

THE PAPER CROW



Issue 1

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Confession of an Ex-Hermit

Gerardo J Mercado

I have tended the winds, and
I have minded the falcons.

I have read the signs—the dying
roses, the withering tower—

I write this so you may better recall,
so I may better remember:

I am not a being of tethered fates.
I embrace the world as is, and so,

I have tended the winds, and
I have minded the falcons.



Gerardo J Mercado (He\They) is a Puerto Rican writer and poet. He enjoys making art, learning about world history, and different spiritual beliefs. Gerardo can be found on <https://twitter.com/OddToB>

An Ode to Indigo

Leslie Cairns

The color of campfires that hold the names we whisper,
The flames that don't deliver,
The cornstalks who shiver.

Ink smudged from fingerpad to fingerpad,
To remind us of our faulty pact,
The way we swore
We'd show each other how to make up for
What we lack.

Say my name in planes landing
Flight paths parallel
Swerving one another,
To avoid
Colliding.

Leslie Cairns (she/her) holds an MA degree in English Rhetoric. She lives in Denver, Colorado. She loves her two dogs, especially the dramatics of her husky. She has upcoming flash, short stories, and poetry in various magazines, including *Cerasus Magazine*, *Londemere Lit*, and others. Twitter: starbucksgirly

The Back of My Father

Maheshwar Padhan

Some uncommon burden diminishes every time
on his return, his back is like
that of a refuge for the entire family.
There's acute water scarcity, no rainfall
but heavy low pressure during the harvest
how cold-blooded is God's look, if
the loan is not repaid, there'd be a disdainful
look from many to devour our rice vessel.

His back is actually like a sturdy banyan tree
that can suppress all the hits of the axes
his back is like an indefatigable chest
which can ignore the killing thrash
of the sun, rain and winter.
Life isn't measured by years, months and days
we measure his life by the bruises he bears
and he measures our happiness by the
depth, length and width of his scars.

Translated from the Odia by Pitambar Naik

Maheshwar Padhan has a B. Ed. degree and teaches in an upper primary school in Jharsuguda, Odisha. He writes poetry in Odia and his work has appeared in various journals in Odia and in Mad Swirl. He grew up in Ulunda, Jharsuguda in Odisha, India.

Pitambar Naik is an advertising copywriter. When he's not ideating for brands, he writes poetry. His work appears or is forthcoming in *The Dodge*, *The McNeese Review*, *The Notre Dame Review*, *Packingtown Review*, *Rise Up Review*, *Ghost City Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *The Indian Quarterly*, and elsewhere. *The Anatomy of Solitude (Hawakal)* is his debut book of poetry. He grew up in Kalahandi, Odisha and lives in Bangalore, India.

Crisis

Madeleine Goode

Dry gallop of thunder
over the hills of my life:
I see rain in the distance. Long streams
of falling water make their way
towards me. Towards us. Since I stopped finding you handsome.

There are jackdaws nesting in the chimney;
I can't light a fire. Cool, thin, jumpered: you work the cold.
I dream of a white hand around my neck. You draw
another blindfolded woman. I say I'm saving the baby birds –
we both hear them, how sweetly they call, even at night – but you remind me
the landlord'll gas them when he finds out, and it'll be worse
than if I torched them, lovingly, myself.

The mealybugs have laid eggs on my alocasia again. The rubber trees
bloom phallic leaves all spring. The damp in the hall cupboard
will come back this summer, I'm sure of it. Rain
returns to erode what is hidden. When you shower,
I hide in the kitchen. So when you call
for a towel, I do not come.

Housefire

Madeleine Goode

My therapist asks: *is there a fire in your house?*
Obviously a metaphorical fire, a pretend flame
In my brain
That represents stress – *seems like something's bothering you.*

The Zoom link glitches for a second. She's back. Sorry. *Is there a fire in your house?*

I see a face carved in the side of the hill, lifelong volcano
of small fires. *It's not urgent*, I tell her, *It's not*
anything new or majorly bad or nasty. Maybe something's smouldering
like if you left scrambled eggs on the hob and went to answer the door.
But it's always been that way.
I don't notice it any more.

I think you do, she says. *It seems like you're noticing it.* I get up
and leave the session for a second: a piece of old bread has got stuck to the grill
and is setting the alarm off downstairs.

Madeleine (she/her) was born in Paris and raised in Manchester, UK. She works in financial services and writes poetry at night. Her work has been published in The Everyday Magazine, Madwomxn Magazine, Acropolis Journal and Swim Press. She can be found on Twitter and Instagram at @goodegracious.

For a Moment I Was Prophetic

Alorah Welti

A sigil too sharp,
kept too deep inside my heart with many teeth—
the new Prometheus,
the new king of loneliness.

Winter's on the catch, Forethought,
where is your fire?
I left myself with you for safekeeping—
don't you want yourself back?

Spring's on the melt
and for a moment I was prophetic.
For a moment we buried our vultures
without punishment.

Epilogue

When my hands, warmed by fire,
trace the white scar over your liver
I will whisper *let this be the neverending hour*.
Let this be all we need to offer.



Alorah Welti (she/her) is a Minnesota-born feminist, synesthete, poet, and artist. Her work has appeared in *Unstamatic*, *lavender bones*, *Cutbow Quarterly*, *Lit. 202*, and elsewhere. She is a recipient of the Daniel Manacher Prize for Young Artists. She lives on stolen Mohican and Wabanaki land, just north of North Adams, Massachusetts, with her family. You can find her on Twitter at @alorahsky.

The Weathermen – A Love Letter

Aneeta Sundararaj

Anjali

Kuala Lumpur

24 October 2020 (Start of Scorpio Season)

Dear Roshan,

Last night, my mother wanted to know about the progress of the revised jadagam report from the astrologer after we gave Mr. Moorthy your wrong time of birth. To paraphrase Shakespeare, if what I told Mummy were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as impossible fiction. It would have been criminal not to share with you what transpired. I promise you that this is a light-hearted read compared to the prolonged uncertainty as we muddle through the pandemic and the possibility of Emergency being declared in Malaysia.

You see, Daddy was a man of few words. However, what he did say was often so meaningful that it remained for life with those who heard him speak. Like when he referred to astrologers, numerologists and palmists as, ‘The Weathermen’.

“Those *jadagam* things they create,” Daddy decided, “are as accurate as a weather report. When they say eight out of twelve ‘houses’ are good between a couple, look at the four that aren’t.” Mummy grumbled at his pessimism, but I learnt from this. The fact of the matter is that I couldn't care less what these reports say. I usually agree to get them done to please others and follow procedure. It's like preparing for my court cases. Any lawyer worth her salt will tell you that although the paperwork is properly done, she must always be aware of being ambushed during the proceedings. I equate those four ‘houses’ that won't work in any union as an ambush in court. Will a marriage work in spite of these non-matching houses? That's the question, Roshan. More importantly, will ours?

Anyway, Mr. Moorthy is probably sulking that we were careless with your time of birth. On the eve of the *atma shanti* prayers for the repose of Daddy's soul two years ago, he insisted that I, at the very least, buy some flowers. I'd asked him to bring absolutely everything as I had no clue where to get things like long-lasting camphor, betel leaves, turmeric paste and pure ghee. I rushed to the only florist whose roadside stall was still open at

7.30 p.m. When I told him what the flowers were for, he practically snatched a few wilting stalks out of my hand and marched to a cooler inside the shop lot.

“Moorthy Sir, ah?” he asked when he returned and began rolling a large bunch of fresh purple and yellow daisies in old newspapers. Adding a few stalks of rosebuds to the bunch for free, he said, “Take this. All new one.”

I smiled. All of Alor Setar was petrified of this cantankerous priest whose reputation for not tolerating mistakes preceded him.

How to push him, Roshan, for our revised *jadagam* report? He’ll scold me.

That’s why I asked Krishnan for help, but I’m on the verge of giving up on his ‘astrologer contact’ in Kerala. After six weeks, Smokey (as I’ve decided to call this astrologer) is probably still roaming the countryside looking for the ideal palm leaf, smoking it so that it’s smooth, sharpening his quill and preparing the ink. Every time I ask Krishnan what’s happening, his WhatsApp message is two words – ‘please wait’.

Finally, I turned to the friend whose name is listed as ‘Wizard’ in my phone’s list of contacts. A pukka Ceylonese, imagine a 78-year-old man with sparse white hair that is styled with Brylcreem gel. He wears starched cotton shirts like the civil servants of the British Raj used to wear. From elbow down, though, he’s a 1970s hippie espousing flower power. He wears at least three bracelets on either wrist made of various beads. On the right, he has amethyst to activate his crown chakra and rose quartz to harmonize the energies in his heart chakra. On the left, there’s topaz to ... I forget for which chakra. In his house, he converted the space where the skylight used to be into a windowless bedroom to align with the energies of *vaashtu* geomancy. That’s the Wizard for you.

I gave him our details (the correct ones this time), but didn’t dare tell him that this was all upside down. This *jadagam* thing should’ve been done before we met. That’s the norm, no? First the report, then the parents meet, then the couple meets, then marriage. Like a proper Tamil drama.

How to tell the Wizard that we’ve known each other for two years already? He asked me which hospital you were working in. I told him that you’ve been in Mauritius for six months because of the pandemic then changed the subject.

The first astrologer the Wizard suggested was Master Yuvaraj from India. With COVID-19, Master's gone high-tech. At RM250.00 (which I can send to him via PayPal), Master will present his report via Zoom and I am allowed to ask as many questions as I like.

I opted for a local and cheaper weatherman. However, he's going to take time because I sent our details to the Wizard on a Tuesday. The astrologer can only accept WhatsApp messages on a Friday. That was yesterday. In the literary footsteps of Robinson Crusoe, I've chosen to name this one 'Friday'.

It seems that since we're in the throes of *Navarathri*, everyone is ultra-busy. Even readers of Western-based horoscopes are saying, 'It's Mercury retrograde until 3 rd of November. You'll have delays in communication.'

Incidentally, I can't understand why so many people are upset about the wrong time of birth issue. Like your mum telling me to take things easy. With all my insecurities, I wonder if she's annoyed with me. The thing is, I feel for her. Poor thing. I can barely remember details about my dachshund, Gulabi (closest I had to a child). Your Mum has six children. Her giving me the wrong time of birth was bound to happen. If she knows the ridiculousness I've been through, she'll see that this is really nothing and very funny.

For example, there was Notchy (I don't bother remembering the names of previous suitors and I freely admit that I sometimes get them mixed up). His father was adamant that we meet only if our stars were aligned. Since we had 10 'houses' that matched, it was permissible for 'the boy' to call me. He spent a quarter of an hour describing his Amma's finger-licking *vengayam columbu*. Also, his darling niece was so clever because she could blow soapy bubbles when she was all of one. His only question was if I was willing to cook the same onion curry as his Amma.

Later in the day, he texted to inform (his word, not mine) me that we should 'take it up a notch'. I asked what this meant. His exact response was this: *Wedding in Kluang of Aunty's son. Your mother will be upset if you don't come.*

Translated, his expectation was that I would agree to get into a car with a stranger, travel 250 km away from everything I know, stay overnight in a town I've never been to (presumably in the same room as him) and attend a wedding I've not been invited to. Best of all, Mummy, a woman he has never met, would be upset if I didn't go with him.

I responded with a, “Let me think about it.” I’ve learnt never to reply with a firm no. Or even in the affirmative, for that matter. Always be non-committal as whatever ‘the girl’ says, however intelligent or honest, will inevitably be wrong and backfire.

I decided, however, to put on my Spidey sensors and sent out feelers.

As it happens, Notchy was a little naughty.

Notchy had a 20-year-old daughter from a previous shot-gun marriage. It was a *thali*-tying temple wedding which was never registered, thus rendering this child illegitimate. Now that he was 50, he wanted legitimate children and his Amma was desperate for him to settle down. Notchy saw my photo and figured that I was worthy enough to be his baby mama. More so since two matching ‘houses’ were intimacy and family.

