Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts

Issue 6

Founded in 2020, *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts* is published by the Center for Spirituality, Dialogue and Service (CSDS) at Northeastern University, a global research university in Boston, Massachusetts, USA with a campus network stretching from London to Vancouver.

Pensive publishes work that deepens the inward life; expresses a range of religious/spiritual/humanist experiences and perspectives; envisions a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world; advances dialogue across difference; and challenges structural oppression in all its forms

Pensive: A Global Journal
of Spirituality & the Arts

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PENSIVE
A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts

Northeastern University
Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service

Editorial Board

Cover Art: Exile II by Silvina Mizrahi

April 19th, 2023

Dear Readers,

Spiritual writing and art does not exist in a historical vacuum. In the months leading up to the submission period for this issue, the world witnessed the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a series of climate catastrophes, and humanitarian crises in Ukraine, Iran, Pakistan, Haiti, Turkey, and beyond. Here in the United States, the national reckoning fraught with questions of racial justice, poverty, immigration, and democracy continues unabated. As we designed our call for submissions, an image came to us: "inside/outside," an image that invites us to consider the experience of those living inside oppressive structures and those inhabiting liminal spaces at the margins. In response, we invited contributions for a special section within the issue called "Inside/Outside," which features work that engages questions of homelessness, forced migration, and mass incarceration. We have always aimed to highlight these experiences, but there is still much work to be done in wider society and in our own *Pensive* community.

As we read and publish the work of socially engaged contributors – who speak from contexts of struggle and strive to stand with the marginalized and give voice to the voiceless – we recognize that we as editors have our own work to do. We cannot idly watch the world from a distance, Rather, the realities of homelessness, the global refugee crisis, the retributive brutality of the carceral system require artistic and intentional engagement.

We believe that spiritual writing and art should bear witness. The word witness means not only seeing, experiencing, or bringing to light the death-dealing realities of our world, but also "witnessing" to a truth – embodied in all world faiths and traditions of conscience – that another world is possible. As editors, we envision a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world – here in measure and still not yet – partially, glimpsed in moments of beauty, justice, and liberation – and still awaiting fulfillment.

We hope you will enjoy this issue of *Pensive* and share it with others. As always, we are grateful to all those who make *Pensive* a space of solidarity, creativity, and liberation.

- The *Pensive* Editorial Board

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Tonight,

in this circle
of candlelight,
late winter roses
and silence, we sit,
allow scenes long-
banished by will
to rise and flare
hard and bright
as we seek together
to grow strong enough,
tender enough,
to meet the truth
of having made them,
of others having made them,
of having waited inside, silent,
when they were made
with those of us
who could not speak.

M.S. Rooney

What If

Given our small pocket of days to fill, what if we went up into that valley
and over that mountain, what if we only told fables about animals,
legends about flowers, what if we joined the wind that defeated an army,
what if our most trusted confidantes were trees and stones and ferns
and we were surrounded on all sides by almost nothing that had a name,
would this be a death by solitude and inconvenience or something else?
I know how to weep for my loved ones and they know how to weep for me,
but who wakes up every day weeping for those places that have not yet
been platted and deeded by survey? Who still says, a thousand years ago,
one morning, I heard this bird, then I followed it and then I disappeared?

J. P. White

Seeing the World Through Jody's Window

Like a pigeon on the roof.
Perched.
Looking
askance.
Askew.
Wondering why
we are
the way
we are.

Do not align yourself to the physical.
It is fleeting and arbitrary.
And bound to disappoint.

Be
Be here
Be now
Be love.
He spoke as he closed his eyes
– for the last time.
It's a brittle existence on this plain.
But we will all be one.

R.T. Notaro

Things to Remember on Bad Days

The smell of fresh rain, dancing and drenched and daring / the way distance generates desperation, but (hopefully) not for what we anticipated / the build-up to a kiss, gifts wrapped and waiting, someone prying themselves open with a crowbar to let you see the light inside / discovering the glow someone thought was gone / rediscovering your own luminescence / redefining what makes you, you in essence / the smell of cherry blossom trees after a spring storm, the way wet clothes cling to you, the way I cling to you, the way that life clings to / You.

Maggie Bowyer

Erin Schalk
Praise Poem for a Body

How to Read a Poem During a Pandemic

TJ Beitelman

Venture into the world, timidly, with provisions: water in a metal bottle decorated with cherry blossoms, some peanuts in a plastic jar, sunscreen (past the expiration date), a hat, a mask your wife knitted for you (the multicolored one), your music, two books, good shoes for all terrain. A lightweight backpack for holding it all in. Drive to the state park, three-point-something miles from your back door, meander to the north trailhead parking lot, park. Strap the pack on. Hit play. (Life ain't fair and the world is mean. —S. Simpson) Walk. Take the easy trail for a while, the slow incline. Wide smooth path. Passing people, people passing you, feels—you can't help it—like dying a little bit. Hold your breath as long as you can. Even behind the mask. When you pass the cordial (unmasked) college kids and finally take in a breath, yes, that's weed you smell. How much viral load in a contact high? Don't answer. Don't want to know. Turn onto the White trail, not least to put distance between yourself and anybody else. It's harder going, steeper, rockier, narrower in places. Soon you're walking along the spine of the highest ridge in the park. By now you're well into the second of the two records you downloaded. Silence around the corner. When it comes, stop. Take off the headphones. Drink some water. Watch a hawk glide, a mile, two miles away. Keep walking. Find where the narrow path opens into a clearing interspersed with lean, spindly trees. If you were Annie Dillard you would know the names of

the trees and later, when you're back on the wide path that leads to the trailhead, you would know what kind of owl it is that stares down at you, wraith-like, from its plain-view perch in a tree three feet from the path. And you would write a timeless, classic, mystical essay about that bird, about this moment of uneasy communion between the two of you. Part nightmare, part numinous vision.

You're not Annie Dillard.

Stay in the moment. Don't fast forward. Don't flash back. In the clearing, stop, pull from your pack one of the books, the thinner one. The poems. Open it somewhere, anywhere, and read the poem there. Read it as if it is a personal prayer, a prophesy, for this very moment. The poem is about hammering nails into wood to build an improbable house along a ridge. (As it happens, it's a house you've been to: you know the poet.) It's a poem about feeling sound, how what is invisible can have a presence. Read the poems around it. How they speak to each other, and to this moment: Trees have names, names you can know, they are more than alive. A place is never just a place. It lives inside you, even if something vital in you never belonged there. Close the book. Drink some water. Thread your arms through the pack's straps and descend the ridge, in this rich silence, toward home.

heartbreak

is everywhere
the missing dog
lump on the couch
the missing boy
the kids' room
closed off
for the time being
January
when I tended
to take up
with the wrong men
the lies we tell
to cover the ugly we see
in ourselves
the dog's wheezing
the future
the past
the rug we traded the car for
memories contained
in this house
window witness
door witness
my memory

Laila Halaby

little boys
who get broken too soon
grown men
who got broken
as boys
witness
the bundles of humanity
in the crook
of the bridge
hunkering down
in crevices
still too cold
their dogs
what their eyes have seen
rain
my mother
the inability
to be kinder
this life

Halaby

Invitation to a Word

Phocas

Come and be my reader whoever you are, even floating dust motes in a shaft of sunlight a few feet above the concrete floor in an empty basement or anywhere truly vacant and waiting for hope or a single pane of glass reflecting every color and parr mark of a baby rainbow or maybe even the bright, rippling chords of a mountain stream tumbling down from the hem line of a cloud, but come and be my reader even if you don't read these words at all, only hear them somehow deep inside your chest as they sound inside of me for we are married in a sound even as I keep bringing leaves into the house as Tina gently scolds me, scolds me accurately that twigs are not my possession, for they are too holy for my lowly name and stupid grasping, though a child part of me wants to grow a tree in the living room and turn my whole life over to bird song or the creative possibility of a nest fashioned out of rejection slips and old receipts to warm and nurture the chicks I will never have, but come and be my reader, for only in this intimate abiding and pouring forth may the confluence of our souls and every soul learn to hear and love each other's voices for we are one voice after all and this can be proven by the hegemony of a single sigh over the whole human race and even the sky whose sighs are epic and the stuff of our high flying dreams as we soar above the earth, but please come and be my reader and come and be my heartache as on this late summer day a spontaneous wedding feast of crickets and cicadas and all who sound for us but also deep within as a spring fed stream a bunged elbow away

from casting with either hand, be my fellow weaver of song and sentences that pirouette and play on the surface of some delicate field of forever and kingdom come so please come and be my reader, come and be my listener hunkered down in the dark and I will hunker down and even kneel and lean into you for spiritual kinship, which the world does not encourage and even shuns on cable news, and I will read the soft folds of your eyelids and the poem of your outstretched hands as heart-making texts of the finest mortal skin and cloth, I will harken back with you to your earliest childhood memory of summer afternoons so open wide and free you ran to every bud and blossom and learned how to walk quietly in the woods, heel to toe, heel to toe as we made moccasins out of ferns and something holy fluttered down to heal us, some kind of numinous and lyrical grace that is still somehow miraculously just above us ready to graze and bless our foreheads, come and be my quatrain, come and be my last note of a violin concerto in E major or minor, my fleur-de-lis come and not be mine at all but something that we share and celebrate together and then give away, a camp fire, a moment of pause in the great crush of churning time, the electric stillness of a butterfly landing on a lilac bush, her wings waving back and forth so slowly we know the graceful movement is akin to prayer, to thanksgiving, to spontaneous praise and love radiating out from the center of all living things, and soul-yearning I cling to you and soul-yearning I make my clumsy way on my knees and sometimes lower than a worm, I crawl with this sound coming out of my mouth and sometimes it is a scream, sometimes it is a whimper, sometimes it is a tender word and sometimes these words are fierce “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places,” and I am a shuttle cock struck back and forth from good and evil, the truth and lies, and maybe, just maybe my joy, this is what it means to be human circa the first falling leaf of autumn as we walk together to the end of this sentence to another place where every word is one, and every word is love.

Note: The quoted material is from the King James bible, Ephesians 6:12.

Epiphany and the Heart

I am in Target, trying to find those
small travel-size kits of shampoo and soap,
drifting away from the task at hand,
thinking about Pascal burning
at midnight in his room, his eyes
ablaze with God, stitching his epiphany
next to his heart.

We are not at one with this world. We lay
foundations for homes we will not
inhabit. Tea cools untouched.
Books lie open to chapters we will
not finish. Under the gray sky
we are restless, weary,
walking without vision,
with shortness of breath.

If we think God is up there,
we are lonely always. If the strong man
could know when the thief would
break in, he would
bar all doors and windows.

The door is unlatched, Silent One,
Mysterium Tremendum. Enter at
will; set ablaze this heart.

Barry Casey

When I Was Young And Old

Out of nowhere we found ourselves
stretched out under the sun on the summer lawn –
and I saw how lively, how supple, he was
in each new pose, as I breathed in, *yes*,
and out, yes, and when we sat down to eat
I heard every word he spoke, *yes*, as if
he knew I would always understand.

And I asked for soup that was green and wild,
and he wanted to taste it, and I said *yes* again –
and on the mountains we slid so smoothly
through snow drifts, down icy-steep ravines,
on our two simple, matter-of fact feet, *yes*.

And one day when I wandered off alone
the wolf who followed us did not attack,
but went his solitary way, so I felt safe, *yes*.

And when we lay down together, at last,
I was amazed how much care he gave
to my humble, forgotten ears and cosmic toes,
and when he kissed me, I slipped like lightning
into another world, *yes* and *yes* and *yes*.

This all happened when he was young and I was old,
and I was young and he was old,
and it still happens whenever a dream arrives at night
to assure me it was all meant to be.
But now I wonder, is my dream more alive
than the poem I write about the dream?
And is my life as alive, as real, as the poem or the dream?

Yes, and *yes*, and *yes*.

Freya Manfred

The Words We Use

The word we use for love
is nothing if not shared.

The word we use for forest
lies quiet without our footsteps.

The word we use for sunlight
darkens without our eyes.

The word we use for magic
makes mystery only chance.

Our pens work themselves on paper
stolen from white birches.

We think letters from distracted minds
and try again to find the Holy.

But wait. Put down the pen.
And sit beside me without words.

Between us now
is everything we need to know.

Collette Sell

Come True

Inspired by Frida Kahlo's "The Dream"

Anchored to the past, you still bloom
toward your future. Your bleached bones –

flags of surrender – broke long ago,
yet your vision never yielded.

You made death your
grinning bedmate, wrapped in timeless

bombs ticking with desire, and grew
new roots in your slumber. You dozed

honeyed with yearning, your vined bed
afloat, cloud-surrounded.

Why are your eyes closed? Do you not see?
Even in sleep, your passion stalks the world.

Maril Crabtree

the devil dwells in the mountain

the devil dwells in the mountain
of my thoughts
between the layers
of granite and shale and
the compacted dirt of pride
swelling up to the summit

each day he crawls
out of the mountain
to join me at the pinnacle
and we stand together
the devil and I
looking down
upon the ravaged valleys
of my life

and as we stand
he sometimes meets
my gaze and sweeps
his sinuous arms
across the panorama
of my shadow times

and tells me that
at the snap of his fingers
and for a small fee

I could conquer them

I could even blot them out,
he says, if I wanted to

Heather Kaufmann

but as I gaze on the land below
strewn with barren trees
and the ash of foregone dreams
now lumped
into the crusted dirt
I feel no revulsion
no cause for war

these barren rivulets of history
are a grief not to be ransacked
but redeemed
as a forest awaiting
the renewal that rests in embers
when her rivers
will be refilled
and her roots overrun
with mycelia and phlox

One day
if I have courage enough
I will blow the devil away
as vapor
and go down
the mountain
to water a small patch
of ashen earth

then I will wait there
and watch
for a sapling to rise up
from the ruin

Masters of the Wheel

We were victors, we were gods, we were keepers of the crown.
We had plucked the fire's eye, we had worn the monster down.
We had pierced creation's heart, we had brought its pulse to heel.
We had cracked the atom's code, we were masters of the Wheel.
Yet we withered at inflections, we wallowed in our psalms.
We watched our brute reflections as we wiped our sweaty palms.
So stranger prayed for stranger, so father wept for son.
Then came that awful moment when the sirens wailed as one.

And the world went mad.

Whole nations torn, woods and cities burning.
Into the tempest life's ashes borne;
What keeps the cinder turning?
Came the rains: relentless, deluging all.
Banshees of steam screamed, rising only to fall.
Hurricane winds ever tapered and then
Sunshine enlightened the planet again.

And the world was seed.

Now, for every step its evolution takes, this rock unnumbered revolutions makes. In seas, in pools, in hollows, in lakes, sunlight the forces of certainty wakes. Eons, ages—incalculable span—in seas, in pools, in hollows, in lakes... In time, the journey of life began.

And the world blushed green.

Ron Sanders

Wherever life ventured, it flourished. Fin begat foot, the land opened wide.
Through conflict, through want, brute powers were nourished.
Blood howled its passage, fresh blood replied.
    Whole species vanished, new species clashed.
    Life savaged life in forests and seas.
    In shadows of monsters a warm creature dashed:
    Something unique was afoot in the trees.
Then one signal spring, embracing the land,
A wayfarer into the wilderness ran.
He outshone his cousins: erect he could stand.
He prowled the wide savanna, his head held high—the Man.

    And the world beckoned.

He ranged in tribes, worked wood and bone,
Built gods of loam, struck fire with stone.
One prize drove this hunter, one prey made him burn—
To break his world, to make it bend…he had to know.
He had to learn.

He walked the plains of forgotten cities, all long reduced to dust.
He studied the fossils of iron pillars, and pondered on the rust.

Millennia passed, he courted the Wheel. His science grew apace.
Nature's spires fell to steel, his towers took their place.
Cities blossomed, succumbed to war, sacred trusts decayed.
Nations clashed like beasts of yore, men took to arms and prayed.
    Then one anxious fall, his slick treaties scrapped,
    This warrior turned magician: the cosmos' source was tapped.
    A hero, a giant, a god would he be!
    He held this power captive—this power greater than he.
So we wither at inflections, we wallow in our psalms.
We watch our brute reflections as we wipe our sweaty palms.
So stranger prays for stranger, so father weeps for son,
Till comes that awful moment when the sirens wail as one,

    And the world sighs again.

And Then All of A Sudden

And then all of a sudden
You were there holding me
Creating space for my being.

Like a mushroom on the moss.
A forgotten, alone tire
Jacked up from life but still remaining.

You give good love
like butter for my toast.

All of a sudden
I became your rope
in the double dutch.

The switch of my everythang

Looka here, looka here
Sookie sookie now.

All of sudden
You had me.

And I was yours.

Brian Ragsdale

When Horses Choose to Speak

Mieke Leenders

Lucy. Do you remember when we went on our picnics during those few warm days of the year? We got on my broken bicycle sick with rust, moaning under our weight, and headed down to the field with haystacks, evergreen weeds, and nine horses. They scared you at first. Do you remember?

A herd of horses, four brown and five white, somehow never escaping that rickety little fence – the fence I could easily step over with you on my shoulders. You called me your giant carrying you to faraway lands we dreamed of only minutes from our home.

You grew to love the horses. You said they had a voice few could hear, and their breath felt like a warm blanket even when the stubborn cold had settled in your bones. I would ask you what the voices said, and you'd shake your head. It is a secret, you'd say. You can only learn when they choose to tell you.

The day we received the news, you were drawing up in your room. Wax crayons were your favorite tools. That day, when we cried together, you drew a different kind of horse from the pure beings of light you'd usually create. Its giant head looked down, mane vibrating like a coming storm, shedding violent strokes of black and red.

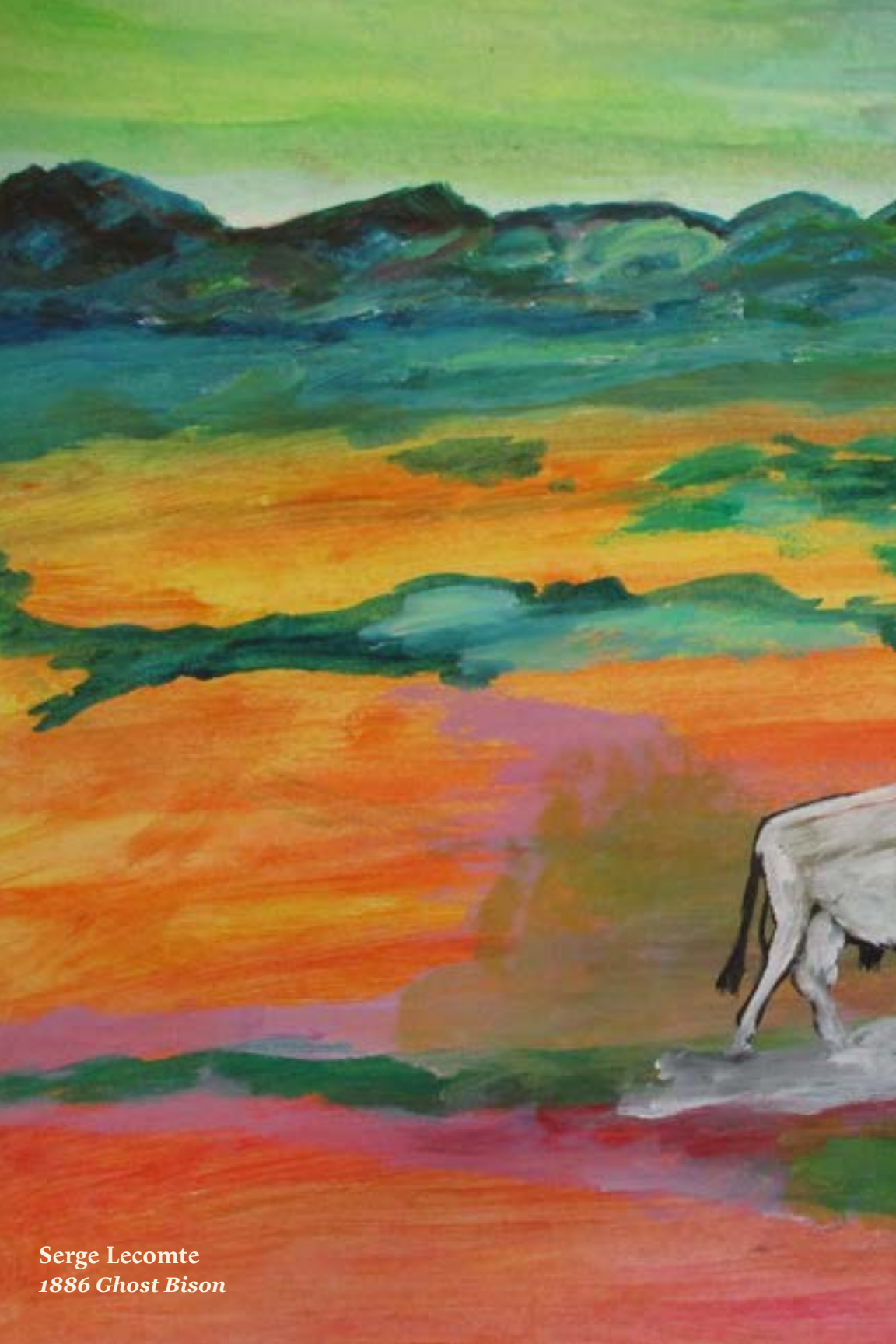
Winter displayed its most ugly face those following weeks. Every snowflake a ghost. Every crack a wrinkle on aging skin. The only signs of life were eager to get anywhere but our home, racing, leaving murky puddles where they passed. Hurried blurs occasionally came into focus wearing an uncomfortable smile or carrying a casserole.

As I mocked our neighbors' attempts at empathy and let the casseroles sit by the door, untouched, you retired your black and red crayons and told me nothing should be left to spoil.

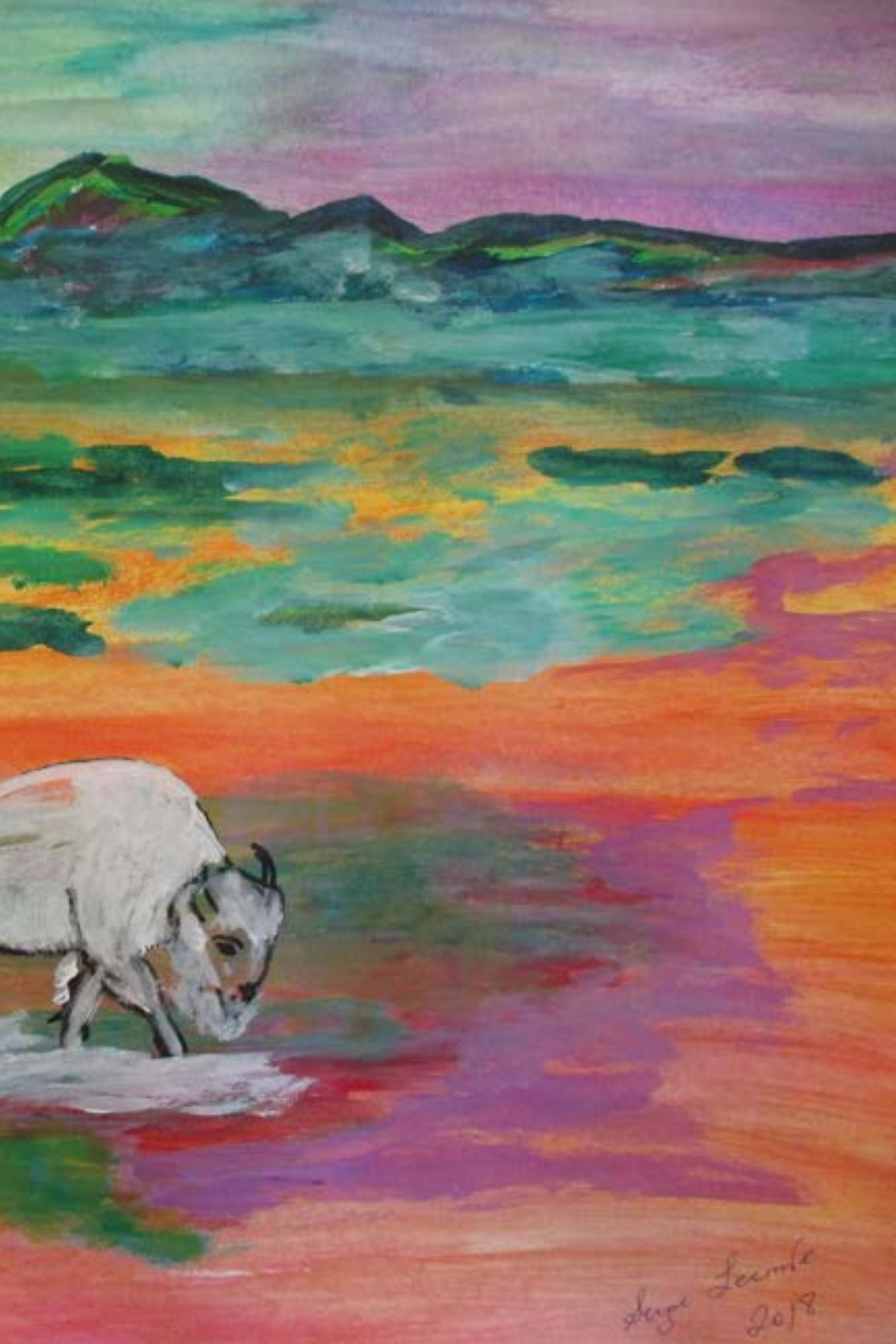
The horses have gone, and I never did learn the secret. There is just the stone memory. A monument created by someone who has never been loved by a horse. A frozen mare watching over faded fragments of hundreds of lives.

You used to say that you'd pray for them to have wings. Winged horses that can escape life's tantrums.

Have you helped them escape, Lucy? Have you taken them with you?



Serge Lecomte
1886 Ghost Bison


Serge Lecomte
2018

The Dreaming Desert

Rebby Onken

On the door, there's an informational poster about the endocrine system. It's got too-accurate depictions of various organs that glisten with an artist's added sheen. The longer I look at it, the more I have to suppress the illogical urge to reach up and poke the side of my head where, deep in, my pituitary gland is apparently hiding. Imagining that little nugget pumping growth and shape and outward appearance throughout my body is an uncomfortable thought, so I try to swallow it, but there's already a thick knot of anxiety resting there while I sit upon crinkling exam room paper. I can't get anything past it, so all these thoughts just sit inside my head while I wait.

My fingers, tanned from long hours of helping my dad at the shop, twitch against my thigh. *I don't like it here,* I think, fight-or-flight thickening in my limbs. My pituitary gland seems to agree with my rogue thoughts fueled by flashbacks of someone saying, *just a pinch now, wiggle your toes,* while I sat on paper just like this with ghosts lingering near my head; it spills fear, panic, and the anxiety of being harmed into my circulatory system. I nearly get up to walk right out of this Palm Springs doctor's office to drive a half hour back home to Yucca Valley, but just then, the door opens.

A young, dark-skinned doctor with a male figure and thick beard walks in with another man, this one blond-haired and probably a nurse, at his

side. The doctor sits down on the stool and lets it spin him closer towards me. The nurse throws an easy smile my way as he goes over to the standing computer in the corner. The doctor flips through the check-in sheet I filled out before lifting eyes the color of vanilla pods to meet mine.

He speaks with a deep voice, one that has the undercurrent of a hammer striking the earth for oil, “Hi, I’m Doctor Rhodes. That’s Nurse Rosen, but he wants everyone to call him Zach.”

The doctor leans towards me, stage-whispering, “I never do.”

In the corner, Zach barks a laugh and nods, “Yes, it’s quite annoying, as you well know, *Stewart*.”

Doctor Rhodes rolls his eyes and turns back to me, glancing down at my file again, “So, you’re here to talk about testosterone therapy?”

Struck by the ease with which he declares that earth-shattering concept, I mumble, hushed, chastened, “Yes.”

The doctor leans in just a bit further at my nervousness, lowering himself so he’s below me, looking up at me with soft, cookie-sweet eyes, “Alright, we can do that.”

***

When I was young, my grandmother used to tell me about the Bible. She told us psalms and gospel from it like they were bedtime stories. I remember many times sitting in her lap after a long day of playing with Hot Wheels and ignoring Barbie dolls. My brother Jack was asleep at my ankle and my sister Olive’s hair tickled my leg as her head rested on Grandma’s knee. When the Biblical parables scared me, I would look up at Grandma to catch sight of swirling, cobalt eyes that roamed over us with maternal love.

That gaze was so strong that looking into it was like staring into the sun on high desert July days: it would burn after-images into your rods and cones so that the faint impression of what you saw followed you around. It was in the kindness of Grandma’s eyes that I could most clearly recall how our own mom had gone out for milk one day with too many bags in the car and never come back. That wasn’t Grandma’s fault though,

and it wasn't what she was supposed to conjure for us when she came to help raise us, so I kept my gaze low.

Still, I couldn't help but seek reassurance when she told us about the deepest, darkest crevices in the Bible where moral lessons reeked of something ancient, even alien. She liked the story of Noah for some reason, but it was always too macabre, too dark, too ham-fisted Old Testament God for me. She found some kind of value in the Flood and what it did. Maybe she, Mojave Desert born and bred and never left, liked in some way the idea of so much water.

When the cancer came, years later when I was too big to sit in her lap still, I wondered if she told that story again and again to prepare herself for the end.

"It's the not knowing that terrifies me," she said to me in the dark, lit by the white line of her own heartbeat on the screen.

Alone in the room with her and unsure, I grasped at what to possibly say, "Well, I can go ask them what's next in your treatment plan—"

She shook her head, "No, I mean, I don't know what's going on inside of me or what's going to be waiting. They always told me there would be someone on the other side when it was over. They said it would be Jesus, or God, or my husband. What do you think?"

I thought of Cain's children drowning, I thought of a snake eating a desert mouse, I thought of drought. I thought too of the shimmering, damning knowledge I have inside of me that this is not all that I am. I told her, "I don't know. Do you want there to be?"

"Yes," she admitted heavily.

"Alright then," I reassured her, my fingers rubbing soothing patterns into her wrinkled hand. "There will be."

She scoffed, "Just like that?"

I smiled at her gently, a small repayment for all the love she stepped in to give, and said, "Yes, Grandma. Just like that."

Her face parted like the sun peeking through long-awaited rainclouds as something like relief stabbed right at the heart of her. She squeezed my hand and, I like to think, believed.

A few days after that, she died. We cremated her. My father put her in an urn made of crushed sandstone and illustrated with black swirls curling down from its lid that he cradled in mechanic's hands scrubbed clean for the occasion. Later that day, our family climbed to the top of a hill deep in the Mojave that Grandma loved the view from.

As we scrambled to the summit, my father explained in a shuddered voice that this was the same urn which once held his father. My siblings and I gave our dad a wide berth. It was October, so the light was softer, cooler; it filled the empty space next to him, making it clear that it was exactly the size of a wife or some other lover he could lean on. We, my siblings and I, exchanged looks, but in our same-colored river mud brown eyes there were only hardened memories of an absence, a mother needed and not there. We couldn't give anything that would fill that hole to him. And, unlike ours, Dad's eyes are deep blue like the sea I last saw glimmering up at me from hospital white linen. We can't give him that color either; no one alive could anymore.

The sand shifted beneath our boots; the wind howled lowly. We caught sight of bajadas, remnants of remembered rain, that carved tear tracks into the earth down from rugged mountains. My brother took the urn from my father's hands, my sister helped him turn it over, and I recited whatever I could recall of Grandma's sermons. My father cried with his knuckle bitten between his teeth. His face was a grimace, his grief was a banking flame, bright enough to rival the blanket of orange the dying sun spread over the clouds as twilight rushed in.

My grandmother withdrew into the wind, her ashes soon to meld with the sand beneath our feet. Once I could find no more pious affirmations to send her off with, I quieted and bowed my head in deference. With eyes cast down, I watched there, at the foot of the hill, a bee and butterfly play hide-and-go-seek before bed in the yellow blooms of a blue palo verde that only lived because the bajada brought water to it when the rain came.

