

# BLACK LIVES MATTER

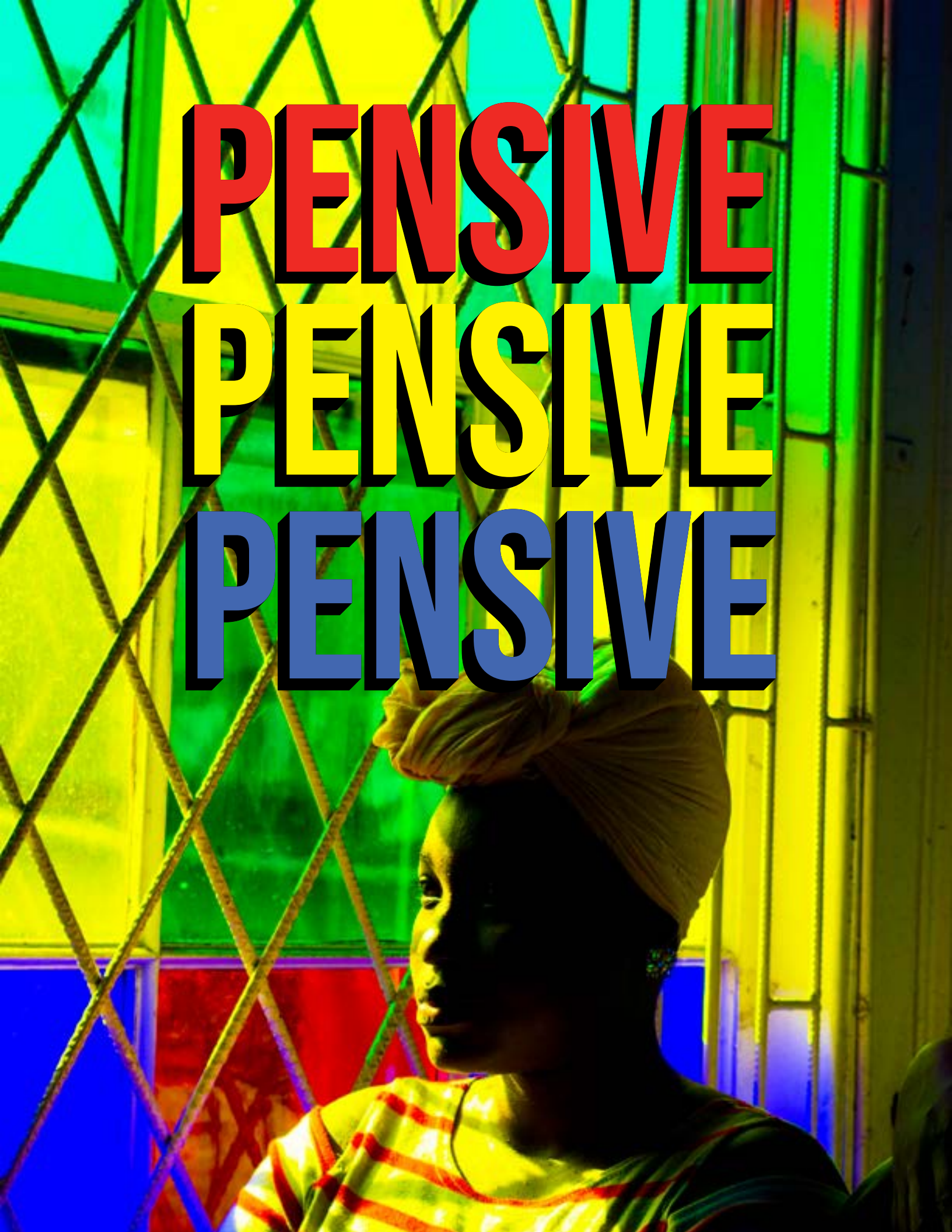
PENSIVE  
SPRING 2021



**PENSIVE**

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# **A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts**



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Spirituality & the Arts*

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Dear Readers,

Art is responsive. Issue 2 came to fruition in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising waves of white supremacy, and mass movements against the pain and disconnection that intersecting structures of oppression have caused communities all over the world.

As an interfaith journal that aspires toward radical inclusion yet emerges from an academic institution the Global North, we are increasingly aware of technological and language barriers, and the perception that certain arts - and even spiritualities - are intended for people of privilege. As we recognize that intention is not enough, we are making efforts to reach out more broadly - not only to highlight these voices from the margins, but to build a stronger, more vibrant spiritual arts community.

This Issue's design consciously reflects the turmoil of the past year, uplifting the creative breadth of the Black experience *beyond* the political: to the spiritual, emotional, familial, and personal. We reserved colors for our Black Lives Matter section, and moved the rest of the journal through themes of darkness to light, despair to hope. This issue literally centers the Black Experience, celebrating the divinity and vibrancy of Black Lives despite state violence and oppression. The placement of this section is symbolic of the fact that our society's movement towards a just future cannot be realized without the catalyzing persistence of Black joy, faith, love, and connection.

We also aimed to keep accessibility at the forefront of our design. Sometimes this meant realizing we had made a mistake, and reorganizing large portions of our design. We also made a concerted effort to provide alternative text for all of our visual pieces so that they could be enjoyed by visually impaired people as well as seeing people. This effort must be the baseline, and we welcome feedback as we strive to make our journal the best that it can be.

With all this in mind, we thank our extraordinary contributors and invite you to enjoy this special issue of *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality and the Arts*. Please share it widely with your own communities, and promote the work of these poets, writers, and artists. Most of all, please lend your own voice to the struggle for liberation in our time.

- The *Pensive* Board

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**\*BLACK LIVES MATTER SECTION\***

# 2020

*after nikki giovanni*  
*Genesis 6:1-8*

it was an unusual weather season /// bomb cyclones in the midwest  
/// 70 degrees on the east coast /// the playgrounds closed /// children  
marched for climate change /// politicians bickered like children ///  
the Green New Deal tried to sprout and /// the bees disappeared  
/// while clouds of locusts ate the sun /// guns sang from the palms  
of highschoolers /// and /// Islamophobes tried to smite out /// the  
mashallahs from devoted ones /// politicians put million-dollar band  
aids over industrial graveyards /// while the homeless starved /// and  
outdated trains stalled commuters /// while tenants froze in public  
housing /// with water bugs /// and /// professors took their students  
to bed /// students lost their homes when the schools closed /// black  
people were gunned down in the streets /// in cars /// in homes ///  
and their corpses crystallized under the heat /// of the sun's rays ///  
crosses burned /// and a virus lingered in the air that /// we had always  
shared with plants and animals and /// it turned us into the walking  
dead /// some said it was God's punishment for the wickedness in our  
world /// that we were /// his sole regret /// and then you arrived /// like  
a thunderclap /// to part the smog from a deflated sky /// and they told  
us /// we were fools for falling in love /// we were fools /// for loving so  
loudly /// when /// a kiss could kill /// but we removed our masks /// and  
opened our eyes to see /// it was /// our love that cleaned /// the grief  
from our hearts and /// the blood from our streets and /// it beckoned  
us to rebuild /// the garden of eden /// outside

**KESI AUGUSTINE**



**To anticipate the  
worst is to contribute  
towards its realization.**

**YAHIA LABABIDI**



Stay happy  
forever...





*words you've written for me to see...*

**MIRZA NAYEEM AHMED**



## **After Reading Fatimah Asghar's Ghazal, "WWE"**

If you ask around you find that the immigrant grandparents of the 1950's loved watching wrestling. I was discussing Fatimah Asghar's spell-binding poem in relation to Jacob, you know, wrestling, and also to how Rebecca steals the house gods and co-opts misogyny to take control, as Asghar's poem does, and everyone started chiming in about their own grandparents, how, when still learning the language, they would watch Channel 5 on Fridays, sitting up-close to the t.v., my husband's grandfather, for instance, leaning forward, adamant, and shouting "C'mon! Hit em" -- with that Yiddish inflection which sapped the might from it-- because such fighting was as foreign to him as The King's English--and it started to make sense, as one person said, because no language skills were involved, and from the comfort of their American couch they believed the matches were authentic-and right, how brute force threw one hulk to the mat with a definitively final thwack, then as the presumed victor gloated to the crowd the flattened fellow rose with the revenge of the slighted, and good, flinging his opponent clear across the ring. Best, at the bell, both walked away, like in cartoons, the circle of stars they were seeing just fading into a dusty cloud above them. Which reminded me of the other mythical cloud, hovering overhead until the promised land. Saying just walk on.

**JESSICA GREENBAUM**

## Poetry Dialogue - *szansa*

"Dialogue Among Civilizations"  
is on.

Names. Faces.

My face next to the microphone.

My mother's name—

I am reading her poem.

One, two...at the count of five  
the words come:

### *A Chance*

*To live*

*I need, like air*

*human kindness...*

I translate her words, try their English  
counterparts for feelings, hues, sounds,

move them across the page,  
across the ocean.

In my poems I go to the USA,  
Mexico, Sri Lanka, Poland.

A girl dancing in a swirl of globes,  
I am tasting her verses, and mine,

in the tongue she gave me,  
in the space of a chance—*szansa*.



*Poem by Lidia Kosk in Polish*

### **Szansa**

Do życia, jak powietrze,  
potrzebna mi międzyludzka  
życzliwość  
przestrzeń  
barwy i zapachy świata

Muszę uciekać przed  
zgiełkiem  
stęchłą  
niszczącą złością

Dopóki jest dokąd wracać  
istnieje szansa

*English translation of Lidia Kosk's poem  
"Szansa" by Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka*

### **A Chance**

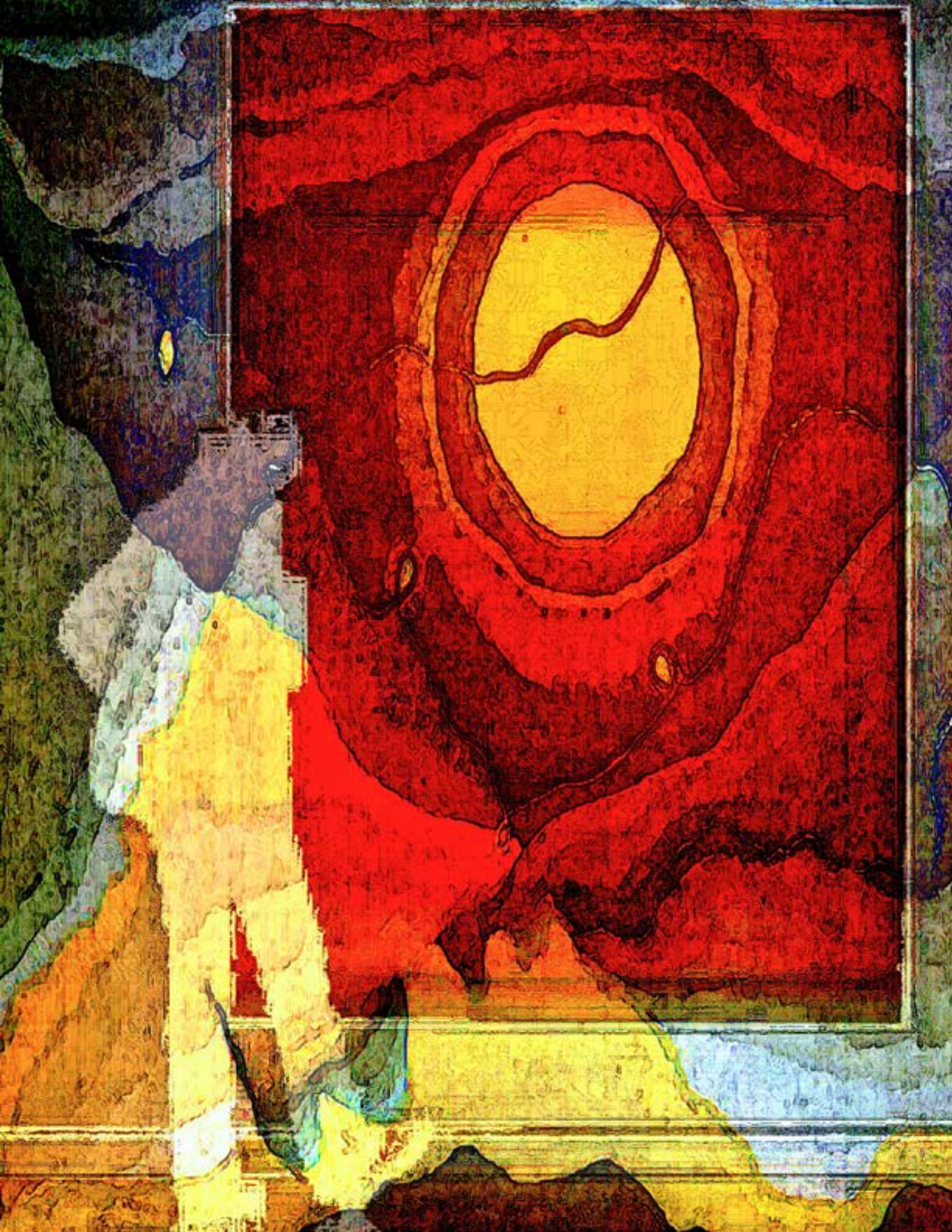
To live  
I need, like air  
human kindness  
space  
color and fragrance of the world

I run away from  
jarring noise  
mustiness  
damaging anger

As long as there is a place for my return  
I have a chance

**LIDIA KOSK** translated by  
**DANUTA E. KOSK-KOSICKA**









*Deja vu Series 7*

**ALEX NODOPAKA**

Home/world

*green curtains,* I think, would liven up the room.  
I Google, *green leafy curtains.*

and pastels and vibrant tones, ex  
eruptions of color form in squares on my screen. infinity. infinity  
of choices.

I am building a nest. I want my home to resemble a forest. someth  
I wonder, though, if there can be any  
real escape from us.

\*

green leaves wind around the window panes— they rustle th  
blocking out my neighbor's motion-sensing light.

\*

after Twitter makes excuses for the national gun fetish, or the f  
pussy-grabber quote circles again,  
I look up fluffy bedspreads. I look up fluffy comforters. I want  
to be comforted. the economy does not comfort me. my ability to buy t  
doesn't do it.

there's this inability to distract myself. no matter wh  
it leaks in, see.

it leaks in a cold draft, chilling.

\*

the headline says the oceans are warming at the rate of five atomi  
being dropped in every second.

it took me a second  
to Google this: *oceans warming, five atomic bombs.*  
I had hoped that it might be per year.



uberant, verdant,

ing un-human.

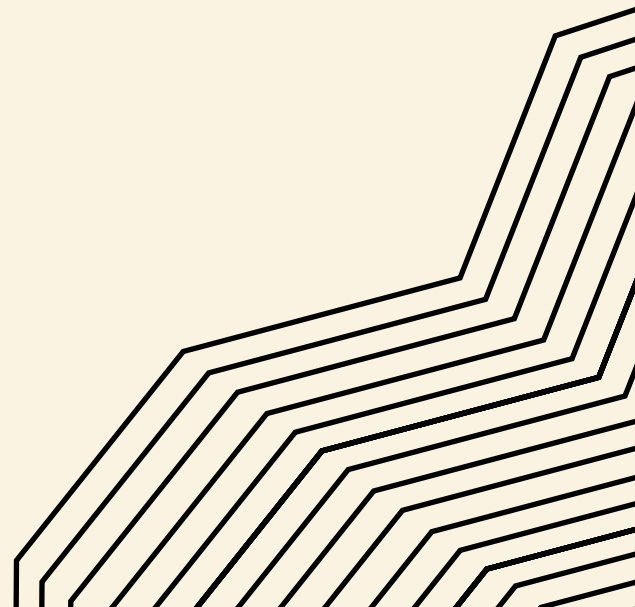
here,

amous

hings

that the thread count,

c bombs



The company ships me my new bathrobe                      in two easy days.  
172,800 seconds.

*it's too hot*, I say                      when the pink fabric comes.  
it's actually too—                      *it's too hot*.

\*

vines part and eyes glimmer out from shadowed  
the twinkle lights we've strung there  
flicker and go out.

\*

it will not save me. it will not save me. this cutely-patterned bedsheet. I ask  
too much of it.                      ask it to be a shield.                      meanwhile, a gunman opens fire  
in my hometown.                      I text five friends and all say,  
*which shooting do you mean?*                      *you know,*                      *there were two to*

\*

I cannot do anything                      for creatures in the ocean.                      the one  
the price that's paid for planetary procrastination.                      the price exacted for  
the almighty twiddling of thumbs.

\*

out the window, something hairy,  
someone growling with long fangs—  
a beast from the last mass extinction  
scratches at my door.  
I slide the glass pane open  
and offer him an apple.  
*it's local,*                      I say.

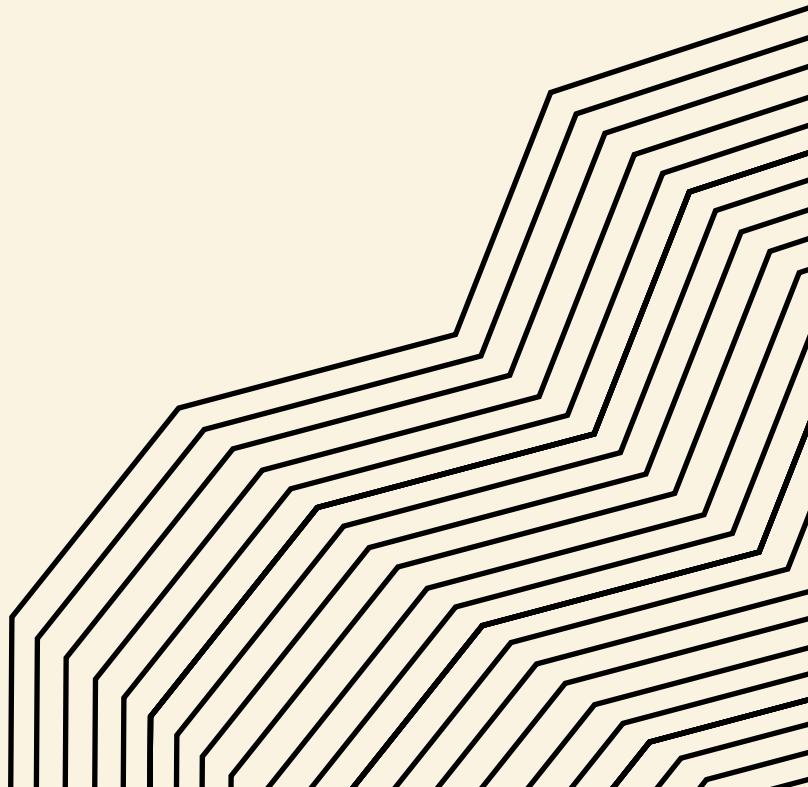
l gardens.

e

*day.*

es right now,  
denial.

*I'm so sorry.*



\*

I cannot go and rescue the mother orangutan who swats at bulldozers  
while clinging to a tree. a leafless tree, shorn like Aslan.  
the system needs to catch up. needs to catch on. I donate  
and close the browser tab.

what else can I do?

\*

my cat has this register she goes to when she's hungry. a higher voice  
a chirping trill she uses to work me.  
they say domesticated cats learned to mimic toddlers to access human  
to feed.  
this small voice cries in the universe  
and stares me

how wonderful it is, then,  
to feed her.

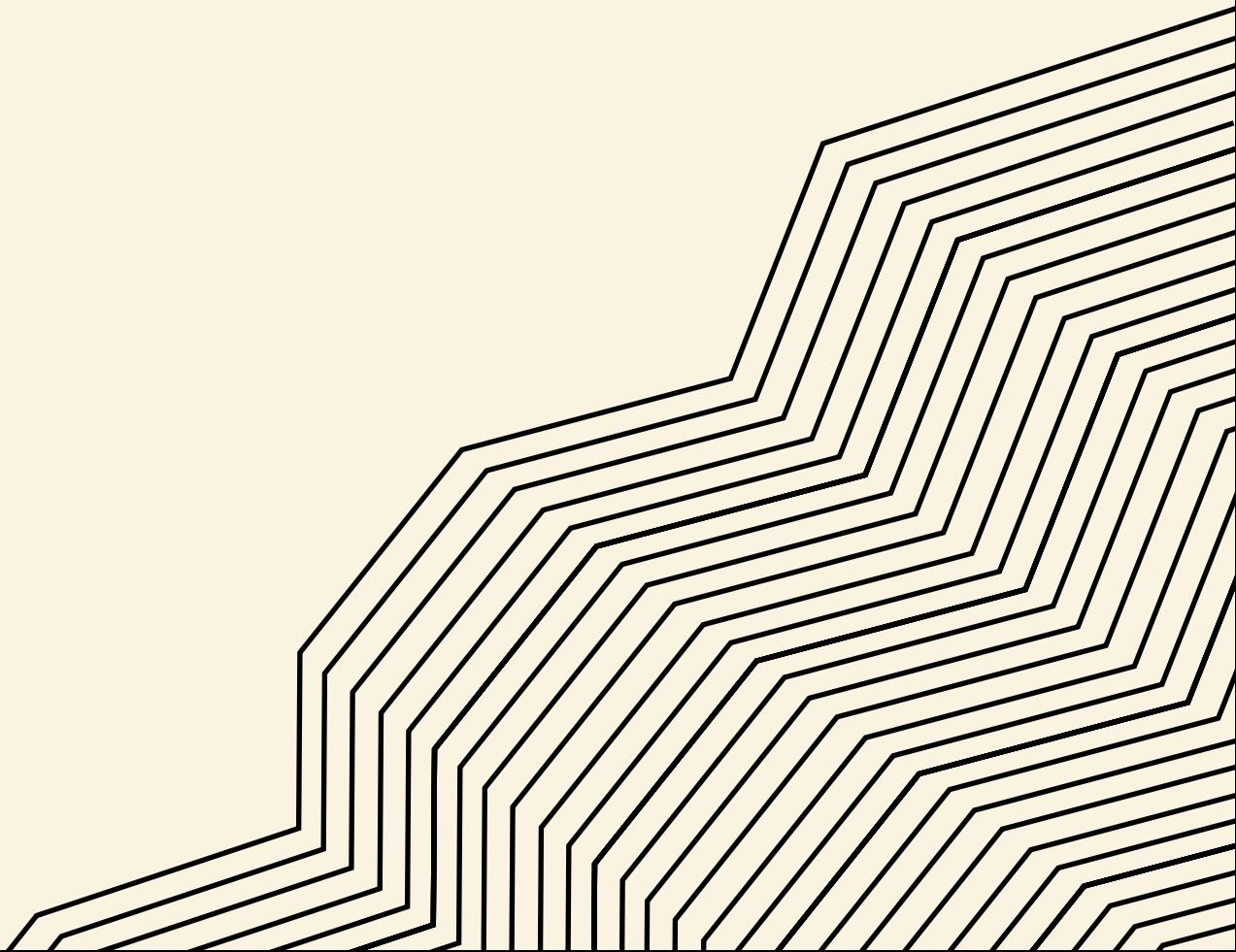


e to a charity

ce,

instincts

right in the eye.  
right in the eye.



# Caesura

It took me decades to know  
the deepest grief - sorrow  
for the land trees extend like fingers  
rooting for breathing space.  
It took my body's river forever  
to end its flow and be still.  
I let my tongue keep the world  
in shape, my tongue anger whips  
into horses, my tongue streaming  
from my mouth's cave echoes  
locating hope.

Now I stand before an empty  
sky, I stand like an arm weary  
of the clenched fish, speechless  
as the dead lion shot in the head,  
quiet as the question mark  
after injustice, impunity and insanity  
drag adjectives into corners, carrying  
the sentence out before the verdict,  
Mother Earth reduced into a land  
of tears. I face a wall.

This is where I turn,  
retrace  
my footsteps,  
be the story  
myself  
that doesn't end  
with a period

# JONEL ABELLANOSA

## Holding

Who would want to be  
the unemployed clothespin  
the one with the resentful spring  
and sad wood face!

I want to hold something,  
keep it from falling to the ground,  
root for it to dry,  
feel like a proud mother  
when I watch what I held  
so dearly  
safe in a basket,

knowing I had  
at least a bit to do  
with the way in which  
someone will wear it,  
sleep between two siblings  
or loudly blow their nose  
into its freshness,

to treat them with the love  
you'd treat family members—  
the ones you like, anyway.

JUAN PABLO MOBILI



**Entwined**

Cats, she had come to realize, were wildflowers that germinated where posies could never expect to thrive. Each kitten in their litters dispersed to take up separate and solitary lives like dandelion puffs wished away on a hopeful breath.

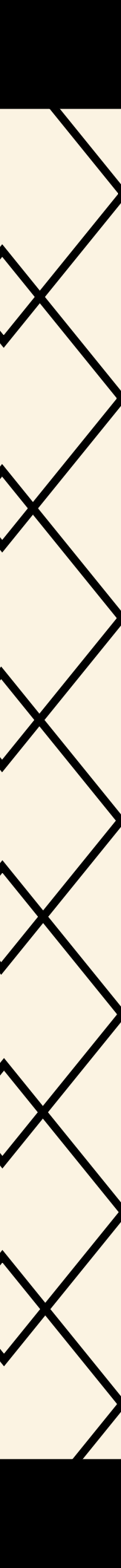
The calico that appeared in Regina's life must have been one of those wilding seeds. For an entire week, the half-starved stalker crouched beneath the car to examine her. Finally, finally, it concluded that she could be trusted.

Once the decision had been made, on a Monday at that, the cat emerged from its hiding place. Its skittery, pouncing gait signaled that, on some level, it doubted its own wisdom. Action was required before questions crushed its will.

The cat's sudden charge startled Regina, but only for a moment. Then the pair recognized each other for what they were—a lonely, less exotic cousin of the panther, and a less lonely yet equally unmoored woman. She, however, had no intention of interrogating her life with the brutal, unblinking focus of a stray.

The cat twined itself between Regina's legs, and Regina allowed it to entwine. She assumed that their pact was for occasional calico sightings around the neighborhood and frequent, although not daily, greetings. Instead, their life together had already begun.

When she arrived home that evening, the cat darted out from beneath the azalea and headed toward her car. She stepped from the vehicle wearing the gritty weariness her job sprinkled over her like false fairy dust. Then her ankle was caressed by fur that carried the coolness of shade. The hours she had spent anticipating that touch were fulfilled.



She shook the bag of kibble bought during her cruelly short lunch break. The cat had never been cared for in that way and did not understand the promise or the bribe. Still, the calico wove between Regina's sensibly heeled shoes all the way to the porch.

Once the door had been pushed open, the cat let itself in. It settled on the sofa as fluidly as if linking its past to a predestined future. Regina did not speak. Their relationship required no ceremony, and words would have cheapened their first hours.

During the weeks that followed, the foundling filled out as quickly as kibble disappeared from the bag. Six months in, it had grown to the average size of the average housecat. Its muscles honed a lithe grace despite never—when Regina was around, anyway—performing anything more taxing than leaping onto the counter.

Their evenings together gained a rhythm that soothed them both. The bedtime ritual never failed to make Regina smile. The cat flung itself atop the bed only to freeze as if the coverlet would shatter like a skim of winter ice. Once convinced of the quilt's stability, the calico settled beside her with all the malaise a feline might muster.

How alike we are, she thought while scrubbing the arch of its neck. We have become skittish in a world that cannot recognize how simple bliss can be.

Despite the reliable cycle of daily activities, the cat never ceased its surveillance. From room to room it pursued its mistress, as eager as a she-goat hoping to be milked. For hours it lounged in the den with her. Regina glanced up from her computer to find that the cat had just shut its eyes or had looked away moments before or, most likely, was pretending it never bothered to study her in the first place.

It was nice, she realized, and comforting to have someone care for you or about you. Even if that someone was not human. Then she would resume her digital life until it was time to eat dinner with the calico purring beneath the table.

At night it was just the two of them. With Regina curled around a book and the cat curled atop a pillow, they drowsed until slumber brought them dreams of each other. Perhaps the darkness of the room, a natural environment for the cat, communed with the lulling dusk that sparked Regina's hopes and yes, even her fears.

Then came the bad time, the time of illness.


So many maladies could be chronic or slow-footed or, like the cat, might spend eons circling before a fatal pounce. Many symptoms could be subdued or at least engaged in mock combat through alternative medicine.

The people in Regina's circle, as much as anyone's well-wishing cohorts might, thrived in that mystical realm. They dipped into folksy cures to dry up a neighbor's diarrhea or soothe a coworker's colic. Teas, tinctures, and toddy recipes were exchanged like bonbons.

Cancer forestalled even this comfort. It was the disease of Puritans, staunch and reticent, utterly resistant to anything doctors might offer. The whisper of its name rocked people back. They deflated like bantam roosters outwitted by a fox; they chirped as giddily as chicks in a brooding pen as they scratched about hoping to unearth the right words.

Perhaps because animals had no use for words, the calico became her truest friend. It did not stray during the long days spent in bed with a pan to catch the vomit. It did not streak away when neighbors took turns cleaning the house and helping Regina to the toilet and, whenever she felt able to eat, cooking a bland gruel for her to pick at.





Hours-long appointments and the dizzyingly long words in medical articles and the upheaval of her home kept her, at first, too busy to fear. The terror arose when she realized, with the dreamy dimness of an approaching night, that the chemicals were not working. They would never work, and no amount of suffering heaped upon that altar would yield a miracle.

For a time—unbearably short considering the sacrifices she would have made to regain an average lifespan, and unbearably long with the curse that is chemo—she continued with the treatment. For a time, she was unwilling to reject even the poor placebo called hope.

Medical journals claimed that a placebo given with the patient's full knowledge of its ineffectiveness produced more healing than nothing at all. She began to weigh that knowledge against the fatigue that swallowed even simple pleasures like reading. She balanced infection and anemia against the chance for more time.

Organ damage, nerve pain, brain fog...the list seemed endless. Every side effect demanded more. Greater grit, stronger fortitude, and entirely inhuman tolerance for inhumane consequences. Because the finish line was so final, she felt obligated to reject doing nothing in favor of doing something.

And yet *nothing* described precisely what the cat had done its entire life. It had appeared exactly when she had needed a companion. With feline ease, the calico had appended itself to her life. She had almost forgotten that such seamless simplicity was possible.

Perhaps simplicity was the medicine she needed most. Even if doing nothing caused her friends to wince and turn away. Even if doing nothing helped less than a placebo. With a mind broken by suffering and fuzzy from fatigue, she imagined herself tucked beneath the azalea.

The calico continued with its surveillance, but Regina took this to be in the feline nature. She thought no more of the auditing, and dedicated her attention to the waning number of her days. She was not terribly young, but neither was she old. In any case, she did not wish to die.

And yet there she lay, dying as busily with appointments and treatments and visitations as the cat was busily engaged in nothing much at all. Other than carefully appraising the comforter, it occasionally skimmed over to the food bowl for a brief and crispy repast.

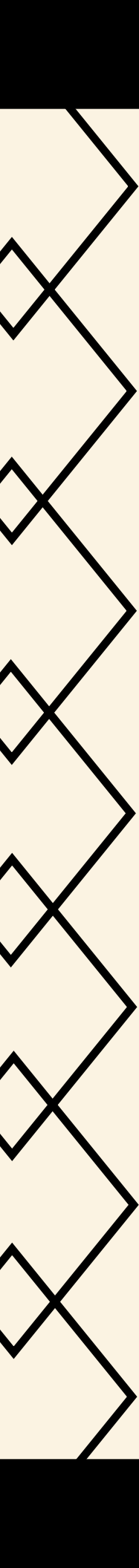
Whenever the calico carried back the fragrance of compressed liver, Regina inhaled the scent as if feasting. The only odor that did not make her nauseous was that of kibble. Although at times she imagined how easily the pellets would crumble between her molars, she was content to allow the calico to eat on her behalf.

She had eaten so little for so long that her ribs were fishtails. Her bones chaffed even atop the wizardry of the remember-me foam mattress and the architecture of pillows engineered to support the bedridden. Only ferocious fur quilted her joints, only a primal purr massaged her muscles.

Then the cat offered something more. Enveloped in a miasma of desiccated tuna, with eyes slitted in confident satisfaction at its own existence, the calico traded its earthbound tortoiseshell spots for rainbow hues.

Regina saw the impossible indigo and orange patches appear against an impossibly beautiful sky-blue fur. The hitch of her breath proved that her eyes were not dreaming. Her mind was not hallucinating, and she had not fallen prey to the drugs flowing through her veins.

The miracle was hers alone. A dying patient, she knew, might see things the healthy could not. Only during the journey between the incessant activity of living and the hushed stasis of death could



human eyes discover the hidden currents. And so she kept her peace even as the hospice nurse sponged her limbs.

The rainbow calico continued to purr no matter how briskly the comforter was snapped. Who will take care of you when I am gone? she wondered. The cat turned its half-lidded, golden eyes toward her as if her kindness, which arose in the midst of her intimate and personal tragedy, radiated like a fireplace.

After the nurse left, Regina's nausea built and bile threatened to rise. The rainbow calico flicked its tail and drowsed, content to be the focus of attention. Watching its breath, matching her inhale to its own, she marked the moment when the calico ceased its constant yet somehow miraculous non-doing and began to do something more.

As the cat rolled its head and returned her gaze, the billowing nausea shifted. Then the calico came to its feet and disappeared under the bed. Regina heard it huffing away, heaving and choking until a chunk of the sickness was expelled.

The mass within her shrank. The sickness, for so long immune to toxic chemicals and radiation, had become a bezoar. The rainbow calico was taking on her cancer.

Could it be true? Her companion was so small compared to her much larger body, and would live so few years compared to her flustered, rushing longevity. Could a cat remove, piece by piece, the darkness that had for so long consumed her?

The calico returned to her side. The roiling clouds shifted and the cat retreated a second time. As the afternoon wore on, it shuttled from bed to floor, removing her suffering a bellyful at a time.

Regina's sight blurred with panicked tears. She did not wish for the calico to die, and yet she desperately wanted to live. Besides, the cat claimed its own mastery. It had exercised the right to act the entire time they'd been together.

She allowed the calico to twine throughout her system. The silky rainbow brushed against every cell. She felt warmth in the parts of her that had grown numb and, where her flesh had broiled under radiation's silent beams, a cooling swatch of shadow.

Finally, finally, dusk built its daily bridge between light and dark, between activity and rest. The transitions linked together in a way that could be spied by those who dared. Finally, the work was done.

The rainbow faded away. The glories unearthed by creatures who surveil from the oleander was gone. It was the nature of rainbows and miracles to dwindle. For the moment, though, a calico sheltered beneath her arm, silkiness swaddled her heart, and a miracle twined around her soul.









*Reincarnation*

MICHELLE SAKHAI

**CELIA LISSET ALVAREZ**

**Do Please at Least Consider Giving Up**  
*for Rosa and Leonardo*

Even now, even as your fingertips  
crawl closer and closer to the  
fine gray hairs on my wrist, as  
your animal static brings my  
old-fashioned wind-up watch to  
a trembling stop, even now  
it is not too late.

When we first noticed  
that the bread crumbs led to nowhere,  
that, in fact, we had got into the habit  
of wolfishness ourselves,  
we had the chance then.  
Then we could have said:  
“Ah, love, let us be true.”  
But now, now the books  
are packed up on a shelf we cannot reach.

No, my love, let us relent.  
Let us pay this check and go,  
let the credits roll. Let us  
spare ourselves the indignity of passion  
at this late a stage, the blushing  
wrinkles, the creaking knees  
and calloused elbows. Let us go,  
straightbacked as we can manage,  
down the widest corridor, your token  
palm on the small of my small back.  
Let us go, content still to be  
tailored and respectable old characters,  
he who worked hard and she who  
loved well. Let us go, and wrap ourselves  
in blankets made of wool, and  
wait for snow. Let us go.

## Mama's Laughter

Mama's laughter kept away dragonflies. pushed her head back, shook hard her slim shoulders, flooded over my soft childhood laughter, and made all seem light. She kept on interrupting my dreams through bright, Alaskan, summer nights. Magnetized men to her easy ways. Gut tight laugh, rat-a-tat-tat, Howitzer laugh like we all have in this family. Campfire beer toasting August hippies. No, stay. Interwoven hours in Shangri-la. Her gauzy Raja top blows in Indian breeze. "My titties are way too small to offend anyone," she says as she bends and shows her smooth stomach, stretch marks showing on bronze between her hanging nipples on her fleshy bumps. The earth delights in feeling her bare feet, long, copper hair. Hookah pipe on jeansy knees. Michael Cliff Ted Dave Sister Mama me. Six people take off a round hookah pipe. Toking, cooking corn, potato, fresh trout. Want some, honey? Just say yes: be polite. People come and go with baggies or foil pouches. Free love, free wishes through the night. Utopian trailer park groupies sing: of Michael's guitar and vocals, sweet Kumbayah, and we, poking sticks in fire ring—My lord, Kum Ba Yah. Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Mama's banjo. Twanging its new, perfect timber. Like Great Grandpa blew the mouth organ, we got the music. Fire sparks, cracks blue amber until it's pitch dark for a few brief hours. And we sleep, mumbling Cat Stevens, Oh very young, what will you leave us this time?

CYNTHIA STEELE

**In the same way that love is regenerative medicine,  
hate is a degenerative disease.**

**Love has many faces—righteous indignation is one.**

**Only love can heal the wounds of love.**

**YAHIA LABABIDI**



**MAYA LITAUER CHAN**

**If I Am Made of Bone**

I have never been good  
at letting go.

I hold my ghosts close like  
children I forgot to bear.  
They wallow in my small womb  
wondering when this winter will thaw.

Perhaps the only way I know  
how to be a lover  
is to become a child.

There is only so much  
mending I can do.  
The rest comes from believing  
I, too, can heal.  
From watching the sky grow lighter  
as winter lifts and clouds  
streak my face,  
daring yet quiet.

The heartbreak is that winter always  
comes.  
I will always long for another  
body which has been baked  
long enough in sun,  
which doesn't need to hurt so much  
in order to finally  
rise from the floor like  
mist from a lake.

The body is not forever,  
yet I find it so hard to feel my blood  
welling up in every chamber, including  
my throat which stays  
unmoving though I place my thin  
body in the wind.

if I am made of bone  
it is only to say  
to my great grandchildren  
I, too, was here  
I, too, have suffered.

Yet I find no comfort in a family  
which has poured all its pain  
into my own bone-white spine and left me  
stumbling like a child over the ground.

I need a mother,  
perhaps more than my own,  
to stroke my hair when I nightly  
disappear,  
to tell me there are other  
ways to be strong  
than holding my breath  
like eggshells, broken  
in my lungs.

Previously Published in *About Place*

## Sweeping

*The Sikhs' magnificent Harmandir, or Golden Temple, is the centrepiece of the temple complex in the holy city of Amritsar.*

Auntie  
Respected, rich  
Humbles herself

Auntie  
Knowing what pride precedes  
Hitches her sari above her feet

Auntie  
A forward thinking lady  
Descends the stairs backwards

Slowly

Clears her mind  
Cleans God's house  
For the pious  
For the tourists  
For the peasants who spend their lives  
Swallowing dust

Not born to be a cleaner  
She sweeps  
Bare-handed  
Right to left  
Right to left  
Gathering tiny piles  
Of unholy dust

Each movement  
Physically  
A speck of dirt

Each movement  
Spiritually  
A broadstroke golden universe  
Of love and hope

Sweeping  
Unkind thoughts  
Sweeping  
Everyday sins  
Sweeping  
The one thing  
No rug is big enough to cover

Outside  
Sweet water reflects  
Ten heavenly smiles  
Nanak to Gobind

Inside  
The eleventh  
Pauses its reading  
And bookmarks  
The purity  
Flowing in and out  
Of four open doors

**ANDY CONNER**

## Accident of Birth

It was the smell of his skin  
and the unfiltered Camels in the pocket  
of his starched white shirt  
as I burrowed into the safest place on earth.

