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THE RUBBERTOP REVIEW

Issue 15

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THE RUBBERTOP REVIEW

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FROM THE EDITORS

Another year under Rubbertop's (rust)belt, and we're so excited for you to sink your teeth into this year's edition. This year has been full of rebuilding and rediscovering the magazine and what Rubbertop means to our staff. We're so proud of the team we've built and the work that has been put into this journal. There is so much sheer talent and creativity and passion in every piece, and it's such an honor for these creators to trust our staff with their work. The work of maintaining a literary magazine is not something we take lightly or take for granted, so we just want to take this time to say thank you. Thank you to every person who has ever happened upon our journal and submitted to it. Reading work from all across the world is a privilege that's hard to put into words, and we hope the gratitude expressed here shows that. Thank you to everyone who has ever had a hand in helping and maintaining Rubbertop; all of our advisors and readers and editors. Your individual inputs and voices are what makes Rubbertop what it is: scrappy, resilient, edgy, unique. Without all of you, this journal and its mission couldn't exist. And thank you to everyone reading this message and this issue right now. We hope you love it as much as we do.

Here's to another year of keeping your fists up and holding them steady.

Madison Helbig
Editor-in-Chief

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SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF THE WORLD

Charlene Langfur

Today I'd like to get back to starting over again
to a place where my grandmother's sunflowers
take over the landscape like a full moon
becomes the sky on a dark night,
showering moonlight on any woman alone
trying to find her way and ground herself again.
This is why I work with the soil to heal it
no matter how much damage has been done
in the past to the ground all over the planet earth
and for this healing I plant nasturtium seeds at dawn,
save seeds, pick old leaves off the Mexican heather
on a hot day to keep it fresh, rejuvenating what lives on,
flowers thriving and seeds and cactus grown fat and edible.
Women like me do this all over the world. I know
how they do it, saving what is needed when they are able
and they touch lightly when they do. I touch the petals lightly
as if they are the vessels, ways for seeds to get
back into the world and bring back what grows
in spite of the fires and the extreme heat and the cruelty.
They try to bring back the easy feel for what is earth.
There is no other solution but this one, only a gentle touch
on a clement night and white sweet pea buds
opening up again under a gazillion stars.
This is the only way to begin. All in.

BRAINED BY A BOY

Laine Derr

At a young age, I learned how
to hammer, nutria swinging from
a hook, brained
by a boy, apron
hanging loose
from a body just
strong enough
to offer flesh
to a family
eager for supper.

If you think me barbaric, then you don't
know my hands, my culture of fur-lined
hats, soil sweet w/ toil, pomegranates
squeezed over hips, joints weeping
over an open flame.

MURMURS

Kate McHugh

I feel them in the morning.

They appear before I wake, like dark threaded webs emerging beaded statues in the winter sun, stretching a silent yawn over my duvet, glistening in the blue glow of the curtains, the cold whispering from wet windows. They silk within my parted lips, seeping into my blood stream, emulsifying like paint thinner so that when I wake my pulse is slippery and racing, gulping against my throat like dancers straining to shadow time-tipping tempos, my mind a slow trudge from the swampy shallows of sleep but my body a phone wire thrumming with the manic murmurs beneath my heart,

and my house is empty.

I feel them in the afternoon.

The faint beeping from the fridge when I realise I've been standing there waiting, the same rhythm as the cursor when I wait for words to surface, when I wait for hunger to come home. The murmurs a drumbeat bulging under my breastbone, a shadowy film leeching my eyes of food, burning a bile in my concaving stomach. The flicker of television distracts while I disobey my gag reflex, a hand that is not my own but mine feeding soft foods down my throat, and I think about the *Staying Alive* on my desk upstairs, the poetry anthology waiting for me to take it in hand, to survive, to stay alive, and I can't swallow,

I put the spoon down.

I feel them in the evening.

How are you feeling today? my mother's voice when she comes home and finds me, sunken eyes staring out my bedroom window, unable to read, to write, to listen to music, only watch the sky sighing low after another day. We sink into bed in unison. Are you feeling a bit... low? her tone calm, sympathetic, but always hesitant to call it depressed, or anxious, or suicidal, and me too, loath to say yes, to place my hand in the one they hold out to me. I know you're sad, but what about? my father's voice, wanting to understand, to soothe, but unable to find the logic, making an awkward face at my younger sister who peers in the doorway, they want to know why,

but I don't have the answer.

I feel them at night.

The house silent once more, inhaling and exhaling with the rhythm of sleeping bodies. I listen, too hot and too cold, too tired and wide awake, waiting for my rising heartbeat to slip into sleep, for the waves of tears rolling from my sternum up up up over my head to level a glass-like sea, for my hands to release their grip on my thighs, for the only pain that keeps me breathing to let me rest, and for the thoughts, hundreds of black-skirted ballet dancers whirling too fast to follow, to leave the stage, but they don't,

because the audience wants an encore,

and I feel them in my dreams.

PRESCRIBED BURN

Allison Cundiff

193.165. Each spontaneous fetal death of twenty completed weeks gestation or more, calculated from the date the last normal menstrual period began to the date of delivery shall be reported within seven days after delivery to the local registrar.

Sony pushed for three days
on all fours, fever in the whites
of her eyes. Chipped a tooth,

moaned her blood itched. I left
just once— to check the burrow
the gundog had nosed by the shed.

I toed the deadwood aside, where
trembling bodies huddled pink in the
tufts. How some of us survive

by scrambling under shelter. Others,
by scratching after. Sony's fever
broke that last night. Alongside hope.

Baby came. Split her open like
an axe into oak. Born slick and limp,
eyes swelled shut, face all wrong

like Christ's head hanging slack
beside those thieves. Death stood
stinking in the air between us.

Sony hoisted herself to an elbow.
Swallowed hard. Her man was still away,
his two-way radio long dead.

"He aint going in the ground,"
she said, "I don't want the coyotes on him."
She pulled a sweater over her soaked

housecoat, wiped her mouth with the
back of her hand. Said she reckoned
she'd burn his body. Over a prayer.

"But the law!", I countered—
Sony shook her head, pulling her boots
onto bare feet. I wrapped him up, his fingers

starting already to go cold. Followed
her footsteps to the shed where she rooted
in the dark past the doe and her kits

in their tufted den, full of life while
my carriage was still. Sony gripped
a drip torch. Lifted a half-charred blower.

"Can't grieve what you never had," she said,
heaving water from the well, enough for two
bright canteens, the afterbirth still coiled inside her.

1 "193.165." Missouri Revisor of Statutes - Revised Statutes of Missouri, RSMo, Missouri Law,
MO Law, Joint

Committee on Legislative Research, Accessed 26 Nov. 2023.

NOCTURNE WITH HELIUM BALLOONS LOST ON THE DENVER AIRPORT CEILING

Rita Mookherjee

Clustered tightly, the balloons look like baby
fruit bats hiding from everything outside like
the cursed statue of that demonic blue horse:
the true symbol of America, trillion-cut ruby
eyes mocking our pain. American life is about
picking your poison. We accept the reality that
something somewhere someone is going to get you.
Maybe sinkholes, the IRS, carbon monoxide,
the KKK, or even just the wind which might be
what swept all these wild balloons into a peak
of the airport ceiling which is billowy and sloped
like a circus tent, a fitting venue because what is
late capitalism and commerce if not high theater?
I want to go home. I stare at the balloons. Their
loud candy colors are nothing like the milky sunset
we watch from an airport platform lined in fake grass
for dogs to pee on. Honestly, the strips of faux turf
look much nicer than any of the plains right now,
with their poisonous runoff and apologetic yellow
grass. In recent years, Colorado has been catching
fire. You can spot the burnt patch in the shadow
of the Rockies. I watch the coastline turn
to mush while landfills become castles of filth.
It's been years since I felt like I had any connection
to this land which I now see was never mine to claim.
I confess: I have no interest in canyons. The famed
amber waves of grain are tainted and sour. Even
the most majestic mountains slouched and softened
with age. Grey, not purple. Besides, I prefer the sloping
shoulders of my Appalachian chain rich with Douglas
firs and boysenberry bushes. At least for now. When
they're gone, I want to sail away on a convincing breeze
just like one of the lost balloons, pink with optimism.
I always thought the collapse of this empire would be blue
flames and glorious wreckage and bandanas and chanting, but
now that I cut America open, all I really find is hot air.



DILAPIDATION #8
Lawrence Bridges

LEGENDS

Kate Krautkramer

“Men!” Dent knew the boys would like being called that, so he used conviction, like Truman declaring *The Buck Stops Here*. What he was about to propose had arrived to him in a fully-lit vision—how he could convince the guys to collectively sucker punch every adult they knew, for fun. “Follow me.” Dent pointed in the direction of the crazy house center stairs.

Decades previous, wealthy folks had sent their insane and infirm relatives to this quiet mansion by the lake. For lack of investment or paid property taxes, the building had been abandoned at least fifteen years, and the vacant asylum was so big, guys could play capture the flag or kick the can inside it. Dent dipped his chin then circled the top of his head to show the boys where he wanted them to follow. It was an action he’d practiced in the mirror for the purpose of someday convincing Minnie Fischer to come with to him places she’d never been before—into the trees, to the top floor of the crazy house, into his room where she would let him pop her cherry in moonlight coming through the broken-out window. But, no reason the gesture wouldn’t work on guys. Instead of the sweet, glossy eyes he’d intended for Minnie, he added a look of knowledge mixed with mystery, just so. And the boys came along with him to the basement.

Through a concrete labyrinth, past the large open space that had been the kitchen and into the pantry with a dumbwaiter shaft in its corner, Dent led the group. The boys had long been using the shaft in their games. With much of its structure intact, a kid could wedge himself in and climb up or down the floors of the building unseen. Some nights alone in the house, Dent lowered himself inside and stood on the fixtures. He liked the walls around him, like players in a huddle, and closed his eyes, soaking in the feeling. Once he fell asleep on his feet in there and figured he’d been in the shaft a few hours before he woke up and climbed out to go to his room.

When he first left home, Dent had slept in the crazy house sitting up, propped in a corner so his head wouldn’t loll around. Then walking around town looking for odd jobs, he’d spied a roll of thrown-out carpet behind the bank and stopped two kids who were racing bikes in the alley. Dent had seen them around before, always together at the Y or at the lake beach. Showing off the face of a cool guy who had graduated and usurping the unwritten bylaw that younger kids were not allowed in until older guys agreed by vote, Dent offered them passage into the crazy house if they helped him schlep the carpet there.

While they hauled the rug across town on their shoulders, Dent had learned the kids’ names. Jimmy Nichol, dark haired, short and with his eyes close together—his face looked like a bird’s. And Michael Sullivan, taller but only about a foot wide across at

the shoulders; the kid always wore overalls and had curly hair that was gold. “I’m Dent,” Dent said. They were half way to the crazy house, Dent at the back of the carpet roll, the two young guys on the front.

“We know.” Jimmy turned his head and yelled backward. “My mom lights candles for you and your mother.”

Outside the crazy house fence the kids sat on the rug like it was a log, taking a breather. Dent pressed Jimmy on what the hell he meant about candles.

“At church,” Jimmy said.

“I don’t go, either.” Michael pointed to himself then Dent.

“My mom does it, before mass or after. The candles are in a rack, lots of them. There’s matches and you put money in a little box. Some people put in a whole dollar. Like making a wish for someone, but its praying. You leave the candle burning.”

Dent had a pact with himself not to say *mother* especially not *my mother*, or *my mom*, and he struggled to keep his face calm. “I guess maybe our parents knew each other.” Using his gesture for nonchalance, Dent kicked his toe into the ground. Most people in town knew each other, but Dent’s mother hadn’t been around in 15 years. “I get it.” Dent worked his face into an expression of understanding, but in fact he did not get it at all.

“I think it’s so her soul will make it out of purgatory.” Jimmy pointed down at the ground.

In answer Michael pointed up to where crows flew among the crazy house gables.

While the kids rested, Dent told Michael and Jimmy lies about fishing and girls and how he’d once seen Miss Sweetland, the long-legged typing teacher get in a car with Henry Miles, who’d only graduated high school two years before and could barely count back change where he worked at the hardware store. “You know what she looks like?” Dent made the outline of a curvy female in the air. Then he told the boys Miss Sweetland had practically jumped all the way across the seat to kiss Henry, full-on Frenching, before she even closed the car door. “Yep, she was sure hungry with passion,” he’d told them, Jimmy and Michael, “Fixing to play back seat bingo, for sure.”

Dent motioned the kids up off the carpet and the two grinned at each other and laughed and stood up exactly together like Frick and Frack. They pushed through a gap where boys had cut the chain link fence surrounding the crazy house and made their way across the long stretch of uncared-for grass. A back door mostly off its hinges opened into

what must have once been a cloak room for crazy house employees, empty cubbies and hooks on the walls.

