

CONTRIBUTORS

Shane Allison
Shamik Banerjee
Mehdi Gassi
Gigi Giangiobbe-Rodriguez
Sean P. Hotchkiss
Slava Konoval
Keith Kunze
Bailey Moore
Xiomara Mueller
Jacky Sanchez Lozoya
Mercedes Shafer
Laila Sheikh
Brooklyn Shepard
Matt Smith
Randall Camden Stemple
David P. Sterner
Alli Tschirhart
Ed Vassilenko
Nancy McKinley Wagner
Kelley Wezner
Dean Wilson



Enjoy editions of *The Bellwether Review* online at
www.bellwetherreview.com

THE BELLWETHER REVIEW


THE BELLWETHER REVIEW

SPRING 2024



Rock Creek Literary and Arts Journal

Spring 2024



THE BELLWETHER REVIEW

Spring 2024

Editorial Staff

Claire Batchelder:	Nonfiction & Proofing Editor
Jonathan Bennett:	Fiction & Poetry Editor
Hunter Bordwell-Gray:	Poetry & Social Media Editor
Quinn Brown:	Fiction & Layout Editor
Sean P. Hotchkiss:	Art, Web & Typesetting Editor
Adam Idris:	Typesetting & Special Pages Editor
Bo Leo:	Typesetting & Proofing Editor
Megan McGrory:	Layout & Proofing Editor
Randall Camden Stemple:	Correspondence & Special Pages Editor
Karen Embry:	Faculty Advisor

Portland Community College
Rock Creek Campus
Portland, Oregon

The Bellwether Review is a compilation of art, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction from writers and artists at Portland Community College and from the general public. The journal is produced by a student-led editorial team enrolled in WR 246/249: Advanced Creative Writing, Editing & Publishing.

We would like to give special thanks to English Program Dean Christopher Rose and Pathway Dean for Academic Foundations, Essentials, & Gateways Dr. Terrell Clark for supporting funding for the journal. We also send our thanks to Maggie Songer and the PCC Print Center team for their support in producing the journal. Lastly, we thank all of those whose submissions continue to fuel and inspire this journal.

Cover art: *Wrapping Freedom* by Mehdi Gassi, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in.

Masthead art by Emily Miller, watercolor on watercolor paper, 9 x 6.5 in.

The Bellwether Review is printed by the Portland Community College Print Center.

Copyright © 2024 Portland Community College
17705 NW Springville Rd., Portland, Oregon 97229

Portland Community College reserves all rights to the material contained herein for the contributors' protection. On publication, all rights revert to the respective authors and artists.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Bellwether Review is Portland Community College Rock Creek's literary magazine. Our mission is to showcase the original writing and art from both students and artistically inclined folks from the greater community. We aim to publish diverse bodies of work from a variety of voices. All submissions go through a fair and democratic process, which ensures the highest quality of work is selected. *The Bellwether Review* commemorates the hard work and dedication of all those involved in its creation.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to acknowledge that the home of *The Bellwether Review*, Portland Community College's Rock Creek campus, is located on the land of the Atfalati-Kalapuya tribes (also known as Tualatin Kalapuya), who were among the First People living in what we currently call Washington County. In 1855, the Atfalati tribes were forced to sign a treaty relinquishing ownership of their land. Today, the Kalapuya people are members of the Confederated Tribes of the Grande Ronde, located southwest of Washington County.

We also want to acknowledge and thank the original stewards of the land throughout the area which PCC serves today, including the Molalla; the Multnomah, Kathlamet, and Clackamas bands of the Chinook; as well as the many other Tribes who have made their homes along the Columbia River.

We, the editors, have chosen to include this land acknowledgment as an active commitment to supporting contemporary Indigenous sovereignty by promoting awareness and fostering dialogue as a contribution toward decolonizing the oppression which has resulted from systemic policies of colonization—including genocide, relocation, broken treaties, and assimilation.

The Bellwether Review seeks to highlight the diversity of linguistic and artistic expression of student voices on the Rock Creek campus and throughout the PCC community; with this in mind, we want to acknowledge the absence of voices that might otherwise have been thriving today, if it were not for the practices of forced cultural assimilation that lead to the loss of fluency in local Indigenous languages. The last known fluent speaker of Tualatin Northern Kalapuya, Louis Kenoyer (*baxawádas*), died in 1937. Kenoyer's memoir, *My Life: Reminiscences of a Grande Ronde Reservation Childhood*,

translated into English from Tualatin Northern Kalapuya, is available at the PCC Rock Creek Library.

We encourage readers of *The Bellwether Review* to honor the journal's connection to the history of the land upon which it is produced by supporting and promoting organizations that are working to cultivate and honor contemporary Indigenous cultures in a variety of ways, such as PCC's Native Nations Club, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, The NAYA Family Center, Salmon Nation, and the First Nations' Native Language Immersion Initiative.

The Bellwether Review editorial team would like to thank PCC Native Nations Club Coordinator Karry Kelley (Yahooskin/Modoc) and Dr. Blake Hausman (Cherokee Nation), PCC faculty in English and Native American Studies, for advising us on crafting this acknowledgment.

Learn more about the Kalapuya people by exploring Pacific University's Indigenous History of Oregon, *The Quartux Journal's* Kalapuyan Tribal History, and the Five Oaks Museum's online exhibition, *This IS Kalapuyan Land*. Links to these resources can be found on our website: www.bellwetherreview.com.



HISTORY OF *THE BELLWETHER REVIEW*

The Bellwether Review had its conception in 1996, originally dubbed *The Rock Creek Review*, staffed by PCC Rock Creek faculty members. *The Rock Creek Review* was renamed *The Bellwether Review* in 2011, with the inception of the Advanced Creative Writing, Editing & Publishing course. *The Bellwether Review* was chosen to symbolize the artistic drive of writers and artists, by drawing on the significance of a “bellwether” being the leader in a flock of sheep, who wears a bell to signal the best direction for the entire herd. Today, the term “bellwether” more commonly refers to any person who takes initiative and sets trends, as those whose work is published in *The Bellwether Review* do in leading the way for artistic expression.

WANT TO SEE YOUR WORK PUBLISHED IN *THE BELLWETHER REVIEW*?

The Bellwether Review primarily seeks to promote the work of Portland Community College students, but we also consider a limited number of submissions from the general public. Any individual can submit up to 5 poems, 2 short stories, 2 scripts, 2 creative nonfiction essays, and/or 4 pieces of visual artwork. We generally do not publish research essays or works over 5,000 words. All works submitted will be reviewed and taken into consideration by our editorial team!

Submit your work(s) via e-mail to bellwetherreview@gmail.com. Written works should be submitted as a .docx file, and visual artwork as a print quality .jpeg or .png file.

All submissions must be titled. Include your name, list of titles submitted, and phone number in the submission email, which should be sent from your PCC email address, if you have one. Submission files should not have your name or identifying information within the file itself. All contributors will receive a copy of *The Bellwether Review*.

Send your work to bellwetherreview@gmail.com by **April 4, 2025** to be considered for our next edition.

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

First and foremost, thank you for picking up and reading this year's edition of *The Bellwether Review*. Students who submit their works for publication, as well as those who create the review, spend hundreds of hours working their craft, and we here on the editorial team truly appreciate the efforts that have gone into developing the outstanding works that appear in this year's journal.

One hundred and six works were submitted this year, and each one was reviewed and discussed by the editorial team, as we sought out what makes each piece special—what makes them beautiful—and ultimately selected those that stood out as exemplary to share with you, the readers of the 2024 edition.

We here at *The Bellwether Review* team thank you for taking the time to appreciate the work of these contributing writers and artists, and we especially want to thank all those who contributed works to this edition.

And with that, we hope to see you next year.

Until then, take care.

— 2024 Editorial Team

TABLE OF CONTENTS

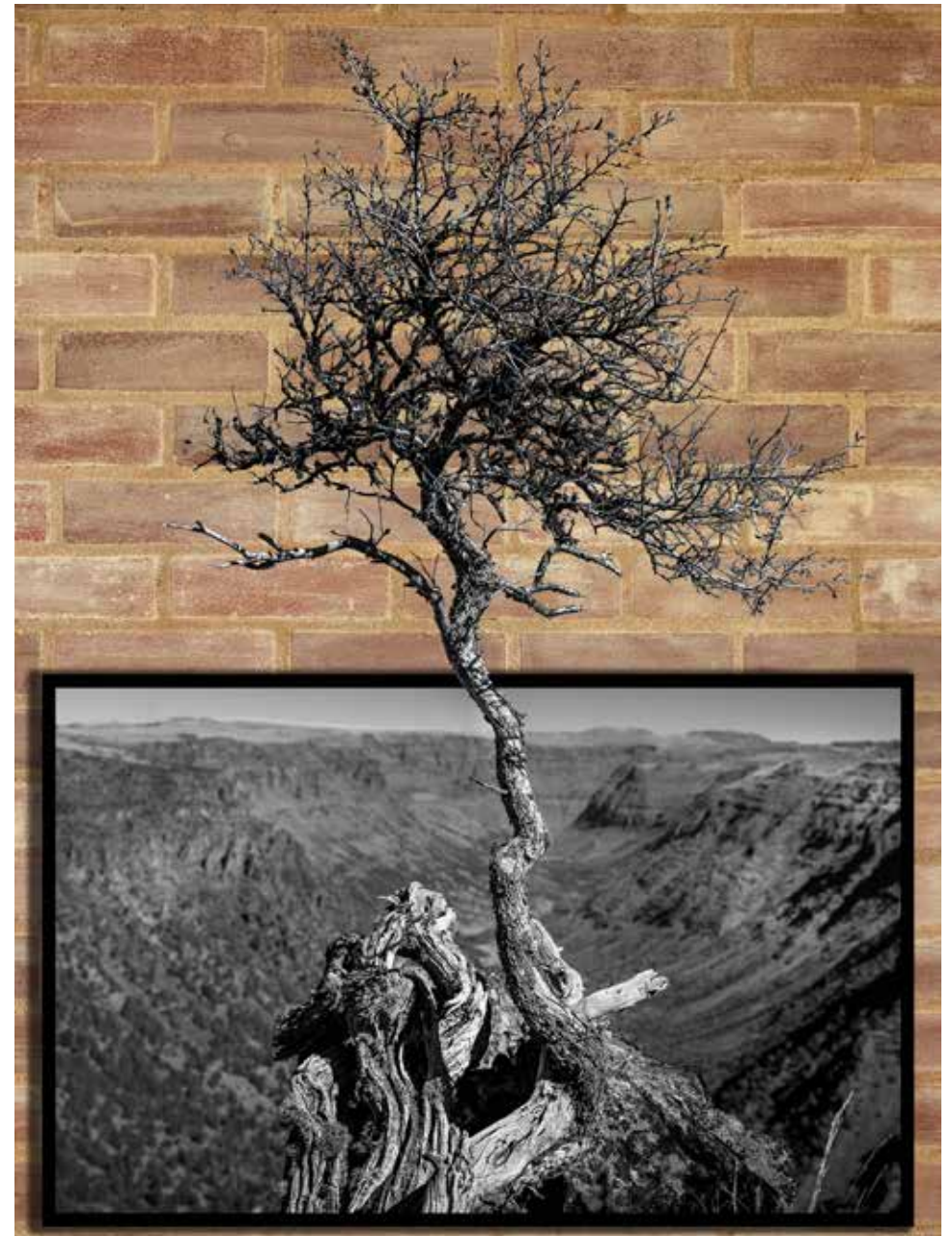
Growing out of Bounds	1
<i>Photograph by Dean Wilson</i>	
Misty Voyage	2
<i>Artwork by Laila Sheikh</i>	
The Whisper of the Rain	3
<i>Nonfiction by Brooklyn Shepard</i>	
Lavender Wedding	6
<i>Poem by Shane Allison</i>	
Patriarchy	8
<i>Poem by Sean P. Hotchkiss</i>	
The Thinking	9
<i>Artwork by Mehdi Gassi</i>	
5 off Your Order	10
<i>Artwork by Shane Allison</i>	
Paying for That Free Cup of Coffee	11
<i>Poem by Dean Wilson</i>	
A Tasty Thank You	12
<i>Artwork by Shane Allison</i>	
Street Glitter	13
<i>Poem by Gigi Giangiobbe-Rodriguez</i>	

In the End <i>Poem by David P. Sterner</i>	17	Mechanical Pencil <i>Poem by Sean P. Hotchkiss</i>	38
How Much Is ‘Mass’? <i>Poem by Randall Camden Stemple</i>	18	Farm House <i>Artwork by Laila Sheikh</i>	40
Ice and Rocks <i>Photograph by Dean Wilson</i>	20	Small Town, America <i>Poem by Alli Tschirhart</i>	41
Sea and Stone <i>Poem by Dean Wilson</i>	21	I Know Anger Well <i>Poem by Alli Tschirhart</i>	42
Litany for Jarret Keene <i>Poem by Shane Allison</i>	22	Mad Scientist <i>Artwork by Kelley Wezner</i>	43
El Alcatraz <i>Artwork by Jacky Sanchez Lozoya</i>	25	Sentinel <i>Artwork by Kelley Wezner</i>	44
A Meeting <i>Poem by Shamik Banerjee</i>	26	Notice <i>Nonfiction by Nancy McKinley Wagner</i>	45
A Tale of Every Night <i>Poem by Shamik Banerjee</i>	28	Amanita <i>Artwork by Kelley Wezner</i>	47
Abandoned Homestead <i>Photograph by Dean Wilson</i>	29	Astoria at Blue Hour <i>Photograph by Dean Wilson</i>	48
Not the Worst Day <i>Nonfiction by Sean P. Hotchkiss</i>	30	Masjid Road <i>Poem by Shamik Banerjee</i>	49
No Relief <i>Poem by David P. Sterner</i>	35	Duality <i>Artwork by Ed Vassilenko</i>	50
Death and Life <i>Artwork by Bailey Moore</i>	36	Backstab in French Ambassador <i>Poem by Slava Konoval</i>	51

