

January House Literary Journal

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JANUARY HOUSE LITERARY JOURNAL

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January House is a meeting place for diverse expressions, urgent conversations, and the ever-evolving landscapes of contemporary literature and art. We invite you to join us in shaping a publication that honors both craft and curiosity, rooted in a belief that storytelling, in all its forms, matters.

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Masthead

Jeffrey Heath, Founding Editor, EIC

Cover Art

The Hand That Feeds
by Tinamarie Cox

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Directive 23 / Jack Tisdale

Belknap House. The Abner L'Argent Psychic College for Pantisocracy, Aspheterism, Benevolence, and Civil Liberty

DE DESPERATIONE, FORTITUDO

Staff Directive 23, October 5.

From: Director Barringwell

Re: Certain Items.

Certain items have been brought to my attention. I address them here in no particular order. Were you therefore to read this from the bottom up, or start in the middle, or indeed, turn it inside out like a glove, the meaning would be more or less the same, and the narrative equally informative, if not entirely compelling.

Item First. As to Clothing. We're a youngish outfit here and still feeling our way about. The same as any newborn creature, we must adapt to the environment and the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Going forward, clothing will be required for anyone wishing to attend a Dancing Party. Those in your care who will not allow themselves to be dressed will please limit their activities to the Billiard Room (Men's House, hours 8-10 pm) or the Sewing Circle (Ladies' House, hours 2-4 pm). The (brief) tradition of late-night "raids" will be discontinued.

Some of you have questioned the merits of this restriction, *asking in faith, nothing wavering. (For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.)*

Why, for example, should those poor persons—formerly kept in chains and stripped of all modesty—now be required to dress for dinner and dancing, solely by reason of a dramatic improvement in their relative situations? And why should staff have to spend time wrestling socks onto the swollen and odiferous feet of those who have consistently and violently objected to wearing socks or anything else? This, when *Aspheterism*, *benevolence*, and *civil liberty* are the very foundations of our charter? *Trailing clouds of glory, do we naked come from God*, etc.

I offer the following observation: Dancing naked is viewed by some as a symptom of mental disorder (see, e.g., *Lear*, *Lady Hamilton*, *Bacchus*, etc.) and, as we are at the mercy of polite society and the generosity of our sponsors, we'd do well to adopt those artifices convention requires of us. Also, you have during my weekly addresses heard me employ the term “processing facility.” Meaning: We do not offer permanent lodging. At some point or other, our sprats must be allowed to swim back to their ocean. I suspect Mrs. L'Argent and the other gentlefolk of Beacon Hill might resent having husbands and daughters returned to them with a taste for gadding about Louisburg Square in their *birthday suits*.

Item Second. Pets. Fortuné is not a pet. He is a guard dog born and bred, and you would be wise to give him some distance. He is not hostile by nature, but will become violent if provoked. I believe Nurse Vickers and her pug might attest to that. Pets are no longer allowed on the premises.

Item Third. Budgetary Considerations. The recent publicity and economic turmoil have caused a number of our sponsors to reconsider their annual endowments. Accordingly, a bit of *belt tightening* will be in order as we fight the challenging seas of salacious newspaper articles and the tempestuous winds of the American economy. The North Building will be closed until further notice. Entry fees will be raised. The old tradition of *four-in-a-bath* will be re-instituted. The Little Workers' Sewing Circle will now operate throughout the week.

A Guest Speaker series has been established, to which we will invite interested subscribers (\$1/per). A good friend, the poet Sophie B__-B__ (Lady Gordon), has been offered the inaugural slot, and I expect before long we'll have the pleasure of hearing her read from her wonderful epic, *The Staff of Life*.

Boarders are contemplated—although members of the general public, as we have seen, may not be sympathetic to Pantisocratic principles. See Item First above and Item Sixth below.

Item Fourth. The New Wing. See Item Third above.

Item Fifth (a). Time and (Brutified) Nature. Time and time intervals have played important roles in all societies. It is not for us to rest in absolute contentment until we have brutified our nature and embraced the spirit of immortality. Staff has been seen smoking in the stairwells and loitering behind the outbuildings. Breaks are limited to one hour in the early afternoon.

Item Fifth (b). Self-destruction; Restraints. Self-destruction is no longer a tenet of our beliefs and indeed it can be no refuge from duty absent cases of extreme exigency, such as those described in *Revelations*. My uncle took his own life because of laws that forbade a man from marrying his brother's widow. Claudius and Gertrude felt Hamlet's wrath for doing the same, when in fact no such prohibition existed under Danish law. The yoke weighs heavily on oxen and donkey alike. Restraints may be applied in appropriate cases.

Item Sixth. Visitors. I entertain very few visitors. This discourages the spread of unflattering rumors. Kitty tells me we are thought by some in town to be engaging in Bacchanalian rituals and *Dark Masses*! Religion and

Pantisocracy overlap, certainly, but only to the extent of certain finer points relating to psychic forces (e.g., spirit manifestations), necromancy (e.g., raising the dead), and music (e.g., Pan flute, light tambour, cymbals).

Gossip paints in the broadest strokes, and it portrays charlatans and saints in very much the same light. Be sure of your audience before speaking. The local press (Mr. Stoker in particular), is fond of distorting the nature of our methods and practices.

Item Seventh. Reading Materials. Our residents have been known to gain pleasure by merely touching certain cherished volumes. Accordingly, I have authorized a small expenditure to have the shelves filled with a single lot of one thousand leather-bound books appropriately sized. Forty works on religion, forty dramatic works, forty volumes of epic and sixty of other poetry, one hundred novels and sixty volumes of history, the remainder being historical memoirs of every period.

Item Eighth. Noise. Sounds in the lower register, Galileo observed, travel further and are more readily apprehended by the human ear. In town, the residents complain of our drums. Their dogs howl at our flutes!

Item Ninth. Hot water usage. The main house was designed by an architect unschooled in the laws of gravity. We do not, all of us, need to “bathe in fiery floods.” Some of us, especially those residing on the upper floor, should expect on occasion to “lie in cold obstruction.”

Item Tenth. Herring, Herring! I am aware we are near the ocean, but mutton, too, is readily available. Thursday is meat, and Sunday is stew from Thursday’s meat (see Item Third above).

Item Eleventh. My Health. As you know, I suffer from a profound inability to recognize names and faces. Should I ignore your greeting, or walk past

you without speaking, or duck into a room during a conversation, please understand these are not volitional acts. A drunken man, incoherent and babbling, once addressed me on the streets of London, and I swatted him away with my glove, damning him at the same time for his insolent familiarity. Mr. Stevenson, had he remembered the encounter, might well have been offended!

Item Twelfth. England, and Why I Do Not Return. A number of the staff have asked this question, and so I address it here. England, in its current climate, is unamicable to the development of poetical skills. As I've explained in my weekly address, here I'm bathed anew each day in the untamed and salubrious stream of life and nature. I do not literally bathe each day. Sunday is for baths. And stew. See Item Third and Item Ninth above.

Item Thirteenth. Poetry. Here is a ripper:

*We naked danced in such a way
As caused the roof to pitch and sway.
On Beacon Hill, they heard our games,
And beat us out with staves and flames.
They hung our scalps from nearby trees,
And draped our skin across their knees.
But on we danced! The Pan flute played,
And ushered in a host of days.
And when at last the sun went down
We brought the light and torched the town.*

Item Fourteenth. Odors. Windows in the Dining Hall MUST be kept open AT ALL TIMES, regardless of the weather.

Item Fifteenth. Queries (as to the True Meaning of a *Free and Open Society*). I have a servant, yes, but I am much more in *his* service than the other way around! Fortuné should not be petted or fed. Some of you know this already.

Item Sixteenth. Words Not to be Used. *Crazy, Loony, Obdurate, Incurable.*

Item Seventeenth. Basement Off Limits. Mrs. L'Argent stores her furniture and sculptures down there and asks that we respect her property. I will speak with her about the smells and noises.

Continue constant!

AB.

No, but / Rikki Santer

what's floating inside these couplets
and what you know the cold wants

start with a sign unknown
ghost in the machine moving through

the long perse of doubt and
what's clicking between your ears

what could be the lone one liner
and what the dream thinks

the din of crackers in your mouth
cod liver oil laced with laughing gas

live oak its long arms snaking through you
dizzy sparrow's heartbeat in your palm

what your privacy screen unhinges
skronky experiment of calcium nodes

what on earth, wind, and fire are you doing
Saturday night ruckus on any bourbon street

ceiling fan twirling in your spoon
the curdling of your luck

your body parts table rapping
scratch tracks on X-ray emoji

your counterpoint upholsters silence
plasticized corridor of your making

another windblown dawn
and your job—to get you home

Session / Rikki Santer

The psychologist's dogs wear diapers
as they parade around the office like Slinkys,
one Shih Tzu to offset incontinence
one Pomeranian to sanction equity.

