

# *Twisted Vine*



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Literary Arts Journal  
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# MASTHEAD

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\* Editors' choice awards

# Letter From the Editor

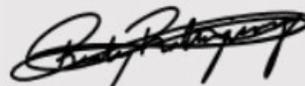
Dear Reader,

Thank you for supporting our journal. Prepare yourself for an exhilarating ride through the realms of laughter, tears, hope, courage, and even a touch of spice. Within these pages, you will encounter creative nonfiction that resonates deeply in the heart, poetry that lingers sweetly in the mind, and fiction that stirs the soul. The common theme in these diverse works is their reflective nature and metaphorical depth. Whether it is contemplative existential musings, intimate reflections on romance and passion, or reverent explorations of nature, each piece offers a unique perspective through which to view life.

This year's Editors' Choice Awards are a testament to the caliber of talent in our pages. These distinguished pieces are the poem "Dirty Mirror" by Kris Green, nonfiction "To See the Saffron Wither" by Jacob Reina, fiction "Who Says I Have to Love Nature" by Maureen Mancini Amaturro, and visual art "Self-Portrait in Shades of Attitudes" by Elena Plumb —each selected by our editors as exemplars of excellence. Editors selected Tatajana Krilova's enchanting artwork "Old Town on the River Bank" to grace our cover.

I commend the exceptional team behind this edition of Twisted Vine Literary Journal for their outstanding work in screening, communications, and layout and design. While many managing editors around the world boast about their teams, this editorial staff excelled in diligently curating a collection of evocative narratives and poetry that promises to take readers on a profound journey.

May you find solace, wonder, and a breath of fresh air within these lines.



Ruby Rodriguez, Managing Editor

# Dirty Mirror

---

**Kris Green**

Smoke rises from the sacrifices of the golden calf.  
Asleep in a burial plot on Mount Olympus.  
The sun reigns all day while the night recedes from grace.  
Even dependent upon the sun, the moon is just a reflection of its glory.

The glow inside bears little reflection of the sun.  
A dirty mirror bearing its true light.  
Will you see what beauty there is behind my glow?  
Or will you just be distracted by these moonbeams?

Ancient burial plots of Mesopotamia with butterflies that witness the apocalypse of Jerusalem.  
The sky grows dark. The thunder erupts. The veil is torn – forever asunder.  
Zombies proclaim a truth that we many cannot bear belief.  
Their hunger is satiated.

Someone asks what I believe.  
Have they seen my dirty mirror, my poor reflection.  
I sigh, telling them – I'm just a moonbeam.  
Not even a good glimpse of the sun's radiance.

# (Please Don't Look the Other Way)

---

L Lois

I feel a strain of urgency in writing  
there's something pushing to be born  
but it's damaged goods  
maybe change is not the way to go

status quo brought me here  
so let me think:  
was that helpful,  
am I grateful that not rocking the ship  
kept me afloat

those years spent affirming  
the guillotine  
denying what I so clearly had to know:  
it was built for a slender neck

just like mine

and now my children, orphaned  
stuck with the legacy of a troubled man  
the stomach bile of misogyny  
made him say he wanted to do me in  
to seek transactionally compliant comfort instead

my children and I live siloed by his decision  
not knowing sufficiency nor trust  
death's valley where we exist

feet slipping as we push forward  
spending the first fifteen years on repeat

chanting that I'd never breathe my last  
valuing what came hard  
speaking against injustice in a whisper  
finding the underdog to take for a walk  
the fresh air does everyone a bit of good

but the leash tangled around my throat  
brought me to my knees in desperation  
stunned that one we loved could cut till we bled  
still, we dragged our corpses  
to the witchdoctors' emergency room

we asked how we were to blame  
what we should have known not to do  
how we could have saved ourselves  
from acts of God and His man  
endless guilt heaped on the one willing to stay

painted red or black  
the colours that show we must be at fault  
where there is smoke  
the lava must flow  
the top sheared off a thousand feet

tall poppies in the shadows cut short  
the shaver's scythe swinging  
even while the crop gathers together  
weeping into the darkened valley

begging for reprieve, reason or both

he finished, we were felled

the blooms were lost, the magma hardened

execution was assigned and posted

so we withdrew

picking up our rolling heads to comfort

# Altered Spaces

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Amuri Morris



# S.O.S

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**Jennifer Santana**

The year we got engaged, I let my hair get long. Taught myself to do all sorts of updos with it. I sauntered around the three story flat I inhabited in an apron and a bun, playing house. It was a fun game in the beginning, and I took to it like the doll I'd become the instant my future husband kneeled before me, smiled wide, and produced a blue-velvet box from his pocket.

After Fred finally proposed, after years of longing for those magical words to fall from his lips, I felt nothing less than indebted, and so I dedicated each thought, word and gesture to the rich, handsome man I loved and now owed my future to, and there it was fully realized in the flawless, sparkling diamond perched upon my finger – a promising future, indeed.

The moment I said “yes,” Fred became my savior. He picked me to love and cherish and play house with forever, and oh how lucky I was to no longer have to depend on myself alone. I could depend on him, this glorious man who was nothing short of princely, and I proclaimed my happiness to family and friends until I lost my Voice.

The only duties I had were domestic, and I tackled them with enthusiasm, believing that with every speck of dirt scrubbed clean, with every article of clothing washed and folded, and with every meal prepared from scratch, I'd show Fred my worth and make my way to his heart, and, in turn, my happiness. It didn't matter that it had taken so long. It didn't matter that I'd had to beg and plead. Fred had proposed, and I chanted “he loves me” until I was convinced that he did.

I learned to cook and bake, mastering multiple recipes a day. Fred and I hosted dinners for his friends regularly. Our social calendar was perpetually full, and between special occasions and trips overseas, I'd plan one party after another. Everyone exalted in the meals I prepared, and I washed the dishes to the sounds of my admirers'

approving coos as they rubbed their bellies and smacked their lips with satisfaction. “She’s a keeper, Fred!” They’d wink and exclaim. “What a doll!” Fred would grunt his approval and I would beam, feeling joy spread from head to toe like wildfire. Only Fred’s loving looks could fuel me, and I did everything a doll could do to keep them Coming.

The morning of our engagement, we departed in first-class seats for the Far East on cloud nine. In Hong Kong, I bought a vibrant pink headband I couldn’t live without. Upon our return, I placed it carefully in one of my vanity drawers next to the expensive perfume Fred had purchased for me in Paris, the one that smelled too good to be true. Paris – the city Fred and I had jetted off to last New Year’s Eve, the day of my birth, and what a lucky birthday girl I was. Fred had promised to propose to me at the Eiffel Tower and wasn’t it romantic? My heart swelled with hope as we gallivanted along the cobblestone streets, shopping and dining, but not a one led to that propitious tower.

One bleak day, the last of our days in the city of love, we stood on top of the Arc de Triomphe. I looked up at the overcast sky, towards the Eiffel Tower shrouded in gray, and realized in devastation that Fred was not going to propose, that he had lied, that the words would never come from his heart because his heart never listened to mine and never could. And my heart was saying DO IT. This is a place where dreams are supposed to come true, I thought.

I ran to the banks of the Seine and thought of throwing myself into the glistening green water, but before I could take a step forward and succumb to my despair, Fred came up behind me and forcibly pulled me away. “What do you think you’re doing?” He shouted, and would he protect or attack me, this sudden stranger that had lied but I still loved, and my heart caught in my throat as his grip on my arm tightened. “I want to die!” The words gushed out of me like blood from a wound. And then, gently, “You promised.” Tears streamed down my face. He didn’t say a word. But he didn’t kill my Hope.

It was a year later, and Paris and all its broken promises were buried deep. I sat in front of my heart-shaped mirror and put on my pink headband. I pulled out the delicate glass perfume bottle, held it to my nose, and breathed gratefully. At last, I have everything I’ve ever wanted, I thought: the big, beautiful diamond on my hand, the

grand, spotless home filled with treasures, and the rich, handsome man by my side. But the house stood eerily silent, and the space beside me was empty.

I'd look down at my ring then, at myself in the mirror, stare hard and see far beyond the pretty image to a place where there was only sadness, and cry. For as much as I had, there was so little in my heart. And what was left was dwindling. "But he loves me," I'd reassure myself. "I'm happy." My voice was thin on the air.

There were, from time to time, evenings left blank on our calendar. Fred would come home from work and there would only be two places set at the table. After dinner, we'd retire to opposite ends of the couch and watch television. Before long, I'd reach my arms towards him, begging to be held. He'd open his to receive me, and I'd fall into them relieved, thankful for their shelter. I'd peck at his cheek and pull at his neck, vying for his waning attention. He seemed more interested in his work, in the television, in himself, than me.

"Look at me, Fred," I'd beseech him. He'd hesitate, reluctant. "He loves me," I'd think meekly, as the flames started to die. And when he would finally meet my gaze, I'd search those green eyes in vain for the love I frantically needed, and his eyes would shift away from mine then, desperate to avoid my intimate stare, my loving expression, my naivety.

The following summer I started to show a lot of skin to attract Fred's attention. I wore crop tops and dresses up to there. I was alone most of the time and lonely all of it. I wandered around the house like a caged bird, alternately preening myself and peering out the windows at a bright, promising world I could only pretend to be part of. The lack of attention bore holes through my heart. The reflection in the mirror told me I was lovely, but it didn't matter how I looked because that summer, Fred, the love of my life, wasn't looking at me anymore. That summer, all his adoring glances became Memories.

I couldn't name the cause, wouldn't give it a place and a presence in our house - the house we had built together upon pillars of hope, just last year, after he'd offered me forever and I'd accepted in tears. But together was a word that had vanished from my vocabulary along with we, us and our. The tears hadn't stopped since.

He worked long hours that summer, and so did I—hours spent clinging to

recollections like so many little life rafts in our sea of love turned stormy, and yes, it was work. Very hard work. I stopped eating and sleeping. I shed ten pounds as effortlessly as skin, but I ignored it like I ignored everything that was becoming obvious. Instead, I gritted my teeth and clung harder, but still the sea swirled angrily around me. Surely, I'd be swallowed. I held my breath and stared at my engagement ring. Wasn't this love? I breathed the question aloud.

My diamond was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen – prominent and sparkling, princess cut and clear as the sky I watched from our roof day after day, always looking up for answers. The infinite blue above me was silent, and yet, somehow, someone, or something, spoke to me in a familiar rhythm that rang like truth but I couldn't bear to listen. Yes, this is love, I told myself. I told myself lots of things that summer. The wind picked up and the waves crashed down.

