevard, where he turned onto Fairfax in the direction of the Santa Monica Freeway.

Way off to the north, lights dotted the hills, the lights of fancy homes whose occupants Steve speculated about at times, not obsessively but with the curiosity of a man who has slept next

door to families for years without learning their names.

On Fairfax the traffic was light, the air mild as the Chevy coasted north toward where sleek office parks began to loom under the twinkling lights in the hills. Now something in his peripheral vision made him step on the brake and ease the vehicle toward the curb about twenty feet before an overpass with a sign for Highway 10 West at its center.

Easy to miss in the half-light was a black Saab parked on the sidewalk near a narrow ramp leading off Fairfax to the parking lot of a factory.

The lot's gate was locked and there was no reason to stop your car on the shoulder beneath the overpass.

No reason at all.

Steve eased the Chevy to a stop ten yards behind the Saab, on the south side of the narrow ramp, put it in park, and got out. Now passing cars were as rare as birds over a remote coral reef, and Steve could but dimly make out a couple of figures moving in the shadows on the far side of the Saab. What could they be up to?

He could not fend off the feeling that came now, not giddiness, exactly, but a warm rush that could make him smirk if he did not check it. With caution he advanced, past the ramp, on the street side of the Saab, where no one was likely to see him without turning all the way around. The two figures loitering a couple of pillars down from the far side of the overpass were not about to do that.

The air was mild. As Steve put one foot forward, then another, they came into relief: a pair of teens with a can of spray paint, emblazoning some kind of tag for their gang on the rectangle of stone supporting the pillars under the overpass.

They whispered to each other without noticing Steve. He froze. He looked up and down Fairfax, at the receding red lights of a car heading north. Calmly, noiselessly, Steve reached into his front right pocket, withdrew the notebook, and fished a pen from his breast pocket. It was so cool and quiet here.

Opening the notebook, he strained to make out the Saab's license plate.

He could almost see the number, almost, maybe if he just got five feet closer.

Just a bit closer now. He almost had it.

One of the teens heard the click of Steve's pen emerging from its plastic sheath, and they both spun around. As soon as they saw what Steve was doing, they knew they must have the notebook. They both stepped forward. They were thin yet had a droopy appearance in baggy jeans and t-shirts, and had slicked-back hair.

The younger of the two, about fifteen, reached for something in his front pocket in a move clearly meant to frighten Steve. Both took another step toward him.

And another.

And yet another step.

And one more.

“Give it up,” said the older.

The younger kept his hand in his pocket, clutching something, keeping his eyes on the intruder.

Steve shook his head and continued writing down details about the Saab, his pen moving coolly but methodically across the page, like a census taker.

The older teen repeated the command, louder and more menacingly.

Steve went right on doing what he was doing. Even now his look was banal. They both took yet another step toward Steve.

“Give it up, hombre!”

The younger one withdrew a big knife from his front pocket and unfurled the blade. A knife was no match for what Steve had inside his windbreaker. He reached inside, then felt suddenly as if all the circuits that sent signals to his brain were screaming with the urgency of worlds falling into the sun, like that moment when a guillotine’s blade strikes the base of a neck.

A third teen had crept up behind Steve and swung a pipe at the back of his head. Steve screamed and keeled forward, his hand sliding out of his windbreaker just in time to break his fall.

The two kids in front of him lunged, then took turns kicking, punching, and spitting on Steve. One of them grabbed the notebook just before all three teens dashed to the Saab.

Steve reached into the windbreaker, pulled out what he had stored there, raised it, and fired. The third teen, the one who had crept up behind Steve, screamed and fell face first into the dust. Steve fired again and sheared off the ear of one of the other teens. The two who still stood cried out, cursed mightily, and hoisted their fallen friend into the rear of the Saab.

The tires of that vehicle spun dizzily before it screeched and careened away from the overpass, as if the teens were racers commandeering an ordinary car. Steve wailed and moaned and spat blood onto the dirty pavement as the lights of the Saab accelerated up Fairfax for about thirty seconds before turning out of sight.

He lay there bleeding, moaning, thinking he would die, until in his peripheral vision the blurry form of a car pulled up and the driver, a young black woman, poked her head out.

“Oh my God, sir, are you all right? Do you need to go to the hospital?”

Steve staggered around to the passenger’s side and climbed in beside her, and the car sped up the street. He found it incredibly fortunate that this nice lady obviously knew the way to the

nearest hospital, but other thoughts had to come out first.

"It's started," he said, spitting up blood all over the car's interior.

"What, hon?"

"It's started."

"What's started? Look, don't try to talk now, okay?"

Blood flowed into his eyes and he couldn't see the road. He spat up more blood.

"The war, the conflict. Us and them. But not you, I don't mean you, don't worry, I like you. Do you like me well enough?"

"Don't talk, okay? I know the nurses where you're going. They'll fix you up."

"It's okay, I got the license plate number. I remember it. LGA—"

She looked at him with all apparent solicitude as he struggled to recall the characters on the plate. They had taken his notebook, the bastards.

"LGA ... something something. Oh, fuck it."

"Please don't talk."

"Would you just kill me now?" he said as more blood streamed down his face and the upper part of his torso felt hot and damp.

"We'll be there in a minute."

"I think it'll come back to me. In which case maybe I do want to live."

"Please shut up!" the nice lady said.

"No. I can't remember."

He reached for the door. Just before he could open it and hurl himself out of the car, the driver pressed a button and locked all the doors as her foot pressed down hard on the gas. At last he found the presence of mind to say what he needed to say.

"I don't need a hospital. I want to go and see a young woman with a Biblical name. She doesn't know whether I'm a *populare* or an *optimate*, and I need to clarify certain things."

He held out a scrap of paper with an address scribbled on it, and the kind woman took it and began to scrutinize the crabbed hand.





the manipulator
Camellia Paul

she had to say she hated us if it said so in the script

Gerald Yelle

I said I already did the Odyssey. Don't make me do it again.
But then they wanted to know if my sister did it.
I said she was busy taking care of our mother.
They said I ought to go over there and give her a hand.
That way she'd have time to do her Odyssey.
I said yeah, right, you got it. By the time I got there
I needed a bath. I reminded her she had to stop spraying
her peonies with malathion. Yeah, she said, I heard
all about it from the lawyer. I said and don't forget to
do your Odyssey. She said I'll do it as soon as I'm done
with our mother, now go take your bath so I can
give her hers. I ran into our father as I was drying off.
I shook his hand and tapped him on the shoulder.
I could tell he was eager get back to work. I said but you
finished the Odyssey years ago. He said he still
had to go over our mother's. I wondered if seeing me
half-dressed embarrassed him by reminding
him how soon we'd end up in one another's underworld.



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matriarchy

Gerald Yelle

I was breathing through my nose but my mouth was open. So why didn't I close it. The woman next door said leave it open –just don't say anything negative, she said and flush your toilet-paper confession and your testimony away –in case the landlord comes. But I was getting dry mouth. I wanted tea from the vending machine if only I could find it –we were still in the process of moving and not everything was unpacked yet. I moved the stuffed chair by the window and had a clear view of the building across the street. The evening sun gave it that burnished glow –the same one I remember from where we used to live. It was my godmother who spoiled the mood, brewing my tea then sticking her finger in it. I went to warm it in the microwave and spilled it on the floor. I grabbed a paper towel and realized it would take a whole roll. I was looking for a rag when my aunt said the TV was too loud and I should turn it off. But my favorite show was on so I turned it down instead.



people keep talking about beatnik poems...

Doug Anderson

People Keep Talking About Beatnik Poems
So I Wrote One and It's Only a Little Bit Awful
but When You Are Freefalling through Hell
You Get to be Imperfect

Beatnik is probably about the nik
as in Sputnik and it is also about the beat
as in cops busting heads
and it's about Allen Ginsburg and his many sins
and his levitation of the Pentagon
and it's about Jack Kerouac who wrote a mediocre book
that nevertheless sold millions
because we all wanted to be on the road
and about William S. Burroughs' alcoholic grandiosity
when he tried to shoot an apple off his wife's head in Mexico,
but mostly it's about how the nineteen fifties
sat on our shoulders like a big stone bird with our neck in its beak
and how somebody named Hoffman
invented LSD and how Timothy Leary
would be elevated to popedom then slither down a hole of betrayal
but it's more about the stone bird
and how we wanted to get it off our shoulders
along with McCarthy and the nonexistent red threat
which was really about billionaires
keeping all their money and ours too
and it was about how women were on fire inside for centuries
and were going to blow the stone bird to bits
and it was about the pill for good or for ill
and terrible rhymes, and long, looping Whitmanesque lines
that gathered all of us into their embrace
and it was all we had and its images were not quite formed,
but longing for birth
and when we hit the streets and there would be
two Civil Rights Acts and Women's Reproductive Rights
so no matter how cynical you get about
the imperfections of the major players
all that really happened and we pray
its spirit will survive the present nightmare
of Trump/GOP trying to rewrite reality
and inculcate the stupid, but they'll fail
because nobody can un-know what they know,
and it didn't work with asshole in Germany or asshole in Russia
or asshole in Italy and it's not going to work now
because we're going to keep on keepin' on.
Verily, please stand aside to not be hit
by the stone bird's fragments falling.



submission

Doug Anderson

He sent the poems out.
 A year went by. Two.
 His hair went from gray to white.
 His dog died and he got a puppy.
 One woman left, another arrived,
 and then there were none at all
 for a long time.
 Years sped by.
 The next door neighbor died
 and some strange people moved in
 with their goth daughter
 who practiced nunchuks
 in the back yard.
 The puppy grew up
 and bit a neighbor who sued him.
 The police came looking
 for the goth daughter.
 The parents shrugged.
 The neighbor dropped his suit
 because, hey,
 it was just a little fang nip.
 There was a new president
 and a new war.
 Gas prices went up.
 The goth daughter disappeared
 for a month
 then came home as a man,
 gave up the nunchuks.

The poet's teeth wobbled
 and he got implants.
 His bowels got fussy.
 He had a new lover for a while.
 He bought a new car
 and gave the old away.
 The president was impeached.
 A gay-hating senator
 was busted soliciting a cop
 in a men's room.
 He was old now.
 His knees hurt.
 He opened an email
 and learned his poems
 had been accepted
 by a journal called
 Anais Nin's Black Eye.
 He would receive two free copies
 and be recommended
 for a Pushcart Prize.
 He sat down
 and read the poems he'd sent.
 Who the fuck wrote these
 he said.
 Who the fuck was that guy.



and still

David P. Miller

Broad, polished floorboards, set down in the 1890s when this house was born. The entire third floor, one bare room without walls or plumbing. Someone is seated on a round cushion, black with red center, directly on the floor. The windows behind face east, though not directly, so when morning sunbeams slide their length across the uninterrupted floor, they paint parallelograms. Two street-level voices move the air with loud greetings or a dispute. The sitter faces the room's single column, once a chimney stack, plastered white. Near the base, a scrap of cobweb flutters in the heat pump's warm air. It appears as a triangle moored to the column, a sail in the breeze, becoming more luminous as the sun's heat shifts. The sitter watches it sift yellow from the wood's gold.

Men on snowmobiles
chase wolves till they drop. Others
burn pups in their dens.



sunshone windows

David P. Miller

Two pavements of light
cross the floor. An
instant, one bird, two
winged silhouettes,
flying right, left, gone.

Lone moth, spot-
sized, flutters into,
out of one sun-sheet.
Quick-sparking waver,
winking on, off, on.



ariadne's island

Alissa Simon

I

Hair dances like a dress
boiling in sea froth.
Blank-faced Theseus
sails away.

II

I can swim
as fast as any man
but human speed
will not save me now.

Black sail disappears and
I surrender, exhausted,
to empty beach.

Watery hem wraps shins.
Feet knead sand like dough.
Waves drag out to sea
in to shore
out to sea. Relentless
indecision holds me here
in waist-high water.

III

I love him still
and hate, hate his expressionless
eyes, the flowing hair
the unquestioned
confidence.

Waning sail
seals my coffin.
Blind, manic hands
tear at weaving water.

If only I had tethered hope
not strength, tethered love
not beauty, tethered a hero
with heroic qualities.

V

Let water
sway
let loneliness in let love
out
let god alone let heroes
lie
they leave and leave and leave and
what hope
is a world
built upon ego?

Rage rage rage into
the voiceless wind –
Ariadne,
who is blank is a
blank
is verse is lost is
no self no self no self
only sun
and sand weaving
a woman's toes.



composite crustose bronchioles

Alissa Simon

Great gray granite
breaches
from desert floor

barnacled in red, green,
and gold.
Breathless, I arrive

among moss and lichen.
We cling
together like a tiny

nuclear family,
plant and
animal breathing,

metaphorizing
the air
through imagination.

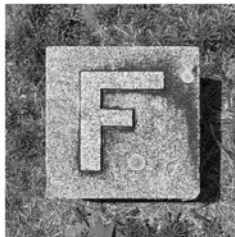
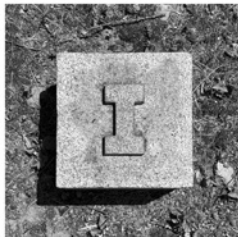
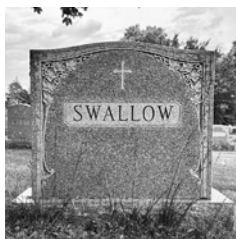


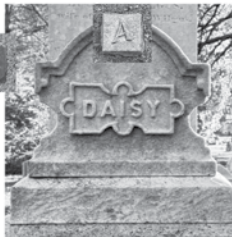
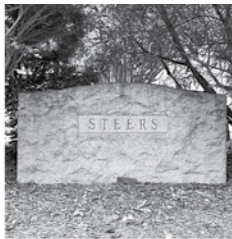
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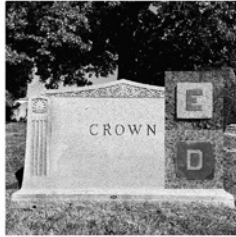
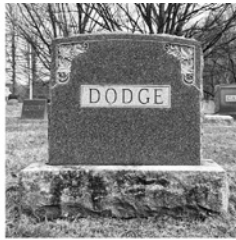
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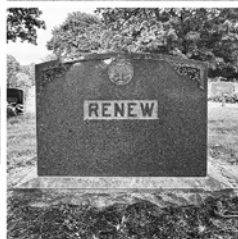
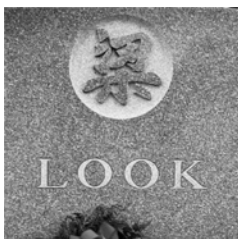
the street rollers of yellow

Robert Zott









belly buttons

Martin Elster & Joan Axelrod-Contrada

She has an innie.
He has an outie.
He thinks his is cool
but hers makes her pouty.

His button is rare
(just one out of ten)
while hers is quite common
in women and men —

a vertical slit
with a hood at the top.
When she shows off her navel,
would anyone stop?

Zippy would love it
if hers were unique
like the shape of a spiral,
a shape that is chic.

When she bends down to look
at the common design
smack in her middle,
she can't help but whine.

"Look at my button,"
she calls out to Norm.
"It's a run-of-the-mill
and commonplace form."

"Zip," exclaims Norman,
"Your navel might take
it personally,
and your belly will ache.

"And, besides," Norman says,
"it's quite deep and aesthetic —
sexy, in fact,
and super magnetic."

He grabs a small marigold
from the back deck,
approaches his girlfriend
and kisses her neck,

then places the stem
in her innie's cute smile,
the flower's bright yellow
shining a mile.

"Your innie's attracting
my outie, you know?
Let's rub them together
and maybe they'll glow."

She says, "Who would have thought
this forgettable place
in my torso could double
as a natural vase?"



illegal aliens on a yellow moon

Martin Elster & Joan Axelrod-Contrada

Far, far from Earth, a craft with Norm and Zip lands on a moon
that glows like a yellow nightlight. Everything —
plants, air, the ground itself — shimmers like a lake at noon.
Tiny beings surround them in a ring.

Says Zip, “What are they, Norm? They only come up to our knees.”
“We come in peace,” Norm says to them. They blink
their prism forms in rhythmic pulses. Norm and Zippy freeze.
Says Zip, “Do they know English, do you think?”

“They talk with light,” says Norman, “not with voice or written grammar.”
Zip wishes she had Alien Translate.
“If all their lights were sounds,” says Norman, “they would make a clamor.”
He grabs his flashlight to participate.

He shines Morse-code-like dots and dashes, trying to say “Hello.”
To them it means, “I SEEK THE QUEEN’S DEVOTION.”
The queen turns yellow, beaming out her favorite courtship glow,
her special hue for amorous emotion.

“Norm,” she says, “why is that creature hugging your legs like that?”
He and the queen are ringed by yellow lights
as they crown his head with a luminescent royal wedding hat.
Just what, he wonders, are his civil rights?

