

# OAKWOOD 2023

Oakwood 2023 South Dakota State University

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and more

# Oakwood 2023



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## Then and Now: Freya Manfred

Freya Manfred was among the first authors published in *Oakwood's* inaugural issue from 1975. Nearly five decades later she is still writing and publishing, with a new book out this spring entitled *When I Was Young and Old* from Nodin Press in Minnesota.

In the following pages we feature a poem from our very first issue, side-by-side with work from her newest collection.





*Freya Manfred*

## FOR A YOUNG SOUTH DAKOTA MAN

I no longer want to meet  
people who have no muscles.

I love your muscles.  
I love the barbwire cuts in your  
tan-gold shoulder,  
the rattlesnake skin tied around  
your head,  
the way your hands curl like warm rabbits  
beside the campfire.

I planted a lilybulb,  
hoed the corn,  
rode the horse,  
swam in muddy Missouri,  
toed a dusty road  
with you  
green green green green  
you.

I'm in love with the way  
the land loves you:  
the way you greet  
morning wild rose  
afternoon fence post  
evening fire under forest leaves.

You show me how to walk  
in the country dark:  
Blacksoil in waves  
under white moon Dakota.  
Black soil seep,  
sing Dakota.  
Black soil in your fingernails,  
white sweat on your forehead.

You speak of farmlights,  
and the north forty.  
You speak of choosing a home  
by swimming toward it through river water at night  
and judging whether you need to live there  
by listening to the animal sounds on shore.

You move with light in you  
toward me in the dark.  
When you open your mouth and eyes,  
light rides out of you toward me.

I no longer want to meet  
people who have swallowed no living light from  
black soil.

## A Home Away From Words

Freya Manfred

I slip my lanky self into the silver-smiling lake  
and swim along the shore  
to watch the lakeweed sway, green and grey,  
and swarming, fleeting fish  
the size of sardines and salad plates.

I stop to rest on a rock shaped like a mushroom,  
slick with hairy green moss,  
where I try to stand until I slide off  
and stroke back through pondweed  
sprouting up from the darkness below  
where dead trees lie,  
sodden, broken, and studded with shells.

In the distance I see my love on shore,  
reading, and watching out for me.  
He knows I have a yearning sadness in my heart  
that eases when I swim on and on  
without thinking, into the arms of the woman  
I become, caressed by water,  
my home away from words.

## Ode to Indigo

Freya Manfred

My deepest desire  
is to ride the rainbow  
into indigo,  
that silken source of light  
streaming toward me  
from the beginning of creation,  
pure indigo! —  
where I find iridescent images,  
resounding cadences,  
words I can't regret,  
and embrace the truth  
that flies toward me  
from the wild indigo distance.

Then I'll rest my bones  
in shades of green,  
lying across fields and forests,  
dig in with fingers and toes  
to smell the growing, twining mosses,  
microbes, and mysteries  
who feed me  
while I muse and meditate —  
until I rise up again to sing a song  
I hope will last as long as desire —  
as long as indigo.

## Still Wild

Freya Manfred

I long to live in a house by a lake  
with a man whose hands are warmer than my own,

to walk with him on the moss and mushroom path,  
picking berries, the sun on our shoulders,

to listen to the owl hoot-hooting in the night  
and imagine her listening, watching, waiting,

and then the swooping flight and raw devouring  
that promises death, and new life.

I long to see two golden eagles share a giant fish,  
and then fly away, one east, one west,

birds who embody the freedom and courage  
I try to summon when I worry about the ones I love,

all of them hopefully asleep now, within dreams  
that will sustain them when they wake.

I long to walk down to the lake that welcomes me  
with quicksilver calm and untamed fury.

Because I am wild, still wild, and this is where I belong.

## With the Dead at Blue Mound

Freya Manfred

I walk alone across the winter prairie,  
wind-whipped and cold to the bone,  
every grass blade and flower buried in ice.

The spirits of my dead mother and brother  
rise from the snowy earth and flow with me,  
dark, deep, and certain as sorrow.

And the spirits of my dead father and sister  
stride before me and behind me, untamed  
as the bright, blue-singing sky.

Like the flesh-colored quartzite rocks  
rubbed smooth by generations of bison,  
I'm full of blood, my heart steady.

I can walk east to the sun, west to the moon,  
south to the slow-running river,  
and north to the land of the white bear's roar.

Here on the prairie all directions lead home,  
and I do not stop because I cannot stop,  
on my past, present, and future journey.



## Fulcrum

B.J. Buckley

Prairie balanced between winter and spring, vacant, monochrome: too silent: absent of bodies. Empty save for this pale wash of light, inaudible whispers of stars. But soon it will fill with snow again, with dust, with dawn, icy rain, each grassy hollow where deer slept, or foxes, where geese as the sun fell pressed themselves to the earth against howling brute forces of wind. Why does the heart think *room* and *abandoned*, those words whose echoes are *wall* and *ruin*, in this field, bright field forever unbounded? Sky curves away, away, touches nothing. Even mended, the fences kept nothing in. Everything's here that ever was, lightning, flame, cold ash, spring floods drowning new wheat in the furrows, hunter and hunted, birth blood and bones, some so tiny even God might miss them, counting his prodigals, dun sparrows, lambs.

## Whisperer

B.J. Buckley

Machine gun rain, drops steel-hard and cold that ricocheted like bullets, bitumen smell as they pocked the asphalt, and all six & a half skinny feet of Swede Granstrom were stretched soaking wet 'cross the double yellow lines, next to the stallion spilled from the wrecked trailer in the pitch dark, and he was singing Brahms' lullaby in a voice so clear and pure the angels wept.

Driver was dead, pickup flipped and airborne over the bobwire fence and rolled so many times it was flat, and the driver under it, and Clay'd gone along the highway to try'n get flares lit in the downpour, and I was standing over Swede and the poor broken horse, both back legs snapped, it was crazed when we got there, that horse, screaming and biting and struggling to rise, beyond dangerous.

Swede got out of our truck, unracked the rifle, handed it to me, cooing and clicking his tongue and humming the music, and he sat next to those flying hooves and laid himself down, put one hand on the stallion's neck and said *easy, easy* – that horse made one last anguished twist and was still, breath rasping like torn paper. Swede sang to it as if it was his own sweet child afraid of the dark, Swede sang, waved me over, mouthed *here* – pointed his finger just below its soft delicate ear – said *now*.

## Vixen Song

B.J. Buckley

Fox-haunted fields, autumn, the leaves red  
ghosts: blood, hunt-stain, bright hunger,  
that low-slunk undulation through fading  
grasses, slick slither in and out of cattails  
in the borrow ditches, fur flash, death's  
soft frame. Mouse, vole, pocket gopher,  
pheasant chick, bug and beetle, sweetest  
berries bears forgot to pick, fallen apples  
and their worms, the fields' waste: trampled  
barley, broken corn, seed from sunflowers  
drying on their stems: nothing spurned.  
At last light, foxing on a page of heavy frost,  
straight quick line, her tracks: she passed so  
close, incendiary, and her wild breath burned.

## Circuit Breaker

Brandon Krieg

Tick on Ez's belly from our hike,  
black ember

I pick off, toss to fireflies  
signaling summer dusk.

The candle-flame stands up tall, sits down again.

Seeking not-seeking is not not-seeking

I hear philosophers saying, with their long strings sadly  
angle by angle cutting through blocks of clay.

Strings pulled from guitars  
once packed with dirt and buried deep in earth,  
whose silence is crickets stop all at once.

All of the sunflowers in the field today were bowed but one:  
Ez stopped many times in front of me  
turning back to see it again.

When seekers miss the path the same way,  
they wear the ground to look like the path

intoned the philosophers in the sad unison of my skull.  
Ez stopped in front of me halfway up the hill and said,

"When it is hard, I have a switch inside me  
I turn to the Earth; when it is easy,  
I have a switch inside me I turn to the sun."

## Tipped Past Equinox

Brandon Krieg

Earth's obliquity  
catches a pond up

in a ring  
of after-frost reflecting  
yellow falling into themselves  
leaves

so thing  
and thought  
touch and dragonfly off

decrecendo surge,  
sudden absence of all

water that ever went into  
rounding a stone in the road.

## Touched by Arctic Air the World Turns White

Brandon Krieg

My touch  
stolen by  
buttons, keys.

We drive to where the white-capped  
wasp nest hangs  
from a tiny hook not having

had to learn trust.  
The squirrel doesn't  
lecture us

for leaving acorns where they fall.  
In woods snow  
falls into deer prints in snow,  
my words

should be careful  
as your hand brushing  
flakes

from my eyelashes.



## Sudden Open

Brandon Krieg

A horse  
rips grass

along the high road,  
the only sound along the high road,

and, pleased at the sudden open any only sound  
leaves the moment it ceases,

I recall the nest  
discovered behind the oven, its mice

long ago returned to the fields.

## Garden Unguarded

Brandon Krieg

Gourd on the ground  
at the gate of the storm:

two posts wired to a split  
and pounded-in oar, un-

sound. The unsaid  
breaks in, lifts

the silver undersides  
of leaves wind lifts

just out of reach of  
belief. But to unsay

the unsaid? That  
is to hold all

the protective reflection—  
cd blanks, holographic

tape—fastened  
around this plot

up to cloud-shadows'  
search-darks.

## Pastoral

Steven R. Vogel

There is no such thing as a wide gravel road  
in the deep country sweeps  
of brome and alfalfa, ryegrass and fescue.  
The land is too precious to tread,  
too full of clovers and field peas, sunflowers  
and orchards for the bees —  
too filled with wafts and scents, savory aromas  
and the fragrance of apple trees.

Walk the stones slowly, with love at your side,  
and let your nose lead you  
to memories and passions that can't fit a book.  
Brush with your fingers  
foxtails and milkweeds that dare to come near,  
and when inclination is ripe,  
step down the bank, through the windbreak,  
and into a field full of grasses —

filled with rabbits and beetles, with field mice  
and katydids. Let your ears play  
the music of nature's vocations and leisures,  
the notes of the breezes  
and clicks of the jumpers, birdsong and scolds.  
And if time gives the blessing,  
bed down a few grass stems far into the field,  
just enough to hide two,

and let the grass rushes put lulls  
in the senses, a drowse in the mind, till the sun  
lets you go to the cool of the dusk,  
the embrace of the dark.  
And if your good fortune allows you to stay,  
sip the moon from its ladle  
at the peak of night, for then it's most sweet  
and the kisses of love most complete.

## Spanish Girls

Steven R. Vogel

The girls of Spain wear searing colors  
bound in flounces and cascades  
and stripes that course their practiced movements,  
slashes of a jonquil yellow,  
forest turquoise  
(half between the robin and the teal),  
a pause of black before the blazing red —  
not blood-red, but a lancing ruby that provokes  
the mind to watch.

And as each passing eye congregates,  
they bend and turn  
like breezes on a meadow —  
no beginning and no measured end,  
only the sway of invitation to catch hold a breath  
until the dream has changed from one  
into another, languid, spelling, tethering.

And worn above, a melded smile that draws  
the while it promises more  
than you could bear if you should take it up  
as yours — if you should put it onto yours  
like cherry jam on toast. And yet, you cannot but  
return the soul of you, together with  
that holded breath, to grasp another while  
the air is soft.

But as you do, they fill the sky with chatter about  
things you cannot know,  
that will not even fit into a dream,  
for they are small but myriad and run together  
like a cloud of starlings.  
And every finger dances with the words,  
just slightly, like the fingers on a harp, each wrist  
makes careful bends  
that gather, gather, hold.

You must pray to reach another day as they pass by,  
for this is their creation,  
made somehow from flax and straw,  
this eternal evocation of the past sent down  
by Spanish girls for themselves alone. And so they go  
rejoicing, for on Monday they'll wear black.



# Paupers in the Rain

Steven R. Vogel

## I. Soweto

She sits against the tin wall, barefoot,  
watching dust go by –  
an afterthought of boys' feet  
wrangling a ball,  
the center of life – her fuchsia shorts  
and tee beautiful  
against her sable skin,  
a tin pail at her tiny toes, her work to  
catch what might fall from a notice.

But charity is slim in the hot air,  
and time pushes the sun  
until it wants to spill its fall to earth.  
The sky is brimmed with water,  
and the dour clouds have caught some  
in a leaky pouch,  
which has begun to tame the dust  
with immense thudding drops –  
widespread, at first, then gathering.

The world, sudden-changed,  
revamps its smells and footsteps,  
hides the birds, and chases industries  
indoors ... but one.  
She inverts the pail over her head  
and takes the drumming deep  
into her soul (its manic  
melody somehow a comfort) and holds  
the yellow dirt until it disappears.

## II. Becida

He sits on oiled dirt  
in a dark green world, a shadow  
of a shadow if the dim light would allow  
such, for nothing can draw  
shadows in this gray.  
His corner is the least of shelters –  
a lean-to implement shed  
meant to keep out the worst.

Its double sliding doors are thrown wide,  
and its slanted roof is made the same  
as all of it:  
corrugated steel sheets  
nailed to just enough wood to hold up.  
It stands near empty,  
for this is not workable land,  
though weed and brush must be opposed.

But not today, for this is leisure –  
close as it will come –  
these hours of guarded dusk  
kept private in the silence of the thunder  
of the rain, its wild, unmetered  
steadiness a friend  
as near as there will be,  
its cloaking cold a solitary hug.

# The Good-Girl House

Erin Flanagan

We show up for Rush Week in droves with our jeans rolled at the ankle for casual night, our scrawny teen busts covered by polos and neon prints. We've come from towns sprouted on the shores of the ten thousand lakes, from suburbs with houses like chains of paper dolls, and we carry our below-average pasts like scales of sludge. Few of us even know what name brands are beyond the Pepe jeans they sell at the mall. We've saved all summer to wear our crossbody Liz Claiborne purses with the two-toned khaki and navy triangles, with our preference cards and dorm keys and new student IDs.

We've set our sights on the good-girl house. We want to be the girls men want to marry. We want to be in the house next door. Not the smart house that wins GPA at Greek Week every year, or the rich house with girls from Summit Hill and Lake Harriett, or the slutty house too much like high school. Not the sorority the Black women join, where they make it clear we don't belong. Sure, the majority of us are white, but there's one Latina, and we all joke we're jealous of her tan.

When Rush Week is over, we're brought to the house and given our letters in a ceremony so sweet our teeth ache. Once accepted, initiated, we're allowed to wear those letters to our classes on oversized sweatshirts with stirrup pants. To the gym where we run laps but never lift weights. We never wear them to the bars, a rule that's not stated but understood like so many other rules we have yet to learn.

As the months march on, we learn how to college. We oversleep classes and drink too much; we fall down fraternity steps. Some of us are the first in our families to make it past high school, and it hardly seems possible this is what they want us to do, but every holiday break when we're home they tell us how proud they are. Classes feel like a sec-

ondary thought as we paint our nails in the common room, drink Old Mill in the afternoon on a frat-house porch as our professors lecture to half-full rooms. It feels like these are the real reasons we're in college, to make lifelong friends, even though we scoff at the outdated notion of the MRS. degree.

One by one we find boyfriends, shedding our high school lovers like a first skin. They were boys and now we date men. Some of us go steady and even get pinned in candle-light vigils on the house lawn, but it is understood the men are not faithful. They go after our little sisters, the independents, and slum it with the lesser houses. But we are okay with this. We are! Because we are the girlfriends.

We are matched with a fraternity house and they're our big brothers, but they do not act brotherly. They make snide comments about our weight, our hair, our skin. When we see them in classes, they are different people, raising their hands, answering questions, furrowing their brows as they bend over blue books. But at their frat house or Bullwinkles or the Kollege Klub, they put their hands on us, an ownership, and we are flattered by the attention. When the hands turn rough, there might be a flash-pulse of panic, but we push it down. We don't know if this is what we want but we do know it's what we're supposed to want: to be the objects of their affections. To be objects.

We are to be both virginal and sweet yet fulfill their desires. We don't know how to be both at once, but we're learning. Men force us into closed-in spaces and demand things we don't understand: hummers and bee-jays. Later we will realize these are blow jobs, and much later, in peals of dark, drunk laughter, one of us will admit that when he unzipped his pants and took it out, she literally blew on it. This is another one of those things we're supposed to innately know how to do: to put a cock in our mouths, to let hands hold down our heads. To learn how to breathe underwater and pretend not only that we're not drowning, but that we're enjoying it.

We tell each other stories: how we woke up without our clothes on in a room with three men; how we found a naked

picture of ourselves we didn't know had been taken taped to a frat-house bathroom wall, and that our first thought wasn't one of violation but embarrassment. Our stomach wasn't as flat as it should be, mouth agape and eyes rolled back, the cellulite visible on our thighs. These are not assaults or rapes or hazing because we know deep down these men care for us. They have to.

We're groped in bars, on lawns, in togas, at lakes, in hallways, in bedrooms, in front of fish tanks they keep in their frat rooms. We drink overly sweet red drinks, and keg beer, and clear liquor now blue with Curacao. They joke to our faces about the weak ones in the herd, and we laugh, because now it's like we're buddies, one of the gang, and we've proven our worth. Freshmen arrive on campus with baby-fat cheeks and prescription glasses and acne medication and we point them out to the brothers.

Over the next four years, we'll amass dozens upon dozens of items with our letters on them: keychains from our Big/Little initiation, beer steins from Casino night, t-shirts celebrating the booze cruise formal on the Mississippi, where at least half the house threw up in the water. This is what we have to show from college, as well as degrees we barely earned and GPAs we leave off our resumes. The few who studied in secret, the really smart ones, will go on to law school or become CPAs or historians.

Senior year we'll plan our weddings, and after graduation, many of us will marry these same men who stood on our lawn with gold pins and candles. For a few years we'll have jobs but not careers: we'll climb the ladders to management at retail stores, or move from teller to loan officer at nation-wide banks.

As we settle into married life, a stack of hopeful pregnancy tests in the linen closet, we'll do our best to lose those same ten pounds, stepping on the scale every morning naked, willing ourselves to be stronger. We'll look back fondly at those years when we were in control – the sewer system at the sorority house always backed up from buckets and buckets of vomit, the knuckles on our dominant hands yellowed

from the acid, the sheer will it took to eat only an apple and black coffee and an ounce of cheddar cheese each day during the week, so on the weekends we could gorge ourselves on pizza, cheese bread, cheese curds, beer.

Eventually we'll get the two pink lines on our stockpiled tests – finally, a passing grade! – and nine months later give birth to the most perfect babies you'll ever see. We'll quit our jobs and make our husbands' dinners, all the while remembering those college years fondly despite those flash-pulses of panic, those threads of unease. Even as we dream of those claustrophobic run ins, the ones where the men held us down, shame clawing at the edge of our nightmares. We should have been better; we should have been thinner; we should have stayed sober. Over and over: the guilt that we should have stayed sober.