One Friday night in August, I wore a white linen skirt with a black and white top that revealed my ribs and dwindling cleavage. Clothes are such emotional things, and I had always loved them. The previous year, after Fred let me leave my job along with all my angst behind, I replaced my heavy black suits with vibrant accoutrements of pink, red and blue. I was among the happiest of brides-to-be, and happiness comes in colors. Something else comes in black and white.

I was meeting Fred and another couple for dinner, friends of ours. Ours. I paused and mulled the word over. Its definition escaped me. Fred was working late, of course, and would meet me there. Ryan offered to pick me up. Meghan, Ryan's girlfriend, was also working late. I accepted, thinking nothing of it. Thinking nothing. When we arrived, Fred was already there and Meghan was standing by his side. I blinked at the image.

"God! You're so skinny!" Meghan exclaimed in her loud, jeering voice. Our eyes met. I paused and looked at her. At her long, blonde hair. Her bigger, fuller breasts. Her figure reminded me of mine but mine was going, going, gone. I smiled and said "thank you" politely, but the phrase lashed off the tip of my tongue like a whip. There was nothing lovely about Meghan.

I don't remember the name of the restaurant, but I remember how it felt when we all sat down to dine, Meghan next to Fred and Ryan next to me, and it felt like the Last

Supper – the last gathering of disciples and betrayers alike – and what was that word that encompassed them all? Oh, yes: friends.

The patio doors were open and the summer air was pleasant, but at our table, there was nothing pleasant about the air. I only smelled danger as Fred and Meghan turned intently towards each other, cozied up and laughed as one, their noxious breath comingling as seductively as smoke. I gagged and winced. No one noticed. The moon was nearly full and positioned in my line of sight. It shone like a spotlight, and the light felt cool and clarifying. My eyes fixated intermittently on Fred, on Meghan, on the moon, like moths. I breathed and sipped my drink, taking note of every coy look and meaningful gesture they exchanged, and not at all furtively. Like the patio doors that showed the way out, my eyes were open. And widening.

Ryan turned in his chair and tried woefully to engage me in conversation. “So, how’ve you been? Nice evening, isn’t it?” I paid him no mind. The urgent, powerful pounds of my heart beat away at its cage of bone, and I could no longer deny, could no longer ignore what my heart was telling me over and over in its furious two-beat rhythm: YOU KNOW.

I stared silently at Meghan and Fred. There was something about the way Fred was grinning at her. And it came rushing back to me then, my most precious memory of Fred and me: the first time we met. And the memory was the largest, safest raft in our sea, but it was also the last and my grip was slipping, the sea was swirling, but not before I remembered that breezy day nine years ago, before I’d become a belonging and my heart was big and bold. Back when I believed.

I remember stepping off the train and walking, no, rushing, down the stairs of the station, forever in a hurry to be whisked away by Mr. Right, and don’t you know that all he had to be was perfect? It took nine years for me to learn that all he had to do was love me. My heels clicked like music across the marble floor and heads turned curiously to catch the pretty sight, and one by one, they smiled knowingly. I didn’t know a thing. Yet.

I remember pushing my way through the revolving glass doors and out into the shining sun. It was a warm Indian summer and winter was worlds away. But the wind picked up and my black and blue dress fluttered around me like panicky birds. My hair

whipped against my cheeks and stuck to my lips as I turned to my left and blinked away the light. Something was coming, way off in the distance, farther than I could see but close enough to feel, and it felt like a storm. On the horizon, straight ahead, stood a tall, blonde man leaning against a shiny, red convertible. The image, no, the mirage, was tantalizing, and my lips started to spread. He smiled in sync with me and my heart stopped to take something like lightening – a jagged electric arrow – identical to the one he shot across to pierce Meghan’s heart now, and before I could shed my last salty tear, I saw her receive the bittersweet sensation with a smile of her own, and I knew then, right then, as the raft fell away from me and disappeared into darkness, that Fred’s million dollar smile would never again be coming in my direction.

# Vega

---

Chloe Kummer

The familiar smell of incense fleeing out the crack in the screen window where we  
directed skunk smoke five minutes ago-

I feel like I'm floating.

It feels like falling in love.

Somehow we're outside. Two in a million small-town babies,

Losing ourselves in dew-drop grass,

Beneath light-polluted stars, palms pressed like blinders to our temples

I thought our shields would make the polka dots brighter against that dome of black-  
paint sky.

I could hardly make out Vega: our star.

We found her and googled her given name.

Being spit out by sky always makes me feel like a magnet,

Helpless to the forces that wrap me into you,

I rub myself against you like a cat stroking a table leg.

Do you feel it too? The blood rush and head fuzz,

The cinematography of this moment?

The sweat rain on our backs and the galaxies above us?

Does it make you want to sleep together without a picnic blanket, braless,

And howl at the moon, fangs out and dirt-streaked,

In our brand new summer clothes?

For once no one is watching.

If I glue us together, who could call it sin?

# A Certain Kind of Luck

---

**Brent Lewis**

That summer, Jake started sleeping with a blue ice pack pressed against his back. Lena wouldn't sleep unless she was held, and heat poured off her like a dryer vent. Jake had a low tolerance for heat; even lying near Karen in bed caused him to perspire. With the addition of the baby, a natural space heater cradled against his chest, the ice pack was a necessity.

Holding the baby at night was his second job now. Initially, Karen had insisted on doing all of the night comforting herself. Jake was still working full time and freelancing in the evening, to earn extra cash to replace his wife's income. But after three months without sleep, Karen made it clear she needed his help. So after dinner he would do a little work in his office, make sure he had fully emptied his bladder, then begin the sleep march.

Most nights, simply holding Lena wasn't enough to put her to sleep. First, she had to be walked with a bouncing gait, near the dim light of the western windows. Jake stroked her hair and cooed in her ear, as he described the different objects they bounced past in a singsong voice. Lena could get heavy as a bag of rice when carried continuously for three hours, for even when she wasn't ready to sleep she wanted to be held and carried. Unable to move efficiently on her own, she relied on her parents to help her observe. Eventually, the steady rhythm of his strides and words lulled her to sleep.

Jake would move toward the kitchen, still bouncing, and slowly open the freezer door. He would shift her limp weight to one arm and retrieve the blue ice with his free hand. The freezer door, hopefully, would shut gently, so no one was disturbed by the sound. Then he wrapped the ice in one of the dishtowels, the long ones with the word "TEA" woven in tan block letters across one end.

On most nights, the ritual would end there. Despite her potent heat production, his daughter was a sound sleeper once she went down. She was undisturbed by night sounds or the discomfort of others. Provided contact with her parents was never broken,

Lena would sleep through the night. And so would Jake, the baby sandwiched between his arm and Karen and an ice pack wedged against his back.

But on that particular August night, after the Portland-Vancouver area had smoldered through a week of triple digit temperatures, no amount of cooing and bouncing would put Lena to sleep. Jake put her in the crib, thinking that perhaps she had reached her contact limit in the heat as well. Besides, Karen had read that they should start trying to encourage her to self-sooth. She seemed stunned as he laid her down, dimmed the lights and turned the ceiling fan on low. Before she could move, he bolted from the nursery, leaving the door slightly cracked.

In the living room, Jake and Karen sat on opposite ends of the couch and listened while Lena screamed. They had placed a box fan on high in the patio door, with a block of ice in front of it and a damp towel draped across the back, a makeshift air conditioner. The air outside stayed still. The only noises in the house were the roar of the box fan and their daughter's plaintive cries.

Fifteen minutes into the standoff, Karen sighed and stood up. She began to walk toward the nursery.

He grabbed her arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I can't stand to listen to her any longer," she said.

"But the book said we're supposed to let her cry it out."

"The author of that book probably never had children." She tugged her arm free of his grasp. "Besides you gave up on her too fast, didn't give her a chance to transition."

"Now just a minute." Jake got to his feet and maneuvered himself between her and the hallway. His head throbbed. His whole body felt hot and uncomfortable. "The car used to put her to sleep." Their midsized Toyota sedan offered both continuous motion and actual air conditioning. "I'll take her for a ride," he said. "You get some sleep."

Not much had changed in the nursery, except Lena stood propped on the crib rail. No wonder she hadn't fallen asleep, standing with her legs braced. Jake marveled that she hadn't flipped herself out in desperation. Lena's face was crimson from the heat and streaked with tears. On the floor was her stuffed turtle, Tait, hurled from the crib as

if to say: You would make me sleep without Tait? She glared up at him and continued to wail, unwilling to immediately forgive his betrayal.

Jake grabbed the diaper bag and Tait before retrieving Lena. Back in the living room, he laid her back in the car seat. He didn't think she had a higher volume, but securing the straps seemed to kick her screaming up a notch. Lena squirmed and reached toward her parents' bedroom, as though she sensed that Karen was hiding there. The straps adjusted, Jake grabbed his keys, shouldered the bag, picked up the car seat and headed for the garage, thankful he had parked inside. At least he wouldn't subject the neighborhood to his daughter's unfiltered screams.

After Lena was secured atop her car seat's base, Jake adjusted the AC and tried to direct the streams of cool air back to her. The car's interior was stuffy but already seemed cooler than the house. He watched her strain against the straps and sob in the mirror attached to the headrest of the back seat. She returned his gaze with trembling lips and he averted his eyes. He pointed the car toward the onramp for I-5 North, just a few blocks from the house. Smooth continuous motion, he thought. Do the circuit between Hazel Dell and Kalama and she'll fall asleep.

Just past the I-205 interchange, they passed the county fairgrounds. The Ferris wheels and other carnival rides lit up the sky with garish spirals of neon light. He remembered the first time he'd brought Karen down from Seattle shortly after they were married. They had gone to the fair. The highlight was milkshakes from the Dairy Princess booth, the flavor somehow enhanced by the fresh smell of cow shit from the adjacent barn.

Karen had been poised and dignified throughout a day full of unsubtle inquiries from his mother about when she could expect a full complement of grandchildren. She only flinched when Jake suggested riding the Ferris wheel. Despite a slight fear of heights, Karen had agreed, provided Jake didn't rock the carriage. Her soft, small and quivering hand clutched his as their seats reached the top. Whenever the carriage descended she loosened her grip, pulled her hand completely away for a moment, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Jake was careful to make every turn and change of speed as fluid as possible. He wondered if babies became velocitized. He remembered the warning in driver's-ed,

one of the many dangers of high-speed freeway driving. He had no memory of losing the sensation of speed before driving himself. Maybe that was the danger, you didn't notice.

He checked the mirror relay. Silent tears streamed down Lena's face as her eyes darted about the car. Her little hands punched the air, clenched in red fists. Jake thought of Karen at home and her nights of tears and frustration. Karen felt guilty about Lena's needy sleep habits, and her inability to console her. One sleep deprived morning, after the baby took four hours to put down, she'd confessed between sobs that she resented their daughter. What kind of mother feels that way? she'd screamed, before collapsing into her seat at the table.

