Kads Corner

Literary Magazine



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Affordability Crisis

I'm baked and naked
because my oven's whole job is gaslighting
with gas I can scarce afford.

Do bandages a mummy make?
I ask out loud instead of thinking
how to pay my 20% rent increase.

Tricks are for marks, like me,
so fold and fill me
like an enchilada
because I'm cooked.

Then my capitalist breakthrough:
Should all aging bands be rebranded
as The Ships of Theseus,
as octogenarians slough off
this mortal whammy pedal?

I actually did talk to Mitch McConnell for 17 minutes today
and he said 17 minutes is about as much as we all have
before the line went silent.

I left the instant noodle kettle melting
into the electric burner.

Do you ever wonder how much heat
rage generates before

the kettle metal boils over

the freshly cleaned stovetop?

~ Michael DuBon

Standing Ovation

The doctor removed
my ovaries. Mild pain and numbness
she promised.
Redress
in the sunny yellow
room, the same hideous shade as my bedroom.
My ex-sister-in-law pops
in with a routine smile
and cold stethoscope.
Her white coat
like a chef, she presents
the bliss-tered cherry tomatoes snipped
from my withering vines
serving me haute cuisine
on a silver platter.
Slice them in half,
not a healthy gelatinous sack
filled with tiny yellow seeds
but microscopic pests. She asks
if I'd like to take them home,
feature my failures.
No.
The rotten tomatoes tumble
into the medical waste
bin, branding them a biohazard.
Eggshells destroyed, grinding in the disposal.

On the drive home
I leak
remnants of me
of what was, could be
into the sterile scratchy pad,
thinking,
This is the second time
surgeons removed poison
from my insides.

My appendix spread infection
like a confetti cannon.
I almost exploded, too.
My body lacks
her appendices, her figures, her footnotes.
Obsolete.
Lacking Opulence.

The sulfur yellow walls
at home assault me,
compel me to
Strip
them free of canary.
Then clean.
Drag the crib to the curb,
fresh incisions tender and tight.
Then paint.
Eggshell is a blank slate,
gracefully bearing weight
heavy compressional loads.
Stand on me. I won't break.

~ Hayley Shucker

‘Doing classic jazz on our way home from dinner so we don't get kidnapped’
(Title after an Instagram reel caption by Michelle and Rachel Quiner dated 15/07/26)

It's a reel, and I want to laugh
with them. I want to be impressed
with the blonde girl's flexibility, admire her
friend's leg extensions, the impeccable
revolutions of her triple pirouette
on midnight concrete
in heels, arms articulating
through her French tips, splaying out
keys like extra fingers, frantically
reaching for the street lamp
across the road. They are
light as shadows, taking turns
to film as they do another spin,
faster, as they kick back
sharper, their exuberant
giggles disguising
the camera's waver.

~ Ella B. Winters

Mining for the Writer's Words

I know each stem's unique
knot
should be untied
slowly
by my tongue. I
know
I must focus on the
art
of the detangle, to
let
what comes out of my
mouth
be legibly true.

But I crave the
sweet breaking flesh as I
carve through the surface. Inky
juice pours down my lips
to
my
chin
to
my
fingertips
as I write. I do not mind the
bloody stains, it shows my work,
and the messy mining I must do
to get to the pit of it all.

~ Hannah Grigaitis

Crossroad ***(Inspired by a natural traffic jam)***

evening rush, traffic brakes.
40 ducks cross
from golf course to pond.
mallard parade.
green brown gray mixes
march as a team.
caring drake helps the lame duck,
guides his jerking right leg
into the rhythmic river dance.
this business day
when money and hours fly,
no one honks. minutes move
one empathetic waddle at a time.

~ Eleanor Jones

Counting Crows

I was eleven when Pa died. After that, I started counting everything. The seven crows every morning. One outside the window. One on the telephone wire. Two on the fence. Three in the oak tree. I counted them until Ma ushered me inside for breakfast. Inside the house, I counted the steps from my bedroom to the kitchen. Forks and spoons in the kitchen cabinet. Cracks in the ceiling. The seconds between the refrigerator clicking off and the house growing quiet. The crows were easier. They were always in the same places.

My mother had begun moving my father's things. His shoes disappeared first, then his jacket, then his books. Finally, his chair was pushed against the wall, so I could no longer see the worn-out carpet beneath it.

"Why?" my mouth half full of cheese toast.

"We have to keep living," she said.

I didn't understand how moving a chair helped. One morning, six crows were there. I counted again.

The space outside the window was empty.

My chest tightened.

"Ma?"

She came outside, carrying her black mug of steaming coffee.

"What?"

"There are only six."

She looked toward the window.

"Maybe it flew away."

“They don’t,” I insisted.

“You don’t know that.”

“Pa knew.”

She stared at me. “What did he know?”

“There were always seven.”

Her hand shook around the mug. She took a breath and beckoned me inside.

That night, I was almost asleep when I heard three sharp knocks against the window.

I sat up. A crow stood on the sill and looked at me. Something pale was caught beneath its wing.

I leaned closer and noticed a white thread.

Pa had worn a white thread beneath his jacket collar the morning he died. I remembered him standing in the doorway, searching for his keys. By evening, Ma told me I could never call his number again.

The crow tapped the glass. Behind me, my mother’s voice came out sharp.

“Don’t open the window.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

She came to the window and stared at the crow. Neither of us said a word. After a few minutes, the crow spread its wings and flew into the dark. Ma slept beside me that night.

The next morning, seven crows were there. I counted them twice.

Two on the fence. One on the telephone wire. One outside the window. Three on the oak tree.

Seven. Ma stood beside me, clutching her coffee mug.

“See?” she said. “They’re all there.”

I looked toward the window. The seventh crow was perched on the sill, its feathers ruffled by the wind. Something white was caught beneath its wing. I started walking towards the window.

“Don’t,” Ma said.

I turned. She was crying. When I looked back, the window was empty. The other six crows had flown away, too. A single white thread lay on the windowsill. I touched it with my fingertip. It was warm. I held it until I heard a flutter on the roof.

~ Swetha Amit

Pitrufquén

By midnight the zinc had begun to buckle.
Rainwater, blackened with ash,
stood in the gutters.

Under the beds, sixteen pairs of slippers
waited in different directions.
One faced the door.
One had been stitched at the heel
with blue thread.
One had worn itself smooth
where the foot entered.
A hospital sock had dried inside another.

In the dressers, cardigans hung
with their buttons misfastened.
A comb held three white hairs.
A handkerchief had been folded
into four neat quarters.
Beside one bed, a hearing aid
lay in a saucer of water.
Outside, three blue parking bays
shone beneath the rain.

Firefighters crossed the grass
and lifted the roof in pieces.
A lamp came down with one sheet,
its shade crushed inward.
A wooden spoon lay beneath another,
black along one side.
The nameplates came loose last,
each still holding its screw.
They laid them in the grass.

By evening, the rooms stood open.
Rain entered through the windows,
moving across the floors,
under the beds,

through drawers left half-open.
A firefighter found the slipper
with the blue thread.
The thread had caught on a nail.
He eased it loose
with his thumbnail.
It broke.

He picked up the slipper.
The other was still beneath the bed.
His hand went beneath the frame.
The hospital sock
was dry inside it.

He carried both outside.
Rain had begun again.
He set the slippers beside the nameplates.
Water gathered in them.

By morning, the brass plates
were dull with rain.
One slipper pointed toward the door.
The other lay beneath the bed,
the hospital sock, still dry inside.

~ Aardhra Chandran

Genesis. Deliverance.

and thus, a hand—
not unlike the outstretched arms
of a gnarled oak—
molds my body, ligament by ligament,
bone by bone.

when i awake,
gasping at the fall
into this world from
one there yonder,
i see, and i cry.

and the hand,
tenderly stitching me,
my lineaments,
my ailments, and woes,
sees too, and cries alongside me.

this hand is one of good nature,
and tender caressings upon cornsilk,
and yet, one of wrath, of the switch,
and calls—truly and steadfastly—for
my obedience.

for the hand fears what
it has thus invented
and calls for the sure
and steady extermination
of its own magnum opus.

~ Curtis Faulkner

It Is Winter and I Am Fruiting

Soil hardens toward the great freeze,
forests pulsing life back down into roots

but the orange tree awakens,
orbs leaping toward color in the cold,

no regard for disappearing light.
Branches bend beneath excess instead.

The fruit catches white winter light,
throws sunrise on nearby emptying

trees: a determined ripening,
a promised return among certain death.

~ Angelina Danae

Run Away/Runaway

Almond dust in a little jar,
three Sharpie markers on the counter,
a red-eye to New York.
The city will wake me up,
I tell myself.

I leave behind
two baby bunnies in the woodpile
and a leaking sprinkler system,
the yard unmowed.

Dinner reservations on Thursday.
The worst thing was the wet clothes
I left in the washer,
very unlike me.

Three squash that will go bad,
grapes to mold.
They could have been wine.
That makes me feel guilty.

~ Rachel Turney

Ms. Sofia and the Future of Humanity

A small kindergarten story

Ms. Sofia was young, creative, and afflicted with a rather inconvenient habit: she thought about the future of humanity while doing quite ordinary things.

Other people, for instance, could buy tomatoes without wondering what kind of civilization had produced the person standing in front of them in the checkout line. Ms. Sofia could not. She had only to glance at the evening news to begin reflecting on the upbringing of children, the decline of human decency, and the alarming possibility that some of the world's most powerful politicians had once been five-year-olds who were never taught how to share or treat each other with respect.

It was a troubling thought.

Naturally, she had decided to do something about it.

Since the world was unlikely to entrust its affairs to a kindergarten teacher anytime soon, Ms. Sofia concentrated on the territory over which she exercised some authority: her own classroom. Here, at least, she could introduce a little more kindness, fairness, and the occasional improvement in the general direction of civilization.

She believed that children absorbed their surroundings long before they understood what they were absorbing. At five, they were like tiny, industrious sponges, collecting words, gestures, prejudices, and habits with an impartiality that would have impressed even the most dedicated archivist. They took in everything and returned it to the world, sometimes with interest.

What worried Ms. Sofia was not that children misbehaved from time to time. Children were children, after all, and even angels, if supplied with sufficient sugar and insufficient sleep, might require some supervision. What worried her was how easily an unkindness could become a game, a habit, and,

eventually, a way of looking at the world.

She suspected that history was full of grown-ups who had never quite outgrown their kindergarten games.

Last Tuesday, she encountered a small but promising example of this phenomenon.

The children had discovered a rhyme.

"Open the gate — who do I hate?"

One child would recite the line, another would obediently ask, "Who?" and the first would point at some unsuspecting classmate. The others would burst into laughter, while the chosen child stood at the center of this miniature public spectacle, having apparently been elected to the office of Most Hated Person without the benefit of a campaign or the right to appeal.

The game was a massive hit.