In Dent's chosen room upstairs, the three dropped the rug, and Dent granted the kids permission to look around the crazy house since it was their first time in. For a minute he thought about Miss Sweetland's class, where he'd sat in the back row. Her neat long finger hovered over the typewriter, bouncing in the air, "f, f, f, space g,g,g, space." Her perfume or powder or whatever she put on always went straight to work on him, and he'd slide his chair far under his desk.

Truth was when he was spying on her in the alley, Miss Sweetland had only smoothed her skirt over her bottom and got in Henry's car when Henry opened the door for her like a gentleman. But, Dent had figured he owed Jimmy and Michael something for their help, a vision they could call up in their heads. Plus, he appreciated that Jimmy had tipped him off about the candles.

Later that night, it was easy for Dent to sneak in the Catholic church through an unlocked side door and follow flickering light to the entry. He found the candles exactly as Jimmy had described, and an unlocked collection box yielded three dollars and twenty-five cents.

Feeling empowered, on his way home, all Dent had to do was work a butter knife lifted from the church's kitchen against a wimpy bolt to get in the storage room of the town's new motel. From a stack of beige blankets, he'd taken three—two for sleeping and one to wrap around the others to keep out dust and mice and spiders in the daytime when he hid the bedroll away.

"My friends!" Dent said as his guys piled into the crazy house's basement pantry and hopped themselves up backward onto the counters. Some sat in the middle of the room on the detached dumbwaiter compartment that still had frayed ropes hanging from its top. "I see an opportunity for us here!" Looks of expectation emanated off the boys' faces and fed Dent's speech in the most pleasant sensation, like an Alka Seltzer fizzing in his brain. Riding inspiration, Dent pointed to a four-foot by four-foot drain, covered by a grate in the floor in the corner of the room opposite the dumbwaiter shaft.

All the boys knew that the grate could be removed and a kid could wiggle himself into the drain. After about 50 yards, the concrete tunnel opened in the middle of what kids simply called the trees, an acre or so of forest that stood between the crazy house and the rest of town.

There in the old pantry Dent envisioned himself taller. He jutted his jaw to make himself look smart and strong and trustworthy. He held his shoulders back and away from his ears, while he laid out his idea, which got better the more he talked.

He leaned one hand on a wall, then stood straight and knocked on it. “Old,” Dent said. He gave a few more thumps and watched big chips of paint fall to the floor. “See?”

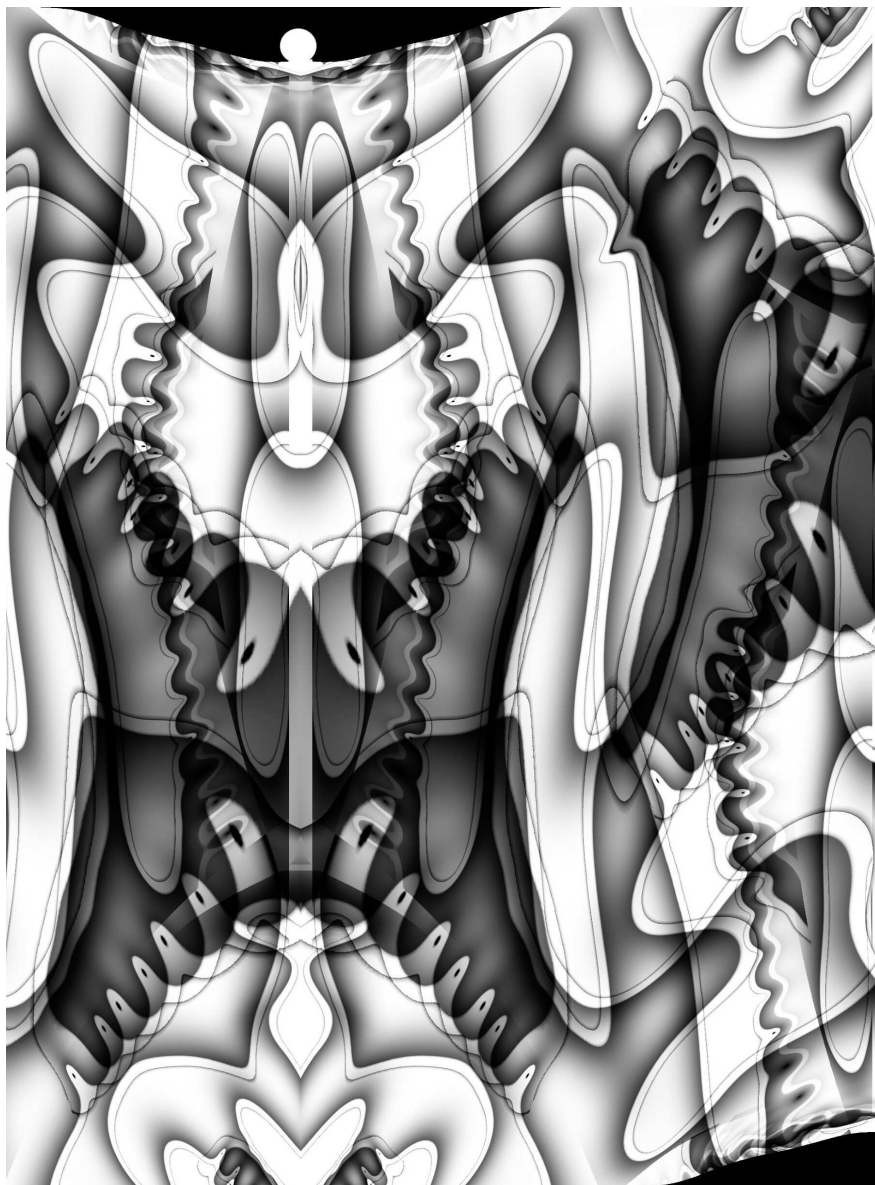
Having proved his expertise, he had the kids riveted. If they got some materials, he explained, and walled off the door, it would be easy to hide the room they were sitting in. It wouldn’t have to look good; they could cover the doorway and make it blend in with the crumbling walls. Anyone who hadn’t spent time in the crazy house basement wouldn’t notice. The town cops, could be duped! Peace and order subverted! “This will hornswoggle them! The cops, your parents, everyone!” Dent leaned in for a moment letting his vision settle over the room. “We will be,” he paused again then let out his word. “Legends.”

Dent spun a story of how they could make a noisy scene at the crazy house. Naturally, the cops would come and try to catch them. But the boys would have already escaped down the dumbwaiter, into the pantry no one with authority knew existed, and headed out the tunnel into the trees. Then the boys would disperse. They could be in their living rooms, at the drive in, cruising Main—doing things they always did in all the usual places while the police lost their minds searching for them up and down in the crazy house. When the cops went to ask their parents, the kids would already be home or out around town in plain sight.

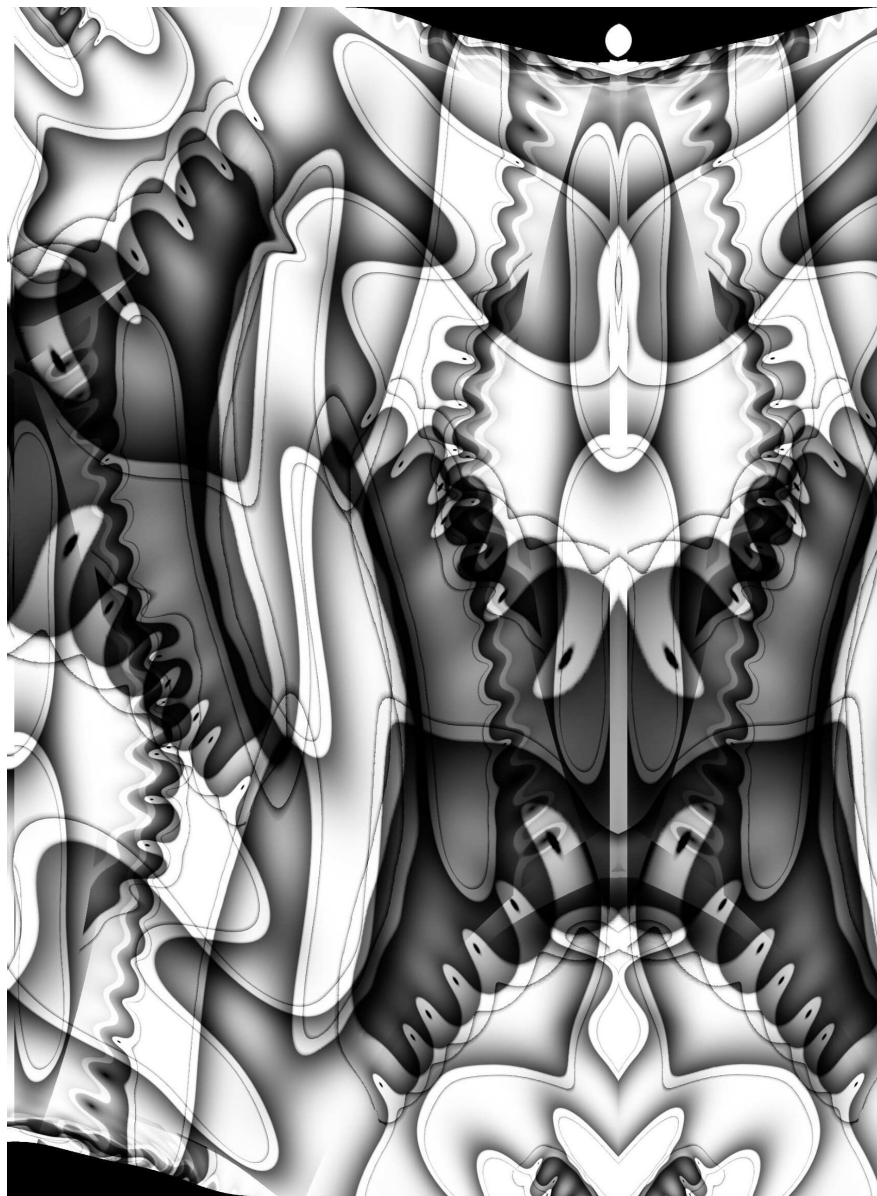
The key would be solidarity among the boys. “Together is paramount!” Dent pulled the phrase from his father’s shtick. It was part of James Shanahan’s false flag operation to sound off this decree, shaking Dent for emphasis. The ritual signaled that his father was out of control, would soon be absent and, days or more in the future, find his way home riding a wake of booze and filth. A key part of the routine was Dent’s dad squeezing his shoulders so hard they would bruise and yelling the word *together*.

While the boys were rapt, Dent paused, reflecting on togetherness and the last time he’d seen his dad, a week or so before. Since Dent started sleeping in the crazy house, he’d only been in and out of the apartment to shower and use the mirror. His dad was usually gone, but that night when Dent unlocked the door and let himself in, there were his dad’s boots, toes directed to the wall, the left and right perfectly parallel like a lie about keeping things straight and in order. His father, not expecting Dent, had lurched out of the bedroom, wiping his nose with the back of one hand, holding his pants up with the other. Belt not buckled, snap undone.

“Son.” James Shanahan’s breath smelled like gutter rot. It was something like ten at night, and he mumbled something about coffee, probably that there was none. Bracing himself with a shoulder against the wall, James had stumbled his way into the bathroom and shut the door. His eyes had never made it above Dent’s knees.



A GRAND ENTRANCE



Edward Supranowicz

Still only two steps into the hallway, Dent made a face of anger. Then anger mixed with more anger, then anger with detachment and a bit of superiority, then anger and any supposed grief he ought to feel about his mother, dead or alive unknown.

Her name was Lizzie Shanahan, and according to his dad she had eyes, “Just that same color as yours, Dent.” Also according to James, Lizzie had last been seen standing under the big musky mounted in Denny Sneden’s tavern, kissing some fella from somewhere out West like the snarling stuffed fish was a sprig of mistletoe. “That’s the picture I live with,” James said. Often.

“Dad.” Dent had said. He squared himself into the bathroom door frame. The door vibrated against his forehead when he spoke.

“Is there a problem?” James’ voice came sleepy and muffled. Probably he was looking down between his knees, talking to the floor.

It would have been simple to bang the door off of its hinges, but Dent weighed the consequence of ever after being haunted by an image of James Shanahan sitting on the pot. Probably his dad’s pants were bunched up around his ankles and his hairy shins were showing. Dent could hear him hiding in there, breathing and not saying a thing.

On his way out Dent squatted down, turned the heels of his father’s boots to the wall and pulled the toes apart so the pair looked like a big, old leather butterfly. Dent did feel tenderly toward the holes in both toes. But he got over it real quick, stood up and pissed carefully into one boot then the other. Then from waist height, he’d aimed well and dropped his apartment key into the left boot as if he was playing a carnival game.