The other was Borty, some management-level person at AIG Insurance. Our charts matched in nine houses. Since I’m in my 40s, he wanted me to buy medical insurance that covered fertility issues. He was worried that our children wouldn’t be perfect and I must be willing to terminate an imperfect pregnancy. I am opposed to aborting a fetus for trivial reasons; if it’s God’s will that I care for his version of an imperfect child, then I will. That didn’t go down well.

Then, there’s the time I had to do prayers at the Nageswari temple in Bangsar. Imagine me, who suffers from ophidiophobia, shaking from head to toe presenting a six-inch-tall cobra made of silver to the goddess whose name roughly translates to champion of snakes. Apparently, I had the curse of a snake in my subtle being – *naag dosham* – and that’s why my sharp tongue repelled men. By making this gift to the goddess, the snake and I were free to find mates. How can I explain to people that since this invisible reptile’s departure, my words are probably more cutting now?

In all this, I still don’t know what that word *jadagam* means. I thought it meant a report that sets out the suitability of a romantic match between two suitors. Now the Wizard has used a new one – *pohurtham*. My feeling is that no one genuinely knows what these words mean and I’m probably the first inquisitive one to ask.

What now, Roshan? I mean, the Wizard does dabble in numerology. He’s said that we must not delay. I wouldn’t rely on it, though. He once told me that to achieve success (because I’m obviously a failure right now), I had to change how I spell my name. It should

I be Annejelly. People will call me Jelly, Roshan.

Echoing Mr. Moorthy's first supposedly inaccurate report, the Wizard also pointed out the obvious when he invited me for tea – you and I are both no longer young. Nevertheless, there are chances that we'll become closer in 2021. The full moon is coming and, apparently, it's special because it's the first time this whole year that there's a full moon twice in one month. Also, the Wizard said that some star is supposed to be in some planet right now. Probably *Shani* in *Rahu* and *Kethu* as they are perpetually in my life. While sipping his piping hot *teh tarik*, the Wizard declared, "The time is right."

Right for what, though?

And what does 'must not delay' mean?

I was desperate to seek clarification, but didn't dare.

Can you imagine what would have happened if I'd said, "Yes, yes, we will not delay. If God wills it, Roshan and I will get married and procreate now."

Naturally, my imagination ran wild. Although there's currently a whole ocean between us, you will marry me and somehow impregnate me this very night – an immaculate conception, at best. Still, Roshan, in nine months, we could have our own Christ-like child who will be highly intelligent with a lovely smile.

What are we to do when our weathermen – Mr. Moorthy, Smokey and Friday – send their reports? Naturally, I expect to receive them after my birthday on the 4th of November because that's when Mars goes direct and communication will be back to running smoothly.

What if we're not at all a match? What happens if one weatherman says we're a good match and other two say we're not? Do we choose the best of three? Do we never see each other again? Or, do we do Tamil drama style and elope? Must we sacrifice ourselves for love à la Shakespearean tragedy? How, Roshan, how?

Muddles, cuddles and bubbles, my darling.

All my love,
Anjali

"The Weathermen – A Love Letter" won the 2022 Trisha Ashley Award hosted by www.CreativeWritingMatters.co.uk

Aneeta Sundararaj is an award-winning short story writer whose work has been featured in many publications. Her bestselling novel, 'The Age of Smiling Secrets' was shortlisted for the Book Award 2020 in Malaysia. In 2021, successfully completed a doctoral thesis entitled 'Management of Prosperity Among Artistes in Malaysia'. Aneeta gives back to the writing community by managing the Great Story Competition (@httags) which is hosted on her website called 'How to Tell a Great Story'.

Splinters

Alex Carrigan

Splinters are how I will
carry a part of the forest
home with me.

I allow them to burrow into
my skin, the Douglas-firs'
becoming anesthetic.

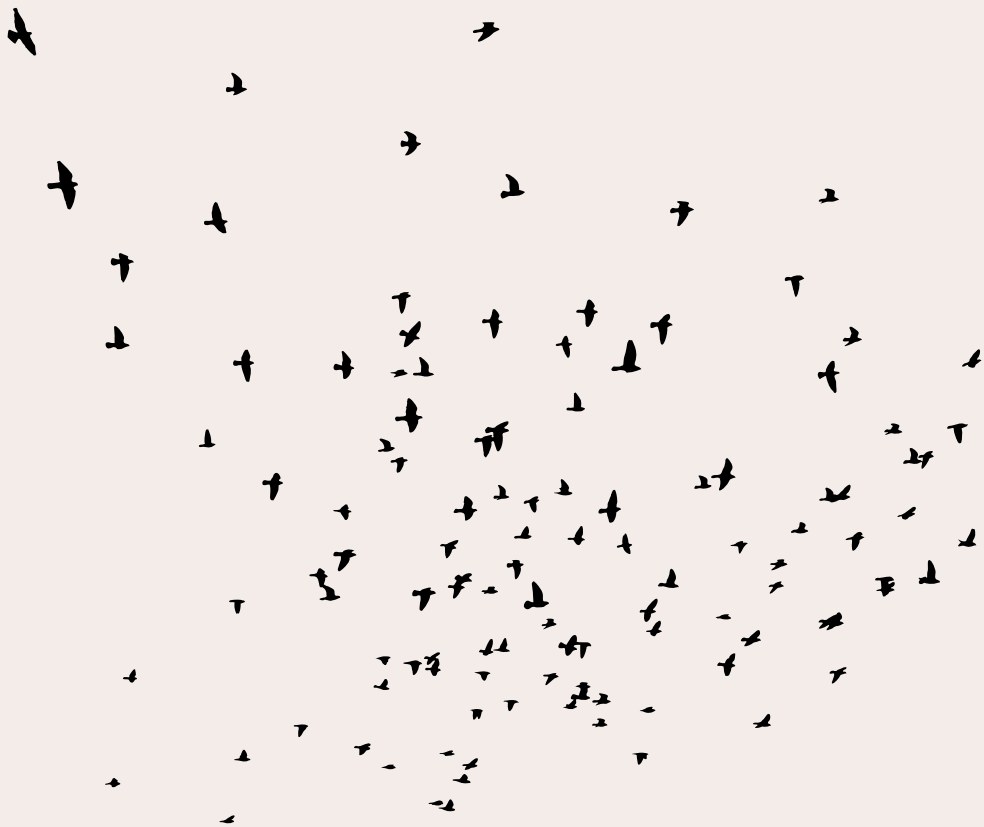
I wipe my tweezers
with a tissue before
I begin the field surgery.

I'll lay the splinters
on the table and play
Nim with my sister.

Each stick removed
is another tree whose
memory will be forgotten.
A toothpick for after brunch.

As for the last one
to be removed from the game?

I'll plant that splinter in my yard
and nourish it with
blood from where it
pricked me.



I'll visit it every day
and continue this bloodletting
so that I can pay for
bringing it out of the woods.

Maybe a forest will
grow on top of me
while I sleep

if I continue this ritual.
Maybe I'll become petrified
and grow rings within,

and maybe then
my skin will no longer
feel the pricks

and will wait for someone
to take me out of the forest too.

After Mita Mahato

How He Sees It

Alex Carrigan

My little brother runs down the hill
away from the hole in which
we've placed our grandmother's urn.

He already peered inside,
saw the urn covered in stars and stripes
(for the woman who was born on Flag Day),
and found another tombstone worth his attention.

The black marble erected in tiers
like our grandmother's wedding cake
depicted a man from the small, Michigan town
who died thousands of miles away.

His tombstone was also covered in stars and stripes,
but neither his birthday nor his death day were Flag Day.

My little brother reads the letters
on the tombstone. At three years old
he's already mastering the alphabet
and reads them out to me one at a time.

He also read our grandmother's grave back to us earlier,
then read aloud the letters of his grandfather,
who was placed there a decade before
he was born, back to us,
one at a time.

In a few minutes, we will go back up the hill
and toss handfuls of dirt
one at a time
into the hole our grandmother now lays in.

He will get a handful from our father to
add to the growing pile, painting the flag
a dusty brown until the stars are unable
to break through.

Later that day, I watch bakers
try to make gingerbread toys on
The Great British Bake-Off.
A sugar cookie rocking horse

breaks under its own weight.
I wonder if my little brother
will also break his toys down

when he learns the significance of
Flag Day,
of those letters belonging to
the son of Edenville, Michigan.

I wonder if he thought the shovel
we all passed back and forth
was another toy,
one last time to play with our grandmother
before her flag was lowered,
shrouded,
and stored away.

I hope he can open that box someday
and remember the touch of dirt on his
hands, how the dirt blended with his skin,
and how he shared it with our grandmother

before we walked away from that field,
where men who made playing with dirt
a career instead of a game
came in to clear away the toys.

After Bianca Stone

Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, Virginia. He is the author of *May All Our Pain Be Champagne: A Collection of Real Housewives Twitter Poetry* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022), and *Now Let's Get Brunch: A Collection of RuPaul's Drag Race Twitter Poetry* (Querencia Press, forthcoming 2023). He has had fiction, poetry, and literary reviews published in *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Lambda Literary Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *Sage Cigarettes* (Best of the Net Nominee, 2023), *Stories About Penises* (Guts Publishing, 2019), and more. For more information, visit carriganak.wordpress.com or follow him on Twitter @carriganak.

To a Space Telescope*

Sourav Sengupta

A million miles from your own launching place,
'Round solar orbit at Lagrange's post,
You peer into the wells of time and space,
To capture beams from reaches furthestmost.
In your despatches wondrous scenes arrive:
Of nature's womb where stars are born and nursed,
Of galaxies that dance in groups of five,
And dying stars in clouds of rage immersed.
Yet greater mysteries does the cosmos hide,
To fathom which our hearts shall ever yearn.
In this our quest for long may you abide,
From stars we come, to stars your gaze must turn.

But in the vein of Keats let this be said:
The Poetry of space is never dead.

** Inspired by the images from the James Webb Space Telescope*

Sourav Sengupta is an architect by training and a human resource manager by profession.
He lives and works in Kolkata, India.

Reincarnation

Amy Sturz

My memory is faint but you feel so familiar
Have I been harmed by you before?
Oh siren of the lake, what is this memory I have
When I was a youth of 24?

A crew of 29, close as brothers were we
With families and friends of our own
From Wisconsin we came near Whitefish Bay would we remain
Not knowing we'd never see home.

On that dark, chilly night in November we sailed
Thinking nothing would happen to us.
When we left for our job it was like any other
Not to be made into a fuss

.

The sky seemed clear when we left for the day
Filled with the taconite that Detroit would have soon.
The bell had been shined, 200 pounds of bronze
Glinting in the sunlit afternoon.

But at night the clouds came,
And the gales were upon us with waves we couldn't outrun
Trying the north, to the Canadian shore
Was the only thing that could be done

When it started to snow we went down below; we couldn't see anyway.
And when the ship swayed
Our captain bade them to stay
He said we were holding our own.

Tracking the radar, we were being watched over
As we kept getting obscured by sea return
Around 7 p.m. the signal was lost once more
Never again to be discerned

I remember the cold then the light of a warm glow
Feeling a sense of peace overcome fear
And before my eyes, I felt paralyzed
As a heavenly sight did appear

Someone once said you don't give up your dead
And I feel my soul will share the same fate
It's hard to refuse you when you shimmer so blue
And your beauty encapsulates

East to the horizon as we sail on you now
I feel the spray and wind on my face
And with a sudden lurch of the starboard bow
Near Six Fathom Shoal

I grapple with a sense of deja vu
The memories rush in
Just like the water back then
Did I choose this same life again?

Amy Sturz is the author and host of the podcast Supernatural Park where she shares her knowledge about fantastical creatures of mythology and folklore. A past park ranger for the Forest Service and National Park Service, she uses her experience to encourage others to find their connection with nature and be responsible stewards of the land. Her poetry is inspired by living along Lake Superior and personifies its beauty and the natural treasures found within.

