



THE POINTED CIRCLE

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The Pointed Circle 2026

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

We are thrilled to present this 2026 edition of *The Pointed Circle*. This edition brings us the highest quality work from dozens of contributors from all around the world. Since its creation, *The Pointed Circle* has collected a diversity of engaging pieces of poetry, prose, and visual art. We are proud to continue that tradition with this 2026 Edition, which features impactful and memorable works from contributors of many different perspectives.

It is worth acknowledging that the Spring 2026 academic quarter was shortened due to a faculty strike. We want to express our extreme gratitude to the faculty and staff that allow us to create. From the teachers that encourage us every day and the staff that keep our campus running smoothly to the faculty that connect students to life changing resources, every person plays an immensely valuable part in the promotion of creativity.

The rapid rise of AI has created a new challenge when it comes to finding high quality creative work. This means that the value we place on original human thought and creativity is increasing every day. We are especially proud to present our magazine with the intention of promoting and encouraging work by people with their own perspectives, lives, and appreciation for art.

This literary journal required hard effort from all of our writers and artists, as well as our editors to ensure everything could be delivered on time. Our submission process attracted more extraordinary works than we could print, all of which we received with a shorter submission period than past editions. We are so grateful to our contributors for all their hard work.

With love,

Gwen, Will, Hanna, Vanessa, Mik, Paloma, Tim, Sam, and Hollie

Jeanie Ngo

Alchemic Whisper

of course, we came from Her
bones and bones
stacked high
a ladder to build a voice of
gratitude, She knows this—why else
why else create the emerald
shine of waxy leaves
tip juices into
the flesh of a peach
make night jasmine harmonize
with saccharine deliberacy
the freckles of stars
a blessing and reminder
to bear witness

soul metamorphosis

the waves once tranquil now bounce and spike in spontaneity before returning to zero—relative to themselves—brushing against the ground. can sunlight burn through the surface of the water? can sunlight bleach the green from a seaweed? can the film of salt protect you from burns or will your figure only fade while the light grows stronger?

a child of the village who doesn't know because she never asks. a child of the village who knows everything because she asks. to brush hands with prestige or excellency as an everyday passerby because someday she, too, will be a hero. the lofty dream flies further away the more footsteps she takes.

the wanderer laughs in the crowd. the wanderer adopts the adrenaline shed by surrounding smiles and carries it with fighting spirit, yet the body that carries becomes transient.

spread your wings and dive. spread your fins and fly. gallop along the highway and drive around the brush, contrarian, inverted fool. you are “complete,” this is your defense. you wonder why punctuation goes inside of quotation marks, especially questions. quotation marks are teeth that hold context and sometimes overeat it, like words and symbols resting gently in a pelican's mouth waiting to be delivered.

“almost” is where the wanderer remains. almost successful. almost an adventure. almost someone who adventures.

almost envious, but not quite.



A Glance Towards Forever - Blake Johnson

For Those Lost in the Middle Passage

Even not knowing the language, one can understand expressions and the vocal tones of violence. Amid a capture more cruel and calculated than that of any prior enemy. The ship, a nightmarish, wooden beast. It lived of swig after swig of salt water.

"We were so those, there was no room, we bled inside each other's wounds."

Skippping over waves, added more fear to the darkness. There was no room, not even for hope. To fall ill, an unexpected relief. To remain ill, brought one up to the deck. But the sky was unrecognizable; it wasn't the sky of home. And an overwhelming presence of salt dried out the senses that remained. With the least amount of effort mustered within two swings, they flew. Through the briny air and into the foam tipped laps. Where they were welcomed into the arms of murkiness. Enveloping beings in the last breaths. The last view was home.

Vanessa Mata

land poem

my country is not a toy,
a blow up doll.
my country is a poem
in a language you don't know.

my ridges grow food for gods
to devour. not white men
in the sky gods, but the gods
i believe in: the ones moving
blood through your chest & mine.

my rivers host snakes, so big,
so beautiful they would crush
all your bones with a single
flick of their wet, long tails.

my waterfalls call angels
thousands of feet down
into the maws of piranhas
they are restless, wild, killers.

my country is a grave.
dead speak through me.
put down the spade,
thief. listen.

Mel Diyarza

Ode to the Redwood Tree

Giant of the forest,
skyscraper of the woods
Insulated from the world by tannins and terra cotta bark
Stronger in numbers, bunches, groves
Reaching, intertwining, fusing
A system of mutual stability
Braving the gusty winds,
rushing floods, toppling trees
Ancient wonder
Drawing sustenance from the eerie mist
that lingers
Ever expanding from your fallen brothers
An attempt to right the wrongs
that destroyed so much
I look upon your beauty
The interconnectedness of your roots
Sequoia sempervirens

Johari House

When Mara signed into Johari House, the intake woman said, “The rooms will meet you where you are.” It sounded like a kindness, until the House began remaking the places Mara had taught herself not to remember: the chlorine-breathed corridor, the kitchen at 3 a.m., the bridge she hadn’t crossed. They said the land kept old spirits; some that pushed, some that guarded. Mara didn’t know which she needed. She only knew that when she thought of her brother’s name, her chest offered a second, wrong heartbeat.

Tonight, the House had built an empty bathhouse. Steam drifted over cracked green tile, making a room of breath. A nickel tap wept into a drained pool; drip folded into drip, sound thinning to thread. Lye and thyme scented the air; Baba’s soap married to clinic disinfectant. Clean and sorrowful. Mara gripped the rail, the metal was colder than the air. A memory rose with it of a balcony dare, Luka laughing down at dark water.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” a boy said, voice as easy as summer. “It’s only water.” He lounged on the opposite ladder, elbows hooked behind, bare feet swinging over the deep end. Luka at seventeen: sun-browned, that sideways grin that made trouble feel like an invitation, thinking the world was still kind.

“Don’t.” Mara said. The word cracked in the steam. He dropped to tile without sound. The room tilted toward him; the House wanted her to look.

“You remember this place?” he asked. “Fish-scale tiles. You said they made you want to swim after closing.”

“That wasn’t here,” she shook her head. Was it? In this place, memory braided into something stronger, less

trustworthy. His eyes were the right brown with the wrong shine. Not Luka's playful, live glass gaze. Her stomach tightened. The wrongness was soft, like cloth laid over a mirror. "You don't have to keep doing this," he said, gesturing upward. "Singing to ghosts. Tying old threads." He wrinkled his nose. "You could stop. You could rest."

A wind pressed along the tile, raising a chill. There was no door open, yet steam furred in it. The light bulbs buzzed faintly. *Zduhać*. Mara knew the feel now; metallic air like a coming storm, something braced and working just out of sight. A Protector, old stories said. They rarely spoke, they didn't need to. You understood what their presence meant when it washed over you. "How?" she asked, voice trembling.

He smiled, a clean knife to her heart. "Forget me."

The wind touched her coat like a careful hand pressing a child back from fire. A valve clanked, and the ghosts of currents moved over the pool's black floor. Ozone lifted the scent of thyme, and the room felt steadied by arms she couldn't see. He came closer. The creature imitating her brother was too clean, the shirt too new; Luka never wore anything untouched by weather. The House painted with true brushes and false, and she had to learn the strokes.

"You're not him," Mara said.

He opened his hands and held his arms to the side. "I am the part you can bear. Stay, and I will keep you safe." The wind did not push. It waited. *You can stand*, it seemed to say. *You can choose this*. Mara gripped the rail until her palm ached. "The best part of my brother was the part that hurt. Because it was alive."

His smile thinned. Steam slid through his outline. "Look at all this," he said, soft again. "You came here to be clean. You won't lose anything." There it was, the price of the

offered rest. Say yes, and the House would smooth the floor, close the shutters. No more second heartbeat. No Luka, not even as an ache.

“No,” she said. “I didn’t come to be clean. I came to shape the mud into something beautiful.” She stared directly at the Zduhać’s and found it smiling softly, glistening tears welling in its eyes. It gave the impression of a nod. The bulbs brightened, the tap stopped. A seam traced the pool’s floor, parting one version from another. The boy’s reflection held. His body did not.

“This won’t get easier,” he said.

“I don’t need easy,” Mara said. “I need true.”

He blurred like breath on glass and vanished. The pressure eased, and Mara exhaled.

One heartbeat.

The wind rose once more, a clean breath through the room then stilled, as if to say: *I can hold the roof. But the rain is yours.*

Mik Morgan

it's a mirror

it's a window—broken
blinds from a futile
attempted escape.
it's an aperture of sound—
the birds in their evening communion.
it's an opening, for something to seep
into the psyche, that collects notions
like lint to adhesive. that sticky sordid
spirit. those spotless sunken sensibilities.
that sad little heart collecting dust:

it's a portal—
for the light to pour in. god knows we
need it. this eery unseasonable sunshine.
let it fill you up. let it let you remember
the way your bones used to glimmer
with possibility—
it's a mirror. it's a mirror. it's a mirror.

b movie teaser

every new day a slight off kilter,
an askew. the well worn trope of the red-
tailed hawk in counterpoint to rising
action. you can only have so much intrigue
before the whole narrative turns farfetched.
isn't it funny how sometimes an orchestra
starts cranking overtures out of nowhere, tremolo
strings flutter an obvious augur and the story gets
twisted? love is a certain type of war and the heart
is collateral damage. will the strong female lead
learn to take the road more traveled, follow the trail
of lavender and jasmine, revel in the familiar?
see the fig tree there, its branches sighing in sultriness
of early autumn—how it settles into backstory all lush
and shrug, how it doesn't feel the constant need to up the stakes,
how it's perfectly content to dig deep and drink in the scenery.

.

Apple Tree

Before I was a woman, I was an apple tree.

I planned to live out my days in a body, become skin and bone, a corpse, then ash and a ghost. But now a field of tall grass has overtaken my living room. The floor turns to dirt beneath my feet and I wear shoes all the time in a vain attempt to keep my toes from sprouting roots.

Plants grow faster in the dark, so I sunbathe. My skin hardens, and then patches of bark appear on my knees and elbows.

It won't be long now. More and more, I remember what it was like: leaves budding, buds blooming, bees swarming as they whispered ancient incantations, nest in my crown, fruit at my fingertips, nights spent basking in the moonlight. The call, when it finally comes, takes the form of wind rushing through branches.

I did not...

I could not...

And then once more I am.



Elizabeth's Light - Wyatt Maxwell

Lukas Quinn

inherent / insolent

being queer doesn't
make me any poorer
in worldly inheritance
than my cishet father, bless
our check-bouncing souls

dear dad, you taught me
my purpose in this world
is to slip sophistication into
strippers' thongs and say
"don't spend it all
in one place, miss"
you ride the high horse
you say you earned
but i don't think you ever
bought it for yourself
did you, dad?

dear mirror, do i look
taller today? do i look
at least taller than him?
tell me: do these flaws
look mostly like seeds
sown into my gut, just
waiting to sprout into
pedigreed convictions?
no, i need to be seeking

different blossoms
for different fruits, but
really the data says:
all these seeds of ours
(the original / unnatural
pleasures of the flesh)
bud in self-indulgence
reaching ever upward—

“and how sweet!” he says
“and charming, yes! but
still sinful, nonetheless”

Carrying Their Hustle

Growing up, the world was quick to tell me who I was. “You’re just like them.” Lazy. Undisciplined. Not smart enough. People assumed I couldn’t succeed because of my name, my skin, the way I talked. I felt it in classrooms, hallways, and everyday interactions. Those small moments piled up until I thought the weight would crush me.

But then there were my grandparents. Their lives were a lesson before I could even understand what lessons were. They came here with nothing but their hands, their backs, and their courage. They risked everything for a future they might never fully see, and they never complained. Every struggle they endured, every insult they faced, was for us—for our family, for the opportunities they wanted me to have.

I’ve always felt the weight of my grandparents before I even knew what it meant.

Everything they gave up. Every long hour of work. Every insult. All of it, I carry.

One afternoon, we were walking home from the store. The air was quiet except for shopping carts rattling in the parking lot. I was speaking softly in Spanish, joking about something that happened earlier. A group of teenagers noticed us. They pointed. Whispered. Laughed. I felt every eye slice through me like fire. My stomach twisted, my hands clenched, and I wanted to disappear—or prove I wasn’t weak.

My grandparents stopped me. My grandfather placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Nunca dejes que los comentarios de alguien te afecten.

Siempre trata a todos con respeto y bondad, pase lo que pase.”

My grandmother added, “Deja que tus acciones hablen por ti. Nunca altercates.”

I froze. The anger boiled inside me, but I didn’t move. I didn’t understand. Why shouldn’t I shout back? Why shouldn’t I fight? All I felt was heat crawling up my neck, my hands trembling, my stomach tightening. Humiliation clung to me like something I couldn’t shake. In that moment, their words felt like a cage. I was mad. I was embarrassed. I was furious that the world thought I was less.

That night, I barely spoke. At home, I sat at the kitchen table while my grandparents moved quietly around me, folding clothes and putting dishes away. No lecture. No follow-up speech. Just presence. My grandfather met my eyes once and nodded, like he understood everything I couldn’t say. That silence stayed with me longer than any argument ever could.

It took years before their lesson landed. Their words weren’t about silence or weakness. They were about control—control over myself, my choices, my path. Strength doesn’t have to be loud. It can be quiet. Steady. It’s persistence when the world tries to push you down and patience when frustration tempts you to lash out. It’s acting with integrity, even when no one is watching.