But the kids ate James’ Shanahan’s *Together is Paramount* spiel right up. Dent had even tried to match his dad’s pleading expression when he said it. As if Dent had cast a spell on him, Tony Sergeant, who lived on the lake and whose family had a Chris Craft put his fist in the air and said, “Together!”

Then all the boys did it. “Together!” they affirmed, and over the next few weeks the guys brought in wood, nails, spackling compound. A kid called Richie feigned a newfound interest in his father’s profession and relayed the basics of building. In the end Dent himself didn’t even have to steal anything for the project, and it was easy to camouflage the pantry doorway with the decrepit, 100-year-old walls around it.

Construction was complete in a couple of weeks, and the guys sat circled up on the third floor. August sun turned the room into a sauna, but the boys’ sweat mingling on the rising air was elixir to Dent. “Men! The most important thing, once you’re out, wherever you end up, make it seem like you were always there. So we have alibis.” Dent cast his gaze around the circle at an even pace, meeting each boy’s eyes. “Some of you

will go to the drive in, some will go home. If you can borrow your dad's car, ask ahead. If you're cruising, roll down the windows. Wave at the old people. If you're on foot, be polite! Say hello to any adults you see and be sure to greet them by name.

"We'll be creating the illusion that none of us could possibly have been here in the crazy house messing around because we were all doing the regular Saturday night stuff in all the regular places." Dent rubbed his palms together to demonstrate conniving and eagerness. He saw that the boys believed in him. Some of them were nodding their heads each time he explained a step.

Dent did a thing like Joe Louis before a fight; dukes up he took a few jabs at the air, then lifted his arms over his head to signal the inevitability of coming success. The boys all cheered. But right then Michael Sullivan raised his hand, and like an idiot, Dent called on him.

"I'm going to prepare by stuffing a hankie in my pocket." Michael said.

The kid always talked like that, spoke in stilted patterns, said weird, irrelevant, things. Dent knew better than to repeat the babyish, un-masculine word, *hankie*. But he didn't dare question Michael, who, even though he was the youngest, skinniest boy there held clout for keeping a zoo of snakes, frogs, mice, and the like in his yard. The kid fed flies to black widows he had in jars. After Michael and Jimmy had helped him with the carpet, Dent had gone over to Michael's to see.

"What's your dad say about your black widows?" Dent kept distance from a pickle jar Michael held balanced on his palm. Inside, a spider showed off its hour glass, hanging from a stick by a string of its web.

"Mom lets me." Michael pressed his nose to the glass and waved at the spider. "I don't have a dad."

"Everyone has a dad." Dent poked his forefinger into the hole he'd made with his opposite hand to create the gesture for screwing. "No daddy, no baby."

Michael put the jar on the ground and stretched his arms wide. "Yet here I am," he said, and he'd stood there a while, on display.

In the crazy house, unprompted, Michael went on. "A hankie. To wipe my face when I get out. So I'll look clean. So no one suspects I've been crawling around in a tunnel."

It wouldn't do to point out that Michael Sullivan always looked like he'd been crawling around in a tunnel. Through seconds of silence, the guys looked back and

forth from Michael to Dent, while Dent's mind cranked and cranked, but wouldn't fire. For a sickening moment he saw the boys' confidence in him fading like a centerfielder backing up, backing up, backing up, only to watch the ball fly over the fence for a homer.

Meanwhile Michael beamed about his idea to wash his face, but he wasn't even wearing a shirt under his overalls. It would be years before the child even sprouted a chest hair, Dent thought, and suddenly aboard a swell of instinct and ascendancy put his hands, palms up, out to the crowd and shrugged. Then he stepped over to Michael and roughed up his stupid golden hair. "Good thinking, my man." Dent hauled his hand another couple times through Michael's mop and pointed at the kid's heart like they were real buddies. "Good thinking," he repeated. Then he led all the guys again in saying, "Together!"

When the boys had cleared out, Dent went to his room to spend some time thinking about Minnie Fisher. Running the odds during the last few weeks of school, Dent had settled on Minnie as his best shot at going all the way. The boys hadn't wanted to hold Minnie's hands because she'd had warts on her fingers when they were forced to do folk dancing in second grade. But now, Minnie had tits like the Great Pyramids.

Lying on his blankets, Dent re-rolled his favorite scene, a time when Minnie had touched his arm. It was only a few weeks before graduation, after hours in the school in April. Minnie had been barely able to keep from running into the door and spilling the books clutched to her chest when Dent stepped out of the janitor's storage. He hadn't expected anyone to be in the hall so late, didn't like being caught thieving, and was chagrined to meet Minnie while holding an implicating light bulb in each hand. But, Minnie shook her books back into a stack and winked at him. As she rearranged her texts against her body, he could make out the seams of her bra through her sweater.

Dent made a face to indicate surprise while also acknowledging the attractiveness of the girl. Clowning around, he raised the light bulbs, placing the fat parts over his eyes. He did a few Groucho Marx lifts with his eyebrows before lowering his hands, bulbs and all, to his sides and leaning his back against the closet door. *Explain as little as possible* was advice Dent had taken from his dad, who had also put forth neither means nor effort to secure new light bulbs for their moldy bathroom, but never mind.

Dent willed Minnie to take a step toward him, and she did. It was after 5:00. Both of them should have been anywhere else—cruising with their friends, at the Dairy Bar having cherry Cokes, dangling their feet off the dock, dipping their toes in the lake speculating, now that the ice was off, when it would first be warm enough to dive in. "Forgot my books," Minnie said. Dent made an understanding kind of mmm sound and paired it with a simple tip of his head before he returned his gaze, not too forcefully, to Minnie's eyes and served up his crooked smile.

That was when Minnie had touched his arm. Maybe she'd even squeezed it a little. Encouraged, he moved both light bulbs into one hand and put his arm around her shoulder. He counted one, two three then gave a soft hug and blew ever so slightly into her ear, as if it could have been an accident. When he released her, he'd heard the jump in her exhale.

On his blankets, Dent took his time going over everything about Minnie, her short brown curls, red lipstick, broad shoulders that defied her name. When she sat with other girls, their arms around their knees at the edge of the asphalt at the town park basketball courts, Dent once glimpsed Minnie's thighs under her skirt, wide and white. Lying on his blanket bed in the crazy house, Dent reached around his own skinny butt and grabbed it. He envisioned Minnie's ass while he kneaded his own for about ten seconds before he rolled over and shot off into a napkin that he'd shoved into his pocket from a dispenser at the diner; he'd planned ahead and taken a whole stack.

The next night, when they pulled the prank, Dent had already set a plan to make noise three minutes on, two minutes off. He knew it was going to take a while to attract attention and assigned Baggy Wilson to lead cheers they all knew from the bleachers. "Rebound that basketball! Rebound that basketball!" The guys yelled and swirled their flashlights out the third floor crazy house windows once Baggy got them going.

After an hour with no action, Dent made a lap around the rooms to boost morale. The guys'd had enthusiasm to start, but it took effort to keep the ruckus going. Dent slapped kids on the back and egged them on where they leaned out the windows making commotion. Approaching the farthest corner room, which was too quiet, Dent peered through the crack between door hinges and saw Michael Sullivan and Jimmy Nichol on the floor. Outside, flashlight rays jumped through branches of a tall elm. Oblivious to the bedlam, Jimmy and Michael sat spine to spine. Michael was making pictures with his flashlight on the ceiling. "Dinosaur?" Jimmy guessed. "A big T-Rex with his tail going out the window?"

"It's actually the left hind footprint of a gorilla." Michael said. "Watch. I'll make it again." Dent moved into the doorway to see, but the boys didn't notice him. Michael explained to Jimmy as he drew. "The gorilla has a big toe that looks like a thumb over here and the rest of the toes are smaller. Then this big swoop down is the main part of his paw. See?"

"I guess that'd be a really big gorilla." Jimmy kept his face lifted toward the ceiling, as if the picture was actually there for him to study. His head rested backward onto Michael's thin shoulder.

Dent walked away and leaned over the railing at the top of the central stairs to look down the giant, empty center of the crazy house. Silence fell while the guys rested from yelling.

When Jimmy Nichol ran out of the corner room pointing and hollering, “Here they come! Here they come!” Dent was envisioning a big gorilla pounding his chest, and it took a second for him to realize he’d met success. Jimmy meant the cops.

“Lights out!” Dent yelled. The boys peeked out the windows while the cop car approached the chain link barrier. Dent believed he could hear the boys’ hearts pumping in unison, thrilled by anticipation in the dark.

When the police opened their car doors, Dent stomped four times on the loose floorboard in the central hallway to signal the boys to start screaming. Not the organized cheers of before—legitimate screaming, crazy-house people screaming. “Make me believe you are terrified!” Dent had instructed them when they ran through the drill. “Convince me. Scream like a monster is pulling you down into the lake, or a giant bear is chasing you through the woods, or you caught your little pecker in your zipper.”

Michael Sullivan timed it by counting to 120. Two solid minutes of screaming, during which the police stood paralyzed staring up at the dark building. Michael pulled Dent’s sleeve when it was time, and Dent stomped four times again with the signal for the boys to stop. It was like a conductor had made the sweep with his hand and closed his fist, the boys were that obedient. Silence filled the rooms and Dent’s heart flooded.

The guys walked light as angels to the corner room and shinnied one after the other down the dumb waiter shaft. In the pantry, Dent went last out the tunnel. He pulled the grate over the drain hole behind him, even though he was confident no cop would ever see the inside of the pantry, let alone figure out what the boys had done. With the grate in place, Dent reached up and drug his hand across the rusty metal like it was a dog he loved.

By the time Dent came out in the woods, the other boys were ribbing one another and pointing back at the crazy house. The cop car lights still shined on the edifice, and they could see the cops’ flashlights moving in and out the rooms and beaming out the windows. Dent motioned for the guys to gather round. When he took two steps in and leaned forward, they all did the same. He was a magnet. “Nicely done, men!” he whispered. Then he pointed at Baggy who rose to the occasion by leading a quiet cheer. “S-U-C-C-E-S-S, that’s the way we spell success.” They all joined in.

“You know what to do,” Dent said, and the boys turned every direction to walk away. To the A&W, to their cars, to wait for girls in front of the movie theater where *Annie Get Your Gun* was still showing.

Adults would be out on their porch swings on a hot night like this, listening to the White Sox game; Tim Welden and Scott Trimmer planned on stopping their bikes and asking people about the score.

Edison Bainer had the idea to go the docks and sit on a bench until Old Man Perry came out of his house boat with his whiskey in a paper bag to sit by him and tell fish stories.

When they'd practiced their alibis, a kid called Carl Cunningham made an elaborate explanation about how he was going to run home and get his mother to make him a milkshake. Dent admired the expressions Carl had mastered—devotion, tenderness. Carl mimed the whole scene, smoothed his invisible apron, gave a prissy curtsy, and bent to put the milkshake glass on a coffee table. He'd made all the kids laugh.

Dent thought about it as stepped out of the trees and hopped onto the network of sidewalks that hugged people's yards to their houses. It filled him knowing the cops were still casing the crazy house, fat men huffing up and down the stairs, searching all the rooms for nothing. Maybe they were even scared in there. Dent smiled and kept walking. It was still early for a Saturday night, but only a few cars went past. Every few blocks he leaned up against a street light while a perfect circular beam shone down around him. He wished Minnie Fisher would go by and stop to talk, but he didn't know for sure if she knew how to drive. Like he'd told the other boys to do, he waited to be seen.



NO ESCAPE
John Zywar

FOOTBALL SEASON

Chelsie Nunn

baby is not an age
we are past proof
there is black & white
there is color
baby is black & white
baby is the ginkgo tree in fall
if orange is anger then it isn't real
really a color can't be angry
I see the plate of mandarin peels
balanced evenly on the car armrest
we are the rear-facing infant
that is not to say we are young
that is not to say we are new
baby I cannot see where we are going
the tawny sun is blinding
we barrel down the interstate east
college football fans swarm into what
they call a navy
they are dressed in orange
they board yachts in the river
sing shanties while televisions blare
all I know is we are fastened
we are in a traffic jam marmalade
we are sweet but chunky in our own skin
someone scores a touchdown and the boats
blow their horns in celebration

SUMMER, WHEN I OUTGROW MY BODY

Harper Bright

I. June

I am allergic to my own body, I realize, when the sun sits high enough in the sky that it sticks there for a few more hours than usual. I am sixteen, and when the air conditioner switches on in the summer, it makes my house smell like the dog that died years ago. Slowly, I lose feeling in all the parts that matter, and learn how to use all the parts that don't.