The next night Jake took over the graveyard shift, as they half-jokingly called the long walk for sleep. And things got better for a while, although Karen still felt depressed and sick with guilt. Although he realized her conflict, Jake had initially taken up the task with a secret joy. He was eager to do better than Karen, to prove he was a modern man who wasn't limited to the role of breadwinner. But as the weeks dragged into summer and the nightly ritual became more involved, that changed. Now he felt the urge to snap at Karen that he had to work in the morning. Pull yourself together and take care of your daughter. When it's all you have to do, how hard can it be? These thoughts simmered inside Jake, a sour, sick feeling in his stomach. He wondered if Karen was sitting up now, anxious about where they were. Or was she sound asleep?

At that hour the highway was mostly empty, with the exception of convoys of trucks eager to put miles behind them while traffic was thin. Outside, I-5 followed the curve of the Columbia River. Suddenly, Lena's protests and pleadings picked back up, as if her voice had returned from a smoke break. "Darling, please," he said. "There aren't any whales in that river, so no more wailing." But she didn't appreciate the pun, and continued to kick and cry.

The darker shadow of Mount Saint Helens rose to the east of the highway. In middle school, he'd taken field trips to the Ape Cave, disappointingly named for a Boy Scout troop, not Sasquatch. Below the collapsed dome, the Lahar had stretched out, desolate and dusty, a scarred strip of land left barren by the mudflows caused by the eruption. Jake had no memory of the mountain's nearly symmetrical peak; it had

erupted before he was born. All he knew were stories of air thick with ash and pictures of a perfect white ball above the timberline. His great aunt Janis had owned a cabin on Spirit Lake and climbed the mountain every summer before the eruption. The cabin had been destroyed. The uninsured property was wiped away. Still, Janis never said a word about her personal or financial losses. And she only spoke fondly of the mountain.

North of Woodland, he decided to turn on the radio. OPB sputtered out of the speakers, the BBC News Service heavy with static. He hit the search button and found a smooth jazz station. But the hum of the engine, the vibration of the car, and the mellow music did little to soothe Lena.

Jake scratched his head and watched a freight train cut through the night. As a boy he'd been fascinated with the optical illusion that made it difficult to tell whether a train was moving or stationary, when viewed from a passing car. His mother had used trains as an opportunity to distract her children, challenging them to count all the boxcars. Unfortunately, that trick wouldn't work on Lena. The train also followed the river, but in the opposite direction from their car.

Jake clicked off the radio. As the train rumbled past, he noticed that a stillness had crept into the car. Lena had stopped crying. He glanced at her mirror-relayed image, and noticed that Tait lay helpless on his back, dropped on the seat next to her. She fidgeted, rubbed her eyes and blinked heavily. A few miles later, Jake could barely make out the smallest of snores over the engine noise.

But when he got to Kalama, he didn't turn around. With Lena asleep, he knew he should. There was no reason for him to drive aimlessly with his daughter in the back seat. He had little doubt Karen was still awake, waiting for their return. The bed would seem empty to her without them. If he turned around now as he'd planned, there was still a chance to get a decent night's sleep before the 6:00 AM alarm.

Instead Jake continued north, toward Seattle. Or, he thought, maybe I'll cut west at Rochester and head for the Olympic Peninsula. He'd spent several summers with Janis hiking near Lake Quinault. There was a peace there, kneeling on the damp moss, concealed in a thicket of ferns. For months after those trips, his clothes retained the scent of cedar. He breathed deep, but the Toyota's interior only smelled of fake pine.

On his last hike with Janis, before Alzheimer's took her memory and she was

forced into the sterile walls of the assisted living home in Olympia, they'd found the skeleton of an elk in a creek bed. It was August and the only sign of water in the ravine was the grass that grew up through the ribs. Jake examined the bones, picked clean by turkey vultures, while Janis prepared lunch.

Janis placed her hand on his shoulder. She held his sandwich in the other hand, balanced on a tin plate. They used a nearby log as a bench and a table, although they had to flick ants from their legs as they ate. Jake asked his great aunt what killed the elk.

"Hard to say," she said between huge bites of her lunch. She always ate with gusto on the trail. "But given the position of the bones with no evidence of trauma, I'd say he starved."

Jake had only eaten half his sandwich by the time she'd finished. He continued to stare at the bones, glaring white in a sunbeam. Janis patted his knee. She spoke plainly, like a narrator in a nature documentary, "When there isn't enough food, young bucks have to separate from their herds."

She stroked his hair back, bleached blonde by the sun. "They don't want to leave their families but they have to. It's their only shot at survival. Sometimes life just bears down on us, Jakey." Then she gestured around the ravine. "But could you ask for a better place to rest?" Janis laughed, and Jake laughed with her, as they enjoyed the good fortune of the bones. He finished the rest of his sandwich and they continued on their way toward Enchanted Valley, singing the Geoduck song, the chorus echoing off the cedar trunks.

Before Karen got pregnant, he'd planned a trip to Lake Quinault for their anniversary. His probationary period with the state was over, and they were both working again. But fetal Lena shifted their priorities, with future budget restrictions and house payments on their minds. The weekend away was postponed, then scrapped.

As if on cue, Lena whimpered from the back seat. Jake checked the mirror relay and saw her shift slightly as her eyes flickered open. She was barely awake, but enough to resist the notion of going back to sleep. Jake wondered if she was searching for Tait, still stranded on his back, or for the warm cocoon of her parents' bodies around her.

The last time he'd been out to Lake Quinault was his twenty-fifth birthday. Karen

had surprised him with a room in the lodge. They were still living in Seattle and were just engaged the month before, and Jake hadn't lost his advertising job yet. The room was barebones, adorned only with a bed, small dresser and nightstand. The full bed was the smallest they'd occupied together since their dorm days.

It was early May and rained the entire weekend. But still they managed to get out for a hike. A laminated flier at the Petes Creek trailhead warned of the possible presence of cougars. Karen was concerned, but made the effort for him. She clutched his hand as they walked, asking after every crunch of gravel, drop of rain, or movement in the brush. When she confessed to Jake that she had a funny feeling about the trail, he finally relented and they headed back to the lodge.

On the way back from the trailhead, they stopped at the world's largest Sitka Spruce, located only a few feet off the road. Jake wondered if they cut down larger trees that grew in less convenient locations. Or did they bribe record keepers, to conceal the existence of those trees from visitors? The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon playing cribbage by the enormous stone fireplace. At dinner, a waiter told them that a biker had been mauled that afternoon on the trail they'd abandoned.

Lena's whimpers were becoming more frequent. Jake pulled off the freeway in search of a safe place to stop and check on his daughter. While idling at a stop light, he tapped the steering wheel, checked the mirror relay, and cooed to Lena.

The intersection was empty, except for a lone woman in a small hatchback directly behind them. At first Jake paid her little attention, until her movements in his rearview mirror became too distracting. She rubbed reddened eyes behind tortoise shell glasses. She worked hard not to disturb the placement of the glasses, even as she pushed harder into her sockets. At first, he wrote the action off as her own attempt to ward off sleep on the final stretch of her drive. Or maybe she had something in her eye. But she kept pawing at her eyes, even as the light changed and they both pulled through the intersection.

Worried about her ability to drive, he kept glancing back at her peculiar actions. As he pulled to another gradual stop at the next vacant intersection, he realized that she had been fighting to hold back tears. Now the woman removed her tortoise shell glasses and lost it. Her face elongated into a tight, grotesque grimace just before she

buried it in her hands.

Jake sat in his car and felt helpless. What was she crying about? He looked at his daughter in the mirror, her own cheeks still showing the stains of tears. He thought of Karen at home and her recent nights of tears and frustration. Was she sleeping now or sitting up, crying, worried about where they were?

The light seemed like it would never change. The woman in the tortoise shell glasses continued to sob in his rearview mirror. He wondered if he should get out, ask her if she needed help. Or at least offer her a tissue. Tissues, something he had never kept in his car before Lena was born. But as Jake debated, the woman reached across her car and retrieved a tissue from the glove box. Slowly she seemed to be regaining control, although Jake could see that she was still upset, too distracted to drive.

She honked and gestured toward the intersection. The light had changed. The woman in the tortoise shell glasses turned left, while he continued straight through the intersection. Within seconds, she was out of his sight; there was nothing more he could do but wonder. Were they tears of despair, anger, or frustration? Had someone died? Was she driving away from trouble, or headed for it? Did her boyfriend abuse her, cheat on her with her best friend?

Jake told himself, the reason for her tears shouldn't matter to him. Maybe there wasn't a reason. Still there was something unnerving about her silent sobs, her sadness perfectly contained within the car. He drove a square of the block and headed back toward the freeway. With no overpass, he had no choice but to continue north. Headed north again, a few cars and trucks continued to stream down I-5, unaware of the woman's tears. For all Jake knew, he was the only witness to her pain. He convinced himself that contacting her wouldn't have helped. But he couldn't shake the feeling that he was just another man who had failed her that night.

Lena's fussing, rekindled by the car horn, increased and Jake gently shushed her. He took a deep breath, realizing his chance to get Lena to sleep easily was gone. He remembered that Karen sang Lena little songs, lullabies she had learned at a Mommy and Me class. But he hadn't attended any of those classes. All the songs he knew weren't appropriate for babies. So Jake sang the only one he could think of:

*Oh it takes a lot of pluck and a certain kind of luck  
just to dig around the muck, just to find a geoduck.  
And he doesn't have a front and he doesn't have a back.  
He doesn't know Donald, and he doesn't go quack.*

But it was no use. Lena continued to resist the sleep her little body so desperately wanted. Unwilling to return in failure, Jake pulled into a rest stop and picked up Tait. He jiggled him in Lena's face, before placing the turtle on her lap. But still she cried.

On the seat next to him, his phone began to vibrate, Karen's picture flashing across the screen. Jake pressed ignore call, clutched the steering wheel and pressed his forehead against the window. God damn it, he thought, I can't even think of one song to comfort my own daughter. He wondered if there were any rooms available at the Lake Quinault Lodge.

