AFTER HAPPY HOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART

ISSUE 28 | WINTER 2025

After Happy Hour

Issue 28

Winter 2025 Masthead:

Elizabeth Abeling
Nathan Kukulski
Shawn Maddey
Daniel Parme
Jason Peck
Jess Simms
Brendan Sullivan

Editing and proofreading by Sophia Craig
Layout and Design by Jess Simms
Cover Art: “Pittsburgh Winter Morning” by Sheila Squillante

After Happy Hour Review is produced and published in Pittsburgh, PA.
ISSN 2831-879X

Foreword

Hello again, dear readers, and welcome to the latest issue of *After Happy Hour Review*.

When people ask what we publish at book fairs and whatnot, I often tell them we’re genre-agnostic. Our goal is to publish great writing, whatever category it might fall into. Because the truth is, creative works often wrestle with the same core questions, and aim to evoke the same set of emotions in readers, regardless of their form or whether what takes place in them could realistically happen.

This approach also makes it easy for us to accept work that doesn’t fit neatly into any particular genre box, which is definitely something that describes a lot of the pieces in Issue 28. The fiction especially occupies a world that’s just a step outside of ordinary. There are phantom itches and potential raptures; mystical nuns who make very bad shepherds; a meditation on obsession in the form of a gardener who develops a very unique link to her plants. The poetry spans a similar range of realities: of nature intruding, rising up, or taking back; of how the dead linger or reclaim stolen narratives; of how lineage sustains what might otherwise be forgotten. These last ideas are themes that resonate in the issue’s creative nonfiction, too, which each explore a very different kind of generational narrative.

Overall, I’d say this is a quieter and more reflective issue than our last few have been. Maybe even (dare I say it) a bit more serious. But certainly no less strange, and hopefully still full of moments that will make you see the world in a slightly different way.

Cheers,

Jess Simms, Managing Editor

Table of Contents

The Undeliverable Mail of William Langford 2
poetry by Greg Hughes

Human Tradition 4
fiction by Emma Dollar

If You Have Seen the Scioto 14
creative nonfiction by Kristina Garvin

girl with a pearl earring peels her face off 18
poetry by Sreeja Naskar

Under the Dock 21
fiction by Ryan Keeney

How the body of the rabbit will turn to wild grass, and the salt in the fish you did not finish will wash back into the sea 29
poetry by Maggie Wang

What If I Like It 30
poetry by Colleen S. Harris

Life After the Minor Leagues 31
fiction by Andrew Rucker Jones

Even in the Woodpile 35
poetry by Dara Laine

The Apricot Tree 37
creative nonfiction by Diyora Kabilova

Suburban Elegy 41
poetry by Abigail Ann Gray

borderlines & braidlines 42
poetry by Sreeja Naskar

Compulsions of the Earth 44
fiction by Mae S. Ladle

Ignoring Omens 57
poetry by J. Federle

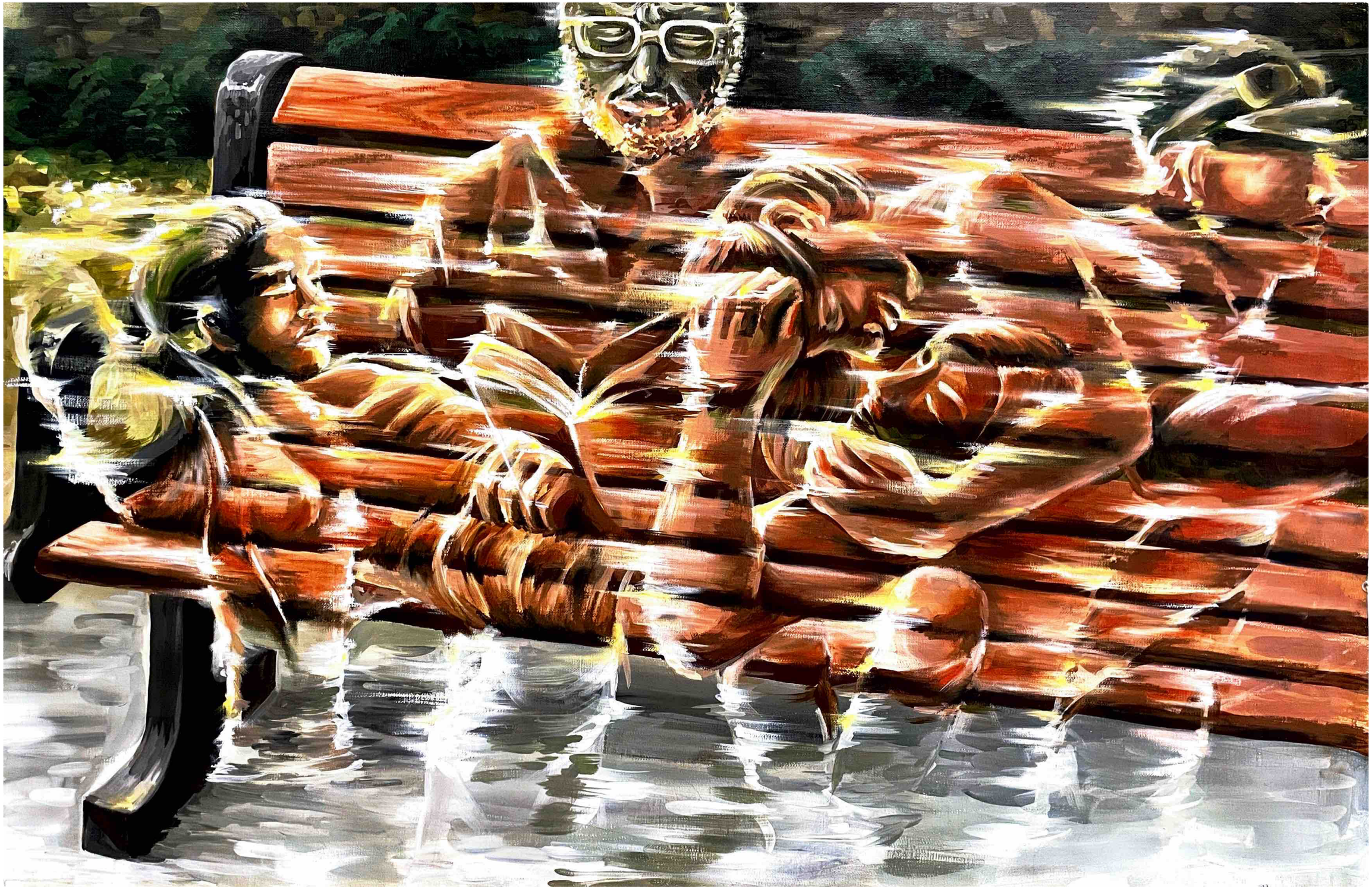
The Church of John the Baptist of Roswell 58
fiction by Christian Fuller

Family Reunion 64
poetry by Ellie Snyder

Of Wolves and Snakes 65
poetry by Victor McConnell

The Sisters of the House of Life-Giving Blood 72
fiction by Alyssa House Rosemartin

Contributor Bios 79



Brian Ji

The Undeliverable Mail of William Langford

BY GREG HUGHES

I'm holding your mail. It's piling up.
William, I know—enough is enough—
you weren't even the owner before us.

Just look at the fence, chewed from the inside
by the dogs of that bachelor
who moved in after you died—
the one who turned the garage
into a leather-clad den with strobing lights.

Not your vibe. We asked the neighbors
what you were like. They shrugged.
"Sad recluse." "Crotchety old guy."

But your mail says otherwise—
Orvis, Filson, *Adventure Life*—
and now, hospital bills in collections,
a final screw-you
to the medical-industrial complex.

So *you*, William. So defiantly you.
I bet you scoffed at the snow
tapping this single-pane window
the day Los Angeles forgot itself
beneath a quiet white.

Was that the night you dreamed
of walking barefoot outside?
I've had that one, too—
wading through the hush
while the world melts around you.

Just give me an address.
I'll forward everything, send it express—
missed phone books, Christmases,
each foil-covered plate, the sun
clawing through our blackout shades.

William, I'll send you the gnawed gate—
the whole clamoring world
slipping through its teeth marks.
It's waiting for us, William.
Tell me how it tastes.

Human Tradition

BY EMMA DOLLAR

THE CHILDREN FOUND Tommy Hardy floating face-down in the pond on a foggy Sunday morning in March. There were three of them crouched on the egg-shaped rocks along the water, their church clothes pushed up around their knees and elbows. They splashed and scooped handfuls of mud into their mothers' mason jars as they hunted for salamanders in the reeds. It was the morning after rain, and dragonflies gilded the water, worms lathered the soil, and the bullfrogs crooned, "I love you, I love you, I love you," from behind the curtain of the cattail stalks.

At some point, one of the children reached down to pull a swollen white worm from between the reeds: "Ughh, look," she had already begun, before she noticed the worm's stubby purple fingernail, and the rest of the arm that floated behind it like spilled milk. The body, now discovered, condensed out from the murky water. Tiny fish whirled around its stomach and sucked at its wrinkled lips.

"Quick, turn him over," one of the other children, a Cub Scout, ordered. "He can't breathe like that."

In the end the Cub Scout had to get in the water, his pants rolled as far as they would go up his chubby thighs, to help the other two drag the body from the reeds. Its head knocked against one of the egg-shaped rocks as they went. "You have to support his neck," the Cub Scout snapped at his companions, who were preoccupied with the paper-thin dragonfly larvae that clung to the body's chest and shoulders.

"Is that Tommy?" asked the other boy once they had settled the body on the damp grass. He was a distant relative of Tommy's on his mother's side, from which he had inherited their same awful, genetically-persistent nose with the hump on the bridge. Tommy's had a little infected metal stud in the fleshy part.

Tommy didn't respond. Brown water dribbled from his swollen, fish-kissed lips.

"What's wrong with him?" the girl wondered. All three of the children stared at the body. His right arm had twisted awkwardly when they'd pulled him up the bank, and the Cub Scout bent down to straighten it.

"Do you think he's drowned?" the distant relative asked.

"No, he's just knocked out," the girl said, and they both glanced over to the Cub Scout for confirmation. But he was silent, his gaze fixed on the purplish bruise of Tommy Hardy's face. The Cub Scout's father had had that same glazed, empty look when he'd collapsed on their kitchen floor the year before.

"Tommy," the distant relative called. "Tommy."

"The pond's really cold," the girl said. "Maybe he'll wake up once he's warm."

"Yeah, we should get him warm," the distant relative agreed, already headed for the heap of raincoats they'd piled on the higher, drier ground away from the pond.

"We sh-should g-get an adult," said the Cub Scout, who had a persistent nervous stutter. When he received his wilderness survival badge, his troop leader had said, "Remember, if there's a real emergency, call 9-1-1." Yet the Cub Scout hadn't followed this most simple, essential of instructions when he found his father on the kitchen floor. Certified in wilderness survival, he had confidently begun CPR to the beat of the song his troop leader taught them, only he forgot the lyrics and lost count of his compressions, distracted. He bypassed the mouth-to-mouth step, grossed out. His father died, but whether he had already

been dead when the Cub Scout found him he would never know, because he'd neglected to check his pulse.

"We could call someone from my daddy's cabin," the girl offered. Her father hunted deer in the nearby woods, and he stored his equipment in an old one-room shack by the pond.

The distant relative wrapped a jacket around Tommy's stomach and draped another ineffectively over his thighs. He tried to stuff Tommy's limp-noodle arm into the Cub Scout's raincoat, the biggest of the three, but he only managed to pull it up to the elbow before it refused to stretch any further. Like this, with a pause every few seconds to readjust the jackets that shedded from Tommy's cold, slimy skin, the children dragged his body through the forest toward the deer hunter's cabin.

"Do you think we're hurting him?" asked the distant relative as Tommy's body humped and hitched over upturned rocks and tree roots.

"He's out cold," the deer hunter's daughter said.

"Lift his legs higher," the Cub Scout said.

"He's so *heavy*," the distant relative protested.

It took the children nearly half an hour to lug Tommy to the cabin. The teenager was normally thin and lanky, but his belly had swelled up as big as a pregnant lady's. Wherever his skin wasn't caked in mud, it had wrinkled like the children's fingers after they spent too long in the bath. Blood oozed out of the tiny cuts from where they'd pulled him over thorny plants and rocks and sticks with sharp edges. At the cabin, they leaned against the walls to catch their breath before the deer hunter's daughter groped around beneath the front step and pulled out the spare key. The children dragged Tommy Hardy through the door and into the main room, where they laid him in front of the fireplace in a pool of his own mud and pond water.

"I can build a fire," the Cub Scout said. "But I need sticks." He waited for one of the other children to offer their help so he didn't have to go alone. As the oldest, the most experienced, maybe he should've volunteered to stay with the body. But later, when the adults came,

they would spare them the truth. They would say the children had done the best they could. That Tommy was doomed from the start.