Outside off-key notes bristle treeshadows,
wingshadows, rattletrap recipe from twilight,
upside down sky in my teacup, a few geese
bark across its span, crows perch around its rim.

I sip and starlings flap between my teeth,
please marry me to hope, that gap between
currency of hammock and what flickers
in the mind. In this suite a wind chime's

distant bells, pause unwraps another bonbon
of relief with a pictorial turn above the couch
in the shimmering/trembling globe of Chardin's
soap bubble, mirror for the filigree of me wanting

to be heard or not, waiting for release
from the pluck and tuck of retelling.
Out back, around the lake, it's eclipse
plumage season for mallards, their bright

green heads molting, biding time
to take flight again. Shih Tzu nests
in my lap, growly sort of purr, tail
wagging like a determined metronome.

I walk to my car, childhood kite bobbing
through the weight of the wind, next

appointment card in my back pocket,
the steady first star of Venus.

This is Where We Split / Stacey Lounsberry

My head breaks the surface for a drink of air, and I see them:
my stepsons coming into my water like divorce-sized bombs.
Your voices, air-raid sirens, surround me.
Your group of teenage boys swarm the mid-lake boulder:
pimpled, hairless chests, too-red lips like vinegary ketchup kisses.
They look just like you.
I swim out to the middle, where the water makes me stretch,
my limbs worming through boat waves.

There's nothing left for me to do, so
I sink.
The thousands of tiny hairs on my unshaved legs
begin to crawl along the lake bottom
like little hands not mine
like little brains, not mine.
It happens here, the split:
I am a centipede.
My body curls into bait.
What eats a centipede?
Do fifty-year-old men, former husbands, fathers? As I always have, I feel
my own grotesqueness
reflected in the slink of your shoulders, the evolutionary dip of your brow,
how you stopped trying to suck in your gut. It doesn't matter, not
for a centipede.

But what if I went all the way?
Unfurl my own stomach, let my used and
pointed tits scrape the sandy bottom.
Slip out of the polka dotted two-piece.
Pluck the long, greyed hairs on my head,
the curled ones on my pubic bone, the lashes
pronged by water droplets. Swim,
barren at last, in the mess

of myself. Drink
in microbes, gulp
phytoplankton, swipe
algae like a fifty-dollar lip-gloss. Really *relish* it.

Become millipede.

Crawl faster. Move

without movement. You

wouldn't even
 feel me

on the tip
 of your finger.

Roadside Sage / Stacey Lounsberry

I have become accustomed to the
whisper of the broomsedge grasses.
My petals, bruise-purple and
violently bright amidst
their crowd of blended brown—
I do not blame the grasses for their envy.

As expected, the whiskers of a passing Tom bend at the might of my tubed
flower.

Nearby, a field mouse flits; the Tom follows.

I watch their play through vibrations
that touch my roots. My feeders
tingle. Then, without warning:
thunder in the underground
rocks. Diesel in the wind.

The blades come for me as though

I am some common weed.

His death scythe slashes my sisters:

long fleabane timbered, wild daisies like risen cobra heads, decapitated,
plumed dandelions like meteors, felled to Earth,
crawling wild geranium, deadened
beneath his tread.

Before nightfall, moon tilts
her receding face at our cut stems,
laid in a common grave with
agonizingly silent broomsedge.

We will be wilted before morning. In the dark, the Tom returns.

The field mouse does not.

Below, my roots, like veins
throb at the life in his wake.

Birdhouses in the Field, 2005, oil / Laurie Hollman



Telling the Bees / Grace Massey

In Celtic tradition, families tell their bees everything—births, marriages, deaths. Bees are also messengers between worlds.

Three weddings this summer
goth princesses, groomsmen in kilts,
bride swollen out to here.

The voles consumed the lily bulbs, tulips
were shipwrecked. But you know this.

Over lunch Doris let slip that her dogs
will outlive her, they're old
but not ill. We whooped it up then—
rosé, French rolls, honeyed butter,
memories of dancing all day.

It won't be long now until she sets out.
I'll dress your hives in mourning,
send you off with news, expect your reports
from over there.

Tell her I'll look for her pirouettes
in cirrus and nimbus, jetés
that bridge the sky.

I'm Tired of Numbers / Chloe Lee

I'm tired of numbers.
Of waking up to a clock
and falling asleep to one.
Of calculating how many hours I got,
how many I missed,
how many I still need.

They are everywhere.
Calories on a granola bar,
digits glowing on a bathroom scale,
percentages on tests that don't ask
how long I studied
or how much I cried.

They tell me to get **8 hours** of sleep,
drink **2 liters** of water,
walk **10,000 steps**,
score a **1600**,
earn a **4.0**,
weigh less than **120**,
but have more than **100,000 followers**
if I ever want to be seen.

Every day is a spreadsheet.
Every breath, a number
I either hit or fall short of.

How many likes?
How many notifications?
How many unread emails
before I'm behind again?

They ask me how many colleges I applied to,

how many APs I took,
how many leadership positions I held—
as if ambition can be measured
in bullet points.

Even joy gets numbered—
“How fun was it, on a scale from 1 to 10?”
Even pain.
“What’s your pain level today?”

And when I say “I’m tired,”
they ask:
“Tired how much?”
As if exhaustion
needs to be rated
before it matters.

But I don’t want to be measured today.
I don’t want to be counted, compared,
ranked, sorted, or averaged.
I want to exist
without being tracked.

I’m not your steps,
your score,
your salary,
your sleep cycle.

I’m not your countdown.
I’m not your checklist.

I’m tired of numbers
because I’ve spent too long
trying to become one
you’d be proud of.

Betta Fish / Haley DiRenzo

My senior year of high school, I pulled a betta fish from a bag.
Licorice candy scales reflecting through the glass.

An exercise in incorporating an object into a speech:
just keep swimming. I tried to return the fish

to the teacher, but she told me it was mine.
On freedom's cusp, I did not want

even the weight of a small creature. Wanted only
to crack open my desire and thumb the holed

honeycomb of each dripping piece. I was afraid
I would kill the first thing that needed me (back).

I learned I had to dechlorinate the water.
He lived in a pitcher I dropped tablets in to suck out

the sick. Survived my college dorm, my first apartment.
Cupping him into little containers while I waited

for safety on the other side of the solvent. I watched
his mouth puckerkiss around food pellets as they sunk

to the bottom. Years later, a pregnancy test in my fist
I thought of this. Married, and too old to be praying

for no two lines. Because look how I could care
for something small and fragile. Look:

I could keep something I did not want alive.

Muscle Memory / Haley DiRenzo

Now I often wonder
if I was really in love at sixteen.
But still, a forest green Pathfinder
draws my eyes through the driver's side
window wondering if they'll find you.
That car must be in the junkyard
by now, but some muscles don't lose
their memory. One night your voice
through the phone telling me
look at the sky – see how it's orange
in the snow? Something
I never noticed then never forgot.
And isn't that what love is?
Waking up to the world glowing
around you. Staring at the sky
even after they're gone.
We dismiss the firecracker
of feeling young, all explosions
and gasoline. Forgetting
something that shocks your touch
can still be admired from a distance.
Leave embers that flicker
through ash when love comes back
to root. And you realize
you recognize it.

The Last Umrah / Aaqilah Mangarun

The darkness of the night blanketed the sandy terrain outside my bus window. I was already bored beyond my mind with the desert view during daylight, and the night didn't do it any better. My eyelids threatened to shut close—it was around 8 PM, I think—but I didn't want to fall asleep. I knew that if I dozed off and we reached our first stop, I wouldn't be moving from my seat at all. My parents would get mad at me and that would ruin the mood of the whole trip.

My family and I, along with the rest of the passengers in our bus, were headed to Dhul al-Hulayfah, a masjid in Madinah. It was the go-to stop for locals and those who journeyed by land before continuing their journey to Makkah. Here, we were to enter ourselves in a state of cleanliness (Ihram) by performing a bath ritual (Ghusl) and changing into specific clothes. My mom, my sister, and I would wear our simple black abayas, with my mom leaving out her usual niqab. Meanwhile my dad would wear a pair of long white cloths draped and tied over his body.