And then more weight to lose, another ten pounds to stay. We'll buy the luxury strollers our own parents couldn't afford, move to tri-level houses with three bedrooms and two baths. We'll do our best to give these kids everything we never had with so many toys strewn across the manicured lawn they'll never have to fight for what's theirs. We'll watch our girls with that tickle of unease, passing on the rules we were taught about how to stay safe: don't tease, smile, watch your behavior. We'll teach the boys they can have anything they want, hoping the lessons they take are to be generous and kind. In our front minds we want them to be like their fathers; in our lizard brains we don't want that at all.

Our children will enter grade school then middle school. Each spring we'll clean our attics, tossing more of the t-shirts and keychains that were so important to us. We'll throw them away rather than giving them to Goodwill, ruled by that still unspoken law that no one but a sister can wear our letters.

And over those years – between kids one, two, and three – many of us will divorce those first husbands, those ones from the lawn ceremony where they asked us to commit to their shit. They were twenty-two years old when we



married them, but we didn't realize they'd remain that age. We'll divorce them over their affairs, their lack of communication, their snide remarks about our natural aging. Not all of us will consider these divorces a good thing, but the smart ones will. These man-boys will go on to marry younger women, and we'll go on to marry their older counterparts. We all laugh about our starter marriages. We were all just stupid kids.

As our own children enter high school, we're still fighting those twenty pounds, sometimes thirty, the weakest among us even more. We cover our gray at the salons and take Zumba classes and Pilates and flirt briefly with the idea of running a half-marathon, which we do, but never again.

Before it seems possible — weren't they just in kindergarten? — we're crossing the Target parking lot in the summer humidity to buy Twin XL sheets to the dorm's specifications. We are so, so excited for our kids! All the good times ahead. We drop them at the same university with our hazards on, obeying their demands we stay in the car and not hug them in the parking lot. When our sons come home for Thanksgiving, leaving full water cups on the oak table and expecting their laundry to be done, we'll wonder when they decided we were their maids. Our daughters spend the long weekend in their rooms on their phones, and when we walk past the bathroom where she's leaned over the counter applying lipstick, something like a ghost will pass through us.

Second semester they'll call home less and less, and by junior year, it's like we don't even exist. Our children gone, our futures stretching, our nests empty except for the gnawing anxiety that's never quite left since the best years of our lives.

And then one day we'll see the mug shot of the white, Midwestern, curly-haired boy in the white hoodie with the blood-shot eyes. He will look so much like the men we knew, only younger. Certainly he must be younger. There's no way men were really that young when we were in college! Just babies themselves as they pushed us down on beds, held hands over our mouths, forced open our legs with

their knees. This boy, the curly-haired one, raped an unconscious woman behind a dumpster and people were saying it wasn't her fault. Was that true? But what about all those years of shame we've endured for our drinking, our culpable behavior? We tell ourselves it was a different time as we follow the case — the character witnesses who say he was a good kid, the father who laments he can no longer enjoy steak. We are surprised to realize our sympathy extends to him more than the girl. We wonder about our sons who no longer call. We pray for his mother.

And then one day we'll start to hear the whispers from the coasts, the accusations of the things other men have done. In Hollywood, at comedy clubs, in restaurant kitchens and in hotels. These whispers will get their own hashtag and each of us will migrate from Facebook to Twitter to see what all the fuss is about. We'll be as outraged as everyone else is, but still won't make the connection back to our own shadowy pasts. Those were just college days, everyone drunk, what did we expect would happen?

In bed with our second husbands, we'll slowly, inch by inch, block off what they're allowed to touch. We're in our forties and then in our fifties. Shouldn't we be over this by now, this groping and grabbing? Even though we know these aren't the men we knew before, rape and assault statistics ring in our brains. Are our second husbands any better? We count backward from a hundred. We watch the ceiling fan revolve. We ignore our thundering hearts as a finger trails up our thighs. Walls will go up against the men we love, constructed by the men before. Everyone will pay a price.

Eventually we will name what we're feeling — rage — and other words will follow. Mansplaining, gaslighting, entitlement, misogyny. The rage will continue to grow as our husbands explain how to best load the dishwasher they never load themselves. As we see a group of white boys steal a drink from a girl at Starbucks. We watch our old favorite comfort movies, the rage growing bigger. How badly we wanted Jake Ryan to sell his girlfriend for a pair of our used

underpants! How did we believe these were the good guys? We're furious these were the men who were fed to us, and furious we were dumb enough to fall from them.

There comes a time when we're embarrassed to tell people we were in a sorority, that we realize how privileged we are, even as we roll our eyes at ourselves and wonder, how else were we supposed to meet guys?

And as our anger is cresting, a reality star runs for president. He's always given us the willies, but people say we need to abandon big government. Has it really been that bad, these lives we've had? Our now four-bedroom, four-bath houses and the SUVs? All the volunteering we do? (Okay, maybe not as much as we could, but we're trying.) Our husbands assure us this president will be the one to make big changes, to get this country on course, and while we question whether he's the most ethical, they swear if government can get ironed out, the ethics will follow. We cast our votes, sick to our stomachs, but we just hate that shrew with her pant suits so much. And her emails!

The day after his inauguration, we watch the march on TV. So many pink hats. So much activism in exactly our names. We talk about the march and everyone knows a friend of a friend who went. Have we made a mistake by casting our votes and not going? But it's so hard to get away, especially for those with kids still at home. Daughters have recitals and basketball games; sons have STEM clubs and theatre. Husbands can't cook the food from the freezer, even when we write on the tinfoiled casserole with a sharpie: 375/40 min. Or maybe they can and we won't let them, too invested in the one job we have.

And then one day, a man will be considered for a job that will determine whether women will be able to stay in charge of their own bodies. This man, unlike the curly-haired one, will be one we recognize as our own. He's our age, fighting the same twenty pounds, gray hair at his temples. He will be every man we knew in college — the privilege leaking from his large pores, his sense of entitlement and outrage like a second skin. A woman so much like us will tell her story:

how he held her down, how they all did, and she barely got away, and now, finally, in this story, we'll begin to see ourselves. As he snivels on television, yelling that he likes beer and pointing at his calendars, we'll want to burn our own lives down.

And in that anger we'll know this is it, really, the rage that will finally mobilize us. Sure, we voted for the reality star, but we see now that was a mistake. We should have gone to the march, and probably would have if it had been any other weekend. If it hadn't been in January, the coldest month. At least some of us must have been celebrating a birthday, or a husband's birthday, or had tickets to a play. Wasn't it enough that we had to put up with the patriarchy all those years, now we have to march about it too?

And then the Chinese flu hits, we hear all about it on Fox News, and it just seems like everyone is out to get the middle-class, like we're the bad guys. No one's standing up for our rights or what happened to us; no one's keeping people out of our country but the reality star.

And then in our own backyard, that awful business with the knee on the neck over a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, even though that man had done plenty of other bad things. People are chanting abolish the police, for pete's sake. Who do they think will keep us safe? Who will protect our four-bedroom homes? And everyone is marching again, but not us. No sir. Aren't they always taking about cultural appropriation? Plus by now the marches just seem sad, for people who can't let go.

When the next election comes around we cast our votes again. We make our beds. The devil you know, isn't that right? And that rage we've felt? It's not healthy to hold on. We've had good lives overall. Better than most. Maybe we'd been right all along, that what happened to us wasn't a crime or assault or rape, but these men doing their best to express that they loved us. Maybe it was all in our heads.

And who knows. Maybe something will happen that will galvanize us and make us stand up. When that next march hits, the big one, the right one, the one we know will make a

difference, we'll come from the comforts of our second-marriage couches, from our mortgaged houses a few years from paid off. We'll pack our snacks in our Yeti coolers and arrive in our SUVs, six to a vehicle, telling anyone who will listen why we ultimately decided against buying the Prius. Because really, if climate change was that bad, wouldn't somebody be doing something about it by now?

## Nine Years Old

Laurence Snyder

Past Pastor Larvik's house square on the hill,  
One doubtful day the middle of July,  
A surreptitious glance thrown at the sky,  
I cursed. "God damn you to Hell!" Then stood still  
Eying the heavens. There was no great grim  
Face emerging from the clouds. No thunder  
Shattered the shocked silence I stood under.  
I listened carefully. No sign of Him.  
Try it again. "God damn you all to Hell!"  
Nothing again. So much for Sunday School.  
No more the Lord's lamb but nobody's fool.  
Free from a faith that never fit me well.

No streak of lightning struck out of the blue.  
God and his son had better things to do.

## The Lesson

Bruce Roseland

My parents each voted for  
a different political party,  
joking that when they voted,  
their votes cancelled each other out.  
When I was six, my father took me along  
on election day,  
to the one room school house  
where the local ballots were cast.  
I was given a sample ballot to fill out  
in order to keep me amused  
while my father voted.  
Behind the curtain, I marked my Xs  
by names that looked nice.  
Down the ballot I went, putting my mark  
right and left, having nary a clue  
who any of these names were.  
Soon as I stepped out of the booth,  
my great uncle, a crusty old tobacco chewing  
curmudgeon on my father's side,  
grabbed my sheet and upon seeing  
I had spilt my Xs right and left,  
let out a roar, saying he's been  
a straight party man for all his days,  
since the first time he could vote.  
Said he could just as well have shot  
some of those SOBs, as elect them.  
BUT NO!  
The straight ticket, his ticket,  
was the only way.  
Enraged, he stomped out of the one-room school,  
leaving the election clerks, my father and me,  
in stunned silence.  
Later my father explained to me

that upon seeing my split sample ballot,  
my great uncle assumed my father had left the fold.  
My dad was merely amused.  
That day, I learned  
what a dyed-in-the-wool iconoclast is,  
and the value of a secret vote.



## Judge/Judge Not

Bruce Roseland

### Judge

Late fall, beautiful day.  
At the drive-up window  
of a liquor store,  
an electric wheelchair is parked.  
The patron chats a while  
with an older female clerk,  
then wheels off to the nearby street,  
a plastic shopping bag tucked at his feet.  
A fringe of white hair rings  
his baseball cap.  
An American flag flutters above on a stick.  
Two oxygen canisters  
are strapped on the chair's back frame.  
Obviously, he has problems.

### Judge not

Late fall, beautiful day.  
Less than 10 minutes later,  
walking out of a grocery store,  
fig newtons in hand,  
I spy the same guy,  
now in the Food Mart,  
cruising in front of checkouts,  
looking at faces.  
The same bag is at his feet,  
the one I thought full of liquor,  
can now be seen full of groceries.  
Either of two stories  
I could have believed,  
depending on when

I had walked by.  
Was he a guy on his last legs, end times,  
seeking oblivion?  
Or a guy making rounds, chatting up  
the neighborhood,  
making connections?

## Turning a Page

Bruce Roseland

2022—a year of widespread drought  
across Western and Northern plains.  
Folks in towns complain their lawns  
turn brown under relentless, rainless,  
heat of spring, turning to summer,  
turning to fall.  
In the countryside cattle ate last year's  
browned grass and then the grass roots.  
Early fall sales of calves resulted  
and then, paring down of herds.  
Economics is everything,  
when it takes so many cows  
to keep a family on the land.  
Cows cannot eat hope.  
Semis full of high-priced hay bales  
travel from the East,  
going someplace to a rancher  
trying to buy a little time,  
trying to take a few more mother cows  
to what we all need:  
deep snows of winter,  
wetness of a rainy spring.  
Holding on with pure grit,  
we all wake up,  
look out a morning window,  
waiting for the weather to change.

## Wasted

A Tanka

Suzanne Allison-Albers

Initially, he  
protested subtly, a  
quiet withdrawal  
from all organized school sports  
his parents enjoyed watching.

Instead of joining  
one musical group, he joined  
them all – concert choir,  
a cappella, madrigal,  
all time consuming

which was purposeful.  
For less time at home was less  
opportunity  
for angry accusations  
and frustrated questioning.

Less subtle was his  
segue into politics,  
deliberately  
supporting McGovern to  
spite his staunch Republican

parents, he conspired  
with his teenage partners in  
crime to steal and hide  
Nixon/Agnew yard signs all  
over the slumbering town.

He ran away so  
many times, and we found out  
later he would sleep  
on a wooden pew at the  
United Methodist Church.

College didn't stick,  
but his music did; so, he  
diligently worked  
in the industry for years,  
randomly relocating.

Sioux Falls, Fort Collins  
Chicago, New York City,  
always up, always  
hyper, a frenzied attempt  
to dodge his dreadful demons.

Surrounded by friends  
a drink in one hand and a  
cigarette burning  
in the other, he was on  
fire, one witty anecdote

after another.  
Didn't sleep, didn't care if  
the drugs and the booze  
shouldn't mix as long as it  
numbed his mind and crushed the pain.

He loved to play host.  
Setting the scene, Dean Martin  
serenading his  
guests, candles flickering, as  
some delicious concoction

simmered on the stove.  
He had a sweet habit of  
tossing a white dish  
towel over his shoulder,  
nonchalantly and chef-like

continuously  
moving and entertaining,  
smile in place, keeping  
track of melting ice, levels  
of liquor, and empty plates.

Eventually,  
distractions dwindled and the  
relentless pain crept  
back . . . slithered under his skin  
and besieged his muddled mind.

And, he just gave up.  
He quit, surrendered, succumbed,  
dumped, and abandoned  
us. Fuck that. Fuck vodka and  
gin. Fuck denial and fear.

I just want my big brother back.

## To Wait

Aaron Cloyd

As Orion and his belt slung  
low across winter skies are spun,  
placed by story and pattern  
that do not always discern,

so the partial equations of  
questions with answers fail to hold  
the hand of my friend or his wife  
carved hallow by cancer, or

my aunt capsized by dementia  
until she surfaced to her  
husband's face without name, or

our four children, conceived, but towed  
under, by waves of other  
moons, of second shores,

for traces in the dusk are  
blinkerred and bunkered, even blind,  
mute to the measured, as it sifts on.

## Relinquishment

Aaron Cloyd

You are now hiking, son  
Into lands where my voice carries no more.

I could take you to the stream that almost swallowed  
My friend and discuss properties of spring flooding,

And I could drive us down gravel, wash-boarded  
Wyoming roads until moon and stars are enough to guide us  
home, but

The stories in these gorged waters and skies  
Are not yours to hold.

Even if you were to slip them on, they  
Would sag, ill-fitted off your shoulders,  
Leaving little warmth or comfort in their fall.

Yet do not mistake my silence for stillness.

For I'm setting camp.  
Arranging our chairs, to  
Listen to the tales of  
Your travels, to what  
You're meant to carry.



## In Which Bobby Allison, Buicks, And A Childhood Sweetheart May Or May Not Appear

Roger Hart

Take this: I'm riding stoker in a rickety old van chasing a white Prius up interstate 35 north of Minneapolis on a beautiful June morning, and we haven't got a beetle's chance in a chicken yard of catching it. In the driver seat is my twenty-seven-year-old son, Russ, and sitting shotgun is an old Buddhist black guy, Oscar. I haven't got anything against Buddhists or blacks or my twenty-seven-year-old son for that matter, but they're chasing this car, this white Prius, because they think the woman driving was my son's childhood sweetheart.

I know it ain't her.

My son. I don't know what to say to him. For years, while I was in prison, I pretended not to know he had totaled my Buick, which I bought the day after Bobby Allison, won the Daytona 500 in a Buick Regal. Russ pretended the car was in good shape, stored under a tarp in the garage, that he changed the oil, put it up on blocks, blah, blah, blah. I knew he'd totaled it on a fool's trip through West Virginia to see a girl, the woman he now imagines in that white Prius. He knew I knew the truth, but we carried on the charade, each pretending for reasons I don't know that my Buick was alive and well. And now we're racing up the highway, another accident waiting to happen, on our way to Camp Second Chance – whatever, wherever, that is – chasing the Prius. Her name is, was, Cass. Both Russ and I know she's not in the car. It's like we're playing a game of chicken with the truth, neither of us wanting to be the first to admit that it can't be her.

One second, Russ was saying he might run into her here in Minnesota and the very next second Oscar, the former Green Beret, former ace Triple A pitcher, and presently bald Buddhist, claimed he saw Cass when the Prius zipped by us. Maybe he's been brainwashed. Maybe he's a delusional Buddhist. I don't know. "There she is," he said, pointing at the Prius passing us on the right. But the craziness didn't stop there. No. Russ started talking looney science, how a tiny atomic particle can be everywhere at once and how that may have been the case with Cass, her being everywhere until Oscar saw her. If that makes sense, I've got a big football stadium for sale in Columbus. I swear if Russ starts talking about fairy dust, I'm bailing out of this piece of crap van and walking back to Ohio.

"Oscar," I say. "You really think she's in that car?" It's a test question. I'm curious if Oscar is as whacked-out as my son.

The crummy van shakes and rattles like a 60's song by the Stones. I think it'll fall apart before we catch the damn Prius, so maybe there's no problem. We can all pretend it was her.

"Harley?" Oscar says, Harley being my name although inside they called me Rails because of my years on the railroad.

I repeat the question louder, almost shouting over the rumbling of the engine and the wind blowing through the mostly closed windows.

"No mistake," Oscar says. "It was her."

I have another test question for Oscar. "Russ ever tell you about my Buick? It's a sweet ride." I sound like a stupid kid, sweet ride. "We should have taken it instead of this piece of crap van."

"Next time," Oscar says.

I don't know any next time, and we won't be going anywhere in a car that doesn't exist. I rub my head, try to rub all the nonsense I'm hearing out of it. I've got to go to the bathroom, a prostate thing. An emergency thing. A two cups too many coffee thing.

"Was she alone?" Russ asks.

"Think so," says Oscar. "I didn't get a good look."

Damn right he didn't get a good look. If he had, he'd've known it wasn't this Cass who they claim keeps magically appearing in their lives. I don't know how a Buddhist got roped into seeing her, this imaginary woman. It worries me and I wonder if my son has finally gone headfirst off the deep end. He seems normal in most ways other than his obsession for saving dandelions from weed killers, his premonitions, and his ideas about time jumping back and forth. Okay, maybe he's messed up in the head. Maybe my going to prison when he was young fucked him up. So, what am I to do about it now?

The two of them are so preoccupied with the Prius that they don't see the bald eagle swoop across the road. They don't notice the pretty lakes surrounded by tall pine off to our right.

"I need a restroom," I say. "It's an emergency and unless you want me to take a whiz out this window. . ."