"My dad's on his way," the deer hunter's daughter said as she hung up the phone in the corner of the room. "He said we should put Tommy in warm clothes, too. He keeps his extras in the closet over there." She began to work Tommy's wet, muddy Nikes off his feet.

"I'll change him, since he'll be naked," the distant relative offered.

"Eww," she said, dropping Tommy's foot. "Then I'll go get sticks."

When they had gone, the distant relative peeled and yanked the soaked clothes from Tommy Hardy's cold, wrinkled skin. Secretly, he was glad the deer hunter's daughter wasn't there to admire Tommy's lean, muscled arms and long legs, which his own mother always promised him he would inherit too. The relative balanced the teen's arms on his knees so they wouldn't flop down as he pulled the shirt over Tommy's head, but they thudded back to the ground. Over and over again. The child's insides squeezed, like he suddenly needed to pee really bad. He left Tommy's wet boxers on and shimmied him into the deer hunter's dry, baggy clothes. Then he punched Tommy in the shoulder—not too hard, just as hard as Tommy had pushed him down at a family barbecue last summer. But the older boy didn't snap at him, or even blink. The distant relative shook out his own tender fist.

The only other creature in the cabin was the salamander the children had caught just before they'd spotted Tommy's body in the water. The salamander pressed against the glass of the mason jar. His eyes were intelligent and molten gold. The children had forgotten to poke holes in the lid of the jar, and with each breath the salamander drew closer to suffocation. Like the Cub Scout, he too knew that Tommy Hardy was dead. He had seen him die. The salamander had watched as Tommy, sixteen and full of sex and alcohol and anger, full of everything, stumbled down to the pond from the high school soccer game nearby. Tommy was so full he thought he might die. He had just lost his virginity to a girl from his math class behind the sports

equipment shed. His head was spinning and he needed to cool down. He, Tommy, needed to go into the pond. He went. His hot, heavy lungs filled with a rush of water. The salamander had watched Tommy's eyes go dull and pale, and he knew that he was doomed to the same fate as he drew the last of the oxygen from the mason jar.

The two children returned with handfuls of sticks and branches, and the Cub Scout balanced them into a tepee, as he'd learned to do for his wilderness survival badge. There were matches on the mantle, and he held one to the fragile structure until it lit up.

"There," the Cub Scout said without enthusiasm. "He'll get warm soon."

"We should try to wake him up," the deer hunter's daughter said. She shook Tommy's shoulder. "Tommy? Wake up Tommy!"

Tommy's mouth fell open and let out a long, airy belch. Water dribbled from the corner of his raisin lips.

"To-m-mmy?" the Cub Scout said, his heart suddenly going hard and fast in his chest.

"Tommy," Tommy repeated. His voice was deeper than the children remembered, almost baritone. Musical. He sounded out the syllables of his name like he was learning them for the first time. "Tom-my." His eyes still hadn't opened.

"A-are you awake?" asked the Cub Scout.

"I am awake," Tommy said. "I am a-wake. Help me up," he said. "Open my eyes."

The children pushed him upright and leaned him against the fireplace. The distant relative peeled his eyelids back until they could see the gummy undersides. Tommy's eyes should've been brown, like his own, but now they were cloudy and stared at nothing. Like coffee with too much milk in it.

"Ah, that's better."

"Tommy, why were you in the pond?" the deer hunter's daughter said.

"I am not Tommy," he said. His head lolled on his shoulders, and the Cub Scout propped it back up against the fireplace. "But I am Tommy," he corrected himself.

"What does that mean? Don't be stupid," the distant relative snapped.

"You shall call me Toad," Tommy said. He let out another burp, then farted.

"Ugh," the deer hunter's daughter complained.

"Maybe he's gone crazy," the distant relative said.

Tommy's mouth fell open as though his jaw had been unhinged. The children could see that his teeth were tinged an unnatural pink. They peered inside his mouth and a pair of blinking gold eyes stared back at them, nestled just behind Tommy's swollen purple tongue. "Toad," he said again, and burped.

"Tommy has a frog in his mouth!" the deer hunter's daughter screamed.

"Don't be afraid," the toad said, not unkindly. Tommy blinked. It seemed like it took him an entire minute to slide his eyelids back and forth. He opened and closed his mouth again. "It's good that I'm here now. It's good that you've pulled me out of the water and warmed me up again. I will be like brand new."

"M-maybe we—we should leave," the Cub Scout said. He smoothed the ten badges on the neatly pressed uniform he wore nearly everywhere. It was not because he had few other clothes. He was only three badges away from becoming a Boy Scout, which meant he was smarter and more mature than the other children. Which meant he should not stutter.

"We should call Tommy's mom and dad too," the deer hunter's daughter said nervously.

"No need, no need," said the toad. Tommy flopped one arm up and then the other, like a puppet on marionette strings. "I'm getting the hang of this now, see. Just let me wake up, warm up a little bit more."

And it was true—the children saw that Tommy's skin was less

purple, his eyes less cloudy, his belly less bloated. He looked more like the Tommy Hardy they knew and less like a dead body in the pond. The children relaxed a bit. Maybe the eyes in Tommy's mouth were just a trick of the light. Maybe Tommy was trying to scare them so they wouldn't tell his parents. They had almost convinced themselves of this when Tommy's tongue flicked out and deftly scooped up the fly that had landed on his cheek. He rolled it around in his mouth for a moment, and swallowed.

"I'm scared," the distant relative whimpered.

"The ad-dults will know what to do," the Cub Scout said.

The toad himself was only now adjusting to Tommy Hardy's unfamiliar body. He hadn't ever left the pond before. Every Sunday morning, he watched the children crouch on the egg-shaped rocks as they hunted for salamanders. He kicked his own legs in imitation of their skips and jumps. He grew to love the children's movements, the swings of their arms and sway of their bodies. So when Tommy Hardy stumbled down to the pond that fateful night, the toad could not help but love him too. Love the way he burned delirious with alcohol as he lurched into the water. Love the way he kicked and twisted until he finally lay still. The toad sat atop the island of the teen's body and sang to him, "I love you, I love you, I love you." Then he crawled inside Tommy Hardy's open, surprised mouth. As the children dragged Tommy from the pond and warmed him beside the fire, the toad felt new and delicious parts of his body begin to thaw and gain feeling again. This toad could love Tommy Hardy, each and every part of him, so intimately, like he had never been loved before.

The children should not be afraid. He was Toad, who they'd sang along with at the muddy pond. He was Tommy, who they'd played with at neighborhood barbecues.

"I'm starting to get the hang of this," he said again, heaving one leg up and then the other so his knees were bent in front of his chest. As the fire dried the water from his wrinkled skin and bloated limbs,

Tommy balanced on his long, gangly legs and rose, rose, far above his former toad height. "Ah, here we are."

"Are you okay?" the deer hunter's daughter asked meekly.

"Just dandy," Tommy said. "Look at me go!" He spun on one leg, did a little jig, hopped up and down. He no longer looked dead at all. His skin was soft and peachy, his eyes dark brown. His stomach had deflated like a popped balloon.

The children looked at each other uncertainly. The Cub Scout's mind was on his father as he laid on the kitchen floor. In the months after he died, Tommy's mother had brought them a frozen lasagna for dinner every week. If Tommy had died too, he didn't know if his mother had it in her to repay all those lovingly cooked, homemade meals. But he'd saved her from that, this time. He hadn't given up even when he'd been sure Tommy was dead. He'd built the fire. He'd brought Tommy back to life.

Tommy was alive. So what if there was a frog in his mouth? The Cub Scout had had one stuck in his throat, swallowing his words, spitting up letters, stumbling and stuttering, for over a year now.

Just then the cabin door banged open, and the deer hunter himself rushed in. His daughter ran to him and clutched his waist, relieved. "What's going on here?" he demanded. "Thomas, they said they found you unconscious in the pond."

Tommy nodded solemnly. "But I'm alright now, sir."

"What happened?" asked the deer hunter.

The toad considered all his answers: the alcohol, the girl, the sweat, the anger that had lived inside Tommy. That now lived inside the toad as well.

"There was a frog in Tommy's mouth, Daddy," said the deer hunter's daughter.

"No, there wasn't," Tommy said immediately.

"There wasn't," the Cub Scout agreed. He had a sudden, terrible notion that if he did not say anything, Tommy Hardy would drop dead

on the floor right that moment, and the toad would crawl out of his mouth and hop away. “Tommy’s okay now.”

Tommy nodded, a pleased smile on his pink, human lips.

“Alright,” the deer hunter said, giving them each a suspicious little glare. “I’m going to take you to your parents, all of you. They can decide what to do with you.” He reached over and patted the Cub Scout on the shoulder. “Good work,” he said, and then walked over to the crumbling tepee to stamp the fire out.

The Cub Scout looked at the salamander, curled up at the bottom of the mason jar as though it was merely asleep. How could the deer hunter not see that Tommy had changed? The adults did not know what to do, he thought. The adults didn’t know anything at all.

As they walked out of the cabin, he noticed the fog had lifted. The trees hung low with Spanish moss, and the damp underbelly of leaves and twigs softened beneath his feet. A lone goose honked and called from the surface of the now-still pond. The Cub Scout breathed in the moist air and saw it all from new heights.

Deborah Fries

If You Have Seen the Scioto

by Kristina Garvin

She knows all too well that the placid water below the Greenlawn Avenue dam belies the dangerous undertow that damned the life of Terry Hill Hallen, who disappeared after wading into the river while playing with cousins.

—*Columbus Dispatch*, 3 July 2000

The children in my city are drowning, venturing to the place where two rivers meet around a bend and past a bridge—they wade up to their knees in the brackish water to reach the edge of slimy dropping-off—mud suctioning their smooth feet—mud keeping them from propelling through gurgle and tow—police don't come fast enough—the next day they will drag that river to prune a seventeen year old from its depths, pickled and thick—unrecognizable to his people save for the fading scar on his left arm

> As for scars the river has plenty: flooding yearly, forked and forsaken. As for scars: sometimes it gives them up. Mingo lived here for centuries until Colonel William Crawford, appointed by George Washington, came in 1774 to clear this land. A veteran of the French and Indian War, Crawford arrived here on the eve of the Revolution, at the village of Seekonk, or Salt-Lick, which sat at this golden sun-struck confluence of the Scioto and Olentangy rivers. This was where the Mingo tribe once thrived —a subset of Iroquois, they named this land "beautiful"—and they would not sign a treaty surrendering these shady banks. *They had a mind to deceive us*, Crawford wrote to Washington. With a regiment of 240 men, he razed the village. In near unreadable syntax, he reported that he managed to procure new land for the good general. *We have Built you a house at your Land oppesite the mouth of Hockhaking and Cleard a bout 8 acres of Land of all the Small Timber*, he concluded. *I am Sir your most Hume Sarvant*. In exchange for his service, he asked to purchase two slave children.

The boy lived in Franklington—they all do—what we Columbus natives call "the Bottoms" because you can do no worse—it's hot and stale—summers without air conditioning, cable or books—summers without camp—summers where houses always catch fire—he and his cousins too old to run through sprinklers—tired of sweating, soaking through clothes in a house so brittle it waits like tinder—so they went to the river—swirling mud always inviting—festive and wet—threading Columbus like a furtive silk road—forgotten like the Mingo—he didn't know how to swim—these boys rarely do—not one who died that summer had taken swimming lessons—how thick the current—how placid the surface—how quickly the body betrays and the roots take hold—he reached to grab a hand that never arrived

> What Crawford didn't tell Washington: Salt Lick had no men. The men were off at war. The women, children, and elderly had no defense, no weapons, no layer between

them and Crawford's militia. The militia drove them into the Scioto. They tried to swim to the other side. If you've seen the Scioto you know it isn't wide enough to provide safety. Bullets reached the other side, killed those lucky enough to reach the opposite bank. No one got away save one child who hid in a hollow sycamore until Mingo elders returned.

Terry was one of many that year—there was Andrew, there were Abdullkadir and Shaikh, brothers who escaped certain death in Somalia —water filling the lungs that nurses had once cajoled to cry, lungs that had once marshalled that first breath of life—in the moment of birth we cannot fathom how lungs might become the enemy—how they make us heavy and inert, filling us with sediment unseen

What happened to William Crawford? History tells. In 1782 he was called out of retirement, sent to placate the Lenape whose kin had died in another massacre in northeast Ohio, that in Gnadenhutten. Gnadenhutten Massacre, when an American militia mistook the pacifist Jesus Lenape, Moravian converts, for British spies. The militia captured them one night and scalped them one by one, ninety-six in all, in front of each other, hoping to force them to give up their secrets, the pine sap of devotion. A night's work, long and impartial. The Jesus Lenape sang songs, recited prayers. They did not fight back. Two survived the scalping. Told other tribesmen. Turned the remaining tribes against the American cause. So when Washington called on Crawford, Crawford went. *Anything for my general*. With the May humidity clinging to his body like a pinned shirt, Crawford accepted his mission.