The Soul Jumps with Joy	52	First Impression	70
<i>Poem by Slava Konoval</i>		<i>Artwork by Mehdi Gassi</i>	
Dear Creator	53	Fat Boy	71
<i>Poem by Mercedes Shafer</i>		<i>Poem by Shane Allison</i>	
Self Portrait of Self Discomfort	54	Fetal Position	73
<i>Artwork by Ed Vassilenko</i>		<i>Poem by Alli Tschirhart</i>	
Bully	55	The Red's Death	74
<i>Poem by Shane Allison</i>		<i>Fiction by Matt Smith</i>	
Aunt Bobbie Is My Favorite on My Dad's Side	56	Untitled	84
<i>Poem by Shane Allison</i>		<i>Artwork by Mehdi Gassi</i>	
Drawing of Jesse	58		
<i>Artwork by Ed Vassilenko</i>			
The Fool	59		
<i>Fiction by Gigi Giangiobbe-Rodriguez</i>			
Orange Is the Loneliest Color	62		
<i>Artwork by Xiomara Mueller</i>			
Promise Rings	63		
<i>Poem by Bailey Moore</i>			
What If I Got Those Cupcakes?	64		
<i>Nonfiction by Keith Kunze</i>			
Sonnet	68	Contributors	85
<i>Poem by Shamik Banerjee</i>		Meet the Editors	91
Bok Choy	69		
<i>Artwork by Kelley Wezner</i>			

**THE
BELLWETHER
REVIEW**

Spring 2024



GROWING OUT OF BOUNDS

Photograph

Dean Wilson

THE WHISPER OF THE RAIN

Brooklyn Shepard

It was a stark and unforgiving mid-winter's evening in western Oregon. This was my second time in Corvallis in a week. The light from the Shari's sign reflected off our faces, casting a morbid glow on the pavement. Sitting on the ground of a rain-soaked parking lot, I held Jason's uncalled hand as he bled to death. The dark rivulets spreading out from his body were growing into a puddle, somehow avoiding the place where I sat, as if they too blamed me for their presence.

"I . . . I think I got shot," Jason spoke quietly.

Three days prior, my daughter had called me, hysterical on the phone, blubbing out, "He hit me." I already wasn't fond of Jason Williams. While my daughter, Cha'uri, felt he was a mature and distinguished older guy, I just saw him as the nearly thirty-year-old who was dating my barely legal daughter. I may have been able to get past that, but he had been accused of molesting his much-younger sister when she was a baby, and he was all too often around my infant granddaughters. When my youngest granddaughter was born to Cha'uri and Jason, the Department of Health and Human Services stepped in and refused to let Nova go home with him. They called me early on the second morning of my daughter's hospital stay and asked if I would take the girls until Jason completed a psychosexual parameters test. We didn't expect that he would refuse, but he did.

At the time of the incident, I was living in Forest Grove, a tiny agricultural town two hours north of Corvallis. It was a harshly beautiful night. There was no moon out, and the stars glinted hard like chips of quartz freshly dug out of their earth. The highway was lonely, and headlights spit their beams through my windshield in stark bursts breaking up long periods of darkness. During my frantic drive south, Cha'uri and Jason had the ill grace to make up, and she sent me a text right before I left the interstate telling me to turn around. She tried to assure me that she was fine; it was all a big misunderstanding. But



MISTY VOYAGE

Oil on canvas

36 x 29 in.

Laila Sheikh

once a plate is broken, no amount of glue can put it back exactly the same as it was before.

I convinced her to meet up with me, and we talked, but she decided not to go home with me, to stay instead with Jason. No amount of my considerable persuasion could change her mind. She was definitely my daughter. Stubborn as a mule. I couldn't let it go. My boyfriend of the time, an ex-Army grunt, pitched one solution that would remove Jason from ever being a problem again. If the United States Armed Forces is good at anything, it's at training its recruits that killing another person is a solution to most problems.

The next day, I offered to meet up with Cha'uri and Jason for dinner, saying I had something to talk to Jason about. I never intended to have a conversation with him. Upon arriving at the Shari's Saturday evening, I expressed a desire to smoke, and predictably, as smokers will do, my daughter and Jason followed outside, bumming smokes off me as we huddled under the bicycle rack out of the rain.

I stepped away to drop my filter in the receptacle, and the first shot ricocheted off the bike rack and hit me in the knee. No plan survives the first attempt, and my plan was already going awry. The shots came from across the parking lot, in the wooded area near the cars, and the pops from the gunfire were so loud and so close together that they sounded like fireworks going off in the space between us. I fell to the ground, and saw my daughter, still standing, staring agape at Jason, who lay on the ground behind me. I screamed at Cha'uri to get down, honestly afraid for the first time. What would I do if she got hurt? She dropped and scrambled over to me on hands and knees. I checked her quickly, desperately making sure she wasn't injured, then shoved her inside the glass-walled entrance to the diner. The door chimed, an incongruous welcoming noise. I crawled over to Jason. He lay on his back, several small red marks scattered across his body, like he had been dotted with a red Sharpie. I could see that none were immediately fatal, but it wouldn't be long. Suddenly, this wasn't what

I wanted at all. Death, right in front of you, goes from being a distant, sterile concept, to being a real and present event.

"I . . . I think I got shot," Jason whispered to me. I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "You're going to be fine," I lied. There was no reason to frighten him. It would be pointlessly cruel.

Both of our lives were fading away like the last light from the sky. While he would never hit my daughter again, I hadn't saved her. I had cost her both her own free will in her relationship choices, and her time with her mother. As I watched her through the plate glass window, safe within the restaurant, I realized I would spend most of the foreseeable future unable to hold her when she needed me or be by her side as she celebrated life. Our lives would be as they were in this moment: me on the outside, watching her, and all too often doing so through glass.

The police and ambulance arrived in minutes. It didn't take the detectives long to arrest my boyfriend and me. I was treated at the Corvallis hospital for a superficial gunshot wound to the knee, and released into the custody of a detective of the Corvallis Police Department. After spending eight months in the county's ancient and derelict jail, my co-defendant and I were each sentenced to prison time for our roles in Jason's death. I received eighteen years, and he got twenty-five to life. It could have been worse. I've been at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility for a little over eight years. The time has passed quickly, but I've missed so much of my life outside of these walls.

My granddaughters are now nine and eight years old. Like them, I've learned and grown. Most importantly perhaps, I have learned that no one has the right to take life from someone else. It is possibly the only thing we own that is ours alone. The ending of a life is a lot like strong perfume. It's impossible to put it on someone else without getting a little on yourself. My freedom died with Jason that night in the parking lot, our funeral dirge the whisper of the rain.

LAVENDER WEDDING

Shane Allison

I'm convinced that I'll get married in the gym of my old high school.
The ceremony will take place on a beautiful spring afternoon
on Saturday 'cause Saturdays are for weddings.
My suit will be "virgin" white
with a shirt of lavender and ruffles at the collar.
The shoes will be platformed.
I'll reek of Brut and Afro-sheen.
My husband-to-be will look stunning in his lavender Christian Dior
wedding dress
imported from Paris.
I'll mow the hair from my legs like newly cut grass with a Lady Bic,
pluck my chest hairs like feathers from a chicken,
paint these lips with apple red lipstick.
I want all my closest friends to come ornamented in those dresses
like they wore in *Footloose*.
The lesbians will come as Wall Street tycoons constantly
reminding me
how expensive all this shit is and how much it's going to
set me back
no matter how many times I tell them that money is no object.
I want my daddy to give me away if he promises to keep his hands
off Aunt Tillie.
My mama will be the bearer of rice and punch spiked with whiskey.
The priest will be a Michael Jackson impersonator.
The reception will be held at the house of Chicken and Waffles
where Debbie, employee of the month, will catch the bouquet.
Wally, the four-hundred-pound, stubble-faced cook,
who smokes stink cigars,
where the ashes occasionally fall in the blueberry pancake mix,

will have the pleasure of pulling the garter belt from my husband's
thigh with his teeth.
There will be no limousines 'cause if a Pinto was good enough for
my sister and her husband,
Then it's good enough for me and mine.

PATRIARCHY

Sean P. Hotchkiss

Father's daughter, husband's bride.
The choice taken from her, and she accepts it—for now.

Passive, subservient, obedient is how she has learned to be.
But this is not really her, although she does not know it yet.

Husband found and courtship orchestrated, she is wed with,
perhaps,
a skewed sense of what love is.

Love is submission and obedience,
it is not mutual respect or equality.

Time passes; days, months, years, and still matrimony does not feel
like love.
More submission, more obedience must be the answer. But it is not.

Freedom is the answer. Not the answer that will heal the marriage,
but the answer that will heal herself.

Not heal so much as reveal her strength, hidden within.
Unveiling the person she has always been.

The rebellion in her heart—thought of as weakness or failing—is
strength and truth.
Honest now, she breaks the bonds that have kept her from being
herself.

Smiles are natural, her face shines, doubts diminish—mostly.
She is herself now—unmarried, unfettered, and free.



THE THINKING

Screen print and gold leaf on paper
12 x 12 in.

Mehdi Gassi



5 OFF YOUR ORDER

Décollage

14 x 11 in.

Shane Allison

PAYING FOR THAT FREE CUP OF COFFEE

Dean Wilson

Eking out this road trip
Scrimping, saving, surviving
Somewhere between a frugal gourmet
And a dumpster diver.

Not quite changing from
A can of House Red to
A bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.
Not quite ready, not quite yet.

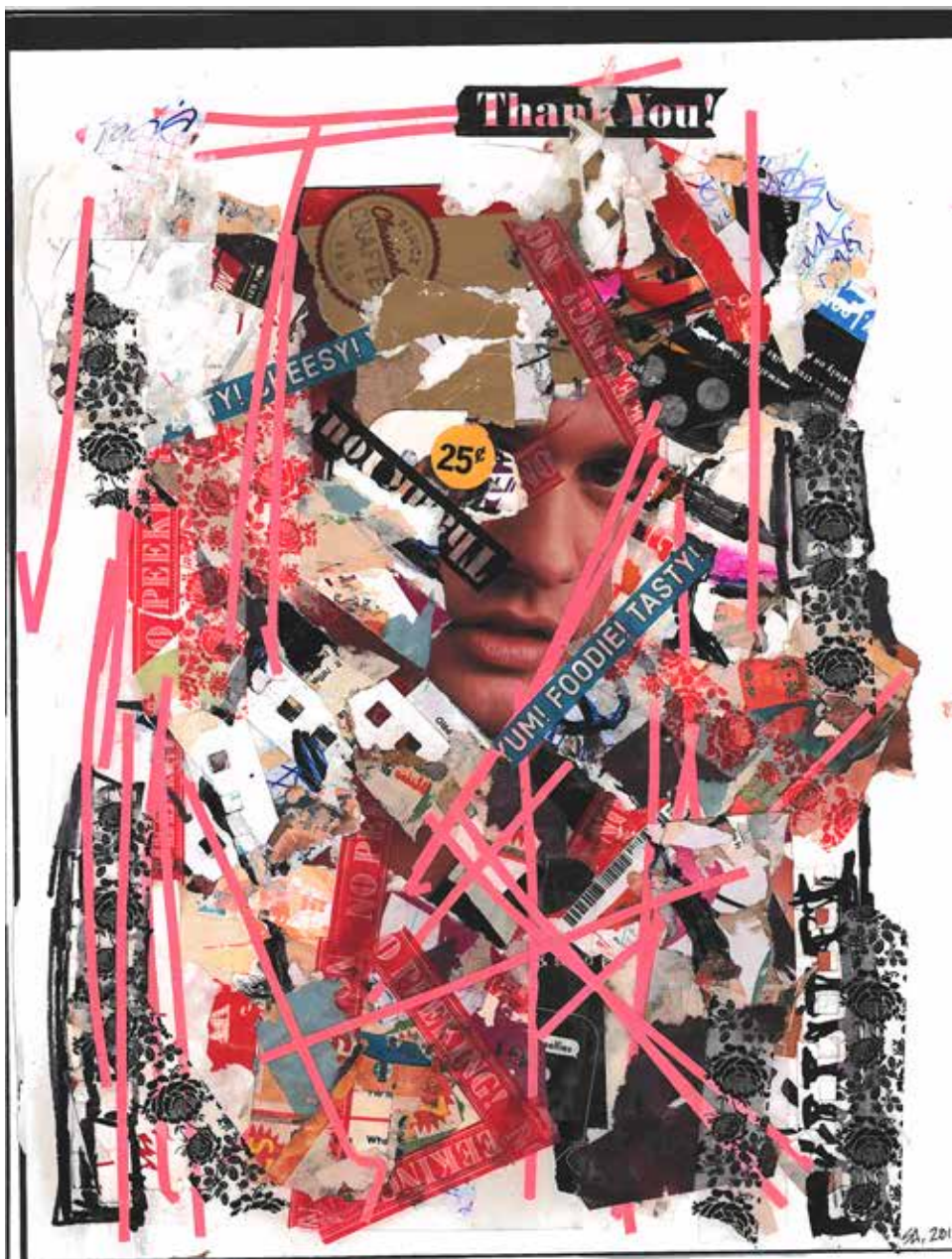
I chose cafés that
Honored senior citizens
55 and older while pondering
Unaccepted offers from AARP.