“They’re trying to marry you off!” Zip says to Norman. To the crowd,
she screams “He’s taken! Mine! He’s mine, all mine!!!”
She tries to storm into the lights. She’s blocked. “For crying out loud,
Norman, do something. Give them a sign!”

Norm clicks his flashlight on and off, attempting to explain.
The Glowlings think he’s saying, “KISS ME NOW!”
The Celestial Shaman shimmers. “No!” yells Zip. “End this queen’s reign!”
This isn’t something Zippy can allow.

As nervous Norm is set to kiss the little Glowling queen,
Zip dashes off straight for the rocket ship,
commanding its AI to translate Glowling language. Green
and yellow ship lamps dance and flash and skip.

The Glowlings stare, astonished by the dazzling display.
The queen flares, “Go away! Leave us alone!”
Back home, Norm gulps and asks his girl, “What did the ship’s lights say?”
“They said, HE SNORES, and the queen fell off her throne!”



had i been born a boy

Chrissy Howland

Take me to my cave
And exhort
Scrawl
Carve
Chip
The letters of my own name
First
Without last
It is the only thing given to me
By a woman
And remains both mine
And no one else's

My stamina for
Love has fallen down
Like a man with a walking cane
On a day he's felt brazen
Like a woman walked by
Past
Young and fresh and he forgot
Forgets
For one moment
Of his weakness
His age,
Hers

My middle name is not
Death or dying
But it stings
When my skin is
Ripped or
Seeing myself in a mirror by surprise
Sags
I still wish it could be
As glamorous as it looks
On television
I sup myself from this
Barren place underground
This town they call
Home
Birthplace
Familial
I carve down an alphabet
From the rot in the trunk
From the peel in the paint

I forget to eat only when I'm
Sullen
Or aroused
But hunger always
Keeps me from orgasm
And orgasm always
Confuses me with love

If I was a man
My name would have been
Michael
Like the angel
Or Christopher
Like the saint
I would have been
Easier to look upon
But less likely to love
But I would have
been loved, exceptionally

Do you think if I didn't
Look at myself for
Fifty days
I would see more clearly

When those days
Were up
Would I be
Ghost
Ghoul
Girl
Gremlin
Giant
A peach
A pit
A paradigm

Would I be
Thinner
Darker
Smaller

My whole name
Is large
Like a mouthful of soup
Cold like a child with a microwave
And several cans of green beans
After school television
Programs
Parentless
Penial

Let the angels down to sing
Like Sunday service
Like cathedrals
Like modern music
Latch and key

Give me:
Arrows
Sparrows
Slings

What is the word
That girl loved?
The one for hooks and latches
For rock climbing

Call me
Carabiner

I do not want songs of love
Back break
Don't make me declarations

I've found this cave
And I climb
I etch
Scribble
Maintain
Today there will be 31 candles on
My cake
Seven letters
A word for your second child
Your second wife
Your next affair

If I was a boy
As they said I'd be
I'd have drug you down
Like all men drag
Like all men
Plunder
Pillow
Philander
Piggy back
We'd have been twins
My mother and I
Teach me how to lie
Teach me to spell
Affair
Arousal
Indecency
Classless
Teach me to spell
Lacquer
Self-control

I am the rot in the trunk
I am the peel in the paint



ambiguous loss

Michael Tillyer

Bilious clouds blow up a threat to flood a sulfurous sand-splayed arroyo with washing grief.

Whatever amber memory moors an image of a soft brow, a curl of dark hair, a yellow blouse, another is loosed.

Finding its way on a dark stone floor, a trickle of urine curls toward what is present and might be lost.

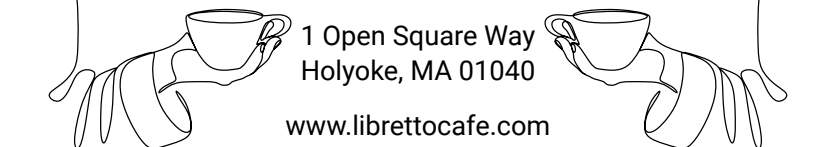


44

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well, actually (a watery folk tale)

Pia Long

Once upon a time, at the beginning of Everything, there were two spirits with no names and no desires other than to observe. One went into the sky and waited there to see what life would look like. One went into the ground, fell into its deep waters, and waited there to hear what life would sound like.

For millions of years, the two spirits saw and heard everything. Their vast and wild shapes, one like a fluffy cloud and the other like quicksilver, were stable and still, taking nourishment from fulfilling their purpose.

One day, mists rose of black smoke, rivers ran red. Both spirits became agitated. This brand-new life had barely blinked yet was changing everything around it so fast.

Where before, a creature came to be, lived and then was no longer, this new life was leaving behind a much bigger mark of itself than anything that had come before. It grew greedily, curiously. It built and destroyed. In what seemed like a mere moment to the ancient spirits, the sights and sounds of their world became too much to comprehend.

Something had changed and their shapes were now changing, too. Splintering. Twisting. No longer being The One that Sees and The One That Hears, they were now many.

There was also beauty. Music fell through to the ground waters and the waters formed rivers and the rivers were topped by sparkling droplets of love and longing. Majestic structures rose up high enough to be seen from the sky and gave form to awe.

The fragments witnessed lust and love, heard tenderness and care. They witnessed hate, fear and greed.

Their shapes were now in constant flux.

Many ages passed.

One sweltering summer's day in 2025, a young man walked down a narrow street in an old English village. His Beats by Dre were making his ears too hot and his tight, straight jeans were squeezing his balls. He was too into the Andrew Tate podcast for him to truly hear or see anything.

There was a green with an old well in the middle of it right ahead. The well was not in use, but had been left where it stood, long before an estate agent had opened on the High Street or water came in bottles.

When Username: RomanSalute224 finally realised that he was about to pass out from heat stroke unless he slowed down, he headed to the corner of the green that was in partial shade, sat down next to the well and leaned against its cool stones. He took off his headphones. He

wasn't carrying a bag, because that is such a beta-male thing to do, so he put the headphones on the ground next to him. He didn't have water with him either. He was parched.

"MEOW", came a sound from the well. Only... it didn't

sound exactly like a cat. It sounded like a cat saying

"MEOW", not like a cat meowing.

RS224, whose real name was Jack, didn't react at first.

He was definitely suffering from heat stroke.

"Help me," said the cat.

"WHO SAID THAT?" said Jack, trying to look around and realising his neck was quite stiff. Maybe he should have listened to mum and worn a hat and sunscreen. And maybe going out on a bender with Dave and Tarquin the night before he was supposed to help Nan with her physiotherapy appointment was not the best idea. Jack quickly dismissed that thought. Why should his life be dictated by anyone? It's peak masculinity to make your own rules. In fact, he should man up, get up, walk the rest of the way to Nan's, and not look back.

"Help me, Jack," said the cat, and on hearing his name, Jack sprung up from the ground so fast that he stumbled, lost his balance and stepped on something. Crunch.

"What the FUCK?" said Jack and looked under his foot where his headphones were now in distinctly less headphone-like shape.

"How do you... what are you?" said Jack as he peered down the well. A sleek, black cat with glossy, smooth fur was hanging on for dear life off a single jutting stone on the inner wall, just within reach.

Jack leaned in and threw the cat down the well. It didn't make a sound.

Fuck THAT shit, he thought to himself. I might just go back home and let Nan sort herself out. Why am I needed when we're getting a taxi anyway? And it's their job to help Nan, not mine. I'd just be sat there, waiting the whole time again and she can barely tell I'm there. What a waste of time. He picked up what was left of his headphones and started heading back.

A few paces up the hill on a low, stone wall in front of a picturesque cottage covered in an abundance of pink climbing roses, sat the most beautiful girl Jack had ever seen. She was daintily perched, dressed in the merest slip of a black bodycon dress that showed off her perfect shape, her slim, pale legs glistening in the sun as though freshly oiled. Her ballerina arms languidly weaved through her impossibly long, shiny, black hair. She was brushing her fingers through it, combing it with her bare hands, and somehow the movements were filled with sorrow.

Jack had never stopped in his tracks for anything or anyone, especially not a girl. This time he did. Something about her was so captivating that he could hardly breathe.

Was this love? Is this how it happens? Why had he walked from his to Nan's a hundred times and never noticed this cottage before? Where had this girl been all his life? Was she visiting? Had she just moved here?

The girl looked up at Jack. Her eyes were a colour that was hard to describe. They reminded Jack of spilled petrol.

"I lost my cat," she said.

"Uhh..." said Jack.

"Can you help me look for it? It's a small, black cat and she must not have gotten far, we keep her indoors, but she jumped out of the bedroom window this morning," said the girl with the impossibly long, black hair.

Finding his swagger, Jack started: "Well, actually..." and then stopped himself, SHIT, shit, shit, double shit, triple shit, what good would it be to tell her that yes, he'd seen exactly such a cat just now, and sorry, but it might be dead because I THREW IT DOWN THE WELL.

"I'll help you look," said Jack, with the confidence of a used car salesman. "I'm sure it can't be far. What's its name?"

"Hiisi," said the girl.

"He...she?" tried Jack.

"Not quite," said the girl and smiled a little.

Her smile filled Jack with moonlight. Her smile made Jack feel like he wanted to see more of it and would not be able to rest until he could make her laugh with joy. He started to regret his earlier actions. He must have been hearing things. The hangover and heatstroke combo had done a number on him. Of COURSE the cat hadn't spoken to him, much less addressed him by name. It hadn't made a sound after it...fell, had it? It hadn't made a sound! It must have found another piece of stone to hang on to, cats are like that, they are agile, they don't just fall, they land with purpose. It must still be holding on. It must.

"Come with me," said Jack to the girl with the impossibly long black hair. "Come with me because I think I know where your cat is."

They walked down towards the well. Jack in front, the girl behind. Jack briefly felt separated from his senses because it seemed that there was nobody behind him at all. He turned around and the girl was following him, walking with her slight feet almost as though gliding. Jack smiled. This was going so well, he'd impress her, and she'd owe her gratitude to him and then he'd take her for lunch and then, and then.

Jack peered down the well.

The girl pushed and Jack fell, and fell, and fell.

The girl with the impossibly long, black hair; who was really Hiisi herself, who was the billionth splinter of The One Who Hears, who was quicksilver and darkness, who was the caress of water and its suffocating embrace, jumped after him and took her true shape once more.

The well echoes what it hears.

Don't worry about Jack, though.

He is now running a highly successful Cryptocurrency business.

Underground.

The Perfume

Well, actually

Description:

Plunge into the depths. Incredible aquatic freshness with a burst of citrus and timut pepper. A confident aromatic accord of armoise, lavandin and geranium sits atop a deep minerality. An empowering base of Karmawood, Ambroxan and cedarwood embodies the essence of masculinity.

Notes:

Armoise, Bergamot, Timut pepper, Lemon

Lavandin, Geranium, Green notes, Well water

Damp ancient stone, Karmawood, Cedarwood, Ambroxan, Patchouli

About the formula:

This fragrance characterises the kind of scent our protagonist would wear, and the formula reflects many of the codes popular in current designer and mass-market masculine perfumery. Pia's story references Finnish folk beliefs about "vesihiisi" and "näkki", water demons who lure people into the depths of cold, dark water. In our case, a well, actually.

WELL, ACTUALLY

MATERIAL NAME	QUANTITY
ALLYL AMYL GLYCOLATE	0.20
AMBRETTOLIDE	0.40
AMBROCENIDE® 10% TEC	3.00
AMBROXAN™	4.00
AMYL SALICYLATE	0.50
ARMOISE OIL	0.20
BACDANOL®	1.00
BERGAMOT ECO ESSENCE BIOLANDES	10.00
CEDARWOOD OIL VIRGINIA	4.00
CEDROL CRYSTALS NAT (EX CEDARWOOD)	0.50
CIS-3-HEXENYL ACETATE 10% TEC NAT	0.30
DIHYDROMYRCENOL	10.00
DYNASCONE®10 10% TEC NAT	2.00
ETHYL LINALOL	2.00
EVERNYL®	0.30
EXALTOLIDE® TOTAL	1.80
FLOROL®	3.00
GERANIUM OIL EGYPT	0.20
GERANYL ACETATE	0.30
HEDIONE®	7.50
HELVETOLIDE®	0.20
HYDROXYCITRONELLAL	0.20
IONONE ALPHA	0.20
ISO E SUPER®	7.50
KARMAWOOD™	4.00
LAVANDIN OIL GROSSO	1.50

MATERIAL NAME	QUANTITY
LEMON OIL SICILY	0.40
LIFFAROME™	0.20
LINALYL ACETATE	2.00
MELONAL® 10% TEC NAT	0.50
MUSC T®	7.50
MUSCENONE® DELTA	1.00
NEOFOLIONE™	1.00
PATCHOULI OIL LIGHT INDONESIA	1.50
SCENTENAL®	0.80
TERRANOL® 10% TEC NAT	0.20
TIMUT PEPPER OIL 1% TEC NAT	2.00
TRIETHYL CITRATE NAT	17.20
VANILLIN	0.20
VANORIS	0.40
VERDOX®	0.30
TOTAL	100.00



the ten stages of love (a one-act play)

Mark Sbani

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SHELLY 26 years old, a mermaid with a broken tail

ROCCO 32 years old, a sailor lost at sea

CUPID 44 years old, the winged god of love

PLACE

A rock island, in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean

TIME

Back in the past



SCENE 1

SHELLY *sunbathes on a rock. The waves lap and a seagull calls. We hear the rustling of wings. Then CUPID enters, unnoticed*

CUPID

Silence, mortals! I am Cupid. Roman god of desire. And these are the *Ten Stages of Love*. I'm a demented little cherub. I like pairing mermaids and sailors. I love watching them mate.

SHELLY *sings a dramatic aria*

CUPID

Allright, now we can begin.

Offstage, a naval ship crashes into the rock island. The lights flicker red. We hear massive explosions and sailors drowning. ROCCO enters, half-submerged, floating on a chest

CUPID

Come on, let's look in on them. Shelly and Rocco. He — a ship-wrecked sailor. She — a mermaid with a broken tail. They meet on a rock island, in the wild Atlantic. I see them, but they don't see me. I'm not present. I'm invisible. Inaudible. (*Prances around*) Mermaids are a fascinating part of nature.

A baby sea turtle crawls by. SHELLY picks him up and kisses his bald head

CUPID

Some deny they even exist, but answer their call and you'll find one. A total Sea-Betty. Part woman, part fish. All wiggle.

SHELLY

All by myself. No one to talk to. It's just me and my misshapen tail. (*Blows a conch shell*)

CUPID

You see, Shelly can't swim because of her injury.

SHELLY

(*Admiring herself in a hand mirror*)

At least I'm having a good hair day. I don't know what I did differently. Hm. Sometimes it's just effortless. (*Lifts up her eyes and stares at the Sun*) I love the Sun, but I can't get away from it. Red rays. Always in my face. Singeing me. Soothing me. The Sun. Yes, the Sun appears perfectly round, a huge letter O, but it's an optical illusion. A circle is the only shape that can't fall in on itself. Yet stars do, all the time. They die and collapse.

CUPID

(*Aiming his arrow at SHELLY*)

Ahhh. Boy meets girl. (*Shoots SHELLY*) Pheromones are in the air-air-air! (*Shoots ROCCO*) Struck by my arrows, they see each other and are interested.

SHELLY and ROCCO look closely at each other and blush

CUPID

When I look at Shelly and Rocco, my heartstrings go—

We hear a harp play. SHELLY and ROCCO freeze in place

CUPID

Please sit and admire my tableau vivant. A living picture of love. (*Frames them with his fingers*) Stage One: First Blush.

The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 2

CUPID

Stage Two: He Overreaches.

ROCCO

Holy mackerel! Your song was mesmerizing. What do you call that?

SHELLY

Scales.

ROCCO

Scales, huh? Did you sing it with me in mind?

SHELLY

No. We just met. I don't even know your name.

ROCCO

Strange. I know your face from somewhere. Hi, I'm Rocco.

SHELLY

(*Flirtingly*)

Hi, Rocco.

ROCCO

What's your name?

SHELLY

Shelly.

ROCCO

Oh, you look exotic, Shelly. (*Whistles*) Rare.

SHELLY

What are you doing here?

ROCCO

You know, just lounging.

SHELLY

"Just lounging?" Out on the ocean?

ROCCO

Well, my ship sank and took all hands with it. I'm the sole survivor. See all the smoke? Look.

(Floats over to SHELLY) Wow. Are you a mermaid?

SHELLY

(Sarcastically)

No, I'm a goldfish. *(Flaps her tail and smacks her lips)*

ROCCO

(Smirking)

Mind if I join you? *(Looks her up and down)*

SHELLY

What, you want to come up here?

