

# January House Literary Journal

## Volume 1, Issue 4



Spring 2026

# JANUARY HOUSE LITERARY JOURNAL

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**January House**



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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

Untitled 2

by Sabyasachi Roy

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*Restlessness Cento* / Linda Laderman

I am three thoughts away from the grave.  
Alone, I sometimes see coffins under sail.  
Endlessness enfleshed in emerald & frost & shades  
I couldn't name without further study.  
The gray air molds. Geraniums heat the alleys.  
Jasmine and gasoline undress the night.  
I don't know what to think of first  
in the list of all the things that are disappearing:  
fishes, birds, trees, flowers, bees, and languages too.  
What ties me to this earth?  
All I want to do right now is sleep

*Cento line sources in order from: Traci Brimhall, Robert Haas, Lines 3&4:  
Joshua Bennett, Lines 5&6: Bert Myers, Lines 7,8,9: Ada Limón, Ilya  
Kaminsky, Elaine Sexton.*

*Gursha* / JK Miller

We played with our fingers over the surface of the  
spongy, moon-like sourdough, rovers dipping

into the Misir Wot, the Kik Wot, and the Shiro Wot,  
roaming around the teff mons, and it wasn't long

before, in Lalibela's on Fairfax, sitting across from each  
other at the small, square table,

with the moon in front of us, we tried to perform the act  
of Gursha. Tearing off a piece of the bread, I scooped up

beets and potatoes and placed them in your mouth.  
Our old house has been sold, I said. Re-sided and landscaped.

And you tore off a piece with collards and ginger and  
cried as you put it in my mouth. It's been ten years since

I spoke to Mom. I could use some good memories. I wiped  
your face with a clean finger: You were born one week

before Hurricane Andrew. We had to stop the car to nurse you  
at the Miccosukee gas station, which is why we finally listened

to the warnings and turned back. And when you were one,  
you rode in the back seat with us from Florida

to the Upper Peninsula, and we camped every night for a month,  
unfolding tumbling mats from the trunk and laying

on them in the tent together, your mom and I taking turns  
reading stories aloud until we all fell asleep in one big heap,

like Atakilt Wot – cabbage, carrots and potatoes.

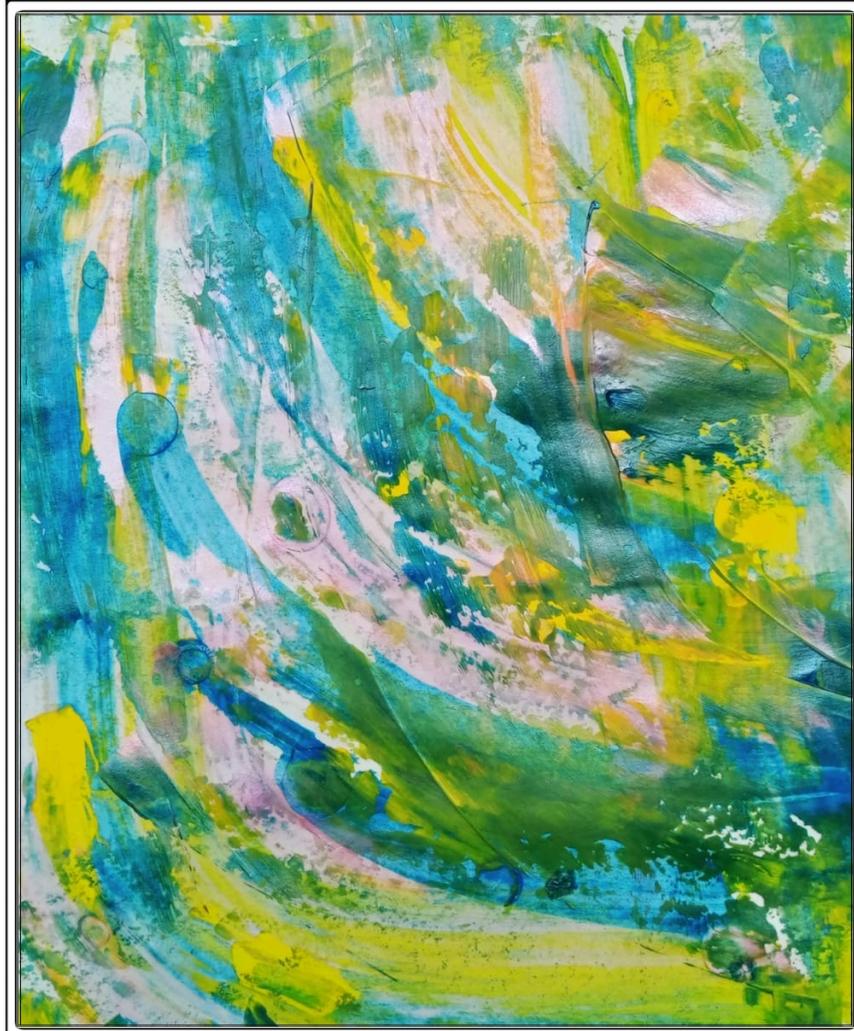
## *Your Gifts / Zach Keali'i Murphy*

You've given the worst birthday gifts, and I've kept all of them. There's the crocodile-shaped keychain that hasn't left my key ring. Its sharp and pointy tail has torn a hole through the pockets in all of my pairs of pants.

Sometimes, the tail even scrapes against my thigh until it bleeds. Then there's the faulty leaf blower that doesn't blow any air. I didn't have the heart to tell you that it didn't work when I removed it from the box. So when you go out to eat lunch with your friends, I take out the secret leaf blower from the corner of the garage and clean up the yard. And then there's the abstract painting you picked up from the local art fair. You were so excited to show it to me. We decided to hang it on our bedroom wall. When the moonlight shines through the crack of our blinds, the painting looks like a pair of demented eyes. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I try not to look at it. It gives me nightmares. I always told you how cool I thought that painting was because I knew how much you loved it.

And here I am, hunched over at the side of your hospital bed. You were just crossing the street. I don't know what all of these beeping machines mean, but they sound like they're designed to make someone worry. I wish I could hear your voice right now. You look as beautiful as always, like a sunset following the departure of an afternoon storm. You'll be alright. I know you will. You'll always be alright, right? You have to be. You'll be alright forever. Forever. I'm thinking about your gifts. I'll never be able to get rid of them. Never.

*Splash of Serenity / Reena*



*Ode to My New Fence / Cecil Morris*

Seven-foot high redwood, board-on-board,  
the usual gaps overlapped, every view blocked  
by new wood gloriously bright in shades of red  
and blond, the fine fur of splinters waiting  
on ungloved hands, for skin as bare as the boards  
and ready, the gentle open arcs of rings, giant  
fingerprints fragmented, divided, and the knots,  
the hundred dark eyes of nature still solid, tight,  
the marks of limbs truncated and lost, not present.

It is a thing of beauty, lovely in its bones,  
as yet unstained, unoiled, still mutely holding the thunk  
of nails sunk, of slap and shuffle of board against board,  
of deafening rip of toothy wheels, of distant breezes  
on flat leaves. It is that sharp line in the fraction  
that divides the tiny numerator, my small patch  
of earth, from the nearly infinite denominator  
of this spinning world. Each handsome plank is a sliver  
planed from a great tree and standing guard now for me.

This runway for squirrels, unmarked perch for nervous birds  
to assess the safety of my feeders, demarcation  
between my neighbor's life and my own, this timber  
marshalled and mastered by my hands, testimony  
to the power of my hammer, to my manliness.  
Lie in the grass and look up at this towering  
barrier, my own great wall to hold back neighbor's eyes,  
to keep the secrets of my weeds inside, unseen  
and safe, the truth of my life for me and mine alone.

*Against Overpopulation* / Michael Blumenthal

I've never liked novels  
with too many characters in them  
just as I've never liked parties  
with too many guests. What I prefer  
are intimate engagements between me  
and just one other person: *Madame Bovary*  
*over War and Peace, The Metamorphosis*  
*over One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

Too many people between the same covers  
always confuses me-- I'm perpetually forgetting  
who slept with whom, who has died  
and who is still among the living.

Had I been an athlete, I would surely  
have preferred golf to juggling:  
one little ball moving through the air  
at a time, just one thing to keep  
your eyes on. In a crowded room,  
I tend just to glom onto one person—  
preferably a beautiful woman—  
and hold my attention fixed there  
for the entire evening, maybe even after  
the party has ended. The older I get,  
the stronger this conviction becomes,  
until I find myself with nothing but books  
like Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*  
and Huysmans' *Against Nature* (even  
Phillip Roth's *Deception*), on my shelves.  
That way, I don't always have to go back  
to the cast of characters to remember  
who's who or who did what to whom.  
Then it's such a relief to be ordering  
for just the two of us, much easier  
simply to split the check, and then,

in the morning, to remember exactly  
who you are, and what your name is,  
and how to get you back home again.

## *Notes From the Frontier* / Benjamin Patterson

The year was coming to a close, but it hadn't closed, right at that moment when the scales shift and autumn begins to tip into winter (think grayscale images, shavings of frost sticking to spent grasses). Car ignitions sputtered. Every few months, a woman, or an occasional man, claimed to be a psychic. Word spread, as predictions miraculously came true. Someone's boyfriend did die, an accident was avoided, blue paint did look good. Lines rounded the block. Social workers and city candidates could be spotted amongst the huddled customers. One could still spot the elderly carrying small reflective mirrors or out-of-place carnations. They always populated breakfast places in the two blocks that we referred to as our downtown, an area with a New England-style charm and several eccentric stores that sold antiques or glass eyeballs. The air was always thick and dusty, the architecture brick and plaster.

We were a college town. Fraternity troops crushed beer cans beneath sneakers and packaged themselves in the homely glamour of Springsteen songs and a constant state of low-level drunkenness. Recruits from the sorority developed casual courtships with many of these men. They lingered around flatbed pickup trucks, sprung for brightly-colored puffy coats as the atmosphere chilled. Meanwhile, our borders expanded. Mr. Barley Johnston invested in a personal collection of housing developments, churning out pavement where gravel had once been. Thin-walled apartments kept many wandering students within their ghostly ramparts. You could get lost out there, tricked into believing you were in another place entirely. In retrospect, maybe that sort of escapism was the point.