Dad lifted his gaze high, to the coming stars, and cried.

***

I only knew about bajadas because Grandma had told me. She taught us about the desert itself because those stories were her birthright too, even more so than anything Christian.

"And it's yours," she would say, "because my mother was Mojave with rich skin the color of watered clay and eyes that were always laughing. She'd tell me about our people, and the desert, and how there is a mythos woven into this land. It's a story that speaks of the great spirit's little brother whose name was Mastamho, and how he scraped river mud into mountains, and how he taught the Mojave, the children of the mountain Awi Kwa Ame and of the river, everything. He was the one who taught them the power of dreaming."

She would smack dry lips and trace her fingertips down our eyebrows, lulling us to sleep, "Like how Noah dreamed of the Ark and then made it, what gifts you are given in your dreams come from creation, and when you carry them back to the waking world, you can do magnificent things."

Once, Olive had sleepily mumbled, "So all I have to do is dream something and it will happen?"

Grandma had laughed lightly and said, "No, child, you dream it and *you* can make it happen."

Then, we all fell asleep in the bed we shared as kids, and I had a dream that was so real I could feel it with all my senses. It was less lucid and more ethereal; I remember opening the screen door to our backyard where we tended creosote bushes and prickly pear cacti. To my left, a kiddie pool sat empty of water except for one stubborn, moldy corner that rested in the shade which birds sometimes settled down to bathe in. Overhead, sparks of light were sprinkled across a throbbing, shifting darkness. Sediment sucked at my shoes, the ground calling me in.

In the desert, certain things only come alive at night. During the day, it's all Joshua trees persevering in the drought and rocks baking in the sun, but at moonrise, the silence of the landscape surges with quiet roars. In my dream, something inside me thundered back at the conjured landscape that felt and looked and *was* so much like home.

I leaned down to pick up a handful of sand and let it slip between my fingers. Particles of quartz stuck to the palm of my hand like water droplets

clinging to skin. I was reminded suddenly of how the desert was once a great ocean. It had changed into its near complete opposite, but there was beauty and life in its new form; snakes that hid under rocks, cougars that walked the paths laid by geology, and creosote bushes just like the ones my family cared for that had lived for millennia.

When I realized this, the hand I had stuck into the earth became roots. I was now a creosote bush, given a crown of flowers adorned with the scent of rain. I was soft yellow with knotted twig vertebrae. I was forever yet terminal, yoked to this body, but I was safe there. I had changed, but I held within me a constancy of being, an omni-present self-surety that was capable of creating clones which would refract my genes across the centuries.

The bushes which I was now a part of swayed in the wind tumbling down from the mountains; they whispered a name I could not say but could feel. I shut my eyes (or maybe it was my leaves) to breathe it in, and when I opened them again, it was morning the next day.

The gift had been given.

***

When I turn twenty-three, six years after we came down from the hill in the high desert, I have a women's health check-up in Palm Springs. Grandma had told Olive and I bare things about womanly facts of life, but she was of a generation that put too much stock in silence, so she let some things go unsaid. Sitting on that table with the nurse practitioner pleading for me to relax, telling me *this is what women are and have to do*, I wish she had explained more.

I wish that grandma's breast cancer diagnosis didn't lurking in that room, and I wish I wasn't fully aware of how all this is an intrusion, a blight upon my insides. They reach in, *just a pinch, we'll go slow*, but then it isn't, and they don't, and I know they think it is and that they do, but this is a horrifying, heaping reminder that I am not in control, that I have no choice, that I do not own any part of this feminine-facing body (no, not any of it, especially not when it feels alien and betrayer to me as I cast

out for some anchor and can only find the dim memory of bushes rustling at night). I can't wait for it to be over; I bolt out the door with hormones screeching through my veins the second they release me. I buckle into my beat-to-hell '77 two-door Maverick that rolls back on hills when I gear shift and push the speed limit the whole way home.

As I make my way back, I see faded signs for towns that I know don't exist anymore and I pass many more brand-new cars that look fit to burst from luggage. Even though (or perhaps because) I'm still shaking from adrenaline and cortisol, I can't help but notice the difference.

There are ghost towns along Route 66 and other highways that are way past their use. The houses crumble in on themselves and the gas prices are twenty— forty— fifty years out of date. Highway 62 splits the desert like an earthquake line, forming new geography around its road signs. Everything rests on the strike-slip faults of the national parks. Tourists come and go; they um-and-ah at the vistas and the kitschy decorations in rented Airstream trailers that become ovens at midday. They come to look at the blooms on cholla cactus and, when the spines from the jumping heads of the cacti get stuck in their skin or socks, scream, "Good *fucking* God!"

This isn't where they're from. They don't feel how the temperature changes from winter to summer, how the reptiles make pacts of their own with us so we can live in the same space, or how the desert folds in on itself to protect its few oases. These are secrets that they come to visit but do not live with. When I race past their tinted car windows, all I can really see in my mind's eye is myself a toddler, butt sat on the floor of Dad's shop, the wrench from a baby's handyman set clutched in hand, the incessant whirs and clangs of mechanic's work in my ear as I watched a Gila monster slowly drag its belly across the sand just past the open garage door. The memory pricks like a cholla spine the whole way home.

I pass by the Buddhist temple down the street from the Taco Bell, turn left at that one rock that looks like a giant-ass seashell, and there it is: home sweet home, complete with a corrugated metal roof and an unassuming grey color scheme. I find an empty house, which is hardly a surprise nowadays since Olive has gone to school and Jack into the Air

Force and only I have stayed behind to help Dad with the shop that he spends too many hours in. I go outside to the patio next to the kiddie pool that we still haven't gotten around to cleaning. We don't have any chairs, so I sit on the bare brick; I can feel it trying to burn right through my jeans.

I talk to the desert at blistering midday, to the ghost of my grandmother in a scorpion's pincers as it ambles past me ten feet away, "What if I —and hear me out now— what if I wasn't like this?"

The scorpion clicks its claws. Something like the sound of my grandmother's considering hum muddles through the whipping wind. I feel like that Gila monster, heavy and throated. I am cold-blooded, sensitive to the environment around me but adapted to survive. I'd rather not eat geckos or molt, but I have to admit that, like them, I can feel my habitat eroding. How could I not, when I sense how the drought around me grows unceasingly? It is nursed by climate change and by my own sheer terror at what the consequences be if I give in to what my heart whispers at the dead of night when the desert comes alive. Would I lose family or sanity? Would I even recognize myself if I healed a wound that's been deepening since I sat in my grandmother's lap and learned about Old Testament God? Would the desert forgive me for this dream?

When I look up, tears secreting down from the lip of my eyelid, I come upon a blue brilliance that is blinding in its own way. It feels impossibly magnificent, even unreal, because it's almost like the ocean is on top of the world, in the atmosphere, not down here. That all I had to do to find water, to find an answer, was to change how I look.

It's easier said than done, but so is turning dry into wet and fear into love, which is the lot of everyone who makes a home in the desert. It's not easy to care for prickly pear or make peace with a rattlesnake. These are not natural, so they must be attempted, bargained for. Sometimes, we lose. Sometimes, my father can't make ends meet so we have to beg the bank for more time. Sometimes, my sister recedes inside of herself, the maw of depression yawning open at the back of her head. Sometimes, my brother doesn't know where to put his anger, so he bleeds it into the world, grinding his pain into the dirt. Sometimes, I can't stand how I look

in the mirror or standing in line at Starbucks. Sometimes, my skin itself feels like it is made of katydids trying to crawl away. Sometimes, it's like my curves are seething pounds of flesh waiting to be exacted from me. Sometimes, I can't hear the shimmer inside of me that sounds like rain and is so confident that this not all that I am. Sometimes, I can't hear anything except the rattle of that snake's tail, the acid rush of weapon-of-last-resort Gila venom, and the stinging tang that always accompanies self-hatred.

This dysphoria, this rapacious disalignment, announces itself loudest these days when I fall in love. When we (this girl I liked who wasn't just a fling, this boy I knew who just moved to town) settle in enough, there is always the rocking desperation that shouts, *I am not as you see me, but could you love me anyway*. Staring into someone I loved's eyes, I breathe out a confession into the night, *I cannot see myself ever giving you this* (stomach small and puckered with rolls but flat and always so), *but could you love me anyway*. I am haunted by darkening, withdrawing eyes; I cry out again and again for an informational poster on what to do when someone rejects me, but I go back to the well of companionship to drink again, again, because *I am flawed but could you love me anyway— I would love you in return like desert shrubs love the rain and jackrabbits the few greens they can find.*

And always, always, I slink back home, my heart dragging on the ground, to watch *Star Trek* reruns with my dad before bed. He smiles easily at me, his minted-Dad brand of affection so simple and quiet that I nearly miss the considerate way that he doesn't comment on my buzzed short hair or the many genders I try to date. But then I remember: his is a generation of silence, and this is not always a curse. Sometimes, this is just the way he makes his bargain with the world, how he expresses his acceptance.

In the shop, day in, day out, he hands me a wrench with an unceasing confidence as we work arm-deep in a salt-flat-crusted engine. At home, he makes stew that's as close to Grandma's as he can get it. He calls to check in on my siblings; he asks after my brother's duties, my sister's classes. He knows that I steal his old shirts to wear, so he has started leaving them

outside my bedroom door with little fanfare. The quiet that envelops these moments is not a condemnation or an ending; I have nothing to fear. This is simply how he loves me. Staring up into the ocean-sky, I feel like I can see this more clearly than ever.

This, what I am, what I'll be, what I've been, it doesn't have to damn me to hell and back. I've long cut my teeth on what the end of the world means. For God's sake, I live down the road from Death Valley. I know what that looks like. I'd like to imagine, staring into my bathroom mirror in private, and walking around out there in the world, that I am a beginning, that I am what I want to look like.

So, I settle something with myself. I come to an accord, hugging my knees to my chest, butt burning from sun-superheated brick. I make a bargain worthy of Jehovah in Noah's visions of the Flood: I go to find the river I need as Mastamho said I should, and I try to follow the gift given in my dreams. I'm going to bind my chest, I'm going to cure my wounds, I'm going to drink water and change my name and become my dream.

I tell this to the scorpion. It waddles away on many legs, totally unaware of the sea-change going on inside my head. *That's fine*, I say to myself, *I know what I'm going to do.*

***

"There, that's fine," Nurse Zach says as he draws some blood from my arm. He presses a scrap of gauze to my sandy skin in a way that is forceful but strangely loving. Beneath my shirt, my binder is also pressed tight to my chest, pulling close with every breath; its overlaid presence keys me into the moment and keeps me from slipping back into memories better left alone. Here and now, Zach carefully rests my hand over the gauze so I can apply pressure while he fetches a band-aid.

Doctor Rosen claps his hands together, "Alright! So, you're clear on all the side-effects of T-therapy, both good and possibly bad."

He nods his head at the collection of pamphlets sitting in my lap and then continues on, spinning from foot to foot on the stool, "Of course, if

anything starts happening that you don't like or didn't expect, then let us know as soon as possible so we can adjust accordingly. Many patients report acne, as well as bouts of hair growth or hair loss. There will also likely be emotional shifts that you aren't used to. All of this is normal but worth noting."

Here, he stops twisting around and pauses, looking considerate. Then, he startles out of that and snaps his fingers at me. He speaks like he's stumbled onto a revelatory metaphor, "It's like your body is going through a second puberty; the first one was a tidal wave of change that your body had to deal with, so this one is going to be much the same. Things will transform in ways that even I can't predict."

I smile wide at Doctor Rosen's words, more comfortable in this room than I have been for the entire appointment. He has no idea that he just hit the nail on its head for me, so he quirks his head at my brightened look, bushy eyebrows furrowing.

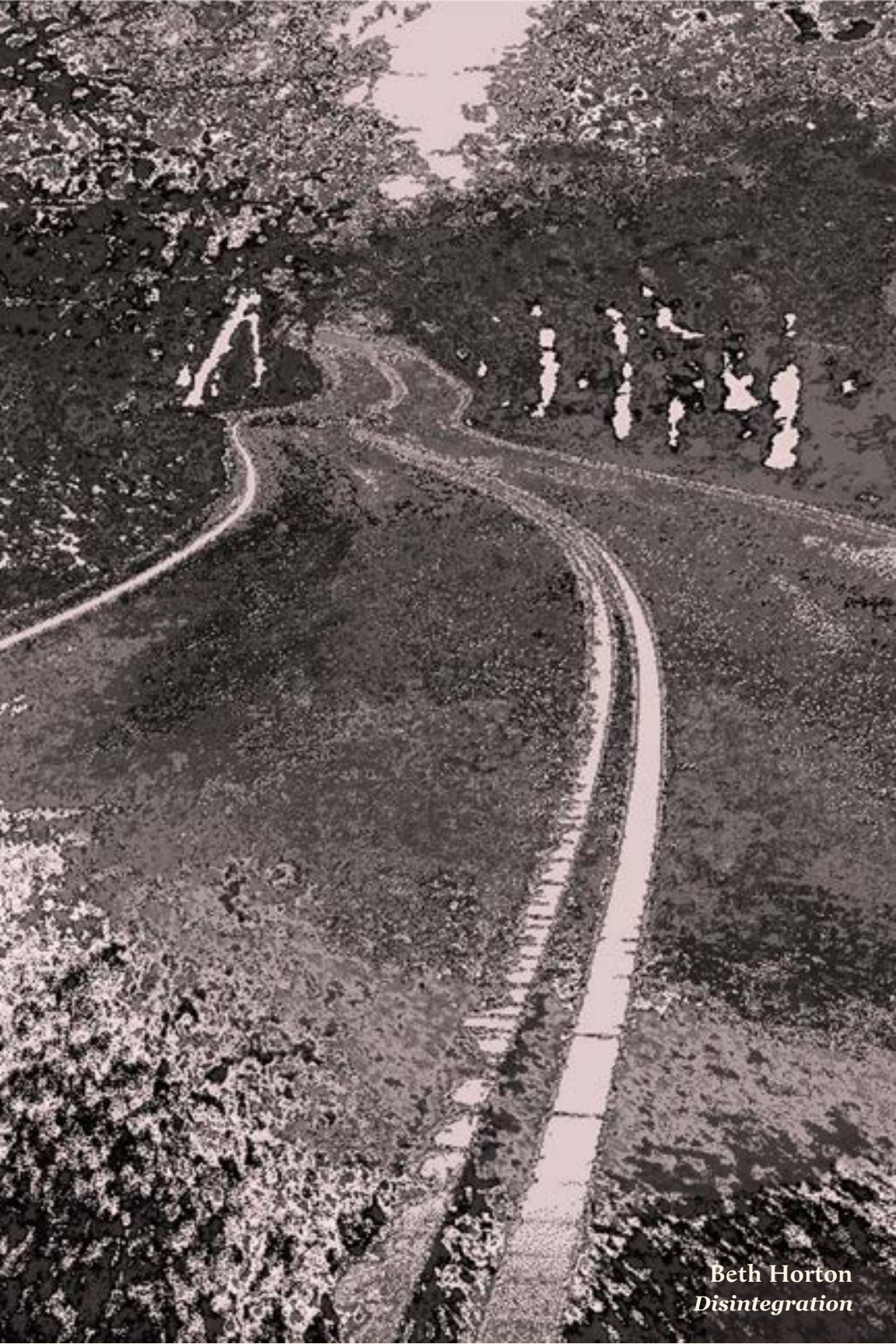
"Good," I reply resolutely, hoping that my conviction will reassure Doctor Rosen about my sanity in spite of the out-of-nowhere turnabout.

"That's very good," I repeat more quietly, still affixed with a slight grin. I cast my eyes down to watch my fingers worry the edge of the band-aid at my elbow.

Doctor Rosen lets out a pleased harrumph before rising to walk to the door. Zach follows him before he turns back to me where I sit on hospital white paper linen, and asks, kindly and quietly, "Should I put a new name into our records?"

I look up at them, the doctor and the nurse, and am struck by how their eyes hold just a touch of ocean-sky.

My grin widens, and my mouth opens to fill the desert with sound.


Beth Horton
Disintegration

You told me

you didn't want to die
    while brushing your teeth
or folding a sweater, or while
    watching a Yankees game on TV
or in your sleep.
    You said you wanted
to know you were dying,
    to not just drop
while pruning the azaleas
    or feeding the city's poor.

You wanted time to lean
    into your departure, to feel
death's tide rising within you,
    the soul nudging the next world,
fluttering God's curtains, his words
    filling your mouth. You wanted

the deep sweetness of evening
    to lay about you like a garden
closing into twilight, and you,
    full of gratitude. You wanted
to feel God's hand on your forehead,
    his breath, all incense and orange
and clover in a far field growing close
    about you like the softest blanket
you'd ever known—and you, birthed like a baby
    in those soft folds.

Raphael Kosek

The River Basket

I set old letters inside a basket,
words float far from the house
where I first learned about pain.

Sometimes the same river
overflows with sadness,
circles back to us as adults,

flooding houses set too close
to the water. Sometimes what
we let go of years before

finds its way to the new
front porch, reminding us of
the hurt we once endured as children.

Maureen Sherbondy

after listening to a past life regression hypnosis I found on Youtube (for the fourth time)

In all of my past lives I am a horrible cook
but a wonderful dancer.

In all of my past lives there is never enough money
but always someone to blame.

In all of my past lives there is a child
but they do not survive.

I know this because I've hypnotized myself
and see this every time.

There is the one I left in a saloon
after spending too many moons crying
over the soil of his mother's grave.

There is the one I lost in a freezing lake
after I fell in, trying to save a horse,
and then saw her future ghost.

Nicolette Daskalakis

There is the one I left wrapped in a blanket of animal skin
after singing her to sleep
and returned to find all of the teepees burned.

In all of my past lives there is a child
who does not survive.

I know this and yet still I try
every time
to find their eyes, open and alive
their hands, reaching for mine
every time
hoping they'll hold on and tell me:

In this one, we both survive.

Astavakra was born crooked for laughing in the womb

I slept on the top bunk
Caleb slept on the bottom bunk

For the best of his years, or what could have been,
Eric slept on the leftover space on the floor

of that closet-sized room that brother brother
and sister shared.

Caleb rode his bicycle over my forehead, once. It was
an accident

but there was the swelling, and at school it drew
attention that I still can't erase.

Once, I fell asleep on Eric's blankets
so in the morning I found him

sleeping under a beach towel instead.
I pretended not to care. Not to notice.

And so does he.

It was like this that we three saw
and made each other bleed:

Giggling in church
and at Grandma's funeral

Kalani Padilla

throwing cold dishwater
at each other' bare shoulders

and sometimes hot irritation.
Singing the shower and in the car, little wolf

cubs crying for duet
through the closed door; we

teased our parents, carefully, predictably,
laughing, too, when they rearranged

the kitchen or our beliefs.
Could we call it a violence

that we laughed
laughed
and laughed

That we grew
our capacities to hurt and leave and forget
and choose otherwises and elsewheres
more and more so in the wake of each year?

The violence
that there is still a kind of sister I have been
Meaning to be.

Renaissance I

If we could only lose
the hate that we hold
lock it out
of mind and body
and melt the key
into lasting love
the universe would be
born anew.

Anderson Duane

Zipporah

Not much of him was mine to love,
but whatever was left, I took it gladly.
The part of him that even his fierce god
could not consume, his sister's tongue
scald, his own rage blister. In my arms
he was allowed to be an ordinary man,
uncertain, clumsy. Born an outsider,
walls on either hand, grateful to belong.
And so was I, startling myself with
soft singing in the tent, like a long
forgotten balm of rain. He smiled
in his red beard, a rusty quirk of mouth,
naming me desert lark, Sinai rosefinch,
laughing dove. I sang only for him,
sharing the morning's manna or a lull
in the simoom. Little more than that.
We flew together when we could,
no stammered demands, no carving
in stone words good enough to bear
the weight of centuries. Listen, I said,
we are one. I give you all my heart,
my soul, my strength. It was enough.

Note: Zipporah was the wife of Moses

Kristin Camitta Zimet

Firewalking in Alaska

Mitchel Jurasek

I was on a cross-country flight from Seattle to Portland, Maine when, thousands of miles away and deep in the Alaskan wilderness, my grandmother passed away. The plane, full of passengers wearing face masks and eyeing each other like their neighbor might secretly be a parasite bounced a few times before we rolled into the gate and the pilot turned off the glowing seatbelt sign. I switched my phone back on. Placing it in my pocket, I sat up and stumbled into an elderly man struggling to pull his brown, tattered suitcase out of storage. We exchanged the typical apologies and I reached to help with his bag. As my hands made contact with his luggage, the phone deep in the pocket of my college sweats — a chasm — started to violently buzz.

"Thank you, son," the man said as I handed him his things.

I nodded and reached for my phone.

"I was afraid that they would fall out and kill me if I tried to get them! You can't ever be too careful at my age you know," he added with a chuckle.

Each of his half-hearted laughs fell melodically in time with the consistent vibrations in of my phone — becoming at odds with the Amy Winehouse playlist I had put on repeat before I fell asleep over Michigan. I struggled to connect my hand with buzzing before finally deciding to use the cord attached to my headphones to tug my phone back into existence.

The flight attendant came over the intercom, interrupting me but informing us that there was a delay with our gate, something was wrong with the bridge. I scanned the notifications on my phone. There were things I was expecting: two texts from a friend picking me up from the airport, four notifications about a photo I had posted to social media before I left Alaska, and some boy I had given my number to was asking if I could meet up at a bar in Anchorage. But as I continued to look, unexpected things flashed on my screen: extended family members had been contacting me — including ones I no longer talked to — someone from my hometown had sent me a message that read "I'm so sorry," and there was a text from my mom telling me to call her urgently.

This is how I learned that my grandmother, Maryanna Jurasek, had died. She was 81 and, although I've seen what time does to a human body, I expected her to be immortal. It would be impossible for me to explain the intricacies of why I felt this way because it was not born from any typical young person's reaction to someone in their life dying. My grandmother *really was* unlike any other grandmother that I knew — she was unlike any person I knew.

Maryanna Jurasek was a sturdy Catholic woman who fell in love with an entrepreneurial Czech man. Together, they fled the comforts of Indiana for the adventure that Alaska promised. In 1959, with the same tight helmet of curls that stayed with her to death, my grandparents settled at the base of Denali — before a store, a school, or even roads. Her hands cleared acres of thick spruce in the mornings, cooked a hot dinner every day on a woodstove for a husband and five children, and planted potatoes at night. When I was young, I would marvel at these hands: the permanently disfigured and brown fingernail on her thumb — crushed by an oil drum, the deep cracks from years of wrestling glacial rock, and the familiar freckles of age that mark countless days spent under the sun. And yet, even as she neared her centennial, those same aged hands held me with such unique grace and power — as if they could keep us both from harm.

Maryanna was never a woman to back down, whether that be her unflinching resolve to paint the Catholic church a gut-wrenching seafoam green or, after divorcing my abusive grandfather, refusing to leave the homestead. And so, with her husband still residing on the farm, she stayed. She continued to work the fields. She painted siding and trimmed roses, she built garages and demolished greenhouses, and she helped raise me. Until her last day, my grandmother watched as the sun rose and fell on the gleaming white mountain beyond the house she helped build.

She would say that all her life — her move to the wilderness, the divorce, and even the mountain — was "God willing." This phrase of hers, I've come to understand, has multiple meanings. There is the past use of it, as in that God willed all these things to be. Whenever something happened, from terminal cancer to the lottery, my grandmother would say that it "was God willing." Then, there is the present use of the phrase. If you were trying to accomplish something, she split the credit of the effort in two: there was the work you did and there was the fact that "God was willing it." As if He were currently doing something. Finally, there is the future tense, the use of "God willing" as a petition, a prayer — something that will happen, "God willing" that is. The summer before she passed, my grandmother became obsessed with plans to self-renovate her home. When she spoke of them, she would always finish with this phrase. In the last conversation I had with her, she said, "I'll get to the kitchen cabinets by September, God willing." She never stopped to pause when she said it, she did not look at the sky contemplatively, it wasn't voiced with any sort of intonation but matter-of-factly. My grandmother's use of this phrase exemplifies the mantra she came to live by in her later years: acceptance. Through the phrase, she accepted the world, let it flow over her body and experiences. For her, believing that things were "God willing" was the pathway to peace.

This subtle complexity in my grandmother's casual expressions was lost on me as a child. In fact, it took me meditating on our intertwined lives after her death — something made possible by the physical distance from both her body and my homophobic relatives — for me to fully appreciate

the impact of her life. My period of mourning was atypical from the rest of my family because it did not include them. I was in Maine and they were preparing a funeral in Alaska. Due to planning difficulties around quarantining and the general expense of plane tickets that take you across the continent, I would not be at the funeral — something my bigoted family members will never let me forget. So instead of the usual convivial experience of death, the celebrations and collective rivers of tears, I thought and felt alone. I secretly took my emotions north to a cabin some friends and I had rented on a lake. I told myself that I shouldn't tell them about her death because I didn't want to dampen the mood. In truth, I think I really just didn't know what to say about it, yet.

***

My grandmother's presence in my immediate family's life was unlike that of any of our other relatives. Like her children, my siblings and I were raised on the farm. Living both in a one-room cabin on the property and then later tucked into one bedroom in the main house, we saw her nearly every day. My own mother, who had moved to Alaska from Alabama and married my grandmother's son at the age of 19, stepped up to help manage the fields into profit — digging trees, clearing land, and planting potatoes. My biological father, who followed in my grandfather's footsteps of abusing those around him, did not work. When my grandmother was out in the scorching sun cutting the hay down in the front yard and my mother was in the back tilling the strawberry fields, my father sat in a ripped lazy-boy recliner watching anything on the TV. This was his superpower: inaction but dominance. It's a power that is at once terrifying and pathetic, a paradox born from some mixture of toxic masculinity and substantial inadequacy.

The deliberate ignorance of my father's faults remains the aspect of my grandmother that I struggle with most. In the graciousness of retrospect, I try to see a mother that must have been so defeated see her son broken, a son she couldn't save from her husband's worst tendencies, that it was

impossible for her to fix him. And to her credit, she worked to fill the void in my life caused by the absent father she gave birth to. In this absence, I came to not only have one strong female figure in my mother but another with my grandmother — a feminist force despite the circumstances. The two of them became inseparable both in my community's mind and nearly in their physical form. The bond they shared as mother and daughter was not made by blood but was somehow more natural. Even after my mother called the police on an episode of my father's abuse and we fled the farm, my grandmother supported my mom and stayed a constant existence in our lives.

Our extended relatives refuse to acknowledge the magnitude of the union between my mom and my grandmother — even despite that my grandmother wrote my mother into her will as her own child. Most of the thirty-six relatives spawned by my grandmother would also rather ignore my existence than confess that I was perhaps the next closest person to my grandmother. Our unworthiness to this title made clear to them by my mother's lack of blood relation and my queerness.

Unlike my other relatives, when I came out to my grandmother as gay, she did not tell me that it was wrong. Others, like my Uncle Tom, told me that I was "a scar on the family — an abomination in the eyes of God." I've not spoken to him for five years.

Although she took it better than most, my grandmother still didn't necessarily want to talk about my sexuality. I came out to her after finishing a late-night dinner at a diner in the city during my senior year of high school. We had promised to get dinner after I "finished my chemistry homework" — though I was really spending time with my boyfriend, Hugo. As I set down the spoon from my soup, the residual ecstasy of happiness from seeing Hugo came over me and I said, "Grandma, I'm dating a boy." She peered into me with a stare that I have never since seen — though people attest that I, too, have a proclivity for looking deeply, with almost psychic intent. I felt her green eyes wash over my body, dart from my face to the snow to my lips and finally back to my own eyes — mirrors of hers.

"In my day," she paused. "We did not talk about such things. We knew they existed but we did not speak of them… I love you."

"I love you, too."

For a moment, I was afraid it was all over, that our eternal bond was broken. I started to cry as she fumbled for her wallet in her purse. When she looked up, I saw something happen beneath her eyes, like she was reliving an entire life and coming to some extraordinary conclusion. She dropped her bag, grabbed my hands, and called the waiter over.

"We'll have two slices of cherry pie please."

***

Over time, she became more open to my life and eventually embraced it — maybe a bit too much.

"How's Hugo doing," she once asked. Followed by, "is he going to go to Bowdoin with you?"

She was heartbroken for me when I explained that because Hugo was a junior, he would be staying in school while I left. We would have to break up.

"That's such a shame," she said. "You said you loved him, I thought he might follow you there. I thought you might propose. In *my day,* when you said you loved someone and were with them for nearly a year you got married."

Then asking, "you people can do that now, right?"

I'm sure that getting comfortable with a new perspective on queer love was difficult for her. But I think she made that effort, an effort not made by my father or relatives, because during my lifetime with her we spent more time getting to know each other than anyone else. She was willing to push her boundaries for me because our happiness with invested in each other — and at this point in her life happiness was the only thing that mattered.

My grandmother never called me by my real name, choosing instead to believe me worthy of the title "Angel." Every Sunday, from age five until the divorce, my grandmother and I would rise early and head to the local diner. As a matriarch of not just my family but our small town, she had a booth reserved for her by the woodstove in the diner. The staff had learned that she would "raise hell" if she wasn't warm enough.

"Now don't go raisin' hell Maryanna," they would say whenever an out-of-town traveler unknowingly took her coveted seat.

"No, no," she would say. "It's too cold in here to do that anyways."

We would order a Denver Omelet, two orders of hash-browns, and four pieces of toast. The staff knew to split the omelet and would bring it out on two separate plates. She would drink coffee and I would run to the drink cooler and find a bottle of orange juice. Out of her large black purse would come a pen and three quarters, which I used for the dispensary outside for that day's paper.

On those mornings I learned not only about my grandmother but, at least partially, about the world. I would sit and read the comics as she went over the news, giving me periodical lessons on how she thought things should be done.

"Lots of people are bad in the world, lots of people are mean, but lots of people are worth loving."

"Who cares what this critic thinks. If people watch something and it brings them joy that should be what matters. Never trust one person's opinion on what's good on life — unless that person is me, your mom, or God."

I also got glimpses into how she felt about her age. Watching someone so eccentric contemplate the end of their life at such an old age gave me a special perception on death.

"When I die don't put me in a box — I don't want that. No one should want to be trapped underground like that. When I die spread my ashes on the mountain, I want to wisp away into the wind."

At moments like these, Red Cooney, the local Irish potato farmer who always sat across the diner and was in an unending flirtatious battle with my grandmother would chime up. With his snorty laugh he would say something like: "Maryanna, you won't have any easier of a time getting to heaven just because you're up on a mountain higher than everyone else."

"I just have to make sure I get there and lock the gates before you can, Red."

Once we were both done with our food, she would get one more cup of coffee and then it was time for the main event: the crossword.

My grandmother never went to college. She was raised in a conservative, Catholic household and went to a conservative, Catholic all-girls school. In most regards, she was uneducated and unworldly. However, she had a passion for reading — and through reading, she became both very knowing and very adventurous. It was for both of these reasons that she was also an excellent crossword-puzzler.

"Polynesian ritual with coals."

"Firewalking."

My grandmother became so much more in these mornings than just an old woman who spent her days in a garden. As she spelled out her answer in the blanks on the paper, each letter capitalized and clearly written, she would begin my lesson. This was my early education: waking early, diner, omelet, coffee, crossword, new fact. As if on cue, she would delve into talking about why and how she knew about something I did not — and I would happily sit, drink my orange juice, and listen. In one of the most memorable cases, she informed me of something I had never heard about her before, that she, herself, had taken part in firewalking once.

***

The story, as she put it, starts deep within the Alaskan "tulliberries" — her term for anything beyond the homestead. Or at least that was where the thought of firewalking seemed to have crept up on her from. One might be skeptical of a landscape's ability to convince someone to potentially burn their feet for spirituality, but they probably don't live in the Alaskan wilderness. That person doesn't know what it's like to look up at the majesty of Denali during a sunset, when you are transfixed by the glowing beams of light dancing across glaciers that hang in the distance, etched deep into the canvas of a mountainside.