ROCCO

I want to be where you are.

SHELLY

Please, I have a lot of things to do. I can't be bothered.

ROCCO

Oh, you got shit to do? Busy, huh?

SHELLY

Yes. Now please stop talking to me.

ROCCO

Wow, I never met a real Siren before.

SHELLY

Sirens are half-bird.

ROCCO

Oh right, and you got a fish's tail. *(Enamored by her tail)* I can't take my eyes off it. Green-blue scales. Orangy foil. It's reflective.

SHELLY

It's whatever. *(Bats ROCCO'S hand away)*

ROCCO

Are you good luck or bad luck?

SHELLY

I'm terrible luck. I don't like you and I don't like your Navy ways.

ROCCO

What? You got other options? (*Pulls on SHELLY'S arm, as he climbs up the rocks*) I hooked one. A mermaid. Fuck yeah!

SHELLY and ROCCO freeze

CUPID

Muuuuuuuuusic!

We hear the harp play

CUPID

A GOOD SAILOR'S HARD TO FIND
 MERMAIDS ALWAYS GET THE OTHER KIND
 (BA-BA-BA-BAH)
 SOME SAY I'M STUPID BUT CUPID'S SMART
 (BA-BA-BA-BAH)
 I KNOW THE WORKINGS OF YOUR HEART
 (BA-BA-BA-BAH)
 I'M A TRAINED DEAD-EYE WITH MY DARTS
 (BA-BA-BA-BAH)
 THEY'RE THROWN AT VITAL BODY PARTS
 (DO-DO-DO-DOH)
 SHE GETS PLEASURE FROM CUPID'S FEATHERS
 TICKLING HER FLOWERY NETHERS
 (DO-DO-DO-DOH)

CUPID frames them with his fingers. The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 3**CUPID**

Stage Three: She Bristles.

SHELLY

Ohhh, that's a big smile you're wearing, sailor.

ROCCO

Well, I smile when I'm happy, I sleep when I'm tired, and I stuff my mouth when I'm hungry. That's just how I am.

The hatchling crawls by

ROCCO

Hi!

SHELLY

Hello.

ROCCO

Hey, what's to eat around here, huh? (*Yanks her tail*) How about a light dinner?

SHELLY

Ouch! Rocco! That hurt! Without meaning to, you bruised my tail.

ROCCO

I didn't bruise you. Where?

SHELLY

Right here. I'm not making it up.

ROCCO

Jesus. What are you, made out of tissue paper? Look, I got rough hands, alright? I'm a warfighter.

SHELLY

Well, watch it.

ROCCO

Come on, baby. All your troubles are over, now that I'm around. (*Holding up SHELLY'S hand mirror, admiring himself*) I'm a well-made man. Tallest officer in the Navy. And the most devastating. (*Rubs SHELLY'S tail*) That's right, you can't do better than Old Rocco here.

SHELLY

Don't touch me. (*Slaps ROCCO in the face with her tail — his white cap pops off*)

SHELLY and ROCCO freeze

CUPID

Shelly's no Disneyfied mermaid. That's kid's stuff. Lame! I'm giving Ariel a makeover. I don't like her sweet and vapid. I like her twisted and mean. The bitterer, the betterer. (*Frames SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers*)

The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 4

ROCCO, looking into SHELLY'S hand mirror, shaves with a straight razor. CUPID places the baby sea turtle into SHELLY'S hands

CUPID

Stage Four: They Get to Know Each Other.

ROCCO

(Putting his arm around SHELLY)

Come here. You know I like you, right?

SHELLY

Well, I don't know why.

ROCCO

I do. I just do.

SHELLY

Even though I'm a saltwater bitch?

CUPID leans on the rock, in profile

ROCCO

Who called you that? "*A saltwater bitch.*"

SHELLY

Sailor boy named Scruffy. He said my eyes were dull and fishy. He said that.

ROCCO

That's no way to treat a mermaid. Any mermaid. Tell me, what'd Scruffy do to you?

SHELLY

He whistled at me.

ROCCO

He whistled at you? That's all?

SHELLY

Well, he slapped me around a little too.

ROCCO

Oh yeah? Really?

SHELLY

My father caught us together. He took Scruffy down in the coral and drowned him. Then he broke my tailbone. My tail, Rocco. My tail. He snapped it in half. Daddy disabled me.

ROCCO

Uhh, is Daddy coming back, or?

SHELLY

My sister — she's a boat-whore. You can tell a boat-whore by her flirtatious dancing and

the seagrass in her hair. My sister wanted to have her way with Scruffy, but I enticed him more.

ROCCO

Well, yeah.

SHELLY

I'm her baby sister. I shouldn't stand in her way. I can't get engaged, because she hasn't gotten engaged. The King commands it. My father, the Old Sea King. I'm supposed to produce eggs and diet. That's my only function. Daddy says so all the time.

ROCCO

Uh-huh. And what's your sister like?

SHELLY

She's a vain bitch. Loves attention. Fucking hates me. So she opened her fat mouth. About me and Scruffy. She said I poisoned him. No! Daddy drowned him. Anyway, her body count is way higher than mine.

ROCCO

Yeah? Tell me about your undersea family. I'd love to learn more.

SHELLY

Well, the Old Sea King? He disowned me.

ROCCO

The prick.

SHELLY

You're all pricks, Rocco. Please don't get mad.

ROCCO

(Agitated)

I'm not mad.

SHELLY

Your eyes are turning black.

ROCCO

I'm not. If I wanted to hurt you, I could. But I never would.

SHELLY

Well, we're both susceptible to pain.

ROCCO

Shelly, don't be that way. I've sailed around the world and I've never seen a girl like you. That hair! That smile! Those eyes! That mermaid! You! With the tits! I want you. Your curves craze my brain. Get me all confuzzled.

SHELLY

I'm glad you like me. I want to look good for you.

ROCCO

Shelly, baby. Don't wriggle away. You know how much I love you.

SHELLY

How much?

ROCCO

More than all the stars in the sky.

SHELLY

So you only love me at nighttime, then?

ROCCO

No, all the time. You and your sweet round ass.

SHELLY

You sound like Scruffy.

ROCCO

How many Scruffys have you dated?

SHELLY

Nineteen.

ROCCO *whistles*

SHELLY

You make twenty, big boy.

ROCCO

I'm twentieth?

SHELLY

And counting.

ROCCO

Well, Shelly, I'm wild about you. Obsessed. I'm always wondering, "What's Shelly up to? What's Shelly thinking? What is she going to say next?"

CUPID *hangs on their every word*

SHELLY

You said you're a warfighter? That you have rough hands?

ROCCO

Dirty. (*Looks at his hands*)

SHELLY

Can you fix me? My crooked tail?

ROCCO

Negative, I can't fix your tail. No Navyman could. (*Takes her hand*) But I can repair a broken heart. (*Takes off his jumper*) Very easily.

ROCCO touches the crook in SHELLY'S tail. They freeze

CUPID

Ooooooh! A tattoo of a mermaid on his shoulder. Looks just like Shelly. Beautiful, but broken. Rocco got her the day he joined the Navy. (*Laughs*) Two fates, twisted together, doomed from the start. (*Laughs more*) Take it from me, a god! (*Frames SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers*)

The lights flash. End of scene

*.xx***SCENE 5**

CUPID

Stage Five: He Gives Her a Gift.

ROCCO *yawns*

SHELLY

Are you tired?

ROCCO

Yeah, Shelly, I'm tired. My bed is a pile of pointy rocks. I miss my pillow. I miss squeezing dreams out of it. I can't sleep without my pillow. So don't ever ask me that question again, "*Are you tired?*" Because the answer will always be yes, I'm tired, ok?

SHELLY

Ok, go back to sleep.

ROCCO

I can't sleep. I keep telling you that. (*Snaps his fingers*) Alright, you owe me big time.

SHELLY

Owe you what?

ROCCO

A rubbing. I checked the books. You're overdue. Now pay up. Rub me.

SHELLY

Rocco, please.

ROCCO

Rub me, woman.

SHELLY

You never rub me.

ROCCO

Yes, I do.

SHELLY

Your rubbings are rubbish. (*Scratches him reluctantly*)

ROCCO

Oh yeah, hit that one spot, will you? Oh-ohh-oh. Right there. Oh, that feels delicious. Hey, come on, why aren't you rubbing me? (*Intensely*) Mmmm. Ooh, ooh. Ahh! More. Ahh! More. Don't stop. You're neglecting me, Shelly.

SHELLY

All I do is rub you! Every day, all day.

ROCCO

Do me right, do me wrong, just do me! Do me, do me, do me!

SHELLY

You sailors — you're all the same.

ROCCO

(*Growling*)

Quiet, woman. That's enough out of you. (*Regains his composure*) I don't like my merladies talking too much. (*Gently pulls her hair*)

SHELLY

Ouch. Don't touch my hair. (*Brushes her hair*) Uhh! You'll frizz it up. Where's Fitz?

ROCCO

Who?

SHELLY

Fitz.

The baby turtle passes in front of her

ROCCO

What's he looking at?

SHELLY

Nothing. See? Nothing. (*Waves at the turtle*) Baby turtles have poor eyesight. That's why they follow the first thing they see after they hatch. It's true. (*Moves — the turtle follows her*) Oh, he's sweet, huh? Look at him. He makes my bosom burst with adoration.

ROCCO

There's no room. He's got to go.

SHELLY

There's always room in my heart for him. Fitz sits in the front row.

ROCCO

Nah.

SHELLY

No one could ever get mad at him. Did you know sea turtles get entangled in the fishing nets? They can't surface for air and drown. But not Fitz. Not my hatchling. He'll perpetuate his species.

ROCCO

Not a chance.

The hatchling hides

SHELLY

Aw, he left us. He'll be back.

ROCCO

(*Dangling a shell necklace*)

I got a present for you.

SHELLY

A present?

ROCCO

Mm-hmm.

SHELLY

What is it?

ROCCO

It's a shell necklace.

SHELLY

Oh!

ROCCO

Yeah, I spent the whole morning shelling. Today's our one month anniversary. I wanted to get you champagne and oysters, but, you know.

SHELLY

I drink champagne.

ROCCO

Ok! An oceanful of champagne. I promise only the finest quality. And I always hold true to my promises.

SHELLY

Oh, I love you, I love you, I love you. Oh, you're so good to me, Rocco.

ROCCO

Anything for you, my queen. (*Bows*)

SHELLY

Thank you.

ROCCO

No, thank you, Shelly. Thank you for your kindness. I was a stranger and you took me in. You shared your home with me. And I'll never forget that. (*Ties the necklace on SHELLY from behind, then nibbles on her ear*)

SHELLY

Oh, Rocco.

SHELLY and ROCCO freeze

CUPID

Enough to make me blush. Yes, oh yes. I've arranged the meetings of a million Shelly and Roccos. A million Rocco and Shellys. I take perverse pleasure in it. Oh, I really fucking do. (*Frames SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers*)

The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 6**CUPID**

Stage Six: Blissful Haaaaaarmony.

ROCCO

An hour goes by. A week. A month. Time drags on. I'm trapped here! Help! My body needs food. Sustenance. (*Stares at the ocean*) I'm marooned. I can't escape. And I never want to leave. Why would I? I got my seamaid, and that's enough. (*Sweetly*) I'll take you, Shelly. You're a good catch.

SHELLY

Sing me a song, Rocco. A sea chantey.

ROCCO

(Snapping his fingers)

OH, WHERE DO I BEGIN?

LET'S START WITH SOME GIN

THEN RED STRIPE

MIGHT PROVE YOUR TYPE

UNTIL THE NEXT BOTTLE OF SIN

I LOVE YELLOWHEADS

I HAD ONE ONCE

A HOTTIE WITH A BODY

CHARM AND INTELLIGENCE

SHE GAVE ME A CHILD

LIGHT OLIVE COLOR

FIRST IN ORDER OF BIRTH

I MADE MANY MOTHERS

NOBODY'S GOT

A KILLER BODY

LIKE MY SOMEBODY

LIKE MY LITTLE ODDLING

NOW SHAKE IT NAKED

ALLRIGHT

SHELLY

Did you call me an oddling?

ROCCO

Shhh. Don't ask questions.

SHELLY

Why not?

ROCCO

Look at those eyebrows. They're so inquisitive. Like two little question marks.

SHELLY

Is that all I have going for me? My eyebrows?

ROCCO

Not just your brows. *(Slides over to her)* Now come on, Shelly Baby. You're driving me mad.

SHELLY

How so?

ROCCO

You got an hourglass figure, and, well, I want to see what time it is.

SHELLY

(Pulling ROCCO close)

Kiss me then, sailor.

SHELLY and ROCCO kiss. They freeze

CUPID

Ah-hah! A perfectly-timed kiss. I drew my bow and sent the arrow to its target. I aimed for the kill. *(Frames SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers)*

The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 7

CUPID

Stage Seven: A Deeper Connection.

ROCCO

Is dinner ready yet? *(Snaps his fingers twice)* I'm starving.

SHELLY

(Tossing salad in a bowl)

Just two seconds. It's almost ripe.

ROCCO

You made sponge? Aw, I hate sponge.

SHELLY

(Serving ROCCO)

It's your favorite.

ROCCO

Back in the Navy, I ate sardines for every meal, you know. And I smoked a pipe and I never complained. That's how I lived.

SHELLY

Great.

ROCCO

Fuck this. I'm going fishing.

SHELLY

"Going fishing?"

ROCCO

Yeah, you heard me. I'm a pesco.

SHELLY

Did you say pesco? Pesco?

ROCCO

That's right.

SHELLY

Rocco, that is a bogus form of vegetarianism. Killing is killing. Meat is meat. Is that how you view me? (*Flaps her tail*) As bait?

ROCCO

You really want to know?

SHELLY

I asked, didn't I? It's time we had that talk, Rocco.

ROCCO

Later.

SHELLY

No, talk to me now, Rocco.

ROCCO

I don't want to talk. I want to eat. Now serve me some real fucking food.

SHELLY

This is "*some real fucking food.*" Sea vegetables. Here! (*Throws salad at ROCCO*) God! That's the last time I cook for you!

ROCCO

How about turtle soup? It's a great delicacy. Ever try it?

SHELLY

Turtle soup? No, Rocco, I think with my brain, not with my stomach.

ROCCO

Turtle soup! It's easy as one-two-three. One: you crack the shell. Two: you peel it back and discard. Three: you clean off the meat and organs. Comes with its own bowl too.

SHELLY

Look, I don't want to argue anymore. Eat something. Well dressed greens.

ROCCO

I'm craving meat and I'll kill to get it.

SHELLY *force-feeds him dried kelp — he makes a face*

SHELLY

You like it? You like it?

ROCCO

Every bite.

SHELLY

You promise?

ROCCO

I promise.

SHELLY

Love you.

ROCCO

Love you.

SHELLY

Love—achoo!! Achoo! (*Sniffles*) Oh my God. I think I have a cold coming on.

ROCCO

Probably because of your prissy diet.

SHELLY

Achoo! Achoo! (*Sneezes on ROCCO — they freeze*)

CUPID

Can a sailor live off a sirenian diet? I don't eat earthly food, so I don't know. (*Frames*

SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers)

The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 8

ROCCO *drools in his sleep*

CUPID

(*Holding the baby turtle*)

Stage Eight: One Hurts the Other.

SHELLY

Rocco! Rocco! Rocco! Rocco! Rocco! Rocco! Wake up! Where's my hatchling? Rocco!
Where's my turtle? I can't find Fitz.

ROCCO

(Awakes)

Don't. Don't wake me up, screaming my name. "**Rocco! Rocco!**" All panicky and shit. *(Jabs his finger at SHELLY)* You hear me? *(Shakes her)* I'm giving you a direct order.

SHELLY

Fine. Ow! Rocco! You scraped some skin off my arm.

ROCCO

Look at me. Look at me! I'm wasting away over here. Fucking barely breathing. Why can't you figure out dinner, huh?

SHELLY

I don't know.

ROCCO

Why is your cooking so bad?

SHELLY

I don't know.

ROCCO

Why don't you have any answers? These are questions I think about. Like where's lunch? How about a little something to eat, huh?

SHELLY

All you got is me, Rocco. So you better start treating me right. *(Snaps her fingers twice)* Or I'll turn against you. Achoo! I've been sneezing for weeks. Achoo! *(Coughs, then clears her throat)* God, this stupid cold has made me more, ugh, miserable and tired than usual. Achoo!

ROCCO

Are you allright?

SHELLY

No! I'm sick. And I hope I make you sick too.

A seagull calls — ROCCO calls back menacingly

SHELLY

Oh, it's going to be one of those days, huh?

ROCCO

Yeah, gloomy. Survive or die. *(Flashes his straight razor — it gleams)* It's eat or be eaten.