"Okay, okay," Russ says. "Hold your horses."

"It ain't my horse I'm gonna hav'ta hold," I say.

Oscar gets out his smart phone, taps some buttons. "Five miles," he says. "Can you make it?"

Five miles equals five minutes. "As long as we don't slow down," I say.

Russ shakes his head, which I ignore. Russ doesn't have a smart phone. He only has a landline. He doesn't have a television either, says the radio waves may act as interference and then he mumbles, doesn't explain what he's talking about, interference with what. This is another thing I forgot to mention as an example that he's messed up. No smart phone. I've been out three weeks, and I have one although I don't know how to do much with it other than turn on the flashlight and send and check messages. I can make calls.

I love my son, but he's off in La La Land much of the time.

I'm sitting in the seat behind Russ and Oscar. Yogi, the bear-sized dog, licks my ear. Yogi, I think, is normal in the head.

There's confusion in the front seat as Oscar and Russ debate whether they are going to get off at the next exit. Russ wants to press on, but Oscar, an old man who may have prostate issues of his own, is more sympathetic.

I hear the conversation and roll down my window.

"Okay, okay," Russ says.

I look at Russ, then Oscar, then at Russ, then the white Prius disappearing up the road while my desperation for a restroom grows more intense.

"Well," Oscar says. "Maybe she'll reappear up the road or maybe she'll take this next exit, too."

Russ takes his eyes off the road, gives Oscar the look. "So, you're voting to stop?"

Oscar turns in his seat and gives me a look, checking out how I'm doing. I give him a look back that says my eyes are about to turn yellow, and if we don't stop soon my bladder is going to burst. "Yogi has to go, too," I say, which may or may not be the case.

"Yeah," Oscar says. "I could use a restroom."

So that's it. The vote is two and a half to one and my son leans over the steering wheel, eases off the gas just enough to back off the shaking and rattling from the van. Oscar and Russ, the two of them are good with their imaginations. I give them that. Not good in the way Russ wants to keep going until I piss my pants and not good in the way Oscar goes along with it. Good in the way they almost had me believing this Cass woman existed. *Oh what a great laugh she has*, they said. *A deep laugh that just bubbles up. And kind! Took a homeless man out for pizza!* On and on they went until I was looking out my window for her. Russ says he and Cass are entangled and then explains it with more looney science. Yeah, right. It takes some kind of sickness for a grown man to get you almost believing in ghosts.

After we find a restroom, I want to stop at a bakery. I have a sweet tooth. "If we find a bakery, I'll buy," I say.

I have money. Not a lot but I did some yard work for Larry, Russ's brother, and he paid me. I'll have more money when I start my new job, which is something I haven't told

Russ or Oscar despite our long trip from Ohio giving me time. I've been hired to work grounds maintenance at the university, the university that fired Oscar and Russ for their refusal to kill off the dandelions. First thing I was asked in the interview was how I felt about dandelions. I said, "Kill those weeds!" Bingo. Hired on the spot. Start July first.

Truth is I've done much worse than killing yellow blooming weeds.

Russ turns on the blinker and we head up the exit ramp.

If the bathroom door is locked at the gas station, it's all over, and I mean all over.

Oh, the relief! I walk back to the van feeling almost buoyant, even my toes are happy, and Oscar says he's a bit hungry, too, and he found a coffee shop around the corner and am I game.

"Hell, yes," I say, and he and Russ act surprised despite the fact I've spent the last hundred miles saying how I sure could go for a slice of chocolate cake.

So, we walk Yogi around the block and then drive around the corner and park in front of Wake Cup, a retro coffee shop in an old brick building with the smell of coffee and bread leaking out the front door. The woman behind the counter says Yogi is welcome, so we file in, and after checking out the cookies, muffins, and slices of pie and cake in the display case, take our seats at a table next to the window that looks out at the old van and a couple kids across the street on skateboards who are going to kill themselves if they don't stop trying to pull off the fancy stuff.

"I'm paying," I say, and Russ touches my arm, says he's got it, and Oscar says, "No," this is on him. I let the two of them fight it out and Russ wins, or loses, depending on your point of view. There's only one slice of chocolate cake in the display case, and I pray that no one takes it before I order. I don't know what Oscar might be praying for or if a Buddhist even prays.

The waitress comes to our table. She's young, pretty, smells of vanilla, and has no ring on her finger. She's the

right age for a flirt from Russ, but he doesn't because he's caught up with the imaginary entangled woman who he thinks was in the Prius.

Emily — her name is on the tag hanging from her blue blouse — takes my order for cake, says, "I think we have one slice left," and I feel good that I have put my stamp on it. She nods and I smile back. It's not a flirt. Russ orders but spends more time looking at a list of coffees than he spends looking at her. Russ! I want to say. Wake up! Look at that smile, that curly brown hair, those dark eyes. But I don't, and Russ continues studying the coffee menu. Then, she takes Oscar's order. He wants the strawberry pie, and he gets the smile, the wink, and she asks, "Would you like that pie warmed? Want some vanilla ice cream with it?" A seventy-year-old bald, black Buddhist gets the flirt.

A bell rings and this old guy comes in and the waitress, Emily, says, "Hi, Bobby."

I give the guy a second glance, and I think it's Bobby Allison. Sweet Jesus. Here in Minnesota. And only a few miles back I was thinking about my dead Buick, the one I bought because of Bobby Allison winning Daytona. He looks a lot older than when he won Daytona but it has to be him. Maybe he came north for the fishing. I look out the window, check out what he was driving and sure enough, sitting next to the wreck of a van is a spotless black Buick Regal. I don't know what to say.

He stands at the counter chatting with the cute waitress and then points at something in the display case.

"Sorry," she says. "That gentleman has already ordered it and that's our last slice."

"I'll split it with you," I say.

"You sure?" he asks.

"Positive."

He looks around the café and although there are plenty of empty seats, I slide out the chair next to me and wave him over "You can join us," I say.

This white-haired guy with the piercing eyes, who I'm sure is Bobby Allison, the famous race car driver who won

Daytona three times, nods as if we know each other, lifts his cup of coffee from the counter, and comes over and takes the seat next to me. "Howdy, I'm Bobby," he says, just like you would expect Bobby Allison who is from Alabama to say.

"I'm Harley," I say although I almost said my name was Rails. Russ and Oscar introduce themselves, and I point at Yogi who is sleeping at Russ's feet. "That's Yogi."

Yogi gives one thump of his tail.

Bobby doesn't say his last name, but it's him, and I'll bet he could still do laps around Daytona. He sure as hell would've been able to catch that white Prius.

Emily brings the pie, muffin, and two halves of the slice of chocolate cake. Bobby thanks me again, a real southern gentleman, and we sip coffee, shoot the shit, tell Bobby we're heading to Camp Second Chance where Russ will be teaching astronomy to juvenile delinquents while Oscar and I fish. Oscar and Bobby carry on a conversation about the Boundary Waters, the fishing, the bears, the bugs. We don't get around to asking Bobby what he's doing in Minnesota, and I don't let on that I know who he is. We keep it man to man, real casual like. Just buds. The waitress, Emily, comes to our table, rests her hand on Bobby's shoulder like they're old pals, and asks if we need any refills on the coffee. I hold my hand over my cup to signal I'm fine. Russ and Oscar do the same.

The chocolate cake is delish. Bobby is making short work of his half slice, smashing the crumbs with the back of his fork, and slipping them in his mouth.

We chat, innocent topics like the weather, and sports, and I try to turn the conversation to NASCAR, but that topic keeps slipping away as Russ and Oscar get stuck talking about fish. I look out the window at his car. "Nice car," I say.

Bobby nods. "My baby," he says.

And then I tell him I have one, too. "It's been stored in a garage for a few years while I've been away. Can't wait to get it out and take it for a spin."

Bobby gets a twinkle in his eyes, and I think he knows I know who he is. "They take curves real nice," he says.

"Well," Russ says, interrupting Bobby and me as we bond over Buicks. "We'd better get back on the road, see if we can catch that Prius."

I see Bobby's ears perk up when he hears that, hears the *catch that Prius*. The old desire to step on the gas still with him. I want to stay, work the conversation around to Daytona and if he would have let his son Davey pass on that last lap the year they came in first and second. It's a connection thing. Me and Bobby.

"Nice meeting you fellas," Bobby says as we stand. I leave a five on the table, tell Bobby his coffee and half slice are on me.

He nods a thanks. "Good luck catching that Prius," he says, laughing like he knows there's no chance in hell that's going to happen.



## A Fan in the Stands Makes His Wishes Known

John S. Nelson

*et augendae intensionem*

There he is stepping to the plate.  
He's nothing, he's nobody,  
He can't hit nothing nohow.

Throw him one.  
    Throw the speedball  
    The curve  
    The drooper  
    The fall away

Turn back to the clock and throw him  
    The uncle Charlie  
    The yakker  
    The Duece  
    The Bender

Throw him the snicker  
    The roundhouse  
    The hammer  
    Throw the slurve

Throw the slider,  
    Throw the screwball  
    The forkball  
    The splitter

Throw the palmball  
    Throw the circle changeup  
    Throw the cutter  
    The hammer

Throw it in there  
    Throw it!  
    For God's sake — throw it at him!

Throw the creeper  
    The mainstay  
    The billabong  
    Throw pumpkinseeds

Throw Whitman  
    Throw the leatherman  
    The wakeboard  
    The holiest of holies

Throw Chittenden  
    Throw makeshift  
    The Taj Mahal  
    The snowblower  
    Throw Night of the Living Dead

You've got it! Throw it!  
    Throw! Fling one past him!

Throw the plague  
    The Asian flu  
    Throw hunger  
    Throw climate change  
    Throw Ebola

Bean him! Back him off!

You've got him thinking you're a softie,  
    A patsie,  
    A playmate,  
    A skinny-armed softball putz.

You've got him to the plate where you can see him now.  
    You've got him right where you want him!

Throw the meathook  
    The sidewinder  
    Throw pemmican  
    Throw a dash of coriander

Throw the Vulcan change  
    The moneymaker  
    The haymaker  
    The horndog

Throw the roundhouse right  
Throw the roundabout  
Throw the round table and King Arthur's crown  
Throw ringworm

Throw the blitzkrieg  
The bollerophon  
The Oliphant,  
The one ring of power.

Throw Mephistopheles  
Throw meatloaf  
Throw metonymy  
Throw metaphor  
Throw metrical stanzas

He thinks he's something —  
he's nothing!  
He thinks he's gonna hit something.  
Throw it! Throw your life savings!

Throw fatherhood  
Throw car payments  
Throw thirty below  
Throw cell phone overcharges  
Throw identify theft

Throw meth addiction  
Throw fatman  
Throw little boy  
Throw the Luftwaffe  
Throw thermonuclear Armageddon

Throw the plague  
The Asian flu  
Throw hunger  
Throw climate change  
Throw congress

Throw it, man, throw it!  
He'll never see it coming!

## Descended from Refugees

Rosemary Dunn Moeller

For years, I've been a descendant of immigrants.  
No more. I'm reassigning my ancestors to refugee status,  
by me. No different than desperate  
displaced persons  
from Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Guatemala.  
As if leaving the Pale of Settlement was an easy choice,  
for Benderskis and Dunskes,  
or for Holmes' starved off farms on stone-necklaced Irish  
hills.  
Houles, indentured servants, sold from Normandy to  
Quebec farms.  
I'm the descendant of refugees,  
three generations or five. It doesn't matter.  
I need to write it, say it, remind myself how I got here,  
from economic, political, religious oppression,  
to cultural, religious, economic repression.  
And I am the beneficiary of survivors,  
witnesses to prejudice, bigotry,  
hated here and there, nobility of the have-nots.  
I'm proud to descend from refugees, the indentured,  
used to keep wages low, schools separate, steal land from  
others.  
Used, abused, sheltered in communities, given lands  
and jobs to subserve powers so others would starve, homeless.  
We're no nation of immigrants, but one  
of slaves and indigenous survivors of genocide,  
refugees and opportunists, dreamers and makers of nightmares,  
using resources, giving back, paid and paying.  
We, carpenters of bigger tables, more chairs  
and new roofs, all need to all survive.

## Strolling Downhill with Sisyphus

Rosemary Dunn Moeller

I interviewed Sisyphus, three-thousand-year old King of Corinth, eternal slave to gods and their unforgiving rage, like Sisyphus had as king. Nasty, in an eternal way that looks like fate, but's just politics.

I started at the base with him, my questions on i-pad, and his boulder, to learn what wisdom he'd share. Sisyphus was speechless. His task was everything. Half-way up he stopped, leaned royally against rock, and interviewed me, I think. "Do you notice we're turning? The smoothness of the trail? Have you been watching me?"

I looked back down the zig-zag across and up the mountain we'd traveled, the path wide and smooth. "I like to push towards the right, widening and smoothing the trail, not grooving and gouging into the mountain, keeping it balanced, my creation after all. You haven't asked the right questions."

He turned, pushing the boulder but never sweating, uphill, ignoring my interruptions. I imagined a descriptive interview maybe being accepted. I'd failed to prepare enough for a myth. Finally, the summit, less than a breath, down rolled the boulder and I cried for Sisyphus, knowing what a murdering, vicious, brute he was as a mortal; but, an eternal example of wasted time.

He kicked a clod off the peak down the other side, took my hand.

"Now we talk. I'm patron of slaves and servants, assembly-line

knick-knack and souvenir makers of the useless, pre-broken,

garbage. Low-wage, low-educated, unempowered, workers.

Feeling sorry? Write about your sense of unfairness. A waste.

Now we walk." On this side of his mountain, I saw a delta of trails.

"Look. I don't sleep. I've taken this slope at every time of day,

every season of the year, every climate mirrored on earth.

Once

I walked one step a day. Once ran straight down for fun. It's glorious, this mountain of mine, and my eternal duty is also to stroll

as I please, however twisted the trails around cedars and olive groves,

with all the flowers and birds, effortless, downhill, easy as water.

My punishment is to appreciate what others won't, to be unable to convince the powers of their poverty."

## the words of gods

Zac Walsh

What if we got the words wrong  
for everything.  
If, from the beginning,  
existence was not  
good, or evening, or morning or first.  
Imagine, before we came along,  
wildly actual words,  
opposing dove-bent covenants  
washed away in salt and death and seas,  
scrolls lost and warred over so  
long that, just perhaps,  
we've exiled ourselves  
into arrival,  
a no exit chimera  
called *progress* and *reward*.  
When the Demiurge disrupted our  
babeling tower work then,  
it was not to correct our  
godlike reach. No,  
we were given that day  
scattered tongues  
to help us forget  
we are the gods above  
and the gods below.

## If I Live, I Work

Zac Walsh

*for Annie Proulx and all lovers of forgotten business practices*

#1 Progress:  
another failed attempt if the attempt is not forward, as in, to  
the right. Right way. Right time. Right side of history, etc.

#2 Competition:  
going back to the beginning, back to the drawing board,  
back to fundamentals, but only back so as to move forward,  
back with the expressed destination of forwardness (See #1).

#3 Losing:  
starting over while the world keeps running, going back in-  
dependently when not instructed to do so or, in other words,  
at the wrong time (See #1). Also, unjoining in going back at  
the right time (See #2). Generally prohibited, though often  
observed.

#4 Matter at Hand:  
too many wills to fit into the game in any perceptually  
meaningful way, even the semblance of meaning becoming  
hazardously difficult. Overpopulated and underpurposed.  
Distraction metrics reaching potential overload, some claim.  
Populace may reach the breaking point of inanity. Experts  
disagree (for a living).

#5 Surplus: (See #4)

#6 Success:  
look around!

\* Anonymous Shareholder Query:  
Can I finally resolve myself? If I can resolve myself, must I  
regret myself? If I regret...is this thing on?

## Earthly Home

Sharon Chmielarz

*after the poem "Adelstrop," Edward Thomas, 1878-1917*

Yes, I remember the garden —  
spaded by hand, seedlings started by hand.  
Tomatoes and green peppers gorged on full sun  
scenting rows familiar with hose and hoe.

Before anyone else was awake I was  
making my breakfast from a row of carrots.  
Beet leaves squatted in dew at my feet.  
The air, savory from the volunteer dill.

August! a swatch of time, untidy, frilly,  
straggly vines and stems, plumped-up-crazy-  
rich tomatoes, and on and over dirt foot paths  
hungry potato bugs, a garter snake, and bees.

Around the garden, a homemade fence.  
On the west, neighbor Molstads' yard.  
Past their apple tree and Railroad Avenue, then  
train wheel rumble and the Missouri's shadowed hills.

## To Put My Finger on It

Sharon Chmielarz

I once tried sketching the elm in our front yard.  
(It guarded the driveway, you wouldn't have wanted  
to crash into its trunk.) Lounging on our deck,  
tablet in hand, I got lost in its branches,  
uncountable roads of joints and junctures.

My paper elm was a destitute approximation.  
Next I tried making an apple, oh, so much more  
than red. My Crayola box — unable to assist.  
And what if the apple had been capped in snow,  
blue and gray morsels of tints, their light?

I gave up apples for clouds, letting my arm roll  
into billowing. Is art about possession? admiration?  
Constable's cumulus explosions, Turner's pale  
yellow interiors, Constable's mist, Turner's steaminess?  
They are so beyond my glance-fulls.

Sat and looked then. Clouds rarely speak  
in first person singular. That one there  
looks like a young woman mothering an old.  
Others are more stage-y. Sets. Walk-ons. Lucky.  
Sometimes hills step right up and into the clouds.



## The Robin's Wife

Sharon Chmielarz

"Being alone is no way to be: thus loneliness is the test of pure being."

"Wicht" by Stanley Plumly, *Poetry*, June, 2019

She lives in the house beside a crabapple tree,  
the tree she loves, a snow-caked crab tree.  
Wind gusts through, and the white stuff  
swirls from the boughs at the mercy of wind  
and the many grays of February, the color  
of listlessness and her husband's passing.  
Morning's inhabited by silence, an estate  
of cold. Beyond Cold. Sun-dogs out.  
Movement making an appearance outside  
her window is everything—there—a robin.  
Plumped up orange breast is his buffer  
and flag. The weight of him, lean bone  
and feather. His tail shivers; it isn't a flit.  
In a landscape offering extinction, intrepid  
for him to call out. So they pass cold time.