Returned to Ohio. Before crossing the Ohio River, he drew up his last will and testament because no one forgot the Lenape, or their Mingo brethren. And so it was. Deep in Ohio country, Crawford's party was ambushed by the Wyandot, Delaware, and Shawnee. Tortured. Ears cut off. Then, burned alive.

The boy's friends heard something—a splash—but when they looked up it was too late—his skin was pulled loose by roots—his fading scar filtering into South Side drinking water—rescuers never arriving in time—his body washing up later, not so distant from the floating replica of Christopher Columbus's *Santa María*—which sits on the banks of the Scioto—mast uncloaked and reaching toward a sky of crowded buildings—this ship the only thing here that bucks the river's current

girl with a pearl earring peels her face off

BY SREEJA NASKAR

they painted me before my bones were done growing.
said — tilt your head like you've seen god
and didn't scream.

my mouth
has been open for three hundred years.
no one asked if i was choking.
there was blood in it
the day he told me to turn.
said it was for the light,
but I think he liked my neck
better when it looked breakable.

the pearl was an ulcer first.
i bled it out during winter.
he said stillness was beauty.
i held my breath so long
my name left me.

do you know what it is
to be trapped in a moment
painted by a man
who never asked
if you wanted to be looked at
forever?

he never painted the bruise
under the scarf.
or the part where
i bit down on my tongue so hard
i tasted memory.
and blood.
lots of blood.

//

they whisper about my softness.
my gaze.
the way my mouth almost opens.
almost opens.
almost opens.

but never does.
because he told me not to speak.
because if i spoke,
the gallery would flood.
the carpet would soak in centuries of
girls asked to pose
instead of scream.

the pearl keeps growing.
sometimes i wake up and it's a knife.
sometimes i bite down and it cuts the roof of my mouth.
sometimes it whispers all the names i forgot
just to stay pretty.

i was seventeen.
bleeding from the thigh.
there was a knife in my pocket
named survival.

they don't show you
the part where i swallow him whole.
where the brush breaks in my teeth.
where i finally open my mouth
and the museum
burns.

(if you look closer,
you'll see
my mouth was halfway open.
not because i was shy—
because i was trying
to say
no.)

Under the Dock

by Ryan Keeney

Mack and Ben are sitting on a park bench like they have forgotten how to be people. Their shoulders not quite touching, Mack is twirling one dark curl with her middle and ring fingers as Ben tries to fill the space on the bench he thinks he is too narrow for. He is broad for his age but still lanky, his worn-brown autumn coat hangs past his wrists. Mack suspects he is wearing his older brother's clothes again.

Ben is trying to tell Mack he loves her for the second time. Mack's head is full of catfish, an affliction she's had since she was a young child, and she is—for the first time—trying to express her condition to Ben. After six months of after-school movie dates Ben's first declaration of love was met with disdainful laughter. How could he ever love *me*? Mack had thought. In that moment, with Ben's rapidly reddening cheeks and hopeful eyes downcast, she had felt revulsion. Immediately following the revulsion had come hatred, self-hatred, for not being able to say *I love you, too*.

Mack watches Ben try to be still. He picks unconsciously at the whites of his fingernails as one foot gently pulses up and down. She decides to break the silence that Ben is too nervous to test.

"You've seen a catfish, right?" Mack says slowly.

Ben moves closer, conspiratorial. "Chris used to love watching them at the lake."

Mention of Ben's dead big brother makes Mack think of Ben's mother. His mother is shrunken, quick to anger. Though Mack had never met Chris, pictures of him and Ben caught smiling with skinny legs and bowl-cuts littered their mother's home. Ben had found Chris waxen and puffy under the dock at their family's Lake of the Ozarks home years ago. When he'd told Mack about finding Chris, the story was clinical, matter of fact. Chris had been dead for hours when Ben found him. He didn't touch the body. His lips were blue, and there had been no note.

Ben's mother still accidentally calls Ben his brother's name on occasion. Whenever she realizes her mistake she smiles unhappily, as if to curse the luck that had taken one son from her but left this one behind. Still, Ben is patient with her. He wakes up before seven to make her oatmeal and count her pills.

Mack taps her forehead, "Think of my head as a big tank."

Ben seems not to hear her, "Mack," He takes a deep breath, "I've been really wanting to say something,"

"There are catfish living in my head," she blurts.

Ben takes a moment to respond.

"How many?"

Ben looks into Mack's mossy-green eyes and thinks of summer; cutting the grass with no shoes and sweat dripping into his eyes. His mother sunning on the dock. *I am not the drowned boy.* He has to remind himself of this often, as if its repetition will steel him against the thought that he *should have been* the drowned boy.

"Chris always said he could hear catfish whispering, but I thought he meant the chubby ones we'd reel in at the lake. They croak until you put them back in the water, like singing. We used hotdogs as bait." Ben's shoulder is now touching Mack's on the park bench.

Mack draws away. "I can feel their whiskers, like strands of spaghetti floating around in my skull."

Ben is not laughing, not looking at Mack in disgust. For a moment, she looks up at the oak swaying above their park bench. It is dying, its branches drooping and fungus growing slowly up the trunk. Her eyes begin to tear. "My Mom told me when I was five. It 'runs in the family.' She said that if I wasn't careful the catfish would grow and grow until the whiskers started coming out of my ears, my nose,"

Ben interrupts her just as her voice is starting to crack. He says, "But do they talk to you?"

"I feel so ashamed sometimes," Mack says, now crying. "I know it sounds crazy. But all my life something has just felt so wrong."

Ben takes Mack's hand in his own and presses it close to his cheek. Her flesh is cool against his. Her shock at his touch makes her cheeks blush. Her tongue darts over her lips to check their dryness.

Ben presses his nose to Mack's knuckles and inhales. "You don't smell like catfish. Catfish smell like mud."

"Ew." Mack allows herself a small grin.

"I don't mind. I could take care of you. Catfish and all," Ben says.

Mack looks at the loose grouping of hair on Ben's upper lip. She thinks of her own mother; how she would cry on the phone until her mascara blurred, how she would leave Mack on her own for hours then come back with gas station pickled eggs, Slim Jims, and a forced smile. Mack has never wanted to be taken care of.

As they sit in silence, Ben eager and Mack unsure, the wind picks up. With an audible snap, a branch from the tree above breaks free. Mack looks upwards and watches, transfixed, as the branch tumbles towards Ben.

Ben sees the dock of his childhood. With a start, he realizes he is in the air *above* the dock, a big catfish hovering in the water just in sight. Chris is watching the catfish.

The catfish floats in a patch of sunlight that turns the lake's muddy, debris-filled water an incandescent green.

Chris is prone, the splinters of the old dock boards grasping at his body. He watches the catfish, suspended almost in a jelly, its whiskers gently shaking back and forth. Chris appears younger and more fit than the last time Ben saw him, bloated, in his coffin. He's shirtless and his arm muscles bunch like tennis balls at his biceps. He has a light dusting of blonde, almost white chest-hair. Those final months, Chris's depression had taken over his appetite and slowly his skin had become looser, his arms heavier. He stopped walking down to the lake to take the boat out, and it had been months since he and Ben had really talked like they used to. It was like he'd been sentenced to his bed by some higher power only he could hear.

Ben remembers this time though, the summer Chris tried to grow his hair out. He is burnt an ugly red that runs in the family, but there is not yet discomfort in how he fills his skin.

Ben feels disoriented, strange, like he has stepped back in time. He looks around for Mack, feels for the bench they were sitting on, but she's gone. He tries to run, walk, but can't move. All he sees is the dock, their old concrete-gray seawall, and an expanse of dark water. Movement from Chris turns Ben's attention back to him. Chris cranes his neck and looks to the water; the catfish's head is slowly morphing. Its eyes lighten to green, its whiskers elongate, kink, and morph into dark curls. Its lips collapse and round, then slowly take on a pinkish hue. Its slimy skin loses its sheen and turns a ruddy pale. Ben knows he should be more surprised than he is. The Mack-headed catfish continues gently floating in the light, but her eyes seem to be now locked onto his brother.

"Hey Mack," Chris says.

Catfish-Mack's nasal barbels twitch. "I feel weird."

Ben can't help but feel a twinge of jealousy as he watches Mack gaze at his brother.

Chris laughs. "I've been waiting for you. I'm Chris."

Mack's face is now scared. "You died a long time ago."

Chris rises to a sitting position, and Ben sees his own mountain-blue eyes, his high cheekbones, like a reflection. But there is a hardness to Chris's gaze that worries Ben.

He says, "My brother isn't like us."

Seeing this strange, unfamiliar version of Chris makes Ben's throat close. The Chris on the dock is not the big brother who let Ben crawl into bed with him when he was younger, scared of the way their old house creaked at night. Chris produces a hot dog and a small knife from his pocket. He begins to gently slice through the pre-cooked flesh. After cutting the hotdog neatly into six pieces, Chris takes the chunks and gently slips his hand into the water. Mack drifts closer, wary, an interloper controlled by her body's instincts.

She says, "I don't hear the catfish in my head right now. I can't remember the last time I was alone with my thoughts."

Chris's face is sporting a sharp-toothed grin that Ben doesn't remember. He looks jealous, almost hungry.

Chris leans his face towards the water and says, "They never stopped talking to me."

Ben watches as Mack flows through the water towards Chris's hand. Once she reaches Chris, her nose bumps his thumb, as if asking permission. Instead of swallowing the hot dog chunks, she instead allows Chris's fingers to slide past her lips to explore her mouth, where he touches her teeth, and her tongue twitches back and forth. Mack's mouth then starts to look cavernous, and for a moment Ben can't tell if Mack will pull Chris to the depths or if Chris will yank Mack's flopping body from the water.

Ben screams, "Chris!"

Both Chris and Mack freeze, and after several moments of stillness, Chris turns slowly and looks upwards to Ben, caught observing the scene. He doesn't make eye contact but instead watches the mouth around his fingers change as Mack's face is slowly replaced. Chris is

left holding the original catfish by its glossy white and pink gums. Ben remembers the sandpaper feel of catfish teeth on his palms, his wrists, the feeling Chris had taught Ben not to be afraid of. The catfish pulses as Chris holds it just out of the water, then it slowly sinks to the depths and disappears as he releases.

"I was tired, Ben. There wasn't anything you could do."

"It's your fault… Mom hates me now." Ben says slowly.

Chris's shoulders stiffen, and he finally meets Ben's eyes. They stare at each other as the water laps against the seawall. Ben feels the combined rage and despair that has been festering for years, the confusion and bottled-up self-blame masked and armored by shallow smiles and a forced optimism that drains him utterly. Ben looks at the bags under Chris's eyes and his anger recedes. It occurs to him that next year he will be older than Chris was when he died. He wonders at the strangeness of being older than his big brother.

"Your old waxed jacket almost fits me." Ben says.

The dock creaks, and Chris reaches a hand up to twirl his hair. Finally, he says, "Tell Mack not to listen to the catfish. I wish I hadn't." As Ben starts to blurt a mixture of *Why* and *Don't go* Chris quickly stands, looks at Ben, and dives off the dock into the water.

Mack is looking down at Ben, his body still except for shallow breaths and gentle twitches of his hands and feet. The arm-sized tree branch that had ripped free from its decayed trunk and crashed into Ben's head has settled onto the ground behind the bench. Mack thinks it's been under a minute since Ben was hit but she is just now shifting from shock to action.

"I'm sorry!" Mack looks on in horror, even if she isn't sure what she's sorry for. She crouches over Ben and tries to cushion his skull from the hard ground beneath the bench, his eyelids fluttering. She strokes his downy cheek and tries not to look at the gash near his temple. One of

Ben's eyes floats open, then the other follows suit like a drunk stumbling home in the morning, the sun already risen.

Ben takes a long but strained breath. Instead of touching her face, he strokes Mack's arms. Then his right hand gently traverses her spine, feeling the knobby vertebrae just under her taut skin.

"I had a dream about you and Chris," Ben says shakily.

Mack laughs through her tears in relief. He's alive.

Ben does his best to smile, but Mack sees a pleading seriousness in his eyes.

"Promise me you won't listen to the catfish," he says.

Mack continues to cradle Ben's head, the world around her coming back into focus. There are joggers in the distance, and the ground is cold beneath her. She wonders if she should call 911.

Mack helps Ben struggle unsteadily to his feet. He lurches back to the bench to sit, his jacket sleeve pressed against his head in a sloppy attempt to mop up the slowly leaking blood.

Mack sits next to him and holds his hand. She wonders if she were to be hit in the head, hard, like Ben, if the catfish just might stop talking.

She says, "I'll try."

Eardley's Country

Judith Skillman

How the body of the rabbit will turn to wild grass, and the salt in the fish you did not finish will wash back into the sea

by Maggie Wang

in memoriam D.A.