Change begins at the edges of my body, and I feel it as my back presses into sand and my brother is next to me. I am at a beach I can't pronounce the name of, but that is unimportant, what matters is that the waves are retreating and the sun touches as much skin as it can. It is this feeling — the warmth that tingles my skin and makes my toes curl — that forces me to notice how my body is shifting as often and quickly as the tide drags in and out.

Topless, the woman to my right flips on her towel. I don't understand how the women here are so comfortable in their bodies, but they are, and this is what lives under my tongue and tries to choke me when I remove my shirt. From somewhere behind us, two girls saunter toward the water, and I smell my brother's gaze on the small of their backs, rancid and foul like a wild animal breathing down its prey. I wonder if this is the experience I am resigned to: inspected then frenzied upon, like a piece of food left to the seagulls. And yet, summer has not begun to mold me into the clay figure I am to become before the fall, so I get to remain disproportionate and cracked, left to dry out in the sun. I return my eyes to the ocean, not understanding that starting now, my eyes will always be concerned about the rest of my body. My brother is soon asleep, his eyes pressed tightly shut.

II. July

The hot air finally arrives and brings some changes. I shed my lips, molting and baking the unused skin until my new smile knows its own form, then the process starts over. I learned how to speak with these lips, how to sing with them, and in a blue room with one too many lights, how to kiss with them. When I tug on them too hard and the seams begin to show — blood infecting the mouth when I smile wide enough — I drape them outside to relax in the dry heat next to the wet bathing suits and underwear I have bled into again.

This is my skin: recently discovered by hands and sunlight, almost-gold brushed on the tops of my arms and shoulders, milky white in all the areas where eyes aren't supposed to wander. This is my skin: red on my shoulders, nose, and chest when I spend too much time thinking about the sun, red under my eyes when I spend too much time thinking about myself. I want my freckles to suffocate me before they're gone with the heat. I want the heat to suffocate me.

As the temperature grows, my hand melts into someone else's until we are interlocked like roots that have merged together. He transplants me to his home where he tells me he loves me. My body no longer shifts in the daylight because I sleep in his bed by day, craving the cooler summer nights when cicadas speak for you and you don't have to think. Becoming nocturnal means ignoring the growing pains until the moon is out and pain feels more like love than anything else.

I'm in a room in his house that doesn't feel like mine: too white, too light, too clean. I am beginning to understand how to use my body correctly, how to sway my hips and bend my face into a shape that men will listen to. But when I am alone again, my pillow becomes my sponge, used for cleaning up messy nights where the tears threaten to set into my bed, salt eating into the frame like termites, chewing and tearing up every memory that lives on that mattress. But my bed is close enough to an ocean, so I am happy enough.

III. August

It's hot again when I am waist deep in turquoise water. A stranger's child slips her small palm in my hand and I begin to think I am okay with being a woman. The pool is crowded with people taking advantage of a recent shift in the weather; mothers gossip under umbrellas and children run unattended, and there are not any people here my age, aside from two tan college-aged men, slick with sweat, who tell me I look old for my age. It still feels like summer when the child presses her head into my stomach and tells me I am her best friend. I wonder if this is what the child whispers to her mother when she hugs her, if a mother's love is supposed to feel like a best friend. As the day ages and the air cools, I realize I wouldn't remember how to love the way I rehearsed, only halfway into my childhood before I decided I didn't know what love felt like. I decide I'm not okay with my womanhood when I get out of the pool at the end of the day, water streaming down my body like tears.

Summer is still all around me, even as the temperature drops and the leaves do too. I feel summer inside my body, like a drug that you need to survive, silently turning my bones blue. When he kisses me, his hands rest on my waist. When I get bored, I try to find my ovaries, pressing my thumb into my abdomen until I feel the organ dance around the wandering finger. Until now, they have felt like nothing more than an object,

something to fidget with. Now, they feel three times heavier, like I can sense the weight of them rattling around and hitting me from the inside out.

When he takes away my childhood, I begin to realize that I may have robbed myself of it long before him, innocence dissipating as soon as I started noticing the parts of men that wandered: eyes, hands, morals. This is my body, yet it's theirs too; it is my choice but theirs too. I can't even tell where I begin or end, just another girl lost between the legs of another boy, teenage until it kills me.

I am sixteen, in clothes that aren't mine because I still don't understand how to hide what I am most ashamed of: my arms, my chest, my back. My body is changing faster than my mind, and I can't stop myself from being called a woman anymore. I am sat down and told I am too young to be a mother by two mothers, but they don't understand that I know, that I resent the changes I have gone through, that I miss what it was like before knowing the full weight of my actions. The air has cooled and I can no longer taste the sun in my mouth, but I am still allergic to my own body, even after summer ends.

IV. September

What happens to me when the seasons change? I feel my new skin hardening.

SISTER
Anna Dunes

the years reveal
a wilderness now:

*I can never be you
or really know*

[what you've seen]

wet sprayed cinder
after a cigarette parade

*the smell of a man's
singd body, mere*

[traces of your dogs]

black drip from a rock
finding a puddle

*shards of linen like crisp
leaves, still falling*

[dark clouds hours after]

signs of winter and spring
spitting at each other

*arriving, breaking down
between breaths—*

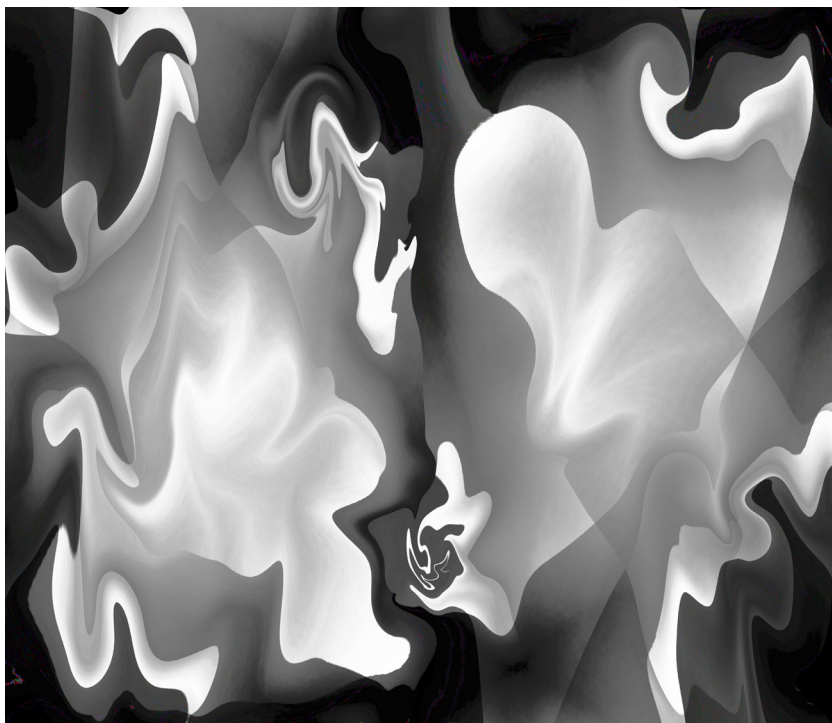
[a sudden flood of fault]

a flame, a simple thing,
so tangible it burns

*but you already know
this: the scent*

[destruction, like slag]

in your hair



DRIFTING CLOUDS
Edward Supranowicz

ALL THAT'S GREAT AND GOOD

Connor O'Mara

Fine dust floated about and on the cedar porch the great-grandmother sat on her rocking chair, sipping a sweating glass of iced-tea. In the yard her two grandsons had worked, weeded, mowed, and finally stopped to drink cold beers which were barely legal to them. The bottles wet their hands and the paper stickers ripped and clung to their callouses. "You boys need anything?" she shouted from her seat.

The older brother, Cole, wiped the film of sweat from his face. "Nope, we're good. Gonna taking a minute." He took a seat on a log in the shade near a stack of firewood. Took a swig from the bottle.

His younger brother, Grady, sat in the freshly mown grass before him and pulled a canister of tobacco from his back pocket. "Want some?"

"Not in front of her."

"She can hardly see a thing." Grady pinched some tobacco out of the can and put it into his bottom lip. He turned and squinted at his great-grandmother. She rocked on the porch with one hand over her brow; the other sat in her lap with a slight tremor. "So this is the last time, huh? She ain't going to make it to ninety-nine. That's for damn sure." He spat into the grass.

"Why would you say a thing like that?"

"Me speaking in a certain way ain't going to make her live longer."

"You speakin respectful will keep me from shoving your face in the dirt." Cole brushed off his knees and looked disapprovingly down at his younger brother.

Grady took another sip of beer. "She give you a Benjamin?"

"Yup."

He nodded and spit again. "Why does she do that?"

"Cause she's a sweet old lady. That's why."

"I ain't being ungrateful. I mean why is it always a hundred-dollar bill? It's always crisp too. Like she went down to the bank and got them special. I know she's got other cash laying around here. Some twenties. Couple fifties." He took a swig. "Hell, I

don't know what I'm sayin."

"It's cause of Pop. But you're too young to remember." Cole leaned away from some sunlight that found its way onto his face. "He used to say that a real man should always have a fresh hundred in his billfold. Something about preparedness, I think."

"She think we couldn't get a hundred ourselves? Or what?"

"She thinks we ain't gonna be real men unless she gives us a little shove in the right direction. And I don't know about you, but getting handed cash is the best kind of shove I've ever received."

Grady nodded and then looked at his great-grandmother again; he chuckled to himself, then spat. "You know there were other men before Pop? Mom told me there were three before Pop. We don't even share blood with Pop, she told me. Did you know that?"

"Yeah, I might've heard that once or twice from someone. Can't see why it matters much. She's old. Bet there's lots of shit in her life that I don't know about."

"I heard they all died. Every single one. But no divorces. How strange is that?"

"Stranger has happened."

"What if she killed 'em?"

"Jesus." Cole shook his head.

"What are the odds you have four husbands and they all die? I'm only being reasonable."

"You're callin Grandma a murderer." He held out his hand for the tobacco.

"No I ain't. I'm just saying it's odd."

"I guess so."

"You think she ever misses one of them?"

"I'm sure she misses plenty of people. That's what happens when you outlive everything else."

"No, I mean, do you think when she was with Pop she missed number two at points?"

Or she was with three and missed one? Or do you think she could've missed all four of 'em in the same day? How strange would that be?"

"I can't even imagine what it's like being her."

"Yeah. I bet she's seen some shit." They looked at the porch and she was sitting in a hunch, mouth agape. A breeze ran through the air and the green canopy above swayed gently in the wind.

"She ever tell you the story about moving cattle with her dad and the neighbor-man?" Cole asked, squinting at his brother.

"She only tells about four or five stories. I'm sure I heard it before."

"No, I had to dig this one out of her. Kicks all her other stories' asses."

"Well, don't be a prick. Tell me."

Cole leaned in closer. "This must've happened in 1930-something, when she was only a girl. Anyways, her and our great great grandfather—I can't remember his name at the moment—had to bring their cattle across the state, and they got this neighbor guy to help out."

"Mhm." Grady looked out into the distance and finished his beer.

"Well, I suppose this was during the Depression or something cause they got stuck up out in the middle of noplac, real desperate times, and two men with stockings over their faces, black clothes, the whole one-two, came and held 'em at gunpoint."

"Jesus."

"That's not even the crazy bit. I guess the neighbor guy tried to talk the robbers out of it. That or he put up a fight, and they blew his brains out with a twelve-gauge. Like," Cole mimed a gun with his hand and made a wet explosive noise with his mouth, his imaginary insides exploding over the freshly cut lawn. "And Grandma saw all of it! Saw that man's memories, all of who he was, spilt on the goddamn dirt."

"Jesus. She never told me that one."

"Mhm." Cole shifted on the log and looked at the country behind him. They stayed quiet for a while. Dappled light danced over the lawn, up the side of the house, and onto the roof. Somewhere in the distance a cow lowed. "I'm going to miss coming out here, after she passes."

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about that,” said Grady, and Cole scowled at him and he lowered his head in shame. “I know what you mean, though. I’m going to miss her too. Can you imagine all the things she never told us?”

Cole blew a hot puff of air through his nostrils and shook his head. “All the things that’ll die with her.”

“Do you think He meant for us to live this long?” Grady gestured up at the clouds but there weren’t any.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Seems like old folk are dead to us way before we put them in the ground. Like they get too old and we don’t know how to act anymore.”

“Yeah. That makes some sense.”

They grabbed their beer bottles and got up from their seats in the yard. When they passed their great-grandmother, Grady squeezed her shoulder lightly. She tapped his hand with her own, all the while rocking in her chair. They kicked off their shoes, got more beer from the fridge and took a seat inside.

“You think she’s fine out there? It’s pretty hot.”

“Yeah, she’ll be fine.”