In many ways, it was a desolate time, a difficult time for the town. Raindrops were caught in cobwebs, weighed heavy and glowing. Cucumber wines spilled over charred wood, while wild children exchanged blows with sharpened stones by the riverbanks. Everybody wondered why they weren't in Chicago, didn't know what "a Chicago" was, or wondered where the fuck is Chicago? It was a pleasant time, like a stack of records and bottles of anesthetizing perfume. There was the general sensation of being rusted

and metallic, wooden and chipped, set up in this strange and forgotten place in time. At the forest by the levy, people sang, fucked, died in the trees. This was the character of Marvin Stentley's world, and he had not a single expectation of its change. He was an older hippie, with long tangled white hair and a matching wizard's beard. He wore patchwork clothing items that resembled cloaks laced with golden patterns that he himself had painted. Marvin worked at a record store, and when he wasn't working, he was hobbling around trying to worm his way into the permanent annals of the memory of each and every person that found themselves in his domain.

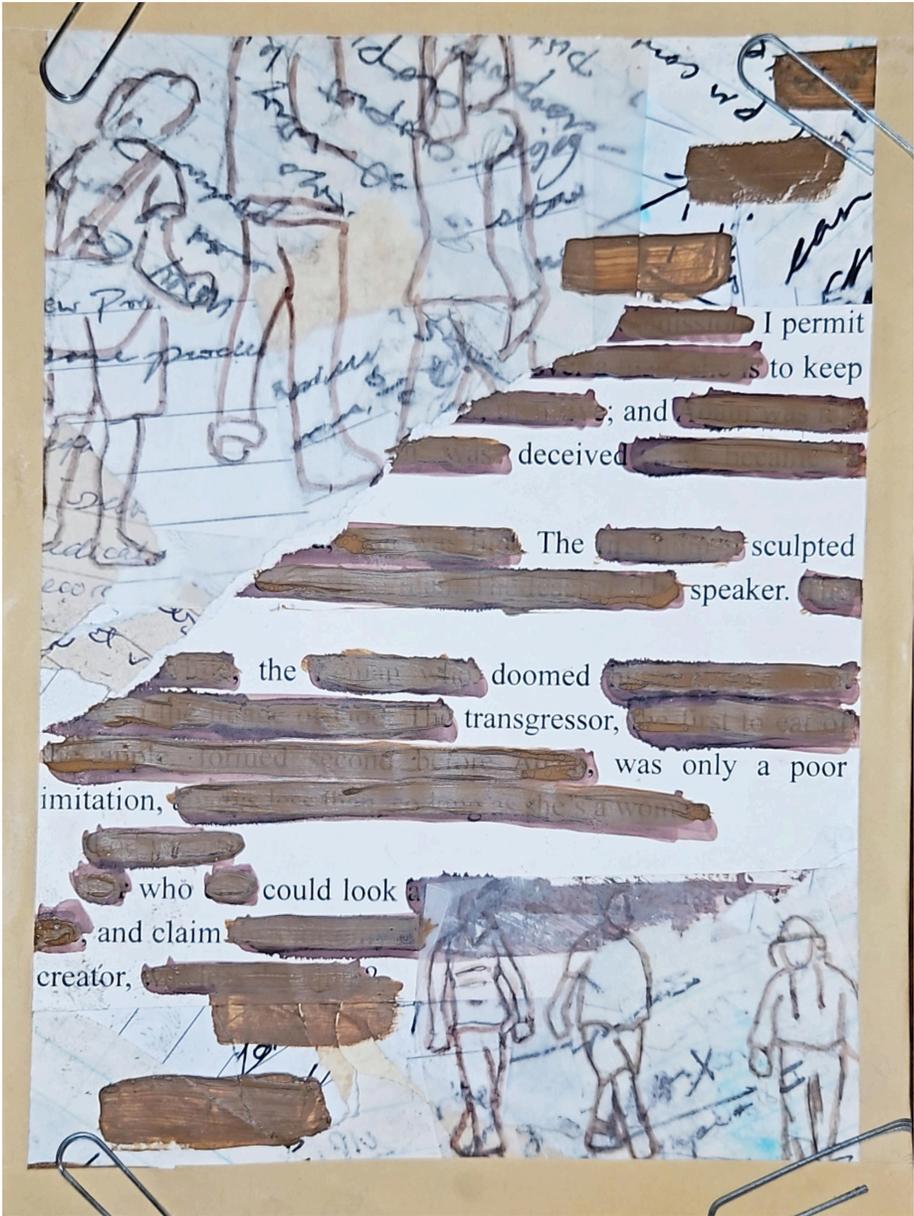
Sandy had come from the mysterious, tattered edges of Iowa. She told people that she was born in a shack. In reality, she was born in a chemical suburb. She had nerve damage in her right arm from a childhood bike accident. Ever so often, her tendons would panic, leaping and writhing as she struggled to bind them in the central will of her mind. This led to a few unfortunate incidents, the most memorable being the time when her arm knocked a professor's coffee onto his favorite button-up. Nobody knew what Dr. Gray's scream sounded like until that fateful Friday afternoon.

One morning, Sandy was walking from her apartment up to campus. The night before, she had seen a local band (The Outrageous Peacock Nine) playing, and fragments of a sub-par musical catalog washed in and out of her head. Most vividly, she recalled the feeling of a hazy red fuzz rippling around the drummer's head. You couldn't find anybody who didn't have some level of hallucinatory disorder, although they called it imagination, and they might've been right. Anyway, on to that decisive instant: Sandy crossed through a frat's grassy lot, a shortcut that many took, emerging in the alley adjacent to the old football stadium. She then took a right, passing by a recently-renovated dorm building before seeing Craig, who had no chronicled last name. On the sidewalk, a fucked-up concrete spell seems to hold her in place. They'll marry in one-and-a-half years and end up somehow in Alberta. These paths are strange, and who expects explanation?

At the essential root of this preserved image of the past and all of its tunnels of meaning and remembrance, slightly curled in at the edges in the form of a wrinkled yellow paper, the only ones that had it figured out were the

birds. In unspeakable lands, miles outside of the city's modest rings of activity, geese, crows, sparrows, cardinals, blue jays, and robins gathered in enlightened rituals. They were joined by exotic birds, Galapagos finches coated in bright azures and oranges. Flocks rejoiced in ecstatic celebrations, surrounded by ferns and low greenery, shadowed by enormous canopies rising above and fungal roots that wound around through eons of distance, slowed passage. The birds were here, and they are still here, but sometimes they get hard to hear, though it is not that hard to listen.

*The Sculpted Speaker / S.C. Sharp*



*Seen* / Eugene Datta

The olive grove next to Hotel Karavostási is full of fruit. I didn't know how bitter fresh olives taste until I ate one the other day. It took the sharp sourness of a half-ripe mandarin to tame the riot of tannins on my tongue.

Two mandarin trees in front of the hotel are also full of fruit, half a crest of blooming bougainvillea above the locked entrance. Closer to the hill, on the same side of the narrow road, Hotel Elina is also closed, the water in the pool near its entrance almost pitch-dark. Next to its perimeter wall, a discarded two-wheeler trying to hide itself from view. Sheep droppings on the roadside remind me of the blue-eyed shepherd I'd taken pictures of the last time I was here, his flock scuttling on as he'd stopped for me—a wavering, moments-long stream of sheep sound and sheep smell.

Where the road bends toward the sea, a for sale sign points a hand-painted arrow 100 meters inland. Closer to the beach, grapes hang from vines along a fence, some having turned to raisins. On the other side of the fence, a vegetable patch with cabbage and paprika, fruit trees, a dog and a young bull. A shuttered mini market with a locked freezer. Facing the sea, a beach bar on the left and a tavern on the right, both in off-season squalor, upturned tables and chairs, empty display fridges, heaps of discarded things. In a patch of grass next to the bar, a row of cacti, and a red boat on its side facing a white one. Then fallen leaves and wind-ripped flags of Greece, and empty beach tents knee-deep in ocean meditation.

in the viewfinder  
a gull above two sailboats  
unreleased shutter

*What they don't say about recovery* / Kathy Pon

beyond a bunch of discomfort and the slog  
towards some sort of body restoration

is the delicious act of napping. For us  
high-strung overachievers better suited as

boundless Springer Spaniels that flush  
fulfillment from fields or boardrooms,

the notion of turning into a daytime zombie  
is terrifying. Who allows the brain to surrender

its powered thought, commands her voices  
quiet, dissolves to floating and lets go? I relax

each muscle, allow the power of breath  
to lead, limb by limb fall into a cool corridor

of respite, doze giving way to sleep. My body  
suspends in time before its soft return to earth...

I never knew rejuvenation could wand itself,  
silk brushing skin and tissue, mend the body

with only a small snooze. A soothing midday  
cleanse to strengthen the spirit just by bathing

in Zzzs. I feared recovery as exile  
from motion, the bursts of adrenaline that fuel

my fiercest self. Instead, its chamomile leaves  
carry me into a state of acceptance. I am

the very gem of salvation I needed —  
under wraps. Tucked in my strange cocoon.

*The Effects of an Erosion Lesson on a Public Educator and her Students / Ash Maielle*

TITLE

is erosion a good thing?

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

- she tumbled into the question.
- after tiny hands filled with recyclables and hope scurried with severity.
  - how we depend on our dependents to deliver us from the destruction we've dealt.

MATERIALS

- the hillside. blue block— a solemn home.
- old sour cream canister with carved holes. leaks spring grief.
- green wire—saplings of sorrow.
- the shores. white beads— a buried secret.
- city lights and waves— twin predators.
- aluminum pans: sand and destruction and wonder.

