

Pointed Circle

Issue 41

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Cascade Campus

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Note from the Editors,

For the 41st Issue of Pointed Circle, we asked writers to DIG IN, which is code for “please excavate something weird and shimmering from the dirt heap of real life” and they obliged. What arrived felt less like a stack of manuscripts and more like a box of glow worms, restless, humming, hungry for oxygen.

We got pieces that sprout tendrils, reaching sideways to feed the lines beside them, pieces that remember the body, the soil, the city block as interlocking systems where one fracture can compromise the whole canopy. Even the quiet ones came carrying a spade, ready to overturn the polite soil and show you the wriggling networks beneath. Community, grief, and radical hope, they all thread through these pages like filaments, unseen but impossible to ignore once you feel the ground pulse underfoot.

Many of these voices belong to writers and artists who have been paved over or talked around. They know the ground is never neutral; it takes notes. While we center on the PCC community, geography is just a detail. If you can swing a metaphorical shovel, you belong at this dig site; the elk aren't the only ones allowed to roam. We editors understand that if you want honest truths, you sometimes have to invite the raccoons, the angels, and the half-remembered jukebox songs into the same living room and see who speaks first.

Carry a little soil in your pocket, a new question at the back of your throat, and if you leave these pages feeling tangled? Good. Entanglement is evidence of life.

Happy Digging,
The Editors

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BIORHYTHM



Aurora Duval

Rowan Tate

wanted to taste salt, to grow teeth, wanted
to leave marks, to put butter on bread,
wanted to watch a scratch heal and get
another one, to dig claws into dirt and
feel something older push back, to make
a hole, to make love, to make up words and
to have hair in different colors, to try
the green part of a watermelon, to watch
water fall, crack knuckles, become a child
cartwheeling through a sprinkler, a child
milking a goat, wanted to eat cheese, to make fire,
to drink from cupped hands, to carry a pebble
in their pocket and believe in luck, to paint nails,
wanted to play tic tac toe, dip fingers in hot wax,
to step into footprints left in wet cement, to
become a climber suspended in a portaledge
3,000 feet over rock bottom, to hear footsteps behind them,
turn and see no one, to run until their lungs burned
chasing a hare into the thicket, fifteen and making up a
life.

ROOTS

Erin Jamieson

the rot begins
deep at the roots

peeling bark
sweetly putrid

we pretend
not to notice

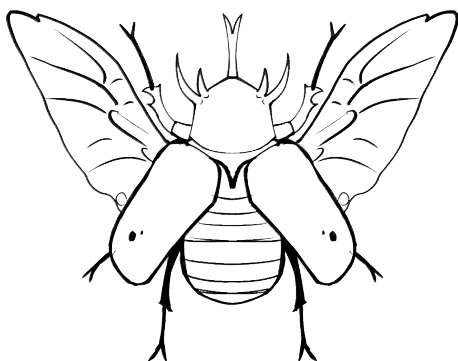
planted a year
after we married

growing with our
children, our bills
our arguments

then

the swollen quiet
aftermath: insidious
contagion

I close my eyes



James B. Nicola

I can't look out my picture window now
but through the filter of my sprawling fern
born years back of the merest snip someone
I loved gave me with a clay pot of dirt.
The love is gone now but the plant is plush
and looks as if "it will keep growing till
nothing less than death do us part" – that's what
some friends who tested the soil yesterday
told me. I had told them about the snip
that grows like love in dreams and fairy tales.
They saw the irony in this. I just
like plants but now look out my window through
a thousand fern fronds. In fact, I can't see
except through green. I'm not sure about spores.

BOLETE

Kati Kim

Boletus edulis,
penny bun, porcini, cèpe,
raw, roasted, grilled, sautéed with butter,
dried, ground into powder, salt, soup, butter, risotto, tagliatelle, gnocchi, pappardelle, lasagne, potatoes, frittata, toast, pot pie, shepherd's pie, pâté, stew, cream sauce, gravy, mushroom ketchup? You betcha! \$50 per pound, or free, for the taking - oak, birch, beech, White Fir, Sitka Spruce, Ponderosa Pine.
September - November,
or April - May.
Sorry, I cannot
say more, or I'd give
them all away!

Two Medicine

Megan Ulrich

When I am six feet underground the soil will hold these
memories, tenderly
Recalling the crunching of the ground beneath my feet
and the fire in my lungs

That summer when Sinopah stared me down, grabbed me,
gobbled me up and swallowed me whole
From inside her belly I meditated on wildness and wild

Someday I will return and the bighorn sheep will hold my
gaze unflinchingly with their freakish eyes
Replaying for me all the times my yells ricocheted off the
walls of their living room

The flies that buzzed around inside my head, driving me
mad from their mere existence
Will crawl around with their dirty little paws scrubbing the
earth clean

The rams will clash like thunder for the honor of licking
our ashes
Beating their thick, twisted skulls together in an eternal
battle over our scraps

Did you know there are Buddhist monks who prostrate
their way across the Himalayas?
Is that what it takes? To understand that we are nothing
and everything all at once

I would have torn down the mountain stone by stone
To know that I am knowable, that I too am love and grace
and patience embodied

I walked hundres of miles waiting for a gentle touch, a
kind believing word
I learned the harder you listen the harder you pray

dow open
So I can hear the world outside and I don't feel so alone



Rachel Coyne

HARVESTING TOMATOES IN SEPTEMBER

Carolyn Martin

We should have known when the tag
said “70 days” that summer would slip
away before Sweet 100’s yellow blooms
ransacked the sun and globed up green.

We watered twice a day.
Shooed curious squirrels away.
Prayed for accelerated ripening
before chilly nights set in to split
branch-heavy galaxies in two.

We admit we were out of sync.
May’s cool soil seemed too soon.
June’s showers discouraged lazy boots.
Now 70 days since the Fourth,
harvesting overwhelms and we can’t consume
red-tamed fruit fast enough.

But this we know —as we tramp around
the neighborhood with brown bags reeking ripe—
next year we’ll make the same mistake:
miscalculate like this year and the year before.
While there’s a lesson about sowing and reaping,
we’re still digging for it. Something
to do with Nature’s wise timeline
and our off-paced ignorance.
Or maybe it’s about intent and choice:
gentle picking day-by-day versus

Where did the panic go / from your eyes / from your brows
/ from the lips you would worship me with / wash me over
with the kind of gaze that makes you wonder if you ever
really seen yourself before / wash me / with your palms /
and rosemary water / can one hypnotize themselves / gain
control and simultaneously be freed of it / did I really stop
loving you / that day / when the wind picked up my call to
you / and put me on hold / my message was cut off by the
payphone busking for another quarter / where did you go /
after the wasted time / rotted / left out to mold / amnesia /
I forget what your calluses feel like / but I think I could still
trace out the blue from the green in your eyes / I thought I
would have forgotten that by now. Where did the panic go
/ from your eyes / from your brows / from the lips you would
worship me with / wash me over with the kind of gaze that
makes you wonder if you ever really seen yourself before /
wash me / with your palms / and rosemary water / can one
hypnotize themselves / gain control and simultaneously be
freed of it / did I really stop loving you / that day / when the
wind picked up my call to you / and put me on hold / my
message was cut off by the payphone busking for another
quarter / where did you go / after the wasted time / rotted /
left out to mold / amnesia / I forget what your calluses feel
like / but I think I could still trace out the blue from the green
in your eyes / I thought I would have forgotten that by now.

OF BIRDS AND TREES: A VOW

Bria Robertson

I will always be your bluebird
If you swear to be my pine tree
A lucky charm is nothing
Without something sturdy underneath
You can hear me sing
If I can watch you sway
I will keep you warm
If your branches keep the wind away
I'll throw my head to the clouds
If you dig your roots deep
Where imagination and memory can meet

Nothing will change how I feel for you
Not a mountain, nor a need to fly free
So I will love you when your needles are healthy
And I will love you if you scorch in the heat
And I will love you as you grow
And I will love you when you one day shrink

They say love should be unconditional
And I cannot disagree
I would love you if you were my star
Or my river
Or my bee
But to me I am your bird and you are my evergreen

MY EXUBERANCE FOR NATURAL PERSONIFICATIONS

Carolyn Martin

I like it when
the stellar nursery
announces
a new star is born
and song sparrows
entertain
with signatures
they've practiced
in their dreams
and everything's epic
as the shadow-making sun
softens
the granite rock
muting rowdy weeds
that squirm their way
to resurrect themselves
and choke feisty grass
fighting

to claim the title
of green
while calendar plants
fribble
along the edge
of a silent starless yard
and chortle ecstatically.

(With thanks to Charles Simic's "My Weariness of Epic Proportions")

ANCIENT COOPERATION

Blaire Baron

Four hundred million years —
soft stems segue into stone,
still, the untold story

Aglaophyton, frozen in time,
its cells whisper a quiet truth:
fungus and root entwined,
secret pact sealed in silica.

Ere forests, ere flowers,
ere the hush of falling leaves,
they reached for each other in the dark,
sharing what the other could not find.

Even now, beneath our feet,
that ancient promise holds —
a thread unbroken,
a yearning answered.



Rachel Coyne

RELATIONAL ANALYSIS

Joseph Byrd

Where did you first see each other?

On South Washington Ave, as my head fell off.

Was it a friendship?

It was an overture, and I can still hear people clapping, and let's go home.

What happened when he sang?

What hot tea will do, drunk too quick.

Was there a word first said?

A hand first held, in prejudice, while a witch said not to. She knew his game.

What was in your first drink?

A few hundred postmortems; a necessary sickness; a rain-soaked squirrel.

What did it feel like?

Screaming I love him in the city park at dusk: wait for all the years to come.

Where is he now?

How many seeds in how much dirt.

BONDING

Kiddo Wybie

I want to drag you through
the mud
in the pit of vipers that I called home.
Browse in the enzymes
of their venom, pushed in

the thick of the earth, where you might
seep through forever.
Sand so fine it's practically dust
through you -
ashing your nostrils, caking your throat.
By hand I'll pull you up an inch of
breath and breath
the life from my lungs into yours.

I'll weave a ladder with your hair, and if it's not long
enough
I'll join it with mine. Lift us
out as I did before. When the hour is up
I'll run up a bath
to wash our time away with salt
drain away my histories
with the sand, enzymes, mud.

MENDING

Eileen Adele Hale

I would stitch the world
back together.

Needle and bright threads in hand,
I would mend it.

Into the fabric of our world
stitch in ponds and meadows,

forests, clear air
clean rivers full of fish the people can eat.

Mayhi – the salmon. *P'aliki* – the trout.
Hanana peku – good food.

With each stitch bring back
another hummingbird, another lizard

to a space of bright air; to a sunny rock
stitch them on, in red and orange

and purple
lines of stitches growing

numbering as the leaves
on the oak trees budding out now

or as the flakes of snow that fell
last night in yet another April snow

just before my sister's birthday.

their turned-under edge
fasten them down with needle
and thread

hold raw sorrow and shrieking grief
smooth the curves, bend and press under

like an arm around a weeping shoulder
like the owl's cry scooping out a piece of the
night, the hollow time or the time when

the sunlight seems brash and pale,
the magenta beauty of tulips an incoherent outrage.

Where we are torn I sew.

stitch us all safe, green and blue
edging batik, fasten lacy-patterned pale green,

sage and yellow to wine or teal,
forest green and peach

to periwinkle.
pick up deep wells and clear, full springs; stitch them in

brimming with water my people can drink, and yours,
our people all around the world.

I would stitch the world
back together;
I would mend it.

*Author's note: mayhi, p'aliki, and hanana peku are all words
in Mountain Maidu, the language of an indigenous tribe from
near where I live.*

COTTON THREAD, SIZE 16, WILDFLOWERS HAND-DYED

Eileen Adele Hale

I want to stitch and stitch, one stitch after another
I want to drink in bright colors and not to think
I don't want to think
*about how I dreamed I missed
the concert I was supposed to be in—I was late,
the choir went ahead, the women all
so much more
beautiful and finished and grown-up
than I.*

*I'd been going to take a shower, long long needed.
My hair greasy, my body full of the stinks of
animals like foxes, ripe
but not cunning.
I'd been trying to round up my family, my
father and mother, my sister, my daughter.*

I don't want to think about my brother dying,
his cells like unwashed hair and skin,
stinking like foxes, past ripe and beyond
cunning, into ruin full of crumbs and unconnected bits
where the threads and the fabric
should hold together,
in muddy lost colors, pale and confused.

I look to the colors of my stitching,
bright clear wine, orange like sunlight,
fresh sweet blue rippling like water,
a strip of young green diving through.

Layer on layer, stitch on stitch they
build solidity I long for

building home and safety.

*I don't want to think about my sister's car
and its improvised harness*

to hold;

*It takes too long to do up, I'm late again,
still fumbling with the zigzagging strings,
on the floor between the seats, while the
car's already rolling.*

With needle and thread,
large squares of fabric
and scraps to sew onto them,
I have all the time I need.

Catch two threads of under-layer
and the folded lip of the top layer
shaped and held with deft fingers
sewn down clean and tight.

Sew it with mockingbird song in
the moonlit heart of the night.
Sew it with the wet song of tears
and green rain.

Stitch some more, coral into
spring green, the two colors of breathing:
hemoglobin and chlorophyll.

Stitch it back together,
to where the holes become doors
and we can't fall
out, fall down,
fall through.

THREADED THROUGH



Eileen Adele Hale

CROSS-COUNTRY CONNECTION

Kerim Bueno

The nomad only owned earth
to trade for my presence; an
incision across my abdomen
was wadded with dirt 'til blood
turned mud and hardened;
long enough to satiate the
worms; more movement meant
more crumbling; but sustained
contortion of the limbs is
uncomfortable when there is no
comfort. I held a
frame the size of the exchange
around us but; it's hard to highlight
metaphors in transactions when
no words were exchanged.
Schrödinger's receipt in my pocket

(or not) I dig for the keys to my
apartment.

RETURN TO ME

Maylie McDaniel

There is a place hidden from time,
Deep in the bogs of peat and muck,
Away from rot and decay and age.
Find me there, entombed in mud,
My body kept whole and untouched.
Join me and shake off the shackles of time.
The earth is cool and comfortable,
Return to the ground from where we grew.
It's better than pickling in formaldehyde,
With a casket of steel and concrete.
Steel tables and dissections, wax and wires
Eyes go first you know, they put the lids on spikes.
Return to me, in my bog of peat and acid,
Lay with me, in mother's cool embrace.

THE THINGS THAT MAKE US HUMAN

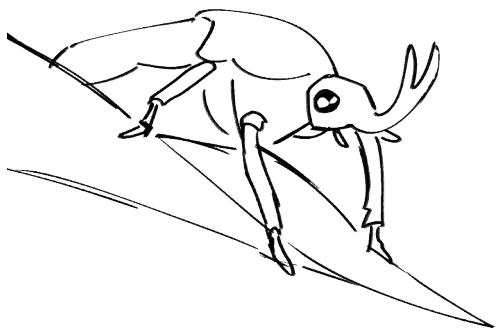
Johnathan Ukah

It's not our mortality, not our dying,
we make a step forward and two backwards,
not even the implosion or the inevitable decay;
from this, we rise higher and better;
from this, we will become eternal.
It's not our fallibility or our failure in everything;
not the debilitating pain in our necks,
not this loneliness nudging us towards the edge,
shrinking us towards the abyss.
There is the rising after a fall,
the afterlife etched on our foreheads,
as though we turn glass after dust;
as though we're steel after wood,
as though we become air after turning water
and there will be no breaking, no breakup.
not the beginning with an earthquake
and the ending without an explosion,

the way we disappear without noise
without waking up the neighbourhood
to a fire service rush, scampering and screaming,
scuttling towards a resurrection.
There is no resurrection without dying,
though Lazarus was never dead but sleeping.
There is comfort in hope,
yet it's not what makes us human,
this hope, faith gathering on our foreheads,
forming coagulated balls of sweat in our blood,
this fear that we will return after departure,
become rich after dying poor
wake up healthy after lying down sick,
whole after an afternoon of splitting into atoms,
and from the side of our incomplete body

we watch time roll us into a flint of fire,
from where we unroll ourselves into the ocean.
We are light enough to be heavy,
light enough to be dark;
we are deep enough to be a shallow river,
concrete enough to be so abstract;
we are sad enough to glow in the dark,
to have joy driving up the ridges of our bodies
like a heavy truck ascending a hill;
we are a hill racing through the valley,
and when we arrive at our destination,
we'll send word to the sky
to wash us up with a downpour.
It's what makes us human,

how to live and die, how to smile and cry,
how to light a candle and blow it out
how to knit grace into the threads of our clothes
and wear it like an apron whenever we go out,
how to force our body to listen to time, our inner time.



WE MET ONLINE

Joseph Byrd

and then we met in Aisle 23 (Health and Beauty) but only after I'd started a poem on the employee picnic bench that was

chained to the dumpster gate outside Fred Meyer, and on which someone had scratched What is happiness. I texted you a picture of it

that your phone could not receive. I found you eyeing the Vitamin D as I neared, and knew why you'd said no to me driving forty-

five miles to see you. I knelt as you turned. You laughed a lion's litter of Don't you dares! I saw why the sun cries over what its burned.

BOO ORANGES

May Mitch

I never liked orange.
Too loud. Too bright.
Too much like trying
to force a smile in the sun.

But she did.
Made me tan till I matched the
pumpkin spice wrappers and sunset
sherbet skies.

October was her month – the whole
block knew it.
Grinning ghosts,
twenty-foot spiders
her parents strung across the lawn like love
notes in cobwebs.

That laugh echoing
like it lived longer than she did.

She swore
orange made her eyes look bluer. Maybe it
did.
Or maybe
she just wanted to be
bright enough
no one would notice the fading.

God forbid
they gave her an orange straw instead of
pink.
She'd pout

like the whole day was ruined — and it
never really was.

She could be sour,
like an orange left too long
on the counter.
But I'd still peel it open,
every time,
because she was mine
and I loved her.

I still hate orange.
I hate missing her.
But grief is a color
you don't get to pick.

And if the rainbow
means anything —
it means letting orange stay,
even when it hurts the most.