Free refills are a blessing in disguise,
Like the toss of a coin:
Never knowing the outcome
Until it's too late.

Driving faster to pay
For time spent drinking
That needed extra cup of caffeine;
My drug of choice.

"No Services Next 90 Miles"
The sign revealed.
I had plenty of fuel to go
That extra mile.

The next corner revealed a line
Of 10 MPH, of bumper to bumper.
That extra cup doesn't seem
Like a good deal after all.



A TASTY THANK YOU

Décollage

14 x 11 in.

Shane Allison

STREET GLITTER

Gigi Giangibbe-Rodriguez

Can you watch my section for five?
 we ask our coworker,
 one we may or may not have slept with,
 so we can slip outside
 apron still affixed
 and smoke a cigarette
 or just stand under the glow of street lamps,
 looking at the remains
 of a Tesla's window in pieces on the sidewalk—
street glitter—
 watching a rat scuttle across the pavement
 to dart behind a patch of grass,
 taking a moment of relative silence and fresh air.

We are misfits
 degenerates
 hard workers
 sweethearts.
 We are gravely misunderstood.
 We smell like hops, yeast,
 oil, grilled meat, bread, fish.
 We make 500 on a good night
if we're front of-house,
 and we make 90 on a bad night.
 After our shift is over and we clock out,
 we drink three to six beers, depending.
 Sometimes,
 during the *really* long days,
 the *really* thankless nights,
 the nights where we cut the tip of our finger off,

or have to clean up vomit, or piss,
 or a drunk guy pinches our ass,
 or some dude tells us we should smile more,
 we start drinking before clocking out.

86 TRIPLE SEC

we yell at each and every server
 while we tend bar,
 pouring pint after pint of beer.

4 COUNT SWEET POTATO FRIES

we yell as we pop out from our prep kitchen cave,
 to tell the spoiled front-of-house staff.

BEHIND! ¡ATRÁS!

we shout as we dart from kitchen to the line,
 back of house to the floor
 front bar to back bar
 walk-in back to the bar
 kitchen to the restroom
 restroom to the lockers
 storage closet back to the line
 prep kitchen to the dumpsters.

WHERE IS TABLE SIX'S BURGER

we demand of our line cooks,
 not daring to talk to the chef that way.

STOP SEATING ME

we frantically mouth to the host,
 after they have sat us a fifth consecutive four-top in ten minutes.
Fuck. Table six stiffed me.
 On to the next.

WHERE'S JESS?

We, the almighty bartenders yell into the void.
 Our most loyal server finds her,
 tells her we have a question.

Jess saunters up,
 already rolling her eyes—
You didn't ring this drink up right.
Here's how you do it.

We hear ourselves
 and are annoyed.
 We're nitpicking ingredient discrepancies
 with the servers
 for what, inventory? To save money?
 For who?
 So the owner can get a bit richer while we hustle our ass all night?

What's the new IPA taste like?

A customer asks us,
 after they have already sampled three beers.
 "It tastes like fucking beer,"
 we wish we could say.
 "It's really good. It's hoppy but not too bitter. Super fresh,"
 we say instead.

THREE BONELESS WINGS ALL DAY;

FIRE ON TABLE NINE

we yell from our little slice of hell
 stationed in front of the deep fryers,
 dodging hot oil,
 wielding knives and squirt bottles,
 tossing
 plating
 garnishing

wiping
repeat.

Two hours left.
Fuck I need a drink.
I need five drinks.
I need a new fucking job.

And then we show up hungover the next day
and do it all again.

We don't have much of a choice.
No one's holding our hands.

We are a band of degenerates—
these misfits,
these sweethearts,
these druggies,
these assholes,
these perfect human beings.
We are a dysfunctional family
just barely hanging on.

IN THE END

David P. Sterner

How will they live once
they've all returned
with tales of the dead
and villages burned?

Will they proudly speak
of how bravely they fought
or now live in shame and
wish they had not?

Will they think that a favor
they've done for our world
that on mothers and babes
tons of bombs they have hurled?

Or will they then see the evil
in this deed they have done
and fear that from God
their souls will be shunned?

How will they live once
they've all returned
with those shiny cold metals
that so proudly, they've earned?

HOW MUCH IS 'MASS'?

Randall Camden Stemple

My feed is a travesty a real day modern tragedy and
amongst all the cute photos of cats and dogs and all my sports
teams' losses
exists a catalogue of all gun violence, an epidemic that crosses
across this nation, rich or poor, black or white, or any color under
the sun so that
when running an errand you might get gunned down by a person
with a problem,
against you, against the store, against the world, or something at
their very core
we don't discuss it, we believe it a chore, and so when a bug
becomes a feature
all that's left to argue is nomenclature; how many bodies need to
be stacked
for it to be considered 'mass'?

Do we just consider holes in the ground and piles of ashes
or do we consider the masses of others? The wounded and the
maimed
the traumatized and frightened whose lives will never again be the
same.
How much does one need to limp to claim their lives irrevocably
changed
by someone with a gun and too much pain?

What we need is a scale, something one to ten, then
take all your pain all your trauma all your shattered dreams
crunch the numbers, run them through a machine, a formula, the
bar is a seven

anything below and you just have to pretend that everything is
fine, that it's normal,
that you didn't just go through something horrible.
While seven through ten will be casualties for the purpose of
statistics,
we will take a wholistic approach to categorizing the slaughter
from major to minor to barely a bother
with so many instances they smother your empathy and innocence
till all that's left is mechanical precision
just the cost of doing business.

This may seem insensitive or at least in poor taste but considering
the waste
of life and of futures, we should at least use their deaths to best
inform and educate
to illuminate the problem and the paths that branch into the gloom.
But we don't and we won't, we would rather forget it.
We scream about what is right and respecting the dead and
scold all the vultures and carrion birds preventing any
conversations from being heard.

I would argue that my system and scale are truly important, truly
transformative
of the horrid discourse surrounding this plague.
I can see the messages and thoughts and prayers you have amassed.
Let's see how many remain after a month has passed.



ICE AND ROCKS

Photograph

Dean Wilson

SEA AND STONE

Dean Wilson

Endless drifting sand
carving the stone and shore,
ever-changing meandering line
as an invisible border
between sea and stone.

The sand does not stay,
does not stop
for a portrait
to be painted
like the words in
a book of poetry.

The sea does not hold back
as it cuts and grinds
stone into sand,
casting about to destroy
or create art.

I stand between the
sea and stone.
Watching timeless lines
shift beneath my feet.

LITANY FOR JARRET KEENE

Shane Allison

Jarret, can I ask you a question?
Well more like a few questions.
Have you written any poems lately?
And if so, have you written any poems about pickles recently?
What about tighty-whities?
Do you have any poems about potted soil I could borrow?
Have you ever written poems about dry, cracked lips?
Jarret, do you have any poems about chewing gum
Or cranberry-colored carpet cutters?
Jarret, what about a poem about Lou Diamond Phillips?
Got any Lou Diamond Phillips poems or poems about Siamese cats?
Can you get me a moped for Christmas
With a poem about it taped to the exhaust pipe?
You got any Joyce DeWitt poems lying around?
Can I have a bite of your danish?
Could you write a poem about my taking a bite of your danish?
I could use a good platinum wig poem
And poems about nylon stockings and durags.
You got any poems like this anywhere in your possession?
Jarret, when you write that poem about the chiliburger
Can you copy a few copies for me?
Better yet, can I get some chili cheese fries
Wrapped in wide ruled notebook paper with a poem
About chili cheese fries written on it?
Remember that series of poems about Marilyn Manson
You said you were planning on writing?
Did you finish it? Can I have one? The poems about Marilyn Manson?
Jarret, do you have any poems about hermaphrodites
Or poems about charbroiled chicken?

Or how about that poem you wrote about
Charbroiled-chicken eating hermaphrodites?
Do you still have that one?
Remember that bad dream you told me about, Jarret?
Did you write a poem about it?
Have you written any sonnets lately or maybe a villanelle?
Can you write me a villanelle about pimple cream?
Would it be too much to ask, Jarret,
If you could write me a poem about Timothy Busfield?
Got any poems about radioactive urine in Rice Krispies?
Or if you have a poem or two about pissing in cereal,
That would be so neat.
Jarret, can you do me a favor?
Can you possibly write a poem about this dead
Armadillo I saw in the road once?
I need a coconut poem.
I need a poem about pink elephants and pig feet
Pickled in pig feet juice, Jarret.
Do you think you can write them?
I need a hockey puck poem, a monkey wrench poem
And a poem about wax fruit.
Jarret, do you know anyone who has written
Poems about Tammy Faye?
Do you think you can write a sonnet on Tammy Faye?
I need it by Thursday.
This poem you wrote about deep-fried chicken fingers
I've been hearing so much about, can you fax it to me?
I might put an anthology of poems together about kiwi milkshakes.
Do you have anything that fits this theme?
You know what I need, Jarret?
I need a Dana Plato poem.
I need some poems about anal beads and shrimp forks.
Jarret, can you write me a poem about dust mops?

Jarret, I want you to write seventy or so poems
About cum in shag carpet in a purple van.
Think you can do that?
Can you write about my hemorrhoids?
Can you write something about that bad case of anal warts I had
last year?
I need a poem about chopsticks and anti-lock brakes.
I need a Beau Bridges poem.
I need that, and a poem written about Anne Bancroft eating peach
cobbler.
Think you can handle that?
If you can, tell me about it in a poem.



EL ALCATRAZ
Linocut on bristol
17 x 14 in.

Jacky Sanchez Lozoya

A MEETING

Shamik Banerjee

We chose our old patisserie, *Faheem's*,
 One Monday noontime. Half the chairs were stacked.
 The waiter Abdul's smile displayed the fact
 He knew our likes: fudge brownies with whipped cream.

Her clothes were simple, just a plain *Salwar*
Kameez—not what she mostly wore to meet me.
 No dimples sat upon her cheeks to greet me;
 Her body there, her mind was somewhere far

Away. "Must be a slight familial thing,"
 I thought and asked, "A crossfire with your mother?
 Another hijinks by your puckish brother?"
 It seemed no act or word of mine could bring

The truth out of her throat. After a pause,
 She spoke (as if an old, corroded door,
 Reluctant to be slid): "Just six months more.
 My baba says it's for my own good cause.

The boy's an engineer from our own caste
 With good emoluments." She turned away
 From me to hide her face, now moist and gray.
 This news, like summer's heat, wizened the last

Bright bloom of optimism in my heart.
 "When is the day?" I wished to ask but could
 Not voice a word—perhaps, for my own good;
 Perhaps, to keep my soul a bit apart,

Veiled from the knowledge of her wedding date.
 We sat, hands clasped, and watched the hour grow,
 The people leave, the lightbulbs' dimmish glow.
 The food remained untouched on both our plates.

Salwar Kameez: an Indian outfit for females

Baba: Father

A TALE OF EVERY NIGHT

Shamik Banerjee

By midnight, once his bottle's downed and trashed,
They sprawl out on the couch and talk of stuff
Still unresolved: which tutor for their son
Can make his Latin-fearing brain more tough,
Some loan-related duty yet undone,
Or which investments need to be encashed.

Amidst such things, if something unrequired
Sprouts like a weed upon a verdant yard—
Some past discordance or unfounded blame—
It makes the husband seize her, all off-guard,
Distressing her with words that sear like flame.
No sense of fault can douse his evil fire.

And she, the lesser, stands there like a wall,
Mute to his waistbelt's whips. Perhaps, such wild
Savagery even beasts would seldom use.
She finds a little corner, and their child
Has ample proof before him to deduce
The weak's meant to be trampled after all.



ABANDONED HOMESTEAD

Photograph

Dean Wilson

NOT THE WORST DAY

Sean P. Hotchkiss



Fig. 1 Funeral by Robert Hotchkiss

Stop for a moment and look at the photograph before you proceed.

Okay, that should be long enough.

It is an overcast day, a gray day, but still light. There is a red and gray kilt-clad bagpiper standing on a field of grass in the bottom left corner with his back to us. His stance gives the impression he is playing. The grass is well groomed with hues of yellow and green mixed in. There is a blue canopy in the center of the photo, sheltering a closed silver-trimmed gray casket that lies upon what looks like a bronze-hued pedestal. The pedestal is actually the bottom of a grave box designed to protect it from water damage, but the casual observer would not know this. A couple lines of grave markers are set into the

earth in the foreground that may not be immediately visible. There is an astroturf-covered mound behind the casket, presumably covering the dirt that has been displaced by the digging of the grave. Lying flat on the grass are several plywood panels. A large bouquet of beautiful red roses lies atop the casket and a green University of Oregon bucket with white and yellow roses sits beside it. Also nearby is a small vase of red and white flowers.

In the background there are a mix of large evergreen and deciduous trees with a line of cars parked in front of them. The deciduous trees are leafless, adding to the starkness of the image. Two distinct groups of people stand in a rough semi-circle around and behind the canopy, with a few lone people standing apart. Most are wearing black, but there is a splash of pink, green, brown, or blue here and there. Everyone is wearing a mask to protect themselves and others from Covid-19. Upon closer inspection you see four people seated close to the casket with a space in between them. Two, a man and a young woman, are on one side, and two more, a young woman and a young man, are on the other. It appears that the people are either listening to the piper, lost in silent contemplation, gazing at the casket, or all three as no one seems to be speaking. Most appear to be looking in the same direction.

What did you think of when you first saw the image? How did you feel? Did any memories or images from your past surface? Were there any imaginings of what the future may have in store for you or your family?