This being said, I'm fairly certain that idea was previously put into her head by something she read — but the conscious mind often takes credit for the archival work done by the unconscious. And then there is the chance that her friends helped conceive such an idea. My grandmother, while definitely a one-of-a-kind woman, had some friends who'd give her a

run for her money. She was part of a rare crowd of rural women with some of the most eccentric qualities I know, many of which choosing to have rainbow hair in defiance of their generation's beauty standards. No matter the original birth of this experience though, my grandmother did her homework. She poured over texts on how to perform the ritual properly, ordering them as fast as she could to the local library — though "local" was across a quarter-mile-wide river. After careful study by this gaggle of women, they decided to start the fire in the front field, alongside rows of freshly planted Yukon Gold potatoes.

"We did it at night," she said to me. "Well, as much of night as it gets in Alaska. But that was nice, it meant we still got to see the mountain."

To this day, picturing this group of middle-aged women climbing over fiery coals during the midnight sun of the north while under the breathtaking splendor of Denali brings a smile to my face.

"It was a hoot and a holler but, even more so, it was important. We really had to trust in the power of ourselves, we had to trust in God and his will."

Although I was only eight years old, I knew my grandmother well enough that I was not entirely surprised by this divulgence. She was a woman of many beliefs, all complex and convoluted, born from her desire to explore multiple paths of spiritualism. She praised Deepak Chopra with the same zeal that she did the Pope. She practiced Tai Chi each morning after she finished saying her Rosary. And now, I learned, she went firewalking on a Sunday.

I'm sure she was not successful in all her spiritual endeavors. My grandmother wasn't successful at many things, one of which I presume to be parenting. There's no doubt that my grandfather's propensity for belligerent tirades against his children other are the primary reason for their issues as adults — and they *all* have issues. Drugs, alcohol, depression, abuse, neglect, manic episodes: my relatives contain multitudes of it all. However, even though she was constantly working for her family, my grandmother was absent even in her presence. She made sure everyone had a warm meal, a place to sleep, and he never ran away — but neither was she was ever fully reachable. There was an emotional distance always present between my grandmother and her children.

I think it was this special kind of a lack of love that led her to turn towards spiritualism with such vigorous devotion later in life. And I'm somewhat certain that at the age of sixty, she saw a newborn baby on her farm — me — as a second chance at the connection she failed to have and sustain with her own children.

"All things come from Him," she would say. "*You* come from him. *You* are beautiful, my angel."

"Really? Even firewalking?" I'd ask.

"Yes, *especially* firewalking."

She believed that all spiritual roads led to God and, as such, one could — and even should — diversify the roads on which they traveled. She did these things to jolt her senses; to keep her exploring what she saw as God's splendor, something God wanted you to do. Rather than distancing herself from her God, she felt evermore close to Him through spiritual experimentation.

***

In the days following my flight, while I was deep in Maine's wilderness and swimming in a wide-open lake, the lesson on firewalking came back to me. There is a tendency I have, a dangerous tendency one might say, to want to skinny dip in lakes after having a few beers. My friends and I had just arrived at the cabin we rented near Machias and decided to start out our week in the wilderness by having a campfire. We had originally decided that we wouldn't actually open the Titos we brought with us yet because we all were either jetlagged or exhausted from driving — but this decision was short-lived. Soon enough we were madly dancing around a fire to a playlist titled "The Best of Prince." In the break between two songs and while my friends were momentarily distracted, I stripped my clothes off and started for the water.

They protested some when they saw me but they've come to accept my erratic tendency for things like jumping into freezing bodies of water after a few too many mind-altering beverages.

"Mitch!"

"There he goes."

"Damn, isn't that water cold?"

I think my friends often write off my flirtation with extreme experiences as the normal eccentricities of a typical Alaskan wild child. And, in many ways, they are right — Alaskans are known for our daredevil behaviors. But it wasn't just that I thought jumping in the water would be exciting, something pulled me into it. I still hadn't told my friends about my grandmother's death. While on the bank of that lake in Maine's nowhere land, my head was wrapped up in a million questions but something seemed to whisper an answer deep within the water.

When I had swam a few hundred yards out into the lake and looked back at my friends, I finally understood the mystical murmur that had lured me away. Below the glowing lights of our cabin on the hill, my friends danced around red embers and gold flames. In that cold water that licked at my bare skin with an icy tongue, I watched as it looked like my friends danced *on* the fire. Even though I had only ever seen one photo of the occasion, pictures of my grandmother laughing and walking over glowing coals raced through my mind. Through my drunken attempt at feeling something, I had sparked some connection to her. Even if I was thousands of miles away from the remains of her physical body, she was with me.

Now, with the sad wisdom that only comes with remembrance, I see my grandmother as an instigator not only for the spiritualism I often find myself looking for but for how I live my life. I believe, like my grandmother, that all things are connected. And I believe, like my grandmother, that when I follow many roads, I feel most spiritual — though perhaps not as close to God. In any case, I have a deep and unrelenting feeling that my isolation from extended family members following my grandmother's death was meant to be. That her timing for passing was a cosmic way of shielding me from some of her own children, people she knew did not accept me for the person I was and who I had purposefully avoided for my own mental health. I'm not so selfish to think that my grandmother's departure was timed purely for my benefit, but I do believe that the complexity of her own spirituality — a spirituality that may

well take me my entire life to attempt to understand — is mirrored in the complexity surrounding her death. I am convinced that I was her second chance, that like a baptism she was reborn with my birth. If I close my eyes and remember the feel of that cold plunge in Maine, I hear again the uncanny voice in my head telling me that all of this was meant to happen — that it was orchestrated by something truly spiritual. If I close my eyes and listen, I hear my grandmother telling me it was "*God willing*."

William C. Crawford
untitled

Logistics

At a crossroad, when you slow down,
you might notice that god has bailed out
without a nod, on the passenger side.

If thoughts of god remain in your mind,
they will coalesce and dissolve
in the day's orange and purple wash.

In the morning, solitary birds wake
to dance with angels in the arms of trees.
Children of earth sing with the saints.

Those gambols will be imitated.
The songs will be recorded, transcribed,
shelved and forgotten by all

but the pale souls who sort stacks
of silence within which are signals
to god to come back to us.

Jeffrey Johnson

Out of compassion or sleep deprivation
you might pull off the highway,
lean over and open the door for god.

Driving with god beats wondering
where god disappeared to, or whether
god, gone so long, had ceased to exist.

With god next to you, clouds relax and mingle.
Nervous dogs feel safe with strangers.
Emergency faith is stashed to make room

for god the pauper, beggar, orphan, hobo,
and hitchhiker, reappearing today
to restore old wheels of turning seasons,

tease new revelations, bless departures,
give clues to disappearances
for soul-doctors to ponder for pay

without having to admit in their notes
what they might know to be true: apathy
and cruelty bring on the same pain.

Johnson

Secondhand Jesus

"I have other sheep that are not of this fold, them also I must bring…"
(John 10:16).

Increasingly known are the perils of secondhand Jesus
Those who whiplash their way from San Antonio Aguas Caliente
over the rutted wash

in converted Blue Bird school busses
named King of All He Surveys
and My Savior Who Other

purring Chuj and Popti
four to a seat
in huipiles and thonged tire sandals

toddlers dangling from tzute cloth slings
are at particular risk
Those who bend to pull their daily bread

from market trash mounds
Those whose evening light comes from spent can votives
who follow barrio curs to hidden watering holes

and burrow their sleep into spent tarp bails
under cardboard lean-tos
Stunting is an obvious issue

as are: the urge toward groundless appreciation
and spontaneous genuflection
before any mystery

or cruciform construction

Jeff Schiff

Going to Prison Tuesday Nights

Released from my office
on a tree-lined college campus
I cruise the colors of the city
and further west down narrowing roads.

In a thick band of woods
South Walpole's Winter Street forgets its name
passing over the Stop River
to become Clark Street in Norfolk

where the trees drop away
for barren fields
like an emptied moat
before high stone walls topped with razor wire.

Inside, sealed behind six coats
of Light Neutral, the cement block walls
have stopped dreaming of sunlight
the twin fluorescent bands overhead their only friend.

The speckled gray linoleum floor won't talk
even when scuffed by the desk chairs
brought in to impersonate a classroom
or when I arrive during 6pm movement.

But with the door closed
and COs nowhere in sight
voices echo so eagerly
that I strain to hear the student beside me.

Tom Laughlin

Time Moves Around

Saba Sebhatu

It is the first time we acknowledge each other. The Englishman who is a regular at the neighborhood cafe I frequent in Brooklyn is flipping through his newspaper. He glances over, his glasses sliding off his nose. He turns to face me and begins to list the countries cited in the paper that are under lockdown. Although this is our first conversation after a few years of spotting one another, we begin to discuss the pandemic in depth. We both are trying to hold on to this moment of normalcy; the encounter with a stranger feels urgent. It's the second week of March 2020. As I leave, I tell him to take extra care, knowing that I won't see him again.

***

My immediate family lives in different cities, countries, and continents. We were generations of refugees, immigrants, aliens, and naturalized citizens who fled endless global wars in the Horn of Africa. We were already familiar with living under decades of war and unresolved states of emergency and crisis, the source of our displacement. We were already living lives of transience. Our diasporic lives had normalized separation.

***

It is February 2017, a frigid afternoon, and a few months before I move to New York City. I am sitting by a window in a cafe a few blocks from Hudson Yards and its surrounding area, a point of transfer and transport. It is steely, stiff, and cold. I feel a deep hollowing in my stomach. I spent two hours with a homeless woman who came into the cafe trying to sell her hand-sewn mittens. Her entrepreneurial attempt was met with repulsive glares from patrons. It was a gesture, one of creating invisible borders. It reminded me of a documentary about homeless migrants and refugees, ones you don't hear about in European cities: Calais, Copenhagen, Aarhus, the Greek Islands, Melilla, and Rome.

I asked her to sit with me and bought her a cup of herbal tea. She kept her hands wrapped around the hot paper cup; the cracks in between the web of her fingers were wide; her hands were dried and overworked.

This woman sitting across from me, another stranger, was an elder. An older Black woman whom I felt compelled to look after. With no home, she bounced from shelter to shelter for twenty years. She emphasized their volatile conditions and that she did not belong there. She proceeded to tell me that she migrated to New York City from the South. We had this in common. She had lived in New York City since the seventies when her family had migrated during The Great Migration.

***

That first encounter stayed with me long after my move. Like when I saw a young man sitting on the stairways to the 7 train in the Times Square - 42nd Street subway terminal who yelled, refusing the admonishment of passerbyers, "I am visible! I am here!" Or the balmy summer afternoon in a bustling area of the Flatiron District when a young blond woman wearing a short skirt and heels, another seemingly figure in the crowd, bent down on a corner, ripped open a garbage bag, and began to rummage through it. No one dared to look or react.

***

Between July 2018 and July 2019, the United States census estimated that 2,600 people were leaving the city each week. New York City saw a mass exodus of its mobile and wealthy at the onset of the pandemic, roughly 320,000 people, according to the census. The first wave of the pandemic highlighted new complications and boundaries: nightly curfews, masked essential workers sought protection from unmasked consumers, nations became inaccessible, and institutions meant to support in times of duress and emergency failed.

The soundscapes of New York City during the first wave of the pandemic were a new type of frantic: car horns belting, far longer than necessary, setting off a chain reaction, ambulance sirens zooming from all directions several times a day, waves of protesters in the streets as helicopters chop through the skies. A new sound had emerged in my neighborhood, church bells on the hour. The world is in collapse and renewal, and lockdown felt like salvage from the conscription of the material world. The rate of change and time has accelerated, and nothing continues to hold. Silence has its loudest presence. Relief comes with surrender, repentance, and falling to my knees.

***

The life I had felt like a dream that I had just awakened from. After emerging out of the first several months of being in lockdown, my eyes feel like they have never been used for sight before. I welcome my new use of senses. They burned as they ingested the light of summer. I observe these new sensations while in the backseat of an Uber, spotting subway lanterns and half-finished skyscrapers.

A makeshift plastic duvet carrier is a partition between myself in the backseat and the driver. Early Sunday morning, I rent a car to visit and reunite with my family. I drive down the highway, out of the city, speeding, the momentum of the road, wind through the crack of a window, listening

to Weldon Irvines' "Morning Sunrise," iridescent clouds puffed on light pink skies that quickly turn orange.

***

Winter quarantine mornings start with meditation, prayer, passing ancestors, drinking holy water, staring out of my backyard window at a winter's sun, scents of copal, myrrh, pine, oud, bakhoor, lemongrass, frankincense, sage, and practicing the art of forgiveness. After a night of snowfall and waking up to a powdered dream world, a sapped tree is flailing in a cold icy windstorm, its pine branches covered in snow powder and icicles. I spend the morning in a blanket, watching a documentary on the ingenuity of architectural structures in various ancient civilizations while drinking my morning coffee. The rim of the spoon is laden with honey and is warm against my tongue. I scrape remnants of honeycomb off the roof of my mouth as I read poetry for the remainder of the day.

Poetry is a blanket amid the confines of the next series of lockdowns. In Eritrea, (my place of origin), oral poetic traditions, like music, are an anchor in time and have been used for centuries to mark special events. In some instances, poetry lines from the past become hybrid forms and intertwine into present poems for continuity. Poetry has always been an antidote to the world; prayers laid in verse; a momentary warmth and protection to shelter into.

It is 530pm, the second day of the snowstorm. The day is a dull light fading into the background as light grey skies saturate the tops of the sky. I pretend the dark clouds are countries and the sky is a map of the universe. A plate of glass and a wet and fogged window screen separates me from the outside world. A streetlamp produces an off-white halo of light; it is dreary, cold, and serene. The emptiness. The stillness. Silence until someone starts shoveling, and the friction of the metal collides with the snow on the ground making a crunching sound; the call to act, shovel, before the freeze. The plower makes way. They've broken through, and the shovel slides down the entire sidewalk. The shovel is now a plow.

I do not want to push or plow anymore. I head over to the couch and bury my face in the fold of my mother's arm while we lay together, the creases where love lives.

***

A wintered quarantine skips spring and turns to sweltering summer, cicadas buzzing, cemented into the sidewalks, and mother birds call out to their fledglings. People tweet incessantly about what is on their minds; the calls online are screams of injustices that land in a void. Quarantine has brought the modern industrial world to dwell on flat screens. I spend an enormous amount of time in my parent's backyard. A mother bird calls to her young with food tapered inside her beak. I see a nestling bird drop to the ground from an improper nest. I make a makeshift nest out of a straw basket and t-shirt. I watch her grow in the basket, her eyes open, and feathers grow. After a few weeks, she leaves on her own.

***

After retreating from New York City for the fall and winter months, my friends from the city are glad its occupiers have left. They are mad that their city was taken from them, abandoned, and molded into a corporate real estate metropolis. The cafe I like to frequent in warm weather in Brooklyn is gone. A place where I pondered my survival in the city the summer after graduation. I stand across the street staring at an unrecognizable, boarded-up, and empty storefront.

***

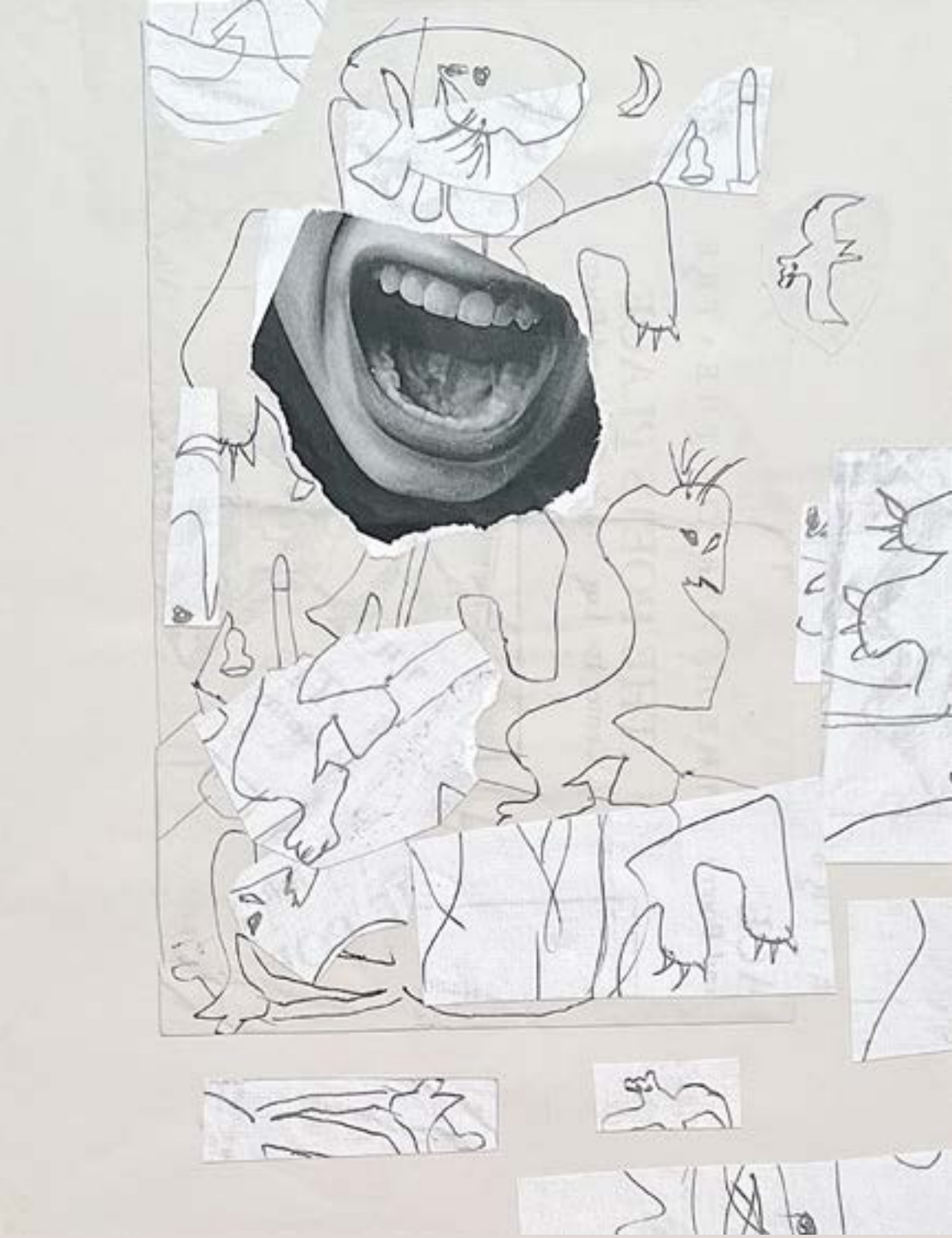
The melancholy I felt upon returning to New York City in the summer of 2021 was not one I had expected. The air permeated with a foreignness; the energy of the city was no longer in high drive. Despite the long time away, it felt less like estrangement and more ominous. I arrive on the

day of a massive heatwave; my dashboard temperature display read 99 degrees, somewhere between the corn-husked farm fields of upper Maryland and the border of Delaware. When I arrive, I park on a one-way street under a tree canopy that lines the road I've partly exited from the cooled interiors of the car, leaning against a half-opened driver-side door, one foot on the edge of the sidewalk, the other still inside the vehicle. The first week of my summer return was accompanied by July heat waves. In August, hurricane storms of the mid-Atlantic rip from the Southern states and Gulf Coast and flood parts of the city. There is historic rainfall and intense flooding in parts of the city. In previous years, construction booms in flood zone areas, including public housing.

***

It is winter in Brooklyn; from the view of my bedroom window is a Southern Magnolia Tree; its origins trace back to North Carolina. It is the only tree in the backyard that survives the winter months; its dark leathery leaves glisten in the moonlight. The tree is not meant to survive climates north of Philadelphia. In the summer months, its white flowers bud and splay over its leaves like teacups floating off its branches. Its creations and firmness grounds me.

I walk without aim through sets of brownstones on the night of the highest recorded cases in the city since the pandemic started two years ago. The fog masked the tops of lights on tower buildings by the downtown district; a light mist coupled with cold crisp winter air gently stung my face as I walked. The gothic-style cathedrals and churches had aged beautifully among the rest of the neighborhood. Christmas lights and decorations are strung, lighting up avenue after avenue. The You Belong Here sign at The Atlantic Barclays subway stop, a glaring neon pink and white installment that wades amid the flood of cars, armored police vehicles, and the needling developing skyline of Downtown Brooklyn does not reassure me.



Doren Robbins
Mariupol Ukraine 2022 Bombings

Volunteer

In street clothes, she is a soup-kitchen
volunteer, warm meal server, invisible
one of the low ranking ostiaries, porters
says if we love one person we must love
the unhoused mentally ill as well as the
conscripted, convicted adults they become
mouths aching open into tortured toothless
yawns as they hand her their bowls to fill
with chicken noodle soup, crustless bread

she is a seasoned veteran, knows what it
feels like to be disregarded, to be locked
out in cold night rain clutching an empty
sauterne bottle, she too has been disregarded
crouched into a fetal position hiding behind
dumpsters on feces-puddled streets, begging
her back pressed and slipping against a wall
of slime, desperate to be missed enough for
someone who cares to come looking for her
find her, feed her, whisper I'm here you are
safe, I love you

you don't see her, not all heroes wear capes
she blends in, cares for the beast as well as
those thrown to the beast, when asked for all
her strength she gives it, she leaves her own
rental room of wallpaper pimply with smashed
roaches, and gives what she can and when
asked again, she gives again, more.

Eileen Malone

Black Book of Hours

prayer long after midnight that turns to anger

Lord,

I am afraid of your blastiomas, your ear-cups burned
to the sockets no reconstructive surgery can ease,
the fact that you imagined twisting bone

shot molars,
creaturely infestation and how it would feel,
and then chose to summon these things.

I fear the way you handle Now,
perpetual gift that, being touched

is removed, so that every seed
blossoms only as loss.
The finest prayer

is accusation. Mantic visions
mouthed in a dry climate,
your own begotten
on his afternoon's cross is in no way sufficient

William Orem

to one slide of muck and bloody rain,
one strain grown resistant,
one apartment ceiling
collapsed above the crib.

What fathomless abortion of Deity
has out of his capacity fashioned grief?
Sir,

how dare you be and not
be here—

among us huddled under mylar sheets,
eating with your fingers out of yellow U. N. buckets
lice-busy grain
and unsafe water?

Orem

A Book Club on Death Row

The Gardener's Almanac
contributes to routine, the screws quipping
'life's no bed of roses'—a joke
repeated to the captive crowd
each week, calming any nerves
about their lawyers' visits.

After all, what good is ad-lib
when the straws they chose are short?

Donated books the staple, before
the rounds the pages fanned
for corner crimps or glossaries
soaked in spice—but time
talking books is what they crave.

A few read well—their crime
a weight offset by Degree, by night classes
or in-house at the factory:
for others, rap sheets spooling years
from truancy to murder, a sentence a mountain
big as any sentence on the row.

Jane Austen was here, library
castoffs stacked ten titles deep, but
Pride and Prejudice was tougher fare
than solitary—the lingo
too much like solicitors.'

Estill Pollock

Over the west wall, a drone
tries its luck—spot-lit from the towers
it snags the nets, then clatters
to the yard below.

Someone calls out in the dark,
'What page you on?' The answer: 'At lights-out
the bit where the best friend gets it
for stuffing the wife.'
In the darkness—a silent nod.

The one reading Nietzsche
no longer speaks—at night his laughter
rattles through the cells and walkways,
but that was since his last Appeal, his life
mimicking the chapters now, with
a final date and time.

No one likes a snitch, and no one
wants to know how everything will end—
the spoiler alert, twenty years coming,
every character in place
for the long walk to the chamber: a page
torn out, folded in a pocket.

Pollock

Spiritus

Before procedural memory, before
the episodic sets us in a narrative of
linear time, old as sensation it comes:
a memory, if we can call it that,

of being held. I call it, “inside-outside,” a dual
feeling of cool air on the face, in the nose,
and simultaneously the heat of being
wrapped in a body, a blanket, an arm.

It’s more emotional tenor than temperature,
a little shelter while set firmly in the world.
Forgive me the illusion when I say, I remember.
In that rush of onomatopoeia, I remember

on the river bank my grandmother
held my new body near and high
above the water, let that language move
through me as her hips dipped. Movement too,

is a lexicon, an ancient way of speaking.
The South Fork of the Payette
undulated through the land as one clear throat,
body passage of food and voice.

The ancestor came to me in that stagnant year
when fractured time curled in on itself,
latches on all the doors busted, the trail
disappearing into leaf-litter and mist.

Brittany Deininger

In my dream, she puts my body back
where the sound of river flows,
gift of somatic imprint, a rough
translation of what Spirit does:

Wielding the erotic, that yearning energy
of enlivenment, we are brought back to life
just as we came, wet and glistening, all want
and desire, needing touch and tit in equal measure.

Remember your aliveness, she says,
*the way you were blown through
with those first gasps of air, the lungs
opening, the heart valve closing,*

*the howl you made,
which startled you, being
a creature who could make
a sound like that.*

We loop like this, lace of memory
sewn into sinew and soil,
patterning us as much with touch
and tone as with the unforgiving mind.

Deininger

My Grandmother's Hands

Alongside Indigenous lettuce
round, aromatic fenugreek leaves emerge
from the warm spring soil.

We harvest the leaves
and are reminded of how far
these beloved seeds have come.

We thresh each leaf,
then slowly chop this tender herb
along with mint, dill, tarragon,
cilantro, parsley, chives.

We light the old stove, add olive oil,
and saute onions in our clay pan.
Sea salt and advieh–
As we stir
aromas of cumin, cardamom,
Rose, and pepper arise.

Melody Joy Overstreet

When the onions are golden-hued,
we fry the greens
stirring the herbs
with our well seasoned wooden spatula.
The chicken eggs laid this morning
now rest in a bowl.

Here we are, cooking in a yurt
within a floodplain,
temporal guests in this
home of the Awaswas, Mutsun, Uypi.

Far from my ancestral lands–
the aroma carries me
back to Iran's kitchen,
space tended by
my grandmother's hands.

Overstreet

Blue is a Being

Eat the seed of blue and it grows in you.
~ Karine's dream

Am I awake or asleep?

Unworthiness a salt upon my tongue,
I kneel

as Blue draws near, a sphere of light
so tall I cannot see her face.
But her shoulders stretch wide—no wonder
they call them wings.

My words, blue swallows, dart across her deepening dress.

Not—What ocean do you carry on your hip?
What heaven do you hail from? What country,
sapphire, cerulean?

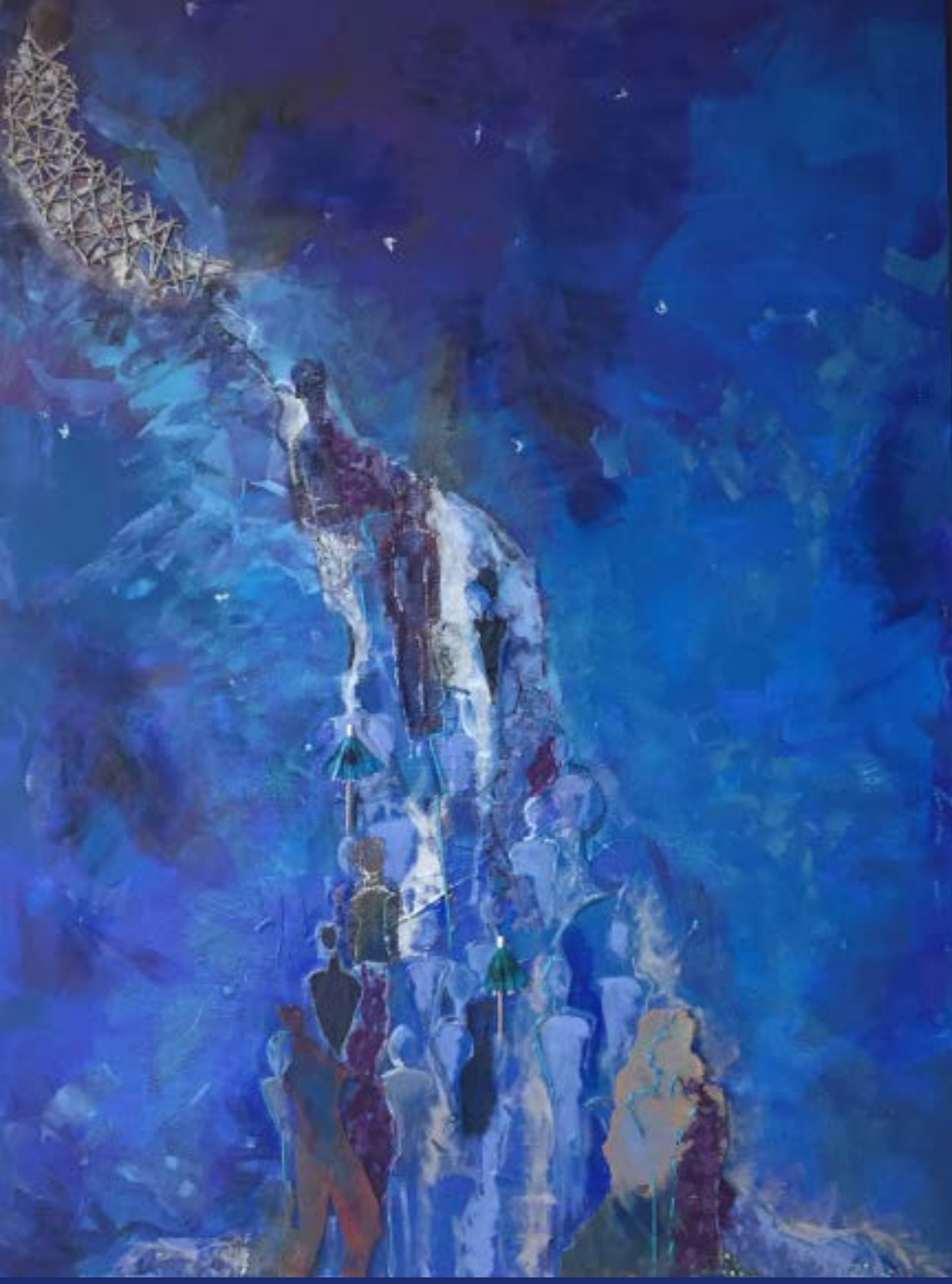
But, *Where does the moral world begin?*

Leaning over the earth in me, the birth of me,
she answers space with time: not where but when inner and outer light are one…

My legs still pressed against the ground, my cheek upon her hem

until the dawn.

Patrice Pinette



Silvina Mizrahi
Exile II

Border

I set up meetings in Congress today
for a woman searching for bodies
along the Mexican border.
I sit very comfortably in my chair.
I don't search for bodies.
I search for hours. For words.

Digging in dirt with a family member,
digging for bones is what she does.
These aren't the deaths from heatstroke
or thirst in the desert.
These are the murders
cartels, coyotes, the police and soldiers
commit. Deported from the US,
shunted back to Mexico, they are
killed by the same coyotes they paid.

Patricia Davis

It is said Mexico has a war on its own
poor. This is true. This I believe.
Young men, if poor, are arbitrarily detained
in Ciudad Juarez, tortured to force
a confession, jailed, removed that way
from the gene pool.

The US has a war on the world's poor.
The jail they are placed in, arbitrarily,
is Mexico. There, with customary swiftness,
with little menace to us, at no cost

they vanish. Haitians, Central Americans,
Venezuelans, Cubans, all quiet now,
soil where the mouth
was, where the soul was
that wanted to speak.

Davis

Antlers on Fire

Yolanda Wysocki

Content Warning: Descriptions of Racial Violence

Some Images just haunt me. Like the one of a buck with his antlers on fire. I don't know where I saw it, an ad maybe. The thing is that just the week before, after many years, I had watched *Bambi* again. I can still see Bambi's father, the *Prince of the Forest*, standing on a bluff watching over the forest, over his herd. His many-pointed antlers are a testament to his regal power, and establish him as leader and protector. Because he has seen many things in his life, he warns the others to beware of humans, for they are the most dangerous of all animals. Now the forest is burning, the animals fleeing for their lives. Not even he can save them. I imagine *his* antlers on fire. What would it mean to have one's antlers on fire? Is it urgent? Or panicked? Does it discredit his leadership? Or is it amazingly powerful to blaze with that which can destroy you.