SYMBIOSIS AS A LOVE LETTER

Wil D’Vane

I wish you were here
So that I could see you, and hold your hand
Hold you close and not let go

But you’d be an exception

I want to work in the gardens with you
And take over when you need to rest
I’ll peel your oranges, fingers sticky with juice and stray
pith
Because I know you hate doing it just as much as me

Tangled hands covered in dirt
While we grow some tomatoes I’m trying to learn to love
I hope you laugh when I still make faces after eating them
I’d get you as many mangos as you could want
I’d grow them if the soil was good for it

I will water your roots just so I can see your flowers bloom
Happy, healthy, loved
An endless vessel for you alone
I’ll pour my soul into you with a kiss
So you may know how deep my well of love runs

I’d let you stick your hand through my chest
Sending shockwave echoes through my heart, my bones
Creating ripples in the lake of me
Fill your cupped hands and take a sip
Let our very beings become intertwined

Two beetles share a leaf, we say they’re just like us

KERNEL



Saoirse Chance

AFTER SONYA MASSEY

henry 7. reneau, jr

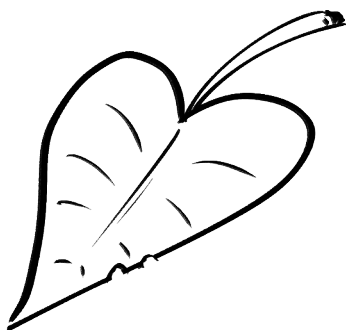
Business as usual
is always a repetition of wrongdoing
. Is to do again (one , two , three times)
what should not have been done
in the first place . Is business as usual
ever a do-over , a mistake ? Is it a glitch
that has not happened before ? Is it
an irregularity , a rounding error . Is
it different than what we have seen
cops do before ? Is 722 Black people
shot by a cop so far this year
an anomaly ? I rebuke you in the name
of the Lord is as effective against evil
as salt thrown over a left shoulder
to rebuke the Devil – does not work
on racist cops . Is a Black person
calling a white cop for help
the same as digging our own grave
? The racist white cop

in the face , is business as usual . Is
in-Just-Us . Is the in-house investigation
a means to look away (lie , distort , deny) to prove
it isn't real . The narrative optics
are business as usual . O raptor-eyed
Lord of Flies , shall justice
burn our church again ?

STRANGER

Mark Herman

I walked with a stranger
'Gainst wind on damp streets
Ducked under low branches
Put faith in cold feet
I walked with a stranger
With the grace of a clown
Square peg words
In my round hole mouth
I walked with a stranger
Who stood a test of time
Our moons in tandem wane
A star dims next to mine
I walked with a stranger
Who's no stranger at all
Their face just a mirror
Casting back on us all



FORGOTTEN

Erin Jamieson

I wander, barefoot
pine needles along
a snowy path-
 the only sign of life
 in barren woods
 with gnarled bark
 & branches the stretch
 like forgotten corpses

Endlessly gray skies
how long has it been
since I felt sunlight?
 I stop at a frozen brook
 to peer at a reflection
 of my hollow eyes
 & matted hair

An owl hoots above me
as evening slips into night-
 only the stars
 can guide me home

But I'm no longer sure
 I have a home
 to return to

WHAT IF I WERE A PIGEON

Saoirse Chance

queen of the street,
quiet ruler of cracked sidewalks
wings soaked with the weight of patience
I don't rush, don't ask
I simply am
perched on the edge of existence,
waiting for the world to give me what's mine.

unbothered by the rush of feet
the honk of cars, the confusion of the city
I own the cracks in the pavement
the crumbs on the corner
the edges of a city that never stops
but always knows I'm there

I wait in the rain, in the heat
unmoved by time, unhurried
I've learned that nothing is lost
when you're patient enough to claim it.

A moment, a crumb, a piece of the world
I take it all
piece by piece with the tenacity
of something that knows it has
nowhere else to be.

DEATHLESS WALTZ

Hayley Covington

How would it feel to let my body say yes?
Would it be safe and cozy –
like a campfire on an early summer night,
its warmth cradling two young lovers
beneath a sky of stars?

Or would it be sultry and sweltering –
Like the cobblestone streets of New Orleans,
of the city's dark and electric aliveness?

As Mardi Gras' king of bones oversees the parade of desire.

No, not I.
I taste like rain, earth, and time –
moonlight, magic, and madness
whispering a gentle yes along your jaw.

That sigh of surrender hidden deep in my soul.
Is it the ripples of a lake brushing my skin on a windy day?

Or the rhythm of rain cascading down my spine?

As mortality lingers on my lips, like the electricity of a first
kiss,

the macabre monarch dances across my mind like a pup-
pet on a string.

Standing tall, arms stretched overhead,
a thread weaving me to the earth and stars –
a soft, unbroken, and eternal exhale.

Maybe that's what it means,
this whispered yes:
a thread that binds your soul to mine,
our lips moving in rhythm to the deathless king's ghostly
waltz —

All puppets on a string, swaying to
a timeless song of life and death.

THE ACCIDENT

Kyrena Heath

It slithered into the room with heavy, shuffling footfalls.
His voice echoes off the damp walls of my mind.
He stands above me shouting "Everything is dirty, you
are dirty, you
are an accident waiting to happen."

Sunset after sunset he tells me how to not be an accident.

The sink stands before me, looming like a sculpture.
Venus.
David.
The Thinker.
Holding attention as if in a museum.

Lemon and lavender, so sweet on the countertop. Hot water rippling in the drain.
Coat your hands with them. Bathe your every crease and thinly veiled bone, pass gently over the splits in your knuckles. Rinse away the foam and the blood tenderly, as if wiping the tears from a downy cheek.
Clean.

The crash missed me.

But was it enough, did you
sing happy birthday? Did you dig
under your nails as if excavating for
evidence that could tell you - who lived here?
Was it me, the accident
who lived here?

My therapist told me of an exercise she saw, harsh in nature.
One spells their name on a blank paper,
their selfhood spread out in bold letters.

Then writes.

Obsession after obsession, every demand made of yourself
every

Until your name is obscured. Selfless. Drowned out by the
voice shouting into your ear, you are
dirty.

My therapist told me
to write the names of my children.
I cried just imagining
how it would hurt to see them eclipsed by every waking
worry I have, every terror that swallows me.
How it would hurt if they saw me
consuming them.

Every description of this noise is the same.

Painful.

Suffering.

Destined to be incurable, locked into the blueprint of our
neurons.

Remission is a closed door I can hear the cries through,
leaking through the cracks, dulled and dampened.

Learning to tolerate the sounds of crushing yourself be-
neath the responsibility
of saving
yourself.

Of the exhaustion of the work of protecting everyone, from
an accident.

but who is going to tell her
that holding her breath
won't stop the relentless howling of
The Doubting Disorder.

It feels so real, I say. Like we've met before, sometimes that
happens.

when is she going to tell her

There is no

Accident

UNTITLED



Cyrus Carlson

I Love You

Matthew Lee

A touch holds the gleam and nothing more,
And then another, that is how we do it.
There is no choice. There is nothing in between one and
two,
Not even time.

You've learned that already, haven't you? Eventually
You will see the wall collapse from all your poking around
to reveal
Nothing. You are a bright young soul, you will achieve
great things.
So look into my eyes –

I love you. Repeat after me. I love you.
That is how we do it.

SONNETS FOR A GIRLFRIEND

Kurtis Matthew Russell

I.

I'll pull over to the side of the road
instead of falling asleep at the wheel
of your moods. I'd like to be awake so
I do not slip on the banana peel
of your multitudes, and I'd like to give
you all the time you need to be alone,
to journal, to puzzle, perchance, to live
bright and solid in place, you traffic cone,
you – caution is not the enemy of
the erotic, though it may feel that way.
Responsibility's the shape of love.
To be alert, *and* at ease. To run days
on end, rest in the sun, skin ladybug
red as the stop sign we greet with a hug.

II.

The multiple piercings in both your ears.
The WWE wrestling match that ensues
every morning when I tickle your feet
to wake you. The hug as the time draws near
for one of us to go to work. The coos,
hoots, and burbles. The please-do-not-leave-me's,
and the bittersweet I'll-see-you-later's.
The two phones charging side by side like lovers.
The world discovered, envy of others,
the lived fantasy and its creators –
The thousand decisions and revisions.
My toast, my tea, champion and foil –
The never-gonna-let-you-go, never-

III.

She rides her bike to me. She rides her bike
with her helmet on her head for safety,
with the bottoms of her trousers rolled like
Prufrock. Going the way of gravity,
aging, I want to run to her but not
overwhelm her. Maintain my labrador-
solitude, acknowledge my needs and wants –
Love is a lifestyle, not a metaphor.
A commitment to pay close attention:
She likes vanilla ice cream and this is
the most important fact I'll learn today.
We punctuate sentences with kisses.

She rides her bike to me. I wait for her.
Something warms in my hand – Heaven on Earth!

IV.

You look cool in your sunglasses, like love
in your black clothes, like Irène Jacob
in your profile. I will never give up
encouraging you to breathe and take up
space – like Rebecca Horn touching two walls
at once, which I try to do inside you –
Parasite or pilgrim? Home is what calls
to you. Love is constant arrival to
ports, mouths, birthed and rebirthed, oceans enjambed,
then honored, like our union. All's water,
spiritus mundi. Your love is the lamb –
We know God has delivered his daughter.
You look like even if things fall apart
you'll come round a second time for my heart.

STARCH AND HOMECOMING

Devahuti Chaliha

What did I give my father for his birthday?
Oh yes, a potato-peeler.
From the hard brown earth they come
Drenched in the tears and toil of a father's hard work.
Long hours turn to years, and the spuds grow
Into wonderful humans. When they finally come home,
They deliver their produce right to his door,
Wrapped in papers scrawled with factory-typed degrees.
He opens the door to finally bear the fruit of his labour –
To peel the potatoes clean, send them back on their way
And smile in fatherly satisfaction.

WE'RE STUCK

Kiddo Wybie

I found myself
wrapped in iron of the night
Skyscrapers tower above and floors in industrial carpeting
The view from a tower is a sea of stars
Halls of fluorescents flicker the way down the stark white
walls
(The absence of fear is worrisome)
so i followed slower than i'm used to
as gently as i can dance
every step echoed a thud
tempered by the semi-soft ground

I've been told
Crossing the bridge takes courage,
i've been told

Faster than my eyes adjusted,
i stepped into the sun
it filled my skin
it warmed the glass under my hands

wrapped in bars of daylight

Lee Escobedo

Even in my old age
I still hear my mare
Calling me, beyond the pale

From the time I knew
My name; I wanted a horse
Who knew it too
A shared language

And would come
When I call
Bearing my mount
Into a fervor

Muscle upon muscle
Thigh upon thigh
I, his pale rider
Him, my exquisite death

UNTITLED



Cyrus Carlson

HOWL: NIGHT AT THE WOLF PARK

Hannah Faith Notess

We started with yelling singing
shouting all manner of carrying on
and then we had to be quiet
because of the children
not that they themselves were quiet
In sleep they snuffled and mewled
before their eyes could even open
and we couldn't say anything
Oh, the things I've done
to avoid waking the baby
flown miles down the highway
letting exit after exit flash by,
circled the block, rolled the stroller
into the lightless hotel room
its mud-streaked wheels
marking my desperation
For months the youngest only slept
in the contraption now recalled

Should I apologize? I didn't know
No one tells the denning mothers
watch out, you're not endangered
anymore. Now a man
can shoot you where you nurse
Whenever the mothers get together
whenever we are allowed to howl again
what an awful racket there will be

BLACKBERRY BRAMBLES

Kal Clay

You look into the mirror for the first time since you've opened your own eyes and see the girl in the mirror who's looking back has thorns poking out all over her skin, small green buds bursting out under her chipped, cracked nails, honeysuckle-sweet blackberry juice running down her arms, her legs,

between the crook of her neck and over the meat of her thighs.

Blackberries dangling down from her brow, mixing into the thick curls of her auburn hair. You touch your face.

The juice-stained hand raises, reflecting how yours does.

This is you.

Apparently.

The gardener planted the seeds for those blackberry thorns under your skin. It took her years and years of hard work for you to grow into this girl.

Which you're not a girl... you think.

No, you know you aren't one.

This homegrown girl the gardener worked so hard on isn't you.

So you decide one day

late at night

after many a day wide awake

to start to pull

tugging, tugging, tugging on the first loop of plant that your shaky hands can grasp sweet red ichor seeping out as

you dig into your own flesh with abandon high on the glee
that is to change yourself into what you want to be
rather than someone others expect you to be.

Though it's nothing short of painful to unlearn everything
you thought about yourself. And it takes time.

Some people stop to watch, to jeer,
or they stop to "help" (they pull on the brambles in a way
that makes you choke, purple-tinted
tears dripping down from your face).

the gardener screams, begs, pleads for you to stop
telling you

"It took me years and years for those to grow! You're ruin-
ing my hard work!"

Which you ignore.

You ignore the laughing, the screaming, the crying of the
people around you deciding to continue to coat your fin-
gers in caramel-sticky blood

and to revel in the feeling of growing into yourself
slowly
yet surely.

Another person stops after a while of doing this
a kind look in their eyes and a mushroom shirt you'll never
forget

and when they do

they actually help.

They don't yank on the half-pulled out vines how you do
or tug on them that makes your breath catch on your
thorn-studded throat like the people
before them

more just coax them out with gentle touches and pretty
words

and they let you lean on them when it hurts too much for
you to stand upright on your own. They refuse to let you do
this alone

admonishing the gardener when out of earshot with their
canines aching and continuing to be a helping hand that's
pulling you up

rather than dragging you down.

Finally

when it's over

and you feel like you for the first time ever

they look between you and the blackberry brambles you
just finished pulling out of your skin smiling at you in a
way that makes your heart skip a beat

and oh.

Oh.

instead opting to look into their star bright eyes
and to throw your arms around their neck.

CATABOLISM

Elle Cantwell

clouds are thick as grief
sighing with a lark's last wish
katabatic winds

this shrouded fury
this wild fireworld burning raw
this riven landscape

corybantic sky
helicopter blades whiplash
churning ocean mourns

its vastness fading
even the jagged shoreline
its shadowed paling

still if the deep's looking
glass water façade is real
and the heavens mirage

in the spectred illusion
cosmic reversal

salvage the music
of the earth its breath its blue
lyric heat and verve

RADIAL (MORNING DEPRESSION HAS BROKEN)

Ewen Glass

My face holds rest as water,
my mouth a pocket of night
not yet out turned.

Morning reads unreasonable,
its freight not in eye-bags
but in liquid jowls.

A mug says don't talk to me
until I've had my coffee.
Or until the water has gone,

which it has by evening.
Skin firms up through the day and
I come back to I am not dead

only darkness not yet out turned.



TEMPERANCE LAMB'S DIARY, DAY 390

Bria Robertson

How does a lamb become a wolf?
What makes a lamb a wolf?

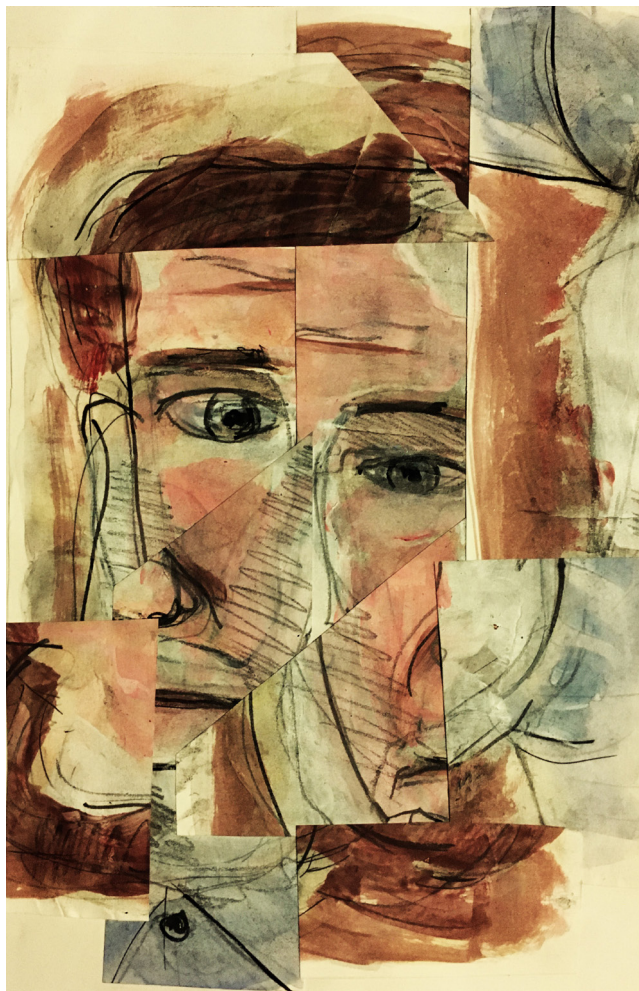
Look into the flame
As answers dance into view

To conclude the former:
It cannot be with encouragement
For her teeth have become too large
It must not be from guidance
As her eyes are too focused on what's ahead
If only it were from a warm caress
Alas, her ungulate toes have turned to sharp claws
A lamb may become a wolf if that which nurtures her
Is the damp and cold

To resolve the latter:
Transformation is all but inevitable
When a home turns to rot
And little lambs are blamed for the lot
Beauty, bravery, and cunning elude her
The nature of the dark does not breed virtues
As her golden wool turns to black bristles
And her meat goes lean
She is reviled in the name of revenge
But motivated only by survival
Without equivocation what makes a lamb a wolf is
Burning fury

She howls to the moon
Without a sense for temperance

PRISONER MAINTAINING INNOCENCE



Diamante Lavendar

COLOSSAL FEATS

Mark Herman

I used to believe in colossal feats
and forgotten trinkets sitting on charcoaled
mantelpieces. I used to believe in resilient
storefront facades against the winds of homicidal
human routines and their forgotten reflections
stuck inside leaded glass windows. I used to believe in
rain on tin roofs, cemetery sunsets, platonic melodies,
and train hopping joyrides into desert twilights. I used to
believe in cigarettes, alcohol, late night leanings in arch-
ways with astronomy dilettantes, and bashful birthday
boys. I used to believe in body language currencies, ocean-
ic misty-eyes, energizer bunny suicides and skeleton radi-
os that played the muffled nakedness that only snot-nosed
children could understand.