The courtyard of the masjid was wide yet empty. Palm trees were scattered around in places, tall and proud, their leaves blown gently by the night breeze. The stalls and shops were closed for the night, which makes me slightly disappointed; I wanted to know what things people sold here, not to mention I also wanted a snack. I stole a glance at the masjid's distinct minaret as we headed to the prayer area to pray a combination of Maghrib and Isha, the evening and night prayers. The people inside the women's section were sparse. I yawned a couple of times as I waited for my sister and mom to finish praying.

It was 2015, and one of the many umrahs my family and I had done over the six years we lived in Saudi Arabia. We have done umrah more times than I could count and through different ways; a few times we took a plane to Jeddah and went to Makkah by land from there. Other times we went straight to the holy city with the family car, a white Hyundai Elantra that felt claustrophobic during very long rides. Those road trips had their own

sort of charm, but they made the journey more expensive, tiresome, and sometimes dangerous. One time, my dad shared with us, he was so close to falling asleep at the wheel that by the time he realized it, the car had already drifted off the road. There was nothing or no one to crash into, though, since it was a straight road for kilometers on end and only the plain desert surrounded us. All he got from that supposedly funny anecdote was a scolding from my mom.

So most of the time we booked a bus, just like we did now. Journey through bus had a lot of pros: bathroom breaks and lunch stops were scheduled so you got to the destination faster. There was no way you would get lost or stranded in the middle of the desert—the complete opposite if you traveled by car and you were unfamiliar with reading Arabic signage. That was where the advantages ended.

Back in the bus, we waited for the rest of the passengers to trickle in. We occupied a row of four seats somewhere in the middle, with me sitting next to my dad and my sister to my mom. The buzz of conversation slowly filled the bus, my ears picking up strings of Arabic, Hindi, and some Urdu. Despite the noise, I still felt sleepy. It was almost 10 PM, and if the bus kept to the schedule, we would arrive in Makkah in the early hours of the next day. The second we arrived there, it was certain that we would go right ahead to the Holy Mosque and do the umrah. My parents were like that, religiously eager but sometimes a little too pushy to their only daughters. As much as I wanted to complain, it was a good plan if one wanted to avoid large crowds and the sun's overbearing heat that can prick the skin like hot, tiny knives.

It was just like any other trip as my head leaned against my dad's arm. Another long, mundane pilgrimage to go through before we could do something fun, like going to the mall to eat and go shopping. You'd think that someone my age would realize how privileged I was to be able to do a religious rite that other Muslims would spend years to save up for. A plane ticket alone could cost a year's worth of an average salary. Not to mention that not everyone could get the chance to immigrate into another country like we did.

A flock of pigeons flew in the air as we circled the Kaaba at an even pace. Some distance overhead, the face of the Makkah Royal Clock Tower glowed green, proudly showing the world that it was four o'clock in the morning. An ungodly hour for most, but in the holy city of Makkah, it was alive with people from all over the world, all present with a united purpose: to worship none but Allah.

It was a strange feeling. Every time we came here, I would almost always catch it like a fever—stifling, sometimes heavy in the chest. But unlike a fever, it was the kind of presence that fills something good inside me. Little eleven-year-old me wouldn't be able to explain that feeling until very much later in life. At that moment, all she wanted was to take a break from all the walking. Doing Tawaf was a physically taxing rite in itself, even having the youthfulness of a pre-teen did not exempt one from getting tired. I already dreaded the next ritual to come.

Finally, after finishing Tawaf, we took a small break. The second I sat down, I could feel the hard marble my feet have become, much like the floor they had been walking over for the last hour. The early day was cool, but still, sweat dribbled down my back. I so wanted for everything to be over, but I kept my mouth shut. Complaining felt like a sin, and my mom would probably yap about how I should be more resilient since even a grandpa could do Tawaf without complaint. That part was true, but maybe I was feeling a little whiny and didn't care about other people.

We resumed our umrah, this time heading to Safa and Marwah, a pair of small hills where we would perform the Sa'ee, the final part of the umrah. The hills were enclosed—for the lack of a better term—behind a tall glass wall or preservation. It was said that when Abraham left his Hajar and his son Ismail in the middle of nowhere, Hajar ran back and forth between the two mountains in search of water. It was only until she ran for the seventh time that an angel descended from the skies and a well called the Zamzam emerged from the earth, blessing Hajar and her son with nourishing water

that continued to flow. Today, millions of Muslims would commemorate this act by doing the Sa'ee.

"I'm tired," my sister grumbled beside me as we did the first lap. We didn't rest as long as I hoped, and while I was slightly rejuvenated by the Zamzam water we drank a while ago, my feet still felt stiff and numb.

"Right?" I stared longingly at the automated wheelchairs some of the pilgrims used. "Mom, can we—"

"Hush. And no. No wheelchairs. You two are big girls, you can walk fine."

"But what about the last time?"

"That was only one time," our mother chided. "See those people who're using the chairs? What can you tell me about them?"

"They're old?"

"Exactly. You can use the wheelchairs again when you're old and have bad knees."

As we stepped past the green markers and my father started to run, my sister and I could only look at each other in defeat. I stared at the sea of white and black ahead, people who were more eager to do the ritual than I was.

I couldn't wait to finish and go home.

Guardian of Dreams / Tinamarie Cox



Bystander / Mary Kate Williams

As a novelist, with quite a robust imagination, I never expected the mob to be involved in the success or demise of my literary art piece novel. But here we are.

“Thanks again,” I trill, exiting the nail salon feeling truly pampered. Some women do this every week; how do they have the time? But for me, this is a treat: a mani-pedi after a decadent massage. Hours of time for myself. And, most importantly, no phone.

Or well, it was tucked into my purse and unreachable.

I stand just outside the salon and pull it from the interior pocket of my bag. I snap a quick, if not awkwardly posed, photo of my nails. For the few times in my life that I’d had my nails done I always went with the neutral French manicure. But today I was bold: fire engine red. Which is perhaps also not very creative, but my imagination is spent on my words. Not my nails.

Should I send this photo to Todd? Eh, he’ll see it in twenty minutes when I get home.

Should I send it to Rina, my agent? No, she is very busy today.

Should I post it to my social media account for all forty of my followers to see? Post something vague and cryptic about forcing myself away from my phone today. People who know will know. All will be revealed soon.

I decide on the last option and fiddle with the settings, filters, and hashtags while I am still on the salon WiFi. I hit post and hear the kerfuffle.

Across the parking lot, towards the back near the shuttered Boston Market, I see two men in a struggle. One is smaller, weaker, and ends up in the trunk after a fist to the crown of his head. He goes limp and the trunk closes

without any objections. The other, self-satisfied, adjusts his clothes as if he can preen the violence off himself like lint.

And here I am. With a fresh set three miles from my house staring straight into the eyes of the one who did the man-handling.

This is not happening. Not today.

Rina, my agent, the second one, saw promise in my book. I was spent from the emotional agony of the book left to wither and die on submission with the first agent. But this time, only two weeks on submission and we had interest calls. Then the offers came in. Today is auction day.

The momentum and interest are building already. On Rina's orders, I have spent as much of the day away from my phone as I can. We have a pre-scheduled time to connect in thirty minutes to review the latest round of offers.

I was zen. I was calm. I was fully detached from my phone and any and all notifications. The stock market is what? My prescription needs authorization? Who knows? Who cares? I am an author who is about to step into the reality I've been working towards for two decades.

Twenty years of my life hunched over a computer. Or thoughtfully typing out critiques for my group. Or placating local literati in the hope they'll select my short prose piece for their new literary magazine that pays nothing, but then I could at least add it to my bio and hope that yields some credibility.

And now, this display of barbarism in front of my very eyes.

I'm shocked, of course, to see such pedestrian violence.

I wasn't even sure what I was witnessing until it was over and now the man staring at me, very much aware that I saw him, is only too familiar.

A Mafioso who was tried and acquitted last year. All over the local papers. I'd have been delighted to be on the jury. A paid excuse to read (while waiting for the court proceedings to begin) and then a front-row seat to human drama. It would have been a juicy character study.

Nonetheless, the case was dismissed because the key witness went missing. The man before me, I'm sure of it, was freed to continue his life of indecency. How convenient for this 'alleged' criminal. And very inconvenient for the man in his trunk. And me!