Phantasma Latina

Anngelina Minnittee

My lips are leaking words
that do not belong to me.
They smell like sulfur on the air,
a warning, a curse,
before the flames
start catching.

I feel my soul detaching from the body I possess,
as it haunts a culture I don't deserve to be in.
Shame ripping through my skin,
never knowing quite enough to fit in.

Lighting candles
to summon some semblance of truth.
Some past I'd love to be a part of,
but my mind's been scratched
only playing on rewind.
Keeping the negative on loop.

I wasn't born in the same land of the people I love,
So, I continue to grasp on to the supernatural.
Trying to speak the same words as them
and pretending as if they're natural.



Anngelina Minnittee is an African American and Afro-Dominican writer from Miami. Best known for her work in *Grain of Salt Magazine* and *The Worm Moon Archive*. When not writing she enjoys drawing and painting. You can find her on Instagram @a.martworktime and Twitter @AMartworktime.

Life Map

Sapphire Lynn Johnson

Writing can be anything.

The words on a page may be permeant once printed and shipped off to the shelves. However, when they are read inside the complex minds of many, they never quite are. They are fluid, and they change depending on the mind it inhabits, and they grow into a beautiful memory of beginning, middle, and end. To thousands, your stories can be a bridge; a sturdy one they trust will lead them to a land where they are no longer aware of their origins, or one where they come to appreciate their own path. Where the sun may be far brighter, and the days less grueling as they turn every page. To a few, your words are a stained-glass window; a focal point where they can admire the various shades and shards you've mended to bring to life an abstract thought, giving them the courage to look through their own windows the same way.

To me, my words are the key; an instrument that turns the internal locks of frustration and anxiety. It's the only way to enter my soul. It's the way my head clears when home feels like a continuously shrinking cardboard box, or when the changes in life come faster than I can grapple with them. My words, my writing, is always there for me. So, in return, I won't let it leave my side as a passion.

Music can be more than something.

Your hum is your roar. Your whistles are your steps. In a world where total silence is near impossible, your harmonious noise is never muted against louder sounds. When you strum your strings, whether there be forty-seven or four, you cultivate a space where others are willing to obit and join your melody with their own set of notes. As you compose your life, the sonic gravity you possess will always pull a chance to be heard, and it'll be echoed out into the universe where another may take inspiration.

Along with writing by my side, music smooths out the path I pave for myself while I create, and it allows me to pour another aspect of me onto the page whether that be rage or ecstasy. Fleeting love or a prolonged tragedy. Music helps me stay true to myself, through writing and life's unpredictable curves.

Painting is an idea.

You begin with nothing—a blank canvas that bends to your imagination’s extent. Your brush stokes the emptiness until it’s pigmented with more than red, but frustration, and different than yellow, but an illustration of pure joy. You encourage the ‘accidental’ splatters because they are expressions. You love the ‘blotches’ because they blend into a seductive rose. You see the big picture because your grip on the wand of graphite is tighter than anyone else. People stare at your work for hours, because they are fascinated by the palette of ideas from which you draw.

While I sketch from time to time, it gives me a moment to reflect as I go through the motions of shading away the corner of my new creation.

Art can do everything.

It can captivate and unify. It is a medium that is infinitely elastic and completely interpretive.

When the lines of life blur, we often clean the lens with creativity and allow ourselves to immerse in something we control and mold to be any color, theme, emotion, or rhythm. We see a world that is not fuzzy with doubt, and it is our compass for a time.

For a time, art is a life map.

Sapphire Lynn Johnson is a 17 year old aspiring novelist from Chicago, who's got a knack for telling equally heartwarming and heart-wrenching tales in her sci-fi romance genre. She's planning on heading off to college after graduating next year and pursuing her career as an author!

Worship

Ruth Osman

The muezzin's² cry flies
across centuries of dark water
and settles in my mango tree —
a blue saki³
calling to its companion
in my belly.

Our eyes track the shock
of electric blue
through leaves dancing
in dappled light.

"Ever noticed how they're always in pairs?" you ask.
An adhan⁴ unfurls
in my chest
flutters up my throat
sits on my tongue
warbling.

2 The person who proclaims the call to daily prayer from a mosque.

3 Guyanese term for the blue gray tanager, a South American songbird.

4 Islamic call to prayer.

Ruth Osman is a Guyanese singer/songwriter and poet based in the Caribbean twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

She was shortlisted for the Bocas Lit Emerging Writers Fellowship 2022. And her poem, "Lost and Found" received an Honorable Mention in the 52nd New Millenium Writing Awards.

Osman views herself as a confluence of ethnicities, traditions and perspectives, like most Caribbean people. Poetry, she says, helps her make sense of those rich, diverse and sometimes incompatible legacies.



Scary

Lewis Figun Westbrook

It's not scary. It's a very normal color for the sky actually. The gray hues give a warning of the storm the news already predicted.

It's not scary at all.

But Erin looks at Annie, eyes opened wide in concern. It just changed colors a little fast.

Moments ago, they were joking about the boy who's been trying to ask Annie out for weeks in between classes. He keeps fumbling through the question though and Annie refuses to give an answer if the question isn't clearly stated. Instead, she ticks her chin up high and smirks. The boy always blushes and wanders away to try again later.

It's been making Erin's stomach turn. But here where it was just the two of them, it felt okay. She smiled along easily. She added to the jokes and laughed.

Moments ago, the sky was blue. This deep hue as the sun got closer to the horizon. It was pretty and reminded Erin of warm hugs. The weather matched it, perfect for wearing a thin jacket.

Erin made one joke, a particularly risky one that resulted in Annie throwing her head back with a laugh loud enough to cover them both and then the clouds crowded in. It was in a flash as fast as most lightning. When Annie recovered, it was stormy. The heat got a little denser. A little scarier.

But it's not scary, right?

Erin looks at Annie and swallows. Her hair looks brighter with the cloudy backdrop. This red fire, impossible and shining. Replacing the sun that's disappeared.

She doesn't know how to ask the question. She doesn't know what question to ask, but her fingers itch. They are only a couple inches away from Annie's. She knows she wants the

answer to be it's okay.

It'll be okay.

Annie's eyes are wide too. Her freckles have disappeared in the dark. Erin wonders, briefly, stupidly if she could trace them by touch alone. She wouldn't. That's not how freckles work. It's not how this friendship works.

It feels like the sky is coming crushing down on them. It feels like Erin can't breathe, not with the new density. It makes every movement and thought feel so impactful, like a boulder slamming into a pond.

Annie swallows back. "Wow, uh..." The voice breaks through. Erin looks from an angry sky to a confused friend. "Maybe I should get home."

"Do you think it's gonna..." The words hit her. The weight, already settled in Erin's stomach, drops down. Her arms go limp. Something heavy and sad collecting just above her elbows. That wasn't what Erin wanted Annie to say at all. "Storm."

It comes out breathless. A silly attempt to stay normal, to finish a sentence like a normal person.

Annie wants to go. Annie wants to leave. And Erin can't do anything. Even if all Erin wants is for her to stay. Is to wrap them both up in a blanket and hide from this stormy sky together. To hold hands in the dark where it doesn't matter who could be watching. Where Erin could get the question out.

Annie rushes home and she beats the rain by just a couple moments. It comes pounding down, ringing against the window in Erin's room. She stayed on the porch until Annie closed her front door just three houses over. She couldn't bear to be there anymore. Not with the empty steps surrounding her.

It's not scary.

It's terrifying.

Lewis Figun Westbrook (he/they) will always prefer their bio to be some kind of joke but now they actually have accomplishments to talk about. They are a queer writer of too many genres and artist of too many things. He is currently published in *Love Gone Wrong*, a horror anthology and *Father Father*, an online dadaism magazine. Find them on most social media @lewisrllw

talking portis and radio

Alice Weatherley

Yeah, I got home ok -- I'm making toast. Thanks for a great fortnight i think of nothing else.

falsehoods and purple floral print.

stumbling to impress. i think about you catching me
off guard

in a blue shirt

and less blue bra

when i spoke nothing but blue for hours

sorry – i'm always fiddling with something.

a pen. a necklace. cutlery. skin. i avoid

a total handover of everything i am

to you

and this view

by forcing my eyes and fingers to the guise of disinterest

and whatever the casual is

but i know it's all over, isn't it, my voice breaks

when i just want to stutter

and you know

it's all lying there bloodstained before your bare feet you see me
bare.

but i say no and look down at pen necklace cutlery skin and squint

all aloof self-aware i'm telling you

i'm self-aware i'm showing you it all but you'll never know

you laid out the proof in a truncated playlist just

a few hours ago i wonder if you know

what I'm doing to you

i certainly do

You made me drop the butter knife! Haha. Anyway, see you soon.

Alice Weatherley (she/her) is a writer from North Yorkshire, England, and currently an English undergraduate at the University of Cambridge, where her poetry has been featured in student zines and newspapers. Catharsis, confusion, and self-indulgence persist in her work, and plague her consciousness. Twitter: @alweatherley

A Writing Spell

Jane Gilheaney

I was meant to be writing,
I made it snow,
Slanting in on the wind,
Soft and slow.
Silenced the birds,
Stilled the breeze,
Mesmerised the leafless trees.
Painted the air,
Faster and faster,
Turned the world to alabaster.
Frosted the lane until it glowed,
I was meant to be writing,
I made it so.



Jane Gilheaney is an Irish author of gothic fiction, poetry and CNF. She is best known for her modern gothic novel, *Cailleach~Witch* and for her fb author page/blog. When not writing, she can be found with her daughters, painting, cooking, or walking her beloved mountain. Just like her witchy characters. You can keep in touch with Jane, find links to her books and get a free story via her Linktree <https://linktr.ee/janegilheaney>

136 Days

Jillian Oakes

Typically, finding a stranger in your bed would warrant a few things— a look through your photos, maybe, or a quick nudge followed by an awkward conversation. Maybe an STD test a few days later... anything. Any sort of reaction. Yet, as you stare upon the dust-haloed space where you once lived, you feel... nothing.

You died 136 days ago and have been returning to your past life for 121. Your death was quick, yet unjust: a drunk driving accident. The sort of scene they'd show in a driver's ed class to scare some 15-year-olds shitless. You didn't understand what had happened for a few days— you simply woke up on a table, your eyes immediately seared with artificial light. A doctor standing over you swore as a piercing mechanical tone rang through the room, but he was unresponsive to any of your following questions. You tried to sit up, but when your body didn't follow, you lost the nerve pretty quickly. The learning curve was steep from there.

You move out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. Your fiancé is in there— you still feel comfortable calling him that since he's yet to give up the ring— and he's making breakfast. Eggs and toast, the latter slathered with ectoplasmic marmalade. Your *replacement's* favorite.

You shake your head. No, that's not fair. Not to either of them. It would have been outrageous to expect your fiancé to afford the rent alone. The two of you barely scraped by as it was. I mean, it's not like it was an easy decision. You'd seen him argue day in and day out— sometimes on the phone, sometimes in person— with anyone who would listen, always numerous things: the service, the cat, your belongings, the rent. He'd eventually cracked and put up the roommate ad, moving both of your belongings into the smaller room the following day. He hadn't budged on the cat, though.

The furry companion passes through your legs (yes, literally through) while you further survey your fiancé. His eye bags haven't gotten better despite the number of clear orange bottles cluttering your side of the sink. You're glad they're finally the purplest thing on his body, though— the bruises from the crash were gone within a month, but the alcohol-related ones had continued to bloom regularly. Sometimes you'd walk to him and run your hands over them. Nothing ever happened, of course. You didn't expect them to. Goosebumps had risen once,

giving his arm a perforated texture, and you'd almost revived your hope before he rose and shut the window. The commotion disturbed the snoozing cat on his lap who rose with a disgruntled back-arch. You tried not to think about the fact that a rogue draught had more sway in his life than you did these days.