Only later did I understand why they lived that way. Every long day and back-breaking job, every person who dismissed them, helped build a blueprint for resilience. Their struggle became the foundation I stand on. Their patience and discipline are the strength I carry today. Every goal I chase and every opportunity I take is proof that their sacrifices were not wasted.

Since that day, I’ve lived with their lesson in my chest. Every time someone doubts me or underestimates me,

I feel them behind me. I push myself harder. I study toward my career, chasing knowledge and opportunity. I work on cars with my dad, learning skills and dreaming of opening a shop with him one day. I hustle in every way possible—school, work, life—because I refuse to let what they endured be forgotten.

The world still tries to define me. It still whispers stereotypes about us—Mexicans, Latinos. When that pressure hits, I think of my grandparents and keep going.

I've realized something else. I'm not just carrying their sacrifices—I'm expanding them. Every opportunity I take and every success I claim proves that their work built more than a foundation. It built a launching pad. I'm proving that stereotypes don't define us. That we are capable. That we are relentless. That we create our own paths, even when the world tells us to stop.

Being Mexican and brown isn't a burden—it's fuel. I've learned to turn frustration into motivation, embarrassment into determination, and anger into action. The lessons my grandparents taught me aren't just words. They are the blueprint for my life.

Sometimes I think about what they never got to see: the life I'm building, the shop I'll run, the skills I'm learning, and the doors I'm opening. Every time I reach a new milestone, I feel their presence. Every achievement is a quiet message to them—your struggle wasn't wasted. Your sacrifice mattered.

The world may judge.

It may whisper.

It may try to push me down.

Pero yo sigo adelante—

carrying generations
on my back.

Because everything
 they endured...
was never meant to end in silence.
It deserves
 results.
Their work didn't end with them—
 it lives on in me.

Y en cada paso que doy,
I carry what they built.



El problema de los tres cuerpos - Pedro Ramírez

The Cost of Living is Always Surprising

Milk (Whole, Vitamin D)

I'd gone up for the layup and he dove over me from behind, pinning my ankle beneath us. The basketball court went silent except for my yowls, everyone's momentum dying mid-stride while the ball bounced twice and rolled into the gray rabbitbrush. The tall kid I'd stolen the ball from stood over me; scrimpy blonde hairs pocked his stupid chin. "Why did you foul me like that?" I screamed up at him. "What the fuck, dude, what the fuck!" I clutched my ankle with both hands, balloon bone already swelling black and blue under my skin. When I tried to straighten it, the viselike sensation of fingers squashed in a car door surged through the left side of my body. I rolled onto my side, then onto my back, then back onto my side, gravel and grit wedged into my shoulder blades. I pushed myself up with my good foot, put weight on the bad ankle, stepped forward and crumpled, my palms slapping the blacktop. A sniveling squeal shot out from my clenched teeth. "I think it's broken, it's broken!" I punched the ground and then again, knuckles opening on the asphalt, blood welling up in the creases of my palm, and I wished it was his stupid face. Someone behind the chain-link fence brayed with laughter.

Bread (Sourdough, Unsliced)

I was nine when my older adoptive sister told me there was no such thing as Santa. Her face twisted into that evil smirk she always had when she was hurting me. "It's Mom and Dad who bring the presents," she said, watching my face as I called her a liar. I didn't want to believe her. I wanted her to be wrong, wanted to prove she was lying just to be cruel. On Christmas Eve I snuck out of my room and hid in the guest room, waiting to catch Santa myself.

Through the crack in the door I watched my adoptive parents carry presents from the garage, heard the rustle of wrapping paper as they placed them under the tree. I shifted my feet and the floorboard creaked. Father turned sharply toward the guest room and crossed the hallway in three strides, flinging the door wide. He saw me there crouched on the floor in my pajamas and his face hardened. "You just ruined Christmas," he said, and it felt like an icicle stabbed into my chest. My mother stood behind him, arms full of gifts, saying nothing. He sent me back to bed. Every Christmas after that, he'd find a way to work it into conversation. "Remember when you ruined Christmas?"

Eggs (12 Extra-large, Cage Free)

He doubled the old leather belt over in his hands as he stood at the top of the stairs. I knew what came next: "Put your hands on the bed and look at the wall. This is for your own good." That belt had left welts on my back more times than I could count. My sisters never got the belt. When he began descending, something inside me cracked and leaked out. I picked up the Louisville Slugger, the one with my name burned into the barrel. I pointed it at him like I was the Great Bambino calling my shot. "You come down here with that belt and I'll hit you with this bat." He took another step and I brought the bat down on my bed frame, breaking it in half. I kept swinging, sobbing and screaming, snot and splinters flying together. "Come down here," I said, choking up on the bat. He didn't take another step.

Butter (Salted)

It happened behind the pool with redheaded Amber, during night swim. We were both on our bikes when she asked me to follow her to the top of the hill overlooking the water. *Rick Dees Weekly Top 40* played on the pool speakers below. The sun had set, but the summer sky was still streaked with fiery orange among pink clouds.

I stopped next to her, close enough that our handlebars almost touched. She reached over and suddenly pulled me into my first kiss, her hand on the back of my neck dragging me close. I forgot to breathe, our noses bumping, mouths smashing against each other. She tasted like watermelon Jolly Ranchers and salt; her swimsuit smelled like chlorine. Her tongue went into my mouth, darting in and out. When we pulled apart she smiled and didn't say anything, just rode off down the hill. I stood there for a long time, touching my mouth where the feeling still melted on my lips, watching the older kids jumping off the high dive, hearing the sound of their splashes.

Coffee (Dark Roast, Ground)

I was a week late on rent at the New York apartment and my roommates were being real dicks about it. They'd given me another week to come up with it, and I was just waiting for my paycheck from the laundromat. Every time I came home Brian would ask if I had the rent money yet, so I started staying away as much as possible. I was at my friend's house watching *Smallville* with a forty of Labatt Blue when Brian called and told me to come to the apartment for a house meeting. When I walked in, all four of them were at the table waiting like a tribunal. They'd found someone else to rent my room and I had to move out. "I thought I had another week," I said, the words acrid. "No," Brian said. "You have to move out tomorrow." I looked around the table at these people I'd lived with for over a year, people I'd helped when they needed it, people I'd partied with, people I thought were my friends, and the bitter truth was they didn't give a shit about me. The vote was unanimous. "I feel like cutting myself and bleeding all over this house," I said "laying a curse so vile no one would ever want to live here." I went to my room and sat on my bed, finishing my forty. Twenty minutes later someone pounded at the door. A cop stood in the hallway saying I had to leave because Brian felt unsafe. I couldn't believe he'd called the cops,

couldn't believe I was being kicked out for saying how I felt. I hadn't done anything. The cop didn't care. He told me I had to leave, and if I wanted my stuff I'd have to call the station and schedule an escort. I locked my door with the padlock and left. The next morning my friend called saying he'd walked past the apartment and all my stuff had been dumped on the street, people picking through it like fucking vultures. I ran over and found half my stuff already gone, everything valuable stolen. I knocked on the door to ask why, but no one answered. I didn't call the cops, just took what I could carry and left the grounds.

Honey (Local, Raw)

I couldn't believe she liked me, that she was coming over to spend the night. At the party she clung to me like I was the only person in the room, her fingers hooked through my belt loops, pulling me closer, her mouth sweet with cheap beer and peach lip gloss. Her friend drove us to my house, and we stayed tousled together in the backseat, drunk as fuck, her hands down my pants, mine up her shirt. At stoplights I'd see her friend watching us in the rearview mirror. She'd roll her eyes, but she was smiling. In the darkness of my bedroom we ripped at each other's clothes. I couldn't believe this was finally happening, and her touch left me golden and dripping, every muscle contracting with pleasure so intense I thought I might pass out. I came almost immediately, shuddering beneath her. I couldn't stop shivering. She grinned against my skin and kissed my neck and my chest, took my hands and placed them on her breasts, her nipples stiff against my palms. "We have all night," she whispered in my ear, tickling my earlobe with her tongue. I was hard again already, and she hummed with satisfaction that the jar wasn't empty yet.

Onions (Red)

We went swimming on the Snake River every summer,

where the wide green river ran placid amongst the dusty brown desert hills. The adults would spend the time catching catfish while the kids swam as the water lapped and sucked at the shores. There was a cottonwood tree with a rope swing we'd been using for years, but the river was low that summer, lower than I'd ever seen it. My cousin John was in front of me. He grabbed the rope and swung out. I can still hear the laughter before the rope snapped. He fell and hit his head on the rocks below, and when I got to him there was so much blood. Through the gash I could see the bone of his scalp, white against all that red, the skin flapping back against his hair. His soundless mouth gaping like a fish. My child's mind turned it into his brain spilling out onto the river stones even though that wasn't what happened. I started screaming and the adults came running, gathering him up in their arms and carrying him away. I can still hear that sound, the wet crack of his skull on stone. I can still see the pale bone, the red spreading across the rocks and mixing with the water, the river stone dripping blood.

Cheese (Sharp Cheddar, Shredded)

When my daughter told me I was her best friend she was sitting at the kitchen table coloring a picture of a rainbow with her box of crayons set out before her. She said it so offhandedly, like she was commenting on her favorite snack. "You're my best friend, Dad." I stopped washing dishes and looked at her, this tiny person I'd made, and could not help but smile. I wanted to tell her she was mine too, wanted to say something profound about how much she meant to me, but all I could manage was a half-choked "Yeah?" She nodded and went back to her coloring, and I felt myself coming apart in thin strips, unable to hold it together. I stood at the sink with soap suds dripping from my hands, my love welling up within me, my eyes wet with my own tears.

Bananas (Green, Turning Yellow)

We watched the Montreal Fireworks Festival, the largest fireworks competition in the world at La Ronde on the St. Lawrence River, the pyrotechnics lighting up the sky and cavorting before our eyes when the ecstasy began to kick in. Then we went dancing and clubbing on Rue Sainte-Catherine until 3 AM, the whole night a blur of music and phantograms. As the clubs were winding down we decided to climb Mount Royal in the center of the city. Katie and I smoked a spliffy at the top under the giant metal cross, the city lights spread below us like scattered diamonds reflecting starfire. After, we descended through the forest on the underside of the mountain, the path dark and twisted beneath the shadows of the trees. In the blackness we came upon a woman having a conversation with a giant oak, her voice rising and falling like birdsong. We stopped and watched, barely a few feet away, trying to understand what we were seeing. She finally noticed us standing there and turned, her face pale in the moonlight, her pupils large as saucer cups. "This is my dead lover," she said, touching the bark tenderly, leaning forward and kissing it. Then she bolted into the darkness, branches cracking under her feet until we couldn't hear her anymore. Katie and I looked at each other and started laughing and couldn't believe we had found someone more fucked up than us.

Apples (Honeycrisp)

I realized I was in love with her at the exact same moment I realized I would never see her again. She was getting on the train back to Boston, her bag slung over her shoulder, and she turned to wave one last time, that smile on her face. The recognition hit me like a fist to the sternum. This feeling I'd been trying to name all weekend was love, and it was too late to give it voice. The doors closed and the train pulled away and I stood on the platform watching it disappear, wanting to chase after it like an idiot in an old movie. I'd spent three days with her and

now she was leaving, back to her life, her boyfriend, her world that I could never be part of. I walked home with the fall rain dripping on my face, my chest aching with this beautiful, useless feeling. I was thinking about her smile, the way her brown eyes turned green as we kissed, her hair falling over my face, the smell of lilacs and passionfruit.

Chicken (Breast, Boneless)

The scar on the inside of my elbow, half an inch from the vein, reminds me of poultry. I'd cut myself in an attempt to take my life but I was too scared to do it properly. The razor blade bit into my skin and blood spurted, so much blood, running down my arm and dripping onto the bathroom floor like a well-done documentary. I watched it pool between the tiles and realized I didn't want to die, I just wanted to feel the pain. I didn't want to be numb anymore. I wrapped my arm in a towel and pressed hard, the white fabric blooming scarlet flowers. The scar will always be there, a wide pale line that catches the eye.

Total: \$107.63

The cost of living is always surprising.

throb of want

the cardiologist wants to get to the bottom of my arrhythmia
but perhaps there is no bottom if rooting for the root cause
only digs up more dirt. turns out my therapist was right—
filthy little secrets come back to bite, they have teeth
and axes to grind, the grist purely mercenary, a syncopated
bloodthirst all brio and backbeat. let's leave the broken world
out of it for now and my mother while we're at it—she died alone
in a cold hospital bed and that's no way to go. her heart just stopped,
the nurse told my brother over the phone, natural causes, she was there
until she wasn't. what she was—an unmitigated enigma, kept the world out
and her heart a lyric locked in. i wear my heart on my sleeve and my heart
is a perpetual throb of want. perhaps my heart wants what it wants
and what it wants will never be contained in a pretty little box
through inarguable diagnostics. perhaps my heart began to wander
and missed the turn, all those septembers ago, all the falling, all the parch.

Keep on Rocking in the Family Tree World

july sunrises & it's already 88 degrees & hundred-percent humidity.
the damp paints closed my million fussy pores. i sweat atrocious.

my radio's probably playing fifty cent, grandpa in his radio room
flop-sweats: tuned to rush limbaugh who flop-sweats pushing
DoD propaganda.