Ms. Sofia observed it with the expression of a philosopher who has just discovered that civilization may have taken a wrong turn somewhere near the playground.

She could have stopped everything and explained that hateful language was not permitted at school. She could have spoken about empathy, respect, and the importance of being kind to others. She had several excellent speeches on these subjects, some of them quite moving.

But she had noticed that when adults began a sentence with "We do not," children often stopped listening somewhere around the second word. The rest of the sentence then traveled through the air and settled harmlessly beside the crayons.

Ms. Sofia needed something better.

For a brief moment, she stood there, searching for inspiration. She had no committee, no grant, and no international

peacekeeping force at her disposal. Only a group of five-year-olds, a troublesome rhyme, and the hope that a little imagination might accomplish what a great deal of explanation could not.

Then the idea arrived.

"Hey, everyone!" she announced brightly. "I have some news. That rhyme is old-fashioned. Nobody uses it anymore."

The children stopped.

Ms. Sofia had their attention. This was already a minor miracle.

"But there are two new, very popular versions. You can choose whichever one you like."

She cleared her throat.

"Open the gate — who do I appreciate?"

"And here is another one: Open the door — who do I adore?"

The children stood there in silence.

For one delicate second, Ms. Sofia feared she had miscalculated. The old rhyme had the considerable advantage of making someone else uncomfortable, and this had always been a reliable source of entertainment for humankind.

But then a question followed.

"Ms. Sofia, what does adore mean?"

Ms. Sofia looked at the children thoughtfully.

"What do you think it means?" she asked back.

Several faces turned upward, searching the ceiling for an answer.

One child suggested that it meant liking someone very much. Another thought it might mean loving someone. A third remained silent, perhaps suspecting that the word had something to do with doors after all.

"Those are very good ideas," Ms. Sofia said. "To adore someone means to love them very much, to cherish them, to treasure them. It can mean that someone is very dear to you, that you feel great affection for them."

She paused, allowing the words to settle.

"So, when we ask, 'Who do I adore?' we are looking for someone who is special to us. Someone we love, appreciate, or care about."

The children considered this new information with the grave attention usually reserved for discoveries of great personal importance.

Then one child repeated, "Who do I appreciate?"

Another tried, "Who do I adore?"

Before long, the new rhymes were being passed around the group with the contagious excitement often inspired by forbidden treasures, birthday cake, or the sudden appearance of glitter in the teacher's hands.

Ms. Sofia watched with quiet satisfaction. She had come to teach a rhyme and had somehow found herself conducting a small seminar on love. Not a bad morning's work for a kindergarten teacher.

By lunchtime, someone had spilled paint, two children were negotiating ownership of the same acorn, and another had declared socks an unnecessary invention.

Civilization, in other words, remained a work in progress.

But at least for now, the gates and doors were opening in the right direction.

~ Margarita Dale

Shaken
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The shooting has fusillied
my stomach.
I mistake 8 quarts
for 6.
Place the pot on a stove
turned to high.

The reporter's update,
2 dead, 1 critical,
heavily salts my eyes.
The governor's segment,
a lifeless notecard reading,
has me steaming.

How many more? I demand.
How many more?
How many more?
How many more?

I am only met
with undercooked
thoughts and prayers
and the sizzling sound
of water

boiling over.

~ Chris Kads

Want

You are a wound
in the shape of a woman.
My body remembers why we broke
but beneath Knowing, the current
of Want still flows.

I want to grip
your pink hair in one hand,
caress you with the other.

Unravel
the silk but keep the
tension taut, press
together our sets of fesh
until they create

a coffin.
We would melt time
to irrelevance, and the world
would begin and end with us.

Though I have left
religion, the blood
of worship
still runs in me.

But before I can
consummate this hope, you
butcher my dream
with a stranger's greeting.

~ Cypher

Burning Helen

I.
The second wife finds the first wife's letters
My dearest Helen.
They began as short notes.
Quickly, they grew more gushing, alluding to marriage. Some even contained poetry - or Feodore's efforts at it.
Poetry like this:
The kissing gates
My own fair love,
We twine as one,
In love's great net,
Till life is done.

The letter was dated September 20, 1897 - two months after Lisa had met Feodore for the first time at the Devonshire House Ball. A week after he'd gone to bed with her. Lisa did the bundle up, her shaking hands carefully mimicking the remembered tie of the thick black bow.

II.
Favourite passages

In bed that night, Lisa curdled with questions, feeling sick. Should she ask Feodore to burn the letters? Should she burn them?
Why had he brought the letters here - into their house? Did all widowers do this?
Lisa didn't know.
Each day while Feodore was out at his club, Lisa took the letters out of the trunk to re-read her favourite passages, by turns tortured, by others, gripped. When he returned, Lisa - picturing herself (as Helen), not netted with Feodore but drowning him - would lead him upstairs.
Of course, one day he came home early.

III
No marks left

"What sort of man brings love letters to his dead wife into his new marriage?" she asked, her eyes blazing.
"Why shouldn't I have brought them?" he said, lighting a cigarette. "They aren't all sentimental." He threw the match on the fire.
"Some are," she said. "Some of them are highly sentimental! The poetry, Feodore!"
He exhaled deeply. "My dear, you recall their contents far better than I do."
"I remember you've written no poetry for me!" Lisa countered.
He shrugged.
"They don't have to remain here," she went on. "I could just burn them all while you're out."
He raised a finger. "Now, I've said nothing to you about letters you may have in your possession. Not one single word!"
"I keep no letters," she said piously (omitting that she had yet to receive any letters worth keeping). "My past leaves no marks on me!"

IV
The fire

Some days later, drawn by the bitter smell of scorched paper, Lisa caught her husband stoking the drawing room fire.
Seeing her, he exclaimed: "Ah! I've thought about what you said."
What had she said? She couldn't think.
"I've burned the lot," he ended triumphantly.
"What have you burned?" she said, her throat tight.
"Ha! The letters, of course," he said, grinning. "Isn't that what you wanted?"
Lisa stared at the burning paper, transfixed.
Feodore gave the coals another good poke.

V
Sensation cessation

After the burning, Feodore changed.
He made bad jokes. He laughed too loudly. He snored too much. He ate with his mouth full.
Repeatedly, he bought her small gifts which she despised - jet rings and brooches, sentimental poetic tomes – possessing, it appeared, a hidden talent for sniffing out the things she most hated in the world.
There was no end to them.
One book even had a poetic inscription Feodore had penned himself.
Shall we change the water?
Shall we try again?
Shall we prune the flowers?
Shall we cut the stems?
Digesting the honeyed words, her lip curled.
But worst of all, all sensation, all glow, had now gone when Feodore touched her. So, she stopped letting him.
And he changed even more.

VI
Hostile greenhouses

The changes in Feodore made Lisa almost seasick. Her mind whirred. Could one mend a broken marriage barely even begun? Could a rotting fruit taste fresh again in that most hostile of greenhouses - one's mind?
Lisa shuddered at the enormity of the task ahead.
Unable to recall the letters in their entirety, she clung to the passages she did remember on the drawing room chaise longue, thinking.
Feodore had loved Helen (beautiful, rich Helen) more - far more! - than he'd ever loved Lisa.
Lisa had always known this.
Why had he burnt the only surviving relic of the marriage – the marriage he'd chosen over union with Lisa?
And why would a man still in love with his first wife – as

Feodore clearly was, ever burn the very letters that tied him to her still?
It made no sense.

VII
The most desired fruits

Over dinner, Lisa eyed Feodore with despair, reflecting, as she eyed the pineapple on the table, even the freshest - the most desired - fruits rot in the end.
Sighing, she rose to ring for seltzer for the hock.
Feodore seized her from behind. “I knew, Lisa. The very first time I saw you - I knew!”
Lisa stiffened.
“My parents wanted me to marry her. It was just understood, Lisa – it was always understood!” His grasp on her wrist tightened. “But fate had other plans! And now, we are man and wife! Ha! Yes! And isn’t that what you wanted, my dear - my darling?” He leered closer.
“Let go,” she said, pulling away, repulsed by the scent of his whisky-stinking breath.
He gave a confused look. His face twisted. “And now? Make me sleep in a separate room, will you, whore?!” He smashed his fist drunkenly on the table.
Lisa, withdrawing, flinched, raising her hands instinctively to her face.

VIII
My own fair love

Feodore left early the next morning to visit his parents in the country - unplanned.
Lisa took to her bed to pine for Feodore. For Helen’s Feodore, she thought miserably, recalling the silken feel of his chest hair on their first night married - fibres coarsened now to something more like jute.
A fortnight later, Feodore came home. “I’ve got something for you.”
“Oh,” she said, with automatic dread.

“Hold out your hand.” He placed a bundle of opened letters onto her palm. “The top one first, please.”
Lisa held it aloft, reading: ‘My dearest Helen, my own fair love…’
Nothing more was said as they climbed into bed.

~ Natalia Gameson

It Spreads

Not every day can be a good idea day.
Every day won't involve
mixing peanut butter and pancake syrup
and putting it on warm toast,
or opening a letter from across the sea
with the perfect watercolor pigeon.

Every day won't involve
watching Jurassic Park
in your pajamas after work
eating Egyptian takeout.

It can't involve kayaking
through a gaggle of Canadian geese
like a gritty city Little Mermaid,
more beaks than cheeks.

Some days are only for paying parking tickets,
especially the one that has a shoe print on it
from the floorboard
while the gas tank barely has any slosh left.

Some days the right words won't come
at the right time,
mouth dry
when you need a monsoon of language
and only your two arms will do.

The gritty geese are still paddling.
The peanut butter is shelf stable,

sandwich-making knife
half hovering on the sink
until good ideas
find you again.

~ Nicole Shepherd

HAND-ME-DOWN

My hands are my mother's
hands: thin skin and raspberry knuckled.
She taught me well how to use these hands:
how to slide velveteen on baby's cheek,
how to tool fingers in soil and feel roots whisper,
how to boil a fist to soften its anger.

My father's hands are oil stained and bleeding
knuckles. He taught me how to crack
at the worst moment, how to split under pressure,
how to carry the splinters of your broken body
for years without relief. He taught me how
to make do with oneself. With these hands

I can read a room without looking,
I can smother a fire with calloused regard,
I can drop a moment into water
to watch the ripple.

~ C.A. Scarborough

Then Samhain
Cinches in

While the veil
Is skin-thin;
Deadbeat,
Dogmeat,
Ashes stoking wind.

Dying daddy
Longlegs
Kittle at the door;
Electric limbs
Akimbo.

Mussed up like a
Black-eyed Susan,
Hemlock mouth
Sewn shut
And obol sight,

I stare right down
The bastard sun
Who steals my light,
Trades thieved
Rawhides for night;

Remind him how
I've fully paid
My due, and that
There is no canine
Menopause;

A dogged
Little bitch
Must self-renew
Her whole life
Through.