MRI

Joris Soeding

I don't ever want to feel that again
to lose you after "they found something"
on the phone with that awful triage reception
I want to rip off those cardiac cords
multicolored, dangling from the hospital mattress
and hurry you home to our children
skip the diagnosis, pills, beeps, prodding for a vein
the gentleman across the hallway
calling for Anja to this half of the neurology ward
let's go home
not watch this nurse run for a prescription
police circling another room
the memories of our mothers
let us return to Tuesday
regain your strength
and let us pray with other intentions

THE CONNECTION

Cynthia Graae

“Where are you when I need you?” I called, my aging voice wavering as I wandered through our cabin. Exhausted from hours of driving, I’d arrived at the lake on the hottest day ever recorded in southern Maine and looked forward to relaxing on the deck, but instead I was crying about his death. Which was more than ten years ago. Last night my nephew phoned to say that he’d turned on the water and electricity and the refrigerator had cooled down quickly. But today when I got here the fridge was dark and warm inside. The groceries I bought on my way through town looked as if they’d traveled all day with me from New York. The egg carton was soggy, the carrots limp, the butter melting as if zapped in the microwave. And like a heartbroken teenager I dripped tears and sweat all over the floor. My husband could have gotten this fridge going again—he could repair anything.

How much longer could I summer alone in a cabin that was aging in sync with me? When we designed it, we didn’t suspect his heart would fail or that in my old age I’d be left to deal with failing appliances by myself.

He was healthy our first summers here, and I had many good reasons to mourn his death. I missed jogging together for miles and taking all-day mountain hikes. I missed watching him pull the long oars of his rowing shell, gliding silently across the lake. I missed the bluefish he smoked, the roasts I couldn’t replicate, and his paellas and lobster bisque. We laughed over his stories at dinner. At night curled close in bed, we listened to the wild, arctic loons call from distant lakes. We breathed in harmony as we slept. His handyman skills were useful, but trivial in comparison to all that. Letting my heart ache for him just because of a nonfunctioning refrigerator was selfish. So self-pitying. Pathetic.

Get over it! I told myself. Imagine how he would approach the problem.

I liked the memory of his voice, deep, as if his feelings came from a steady place far inside him. I could almost hear him say, as he did every year when we packed up to leave, “When you unplug the fridge to clean it, don’t forget to tie its cord to the dish drainer. Otherwise it will slip out of reach, back behind the fridge.”

His first question today would have been whether our nephew had reconnected the fridge properly.

Yes. It was plugged into the outlet above the dish drainer.

Did the outlet work?

I tested it with the electric kettle, as he would have done. No question, the outlet was dead.

Was it getting power?

I checked the circuit breaker box—he would have done that, too. The block letters identifying each circuit were large and bold. Without reading glasses, I read LIVING ROOM, BEDROOM, STUDY, BATHROOM, KITCHEN, and REFRIGERATOR. I rocked the switch labeled REFRIGERATOR back and forth, the way he'd taught me, until I knew it was engaged.

That had no effect. Frustrating.

By then the floor was positively slippery with sweat. My ego was slipping, too, I threw two bath towels over the groceries and added my thick red oven mitts and a quilted tea cozy on top.

I retrieved the detailed user manual he wrote for me to use after his death. He hid it in my desk, probably after I was seat-belted into the car the last time we were here together. To make time feel infinite, we didn't jointly acknowledge what we both knew that summer—that he wouldn't return. He didn't want me to find that manual until I came back here alone.

Those instructions didn't solve the refrigerator problem.

My brother's summer cabin was a few minutes' walk from mine. I could probably find him in his workshop squaring a floppy screen door or making toys for his grandchildren. Both he and his cabin were aging, too, and I hated to ask him for help, but my nephew was at work, my groceries were in trouble, and I was stymied.

My brother agreed to take a short break. He repeated my diagnostic steps. His results were the same as mine—my husband would have been proud of me.

My brother pointed to an outlet on the other side of the sink. "Let's try this one," he said. Why hadn't I thought of that? That outlet was so far from the fridge that we had to use my heavy-duty, orange extension cord. Nothing happened until my brother noticed the outlet had a reset button. He pushed. The refrigerator hummed.

"There should be reset buttons for older people, too," I said.

The orange cord wasn't attractive, snaked as it was in circles on the floor in front of the sink, but I had a working refrigerator and my brother wanted to return to his project.

“Maybe it’s the circuit breaker that’s dead,” I said as he walked out the door.

“Good point,” he said. He pulled it out, handed it to me, and told me that if I drove to town in the morning to buy a new one, he’d install it in the afternoon.

I had hoped to spend that morning sweeping cobwebs from corners and washing windows so that I could finally relax on the deck, but it was noon when I returned with the replacement and I was hungry.

I opened the fridge.

The light was off and the food was warm.

I pushed the reset button and the fridge sprang into action. Why was that fridge paralyzing outlets? Something was wrong with it.

I imagined my husband saying, Have a little faith, meaning Why do you always think the worst?

I don’t think the worst, I countered. I saved us from disaster more than once because my marital role was spotting trouble from a distance. And in that role, I was certain that the refrigerator would be soon stone-cold dead, but not before killing more electric outlets and circuit breakers that he wasn’t here to fix. It would be short-sighted to have faith in a refrigerator that was at least twenty years old. No, I thought to my husband, I need a new one. Now.

Ok, I thought, as I turned on my computer. Let’s get it done. I’ll wash windows tomorrow.

My wish list was simple. A new fridge had to fit where the old one did. It should have a minimum of parts that could break. I preferred off-white.

Choices that hadn’t existed twenty years earlier overwhelmed me. They included energy efficiency scores, size and configuration of drawers, adjustability of shelves, temperature and moisture controls, and customer ratings. I listed features, including internal measurements, prices, and delivery dates, across the top of a spreadsheet. Down the side, I wrote makes and models. Then, to help me choose, I measured my milk and juice cartons, my imported butter, and the box that held two and a half dozen eggs. I counted jars of condiments. If my husband had seen me toss the fruit and vegetables into bags and measure them, too, he would have laughed at me.

I became so immersed in paralyzing details that when I stood to stretch and saw the orange cord, I wondered why the refrigerator wasn’t plugged into its home outlet

the way it should be. I had definitely gone into town and come home with a new circuit breaker.

Fingers crossed, I moved the plug back where it belonged.

The refrigerator hummed.

I rolled up the orange cord. I washed the dishes.

The fridge was still running. Maybe I should have more faith. Maybe the breakdown had been a fluke and I wouldn't need a new one. I decided that as soon as I wiped down the kitchen counters, I would sit on the deck. No sweeping cobwebs today or washing windows. I deserved a rest, right?

Nope.

One more wipe and I discovered the new circuit breaker on the counter in front of the toaster oven, precisely where I'd put it when I returned from the store. To confirm that this was the new one, I checked the circuit breaker box. The REFRIGERATOR slot was still empty.

Now I was puzzled. How was it possible that the refrigerator was working? Maybe to understand the wiring, I needed to find out what was connected to the now-empty REFRIGERATOR slot.

I raced through the cabin turning on lights and appliances. Everything worked. I looked for outlets behind bookcases and my bed. All of them worked, too. Finally, the only place I hadn't searched for an outlet was behind the fridge.

I pulled and tugged until the fridge was two inches from the wall. I couldn't budge it further. Once again, I was drenched in the pain of missing my husband. He wasn't much taller than I, but he was stronger.

Stronger, until his heart began failing.

A memory of his last row across the lake broke free from deep inside me. Ten strokes, a two-minute rest while he leaned over his oars, determined to be a rower until the moment he could not. Another ten strokes. A rest again. Eventually he covered the mile that our first summers here he had rowed nonstop and each year grew longer for him. I remembered how, as he neared the shore that day, my chest hurt as if I shared his failing heart. Together he and I had collaborated in illusion. We called his near-death hospital visits minor tune-ups. We invented "reasons" for me to do tasks he could no longer handle, like loading suitcases into the car, while he did the easier ones, shutting off the circuit

breakers, for example. As he struggled to pull his boat in after that last row, instead of helping I went for a walk, desperate for both of us to hang onto our illusion.

But exposed now, that illusion no longer served a purpose. I let it fall away, the way water slid from his oars as he rowed forward. I knew what I would find behind the refrigerator.

By boosting myself up until I leaned over the counter with my feet in the air, I was able to see the empty outlet. It was a dedicated one, only for the refrigerator, I remembered. We had used it when he was strong enough to move the refrigerator.

Of course I hadn't noticed when he lost that strength. Don't forget to tie the cord to the dish drainer, he'd said, convincing me that I had forgotten this important precaution before. Bravo, I thought to him, for pulling off that sleight of tongue.

It amazed me that his rigged-up arrangement had lasted so long. He must have known that with the fridge plugged into it, the outlet were using would, at some point, overheat and shut off. But why, when he'd left such detailed instructions about everything else, hadn't he left me a reminder about what he had done?

Was there a clue I hadn't found?

Surely an electrician would have needed one.

I returned to the circuit breaker box, this time with reading glasses. In his handwriting, the word Fridge was lightly penciled above the word KITCHEN, which identified the circuit breaker controlling all the outlets in the kitchen, including—I now understood—the one above the dish drainer.

Later, my brother appeared at the door. My nephew, who wanted to know how I was settling in, followed. My brother installed the new circuit breaker in the REFRIGERATOR slot. My nephew plugged the fridge into the outlet behind it. The word Fridge on the KITCHEN circuit breaker was now obsolete and misleading, but I couldn't bring myself to erase it.

At last I was alone. I went onto the deck. A cool breeze eased the heat, as if the summer had been reset. My husband's voice rippled through my mind, Have a little faith. I could almost see him in his shell, determined to row that one mile however he could.

How could I explain to anyone that our last year together was our happiest?

I would summer in our cabin until the moment I could not.



DILAPIDATION #7
Lawrence Bridges

THE NIGHT LIVES WITH ITS LONELINESS

Kevin LeMaster

the night spreads its wings
like crows or blackbirds,

littering the air in scattered
formation, engulfing the sky

and stars with bewilderment.

darkness drops this February
night by ten degrees

and I stand barefoot
on the front porch

watching dusk relinquish
its tight hold on the day.

the cold touch of concrete
clutches my feet like warm

earth on a Summer afternoon
long ago,

held close to the river's edge
by my spread toes sinking

in the moist mud; pant legs rolled
and tucked up to my calves.

we'd hunt for worms, long
as our arms,

the perfect bait for trout
and catfish, plentiful in this part

of the Ohio.

years later the silt and deluge float
downstream faster than the remains

of fish, their bloated bodies
translucent against

a failing moon, its sliver,
a broken plate barely

visible behind gray-silver
clouds. the train whistle bites

through the cool air
like an angry dog that bares

his teeth at strangers.

the throes of time
aging the landscape's

graying future, promising
graves as deep as love is

when it is new, when it is love.
the night lives with its loneliness,

why can't we die with ours.

OUR BOYS

Aimee LaBrie

We were worried sick about our boys.

That summer in the City of Brotherly Love, straight white college boys were being targeted, not by fraternity hazing or ticket scalping or probiotic scams, but by a female perp out to shatter their innocence. Most of the boys were upperclassmen, which meant they had just started to learn how to make spaghetti or schedule their own dental appointments—many still didn't know how to change their phone plan or pay for car insurance. In other words: they were green. Perhaps that's what drew her; maybe she liked that they were helpless, or maybe it was pure animal attraction.

We wondered: Did the attacker like the way they looked? Like the way they rough-housed at soccer practice on the fields of Penn stadium? How their young muscles undulated under their red and blue jerseys and the sweat trickled from their handsome, wrinkle-free brows? How their quads tightened when they bent over to pull up their athletic socks? How their puckered lips looked when they spit? Did she think about the way the smelled, like fresh sweat and Tommy Hilfiger cologne?

We could only imagine.

It was our job—no, our *duty* as Philly's finest special victims' unit to solve these outrageous crimes before another white college boy was hurt. Nothing like this had ever happened. We'd seen crimes before, of course—break ins, robberies, stolen baby carriages, run-away buses, horses gone wild, an explosion of the feral cat population, Ponzi schemes, adultery, small animal sacrifices, but nothing, nothing like this. We'd heard of guys having their asses grabbed, yes, we'd caught our fill of dumb jock jokes, we'd written down complaints of wolf whistles, cat calls, chicken clucks, and other general harassment, but nothing that crossed the line into physical contact.

It worked like this: the victim would be out drinking at a local bar in South or West Philly; places where the white youth typically gathered to watch games on big screen TVs and funnel beer: Chickie and Pete's, Fado's Irish Pub, Buffalo Billiards. A kid would stumble to the back alleyway to pee. That's when she'd strike. The victim would feel a cold hand clasp his balls, a voice hiss in his ear. She pinned them there, using a warming lotion while touching them to completion on the bricks they had been emptying their bladders against moments before.