Even without the casket being so prominent, it is easy to tell that the photograph has captured a funeral in progress. The somber gray sky, the grass, and the mix of evergreens and deciduous trees are classic signs that this photo was taken in the Pacific Northwest. The canopy, seeming out of place with its bright blue color, is unaware that it is pulling focus away from the other details in the picture. It is only there to fulfill its purpose of protecting what is underneath from potential rain. The lack of leaves on the trees tells us it must be winter. The

University of Oregon bucket leads to the conclusion that at least one person in attendance is a Ducks fan and may narrow down where the photo was taken, Oregon. All the masked faces show that the funeral is taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps this death was another casualty of the virus. Seen are friends and family paying their last respects to a loved one. Presumably grieving would be a unifying catalyst, but cliquish groups, reminiscent of a poorly-themed high school dance, have formed. It's unclear if these groups were formed because of a rift, a coincidence, or social distancing.

While it is expected to see black formal wear at a funeral, reality leaks into this photograph contrasting what is seen in a movie or television show. If this were a staged ceremony, everyone would be in almost-matching black suits and dresses. The splashes of color or the blue jeans would be absent. This must be a real event—with people present having different stories. This must be a real event—someone is in the casket. This must be a real event—someone is in pain. The four seated people are likely to be the closest friends or family of the deceased. Who else would rate such an unwelcome honor? Who are they? Who did they lose? Who was this person being honored by this group willing to risk their health by gathering? How this photo affected you, if it did, might depend upon your own personal experiences. It may be easy to make some assumptions about aspects of this image based on where we live and what is currently going on in our lives right now. Perhaps your observations and conclusions were similar to what has been described so far. Perhaps they were different.

Often, I think our reactions to and interpretations of photos are impacted by our level of separation from what is depicted. This photograph of a funeral could be interpreted differently by those who have or have not attended one. Differently still if the funeral was for someone you were close to. And even differently still if someone you love is very old or infirm. To what extent did your own memories and experiences shape what you saw and how you felt? Our interpretations might not reflect the reality of

the photograph, or the timeline of events to the left and right of it.

The truth behind the photograph is that it was taken by my brother at my wife's funeral—freezing, forever in time, a single frame of the terrestrial end of a wonderful story. She passed away and was laid to rest in January of 2021 after bravely and tenaciously battling cancer for almost a year. The image was captured as the Piper played “Amazing Grace” to a grieving and tearful audience towards the end of the service. The four people seated under the canopy are me and our children. We had just finished honoring my wife with our words and stories of love and loss and hope. As I write this, it occurs to me that the closeness of the relationship each person had with my wife can be gauged by their distance from the casket. The two groups that formed are primarily segregated by my wife's people, who we call the “Out-laws,” on the right, and “my people” on the left. We named them the Out-laws because they are the family of my wife's brother-in-law, so not “in-laws” themselves; therefore, “Out-laws.” The man in the suit closest to the pavement is the minister and the other two lone mourners are friends of my kids. My wife and I had ended up staying closer to my people, so the distance between the groups may reflect that. My wife is a Ducks fan and the bucket was her constant gardening companion. To some, it may seem just as out of place as the blue canopy, but not to me.

So now that you've read an interpretation of the photograph and have heard some of its story, how much have your thoughts and feelings changed? Are your perceptions and perspectives different now that we are at a different point in time? You may wonder, how could this not be someone's worst day?

This picture cannot convey the emotion I and the others attending are feeling; that can only be left to the imagination, informed by interpretation and context, of the viewer. For me, examining this photograph so closely has been deeply interesting, frequently tearful and painful, and hopefully a little healing. There are things that I noticed for the first time, some of it pointed out by others. Such as

the unanticipated segregation of the crowd, the ashen sky, and how the artificial blue of the canopy seems unfit for the occasion. This photograph is of one of the worst days of my life, but what it does not show, can't show, is that the day after was worse. The thirty years prior to the snapping of this photo had been spent getting to know, marrying, loving, and being loved by my wife. The year prior had been spent caring for her, helping her fight the cancer that would take her from me. The days prior were spent making preparations for her memorial and funeral. The day after, there was nothing more I could do, or needed to do for her—except tell her story.

NO RELIEF

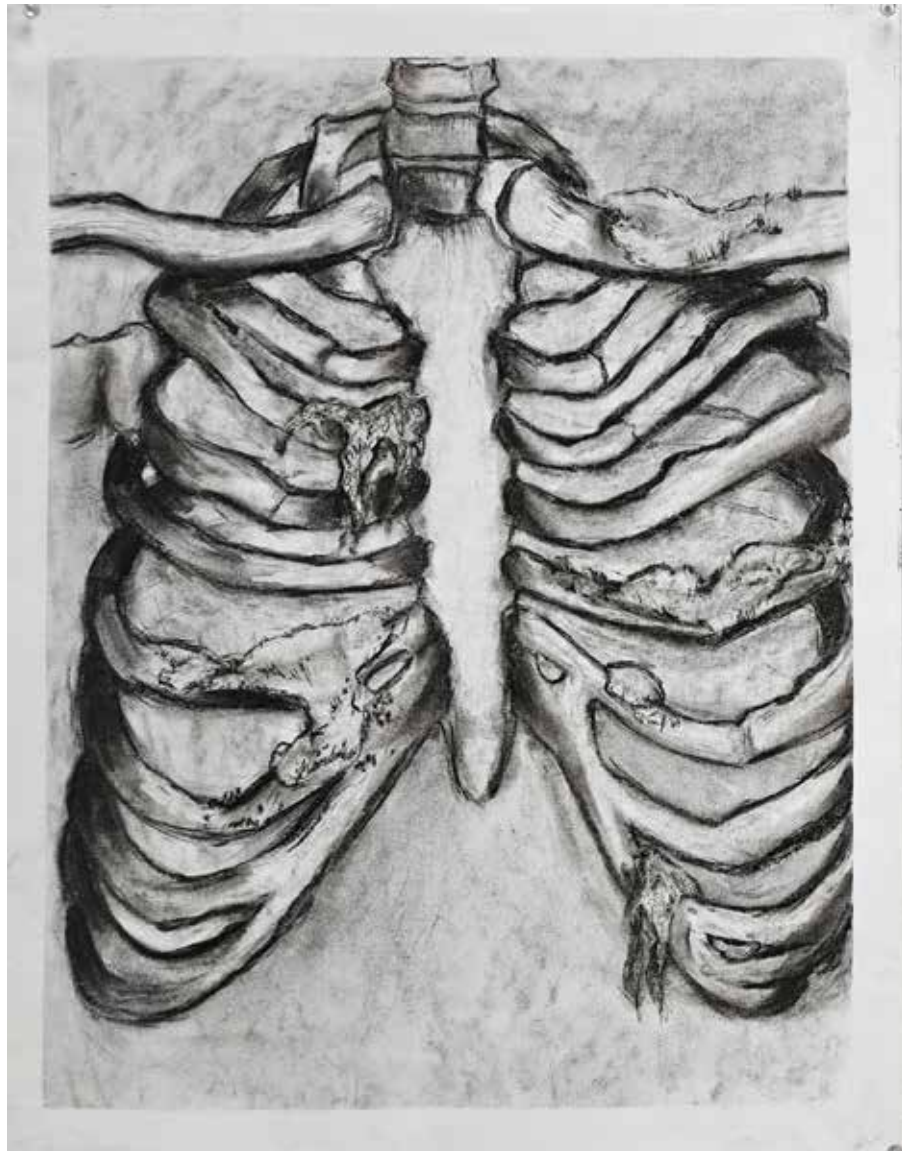
David P. Sterner

Endless tears I shed in vain,
though
my eyes are cleansed
the world still looks
the same.

I want to die and not
exist,
but this thing called
life
somehow persists.

Though my friends reach out
to understand,
I can't seem to
grasp
a helping hand.

So I return to myself
in sorrow,
in grief,
for this pain that I feel
comes no relief.



DEATH AND LIFE

Diptych in charcoal on paper
24 x 36 in.



Bailey Moore

MECHANICAL PENCIL

Sean P. Hotchkiss

I prefer to write in pencil
Not sure why
Ink may be too permanent

I wrote to you of my love
“click”
for you, the deepness of it

There were times that we
irritated each other, or “click” disagreed
A short interruption of our story
“click”
like when the lead is too short

and must be pulled from the pencil
“click click click click”
(too far, push it back a little)

But our love was always there,
always strong, always true
“click click”

Love, marriage, children,
“click”
bills, home, love. Always love
Even when, or especially when
you got sick. “click” Always love.

Our story continued, with
“click”
care and mutual devotion

I check the pencil, and
the lead is running low
“click”

I see no refill, as
your end draws near
“click click”

I would love to write
less to preserve the lead
but our love must be told, must
continue fully until the end
“click”

To the last we were together, you
“click”
dying by my side as we slept

The story ended, the lead is gone
“ ”

Perhaps if I had written our story in ink. . . .



FARM HOUSE

Oil on canvas
36 x 29 in.

Laila Sheikh

SMALL TOWN, AMERICA

Alli Tschirhart

Yes ma'am no sir. In school, we prayed before every football game, the coach hand in hand with the players as *amen* rings out. Giant pickles wrapped in paper at every single event. Four churches in one square mile. A dog named Bear roamed the streets of town for years before we realized it was a pack of fluffy white dogs all with the same name. Once, through the window of our truck, I saw them, a pride of lions resting after a hunt. We find one on the side of the road one year and collectively grieve for a dog we didn't really know. An old silo brittle and sharp, roof gone from past storms, we play carelessly, counting down for hide and seek. A vast backyard where we run, wild children screaming and pushing our hands into mud. The sprawling pecan tree in the yard that I spent so much time collecting the nuts from, and then more shelling. The one small bathroom with no windows that we all huddled in as the tornado warning rang out. The worn-out trampoline that my dad would spray in the summer so we could dance with the water, sometimes we would just lay out and watch the stars.

I KNOW ANGER WELL

Alli Tschirhart

He comes over often,
arms overflowing with gifts I don't want
I offer him tea, which he always declines
He instead prefers whiskey
and a cigarette hanging from his lips
I've told him no smoking in my house,
I'm renting
He scoffs and lights up

Most times he arrives with unwanted guests:
depression, rejection, anxiety
All setting their hot cups on my furniture
Please, use a coaster
The rings set in the wood,
not something I can easily clean

My lover doesn't appreciate
anger, just finds him rude and
difficult
I try to tell him I am working on it,
He just needs a place to stay
every once in a while

The truth is I worry
I worry he has my secrets
Secrets I don't want anyone knowing,
holding against me
So, I let him walk all over me
My friend, anger.



MAD SCIENTIST

Watercolor on paper
6 x 4.5 in.

Kelley Wezner



SENTINEL

Watercolor on paper
6 x 4.5 in.

Kelley Wezner

NOTICE

Nancy McKinley Wagner

Hey, you . . . did you perhaps notice something as you passed this way? Did something wonderful try to sneak into the corner of your eye? Did you resist? Did you notice the lovely little sparrow singing its song? Did you hear the hopefulness in its shrill? Did it make you feel alive and connected to the whole wide world? Or did you simply pass by?

Allow me to let you in on a secret; there is an innate knowledge that's been washed away by a good scrubbing and an infantile belief that the world must be conquered in the name of progress. We live in a world of concrete, of chemicals and of hard steel and flimsy plastics. It is a place of indifference and of a strange superiority that dares to look down on the soil of the good earth like it's something dirty.

The sound of traffic is amplified by the tall fences that skirt the sides of the wide boulevard. People enveloped by cars speed by. Every one of them wears a crumpled forehead of practiced concentration accompanied by an intense and slightly sorrowful scowl. There is not one smile among them, not one.

The striped song sparrow tries to get your attention. It is in a bush near the entrance of your building. It sings its lovely song. Its little throat vibrates with every note. The roar of traffic almost drowns it out but if you listen—if you stop and take a moment to notice this tiny life right there in front of you, singing its heart out, you may be able to receive its message. You may then realize, if you haven't already, that you, all-powerful human, and this small, seemingly insignificant creature are kin.

If we don't notice something, we don't notice when it's gone. Humankind's expansive growth has left our precious wildlife with nowhere to go. And we are losing our precious birds. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, habitat loss poses by far the greatest

threat to birds, both directly and indirectly, more so than any other cause.¹ It is essential to conserve what we have and rewild and restore what places we can that will make the most impact.

Our natural world is our home as well as it is home to the sparrow and all the other creatures. All life on this Earth is connected. It is up to us all to do our part. Desmond Tutu, the Nobel prize winning Archbishop, once said, “Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.” I believe that wholeheartedly. We have inherited this good Earth from our ancestors, just as others have before them, but never has the Earth needed us as it does now.

It goes beyond recycling and reusing, it entails a rethinking of what it means to be human and live on this planet. Coexisting in harmony and working with nature instead of against her. This is a way of thinking we must teach our children who will ultimately inherit it all from us. The little sparrow is a canary in a coal mine, singing a warning and a plea. My hope is that we listen.

1. “Threats to Birds,” *U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, n.d., www.fws.gov/library/collections/threats-birds.



AMANITA

Watercolor on paper
6 x 4.5 in.