~ Caitríona Walsh

Natalie, Who Hurt You?

Was it the man from Clearwater Drive?
He got me, too. Oh, Natalie.
I bet he pushed you
down, kicked you,
and laughed. I can still hear it -
the way his cackle

could cut

like the edge of a butcher's blade.

I have scars on my back to prove it.

I bet he poured salt
on the wounds he made
let it soften you, like a New York strip.

It is not your fault he made you

so tender.

I missed the signs, too, Natalie,
the blood red flags disguised themselves
as pink. Natalie, you and I
are twin fools. We assumed a man so tall
would have equal stature.

He could carve marble into such stoic lies.
I know. Please, Natalie, tell me

you ran.

~ Sydney Merrell

Please Secure Your Flotation Device

"I'd die for one look in your eyes."

Probably what the gnat said
before torpedoing into my right eyeball.

He probably mistook it for melted honey,
and I can't blame him.
With a life measured
in how the air hums around bruised fruit,
who has time to test the water
before cannonballing into
something sweet.

All he found was saltwater,
and the mascara I bought for $4
doesn't make for a good float.

I'll cry for both of us:
buggy hearts not quite Darwin proof.
Still wired to leap.

~ Nicole Shepherd

Poser

There was this group of eight skater kids on the steps of a college I didn't go to. They'd fling themselves to the ground over and over again, shattering their teeth against the otherwise quiet side-street. I passed by them twice a day for two years. I never once saw them hit a trick.

They are useless people, undeniably so. But their long-form crime against the peace and sanctity of their local surroundings does not make me innocent by comparison. No, because I am by far the guiltiest. I would often spy on them from behind the window of the Starbucks, or while carrying groceries back to the apartment of the girl I liked. Sometimes I would just sit on the curb, watching, wishing I had something to smoke so the roll of little tires against the pavement could sound like music. In a way I had become the ninth member of their group, a secret member not even they knew about. I am a useless person all the same.

I realized this while thinking about enlightenment. It's true that most people reach some form of temporary enlightenment within their lifetimes. Like when it rains and you're sitting at the wide glass window on the first floor of a college you don't go to, swirling the cup of coffee you made with the water from the sink, and you're drinking it even though it's late and you need to wake up early tomorrow. That's when you know you got it right. You know also when you see that guy with a scratchy beard and garish teeth dance in the rain on the other side of the window, moments before being thrown to the ground and arrested for robbing the Circle-K across the street, he too got it right. Yet his enlightenment seems more profound than yours, more permanent. You wonder why that is, but thinking so hard about things breaks the spell, and you realize the only crime you've ever committed in your life was drinking tap water from the sink. That's when you realize how miserable you are. Not miserable in the sense that you're sad—more holistically, you're miserable in the sense that every action you've ever taken in your life has been behind glass, away from the cold and the rain, and

that you've taken a disgusting amount of pride in just watching.

In the month of November, I bought a skateboard. I would end up swinging by the college I didn't go to with my skateboard zipped up in a backpack, but I wouldn't skate. I'd sit on the curb and every so often I'd gather enough motivation to ask those eight kids if I could skate with them, but then a car would drive by, or a dog would bark, and my focus would dip to 99% instead of the required 100%, so I'd stay on the curb. Some force in my head told me that it would be ridiculous for someone with my imperfect skills to do tricks on their territory. I'd take a single fall and become their laughingstock. Not that those kids didn't fall all the time too, but they fell in a different way, a much more cool and skater-like way.

I went home. A package had arrived for me—a set of tools and decals specially designed for upgrading skateboards. It was the only thing I'd ordered that week. I left it on my kitchen table, unopened. I just couldn't that day. And when I sat down to eat dinner the package sat across from me, silently judging me. I felt lazy, and slovenly, which are not good things to associate with eating I've figured out, so I shoved the package under a blanket, sealing it within a thick layer of "out of sight, out of mind."

One day there were only seven kids riding around on their skateboards. The eighth member of the group was missing. Maybe he got sick, or had a death in the family, or finally realized his true passion was interpretive dance. It didn't matter, because it just so happened this was the one day I didn't bring my skateboard with me. It was too much to carry in my backpack when it wasn't seeing any use. Now my perfect opportunity to slip into the group and fulfill that missing role had been quietly extinguished.

But it was because of that event I decided to open the package under my blanket. I didn't know exactly how the pieces I ordered worked or where they went, but I trusted my love for skateboarding, and I hoped it would allow me to intuit their

functions. At the culmination of my remodeling, I spread eight colorful stickers carefully on the underside of the board, creating a beautiful collage of reflective material. I saved the ninth sticker for when I'd finally joined the skater group, a symbolic treat for accomplishing my goal.

Then, two weeks later, it happened. Maybe there were no dogs barking that day, or the coffee I had that morning was a bit too strong, or there was something in the air that set my focus to 100%, but I took my skateboard out of my backpack and asked those eight kids if I could ride with them. Excited, they said yes.

We skated together.

I didn't hit a single trick, yet neither did they. We shattered the silence. We faceplanted with smiles. They let me try out their boards and each one felt like trying out a new life, a new way to move.

And in that moment, falling into the pavement, I realized maybe the world wasn't ever as concerned with me as I was with myself.

~ Mara Murphy

DEAR 1990s KEANU REEVES (THE ONE FROM *SPEED*)

My parents bought a big green conversion van
when I was in fifth grade. The kind with pull-down
blinds, reclining pilot seats, and a little square
TV, thick as a loaf of bread, wedged on the floor
at the front between the driver and passenger.
On basketball game days, I'd shave my legs
with my mom's electric Remington in its pink
plastic case. (One time, it sparked when I plugged
it in, but my mom was afraid to hand over
the disposable ones, a small glint of silver
a threat too big in unpracticed hands.) I was
only learning how to be a woman, a small glint
of what I thought that to mean. And then
there was Keanu Reeves leaning over
the bus driver's seat (commanding, telling
her what to do, how to do it, and I thought
this was womanly [the listening] and I wanted.
This version of me with crooked teeth daydreamed
and wanted from the pilot seat, watching the screen
as we drove to the next game where I'd sit
on the bleachers the whole time, imagining
my chance to do something amazing [it never came]
but soon enough, I'd meet a man who talked
nice [at first]. Who loved the way I listened
[until he thought I wasn't]. Who loved the way
he could make me shut up, and tell me why,
[please] tell me why) He looked like all my dreams.

~ Bri Gearhart Staton

You're a tourist in a medieval cathedral

A cellar spider hangs upside down in a stained, glass window,
translucent and unmoving in its messy web, glowing in the light.

You take its picture, twice, wishing you could silence your shutter,
hoping you're the only one who can hear it beneath choir practice

voices and polished-tin organ pipe. The music fills the centuries-
old building like liquid you could almost float, or drown in.

You know it's not, but the song seems language-less, like pure
melody being sent down from the sky, instead of up toward it.

You lower your camera and try not to let your pink sneakers drag
across graves set into the floor like tiles. There's no other way

around. They've been walked on for centuries, the names worn
to tally marks, but you're the one who gets goosebumps.

Maybe it's just the stone walls cooling your sweat, but when you
used to sit in Sunday pews, even after you stopped believing

the words the preachers said, the music and stained glass window
light gave you the same shivering feeling, like standing next to God.

~ Heather Heiney

Childhood weeds

"I really don't know why they – I mean, her parents, Douglas, and errr, whatever his wife is named - called their daughter Fleur instead of Ragwort," said my grandfather over dinner about my childhood friend.

And I thought, well, Fleur is a nice name – it's probably the nicest thing about her. And Ragwort probably isn't, given his tone.

"I think he's trying to say that she's not very nice to have around the house," said my grandmother - my grandmother who'd found Fleur jumping hard on the antique lemon room sofa earlier that day.

"If she were called Ragwort, then you'd definitely know something nasty was coming your way when you saw her, rather than it being a shock," added my grandfather.

"Some people think ragwort is the worst weed in the countryside," said my grandmother vaguely, cutting a pear, "it kills horses. And then others think it's a flower that pollinates insects."

"It's a weed," said the old man.

"You know what the worst thing is about ragwort? A single plant contains thousands and thousands of seeds," said the old woman.

"So what?" I said, helping myself to a slice of bread. "Why's that such a bad thing?"

"Well, once it's on your land, it can go anywhere." His grandfather took a swig of tea. "Remind you of anyone?"

"We'll need to have the sofa looked at," sighed the old lady. "Who knows what that girl's filthy stems have done to it."

"Just remember, Jane, we're giving Douglas the bill," said his grandfather firmly.

Grandma winced. "Oh, I hate asking people for money."

"It's got to be done," said the old man.

"He's got his hands full with that one, and no mistake," said Grandma, tossing the pear's stem on her plate.

"Perhaps all plants - maybe all people - have their uses," mused his grandfather. The old man chewed silently, lengthily on another dumpling. "Perhaps I'll tell Doug that she can't come back. Not till we've discovered the point of her."

Years later, I remember this as I watch Fleur brush her hair, reflecting how I went away and looked it up for myself in a botanical dictionary. How I found out that ragwort is sort of like a yellow daisy and quite pretty in its own way - very, very much like the woman I married, against my family's wishes.

~ Natalia Gameson

estranged graces

across the table from my grandmother and she
has forgotten everything I told her last week
and the week before that never existed
time is only a trickle now
and the hose is turning off
and she tells me my great grandfather had metal
deep in his leg
she tells me *he could feel the weather*
before it came
I rub my knee
The old woman two seats down
offers asinine political commentary
because her grandkids don't care
enough to visit her.
once, holding my shoulders
in a hospital bed
my father said *you've always been*
our most sensitive child:
everything
that's ever bled
is still bleeding
and my mother
is a planet, my father
its rings; together my siblings
are a constellation
but I am alone
and I've never been anybody's north star
and I don't want to die like her
cruel and quiet
misery the bread you eat and the butter
you spread on it
every day the same as the last
when i finally tear out of the parking lot
the sky knocks me dead
Bumper sticker idea: *I'd rather be*
a prophet

at least Elijah felt it all
right up to the end
my great grandfather knew
when when it would rain
and my grandmother's forgotten the accident
the surgery there're screws
holding my leg together same as him
and I know when the storm is coming
I know

~ R.E. Campion

“How did you find comfort in the silence?”

my ex texted me
two years later he still thinks I have magic
answers for loneliness

but
I didn’t find comfort in the silence
I crafted it

I took the wet clay of solitude
sculpted it scored it and stuck it together with hopeful hands
and slip

I learned to let the absence of sound
become bone dry

before firing I put the shiniest glaze on the silence
covered it in gold luster
until it was something beautiful.

~ Sydney Merrell

The Many Differences Important When Discussing Jams vs. Jellies

By which I mean there's only one clear winner,
only a dullard would choose a jelly,
all jewel colored and empty.