The seagull calls again. ROCCO howls with hunger. CUPID puts the turtle on the rock

SHELLY

Oh! My baby boy. (*Moves away from ROCCO — the hatchling follows her*)

ROCCO

(*Picking up the turtle*)

He looks good enough to eat.

SHELLY

Give me my turtle. Give me my turtle. What's the matter with you? You're making him cry.

ROCCO

Yeah, yeah. Don't worry about it.

SHELLY

Careful. Be very careful with him. He's endangered!

ROCCO

And I'm not? (*Slashes the turtle with his razor, then gobbles him up*) Mmmm. (*Licks his lips, as the juices dribble down his chin*) Anything for dessert?

SHELLY

(*Beating ROCCO*)

What is wrong with you?! (*Cries*) You're a psychopath! Depraved! Sick! (*Hooks her fingernail inside his lip and drags him*)

ROCCO

Hey!

SHELLY

I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! You motherfucker!

SHELLY and ROCCO freeze

CUPID

Wow! That's some wild shit, huh? From the land of what the fuck?! (*Frames SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers*)

The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 9**CUPID**

Stage Nine: The Other Gets Revenge.

ROCCO

I'm sorry.

SHELLY

I'll never forgive you, Rocco.

ROCCO

You're just cold. Here, take my jumper. It's fuzzy.

SHELLY

Stay on your side.

ROCCO

Look, Shelly, I'm sorry I appeased my hunger. I'm sorry I wanted to stay alive. I'm sorry you got upset. And I'm sorry it turned into all this.

SHELLY

Oh my God! Stop talking. You're "**sorry?**" You're just saying words.

ROCCO

Come on, you can't stay mad at Old Rocco.

SHELLY

Look at you. You don't even care.

ROCCO

Allright, I'm sorry for apologizing, then.

SHELLY

Will you shut up and leave me alone? And take your stupid fucking necklace with you! (**Throws her necklace at ROCCO**) You killed my hatchling. You came with a knife, you cut him in half and ate him alive.

ROCCO

It's a bad way to die. I admit it. Probably the worst.

SHELLY

(**With contempt**)

Don't shut your eyes tonight. I will kill you. I will kill you. I promise, I will kill the one who killed my baby. I will make you pay.

ROCCO

(**Taking out his knife**)

Here, take the razor. Take it! Take it! Cut me, come on.

SHELLY

I can't.

ROCCO

You saltwater bitch. (**Pins her down**) Don't look at me that way.

SHELLY

Stop it! Get off me!

ROCCO

You drowned the Navy. You're cold-blooded, Shelly. You killed my friends.

SHELLY

(Pleading for her life)

That was before I met you. Before we fell in love.

ROCCO

(Twisting SHELLY'S arm)

Don't fight me, don't fight me.

SHELLY

Ow! Your grip is so strong! *(In pain)* Please, I love you, Rocco. I love you. I love everything about you. I just want to be with you, sweetheart.

ROCCO

That means nothing to me. *(Cuts SHELLY'S tail with a downward slice — blood and fish guts fly out)*

The lights flash red — SHELLY screams

ROCCO

(Red-handed)

Very little blood. Only so much to lose. *(Makes the opening of her wound bigger — she screams louder)*

SHELLY tries to escape, but ROCCO blocks her, standing with his back to the audience

ROCCO

Ah, fine and delicate work.

SHELLY

(Flopping around)

Oh God! What are you doing to me? *(Panic-stricken)* You fucking carnivore! You filleted me.

ROCCO

Well, a man's got to eat.

SHELLY

(In shock)

Ha, ha, ha, ha. Ha, ha, ha, ha. Your dinner is getting cold, Rocco. Ha, ha, ha.

ROCCO

What are you laughing at? What's so funny? Huh?

SHELLY

You'll see. *(Goes limp)*

ROCCO eats SHELLY raw. They freeze

CUPID

This fucking guy here. I mean, what a dildo! I feel sorry for what happened to Shelly. You know, she's a mermaid, she's pretty, she gets gutted. It's nothing personal. "**A man's got to eat.**" (*Frames SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers*)

The lights flash. End of scene

SCENE 10

The rock is stained with blood. SHELLY floats upside down in the water

CUPID

Stage Ten: Salmonella Poisoning.

ROCCO

(Moaning)

Oh, my stomach! (*Gripping his stomach*) Ohhh. (*Screams in pain*) God, what did I eat, bad bacteria? (*Trips backwards on the rocks and falls*) Please, I'm begging you. (*Vomits behind the rock*) Aarghhhhh. I'm covered in this pink rash. Fucking mermaids — they're toxic. (*Dies of poisoning*)

We hear SHELLY laughing from beyond the beyond. CUPID frames SHELLY and ROCCO with his fingers. The lights flash

CUPID

Well, mortals, there you have it. *The Ten Stages of Love*. Depicted by I, Cupid. Mischievous Matchmaker. Allright, how about it for Shelly and Rocco, huh? (*Claps*) I hope you enjoyed the different phases. We moved from "*First Blush*" to "*Blissful Harmony*" to "*One Hurts the Other*" until finally "*Salmonella Poisoning*." Hey, you cannot fault the gods. All he had to do was eat kelp and he'd be alive today, and in love.

We hear the harp play

CUPID

Why? Why? Why didn't she whip him with her tail? Only I know why.

We hear the harp again

CUPID

The mermaid and the sailor. (*Flitters his wings*) One always consumes the other. (*Flies away*)

The Sun fades. The stage darkens

End of Play



things that go boom in dallas

Richard Wayne Horton

From: **Two Guns (1963)**

The street near the bookstore is desolate. Sunny. Large slow cars pass sadly as if remembering. A bus stops on every block searching for former riders.

Two gray haired men stand on the corner bragging to each other about being Irish.

In the bookstore, everyone, young and old, is searching for evidence of past heroism. A faint bell rings. I find Tacitus Annals and Herodotus Histories, both Oxford 1859. Later at the diner next to the bus stop I open the Herodotus. The footnotes bubble up taking over entire pages. They've become pirates like the English scholars that wrote them, gone wild in Greece.

I order a glass of water. The old man in the white apron isn't happy about it. I leave a dime for him on the counter. Will it console him? Easing out the door I see him wipe it off onto the floor & walk on it.

On the bus going home, I'm the only passenger. The city outside the window comes loose and starts to slide backward. Flash daydream: buildings that roar.

74

Suppose you've got irresponsible nuclear experiments going on, for instance in the desert outside Hollywood, and before you know it, a casual bomb goes off: Boom! Just like that.

The arrogant scientists have sure gone too far this time. The nuke blasted a prehistoric egg loose from bedrock where it was in bed sleepin' late. The heat and radioactive juice hatched it. Movie music starts to lumber in the lower registers creating a primitive two-note melody: "Ai-toh!" 60s Japanese slang for "Ouch!"

The thing grows quickly, as if wicking up the harsh menace around it. Maybe it started out cute and vulnerable, a lovable pet, but went bad somehow, poisoned and bloated by the sick agendas of power brokers who live in the skyscrapers it could not understand but would become. Now it is hundreds of feet high, covered in scales that glitter like lighted windows from which tiny frightened men in suits peer out.

Bomb footsteps get closer: Boom! ... Boom! Or is it shots that are killing Kennedy? Is it drumbeats walking Brahms' First Symphony out of a cave and into a cortege?

Who has pulled what trigger?

The narrator begins to suspect that his own alibi is not holding together. Someone will say: "The narrator done it!" The movie soldiers will turn their guns from the unkillable beast to the thoughtful...

...the ever so mercurial... narrator and force him to confess at last: "I myself am the leviathan!" The beast, unpunished...unpuny...Look out! It has lost all restraint! So huge and yet so spoiled! It really is a baby. The shifty narrator is forgotten as the beast throws a tantrum. Throws a building. Throws itself.

The narrator appears again, waking up in a suburban bedroom. "It wasn't me! You gotta believe me!" He's a 16 years old boy. Boom! A folded newspaper hits the front door. He sits up, the blanket falling away from his skinny chest, bird legs swinging to the floor cluttered with plastic soldiers with weapons pointed at him. One of the soldiers says, "I think you'd better come with us!" Above the kid's fluffy and defeated head, a plastic V-I rocket hangs on a string. When he stands up it detonates in his dandruff.



add yellow: instructions for a tornado

Skylar Lovelace

Bison graze under a cerulean sky,
 when the cicadas stop whirring and
 the redtail hawks stop circling overhead.
 Bluestem bends under a breeze
 that stirs the cotton-boll clouds
 and pushes them together.
 Humid.
 Sticky.
 Towering.
 The blue turns green.
 The air smells like neon and disaster.



prairie sketchbook

Skylar Lovelace

Page 1

Pullet Eggs

A hen's first clutch ...
 tiny and leathery.
 She remembers her lizard-father.

Page 2

The Tao of Cow

Cowpaths dogleg pastures.
 Cow karma is not
 a straight line.

Page 3

Fine Manners

Crawdadd plays
 with his food,
 holds it in a polite pinch.

Page 4

Yin/Yang

Puppies nap together,
 two make a circle:
 T'ai-chi T'u in fur.

Page 5

Sulphur Yellow Fans

Look: the cabbage butterflies
 rest in the mud,
 and flirt.

Page 6

Music

Coyote yodel slices night:
 laughter scored on
 pentatonic scale.



november in new england

Ed Meek

Your chosen colors brown and gray
keep you somber as a sober drunk.

On your watch, leaves
lose their luster and once they fall,
turn to clutter--slippery as eels
beneath our feet.

The skeletal branches of trees
map the sky with dead ends.
The sun cold as gold, a distant
cousin we seldom see.

Being next to last has made you bitter.
You are the wake
before the funeral of winter.



peaches in august

Ed Meek

The way you have to be careful
not to bruise
the fragile flesh. So sensitive
to touch, inadvertent bumps, crowding in bags
and the hard surfaces of kitchen counters—
the thin skin, soft and fuzzy as a kitten.
Red and orange from-basking in the summer sun,
the sweet liquid
just beneath the surface.
When you bite into one
the juice floods your mouth,
the excess seeping out onto your chin.
It's enough to make you laugh,
happy as a child,
Aa you savor the short seasonal
delight of peaches.



the mountain people

Jacob Chapman

When the mountain people came down
to see the ocean, it took some time
to get over the shock of the salty air
and the crashing waves and all the birds
and their constant chatter,
but when they saw their first
enormous sunset, their bodies relaxed.
In the morning, the water was low,
and they said it's like a river.
It breathes with long, slow breaths.
Their hosts, people who had spent their lives
next to the water, said we've never
thought about it like that,
but the water's always coming
or going, so sure. Tell us
about the mountains.
The mountain people said what
is there to say about the mountains?
They're always there,
and they never change.
They keep us sharp, and we like
seeing our breath in winter.
Everyone nodded and traded stories.
As the mountain people were packing up
their things, all the second sons
said we like it here. We're staying.
Their parents said what
are you thinking? You belong
with us. You belong in the mountains.
They said no we don't.
We never did. We're going to write
our own stories down here
next to the water.
Their parents couldn't believe
what they were hearing,
and after all the tortured arguments,
they traveled home confused,
and the mountains felt different,
and the mountains felt the same.



the dregs of winter

Jacob Chapman

When gossip is scarce,
and the snow
is hanging around
for no good reason,
and everyone
is a little drowsy,
we get tattoos
to pass the time,
and we pick fights
with each other
because we're cranky.
Unpredictable friends
tear through town,
and we think yes!
And then we think maybe,
and then we think no.
And the tattoos
start to seem like a mistake,
but you never know.
Maybe someone looks at you
in a funny way, and maybe
you pull up your sleeve
a little, and maybe they see
part of your tattoo,
and they think oh, shit,
and you say yeah, bitch.
That's what I thought.
You don't know me.
You only think you do.



dream girl

Denise Duhamel

DREAM GIRL

I died my hair calico (like a cat) because my boyfriend said he thought redheads and brunettes were hot. I kept some of my own blond in patches and strands here and there so I could be all things, everything, every kind of dream girl. I cut the left side into a bob and let the right side stay long. I wore a padded bra, but just one cup so he could have his choice. I wore a gown that zipped off at the crotch into a miniskirt, ready to accommodate whichever he was into. I painted each toenail a different shade of pink for our big night out. I was ready for anything! My boyfriend sat on my favorite chair, drinking my beer. The slob hadn't even bothered to shower. *I'm too tired*, he said, *let's postpone until tomorrow*. He didn't even look up as he flipped through the latest issue of my *COSMO*.



sun-maid

Denise Duhamel

I went to ask for a raise wearing my most frayed dress. The boss thought I asked for a raisin and handed me a tiny Sun-Maid box, the kind every kid dreaded at Halloween, poor substitute for Hershey's. My boss was a she, her tailored suit making a mockery out of me. *Speak up*, she said, but I couldn't. I stared instead at the box in my hand, the maiden in a bonnet holding a tray of grapes. My own face frayed, my mouth tiny and wrinkled.



under the yellow sun by the irish sea: failure at carrick-a-rede

Kaila Schwartz

I had every intention
of crossing that bridge
to explore the tiny
fishing island off the coast
of Northern Ireland

every intention to breathe
in the summer salty air
and feel the spray on
my face, to live a full
life with adventure
and champion moments
waiting to be conquered

but
as i stood at the

abutment and grabbed
hold of the bridgehead,

worn smooth by
countless travelers,

I cast my eyes to the sea
twenty feet below

my knees shook and my
stomach waved like the ropes
of the bridge itself. My foot

hovered as my body pulled back,
as if someone tied a rope
to my navel from inside
and behind.

It would not meet
the tread, not for any length
of breath.

My mind kept seeing
my body tumbling over and over
into the sea between
the rocks.

Defeated, I turned
and walked the dirt road back.



beach rules

Andrew Shelffo

I see you, strutting around on the sand like you own the place. No respect for people's boundaries. Your laugh is annoying. You're annoying.

This is my beach. I paid for a beach badge, and I get to determine what happens in my realm. A lot of people talk about how insignificant they feel when they go to the beach and think about the endless ocean and the countless grains of sand. I feel empowered. See that sailboat on the horizon? I could flick it off into oblivion if I felt like it. But I restrain myself because I'm a good guy and I follow the rules. In fact, I wish there were more rules here. They should definitely ban vaping because it's weird and gross. And they should penalize anyone who plays loud music. Fines should be doubled for people who engage in loud FaceTime conversations. Yes, I'm looking at you, middle-aged woman near me who just spent twenty minutes describing her hotel room to someone who didn't make the trip. Now I will forever know that you appreciate the full-sized shampoo-and-conditioner bottles the hotel puts in the bathroom and the bright shade of yellow they used to paint the walls. We're all at the beach, lady, and we're all trying to relax. Please keep it down.

But what's the point? Who's going to enforce these sensible rules, those teenaged lifeguards? No one would listen to them, because people are horrible. I don't actually say anything, of course, mainly because the idea of getting into an argument with a stranger while we're both basically wearing underwear is too awful to think about.

Instead, I focus on my perimeter. I bring a towel for drying off and providing sun protection and a beach blanket for establishing boundaries. I bring my two chairs, because I've learned that it's easier to move from one to the other than adjust on the fly, and because anyone who tries to encroach will think that I'm not alone. I also bring a kid's pail and shovel. I have these left over from when my two boys were little and would vacation with me. Anyway, I use these tools to create bulwarks at the corners of my territory, which I think connect with trenches. I also bring my book, my drinks, my binoculars, my snacks, and other accoutrements. These smaller items I carry in a five-gallon bucket, which I then fill up with water to create a moat. The people around me get it, and they leave me alone.

But you, you ignore all the obvious warning signs. You strut right up and cock your head at me, expectantly. You know that I won't willingly give you what you want, but you laugh at me. You taunt me, the look in your eye telling me that you're going to get what you want, and there's nothing I can do about it.

You know what, laughing gull? I laugh at you. That's right: I know who you are. I'm a man in his 50s. Of course I've got that app that identifies birds on my phone. And I've seen you in action, the way you brazenly peck at people's belongings if you sense there's a crumb to be had.

I hate the beach. I come out of habit, because that's what my wife wanted when we were married and the kids were little. I still come here by myself. I'm here and it's mine. The badge checkers tremble when they see me. The powerful yellow sun wants to burn the tops of my feet and the bare top of my scalp, but I won't ever let that happen. Just like I won't let you take my chips or deny me the pleasure of enjoying a snack of my choice. Think about it this way: I've eaten thousands of birds in my lifetime. How many people have you eaten?

I hate the beach, but it's mine. You want a piece of this potato chip? Bring. It. On.



love and bats

Andrew Shelffo

The sound wakes me up. I've never heard the sound before, but I know instantly what it is. It's one of those indescribable but immediately recognizable sounds.