Kelley Wezner



ASTORIA AT BLUE HOUR

Photograph

Dean Wilson

MASJID ROAD

Shamik Banerjee

Fishmongers' cleaver knives don't rest at all;
 Their heavy *thuds* outdo the termless spiels
 Of colporteurs dispensing large and small
 Versions of holy books. On mud-sunk wheels,
 Waxed apples, sapodillas, apricots
 Effuse their fragrance, trapping passersby
 Who check the rates, then stand submerged in thoughts—
 Some fill their punnets, some leave with a sigh.
 Outside the mosque, blind footpath dwellers wait
 To hear the *clinking* sound—the sound of true
 Relief—while dogs, flopped by the butcher's gate,
 Get jumpy when he throws a hunk or two.
 Loudspeakers, placed on high, say “call to prayer”
 And all work halts; there's silence in the air.



DUALITY

Chalk pastels on paper
24 x 18 in.

Ed Vassilenko

BACKSTAB IN FRENCH AMBASSADOR

Slava Konoval

The Nigerian junta backstabs
the French ambassador.
Partisans remind him subtly
that their country is not a colony of Paris.

The ambassador is crying,
he has a legitimate agrément
laments the old man desperately.
The demand is brought by the rebel
outwardly dirty and disgusting.

"I don't want to," says the ambassador.
"I'm worried a legion of 1.5 thousand
stands here, Niger is my country."

Wagner musicians visit Niger,
they're laughing, looking hideous,
Moscow is driving its ideas hybridly.
Am I the only one ashamed?
Am I the only one so confused?

Measuring the force of direction
it will wipe the despotism
of the bourgeoisie into dust.
The entire French rear dances
on the bones of the Russians.

You, Macron, weakened France,
she is no longer a thunderstorm.
Russia dictates rules to Africans,
there is no strength on the continent from now on.

THE SOUL JUMPS WITH JOY

Slava Konoval

The soul jumps with joy,
she's surrounded by British care
and twenty years of drunken life in Ukraine.

A former alcoholic mother flaunts herself
by the colored pictures in a web.
Her peasant neighbors are jealous of her,
their fields are not plowed, their fields are not sown,
as they are all alone.

How is it in the blood to live peacefully?
How is it to thank God?
He had released a mother from an impoverished life.

Mother's house is bequeathed
by the descendants of English barons.
A smoke has settled in Ukraine,
never to see their mothers
on Ukrainian railway platforms.

DEAR CREATOR

Mercedes Shafer

I do not know myself.
I do not know my worth.
I do not know why I am here.
But it must be for your paycheck.

I do not know why you need me.
I do not know why it is a must.
I do not know your point of reasoning.
But it is simple, I am just not enough.

I do not know what I am meant to do.
I do not know why you use me.
I do not know if I am of any help.
But it's is easy to see, I am nothing much.

I do not know my identity.
I do not know your tests.
I do not know where I belong.
But what I do know,
Is that I do not know you.



**SELF PORTRAIT OF
SELF DISCOMFORT**

Mixed media on cardboard
24 x 18 in.

Ed Vassilenko

BULLY

Shane Allison

The last time I saw my cousin, Darrin
Was at the burial of my Aunt Lurine.

It wasn't a sad funeral.
I didn't cry when they lowered her into Southside Earth.

Instead of wrapping me with a hug, he shook my hand
As if I was simply a friend of the family.

He didn't show me the same kind of love as those
My kin folks give on my father's side.

Maybe it had something to do with my being queer.
If so, I don't want to know.

Growing up he was never much of a cousin.
Maybe because he was older than us and was never around.

Too cool to spend time with a bunch of babies.
He was worse than any bully I ignored in school because he was
family.

Teasing and picking until I had no choice but to fall into a fight
Which I always lost because Darrin was the oldest, the strongest.

He knew how tender the skin of a shy boy was.
My mother asked if I remember chasing him with a knife in my
grandmother's backyard.

All that anger I would have cut him for sure.
I don't know why my aunt left him the most out of her money.

He never wrote her letters or sent her poems.
I imagine with all the trouble that has plagued our brood,

He will either see me at my funeral,
Or I'll see him at his.

AUNT BOBBIE IS MY FAVORITE ON MY DAD'S SIDE

Shane Allison

Aunt Bobbie put in 16 years at Extended Care.
She gossips with her friend Elenore

on picnic benches during lunch breaks.
They say she's doing crack again.

She sells television sets and wholesale outfits to gold tooth drug
dealers.

She takes care of babies of girls who party all night

with golden boyfriends. Aunt Bobbie doesn't want to be found.
She doesn't want anybody to see her this way.

Her sisters have given up, thrown their hands up like white flags.
Her brothers have had enough.

Shawn, her only son, is ashamed and doesn't want her for a
roommate.

Aunt Earline, who creates magic in the kitchen, who makes the best
jelly cake,

doesn't want Aunt Bobbie in the house.
She gave her clothes, soap to wash herself

and three square meals on the good plates
from her china cabinet.

Aunt Alice didn't have room in her heart for a drug addict grown up.
Bodies pack in every crack and crevice of a three-bedroom house.

Aunt Norris doesn't trust her.
She could run off with my jewelry and sell it for drugs.

Anyway, my son is coming home from the army and she can't be here.
"If only you knew how hard she worked," Mama said.

Aunt Bobbie is my favorite on my dad's side.
Third cousins talk about her like a legend.

She used to laugh loudly at family reunions.
She used to be pretty.

Will someone help her?

Help her like Uncle Howard,
like Uncle Weed falling down drunk on the living room floor.



DRAWING OF JESSE

Chalk pastels on paper
24 x 18 in.

Ed Vassilenko

THE FOOL

Gigi Giangibbe-Rodriguez

The man on the bicycle's name is Tony, short for Antonio. Antonio was his father's name, sour on his tongue like spoiled milk. He ditched Antonio and he goes by Tony, hoping he can pass as an *Anthony*. He had always thought Anthony sounded like someone who graduated from high school, maybe even from college. Someone with a dad who didn't punch on his mom every night and whose mom didn't have two separate personalities on a good day. Tony could have been the guy who graduated college if he had kept pedaling, but as it was, he hopped off his bike and wandered, often.

Tony had one hand on his ruby red bicycle and one hand on his cherry red gasoline drum that he just filled to the brim. Tony is as red as they come. His nose and ears are crimson from the gout. His eyes are bloodshot from years of drinking, smoking, and crying. That, and he doesn't get much sleep. He's been called a commie, socialist, anti-capitalist, revolutionary, Rudolph, bashful, flaming, angry—and he was most of these things. Even his bank account inched closer to being in the red every day. It wasn't that he had spent more money than he'd made; the real problem was that he hadn't had a job in decades, and that was just fine with him.

He was pedaling through the Tenderloin district in San Francisco, where he had lived for twenty-five years. He had seen more grown men's pricks and backsides last year in the Tenderloin than he did in his whole tour in Germany. Very often, the noise and smells of this neighborhood brought his mind traveling back to the barracks, to a time when he didn't know what tomorrow would bring and it scared him, but at least he hadn't completely given up yet. His mp3 player broke last week, so today while he rides he hums "Killing Yourself to Live" by Black Sabbath. He has a beautiful voice, though no one ever hears it.

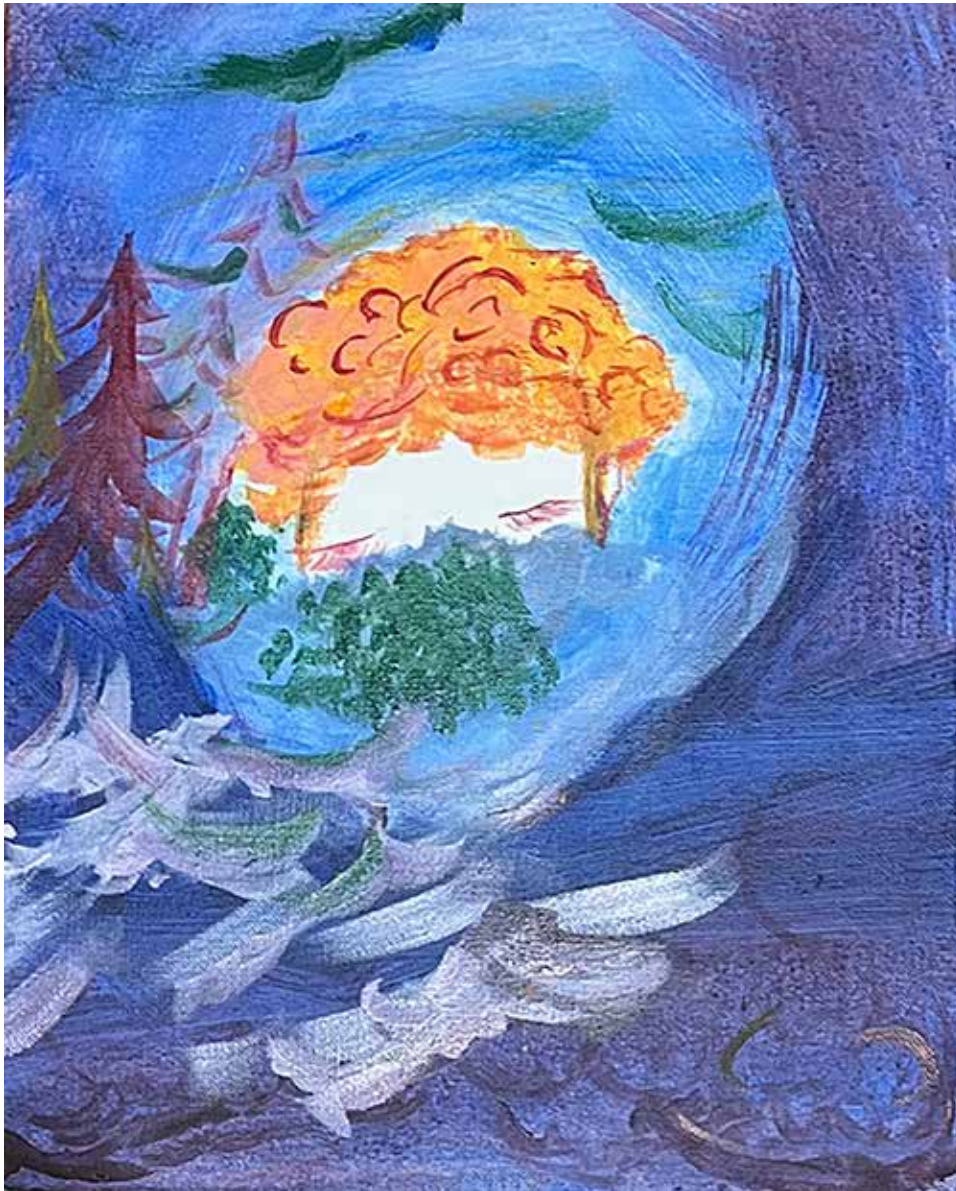
Tony was well aware as he wandered through the streets that people assumed he was homeless, and that comforted him. The average person with their life together doesn't bother to look at homeless people, to really see them or ask how they're doing. He doesn't want eyes on him, or questions directed at him. Today, as he made his commute in obscurity, he was bringing his full gasoline drum to his fire engine red Buick Skylark, which had been sitting in the same spot for months, on one of the only streets in San Francisco that remained unmetered and unpermitted. He had only received two street-sweeping tickets the whole time his car had been there, and that's because it is an insanely steep and zigzaggy hill that most street-sweeping drivers conveniently "forget" to go up on their weekly route.

He pedals past the weirdos he feels kinship with in the Haight Ashbury neighborhood, nodding at the few that make eye contact, keeps riding past Buena Vista Park, and hops off when he hits Belvedere Street. He squints through his sweat and scans the middle of the block for his rusty Buick, where he knows he left it. It takes him several seconds longer than it should to realize his car has been towed, or stolen, it really doesn't matter which.

Lungs burning with exercise and rage mingling with humiliation, he throws the gas drum and hears it thud and crack. Angry tears burn his eyes and he hopes someone lights a cigarette right now right this very moment and blows it all to fucking hell. Tony wishes he had a lighter or cigarettes on him because he is starting to get some sick thoughts and wants to do some sick things, and then the corner of the letter in his shirt pocket pokes him and snaps him out of his fury. He starts to walk his red bike over to the park, leaving the leaking red drum and the memory of his red car behind. He is drawn to a grove of towering eucalyptus trees, their bark torn and falling apart. He walks for a while as his anger turns to sadness and self-pity, the emotion he is

most comfortable with. After about an hour, Tony finally sits on a large tree stump and feels for the contents of his breast pocket. Avoiding the piece of paper, he grabs the doobie next to it instead. *Shit*, he thinks, *I don't have a goddamn light*. He walks up to a homeless man and offers a couple hits for a spark.

By the time he returned to his stump, Tony had calmed considerably, and the breeze filtering through the grove was tepid like his mood. He took off his shoes and felt the grass with his toes. There was a letter from his son in his pocket that he hadn't found the courage to read yet. His son had not contacted him for years, and considering Tony's absence and behavior he more than understood this choice. Seeing the envelope in his mail slot made Tony feel both excited and ashamed. He took the letter out of his pocket and stared at his name on the envelope, inches away from a little red stamp, and was hit by a wave of nausea and jitters. *Maybe after this smoke I'll read it*. But probably not. Most likely not. Where he sits, the salty ocean air is veiled by an herbaceous, arboreal smell. The eucalyptus trees and sweet bay laurels commanded his attention, and so while he sat and smoked he stared up at their peeling trunks. Every day it gets a bit harder to breathe, and the joint is probably hurting more than helping him, but he doesn't care. Tomorrow, he will read the letter. Tomorrow.



**ORANGE IS THE
LONELIEST COLOR**

Xiomara Mueller

PROMISE RINGS

Bailey Moore

Butterflies on silver wings
tie silver strings

On our fingers

Blue skies, dark eyes

Do you remember?

Long days. No life

Asking what am I?