FRANGIPANE

RJ Ingram

I once loved a mime who smelled of almond croissants & Shirley Temples / We threw bricks at passing trains & smoked joints in dingy basements & sold dictionaries door to door like our fathers before us / We ran bingo halls into the ground & drove church folks to 24 hour diners just to watch them ruin the burnt coffee with ice chips / As the oven warmed our studio apartment I connected the moles on his back with my index finger against the blonde hairs on his back & named the constellation after his alter ego / Frangipane the French mime of Front Street / He could pack himself into an invisible box so tightly his clothes refused to wrinkle / He smoked Lucky Strikes bc they were healthy & soaked his feet in salt water after those dreary Saturday Markets / I would have ran away with him if he had anywhere to go but he loved the rain too much to leave / His curse was his beautiful whistle / Every morning he shaved in a chipped pedestal sink to the tune of "Send in the Clowns" / I liked to sneak a hickey under his turtleneck the way our mothers hid Easter eggs in the rose bushes / We are going to make beautiful women miserable he would say to himself ashing into oblivion / He was hit by a truck jaywalking home from his corner on Front Street / On his birthday I leave a fresh croissant with a cigarette stuck in it like a candle.

GRISLY VISCERA

Lukas Quinn

I never dreamt he could whittle
The key to my heart down
Into a tiny golden shiv
But I let him loose
With these innermost trappings

He ran wild and mad and manic
With the power I had given him
He flew all at once, instinctual, like southbound
Waterfowl, leaving me the dead of winter, the hunger of

In summer, when he returned, I
Embraced him with a warmth in my stomach that I could
not
Find to warm myself. I looked up
Eyes telling me to
Look down: a nubile slit across my navel, gushing
The bodies of art and bodies of rivers
Of my lifeblood, letted like so much sap
From a deep-rooted maple. Syrup

Should be exported to southern Brazil
Somewhere warm and distant like that
Moving down in thick ripples
Slowly, drooping out of the vessel
Woozy into golden amber eyes
He swims far and wide in my vision

He bends to one knee, like a proposal
Below, he opens his mouth (I supposed for laughter)
And swallows up my visceral bits with lapping tongues
Suckling entrails at exposed rib bones. This fucking dog!

This —
With his fist in my stomach, I feel fingers
Crawling in, crawling up, crawling around my heart and
His golden key gnaws within, scraping my sternum
The bone bifurcates beneath the blade
He cuts right through my armor and thrusts the dagger
Deep into my soul. In my last breath
I gasp:
“Why didn’t you just ask?”

FUCK THE FORECAST

Aurora Duval

My middle school teacher would always tell my class there is no such thing as bad weather. Just bad preparation. But not a single molecule in my body was ready for the hurricane, subsequent to your exit. Not for the blood rain on your walls. I would have stood naked in the hail for months. If it meant you'd still be weathering it with me. I used to think preparation only existed in raincoats and extra layers—how could one prepare for this kind of on-slaught.

I can feel—it's still raining. It never stops.



HOMELESS

Rowan Tate

the earth is an organ of love and like all living tissue, it bleeds. i spent a year on the streets but i don't tell people that. some symbiosis gives life and some takes it, all of it breaks through the skin. the human race is a parasite, by definition.

time tells us the history of a rock scalping space, our teeth clamped to it. whatever we don't understand we call god, groping the intestines of the night.

she has a fever. my problem is the things that i see are rarely ever there. some of us know what it's like to have nowhere to go, someday all of us will. there is only so long the center can hold.

PERMANENT RENT.

Stephen Joffe

as the market soared
and we, none of us, could afford it
our house parties

took to the streets-
ninja turtle

new york trash cans
overturned across suburbia
someone think of the children,
where will they do poppers?
when my desperate tongue
found first purchase in budding peaks- proved its
measly worth-
it was in the kitchen of some stranger
among the detritus of wasted youth.
is there time to waste, now
so close to the end?
we have been gifted the bottle of stoli
that drop by drop we

indiana jonesed, years ago
with water from our mothers cabinet
until toothless,
'have fun out there, you've earned it.'

INVITATION TO CREATIVITY



Diamante Lavendar

Lake Etsitty

Maybe there is a bug, or a bird,
playing inside of my old skull.

The front door creaks, and an old friend sunset
yawns further into orange. Colors make paintings
inside the houses
made from skulls.

there is a weird blue out this evening

and fill the clouds above.
My window, who frames
the edge of the forest,
loses its grip.

...

Somewhere, far upstream,
someone mutters to themselves.

a quiet god draws an arrow in his bow,
and again, the great lungs of our lazy hills
cough, and creak, slowly.
After the harvest festivals, leaves flutter
from black, aching branches, all night long.

These days,
I'd say something about art and suffering, if I wasn't so
human.

lungs, water, roots, minds

Minds

...

*Our current religions
will deliver us this winter.
So on, and so on.*

something weaves
over me

Crows and ravens
speak in a dark room
in an abandoned building
in winter.

Somewhere, unspoken mothers
and unspoken brothers
froth with fur, around you.

9

Michael Zysk

Deny your surface self, take up the pain
of the dome, and follow its vanishing
point. To count its layers, simply
hold a mirror before a mirror.

Each plane of sacred self-restraint
emanates from Your vanishing point.
See it? From which perspective radiates
and returns? It's not You
whom people curse, but their illusion
of separation. We are transcendent,
of course, we are immanent: free,
of course, bound with veils of light:
transparent, lucent, even frozen
as the matter of the world.

7

Michael Zysk

To give and receive is to live. Between
all extremes is the dry land You
called Earth, the waters Seas: the matrix
of angels anchoring the flow of Your
giving and all receiving without
annihilation. This is good.
When You said Let there be
vegetation, imagine angels
equilibrating the warp and weft
of spacetime, studded with starry bodies
like our own mesh of tissues
expanding and contracting. You

of all opposites – good.



BELLOVED BITE

Artemis Mackay

Earth's teeth sprout

small then buttress towards the

beloved bite – a

cypress sapling

an indelible mark

my only owner

rhapsodic vines

take hold my wrists and ankles I know

no perfect

place but the loam.

ARIA FOR THE BEATING HEART

Elle Cantwell

i believe in summer, in its mess and swelter,
in the ice cream truck and orange popsicles,
i believe in kisses and cherry chapstick, the sweet
and the salt and the sweat, i believe in the air thrumming
with power ballads, in all the sappy love songs
and their earworm tunes that drive you absolutely
batty, every last one, i believe in lucky numbers
3, 5, 8, 9, 22, i've got my reasons, i believe
in fortune cookies, their beautiful lies,
i believe in sunlight and shadow, their push and pull,
i believe in the ramble of clouds and their daily
parade in the sky, in words moving across the page,
in poems and stories and works of art that live and breathe,
i believe in breath, that's where it all begins,
i believe in the beating heart, my heart still beating,
and i believe in our evanescent earth, all its brokenness
and shimmer, the clover growing in the cracks, the tangle
of rose vines, in dogs and cats and birds, their voices
and quiet, their immeasurable lessons, in the ocean waves
breaking diamonds in the magic hour, the fathomless deep
and its fascinating creatures, in the sunsets shattering
the violet night, i believe in the stars and planets
and their sexy little dances, all venus baby all the time,
all the love, i even believe in that vagabond moon,
that ridiculous allure, all silver tongued and howl
and whose side is the moon on anyway, and yes,
i still believe in us, the radiant wreck of us,
all the hungers, all the want.

STEEL BLUE

Megan Mitchell

My mother gave me her
eyes — not just the color,
but the weight behind them.

Steel blue, my dad would say,
as if strength
could explain stillness.

They used to be brighter,
sky-colored laughter
before the long stretch of overcast.
Grief, even as a child,
fit too well on me.
I wore blue long before I chose it.

People say it suits me —
cool tones, cool skin,
as if the palette chose me
before I could protest.
I used to want brown
— not for beauty,
but for warmth.
Brown is what you
miss until sunlight
finds it.
My dad's eyes are like that
— flecks of green and
gold if you bother to look.

He always looked at mine
like he hoped the steel meant Depth.
But these eyes —

they're not armor.

They're mine.

They've seen too much
anyway.

And isn't that
a kind of love, too?



Rachel Coyne

THIRST TRAP 2020

Hannah Faith Notess

There's too much shit I know and don't tell you
anymore. For instance yesterday
Kpop star Wonho, formerly of MonstaX,
posted another thirst trap on Instagram.
In this one he's lying in bed yet again,
and you can look straight up his shorts,
up the long, muscled line of his thighs
into darkness, into shadowed and rumpled
ambiguity, while he looks back at you
with a heavy-lidded gaze, as if to say
*Do you like what you can't see? Do you see
how I didn't even care enough to remove
my ugly tube socks before I paid someone*

Once I wrote aesthetic
paeans to actual art. Now I can barely recall
the word "ekphrastic," and most days
the thoughts slide by my brain and disappear
like little ice floes that catch in snarls of dead branches
at the river's edge, then melt. I don't know what's art.
I don't know if museums are even open
or closed now, or how many people they're letting in,
or when we'll even feel safe enough to go.
I don't know how this guy achieved the effect
of contrapposto, who took the photo, or who
is going to make money off it. All these questions,
I know they're pointless. Still I zoom in, wondering.

MOTHER SUPERIOR

Saoirse Chance

Connect, reconnect
dance around in circles
like swirling magpies.
Mocking, rocking
yourself to sleep.
An infant at edge of the abyss crying
and screaming for help.
Oblivion awaits if only you could jump
into the arms of our mother
Earth. She'll break your fall with soft kisses and wishes
of a better life, if only you'd reach out to grasp it.

CALLING UNION GOSPEL AND PORTLAND RESCUE MISSIONS FOR TAX RECEIPTS

Carolyn Martin

While volunteers are feeding hundreds of bone-cold souls
and fielding calls for warm beds and rehab sites,
I need a letter proving I sent them money I won't miss.
Barbara says it's on its way.
Pete is more precise: *In your box by next Friday.*
That is, if the mail guy doesn't screw up my address again.

This morning's weather news:
'Hair ice' spotted in Portland as temperature dips.
My feral cat is sleeping in her sheltered cardboard bed,
exchanging body heat with recycled towels and sheets.
Ice covers her water dish and chimney smoke
flows through naked maple trees.

Today's Dictionary.com offers winter words:
from brumal to hoarfrost, rime to isocheim,
arctic to latibulize. So many ways to define
misery freezing under tents along city streets
or under tarps squirming on storefront steps.

Until my receipts arrive, I'll count
each hot shower, meal, and peaceful night
as grace unearned and gratuitous.
When the sun melts a slice of day,
I'll scout offramps up and down I-205
in search of shivering hands holding Need Help signs.

CLARISSA EXPLAINS IT ALL TO SENATOR SMITH

RJ Ingram

Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books.

-Senator Jefferson Smith

For once in your life you are going to sit down & listen to people trying to talk to you & you aren't going to open your mouth until I've said everything I need to say / When you come around to look at the carnivore exhibit in the zoo they don't hand you the keys & a slab of meat & expect you to know how to feed them / The same rules apply here bc the predators that stalk these halls are far more dangerous to the people of this country than any cold blooded killer you might find asleep behind bars or locked in a tank / Gentler folks who have committed smaller crimes than you have wound up under the big black boot of Senator Cigar Burns & Representative Pocket Watch / Fresh faces like yours never get picked first for recess / Isn't it a little suspicious that you seemed to be exceeding at this business without really trying to learn how things work? / I'm sorry that no one has been smart enough to teach you how to chum these waters & I never thought I would be the one to teach a grown man how dirt is made but here we are / These predators have trouble hunting more than one meal at a time / That's our dirty little secret & tomorrow I'll teach you the handshake / You've got to watch them when their backs turn & when the whites of their eyes cast a wide net you might get a chance to strike if they loosen their grips / Let men who

/ It isn't the fool who gets ran out of this town / Senator.

WHAT THE UNIVERSE WANTED

Leen Raats

The universe wanted it that way
he claims, and everything happens for a reason
as we're all made up of pieces of a primordial planet
overwhelmed with nostalgia for the cosmos.

He talks about black holes, the Big Bang
and the evolution from single-celled creature
to fish to mammal to man.

I hear him say even worms and algae
are part of some ingenious, cosmic plan
and how everything starts with the cycle of life
but I don't want to run around in circles.

Of course, I would like to believe
that every stone can turn into gold
which we use to buy stairways to heaven
but all I see is unbearable randomness.

So I curse the coincidence that brought us together
like atoms that don't have anything better to do
just happen to form a human, or a dog.
A Maltese with separation anxiety, for instance.

In a single glass of water, you can fit more atoms
with an expression that says 'don't you dare to disagree'.

Thanks to him I discovered you can learn to dream
like you learn to ride a bike, swim
and stop calling your ex.

WHERE THE ELK GO

Eden Lilley

Temporary home in the fields and woods across the creek
The elk have left there
And an ache swells from somewhere deep within me. I
want to follow
But I do not want to track
They are free, they are free and I will not trace their path \
Where do they go? Where can I go
To be free
I will not follow
I will not lead the hunters
Roam far, run fast
Slide into the forest where the Columbia kisses the Willa-
mette And I will wait at the treeline.
Watching, never searching
Wondering where you go to be free
Waiting for where I can go to be free

COFFEE CREEK CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

As a first-generation student and one-time teen mother, I consider it a privilege every time I connect with students working toward a better future, but never more than the last two years when I have taught at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. I'm very proud of PCC's program at Coffee Creek and grateful to all the people who make it possible.

Because I teach on the minimum security side of the facility, most of my students are nearing release. A few have participated in short-term poetry workshops while at Coffee Creek, but for most, this is their first class entirely dedicated to poetry. We meet for four hours each week which I break into one brief craft talk, two prompts, a workshop, and a reading period.

I teach from prompts meant to elicit experience or ideas but which then provide a container for those topics using patterns often seen in poetry. We talk about enjambment, the line, the stanza, image, voice, persona, etc. Then we listen as a poet hears, often for the first time, how her lived experience or her dreams or ideas sound when read aloud

what their poem sounds like in another student's voice.

As you'll see, much of what they write is stunning, as tender as the best poetry you've ever heard. Imagine how lucky I am to be the one who first gets to see what these students can do. And now you get to enjoy it too.

— Melody Wilson, PCC Faculty

UNTITLED

Mercedes Armento-Gallardo

In a single hitched breath
my yearning hands pulled you
from my mourning womb.

Upon exhale I laid you on bare breast.
My chest ached as it expanded,
I love you my sweet boy.

I held your tiny hand
as you tip-toed across the carpet
testing your independence.

I swept my hand through your blonde curls
and stroked your back in circles
persuading sweet dreams.

Your dimpled hands wrapped
around my protective fingers
gave me life

life is short
life is taken for granted.

I swept my shaking finger
across your cold soft cheek
but I could not say goodbye.

SAFE PLACE

Mercedes Armento-Gallardo

Our hands are locked together, not even a breeze
can slip through, like if we let go
the other might dissolve into a memory.
Your rough calloused thumb, tenderly glides
across the sensitive delicate spot on my skin.

Is there a war raging in your mind?
Is this rhythmic act of love, your personal surrender?
Is this point of contact your safe place?

You are a man, but my hand, makes you feel safe,
like a child. You are made up of worry and doubt.
I need to remain strong. Your calloused thumb reminds
me that I'm your saving grace.



MERMAIDS

Alaina Castillo

Our legs dangled in slow circles
as the towels beneath us
soaked from our bikini bottoms.
Iced tea filled our bellies
and laughter left our lips.

That summer we pretended to be mermaids
plunging deep into the cold,
the stones in our palms were
our pearls.

Nineteen years later
the memory remains,
like the bottle we filled with a note,
our scaly tails waving toward
its destination.

Love And The Senses

Nancy Reitzer

Love smells like home
Silver madrone crackling, in the fireplace that warms
the lives that fill these walls.
Love tastes like split pea soup.
My favorite birthday dinner.
A warm loaf of bread sitting in the middle
of the table that nourished me, every growing year.
Love smells like Vicks VapoRub,
slathered all over my chest.
Eucalyptus filling my clogged nostrils,
as it cools the deepest parts of my lungs.
Love sounds like an old man snoring in his chair.
As soap-opera's re-run on recorded V.H.S. tapes,
and the hiss of the fresh log catching flame.
Love feels like whiskers poking and scratching my face.
Kissing the precious man that saved me,
from a life of house to house and no stability.
Like diving into the clear blue water,
of my backyard pool,
and going to bed safe every night.

In BETWEEN

Alexis Weis

In between...

I am somewhere in the middle

Between a rhyme and a riddle.

I am in between hard and soft, and in between Jolie and
Laura Croft.

I am in between right and wrong

I am the parts between a sad country song.

I am not mean, and I am not nice, I am experimental.

Melting ice.

I am not here nor there, I'm in between everywhere.

I want to die but more I want to live

I'm in between what will and won't give.

I am in between hate and in between love

Knowing that only one comes from above.

On the outside I'm always happy

but on the inside, I don't know

my emotions are always on the flow.

I am in between man and in between woman.

I am the greatest showman.

I'm like the story of Goldilocks

Just trying to be content with what I got.

So where will I end up,

What will I do?

Being in between her, me, and you...

INVISIBLE NECKLACE

Alexis Weis

Out of bed for the day and dressed.
Time for the finale
One swipe per set of lashes
a splash of gloss sliding across the pillow of my lips
running the brush through my hair, I'm not comfortable
with what I see.
Until
I slide it over my head,
I feel pretty, Seen.

Moments like this come far and in between.
It is a cloak, a protection, a validation...
I feel the hands that put it around my neck.
I shiver from forgotten love.
Eyes wide with excitement for the surprise that I didn't
see...