Jelly, with its no substance,
only essence,
as strained as the look I'm giving you now.
Poreless, boring, whisper of gelatin,
a pious biscuit's hell.

Jam would never leave you with fruit's ghost.
Savored, seedy, dessert gone greedy,
jelly's wild sibling
who married bread sturdy enough
to handle all that plump pulp.

Jelly looks away,
jam makes eye contact and butter melt.
Who would deny such thick decadence,
choose a life where nothing
sticks in your teeth?

~ Nicole Shepherd

Piano Music Causality
For Patrick Caswell

In the time after time ends or before
it starts there is a boy sitting under the piano,
bracing it with his feet.

He likes the crickets because they move
quicker than he expects them too; he likes
watching the piano's corded innards
while his sister plays for the same reason.

In the time after time ends or before
it starts he flexes his fingers finds joy
in the gracefulness of his unscarred knuckles
the veins at the edge of his wrists.

He asks his sister what she wants
to do today & she says she's not
quite sure, then falls asleep
on the piano bench her hair
falling over the edge, brown
& straight, almost brushing the rug.

In the time after time ends or before
it starts the boy is bored; without his sister
to press the keys there is no show
to be admired no mechanism
to unlock & maybe he wants
to be the one to make something beautiful,
for once.

The crickets are still crossing the carpet,
in search of warmer territory. The boy
closes his eyes, thinks, maps out
the floor. When his sister wakes,
he will give her a beautiful puzzle
to figure, to watch. *Alright*,
he tells the bottom of the piano, traces

the grains of wood with his fingers.
I'll make a world.

~ R.E. Campion

Hatchling

The grass was young, the sun was high with life. In this time there laid strewn a nest of layered straw, bramble, and human refuse cradling a spotty egg. It was the only one born from its mother, who labored the monsoons months prior and now molted under the clear skies. While other chicks quickly took a taste for grubs, the egg preferred its starving. While others would engage in the hunt to see another morning, the mother bird would spend nights making attempts to beckon their child from the other side.

From morning to midnight, with only breaks to eat and rest, the mother bird would regale its kin with tales of the outside world, of the green grasslands to soar through with the wind under their wings, of the friends of various flocks to fly ever further, all of these promises through the rattling of construction workers down below, machinery screaming at every potential hour as they built up a new gas station to go on the corner of 12th and Sunshine.

It was a month late when the egg finally made its first attempt at engaging with the outside. The day was much louder, the Mans had moved onto installing the pumps, requiring them to blister open the Earth. The mother bird had kept on spouting the same stories she always had, when the egg finally said:

"Are the monsters really still here?"

"My dear," The mother bird said after an angstrom of shock,

"Whatever do you mean?"

"The yelling. The screaming. Those aren't kindly words, this I know, there's evil standing outside in wait."

The mother bird glanced down at the Mans. Indeed, they were now pointing in their direction, unaware of their presence,

and the potential of expanding further into their home for zoning reasons. She sighed, “I know, they’re very loud. Treacherous, even, with how they keep moving in on our tree. But that is for later. For now, there is you. Why not come outside? There’s beautiful things lying in wait.”

“How can I trust that?” The egg spat back. “All of these beautiful things, these green grasslands, friendly flocks, gourmet grubs, all of this comes from you. How do I know that you’re not seeking to do me in the moment I leave? That you’re in cahoots with the monsters down below?”

“I would never. You can trust that if nothing else.”

“It is just as valuable as everything I have heard from you before. And worse, perhaps you believe yourself to be true. Perhaps you’ve become sick and truly believe there’s good things waiting while you’re stewing in your own delusions.”

The mother bird sat there for some time, unable to say anything. The egg, despite having no reactionary symbols, seemed coated in guilt.

After the silence grew to be too much to bear, the motherbird managed, “This is more than just the monsters, isn’t it? There must be more than that to dissuade you?”

The egg was slow. In languished pace, it said “If there were only monsters out there, then the choice would be easy. I would be content to just stay here and meet with the end early. I’m sure that we could get along more than the Something out there.Instead, I have that cursed promise.”

“What cursed promise?”

“The promise of something to lose. I know of green grasslands, I know of the flocks, of the grubs, of plenty of wondrous things, and if even a fraction of it is true, how much of it will I truly get to see? How many beautiful things will I

forever remain unable to grasp? Those monsters, I've heard them discussing the chopping down of our tree, and if I knew precisely what a tree was beyond anecdote, then I know that the pain would be even greater. I can't accept a world that will not accept me."

"I accept you." The mother bird chirped. "I accept you more than anything else out there. And I carry this pain as well, I know that I will find myself robbed of the beauties that you seem to be hoping is imposed on yourself. I will lie no longer, the grasslands are real, all of it is, but every day I struggle to find them more in this concrete jungle. The monsters are never going to leave, and I know that I'll be taken from this place on a date unknown and in unjust manner. But for every vengeful sun there comes the warmth of its embrace. For every furious storm there comes the philanthropy of refreshment. And there will be those who seem to know more than you, know where to go first, how to fly, how to hunt, but you'll find people who need you to soar alongside. If I found myself encased in that membrane again and given the choice to stop then and there, I promise you, there's nothing that would make me succumb. You've spent all of your life knowing Nothing, wouldn't you like to try something for a change?"

There was no response from the egg for the rest of the night. When morning came, the gas station had finished installing the pumps. They shone well with their sleek red paint, and the price signs hummed with reasonably affordable deals. It was lunch time, there was a crowd in dozens peeling off to eat before beginning again. Between two friends, the first suggests a local diner, boasting about them having the most exquisite omelettes. The second agreed even if it was a bit late in the afternoon for such a meal. Despite this, in the tree above, a chick had finally hatched, laying there in its albumen, soggy and sensitive. The chick laid under that brilliant, awe-full light, only protected soon after by the shade of its mother.

"Was it worth it?" She asked.

In a croak, the chick mustered: “More than I could have known.”

~ Alexander Castro

NOTICE AND COMMENT

I don’t want to speak
publicly, in part,
or in full, in front of
a room of strangers.
my magnifed glasses
make me bug-eyed curious
about crabby politics.
I’ll walk up
with ocean legs.
I have a hunch
my lunch
may be resurfacing
while I talk about fshing
in the gulf.
I’ll take a gulp
of water—
where’s the oxygen?
I don’t know
what species
I am
or where my gills
have gone.
I’ll be gutted
by a question
by imposter syndrome.
the microphone
will capture every
stutter, every slip
of floppy tongue.
the timer ended
seconds ago.
my cheeks—
a cherry tomato
a spawning salmon
a sure tell
that I care

about this issue
to try
&
say aloud
some [fill-in-the blank]
reason
for them to
please care
& consider
my cause,
however quiet
however quelled.

~ Lancee Whetman

The Truth is …

you can't really hold on to anything

the moment or cold water or the way your skin looks
on any particular day

and you can't trust reflections or anything anyone
says to you after they've had a few or the sound

of that singer you liked when you were young
aspartame on the tongue starts to taste real
after years of

pretending, the Truth is the calluses on your feet

that will never fade and the way your hair curls
never the same and the truth is

no one or nothing will ever fill you up

Emptiness is a condition of truth,
everything without that little gap is a lie.

~ Carly Thompson

The Gift

We open the door, gleaming
with a holiday feeling
and there you are,
maggots.
Worming your way
from the bin to the floor
and into the hallway
like you're welcoming us.
You bend your cylindrical bodies,
waxing and waning your rings,
backs arched
into white crescent moons.
You bring us right back
to this life we have built
where we hang up the washing,
mop up the milk,
and kill all the crawlers
to make this a home
that we love.
Our affection sprayed
into every corner,
we sigh and collapse on the sofa,
happy
to be home.

~ Sarah Barke

Blossoming

You were drawn to the dress
like the butterfly to the blooms
embroidered on the bodice's tulle—
the golden dress with the puffed
sleeves and crinoline skirt.

The one you fell in love with
during our mommy and son
saturday Target run.

You looked in the fitting-room mirror,
said mommy I feel so beautiful,
not yet knowing how brave you are.

You settled on a pink cotton dress
with ruffled sleeves.
Less itchy, you said
throwing it in the cart,
next to the big yellow box of legos.

You are still free
to love what you love,
to feel what you feel
when you feel it.

So I can't get mad
when you cross your arms and pout,
sit down in the middle of the aisle,
insist that your legs are too tired
and I must carry you home.

~ Mara Lovelock

Returning an Item

The first thing this time
is the melted cheese on my tongue
savoured, slowly.
And then my best friend's face,
that smile she smiles
at me.
Now she reverses in glitches,
picks up the pizza,
walks back to the oven,
closes the door.
I get up from the table,
return to the bed
she had made for me.
I stare at the boxes.
We back out of her flat
and out of the building,
drive back out of Putney
backwards
into deepest East London.
We carry the boxes
and my red and black rucksack
back up the stairs
into the old lady's house.
(The lady was nice.)
By the door to my room,
I open the letter,
unwrite every sentence
until there is nothing
left to explain.
We flatten the boxes, leave
the red and black rucksack
at the back of the wardrobe.
Back where I hid it
in case
he gets violent
again.

~ Sarah Barke

Negatives

Sania told herself she had gotten used to the pang of bitterness she felt every time her eyes flickered to the corner booth. She braced for it again as she stepped into the cafe, looking over despite herself. A sharp wave of shock crashed over her instead when Raya looked up to meet her gaze. Sania looked away immediately, heading straight for the counter to put in her order. She could feel Raya's eyes on her like a physical thing, a familiar touch against her back.

Raya looked different. It had been years since they were teenagers, and Sania hadn't expected Raya to look the same, but she had thought the flashy smile and devil-may-care attitude had been an inseparable part of Raya. She had the same wood-carved eyes and inky waves, but there was a defeat in her shoulders that was so unlike the Raya Sania knew.

She was planning on leaving, she really was, but the girl at the counter said the espresso machine was causing trouble. Sania would have to wait for her order. She stood to the side, watching Raya stare into her coffee mug. The morning light cut through the windows to light up her skin in a gold that made Sania itch for her film camera.

Despite everything in her telling her not to, she headed for Raya's booth. The corner booth as this cafe had been frequented by them in school, empty coffee mugs and open notebooks forgotten on the table as they danced around the unnamed thing hanging over them. Sania had tried to name it, and it had ruined everything.

Sania kept her face expressionless as she sat down across from Raya, ignoring the way her eyes drank in Sania. Unlike Raya, Sania had changed more drastically. She had thrown herself into everything she could get her hands on as a teenager, sharp and abrupt changes in appearance every few months, grasping at anything that might make her feel at home. Sania's outwardly professional demeanor wasn't news to the

rest of the town, but Raya hadn't been back in years.

"You look different," Raya said, the words etched in surprise like she hadn't meant to say them. Sania shrugged.

"It's been a while," she said. "How's Boston?"

"Good." Raya picked at her watch strap. "My mother likes it there."