I go frequently to forests for healing, peace. Recently I went camping alone. Awed by the lush layers and shades of green; the beauty of the evergreens dripping with rain; the hush, so quiet I could hear the gentlest breeze moving through the trees, my soul settled into deep stillness. As I pulled my tent out from the trunk, a deer stopped at my car; we stood curious and looked at each other for a minute before she moved on to drink from the river. So much beauty, so many gifts from our earth.

But fires burn the Amazon, Siberia, India, California, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, Nebraska, Texas, South Dakota, Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas, Alaska, Montana, Utah, Washington, Kentucky, British Columbia, Turkey, Greece, France, Spain, Indonesia, Italy; the list goes on. Some of these forests are burned deliberately to create more farm/ranch land. Three billion animals died in Australia, 17 million in Brazil. No one knows how many more around the world. And even when I get completely still, I cannot hear the sound of my heart breaking. Bambi's father is right.

Rage or despair…neither is enough. How to be with this?!

***

Some images make me want to cry, throw up. Like the one in **Underground Railroad** of an enslaved man, after being whipped until his skin is peeling off, set on fire while still alive and screaming, as plantation owners sit across from him eating their lunch.

Images of Black folks being assaulted by dogs and fire hoses, batons, rocks, bottles and numerous other projectiles filled the TV news of my childhood. Cringing as I watched hate-filled faces of white crowds jeering, cursing children integrating Southern schools; hot coffee dumped over Black people's heads for reasons I could not understand. Communities burned.

And now again fires burn our cities. In the streets of Portland, Minnesota, Dallas, Atlanta, Denver, Detroit, LA, Memphis, Louisville, San Jose, San Francisco, riots flame. Another (and another and another) Black person has been killed by police. Internal fires erupt and things and places and communities burn. Despite—or maybe because of—diving deep into educating myself about causes and conditions, my jaws tighten, my stomach churns as if paddling through a rough ocean; tears and rage burn… for all of us. But that's not good enough. How to be with this?! I don't know how to be with this.

What is it like to be burned alive? What must be destroyed *inside* in order to set someone on fire, over and over and over?

Psychologist Carl Jung named that which is denied, hidden, refused to be looked at--*positive and negative* -- our shadow. Do Black folks function as white people's "shadow" because we aren't courageous enough to accept in ourselves the vast range of what we humans are capable of? To own who we have been and continue to be? Does the gap between our self-image and who we actually are seem too wide to bridge? I wonder.

James Baldwin from **The Fire Next Time**:

"...White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never –the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed."

Why is loving ourselves so hard?

Facing our deepest truths –whether personal, societal, or collective—surely requires an immense amount of courage, again and again. Ashamed of what we find at times, yet we also discover unexpected nuggets of gold, strength, creativity, wisdom, compassion, authenticity, forgiveness, freedom, peace.

From **The Fire Next Time:** "A civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless."

***

Some images make me humble. Like a row of elders sitting outside in wheelchairs watching their home, an assisted living facility, burn down. Next to them is a young man who ran in and pulled many of them out, saving their lives.

I went to my favorite bakery today to buy a loaf of bread. As I got out of my car, I saw a homeless woman sitting on the sidewalk with a small fire burning next to her. I wasn't sure how the fire was built but it looked contained and there was no apparent danger. I called across to her, "You're being careful, right?" "Yeah don't worry" or something like that, and I

continued toward the bakery, just as an employee came out with a pitcher of water to douse the fire. Within a few minutes a fire truck also arrived. Others stood and watched. As I drove away later, I wondered about the four different responses and-- given that I didn't know either the pitcher of water nor that the fire department were coming-- if I had done enough.

Sometimes spineless is glaringly obvious, but more often it's an accumulation of (non)responses that build up slowly over time to ***SPINELESS***. It seems to me the same is true in the opposite direction, in *developing a spine.*

The forests are burning; cities are burning. Fear and cruelty seem to now be walking hand-in-hand. The world is on fire. My heart is on fire. Helplessly I see-saw between rage ->despair->rage->despair. How to be with this! Neither of these extremes is effective in creating positive change and there are so many problems...yet so many opportunities.

When a bicyclist got hit by a car, one of my friends approached and offered this stranger her hand in comfort, talking softly while they waited together for an ambulance. Another friend in another country, seeing a boy laying on the ground, found some food and coins for him. They automatically responded with compassion when they saw someone in need; I envy their lack of hesitancy. Yet they speak to me.

In the everyday interactions that make up my "new normal" can I be present with an open heart? Can I be brave enough to allow that open heart to guide me? Or will I hesitate unsure, wait for someone else, can't be bothered, have my own stuff to deal with, afraid of what might happen, of what people might say? There isn't an always or never, just unique moments that matter, that will show me who I am, like it or not, as well as shape me into who I want to be...purposefully making my way toward developing a spine.

Antlers on fire. *Some images* do haunt me. What does it mean to have antlers on fire? I guess it depends on whether you are the buck, bystander, witness, or hold a bucket of water in your hands.

NIAMANI : she whose purpose is peace

we
have always been different and the same
of course not the color of skin and hair
you'd change your look with cornrows one day
long braids and seashells the next and i never understood
since i just brushed mine and put on the same torn jeans
and Indian print t-shirts that said peace and love as in the name
you gave yourself Niamani like everything else
you carried in your heart and i wore it on my sleeve and

thought about
the subway ride you had back to Brooklyn when you weren't
on the upper West Side with me or at school where we were aliens
in "Waspdom" as we'd call it back then and howl with laughter
as none of our grandparents had been slave traders or robber barons
but Italian shepherds from the Bronx and kings from Sierra Leone
in Honduras near Flatbush and the Brooklyn Bridge
i thought you looked like a princess so it all made sense to me

it made sense
after the Civil Rights Act and the Vietnam War that everything
would forevermore be ok though i admit with hindsight you had
your feet more firmly planted in the ground and i'd say i was more
the "feeling groovy '' song type so you laughed at me…"that song…
that song…" was about everything wrong with me you bellowed
"hello lamp post" and cigarette smoke billowed out of your mouth
though you were right and i was too optimistic and think

Lucia Coppola

around then you changed
your name because your boyfriend was a Rastafarian
from Jamaica while mine played frisbee in Central Park
do you remember you gave me a Maya Angelou book and i
wrote a tune that i played on the piano while you danced and then
we went to the same college and you used to let me sleep sometimes
in your dorm room because i was freezing in my off campus house
and then i bumped into you boarding the bus

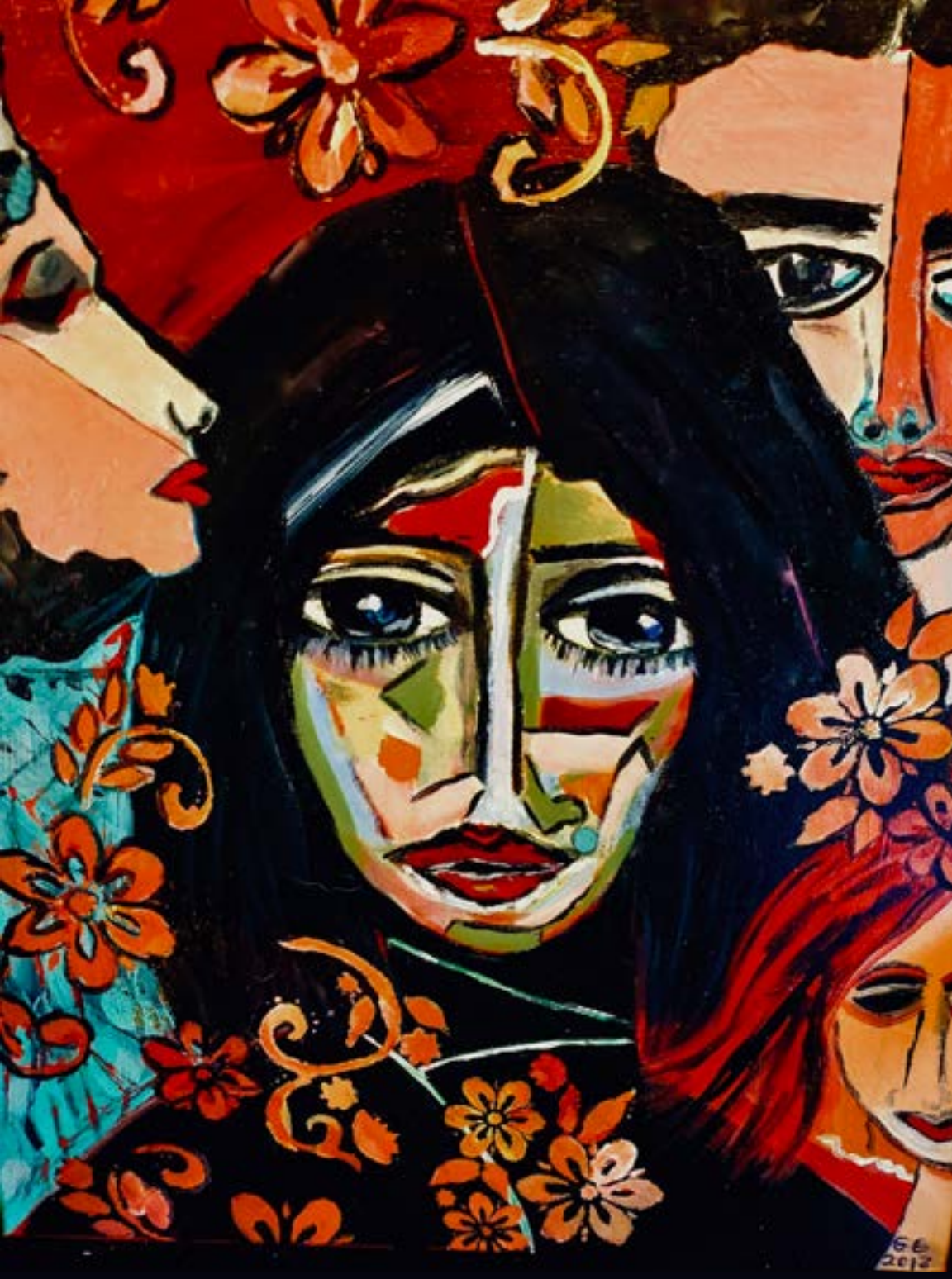
one day at Columbus Circle
to visit your old boyfriend at Rikers Island and it's stayed with me
you with the other black women and children standing there
i asked how many years does he get for marijuana
and you said what's important is for folks to stick together
and i knew what you meant about friendship and solidarity
we always had the same convictions anyway though

i never understood what happened after
and why you briefly married some mediterranean guy whose
name and face i couldn't remember even before you got a divorce
and then at my wedding you came late and i spent years wishing
i'd just eloped and gone to live in a tree not because of you
but because of everything else going on that day
by the way did you say you'd gone to Macy's
as if it was important just then to do that
we were both always late and i don't remember

we were dispersed and i should've listened
thrown sticks of Yi Ching or at least learned how to do that
gone to Church more or been truer to myself and thought less
about how or if others were thinking of me while
we were searching for the transition into the lotus position
at centerstage looking to change with some style and variation
with a little attitude from the days when we were feeling groovy
and i wish it had taken less long for us to find out what it is
we truly hold dear in our hearts now or

should we be grateful for the growing pains
i suppose you'd say that it's ridiculous to assume
it's easy as when we first became friends
choreographing that duet to the Jimi Hendrix song "Little Wing"
finding graffiti on subway walls colorful and the rattle
the trains made awful only late at night
when it felt like a snake riding toward uncertainty
but then we were both so curious about everything
"walking through clouds" young and bleary eyed weren't we

just telling the story from my point of view
i remember we often wore green army pants back then
you had a Malcolm X book in your school bag and i was reading
Herman Hesse and Yoga was a thing that we wanted to explore
to get away from the Hudson and East Rivers hoping
perhaps one day you might send me a photo of a dancing swan
in Rhineland where you live now and then I'd send you one
of an egret meditating by the San Francisco Bay since
i don't think we've changed all that much
not in any significant way Niamani ... namaste



Gerburg Garmann
Women's Council

Bad Atheist

Peter E. Murphy

It's December 1971, and after a two-hour sailing from Scotland, you dock at Larne, about twenty miles north of Belfast. As you walk down the gangplank, you're stopped by soldiers who tell you not to move. They point their automatic rifles at you, and the good buzz you've been feeling flies away. They examine you closely like they know you've done something wrong, then wave you through.

What the fuck?

You walk as fast as you can, barely noticing that it's raining until you leave the dock area behind and walk past terraced houses and closed shops. And rubble. It looks like a war's going on, and you're so fucking ignorant you don't know that a war *is* going on.

You walk north along the coast for an hour and check in at a B&B in Ballygalley. You ask the woman about the soldiers, and she tells you about the Troubles, and you're confused. Everyone's got troubles.

"It's horrible and it's become more violent," she says. "You must be careful not to do anything to make them want to shoot you because they will shoot you."

"Who will shoot me?" you ask.

"The Brits, of course, the soldiers. Be careful."

She must think you're just another stupid American because you don't know that the Catholics and Protestants have been fighting for years, decades, centuries actually. You don't understand why religion makes people kill each other. You remember when you were a kid you got spanked for going to a Cub Scout meeting in the basement of a Lutheran Church. "Don't you dare go into a Protestant church again," your aunt said. No Cub Scouts for you. Maybe that's why you never learned to tie a decent knot and why you've never been prepared for anything.

The next morning is all sea breeze and sunny skies, but you wish your thirty-pound backpack were lighter as you walk twenty miles along the Antrim Coast and stop at a B&B in Waterfoot. A day later you walk to Ballycastle where you encounter the Giant's Causeway. You climb over huge stone columns that rose out of the earth eons ago. At the youth hostel you read a flier that says that the forty thousand basalt pillars are the result of volcanoes. You prefer to believe a different story, the one the hostel manager tells you.

"An Irish giant named MacCool challenged a Scottish giant named Benandonner to a fight. MacCool built the causeway across the sea so he could go to war. But when he saw that Benandonner was a lot bigger than he was, he ran back here and got his wife to dress him up like a baby. She sewed a giant diaper made from the sails of a ship and put it on him. When Benandonner came over and saw how big MacCool's baby was, he figured his father must be a gianter giant than he was. As Benandonner fled back to Scotland, he tore the Causeway apart so MacCool couldn't follow him."

When you return to the hostel that night, it's been colonized by a school group from Londonderry. They're like ants in the kitchen, everywhere and in the way. Your food is where you left it in a cubby, but your Swiss Army Knife is gone. Fuck! One of the little bastards stole it. You

don't know if the kids are Catholic or Protestant. You imagine your knife turning up in the back of a soldier, and you regret leaving it out.

Time to head to Limerick to find out about the poem, so the next morning you walk for a bit, then stick out your thumb and get picked up by a trucker who makes deliveries along the coast. You look out at the water, which you learn is not called the Welsh Sea on this side, nor the English Sea nor the Scottish Sea. It's still the Irish Sea. You're about to say Ireland sure is beautiful until you remember what happened when you said England is beautiful in Wales, and the driver stopped the car and told you to get out saying, "This is Wales, not bloody England." You keep your mouth shut until this driver asks, "So where might you be from?"

"New York."

He stops the truck and looks at you. "You mean in America?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my goodness. I can't believe it. My cousin Tommy Lynch lives in Chicago. Do you know him?"

You want to laugh. He probably knows everyone between Belfast and Londonderry and thinks you know everyone between New York and Chicago.

"No, sorry, I don't know him."

After giving you half his sandwich and pledging his lifelong friendship, the trucker lets you off at an intersection where he says you can get another ride through Londonderry then into the Republic of Ireland. And you get another ride with two guys in a three-wheeled milk truck. You hadn't seen these strange vehicles in Britain proper, but they're all over Northern Ireland. You throw your backpack on the flatbed next to empty milk crates and get in the cramped cab. They ask where you're going, and you say Donegal. They say they'll take you through Londonderry—they call it Derry—to the Irish border, and from there you'll have a straight run to Donegal on the other coast. Their thick accents…brogues…are difficult to understand, but you can see they're angry. What you finally get is that that morning there was a protest in the Bogside, a Catholic neighborhood where two of their friends were shot.

"Fookin' Brits just drove up and ordered everybody on the ground. Our mates refused to get on their knees and the fookin' bastards shot them with their fookin' rubber bullets. They hurt, man. They can kill you."

You're horrified. You know nothing about this war that you didn't know was a war until a few days earlier. It makes no sense. In a few weeks soldiers will shoot and kill fourteen innocent Catholics in the Bogside in a massacre that will be known as Bloody Sunday.

The driver proceeds through checkpoints manned by armed soldiers. These barriers are made of concrete, wood and barbed wire arranged as a maze. And there are speed bumps. The posted speed limit is 5 mph so the soldiers can get a look at who's in the vehicle. Your driver slows, opens his window, spits at the soldiers and curses "Go home, you fookin' murderers!" The soldiers have automatic rifles. He has empty milk crates. You think he's nuts.

He enters a maze, turns right, turns left, turns right again. You pass through three or four of these when the driver says, "One more and we'll drive you to the border." He slows down to crawl through the "one more" when some kids across the street start throwing rocks at the soldiers.

As the soldiers lift their rifles, the driver curses "O fook!" He steps on the gas and speeds through the maze. You hear the milk crates slide from one side of the flatbed to the other and know your backpack is sliding with them. Then the abrupt turn and everything slides the other way.

You hear shots fired.

"O fook! O fook!" all three of you say at once, as you crouch as low as you can in the cab, your forehead pressing against the dashboard. On the way down you notice the speedometer racing toward fifteen mph. That's nuts, you think. This maze is tricky at five miles an hour. Impossible at fifteen. You don't know if the soldiers are using real bullets or rubber bullets. More shots. You don't know if the soldiers are shooting at the kids or shooting at you. You're surprised the truck doesn't roll over at this speed. You're surprised you're not dead.

The truck breaks out of the maze and races away. Several minutes down the road the driver stops and yells, "Get out!" He points and tells you

to run that way and you'll be in the Republic of Ireland. You get out and almost forget to take your backpack, which, holy fookin' shit! is still there. You grab it. You can barely breathe. The truck roars away. You haul your ass in the direction he pointed.

You don't see a border sign, so you don't know if you've crossed into the Republic or not. Eventually you stop running to catch your breath and make sure you're alive and unshot, and damn! You look at the sky and raise your fist and scream. And scream. You shouldn't be shot at in a war that has nothing to do with you, a war you didn't even know is going on. You don't even live here. How fucking stupid! Killing each other over a God that doesn't exist. While you know nothing about it, you can at least understand the Muslims and the Jews killing each other because they believe in different gods. But Catholics and Protestants, they believe in the same guy. They're on the same team. Obviously, you know nothing about the Reformation and the centuries of hatred between Catholics and Protestants. Then you have an idea, an original idea:

Why are we killing each other because of our religions? Why can't we see that we're all human beings? We're all basically the same."

In the history of the whole fucking world, no one has ever thought this until you fucking thought it in the Republic of fucking Ireland in December of fucking 1971. You're fucking brilliant!

You hitch a ride to Donegal, check into a B&B, and sit in a pub till closing, trying to drown your original idea and your miserable brilliance. Hours later, despite several shots of Irish whiskey and several pints of Guinness, you lie shaking in bed all night.

In the morning you begin a two-day trek south toward Limerick. You walk and hitchhike, walk and hitchhike and arrive in Galway, where you check into the youth hostel and despite your earlier, decision to not drink so much, you spend another night in a pub getting drunk.

In the morning, you walk and hitchhike, walk and hitchhike toward Limerick, each ride taking you just a "wee bit down the road."

You notice something strange. In England, Wales and Scotland the cows ignored you, but when you walk past the farms in Ireland, they come

up to the fence mooing at you as if you're a taxi and they're looking for a ride. These Irish cows are friendlier than the English ones, you think. You mention this to one of the drivers who gives you a lift.

"Oh, that's a riot," he says. "No, they're not lookin' for friends, the cows. They're lookin' for someone to milk them, 'cause those farmers are drunk from the night before and are sleeping in."

You know nothing about cows or farmers, but you do know about getting drunk and how hard it is to get up in the morning to go to work.

Along one of these small roads you see a billboard split in the middle with two advertisements. On the left "God is our refuge and strength," which is from one of the psalms you recited when you were a kid. And on the right "Double Diamond, the best beer in the bar." Even you can see that religion and alcohol are the biggest problems in Ireland. Then, Huh! you realize that religion and alcohol are probably your biggest problems too.

There's just one other person staying at the youth hostel in Limerick, and after five and a half minutes you become best friends. Callum asks what you're doing, and you tell him that you want to find out where the limerick comes from.

"The what?" he asks.

"The limerick," you say. He has no idea what you're talking about.

Callum is a sidewalk artist from Dublin. He goes from city to city sketching nativity scenes on the pavements outside churches in the weeks before Christmas. Of course, he has a box for donations. The next morning you walk with him to St. Augustine's Church. He's down on his hands and knees, moving stubs of chalk across the pavement. Figures appear: Baby Jesus in a manger, Mary, Joseph, sheep, a cat. You wonder what he does when it rains.

Then you look closely, and notice things are not what they appear to be. The tree in the background is actually a rocket ship. The halo around the babe in the manger is a space helmet.

Like you, Callum's an atheist. When someone puts a coin in his box and says something nice, Callum tells them to fuck off!

"I despise the old fakers," he says. "They flock into the church to make

deals with God and then walk back out to screw their neighbors."

You tell Callum about the shooting incident in Derry, and he agrees the world would be better without religion. You describe the billboard you saw, one half a psalm the other half an ad for beer. "I'd love to fuckin' see that," he says.

"If only they can get rid of the God part," you say, "and keep the beer part, this might be a decent country."

"No," he says, "it's too late for Ireland. We're fucked!"

You go off to find the building you're looking for. On the ground floor is a library, the floor above it a museum, each tended by a little old lady. You try the museum first. "I want to find out about the history of the limerick."

"Well, you've come to the right place. We have artifacts and documents going back to the city's founding."

"No, not the city," you say. "The poem."

"What poem?"

"The limerick poem. You know, it goes like "There once was a man from Nantucket…"

"Nantucket? What's that?"

"I don't know, but that's not the point. I'm talking about the poem. The limerick poem." The woman looks confused.

"Why don't you ask at the library downstairs. I'm sure they have poems there." You realize she's never heard of the limerick.

You try the library with the same result. The woman asks if you can recite one. You search your brain for one you can say to this little old woman who reminds you of Aunt Dud, but the only ones you can think of are dirty.

"Sorry, I can't think of any."

How is it that people in Limerick never heard of the limerick? The only reason you came to this fucking country was because you thought you'd look into the limerick. You've wasted your time and almost got killed in the process.

You walk around the city. It reeks of ancient decay. Everything is rundown, dark, ugly and grim. You sit on the side of the River Shannon feeling sorry for yourself. You stare at the water and notice a twig stuck near the bank. As the water rushes around it, it shakes, but it doesn't come loose. You surprise yourself by wondering which is worse, to stupidly hang on as the water passes you by, or to be moved by the river, which will shove you out to sea. You wonder if you are being pushed by a river? Or are you hanging on to something you hope will save you? The only thing you've ever clung to is poetry. You guess you're more of a keep moving, let the river push you along guy. You toss a rock at the stick to knock it loose, but you miss.

The air is full of smoke from the coal fires that heat the houses. It's a pleasant smell. You stare at the river and after a while, a long while, you realize that it's beautiful in a gray, ashy kind of way. You look at the sky, which is also gray…and you are overcome. A great and brutal weight seems to lift from your shoulders, and you feel something replace it. Something with wings. As you look out at the River Shannon you remember what Wordsworth wrote as he looked out at the River Wye:

In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:

You don't know the word "awesome," but that's what you're experiencing. Awe in its purest state: powerful, sublime, beautiful…and terrifying. You need to change your life. You take out your notebook and write:

here
holy spirit
there
holy spirit
holy spirit
holy spirit

river
holy spirit
sea gulls
holy spirit
gray sky
coal smoke
holy spirit
holy spirit
rocks
cars
dogs
holy spirit
holy spirit
holy spirit

You've written a poem about the holy spirit. What kind of atheist are you?

You go back to the church to find Callum, but before you can tell him about your poem he says, "I met these people, and when they said they liked my drawing I told them to fuck off! like I usually do, but instead of cursing me or walking away, they said, 'Sorry, man. We didn't mean to hassle you.' And I said, 'Why are you so nice?' and they said, 'We're members of…' I didn't get that part, 'a new religion, and there are fifty of us.' I don't know if they mean fifty in Limerick or in Ireland or in the whole world? Then the girl gives me this card and says I should come to their meeting tomorrow and check it out."

He shows you the card. On one side is a quotation written with fancy colorful letters neither of you can read. It has a name after it, like who wrote it. On the other side is a neatly printed address.

"If it's a religion," you say, "they'll probably just start another war."

Callum agrees, "You're right about that, but there're only fifty. Maybe we can talk 'em out of it."

You think about that and say, "And if we can't, maybe they'll give us a cup of tea."

So it's decided. You'll stay in Limerick another day and go to this meeting with Callum and try to talk these people out of their religion so they don't start another war. And if it doesn't work, maybe they'll give you a cup of tea. Who knows, maybe they'll offer you a biscuit too.

When you show Callum your poem about the holy spirit he says, "It's astonishing. I know exactly what you mean. There's something profound about Limerick."

You're having second thoughts when you and Callum arrive at the address the next day. You think about the nuns that beat you, about Father Smith who "wrestled" you and about the priests at St. Bonaventure who lied to you. What has religion ever done but hurt you? Why are you going out of your way so these people can call you a sinner and tell you you're going to hell?

Callum knocks and a girl around your age opens the door. He holds out the card and says, "I met these people yesterday. They gave me this card and invited me to come here today."

"Welcome," the girl says.

"Is it okay," he says, "I've brought a friend?"

"Lovely, come in."

The living room is crowded with young people sitting on chairs and on the floor. Someone is playing a guitar. And they're singing. You don't know the song. They seem happy. They're grooving. You figure they must be high, but you don't smell weed. Then, strange, you see three white haired women sitting on folding chairs on the other side of the room, and they're grooving too. No way the old ladies would be getting high. There's something else going on here.

The girl who answered the door says, "Find a place to sit." You and Callum look around. He heads for a spot on the floor near a fireplace. You find a space in the middle of the room next to the guy playing the guitar. He nods at you as you sit down.

He stops playing and says, "Welcome. My name is Jack."

You tell him your name and say, "You play pretty good."

"I'm in a band with my mates. They're here too."

"So," you ask. "What's going on?"

He says, "We believe in world unity. We're all equal."

You couldn't have heard him right. "That's my idea," you say. "We're all human. I thought of it last week."

"Our religion has been teaching it for more than a hundred years."

"What's it called?" you ask. He tells you. You never heard of it.

"The word "religion" means to unite," he says. "So, if two people are arguing about religion, we believe they're both wrong."

"Religion doesn't bring people together," you say. "It breaks them apart. They're killing each other not far from here. I got caught in a shooting thing in Derry."

"What happened?" he asks, and you tell him.

"That's scary," he says, "but I live in Ireland. You don't have to tell me. My parents won't speak to me because my girlfriend's family is Protestant."

"Wow. I'm sorry."

He starts strumming his guitar again.

"What else do you guys believe?" you ask, but before he can answer one of the old ladies stands up and says, "Welcome. Thank you all for coming to our home." Strange, she has an American accent, not Irish. "Why don't we start with some prayers." And with that everyone is quiet.

You look around. Most have their eyes closed. You're not going to close your eyes. You look across the room at Callum. He looks at you.

A girl says a prayer about removing problems, and you wonder if their god is going to remove you, suck you up with a giant vacuum cleaner into the sky. You hope not, at least until you get a cup of tea.

A guy with a red beard sitting near Callum reads a prayer. You're hardly listening when you hear a beautiful phrase about dazzling stars. You love the sound of that and start to pay attention. There's a brief pause between prayers, sometimes a bit longer before the next one begins. You realize no one seems to be in charge. Where are their priests?

The woman stands up again begins to speak. Is she the priest? She doesn't look like a priest. Besides, she's a woman. You've never heard a woman talk about religion except for the nuns. And you don't think she's a nun.

"In the past," she says, "people were illiterate and needed teachers to tell them what was in their holy books, first rabbis, then priests and ministers. The world today…you can fly anywhere in a matter of hours. And because people are educated, we don't need a clergy to tell us what's in the holy books."

If they don't need a clergy, you're guessing, she's not a priest. And if they don't have priests, who does the stuff? You glance at Callum. He's watching her, paying attention.

"Each of us is responsible for our own spiritual development. It's not good enough to sit back and be part of a congregation. We have to act. We have to improve mankind, to advance civilization. To create peace. One way to do that is to eliminate all forms of prejudice."

You're good with that.

"One way to do that is to have a common language that everyone will speak in addition to the one they grow up with. This way we can communicate with each other while preserving our different cultures, many of which are dying out."

The woman continues, "This way we can talk to one another and maybe not have so many wars. Though I must admit, you Irish speak the same language I do, but a lot of the time, with your brogues, I don't understand what you're saying." Everyone laughs, even you. You don't think you've ever laughed about anything to do with religion.

She talks for a few more minutes, thanks everyone for listening and sits down.

You ask Jack about the stuff you're not supposed to do? He tells you that they don't drink or do drugs, and they are prohibited from having sex outside of marriage. You knew it was too good to be true. It's the same crap you grew up with. Religion telling you what to do. You haven't had sex since you left New York in September. But wait till you're married? That's impossible. God never believed in you, so why should you believe in God? And not drinking? Even Catholics drink.

Jack introduces you to the three women. "Welcome to our home," one says. Another offers you a cup of tea. You look at these people who appear to be happy, and you wonder if you could be happy too. You remember

what you and Callum said yesterday that maybe you can talk them out of it. But you're not sure that you want to talk them out of it. You'd like to believe that this religion can stop wars and have everyone speak the same language. You'd like to believe that they'll change the world. You'll never become one of them, but they seem to have a few things worked out. You hope that maybe, even though you don't believe in God, that this is true.

"Are you a Seeker?" one of the women asks.

You've never thought of yourself that way, but it makes sense. You've been seeking your whole life. "I guess," you say.

"Well, I hope you find what you're looking for. And if we can help, let us know."

There is so much you like about these people and their religion. They don't push. They really seem to practice what they preach. If only they believed in drinking instead of God, you could see yourself….No. No way. You need a drink. Religion isn't for you. But this religion is different from what you grew up with. It has a heart.

"Do you have something I can read?" you ask.

The woman who gave the talk looks at her friends, then looks back at you and says, "No, sorry." They must not be trying too hard to get people to join if they're not passing out pamphlets like the Moonies and the Hare Krishnas.

"I can get you a book from Dublin," Jack says, "but it'll take a few days."

You were only planning to be in Limerick for one day, which has extended now to two, but, what the heck. You decide to hang around and wait for the book.

"Okay," you say.