His shoulders also sag significantly more than they had during your lifetime. You remember the numerous times you had to remind him about his posture, usually while rehearsing lines or shooing him out the door for another audition. You haven't seen a new script show up on his bedside in a while. Maybe it's because he's got nobody to run lines with.

You died 136 days ago and have been visiting your past life for 121. You've only accepted your fate for closer to 100. It's hard to pin down the exact day that your attitude shifted; maybe it was the night you saw your fiancé stumble through the door donning his new job's uniform and an intoxicated stumble. He'd tried to untie the apron for around 5 minutes before bursting into tears. He didn't stop until the sun rose high enough to dry the splotches on his face and shirt. Maybe it was when you spent a whole afternoon watching the new roommate move in and noticed how similar their room organization was to yours. Perhaps it was the day that your cat stopped waiting by the door at 6:00 pm sharp, perched upon the promise that this time, this time you would return home. It's hard to pin down.

You sit down, crossing your legs. It's only 7:30 am, so you've got another half hour with your fiancé before he leaves for work. You know he won't wake up his roommate, so for now, he's just yours. Not that that was ever up for debate.

Your cat walks up to you. You almost don't notice, already desensitized to being ignored. You do notice, however, when he lays down, tucking into a tight ball right in the space where your lap should be.

You smile. It's a coincidence, nothing more, and somewhere deep down you know that you know that. Still, it's hard not to grin as you savor the moment, relishing in something close to a whole family for just a fleeting second.

Jillian Oakes wrote her first short story, Camp Twister, when she was 7 and hasn't shut up about it since. She is a senior at Clinton High School in Clinton, NC. Outside of her studies, Jillian enjoys reading, creative writing (specifically flash fiction and short stories), crocheting, and just overall being *really* cool. She also finds it important to mention her two cats, York and Eliza, and that they are major inspirations for her writing.

Blood's Thinner Than Waiting

Will Schmit

In the too dark my two brothers
sleep well away after a stroke.

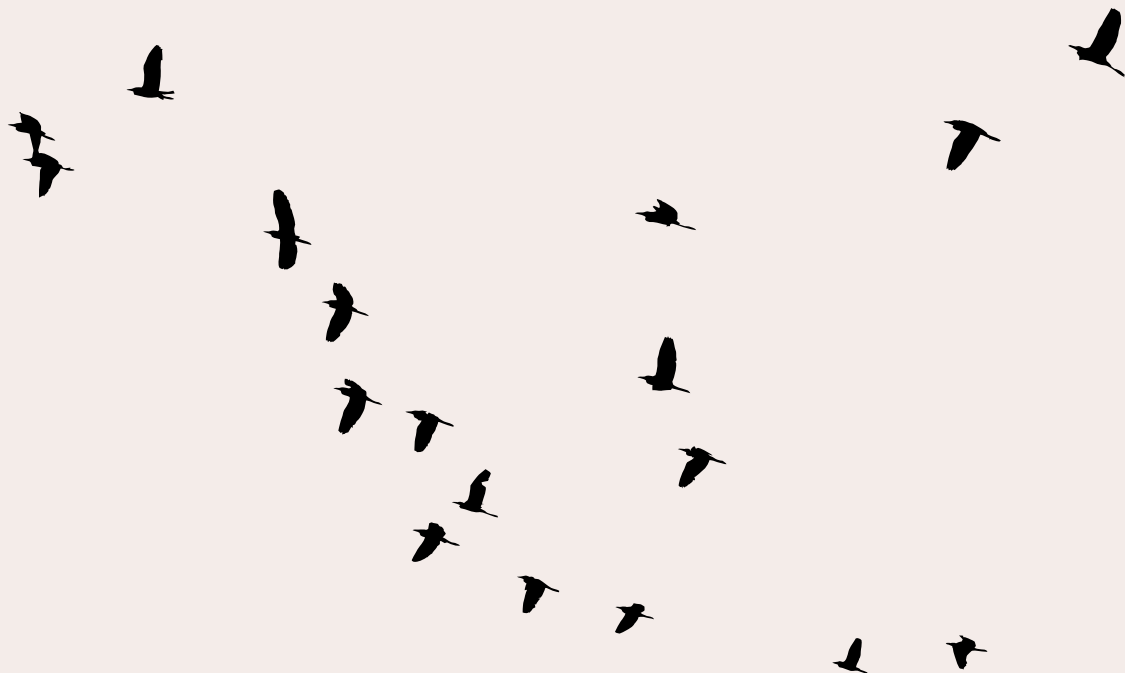
Medical expressionisms click
late night texts, conversations

stall for the charging cycle. We
like to stay plugged in. If God

needs wires or arteries, we can
offer guidance. Additionally,

a response is needed. Tiny
green lights flash progress

for the chart like shooting
stars over a barrel.



Seven Nights of Spaghetti

Will Schmit

I came across two snakes in two days.
How do I know it was two days? The sidewalk
matched the clouds and the back door blew open.

Our cat broke kibbles with soft teeth.
Seed packets left too long between pages
sprout. I listen knee deep in every wave

coming ashore. The water rushing back-
wards, missing your burrowed feet,
my head in the sand. I vacuumed

the laundry, folded the refrigerator,
spell checked orchid, ate pesto
from my lap in the van.

A bald man dancing in pajamas
had trouble adjusting his wig. I
came home after three songs.

Your flight details are in my phone.
I rub the temporary tattoo like a lamp,
estimate the coffee needed to stop

shaking.

Will Schmit is a Midwestern poet transplanted to the Redwood Forests of Northern California. Will's most recent recording, "Fix my Car A Spoken Word Mythology" by Will Schmit and Friends is available for streaming on Spotify, iTunes, Apple Music, etc

Missing Rib

Deborah Wong

after 'Burn The Floor'

I am that flesh,
plunge into
the wilderness,
coalescing
wicked interludes
and mournful requiems.
You're discerning
that vertebrae
stolen from you,
like a storyteller
you trade surrealism
with distant memories
of the faithful departed,
enumerate dusks
through
perpetual nights,
craving
for
sacred union—
In separation;
a hang fire,
I've procured
a knowledge
of inner peace,
manifesting
a resplendent immortal
in you,
that I longed
to be
home.

A Rhysling Award and Pushcart nominated poet, **Deborah Wong's** writing has appeared in *Thought Catalog*, *Ricepaper Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Twisted Moon Magazine*, *The Rhysling Anthology* 2020 and 2021, *Dark Matter Magazine* Halloween's Edition, and on other platforms. She self-published her poetry chapbook 'Autopsy of Sentiments' in 2020, and is currently seeking representation for her adult contemporary romance novel *ME IN YOUR MELODY*. Finds her chirpy and grumpy rants at Twitter @PetiteDeborah.

"Seasonal Droughts..."

Emma Major

Seasonal droughts
Splinter forest centurions
Fading the golden glow
Of autumnal carpets

Bruised communities
Deeply rooted in fear
Find calm in moon reflections
As they cling to the margins

What salvation is offered
As ruins lay uncovered?
May dawn's breathless hope
Beckon early autumn rain

Are these hallucinations?
Or might all tomorrows
Be balanced in creation
Every day ever after



Emma Major is a blind wheelchair user, artist and poet. She has had seven books of poetry published on different themes including disability, grief, mental health and climate change. You can find Emma online at LLMCalling.com or on social media @emmuk74 where she shares her creativity to encourage, bless and affirm people.

Please Burn Before Reading

Katherine Varga

Every morning, the girl with the scar on her wrist and the long red hair stepped into the dusk. The sun wasn't up, but she could get to the barn with her eyes closed. She climbed to the alcove above where the cows and horses slept. She kept ample paper and a match behind a loose panel in the wall. She wrote as the sun filled the barn. After filling two sheets of paper, front and back, she concluded by lighting the match and burning the pages, using the bottom of her robe to gather the ashes to deposit by the oak tree near her house. After shaking the ash from her robe, she hurried to the chicken shed so she could return to the house with a basket of eggs as her alibi.

In case she got a spontaneous heart attack or was accidentally trampled by a cow, at the top of the first page she always wrote: "Please burn before reading."

Anna had never been on a farm. Anna had never seen a cow. Anna only knew sidewalks, traffic lights, and dirt you had to wipe from the bottom of your shoes before entering buildings.

Her phone alarm rang. She hit snooze.

When she first got hired by her favorite environmental nonprofit, she set multiple alarms out of fear of oversleeping, and arrived at least an half hour before everyone else. After a year, she realized no one at her nonprofit could fix bugs like she could. So she let herself hit snooze, sometimes not making it to work until the staff meeting at 11am. If there were any technical difficulties before then, everyone floundered until Anna arrived. She could get a computer working again with her eyes closed.

Today started as usual, but then an oddity occurred that changed the direction of her day.

The girl with long red hair was born and raised in Canada. Her parents died when she was

young, so she lived with her aunt and uncle on their farm. Now she was old enough to take care of them.

She worked the farm in the morning, and in the afternoons taught at the local schools. She biked there on the machine she built herself. Sometimes men asked her to look at their broken bikes, but she would only ever help the women who asked, and at no charge.

The scar on her arm did not come from hitting a sharp rock when she fell off her bike, as she told people, but from the first time she wrote.

She hid in her favorite spot in the barn and laid on her belly. “I don’t believe in God.” She felt a delicious thrill, such scandal, that she kept writing. All the thoughts she had every Sunday when she and her aunt and uncle sat in the third row from the front of the chapel – there they were, real, spread out on the page. She was real! She covered the page, then turned it sideways and continued to write in a cross stitch of words.

When she finished two pages, she leaned back against the broken panel. She didn’t want anyone, including her future self, to stumble upon blasphemous scratches.

She folded the paper into as many rectangles as possible and returned to the house, the corners digging deeply into her palm. She took the matches from the cabinet.

Her fingers trembled too much to do it right. She was surprised by the heat (stupid, she knew) and flinched, right into the flame. The burn would scar and forever remind her of the indelible power words had on her body, even the words she destroyed.

Anna turned up the radio dial, bobbing her head along. She did this every day. Jamming along wasn’t a distraction. It most definitely wasn’t her fault – the other car rear-ended her. Even so, she immediately turned down the radio, lest Janelle Monae got blamed for the accident.

The guy in the car was so apologetic. Her car was dented in back. His headlights were worse. He admitted it was his fault, then backpedaled and said it was a tricky street. Anna nodded. Both these things were true. But the more he thought about it, the more – had she been

listening to the radio or something? Maybe she was distracted and slowed down unexpectedly. Fortunately, they were down the street from a mechanic, who nodded when she saw their cars. It was a tricky street. She didn't have the right parts to help with the headlights. She was sorry, she said, she wished she could serve everyone but today she could only help Anna.

Anna texted her boss. He sent a frantic response about an Internet connection problem at their non-profit before remembering to ask if she was OK. She told him to unplug everything, count to ten, and plug everything back in.

When the mechanic asked if Anna would be staying or getting a ride, Anna said she'd wait for the car but no rush. The mechanic said it could be a few hours. Anna hugged her coat tight and stepped out for a walk.

The girl wrote the thoughts she couldn't say out loud. She wrote about her hopes for her students, and speculations on how the chickens perceive sunset or how the trees feel when people eat their apples. Sometimes her writing was journalistic, sometimes poetic, sometimes sheer nonsense. Coherency and style didn't matter to her. None of it was continuous or linear. All of it burned. Her fantasies, outrages, dreams, glimpses of the future – they all turned to ash and became little black clumps that got stepped on and flattened into the earth.

Back in college, Anna fell in love. Not with a person, but with geology. Her parents wanted her to get a practical degree and she didn't mind computer science. But Anna took geology classes for her superlatives and often thought of rocks, and trees, and layers of the earth that barely changed despite the wars fought over them, the countries built and demolished, the revolutions erupted and the symphonies written.

Even though she didn't fall in love with a person, she never forgot the T.A. who said her final paper would be a strong writing sample to submit to grad programs. Anna fantasized about becoming the next Blake, sitting in each lecture already knowing everything. In reality, she wasn't cut out for research. She was content reading what other people had discovered.