It was the introduction to Fenway and the Garden  
and being at Yankee Stadium  
for the '58 Series and his reassurance,  
when my brother teased me,  
that the Yankees wouldn't come back  
from 3 games to 1 and it didn't matter when they  
did.

It was the stories he told me on my bed at night  
about the war, his ship and his fear and how  
he seemed to tell them only to me.  
And how he would check my closet without  
making me feel bad for asking.

It was getting up at six for daily mass in Lent;  
the awful feeling of the cold and dark but  
also a time alone with him,  
away from my mother's voice.



Even with the arguments about the unjust war  
that could have killed me

even with his votes for Nixon and Ford  
and the pinky ring he started to wear in his fifties  
even with his absent Saturday nights  
when I had to comfort my weeping mother

even with his complaints about welfare cheats  
while he worked under the table for the men  
he was supposed to investigate

even though he wouldn't sell the house  
to a black family  
because it wouldn't be fair to the neighbors;

I couldn't help myself.

**JAMES HANNON**



**MICHELLE SAKHAI**

*New Love*

## Without

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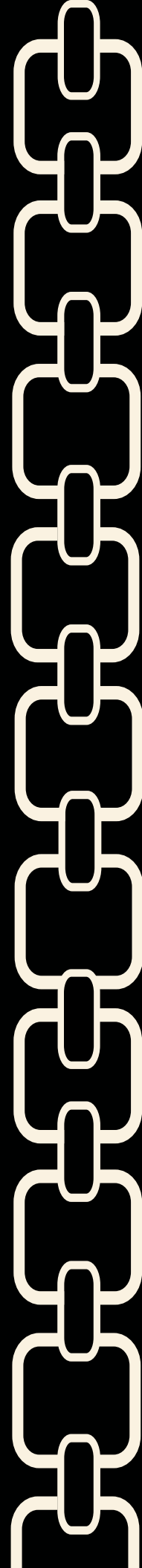
*This world is the closed door. It is a barrier, and at the same time it is the passage-way.*

—Simone Weil

My family has joined the Opels at their farm where they raise Cornish Crosses, large broilers. The fathers have set up operations by the henhouse: two iron pots of water kept at a boil for scalding the fresh carcasses, a long table for defeathering once the scald has loosened the feather shafts. The fathers slaughter behind the barn. They string up the clucking hens by their feet and cut off their heads swiftly with the axe—I'm not exactly sure how they maneuver it—and we kids, from our stations at the table, hear the headless bodies flap and swing and fling blood all over the men's shirtfronts and boots. A few of the heads bounce into our view, the thin eyelid taking time to slide closed. Once motionless, the bodies are eased into the boiling water and then my older brothers pull them onto the long table where we pluck them clean, the nude steaming birds, then plunge them into buckets of ice. Beside me at the table, Matthew's face is round and red over the task. He says little, he presses on a naked broiler's stomach and squeezes out the remaining air in her lungs in a final squawk, a big ugly voice repeating with each push in a stutter. It's awful. He is forever a

boy I am supposed to love. We eat alongside each other at Beatty Church potluck meals, we sit side by side in the choir and sing the Beatitudes from the King James, *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*, Matthew in his dreadful tenor. One day, he will be the rural West Virginia boy I did not marry. After today, we will smell like raw denuded breast for so long.

Elizabeth Opel and I, who weary quickly of the hard pulling of stubborn feathers, are charged with carrying the bodies to the canners, to our mothers. The bodies are upended, we clutch their feet, and the inches are few between the headless necks and the rye grass nuggeted with cold cow manure. I hold a pair of scaly bound feet in each hand as I cross the pasture from the butchering table to the basement kitchen, and I feel, without having the words for it, this dangerous intimacy. I feel gravity in the hens hanging from my hands. I move as quickly as I can through the field, Elizabeth falling behind. I still hear the hen's big voice and I round the corner to the basement door propped open and there are the mothers on the concrete floor with a drain somewhere that makes all the room tilt slightly inward. I search out my mother's face, always a face I feed on just as I fed on her milk, as I fed on her blood-food for nine months. I stand at the open door with a cold carcass in each hand watching the mothers at the stove with the pressure canners and pots and mason jars in the sink, vats of ice, vats of talk, ring lids lined up and ready. Their hands work automatically, they take my burdens without a word, and begin to turn the dead things toward a fate of buttered dish or casserole or tender barbecue. All this intricacy, all the intimate viaducts



of feeding swirl toward the floor drain with a violent quiet. I look for the hidden drain, I see blood on my shoes. I spin around as Elizabeth arrives, and run back to where Matthew will be waiting for me.

\* \* \*

Tonight I return to Simone Weil, a French philosopher of the twentieth century. Some people that you read neither heal nor give solace. They disturb, a fresh slap of cold air through the window when you crawl at midnight to the desk longing for its force of recognition. And once there, beneath the window, you notice it's raining and the rain is slanting in. You smell your lover on you and you smell animal, all body and fur, no ideas, as you unfurl from sleep. A sense of Weil's saintliness dampens your whole self awake, the way the rain darkens the sill, and then you smell only wet wood, picturing her there where you sit, her mind lush and horribly electric in the dark. You picture her notebooks stacked too near the window, getting soggy, the ink running, indecipherable. As if she wants to disappear.

I return to Weil when I remember to wonder how to love without devouring, how to give without harming, how to hold disquieting opposites in the head and abide the contradictions with something like calm. Over the years I've copied out passages from her notebooks she left in the care of Gustave Thibon, the farmer-philosopher who did not respect her wish that he cannibalize her ideas, remove her name as author, and present her thoughts as his own. My copybook is studded with gems attributed rightly to SW, pried out of texts groped for whenever my big shiny life called for them—I the little tornado, the twenty-two-year-old, for instance, in the center of a stack

of books, drawn at first glance to Weil's extremity because I was deathly afraid of acquiescing—to what or to whom, I couldn't say. The brightness of her asceticism thrilled me.

Eating—devouring—is a central metaphor in her notebooks, pulled toward God as she was by George Herbert's poem "Love" that ends with the lines: "*You must sit down,*" says Love, "*and taste my meat.*" / *So I did sit and eat.* And, uncomfortably, eating is a central metaphor in her strict life—a stubborn five-year-old refusing sugar because soldiers on the front lines of World War I went without, a thirty-four-year-old philosopher starving herself to death, refusing to eat more than her French countrymen on rations and so, in 1943, the tuberculosis killed her. Eating is intimacy, devouring is both union with and destruction of what you devour. For Weil this is the crux of ethics and love.

What would she think of the headless hen in my hand, the hen's big voice? Maybe she would interpret the butchering scene as a pageant of what we often do in loving: behead, denude, plunge, carry like a burden, send to soup and ingest, feed on and feed on. She warned against the violent potential in possessing lover and friend for your own sustenance. The hen's body was a metaphor introduced early to the muscle-memory in my arms, my own warning against such devouring.

It's possible Simone Weil was crazy. She was surely severe and baffling—a Jew who some say hated her Jewishness, a Catholic who refused the sacraments with her heels dug in on behalf of all those outside the fold. A self-denigrating woman in long black capes that hid her hips. A brilliant girl who blazed with such frustration over not being as brilliant a mathematician as her brother that she wanted to die, not out of envy of the glory but out of envy of the access he must have had to truth. She remains a question mark to me mostly, but there's no doubt of one thing: her



body was involved with her mind. Her ideas animated her flesh. You see it when she took leave of her teaching post to work the power press at Alsthom Electrical Works in Paris, then to work a milling machine, a stamping press, to feel the factory for a year in her bones and migrainous head. You see it when she rushed to the front of the Spanish Civil War; when she felt, inexplicably, a desire to pray and to do so by kneeling, for what point is there to prayer without bending the body to it?; when she picked grapes with laborers and muttered over and over the Our Father (*the very first words tear my thoughts from my body*); when she demonstrated in the streets with the unemployed and marched with the miners; when she returned to teaching the shy girls with undisciplined thoughts and poor writing skills who helped her fix her misbuttoned sweater. She was a metaphysician who dealt in the physical, nothing mere academic exercise, always zeroing in on the base level of love. So it makes sense she would cultivate an ethic themed by morsel and bread and meat—the stuff of the body.

But it's possible she was crazy. And it's true she starved herself, really, taking renunciation to suicidal extreme. So why return to such a woman, her radioactive bones showing up through her skin? Because in my everyday life I am trying to love again after failing miserably at it, and I also need to live more responsibly in the world, more generously. But, beyond that, there is an attraction difficult to articulate. I come to her because her aggressive tearing-down of her own ego—her refusal to let it get fat off of the lives of others—inserts a scratchy interruptive sound into the hum of self-satisfaction buzzing around us. There is the publication credit, the slideshow at the college where I teach showing our ranking in *US News & World Report*, there is the quick wit on NPR and the ironic internet meme, there is

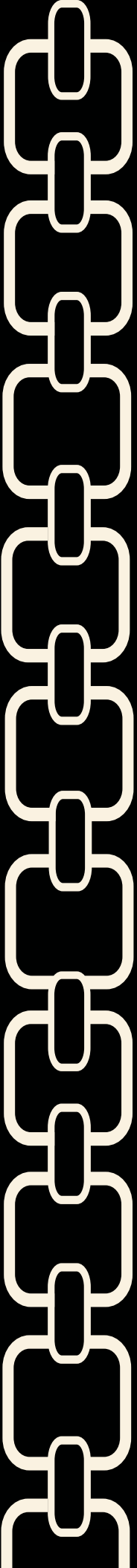
the sense we are doing well for ourselves and ought to be full of congratulation as we churn out reports on increased enrollment, outcomes met, lives lived successfully and with the appropriate degree of self-awareness. And then there is Simone.

She is there peeling back layers to expose a ravenousness. There is her desire to revoke her very name, there is the transmogrification of her body into bread and meat to be scattered and scraped out the train window to anonymous vine harvesters to whom she may as well have said—Take my notebooks, I am dying—and the workers make their automatic wave to the passing train and then begin, slowly, to gather her in.

\* \* \*

The first essay of hers I ever read was “Come with Me.” My sister Miss had read it in college and had made me a grainy photocopy from *The Simone Weil Reader*, and I was in love with Miss’s experience of college. The essay is Weil’s strange two-page encounter with Christ: *At times he would fall silent, take some bread from a cupboard, and we would share it. This bread really had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again.* In this same vision, Christ shockingly throws her out onto the stairs of the garret and she wanders the streets trying to gain entry again until she realizes she belongs elsewhere—maybe in a prison cell, she says, or in a suburban house full of knick-knacks. Anywhere but in the garret. And all of her life she seemed to live on that taste, as if to say: Don’t waste time on hunger that is not hunger, on bread that is not bread.

When I graduated college and went to work in DC as a stipend volunteer with other fervent volunteers, I got hold of Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*. I began my copybook then, in a season of my



life when saintliness seemed pragmatic. Late into the night, I typed up passages from the book on a typewriter, annoying Mark who was trying to sleep across the hall because he'd had a long day at the clinic for the homeless. Mark was a caseworker, and I taught high school dropouts. I taped the notes above the desk. *SW: To be only an intermediary between the uncultivated ground and the plowed field, between the data of a problem and the solution, between the blank page and the poem, between the starving beggar and the beggar who has been fed.* Everything in her felt elemental, pungent, poker-hot—it came down to food and feeding, food and love, meat and carnality, what else was there? (I also kissed someone for the first time around then, and kissed three others in the course of a few short months, all of them tasting different.)

Her basic posture seemed to me one of renunciation, of fasting to purify love and to practice not taking bites out of others for your own sustenance. So, I fasted during my volunteer years, a newly minted pacifist during the Iraq War, shortly after the towers went down; I lived with Mennonites who were cradle pacifists. A fast meant letting loose of the material world for a moment so as to make a more vertical reach possible, my hands unoccupied by our communal pots and pans. Ascetic practices all seem to mean saying no in order to say yes. A fast could clarify hunger, reify the nature of bread, give you the chance to thin the overgrown heart.

Every Wednesday my friend Jessica and I stuck only to hot tea, juices, and water, and we would pray. No coffee even. At work, I found an old nametag and wrote *Pray for*

*Peace* on the back and pinned it earnestly to my shirt. I read up on Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Elie Wiesel. I read up on the word itself, *fasting*, which comes from the idea of *holding fast*, as in *keeping* or *observing*. The Greek version translates *emptiness of food*; in Arabic it might have originally meant *to stand still*. People fast to atone or to dream dreams (like the Zulus of southeast Africa who know the continually stuffed body cannot see secret things); people fast before a sacrifice, before entering a sanctuary, after the first menstruation, before marriage, after a death. Muslims for Ramadan, Southern Baptists for the damned, a fast to ward off a plague of insects, a fast kept once the swarming locusts hit. I wonder if I did it because I relished the taste of my own renunciation—I have always wanted to know if you can love emptiness. I added a line from the poet Rilke to my copybook: *We can let ourselves be poor again*. I faxed a letter to President Bush. I puked up orange juice on one of the fasting days.

And on one of the days I scrambled two eggs and toasted bread and wrapped them up in foil to pass along to a guy who more or less lived in the bus stop on Irving Street on my way to work, because I'd read the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 55: *Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush?...Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry?* Robert was his name. I didn't ask Robert how he liked his eggs. He seemed to like the mushy sandwich, and I wished I could have a bite.

Weil used the word *gravity* to refer to our natural tendencies—doing all we can to get ours, looking out for number one. She urged that we seek the unnatural thing, that we renounce—look at and

do not eat, do not take by violence into yourselves. Fasting is rehearsal for loving without devouring, but going without bread is not enough, there is another element in resisting gravity: feeding bread to another. She read everything, I'm sure she read Isaiah 55. And in this feeding act for her: *It is not surprising that a man who has bread should give a piece to someone who is starving. What is surprising is that he should be capable of doing so with so different a gesture from that with which we buy an object. Almsgiving when it is not supernatural is like a sort of purchase. It buys the sufferer.* How to properly give an egg sandwich? Supernaturally, or else it's a transaction. Weil's kind of giving is done through grace, of course, that's what she stressed, and grace—gravity's antonym—ultimately comes from outside of us.

But at twenty-two, and for the whole decade to follow in my life, everything was for me only a matter of my will. I do not know what the exchange meant to Robert. I was willing myself to love God and humankind. I thought this was something you could get right, even though Weil pressed on, relentless, with nuances I wouldn't begin to understand until later down the road: *He who gives bread to the famished sufferer for the love of God will not be thanked by Christ. He has already had his reward in this thought itself. Christ thanks those who do not know to whom they are giving food.*

At this desk now, with the wood wet, my body and eyes heavy, it feels strange to remember my younger, more fervent self. I think that Weil would see me—who I was then as much as now—as feral, undisciplined in thought, a cherry-picker of her ideas. She was not a systematic thinker but I am an even less systematic reader. The passages that make it into my copybook

are often not the hard parts. After a while, I cannot even sustain this line of thought and I crawl back into bed between sheets that need washing. I don't take ideas to their natural conclusion as she did, out there with migrant workers reciting the Lord's Prayer until the prayer and she became a single stab of light with dust motes. But I am hungry for some kind of bread, maybe my life lacks fervency. And my lover has left for the night and I wonder, when I miss him, what is it about him I miss? Just the food of him on my tongue? I feel there is a whole plane of loving I've yet to even approach.

\* \* \*

When I fell in love the first time, it was quick and irrevocable. Two weeks of knowing each other, then there were two years of letters—we were very good in letters—and then we were married with a corn roast at our wedding, and heirloom tomatoes and cousin John's side of beef cooked in a fire pit. With gladiola bouquets and rented tables set with cut flowers in mason jars—zinnias, Shasta daisies, poppies, cosmos, marigolds—the ceremony so sweet, outside on the grass. There was a slight unspoken hope in each of us—at least in me—for rain, so everything wouldn't be so perfect. As though we wanted to stand separate from ourselves, not grasping at anything too tightly. *Beauty is a fruit which we look at without trying to seize it.* We each had our own Weil libraries. We were so careful. We preserved, I think, the rich and loamy loneliness in the other.

In one of his early letters, my would-be husband copied out excerpts from Weil's essay on friendship. He seemed already



wary and, who knows, maybe he sensed the sad disaster to come and the big chunks of flesh we would eventually take out of each other. I did not marry a boy from home like Matthew of the hen-butcherer days, though I'd always assumed I would. I married a philosopher who enclosed notecards with his letters with neat passages from Weil's essay: *Friendship is a miracle by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food.*

I loved his idea, her idea, we had very good ideas. Embrace and not grasp, that is marriage, I thought. Intimacy doesn't have to mean violent possessiveness. We need not storm the door of the other's soul and body and gobble him up, take away his autonomy, get fat while he wastes away. The idea was to seek the other's good. But we lived too much in our ideas. We both wanted to *be* Weil, and the writer Dostoyevsky and the philosophers Wittgenstein and Buber and Levinas, instead of our clumsy selves. We wanted to live and breathe beautiful thought. But that is hard to do. I can close my eyes now and see us each as the naked hen body in my little-girl hands: I do not swipe either body down into a cow pie, frozen yet still filthy, but it takes so much effort to hoist them up for the whole trek, gravity pulling them down, the destroyed bodies headed into soups and covered dishes to be devoured, as husband, as wife, and the clear autumn sky above us all with the precise outline of leaves against that blue, like an incision.

*To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love.* Yet in trying to preserve distance, you sometimes trip over your own



carefulness. Sometimes the adoration of distance simply leaves you cold.

I don't know that we understood any of it, any of Weil's ideas, even the best ones. But how can you? All the contraries are true—for Simone: silence is sound, doubt is belief, absence is presence. And: *The beautiful is that which we desire without wishing to eat it. We desire that it should be.* We desire that his good fills its full space in all dimension in the center of the kitchen as he kneads and bakes bread and we watch him in his beauty from the other side of the room. But then we cross the room to taste because we cannot help it.

Perhaps we did devour one another in marriage, feed on each other. Perhaps we did not say, There is a beauty I do not eat, and I will give myself as meat instead, for my husband, for my wife.

Once, at a retreat cabin together in Michigan, we wondered what we could go without—not the red oil lamp, not the awful instant coffee, not the notebooks, not the colored pencils. Everything else could go. We lit the woodstove and talked softly in its simple light, then read quietly. We did not think we could live without each other. Some time later, did we really walk away and never meet again? Is that possible?

\* \* \*

A few years ago, when still married, I gave a lecture on Simone Weil at the college in Oregon where I lived and taught. In the room was a doctor of systematic theology and he was surprised the lecture was any good. So was I, but not for the

same reason. He was surprised because he knew I am unsystematic; I was surprised because I was distracted by my marriage loudly falling apart. The falling-apart occupied the pre-lecture morning with heated argument, and also the post-lecture listless afternoon. But I knew, during the hour and a half with that room of students and faculty sitting in a circle, the points I wanted to focus on—the face of her I wanted to show, and there were many others I might have shown. I knew I wanted her version of love to mean something to them, even if it was an impossible version—or maybe *because* it was an impossible version. Simone had worked so hard to erase herself even as she wrote herself. The eraser always leaves a smudge and leaves someone trying to decipher what had been written there. We tried our best, the students and I.

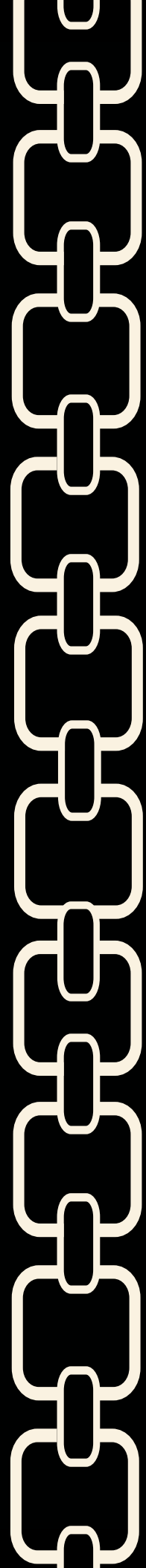
In the lecture, I did not want to focus so much on renunciation, on not devouring, on willing yourself into ethical relation, on resisting gravity. I wanted to say something about grace—a concept I had never really understood in my bones—that thing out beyond our ideas and our attempts to make one thick cord out of our theory and praxis. In fact, it is grace that becomes real in the unraveling of such a cord. Grace bridges your deepest hunger to the deepest hunger in another. Then, you give bread out of hunger instead of saintliness, or surplus, you give with forgetfulness, beggar-to-beggar not almsgiver-to-beggar. You give helplessly, and you love helplessly. It's as if, though you can't deny the gravity pulling at your small arms as you carry the hen bodies, you also sense some kind of hollowing-out of your bones that fills them with a lightness that lifts: you carry the burden but it is somehow weightless.

Once, with my potter friend Nancy, my Oregon neighbor who has read nearly everything Weil ever wrote, I made a

beggar bowl out of clay and she glazed and fired it for me to cup in my hands when I prayed, or did not know how to pray. To pray as a beggar made sense, to hold emptiness that way, even if I did not know how to love the emptiness. In time, Nancy wept with me about the marriage. And often, she and I both puzzled over the hardest part of Weil's eating metaphor, the weird part where God eats us.

In Weil's essay about beauty teaching us to love God, she writes: *The beauty of the world is the mouth of the labyrinth...if he does not lose courage, if he goes on walking, it is absolutely certain that he will finally arrive at the center of the labyrinth. And there God is waiting to eat him. Later he will go out again, but he will be changed, he will have become different, after being eaten and digested by God.* How forceful, how strange, Nancy and I always remarked, yet when I think about this part of Weil's metaphor now, it seems to me this is the way grace reaches the most stubborn of us: God eating us up as we stumble, hungry and thirsty, through the world, stubbornly doing our best with our belabored love, ready finally to be devoured, received, broken into morsels and fed out.

Ultimately, Weil thought God eats us like a mother bird and feeds others with our flesh. I can picture the bird feeding wide-mouthed babies in a nest caked with shit and mud, in their first few days of life on the outside, until they can handle a whole grub on their own. This bizarre process of grace, this being-eaten-by-God, is not what Weil accomplished by refusing food and dying of TB at age thirty-four, younger than I am now. I don't know what that accomplished. I know only that none of us fulfills our beautiful ideas in perfect gestures. That doesn't mean we should not have them. *Ideas come and settle in my mind by mistake*, she wrote in a letter to her friend Father



Perrin. *Then, realizing their mistake, they absolutely insist on coming out. I do not know where they come from, or what they are worth, but, whatever the risk, I do not think I have the right to prevent this operation.*

The next morning, at this desk again, there is a stillness. I can hear the kindly mailman who limps. I can hear the rustling of the different selves in me, the girl with the peace pin—I like her, even though she’s a fool—the girl hoisting carcasses and at other times folding fresh venison into freezer paper alongside one of her brothers and labeling it *tenderloin*, and at other times canning sausage and freezing corn, snapping beans on the porch into a bowl in preparation for the ordeal of supper—I like her too—the girl saying her marriage vows, trying to be a good wife, lecturing in a classroom and shaking from the violence by which ideas tear free of the body—I am forgiving her. Such rustling seems louder these mornings in my thirties; it must be deafening at age eighty, like a pack of raccoons in your shed.

My mind wanders and I think about being a mother. I think of a little one feeding on and in me, a helpless little mite. I think of the world eating her as prey, then I picture her old, and myself too, feeble, someone spooning up applesauce to our lips. I wonder if Weil ever wanted to be a mother. Yes and no, no and yes, I assume. My girlfriends marry, buy houses, have their third child and offer their milk-full breasts. I wake in the middle of many nights ravenous, I want to fill notebooks, I do fill notebooks. I teach class and go to faculty meetings and squirm with my outcomes and assessments, I go to yoga and call my mother a few times a week and take food to my colleagues who forget to eat. I love a man, sometimes well, I try not to fear or be blind to this dangerous intimacy.

Probably she was pathological. Surely she was too austere. Not a life to follow. Or, at least, not a death to follow, the starving. But it seems to me that she lived her life feeding and being fed the real bread and meat, at times refusing it but, still, she was able to recognize it for what it was. *What is essential is to know that one is hungry...in the end we shall be fed and then we shall not believe but we shall know that there really is bread.* Hunger speaks to hunger, and says: Here is bread, you have never tasted bread like this. God, make me that kind of bread—consume me and feed my flesh to others—keep it all a secret from me, that is all right—take my notebooks, I am dying. It may have been her prayer, it may be mine.

## Notes

I am grateful to Alec Irwin for his study of Weil's eating metaphor in "Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil" (*Cross Currents*, Summer 2001). The passages included in this essay are drawn from Simone Weil's *Gateway to God* (Fontana Books, 1974), *Waiting for God* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), and *Gravity and Grace* (Bison Books, 1997); and from *The Simone Weil Reader*, Edited by George A. Panichas (Moyer Bell, 1977).





*Untitled*

**MIKELE RAUCH**



## **The San Antonio Catacombs**

Faith and disillusion are two sides of the eternal coin flip on which we all ride. Well—at least, my family does. We are a breed of passion, madly pursuing whatever symbol pierces our heart next. Even my ancestors stampeded into the Texas desert and rode until their souls died of thirst. Then, they curled up like dried centipedes and were lowered into the dust where their bodies disintegrated within a single arid season.

Here, people were proud if they could manage to live and die without making a fuss, just gently fade into the face of their offspring. In a perfect life, a barber's clients wouldn't even have to learn a new name when the Junior inevitably replaced the Senior. Life ran in neatly concentric circles back then.

This is not to say San Antonio was a city without memory. Remember the Alamo? It has no basement. I always resented that my city did not have catacombs or even cellars. Perhaps, one day long ago, some commanding mustached vaquero placed one freshly oiled boot upon a rock and proclaimed, "There will be no basements built in San Antonio because Texans don't hide." He couldn't have announced this from a hilltop because San Antonio doesn't have one. We are the delineation between the green rolling hills of Fredericksburg, and San Marcos to the north, and the desolate oil fields of Kennedy and Karnes City to the South. If not for the scars of quarries we've dug, our city would be as horizontal as the bottom of this paper. But back then, San Antonians preferred their city flat, so no one was tempted to look down on another.

We were a city of workers, *mas trabajo por favor*, united by the grease on our hands and sweat stains in our armpits

because we were all daily roasting like hell alike. This was a time before thermostats; when like the modern saint, Santa Muerte of Mexico, the Texas sun was a deity unto itself who claimed lives each summer without discretion. I am sad to report; I no longer believe this to be true.

I was born into a time when the city was experiencing a spiritual rebirth. Perhaps not everyone felt it. I cannot speak for the Southern Baptists living in the prairies on the outskirts of the city, but I will attest to the Southside Latino population to which my family subscribed. The Pentecostal evangelical spirit of revival was overwhelming the city's Catholic roots.

Pentecostal's namesake was The Day of Pentecost, the day the holy spirit descended on Jesus' disciples as a strong wind, setting their tongues on fire, and filling them with that most delightful of madness. After this, they could unconsciously speak in any language. The only requirement: absolute madness.

I remember once asking my mother why the Catholics rebelled; she responded, "We are not rebelling. It is all love." The new God was meant to be our personal lover, but really, he was selfish, vague, and initially lawless outside a few hungover hippie sentiments about brotherhood and individuality—you've seen his type.

My father was a rebel, like me, making him all too well suited for the new religion. Indeed, he found his new faith so liberating that he became the embodiment of his God, thrusting new boundaries upon the virgin landscape, forging contemporary chains where he saw fit.

It is hard to blame him for his actions because he was living his truth; at the cornerstone of his soul, he was a leader. So, when he received The Calling, like Noah, he built a stage and purchased a dozen speakers to preach, to sing his message like a finely plumed

bird from any perch where he could park his mobile circus. I played his clown. I played his bass guitarist. I played his fool. Twice he convinced me to burn all my worldly possessions citing demonic activity coming from my bedroom. He raised one hairy fist and bellowed: "I heard the sweeping of a great evil wind and the smell of sulfur." Then he farted.

It was chaos trying to discern the internal workings of his sacred madness. And he wasn't alone. At that time, the whole city went mad—madness was in vogue. The individual experience, a taste for direct contact with God, took root. Our faces sweated red like Moses as we burned away the weedy catholic intermediaries crying, 'Padre, we prefer being bastards!'

God belonged in the heart, not in the mouth, and the body would react. I remember watching the epileptic converts flail on the ground as their subconscious gripped them with seizures. Their mouths would curl at the edges as if gripped by a midnight spasm, and sometimes they would hiss before releasing their ephemeral demons. Each time the fit was lauded as a miracle.

I remember, "ashana-ma-shanana-neigh-neigh-neigh," because Marla spoke as the Metatron, the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. From there, the phrase caught on, and if the wailing possessed congregation were willing to synchronize, they could have formed a cohesive chorus.

I watched them cry and wave their arms from my perch atop my father's boat trailer (which never once held a boat) as I thumped God's heartbeat through my bass guitar. As they praised, their eyes rolled back like in REM sleep, and they gave their heads liberty to lilt and loll as if moved by the waves of an invisible ocean, and all I saw was a sea of white glass without

pupils. My father stood center stage; I, the right-hand corner with the rest of his praise and worship band.

That period is still a haze of endless parking lots, grilled corn, and churches named something-something-Iglesia. I remember seasoned musicians asking me in private to turn down my instrument because they knew, if my dad caught them, he would force me to turn my volume even higher. To every challenge, the answer was the same. Rebel! Fight!

The Pentecostal sermons were shouted both from the stage and at home—Both in a made-up language, I did not understand. Once, I saw a missionary from El Salvador become so possessed by the holy spirit that God told him to push me down onto my back mid-service.

Unfortunately, God had not filled me in on his plan, and when the preacher laid his hands on me, all I heard screaming red through my ears, sparking my blood, was Fight! Rebel! Dominate! —the results were awkward; one result being, I lost my faith. Right there, at age twelve, disillusion arrested me into something like a midlife crisis, a spiritual death. But the coin continued to turn, and in a dimly lit club called The Catacombs, I found my new faith. I again touched God.

The venue was a door in a strip mall on West Highway 90, near Lackland Air Force Base, a few blocks from a known corpse dumping ground. Of course, if I visit the neighborhood today, I can buy a Crispy Cream donut—chingao! Lately, when I return to San Antonio, it feels like it is actively washing the streets clean of everything I ever touched.

On October 31st, 2012, a San Antonio institution died. The longest-running haunted house in the city, Nightmare on

Grayson Street, closed its doors for good. The reason: the old Pearl Brewery next door had been purchased by land developers to gut and remodel. To be more precise, they'd bought the entire block with plans to turn it into a high-end shopping center under nearly the same name, The Pearl. The purchase immediately rocketed the local real-estate values, pricing out The Nightmare's ability to make rent.

Sometimes, I think this city is building another city atop itself to be inhabited by someone else, someone other than its original inhabitants. I am certainly not invited; I moved to California. So, when I decided to dig up the bones of my old haunt, The Catacombs in the season of Covid-19, I could not do so in person.

In the age of social media, I take for granted that all the memories I will ever desire to recall are digitally eternal. I know no telephone numbers. It is an inhuman level of trust. I am like a stock laptop, no memory, just happy to rely on external drives such as Facebook for all my JPEGs. If we met, I would store you in my phone, then promptly forget the interaction until the point your relevance returns; then there you will be, waiting for me, in my stored messages, in my phone book. But like Obi-Wan Kenobi, when I queried my database (Google), I found I had lost a planet. "How embarrassing." The Catacombs, once a Christian metal music venue in San Antonio, had been erased. The only remnant of its existence I could find was one fifteen-year-old article by the San Antonio Current in which the owner, Big Jesse, relives the hardships of trying to keep the club open.

Jesse recalls losing his house and moving into a motel room to pay the venue's rent, lamenting, "The Christian community wasn't my friend on this," which brings to light an

interesting divide. The Catacombs was a Christian music venue deeply entrenched in the Westside barrio competing for the youth's interest against bands like South Park Mexican, Cradle of Filth, and Metallica. So, yeah, the club specialized in Metal, Hardcore, and Punk, which made the heavy-pocketed, grey-headed Christian community wary. But I digress.

In retrospect, the reasons the club failed are apparent: the club did not sell alcohol. I never paid more than eight dollars to attend a show, and the entire staff was volunteers. More than once, I saw kids who couldn't afford entry admitted for free.

I never knowingly met the rogue hero, Big Jesse. However, I am positive, we've shared the same cramped, sweat-scented room on many occasions, for the Catacombs were no more than a single place—a room at the end of an enclosed strip-mall hallway, on the right, behind a bleak black door with gapped hinges from being kicked open too many times.

From the inside, the performers speak about Big Jesse like the cast of Saturday Night Live praises Lorne Michaels. Chris, the frontman of Ashburn, is sauntering, breathlessly lapping the width of the tiny stage, proclaiming (and I'm quoting from memory here), "We'd all like to thank Big Jesse for giving us misfits a place to belong on Saturday night." And I suppose, I am merely attempting to say the same thing; to say, Jesse, you created something so formative to my being, that I must thank you. In 2006, the frontman of NOFX, Fat Mike, again, conjured your memory in me, by saying, "Take care of each other. Look around you. When you see those ugly fucks on the street, remember, those are your brothers and sisters."

Music can create family, but some songs forcefully move in and take up residence like they are kin. Of these, there are

different types, just as there are various personalities in families. There are passages of lyrical beauty that fascinates the mind; then there are those that ground the soul. The first merely requires the ability to sort information aesthetically, whereas the second is the plane on which John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, and Janis Joplin operated. In short, the latter requires a connection. It is transcendent when these moments step out of history to meet you in person. I have only experienced this phenomenon twice.

The second transcendental moment occurred in November of 2015, at a bar, The Chuggin' Monkey, on 6th street in Austin. I was watching a local country band I didn't (and still don't) know the name of from the balcony overlooking a graveyard of my crushed Lone Star cans. It was the refrain of the song that caught me, unexpectedly applying THAT missing Lego piece to my life. The beard in the ten-gallon hat sang,

“You're getting older; You're getting colder.”

And he was right. There I was relaxed into my barstool stupor, when my funhouse mirror shattered, cruelly revealing the truth—that it was time to get my life in order.

My first transcendental moment was July of 2001, my first trip to The Catacombs. It is hard to say that I'd been sheltered up until that point. I certainly had not been protected from pain, death, or poverty. But it was more like I had been limited or bound. There were thoughts that were not allowed to be thoughts; feelings that couldn't have existed, so, instead, I called myself crazy and screamed at the mirror until my subconscious slumped back below. Given time, the new God drives everyone crazy. The God I knew was a chainmaker, a vastly judgmental, jealous parent who whimsically changed rules to fit the occasion and expected that everyone should already have known them.



I had found a flyer. That was how these things worked before the internet. I found a yellow flyer with a picture of four tattooed 20-something-year-old guys in black t-shirts. One had a skull superimposed over his face because (I would later learn) Muskrat feared being photographed. Eventually, with significant time and effort, I would get a photo with him; and his image even kindly showed up on the film. The flyer's banner read Naos Project, and the bottom provided the date, time, and address.

I was a child then, who had yet to clip the tense: teen onto the end of his age. To me, an address was still an address; I understood no real frame of reference. That was mom's concern. But now, older, I realize I had effectively asked her to drive me forty-five minutes away to the Westside Barrio and wait outside a Tejano dancehall until past midnight.

God bless her; she did it, and I know why too. I knew she would do it from the moment I'd read the bottom of the flyer, which read 'Christian Metal Club,' or something to that effect. During those formative years, as my mother watched her seraphic son mutate, deteriorate, and devolve into something she couldn't understand, there was no length she would not drive, no price she wouldn't pay, if it presented a shot at bringing her wayward child back to the fold. Most years, I received engraved bibles at a rate of more than one-per-year: one for Christmas, one for my birthday.

Worldly possessions were not evil unto themselves, not until I wanted them. Then, I was being covetous. Now the sin had been committed. But luckily, there was a simple remedy: another bible; our bookshelves in one word: singular.

The strip mall The Catacombs was in was sketchy, so I brought my friend, Zach, a drummer, on that first visit, reasoning

that between two seventh-grade boys, there was nothing the city could throw at us. We were cavalier at its dumbest.

My mother dropped us off outside the front of the Tejano club next-door because The Catacombs didn't have overhead lighting. Today, I am happy to report that according to google, the El Corona nightclub is still in operation. Why shouldn't it be? Everyone there was dressed impeccably. The men wore long-toed waxed boots, tucked in ranchero shirts with embroidered roses, and elegant black Stetson hats. The Latina women loitering out-front smoking cigarettes were stunning. Then, my gaze accidentally met a vivacious figure. My eyes must have popped in startlement because she giggled, and my face went red as I scampered in retreat. Perhaps there were still some things a seventh-grade boy wasn't yet ready to handle.

As an adolescent, I spent way too much time wondering if older women found me attractive. I was jealous of all those non-minor men. The Tejano dancehall was 21 and up, which led my perverse mind to fantasize that the women got naked to dance as soon as they passed beyond those heavy velvet-upholstered doors. What a disappointment bars would eventually turn out to be.

Behind the glass entrance to the strip mall's interior hallway, skateboards ollied over empty guitar cases. I was a shit skateboarder, but Zach was experienced enough to join the crowd, and I was his plus-one. The vibe was black boards, black hoodies, black hair, black everything, and dimly lit. When I entered the main room, it was even darker than the hallway. Straining, I could see the décor was scant, to nonexistent; just a cramped room painted black with a mural behind its one-foot tall plywood stage of the Sacre Coeur: a symbol I would later get inked on my skin.

The room was overburdened with CO2 spewing teenagers sweating but unwilling to remove their hoodies. It seemed there were bound to be casualties. The air did not have adequate O2 content to support life— and then they lit the incense. Kegs, plastic barrels, and trashcans were rolled in and placed in a circle on stage to complete Muskrat's monstrosity of a drumkit. Zack's jaw dropped, but it could have been from lack of air.

The full-stack of Marshall amplifiers that the dread-headed volunteer lugged on stage was a fantasy I had yet to meet. When he turned it on, it popped, then saturated the air with a high frequency I can only describe as anticipation. Finally, Isaac, the singer, box-jumped on stage, and bunny hopped a few times to spike his blood flow. He was already soaked in sweat and looked fresh off a construction site. Then he began pacing, silently stalking the stage like a jaguar waiting for his cage to unlock.

There was no air conditioning to my knowledge. The room was hotter than hell, so Isaac opened four bottles of water and sloshed them on us, baptizing the entire audience. I'm surprised he didn't accidentally short-circuit their soundboard. Then, the soundman gave him the thumbs up, and Isaac motioned for silence, and the only sound remaining was the boom, boom, of the kickdrum synchronizing our heartbeats. We took the time to become one animal. A minute went by; the trance continued, the intrepid boom, boom, boom of the animal's pulse.