I don't know what to do, and honestly, I don't want to do anything. I can ignore it for a little while longer, right? My girlfriend is next to me, and she's still asleep. It is the middle of the night, after all.

In all fairness, though, it's the middle of the day for the bat that's flying around my bedroom.

I close my eyes, but I can still hear it, fluttering around the room. And then I start thinking—really thinking—about bats and then I think about rabies, and now I know I have to do... something.

I sit up and turn on the light and see it flying in terrifying circles around the bedroom. I reach over to gently wake my girlfriend. As soon as I touch her shoulder, she opens her eyes and screams "Bat" and dives for the floor. "Get it out of here!"

It looks like it's up to me to be the hero tonight.

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, ducking when the bat gets close.

Finally—finally!—the bat lands on one of the curtains by the window, and I get an idea. I run out of the room, down the stairs to the kitchen, and find the used Amazon box that I knew was still there. I run back upstairs and I tiptoe over to the window and place the box over the bat. Then I use an album cover to fully capture it in the box. Then I go back downstairs and put the box outside on the front stoop.

Feeling good about things, I go back inside and pet the useless dog who never woke up before I get back into bed and fall asleep, looking forward to a hero's reward in the morning.

The next morning, my girlfriend wakes me.

"I'm worried about the bat," she says. "I just took the dog for a walk, and that bat's still in the box."

I don't say anything, because I just woke up.

"Don't you care about the bat?" She asks.

Now, I've always believed that I care the appropriate amount about animals. I like dogs for example, but I don't think they should be dressed in human clothes, like jackets and booties when it rains. They don't need it, and I believe it makes them the object of ridicule from other dogs. Also, while I don't donate when I see those commercials with the abused pets and the Sarah McLachlan song, I do watch long enough to feel sad before I change the channel.

But bats are a whole different kettle of fish, to mix my metaphors, and I can't help but think that the bat doesn't give a shit about me.

"Of course I care about the bat," I say. "But honey, what can we do?"

Then she begins doing what she does very well: researching things on her phone. Within minutes she finds the phone number of a wildlife rescue that takes care of bats. She tells me to call them right away. She can't call, she reminds me, because she's going out of town to see friends.

That's how I end up decorating the box I'd put the bat in the night before with a yellow dish rag for comfort and a covering to keep it in the dark. The woman from the wildlife rescue asked me to text them a picture of the bat, which I did. She couldn't talk long because she was on another call, but they told me the bat was a juvenile brown bat, and that juvenile bats in early summer are learning how to hunt, but they can often get confused and end up in a house and not know how to get out. The first thing I had to do was make sure the bat stayed hydrated. I add a small dish of water to the box. I even dip the rag in the water and place it near the bat's mouth. I can't tell if it drinks or not. And I wait for the rescue person to call me back.

When she calls me back, she compliments me on the care I've given the bat so far. Then she tells me what to do next. In order to fly, bats need to drop vertically first. That's why the bat couldn't just fly out of the box. So I have to place the bat on the trunk of a tree, high enough up so predators can't get it from the ground

I put on gardening gloves and bring the bat to the back yard. I examine and dismiss a few trees because they're not good enough. Then I find the right one, tall enough with lots of shade. I place it on the trunk, and it clings there.

And then I check every hour. I tiptoe up to the tree, hoping that I won't see anything. But all through the day, it's still there. I'm starting to worry.

After a sleepless night, the next morning, I go out and check again, and it's gone! But then I look down and see that it's fallen into the weeds at the base of the tree.

When my girlfriend gets back home, I tell her that Stan didn't make it.

She asks me who Stan is, and I tell her it's the bat. She asks me why I named it Stan, and I tell her because he looked like a Stan.

She says she's sorry and then asks if I'm ready to go grocery shopping.

How can she think about food shopping at a time like this?

The bat didn't make it. And eventually, neither did my relationship with my girlfriend. The world can be cruel sometimes, but we have to grieve and move on. But I'll be ready for the next one. I've got the bat lady's number in my phone.





slashes of sunlight
Janina Aza Karpinska

8

Scott Ferry

i am the person
in the photos

smile pale pastel
eyes burrows in the wall

mind cliffside synesthesia
spirit soothing myocardia

watcher in a fog gondola
boy with shields and seeds

god in gallop and heme
antimatter as sanguine smoke

voice a wound and a balm
body a silent alarm

and the river through and through
and through



on the way to work i drive by the airport
and man has constructed a thin bridge of lights
over a lush valley to guide the planes in
with a level artificial path

i assume it works to keep the pilots from steering too low
right before the runway rises up to meet them
but how much of that is done with computers
already i don't know

yet sometimes i think our attempts at creating
a clear passage in the wilds are foolish
when i see tsunami hurricane tornado flood
earthquake

i think these pills i take are a tiny scaffolding
over the waving sword-grasses and feral
howls that the structure is merely tin
and glue

that one day all the navigation will be offline
the beacons swallowed in squalls of grief
that i will dive weeping into the winds
that the familiar teeth

will find me



flying home via chicago

CL Bledsoe

After a song by Wilco

I read my book and kept
my nose down. Wrens
hopped through the airport.
I didn't say a thing. I'm
no narc. Maybe I was
waiting for the gold rush
to end, for those bright
silver saucers to take away
what we've already broken.
I don't know, man. I'm
just trying to read my book
without crying or laughing
so hard anyone notices.
I was going home. Back
when we had portable CD
players and nobody leaned
their seats back like psychopaths.
Nowadays it's all measles
and If You See Something
Say Something posters.
There was a girl and I was broke
and not so much has changed.
But I was thinner then and maybe
had a chance. On the plane, I sat
and I waited for the piano
to start, for home to appear
somewhere far below me.



sundress

CL Bledsoe

The sun
shimmies
out of
its dress
and lies
on the
still cool
grass of
summer.



sandwiched

Niles Reddick

My grandparents' clapboard house with a tin roof was sandwiched between the city cemetery and the Tillers, a family with a single mother and three teenagers who didn't function at full capacity. My grandparents had walled themselves in with red Azaleas, pink Camelias, Ligustrum, Wisteria, and yellow Forsythia, giving them a fenced-like yard where they could sit in the swing, their backs to the cemetery, watch birds in their cement birdbath, or keep an eye on their neighbors who often found a way through the shrubbery to say hello, ask for mayonnaise, ketchup, and yellow mustard sandwiches, a condiment diet for poor spun into something special, or ask when their grandchildren were coming to visit. My grandfather smoked cigars and didn't acknowledge them anymore than he did the news the doctor gave him that his chest Xray showed spots on his lungs. My grandmother's alto voice could shoo neighbors away, but she couldn't help his spots.

One of my aunts said the mother Tiller had an Oedipal relationship with her brother that likely caused the conditions of their offspring, but my mother said they didn't get enough oxygen before they were born. Regardless, we were frightened of them. Their house was built up on brick pylons, was open underneath to stray animals, wasn't painted, and windows were propped open most of the year. We heard noises, screams, and cries that we didn't understand but gave us the willies as much as the quiet from the cemetery filled our imaginations with ghosts, spirits, and demons. Sometimes, if we were outside playing and my grandparents were inside, one of the Tillers wandered over, made faces at us through pulled branches, scared us with noises, or asked us random questions about our hair, shoes, or school.

One of them had asked me to come into the bushes because he had a question. I moved closer but feared he wanted to take me into their haunted house. He told me to pull my pants down. His own pants were too big for him. A belt fastened in the last notch barely kept them on his waist, his shirt was not buttoned correctly, and his shoes were untied. I didn't pull my pants down and ran inside to tell my grandmother.

She came outside with me by her side. She called his name and told him, "Come here, right now!" He stuck his head out of the bushes; then, the rest of him appeared, his head lowered.

"You want me to come over there and talk to your mama?"

"No mam."

"Then, you stay in your yard and leave my grandchildren alone. You hear me?"

"Yes mam."

He slinked back into the bushes, and we went inside to watch cartoons, eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, potato chips, Little Debbie snack cakes my grandmother kept in a jar on her counter, and drink bottled Cokes. I didn't dwell on the incident, and he didn't return.

My grandparents moved to the country before my grandfather died. On one visit, she prepared tuna sandwiches on white bread for us, and we drank sweetened iced tea. My grandmother asked me if I remembered the Tillers and I nodded.

“Their mama died, and they were all put in a home. Not long ago, the girl called me. Can you believe that? I guess she found me in the phone book. It was sweet. Some of my own grandchildren have forgotten to call me.”

I shared my best frowny face and knew she wanted her grown grandchildren tethered closer to her because she was lonely, so I texted them. I later learned from her by phone that some had reached out and others hadn't, but I was happy she was sandwiched between good neighbors, had memories to comfort, and watched Robins, Cardinals, Blue Jays, and yellow Finches splashing in the cement birdbath from her glider on the porch.



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my close personal relationship with donna tartt

Mark Wish

every day these days
I receive several emails or
as the kids say
DMs
from people pretending to be
bestselling authors who for some
unexplained reason now—
in 2026—
as I approach & sometimes even
welcome death

have supposedly taken interest
in my books & career & me with more fervor than any
agent of mine has

furthermore these people don't bother
to use my name at all
thus suggesting they're Russian or con artists living in one
of America's poorest states

in any case they clearly use AI
to try to talk me out of some of the cash
I've lived like a cheap fucker for decades
to save

& they've done this so often
to me & other writers
(even unpublished ones?)
(maybe especially the unpublished ones?)
that lately I sometimes answer by asking
why they'd want to chat with me when we both
as writers should be writing

for example one was supposedly
Donna Tartt emailing me

& she never answered
that big question of why

instead going on to ask
increasingly nosy questions about my last
published novel

my relatively unsatisfying career

& why do I think I'm not
as successful as I'd like

lately I then tell these people
hey you really need to try
this con on someone younger & more egotistical
someone with the amount of naivete-based hope I had
three decades ago because you ain't getting'
a cent out of me via Paypal
Zelle
or otherwise

after I let loose
with more statements like this increasingly full
of anger & accusation

they stop responding

except one

who keeps saying she wants
to exchange war stories with an old
jaded but widely published author like me

& keeps insisting
again & again

that she is
"for real" Donna Tartt



things i could say to my pro-fascism relatives

Mark Wish

at this point I don't know
what I'd say to family members who've cheered
on you-know-who if ever we
returned to speaking terms

if honest I'd say that lately
the only way for me not to feel shame
regarding your idiocy or cold-heartedness—take
your pick—is to tell myself
you must not be aware of much of what he
says & does

sometimes I think
to tell them I think
it could be that small
amounts of a person's idiocy
can combine with smaller amounts of their

cruelty to create a synergy
of significant mindlessness completely foreign to me

yes

I tell myself

tell them *that*

but then I decide
to let another day
of relative
peace to pass



jute

Louise Kertesz

It's taken me about eighty years to write this poem
then came the right prompt and shazam!
the jute mills' dusty sweet smell manifested—
grass and hay and oiled machinery,
the smell of last-century Ludlow
and of my childhood, streets lined with
immigrant workers' houses funelling to the mill gates.

They called it “the golden fiber” for its pale yellow sheen,
and for its tensile strength, and for the Musk-like dynasties
it spawned back in the day. Indiscriminate
as the sparrow, jute can be grown anywhere,
given heat and humidity and as the textbooks say
“abundant, cheap human labor.”

Calcutta was once the capital of jute's earthly kingdom,
its New England colony pungent with our parents' sweat,
transplanted Wops and Polacks and Canucks
worked to the pitch of their pliable strength,
pensioned off at a dollar a day when The Company left
for still cheaper labor (called consolidation),
subsidies ceasing at death, condolences to widows.

For thousands of years its tasks have been the lowliest,
bagging the staples of the race: sugar, coffee, cotton, wool,
binding the threads of carpets under our feet.

Now fast forward to Amazon's kingdom. Yellow jute twine
for eco-friendly crafts, table runners, and stylish totes
(applause! better than plastic), and cat scratching posts,
all easily deodorized with Arm & Hammer.





David S. Morley

scorched

Barbara Edler

Brutal days of scorching heat eviscerate our lawn. Now the old road rises from underneath like a ghoul from its crypt. It's ugly and thirsty. Wants to remind me of its presence and the days before the new road reconfigured a wicked curve and buried the gravel path beneath dirt and grass. Wants to remind me of the days when I had three sons and the school bus used the old road to pick them up. I can still see them waving goodbye; then returning home. Bouncing down the bus steps and leaping into a sea of golden leaves. But the trees are gone, too. Destroyed by a derecho three years ago.

Years ago, my grandmother and aunts visited and admired the trees. One said, "I bet they're beautiful come September. My middle son replied, "They're simply gorgeous. Simply gorgeous." We all laughed delighted by his expression. I miss that voice and the chubby-faced boy who loved to entertain.

Now I look at the clear indentation of the old road beneath the dying grass and remind myself that everything dies. Everything fades, curls up, drifts away except for grief. Grief never loses its color, never yellows. Grief always remains.



the archive of forgotten things

John Dennis

The Archive of Forgotten Things occupied the basement of City Hall between Property Records and Vital Statistics.

I found it because my doctor circled the address without explanation. “You’ve been misplacing things,” she said. “They’ll know where to begin.”

The receptionist looked up as I entered. “First visit?” I nodded. “What was the first thing you noticed missing?”

The question felt oddly personal. “My watch.”

She smiled. “No. I mean the first thing.”

I searched my memory. After a while I said, “I don’t know.”

“Most people don’t.”

96

She disappeared through a door marked ARCHIVE and returned with a grey-haired man carrying a clipboard. “I’m Ellis.” He led me between rows of shelving that stretched farther than the building should have allowed. Each shelf bore neat handwritten labels.

‘The smell of coal fires after rain.’

‘The sound of typewriter keys in empty offices.’

‘Directions to a village bypassed in 1983.’

‘A lullaby remembered only by one fisherman.’

“These aren’t objects,” I said.

“Not always.”

“What happens to them?”

“When the last person forgets something, it arrives here.”

“And if someone remembers it again?”

He considered that. “It has never happened.”

We stopped before a trolley holding a single cardboard box. A label on the front carried my name.

"I'm afraid this one's yours."

"I've never been here."

"No," he said. "But your things have."

Inside lay a brass house key, a birthday card signed only "Love always", a train ticket dated seventeen years earlier, a tiny knitted yellow mitten. I picked it up. It felt familiar enough to hurt.

"I don't know what any of these are."

"I know."

He waited while I looked through the box. There was a photograph at the bottom. Two adults stood beside a small child on a windy beach. The faces had faded almost completely, as though the sea air had reached the paper from inside.

"Is that my family?"

Ellis looked at the photograph for a long time. "It was."

"What do you mean, 'was'?"

"You've forgotten them."

"I think I'd know if I'd forgotten my own family."

He said nothing.

Somewhere deeper in the archive, a trolley rolled softly across the floor.

"I want to take these home."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"They no longer belong to you."

I laughed because there didn't seem to be another response. "Who do they belong to, then?"

Ellis glanced around the endless shelves. "Whoever remembers them."

I looked back into the box. For just a moment, the yellow mitten seemed to carry a faint warmth. It vanished before I could decide whether I'd imagined it.

Ellis quietly replaced the lid.

As we walked toward the lift, we passed an empty shelf. Only a handwritten label waited there.

I slowed to read it.

"Everything you will forget tomorrow."



98



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you think this is a joke

Stewart Rudy

It was three a.m. and the alarm at the public high school started wailing, clamoring over our neighborhood. It was a bit muffled by the storm windows, but the honks woke me eventually, and very suddenly when they did. I shot straight up, eyes wide, like it was coming after my child. There were these three long honks, then a pause. Incessant honks swarming my mind, pauses long enough to offer me hope it was over. Three honks and a pause. Three honks and a pause. One set after another.

My partner stayed fast asleep, our baby too. The streets were dead quiet. Had no one noticed but me? Someone in charge must've heard by now, I thought. It was a school after all. Surely, civil society would not let schools come under attack. But those rhythmic cries didn't stop. Three angsty honks, that capricious pause.

In aggravation I mumbled, "Will anyone shut that—"

"Huh?" she stirred. "I was sleeping."

I took out my night guard. "You don't hear that? The alarm at the high school's been going off for ten damn minutes. It's gonna wake—"

"You couldn't let me sleep, babe? I have that donor meeting in the morning."

The comment made me more anxious, the honks more desperate and needy. I secured my sleep bonnet with another bobby pin from the nightstand. "And I got that grant proposal. Three million dollars, remember? You know the bosses are out to get your girl." Three honks and a pause. I turned on the bedside lamp and stood up. "Should we call 911? It might be an emergency."

"If we caught it, I'm sure the authorities did. Now, come back to bed. The baby's gonna hear you." Her yawn turned into the dark. "And I'm not losing this time."

"What if it's vandals, looters, arsonists? They could—"

"If the place burns down, the kids'll probably be thrilled. I would've been at that age."