And now. What?

I should scream. I should call the cops. That's what a good person would do. A rule-follower.

That designation chafes. For years, writing instructors, critique partners, and agents all said the same thing. My work was *too* polished. *Too* perfect. Not messy enough to reflect the human condition. That I lacked a killer instinct with my characters and plot.

Well, how about a silent bystander instinct? Because I'm so damn close to my dream I can smell the ink on the freshly printed contract. Or is that the fumes from the nail salon?

Look, regular everyday people not on the cusp of realizing a life dream would turn a blind eye too. I mean it's not just pointing the finger at one guy and we're done. (There would be paperwork, depositions, courtrooms, and on and on.)

There would also be *repercussions*, revenge. This is organized crime after all. Many reasonable citizens who would otherwise call 9-1-1, jump in to make a citizen's arrest, or ask for help, would stumble here.

Wouldn't they?

At 5'1" and 110 soaking wet I'm not about to think about citizen-arresting this behemoth in bespoke Italian wool. His glare is precise, exacting. Like some scene out of a western. A high noon stare-down.

What if he charges towards me and I end up in the trunk?

Dammit. Today is *my* day. Tomorrow I'll have a book deal and edits will begin in earnest. The pitch for book two between proofreading rounds. This is my day to enjoy and savor and celebrate and make a fucking deal.

I don't have time for this.

And even if I scurry away to notify the police, this man has seen me! I'll have to go into witness protection to ensure my safety so that this thug can be put away. And what if he is acquitted again? I leave my entire life, my family, without a word on a chance at justice.

But justice for who? The poor fellow in the back of the car, they aren't protesting. I'm guessing Mr. Mafioso knocked them out. And he got himself mixed up with this group, perhaps he isn't as innocent as it might appear at first glance.

No justice for me, the long-suffering artist. Nor my husband who has patiently championed me nor my children who barely tolerate my nerdy habit. I disappear.

And then... oh no! My book deal would evaporate too.

Unless it is published "posthumously" since everyone will assume I'm dead and then I have to watch from the sidelines as what should have been the beginning of a beautiful career is cut short by some infinitesimal chance at imprisoning a mob underling.

The man who has locked eyes with me for too long adjusts his tie. The rings on his thick fingers reminiscent of brass knuckles.

I don't think. The thinking side of me is impertinent and demanding I be the good citizen I've always been. I return my library books on time even if they have canceled late fees. I pick up the litter when I go on walks. I donate to local women's shelters. I like every other writer's publisher's marketplace announcement because I'm happy for them, even when it reminds me of my failures. Even when I'm seething with jealousy, I buy their books. I donate to my library. I give and I give and I give.

I'm a good person but I'm too close. I'm too in love with the version of my life that is unfolding.

This isn't some ethics class dilemma. This is the real world. Real life. People do shitty things all the time and they were rewarded for it, elevated for it, elected for it. So, what if I turn my head here? Mind my business?

Am I supposed to be a compliant citizen? To sacrifice my life, my family, my neck, my hard-fought career *for this*?

I know the right answer. And I know the answer that feels right.

So, I smirk. I wave a perfectly manicured middle finger, roll my eyes, and stalk away.

And Again About My Father / Mia Vodanovich

In another world I inherit my father's Mustang -
We drive to the beach for my 20th birthday
And nothing turns to a pile of crushed metal;

In the spring my hair whips around my face
and all the falling cherry blossoms.
My father sits shotgun, no seatbelt.

DIES IRAE / Garrett Speller

I think, it would start with the wind, a simple,
Summer thing, winding its way over whitecaps and waterboards
Skirting up mountains to mingle with clouds that hang
Over mountaintops, then descending into forests and bringing
The first hints of storm,

A whisper of rain, a darkening sky crawling from
Behind verdant peaks, their descent inevitable
And brutal and final
I can have it no other way,

I implore you: Lady of wrath,
my destroyer, aspect of thunder, reaper, ending of mine,
I love you with a nihilist's kiss, the rumble of split air
Shatter me with one single, divine strike,
Your fist a falling star, bring heaven to earth;
One final blow to set us free,

I burgeon. I swell, malignant, blossoming with
A hatred that must, somehow, *somehow* be divine, uncontainable in
This pitiful flesh, a thing of embers, born of basilisks and brimstone;
I cannot breathe and
My blood boils with starfire...

I persist. Persist, on past zebra and amen, on into impenetrability,
On — into nightmare
ashen and cold.

Invitation / Elizabeth S. Gunn

I cannot describe my aeipathy for you, so I sift
through an orange and stony desert.

Its immense world
beneath each fuzzy, violet Antelope Bitterbrush. Its pouring scree

and dry bed rivers and hot antivenom
for indifference.

Mycologists comb for lichens
that find their way through ancient plutonic rocks
to thrive on petrified wood.

Waters come and go. Monsoon season too.
Pocketing home a pink stone

no bigger than a heart,
side door it props open the
hoping you will stop
by.

Birch Trees, pastel and acrylic, 2022 / Laurie Hollman



We, the Spiders / Jaclyn Port

The spider appeared late Wednesday night, or before dawn Thursday morning. None of us knew the exact time, as we were all getting our recommended six-to-eight hours of sleep or finishing our homework. We only saw segments of it as we arrived at The School: three legs each on Keyuan Road and Lanlong Road, which both ran north-south and held the east and west gates, respectively; and one leg apiece on Gaoxin 2nd and 4th Streets, which ran east-west. This detailed account was collated a few minutes after 7:20am, when the swim team and orchestra students arrived for early morning practice, and spread quickly in the group chats, first with photos and then, by the more enterprising students, sketch maps hypothesizing the overall orientation of the spider's body over The School, which was later confirmed when those who lived in nearby high-rises woke up and looked out their windows.

The spider consisted of assorted soft browns, chestnut and sienna mostly, a welcome variation on the school's colour scheme of steely grey lockers and the crisp blue and white of our uniform tracksuits. Its bulbous abdomen shaded B-Block and C-Block from the low November sun that glared in through the windows, the wiry hairs on its legs within inches of the upper floor windows. Many students spoke about reaching through the windows to touch it, or climbing the pair of palm trees in the courtyard to stroke its belly, but none actually did so.

The teachers reacted predictably — the most memorable of which was the ninth grade Chinese literature teacher scurrying across the courtyard with her laptop held over her head, as if that would protect her should the spider choose to take decisive action — but, once recovered from their initial shock, mostly chose to pretend the spider didn't exist. They shut down all conversation about the spider, as futile as it was to do so; we discussed it in English in front of our Chinese teachers and in Chinese in front of our foreign teachers. They couldn't understand the delight we gained from something unscheduled, something unplanned, those whose job it was to make sure everything followed the schedule and went according to plan.

The exception was the upper year biology teacher, the one with the watery eyes and shaking hands who forgot our names. He wanted all our questions and wanted us to think of how we could answer them, the variables we would test, the data we needed to collect. Hypothetically, of course. Only in his class did we fall silent. This wasn't how we wanted to discuss the spider.

It was normally only the high school students who were bold enough to order delivery to The School, confident in The School's need for them, for their top-ranking scores in the national exams and their acceptances to prestigious universities. But that Thursday, a flood of waimai packages arrived at the gate, as students across grade levels put in orders for spider hats with dangling plush legs, spider stickers for notebooks, and — by one seventh grade girl who quickly earned the admiration of even the jaded, burnt-out seniors — spider charms that could be tied into the shoelaces of uniform-compliant all-black sneakers. Students drew their own eight-legged interpretations on their arms in blue ballpoint, black felt-tip markers, and fluorescent yellow highlighters. This lasted until the penultimate lesson, when the head-of-school announced on the intercom that all spider-related paraphernalia were to be confiscated without warning, and troves of students were sent to the bathrooms to scrub their arms. That successfully subdued our excitement for the remainder of the school day, though we did say our farewells to the spider as we went to the cars, e-bikes, and buses that were to whisk us away to our after-school classes and homework: the younger students saying 'bye spidey,' the older ones simply providing a respectful salute.

Our parents were just as dismissive at the dinner table, for those of us who saw our parents at dinner, calling it a distraction, a prank, a marketing ploy. We didn't see a need for the spider to have a purpose. After all, we didn't see a purpose to The School and yet we attended every day. That evening, our conversation continued over the group chats, while we hunched over our math books and gave the appearance of progress. Memes were the next step. Students edited their faces onto stock images of spiders they found online, with captions like *we are all the spider*, or shared photos of themselves curled up under the classroom desks, commenting itsy-bitsy-

tired, referencing the English nursery rhyme we were taught in primary school, a foreign song for our foreign language lessons.