Until I opened my eyes,

a happy little girl with a daddy.
Who tells her she is beautiful.
Who tells her it's ok to love herself.
Who tells her...

nothing because he didn't exist.
This invisible necklace, from a man I barely knew,
I put on every day. A sad reminder that I never received a
necklace,
Yet a peaceful one too,
because I am able to love myself anyway.

LAST DANCE

Teresa Whitesides

Hopeless for the very last time,
she searched for relief.

She was done, made up her mind,
resolved to go out the coward's way.

The taste of death lingers on her lips,
as her soul prepares for its freedom flight.

She's so tired as her head dips,
she starts to tumble into death's dark abyss.

All of her pain floods in from her past,
she takes back control as she takes her last hit.

Feeling relief at long last.

Seventeen minutes later she opens her eyes,
the tinge of Narcan lingers in her nose.

So grateful her kids won't have to say their goodbyes.
Sirens scream in her ears as a tear slides down her cheek.

SHADOW

Jody Warren

Grief exudes from my pores
and you say it is only a phase.

It morphs into tears, unpredictable
outburst. Still you insist:

time will heal all wounds.
All while it eats at my soul

long having eluded the walls I had built,
cracked and crumbled in places.

The whole damn house. Come day break,
I am a different kind of hostage now,

as it seeps into my identity,
casts itself into the reflection I see

glaring back at me from a cracked mirror.
In time, I will place hide and seek

with this new shadow of a friend. In time,
I will simply side step the monster lurking in the corners.

KNOTS

Jody Warren

See, my father.

the knot in my stomach
is all tied up.

Was never there,

squeezing my insides.
Sucking the air from my lungs,
I struggle.

Laughter and fun, he has.

Knots; only get tighter.
Curling around each other,
they squeeze.

With his grandchild,

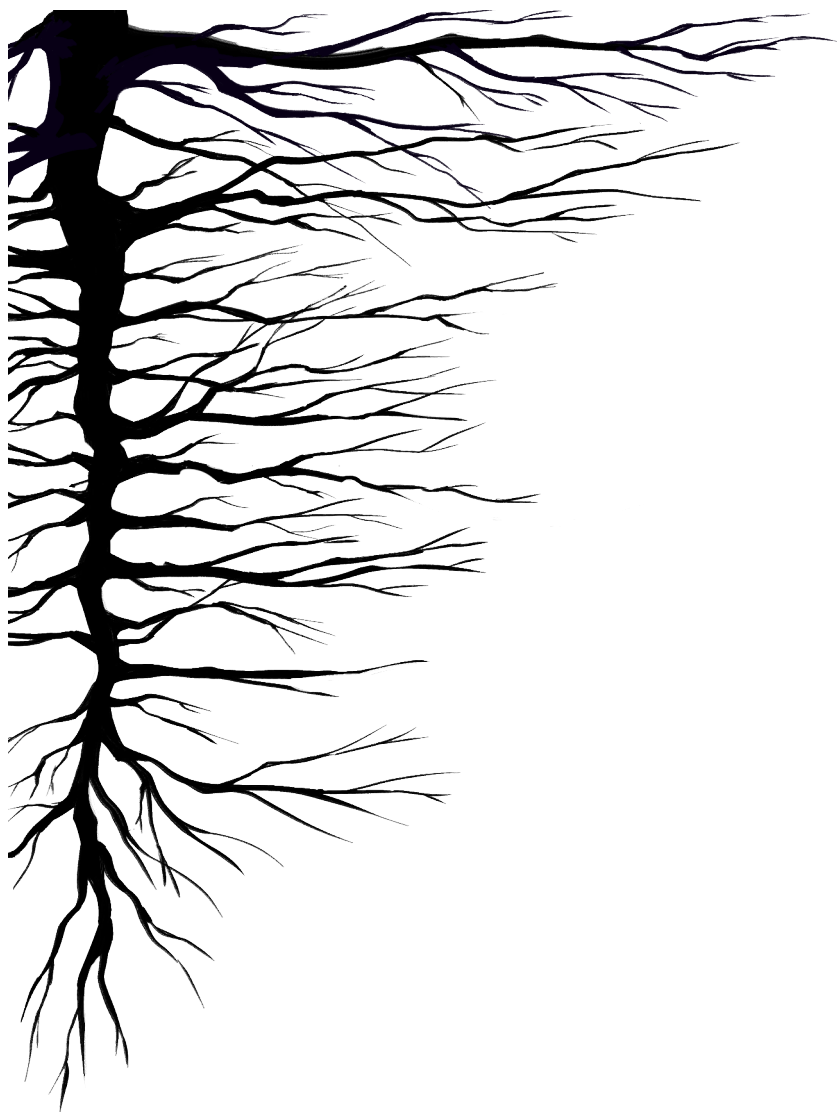
but, sometimes I have a smirk,
the ridiculousness of being jealous
hits me and I laugh.

When he was never there.

My air comes back,
finally breathing again.

He has a second chance.
my stomach unclenches,
the knots unraveling

The boy has a grandpa;
when I never had a dad.



STICK DAY

Christopher Byrne

A fine drizzle hung in the air, gentle as steam, easing the cling of the first warm sun.

Dimitri breathed on the window, the glass cool on her forehead. She traced the letter D in the mist, and then drew a smiley face, and added in Papou and his white curly hair for good measure before drawing her cuff up and smearing it off with her sleeve.

“I’m bored,” she groaned.

Papou didn’t look up from his mortar and pestle. He was grinding something that smelled sharp and citrusy – like lemon peel and pepper. He only paused to shake the pestle in her direction.

“There’s plenty to do.”

“Like what?”

Papou wiped his hands on his apron, picked up a woven basket from beside the cupboard and handed it to her. “Today is a stick day.”

Dimitri blinked at him. “What?”

“The orchard,” he said, “is full of fallen sticks. I want them cleared.” She took the basket, stared into its emptiness, and scowled. “But why?”

“Because,” Papou said, “when the trees are done holding their branches, they drop them. And if we leave them on the ground too long, the orchard sulks.”

“That’s silly,” she said.

“That’s sticks,” Papou replied with a shrug.

Dimitri pulled her yellow anorak on, and her welly boots, it was very damp, and stomped outside, not entirely calmly.

The orchard stretched out at the back of Papou's garden, past the lemon trees and the sleepy calendula, past the mint barrels and the shy tomatoes. It sloped gently downward like an old man's back, and the trees grew crooked and companionable, each with its own pile of fallen branches.

Dimitri kicked at a clump of wet grass. "This is stupid."

She picked up one stick – a thin, bendy one – and dropped it into the basket.

Then she sat under a fig tree and crossed her arms, her nose wrinkled as the drizzle glossed over her. A snail ambled past.

"You're slow," she told it.

It didn't seem to mind.

She picked up two longer branches and began to swash them through the air, pretending to be a pirate queen, then a wizard, then a dinosaur. She roared into the damp, startling a magpie.

But after a while the fun thinned out, and the clouds kept on dripping, and the orchard still looked messy. All mottled greens and dry khakis, sticky sticks and stickier sap.

She sighed again, louder this time, her eyes flashing to the house, but Papou was in his workshop and facing away from the window. She wandered further in.

The orchard closed around her like an old blanket – not heavy, but familiar. The mist-like rain softened everything. Even the birdsong sounded muffled, like it was being sung behind a curtain.

A crooked stick was nestled against a patch of moss. She crouched to get it, but paused. Something glimmered beneath.

Tiny mushrooms – no bigger than her fingernail – pushed up through the green. One was white and domed, another speckled with brown. A third, delicate and pale, looked like a bonnet blown from lace. She stared at them

it, as if her presence might tip the whole scene off balance. Then, very carefully, she lifted the stick away, trying not to disturb the mushrooms, and placed it gently in the basket.

Further along, another branch was half-covered in lichen, pale green like barnacles. She turned it slowly in her hands, watching how the patterns spiralled and spread. Like frost, or forgotten maps, or the sea. She held it up to the soft light and squinted, wondering if it was a secret code only trees could read. Maybe Papou would know.

There were ants on one stick — a whole line of them, nose-to-tail like dancers. She watched them for a full minute, fascinated by how determined they seemed, how sure of their tiny purpose. Another stick had a ladybird tucked beneath it, red and shining like a drop of paint. She scooped the stick and left the ladybird behind, whispering, “Sorry.”

And then she saw them everywhere — the little ones. Worms curled like question marks in the damp soil. A spider the size of a lentil waiting patiently beneath a leaf. A woodlouse tumbling like a grey bead over a root. The orchard floor wasn’t cluttered. It was alive.

It felt like picking up stories. Carefully, reverently. Not wanting to bend the pages.

Her hand found another stick, then another. She began to hum — one of Papou’s kettle songs, the kind that went up and down and up again like a question with no answer. The drizzle pattered on her shoulders, but she didn’t mind. Her curls stuck to her cheeks. Her knees got damp. Her hands were grubby and beautiful with soil. Her boots made the kind of squelch that felt like permission.

She found a rhythm. Crouch, pick, inspect, carry. Crouch, pick, inspect, carry.

It wasn’t magic. Not like tea-reading or spirit houses or the whispery spells Papou sometimes muttered when stirring honey into boiling water.

The orchard began to clear. One stick at a time.

By the time her basket was full, the sky had cleared. The last of the clouds chased off by a brisk wind that tugged at the trees and rattled the last few leaves clinging to their branches. The orchard, bathed in the bruised-blue light of twilight, shimmered with a quiet kind of clarity.

Dimitri stood still, the wind tugging gently at her fringe and tickling the nape of her neck. Her curls danced, lifted and twisted by the breeze, no longer soggy but wild again.

ning that promised a chilly morning.

She turned to look behind her. The ground was clear now, almost tidy. The trees looked... lighter. Straighter. As if they'd let out a long breath. She imagined them exhaling – not in words, but in a slow, grateful rustle of leaves.

“Welcome,” she whispered to a new bud on a low branch, brushing it with one finger.

The robin from the lemon tree fluttered down and landed near her boot, cocking its head. Dimitri looked at it, and the bird looked back.

She gave it a solemn little nod.

The robin didn't nod. But she felt like it understood.

When she stepped back inside, the wind had given her cheeks a rosy flush. Her fingers were cold, her boots mud-died, and her arms a little sore. But her basket was full.

Papou was at the table, already pouring tea. The steam rose in lazy spirals. Nothing fancy today – just thyme and honey, the kind that went straight to your chest and made everything quiet.

He took the basket from her without a word, pulled out a forked stick and turned it over slowly in his hands.

“Well,” he said, after a pause, “that is a job done properly.”

Dimitri beamed, kicked off her boots with two solid thumps, and scrambled into the chair opposite him.

She cradled the cup he passed her, both hands wrapped

around the warmth. “Do I get a treat?” she asked.

Papou sipped his tea, then looked out the window at the orchard, now shadowed and still.

“You’ve already had it,” he said.

“What?”

He smiled, not at her, but at the fading light beyond the glass.

“You heard, didn’t you?”

FOUND FAMILY

Bruce Buchanan

She and Mama sat at the kitchen table when I walked in from school, Mrs. Hamrick crying so hard I thought she might choke.

Elizabeth Hamrick, her husband Patrick, and six-year-old boy Jacob moved in down the street over the summer. Jacob and I both went to Graham School—I was in sixth grade and Jacob in first. Just days after they moved to our Shelby, North Carolina neighborhood, Mr. Hamrick got drafted. I didn't know exactly where Vietnam was, but I knew by the desperation of Mrs. Hamrick's wails that her husband wasn't coming home.

Daddy gestured for me to sit at the table as Mama walked a glassy-eyed Mrs. Hamrick home. "Lord, Cathy...I didn't know what to tell her. A fella in an Army dress uniform came to her house. Said the Viet Cong attacked Patrick's base and...."

Mrs. Hamrick worked at Lily Mill with Mama and Daddy. Lily was one of more than a dozen textile mills around town. Folks said that our soldiers overseas wore uniforms made from thread spun right here in Shelby. I wondered if Mr. Hamrick had been wearing one of them.

Most everybody in our neighborhood worked at Lily. We lived in a mill village: street after street of identical houses, like saltine boxes stacked on a grocery store shelf, encircling a red brick textile mill. At one point, the mill owned all the houses and used them to house employees' families, as long as the families supplied one worker per room. That meant kids my age would go to work in the mills.

That wasn't true in 1967, of course. My thoughts were on starting junior high school in the fall, not going to work. But still, Shelby was a mill town, and plenty of teenagers dropped out of high school to work in textiles.

Mr. and Mrs. Hamrick had been two of those kids. Mrs.

Hamrick got pregnant at 16, so she and Mr. Hamrick left school, married, and got jobs at Lily. They were young, but things seemed to be working out. The three of them moved to our neighborhood a few months ago. I didn't know Jacob too well. He was a quiet kid, but nice – and a good artist for a first grader.

Once, I gave him some of my old Donald Duck comic books. He copied pictures from those comics on his front porch for the next two weeks.

“Where's Jacob?”

Daddy tapped a Camel cigarette against the table, then struck a match. “One of his teachers walked him home. He doesn't understand what's going on. I reckon he's lucky in that regard.”

Death always seemed as far away as Vietnam was from North Carolina. But on this chilly afternoon, death and distance seemed a lot closer than they had been this morning.

That Saturday afternoon, the kids in the mill village gathered at Optimist Park to play basketball. Even on January days like this one, we bundled up in layers and played ball for hours until our noses turned red.

Paul Garner bit when I faked right. I drove past him to my left, laying the ball off the converted shipping pallet that served as the backboard.

“That's 9-6; game point for us.” I bounced the ball off the cracked cement court over to Paul.

“Don't count your chickens, Humphries. This game ain't over yet.”

Paul rubbed the worn-slick ball with his fingertips, as if he could warm up his shooting touch through skin-to-leather contact. Paul probably was my best friend in the mill village. But he hated to lose at anything, especially basketball.

So, friends or not, he gave me a little shove with his forearm as he tried to drive past me. But I stayed between him and the basket with my hands up, like Daddy taught me. When Paul launched a shot, my extended arm obscured his

KA-THUNK! Paul's off-balance shot missed so badly that it didn't even hit the rim. Instead, it clanked off the backboard and bounced down the hill, into the creek bed that ran through Optimist Park.

"Aw, geez! It's freezing out here and the ball's wet!"

"Don't be such a baby, Paul."

I scooted down the steep embankment on the seat of my jeans. Mama undoubtedly wouldn't be happy that I got red mud on my clothes, but such was the price of basketball glory.

I scooped the ball out, holding it away from my body to keep the cold, muddy water off my gray UNC Tar Heels sweatshirt. But as I climbed the embankment, a strange sound, almost like a whimper, came from the wooded area across the creek.

My first thought was that it must be a wounded animal. I threw the ball back up to the playground and broad jumped across the narrow creek.

To my surprise, Jacob Hamrick shivered behind a clump of scrubby pine trees, pine straw clinging to his brown corduroy pants. He looked up at me in surprise, then turned his eyes back down toward his Buster Brown shoes. They were as red as his cheeks.

"Jacob, what are you doing down in the creek, getting all muddy? C'mon – shoot baskets with us. You can be on my team." I figured he just didn't feel comfortable asking bigger kids to play. But I'll never forget what that trembling little boy said next.

His lower lip shook. "Muh-my mama done left. Sh-she's gone!"

I was one of the tallest kids in sixth grade – I'd shot up

it "puberty," but I didn't want to know what that entailed just yet. Little Jacob's head barely reached my ribcage, so I stooped to meet him at eye level. "Sweetie, I'm sure she'll be back soon. Probably just had to run to Blanton's Store for a loaf of bread."

“No! She’s not!” By this point, Jacob was bawling. Not knowing what else to do, I took him by his hand and told him I’d walk him home and wait until his mama returned. I figured I could teach him to play checkers or Go Fish if we had to wait more than a few minutes.

The Hamricks’ house was laid out just like ours and every other home in the neighborhood. The front door opened into the kitchen and living room area, with the bathroom and two bedrooms in the back of the house. But while Mama had decorated our house from floor to ceiling, the Hamrick place only contained a few possessions. A couple of cane-bottom chairs and TV trays stood in for the kitchen table. The kitchen sink overflowed with dirty dishes, and the linoleum floor clearly hadn’t been swept or mopped in Lord knows when.

We went to the back of the house. Spare clothes formed a lumpy heap atop the dresser, the empty drawers stacked on the unmade bed.

“She gave me this.” He presented a scrawled note from the bedside table. “I tried to read it, but I couldn’t figure it out. Can you tell me what it means, Miss Cathy?”

Jacob,

It’s too much. I can’t be the mother you deserve right now. The Humphries are good people – they will take care of you. Go to Cathy’s house and let them know I’m gone. I feel like such a failure, and I can’t face them myself.

But don’t ever forget that I love you. I’m going away because I want to do what’s best for you. And you deserve better than me.

Love,

Your Mama

To Jacob, I was a near-adult, someone who could solve problems beyond a first grader’s comprehension. But I still was a kid myself, and this seemed way too big for me, too.

So, I found a clean pillowcase and threw in some of Jacob's clothes. I told him to grab some toys, particularly the teddy bear he slept with every night.

"Let's go to my house, buddy. My Mama and Daddy will know what to do."

We entered my house through the kitchen, and I made Jacob a peanut butter sandwich on two slices of white bread. Then I poured him a glass of Sun-Drop into a flowery glass that originally served as a jelly jar. I drank the rest of the tangy-sweet yellow soda straight from its green glass bottle. He gobbled up the sandwich far faster than a six-year-old should have to. He then practically ripped a Little Debbie oatmeal cream pie from its cellophane wrapper and devoured it with similar vigor.

Mama and Daddy joined us at the kitchen table a few minutes later. Once Jacob finished his lunch, I unfolded a towel in front of our black-and-white TV set so Jacob could watch Bugs Bunny cartoons.

"So, where's his mama? She is coming back soon, right?"

Mama patted the back of my hand. "Cathy...I don't know. But I don't think she'll be back soon. She went to her sister's down east. 'Least that's what Dottie Bridges, who works second shift with Elizabeth, believes."

Daddy scratched his forehead. "I guess we should call the police. Lord knows, I don't want to get Elizabeth in trouble, not with all she's been through. But Jacob can't stay in that house by himself. And they don't have kin here in Shelby."