PROCEDURE

- she leaves them, clusters of children, to navigate— unadvised.
- she patrols the perimeter.
- the coordinates of the moment:
  - Needs panic pulsing the public
  - Where society's salt of ignorance kisses the sea.
- it's not lost on her. she, the only adult in the space, creates the catastrophes.
- pose the question: is erosion a good thing?

RESULTS

- most offer obedience. a decline of predictability.
- eagerness is a gleam in sapphire eyes—a hand rocketing into the air. clues that gears have indeed been turning.
- erosion could be good.

- peers turn in protest. mouths agape. a chorus of but— descend upon the dissident.
- picture a factory that makes pollution. picture it at the bottom of a mountain. picture a landslide that crushes it. picture erosion stopping pollution production.
- a chorus of but— the factory workers!
- discussion topics that jumped like electrons:
  - why do factories cause pollution? → recycling can stop pollution right? → i recycled my snack container today → i turned off the light before leaving the room → each time i walk to school does that help global warming? → can a tiny step of man make a giant leap of progress? → what is the best thing we can do to help the environment?

## ANALYSIS

- every action has a reaction consequence.
- a positive tip in the scale deserves recognition. she wishes it were that easy.
- how do you explain to seven and eight year olds— that some people exist solely to pad their pockets with our planet's pain?
  - and your only response is placing another expectation on their shoulders:
    - vote for people who pass laws to protect the environment
    - become the people who make positive change
- the innocent— an instrument for change

## CONCLUSION

- hope is her tether to this earth. this earth she wants to endure.
- curiosity is a mudpie.
  - a mixture of familiar minerals.
  - creative compounds.
  - unidentified clay.
- and us— all sculptors by survival.

*Phantom Zone* / Mallory Caloca



*Becoming Swans* / Stefanie Leigh

*After Rachel Rabbit White*

We found each other's eyes  
in the mirror—tendus, jetes, fouettés—

for years. Our conversations, leaning  
over the piano, held

like hands. Until my ring  
finger was free

to trace your throat, my whole palm  
on your jaw. Your gaze

erasing our outlines, our limbs  
inhaling, gliding, like twilight on a lake.

*Kissed Stain* / Jennifer Mills Kerr

Here, take these berries on your tongue,  
taste their tang as a sentinel of grief,

and with the sun's red glare, come into  
my meadow to sip the morning air. See

my mother, the crushed, crimson flower  
I handled, relenting to her hot temper,

her weeping. It was never enough. And  
though she is dead, my palms still bear

a bright burn of tenderness. I want  
to believe everything is a gift, to believe

it is enough to put this sweet and bitter  
offering here, to be tasted, to be trusted,

even when this bounty has not filled me.

*line and sinker* / Heather Emmanuel

You slide *pescatarian* into the conversation like it's your word to claim.

"When it counts," you say, scanning the menu. Across the table, in a crisp button-down and cuffed sleeves, she doesn't bother pretending to read hers.

"And when *does* it count?"

The intensity of her slightly downturned eyes unnerves you. Her voice is light, but her gaze is *not*. You imagine this is how a fish feels in the instant it understands the hook.

She somehow remains polite enough to never look below your neck. Generosity or restraint, you make no effort to guess.

You could admit that pescatarianism is more of a dietary choice than a moral one. More convenience than conviction.

Instead, you order the lamb. Medium-rare.

She doesn't bat an eye.

"You did say *newly* pescatarian," she chides, not unkindly, all ease and elbows. You wince anyway, skim through your memory for the last omega-3 rich meal you had. As if memory serves you, here.

Without a glance at the menu, she chooses the branzino. Skin-on. No gloating — but there is a wink. A real one. You imagine she kisses the same way: soft, certain. The smile behind her wine glass *could* be sympathetic. Interpreting it any other way invites a can of worms you'd prefer to keep shut.

Another half truth: you've been attempting to slip into the sleeve of pescatarianism for the better part of a year. A new year's resolution

swimming well into leo season. But you did choose sushi for your birthday dinner and not a steakhouse.

“Progress,” she raises her glass. A toast, a challenge, or both. The word *hypocrite* clings like sediment in the wine, tickles your tongue, your throat. Your sip is decidedly longer than hers. Deliberately so. A ghost of cherry lip gloss clings to the rim, and you wonder if it’s a detail she favours.

You think of them. Lies. How some are more forgiving than others. Some pierce, some linger. Some nestle into crevices you don’t remember to check. They grow fins and gills and *procreate* until there are too many, too deep. Until the net closes, and you understand what it means to be caught.

*Skybound Motion / Reena*



## *Chips* / Sarah Seybold

*for Mamaw who worked at the Chesty Foods potato chips plant in Terre Haute, Indiana*

Conveyor belts roll by, and she remembers a road—  
Indiana to California, 1938.

Her long, smooth legs and slender waist,  
her wavy hair ungrayed. Far away  
from that flat town,  
her mother's ghost, her father's fist.

In her pocket, dreams of the West:  
love and money, sunshine and glitz.

But once she made it to the Golden State,  
she had to come back—  
a baby coiled inside her.

Now she picks out flawed potato chips,  
bruised green and purple, for a paycheck  
that can't keep up with the bills.  
Hours to go. Miles of chips.

*inadvertently, I disturb the sanctuary of a nest hidden in a  
clump of shrubbery* /Julie Allyn Johnson

but for this zealous, late-summer breeze, today's warmth and humidity would likely unravel my otherwise optimistic, carefree nature. finished with yardwork, I sit quietly for a well-earned time out under the shaded eaves on the north side of our three-bedroom ranch. I watch as a groundskeeper traverses the fairway, apparently mindful of the cratered ruts on the course, the aftermath of recent storm-damage and heavy rains. he zooms by, not unlike a giddy child, on his tractor mower, its metal apron skimming the bentgrass, the rumbling, roaring machine's orange paint reflected in the still-puddled water, not a hundred yards from the ladies' tee box.

baby hummers chitter in the fading weigelas  
still stressed, it seems, from my earlier pruning  
our stately linden, an indifferent refuge

## *Dry / Chila Woychik*

It was the farthest north they had ever been. And time was all Maddie and Saul had left. Hours awash in Maddie's own thoughts, the strangest memories crept in at even the hint of a connection: an oak tree with a split trunk reminded her of climbing a tree in her back yard years ago with her younger brother. A curve of the riverbank reminded her of days fishing with her dad. A dragon-shaped cloud formation mimicked a coloring book picture she penciled in with her niece. She couldn't stop the visions.

The pack lay heavy on her shoulders, but lighter than when she left Northfield ten days ago. One full water bottle and two empties, a camelbak, also full, two portable water filtration straws, a camp stove, waterproof matches, all the usual essentials. Those survival shows; she had learned much. And all that Googling, spending her hard-earned money on "camping stuff"—that's what she told her friends. Now the friends were gone, escaped with their families to god-knows-where, left in hopes of reclaiming the past, in hopes of safety, probably heading south. All but her. And Saul. But even he had stayed in the last town, left her to wander off alone.

She guessed maybe fifty more miles to Duluth and another fifty or sixty to Superior National Forest. She'd find a secluded cabin, cut and burn wood, hunt. She could weather these winters, had camped for weeks in those nearly four-million-acres of trees and rivers, with the bears and wolves, though she'd never seen either, only heard the strong melodic wolves' cries at night. She wasn't worried.

"The Walking Dead. It isn't like that," Maddie said aloud for the umpteenth time. "Desperation, yeah, but no zombies in need of a knife through the eye." She ran her hand over the leather hatchet sheath at her hip. Water. The killer is the lack of potable water. No one came into this prepared.

August. The rivers would be clear. Multitudes dead in the cities, but this would be different. The trees would filter the atmospheric haze on days

when the Jetstream blew it overhead. All that talk about North Korea, and then this. Was anyone left in the Capitol? Did we have a military? Her wind-up radio spewed only static. She shut the questions off.

\*

The streets of Duluth reflected Maddie's destitute longings. She stayed on the edge of town, believing the center had gone like those mentioned in the reports the night the news hit. Every large city. There must have been hundreds of missiles. She checked four houses before she found an unlocked door. The mailbox along the sidewalk said Miller. Once inside, Maddie called out. No reply.

She slid off her pack, and rummaged through the kitchen. She wouldn't take heavy cans with her, but grabbed baked beans off the shelf. A hand-crank opener was in a drawer; no need to use the hatchet. She turned the handle on the kitchen sink. Nothing. No generator, no electricity, no refrigeration, no water. She didn't need water, knew what to do. She should have written a book.

There was nothing else she found or needed, so opened the beans, sat on the sofa, and ate. The dead television screen stared back at her for the longest time, but it was okay, and Maddie would spend the night in another soft bed. The crazy purple drapes sparkled.

The map put the next closest pitstop twenty-some miles away: Taft—an unincorporated village just inside Cloquet Valley State Forest on the southern end of Superior. A little speck on the map, Taft. Could be a cabin there. Could be a lot of things.

A blue-green sunrise greeted Maddie on her slow trek north on 53. She met no one for several miles, then heard the roar of a motorcycle around an upcoming bend. She left the roadside and ducked behind a tree. The motorcycle flew past, and Maddie resumed her journey. So rarely did she

see anyone anymore, the temptation to stop them and talk weighed heavily, but common sense told her not to.

\*

Two days later, Maddie scrounged around Taft's few remaining buildings but found nothing suitable for long-term living.

This road so cold and gray

These tinsel trees of evergreen

The sky's still blue, don't cry

A place called home is just ahead

A place called home is waiting

Maddie rang out her home-cooked song, and added verses when burdens bore down to the tune of a semi's-worth.

\*

### *Seven Months Later*

Maddie's little hunting cabin perched on a high ridge, well-hidden by trees and brush, yet her view of the valley below continued to bring comfort; the woods cosseted her in that stark solitude. Her rare trips to Duluth yielded necessary supplies & a few fun extras. She met the occasional adventurer on those all-day jaunts, and twice, those who wished her harm, who wanted what she had, body and belongings, but Maddie had grown tough, and a brave escape followed each scrape—with the help of a long-handled hatchet.