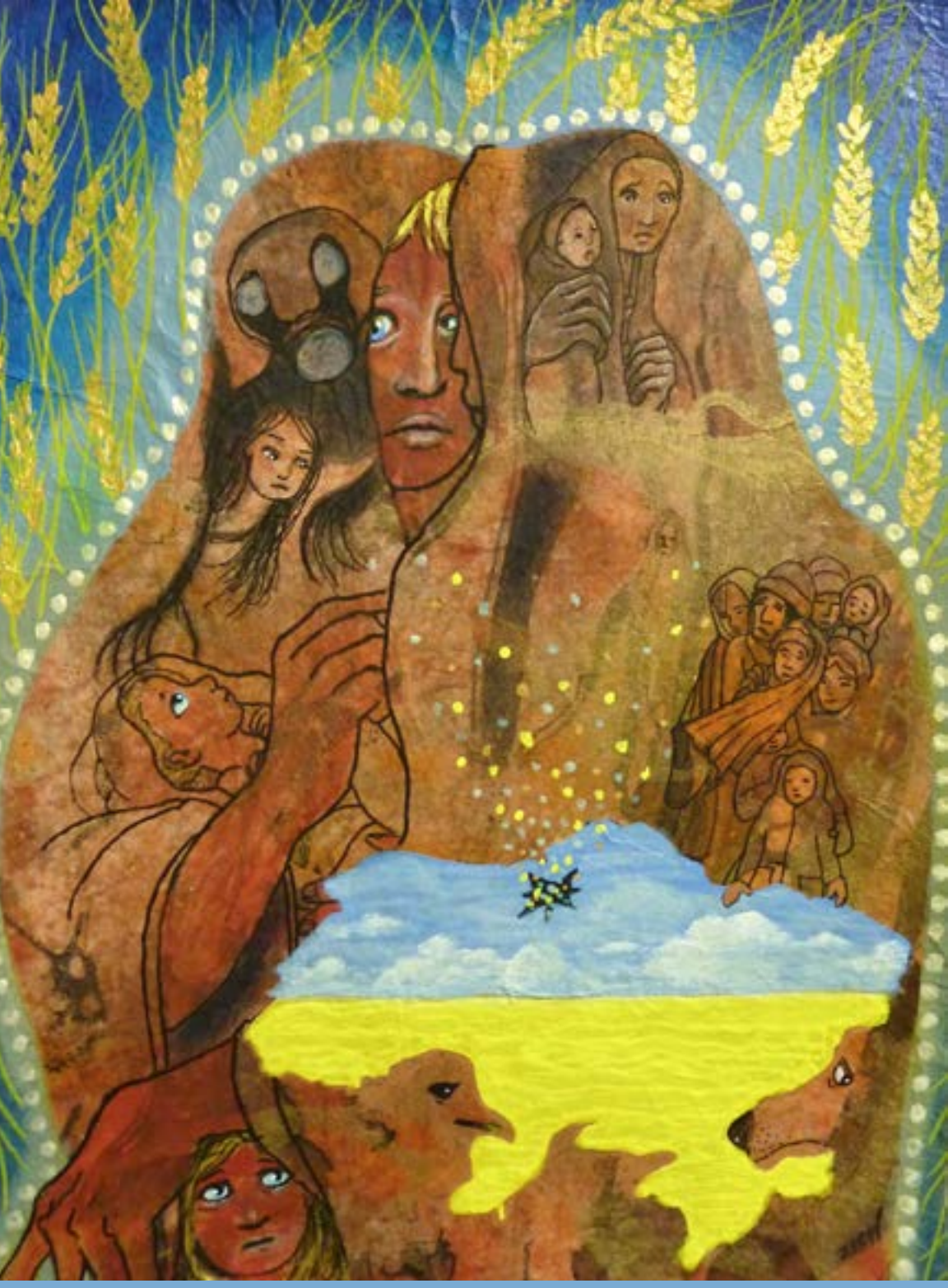
You and Callum go back to the house the next night and the night after and you feel good. You feel whole, and you haven't felt whole since…you can't remember.

You decide to make believe you can live like they do. You won't have sex. Ha. As if the girls were lining up. And you'll try to not drink. You made it three weeks in high school, so you're pretty sure you can make it a few days in Limerick. You decide not to curse around these people, but you're

not going to say their prayers. You ask questions and try to understand the answers, but you know you're missing a lot. There's always music. Jack and his bandmates are there every night and add a song or two.

When the book arrives, you ask Jack how much you owe him, but he says no, it's a gift. He writes in it "To … with best wishes from Jack." You know that this book is special. You double wrap it in plastic and bury it deep in your backpack to keep it safe and dry.

After saying goodbye to Callum and Jack and your other new friends, you leave Limerick and hitchhike to Dublin where you drink your first drink in a week. You feel good and bad at the same time. You like them, their sincerity, their belief that as they can change their own lives, they can change the world. Too bad they believe in God. Too bad they don't drink. Best not to think about this anymore. You take the ferry to Holyhead, and you're back in Wales.



Jane Zich
Remembering Ukraine

Easter in Our Palms

Palm Sunday, 10 April 2022

When children drink from puddles carved by bombs
from battle tanks emblazon-sprayed with Zs,
our prayers cry out this Sunday of the Palms.

How dare we sip our tea or sing the Psalms
while Ukraine bunkers boom with ghostlike shrieks
and old men drink from puddles, maimed by bombs

as beardless soldiers gag the rebel songs
of white-winged neighbors cycling blackened streets?
Our requiem prayer this Sunday of the Swans

begs mercy for a motherland of moms,
pleads Alphas locking horns: at once, release!
No toddlers must drink puddles, eat their bombs

as Councils spin spent wheels with talks of arms
while dying towns crave Ministries of Peace.
Yet silence reigns this Sunday of the Palms—

Oh God, our beggar world implores Your alms
to suture hearts with Holy balm so deep
that youth will frisk in puddles, freed from bombs
Our prayers arise this Sunday in our palms

Jeannette Tien -Wei Law

Spring with Refugees at the Border

All winter the persistent scraping
in the cold and wind at the window

my azalea pleading
with pencil fingers with tendinous arms.

I thought to prune it out
come spring.

But now
in warm light pale purple faces

flock into bloom
massing against the glass—

a profusion
a bramble
tender and tough

determined
in this season of jubilation

desperate
after a season of mourning.

Who would dare now to check

their heaven-scented
agency?

Let them in.
Let them in.
Let them in.

Cheryl Anne Latuner

I Wish I'd Held My Father's Hand

My father put what he wanted to buy on the drugstore counter and said a polite "Good Afternoon" to the young white clerk, who didn't return the greeting or meet his eye, just stared at the items as if Father had dumped a bucket of kitchen scraps, and then with exquisite slowness that dripped contempt, began to ring them up.

It was an ordinary day in Indiana in the early sixties. Everywhere a black man went he had to bite his tongue. Looking back over the years, I wish I could go back to that afternoon when my father stood quiet and still while that punk tried to put him in his place. I wish I could have caught his eye, delivered the silent message that I understood what he had to go through every day to keep the peace, to raise his family.

I wish I'd held my father's hand.

Charles Coe

Not enough home, not enough land

It's always three years since
one tragedy
or another, though
they mount, one atop
another, like poorly domesticated
animals, especially when the weather
warms up, since historically
guns hibernate
during the winter, and make
baby bullets in the spring;
that's how revolutions are
born, though most are still
waiting for conception, waiting
to be loaded into arm cannons
hurling rocks at bystanders
who may very well be just
as guilty as armor-clad
peacekeepers, who only exercise
violence when
it suits them. I once debated
birthright versus heritage
and lost,
though the fight was fixed
and had been for at least
a thousand years; anything shorter
is just a brawl unworthy of more
than cursory mention, and yet
we all use Arabic numbers, and our
alphabet still starts with Aleph:

Ori Fienberg

common memes should be
enough on which to build
a peace accord, or at least
an afford, because choosing
war is a lifestyle choice;
an olive branch can extend beyond
a barrier, a wall can be built
from words, and shaped around
people; one checkpoint is not
enough, but all who try in earnest
and make progress should pass:
there is no passing grade for
conflict, no honor
society; a wall can run forever
in one direction, but there are lines
we should never cross: bite into
a lemon if you seek bitterness;
why is there never enough
pomegranate syrup to share,
or a point where ploughshares
can cross without clashing.

A Library of American Dreams

Brian Schwartz

Somewhat late in our mostly agnostic parenting my wife and I started casting about northern New Jersey for a suitable lefty progressive Jewish temple. We joined one; we figured our young daughters should both eventually have bat mitzvahs. During the pandemic, we began receiving mass emails from the temple's young rabbis (both rabbis younger than I am—who could have imagined this?) inviting our family to join Zoom services and virtual support groups: an effort at congregating. That June, the temple began sending information about how we could join in mourning for George Floyd, through various virtual events and physical gatherings. *May his memory be a blessing*. The mixture of social justice and faith-based ritual made me feel good about choosing this place to provide our children with some Jewish education. But while I valued all the temple's emailed invitations, the truth was we weren't very active in the temple community, so I felt guilty, too, whenever a new announcement popped up in my inbox.

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That summer by the Jersey Shore, two different humpback whales came unusually close to the beaches, seeking oily-fleshed fish called menhaden, a favorite food source. Apparently one of these whales was

young and slim enough to slip into a river inlet, allowing local shore dwellers to whale-watch from their waterfront homes. (An adult humpback might grow over 50 feet long; a newborn is closer to 12 feet; the young whale raiding the Shrewsbury River that summer was between these lengths.) I wanted some state marine biologist to announce how I, a soft-hearted weekend environmentalist, might make a difference by joining a civilian corps of whale-spotters and seal-seers. It was too sad to imagine a confused young whale stuck and starving near Atlantic City, visible to gamblers in the casinos. But it turned out our Jersey humpback was okay, not stuck, just hungry. Anyway, the river is miles from Atlantic City, and at the time gamblers could only dream about gambling: the casinos were all shuttered by the pandemic.

It was a relief to learn that the whale had made its way back into open water, able to eat, swim and breathe as it normally would.

***

In her essay "Bewilderment," the poet Fanny Howe creates an alternative definition of imagination. "Weakness, fluidity, concealment, and solitude find their usual place in the dream world," Howe writes, "where the sleeping witness finally feels safe enough to lie down in mystery." For Howe, the imagination and the dream world are places where we unjoin, cast aside our conscious affiliations, embrace what we can't understand. In dreams we can conceal ourselves, and in that concealment, we are shielded from the expectations of others. Howe's meditation reminds me of what happened (so I was told) in my own house one night during that summer of 2020: I went to bed early, began snoring so loudly that my wife decided she would rather sleep on the couch than trouble me after a long day of virtual meetings with work colleagues. My wife didn't want to wake our daughters, either, both of whom were dreaming their own dreams. The next morning I walked past the downstairs couch and couldn't fathom why my wife was there under a blanket. When she shared her story, I told her she should've shaken me

awake. But no: she wanted everyone in our family, all of us—so on top of each other every day during the pandemic—to have our own separate nights.

So many hours asleep, when a family is both together and apart. And in our waking hours we are more apart than we realize; we dream with our eyes open, too. Five years before George Floyd's murder, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote about what he simply calls "the Dream" in his book *Between the World and Me* (our temple's first Social Justice Book Club selection: a congregational activity I immediately felt comfortable joining). The Dream, Coates insists, is an illusion of equality and justice within America's borders. In his book, Coates writes that the Dream is "the lie of innocence," an illusion of blameless peace most white Americans cling to because it's the only way to believe we've earned our prosperity and safety. But African Americans, Coates reminds us, have not been allowed equal access to this Dream. Unlike the unconscious world Howe describes, where we can be freed from conventional roles and can wrestle with mystery, Coates's capital-D Dream describes a state of blindness that reinforces unjust American beliefs about race, class, culture and law enforcement.

The Dream Coates defines in his book can be especially complicated for Jewish people in this country. I am not the first to make this claim—the scholar Marc Dollinger gets at something similar in his 2018 book *Black Power, Jewish Politics*—but American Jews are caught in a head-spinning paradox, having to check our community's white privilege at the same time we are confronting rising 21st-century anti-Semitism. In most (though not all!) cases, Jewish Americans are white people. But we often don't feel as white as we look. As Jews, we still feel the precarity of our grandparents or parents, many of whom barely outran centuries of virulent European anti-Semitism before arriving on American shores. During and after the devastation of the Holocaust, the Nazi genocide that caused the murder of six million Jews, the U.S. became our most trusted sanctuary, providing Jewish people a (mostly, relatively, usually) safe haven in American whiteness. That said, even now, when I drop my daughters off at our New Jersey temple for various religious classes and social events, there's

usually a police car in the parking lot. Jewish temples across America have increased their security budgets significantly in recent years.

Guess why.

In his story "The Library of Babel," Jorge Luis Borges imagines an infinite archive which contains "Everything," including, as the story wonderfully puts it, "the minute history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels." Borges's endless storehouse of texts and materials reflects both the past and the future, the earthbound and the unearthly. I love the phrase "autobiographies of the archangels" because it implies that even divine beings might need time to painstakingly compose their memoirs—that angels can't simply transmit their stories by dreaming. What if there were a library devoted to the hours we spend sleeping, unable to join with others? With his fictional library, Borges pictures this unacknowledged spillover of our conscious and unconscious histories. What could be more peaceful? And yet this Borges text is full of dread.

In recent years, a new kind of overstuffed American library has been constructed using footage from body cameras and shaky phone videos. As this library's holdings grow, we can hear—even in the virtual space where we live so much of our lives now—we can all hear the shelves groaning. We hear the names of Black Americans who have been brutalized and killed by police: Breonna Taylor and Jacob Blake were just two of the victims whose names rose above the waves of noise during that first pandemic summer. As I write this, news about the racist mass killing at a Tops Supermarket in Buffalo—a hate crime perpetrated by a white kid who grew up 30 minutes from my hometown—is still making headlines. The story of George Floyd is perhaps the best-known item in this tragic collection, and for much of the summer of 2020, people around the world marched in the streets, grieving and raging at the way Floyd died—pleading for his dead mother while a white police officer kneeled on Floyd's neck and ground his airway into oblivion. The video footage allows anyone to imagine Floyd's desperate need to breathe. If they care to look, white Americans can now see that George Floyd's name has joined an expanding archive almost too far-reaching to comprehend.

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There is a well-known, centuries-old Jewish tale about a monstrous creature called the golem—a clay man, big as a whale, nothing like an angel but magically animated to come to the defense of a Jewish community under siege near the city of Prague. The clay man is fed a secret word, then the creature rises from the ground to scatter and pound anti-Semitic attackers he finds all around him. In the golem story, a just-born Frankenstein monster with dirt-covered eyes has no trouble determining who's suffering injustice and who deserves punishment.

***

I am a Jewish writer trying to discuss whiteness; I am a white writer trying to think about the African American experience. Writing is school, the French literary critic Helene Cixous suggests, and perhaps she means that the words of others—the words we choose to read and listen to—will inform and influence our own compositions, and our words in turn might animate others. In my temple book club's virtual discussion of Coates's *Between the World and Me*, the young rabbi, troubled by Coates's bleak description of "the Dream," asked, "Is there anything hopeful about this book?" And, haltingly, I said to my fellow Jews on Zoom, "If there's something hopeful here, maybe it's the library Coates describes visiting as an undergrad at Howard—the way libraries can help us fill our minds and mouths with unfamiliar words that others have written." How might this relate to the golem from the old folktale who needs someone else, a living other, to place a word in its mouth, a Hebrew word that animates its clay form? As legend has it, the golem was a body fashioned by panicked people in need of protection. The panic is over. Even as anti-Semitism persists, even if we still have reason to protect ourselves—and we surely do—as Jews we need to find ways to recognize our power and privilege, to join and defend a different community of vulnerable bodies.

Giti Ganjei Saeidian
Hidden Eyes

Maror

How bitter is bitter without the sweet.
We taste test it, then retreat behind cups
of wine. Dip and drip droplets from goblets
onto our plates. Count the plagues like blessings,
like sheep on sleepless nights, which makes this night
different from all the others. We turn
the page with the help of the hand of God,
repeat the phrases from the sages set
down from other ages. Unfurl our tongues
to pronounce all those once-familiar words,
the sounds that catch in the throat, trace the years.
Open the door to the vagabond soul
waiting outside, deciding to come in.
Where is enough ever enough and when?

Deborah Doolittle

For Those Who Pray

Bring *gape* as well as *Agape*, whatever *creed* the day will bear instead of *screed*, and offer neither *crow*, nor *crown*. Allow *Ave* and *have*. Pour mercy over *deadliness* and *deadlines*. Let *glob* be *globe*, at rest on axis and spinning like a star. Let *descant* rescue our *descents* and *decent* be sufficient to the day. May *muss* turn into *muse* and feed us lovely words. Lead *dread* resolve to *tread* and bring us safe returnreturnreturn. Where *cares* spill forth like volcanoes, let prayer be water's caress, receiving fire and making islands where new growth takes root, survives the storms. Let prayer be island. Be lit window. Be unbreakable and unbreaking. Let it be play in the breathing fields. Be fields, be breath, be the quiver of aspen leaves, water over rock. And let me learn praying. I have no silence in me, though I sleep.

Devon Miller-Duggan

Apology

Kit Carlson

It is cold and grey, this day before Thanksgiving, in the last waning week of the liturgical calendar—just a few days now before we will flip the page to Advent and begin the church year again. The winds are dangerously high, shoving my car down the interstate along with the chaotic swirl of late-season oak leaves. I am heading to a small Michigan town, to a church I have never seen before, to meet a priest I do not know. Forty-five miles from home. It seems far enough--far enough away to do what I have come to do.

I am going there to make a private confession to a fellow Episcopal priest. In our tradition, this is not a regular, or even an expected, practice. "Many should, some will, none must," the saying goes. In my own ordained ministry, I have heard only a few confessions. Usually, it's because someone has done some singular, horrible thing that has seared them with shame. Receiving formal, sacramental forgiveness helps the person move from horror and self-loathing into a place of hopefulness. After the two of us have gathered in the chapel, with the liturgy of the Prayer Book to hold us up, it seems that the penitent one then discovers a way forward into the future, a re-entry into a blessedly ordinary life.

I have heard others' confessions, but I have never made one myself. Although we were trained in seminary in the practice of this "minor rite," as the Episcopal church calls it, none of us were expected to make our own

confessions first, before we could hear anyone else's. I have been ordained for almost twenty years, proclaiming God's forgiveness to others, while never actively, formally—apart from regular Sunday worship—seeking it out for myself.

But something inside me has moved me to this moment…or Someone. For weeks I have been compiling a list of sins that will not leave me alone—old grudges, repetitive and destructive behaviors, people I have neglected. People I can't stop hating. They are not all the sins of an entire lifetime--I am willing to assume that kneeling every Sunday with my congregation and saying the prayer of confession along with them has managed to help me access God's forgiveness. But this list is about things more stubbornly persistent, even things I did as a child that I never said "sorry" for. Even though now I am very sorry, and I can't apologize because the people I hurt are long ago scattered and lost from my life.

As my list grew longer, I decided to find a confessor, a priest who could listen to my list of sins and tell me God would forget every single item written upon it. I decided to stay within my own tradition—the Episcopal Church. I decided not to ask a friend or a familiar colleague. No, it must be a stranger. It has to be no one I will ever bump into at a clergy conference, only to lock eyes and think, *he knows what I have done*. So, I started reading the websites of churches fifty miles or more away, wondering if there was anyone out there who I could trust enough to do this. At last I found a website that said, "contact the priest for information about weddings or baptisms or" … there it was… "reconciliation/confession." The friendly biography of the priest convinced me that she wouldn't be judgmental or curious or offer that kind of sanctimonious preciousness that I most fear. I reached out. We made an appointment for this grim Wednesday morning, right before Thanksgiving.

And here I am.

I ease off the highway, sliding in the rain along narrow streets, past historic gingerbread-trimmed houses and high-end, farm-to-table restaurants, until I pull into a worn parking lot behind a solid, red-brick,

Victorian-era church with a square bell tower. I sit there in my car without moving for some time, considering and reconsidering. Why have I come? I have nothing cataclysmic to confess. I pull out my list of lingering sins. There is nothing here that would shock my congregation or disappoint my husband. But as I read the list, I feel a sense of weight, a kind of grief over some of the items written there, and also a peculiar resentment, as I re-read the names of people whom I have not been able to forgive.

Reading it over again, the list feels like a catalogue of wounds, the kind that don't heal properly. The kind that keep oozing and swelling, no matter how much antibacterial ointment you spread upon them. They don't close up and fade away. They don't scab over and seal up into scars. And really, that is why I have driven fifty miles on a dismal day to kneel in a cold church and speak each one out loud.

Because I want healing. Because each sin, each open wound, is holding me back from God. Because I can't let go, haven't let go, even over fifty years in some cases. I want to let go. I want to be healed. I want to be reconciled.

I have come for the rite that the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* calls "Reconciliation of a Penitent."

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Reconcile. From Latin—*re-conciliare*, to unite again, to bring together, to restore.

Penitent. Not adjective, but noun—*A* penitent, *The* penitent. A singular thing. A singular person. From the Latin also, *paenitere*, which means repenting—a recursive definition. A recursive definition that blossomed in medieval times, in Old French, with expressive force, the *re* grabbing the *pentir* by the throat as if to say, "This is serious business, buddy."

Reconciliation of a Penitent is a short liturgy performed by a person and a priest (generally a Catholic, Episcopal, or Orthodox priest) to help erase those sins that have driven a wedge between a mortal human being and the vast infinity we address as *God*. It is not designed to deal with all

the daily wedges that clog the lines of divine-human communication--like being too busy, or needing more sleep, or having to answer just one more email, or contributing to global warming simply by sitting in a heated home.

Reconciliation of a Penitent imagines a wedge larger than the separations caused by simply trying to live your life. Reconciliation of Penitent is designed to heal persistent breaches in one single relationship—the penitent's relationship with God.

It is rare in my Episcopal tradition for someone to learn about this rite and then respond, "Yes. That's just what I need. God and I have been on the outs lately, and it's all my fault. Reconciliation sounds great. Let's get started!" More likely, they will say, "I'm not a bad person. What would I confess? I cheated at golf?" Or, "Why should I go tell all this to a priest? Can't I just talk to God directly?" Or, "I confess my sins in Sunday worship. That should be enough."

Even Catholics say these sorts of things. Maybe fifty or sixty years ago, Catholics made regular, weekly private confessions. But modern Catholics, by and large, shun the confessional. In 2005, Georgetown researchers reported that three-quarters of Catholics never participate in private confession, or they do so less than once a year. Fewer than two percent make confession at least once a month.

Perhaps this is because, in general—modern American Catholics included—most of us would describe ourselves as "good people." Or at least people who try to be "good people" in a general sort of way. The idea of exposing our human failings out loud to another person, and then asking that person to proclaim God's mercy and forgiveness seems unnecessary at best, outlandish at worst. Most people want God to believe that they are doing the very best they can. They don't want to believe that their persistent cruelty, snarky judgments, bad attitudes, or careless neglect are significant enough to deserve God's sorrow, God's wrath, or God's condemnation.

After all, you only have to enter the Twitterverse or turn on the news to see that many, many people around the world are doing very, very cruel

and evil things. Surely—the reluctant penitent might argue—it is *those* sins deserve God's sorrow, wrath, and condemnation. "Why not those people?" this penitent might ask. "Why me? I'm not a bad person."

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For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. – Romans 7:16, 19-20.

Why make a confession at all then, if we are basically good people, each of us doing the best we can to get through the day, to get through our lives? Well, Saint Paul, writing to the Romans, understood well enough why one might need to come face to face—now and then—with one's fallen and sinful self. Because you simply can't avoid the fact that you are, I am, we all are fallen and sinful selves. Even though we try to be good. Even though we are doing the very best that we can.

Saint Paul understood something profound about human nature, because it was written in his DNA, in his cells, proteins, and lymphatic system, in his organs, glands, and brain cells. It came to him from his culture's expectations for a nice Jewish boy, a Roman citizen, a human man locked into a patriarchal world, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, trained in classical rhetoric, with a personality hard-wired to demand the last word. When he was first converted, Paul's experience of the resurrected Christ convinced him that the New Creation was breaking into the world, that the power of Sin and Death had been crushed forever, and that he could live a new life according to the self-giving way of Christ.

Except he couldn't. He *wanted* to. He was chock full of advice on *how* to do it: how to live in love and embody the fruit of the Spirit -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. He even found himself living that way—from time to time.

Except he couldn't do it all the time. Yes, he was a new man in Christ, but that old man-- the biological man, the culturally-constructed man, was

still in there. As long as he was alive in this world—in the flesh, Paul would say—he was trapped in this dilemma.

The good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.

Poor Paul. Poor us, who are actually no different from--and no better than--Paul.

Why do I do this? That is perhaps the best place to start, if one is to consider that there may be things that need confessing, that a wedge has been driven between a "good person" who can't be good all the time, and the love of God. *Why do I do this?* Why do I hurt people I love so much? Why do I lash out? Why do I fall into this same, repetitive behavior, over and over and over again? Why do I do the things I do not wish to do? Why am I still holding this same old grudge against this same old person? Why don't I do the things that I actually wish for and pray for and plan for?

As Paul would say: *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

***

I fold the list, slip it inside my small *Book of Common Prayer*, tuck the book inside my purse, and snap the purse shut. My peculiar sins are buried for the moment, and I look like any other person on the rainy street. Not like a penitent. Like a person.

The priest I have never met before welcomes me into her office. The woman I have been emailing with turns out to be a real person, with a soft, greying pageboy and bright, hazel eyes. Her office is small and warm, with a periwinkle wall covered in twenty or more different kinds of crosses. The wall gives me a place to direct my gaze; the crosses give me a topic to launch our conversation. I feel incredibly shy and awkward, as though she can see that I have a scribbled-on, folded-up list of sins stuffed inside the prayer book that is stuffed into my purse.

But there is no rush. We chat for fifteen minutes or more about all the things two colleagues chat about when they first meet: about congregants and churches and other priests we know in common, and Rite I eucharist

versus Rite II eucharist, and bishop transitions, until we run out of topics. Eventually, she leads me into the chilly church, where the grey November light shines dimly through pearly stained glass, and oak beams disappear high above us into the shadows of the vaulted ceiling. She puts on some lights. She asks if I want to sit or kneel. I decide to kneel, there in the front row of pews. She stands before me. We begin.

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The Reconciliation of a Penitent is found on page 447 of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Form One

The Penitent begins

Bless me, for I have sinned.

The Priest says

The Lord be in your heart and upon your lips that you may truly and humbly confess your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

("Amen," I say. My eyes are closed. I do not know if she makes the sign of the cross or not. But I must open my eyes now, because my moment has arrived.)

Penitent

I confess to Almighty God, to his Church, and to you, that I have sinned by my own fault in thought, word, and deed, in things done and left undone;

especially _____.

(The blank line is for me to fill in. This is what I have come for: my confession. I unfold the creased and worn sheet of paper. I have sorted the sins by category. I have scribbled them in the margins. I have drawn arrows connecting one to another. I begin to read, to read, to name, to

speak aloud, to list, to bring into the light things I have never shared with another living person, to get it all out there, to be done, to be done, to be done at last with all of it. To be done with it. At last.)

...for these and all other sins which I cannot now remember, I am truly sorry. I pray God to have mercy on me. I firmly intend amendment of life, and I humbly beg forgiveness of God and his Church, and ask you for counsel, direction, and absolution.
Here the Priest may offer counsel, direction, and comfort.

(She offers counsel. She zeroes in on those people I can't forgive. I have held grudges for years, like Stephen Crane's poem about the man in the desert, chewing and chewing on his heart. The poet asks, "Is it good, friend?" The man answers, "It is bitter—bitter. But I like it because it is bitter, and because it is my heart." Do I want to let go of those people I cannot let go of? I do, I do. I am tired of bitter chewing. Tired. I have been hurt and I haven't let it go. Some of the people on this list have even apologized, and still I chew on bitterness. Some of them will never apologize, because how can they know enough to be sorry, sorry that they are broken, or disordered, or even dead now? "Is it good, friend?" Not anymore. No more. I am done. I give up, give over--all of them, all of myself.)

The Priest then pronounces the absolution

(She has taken a tall glass flagon from a shelf near the altar. It is filled with oil, blessed oil, *oleum infirmorum* for anointing the sick, the sorrowful, the dying, the repentant, and the reconciled. She removes the glass globe of a stopper, and slides her thumb into the neck of the flagon until it is coated with oil. She draws a cross upon my forehead in fragrant slickness.)

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who offered himself to be sacrificed for us to the Father, and who conferred power on his Church to forgive sins, absolve

you through my ministry by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and restore you in the perfect peace of the Church.
The Priest adds
The Lord has put away all your sins.
Penitent Thanks be to God.
The Priest concludes
Go in peace, and pray for me, a sinner.

(She kneels down in front of me as she says this. She points to the last prayer on the page. "Say this," she asks. "Say this for me." I look at her, there on her knees. There is no one over and above anyone here. We are only two women in an empty church, two human beings, two sinners. So I say it, looking right into her eyes.)

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who offered himself to be sacrificed for us to the Father, forgives your sins by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

(Together we say ....)

Amen.

***

In James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* the hero, Stephen Dedalus, wracked by a host of appropriately adolescent sins, confesses to a lackadaisical Capuchin priest in a dismal chapel. The experience is completely transformative for him. Afterward, he feels his prayers rising to heaven like "perfume streaming upward from a heart of white rose." He heads for home, "conscious of an invisible grace pervading and making light his limbs." His soul feels so pure, so holy, so happy, that he thinks, "It would be beautiful to die, if God so willed."

I cannot say that I am in a state of grace, with perfumed prayers and a desire to die, shriven and at peace. But as I drive back in the encroaching

darkness of late afternoon--taking the two-lane country highways this time, around lakes and past farms--I feel *clean*.

I have left my sins behind. Literally. The priest had suggested burning my list when I got home. But once I finished reading every note on the grubby page, I wanted nothing more to do with that scribbled-over piece of paper. I shredded it in the parking lot, tearing it into flakes like sooty snow, then I stuffed the shards into a blue recycling canister at the edge of the parking lot. My sins would be pulverized into some coffee cup or paper bag. They would not return with me in any form.

So I drive home unburdened. *Clean*. Where those grudges and old memories and tiny, insignificant cruelties had been, there is now an empty space, like summer sunlight shining on a blank page of paper. Whatever has happened in that moment of honest speech, in the living presence of another human being, the presence of a woman wearing a clerical collar and a purple stole—those visible signs of the companionship and prayers of the Church—has shifted everything.

I had done those things, yes. Thought those things, yes. Clung to those things over decades. Yes. They were bitter…bitter fruit for bitter chewing. But in this strange encounter, this exchange of honest, apologetic truth for God's forgiveness, I have come face to face with my own self--as stumbling and petty and hopeful as it has ever been. And I am not condemned. "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus said to the woman taken in adultery.

No one is throwing stones here.

For Bahia, Bay of all Saints

> "Beyond every essence, a new essence awaits."
> C. Milocz

We descend into tunnels built by slaves,
roaming alone, *in me catacombs open*

Tourmaline waves speak to me
I hear their roaring koan, *in me the ocean opens*

Houses formed on monsoon hills, one over another
slip into seafoam, *in me fragility opens*

The flamboyant tree unfurls its red-tipped wings
over Pelourinho, its seeds blown, *in me desire opens*

A monarch butterfly ascends to my window
in tangerine tones, *in me a journey opens*

A boy in shadow crafts me a rose of coconut palms,
in me a shadow rose opens

The Church of Bom Fim wraps scarlet strings
around wrists and bones, *in me devotion opens*

Twilight falls on the Bay, the light
pools silver and stone, *in me Deborah opens*

Fabled Buddhas

These fabled Buddhas

that you speak of,
These Zen folk
expansive,
who are they
Do they wait
footsteps to tire,
bare vessels
for our
and our
Is their
truly
Where might
if not
hidden in
elusive and
remnants of
Have they
my house
my
Slipped
without
Have they
and slept
left me
they
in the
Have they
have they
with all my
Will they

who are they?
with their
empty bellies,
and do they wait?
for our
for our
to dissolve,
slight smiles
shining eyes?
patience
infinite?
they be,
among us,
plain sight,
yet trailing
their identity?
come into
without
knowledge?
into my mind
my memory?
shared my food
beside me,
to dream as
slumbered
deep?
loved me,
accepted me,
forgetfulness?
arrive again?

If so, let them knock gently, so as not to wake me.

Ania Ektate

In Fink's Bar

Larry Lefkowitz

The last person I expected to meet in Fink's Bar was the messiah. But then I may have been the last person that he expected to find there. On the other hand, if he was the messiah, he probably knew I was there. True, the messiah is not God; nevertheless, he isn't your average man, either.