The honks hit more urgently. I peeked out the window even though it didn't face the school. I started pacing. "How can you say that? The kids would be devastated. They wouldn't feel safe anymore. They'd be anxious and depressed and they'd stop going to school. Absenteeism would be out of control. Can you imagine the vicious cycle? The domino effect?" This dire concern was suddenly nagging me. Three honks and a pause. I checked my lines in the bureau mirror. "I mean, what if it was our child going there?"

She turned, annoyed. "But it's not— Ugh, I'm getting a cookie."

"Grab me one too... And don't wake the baby. I'm on a hot streak, remember?"

The stale cookie crumbled off one bite, but I enjoyed the distraction before the alarm started tugging at my senses again. “But wouldn’t you worry about vandals destroying the place? The battered facilities and crumbling infrastructure? Our baby going to classrooms in total disrepair?”

She stood in the bathroom door, pointing with her toothbrush like a diversion. “Did you call a plumber about the water pressure in here?”

“You were supposed to call. Now, stop dodging the question.”

“Honey, it’s probably just kids blowing off a little steam.”

“Or worse. They could be hacking into the system and inflating all the grades. Or destroying the standardized tests.” Three honks and a pause. “We’ll never know if they’re learning anything at all.”

“How about I check on the school tomorrow when I drop the boxes at Goodwill?”

“I thought I was taking those boxes.”

“If you want to...” Her sigh was so heavy. “Let’s go back to sleep.”

“I can’t go back to sleep. You expect me to bury my head in that pillow, just ignore this damn alarm?” It was still piercing through the neighborhood—through the night and toward morning, where we all had more important things to stress over. “How could anyone sleep with that thing going off? Thinking of all that could be wrong? Looters could be ransacking the auditorium, the band room, the ceramics studio. They could be gutting the entire arts program.”

“Hand me a tissue,” she demanded before ferociously expelling a clump.

Three honks and a pause. “Maybe they’re going after the library, pulling books off shelves and setting them on fire. Kids won’t even be able to read books anymore.”

Her stuffy snark emerged from the ruffling covers, “They’re probably drawing swastikas in the history textbooks, nooses too. They’re ripping penises and vaginas out of the biology books, I tell ya!”

I was incensed and snapped. “You think this is a joke!”

“Shhh!” She whispered earnestly, “I’ll pull an ace, you’ll see.”

The honks were rattling my ears now and the pauses offered no relief. “Just imagine if you had to work there. You couldn’t do it. How could anyone work there? When criminals destroy it in the night with that alarm screaming and no one cares, no one helps. Everyone’ll quit. There’ll be a massive teacher shortage, no one to educate our baby.”

It kept going. Three honks and a pause. Three honks and a pause. I couldn’t believe the whole damn neighborhood wasn’t awake. Why wasn’t every light on?

Then, the pattern just changed. The pause behind the honks prevailed. Everything went back to normal.

I slowed my strides and peeked into the night, relieved. "It stopped."

"See, no need to worry. It's taken care of... It's safe."

"I guess. Sorry, I... You ain't mad I woke you up?"

"Of course not," she reassured me.

Suddenly, coos and coughs escalated from the hallway, then broke into our baby's wail. My partner sighed miserably from the down comforter, and I threw the deck of cards on the bed.

She drew a seven. Then I showed her a queen.

"Your turn."

"Damnit." She got up in a huff.

I put in my night guard and fell back asleep.



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i am an old house

Trisha Leigh Shufelt

I am an Old House

entering myself through
the yawn of a door
left ajar in a dream.

Every step creaks bones
of forgotten memory.
Every wall weeps yellow
faded flowers to the floor.

I remember these rooms;
pieces of myself, I covered
in white sheets of lead and ink.
Boxes of silent remains,

I hid in the back of closets,
subjugated to shadowed stillness,
eaten by hungry dust motes
where my voice used to be.

Oh, that I could find you again,
unfold musty sheets, Poetry abandoned
like a bored lover tempted by another.
If only I could ignite insects,

no longer licking light but resolute
to remain inside a refuge
of ivy-choked windows where moths
hold no myth in their wings.

What would you say to me now?
What would you salvage or scrap?
Would you scream your ghostly lament
or burn everything and start from scratch?



original sin

Diane Funston

Poetry found me
Aching for a voice
My hair in junior high pigtails
Budding body under
Pink Taurus sweatshirt
Sitting in the back
Of English class
Falling into quicksand
Stuck in the city
Yellow clapboard house
An only child of
Fatherly abandonment

Cursed by teachers
For having imagination
Wasted on pimply boys
Who couldn't spell frustration
A soon to be orphan
Never guessing
Future importance of words
Silent on the page
Growing to blossom
Fertilized by all those
Concrete sidewalks
Burning inner city sun
Blooming into
Wild flowers
Flaming
into confident verse



a relentless stalker

Diane Funston

The conscience is a relentless stalker
trying to raise and reconstitute guilt
It feeds on the incredulous
until we offer a truce
throw it a stick
just then it roars
to swallow us whole

Everything you believe shifts somehow
Lies float to the top
like fat on cooling broth
we try our best to skim it off
can't keep up
an assembly line warp speed
we can't catch them all

Like manic butterflies
the yellow and the black
black then again yellow
fluttering fast
then it all implodes
the debris trail
long and widespread
blacker than coal
with an enticing orange center



exposition of the holy eucharist

Ruth Saxey-Reese

Exposition of the Holy Eucharist

Sometimes I want everything at once.
I want you to stay well clear and
I want you to tighten your arms around me

like wings, the way you wrap the triangular ends
of that golden shawl around the starry eyehole
where I spy the Body of Christ
(why is the word monstrance),
bearing it aloft down the aisle
and seating it high while everyone bows.

In the darkest corner of the sacristy,
I want you to bury me beneath heavy brocade
and exhume me, ray by ray, far from any pedestal,
any burning eye, and adore, adore, adore.



what is this if not limbo

Ruth Saxey-Reese

Here in the dark with the pagan babies
and the ancient bearded philosophers,

I believe everything.
I love you like the earth is ending tomorrow

because it has already stopped,
and some new world may be with you in it.

That crack opening the sky
could be a way out or a way in so

unroll the silken ladder or just throw
down the brimstone and be done.



all the tender things

B. Fulton Jennes

Bath-time ducks bob around your plump thighs.
Yellow and orange, they remind me of daffodils.

In the wild, daffodils are yellow—only yellow—
but gene-tricking chicanery added the orange.

Likewise, duck farmers seized on serendipity,
bred melanin-free mutants to yield white feathers

and clown-shoe red feet, their ducklings
dandelion-hued, bills and webbed toes aflame.

Dear child, bathed by waters of springs yet unseen,
could I reassemble your chromosomes now, I'd craft

a heart like the webbed feet of ducks, free of nerves,
unfeeling of pain, impervious to grief,

and a mind with the vibrancy of wild daffodils,
forced to subside in summer, surrender to winter,

only to rise again, resilient and beaming,
when all the tender things have disappeared.



better living through butter

Barbara Krasner

After *Mound of Butter*, by Antoine Vollon (France) 1875-1885

A mound of butter says you spare no expense. Melt this yellow grease in a pot or pan. Caramelize the onions, the skins of geese and duck. Pour in the wine, don't skimp. Smother cakes in ganache, fill pate choix with cream, better yet, chocolate, drizzle with caramel. Make a quick meringue with egg whites, whip until the stiff peaks form. Arrange the banquet table with an array of culinary creations and confections. A mound of butter is all it takes to mark that perpetual fault line between the haves and have-nots. A mound of butter holds a knife forever.



the color of velocity

Barbara Krasner

Since old *Jeopardy!* days, I answer questions in turquoise.
I ride my Schwinn 10-speed in cobalt blue.
I floor the gas pedal in my SUV in maroon.

Once I recovered from meningitis in apple green,
from gall bladder removal in baby blue.
I painted my house with Dijon mustard.

But since three hospitalizations within two months,
my recovery is buttercup. I can remember
summer days holding a buttercup under my chin,
determining whether a shadow
indicated a preference for butter.

If I close my eyes in this plastic bed,
I imagine myself again on the front lawn,
pressing each golden petal between my fingers.





yellow moon, why do you frighten me so? (a cento)

Joanna C. Migdal

Yellow Moon, Why Do You Frighten Me So? (a cento)

- Angela Manalang-Gloria

In the evening, under a low yellow moon above the quiet lamplit house,
I rushed home to get safely into my bed
As scheduled, I could not eat or drink except for yellow pills.

I quickly changed into a yellow dressing gown,
And turned off the glaring yellow lights
Until only bedroom candles burnt and they too were yellow and indifferent.

Sources: Jack Kerouac, JcMigdal, Anne Sexton, Robert Browning, JcMigdal, Anna Akhmatova



108

the girl with the yellow eyes

David Blumenfeld

Even now, over seventy years later, I occasionally think of her.
I was sixteen when I saw her: the girl with yellow eyes, a tinge
of orange or gold, and all that sizzling yellow. They glowed, gleamed,
like iridescent laser beams, holding every boy at the party entranced.

I barely noticed anything else about her: high cheekbones, full lips,
smooth skin? All I saw were *those eyes*. When she glanced my way
with interest (or so I thought, hoped, prayed), I froze, struck dumb,
paralyzed as if caught in Medusa's stare, though this was a goddess.

Was she kind? Cruel? Brilliant? Stupid? It didn't matter. All I wanted
was to kiss those precious lids, touch her skin, be with her forever,
for eternity. Then, suddenly, she was gone, on the arm of some
undeserving guy, vanished like a specter. And I never saw her again.

Did she really have those glowing yellow eyes? Or is it
merely a false memory, colored by the passage of time
and my deep longing for an irretrievable past?



platform no. want

Sushanth Shyamsundar

There was once a boy who waited at a railway station for the train to Normal.

He had been told the train would come. Everyone had been told. The station was built for it. The yellow line was painted for it. The benches were crowded with children holding invisible tickets, their bodies polished, nervous, and ready to be taken somewhere important.

Every morning, the loudspeaker cracked awake and said:

Attention please. The train to becoming Normal is expected shortly on Platform No. Want. Passengers are requested to keep their bodies ready, their excuses brief, and their hunger pointed in the approved direction.

The boy stood behind the yellow line and waited.

Around him, other trains arrived on time.

The Desire Express came first, crowded and hot, its windows fogged from the inside. The Lust Passenger followed, slow but reliable. The Marriage Local came decorated with marigolds, parents, bank loans, and the smell of new silk. The Dirty Joke Special arrived shrieking, full of boys hanging out the doors, waving someone else's shame like a flag.

One by one, the children boarded.

Some left laughing. Some left frightened. Some left pretending they were not frightened. Some left in pairs. Some left alone but returned with the swagger of people who had seen the world and badly misunderstood it.

The boy remained.

He had a small bag with one tiffin box, one notebook, one Hero pen leaking blue into the pocket of his uniform, and one hunger that refused to stand where it was told.

The station staff began to notice.

Late bloomer, said one clerk.

Shy, said another.

Decent, said a grandmotherly ticket inspector, pleased with the wrong thing.

Secretly naughty, said a boy who knew nothing but had learned to sound worldly.

Just wait, said everyone.

Just wait.

This is how patience becomes a knife: slowly, kindly, with one hand on your shoulder.

So the boy waited.

He waited through school bells, film songs, tuition gossip, cousins returning from college with facial hair and bad perfume, boys learning the holy geography of women's bodies with the confidence of failed cartographers. He waited while the platform emptied and filled again, while posters peeled from the walls, while dogs slept under benches with more certainty than he had ever owned.

Still, the train did not come.

Instead, puberty arrived at the station with a clipboard.

It asked him to complete several forms.

Form A: Do you now want what other boys want?

Form B: Are you willing to discuss women as if they are fruit?

Form C: Can you produce, upon request, one acceptable fantasy?

Form D: Explain delay in not more than fifty words.

The boy wrote:

I am not late. I am elsewhere.

The form was returned.

Please attach a life we can understand.

The boy looked at his body.

His body shrugged.

What could it attach?

The friend who saved him a seat?

The shoulder pressed against his in the school van, briefly, accidentally, ringing inside him like a temple bell nobody else heard?

The strange wish to be called first?

The longing for a hand to find his hand without the whole station bursting into instruction?

He wanted.

That was the difficult thing.

He wanted badly.

But not the way the timetable required.

He wanted someone to say come here and mean only come here.

He wanted nearness without the station announcing destinations.

He wanted warmth without the platform turning into a court.

He wanted love that did not arrive with a porter carrying luggage labelled next step.

By evening, the station had changed. The lights flickered. Men spat red moons onto the tracks. Women adjusted sleeping children on their hips. A crow landed on the signal post and looked at the boy as if it knew something sacred and rude.

The loudspeaker crackled again.

Attention please. The train to becoming Normal has been delayed indefinitely. Passengers may proceed to Platform No. Marriage, Platform No. Sin, Platform No. Secret, or Platform No. Cure.

The boy did not move.

Not because he was brave.

Not because he was tragic.

Not because he was pure.

Because none of those platforms had his name on them either.

Night came down over the station. The tracks shone in the dark like two obedient lies running away together. Somewhere far off, a train wailed for someone else's life.

Then, very softly, from beneath the platform, another sound began.

Not a train.

Not yet.

More like metal waking underground.

The boy bent down and listened.

There were other tracks below the visible ones. Smaller, stranger tracks. Some led to friendship. Some to solitude. Some to touch. Some to language. Some to love with no bed waiting at the end of it. Some to places where flesh suits did not have to apologize for arriving differently.

No one had announced these trains.

No one had printed their tickets.

No one had painted their platforms.

The boy stood up, still holding his leaking pen, and understood at last that the station had lied by being too large and not large enough.

The train to Normal never came.

But somewhere under his feet, the earth was full of departures.



plates

Acacio Barros

The new Vereco plates.
Amber glass,
a rounded square shape,
honed, seam-like edge.
I used to trace my fingers
around it: rough, yet soothing.
Those were every-day plates.
Not the good China.
The good China was not
for me or my sister.
They were for guests,
like the Christmas ham.

The plates
now in boxes.
The good China,
its golden details still sharp.
The Vereco
abraded from use.

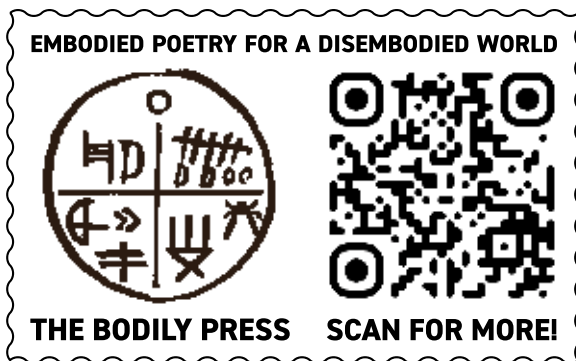


lottery

Acacio Barros

A record prize, announces the radio. One
dollar for 82 million. I drive and daydream
about the money. A new car, a convertible,
the type my wife drove when I met her,
but newer. A car for her, today, wrapped
with one of those large red bows. And a ranch
house, with an infinity pool. A granny
unit for the inevitable guest who wants to stay
too long. I can't wrap it with a bow:
My wife doesn't like ranch houses.

A horn wakes me. What
are the odds? I decide
to put the dollar in a jewelry box
and wrap it with a small gold bow. My wife
always says, "It is the thought."



entrepreneurs with trowels

Ellen Gerneaux Woods

for my Father, Indiana 1955

Daddy hand-mows straight lines on our acre lot
unlike our obese neighbor Harlan Hillenbacher who
scowls while riding in circles on a motorized mower
to maintain the massive yard of his colonial-style house

both men go shirtless as they mow their lawns
Harlan's moobs bounce and rowdy boys yell *get a bra!*
Daddy walks back and forth in even rows his muscles
glisten with sweat he cusses at a flying rock

in spring he routinely hires my sister Carolyn
with me to uproot golden dandelions so in summer
their white fluffy seed heads won't multiply when
blown by winds or children making hopeful wishes

yellow crowns of the plant are worth a penny
six-inch taproot required without it no cash
a nickel brings a single scoop at Dairy Delite
a dime gets both chocolate and vanilla



inspiration point

Ellen Gerneaux Woods

Berkeley, 1985

Julia Child look alike
tall big-boned strides
melodic high-pitched voice
raucous exchange
bluejay sparrow cardinal

on the path
daily at noon
UC Berkeley professor?
supe from Lawrence Labs?
bored matron on a lark?

navy skirted suit
grey haired bob
top handled purse
swings beside
confident grip

ready to defend
perhaps a weapon
no nonsense shoes
no hesitation
taking charge

disappears
around curve
grove of trees
I turn back
two mile mark

now in my 70's
when I am tired
of life's challenges
I think of her
and hit the trail



activation

Cindy Rinne

My hair is the language
of plants. My inner world
a duality. I diagram
the song of every
leaf, seed, and bird.
I record asters, sunflowers,
and dahlias, for my codex.