The empty coffee can held what was left of the deer jerky, and the rabbit snare outside sat empty, as it did most days. Deer jerky, butter beans, and hot coffee. It would do. Another log in the cast iron stove and an umpteenth reading of the Duluth News Tribune, dated April 15th last year, cover to cover. Income Tax Day. Appropriate. The notebook and pen taken on the last trip prompted Maddie to begin what she labeled “The Sun Still Shines,” a diary. Today she began it in earnest.

The cabin’s thick walls kept out the draft, and the stainless steel pot she scrounged from someone’s house soothed worries about Alzheimer’s from using the aluminum one sitting against the wall, as if anyone needed to worry about Alzheimer’s these days.

Weeks dragged on in this exact fashion. Days jumbled together. Once the snow began its eventual melt, traveling would be a cinch, and a move might be in order. Possibly even an acquaintance could be found, someone trustworthy to spend her days with.

\*

*After*

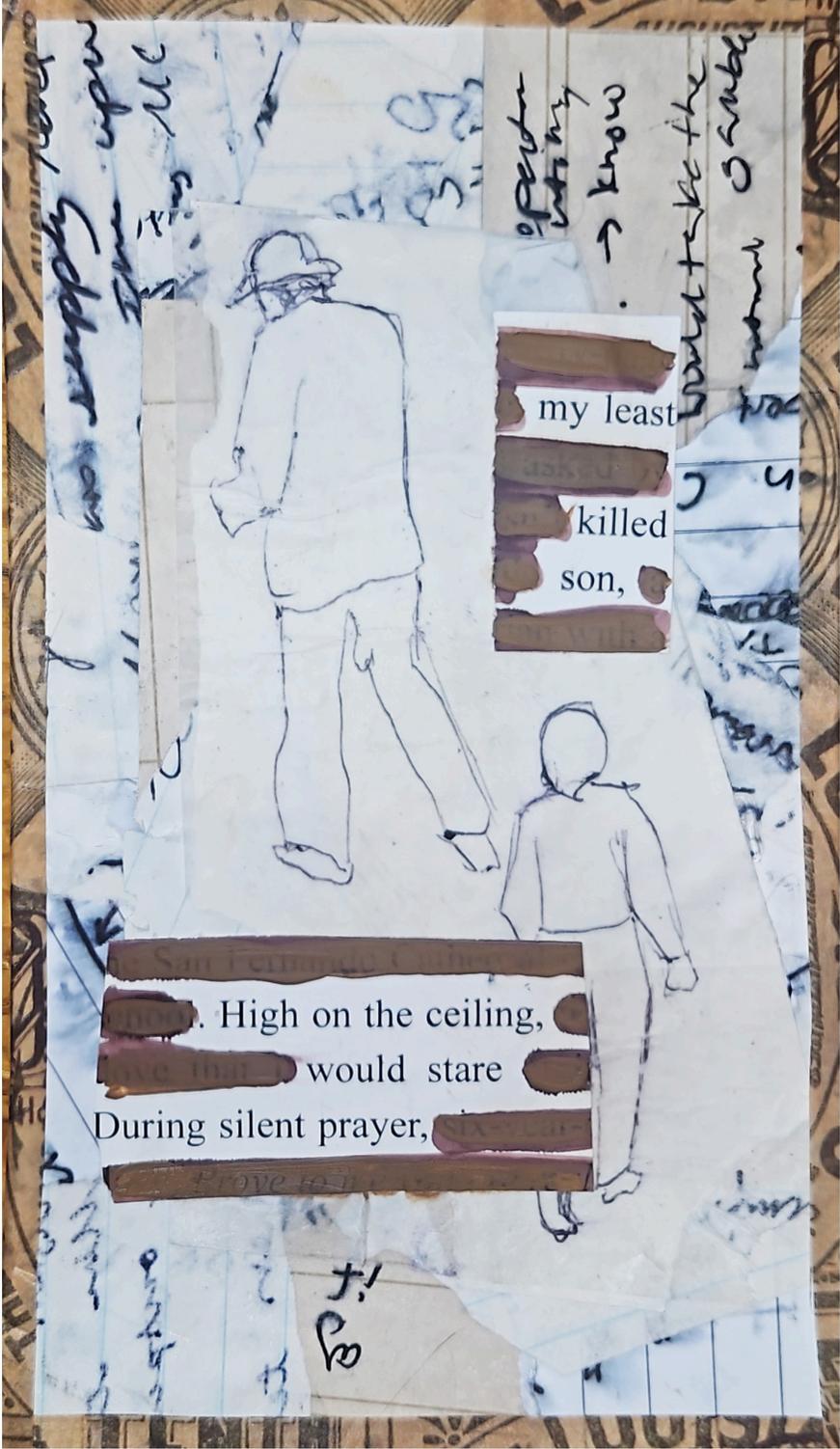
David pounded on the door of the old cabin. No response. He lifted the latch and the heft of connected logs budged open. The tiny room ached with neglect: a partially eaten can of beans on the table, crumpled blankets on the bed slab. Scant human presence lately, that was sure.

There was a notebook next to the beans.

*Take a look, take a look,* David said to himself.

*Trip to Duluth. Number three. The loneliness stings more than ever. If only I could find that one good friend—is that too much to ask? Saul, where are you? I have enough water to go around and can share.*

*My Least Killed Son / S.C. Sharp*





## *Roping Steers with Milton Erickson / Bruce D Snyder*

Twenty third-graders, six parents, and a teacher all piled into four or five vehicles and headed for Decorah, Iowa. The class camping trip circa 1981. Once there, we got the tents up, the spaghetti cooking, the s'mores at standby alert. The kids were into it and the parents, adrift in a fog of DEET, were taking pictures of anything that moved.

We did the camperly things: hunted for lost socks, did outhouse escorts, pulled ticks, rummaged for band-aids, and issued stern instructions to 'go to sleep.' Finally, the little circle of tents was quiet; we adults sipped hot cocoa by the campfire then turned in.

I have never slept very well on the ground. Foam pads and air mattresses don't do it for me. So I was rolling over stiffly and trying to find a place for my right foot when I began to hear a sort of moaning sound. I wondered if it might be an owl but soon it was obvious some kid was crying and he sounded serious about it.

I got up, stretched, and staggered over to tent three where the halo of a flashlight was zigging and zagging. Lorraine, the teacher, and Bob, the tent parent, were huddled around a little guy in buckaroo pajamas. He was holding his stomach and sobbing.

We asked the usual questions (what'd you eat? are you nauseous?). He just cried harder. Lorraine had a note from his Mom and some medicine for him. She read it. The boy's name was Turner, and he had a congenital heart defect and was taking Coumadin, a drug that prevents blood clots from forming in the circulation. But it's potentially dangerous, can result in hemorrhaging. So, if somebody had punched him in the stomach he could be bleeding inside.

Short discussion. I'm a neurologist for adults so I don't trust myself to make a good judgment about a child's belly pain. And I sure wanted some lab backup to tell me if his blood count was okay, his clotting not too slow,

and things like that. We had to find an emergency room and get him seen. And this was decades before cell phones.

We wrapped Turner into a blanket with his stuffed bear. Lorraine drove her Datsun and I held the boy on my lap. About fifteen miles away was a small town that probably had a hospital, we hoped so anyway. Turner kept on crying and holding his belly. A half-hour later we pulled into the emergency entrance.

Once inside an aide helped us get Turner onto a gurney. Lorraine called his mom and let her know what was going on. Turner was howling and kicking, really upset. The nurse struggled to get an armpit temperature. He didn't have a fever but he obviously was in pain. Getting a blood sample was going to be difficult. We could have held him down but I hated to do that to a kid who was away from his folks and scared. So, I decided to try and hypnotize him. I had used hypnosis some for pain control in my practice.

Now, hypnosis is an interesting phenomenon. Although it seems that the hypnotist is controlling the subject, it requires a fair amount of trust and cooperation between the two; the hypnotist and subject need to have a common goal if the process is to work. The hypnotist helps the subject focus his or her attention inwardly on certain images and sensations and this creates a very relaxed dream-like state, a trance. In trance, subjects may be able to follow directions and accomplish things that they couldn't get themselves to do when normally awake. Even though it may not seem that way at the time, the subject has to want to follow the hypnotist's directions or nothing will happen.

There's an anecdote about the great American psychologist and hypnotherapist Milton Erickson that I read some years ago. I can't vouch for the accuracy of my recall, but I think the story will illustrate my point.

Professor Erickson was lecturing at a university sometime in the 1950's when a fellow in the rear of the auditorium began challenging him and his work. Hypnosis is controversial; perhaps that's what led to the outburst. At

any rate Erickson paused and spoke to his critic. *See here*, he said, *you can't say those things about me. Stop it this instant!* Well, of course, the fellow became more outspoken. Erickson said, *look, it's easy for you to insult me and hide in a crowd. I dare you to stand up and let people see who you are.* There was some hesitation and then the man jumped to his feet and called out a few more gibes. After a moment Erickson addressed him again. *Stop it at once! You wouldn't dare come up to this podium and say those things about me.*

The man looked around, hesitated, then pushed his way to the aisle and began walking toward the stage. Erickson said in a more friendly voice, *if you are coming up here at least you can speak more quietly, we have microphones.* Muttering, the man walked to the stage and climbed up the stairs with a show of bravado. There he stood anxiously before the audience. Erickson turned to him, smiled calmly, and said, *you're upset, why don't you take a few deep breaths and try to relax.* At this point the fellow had a problem. If he continued to confront Erickson he would appear undisciplined and rude. If he backed down he would look foolish. The only other option would be to follow Erickson's suggestion and enter a trance. A chair was proffered, he sat down, his breathing became quiet and regular and he sat quietly onstage until the lecture ended.