The reader will ask how did I know that he was the messiah? The simple truth is that he told me so. (Incidentally, I use a small "m" in "messiah," only God's name do I capitalize. Admittedly, I would prefer a semi-capitalized messiah to reflect his relative status, but the language does not provide for it. This is written in English; Hebrew blessedly lacks capitals and thus avoids a lot of earthly polemics.)

I was skeptical at first, I admit. These days in Jerusalem there are plenty of people who will tell you they are the messiah. Therefore, I waved him off (mentally), politely not saying anything, faithful to my doctrine that answering these types, even negatively, simply provokes them to bend your ear more.

Finally, his persistent preaching of his messiahship got on my nerves. "Show me, " I said, folding my arms. "Prove to me that you are the messiah. Hit me with a minor miracle." I made my request in a low voice, partly in deference to his claim, but mostly because I didn't want Fink's regulars to hear me debating a subject like that out loud. There is not a bar in the world so ready as Fink's to declare a man *persona non grata*.

His face registered disappointment. He sighed, "You give me little choice."

He said this in a tone of such sadness that I regretted my denial (while still, inwardly, convinced of its truth).

He pointed to my glass of beer, which had remained half-emptied since he had first made his messiah claim. To continue drinking in the face of such a claim seemed to me the height of impertinence. I may have been a doubter, but I did not consider myself an oaf.

Immediately with his pointing at it, the beer turned a ruddy color. I couldn't help thinking of Jesus' changing the water into wine. He must have read my mind. "Changing water into wine isn't so hard – beer into wine requires real skill at working miracles."

I scrutinized him in order to figure out if he was serious. I discerned that he was – although the concept of a droll messiah fitted my approach to Judaism, a religion which had always contained an element of the metaphysically humorously absurd to go along with its very serious and detailed cosmic formulations, unlike, for example, Christianity which was totally serious.

"Well done," I said, for lack of anything to say.

"Nu, taste it. you still doubt. I don't work with colored liquids."

I sipped it. It *was* wine. And delicious wine. "Is it from the wonderful wine reserved for the righteous to drink in paradise?"

"It's not a bad vintage, but it doesn't compare to that wine," he assured me.

I wondered if I would be destined to drink the real thing someday, but feared to ask him. I had forgotten that this messiah was a mind reader. "I can't tell you," he said, "that contravenes the rules of the game. Besides, you have some more years yet – before you are judged."

I tried to fathom if this was an optimistic or a pessimistic assessment of my chances. He clearly knew that I was thinking this, but he kept his messianic cards close to his chest. I reasoned that if I accepted him as the messiah, my chances might improve.

This weighing of my interests brought forth from him a robust laugh that caused the patrons of Fink's to look over in our direction. I was a bit embarrassed, but then thought why concern myself with what these small

fry thought – they're not sitting with the messiah (as I believed him now to be – you would believe, too, if you had tasted that wine, that wasn't Uri Geller's hocus pocus at work). I even started to bask in my new role as confident to the messiah.

The messiah caught it at once. He raised a warning finger and the words "Pride goes before a fall" jumped into my mind. I could not recall if they came from the Old or New Testaments, but in any event my attention was drawn to his surprisingly manicured finger (my messiah had always visually been modeled on Jeremiah or John the Baptist, hair-shirted and dirty-nailed). Apparently, the messiah was less interested in warning me of my failures or in appreciating my scriptural erudition – both of which reactions on my part (he had read my thoughts, remember) he may have taken, perhaps correctly, as attempts to limit my role to that of confidant, and nothing more demanding, because he immediately tuFrned to *tachlis*. "The point is that I need not simply recognition, but a disciple, a hasid. I need you." Here, his finger pointed at me, and I recalled the pointing finger from an old army recruiting poster which merged with the finger of God which almost touched the finger of Adam in the painting "the Creation" on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

I started to shiver all over. Being a disciple for the messiah wasn't exactly my cup of tea, especially in these days of doubting messiahship. "Why me?" I asked weakly.

"You possess the prerequisites."

"Not that I can see."

"We don't see things through your eyes."

"We?" I wondered – "you and *Him*?"

He nodded.

"What do I have to do?" I asked, weak-voiced.

"First of all, finish your drink. It will strengthen you for your task. Then I'll enumerate."

I felt frightened, I admit.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly. "And remember, if you succeed in your task, thus helping me succeed in mine, you will not go

unrecompensed." He pointed to my glass of wine that seemed to suddenly glow an infinitely rich ruby red such as I had never seen in my life, and which seemed to emanate from the world-to-come.

I stretched forth a hand to seize the glass, eager to down this treasure. But he was quicker. Before I could drink, the liquid reverted to its previous color. "Don't jump above your belly-button," he admonished me, invoking the familiar saying that I myself liked to use; obviously he knew this. "Now down the hatch, we have work to do."

I complied. You don't wait to be told twice, this wasn't my sergeant in the army, we're talking messiah!

As we left Fink's, I turned back (like Lot's wife) in order to take one last look at the place; I had the unmistakable feeling that I was no longer one of Fink's "regulars." Yet I was comforted by the thought of the wonderful wine that possibly (ultimately) awaited me. Nothing on Fink's admittedly superb wine-list stood a chance of coming close.

Mary Magdalene In The Desert, 2022

after Donatello's image of the aging saint

And here she is, perhaps, in some place
where there's a place for one like her—

some landscape like far West Texas
in early spring, where she wanders out

on another rare morning, entering
the red cliffs rising above the narrow

bend of river, entering those limits
and this light. The sky's a vast surge

of blue around her. The flash
of a painted bunting on its own long path.

The whole desert world as clear in its
insistence as the sea. And as pure.

A kingdom here and now.
One by one, those who had known Him

left the world, but it is her gift
to be here still—

not *haggard*, as some have said Donatello
made her. But aging, yes—

her face marked by weather and by time.
And not *penitent*, either. No, not that.

What had she done wrong?
That's a story others chose to tell.

Margaret Mackinnon

Afternoons, I see her in a little shop,
some odd space on the dusty town's

main street. A jumble of paintings and pots.
Old clothes. Anything that has caught her eye.

Old photos of children whose names have all
been lost. You open the door to angled

shadows, sharp scent of sage and pine.
Her feet are bare. Her wild, white hair.

She rolls up her sleeve so you can see
what's inked along her arm:

Speak the truth with those who search for it.
There surely must be days when she misses them,

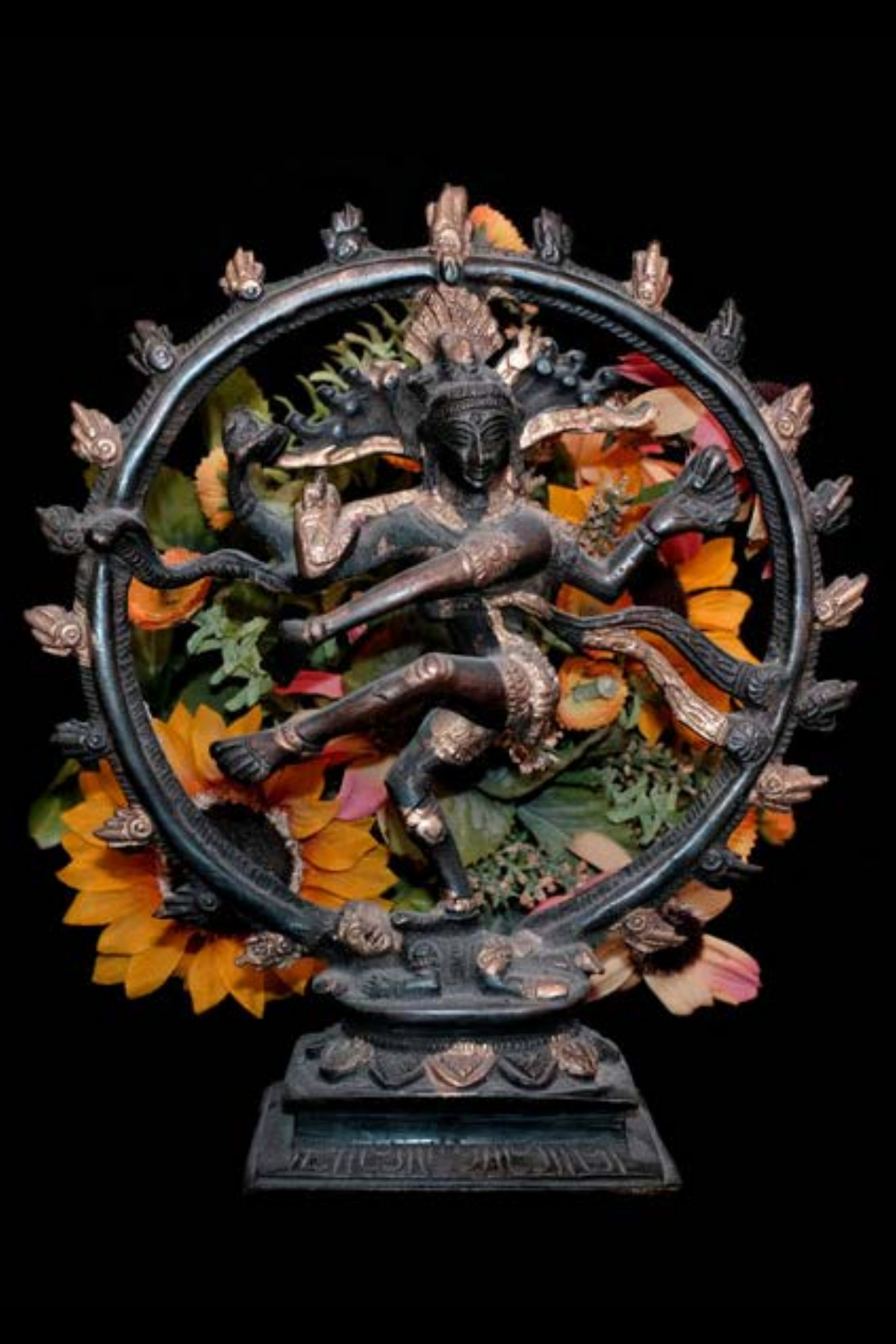
the others who knew Him, too—
though loneliness can feel like home.

Is it longing that leads her on?
After all, she was the first to witness it:

a morning shimmering and windless,
and the way the light carved out an emptiness

in the stone, space hollowed by His leaving.
That absence a presence that is with her still.

The way those first days surprised them all.
The way it might have ended but did not.



Kon Markogiannis
Lord of Dance

The Dervish in the Red Skirt

Fiyola Hoosen-Steele

You are in Konya in the central Anatolia region of Turkey. The city is famous for the shrine of Jalal-al-Din Rumi, the 13th Century Persian poet, Sufi mystic, and founder of the Mevlevi Order, commonly referred to as the whirling dervishes. You have been invited to the 'all female' *Tekke* of that Order for a unique experience, a *sema* ceremony to be performed by only women. It is not the norm for women to whirl in public, but this is a special occasion, it is in honor of Rumi's birthday.

The *Tekke*, with its purple and yellow stained windows and elevated stone walls is situated in a serpentine alleyway that holds space for only slinking cats. Well hidden from the outside world, it is the perfect place for spiritual rejuvenation. You have arrived early. Content to sit in its aqua-tiled courtyard with the setting sun warming your back, you watch two devotees climb wooden ladders to pick ripened fruit off the many clementine trees that inhabit the courtyard. The air smells of citrus as the breeze catches the falling leaves.

You think back on your connection to Sufism. It began in your grandfather's study, a big room made small by volumes of books on politics, philosophy and religion. You had been tracing your fingers along the dusty shelves when you touched the velvet of a hidden book— on its cover a motif of maidens moving in concentric circles between petite

petaled flowers. The book, a treasure trove of Sufism told tales of the Qadiri Order founded by Sheikh Abdul Qadir Gilani, known for his piety and performing of miracles. And of the Rifai Order who pierce needles through their tongues and swords through their bodies without spilling blood. And the Naqshbandi Order who become high on the name *Allah* by praising Him for hours through dance and music. And stories of the great female Sufi, Rabia of Basra who gave of her last provisions to anyone who knocked on her door saying God would satiate. And of the white clothed men with the tall oblong hats atop their heads, spinning, skirts floating through the air. They were the whirling dervishes of the Mevlevi Order.

The Islamic mystics enthralled you, and your grandfather indulged you. He filled your head with stories of *dhikr* ceremonies and of his encounters with Sufi miracle men. He laughed at your wanting to be a Sufi, to live amongst the mystics in the desert. And cried when you asked him to teach you to whirl. He would say, "So, you want to whirl, you want to put your neck in the shackles of love?" You would nod, knowing that he loved quoting Rumi. He would pull you into his chest and say, "Don't complain about hardships because through them your rusty chains become a necklace of gold."

He bought your first sacred garment and informed you about its symbolism. The white jacket is the *destugal* or bouquet of roses because whirling unveils the heart's purity, the fragrance of which is like fresh roses. The long full white skirt and bodice represents the shroud, the cloth placed over a body in preparation for burial. The belt separates one's lower self from one's higher self. The cloak is symbolic of one's tomb, and the white conical hat, the tombstone.

One could imagine that the many books in the study would be a deterrent for whirling, but your grandfather pounded a nail into the wooden floor saying, "The nail represents the position of humility, between the big and second toe of your left foot so you know to return to the same place with every turn." He sprinkled salt over the nail saying, "Salt is the element of divine essence that aides the spiritual transformation of the *murid*." And he placed a cube of crystalized sugar under your tongue,

saying, “The sugar will melt leaving only sweetness, which will ground you to the earth while your soul soars.” In that manner, you and your grandfather whirled in his study, turning left, toward your hearts. And with every brush of his fingertips against yours, his love for whirling was transferred to you.

You are brought out of your reverie by the flute-like whistle of the *Ney* being released into the courtyard to mingle with the breeze. It signals that the ceremony is about to begin. You enter the *sema* room with its high-beamed triangular-peaked ceiling and sterile wooden floor. The air inside is perfumed with the pungent scent of myrrh and frankincense, ancient gifts given by the three wise men to Jesus at birth, now burning to rid the *Tekke* of bad spirits and negative energy. You take your seat amongst the other invited guests. The lights dim. A hush falls over the audience. And onto the floor walk a procession of women in white flowing skirts, heads bowed, hair tucked up under conical hats, and arms locked across shoulders as if hugging themselves. They are followed by a group of musicians who move off to the side. Sufis use music as a gateway to God. This you heard from your grandfather who said, “In the Orient, there is a legend that God created a statue of clay and asked the soul to enter it. The soul refused. It wanted to be free. The angels began playing musical instruments, and the soul, enchanted by the sound, danced in ecstasy and entered the statue of clay. And that is how life came to be.”

You think on this story as the soft pitter-patter of the drum begins. The sound is accompanied by the sweet whistle of the *Ney* and the jingle of a tambourine. A melodious voice chants *Ahad*, one of the ninety-nine names of *Allah*, meaning *The One*. The chanting reverberates into the rafters, feet scuffle, sawdust rise off the floor and circles of white begin to form. Around and around the *murids* go, one foot leading the other, turning left, toward their hearts. Their feet swish, their arms extend from their bodies, right palms to the sky, left palms to the earth, a gesture of giving and receiving—receiving blessings from the heavens and giving those blessings to the earth and their fellow humans. The chanting hastens toward a trance and the feet of the *murids* disappear under their flapping skirts, their whirling

effortless, defying gravity. The circles grow bigger and bigger, then smaller and smaller until the white skirts all come to softly rest on the wooden floor.

Out of this serenity emerges a red skirt, mushrooming, burgeoning, whooshing, creating a cocoon around the wearer whose feet are bare, her hair open, black, curly, down to her waist. She circles the room, eyes closed, one foot over the other, around and around. Her movements are soothing and all at once mesmerizing. She is smiling. The joy on her face swells, bursts and when it explodes, she revolves out into the open of the courtyard. You hold your breath then move with the audience, following her out of the *sema* room. And there in the courtyard, amongst the clementine trees she orbits, left foot over right, right palm toward heaven, left palm toward the earth. Her hair leaping off her shoulders. She is spinning freely, led by invisible hands. Her demeanor is tranquil though her heart is spiraling away from the courtyard, over the vastness of Konya, heavenward. She is not contained by four walls, leather shoes, conical hats, sacred garments or even music and chanting. She is the embodiment of Rumi's words: *Only from the heart can you touch the sky*. And with every revolution, her heart is tapping the sky. She is the dervish knocking on God's door. Around and around the clementine trees she goes, her circles expanding, widening, magnifying, multiplying. Her feet vanish under her red skirt and then reappear forming smaller circular movements, smaller and smaller until her head sinks and her red skirt folds into itself as she gently comes to rest on the ground. She is the dervish walking through the door of God.

All is still, even the rustling clementine leaves have submitted. There is no applause. Sufis are not accustomed to acclamations. Their whirling is inward. So you place your right palm over your heart in acknowledgement of the spiritual jubilation her whirling has given you. She catches your eye and places her right palm over her heart.

You step out of the *Tekke*. Night has fallen. You look up, and there away from the trees and above the stonewalls, kissing the deep blue sky is a rising minaret, its cylinders covered in a blue-green tile, tilting toward

a triangular peak— the structure resembling a rocket awaiting its flight to the heavens. It is Rumi's shrine.

It seems that in Konya all roads lead to Rumi's shrine. So you follow the golden lights of the minaret, boulevard after boulevard until you come to stand at the shrine. It is made up of three sections: the mausoleum that houses the tomb of Rumi, the museum, and the old *sema* room wherein Rumi himself whirled.

You enter through the tomb gate that leads directly to the mausoleum and Rumi's sarcophagus. The sarcophagus is covered in a golden-brown brocade and on it rests Rumi's large headdress, a green silk turban draped around a yellowing white hat. Around the tomb lay an array of objects. There are closed envelopes and opened letters, lists of wishes and prayers, and names of family members who need blessings. There are glass vials with handfuls of sand from the homelands of devotees, and vials with sweet smelling oils and intoxicating perfumes. There are garlands of flowers, mainly yellow roses, and packets of crystallized sugars. There are even pieces of jewelry, pearls, and lockets strewn about. It seems that every devotee who has owned something valuable or beautiful has laid it at Rumi's feet. His is a catacomb of treasures.

You note some devotees offering prayers and salutations to Rumi. Your recall your grandfather saying, "To stand at Rumi's grave is a gift. You should open your heart and pour forth your desires because you may never return." But you have nothing to say. Your heart is full from soaring with the dervish in the red skirt. So you say, "Thank you."

Grateful for all in your life that has brought you to this moment, you pass through to the museum. There you linger at the glass case that contains a hair from the beard of Prophet Muhammad, the prophet of Islam who many regard as the original Sufi. You extend your hand to touch the glass, but your eyes fall onto the "Do Not Touch" sign written in many languages. You move on and linger at the glass case that contains the hat of Shams-Al-Tabriz, the wandering dervish, who was Rumi's mentor and who initiated him into whirling. Your impulse to touch the case is again thwarted by warning signs.

Making your way out, you pass a large empty square room with a balcony. It is the old *sema* room where the dervishes first formalized their whirling ceremonies. Your grandfather had spoken of this room, saying, "The floorboards are marked with footprints of dervishes who had whirled there for hundreds of years." In your grandfather's honor you ignore the "Do Not Enter" sign and sneak your toes under the edges of the thick woolen carpet that covers the floorboards, and you keep them there until you feel a connection with the dervishes who had once whirled there. Through you, you are certain that your grandfather, in whichever realm he is, feels the elation that you do as the vibration moves off the wooden floor and up your legs.

You leave Rumi's shrine. Reflective. Wistful. You close your eyes. Like film tape images of the dervish in the red skirt play in your head. Around and around and around she goes. Her red skirt, like an eiderdown covering you, covering the shrine, covering Konya.

Echoing Damocles

I am no monarch.
There is no sword
dangling over
my head, but many
worries of the world,
of undone tasks,
roost and flap
and squeak inside my brain—
wherever my mind lodges—
joined by the gibbering
ghosts of remembered wrongs:
mine to others, theirs to me,
no difference.
Oh, how I would love
to sweep them clean
out of me, to fill
the empty spaces with roses
of love, and fountains of compassion,
and
great lotus-lined lakes
of tranquility so that,

Leslie Schultz

at sunset,
when the dark-webbed feet
return,
these creatures
of my own creation
can at least
be fed by beauty,
be dazzled
and momentarily
enchanted
when rays of fading sun
ignite their reflections.
Maybe then
they will fold
their sword-
sharp wings in sleep.

Credo

I believe the witnesses of these things.

I believe the song not sung at Babylon riverside. I believe in don't cry, scream. You and your word. The history of a charcoal fire, fine fish and thick bread. I believe Hosanna, Alleluia, kudos, mazel tov, joy, transubstantiation, disputation, sorrow crows, notary publics. I believe in garments whiter than snow. Whirlwind blooming.

I believe in Western Avenue car dealerships, Halsted Street gay bars, Clark Street taquerias, storefront Madison Street churches, vast vacant South Side lots of buildings disappeared, labyrinth Lower Wacker Drive, South Water Market, Peanuts Park, Loretto Hospital, the gas bursting into air out of Bubbly Creek, the clots of high schoolers, dopey with youth, in McDonald's in mid-afternoon, the ostentatious simple of Daniel Burnham's grave, the painting of Msgr. Long posed as St. Edward in the circle high up in St. Martin de Porres Church, the pew there where the two who made me vowed to wed, the tunnel of el tracks along Lake Street that my 12-year-old brother, unlost, walked home seven miles to avoid asking for help. Who would answer?

Patrick T. Reardon

Listen, I believe meniscus tear.

I believe the echo of the name-caller, the stained glass shattering, the crumbling of the eucharistic Saltine. I believe the red priest sermon, the baby's prayer for salvation. Peasant pugilism, I believe. Gospel cockfights. I believe I ask three times. The thunder out of White Mountain, out of the Church of the Holy Innocent, out of the Leamington gangway, the signboards weeds, the Blacktop glass glitter in sunrise, the deaf girl who was my playmate once, the aroma of incense rising to the darkness in the ceiling of the apse. Walls shaken, my brother's forlorn bullet. I believe lightning.

You want to know what I believe?

The yearn, turn, of the baby to light — the reach to hope.

I believe in the innocent knees of the thieves broken with a sledgehammer to quicken the sag and strangulation and death to fit the time parameters, for clergy convenience. Together in Paradise this day. I believe in Mecca and Saint Martin Luther and Saint Michelangelo, in Rome and Saint Edith Wharton, Saint Chaucer, Saint Virginia Woolf, in Buddha's tree and Saint Einstein, Saint Lincoln, Saint Elizabeth I, in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem. In *Howl*. In Song of Songs. In *Leaves of Grass*. In King Lear. In Edmund's maidenliest star, the snow-white brow of Moby Dick. I believe washed in the blood of the Lamb.

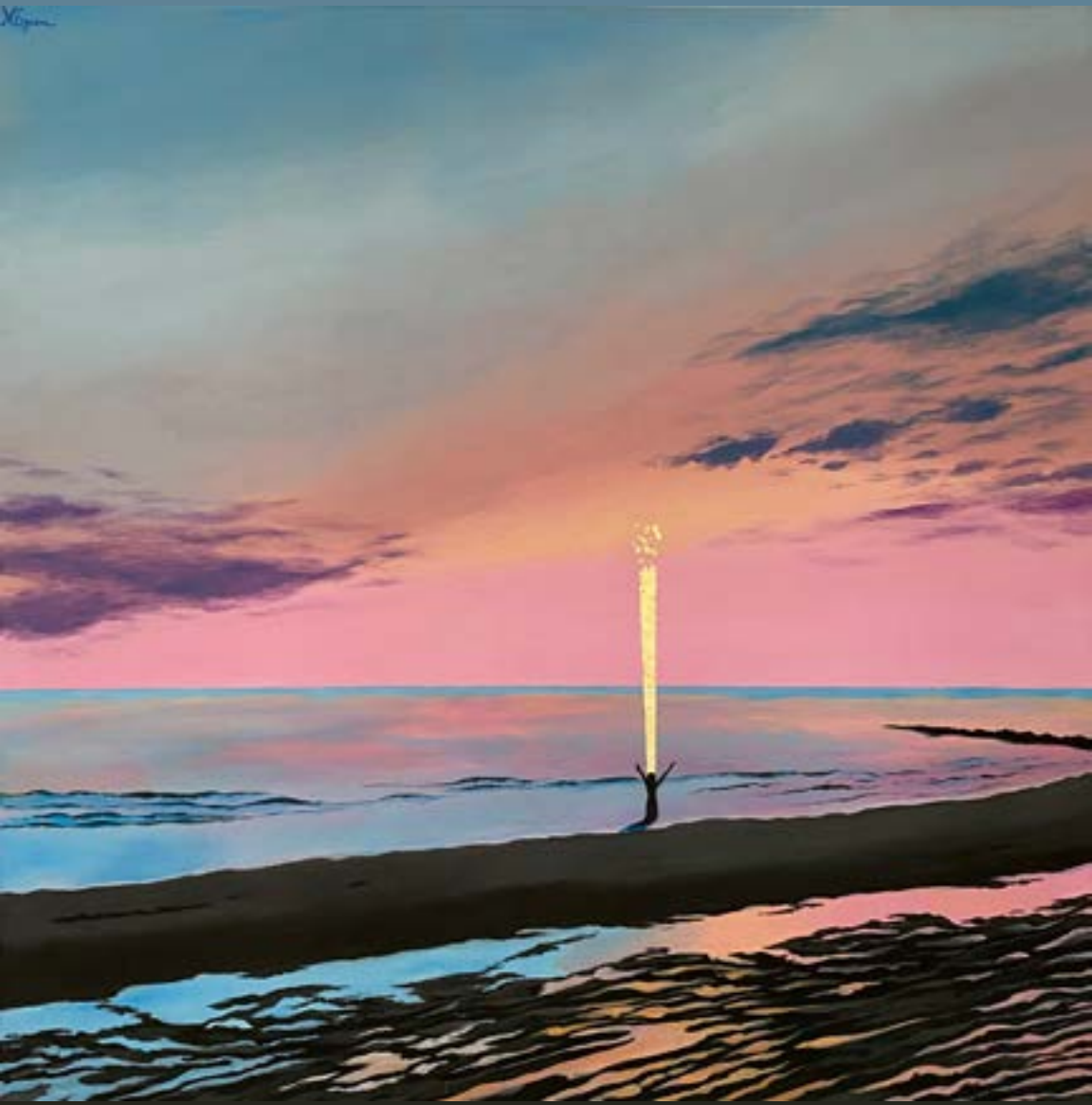
In the sunset light on the red brick wall across the street as I awaited the cancer word — this, I believe. In the rain-snow of my brother's final breaths before his trigger pull. In the infant turning away from his mother. In the uniforms of the father. This, and in the trunks of city street trees on the flat grid endless from lake, north and south and west, miles upon miles, squared, pavemented, urban fabric, sackcloth and satin.

I believe there is no God but God.

My belief is one and holy — erotic, anxious, competitive, raw, unprotected. My conviction is my dance with death. I believe in the fear of religion and the fear of the world, grit and shit, the boundless beauty out of the corner of my eye, my own scars, blood bruises. I await the spark of creation. I embrace suffering and bliss, jagged and smooth. I am, as are we all, innocent of power. I believe in the Book of Job, dung hill and all, and the bully-boy whirlwind who commands the morning and sends lightnings on their way. I believe in Ecclesiastes. Breath, mere breath, exhalation. In Elijah on his mountain face-to-face with a still, small voice. Cocks crowing.

My faith is the fingernail of a baby.

I believe the live coal the angel flew from the altar to touch my lips to sanctity.



Mónica Esgueva
Connection

It Is Up to You

Waiting is a kind of praying
or a kind of jailing and both
can happen at the same time
because you are the priest and
the altar is built with your
labor and you are the jailer
and you hold the key and no
matter what happens today,
the benediction or incarceration,
communion or execution,
transubstantiation or exoneration,
is in your hands, held together
in prayer or open with the gift
of forgiveness or knotted in
anger or pushing the blessing
away. It is up to you to say
exactly what will happen today.

Cassie Premo Steele

Chuang Tzu

After he flew high over
all of China, from far east
to west, north and south,

a man dreaming he was
a yellow butterfly woke
or maybe slept, a butterfly

dreaming it was a man.
Now when each moved
on land or through sky

the other knew, they wore
a sandal and a wing, for
sleep and one for waking.

Nels Hanson

The Medium Channels Duende

I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing.
—Czeslaw Milosz

La dueña is the real
mistress of the house,
mischief, a *diãno*
disturbing the peace
under our skin.

She rolls naked
in the snow, white
fire, barking black
sounds like birth.
She infests anthills

and bedroom walls,
a succubus, keening.
As imp and pixie,
she sports horns
and wings, or wings

and barbs, smells
like blood and loam
and luck, both good
and wild. We glimpse
ourselves in her.

She's a *djin* named
Qarinah, a siren
singing the blues.
She is Eutychia,
borne of Nyx, *qi*

Pamela Wax

and *brio* and *joie*
de vivre. She's Lilith,
a lamia sucking
blood, queen of night.
She lurks, steals

babies by charm
or spell, howls
at the crowning
of the moon.
She is *duende*, the mad

poet in the attic,
who sleepwalks
through trapdoors,
scribbling prophecies.
She is flamenco

incarnate, a *bailaora*
swishing her skirts,
drumming her heels.
She climbs in
through the bottoms

of our feet,
wells our eyes,
her castanets pulsing
live, ululating
off the empty page.

Tashlich

Marlene Olin

I never bought the whole iconography. An old guy who looks like Charlton Heston. A bunch of fat babies flying in the air with tiny harps. My relationship with God is more transactional. If there is a spirit guide or a life beyond what we know, I want to hold a winning hand. So I do what most Jews do. Attend synagogue on special occasions. Cook a seder. Eat Chinese food on Sundays.

For sixty- nine years my routine had always been the same. But thanks to Covid, normal was upended. The pandemic struck and going to religious services was taboo. When the High Holidays rolled around, I felt surprisingly unanchored. Something important was missing. I felt panicky and jumpy, lost and afraid--as if I misplaced my keys.

My pilgrimages to temple have marked every passage of my life. Growing up in Miami, I never learned to read or write Hebrew--in the 1950's women rarely did. Instead my older brother and sister dragged me to the neighborhood shul. Sitting ramrod straight in my best dress, I memorized the tunes and enjoyed the performance. The men beating their breasts, bowing their knees, swaying. The women in their fancy dresses and brimmed hats watching and whispering. While my father preferred to pray at home, my mother cooked. The three of us would come home to a house brimming with brisket and bay leaves and freshly baked bread. That was part of the holidays, too.

When I was in college in Ann Arbor, my friend Warren and I went to services together. Warren's long dead now after suffering from kidney cancer for a horrific 15 years. His parents were Holocaust survivors who settled in Long Island. His dad was a baker from a long line of bakers, and each holiday a care package would arrive in the mail. Vanilla cookies with

dried cherries in the middle. Mandelbreit. Marzipan. Warren's Dad always sent enough to share.

Then I married. My husband Michael and his parents rejected their Judaism flat. A Christmas tree in December. A slice of ham on every plate. My father-in-law loved to antagonize his mother, and the more he rebelled--the long hair, the pierced ear, the hippie clothes-- the more aggravated she became. For over a dozen years, she and I had a yearly ritual. I'd drive to her apartment, find her waiting at the curbside, help her maneuver into my car. Then the two of us would sit side-by-side at the synagogue, leaning on each other, supporting each other, so close our hips would touch.

How she'd weep! Holding my hand, her chin would shake and her lips would tremble. And then on the ride home, she'd tell me for the hundredth time about her parents and her grandparents and their life in Kyiv ages ago.

Life swings like a pendulum and by the time we had children, Michael's views on religion had changed. Maybe God's like a fine wine, he decided. We should at least provide the kids a taste. So together as a family we observed. We lit the menorah. We hid matzah under the couch. On Fridays, we lit candles.