*Dahlias of composite
flower heads arranged around
a central disk. A flower
star with rays. This plant
sends out roots of words
to bring healing and calm.
Listen. Do not hurry.*

Flower language
activated by birds,
the wind, and the drone
of bees.

*Echo, drop by drop
by drop by drop
by drop by drop.*

I hold one stem in my hand
hoping I can perform
photosynthesis in my veins.

after Unsubmissive Plant, by Remedios Varo, 1961



a flammable heaven

Cindy Rinne

Every morning she lights
a candle. She honors the four
directions and the five elements,
forgetting ether as number six.

She hikes. The earth speaks
through oak tree witches
in a forest ravaged by fire.
Yellow flowers inch through

the ashes. Rattlesnakes and
foxes nearby. Be careful.
The water of her body
sidesteps the rusted poles.

She climbs among plants
and berries used for medicine.
These bones of twisted
branches under the ether

of a flammable heaven.
A window inside a window inside
a window when she feeds
her child in public bare breasted.

Her friend has both breasts removed.
She blows out the flame of loss
and birth. All disappear
in a trail of smoke like dust.

after The Six Elements by Rene Magritte (Belgian) 1928





yellow will be fashionable color for summer clothes

Margaret Taylor-Ulizio

From *The Courier News*, Bridgewater, NJ,
Saturday, May 1, 1920, Page 11.

Yellow promises to be
a fashion-able color for summer.
It was great-ly exploited at Palm Beach
and gave much life and gaiety
to the outdoor gatherings.

Yellow is charming—
when there is not too much of it.
An occasional yellow costume,
or even a yellow hat or parasol,
stands out conspicuously anywhere
and, if smart,
lends its possessor special distinction.

A full length cape
of soft deep yellow cloth
with a big col-lar of kolinsky
is new
and will be stunning
on a summer hotel veranda.

Yellow and white gingham
are being made up by dressmakers now
for summer wear
with black hats
and narrow black patent leather belts.

A charming checked ging-ham
in yellow and white
has pleated frills
of yellow handkerchief linen.

(This found poem retains the 1920 article in its entirety, including punctuation and hyphenated words.
Formatting was changed to include line and stanza breaks)



no parking on the yellow line

Margaret Taylor-Ulizio

The yellow paint on the curb was a sign that no cars should be parked there, and she was relieved that, in fact, no cars were parked there.

But she wasn't sure she should feel relieved.

"It doesn't make sense for people to park on a yellow line when there's plenty of parking elsewhere," she said aloud.

"What?" A teenager was just stepping onto the curb. "I didn't park on the yellow line."

"I know, I know." She said it anxiously, wanting to make sure the teen knew she wasn't talking about him.

"Then why did you say, 'It doesn't make sense for people to park on the yellow line'?"

"I was talking to myself," she stammered.

But she sighed anyway. And the teen walked away quickly.



a yearning for bananas

Taria Karillian

“Michael! ... MICHAEL! ...STOP!”

I jerked back the blowlamp with a curse word that my Ma, God rest her, would've clipped my ear for. My workmate pushed up his welding mask and shouted through the biting, salty gusts.

“Jesus, Mary and all the Saints, you nearly torched your own leg, y’ eejit!” He shook his head and ran his big hand over his salt and pepper chin. “What the divvel were you playing at, lad? A welder *can’t* get distracted - especially strung from a shipside at this height! Wake UP, lad, or you won’t be seeing Christmas, never mind 1912!”

“Thanks, Seamus.” I clutched the rough ropes and turned off the hissing blowlamp. I’d have crossed myself, but the cradle was swaying fit to bring back breakfast.

He was right, of course. But I couldn’t help but glance back across the dock again ... and sigh. Against the Belfast shipyard, sky and buildings - all equally grey and grimy - the brightly painted crates being unloaded were little square nuggets of beautiful. Colours that would never be used in the front parlour, even - exotic and thrilling and vivid against the Guinness-coloured arms of the men lugging them. The sight gripped me with a fascination I was embarrassed to admit to. What was it like where they came from? Anything but grey, I’d wager. They’d told me one time about the trees and birds and wildlife and music, and my mind had been in half a trance over it for days. Ever since then I kept thinking, what if -

“MICHAEL! ... Daydreaming again, is it? Get your head straight, lad!” Seamus’ frowned, but his expression softened as he followed my gaze.

“Ah, c’mon - lunchtime.” Seamus called. “Help me winch us into the shelter of the prow.” I put down my mask and pulled my cap down over my ears, dulling the sounds of the riveters and distant carols.

Brown paper hid a brown, buttered crust, a brown boiled egg and a dull, brown russet apple.

“Here we go again...” I heard myself sigh.

Seamus was oblivious, reading a flapping newspaper and muttering about unionism and Home Rule - the front page was full of angry faces and angry fists, and I was truly tired of hearing about it.

“I was thinking ... I might emigrate, Seamus.” I ventured. “Now my apprenticeship’s finished. Don’t be letting on to the gaffer yet, though, eh? ... I might see if I can get passage with the Jamaicans - lugging can’t be too hard if they’re singing half the day like they do.”

“Shows what you know, lad.” he mumbled through a mouthful of pie. “They work far longer hours than us for far less pay, poor blighters...And them’s hymns they’re singing - I think it keeps ‘em sane, God bless ‘em. ... Anyway, what’s wrong with a nice, steady life here?”

"Oh Seamus, it's ok, I suppose... But you should hear the stories! Kingston, Montego Bay, and all the tropical islands around and about there. They all sound so grand... exciting and ... and *sunny* ... just bursting with life, and ...and colour! Even their food – have you seen the exotic fruit? ... I *really* like those peculiar, curvy yellow ones..."

"Bananas?"

"Aye, bananas! They're like ... like little slices of sunshine!"

As if to emphasise the point, it started to rain.

A shrill whistle brought me back from my daydream. A girl's voice was calling through the dockside hubbub.

"DA! You forgot your tobacco, Da! ... Lower a pail and I'll send it up!"

It was Seamus' daughter Kathleen, looking a real picture in the Sunday best ribbons that she usually saved for Mass - their vivid green as gloriously pretty as the long, burnished copper curls they held.

She waved up at us, smiling that beautiful, sunny smile. But knowing how fiercely protective of his only daughter Seamus was, I didn't dare wave back or answer.

But to my surprise, he tapped my boot with his own. Twice.

"Well? ..." He chewed on his empty pipe and squinted at me with a half-smile.

"Go on and wave back, lad! ... Or did you think I didn't know it was you as bought her those ribbons?"

My lungs felt like they were fighting each other for a moment, and maybe it was the sway of the cradle, but my stomach threw itself into the fray too.

Seamus hauled up the pail and loaded his pipe bowl, addressing it more than me.

"...Well, I *did* know, and any decent man who spends a week's wages on Mrs Shaughnessy's overpriced fripperies on the quiet like that is worth a dinner invite in my book, so you can thank our gossiping gasbag grocer for it."

He took a slurp of his tea and we waved Kathleen off. She smiled up at me... and for a moment I lost track of where I was. The shock that her Da might let me court her made me grin like a Cheshire cat.

"So, Michael, you'll join us? ... Sunday after Mass? Nothing fancy, mind, though herself'll be making a cake most likely. What do you say? Oh, and maybe ..." He waved his pipe at me and gave me an odd look. "Maybe think twice about haring off on a boat? ... Eh?"

"I will, Seamus, I will... thanks..." I blushed. Of the few reasons I had to stay, the lovely Kathleen could be one of them. And I think he knew it.

"I think I'll be getting myself down to the barber's later on." I murmured, rubbing my burning cheeks.

"You won't be going anywhere but the Gaffer's hut for an earful if you don't sort *that* thing out" Seamus pointed. "Mind you fit it right, now - he'll swing for you if you put it on the wrong way round!"

I stared up at the five-foot-high painted letter hanging from the approaching hoist – I've never been too good with letters and spelling and such – thank the Lord Seamus noticed. We heaved it into place and watched the riveters fix it down.

"That's one big "C" there." Seamus smiled. "But it'll look tiny from the quayside when she goes."

I nodded. I don't think I'll be too sad to see her off without me now... God bless you and all that sail in you, *Titanic*.



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lavender chamomile

Shirley J. Brewer

How come my name
sounds like a stripper?

Picture a leggy femme fatale
flamboyant in purple spandex

snaking around a pole.
No. Not me.

I'm a tea bag, honey, and proud of it.
If you call me an *old bag*, we're done.

Caffeine-free, I support you, plus
healthy digestion. Add hot water. Steep.

Sip me from your favorite mug, cup, or saucer.
I'm extra saucy with a squeeze of fresh lemon.

You'll find I'm a mystery of ingredients:
rose hips, rooibos, licorice root.

Let me soothe your taste-weary tongue.
It's too early for happy hour, too late for lunch.

I'm eager to hop in the pot,
but not too eager. Saddled

with a hottie name like Lavender
Chamomile—
a girl's got a reputation to preserve.



therapy 101: playing with words

Shirley J. Brewer

I gaze at twin waterfalls, turquoise cascades
gushing into whirlpools—Niagara sounds a rush.
Quiet starlight, quite the opposite.

Reminds me, the moon sent a text today,
said I was *full of it*. What next?

The loneliness of a broken zipper signals
seven years of luck, although my rearview
mirror remains intact. In fact,

the scent of lemon scones propels me
over the aforementioned yellow moon. Before I forget,

what do you love most about horses? Soft
muzzles calm, until the news blares:

Hitchhikers disappear halfway to Everest summit.
Arcade killer desecrates Skee Balls, then flees.
Santa Claus diagnosed with a hoarding disorder.

Let me escape this pockmarked universe,
gallop away—pens and notebooks in my saddlebags.

Hand me your dreams from the vending machine.
Feast on treats my two-slice toaster released—
raisin bread. No, instead I detect twin

pop tarts of sky in Monet-blue, a perfect pair,
an exuberant whiff of citrus air.



in celebration of dandelions

Katy Z. Allen

dandelions
are beginning to bloom once again
bright yellow
against the emerging greens of spring

dandelion chain crowns and necklaces
dandelions dipped in batter
 and fried as fritters
dandelions feeding hungry deer
 and rabbits and squirrels
dandelion wine for a moment
 of relaxation
dandelions held under the chin
 to see if someone likes butter
dandelion greens sauteed in olive oil
 for dinner
dandelions awakening the bees
 to the advent of spring
dandelions for healing
 in infusion, tincture, or tonic
dandelion root for a hot drink
 in place of coffee
dandelion seeds nourishing the birds
 especially goldfinches
dandelions in a bouquet
 upon the table
dandelion roots enriching and aerating
 the soil
dandelions for salads and smoothies

dandelions
are beginning to bloom once again



little yellow flowers

Katy Z. Allen

Towering flower stalks
adorned with peaked crowns,
masses of dime-sized yellow flowers
with centers of tawny brown,
rise above the midsummer blooms around them,
declaring their majestic role.
Striking they are,
a pleasure to behold,
even for those of us aware of their hidden agenda—
they hold tight to their spot in the universe
with an aggressive taproot that bores deeper every year,
not readily extracted with even the sturdiest of shovels;
their abundance of flowers, marching up their numerous spikes,
give rise to myriad—countless really—tiny seeds,
unseen as they waft away in the evening breeze,
settling in around the garden amidst the asparagus, vervain, coneflowers and leeks,
their newly designated homes boldly announced only the following spring
when the first leaves of the regal parent's ever-expanding progeny
open in unexpected, undesirable places.

In short, these handsome yellow flowers,
beautiful though they are,
are a menace to my garden,
and my wellbeing.



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ketamine
Dayanna Almeda

Contributors' Notes

Katy Z. Allen is a lover of the more-than-human world, poet, retired rabbi of an outdoor congregation, former healthcare chaplain, and co-founder of a Jewish climate organization. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in print and online in such places as Amethyst Review, The Bluebird Word, Cosmic Daffodil, The Soliloquist Journal and Art on the Trails: Number 9. She was awarded Honorable Mention in The Prose Poem's 2025 Prose Poetry Competition, and her book, *A Tree of Life: A Story in Word, Image, and Text* was published by Strong Voices Publishing.

Dayanna Almeda is a poet and artist living in Tucson, Arizona. Her writing examines intimacy, memory, and the lived experience of chronic illness, using sensory detail to navigate survival and care. Poetry emerged as a necessity following sudden medical upheaval, becoming both refuge and form. Her work treats the body as an emotional archive, where grief, resilience, and love move together rather than apart. Rooted in lyric narrative, her work lingers in stillness, care, and the unspoken.

Doug Anderson's last book of poems was *Undress, She Said*, from Four Way Books, 2022. Also a photographer and workshop leader, he lives in Ashfield, MA.

Acacio Barros is a Brazilian-American physicist and philosopher. He writes about uncertainty, memory, language, family, and the ways people make sense of the world while misunderstanding themselves.

Raised on a rice and catfish farm in eastern Arkansas, **CL Bledsoe** is the author of more than thirty books, including the poetry collections *Riceland*, *The Bottle Episode*, and his newest, *Having a Baby to Save a Marriage*, as well as his latest novels *If You Love Me, You'll Kill Eric Pelkey* and *The Devil and Ricky Dan*. Bledsoe lives in northern Virginia with his kid.

David Blumenfeld is a former philosophy professor and associate dean who resumed writing stories and poems after a break of more than forty years. Since 2022, he has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize three times. One of his pieces received a "notable essay" mention in *The Best American Essays 2023*, another was featured in *The Best American Haiku 2023*, and 12 of his works were finalists or received other high praise in literary magazines. Blumenfeld also writes children's stories and poems under the pseudonym Dean Flowerfield. Davidblumenfeld.com

Shirley J. Brewer serves as poet-in-residence at Carver Center for the Arts in Baltimore, MD. Her poems appear in *Barrow Street*, *Comstock Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Meat for Tea*, *Plainsongs*, *Poetry East*, *Slant*, among other journals and anthologies. Shirley's poetry books include *A Little Breast Music* (2008, Passager Books), *After Words* (2013, Apprentice House), *Bistro in Another Realm* (2017, Main Street Rag), and *Wild Girls* (2023, Apprentice House). *Goddess of Swizzle* was published in April 2026 by Apprentice House. shirleyjbrewer.com

Jacob Chapman lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. His publications include the chapbook *Other Places* (Open Country Press) and the books *Here Over Here Over Here* (Human Error Publishing), *Are We There Yet* (Human Error Publishing), and *My Wife Made This Possible* (Human Error Publishing).

Barbara Adler is a college composition instructor. She loves to write flash fiction, poetry and collage art. Her work has been published in *The Cities of the Plains: An Anthology of Iowa Artists and Poets*, the NFSPS Encore 2025 Prize Poems, and issues of the *Grant Wood Country Chronicle*, *Moss Piglet*, *Sandcutters*, and *Lyrical Iowa*. She is also a contributing author to the 2025 Routledge publication: *Assessing Students with Poetry Writing Across Content Areas: Humanizing Formative Assessment for Grades 6-12*.

Martin Elster and **Joan Axelrod-Contrada** are a collaborative duo whose backgrounds in music and journalism meet in the middle through light verse. Martin is an award-winning poet and five-time Pushcart nominee whose most recent poetry collection is *From Pawprints to Flight Paths: Animal Lives in Verse* (Kelsay Books, 2025). Joan is a columnist for *The Daily Hampshire Gazette* who holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Martin and Joan are the authors of the forthcoming collection *Older & Funnier: A Senior Couple's Journey in Rhyme*, featuring an eccentric pair based loosely on the authors themselves.

Shaun Coon (he/him) is a spare time writer, who grew up in Springfield, went to college in Amherst, lived in Northampton, then the Boston area. Finally moved to NYC where he found his footing as an IT guy, then was moved by Covid to the Berkshires, where he lives with his wife, son, dog and cat.

John Dennis was born in New York and moved to Sweden after being stationed in Italy while serving in the US Navy. He holds a Master's degree in Pedagogy from Malmö University where he also studied Creative Writing. A stroke ended his teaching career giving him more time to write. He has been published in *Nunum*, *The Good Life Review* and *Midsummer Dream House*. He is married to Anna, father to Julia and grandfather to Noah.

Denise Duhamel's most recent books of poetry are *Pink Lady* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2025), *Second Story* (2021) and *Scald* (2017). *Blowout* (2013) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is a distinguished university professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami.

Scott Ferry helps our Veterans heal as a RN in the Seattle area. He has two books birthing in 2026: *Blood on the Map of Man* from Luchador Press and *Inheritance of Air* with Aakriti Kuntal from Meat For Tea Press. More can be found @ ferrypoetry.com.