*there's weapons of mass destruction you know,
iraqis chatting on the radios.*

shake, shake, shake it like an anthrax sample.

i log on to my grandma's beige box running windows ninety-eight
there are ten toolbars, you need a terabyte external just
for the malware. i order then eat
unforgivable papa john's pizza

(this was before the slurs when it just regular sucked)

my neurons flicker in the
annoying fluorescent lights of mall cooled to damn near freezing
lest the ice rink perish. we've already etched an epitaph

there's nukes under the bed & we're all going to die;

my dad lived in miami during a missile crisis.
troops came into the lot across the street.
pitched a tent & loaded a missile rack.
even a ten year old could
see the future was nuclear soup.

Something is Better Than Nothing

“The first day I met Laura, she saved my life.”

Chris laughed at me in that bro-y way that got under my skin, but he didn’t stop digging.

“I get it. I miss her, too, dude.”

“It’s not a joke, Chris. Jesus. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t met her. She saved my life, and I owe her that debt. Forever.”

“Forever?” Chris glanced at me. He stuck his shovel in the pile of dirt at the foot of her grave. “Come on, man. You sound like you’ve watched *Lord of the Rings* too many times.”

How could I explain the connection I shared with Laura? What she did for me? How she reached out to me when I thought that kind of connection to other people was severed.

“I was drowning.” It’s hard to admit now, but I would have taken the easy way out if I hadn’t met her.

“She’s the one who told me, when everything feels impossible, to start with the smallest possible thing.”

When she said it to me, she sounded embarrassed by her own sincerity.

“Look,” she said. “When you’re doing nothing, literally anything is better than that.” She laughed. “I know. It sounds so dumb. But, like, it works. It really works. I swear. Something, anything, is better than nothing.” She took my hands in hers and forced me to look into her eyes. “Promise me you’ll try?” Of course, I promised her. No one could resist her when she asked for something.

Love was the second way she saved my life. I kept that to myself. Her voice, her words, her soul, I kept; Chris didn't get those.

"She helped me start small and build my life back up," I simplified for Chris.

With her help, I picked the smallest tasks to start. I took a shower or made my bed. I took a walk around the block. I put my water glass in the dishwasher instead of leaving it to grow cultures by my bed.

With each step, I put an iridescent star sticker next to the task on a twee tracker she made for me. She called it motivation, I called it devotion.

It wasn't enough, obviously, but the small steps began to turn into a few steps together. I made my bed, and I took a shower on the same day. I walked for ten minutes, then twenty. I ran my dishwasher after cooking boxed mac and cheese for dinner.

As I gained momentum, I called a real therapist and made an appointment. She held my hand while I was on the phone. I started taking SSRIs and feeling like I could live again instead of dragging myself through life like a walking corpse.

Instead of all that, I said to Chris, "I don't think I would have gotten through school without her. It was already my second try. I dropped out the first time, and I was on track to drop out again for the same reasons."

Chris stopped digging for a second time, wiping away sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand. His breath heaved with exertion now that he was close to the bottom.

"I get it, man, she was important to you. She was important to me, too." Chris held up his hands and quickly amended. "I was just a friend. You got to her first. But

she was great. The world is a worse place because she's not here."

That's why Chris was here tonight. That was why I could trust him with this. He was the only other person who hadn't written her death off as "the way of things." He wasn't as broken as me, but if there were another person who owed Laura a life debt, it would be him, even if he'd never call it that.

"Exactly," I agreed. "Thanks to Laura, I learned how not to give up, and I'm not giving up now."

After what felt like ages of watching him dig, Chris hit wood. His arms were shaking with exhaustion as I helped him out of the grave and gave him a drink from the water bottle I brought for him.

I took his shovel and leaned it against her headstone. I looked up at the sorrowful marble angel, wreathed in moonlight, meant to mourn Laura forever. It seemed appropriate, but it was ostentatious and dramatic. Laura would have hated it. She wanted to be cremated and her ashes scattered in the woods where she hunted for chanterelles in the early winter.

Her family could have asked me what she wanted; I was the person who was always with her, but they politely ignored me when she got sick. By the end, I didn't count as important enough to have a say in how she was remembered.

It was good that no one asked me. Stupidly, I would have told them about the cremation, and there would be no body to dig up. No way to complete the ritual.

"I got my degree in religious studies. That's what she helped me with." I grabbed the long pry bar from its place next to the shovel and handed it to Chris.

Chris huffed as he dropped to the ground with the pry

bar in his hand, readying himself for the next steps of the plan. He thrust the pry bar into the grave, catching the lip of the coffin in one smooth move.

There were many reasons why Chris was the one who could help me. He loved Laura. He was strong and willing to help. He was a bit stupid.

I laid the book at the base of the angel and surveyed the scope of my work.

“I was fascinated by the kind of magical thinking that helped me crawl out of my own, very metaphorical grave. I wanted to know how other cultures dealt with the same thing.”

Magic. They used magic. Most of the professors called it “magical thinking.” As if the hard work and hope I used to get out of my depression were anything less than miraculous.

“Anyway, you’ll find amazing things in the university library. Stuff you’re not supposed to take out of the special collections room.” I knocked on the book with my free hand and opened it. “It was easier to smuggle it out than I thought.”

Chris hasn’t seen the book yet. He understood the rough sketch of my plan for Laura, and he agreed to help. He was always willing to help a friend. If he didn’t count me as one, then Laura still counted. I thought it would be harder to convince him, but he wanted her back. If he had other reasons, well, they wouldn’t matter.

Before our first conversation, I wondered how I’d get all the components for the spell. What animal would be big enough to count? How could I afford it? Then he said yes and offered to help dig her out. With Chris’ help, I got a grave digger, a coffin opener, and a sacrifice all in one.

I didn't know how the spell would go. I was fairly certain it would work, but the text wasn't clear about what happened after the sacrifice. It didn't detail what came back, like it detailed how to make it happen. The lack of detail was not my translation error; whoever wrote the spell was as unconcerned about the specifics of the outcome as I was.

I don't care how she comes back, only that she does. Something, after all, is better than nothing.

Artemis Mackay

elegy for a queen

the arsenal had unwise arms,
my trembling fingers leading

to the pit of the rat.
alabaster brilliant, a domestic
defense of your *deadbeat*, *deadweight*

inbred hapsburg of a husband. i was
your eyes. sprung forth a tactic,
shuffle of the situation. the bishop

poised in prayer—*never* trust
a lurking churchman. even i,
a republican in the irish mourn

be reborn
when the pawns find eden

& transform
like a tall

east Burnside transfemme heels *clack*
clacking

i'll gut the priest
in a chosen square yet.

Seven Bananas

Yes, he was a little stoned—he was at the beach cabin alone for the first time in years, of course he was stoned. But this was next level. He'd hallucinated once before, a mushroom trip, his buddy Jason's head morphing into a giant grape. This wasn't like that.

Greg stared at the banana sitting on the counter. It didn't glitch. It seemed absolutely real. He walked over and touched it, like he'd done to the other banana a couple minutes before, and again, very real. Cool to the touch. Smooth.

Despite a wave of nausea, he had to follow through with whatever was happening here. So he grabbed the banana and turned around and marched back across the kitchen and through the garage door, swinging it shut. Then he turned around and looked back through the door's small glass window. Nothing on the counter. He looked down at the banana in his hand. Just a regular banana, still green near the stem. Which was of course exactly how Diana liked bananas. "More nutritious," she insisted.

He took a breath and looked up through the window. He let out a stupified wheeze. Because yet another banana had appeared on the counter—identical to the one he was holding, which he set down on the work bench beside the first two bananas, so he could push open the door and walk over and touch the new specimen on the counter. Just as cool, just as smooth and real.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me," Greg shouted. "Goddamn it, Diana!"

He snatched up the banana and leapt out the door, slamming it shut, then stared back through the glass, waiting. Nothing happened at first. He kept staring.

Then, materializing out of nothing, a new banana popped into existence.

He stood there for a long moment with his mouth half open, breathing heavily, staring at it. He slowly stepped back from the door and lifted the hand that was holding the prior banana up in front of his face, and he tenderly pulled the green stem downward, popping it open, revealing what he fully expected—the powdery white nose of a real banana. He hesitated a moment, then bit it. His tongue puckered at the sweetness.

He leaned his head against the doorframe, dropped the banana to the floor, and wept. Eventually, the half-chewed chunk slid from his mouth, threaded with drool.

He knew there would be another banana when he looked up, and there it was. And this time when he opened the door and walked toward the counter, he walked like a churchgoer toward an altar, toward receiving the Eucharist as he'd done so many times as a kid. He gently picked the newest banana up and carried it outside, and set it on the smooth concrete floor. Then gathered up the other four, and crouched down and arranged all five into a tidy row. "Diana," he whispered, like a warning.

He stood up and looked through the door. A new banana, the sixth banana, had appeared. And so he said her name again, and walked in to pick up the banana, then back out the door where he hoarsely whispered, "Seven bananas," as he leaned down to reverently add the sixth banana to the row.

Because that was her invented idiom. Theirs. The Wednesday before she'd died, they were crying together in the hospice room, laughing through tired tears about all stupid idioms used for the dying, all the cliches. And Diana pantomimed the tone of the

generically mournful, saying, “She lost her battle with cancer,” in a solemn voice, and then laughed bitterly, and made him promise to never say it. Her death needed its own fresh idioms. She pointed at the banana on her bedside tray, well past the point of consumption for her, and said, “For instance, overripe banana,” then lowered her voice an octave, and said, “We’re all just bananas, Greg, ripening throughout our lives toward death,” feigning seriousness, and he’d put his hand on her face and said, “I love you, you stupid fucking banana.”

She laugh-cried and then coughed, and weakly said, “Well, I love you double banana,” and then pulled her hand from where it rested below his and grabbed a handful of his long hair, and let her arm drop, which stopped him from formulating a retort, and she sighed, “I love you seven bananas.” He laughed at her specificity and asked, “Why seven?” and she paused, then said, “Seven’s the perfect number.”

And here, through the small glass window of the garage door, was a seventh banana. Waiting for him on the counter.

Radiant with gooseflesh, he walked in and stood a foot away from it, half chuckling, half crying. He turned and hopped his butt up on the counter next to it. He looked down at the banana, and then picked it up, and opened it, and ate it with intention, bite by bite. A sacrament.

Then he slid off and walked out, and slowly closed the garage door and stood there watching back through it, but not really watching, because he guessed, correctly, that there would be no more bananas. That this would be the last banana, that this was the last time he’d ever eat a banana. That he would always feel an enormous amount of love for bananas, but that he would never be able to eat another one after this, after going back out and eating the other six bananas, even the one he’d opened and left sitting on the cold concrete, and

that he would never tell anyone about this, would never disclose the fact that in the middle of the night he'd dug a deep hole in the sand out behind the beach cabin, and that he'd buried inside that hole a shoebox full of still-green banana peels.



Solace - Aspyn Erikson

OCD Diagnosis

Symptoms may include
becoming wilted and tired hiding in bathroom stalls
in lone mornings,
in lunch hour crowds, in their voices and vape smoke.
Symptoms may include letting the cold night absorb you,
absolve you from
pixelated fits and fears
that muddle sanity and safety.
Symptoms may include letting routine and ritual and meaning
slough off your skin
off your flesh bone and muscle until there is nothing but
cold blades and sweaty bedsheets to blanket you in your fever.
Symptoms may include checking
the stove your skin the light switch your mouth your scalp
your sores your breath
a hundred times over again, a thousand times
is not good enough until you have
washed bathed scrubbed sanitized showered doused peeled
grated scraped glazed your hands in
bleach, your thighs in Lysol your teeth in rubbing alcohol.
Symptoms may include finally eating and letting your dry
fingers brush
your lip by a hair. You will die over again.
Symptoms may include generously gifting, bestowing
years upon the altar of worry,
of desecration,

of Google searches and r/nurses r/advice r/mentalhealth threads
Symptoms may include searching for peace in the stillness of
sleep in the safety
of gnawing
granola bars, fruit snacks, clean and prepackaged
sit in your stomach they are
shallow tasteless hypocritical empty calories empty
memories
they are sour
you have soured.
They are a veneer of what you intended to be.

Amber Ritchie

Cast Iron Stomach

milquetoast, runny nose
the day slipped away from
greedy little fingers

how much mettle smelted
into my belly, firm
handshake and a winking eye

smoke out the dog house,
leashed to the couch

crouch, all skinned knees
whistle through your gapped tooth

find how youth sits upon
your buoyant breath,
milk stained fingers, arts and crafts

daft like your father hiding
booze in the shed, let's not pretend
the rot isn't coming from inside the house

the call slinks along the kitchen
sprung like the cord twirled
around your pinky finger
doe eyed in the headlights

painted on the sidewalk, make
promises that you intend to keep

sleep like tomorrow is guaranteed

Shards

In January of 2020 I received a phone call, and the words created a crack in the soft glass form of my body. The fracture trailed from my right ear down my neck to my collarbone, where it widened into a gaping fissure. From my collar it traveled inward, taking the form of almost invisible hairlines channeling their way to my center. I taped it together as best I could. I wore scarves. I bought a turtleneck.