I suppose you don't miss what you've never known. Whenever we went to temple, Michael just sat there. Faith was like a foreign language. He had never been exposed and at this late date-- had no interest in learning. For him, the prayer book was like any other book. A bit of mystery, a bit of history, and a lot of bunk. I couldn't argue with his reasoning. How do you touch the intangible? How do you calibrate the obscure?

Then Covid entered our lives. My daughter's job was put on hiatus and Michael's office closed. No longer could we visit our son and his family in Maryland. Death was a hand on our shoulders, a shadow in the doorway, a neighbor knocking down the hall. I found myself searching for reassurance. I missed my rituals. I ached for my routine. And for the first time in a long time-- I needed to believe in belief.

***

We decided to weather the pandemic in our home in Jackson Hole. Nearly thirty years ago, we built a log cabin in woods. It's our summer escape. Instead of slogging in the Miami heat, we snuggle in puffer jackets, inhale the evergreens.

Jackson is everything Miami isn't. In many ways, it's still a small town. Years ago, a forest fire came within 300 yards of our home. One overcast afternoon, the sheriff knocked on our door.

"The wind's picked up," he said. "You have to evacuate. Now."

For two weeks we lived in a hotel and watched that fire burn. It was the longest two weeks of our lives. Rusty the fire chief gave us his cell phone number. The sheriff would spot us at the diner, tip his hat, sit by our sides.

The people here are coping with the pandemic in their own unique way. For Easter, a local pastor conducted services in the Kmart parking lot. He climbed on a forklift, grabbed a megaphone and preached The Gospel to a hundred cars. Thrift stores and food banks are packed with goods going in and coming out. Sure there's division. Republicans and Democrats. Mask wearers and mask deniers. But with so much space, it's easier to breathe.

August passed. And when September rolled around, instead of heading back home to Florida, we stayed. One by one the tourists left. The leaves turned yellow. Elks bugled and the horned owls hooted. We woke up to windows tatted with frost.

In a way we were blessed. In the middle of a pandemic, Michael was able to go fishing and hiking. My daughter is forty and on the autism spectrum. Rachel had perfected social distancing long before social distancing was in vogue. She and her yellow Lab Molly were perfectly content traipsing the forest trails.

But the mountains no longer worked their magic for me. I knew I had much to be thankful for. So far my immediate family had emerged unscathed. But two dear cousins had died from the virus, and two close friends had lost their mothers. Of course there was Zoom. By now we had attended Zoom weddings. Zoom Bar Mitzvahs. And more Zoom funerals than I could count. But like a bad Internet connection, my Zoommates

seemed out of sync. A hug or a kiss can't be pixilated. A blue screen leaves you cold.

By the time the Jewish holidays approached, my sadness was palpable. I'd read and write. Cook and clean. Go about my business. And suddenly it would find me-- a depression so real it was startling. Sure I tried to distract myself. Attack a jigsaw puzzle. Watch Star Trek reruns. Attempt a new recipe. Then when I'd least expect it, gloom would jump out of the shadows with its paws unsheathed.

Like the sci-fi shows I was drawn to on TV, I needed to be teleported to another dimension. I yearned to be lost in something bigger than myself. Then one morning, I was leafing through the local newspaper and saw an advertisement. The Jackson Hole Chavurah, a community group that meets in an Episcopalian Church, had published an invitation to its services. My eyes slowly scrolled the newsprint. Nothing was mentioned about membership fees. There was no obligation. Jews. Christians. The whole world was invited! Opening my computer, I clicked on the page. The website detailed a calendar of events and a virtual welcome mat.

When the evening of Rosh Hashanah came around, I put on my nicest outfit and plugged into the family room laptop. Meanwhile Michael and Rachel had made themselves scarce. Alone, I listened as the *hazzan* chanted the ancient tunes. Hundreds of people soon joined us.

I was fascinated by the participants. Some were in dress clothes, some in jeans, while others kept themselves hidden. The *hazzan* was a local folk singer. There was a teacher from The Teton Science School. A gray-haired female Rabbi from Montana. A college professor from Idaho. Young women with babies on their hips--the new generation-- recited Hebrew effortlessly.

The next morning, I signed on again. This time I blocked my photo on the video, wore a comfy pair of sweats, and relaxed on the couch. Closing my eyes, I listened more carefully than I ever had before. The prayers floated over me, as calming as a lullaby, as soothing as a mother fingering your brow. *May God bless you and keep you. May you and your loved ones be granted long and happy lives.*

Three hours flew by in a blur. And as the participants said their goodbyes, the rabbi made an announcement. There was going to be a Tashlich ceremony performed at a park that afternoon. My ears perked up. I knew that park. That park was ten minutes from my house! I had no idea where my husband and daughter were. Napping? Reading? So I lifted my eyes unto the heavens and shouted with all my might. "It's time to get dressed! We're going out!"

We were among the first to arrive. The air was nippy. We laid our blankets on the grass and zipped up our fleece jackets. The aspen leaves had turned a golden yellow. A nearby creek was rippling. If you listened hard, you could hear trout splashing, the sound of water lapping against rock.

Slowly within the half hour, another fifty or so people joined us. I recognized some of them. The Teton Science School teacher. The folk singer. Families came with their children. Old men walked with their canes.

Speaking from beneath a small open shelter, the Science teacher welcomed us. Then the *hazzan* led us in prayer. Twenty minutes away, our local hospital was packed with Covid patients. But right here and right now, life was unfolding like a flower. I looked up and saw a bald eagle soaring. A young couple asked the congregants to bless their newborn child.

In a flash, memories of my past passed before me. My brother and sister. My friend Warren. My husband's grandmother. My children when they were small. Is this faith, I wondered? I looked up again at the sky. Is this God? Then I glanced down once more at my family. Rachel was curled on the blanket, sleeping. Michael was taking pictures with his phone and texting his friends. Only the dog seemed lost in the moment, her tail wagging, her belly begging to be tickled, her eyes squinting in the sun.

Finally, the part of the service I had been waiting for arrived. The Tashlich ceremony is both symbolic and literal. First, we walked over to the creek. Then the *hazzan* led us in prayer.

"Oh God of Abraham, let us cast our sins into the water."

As if on cue, everyone reached into their pockets and tossed whatever

crumbs they had on hand. Bread crumbs. Cake crumbs. Cookie crumbs. In they went.

"For the sin of blind ambition," intoned the *hazzan*. "For the sin of envy. For the sin of selfishness. For the sin of indifference. For sin of pride and arrogance. May we be forgiven."

Suddenly I felt lighter. Buoyant. We watched and waited as hundred of bubbles came to the surface. Fish nibbled, and birds swooped. It wasn't long before our offerings were eaten. *Tikkun olam,* the *Mishnah* tells us. To mend ourselves, we feed the world.

Eventually the waters quieted. Children got bored, and the congregants left for their cars. Still we stood and waited.

***

Job and Jonah. Deborah and Dinah. I don't know whether our stories are myth or magic, legend or holy law. But a few weeks later the temperature dropped. That evening, we layered on the covers. In the morning, we woke up to a wonderland of white. At least someone had her prayers answered.

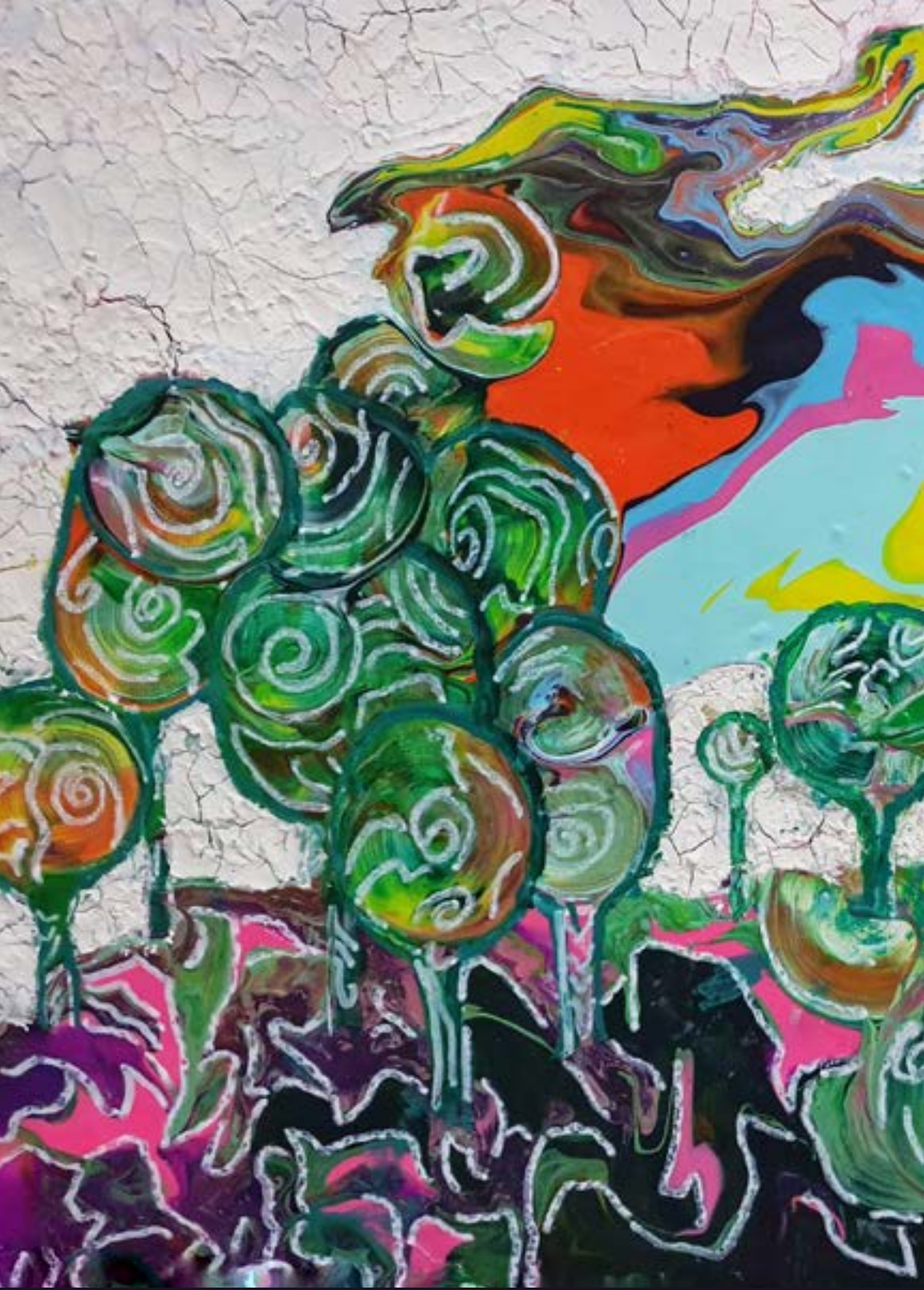
"I don't know what's wrong with her," said Rachel.

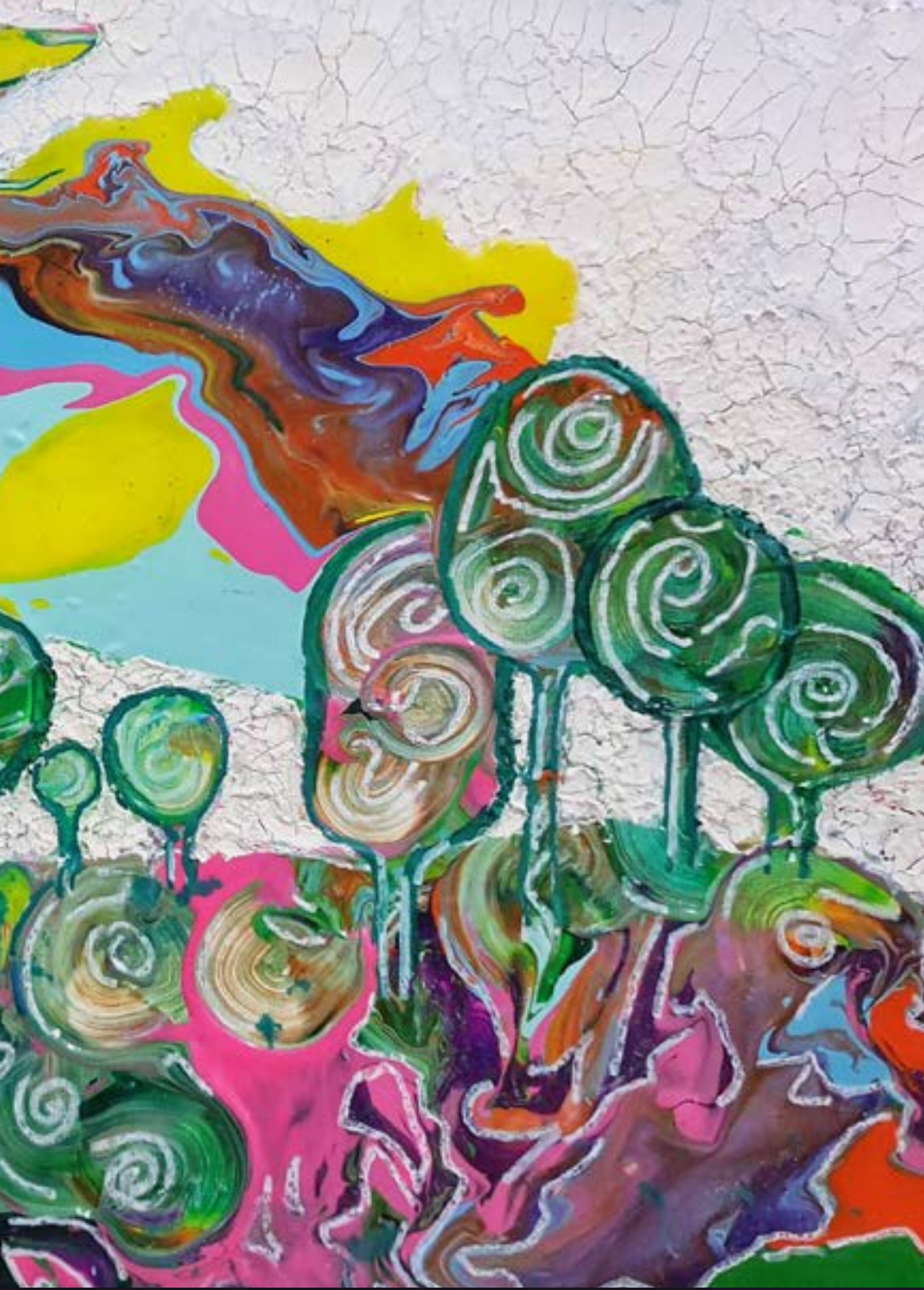
My daughter's dog was clearly the calmest member of our family. Whatever is the opposite of alpha, that's what this dog is. But now Molly was running in circles, whining and chasing her tail.

Rachel looked exhausted. Rubbing her eyes, she yawned. "She's already gone to the bathroom five times."

I supposed it was my turn. I put down my cup of coffee. Then I slipped on my coat, my gloves, and my boots, and led the dog outside. She took two three tentative steps and shivered. Then she lifted her snout, pricked up her ears, and charged into the snow.

A moving melody. A brand new baby. A warm blanket on a cold night. Why go searching and searching for that one elusive thing? Maybe Molly had it right. Sometimes the answers are right in front of us. You just have to open the door.





Galen Cortes
Covenant

Homecoming

They knew my name and saved me
a corner of a far field
where under a library of dreams
I'd built a closet, hung the ghosts
of all I'd forgotten.
The moon fell through its changes,
numbers through an almanac,
accumulating years
in a forgotten necrology
in which I was to have been listed,
was to have been made past tense.
But I'd gone forgotten between
the recipe contests, meteor showers
and eclipses, *forgotten,* a sweet
redundancy among anecdotes and husbandry.
And so the wonder of them
knowing my name here
where weeds grew
wan and bright as death
was truly something,
to be stood
like snow inside a crystal,
that is to say, to hear
my name just then was more
than a kindness.

Marc Harshman

Beyond, the forest was undressing
on the doorstep of winter
and the stars coming out
one after another
and while the set change continued
you arrived
and sang me a story,
helped me build the ladder
from which one day
I would see over the horizon
and wave
to those still waving back.

Shekinah

Sky a glossy blue, Fra Angelico clouds
puffing up, as though the divine lady might
step through a bright gap toward us,
take a turn in the garden
with the child on her hip holding the world,
and her blue hem trailing in the clover.
An oriole on the maple inserts that slice of song,
opening and immaculate
like the light underneath the leaves.

None of us does anything to deserve
this lush world's loveliness,
nor even a single sumac insistent through
cracks of city cement,
or the tree-of-heaven's parasol
shading the razed grey lot.
Not this glad choir,
not this garden's perfumed green nave.

The eight a.m. train sends out its concertina-squeeze,
sound of the passing-by world
hustling forward to its tomorrow, but
leaving its sound behind like the last great lonely beast
of the Cretaceous, calling across the marshes.
I sit in the perfect interval between times and places,
watching a chipmunk holding a hazelnut in its two
tiny paws, a posture like prayer
and who's to say it's not,
when the whole day offers itself up this way,
the Shekinah strolling among the lilies
brushing the leaves with her hand?

*

Jennifer M. Phillips

The Garden of Olives

Pilgrims cross oceans to come and weep here
under the sukkah of silvery latticed leaves
where modernity has struggled to cultivate
roses in the dust. A parley of doves
rises voluble in the church's eaves --
the one that makes peace its business. But too late
for such marvels. The signals are unclear.
These twisted old olives are a substitute
for older, similar trees. We are content
these days with likeness. One or two great boulders --
so that no angel might think to roll away --
have been set in one foundation in cement
fixed safely under the church's sloping shoulders,
the ancient sorrow, petrified and mute.
But as the trauma doctors like to say:
that catastrophe is finished and past.
No need to keep reliving grief or omission.
That's never what our beloved dead would ask.
Go forward and love in lightness, live today,
if chastened, then unburdened. Sleep again.

*

The Marble Stair

Have you ceased to be surprised
at the places hunger takes you?
Down the slope, and up the marble stair,
the cupped and yellowed steps
to that gate in from the Kedron valley
from the Olive-Mount, where the privileged
dead molder restlessly, waiting for the first cries,
to throw back their cracked slabs and rise.

Now, as always before, there is,
and will be, waiting, in a garden
idling among the small connubial glories
of the hummingbird and rose
between the tree trunks where even the terrified
doze on the days before catastrophes.

The valley road snakes back on itself, around
the Orthodox dome gleaming like a milk-wet breast.
Tourists process alongside vans laden down
with day-laborers and goods, then turn off to the East
and upward path, mapping their shortest route
to the next monument or vantage for selfies:
Here, Jesus and I perspired and prayed.
Over there, under the dome, and by that plaque, he died.
The guide told us so.
What you find, you find, is always less
than you were seeking, but more than you know.

Old cities build on top of themselves like eagle-nests,
thrusting up and shifting the markers, raising new spires,
displacing their dark and fond histories.
Maps fill with imaginings and lost desires.
You, yearning for authenticities,
you are the door you are looking for.
Sit for a moment -- there, with me,
like any heat-wearied Roman banished
to the provinces. This stone has not vanished
into time. Christ to Caiphas, Jezebel to Judas, everyone
toiling from Olivet into Jerusalem, rests
a foot on this tired, anonymous stone.

*

Disclaimer

If you are someone God talks to
over the Maxwell House and cornflakes daily,
you won't need words from me.

If your King James falls obediently open
and your finger alights on gospel
pruned just for you without aid of eyes,

you will think me querulous,
or alarmingly unconvincing and unconvinced,
a lighthouse perpetually semaphoring:

don't come too near. Here there may be rocks and ruin.
Magnetic North is on the move.
Mercy may be a cauterizing blade.

What I am hallooing to your boat is,
what if the hand calms not the storm
but the fear? Hang on.

What makes us think we want to arrive
under the tree having seen all the unwrapped presents
in the closet?

I hope I die packed for a journey
without having figured anything out
not even the figurative prefigured. Up for grabs.

Rapt. Why should you listen to me?
I don't know what home is
beyond that certain color in the hills
our car once went past but never stopped.

*

Devoted

The goats eat all day,
so much and with such oblivion
that sometimes they have to nap,
bloated belly rising like a brown
hill between skinny legs,
when they lie on their side
and sleep it off.

In the garden, a small shape,
brown and goat-sized,
a few feet from where I weed
among the flowers. A fawn,
spotted and lithesome, sustains
her quiver beside the phlox, their blossoms
chewed to stumps the night before.
She stares, not a twitch of an ear,
so intent is her craving.

Appetite, silent urgency, the way
we scooped up my mother's
Cherries Supreme dessert, stealing
bites out of the molded shape
when she wasn't looking, until
the plate she served her bridge club
came out pocked and lopsided.
Dished in lumps, stabbed with a fork
between confessions and secrets
the women had saved up all month.
The craving to tell running
like a fever through their limbs.

Ginnie Gavrin

At day's end in my parents' house,
the cocktail hour became
a devotion, a rite. The opening
of the cabinet at dusk. Inside
the shimmer of brown whiskey,
clear sparkle of gin, of vodka.
Click and glug splashing over ice.
Clink of cubes. The toast
Here's to ... With no words to follow.

One more became one more.
A craving eased and increased
Sacrament where all heartaches
received a benediction. A hallowing
of every lost sale. Each held breath
negotiated at the bank. What they made
of their lives formed a prayer.
Forgiveness swallowed until the words
slurred and the body disappeared
into the dark sleep of forgetting.

At The Abbey

If I were to find God anywhere
It would be here,
Amongst the quiet hills
And uneven ground of the cemetery.
Here, Thomas Merton is buried next to
His Abbot, a man he hated
But always obeyed.

If I were to find God anywhere
It would be in the minds of men
Who have devoted themselves
To a life of contemplation.
They tell me,
Before you speak,
Know the God you're praying to.
The God that fills the air
With silence. You can hear Him
In the windchimes and the rustle of
Leaves that have just started to grow.

Spring is coming, although we cannot
see it now.
We must have faith
In this world and it's ability
To destroy and create ad infinitum.
It seems here we are all useless:
Breakers of silence,
Askers of questions that
cannot be answered.
And yet we pray together
As the sun dips below the trees
And we return to wherever we came from,
No more changed than the world itself.

Ariana Alvarado

Sit here long enough

says the river *I will retrieve*
what was lost

But time I reply it goes
back and forth

That tree you loved?
asks the river

Yes its generous spring blossoming
and its cradle and drape of art
students sketchbooks
on their knees
What do you
know of this, river?

It lives in you
depends on you
as you in me

The river's face blazed
and I could barely
stand to look into it

but as I stood there
it softened to a blush
and then almost disappeared

How can you not decide?
I asked

The sun said the river
it comes
and it goes

Mary Buchinger

Erin Schalk
A Body Not at Peace III

Late Summer, Block Island

The air gray, still, and parched.
The rain, when it comes, is a sprinkle
dripping silently on the ground.
The mourning dove's call is backdrop

to the sea's suck and ripple
that speaks of longing
and sadness, buried hopes
like lost wrecks off rocky shores.

From the marshes comes the trilling
of red-winged blackbirds, in the thicket
the cardinal's chirp, the meadow lark's whistle,
chatter of a hawk chased by crows.

In the afternoon, sunlight behind
banked clouds glints off a sea
as pale as isinglass, reflecting back
my memories as I write,

until the day when words will be
all that are left of me,
words and images
and other people's memories.

Bury my body deep in the earth,
but may my soul roam free
in the shadows under the trees,
in the dancing hearts of flowers,

the setting sun and the rising moon,
the barred clouds and winds that move them,
the waters where I love to swim,
beloved haunts of my essential solitude.

Anne Whitehouse

sun, so generous

i am not it, but will endeavour to receive.

to drink whatever light falls through
canopies bejeweled. to turn a face,
offer shoulders for the sun to polish.

  perhaps we could walt whitman this.

and name: the ficus, the frangipani. all
count towards a bliss restored, renewed
dispositions for embraces. i read: the air

is blue. not a single cloud is dying. or if,
then glad, rendered onto. we call it:

spring – a time

to grow into grass blades, the clear
  glockenspiel of children around,
around. this joyous thing does require

practice. in large amounts, carved out
of misery, the dark – what if absolutely?
what if celebrated? shall i welcome

what invites itself on the field? start

small. start here. with a mouthful.
with cherry tomatoes. the red
roof of the mouth clicking. sonorous, he

repeats, repeats: that *living is*
the best revenge.

perhaps, this time, he's right.

Lorelei Bacht

Zen Rain

You figure things out when it rains.
You get a chance to think things through.
People walk home in the rain.
People look down in the rain.
People walk to the grocery store in the rain.
People get off buses in the rain.
Some people wear raincoats and galoshes.
Some people open umbrellas in the rain.
You can listen to the rain and wonder about it.
People wait for the rain to stop but it doesn't.
The sound of the rain is who you are.
Rain is Zen because of every reason of Zen.
In the rain you ask who you are and the rain
tells you, you are the rain.
Everyone is a writer in the rain.
Everyone gets wet.
Everyone writes when it's raining, especially
when it rains hard and does not stop.
When it rains you can sleep;
go somewhere and sleep--close your eyes
and dream of rain in the rain in dreams
and this is--a dream that is rain
which is time anyway and time is
over in the rain.

Daniel Sklar

The water takes over time
in the flash flood rain, like in the movies.
There is nothing wishy-washy about movie
rain when characters duck into a storefront.
Hollywood rain does not stop unless there's a
new scene or the script says the sun comes out.
Unless it is raining hard, there's no reason
to write anything.
You are a writer only when it rains.
Otherwise, why do it?
You can figure things out when it rains.
You can think things through.
When it lets up it lets up and sometimes
it doesn't but then it does and then you
don't have to be a writer anymore and you
can be the rain again which is what you were
in the first place and before that and all along.

Sklar

Seasons In My Life

reflections from a female chickadee

Autumn. Hippocampus swells. I collect
1,000 seeds a day, remember
each storage niche.

That's half my winter diet. Spiders,
insects provide balance. Less predictable
more satisfying.

If a human ate like a bird,
she would chow down
25 pizzas each day.

Winter. Stash seeds in clusters
of spruce needles, bark crevices. Brain cranks
with urgency, oncoming cold.
I amass 8,000 seeds this season.

Spring. Settle into abandoned woodpecker
cubby, softened with moss, dead marmot fur.
Same neighborhood; we don't migrate.

Christy Wise

I doze all day, grow heavy. Legs stiff,
wings creaky. Babies
rustle in their eggs until too large,
start to break through. My mate brings food, news.

Summer. Fledglings famished.
I capture 1,000 small caterpillars daily.
Solid protein for sturdy bones, keen vision.

Sunlight arrives early, stays late. Titmice,
warblers, nuthatches call
from nearby willows. Their babies,
too, squeak with hunger.

Ducks dive through pond's surface,
trout rise, wide mouths eager for flies,
mosquitos. Burgeoning livens my days.

Limbic brain shrinks.
Food is plentiful.
I feel light.

Wise

Stopover

We park where they hike off
Route Seven in Massachusetts,
then we don't hike. We eat Stop
& Shop food on a bench by
a clean but public pond with
dragonflies and polliwogs where
we see all the way to bottom.
Shaded by a crabapple tree,
I am reading in a book how
the Chinese called frogs sky-
roosters and how Jakob Lorber
said they crow like apostles.
It's getting to late afternoon when,
I also read, the setting sun
warms the place of the dead
so that new children walk up from
wells and ponds to find places
safe enough to stay. Pea pods
were two for the price of one
at the Stop & Shop. The children
who walk up from wells might want

Laurinda Lind

these once they dry off,
plus laugh to hear a bullfrog make
his rubber-band boing, this
toystore banjo sound a boy
would use to annoy his sister
in the hallway between
their upstairs bedrooms after
they've walked up from the wells.
So glad you made it out is what
I see as the sky apostle's message.
Don't stop now. We watch with him
while cars whiz by going to
Mount Greylock and crickets climb
through our bag of deli chicken as
the world turns its back on where
it was in the morning, while kids
we can't even see hike right through
us hoping it won't be as hard on
them here in a quiet spot in an
entire galaxy as it wanders away,
using up the universe.

Morning Poem

for Rilke

Still, one can't avoid what's destined.
Spring comes, with her tangle of stems and wings.
Mysterious, how one heart knows another—
or swells right out of it, spreads itself, and sings!

Embrace what's for embracing. Prize
the instrument by which your tale comes true:
like rain, you astonish me with life. I'll rouse
all nature to root for you.

Sally Wilder David

After last danger of frost is past

From planting directions on a seed packet
For my brother

After last danger of frost is past,

after the final skim of ice leaves the surface of the pond,

after the mirrors of dew disappear in the clear light and
the stilled grasses lie down for your pallet,

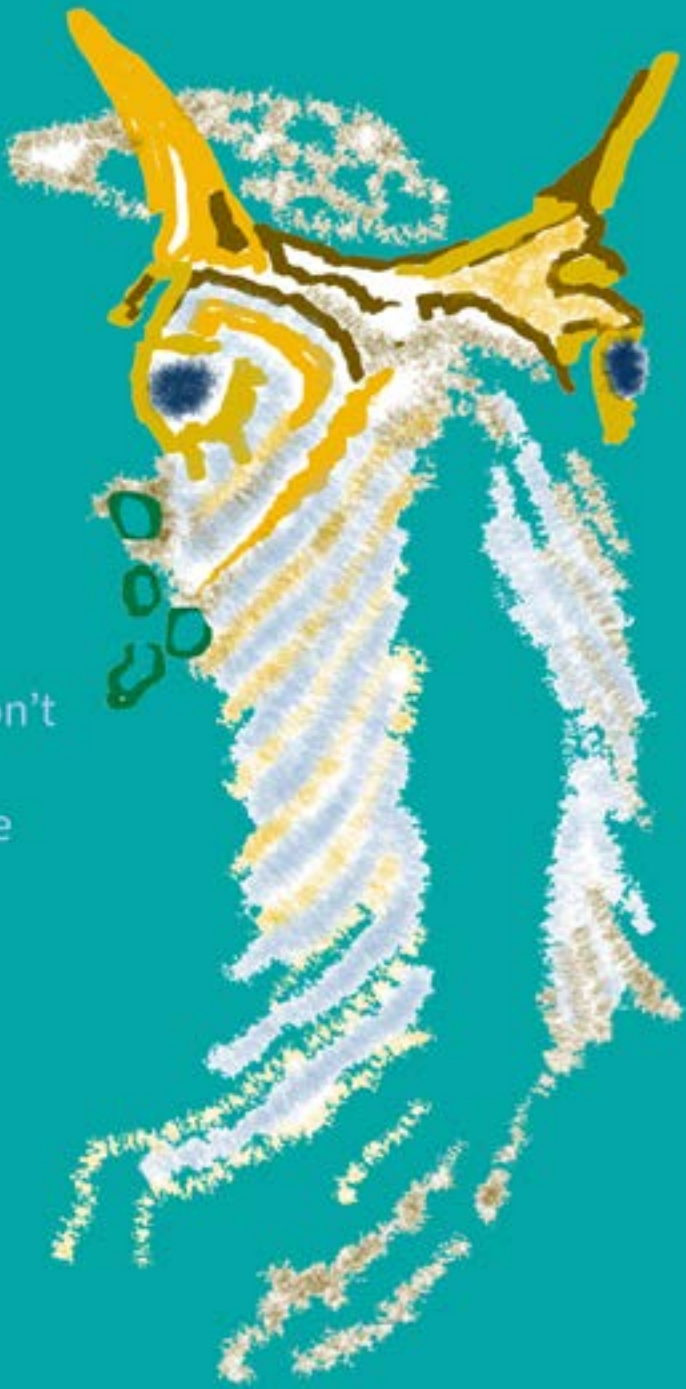
after the fox and the sparrow and the deer gather around you,

after the winds cease and the seas calm and the struggles of this world
slip away into the woods at the edge of the field,

you will rest at last
at last, rest

you will rest at last
at last *rest*

Linda Buckmaster



Desirée Jung
unveil

Contributor Bios

Ariana Alvarado is an undergraduate student at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky studying English, Creative Writing, and Theology. At Bellarmine, she has served as founder and President of Pen and Sword Open Mic Club and has served as an editorial board member, Vice President, and President of the Ariel Literary Society, Her work has been published in *The White Squirrel Magazine, Preposition: The Undercurrent Anthology, Sanctuary Magazine,* and two editions of the *Ariel Magazine*. Her poem "I ask my father why he believes." won the Flo Gault Student Poetry Prize in 2022 from Sarabande Books.