We tried not to judge the fact that victims were hanging out at dive bars, drinking with their buddies, wearing stretched white T-shirts that showed off their triceps and biceps, skinny jeans from Urban Outfitters that tapered just so along the ankles,

sneakers with a thick sole that gave a lift to their asses.

You focus on their behavior and appearance, and you forget that nobody goes for a pitcher of Bud and two-for-one curly fries imagining he'll end up confused in an alleyway, his limp dick hanging out of his jeans, asking the one question every rape victim asks, "Was it my fault?"

When you take that question apart, you find one more: *could I have prevented this?* The answer is an emphatic no, and also a quiet yes. Yes, maybe the boys could have.

Then, things turned darker. Rugby, a twenty-year old male Drexel student majoring in global supply chain management, was found wandering around the Farmer's Market, barefoot, his GAP T-shirt torn at the collar. His eyes were wet pools of tears. Blue, like the ocean. Rugby was the first to report that she'd threatened to cut him, "down there. Near my junk," he said, a catch in his throat. It was only by a stroke of luck that a busboy from the bar happened to step out into the alleyway and she bolted.

This suggested that simply humiliating the boys was no longer enough. She wanted blood.

When Rugby came to the station, Amber, our lead detective, approached him as one would a skittish stray. Amber had eyes of blue steel and a body to match. But she knew how to handle the boys. "Rugby, it's okay. You're safe now. No one is going to hurt you." She poured him a glass of Gatorade, tried not to notice the delicate bob of his Adam's apple as he gulped it down. "Would you rather talk to a man?"

He shook his head, eyes cast down, long eyelashes nearly touching his cheeks. "She, she, followed me outside of Misconduct Tavern, and she...I...She...I...She...At first, I thought she needed help looking for her kitten or, I don't know, but then I-- " He burst into big, heaving gasps.

Lieutenant Randy Washington, a well-muscled blond who kept his demeanor tight, and his pants tighter, stepped up to the boy. "Listen, I have a rule I go by, and it's something my dad taught me. No matter what the problem is, there's no reason a woman should be asking a man for help. She should ask another woman. You got that?"

The kid nodded, blinking back tears. He told his story.

He'd gone out to take a piss, but tried to stop when she appeared. She was quick, pushed him forward, one hand pressing a knife to his throat, the other clutching his balls. "You move, I cut." Rugby rested his head on the interrogation table where one of our perps had used an earring back to scrawl "Johnny's a Slut" in tiny letters.

"It's not your fault, Rugby. You didn't do anything wrong," Barbara said.

We refrained from adding, *Except for peeing in a public space which is technically a Class-A misdemeanor*. Hadn't he been through enough?

The media came up with a name, as if glamorizing the crimes: "Jerk Off-Jane," they called her.

We went into to the college campuses to educate the boys on how to avoid the assaults. We had a PowerPoint outlining the locations of the attacks, and tips for not tempting the perp. Pee with a buddy, watch out for one another, don't wear soccer shorts that have easy access—it sends a message, right or wrong. We gave the boys whistles to wear around their necks like collars.

A crew-cut dad with a giant moustache argued that his kid should be allowed to wear whatever he wanted, that sporting gym shorts doesn't mean he wants to be forcibly given a hand job. "I mean, look at him!" We looked at him and at the other boys. They pulled their T-shirts down over their bellies, faces burning, wiggled in their seats, tugging at their low-slung jeans.

We bit our tongues. We didn't point out that in the tighter versions of their shorts, you could see the outline of their dicks, the mushroom shaped head, or the cloudy clot of their balls.

We took the Penn football cheerleaders aside before practice, all of them women except for Jeremy in his tight stretchy pants and glowing white wrist bands. We sent him to fill the water bottles. "You got brothers?" Barbara asked.

"Yeah," a high voice yelled from the back. "She's got a brother and he is smoking hot." A sports bra sailed through the air, hitting Barbara squarely in the face.

They'd understand all too clearly when some guy they met at a sorority party cried rape and their whole life was destroyed because a needy bro thought they were more than just hook up buddies. We'd seen it happen. Well, actually, we'd never seen it happen, but that didn't mean it wasn't a possibility. A rep for rape could keep you from so many things—a job as a law enforcement officer, for instance, or a judge, maybe. Possibly even president of the United States.

With no solid leads, we decided to set up a sting operation. Brandon, this kid from the IT department, was young and tough, grew up on the hard streets of North Philly, yet somehow looked as though he'd been raised in the best private schools in up-state New York. *She's tricky*, we warned. *Be careful*.

Barbara gave him a condom, for no reason at all that we could think of.

“I got you,” he said, trying for an awkward high five. We looked the other way, certain now that we’d made a mistake.

The plan was simple. We’d send Brandon to Tattooed Mom’s, where the attacks had happened half a dozen times before. We dressed him in khaki Dockers and a polo shirt. We gave him a pair of mirrored sunglasses to wear backwards on his head, enough hair gel to tame his wild locks into crunchy looking Styrofoam waves.

You’re good to go, we said, punching him on the shoulder, pinching his cheeks, pretending to grab his ass. He was scrumptious really. Enough vulnerability in his mouth to be alluring along with the heady smell of clover shower gel. We found ourselves leaning in and then, no, shaking it off.

We were not like her.

Brandon sat for three hours in the dark bar, drinking lager after lager, going outside to piss half a dozen times. She never showed.

We ended up listening to an increasingly more intoxicated Brandon sing every possible Billy Joel song on the karaoke machine. When he started “Angry Young Man,” for the third time, we called it a night.

Brandon was devastated. “Is it me? Am I not handsome enough? Too skinny?” He gave us a pained look. “Am I not attractive enough to rape?”

“Naw,” Amber said, glancing away. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

Some of us had sons, yes, and daughters. Who should we worry about more? Our sons were more careless, prone to car chases down one-way streets and skinned knees from skateboarding feats at Rittenhouse Park. We bought them kneepads and shin guards; darling jock straps shaped vaguely like speculums.

But how well did we really know our daughters? Our daughters were taught to respect boundaries, to open doors for old men, to leave a twenty percent tip or more, even when the service was subpar. Buy who’s to say they weren’t tempted in dark cars behind bowling alleys with their high school crushes, the moon hidden behind fast-moving clouds? What might they do in the dark, enticed by the flash of checkered boxer shorts above denim or the scent of sea breeze aftershave mixed with lacrosse-induced sweat?

We heard of copycat jerk off assaults in D.C., Baltimore, Boston. Taylor Swift released

a song called “You Knew I Was Trouble” that went straight to number one on the country and pop charts. We saw the beginnings of pornography fetishizing the white male as liking forced hand play, even as their anguished faces told another story. Barb caught her niece arranging naked Ken dolls in provocative positions. Our boys were running scared, considering community college only, refusing to pledge Kappa Alpha for fear of being roped into a night of binge drinking that ended in salty tears and misgivings.

And then, a break.

Rugby showed up at Amber’s apartment, wearing a tight white t-shirt and soft gray jogging pants. The porch light shined behind his head, making his dark hair glow like a halo. “What are you doing here?” she asked, taking off her reading glasses. Even though she was older and had a helmet of salt and pepper gray hair, most young men considered her utterly irresistible.

“I needed to see you.” It was raining and he shivered. Goosebumps raised on his sculpted biceps.

She let him in, poured him a pina colada wine cooler, and threw him a towel. “Don’t drip water on my nice floor.” She offered him a sweatshirt. He shook his head. He took a sip of the wine cooler, shuddered and gasped. “What’s going on?” she said, fighting the urge to push his wispy forelock off his damp brow.

“I think I know something,” he said.

She suggested he calm down, take a moment, do some deep knee bends or squats.

“I know you’re smarter than me,” he shrugged, wiped his nose on his sleeve. He looked like a little boy.

She told us later that she wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, just to watch his mouth open wider, so she could get a look at his tongue. But she was a professional, goddamnit! “What is it, Rugby?”

“Well, it’s that we all have Labs.”

She remembered now, all of the dog hair on the victims’ windbreakers. “Go on.”

“I didn’t know all of the guys who were attacked, but I recognized some of them from the dog park, not friends of mine, but I’d see them every other weekend or whatever, or picking up after their dogs on South Street. Then it hit me, we all own the

same kind of dog.”

“What does that matter?” She tried not to stare at the Cupid pout of his mouth, the way he shook his hair to clear it of rain like a boy in a shampoo commercial.

“Our vet. I think we all go to the same goddamn vet!” He started to cry. He grabbed a plastic banana from her centerpiece and threw it against the wall. “I can’t live like this anymore.”

She slapped him. Hard. His hand flew to his cheek, eyes stunned blue orbs. She apologized. She hadn’t mean it, but Mother of God, he needed to quit being so hysterical.

She told us later that she gave comfort the only way she knew how. With her hands. Hands that were meant to soothe sweating brows, to knead bread, to untie knots in hoodies, to twist the neck of a chicken for Sunday dinner. She took him to her bedroom and laid him gently on the covers. In the dark, she moved with care, touching only when and where he allowed her to.

She got a far-away look in her eye when she described the way he startled when she touched him, as if burned. How she found deep valleys of scratches on his thighs likely self-inflicted by the sharp blade of a scissors. How he whispered that he wished he had the courage to cut deeper. These details—what did they matter? Eventually, he offered himself up to her. Our boy. This boy. Him.

We tracked her down easily after that. Her name was Kimberley Cotton, and she ran a veterinary clinic called The Standard-Standard Vet Clinic. We brought her to the station. While she was in our custody, we searched her clinic. Her records confirmed she had our victims as clients. Brad, Chad, Tad, Dave, Chad, Brett, Alex, Christopher, Brock, Chad, Blaine, Blake, TJ, JT, and yes, Rugby.

She wore a faint slash of dark lipstick. She had a foxy look—pointy nose, hair pulled back into a pink scrunchie.

For the line-up, we had six women, including our main suspect, hold out their hands. Next, one by one, they stepped forward, reading the words off the index cards we’d given them. “Oh, yes, you’re such a good, strong boy. Yes, good boy. Good, good boy.” When the suspect read her card, she did it in a monotone, hardly any enthusiasm. Rugby shot up out of his chair. “Number three,” he said. “That’s her. She’s the one.”

We returned to Kimberly, and let her know she’d been identified. We got down to business. *Tell us about the boys.*

“What about them?”

"All of them owned Labrador Retrievers," Barbara said, a note of impatience in her gravelly voice.

The vet snorted. "It's a lack of imagination. They feel like they're supposed to get these big dumb dogs to match the big dumb dogs their dads grew up with. And then they don't have the time to walk them or give them the care they need and so the dogs get rowdy from neglect. I love dogs. I don't love the boys who own them."

Amber slammed her fist on the table. "But why? Why did you do it? What turned you into this creature?"

"You want me to say that my daddy left me when I was a baby and my mother's parade of boyfriends molested me in the swimming pool? You want me to confess that I was unpopular in high school, humiliated and teased by beautiful male track stars? None of that is true. I grew up in the burbs of Boston. My parents loved me, and they are still married. I was a cheerleader in high school and also took jujitsu. No man every touched me unless I wanted him to." She smiled then. She had a gorgeous smile, and a dimple tucked into her cheek like a stitch. She leaned back in her chair. "You want to know the truth? I did it because I could." She narrowed her eyes, gestured for Barb to come closer. "I felt like they belonged to me, you know what I mean?"

We had our confession. We were all a little tired, dazed. Even Kimberly seemed exhausted. "Look," she said. "You mind if I use the bathroom? It's been a long day and I stopped at Starbucks twice."

Sure, yeah, we're not animals here.

We let Brandon take her back to the lady's room, told him to watch the door.

How she managed to escape through the tiny square window was not anything we could explain. Nor could we figure out who had forgotten to put bars on the bathroom window of a police station, for God's sake.

She left us one final message, scrawled in lipstick across the bathroom mirror. We saw it the moment we walked in, "Grab 'em by the balls." It seemed like foreshadowing, the red words an ominous precursor to darker times to come.

Amber raged when she learned of the escape. "You left her alone?" She threw her mug of chamomile tea across the room.

Lieutenant Washington rushed to swab away the growing stain that spread like blood on the carpet.

We were silent, finally, even Barbara. We had nothing more to say.

She's still out there. She's moved on to another town, maybe the Windy City, a place where Midwestern farm boys from Wisconsin go to chase their dreams of love and fortune at the Stock Exchange. On the streets, the boys are more gullible, and also more irresistible with their sunburnt, open faces and trusting demeanor, smelling like fresh hay and dime store aftershave.

She's coming for them. For the ones we failed to protect. For our boys.