## The Old Woman in a Time of Aggression

Sharon Chmielarz

I do not want to end my days in a closet  
of a room, my bed piled high with blankets  
and a floor rug to keep warm.  
But here I am. A neighbor of the kind sort  
brings me gruel or tea from staples  
she's stashed in her cupboard. My rescue  
then is memory of the plentiful times,  
plenty being little but more. And will  
the relatives and friends around me, my  
ghosts, be happy in my flimsy remembrances?  
Flimsy times and flimsy houses in my head?  
What if someone comes along and robs me,  
and the last of the spuds I hid away, gone  
from the drawer. With salt, my fine supper.  
I'll chip some ice from the windowsill.  
I'll make myself a cup of cold water.  
My happiness! Who'll rob me of that.

My happiness! Who'll rob me of that.  
I'll make myself a cup of cold water.  
I'll chip some ice from the windowsill.  
With salt, my fine supper in a drawer  
is the last of the spuds I hid away. But what  
if someone comes along and robs me?  
Flimsy times and flimsy houses in my head,  
ghosts happy in my flimsy remembrances,  
the relatives and friends around me, my  
plenty being little but more. And will  
then memory of the plentiful times be  
stashed away in my cupboard? A rescuer  
bringing me gruel or tea from staples.  
But here I am. A neighbor of the kind sort,  
with a floor rug to keep me warm, my bed  
piled high with blankets for my room.  
I do not want to end my days in a closet.

## a nightmare a dream and someone else's memories

Storm Ainsely

*It started with the eyes. Possibly because they were always the  
easiest to see in the glass window of the car as she fell*

*asleep.*

No. It starts with the stories I was told I told once to  
make bedtime a little bit easier.

Really the moon whispered down this story  
in one of its waning days, the only time the clouds cross  
enough, silver lining bellied depths of there but not, broken  
and maybe what I see is sky.

*I want to go to Africa, she says.*

*Why? You know there are monsters in Africa.*

*There are no monsters left, we fucked it up by  
questing and killing them all.*

*That just means we have to be the monsters too now...*

*Well I still want to go to Africa.*

*You want the monsters to get you?*

Fingers squished in the  
candy-land mud puddle. Even the babysitter.

The moon was built with slippery pointed stones and every  
time she had to put all of them back on the shelf, standing  
atop 'til the brick was the last.

The golden fish swam in small circles  
and she ran around the bowl because fish aren't butterflies,  
unless they fly away.

*If it started with the eyes it certainly wasn't because she was  
asleep.*

Some days the paper would fall down from the sky so  
thick and heavy that everyone needed scissors if they  
wanted to move upright, break through to a layer above,  
where trees have branches but the ground is blank.

*If it started with the eyes it certainly couldn't be because she's  
alone.*

Rainforest seeds came packaged rough in the mail  
one day, and were never planted. No place for vines among  
wires.

*No place for jars on tables in worn gray boarded rooms.*

The moon really whispers quite a lot of things, but it won't  
tell her why the paper. It's really quite unfair, moonplanes  
are so much money, can't try and get it out of the other side,  
even by persuasive coin flips.

No oil wasted.

They only try to take you out if you know.

Fences are made to be vaulted over, if you can.

*She gave all of her refrigerator boxes addresses, none of which were  
her own.*

Disappointment bile writhing in stomach and climbing up to  
chest, a burn that gets hard to taste, staring into the plum-  
meting vault... Reality tests the gag reflex.

*Which was fine because there was only one refrigerator box. First it  
went the long ways, overtaken inside by couch cushions and all the  
toys in the apartment. And when the sides sagged, and the horizon  
went up, someone noticed*

*All the toys were sharp  
and ballpoint pens*

*tend to explode in Africa.*

Cracked the glass of clock, my fist went through the hands.  
Used to feel like maybe I could do that in school while  
I was holding my breath.  
To see how long I could do it. To help make the minutes  
pass.  
Put ghost numbers in the shell of a grandfather.

*So many fights with trusty siblings, rows of smiles on either side,  
look exactly not like you.*

Before Africa, I'll hit up the Midwest.  
Someone I knew was born there. She never got the  
chance to go back.

A gray mailbox stands in a sea of white. There is a driveway  
that leads to a gray house.

Recognition.

*This is your nightmare story.*

*What makes one wavering vantage view more  
valid?*

*I know.*

*Fuck you. I am as real as I feel like being at  
any given moment.*

The crayon candles could not burn bright enough so she  
could forge her name in the slate so instead she cried and  
watched the tears evaporate before they hit  
a thing any else

*And the cats with wings grew tentacles and locked down the name  
chalked gray board walls, twining even around the white picket  
fence stuck up around nothing but piles of half-rotted leaves.*

There is still dirt on my knees from how high I climbed.  
Cigarette sparks sprayed across wet road in rear  
view mirror.

Pure aesthetic for the dying of embers.

Last little dust-puff cough.

The best part is watching your mother die of cancer.

*Turned into spined vines, twitching and hissing, just, ever so ...  
slightly.*

She didn't understand that spaghetti was cheap. Juice was  
not, which is why it is farther out of reach from that damn  
cart-seat.

Card houses are all the multiplication tables ever  
made for.

*Years of obituaries received by blog.*

There's a  
fucking

pot of gold

if

you dig a hole big enough  
(at the end of a rainbow.)

Probably diamonds really. Either  
way, you're digging

to Africa, not to China.

Twilight FADES to dawn. Only time for thoughts of sleep.

*Because it all starts with the eyes, there they are in the jar again on  
that damn shifting table that can't decide if it's a cog or a stop.*

I don't understand how the rest of you aren't always  
walking through your own ghosts.

But then sometimes I can see them, static blurs walking  
up stairs.

Peripheral figures that vanish 'round the trunks of  
trees.

*There they are again*

*There they are again*

*Their they r a gin*

*Their they are a gin*

*There they aren't again*

*Because some things just*

*It all starts*

Medieval peasant girl pissed because she can't help put out  
the fires standing up.

*With the eyes*

Reading graffiti

*Who's going to see what.*

*Who's gong to say what.*

*Who's gone to say what.*

*Who's going on?*

*Who's gong?*

*Who's gone?*

The winged cats grow scales  
To weigh out who is worthy

And if you don't get past the sphinxes and the snakes and  
the pirates you want to become...  
(who mailed that coconut, address written on the  
side?)

there is no talking to the man in the moon.

*There are eyes in the glass jar on the floor and on her belly she lays  
making toe prints in the dirt.*

Stupid childish metaphors when we can blink out with just  
that mischievous glint ...

*there in the jar*

*Smoke from shredded tires*

Hell, inertia or static. Whatever gets me fucked.  
Medieval chick wants a cock.

*Where does it become hunger to be consumed?*

Please buy both the glow in the dark condoms AND the  
glow in the dark jesus. For your own safety.

Ecstasy can sometimes be found, blue, in the carpet or  
the grass. The marking is of your own choosing.

*Instinct to apologize for not feeling angry. For not feeling  
guilt.*

Two hippies pus-popping a toad to trip talk about homeo-  
stasis and crack rocks.

No? How 'bout spiking the coffee.

Into your arm.

*Playing musical chairs alone on a stage, she is talking, not singing,  
maybe sing-songing or just rambling*

But it's hard not to see after awhile.

Fucking spinning

Glass doors

Flaps can't turn them back

But it's hard not to see after awhile.

Moon waning

Mood waning

Wax eyes, one'd only be wishing

Lies. Everyone wants to be plastic.

Fuck plastic. Africa.

*After awhile I can see what she tricked herself into forgetting.*

Sleep deprived driving makes for speech muttered toward  
all the vehicles

*in the way.*

Of gauze by static guise

*It all started with the nightmare. She's talking to the eyes.*

## Birth, War, Now

S. D. Bassett

There is birth.  
There is war.  
As blood dries,

there is  
patricide,  
matricide,

fratricide,  
infanticide,  
feticide.

Please,  
won't you be  
my bride?

You there,  
trying to hide,  
swallowed up

in a flood tide  
isn't really  
suicide.

We may all  
just be  
along for the ride.

All the politicians  
lied, religions too  
by this have dried,

and media is not  
our guide.  
Should science

be our confide,  
with it's  
liquified,

gasified,  
bromide,  
insecticide,  
herbicide,  
glyceride,  
hydrazide,

methoxide,  
peroxide,  
rarified,

specified,  
quantified,  
triglyceride?

(Don't forget  
hydrogen  
cyanide.)

Before you get  
too terrified  
or horrified,

please come sit  
by the fireside.  
Look at the sky

wide eyed.  
Travel deep inside.  
Let your spirit glide,



leading you to  
the other side  
where there is

no great divide  
between you  
and those

you've loved  
who have died.  
Never fear

breaking your stride.  
Life is not  
for the stratified.

And with all that  
you cannot say,  
I haven't tried.

## Unwanted Inheritance

Adrian S. Potter

One summer, my father swallows depression. It camps in his throat as an emotional refuge. Family members take turns trying to pluck it out with elongated objects — tweezers, tongs, needle-nosed pliers. We touch it, sometimes, but never remove it, so it persists. Eventually, everyone pretends it doesn't exist, except for me. I hear depression lingering whenever he screams at us about trivial things. Nobody else notices how it slinks around the periphery and rattles inside his esophagus. All day, it sings the blues. Through birthday parties and vacations and graduations. All night, his depression sleeps with barely a peep and survives on menthol loosies and self-loathing. No one can convince me that it isn't real. That it isn't there. That it isn't scheming to crawl out one night, out of his mouth and into mine.

## Meditation During a Mask Mandate

Adrian S. Potter

I wake up and morning suffocates my soul.  
I draw the blinds as dawn's silence grows

deafening. I tentatively ride the commuter train,  
walk past buildings, and remain a CDC-sanctioned

distance from the guys wearing power ties  
and scowls like corporate merit badges.

The flight of pigeons, the sad encampment of tents  
in the park, sidewalk vendors hawking counterfeit

purses, and endless litter all hijack my hopes. A lucky  
man on a street corner gets to sing his blues. This city

is ghosting me, gradually drowning itself in a sea  
of gentrification. There's this dream I have in which

I love the world, and it chooses to love me back,  
sometimes, like a disgruntled spouse. I explore it

from start to finish, like how my fingers touch a new  
library book. There are no limits, only wind. Like you,

I was created out of desperation. Like you, I was baptized  
into the religion of optimism, blindly pledging allegiance

to the vague existence of better days ahead. Head in the  
clouds, hand over my heart. Hand over my foolish heart.

## Covetous

Adrian S. Potter

A weatherman predicted raindrops  
that forgot to fall this morning.

They aren't hanging heavily  
in the sky's swollen belly;

the clouds remain barren mothers,  
pregnant only with possibilities.

And the plants pleading for  
precipitation don't symbolize

anything, despite my tendency  
to give meaning to the meaningless.

Disenchanted by false forecasts  
passed off as sure bets, squirming

under the burgeoning uncertainty  
of the future, I foolishly yearn

for the allure of sketchy promises  
and the makeshift comfort of lies

only to be left empty-handed,  
my soul grinding into nothing.

Outside: it might downpour  
or limp towards drought.

Flowers may bloom or wither  
away. But whether it's a storm

front or a miracle, I will continue  
longing for all that I cannot possess.

# Open Graves

Grace Lundeen

my body is the plains of a cemetery.  
graves opened haphazardly lay overgrown with time,  
filled in but still visible.  
before i shed my clothes or begin a date,  
i explain my empty graveyard state.  
it's not "the" talk but it's one i must give  
every partner before we uncover ourselves.  
pitiful eyes assure me it doesn't change how they feel.  
well, one didn't. his gaze tore me open,  
solidifying the ugly i knew myself to be.  
i hate who i am, what i've become.  
shielding myself from the watchful eyes of life,  
a body with a disclosure statement, unable to just-  
be.

i forgot about my state the first time i exposed my torso  
and her eyes locked on the unmarked graves.  
we stood there in a stone-still dance with  
hollow words stumbling past our lips.  
that night she left with a silent goodbye, texting me later to  
explain she was just surprised, nothing more.  
she didn't need to explain.  
our next encounters were rigid, she crept carefully so i  
wouldn't crack.  
but it's hard to shatter when you're already in pieces.

i then remembered to give my Viewer Discretion Advised  
speech.  
he smiled weakly and looked away.  
despite the disgust i felt when i was with him, i stayed.  
at least he tried to hide his repulsion towards me, right?  
i couldn't be still for more than a few minutes, hating the feeling  
of his hands on me- but never on my stomach,

he didn't like the feeling of the ridges.  
he asked if i was "done with my depression" so i was "normal"  
again.  
i was too weak to leave him.

then you came along. i assured you we wouldn't last,  
that i was a ticking time bomb.  
but you pulled me in by my waist  
kissed me gently and said you wouldn't mind getting caught  
in the blast if it meant being with me.  
i fall asleep in your arms. you wrap around me like my coat  
on a cold day,  
cradling every part of my body. holding me while I unravel  
in your bed.  
when i showed you the graves littering me, you didn't look  
away.  
You didn't stare, you just observed. carving a mental  
picture,  
a beautiful headstone of the person you cared for  
to remember me when i became still. it was never about my scars;

they were as natural as acne or body hair to you.  
although my graveyard state saddens you, i've never  
wanted to hide,  
to tell crests to disappear.

just as flowers are placed by graves, sadness can be beautiful, too.  
the nights are peaceful the stars sigh above us,  
silent observers to our bubble of time.

*First place winner, 2023 Anita (Sarkees) Bahr Award for Student  
Creative Writing*

# Ghost Town

Arystan Jurgens

## I. Grandma

Date of Report (mm/dd/yyyy) 10/15/2019	Time of Report 9:23 AM	Date(s) of Incident (mm/dd/yyyy) 10/14/2019	Time of Incident From 10PM To 12:53AM
Last Name Clarison		First Name Jane	Middle Name Vera
Any Aliases N/A	Sex M or <input type="checkbox"/> F	Date of Birth (mm/dd/yyyy) 12/5/1999	Height 5'4"      Weight 122.6 lbs.
Telephone: home (415) 385-2948	Work N/A	Cell (712) 829-4729	Email jane.clarison@eryxuniversity.edu
Emergency contact Sharon Clarison	Emergency contact telephone (712) 482-4893	Best way to safely contact victim Home phone #	
Victim demeanor observed at time of interview (select all that apply) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Afraid/Fearful <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Confused <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Shaking/Trembling <input type="checkbox"/> Other (describe) _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Angry <input type="checkbox"/> Flat Affect <input type="checkbox"/> Tearful/Crying <input type="checkbox"/> Calm/Controlled <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Nervous/Agitated <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn/Quiet			
Are there any injuries? (If yes, detail in narrative)			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Y or N
Does the victim report pain? (If yes, detail in narrative)			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Y or N
Were weapons used to hurt/injure/threaten? (If yes, detail in narrative)			<input type="checkbox"/> Y or <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N
Does the victim believe she/he may have been drugged? (If yes or unsure, detail in narrative)			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Y or N
Did the victim consume alcohol within 24 hours of incident? (If yes, detail in narrative)			<input type="checkbox"/> Y or <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N
Did the victim voluntarily take other controlled substances within 96 hours of incident? (If yes, detail in narrative)			<input type="checkbox"/> Y or <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N
Has sexual abuse by suspect been ongoing? If yes, how long?			<input type="checkbox"/> Y or <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N
Any other known or possibly victims? If yes, list names and contact information			<input type="checkbox"/> Y or N unsure

“Mom?”

My daughter stood in the kitchen, hair falling out of her bun. Tears stained her face and her legs trembled so hard the floor creaked.

“Jane,” I gasped. I had not seen my daughter in two weeks since coming home from the hospital. I felt my own eyes fill with tears as I jumped up from the couch. I wanted to hug her, to protect her from this nightmare. She flinched when I reached for her.

“I...I...think I might be...”

“No, this can’t be happening...this can’t be happening!” Jane cried. She didn’t want to take a pregnancy test right away when she told me. Now, she held the little white stick in her hand, the plus sign outlined in blue on the screen. I stood in the doorway, unable to control the tears pouring from my eyes as Jane shouted, “Why? Why me? Why!”

Jane angrily threw the stick across the room, watching it clink onto the tile floor. She took fistfuls of her hair and pulled, throwing herself to the floor. I watched, not knowing what to do. I had never seen Jane so angry. She screamed at him, at the coffee shop, at the barista, at herself.

“Jane...Jane...” I whispered as I lowered myself to the ground. I took Jane into my arms as she shook and trembled. She screamed at the ceiling, rattling the light fixture above us and sending searing pain to my own eardrums. We sat like that for hours. I just held my little girl, letting her cry and scream and shake, for as long as she wanted.

\* \* \*

<i>Birth Certificate</i>
This is to certify that <i>Jackson Arthur Clarison</i>
Weighing <u>7</u> lbs. <u>3</u> oz. was born
On the <u>21<sup>st</sup></u> day of <u>July</u> in <u>2020</u> at <u>2:46 PM</u>
To <u>Jane Vera Clarison</u> and _____

## II. Younger Jackson

“You’re nothing like that *beast*, Jackson. Nothing like him,” my grandmother used to say to me. When my mother was still alive, I used to believe her.

When I was a baby, Mom was different. She held me and talked to me. I remember when she did my hair and sang songs to me. Mom and I would go to the park on sunny days, watch movies inside on rainy ones. She let me sit on her lap and hold her hand. I always slept in my mom’s room with her, under a light blue comforter and her teddy bear snuggling next to me. She looked past my emerald eyes and my cheesy smile that reminded her of *him*. She saw herself in me, in my blond curls and on the little blob of tan skin on my left arm, identical to hers. My mom wanted to save that part of me, and not the ghost of *him*.

That all changed when *he* was released.

“Good behavior,” my ass.

I was five years old when my mom started drinking. I didn’t understand back then. I didn’t understand why it was bad, the colored liquid in various glass bottles seemed to make her happy. “It’s just one,” she would say. Over the

next year, one a night would turn into two, and two would turn into three. Grandma Sharon would have to take me to school after nights Mom drank.

By the time I was eight, Jane had turned ‘one’ into ‘too many’ as Grandma would say. Grandma told her she couldn’t drink in front of me anymore and then Jane locked herself away. She didn’t let me sleep with her anymore. Tears stained my bed sheets the very first night I lied alone in my room. Grey walls and no teddy bears to comfort me, I transferred to the prison where she wanted to keep *his* part of me.

After a couple of weeks, Jane started going out at night to drink. Grandma Sharon couldn’t stop her from leaving the house to drink. Jane would come back late every night, stumbling blindly around the house, usually with a bottle in hand. Sometimes she would come back yelling gibberish and collapse on the living room floor.

“Why does Mommy sleep on the floor?” I asked the first time I woke in the morning to Jane on the floor with a broken glass bottle next to her.

Grandma sat me down at the table, “Remember how I told you something bad happened to your mother before she had you?”

I nodded.