Duane Anderson currently lives in La Vista, NE. He has had poems published in *Fine Lines, Cholla Needles, Tipton Poetry Journal,* and several other publications. He is the author of *On the Corner of Walk and Don't Walk, The Blood Drives: One Pint Down,* and *Conquer the Mountains.*

Lorelei Bacht (they) is a person, a poet, queer, multi-, living in Asia with a disgruntled fishkeeper. Their recent writing has appeared and/or is forthcoming in *After the Pause, Barrelhouse, The Bitchin' Kitsch, SWWIM, The Inflectionist Review, Sinking City, Door is a Jar,* and elsewhere. They are also on Instagram: @lorelei.bacht.writer and on Twitter @bachtlorelei.

TJ Beitelman's most recent book is *This Is the Story of His Life,* a linked sequence of prose poems published by Black Lawrence Press. His work has appeared widely in literary magazines and garnered fellowships from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the Cultural Alliance of Greater Birmingham. He can be found online at tjbman.me.

Maggie Bowyer (they/them/theirs) is a poet, cat parent, and the author of various poetry collections including *Allergies* (2023) and *When I Bleed* (2021). They've been published in *The Abbey Review, Chapter Journal, The South Dakota Review, Wishbone Words,* and more. You can find their work on Instagram and TikTok @maggie.writes.

Mary Buchinger, author of six collections of poetry, including *Navigating the Reach* (Salmon Poetry, 2023), *Virology* (Lily Books, 2022), *einfühlung/in feeling* (Main Street Rag, 2018), has work in *Agni, DIAGRAM, Gargoyle, Laurel Review, Maine Review, phoebe, Plume, Salamander, Salt Hill, Seneca Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences and serves on the board of the New England Poetry Club. Website: www.MaryBuchinger.com.

Linda Buckmaster has lived within a block of the Atlantic most of her life, growing up in "Space Coast" Florida during the Sixties and living in midcoast Maine for forty years. Her poetry, essay, and fiction have appeared in over forty journals. Two pieces were "Notable Essays" in *Best American Essays* 2013 and 2020. She has held residencies at Vermont Studios Center, Atlantic Center for the Arts, and Obras Foundation, among others. Her hybrid memoir, *Space Heart: A Memoir in Stages*, was published by Burrow Press in 2018. Her latest hybrid, *Elemental: A Miscellany of Salt Cod and Islands* (Huntress Press 2022), is a response to the beauties and realities of islands across the North Atlantic.

Kit Carlson is an Episcopal priest and a life-long writer with work appearing in publications as diverse as *Seventeen Magazine* and *Anglican Theological Review*. She has been a Pushcart Prize nominee, recently published in *Rock and Sling, Burningword Literary Journal, Little Patuxent Review*, and *The Windhover*. She is author of *Speaking Our Faith* (Church Publishing, 2018). She lives in East Lansing, Michigan, with her husband Wendell, and Lola, a nervous rescue dog.

Barry Casey is the author of *Wandering, Not Lost,* a collection of essays on faith, doubt, and mystery, published by Wipf and Stock (2019). His recent work has appeared in *Adventist Society for the Arts, Brevity, Faculty Focus, Detroit Lit Mag, Lighthouse Weekly, Mountain Views, Patheos, Spectrum Magazine, The Dewdrop,* and *The Purpled Nail.* He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion from Claremont Graduate University. He writes from Burtonsville, Maryland.

Charles Coe is author of three books of poetry, *Picnic on the Moon, All Sings Forgiven: Poems for My Parents,* and *Memento Mori,* all published by Leapfrog Press. A fourth volume, *Purgatory Road,* will also be published by Leapfrog in Spring of 2023. Charles is also author of the novella *Spin Cycles*, published by Gemma Media. He is an adjunct professor at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island and Bay Path University in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, where he teaches in both MFA writing programs. He is also on the Steering Committee of the Boston Chapter of the National Writers Union, a labor union for freelance writers and editors.

Lucia Coppola is an ESL teacher who is originally from New York and has lived in France and California. She has a professional background in dance and body techniques. Her writing is informed by nature and traditional storytelling. Much of her work has been presented on the radio, online and in print. Her first collection of poems, *Talking With Trees* was recently published by Plants and Poetry. You can follow her on Instagram @luciacoppolapoetry.

Galen G. Cortes is a Filipino Redemptorist Missionary (Cebu-Province) Philippines. He is currently assigned as a Formator. He is an amateur visual artist and a poem composer.

Maril Crabtree grew up in Memphis and New Orleans, but calls the Midwest home. Her full-length collection, *Fireflies in the Gathering Dark*

(Kelsay Press, 2017), is a Kansas Notable Book. Her work has appeared in journals including *The DMQ Review, Literary Mama, Main Street Rag, Persimmon Tree,* and *Earth's Daughters*. She served as poetry editor for *Kansas City Voices* and contributing editor for *Heartland! Poetry of Love, Solidarity, & Resistance*.

William C. Crawford is a prolific itinerant photographer based in Winston Salem, NC.

Born in the fog of San Francisco, **Nicolette Daskalakis** is a writer, filmmaker, and visual artist. Her poetic and photographic work has been published by the likes of *Rattle, The New York Times, Pride.com*, and HarperCollins, and she was a 2022 finalist for the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. She received a BA in Film & TV Production from the USC School of Cinematic Arts and is completing an MFA in Art at the institut supérieur des arts et du design de Toulouse. You can find her on Instagram @hellonicolette and @nicolettepoetry or at www.nicolettedaskalakis.com.

Sally Wilder David has published poetry in *The Worcester Review, Anthology, 3Elements Review, Athena, Voices* (international anthology; Israel), *Silver Needle Press, Ekphrasis, The Anglican Theological Review* and other publications. Sally earned Honorable Mention in a *Writers' Digest* contest as well as First Prize in a Worcester County Poetry Association contest judged by Pulitzer Prize winner Mary Oliver.

Patricia Davis' poems and translations have appeared in *Smartish Pace, Third Coast, The Atlanta Review, Salt Hill, Crab Creek Review, Kestrel, New Laurel Review,* and other journals. She was a Lannan Fellow at American University, where she earned her MFA, she is translations editor for the literary journal *Poet Lore*. She lives in the Washington, DC area, where she works in human rights advocacy.

Brittany Deininger is a poet and theologian who holds an MA in Theology and Culture from The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

where she taught as an Assistant Instructor. She is currently earning an MFA in Poetry at Sarah Lawrence College. Her academic work and poetry pursue themes of memory, lament, spirituality, embodiment, trauma and healing that center in traditions of feminist and ecotheology. Her work has appeared in *On Being, EcoTheo Review,* and other blogs.

Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of different places, but now calls North Carolina home. Her recent publications include *Floribunda* and *Bogbound*. Some of her poems have appeared or will soon appear in *Comstock Review, Ibbetson Street, Iconoclast, Pinyon Review, Rattle, Slant,* and *The Stand*. An avid bird-watcher, she shares a home with her husband, four housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

Ania Ektate is an undergraduate student pursuing Environmental Sciences in the Netherlands. Born and raised in India, she practices writing as a form of mindfulness, and feels her poems emerge from within periods of meditation. You can discover more of her work on her blog: www.mindfullysustainable.org.

Having lived in London, Paris, Tanzania, and India, **Mónica Esgueva** is a Visionary artist now based in Madrid, Spain. Her art career started as a child, so to speak. Her talent was innate, although later on she took courses at Paris École des Beaux Arts and studied with renowned painters in France. She started exhibiting her paintings when she was very young, and her artwork has been shown in exhibitions in the United States, Holland, Great Britain, France, Costa Rica, Italy, Greece and Spain. A number of institutions own her artwork, such as: Rochester Museum of Fine Arts (NH, USA), Monaco Museum of Modern Art, LatinAmerican Art Museum (Florida, USA), ACCR (Washington DC, USA), Hewlett-Packard France.

Ori Fienberg is the author of *Old Habits, New Markets* (elsewhere press, 2021). His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in venues including the *Cincinnati Review, the Dallas Review, Dusie, Obliterat, Pank, Sixth Finch,*

and *Subtropics*. Ori teaches poetry writing for Northeastern University. Read more at orifienberg.com and follow @ArtfulHerring for poetry and political tweets.

Giti Ganjei was born and raised in Iran in a Jewish family. In her early 30's determined to leave Iran, Giti and her husband and their son were able to leave on a perilous journey. She arrived in the US in 1989 as a refugee and quickly built a life for herself and her family. In her long journey as an emigrant with no western cultural background, she endured, and survived so many obstacles. Her passion for art, in her early 60's, she decided that life has given her an opportunity to follow her passion as an artist and to use her own multicultural experiences, as subject of her paintings. Giti studied painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Boston Architectural College.

Gerburg Garmann's art addresses women and men who want more than a realistic depiction of any given subject. (That's best left to the photographer.) Instead, she embraces and mirrors the edginess of human existences in her art– that of struggle and achievement, of the surreal in the real, while opening up pictorial spaces for various forms of personal interpretation and enjoyment. Her pieces are one of a kind. They celebrate key existential moments, questions, and insights while being intentional about bearing specific witness to women's experiences. At the same time, her artwork memorializes women's uniqueness within the human fabric. For more info please visit her website at www.gerburggarmann.com.

Ginnie Goulet Gavrin worked as a massage therapist for over twenty-five years. Currently she teaches meditation and writing workshops at the Monadnock Mindfulness Practice Center in Keene, New Hampshire. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in *The Literary Review, The Worcester Review, THEMA, Primavera, Slipstream, Oyster River Pages, Leaping Clear, The Greensboro Review, Rewilding: A Split Rock Anthology, Cold Mountain Review, Tar River Poetry,* and *Silk Road Review*.

In addition to more than seventy-five poetry, essay, and short story publications, **Laila Halaby** is the author of two novels, *Once in a Promised Land* and *West of the Jordan* (winner of a PEN Beyond Margins award), a forthcoming memoir, *The Weight of Ghosts* (Red Hen 2023), and two collections of poetry, *why an author writes to a guy holding a fish* and *my name on his tongue*. Laila lives in Tucson where she works as a counselor, museum educator, and creative writing teacher.

Nels Hanson grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016. His poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.

Marc Harshman's *Woman In Red Anorak*, Blue Lynx Prize winner, was published in 2018 by Lynx House Press. His fourteenth children's book, *Fallingwater…*, co-author, Anna Smucker, was published by Roaring Brook/Macmillan and named an Amazon Book of the Month. He is co-winner of the 2019 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award and his poem, "Dispatch from the Mountain State," was printed in 2020 Thanksgiving edition of *The New York Times*. Poems have been anthologized by Kent State University, the University of Iowa, University of Georgia, and the University of Arizona. His newest publication is *Dark Hills Of Home,* Monongahela Books, 2022.

Fiyola Hoosen-Steele is a former South African diplomat to the United Nations (UN) and former UN Representative for Plan International, Independent Diplomat, and Save the Children. She holds a Bachelor of Laws Degree, a Bachelor of Arts Honors Degree and a Master of Arts Degree in International Relations. She honed her writing craft at Gotham Writers Workshop and taught The Writer's Manifestation Project at Art of Alignment Academy. Her works of fiction and non-fiction have been published in the *Bosphorus Review, Flash Magazine* and *AFREADA*

Magazine. She was also a finalist for the 2022 Ruminate Flash Prose Prize. She lives in New York with her husband and daughter.

Beth Horton is a health sciences graduate, living and working in Western New York. On the weekends she enjoys exploring her world, camera in hand.

Jeffrey Johnson's new book of poems, *Babylon*, will be published later this year. He is the editor of *Stars Shall Bend Their Voices: Poet's Favorite Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.

Desirée Jung is an artist and illustrator from Vancouver, Canada. Most of her literary work and art have been published worldwide, as well as her series of video poems, screened in several film festivals, and available on Youtube. Her most recent book *Meu Jeito de Viver,* has been published by Editora Selo in Brazil, 2022. For more information, check her website: www.desireejung.com.

Originally from Talkeetna, Alaska, **Mitchel Jurasek** studied English literature at Bowdoin College. While at Bowdoin, he developed his love for creative writing under the guidance of novelist Brock Clark and non-fiction writer Alex Marzano-Lesnevich. An assortment of magazines and newspapers have published his work, including *Q Magazine, The Bowdoin Orient,* and *the Anchorage Daily News*. He currently resides in Brooklyn with his loving puppy, Ginny.

Heather Kaufmann is a New England native, poet, and freelance grant writer. Her recent work has been published in *Christian Century, Ekstasis, The Windhover, CRUX,* and *St. Katherine Review*. She is the recipient of the 2022 Luci Shaw Prize for Creative Writing from Regent College.

Raphael Kosek's latest book of poetry, *Harmless Encounters,* won the 2021 Jesse Bryce Niles Chapbook Contest. *American Mythology,* a finalist at Brick Road Poetry Press, was released in 2019. *Rough Grace* won the 2014 Concrete Wolf Chapbook Contest. Her poems have appeared in

Southern Humanities Review and *Poetry East,* and have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes. She served as the 2019-2020 Dutchess County, NY Poet Laureate where she teaches at Dutchess Community College. www.raphaelkosek.com.

Cheryl Anne Latuner has published two chapbooks of poetry and a non-fiction memoir, *Baby at My Breast, Reflections of a Nursing Mother*. Her work has appeared in journals such as in *The Comstock Review, The Naugatuck River Review, The Spoon River Poetry Review, Tar River Poetry, Literary Mama, Brevity*, and *Writing Fire: An Anthology Celebrating the Power of Women's Words*. She lives in Northampton, MA, and is at work on a second memoir—*No Long Island Girl.* Her website is www.cherylannelatuner.com.

Tom Laughlin is a professor at Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts where he teaches creative writing and coordinates a visiting writers series and open readings for the Creative Writing Program. He was a founding editor of *Vortext*, a volunteer staff reader for many years for *Ploughshares*, and he has taught literature classes in two Massachusetts prisons. His poetry has appeared in *Green Mountains Review, Ibbetson Street, Drunk Monkeys, Sand Hills, Superpresent, Molecule,* and elsewhere. His poetry chapbook, *The Rest of the Way*, was published by Finishing Line Press in August 2022. www.TomLaughlinPoet.com

Jeannette Tien-Wei Law is an international educator who makes her home in Milan, Italy. An American of Chinese descent, she was born to first-generation refugees. Her alma maters, Wellesley College and Cambridge University, awarded her poetry with the Florence Annette Wing Prize, Amanda Sternberg Memorial Award, Rima Alamuddin Prize, and the prestigious Quiller-Couch Prize. She is a 2022 recipient of the global Newman Prize for English Jueju, an innovative form of classical Chinese poetry in English. Ms. Law's poems have been published in the spiritual anthology *Becoming Fire,* while her prose has supported oral history and memoir projects for members of the Organization of Chinese Americans. Website: http://sageadvising.net/poetry-blog/

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium. He emigrated to Brooklyn in 1960. After graduating high school, he became a medic in the Air Force. He earned a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature,worked as a Green Beret language instructor and received a B.A. in Spanish Literature from the University of Alaska where he taught from 1978-1997. He built houses, worked as a pipe-fitter, orderly, landscaper, driller, bartender. He is also a published poet, novelist, playwright and artist.

Mieke Leenders is a writer, journalist, photographer, and art historian. Her poems, short stories, and photographs have appeared in various publications including *The Abstract Elephant Magazine, Wanderlust Journal, Quillkeepers Press, The Bluebird Word,* and more. She is passionate about travel, hiking, literature, animal rights, social justice, and art.

Larry Lefkowitz's Jewish story collection *Enigmati Tales* is published by Fomite Press. His book, *Varieties of Jewish Experience* contains stories, a novella, and a humorous Yiddish glossary and is also published by Fomite press.

Deborah Leipziger is an author, poet, and advisor on sustainability. Born in Brazil, Ms. Leipziger is the author of several books on sustainability and human rights. Her poems have been published in eight countries, in such magazines and journals as *Pangyrus, Salamander, Lily Poetry Review,* and *Revista Cardenal.* She is the co-founder of *Soul-Lit,* an on-line poetry magazine. Her new collection of poems, *Story & Bone*, was published in early 2023 by Lily Poetry Review Books. Her chapbook, *Flower Map,* was published by Finishing Line Press. Her work appears in numerous anthologies, including *Tree Lines: 21st Century American Poems*.

Laurinda Lind is a caregiver and former journalist in New York's North Country, close to Canada. Some of her poems are in *Atlanta Review, New American Writing, Paterson Literary Review, Radius*, and *Spillway*. She is a Keats-Shelley Prize winner, and a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. She can't breathe.

Margaret Mackinnon is the author of *The Invented Child,* winner of the Gerald Cable Book Award and the 2014 Literary Award in Poetry from the Library of Virginia. Her new book, *Afternoon in Cartago*, won the 2021 Richard Snyder Prize and has been published by Ashland Poetry Press. She lives in Richmond, Virginia, and is studying for a Master's in Divinity.

Eileen Malone's poems and stories have been published in over 500 literary journals and anthologies, a significant amount of which have earned literary awards. Raised in the U.K. and Australia, she is in her 78th year and lives in the coastal fog at the edge of the San Francisco Bay Area where she founded and now directs the Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition.

Freya Manfred's most recent books of poetry are *Speak, Mother* and *Loon In Late November Water* (Red Dragonfly Press). Manfred's poetry won a Harvard/Radcliffe Fellowship, an NEA Grant, and the 2009 Midwest Booksellers' Choice Award. Her memoir, *Frederick Manfred: A Daughter Remembers* was nominated for a Minnesota Book Award and an Iowa Historical Society Award. Her second memoir is *Raising Twins: A True Life Adventure*. Website: www.freyamanfredwriter.com

Kon Markogiannis is an artist-poet-researcher with an interest in themes such as memory, mortality, spirituality, the human condition, the exploration of the human psyche and the evolution of consciousness. He sees his work as a kind of weapon against the ephemeral or, as Vilém Flusser would say (*Towards a Philosophy of Photography*), a "hunt for new states of things". Kon has been exhibiting his art for many years (mainly in Greece and the UK) and his work has been featured in various books, journals and magazines. His university studies include a BA in Visual Communication Design, an MA in Photography and a Doctorate in Fine Art.

Devon Miller-Duggan has published poems in *The Antioch Review, Massachusetts Review,* and *Spillway*. She teaches at the University of Delaware. Her books include *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* (Tres Chicas

Books, 2008), *Alphabet Year,* (Wipf & Stock, 2017), and *The Slow Salute* (Lithic Press Chapbook Competition Winner, 2018).

Argentinian American, **Silvina Mizrahi** is an interdisciplinary artist and art educator based in Boston. Her works is fueled by her beliefs in Art as a tool that help us to connect, to heal and to embrace our differences. She likes to work with different medias and techniques that can express more accurate the purpose of the project. Her works encompasses figurative bronze sculptures, abstract expressionist mixed media paintings, recycled materials sculptures (created with the communities) and public art.
Her art is a mirror of her experiences as immigrant, memories from her childhood, Jewish traditions and her commitment to environmental causes. Her work is in Galleries and Museums Internationally.

Peter E. Murphy was born in Wales and grew up in New York where he managed a night club, operated heavy equipment, and drove a taxi. Author of eleven books and chapbooks of poetry and prose, his work has appeared or is forthcoming *The Common, Guernica, Hippocampus, The New Welsh Reader, Rattle, The Sun, Witness* and elsewhere. He is the founder of Murphy Writing of Stockton University in Atlantic City. www.peteremurphy.com.

R.T. Notaro is a news photographer/writer/producer, currently working in Philadelphia. In over 30 years in the television industry R.T. has been nominated for three Emmy Awards with one win along with two AP News Awards. When not writing R.T. can be found cooking, reading or trying to improve on guitar. R.T. writes on a variety of topics because nothing should be off limits. Recently published in: *In Parentheses Magazine, Santa Clara Review, Progenitor Art and Literary Journal, Wingless Dreamer* and *The Antonym Magazine*. Twitter: @rtnotaro

Marlene Olin was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. Her short stories and essays have been published in journals such as *The Massachusetts Review, Catapult, PANK,* and

World Literature Today. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of The Net, Best Small Fictions, and for inclusion in Best American Short Stories.

Rebby Onken (she/they) is a student, aspiring historian, and avid writer. Her writing has had many phases: she began scribbling away at age twelve but did not start to share her work until she joined a slam poetry team in high school. Their experiences on that team encouraged them to use writing as a way to contend with their own queer, asexual identity as well as the challenging environment around them. Long past slam poetry days now, they nevertheless still use both academic and creative writing to examine their inner world and the worlds of others.

William Orem writes about spiritual issues. His first collection of poems, *Our Purpose in Speaking*, won the Wheelbarrow Books Poetry Prize and the Rubery International Book Award. His novels and short story collections have been honored with the GLCA New Writers' Award, the Eric Hoffer Award, the Gival Press Novel Award, and others; currently he is a Senior Writer in Residence at Emerson College. Details at williamorem.com.

Melody Joy Overstreet is a poet, artist, printer, weaver, and community educator. Her work has been exhibited locally as well as internationally, and has been featured in numerous publications inclusive of *Loam Magazine, Seed Broadcast, Inverness Almanac*, and *The Philosopher*. She was a recent Artist-in-Resident with the On Being Project, where she completed a book of place-based poems and illustrations titled, *Reverberations*. Melody is a recipient of a Gemological Award and a Peace Studio Fellowship for her ongoing work at the intersection of art, teaching, and land stewardship. To learn more about her, visit reciprocalfield.com.

Kalani Padilla (they/she) is a Filipino-American and Kama'aina poet from Mililani, Hawai'i. Kalani is a Whitworth alumn of English (B.A.) and Theology (M.A.). Currently, Kalani tends home in Missoula, Montana — an MFA candidate, writing mentor, yogi, night baker and river rat.

Jennifer M. Phillips is an immigrant, retired Episcopal Priest, gardener, grower of Bonsai, painter, and has been writing and publishing poetry and prose since age seven. Phillips grew up in upstate New York and has lived in New England, London, New Mexico, St.Louis, Rhode Island, & Cape Cod, Massachusetts. She has published two chapbooks, *Sitting Safe In the Theatre of Electricity* and *A Song of Ascents,* and her work has appeared in over 50 journals.

Patrice Pinette is inspired by alchemy between the arts in her own practice and in collaboration with other artists, writers and musicians. She facilitates NH Humanities Connections programs and teaches in Antioch New England's Waldorf Education program. Patrice received an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and her poems have appeared in *Writing the Land, Poets Touchstone, The Inflectionist Review, Allegro Poetry Magazine, The Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review, Adanna Literary Journal, Poetica Magazine, Evening Street Review, Snapdragon: A Journal of Art and Healing,* and elsewhere.

Estill Pollock's publications include *Constructing the Human* (Poetry Salzburg) and the book cycle, *Relic Environments Trilogy* (Cinnamon Press, Wales). His latest poetry collections, *Entropy and Time Signatures*, are published by Broadstone Books. He lives in Norfolk, England.

Cassie Premo Steele is a lesbian, ecofeminist, mother, poet, novelist, and essayist whose writing focuses on the themes of trauma, healing, creativity, mindfulness and the environment. She is an award-winning author of 16 books and audio programs ranging from novels to poetry and nonfiction and scholarship. Her newest book, *Swimming in Gilead*, is forthcoming from Yellow Arrow Publishing in 2023. And her poetry has won numerous awards, including the Archibald Rutledge Prize named after the first Poet Laureate of South Carolina, where she lives with her wife. Her website is www.cassiepremosteele.com.

Brian Ragsdale is an artist, writer, and scholar who lives in Southern New Hampshire. He writes about navigating systems of love, oppression, power and being part of the African diaspora.

Patrick T. Reardon, a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, has authored twelve books, including the poetry collections *Requiem for David* (Silver Birch), *Darkness on the Face of the Deep* (Kelsay) and *The Lost Tribes* (Grey Book). His memoir in prose poems *Puddin': The Autobiography of a Baby* was published in November, 2022, by Third World Press with an introduction by Haki Madhubuti. His website is patricktreardon.com. His poetry has appeared in *Rhino, Main Street Rag, America, Autumn Sky, Burningword Literary Journal* and many others. His poem "The archangel Michael" was a finalist for the 2022 Mary Blinn Poetry Prize.

Doren Robbins is a poet, mixed media artist, from Santa Cruz, California. Since 2001, he has taught at Foothill College. Robbins' poetry and art has appeared in many publications over the years, including *The American Poetry Review, Another Chicago Magazine, The Iowa Review, Indiana Review, Lana Turner, New Letters, Nimrod, Otoliths* and *Sulfur*. His books have been awarded the Blue Lynx Poetry Award 2001 and the 2008 PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Poetry Award. *Twin Extra: A Poem in Three Parts* was nominated for the 2015 Jewish National Book Council Award in Poetry. In 2021 Spuyten Duyvil Press published *Sympathetic Manifesto, Selected Poems 1975-2015*. dorenrobbins.wordpress.com

M.S. Rooney lives in Sonoma, California with poet Dan Noreen. Her work appears in journals, including *The Cortland Review, Leaping Clear,* and *Soul-Lit* and anthologies, including *A Walk with Nature: Poetic Encounters that Nourish the Soul* (University Professors Press). Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Ron Sanders is an L.A.-based author, poet, and illustrator.

Erin Schalk is a visual artist, writer, and educator located in the greater Los Angeles area. She has exhibited her artwork and published her writing both nationally and internationally. She also holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Schalk is also a major advocate for disability awareness and accessibility in the arts. She teaches visual art and creative writing to adult students with vision loss, and she is a Board Member for Orange County Arts and Disability.

Jeff Schiff is the author of *With light enough to braille me nextward, They: A Letter to America, That hum to go by, Mixed Diction, Burro Heart, The Rats of Patzcuaro, The Homily of Infinitude,* and *Anywhere in this Country*. Hundreds of his poems, essays, recordings, and photographs have appeared in more than a hundred and fifty publications worldwide, including *The Alembic, Bellingham Review, Cincinnati Review, Grand Street, Ohio Review, Poet & Critic, McNeese Review, Salt Hill, Tulane Review, Tampa Review, Louisville Review, Tendril, Pembroke Magazine, Carolina Review, Chicago Review, Hawaii Review, Southern Humanities Review, River City, Indiana Review, Willow Springs, Salt Hill,* and *Southwest Review*. He has taught at Columbia College Chicago since 1987.

Leslie Schultz (Northfield, Minnesota) has five collections of poetry. Her poetry has appeared in *Able Muse, Blue Unicorn, Hawai'i Pacific Review, Little Patuxent Review, Light, Mezzo Cammin, MockingHeart Review, Naugatuck River Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Pensive, Poet Lore, Poetic Strokes Anthology, Third Wednesday, Tipton Poetry Journal, The Madison Review, The Midwest Quarterly, The Orchards, The Wayfarer,* and *Tipton Poetry Review*. She serves as a judge for the Maria W. Faust Sonnet Contest.

Brian Schwartz's fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Harvard Review, JewishFiction.net, TIMBER* and other journals, and in the anthology *Inheriting the War*. He used to write the *Rumpus* sports column A Fan's Notes; now at work on a novel, he no longer has time to write about sports but is keenly anticipating the NBA postseason.

Saba Sebhatu is a writer, photographer, and educator. She also worked as a peace-building practitioner in conflict-resolution initiatives after moving to Eritrea. Her work can be found in *World Literature Today, Lolwe,* and *Narrative Northeast*. Saba has received writing fellowships from Callaloo, AWP, and MVICW and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. She is currently working on a collection of essays. She received her MFA in creative nonfiction at The New School.

Collette Sell is blessed by the generosity of author and coach, Judyth Hill; poet and editor of *Tiferet Journal*, Donna Baier Stein; by Abby Wasserman at the O'Hanlon Center; and workshop teachers at The Grotto, San Francisco's esteemed gathering place for writers. She is a member of San Miguel PEN and has read there as well at the San Miguel Literary Sala. For years, she wrote only on things that could easily be lost - scraps of paper left behind in abandoned apartments or in the pockets of raggedy coats donated to Goodwill. This will be her first published work.

Maureen Sherbondy's most recent book is *Lines in Opposition*. Her work has appeared in *European Judaism, Upstreet, Calyx,* and other journals. She lives in Durham, NC. www.maureensherbondy.com

Daniel Sklar teaches Creative Writing at Endicott College, and has been published in the *Harvard Review, English Journal, Beat Scene*, and the *New York Quarterly* among other journals. His books include *Flying Cats, Hack Writer*, and *Bicycles, Canoes, Drums*. His play, *Lycanthropy* was performed at the Boston Theater Marathon in 2012 and was reviewed in *The Boston Globe*. He rides a bicycle to work.

Robert Vivian lives in Central Michigan, and as with the respective piece, sometimes publishes under the name **Phocas.**

Pamela Wax, an ordained rabbi, is the author of *Walking the Labyrinth* (Main Street Rag, 2022) and the forthcoming chapbook, *Starter Mothers* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have received awards from *Crosswinds,*

Paterson Literary Review, *Poets' Billow*, *Oberon*, the Robinson Jeffers Tor House, as well as a Best of the Net nomination. She has been published in literary journals including *Barrow Street, Connecticut River Review, Naugatuck River Review, Pedestal, Tupelo Quarterly, Sixfold,* and *Passengers Journal*. Her poems have also appeared in two previous issues of *Pensive*. She offers spirituality and poetry workshops online from her home in the Northern Berkshires of Massachusetts.

J.P. White has published essays, articles, fiction, reviews, interviews and poetry in many places including *The Nation, The New Republic, The Gettysburg Review, Agni Review, Catamaran, APR, Salamander, Catamaran, North American Review, Shenandoah, The Georgia Review, Southern Review, The Massachusetts Review, Water-Stone, The New York Times, Willow Springs, Crazyhorse, Peripheries,* and *Poetry* (Chicago). White is the author of five books of poems, a novel, *Every Boat Turns South*, www.jpwhitebooks.net.

Anne Whitehouse's most recent poetry collection is *Outside From The Inside* (Dos Madres Press, 2020), and her most recent chapbook *Frida* (Ethel Zine and Micro Press, 2023)

Christy Wise is a poet, essayist and author. Her poems have appeared in *Evening Street Press, Anthem*, and *The Raven's Perch,* among others. Christy is co-author of *A Mouthful of Rivets: Women at Work in World War II*. Her essay, "Memory Book" was a notable essay in *Best American Essays* 2010. Christy feels most at home walking along the Pacific Ocean and hiking in Desolation Wilderness.

Yolanda Wysocki is an emerging writer of creative nonfiction, although she still occasionally writes poetry as well. She recently had an essay published in *The Writing Disorder; another in Stories That Need to be Told 2022*. Retired from Social Services, Counseling, and Life Coaching, she is committing her time to creative pursuits, meditation, and other interests. She has an MA in the Study of Human Consciousness.

Jane Zich is a San Francisco Bay Area artist who primarily explores imagery from the unconscious. Her award-winning paintings have been juried into national and international art exhibitions and published in numerous literary, art, cultural, and psychology periodicals and books. “Remembering Ukraine” has previously been exhibited by the Marin Society of Artists and published in their monthly newsletter. More of her work can be viewed at: www.zichpaintings.com.

Kristin Camitta Zimet is the author of *Take in My Arms the Dark* and the editor of *The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review*. She has poems in journals and anthologies around the world. Her newest manuscript gives voice to characters in Torah. She is also a visionary photographer.