“How ya doing?” I’d say, speedily walking past acquaintances before they could spot my wound. The damaged surfaces of my insides rubbed and creaked against each other when I moved. I spent my evenings laying in bed with soft music and softer light in an effort to prevent the cracks from traveling further.

At some point during the January rain a droplet of water slipped its way into my fracture and settled in the hairline cracks behind my ribcage. I carried this droplet with me for a month. It created an ache in my chest and a sweet taste in the back of my mouth when I cried driving to and from work.

In February of that year I experienced an extreme freeze which settled in my apartment and trailed along the roads between Oregon and Washington. The droplet within my ribcage expanded, and with a soft, almost imperceptible creak, I shattered. It felt wrong for the moment of my implosion to happen so quietly. It seemed only appropriate for a full human shattering to be accompanied by deafening thunder which would set off car alarms and announce to the

neighborhood that a world-shifting event had occurred. Not the meek “uh oh” I let out while cradling my ribs, trying to hold my insides in place.

The shards that used to be me slipped through my many cracks and trailed behind me on the sidewalk. I left fragments of myself on the highway, throughout my neighborhood, in the back roads of my hometown walking home late at night. I sat drunk next to the skate park and cried, leaving a scattering of small fragments sparkling in the streetlight. Each morning I woke up rolling in loose pieces which had dislodged in my sleep. Trying to wedge the shards back in place gave me sharp edges where soft surfaces had once been.

The losses became such a familiar, painful sensation I tried not to think about them and shunned activities which would make my missing pieces visible to others. I avoided looking at pictures of my previous complete self. In that avoidance I did not notice the remaining pieces growing together into a solid being. I only noticed when small, tangible aspects of myself began to return, reminding me of where a loss had been.

I'm a different shape than I used to be. Transformed, yes. New and improved, probably not. But my edges have been softened by a few years' time and my shape feels familiar to me now.

Sometimes I'll be walking the dog and see something familiar shine from the ground, half covered by a tuft of grass. I'll wriggle the shard from its spot embedded in the hard earth, wipe the dirt from its surface and place it back in my personality where I remember it used to live.



Untitled - Hailea Aliza

Mik Morgan

elegy for my body

i'm searching for it again
that somatic sorcery
i remember it so well
that rhapsody of shape
i'm sorry for the times i abandoned you, buddy
and i'm sorry that i know i will do it again
and again, and again, and again, and again

can you white knuckle your way back to safety?
can you keep your nose clean and your spine straight?

this is a prayer this is an apology
every inhale a requiem for myself
every exhale an invitation to mend
every day rotten gut and grasping jaw
every night grave digging

every trespass by the other
every betrayal of self
your body remembers it all
your body remembers it all

Edinam Denoo Yawo

Lost in Translation

I.

Where do you go when you go
quiet? Here is a river that slows down loud syllabi
at my navel,
past the congested traffic on hungry roads
past taxi drivers complaining about a country into the future
that has killed them in the past,
past the hawkers selling dreams half the price of God's silence,
past the beggars whose bowls are ropes for the living,
past the fear of loving a country that can't love you back,
past silver eulogies, past the president smoking the country's youth
 into oblivion,
past the dead eyes of a cathedral into a muezzin's call;
into a language you do not know/into a language that can't identify you
which is to say, this body is lost in translation.

II.

Where do you go when you close your eyes?

The blood here is a lamb slain to usher in
a new mural of sunlight.

This body has seen the end of a prayer,
has seen eyes roll into their sockets while waiting for answers,
has seen bullets rewrite the constitution of a body,
this body has seen loss; the cavity for caskets,
has seen nomads look for a new language to survival. A new
language to direct loss into. Because loss is a god
demanding too much from your existence.

III.

Grief survives in the liminal spaces
where something is always lost in translation:
a child, a mother, a god,
a memory looking for tribal marks,
a desire with sharp claws
or a name with no vowel
on a tongue retching a graveyard
every time it attempts to name itself.

GLOSSARY

"Where do you go when you close your eyes" is a line taken from 'Intuition' poem
from "Pray You Catch Me" by Beyonce from her album *Lemonade*.

Justin Rigamonti

The Five Stages of Grief

The first stage is burying
your face in your hands.

The second is bending over
like you're vomiting
because you're vomiting.

The third stage is worship
or sex, because you've dropped
to your knees, and grief
is holding you by your hair.

Grief is your god now.
This is the fourth stage.
You fall forward like a child,
you wrap your trembling
arms around your head.

The fifth stage is resurrection.
But you don't get to return.
It's someone else who rises
off the floor. Someone new
who gets up slowly, breathes
your storm-wet breaths.



Grief Body 2 - Shelley Chamberlin

Kat Curey

Shrine

Like a Degas dancer,
sanctified in true blue, burning breath

Moving as a spoonful of light
draped in seraphic aches

You loved me, holy
a keeper of wonder
building altars of hallowed life

You made wishes for me
as I cast a shadow
over your shrine
left cups
brimming with lurid spite

Telling profane stories
with your eyes

I'll dissolve into a puddle, soft and buoyant
to reflect and cradle your light



Crimson Virgil - Kat Curey

The Dance Hides in Stillness

The dance hides in sanguine stillness.

Waiting to uncoil, waiting to strike. To show
the watchers only what they need to know,
to witness the fearful riches.

Accepting the mission into the maze,
the body's bewilderment becomes certainty.
Get out of your head—live in your body,
the dancer proclaims.

The dance embraces the refrain,
like a mother's smothering hug of a
pardoned teen. Triple step, rock step.
The heel and toe sneer in their petty vignette.

Then pirouette, hands thrown to the sky.
Once, twice, three times, four,
the entire length of the wood-sprung floor.
Mambo! Promenade, chassé.

Keeping the darkness at bay
another day.

Broken Haibun

I start with the large broom.

Your pillow, medication bottles,
1980's drugstore sunglasses.
I run my hands on their curved edges
and it makes sense.

I push together memories
of summers at the lake
and by the pool,
pizza and ice cream,
Christmas,
cats.
They form a pile and I kneel,
like at your headstone when I thought,
"You are not this pile of dirt,"
but you are.

Photograph after photograph now,
some faded and some not,
anything with sharp edges—
a carving knife,
a shark's tooth.
I need a smaller handle.

Paper bag in hand,
I marvel at the shapes no
hands could form if they tried,

some glazed, shining, unremarkable,
some white, raw, blazing, almost
crystalline in nature.

This is your stutter.

This one is your bad hip—
shattered, yes, but there was no
saving it. To be solid is a lie.
Not only at the end are we dust.
Sweeping, sweeping, sweeping,
it never ends.

When the bowl left my fingers,
I didn't expect it to bounce.
But here on my knees, I am
a nose-length away from
confronting everything, past,
present, future—brushing the
infinite and the infinitesimal.

The people who live
here after me won't find the
pieces under the fridge.

Alex Carrigan

Ars Poetica: Knife Block

After "Ars Poetica" by Aldrin Regina Valdez

I've had this
knife block for over
twenty years,

dug my skin into
the dots etched
into the handles,

and always return
to it no matter
how hard my hands cramp.

No matter how
worn down
the blades get,

I always come back,
trace my thumb along
the blade and promise myself
today will not be the day
I finally take a finger tip off.

I promise myself
the blade will
return to its shell,

a hermit crab that has grown
tired from searching,
from being naked to the sea.

If I do cut my
fingertip off
today,

I'll finish this poem
on the cutting board
and consider finally
getting myself
some new knives.

Anna Crandall

The City Of My Name

I haven't borrowed a name recently, don't
remember how to be both/and without you—
the way we know when a dream fades
from waking, a terrible curse smoothed
by a mother's cool hand, crumbling
between us and love.

How the tumbleweed neglects
the calming air, the wind its pride.

Or how when you came in the darkness
behind the Safeway you couldn't
look—how eyes avoid fire. Who
is most saintly neglects
sinners. Who prays neglects
the heathens. Who hangs before he cries

out. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, for my past
disguises, but never for what
I told you I was when it mattered.
Let the city of my name burn.



Untitled - Christine Vo

Aubade with Shining City

Inspired by "Aubade with Burning City" by Ocean Vuong

Armed Forces Radio will play Vera Lynn's "We'll Meet Again" as a code
to begin Operation Jumping Sand, the ultimate evacuation
of American civilians and Iranian refugees
by air prior to a nuclear strike on Tehran.

Glorious

A light that hurts to look into spreads across the sands.

Don't know where, don't know when...

Boots kick pyramids, a trail of tombstones dashed
lining the paint.

The soldier looks at his pins and drops his cigarette.

Sandpaper stubble sharp enough to light the match,
butt burning and writhing on the concrete.

Ants under a magnifying glass.

We'll meet again some sunny day...

A boy is pulled from class, down to the office. American,
he is. Lockers locked him in, holding him within
the halls of the school, he leaves.

The rest stay in their seats. A man clocks out of
work early.

Off the hour. A family runs across busy
streets. Their little girl thinks,

this is familiar,
 keep smiling through... this is a missed flight,
 crushed in my mother's arms,
and closing my eyes when she screams.

The soldier starts to feel his heart in his chest,
 You've trained for this,
The soldier's mind says
 As it tells him. Raise your arm raise your guard son
 Raise your gun.

Planes have been flying above the city since morning.
 Early morning when the steel shined in a bright light.
 When the grey flock flew home and the leopard
 stalked the jungle below.
Chase those dark clouds far away...

Strutting on a catwalk, a wire, a leopard's prowl, the
jungle explodes,
 with the leopard so near.
And the streets flow like a river.

 All boys pulled from their seats,
and the bridges are brimming.
 Prayers in bulging backseats as white lines
 drill into employed eyes,
and the people are screaming.
 A symphony echoes off tempered deserts
 beamed into the sky.

Don't know where, don't know when...

A small cry pleads its way into a boy's heart. His father pulls him through the crowd, leaving the youth's future to bawl in the square, parents ripped to the wind or to the sands.

The sands that shine in late morning and blow
with the screams

We'll meet again, some...

As a light,

too bright to look into

Sunny day

spreads across the sands.

Justin Goodman

Al-Qahira Castle

Yemen's Al-Qahira Castle Survived Centuries of War and Neglect. Can It
Survive Its Own Restoration?
-Smithsonian Magazine Headline

History

Dyslexic

Spells

Al-Qariah

In

Qadad

Beneath

Empires

People

Beneath

Rubble

Carding

Wool

nina's gun

my ugly feelings run wild. like children at a restaurant: screaming, crying
as if it's the end of the world. is it not? all three of my friends i still talk to
say they can't leave the house without wanting to cry, or that community is
one more unkempt room in the house of the collective unconscious. who wants
to touch a bird with a bloody hole in its stomach, pick it up and let it die on
the palm of their hand? my favorite people will do it, even give them flowers
in the backyard, a proper burial. others will run it over, try to flatten it into
the concrete. like they do everything else. it's not that they want to, i tell
myself it's all they know. condescending bitch—the other voice says—
slinging rocks at the glass cabinet where i keep my love for them for fear
i will lose it. how do you write a poem when you know what you have to say?
i'm not subtle. not nina begging not to be misunderstood, but more like the
nina music guy tells me about: pulling the gun on the record exec that
stiffed her. hysterical, he hints, but in her sharp edges, i understand kin.

chicago

have you ever loved a thing that crushed you
crumpled you ruthless like a paper cup
grasped in a fist after thirst has been quenched
and the desire to drink now memory/
what if the thing was the first to hold you
protect you from the certain drought
the life about to take you by the throat
to throttle you a snake thirsting for your
last drop/what if your song was a river
of promise of possibility a watershed
beginning to break free from yesterday/
let's call that first love what it was—flashback
and flimflam, moonlit and slithering/the city,
or him, or her/all that hardscrabble charm
and the wind, always the wind/pick your undoing.

Second Day of the Chinese New Year

I was in the living room with my parents when my phone buzzed. It was a WeChat message from my niece Ling—the eldest daughter of my sister Lilin:

“Mom and Mei got physical.”

“Physical? Weren’t you supposed to go horseback riding?” I typed back. My sister had said she was taking her two daughters riding. They’d only left less than two hours ago, and everything had seemed harmonious when they set off. How could they already be fighting?

“No reservation. Too many tourists,” Ling replied.

Through her fragmented voice messages and texts, I pieced together what happened:

The car was parked by the roadside. On either side of a concrete path lay barren land, withered grass, and a steady stream of vehicles. The sun blazed down, as if summer had arrived early. Mei slammed the car door.

“And you dragged me to this horrible place for Spring Festival?” Mei said.

My sister glared at her and said, “Then walk back yourself.”

Their quarrel escalated until Mei lunged forward just as my sister turned around. Mei’s slap landed across my sister’s face. My sister’s fist struck Mei’s shoulder.

Ling tried to pull them apart. Caught between them, she was pushed and shoved back and forth. My sister’s nails scratched her arm. Mei’s kick landed on her calf. The car door stood open, heat pouring in. No one got out; no one wanted to leave.

“Good thing I’m strong enough, or I really couldn’t have separated them.” Ling’s voice carried a tone of self-mockery,

that kind of accustomed calmness. In the background of her voice message, I heard crying and the sounds of arguing.

I told my parents about the fight. The TV was rebroadcasting the Spring Festival Gala. My mother blurted out: “Mei is in the wrong. Her mother went through so much trouble to take her out to have fun; she shouldn’t complain.” Her tone was accusatory as always.