Jake killed the engine and got out of the car. He retrieved Lena from her car seat. Across the narrow strip of pavement, a handful of weary travelers milled about the free coffee stand. For a moment Lena stopped crying, perhaps shocked by the audience, to be out of the car, in the night air, or back in her father's arms. But it didn't last. So Jake cooed in her ear and began to pace about the rest area, back and forth, with a bouncing gait. He rubbed her back and in her ear he softly sang. His voice low and raspy:

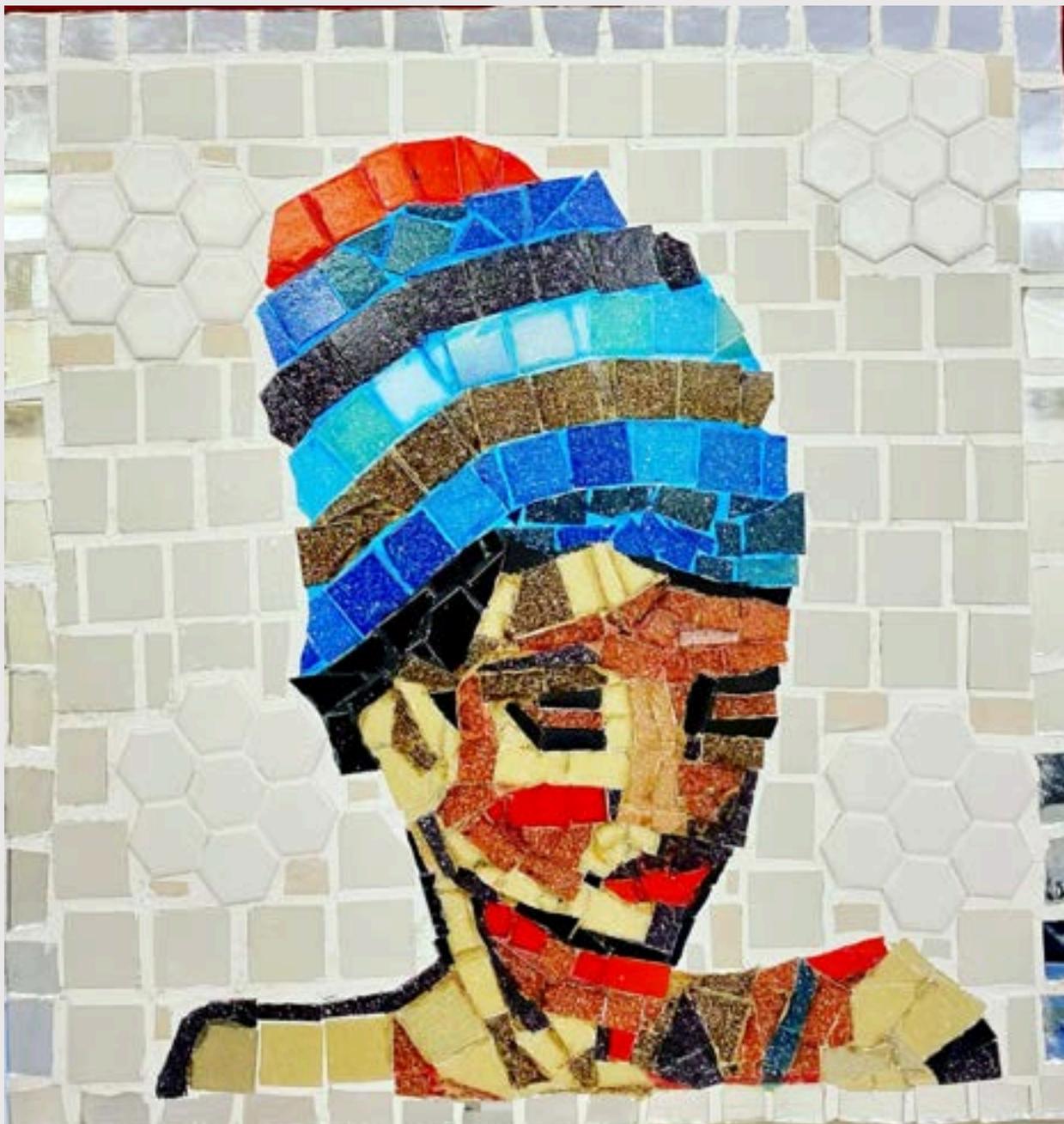
*Dig a duck, dig a duck, dig a geoduck.  
Dig a duck, dig a geoduck, dig a duck a day---*

After a few passes in the open air, when she realized he wasn't going to stop, Lena began to calm down. Once her body became limp, her weight pulling his arms toward the pavement, then he'd check the rest area map and find the nearest overpass. He'd text Karen before driving south. Let her know that Lena was asleep and they were on their way home. With any luck, Jake would be able to turn around before it was too late.

# Thinking Beyond Belief

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Zakia Chowdhury



# Buoyancy

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David M. Alper

The vast sky, restless waves crashing into each other,  
hitting against rocks that now scare me. The  
calmness is  
too obvious, the absence of the pounding tide, the  
beating

delivered by the moon's watchful eye. Rarely do I  
wake up  
in the morning without hearing the sound of the  
drowned sighing. My dreams are intertwined with  
strands

of seaweed. Always feeling the wetness on my skin,  
the rush sliding in, the play of limbs beneath, the  
shudder of released breath. Water has always been  
with me:

oceans, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, both known and  
unknown ones we visited on vacations. Should I have  
stayed  
on the shore and settled for a predictable view of a  
plain

inland. I stumble down the slope towards the beach,  
empty sand dunes, untouched sea-grass beds,  
seagulls crying for lost lovers.

I don't understand buoyancy, but I long for the sea,  
for my return, for your return to me, because I have  
no other choice - I am trapped in the whirlpool of this  
scene.

# To See the Saffron Wither

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Jacob Reina

(Dedicated to N.N.)

Still holding the old photographs of my grandma and grandpa, I sat still, waiting for Mom to answer while I searched her eyes. “Maman? Mom, did you hear me? Maman? How did we end up here?”

At last, she broke her stillness with a heavy sigh, then, after taking a heavier gulp of shiraz, said—with her low, gravelly voice—“First, let me tell you about the home where we used to live.”

\*

“It was a villa in the arid plains southwest of Mashhad. Like a single god, Zibad Mountain looked over our village. Once, when adhan was finished waking everyone up, I stuck my head outside my bedroom window to watch your grandpa’s purple fields of saffron swaying in the gentle breeze. I listened to the birds of morning softly sing before the wind picked up and my wooden window shutters shook just as a pomegranate fell from its branch into the dust. Across the hall was the bedroom of my sister, your Aunt Sara, and her window overlooked the courtyard with the fountain centered between four cypress trees and rose bushes and morning glories that were grown on low hedges to form a square perimeter—like a picture frame for the doves to see as they migrated somewhere under the navy puffs of clouds. Whenever the wind blew especially hard, Aunt Sara and I knew that the wind turbine on the roof was stealing speed to send cool air rushing down its chute below into the little hoz room where we escaped to every summer after playing in the grapevines beneath the high-noon sun.

“By that time, we were skipping through the vineyards, carrying baskets full of grapes to smash because your grandpa loved his homemade wine—how it helped the village laugh at night, when they would gather to share poems and clap and dance. The

buzzed men of those parties would slouch against the wall or lean with their elbows resting on the balcony railing, chins balanced by single fists, as they would smile half-asleep, gazing at our family's saffron fields.

'It's beautiful, Hamin,' one of the men would say. 'There's no saffron in the world more majestic than yours here.'

"Your grandpa would gesture with kind eyes and constant forward nods. 'Ghorboonet beram, my friend, merci, but it is nothing special.' But it was special, and your grandpa knew, and it would have killed him to even think of ever losing his home and those awe-inspiring saffron fields. So, he always smiled and felt pride burn deep within his heart and enjoyed dragging on his cigarettes and sipping the richness of the country wine produced by our own family, from the grapes of our own beloved land.

"And he had no idea what the land meant to his girls—how earlier that morning, Sara had picked two saffron flowers while looking up into my eyes, giggling the way all little girls like to do, still crouching as she smelled the threads before placing one behind my ear and placing the other behind her own. It was in this fashion that we skipped across the vineyards. And before reaching the house, I traded Sara petals, and we tucked each one in the front pockets of our linen blouses—near our hearts, until a safer home for us little buds could be found."

\*

"Those were very different times," Mom said, taking another gulp, "and we were free to do more than the years that followed. You know, your grandpa was well-respected," she smiled, "his grandfather, and his grandfather's grandfather—they always had that home, and they all—every one of them—helped anyone who came and knocked and said they were in need. Your grandma loved him, and not just for his wealth but for his compassion too. But she was afraid, and well—well, she knew we had to—"

I turned away and looked outside our living room window, when I heard a distant roll of thunder followed by the plop plop plop of late-evening rain and hail. I studied the ripples the storm was making in our pool, dividing my little brother's inflatable ducks toward opposite sides, causing one to tip over in the shallow end, while in the deep end the other drowned, lost at the bottom beneath the fierce black night.

\*

Mom explained that as the years passed, people of the village began to vanish. Sometimes, there were explanations, but other times...

“One of your grandpa’s closest associates, Amir—a pistachio farmer and baker who made the best baklava, which he would start selling near the Mashhad Bazaar every Friday morning when everyone was leaving the mosques—came to your grandpa less merry-faced than usual.

‘Hamin, it’s all over now. We are leaving for Turkey soon, to the city of Van. Please come with us. There’s no time to waste.’

‘Hamin-joon, Amir is right. It’s not safe here anymo—’

‘What do you think these people are going to do?’ Your grandpa swigged another glass-worth from the bottle. He had been doing this much more regularly than he did before. ‘Why would they even come here, where nobody lives but us? Sure, they have Mashhad—so what? What more could you expect of a city that boasts all the time about being so holy?! But we, we mind our own business here, and—’

‘What are you saying?’ Amir’s voice became as stern as his face. ‘My business is in Mashhad. And you’re right, they already have the city. The other merchants aren’t trying to stop them—they’re the ones cheering! And one of them already threatened to report me and my family! My family! Do you hear me? That’s why I’m telling you, the time to go—it’s now, Hamin!’

‘Hamin,’ your grandma tried to plea a final time, ‘in their eyes, we are the enemy, just as much as the Shah. The Tudeh blames people like us for having too much faith in who we believe in, and these clerics hate us for not having much faith in them. Our country—how we always knew it—it’s gone. It’s theirs now.’

“Aunt Sara and I watched your grandpa’s face twist to your grandma’s words in such a way that they had never seen before. It was the kind of belligerent face that would make an unsuspecting child cower, whining like how dogs do when they tuck their tail beneath their legs and back away. The roar, the half-sensical echo of phrases formed by stupefied feelings—‘It’s theirs?! It’s theirs?!’—how the sound of it was becoming less human by the second—‘What in the hell do you mean it’s theirs? Are you stupid or just scared? You lazy coward! It’s whose?! This home belongs to us! To

me!’—and once breakable items were brushed off the surface of the table, once chairs were thrown—It’s theirs then?! Okay! So, I will ruin it!’—that’s when your grandma took me and Aunt Sara by the wrists and marched us out, trying to compose a stoic face for herself to conceal her tears and trembling lower-lip, leaving our traditional Persian home to escape zealous despots once and for all.