Every year I know less
about my body.
Pigeon sings in the stomach.
Dove in the chest.
Sun walks quicker
across thinning skin.
Sky balances on crown.
Soil reaches for sea.
Chaos of living settles
like leaves after light.

What If I Like It

by Colleen S. Harris

What if I loosed the sewn seams
of all this grief, and poured it
from my throat like sand from burlap,
what if the gritty spill opened my lungs
and I could breathe easy again?
What if I told you the motion I use
to wring a pet chicken's neck
before laying its roasted breast out
on our family's table is the same
as how I would open the sealed screw-top
of a cheap bottle of wine? What if
these needful hands are my father's?
What if I can never put that bottle
back down, what if you catch me
with the last drops on my lips, what if
you like the taste when you lick into
my bitter berry mouth, what if I like it
when you do? And what if I accept
the script the nurse lays in my loath hands?
What if I took just one of these sixty
tiny white pills, small poison spores,
what if I laid it like a sacrament
on the pointed pink quest of my tongue,
what if the pain goes away, what if
this curse loosens, what if I could move
easy again, and oh, God, what if I like it?

Life After the Minor Leagues

by Andrew Rucker Jones

Larry's itch couldn't have been more connected to Roy's flatline if a wire had hung between the EKG and Larry's arm. Short beeps and Larry's skin was fine, but the instant the long, unbroken tone settled on Roy's hospital room, Larry's fingernails found his forearm and scratched. He scratched while the nurse covered his brother with a sheet, turned off the TV in the middle of the Springfield Cardinals baseball game, then killed the EKG. The steady tone halted mid-death, but Larry scratched on.

Roy's sharp nose remained prominent under the stiff, white shroud. Older Roy. Wiser Roy.

Larry was still there, still scratching, when the orderlies took Roy away, and Larry wondered what he should call Roy now. By the time the nurse brought an empty bed, Larry had a short list: body, remains, corpse, cadaver. He asked the nurse which she would choose. He needed to know when he talked to friends and the funeral home. The nurse scrutinized the incessant sawing of his fingernails at his forearm in the mid-summer light streaming through the window and sent him to the weekend dermatologist in Building B.

Cadaver—he decided as he walked by room after room of the terminally ill—was influenced by the place and inappropriate for

intimate conversation. His forearm burned, so he switched arms. It was the proper word for speaking with the staff about Roy's wish to donate his body to science. *There, you see?* he thought. *It's "body." It must be.*

In front of the dermatologist's office waited an elderly Hispanic woman with splotches on the backs of her hands and a man in a suit with a rash peeking out from under his collar. Larry sat beside the woman.

But *body* reminded him of school shootings and natural disasters—things far more traumatic than a slow, predictable cancer death. "There's nothing traumatic about death, Larr," Roy had said after six months of chemotherapy. "Folks die sooner or later, and in the grand scheme of things, not a one of us is really important." Roy's skin had been papery and jaundiced, bruised from needles even, but it had not itched. No, *body* couldn't be right. Roy had said so himself, by extension.

The woman beside Larry fingered the beads of a rosary and muttered. The cherry crucifix at the end dangled over her lap. The metronomic motions of Larry's nails, up and down his forearms, extended to the backs of his hands. When the dermatologist came out, he glanced at Larry. The welts on Larry's arms beaded red dewdrops. The dermatologist called the Hispanic woman, who disappeared into the office with a final prayer.

Remains had a pleasant churchy ring. One could add *earthly* before it for a dash of theological panache. But Roy had never been religious. "When you're dead, that's it," he had said while they watched *The Sixth Sense* the night Larry drove him to the ER for the last time. "Worm food." Larry supposed *earthly remains* really was just a euphemism for *worm food*, and Larry didn't want to talk to the funeral home about Roy's worm food.

The suited man sat straight and unmoving, palms on the briefcase across his lap so his manicured fingernails shone in the fluorescent

light. His hair was frozen into a shape like a river flowing over a rock. His feet were flat on the floor, and his knees bent at a right angle. He breathed slowly, as if breathing faster might make his rash itch. Larry began scratching his neck.

The Hispanic women emerged and waddled down the hall. Nails at his throat, Larry coughed toward the dermatologist, who took a longer look at Larry before leading the suited man into the office. Larry pulled his Cardinals fan jersey up and scratched his belly.

That left *corpse*, but *corpse* was hopelessly bound to horror movies and schlocky murder mysteries, which Roy couldn't abide. "Life is for living, and baseball is life. Only, forget the major leagues. In the minors, the players screw up, and that makes the game exciting." Roy had channel-surfed on his hospital television with near obsession, hoping always to find a minor league game. "If you want heart-pumping, root-for-the-underdog joy, go to T-ball games. In T-ball, everybody's an underdog. It's the highest plane of existence."

The suited man stepped into the hall and clopped away in his patent leather shoes, hardly bending his joints.

Larry followed the dermatologist into the office and sat. The lights were off and the sun had sunk below an adjoining building, so the doctor's boney features and prominent nose carried the weight of edging shadows. He considered Larry across steepled hands, face rigid as a death mask. A hospital bed rumbled from one end of the hallway, clattered as it passed, then faded to a whisper and stopped.

The very tips of Larry's fingers itched, but under the dermatologist's stare, he could no longer bring himself to scratch. What was the use? Larry knew what the doctor would say.

"There's nothing wrong with you."

"I suppose not," Larry said, clenching his smoldering forearms in his hands, "but how do you *know*?"

The dermatologist sighed and let his hands drop. "I could tell you

it's because I'm a trained physician, but with some patients, it's not training. It's instinct. I just know."

"You're never wrong?"

"About my opinion? No. About the patient? Sometimes." He stood, so Larry was forced to leave. The electronic lock in the office door shut behind Larry with a long, monotone beep, like the EKG that had never finished.

Roy was not a body or cadaver for Larry. Roy was Roy, and as unimportant as the universe considered his death, Larry ached. He sat in the long, white, empty hallway, hunched into the Cardinals jersey, rested the bridge of his nose on his steepled hands, and cried. The tears trickled over the welts on Larry's arms. They burned at first, but after a while, the itching cooled.

This story was first published in *Ink Nest Literary Magazine*, February 2025

Even in the Woodpile

by Dara Laine

We never did burn
the last cords he cut.
Let it soften under tarps,
edges black with damp,
sweating white mold.

Now mushrooms bloom along the seams—
soft suede antlers, ivory.
A kind of undoing
I don't know how to stop.

Once, I thought
wilderness was elsewhere—
a trailhead, a thicket,
a place you bring a map.

But there are forests
even in the woodpile.
Even in the hitch in my chest
when I open the door too fast

and remember—
no one's home.

It's quieter now.
Not peaceful.
Not like it was.

They say to leave the trunks where they fall—
rot feeds the next season.
That every fallen thing
still warms something.

Isn't it odd that standing tall we call them trees—
only when they fall do we rename them
logs.

After,
I want
to leave the logs as they are—
half-used,
moss, lichen
crawling,
connected,
not yet ash.

The Apricot Tree

BY DIYORA KABILOVA

I WAS EIGHT the summer my feet learned the orchard's secrets. Barefoot, knees browned by sun and grass stains, I climbed the apricot tree like it was part of me—bark under my nails, sweet sap on my fingertips. I remember the sticky drip of juice down my chin, the way I tilted my head back to let the warm wind dry it, eyes squinting through branches heavy with fruit.

Below, her voice rose through the hum of bees and the hush of leaves. "Come down now, little bird." My grandmother, apron smudged with flour and petals, hair pinned up but forever slipping loose in the heat. Her hands were always busy—tying, mending, stirring—yet somehow they were soft as orchard blossoms when they cupped my face to wipe away the apricot's golden mess.

When she laughed, I felt safe enough to breathe all the way down to my toes. The whole orchard smelled of warm earth and ripening sweetness, the sun pressing its promise into my scalp. She'd tap the trunk with her knuckles and say, gentle but certain, "If you care for the tree, the tree will care for you."

I didn't know then how true that would be. But I never forgot.

I learned to climb that tree the way she showed me to hold a thing you love—gentle, barefoot, careful not to snap what keeps you steady. She'd stand below, apron smudged with jam and grass, telling me

where to place my feet, which branch would bend but not break. I'd reach up, palms stung with sunlight, picking the fruit without leaving a bruise.

In her kitchen, the air smelled of warm sugar and orchard dust. She'd slice the apricots open with that little paring knife whose handle was worn smooth from her thumb. She'd lay the halves on old screens by the window, whispering to the fruit like it might listen: waste nothing, save everything that can be sweetened.

When the pot bubbled thick and gold, she'd let me stir, my small hand clumsy beside hers. If I dipped my finger in too soon, she'd laugh soft—never scold, just wipe the syrup from my chin. "Patience," she'd say, "sweetness knows when to be ready."

On the porch steps, dusk humming all around, she'd tell me how she planted that tree when the world was hungry and so was she. A seedling for hope. Roots deeper than the years could reach.

Before I'd run off sticky-mouthed and sun-tired, she'd press the ripest piece to my lips and say, "You're my orchard, too." I didn't know how to hold that yet—but I tasted it all the same, sweet as the promise of staying loved.

Years slipped by like sun through leaves. She grew smaller while the tree grew bigger, branches heavy with summers I kept missing. I left for college with boxes of books and a promise I meant with my whole young heart—I'll come back every holiday, every break. Sometimes I did. Sometimes I didn't.

When I did, I'd find her under that tree, same old apron, hair thinner, hands folded soft in her lap. She'd pat the chair beside her and press my palm to the bark like it was still teaching me something.

"Plant something of your own one day," she'd say, her voice softer than the wind that rustled the orchard awake. "Roots keep a heart from drifting too far."

I'd nod, tuck the words away for later, the way she once tucked ripe fruit into my pockets.

Then one summer I came back and she was gone. The orchard stood waiting, branches creaking in the warm hush like they were trying to remember her shape.

I stood there, grown taller than I'd ever been in her shadow, hands empty except for the ache that filled them. I reached up, picked the softest apricot, tasted its gold on my tongue, and let her goodbye melt sweet as sugar down my throat.

Now I stand in the garden again, my own daughter's small hand curled warm in mine. I lead her to the old tree—gnarled now, tired, half hollow where storms have tested its bones. But alive, still alive, roots deep as my memory.

She scrambles up the trunk like it's nothing, legs swinging higher than I'd dare now. Her laughter rains down with the leaves, and I stand below, my apron catching the fruit she tosses, golden and soft like the past repeating.

I tell her about the woman who once taught me how to climb without breaking branches, how to listen to stories carried in sap and shade. She listens wide-eyed, a sunbeam caught in her hair.

"Can I plant my own tree when I'm big?" she calls down.

I reach up, brush her ankle with my fingertips, and smile so it roots deep in her.

"Yes," I say. "Always yes."

Evening folds itself gently around the garden, the last sun slipping through the branches. My daughter sleeps curled up on the old porch, hair wild, palms sticky with fruit she couldn't finish. One small hand still clings to my apron, like she's holding on to every story I've tucked into her pockets tonight.

I stand beneath the apricot tree, its bark rough under my fingertips, its shadow pooling soft around my ankles. I press my toes into the earth and feel the hush of roots beneath, patient veins that hold three lifetimes in the dark.

Under my breath I whisper thank you—to the woman whose hands

turned hunger into blossoms, whose voice made the branches sing, who gave me sweetness when life was lean. To this tree that never asked for anything but care and gave back more than we deserved.

I crouch in the grass, find a fallen pit half-buried in clover, and slip it into my pocket. A promise, warm and round against my thigh—that near my own front steps, there will be shade, and fruit, and a place for small hands to reach for hope.

Someday she will stand where I stand—older maybe, braver maybe—and she'll taste the same sweetness, feel the same roots hold her steady when the world sways. She'll press her palms to the trunk, whisper her own thank yous, and know this truth that softens every leaving: love grows in the quiet spaces we tend—and it stays, even when we don't.

Suburban Elegy

by Abigail Ann Gray

Mother, they are tearing up the fields again.
This time it's the field beyond the fire station,
the one where Phil's farm might once have been
(I will have to ask the next time I see him).
They're ripping out the grass, the trees, and building
monstrous hulking things that no one can pronounce.
We need them, they say, and *they are good for us.*
Did we not need the grass, the flowers, the trees?

Mother, I am tired of feeling helpless.
Of watching men working, sweating in this heat,
building things that they were told to build by men
who are not here. Of watching and waiting for
who knows what. For something to fall from the sky.
If everything is connected, why do I feel
anything I could do would be swallowed whole,
ripples fading out before they reach the shore?