My father simply shook his head, finished the tea in his *gongfu* teacup, and delivered his classic line: “Useless,” his expression of contempt familiar too. In his eyes, we were all disappointments.

“Besides, how can a child hit their mother?” my mother continued.

I didn’t respond. In my mother’s mind, every tragedy originated from my sister refusing to listen to the family’s advice when she insisted on marrying that irresponsible man. After marriage, she ran a clothing store alone, supporting three children, her mother-in-law, and a man who only gambled, spent her money, and argued with her.

“You can’t blame my sister entirely. If you all hadn’t stopped her from getting divorced back then—”

“What good end can a divorced woman come to?” my father said.

I wanted to ask him, why should women endure regardless of their marital status? Why did everything have to be decided by him? My mother had been married to him for over forty years, spending every day in arguments. Was this the “good end” he spoke of? I bit my lower lip, reminding myself: it’s the holidays now; don’t argue with him.

I shouldn’t have come back, even though according to custom, married daughters should return to their parents’ home on the second day of the Chinese New Year. But my ten-year-old daughter wanted to spend the holiday in the countryside with my husband’s sister and her family. I had to take her from Guangzhou to Shenzhen first, then she went with them from there. My parents’ town was only a nine-minute high-

speed rail ride away. My husband had to work and couldn't accompany me, but he persuaded me: since it was so close, you should go see them. I listened to him and came. But I was glad I didn't follow his other advice: "Stay two nights and spend more time with your parents." I would go back to Guangzhou tomorrow at noon. Thankfully, my daughter wasn't here; she didn't have to witness all this.

My mother called Ling, insisting they come over for dinner and not let Mei go home alone. Mei's father had bought an apartment; usually Mei lived there with her paternal grandmother. I knew what my mother was worried about: during the festival, the grandmother wasn't home. If Mei went back and hurt herself again? Last time she fought with her brother, she had cut her wrists in a fit of anger. Fortunately, the grandmother discovered it in time and took her to a clinic. My sister had also cut her wrists at sixteen. After arguing with my parents, she went into her room. When I pushed open the door, she was sitting on the floor, her wrist covered in blood. Like what happened to my sister back then, Mei's "stupid behavior" only earned her harsher scolding.

"You must bring your sister over, understand?" My mother hung up after saying this.

I wanted to tell Mei that regardless of what parents did wrong, children should never lay hands on them. This was absolutely forbidden in our culture of filial piety. But thinking of everything Mei had experienced growing up, what could I say? My sister had once beaten her black and blue with a clothes hanger after an argument—this was what Mei told me. And Mei's father had slapped her hard across the face just for talking back, knocking out one of her teeth—this was what my mother told me. Hearing these descriptions, what came to my mind was my sister as a little girl, covered in bruises from being beaten by my father with a broom. As a grown-up, in an argument, my sister's body moved faster than her mind. The slap came first, her words trailing behind.

Could I blame my sister? No. My father was an even more violent man. When he beat his children, he did so as if to kill them. When my sister was arguing with her then-husband

about divorce, my father heard them downstairs, grabbed a kitchen knife, and rushed upstairs, saying to my sister: "If you dare get divorced, die right now!"

An hour after my mother called Ling, she pulled Mei into the living room. I asked: "Where's your mom?"

"She's downstairs. She'll come up in a bit."

Mei's eyes were still swollen and red. She sat down in a corner of the sofa. My mother sat beside her, putting her arm around Mei's shoulders, and asked: "Why did you argue with your mom today?" Her tone was gentle, as if coaxing a three-year-old child. In my experience growing up, she had always been that terrifying mother who would scream curses at us, who would slap me at any moment. Perhaps she had mellowed with age, or perhaps life wasn't as impoverished as before and her temper had improved.

Mei told us she had only complained about the heat, and her mother kept scolding her. She had endured it all, until my sister said those words: "No wonder your father doesn't want you. Who would like someone like you? I don't want you either. You're no longer my daughter." Those words detonated Mei; that's when she lunged at my sister, and my sister slapped her back. "In such a desolate place, she wanted to kick me out of the car." Mei's tears streamed down. "Mom said this car was a gift from her boyfriend."

"How could she say such things?" my mother said.

I wanted to tell Mei that her mother's father—that is, my father—had spoken to us like that since we were young, hurting us with even uglier words. Her mother had learned to speak this way because she had been treated like this her entire childhood.

The words reached my lips and I swallowed them back. Because what would come next? That because we were treated this way, we could pass this harm on to our children, letting the vicious cycle continue? Such an explanation would sound like making excuses.

My sister walked in. My mother began to lecture her, saying she shouldn't speak like that, that she knew perfectly well how much Mei cared about her parents' divorce.

"Her father and I are already divorced. Does that mean I have to apologize for it?" my sister said.

"But you can't say her father doesn't want her," my mother said.

"Whatever the case, I'm still her mother. She hit me like this. Does she treat me like a mother?" My sister's emotions were running high too.

"Enough," I said. "Everyone calm down."

At my mother's glance, I took Ling and Mei upstairs. I knew I needed to say something to help Mei and my sister reconcile, to ease their relationship. But I didn't think I could do it. I wanted to tell them about the hurt and violence my sister had endured, how she too lacked love. I had mentioned it to them before.

After a moment of silence, I spoke: "I believe your mother loves you." Even if she couldn't convey it, even if she didn't know how to express it. "And I believe you love your mother too." Even if they argued and hurt each other whenever they were together.

All the psychology books I had read only helped me understand why they were this way, but I didn't know how to help them. In the same way, I could understand why my father had such a volatile, negative personality. It came from his childhood trauma. His own father, to feed his starving family, once dug up sweet potatoes from the state's fields and was reported. He fled that night and later slipped into Hong Kong, then a British colony. After that, my father's family was looked down upon in the village. During the Cultural Revolution they were persecuted again.

I understood my father's violent tendencies stemmed from fear and humiliation carried for years, but emotionally I couldn't get close to him. The moment he opened his mouth, it was criticism and attacks (I reminded myself that during

the Cultural Revolution, the attacks he experienced were far more severe), and I couldn't help but retort, which eventually escalated into an argument. So I stayed away. I think I love him, and I believe he loves me too. It's just that we only know how to express it through mutual harm. Keeping our distance is our only way to remain at peace.

So, my sister lives alone in an apartment, Ling lives upstairs from my parents, and Mei lives in the apartment her father bought.

The next morning my sister messaged me: Awake? I'll take you to breakfast.

My parents woke late and skipped breakfast, going straight to lunch. When my sister arrived I had just finished brushing my teeth. I followed her to a rice-roll shop beside the market. A seafood stall stood next door, and the smell of fish drifted over now and then.

We sat down.

"Mei is still young," I said. "Don't hold it against her."

"She's eighteen." Her voice rose. "What kind of person hits her own mother?"

I wanted to remind her that the last time they fought, her boyfriend stepped in and slapped Mei while she watched coldly. I would never allow anyone to hit my daughter like that. But I said nothing. It wasn't my place to judge her.

"When I divorced, I only took Ling with me," she said. "I could only afford to raise one child. I knew then I would lose Mei and my son."

I also wanted to tell her that divorce was normal now, that children didn't automatically hate their parents for it. The real damage came from Mei's father's family. They spoke badly of my sister in front of Mei and her brother. Their paternal grandmother even cursed my sister with the harshest words and forbade my nephew from contacting her.

"I never say a bad word about their father in front of them," my sister said. "I don't want them caught in the middle. But has anyone ever thought about me?"

"You need to tell them why you stay silent."

"Do I really have to explain that?"

"Yes. If you don't, they won't understand."

She was quiet for nearly a minute before saying, "You know I don't like complaining."

Neither did I. We grew up in the same family. We learned too early that no one could be relied on.

Our ways of loving and arguing come from the families we were raised in. Even when we hate those patterns, we repeat them without knowing, keeping the same hurt alive.

"I don't like holidays," my sister said. "On ordinary days it's fine. Every holiday ends badly."

Neither did I. Holidays forced us to gather together. I didn't want to come back, didn't want to watch them hurt each other in the name of love while I could do nothing. I was a coward, choosing distance, closing my eyes, as if by not seeing it, I could pretend everything was fine.

The woman at the shop brought us two plates of rice rolls. My sister ordered soy milk.

"Only one left," the woman said.

"That's fine."

When she set it down, my sister pushed the cup toward me. I pushed it back. "I don't want it," I said.

She took a sip and set it aside. "This isn't soy milk. It's just sugar water."

The cup stayed in the middle of the table. Neither of us touched it again. When we left, it remained there.





War Unicorn - Bryn Phillips

John Grey

The Ring

A wedding ring
occupies the fourth finger
of her left hand.
It bears the thin metal taste
of a promise.

And her flesh has grown
around it.
It's impossible to remove.
She would need to cut
that finger off with a saw
to free herself of all that it means.

It's not the same
as turning the wedding photo
to face the wall.
Or changing the locks
to the apartment.
Or getting a new phone number.

That ring feels like a spy.
She imagines it reporting back
to her life's biggest mistake.

But some mornings,
with her hands under the hot tap,

the metal warms,
expands a little.

It reminds her of a different vow.
It had nothing to do with him.
This was an oath
she swore to herself.

She lets the water
run and run and run.
She feels the ring loosen,
not from her finger
but from its authority.

She dries her hands.
The ring stays.
But there's something in her
that's not wearing it.

Anna Crandall

Universe of Light

Go back
to kissing
in my parents spare room, or
thirteen point seven billion years—
reverse.

There's no
thing, no stars, no
atoms just the scratchy
beige rug, heat, and a universe
of light.

Your hands
like birds with no
nests, those light years past not
belching out electrons, only
darkness.

What if
we don't exist?
Physics takes a left turn
and leaves us in the hall talking
of death.

No weeks
later, no me
on my knees as I hold

your face, no universe of light
burst from

my chest.

Plight of the Penny

I am a derelict copper penny beneath a
leaky washing machine in a
laundromat in a seedy part of town and I'm

starting to get tired of the company I keep,
swimming in laundry water with
other forlorn coins,
drowned dust bunnies, &
receipt paper, tattooing its content upon itself,
ink repeating through thin, damp skin.

I yearn endlessly for the day a destitute hand seeks for
me.

To trade the dim, linoleum night for a snug, black pocket
& the poor company for warm lint
& the gnawing teeth of the housekey

untitled

sometimes i forget i left the water running in the sink
not like how i forget i won't be seeing you after work
or how i forget i won't get to ask you what that song is
that goes like that or how i forget i won't be seeing you
at the next game night or how i forget i won't need to
pick up any bagged salads at the store no because i've
already forgotten all of those forgettings it's more like
how i forget i won't be with you ever again a year from
now or five or twenty and then i turn off the tap and it's
silent



Untitled - Alan Acosta

Artemis Mackay

sincerity

i love your
cradled vowels.
sound a samba,
make the air jealous.

The Cat Feels Weird

His fur is just as silky
as usual, but the cat feels weird. Life feels
weird. I've been in a daze.
The daze is weird. The days are weird. I lost
my heart. My heart is weird. You took it
and you hid it. You're weird. With your rat
tail hair and your hazel eyes.
You're weird. My fiddle playing
has been lacking. Fiddle is weird.
Just because you commented on it.
You're weird. You'll see me again
next month. The month is weird. You'll dance
with me again next month.
The dance is weird. Something about
seesawing. It's weird. I have two left
feet. Feet are weird. Life is weird. My heart is gone
and it's weird 'cause I've never lost
my heart before. Not to a German
boy going to public school. Germans are weird.
That's saying something. I'm German. I'm
weird. You saw me through the name. You're weird.

Anna Marie

Bad Boy Fever

in the garden with You i was a sunflower,
straining my neck for the light of Your occasional approval.
i folded petals You criticized, offered You others
more the shape that pleased You.

You rushed over me; i was only a speed bump.
i was the tool, the wrench; You made me twist myself.
You passed through me like i was a doorway,
leaving only dirty fingerprints.

i was a rat
scrambling to catch the stray compliment You tossed my way.
i ran through the maze You'd rigged with false doors and
electric shocks.

what would freud say, as he stood over me,
my body supine on the couch?
this illness, it stems from my mother
this sickness, it comes from daddy.
no, i have swallowed this poison willingly,
on my knees before you.
i'm addicted now.

Anna Crandall

Flight

Sometimes I walked late at night, distant
streetlight halo of pollen apologizing
for wearing too little: Just
the rays
& the
dust.

Cars
splashed
puddles to the dark
shape. Me: hollow with rot,
the kissing someone I should not,
ache making space in my ribs to curl

up, nothing new about loneliness, tender
edges I touched as I came,
the futon, the floor
muffling me trying
too hard.
Try

feather
light. Try not
eating or living simply
on wine. Try all of them,
in a line until you know what
you like. Try tempest or temper-tantrum.

Try silence like it will save
your life. The lean space
between yes & no
made of questions
& when
some

one
wants to
know, you don't.
Better to swallow, turn
bird, wait for tomorrow &
save the map for when anyone

will believe & follow a girl who asked for it.

How to Wrangle

Try on the job title: wrangler. Know what it means—to control something difficult to control—but remain uncertain what the job actually entails.