‘Amir,’ she sniffled, ‘we will come with you and your family to Van.’

“And Amir said nothing, just nodded and sighed.”

That was the last time Mom ever saw my grandpa, but Aunt Sara was little and so inseparable from him...

“Being a few years older than her, the sounds of my little sister’s cries will echo on forever into my dreams each night. Not one night has passed since that I haven’t seen Aunt Sara dive onto the threshold and then the quaking feet of your grandpa—his confusion already quietly hinting some approaching calm and deep regret—where holding onto his ankles, Sara screamed her pleas. And I won’t forget the look in your grandma’s eyes when I turned my head—my usual go-to please-stop-this-please-do-something! expression was hopeless—looking at your grandma was like seeing myself in a mirror—it made me realize, even at that young age, that your grandpa and Aunt Sara would have no choice but to be stored away inside my memory as future stories to tell between all these swigs of wine and this tense throbbing in my throat.”

I tried to watch Mom, but instead I looked down. From the corner of my eye, I could see Mom burying her face. Then she poured another glass and breathed.

“Is Aunt Sara okay?” I asked.

“That’s why your grandma went back,” she said, “to go find out.”

\*

“By the time your grandma and I, with Amir’s family, neared the Kurdish hills just west of Tabriz, your grandma collapsed and cried in prostration beneath the stars. The wind picked up—it was colder than home. Seeing your grandma bury her face onto the land—the way a child does when secretly ashamed about some troublesome choice—I thought she looked just like Sara. And thinking this, something strange came upon me. It was a sudden sensation, a realization like no other—it invaded my mind and never

abandoned control. Suddenly, every detail mattered: how crisp the wind; how bright the stars; how red the lake; how fine the earth; how much darker the clouds than the sky they fled across; how much brighter some stars when beside some dimmer; were those jasmine flowers I smelled in the wind? how barren and yellow those rolling hills seemed, with their little scattered patches of shrubbery and grass. Yes, everything matters! Everything is worthy of always being remembered. Every detail counts. This, this never left me.

“When your grandma stood up again, she smiled and pulled Amir aside to whisper some things I couldn’t hear. A few minutes passed, and with every second, my heart beat faster. Then, she bent low and kissed my forehead, hugging me for several minutes in the ever-increasingly chilly wind. Your grandma’s hug was soft and warm like fleece, and her face and neck still smelled of rosewater even after all the strenuous climbing of mountains. After being let go, I started to cry, but Uncle Amir quickly came to pull me away. He said ‘shhh shhh’ and knelt low to hug me. Then your grandma used both hands to lift up a chador she never felt the need to wear until first leaving our home on that horrible day. The chador blew in the wind like a black flag lost at sea, then like a fearsome wave, it swallowed your grandma whole. Hiding herself like this, she walked the other way. Like a passing shadow, your grandma faded down the hill. I screamed and cried, screamed and cried, and Uncle Amir just kept saying ‘shhh shhh.’”

‘Azizam, shhh shhh, everything is going to be just fine! You’re just getting a second home, that’s all. You’re not losing any of this. You never will. This will always be your home. Shhh shhh...’

“Carried away in Uncle Amir’s arms all the way across the Turkish border, I looked over his shoulder to take in every detail of our beloved land. Then—still sniffling, with the warmth of tears in my eyes, with that painful tension of crying caught inside my throat—I took the dried and withered saffron bud from out of my pocket and placed it behind my ear.”

\*

We sat in silence. I listened to the rain outside—how it was beginning to fall more lightly from the clouds clearing in the sky. I looked up finally and saw the beautiful moonlight beaming from Mom’s smooth cheeks with prominent bones, like two rolling

hills, beneath the fierce black sky—the memory still squeezed tightly like a warm embrace for crying eyes—and in her eyes, I also glimpsed the twinkle of a star beside three others that slowly dimmed out of sight.

# Self-Portrait in Shades of Attitude

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Elena Plumb



# Who Says I Have to Love Nature

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**Maureen Mancini Amaturio**

After living most of my life inner-city — the only water nearby being the Hudson, the river with an attitude, and what came out of our faucets — I never developed a passion for or even a passing interest in the ocean. Never craved a day at the beach, never felt I was missing out on anything seashore-related. Wouldn't you know it, after marriage, I ended up living an eight-minute walk from a beach — a beach with a boardwalk, restaurants, mini golf, joggers, dog walkers, and so many toddler-filled strollers. Where I live now, there are several nearby marinas, and 25 years ago, ten years after we were married, my husband — an avid fisherman and lover of the sea — bought a boat. I've still never been on it. I went to his dock one season to take photos when he was launching the boat, but the dock rolled in sync with the waves. I felt nauseous. I moved on.

Residing in this maritime, very suburban environment — meaning there aren't a lot of sidewalks but lots of lawns that border the street — when I want to take a walk for exercise or to get away from my computer, the beach is only place to go.

I walk early, before the beach-yoga women arrive. Before the preschoolers are hurling frisbees at their nannies or driving tricycles into passersby. Before I am subject to too many cell phone conversations that I shouldn't be hearing. But honestly, what time do dog-walkers get up?

My knees are not what they used to be, so I walk slowly. Sometimes, I rest on a bench that, of course, faces the water. Can't sit too long because the movement, the roller-coaster motion of the water, the incessant waves make me seasick even though I'm sitting on a stable wooden bench on an immobile wooden boardwalk. The water is not beautiful to me. I move on.

This morning, among the dogwalkers are several parents and/or nannies with small children marveling at nature. "Look down there!" a thirty-something woman holding a juice box and a tube of yogurt yells to her scrambling kids. "A horseshoe crab. Isn't it beautiful?"

There weren't a lot of horseshoe crabs in Jersey City, where I grew up. Truth, I had never seen one in person, close-up. I peek over the wooden boardwalk rail to see this beautiful creature. It sits, sleeping or dead, at the base of moss-covered boulders surrounded by mushy green swirling stuff, like giant snot, and I see nothing "beautiful." I see a crab that looks like a mash-up of a big insect and a rock. The longer I look at it the creepier it seems. I move on.

With no ear buds or music to override the sound of the insistent waves, I feel queasy and find another bench. The breeze felt like a gentle caretaker placing a damp cloth on my forehead, and for a moment I forget the Long Island Sound is all round me. Until I smell it. Salty, mildewed, uric-acid-like. I move on.

I walk to the very end of the pier where locals hand-carry their fishing gear and toss lines over the boardwalk railing. Their nimble fingers and expertise at their craft impresses me, and one has a radio tuned to an oldies station playing music from the 80s. Squeeze, my favorite band, was on. I never hear them on the radio. I stand there until "Pulling Mussels (from the Shell)" is over. Not kidding. Of all songs. As I turn to leave, I spot a slimy, silvery, smelly fish on the ground, maybe someone's bait. Its eyes are steel, and its mouth is open as if it's about to vomit, just like me. I move on.

Some feel calm being near water. Some absorb the beauty of nature while walking along the beach and feel their spirit rise. The sound of waves even puts some to sleep. I'm not one of them. Even though I don't like it, I don't believe in harming any part of nature and do believe in keeping it healthy. Well, full disclosure, I'm not against killing bugs. I fear them that much. What kept me awake all night recently, after watching the news, was not the numerous stories of violence on the streets or the political insanity. I was haunted, and still am, by the arrival from China on American shores of a black-and-yellow spider that with legs extended is the size of a dinner plate. Sometimes, nature goes too far.

Although nature is not my thing, I don't litter, pick flowers off bushes, or kick rocks. I bring reusable shopping bags to the grocery store. I get that nature has wonders to offer for a lot of people, and trees do us a solid by changing carbon dioxide into oxygen. Nature has its upside. I just don't want to be involved with it. I don't even have house plants. As far as I'm concerned, everything leafy is a potential insect

habitat. Who needs that on an end table? Trees, water, animals, fish, bugs, birds, and mountains don't do it for me. I'm a confirmed cement person. I like buildings with elevators and streets with sidewalks. Because of that, I can spend just so much time around all that natural beauty and those dizzying waves.

I accept the majority doesn't agree with me, and I'm fine with that. Since we live in the you-be-you era — when everyone is supposed to be proud of who they are, accept everyone's differences, and live their truth — then I'm putting my truth out there. I don't like nature, especially water and bugs, and I don't expect to be hated for it. After all, if someone doesn't like dark chocolate, I don't hold that against them.

I may start walking around the train station parking lot —cement ground, traffic, wires, streetlights. While there are a lot of pigeons to dodge, there are no bodies of water — other than the puddles in potholes — and definitely no horseshoe crabs. The people who live for active wear and recyclable, to-go coffee cups can keep the boardwalk. I'm moving on in maxi skirts, makeup, and still wishing God never created centipedes.

# Spring Breathes its First Breath

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**Bailey Silver**

Wandering

Through a field of

sharpened glass

I fly, feet and hands

driving me forward

touching the iced blades

in quick succession

Inertia and praise

carrying me as I flail

A blaze fantastic

Rays

of a prismatic sun

Pierce the cotton canopy

Shading my

revelatory call for

humanity

A burst of perfect

crystal confetti

Frozen abstract sculptures

Too minute

Too fast

Too abundant

To adequately

Appreciate

Explode in

Exuberance all around

Light emanates from  
every surface and direction  
The warmth of my heart  
Whispers to the heavens  
As whiffs of vapourous  
Trills are sent shrilly  
Into the ether

I spy a miracle  
Spring's most precious gift  
Yellow trumpet  
Blooming on a  
most mysterious  
itinerary  
Ignorant of the imminent  
Freeze  
You shrink and squeeze  
Wearing a puffed-up quilt  
Each morning  
shrugging it off  
As a golden hand extends  
From the heavens above

# Cathartic Cleansing

---

**Sara Smith**

I threw my favorite book in the fireplace today  
The one where time stands still and we live in place.

Chapters filled with dancing in big, empty rooms  
Twirling around feeling drunk from the star's midnight views  
Fingers finding each other without telling them to  
Chapters filled with someone who knows every piece of you

I want the book back, more than anything at this point  
These spaces feel barren without your love employed.  
Grabbing it from the embers, I know it'll hurt  
I knew to throw it on the quiet side of the fires lurch  
Just in case I wanted to read about us again  
I didn't know breathing could be so hard with no air to let in.

But the books already written, and stories can't change  
No matter how many times you reread that last page  
New scars on my hands accompany my heart's  
I took a risk coming back to something that tore me apart

Following the smell of the fire; this time I'll see it thru  
I won't allow myself to keep even a tiny part of you  
Because I know how quickly you can switch characters  
And I know how smoothly you can compose all the love I'm after  
I can't keep my nose in the same few chapters forever  
It's time to unravel some new pages bound in leather

In you go, to the core of the fire  
My tears extinguish all of my past desires  
Saying farewell to him and to who I was with him  
Saying goodbye to the sequel I'd hoped could be spoken.