"That's good," Sania said, her voice hollow in her ears. "You're visiting?"

"Selling the house," Raya corrected, her eyes falling to her coffee mug again. "My mother wanted me to make sure everything went well."

"Right." Sania didn't know what she was expecting. This was always how it was going to be, she knew that. She knew that, but it never stopped her from hoping.

"I would have visited sooner if I could."

"Right," Sania said again, and Raya looked up, a flash of hurt in her eyes. Sania stood. "I should go—"

"Hi, you ordered the lavender latte, right?" The girl from the counter was by the booth, holding out the cup to her. They must have called her order.

"Yes, sorry. Thank you," Sania said, momentarily interrupted in her escape. Raya's eyes latched onto the drink.

"You still drink that?" she asked, her voice soft. Sania dropped back onto her seat.

"It's good," she said, the words barely making it out of her throat. She had spent years wishing it would be too difficult to remember, ribs too tight against her lungs to even think of it, but it came to her as easily as breathing. She could still feel the

crisp spring air, the condensation from the latte on her fingers, the almost-natural way Raya's hand had slid in hers, fitting together like a perfect puzzle, wrists pressed against each other, beating from the same heart. They were celebrating, having passed some exam important enough that Sania's parents had finally agreed to get her a film camera, and Raya's mother had allowed her to go out for the evening. They wandered the empty streets together, lavender lattes in hand as Sania took pictures of everything. Raya was in all of them in some way, whether in center-frame or a blurry hand in the corner.

They had ended up on the swings, Sania trying to capture the stars with Raya's silhouette in the foreground when she had turned and smiled at the camera. That had been all it took, in the end. Sania set her camera down, parting her lips for words that would never make it out. Raya must have seen it on Sania's face. She moved, the barest fraction of an inch forward, and an explosive joy burst in Sania's heart fast enough to blur her vision. Then Raya had jerked back, and Sania forever shrank into herself.

"We can't," Raya said, her voice paper thin. "My mother—"

"I know." Sania cut her off. She didn't want to hear it, not when she should have already known this would happen. Raya would never choose Sania over her mother. She would never choose herself over her mother. Sania knew this, but she had hoped anyway. It didn't make it any easier to hear Raya say the truth.

Sania had never ended up developing the pictures. The negatives sat in a box, hidden from the light of day. She couldn't bring herself to look at them, not then, not now.

"I won't be back in town again," Raya in the cafe was saying. "Really, this time."

"You could stay," Sania said, despite everything,

surprised at how raw her voice sounded.

Raya's eyes widened.

"I—" Her phone buzzed, an urgent beeping that vibrated the table. Raya's face fell, her mother's unsmiling face filling the screen. "I have to take this."

"I know." Sania should have left when she saw Raya from the doorway. She shouldn't have hoped.

"I'll… yeah." Raya offered a small smile before rushing out, phone already at her ear. Sania watched her leave, the condensation from her lavender latte dripping onto her hands.

~ C.R. Mathew

Available with Subtitles

The programme begins
inside a Deaf family's kitchen.

Their hands cross the table
between cereal bowls
and an open jar of jam.

When the presenter speaks,
the signing stops.

The camera moves closer
to his face.

At the bottom of the screen:

When we communicate,
everyone benefits.

I read each word
while watching the space
beside him remain empty.

In the next scene,
the family's youngest daughter
signs faster than the subtitles.

I rewind twice.

The remote leaves
four small dents
across my palm.

During the adverts,
a charity asks viewers
to imagine losing
one of their senses.

I turn the volume down.

The programme returns
with music, narration
and no interpreter.

At the credits,
Access Services
passes across the screen.

I pause there,

the television holding
the words still
because nobody else did.

~ O. Quiet

The Passenger in the Window Seat

She sat half-asleep
in the window seat,
jerking awake each time
her head hit the metal bars
where a chunk of paint
had peeled off.

As she stretched her hand past me
to buy the ticket,
her palms smelled of
crushed garlic cloves.

The pleats of her chiffon saree
were barely held together
with a safety pin
and the red bindi
had slipped
to the top of her eyebrows.

When the conductor called out
the name of her stop,
she stood up—
her fingers fumbling at her neck
till they touched
her gold chain.

She corrected her pleats
and walked past me;
her shadow falling over
a ticket stub.

I corrected my own pleats
before moving
into her seat.

~ Anjana Vipin Edakkunny

A Visit from the Rat King

Aurora stood by the back door, like every night. I opened it to let her out into the twilight. Rather than her strange back-and-forth dance of will she, won't she, Aurora turned and ran. In the doorway was a rat the size of a grown man. He had shifty, sunken eyes, long claws, and a tail covered in spiky hair. I should have heeded Aurora's warning, but for some unfathomable reason I allowed the rat in. He nibbled on cheese and drank red wine until his tongue turned black. When he departed, the rat left little pellets of filth behind and a strange oily smell that I couldn't rid my home of for weeks.

~ Rachel Turney

Black Overcoat

I wear your black overcoat,
your cat's hair the color of slate
still on it from 16 years ago.
And if I'm lucky,
a strand of yours, chestnut brown.

Your body isn't here anymore,
yet you still warm me.

~ Jennifer Gawinski Cuming

still

stay like that, for
just a while longer.
while i run a hand
over the dip in
your back.
till i've
memorised
the route from
your hip to your
shoulder through
the barren road
of your spine.
hold space.
where fabric
fuses with skin
fuses with bone.
low lamplight
lichen spread
over limbs.
breathe.
through each rise,
and fall. in, then out.
be here, for each breath
we take in this silence
that belongs only,
wholly, to us

~ Claire Wong

Pinpricks

I wonder what she removes
first
as soon as she bolts
the front door.

For me, it is often
that too tight blouse with the last hook
and the one just before that
refusing to latch.
Soon, a masala-stained nightie becomes
my home.

When she stretches her back
after spreading her burqa
on the bed
and gulps in a mouthful
of air,
does it keep
its ironed folds?
Or ripple across the sheet
carrying a whiff
of her hair oil?

If one day our eyes
happen to meet,
I wonder
how those pinpricks
might slice
my face
as we walk past each other
on the same street
sloping differently
beneath our feet.

~ Anjana Vipin Edakkunny

Spidey Sense

This morning I entered the room after a night without you—shift change with daddy. You were watching *Spidey and His Amazing Friends* on the TV mounted in the upper corner of the room, across from your hospital bed. You had large purple moons under your eyes and your oxygen level hovered around 92%. When the bed could no longer contain you, the nurse brought out Hot Wheels and Spidey action figures. You lay down on your stomach on the floor, knees bent and feet in the air, immersed in a spirited interspecies dialogue—only pausing for vital checks. With each labored breath I saw you as a fragile glass figurine, and I wanted to engulf you in bubble wrap, protect you from the impact of this unpredictable life. But now you were flying your figures around the room—your raspy giggles turning up the corners of my lips as I watched from the stiff vinyl visitor's couch.

The playful soundtrack receded as I was transported to the day you came into this world. You were born in that state: admitted. Your umbilical cord quickly replaced with breathing machines, IV, and a feeding tube. But it's been years since I saw you as a little figurine. Now as I write this I realize you were Spidey all along, surrounded by your web of support, a super hero before you could walk. And by the age of two you had already saved my life—when I found myself caught in my own web of IVs. In this moment I sense the presence of this vast web that connects us, protects us, gives us strength to fight the unknown villains around the corner. I suddenly look up to catch your eye. We smile at one another, your baby-tooth grin still perfectly intact. You play, I write—together, both gasping for life-sustaining breath.

~ Mara Lovelock

When I heard the Learn’ed Astronomers
After Walt Whitman’s When I Heard the Learned Astronomer

When I heard the learn’ed astronomers
Couldn't come up with a good reason so as not to rename the Magellan Star Cluster,
When I, panicking, thought,

'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’
This is much too ‘Ministry of Truth’
and the next time we slay the indigenous
it will be in the name of an algorithm who hallucinated,
‘The sun isn’t yellow, it's chicken.’

How soon accountable I became entirely manic and sick,
Till shepherded gliding by car to the hospital emergency room by my long-gone fiancée,
I sat for over an hour until I yelled at them all,
And the nurse who agreed with me but didn't bother to show me what he was dispensing
Looked rather befuddled watching me chew the diazepam.

~ Jonathan Delehanty

Planet Ponderosa

183 miles might be what it takes
to forget her. Ancient evergreens surround,
reach toward the clouds. Jagged rocks
even higher, black water stains
over gray, tiny-to-me trees at the top.
An underground creature pushes up dirt,
evident only if your gaze holds steady.
A lone Steller's Jay lands on the lowest branch
of an Incense-cedar, white reflects
off his ebony crest. I rub the bottom
of my feet hard against pine needles,
try to remember the last time my soles
were dirt brown, stare at the crinkle-cookie
bark of a Ponderosa Pine, lit by sunset
notice the color of each layer:
purple, maroon, pink,
like land formations on another planet—
still not far enough.

~ Mara Lovelock

Forgiveness

Trees swallow our bitter carbon
and instead of spitting it
back into our faces,
they cradle it beneath bark
and gift us breath.

~ Bella Melardi

Packing a Go Bag in the Cradle of LA

You've known the Santa Ana winds to be cruel and fickle, but never like this. Your ears are tuned into the television and the news. The Palisades Fire is at 0% containment. Surely the firefighters should have the flames corralled by now. The KTLA5 reporter says that fires could spring up anywhere. Don't start unnecessary bonfires. Don't use candles in the event of a blackout. Do report downed power lines. You're messaging your friends and family in Brentwood and Santa Monica and Monrovia and Duarte—because although that's not quite the Palisades or Encino, or Altadena or Pasadena, it's close enough to warrant worry. Your thumb lingers on bare bones infographics with sepia tone images of intact palm trees on Instagram stories with instructions on how to build a go bag. You put that off as long as you can. Your out-of-state-college best friend messages to ask if you're safe and okay. Your cousin DMs you a black-and-white LA Times-approved map of evacuation zones. You decide that it couldn't hurt to pack a bag. You never got around to it before; earthquakes always seemed to be such a nebulous threat. Fire, perpetually in the periphery. But the AQI is well above 250 now and a fire's started in the Hollywood Hills. They're calling it the Sunset Fire. You know you gotta get out soon. You scan your bookshelves, trying to find the copy of *Because of Winn-Dixie* your third-grade teacher gave you when she retired at the end of the year. She's the one who worked with you on your penmanship and taught you to look people in the eye when talking to them. Now, it's your favorite book. Not because it's a banned book, therefore subversive to read, but because it reminds you of your childhood dog, Bagel. You wonder where Ms. Feeney is now, if she's safe. Your phone rings. Mom says your Aunt Paulina and Uncle Arvin in San Diego can host you. For a little while. Besides, air quality here is really bad for you, especially with your asthma. Rumors of asbestos. Traces of arsenic. You grab your half-packed go bag and an N95 mask from COVID times. You shove the deed to the house, your birth certificate, and other hard-to-replace documents in the laptop compartment of your go bag. You catch a glimpse of that off-

white spine, its title in Garamond, *Because*. You yank the book out and stuff it in your bag, not caring that it's getting bent. You get in the car and drive, a sea of red lights—to match the red flames—stretching from Sunset Boulevard to the 101. You imagine the helicopters releasing a plume of Mars-red fire retardant on the iconic dome of the Griffith Observatory. Underneath it, the Samuel Oschin Planetarium, where your dad took kid you to see a giant 2D projection of the stars, so real it felt 4D. In photos of that day, your dad stands in front of the observatory, wearing aviator sunglasses and an oil spill-black leather jacket, one hand in his pocket. Two rumpled 2010 tickets to *Iron Man 2* at the Vista Theatre spill out from your wallet. You think of Dad's plot in the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, the grass charcoal-black and his headstone illegible, covered in ash.