"He can stay with us!" I blurted out before I could think better of it. "I mean, you saw the note. His mama trusted us to take care of him."

Mama and Daddy just looked at each other with one of those silent glances in which two people share the same unspoken thought. "Sweetheart...I saw the note. But we just can't...."

"What your Daddy is trying to say is that Jacob can't live with us. There are laws about this sort of thing, and we aren't his legal guardians."

“But surely, we can work it out! You said it yourself, Daddy, Jacob ain’t got any family around here. And he’s gotta stay somewhere.”

“First off, ‘ain’t’ isn’t a real word, Cathy. The police will take him to the County Home. From there, maybe he’ll go into foster care. It’s not ideal, but Jacob will have a roof over his head and three meals on the table.”

Foster care. County Home. I didn’t know exactly what these terms meant, but I knew enough from playground conversations to realize that “not ideal” was Daddy being optimistic. The social services system would eat up a shy, scared kid like Jacob.

Mama folded her hands together, like she did when the pastor said, “Let us pray.” She explained that even if we legally could keep Jacob, she and Daddy simply didn’t have the time or energy to take on a small child. “Think about it: Who’s going to feed him? Make sure he’s got clean clothes and his homework done? We’re glad you’re old enough to help, Cathy, because we’ve got all we can handle.”

Daddy smiled. “And with that, it’s almost time for the Tar Heels to play.” That was his polite way of saying the discussion was over, so I didn’t argue. Plus, I wanted to watch the basketball game, too. But I wasn’t ready to give up.

The next morning meant church at Zoar Baptist. Mama said Jacob could take his colored pencils and sketchbook. They used to let me color and read in church, but a few years back, they said I’d gotten too old, and I needed to pay attention, like the grown-ups do. I thought of that conversation every time Mrs. Littlejohn nodded off in the back pew.

Jacob didn’t squirm or fuss the way a lot of little kids did at church. Instead, he focused on his drawings. That kid loved to draw better than anyone I’d ever met.

Mercifully, the pastor kept his sermon short, and Mama didn’t spend too much time gabbing with her Sunday School class in the parking lot. We went home and Mama

Jacob kept his colored pencils moving between bites. I

stretched my neck across the table, where he sat to Mama's right, and asked, "Whatcha drawing? You've been working on pictures all day."

He pulled his light blue pencil from the notepad. "Take a look."

I flipped through dozens of drawings and found the last page. A girl in a gray sweatshirt left her feet to line up a jump shot. Her dark brown hair flew behind her and the ball sailed over the head of a hapless defender, who looked suspiciously like Paul. Above the action, Jacob had written, "CATHY HUMPHRIES—BEST BASKETBALL PLAYER" in bold purple letters.

"Jacob — I...I love it!" And I did. Mama and Daddy admired it as well.

For the first time that weekend, he smiled. "You can have it, Cathy." I planned to hang it inside my school locker on Monday.

After lunch, he discovered some Flintstones cartoons, so we let him watch TV and draw while we stayed in the kitchen.

"Mama, Daddy, you see Jacob isn't any trouble. And he's such a sweet kid." I leaned forward across the table, arms folded across my chest. Perry Mason had nothing on me; I was ready to plead my case.

Mama sighed and pulled a Doral out of the leather cigarette case she carried in her purse. "Sweetheart, we talked about this. We can't just keep someone else's child."

"I get that. But you said yourself that Social Services could place Jacob with a foster family. Why can't we be that family?"

Mama rolled her eyes and tried to suppress a laugh. "Lord have mercy, Cathy! You don't ever quit. Your heart is in the right place, and your Daddy and I are so proud of you. But we can't take on raising another kid. Not with work, church, seeing after your grandparents, and taking care of the child we've already got."

"Well, what if I help out more around the house? You

know, pitch in with taking care of Jacob.” To be honest, I was bluffing, at least a little. Sure, I did chores – cleaning up my room, taking out the trash, even dusting and vacuuming sometimes. But I knew nothing about caring for a six-year-old.

Mama and Daddy weren’t biting, though. “I’m sorry, sweetheart – I wish he could stay. But it just won’t work.” Daddy checked his watch. “We promised your parents we’d take them to Winn-Dixie this afternoon. I reckon we better get over there before your daddy lays down for his nap.”

“We’re leaving Jacob with you, Cathy.” Mama stuffed her coupon envelope in her pocketbook and grabbed the keys to the Buick. “See y’all around supper time. Don’t make any messes, y’hear?”

They pulled out of the driveway, and I checked on Jacob. “You good, buddy?”

“Sure am. You want to see some more drawings?”

I thumbed through the sketchbook, which was rapidly filling with pencil and crayon sketches. He’d drawn more of his favorite cartoon and comic book characters – from Minnie Mouse to Spider-Man. But my attention lingered on a more mundane picture.

He’d drawn a house in the mill village – our house. The proportions weren’t perfect. But Jacob captured small details – the blue shutters, Mama’s petunia planter, the azalea bushes Daddy planted a few years back – that distinguished 1108 Textile Drive from the neighboring houses built from identical blueprints.

I couldn’t let him slip into the Social Services system. He had to stay with us. I had an idea that I thought might change Mama and Daddy’s minds. And Mama would be happy: It didn’t include making any messes. In fact, it involved cleaning them up.

My plan began in the backyard, where Daddy had left a pile of wood to be split into pieces small enough to fit in our fireplace. On cold days like today, a roaring fire made a splitting wood, and with as many hours as he put in at the

mill, I couldn't blame him.

So, I got his ax from our small tool shed and started swinging. It felt like practicing free throws; my arms pumped up and down, over and over. Jacob decided he'd rather hang out with me than watch another cartoon, so he watched as I worked.

"Look at you go, Miss Cathy! That log don't stand a chance!"

I paused to catch my breath. "Ha! You grow a bit more and I'll have you out here splitting wood. Teach you to play basketball, too." Jacob grinned at the latter idea.

In an hour or so, I'd rendered the pine logs into skinny, foot-long pieces. After stacking the wood in the bin by the fireplace, I swept the stray bark and sawdust off the linoleum.

I then gathered the household trash and scrubbed the bathroom. The clock over the stove read 4:16 p.m. Mama and Daddy would be home in an hour – and no doubt grumbling about being hungry.

I washed my hands, got the milk from the refrigerator and the flour from the cabinet, and pulled a sheet pan from the drawer under the stove. I didn't claim to be much of a cook. I spent most Sunday afternoons at Optimist Park roasting Paul Garner on the basketball court, rather than frying chicken in the kitchen with Mama.

Today, though, I had to show Mama and Daddy that I could step up. So, I mixed the flour, salt, baking powder, shortening, and milk together, kneaded it into a big ball of dough, and rolled it out on a wooden cutting board. Using the edge of a glass, I cut a dozen biscuits from the flat sheet of dough.

Once I'd popped the biscuits in the oven, I unwrapped a package of sausage, shaped it into small patties, and set them in Mama's cast iron skillet. I kept the heat low, like she'd taught me, so that the sausage would get cooked on the inside but not burned on the outside.

When they were done, I moved the sausage patties to

a plate lined with paper towels. The grease in the pan is combined with milk and flour to make white gravy. I added plenty of black pepper 'cause that's how Mama liked it.

I put the lid on the gravy pan, covered the biscuits and sausage with a clean dish towel to keep them warm, and built a fire in the fireplace. The flames devoured the dry pine I'd chopped, and soon roared into a toasty blaze.

With supper cooked, the house clean, and a fire going, I called Jacob to the kitchen table for a card game.

"Do you have any kings?"

"Go fish!" Jacob waved his arms over his head in triumph.

We'd just finished our first round when the Buick pulled into the driveway. Mama didn't even say hello when she rattled open the front door; she just furrowed her dark eyebrows and looked from side to side.

"Yum! I smell sausage and biscuits!" Daddy hung his thick winter coat on the rack beside the door. "And will you look at that fire! Where did you get the wood, sweetheart?"

I explained how I'd chopped a stack of wood, plus cooked supper and cleaned the house. Mama still hadn't spoken, but she sampled the gravy with a wooden spoon and nodded her head approvingly.

"Well, I reckon it's a good thing you did, 'cause I'm ready

"I don't like you using an ax and lighting the stove while we're gone...but to be fair, you did a great job."

My face stretched into a broad smile. I quickly set the table as Mama and Daddy loaded their plates.

Daddy shoveled a big bite of gravy-soaked biscuit into his mouth and looked at Mama again. She nodded. "Seeing how you stepped up to help, your Mama and I were thinking...how would you like Jacob to stay on with us a little longer? Jacob, is that okay with you, little man?"

"You bet!" He punched above his head. "We can draw pictures and play games every day, Miss Cathy!"

I exhaled, allowing the joy and relief to sink in. Jacob

would be in a real home, with people who cared about him.

I got up and put my arms around Mama and Daddy at the same time. I wasn't able to stop myself from crying, but I didn't care. "Thank you for giving Jacob a chance. And thank you for believing in me."

Of course, Mama and Daddy were right that keeping a child wasn't as simple as taking in a stray cat. But they called Mrs. Hamrick's sister and got everything worked out.

Mrs. Hamrick needed treatment for depression, but once she finished getting the help she needed, her sister thought she'd be able to come back to her life in Shelby. That could take weeks, maybe months. Until then, she agreed that Jacob should stay with us.

Monday morning, he and I walked down the sidewalk together to meet the school bus. I looked over to him and smiled. "I had an idea for after school, if you're interested...."

Jacob peered up at me, his eyes big. "Yes! What is it?"

"I was thinking we could go to Optimist Park. I could teach you how to shoot a basketball. Maybe we even grab a soda on the way home. What do you say?"

Jacob said nothing. But his little hand grabbing my coat sleeve told me all I needed to know.

ORANGES

Elyse Kamibayashi

The garage was dimly lit and smelled of mold. It overflowed with cardboard boxes stacked precariously on top of each other. An ancient lawnmower presided over half-empty cans of gasoline. I was standing gingerly in the one spot that seemed to be free of spiderwebs, looking down at a bulging takeout bag that Grandpa had carried in from the backyard. He fished inside, and without a word, handed me the soft, summer sun. It was technically an orange, but if I had told you that from the beginning, you wouldn't understand this particular orange. This orange was so vividly orange that it gave off its own glow. It was so fragrant that for a moment it overpowered the 25 years of smells that had cultivated in the garage. It was always best to bite into Grandpa's oranges over the sink or a napkin, because they were altogether too juicy to enjoy responsibly. And the taste. The taste was how you knew it was the sun. It was sweet and bright and warm — a light that traveled inside you and made your entire body feel like a June morning.

Grandpa grew the world's best oranges in the world's shabbiest backyard. He lived with my grandma in an old ranch-style house in Stockton, California — foreclosure capital of America and (to my eight year-old self) the flattest, most boring place on earth. When I first peaked into Grandpa's backyard, I was dismayed. It was small and a bit ramshackle — sparse grass and ragged bushes bounded by a wooden fence that sagged despondently. The orange tree looked more like a large bush that had managed to catch some falling oranges. I was surprised that anything could grow in a place so barren, and I remember wishing petulantly that Grandpa, who understood gardening, would make more of an effort.

I don't know what I was expecting, but I think it was something closer to a Zen garden. I wanted control and simplicity — beauty through deliberate and intentional

choices. I wanted trees that were coaxed into producing oranges through attention and care. I wanted manicured moss and maybe a water feature. But Grandpa didn't care about any of that. He was the opposite of a minimalist, but he also wasn't a maximalist. He was among the generation of Japanese Americans who simply let things be. This generation had learned that no matter how hard you've worked to create a life for yourself and your family, one executive order and a few years in a concentration camp can destroy it all.

Grandpa was 19 when President Roosevelt signed the document that authorized the "removal of all persons deemed a threat to national security from the West Coast to 'relocation centers' further inland." Grandpa and his family were sent from their home in California to Rohwer — a swampy, 500-acre allotment of land in southeast Arkansas. They lived in shoddy barracks that featured canvas cots, pot-bellied stoves, and not much else. It was hot and humid in the summer. Chiggers and mosquitoes abounded. Rohwer was surrounded by farm country, and Grandpa was part of a group that was allowed to go on "agricultural leave" to work on the surrounding farms. Grandpa later recalled that he earned four bits (50 cents) an hour, so it's not terribly surprising that when given the chance to leave, he took it. Unfortunately, the chance to leave involved signing up for the military. Grandpa joined the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a unit made up of Japanese Americans who agreed to fight for the country that imprisoned them. The 442nd went on to be the most highly-decorated unit of its size in US military history. Grandpa served as a scout, fought in Italy and France, and added his fair share of medals to the unit medal-count. 66 years after the war was over, when most of the men who served were long gone, the 442nd would be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

The 442nd helped the US win the war, but its members lost everything. Understanding this has helped me understand why Grandma and Grandpa's house never changed. They never threw anything away. They never changed anything about the interior of the house, even when they could afford it. The neon green velvet couch in the living

room, the 70s carpet, the laminate counters in the kitchen stacked with takeout bags full of odds and ends. The outside with its greying white paint and cobwebby shutters. My dad once said that the house was exactly as it had been when he lived there as a kid, except for his old room which had been transformed into a storage unit, where everything from broken rice makers to decks of hanafuda cards languished in teetering piles. The only thing about the house that did change was Grandpa's TV, which he upgraded to one that had a screen as big as the wall. This was his big splurge and it was for a worthy cause: the San Francisco Giants. Other than that, my grandparents were savers, not spenders. They were not big on change.

Which is why it must've been difficult for Grandpa when my dad told him that we would be leaving California and moving to Pennsylvania. He didn't say much. Like a good Japanese parent, he valued his kids' success over everything else. He was quiet and supportive, but I wonder now if the loss reminded him of other losses.

And then one winter day, after we had settled into our new house in Pennsylvania, a box arrived on our porch. My dad lugged it inside, saying it was from Grandpa, and when he opened it, I saw that it was full of oranges. I grabbed one and raced to the kitchen. I sliced open the orange and shoved a piece in my mouth. Nothing happened. And then something bad happened. The orange was mostly mushy and vaguely soggy. Bits of pulp clung desperately to my teeth. It tasted sour. These were not Grandpa's oranges — or they were, but not anymore. They had betrayed me, changed into something that wasn't what I remembered. Grandpa would never have sent us oranges that weren't ripe, which meant that the cross-country trip in a cold cardboard box had probably ruined them. The 3,000 miles had taken away their magic.

able sensations, and even more uncomfortable realizations. Until that moment, it had been easy to distract myself from the feelings I'd experienced because of the move. I now had a big backyard and a new bedroom, which I'd painted a warm, optimistic yellow. I had my parents, my brother,

and my books, and I told myself that nothing had really changed. I had simply swapped houses and had a chance to make new friends. I had tried to convince myself that the move couldn't take away the things that I really cared about. I was wrong.

This is the thing they don't tell you about leaving a place and the people in it: you don't feel the loss right away, and you won't know exactly what you've lost for quite a while. It's a feeling that grows over time, deep underground. It's easy to ignore. I didn't miss my family and my community in California right away. I was sensible about it. I was in one place, and then I wasn't, and that place didn't exist anymore. In a way, you can apply this logic to people, too. You leave, and they don't really exist anymore — which is great because it means you can't miss them. You try not to think about the fact that the place will change, the people will change, and you won't be around to see it. When you go back, you'll strain to remember what it was like to be from there, and every time you find a new home, you'll wonder when you'll have to leave it.

Grandpa never sent a box of oranges again. My dad must've told him what had happened. He never mentioned it to me, and I assumed he just decided not to risk the shipping expense. Now I wonder how he really felt about it. How much did he miss being able to share the things he grew with his grandchildren? Or did he simply accept it as another change, another loss?

There is a phrase in Japanese: “shikata ga nai,” which translates to: “what are you going to do about it?” or “there is nothing to be done about it.” It's a verbal shrug. This is one way to approach change. It's how my grandparents approached the violent shift of losing their homes and spending a few years in concentration camps located in some of the most godforsaken parts of the US. Things change and you let it happen. You accept it, and you let it be. Most importantly, you try not to talk about it or acknowledge it.

ing the pain, and that can only distract you from the main goal of keeping on.

I see the way my grandparents adopted that attitude as a means of survival. I see the way it was passed down to my dad, and I see my own tendency to ignore change and loss, as if refusing to acknowledge its existence will make it stop existing. Every family has themes that are repeated and reinterpreted with each generation, and this is ours. It explains a lot, but it doesn't explain everything. It doesn't explain why Grandpa grew oranges in a backyard where everything else was dead, or why he tried to ship them 3,000 miles across the country to us. It doesn't explain how he created the life that he did — going from nothing to sending his kids to college, and helping his grandkids buy their first cars. It doesn't add up. But there's one more thing.

The 442nd had a motto: "go for broke." It was a slang phrase used in gambling that originated in Hawaii. It means, roughly: "to wager everything on one roll" — to risk it all in the hopes of winning big. Grandpa had a choice between working on a farm for 50 cents an hour, or volunteering to go into active combat. He could've let it be. He could've stayed in the camps as long as he could, before the draft forced him into fighting or until the war ended. He could've accepted that there wasn't much to do about his situation, and that the choice he was given was impossible and unfair. Instead, he chose to do something brave and maybe a little stupid. I'll never know all of the reasons why, but I think it had to do with hope. And now when I'm faced with choices and changes, which seem so small in comparison, I remember the strange, stubborn hope that Grandpa built his life on. I think Grandpa believed that you can accept that the world is broken and may never get better, while also hoping and believing that you can make a few things better; that you can become better. I think he believed in winning big, but measured it differently — measured it not by quantity or the way things looked to others, but by the sweetness of the fruit that it bore and the light that it shone in the dark.

THE CALL OF HIS PEOPLE

Quinn Sliter

July 2019, 3:00 AM

I always hated waking up to use the bathroom, and this time was like no other. You know that zombie-esque feeling when you open your eyes, wondering what time it is, only to feel a mixture of satisfaction and annoyance when you realize it is only 3 AM. For some reason, even the tiniest sensation in your bladder forces you to get up and do your duties. Sometimes, I would stick it out and wait for the next time I woke up, but not tonight. Tonight, I have more problems on my plate than a quarter-full bladder while trying to sleep, I just didn't know it yet.