I thought about that story as I held Turner's hand. He was scared and trying to fight us off. But I knew that even while fighting us he wanted our help. He certainly wanted to feel better. But he didn't know how. I asked him if he would rather be a Texas cowboy or a space cadet. He said, 'cowboy'. So I put my finger in his hand and told him to grab on tight to hold a big longhorn steer he'd just roped. I described the steer, big and red, with great black horns and scary eyes, kicking up dust under a hot Texas sun. *But you can hold him*, I said, *that horse you're on is strong and so are you.* His grip tightened on my finger. I told him the steer had been frightened by a rattlesnake and we had to pull it to safety and only he could do it. And to hang on and pull hard. After a few minutes he wasn't crying, he was looking off into the distance and he was pulling on me for all he was worth.

The nurse quietly drew a blood sample from his other arm. He didn't seem to notice. She told me a pediatrician was on his way in.

Turner kept pulling, and so then I told him that the snake was gone and the steer was tiring out from fighting so hard against the rope. And it sure was hard work to pull that steer in. I bet that Turner was getting a little tired too. Maybe he could ease off his pulling a little and let his arm rest. He might even close his eyes for a moment since the sun was so bright and hot. And slowly his grip relaxed and his eyes closed and finally, he yawned.

After he was examined and his tests were back it looked as though the problem was simple. He'd gotten constipated and had cramps. An enema fixed him up and I carried him back to the car in the blanket. He was sound asleep. But as I looked down at him, I saw his eyelids flicker and his eyes roll back and forth. His fingers twitched and tightened, just a little bit. And it occurred to me that in his dreams, he was back on that range in Texas, roping a big red steer.

*Somebody, Please Think of the Children* / Rebecca Klassen

I haven't seen him since he was a boy, and even though he has his back to me, I recognize him in my headlights. It's his oblong head and right-angle-ears that ring familiar. He staggers from alcohol, lurching off the end of the pavement onto the country lane. The national speed limit signs rise like masts from the hedgerows that line the way home. I know every turn, blind corner, pothole, and narrowing, along here, but I've never driven at sixty because I'm not stupid. Or maybe I am, because I'm pulling up alongside him and winding down the passenger window, his breathing heavy over the engine. Guilt over what I did to him shudders inside me like animal skin.

He's clutching a polystyrene tray of chips smothered in a brick-coloured sauce, the spicy scent making my mouth water. Chewing and smiling as he leans towards the open window, I see the potato churning in his mouth. His smile disappears when he realises it's me.

'Mrs North.' He pronounces it 'norf', maybe because of the drink, or maybe because some habits never die.

'Let me give you a lift, Tyler. It's dangerous to walk down here, especially at night.' I'm tired, so I sound whiny. We haven't spoken since he was eight years old, so I'm unsure how to convince this man version of Tyler to get in. Not that I was ever able to convince him of anything when he was my student, even after his left cheek glowed from the slap I'd delivered as hard as I could. Now, he's an intoxicated man with broad shoulders and a justified grudge I'm sure he's nurtured for the past fifteen years. I suspect he'll tell me to eff off, but instead he opens the car door and gets in, his eyes fixed on the moths dancing in the headlights ahead.

I accelerate.

We've seven minutes until we're off the lane and I can let him out. I crack my window because his aftershave is mixing with the now overpowering chips and curry sauce, which he's stopped eating. The engine's roar doesn't

fill the silence between us like I'd hoped, and I wonder if he's too drunk to listen to apologies, to hear me say that what I did was inexcusable but hopefully not unforgivable. He speaks first, and it startles me.

'You still teach?'

'I do.'

He gives a small, breathy laugh that I deserve. A polite reflex makes me ask,

'And what are you up to these days?'

He laughs again, big and bold now. 'Didn't you hear? I'm chancellor of the bloody exchequer. Left my Jag back at the pub.'

Six minutes now until I can let him out. None of his words are slurred as I'd expected. My cheeks are numbed by the breeze, and I debate offering him to slap me – an eye for an eye, making us even.

But it wouldn't.

I glance at his clublike fists holding his chip tray. I should've let him walk the lane, left this nightmare in the past. He'd have been home in an hour, likely unscathed. Belly full and his mood still high.

We pass the first of the sharp bend signs, withering carnations taped to its post in memory of the cyclist killed three months ago. Then headlights grow quickly in the distance and dash past us.

No, I think I've made the right choice.

Tyler asks, 'Did you ever tell anyone the truth about what you did to me?'

'Yes.' I don't tell Tyler that I told my husband, Jim, who agreed that I should lie to keep my job, which worked. I told the headteacher that Tyler

had smacked himself with a book during a tantrum, then spun a story when I tried to take the book away for his own protection.

‘Did they think you were a bitch, too?’

‘Probably,’ I say. Jim had been understanding when I told him what I’d done, even kind, which felt worse somehow. Then he’d suggested that I change careers; an office job.

Tyler lifts his hand to scratch his nose, and I inadvertently flinch. Five minutes before I can let him out. He asks, ‘Have you ever hit any other kids?’

Just like when he was a boy. Lots of questions, trying to figure out his place in the world.

‘No, just you.’

In my peripheral, he shakes his head and delivers more of that breathy laughter. ‘I must’ve really got under your skin,’ he says.

I tap the brake for a hairpin bend, feeding the wheel through my hands, three passes to the left, three passes to the right, the rhythm of it and the concentration making me take a breath before I speak.

‘Got under my skin? You caused me so much stress my hair fell out.’

‘That wasn’t me.’

His words plant me back in the classroom, with the drawing pins on my seat, my lost toenail from him stamping on me in football studs, the school guinea pig he’d killed by feeding it Blu Tack, ripping up my books and wall displays.

Throwing a chair at my growing baby bump.

He said it every time: *that wasn't me.*

Four minutes until I can let him out. I momentarily veer over the white lines to avoid the anticipated pothole. We go past the dead tree, its most dominant branch pointing behind us. I consider putting the radio on, because nothing I say can make anything right between us. Instead, I repeat exactly what he said before I slapped him.

‘I’m going to hurt you so much that your baby dies. You said that not long after you’d thrown a chair at me. Even though you lied a lot, I believed you.’

Tyler picks up a long, floppy chip and pulls it into his mouth with his tongue, speaking as he eats. ‘I was only a kid. You were just chickenshit.’

I squeeze the steering wheel and feel my face burn, slowing the car for the blind corner. Three minutes before I can let him out. I turn us gently round a tight bend.

‘The thing is,’ he says, ‘I reckon you wouldn’t change a thing. You’d probably like to wallop me now, wouldn’t you?’

I brake sharply for what’s in the road. Tyler’s chips hit the windscreen, the dry ones ricocheting to the floor, the saucy ones sticking to the glass. I’m used to seeing foxes dart across the road, but this one is sat facing us, unperturbed by the headlights and the car’s rumble. She stares at me, her teats swollen.

Tyler swears, asking why we’ve stopped, the mess on the windscreen blocking his line of sight to the fox. As I gaze at her, I play what happened that day at school in my head like a movie. The back of the chair hitting my arm as I shielded my unborn daughter, one of the chair legs striking my head, telling little Jenny to go get the headteacher, then remembering he was at a safeguarding conference. I sent the class into the playground because Tyler was still working through his anger, and all I could do, all I was allowed to do was watch.

Two minutes before I can let Tyler out. He leans towards me so he can see around the mess on the windscreen, so close that I hold my breath. Then he holds down my horn, making me jump. The fox doesn't move.

'What's wrong with it? Is it dead?' A ridiculous question with the thing being stood upright. 'Is it real?' Not so ridiculous a question. It's taxidermy still.

There's dried blood around her muzzle. She must have cubs in a den nearby, her *raison d'être* beating within nature's chest cavity. In her bulb-bright eyes I see the wildness that flashed in me when Tyler mentioned my baby dying. The slap had been a reflex so primal and undeniable that I wonder whether I'd bared my teeth when I'd struck him.

Without prompt, the fox scurries away, back into the hedgerow to her babies.

'Of course I wouldn't hurt you again, Tyler,' I say. 'I wish I could undo what happened.'

That laugh again. 'Sure.' I notice him squashing the fallen chips with his trainers into the footwell mat.

Pulling away, it's one more minute until I can let him out, until I can call my daughter on my mobile, tell her I'm nearly home, ask her if she wants to watch *Friends* and eat popcorn when I get in. She'll say yes, get a blanket for us, and before we sit down, I'll give her a hug, which I'll linger over. She'll ask what's up, and I'll say nothing, it's just because I love her more than anyone else in the world, and I'd do anything for her.

Absolutely anything.

## *Me or You / Allison Palmer*

I remember you from time to time, when I sharpen a pencil and press its new tip to the pad of my thumb to test the sharpness. Ideally, fine enough to leave a mark on the skin for a few moments, but dull enough not to break it.

In second grade, I sat at my quarter-sized desk and rubbed the pin prick on my forearm where your graphite No. 2 had done its intended damage. It stung, and I leaned even further away from you in my seat, letting out an audible sigh. You, the red-headed boy to my left, the current bane of my existence. You laughed smugly under your breath and turned back to your times tables. We were on 7s.

I think of you, sometimes, when I look at my knees. In the shower, or in the summer months or at doctor's appointments. The scar is shaped like a T so distinctly that my Uncle Tim likes to add the I and the M with a pen, if he feels like being funny. It's the only real scar I have. I got it chasing you down the basketball court that no one used for basketball, kicking up loose debris in my pursuit.

You'd called me shrimp for the third time that week. As furious as I could be given my size, I took off after you, unsure of what I'd actually do if I caught up. A bump in the pavement or a stray shoelace, however, sent me flying headlong to the ground, where a chunk of asphalt lodged itself deep in my kneecap. I refused to cry as I was carted inside to the nurse, my leg a sticky canvas of dirt and blood.

I see flashes of you in October too, when the doorbell rings by the minute and sets of fat, eager hands belonging to Spiderman, a tiger and Little Red Riding Hood plunge into our plastic candy bowl. The seasonal sugar cookies from the box remind me too, the ones with pumpkins in the middle that don't really look like pumpkins when they're disfigured from the oven.