~ Rayne Alarcio

In the Wake of Closure

A squealing toddler out my window
wakes me from unexpected slumber,
a body surrendered to knowing.

Now I rise out of muscle memory—
someone has to make dinner.

After school pick up
I watch two boys,
one of them mine,
laugh as they go down the slide.

The grass underfoot
offends me with its lime luster.

I reach for a nub of pink chalk,
feel its satisfying scrape upon concrete,
powder between my fingers,
press my grief into spirals, hear
That's beautiful mommy.

~ Mara Lovelock

Little Sister Re-Lives Family Sunday Rituals Circa 1960

Mid-Sunday is for The Tickle Game. Big Brother tickles Little Sister until she squirms, giggles, screams, contorts, and writhes on the splintered wooden floor of their bedroom. He holds all power. Starts with a light touch from his pointer finger to her bare belly, then moves slowly across the room – holds that finger in the air aimed directly where her umbilicus once attached. Even when she is across the room, her small back plastered to a wall while standing, he just glares at her, eyeballs afire, his menacing finger pointed at her belly button, circling around as she doubles over in laughter-pain, connected by an invisible beam from Big Brother's waving pointer to her innervated belly skin. She howls – STOP, STOP – but he is merciless and she is his love-sick-sister, so he does not stop until he decides to assemble his electric train set. How she admires its figure eight infinity design where full metal freight cars loop endlessly – CHOO, CHOO – as he controls the transformer.

Early Sunday morning Big Brother is fed cherry cokes and cheeseburgers as rewards from men at the garage where Father works. As a girl Little Sister is not allowed to move cars in and out of tight spaces and pump-pungent-leaded gasoline in the asphalt-concrete-flammable building – NO, NO! On Sunday Big Brother is treated to sweetness and red meat while Little Sister isn't. The treats, electric trains, and cars belong solely to him as does his power to make Little Sister writhe across a room.

Late Sunday Father returns smelly from a greasy-sweat-filled-day of garage work. He kiss-bites the girls knuckles, then crushes the boy's forehead with giant taunting hands, bellows insults in a voice-boom like a warrior drum, and all Little Sister wants is to love Big Brother enough for this to – STOP, STOP – for her tickled powerlessness at the fingertip of Big Brother to make up for tyrannical treatment dished out from Father's beastly palms – Father's grin shines as he breaks the boy's spirit into singular vertebrae, like a chicken neck picked apart into nubs scattered across a chipped greasy plate.

Where is Mother on Sunday? Swallowed by the dirty laundry hamper. Stuck hopelessly trying to fish her wedding ring out of the drain she dropped it down. Sunk into cracks of her tattered green couch, spooning chocolate-mint-chip ice-cream down her raspy throat – a rusted carburetor stuck in her esophagus. In an adjacent room the sound of a train – CHOO, CHOO's – to infinity.

~ Sandra Beth Levy

Petrichor (Earth)

Wet leaves on the ground
made a big magic mattress
to thaw my stiff life.

~ Tamizh Ponni VP

THIS POEM IS FOR YOU
After Aracelis Girmay

You, who listens to the creek rolling over the soft stones, the ones that weigh down your open palms

You, you with your shallow breaths trying to gather oxygen for your sagging, wilted balloons

You rescuing bees from swimming pools, bird baths, anywhere they are wet and not supposed to be – using your breath to gently dry their drenched wings

You, watching the way the clouds dance across the sky and not worrying about the emails pinging alerts to double digits

You pausing to listen to the trees, running your hands on their bark and noticing the intricate detail that no one else sees

You, in line at the coffee shop with a book in your hands, savoring the pages with smiles

You pulling over on an autumn road to cradle your migraine in your lap like a warm, curled cat while you sleep away the pain

You, rolling your heart in your hands trying to knead the anxiety into oblivion

You, who never sees stars at night, but only before the sun rises while sipping a hot mug of coffee that is sometimes tea to appease the anxiety gods

You watching grass grow, or imagining that it is possible just to evoke the feeling of calm

You holding the fragile shape of acceptance, letting it settle like a weighted blanket on your shoulder blades

You, trying to wrap your feelings in the perfect boxes that can be tucked away in the attic for later, but making sure they look

like gifts to discourage anyone from accidentally releasing them

You trying to catch a bit of peace to settle your nerves in a world ruined by self-obsession

You who releases wishes from the lotus flower at the end of your arms and knows that hope is more than a word that pops like a bubble on your lips

This poem is for you.

~ Nicole Zwolinski

That Time I Showed My Mother My Purpling Elbow

"Val, you're such a drama queen." She didn't look up from her book. "Dial it back."

Another time, I had an ache and clutched my pillow to my stomach. She told me I was "the princess and the pea."

From then on, I became the princess and the pea. Hypersensitive, whiny, annoying, clutching my stuffed lamb. She scripted the role to fit me perfectly, so I carried on at school internalizing every scratch, every misplaced word, feeling no pleasure because pain outweighed it.

At conferences, my mother whispered to my teachers. They stared at me.

In those days, I thought she meant that I was like the princess who felt the discomfort of the pea through all those beds. But one day she let slip that over the years I'd turned her into a princess. Now I realize she believed that I was the pea who annoyed her.

Too late to put on the pea's hat. I've been wearing the tiara too long.

~ Luanne Castle

Strangers

“Hi, Mom,”

startles my swallowing.

she’s nameless to me

but asks about lunch.

i am skimming the edges

of a f a d e d memory.

soup.

“How was your morning today?”

i play with buttons instead of answering.

small black ones four holes

happy buttons.

“I heard you had a holiday party last night!”

yes. it was cold and

too long. i’ve been here too long.

“when am i getting out?”

“Your walk is at noon.”

is that what i meant?

“who’s taking me?”

“Nurse Shana.”

oh. okay. good.

i look and see white clouds.

pretty pretty clouds.

“that will be nice” i smile

“ i don’t like walking

with s t r a n g e r s.”

~ Kate Reim

Hedge Fun

i cut the hedge today
the one taller than i
the one neighbors threatened,
“chainsaw its green ass off!”
i clip gently, find haiku situations—
berries comingling with fungi,
abandoned sparrow nests
where fledglings studied,
mazed vines, spider art.
nature’s persona thrives
within green ass messes.

~ Eleanor Jones

novelty item

novelty burns out like a firecracker,
melts like cotton candy on my tongue.

for years I got by on the spectacle
of the world, that subtle glimmer.

four cities and three heartbreaks later,
the streets and the soundscapes are the same

no matter where I go. I get deja vu
whenever I see a stranger.

I think I knew them all long ago.
movie theatres, book stores,

train stations. *I met you once*
when we were new.

~ Cassie Lipton

Weight of a Room

The chair has four feet sunk
into linoleum—four brown aureoles
where oak has compressed the floor,
vinyl darkened by dust, hair,
the minute residue of habitation.

Its arms are lacquered smooth.
Camphor clings to the grain;
old sweat has entered the varnish.
Under the resin, the wood
keeps the smell of wet weather.

She rubs the armrest
with her thumb.
A pale crescent appears,
then closes.

Heat has softened the lacquer.
Her print remains
after her hand has lifted.

At the threshold, one leg catches.
A splinter opens along the grain,
pale and fibrous.
She pinches it between her nails.
It curls toward the chair.

Outside, the chair stands in dust
among vessels, bedding, folded clothes.
Afternoon whitens everything.
On the seat, a dark patch
of varnish begins to sweat.

By evening, the room is bare.
Four depressions remain.
She kneels.

The floor is warm
where the chair was.

~ Aardhra Chandran

The Penny Lift

Dorsey Pringle believed America's real fortune lay under couch cushions.

Eighty percent of all pennies, he'd calculated, were idle in jars, junk drawers, glove compartments, and old coffee cans labeled "VACATION FUND." That was more copper than the Statue of Liberty's skin, just sitting there in the dark.

He had a plan.

The Pacific and the Atlantic would be his battery terminals. The Mississippi would act as a natural conductor. All he needed was a stack of thrift-store oscilloscopes, twenty-two miles of scavenged copper wire, and two dozen expired RadioShack gift cards to stabilize the current. He called it the Penny Lift.

On Penny Day, he bolted a lawn chair to the roof of his garage. He put on a welding mask for no clear reason other than it felt like a moment for one. At noon, he flipped the switch.

The air made a sound like a thousand coins humming in a jar. Then came the lift…pennies rolling out of pockets, sliding down kitchen counters, toppling from piggy banks. One by one, then all at once, they rose.

In Milwaukee, an old man watched his laundry quarters twitch but stay put. "Wrong denomination," he muttered. In Tulsa, a cat batted at a coin climbing the air like a helium balloon.

Over Kansas, the sky went the color of a new cent. Copper shadows spun across living room walls. People stepped onto porches to watch their change drift away. No one complained; there was something almost polite about losing only pennies.

By sunset, the nation's loose copper had gathered into a trembling, burnished cloud over the Nebraska-Kansas border. Dorsey, heart pounding, checked his readings. Just a few more volts and it would all come down…every cent of it…into his waiting grain silo.

He threw the lever.

A sound like metallic thunder rolled across the plains. The cloud shuddered, shifted…and began to drift north.

"No, no, no," Dorsey whispered, but the polarity wouldn't reverse. His calculations had been wrong; the magnetic lines of force favored Hudson Bay.

In less than an hour, Canada was richer by 137 billion pennies.

The next morning, Dorsey stood inside his empty silo, the smell of copper still on the air. A single coin clinked down from the rafters. He picked it up. A Canadian cent. Queen Elizabeth smiled faintly from its face.

Weeks later, meteorologists identified a thin, glowing ring encircling the planet…pennies in low Earth orbit, a new atmospheric phenomenon disrupting both sunsets and migratory birds. The coins had floated on past the Canadian north where they had been flushed outward from the North Pole.