“That bad thing, it makes her sad sometimes and she goes out to try and make the sadness go away. When she comes home, sometimes she forgets where her bed is, so she sleeps on the floor,” Grandma tried to explain. I was twelve. It didn’t make perfect sense, but it was easy for my young mind to grasp.

\* \* \*



Luhula County Court Report
Disposed 3/12/2032 - 3/18/2032
Drug & Alcohol offense: Jane Clarison, public intoxication, \$120.50; Gordon Matthews, possession with intent to distribute, Jeffrey Cunningham, possession of a controlled substance, Hudson O'Brien, driving under the influence - third offense, \$1291.50
Speeding: Vernon Howard, \$117.50; Rylee Decker, \$117.50; Billy-Joe Sheldon, \$117.50; Gabrielle Rasmussen, \$117.50; Kerry Hines, \$117.50
Seatbelt violation (\$25): Everly Barclay, Leyton Ibarra, Ted Gardner, Bobby Milner, Rita Travers
Overweight on axle (\$196.82): Keith Robbins, Caitlyn Boone, Adam Ryan

### III. Jackson

“Grandma, what does ‘drunk’ mean?” I came home and asked her one day. She sighed, looking down at the floor. She sat me down and brought out a police report. She explained what really happened to Jane. Grandma then told me that she drank alcohol to deal with the memories. When she told me that I felt all the air in my lungs disappear.

She wanted to forget the memories of him, but in turn she was also getting rid of ours.

From that moment on, I tried to make her happy. Although, she made it hard. She continued to drink and lock herself away, not even saying ‘hello’ when she would stum-

ble out from her room in the morning to make coffee. When I was fourteen, I got into an argument with her.

“You should really come to one of my games, I scored 23 points in the last one!” I excitedly told her. She held a bottle a vodka in hand, eyes barely open.

“Yeah, yeah...s-sure buddy,” she slurred. I frowned, my excitement draining from my face.

“But you can’t come to the school drunk, Mom,” I nervously said. It had been so long since she had talked to me.

“Well then, I’m...n-not coming,” she stuttered. She rocked back and forth on her feet, trying to keep herself from falling over.

“Not even for one game?” I pleaded.

“No,” she answered quickly.

“Come on! It’s one game, Mom!” I groaned

“No! I d-don’t...h-have to do anything,” she slurred, taking another long drink from the bottle.

“Why do you always have to be drunk! I wish I wasn’t your son!” I angrily shouted at her.

“You aren’t! I am not your mom!” she shouted back, “You are...not...my son! You, you are the...spawn of the...d-devil!”

Jane swung the glass bottle around and hit the corner of the kitchen countertop. The bottle shattered and vodka splashed on the tile floor. Grandma came running.

“What is going on?!” she exclaimed

That!” Jane shouted, pointing at me with the bottle neck still in her hand, “Is not my son! He will never be.”

Jane huffed and stumbled out the front door. I looked at Grandma with wide eyes. Then I knew that she was talking to him. His emerald eyes, his cheesy grin, and his stocky build; all the things he passed to me. No matter what I did, she would always see him. I was the ghost of the monster that hurt my mother.

Jane locked herself away for a week after our fight. She didn’t even come out to make coffee or leave to drink more. The house grew quiet as Grandma and I continued living

our lives. When she finally came out in the middle of the night a week later, she decided it would be her final night.

I didn't cry when I found out. I didn't say anything about her at the funeral. I watched as women in black dresses and men in suits mourned. I didn't feel anything. I stared blankly at the wall behind her casket, a dull orange. Like her yellow room at home, something inside of me said that color was Jane's way of telling me she was at peace. Before I left the funeral, I slipped a note into Jane's casket. Something I never got to tell her.

*Jane*  
*Mom,*

*I'm sorry.*  
*I'm sorry your world was so dark,*  
*And I'm sorry I didn't make it better.*  
*That I couldn't make it better.*  
*Maybe loving me was the reason you couldn't love yourself.*  
*I hope you find happiness, wherever you are.*  
*I'm left here alone and afraid to say, maybe you'd be happier*  
*with someone else.*  
*Maybe you would've had a better life with a child you actually*  
*wanted.*  
*I'm sorry I wasn't that child.*  
*I still love you*

*Second place winner, 2023 Anita (Sarkees) Bahr Award for Student Creative Writing*

## Nightmares of the Lakota

Dallas Kelso

### Lakota Translations:

**Uŋčǐ --- Grandma**

**Iná --- Mom**

**Wanáǵi --- spirit**

**Lalá --- Grandpa**

**Uŋčǐ Maka --- Grandmother Earth**

Just a sliver of sunset remained as I turned off I-90 onto Highway 73. The small town of Kadoka provided a sense of security – no reason to be afraid, but during the remaining three hours of my trip home, civilization was scarce with each tiny town that did appear run-down and ghost-like. During the day, this route is scenic and full of beauty as the rolling hills turn to tanned buttes carved by the wind and rain. Driving these winding roads is serenity. A breath of fresh air. But, as the sun fades beyond the horizon, this enchanting vision mutates into scarlet knives jutting out of the surface and the canyons become abysses. *A fireless Hell.* These are the Bad Lands. A place I grew up to admire and fear. A place filled with secrets and haunting tales of the past hidden behind thick blankets of shadows.

Tonight, the shadows have conquered the moon, casting the entire area in raven-colored darkness save for the few feet of highway the dim yellow beams of my suburban illuminate. It's silly to be afraid. I know that, but the stories I was told as a child have my heart racing like the prized thoroughbreds at the Kentucky Derby. Their hooves pound the dirt track just as my heart pounds heavily against my chest. I am the jockey with a tight grip on the reins, willing the engine to go faster. Yet, if I were to go faster around the winding roads, I would lose control, ultimately, landing in

a ditch—stranded in a nightmare. Instead, I settle for the speed limit and the antagonizing long drive. The low growl of the engine and the soulful energy of the Beatles bring a small amount of comfort but the screaming howls of the wind rip that peace away.

With each shriek, I am yanked to the shoulder of the road and reminded of the horror stories of a banshee that is said to haunt the canyons of the Badlands. My uŋčí's raspy voice floods my brain as another howl echoes throughout the car. *Her cries chill the blood of all who encounter it and would not have at the sight of a mountain lion or rattlesnake. A chill crawls up my spine, causing a shiver. She rests on a hill with her hair billowing around her in a hypnotizing trance, daring her victims to ask a question.* The fact that my iná is usually a skeptic of my uŋčí's stories makes this tale even more terrifying, for she has witnessed the horrid shriek while pulled over at one of the buttes.

Turning up the radio in an attempt to drown my nerves, my voice mirrors Ritchie Valens singing La Bamba as the terrifying countryside passes by in a blur. The melodious repetition of roughly 75 beats per minute lulls my anxious brain into a carefree trance, synchronized with the beat. Soon my only concern is the road ahead of me.

Suddenly, the flash of a shadowed figure along the highway breaks my relaxed stupor, and I am reminded of the many ghost hitchhiker stories. Ghostly figures—some faceless—suddenly appearing in the car even though the vehicle never stopped. Quickly glancing at the rearview mirror and finding the figure gone, tension fills my chest. I'm afraid to look in the backseat or even next to me in fear of finding a ghostly passenger. *Lost souls are what they are. Wanáŋi. Some good and others with bad intentions.* Relax. Just relax. But I can't because I know these are more than ghost stories.

*It was late at night, and I was just getting off my shift. There was this section of the road that passed by a graveyard. It was always real spooky 'cause no cars were on the road that late. But as I passed that graveyard, I felt the car move like someone jumped in real fast. Another shadow on the shoulder. I never stopped*

*though. Gone as fast as it appeared. The air got real cold and chills just ran through my body. I blasted the heat, but it was still freezing. More chills ran through my body. I could feel the back moving like someone was trying to get comfortable. I was scared 'cause I could just tell it was bad. Don't look. I just started praying, shouting for the Holy Spirit to remove this Wanáŋi. It didn't leave though. It stayed there for 'bout four miles until I came up on the other graveyard. I felt the car lift like it had left. Probably needed a ride to visit his friends.*

Her voice would always lighten at the end of the story like she was trying to break the tension—or her fear—with a joke. I never dared to ask my uŋčí how they became lost souls. Maybe they wandered too far into the Badlands in search of the Stronghold, or some other dark force got a hold of them? Whatever it was, I knew I didn't want any part of it for fear of becoming just like them—lost. No direction for my life. Just stuck adrift, forced to wander around hopelessly.

My fears can't be relinquished with some joke. The sharp air remains, as does the feeling of being watched. *Don't look.* I couldn't even if I wanted to; I'm too scared. Knowing that I'm only a few miles from Martin calms a few of my nerves. There's security with the artificial light provided by the small town. Even if it's only a brief interruption from my fears, I welcome it with open arms. Then 12 miles to the Nebraska border—my finish line. Crossing it would mean I outraced my fears, that they couldn't reach me since I wouldn't be on the reservation any longer.

*Your lalá was on his way back from visiting relatives in Omaha late at night, eating sunflower seeds to help keep him up. Driving down highway 83 was dangerous, even during the day with all the potholes and small shoulders. You couldn't take your eyes off the road without wrecking. Focus on the road. Well, he dropped the bag, and when he reached down to grab 'em, he took his eyes off the road. In that briefest second, your lalá said he almost hit this man walking along the shoulder. Another shadow in the rear-view mirror. It was weird cause he said the man just appeared outa*

*nowhere, but he pulled over to ask if the man was okay and if he needed a ride.*

*The hooded man got in the pickup, and grandpa asked if he was headed towards the rez. The stranger only responded with a yes-like grunt. Lalá started driving, trying to ask the man 'bout himself, but he never spoke. Just stared out the window. Don't look beyond the road. A real uneasy feeling came over lalá like something wasn't right. Little while later the man finally spoke, telling your grandpa to stop. His voice was low and husky, scraping like nails on a chalkboard. The unsettling feeling seems to be my second skin. They were in front of a dirt road leading to one of those old boarded-up houses outside Valentine, NE. I can't escape. The stranger got out, turning to shake lalá's hand and that's when he saw his face. Parts of it were missing like his flesh were torn apart, except for his menacing grin. Faster than hell, your lalá sped off, shaking with fear. Even when I get off the rez, I know the fear will stay with me for the remainder of the trip. Fear knows no boundaries, and neither does discrimination.*

*Worn homes with boarded windows, old Dorito bags in the gutters, and copper-skinned relatives come to mind. Images of my reservation. Home of a tribe that used to stand as tall as Black Elk Peak before their land was stripped from them, and they were condemned to live on reservations. Instead of being known as a great, noble and prosperous nation, they are now only known for the issues that plague the Pine Ridge Reservation: being one of the poorest counties in the nation, heightened suicide and homicide rates, missing people, poor housing conditions, lack of healthcare, a high unemployment rate, substance abuse, and poverty. My people have been cursed. Cursed to endure an eternity of wandering, like Wanáǵi, searching for our Lakota identity that was poached from us, turning the culture into a sin. A one-liner for crude comedians.*

*It all started with land. The colonizers' incessant need to dominate everything Uŋći Maka blessed the Lakota people with. There's an old rusted 1950's Plymouth roaming the reservation backroads. A ghost car with no driver just appears out of nowhere with blinding headlights. It's determined to run travelers*

*off the road to their demise – equivalent to the colonizers instituting treaties that limited my people's rights to their sacred land, forcing them to live lives filled with cultural depreciation.*

*I'm not a little girl anymore. I see that these stories are more than ghost stories. They are an anthem for the Lakota people. Each narrative conveys their pain and hesitation about the future, for each promise made to them was broken. The Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868 are proof of such. I now recognize that my fears are greater than mere ghost stories; I'm afraid. Afraid that it is too late. Afraid we have evolved too far from the true Lakota virtues to ever implement them back into the culture. Afraid that the culture is lost forever, and so are we.*

*Third place winner, 2023 Anita (Sarkees) Bahr Prize for Student Creative Writing*

## The Red Shoe

Saige Anderson

Dull stars,  
coated by clouds.  
Nature's nightlights  
suffocated by  
rolling thunder.  
The moon trapped  
behind a wall of mist,  
unable to illuminate  
the sea thrashing below,  
its depths a darkness that  
accompanies death.  
Waves capped in white  
ricochet off rocky cliffsides,  
merciless as misery.

Hidden amongst the  
water's push and pull,  
a single red sneaker  
bobs amongst the waves,  
flashes of color popping  
up here and there.  
Laces once tied by  
scarred hands, now tinted  
brown, float aimlessly  
around the flooded sole,  
stained by miles of  
torment trekked through.  
Isolated, lost by the foot  
that bloodied it, that  
plagued it with pain.

Under the waves, the  
screaming of the wind  
falls to silence. The  
beasts of the deep  
plunge their teeth,  
ripping fiercely and  
pulling down towards  
oblivion's awaiting jaws,  
to the cold that numbs,  
where it's too late  
to be saved. But  
over and over the shoe  
resurfaces, still alone,  
forced closer and closer  
to the jagged rocks of the  
towering cliffside until its  
inevitable imprisonment.

Bitter sea salt hangs damp  
in the air, one that leaves lips  
chapped, lungs gasping, and  
throats burning. The wind  
whispers now, carrying  
secrets of those lost as  
waves continue to crash.  
Even as the sky beckons  
the shoe back towards  
the dangers of the sea,  
it stays, a red mass caught  
between the sharp edges of  
the rocks – a warning to all,  
a reminder of one.



## Holocaust

Saige Anderson

The wind pulls me away from those who raised me. They brought me light but now we head towards the dark, as if the sun itself has ceased to burn.

The wind won't let me join them. They file into a line separate from mine as my bones themselves rattle beneath my skin.

"Go this way," whispers the wind. Dragging me back when my feet try to wander away. It pushes me to the ground, screaming into my ears—a gust so sharp I let loose a shout of my own.

A stinging pain shoots its way through my limbs, like bolts of lightning electrocuting me as my knees hit the ground. The wind doesn't like when you fight back, it whips harder in return.

I try to remember my faith, to stay true to it all. But the blood dripping from my ears when the wind howls and squeals that I am wrong floods my mind, washing away my prayers.

A strong burst of the wind, cold on our bare skin, shoves us into the large shower. My hands quiver in this sea of people but at least I'll be able to wash that blood away.

But now I wish for the wind to return. For even though it threatened me, it was better than this stagnant air. I can't breathe. A chorus of coughs echo across the walls as I sink to the ground.

Death sings a happy song, stretching its hand out to cup my cheek. In the warm breeze much gentler than the torrent I leave behind me, the glow of a yellow star now fades into the dark.

## The Cup

Hannah LeMair

The other day as I went to wash a cup  
I held it up real high and felt like smashing  
it into the tile instead. In my head  
the act was already done, the  
ceramic shards already one  
marvelous explosion of  
defiant sound in  
a world  
too

*quiet*

for my raging,  
pounding heart. I'd start with  
the cups then perhaps the plates too;  
forget the memory of a broom or  
what the future may store—  
the cupboards have more.  
My hand raised to  
strike, the cup  
ready to

...soar

It's over.

*Stop.*

The cup survives another day.  
Lucky I'm grown up and  
lucky they say that adults  
don't allow themselves  
to blow up and adults  
certainly don't  
throw cups.

# One, Just One

Wynn Sandman

*after Margaret Atwood's "The Female Body"*

## 1.

Here, in this crazy place that locals call "high school," we see a wild teenager! This one's a female. You can tell by her skinny jeans and newly formed sense of insufficiency. Ooooh! And would you look at that? A young male has just entered the shop classroom! Let's see how the two interact.

As you can see, our young male has already begun making moves on his female. See how he crowds her workstation? This is his way of showing her that he's interested. Now, if you use a careful eye, you may notice that she is slowly backing away. What does this mean, you ask? She is sending a very subtle and intricate invitation for him to continue his pursuit! Our young male receives this message loud and clear, hence moving on to the next stage of his complex mating ritual. "I know!" he thinks, "I'll woo her with my extensive knowledge of small engine mechanics!" What a smart young teenager! Despite the young female's competence in this unit of small engine repair, our male seizes his opportunity and begins to scrutinize her work. In doing this, he exhibits his generosity and helpfulness. What a kind young male!

Uh oh! The young female seems to be slightly annoyed by this thoughtful gesture. How will our teenage male respond? By insulting her! This evolutionary tactic consists of calling the young female names, such as "fat," "stupid," and "ugly." Although executed with brilliance, this tactic, too, fails to woo the female teenager. But does our young male give up that easily? No!

Just before the sun sets on another great school day, our young teenagers encounter each other again in physical

education class. Will our teenage male finally win over the female? Let's watch and find out! At this time of year, the "high school" physical education class has just begun its tennis unit. Our young male first begins by revisiting his usual rituals of crowding the female teenager's space and insulting her in front of their peers, making sure to critique her form and athleticism when possible. When this doesn't work, our male is forced to move on to new strategies. As the young female is talking with a friend, our teenage male recognizes his chance. With one big movement, our young male whacks the buttocks of the female teenager! Oh, how playful he is! Now, let's see how she responds... WOAHH! What a roar from the young female! She, unfortunately, does not seem too interested, signaling for him to back off. Aw, our poor young male. But it's all right, friends! I'm sure he will find a better partner to pursue! One that can appreciate his adorable sense of humor.

## 2.

I haven't seen my family in so long. Extended family, I mean. Our last reunion was probably back when I was about five, or so. As soon as we walk in, everybody is saying the same couple of phrases, "Oh my, you've grown so tall. Honey, do you see how tall she's gotten?" and "The last time I saw you, you were just about knee-high on a grasshopper. Har Har Har," and "Wow, you're gonna be taller than your mamma here soon." Yes, a girl does tend to grow from age five to age twelve. I really don't mind the comments though. I am taller. It's kind of cool. I'm several inches closer to adulthood.

Who to talk to? Who to talk to? I see my dad and brother and walk their way. They are with a person I've never seen before. The tall, middle-aged man is watching my family play chess. I am invited to sit, and Random Older Relative begins asking me about myself. "How are you liking school?" he inquires. "It's been good! I'm honestly just looking forward to high school." I chuckle in reply. He asks

me more questions about my interests and the subjects I'm taking and the sports I play. It feels like I'm definitely talking about myself too much. "I play softball. My brother actually plays baseball. What team are you on again, Mark?" My brother opens his mouth to answer, but before he can speak, Random Older Relative interjects, asking, "Oh, softball, huh? So, what position do you play?" Mark and I share a glance, acknowledging that this interruption was slightly unusual, but agreeing to ignore it. As the conversation progresses, this pattern repeats itself many times. Random Older Relative has no interest in what Mark has to say. I am unsettled but shove the feeling aside and continue talking.