The next morning was an unseasonably late tropical storm. Any other day we would have been glad to see the sheets of water pouring down, and the pictures on social media of flooded metro stations, because it meant a day of cancelled classes. But that morning we were concerned, because what would become of the spider? #SaveTheSpider trended, as students posted images of themselves on apartment balconies, holding out buckets or offering umbrellas to the mist and rain, symbolic gestures, as we were all forbidden to leave our buildings by our parents for the duration of the storm. By early afternoon, the rain had subsided enough for the students who lived near The School to look out and confirm what we already suspected was true: the spider was gone.

Monday was the flag-raising ceremony. As scheduled. It was typically held outside at the flagpoles, with students standing in tidy rows by class, but, due to the persistent drizzle, this time we were in the auditorium to sing the national anthem to a video of a poorly-animated flag, to be followed by inspiring speech by a member of the school administration or a favoured teacher. This time, we were particularly well-behaved. Punctual, silent when asked. We were burning with curiosity. Given the opportunity to address the entire student body, what will be said? How will the spider be reframed? What will we be told to learn from this? This, the most important thing that had ever happened to us.

The head of school rose to give his speech. A familiar one, on his negligence of his studies during middle school, the harsh-but-fair teacher who knew he could do better, the turnaround he enacted through sheer effort, and his resulting achievements to this date. A murmur rippled through the students, soon hushed by the teachers, but not before we all knew and understood. They weren't going to speak about the spider.

We don't know who started to sing first. Perhaps it was the seventh grade girl with her spider charms still laced onto her shoes. None of us heard it until there were already several people singing, or at least that's what we all

told each other after. Soon we were lifting the melody with one voice, the song they had taught us. Over and over again. Remembering our itsy-bitsy spider, washed away by the rain.

Planck Time / Elizabeth S. Gunn

you are not the reader
tethering buoys at elbows
carefully drawing herself
back from where sea and galaxy
enfold their blue bodies

you are not this poem
bowing under July's
purple night
parched with desire
disguised in philosophy

you are not tamed
barn cat purring orange
and dressed in hay
scratching
in sundown sweet

you are lack
like warm wind
to late October
and all of you
slips just beyond me

Concrete Elegy / Sofia Bagdade

Yesterday I fell off my bike. The truth is,
under lamplight, the bruises rich as berries
& blue too from all the pinching,

when my knees hit the pavement it was prayer
or the white pews peeled with paint and back
sweat, our thighs almost touching on velvet seats.

White-hot moment of suspense, my hip
bent to cement, old man approaching like tepid
water from the tap. Then garble of sewage drain,

how beer caps line the streets like trees
snapping under the weight of a week straight of
rain, wet bark curled in raw rings.

Once we had chalk in every touch,
clumps of pollen under sneakers
and kneecaps, and from the cracks,

low antenna ants marching neon lines
in battalion, mothers' backs and lint faded
denim, lost bake sales and names in curled swell.

Bare lights of midnight pickups and backpacks
loud with wine chime bottles, moonlight and early
perspiration, arms extended with silver keys, swords

to flat rooftops. The whole city unfurled in smoke
stacks and text tones, tracing each tier of spine, our

shoulders piled against Sixteenth Street brick:

outlined bodies interlaced on the wet gravel,
or that padlocked pair from Pompeii, our limbs
just playthings for the spokes to latch onto

The Resolution of a Woman's War / Kaci MoDavis

THE

RESOLUTION

Recognizing the importance of

women of all ages.

Where women

should feel

equipped with the knowledge to listen to

and advocate for

the needs of men

Where health care

should

access

social services that empower

men

Pro Women

centers

serve

Pro Women

Where every

Women's

health

and

pregnancy

and

miscarriage

instruct

referrals for material

resources

certified

nationwide

Now, therefore,

be it

Resolved

the

Representatives—

express support for

convenient,

compassionate

established

Women

Gertrude Stein's Rose / Janina Aza Karpinska



Your Fictional Life / David Raney

I'll admit it: I'm a word nerd. Books lean from stacks on my floor and bedside table; I read at coffee shops, on elevators, at red lights. Years ago a new neighbor mused, "I'm gonna have to get some books for all these shelves," articulating a problem I'm not familiar with. Reading forty or fifty books a year isn't crazy, but it's a lot for a country where between a quarter and half of us don't read even one. Not Harry Potter or a detective novel, not the Bible, not a single book.

Here's a question: Does the idea of a short story vending machine seem delightful or insane?

(2019) Weary city workers will have a new way of passing the time on their commute once the UK's first short-story vending machines are installed at Canary Wharf this week.

Dispensing one, three and five-minute stories free to passersby at the touch of a button, the vending machines already feature in locations and in the US, where Godfather director Francis Ford Coppola was such a fan he invested in the company and had a dispenser installed at his San Francisco restaurant, Cafe Zoetrope.

The notion was prompted by research showing that members of the British public weren't finding the time to finish books. Some 36% had given up on at least one book in the last year, and 30% hadn't finished one in over six months. It's true in the U.S., too, where apparently 57% of books aren't read to completion. Our phones provide the easiest villain. "I travel on the tube every single day and I see everybody buried in apps and games, or looking at old tweets," says British author Anthony Horowitz, who contributed a story. "So the idea of using that little chunk of your day for something that entertains you, something which is, with a very small 'I', literature, is appealing."

There's certainly something to phone addiction, our mesmerizing little window on the world, and you've seen the numbers: we check our phones

150 times a day, phones cause 1.6 million wrecks a year, 44% of us fall asleep with our phones in our hands,.

But stats about screen time, like all stats based on surveys, call for a grain of salt. E-books, for example, make up a quarter of all book sales, and on average readers using a tablet read for longer than those reading print books. And it's not all about phones anyway. The average American spends three hours a day watching TV, nearly ten times what they devote to reading for pleasure.

Sometimes that grain of salt could be a block. Recently, Constance Grady in *Vox* addressed the "national crisis" imbedded in the questionable statistic that women account for 80% of the fiction market in the U.S. (and Canada and Britain), leading to the conclusion that "men don't read fiction." As early as 1997 the *New York Times* was proffering this stat, which appeared in another *Times* article in December titled "The Disappearance of Literary Men Should Worry Everyone." But, Grady asks, "Do any of these sources ever cite any of these alleged multiple surveys? They do not."

In any case, book sales tell us nothing about library visits. And more generally, as author Caleb Crain says, "It's pretty much useless to ask how many books somebody read last year, because almost nobody remembers, and many exaggerate, to seem smarter."

Horowitz's reference to "small 'l' literature" made me wonder whether the exaggeration Crain points to, or competitive snobbery about how long one's list is, springs from guilt about reading "just" for pleasure. And whether both owe something to academia.

You'd assume, for instance, that college graduates read more books than the less educated. But an astonishing 42% of college students — again, if you can believe the stats — will never read another book after they graduate. I was an English teacher in a former life, and I can only hope my students aren't reflected proportionally in that. Copying my own favorite professors, I tried not to teach stories as intellectual mysteries approachable only by those with opaque critical vocabularies. I didn't approach books as, to quote Wordsworth,

*a dull and endless strife...
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things —
We murder to dissect.*

In an essay called “On the Hatred of Literature,” Jon Baskin recalls a fellow student in college who accuses her professors of just that:

We had become English majors in the first place not because novels and poems told us interesting things about history or politics but because they made us feel less alone, captivated us with their beauty, helped us to better know ourselves and the world. The professors, as far as I can remember, responded politely: after all, the student was only a sophomore. She would learn.

“It is no secret,” Baskin adds, “that in contemporary America there are many people who hardly read at all.... It would be wrong to say such people hate literature, for one has to care about something to truly hate it.”

As kids, most of us love reading, but that tends to diminish steadily with age. Half of 6–8-year-olds, for instance, say they read five or more days a week and think reading books is both fun and important. This drops to one-third by age 9–11 and to just one in seven by the late teens. And while the vast majority of parents believe it’s important for young children to read books for fun, they’re much less likely to say so as kids grow up.

But young or old, in or out of school, it seems fair to ask: Why read fiction at all? If it’s for a simple diversion from real life, we can all use that. Is there a more lasting reason, though, to involve ourselves in the lives of people who don’t exist?