Then it stopped. And we felt an absence, simultaneously realizing and mourning the death of the collective beast we'd become. That was the genesis of my first transcendental moment in music. Then, Isaac opened his mouth, and a gust poured out:

"The Pain behind my Eyes, This Pain inside my heart."

They were simple words buttressed by nothing, nothing but extra space for connection to occur. In an old David Gilmour

interview that I tried but couldn't find, I recall him saying something to the effect that it's not the notes he chooses to play that makes the song, it's the space he leaves between the notes that are important, but at this point, I still didn't know who Pink Floyd was. To that point, I didn't know nearly anything about secular music. Oh, the joy it would become. Isaac had unleashed something in me. Soon after, I was voraciously inhaling everything: Deftones, Glassjaw, The Mars Volta (then again, looking at this list, maybe I did have a type.).

Perhaps the VHS propaganda videos my father had shown me were authentic, and it was the pagan druidic beat of Rock music that hypnotized my mind into doing the devil's bidding. I had begun committing mild acts of treachery: stealing street signs, and spray-painting garages. I'd consider my actions as less Anton LaVey and more Johnny Knoxville, but I mean, if you were an angelic prosecutor trying to send me to hell, the circumstantial evidence is there. And this was only the beginning. Was it my fault? Of course, I would drown myself in ice cream after escaping a prison that had only fed me saltines. I was overwhelmed by all the forbidden magic in the world. Unprepared. Prior, praise was all we did. It was the ultimate human purpose, and hell awaited the silent. Just Praise! Praise! Praise the day away like a hypnotic chant—like a witch's spell, repeating words I didn't mean, singing songs that, when I stopped to think about their lyrics, made me feel vaguely violated. But still, Sing! Sing! Sing!

I'd never heard anyone sing like Isaac. It was far from the drone of the Sunday morning zombies. I'd never heard anyone acknowledge pain, equate it to anything other than shame and weakness. In my family, we were strong and would far prefer to bleed to death than submit to the pressure of a tourniquet.

“The pain behind my eyes! The pain inside my heart!”

Do you know the neck pain of the night after a fantastic metal show? If you do not, immediately run, don't walk, to add it to your do-before-die list— secular, or Christian—I do not care. Then, when attending, the best advice I can give you is, when in Rome do as the Romans do. Find the breathing circle at the center of the crowd known as the pit, and give yourself to its tide. The motion will be similar to that of pilgrims swirling around the Kabba. Make an offering of your body to the communal animal and skip fearlessly as you have only done before as a child, knowing here, if you fall, you will be lifted to safety. And you may leave bloody, but you will leave as family.

The next morning, I awoke to find my neck was no longer composed of joints, but one drumstick. The following day was no better, but it was a school day, and when called upon by the teacher, I had to extract myself entirely from my desk to turn my body.

She asked, upspeaking in high-ticked inflections, “Did someone beat you up?” and without irony, I said, “God did,” and it had hurt like a mother fucker.

Call me a sadist, but I loved it. Addicted, I slung a 10-pound weight over my shoulder and hardly removed it for anything but showers for the next ten years. I hauled my Sunburst Epiphone Les Paul like the Spear of Destiny from house to house, jamming, writing, practicing, practicing, practicing ...

What were we doing? Did we want to become Rockstars? Fuck Yeah, we did! And why shouldn't we experience the wonderful lunacy of grandiose dreams? Zach and I started a band, broke up (we were only good at Nirvana covers), then built several new ones to varying degrees of success. I am proud to say, once I even played Sunset Station. Granted, it was for a comedy expo—but I decided to count it as a dream-come-true

anyway. But you know the end of this story, given that you didn't recognize my name at the start of this article. That's okay. Still, as I said, we had a hell of a time.

This is by no means to say that my newfound freedom went unprotested. Secular music was still on the new God's no-fly list. So, we snuck out the window instead. Then, put my friend's car in neutral and rolled it out of the driveway. Chasing it into the night, we dove into its open windows and depressed the brake pedal by hand before the driverless vehicle became a battering ram at the approaching four-way stop. It was reckless to gun the engine causing the tires to squeal an alarm, but we were uncatchable, ethereal ghosts by then, as we sailed to the White Rabbit, Zombie's, Jack's Patio, or even a local party—somewhere to either perform or hear live music.

Yes, Big Jesse, I'm afraid your well-intended establishment was the nexus tunnel to my delinquency. But, hey, if it's any consolation, I wouldn't trade my past for anything. Would You? And look at me—I turned out alright ... I guess. Today much has changed about me and our city. Do you ever return to haunt your old haunts and find yourself complaining about their higher prices and the disappearance of their so-called 'soul?' Inflation has turned me old, Jesse. Sam's Burger Joint used to charge \$6.50 for a burger with fries and a drink, and at night, local bands would clumsily pile their Yamaha equipment onto the patio. At first, there was no stage, and the venue never asked them to turn it down. Music—or at least raspy guttural screams, and the quick metronomic, pop, pop, pop of the kickdrum would echo like gunshots along the underpass of the 281 freeway all the way to Brackenridge Park.

Sam's Burger Joint is where Duncan, Lauren, Cindy, and I first encountered the female punk trio, Girl in a Coma, which



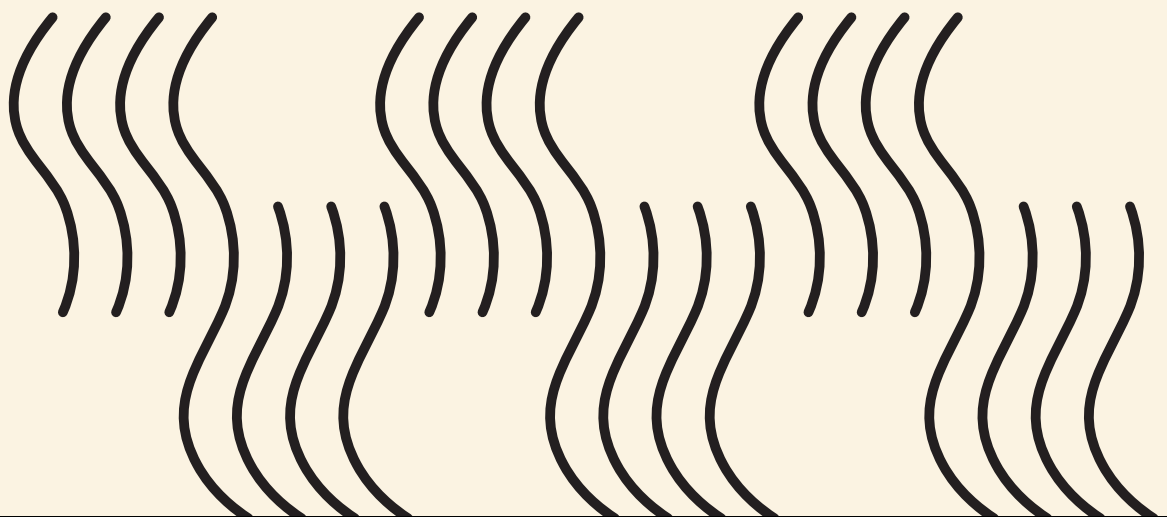
we were all destined to fall in love with. Nina Diaz's song-writing instantly enchanted us, but her vibrato-soaked voice had us smitten. We all agreed it had an eerie familiarity, like the voice of a forgotten family member. She was the voice of the city we knew. And like the pied piper, we followed their performances through the streets and adjoining ramshackle towns; from late back-room shows to flea market squares— we followed like ducklings until Joan Jett swept them away on to national tours, record deals, places we couldn't follow; young heartbreak. Later, their cover of Selena's *Si Una Vez* made a proper goodbye.

I never got such closure from Naos Project. When you're a small local band, things just happen. Nobody reports on it. Sure, they disbanded in 2005; but that mystical element, the ritualistic atmosphere of their shows which my soul responded so passionately to had long since dwindled to a husk. Muskrat was already gone; I imagine he sensed the sinking or at least metamorphosing ship early. I understood. In college, I witnessed many drunken rants categorizing all Christians as mindless drones; but let me assure you, this was not the case with Muskrat. He was a purist and a nonconformist with strong opinions about everything. He wore black eyeliner in 2001 and looked like a shrunken voodoo priest version of Rasputin—someone not meant for stage lights, but shadows and darkened backrooms such as The Catacombs. Also, from my experience as a musician, I imagine most small venues refused to accommodate the eclectic pile of resonant trash he called his drumkit.

I never had to say goodbye to Isaac; he was instantaneously reborn into a new band composed of Naos Project's closing lineup, plus one new guitar soloist. He christened himself with the stage name, Lenny King, and even wrote a song about the character: *The Ballad of Lenny King*. Don't worry; I was uninterested too.



The Heroine was a secular southern rock band that drank cheap beer and sung about the virtues of the blue-collar lifestyle. Simultaneously, I was experimenting with psychedelics, reenacting the sixties, and being lured into a ring of neo-Marxist delirium. So yeah, we grew apart. But then, in 2012, one night, I got sentimental and went to a The Heroine show at Mohawks off Red River Street in Austin. After the show, I approached Isaac, and he hugged me, and I became comfortably drenched in that familiar sweat that I knew by scent. We drank beers as I'd always dreamed of, and while we talked excitably, I had a pit in my center that knew we had nothing real to say to each other. He did not remember me, so I felt awkward saying goodbye, but I suppose that is what this is. With these thoughts written, everything can rest and disappear. The evidence of this past has already turned to dust. The only catacombs remaining are in my mind.





## **Side Effects of Prayer**

*after Shira Erlichman*

Side effects to prayer may include (enlightenment, a closer relationship to God, questioning who the fuck God thinks He is, scratching due to lack of other grounding techniques, frustration, a merciless sun in July in North Carolina, a baptism through downpour in April in Maryland, an ambivalent snowstorm in February in Maine, reading scripture, a forced linear relationship with God, questioning all the people and systems who told us our relationship with God had to be linear, answered/unanswered/half answered/incorrectly answered prayers, the ability to crave signs, the ability to assign free will or fate, performative survival, survival that gradually feels more real, seeking multiple definitions of the word “miracle,” therapy despite your family members’ protests, isolation that helps, isolation that doesn’t, community that helps, community that doesn’t, trying to bless or damn something yourself, writing prayers to have personal receipts of how much God has accomplished, writing prayers to have personal receipts of how much bad shit God allowed to happen, seeking multiple definitions of the word “evil,” making Christians upset for finding humor in nonreligious jokes, making Christians upset) having grief and/or grace for past versions of yourself.

**MAYA WILLIAMS**

## Fables for Aesop

Dear Aesop, the sun has come;  
the turtle's won the race;  
the hare is far behind;  
Jerusalem's delivered, and  
Blake is lying down  
on the greensward with Wordsworth,  
the tyger and the lamb.

The angel with the sword  
is plowing Eden; Paradise  
is being subdeveloped.  
Milton sees and is blinded again  
by neon lights proclaiming:  
"See the original sin!"  
Man's heart is no lighter,  
no darker than before.

We are guided in the wilderness  
between the city dump  
and the White House  
by dark clouds of smog  
fresh from the god of Industry.

We learn the Decalogue anew --  
in perversity it's true --  
from the authoritative voice of media  
massaging our weary brains.  
On to the Promised Land,  
led by politicians and their crew.  
Sounding like cuckoos in cloud-cuckoo-land  
Cockledoodledoo!



## God is an Atheist

And on the sixth day man said  
Let there be God  
for it was not good for man to be alone.  
He threw his thoughts into the sky  
so he could be baptized by his own strength  
returning to him.

Dawn breaks on the border  
of the middle of my life.  
All of a sudden, nothing has changed.

The retirement agent,  
beige with charcoal eyes,  
points to the square I'll have when I'm 65.  
I wonder where our faces end  
and the tuna sandwiches begin.

I almost yawn. It is cut off  
by a lack of oxygen,  
which is technically what started it.  
I count the hours to bed  
and think I'm not looking forward to death.

I imagine it's like the tomb of birth,  
big enough to hold wonder  
that won't fit into a question.  
Like broken candlelight on the wide-arched ribs  
of a Christmas Eve service,  
before they fade in the hall lights  
left on for late-comers.

What burdens does our long lost father lay  
on a cold pillow in front of the night?  
Perhaps He starts on his back looking up,  
and seeing nothing, curls up on his side.

**ELISABETH SHARBER**

## haint

Storms warning over Romney, from Buck Creek to  
the gas station.

Closer to the ground—  
no division of a shape, color  
only sensed  
as the value of a woman.

Brakes lament the grade—  
the yellow line tightens like a noose around  
the veined throat of the mountain—where to?

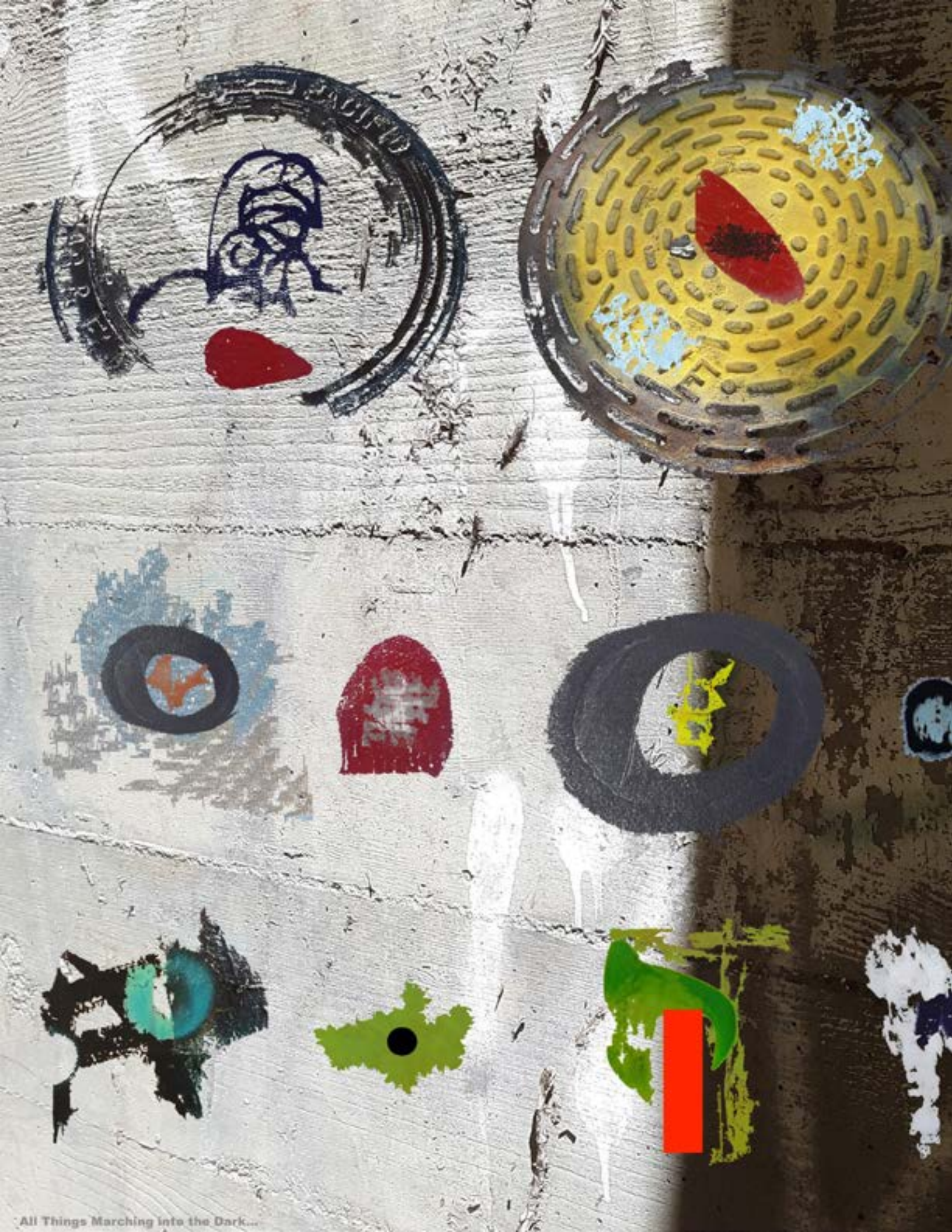
you ask, as she climbs into the back seat like  
a cab—where to?  
the gullies washed, the bridge collapsed.

A mist hangs at the hairpin.  
Sky's gone, a patchy fog  
coils through the redbud in the hollow—where to?

She lifts an icy finger—her lips are blue,  
her veil is tattered as the moon—remember?  
*The dreams you boarded up.*  
*The dozen times*  
*you called and no one answered*—remember?

KATHLEEN HELLEN









*All Things  
Marching into  
the Dark*

**TIM MYERS**

## Confiscated

*After El Sueño Americano | The American Dream:  
Photographs by Tom Kiefer*

No one hides from the man with the broom.  
Whatever we consume, the evidence eventually  
finds its way into his bins,  
detritus of our cruel and greedy hearts.

*Nonessential*, the officers say, or  
*Potential lethal weapons*.

*Confiscate.*

It begins with the general:  
items that can be bought anywhere,  
from any gas station  
or Motel 6 vending machine  
or Dollar Store.  
They could belong to anyone.

Toothbrushes. Tubes of toothpaste.  
Rolls of toilet paper. Bars of soap.  
Condoms. Foot powder.  
An assortment of combs and brushes,  
hair no doubt still clinging  
to bristles and teeth. *Nonessential*.

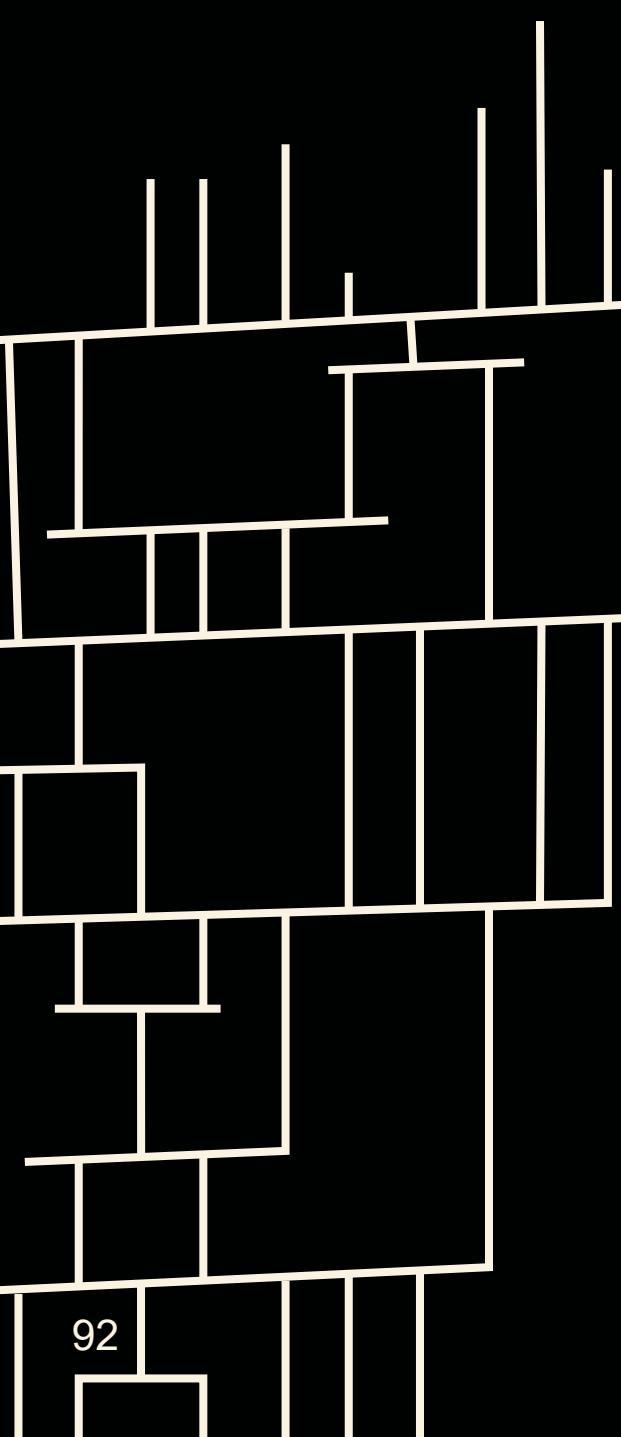
He is unable to bring himself  
to throw it all away,  
items someone saw fit to carry  
as far as 2,500 hundred miles,  
little bits of comfort  
on a hard and dangerous trek.

Next are survival items: still impersonal.  
Flatware. Bottled water and canteens.  
Blankets. Canned food.  
(Many varieties of Tuny's for easy protein.)  
Snickers bars. *Nonessential*.

For a time, he collects the nonperishables  
to donate to a local food bank,  
until the facility comes under new management  
and they make him stop.  
That is not the service they pay him to perform.  
*Nonessential*.

Now we're verging on the personal:  
blister packs of medication.  
Birth control pills. Prozac. Insulin.  
You wonder what's become of their wellness.  
*Nonessential*.

Belts and shoelaces. *Potential weapons*.



Cell phones and chargers,  
CDs on a dream-pink backdrop:  
*Boogie Nights. Trapt.*  
Somebody's burn mix labeled, *Brown Pride.*  
Wallets. Striped polos. *Nonessential.*

Work gloves. Pocketknives and multi-tools,  
probably necessary for crossing  
mountains and deserts, probably  
in anticipation of the hard labor  
they've come to seek.  
*Potential weapons.*

Rosaries coiled on a gray field,  
absent fingers and mouths to pray them;  
Blue Bibles on a yellow bandana,  
Virgin of Guadalupe statues.  
The soul. *Nonessential.*

At last, we've arrived at the intimate:  
unfolding the gold-locket heart of it,  
photos, a handwritten love letter,  
*tuyo siempre.*  
But what has become of the hand,  
and what of John 13 and 15?  
1 Corinthians 13? Luke 6:31?  
*Nonessential.*

Rubber duckies.  
A single toddler's shoe.

When do things stop being things  
and graduate  
to artifact?

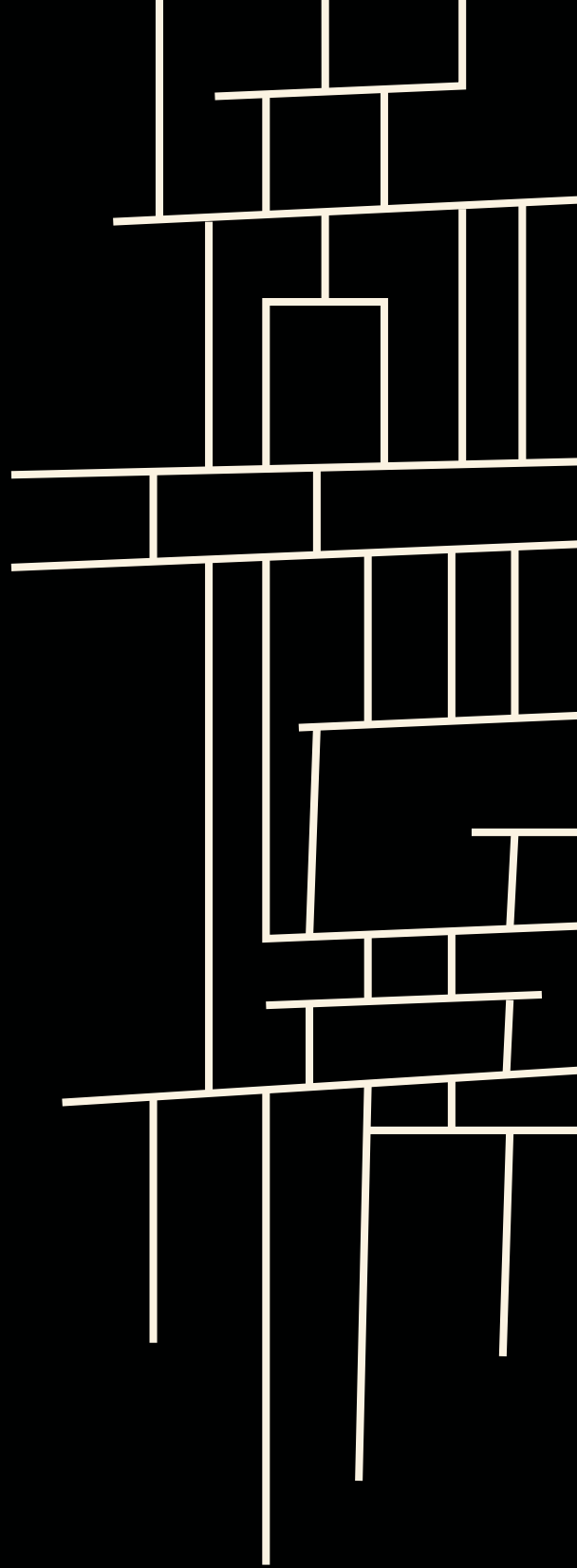
10,000 objects salvaged,  
such a small collection,  
even fewer made poignant  
beneath his lens.

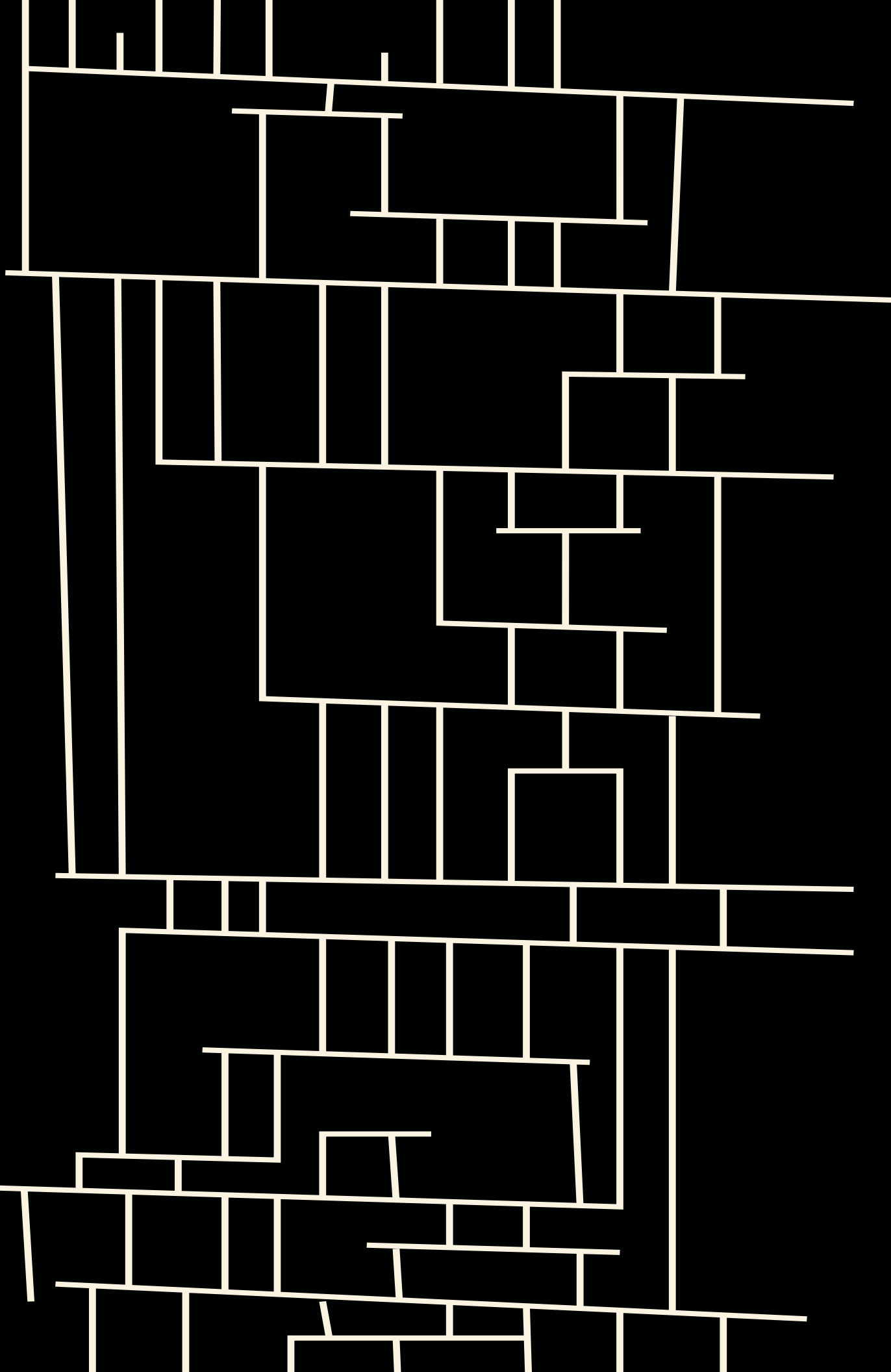
Imagine 10,000 pairs of hands.  
Imagine 5,000,000 steps.

Confiscated. Thrown out.

Now imagine  
salvage and salvation.

Essential. Shields.





## Memories

Camille

took my sleep

Frederick

took my high-heels

Katrina

took my carpet

Ivan

took my trailer roof

Sally

took my storage shed

power out,

sitting on back porch

unsticking

old photographs

they all

took my memories

but none

took my life

wondering what they

took from ancient ones

**DR. DEIDRA SUWANEE DEES**





**BRUCE SPANG**

## **Destiny**

It was a cocktail party with notables—professors and their mates—sipping Muscadet, drinking Lowenbrau, even a gin and tonic—and others, a physician from the college clinic and me, a spouse of a graduate student, awkward, out of place. The physician took pity on me and told me about the train, the one he was supposed to take, the last one to leave an occupied city where Jews were being rounded up, street by street, yellow triangle by yellow triangle. He and his wife had tickets and knew if they got out on that train, by three pm, the iron rail would take them to freedom. But their car broke down. They had to walk, run suitcase in hand, miles to the station. They arrived to the grind of iron on iron, the whistle, the train gone. He bartered—it cost him—for tickets on the last train, a night train, that, hours later with no guarantee, they rode across a valley through the pass into the mountains to freedom. The train he was to take had been stopped before the border. He stopped too, eyed me, checking if I had heard him—this elegant man who smoked a pipe,

who wore a beret and dressed in  
a sporty Wooster suit—making sure  
I had followed him from the car to  
the disappointment to the train.  
And I had. Then he began again to  
tell me about the train he'd planned  
to take, how it was halted by  
Gestapo and all the Jews, passport  
by passport, yellow triangle by yellow  
triangle, were herded off the train,  
marched to a hillside, mere shadows  
in the evening light yet clearly visible  
to those left on the train, and shot.  
“He said, “Fate is fickle, no?”  
I said, “You were lucky,” and touched  
his jacket which was soft and smooth.  
“No. Not luck,” he said. “Fate. It was destined.”  
A week later, I heard he was in his office,  
and stood to go to greet a patient  
when he had a heart attack and fell,  
his body at such an angle between the desk  
and the door to make a perfect doorstep.  
The door not budging, no one could  
get in as he cried out, “Help. Help,”  
until a custodian unhinged the door.  
By then, the good doctor was dead. Witnesses  
said, “What bad luck to die that way.”  
I wanted to say—but didn't, “Not luck”—  
those wraiths on the hill—“It was destiny.”

**Canary, Plum**  
*for Vanessa*

She runs her finger  
across tubes of paint, tosses them  
on the kitchen table where a clatter  
of color spreads out. Midnight blue  
overlaps umber, something new

and nameless, like the look  
on her mother's face  
the night the police shot her uncle.  
Mauve and periwinkle, named  
by someone long before she was born,  
when she was just a dab in the swirl.

Yellow bleeds red seeps orange.  
Words keep changing, too. Sometimes  
it's *victim*, other times, *survivor*.  
Words gather themselves  
in strands, like the crystal beads  
her mother wears to capture the light.  
Every night she comes home  
from the hospital saying soon, soon.

JENNIFER MARKELL

## Means of Survival

Arrange to have your house passed over  
or your name misspelled on the raids' list

have enough children to stand watch  
at every one of your windows

learn to imitate your dead neighbor's longhand  
or dig a tunnel from your living room to the bottom

of the sea and become an eel or —*plan B*—  
drown and die with some dignity

denounce the peonies since they will die soon  
and what may haunt you will be easier to forget

join a monastery order that promises  
you will become as invisible as God

turn yourself into a memory not worth remembering

or consider standing where you are,  
facing whatever is knocking at your door

JUAN PABLO MOBILI

**WILLIAM DORESKE**

### **In the Present State of Witness**

Strung out along the highway,  
waving signs at grinning traffic,  
our little clot of protest  
suffers under judgmental sun.

Even in shade we wilt and nod  
with a greedy vegetable thirst.  
Local cops cruise us and wave  
from air-conditioned vehicles

braced with massive bumpers  
and armed with loaded shotguns.  
You comment on every honk  
and friendly gesture, count

the few rude middle fingers,  
note that certain auto colors  
seem friendlier than others.  
Like kids on a boring road trip

we pass the hot noon hour  
parsing tenor and baritone  
registers of tooting horns.  
The rare soprano or bass

confounds our calculations  
but amuses and alerts us  
to factors we can't account for.  
So the protest protests itself

in the cool secret dark inside us.  
The message of our signs exhorts  
a more thoughtful and inclusive  
lifestyle, urbane and sculpted

in the finest Carrara marble.  
But America's too ramshackle  
and nervous for such a vision,  
the tattered pages of bibles

torn from tired old bindings  
and wafting across rock-hard sky,  
miming and mocking angel wings.  
We'll never escape the politics

of barbecued meat suffering  
as the thickest flavors must.  
We'll never unravel every thread  
of that famous Confederate flag

flying against a thunderstorm.  
I watch you watching the traffic.  
We look too small and irrelevant  
to punctuate the national text;

but at least we hold our ground  
more firmly than Charles the First  
held England the moment before  
his head fell into a basket.









## KEN BAKER

### Homeless

he's gruff.  
we would not invite him in.  
he plays for a few cents  
but looks down at the ground.  
at night,  
navigates the globe.  
enumerates stars.  
but floor boards are hard,  
once a gifted kid with a trophy build,  
now his arms like twigs.

speaks of his daughter,  
her pink roses,  
Sunday dress.  
holds an old faded photo.  
he hasn't grown tired of love  
but knows he'll never find it.

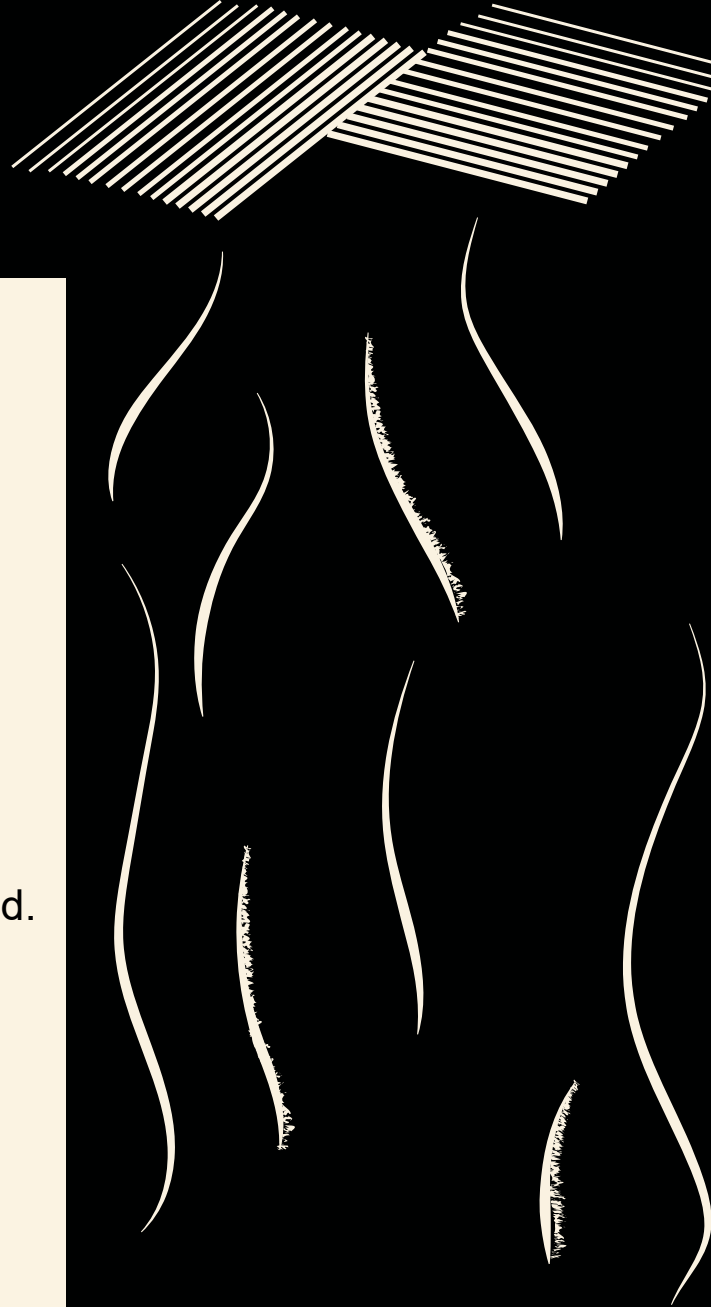
to him this world is oblique.  
he's lives in its underbelly,  
the scaly streets,  
the nerves of night,  
the asphalt heat.  
but give him a coin and he thanks you.



when old ghosts rise,  
he lifts his fists.  
gets lost in his own shadows.

silken youth mock.  
adults judge.  
his soul cheap, undervalued.  
he's lost his rightful human way.

an antidote?  
some say a faltering brain cannot be repaired.  
impending night returns silence,  
quiet hours for an old soldier's blood.  
at his outpost,  
he lays down, boots on.  
he'll catch sleep,  
while the world moves  
further away from him.



## Venus Jones

I think I saw Venus Jones in Central Park today; we were wearing face masks, so I am not sure.

It's been at least forty years since we last met in the same park near the Alice in Wonderland statue. This time she was with a tall teen-age boy who could have been her grandson. He was wearing a BLACK LIVES MATTER T- Shirt. I was hoping she would stop and talk to me like the last time, but she didn't. I waved but she turned away. Maybe she didn't recognize me with my white hair and my mask. But there was something in her eyes that made me think she did.

In 1965 when all things were possible. At Columbia Teacher's College, I was in a master's program and took a course called Negro Literature. Dr. Bone armed us with books we could take with us to teach in Harlem or the South Bronx. We were the future; we would change the world. Most of us were white.

At the end of the class Dr. Bone required each student to interview a black poet for an anthology he was writing. Gloria Oden was my assignment.

She lived in a basement apartment in Greenwich Village. To me the village was the epitome of romance back then. Having grown up in a white suburb with country clubs, no sidewalks, no grit. Greenwich Village meant freedom, sex, art and danger. My friends and I would go there on weekends to hear folk music. We vowed we would live there some day. If I was apprehensive about the visit, I don't remember. In those days, I pretended to be fearless.

I walked down a short staircase to the basement apartment. I could see the poet through her window. She sat on a green

couch looking through a book. I rang the doorbell. She opened the door and smiled a welcome smile. I could see that she lived alone. A record was playing, Billie Holiday, Strange Fruit . “ Southern trees bear strange fruit. Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.” She asked if I knew the song and seemed surprised that I did. Her shelves contained a multitude of many books: poetry from Paul Lawrence Dunbar who wrote in dialect and was out of fashion, to Nikki Giovanni, Langston Hughes and Leroy Jones. Every black poet in her collection wrote about race I don’t remember what we talked about or if she offered anything to drink. What I remember was her statement which upset me : “Inside every black person is a valid chasm of hate.” Maybe I wanted her to be wrong. I didn’t want to be hated.