"Do you want to dance?" Random Older Relative asks. It is a tradition at our family reunions to have a dance floor dedicated to polka dancing, being that we are all of Finnish descent. Internally, I am disinterested, but externally, I give a polite "Yes, please." As we move toward the dance floor, the hairs on the back of my neck begin to stand. What's wrong? Why do I feel so off? As we get into position to start a schottische, I feel even worse. Somehow, a dance that normally includes only linked arms and held hands has turned into one where Random Older Relative has his hands on my waist and the small of my back. He pulls me in too close and does not break eye contact once throughout the course of the song. As soon as the band stops playing, I quickly express my thanks for the dance and hurry away. I am horribly uncomfortable.

After this weird interaction, I spend a lot of time jumping from table to table, talking with relatives all by myself. I really am so adult now. I never could have done this at the last reunion. As I finish my conversation with a nice older lady (maybe a great aunt or a distant in-law?), I see a familiar face marching in my direction. "Save me another dance?" Random Older Relative asks. I say, "Sure. I might sit for a little while, but the next dance is yours!" Every part of me hopes he won't remember this promise, but every part of me knows he will. I need a game plan. Ask Mark to go outside for a while! That's what I'll do!

My brother and I play frisbee in the yard outside the event center until the sun goes down. With every minute that passes, a little more relief sets in. I don't have to dance with Random Older Relative! That relief leaves pretty quickly upon hearing his voice behind me. "What have you been doing out here?!" he yells. "W- We were just playing frisbee." I stutter in response. "So what? You were just going to forget our dance?" Random Older Relative replies. "No! Not at all! We can go in and have our dance right now." I say, in a small, shaking voice. "No. We can't. The band is packing up for the night. Real nice." He turns on his heel and stomps his way back into the reunion. I have never felt so mortified in my life. That is until it came time to say goodbyes, of course.

The process of leaving our reunions usually entails two incredibly long lines, one line remaining still while the other moves toward the door. My family is in the moving line. Standing between my brother and mom, I slowly make my way through the crowd, dreading my inevitable meeting with Random Older Relative. The moment finally arrives. As I look at Random Older Relative, I am immediately confused. I study every part of his face but can find no remnants of his former anger. He greets me and then initiates a hug. As we lean in, it almost appears as if he's going to kiss me. OH! He is going to kiss me! I swerve at the last minute, causing Random Older Relative's kiss to land sloppily on my cheek. Still in disbelief, I attempt to shorten the length of our embrace. As I begin to pull away, he holds me in place and whispers a phrase I will never forget. Nestling his mouth close to my ear, he softly says, "It's okay. You can kiss me." I pull back in fear. He smiles at me, then acknowledges the next person in line.

### 3.

It is Halloween. The group is waiting excitedly. The group is waiting excitedly to walk the haunted trail. The group walks the trail. The group gets scared while walking the

trail. The group laughs while walking the trail. The group finishes the trail.

The group must wait for the other group to finish the trail. Girl and the group are waiting by rows of haunted houses for the other group to finish the trail. Girl does not want to go into the haunted houses. Girl and the group get scared of the pretend monsters walking around the haunted houses. Girl and the group go into one of the haunted houses. They have fun in one of the haunted houses. They get scared in one of the haunted houses. They exit one of the haunted houses. Girl and the group are giggling outside of one of the haunted houses. Girl and the group are waiting by the tall grass outside of one of the haunted houses. Girl feels something grab her ankle through the tall grass outside of one of the haunted houses. Girl sees a hand.

Girl sees a hand wrapped around her ankle. Girl sees a pale, white hand wrapped around her ankle. Girl tries to pull away once. Girl tries to pull away twice. Girl tries to pull away a third time but loses her balance. Girl loses her balance and falls to the ground. Girl gets increasingly scared when she loses her balance and falls to the ground. Girl becomes frantic. The hand remains wrapped around Girl's ankle. The hand remains wrapped around Girl's ankle and begins to squeeze tighter. The hand remains wrapped around Girl's ankle and begins to drag her toward the tall grass outside of one of the haunted houses.

The group grabs Girl's wrists. The group grabs Girl's wrists tightly. The group grabs Girl's wrists tightly and pulls her away from the tall grass outside of one of the haunted houses. The hand remains wrapped around Girl's ankle. Girl is scared. Girl is very scared. Girl is scared enough to kick. Girl is scared enough to kick the hand that remains wrapped around Girl's ankle. Girl kicks the hand hard. Girl kicks the hand hard enough to make it lose the grip that had remained wrapped around Girl's ankle. The hand lets go.

Girl's ankle hurt. Girl's ankle hurt very badly. Girl's ankle hurt very badly as she limped toward a floodlight. Girl needed the floodlight. Girl needed the floodlight to feel safe.

Girl needed the floodlight to feel safe from the hand that had remained wrapped around Girl's ankle. Girl and the group made it to the floodlight. Girl and the group made it to the floodlight and looked down at Girl's ankle. Girl and the group looked down at Girl's ankle to find it covered in blood. Girl was embarrassed by her fear. Girl was embarrassed by her fear of the hand that had remained wrapped around Girl's ankle. Girl smiled and laughed to disguise the embarrassment she felt about her fear of the hand that had remained wrapped around Girl's ankle. Girl saw Mom. Girl saw Mom and smiled. Girl saw Mom and stopped smiling. Girl saw Mom and bawled.

In the next week, Girl's ankle bruised. In the next week, Girl's ankle bruised and scabbed. In the next week, Girl's ankle bruised and scabbed and hurt. Girl did not sleep. Girl did not sleep on the night of the encounter. Girl did not sleep well in the week following the encounter. The world felt unsafe. The world felt unsafe to Girl. The world still, sometimes, feels unsafe to Girl. Yet, We go on.



## Death is a Final Peace

Abigail Muller

The man was standing on the chilled shore, gazing out over the gentle waves when the dog approached. His concentration broken, he looked down at the scraggly thing—mid-sized and scruffy. Altogether rather ugly, like a stuffed toy subjected to too many wash cycles. The creature peered up at the man inquisitively before relinquishing his prize by the man's bare foot. A dress shoe, nearly worn through in the sole and filled with briny grit. Algae already festered at the laces, threatening to overtake a moldy colony clinging to the smooth side. The man stooped over, resting his elbows on bony knees before the thing. It seemed oddly familiar, he knew not how. Like it belonged in a memory, but the memory of another man, plucked from a scrapbook tucked away in a dusty attic.

He gingerly picked up the shoe, cradling it in the crook of his pale arm. He glanced up for a reaction from the dog, but it was already gone, trotting down the rocky beach and toward a dull gray outcropping that stuck out from the jade sea like a tumor. The man opened his mouth to call after the dog, but finding no voice, stiffly hastened along the trail of pawprints. At last staggering around the corner of the rocky formation, he discovered the dog seated placidly at the side of a strange figure, the figure of a man.

Or what had once been a man. For the man was now at the mercy of the sea, slightly bloated and tinged in ghastly shades of green and gray. He looked to the man's face, saw the glazed over irises, now almost indistinguishable from the liquidy whites. His lips appeared an icy blue, an unholy smile that extended past his mouth to crawl up his cheeks. They were slightly parted, revealing a snaggle tooth encrusted in sea salt and grime. The man instinctively reached to graze his own snaggle tooth with a shaky finger, the filthy fingernail of the same jagged cut as the dead man's. He reached down then, extending his fingertips to brush dark

locks, now matted and crusty, from the mottled gray forehead. He found his hand tracing down, delicately brushing the eyelids into a final resting place. But his hand continued beyond the eyelids, down to the neck, where a thick rope had been fastened about the man's throat.

The rope was sturdy; it could have perhaps been considered new if not for its marriage to the water. It encircled the man's neck near the nape, knotted meticulously in the back before trailing down to the sand. It ended there, in the sand. Its jagged end had become frayed, as if it had been tested by the elements and overpowered. The man looked to the corpse's face once more. There was no sign of struggle, no lines of tension written into the rotting skin. Only tranquility, serenity perfected in the smooth lines of youth. A peace in death.

A smile played at the corner of the man's lips. Had this man died gladly, found greater meaning in the journey of ending? *Perhaps. Perhaps it is true*, thought the man to himself. *Perhaps the world is mere shadows and dust, a projection of ash on a filthy lens*. He chuckled to himself—his mind was empty, devoid of concept or burden—yet he understood the man's pain, understood his wish to free himself. He gently laid the shoe down next to the man's bare foot and was met with the tongue of the dog, licking a trail up his gangly arm and smooth face and into his salty, dark hair.

At this, the dog stood once more, trotting onward down the desolate beach and toward a distant tree line that stood guard over the pebbles, a legion of giants against the ocean's battering. The man gazed down one final time at the corpse on the shore and then turned his face out to the sea. The sun dazzled off of the turbulent waters, but he was not pained to look. No, there was no pain in this, no feeling of illusion. He saw everything, felt everything, heard every song in the world as it poured over the waters and flowed through his body. How wonderful it was to be there in that moment, free of the shackles of figment. He turned to follow after the dog, padding down the sandy beach as though through a dream. In his wake, only the delicate pawprints of the dog could be seen in the sand.



# Modern Vampires

Jordan Heisler

December 18<sup>th</sup>, a Saturday, the not so distant future

During northern winters, the sun never quite reaches its highest point. It almost moves horizontally across the sky so that shadows appear long for the entirety of a day. Dawn and dusk are nearly indiscernible because they are only hours apart. Northern winters are dark early and often. They are cold and gloomy even in the absence of clouds. Sure, it snows sometimes, and for a few days, the countryside brightens under a cover of undisturbed white. But it is not long though before the temperature drops well below freezing. The wind kicks up, and snow turns dark, dirty, hard like ice.

Allison Murray stared into these conditions from behind her car windshield as she returned to her hometown, Sascha, South Dakota. She had left for school in the Twin Cities only a few months prior. Her new metropolitan home, while similarly cold, contained a certain heat, a certain liveliness not present in the countryside. She shifted in her seat, trying to rid her back of stiffness after hours of driving. Dmitri, her boyfriend of the past few months, laid on the floor of the back seat, covered entirely by a reflective blanket. There wasn't much sun to speak of, especially after noon, but Dmitri couldn't tolerate any of it. He had this strange condition that had become common within major American cities. Dmitri had contracted it during a one night stand a little more than a year ago. That was the most common way to catch it – though it could be transmitted through any other exchange of bodily fluids: kissing, shared needles, biting. While not exactly life-threatening, the condition – known commonly as Sundowners' Disease – was accompanied by several symptoms which made normal living difficult: odd

dietary habits, sensitivity to sunlight, and impulsive behavior – to name a few. For this reason, people in less evolved places called guys like Dmitri “vampires.” Allison recalled that when news first broke about the spread of this mysterious condition, the locals in Sascha conjured wild tales of evil, bloodthirsty monsters. Many – including her own father – had even begun to stash holy water and crucifixes in their bedside drawers. Each resident, it seemed, had at least one wooden stake hidden within their home, just in case Sundowners made its way to the countryside. It should be noted, though, that all of these precautions were beyond ridiculous. Despite all of the hullabaloo among the residents of Sascha, people with Dmitri's condition were human, of course. Vampires don't exist. Allison knew that even if the smaller minds in her own town did not.

By the time Allison's car pulled up to the Murray family household that evening, the sun had fully set. She thanked the Lord for small mercies. Her mother, Laurel, sat on the porch, awaiting the return of her baby girl. Allison's father, Karl, was on his Lay-Z-Boy recliner watching the news – no doubt a program on the degradation of American values. To this point, Allison was unsure of the welcome she and Dmitri would receive from either of her parents. She had obviously told them about Dmitri and his condition. She had to – for his sake. As she expected, her mother had responded warmly, but Allison knew that was her default setting. She simply didn't know how to be confrontational. It was a quality that had been completely bleached from her DNA. Her father, Karl, on the other hand, was repulsed. Though he never said as much to Allison directly, she could picture him storming around the house cursing under his breath the way he did at any minor inconvenience. Karl had, of course, heard about people like Dmitri on the news: “The scourge of city life. God's punishment for immoral acts. The embodiment of sin,” his favorite newscaster had called them. In his mind, no boy could possibly be good enough for his daughter, unless, of course, that boy was Christ himself.

When Allison wheeled her suitcase up the walkway to the house, her mother rushed to greet her. Laurel pulled her daughter into a warm hug. She kissed Allison on both cheeks then embraced her once more. Laurel had always been affectionate when it came to her only daughter; however, since Allison had moved away, Laurel felt a glaring void in her life that no one could fill. Now in Allison's presence again, Laurel felt compelled to be close to her, to feel their heartbeats synchronize. When Allison finally squirmed from her grasp, Laurel turned to the young man who stood nearby. She thought him odd-looking, not unattractive necessarily but, perhaps, off-putting. Allison had told her that he was a bit older – in his mid-twenties – however, he had a remarkably youthful look about him. He was thinner than she imagined and taller too, though he slouched rather substantially. His skin was free of wrinkles, and he was ghostly pale, without even the slightest hint of blush on his cheeks.

"And you must be Dmitri!" Laurel said. She reached toward him and squeezed his shoulder tentatively. "Alli has told us so much about you. Come in. Come in." Laurel grabbed the suitcase from her daughter's hand and began to head into the house.

Within a few hours of the pair's arrival, Laurel announced that it was time for everyone to retire to their sleeping chambers. It was, after all, Saturday. "Can't have all of us sleeping through Mass tomorrow morning," she said, cheerily. Not everyone, though, was so anxious to sleep. For hours, Dmitri lay awake on the basement couch listening to the seconds tick by on a nearby grandfather clock. These days, he spent most of his sunlit hours in bed while others were active. As a result, he spent a lot of his waking hours alone in thought. During times like these, his mind wandered. It filled with strange thoughts, with passionate sexual fantasies – waking dreams in which he had strange, beast-like powers, an insatiable appetite, an uncontrollable stamina. These thoughts were so real, so present that he sometimes felt he couldn't control himself. Such was the case tonight when, against what he supposed was his diminutive, better judgment, he

rose from the couch and made his way to the main floor. He snuck by Karl, who had fallen asleep on the living room recliner, and made his way up the stairs toward Allison's room. His feet were so quiet, his breathing so utterly silent, that a superstitious onlooker might have sworn that he was levitating, that he hadn't drawn breath at all. But, of course, that would have been ridiculous.

"Can I come in?" He whispered into Allison's door, which was cracked open just the slightest bit. He nudged the door open further and entered to find Allison awake, eagerly awaiting his visit.

#### December 19<sup>th</sup>, a Sunday, the Lord's Day

Allison had awoken early, even after her late-night rendezvous. Of course, Dmitri had retired to the basement sometime while she slept, satiated. The first few times they had been together, she lay awake for hours afterward – too much dopamine, she figured – but recently, sex had become something less of a monumental thing for her. She first experienced someone in that way when she was 17, but few outside of her close friends had any idea. She had learned from an early age that discretion was the best practice here in Sascha. People here looked at a girl differently when they knew she was active. So, when she decided she was ready, she approached a boy in her class named Garrett, who she thought would be gentle and quiet about their affair. They explored each other curiously that first time, and in their subsequent meetups, they gained confidence and practice. She learned to tell him the things she wanted, and he learned to last longer than a few minutes. Things proceeded that way for much of their senior year, quietly. The two of them weren't quite a couple, not in public anyway, but there was something unspoken between them. Then, they graduated and went their separate ways. They didn't break up, not really. He had never been her boyfriend in the first place, nor had she been his girlfriend.

Not long after their split, Allison met Dmitri who, unlike Garrett, was experienced, learned, metropolitan. To him, sex was something that just happened between people, as inane as conversation. He and Allison had slept together on their first date and on pretty much every date since. That, Allison thought, had been fine for the first month or so. After all, Dmitri's impulsive nature made him unpredictable, exploratory, fun in the ways that Garrett didn't know how to be. However, she recently she wondered if sex was all they had in common. With most people, this might have been okay, Allison figured; however, every night with Dmitri presented a certain risk. She wondered what her parents would say if she contracted his condition. She had heard the things her father sometimes said about experienced women and imagined them, instead, directed at her. She pictured each word from his mouth like an artillery shell and wondered how many she could survive before they obliterated her entirely. Surely a boy with whom she had little connection would not be worth such assault.

Allison tried to shake these thoughts from her mind as she climbed out from under the covers and walked to the vanity. Without much thought to the contrary, she began to prepare herself for Mass. Her reflection in the mirror informed her that Dmitri hadn't shown an ounce of restraint the night before. He had this bad habit of kissing, sucking, biting on her neck when they were in the throes of passion. Last night, he had left a crimson splotch the size of a half-dollar. Make up wouldn't cover it, she figured, so she grabbed a green bandana that she often wore in her hair and tied it like a kerchief around her neck. A temporary fix, but maybe she could get through the week without her father noticing.

Karl, after all, was the protective sort, the punitive sort, vengeful and unreasonable. He was a religious man through and through, molded by generations of patriarchal men. A father, in Karl's mind, was responsible for the moral wellbeing of his family. To him, the failings of a wife and daughter reflected poorly on a man's ability to shepherd his

flock toward salvation, so he couldn't afford to be lenient. The stakes were simply too high. And so, on Sundays, he marched around the house with the demeanor of a drill sergeant, barking and hurrying and chastising his wife and daughter all the way up the church steps. As long as he drew breath, Laurel and Allison would attend Mass every week. They would be on time, and they would sit in the first row. He would make sure of it – no matter if they were sick or apathetic or disinterested – because to not do so would be a failure on his part as a churchgoer and as a man.

That particular Sunday, the Murray family maintained their usual position amid the congregation. They listened as Father Gary lectured about living an ideal life in the eyes of the Lord. He said that the holiday season was the perfect time for everyone in Sascha to break with their sinful ways. He said casting off old habits required diligence and focus but that the rewards would be plenty in the afterlife. Though Allison tried to dissociate herself from the priest's suggestions, she still felt the chafe of Dmitri's unshaven face on her chest and neck. The places where he had touched her the night before suddenly stung with guilt, as if some part of her couldn't shake the weight of Catholic authority. She figured her own upbringing had conditioned her to feel this way after she had done something so patently forbidden, but perhaps she genuinely felt the light of divine intervention, God telling her to avoid her ongoing sins of the flesh.