A pebble among the thousands

Another grain among the bunch

A tree in the forest

Something easily overseen.

Out of touch?

You know

When it rains it pours

When I cry it storms,

Sunshine

What I'd give to see from your eyes

A vision

An after-image

A reason

Wings fluttering and suns setting

Through the clouds and fields of blue

I will be there for you

WHAT IF I GOT THOSE CUPCAKES?

Keith Kunze

Wes picked me up after I was done with class at Clackamas Community College. I didn't want him to pick me up from home because I didn't want my family to see me with him. I also knew a lot of people in the area, so I wanted our first date to be a bit more out of town.

I had never been on a date with anyone before. We had been chatting for months on a dating site and it was a big deal for me to meet anybody. I was still in the closet and ended any communication from a group called Exodus International whose slogan was "Change is possible."

At some point prior to meeting in person I told him about "ex-gay ministries," which he seemed interested in. Exodus International formed in 1976 and claimed to have helped many men live a life where they can be a family man and have a happy marriage. What they didn't advertise was the incredibly low success rates and the fact that you can't change your sexuality. I made sure to emphasize this with him in an effort to prevent him from looking into it.

He only realized he might be gay after he saw two men kissing for the first time. He'd recently moved to Oregon from Texas where he'd never met a gay person before. We both grew up Christian Evangelical and we shared similar beliefs. Every day I woke up to a "Good Morning" text from him except once—to which I reached out saying, "Excuse me, where's my good morning text?" in hopes he'd find it funny (he did). Boundaries were set and we agreed this meetup was a platonic date.

I was waiting for him anxiously and kept looking around to make sure nobody saw me hopping in the car. His orange Fiat was small and felt appropriate as he was wearing orange-smelling cologne. Wes wore a white button down underneath a gray sweater vest. On his face he had thick-rimmed glasses, probably because I told him I had a weakness for them.

He also had a small gift bag with a paper rose on top. I remember being embarrassed and a little nervous because I didn't want anyone to ask me where I got the rose from. Inside the bag was a book called, *The Official Dictionary of Sarcasm*, which I loved!

We chose to go to the theater at Clackamas Town Center because they had a cupcake kiosk right next to the theater. My nickname among friends was "cupcake," due to my love towards them and I wanted to see if they had Christmas flavors.

Naturally, the theater was decorated for Christmas and the cupcake kiosk was in the food court, just across from the entrance of the movie theater. We checked the time and agreed we should wait on the cupcakes because the movie had already started.

While we both weren't big fans of using guns, we enjoyed movies with guns. The movie we chose was the remake of *Red Dawn*. I'd always loved action movies and the original was a classic, so it was an easy choice for us to make. To be perfectly honest with you, I don't know how that movie ended.

In 1999, two teens killed 13 others at Columbine High School. There were seven victims in 2005 during the shooting in the Living Church of God, located in Wisconsin. Thirty-two dead at Virginia Tech in 2007. In a movie theater in Aurora, there were 12 killed and over 70 injured in 2012, and that wasn't even the deadliest one that year.

"Everyone should have a gun on them so if there is a shooter, you can just shoot them first," is an ideology I subscribed to for a long time. About 430 deaths happen per year in the U.S. due to accidental firearm usage. I was required to take gun safety classes as a kid and I'm not sure if that could prevent accidental deaths if everybody took those classes.

Before 2012, there had been many conversations about mass shootings and gun control. We as a country have also experienced two

of our deadliest ones since 2012: one at Pulse Nightclub in 2016, where forty-nine died and fifty-three were injured, and the biggest one where sixty-one people died and over four hundred were wounded during a concert on the Las Vegas Strip. Continued conversations about gun control happen often and little has been done to prevent mass shootings.

I had knowledge of these incidents before 2012. Of course, I wasn't thinking about them when we entered the movies. Just a few minutes into the movie, an employee of the theater came in. She sat right behind us looking petrified. After a few seconds, she leaned forward and calmly said, "There's somebody right outside shooting a bunch of people. It's really bad." Then she leaned back into her seat.

We looked at each other. I wondered if she was crazy but also remembered the face of the man who killed all those people in Colorado just a few months prior. The movie was the latest Batman film and apparently some audience members thought the gunshots were from the movie itself. I couldn't help but wonder if I had heard real gunshots and assumed it was from *Red Dawn*.

The employee left and after a few minutes, everything seemed fine. Suddenly, the movie stopped playing and she came back in. "Attention!" she announced to the audience, "there is a man shooting people in the mall. You are to remain in here until police escort you out of the theater." Her posture was rigid. I remember she wore a navy-blue dress that looked very formal. She had no emotion in her voice, but you could tell she was in shock. Maybe the lack of emotion in her voice was her way of processing what was happening. Did she see it happen?

It seemed like hours had passed before we were finally able to leave the theater. My mind and body felt numb; whenever someone tried to talk to me, I sank out of reality momentarily. The officers maintained a calm composure as they led us out of the theater through

an exit I hadn't noticed before. They gave firm directions and led us outside on the sidewalk near the entrance of the mall and theater where we were instructed to continue waiting.

"Oh my God, there's bodies," said a bystander. I caught a glimpse of paramedics transporting motionless figures in wrappings. I saw that the cloth absorbed crimson blotches and quickly looked away, avoiding being exposed to their faces; I didn't want to see them. Neither Wes nor I had much to say in the remaining moments.

Eventually news reporters came and one started asking us questions about what happened and what we experienced. We told her everything and she asked if we could say it on camera. Both of us in unison firmly said, "No thanks." She looked very surprised but thanked us for our words.

It felt like a firework of reality hitting me in the face. This was my first date and it was with a man. Both of us were trying to be as discreet as possible. The dread of being seen on TV with a man my family didn't know made my skeleton jump out of its own skin. The past hour I was only processing what was going on. I forgot about everything else in the world. I hadn't realized it was extremely cold and a lot of people were shivering. It's hard to explain but just being asked if I could "say it on camera" snapped me back into my reality outside of these moments.

If people knew, would they say this happened because I was on a date with a man? Did I believe this? My church friends might say that. I'd finally cut off all ties to gay conversion therapy and this happens. Is there some tragedy everyone experiences when they come out? Is it bad that this is what I'm now focused on? How many more mass shootings are going to happen? Will this be the only one I experience?

SONNET

Shamik Banerjee

They came as light into my darkened world,
Rekindling everything that once stood grey—
The need to wield my pen, so thoughts unfurled,
To be the lively man again who prayed.
Six years of oneness, then this sudden pause
That seems eternal; time's reversed its course.
The kibble bowl's exactly where it was
When *Neeku* left us. Life has lost its force.
Now there's no hopping on the etagere
Or pawprints on the matting, though their noise
From gamboling still echoes in the air.
Two mortal friends gave all the love and joy
No man can give, but left this void within
And these immortal scratches on my skin.



BOK CHOY

Watercolor on paper
12 x 9 in.

Kelley Wezner



FIRST IMPRESSION

Digitized drawing

Mehdi Gassi

FAT BOY

Shane Allison

I'm barely awake checking emails
And social media messages
When my mother asks me
If I want anything from the store.
She does this sometimes,
As if she's some kind of space Martian
From Mars who is new to planet Earth
And doesn't know her way around a supermarket.
With sleep seeds still in my eyes,
I tell her to get yogurt,
Turkey cold cuts, and chicken pot pies.
I tell her to throw waffles in the cart,
Plums and green grapes without the seeds.
I know she'll forget most of what I ask
For, like kiwi and dragon fruit.
Raisin bread instead of Cherry plums.
I don't want to clutter the corners of her mind
With things like blackberries and almond milk.
Needed ingredients for smoothies
To lower my blood pressure.
She will come home armed
With an arsenal of bags
Filled with turkey wings,
Ham hocks,
Neck bones and frozen okra.
Finger cookies for dad
And canned vegetables pickled in some soupy,
Salty concoction.
She'll come with chocolate milk,
Sugar Pops and Frosted Flakes,

Zero sugar root beer for Dad's bad blood
And her kidney disease, which was
News she broke to me in the lobby at the cancer center
Minutes before her CAT scan.
The calories I burn at Planet Fitness
Will only be regained under her reign
Where everything must be cooked
With butter, bacon, or grease.
She doesn't know that it takes more than push-ups
To flatten a belly like this.
A thousand thigh crunches to keep them from rubbing together.
My friend Chuck lost 90 pounds on Noom.
I would give both my nuts
To shed 90 pounds of fried food flesh,
Suck out the midnight cravings with a vacuum hose.
My mother doesn't know what it's like to look down
And not be able to see your dick without having
To hold your belly in.
"You look fat sitting on the sofa," she told me once.
"Are you still going to the gym?" she asked when she
Saw me coming out of the bathroom with my shirt off.
Tonight I'll write out a grocery list on the back of this poem:
Pork loin
Salmon
Beet and pomegranate juice
Almond milk,
Yogurt,
Blackberries and whiskey,
A little something extra for the smoothies.

FETAL POSITION

Alli Tschirhart

This house holds no heat
Chill clings to everything:
the plywood floors, the furniture—me

The small metal heaters do nothing
only burning our fingertips as we press
against them, the water pop-popping inside

The naked mattress stays cool
I shiver beneath my flimsy throw,
my feet have turned to stone

So many children in the house
that when it comes to bedding,
the oldest gets overlooked.

Sleeping is easiest with
my knees knocking against my chin,
arms hugging them close

Morning comes,
bones creak and muscles ache
It's better than being cold.

THE RED'S DEATH

Matt Smith

It sat in a little jar on a shelf, her death.

She had captured it many years before, snatched it from her soul and pinned it to the wall. She had poked it and she had prodded it, watched it squirm with all the fascination of a child pulling the wings from a butterfly. She cataloged its struggles and made note of its pleading writhes. Eventually it had stopped fighting, and she had stopped caring, and so in the jar and on the shelf it went. There it sat for centuries, a wispy reminder of mortality, gathering dust on high. In that time she had lived and she had loved and she had learned. One world had forgotten her, a bad memory best left up on a shelf, away from the prying eye. Another had embraced her, hailed her as a genius, catered and pandered to her every whim.

It amused her, the lengths to which they had gone not to ask her secret. They gave her riches, knowledge, resources, all without breathing a word of recompense. They bid her sign her name in the Book, and from then on addressed her only by the title it had assigned. They allowed her a place in society, in their colleges, gave her young minds to mold and twist as she saw fit. It became a badge of honor, to have once been a student of the Red.

When finally they felt confident in her comfort, when they believed her to be integrated and ingratiated into their world, they found the courage to ask. They came to her, hat in hand, and lavished her with compliments. They praised her achievements, large and small, before bridging the topic that had until then been taboo. They asked her how she had done it, asked what she had done with her death.

She had smiled demurely, given an exasperated little shrug and said that she had forgotten.

Despite the disbelief the answer was always met with, it was in actuality the truth—if perhaps a sideways version of it. She forgot her little death on most days, forgot its little jar and how it got there.

For her death did not concern her any longer, as it had no bearing on her life. She had experiments to run and notes to take and students to teach and torment. Every day was new and exciting, too much to see and too much to hear and too much to do to concern herself with such passé matters as death. If only she truly could forget.

It was almost disappointing in its mundanity, death. The questions of why and how it stalked all that lived, how it could never be evaded, only delayed; questions that seemed so impossibly important. Some sought answers in the sciences, in explanations at scales ever smaller, citing failures of systems but never quite explaining why it all began to fall apart. Others philosophized and claimed it to be the next step in some great, cosmic journey, a stone on the path of enlightenment. Still others turned to faith, claiming mortality to be the punishment for the first committed sin, an evil so great that it stained every man and woman who came after it. She had found the truth to be far less fantastic. Death was simply a parasite, a twin of the soul that clung to it like a limpet. It fed upon the light of life, more and more until eventually snuffing the flame. She had found the truth to be so boring as to be offensive, and so from the moment she had understood her death she had resolved studiously to ignore it.

Perhaps that dismissal was insulting. She found herself musing over it from time to time, lost in thoughts and could-have-beens. Not over death, no. Death in all its lack of grandiosity had earned her scorn. The insult was to the knowledge itself, to the process, to the effort that had gone into acquiring it. To the lives that had been ruined in its pursuit.

None understood her methods, she knew. Already, separated only by paltry centuries, had she become legend. A monster told of in hushed whispers around midnight fires, a shadow checked for beneath the bed. She knew well the stories that were told of her deeds. How grief had driven her to madness, to desperation. How her punishments grew cruel and wicked as her sanity declined. How a drop of blood that had chanced to fall upon her skin had been the first of a deluge, a flood

howled for by the slaving beast she became. How she tortured and tormented those girls, those poor innocent girls, before snuffing their lives and swimming in their fluids.

Crazed ramblings of bored, ignorant peasants. She never bathed in anyone's blood, virginal or otherwise, just as she never truly regretted that they had to die for her success.

None understood her methods, least of all those she had performed them upon. It was no fault of her own that they could not comprehend the necessity of her research. How could you explain to someone that they were diseased, that all of humankind, every beast of the field, every bird of the sky and fish of the sea were afflicted and the only way to work out a cure was to watch the way it killed them? She had no ur-example, no recorded ancestor that might have held the first and purest of clues, and so had to make due with scores of lesser beings. Perhaps if she had access to the great Behemoth, she would not have needed to experiment on cattle. Perhaps if she held the Simurgh in a cage she could have studied it and not pigeons nor parakeets. Perhaps if she could have watched the death throes of Leviathan churn the sea she would not have needed schools of herring.

Perhaps if she could have watched the passing of God she would not have needed to turn her eye to His children.