In my senior year of college, I was a student teacher in the Hough Area of Cleveland. I was assigned to student-teach at Harry E. Davis Junior High School. Mrs. Sutphin was my master teacher. Tall, caramel and elegant, always in heels, her hair in a French twist, she had careful and what I thought was affected English. She pronounced literature “literatur.” She insisted that Friday was dress- up day. Each seventh-grade boy had to wear a tie. The girls dressed in their Sunday best. The children did a choral reading of James Weldon Johnson’s “The Creation.” Her writing on the blackboard was like calligraphy. And she loved me. Didn’t she ? The kids seemed to. I know I was adored by Roosevelt Winbush and Boogaloo Bush . Boogaloo was the dance craze back then. I took them out of class every day for remedial reading. I gave Roosevelt a book about F.D.R. , his name sake. But we never talked about the book. I wished we had.

At the end of my teaching assignment, a male teacher and I went to a bar in downtown Cleveland to hear Miles Davis.



I was shocked when Davis turned his back on the audience. I suddenly felt that he was rejecting me. I think I was the only white person in the room.

It's the same way I felt today in the park, when I thought I saw Venus Jones. Of course, I could be wrong but after all that's happened, who knows?

After graduate school I was assigned to teach at Benjamin Franklin High school on 116th Street. What I learned about black literature and the Harlem Renaissance stood me in good stead when Venus Jones sat in the first row of my tenth grade English class. She sat upright at her desk, always attentive. She loved the books we read and wrote about them with insight and grace. She asked me for more titles and recommendations. Her favorite was a play called "A Day of Absence" about what happens in a small Southern town when all the black folks refuse to go to work. She ignored the girl who slept slumped over at the desk next to her. It was my job to get the attention of each child. I threw out the assigned curriculum. Instead of Silas Marner, I opted for Bigger Thomas from Wright's Native Son. The kids, even the sleeping girl, listened.

I didn't have to work to get the attention of Venus Jones. She was my most brilliant student.

Venus's mother was head of the PTA at Benjamin Franklin. She was one of only three mothers who came to parent- teacher night. It was hard for me to understand.

"These mothers are too busy getting high," was what some white teachers said. The kids hated them. They told the kids to open their books and read while they flipped through the New York Times.

I taught with fury. I didn't want the kids to miss what Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright could say to them. And just like in Mrs. Sutphin's class, we did a choral reading of "The Creation" and invited all the other English classes. Years went by and I left Harlem. I got married, divorced. I was a single mother back then.

One day in Central Park in 1976, I ran into Venus Jones. She was working as a research fellow at Memorial Sloan Kettering.

I don't remember if we hugged but I will never forget what she said,

"Mrs. McKechnie, I've never forgotten you. You were like a mother to all of us."

Of all the things students have said to me over the years, these are words I most cherish.

But now in the middle of a terrible pandemic, when we are all afraid, we are seeing that chasm the poet talked about. The lyrics of Strange Fruit that played that day, played in my head when I watched the face of George Floyd. "Pastoral scene of the gallant south, The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth." Has the curtain that hid a horrifying history been pulled back? We see the life of black mothers and more pain than we ever imagined.

So, if it was Venus I saw today in the park, she is the mother or grandmother of a black son. How can she still think of me as being like a mother to her or to any black child?

I understand if she turned away.





## Why We March

Tell me about your dreams  
as brave as you  
on the warrior's path.

Radical honesty.  
Healing words  
flow.

Courage  
crying:  
Rising strong!

Because of you  
daring greatly,  
breaking bounds.

Sweat your prayers.  
Spark  
the anatomy of change.

The call?  
A higher loyalty.  
The mastery of Love.

Sacred journey of the  
peaceful warrior:  
the power of now  
illuminating shadows.

The awakening  
becoming  
what we talk about when we  
talk about love.

Sensing, feeling and action,  
bone breath & gesture  
creating the impossible.

Making a difference  
to our children's children.  
Great expectations.

My dream of you:  
living in balance,  
teammates for life.

Beyond fear  
peace breaks out.  
Keep going.

**TRACY ROSE STAMPER**



*Next*

MIRZA NAYEEM  
AHMED





*Guyana*  
**TOM DARIN LISKEY**



# **MISOGYNOIR**

**MYLES MCCOLLUM**



## Misogynoir

From the painful ways of birth  
The system preys upon the hurt of black women  
Their pain, their feelings, marked as exaggerated  
It's invisible to them, those who use the tools of systemic racism  
Their token lives are lost and remain a statistic  
We're fishing for change in our pockets but nothings there  
A mother bout lost her child until the nurses finally cared  
Heart rate was at 0, yet we look to them to be our heroes?  
And then pay the bill with about six zeroes  
For what? Your inattentiveness  
Cuz you're told they tend to be overdramatic, ratchet?  
Try passionate, educated, and yet you call them crazy  
I'm asking you, what do you know about what black women go through  
Have gone through  
So much trauma, call it generational  
Never get applause when you're mimicking their style  
They're so inspirational  
Never ask how the fuck they feel  
Half of your ancestors wouldn't be here without their breast milk  
Fed y'all asses when they couldn't even feed their own  
Nun but dirty water and cows milk, and end up dead on a stone  
While massa's child thrived and survived cuz their worth more than gold  
You should be thanking these women for being here cuz reparations is owed  
So when you pick and choose what to pay attention to  
Remember this thing called melanin blues

**DARRYL HOLMES**

## **Dark Encounters**

He walks toward the car like he's riding a horse  
ass high heels dug in

I can feel my wife at home, pinching me.

His flashlight washes slowly over my face  
like something familiar.

All of our families have rehearsed the drill  
hands on wheel hearts tucked in muted corners

She covers my mouth with her faith.

We both know what can happen from here,  
how a taillight can turn into a chokehold.

## Erica, O Erica

Think of Erica Garner  
fighting for her father  
fighting for us all  
impassioned, articulate, persistent  
protest in pursuit of prosecution,  
turning the terrible grief of unjust murder  
into a profound scythe cutting      cutting      cutting  
through the pause, the postponed,  
the stall, the shilly shallying  
the equivocation      the dilly dallying      vacillation  
failures and falters      finding      no fault  
postponed      delayed      denied

parsed procrastination defying the proof before our eyes  
all who could, hear and might know and feel the theft  
of her father's life too soon    too soon    way too soon  
and she carrying their generations within  
as she carried this dismantling loss  
as she carried our dismay and dysfunction  
as she carried what burdens we might imagine  
and those we can't      poor, pregnant, bereft    on fire

grief upon unmitigated grief for cause without  
cause for no good reason never good and never reason  
for the unreasoning unreasonable and the unpunished  
theft of life      what she carried was too much  
was unrelieved by result or circumstance  
was unlifted      unremediated    unhealed  
what followed    egregious as what preceded

Erica  
another father said I can't breath  
another black man by another grocery store  
another held in fond affection by his many

another murdered by police  
in broad clear, documented daylight  
another begged for air, for life

we are left again  
in stunned disbelief

even as witnesses begged for the dying man's release  
even as onlookers expressed dismay

other officers abet the murder  
one kneels on the prone man's throat

as before for your father  
a uniformed gang attacked  
aided and abetted the theft of breath  
the cessation of being for  
reasons unexplored unexamined  
unquestioned unprosecuted for 6 years

after and we see it again and again  
and you Erica died too were killed  
too were undone by the burden  
of pursuing parity, acknowledgment  
of the wrong done of the murder  
of the loss endless piercing

gratitude for witness in recordings  
proof of unreasoning savagery  
dressed in the clothes of protection

Erica, maybe this time  
a daughter won't die  
awaiting justice for her father

**AKUA LEZLI HOPE**

**Erica Garner-Snipes** (May 29, 1990 – December 30, 2017) starting a month after her father, Eric Garner's death after a NYC cop placed him in a chokehold in 2014 and for the following year, led twice-weekly marches visiting the scene of her father's death, visits which the media labeled a "die-in" She created a foundation in her father's name, the Garner Way Foundation, to "engage communities all over the world in social justice issues through political awareness, music, arts and activism." Garner campaigned to have the transcripts of the grand jury into her father's death made public.

"None of the New York officers involved in Mr. Garner's death have been charged with a crime or disciplined by the Police Department. That fact has enraged the Garner family and various advocacy groups devoted to holding the police accountable for abuses of power." NYT 2019

## questions for henrietta

who are you?  
why can't I see you?  
I want to write you a poem.

they say  
that even though  
your womb tormented you,  
and your cells failed you,  
you became, henrietta,  
the eve of modern medicine,  
because your veins branched  
out like the tree of life,  
each immortal cell showing us  
our own chromosomes,  
midwifing lives in vitro,  
mapping possibilities  
for stagnant genes,  
shooting us into the stars.

henrietta, you made  
an entire body  
from a fractured rib.

but did you deserve  
to become a martyr  
for your own sickness  
while being the savior  
for so many others?

henrietta,  
are you finally able to rest  
now that we know your name?



**Lesson on Nostalgia**

~ after Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last*  
*"Black Cargo"*

"Most slaves weren't treated that bad,"  
one of my students wrote last year,  
adding, "Slaves had it better  
here than in their pagan home."

I wanted to say to him, "This is about a home  
you must be cured of,  
your endemic *analgia* a blight  
others are forced to bear,  
their family history erupting  
with *enteralgia*, igniting *glossalgia*,  
their bowels, their tongues aflame with pain."

I wrote him a note instead: "Imagine you are  
Oluale Kossola, and you are still a boy  
in the eyes of your Takkoi village, the only nation  
of joys and rites you've ever known,  
where the leopard roams the same earth you walk upon  
and know as well as your name—its soil springing forth  
with wells, spreading open for seeds that sustain you.  
Then: your permanent

separation from it and the woman you

wanted to marry once you became a man.

“You remember the Dahoman men  
with French guns and women with machetes,  
warriors in the service of another king,  
hunting your human capital,  
swinging through jaw bones and necks.  
You were only nineteen—

the age you are here, in my class—  
and helpless before their traitorous teeth, the new world’s supply-  
side economics. You were taken.

“You spent weeks walking to the sea, dying  
nearly of thirst, then held captive in the Ouidah  
barracoon where your *coxalgia* began, that searing  
complaint in your hip’s ball and socket,  
which, when you think about it now, foretold  
you’d never see your folks again.

“Stripped for the *Clotilde*’s Atlantic crossing,  
you were christened Cudjo, and you were never  
warm while the boss on board, whip threaded  
through his belt, drove you to deeper grief,  
the middle passage afflicting  
your every joint, muscle, and nerve  
the way Shingles lingers, sharp-  
shooting beneath your skin, unrelenting,  
stabbing you in American fields  
even when you’re freed six years later,  
every pang of sweat reminding you how poor  
you are, how far away, how impossible to return.

“Look: This was your transformation from chief’s son  
to cargo, from beloved brother to coin,  
your introduction to the color white,  
which translates into *nostalgia*,  
condition as terminal as cancer  
or cardiac arrest, your tears your matins and vespers,  
more faithful than any Christian’s  
prayers. No matter what you found to replace  
your dreams—the town on the plateau you built  
with others from across the water;  
your six children, who all died before you;  
your beloved wife, who climbed the hill  
to visit them in the graveyard,  
then stayed forever;  
your role as sexton, sweeping the church on Saturdays—  
this is your story, this is your song.

“So when you pose, dear student,  
for a photo in the new century, near the end  
of your life, wearing your dark suit,  
your clean shirt, you remove  
your shoes, stand in your bare feet  
because you long to look  
like you’ve  
come home  
to the African land  
where life began.”

Note: According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, nostalgia in 1770, meant “*morbid longing to return to one’s home or native country, severe homesickness considered as a disease*” . . . . By 1830s the word was used of any intense homesickness: that of sailors, convicts, African slaves. . . . It was a military medical diagnosis principally, and was considered a serious medical problem by the North in the American Civil War: “In the first two years of the war, there were reported 2588 cases of nostalgia, and 13 deaths from this cause. These numbers scarcely express the real extent to which nostalgia influenced the sickness and mortality of the army.”

## Capital Punishment

(Verse 1)

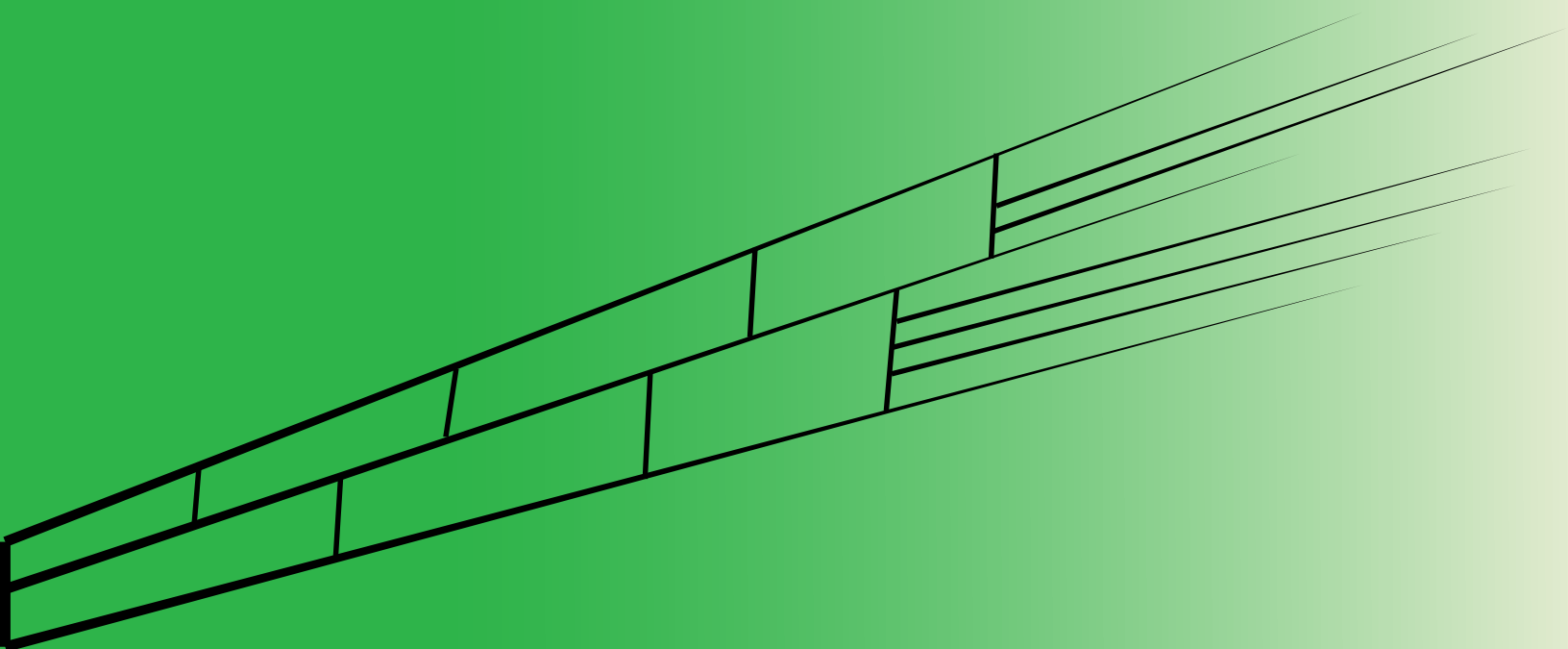
Framed for my black skin  
It's hard to speak in past tense  
When the same shit keep happening  
Target acquired  
Ready to shoot, aim, fire  
More guns for hire is what the harassment inspires  
And the threats fuel the desire to fight back  
Peaceful or riot  
There's power to the many  
There's peace to the few  
And you already know I'm lookin for peace when i look at you  
Cuz I may need help when I'm in deep ridicule  
It's crazy what lies can do to a man who's seeking freedom  
Battling between insanity, and so vulnerable to prey  
It's hard to survive when you're enslaved so physically  
And they expect you to break  
And a lot of men do  
They end up hanging from sheets before the clock hits noon  
They wonder why haven't you?  
Cuz willpower is hope's biggest tool  
I mean there's faith and there's strength  
And holding onto the truth  
It shouldn't take divine intervention to save you  
But without enough word of mouth  
You can go unnoticed  
Your life is surely real, just takes one person to voice it

(Verse 2)

There's continuous death that hangs over my head  
I'm just tryna find a way out to escape the bloodshed  
I'm just tryna keep my hood up without being a suspect  
I wanna live, don't want to be killed in custody  
And have the news say it was suicide  
Mark my words that's never me  
I don't want to be a shield to the police  
An innocent bystander  
Who was never named and forgotten in a week  
Week by week, the cycle repeats  
Shot down, spread around, retweeted, cops get off, no rest for family  
That's the American dream  
Oh say you can see justice  
By the dawn's early light  
Can we see a better country  
Universe knows I want to but as always  
Red white and blue stands for freedom until they're flashing behind you

**MYLES MCCOLLUM**

**MARCELLO GIBBS**





## Vote or Die

Discrimination is what Blacks been facing for years.  
Taking the lives of young Black men got us all in tears.  
Recidivism is at an all time high for a Black man.  
The government don't insist on designing a rehabilitative plan.  
They want to continue to enforce Jim Crow laws to keep us bound.  
We have to show unity with Black Power, and be determined to stand our ground.  
We face all types of obstacles in the land of the free.  
Black people have been lied to for centuries, and that's obvious to see.  
Black women being raped by their slave owners, sabotaging the Black race.  
Then for them to say that we're not a part of America, is such a disgrace.  
We have to rise above all the assassinations.  
And continue to strive to give our kids the best education.  
Teach them about the laws and the government that's political.  
The way they can maneuver through situations, when they get critical.  
Vote or Die "Puff Daddy" said it a long time ago.  
If we don't come together, "How will we continue to grow?"  
We must vote for the one that will increase our chances at success.  
Rather than vote for the ones that get into office, only to finesse.  
We need a leader that can lead us in this promised land.  
And that could provide us a way for every woman, child and man.  
Black America; White America; Brown America; we all need to come together, and show humanity.  
God sees us all as one, regardless of our nationality.  
Government and police officer's shouldn't show racism and brutality.  
We as people have the voices to vote; or face reality.  
I believe voting can make a change.  
If we choose not too, it will only stay the same.  
Our Ancestors have shed blood, sweat and tears.  
Only to be denied the right to vote years upon years.  
See me, I'm fed up with this, one sidedness and this lack of having success.  
This is something I must confess, because Blacks are still being oppressed.

Black America! Vote or Die.

## **what remains**

i have the right to remain silent  
but not the right to remain?

i write to reframe violence  
as i fight to retain  
passages of middle passage  
i write like the rain  
pouring rites of passage horrors  
stored right in my brain  
boring holes into blackness  
lo! the nightly refrain  
o say star-spangled bodies  
see the light from the train  
in lieu of flowers fight the power  
test your might in the game  
before the final mortal hour  
as i right what remains

of my remains

**RUSSELL NICHOLS**

## Coming North

You looked more like a matinee idol  
than a boxer,  
bobbing and weaving in the narrow  
hallway of our Brooklyn apartment—  
intent on buckling the air.

You moved toward the shadows  
slipping punches,  
your sweat  
knocking paint off the walls.

I always wondered  
who was in front of you,  
how hard they fell father  
as you stepped over the noise—  
Your right arm bent  
in an Ali wishbone.  
Your blue fist, swelling like a storm.

**DARRYL HOLMES**

## **Blackness: Night before Ash Wednesday, 2020**

Not that midnight is so very dark  
in my dimly lighted sleepless room,  
white sheets on my bed  
even whiter than what's so thoroughly painted  
around me;

not that darkness is so bleak or fearsome,  
full of bad dreams that need an ending  
or even the pain one suffers alone;

no, none of these realities  
describe one's ailing self  
before the unseen impalpable strength  
inside one's soul and everywhere within,  
where blackness is a promise of gentle rest,  
a way of being whole.

**PATRICE WILSON**

## Open Letter to My Younger Sister

Oluchi,

The day you told me you thought you weren't pretty, I bittersweet smiled like grayscale flashbacks on prepubescent insecurities.

The day you told me you thought you weren't pretty because your skin was too dark.

I felt the beginnings of this poem rupture my stomach.

My throat closed its walkways

I feared my self-hate projected unto you like movie screenings

That you witnessed me wallowing in the shallow waters of my reflection in our bathroom mirror and became accustomed to the salt

To the way I cupped my own head and held it under the waves

Colorism has a way of dancing.

A way of swinging its hips

A way of entrancing you.

A way of burning itself in your retinas

A way of whispering demands into the ears of adolescent boys

Tells them beware

She is not of your kind

She is lesser than

And they believed it  
And so did we

I don't know how we've lived with this pain for so long

Oluchi, what good is our armor if we are too busy trying to destroy it?

Oluchi, this is no skin-deep battlefield

Oluchi, you are waging a war against yourself and  
no part of you will win.

Baby girl listen to me,

Your skin is petroleum.

It's the backbone of this country.

It's everything they can't and we will

It's where queens arise.

where success takes root.

where crows gather to harvest their joy.

moons litter dust

murky oceans and clear hearts

sepia spilling unto egg whites



sweet and salty and whole

So, in days you put fist through mirror,  
Like I did

Hammered your face to stitch it back together with pieces of models in  
magazines,

Like I did

Know that the downfall of my self-ownership will not fashion you a starting  
gate

I will not let it

Come, dine with me

We will sip tea from each other's hands and frolic in gardens of wheat like  
mahogany

We will make our bodies sanctuaries and stop trying to uproot the god that  
lives therein.

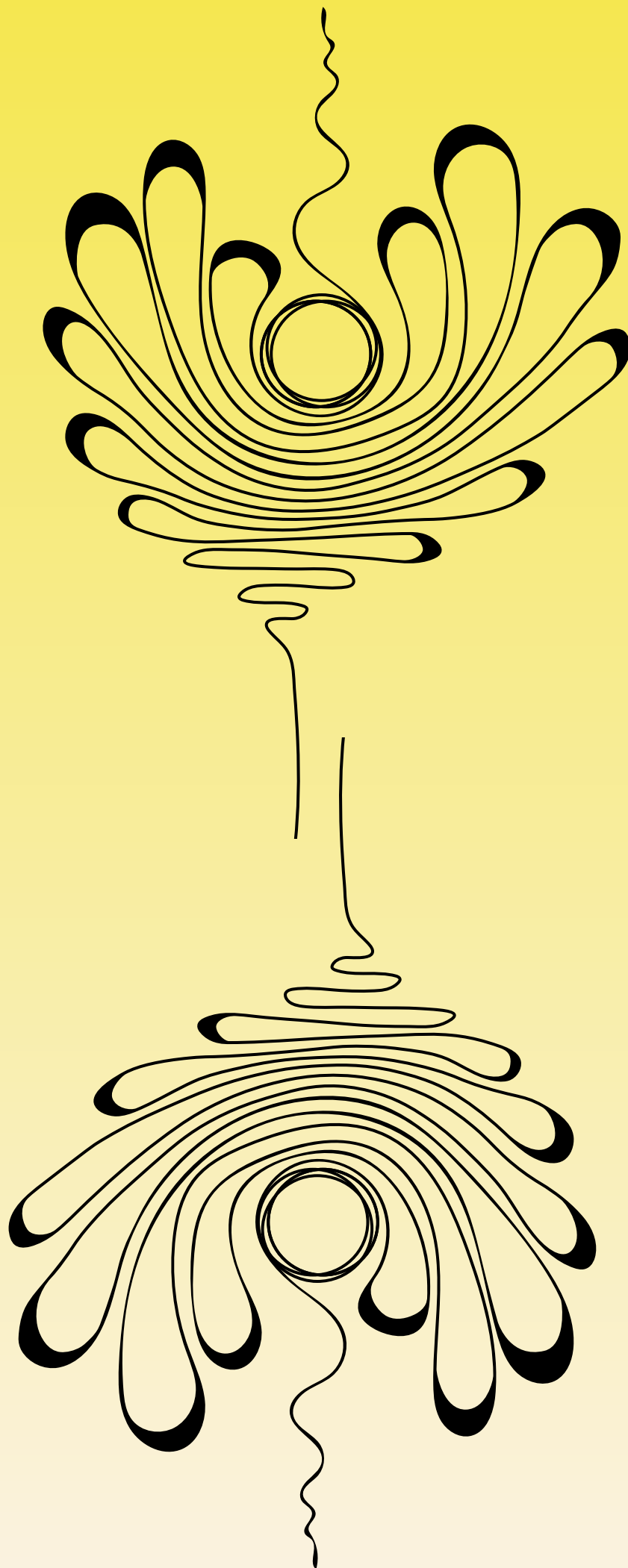
We will fall in love with the night that nestles between stars yet stretches  
itself into masterpiece

You are masterpiece.

You are alchemy aftertaste

You are beautiful.

Don't you ever let anyone tell you otherwise



## BLM

•

I know of a contagion—  
the DNA of our blood flowing in the veins  
of the seas and rivers. The shores  
overseas welcome our visits since centuries.

I cannot remember a face like my father's  
on the ship of slavery, nor his native name,  
but his chains of heritage are long enough  
to reach my children's children.

The plague of a branch spreads across,  
so why would we not protest? Our tree  
of lineage would be cut off if we stay silent.

History has managed to knock on our doors  
with his bruised knuckles— these doors  
are built for millennia, and we have learnt  
how best to open them, and to whom,  
from which place, for which cause.

We see what vile lurks out of our windows  
on our distant relatives, and we cry out  
for our lives in another's flesh.  
We are not souls apart, at least not anymore.

**TUKUR RIDWAN**

## For Wanda Coleman's Wicked Enchantment

I have waited three months for Wanda Coleman's book. It kept getting delayed. Phone calls did not make the delivery faster. Neither did breezing through books I had in the meantime. One week ago it arrived at Print Bookstore. Safe in its brown paper bag at the curbside. The pages smooth to touch with no worn discoloration; but they know it will come in my captivity. This week my anxiety threatens my mortality. Withdrawal-induced headaches from lack of internal chemical vibrations. Withdrawal-induced spit builds under my tongue from lack of dry mouth. Withdrawal-induced tears over an article about police officers who got fired for killing porcupines instead of for killing Black people. I read Wanda's work. Wrapped in my partner's plaid blanket, I realize that God waited for the right time for me to read sustenance. Sonnets that decolonize my mind about form. Idioms that hold me like my grandmother's arms in an embrace. Room to cast curses to mitigate apocalyptic harm. It's too cold outside, and amidst all the upheaval God allowed, amidst the wait for new medication, amidst the need to take a break from the news cycle, God allowed space for soup.

MAYA WILLIAMS



# MIKE EKUNNO

## AUSCHWITZ IN SMALL DOSES: THE GEORGE FLOYDS OF AFRICA

The cab driver's facility with navigating the Old City neighbourhood showed a certain familiarity. The alleys were unclogged. Which should bode well. With hindsight, it was a giveaway. In that downtown part of the city, carts and urchins and vagrants and regular folk would normally be angling for rights of way with wares borne on heads, backs and on carriages. From the back seat, I flipped the warrens of street blocks with bloated columns and beams – handiwork of natural architects. Then, suddenly, the cab came to a stop. It was by a clearing where the relentless alleys breathed. I quickly took in the unfolding scene – boys wielding cudgels, machetes, iron rods and cut tree branches. It was a disorganised scene like the brewing of something more full scale and sinister; a seasonal communal angst. They disembarked us – the driver and me. In a fleeting moment, I wondered whether it was all a set-up with the driver virtually surrendering his hunted quarry to his patrons. But a double take showed the driver was also being marched away with me to I know not where.

I was mortified. I was the 'other' in that crowd. Merely from looks, my captors already knew it. I picked up the staccato of 'Nyamiri, ne!' 'Nyamiri, ne!!' identifying me by the pejorative of my ethnic group, the Igbo. My people have been led like sheep to the slaughter ever since the pogrom of 1966 in Northern Nigeria. But in recent years, the killings have become more 'inclusive' incorporating minorities from Nigeria's Middle Belt. I could see the glistening machetes, daggers, improvised sticks and rods. Their wielders were a motley of urchins with rheum in eyes and unwashed bodies. I was being poked randomly as they walked me along. The gang on the cab driver had stopped on the way and he was being interrogated. He wasn't Igbo and in the pecking order of slaughter candidates, the Igbo occupied the topmost rung. As I saw my gruesome murder in the glistening blades of iron, I tried to remember what could be the origin of the

extant mayhem. I was fully self-conscious. My real-life persona would not be in the dark concerning any security alert and would not knowingly breach the jackals' pack. But I could not recall any latest national or local provocation to have warranted what surrounded me. I prepared for the worst and steeled my nerves against the steel around me. I couldn't run for it. This was the middle of enemy territory.

A dash would finally give them the excuse – like the times I have had to brave it past a host's growling dogs. We walked along to where must be their leader's court all the while being rudely poked here with a stick and there with the tip of a machete. The bystanders gawked me like some circus animal. The pathological dread inside of me was unspeakable. As I walked my final moments on God's earth, I remembered my young last born. The others would mourn my unfound corpse for a while and move on but Ifechi would not be able to bear it. It was the thought of him that brought my weeping. And then I woke up.

It wasn't gratitude that immediately gripped me. It was the sorry I felt for my own near death. The tear drops coursing both cheeks were evidence enough that the nightmare was 'real'; it wasn't made up. Then I felt grateful. Grateful that it had all been a dream, a bad dream. Grateful for the fresh gift of life; for the chance to be seen by my boy again and to watch him grow. I flicked on the rechargeable lamp by my bedside and with it I made my way to the switch by the wall to have the room fully lit. I was lucky, electricity had returned while I slept and I was immediately bathed in familiarity – my wardrobe, desk littered the way I know it, the mirror picking up my distraught image. I felt welcomed back to life.

George Floyd's gruesome murder has woken the world up to the reverse terrorism of the state against the individual. But most killing fields of developing countries are not so much state-sponsored as state-tolerated. How does one explain that in the long bloody history of Nigeria's continual slaughters, nothing near a commensurate number of convicts exists for the slain? In fact, one would be hard pressed to find any convict from Nigeria's seasonal slaughters going



back to independence in 1960. This is not unlike looking for convicts for the US police's anti-Black homicides. Which makes the current frenzy with police reforms in the US something of a red herring without a commensurate attention to judicial reforms.

Before George Floyd, my nightmare shared coequality with the state-sponsored murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The temptation to review my experience in the light of his has been irresistible. The creative in me has tried to serenade his last moments from the viral video clip of his stepping onto the threshold of the Saudi embassy building and unto his mortality. I wonder: did he have any premonitions? What moment did it dawn on him that he had walked into a fatal set-up? Who did he feel most sorry for among his beloved who were to be bereaved by his death? How did he take the prospect of his own death when the mission of his butchers became obvious to him? We may never know the answers to these questions now. We may also never know if his spirit has been haunting his killers and making sure they'd "sleep no more." As for Floyd, his plaintive cry for his late mother shows something about how our memories process bereavement and loss. The dead live in our consciousness.

The killers of Khashoggi and Floyd murdered sleep. The uproarious responses from the rest of the world more than proves that. Cheery as such aftermaths are, they look invidious to the others worldwide who share the possibility or reality of an extra-judicial murder like the duo but not the retributive aftermath. These are the ones who watch their governments preside over unspeakable atrocities in the backyard of their homelands and later hug the klieg lights of civilisation at international forums. They use bloodied hands to shake other world leaders who gloss over these atrocities in the name of non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. In life, no one should pray to die Floyd's cruel death, but if it comes, it should be some comfort that the world would drag the culprits to justice or justice to them.

Letting killers go scot-free becomes like second deaths for the hapless dead and their relatives. By extension, the victim's ethnic, religious, or ideological constituency is also being told not in so many

words that they are the inconsequential other. Since the dead were killed just for belonging to a particular faith or ethnic group or holding on to a certain ideology, their perceived offence then is corporate. It could very well have been any other member of the group. This corporate victimhood manifests in many ways including nightmares for survivors like the one that foregrounded this piece. Needless to say, one set of unprosecuted killers which melds back into its community and boasts of its exploits incentivises a successor set which would be out to earn its own bragging rights at 'the fire next time'. And if the next causal offence takes too long in coming, one is instigated. All this because the chances of the killer ever being prosecuted and convicted simply do not exist. Over time, kill-and-go-free becomes endemic in these regions – Northern Nigeria; Darfur, Sudan; Rakhine State, Myanmar but also in US police departments. We are here not talking of full-blown war zones. We are talking of low intensity but continual massacres with body counts that rival many full-blown wars. Auschwitz in small doses. At least with a war going on you know to avoid the war zone and protect yourself.

Many a national government's claim to sovereignty consists in securing her borders from external aggression. This they ought to do without neglecting internal insecurity as is the bane of many a developing country. Nigeria's unfolding genocide has been called out recently by no less a body than Britain's All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. Some of the reactions to Floyd's murder from Nigerian social media space have questioned the rationale in condemning US's racism when the Blackman is being killed by fellow Blacks who go scot-free in Africa. From South Africa's xenophobia to Nigeria's low intensity seasonal genocide. Every government becomes complicit in the killings within its territory when the killer is not brought to justice. When one now has to talk about serial killings or ethnic cleansing, it goes from tolerance to instigation by default.

In Nigeria, one of the usual suspects for the seasonal carnage loomed large on the national psyche when I had the nightmare.

The presidential election campaigns had been flagged off with politicians poking the nation's fault lines with brinkmanship's rods. My nightmare could have been triggered as a psychic recall of its past history of wanton sectarian killings. In the 2019 race, one of the incendiary ingredients, religion, was dampened in the two frontrunner parties whose candidates were both Muslims. At best, this religious monochromaticity only took care of one half of the excuses for violence. The other half that remained, tribe, still looked menacing enough not least because perpetrators are assured in advance that they would go scot-free. At every such election period, settlers leave their abodes in droves to the safety of their ancestral homelands. Even the Nativity doesn't come close. While the primary costs of such a huge internal migration would be felt in road accidents, burglaries of un-manned shops, and homes and disruption to children's schooling, the intangible costs are more deep-rooted in the psyche. They include psychoses and nightmares the like of which I woke from.

While the Reverend Al Sharpton spoke powerfully at Floyd's funeral about US minorities preparing for the next era of agitations against racism and police brutality, in Africa and the rest of the developing world, what should long-oppressed minorities prepare for – more nightmares like mine? How many/much feet on the streets, placards, op-eds, TV airtime, vandalisms, public outcries would it take to shine global lights on the cesspits of extra-judicial murders in the Third World? What if there were no nightmares and all our phobias came to pass without warnings? What if one did not wake up from a nightmare? The relief that a nightmare is just that for now beats its reification while sleep lasts.



RUSSELL NICHOLS

**Welcome to Freedom!**

Did you have any trouble  
finding the place? I know  
those maps can be tricky,  
sticky with saltwater  
tears from so many lost—

and yet


**You Are Here**

Did you have any trouble  
finding the place? I know  
those roads can be rough  
by design, lined with fresh  
Black bodies, white lilies—

and yet

**You Are Here**

Did you have any trouble  
finding the place? I know  
those signs can be misleading  
(read: slippery when wet with  
the blood of the breathless)



streets flooded with the young  
the restless protesting the mess  
no soap can wash out

under/served  
over/stressed

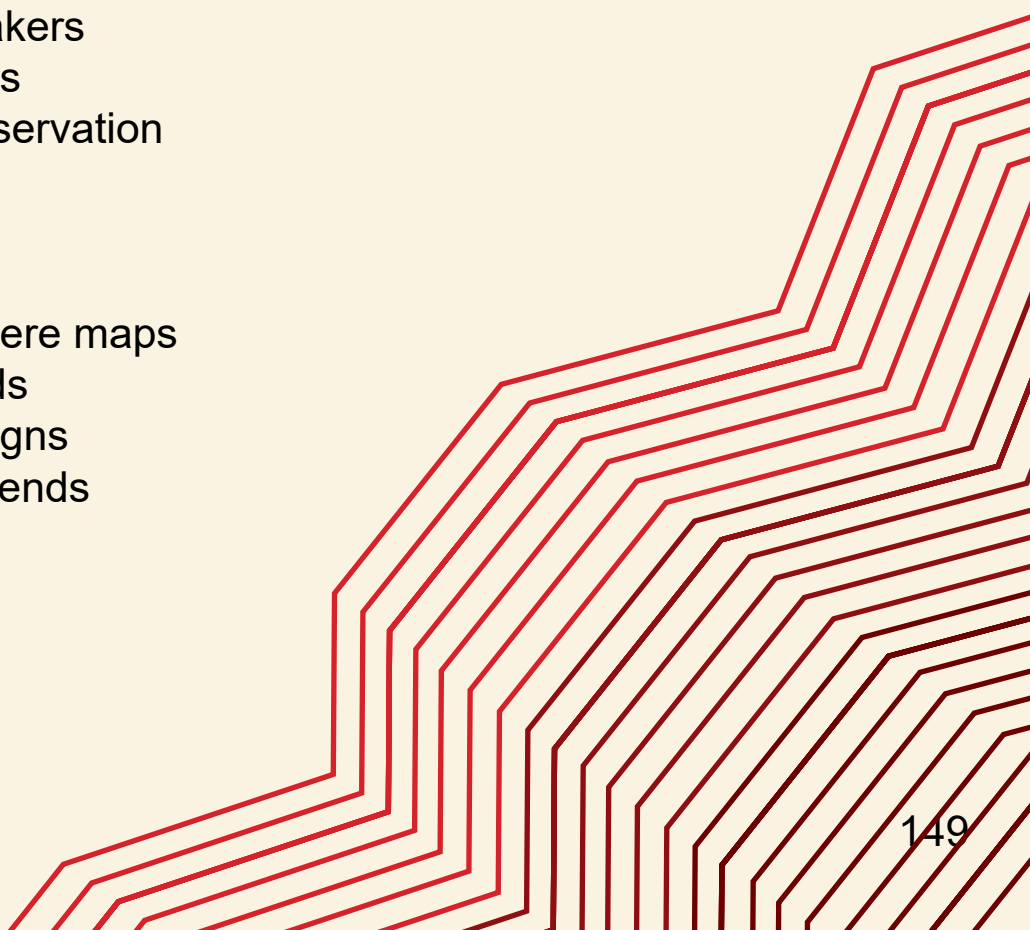
hard-pressed to look within  
when it's always time to watch out—

and yet  
and yet

In a plot twist of 97  
acres 19 families born  
of salt become shakers  
so we can see sons  
in the name of preservation

You Are Here

in a safe space where maps  
can't trick and roads  
aren't rough and signs  
don't lead to dead ends









***Portrait: Entrepreneur***

**K ROBERTS**



## Repair Work

I.