#### December 20<sup>th</sup>, a Monday evening, at dinner

Dmitri didn't eat much of anything during his time in Sascha. For one, he had adjusted his diet so that he was more or less a vegetarian at this point – not for any moral reason, though. He just found that his condition rendered some food inedible. Meat wasn't the only food that disagreed with his stomach, though. Pungent dishes often caused him problems as well. Garlic, for instance, now made him violently ill. So, when Laurel heaped a mound of spaghetti and marinara onto his plate a few days after their arrival, his stomach

began to churn loudly – begging him to reject the poison set before him. None of the Murrays seemed to notice though as they had begun to bicker amongst themselves. Allison had just told her father that she didn't want to be a nurse anymore, that she now wanted to pursue a women's studies degree. Karl's face had turned red at the suggestion, but he didn't immediately burst with anger the way Allison had expected he would.

"Women's studies?" he asked, his tone thick with superiority. "What do they teach? How to properly burn a bra?" He had heard of "new age women" and "feminists" on his television programs. Certainly, his little girl hadn't become the liberated type, the type to attack the bedrock of American society, right? The two of them went back and forth, each thinking they might succeed in winning an unwinnable argument. Eventually Karl turned to Dmitri. "What do you think about all this? You really want to be married to a feminist?" Karl asked him, trying to find allies to aid his cause.

"I dunno," Dmitri responded, honestly. He didn't know that he and Allison were to be married. Girls, he figured, dated all sorts of guys in college. He imagined that he represented the first in a line of men Allison would eventually bring home to meet her parents. He also didn't quite know what feminism was. Sure, he posed as a feminist at bars when trying to bring women home, but it wasn't something he had put much thought into.

"Dunno, huh?" Karl continued. "Laurel, you hear your daughter?"

"Karl, dear, she can be whatever she wants," Laurel said timidly, refusing to look up from her plate. In all honesty, though, she hadn't paid much attention to the conversation. She was a woman with a rare and untapped imagination. In another world, she could have been a famous author or a painter, a brilliant artistic mind. She frequently lost herself in vivid imagery, in fantastical movie scenes which were infinitely more entertaining than her reality. For the longest time, Laurel hadn't been a sexually adventurous person. On her wedding day, her soul had been as clean and white as

her dress. She had only ever been with Karl and, despite her creative tendencies, she figured it wasn't her place to question the kind of love that he gave her on a given night. Then, one day, she had an epiphany, an awakening like a dam rupturing. Ever since, she had difficulty paying attention to any given moment for longer than a few seconds. If she wasn't actively speaking, in all likelihood she was imagining herself in the arms of a man. She had a particularly bad habit of imagining Father Gary, Sascha's resident priest, folded into all sorts of sexual positions – even though he was more than two decades her senior. At Mass that Sunday, she had imagined herself coiled around Father Gary like a snake, mating like wild beasts in the jungle. Now at dinner, she pictured the two of them kissing so passionately that their teeth scraped against one another.

Karl squinted in her direction, now. He had never liked it when she contradicted him. It wasn't her place. His reading of the Bible told him that a couple united in marriage should be equally yoked, united in body, mind, and spirit. Without a word, he aggressively excused himself to the kitchen. Laurel also pushed herself from the table and moved to start clearing dishes. But, she remained quiet, still lost in thought. Her mind had moved to another man, James Schultz, who had died in a farming accident the year before. Together, they were reenacting her favorite scene from *Ghost*.

### December 21<sup>st</sup>, a bustling Tuesday night

People all around the region knew the lone bar in Sascha, the Duck, as something of a hot spot. Here, the townsfolk had tequila on Fridays and whiskey on Saturdays. Then, they'd visit St. Michaels for wine on Sundays. The bartender, Tom, had a reputation for serving drinks to whomever was tall enough to see over the bar. For that reason, many nights – and especially on weekends – Sascha would nearly double in population as various underage patrons poured in from the surrounding towns. So, it is, perhaps, not surpris-



ing that this is where Dmitri and Allison found themselves on an otherwise sleepy small-town night.

Allison, who mostly abstained from drinking, now found herself excited at the prospect of imbibing some cheap booze. She hadn't seen some of her closest friends since she had left Sascha in the fall. Carrie, Allison's closest confidant, had planned to go to school in the Cities as well, but then she had gotten pregnant with her boyfriend Greg's baby in the fall of their senior year. Now they were married with a kid. No time for school. Barely enough time to sneak away to the bar one night a week.

Initially intoxicated by each other's presence, the Sascha High grads shared round after round after round at the bar that night. Meanwhile, Dmitri mostly drank water. To him, the conversation was too filled with inside jokes to be comprehensible, and as a result, he began to dissociate from the joy of the rest of his party. He also found himself irritated with his date — who was too lost in drink to realize his discontent. In his mind, she seemed decidedly less complex when around these particular people. To him, she had always been a city girl, a metropolitan figure born in the wrong place. She had come across as a person with big ideas, with forward thoughts, a unique taste in arts and culture. Now, he thought maybe he had been mistaken, as if his lust for her had clouded his better judgment. Frustrated with his lack of attention, he eventually took himself to the bar to order another pitcher for the table. And, when he found the conversation with the bartender, Tom, more inviting, he ultimately stayed, assuming that Allison wouldn't notice his absence.

When it was eventually time to head home, Allison, Carrie, and Greg uttered incoherent farewells to one another outside the bar. Then, they went their separate ways, stumbling in opposite directions down the empty streets of town. On her way back to the Murray household, Allison initially swerved playfully from one side of the street to the other, but when she noticed Dmitri's more somber demean-

or, she stopped, self-conscious that he was silently judging her.

"Noticed you were talking to Tom quite a bit," Allison slurred, trying her best to fill the silence between them.

"Yeah, nice guy."

"You know he likes to get little girls drunk," Allison continued, reckless, uncontrolled words spilling from her mouth without her consent. "He has a reputation, you know. Not sure I'd want to hang around with him if I were you."

"If you say so," Dmitri said, grabbing her hand. He quickened their pace, hoping to minimize their conversation. He had liked Tom after all. They had been able to talk with one another, as in truly talk. No forced pleasantries, no drawn-out pauses. It felt natural, like conversing with an old friend.

"Hey, D?" Allison started again after a moment of silence, her tone noticeably different than moments before.

"Yeah?" Dmitri responded.

"Are we for real?" she asked. By now, she had wrestled her hand free of his and had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Their early days had been filled with parties and hook ups and indiscretions. It had been a honeymoon of sorts — the way all new relationships are — and Allison had enjoyed every moment of it. But, now that they were far away from the city lights, she saw Dmitri differently than before, a stranger. She felt her hesitations about him more strongly, and without the buffer of sobriety, she heard them materialize into words for the first time.

"What do you mean?" Dmitri tried to grab her hand again.

"Are we real — I mean — as a couple?" she asked again, doing her best to evade his grasp.

"Jesus, Alli, what kind of question is that?" he swiped for her again.

"No, wait. I just — we don't talk. I was thinking about it, and I can't remember a time we had a serious conversation, just us, you know?"

"I dunno, Alli. Can we talk tomorrow when you're more — you know?" Dmitri fumbled for the right words but



never quite found them. He swiped for Allison's hand one more time – to which she finally responded in open frustration.

"I said stop!" Allison flailed to evade his grasp, and in doing so, the back of her hand caught Dmitri across the face. At this point, the whites of his eyes turned red, and his pupils dilated. He grabbed at Allison's coat, and in her attempt to avoid him, she fell backward into the street. She landed flat on her back, her head snapping downward onto the gravel underneath with a crunch. The trees and homes nearby mocked her while Dmitri stood overhead, a suddenly violent presence in her eyes. His teeth had morphed into fangs, his face twisting and contorting into an animalistic snarl. In response, Allison did what anyone might do when in the presence of a monster. She pushed herself to her feet again and began to run in the opposite direction of her parents' home.

"Alli, wait!" Dmitri called after her, but she was gone, her footsteps echoing down the abandoned street. Even if he could catch her, he figured, she wouldn't likely go anywhere with him at this point. Defeated, full of regret, he returned to the bar. He knew he couldn't very well sleep at the Murray household if Allison wasn't there. Luckily, even after two in the morning, the Duck remained open. Tom was still serving drinks to eager patrons. Dmitri was thankful for that small mercy because, suddenly, he had a craving for whiskey.

#### December 22<sup>nd</sup>, a Wednesday, the morning after

Allison awoke to the screaming cries of Carrie and Greg's baby. Her head felt tight, almost swollen, last night's alcohol still corrupting the blood in her veins. She lay next to a toilet in an unfamiliar bathroom. Her phone – which was on the floor nearby – told her that she had two unread messages. One was from Dmitri, apologizing. The other was from Carrie. Apparently, someone had seen Dmitri leave the Duck with a strange girl in the early hours of that morning. Word

gets around quickly in towns like Sascha. "I just thought you should know," the message read.

Carrie agreed to give Allison a ride home after some more bickering with Greg. Nothing was more than a few blocks away in Sascha, but Allison couldn't bring herself to walk. Carrie's car, though, smelled like stale cigarettes, and Allison struggled for the whole of the ride home to stop the world outside from spinning. She put her hands on the dash to stabilize herself. She stared at her feet. Her mouth welled with saliva. She knew what was coming.

"Not in the car!" Carrie begged.

"Drive faster," Allison managed – though every sharp turn and untamed pothole already threatened her shaky disposition.

The short time spent between houses felt eternal, and when Allison spilled from the vehicle into her parents' yard, she retched instantly, all booze and bile. Ignoring her parents entirely, she made her way up to her room – or more accurately the adjoining bathroom. And, for much of the afternoon that is where she slept and heaved and cried – not for Dmitri though. She didn't have the wherewithal to even think about him, what he had done and with whom. No, she cried like one does when begging for death.

Dmitri felt a different sort of sick when he awoke that same morning. His nighttime companion had left the blinds open, and the rays of the sun had begun to burn his skin. It wasn't a spontaneous combustion like in those silly vampire films. Dmitri's symptoms were more like an intense sunburn, accompanied by boils and blisters. Today he also felt nauseous, exhausted, dehydrated, guilty. He crawled from the bed and began to close the shades. The girl in the room with him stirred ever so slightly. She hadn't dressed herself after their foray, neither of them had. He sluggishly moved to find his scattered clothes from around the room: underwear, a sweater, tattered skinny jeans.

A clock on the bedside table told Dmitri it was just past eleven in the morning. Best to let the woman – whoever she was – sleep as long as possible. He dreaded the thought of

asking to “hang out” at her place until the sun went down. So, Dmitri crawled back into bed, silently, trying not to move the mattress in any capacity. He pulled the blanket up over his companion’s shoulder, right up to the marks he had left on her neck.

That evening, Dmitri walked home through blocks of identical houses, all dilapidated, all crumbling. Each had broken and missing shingles from harsh weather. Each saw its paint chip in more than a few places. Eventually, though, he found one he was looking for: the one with Allison’s car parked out front and his own belongings packed and waiting for him on the porch. He thought about trying to reason with Allison, about asking if he could stay, but instead, he grabbed his suitcase and wheeled it back to the Duck. He thought if anyone would take him in until he figured out a way back to the Cities, it would be Tom.

#### December 23<sup>rd</sup>, a Thursday

Allison felt better the following day – physically at the very least. Some part of her felt dirty even after a shower, like she had a stubborn grime clinging to her. She could still feel Dmitri’s body rubbing against hers, his lips on her neck, his sweat in her pores. She thought of him and the things they did. She thought of him doing those things with someone else. It hurt – but not necessarily because she was broken-hearted. She had often questioned the longevity of their relationship anyway. She was rather bothered by the fact that Dmitri could do these same things with just anyone. It made her feel replaceable, like he had kept her around to nourish some unfulfilled need. It was for this reason that Allison visited Sascha’s lone grocery store, the Kwik Mart. Garrett had worked the register there throughout high school. His parents owned the business, so he was something of a mainstay: stocking shelves, cleaning, ringing up groceries. Allison now hoped that he had come home for break, that he might be working shifts at the store to make a few bucks before his return to school.

When she entered the store and saw Garrett standing behind the counter, she abandoned any pretense of the reason she was there. She approached him directly, spoke to him bluntly, and within fifteen minutes he was “on break.” He led Allison out back to where he had parked his truck, and the heat between the two of them soon filled the vehicle. He unbuttoned his pants and pulled them to his ankles, and she took off her shirt. He fumbled with the clasp of her bra, and she undid the bandana that was still around her neck. “I’ve missed you,” he said, but Allison didn’t say anything back. He tried to climb on top of her, but her legs were bent at ninety degrees, and his non-slip shoes pressed against the car door. The angle was all wrong, so she climbed on top, ready to do what they had done many times before. That was, of course, until he saw the marks Dmitri had left on her neck days before.

In a matter of moments, they were dressing themselves again. “Look, I’m sorry, okay?” Garrett said, trying desperately to backtrack.

“I have a boyfriend, Garrett. I’m not sure what you expected.”

“I guess I wasn’t sure either.”

By now, Allison was mostly dressed. She pulled the bandana from under Garrett and tied it back around her neck.

“I just thought you’d be a little more hesitant to jump into bed with someone else,” Garrett said, pulling his own pants back up. He realized too late the cruelty in his comment, but before he had the chance to apologize, Allison had exited the vehicle.

On her walk home, Allison’s mind filled with venom for the various men she had known: her father, Dmitri, Garrett, even people like Tom and Greg and Father Gary. She resented them all. To her, they were broken and backwards people. To her, their lives – all their means of satisfaction – came at the expense others. They latched onto people and used them for fulfillment. As she approached the house, she couldn’t help but wonder what they would be if they weren’t able to sustain themselves on the blood of those

around them. Would they wither? Would they shrivel up and die like leeches without a host?

December 24<sup>th</sup>, the night before Christmas

Christmas Eve was a day for feasting in the Murray household. Laurel prepared a dinner of roast beef and mashed potatoes, green beans and yams and stuffing. She did these things without the help of Karl or Allison—the latter of whom had spent the entirety of the evening in her room. Laurel, though, was not one to complain. She had been conditioned to cook large meals on behalf of her family as her mother had done before. It was as much a part of the holiday tradition as opening presents. The Murrays celebrated as they did on Christmas Eve because Christmas Day was about the Lord, according to Karl. That meant it was a day to be spent in reverence. It was not about presents or food or sports. In fact, Karl insisted that, from Christmas Eve dinner until mass the following morning, the family should fast in preparation to receive the Eucharist.

“Alli, dinner time!” Laurel called up the stairs after she had arranged the dining room table. She had raised her voice intentionally so as to wake Karl who had, for the last few hours, been asleep on his chair. He stood slowly and shuffled to the table. He began immediately helping himself to the food that Laurel had dutifully arranged. He was so singularly focused that he didn’t notice Allison seat herself across from him. If he had, he would have noticed that his daughter had dressed herself rather formally for their holiday dinner. She had on a black dress, a cocktail dress—low in the neck, sleeveless, extending to the knee. It had a small cutout that revealed a fraction of her stomach just above her belly button. Not necessarily revealing, but perhaps risqué by Karl’s standards. It was her favorite article of clothing, but she hadn’t planned on wearing it while in Sascha. She wasn’t even sure why she had packed it.

“Oh my, Allie. Don’t you look nice!” Laurel put an arm around her daughter as she came back from the kitchen

where she had already started her post-dinner cleaning. It was only then that Karl looked up from his plate in Allison’s direction. He didn’t really notice what she was wearing as much as he noticed what she was not. Absent from her neck was the bandana that had been a mainstay in her recent attire. The marks on her exposed neck were dark, more the purple of a bruise than the red of blood.

“What are those?” Karl asked, though he needed no explanation.

Allison shrugged, innocently, a coy smile stretching across her face.

Karl’s reaction was not what she expected. He didn’t actually say anything in return. He just stared at her, his gaze shifting back and forth from her neck to her eyes. He formed countless thoughts that he wanted to say aloud, but some part of him couldn’t put them into words. After a prolonged silence, he just let out a sound that was something between a laugh and a shriek. He tossed his plate full of food on the table, grabbed his coat, and made for the door. Without much in the way of notice, he was gone into the night.

It was only now that Allison began to help herself to the food her mother had prepared. Laurel was still in shock, confused at the scene that had unfolded before her. She looked to her daughter, to the marks on her neck. Some part of her, she thought, felt something unfamiliar, perhaps a cautious pride? “Karl?” she called toward the door. She started to follow after him, but she stopped when she heard Allison’s pleading voice from behind her.

“Mom?” she said. “It’s okay. Let him be.”

Laurel turned back to the table, then glanced at the door one more time. After a short pause for consideration, she pulled her chair close to Allison’s.

“Merry Christmas, Mom,” Allison said, gripping her mother’s hand. Laurel responded with the faintest hint of a smile.

December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Day

Allison didn't sleep much that night. Lying there restless in her bed, she decided it best to leave before the sun came up. She had outgrown this place. That was obvious to her now. The previous night with her mother had been nice, but her father would return soon. Things would regress to their normal state. She saw no way around it. After all, her father had generations of precedent on his side.

Allison messaged Dmitri telling him to pack his things. Some part of her knew she couldn't just leave him in Sascha. She hadn't suddenly forgotten what he had done, but she wasn't petty. She pulled her car in front of the Duck which, even at five in the morning on Christmas Day, was somehow open and serving drinks. She walked in to find Tom behind the counter and her father seated at the bar. He looked like he was about to tip from his stool, and he probably would have without his firm grip on the the counter in front of him. From his appearance, Allison assumed that he had walked to the bar directly after leaving home the previous night. Dmitri was waiting in the corner, flipping through the records on the jukebox, trying his best, for the time being, to avoid Karl's obvious vitriol. Other than the whine of a warped Bob Dylan song that Allison didn't know, the Duck sat entirely silent. Karl squinted in her direction as she entered, trying to make sense of the blurred shapes around him, but he immediately returned his attention to his double whiskey. That was fine, Allison thought. To her, he was a man who hadn't spent enough time in silence, thinking about the ways of the world.

"D, come on, let's go," she said, startling Dmitri from his trancelike state. He turned and began to wheel his suitcase in her direction. He stopped next to the bar, however, and gave Tom a hug. Then, against his better judgment, he put a hand on Karl's shoulder and thanked him for his hospitality.

"Get your fucking hand off me," Karl responded without looking up. He slugged the rest of his whiskey and motioned to Tom to pour another.

For a moment, Allison looked at the three men and wondered if, under different circumstances, they would be different people entirely. Could her father have been in a punk rock band? Would Tom have been a world traveler? Could Dmitri have been a priest? Maybe, had each of them been born somewhere else, had different parents, lived in different eras, they would be strangers to one another and to themselves.

"Ready?" Dmitri asked as he reached the door.

"Yeah," Allison said. She waved goodbye to the drunken man at the bar. Then, she and Dmitri loaded their belongings into the trunk of her car and began their long drive to the Cities.