It was not torture she subjected them to, but precise methodology. She had tried, at first, to allay their pains and fears. To give them some modicum of the question that she sought the answer to, as though it might have calmed them. The screams, the cries, the thrashings, they never changed. Eventually she had lost the will to offer even that token comfort. She understood, she supposed, in some small way. Whatever the reasons she gave them, it did not change that they would have to die.

For death was the question. What was it, why was it, how did it chomp at the heels of men throughout all of recorded history, by what method did it strangle the air from their lungs? How did it know the moment to take them, be it the last beat of an aging heart or the sudden

violence of a bludgeon to the head? From where did death come, and to where did it go when its work was ended?

She found answers in pieces. Clues spread out across a dozen corpses, a hundred. Death had to be unique, she knew. Very rarely were any two endings the same. She had, of course, engineered such similarities. The spirit of her research demanded no stone be left unturned. It sent her upon a tangent, one ultimately without meaning but not effort she felt wasted. Was there a particular death for those who died of exsanguination? One for crushing, for burning, for closing your eyes to sleep? It would have been a fascinating discovery, and so of course it was not meant to be.

Death had to be unique, she knew, and she proved it so. She found it in the light that faded from the eyes of her subjects. She found it in the last whisper of breath that parted their lips. She found it in the sudden emptiness of the fleshy shell. What a pathetic thing death had been to her eyes. A wisp of smoke, a roiling shadow that gnawed at the radiant essence that was life. Death gluttoned itself on the vitality of its host, grew fat and sick until finally it crushed the spark beneath it. She found it in the elderly. She found it in the young and hale. She found it in babes.

Yet further experiments proved that it was not an invasive force. It was not being birthed that infected a soul with death, it did not force its way inside on the first drawn breath. From the moment the light of soul ignited within, it cast that pathetic shadow.

The only thing she could not mock the wretched parasite for, the only thing she never could explain, was the timing. No matter the cause, no matter the day, not a care for the hour, death's feeding finished when its host passed away. It made no difference if the subject died naturally or met their demise at the end of a rope, death fed upon them at such a precise rate as to always, always take its last bite as their fate was sealed.

That mild intrigue was not enough for her to respect the sanctity of her death. She used the knowledge she had gained, fueled herself

with the truth of the answer she had found, and with skillful hand she wrenched herself open. She teased her spirit from her form, and she found that wretched shade clung to it like some spectral tick. She pulled it until the light was taught, and she snipped it free of her soul. She threw her death into a little jar, only to come down when she felt she had more to learn from it, until she had carved every last secret from its gaseous hide and put it up upon a shelf, never to think of it again.

Until the day that her death began to die.

If asked why she had kept it all that time instead of banishing it as any other seeker of eternal life might do, she would answer that it was merely for oddity's sake. After all, who else could say they had bottled their own death? Really though, it was kept in case she ever decided to release it. Eternity was such a very long time, and in truth the idea of it terrified her. She had much too much to do to live one measly little life, but forever? Forever was for gods, and despite all her bluster she was still as tiny and human as everyone else.

That was why her death had come down from its dusty shelf and out of its little jar. It had been a passing glance that caught her notice, her mind registering what should have been there and seeing instead what was not. Her death—vibrant and black and pulsing with her end—her death was small and lifeless. She watched it in its jar, panicked and scared beyond anything she had ever experienced. Was this mortal terror, she wondered? Perhaps this was how the girls had felt? Did her eyes mirror theirs, wide and glassy and devoid of all hope and light? Who would be there to reassure her that the horror she experienced was for a good cause?

She brushed aside those thoughts and poured her death from its jar. She poked it and she prodded it, stuck her head in its smoke and breathed deep.

Her eyes watered.

She sneezed.

She lived.

Her death swirled and settled and dimmed just a little bit more.

Despite her age, her mind was still sure and her hands still steady. She remembered every note, every procedure. With keen blade and skillful hand she wrenched herself open. She teased her spirit from her form and found the scar in her inner light, the dim remnant of where her death had once rested. She took up the wisp and held it to her soul like a nursing babe, but it would not latch. She tried to sew her death back onto herself, but needle and thread refused to pass through. She tried again with implements made of blood and bone, thread made from the sinew of dragons and hairs plucked from a unicorn's mane. Each pass through her death seemed to claim that much more life from it, with more and more fizzling away.

Again and again she tried to reclaim her death. She swallowed it whole, only for it to drip greasily from her pores. She tried to burn it back into herself, as though it were a metal to be forged. She tried to bind it with the sound of cat's footsteps and the roots of mountains. She tried and she tried and she tried until she could try no more. Not that she ran out of ideas, no. Her mind raced fast enough to send her thoughts spinning, beat an aching gallop through her skull, but as her death died with each and every failure she was soon met with the inevitable.

She was forced to watch, heart racing and chest heaving, as her death dissolved before her eyes.

She did not mourn its passing. She did not lose herself in her panic. She prided herself on her knowledge, on her acumen both scientific and mystical. The loss of her death was a setback—one that filled her with a primal, dreadful fear—but only that. Hers was not the only death in the world. There were thousands—millions, all of creation playing host to the craven smoke. She would simply have to take one of them for herself.

Unfortunately even that simple thought proved to be a long and arduous endeavor. It was no simple thing to choose a subject to sever from death, not from any stance of morality but for practicality's

sake. It would not do to flood the world with deathless creatures in her efforts to restore her own mortality, nor deathless men. Few were those she would trust with the responsibility of endlessness.

Those she did not, she would simply drop into the ocean with stones tied to their feet. No death would await them in the depths, but it would be a kind of oblivion nonetheless.

She stole the death of beasts great and small. She plucked the death from women and men, children and elderly. She stuck them to her soul with pins, she took them into her lungs, she swirled together their smoke until she had great, gaseous clouds of entropy and bathed in them, bid them to envelope the light of her life.

No matter what she tried, no matter how many avenues she pursued, her spirit remained pristine and bright.

What infuriated her was not her failure—no, failure frightened her more than anything. What infuriated her were her successes. Those whose deaths were returned to them after excising. Those whose deaths embraced their light like old friends, like lovers, twining naturally around and through them, permeating and perforating their souls without hesitation. Those whose deaths took easily to needle and thread, let themselves be sewn together as readily as mending a seam.

With each success her fear grew. She tried new and outlandish methods, those that ought not to work—had proven not to work for her, but in each and every case soul and death were reunited. She retrieved subjects she had cast aside, pulled them from prisons and graves and ocean depths. Those whose deaths had been gone from them for months and years. With every one she hoped for failure, and with every one she was denied that satisfaction.

When she could no longer deny proof that death could be reintroduced, she again moved to attempts to bind foreign deaths to souls not their own. Again her fears were stoked. She could pull death from a newborn and attempt to grant a lifetime to a man on his deathbed, but death refused to take. She snipped the deaths from dogs and cats and they scorned their opposite souls as famously as the creatures did.

No matter, no matter, no matter, attempt after desperate attempt, she was met with failure and formless smoke.

She proved only what she already knew. That death was a personal affliction, one special and specific to every living thing.

She spent years and years in her experimenting. She plucked apart the lives of countless numbers. More even than had been needed to find death in the first. She isolated herself from the community that had welcomed her, ignored obligations, allowed apprentices to languish without her guidance. Once more she became a figure of myth, one of hushed whispers and speculations.

When rarely she made appearances, it was not to teach or collaborate or unveil some new spectacle. She arrived in flurries of demands, for potions, for spells, for objects of power. The respect and reverence that had once preceded her became replaced by fear and trepidation, as each and every snapped order was lethal. From alchemists and potioneers she took poisons and venoms and bottled explosions. From incanters she learned words that could choke the air from lungs, rituals that would steal her soul for fuel. From enchanters she took cursed creations that caused death with a touch.

Perhaps if she had ever spared any thought to reputation, to the frightened bleating of lesser creatures, she could have predicted the foremost outcome of her seclusion. Where before the Red was a figure of veneration, in her desperate search to return herself to death's clutches she had regained her bloodied legend. To those of the community who had not known the dawn of her age within the World, who saw only the sallow and dark thing she had become, hissing demands for murderous implements, there was no saintess to be found. She was reduced to yet another sinner, locked away within her towers, plotting doom for all.

When she had recovered, abandoned within the ruin of her home, she felt only embarrassment in her setback. After, of course, the panic had receded.

They had come not as before, with priests and pitchforks. Instead the mob wielded wands and staves, swords blessed to slay the wicked and bows enchanted never to miss. They came to put an end to her hidden deviance, to put an end to her before she could turn their knowledge and creations against them. There was no explaining truth to them, as there never was. They would not hear her words, frightened of some bewitchment passing her lips, just as they would not have comprehended them if they had. She could not recollect if a spell had stolen her voice or a blade had severed the strings of her speech. They came upon her prepared, struck quick and true and left her no recourse but to suffer beneath their ignorance as they tore through limb and stone and paper, put her life's work to the torch.

She did not know how long it had been between her murder and the moment she awoke amongst the ashes, only that the first pull of blackened air into her lungs was the sweetest in memory. Then the next breath choked as she came to realize the horrific miracle of her survival. Not a blemish remained on her skin, not a hair shorn from her scalp, not a bone in need of mending or a joint out of place.

It was not simply that her death had gone, but her life had grown in its absence.

Such precious time was lost in rebuilding. In humoring the placations and platitudes of old John as he attempted to make right the assault on her person. She demanded from him no less than all that had been taken from her, and no more than she deserved. All the while the light within her grew ever more brilliant as she schemed of ways to snuff it out.

She turned first to poisons, and could not recall the days she had lost to sickness. Could not quantify the pain of noxious concoctions ravaging her body, the way her own organs seemed to reject her. She could not count the burns and breaks that accompanied every alchemic bomb. No matter the torment she underwent, no matter the suffering she put herself through, it was never enough. No physical force could rend away her light. No amount of illness could wither her spirit. After each bout of bottle-borne disease she arose clean and new.

Incantations, too, were useless. Any harm wrought by spellwork did not reach deep enough to touch the soul, only succeeded in causing her pain. Words of power that severed her nerves, filled her lungs with water, replaced her lifesblood with acid and venom. Each one left her stranded upon death's door, and just as before her vitality would refuse her the opportunity to knock and restore her to a pristine state.

Objects imbued with cruelty and malice were the next to be tested, wicked things that had been created—by accident or for cruel purpose—to destroy those who possessed them. Dolls into which she had to sew her own hair, misshapen statues that hurt the eyes to gaze upon, rings and lockets that decayed the flesh they rested upon. Each and every one a failure, inert baubles in her hands, little better than paperweights and bookends.

Those rituals that were meant only to be theory, that would pull on her very essence to complete, were worse than useless. She could feel the tug as she chanted, but nothing more. Only once did she experience anything of significance, a strange double sensation where her soul slipped away from the shell of her flesh and she became two instances of herself. She hung and shone as light, while before her stood herself, still moving, still living.

She cut the ritual, slammed back into herself, and spent the rest of the evening sobbing on the floor. Her life—endless, infinite—was already too much. To then be two, to double her torture, would have broken her completely. To feel the hopelessness of life unending multiplied, to be reduced to wailing madness as she was then forced to devise a method to kill the unkillable twice. She found no words to express her despair, only some deep, primal howl that had ripped and torn its way from her lungs and mixed red blood in with her tears.

That night, for the first time in her long life, Elizabeth prayed for death to claim her.

She received no answer, for death had come for God and men and death itself, but never again for her.

2024 CONTRIBUTORS



UNTITLED

Oil on canvas
16 x 12 in.

Mehdi Gassi



Shane Allison was bit by the writing bug at the age of fourteen. He spent a majority of his high school life shying away in the library behind desk cubicles writing bad love poems about boys he had crushes on. He has since gone on to publish several chapbooks of poetry, *Black Flag*, *Ceiling of Mirrors*, *Cock and Balls*, *I Want to Fuck a Redneck*, *Remembered Men*, and *Live Nude Guys*, as well as four full-length poetry collections, *I Remember* (Future Tense), *Slut Machine* (Rebel Satori), *Sweet Sweat* (Hysterical), and *I Want to Eat Chinese Food off Your Ass* (Dumpster Fire). He has edited twenty-five anthologies of gay erotica and has written two novels, *You're the One I Want* and *Harm Done* (Simon & Schuster). Allison's collage work has graced the pages of *Shampoo*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Pnpplzine.com*, *Palavar Arts Magazine*, *Southeast Review*, and a plethora of others. He is at work on a new novel and is always at work making a collage here and there.

Shamik Banerjee is a formalist poet from Assam, India, where he resides with his parents. His poems have been published by The Society of Classical Poets, *Sparks of Calliope*, *The Hypertexts*, *Snakeskin*, *Ekstasis*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, and *Autumn Sky Daily*, among others.



Mehdi Gassi: Using different mediums such as painting, graphic design, and 3D media, I strive towards depicting the world we live in and the chaos that fills our time, as I aim to dive deep into the subject matter and create a sense of universality that resonates with all. My practice often involves creating a series of work using different mediums, allowing me to explore and experiment with techniques that are visually compelling. I take great pleasure in discovering new ways to layer my paints to create a sense of depth and originality.

As an artist, I am deeply passionate about exploring sentimental matters and paradoxes that we come across as humans, and do so using symbolic figurative style. I look forward to continuing to push the boundaries of what is possible with my creativity and bringing new perspectives to the subjects that I am passionate about.