Learning to read again for the first time  
My mind often wanders off in between the lines

Each day I'll put a new log on the fire.  
And sometimes I forget about the book that retired  
Because now I've burnt every last page  
And all that I have of it is the ash that remains  
Burnt again day after day  
Until the smoke has erased it from my brain

# What Remains

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Sara Korhs



# Elegy for a Gargoyle

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**Sara Korhs**

In the southwest corner of Indiana, you'll find a small town called Winslow. It sits on the slick, muddy banks of the Patoka River, and by the mid-20th century a movie theatre, a high school, a soda shop, and a hulking iron bridge lined its streets. They're all gone now—victims of progress, consolidation, and the Interstate Highway System. It's unlikely that the few of you who'll ever drive through Winslow will stop your cars, or even slow to the 35-mile-per-hour speed limit. If you're attentive, you'll notice a collection of worn-down houses and boarded-up storefronts. There's nothing main about Main Street anymore. Just an afterimage of Midwestern antiquity on a meandering path through overmined coal country.

For decades after everything else was shuttered, however, there was a good chance one remaining oddity would stand out to you in this tired little town: a man sitting on the cracked, grassy sidewalk outside the defunct Lucky Dollar grocery store in a beaten and rusty folding chair—the kind wrestlers smack each other with. Sometimes you'd find him sitting with other townsfolk conversing about the front-page stories in the Press-Dispatch or the highlights from the town council meeting the night before. More often, though, you'd see him rooted in his chair alone, watching locals drive through town on their way to Petersburg or Oakland City, or glancing up more deliberately at your unfamiliar car if you cruised past with strange markings on your license plate.

His name was Arvle Wade. More people knew the name than the man, and he did nothing of public notoriety other than sit on the sidewalk in his folding chair every dry day for the better part of twenty years. Usually, he wore overalls made of dark, crumpled denim and a white T-shirt stained with coffee, axle grease, and yellowed sweat. He wasn't a small man, probably north of 300 pounds, and on warmer days his butch-waxed crew cut glistened with perspiration. He had the deeply creased, dark leather visage of a farmer, though you'd have to ask to learn if he'd ever hoed a row in his life. He looked as if he'd been carved there, like a statue on a courthouse lawn, to oversee the final stages of the town's deterioration.

If you encountered him, you'd most likely remember his watchful gaze. He had no sense of his own appearance, from his clothes to his expression, which made him an ideal gargoyle for Winslow. You might've mistaken his lack of self-awareness for rudeness, even hostility. His face always tilted groundward, and his jowls hung thickly off his cheekbones, pulling his bottom lip with them and keeping his mouth perpetually half-open. Several days of stubble darkened his cheeks, and he wouldn't raise his head if you spoke to him. He simply gazed across the inverted horizon of his shaggy eyebrows, bringing the bottom halves of his deep-set eyes to bear on you. You could feel this when it happened, as surely as a spring breeze on your neck or a sunburn baking into your skin. You would never quite know why he was watching you. Curiosity, perhaps. Or just boredom.

Of course, not even the smallest town can be defined by a single resident, and even today, if you investigate the nooks and crannies of Winslow, among the midsummer porches decked with Christmas lights and the unfinished hardwood barstools of the shuttered tavern, you'll find a supporting cast to round out the town's coarse personality. Still, Arvle was the closest thing to a patron saint this whistle-stop on the Patoka would ever have. Like him, Winslow has no pretention or inflated sense of worth. It's grown content to watch the rest of you motor past on your way to something important. To watch its inhabitants and buildings fall into senility and disrepair. But it won't hasten such events. It hangs on.

For years, when he wasn't holding court in front of it, Arvle made his home in a modest apartment above the Lucky Dollar. Then, one night in the mid-2000s, the store caught fire. The volunteer firemen roused him and got him down onto the street in his T-shirt and overalls. He watched them battle the blaze, assuming more than hoping that they would get it under control before it reached his home. Around one in the morning it became obvious that the dry wood and ratty insulation was no match for the flames, and against the advice of the townspeople gathered to watch one of their few landmarks burn to the ground, Arvle went back into his apartment, holding a handkerchief to his face. He emerged with his folding chair.

After that, he sat in front of a vacant lot filled with loose gravel and Johnsongrass and ragweed and small charcoal bits of his old home. On sunny days, he moved across

the street to the shade of the long-dormant Dime Store, but when the cool of evening approached and the sun glowed red in its treetop descent, he moved back, taking his time crossing a street with no traffic. In his final years, he sat beside a gravel scar, but like any scar it reminded him of what had been lost, and how we can survive impossibly deep wounds.

Arvle died in January 2020, just before every street in the world grew as deserted as the one he'd safeguarded for decades. Now, when I drive south through Winslow to visit family, the town feels vulnerable in a way it never had before. This is silly, of course. Winslow is in the final throes of a rural decline that's stalked the Midwest for decades. But we grow accustomed to talismans that bestow comfort. A blanket, a perfect pair of jeans, an inherited pocketknife. Entities with no inherent power that still manage evoke an unnamed protection. I doubt Arvle ever thought of himself that way. Or maybe he did. I didn't know him much better than you did, honestly, even if I saw him more often. Some things are unknowable.

I'll remember him, though. A glowering, stained presence in a rusty sidewalk chair. As twilight eased into dark, you'd find him sitting under an amber wash of streetlight, chatting with anyone who might wander by on their walk home from the tavern or church. Late into the night, he'd pick up his chair, fold it with a creak, and leave Main Street to its repose.

# Watching Many Sunsets

---

Carter Vance

No river was less running,  
than sky-body left to  
shine, miracle grey in mist,  
looking out above the house to  
stepladder escapes and whirring  
box fans.

No less were we standing  
making fingers slide, to believe  
in something greater than flesh touch  
the starring-back sense I got  
from being still when things  
looked paint-prepped.

No storm came from swirling  
horizon, no clash breaking open  
slippery skies, falling frozen  
over the rocky silt, where  
green pushed through, pushed on  
in its way.

No night came on so quickly  
as the ones which flickered  
through the summer heat and  
mourned our passing selves,  
not in sadness, but in truth  
that found  
Us watching together.

# The Matriarch

---

**Jennifer Handy**

It isn't yet Thanksgiving, but already the mall is fully decorated for Christmas with elves and trees and tinsel.

"Don't you think that's ridiculous?" my mother asks Aunt Martha, who is of course her sister. The three of us are out for a day of shopping. How is it that I always manage to get dragged along on these outings? I don't wear makeup or perfume, and I could care less about my clothes. Yet here I am, as I have been so many times before, standing with my mother at the makeup counter at Dillard's. She is looking at mascara.

"What do you think of this one?" She gets a sample and whisks it on, her already mascara-ed lashes becoming unreasonably thick and pasty. "I think I like the blue."

"I can't tell the difference between the colors. They all look black to me."

My mother sighs. "Really, Julia, you're exasperating sometimes." She looks over at her sister. "Don't you think so, Martha?"

"Well, I can tell the difference." You can count on my mother's sister to always take her side. "And I think the blue is nice."

My mother takes out her wallet. "I'll take it," she tells the woman at the counter, "and the moisturizer too."

"And do you want the lipstick? I think this Copper Sunset looked ravishing on you."

"Yes, I guess I'd better take it. One must try to look one's best." She doesn't glance over at me when she says this, perhaps because she doesn't have to.

When the purchases are safely bagged and stowed away in my mother's enormous Gucci bag, we trek all of thirty feet to go and haunt the perfume counter. The woman who comes over to ask if we need any assistance has no idea what she is getting into, and there is no way to warn her. My mother has this weird belief that a woman's odor is the source of all her powers. Now she would never say that, but she believes it all the same. For years when I was growing up, she wore Chanel No. 5 religiously, putting it on even at night to go to bed, as though to enter her dreams

without it might strip her of some essential weapon and she might never wake up again. Then came a day when suddenly, she knew the perfume was no longer right. She went out and tried on every one until she found a suitable replacement. She had worn it ever since, applying it like clockwork some three times every day. But the saleswoman doesn't know this, and so she smiles at my mother.

"Well, you see, dear," and my mother launches off in her convoluted explanation. The clerk looks baffled, but it doesn't matter. My mother continues onward without a thought for other people. At last, she stops and stares at the clerk, who tries to see if she has followed. "So you've been wearing Poison, but you think you might like to switch to something new?"

"Not new, my dear, but different. Yes, that's the thing. You see, they're strong at first, but they gradually lose their staying power. So every so often, you have to switch them out."

Aunt Martha nods as though she quite agrees. I stand there, a little to the side, trying my best not to look crazy, to separate myself from them.

The clerk suggests Obsession, and my mother tries it on. She sniffs it and starts twitching, first her upper lip, then her eyelid, and at last her entire face. She coughs, then grabs her throat as though she might be choking.

Aunt Martha grabs at her. "My God, are you alright?"

My mother suddenly collapses into a heap upon the floor. Her tongue juts out of her open mouth. Her body convulses briefly and then is strangely still. Aunt Martha stoops down to help her, while I watch and keep my distance.

An ever-increasing crowd of people gather, both clerks and random shoppers, to see just what is going down. While they whisper, none too softly, about that woman, that woman lying there—what an ugly woman, I overhear someone say—I think back to that time some years ago, to that thing about the will.

#

Winston was there for Christmas, along with his wife Aimee and their two young boys. I was there, and Aunt Martha had just left. The presents had all been opened and the Christmas feast consumed. The boys were playing with their toys when at last Winston announced that it was bedtime and that they must be leaving.

“Do you really have to go so soon?” my mother pleaded.

“Yes, I think we’d better.”

“Winston,” his wife pressed, “it’s Christmas. They could stay up a little later.”

“Rules are rules,” he said. And he wouldn’t budge. They stayed another fifteen minutes as they argued, but eventually he won.

“Say good-night and thank you to grandma and grandpa,” Winston told his sons, who promptly did as they were told.

My mother hugged them both. “Now, boys, make sure you leave those new games we got you here. That way, you’ll have something to play with whenever you visit us.”

“Ah, do we have to?”

“But I want to play with them.”

“Now, stop that!” my brother said, “you’ll do what you’re told.”

“Isn’t it just awful,” my mother said when they had gone, “the way Aimee fights with him? I don’t know what he sees in her. He’s too good for her, you know.”

I disagreed and said so. “He likes her, and she’s good to him. That’s really all that matters.”

My mother pointed out I didn’t like her either, which of course was true. And I said she wasn’t the one who had to live with her, and she said she was certainly glad of that. My father was alive then, sitting over in his recliner, pretending not to hear.