Before reaching the bathroom, even before turning the corner, I heard a deep screeching meow, over and over, coming from up the stairs. We would later refer to this meow as, "the call of his people," like a person with a throat full of phlegm mimicking a cat. In my tired state that made me seemingly drunk, I stumbled up the stairs, marginally interpreting what I was hearing. I was more curious than anything. Who? Where? Why? With each step came a new interpretation of the meow and a new level of alertness. My tired self was left at the bottom of the stairs, leaving me with curiosity and wonder as if I walked up the stairway to heaven. Or, the stairway to hell, given what I would discover.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I felt awake, alert, and aware, shifting my tired-found curiosity to an awakened-found fear. Upon reaching the living room, where the phlegmy meow was taking place, numerous scenarios ran through my confused mind. Were the cats fighting and one got hurt? Did they want food? Or maybe it's nothing and this is his attempt to wake us up? I wasn't sure, and I wasn't necessarily ready to find out. Then, I saw him. Our cat Oliver was sitting front and center on the grey living room carpet licking his private parts, continuing the deaf-

ening and resonating meow every few seconds. I hadn't even noticed at first, but my mom sat awake on the couch, already having woken up to the call of Oliver's people. She told me he had been doing this for around ten minutes, and she was already searching for an emergency vet to take him to. I knew I wouldn't be going back to bed any-time soon when she told me what she thinks is causing Oliver to make the call of his people; an inability to go pee.

After what seemed like half an hour of attempts at comforting and nurturing Oliver, my mom finally found a place we could take him, barring the bill we would receive. The bill was the least of our worries though. As long as we could save Oliver from eternally calling to his people, we would be happy, broke or not. Oliver hadn't been to the vet, or anywhere for that matter, in a long time, so he wasn't too fond of being coerced into the cat carrier and the car shortly after.

Oliver was not prepared for the 3AM car ride, not only did his lack of experience in a car or cat carrier stress him, but his current situation did not help whatsoever. He has always been very vocal so the constant meowing throughout the drive wasn't surprising, but the tone and resonance of the meow was so much different than I ever heard coming from him, or any cat for that matter. The call of his people. I spent most of the drive wondering what he was thinking. He was obviously in great pain, probably made worse due to the stressful conditions of the car ride. I came to the conclusion that maybe I don't want to know what he is thinking. What goes through a cat's mind, particularly in a situation as stressful as this one? Whatever the answer, I probably wouldn't want to know.

We were finally reaching the vet after our 20-minute drive of torment. Oliver spent the entire drive meowing in that deep phlegmy voice every few seconds. Every time he paused I was convinced he would stop, only to be proven wrong once again. I did the best I could to comfort Oliver throughout this nightmarish drive in the middle of the night, but all of my efforts seemingly went unnoticed. It was as if Oliver had been put into a trance, no longer in our

reality, stuck in a loop of calling to his people. Whoever and wherever they were.

I'm not sure what I expected the vet emergency room to look like. Probably nothing given my worries about Oliver, but it is a place I hope I never have to visit again. It was the middle of the night and there were numerous people in the lobby, sobbing their eyes out over what I could only imagine was something horrible. There was an older woman in the corner, still as a statue, not crying, but still grieving. I knew she was grieving because I overheard a conversation she had with a vet about her dog's unsuccessful surgery. Everybody grieves differently, and it was at this moment when I started to wonder how I would grieve if we couldn't help Oliver.

The vet informed us that Oliver had a life-threatening urinary tract infection, causing a urinary blockage, preventing him from going pee. Without surgery, this could cause Oliver to go through kidney failure or a bladder rupture, two devastating outcomes. The vet was straight to the point; either we put him down or pay three thousand for surgery.

To our ears, there was only one option. There was zero chance that we were going to put Oliver down at only four years old, but money was tight, so we had to find a way to make it work. However, with Oliver's state worsening, and his people presumably getting closer, we knew we didn't have a lot of time. He would eventually reach the kidney failure or bladder rupture that the vet mentioned to us. My mom spent the next 20 minutes or so mulling over our options while I sat with Oliver, trying to calm him to the best of my ability.

After what felt like hours of not just Oliver calling to his people, but humans in despair, my mom had finally found a solution that we could work with. By applying for Care-Credit, the surgery cost could be paid for throughout the coming months, and luckily we were eligible to apply for

guarantee, I finally felt like we had saved Oliver, a feat that we would have done anything to achieve.

Oliver's surgery wasn't too long. We spent most of the time in the car outside of that depression inducing environment of the vet lobby. My memory after the surgery was faded by the immense relief that came with the news of Oliver being okay. When he came out of the operating room, he was a new version of himself, and more importantly, not in pain and not calling to his people anymore. The vet prescribed him a specific kind of food that he would need to eat for the rest of his life, and gave us some precautionary details to help prevent this from happening again. Oliver's life changed from this experience, but I like to think that his biggest takeaway from the night is the fact that we were there for him every step of the way. His people.

It was finally time to go back home, along with Oliver, something we weren't sure would happen when we first arrived at this hell of a location. I shouldn't say hell, because the people working there saved Oliver's life along with countless other animals, but that's how it felt; a hell that encourages depression, regret, and humility. While walking out of the door, I realized I had never done what I woke up to do, so I turned around with a full bladder and headed to the bathroom. I felt the irony of it all, and couldn't help but to feel a sense of satisfaction as I walked through the hellish landscape, avoiding eye contact, one grieving person after another. I could only hope that these people would soon feel the way I did.

March 2025

Today, Oliver is better than ever, that night certainly changed him forever. Oliver's affection doubled overnight after the visit to the vet, and ever since then, he never wants to leave our side. He is the most cuddly, loving, and affectionate cat I have ever had, and that is saying a lot given the fact that I grew up surrounded by cats from the day I was born. Oliver knows we were there for him on that terrible night, but sometimes I still catch him meowing that phlegmy meow, and every time it worries me to pieces.

THE BEAUTIFUL PAIN OF PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

El Mortenson

I asked a Magic 8-Ball if I was going to get dumped today.

I know what you're probably thinking. This dumb bitch. A Magic 8-Ball?

And yes, I acknowledge that using a Magic 8-Ball is probably an incredibly stupid way to determine if you're going to get dumped or not. I suppose I could ask her directly, but that feels sort of taboo. We're in a relationship that isn't a relationship, but isn't not a relationship either. You know the kind. You don't text your not-girlfriend Hey, uh, so do you still like me? You gotta play it cool.

Plus, as a new-ish lesbian hoping for my first long-term queer relationship, I was just happy to be there. Over-eager to not rock the boat, I sure as hell wasn't going to be asking any questions. Can't risk jinxing it. I bask in the blissness while it lasts.

But this morning I got that stomach-twisting, distinct and sudden I'm-gonna-get-dumped feeling. I wanted to be wrong. Maybe she's having a bad week. Maybe I'm imagining things. At the very least, maybe I can prolong the time that everything was almost perfect, freeze this beautiful moment that we are still together for.

But even people who turn to magic eight balls for relationship advice know when to quit being delusional.

I went over to my parents' house for breakfast this morning, and afterwards Dad and I poured freshly brewed coffee into our mugs and went out to sit on the porch together. After a few moments of quiet he turns to look at me, "So are you going to tell me more about this girl you're seeing?"

I swirl my coffee around its mug a few times, eyeing the splotches of milk that haven't mixed in yet. "Probably nothing to know anymore."

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's from her. Can we talk?

Anxiety building, I grew desperate for divine clarification – or better yet, fuel for my denial. Arriving home I rush upstairs to my room and close the door. I pluck the magic eight ball off my desk, and plop onto the edge of my bed, staring into the bubbling, blue pool of answers.

I ask the magic question.

Is she going to dump me?

I shake the ball. Hard. With a ferocity that would inspire this magic beholder of knowledge to, one, be accurate, but also to say what I want to hear. We all have our selfish moments.

Blue water swirls until one face of the die is pressed up against the plastic window.

Yes.

Furious, aghast, in denial, I shake the eight ball hard again. I refuse to accept that answer. No.

I shake it harshly for a full minute. Face red, I glower at it, waiting for the answer. Sometimes when you shake an eight ball too hard, the inside turns to bubbles and the message becomes nearly impossible to read until it settles. Not today. There, so as clear as day it may as well have been in bold:

Yes.

And, of course, the stupid thing was right.

Cue the breakup montage: sobbing in the car before work, extensive, erratic journaling sessions, wild nights out with friends, reemergence on Tinder. Through it all, I'm shocked by how alive I feel. I've always struggled with depression and anxiety. Growing up, disassociating became my best friend. I was a master at escaping reality. There are still days I have to fight against my own brain, plead with the thing to not be so damn dark, to stay present. Despite this heartbreak I feel undeniably raw and real. Like I can't escape reality if I try. Helpless to feel the blunt force of my feelings.

This was the queer relationship I saw real potential in, and I realized that without meaning to, I had put roots down into this person. I grew to trust and care for her. Laid down a foundation imagining what our life would be like together. It's not fair. I wanted to scream. Did scream. Feral. I unearthed every last ugly feeling that lurked inside me, and with them I found some of the most pure and beautiful feelings too. Through heartbreak I somehow feel so open and beautiful in a way I rarely feel. Uprooted, but confident now that I would regrow.

I've always liked eight balls, magic or otherwise. Really for no deeper reason than they look cool and represent luck of all kinds. All the kinds of luck you'll inevitably experience in life. Last week I got hit with a \$1,000 healthcare bill. Then a few days later I got back a \$1,600 tax return. Bad luck. Good luck. I like eight balls so much my first tattoo became one.

The whole thing was spontaneous, as most tattoos at nineteen are. Mid college house party, my friend Adrienne grinned at all of us. "I want to get a smiley face tattooed on my finger so I can do this!" She sticks up one pointer finger and waves the pad of it at us, bopping it up and down like it's alive. We couldn't deny it would be pretty funny if it had a face.

So off we went. Drunk enough to get a random tattoo at 7pm on a Wednesday, but sober enough to act it, a small group of us ventured out to the tattoo studio to get Adrienne her smiley face. It was October of my freshman year of college. I was freshly nineteen and ready to make my first moves as a proper adult. A tattoo felt like a proper rite of passage. I instantly knew I was going to get an eight ball.

My weed grinder, thoughtfully, had a sweet eight ball design on top, and as we left I swiped it off the table.

Tilting the grinder up for an inspection, the woman at the shop blinked at my grinder and then down at me from across the counter.

"Is this a weed grinder?"

“Yes.”

She took it away to get scanned without another word.

I got my eight ball and Adrienne got her smiley face, albeit not on the pad of her finger. “Waste of money. Thing’ll wash off within a few weeks”, the artist said.

That night, I put some roots down.

I moved to Bellingham from Portland without knowing anybody at my new university. I wanted it that way. Leaving high school, I felt a clawing desperation to reinvent myself. Getting impulsive tattoos with my new college friends may seem silly or insignificant, but that moment giggling with my friends, squeezing their hands while the needle buzzed, was proof I had made friends I cared about. Friends who cared about me in return. Proof our roots had intertwined, just so. In that moment we were a community, taking life on together.

When I first moved back to Portland after college, I was determined not to put down any roots. Living in Portland was temporary. A stint at best. My nostalgia pit-stop on the way to greater and grander.

I was a completely different person on my return to Portland at twenty three than I’d left it at eighteen. During the past couple of years, I’d come out as non-binary and started using they/them pronouns. I realized I couldn’t picture myself marrying a man, only a wife or a partner. I no longer related to the girls I hung out with in high school. I’ve transformed so much since those days. Over the years, our roots slowly unwound and grew apart, joining up with new systems, new connections.

I felt alone. I spent five years building a community in Bellingham and I ached for its familiarity. I missed going swimming with my friends. I missed my roommate’s cats. I missed working at the bagel shop. I missed walking to the ocean. I didn’t want to restart somewhere else. I didn’t want to regrow connections I had worked so hard for.

Don't get me wrong, I love Portland. I was raised here and can't fully picture myself not against a back-drop of lush green trees, wet with the rain I adore in October and loathe by April.

But being back in Portland felt like a step backwards. A waving of the white flag. I should be off exploring a new city. Somewhere huge and exciting and reverberating with aliveness. Instead I was back in my hometown and living in my teenage bedroom. A measly vacation back to my teenage years.

It turns out moving takes money. And a job set up in advance. And an apartment. Saving money and planning where I wanted to go next would take time, and the meantime I had to keep living. Though I resisted it, I settled into the soil, planting myself just a little bit.

Those first months, I was barely better than a hermit. I didn't want to make plans, especially with new people. I sank into the warm embrace of depression. I waited to find

perating from my loss of community. Starting over again felt impossible.

The thing about community is that if you spend enough time in one place, it'll root its way into you, whether you like it or not.

After six months of living at home, a room opened up in my friends' house and I moved in. Weary about living with roommates again, I immediately softened seeing how the boys cared for my cat, Malcolm. We threw parties, watched Avatar the Last Airbender, and held kitchen gossip sessions. I put a root down.

I joined a soccer team in a new adult soccer league for queer and trans players, Lavender League. Playing with my team, the golden-shirted (and for a long time undefeated!) Dandy Lions, I rediscovered my love for soccer, and felt instantly drawn to the beauty of the queer community. Despite being trans, many of my college friends were straight or cis or both. Finding people that understood my identity was such a powerful thing. Different than anything I had felt before. I felt seen, wholly. Suddenly, I wanted to im-

merse myself in this world, in queerness and queer people. I put another root down.

I started taking classes at the local community college and started writing again. It feels good to interact with peers and professors. A root.

I went on first dates. Roots. I made new friends. Roots. I started to have favorite coffee shops and bars and parks. I followed new routines and created new favorite memories. Roots. Roots. Roots. Before I knew it I had a home again.

To put roots down means to accept that one day they may be uprooted. There is a beauty in relinquishing control, letting the roots burrow deeper anyway, knowing it'll make it all the more painful to remove. To love while it lasts. Because despite pain, despite heartbreak, there is so much wonder in being open, letting yourself be vulnerable, and truly connecting with others. Beauty that's worth all the bad luck. There will always be something beautiful that regrows.



THE LAST CONVERSATION

JS Apsley

She raised her eyes wearily from the book she loved so. God damn it all, she thought. Just one hour to sit myself in peace, that's all I wanted. Gawking at the man who had approached her with a stare she felt would commandeer his unequivocal surrender, she was startled when he repeated his question.

"Would you mind some company?"

She had come to her favourite diner that day, to find it empty save the cook and waitress, both of whom clearly had nowhere else to be. She had come armed with her book, partly expecting to find them closed. She had come for an hour of peace, an hour with her beloved book. Her mobile phone was asleep in her pocket; it would not disturb her.

The waitress absently said she could have anything at all; it was on the house. When the food arrived she ate leisurely, uninterrupted. After she had finished, she had wiped the crumbs from her hands and opened her book, content to sink into the bliss it could offer for what time she had left to her. To spend time with these characters was a gift; she loved them so. It had been her mother's favourite book, so she and her sister had been introduced to it as children. Reading it now, so many years later, allowed her to bridge the chasm of absence which had opened up when her mother had died.

But now her plans to read peace were dashed. An oddball had appeared to pester her; a spanner in her works.

Do I mind, she thought? Of course I mind. I don't want you sitting next to me or anywhere near me. I've got an hour at most. Yet she remained civil. Her mother had raised her well.

“I don’t mean to be impolite, but as it happens I do mind. It’s not that I don’t appreciate the attention. I’d like just to be alone and read my book ... I’m sure you understand.”

Having dropped what she hoped was a soothing rebuff, she studied her interloper.

The man was around her age and handsome, granted, but in a very unfamiliar fashion. His suit was ill-fitting; yet looked expensive. His skin was free of blemish, soft, well cared-for. His hair was combed and his nails immaculate. This was a man who had taken time with his appearance.

She thought she could understand that, on reflection. That was some credit in the bank, then.

He smiled at her, a goofy smile which she thought endearing. He’d been polite, she’d give him that too. But now, with the clock ticking, his presence was an irritant. Her eyes flirted across to the waitress, who’d been trying to make calls to who-knows-who without success. That she was here at all might suggest she had no one to call; no one who would care.

The cook, in the back somewhere, was making a racket with the pots and pans, cursing at will. Crockery skittered off the floor, possibly the wall. We’re all having a bad day, pal, she thought.

“Perhaps you’ll allow me to sit for a moment. To ask a question?” the man said softly. He seemed sincere; she found herself disarmed, though he need not know that. She heard her mother’s voice. Cards to your chest, dolly. She placed her book face down and took a sip of her tea.

“Okay, friend. I’ll play ball. You get to ask one question. I’m not saying I’ll answer.”

The man nodded and gently lowered himself into the seat facing her. There was another crash from the kitchen and the man jumped a little. Perhaps he was nervous; or simply afraid. He raised his face to look at her, and he smiled his goofy smile.

“I noticed your book. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Never got round to reading it myself, but the film’s a classic. Grego-

ry Peck and all that. I got to wondering ... what made you choose to read this book, at this precise moment?"

The waitress had disappeared, and the combustible cook had gone silent. She was in an empty diner with an odd but curious character. Play it cool, dolly, she heard her mother say.

"It gives me an enormous sense of well-being," she said, with a frisson of sarcasm. Her clipped banter seemed to put him off, just as her steely stares had failed earlier in the conversation. That's two bridges crossed.

"I wonder. If this is the last book you read, does that ... elevate the joy you take from it?" he asked, springing her from reverie.

"I suppose. This is my sixth go-through. It's special to me. It was ... it was my mum's favourite. I like to read it because I love it, but also to remind me of her. Now, friend, I've just little time left to do so, and that was your second question."

"It was. I thought I'd take my chances, you seemed friendly enough. You know, just to make some conversation as people do," the man said absently. Thanking her, he left her booth with a courteous nod, and walked to the window, placing his hand on the glass.