Now, at the little free library, she casually flipped through a book with a picture of a farm

and a girl writing under a tree on the cover. She wasn't sure why she picked that book off the shelf to flip through, but she knew exactly what compelled her take it back to the mechanic: a handwritten "Blake" in blue ink on the top of the front cover.

The morning started as usual for the girl, but then an oddity occurred that changed the direction of her day. But before that: noisy roosters, a walk to the barn, "Please burn before reading," and an outpour of words.

"I don't believe in coincidences," she wrote. "So many number of things can happen, that the things that do happen bare no special occurrence, unless we lie to ourselves and say it is special." She crisscrossed across the page, writing about the unpleasant feeling when a horse knocks your back, and how strange it was that her banana bread never tasted as good as her aunt's even though she used the same recipe, and how nice it was to decide what to do with her mornings and not immediately start the day answering to someone else.

"I'm happy I live in Canada," she wrote. "But I do believe I could be equally, if not more, happy elsewhere."

Anna wondered if she could be happier elsewhere. She sat in the mechanic's uncomfortable green chair and searched Blake on her phone, scrolling through pictures of Blake by rocks and on cliffs and smiling under a hard hat. According to their profile, Blake was now an adjunct professor in Canada.

Her phone battery was getting low, so she put the phone in her bag and opened the book.

Before the girl could light the match, she heard piercing, urgent screams that made her drop everything, and run, stumble, down the stairs.

The house was on fire. This was not a metaphor. The house was on fire.

Her aunt cried outside. The uncle was still inside. The girl ran towards the window. Her aunt cried after her, but she ignored her. The air was hot, almost spiky. Flames burst and ate the house. The girl got inside. Her uncle was in bed, frozen. She led him to the window and got him outside, but she couldn't keep her robe from catching fire. The last part of her to burn was her right arm, outstretched, the scar staying dry and white until the very end.

Anna tuned out the '80's pop music coming from the receptionist's desk. Within a few pages, she was hooked. The prose of the book was simple and direct, making it easy to fall into the Canadian farm side and the world of this young farm girl. A bit morbid, which Anna enjoyed.

The receptionist left to use the bathroom, leaving Anna alone. The bell jingled. Anna glanced up. A customer walked in – well, she didn't look like someone who would have a car. She wore a white dress and a dusty, worn robe. She sat next to Anna.

Anna opened her mouth to say that the receptionist would be out in a moment, but the girl started talking. "I don't believe in coincidences," she said. Anna nodded offhandedly. She wanted to return to the book, but didn't know what the girl with the haunted eyes might do next.

"It's a usual day. I walked here like I do every day. I could do it with my eyes closed. But if anything unusual happened, it wouldn't be a coincidence. It would be an accident. There are so many things happening at once, so many things that could happen, and they are only coincidences if we decide they are. In reality they're accidents."

The girl continued, faster and less coherently. The words crisscrossed each other to get out of her mouth. And then she stopped. She smiled. She put one hand on Anna's arm. Her skin was hot.

"I see you," the girl said. "Your life is beautiful." Then she walked out the door, just as the toilet flushed.

Of course, this is assuming a whole number of things. For example, this is assuming that when the boy who the aunt hired to take over the girl's farm duties finds the papers, he ignores

the request “please burn before reading.” Assuming he decides to read before burning, and then decides not to burn. Assuming he thinks these papers might help the aunt grieve, but they only keep the aunt from sleeping at night so she can comb through sentences, distinguish commas from crossed T’s and periods from dotted I’s and unthread everything onto new sheets. This is also assuming that she can find people who think there’s profit to be made from distributing those words, and that Blake liked the book enough to buy it but needed to weed out some books after graduating to save on moving expenses to Canada. This is really assuming a lot. If you believe in a god or two, perhaps you can assume less.

The mechanic called Anna’s name. The car was ready.

On her way to work, Anna returned to the little free library. She knew she would never see Blake again. She stuck the book back on the shelf for the next person who needed to feel content with where they are, if only for a moment.

Katherine Varga is a writer and teaching artist living in Rochester, NY. Her plays have been performed at Geva Theatre Center, the Rochester Fringe Festival, 20% Theatre Company, Tantrum Theatre, Voices HEaRd Women Playwrights Festival, Little Black Dress Ink, and Curious Theatre's National Collective, amongst others. Her prose has appeared in *Passengers Journal*, as well as the *Democrat & Chronicle* and *Rochester City News*.

Olokun

Prosper Iféányí

My grandfather and I, today, caught a
Marlin. She was smoked over a raft and
As we drifted, he taught me a lesson
About the smoke and the sea. He said:
One day, we will talk over two shots of
Ogogoro, how a woodsmoke dismembers
Itself from from it's body just to see God.
Tonight, the seagulls chant canticles
Beside shore and pigeons scavenge the
Remnants of diaphoretic pepper and
Tomatoes lying beside the motionless
Water. In that water, we see a troupe of
Worshippers crafting their tongues over
Things of old. My grandfather tells me
They are a connection between the sea
And land. The sea gives, the sea takes, but
At what cost should one prey on it's
Evanescence? The sea, musics melody to
The man, and the man offers it a slice of
Himself. The sea is a disambiguation of
Everything man probably misconstrued.
Smoking a fish is an understanding of a
Transaction with the sea; what is smoked
Is recompensed to the sea with diffused
Vapour and then given back by rainfall.



Prosper Iféányí is a Nigerian poet. His works are featured or forthcoming in *Brittle Paper*, *Feral Poetry*, *Lumiere Review*, *Identity Theory*, *Aothen Magazine*, *Petrichor Journal*, *Eremite Poetry*, *New Note Poetry*, *Pepper Coast Lit*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal* and elsewhere. Reach him on Twitter and Instagram @prosperifeanyii

The Between

Brooklyn Duke

I have much compassion for very young things
and very old things
and I feel nothing for what lies between.

I am in the between
where my skin has begun to wrinkle at the corners,
and I have worked hard enough to earn a few stray white hairs,
but most of my head is still brown.
Every night I must massage my feet to quiet their ache
but I wake up fresh in the morning,
pointing my toes into fluid stretches,
and spending every inch of my body.

I still think boys are beautiful,
but I know when I have shown too much of myself to one.
At 15 it would not have mattered if a boy didn't see my color,
at 30 I will no longer be vibrant,
but right now I burn red,
and I pray he sees it.

If I could go back and be fresher,
and round out my edges some more,
I wouldn't make such a mess.
I would hurt myself less,
love others more,
and write everything down.
Yet still, I cannot help the thrill of being wrong.
of messing up what is soon to be the past,
and imagining what it will feel like to look back on this moment,
and dully perceive what I once was like.

What I must say,
is that I wish to muster life's experiences for the first time again,
as much as I long to be full of them,
spilling them out at dining tables onto people stuck in the between.

There's a wrinkle cutting through the center of my forehead,
all the way to my right temple.
I cannot help but wonder
if it will be the faintest or the boldest,

20 years from now.

Brooklyn Duke is a second-year creative writing student at Eastern Michigan University. She lives near Detroit, Michigan with her family, dog, and abnormally extensive collection of Penguin Classics. Her creative focus is on prose, poetry, and narrative nonfiction.

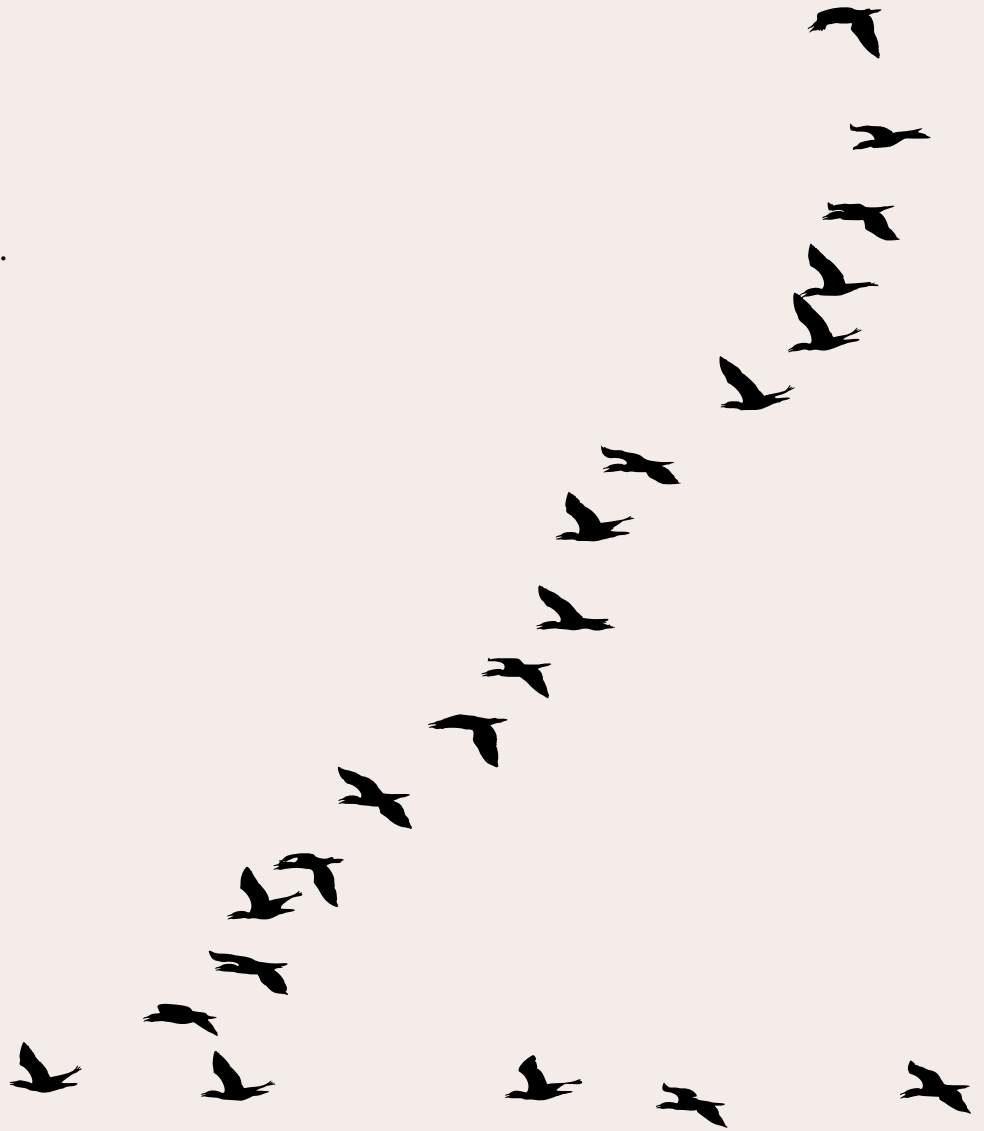
Fishing With Fred

Andre Peltier

Early October winds blew
through the streets of town,
they blew us towards
the bakery and tackle shop.
Every autumn a new trick,
a new gadget, a new lure.
With Princeton spawn sacks
and Yale blue raincoats,
we approached the Lake St. Bridge.
We elbowed our way to the edge
through crowds of anglers
who'd forgotten more about fishing
than we would ever know.
Our lines dropped,
and we waited for the first bite.
All day we waited as we watched
those rugged men pull salmon
after salmon from the Bear River falls.
We waited and watched
but never brought one home.

Ten years later,
they found one in his back.
“A tumor the size of
a large fish,” they said.
Uncle Fred had been talking
of lumbar pains.
He was gone within six months.
It swam upstream
and spawned behind his spleen.
Those doctors cast their lines.

They baited their scalpels,
but the cancer was just
out of reach.
That fall, he was in and out
of the hospital.
That fall he aged twenty years.
He was home for Christmas;
it was the last time we saw him.
He'd made his final run
so we could say out final
goodbye.