Gigi Giangiobbe-Rodriguez is a writer based in Portland, Oregon but was raised in Oakland, California. She's never met a tree she didn't like and has what some would call an acute addiction to tea. When Gigi is not amassing books faster than she can read them, she's writing, snacking, or scream-singing karaoke at a dive bar with her husband and their friends. Her current works include her chapbook: *I'm Okay, I Promise*. Gigi writes personal essays, memoir, prose poetry, poetry, fiction, and occasionally takes a stab at other genres. Her research essay on Indigenous voter disenfranchisement was showcased at PCC's 2023 Groundswell Conference. Gigi is on the President's List at PCC and is an All-Oregon Academic Team scholar. She is an editor for the literary magazine *The Pointed Circle*.

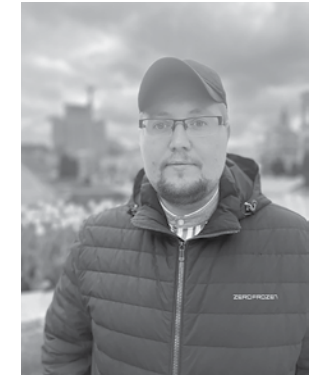
Sean P. Hotchkiss was born and raised in the Portland Metro area of Oregon. He is a father of three, grateful partner of one, and widower. He recently rediscovered his love of writing after returning to college after three gap-decades. Sean is in his last term towards earning an A.A.S. in Business Marketing at Portland Community College (PCC) with plans to pursue a Master's degree in clinical mental health. In addition to his "day job" as a digital marketer, he is also a reading and writing tutor at PCC.

He believes he does his best work where thought meets inspiration, and seeks out those things and people that stimulate both. You can engage with Sean on Instagram @sphotch_the_writer or on his website at <https://www.sphotch.com>.



Keith Kunze: Growing up in a rural small town in Oregon made being in the closet quite an intense experience. Journaling is something that I found beneficial and was a huge process in accepting myself as a gay man. Besides non-fiction storytelling, I enjoy a variety of other genres, but especially enjoy stories that are a "slice of life" with sci-fi/fantasy components. Playing video games, watching shows, and researching miscellaneous topics that might not be relevant to anything of importance are things you are likely to catch me doing at home. Currently, I am studying to become an elementary teacher, after taking a hiatus from college.

Slava Konoval: My creative works are dedicated to the central themes of modernity, and the main one is the exposure of the concepts of "good" and "evil" and their transformation into a gray shade. Poetry is a weapon against consciousness, which feeds on cheap informational garbage, cultivating a consumerist attitude and civic indifference for the future of the society in which individuals live. Since I am a lawyer by profession, poetry is my additional tool that allows me to fight where politics mercilessly and maliciously defeats the law. I am an active member of civil society and perform the functions of the Commissioner for Prevention and Counteraction of Corruption on public grounds. I adore the poetic satire.



I have never attached much importance to the naming of my poetry, as I believe that poetry should be devoid of advertising content. The heart of poetry is the power of words. That's the main thing. Ideologically, my works are in the canvas of a poetry group called Voices from Ukraine.



Bailey Moore: I live in a small Halloween-loving town with my family, including two cats and a dog. I love reading, writing, and playing games. I've worked with a lot of different mediums, but I have enjoyed working with oils the most. I plan to transfer to a university and pursue my degree in fine arts.

Xiomara Mueller is a PCC student whose artwork, *Orange Is the Loneliest Color*, is published in the 2024 issue of *The Bellwether Review*.

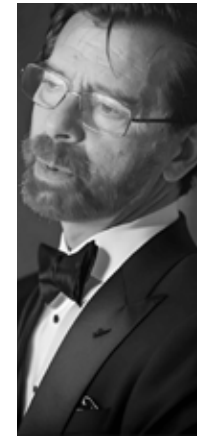
Jacky Sanchez Lozoya is a PCC student whose artwork, *El Alcatraz*, is published in the 2024 issue of *The Bellwether Review*.

Laila Sheikh: Hailing from Lake Oswego, Oregon, my paintings reflect my love of cheerful, vivid colors inspired by my world travels. I am inspired by art masters, a global perspective, and my training in Feng Shui and Ikebana to create unique oil and acrylic paintings that intersect the abstract and the modern. I hope to fill your space with happy colors.

<https://lailaduttastudio.wixsite.com/lailaduttastudio>

Instagram ~ @lailaduttastudio

lailaduttastudio@gmail.com



David P. Sterner: I was born in the small town of Grants Pass, Oregon. I have attended 22 different schools in Oregon, Montana, and Northern California—including PCC—which all exposed me to various cultures. My passions are art and science. I express my inner feelings by drawing, painting, sculpting, and writing. I study science to understand life and emotions, which I find very intriguing. Some of my achievements include winning blue ribbons for my artworks, being the lead singer of the Dave Everest Band, and receiving U.S. Patent #4,572,622 for a photographic lens. I have also authored a book titled *DOR: The Missing Geometric Link*. My hobbies include rock and fossil hunting, and I am proud to own the largest carnelian agate ever to be discovered in the Vernonia, Oregon region: it weighs a whopping 65 lbs.



Brooklyn Shepard, who also goes by Crescent Holiday, is a resident at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville. She takes college courses offered by both Portland Community College and Portland State University, where she majors in English. She is the mother of a number of children including Soriyah, Britain, Iliyana, Indigo, Sterling, and Cha'uri—and she has a husband who is the love of her life. She can be reached by mail for comments and discussion:

Brooklyn Shepard/Crescent Holiday
CCF #15721242
24499 SW Grahams Ferry Rd.
Wilsonville, OR 97070

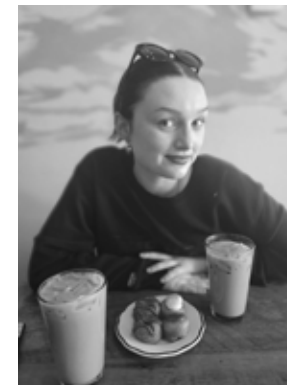
Matt Smith: “The Red’s Death” is a product of a few passions, namely somewhat obscure history and spiteful takes on fantasy tropes. I’ve spent my life reading more than is arguably healthy, and in that time I’ve developed my own fascinations and irritations when it comes to written works. This story came about by asking myself how I would deal with the classic immortal sorcerer, and near immediately I knew that I wanted it to be a cautionary tale. From there came the concept of death as a physical force, something I felt unique and that worked well with the story I wished to tell. The idea bled into a sort of magical scientist, one whose legend blurred together with that of a real world mythical figure, and thus the tragic origin of Elizabeth the Red, true immortal, came together.



Mercedes Shafer: I am 18 years old and have always used poetry as a way to express how I feel. I took the Writing 242 poetry workshop at PCC and found that poetry helped me with my feelings a lot more than I thought. When creating “Dear Creator” I did not originally have a specific person that I was thinking about, but after some fixing up, I began to have a person in mind. I left it as “Dear Creator” to give the readers some room on how they want to interpret it.



Randall Camden Stemple is a PCC student whose poem “How Much Is ‘Mass’?” is published in the 2024 issue of *The Bellwether Review*—see our “Meet the Editors” section for full bio.



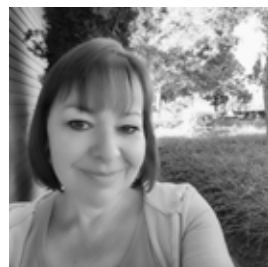
Alli Tschirhart is an aspiring writer and poet. From Texas, she enjoys being outdoors and reading, as well as her three cats. Her work has previously been published in *The Bellwether Review* and *Free Verse Revolution*. She is continuing her passion for reading and writing at PSU this fall.

Instagram ~ @allitschirhart



Eddie Vassilenko: I'm a fella who likes to make things. My work centers around my life being queer, body image, and the people around me. I often focus on the human form. When I'm not making art, I'm probably playing *Guitar Hero 3*.

Nancy McKinley Wagner is a business major with a love for nature and writing. Writer of nonfiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry centered on the natural world and its wondrous and beautiful connection to the human spirit, she lives with her family in Beaverton, Oregon.



Kelley Wezner is a recent retiree who has returned to school to study art. She is in her first year at PCC. She particularly enjoys drawing and painting the nature she sees on walks. When she's not in school, she enjoys reading, hiking, and time with friends and family.

Dean Wilson: Born in Oregon, our family moved around a lot. I used my first camera, a 126-roll film from the 1960s, very infrequently. Progressing through the Instamatic days of the 1970s, I bought my first SLT in 1976. This eventually led to a DSLR in 2015 and mirrorless from 2019. Photography is a passion for me that allows me to capture a feeling, mood, or a moment in time that tells a story. I capture landscapes with a creative eye of a place that may have existed for thousands of years or in the blink of an eye, which may suddenly disappear tomorrow.

Facebook ~ Dean Wilson Photography
Instagram ~ @DeanWilsonCanby



MEET THE EDITORS

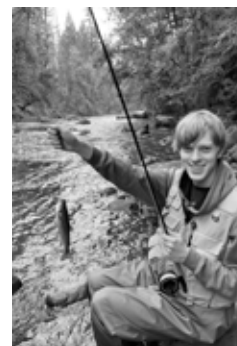


A high-adrenaline enthusiast with an endless supply of energy, **Claire Batchelder** has been writing for as long as she can remember, and these days she writes a solid mix of poetry and fiction. She has been rock climbing for eight years and scuba diving for five, and her inspiration draws heavily from the natural world she's encountered—and the disturbing changes she's witnessed. Claire has submitted an assortment of poems and a piece of nonfiction for publication in several journals, and she's currently revising a fiction story. When she's not writing or adventuring in the outdoors, she's cuddling with her husky, Artemis.

Jonathan Bennett is a 21-year-old writer from Oregon currently attending Portland Community College. Jonathan works as both a Poetry and Fiction editor for this journal. They have been writing on and off since their junior year at Mountainside High School, taking a gap year to find another but ultimately going back to writing. They plan on transferring to Portland State University for a Creative Writing degree, and they hope to someday write lore for a good indie game. They mainly want to pursue fiction writing, but that's currently taken a backseat to their newly found passion for poetry. Outside of writing, they enjoy hiking, listening to Midwest emo music, playing games a bit too competitively, and hanging out with their amazing partner.



"O Time thy pyramids."
—Jorge Luis Borges



Hunter Bordwell-Gray is a lifelong Portland resident and half-a-lifelong writer. What was first a dead set passion on becoming a novelist in the third grade has since warped and evolved into a much broader love of writing. His inspirations draw from a roulette wheel of nature, analog horror podcasts, and music to create . . . whatever the intersection of those three things creates. Mostly poetry, but who knows what it may be tomorrow!

MEET THE EDITORS

Quinn Brown is a trans and indigenous Portland writer and poet. Since writing from a very young age, Quinn found herself pursuing a passion for writing in all different forms, from varying genres of fiction to poetry. Her key inspirations for most of her writing comes from a place exploring identity, culture, and where those ideas overlap.



Sean P. Hotchkiss is one of the Typesetting Editors, as well as our Art Editor and Web Editor. Proud father of three, grateful partner of one, and widower. Sean is in his last term towards earning an A.A.S. Business: Marketing degree at Portland Community College (PCC) with plans to pursue a Master's degree in clinical mental health. He rediscovered his love of writing after returning to college after three gap-decades. In addition to owning a small marketing support firm, he is a reading and writing tutor at the PCC Sylvania Campus. Sean is a second time contributing author to *The Bellwether Review* and was also a presenter at PCC's 2023 Groundswell: A Conference of Student Writing.



"I am the puppet master! You're a puppet in a play, and I hold all the strings! And cards, still got the cards. I've got the cards in one hand, and the strings in the other hand, and I'm making you dance around, like a puppet, playing cards."

—Wheatley, *Portal 2*.

Who's that fine lookin' fellow with the sexy hair, the one whose opinions on style choices were like black sheep? Why, that's **Adam Idris**, baby! His very first year of college and he's already dabbling in the art of publications, maybe he's hoping to get his own stories published. What kinda stories, you may ask? Just your typical fiction, filled to the brim with laughs, action, witty one-liners and loveable characters. What a guy, am I right?

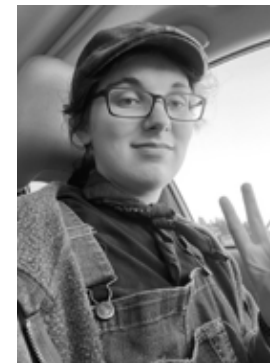


MEET THE EDITORS

"Butterflies can't see their wings. They can't see how truly beautiful they are, but everyone else can."

—Naya Rivera

Bo Leo, one of our Typesetting Editors and Proofing Editors, is an aspiring author who resides in the Pacific Northwest. Their deep appreciation for animals and nature is evident in their writing, which typically focuses on themes of identity and trauma. When they're away from their desk, you can find them reading, painting, daydreaming, spending time with their pets, or enraptured by the music of one Alessia Cara.



Megan McGrory is an avid consumer of media who's lived in Washington, Alaska, and finally Oregon. She has been writing since before she could technically write, getting her mother to write down her stories for her. Her greatest passion is prose, particularly fantasy and science fiction. Aside from writing, Megan loves to read, watch movies and tv, perform on stage, and analyze media through a feminist lens. One of her greatest passions is napping with her cat, Spooky.

You can always edit a bad page. You can't edit a blank page."

—Jodi Picoult

Randall Camden Stemple is a PCC student who enjoys spending most of his free time reading, writing, and watching whatever slop YouTube recommends. This of course, in-between bouts of struggling to format his dialogue and working as the Correspondence Editor. If at any point you received an email from *The Bellwether Review*, it was most likely from him, and if you at any point noticed the inconsistent manner in which he formatted each email, please keep it to yourself.