There was an inevitable sadness behind that goofy smile; a pain hidden underneath that extra-large suit. She realised he had beguiled her, charmed her, even. Her mother had always said to keep her attractions close to your chest. Make them wait, she would say, you're worth it, dolly.

"What's the deal here pal? You looking for women to chat up?"

The man turned back from the window of the diner. She saw that the light of the late afternoon rested upon his face like a mask. It was an unnatural light.

The bell above the front door pinged solemnly; the waitress had wandered outside and was walking past the window aimlessly, as if lost. The woman watched the waitress toss her phone to the ground, uncaring. Looking further out, the woman noticed a couple walking with a young

girl, swinging her between them.

The child's laugh was the only noise she could hear from the outside world. She took some slither of joy from the girls' delight. The girl's parents seemed to laugh with her, though it may not have been laughter at all, but something else entirely. Still so quiet, she thought. So terribly quiet.

Focusing inside the diner again, she realised the man in the ill-fitting suit was upset with her accusation.

"Not at all. I'm not like ... that's not me. You looked friendly, that's all. I thought I'd ask about your book." The man straightened out his suit, nervously placing his hands in each of the inside and outside pockets in turn. The suit was really far too big for him. He caught the look of curiosity in her eyes.

"It was my fathers," he confirmed.

"The suit I mean. Thought it would be somehow fitting to wear it today. You know?"

"I know, I think. I did wonder. It doesn't really fit you at all."

He smiled and patted at the pockets again.

His hand was now in the inside pocket, holding something. He paused that way as they studied each other, and she was reminded of Napoleon. Inside the jacket pocket, the man's hand caressed a well-worn note.

She watched him read it, and saw his eyes redden as he contemplated whether to tell her about it.

"Care to share?" she ventured. Her intrigue had gone up a notch.

"Please," he replied.

There was a crash from the kitchen. The cook staggered in from behind the servery. He was swilling a bottle of whisky in one hand, and clutching another. Having polished off the first, he opened the second and drained the contents. He stared at the two diners; he did not see them. His eyes were bloodshot and vacant. He dropped to one knee, then collapsed, unconscious.

“Would you care to read it for me, aloud I mean? It’s a note from my father,” the man asked, ignoring the stricken cook. “I’d like someone else to read it.”

She thought for a moment. She laid *To Kill a Mockingbird* down on the table, caressing the scarred spine. Her thoughts turned briefly to her younger sister, who loved the book as much as she. But her sister was thousands of miles away, and would be with her children. She held it out, to receive the man’s note. He passed it, softly. The woman read it for him.

“Hello Son. I know you’ll get round to checking this suit when I’m gone. I’m afraid you won’t find any money. I’m broke from the medical bills, and this bastard cancer has me beat. We gave it a good run though, didn’t we? When you find this, please know I don’t want you to dwell. I reckon I’ve kept my nose out of trouble enough to book a ticket to meet that wise old feller up in the sky somewhere. I’ll see your mom again, and Jessie. Maybe it’ll all be like a dream, and when I wake up, you and I will head off to the creek to go fishing. That’d be about the best son, if we could go fishing one last time. You’ve been a wonderful son. I love you so very much.”

The last part took her breath away. She looked at him, and found she saw him anew. He was wearing his father’s suit to honour him, to remember him. He was a wonderful son. “Who’s Jessie?” she asked.

“My sister. She died when I was ten or so. Car wreck.”

“Sorry to hear it. What a lovely note from your father. I hope he fitted his suit better than you do, friend,” she said, goading a gentle laugh from her table companion.

“When did he pass?” she asked.

“Oh, around a year ago. I found the note not long after. I decided to keep the suit that it came with. I think he got married to my mother in this suit. And now it belongs to me. I guess it’s up to us to be the stewards of our parent’s stories. After they’re gone, I mean.”

She knew exactly what she meant. She lifted her book, her most treasured possession, and offered it to him. He took it with a nod, and flicked through the pages.

“I’m guessing you don’t have a kid out there, stewarding your story,” she asked bluntly.

He shook his head, gently. His eyes watered; she held his hand and nodded back at him in silent accord. She realised it was her turn to share with her new friend.

“My mother and I were very close. But in the end, she barely knew me. About a week before she passed I found her sitting in the care home like a ghost, holding her book, this book. She knew what it was. She looked at me and said, ‘It’s a Sin’. One of the nurses thought it was a com-

the book, holding it up like a hook to catch herself on before she slipped to the darker waters. It was the last thing I heard her say.”

The man placed the book back down, respectfully.

“So here we both are. You with your mother’s book, and I with my father’s suit. I think they’d both be pleased with us, don’t you?” he asked. “I’m happy to remember them now, to have this chance to think of why we loved them.”

She could see her father shooting at targets at the funfair. He had been hopeless, laughing at his own uselessness. Her mother shot every target. She picked a toy bear, and passed it to her dad. They had laughed so much, the three of them.

“I guess I’m happy too,” she said. Looking at the man, she realised he had been a gift. He had reminded her to cherish the small things: the small things which are guarded jealously in our secret hearts. Her mother’s love for books and reading was now her own, and that was something. It was these small things that kept those we’d lost anchored to us. Tethered in time, their story became our story, and helped us accept the inevitability of mortality. It was the little things, those tangible conceits and contrivances, which helped us reach the truth of Feeble’s wisdom: that we each owe a death.

The diner was suddenly scorched in a sear of white light. They stood, shaking, and scrambled to the window, screening their eyes through their fingers. They both knew, each of them, that this would be their last conversation.

It had been a worthy one.

Though they bore no deep affection for each other, they held hands as the intensity of the light pained their eyes, and the windows of the diner began to rattle. The man straightened out his suit, and reached into one of the pockets with his free hand, where his fingers found a fish-hook.

The woman clutched the book to her bosom.

After all, it was the little things.

VIBRATIONS FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE LAKE

Saoirse Chance

The first time I saw him play for people, it was in the basement of a bookstore that smelled like dust and old paperbacks, the kind of place where no one really clapped and the sound bounced weird off the concrete walls. I was 14 and still small enough to curl up on a crate of encyclopedias without my knees knocking into my chin, and he was 17 with his guitar slung low like it was some kind of talisman, his voice rougher than the songs called for, but people leaned in anyway, like something about the way he sang made them feel less alone, like maybe their bones hummed the same tune.

I started going to all of his shows after that. I carried his cables, learned to wrap them right so they wouldn't get twisted. Tuned his guitar when his hands were too shaky, which eventually became most of the time. Once I had my license, I drove him home more times than I could count, his head against the window and his fingers tapping rhythms I couldn't hear. I made excuses to venues and bandmates and the kind of girls who wore his shirts to bed. Told them he had strep. Or the flu. Or food poisoning. They always nodded like they believed me, but I think they just didn't want to ask.

He once told me that heroin felt like lying on the bottom wasn't warm exactly, but it didn't hurt anymore. "You just float," he said, eyes glassy but almost peaceful, like he truly believed he'd found the softest place in the world to disappear. I never floated. I stayed on the shore, holding my breath, learning how to look for pinprick pupils and shallow breathing, how to listen for the creak of floorboards at 3am and distinguish it from the sound of a body dropping. I kept Narcan in my pencil pouch, right next to a dried-up highlighter and a cracked stick of lip balm. Other girls had

prom dresses and college brochures. I had harm reduction posters taped inside my locker.

He got clean once, for a little while. Moved into the garage, hung fairy lights like constellations, and played with the windows open so the songs could spill into the yard. He wrote music that sounded like it was stitched together with fishing wire and grief, and I helped him record demos on my phone. He called it “our record,” we let ourselves believe that it meant things were getting better.

But roots don’t wither just because you trim the leaves.

He died in early summer, right when the dogwoods started to bloom, and the preacher mispronounced his name at the funeral. I corrected him. Loudly. Our father winced, but didn’t chastise me.

Sometimes, late at night, I would think I heard the faint hum of his amp coming from the garage, like the walls themselves were holding onto the last of his notes. Maybe we’re all just resonating, echoing the grief of people we couldn’t save but tried to love anyway. Maybe I wasn’t enough to keep him here, but I was there. I held the thread. Sometimes, I still dream about the bottom of the lake. I don’t float. I reach down and drag his chords up from the silt, over and over again, until the water sings.

THE WEIGHT OF KNOWING

Kamea Gray

The hot flame of the oven ignites in preparation for the next cadaver. A large garage door opens to make way for a hearse to drive through the loading dock. Three diamond-plated aluminum furnaces produce a solemn whirl; the sound fills the room. A mortuary bag covers the deceased, securely strapped down on a gurney. Two sets of hands wheel the decedent to a nearby deconstructed box, then forcefully push the body inside. An unsettling thud echoes throughout the warehouse as the stiff remains fall into the cardboard and are quickly sealed with packaging tape. Layers of synthetic material prevent workers from ever coming in contact with the cold flesh of their product. Numbed through their line of work, they don't need to acknowledge the dead.

If it wasn't for the bodies, no morbid presence would linger between the sounds of lighthearted conversation. One might even assume they're in a distribution facility or a packaging center. Long boxes are transported into the refrigeration room where other boxes are stored — soon to be placed in the refractory brick chamber.

Then it's first in, first out. Bodies ready for incineration are moved back out of the cold room. The gurney rises to slide the cardboard box into the three-foot opening of the scorching mechanical oven. The furnace glows a warm magma orange from the intense heat of spitting flames. One can only hope the souls of the dead aren't experiencing the same searing blaze in the afterlife. After a few minutes, a worker repositions the box for an even char. Now complete, the cremated remains are left to cool before a special tool moves them, with small blasts of air, for collection.

Maybe your soul is turned to dust when the incinerator burns your brain to ash. Would natural decomposition of the body allow your spirit to roam free? Maybe conscious-

ness is simply an illusion. If so, what was the point of anything? These are things I think about as the worker scoops the remains into a metal container resembling a desk drawer. I'm sure that thoughts of consciousness rarely cross his mind at this point. He places the container in front of an ordinary square fan to further cool down the remains. Once at an acceptable temperature, they are placed into a blender of sorts, to grind down large chunks of bone. A special brush gathers any dust particles stuck to the lid, then the ashes are poured into a plastic bag. The brush is used once again inside the processor, to ensure no molecule of the once-human is left behind. He habitually ties the bag, placing it into a small box before quickly sealing it shut. His speed and lack of error reminds me of a typical Amazon warehouse employee on the line. He then guides a rubber band down the box, using it to secure a note. The product is complete.

The screen fades to black, and the credits begin to roll: "*Death Care: An Unseen World*," a documentary by Christina Strunk. I sit still, unsure how to feel. The film hasn't lessened my curiosity around death, but it has left me unsettled. I find myself wavering between admiration and unease. How can the employees seem so detached from something so devastating? Their composure feels almost inhuman, though perhaps it's simply a result of the exposure they've had to this work. There's something inspiring in their ability to face mortality so directly. Could I? Death is supposed to be a natural part of life, not sanitized and avoided. And yet, I can't ignore the irony. Here I am, observing behind a screen, my understanding of death filtered through pixels. I feel farther removed than they are, grasping at concepts they confront every day.

I've never seen a dead body first-hand nor have I grieved another living being, but lately death seems to linger around every facet of my life. A near-fatal heart attack struck my healthy father and my grandparents continuously find themselves in emergency rooms. Yet thankfully, undoubtedly terrified of death, and almost obsessively

intrigued. It feels close to me at all times, yet so elusive. I often wonder who in my family will die first and what kind of chaos will ensue.

For the past year, after a debilitating car crash and a cancer scare, I thought it might be me. Waking up on a hospital bed with a doctor standing over my fluttering eyes, telling me I had a lifelong disease and not an Earth shattering death sentence was the best thing to ever happen to me. I had spent almost a year preparing for the opposite, devising a plan to travel the world before I died young, undergoing many spiritual epiphanies. The good news gave me a second chance and brought forth a path I knew I must follow to achieve my dreams. The world is now so beautiful and abundant – I wonder how I could've been so blind to it before.

My new awareness also brings unrelenting dread, as I now neurotically observe the passage of time and think of how quickly my life will pass. The snail of death which slowly creeps behind us all is not as horrifying as the nothing it brings. Although, as I write this I realize the American fear of cessation is what's poisoned my mind. Individualism and the desire to find immortality through science has rendered death almost a fiction in the west. I want to accept my fate and honor the dead as they do in every other part of the world. It's hard to unlearn the avoidance, but I am hoping that I can become more comfortable with death, at least partially, by talking to someone who is surrounded by it every day.

Casey stands on a narrow asphalt path overlooking a natural reservoir in the back of the cemetery. She points to blank headstones near the water, "This is where we bury a lot of homeless people. I do my best and try to find their families, and when I do I'll send them their ashes, but a lot of times we just can't find anybody. So they end up here." These people who died poor, in the streets and without comfort are now honored for eternity, resting in front of the serene landscape; surrounded by the wildlife residing in the trees, tall grass, and water. The funeral company receives funds from the state government, to provide these

services. Although there is no specific fund in the state of Oregon to assist with burial costs for the homeless, there is the Indigent Disposition Fund, which helps reimburse funeral homes dealing with unclaimed bodies. Though ironically, the fund does not cover the full cost of disposition and funeral homes often bear a significant financial burden.

Plots near the bustling highway are the best some can do for their deceased loved ones. It seems disrespectful to legally bury a human in soil waiting to be upheaved by a drunk driver, whilst corpses from richer families rest safely atop a hill, protected by a white picket fence. The economic hierarchy of gravesites might feel abominable, but it's good business for the funeral company.

It was heart-warming, in a way, the homeless buried where they were instead of in a ditch by the front entrance. The deceased near the roadside might've not deserved the undignified fate, but at least they had full names and life dates carved into their headstones.

Beside them lie those who wished for 'natural' burials. No chemicals pumped into their veins after death, or lacquered caskets delaying inevitable decomposition. In your head, an image might appear: a dirty cadaver thrown in a six-foot hole like a farm dog – shot after contracting rabies from the tree squirrel it maimed. This is not the case. Biodegradable shrouds and wicker coffins are used to lower the body during a service, and these break down organically, making for healthier soil. The natural burial area is not upkeep by the groundskeeper. Instead, the nutrient rich dirt nourishes tall grass and greenery near the waterfront.

Opposite this area, the land takes a decline. Casey explains to me how the plots here were prepped with concrete slabs for the caskets to be placed in. Many families choose sites with this configuration because they think it will help preserve their loved ones. In reality, it's required by the state to prevent the soil from sinking, due to the natural settling that occurs over time. When a body is buried, the space around it fills with air, causing the dirt above to compress

meant to preserve the bodies anyway," she told me.

Casey takes her lunch breaks on the footpaths that wrap around the reservoir, choosing to be surrounded by life for a few moments of her day. The calm provides an escape from the endless barrage of questions by mourners and the complexities of funeral work. Every customer wants something different, and if it's legal, she provides it.

The city of Hillsboro, Oregon where the cemetery resides, has quite the diverse population, giving Casey the opportunity not only to witness, but to participate in cultural funerary practices she might not have otherwise. The Buddhists, Islamics, Mormons, each hold their own sacred rituals which help them say goodbye. Even common Catholic or Christian practices change subtly in other cultures.

Sometimes families wish for body repatriation to their homeland alongside other family members, and this is one of the biggest challenges on the list of death care services.

Human remains are shipped by plane for the most part, preserved in wooden caskets held inside Air Trays which are stored at regulated temperatures. Cargo planes transport the bodies along with other standard deliveries. (Your online purchase might have found itself next to a cadaver on its journey to you!) Casey takes long drives to the airport each week to pick up or drop off bodies.

"Some places are easier than others, but I hate shipping internationally." She adds, "especially to Mexico."

Countless documents must be signed meticulously. Many of these can only be turned in at the state's capital in Salem, and require frequent attempts before the state accepts them. Documents must have two copies: one in English and the other in Spanish, which calls for a translator to be hired, as Google Translate cannot be trusted with something so delicate and exact. The process ends up costing her and the families a lot of money and stress.

"I've shipped to Africa, and that was incredibly easy compared to Mexico. All they asked for were two documents and it was done." No other country or continent warrants the same amount of effort.

Everytime she has a complaint about the work, she finishes by saying, “But, I really enjoy what I do.” She feels genuine satisfaction guiding families through death and their grieving, although the process can cause challenging emotional fatigue if she is not mindful. Casey admits that some families are just difficult to work with, while others want the world for five dollars and get mad when that isn’t possible.

“A lot of people meet me for the first time on the worst day of their lives, and it is my responsibility to help them. Not only do I get to be empathetic and help people navigate the confusing world of probate, veterans benefits, and funerals in general, but I also get to hear the loveliest or most dramatic and juicy stories about people. Their favorite pictures, their favorite memories; or their most hated. I know the laws, so I love helping people get what they want or need within the confines of that.”

The stories the families tell her, reel her in each time. A person will come in to discuss funeral plans, then give her an earful about all the bad things that person did. Memories of an abusive father, or the trademark creepy uncle. Casey does her best to treat the deceased with equal respect, but on occasion will look down and say, “you know what you did,” while their cold, lifeless bodies stare up at her from the steel embalming table.

I ask her about her experiences handling the dead, specifically the embalming and cremation process. She doesn’t seem to have any strong feelings about it either way. It’s just a part of the job for her; she drains a body of fluids for preservation like a car mechanic flushing an engine’s oil.

The corporation that owns her funeral home embalms in a shared facility, so she can’t just prepare bodies whenever she finds the time. Sterilization, along with transport, must be requested and put into action. She tersely explains to me how she bathes the bodies and closes their eyes for the last time. She doesn’t discuss the more gorey details involving organ draining, opening up the cadaver, or injecting chemicals. She might’ve wanted to avoid grossing me out, since she is used to people finding her work taboo.

The introduction of embalming to the public was the catalyst for America's dissonance with death, as seen in Mattie Agüero's "Evolution of American Funerary Customs and Laws." I came across the concept while trying to resolve my own fears. Unlike in America today, wakes were once lively parties, where friends and family of the deceased would watch over the body as they drank and feasted. House funerals were the norm and families would bathe and prepare the body for the coming service. Only a few centuries ago, living rooms meant to provide space to display the dead and not a flatscreen TV.