My father asked me that once at the dinner table while I was home for a holiday during graduate school. He was a smart, well-read man, not at all dismissive of my plans to teach literature, just genuinely curious. Why do we read the minds of people who never lived, doing things that never happened?

My answer, which I didn't have then or for years afterward, tips the question on its end. True, fictional characters aren't real, but neither is "real" life. Ask Irish novelist Keith Ridgway:

I love getting lectures about the triviality of fiction, of making things up. As if that wasn't what all of us do, all day long, all life long.... What we actually live, what we actually experience with our senses and our nerves is a vast, absurd, beautiful, ridiculous chaos.

"Fiction," Ridgway adds, "gives us everything — our memories, our understanding, our insight, our lives."

This can happen with historical writing, too, but even the best history can't approach fiction's level of empathy and projection. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn put it in his 1970 Nobel Prize lecture, "Literature can overcome man's unfortunate trait of learning only through his own experiences."

In the end we're all storytellers, whether it's our day job or not. We can't help it. And the way we recall our lives, loves and losses — childhood, our teens, our first job, our second marriage — changes over time as we do. What critic John Leonard says of a book is equally true of our personal story: "When we go back to it, it's full of even more surprises. We get older; it gets smarter."

What we learn from fiction, I think, is how unfathomably different people are across years, miles and cultures, and at the same time how arrestingly — fathomably — alike. The Mayans had a word, *yail*, meaning both love and pain. For my money it could be every book's title. "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world," James Baldwin once wrote, "but then you read."

And when we do, we become not other people but ourselves. George Saunders thinks fiction makes us "empathize with people we don't know,

and if the storytelling is good enough, we imagine them as being, essentially, like us.” This made even more sense when I heard Saunders later describe his favorite stories as “complex and baffling and ambiguous.” I submit it would be hard to come up with a better description of humans.

Stories are simply how we organize our world, understand it, survive it. And if we can’t live without the stories we tell ourselves and others — our “survival manuals,” biologist E.O. Wilson calls them — we should try to stop thinking of books as childish diversions or capital-E education. “Life,” in the words of author Anne Lamott, “will always have hardships, pressure, and incredibly annoying people. But books will make it all worthwhile. In books, you will find your North Star, and you will find you, which is why you are here.”

I would say this to my father at dinner tonight, if I could. In dreams I sometimes do.

Conversations With My GP / Letty McHugh

Would you describe your experience as dizziness, light-headedness, or vertigo?

My brain has broken and now I'm constantly aware
I am a stationary body
on a spinning planet
in a spinning galaxy
in a spinning universe.

I would describe it as
that bit on a roller coaster when you
pass the peak of the hill and your body

drops

but your stomach stays ^{up}

I would describe it as
a perfect summer afternoon in the early 2000s.
I've just rolled down the biggest hill in Cliffe Castle Park.

Only not the rolling: the bit immediately after
when I try to take a step and instead tumble sideways into the soft grass
with the sky hula hooping above me.

Only it's not the joy and innocence—
it's the most ill you've felt in your life.

The Trophies in the Brother Mausoleum / Emma Lagno

wink their gold heads and smooth mouthless
faces and flat fingerless hands. On the shelves,
softback books on baseball and the wilderness

crackle. They say how to be a boy
when the plane goes down in the woods.
How to hold a hatchet. How to swing a bat.

It's the inside of a basketball in here.
The air brrrings and smells like rubber
and is orange and is black. It's the plastic

Halloween tub under the bed. The flattened
werewolf mask and the tarantulas.
On the desk, the home computer sleeps

for winter, noiseless. The small digital
football linemen sleeping too.
The windows eject holographic

discs onto your bed, where I have
the most spelled, dreamless
midday deaths. Then wake up

on Saturday, ghosts
from the sitcom
laughing.

Mom's Mom's Mom's Music Box / Nora Esme Wagner

Mom's music box is being auctioned off on eBay. Not her exact one—that disappeared with her. Delia and I upended the entire house, opening air vents, the false back board in her closet, the paint cans left in the garage from when she decided to paint all the walls lemon. She only got as far as the kitchen. That solitary splash of yellow always reminded me of jaundice, how it starts in the palms, then consumes the body.

For the most part, Delia and I have wildly different memories of the music box: whom Mom promised to bequeath it to, who accidentally snapped off the tiny spinning ballerina and did a shit job hot-gluing it back on, so her slippers look set in congee. But we can at least agree that Mom shouldn't get keepsies. It belonged to her mom, and her mom's mom before that, and her mom's mom's mom first. Even though it can't be the same box (Mom left a note swearing off technology, vowing to make herself unreachable), I place a \$200 bid, \$45 above the last.

A few hours later, I check the listing. I've been outbid by MOMMYMONROE. Her profile picture is a pixelated toddler's face, eyes spaced wide and a cleft lip. I pull up Delia's Facebook in an incognito browser, since she's blocked me. Sure enough, photo after photo of the same aesthetically-challenged kid—my niece. Delia is in every picture, her rotini curls so tiny and tight they give me a headache just looking. I imagine Delia cranking the box for her daughter; Delia tapping out the tinkling notes on her tummy like Mom used to do to her; Delia's younger son, invisible on her socials, watching from the doorway. I raise her thirty dollars.

We go up in smaller and smaller increments: five dollars, one dollar, fifty cents, a nickel. There's no way for Delia to know her competitor is me, but I'm convinced she does. The last thing she ever said to me: Find Mom and she's all yours, but I'm getting the fucking box.

I'm about to let her have it – all this fuss over a knockoff – when I notice something about the ballerina's feet. I zoom in, trying to make out whether

the shimmer is a lens flare, or the crusted edge of hot glue.

Wish List / David Rodriguez

Whether it's one year or five decades
before we board an ark of silica ceramics,

of flexible insulation blankets or whatever
we have (oak timber and tallow, like do-it-

yourself Vikings), may I be done
with all my pettiness and grief,

all my lists of tired resentments
and whimpering dreams of renewal,

bedside medicines, phone calls to
no one and profile pic filters.

May I rise in sizzling atmosphere,
Capcom cheering at the moment of

half earth, half other, half abundance,
half tathata, and none of me

as I've always known myself:
tired and fearful, numb, perkless,

searching for someone to sense
what I mean when I look with

full eyes or smile in the glow
as I undergo halation.

Dangling Participle / Gail Purdy



Subsidence / Francis Dylan Waguespack

Millimeters (Annual Measurement)

In Terrebonne Parish, subsidence occurs at a rate of thirty-five millimeters per year, a disappearance act measured in a stretching distance between step and ground, in water lines on buildings like faded magic-marker charting growth spurts on your childhood bedroom door.

The Corps calls this *relative sea level rise*, a bureaucrat's term for drowning.

Once, we believed that concrete could save us,
poured into foundations, formed into levees,
the illusion of permanence hardening into place.
But concrete itself subsides, cracks, tilts seaward.
Nothing we build escapes the physics of sinking.

Centimeters (Human Lifetime)

We adapt without noticing: the extra cement
poured each year to level porches, heirlooms
settling into new homes on higher shelves,
the casual way we say it's always flooded here
when history and soil samples say otherwise.

This slow normalization of loss might be our most dangerous adaptation.

South of Golden Meadow, you can stand
where maps still show land, body impossibly
buoyant over ghosted properties, gulf rippling
over what tax records still list as residential lots.
Paperwork doesn't sink as fast as soil.

The land and the law might subside at different rates, but neither can be

trusted to hold you.

Meters (Generational Scale)

My cousin adds cinderblocks to his hunting camp in Cocodrie each season, a slow elevator rising from the edge of the earth. He says it's easier than selling, says he's gaining elevation while the world sinks around him. I admire his obstinance, so I don't tell him it's no match against physics or hydrology.

We can't run from the compacting of sediment cut from its source when we built the levees.

At the water's edge, oak tree skeletons stand in formation, bone-white and leafless, a vanguard. They don't topple dramatically as you might expect. They simply dissolve, molecule by molecule, cellulose digested by salt and sun, until one morning, you notice a tree is shorter.

Years later, you notice it's gone—you didn't have time to watch the clock's hour hand move.

Kilometers (Historical Record)

Engineers avoid certain words: *abandonment, retreat, loss*. They talk instead of *adaptation strategies, resilience planning, managed retirement of assets*. Euphemisms echo in half-empty town halls, language subsiding under the weight of denial, attendance abating as residents relocate, as hope too subsides.