I stood next to a plate of them at the annual party, held at a barn that year, letting the green crystal sprinkles melt and turn my tongue unnatural colors.

I scratched discreetly at my polyester witch costume. I retreated back to my parents when a group of boys dressed as hockey players came crashing through. A streak of red hair under a helmet and a raucous laugh and then you were gone. You didn't spare me a second glance. That was the last time I saw you.

Occasionally you'll snap into my mind when I watch my Mom talk on the phone in the kitchen. I was fishing for the remaining few Cheerios in my bowl, sitting cross legged in front of the TV when one of the neighborhood harpies called to tell her the news. I ignored the broken pieces of her conversation that interrupted my morning routine.

She didn't say anything while we walked down the short drive to wait for the bus. Curiously, I studied her face disappearing in the distance, old enough to acknowledge the extra weight in her hug but too young to name it.

I know now what she had heard. That you'd taken an ATV into the woods with your best friend but your feather-light freckled frame and his were not enough to keep it steady as it flew over a loose root or rock. The machine had pinned you underneath and broken your best friend's leg. I imagine the thud knocking you loose from the world. I see your soul sailing right up to heaven, gone, by the time the adults finally arrived.

I'm still uneasy in the back-row pews of churches and in long lines. I sat huddled in between my parents the day of your funeral, sinking further into either one of their sides as people filled the church. I watched adult after adult stagger to the podium, try to speak and fail. I watched your Dad fall to his knees in a state of grief so deep three grown men could not keep him standing.

After the service, I waited to pass by your open casket brimming with stuffed animals and trophies and jerseys. A slideshow played on the wall above wreaths of rigid-looking flowers. A recent photo of you, grinning with both arms slung around your older brothers, faded to black. This next one, a picture of your whole family gathered around your hospital bed,

wearing stiff, scary smiles. A ventilator must have clicked. A nurse must have shaken her head slowly.

Very rarely, I find you in silence, in moments of hesitation. I wonder what you'd be doing, when I don't know what to do myself, when my life is changing. I paused. It was our turn to look, to pray. I avoided your face and gazed down at the floor instead. The carpet was dark green. My left shoelace had come undone. A tiny ant crawled around a crumb.

My knee itched. The scar had almost finished healing and I could see the pink edges of new skin starting to poke out under the scab. Don't pick it please, my Mom kept saying. I wondered when it would fall off. I wondered what happened to cuts and scabs when you were dead. Now, on the outside, I was only 99% alive. I wondered if it had to be me or you. There was a tug on my hand, and I let myself be led out of the church, abandoning my thoughts there, swirling in the eternal air like dust.

*Rains on the Mountain* / Mallory Caloca



## *We Had Tea* / Tracie Adams

I once had lunch with royalty, but what mattered most wasn't the crown. It was the moment a young woman in a royal-blue dress lifted her head, met my eyes, and made me feel visible at a time when I thought I might disappear.

It was 1983, long before Charles became King. He was there too, making jokes over wine, but it is Diana I remember. Princess of Wales. A woman whose kindness cracked through the shell of my anxious, homesick sixteen-year-old shell. The royal couple had brought their infant son, Prince William, to visit Charles's brother, Prince Edward. He was tutoring at the Boys' College in Whanganui, New Zealand.

I was an American exchange student still stumbling over Kiwi slang, still crying into my pillow at night. The luncheon was another obligation in a year full of them—Rotary speeches, cultural tours, even a terrifying submarine visit amid angry anti-nuclear protests.

When I first arrived, the father of my host family cracked a joke in the town of Bulls, "This is the only place in the world you can get milk from Bulls." Everyone roared. I sat silent, still startled by the steering wheel on the wrong side of the car. I learned new words hourly—*loo, jumper, wanker*. I ate cow-tongue sandwiches and salty Vegemite without complaint, but I missed my mom's pork chops with applesauce, my best friend's laugh, buttery popcorn at the drive-in movies.

I never expected to share a meal with a future King.

At the table I sat among a row of foreign students, facing the princess herself. To my left, a girl from Osaka whispered "konnichiwa" and giggled when I repeated it. She told me about the raw fish her family eats in Japan,

seated on floor cushions, the low table heated underneath. I told her about Virginia suppers—fried chicken livers smothered in ketchup, lemon-pepper chicken with mashed potatoes, corn dogs dipped in yellow mustard.

To my right, a Chilean boy's words tumbled in rapid bursts, the Spanish rhythm fractured in English. Further down sat a Sri Lankan boy, broad-shouldered, wrapped in vivid fabrics, his spicy aura intoxicating. We were the world gathered in miniature. I gripped my teacup tightly, desperate not to embarrass myself.

Just weeks earlier I had been marched aboard the USS Texas, a nuclear-powered warship in Auckland Harbor as protesters swarmed with signs and charred baby doll heads on sticks. "No nukes!" they shouted with electric fury. Down in the submarine's belly, the metal-thick air turned my childhood claustrophobia into panic. My palms slicked with sweat as I counted my breaths, desperate for someone to notice. No one did.

So, when Diana lifted her head at the luncheon and her eyes found mine, everything shifted. She was softer than newsreels, quieter than glossy magazines. When one of us spoke, she looked up. Just for a heartbeat, she gave us her full attention. Her eyes were the opposite of that submarine—wide open, full of air, a door into light.

She asked about Virginia. My voice wobbled as I told her about leaving friends behind, about playing the flute and cheerleading. Her smile spoke peace over my wiggly nerves. We ate mutton and kumara, the sweet earthiness of the root vegetable melted in my mouth. Dessert was pavlova crowned with kiwi fruit on top of airy peaks of whipped cream. I sank my teeth into the chewy meringue, careful to wipe my mouth with the linen napkin. Charles drank wine and told jokes I caught only through others' laughter. Boys were *blokes*, girls were *birds*, dinner was *tea*. Language was a puzzle. But Diana's smile was a universal language that felt like home.

Fourteen years later, on August 31, 1997, I was on a British Airways flight bound for Italy when the pilot announced that Princess Diana was dead, a car crash in Paris. British passengers and flight attendants wept bitterly, their knees sinking to the floor like dead weight. Unlike them, I had sat across from her once. I knew exactly what the world had lost.

By strange fate my husband and I were in London the day of her funeral. Strangers sobbed in the airport, flowers piled high. I pushed my own grief deep into my gut. Sitting on the stained carpet, I drank tea with honey and ate a scone drenched with jam. I closed my eyes and returned to that luncheon—her nod, her smile, the way she made me feel seen.

Years later, I told a young woman about Diana. She blinked, uncomprehending. The world moves on, even royalty eventually disappears. Maybe legacy isn't statues or headlines but the quiet gift of presence. One hour. One glance across a table. Diana gave me kindness. It was enough.

*Unemployment Doldrums (Kind of Blue)* / Samuel A. Bellin

I am released into my nothingness. I turn it into air  
disturbed by the pitiful clacking of black squares.

Above my gabled roof the yellow moon hangs like a pear  
ripened and full of summer's sweet juice. I lust

and flick the dial on the record player back to "phono",  
watch its red light burn as I deftly pick the needle,

sizing it for a moment before letting it fall and punch  
the sliced grooves on that wavy-black vinyl.

Alone, I slide on the pumpkin bright floorboards  
in soft illusions spun by the sizzling record.

I dream of dust, and cities sprawling with a million open doors.  
The streets are lit by a triad of lamps

staked on every corner like flannelled scarecrows,  
bulbs full of ghostly light. These are just dreams. They close

when the laptop clicks shut, when the jazz jumps  
and all that remains is the record player's staticky echo.

*Coluber Constrictor* / James Evans

On the day you died a snake fell  
from the sky as I opened the overhead door  
to my garage. It thumped long and black

against my chest, slid down  
my legs and raced away

into the green, tall grass. It could be an omen,  
I thought, but I don't really believe

in things like that and neither did you. Fearing  
its return, I identified the intruder

and was relieved to learn that this  
species of snake is non-venomous and,

unlike their scientific name suggests;  
they do not constrict their prey. Instead,

they pin it with body loops  
and swallow it alive.

## *Not Charles Bonhoeffer / Wim Hylan*

After a drunk driving arrest, Kyle Perkins moved from Bradley Beach, New Jersey to Eldham, Colorado, a town he picked by throwing a dart at a map of the United States. Intent on making a fresh start, he adopted the name Charles Bonhoeffer because it sounded regal, like an Austro-Hungarian prince. He didn't think of it as a lie, but as an exercise in creativity and imagination, a powerful wave in the dull sea of his life.

He started attending AA meetings. Although he knew truthfulness was the foundation of recovery, he was dishonest in the meetings. He claimed to be a former executive with a Fortune 500 company who had embezzled funds and sexually harassed his secretary. He told his fellow addicts that there were many details that he couldn't share about his former life because of the non-disclosure agreement he had signed. In truth, other than drunk driving and the innumerable fabrications he had concocted in bars throughout Monmouth County, Kyle had been a model citizen. As a manager at a car rental company he had been unfailingly reliable, no matter how hungover. He was kind to the employees he supervised and loyal to the few friends he had. He visited the graves of his parents once a month and visited his brother, the optometrist, every Sunday, regaling his niece and nephew with absurdist fairy tales – The Princess Who Worked at Wendy's, Snow White and Her Aggressive Bodyguards – that made them squeal with pleasure.

When he found himself lacking motivation to attend meetings, he buoyed himself with the thought of seeing Aileen, a real estate agent whose career had been derailed by drinking. She was smart and tough and spoke with the husky growl of Stevie Nicks. But she had moments of vulnerability where she would cry quietly, not the hysterical sobbing some addicts engaged in that smacked of egotism. She would wipe away the tears with her long

fingers and brush her blondish-gray hair away from her face, as if the motion could dissolve the grief.