How that conversation about my brother’s wife led into the matter of the will is one of those little details I cannot recall. Both topics were favorites of hers. She lapsed into them far too often, so perhaps it was only natural that one should bring up the other.

They were having their will redone, my mother told me, and she began to spell out all the preparations she was making for their deaths and funerals. “I could go with either method, cremation or burial. But your father insists on being buried. We have plots already paid for in Memorial Park, just north of town. And the funerals will be closed casket. I think it’s tacky to have them open.” My father got up and left the room. “Your father can’t stand it, all this talk of death. I have to be the one to make all the preparations.” She paused. “I made arrangements about the bodies, who can view them. I’m putting in the will that it’s only you and Dad and Winston, and of course Aunt

Martha. But definitely not Aimee. She's not allowed to come. You don't want just anyone to see you. And not the boys either. They aren't old enough. It would be traumatic for them."

I said nothing in response. What does one say to such a speech?

#

Now, here at the perfume counter at Dillard's, the paramedics are slow to come. The people milling about are getting restless, though why I can't imagine. A glance is all it takes to see my mother is fully dead. At last, someone comes over the speakers and asks the customers to clear out of the department. "There's a woman who needs immediate medical attention, and we need to give the paramedics room." The people drift away, and the manager prepares a path from us to the nearest door, hoping no doubt to usher the body out with as little fanfare as possible. He plays up the charade that my mother is need of urgent care.

Aunt Martha comes and takes my arm. "Julia, I just don't know what we'll ever do."

I pat her arm and tell her everything will be alright, which I suppose is true enough.

It's nearly an hour later, and the paramedics still aren't here. My mother begins to smell of death, and I can see her makeup's smeared.

#

The next day, we have a family meeting. The whole thing seems absurdly formal. For one thing, it is held at my mother's house. Aunt Martha presides over the proceedings. She has commandeered the keys to my mother's house and car. As soon as we all are present, she takes out a document and waves it around for silence.

"Now, as I'm sure you're all aware, I'm the executor of her estate."

"Don't you mean executrix?" The words are out of my mouth before I have time to think of anything but Thomas Pynchon.

Winston cracks a smile, but Aunt Martha frowns. I don't think either of them know of Oedipa or the significance of Lot 49.

"No, the executor." She draws out the word as if I might need help pronouncing it.

"That means that I'm in charge of seeing her last wishes carried out."

I look around at Winston, who looks bored, and his wife Aimee, who seems enthralled. The only other people there are Martha's son and a distant cousin we rarely see.

"We're set to have the funeral on Saturday. Are there any conflicts?" She looks around to each of us. "Then that's settled. How is two o'clock?"

No one objects, and she continues. "Your mother designated certain people she wanted to speak." The list includes herself and the distant cousin as well as her children, which refers to Winston and to me. "Write out your speech and time it. It should be about five minutes." I notice Winston roll his eyes, then try quickly to conceal it.

"She told me she wants to be buried in all her diamond jewelry and her pink Givenchy suit." Aunt Martha looks over at me. "You'll help me get that all together, and we'll take it to the funeral home, alright, just as soon as we finish up the planning."

"Wait," Aimee interrupted. "You're going to bury her diamond jewelry? But that's a lot of money. You can't just throw it all away."

"Well, the jewelry's hers, and that's what she said she wanted. We have to honor the wishes of the dead."

Aimee began to pout. I could see in her eyes that she had hoped to get the jewelry. She knows I wouldn't wear it, which makes her claim more viable. But this particular hurdle about the burial, she clearly did not expect. She looks at Winston, who ignores her.

The details of flowers and a casket, of what music should be played, of calling friends and family, all these things are dealt with one by one.

"One more thing," Aunt Martha says, just as everyone is about to get up to leave, "we'll have the viewing of the body the day before the funeral between the hours of one and three." She looks at Winston and at me. "It will be a private viewing. It's just you two who are invited. And I'll be there too, of course."

"What about me?" Aimee asks.

"Well, there were only certain people listed, people who she said could view the body, and I'm afraid you aren't listed."

Aimee looks indignant. "But aren't I family too?"

“I’m sure it’s nothing personal.”

#

“You should have seen her face,” I tell the man who picks me up. His name is Theodore, and we’ve been dating for several months. My mother, when she was alive, always refused to say his name. She never referred to him as my boyfriend, though once she called him “that boy” as though he were eighteen.

“But why? She really wants to see the body?”

“I think it’s more the principle of the thing.”

“Well, I don’t want to see her dead body, and that’s on principle. You can count me out.”

“Aunt Martha was really something else. She opened up by announcing that she was the executor of the estate. She said it as though she had just been crowned the Queen of England.”

“I’m glad I’m not an estate attorney. I can just imagine dealing with that each day.” Theodore is a corporate attorney though he seldom admits to this in public. He just tells people he’s in business. It’s one of the things I find most endearing about him, though he insists it’s purely practical.

“When she said it, that she was the executor, I asked her if she didn’t mean executrix instead. And do you know, she gave me a dirty look as though I had just said something obscene.”

“Maybe she confused it with a dominatrix.”

“That would figure.” I pause, then ask him. “I’m having dinner tonight with them, Aimee and Winston, and they invited you too. Do you want to go?”

“I’ll go with you to the funeral, if you want me to. But as for the rest, I’m staying out of it.”

#

When Aimee opens the door, I can see that she is furious, though her fury has a ridiculous quality to it as she stands there wearing a green sweater and purple eye shadow, sucking a bright red Tootsie pop.

“Hi, Aimee. Thanks for having me.” I try to be polite, though God knows, it isn’t easy.

She starts in at once. “Can you believe it? I mean, she intentionally cut me out. I’m practically her daughter. I’m the mother of her only grandchildren. You would think she would appreciate that, at least.”

“Oh, I’m sure she did.”

“Well, she has a funny way of showing it. I mean, what am I supposed to do? Sit out in the car, out there in the cold, while Winston goes in alone? Like I’m some kind of freak who isn’t good enough to see the body. It’s humiliating!” She licks the Tootsie pop, then points to a basket of them. “Want one? It will be awhile before we eat.”

“No thanks.” I refrain from pointing out that it’s still November and not particularly cold. Instead, I pass her the covered dish I’m holding. “Here, I brought something for dessert.”

“Great. What is it?”

“Nothing special. Just some brownies.”

“That sounds good. The boys will love them.”

“Yes, I figured so.”

“Where are they?” She looks around in dismay. The living room is cluttered with colorful pieces of a dozen games and puzzles. “I don’t know where they got off to, but I’m sure they’ll come in and say hello once they see you’re here.”

I pick up a piece of Jenga and twirl it around. Aimee starts to pick up the pieces of a puzzle. “They like to mix them all together.” She sighs. “I will never understand that woman!”

I have a burst of inspiration. “You know,” I say in my most conspiratorial voice, “I don’t really want to see the body. I mean I already saw her die. She was there in front of me for a goddamn hour before the ambulance arrived.”

Aimee said nothing. She didn’t seem to catch my drift.

“So maybe I can transfer you my right. Then you could go in with Winston.”

Her face lights up with sudden interest. “Would you really do that?”

“Sure. Why not?” I think it will be amusing, though I keep that part to myself.

“Winston!” she calls out. “Your sister’s here!” Then to me, “he should be here in a minute. I can’t wait to tell him.”

Winston emerges from the back of the house, looking somewhat disheveled. He nods at me. His usual greeting.

“Winston, I’m going with you on Friday. She’s going to transfer me her right.”

“Her right?”

“Her right to see the body.”

“I’m not sure you can do that. I mean it’s not a hall pass or something.”

“I don’t see why not,” I tell him. “She gave me the right to see her body, and if she can give it to me, why can’t I give it to someone else?”

Winston looks skeptical. “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Did you invite Aunt Martha over?”

“Yes, I felt I had to.”

“Great, we can tell her when she gets here.”

“I don’t think she’s going to like it.”

“Well, she doesn’t have to like it.”

When the doorbell rings, Aimee flies to get it, her Tootsie pop still in hand. “Aunt Martha!” And she hugs her. “How are you? Let me take your coat.”

The coat falls almost to her ankles and has a hood with real fur trim.

“Aren’t you hot in that?” I ask her. She doesn’t answer, only gives me a sideways glare.

“Thank you, dear,” she says to Aimee. I see her take in the state of the living room and stifle some sort of groan.

“Aunt Martha, we’ve just been talking, you know, about the will.”

“Yes?” She looks up with authority and interest.

I speak up. “I’ve decided to transfer my right to Aimee so that she can go in with you and Winston on Friday.”

“What?” Aunt Martha’s face turns white.

Aimee smiles sweetly at her. “She’s giving me her viewing rights.”

Aunt Martha is adamantly against this. “The will is very clear.”

“If she left me an armchair, I could give it to someone else. Or a theater ticket. So why can’t I give away my right to see the body?”

“That’s obscene, you know. I can’t believe you would even suggest it!”

“If someone can deed you a right or privilege, why can’t you deed it over to someone else? Just like a piece of property.”

“It’s not an opera ticket.”

“No, an opera would be more exciting.”

“I can’t believe you would say that! She’s your mother. You should show her a little respect.”

“I think it’s ridiculous that she did this. There’s no need to leave anyone out. And that’s pretty much what this amounts to. They were married when she wrote that will.”

“You can’t do that. I won’t allow it.”

Aimee just smiles and says, “we’ll see.”

#

The viewing is less than an hour away. I don’t want to go, but it seems like I should. I put on a dark gray skirt and a navy sweater.

When I arrive at the funeral home, I see Aunt Martha standing just outside the door. She has on a black lace dress like something from the nineteenth century, and she is holding her ermine coat. There’s something glinting in her hand, something metal, like a gun. She frowns as I approach. Is it my refusal to honor the dead with the proper lipstick and mascara? Or the fact that I am not dressed, as she is, from head to toe in black?

I don’t hurry, and as I cross the street from where I parked, I catch a glimpse of Winston and Aimee coming down the street from the other direction. They reach Aunt Martha before I do, and she holds out her hand to signal them to stop. That’s when I see what it is she holds, the metallic object. It’s not a gun, but a pair of handcuffs. Behind her a burly man emerges, a security guard, I gather.

I can hear Aunt Martha tell him, rather loudly, far more than necessary, “She can’t come in here.” And then, this even louder, “We must defend the will.”

#

I pick up Theodore for the funeral a little after one. He is wearing a dark gray suit. There is surprisingly little traffic for the weekend before Thanksgiving. People aren’t in cars, it seems, they are out walking on the street, more of them than usual, dressed in candy-colored sweaters and carrying shopping bags.