Dorsey never became a rich man. But on certain evenings, he'd look up and see the Copper Belt catching the last light, and know that somewhere up there, his life's savings were still airborne. It was also, somehow, solving global warming, and for that he received a modest plaque from the Department of Energy, which he kept in the same drawer as his loose change.

~ Zary Fekete

Cringe Is Not Cringe

Some mother says, “Everyone is family here,” and holds
her embrace of a stranger too many seconds. Too many
someones are missing their mothers. Just saying so—

Like this couple in heat in the line to the Ferris wheel
feeding one another puffs of cotton candy. They’ll disintegrate,
no doubt, just don’t doubt that they are real in that moment,

as real as whatever it is thorning this dismissiveness, defense
against the dark arts of ebullience. Everyone who wants to love
will say so, softly and often. They know the scared snarl and
scratch.

~ J.D. Isip

Figs

When we lived in Winchester
There were fruit trees.
An abundance
Apples, pears
In neighbours gardens.
I'd always wanted fruit trees.
That first September
The pathways were ripe with windfalls
Rolling apples underfoot
Pears fermenting beneath drunken wasps.
I couldn't bear the waste,
Next summer returned home every day
Pockets knobbly with apples
White flesh blushed by sunshine
My neighbours trash, my treasure.
My husband was horrified
What if the neighbours thought I was stealing, what if there were worms in the fruit?
I cored the apples and munched.
Then the second summer
The fig tree.
Its boughs sweeping over the side alley
Quick step route to school.
A northern girl
I'd never seen figs outside of plastic cartons.
The branch-fast bulbous swell a promise
Of sweetness to come.
I stalked them all summer term
Watched the purple seep
Flushing the flesh from the inside out
Until they were fit to drop
Into my scavenging hands.
'What would the neighbours say?'
I thought
And bit.

~ Jo Wright

Contributor Bios

Rayne Alarcio | Rayne Alarcio (he/they) is a Filipino American transmasculine writer from Los Angeles and the author of Starving the Wolf (Bottlecap Press), housed in the Poets House Permanent Collection and the New York Arts Program archive. Selected for the 2027 McCormack Writing Center (formerly Tin House) Winter Workshop under Zefyr Lisowski, their work appears or is forthcoming in Chicago Quarterly Review, Cimarron Review, failbetter, ANMLY, and Up the Staircase Quarterly. A graduate of Kalamazoo College and an alum of WriteGirl and the New York Arts Program, he has also served as a National Juror for the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and currently mentors emerging youth writers.

Swetha Amit | Swetha is an MFA graduate of the University of San Francisco. She is the author of a memoir, A Turbulent Mind, and three chapbooks. Her work across genres appears in Bending Genres, Ghost Parachute, Gone Lawn, McNeese Boudin, and other publications. She is an active member of the Writers Grotto, where she chairs the literary salon series on the 3rd Friday of each month. A Rooted and Written Fellow in 2024, she has received support from Tin House, Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, Community of Writers, The Writers Grotto, Vona Voices, Bending Genres, and Lit Camp. Her stories have been featured in the Ghost Parachute anthology, selected for the Wigleaf Top 50 2026, and nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fiction, and Best Microfiction.

Sarah Barke | Sarah Barke is a Berlin-born, London-based poet and artist who releases experimental music as Electric Animal. Her poetry is forthcoming in Mslexia, Nettle, Inframince and the 2027 Poem Stellium Calendar. She was also longlisted for the 2026 Superlative Poetry and New Writers Poetry Competitions. Her work often explores the tension between belonging and rupture, and the waysthings merge, dissolve and reform. Instagram: @_electricanimal_

R.E. Campion | R.E. Campion is a poet and writer from the DMV who can be found standing at the edge of a photograph with his face slightly out of focus. He is the founder and former editor of the annually published University of Maryland Terpoets Anthology, a literary journal of student poetry, as well as the winner of the 2024 Sadat Poetry for Justice and Peace Award for his poem "Rose in the Shredder" and the 2022 Amaranth Staff Pick of Poetry Award for his poem "Common Grace." His work has previously been published in Amaranth Journal of the Arts, Stylus Literary Journal, Persephone Literary Magazine, Oakland Arts Review, Atropos Magazine, Dirt Freckles Literary Magazine, If All the Trees Were Pens Anthology and Silly Goose Press, and he was a featured poet at the American Poetry Museum in May 2026.

Luanne Castle | Luanne Castle's poetry and prose have appeared in Copper Nickel, River Teeth, Your Impossible Voice, JMWW, Grist, Fourteen Hills, Verse Daily, One Art, Lunch Ticket, Saranac Review, Pleiades, Cleaver, Moon City, Moon Park, Anti-Heroin Chic, Bending Genres, BULL, MasticadoresUSA, and more. Her sixth book, Hunting the Cosmos, an ekphrastic collection of flash and poetry based on the art of Remedios Varo, is forthcoming in November. https://www.luannecastle.com/

Alexander Castro | Alexander Castro is an Undergrad student of Arizona State University, Barrett's Honors College. In their adolescence, they fell in love with story telling and sought out ways to make it possible. In their free time now, they enjoy writing, reading, voiceover work, and previously hosted a small writing/bookclub to encourage the craft. They currently seek to write a full length novel of their own.

Aardhra Chandran | Aardhra Chandran is a poet and postgraduate student from Kerala, India. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Gulmohur Quarterly, Rust & Moth, The Tiger Moth Review, Philly Chapbook Review, Punch Magazine, and Bloodroot Poetry Journal, among others.

Jennifer Gawinski Cuming | Jennifer Gawinski Cuming writes poetry exploring love, loss, memory, and the fragile beauty of human connection. Her work often finds emotional depth in ordinary images, weaving lyrical language with themes of longing, grief, and resilience. She lives in Wisconsin. She has been published in The Raven Review, The Orange Rose Literary Magazine, Summur, Persephone Literary Magazine, and Luminaura.

Margarita Dale | Margarita Dale is a clinical hypnotherapist specializing in Rapid Transformational Therapy (RTT®), a seasoned teacher, and an advocate of Waldorf education. Her work explores the intersection of psychology, nervous-system–based healing, embodiment, and the quiet intelligence of natural processes. Bridging therapeutic insight with reflective writing, she offers contemplative essays on healing, relationships, and personal transformation that emphasize presence, attunement, and the subtle power of gentle change. Originally from St. Petersburg, Russia, she has lived in Northern California for more than three decades. Her stories and essays have appeared in RedRoseThorns and Thorn & Bloom Magazine. You can find more of her here: www.retunetherapy.com , www.facebook.com/ritadale , IG @rita.dale

Angelina Danae | Angelina Danae is a poet, essayist, and editor who spent more than a decade working as a writer and strategist in marketing and PR. After experiencing burnout, she pivoted her career to prioritize her creative energy for her own writing. Now she spends most of her time unpacking her heritage of being born and raised in an Amish community and plotting a way toward healing by returning to nature and reclaiming the redemptive parts of her origin. fromthehand.substack.com , https://www.instagram.com/angelinadanae_/

Jonathan Delehanty | Jonathan Delehanty was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1986. He has been published in Echidna Literary Magazine and has work forthcoming at Hobart, Ape House Magazine, and The Goldfinch Review. In his spare time, he

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Michael DuBon | Michael DuBon is a first-generation U.S. citizen of Guatemalan descent and a first-generation college graduate. He is the author of the poetry collection Fragilidad y Free Dissociation (Girl Noise Press, forthcoming 2027), and his work has been nominated for Best of the Net and GENREPUNK Magazine's Editor's Choice Award. His poetry has appeared in The Meadow, Anti-Heroin Chic, and Shine Poetry Quarterly, among others, and his creative nonfiction has appeared in The Plentitudes, Heartwood, and Under the Gum Tree. He holds an MFA from Saint Mary's College of California and an MIS from Southern Utah University, and he is a tenured English professor at Everett Community College. He also serves as a board member at large for WTAW Press. At his most natural, he is laughing and smiling like no one is watching—mostly because even his cat is over it and napping in the other room.

Anjana Vipin Edakkunny | Anjana Vipin Edakkunny is a writer from Kerala, India currently residing in the United States. Her work often engages with myth, memory, and contemporary experience, tracing how they bleed into one another. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in Target Global Magazine, Poetry Potion, Borderless Journal, PoemsIndia, Zhagaram Literary Magazine, DoubleSpeak Magazine, Inverse Journal, Ghudsavar Literary Magazine, Tap Into Poetry, Plato's Caves Online,The Wise Owl, Housebound Magazine and Avangeline Review. Her debut collection, The Sandalwood Pyre, is forthcoming from Writers Workshop, Kolkata.

Curtis Faulkner | Amy Palmer, writing as Curtis Faulkner, is a long-time literary novelist working on her seventh novel and holds a degree in English Literature. Her selected poems are part of her ongoing narrative collection of bucolic poetry titled "Citizens of the Slaughterhouse." Also holding a degree in Fine Arts, Amy Palmer teaches art workshops and works as the art

director for a local theatre in Peoria, Arizona, and was first published as a painter in the 2022 edition of GCC's "The Traveller" magazine.

Zary Fekete | Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary and currently lives in Tokyo. He has a debut novella (Words on the Page) out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection (The Written Path: A Journey Through Sobriety and Scripture) out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. Twitter and Instagram: @ZaryFekete Bluesky: zaryfekete.bsky.social

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Ashley Gaskin | Ashley N. Gaskin is a mixed media artist from Phoenix, Arizona. Her work typically focuses on memory and our relationship with nature. She has been creating her whole life in a multitude of mediums including, but not limited to: acrylic, watercolor, oil pastels, and lino-cut printmaking. Like many creatives, she can be a perfectionist; through her life, painting has allowed her to have a safe space to let go of her mistakes and embrace her humanity. You can find her work at angaskin.com

Hannah Grigaitis | Hannah Grigaitis is a poet who lives in St. Louis, Missouri. She is a AWP Season 24 Poetry Mentee working with poet Rachel Turney. She writes as a form of discovery and synthesizing her own perspective of her inner and external world. She is just emerging into sharing her work. Find her on instagram @hannahg_playspoet .

Heather Heiney | Heather Heiney fell in love with writing at 10 and photography at 21, so she became an Air Force photojournalist at 23 and earned a bachelor's in creative writing at 28. Now she's exploring her own work full time and trying not to take that privilege for granted. She's hard to keep track of, but you can usually find her on Instagram @heather_heiney.