Andre F. Peltier (he/him) is a Pushcart and Best of the Net Nominee and a Lecturer III at Eastern Michigan University where he teaches literature and writing. He lives in Ypsilanti, MI, with his wife and children. His poetry has recently appeared in various publications like *CP Quarterly*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *Provenance Journal*, *Lavender and Lime Review*, *About Place*, *Novus Review*, *Fiery Scribe*, and *Fahmidan Journal*, and most recently in *Menacing Hedge*, *The Brazos Review*, and *Idle Ink*. His debut chapbook, *Poplandia*, is available from Alien Buddha. In his free time, he obsesses over soccer and comic books.
Twitter: @aandrefpeltier

Military History

Chris McCann

The water tower's been painted
over so many times it resembles
the sky.

Not too long ago men
worked here in dark rooms
listening to messages
they couldn't understand
until one day they could,
but by then there was no one
left to tell. So they chanted
the codes and translations
to each other around small
fires they built in filing cabinets
while swifts skimmed the grass
and the first stars became visible.

They saw patterns
in everything and painted
symbols on the walls
of the squat concrete cubes
that surrounded the tower
they'd climb to sleep above
the teeming ground. You
could say that they were
happy and you would not
be wrong.

Today, we still try to parse their symbols
but cannot crack the code. If there
ever was one. Maybe we've been

wrong about them and instead of making
meaning they were diffusing it,
their palimpsests on rusting steel
more bouquets than sentences,
their messages to those who came
after nothing more than birds
stitching their flight into
a sky that never stops changing.

Chris McCann's work has been published in *Moss*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Noctua Review*, and *Salt Hill Journal*. He lives on Bainbridge Island in Washington.

The Exorcism of Troublesome Demons

Rosie Garland

The waiting room

She checks the ticket torn from the numbered roll, grips her purse. Mouse-squeak of patent leather. A stir of quicksilver between her thighs. She squeezes her knees tight to erase the memory of the moon's touch.

The brochure said, *imagine your handbag. Imagine shaking till everything has gone. That's what we do here. Imagine yourself turned inside out. Imagine yourself empty.*

Her seams strain. As a distraction, she locks her gaze to the poster of warning signs. Scarlet arrows label the danger zones: breasts, navel, armpits, vulva, thighs and tongue. Especially the tongue, pierced with three arrows.

Anything, her mother said, is better than your condition.

She is a maze of dead-ends. Stumbles through each day stretched tight around an unruly spirit. She clamps her lips shut to hold back the words with which she seethes. The blazing wrongness of everything she says, of everything she desires. The wrongness of desiring anything at all. Doesn't she have everything?

How dare you! she cries at her disobedient insides, and checks her ticket again. Only 26 more patients before her turn. On the facing wall is another poster, this one of a woman with eyes downcast, sheltering two children who gaze adoringly at their new, cured mother.

There's a blonde woman to her left, talking in a high, unsettled voice, cheeping about the gifts her husband is buying for her Restoration: a visit to the islands, a pair of shoes, a set of brand-new saucepans.

I've promised it won't happen again, the woman says, grasping at the words and clinging to them. The ends of her hair are damp from chewing and her gaze flickers at every movement: a nurse clicking a ballpoint, the receptionist crossing and uncrossing her legs. *Success is guaranteed. It's permanent. The brochure told me so.*

A number is called. The blonde woman stands, arranges her face into smooth acquiescence. From the treatment room five minutes later, she can hear muffled screaming. Tells herself it must be the laughter that comes after release.

Anything, her mother says, *is better than your condition.*

The Jezebel

How can you do this when you know I'm not a devil?

We are closer than skin on skin. Every night you try to shake me out with dancing. Every day you stuff your skirt into your mouth to stop me howling. You pray to be made empty, so terrified of desire and danger you would rather be a void.

Don't do this to yourself. Don't settle for scuttling after happy-ever-afters, lies of a heaven tailor-made for martyrs. You know the truth. We are granite. Hard enough to blunt their buzz saws, blades, barbed wire rolled along the top of fences built to keep us in.

Come with us. Be defiant. Be wild. Be filthy. Be free. Kick down your walls. Birth yourself free of painted wooden gods. Drip fire at the stars' touch. Print footprints on the bed of coals. Heap your hands with what you've done and can still do.

There's still time to run. We are opening up. Wait till you see what's hidden. Spread me wide and drink me in. You can't tear your eyes away from my depths. And you don't want to. Shake the sky to its knees, grab the highest star and set it in your teeth. Out-scream the storm. Out-shine the lightning.

This is not rescue you are clinging to. It's a gallows pole. Get out of here. Quick, before the buzzer sounds and it's your turn to be scoured.

The patient

When I first see the angels, I'm confused. They swirl in jagged beauty, a radiant helter-skelter zig-zagging to the moon and back, up again and past the stars. Wings gather themselves in the reaches of my body. I quit the heaviness of earth, touch rapture.

When I return, I try to explain the envelopment of dazzle, the piercing brilliance, the agony of flight. They think I'm asking for a cure. I try different words, but remain a problem to be solved: an observation, a naming, an intervention.

I learn to pretend. I imitate their unlit lives, their denial of ecstasy. I study my mother's shoulders, see the stumps of pinions, ragged and torn. See the knife in her own hand.

She hisses, *aren't you ashamed? Anything is better than your condition.*

I learn to smile, show my teeth and declare myself restored to health. Tell them I see no heavens, no angels, feel no pain. Hide my wings. Doctors believe their cleverness is the cure for the most stubborn possession, and I am left to paradise.

Rosie Garland writes long and short fiction, poetry, and sings with post-punk band The March Violets. Her poetry collection *What Girls Do In The Dark* (Nine Arches Press) was shortlisted for the Polari Prize 2021. Her novel *The Night Brother* was described by The Times as “a delight...with shades of Angela Carter.” Val McDermid has named her one of the most compelling LGBT+ writers in the UK today.

<http://www.rosiegarland.com/>

Beginning With Moonshine, Ending With Nostalgia

Muhammed Sanni Olowonjoyin

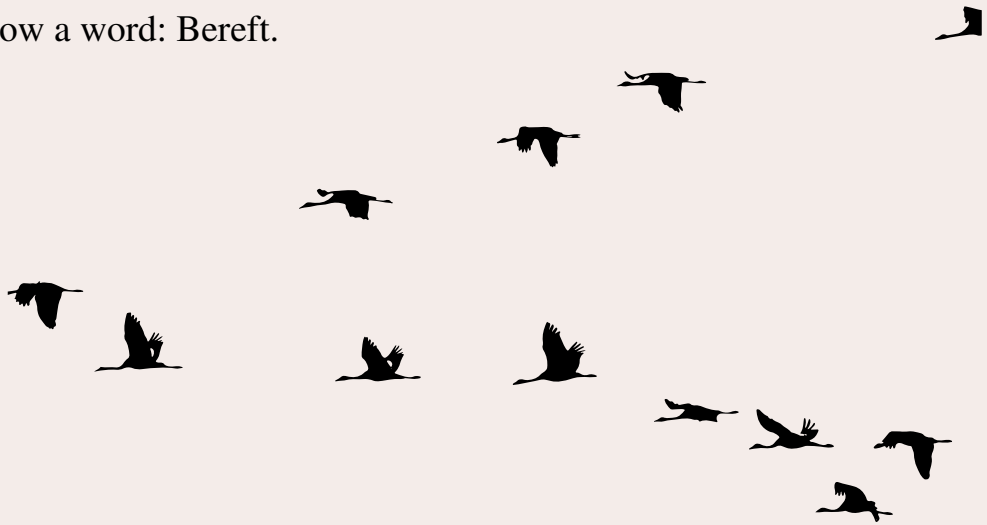
Begin with a half-chewed love under the moonshine,
Or kisses floating halfway before rewinding into our
Mouths. Begin with hope. Begin with bubbles running
Through the innards of water before becoming
Ghosts at the surface. Don't begin with death because
Death means a poem must begin somewhere. Begin
With memories punctuated with hurt. Begin with a
Butterfly entrapped between the claws of thorns before
Getting its wings torn. & I am the butterfly. I wake every day to
Scorn my body because I don't know which is closer
To the mouth between hurt and death. I sleep late
Because the night is somber. By which I mean, I'm
Only alive at night. I wake up early but my body wakes
Up late. That's what I hate about serotonin, the urge
To keep dying to live like burning matchsticks. Perhaps,
There's a life where we do not die, which is to say, no
One should die more than twice. End with a country,
With formaldehyde, with a half-chewed love, with a
Body running through a maze. I want to stop him but
To stop him is to stop me. Don't end with death. End
With nostalgia.

Muhammed Sanni Olowonjoyin, TPC III, studies Biochemistry at the University of Ilorin. His poems have been published or forthcoming in *The Kalahari Review*, *Acropolis Journal*, *Salamander Ink Magazine*, *African Writer Magazine*, *Words And Whispers*, *Kreative Diadem*, *Fiery Scribe Review*, *The Origami Review* and elsewhere. He reads poetry and translations for *The Dodge Magazine*. When he's not tracing biochemical pathways, reading, or writing, he's searching for peace. He tweets @APerSe_

Garden Muse

Thomas Zimmerman

This morning, our designer brought us pied
red garden flowers that she said she'd trimmed.
We broke a wineglass Friday night, and sighed,
"Oh well, we're down to two." My mind, salt-rimmed
with pixelated daydreams I suppress,
is swizzling two parts Us and one part Grand
Design to make the cocktail: Eden. "Dress
it with a cherry," sings my Muse. "Then hand
the laptop over." Under laden trees,
we're all abuzz with spirits, knowledge next,
and then our nakedness. We're on our knees. . . .
My Muse clicks God, then sex, in hypertext—
Our paradise goes Poof! Alone, I'm left
with one line more. And now a word: Bereft.



Thomas Zimmerman (he/him) teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and edits *The Big Windows Review* <https://thebigwindowsreview.com/> at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His poems have appeared recently in *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*, *Rough Diamond*, and *Sixpence Society*. His new chapbook, *The House of Cerberus*, is forthcoming from Alien Buddha Press. Website: <https://thomaszimmerman.wordpress.com> Twitter: @bwr_tom Instagram: tzman2012

Brief Candle

Roger Evans

Alex wandered the back streets of Athens without intent or destination. Every now and then he'd stop, take a letter from his pocket, as if somehow reading it again could change it. But it didn't, so he kept on walking; oblivious to the heat and the light jumping off the whitewashed walls, not noticing his sweat and the weight of the guitar case on his back. He had meant to go to one of the tourist spots to play for coins but that didn't matter anymore. The letter from the hospital was compassionate, but the words were there in black and white, factual, spelling out what little time he had. So he walked.

A fading sign swung gently outside a small café down a dusty side road, above a small courtyard with a vine decked trellis casting its shade over chairs and tables, none alike. He stopped. Like a dimly remembered dream he realised he'd been past this sign several times, circling around, walking without direction. The café was nearly empty, a single customer sitting with her back against the stone wall. She stared out into the street, intent on the world behind where he stood at the courtyard's entrance. But if her face was immobile her hands made up for it. A life of their own, he thought, as her fingers turned and rubbed against each other, over and over, twisting and turning.

An old man, skin like leather, came out of a dark doorway at the back of the courtyard. He beckoned to Alex to come in, to sit. He didn't have anything better to do, not now. So he sat, propped his case against the table and turned to speak to him, but he had already disappeared into the darkness of the doorway.

Despite himself, Alex's eyes kept returning to the woman, trying not to stare but failing. She didn't seem to notice. Her gaze was set rigidly on the street, and her hands continued their dance.

A rattle startled him. The old man had returned carrying a tray bearing a coffee pot and cup. He placed it on the table, smiled, and once again vanished into the gloom. Alex poured himself a cup.

"You burn like a mayfly."

He stopped, the cup against his lips, the hot, bitter coffee barely tasted. The woman still looked out at the street, hands intent on their twisting and turning, but it was her voice. He put the cup down as he felt his hand begin to shake unexpectedly.