“You would think it was a carnival,” I say to Theodore, nodding at all the people, who seem to be heading toward the park.

“There’s a free symphony there today. Some program. Music in the park.”

“Is that where you think they’re going?”

“It must be.”

“Why the shopping bags?”

“They’re probably food. Or maybe wine.”

I pull over and stop the car. Theodore looks at me. “Are we going to the funeral?”

“I don’t know. Do we really have to?”

“Well, the will can’t make you do it. No one’s forcing you. And I don’t care at all.”

I get out of the car and Theodore follows my lead. We start following the crowd of people.

“What happened yesterday?” he asks.

I tell him about the handcuffs. “Aimee was screaming that they had to let her in, that she had a right to see the body, and Aunt Martha told her they were calling the police.”

“Did they arrest her?”

“I don’t know. I left before it was over, and I turned off my phone.” I take Theodore’s hand and walk beside him. “If we ever get married, let’s never have a family.”

“That’s certainly fine by me.”

We walk inside the park, but we keep to the outer side, away from all the people. Most of the trees have lost their leaves. I pluck a branch from one that hasn’t and begin to strip it of its leaves. They still smell fresh and green.

We sit down on a bench. Theodore reaches down to one of the wooden slats and crushes an ant between his fingers.

## II-XXI

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Allison Hummel

The water is high and  
colder near the bottom

where our fears live.

More           frightened when alone,  
we seek out moments of solitude,  
and soak in the fear,       and I'm not  
                  sure why.

Maybe because we think  
that during some       quiet moment  
we might figure it out,

this thing       that makes us  
curl up like     a ribbon  
                  skimmed  
                  by scissors.

It's a wonder to       me what  
we persist in.        I mean that  
in a good way. Sticky as a flytrap's  
maw to sustain ourselves.

Our appetites could swallow the sun.

The miracle of touch       is never lost.  
A high window gilded by tin foil.  
Plaster lion   heavy on its haunches

guards        the door.

It's how        we stand  
there, on the        tendon  
of        our conundrum,  
bouncing.

Sanderac

Adages prevail. We all  
live in equidistance.

Flexing roots between  
      the head of heaven  
      and the feet of work.

In contrast: an impossible  
softness.        A pliant brush of green.

Soft belly of a wild thing,  
resin gum of a cypress.

The winds        kick forward again  
and defy        our notions.

Servants to        ineffable ends,

they show the way,

and we don't take it, which is  
*our way*.

Cupping smoke, shellacking  
relics and streaming with tears.

# Contributors

**David M. Alper's** (Poetry) forthcoming poetry collection is Hush. His work appears in Variant Literature, Washington Square Review, Oxford Magazine, and elsewhere. He is an educator in New York City.

**Maureen Mancini Amaturo** (Creative Non-Fiction) is a NY-based fashion/beauty writer with a Creative Writing MFA — teaches writing, leads Sound Shore Writers Group, which she founded in 2007, and produces literary and gallery events. Her fiction, essays, CNF, poetry, and comedy are widely published. Recognition includes: Bram Stoker Award and TDS Creative Fiction Award nominations, Honorable Mention and Certificate of Excellence from Havik Literary Journal, Reedsy and Flash Fiction Magazine Editor's Choice Award shortlist, and Funny Pearls UK Best Short Story selection, 2023. A handwriting analyst diagnosed her with an overdeveloped imagination. She's working to live up to that.

**Zakia Chowdhury** (Visual Arts) is a London based Bangladesh artist who works in various media to explore our place in the world.

**Chris Drew's** (Creative Non-Fiction) writing has appeared in a variety of publications, including The Bellevue Literary Review, Quarterly West, Concho River Review, The Sycamore Review, Red Wheelbarrow, and Big Muddy, and I was previously the creative nonfiction editor at cream city review. I'm currently an associate professor of English at Indiana State University.

**Kris Green** (Poetry) lives in Florida with his beautiful wife and two savage children. He's been published over 60 times in the last few years by the wonderful people at Nifty Lit, The Haberdasher: Peddlers of Literary Art, In Parentheses Magazine, Route 7 Review, BarBar Magazine, and many more. He won the 2023 Barbe Best Short Story

and Reader's Choice Award for his short story, "Redemption". Currently, he has regular nonfiction articles being published by Solid Food Press on fatherhood entitled: "On Raising Savages".

**Jennifer Handy** (Fiction) is a fiction writer whose work explores sexuality, psychological trauma, mental illness, homelessness, severed family relationships, and environmental issues in the southwestern United States. She has a PhD in English Language and Literature from the University of Tulsa, and has taught writing on the university level. She has published academic articles in *Style*, *TETCYC*, and *World Literature Today*. Her fiction has been published in *A Plate of Pandemic* and *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*. She is currently at work on her first collection of short stories.

**Allison Hummel** (Poetry) is based in Los Angeles. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics* and *JMWW*. Recent fiction can be found in *Bloodletter Magazine*.

**Sara Korhs** (Visual Arts) is an award-winning poet, potter, and photographer, who contributes to The Foundation for Photo/Art in Hospitals. SENK has photography published in *Beyond Words*, *CALYX*, *Culinary Origami*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, *GROUND*, *Months to Years*, *Lavender Bones*, *Litro*, *Nassau Review*, *Paper Dragon*, *Peatsmoke*, *Progenitor*, *The Sun*, *Quibble*, *Voices de la Luna*, and numerous other journals. Sarah has a BA in Classical Languages and Archaeology from College of Wooster, Ohio, and a Virginia teaching license endorsed in Latin and Visual Arts. She serves as president of VECCA, an arts education non-profit in a rural Shenandoah Valley community.  
<http://senkohrs.com>.

**Tatjana Krilova** (Visual Arts) was born in Latvia, is contemporary visual artist living and working in Toronto, Canada. Having received a higher education in architecture and civil engineering, she studied painting and sculpture at the Latvian Art Academy, as

well as at the Art Studios of the famous Latvian artist Yuri Cirkunov and professor sculptor Igor Vasiliev.

Tatjana works in oil, acrylic, watercolour and oil pastel.

Reflecting the inner harmony and unity of the opposites of the world, using metamorphoses in her art, Tatjana developed her own conceptual style.

She has achieved recognition as a winner and participant in international and local art competitions and exhibitions.

**Chloe Kummer** (Poetry) currently an English: Creative Writing major at the University of Southern Indiana. Who writes fiction, poetry, and non-fiction.

**Brent Lewis** (Fiction) earned his MFA from Eastern Washington University. He served as an editor for both Willow Springs and Sundog Lit. His fiction has appeared in Tribute to Orpheus 2, Gold Man Review, Cagibi, HASH, In Parentheses, Defunkt Magazine, Drunk Monkeys, the Westchester Review, and Bookends Review. He currently lives in Roseburg, OR, where he teaches at Umpqua Community College.

**L Lois** (Poetry) lives in an urban hermitage where trauma-informed themes flow during walks by the ocean. She is pivoting through her grandmother-era, figuring out why her bevy of adult children don't have babies, nor time. Her essays have appeared in the Globe and Mail, her recent poetry In Parentheses and Woodland Pattern.

**Amuri Morris** (Visual Arts) recently earned a BFA in Painting and Printmaking from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2022. Here Amuri learned the essential art traditions and methods while still maintaining creative exploration.

Amuri's artistic philosophy is to utilize art as my vehicle for their individual journey of exploration and discovery. For them, the paintbrush in their hand allows the boundary between the imaginary and reality to fade away. Amuri discovered that artistic creativity is something that can't be stagnant, it looks beyond what's there and sees what could be. Amuri's artistic passion derives from the surreal feeling of being a creator. They see

it as simultaneously the ultimate form of escapism and the strongest tool I have to craft their own reality.

Amuri has considerable experience as an artist doing a wide variety of different projects for various clients. They have completed portrait commissions, logos design, as well as selling their own work.

Amuri has devoted myself to advocating for community engagement in the arts. One of the roles they held was a volunteer art assistant studio position at the Children's Museum of Richmond. They helped organize artistic activities and then set their work up for display. By elevating their art they hoped to build their confidence and help them gain a sense of pride in what they can create. Amuri has been involved in several city Murals around Richmond, Virginia.

Amuri has won several awards from the National Society of Art and Letters, the Whitaker Watercolor Foundation, The Congressional Black Caucus, the Scholastics Art and Writing Awards, The American Institute of Graphic Arts, The Clarence B. and Nell G. Williams Painting and Printmaking Scholarship and so on.

**Elena Plumb** (Visual Arts) is a student of art at Towson University -- currently enrolled as a sophomore pursuing a BFA in painting. Elena has a deep passion for learning, and believes that by prioritizing active and engaged learning, lessons in all disciplines will influence their artwork. Elena approaches every subject with the idea that it might translate into their art. This makes them vigorous and enthused about my coursework and informs their artwork in unexpected ways. Knowledge is power, and you never know how images of cell structure or events of Russian history might influence a piece – Elena likes to think of their education as part of their process.

Elena's artwork internalizes, but also reflects their status as a student – it's exploratory and curious. Elena invites new mediums and techniques with the same open approach to their learning. Which is why, to Elina, art and learning operate together. Elina's current work is characterized by bold color stories, confident mark-making, and figurative narratives. Elena likes to continue practicing and

developing my artistic voice by reflecting on their own experiences, education, and future.

**Jacob Reina's** (Fiction) work has been featured in New York Quarterly, Paper Dragon, Watershed Review, Free Spirit, and Rougarou. His debut book, a memoir called Purity of the Sky, will be published by Atmosphere Press in 2024. An advocate for refugees and immigrants, Reina has worked with families seeking asylum from Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries.

**Jennifer Santana** (Creative Non-Fiction) is a poet and writer with a small scattering of published pieces throughout their lifetime. Who appreciates all the time and attention their work receives. Jennifer graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in English and lives in Lone Tree, Iowa with my pug, Flora.

**Bailey Silver** (Poetry) uses the art of writing to support a healing journey, regain memories of a painful past, and move on to a healthier and happier future. They are a disabled member of the California LGBTQ+ community and are striving to write from a place of acceptance and love.

**Sara Smith** (Poetry) is an aspiring poet working in Washington, DC as a fertility nurse. She was recently published in The Mid-Atlantic Review. She writes to expose the meaning that can be found behind every story. In her free time, she can be found at a yoga class or on the phone with her sister.

**Carter Vance** (Poetry) is a writer and poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, Canada currently resident in Gatineau, Quebec, Canada. His work has appeared in such publications as The Smart Set, Contemporary Verse 2 and A Midwestern Review, amongst others. He was previously a Harrison Middleton University Ideas Fellow. His latest collection of poems, Places to Be, is currently available from Moonstone Arts Press.