We collected in the common room, eyes moored with sleep, weighed down with the new chemicals, each of us off our dark night and trying to understand how to wake into a morning we didn't want to come. They lined us up thrice: once for pills, once for vital signs, once for applesauce and wet pancakes. Over breakfast and a cigarette break and morning art therapy, we began to see each other through the stories we bore: the cocaine addict who awoke naked and shaking in the road, the alcoholic left stumbling on the doorstep by his son, the suicidal one—though, weren't we all that—still sucking charcoal out of her teeth. By noon I sat with the others, watching CNN on TV, thinking with some relief that the election no longer applied to me, that I wouldn't have to choose, that I would be gone. I was the one who had vomited the charcoal, though next time that measure could be avoided. And then I would never have the burden of choosing anything again. Then a young man came toward me in a green hospital jacket, handsome, bearded, his blue-black hair sliding sideways with a studied

AMANDA GUNN

sweep of his head. He made his way down the long corridor to where I sat curled like a pill bug in my armchair, and when he reached me, I smiled at him, fluttering, actually fluttering, petal open, as if he had caught my eye in the subway. He smiled back, then he handed me a cup to pee in, and said to drop it at the front desk when I was done. The blood of desire and embarrassment suffusing my skin shifted a thing in me as no pill could have done. It was the first burden to return to me, shame, moving under me as tectonic plates under the landscape.

II.

We came to have our favorites among the staff, though it was slim pickings, the way most of them looked at us—like handlers at a zoo: occasionally affectionate, always wary. Jim was mine. He gave us two-cigarette breaks and one-armed hugs, forbidden even when we cried so hard our toes were clenched and snot came pouring in rivers out of us. We told him one night over the popsicles he'd sneaked us that we liked him most. He said, "It's nothing, you know. You're not that much different than me," proving that even to the best of them, we weren't whole, we weren't quite human.

### III.

My last night we sat in the common room waiting for dinner to be wheeled in. The TV was off for a change and someone (George, the cocaine addict) was recounting an outrageous tale involving the police, some ecstasy, his pet ferret, and a car full of exotic dancers. It wasn't group, we weren't spelunking through our childhoods or learning mindfulness from a box of raisins. We were gathering around a table, telling dirty stories just as people with friends do. Once we laughed—every one of us, it erupted from our guts like activated charcoal. It couldn't be stopped. The nurses and techs came running when they heard it, convinced, probably, that we were raving, outside our minds, or maybe fighting over the remote—all in all, insufficiently medicated. They didn't understand a ward full of laughter, the sound of fragmented souls repairing themselves.

## FATHER AT TABLE

There was what he demanded—“cornbread,”  
“chicken,” “tatoes,” the delicacies his labor  
both purchased & prepared us, all his long  
hours ours—with a pointing finger. Trying  
not to interrupt the table talk that had snapped  
shut & refused him. Not vain, not white folk,  
he asked only one courtesy: no swearing  
he could hear. He was a Christian & my father.


That godforsaken finger. How stingy it seemed  
then. Now how tender, how pleading. How I bristled  
at the soft of his voice, an engine rumbling under  
the hood of our attention. & O what kindness  
I held back, expecting things he would never ask  
of me: wait your turn, say thank you, say please.

AMANDA GUNN

## Waiting for Chaplain

Waiting for the chaplain, we thirteen County Jail inmates sit in folding chairs against the walls. I sit in the corner where several boxes of donated books are stored. Today marks my third attendance to this weekly so-called Bible class. I say so-called because each of us has his own selfish reason for coming. I have several motives. I loathe idleness, and choosing to hang out with inmates from other dorms help to provide needed distraction. Also, I am a reader, that's mainly how I do my time. Though much of the literature in Chaplain's domain is Christian, Islamic, or Krishna propaganda, if I am diligent like last week, I am likely to run across a Graham Greene, or maybe a Hemingway. Maybe even a Man-Booker honorable mention. Another favor I am hoping for is that Chaplain allow me a phone call. He's good at niceties like that. At least half the fellows here in orange jump suits will be requesting a (yeah, just one) phone contact. Chaplain dials the number, ascertains the contacted person, then hands you the receiver. Sometimes we get as long as four, five minutes. Once in the inner sanctum that is Chaplain's office it is easy to filch things. Like envelopes—both regular ones and large manila ones. Note pads can be stuffed in underwear, and pens can be palmed. Red and other colored pens are favored. It's easy. Back in the dorm or cell block these items can be bartered for coffee or cheese crackers. I think Chaplain knows he's being ripped off, but he's mild-mannered and forgiving of small sins. He listens and smiles and may even pretend to understand our misdemeanors. He's cool.

The first box of books doesn't yield much. At the very bottom I find four-fifths of a disintegrating *The Great Gatsby*. I've read *Gatsby* at least three times previously, so a less than whole serving doesn't appeal to my appetite for amusement. The box is good size and I dutifully re-pack the thirty-odd books. The second box holds a smattering of *Reader's Digest* on top. I discard the bland offering at once. Midway the heap I find something quaint. The title is *Seven*



*League Boots*, by one Albert Murray. Hmm. I read the dust jacket. Oh, my goodness! A contemporary and intimate of Ralph Ellison. A jazzman to boot, just like his buddy Ellison. I read the opening page. Eeeow! I've found treasure. I look about to see whether anyone's peace has been assaulted by my contained primal scream. No one looks my way. Some guys are lazing cross-legged in their chair, eyelids losing tension. Some others are leaning forward looking into empty hands.


Most of us are awaiting Court dates for infractions committed in the course of drugging or selling drugs. Somehow I feel a bit smug being numbered with the former. I've found users to be eminently more personable than jive ass purveyors of crack cocaine. We find ourselves in jail time after time and serving four, six, and sometimes twelve month stints. It's rough and dicey in this nether world. Our aunties shake their graying heads and commiserate on the uselessness of diplomas on the wall. However, the upside to our folly and umpteen arrests is the respite arrest brings. We can then ease back into our truer selves, back into our own skin, as it were.

Senora is another crackhead and he sits in the opposite corner. Though he wears his given name proudly, he is not Hispanic, and certainly not female. He's quite ordinary in appearance, despite being recipient of yet another ridiculous ghetto naming miscue. Senora is reading from a Bible. I can detect he's reading twenty-third Psalm because the Gideon Bible is splayed midway and he seems to already know the words. His lips move and I wonder what is the take-away here cause I happen to believe that people who read audibly are really imposters, just calling words as my third grade teacher used to chide. Besides crossing paths in this County Jail I've seen Senora in the neighborhood. He is often a blur, quickly getting into his patched-up car, or quickly getting out. Always on some mission. And I've heard his name mentioned at the Fun House.

Everyone who smokes the pipe (the devil's dick) at one time or other passes through the rooms at the Fun House. It is a seedy two-story. The door is rarely locked; indeed, visitors have no preferred hours. We enter from the misshapen alley that runs alongside. At the creaky door the user will announce himself to the house-man. A black calloused hand will appear almost from nowhere there in the semi-darkness. "Where me? C'mon, break me off," the hand insists. A yellow-white rock of crack is placed in the hand, and admission is granted. The user takes the stairs with his fun girl in tow. She is antsy and makes a nuisance of herself with obsequious behaviors. She bounces on the stairs in dirty sneakers that were once a cherished pair of *Nike* by a previous owner. She talks a blue streak, all the while smacking her mouth salaciously. In the rooms there is noise of ghostly voices and flicking of waning cigarette lighters. The fun goes on day into night into day until there's no more crack and no more means.

"God gon deliver me," Senora breaks our preoccupations. He makes the declaration with hard insistence and closes the Bible. Then he surveys us with popped eyes. He looks at us like we are the impaneled jury. (But we know that can't be, we are his peers) He fixes me a harder stare, so I presumed I am designated jury foreman. He licks his lips and sits erect—preparing to try his defense on us. "They trying to railroad me, man." A slight righteous tremor is in his voice. He then tries on some humility. Yeah, I'm guilty—but I ain't guilty of what they trying to say!" This apparent paradox gains feigned empathy from us jurors. We murmur our interest. "See, this the way it went. I get high, no secret, bro. I make a good lick sometimes...I'm gon smoke... and I'm gon sm-o-o-ke! See, I got this here snow bunny with me—a blonde blonde girl. She aw-ight, get me? We have our fun. I'm treating her right, she doing me right. Few hours go by I run outa dope, got nothing to work with. Now I gotta make another lick. Nothing big. We drive to this liquor store over on Moncrief. I done hit'em before. I go in, cop two fifth bottles of Crown Royal, that's all. The clerk he busy, got two customers at the counter, so I slip by like, you know, I





done forgot my wallet. You know the game. One of them jive-ass customers whisper something. I'm at the exit door. The clerk holler, 'Not so fast, buddy,' and he jumps over the counter. He say, 'Buddy, you got to pay for what's under your shirt.' I keep going like he aint talking to me. I'm out the door, fast-walking toward my car. Snow Bunny, she waiting. I can see her watching me. She see I'm being followed. She do the smart thing, she push open the car door for me. I grab my keys. See, that the problem, cause the key chain got a lil' bitty pocket knife on it. Yeah, one of them ornamental do-hickey. I point the key, to tell the clerk Quit harry-assing me, see. Now he saying I threatened him with a knife. Yeah. All I done was shook the key, I aint point no doggone knife."

"I would've sped off," one panelist interjects.

"Did. But this good citizen\_\_\_\_\_"

"Always some meddler about."

"He copy my tag number," Senora continues. "Cops pull me over on Main Street. Armed robbery! Armed robbery, the cop say. That aint me, I do not arm rob nobody." He obviously needs a ray of hope, but we all got problems.

We are crestfallen. Only a few eyes meet. A true veteran of the system speaks up. "I wouldn't sweat it, man. Them folk bluffing. Stick to your guns, they'll drop that phony charge, I done seen it happen before. Seen it too many times. The charge is shoplifting, plain and simple. Wish they'd try me like that."

"Whatcha say, Professor? He is speaking to me, and he observes that I've got Albert Murray tucked safely underarm. "You be reading all the time, you smart." It's almost an accusation. "Whatcha say? I can beat this charge, can't I?"

I shrug.

“C’mon, bro. You know something. I know you know.”

I scratch my kinky head and try to think of something. Something that’s not just whitewash. I realize we’re dopers and we’re caught up in the mix. “A good lawyer’ll work.” Again his eyes behold me like I’m holding back some tested theorem I want to keep all to myself.


A strange acceptance falls upon him, he relaxes, takes a deeper breath. “I been praying. Done prayed on it. Gon keep on praying. God gon intervene. Watch and see,” he challenges the lot of us. God done put me in this fix to get my attention, I know that.”

It irks me just now that my sound advice seems completely lost on him. I won’t dwell on Senora. Instead I recall an ornate sign I’ve seen many times, just blocks beyond the Fun House. The lighted sign that augments the splendid lawn at Stanley’s Mortuary reads: **More things are wrought through prayer than this world dreams of.** But I believe the sign is narcotic used by slick morticians to fleece the bereaved.

“What about the white girl with you, what she say? That’s your witness, man,” I offer this bit of jurisprudence with warmest regard.

“She, uh...She gon talk for them.” Senora touches his own face tenderly, as if he’s the only one who loves himself just now. “They come at’er with the boo game,” he rationalizes. “Got her saying I drewed the knife. You know how they do.” The jury is doubtful and it shows on all our faces. “Want me to cop out to twelve years.” There’s collective groaning. “I told’em let’s do it, pick twelve honest and true.”

Chaplain enters. He cradles a stack of periodicals and pamphlets the way high school girls tote textbooks. He is very tall and large-boned,



yet he is rather doughy and smooth-skinned. A busy air accompanies his entrance. He lingers guiltily like the wayward shepherd that he presently is. "You waited," he intones with a dollop of admiration for us. "Someone could have begun. You know where we left off last Thursday, I believe." His brows rise askance. He glides toward his office door. "Won't have time for *Daily Bread*. Any really necessary phone requests? He checks his Seiko wrist watch. "Can only spare a few before time is called."

Several of us rise to be first in line with a pretense of casualness. Senora raises his hand. "Chaplain," Senora says, and his voice is as sonorous as a Baptist preacher. Chaplain holds onto the door knob. "Tell me how...How do I get a prayer through?" The gravity of the entreaty constricts the room severely. Chaplain is fazed, doesn't yet move through the doorway. It seems the first time he's been put in the box where he truly must speak for God and the power of prayer. He taps his forehead and we suspect he is putting the question in storage for future rumination. He blows air through thin lips. "We've only ten, twelve minutes for calls. Uh, who's a first-timer?" he asks. Then he passes into the office and unburdens himself.

On the following Tuesday Senora's courtroom jury finds him guilty of armed robbery. The judge considers that he is bound to impose a legal sentence, that the defendant declined a negotiated plea, and that defendant has numerous prior convictions. The judge metes out Life, with possibility of parole.

## Black Ink

Starting with Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, my best friend has written, on the inside of his wrist, the names of every unarmed black person who has died unjustly. He writes their names in black ink, sends me a picture and then we both sit in silence because there are no words that need to be spoken. We innately know what the other is thinking and those thoughts are too big for words - too heavy to adequately express our pain.

The name written in ink is a very small token serving as a reminder that the life taken mattered; even though we live in a society where black male lives often don't. It's a reminder of his mortality. My friend knows deep down that it could have been him and he doesn't feel the need to continuously verbalize his fear; he lives it. Everyday. And every time he looks at his wrist he is reminded that his skin color is a source of fear in others; a source of fear that could cost him his life.

As someone who has a black male father, black male cousins, and black male friends, I worry, but choose to keep my fear silent as well. It manifests itself in the tears that fall during my most vulnerable moments. It appears when I text them and ask them if they made it home safely. And it causes rage when I hear them explaining to their black sons that the rules are different for them.

It was easier for me to worry about them. Because if I'm worrying about someone else, I don't have to think about the impact that this has on my own life- my mother's life, my grandmother's life. I have to be the strong black woman that society tells me I am. I don't have time to look fear in its eyes and actually grieve for the culture. But I knew deep down that it always could be me. My being female does not discount my being black. I'm not exempt. The fact that I'm an educated, professional black woman doesn't buy me a free pass.

The death of Botham Jean on September 6, 2018 drove this point home for me. I could be next. In fact, you don't even have to leave your house to be killed. They will come to you. That day, I saw my mortality sitting on the couch doing nothing but being black. I realized that I too am a target. It seems with each passing day more things are added to the list of what justifies killing a black person - breathing, running, sleeping, walking, riding a train. Never mind that there is a global pandemic, I could die from just simply being me.

I don't want the next name written on my wrist to be my best friend, or my father, or any black person - or white person for that matter. I want to use my pens to write about the happiness in the world - the joy that can be felt by loving one another. But you can't write about it, when you don't feel it. My pens will continue to inscribe my wrists with the names of my brothers and sisters that die from their lack of privilege. It reminds us that we are not valued by society at large. Even if all the killing stopped, the ink on our wrists will never quite wash away. It is branded in our hearts and it stains our bodies like the blood of the innocent people that have been slain.

**CHRISTINA MCELWEE**





*The Unseen*  
MYLES MCCOLLUM





**HUDA KHWAJA**

## **For Graduating Student Activists**

These words are for my people who graduate with college degrees  
but know that their work is not over yet and never will be.  
We're the people who remember our responsibility  
as the ones who fight for justice, for freedom, for mercy.  
As students we spent our time  
searching for opportunities  
to fulfill the obligation we have to learn,  
the obligation we recall every moment we stretched out our hands  
hoping, trying, keyboard keys clacking, minds wracking, and we prayed...  
"Increase me in knowledge,"<sup>1</sup>  
knowledge of benefit to us and to our communities  
in our lives, our joys and our cries,  
our constant search for unity.  
Unity, but not conformity.  
Today, we are graduates,  
and we have each struggled in our own individual ways  
as we searched for our voices, our spaces, our purpose  
through the blinding haze  
of homogeneity, of rampant institutional injustice in society  
and small and large acts of violence  
that begin and end with suppressing silence,  
even when we tried to shout out in protest.  
Yes we have struggled.  
We have many wars already fought.  
We wrestled within ourselves and wrestled others without.  
And we made it this far, tired but  
We're not finished.  
Tomorrow we wake up and start working  
searching, learning, fighting, righting  
the mistakes we see around us

keeping in mind the giants who came before us  
and passed us the torch,  
The message that lights our way forward toward  
our final destination,  
our ultimate goal.  
And we remember while others have moved mountains before,  
we are the ones we have been waiting for.  
So we have let go, our hands and our minds, of the textbooks,  
the rules, whether cultural or grammatical,  
the institutions, the targeted silencing and grooming,  
our inquisition redirected to problems and solutions  
outside our classrooms  
that we are leaving behind us today.  
Tomorrow, as activists and writers we rise  
to speak truth to power  
Even, even as our voices shake,  
even as we struggle to fake being bold  
even and as we choke  
on the fear we swallow back.  
We, as innovators and dreamers  
we stand together in strength and our efforts combined,  
we remember our liberation is always intertwined.  
We aim to be what we claim to be:  
“A mercy to humanity.”<sup>2</sup>  
And as speakers, artists, and teachers  
we remain in play  
knowing our success up till now came from the Merciful, the Just  
knowing we owe gratitude for blessings as frequent as the specks of dust  
that are scattered by the winds,  
those little things we fail to see at times but are always there.  
And when blessing becomes too hard to see,  
As exhaustion overtakes us  
when the people we trusted becomes the ones who thrust us  
into the crowds of naysayers who tell us

We're wrong...

We flee to the safety, the space, the security  
we only find among each other,  
among the changemakers and leaders,  
the believers

and we open our arms to each other with the promise we hold tight:

"What is to come is better for you than what has gone by."<sup>3</sup>

and we remember:

"With every hardship comes ease. Indeed, with every hardship comes ease."<sup>4</sup>

So we carry on together,

As fighters, entrepreneurs, and creators.

We are the strivers

aiming to enjoin in good, to forbid evil, to establish justice.<sup>5</sup>

We know our duty extends beyond schooling.

We look to the future.

We look to a day when we will hear and see

nothing but greetings of peace,

Salamun alaykum bima sabartum, "Peace be upon you for all you have persevered with,"<sup>6</sup>

Been patient with,

as you raised your fists to the sky in humility,

In the name of God's justice and mercy.

<sup>1</sup> Quran, Taha: 114.

<sup>2</sup> Quran, Anbiyaa (The Prophets): 107.

<sup>3</sup> Quran, Duha (The Morning Hours): 4.

<sup>4</sup> Quran, As-Sharh (The Relief):5-6.

<sup>5</sup> This concept is often repeated in the Quran as a duty on believers. One such example can be found in Al-Imran (Family of Imran): 104.

<sup>6</sup> Quran, Ra'ad (The Thunder): 24

## The 42nd Day of the Omer, 2020

*I become ever more joyful as I get closer to the day  
on which Torah was given... That's why I dance  
ecstatically after the Counting of the Omer.*

- The Baal Shem Tov

I spoke about joy on the evening  
of his second yahrzeit,  
and in the morning I spoke  
about wilderness. Then, I baked  
a chocolate soufflé with strawberries  
in a microwavable mug, one minute  
and thirty seconds, rather than  
a leaching rainbow palette of M&M  
pancakes he might have preferred.  
I wiped my lips, went out to the garden,  
and planted my parsley and beans,  
something I would not, could not  
do a year ago, in the midst of weeds and chaos.  
In the afternoon, I sat with 300 people  
on Zoom and taught again about joy,  
and again about wandering and coming  
home through the desert. We sat in silence  
together for a time, breathing in hope,  
breathing out uncertainty. And then  
in his honor, I turned on my music,  
stretched my hand toward him,  
and danced.

PAMELA WAX

## Visiting You at Westlawn

I clear your plot of winter detritus,  
soggy leaves and stiff bugs.  
My dusty hands splayed  
toward where you lay,  
I tell you everything you  
may not know—

about your daughter's piano playing,  
how she has taken to it as you had  
at her age, about your son's  
sense of humor, a chip off your  
own block; your husband's  
culinary ventures, newsy  
updates about our sister,  
niece and nephew,  
and my writing, how you  
became my muse—

and listen  
for what I've missed.

PAMELA WAX

## Event Horizon

After you died, I felt like making out with your pillow  
before ripping it to shreds,  
stuffing the feathers into a burrito  
and eating it with enough Sriracha  
to make my nose run—  
but it wasn't because I loved you or missed you.

It was because you collected National Geographic  
magazines since college, and now a small stack  
of those yellow-bordered books lay under the mail slot  
covered in dust, the dog's piss, and other domestic detritus  
I can't be bothered with anymore.

It was because you would quote Pushkin or Gogol  
whenever I asked you to take out the trash.

It was because every corner of our house is  
ingratiated with you:  
your butt print on the corner sofa seat,  
your coffee mug taunting me from the cupboard,  
your bathrobe,  
your clothes,  
your pillow.

Your stupidly expensive, down pillow that still smells like you.

It was because our story ended, before it barely began.  
It's because I found out it's going to be a girl.

It's because I am just skin and bones now,  
particles and fragments of my former whole self,  
orbiting the edges of a black hole,  
a forced heartache that is  
intense,  
distorted,  
and completely inescapable.







***The Universe Cracks Open  
with New Life Possibilities***

**JENNIFER ELAM**

## The Siamese

Mara and I are inseparable, not from will, but because we are united by the hip. We are fourteen, one meter fifty tall, with black hair, green eyes, small noses and mouths with thin lips. We are usually agreed what to do and where to go, but, when that doesn't happen, I impose my will. As our mother would not let us go to school, we hardly know how to read and write. She said that we were a punishment from God and only spoke to us to give orders or insults. On the night of the turn of the nineteenth century, she disappeared and we never saw her again.

One week later, our father took us to the circus. There was a big tent with white and red stripes, six caravans where the artists lived and two cages for the lions. It smelled like something rotten. However, we were not there to see the show, but to participate. Our father took us to the circus to sell us.

"Their names are Lili and Mara. They are smart, do everything you tell them and don't eat much," he said.

Mr. Knut was a stocky man with a red face, and red hair and whiskers to match. He wore a black suit with a violet vest where a silver chain sparkled. He looked at us amazed, widening his gray eyes.

"Are they really tied together? There is no trick?"

"Touch, touch," said our father, proud, pointing to our hips.

Mr. Knut put his hairy hands on our body, pulled each of us by the arm and shook us until he was convinced.

"Damn. These creatures are as if they were one. How much do you want for them?"

"One hundred dollars," said our father.

Mr. Knut laughed.

“For that price I can buy three monkeys. And as a freak I have a woman with a beard. I’ll give you half.”

“Done. Sign these papers and treat them well.”

\*

Since that day we became Mr. Knut’s possession and we began learning to be circus stars. We were installed in Sheila’s tent, the bearded woman, and the first thing she did was threaten us.

“Listen, I am the main attraction of the circus. If you do something to sabotage that, I’ll split you in two.”

Then she threw us some blankets and shooed us to a corner where we slept for a few months.

Sheila was a tall woman with blue eyes and black hair, and her beard was just some dispersed hair around the face. She could have been about forty years old - no one knew her age and we never had the courage to ask her - and she had been in other circuses before working for Mr. Knut. Unlike our mother, she only beat us when we didn’t obey her. It was she who taught us how to act, although it consisted basically of being looked at by people.

The following day we woke up with kicks given by Sheila and then Mr. Knut presented us to the rest of the company. We met Sílvia and Zita, the acrobat couple that flew without a net; Hector, the tamer of wild animals; Peng, the fakir; Nina, the contortionist; Tico the dwarfish clown and Madame Rita, the clairvoyant. Sílvia and Zita were Italian immigrants. He had curly black hair, almond color eyes and was strong, she had blond hair, brown eyes and was thin; they were the only ones that gave us a kiss. Hector was bald, had half his face cut up by the paw of a lion, a single blue eye and smelled of alcohol; he spat on the ground as a way to greet us. Peng was of

Chinese descent, had black eyes and hair and copper color skin; he bowed to greet us. Nina was black, had dark eyes, was almost our height but a little older than us; she just said "Hello". Tico measured ninety centimeters and had an enormous head with blond hair and blue eyes; he approached us, smelled us and grimaced. Madam Rita was gypsy, had gray hair and yellowish eyes; she caressed our heads as if we were pets.

In our first presentation Mr. Knut decided that we would appear at the end of the show. He wanted to expose us scantily clad, so that everyone could see the flesh that united us, but as there was a risk of the circus being closed by an outrage of morality, we used our shorter dresses.

"I invested a lot of money in you, don't disappoint me girls," he said.

The circus was full and there was a nasty smell of sweat. Two yellow spotlights illuminated the center of the stage and the rest was dark. After Mr. Knut welcomed the audience and announced they would see the world's greatest show, in stepped Tico. He came in to the sound of a bugle played by Peng, and the circus almost came down, such were the people's laughter. Tico wore a yellow suit with blue balls, had a painted white face, red lips and black eyelids. He began somersaulting forward and back as children do. Then he imitated animals walking on all fours, beating his chest with his fists and emitting roars. If I and my sister had made these jokes at home, our mother would have punched us. Finally, Tico showed a balloon and began to fill it, simulating a tremendous effort. He did this for some minutes - with Peng blowing the bugle stronger whenever he let the balloon lose air - until finally, he said gibberish, took a deep breath and burst the balloon. The audience laughed even more and some people pelted him with coins. Tico picked them up, bowed and left the scene by giving ridiculous heels. Everyone was happy, except himself who never laughed.

Then came Silvio and Zita, dressed in white suits glued to their bodies - I realized then that Silvio was the most beautiful man in the

world. The aerialists saluted the audience and began to climb a rope ladder that led them to a platform where two trapezoids stood. When they reached the top, lit by yellow spots, they seemed like two dolls - the audience was silent and I prayed so that nothing happened to Silvio. Meanwhile, down below, Mr. Knut announced that they were the only ones in the world who dared to act without a net, defying death. Zita was the first to launch herself into the void. First she sat down on the beam as if it were a swing, later she held the beam with her hands and finally she hung upside down by bending her legs and flew twice to each side - the audience let go an 'ooh' ' in amazement.

Then Sílvia launched himself on the other trapeze. Impressive muscles appeared in his arms and his body swung over our heads. Every time he crossed with Zita it looked like both were colliding, but the two passed close without anything happening. With their white suits and graceful movements, flying in the heights, they no longer seemed like dolls but two angels blown by God. And for a moment I saw Sílvia with a pair of wings on his back as a gentle cherub who plays in heaven, above this hell where we stood. Then, Zita broke free from her trapeze, hovered a few seconds in the air and when she started to fall was grabbed by the strong hands of Silvio who was upside down - the audience let out the largest 'ooh' of the night. Like me and Mara, the two formed only one body with two heads united, not at the hip, but at the arms. However, unlike us, death could separate them. I had a bad thought then: Sílvia could drop her, come get us and, for a moment, we could be happy. But soon I repented and they cheated death once again coming down to earth.

Then there was a break to assemble the bars protecting the audience from the lions. Mr. Knut announced the arrival of man-eating beasts and Hector entered the cage in trunks, holding a whip in his hand, and opened a door through which entered two lions and a lioness. The fearsome beasts were old and thin animals with bad fur, but even so still intimidated the audience. The animals roared showing yellowed teeth and sharp claws, but Hector snapped his whip and they recoiled. Suddenly, this brought back memories of my

mother and father when they fought. She roared like a lioness and he gave her whippings with the belt to tame her, making her fall to the ground, covered in blood, and then, as a final lesson, gave her kicks in the back. But these beasts were more docile than my mother as Hector did not need to make them bleed for them to sit on a pedestal and stay quiet. And there was little more going on than that, Hector not daring to put his head inside their mouths or even touch them - our father was braver than him and the circus in our house was more dangerous.

Then came Nina, presented by Mr. Knut as the rubber girl, with a dress that looked the same as Zita used. Nina bent and stretched her body in a way that we didn't think was possible, putting a foot to her mouth and tapping her heels on her head. The audience, however, was not impressed because nobody applauded her. Then, in the high moment of her show, she opened a glass box that could not have been more than half a meter square, stepped inside, sat down and twisted her neck until her head was between her legs - then Tico came quickly on the scene and closed the box. Seeing this reminded us when our mother punished us by closing us inside a trunk for several hours, forcing us to do our bodily needs there. But Nina wasn't inside for more than a minute because a little later Peng appeared, announced as a fakir that had served a Chinese emperor. Peng, wearing only black pants tied with a rope, had a torch in one hand and a bottle in the other and was blowing flames from his mouth like a dragon. The audience applauded and Peng freed Nina. Then she leaned against a wooden board, joined her arms to her thighs and lay still. Peng opened a bag that Tico brought and took the first knife. He showed it to the audience so they all saw how deadly it was, then turned to Nina, pulled his arm back and, relaxed as if throwing a stone into a pond, flung the knife.

The tip hit the board two fingers' length from her neck and the audience let out a new "ooh". Peng then launched five more knives that also hit very close to Nina's flesh, striking the wood and drawing



the outline of her body. That reminded me again of our mother when once she picked up the knife for scaling fish and threw it at our father, the difference being she had a better aim than Peng and got him in the chest, almost killing him. Then, to finish the show, Peng took an axe, but this time he concentrated before throwing. Nina remained motionless, as if the blades that could have killed her were mosquitoes buzzing around. Peng threw the axe, the head flew, turning on itself, there was a hiss and suddenly the sound of iron against wood. The axe struck close to her ear, missing it by a mere millimeter. The audience applauded enthusiastically, Nina left the wooden board, gave her hand to Peng and together, as a happy couple, they bowed. Was there a time that our father and mother, after throwing knives and dishes at each other, made peace and held hands?

It was then Madame Rita's time, presented as a seer that communicated with the dead, to enter the arena. She appeared with a black handkerchief on her head, a red blouse and a green skirt that hid her feet. There was silence, her figure scaring more people than the lions did. The lights went off and she sat at a table with two candles - behind the scenes, Peng played a violin. That faint light made her body disappear and gave her face a ghostly look. Perhaps because she looked like a creature from another world, no one seemed surprised that she could speak to the dead. Mr. Knut then invited a member of the audience to come forward. A murmur ran through the crowd, but no one moved. Mr. Knut insisted, saying not to be afraid. Shortly after, a little blurry, middle-aged woman dressed all in black rose went to Madame Rita.

"I want to speak with my husband, he died a year ago," said the lady.

"What's his name?" asked Madame Rita.

"Gabriel Watson."

Madame Rita closed her eyes, put her hands on her temples and began to call the deceased with a slow drawl.

"Gaabrieel, come Gaabrieel, your wife is here."



The woman clasped her hands as if in prayer.

Madame Rita continued to call the dead for some time until, suddenly, she started talking in a strange voice.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?”

The crowd let out another “ ooh ” and the woman fell to her knees. Madame Rita explained that she had already managed to get in touch with the dead and continued the conversation, regaining her normal voice.

“I’m Madame Rita and your wife is here to ask you questions.”

“I’m at your disposal,” she said in the strange voice again.

“What do you want to know?” asked Madame Rita to the wife.

“Ask him where he hid the money and if the maid’s son is his,” whispered the woman.

“He heard, let’s wait for the answer,” said Madame Rita with her normal voice.

Seconds later, again with a strange voice, Madame Rita spoke for the dead.

“The money was given to charity and the father of the maid’s son is the baker.”

The woman crossed herself.

“Forgive me Gabriel, I should never have suspected you,” and she began to cry.

Madame Rita got up, hugged her and gently took her back to her place.

The majority of the audience remained silent, but some people hooted.

It occurred to me that we could also ask some questions to Madame Rita about our mother: where was she? Why did she leave? Has she ever liked us?

Finally our time came, as Mr. Knut had decided that in our debut we would appear beside Sheila, the bearded woman. We were presented as the greatest aberrations of the world, terrible mistakes of nature, creatures somewhere between human and animal. Then, to the sound of Peng’s bugle, all three of us entered the circus arena.

Sheila wore a loincloth imitating tiger skin to show that she had a woman's body and we wore short dresses for the audience to see most of our bodies. They burst out laughing as if we were clowns, droller than Tico, although we didn't do anything funny. With a hand held by Sheila, we walked around the arena - and the people called us freaks, beasts and gave other insults. So Mr. Knut invited a person to come and prove that we were authentic aberrations and several men fought each other to have that privilege. Finally, a baby-faced fat man that had won the right with punches and pushes to touch us entered the arena, but when he stood before us, he seemed to lose his courage. And it was Sheila who took his hand and made him pull her beard. The man began to laugh, a stupid laugh as we had seen in mentally disabled, then advanced to us and touched our bodies up and down, exploring our breasts and buttocks with his tongue out, drooling, not bothering to verify if we were conjoined. Once, a man our mother took home did the same, then gave her two dollars and left.

\*

The following morning we went for a walk in a garden near the circus. The sun shone and everything seemed full of color; butterflies flew and birds sang in the trees. Suddenly, we saw a mother with two daughters, two girls of our age and height, brunettes like us. They wore beautiful color pink dresses and her mother wore a white dress that combined with a light blue hat. The mother took them by the hand and they were eating ice cream. The three passed us without seeing us, talking and laughing. Myself and Mara kept looking at them as if they were circus freaks. Where would they go? Did they have a father at home that would kiss them instead of beating the mother? Would that happiness last forever? When they disappeared from our sight we no longer heard the birds. We felt a lump in our throat and a pain in our chest; at the same time, we started to cry.

When we stopped, we decided to go to Madame Rita.

After we knocked on her door, she told us to enter. Madam Rita

was dressed in a kind of pajama, her hair seemed the mane of a lion and she walked barefoot. She smelled of tobacco and alcohol. When she saw us she became more surprised than if a dead person had come to visit her.

“We need your help,” I said.

Madame Rita smiled.

“I don’t have the power to separate you, girls.”

“It’s not that,” I said. “We want to know where our mother is.”

Madam Rita stopped laughing. Her face became serious and dozens of wrinkles and hidden marks appeared, as if it had been on her face that Peng had trained his knife throwing.

“Come on girls, you know very well that...”

“Please try,” I said.

Then Madame Rita approached us and embraced us. A strong and gentle hug against her chest as we had never felt before; a long hug, so good that we wanted it to never end. But, finally, she unfastened us and looked at us in silence. For the first time we saw a face that was happy and sad at the same time, as if her lips had a smile, a tear ran from the corner of her eye.

“All right, I’m going to try,” she said.

So Madame Rita, dressed like that, placed her hands on her temples and closed her eyes. After a while she spoke.

“Yes, I can see her...”

“Where is she?” I shouted.

“She is ... in a city far from here ... but she’s all right, don’t worry.”

“And will she come for us? Ask her, please.”

Madame Rita pursed her lips and then took a deep breath.

“Yes, yes ... one day she will come for you, but at the moment she can’t. She asks you to be patient, be good girls and everything will be fine. And now I lost contact ... I can’t see anything...”

We left happy. Now we were sure that our mother, one day, would come for us and then we would walk through the streets eating ice cream and, when we returned home, our father might not spank her.

\*

Besides traveling, a lot of things changed in our life, the most important of which was people began to speak to us. So it seemed normal that Hector, the only one that never said a word to us, one day appeared smiling and invited us to his caravan to eat chocolates. It was a late summer afternoon and a huge orange moon was moving over the blue horizon. Mosquitoes buzzed everywhere. Myself and Mara were looking at the lions' cage when he appeared. Before we saw or heard him, we smelled the alcohol. Hector's caravan was all messy: the bed unmade, dirty dishes on the table and clothes scattered on the floor. On a wall was a picture of a naked woman flogging a man. He opened a drawer and pulled out a box of chocolates. Then he began to look at us with his blue eye and to jiggle the box. In that moment, his smashed pudding face that caused us so much horror almost seemed normal.

"Do you want it?" he said with a sweet voice.

We nodded our heads and took a step to take the box, but Hector hid it behind his back.

"Calm down, girls, everything has a price. I give you chocolates if you do some things for me." And he lowered his pants. "Kneel down and open your mouths."

Although we are accustomed to obey, we didn't move. Hector's face became repulsive again and he grabbed Mara's arm.

"On your knees, I said!" he shouted.

So we started screaming and hitting him with our four arms and legs. But as he was stronger, he lay down on us and threw himself upon us. Hector was about to get his way with Mara when the door burst open. It was Sílvio with a club in his hand. Then, as if he were the tamer and Hector the beast, Silvio gave him several blows until he dropped his prey. Full of blood and moaning, Hector dragged himself to a corner. If Nina's box was there, he would have entered it like a frightened animal that hides in a hole.

"If you touch the girls again, I'll kill you."

Looking at Sílvia, so beautiful and strong, I knew that he was an angel, our guardian angel that would protect us while our mother was away.

\*

One night when there was no show, we discovered behind Tico's caravan that he was speaking as if angry, with Sheila, Nina and Peng. He said strange things that we had never heard of: social inequality, exploitation of man by man, racism, and spoke about some German thinker.

When he saw us, he made a sign to approach.

"Come here twins, because this also concerns you. We are the freaks society exploits. The dwarf, the bearded lady, the siamese, but also the black and the yellow, we are all victims of capitalism. As we have no place in society, as we are not considered human beings, we are forced to work in a circus like animals. In fact, we are still treated worse than animals because no one laughs at a lion or an elephant. But this is about to end. The capitalist system is doomed and in its place will come socialism. And then we will all be equal and there will be no more circuses nor will any human being be considered an aberration. If we fight for our freedom, nothing is impossible..."

Sheila and Nina listened to him intently as if they had heard the most important revelation of their lives and seemed convinced that things would change for the better. But Peng shook his head in disbelief, as if listening to a fairy tale where in the end the prince kills the dragon and marries the princess. This made me remember the priest's sermon in the mass, with the arrival of socialism to substitute paradise. I wanted to ask Tico if it was because of this cruel capitalist system that mothers abandon their children. But seeing him so serious, with his blue eyes lost on the horizon, I dared not ask.

\*

One night after our act, we were called to Mr. Knut's caravan. When we entered we saw a very well-dressed gentleman. He wore

a top hat, a black suit, a white shirt, a blue scarf and bright shoes. He had gray eyes, brown hair and whiskers. He was tall and thin and could have been around thirty years old.

“Girls,” said Mr. Knut. “I present you Doctor Stein, he is very interested in you.”

His eyes shone like blades.

“It’s amazing, they are so perfect. It is the first case that I know like this. Can I examine them?”

“Of course. Girls, undress,” said Mr. Knut.

He was our owner and Dr. Stein filled us with confidence, so we obeyed. Then the man came up to us and touched our bodies, but in a different way from that of other men during the shows. He had soft hands and we felt no shame or that he was abusing us. Then he put his ear to our chest and our back, perhaps to make sure we had two hearts.

“Extraordinary,” he said to himself.

“Dr. Stein wants to separate you. Do you understand? Now wait outside a little,” said Mr. Knut.

The idea of being separated left us stunned. We should have been happy, but we left the caravan terrified as if he had told us that we were going to have an arm or a leg cut off. Outside, we stood under a window to hear what they said.

“Two hundred dollars? Okay,” said Dr. Stein.

“Tell me doctor, how are you going to separate them? Is it like a butcher cutting a beef carcass?” asked Mr. Knut.

Dr. Stein cleared his throat.

“It’s a very complex scientific experiment, a layman can’t understand. What I can tell you is that, as they seem to have independent bodies, the chances of success are reasonable.”

“How many have you separated before now?”

“Well, this will be my first attempt, but my colleagues have already done it. The important thing, Mr. Knut, is that this will be a great advance for science.”

“The name of my circus will be mentioned, right?”



“You have my word,” said Dr. Stein.