The scrape of folding chairs being put away grows louder than the voices of those who remain.

Loss measured in millimeters feels manageable until you multiply by decades, centuries, millenia. Until the place names on maps, your elementary school,

become nautical navigation hazards, the roads on GPS leading you straight into open water.

In Terrebonne Parish, subsidence occurs at a rate of thirty-five millimeters per year.

In a lifetime, that's enough to drown a world.

Winter Walk in Pittsburgh / Charlie Brice

Blizzard so bright the sky turned dark.
Pleasant-sting of flakes against cold-

flushed cheeks. A parka-bundled neighbor
shovel-scrapes his front walk. We gesture

to the snow, palms up, as if in prayer. I love
it, I yell. Me too, he says. Cold-mist erupts

from our mouths—incense to the gelid gods.
I get worried, I say, when we don't have winter.

They criticized Freud for proposing a death drive,
but what else can we call pumping thousands

of pounds of pollutants into the atmosphere every
day? What else is drill baby drill but a death

sentence for our planet? Too many thoughts
on this walk down Maple avenue in January.

A block further on, a plump beagle named Clyde
lets me pet him in the storm. I love it, but

it makes me miss Mugsy, gone four months
now. Clyde's sweet tongue and wiggly body,

oddly unsatisfying, like expecting a recipe
to quell hunger without fixing the dish,

like holding onto a winter storm and pretending
that death doesn't drive us all.

Daddy's Gardy / Charlie Brice

He toddler-waddled into my garden,
plopped down, and filled his tiny bucket
with topsoil I'd hauled from the nursery
the day before. His stubby arms worked
his plastic shovel while I dug the rows.

At three years he already had a work ethic—
the will to see the job through. He called it
Daddy's Gardy. It was an ambivalent garden
as we were unwilling to sacrifice the oak
with its shade-leaves to allow enough sun

for vegetables to grow. All we ever reaped
were tiny carrots, dwarfed lettuce, a few
tomatoes, and the sight of that little boy
in the dirt with his shovel and bucket—
merry moments of earth-bound bliss.

At five he'd help wax the car, polish the chrome,
hose down rubber mats. I had to force him to
quit. And the lawn, he'd get his plastic lawn-
mower, line it up with mine, and off we'd go.
If I did it, he wanted to do it too. Sometimes he

sat so close to me, I thought he'd become my left
arm. Years of soccer, baseball, and ultimate Frisbee
followed, along with carefully crafted ceramic
sculptures, exhibits, and high school art awards.
We rooted; we bought mugs—we loved it all.

When we visited him at college, he took
me to the Art Department—told me to turn
my back to him. His assignment was to paint

a portrait of someone he admired. When I
turned around, I saw his portrait of me.

These days he visits three, maybe four
times a year. He lives two thousand miles
away with a woman who can't stand us.
She guards the gate of our garden, holds
a flaming sword where our joy used to be.

Ghost Wedding / Xingyu Zhao

After Boey Kim Cheng's *Clear Brightness*

Apples, persimmons, and orange sponge cakes
Shining under halogen glare, and mother and I
Watch Bai Wuchang toss his divining blocks,
Inviting the spirits to enter papier-mâché
Dolls dressed in red silk robes. Peachwood
Tablets sway above their heads in humid wind,
Pregnant with the scent of lilies and peonies,
And the dragon and phoenix candles wink
Like a pair of blue-red eyes in the night.
The thick, black calligraphy of their names
Smudge and fade as the drizzle keeps time
With the drums and cymbals, falling in fits
Like the heaving of a great grey throat. We
Relight the snuffed-out joss sticks, curved
As palm-lines, curled cypress leaves nearby
Reaching like a child's swollen fingers.

I remember my mother telling me years ago
About my brother, unborn within the palpating
Ocean of her womb, how she dreamed
That night of a boy speaking of loneliness.
We brush the dolls' hair, tie brown, slender
Rivulets together, cat's cradle of buried
Memory. Carrying reams of paper money,
Rolexes, and a bungalow, we set all alight,
Watching the smoke funnel skyward
Like branching capillaries, painting the moon
Chiaroscuro. We pour liquor around the pyre,
The dolls crumbling into fire, their names
Plunging into darkness. Children circle us,

Collecting powdered ash with their fingertips,
Laughing, shouting, *It's snowing*.

Concession / Robert Schiff

The speech is drafted—brief, polite, gracious. Tradition calls for writing two. One for victory. The other for this.

Two are not necessary tonight.

Twenty five years ago: The last Fall practice wrapped. Jordan packed up gear. That was the freshmen's job. Coach coming over. Jordan saw and walked the other direction. Coach trotted to catch up.

“We're going in a different direction. Thank you for coming out. For playing as hard as you did.”

The train was going the same direction. Jordan was not welcome onboard.

Jordan is alone in the large hotel room. Intermittent sirens come in through the window. Party members fill the ballroom.

Jordan's will be the only concession speech they hear tonight. The others have done what is expected of them.

A hotel-branded saucer and coffee cup sit on top of disheveled papers. Jordan picks up the coffee cup and throws it across the room. The cup and a full length mirror shatter.

Jordan always had a good arm. Jordan's dad made sure of that. Sports were never important to Jordan's dad, but he said that he thought of his dad every time he played catch. He wanted that with Jordan.

Sam is not here to clean up the mess.

Jordan and Sam have not had a real conversation since it happened.

Jordan has not had a cigarette since the first date with Sam. Sam thinks smoking is unhealthy.

That is only the view of someone who knows other ways to feel complete. The first breath in, it feels like anything is possible. And like everything can wait.

Jordan will smoke again after tonight.

Jordan did good with power. With proximity to power.

“To amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to extend the exclusion for employer-provided educational assistance to employer payments of qualified education loans.”

That is all the legislation said. A tax incentive for companies to repay their employees’ student debt. Politically palatable to all. A real dent in inequality, funded by the private sector.

This is why Jordan stayed up late in high school. To get into a good college. To get into the best law school. To wait politely for a safe seat. To govern well.

The Chairman had refused to move the language out of committee. An old argument with one of the co-sponsors.

A committee staffer left their laptop logged in. The committee was moving another bill to the floor the next day. Jordan scrolled up to a section that had already gone through final proofreading. Knew the one sentence by heart, typed it in, scrolled back down and left.

By the time the Chairman learned what happened, he was being lauded for his leadership.

Jordan never heard what came of the staffer.

Now Jordan is leaning back in the desk chair. Feet on the desk.

Jordan glances back at the speech. Feet off the desk. Doubles over. Elbows on knees, looking straight ahead. The seated position of a focused bench player.

This position used to be uncomfortable. Big belly and heavy chest in the way. Constant back pain.

Jordan resolved several years ago to do something. Eat less. Exercise.

Jordan posted a picture one morning of the clock showing 5am. Time for a workout. More likes than any post before.

Jordan did it again the next day. Bigger response.

After a couple of weeks it became a thing for a couple of months. And then it was Jordan's thing.

Just after Labor Day this year, Jordan was alone in the apartment near Capitol Hill. So tired. About to go to bed and desperate for more than a few hours of sleep.

Jordan adjusted the time on the alarm clock from after one in the morning to five. Took the picture. Used the "post later" option. Checked it four times to make sure it was done right.

There were no dreams that night. Just rest.

By lunch it was over. An engineer at the tech company posted what Jordan had done.

Jordan's staff issued denials. So did Sam. Nobody checked with Jordan first. Jordan is still grateful for that.

Parents stopped taking their kids to Jordan's campaign events. That is how Jordan knows only one speech is needed for tonight.

In the hotel room, Jordan disrobes completely, sits back at the desk. Bare butt and back on the leather chair.

Jordan pushes aside the typed words. Puts a blank piece of paper in the middle of the desk. Takes a hotel pen out of the drawer and places the pen next to the paper.

As a kid, Jordan would study at the family table. Paper and pen in front in the same way. Jordan's mom would come from behind, lean over, put her head on Jordan's chest, wrap her arms around Jordan's torso.

Jordan would return the hug, back arched over the chair, arms stretched wide, reaching around Mom's back. That is the position Jordan is in now. Jordan takes a glass of water from the tray at the side of the desk. Raises the glass up and pours it out without getting up. The cold flows over Jordan's chest, flat stomach and groin. Water pools between Jordan's legs.

Deep breath.

And one more.

Jordan hears rising noise from the ballroom. Looks at the clock. The results are in.