End up with a job like this through economic betrayal. Graduate in the spring of 2008 with an English degree that won't pay a single bill. Write "excellent communicator" on your resume. Resist your parents' roof. Lean on your hard skills, as your professors advised. Leverage the only one you have: riding horses.

Drive past the sign: Population 900. Pull off the highway onto gravel. Pass beneath the ranch sign suspended from a beam. Let the ranch appear around the corner—log cabins, a saddle barn, an antique stagecoach on display.

Follow the ranch manager through the bunkhouse. Notice his fake teeth when he smiles. Note the grime-caked cowboy hat he'll never remove. Hear him say, "Morning wrangle is at five." Stand alone after the door slams. Ponder the word: wrangle as a noun.

Get the hat wrong. Buy a lightweight palm leaf in Jackson, not knowing you're in beaver felt country. Hear Rudy say it's "too clean and too big" and "the wind will blow that sucker right off." Learn that a properly fitting hat should make your forehead sore for a week.

Get a few items right: pearl-snap flannel shirts, high-waisted boot-cut jeans, roping boots with riding heels. Help the guests—the dudes—feel transported. Help the ranch achieve its implied promise: come out West, ride a horse, forget your regular life. Encourage self-forgetting and self-remembering. Feel wonderfully puny against the vast land.

Spread yourself out. Take stock of who you are and are becoming.

Discover that the horse herd is stunning: one hundred duns, sorrels, roans, bays, greys, appaloosas grazing the valley together. Figure out that to wrangle can mean to gather.

Ride a salt-and-pepper mare along Windy Ridge. Notice her teeth hooked around her bit, foam rising along her neck, a shiver through her barrel. Suspect she wishes to join her sisters in the herd ahead. Hold her firmly back despite your unease.

Place a hand on your hat to keep it down in the wind. Feel the mare sense it. Feel the shuddering bubble up from deep inside her body. Watch her rear, straight and tall, her body rising vertically. Hinge at your hips. Lean forward. Heave your legs from the stirrups. Watch the mare thud onto her side. Roll, stunned, into the orange dirt. Watch the blur of salt-and-pepper leap past, stirrups and reins streaming like tendrils on a giant catfish.

Accept a ride from another wrangler. Hear him say, "Asking to walk with her sisters, eh?" Say, "Some way to ask." Leave your hat somewhere back on the trail.

Enter the corral. Hear Rudy say, "No hat, no horse, eh?" Take the mare's reins. Hear him say, "This isn't arena riding. It's wrangling." Nod. Be sore but not injured. Notice the mare is happy—she got her wish.

Drive to town that afternoon. Buy a beaver-felt hat. Let it leave a bloody bruise on your forehead for the rest of the week. Accept this as penance.

Beg throughout your childhood for a horse. Hear your dad say, "Horses eat money and shit it out" and "there are plenty of horses in the world to ride." Take lessons. Ride whatever horses you can. Learn to jump on warmbloods, do dressage on Holsteiners, race around barrels on

quarter horses. Accept the occasional monotony. Make it better than not riding at all.

Enter college to study Equine Science. Sit in dark lecture halls. Take notes on hock injections, stallion semen collection, vaccination programs for broodmares. Feel the animals you love reduced to body parts.

Write a paper in your Survey of British Literature class. Make yourself giddy. Trace the imagery of horse and master in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Watch Gwendolen go from "a high-mettled racer" to "answering to the rein" under her husband's control. Argue that Eliot uses horse imagery as linguistic necessity. Get an A.

Switch your major to English three months later. Tell your parents, "I'm interested in the equine part, not the science part. I don't want to treat horses as a commodity."

Tell your parents four years later, "All those horseback riding lessons are finally going to pay off!" Cram your saddle into the back seat of your Honda Civic. Hear your dad point out you'd have to work summers the rest of your life for your lessons to break even.

Be happy anyway. Make seven hundred bucks a month, plus a bunk.

Hear Rudy's spurs rake the linoleum kitchen floor. Watch him point at you. Hear him say, "You're coming with me to the mountain." Hear him bellow, "We'll need packed lunches for the mountain ride!"

Climb the mountain. Feel your body still sore from the salt-and-pepper-mare mishap. Suspect Rudy has an agenda. Wonder if you're one of the wiley ones who needs miles put on them.

Cover yourself hat to boot with fine orange dust. Follow Rudy as he rides the salt-and-pepper mare. Ride the steady black gelding assigned to you. Make conversation

with the dudes. Put your excellent communication skills to use after all.

Reach the mountain meadow twelve miles later. Help the dudes off their horses. Give them their pack lunches. Tie their horses to trees.

Watch Rudy slip a leather strap around the mare's front ankles in a figure-eight. Watch him take off her bridle. Ask, "You're letting her loose?" Hear him say, "She's hobbled, she'll be fine."

Watch the mare graze in her hobbled steps. Fish your lunch from your saddlebag. Eat your smashed sandwich. Remember: a few months ago you were in a college library reading Milton and Shakespeare. Notice: now you're on a mountain, new hat leaving a bloody mark on your forehead.

Turn the word over in your mind again: wrangler.

Look up. See an empty meadow where the mare had been. Pan the landscape. Find no mare.

Jog over. Tap Rudy on the shoulder. Whisper, "The mare quit." Watch Rudy take off his grimy hat. Watch him lower himself onto the ground, sprawl onto his back, place his hat over his face. Hear him say into the dark of his hat, "Well, go get her."

Run back to the pine forest. Follow the trail backwards toward the ranch, down and down the mountain where the herd waits. Think back to the mare dumping you, to your bruises, to her simple request: Can I walk with my sisters? Remember telling her no. Remember calling it wrangling.

Run in boots with riding heels. Stumble over rocks. Look for a salt-and-pepper smudge in the trees. See her one hundred yards ahead, stopped in the middle of the trail. Stop running. See her front legs still hobbled.

Realize she's been leaping toward home, front legs bound together, followed by gallop steps with her back feet.

Start toward her, shoulders square. Project confidence. Watch the mare's ears flatten. Watch her gather herself to leap away. Realize she can hop home faster than you can run. Realize she could fall and injure herself.

Stop.

Remember the line from your college paper: she answered to the rein. Remember writing about it as subjugation, as breaking. Understand suddenly that the mare can always say no. Understand that wrangling doesn't mean controlling. Understand it means asking, answering, conversing, listening.

See your predicament clearly: stand on a mountain trail with a horse who's already said no. Figure out how to ask a different question. Ask with your body if you want her to answer with hers.

Turn away from her. Look sideways into the forest. Soften your gaze. Wait.

Ask without a rein, without a whip, without looking. Remember: you can't control a horse. You can only ask.

Feel her answer—the mare's breath on your wrist. Reach up. Stroke her nose. Crouch. Release the buckle from her ankles. Unravel the strap of leather. Place it gently over her neck. Guide her back to the meadow.

Let Rudy hear you coming. Watch him lift his hat from his face. See the flash of his fake teeth as he smiles. Watch him place his hat back down.



Contained Energy - Blake L. Johnson

Goblynx Joestar

Morning Classes

(or the life and struggles to improve ones situation)

I traded up
chronic master
batory actions for a
little morning glory and I
still struggle thinking “I’m
still fucking up
my own life.”

Ain’t no point in dwelling
on a half-ass choked back cry
ain’t no luck, no English Channel gloat,
but maybe with just a stroke
You’ll be fine. Addicted actions reacting
To limp dick facts and retched
cries.

Mourning reactions to the life
styles around a former life.

HOA Meeting Minutes (Internal)

I. There is a 19:1 ratio of cookies to humans.

II. Danielle—I could fight her. I bet she's got hollow bones like a bird.

III. Where is Lisa?

A. Lisa? No.

B. Where is she?

1. Oh, finally. Look who showed up.

2. Come sit by me.

3. Why are you so late?

4. I had to make small talk in this beige room full of idiots who know where I *live*.

IV. *He's* sleeping with *his* wife; *she's* sleeping with the Robertsons' kid; *they* are swingers—really? *Them*? Yes, somehow, even though *he* looks like he has stock in sweater vests and *she* looks like her idea of fun is vacuuming between car seats—and *he's* sleeping with *his* wife's boyfriend. Talk about a roll call.

V. Will this rain let up before the meeting ends? What if lightning strikes me on my way back home? I refuse to die in front of these people.

VI. Wait, what's going on?

A. Is someone crying over a hedge?

B. They're *measuring* our hedges?

1. I haven't trimmed my pubes in 7 years.

2. Not like I can see them anyway, past my belly.

VII. Humdrum, hostile, humiliating. Ostentatious, obtuse, obligatory. Agonizing, aimless, argumentative.

VIII. Yeah, I've got some unfinished business: what happened to my pie dish from the potluck? Who stole it? I shouldn't have said it was vintage. But who would steal a pie dish? How do I get into everyone's kitchen cupboards to check?

A. Should I call the police?

B. Should I hire a PI?

IX. New business: don't make eye contact with me, *Kevin*. There's nothing that says I can't own chickens, and Henrietta would scratch your pervy eyes out and I'd fry them in bacon fat for her to eat as a treat.

A. So there.

B. P.S. Eat shit.

X. Adjourned. Can't wait to ignore you all on the street.



Unnamed Black Woman - Hailea Aliza

Lunch interviews are rough for the perpetually hungry

Employers schedule lunch interviews to see how well you can handle pressure without vomiting. This has to be the only reason they would want to watch me simultaneously chew and explain my leadership style. I roll my eyes when I see “Lunch with ...” on my itinerary, squeezed in the middle of “Presentation with ...” and “Panel with ...” I’ve tried to treat lunch interviews like a date, but gazing into my future employer’s eyes would make the situation more uncomfortable. Instead, I follow strategies I dislike as much as the interview itself.

As a Black man, with a protruding belly, who loves food, I hate having to negotiate whether or not a burger and fries are aesthetically pleasing to my interviewer. My self-consciousness always leads me to choose the spring salad with grilled chicken and a drizzle of Italian dressing. I wash the saltiness of the salad down with a cup of still water because belching from a carbonated drink seems a bit juvenile. During the interview, my mind juggles the interview questions and the concern of a dark green leaf stuck between my teeth. There are moments when the questions require me to stop eating because “intersectionality” and “theoretical framework” can only be pronounced with an empty mouth. The frequent pauses throughout leave my salad warm and wilted. Unsatiated, I push the plate to the side. My stomach makes up for the lack of belching with a rumbling echo.

Dessert is an option, but at the same time, it isn’t. I can never keep the chocolate chip cookie crumbs (even the soft-baked) from getting into my beard. I can’t be taken seriously when a pink cupcake is crusted on my upper lip. Then, I have to play “how many licks does it take to dissolve frosting before my interviewer thinks I am being inappropriate?”

Have you ever thought of the racial implications of choosing a dessert? I didn't until I had an interview in Georgia. It was a humid day, with the temperature being ten degrees hotter under my black suit. I skipped the pastries and headed towards the seemingly innocent fruit bar. Unfortunately, there was only a bowl of apples and freshly cut watermelon wedges. While I knew I could benefit from the hydration and refreshing taste, I didn't feel comfortable widening my mouth and accentuating my lips to eat watermelon in front of my white interviewer. I made the biblical mistake of choosing the apple, which was a warm, overripe mush.

The dread of a lunch interview exists beyond the eating area and past my first day of work. The discomfort returns when I sit at my desk, eating another salad, because an hour is not enough time to eat and digest my leftover shrimp biryani from last night. My boss walks to my desk to ask me some "urgent" questions about work because I have already proven that my stomach can handle it. In those moments, all I can think about is how good that burger looked with those Cajun fries.

Jan Wieszorek

Field by a Field

The punk vine is as elegant
as signet eyes that say

Stand clear, don't touch,
move it. Lips of paintbrush

veil the mayapples, loving
our souls of red thread.

Two Canadian geese walk
side by side, but choose

indifference like baseball
in progress. Parents and coaches

all scream at the kids—
preteens just trying their best.

I feel sorry for them,
as you do when you stumble

on a gravestone
and bat sticks away,

convincing yourself the day
will carry you higher

than a pop-up
hitting air.

Mandy Prell

When They Saw Girls Traded Like Wall Street Stock

They said nothing.
The contractors
housekeepers
groundskeepers
and airport staff
grabbed bills earned from between
a 12-year-old's thighs
and went home, bought
groceries, put their
children to sleep
while world leaders
slept with children.

And in the morning the pilot
grinned, greeting
each child as she boarded—
bright beaming braces
smiling back. No, I am
not surprised. I, too,
wore braces once.

J. Hyeji Lee

Shake

And when you tell me to shake, I'll have to shake.

Shaking shaking

shaking

off

my people and our ways

Strawcutter gods and paper effigies of

the mountainous past

Shake and shake

to the sound of artillery shells

and hot fires of human sacrifice

One end of the bayonet tries to convince me that maybe

care exists in violence

the other goes through my heart

shaking and shaking

Pouring fluids from plastic bags and

grassroot fingers gripping to

last ideas of rebellion

Peace.

Shaking and shaking hands with bread as you toss it to your husband
not knowing if it will ever touch his lips
in the same way you have.

Shaking shaking
bodies into pits
with dirt.

When our last bridge falls

and our last bride is taken in the bed of a countryside truck

I will still shake.

Shake shake
shaking out of fear.

John Grey

No Salmon

There's no salmon.