\*

The next morning we woke up without fear because we understood that our exploitation would only cease after we had been separated. Besides, it was always what our mother wanted. After a while, our friends came to bid us farewell. Silvio and Zita hugged us and told us that we were going to start a new life. Sheila gave us a kiss and apologized for sometimes giving us beatings. Nina hugged us and told us that we were sisters. Peng greeted us with a bow and wished us good luck. Tico smiled at us for the first time and told us to fight for our rights. But when it came to say goodbye to Madame Rita, she clung to us in a way that choked us and began to cry as if she had seen something that eluded the others.

Hours later, Doctor Stein took us to his clinic and handed us to a nurse. She was a fat woman with crooked eyes wearing a nun’s habit with a cross on the chest.

“This is sister Benedicta and she will take care of you until the operation.”

Sister Benedicta prepared us a bath and gave us food without forcing us to do anything. Then she took us to a garden full of trees and let us play the whole afternoon. We had never heard such beautiful bird songs, nor seen such colorful flowers and butterflies. At one point, near a pond, we found two ladybugs mating. They were together for some seconds, but, when it seemed that they were separating themselves, two boys ran over and crushed them.

Meanwhile, sister Benedicta had fallen asleep while lying on the grass. We sat down beside her and, looking at her face so kind, we thought that she was a socialist and that our lives would really get better. In the following days, we were subjected to various tests and

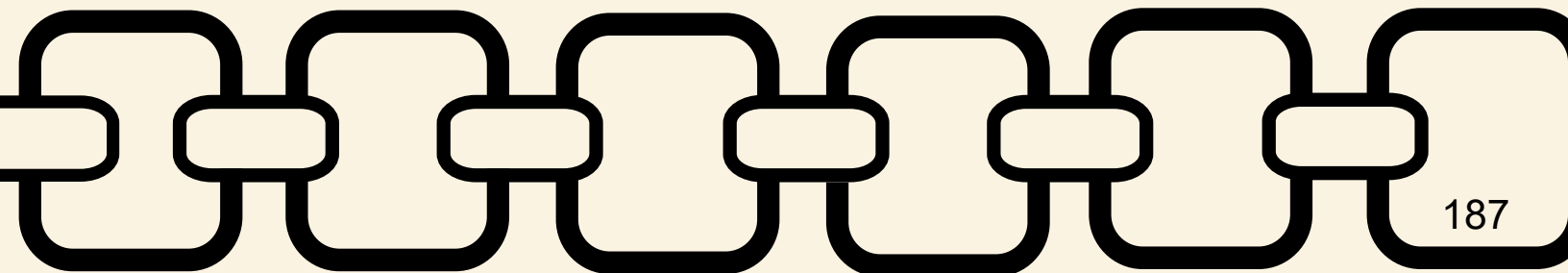


were shown to other doctors who observed us - it seemed like we were back at the circus. Some discussed with Dr. Stein in front of us, as if we were not present, and we noticed that they didn't agree with the separation. One of them, an older doctor, with flames coming from his mouth, spoke of guinea pigs and scientific impossibility, and told Dr. Stein that he would be made responsible for his actions. But we knew that nothing was impossible and that Dr. Stein would give us freedom. Moreover, after these discussions he offered us chocolates and guaranteed us that he would find our mother.

On the day of the operation, sister Benedicta gave us such a strong hug that it almost separated us before the time, and she told us that God would protect us, but in her crooked eyes there were also tears.

Two other nurses shaved us, washed us and gave us something to drink that made us sleepy. Then we lay on a stretcher with wheels, covered by a sheet and were taken to the operation room. It was a place with white walls, a ceiling with bright lights, a closet with medicine, a gas cylinder, the operation table and a table with surgical instruments similar to Peng's weapons. A weird smell caused us to go cold. With their faces covered with masks, there was Dr. Stein with two assistants; behind, on a long step, sat eight people watching - now we were sure that this was another circus. The two nurses, like Silvio releasing Zita back to her trapeze, made us fly onto the operation table. Dr. Stein winked at us as one of his assistants covered our mouths and noses with a tube and we began to breathe in a gas.

We felt relaxed and our eyelids began to close. A kind of fog enveloped us, and then, through the mist, we saw the face of our mother. Finally she had returned and, after watching our last show, she would take us home.



## ASTERISM

Light articulates and discloses  
The marks and voids that equal  
The letters of an alphabet.

::

An empty room is freighted  
With what it no longer holds:  
The cancellations, the accretions.

::

An upset bucket. A folding chair.  
How few objects make of a stage  
A bridal chamber, a ruined temple?

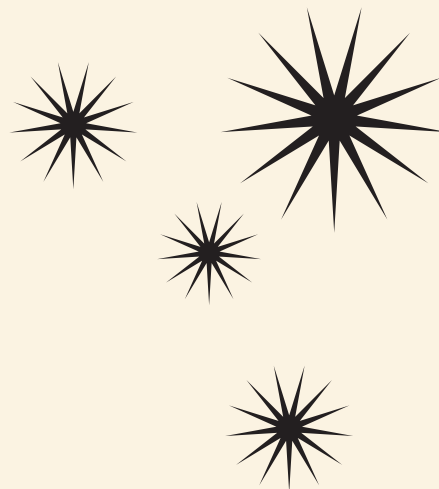
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Collapsed distance unfixes  
From time: a trackless hinterland  
Scuffed and buffed by high winds.

::

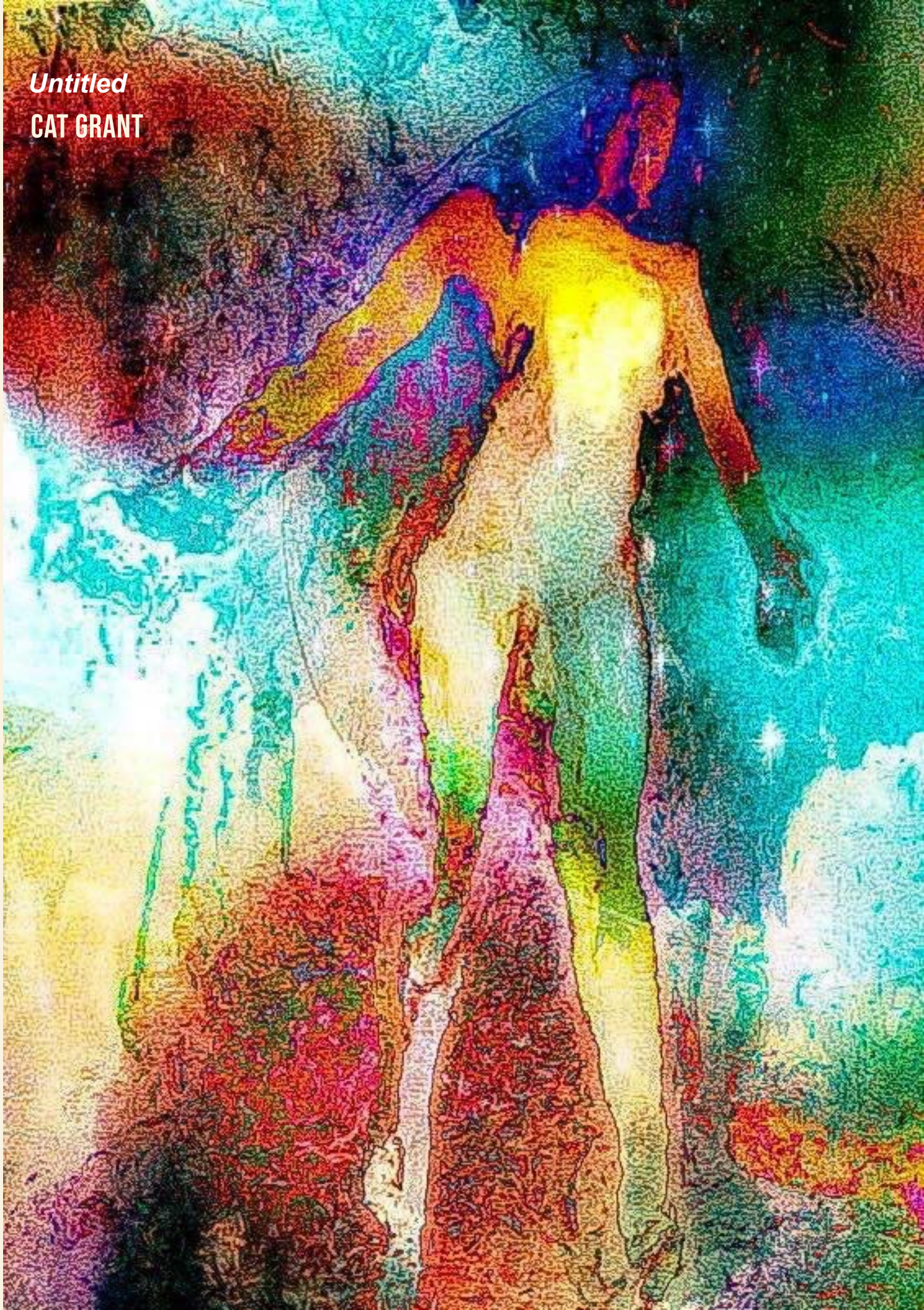
What is the function of wonder?  
An apple cut half wise  
Reveals a five-pointed seed-star.

ERIC PANKEY





*Untitled*  
CAT GRANT







## **Serenity Prayer 2.0**

God, spare me your serenity of excuses,  
The wisdom that allows me to look away.  
Who knows what I could change unless I try?  
Grant me the courage to change what needs changing,  
A lever long enough and a place to stand.

**BRUCE E. WHITACRE**

## **Center Point**

Bobbi toddles from the bed  
to the closet to the bathroom to  
the end table to the dresser

to the bed again, red-eyed  
from sobbing. "Mom, please,"  
I kiss her head, coaxing

the dead to stop living, "you  
have my consent, if you need  
it." Then she hugs me even

tighter, saying nothing, and  
she rubs my back, small circles,  
no endings, no beginnings.

**GARY RAINFORD**

## Ramadan Meditation

The first thing I notice when we walk into the mosque is the noise, a noise that grows louder as we near the bottom of the stairs. Entering into the fellowship area, I immediately see the curtain dividing the large hall into two portions—one side for men and one for women. The woman I'm with explains that it is so the women can have their privacy. I continue to be skeptical about that explanation, but it seems to be the most common one. And once I see the several women with the full face veils—the niqab—come down the stairs, I figure there is at least an element of truth in saying it's for the women's privacy. How else are those particular women supposed to eat if they don't feel they can show their faces in front of the men?

It's still several minutes until the maghrib adhan, and as we all wait for this call to prayer to begin, eyeing the bottles of water and bowls of dates and watermelon taunting us on the tables before us, the chattering from both the women's and men's sides grows louder and louder. Since the women I am with are all speaking in Bosnian, and it is too loud for my rusty Russian to make out the general topic of conversation, I busy myself with looking around the room. Apart from the women in niqab, most of the women are wearing long overdresses called abayas and headscarves in many colors and styles. The words of several different languages assault my ears, among them Bosnian, Arabic, Urdu, and an occasional snippet of English. The tables steadily fill with women and small children, while bigger children run freely around the room, down the hall, and even up and down the stairs. My stomach growls as the scents of soups, meats, rice, and breads waft from the open kitchen across the room. My senses are so overwhelmed that I almost miss the beginning of the adhan.

"Drink! Eat!" my young friend Emina nudges my hand with the bowl of dates.

"We don't have to wait for the adhan to be done?" I ask. "We aren't supposed to delay breaking the fast," she replies as she takes another drink of water.

Nothing is more satisfying than that first sip of water after seventeen hours without any food or drink. A small sip quickly turns into a long swallow, and momentarily the whole bottle of water has been consumed. And the sweetness of one small date cannot be matched by even the most decadent chocolate cake. The gratitude in those first moments of breaking the fast is amplified only by the remembrance that many brothers and sisters have less than that—some having nothing at all—with which to break their fasts. Those in war zones or in areas of famine or political, social, or economic unrest often have only water and maybe grass or other plants they can forage. They have no communal meal to look forward to after the maghrib prayer. Yet, we are blessed with abundance, and that knowledge turns the sweet satisfaction of simple water and dates into a feast of gratitude toward the God who has brought us to this place.

As a white American, I am a minority in this room filled with color. I see sisters who have come to the United States seeking opportunities that their families would not have in their home countries. Many are professional women—doctors mostly—or the wives of doctors and engineers. They have been able to acquire educations and credentials that allow them a somewhat privileged lifestyle. I also see women and children who have come as refugees, fleeing war, political unrest, famine, persecution, and untold atrocities. Their stories are etched in the lines on their faces and hidden in the depths of their eyes.

And again I am overcome with gratitude toward the God who promises after hardship there will be ease.

My mind returns to the present place as we begin moving toward the stairs. Once again I become aware of the noise of chatter and children, of clomping and stomping as we make our way to the prayer hall. This will be my first time joining the congregational prayer, and I am shaking with nervousness. There are rules and procedures and customs, and I am afraid that I will make a mistake.

**NOOR SPRING**



## Again and Again

I step out of my old clothes:  
shame, frustration, rage.

I take them off like a child coming in from the cold  
into a warm house, throwing them in a wet pile  
on the floor.

Again I am opening the door,  
again unzipping my coat.

Over and over I must learn the same lessons  
like late October sleet  
that bends the birch, still heavy with leaves, almost to breaking -

And again I shake it off, stand  
in my same body in the light: here, now,  
water dripping from my sleeves.

**NADIA COLBURN**

## **my dear depression**

don't they understand  
they are so much  
darker than you and I  
my dear depression that  
everything is so much  
sadder out there than we  
are in here compared to  
their everyday every post  
every newscast you and I  
are ecstasy personified it's  
a healthy alternative our  
melancholy to the pathology  
most are married to cheat on  
return to it's holy, even, my  
dodi li, my beloved downcast  
we are our own shabbat  
everything stops and we alone  
have escaped to keep it what  
do they know the society of shooters  
the electors of mad kings  
to calls us names come  
lock the doors my preferable  
eclipse don't let their  
darkestness in.

**WAYNE-DANIEL BERARD**

## A Conversation

He says, "Think of your awakening  
as the event that it is, that it perpetuates,  
that its ascendancy is as resilient as  
a tungsten filament radiating within you."

She says, "Tell me more." He says,  
"When I drive to the studio in  
the morning, I experience independent  
moments of my life but am aware

that they are all interconnected—  
as we are all enmeshed, as in  
the metaphor for interbeing,  
the jeweled net of Indra." She says,

"Yes, we're all one, but tell me more."  
"By the time I drive through  
those s-curves by Gagne's Store before  
the Granby Road, and look out at

that plein of uncut meadow  
on the other side of the street, I see  
that I am present in the moment  
when I was five, wearing a captain's

hat, gazing over the ocean from  
the shore, on a school field trip,  
by a lighthouse, on a clear day,  
near Miami; or am one with you

the day we hiked the Notch that  
brilliant October day when we

WALLY SWIST

cavorted among the colored leaves,  
the sunlight flooding through

the partially defoliated trees.”  
She asks, “Is there more?” He says,  
“Yes, there is always more, every  
changing moment is eternal, that

is what is our eternity truly is,  
and there are as many awakenings  
as there are stars in the sky,  
and to experience that is to observe

that tungsten glow inside you,  
to feel its filament radiating  
within, and to feel your life unfurl,  
in your ascendancy, as does

a scarf rippling in the wind—  
all of it interconnected, each sequin  
reflecting the other, as in Indra’s  
bejeweled net, all of it aglow.”



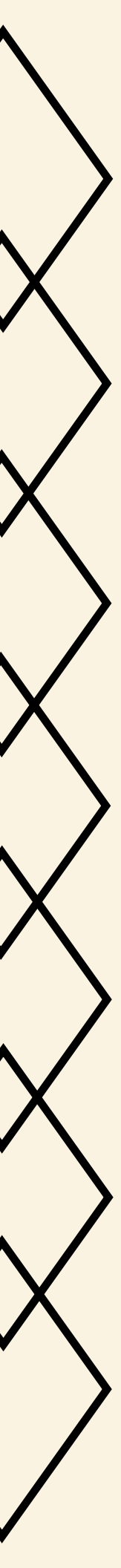
## Now and at the Hour

Two women from the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church met Bashira at Bradley Airport in Hartford, Connecticut. They helped her move into an adequately furnished studio apartment in Worcester, Massachusetts, introduced her to American culture through evening classes and seminars, and assigned her an American life-coach to help her learn the bus routes, find her way around the supermarket and the pharmacy, open a bank account, find a doctor and a dentist. She lived rent-free, and received vouchers for groceries until she passed the certified-nurse's aide exam and accepted a job as a health aid at St Mary's Health Care.

At first Bashira walked two blocks to the bus stop, then rode the bus across the city to St. Mary's. When she saved enough money to pay cash, she bought an eight-year-old blue Toyota Corolla. Driving to work on the streets of Worcester, early on winter mornings, Bashira felt grateful for the community of strangers around her, some of them on foot, bundled against the weather, scarves around their heads and breath rising and spiriting above them.

The warmth inside the big brick building of St. Mary's welcomed her every morning. She arrived to steaming breakfast trays unloaded on the resident floors and to residents rolling out one-by-one to the common room where they dozed together in loose circles as music or nature programs played on a television mounted on walls above them.

Brother Leo, one of the residents Bashira cared for, was a Trappist monk from the monastery north of Worcester. Throughout the winter he watched him sink deeper and deeper into himself, slumping in his reclining wheelchair with straps holding him in place. The edges of his big ninety-year-old body and his active mind wilted and curled in as he returned slowly to the spiritual sea of the universe, back into the mystery of his own existence.



By mid-February, his eyesight was nearly gone. Wearing sky-blue scrubs, Bashira sat down beside him and set his Friday lunch on a tray in front of him. He announced, in a wistful, whistling voice, that he needed to get back to the boat.

"It's time for me to go now," he said, his eyes closed, his head turning side to side.

"Where will you go in the boat, Brother Leo?"

"We use the boat for our business, my dear. My father and I use it for our work. Can someone please help me? I need to get back to my father, and to the boat."

Bashira recalled how some of the old people she knew spoke about journeys or about seeing deceased brothers and sisters in the hours before their deaths.

She could have stayed home in her village in Ghana with her family. She could have married a man from the village and been content. She was not directed or instructed by the elders of her village to come to America, but the suggestions, that started with vague talk of opportunities there, became regular topics of conversation until the idea of going to America turned from their idea to hers.

Bashira was bright and outgoing, and the elders identified her, when she was still a toddler, as a child of the village who might enjoy the adventure of a new life, as one who might take advantage of the opportunities that they thought would come to her in America. Just before she left, each of the elders tried to cheer her and find a way to bless her with a touch or a small gift. They wanted her to find life beyond their village, and she wanted to please them, so she willed herself to be happy in her new home in Massachusetts.

As she became acclimated, Bashira recalled the faces of the people she left behind, especially the elders. Memories of them drew her back to Africa in her mind. When she was tired,

or in a reflective moment because of a change in the weather or because of a song she heard or an image on television, she would think of the old people in her village, how they were quiet all day, how they sat still in their light thoughts. In the shade of guava and mango trees their eyes followed the movement of dogs and chickens and children. Bashira believed that images of the old folks stayed with her in her mind because she might not see them again in person. They appeared in her subconscious so that she might not forget them. She believed that the spirits worked that way.

She tried to write adventure and satisfaction into the letters she sent to her mother and to her grandmother. She knew that the women would take her letters to the other women in the center of the village and read them aloud. She told of good things so that they would not worry about her or wonder how she was getting along. She imagined the women of the village reading about her American life, not with envy or wonder, but with an eye for signals that their child was happy in another world.

On blue days in December she thought of the well-meaning American Protestant missionaries who lived in her village for a few years and then moved on. They taught the children bible verses and songs. One of the Christmas songs had a refrain: "Oh-oh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy!" As a young adult, looking out on snow falling outside her window, she thought about those words. Comfort and joy had never come to her as a pair. Comfort was her village. Joy was the excitement of a new life. Comfort *or* joy is closer to the truth, she thought. Comfort *or* joy. On lonely days in the city she had neither comfort nor joy.

Bashira moved her chair close to the big monk and spoke to him in a low voice. Some of the staff and residents, overhearing her, thought she was singing to him; the tone and rhythms of her speech were so unlike the local accents and vocal patterns.



She stirred parts of the monk's pureed lunch into a mixture that resembled the color and texture of the corn-based mush she ate nearly every day as a child. Once in a while she cooked something like that Ghanaian *tizet* in her studio apartment. But without children and dogs around her, and without the smell of the village in her nose and in her mouth, it did not taste as she remembered it.

"I need to go to work now, with my father," the blind monk said, his chin lifted, his eyes pressed together tightly. "Will someone please help me? Thank you! I must be on my way now."

All his adult life, except for two years after college when he taught high school English, Brother Leo lived a cloistered life at St. Joseph's Abbey, a monastery of the Cistercian Order of The Strict Observance, north of Worcester. When he needed round-the-clock comfort care, the brothers of the monastery agreed that he should move to St Mary's.

Brother Leo's parents were Iowa dairy farmers. When he was born, their second son, they named him Andrew, a family name that pleased their devout Catholic sensibilities with its reminder of one of the fisherman disciples of Jesus. As he grew, Andrew worked with his older brother and their father on the farm. Together they milked cows, cleaned stalls, helped with births, planted feed crops and cash crops, cultivated fields, harvested corn and grain, baled alfalfa hay, repaired equipment and buildings, all in the never-ending rounds of farm chores.

Andrew passed through his rural childhood with few soul-scares. The routines of farm life, supported by the public school and the church, held the family together. When it became clear that his older brother intended to stay on the farm, Andrew announced that he wanted to leave Iowa and live in another part of the country. His parents responded with passive acceptance.

“Well, okay, if that’s what you want. We won’t stand in your way.”

Andrew mother’s brother-in-law worked as an automobile mechanic in Worcester. Ten years earlier, on the only vacation his family every took together, they visited that uncle and his family. Since Andrew had never been anywhere else in the country, he hoped to find a college around Worcester, a place far from home but, on account that one vacation, not entirely unfamiliar to him.

Six-feet-four and broad-shouldered, in the fall of his freshman year at the Jesuit College of the Holy Cross, Andrew was identified as a young man who could make an impact on the football field or the basketball court. He was even approached by the varsity coaches. But no matter how hard he tried to fit in, he was too slow and awkward to contribute or make a difference in the game. Eventually the invitations to join a team stopped coming, and Andrew spent his college years as a trusting and unthreatening member of the college community.

With a degree in English Literature, he found a job teaching at a city high school. His colleagues liked him and admired his disciplined cheerfulness. At the same time they thought he was reserved and distant. They called him farm boy. When one of the physical education teachers found out that Andrew had been driving out to St. Joseph’s monastery on the weekends, she began calling him the monk.

In time, Andrew inquired with the brothers about a religious vocation. In the early stages of learning about the monastic life he kept his job, but when he was invited to move into the cloister as an observer, he resigned his teaching position.

The stages of discernment and spiritual formation at the monastery lasted nearly six years, ending in profession of a solemn vow to live according to the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

Life at the Trappist monastery was a disciplined routine that reminded Andrew's heart of childhood on the farm. Through the early years as an observer and then as a novitiate at the monastery, twinges of uncertainty and regret over his choice of life chilled him. He overcame these feelings through prayer, counseling, spiritual direction with older monks, and through immersion in the daily busyness of routine physical labor that occupied all the members of the community.

His doubts about his way of life became less intense with every passing year of vocational training. Finally, when he vowed to accept a new life of "stability, obedience and conversion of manners", regrets faded to shadows, and, to mark his new life, he accepted a new name: Brother Leo.

Time in the cloister was ordered and predictable. Darkness was for sleep in preparation for the day. Daylight was for work in preparation for sleep. The lights in his cell were put out at 8 p.m. Bells woke him at 4 a.m. for communal reading of the Psalms. Private devotions and prayer were followed by a breakfast of hot cereal and fruit—food for the body—and by Mass in the chapel—food for the soul. The darkness that hungered to swallow human souls was faced and known in the words of the Psalms, and quieted with the sacrifice of the Eucharist.

The day's work—in the fields, at the honey combs, with the farm animals, or making jelly in the kitchen—was interrupted by the spiritual work of prayers, at midmorning and again at noon. Lunch was followed by a nap or a walk and by more work: painting and repairing the buildings, tending the gardens, cleaning the cows' stalls. Afternoon prayer was followed by more work until, at 4:30 p.m., the bells of the church rang to end the work day. Vespers preceded supper. Quiet reading and personal prayer occupied him in the evening until *Compline*, the last office of the day, which ended with a hymn to Mary:

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,  
our life, our sweetness and our hope.  
To you we cry, poor banished children of Eve;  
to you we send our sighs,  
mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.

Turn then, most gracious advocate,  
your eyes of mercy toward us;  
and after this, our exile,  
show us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus.  
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

Brother Leo sang with the other monks as Mary's faithful children. They asked her to lead them safely through the silence and darkness of night. The word of God and the body and blood of Christ would be enough to keep them going through the light of day.

"Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," the monk whispered, as Bashira put a spoonful of food near his lips.

"He says things like that all day long," Bashira said to the supervising nurse as she walked by.

"Please help me, I'm slipping down in my chair. Can someone please help me?"

"I think you're fine, Brother Leo. You seem to be sitting just fine in your wheelchair."

"I can't get comfortable here. I hope you can help me, my dear."

The monk's large body did not fit the chair on which the slightly-built women residents rested comfortably, but Bashira could see nothing to do about it, so she attached the *Velcro* of a terry cloth bib around Leo's neck and slid her own chair next to his.

“Brother Leo, are you hungry?”

“Yes, dear. I am.”

The three pureed servings on the plate were salmon, peas and whipped potatoes. On the tray beside the plate was a beige plastic cup of black coffee, a carton of milk, and a *Dixie Cup* of vanilla ice cream. When Brother Leo spit out the mixture Bashira stirred for him, she tried the foods separately: one-half spoon of whipped potatoes, two bites of salmon, and one of peas. Each bite was followed by an explosive breath.

“Thank you,” he said, after every swallow and breath.

Bashira watched the old monk as he ate. He seemed to be bobbing, going down below the surface of life as he held his breath and swallowed, resurfacing with a blow of air.

“That’s almost enough,” he said. “I shouldn’t need more to eat today.”

She held another bite of peas up to the old monk’s mouth, and he swallowed most of it. She wiped his mouth with the white terrycloth bib around his neck and wiped the table with another one.

“Thank you. That should be enough food for today. Have mercy, Jesus. Jesus Christ have...”

His words trailed off. Unintelligible moans and vocalizations faded as he fell asleep. Bashira removed the monk’s bib and wiped his mouth with it again. She put her hand over his hand where it rested on the arm of his wheelchair. Her smooth skin, the color of coffee with a splash cream, looked small across the monk’s thick, age-spotted arthritic fingers. She rested with him for a moment, then she stepped into the hallway and took a clean white twin-sheet from the laundry cart.

Leaving the door barely ajar behind her, she sat back down next to the old monk, twisted the sheet, and wound it around her hair in the way she learned as a child from her grandmother. The sheet billowed above the brown skin of her forehead. She sat

with the monk as he slept. When she got up, she refolded and replaced the sheet and finished her rounds to end her shift and her work week.

Through Saturday and Sunday, the old monk slept toward his death. Light snow fell over the city. The nurses and aides could not wake him. When Bashira arrived Sunday at 11 pm for the night shift, the nurse-in-charge reviewed the needs of the residents on the fourth floor. "Brother Leo is not doing well," she said. "He has been asleep since you saw him Friday."

Bashira walked into Brother Leo's room. She wore robin-egg blue scrubs. Earlier the hospice nurse had placed a large battery-operated candle on the bedside stand. The little bulb flickered light and shadows against the dark wall. The old man slept on his back, breathing deep gulps of air. Even in the darkened room Bashira could see that the color of his skin was yellowing.

"Hello, Brother Leo. Hello *Opanyin*. Hello. I am here. Bashira is here."

She pulled back the sheets, gently removed the old monk's diaper-briefs and his thin cotton gown, washed his body and dressed him in a clean diaper and a fresh white and blue gown. She spread a thin layer of shaving cream and shaved his face. She washed his face with a wet cloth and dipped a blue mouth swab in water and held it to his lips. The old man opened and bit down lightly.

"I'll be back, grandfather. Bashira will be back."

She worked through her rounds on the floor, checking in on the sleeping patients, helping those who needed her, making small talk with the nurses. As she walked out of one-hundred-year-old Worcester matriarch Antonia Comforte's room, at the far end of the hall from the monk's room, she saw two men in dark robes step out of the elevator. They spoke briefly to the supervising nurse at the station before they entered Brother Leo's room.



When Bashira worked her way back down the hallway, she looked in on Brother Leo and the two men. The two younger monks stood near Brother Leo's head. One of them held a rosary. Both held prayer books as they spoke their prayers above their brother monk. One of them, a thin man with very short gray hair and rimless glasses, looked up from his prayer book at Bashira and nodded. Bashira bowed her head to the three of them and walked on down the hallway.

Just before one o'clock in the morning, Bashira heard the sound of the two men retracing their steps to the nurse's station, for a longer conversation with the supervisor, and back into the elevator. When the elevator door closed, she walked down to the monk's room, entered, and rested the door shut.

Beside Brother Leo's bed, Bashira filled a white plastic basin one-third full with warm water and set it on a chair near his head. She swirled a wash cloth through the water and squeezed it out. She knelt beside the old man's head, touched his face with her fingertips and spoke the names of her ancestors and of the old villagers, making no distinction between the names of those she knew were dead and the names of those she believed were alive.

She placed her right hand under the monk's pillow, raised his head slightly and lowered it again, and again. With her left hand she pressed the warm washcloth against the old man's cooling skin. She spoke all the names of the village elders she could remember, then spoke them again, remembering more names each time.

The old man's gasping, rhythmic breaths relaxed and slowed. Bashira held his head and whispered in his ear about a place she thought she remembered from her childhood, where palm trees grow near the ocean, and fathers and sons, in their fishing boats, sail in and out from a pier, at work on the patient sea.



*Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear almost any 'how.'*  
- Victor Frankl

*The meaning of life is finding your gift.  
The purpose of life is giving it away.*  
- Joy J. Golliver

### **the invitation**

I Am Gift

Meaning meets Meaning meets Meaning  
Eternal Embrace

I Am Giver

Purpose pouring Myself out  
Eternal Dance

I Am the Why  
and when you cry out  
you call Me by this Name  
though you know not  
refuse the limited horizon of answers  
seek Me hidden in the hows  
waiting for you  
gently

**SISTER LOU ELLA HICKMAN I.W.B.S.**



## **I Gave A Gift**

I gave a gift to my parents,  
an indecipherable scrawl,  
they put it on the fridge, sent it to the relatives  
and taught me to do more than crawl.

I gave a gift to my beloved,  
a bleeding, pulsating thing.  
She dabbed its red tears, soothed all its fears,  
and it began to sing.

I gave a gift to my creator,  
a sodden, warbling prayer.  
He calmed its weeping, and after speaking,  
it became something that I could share.

I gave a gift to a student,  
a book instead of a broom,  
he picked it up as if for good luck,  
then threw it across the room.

So I gave a gift to his mother  
and told her what he did,  
she went to ground him and promptly found him  
quietly reading it.

**JESSE ELLSBURY**

## Frontiers & Truth

we evade sentences  
or maybe time

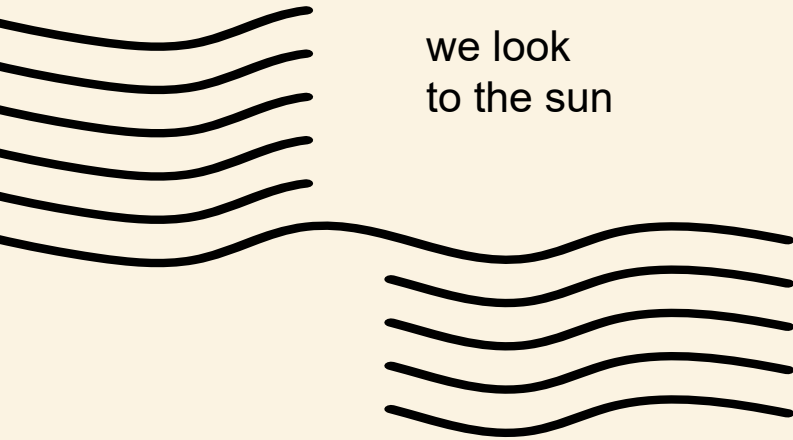
pressing wildflowers into books  
we dream of the Lake Country or maybe  
Egypt

existence is  
a lecture (many lectures) on psychology

we navigate chrysanthemums  
converse with poems

our fears  
illicit salvation

we look  
to the sun



MARCIA ARRIETA

## **nopales**

I sit among death  
trees whose branches are white  
crumbling  
hollow  
I make my body hollow so something old can enter  
I dream always of snakes  
as some writhing mass  
I am running away from  
with words I don't need to be always  
trying to convince myself of something  
I write what is  
at the same time that I write myself into being  
past, present, future are one  
I choose the forked path  
it is not an easy one  
and my tongue still bleeds at night  
wasps bless me always  
paint yellow on my cheeks and eyelids  
I am scared and it is beautiful  
a cactus, I lose my spines  
and grow new ones  
at times everything seems a threat  
but the world bends me into shape  
into softness, into embrace  
time braids me  
folds my body into the wind  
one strand over the other  
one limb over the heart-lung  
above all I ask  
forgiveness and protection  
spines grow inward, too, you know

**MAYA LITAUER CHAN**

## **Analects on Love**

*(from Letters of Hadewijch, Beguine of Brabant)*

I.

Love is invisible and a mystery. Only the Beloved sees it. No one knows when love will arrive.

II.

When love kills the heart, the heart love kills cannot die in itself.

III.

Love will teach the Beloved to live and die in love, which is the greatest mystery. No one can love without pain.

IV.

Love shows her darkest secrets to the Beloved, the misery of living without love. The Beloved has found love since he was with her and believed in her.

V.

Love takes the heart and soul, but drives the soul out so it will forget its pain, for when the Beloved comes to know love, he knows nothing.

VI.

Love does not accept anything rational, but makes everything possible. Reason is against true love, because it can add nothing to love, nor stop it, because love's only law is to increase forever or die, and nothing can be added upon that.

VII.

The only thing that can live in love and touch her is desire. The secret name of love is touch. Love is perfect and can live in all things, but love lives best according to her desire and touch.

VIII.

Love is a mystery. Her countenance is a secret. Love herself is in herself and through herself the soul will better know her.

IX.

Love is the fiercest, attacks most fiercely when she is the sweetest and most gentle. She deeply wounds the soul when she is gentle and envelops the Beloved entirely within herself.

X.

No one is responsible for love, but she passes judgements on all. God gives her this power and does not give such fruit to angels or anyone else. Even the most victorious are chained with the command to love Love.

XI.

Love possesses the Beloved. His soul cannot err. Love enters his memory so he can remember that he loved no one else but love.

XII.

Love is the highest quality. She was born of herself. She labors on her own, and then reposes into herself. Love is happy on its own. Love is love and her name is above and below everything, even if no one has loved.

**WILL REGER**

## **The Man from Sodom Explains Resurrection**

Whenever I am naked and not ashamed,  
I am back in the Garden of Eden,  
resurrected into innocence,  
my true being.

Whenever I am naked in bed with another man,  
I bring him to Eden, too. We return each other to God,  
skin to skin through the gate  
and down the path to Paradise.

I often don't know the man's name.  
I don't need to know.  
We're before Adam,  
and Eve,  
before man  
and woman,  
before names and animals,  
before sea and sky,  
before light,  
in the beginning

just God  
all night.

**BEN BAGOCIUS**



## Imperfect Contrition

Giver of life, Lover of souls,  
you who pour mercy into each hell  
of our making, grant me the grace  
to forgive those you've already  
forgiven. Accept, if you will, my grudging  
concession that you love even me,  
despite my rather more fixed  
opinion that you, of all people,  
should keep higher standards.

Teach me to tell my mistakes  
from my sins, to learn from the former  
while mourning the latter. Free me  
from the misbegotten search  
for a better past, that I might live  
in the now of your creation,  
groaning as it is, as am I,  
who remembers your odd affection  
for the flawed, counter, fraught:  
the many you rescue, not in spite of,  
but *through* our self-rendered wounds.

**BRIAN VOLCK**

## **Muse**

no matter how tired,  
how drained the day makes me,

your being fills me with lightness,  
with hope;

like rays of sun shining through the  
darkened clouds,  
like a warm and soft spring breeze,

your essence rids my mind of heavy  
thoughts,  
casting them away far beyond my reach

you fill me with the need to progress,  
to look ever forwards;

my desire to create is fueled endlessly,  
rivaled only by constant dreaming of you

you've poured immaculately into my  
cracked heart,  
like hot wax cooling into a mold

fortifying me,  
steadying me with courage I've never  
known

**SUISEN HOSHIJIMA**

## **To the UBC Aquatic Centre Women's Locker Room**

I have never seen myself in three dimensions all in one glance.  
That comprehensive view has been granted to you.

Once in middle school, girls in another locker room laughed  
at my Latina ass. But now I am here where I change into my suit  
as I hear one woman tutor another on the trick of the locker,  
“Hold the handle up the whole time, put the coin in, close it,  
and then turn the key.” When I turn around, I see the speaker’s  
stark naked, buxom buttocks and all.

Undergraduate students vent in righteous indignation  
on themes of feminism and inclusion. One among them, like me,  
has faint acne scars on her back, no less beautiful for that.

Morning regulars include a woman with jet-black hair  
and brown-sugar skin, early 40s; and another, silver-haired  
with sun-speckled complexion, mid 70s, both similar  
to my short height, small cup size. I aspire to be like them,  
comfortable in their own warm-toned skin, still swimming.

Every so often an exhibitionist leaves off clothes for a while,  
affording even respectful, averting eyes a chance to see  
organic female glory.

After my post-swim shower, I return to my locker,  
dab on and rub in lavender lotion, aware  
that this process leaves me open to view.  
So be it. I’ve accepted, thanks to all of you, I  
am a real woman, too.

**JOLENE NOLTE**

## **From the Life of a Saint**

*by Rainer Maria Rilke*

He knew anxieties whose coming on  
was like a death and not to be withstood.  
His heart learned to go through them at a plod;  
he brought it up just like a son.

He knew unspeakable adversity,  
as dark and dawnless as a dungeon cell,  
and yielded up his soul obediently,  
when it was fully grown, that it might dwell

beside its lord and bridegroom, while he stayed  
behind alone in such a stark locale  
that loneliness made all things magnified,  
and lived far off, not needing words at all.

But in return he learned, as years went by,  
the blessings, also, of his situation,  
so that he felt a tenderness, to lie  
cradled in his own hands, like all creation.