As towns grew into cities, populations increased and cemeteries ran out of room. Park cemeteries were formed – far enough from the city to require transportation, and undertakers took care of hearse fees and carriage rides for mourners. At the height of the Civil War, soldiers demanded they be buried near their homes instead of enemy soil, but the summer heat made preservation difficult on the long train ride home. Dr. Thomas Holmes began the first practice of embalming on the bodies of fallen soldiers for the Army Medical Corps, and other surgeons quickly followed suit. Doctors would advertise their services outside of army tents, posing an embalmed dead soldier saluting in his casket.

Surprisingly though, it was only when President Abraham Lincoln died, in 1865, that embalming became a public affair. His two-week national funeral procession from D.C.

stop to maintain his appearance. At the end of his journey, he was close to being perfectly mummified. This was the first time many Americans had seen an embalmed corpse and the new way of preservation quickly became common practice. Body preparation moved from family homes, to the buildings of undertakers, who soon formed the National Funeral Directors Association in 1882. The 1900s brought an emergence of family-owned funeral homes in each state, and exposure to death grew ever distant. In the next few decades as World Wars I, II and the Great Depression wiped out populations, the concept became terrifying and villainous.

these events has left Americans estranged from death. We do not embrace the topic in social culture, nor do we speak of it. We lower our heads and whisper, not for sadness, but in shame. Careful not to say strong words like death, dead, dying, or even worse; suicide. Still, it lurks in our collective silence, like the forbidden story of an urban legend, afraid that uttering its name might summon a shadow to appear behind us.

To avoid its materialization we use our words softly: deceased, lost, passed away, departed, no longer with us, gone to a better place, taken from us, kicking the bucket, crossed the rainbow bridge, left this life, shed their mortal coil, with the angels, with God, found peace.

Death is seldom spoken of bluntly, when it is it's in terms of violence and pain: A mass shooting, a war – civilians, hostages, dead soldiers, the victims of a serial killer, a freak accident, a natural disaster, an increased suicide rate among teens which has been linked to social media. When we say death is all around us, this is what we mean. Knowledge of horrific events only brings us a heightened sense of danger.

Honoring the dead and confronting our grief for those we've lost along with the slow demise of ourselves, are the only things that will allow us to change our feelings toward it. It's important to foster a healthy relationship with the concept – it shapes how we live by influencing our priorities and how we cope with loss. The people now responsible for initially shielding us from death in the first place, are now the only ones who are comfortable with it.

POETRY

Blaire Baron is an award-winning director, playwright, and poet. Her poetry appears in *Amazine*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Mental Health Anthology*, and *Bright Flash Review*. Her theatrical works have earned multiple honors. Baron is a PBS Community Champion Award recipient.

Erin Jamieson's writing has been published in over eighty literary magazines, including two Pushcart Prize nominations. Her poetry chapbook, *Fairytales*, was published by Bottlecap Press. Her debut novel (*Sky of Ashes, Land of Dreams*) was published by Type Eighteen Books.

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah lives in London with his family. His poems have been featured in many literary magazines and anthologies like *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets*, *Atticus Review*, *Shift*, *The Journal of Literary Oddities*, *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* and *The Pierian*. He has received many literary prizes and nominations.

Wil D'Vane (vae/it) is a Kentucky based writer, poet, artist, and aspiring jack of all trades. A lover of fantasy and collecting trinkets, it tries to put a bit of magic and whimsy into everything it makes. Vaer success rate varies, but that won't stop vaem from trying.

Stephen Joffe is an award winning actor, musician, writer, and sound designer based in Toronto. He has previously been published as a playwright, songwriter (*Birds of Bellwoods*, etc.), and poet.

Devahuti Chaliha is just finishing off her Neuroscience PhD, and can't wait to finally learn how to be a normal human. Between gleefully experimenting on humans, she loves historical detective novels and logic puzzles. She watches horror movies for a laugh, and is equally merciless towards violators of human rights.

Michael Zysk is a mystical revivalist, whose third poetry collection *Sophia's Wisdom* launched in spring of 2024 (Wipf & Stock).

James B. Nicola is the author of eight collections of poetry, the latest three being *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*, *Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies*. His nonfic-

tion book *Playing the Audience: The Practical Actor's Guide to Live Performance* won a Choice magazine award.

Kal Clay (they/ve/ae) is a trans and queer artist, writer, a poet, and an aspiring cryptid. They like body horror, knights, time loops, and anything regarding stars. Ve's working on improving ver craft by reading, writing various short stories, and listening to five songs over and over again.

Lukas Quinn is a gay writer and English student from Portland, Oregon. He authors short fiction and poetry demystifying mental health. Quinn has been featured in publications such as *Door is a Jar Literary Journal*, *Pathos Literary Magazine*, and several others. Find Quinn (@ichaotiq) on Instagram.

Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative and curator of beauty. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

Matthew Lee is a writer and editor living with cancer in Melbourne, Australia. His work can be found or is forthcoming in *Meniscus Literary Journal*, *North of Oxford Journal*, and *Neologism Poetry Journal*, among others.

Lee Escobedo is a LatinX curator, writer, and artist based in Texas. He has been profiled on NPR and the CW and curated site-specific exhibitions for The Dallas Art Fair, Nasher Sculpture Center, Southern Methodist University and Piero Galio's Chalet series.

Hannah Faith Notess is a poet and software product manager in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her first collection of poems, *The Multitude*, won the Michael Waters Poetry Prize from Southern Indiana Review Press. Learn more about her work at hannahnotess.com.

Joseph Byrd's -
da Poetry Journal, *The Plentitudes*, and *DIAGRAM*. A 2023 Pushcart Prize nominee, he was in the StoryBoard Chicago cohort with Kaveh Akbar, and was an Associate Artist in Poetry under Joy Harjo at the Atlantic Center for the Arts.

Ewen Glass (he/him) is a screenwriter and poet from Northern Ireland who lives with two dogs, a tortoise and a body

of self-doubt; his poetry has appeared in the likes of Okay Donkey, Maudlin House, HAD, Poetry Scotland and One Art. Bluesky/X/IG: @ewenglass

Leen Raats lives in Belgium. She runs a copywriting business, writing about nature, landscapes, and history. She self-published books in Dutch and won writing contests in Belgium and the Netherlands. Her English publications include Pleiades, 34 Orchard, Crannóg, and Rathalla Review. Find out more at leenwrites.com. Instagram: @leen.raats

Kati Kim is a current PCC student with a BA in French. This June she begins an MFA in Creative Writing Program at Pacific University.

Hayley Covington is a writer and artist drawn to the cyclical nature of storytelling, where themes of inevitability, return, and transformation take center stage. Their work delves into the raw edges of human desire, mortality, and the uncertain spaces in between. Designed to unsettle, captivate, and linger, their storytelling evokes emotions that are both visceral and inescapable.

henry 7. reneau, jr. writes words of conflagration to awaken the world ablaze, an inferno of free verse illuminated by his affinity for disobedience & a barbwired conviction that prequels the spontaneous combustion that blazes from his heart, phoenix-fluxed red & gold, like a discharged bullet that commits a felony every day, exploding through change is gonna come to implement the fire next time. He is the author of the poetry collection, *freedomland blues* (Transcendent Zero Press) and the e-chapbook, *physiography of the fittest* (Kind of a Hurricane Press.) His work is published in *Superstition Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Zone 3*; *Poets Reading the News*; *Frontier Poetry* and *Rigorous*. His work has also been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

Megan Ulrich is 28 years old and a student at PCC. She has way too many hobbies. Her writing is a vessel for pondering spirituality, identity and other curiosities. Her most recent work is about her summer as a backcountry ranger in Montana.

Mark Herman is a student at PCC originally from Manitowoc, WI. He is a musician, writer, guitar/ukulele teacher, rock collector, vinyl collector, and a cyclist.

Eden Lilley is a queer, non-binary, disabled artist living in and constantly falling in love all over again with the Pacific Northwest.

Kerim Bueno is a poet living in Portland, Oregon where he explores human connection by using words as a tool to express himself in ways he could never manage in person. Their work has appeared in Pathos Literary Magazine, in Portland Zine Meetup, and is forthcoming in Lurch Magazine.

Elle Cantwell is a graduate of the MFA in Writing program at the University of San Francisco. Her poems have appeared in Ponder Review, December, HAD, Barrelhouse and Seneca Review, among other publications. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and a winner of the Jeff Marks Memorial Poetry Prize. A freelance theatre director and editorial specialist, she lives in Santa Monica, California.

Aurora Duval, a Portland transplant from Ashland, is a 23-year-old student and lifelong poet. They've been writing since middle school and find their best inspiration in the sunshine or when their golden retriever, Lupin, is snoozing beside them. Aurora served as an editor for The Pointed Circle's 40th edition, where they and their partner helped bring both the design and writing to life. Currently pursuing their interpreter certification in American Sign Language, Aurora strives to write, submit, and share their work whenever possible.

Lake Etsitty is a Navajo poet and engineer who graduated from Gonzaga University. In his free time he hangs out with his friends, and he has recently learned to appreciate his apartment porch.

Bria Love Robertson is an engineer and notes app poet.

loved ones, and anyone who reads her Instagram captions—with this being her first time to publish. A Southeast Portland local, she enjoys good food, music, and her biweekly game of Dungeons and Dragons.

Kurtis Matthew Russell (he/him) is an amateur filmmaker, writer, actor, comedian, and someday-costermonger, residing part-time in Portland, OR. His poetry has appeared in Pathos Literary Magazine and PCC Cascade's Pointed Circle. He is currently inspired by bouffon, guillotines, and classic cinema.

Eileen Adele Hale was born in Berkeley (California), grew up in New Jersey, and made her way back to California. A lover of horses, trees, and languages, she has published several chapbooks of her poems, including *Breathe for the Trees*. Her poems have appeared in *Onthebus*, *Canary Magazine*, and the anthology *News from Inside*.

May Mitch is a Portland-based, multidisciplinary artist, writer and design student. These poems are part of a developing book-length series that explores the emotional spectrum and complexities of life. She currently attends PCC and will be transferring to PSU to pursue a career in sustainable architecture. Instagram: @may_mitch_art

RJ Equality Ingram works as a necromancer for Goodwill Industries. Their poetry collection *The Autobiography of Nancy Drew* was published by White Stag. Work can be found *Voicemail Poems*, *Garlic Press* & *Deep Overstock*. RJ & their husband live next to a cemetery in Portland with their cats Twyla & Senator Padme Amidala.

Kyrena Heath is a PNW native who loves writing poetry and occasionally prose. Her other interests include fiber arts, gardening, and more recently baking. They are a mama to two small humans and several cats.

Carolyn Martin is a recovering work addict who's adopted the Spanish proverb, "It is beautiful to do nothing and rest afterwards" as her daily mantra. She is blissfully retired—and resting—in Clackamas, Oregon. Her poems have appeared in more than 200 publications throughout North America, Europe, and Australia, and her sixth collection,

in March. She is the winner of the 2025 Howard-Fowler Prize for Poetry from the University of Central Arkansas. For more: www.carolynmartinpoet.com.

PROSE

Bruce Buchanan is the author of several anthology short stories as well as the upcoming new adult fantasy novel *The Blacksmith's Boy* (Wild Ink Publishing, 2025). He lives in Greensboro, N.C.

JS Apsley is a fantasy and thriller author based in Glasgow, Scotland. He won the Ringwood Short Story Prize for "Immersion" which was published in January 2025. For more, see www.jsapsley.com

Christopher Byrne is a therapist and teacher based in the UK whose work explores the quiet intersections between people and the natural world. Drawing from his experiences supporting individuals in discovering their place within larger systems, his fiction often features characters finding unexpected connections and wisdom in ordinary moments. As a gay therapist, he brings a perspective that values diverse ways of belonging and finding community. His writing is influenced by the subtle magics of everyday life and the healing potential found in connecting with nature.

Elyse Kamibayashi is a queer, Asian American writer based in Portland, Oregon. Her work explores the process of healing from religious trauma – and the in-between-ness of being both biracial and bisexual. Her work has appeared in *Alchemy*.

Kamea Gray is an aspiring artist, photographer, writer, and filmmaker from Oregon. She plans to pursue a B.A. in the arts and is dedicated to a lifelong pursuit of creative expression. Through her work, she hopes to capture the beauty of the flawed human condition.

Quinn Sliter is a 21-year-old student at Portland Community College who will study creative writing at Portland State University with a focus on fiction. Quinn has one other upcoming publication that will be published by *The Offing* in mid-2025.

VISUAL ART

Aurora Duval, a Portland transplant from Ashland, is a 23-year-old student and lifelong poet. They've been writing since middle school and find their best inspiration in the sunshine or when their golden retriever, Lupin, is snoozing beside them. Aurora served as an editor for The Pointed Circle's 40th edition, where they and their partner helped bring both the design and writing to life. Currently pursuing their interpreter certification in American Sign Language, Aurora strives to write, submit, and share their work whenever possible.

For this piece, I used cutouts from magazines, glue, and paint pens. Created during a craft night hosted by my mom, the artwork was inspired by the Pointed Circle theme "Dig In." I spent 2–3 hours carefully cutting, selecting, and arranging the pieces until the composition felt just right before committing it to glue. The process was intuitive and hands-on, allowing the collage to evolve naturally.

Rachel Coyne is a writer and poet from Lindstrom Mn.

Collage of watercolor and peony petals photographed with an iPhone and digitally altered

Eileen Adele Hale was born in Berkeley, grew up in New Jersey, and made her way back, ending up in the Northern California foothills. A lover of horses, trees, and languages, she's published several chapbooks, and paints with an interest in combining multiple genres figurative, abstract, expressionist, surreal. For more: <https://eileenadelehaleart-blog.blogspot.com>

Watercolor on paper

Cyrus Carlson is an abstract painter from the Midwest.

Acrylic on paper "4x6"

Sean Bw Parker (MA) is a British artist, writer and musician specialising in painting, cultural theory and justice reform. After gaining a Masters degree in Fine Art from the University for the Creative Arts in 2003 he lived and worked in Istanbul for ten years, has released albums and performed at or curated festivals, given a TED talk, had work displayed at London's South Bank, and won a number of awards. His tenth book SOCIETY (portraits) was published in 2025. He was born in Exeter in 1975 and currently lives on the West Sussex coast.

Clive Freeman - the UK's Longest Serving Prisoner Maintaining Innocence is a cubist portrait made in cut-up style, representing the decimating effect that 40 years maintaining innocence in the British justice system might have. It is in watercolour, pencil and ink on card, and I intend on personally giving it to Freeman if his fifth attempt to the CCRC, currently being looked at, succeeds. Clive is 82 years-old and lives with prostate cancer.

Diamante Lavendar is an award-winning artist and author based in the USA. Her varied art practice includes mixed-media digital creations that feature elements of photography, fractals, painting, and/or drawing. Lavendar's website can be found at www.diamantelavendar.com.

I created Invitation To Creativity by layering work from two digital programs and adding digital effects. I wanted to visually capture the idea of creativity being as individualized an experience as the thought process of each creator. We all put our unique touch on our work. Creativity is a flow and a gift, an offering of ourselves as creative beings. To respect our individualized creativity is to respect the unique spark that makes us who we are in our hearts and spirits.

In the words of Edward de Bono, "There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would forever be repeating the same patterns."

Editors

J. Artemis Mackay (they/them) is a queer, trans writer living near a bridge in Portland. They hold a master's degree in comparative social change from University College Dublin and several DSM-V diagnoses.

Kiddo Wybie is a multinational, multimedia artist, writer, and editor. It has been writing poetry since 2022 alongside its main works in ceramics, dance, and mixed medium sculpting. Focused on childhood trauma and recovery, Wybie describes its art style as uncanny, bittersweet, and vivid.

Saoirse Chance is a writer, artist, filmmaker and photographer. She is the author of the chapbook *Dissonance // Resonance*. She was the recipient of the Postcard Cabins Artist Fellowship in 2022. Her Radiant order is *Lightweaver* (if you know, you know) and she's obsessed with birds and books. Instagram @saoirse.chance

J. Flower Edmiston was a legal professional before turning to the less stressful world of editing, document design, and proofreading. With red pen in hand she endeavors along the rocky, turbulent path of grammar, punctuation, and concise communication.

El Mortenson is an aspiring writer and artist from Portland, OR specializing in creative nonfiction and fiction writing, and multimedia work. El graduated from Western

Communication Studies. Their work focuses on themes of gender, queerness, and human connection. Their writing and art can currently be found on Instagram and Substack @whatsinthejunkdrawer.

Casey Elder is a writer and musician from Portland, OR. His poem "The Stone Pig" was published in the *Bellwether Review*. He has music under the moniker's "Shambles" and "Dungeon Brothers".

Fiona Rose is a writer, musician, artist, and student residing in Portland, Oregon. A poet and editor, her work has been featured in *Humans Of The World*, *Poets Choice*, *Cathexis Northwest Press* and *Lowlife Literary Press*.

is a non-binary poet from somewhere in Nebraska. They currently live in Portland, Oregon with their cat, Captain. @maddbuttons

Maylie McDaniel is a writer, artist, and editor based in Portland, OR. Her writing skews towards hauntings and humor as she draws inspiration from the various ghost stories of the state and finding laughter in place of fear.

Adam Vanhee holds a BFA in Theatre Performance and while living in New York City he was nearly killed one night when ran over by a drunk driver near his east side apartment resulting in a subdural hematoma and many broken bones. After years of rehabilitation Adam found a new passion in writing poetry and is currently pursuing further study in Portland, Oregon where he lives with his husband and their two cats.

Justin Rigamonti teaches English at Portland Community College and serves as the Program Coordinator for the Carolyn Moore Writing Residency, before which he served as Managing Editor of Fonograf Editions from 2019-2021. He is also the Poetry Coordinator for Chatter PDX. His poems have been recently published or are forthcoming in Hayden's Ferry Review, Ghost City Review, American Poetry Review, Radar, New Ohio Review, and Smartish Pace, where his poem The Secret was a finalist for the 2022 Erskine J. Poetry Prize, and he was the editor of the 2023 collection The Great Uncluttering: The Collected Poetry of Carolyn Moore.