BLACK CAT
Zoe Nikolopoulou

KIRK

Dani Putney

1.

Again, I find myself at the downtown
bar—you know the one—in a closet-
sized restroom, vomit scintillating
from the sink & urinals. He tells me
to hold out my thumb, of course
I will, 5 a.m. weeknights better be
good for something. We look
into each other's eyes, tierra
del fuego, our noses lava-capped.
Isn't it beautiful to watch a body
burn.

2.

In the car he navigates a rough
palm up my shorts. I'm hard
& he knows it. I watch his lips
tentatively, waiting for a becoming.
I don't kiss guys, he utters
with fingers encircling my thigh.
Should I tell him I'm but a ghost
of the mountainside, an illusory
battle cry for pleasure. I nod
instead, I've been here before,
a reminder that inertia is a synonym
for manhood.

3.

He grabs a jar of coconut oil—how
organic—& lathers me inside out.
A few thrusts in, he mutters
Good boy, both right & wrong,
but who cares when my role is

plaything. Therapy for the soul,
my ass has been called, a joke
even funnier when you learn
he's a forty-something therapist
with an angry ex-wife. But I know
something she doesn't: objects
catch fire easily under a slant
of light.

4.

Leaving his upper-middle-class
lodge, I see him window-side
gathering sheets & ferrying them
to the washer. How quickly men
remember life's physics, the plateau
post-storm, come, come, go. No
kiss goodbye or touch farewell,
but I'm an expert at this game
already. I give & let take. My mother
raised me well. A single tear runs
down my cheek, quickly swatted
away. Yes, there's always a cost.
Heat escapes from my belly,
withering in morning twilight.

REVERSE AUTUMN

Evgeniya Dineva

I wake before dinner and skip breakfast -
blackened slices and bitter crumbs.
With frosty fingers I warm
the porcelain I'm holding
and stale coffee's seeping through the cracks.
In reverse admiration I remember
this is not an exile so I pick up my coat
canvas and crunchy leaves indulge me
as I step outside.
I pinch pavement holes
but hope to avoid landing in one.
I tiptoe the empty autumn streets
surrounded by concrete windows –
hard like the ground
my mother used to tread on.
Hard like the floor in Nicola's prison cell.

THE USUAL CYCLES

Julia Saunders

“Ace is going to kill himself,” Rya says when I get home from work. Porter is slumped on the couch next to her, staring at the hole in the wall next to the TV. Henderson won’t be done at the bar until well after two.

I drop my keys on the entry table. “I’ll start dinner.”

Rya eats hunched over her plate. Porter piles up mounds of rice with their fork, eyes still fixed on the missing chunk of drywall.

“We’re out of green onions.”

Rya adds it to the list on her phone. “He told me last night.”

I added too much chili oil. Ace is better at cooking, but I let him take over mopping so he could rest in the evenings. “What’d he say?”

“He said he’s tired. Misses the quiet. That his body aches when he breathes. He’s always sad after we fuck. Gets this blank melancholic look and lets me hold him. Won’t even move to clean up. Usually, he whispers in bits about teaching his sister to catch crawdads until he falls asleep. Last night he just picked at his fingers and told me he was done.”

“He’s been cutting again,” Porter says. There’s a piece of beef accordion folded between the tines of their fork. “He asked me to sit with him last week while you guys were at Aldi’s. The ice cubes weren’t working.”

Rya’s lips tighten. “He didn’t say anything.”

Porter shrugs. “You hid all the scissors last time. My pocket knife, too.”

“Didn’t he have a rheumatology appointment yesterday?” I ask.

She ties a knot at the top of a loose sweater string and pulls the extra off. “Yeah. It didn’t go well. They want to keep him on the Prednisone.”

“I should’ve gone with him,” Porter says. “Or made Henderson ditch the rock climbing twink to go. He gets intimidating as fuck.”

“I’m scared,” Rya says. It’s a utilitarian statement.

She pulls up the budget for the week and starts adding sugary cereals to the grocery list. WinCo's having a sale tomorrow, and Henderson'll need it before she leaves for her shift.

In the four years I've known her, I've never seen her cry.

The five of us are grandchildren of dirt-scrabbling, depression-era farmers and minimum-wage, 80-hour-a-week factory linemen. We were raised by middle-class parents—office assistants, CNAs, mid-rate accountants.

Henderson is the only one who still talks to his mom and dad.

I set my plate down. "Did he call the therapist I sent him?"

We're sitting around the chipped kitchen table the guys found next to the dumpster at Sunny Oaks, up the street. There are bourbon stains on the raw wood and gouges from Rya's attempt at butchering lamb for Orthodox Easter. One of the legs won't sit flush against the linoleum, so it leans forward, bolts squeaking, if you rest your elbows on it.

"He's been busy with CAASPP testing and mid-term report cards—been late every night. I asked him last week if he'd let me call, but he said he didn't want me worrying." I have a grant due tomorrow afternoon. Six more pages of editing before it can be sent to Cheryl for approval. I've been hoping to start résumé classes in the fall, but most of whatever we get will go to Tayisha for hygiene products and cleaning supplies.

"He's got plans to go see his sister next week, right? Maybe we should drive him to the cemetery and then take him out to that B&B near Sonoma. Give him some time to rest without the noise."

There's a sesame seed stuck between my teeth.

"I'm not willing to wait that long just for the hope that some R&R will fix him. It's fucking delusional. If he slits his wrists tonight or downs a gallon of bleach, I'll be the one to wake up to it."

I've played strip poker at this table.

I've taken free body shots from a leather dyke and learned to make my great-grandmother's rullekake from a box of recipes I stole before my dad beat my front teeth in. Ace taught me how to carve a whistle out of a chunk of willow in these chairs, and I finger-painted with my cousin's six-year-old last month while singing to Raffi. "We can't wait a week."

Porter sets aside their fork. “Well, what do you want to do? He won’t go to therapy, and we can’t commit him. There’s not enough tangible evidence that he’s a danger to himself. We can walk in and say he’s cut his thighs to shit, but if they ask him if he wants to die and he says no, we’re shit out of luck. Besides, he’d never forgive us.”

The sesame seed wiggles underneath my tongue. “He’d forgive us.”

“Zephyr gave me a pamphlet for this crisis center in midtown, out near Cam’s old apartment. It says they focus on non-authoritarian, patient-informed treatment. I read about their triage system. I can call into work tomorrow and drive him,” Porter says.

“The lady who runs youth advocacy told me about them. They only take patients below a certain income level. 29k, I think.” We’re out of toothpicks. Porter says floss works just as well, so Henderson’s stopped getting them.

I should write up a section about how the last grant money was used before I go to bed. There’ll still be time to edit tomorrow.

“I’ll talk to him tonight. Tell him he has to get help or I’m taking him to the ER myself. No more excuses.”

It won’t work. We know it won’t work. It’s a waiting game now. Either Rya will blow up and dump him or Ace will finally settle on whatever shit he thinks’ll be fastest and least painful. Rya goes to bed anyway, taking a bowl of rice in case Ace wakes up.

Porter leaves the dishes on the table and moves back to the couch, center cushion, six feet from the hole.

There’s a pile of boxes on the counter that need to be flattened. Ace’s been slipping granola bars—expensive ones, high in protein and fiber, that only come in packs of five—into one of his students’ desks since Christmas, and I’ve fallen behind since second draft edits.

I leave them for tomorrow and settle down next to Porter, wrapping a blanket around the two of us. “I keep meaning to patch it. I have some caulk in my room, but every time I go to fill it in, all I see are bits of glass tangled in the carpet. All the polaroids of Cam we couldn’t salvage. Seems easier just to leave it.”

Porter leans their head back against the cushions, eyes unblinking. “I miss my mother sometimes.”

I watch the spikes of plaster dip into dark inner wall and wonder how much would crumble away under just my fingers. How did it hold a hook in the first place?

"I can't forgive her, but I still miss her fingers brushing through each tangle before she braided my hair and the shrill of her voice when I refused to wear my lace dresses. We had that fight every Sunday. 7:35 AM. Just enough time to still get pews in the front. Her forehead used to crease right in the middle when she found me trying on Theo's ties. She'd drag me by the Windsor knot to stand in front of that goddamn mirror. I can still smell the beeswax in the lipstick that she wore."

They lean forward until the blanket slips off, face level enough to keep their eyes fixed on the hole. "I wish that I could see her again through the top of a crowd, just to make sure. I wish I could erase her. I'd want to erase all the people before me, if I could. Parents. Grandparents and great-grandparents and their parents. I can feel the weight of all of them in my heart. You know my grandma used to push a chair under the front door handle every night? There was a rapist loose in her neighborhood after she gave birth to my aunt. My mom did it too, and now whenever I wake up to yelling in the alley, I catch myself dragging a chair from the kitchen. There's a million of their things I can't shake out of my brain." One of Ace's charcoal drawings shifts flaps under the A/C from where it's tacked against the TV frame. Porter's eyes don't move.

"When I was at UCSB I knew this frat boy in bio who would park his Tesla in the red zone out front of the lecture hall, and every day, without fail, he'd get towed. When I asked him why he didn't just come early to find a spot, he said it was easier to pay the fine and catch a rideshare to the impound lot. He heard about it online. Do you think if I had his kind of money, if I grew up with indulgent parents and low expectations, that I'd be different? Cry at movies and weddings and get trashed at birthdays?" Their eyelids haven't fluttered.

"Maybe I'd be able to hand homeless people money without feeling guilty for wasting it."

I close my eyes. "You're not selfish if that's what you're asking."

"It doesn't matter either way."

"I told my cousin that I wanted to strangle my parents. And our grandpa."

"Jesus Christ."

"It was after graduation, a few weeks before he left for his mission trip. I leaned right into his ear and said it during a hug. I think I have a picture somewhere with my tassel dangling in his pale face. Told him I'd like to feel the roll of their necks' tendons under my thumbs, watch them spring from my touch. I want to know the feeling of their nails scratching at my arm. See their temples tinged purple. 'Would I see remorse?' I asked him. I don't think he knew how desperate I was for his answer. Haven't heard from

him since.”

“Fuck.”

“It’s best this way. Dad always had a soft spot for him.”

“Of course he did.”

“It’s like when my dad pulled a chunk of my hair on the subway. We were headed to his half-sister’s birthday, a nice sushi spot with little polished cups of sake, and I told the girl across from us that I liked her makeup. He grabbed a handful of my curls when the doors opened and pulled ‘til they came loose. ‘See if she’ll fuck you now,’ he said. Took me months to grow it all back. Whenever I took public transit after that, I wouldn’t look anywhere but out the window. That’s why I won’t drink sake with Henderson. And my grandpa. He didn’t believe in doctors. He was happy to let strep throat—turned—pneumonia kill him as long as he didn’t have to trust some stick-up-their-ass pretentious academic in a white coat. Somehow that stuck with me. You know the last time I went to the dentist? Junior year of college. I was having trouble with the incisor roots my dad crushed, and my professor told me I had to get it checked out before our next field observation. I only did it for my senior internship recommendation.”

“They sound like dicks.”

“They were. Are. But I also learned the good stuff from them—how to change a tire and negotiate a raise, how to comfort someone with a fever and bake slow-rise rolls for Thanksgiving. How to swing dance with the femmes that hustle pool during Henderson’s shift. I was able to fix that lady’s sink, the single mom below us who keeps getting blown off by the maintenance guy, all by myself, no extra tools or instruction videos. If I went back and erased them all, I’d lose that.”

“Ace said he’d do it.”

“He’d still be stuck with the same shitty genetics. Don’t think it would do him much good.”

“He wouldn’t have the nightmares anymore.”

“He would. We’re not just our family. There are other people who shape us. He’d still cut, and he’d still want to die.”

“I agree with him. I’d do it.”