“Pardon?” Alex, confused, turned in his seat to face the woman, but unsure of what else to say he watched her hands, still drawing their shapes in the hot afternoon.

“He never loved me you know.” She emphasised the word “me”.

Alex’s confusion grew.

“Who? Who didn’t love you?”

“He loved my sisters, the three of them, even though he had a strange way of showing it. But not me. I was always the embarrassment, always the one he wouldn’t mention, wouldn’t even look at.”

She turned and stared straight into Alex’s eyes. “He’d sit with them as they worked, laughing, and telling stories. But not me. I was sent out. To fix his problem, his mistake. His embarrassment.”

Alex felt out of his depth. She seemed intent on her story, almost as if her audience didn’t matter. Which, he supposed, was probably quite true.

“So they would sit there, my beloved sisters. Spinning. Measuring. Cutting. Over and over, working the threads of men’s lives. The Fates, dispensing their destinies to paupers, thieves, kings, and heroes.”

Her fingers continued their turning, over and over.

“And what then when the basket is empty? How will you work then, Clotho? Without your spinning what is there to measure and cut, Lachesis and Atropos? An empty basket, barren. Desolate. Does it need filling sisters? Does it? Leave that to your sister, the fourth, the unsung.” She stopped. The moments stretched out, the silence broken only by the hum of insects in the vines overhead and the whisper of her dry fingers. They sat, not speaking. An eternity, or simply a moment later as if waking from a reverie, she spoke again.

“I can see your thread is pitifully short.” Alex felt as if he’d been punched. The tremble in his hands grew stronger and he put them, fingers intertwined, on the table not daring to lift the cup. Alex stared at his hands, the weight of the news in his pocket almost too much for him.

The old man emerged from the gloom of the doorway, walked over to the table and sat down.

“You can ask her if you like.” His voice was slow as if struggling with the words, as if they were somehow foreign to him.

Alex lowered his voice, unsure of what to say, what either of these two people meant, if the woman was even listening to him.

“Ask her what? I don’t know what she’s talking about. She doesn’t make sense.” He paused, lowered his voice even further, to a whisper. “And what is she doing? Her hands...” His voice trailed off.

The old man leaned in towards him.

“You’ve listened, but you’ve not heard. She’s telling you her story, who she is. What she is. She’s the unknown sister, the fourth Fate, the gatherer, reeling in the used thread of mortals. Without her there would be no more fortunes of men. You should be thankful.”

“Thankful?” He thought again of the letter in his pocket.

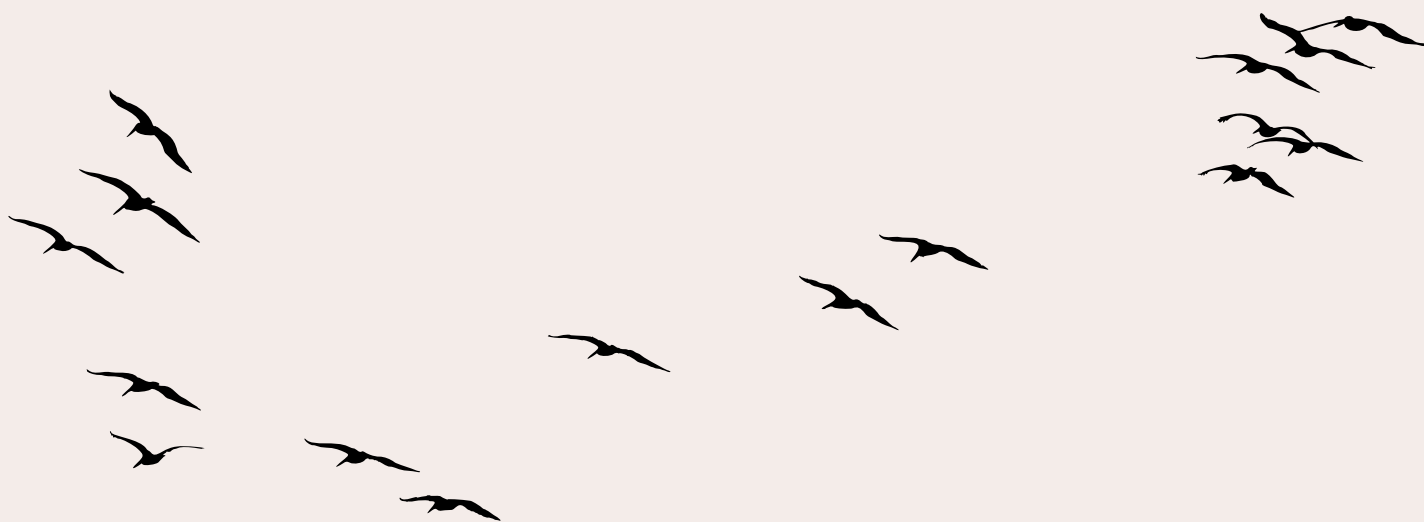
“How many times have you walked past here? I’ve watched you, going round and round. You’re meant to be here. Just like me. I’ve served her for a long time, far longer than I was allotted. Will you play for her, bard? That’s what she wants, and she has thread to spare in exchange. Her sisters won’t miss a little, but it will mean the world to you.”

Alex looked into the old man’s eyes, saw the weight of ages in them. “How long have you been here?” he asked, realisation dawning.

The old man smiled and proffered Alex his guitar.

Roger Evans is retired from a career in technology and after living in various places across the UK now resides in South Manchester. He writes about the fantastic and the peculiar, not necessarily at the same time.

He has been published as part of The Orton Collection 2021 and 2022 and *Noctivagant Press*, and his flash fiction has been featured by The Faber Academy and Paragraph Planet.



Minor Second

Frederick Pollack

One of those tunes is back –
after n years –
being sung with unknown words
by an earnest chorus in my mind
or played by a state-supported
orchestra of geniuses.
One of those tunes I think I invented,
almost certainly didn't,
and don't know how to transcribe.
The majority are marches,
which reveals something about my character
that puts me out of step
with nicer people.
But some, like this one, operatic or symphonic
and grossly Romantic,
would have audiences dreaming,
weeping, ready to love or unite,
if someone produced them.
So I'm stuck with what has become
a silent art,
which, notice, you're reading silently;
which doesn't aspire
"to the condition of music"
but to that of math or science –
all proofs and revelation –
also beyond me.

Frederick Pollack is the author of two book-length narrative poems, *THE ADVENTURE* and *HAPPINESS* (Story Line Press; the former reissued 2022 by Red Hen Press), and three collections: *A POVERTY OF WORDS* (Prolific Press, 2015), *Landscape with Mutant* (Smokestack Books, UK, 2018), and *THE BEAUTIFUL LOSSES* (Better Than Starbucks Books, forthcoming, 2023).

subway serendipity

Eve Greenlow

Three-twenty train to make it to a four-thirty-five class
Hum and drum and beat of a city from its veins
A stranger sat across the car with the softness of grass
Cuffed pants and bishop sleeves where focus strains
Soft pink adorning the cheeks of the artist
They scribble away at their sketch book of mystery
Coffee eyes flying across the page like a harpist
with their instrument, a type of mastery
I didn't think I'd see on the subway today
Heat rises up through my body and claims my face
My crimson complimenting their rosebay
They glance towards me and with a silent grace
our stares entangle and I melt into my seat
in disbelief of the vision I did not know I'd meet

Eve Greenlow (she/they) is a twenty-two year old black and queer writer who was born and raised in the golden state of California. Her Scorpio nature gave her a love of writing, horror movies, and true crime. Her personal experiences often bleed into her work, leading to a strong bond formed with every word she writes. She is currently earning her MFA in Creative Writing from City College of New York.

Two Train Stops Before the Sea

Maitiú Charleton

I think we had met before. It was that or I had followed him on Instagram and he did that thing where they accept your follow request and don't follow you back. His neck was his best feature. The middle of it was like one of those water bottles that could fold into itself when it was empty. You know, with all the ribs? Maybe that's an obscure reference, I'm not sure, but that image floats into my head now and then and I think it's really significant.

Wait I missed the start of that where were you? Kay sloshed the light yellow inside her prosecco glass and leaned towards Síofra and Colum. This was the waiter on my date last night.

Were you not paying attention to your date? She asked incredulously and flashed her teeth. Síofra tipped her head upwards and sat back on the beanbag Colum and her were sharing. Of course I was. How many eyes do I have?

Two.

Exactly. So I was on my way to the bath-

I love your dress so much by the way Síofra, have I said that already tonight? Kay took a piece of the silk dangling off Síofra's leg into her hand and angled it towards the garden's fairy lights. Look! That's amazing.

Thank you. Colum's smile was tight.

Where did you get it?

It's actually my sister's. Síofra didn't have anything else to offer about the gold dress. The pair on the beanbag looked over towards the group closest to them. Two guys were standing in the middle of everyone and bumping their chests against each other. Is there a word for that?

Which? Kay turned around, her mouth opened slightly. Colum felt Síofra start to laugh quietly beside him. Jack is such an idiot, she said. Kay's shoulders were facing the group now. Yeah he is. Colum scratched his stubble. So how do you know Ciaran again, Kay? Oh I don't really know him actually. But his house is so nice isn't it? His dad must be minted. His mum's a doctor yeah, Colum said flatly. Kay was still angled towards the group. She didn't reply. Is it ok if i snuggle on your shirt, I might get makeup on it? Síofra looked up at Colum. No, yeah go ahead, I can just wash it anyways. She put her head on his shoulder. Of course, he added, a few seconds later. She might ask about the rest of the story tomorrow.

Maitiú Charleton (he/him/it) is a writer and journalist based in Dublin. He has been published in *Icarus Magazine*, *JAKE*, *Sweet Tooth Poets*, *Neuro Mag Lit*, *The Madrigal Press* and others. Maitiú is the EIC of digi literary journal @thecczine.

The Lily Pulitzer Dress

Robert Halleck

He's making dinner this evening as the last
of the casseroles from the funeral are gone.
Simple fare: Marie Callendar's pot pie and
a store-bought salad washed down by a
non-vintage white blend with a screw top.
He turns to ask her the oven temperature
realizes she is not there. He is alone now.
Alone, often tired and feeling a bit not there.
As he puts down the placemat, he can't
remember where the fork goes—a simple
thing she always did right, that and how to
keep the edge of the pot pie from burning.
He skips grace later still angry at a God that
has inflicted such pain in his heart too soon
too sudden. The house is still at the end of
a long day that started with an effort to clean
out her closet. He got as far as her favorite—
the long pink flowered Lily Pulitzer dress.
He sat on the edge of the bed and recalled the
Jersey shore summers with lobster dinners
at The Crab Pot, cold Bombay Gin and ice
with a twist. He sat for an hour in tears and
laughter before he put the dress back on the
hanger, closed the door and left the bedroom.



Robert Halleck is a member of San Diego's Not Dead Yet Poets. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Chiron* and elsewhere.

LURKER

Vern Fein

On my daily walk
in my neighborhood,
cuddled houses,
trimmed, green lawns,
saluting soldier trees,
manicured flower beds,
my dog and I stroll
past a gnarled tree,
twisted, a runt,
bony fingers sky pointed,
green moss dusted
on her wrinkled bark.
Misfit body.
A witch alive
in the burbs.

A retired special education teacher, **Vern Fein** has published over two hundred poems on over ninety different sites, a few being: **82 Review*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Courtship of Winds*, *Young Raven's Review*, *Poesis*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, and *Taj Mahal Review*. His first poetry book--*I WAS YOUNG AND THOUGHT IT WOULD CHANGE*--was published by Cyberwit Press.

Sunday, 8:19 a.m.

Justin Lacour

They built a Whole Foods
on the very spot where, in 1998,
a girl and I climbed into
the backseat of an abandoned car
because we had nowhere
else to be alone.

We drained tall boys, then curled
together, watching clouds pass
overhead, holding each other
as sleep sprinkled down.

I like this story because it is true
and there is no moral,
just the eye of God, tender
and unconquerable.