Aileen declined Kyle's first invitation to meet for coffee but accepted his second. They talked for three hours over pie and espresso, sharing secrets – hers plumbed from the depths of her soul and his a jumble of truth and the fictional missteps of the disgraced executive he was impersonating.

Afterwards, they kissed outside her car and he waved as she drove away, letting out a quiet sigh. When he thought of what she had told him, how she had siphoned money from clients and spent six months in jail, emotions collided: empathy and tenderness but also a tinge of superiority.

After a week of indecision, he decided to come clean. With a mix of excitement and anxious guilt, he worked up his courage with a single shot of tequila. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror, swirling mouthwash, trimming his goatee, and rehearsing what he would say. At dinner, in a hot rush of honesty, Kyle revealed his litany of lies to Aileen. As the truth poured from his mint-scented mouth, he was cleansed and renewed. He sat across from her as if stripped naked; Kyle, a Budget Rent A Car manager from Jersey.

Aileen listened intently as he spoke, her face an inscrutable mask. When he finished, she swirled the lemon in her water with a straw and asked only one question: why? He knew this was coming, had rehearsed an intricate response, but under pressure he found himself mute. His prepared answers rose up before him, facile explanations that he had conjured as easily as his lies. How to describe the expression on Aileen's face right before she walked out of the restaurant? There was anger and disappointment but also something else he couldn't put his finger on. Despair, weariness, defeat?

Two weeks later, in the middle of January, Kyle moved back to Bradley Beach. He hated the Rocky Mountains, he decided. The freezing Atlantic

Ocean, its water a sickening greenish color, called to him. Somewhere in its depths, an angler fish was working its scam, dangling a bioluminescent lure in front of its repulsive face, hoping to deceive unsuspecting prey.

*After the Battle of Ideas* / Sean Bw Parker



*Solstice* / Beth Sherman

I hadn't let my mother near a stove in months. Not since she was forced to move in with me. Dinner was usually anything I could microwave – frozen burritos, mac & cheese, fettucine Alfredo, single-serve pizzas. I've never been all that interested in cooking and I didn't have time for it, between working and taking care of her.

*Let's make meatloaf*, she announced one morning.

I loved my mother's meatloaf. Savory, moist. It didn't dry out in the oven or fall apart on the fork. The last time I'd eaten it my father was still alive. She'd gotten dressed, combed her hair. It had all the makings of a blue-sky day.

*I would love to make meatloaf*.

The recipe directions were in a worn wooden box decorated with drawings of smiling salt and pepper shakers. After phoning in sick again, I drove her to Shop Rite.

The store had just opened and was nearly empty. We breezed down the aisles, tossing ingredients in our cart. She made small talk with the check-out girl, played peekaboo with a baby in a stroller. Maybe she was better. Maybe this would last.

Back home, she let me tie an apron around her waist. I chopped the celery and garlic, measured out ketchup, Dijon mustard, brown sugar, soy sauce, milk.

*My secret ingredient*, she said triumphantly, shaking a package of gelatin.

*How did you think of using it?*

*I was making Jell-o and had some left over.*

She stirred the mixture with a spatula briskly before I poured it in a loaf pan.

*Tonight is the Summer Solstice, I said.*

*Solstice, she repeated. Sol for sun. Stice for stop. Sun standing still.*

*I can't believe you had to take Latin in school.*

*Such a beautiful language. No one speaks it anymore.*

Sitting in my kitchen, with sunlight drifting through the window, I was reminded of all the times I'd watched her prepare meals while I did my homework and she told me about growing up in the Bronx.

*Could you tell me a story?*

She had lots of them. The one where she got stuck atop a Ferris wheel. The time she found an organdy dress in the trash and wore it to a dance. The one where she was dating my father's best friend and fell in love with my father instead. Some of the details were off. She called my grandmother by the wrong first name, couldn't remember where she went to high school, claimed she never had a brother. But the gist was the same.

When the timer rang, she clapped her hands. *Hurrah*, she exclaimed. *I'm hungry.*

*You want to eat now?*

It was ten thirty in the morning.

*Our dinner will get cold.*

I took out plates, silverware, napkins.

Later, the earth would tilt on its axis, stretching toward the sun on the longest day of the year. Now I took a bite of meatloaf, watched my mother chew. For one blue-sky moment, we were aligned.

*Things Found in My Father's Bedroom After the Funeral /*  
Beth Sherman

A pair of Vortex Optics Crossfire binoculars. *Waterproof, fog proof, shockproof.*

His life list, tucked in the back of Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*, with each species he saw neatly crossed off.

A letter from me, age eight, written at Camp Flowerdale, asking that he take me home immediately. *I hate it here. We had hot dogs for lunch. I saw a snowy ibis.*

A bedraggled peacock feather.

A photo of the two of us at Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, the day we spotted a sandhill crane for the first time, our smiles bright as a promise.

A picture of him and my mother at the beach, posing in front of a flamingo sand sculpture, nine years before she left us.

A letter he received from her detailing his many faults. *You're selfish and stubborn. Closed off. Insensitive.*

A half-empty bottle of Valium.

Drugs used to fight pancreatic cancer whose names – Afinitor, Xeloda, Zortress – sound like female superheroes.

197 scratched-off Mega Millions lottery tickets.

An essay he wrote in ninth grade called “My Philosophy of Life,” which received a grade of C plus. *You neglect to cite where you got your ideas. The point of the assignment wasn't to merely make things up.*

A chipped mug shaped like a raven.

A dusty deck of Woodpecker Trivia cards.

A packet of letters with duck stamps, return address Del Ray Beach, from a man named John Westin, whose existence was as cryptic as the birds we once struggled to identify, studying their wing bars and eye strips, the shape of their tails, *You ground me*, John Westin wrote, *you're my everything*.

A list of New Year's Resolutions. *Go skydiving. See a purple gallinule. Live more freely.*

A crumpled fortune cookie slip. *There is always something left to love.*

*Fish Kebab* / Erin Jamieson

I order a fish kebab from Buck's Chippy, walking the rainy streets of London with lime green rain boots.

Eating lunch this way, under the canopy of the striped umbrella from my childhood, makes my office job an illusion, a passing dream.

As if this is what my life could have been: magical in its simplicity, adding color among lanky, shadowed buildings, walking amongst tourists who come here to feel something again.

On the train to Norwich, the man across from me reads *The Daily Mail*, turning the page with urgency as if he cannot live until he finds out what King Charles *really* said to son Harry before he left.

Or maybe he's more invested in learning if the nearest chippy sells locally sourced haddock.

The way he reads reminds me of how I once loved.

Not with passion, but with a desperation to see *what happens next*, until one day, eager to turn the page, I found it blank, and my fingers stained with ink.

I am soaked from head to toe when I finally return to my flat. The cold is bone deep, so I brew tea. The whistling kettle muffles the noise of the wife and husband below arguing.

Licorice, with just a squeeze of lemon. The bitter and the sweet, as the streets below flood. My phone rings and I see it: the number of my last partner, a partner who is now a ghost, who sinks into my dreams.

I don't answer.

I sip my tea, hoping it can fill me the way nothing else can.

*Boyfriends / Jenny Chu*

My aunt was always terrified I would die  
before I could get married. She would tell me  
to date whichever boys could speak Mandarin,  
the clumsy ones who fidgeted with their keyboards  
and made little electricities every night. I pictured  
them, future engineers, kissing, elbows flush against  
yellowing wood glue. Some would end up in New York City  
and become the antagonist of an old woman's memoir.  
She would describe their fingers as swanlike,  
shedding her inherited cash like snow-colored feathers.  
There would be me, too, veil bleeding into a marble floor.  
All gone in the flap of two curled fans and unread emails.  
I broke up with the first one the summer before  
our sophomore year of college, in Los Angeles. He confessed:  
I don't know you anymore. I had never known him to be so unsalted  
with a weak Shanghainese accent. The brain I'm dating now doesn't  
really cry in kitchens like me. What I really mean is there's  
no reason to argue about what's for dinner. In her memoir,  
Amy Tan says: I have not died yet and so my cousins  
still hope. He and I go to our garden sometimes and  
unearth scallions with mason jars, dreaming of a greener dish.

*Monster* / Sara Eddy

At the end of the horror movie, when our person has killed  
the monster-villain, she—and I'm thinking of heroines here,

Sigourney or Jamie Lee—looks to the camera and we feel delight for her,  
we know she deserves this relief from all the hard work of killing and life.

We relax a little, we undo some fears and let ourselves imagine  
what it's like afterward, when the work is all done and we can put

our feet up on the couch and turn on some comfort TV, martini in hand.  
But down in our guts we know it's not done, the monster

is about to appear behind her and she'll have to find somewhere  
the strength to do it all again, as she does every single day.

*At the End of the Movie* / Sara Eddy

(on watching Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days*)

At the end of the movie  
we all stayed in our seats  
no murmur or stretch  
no shrug-on of coats, no  
movement toward the next thing.

The final frames had us  
spell-bound, all of us  
in the theater still feeling  
pain and joy, still  
feeling human  
together in the dark.

This might be the only  
thing we do better  
than animals—unless  
fox mothers tell their kits  
stories in the den,  
or bears make shadow-play  
on cave walls.  
But they don't.

No, this one thing is good  
about us, truly good,  
that we're sometimes able  
to imagine each other.

*Sunrise, Inle Lake, Burma / Roger Camp*



## Contributor Bios

Allison Palmer is a Florida-based writer and editor. She has been a Best of the Net nominee and finalist for the Barry Lopez Prize in Creative Nonfiction. Her work has appeared in Pithead Chapel and The Manifest-Station.

Ash Maielle is a queer poet, artist, and educator. When not writing or teaching, you can find her at your local thrift store, walking her huskies, or designing her next themed board game night. Her work can be found in fifth wheel press anthology, brainrot.