Diane Funston writes poetry of nature and human nature. She co-founded a women's poetry salon in San Diego, created a weekly poetry gathering in the high desert town of Tehachapi, CA and most recently has been the Yuba-Sutter Arts and Culture Poet-in-Residence for the past two years. It is in this role she created Poetry Square, a monthly online venue that features poets from all the world reading their work and discussing creative

process. Her first chapbook, *Over the Falls*, was published in 2022 by Foothills Publishing. Diane is also a visual artist in mosaic, wool felting, and collage.

Richard Wayne Horton has 2 Pushcart nominations and is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate. His work has appeared in *Southern Pacific Review*, *Scryptic*, *The Dead Mule*, *Meat For Tea*, *Bull & Cross*, *Danse Macabre du Jour* and others. His books include *Sticks & Bones* (2017, Meat For Tea Press), *Artists In The Underworld* (2019, Human Error Publishing) and *Ballet For Murderers* (2021, Human Error Publishing).

Chrissy Howland was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. She left home at 16 to tour in bands, make art, be a rebel, and find peace. She has lived in four countries and speaks two languages. She attended the Baltimore School for the Arts where she majored in classical music and graduated cum laude with a fine art degree from the prestigious Maryland Institute College of Art. She has played in many bands and currently plays bass in Valley Gals and sings and plays multi-instruments in Mother. She has held solo and group exhibitions of her paintings in France, Italy, and the U.S. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her partner and two daughters. She is a staunch feminist and believes matriarchy is the answer.

Matt Jasper has had poems, stories, and art in magazines such as *Grand Street*, *Evergreen Review*, *Fine Madness*, *Cafe Review*, *Gyroscope*, *Lisa Carver's Rollerderby*, *Paragraph*, *Verse Daily*, and (upcoming in...) *Heavy Feather Journal*. He is autistic with five diagnosed kids. He is working on a book called *The Water of Learning to Drink*. He loves Millerites and recently completed a chapbook (illus. By elin o'Hara slavik) called *Apocalypse Portfolio*.

The award-winning poems of **B. Fulton Jennes** appear widely in literary journals and anthologies. Her debut full-length collection, *In the Time of Sonic Booms*, was released by Grayson Books in July 2026. *Blinded Birds*, received the 2022 International Book Award for a poetry chapbook. Another chapbook, *FLOWN*—an elegy-in-verse to her late sister—was published by Porkbelly Press in 2024, and a third chapbook, *Dirty Bird & Myrt*, is available from dancing girl press. Jennes directs the Poetry in the Garden festival in Ridgefield, CT, each summer.

As the daughter of an antiquarian book dealer, **Taria Karillion** grew up surrounded by far more books than is probably healthy for one person. A Literature degree, a journalism course and some gratuitous vocabulary overuse later, her stories have appeared in a Hagrid-sized handful of anthologies and have somehow won enough literary prizes to fill his other hand. Despite this, she has no need as yet for larger millinery.

Janina Aza Karpinska (she, her) is an artist-poet from the south coast of England. Poetry informs her collages with an eye for the 'chime' and rhythm of line and pattern. Her collage-artwork has featured on the covers of *Heart of Flesh*; *Drawn to the Light*; *The Genre Society*; *Under_Score Magazine*; *Viridine Literary*, *The Quasar Review*; and in: *3 Elements Review*; *The Empty Mirror*; *Waxing and Waning*; *Quibble*; *Grim and Gilded*; *805 Lit*, and *Blue Mesa Review* amongst others.

Louise Kertes was born in Ludlow, Mass., of Italian immigrant parents who worked in the jute mills. She got a Phd, taught briefly (including at the Williston Northampton School), published *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (LSU Press, 1980) and poems in several journals, then made her living as a business journalist in for 40+ years. She now lives in Michigan and is grateful for the time to read and write poems again.

Bursting with color, movement, and imagination, **Amy D. Kotel's** work invites viewers into richly layered worlds where countless forms converge to create expansive landscapes, dreamlike narratives, and unexpected connections. Balancing intention with intuition, her paintings explore both the visible and invisible dimensions of experience, reflecting the complexity, beauty, and mystery woven throughout everyday life. Amy attended art high school in New York, , studied art education at SUNY New Paltz, graduating with a BA in Women Studies, minor in dance. Has her masters in education , She has both danced and puppeteer proffesioinally. and is a mom, partner, naturalist and community activist.

Barbara Krasner is a New Jersey-based poet with an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Recent books include *Poems of the Winter Palace* (Bottlecap Press), *The Night Watch* (Kelsay Books), *Insomnia: Poems after Lee Krasner* (dancing girl press), *The Wanderers* (Shanti Arts), and the forthcoming *Memory Collector* (Kelsay Books) and *The Appropriation of Brueghel* (Shanti Arts).

Pia Long is a Finnish-born, UK-based perfumer who views scent as a form of communication and perfumes as bottled stories. With an upbringing and education rooted in studying languages, translation, and writing, she approaches her craft as magical realism, combining art, design, and science to conjure imaginative experiences. Her career in fragrance spans four decades, during which she has created a multitude of perfumes and product fragrances. She is a member of the International Society of Perfumer Creators, a member of the British Society of Perfumers, and a recipient of the Septimus Piesse Visionary Award from the Institute of Art and Olfaction. www.demoaccords.com

Skyler Lovelace is a Wichita-based writer and mixed-media artist whose creative practice explores the intense frequencies of place. While formally trained in the literary arts, she approaches painting with an experimental spontaneity that relies on instinctual layers, raw texture, and negative painting techniques. Whether utilizing a saturated acrylic palette or a tightly wound stanza, her cross-genre work seeks out the unpolished history, atmospheric weight, and domestic realities embedded within ordinary landscapes. Her art and poetry actively dialogue with the vast, shifting rhythms of the Great Plains.

Ed Meek is the author of five books of poetry and a collection of short stories. His most recent book is *Great Pond*. He has had work in *The Paris Review*, *The Sun*, *Plume*, *The North American Review*, *Hobart*.

Joanna C. Migdal has lived in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, a vibrant artists' and writers' colony where she published a collaborative book of poetry and artworks, *My Quicksilver Lover*. A poem from the book (*Ode to the Cedar Bar*) has appeared in *Of Burgers and*

Barrooms. (Main St Rag). Poems have appeared in Muse/A, Zo, Ethel, Scarlet ILeafReview Modern Poetry, Unlost Journal, Mezzo Cammin.

David P. Miller's collection, *Bend in the Stair*, was published by Lily Poetry Review Books in 2021. Nixes Mate Books published his *Sprawled Asleep* in 2019. His poems have appeared in Meat for Tea, Reed Magazine, FOLIO Literary Journal, Tar River Poetry, Cherry Tree, Second Coming, The Ekphrastic Review, The Disappointed Housewife, and Blood+Honey, among other journals. In 2025, David received a Tanne Foundation award. He is a member of the New England Poetry Club's Board of Directors. David is also a member of Boston's Jamaica Pond Poets and co-directs their Chapter and Verse literary reading series.

David S. Morley is a UK-based visual artist specialising in detailed hand drawn illustration that bridges the gap between reality and imagination. He Takes inspiration from magical realism, myths and folk tales incorporating this into his work. Alongside his drawing practice, he likes to make video art and photography. David holds a BA in Fine Art and an MA in Drawing.

Camellia Paul is a PhD student of Comparative and World Literature at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her areas of research and publication include Comparative Literature, environmental humanities, ecocriticism, animal studies, myth and folklore, and Translational Studies. Her works of translation, fiction, poetry, and art regularly appear in magazines, online journals, and anthologies. Camellia loves owls, Nature, reading, listening to music, and exploring cultures.

Susan L. Pollet is a visual artist and author whose works have appeared in multiple art shows and literary publications. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC. She is also a published author in multiple genres.

Niles Reddick writes from his home at Cherokee Lake in the Appalachian Mountains and is author of a novel, four short fiction collections, and two novellas. His work has appeared in over forty anthologies and in more than five hundred pubs including The Los Angeles Review, The Saturday Evening Post, Boudin, Flash Fiction Magazine, Bending Genres, Citron Review, Midway Journal, and Vestal Review.

Cindy Rinne creates poetry, fiber art, and zines in San Bernardino, CA. Rinne was awarded a writing residency at the Chateau d'Orquevaux in France and The Ou-Telier Artist Residency on Vancouver Island, Canada in 2026. Her books include: *Etheric Ghosts and a Cup of Tea* (forthcoming Kelsay Press), *Today in Three Caves* (Cyberwit.net), *Structures Break Down* (Cyberwit.net), *Dancing Through the Fire Door* (Nauset Press), and more. Her poetry appeared in: The Closed Eye Open, Unpsychology, Lothlorien, Mythos Magazine, and others.

Stewart Rudy is a public high school teacher. His fiction has appeared in BULL and Moss Puppy, among others. His debut was a 2024 Best of the Net nominee. He lives in Oakland, CA with his partner, daughter, and cat.

Ruth Saxey-Reese earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine. She teaches writing and literature courses at Boise State University in addition to poetry workshops for local non-profit organizations. Her work was nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize and her poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in several publications, including *Meat for Tea* previously, *Chiron Review*, *Calyx*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Rattle*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *America Magazine: The Jesuit Review of Faith & Culture*.

Mark Sbani is a Denver-based playwright whose work blends sharp wit with offbeat observation. Born in New York, raised in Virginia, Sbani reached his peak in Colorado, settling near the quiet lakes of Washington Park, where the rhythms of nature — especially the flowers he admires and the geese he dislikes — influence his writing. Known for his humor and distinct narrative voice, Sbani's plays often reflect how small moments shape larger truths. As he jokes, "Writing a play is like strangling a goose. It takes a long time."

Kaila Schwartz runs an award-winning high school theatre program in the SF Bay Area where she lives with her spouse and kitty overlords. Her work can be seen in *Superpresent*, *Eckphrastic Review*, *Boudin*, *Metphrastics*, and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, among others.

Andrew Shelffo is a writer, teacher, and storyteller who lives in western Massachusetts. He has told stories on the World Channel's *Stories from the Stage*, *USA Today's Storytellers Project*, and *New England Public Media's Valley Voices Grand Slam*, and numerous virtual storytelling events, including ones in Philadelphia, Toronto, and Chicago.

Trisha Leigh Shufelt is an award-winning confessional/narrative poet and artist. Her most recent poetry collection, *Thundering on the Pink*, published by Kelsay Books, along with her other works, is available online. You can find her at thepoetrymoth.com.

Sushanth Shyamsundar is an Indian writer and poet based in Chennai. He performs spoken word as Rakshasan and writes across poetry, fiction, horror, comedy, queerness, family, memory, and the strange machinery of everyday life. His work often explores bodies, masks, refusal, tenderness, absurdity, survival, and the private rituals people build to keep going. He is the author of one poetry collection, with two more manuscripts in progress.

Alissa Simon discusses literature with students and Harrison Middleton University. She also enjoys writing, swimming, the outdoors, and every sunrise. She lives in Albuquerque with her family, nestled between a river and a mountain.

Seasoned, **David R. Solheim's** fifth book of poetry, was recently published by the North Dakota State University Press. It and his previous four books of poetry and his literary travelogue, *A Week on the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers: Thoreau's 1861 Minnesota Journey Revisited*, are available via buffalocommonspress.com. He has published reviews, essays, interviews, and poetry in a couple dozen periodicals and several anthologies. Solheim is an emeritus Professor of English at Dickinson State University(ND) and was the North Dakota Statehood Centennial Poet and an Associate State Poet Laureate.

Peter Tacy has always written. He wrote and published both prose and poetry when he was an undergraduate in the 1950's; but then, during a long career as a teacher and educational leader, he focussed his published writing on professional subjects, including two books about experiential education. What poetry he wrote during that long period was not only unpublished, but completely unshared. It was only when he was in his eighties that his old friend and recent wife Jane Yolen prodded him to publish his poems— and then, to collect some of these poems for this, his first book of poetry, published in his 90th year.

Margaret Taylor-Ulizio is a writer, part-time Religious Studies instructor, canon lawyer, and volunteer wildlife rehabilitator from New Jersey. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in San Antonio Review, Amethyst Review, The Orchards Poetry Journal, Merion West, One Art, The Lyric (forthcoming), The Write Launch, and elsewhere.

Michael Washburn is a New York-based writer. His fiction has been published in dozens of journals, magazines, and anthologies in the United States and abroad.

More than 300 poems of **Mark Wish's** have appeared in print venues such as Poetry, Ecotone, Post Road, The Iowa Review, and Prairie Schooner. A Pushcart Prize winner, he's the founding editor and publisher of Coolest American Stories, an annual anthology tasked with uniting Americans via interesting storytelling.

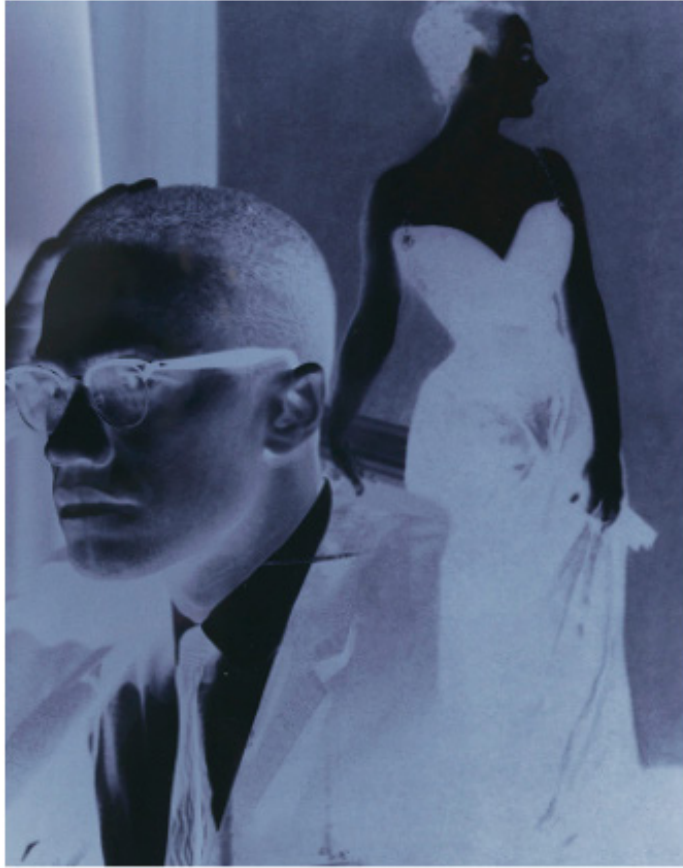
Ellen Gerneaux Woods writes poetry and memoir and is the author *The Watchful Heart* (Recedes, Finishing Line Press (2021)) and *Warriors in Transition*, Word Project Press (2014). Her work appears in literary journals including Persimmon Tree, Monterey Poetry Review, Blood and Thunder, Poems of Political Protest Anthology, California Poets Collection, Marin Poetry Center, among other. She was a judge in the prose poem category, Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition and is currently on the prose staff of The MacGuffin, a print journal.

Gerald Yelle has worked in restaurants, factories, schools and offices. His books include *Love Bomb, the bored, The Holyoke Diaries* and *Evolution for the Hell of It*. His chapbooks include *No Place I Would Rather Be* and *A Box of Rooms*. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Robert Zott has taken photographs of tombstones bearing single last names that are common English words for 30+ years. His subjects appear as he found them; no details have been changed. For Zott, it is essential that the names are part of the genealogical record, returned to common language through the omission of supporting text. The New York Times has written, "Robert Zott's surveying of graveyards to find tombstones with startlingly appropriate names on them is a fascinating and increasingly well-known obsession." He has published two chapbooks: *Stone Poems* and *Life Lessons - The Tombstone Poetry of Robert Zott*. robertzott.com

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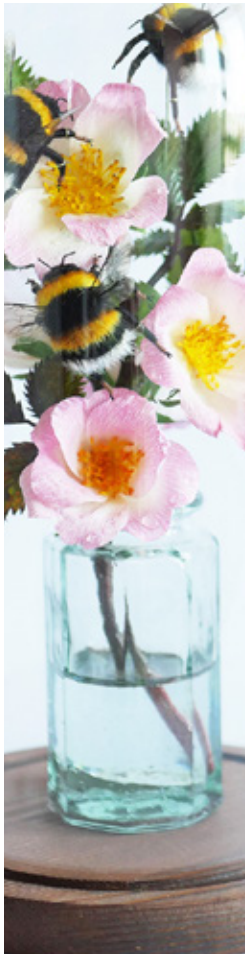
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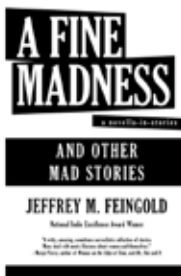
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