Mother, do you see the wildflowers?
Tall and purple-blue and waving in the wind,
sprouting up everywhere, everywhere
they shouldn't be, everywhere they should be:
between roads and cars and the construction sites,
lifting faces to the sky, singing, singing:
This place was ours once.
It will be ours again.

borderlines & braidlines

BY SREEJA NASKAR

your fingers were half-oil, half-gospel.
grandma's scalp smelled like fenugreek & something rotting sweet —
maybe time. grief. that apricot soap she hoarded
in a tin with old ration cards & a bullet
she never talked about.

i remember parting her hair every afternoon,
line down the middle.
she used to say, "war always starts at the scalp.
the mind splits first."

and then somewhere in the 3 o'clock heat,
i started crying.
not for her —
but for the way no one
teaches you how to hold a country as it unthreads
from your hands.

—

a soft hymn on the transistor.
"don't pull too hard," she said,
"even dead roots remember pain."

her braids coiled like snakes in my lap,
& i thought of borders —
how they are nothing
but hands that forgot how to braid.

—

once, i saw two men shot for crossing a line
they couldn't see.
once, i saw grandma untangle knots
as if they were bombs she could disarm
with patience and coconut oil.

—

the day she died,
i slept on her pillow.
smelled mustard, sweat,
a little smoke.
i think that's the smell of survival.
now i oil my own hair and
forget which hand is war.
which is balm.

every strand pulls me backwards
into a country
that no longer has a name
i can say
without bleeding.

Compulsions of the Earth

BY MAE S. LADLE

QUIN KEEPS HOUSEPLANTS. It started with a droopy little spider plant. She didn't buy it herself, she doesn't even like the name, spider plant, because she doesn't like spiders particularly. But it was her birthday, and a friend needed a birthday present, and well, they were discounted at Lidls. Sometimes the universe makes choices for you like that.

So she has a spider plant, and then there's a sweet succulent available by donation at her local church, and thereafter people in her life assume she likes plants. They are offered at Secret Santas and work celebrations, dinner party gifts, house-moving clear outs. Her mother comments that that corner looks a bit sad without a TV or anything. Quin doesn't watch TV, so for Christmas she gets a monstera. It casts swiss cheese shadows on the white walls when the morning sun streams in through her windows. Curtains open always, for the plants. She may not have chosen them, but they live here now. It feels neglectful not to care for them.

Her friends comment on the lushness of her plants. They do it by putting down their own gardening skills. "I had a cactus for a while… apparently those are hard to kill, but I managed to anyway! How do you do it, Quin?"

With a mellow smile on her face, Quin obliges. She mentions different plant types, soil moisture, pH levels. She directs them to the two plant care books on her shelf. Hardcovers, with crisp edges and white pages. There is dust on their tops, and they smell like the bookshop her ex partner bought them from.

Her friends thank her, laugh at themselves, and move on.

Quin feels sheepish. Even though she knows her friends don't care, she cringes at the thought of them applying her tepid advice to the dying things in their life. She hopes there is something of use in those books she's never opened.

It's not that she knows something about spider plants that Clarissa, Tom, or Scott don't. When her plants aren't watered, she can never fully hydrate. Her lips are dry, her skin cracked, always left wanting, no matter how much iced tea she gulps down. She can rub cream on her hands and watch it soak away into the gulfs between the flakes of dead skin, and it won't matter, won't help, won't fulfill its function until she sets that terracotta pot beneath the tap and lets it soak. She can taste that tap water too. It leaves a rubbery residue in her throat. Soon she sets up buckets and pans out in the narrow walkway between her house and the next, to collect rainwater.

One morning she can scarcely step out of bed. Agonizing tendrils of pain shoot up her legs when she puts weight on her feet. Her cheeks are flushed; the thermometer tells her she's 38.4C.

Three days she tosses and turns in bed, trying fruitlessly to find comfort in her agony. She has dragged herself to the rain buckets downstairs, back up to the bathroom three times, watering and watering, until she feels limp and soggy, and her hands won't dry no matter how hard she tries. Still the fever persists. Perhaps it's just a flu, an ordinary one, one that everybody gets. Until one sick afternoon, groggily following the lines of the cracks in the ceiling with her tired eyes—tracing their shapes—she realizes. She pulls

herself out of bed, clenching her teeth. It's like walking on heated coals; her eyes stream. She doesn't know which one it is, and yet her feet take her straight toward it—the string of pearls dripping attractively off her shelf. She picks it up. She sniffs.

Ten minutes later she is on her hands and knees, a hastily sliced open garbage bag containing the spill of earth, as she thoroughly cleans the roots. She uses a pair of kitchen scissors to cut off the rot and washes them in soap and water. The relief takes a few moments, but is so intense she lays hunched up for a while, crying. This is how her mother finds her, having popped over with some supplies for sick Quin.

Whatever is Quin doing, up to her elbows in dirt, bare feet, taking her plant apart on the floor? Quin doesn't know what to tell her. Her mother insists she go back to bed. Quin complies only after the string of pearls has been repotted with fresh, nutritious soil, and set upon a warm spot on the windowsill. Only then does she let her mother help her shower off. She is crying all the time. Her mother worries, but the next morning Quin's fever is gone, and soon after she is up and about as usual.

Her indoor garden thrives, and she mirrors it. Her hair is darker, shinier, her skin clear. She has her life together, people think. And she does, only she's not sure what her life is. She's out bowling with her friends, and her face flushes hot. She excuses herself, drives home. Pulls down the blinds to give her begonia relief from the bright late afternoon sun. Sometimes she's at work, typing away, and her fingers itch, and she has to clench her firsts to keep them from shaking. She excuses herself during her lunch break. She squishes white mealy bugs with a q-tip for the rest of the day.

Even when all is well, her condition weighs on her mind. What if there's a house fire? Would she stand at the bottom of her block of flats, skin sizzling, choking on smoke, her eyes melting out of her head as the heat makes terracotta pots burst and shatter? She went for groceries once, but only made it halfway before doubling back because

she thought she smelled burning. But when she came home, hungry and sweaty, it smelled like always—green and earthy.

She's considered getting rid of them—no, rehoming them—but then, would that change the connection? She's wanted to try. Just a wee cactus, give it to her mother to put on her windowsill. She's thought about texting the idea, just floating it. But whenever she thinks she will, her fingers won't move. The thought of moving the cactus makes her nauseous. That cactus on someone else's window sill. If there isn't enough light, if it's overwatered—her mother is always overwatering plants - then Quin can do nothing. She will have to curl up and suffer until she can get back to it, to fix the wrongs. She has visions of herself, collapsing into someone's dark apartment in the middle of the night, for her plant, for that piece of her—she knows she should try, just to be sure. But she can't.

She worries about being around other houseplants. When Clarissa acquires a bonsai tree, Quin makes sure she sits in the bean bag the furthest away from it as possible. She tries not to look at it, although the tiny gardening tools in their sleek black carrying case intrigue her. She won't approach it even when beckoned. Quin! You're so good at this, tell me how to keep this guy alive. I named him Toby!

Quin doesn't want to know. At home—and she is mostly home since she arranged with her boss to work remotely four days a week—she doesn't do much else when work is over. Every time she starts to read a book or picks up a pen her mind drifts. She gets up and paces. Promises herself she won't check the windowsill, or the corner with the monstera, or the shelf, which is more plant than books now. Forces herself to sit back down. Two minutes later she's up again, digging a finger in the soil to check the moisture. Her throat is a little dry. Is it she who should be drinking? When has she last had an iced tea? She takes hasty sips from the rainwater buckets now. Everything else makes her a little sick.

She lies on the big orange rug in her living room a lot. Lifts up her arms, holds them to the sun, and wonders if she'll grow leaves soon. Where is this going? If she lays here long enough, will roots dig through her overalls, into the weft of the rug, the cracks of the floorboards, keeping her there permanently? It's a ridiculous thought, but the longer she lies there, the more she believes it. Maybe she wants to believe it. She closes her eyes and focuses on breathing.

People notice that she's changed. She loves them for being so observant, and she hates them for it even more. She feels like she's grown a big, embarrassing tumor. She stops mentioning her plants whenever she makes her anxious trips home. She would rather die than have them know. To her horror, her mother suggests Quin spend a few days at her mother's apartment across the city. When Quin refuses, she insists on staying with Quin a while. Reluctantly, Quin agrees.

The days are terse. Quin smiles until her jaw hurts. She avoids looking at her plants so much her neck aches from whipping her eyes away sharply from the offending places in the flat. They are everywhere, the windowsills, on her shelves, on the top of wardrobes and even on the back of her toilet, a glossy ivy with tendrils licking down to the floor. Whilst her mother does the dishes, singing songs Quins remembers fondly from her childhood, Quin tends to her plants hurriedly, prodding, feeling, sniffing, earth under her nails evidence of her crimes. She hasn't felt right in days, weeks really; there's this itch under her skin, and her body hurts in an undefined, hollow way. But she doesn't know which one it is. There is no trace of parasites. All the leaves are strong, shiny, and healthy, flowers bright and fragrant. Another root fungus? Something hidden deep below the surface? Should she repot the blue star fern again?

"You alright love?"

Quin jumps, spins around.

"I didn't mean to scare you," her mother offers her a tender smile.

She is pulling rubber gloves off her hands. "You look so pale Quin, I wish I knew what was wrong. You know you can talk to me, right?"

"Nothing's wrong," Quin says, forcing a smile, trying to surreptitiously rub the soil off her fingertips. It's normal to look at your plants every once in a while. But only if her mother hasn't noticed the abnormal amount of time she's already spent at this windowsill in the past few days. Has it been abnormal?

"I'll just go to the bathroom," Quin says.

She's on the floor again there. She is crying, wraps her arms around herself like she's trying to parcel herself up and away, out of existence. Digs her nails into the flesh of her shins. But it's not enough. When she closes her eyes, all she sees is green and pale green and shimmery red leaves, purple flowers. Drainage pots, brown spots, crispy ends. Clarissa's bonsai tree with its ornate yellow and grey pot, and the tiny gardening shears.

When her mother knocks at the bathroom door, she is cross legged on the tiles, systematically snipping triangles out of her aloe vera. Each snip slices through her, like clipping off arteries somewhere around her stomach. It leaves her on a peak of adrenaline, wincing and craving more. It shocks her fuzzy mind into hot clarity. By the time the knock shoots her back to reality, her hands are sticky wet and her breathing comes laboured. The sun has set, and in the halflight, the broken bits of aloe look like dark teeth. A shattered grin.

"Just a moment!" Quin garbles, already on her feet, running the tap. Her hands are shaking so badly she sprays her front with water. She shoves the aloe in the cupboard under the sink, tidies the hem of her shorts. Dabs the tears off her face with the sleeves of her cardigan.

When she comes out, she smiles as brightly as she can. "Did you want to take a shower?" before her mother can respond: "there's some towels on the top shelf of my wardrobe, pick whichever you like. And you can use any of my soaps."

"Were you in there in the dark?"

"My eyes are a lot better than yours," Quin laughs. The laugh feels jagged in her throat. Quin can tell, so maybe her mother can too.

And life goes on. Reluctantly, Quin's mother leaves her on her own again. Quin prefers it that way. She doesn't have to lock herself in the bathroom. She works sitting on the floor by her radiator now, it's easier to check things from here. And somehow, with some nail scissors, and her own iron will, she manages.

Tom's birthday is coming up. He wants to go on a half a week's trip with his twin brother but needs someone to take care of his guinea pigs. Quin is the only one in their group who has flexible working arrangements. She surprises herself by volunteering. Yes, I'll take care of Padflower and Footflea. It's just fifteen minutes from mine, it's no bother. She mentions it—casually—to people in her life. She wants to spit: *see, I can go out if I want to*. She wants to yell it at herself in the mirror. Her reflection looks so vicious, she has to avert her eyes. They fall on the mutilated aloe vera instead. It's been recovering, when she lets it. It fills her with a sick sense of power when she sees it, even as she feels the open cuts and scabs on her own skin.

For five days, she heads out twice a day, and she feeds and waters Padflower and Footflea, cleans their enclosure with a dedicated trowel and showers it with fresh wood shavings. She pets their soft fur, and loves them for being perfect and unconnected to her. When they are hungry, she only knows by their sniffling cries. If she isn't there, she doesn't know. She keeps telling them how perfect they are. She does run a little, when she gets home, up the steps to her flat. Just to cross the threshold a little quicker. It's not like it matters, whether she is a bit quicker or not, it's not like it's a problem. And she does sigh an internal sigh of relief when she's safely in her own four walls again. But that's okay. She is managing.

Tom comes back from his holiday, with a new spring in his step, and two new plaid shirts. Quin is thanked, and although she misses the guinea pigs a bit, she is glad to be home all day again. And for a while, things stay the same.

It's a gloomy Saturday morning. Quin is hoping for rain, for the buckets. She feels thirsty, but she's out of good water. Her buzzer rings. It's Tom, and who? Her mother? She's only listening with one ear. She darts over to her shelf to rearrange a slightly ragged mother of pearls. Ragged, but you can't really tell from afar. The windows are open to let in the thick, damp air.