The grizzly bears take large swipes
at the passing water
but come up wet and empty.

Maybe it's the dams.

Maybe it's the new factories.

Or the spreading suburbs downstream.

How's a bear supposed to fatten up,
when the protein-fatty acid vitamin-rich
spigot has been turned off?

But the river keeps rolling by.

The bears hope the river might remember them.

But it's as indifferent as the rocks
it splashes and foams against.

The grizzlies stand there, enormous,
patient and hungry.

They listen for the old pulse,
the constant salmon schools
cruising the gravel beds.

What else can they do
but keep opening their great hands
into the shining emptiness.
And trusting.

For they carry the taste of the world ...
as it was ... as it could be again.



Untitled - Christine Vo

John Grey

The Shark on the Shore

What remains of the shark
is washed up on the shore.
Maybe he followed a fish
toward the beach,
was picked up by a wave,
tossed onto the sand.

Then, after many a defiant flap,
his gills gave up trying to breathe.
And life fled from the creature
like schools once did.

It's not a large shark
but the shape is intact.
As is the solemn gray skin.
And one tooth protrudes
from its still firm mouth.
It's sharp enough to pluck
an observer's nerve end at twenty paces.

The cleanup crew will be here eventually.
But, in the meantime,
a crowd gathers.
Some have never seen a shark
eye to eye before.
The fish's stare, even in death,

can warrant a fear, a gulp or two.
Braver kids edge closer.
A dog pulls at its leash.
The beachcomber reckons
it's the same old story of hunger,
the unpredictable ocean, and misjudgment.

Flies appear from nowhere,
buzz about the shark's head.
They see things almost
at the level of elements—
the salt, the grit, the long road
to becoming something else.

Waves roll in and out as always.
They have no idea
what's been lost to them.

Mik Morgan

angel numbers

it's been 33 days since you left this wretched earth,
kicking and screaming. you held on to life with
vigor, your holy white knuckles clutching
to this earthly plane. until your body made you
go. you were tapping your toes in your death-
bed. you sang yourself to sleep. but i feel you
in the walls, i do. angels everywhere

by the grace of my small wings

I have felt a restlessness forever, for as long as I have known the sky, which has been long indeed. I have felt the world pushing against me in its impossible bigness, with space beyond space and the sinking weight of the wide-open well of the sky. I have watched the stretch of the earth as she carries herself like a stomach, day after day, through the black beyond. I have known this land and the next, and the lands that I have visited only in my dreams, and they each have spoken to me of the endlessness of it all out there. And in it all, I have been a bird, carrying the wisdom of my own smallness like a fool at the door of the universe.

How beautiful is it, then, that I have come to this island to die, an island of its own smallness in the depths of the great blue sea. The sand here is folded with bones and shells. It is folded with the detritus of humans who give to a bigger death as they throw the things they no longer want into the sea.

The guardians of this island are the dogs. They walk on the sand and they greet the sea as she tries to swallow the land in her cavernous thirst. One day she may succeed, but today, as I lay here to die, the dogs turn her away. It is for this great service that I will give them my body to eat, for I will no longer need it once I am dead. This body with its small wings and small bones and small heart that has carried me, restless, against the well of the sky. That has allowed me to know the land and the stomach of the earth and the great black night that has no end.

I nest in the sand and will my heart to finish its work. The sun gives its light to me a final time, and the wind holds my feathers in familiarity. I see the door of the universe stand open before me, and I dance through its threshold by the grace of my small wings.

The dogs sit by the shore and wait as the bones and the shells and the slow death of this earth sing against the great blue of the sea.

Hollie Dugas

Cricket Weather

In lieu of fire and flood,
of hurricane and waves

of heat, they arrive
eating

through the green
like a symphony of

black
fog, splitting

and reforming again
into swift and sundry

nameless shapes—
each mass

expression, a syllable
of meaning to be decoded

from the genetic
song. And what if

we lend our ears
to the gravity

of their rolling
melody? What

bolt of secret
could be mustered from

their soft
chantings?

And how wildly
would one cricket

have to rub
together

its papery wings
before the world went

boiling over
with cosmic

truth? What better
Mother

could we ask for
from nature—

other than one of divine
visitation—that lives

and sleeps, and copulates
in a consequential

seedbed of lyric?
In every imaginative

version of myself, I am
creature-esque,

more of wind
and instinct—

with a barometric compass
and a wing-span.

Yes, I'd like to
believe I rustled

to life from the refuge
of an egg, too, connected

to the same
innate language

as the Earth, each cell
of my being

like a heavy cloud
humming along

in a pulse of stratosphere.

Hallow Desertification

For two days, two nights, I ran.

The time was best at gloaming dusk and civil dawn, the times of precipice.

Dead awake, with dry eyes, I traveled in a temperate desertland. The mountain rock and sand were saturated to opposite shades of gray. The deep, cobalt sky scintillated with rosy auroras. It was not unlike my uncle's stories of the Hollow World.

A moment held. I kept to my walkabout, moving toward my patron, Ninsianna, the red queen in the heavens. My empty mind wondered how often this place called to me. Now that there was a fracture within my crumbling soul, I heeded the evening star's hollow call.

One night, before my run began, I met one old coyote—the bone-white old man was, himself, tear-stained. Upon seeing him, something within snapped. I cracked and frayed. Agaric tears flooded down into the sandbanks. And though I hold no kinship to him, I asked, desperate for any answer, “What must I do?”

With mouth unmoving, he regarded me and said, “Run with me.” Off he took at a measured pace, toward a dead riverbed of petrified yucca and opalized saguaros. I kept up because I had to—because I knew it was what I must do.

I felt the cool dunes under my feet. It reminded me what fun it is to just go. I focused downward at the imbricated dune and saw a microcosm. I tread upon fossils of life from ancient times—grains that remember the vibrant, torrid sea of eons past—stony particles all broken up, loveless, rough, aloofly strewn about by the softest breeze. And

there I was treading upon it all, in search of something sandy that was gone or may have never been.

I looked back—I'd lost my spirited companion—his prints scattered in the wind. Perhaps the old one had played a trick; perhaps this place was the goal; perhaps the run, the play was the thing; perhaps...

My mind returned to what was then my now, my hallowed present, still moving ever deeper toward the daystar. All the while, as I went, flecks of my ceramic skin, exposed to lukewarm winds, crumbled off to join the sands of dead life and love.

Contributors

Alan Acosta is a photographer and artist whose work explores the intersection of perception, reality, and meaning. Deeply influenced by the mysteries and revelations found in imagery, Acosta's practice centers on photography as both a reflective exercise and a personal journey. His art resists convention, seeking to preserve the vitality and authenticity of life. Through his lens, Acosta is committed to unveiling truth, pursuing happiness, and fostering dignity and love. His creative process is an ongoing search for significance, pushing back against the mechanization and emptiness of the modern world.

Pages: 92

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, VA. He is the author of *Now Let's Get Brunch* (Querencia Press, 2023) and *May All Our Pain Be Champagne* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022). He has appeared in *HAD*, *fifth wheel press*, *Sage Cigarettes*, *JAKE*, *Inlandia Journal*, and more. Visit carriganak.wordpress.com or follow him on Twitter @carriganak for more info.

Pages: 67

Amber Ritchie is a lifelong lover of writing. Originally from Ohio, she moved to Oregon with her husband, a big, goofy dog named Luca and the sassiest cat Scout. She plans to double major in psychology and writing. These days, she can be found playing video games, reading horror novels, or learning random animal facts.

Pages: 52

Anna Crandall (she/her) is a writer living in Portland, Oregon. She has previously taught in Oregon's Department of Corrections and is currently a high school Language Arts teacher. She is pursuing her Master's in English and Creative Writing at Eastern Illinois University, and has work recently published or upcoming in *MER Literary*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Does It Have Pockets*, *The Vehicle*, and more. You can find her on Instagram @teacupsandghosts.

Pages: 69, 88, 96

Anna Marie is a dog, frog, and tree hugging poet who does her best work with both feet bare in a cold river. She is primarily a live performer, and has organized and performed in numerous poetry events locally in Oregon, as well as nationally with the Poetry Brothel. Anna's nonfiction work has been published by *The FrontSteps*, *Curbed*, and *SFGate*. Anna has also taught (and continues to teach) Creative Writing and Poetry for colleges in California and Oregon.

Pages: 95

Artemis MacKay (they/them) is a trans, neurodivergent writer and poet based in Portland, Oregon. Their residence and work exists on unceded lands of tribes and confederations of the Siletz, Grand Ronde, Clackamas, Cowlitz, and Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla, and others unrecognized. Their work spans and mixes nonfiction and poetry. A peer once said their work "contains a metabolism of the Internet" which they assume is a compliment. Artemis is a first-semester student in the Low Residency Creative Writing MFA at Pacific Northwest College of Art. You can find them on Bluesky at @itsartem.is.

Pages: 37, 44, 93

Aspyn Erikson is a visual artist whose work has been featured in galleries across the state. Her pieces are driven by feeling, curiosity, and a love for storytelling through image-making. When she isn't creating, she can usually be found wandering exhibitions, romanticizing her life, and insisting that "What, like it's hard?" from *Legally Blonde* is applicable to nearly every situation.

Pages: 49

Austin Oscar Hunt, a freshman at PCC, has been a life-long reader, writer, and poet. What started as an avid obsession with the *Warrior Cats* book series and incessant "song-writing" in spiral notebooks quickly developed into a passion for literature and poetry of all varieties. Austin enjoys using his writing as tools to navigate the human experience, especially themes of alienation, surrealism, and body horror. In his free time, he can be found scribbling in legal pads on TriMet, attending local drag shows, or cuddling with his cat, Bug. He can also be found posting sporadically on his Substack: [austinhuntwrites](#).

Pages: 90

Blake L. Johnson is a photography student at Portland Community College whose practice engages both black & white and color street photography. His work centers on the documentation of individuals within their environments, with an emphasis on capturing transient moments of human interaction.

Pages: 11, 103

Bryn Phillips is a 17-year-old visual artist and ceramicist born and raised in Vancouver, WA. Using many different materials and processes, Bryn creates sculptures often depicting animals with connective political statements. Her work is often displayed at local art shows, as well as the gallery where she creates, Kādence Collective.

She currently attends Clark College as a Running Start student and will transfer to Western Washington University this fall to pursue an Art Education degree. You can find more of her work and process on most social media platforms @Lesbianlattice.

Pages: 84

Brenna Park writes about uncomfortable spaces and sculpts strange animals in Portland, Oregon.

Pages: 54

C.W. Mortell was startled into poetry early by Dickinson, Pound, and Plath. He was rough cut by the University of Wisconsin English faculty and by editing *The Daily Cardinal*. His work has been published by the *Naugatuck River Review*, *Steam Ticket*, *Bramble*, *Willow Review*, *ND Quarterly*, *Isthmus*, *The Stacks*, *Zines*, *EtAl*. He has read live at Pearl Street Books, The Root Note, Cafe Steam, and The Listening Room (at arthouselacrosse.com). He is a poetry reader for *Quibble Literary Magazine* (quibblelit.com). His chapbook, *The Dance Hides in Stillness*, is slated for release in 2027.

Pages: 64

Christine Vo is a Portland-based creative whose work centers on visual storytelling through photography. Inspired by light, emotion, and the beauty woven into everyday moments, she uses thoughtful composition and perspective to create imagery that feels authentic, evocative, and meaningful. Whether capturing people, spaces, or fleeting moments, her photography reflects both artistry and connection while remaining rooted in purpose. Alongside her creative work, she is pursuing a future in healthcare through dentistry, guided by a calling to blend compassion, artistry, and human connection through both clinical care and creative expression.

Pages: 70, 117

Christopher Pierce is a writer from Dallas, Oregon. He graduated from Portland Community College in 2026 with a 4.0 and transferred to Oregon State University to pursue a double degree in creative writing and history. He is a husband and a proud father of two beautiful daughters, Destiny and Daenerys, whom he loves with all of his heart. His favorite pastime is hiking the Oregon backcountry seeking hiraeth, a Welsh word of longing for a home that never was. He believes in empathy, embracing difficulty, doing the right thing, and fighting for a future for all living creatures.

Pages: 29

Croi Idrieus is a writer and a fiddle-player in the Oregon countryside. She is writing several works, including two collections of poetry and two novels, delving deeper into her passion for writing, whether it's throwing commas around or overdoing similes. She also fell in love with old-time fiddling as a child and has been playing for several years. She enjoys exploring the viewpoints of many different people through her poetry and her music, and every day is a new experience through someone else's eyes.

Pages: 94

Danielle Hettema is a writer based in Portland, Oregon, whose work spans mystery, fantasy, and horror and explores the limits of love, friendship, and belonging. She holds a Master of Library Science from San Jose State University, a degree that speaks to her lifelong devotion to the written word. This is her first publication.

Pages: 39

Denoo Edinam Yawo is a Ghanaian poet/writer whose work delves into themes such as the body, the politics of language, spirituality, and faith at the intersection of living. She is a 2025 Black Atlantic Residency Fellow, an

alumna of the 2025 CAINE Online Editing Program, and the 2025 Johannesburg Institute of Advanced Studies (JIAS) Creative Writing Workshop for Emerging Writers. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Rowayat*, *Kalahari Review*, and elsewhere.