J.D. Isip | J.D. Isip is the winner of the 2026 Louise Bogan Award for his collection, What Wonder (Trio House Press, 2027), and he is the editor of the upcoming anthology, The American Pop Culture Almanac: Daily Readings of Poetry & Prose (Moon Tide Press, 2027). His full-length collections include Reluctant Prophets (Moon Tide Press, 2025), Kissing the Wound (Moon Tide Press, 2023), and Pocketing Feathers (Sadie Girl Press, 2015). A native of Southern California, J.D. now teaches in South Texas, where he lives with his dogs, Ivy and Bucky. X: @JDIsip1 , Facebook: J.D. Isip , Instagram: @j.d.isip

Eleanor Jones | Communications executive Eleanor Jones is a Maryland resident and equestrian. Her poems and memoirs have been published in international literary journals and anthologies, including Azarao Lit Journal, Decolonial Passage and The Sun. Eleanor's health and fitness articles have appeared in Essence, People and the Washington Post. You can find her at: Instagram@eleanorjjjoneswriter & www.jonessummersbooks.com

Chris Kads | Chris Kads is the curator and partial author of the anthology "An Apple a Day," and she is also the author of "The Caretaker's Break," a short story nominated for a Best Microfiction award. In her works, she enjoys exploring queerness, aging, and unhealthy relationship patterns. Other pieces of hers can be found featured in Shadow and Sax, Maudlin House, Poetry in Brief, Blood+Honey Literary Magazine, SHINE International Poetry Series, Belladonna's Garden, the Orange Rose Lit Mag, Prosetrics the Magazine, Canyon Voices Literary Magazine, and more. When she is not writing, Chris enjoys being the EIC of Kads Corner Lit Mag. For more info, you can find her at chriskadswriting.com or @chris_kads on Instagram.

Sandra Beth Levy | Sandra Beth Levy has published over fifty pieces of poetry and creative nonfiction in the U.S. and internationally with Arcana Poetry Press, SHINE Quarterly, Viridine Literary, The Poetry Lighthouse, Quillkeepers Press, Wild Willow, Cosmic Daffodil, Azarao Literary, Nettle Literary,

Three Panels Press, The Orange Rose, Poetry in Brief, Hollow and Sky, and Wild Roof, among others. Two of her poems were shortlisted for the "2026 Rough Diamond Poetry Prize" and she has received two nominations for "Best of the Net" in 2026. Her debut poetry chapbook launches with Finishing Line Press in February of 2027. Sandra is a retired psychologist who passionately practiced the healing art of psychotherapy for over forty years and is now pursuing her dream of immersion in creative writing. Find her on Instagram @slevy43.

Cassie Lipton | Cassie Lipton is a poet and writer currently based in Washington D.C. She is a graduate of the University of Virginia and has work appearing in fifth wheel press, Folklore Review, and Somersault Magazine. She was a finalist in Garden Party Collective's 2026 Chapbook Contest, and was recently featured on the One Poem Only podcast. In 2023, she was the second place winner of the One Page Poetry Contest. She can often be found at indie shows or in the public library. @cassielipton_writes on Instagram.

Mara Lovelock | Mara Lovelock (she/her) is a poet, mom, and mindfulness coach originally from East Tennessee and residing in Northern California with her husband and son. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in PHIL LIT Journal, Spellbinder Magazine, Literary Mama, Anti-Heroin Chic and Anodyne Magazine, among others. She is the Managing Editor for Housebound Magazine and a reader for The Turning Leaf Journal and The QandA Queer Zine.

C. R. Mathew | C. R. Mathew is a forensic psychology student, thought their affinity for creative writing tends to surface at every opportunity. They tend to lean towards stories with some kind of unreality in it, as well as interesting character dynamics. They've previously been published in Canyon Voices Literary Magazine. Insta: @cassjellyfish

Bella Melardi | Bella Melardi is a poet and author. She writes about the political and personal. She attends OCADU. Find her on instagram @poetluvs.

Sydney Merrell | Sydney Merrell is a poet, artist, and cat mom residing in Kansas City, Missouri. Her poems explore themes of love and the loss of it, of life and the loss of it. Merrell's work dives deep into narratives of personal grief and a rocky relationship history that she describes in crisp, colorful imagery. Merrell has a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Kansas City Art Institute (class of 2018). She can be found on Instagram @punkwednesday_

Mara Murphy | Mara Murphy is a queer student at ASU working towards a master's in mechanical engineering. In her free time she loves to write, climb, and dance.

O. Quiet | O Quiet (they/them) is a Scottish poet based in Glasgow. Their work explores chronic illness, disability, identity and the ordinary objects that reveal more than expected. Their poetry has been exhibited in Glasgow and published online. When they are not writing, they can usually be found in a library or adding another unfinished line to their notebook. Find them on Instagram at @oquiet.poetry

Kate Reim | Kate Reim is an emerging writer and first grade teacher. She is the recipient of various awards, including a 2026 Poet and Author Fellowship from the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing, the 2026 Quinn Alexandra Scholarship through Wide Open Writing, and the 2023 Elda Wollaeger Gregory Award for Poetry from the University of Delaware. Her work has appeared on the Poetry Vessel podcast, and elsewhere. She is an active member of Sustenance, a craft-focused creative writing community. Originally from New Jersey, she now lives in Southern California. Her writing can be found on Instagram @kate_reim_writer.

CA Scarborough | CA Scarborough is a Southwest Florida poet who writes to help heal herself and live for her family. She's a yearning birdwatcher, a burning fractal, and convinced she was a cat in a past life. When not writing she's probably playing Magic: the Gathering with her husband. You can find more of C.A.'s writing on Instagram @kitschylich.writes

Nicole Shepherd | Nicole Shepherd is an Appalachian poet made up primarily of sassafras and coal dust. Her work appears in Maudlin House, Rust + Moth, Corporeal Lit, Orange Rose Literary Magazine, Free the Verse, Porridge Magazine, and elsewhere. She writes about intimacy, survival, the body, heartbreak, and the things that are hard to say. You can find her on Instagram @tenderpunkconfessional

Hayley Shucker | Hayley Shucker holds an MFA in Fiction and an MA in English. Her creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in Silly Goose Press, Stanchion, The Mersey Review, Door is a Jar, Los Angeles Review and more. She is a reader at Craft Literary Journal and runs First Chapters on Substack. She loves musical theater, cats, and baking. Find her at hayleyshucker.com and Instagram @superhayleykaystuff.

Bri Gearhart Staton | Bri Gearhart Staton (she/her) is an award-winning poet living in South Dakota. Exploring womanhood, intersections of identity, and experiences that exist in the periphery, Bri's poetry has been published by Button Poetry, The Fiddlehead, Quibble Lit, FLARE Magazine, Gather, and more. Bri is a two-time 2027 Best of the Net nominee and the winner of the inaugural Quibble Lit Audio Poem Award. Connect with her on Instagram @bristaton.writes

Carly Thompson | Carly Thompson is a New York City-based fiction and poetry writer. Her work has been featured in fiftysevenpercent literary journal, on the One Poem Only podcast, in Parallax Press, in Aphrodite Press and is forthcoming in Avangeline Review. Find her on Substack @comehither, Instagram @comehither_poetry and X @carlyt_writes.

Rachel Turney | Rachel Turney, Ed.D. (she/her) is the Writer in Residence (2026) at NKollectiv in Englewood, Colorado and runs the Trident Women's Writing Group in Boulder. She is a poetry mentor with the Association of Writers & Writing Programs. Rachel is passionate about immigrant rights, teacher support, and empowering other artists. She is a Writers' Hour prize winner and has been nominated for Best of the Net, Best

Microfiction, and Pushcart Prize. Rachel is the founder of the popular online reading series and magazine Poetry (in Brief). She is on staff at Bare Back Magazine with her monthly column, Friday Night in the Suburbs. She reads for The Los Angeles Review. Her debut poetry collection, Record Player Life (the b-side), is available with The Poetry Lighthouse. Her second poetry book, Retired Wannabe Club Kid, is out now with Parlyaree Press. Website: turneytalks.com Instagram: @turneytalks Bluesky: rachelturney

Tamizh Ponni VP | Tamizh Ponni VP is a stoic art buff who loves literature, visual arts and music. Tamizh's articles, poems, stories and paintings have been published in many anthologies, digital journals and educational blogs. Tamizh spends most of her free time painting, reading, writing articles, stories and poems, playing piano and watching documentaries/movies.

Caitríona Walsh | Caitríona Walsh is a writer, musician, and educator living in Cork, Ireland. Her work features in Poetry (in Brief) magazine, An Apple a Day anthology, Avangeline Review, Crying Heart Press zine, and One Poem Only podcast. Unfettered reclamation of the female body is the core tenet of everything she reads, writes, and teaches. You can find her on instagram @tone.down.the.blonde

Lancee Whetman | Lancee Whetman (she/her) is a human. Being. Otherwise known as "Vigilancee," she writes with keen observation. She is an Alaska-based writer, and the author of five poetry collections. While not writing, Lancee is found wandering with her dog, Howdy. Find her work on Instagram at @__ vigilancee and online at www.vigilancee.org.

Ella B. Winters | Ella B. Winters (she/they) is a social worker, researcher, and writer, living on the South-East coast of England with her partner and their sausage dog. Her poetry often explores themes of identity, memory and belonging. It has been published or is forthcoming in The Aftershock Review, Anthropocene, New Nottingham Journal, Frozen Sea, Black Iris, and elsewhere. She has been nominated for BOTN, Forward and Pushcart

prizes, and in 2026, was shortlisted in the Bridport Prize and the Artemesia Arts poetry competition.

Jo Wright | Jo Wright is a parent, poet and part time adventurer, working in the Arts in Birmingham UK. Jo has been writing poetry since her teenage years and has recently returned to writing and performance in the vibrant West Midlands poetry scene. In 2025, Jo was awarded runner-up in the National Book Tokens Poetry day competition, judged by Nikita Gill, and in 2026 three of her poems were selected for performance on the podcast, 'One Poem Only'. Jo has upcoming work in Gut Punch Literary Journal and Beyond the Veil Press's 'Rage' Anthology and can be found @joslipstick on Instagram

Claire Wong | Claire is a student and aspiring writer from Singapore. She writes poetry to find beauty in the mundane, as well as simply for the love of it. Aside from writing, Claire is always looking to pick up a new instrument, or hunting for a good bowl of noodle soup. You can find more morsels of her writing on her Instagram @clamshellpoetry.

Nicole Zwolinski | Nicole Zwolinski is the author of the full-length collection Motherhead (Finishing Line Press 2026) and two chapbooks. She was shortlisted for the Central Avenue Poetry prize and has two poems published their 2026 anthology. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Firewords Quarterly, Feminine Collective, Effemera, Gather, Nettle Literary Journal, Blood + Honey Lit, An Apple a Day, The Museum of Human Hearts, Wild Roof Journal, and more. Visit her at nicolezwolinski.com or on Instagram @nicolezwrites.

Cypher | Cypher (she/her) is a self-taught brown, queer, and working-class Tamizh diaspora writer in Canada. She is the recipient of the Gingko Prize in poetry, and her work has been featured by Button Poetry, Lit Fox Books, Wildscape Lit, OTHERSIDE, Anathema, FeelsZine and several other publications. Cypher's first full-length poetry collection, The Self is an Ocean, is out now with DarkWinter Press.