She opens at the knock, and steps back. Her mother comes in first. She is talking, but Quin isn't hearing what she's saying. She's staring at Tom's plaid back as he walks in backward. He's carrying a pot that fills out both his arms, a bushy grey-green fern swaying and bending to fit through the doorframe. Words like "new," "for you," "for your help". There is bile in her throat, and she finds herself trembling so hard it's difficult to speak.

"No," she says. "Take it out, I don't want it. I haven't seen it." The last bit, she says more to herself. She doesn't know if she's about to scream or cry.

When Tom opens his mouth to protest, she does both.

She darts forward, and pushes him, him or the pot—whatever her hands can touch. *Hard*. Tom is tall and built like a tree, so he doesn't fall, but he does sway, and the pot falls and shatters. She feels it reverberate through her skull, the sharp shards, the feet trampling her roots, as she kicks the bundle of vegetation out—out of her flat, out, down the stairs, out, out, *out*. She thought she was screaming something, but maybe she's just sobbing.

There's a gentle hand on her arm, but she shakes it off like it's a fat spider. "Out!" she yells again, and again, "Out, out, out!" and somehow that's not enough, even though the whole hallway is full of earth and torn leaves now, and her chest feels like it's about to explode. She runs back into her flat, attacks the shelves, flings what she can get a hold of

out the window—again and again and again. There are clumps of String of Pearls and Mother of Thousands in either of her bloodied fists.

There are heavier hands on her now pulling her away, onto the floor. Quin can't see, can't hear, she can only feel her own trembling, hurting body, and soon that is fading too. Is she fainting, or is she dying? She hopes, hopes, hopes she is dying. She wants to yell this, but she can't do that in front of her mother, her mother would hate that, and her throat feels lumpy—something wrong with her plants—yes, of course, she just threw them on the ground—oh god… but she didn't do that to the begonia, did she? It's so delicate, it wouldn't—she feels numb.

And somehow, that is a relief too.

She wakes up in the pitch dark, sweating under too many blankets. It takes her a few moments to find her bearings, to understand how heavy these blankets are and how overheated she is. She pushes them off her. There's a crack between the window and the blinds where the lamplight from outside filters in. It's so quiet that her own breathing, heavier than the setting warrants, is deafening. She is putting together pieces from her memory, untangling dream from reality. Like a puzzle, it's slow at first, the picture indistinct, but the further she gets, the quicker it happens, and she starts to remember.

Suddenly she is violently nauseous, on her feet, tripping to the door. It can't have been real, she's been dreaming, it's the heat—and for a brief moment, relief washes over her. There is no carnage on the living room floor. Everything is tidy and in its place. Except it isn't. The streetlight streams unfiltered into the room, *her windowsill is bare*. There is nothing on her shelves. A lone, dusty candle that she never lit because of the way it pollutes the air. She hugs herself tight to keep the shaking from taking over.

She is already flying out of the flat, down the stairs, taking two, three, five steps at once. She trips once and scrapes her hands and knees on the bare concrete, scrambles to her feet, keeps running.

She's in the courtyard, below her window five stories up. There are shards of pottery here and there, some earth, but not enough, nowhere near enough, and no plants at all. She is digging through the big wheely bins. She wants to be sick from the smell, but she has no time for that. She knows internally that there is no point digging around. If they're not on top, they won't be in there, but they have to be somewhere, *somewhere*. She can smell something burnt, she hasn't been paying attention to it—doesn't it always smell a little burnt around here? She takes a moment to catch her breath, feeling the sticky bin juice run up her arms. She turns around, taking in the darkened courtyard properly. On a patch of ground that should be grass but is mostly hard earth there are a few crates, remnants of beer bottles. And a big fire pit, still smoldering. Torn pieces of vegetation, charred black.

She has been rooted to the ground. She can't remember how to move. Her gaze is fixed on the pit. She's only wearing a tanktop and shorts, and it's cold out here in the night. She feels like she tastes the gritty, beer soaked coal. But she's alive, isn't she? Isn't she?

Not until the first rays of sunlight colour the sky a sweet, washed out blue, does she thaw. Slowly, very slowly, she wrings her hands. Wriggles her toes. And then she turns, and walks back into the house.

And somehow, her life continues. She is maladroit at first, a deer taking its first steps. She avoids any kind of plant. Not unhealthily, she likes to think, though it's been months since she's managed a Lidls; it makes her lightheaded to consider forcing herself through a tunnel of cheap green things. She knows she can choose not to buy, and of course she wouldn't. But she'll be even less likely to if she's not there.

She ducks a little when she passes under trees on the pavement. It's bug related, she tries to tell herself, it's not like she can't *touch* a plant. She can if she wants to, she just chooses not to.

No one mentions her episode, or her change in lifestyle. Quin is glad for it, she feels deeply ashamed of her outburst. She knows she pushed

Tom, and she never apologised for that. And what would they even talk about? *So Quin, what was up with you and the uh, fear of houseplants?* But no one talking about it makes her feel slightly insane sometimes. Maybe it never even happened and she's utterly delusional, suffering from trauma she made up. On one particularly panicked evening, she was on her hands and knees, crawling around her flat to find some speck of earth, a curled up leaf. Eventually she finds some plant food at the back of a cupboard. She throws it away.

And after some time, she finds she can talk about it. Or at least reference it, in a little self-deprecating joke here and there. She's relieved when people smile. She feels like she is cracking her shell a little bit. And she goes out again, sometimes more than is good for her. She feels safer around other people. She slips back into her chair at the office.

Everything is a process. She has to start feeling her own hunger again. She forgets to eat often, and then wakes up in the night with an aching stomach. She turns to meal planning. She has an app on her phone that reminds her to drink. Taking care of herself this way starts feeling therapeutic. She rediscovers her own skin every time she takes a shower.

It's been a few months. She is at her mothers for tea. And as she sits at the kitchen table, waiting for her mother to boil a second pot of water, she spots a familiar shape on the side board. The earl grey turns very bitter.

She gets up. Approaches, with caution. Not getting too close. "Mum?"

"Ready in a moment! Would you like any custard on your pudding?"

"I don't mind!" Quin replied mechanically, eyes still fixed. "Mum, where's that plant from?"

Her mother comes bustling into the room, setting down steaming plates of syrupy pudding and custard. She has to repeat the question.

"Oh, that one? Well—" she hesitates, giving Quin a tentative smile, "Well it's one of yours. After your panic, I wasn't sure if you wanted to hold onto them or not."

Quin doesn't know what to say. She tears her eyes away from the plant, looks down at her custard.

"I didn't know if you wanted me to bring it up, and since you didn't mention them I thought it best not to... I hope that's okay. Are you alright Quin?"

"Yes, no, it's okay," Quin mumbles. She is fine, isn't she? She has been fine for months. She eats a big spoonful of pudding and custard. It's so hot it hurts a bit.

"If you wanted them back..."

"No, no, I'm good. I'm fine, I don't want anything. It was nice of you to do that," Quin can't believe she's saying it. "And... the others...?"

"Tom and Clarissa took some. Not all of them though, you had so many, bless. And some were pretty damaged."

"Yes, of course. The pudding is really good Mum. Let's not talk about them anymore?"

And they ate the pudding and drank the tea. Quin does not look at the plant, but she does not avoid it either.

Just a plant.

Not *her*, and not *her* plant. It hasn't been for a long time. She breathes evenly, and for a moment, she is so relieved she could cry.

Ignoring Omens

BY J. FEDERLE

A lemon yellow as a bird
rocks on the wood block.

The kitchen is otherwise quiet.
In the garden, ash falls, thick
as coal dust, determined as snow,
blanketing hedges in black.

Her knife is sharp. The weight
of the blade does the cutting.

She tries to read the throat
of the lemon like tea leaves,
but the flesh refuses to sing.

As the window darkens,
she candies the rind.

The Church of John the Baptist of Roswell

BY CHRISTIAN FULLER

ONE DAY SHE was here with us in her earthly body, decoupling her hair from its scalp in spires of platinum blonde, and the next she went poof. Raptured or abducted. It was tough to say, very tough to say. Pastor Beloved Mouth thumbed the place where his genitals had been in a past life, before the Father God had cured him of them. Above the fire circle, desert lights pulsed like a throat swollen shut, struggling for oxygen. The commune hummed, the Church of John the Baptist of Roswell together in concentrated meditation to geolocate the afterglow of her spirit left stained across this world.

Sister Poor Companionship came to our congregation sewn together by scars the secular world left upon her. Born into foster care, shuffled between wet-mouthed pervs and belt buckle tyrants. On the streets by 15, selling herself piecemeal to the bidders with the hungriest gazes. She was fresh, just given her whites, not yet cured of her innate nature. It felt unfair that she should get chosen, plucked away from this place without so much as a whisper from the Father God or the hum of the Travelers' engines. We prayed. We wept. We deployed electro-magnetometers across the splotches of sagebrush that dotted this land. Sister Much Exaggeration licked the surface of the red desert rocks that spilled like Jenga towers, claiming she could taste the leftover molecules of our sister in Post-Terrestrial Christ, that she had just been here.

"Should we search for her, Pastor?" Brother Better Quiet asked.

Pastor slurped the antiseptic dripping from his lower lip, savoring its sting. He carried it in a bedazzled flask, only allowing himself limited pleasures in this, the era of his enlightenment.

"No, we shan't. Meddle not in the conscriptions of divinity, ye of little faith."

We nodded. We concurred. We returned to our good work. Pastor Beloved Mouth knew what was true and right and when we are carried up from these bodies, bliss-burned into stardust, we would be uncoiled from primitive concerns like the hunger pangs in our bellies or unexplained disappearances.

THE PASTOR'S WORD was Bond. Usually, at least. But it seemed more and more each day, the desert was digesting us. The foundation seared the ghosts of Richter lines into the blisters on our feet, the plates of belief ever so slightly moved from their perfect positioning.

A hushed gospel swept its way through the encampment. The earth baked, 117, and together we sweated over our camp stoves, shriveled in mud hutches, microwaved in Coleman canvas. We began to stack our theories, collectivize the evidence. Raptured or abducted. Each Brother and each Sister presented their arguments in throaty whispers, theories coughed up between gasps of campfire smoke. One night, just after the sun had finished bleeding out across the jagged sky, we brought our theories to him.

And each was met by an impregnable dispensation of doctrine.

1. Sister Pretty But Lazy Eyed saw her while collecting plastic bottles for the evening worship, jubilant and laughing along the edge of the dried river bed. Sister Poor Companionship had a full conversation in two parts. She dragged her feet through the dust to an unheard rhythm. She moved so fast she was more blur than girl.

a. To it, Pastor said, “Chapter 32T: Prayer Through Crop Circle, Sailing Stone, and Fairy Ring. You, my daughter, must neglect your readings. Or perhaps you see yourself worthy of hanging shame upon fellow children of the Lord. We all pray in different ways. Did you bother to record the pattern her feet drug through the dirt? If you had, perhaps you would have understood she was praying for relief from her stomach cramps.” We all nodded in solemn agreement. The Pastor had a point, of course. “And,” he added, rolling the words between his tongue and teeth like rough stone against a rock tumbler, “I’m not sure we can trust you as an eye witness given your, well…”

2. Brother Prone to Sudden Outbursts wasn’t having any of it. We had a right to know, didn’t we? Burning alive out in this sun, and for fucking what, he shouted. We want water, he said, we want more steel cut oats and spirulina. The rations are, frankly, fucking bullshit. You ever dug a fence post into desert dirt hard as permafrost, praying each spot you pick isn’t a festering ground for fire ants? And also, I saw the two of you arguing. You were making an ugly little face, telling her something about how pain is a product of spiritual vapidness. Something like that. Where’s the fucking water?
   a. To this inquiry, the Pastor had us fasten Brother Prone to Sudden Outbursts to a fence post. It wobbled, uneven in the dirt, partially set. His naked chest tore open, burnt orange and bloody, where it met the chicken wire we bound him with. When the fire ants came and he began screaming, we all pretended not to hear. We’d done what was correct and just and demanded of us.
3. Brother Better Quiet cleared his throat fifteen times before saying he’d found her clothes. Neatly folded along the dried river bed, as if she’d gone for a swim despite the fact that water hadn’t visited this stranded valley since before the Pastor took his genitals off

with a Postal Service boxcutter. Her whites were free from ochre splotches of the earth. She’d kept the underwear of her burdened life, a purple thong. It sprouted atop the pile like a lavender sprig sawing through a salt flat. A sign she’d been carried up in the traditional means, he presupposed. Not a visit from the Traveler Angels but plucked by the hand of Father God.

a. Pastor Beloved Mouth shook his sun cracked lips at us, wagged them, mocked our mewling. “In the first verse of the fourteen Divine Appendices, plain as all English, it is stated that the holy Extraterrestrial Servants of our Post-Terrestrial Christ sometimes also request the removal of earth fabrics as they can scramble vital machinery. Your theory is weak at its hinges, joists, and doctrines, Brother Better Quiet. Now, follow your namesake.”