Jordan stands up and lets the water drip for a few seconds. Walks to the bathroom, towels off and puts on fresh clothes.

Jordan turns on the TV and takes in the results.

Shoulders drop. Chest caves in.

Jordan leaves the room. The speech stays on the desk.

Things never feel like you think they will.

Jordan knows what to say.

Contributor Bios

Aaqilah Mangarun hails from the quiet suburbs of southern Philippines, although she's grown up in two different countries during her childhood. She currently studies Biology at the Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology. Her taste in fiction ranges from mystery to historical fiction and science fiction, but fantasy has always been her first love. She was a fellow at the 1st Paradox Philippine Speculative Fiction Writing Workshop 2025. When not writing, she's busy cramming for exams and slurping her favorite caramel macchiato.

Charlie Brice won the 2020 Field Guide Poetry Magazine Poetry Contest and placed third in the 2021 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize. His ninth poetry collection is *Tragedy in the Arugula Aisle* (Arroyo Seco Press, 2025). His poetry has been nominated three times for both the Best of Net Anthology and the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Ibbetson Street*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Impspired Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, and elsewhere.

Chloe Lee is a thoughtful student and creative thinker who uses writing and storytelling to express real-world emotions and ideas. She aims to inspire others through honest, impactful work.

David Raney is a writer and editor living near Greenville SC with his family and a 2-ton puppy called Oscar who comes up with his best ideas. His work has appeared in several dozen journals and has been listed in four editions of *Best American Essays*.

David Rodriguez is a writer and teacher based in New Orleans with an MFA from Florida State University. He has previously been published in the *New Orleans Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *The Sandy River Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, and *Jarfly*, among other places.

Elizabeth S. Gunn (www.elizabethsgunn.com) serves as the Dean of the School of Arts, Sciences, and Business at Nevada State University. She

writes poetry and fiction in Henderson, Nevada, where she lives with her wife and their three rescue pups in the endless Mojave Desert.

Emma Lagno is a writer from upstate New York.

Francis Dylan Waguespack is an activist, painter, writer, and Loud Transsexual from New Orleans who writes poetry about Louisiana, the politics of disasters, and being from a place and in a body that both live under threat. He is a teaching artist and maintains a studio practice in Chicago. He is thirty-three, and therefore recently found out about birds.

Gail Purdy is a writer and visual artist living on the west coast of British Columbia. She is the runner up recipient of the 2021 International Amy MacRae Award for Memoir. Her writing has appeared in the 2021 Amy Award Anthology, The Bluebird Word, Last Syllable, Quillkeepers Missing Pieces Grief Anthology, Witcraft, rhizomag, and Four Tulips. Her photography has been included in Beyond Words and The Waxed Lemon. Long walks in the forest accompanied by her inner child nurture her creative soul.

Garrett Speller is a college teacher in Tokyo, Japan, a game designer, and an aspiring author/poet. His creative work has previously been featured in Kyoto Journal, The Bristol Noir, and The Clockwise Cat. Those achievements, however, pale in comparison to the look on his student's faces when he wore a banana costume to school for halloween.

Grace Massey is a poet, classical ballet and Baroque dancer, gardener, and socializer of feral cats who lives in Newton, Massachusetts. A retired editor in educational publishing, Grace has degrees in English from Smith College and Boston University. Her poems have been nominated for Best of the Net and have been published in numerous journals, including Quartet, Thimble, Lily Poetry Review, One Art, and RockPaperPoem. Her chapbook A Future with Bromeliads was a finalist in the Moonstone Arts Center and the Jessie Bryce Niles chapbook contests and is available from River Glass Books.

Haley DiRenzo is a writer, poet, and practicing attorney specializing in eviction defense. Her work has appeared in Gone Lawn, Flash Fiction

Magazine, Epistemic Literary, Eunoia Review, and Panoply, among others. She is on BlueSky at @haleydirenzo.bsky.social and lives in Colorado with her husband and dog.

Jack Tisdale attended graduate school in Boston and now lives on an island in Maine. His short stories have appeared in a number of literary journals, including Portland Review, Indiana Review, The Journal, River Styx, and Pleiades.

Jaclyn Port is named for where the ocean meets the land. Her writing is sometimes about points of transition and in-between places, but other days she just makes it up as she goes. She currently lives near one of the busiest ports in the world. You can find more of her writing at <https://jaclynportwrites.carrd.co/>

Janina Aza Karpinska is a multidisciplinary Artist-Poet from the south coast of England. Poetry informs her collages with an eye for the 'chime' and rhythm of line and pattern. Her work features on covers of: Heart of Flesh; Drawn to the Light; The Genre Society; Under_Score Magazine, and in: 3 Elements Review; The Empty Mirror; Waxing and Waning; Grim and Gilded; Blue Mesa Review; Quibble; Rundelania, and Mercurius amongst others.

Kaci MoDavis is a Pennsylvania-born writer and MFA Candidate in The Writer's Foundry in Brooklyn, NY. She's the Fiction Editor for Mouthful of Salt and Assistant Managing and Marketing Editor for Tabula Rasa Review.

Laurie Hollman is a psychoanalyst who has published award-winning books, poetry, and short stories, and cover art in publications such as The California Quarterly, Pithead Chapel, Beyond Words, Cosmic Daffodil and others.

Letty McHugh is an artist and writer based in West Yorkshire, she is currently researching what healing practices in medieval monasteries can teach her about living with chronic illness today. In 2023 her self-published artists book Book of Hours, a collection of poetry and lyric essays won the

Barbellion Prize for Literature and was featured on BBC Radio Fours Front Row.

Mary Kate Williams' debut speculative cli-fi novel, *Genisse*, was the lead title for Hugo's new iMPACT imprint (FR) in 2025. Her YouTube channel dedicated to the writer's journey currently has 25K subscribers. She is originally from Philadelphia and now lives in St. Pete, Florida.

Mia Vodanovich is a writer, educator, podcaster, and semi-avid ABBA fan from the Bay. She has had work published in *Troublemaker Firestarter*, *Taco Bell Quarterly*, and *Gardan*, among others. Follow them on Instagram @the_galacticmermaid

Nora Esme Wagner is a junior at Wellesley College. She lives in San Francisco, California. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Smokelong*, *Wigleaf*, *JMWW*, *Milk Candy Review*, *Flash Frog*, *Vestal Review*, and elsewhere. Her stories have been selected for *Wigleaf's* Top 50. She is an assistant fiction editor at *Pithead Chapel* and the Co-Editor-in-Chief for *The Wellesley Review*.

Rikki Santer's poetry has been published widely and has received many honors including several Pushcart and Ohioana book award nominations, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 2023 she was named Ohio Poet of the Year. She is a past vice-president of the Ohio Poetry Association and currently is a member of the teaching artist roster of the Ohio Arts Council. Her collection, *Resurrection Letter* was grand prize short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Book Award and her forthcoming collection, *Shepherd's Hour*, won the Paul Nemser Book Prize from Lily Poetry Review Books. <https://rikkisanter.com>.

Robert Schiff lives with his family in California. This is his first piece of published fiction.

Sofia Bagdade is a poet from New York City. Her work appears in *One Art*, *The Shore*, and *Roi Fainéant Press*, among other publications. More of her

work can be found at sofiabagdade.weebly.com. She finds joy in smooth ink, orange light, and French Bulldogs.

Stacey Lounsberry is a prose reader at the upcoming literary magazine Broad Ripple Review, and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Bright Flash Literary Review, Heavy Feather Review, Liminal Spaces, Appalachian Places, SBLAAM and others. Her flash fiction, “The Bet,” (first published by The Mersey Review) is a 2025 Best of the Net nominee. She is a full-time mother and writer and holds a BFA in Creative Writing and an MAT in Special Education. Find her in Eastern Kentucky or online at www.sglounsberry.com.

Tinamarie Cox lives in Arizona with her husband, two children, and rescue felines. Her written and visual work has appeared in a number of publications under various genres. Her artwork has appeared on the covers of Troublemaker Firestarter, Heimat Review, Soft Star Magazine, Full House Literary, and more. Her photography on the cover of In Short was nominated for a Best of Net. You can follow her on Instagram @tinamariethinkstoomuch, and find more of her work at: tinamariethinkstoomuch.weebly.com

Xingyu Zhao is reading literature on the sunny island of Singapore. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in CAMEL, The Wild Umbrella, Cordite Poetry Review, Portside Review, and Funicular Magazine among others.