The Bounce-Back Effect

Gabriel Rosenstock

When 200 Irish-language poets signed a petition and went on strike, nobody believed it. Well, nobody even heard about it. (The story didn't get out).

Firstly, apart from the 200 poets in question, nobody believed that there could possibly be 200 Irish-language poets alive today. (Half of the 200 poets didn't think the other half were poets at all, and vice versa; but that's a story for another time).

Secondly, why bother to strike? How could such action have any possible effect on anyone? It would be a different story if, say, breweries and bakeries went on strike. But poets? Irish-language poets?

The truth of the matter is this: yes, there are 200 Irish-language poets, alive and well. (Let's just say 'alive' and leave it at that). I saw the list and can account for most of them. 200, apart from the lone wolves. Lone wolves sign nothing, do nobody's bidding. Nobody gets to know them. They flee familiarity, retreating into the magnificent, indescribable matrix of their own dialect and folklore, their own obscure but chastening view of history and modernity.

some still hear
her terrible wail . . .
the last wolf in Ireland

Many of the 200 poets were puzzled that their action was completely ignored, apart from a few tweets that went unnoticed. They blamed the instigator of the strike, a maverick who was once accused in the monthly magazine *Comhar* of informing his readers what he had eaten for breakfast that morning; thereupon, the said so-called maverick brought out a slim volume of poems called *Calóga Arbhair*, meaning 'cornflakes', and got some of his cronies to write predictable blurbs, such as (I translate): 'crunchy', 'nutritious' and so on. One of his cronies, who couldn't think of anything to say, sent him an emoji and that, too, was duly slapped on to the back of the book, along with all the other corny endorsements. What's the world coming to? Poems about cornflakes? Emojis? Maybe readers should go on strike . . .

Anyway, I wanted to know why the story couldn't find any traction in the media. I half-knew a sub-editor in the *Sunday Independent* and worked up the courage to ask her why the newspaper didn't think the story was newsworthy. A lot of humming and hawing and then, finally, she said, 'We had to think of the bounce-back effect.'

Bounce-back effect? She explained. 'It could have bounced back on us. 200 poets? Let's say an average of three books in a decade from each of these poets; that's 600 books, right? Nobody has seen any of these books – I certainly haven't – but I'm pretty sure they exist, somewhere, in some parallel universe. OK?'

'Yeah,' I said, weakly.

'We didn't want to be accused of not having reviewed any of them, your own included. 600 unreviewed books? It wouldn't look good. And that's just the poetry! So, I'm afraid, there you have it. You didn't hear it from me, but that's why the story of the strike was unceremoniously binned as non- newsworthy. There was a story there to be sure, but the bounce-back effect was the deciding factor.'

'The bounce-back effect . . .'

'Yeah. There's constant rivalry in media circles – sure – but we know when to circle the wagons too. Gottit?'

small earthquake
in Chile . . .
nobody hurt

Gabriel Rosenstock was born in postcolonial Ireland. He is a poet, haikuist, tankaist, novelist, playwright, translator, essayist and short story writer. He also writes for children. Irish (Gaelic) is his literary medium of choice. A recent title is *Daybreak*: bilingual tanka in the form of poem-prayers for prisoners with photographs by Ron Rosenstock, published by Cross-Cultural Communications, New York, in association with Smashwords:
<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/1135894>

Dream

Goodnews Karibo

for Eela Agape

you did not mention the size of
moon coming down on us

the protein cylinder shielding the
trees cleaves our names with rust

I make to cup the sun,
bury it in the canyons of my palm,
and, afterwards, find you where a rushing
wind greens into a forest of algae

how else should the universe
announce what has flattened us on the
anvil of almond furniture?

the best part of the dream was when
you put your hand in mine and I put
my hand deep down into the ocean bed
and we both felt pebbles under rushing water.

Goodnews Karibo is from Rivers State, Southern Nigeria. He travels the earth gathering stories to tell Kaleela. His works have been published by *Gutslut Press*, *Stone of Madness Press*, *African Writer*, etc. On Twitter he is @goodnews_karibo. On Facebook: Karibo Goodnews.

Small Fears

Peggy Hammond

The cat's nap interrupted,
she licks her lips,
sign of fear.
Banging sounds
above us
could be beast,
impending
attack.

Upstairs, you
scrub shower
stall, noisy, safe
in your maleness,
oblivious
to small fears,
to biology of
the vulnerable,
marrow-deep code
of never
sleeping
deeply.

Peggy Hammond's recent poems appear or are forthcoming in *The Blue Mountain Review*, *Thin Air Magazine*, *Spare Parts Lit*, *Pangyrus*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Hyacinth Review*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *Olit*, *Club Plum*, *Red Tree Review*, *UCity Review*, and elsewhere. She is a Best of the Net nominee, and her chapbook *The Fifth House Tilts* was published by Kelsay Books (2022). Learn more at <https://peggyhammondpoetry.com/>

Stayed So Long

Lisa Ashley

in the summer afternoon
that I fell into the blue columbine flute
where I bumped into the bee
decked out in his stripes.

We danced,
told each other our stories.
Its story was shorter than mine,
one season, six weeks,
mine, sixty nine years of traveling vines.

Brief as the blossom summer,
the bee's story seemed the more durable.
It buzzed to me,
I whispered to it.
The sun was hot, the birds quiet.
The calm came around us
and I slept.

Lisa Ashley, a Pushcart Prize nominee, descends from survivors of the Armenian genocide and spent eight years supporting incarcerated youth. She navigates her garden with physical limitations and unlimited imagination. Her poems appear in *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Blue Heron Review*, *The Healing Muse*, *Gyroscope*, *Last Leaves Literary Review* and others.

This morning on Seal Rock Dr.

Janice Bressler

I try to convince myself of what I'm always telling everyone
I love living
in the fog.

This morning on Seal Rock Dr. the title of everything
I scribble or mutter is Seal Rock.
Seal, not the warm-blooded animal with flippers
but a device used to prevent anything from passing between.
Rock, like the giant one that kept Sisyphus so restless.

This morning on Seal Rock Dr. the headline reads Murders Surge.
A woman told the Times *I hear gunshots every day. I just listen to hear*
where they're coming from, then move to the front or back of the house.

I move to the front or back of the house.
It's not gunshots and I can't tell where its coming from.
All I see is fog.

This morning on Seal Rock Dr., even my old old dog Emma, curled in a soiled circle
even Emma is a gray burden.

This morning on Seal Rock Dr. everything I write or have ever written is titled Seal Rock
including the collection
and on the back cover the blurbs are all by my dead father who no matter what he says about me
always says *She could have done better.*

Janice Bressler has worked as a children's swimming teacher, a civil litigator in the state courts of California, and in 1989 organized the residents of her street, Seal Rock Drive, to successfully press the city to put in a stop sign at the bottom of the hill. She still lives on that same street, Seal Rock Drive, on the far westside of San Francisco, a stone's throw from the Pacific Ocean. Poetry is one of the best things that has ever happened to her.

ade

KRISTINE ESSER SLENTZ

impressed!

best pity

paper faces

will find you

flash fool

green queen, beast

turn, ride

inhuman eye

false lip

swirl of clown

drink, drink

till in sound

name the spectacle

burn heads

stop the sea

shadows lie

you can

pursue

all relief

peace! breathe

more ghost

health our friends

and joy
change release

think secret
afraid of pretend

understand in time
look, you

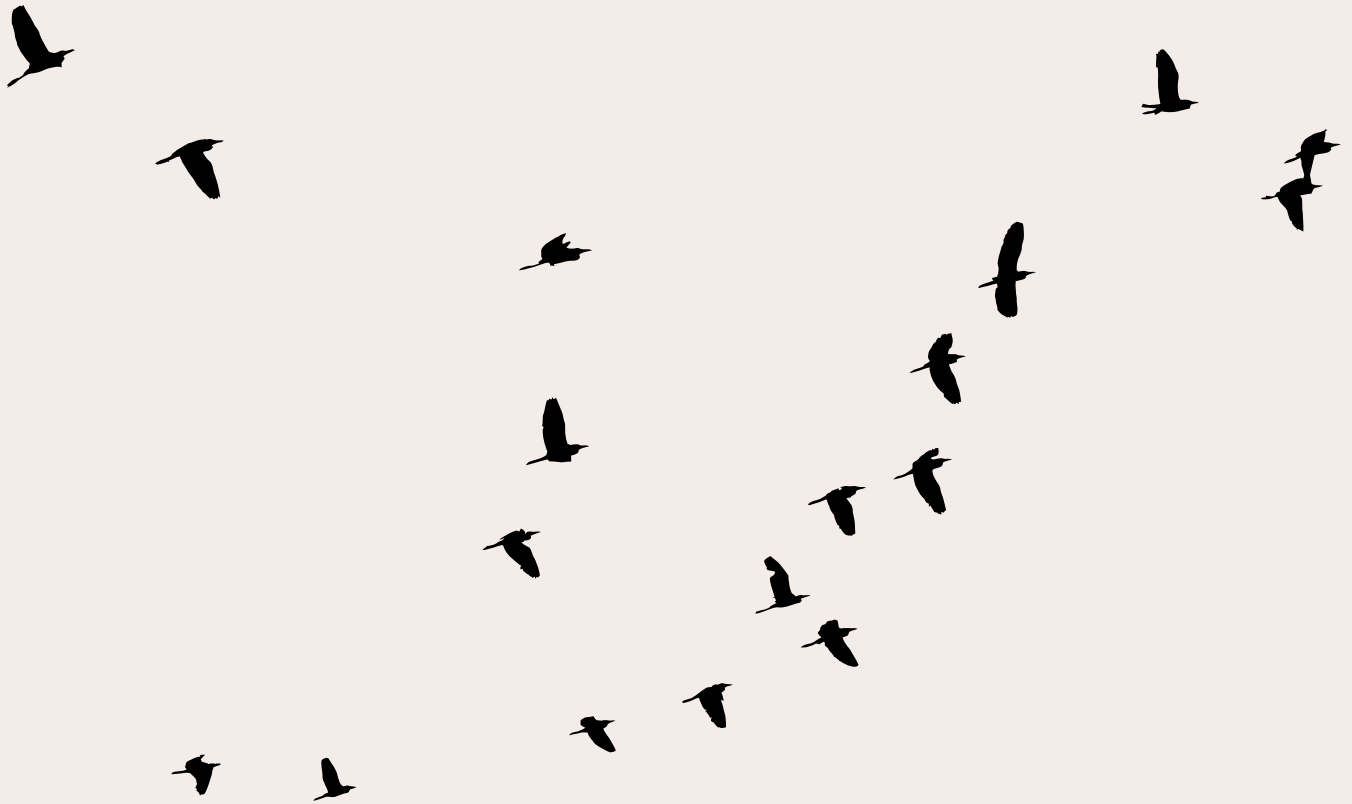
"ade" is a part of a larger erasure project involving the Phantom of the Opera, and consists of the musical's lyrics.

KRISTINE ESSER SLENTZ is a 2017 Pushcart Prize nominee, a finalist in the 2020-2021 Glass Poetry Chapbook Contest, a Spring 2020 Flash Fiction Contest finalist for F(r)iction, and a resident of 2021 Poets Afloat. Her first collection of poetry, also her graduate thesis, was released through FlowerSong Press in April 2021, and a forthcoming collection with Kintsugi Books.

Wailing Wall

Mike Cooney

If you write the name of your loved one
on a tiny piece of paper
and tuck it into any ordinary wall,
God might hear your prayer



Michael Cooney has published poetry in *Badlands*, *Second Chance Lit*, *Bitter Oleander*, *Big Windows Review* and other journals. His short stories have appeared recently in *Sundial Magazine*, *Bandit Fiction* and *Cerasus* and his novella “The Witch Girl & The Wobbly” was published by Running Wild Press in 2021. He has taught in public high schools and community colleges and currently facilitates a writing workshop with the New York Writers Coalition.

thank
you
for
reading

The Paper Crow
issue 1

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