Translated by:

**SUSAN MCLEAN**

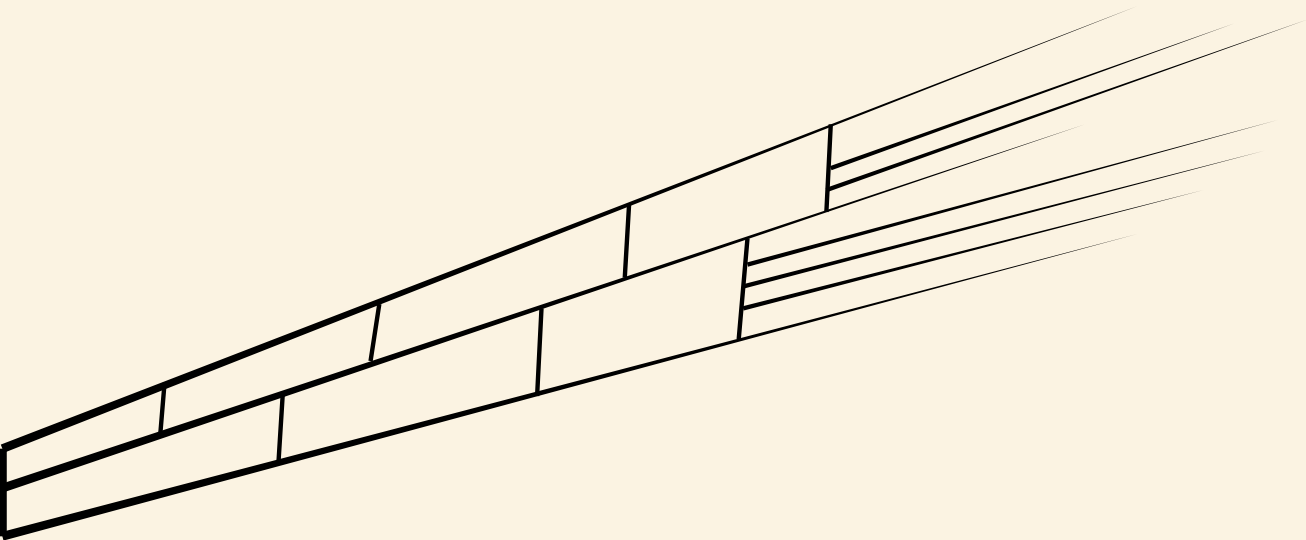
## Aus dem Leben eines Heiligen

Er kannte Ängste, deren Eingang schon  
wie Sterben war und nicht zu überstehen.  
Sein Herz erlernte, langsam durchzugehen;  
er zog es groß wie einen Sohn.

Und namenlose Nöte kannte er,  
finster und ohne Morgen wie Verschläge;  
und seine Seele gab er folgsam her,  
da sie erwachsen war, auf dass sie läge

bei ihrem Bräutigam und Herrn; und blieb  
allein zurück an einem solchen Orte,  
wo das Alleinsein alles übertrieb,  
und wohnte weit und wollte niemals Worte.

Aber dafür, nach Zeit und Zeit, erfuhr  
er auch das Glück, sich in die eignen Hände,  
damit er eine Zärtlichkeit empfände,  
zu legen wie die ganze Kreatur.







*Dancers*

**CAT GRANT**



## The Daughter of Jairus

*And they laughed Him to scorn, knowing  
she was dead. But He took her by the hand,  
and called out, "Maid, arise!"*

*Luke 8:53-54*

Since that time He touched me,  
the fever has not left,  
and my eyes are sparks in stubble.

I had my father turn away  
all the meddlers and matchmakers --  
and the men with coins in their belts.

A shame to my mother  
to hear the snickering in the synagogue--  
her daughter unmarried at eighteen.

I slipped away to the festival  
of New Moon to wander  
among the torches and timbrels.

In that glare of fire,  
and clamor of pipes  
and bright tambourines,

body to body pressed  
against absence,  
against death.

But by the black river,  
reeds whispered,  
rushes whispered.

And my breath broke  
and my heart beat  
like rain on stone

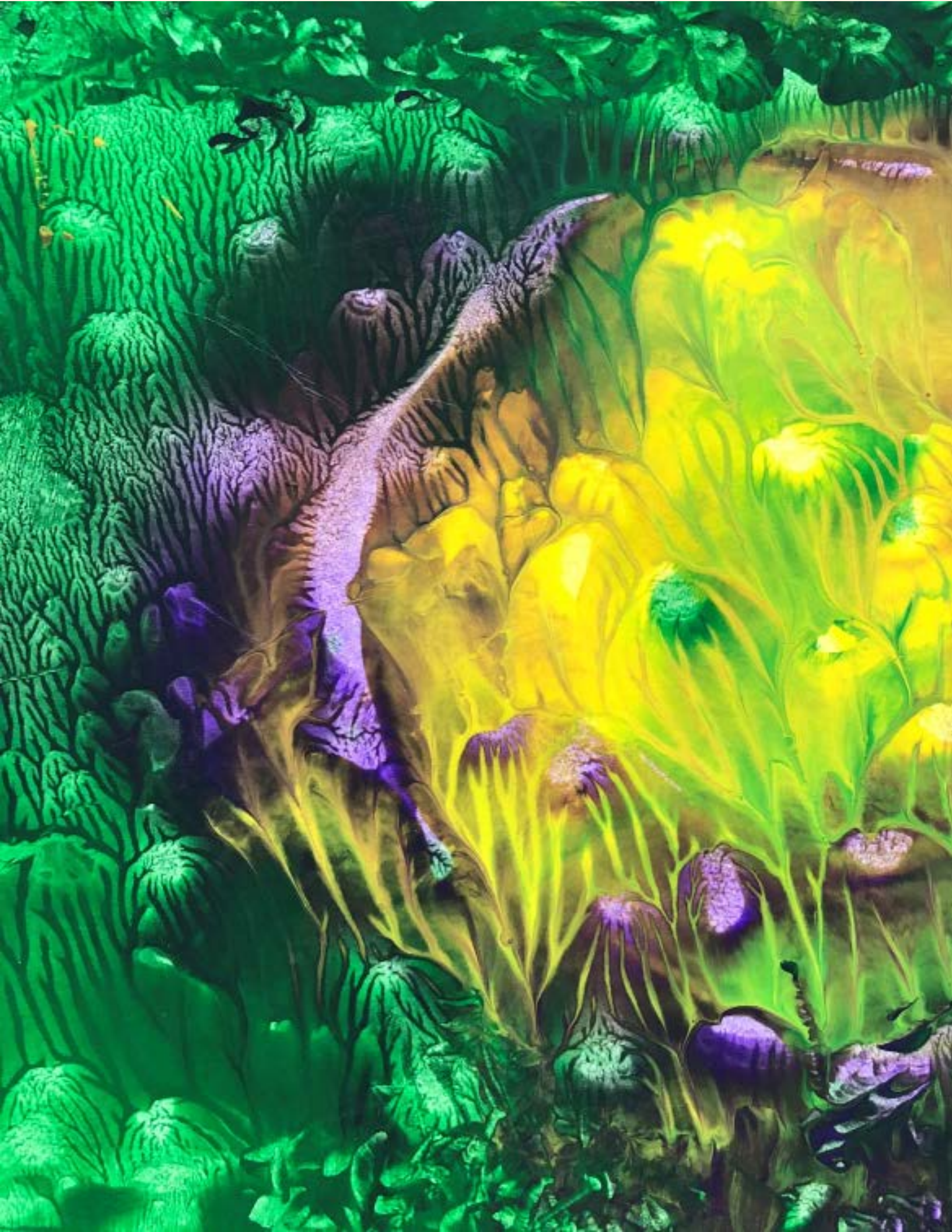
as the new goddess rose--  
a shining sickle  
in the drumming dark.

**DAN MACISAAC**

Our insecurities prevent us from  
recognizing how dearly we are  
Beloved.

**YAHIA LABABIDI**









*Light and Growth  
Appear in the  
Universe*

JENNIFER ELAM

## **Pruning**

I'm dead-heading marigolds  
in a pot on the porch,  
pinching off what's dried,  
no longer useful, done—

for the whisper of a new bud,  
yellow in a small green fist.  
And when I've pruned it all—  
every last thing, I keep going,

leaving only monogrammed  
cereal bowls, a set of plates  
with family initials, a torn  
baby book and bags of used

boy clothes, the broken Ford,  
chipped baseball trophies  
on the closet shelf—  
I prune until all that's left  
is earth in my hands.

**CYNTHIA GOOD**

No respite in the garden without,  
first, struggle in the wilderness.

**YAHIA LABABIDI**

## The Stabilities of Place

*Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering.  
There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*  
—Leonard Cohen

An early winter evening falls and the burden  
of the day's work flows gently back into pools  
of relief and forgetfulness, as dusk gathers us  
in her gentle folds of cobalt blue. In this stillness

I no longer wonder if I've made of my life  
something definite and true, or if I've let  
the pressures break me open deeply enough  
to let a straying shaft of light shine through

against losses that hope and prayer cannot  
withstand. Tonight, though, my questions  
begin to fall away as the wind outside begins  
to heave and have its way with this old house,

shaking it as the snow flies slantwise through  
the dark and heavy skies, and all the while  
the grand old maple stands silently close by,  
stretching her arms out over the roof, having

seen centuries of this and more, not knowing  
a single worry even as her limbs groan against  
the fury of this storm, her hard-bent frame now  
emptied of the last stubborn autumn leaves.

She's known the rhythmic rise and fall of sap  
for more generations than we'll ever see, and  
so might give us a glimpse of what endurance  
might mean to those, like us, who seem to

know so little of the stabilities of place.

**MARK S. BURROWS**

**JONEL ABELLANOSA**

## **Neuroplasticity**

Words  
imagination's neurons

Thought acoustics  
electric

Vision and the image  
quantum entangled  
long before existing  
in space-time

The wanderer finds a tree

In a split second  
the word in his mind,  
in a split second  
the word birthing *green, leaves,*  
*bark, brown, roots*

*tree* birthing *water* elsewhere

The wanderer hears chirps.  
Winged word taking off  
in a split second  
the word multiplying.  
Resting on a root,  
he watches the murmuration.

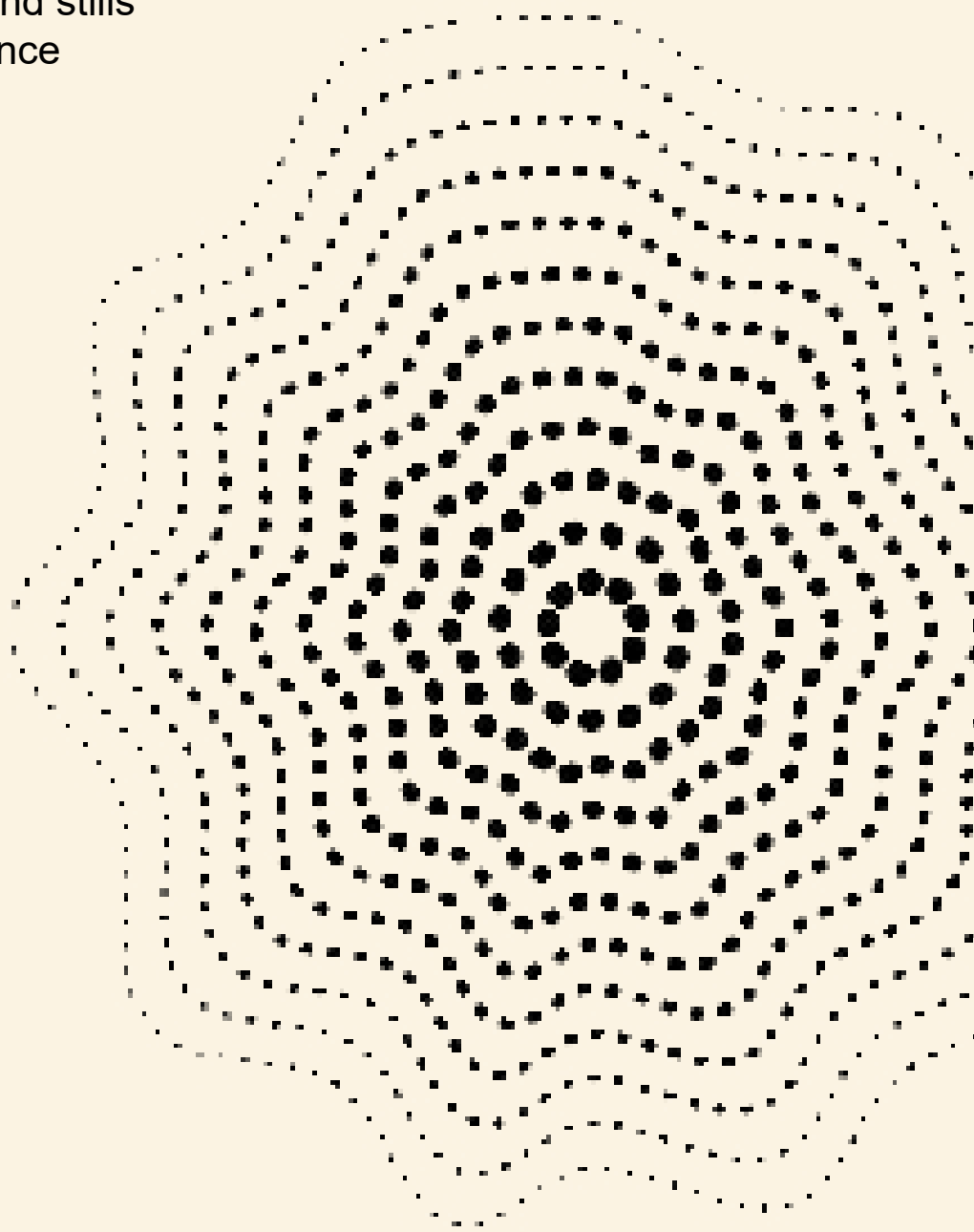
In memory's rain forest  
words



Sounds-shaping colors  
connecting phrases  
syllabic replicating  
pulsing evolving revolving

words in and out of geometry

The wanderer  
might remember the moon  
before it arrives, and stills  
his mind in reverence  
of divine light



*A Traditional Ca Dao, Folk Song Poem*

**Speaking with My Buffalo**

My buffalo, let me speak with you!  
Come, plough with me in the fields.  
I am a farmer. It is my calling  
to plough these fields, then grow rice.  
My buffalo, you and I work here and there.  
We never care if the work is heavy.  
As long as rice plants provide me with good grains  
You will have plenty of fresh grass in the fields to  
eat!

**Con trâu**

Trâu ơi ta bảo trâu này,  
Trâu ra ngoài ruộng trâu cày với ta.  
Cấy cày vốn nghiệp nông gia,  
Ta đây trâu đó ai mà quản công.  
Bao giờ cây lúa còn bông,  
Thì còn ngọn cỏ ngoài đồng trâu ăn.

Translated from Vietnamese by:

**EDWARD TICK AND TRAN DINH  
SONG**

## July Night, More Rain

To be lonely alone is not the worst thing,

not by far.

By night, taking in the rain's spatter and splash of the gutter down-spout,  
and eruption of the sump, belching the cellar's flood on downhill.

The silences are all replete with unheard conversation.

*What comes next? Why? And who will be taking note?*

Like Thales, I think the sieve of heaven is permeable --

enough to drown us

who long for the return of those pinpricks of leaked light  
when God up there steps naked from the shower and turns  
and flips the lightswitch on again in that eternal room.

Down here, it's like breathing in aspic,

a pale gilled life,

even insight blurred like a kind of fog, wisping  
between the rain-blackened trunks of two old tardy pines  
left de-skirted when the wood was cleared a century ago;  
two bare legs, barely an armspread between them,  
sharing a single rootweb over the shallow granite bed.

Too dark to see them, but I feel them

conspiring gently like two old horses dozing in a damp barn  
side by side.

So I roll over and recompose my boneshack for more sleep,  
solitary but not entirely, wondering  
as all the long-solitary must do,

*To what question might I be the answer?*

JENNIFER PHILLIPS

## Mother Earth

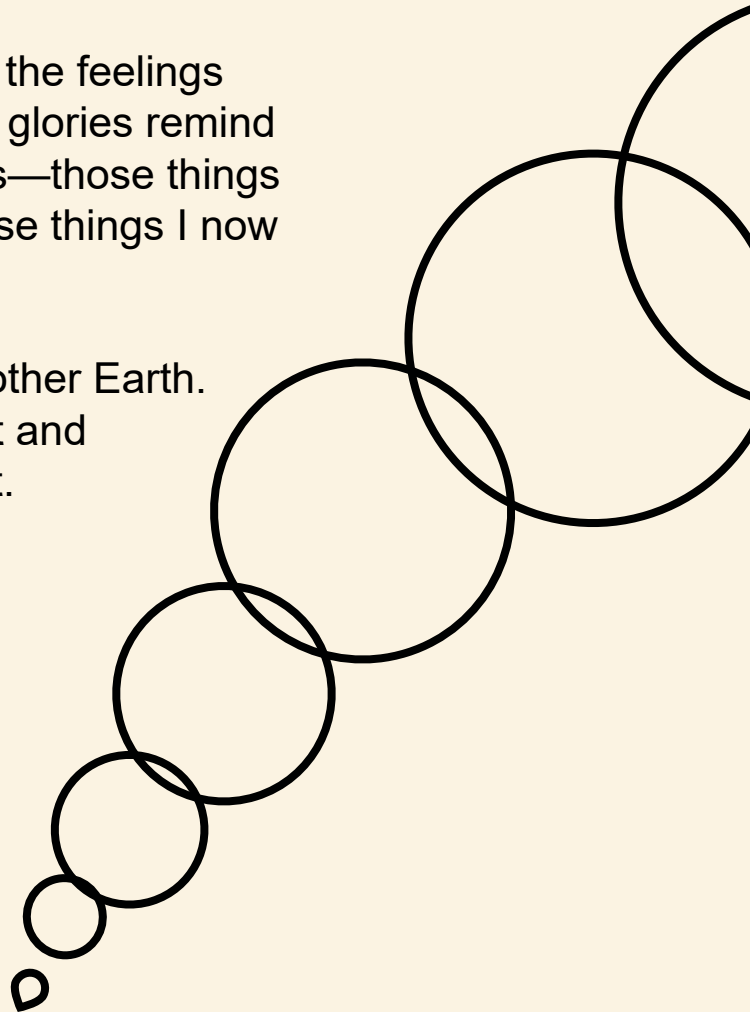
The whiff of strong coffee brewing  
and fresh cut bacon sizzling, hits  
my nose and wakes me before the  
rooster yelps “good morning.”

Standing on my porch watching  
the sun rise over the fields of  
corn stalks swaying in the wind,  
sopping of the remaining red-eye  
gravy with the biscuit left in my saucer.

Squeezing the warm, full utters of  
our milk cow while sounds of fresh  
dairy ping the metal bucket as she  
munches on the grain placed before  
her.

The smells, the sights, the feelings  
of the earth and all her glories remind  
me of the simple things—those things  
I took for granted—those things I now  
long for.

How I betrayed you Mother Earth.  
You gave me your best and  
I showed you my worst.



Deprived of your love now—your  
mud and sand formed the concrete  
pillars that imprison me.

Your metals shaped into bars that  
I peer through where I see beyond  
the razor wire, watching the trees  
bow at your majestic wind.

Bring me back to your bosom and  
I will not forsake you again. Let  
me die in your earth and return to  
it the dust that you formed me with.



**TONY VICK**



*Garden of Peace*  
**MICHELLE SAKHAI**

## **I talk with Mary**

We sit in her kitchen, sip wine from stoneware mugs, pass photos, compare stories. She speaks of her fear when the angel arrived, when she said “yes” despite her shame. She tells me how, hearing the news, her betrothed shook his head, walked away when she wept...then returned the next day and took her hand. I tell her that not long ago I witnessed a different annunciation, the chance to become a mother by signing my name on a line. She nods as I speak of armed borders, of children crossing deserts alone, of metallic blankets, crowded refugee camps without soap. I tell her that when I met the beautiful seventeen-year-old who needed a guardian to apply for legal status, I saw something in her eyes – a flame, a love. I couldn’t just call her a ward. Suddenly I realize. “That was your son,” I say. She smiles, her eyes filled with light.

Then I ask her my questions. I ask about her own flight after that terrible birth. “We never thought we’d see home again,” she says. I ask about the day her son got lost, about the moment she found him in the temple, standing tall before the elders. “I was furious, but wow, did he stump them,” she beams. I tell her that mine has also preached, that she thanks Adam and Eve for the life we’ve been given, that she recently spoke in a college class called “God is not white.”

We talk about our fears: hers, that her son will be killed by the state, mine, that my daughter will be deported. She takes my hands in hers. They are smaller than mine, but firm, brown, covered in tiny spots. We say nothing. We sit like that for a while, silent. The sun begins to descend. Other tasks call each of us – clothes to wash, bread to bake. Her son is out on the road, but her brother will be back from the city soon, so she hopes he’ll bring news. My own dear girl is expecting me. She makes tamales for supper, listens to Enrique Iglesias while solving quadratic equations. As she plants tomatoes and peppers in her garden, she’s waiting for me to come home. I drink one last drop from the cold stone mug. Mary and I agree to meet next week – same time and place. She squeezes my hands, then releases them.

**JEANNINE PITAS**



## Newborn

rain

forms

refreshing pools

of water

where newborn

turtle

learns

to swim

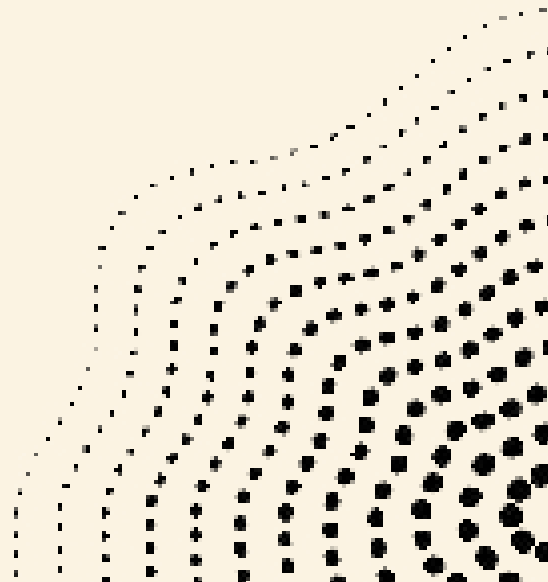
unaware

that

it's my

driveway

**DR. DEIDRA SUWANEE DEES**



## **A Thousand Tiny Murders**

An uphill breeze ruffled  
Scattered pink and white cups--  
A patch of spring beauty in a bed of moss.  
One brief waft of perfume and it was gone.  
The scene: a local park.  
I bent, picked a pinkie-tip flower,  
Inhaled, drew deep for just one drop of scent.  
The perfumed breeze had been a symphony,  
A thousand notes  
Conducted by the breeze.  
Among the flowers, though, below an overhanging  
branch,  
A tangle of gray and white feathers--  
A coat not willingly laid aside but stripped  
By something great and terrible.  
It felt like stepping into a room the moment after  
Some argument had ended.  
Thus is the secret imparted:  
Nature is perfume and a thousand tiny murders.  
Inseparable, like life--like our lives--  
Good and evil, wonder and horror, sorrow and joy.

**ANDREW GUDGEL**

**Okami**

*Yamatsumi Shrine, ca. 1000-2017*

Wolves with long noses  
and saw-teeth, their ears laid flat,  
lift a paw or two

as leaves fall, gold flecks,  
on the ceiling of the shrine  
for a thousand years.

When deer and wild boar  
roamed Fukushima, these wolves  
protected the fields.

\*

The mountains shiver,  
and a tsunami crashes  
three reactor cores.

The village empties.  
Each morning a priest returns  
through the cypresses.

Then, one night, a fire,  
smoke blackening the ceiling,  
ash drifting through doors.

\*

For a month, students  
practice the ancient brushstrokes.  
They study photos,

and wolves come to life  
on two hundred forty-two  
bright wooden panels

where grain is landscape  
beyond a frond or branch,  
a few tufts of grass.

\*

Gray, black, and tan wolves,  
and a white one, ears raised,  
like the wolf kami

still watching over  
this place, though no one alive  
has seen his kind's track,

and they are only now  
coming back to the village  
with offerings of hope.

## **The Air Rises Up, the Fire Burns Further**

She's nameless in this story as it goes and goes,  
History has not left its mark on her body  
As clearly as fires mark the rings of trees

Her scent was of dying honey and lemon rind  
And she had dark lines across her feet, deep scars  
So that the others wondered where did she go

Her fingers eagerly bent light aside, a touch  
That slip that falls, falls, pursues the deep sun  
A clustering dance of still, looking for form not available

She had the voice of a convalescent, no a voice  
Of one who had lived alone in a cave for a long time  
Without speaking to a soul; anticipatory beauty

O instantaneous river, o brass wellspring, she slowed to a walk  
Working through her own penance in the dust.  
She looked through her own shadow in the telling,

Compelled to kneel on the stone, the thrill of the ask, the  
space,  
Balance between decorum and pain, then see her running  
A sacred wraith, her face a pale lantern in the dusk

Imagine a beehive, as it hangs from a branch like a sling,  
What is to understand she let fly, and she thought of where  
The mind opened out, each wingtip unfolding and through...

**LENORE WILSON**

## **Synchronized Fire-Setting**

We set a fire on a  
windswept beach  
close to the time a  
sun would set by  
crumpling up the  
day's newspaper  
and striking a  
match.

Each flame itself  
rebelled,  
becoming  
indifferent to the  
task and we  
sipped from the  
flask we brought  
to a continent's  
edge and jeered at  
stars arriving late.

**SCOTT KINDER-PYLE**

## Coal Mine Canyon

*For Karen and the Diné*

What your eyes and mine regard, even from  
this shared vantage, will never be the same,  
for if this steep chasm's carved from rock layers  
whose textures and smells I know as surely  
as their given names – Dakota, Cow Springs,  
Carmel – I'm but a late pilgrim to what  
fierce beauty abides in these banded cliffs  
of ash and ochre, their powdery scree  
inviting my touch like the raised borders  
of a Navajo rug, while this, to you,  
is the Jagged Place, where rimrock hoodoos  
guard a onetime home fraught with memories  
of childbirth, forced removal, and three graves  
marking land no longer yours. You, though, walked  
the steeper path to our graced rendezvous,  
entrusting me – who had yet done little  
to merit trust – with the welcoming weight  
of your stories, sustaining and brutal,  
offered like fresh-baked bread leavened with tears.  
And now, having since shared many losses,  
what words we speak stay circled in silence –  
grief proving the surest route to tacit  
comprehension – as we stand together  
at the canyon's edge, most unlikely friends  
watching ravens dance on currents of air  
up and beyond the far rim, where red hills  
tumble in waterless ocean waves toward  
dark mountains your people still call sacred.

**BRIAN VOLCK**



## **Sunnyside Trees**

Each pebble the origins of its birth  
a grain of sand contains the body  
of the mother star from which it fell.  
All pieces keep remembrance  
of that which went before.  
As a child I prayed to the trees

that were allowed a space  
surrounded by squared pavement  
across from the gravel playground.  
I would apologize for where they lived,  
tell them how beautiful they were,

that I was glad they were on my block.  
I still can see the dappled bark,  
the green maple hands in summer.  
I would ask them to imagine me

somewhere else-  
take me on a journey,  
open my arms like they opened theirs,

ask to be spirit lifted to the sky  
to see whether looking down on it

it was the same blue as my mother's eyes

**CHARLENE STEGMAN MOSKAL**



*Horse Descending*

## Gestalt

You notice the wild horses first. Flight animals with bodies as sensitive as fingertips, 180 degree swiveling ears, and impressive memory retention. On the left, one descends, rippling neck and head of white water rapids. A whinny erupts from its twisting muzzle. A scribbled alphabet, initiating something. To the upper right, a miniature dark horse gallops across the lap of a woman in a long, black Victorian gown. She is gazing into a crystal ball. The horse, with a blaze on its forehead and limned in lightning, gusts past the ball's gathered illumination into a triangular expanse of light.

The triangular expanse suggests a slightly elongated heart-shaped face, over-exposed, but a face nonetheless. A face looking directly into your eyes. *I counsel thee to take a few steps back. And then a few more, as with Dalí's "Gala Contemplating the Mediterranean Sea which at a Distance of 20 Meters is Transformed into the Portrait of Abraham Lincoln (Homage to Rothko)," 1976.*

What? What? You hesitate. You lean forward, skeptical. You lean back, intrigued. Then you step back, once, twice, a few more times. When you tip your head, the triangular face morphs into a white cap, the white cap of a Vodouisant. Now you see this whole other face, cheek to cheek with the equine head, rush of water descending. You focus on the lips by the horse's muzzle. And, on the angle of the head, like Ray Charles's at his piano, breathing music and playing the slowest of blues.

Together, the black head, the triangular expanse, and the horse of rapids form a mandala of sorts, a yin yang of dark and light.

As you cannot see the eyes of the Vodouisant, you try to read the lips. Prayer for justice, freedom, healing? Your gaze lingers on the lips. Suddenly, you realize that those lips and their breath compose another face. A pale, stern face: thin-lipped, hawk-nosed, blue-flashing darkened-eyed except for one pinprick gleam of light. The face seems to belong to a figure dressed in a 17th century doublet. An English Puritan immigrant.

*Is it you, again?* A curate. Then a pastor. Copper, iron, fire. A rounded helmet or hat on the head extending into a bubble of trouble above it.

In that obscure alembic, figures cluster, silhouetted against the sulfurous light of some New England crisis. A raid? A conflagration? Oppositions, accusations, slaughters, enslavements, confinements, famines, pestilence? The Pequot Wars and the Mystic Massacre? The Narragansett Campaign? What sermon can be preached in their wake? That these were acts of God, like droughts and hurricanes?

The pale-faced pastor, tall and lanky, has sunk into a swamp of despondency and ill-health. *Deadness of heart*. Members of his congregation whisper to one another about his state, the tarnished silver of visible sainthood. On the long night of his death bed, struggling to find the words for his next sermon, he falls into a trance. In the trance, he sees an oncoming eclipse reddening a full moon rising over a deep forest. He feels and hears the jeremiad rattling in his throat, this time in the form of a name that rhymes with “comet”: *Metacomet*, *Metacomet*, *Metacomet*. But, he does not know what to make of it, peering through a glass darkly. He is tired, very tired and things swim before his eyes.

Your own gaze drifts back to the rippling neck and head of white water rapids descending from one side of the elongated heart-shaped face, over-exposed and thus mostly hidden, but a face, nonetheless. Looking directly at you. One eye almost visible, the other veiled by the light into which the blazed dark horse gallops. Meanwhile, you wish you could see the eyes of the Vodouisant, but you cannot, only the lips and the pallid face of that pastor following a trail of floating letters in a fixed trance.

You begin to see other faces and forms, bluish gray, in the white horse's mane, mercurial. The bowed head of the Vodouisant reminds you that you stand at the edge of the known senses.

## Cemetery Songs

“In Pobiddy, Georgia what we are doing is reading the strange  
and wonderful names of the dead.”

Mary Oliver

She sometimes accompanied me  
to the cemetery, vast with its flat markers,  
flat to avoid  
cluttering the vast sky here,  
she four-years-old,  
wandering from name to name to name,  
each with dates  
pinned down forever  
within brackets,  
piping, “Oh! How sad!” .... the next the same  
and again the same.

I rarely noticed others than my own there  
except once,  
as she and I drove away.  
A young girl knelt beside a mound  
of disturbed soil, praying,  
or so it seemed ... not raising her head  
to the grave-surrounding  
white picket fence  
filled with teddy bears.

My little one was indiscriminant  
in her mourning, and my task  
of coaxing her back to our busy world  
was easy,  
where many sorrows  
awaited her, too.  
Even the kneeling one  
eventually left.

That is what the living do. We seldom,  
unless we have to, stay there  
for very long.

**CAROL HAMILTON**



## Sue Me

Forgive me I wasn't interested in the mean mothers  
the drunk mothers, the hard-smoking or cursing  
mothers, not on the page, the theater, the movies, not in a too  
long story someone was polishing and telling  
to save their own lives, I wanted to skip to the mother  
who found her way around high hedges of thorns  
to come face to face with, well, *kindness*, and I wasn't  
the least interested in the mean fathers, the silent  
abusive and/or hard drinking fathers whose own  
trials had made it impossible for them to say three  
nice words in a row except maybe one day which became  
the centerpiece of that boy's story, or worse  
that girl's story, I didn't want to waste a minute on them  
whose own childhood had poisoned their future  
family's lives and I wanted to skip, literally skip  
down the street—because kids do—and look in the kitchen  
window where miraculously the miserable father  
laughs so hard at an old riddle that something jars loose  
between his heart and ribs and he has to lie down in the  
living room and when he gets up it's like the first time  
he saw his first child and he sees everything, and he  
sets out to fix all the broken joints of the doll house he had  
kicked to bits and then he looks out from the page and says  
I don't know who the fuck you are but either get  
the fuck away or come in and sit the fuck down because  
I have a story that will break your fucking heart

JESSICA GREENBAUM





*Deja vu Series 22* ALEX NODOPAKA



## **My Soul Shudders In and Out of my Body like a Microscope In and Out of Focus**

I want to watch certain cartoons with you.  
Not the bad stuff where breasts get groped  
for laughs, but the nourishing stuff, the ones  
where girls turn into cats and crystals light  
the way. I don't know how to change  
the world. I do know how to make good  
blueberry pancakes. The secret is in the vanilla.  
I know how to weed around the rosemary bush  
so that birds swoop down and gobble up the unearthed  
bugs. I admit I don't know how to keep this soul  
inside of this body. It keeps shifting  
out. We joke I am made of three eels and a fog spirit  
wrapped in a pink bathrobe. The eels squiggle restlessly,  
sniffing out salt water. The fog spirit tugs me toward the foothills  
in the north. All those rose hips and prospects  
of vanishing. It's an ongoing process to not evaporate.  
Can't tell you how difficult it is. *Stay here*, you whisper  
into my hair. Holding these fingers  
that are somehow mine. My soul flickers in  
and out of my body to the beat of the song  
in the show we are watching on the laptop raised  
on your knees. Rain splatters down from the storm drain and  
although embodiment often feels like a cinched-up ballgown  
of thorns, this is pleasant. I sip lemon tea.  
I feel your warmth. *I'll try*, I say. *I'll think about it*.

**CATHERINE KYLE**

## **Willing: creator/painter**

Under the canopy of  
Earthy velvet,  
A spotted sun seeps  
Infiltrates, captivates

Compulsive strokes  
Layer by Layer, a  
Thickening  
Intoxicating  
Incubating  
Wood.

Delicate strokes, a  
Molasses-coated  
Honey-plastered  
Syrup-smothered  
Wood.

Craving a  
Fascinating  
Fixating  
Fabricating  
Wood.

Helpless,  
Reckless,  
Rooted.

## **Willing: observer**

Under the canopy of  
Earthy velvet,  
The scent of nutty pine  
Emanates, circulates

An aging colony  
Layer by Layer, an  
Inviting  
Reaching  
Striving  
Wood.

Bustling stillness, a  
Bird-fluttering  
Leaf-rustling  
Wind-whirling  
Wood.

Seduced by a  
Swirling  
Streaming  
Surging  
Wood.

Deliberately  
Deliciously  
Addicted

**ELIA MIN**

## **swans mate for life**

but this one is alone

beneath the falls

every night she circles

too late now

like the rest of us

the curve of wings

a fairy tale

a highway of stars

heavy and beautiful

keeping us all

hushed clouds of breath

dropping from black branches

caught in this pond I am

singing all night our tale

the ache inside waking

outside the resting place

I do not know

*in the small pond of water*

*where the river remains open*

*inside those boundaries of ice*

*she commits to winter*

*her long arched neck*

*frames the wintry landscapes*

*the white river*

*snow weighing on pines*

*is this curse*

*asleep forever*

*a solitary sound*

*like the quiet flap of wings*

*circling*

*a frozen world*

*outside the given*

*where I call the name*

*to be known*

my own name called  
swimming up from the dark  
we never learn how  
only that she waits

*in return that light might come  
resurrected in these flowing waters  
swan lost her shadow  
and he like spring  
might never arrive*

**TARA MOGHADAM**

## What the Sages Say

1

< Gr *amoibē*, change

This, said the bearded scientist  
in his lab, is how it works.

Shape-shifting, uncontained,  
the *amoeba* surrounds its prey—

dead or alive. Hunter, gatherer,  
scavenger, it hugs, absorbs, then

splits, doubling down. Giving no  
ground, it survives, a moving maw,

all-consuming self.