Benjamin Patterson is a 17-year old high school senior from Lawrence, Kansas. His writing has appeared in Glass Mountain, Rust & Moth, Ballast, Wilderness House Literary Review, and The Pedestal Magazine. He's the recipient of several Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

Beth Sherman's writing has been published in more than 200 literary magazines, including Flash Frog, Gone Lawn, Tiny Molecules, 100 Word Story, Fictive Dream, and Bending Genres. She's a submissions editor at Smokelong Quarterly and the winner of Smokelong's 2024 Workshop prize. Her work is featured in Best Microfiction 2024 and the upcoming Best Small Fictions 2025. A multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, she can be reached on X, Bluesky or Instagram @bsherm36.

Bruce D Snyder, a retired physician, lives cautiously near Minneapolis where zinging bullets provide a nice breeze to help with the latest heat wave. He is married with three children and various grandchildren and works on the public health effects of climate change. He writes to try and forget the news. His work has appeared in Spillwords Press, Red Rose Thorn Magazine, Literally Stories, Who Let the Stories Out, Journal for Expressive Writing, and Witcraft.

Cecil Morris is a retired high school English teacher, sometime photographer, and casual walker. His first collection of poems, At Work in

the Garden of Possibilities, came out from Main Street Rag in 2025. He has poems in The 2River View, Common Ground Review, Rust + Moth, Talking River Review and elsewhere. He and his indulgent wife, mother of their children, divide their year between the cool Oregon coast and the hot Central Valley of California.

Chila Woychik is originally from the beautiful land of Bavaria but has lived in the American Midwest most of her life. She is widely published, and has an essay collection, *Singing the Land: A Rural Chronology* (Shanti Arts, 2020). Her impressive barn is currently home to an old cat named Sweet Pea and four young strays, Shadow, Skitter, Suzy, and Scamp. Chila is the founding editor at *Eastern Iowa Review*, and also reads for *Birdcoat Quarterly* and *The Upper New Review*. [www.chilawoychik.com](http://www.chilawoychik.com)

Erin Jamieson (she/her) holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Miami University. Her writing has been published in over eighty literary magazines, including two Pushcart Prize nominations. Her poetry chapbook, *Fairytales*, was published by Bottlecap Press and her most recent chapbook, *Remnants*, came out in 2024. . Her debut novel (*Sky of Ashes, Land of Dreams*) came out November 2023. She resides in Loveland, Ohio. Twitter: @erin\_simmer

Eugene Datta is the author of the poetry collection *Water & Wave* (Redhawk, 2024) and the story collection *The Color of Noon* (Serving House Books, 2024), which has won the first Walter Cummins Award for Short Fiction. His work has appeared widely both online and in print, with some having been anthologized, and translated into German, French, Arabic, and Italian. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and the Touchstone Award for Individual Haibun. A native of Calcutta, he lives in Aachen, Germany.

Heather Emmanuel is a writer of contemporary lesbian literary fiction and prose poetry, exploring the complexities of human relationships, self-discovery, and the quiet moments in between. You can find her at [heather-emmanuel.com](http://heather-emmanuel.com)

James Evans is a writer from Kentucky. His work has appeared in the San Diego Poetry Annual, The Coop: A Poetry Cooperative, Anti-Heroin Chic, Rat's Ass Review, BULL, & elsewhere.

Jennifer Mills Kerr's poetry has been recently published in The Inflectionist Review, MORIA, & SWWIM. She hosts art-inspired writing circles online and curates poems on the Poetry-Inspired Substack (@JenniferMillsKerr). Read more of poetry at <https://jennifermillskerr.carrd.co>

Jenny Chu is a Chinese-American poet from Dallas, Texas. Her work previously appeared in Pithead Chapel, BRAWL Lit, and Turning Leaf Journal. She really loves Swedish Fish and her friends.

JK Miller is a former third grade dual language teacher. He lives on the edge of cornfields. He is the first prize winner of the 2025 Helen Schaible International Sonnet Contest. In the summer of 2025 he completed a solo 1,335-mile bicycle ride from his house to his son's house to see his newborn grandson.

Julie Allyn Johnson is a sawyer's daughter from the American Midwest whose current obsession is tackling the rough and tumble sport of quilting and the accumulation of fabric. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, her work can be found in Star\*Line, The Briar Cliff Review, Phantom Kangaroo, Lyrical Iowa, Moss Piglet, Lowestoft Chronicle, Coffin Bell, Haikuniverse, Chestnut Review and other journals. Julie enjoys photography and writing the occasional haiku, some of which can be found on her blog, A Sawyer's Daughter.

Kathy Pon lives with her husband, a third-generation farmer, and two dogs. They live on an almond orchard in rural California. Her work has been featured in Wild Roof Journal, Passengers Journal, Canary, RockPaperPoem, The Closed Eye Open and other places. Her chapbook, Orchard Language (Finishing Line Press) was published in September, 2025.

Linda Laderman is a Michigan poet and writer. Her poetry has appeared in, numerous literary journals, including Gyroscope, SWWIM, ONE ART, Thimble Literary Magazine, The Scapegoat Review, Rust & Moth, Third Wednesday, the Jackdaw Review, and Mom Egg Review. She is the 2023 recipient of Harbor Review's Jewish Women's Prize, and was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her mini-chapbook, "What I Didn't Know I Didn't Know," is published online at Harbor Review. For nearly a decade she was a docent at the Zekleman Holocaust Center near Detroit.

Mallory Caloca's passion is to share the little details, simultaneously bold and delicate, and create an imagined image for others to perceive something beyond conventional understanding. Combined sources that are both organic or natural and geometric shapes and forms create a fantastical blueprint of possibilities. Watercolor is an immediate and mostly unforgiving tool that has kept the art process uniquely grounded.

Michael Blumenthal, formerly Director of Creative Writing at Harvard and Professor of Law at the West Virginia University College of Law, and has taught at universities throughout the world. In addition to ten books of poetry, most recently *Correcting World: Poems Selected & New, 1980-2024*, he has published a novel, a memoir, short stories, essays and translations from the German, French and Hungarian. He spends his time between Washington, D.C. and in the small Hungarian village of Hegymagas near Lake Balaton.

Rebecca Klassen is co-editor of *The Phare* and a Best of the Net 2025 nominee from Gloucester, UK. She has won the London Independent Story Prize and has been short and/or longlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award, Flash 500, Bridport Prize, Alpine Fellowship, Laurie Lee Prize, Henshaw Press Competition, Quiet Man Dave Prize, and the Oxford Flash. Her stories have featured in *Mslexia*, *Fictive Dream*, *Toronto Journal*, *Shooter*, *Brussels Review*, *Molotov Cocktail*, *Writing Magazine*, *Flash Frontier*, *Flash Flood*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Baltimore Review*, and have been performed at numerous literature festivals and on BBC Radio.

Reena's artworks have been published in several print and online publications, including Magazine-The Perch Magazine (mental health and substance), The Climate Art Collection, Aunt Lute, Judy Magazine, Farm Girl Magazine and Art Axis Project Organizing Committee and won Silver Medal in India Art Contest (Khula Aasmaan).

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight*, Thames & Hudson, 2002. His documentary photography has been awarded the prestigious Leica Medal of Excellence and published in *The New England Review*, *New York Quarterly* and *Orion Magazine*. He is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NY. More of his work may be seen on [luminous-lint.com](http://luminous-lint.com).

S.C. Sharp is an artist from Texas.

Sabyasachi Roy is an Academic writer, poet, artist, and photographer. He regularly contributes craft essays to *Authors Publish* as a guest writer. His poetry has been published in *The Broken Spine*, *Stand*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Dacey Brown*, *The Potomac*, and other print and online magazines. His photograph has appeared on the cover of *Sanctuary Asia*.

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Samuel A. Bellin lives in Lewisburg, PA. His poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Rust and Moth*, *wildscape.literary journal*, and *Delicate Emissions*. In his free time, he enjoys hanging out with cats and wandering.

Sara Eddy's second full-length poetry collection, *How to Wash a Rabbit*, is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press. She is also author of *Ordinary Fissures* (Kelsay Books 2024), and two chapbooks: *Tell the Bees* (A3 Press 2019), and *Full Mouth* (Finishing Line Press, 2020). Her poems have appeared in many online and print journals, including *Threepenny Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Sky Island*, and *Baltimore Review*, among others. She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, in a house built by Emily Dickinson's cousin.

Sarah Seybold's poetry has appeared in Alaska Quarterly Review, Chicago Quarterly Review, ZYZZYVA, The Dodge, Cold Mountain Review, Thimble Literary Magazine, The Indianapolis Review, and elsewhere. She grew up in Terre Haute, Indiana, and earned her BA in English and Gender Studies from Indiana University and her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon. She lives with her husband and daughter in Columbus, Ohio.

Sean Bw Parker (MA) is a writer, artist and musician based in Worthing, West Sussex. He lived in Istanbul for ten years, has written or contributed to a number of books and albums, and given a TED talk. He was born in Exeter in 1975.

Stefanie Leigh is a poet and professional ballet dancer based in Toronto. She holds a BA from Columbia University and was a dancer with American Ballet Theatre. Her work has been published in Rust & Moth, ONE ART, SWWIM, The Inflectionist Review and elsewhere. Her first chapbook, The Stilling of Movement, is currently on submission. She can be found on Instagram @iamstefanieleigh

Tracie Adams writes from her farm in rural Virginia where she spends a ridiculous amount of time with two writing buddies who look a lot like dachshunds. She is the author of two essay collections, Our Lives in Pieces (2025) and Not Finished Yet (2026). Her work, nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Microfiction, and long listed for Wigleaf Top 50, is featured in over 100 literary magazines. Read more at [www.tracieadamswrites.com](http://www.tracieadamswrites.com) and follow her on Twitter @lfunnyfarmAdams.

Wim Hylan's work has been published in The Adroit Journal, On The Seawall, The Westchester Review, JMWW and Brilliant Flash Fiction, among other places. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona.

Zach Keali'i Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Raritan Quarterly, Reed Magazine, The Coachella Review, Bamboo Ridge, Another Chicago Magazine, The Vassar Review, FOLIO, and more. He has published the chapbook Tiny Universes

(Selcouth Station Press). He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.