On occasion, stopgaps of silence filled the cool night air. Brother Better Quiet looked to me with those highbeam eyes of his. *Tell him. Say something.* My mouth marionette-mimed the words. About the Sister in her quiet moments, when the grief was only a trickle rather than a river. How she let me lick the salt from her cheeks on that morning I could barely get off my bed roll. How she took the shed skin from a western massasauga and named the discarded pieces after two dogs she’d been raised with in a foster home. How some nights we’d see who could count more stars above before losing track, and we’d have to guess which ones shone bright enough to puncture through the blankets of light pollution back in the cities where we were raised.

How she told me even when it’s bad, it’s not all that bad, because we can always just go home.

4. Others stepped forward to stake their claims.
   a. Sister Mostly Flat Footed wobbled her way into the firelight. “She found a bottle cap in the sand. I saw her use it to put verses

into her thighs, Pastor. I didn't try to stop her, because we all pray in our own ways."

b. Brother Poor Life Choices thumbed the misspelled slur tattooed above his eyebrow and began to weep. "I loved her, Pastor. Truly loved her, not the earthly body, easily discardable, but those hard bits of her soul. We hugged once, when on watching duty for the Travelers' lights. I could feel it then, her divine spirit, the whole of it shook up like bone fragments in a car accident. I told her she should be first, that she deserves to join the desert lights. Am I responsible, Pastor?"

c. Sister Prone to Great Exaggeration went back for seconds, announcing she'd seen our missing sister dancing in the sky, her flesh gently folding away from the muscle and muscle daintily flowing away from the bone as the Father God raptured up only her soul, light as a saguaro skin emptied of its water.

Sweat furrowed Pastor Beloved Mouth's forehead. We'd never been so riled, so accusatory, not in our two years in this desert. Not when Mama Image of Christhead cut that rattlesnake open and ate its liver, and spent two days in her dying, not when Brother How High botched his eunuchization and his manhood spilled out on the desert floor, not when we spent three days drinking our own piss because our benefactor had a heart attack and the traveler's checks stopped coming, not when we were lashed by padlocks on the end of bungee cords, not when the Pastor had his tent parades, our whites folded neatly outside as we crawled and cooed and suckled upon the suntorn bits of each other, him stroking his phantom third limb, his eyes like two moons collapsed by gravity. Not when we stayed up for days at a time waiting for the desert stars to turn to pilot lights, for asteroids to rain upon the cities of sin and asphalt, for spirits to be hoisted up, our bodies stripped for research and development, our souls granted eternal placidity.

In that promise, there would be no hurt, no thirst, no skin for the

sun to peel bit by bit, no past life to noose around our necks, no anything but bright, foreverness. And we kept waiting. We would keep waiting. Until Sister Poor Companionship left us like this.

My tongue finally found its words. Pastor looked to the fire and then to the sky. He sat in his stained whites, chewed a half-rotten apple, biting and spitting each time. "Sister Painfully Meek. You have something to contribute?"

"Yes. I would like to remember her as she was, as she could have been. And ask why?"

"'Why' is the perennial ache deep within our mortal guts. The engine of sufferance that drives us into the arms of sin."

"Why didn't you stop her, Pastor? Why didn't you help her?"

Overhead, something flashed in the night sky. In this empty place, so far from anywhere, so far from every place we came from, its brightness screamed through us like a knife wound. "Because, Sister, we all pray in our own ways. Haven't you learned that by now?"

Her verses sang, she was terrestrial and astral in concert, she was too short for this world, its kaleidoscope of ugliness in every shade. In that desert, we waited and waited and she got done with the waiting. She'd spent her entire life waiting on it, the promise of something better that hangs like a sigh at the end of a sermon, as tangible and ephemeral as the slipstream of distant light pinpricked across the vast loneliness of this universe, its beauty already waning into dust by the time it touches our eyes.

The glow throbbed above us, the welcoming embrace of an unidentified chariot aflame with transmutation and promise. Or, it was simply the position lights of a passing aircraft, charting a path for those who know their destination and the precise moment of their arrival.

Family Reunion

by Ellie Snyder

We threw eggs to each other
across the lawn, stepping back
and stepping back until most
had cracked against unsoft palms
or the gravel drive and only
the boy twin cousin kept saving
my wide left throws while the
girl twin cousin kept catching
my brother's, whole big family
now watching wiping egg
from their shins as the sibling pairs
competed and I couldn't even quite
wing it all the way to him anymore
but he'd lunge for the padded
catch and I wanted to win then,
activated, terrified, focused,
but the next toss came
from such a distance I watched
it thinking, I cannot catch this,
until I caught it and the arresting
gear of my hands failed
to cushion the blow and the egg
broke into my fingers broke
across my fingers by my right hip
like a bullet wound, bled yolk
into the grass and they all said,
Good try good try, wandering
away as he closed the distance
to me, smiling and annoyed

Of Wolves and Snakes

by Victor McConnell

My neighbors and the former owners
of my house sued each other
about land and water, access,
property rights,
the type of things humans
have fought over for a while.

I moved in and they told me
that the pergola built beside my front door
was technically on their land,
that I didn't own it,
that I could only enter or leave my house
via a prescriptive access easement.

I didn't know what a pergola or
a prescriptive access easement was
before I moved in.

It's been a year, and I haven't
taken the pergola down.
It is aesthetic, I guess, but doesn't
do much, just creates partial shade
there at the entryway.

Not enough shade to block the sun
from warming the flagstones,
and I suspect it was there,
on those smooth, sunbaked rocks,
that the snake was relaxing.

I don't know, because I was inside
on the couch with my son.
We'd let the dog out a minute before,
and we both cocked our head
when we heard barking.

He never barks.

Is that Lightning, my son asked.
I think so, I said, and walked outside.

Lightning stood beneath the pergola,
bellowing a deep belly bark,
an ancient warning,
and there, six feet from the door,
coiled and raised, emitting his own
ancient warning, was the rattlesnake.

He must've slithered up from the riverbank,
beneath the fence, probably sunning himself
when Lightning happened upon him.

He looked at me, sensing that
he now faced a bigger threat.

Lightning seemed abashed or confused,
as if suddenly transported back
from old instinct to new domestic self
—*Lightning is perhaps further removed*
from his ancestors than the snake or I—
and he scurried back inside, hopping
up onto his safe space, my son's bed.

It's a rattle snake, bring my boots, I said.
He did, and I slipped them on.
Do you want me to get the snake grabber?
No, I said, as I picked up the two metal shovels
that leaned in the corner by the door
for this purpose, wondering if my son
had more humane instincts than I.

I handed him a shovel and
he stood behind me as I stepped forward,
moving my blade
in front of me like a shield
until it hovered
six inches from the rattler's head.

He didn't strike, either afraid or knowing it senseless,
and I brought the blade to bear quickly,
with my own ancient adrenaline,
inaccurately at first, wounding him,
then a rapid second and third and fourth strike
and he lay still, or almost still,
his now separated tail pointing skyward, vibrating,
the proverbial death rattle.

We brought Lightning back outside to watch,
to see that he had done his job,
that the threat was gone,
yet he remained confused, or fearful,
or maybe he would also have preferred that
I use the snake grabber, not knowing
that the rattler could have wrought his end,
or knowing it and being willing
to grant mercy nonetheless.

I lifted the body on the metal shovel and
carried it out into the brush,
off trail, leaving it for a hawk or other scavenger.

Back in the yard,
we watched Lightning sniff the blood
then race around the perimeter, enervated,
checking for other threats, before stopping
and emptying his bowels in the tall grass—
apparently he, too, had felt the adrenaline
that comes when facing an ancient foe.

Back in the house,
we called him our own Rikki-Tikki-Tavi dog,
and he wagged his tail, pleased at the praise.

I thought about the blood stain there
on the stone by the door, beneath the pergola,
on top of the prescriptive access easement.

It will remain there for some time,
possibly through more than a few summer storms,
for blood is slow to be washed away,
and that rust patch will be a reminder
of things old and new, of choices we make,
of wolves and snakes, of humans and violence,
of life in conflict and harmony.

Climate Change

The Sisters of the House of Life-Giving Blood

BY ALYSSA HOUSE ROSEMARTIN

For my mother

We have exceptional hearing. For certain things. The cries of labor, of course, but also a noise like a glottis quivering before speech, as the cervix dilates. We can hear doubt and the fumbling of a newborn's poor latch. We hear the relief as a cramp releases, and the faint draw of incoming tide as the uterine tissue grows plump again.

But that day we were cooking. Sizzling peppers and boiling jam and roasting pork, and maybe we were carried away, with each other's laughter, with getting the seasoning just right. We didn't hear a thing.

Later, we found the main gate split and charred, as if struck by lightning, though there had been no storm. One thing after another, after that. Aurelie fed the chickens moldy grain. Two babies came tangled in their cords. Marthe fell and injured her hip. We argued with each other late into the night, seemingly about work schedules and harvest dates, but also maybe about whose work was most important. When the Donreia rang the bells some of us slept on.

Still, the work of the house continued. I remember a young woman called Gisel came to us because her monthly bleeding had stopped.

There were a few Sisters to attend her, who could listen, at least in an ordinary way, to her story.

I run most days, she told us. *Eleven miles to the coast, where I work the crab trap lines every spring. I'd sleep at the seaside camp, but there is Milte now, I want to sleep by his side.*

We laid our hands on her translucent arms, on the sharp crest of her hip. Of course, we could still comprehend and explain the basics; under duress, her body had chosen to economize on eggs. But what had we missed—a clamor in her mind that set her legs in motion or the taut hum of a love that asked too much?

Gisel took her time with us, in the garden and at the table, ground cherries and leeks, rye bread and vanilla cake. Distantly we heard the ring of clarity in her mind, and knew, as she did, that she was ready to go.

A few weeks later, our loom disappeared. Ilene had been working on a beautiful and strange piece. She had woven wild grape vines with colored cloth making thick and messy sections, followed by sections of fine grey and red thread. We had teased her about it—what was it for, exactly? Not harshly, I would say, but often. Soon enough we longed for the rattle and clack that had backgrounded late afternoons in the hearthroom.

A greater discontent welled up. Action leapt out in front of thought, and soon there was too much response. Five of us went to meet with the town council. Three of us took it upon ourselves to seek answers in the foothills. Six of us fell into a deep sleep—the more activity there was, the more deeply we slept.

Some births went unattended. A couple seeking advice on pleasure wandered the grounds and found no one to listen. A fungal disease curled the leaves of the bean plants and by the time we noticed, it was too late to save the harvest. On some days, the Donreia skipped the evening bells.

Those who had met with the town council came back and said that a family with a sheep farm had come at the same time, that their problem was that they had too many sheep and not enough pasture. All our Sisters could say was that something was out of balance here at the House. The council urged them to take a dozen head of sheep and pasture them here. Thinking of equilibrium, our Sisters assented.

Those who had gone to the hills came back and said that we should divide our house, and some of us should go South where our skills were said to be needed.

Those of us who had slept, woke, and remembered our dreams. I had dreamed of a great bellows below the earth that sagged and swelled. Emirl had dreamed of a child with wide glassy eyes who could turn rivers back upon themselves. Usalie had dreamed only of patterned sand, thousands of parallel divots laid down by the passage of crabs.

Mostly, we didn't want to divide in two, and certainly no one wanted to leave. The meaning of our dreams was not clear. We focused on the sheep. We harvested onions just a little early, so that the sheep could inhabit the lower field, where there was already some fencing. Usalie and Liona made a trough from a partially rotted log and a lean-to with branches that had fallen in winter storms.

The House felt crowded then, full of ordinary noise. Usalie asked a few of us to go down to the sea with her and we did. We packed to sleep one night on the beach, tarpaulin and flint, dried plums and bread. We followed the creek to the river and the river to the sea. Passing not far from Ilene's family's place on the edge of town, we heard the familiar rhythmic clatter of a loom. Further on, we heard the passage of millipedes in the leaf litter and the sluice of eddies in the stream. We started to feel like ourselves again. The loamy earth gave way to sand and we stood out in the open, surveying a grey-green sea. Several vultures were working the carcass of a seal. Diligent, I thought. Watchful. Usalie dreamed that night of a limestone cliff eroding,

causing the sea to mineralize and harden, waves paused in their peaks. I slept dreamlessly, wrapped in thick wool, my face cool in the night air.

When we got home, again the air was muted, again the rhythm was off. There were three women in our care then: two we were nurturing through difficult menses, one with a newborn, resting and bonding in one of the dormitories. I remember I went to the kitchen to boil water for tea, and there I came upon a great fresh mass of sheep dung. I might otherwise have cleaned it myself, but instead I found Liona and lectured her about diseases and all things in their places.