Pages: 58

Dominica Phetteplace is a writer whose work has appeared in *Ecotone*, *Copper Nickel*, *PANK*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Zyzzyva*, *Wigleaf*, *Best Microfiction* and *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy*, among other venues. Her honors include two Pushcart Prizes, a Rona Jaffe Award, a Steinbeck Fellowship and support from MacDowell, Tin House, Djerassi and a residency at the Carolyn Moore Writer's House.

Pages: 20

Elle Cantwell is a graduate of the MFA in Writing program at the University of San Francisco. Her poems have appeared in *Ponder Review*, *Welter*, *The Pointed Circle*, 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.

Pages: 19, 36, 76

Fernando Torres Corona is a first-generation Mexican American student who writes about identity, family, and perseverance. His work focuses on honoring immigrant sacrifice and the strength passed through generations.

Pages: 24

Finn Mishler is a student at Oregon State University studying nuclear engineering. He writes both poetry and prose, and takes inspiration from nature and current events. He hopes to work in reactor design and continue writing throughout his life.

Pages: 71

Goblynx Joestar, 31-year-old nonbinary transfemme, resides in Portland. If they aren't found doing bizarre art projects on the transit, like learning to water-color or juggle, she is often found obsessively cuddling her cat and talking about silly pirates. She managed to go from homeless in a brand new part of the country, to stumbling into PCC Fall 2025, and they managed to graduate with an AAS in Multimedia Spring 2026. She hopes to continue learning, loving, and making as much art as they possibly can, and giving Goro-Boo, her cat, all the wet food she deserves.

Pages: 104

Hailea Aliza is a mixed-media abstract artist, acrylic paint on canvas being their most-used medium. They have been practicing art for almost 10 years, often expressing emotion as a mixed race, black person through their artwork. They have given 50% of all proceeds from their art work and ticket sales (fundraisers, etc.) to the non-profit Last Prisoner Project since 2023. They are co-founder of the Ratchet Saturn Girl Creative Collective, where each artist has their own chosen cause they support through their work.

Pages: 56, 107

Hanna Lilly is a chef, butcher, student, and writer living in the Pacific Northwest. She hopes that her stories and poems may be some small offering of gratitude to the gift of living.

Pages: 121

Hollie Dugas lives in New Mexico. Her work has been included in Barrow Street, Reed Magazine, Qu, Redivider, Porter House Review, EPOCH, Salamander, The Louisville Review, The Penn Review, Breakwater Review, Third Coast, RHINO, Sixth Finch, Soundings East, Phoebe, and Broad River

Review. Most recently, Hollie was awarded the Rash Award and Broad River Review. Hollie has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and for inclusion in Best New Poets. She is currently working with two manuscripts that has been a finalist in several contests

Pages: 123

Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her creative work has been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and other literary journals. She has received multiple honors, including nominations for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She lives in Guangzhou, China, with her family.

Pages: 77

J. Farr is a concept. J. Farr is an idea. J. Farr is an apparition. Who is she? What does he do? Perhaps science? Perhaps pigeonholed into the arts. She is a PCC undergrad. He is a hindrance to the social contract. She was born in Oregon, but is Californian in spirit. He does calculus as a hobby and writes to wake up and shake up the world.

Pages: 10

J. Hyeji Lee is a poet from everywhere and nowhere. Alongside pursuing a B.A. in Writing and Literature at California College of the Arts, Lee has engaged in other mediums like analog photography, installation, and perfume—which have already been written about or are soon to be documented. They are also the author of the chapbook *As I Hold My Body* and are currently “raising” two more long-form poetry manuscripts. They can be contacted at jhyejilee@gmail.com

Pages: 112

Jan Wiezorek (he/him) writes from the Harbor Country of rural Michigan and is author of the poetry chapbooks *Prayer's Prairie* (Michigan Writers Cooperative Press, 2025) and *Forests of Woundedness* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2026). Visit him at janwiezorek.substack.com.

Pages: 110

Jeanie Ngo is a San Francisco writer whose plays have been produced at Bindlestiff Studio, SFSU, Exit Theatre, Stage Werx, B8 Theatre, Brava Theater, Strut, Potrero Stage, and PianoFight. She has also written “MÓN QUÀ YÊU THƯƠNG,” an Asia Entertainment Christmas special. Her short stories and poetry have been published in *Transfer 109*, *Quiet Lightning*, *Blue Rivers*, *Five Fleas Itchy Poetry*, and *barbara*. She's also appeared as a featured poet for the Abrams Claghorn Gallery, Black Bird Bookstore, the Durham East Regional Library, and Lit Crawl.

Pages: 9, 105

John Grey is Australian born, US resident short storywriter, poet, playwright, musician. Has been published in numerous magazines including *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Adventures*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Greensboro Poetry Review*, *Poem*, *Agni*, *Poet Lore* and *Journal Of The American Medical Association*. His latest books are *Bittersweet*, *Between Two Fires* and *Covert*, available through Amazon. Has had plays produced in Los Angeles and off-off Broadway in New York. Winner of the Rhysling Award for short genre poetry in 1999.

Pages: 86, 115, 118

Justin Bulava is a Portland-based musician who also sometimes does other things, like waving to cats in windows.

Pages: 65, 91

Justin Goodman (they/them) is a writer based in Brooklyn, NY and a member of the New Haven Writers Group. Their poetry has been published, among other places, in *Cordite Review*, *The Pinch*, and *Baby Teeth*. Find more of their work at JustinDGoodman.com.

Pages: 74

Justin Rigamonti teaches English at Portland Community College and serves as the Poetry Coordinator for Chatter PDX. His poems have been recently published or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Rattle*, and *New Ohio Review*. His poem “Failure” was selected to appear in Best New Poets 2025, and his poem “News Crawler” won the 2026 West Trade Review Prize for Poetry.

Pages: 45, 60

Kat Curey is a social worker, photographer, and poet originally from Montana. She pays close attention to the quiet details of the world around her. Her work highlights both the small and the vast, focusing on emotional and natural landscapes and fleeting moments, while holding space for the complexities of the human experience. She began photographing in 2022 after inheriting her grandfather’s film camera and later began writing poetry in 2025, finding both practices essential for making sense of her inner and outer worlds. She hopes her work inspires a sense of catharsis, camaraderie, and belonging.

Pages: 62,63

Kelsi Boone is an amateur poet and artist living in the Portland area. She enjoys writing about mental health, the natural world, and the dynamics and intricacies of human relationships. When not writing, Kelsi can be found drawing, walking in nature, or re-reading her favorite novels.

Pages: 50

Lukas Quinn (he/they) is a gay writer and English student from Portland, Oregon. Lukas authors short speculative fiction, psychological chillers, and sad-boy poetry demystifying mental health. If you can't find Lukas holed up in the sci-fi section at the library, he's either fighting for his life at the gym or in a TTRPG encounter. Lukas has been featured in literary publications such as *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Door is a Jar Literary Journal*, *Pathos Literary Magazine*, among others. You can find more of Lukas and his work on Instagram (@lukasbewriting).

Pages: 22

Mandy Prell writes poetry and flash through a feminist lens. She works to deconstruct patriarchal, religious, and cultural systems in life and through language. Mandy teaches at a forest school on a nature preserve in the Kentucky woodlands. She lives with her daughters, spouse, and cats in a historic, haunted train town. Mandy holds a Master of Science in Education from Johns Hopkins and an IndieMFA in Advanced Poetry through Writing Workshops. Find her published and upcoming work at mandyprell.my.canva.site.

Pages: 112

Marin Smith is a poet, essayist, mother, teacher, and an Enneagram 4. She has an M.A. in English from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and her work has been published in *MER Literary*, *Split Rock Review*, *Oregon English Journal*, *CALYX Journal*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Gold Man Review* and others. She also is founding editor and Editorial Director of *Abraxas Review*. You'll find her in the Columbia Gorge, tending her chickens and garden, coffee in hand.

Pages: 98

Matthew D. Albertson is a Tigard poet and a graduate of PSU's Honors College. His work is at the intersection

of mythology, digital culture, environmentalism, and civic life. His previously published work may be found in *Alchemy: Issue 50*, on Oregon's Tele-Poem Hotline, and in Acrana Poetry Press's "Smitten with the Written" anthology. He sometimes posts on Threads and IG @ matthewdalbertson.

Pages: 126

Mel Diyarzam is a queer poet residing in Vancouver, WA and currently attending Eastern Oregon University earning an MFA with a focus in poetry. In their free time they enjoy spending time with their partner Diana, their dog Bailey, and their cat Jujubee.

Pages: 14

Mik Morgan (they/them) is a thirty year old drug addict currently residing in the American hellscape. They suffer from intractable mental illness and homosexuality. They are fueled exclusively by McDonald's chicken nuggets and shame. You can find them wiggling (emotionally), walking their Sports Mode chihuahua named Doctor Baby, or staring at a wall thinking about their thoughts.

Pages: 18, 57, 120

Pedro Ramirez, nacido en Villa de Cura, teje rostros y memorias entre Venezuela y Ecuador. Su arte urbano y comunitario transforma muros y galerías en espacios de encuentro, donde la identidad se multiplica y el color abre caminos posibles.

Pedro Ramírez, born in Villa de Cura, Venezuela, interweaves faces and memories between Venezuela and Ecuador. His urban, community oriented work transforms city and gallery walls into places of gathering, where identity multiplies and color opens up possible pathways.

Pages: 28

Saoirse Chance is a PNW writer, artist, and devoted bibliophile with a soft spot for geese. Their work lingers in the space between sad and soft things, and has been featured in *Icarus Magazine*, *Alchemy*, *Pointed Circle*, and *The Reader*. Their story “A Distant Light of Belonging” was chosen to be featured at the PCC 2026 Groundswell Conference.

Pages: 15

Shaquan Womack (he/him) is an Oakland-based multi-genre writer from the Bronx, NY. He is currently an MFA student in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University. His work focuses on American realism, social commentary, and the preservation of Black culture and tradition. He uses satire and absurdity to hold the mirror up to our absurd world.

Pages: 108

Shelley Chamberlain

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Shontay Luna majored in Poetry at Columbia College Chicago before finishing elsewhere. Her poems have appeared in *Olney Magazine*, *Bullshit Literary Magazine*, *EKL Review* and *The Crucible* among others. Her most recent book title is *The Goddess Journal* – a tool for unlocking the Goddess within every Woman. When not writing, she’s couponing or gleefully hoarding pens and notebooks and lives in Chicago, IL with her ‘Sons of Anarchy’ Juan Carlos “Juice” Ortiz photo gallery.

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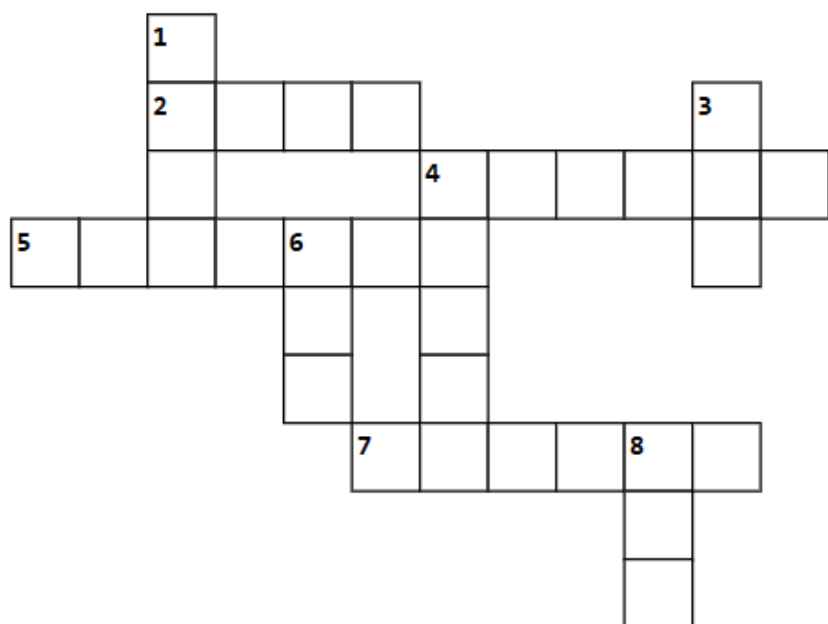
Vanessa Mata (she/they) is a queer Venezuelan writer living in Portland. She splits her time between working as a cook, studying, and playing hard with a cat named Mimo. They also enjoy gardening and learning about

consciousness.

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Wyatt Maxwell is a Washington photographer whose work focuses on the inner human spirit and capturing the beauty that humans create and perceive. He started photography in 2016 and, since then, has expanded into filmmaking. He currently attends Clark Community College, where he is getting an Associate of Arts.

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Editor Bios

Across

2. ____ is in love with his Honda Element.
4. ____ is an Australian youth rugby coach.
5. ____ is a lover of poetry (particularly the confusing kind), a.k.a. a Pisces.
7. ____'s name means 'Dove'.

Down

1. ____ feeds crows, laughs at funerals and cries at comedy shows.
3. ____ is a queer prospective science fiction writer with a BA in Creative Writing from UC Riverside.
4. ____ dreams of being a rodeo queen.
6. ____ wrote and co-directed a multi-award winning short horror film called "Fanatico" at Portland State University.
8. ____ is the mother of an extra tall chihuahua named Doctor Baby.