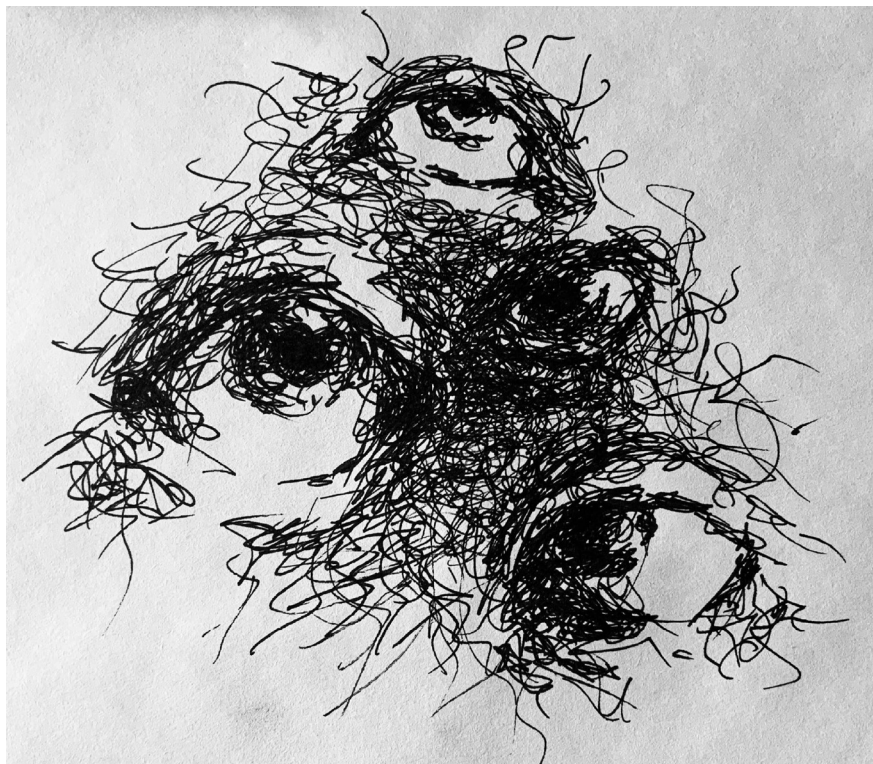
“I don’t blame you.”

Porter nods and closes their eyes.

Six pages of editing. Then I can sleep.

I drag the blanket closer to fold one knitted corner against the other. “How far back do you think you’d have to go?”

They tilt their head back, far enough not to see Ace’s drawings, the carpet or the wall. “As far as it takes.”



EYES
Donald Patten

GARMENT DISTRICT

JM Huck

My paternal grandmother has no fingerprints
her hands torn up
and faded
from the unforgiving work of washing clothes

I've worked in retail
folded and tidied clothes
surviving remnants from teenage shoplifters
and later Wall Street business women

This is my inheritance.

MOTHER TONGUE

Elaine Liu

At nine, māmā wound a leash around my tongue
and tugged the meat loose until I spat out syllables, how a spooked dog
would let go of its marred bone. I ironed out my words,
slept with a mantle on my tongue, and beat my mouth into submission.
Inflections don't exist in English, a single word
has a single meaning, māmā said, so untrain your lips.
In Chinese, love is “ai” and “ai” is a mutable thing, a sigh, a tumor,
an herb, “ai” is what you tell someone when you're sorry
for their loss, but you are actually tired of their sadness
and just want to go home. In English, love has no sibling, no sister
you could mistake her for, the weight of her body plump and familiar in your mouth.
To teach myself I read the newspaper daily,
double homicide in Buffalo, this city is an animal.
Shifting scales, wires running through tendons, cables moonlighting
as arteries. I felt its pulse crawling in the pipes
every night I slept, ozone puffs sizzling down my gaping wounds.
Bàbà gave me a name just so he could tame me,
so he had a curse to hold onto, a tether for his wife who told me
he loves you, you know, a soured treat, a brown, moldy bone.
At nineteen, I met a boy who asked where I came from,
I told him: an animal. He asked me to teach him Chinese,
but I couldn't pull the wilted muscle free from my clamped teeth.
The boy asked if I loved him, but I didn't know what he meant.
I said his name but it came out a lot like an apology, like I'm sorry,
I have to go home, except I couldn't remember what that meant, either.



RUBBLE
Jennifer Weigel

GARBAGE CITY

Rayni Wekluk

The sky mapped out, to the migrants,
how far they'd come and how far
they have left to go.
Mom, dad, son, daughter, all
roadside begging as if it were
the family business.
They arrive at the same corner
each morning. I cannot help but wonder
if I have been here too long too, waiting,
not on money in this garbage city,
but on God or my tongue to tell the truth,
and either would do if they could do it.
Love is a terrific trap designed for the stupid;
one fall can fracture parts of us forever.
I ran for you, to everywhere,
for everything, yet I ended up here.
I rack my brain: What do I have to do
to get back to you?
My gaze drifts to the migrants.
I wish I could empty my pockets;
offer them my portion of nothingness.
This car is bare except for The Bible
and its back page I'm writing on.
Anymore, I'm not sure what I've got
to give. The migrants wave— I suppose
if home is a place, there's hope for escape.
My car implodes. It and I are the size
of a pebble. We've become the city.
We could be taken out of it and we'd still be it,
we're it, I scream and drive off
like a bat out of Hell.

CONTRIBUTORS

Lawrence Bridges' photographs have recently appeared in the Las Laguna Art Gallery, the HMCV Gallery in New York, and the ENSO Art Gallery in Malibu. He created a series of documentaries for the NEA's "Big Read" initiative, including profiles of Ray Bradbury, Tobias Wolff, and Cynthia Ozick. He lives in Los Angeles.

Born and raised in upstate South Carolina, **Harper Bright's** world always revolved around words, and she used her writing as a tool to understand the complexities in her identity: how her gender, sexuality and femininity have been influenced by the Southern landscape she grew up in. She was a Finalist in the Nancy Thorp Poetry Contest, and has collected many Scholastic Writing Awards over the years — winning two regional Gold Keys in 2023. When not writing, she is often reading, listening to music, performing with her symphony orchestra, or attending local arts events in the community. She owes her success to the decrepit bookshelves in her life, introducing her to the authors and musicians that would inspire her to begin writing.

Allison Cundiff's publications include the forthcoming novel *Hey, Pickpocket* (2024, JackLeg Press), two books of poetry: *Otherings* (2016, Golden Antelope Press), and *In Short, A Memory of the Other on a Good Day*, co-authored with Steven Schreiner, (2014, Golden Antelope Press), and two chapbooks: *Snapshot* (2023, Bottlecap Press), and *Just to See How It Feels* (2018, Word Press). She lives in St. Louis

Laine Derr holds an MFA from Northern Arizona University and has published interviews with Carl Phillips, Ross Gay, Ted Kooser, and Robert Pinsky. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming from *J Journal*, *Full Bleed* + *The Phillips Collection*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Portland Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere.

Evgeniya Dineva is a poet from Bulgaria. Her works appear in *The Hong Kong Review*, *Ethel*, *Asian Cba* and others. Her debut poetry collection *Animals Have No Fathers* came out in November 2023. Evgeniya is a fellow of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation for Creative Writing.

Anna Dunes is an MFA candidate in fiction at New Mexico State University.

Cynthia Graae lives in New York City and Hiram Maine. Additional stories about the man in *The Connection* have been published by *Exsolutas Press*, *10x10 Flash*, *Griffel*, *Swallow Press*, *Alternate Route*, *Rogue Owl Press*, *The Common*, and *Deep Overstock*. Other publishers of her work include *HuffPost*, *Barren Magazine*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Bridge*, *Maine Public*, *Canadian Women's Studies*, *Bat City Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Garfield Lake Review*, *Kinder Link*, the *LA Review*, *Rattle*, and *Exchanges*. When she isn't writing, she might be walking in the woods, having dinner with friends, going to concerts, opera, or theater, or working hard to find homes for her unpublished stories.

Judi Mae "JM" Huck is an arts administrator currently based in Las Vegas, Nevada. She is the Clark County Poet Laureate coordinator and a teaching artist for both literary and visual arts. Follow her on Instagram @bandittrl.

Kate Krautkramer's work has appeared in such publications as *Fiction*, *National Geographic Magazine*, *Washington Square*, *Mississippi Review*, *Orca*, *The Normal School*, and the *New York Times (Modern Love)*. She's been included in *The Beacon Best*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and *Best of the West* anthologies and has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Kate's stories have most recently been in *Iron Horse Literary Review* and *Santa Fe Literary Review*. She lives in rural Colorado with her husband and children.

Aimee LaBrie's short stories have appeared in the *The Minnesota Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Cagibi*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Cimarron Review*, *Pleiades*, *Bomb*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Permafrost*, and others. Her second short story collection, *Rage and Other Cages*, won the Leapfrog Global Fiction Prize and will be published by Leapfrog Press in the spring of 2024. In 2020, her short story "Rage" won first place in Solstice Literary Magazine's Annual Literary Contest and her novel in progress won the Key West Literary Seminar Emerging Writer Award. In 2007, her short story collection, *Wonderful Girl*, was awarded the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction and published by the University of North Texas Press.

Charlene Langfur is an LGBTQ and green writer, an organic gardener, with many publications in *Room*, *Weber*, *The Stone Canoe* and most recently *Acumen*, *The Hiram Poetry Review*, *Poetry East*, an article about gardening in *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, a short story highlighted on the Hudson Valley Writer Guild's website.

Kevin LeMaster's poems have been found at *SheilaNaGig* online, *Gyroscope Review*, *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Barely South Review*, *Mantis*, *Amistad* and others. Kevin has work forthcoming in *Appalachian Places Magazine* and *BigCityLit Journal*. His second chapbook *In The Throes Of Beauty* (Finishing Line Press) is forthcoming. Kevin is the author of the chapbook *Mercy* (Arroyo Seco Press, 2023) and has been nominated for a Pushcart twice and once for a Best of Net.

Elaine Liu is a poet and undergraduate student studying neuroscience and English at Colby College. Born in California but raised in Shanghai and New Jersey, she is fascinated with stretching the material of language.

Kate McHugh is a 23-year-old writer from Galway, Ireland. With a degree in Creative Writing, English and French, she is currently teaching English in a university in Nantes, France. Previously published in *ROPES*, *Southword* and *Drawn to the Light Press*, her principal desire is to publish a collection of poetry and auto-fiction.

Rita Mookerjee is an Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Worcester State University. She is the author of *False Offering* (JackLeg Press 2023). Her poems can be found in the *Baltimore Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Poet Lore*, *New Orleans Review*, and the *Offing*.

Zoe Nikolopoulou is a self-taught watercolor illustrator from Athens, Greece. She is also a poet and translator watching inspiration taking shape into paper. She discovered the magic of watercolors and continued to experiment with them after studying English Literature and Computer Science.

Chelsie Blair Nunn (they/them) is an LGBTQIA+ artist and educator working in Knoxville, TN. They have taught visual art and pedagogy for the past 11 years while maintaining a humble studio practice that includes painting and writing. Their friends lovingly call them “fire daddy” because they take great delight in building hot fires in the backyard for everyone to enjoy in the winters.

Connor O’Mara is a fiction writer from northern Colorado. His early years were spent writing music and playing in punk bands around the western United States. He now writes about death and tragedy set in the Mountain-West, finding inspiration from his childhood and the real-life characters in the towns he loved.

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He produces oil paintings, illustrations, ceramic pieces and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries across Maine. His online portfolio is donaldpatten.newgrounds.com/art.

Dani Putney is a queer, non-binary, mixed-race Filipinx, and neurodivergent writer originally from Sacramento, California. Their debut full-length collection, *Salamat sa Intersectionality* (Okay Donkey Press, 2021), was a finalist for the 2022 Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Poetry. *Mix-Mix*, their second full-length poetry collection, is forthcoming from *Baobab Press*. They’re also the author of the poetry chapbook *Dela Torre* (Sundress Publications, 2022) and the creative nonfiction chapbook *Swallow Whole* (Bullshit Press, 2023). They live in Reno, Nevada.

Julia Saunders writes about queerness and disability, exploring relationships with bodies, families, communities, and institutions that benefit from avoidable suffering. Yyr work can be found in magazines such as *Drunk Monkeys* and *The Molotov Cocktail*. In yyr free time, Julia indulges in pin designing, furby modification, and amateur baking as a declaration of love. You can find xem on Instagram @juliapsaunders.

Joris Soeding's most recent collection of poetry is *After Highland Park* (Origami Poems Project, 2021). Soeding's writing has appeared in publications such as *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Portage Magazine*, and *Tint Journal*. He is a 2021 and 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee and fifth/sixth grade Social Studies teacher in Chicago, where he resides with his wife, son, daughter, and cats.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and print-making. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, sculpture, video and writing. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards.

Rayni K. Wekluk is studying poetry at The University of Nebraska-Omaha. She focuses on making a spectacle of the mundane, hilarity, and allows her surroundings to inspire her.

John J. Zywar is a retiree who enjoys pursuing his interests in photography with digital post processing. Over the years he has worked various jobs including fire protection engineer, computer programmer, attendant nurse in an insane asylum, library assistant, production manager and accountant. His interest in photography grew out of a 4H program in photography which included darkroom experience when he was in high school. His view is that art is a presentation to the senses to elicit an emotional response. John's photo based images have been published by *Massachusetts Audubon* and in various literary/art publications including *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Poetry Society of New Hampshire Touchstone*, *The Closed Eye Open*, *3Elements Review*, *Stonecrop Magazine*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Beyond Words*, *Fusion Art*, *Light Space & Time Online Gallery*.

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