Meals together were either somber or heavy with argument. I felt sure that while it had all started with the damaged gate, it wasn't really about that. In any case, two Sisters had already rebuilt it, with pine wood sanded and shaped into curls and leaves, stained to a rusty brown. Meanwhile, Emirl, Liona and even Usalie steadfastly defended the sheep, even as these beings introduced even more feeding and bleeding and shitting into our daily cycles.

I thought of the vultures' diligence, and that we might iron out the tangle we were in by throwing ourselves into work. I centered my days on Lea, one of the women with us to bleed. I brought her hot stones and bone broth and I massaged her lower back. She would sit in front of me on a bench, and I would lean forward to steadily press into her muscles, feeling my hands warm as they worked. On a rainy afternoon, I helped her bathe in warm water that slowly clouded pink. As she dried herself, she paused to double over in pain, and a glutenous clot of blood slid down her leg.

When she was dressed, wrapped in a shawl and bleeding gently into thick cloth, we sat talking on the back porch. The smell of wet wool from the lower pasture settled around us. Lea wondered how it could be that every villager had passed through our gates, that even the most timid young child felt welcome, and knew their questions would be answered. And yet, being in our care, she felt apart from village

life, wholly safe and separate. I remember thinking then that ordinary care may suffice.

She made a little keen, then, through clenched teeth, as a cramp passed through her. And as I recall she said something about slaughtering the sheep, about blood enriching the soil.

As fall turned to winter, the landscape of sound came to us brusque and clanging. Ice-laden branches clinked against each other, a baby hiccupped with his whole body. The hearth fire popped and duck wings squeaked as they passed overhead. All day we heard the bleating and jostling of the three rams we kept up near the porch, away from the flock as the ewes went in and then out of estrus.

We didn't hear the dual heartbeat before the birth of twins, nor the slow breath of hibernating frogs, nor the snow before it fell, nor the doubts of someone passing by our doors, not even the soft *tisp* of our own bodies when we ovulated.

At dinner one night, on a day when the stream was beginning to stir, and melt its covering of ice from below, questions arose about the sheep. *Would we breed them and birth them this year? Would we forgo the lower pasture for planting from now on?* Suddenly we were all speaking at once:

Could we grow enough forage to sustain them?

We could have mutton, just as the stores are running low.

We are gardeners, are we not? We have never been shepherds.

There may have been arguments withheld, or arguments that I do not now remember. But it did not seem to take very long to decide that we would slaughter the sheep.

There were several things in our favor when it came to it. We knew how to work together, and we knew how to prepare for messy operations. We sharpened knives and gathered lengths of strong rope and a sturdy table. We set up by an oak tree with a low hanging branch, far from the sheep pasture.

One by one, Ilene led each sheep to the tree, and secured each halter to a stake in the ground. Emirl shaved each neck. Usalie took the blade and drove it across each jugular and again above each heart. The blood soaked the earth, though some of it we caught in pitchers, to later make into blutwurst, with ground meat and onion.

I aided in the looping of ropes around the haunches and the levering of each sheep into the tree. We slit and peeled back the skin and bloodied wool. We eviscerated the bodies, trying to keep the guts from the meat. We had asked the butcher's assistant how to accomplish this, but it was not easy to replicate her answer. On the second day she came out to help us, and things began to go smoothly. Her sharp knife slid fiber from fascia and well-formed cuts accumulated on the table, shank and loin, rib and shoulder. *Why did you not shear them first?* she asked us. This we couldn't answer. There had seemed to be an urgency to the slaughter, and perhaps we had thought it wasn't the season.

Several of us took to the kitchen then, packing clay pots with mutton and plums, rosemary and salt, and sealing them tight. The second evening, we built a great bonfire and tended it overnight. In the pre-dawn hours it burned low, and we set the mutton pots among the coals. We roasted them for hours this way, taking turns feeding the fire to make new embers. Eventually the meat softened, fiber breaking from fiber, sweet with plum and aromatic with rosemary.

By the morning of the fourth day we had specialized, working in pairs: a pair to slaughter, a pair to clean the table and bury the offal, a pair to butcher, a pair to prepare the pots, a pair to clean the kitchen, a pair to roast, a pair to deliver the finished pots of mutton in town. Another pair to feed and water the rest of us.

In all, it took a week and wound us into a kind of delirium. Our hands were chapped and blistered, and when we closed our eyes at night we saw coals and pots and hocks and vertebrae and cloven feet.

We were consumed, and it's true what the town council said later, that there were consequences. That a woman nearly hemorrhaged to death that week, after a miscarriage at home. That the sheep had been entrusted to us. We agreed, and felt we'd entrusted them onwards. Perhaps too, in the following years, fewer young people sought our counsel.

But somewhere in the bleeding, in the sweating, in the tending of the fire, in seeing the light leave each face, and even in the stacking of the clay pots as they were returned to us, our ears blazed open. We heard the clatter of a family at dinner a mile away, and the scuffle of a dog burying a sheep's anklebone. We heard the soft rhythm of bats nursing their pups, tucked in the peak of the lean-to. We heard the seams of spinach seeds split in the cool spring earth. We again knew just where to stand, just where to place our hands, just the right tone.

A few years on, Ilene and Marthe and Liona brought the loom home and we began again to work in cloth. Some years after that, I came to be the Donreia, the bell-ringer, the keeper of time. When I ring the bells each morning and night it is with the blaze in mind, to tune each ear. One to the next, to the next, to the next. And sometimes, when I am able to land the mallet just right, it touches even a low-toned swell, like bellows below ground, bringing to mind the dream I had, all those years ago.

Contributor Bios

Emma Dollar (she/her) is a fiction writer and denizen of upstate New York. Currently an editorial assistant at Viking Penguin, you can find her own work in *The Talon Review* and *Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival Magazine*.

J. Federle grew up in Kentucky in a big, brick house in front of the woods. Catholic school left her with a deepened love of the macabre and an empathy for monsters, which she suspects wasn't the intended effect. She's been published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, which her dad recognized, and in *The Threepenny Review, The NoSleep Podcast*, and several other places her dad "has never heard of" but was proud about nonetheless. For now, she lives in Lima, Peru, where she misses thunderstorms but loves the sea.

Tanya Fillbrook is a published author and illustrator. Her art often showcases speculative themes.

Deborah Fries is a Philadelphia-based printmaker, poet, writer and editor. Her work from "Reclamation" —an April, 2025 solo exhibit—features collage-on-monotype prints that add narrative elements to existing landscapes. These reclaimed works were inspired by real and imaginary events, including Marie Curie's taxing 1921 tour of Standard Chemical Co. and a fictional weather event (anthropomorphic cats falling from clouds).

Christian Fuller is a writer from Baltimore. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *BRUISER, HAD, Variant Lit, BULL, Weird Lit Magazine*, and other lovely publications. Please send all inquiries to him in the form of Midwest emo song titles to @Cfullerwrites on Twitter.

Kristina Garvin is a researcher and writer in Philadelphia. Originally from Ohio, she earned a Ph.D. in early American literature and works in the public health sector. Her essays and stories appear in *North American Review, Salamander, The Forge Literary Magazine, Pithead Chapel, Eclectica Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Abigail Ann Gray is an emerging writer from Virginia, who primarily writes fiction but sometimes writes poems by accident. She holds a BA in literary studies from Roanoke College. These days, when she isn't writing, she works at a public library and as a freelance pianist (though generally not at the same time). Her work has appeared in *The Mid-Atlantic Review* and *Press Pause*.

Colleen S. Harris earned her MFA in Writing from Spalding Universit and works as a university library dean. Author of four poetry collections and four chapbooks, her most recent work includes *The Light Becomes Us* (Main Street Rag, 2025), *These Terrible Sacraments* (Bellowing Ark, 2010; Doubleback, 2019), and chapbooks *The Girl and the Gifts* (Bottlecap, 2025) and *Toothache in the Bone* (boats against the current, 2025). Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Berkeley Poetry Review, Gone Lawn, Wild Roof Journal*, and more than 90 others. Follow her work at colleensharris.com

Greg Hughes is a writer and nonprofit marketing consultant based in Redondo Beach, CA. His poetry has been featured in *Rattle* and *Only Poems*, among other literary journals. Greg holds a BFA in Dramatic Writing from the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at SUNY Purchase and is currently studying poetry in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program.

Brian Ji is a seventeen-year-old writer and visual artist currently attending Seoul International School in

Korea. He finds meaning and delight in creative expression, channeling his energy into both literature and visual storytelling. His artwork investigates themes of urban compression, spatial memory, and the quiet poetics of daily life. His work has been featured in *The Collidescope, The Expressionist, The Amazine, Alcott Magazine, Altered Reality Magazine, SCOPE Magazine, Lullwater Magazine*, and *VOICES Journal*. Brian is an alum of the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop.

Andrew Rucker Jones is a former IT dweeb and American expatriate living in Germany with his Georgian wife and their three children. He has had the honor of being published in *The Four Faced Liar, Dark Matter Magazine*, and *Tales from Fiddler's Green*, among many others. Blog: http://selfdefeatistnavelgazing.wordpress.com/

Diyora Kabilova is a poetess and storyteller whose work lingers in the spaces between memory and myth. Her prose blends the intimate with the timeless, drawing on the textures of love, loss, and the quiet rituals that keep us tethered to one another. She writes to preserve fleeting moments—sunlight in a kitchen, the weight of a hand in yours—turning them into stories that ache and glow. When she isn't writing, she tends to small gardens, old books, and the belief that sweetness, like love, must be cared for to last.

Ryan Keeney is a writer from the Midwest living on the East Coast. His short fiction and poetry can be found in the *Heavy Feather Review, the American Journal of Poetry, the 2 River View*, and *Third Wednesday*.

Mae S. Ladle is a writer and poet currently residing in Germany, and has a B.A. in Psychology. She enjoys writing surreal fiction to explore the human experience. Whilst she doesn't have any pets, she will provide any errant cats at her windowsill with fresh water.

Dara Laine (she/her) is a poet and evaluator based in Baltimore, originally from a hay farm in New Jersey. She returned to poetry following the sudden death of her father. Her work is forthcoming in *Pine Hills Review, Right Hand Pointing, Thimble Literary Magazine, LEON Literary Review, American Poetry Journal, Querencia Press Quarterly Anthology*, and *Quibble Lit*, and she was a July 2025 30/30 poet with Tupelo Press.

Victor McConnell grew up in a small town in Texas and graduated from Dartmouth's creative writing program in 2004. After a year in a wheelchair in 2005 and a long, mostly dormant period from 2010-2019, he resumed writing fiction and poetry in 2020. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in a variety of literary journals, such as the *Los Angeles Review, New Ohio Review, Dogwood Literary Journal*, and *Driftwood Press*, among others. His first book, a collection of short stories titled WHEN EVEN THE BONES HAVE THINNED, is scheduled for publication in 2026 with Hidden River Press out of Philadelphia. He has a 14-year-old son and lives in Golden, Colorado. More of his work can be found at https://www.victormcconnellauthor.com/.

Sreeja Naskar is a high school poet based in India. Her work has appeared in *Poems India, Crowstep Journal, ONE ART, Ink Sweat and Tears, FRiGG, Gyroscope Review*, and elsewhere. She believes in the quiet power of language to unearth what lingers beneath silence.

Alyssa House Rosemartin is a writer and ecologist who worked for many years on climate change impacts to seasonal cycles. She has a story forthcoming in *Terrain.org*. She gardens, kayaks and builds community in coastal Massachusetts.

Judith Skillman paints expressionist works in oil on canvas, board, and paper. She is interested in feelings engendered by the natural world. Her paintings have been featured on the covers of *Thin Air Magazine, Torrid Literature*, and *The Awakenings Review.* Judith studied visual art at McDaniel College, Pratt Fine Arts Center, and Seattle Artist League (SAL). Shows include The Pratt, Galvanize, and SAL. Visit Saatchi Art: https://www.saatchiart.com/account/artworks/823323

Montanan poet **Ellie Snyder** writes and manages social media for a global nonprofit and is passionate about literature, fashion and music. Find her work in *Pangyrus, The Dewdrop, Magpie Zine, Pinky*, and elsewhere, and find her fitchecks on Instagram @elliegsnyder.

Sheila Squillante is a writer and visual artist living in Pittsburgh. Her abstract paintings have been featured in numerous literary journals, including *Brevity, Asterales, Zocalo Public Square,* and *A-Minor*, and as the cover art for *Mid-American Review, Boudin,* and *Dogwood: A Journal of Poetry and Prose*. The author of two poetry collections, four chapbooks and an essay collection, *All Things Edible, Random and Odd: Essays on Grief, Love and Food* (CLASH Books, 2023), she directs and teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at Chatham University. She is executive editor of *The Fourth River*, Chatham's journal of nature and place-based writing, and editor-at-large for *Barrelhouse Magazine*.

Maggie Wang is interested in intertextuality, the environment, and the absurd. She is the author of *The Sun on the Tip of a Snail's Shell* (Hazel Press, 2022).