2

< IE base *sē(i)-*, to cast, let fall

That, said the bearded hermit from  
his cave, is hardly half; the soil

is richer than we know. Bound into  
its form, the *seed*—acorn, maple,

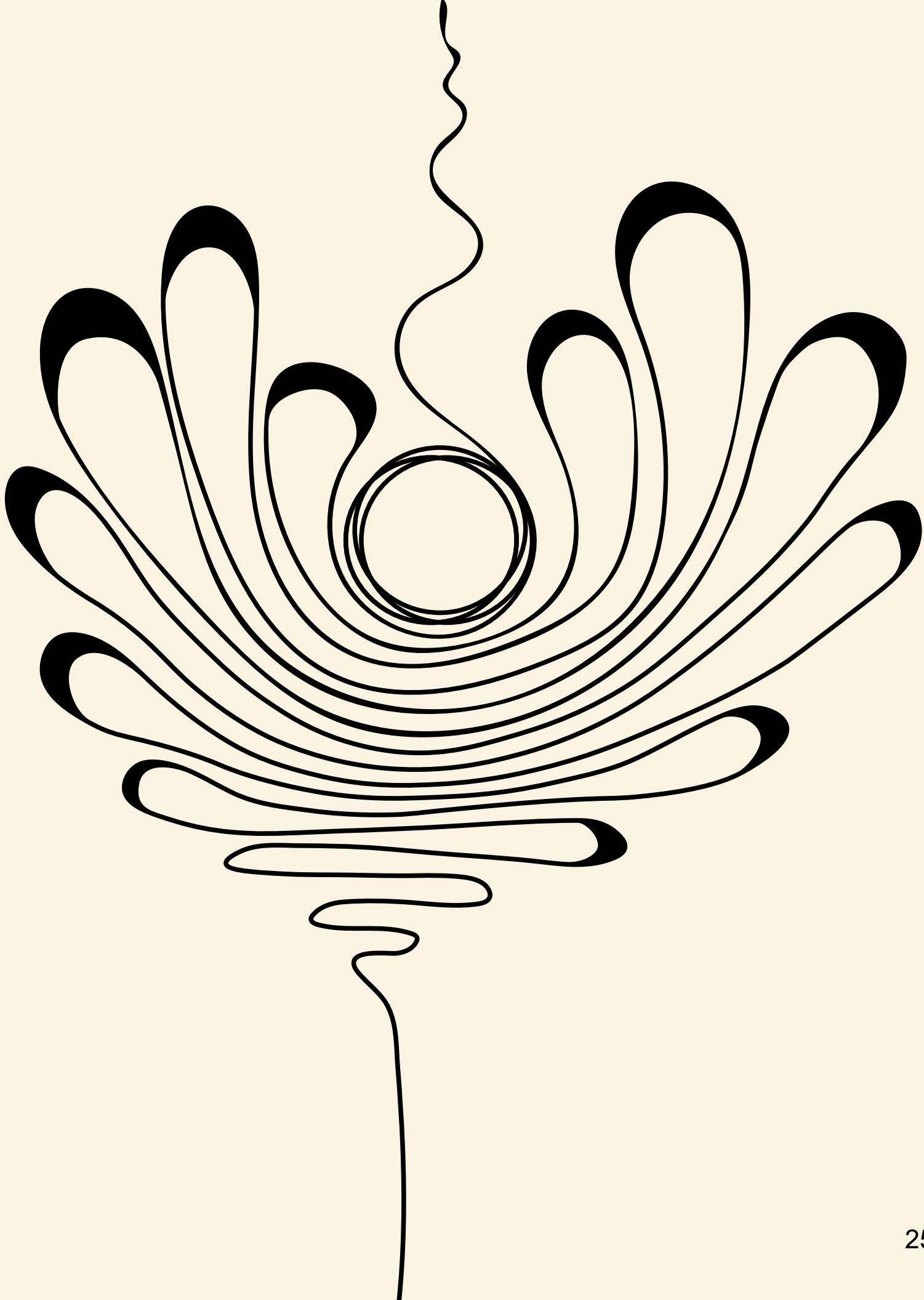
wheat—lets go, falls to ground.  
Dying, giving up its single self, it

bursts new life, surges to the light,  
yielding stalk, branches, leaves, fruit,

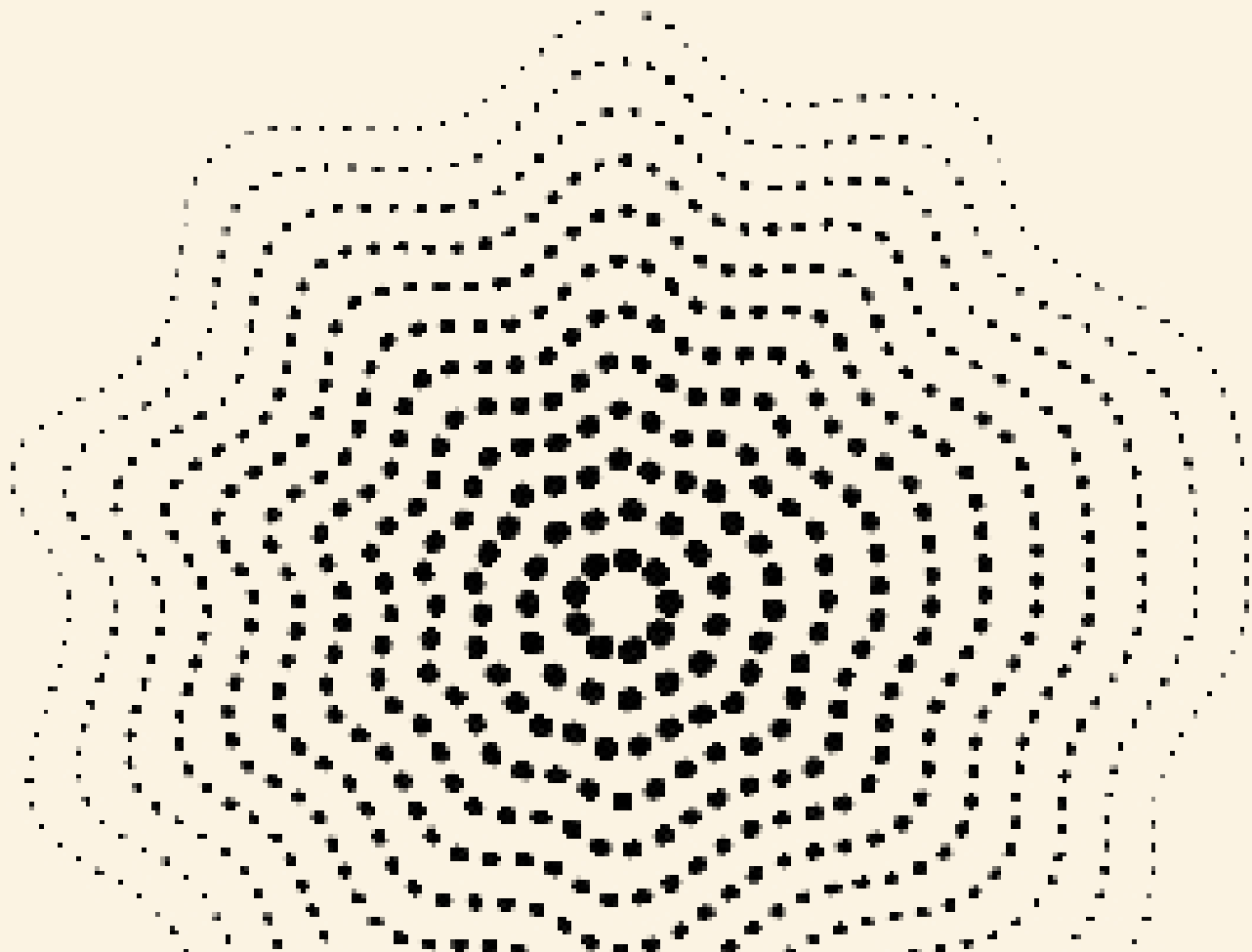
rich harvest, a field of ripened grain.

**HARRY MOORE**





# Contributor Bios



**Jonel Abellanosa** lives in Cebu City, the Philippines. He is a nature lover, an environmental advocate, and loves all animals particularly dogs. His poetry and fiction have appeared in hundreds of literary journals and anthologies, including *Windhover*, *The Lyric*, *Star\*Line*, *Poetry Kanto*, *Marsh Hawk Review*, *That Literary Review*, *Loch Raven Review* and *The Anglican Theological Review*. His poetry collections include, “Meditations” (Alien Buddha Press), “Songs from My Mind’s Tree” and “Multiverse” (Clare Songbirds Publishing House), “50 Acrostic Poems,” (Cyberwit, India), “In the Donald’s Time” (Poetic Justice Books and Art), and his speculative poetry collection, “Pan’s Saxophone” (Weasel Press).

**Mirza Nayeem Ahmed** is a second-year Data Science student at the Khoury College at Northeastern University. He is originally from Dhaka, Bangladesh. He seeks to use his knowledge to effectively bridge the gap of data literacy and make information understandable and accessible by all.

**Celia Lisset Alvarez** received her MA in English and MFA in fiction from the University of Miami. Instead of writing fiction, however, she published her first award-winning collection of poetry, *Shapeshifting* (Spire Press), in 2006, followed by *The Stones* (Finishing Line Press, 2006). Her work has appeared in several anthologies and journals such as *Prairie Schooner*, *BloodLotus*, and *Prospectus*, and has received both a Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations. Her new book, *Multiverses*, will be released in 2021 by Finishing Line Press. She has been a professor, a teacher, and now a mother, living in her hometown of Miami with husband and fellow poet Rafael Miguel Montes and daughters Lucy and Sara.

Artist, traveler, poet--**Marcia Arrieta**’s recent poetry collections include *perimeter homespun* (BlazeVOX) and *vestiges* (Dancing Girl). Her work can be found in *Bee House*, *Claw & Blossom*, *Otis Nebula*, *Otoliths*, *Word For/Word*, *Cloudbank*, *Angel City*, *Anastamos*, *Hobart*, & *Tiger Moth*. She edits and publishes *Indefinite Space*, a poetry/art journal.

**Kesi Augustine** is a writer, teacher, and scholar based in Queens, New York. She holds a PhD in English from New York University. Her recent publications include RESURRECTION, South Broadway Ghost Society, and

she was named a finalist for The Brannan Prize (2020). Kesi is signed to Red Fox Literary Agency. Her children's book, *A HEART FOR THE HUNGRY*, is forthcoming.

**Benjamin Bagocius** holds a Ph.D. in English from Indiana University, an M.F.A. in creative writing from The New School in New York City, and a B.A. in English with distinction from Kenyon College in Ohio. He teaches writing and literature at Bard High School Early College in Cleveland, Ohio, and facilitates Soul Salon, an online spiritual writing workshop. His writing appears in a range of venues, including *On Being*, *Tiferet*, *Soul-Lit*, *After the Pause*, and elsewhere.

**K. J. Baker** has been writing poetry since graduating college. In the 1970's, he published poems in anthologies. He recently published several poems in *Avocet Nature Journal*. He reads publicly from time to time in Portland. He loves the outdoors, camping and hiking. He worked as a computer technician for 20 years.

**Wayne-Daniel Berard**, PhD, teaches Humanities at Nichols College, Dudley, MA. He publishes broadly in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. His latest full-length work of poetry, *The Realm of Blessing*, has just been published by Unsolicited Press. He is the co-founding editor of *Soul-Lit*, an online journal of spiritual poetry ([www.soul-lit.com](http://www.soul-lit.com)). Wayne-Daniel lives in Mansfield, MA with his wife, The Lovely Christine.

**Richard E. Brenneman** lives in Boston where he has been recently published in *The Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and *The Nixes Mate Review*. His work was included in *No More Can Fit Into The Evening: An Anthology of Diverse Voices* published by Four Windows Press in 2020. He is retired and recently returned to writing poetry. He is currently working on gathering a collection for either a book or chapbook project.

**Mark S. Burrows** is a poet, scholar, translator, and historian with academic interests ranging widely in the fields of spirituality and poetics. His recent publications include a new translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours*, published as *Prayers of a Young Poet* (2016), as well as a translation of the

Iranian-German poet SAID's *99 Psalms*. His recent collection of poems, *The Chance of Home*, appeared in 2018, and, together with Jon M. Sweeney, he published two recent collections of meditative poems inspired by Eckhart's mystical writings: *Meister Eckhart's Book of the Heart* (2017) and *Meister Eckhart's Book of Secrets* (2019).

**João Cerqueira** is a Portuguese writer published in Spain, France, Italy, England, United States, Argentina and Brazil. He won four literary prizes in the United States.

**Maya Litauer Chan** is a poet and dreamer born and raised in San Francisco, CA and living in Portland, OR. She works at a health equity-centered non-profit, and in her free time she loves to garden, write, and read. Currently her favorite poet is Ocean Vuong. Previous publications include *Assisi: An Online Journal of Arts & Letters*, and *About Place Journal*. Her work spans themes of trauma, loss, spirituality, ancestors, healing, pain, and the body.

**Nadia Colburn** is the author of the poetry book *The High Shelf* and her poetry and prose have been widely published in more than 80 publications including *The New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review*, *LARB*, *Spirituality & Health*. She holds a PhD in English from Columbia University, is a yoga teacher, a serious student of Thich Nhat Hanh, an activist for social and environmental justice, and the founder of Align Your Story writing school. She lives in Cambridge, MA with her husband and two teenagers. For free meditations and writing prompts and other resources for writers visit <https://nadiacolburn.com>.

**Joan Colen** is a retired educator. Her work appears in *Adanna*, *Prometheus Dreaming* and *The EastHampton Star*. She studied fiction writing at Hunter College Writing Center and Marymount.

**Andy Conner** is a Birmingham, UK-based poet, activist and educator, with a long track record of performing his work nationally and internationally. His work has also featured in numerous publications. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His credits include BBC Radio 4, Jaipur Literature Festival and India International Centre. He has also conducted workshops for The British Council.

**Laine Cunningham** is a novelist and a three-time recipient of The Hackney Award. Her short prose and poetry have been published by *Reed*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Wraparound South*, *As You Were*, and *MacQueen's Quinterly*. She is the senior editor and publisher of *Sunspot Literary Journal*, a multinational publication seeking to change the world.

**Dr. Deidra Suwanee Dees** is Director/Tribal Archivist for Poarch Band of Creek Indians. She was Associate Editor of *University of South Alabama The Jaguar Journal*. She is featured in the poetry book, *Absorbing Destruction: Poetry by Ten Women*. Her chapbook, *Vision Lines: Native American Decolonizing Literature*, explores decolonizing methodologies from a Muscogee woman's perspective. A contributing writer, her indigenous research is reflected in *The People Who Stayed: Southeastern Indian Writers After Removal*. Her writings are published in the *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Postcolonial Text*, *Joining the Circle*, and *Multiracial Activist*. Helleswv heres. Mvto.

**María DeGuzmán** is a scholar, conceptual photographer, and music composer. She has published photography in *The Grief Diaries*, *Coffin Bell*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Map Literary*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Harbor Review*, *Alluvian*, and *streetcake: a magazine of experimental writing*; two creative nonfiction photo-text pieces, one in *Oyster River Pages* and the other in *La Piccioletta Barca*; a photo-text flash fiction in *Bombay Gin* (forthcoming); photo prose poetry in *Landlocked Magazine*; poetry in *Empty Mirror*; and short stories in *Mandorla: New Writing from the Americas*, *Huizache: The Magazine of Latino Literature*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *Obelus Journal*.

**William Doreski** has published three critical studies and several collections of poetry. His work has appeared in many print and online journals. He has taught at Emerson College, Goddard College, Boston University, and Keene State College. His most recent books are *Water Music* and *Train to Providence*.  
[williamdoreski.blogspot.com](http://williamdoreski.blogspot.com)

Within the Lockdown, **Mike Ekunno** has had works published in *Mysterion*, *The Blue Nib*, *Oddball Magazine* and *Written Tales* with pending anthology publications in *Essential Anthology of Underground Writers Association of*



*Portland, Maine, and Omens Anthology of Antimony* and *Elder Lace Press*. He is a freelance book editor, ghost biographer and author of *Cowboy Lamido*, a children's book approved as school text across Nigeria. Mike venerates the late Mohammed Ali and is a massive fan of the defunct ABBA which doesn't make him New School by any means.

**Jennifer Elam** studied Arts and Spirituality (with Sally Palmer as mentor), Social Justice and Quakerism at Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center in PA. In second grade, she learned that art was for those who are talented and she was not one of them; so, she pursued an academic life in psychology for over 35 years and has done social justice work for almost 50 years. In retirement, her creative forces are powerfully flowing. She spends much of her time writing, painting, and dancing to support social justice issues and doing estates settlements where intergenerational healing work is needed related to native heritage and a past of slave-holding on the farm that has been in her family since the 1790's.

**Jesse Ellsbury** is a teacher and the author of *Cantos, Carnivals, and Other Atrocities*. He has written over 5,000 poems. In addition to posting daily poems on Facebook and Twitter, he was the guest on Quintessential Listening Online Radio Show.

**Marcello Gibbs** is an up-coming author, poet and essayist who prides himself on being able to create poetry on any and all topics. He has numerous poems and books ready for publication. He is currently incarcerated, and heard about *Pensive* through the *Poets & Writers Magazine*.

**Cynthia Good** is an award-winning author, journalist, and TV news anchor. She has written six books including *Vaccinating Your Child*, which won the Georgia Author of the Year award. She has launched two magazines, *Atlanta Woman* and the nationally distributed *PINK* magazine for women in business. Cynthia's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals including *Main Street Rag*, *The RavensPerch*, *Maudlin House*, *Awakenings*, *Reed Magazine*, *Bridgewater International Poetry Festival*, *Outrider Press*, *Pink Panther Magazine* and *Terminus Magazine*, among others.



**Cat Grant** (OCADU) is a multidisciplinary artist, currently focusing on multimedia portraiture, photography, illustration and writing. The current executive director of The Goddess Day Arts Festival in Toronto, Cat is also published poet. She has her own column SHEBEAT in *BUZZ Magazine*, is Senior reporter for On The Couch TV show & newest contributor to CIUT 89.5 fm radio show Rainbow Country. You can find her as Granted Arts on Facebook.

**Jessica Greenbaum** is the author of *Inventing Difficulty* (Silverfish Review Press, 1998), winner of Gerald Cable Prize; *The Two Yvones* (Princeton University Press, 2012), named by Library Journal as a Best Book in Poetry; and *Spilled and Gone* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019). She has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Society of America. Greenbaum teaches in New York City.

**Andrew Gudgel** is a writer, translator and poet who lives in Maryland. His poetry and translations of Classical Chinese poetry have appeared in *Lily Poetry Review*, *Speckled Trout Review*, Southeast Missouri State's "Proud to Be" anthology, Western Michigan University's journal "Transference," and other publications.

**Amanda Gunn** is a doctoral candidate in English at Harvard where she works on poetry, ephemerality, and Black pleasure. Her work appears in, or is forthcoming from, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Baffler*. She was recently named a Stegner Fellow.

**Carol Hamilton** has recent and upcoming publications in *Louisiana Literature*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Southwest American Literature*, *Commonweal*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Dryland*, *Bookends Review*, *Tiny Spoons*, *Gyroscope*, *Poem*, *Brushfire*, *Sin Fronteras/Writers Without Borders*, *Psaltry and Lyre*, *Ceseara*, *Broad River Review*, *Burningwood Literary Review*, *Abbey*, *Main Street Rag*, *Angel City Review*, *Hole in the Head Review* and others. She has published 17 books: children's novels, legends and poetry. She is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma.

**James Hannon** is a clinical sociologist in Massachusetts where he accompanies adolescents and adults recovering from disappointments,

deceptions, and addictions. His poetry and fiction has appeared in journals including *Blue Lake Review*, *Blue River*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Psaltery and Lyre*, *Soundings East*, and in *Gathered: Contemporary Quaker Poets*. His collection, *The Year I Learned the Backstroke*, was published by Aldrich Press.

**Ben Harris** has been writing creatively since the 1960's. He has had plays staged at Savannah State University, 2004, and University of Hawaii's Last Frontier Theatre Conference, 2003 as well as Essential Theatre/Atlanta, GA, 2018. He is also recipient of O'Connor/Faulkner Award for Creative Non-fiction, 2003.

**Kathleen Hellen's** honors include the Thomas Merton poetry prize, prizes from the *H.O.W. Journal* and *Washington Square Review*, and her prize-winning collection *Umberto's Night* (Washington Writers' Publishing House 2012). Her work has been featured on Poetry Daily and Verse Daily. Hellen's latest poetry collection is *The Only Country Was the Color of My Skin* (Saddle Road Press 2018).

**Sister Lou Ella Hickman's** poems and articles have appeared in numerous magazines and journals as well as four anthologies. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2017 and 2020. Her first book of poetry entitled *she: robed and wordless* was published in 2015.

**Darryl Holmes** received his MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University, where he also served as an editorial reader for *TLR*, the university's international journal of contemporary writing. He has other new work out or forthcoming in *African American Review*, *580 Split*, *Kind Writers Literary Magazine*, *New York Quarterly*, *Obsidian*, *River Heron Review*, and *Toho Journal*. His first collection of poetry *Wings Will Not Be Broken* was published by Third World Press in Chicago.

**Akua Lezli Hope** is a creator and wisdom seeker who uses sound, words, fiber, glass, metal, and wire to create poems, patterns, stories, music, sculpture, adornments, and peace. Published in numerous literary magazines and national anthologies, she's been in print every year since 1974. A third generation New Yorker, her honors include the NEA, two NYFAs, a SFPA award, Rhysling and Pushcart Prize nominations, among others. She has

twice won Rattle's Poets Respond. Her first collection, *EMBOUCHURE, Poems on Jazz and Other Musics*, won the Writer's Digest book award. A Cave Canem fellow, her collection, *THEM GONE*, was published 2018. She's launched Speculative Sundays Poetry Reading Series.

**Suisen Hoshijima** is a Japanese artist and writer that has grown up in the quiet American Midwest. Recently having moved back to Japan, she finds herself reflecting on the interactions and experiences she has had with the people that have come into her life. Her work focuses on the emotions that arise from inner musings, often paired with sensory descriptions. Hoshijima focuses on freeform poetry and prose, looking for ways to express her often bilingual and jumbled internal dialogue.

**Jeffrey Johnson** is author of *This Will Be A Sign*. He is editor of *Stars Shall Bend Their Voices: Poets' Favorite Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. His blog is *Harbors of Heaven*.

**Huda Khwaja** is a 3L at Northeastern University School of Law specializing in International Law & Human Rights, and an alum of Agnes Scott College where she majored in History and Human Rights. Outside of school and work, she is engaged in the American Muslim community in social justice organizing and youth empowerment. Huda spends her free time writing, reading, and strolling through Boston looking for new coffee shops.

**Scott Kinder-Pyle** lives in Spokane, Washington with his spouse and two children, Ian and Philip. Scott is now recovering from 25 years of service as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). As a sort-of-transcendent therapy he teaches at Eastern Washington University, where he is also taught by Jonathan Johnson and Christopher Howell in the Master of Fine Arts program. His favorite theologian is Wolfhart Pannenberg. His favorite existentialist philosopher is Soren Kierkegaard. Scott has published previous work in *Sojourners*, *The Journal for Preachers*, *The Stone Hobo*, *RiverLit* and *Cybersoleil*.

**Lidia Kosk** is the author of twelve books of poetry and prose, and two anthologies. Her collaboration with Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka resulted in bilingual

volumes *Niedosyt/ Reshapings* (2003) and *Słodka woda, słona woda/Sweet Water, Salt Water* (2009); *Szklana góra/Glass Mountain*, featuring Lidia's poem in 22 languages (2017, 2019), and *Meadows of Memory: Poems and Prose by Lidia Kosk* (2019). Translations appeared in numerous journals and anthologies in the USA, Spain, Russia, Hungary, and a book published in Japan. As choral compositions, her poems were performed in several countries. She resides in Warsaw, Poland. Her Website: <http://danutakk.wordpress.com/about-lidia-kosk/>.

**Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka** is the author of two collections: *Face Half-Illuminated* (Apprentice House, 2015) and *Oblige the Light* (CityLit Press, 2015), winner of the fifth Clarinda Harriss Poetry Prize. She is also the translator for four books by Lidia Kosk. Recently her work has appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, *Spillway*, *Subtropics*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She is the Poetry Translations editor at *Loch Raven Review*. Her website: <http://danutakk.wordpress.com/> The Library of Congress interview: [https://www.gracecavalieri.com/poetLaureates/featuredpoet\\_danuta\\_e\\_kosk-kosicka.html](https://www.gracecavalieri.com/poetLaureates/featuredpoet_danuta_e_kosk-kosicka.html).

**Catherine Kyle** is the author of *Shelter in Place* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2019), *Coronations* (Ghost City Press, 2019), and other collections. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Midwestern Gothic*, *Mid-American Review*, *Bellingham Review*, and other journals, and has been honored by the Idaho Commission on the Arts, the Alexa Rose Foundation, and other organizations. She is the winner of the 2019-2020 COG Poetry Award. She works as an assistant professor at the College of Western Idaho, where she teaches creative writing and literature. Her website is [catherinebaileykyle.com](http://catherinebaileykyle.com).

**Yahia Lababidi**, is an Egyptian-American thinker/poet, and author of several well-received books of poetry and prose. He has been invited to speak at Oxford University and NPR as well as being featured in *Best American Poetry*, *World Literature Today*, *On Being with Krista Tippett*, *The Guardian* and *Al Jazeera*, among several other esteemed cultural outlets.

**Tom Darin Liskey** spent nearly a decade working as a journalist in Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil. His writing has appeared in HeartWood Literary

Magazine, Live Nude Poems, and Driftwood Press. His photographs have been published in Museum of Americana and Midwestern Gothic, among other publications.

**Dan MacIsaac's** poetry has appeared in many literary magazines, including *The South Carolina Review*, *Stand*, *The Malahat Review*, and *The American Journal of Poetry*. Brick Books published his collection of poetry, *Cries from the Ark*. His poetry has received awards including the Foley Prize from *America Magazine*. Dan MacIsaac's work has been short-listed for the Walrus Poetry Prize and the CBC Short Story Prize. His website is [www.danmacisaac.com](http://www.danmacisaac.com).

**Jennifer Markell's** first poetry collection, *Samsara*, (Turning Point, 2014) was named a "Must Read Book" by the Massachusetts Book Awards, 2015. Her work has appeared in *Consequence*, *The Comstock Review* (awards edition, Special Merit), *Diode*, *RHINO*, *Tinderbox*, and *The Women's Review of Books*. For over twenty years Jennifer has worked in community mental health and as a psychotherapist. She serves on the Board of the New England Poetry Club.

**Myles McCollum** a.k.a "MylesTheRed" is a multifaceted artist. He's a songwriter, dancer, photographer, writer and painter, who wants the whole world to see his artistry regardless of what form it may be. One of his main desires is to capture black beauty and excellence, while also remembering the plight that we have endured, and bring light to the unspoken crimes that we have faced.

**Christina McElwee** is an Associate Professor of English at Grand Rapids Community College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Prior to entering the wonderful world of higher education, Christina taught for several years in the K-12 school system. Christina has found writing to be both cathartic and an excellent way to connect and communicate with her students. As an educational, inspirational and social justice writer, Christina has been published in Grand Valley State University's *Colleague Magazine* and several other Christian-based publications. Follow Christina on twitter at @crmcelwee.

**Susan McLean**, a retired English professor from Southwest Minnesota State University, is the author of two books of poetry, *The Best Disguise* and



*The Whetstone Misses the Knife*, and one book of translations of the Latin poet Martial, *Selected Epigrams*. Her translations of Rilke have appeared in *Subtropics*, *Transference*, and elsewhere.

**Elia Min** is currently a junior in high school at Polytechnic. She lives in Pasadena, California and experiments with different types of poetry. Elia enjoys writing about perspective, her Korean culture, and art. She has taken an interest in art and art history during her teenage years. Elia explores the emotional and spiritual connection to nature and art as well as the insignificance of humans.

**Juan Pablo Mobili** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and is an adopted son of the City of New York. His poems have been published in *The Journal of American Poetry*, *The Worcester Review*, *The Red Wheelbarrow Review*, *Mason Street Review*, and *Spirit FIRE Review*, among others. In addition to that, one of his poems received Honorable Mention by the International Human Rights Art Festival, as well as nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Anthology in 2020. He also co-wrote a chapbook of poems, in collaboration with Madalasa Mobili, "Three Unknown Poets," published by Seranam Press.

**Tara Moghadam's** poems have been published in journals such as *The Southern Poetry Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Tifferet*, *Ruah*, *Driftwood* and many more. Her chapbook, *One Room Over*, was the winner of the Edda Poetry Prize for Women. She holds an MFA in Poetry and currently lives in Washington State.

A Best of the Net and five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, **Julie L. Moore** is the author of four poetry collections, including, most recently, *Full Worm Moon*, which won a 2018 Woodrow Hall Top Shelf Award and received honorable mention for the Conference on Christianity and Literature's 2018 Book of the Year Award. She has also had poetry appear in *African American Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Image*, *New Ohio Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Southern Review*, and *Verse Daily*. Her work has also appeared in several anthologies, including *Becoming: What Makes a Woman* and *Every River On Earth: Writing from Appalachian Ohio*. You can learn more about her work at [juliemoore.com](http://juliemoore.com).

Recipient of the 2014 Writers Exchange Award from Poets & Writers, **Harry Moore** is the author of the poetry collection *Bearing the Farm Away* (Kelsay Books) and three chapbooks—*What He Would Call Them* (Finishing Line Press); *Time's Fool: Love Poems* (Mule on a Ferris Wheel Press); and *Retreat: A Way Forward* (Finishing Line Press). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Avocet*, *Pudding Magazine*, *Main Street Rag*, *Anglican Theological Review*, *Xavier Review*, and other journals. An assistant editor of *POEM magazine*, he lives with his wife, Cassandra, in Decatur, Alabama.

**Charlene Stegman Moskal** is a Teaching Artist for The Alzheimers Poetry Project under the auspices of the Las Vegas Poetry Promise Organization. Charlene is a visual artist, a performer, a voice for NPR's Theme and Variations and a writer. She is published in numerous anthologies, magazines and online, most recently, "Connecticut River Review", "Sandstone & Silver; an Anthology of Nevada Poets", "Southwestern American Literature", "Oyez Review", and "Humana Obscura". Zeitgeist Press is the publisher of her second chapbook, "One Bare Foot". Charlene is in her seventh decade, loves laughter and coffee ice cream hot fudge sundaes.

**Tim J. Myers** is a widely-published writer, storyteller, songwriter, visual artist, and senior lecturer at Santa Clara University. His work has made the *New York Times* bestseller list for children's books and has been reviewed in the *Times* and read aloud on NPR. Find him on Twitter at @TMyersStorySong, at <https://www.instagram.com/tmyersstorysong/> and at <https://www.facebook.com/TimJMyers1>.

**Russell Nichols** is a speculative fiction writer and endangered journalist. Raised in Richmond, California, he now lives out of a backpack with his wife, vagabonding around the world since 2011. His work revolves around concepts of race, mental health, technology, and the absurdity of existence. Look for him at [russellnichols.com](http://russellnichols.com).

**Alex Nodopaka** was immaculately conceived in Kiev, Ukraine. First breech exhibition 1940 Vladivostok, Russia. First finger paintings Innsbruck, Austria 1946. Studied tongue-in-cheek at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca,



Morocco, 1958. Doodling in the USA since 1959. Self-appointed art pundit. His interest in literature and the visual arts is exhaustively multi-cultural.

**Jolene Nolte** recently graduated from Regent College in beautiful British Columbia, where she completed a poetry creative thesis and a MA in Theological Studies with an emphasis in Christianity and the Arts. She is also an alumna of Biola's English program and the Torrey Honors Institute. She currently works as a freelance writer/editor and is poetry editor for *Curator Magazine*. When she is not working with words, you can find her cradling a mug of coffee, on long walks, and/or engaged in meandering conversation.

**Eric Pankey** is the author of many collections of poetry. A new book, *NOT YET TRANSFIGURED*, is due out in fall of 2021.

**Jennifer M. Phillips** is an immigrant, gardener, grower of Bonsai, and painter, and has been writing since she was seven. She has bounced between two countries and four states, but her spiritual sense and writing life have always been rooted in northern seas and landscapes and their changeability. She has published poetry in a fistful of little magazines, and was recently a finalist in the International Lawrence Durrell Foundation's White Mice Poetry Contest. Her poetry chapbook is entitled, *Sitting Safe In the Theatre of Electricity*. She is busy helping her church become carbon-neutral and keep people fed during the pandemic.

**Jeannine M. Pitas** is a writer, teacher and Spanish-English literary translator. Her first full-length book, *Things Seen and Unseen*, was published by Mosaic Press in 2019. Her newest translation of Uruguayan poet Selva Casal's *We Do Not Live in Vain* was published by Veliz Books in 2020. She lives in Iowa and teaches at the University of Dubuque.

*Author of Out of the Blue*, (Big Table Publishing, 2017) and *The Face I Desire* (Nixes Mate, 2019), **Renuka Raghavan** writes short-form fiction and poetry. She serves as the fiction book reviewer at *Červená Barva Press*, and is a co-founder of the Poetry Sisters Collective. For a complete list of her previous publications, visit her at [www.renukaraghavan.com](http://www.renukaraghavan.com).

Author of *Salty Liquor* (2014) and *Liner Notes* (2017) **Gary Rainford** lives year-round on Swan's Island with his wife and daughter. *Adrift*, Gary's third book in progress, is a verse novel that tells the story of his mother's dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

**Mikele Rauch** is an artist in Boston who works with words and substances to communicate the outrage and the wonder of the world.

In a Missouri beanfield, while picking beans with the matriarchs of his clan, a 7-year old **Will Reger** discovered that "itch" rhymed with "bitch," and mentioned this realization in passing, only to receive a slap for being a potty mouth. He was in awe of poetry from that day forward. Such power! Now he is Poetry Laureate for Urbana, IL, and recently published his first book, *Petroglyphs* (2019).

**Tukur Ridwan** writes from a coastal axis in Lagos Island. His poems have been published in *Libretto Magazine*, *Erogospel*, *Art Of Peace Anthology*, *Z Publishing* (Best Emerging Poets 2019), *Best New African Poets Anthology 2019*, *Nigiga Review*, *BBPC Anthology*, *The Quills* and elsewhere. He won the Brigitte Piorson Monthly Poetry Contest (March 2018) and shortlisted in few others.

**K. Roberts** is a professional non-fiction writer and artist.

**Michelle Sakhai** is a contemporary abstract expressionist artist based in New York City. Michelle exhibits in the USA and internationally, known for her paintings with metal leaf and oils combined. She strives to connect with viewers on a deeper level, provoking self-healing and peace through art.

**Lauren Scharhag** (she/her) is an associate editor for *GLEAM: Journal of the Cadrador*, and the author of thirteen books, including *Requiem for a Robot Dog* (Cajun Mutt Press) and *Languages, First and Last* (Cyberwit Press). Her work has appeared in over 150 literary venues around the world. Recent honors include the Seamus Burns Creative Writing Prize and multiple Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominations. She lives in Kansas City, MO. To learn more about her work, visit: [www.laurenscharhag.blogspot.com](http://www.laurenscharhag.blogspot.com)

**Elisabeth Sharber** is a 12th grade English and Etymology teacher at Frankfort High School in Indiana. In her free time she writes, dances, fights the man, drinks wine, and listens to Hadestown. She has been published in *The American Aesthetic*, *FLARE*, *Driftwood Press*, *Bending Genres*, and *The Chestnut Review*.

**Cynthia Steele** likes to bravely pluck a bit humor, beauty, or memory through non-fiction writing. She's also slowly growing her petite poetic oeuvre. In photo classes with Mike Conte, she keeps finding new Ways of Seeing. She serves as Assistant Editor and Publicist for *Cirque* and as a dog whisperer for Rover. MA English, BA Journalism. She's read plays for the Valdez Theatre Conference for a decade and been in a few plays, too. Most often, she reads for Poetry Parley.

**Dana Sonnenschein** teaches at Southern Connecticut State University; her most recent books are *Natural Forms* and *Bear Country*. Her poetry has appeared in *Permafrost*, *Mojave River Review*, *Memory House*, *Feminist Studies* and other journals. Find her at <https://www.facebook.com/Dana-Sonnenschein-104761453404/> and by name on Instagram.

**Bruce Spang**, former Poet Laureate of Portland, is the author of two novels, *The Deception of the Thrush* and *Those Close Beside Me*. His most recent collection of poems, *All You'll Derive: A Caregiver's Journey*, was just published. He lives in Candler, NC with his husband Myles Rightmire and their five dogs, five fish, and thirty birds.

**Noor Spring** is a dreamer, a thinker, a writer, and a reluctant poet. To keep the lights on in her house, she enthusiastically teaches English at the local community college. To keep the lights on in her soul, she prays five times a day, writes regularly, reads voraciously, cooks creatively, gardens haphazardly, drinks coffee with friends, and fills the house and car with music. Her best friends are her husband and her cat, but not always in that order.

**Tracy Rose Stamper** dances with words. Her recently acquired middle name is the most significant word she has written lately during these days asking us to rise. She lives in a home on a hill in St. Louis with two beloved humans, two

rescue beagle boys, and two whimsical wind sculptures. She is a columnist at *Rebelle Society*, contributing author of Anna Linder's *The Book of Emotions*, and has had work appear in *Drunk Monkeys*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Dime Show Review*, *Feels*, and *Six Sentences*, among others. You can find her dancing with words at [www.facebook.com/DancingPenTracyStamper](https://www.facebook.com/DancingPenTracyStamper).

**Wally Swist**'s books include *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), selected by Yusef Komunyakaa as co-winner in the 2011 Crab Orchard Series Open Poetry Contest, and *A Bird Who Seems to Know Me: Poems Regarding Birds & Nature* (Ex Ophidia Press, 2019), the winner of the 2018 Ex Ophidia Press Poetry Prize. Recent books of poetry include *The Bees of the Invisible* (2019) and *Evanescence: Selected Poems* (2020), *Awakening & Visitation* (2020), all with Shanti Arts. Forthcoming books include, *A Writer's Statements on Beauty: New & Selected Essays & Reviews*, *Taking Residence*, and a translation of Giuseppe Ungaretti's *L'Allegria*, also with Shanti Arts.

**Nathan Dean Talamantez** is a Fiction Novelist and Nonfiction Essayist. His writings are eclectic and philosophical—often coupling cultural and spiritual themes. Before Texas was colonized, Dean's roots were in San Antonio—or Adkins, to be exact. He moved to San Marcos to attend college at Texas State University, earning a Bachelor's Degree in Cultural Anthropology. While there, His best times were spent eating Torchy's Tacos, working at the university radio station: KTSW, tubing the San Marcos River, and performing Southern Punk Rock with his band, Rio Specter, at the many bars dotting Austin's famous 6th Street. After seven years serving in the Air Force, Dean is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Writing at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. His debut novel, *Sacred Fool*, was released in January of 2021.

**Edward Tick**, Ph.D., is a transformational psychotherapist, international guide and activist, poet, translator, author of the groundbreaking *War and the Soul* and five other books of nonfiction and poetry. **Tran Dinh Song** from Da Nang is a veteran, educator and tour guide. Since 2000, Ed and Song have led annual reconciliation journeys in Viet Nam, using literature, culture and poetry exchanges as tools for healing and friendship-building.

**Jessie van Eerden** is author of three novels, *Glorybound* (WordFarm, 2012), winner of the Foreword Editor's Choice Fiction Prize; *My Radio Radio* (Vandalia Press, 2016); and *Call It Horses*, winner of the 2019 Dzanc Books Prize for Fiction (2021). She is also the author of the portrait essay collection *The Long Weeping* (Orison Books, 2017), winner of the Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award. Her work has appeared in *Best American Spiritual Writing*, *Oxford American*, *Image*, *New England Review*, and other magazines and anthologies. She has been awarded the Gulf Coast Prize in Nonfiction, the Milton Fellowship, and a Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation Fellowship. Jessie holds an MFA in nonfiction from the University of Iowa and teaches creative writing at Hollins University.

**Tony Vick** has been incarcerated for 25 years, serving a life sentence. He writes about the experience of confinement to bring awareness about needed prison reform.

**Brian Volck** is a pediatrician who lives in Baltimore and practices medical care in Maryland and on the Navajo Nation in Arizona. He received his MFA in creative writing from Seattle Pacific University. He has published one volume of poetry, *Flesh Becomes Word* and a memoir, *Attending Others: A Doctor's Education in Bodies and Words*. His essays, poetry, and reviews have appeared *America*, *The Christian Century*, *DoubleTake*, *Health Affairs*, and *Image*.

**Pamela Wax** is a rabbi, a poet, and a devoted teacher and student of Mussar, a Jewish spiritual practice of character development. She also facilitates a weekly spiritual poetry group. Her essays on Judaism, spirituality, and women's issues, in addition to her poetry, have appeared or are forthcoming in many books and publications. Her first volume of poetry, *Walking the Labyrinth* is forthcoming from Main Street Rag. She lives in the Bronx, NY and North Adams, MA.

**Bruce E. Whitacre's** work has been published or is forthcoming in the *American Journal of Poetry*, *North of Oxford*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *World Literature Today*, and *Poets Wear Prada*, among others. He has been a dramaturg and



theatre manager, and holds an MFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. He lives in New York City.

**Maya Williams** (ey/they/she) is a Black and Mixed Race nonbinary suicide survivor currently residing in Portland, ME. They have been previously published in venues such as *The Portland Press Herald*, *glitterMOB*, *Black Table Arts*, *Occulum*, and more. Check out her website [mayawilliamspoeet.com](http://mayawilliamspoeet.com).

**Leonore Wilson** is a former professor of English and creative writing from Northern California. Her work has been in such magazines as *Iowa Review*, *Madison Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Pif*, *TRIVIA: Voices of Feminism*, etc.

A retired associate professor of English at Hawaii Pacific University, **Patrice M. Wilson** recently spent 5 years of study as a novice in the cloistered Carmelite monastery in Kaneohe, Hawaii. Her full-length poetry book *Hues of Darkness, Hues of Light* was published in 2013 by eLectio Publishing. She has three poetry chapbooks with Finishing Line Press: *When All Else Falters*; *On Neither Side*; and *A Different Current*. Her poems have been published in several journals.