Not long after, Laurel awoke to a quiet house. Karl had not come home yet. She half expected to find him in his chair, sleeping off his anger from the night before. On the kitchen table she found a note in Allison's handwriting. As she read it, she couldn't help but feel conflicting emotions. She had missed her daughter over the course of the past months and knew she would miss her again. Yet, some part of her felt happy for the person she was allowed to be when away from this place.

Karl shuffled into the house as she read. He smelled as if he had found the bottom of a bottle. He began to stumble up the stairs, but then he stopped and turned to Laurel, steadying himself on the railing. "C'mon. Time to get ready for Mass," he said. Then, he continued up to the bedroom.

"Be right there," she called after him. She folded up the letter and walked to the kitchen. She tucked it away in a junk drawer until she could find a better place for it. Then, she wiped away the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes and began to ready herself for the Lord's Day.

Allison and Dmitri had been on the road about an hour when the sun started to peek upward from the horizon. Allison grabbed her sunglasses from the dashboard and put them on. The next few hours were shaping up to be unbearably bright.

“Hey, Alli?” Dmitri called from under his blanket in the backseat.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “For everything.”

“I know,” she said.

“What’s this mean for us?” he asked after a moment’s pause. His voice was filled with fear, with desperation. It was vastly different from what she was used to. He had always seemed so confident, so powerful when they were together, when he held her body against his. It must have been only now, Allison figured, that Dmitri realized he might find himself entirely alone with no one to help him occupy his sleepless nights.

Allison didn’t respond to him though. She didn’t really know the right words for that precise moment, and she figured Dmitri could stew in his emotions a bit longer. She turned on the radio to fill the silence of the car. A muffled voice sounded from the speakers, a jockey from some nearby town talking about the destruction of the nuclear family. The sun was gaining strength now as it continued to rise. As the light touched Allison’s skin more forcefully, she felt its caress warming her, burning her pale skin.

## Riverside Avenue

Cole W. Williams

and 9<sup>th</sup> forms an X, not a cross, we rented a home on the frontage road shadowed by towering highway walls hearing traffic pains and blows where at times big rigs broke jake brakes like shots fired, like automatics with waning motivation as sirens parted the sea – another day of delivering. We watched from the roof, from peeling shingles, and the sizzling heat, we smelled hashbrowns from Perkins, this was our corner for a hot minute – a corner existing long before Perkins and Zipps Liquors with the happy pack of Old Style, or Colt 45 Double-Deuce, we drank Schlitz in the shower, Old English 800, my my, malt liquor, kissing my fingers to Snoop Dogg’s cardboard cutout, newsprint’ed fingers from the City Pages and loose change delivered at the door – what used to be a route for indigenous travelers: *Riverside*: star path, river guide, and when they said the Perkins would close for good, how an elder lamented for this refuge of light and heat, for the star path was still alive, through heat waves, all the stop lights, light pollution, can you see it now, how much worth was in each one-dollar drink with seven cent tax and a clean bathroom – I walked Riverside every day toward Fairview and Children’s, toward campers seeking shade and stopped at the rehab center where compression socks dangled on display, O<sub>2</sub> tanks for cystic fibrosis kids I would ask to cough harder, back then I thought I could save someone – in front of the glass window I dreamt of all that saving – until I shifted focus and saw



## Cedar-Riverside, Minneapolis, Circa 1990

Benjamin D. Carson

“Dog-tired, suisired, will now my body down  
near Cedar Avenue in Minneap,  
where my crime comes.”

—“The Poet’s Final Instruction,” John Berryman

We small-town kids, refugees from the Dakota plains,  
screamed  
our way into one half of this twin city and, each in our turn,  
were forged by its streets and seared in the alembic of  
adolescent mania.  
From the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of a high-rise, flecked with Rothkos  
— fading panels of blue and white and red and yellow — and  
with a view  
of the Mississippi and the bridge from which Berryman took  
a fatal plunge,  
we blazed, shorn of sense, muddle-brained, and found  
company, our tribe,  
in the patients on the ward of Cedar and Riverside: Earthy B  
and his pyramid  
of televisions, Shorty Mac and his Night Train, and Ten Bear  
trading peyote for pot.

And it was on this corner where Phil, whose preferred poetic  
form was fists,  
failed to match wits, one flailing night, with a one-armed  
Ethiopian, who,  
having unscrewed his hand from his arm, stamped his  
prosthetic poetry of war  
on Phil’s deserving face, blue-black spondees on his cheeks  
and jowl.  
Enjambment.

And it was here, in a frenzy of insobriety, the contents of our  
refrigerator flew  
from the balcony as though we, the wardens of the ward,  
were feeding sharks  
from the bow of a listing ship, the hull vomiting up chum, a  
blitz of food-bombs  
raining down on rooftops, victuals for scavengers in a sea of  
concrete and noise.  
Pin joints, sustenance of a kind, hid under the microwave, an  
amuse-bouche.

In the foam and froth of youth, we, indignant spirits  
unbound, were hungry,  
fed by the urge to shape something, to name the rinds of  
waste that mottle  
the cityscape, to give rise to a poem in which we, the new  
arrivals, fresh flotsam,  
washed up as we were from a sea of grass, got to the heart of  
something, set the rhythm,  
the “I AMs,” to an unsettled life; and so it was here, on this  
corner, overlooking rooftops  
and the bridge from which Berryman took a fatal plunge,  
that we, for a time, lived,  
the place where Cedar meets Riverside.

## The Hole

Benjamin D. Carson

She stood staring into the darkness, as if waiting for it to speak, to reveal something about itself. This was the first time she'd seen the hole, the hole behind her house and the nothingness it cradled. She didn't know where it'd come from or who'd dug it. When she knelt close to its open mouth, cool air breathed her hair back, and she closed her eyes to listen. She felt a stone beneath her hand, rubbed it between her fingers, and then brought it to her lips. "Gone," she whispered, before dropping it into the hole. She waited, ear to its lip, and waited, hearing only silence in reply.

## The Trapping Web

Benjamin D. Carson

All of that is nothing to me, she says, reaching toward the sky, as if the gesture would free her from the bullseye. I will not look back, she says, craning her neck, the sting of salt in her eyes.

I'm out, she says, laughing, as if that too will leave her unencumbered, free of night sweats, the shadows that move in her room after sundown, saying, we are still here.

It's nothing, she shrugs, as the spider circles, spinning its trapping web around her legs and arms, her mouth. And she thinks: How lucky it is to unspool itself in thin pearls of only now, now, and now.

## The Final Cut

Benjamin D. Carson

I cut up a poem, I confess, and want to keep what is left,  
consonants and vowels like fingers and toes  
scattered on a highway. And I wonder:  
what if we didn't murder to dissect  
but to murder and dissect,  
left parts un-scrutinized, only sounds of a crime:  
a gurgle, a slashing of sorts, in the throat.

I moved my fingers across a scar on my lover's wrist,  
and over the ridges on her thighs, tracks to nowhere,  
and said nothing, just worried them, lines unreadable.  
Then, just above a whisper, she says, I dreamt of birds,  
a wake of vultures, picking at my flesh, and I await, await now  
the final cut.

## Reverberations

D.A. Hickman

Eyeing the country house with its  
scruffy yard, the lone redbud tree

with its bare soul exposed, I edged  
closer, steps precise, deliberate

Midday sun at my back, touching the  
flimsy door, pushing it wide

abandoned rooms rushed to greet me,  
mocking time, ordinary beliefs

Streams of lost years riddled the air,  
my resistance exhausting, useless,

yet succumbing made me nauseous,  
and I wanted to know why or how

even as a smothering sorrow stole  
each breath, and there was no way

to make the universe wait for me.

## An Excerpt from *Dog on Fire*

Terese Svoboda

The auctioneer uses his face. Some of them try not to, they move the skin around their lips while speaking the way a clarinet player puts danger into a tune, but not this one. He uses his face and works it.

Music does play in between each bid, however, clarinets and whatnot from the radio as if to make much of each little lot of mismatched silverware, each hardly worn Sunday suit and right tie. The things of a life are all clues to it. You put your arm up to your wrist into a bag of old shirts and my brother is inside, as much as a person is inside anything. But my brother's books — a lot of them — surprise everyone, their backs so unbroken his buying them at all is what's shocking. Most were collected from unread clumps lying around on the clean floor he always kept, with the book shelves used for the storage of everyday changes of outfit, for shirts, ripped and smelly.

Some shiny shovels go for what they are worth.

So many people come because he had four beans more or some less than others and they like to see how he spent them, or else they come to see what mourning looks like on this set of people. They all look like friends, friends from the feedlot, the kids from the Stop-and-Go, the lawnmower man, even the priest. They are good enough friends of the family that they think to ask when's your mother coming back, and I say next week as if I mean it. They and their wives bring nuts and bolts food, cake with impediments of raisins or actual pecans, hams socked with cloves. Everyone eats from their gifts and the others' while they stand inside, paddles up or down to the auctioneer, or turn over the stuff in bins on the sidewalk and get it priced. All of them walk around the fill the Shove-it boys left, who are not — what a relief — in evidence. Two of the Shove-it boys have fathers who are wealthy and, I hear from a neighbor, one of their father's a

cop, which is enough say in the town to have the making of the mound of fill in front of his place just an accident. There is one of the fathers now, kicking a cardboard box over to the fill. The younger boys like sliding down the mound on other cardboard, all the way to the soft spring weeds that have sprung up that we have beaten a path through. They slide down as if it were snow and not dirt.

The neighbors carry their curiosity close, like something that can't be exchanged but that they can't make up their minds to keep. Already they want to use the toilet or at least drink from his tap. My father doesn't mind. He's not sad about my brother right now, especially with all this turmoil in and out of the house. His job is to direct those who don't want to bid back out to the bins of clothes on the sidewalk. Over there, he gestures to Aphra, who has turned up late but is looking at the things on display in the bins as if they were drawers. I have found not a single thing that might be Aphra's inside, not a dropped pen with her initials on it, nor something with sequins for the bed. Did she clear out everything that might look like evidence before calling for an ambulance? Was he that tidy?

Out of one of the bins Aphra pulls a shirt of my brother's and goes behind a tree that the Shove-it boys have gashed, and tries to make the shirt fit over her. Of course the shirt gapes and loses buttons and seams until it is only right for the junk bin, until it is only right on her.

I watch through the window not far from the paddlers and the auctioneer's amp while someone takes her two dollars.

We have a Native American story in our family, one where we, or rather, the we that we were a hundred years ago, are looking out this same kind of window. Gallopers come up, not dressed well or overdressed in, say, feathers and makeup, nor are they making a lot of noise as if they are unhappy. They smile.

The Native Americans want bread.

They don't ask for the bread but we in the past have given it to them. We are not generous every day or even now,

we give it not because they might kill us – that problem has been dealt with, overdealt – but because we know we shouldn't have ever built towns at all where they ride, we should just be visiting. See you later is what we should be saying to them as if we are just passing through, but by then we've stayed long enough in their area to raise all of what goes into this kind of bread and we want to raise more. Not to mention having a good start on all the graves.

They want the bread. At least.

We see in close-up, giving them our loaves, that although they are not so painted, they have painted their faces not so long ago. There is paint where it would surprise you, on their horses too, to make them spotted. While their horses lift their feet and they put up their hands in a salute, we also see that one of them is not what he appears to be – a woman – but is someone with whiskers. After they gallop off, breadcrumbs in their beards, we figure out that the one with whiskers is also not Native American and has robbed a train – Jesse James. The delay he and his gang made with the bread caused the cavalry to miss them, to trot right on by.

Time was all these scoundrels wanted with our bread.

My brother didn't have more time, disguised or not.

No one walking inside, or down the aisle the bins make ask Did you find out why he died? They come for what's to be sold, and such a question's answer might force bids higher. The auctioneer quips with that possibility at the tip of his quick tongue – Coming up is the hot tub! – for sometimes people will pay more for the true taint of the body. Anyway, they don't so much as bid for everything as wait for the last item. Some of them want it but not everyone lives in a way that they could use it. This item is on blocks out by the garage where a new car would have been if he had had the money to buy one and no seizures. The crowd inside goes outside and floods over to the item. People like to inspect what my son had guessed correctly after the firemen came to put out its steaming because of the round emptiness they see when they lift the lid, that death. I tell my boy not to ever sit inside one because maybe he is predisposed.

My son opens the tub anyway, he's a big boy, he wants to see if the insides bears a warning, a label that on a mattress you are not allowed to tear off, but of course he is looking where everyone else has looked, to see if something of the body is somehow still in there. Four holes show where that label has been screwed off the way they do when it is a secondhand item, and no other label is anywhere else, either inside or out, not even the one warning pregnant women and small sweaty children about death deluxe in the amniotic waters of a hot tub. Nothing about seizures.

My brother had just left this tub at the time of his death.

But if he died from that hot tub getting him so hot his brain fried, the papers that we have of his death would have said so. They just say his heart stopped and it looks as if they mean it, although no one in this family has problems with his heart, and not him either that we know of.

People love the hot tub regardless. It is a grown up above-ground tub that shows you are above-ground with your wants and your wishes, just look at it. The auctioneer starts spieling. Someone who already has a hot tub but wants two, bids higher and higher against a large family who could use an extra so the littlest can pee in the other one. If he who just does shovel work can have a hot tub, then they of course need more than one. How much for his hot tub? Another one wants it just to have it and would put plants in it and say this is what happened in it.

We let them all bid. The money will go to a place in the country that keeps the country wild and undug, with his name on it. Or else my father will take it. He hasn't decided.

Soon someone loads it onto a pickup.

Not a mark on him and just out of the tub. No one believes that, but some believe that enough to want it and bid high.

My boy says he'll have to try one and I say some girl will make you.

Excerpted from *Dog On Fire* by Terese Svoboda by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. ©2023 by Terese Svoboda.



## The Photograph Album

Noreen Oesterlein

A high keen filled the room as her  
tears splashed on the pages of the  
family album with her not there  
in the early years of place and the  
birth of the baby who would  
be her sister with toddler toys  
and smiles.

Pictures of joyful inches grown in  
happy times all without her until  
her adoption photograph appeared  
on a page stark in black and white  
with a shaved head middled by a  
starved belly in front of the old  
orphanage building.

Her memories were as empty as her  
presence in the photograph album  
with no recall of a goodbye to her  
birth mother or the plane ride  
to a new home with a welcome  
and promise to love so she turned  
the page.

## Sin Line

Noreen Oesterlein

School year Friday confessions  
grades one through eight  
a procession of uniforms  
line along the pews.  
Steel eyed sentries  
costumed in black and white  
a synchrony of habits  
holy hands under scapulars  
fingering the rosary  
attention divided  
amid beads and penitents.  
Confession box in sight  
wrongs swirl in young minds  
the coughing fit  
the fake faint mask  
murmured communions  
in the search for sufficient  
sins to disclose to the Fathers  
hidden away in the dark.  
Examination of conscience  
reveal offenses against  
the eighth commandment  
thou shalt not bear false witness  
bless me Father  
for I have sinned.

## The Recital

Edward Voeller

The man in the foyer of the Center for the Performing Arts looked dispirited or unsettled. It was not his personal appearance necessarily—he was neat enough in his olive sport coat, ecru trousers, and necktie, but you could tell. It was his comportment mostly. He stood beside an entrance to the auditorium with his feet a measure ahead of him and his hips braced against the wall. He was clearly comfortable that way, hands in trouser pockets, but it seemed incongruous with the formality of the interior architecture of the new arts center. His posture made him look restless. His eyes gave him away too—his meandering focus. Head bowed slightly, he followed the mineral veins in the white marble and red slate tile floor. He studied the odd shadows cast on the floor by the irregular, pentagonal windows of the arts center. He watched music lovers straggle into the auditorium through the double doors next to him, and he furtively eyed the usher who stood opposite him at the doors with a handful of piano recital programs. His program he'd stuck into his coat pocket without looking at it. He knew his estranged daughter would be playing Beethoven. He had received an email announcement of the event.

The usher, white blouse and black skirt, occasionally fanned the programs like playing cards cards, and then collapsed the fan into a stack again. Now she removed a program from the top of the stack and handed it to a couple, ("Has the recital started yet?" "Not yet. A few more minutes."), and she pulled open a door to the auditorium for the elderly pair. Patrons seated themselves in the spacious place.

The man in the olive sport coat turned toward the usher. "Music student?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. "Handing out programs is the job of music students."

"Piano?"

"Violin."

"I love it."

"Violin?"

"Especially Fritz Kreisler."

The usher looked kindly at him. "You're not entering the auditorium?"

He responded with a silent rumination.

"You have a family member playing this afternoon?"

"My daughter. A Beethoven piece."

The usher opened a program and scanned it. "Oh, then she's playing a very difficult Beethoven sonata. She's very advanced." The usher looked up. "There's good seating up front," she said.

The man in the olive sports coat was agog to hear his daughter play. He'd not seen her for many months, but he would listen through the door. He didn't want the girl to be embarrassed by the sight of him and emotionally distracted from what she would be doing at the piano. She should concentrate only on her Beethoven, he thought. He was not going to miss hearing her play for anything. He had too many regrets in his heart for room for another disappointment.

The faint strains of a piano began seeping through the double auditorium doors. The man in the olive sport coat recognized "Musetta's Waltz" from *La Boheme*, "Memory" from *Cats*, "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Misérables*, and other familiar *morceaux*, and finally, the start of a Beethoven sonata. He recognized it from his own brief dalliance as a piano student. He looked over to the usher. She was gone. Maybe seated inside, he thought. He hadn't noticed her leave.

He moved to the double doors. There he had a myopic view of the scene through a very slim gap between the doors; the pianist was only a blur. He'd forgotten the name of the Beethoven piece she was playing, but she was wonderful. The man breathed deeply. His chest heaved. He felt the chill of pride.

The piece began happily, playfully. It was lively, fun. In his mind he saw his daughter's hands hopping all over the keyboard and fingers spanning impossible distances over keys. The Beethoven piece was joyful and optimistic, somewhat teasing, the man thought. Played perfectly by his daughter. His daughter! The man moved his fingers to the music as fast as he could over an imaginary keyboard in the pockets of his olive coat. He could not keep up with the speed of the pianist.

When the sonata came to an end, the audience applauded vigorously, and the man peering through the tiny gap between the double doors touched the finger tips of both hands together and applauded silently like that. He would surprise his daughter later that evening with a call, he decided. He'd tell her how beautifully she played. He wanted her to know of his pride and affection. Maybe it would be a first step in mending family relationships after a long period of alienation. He looked forward to hearing her voice. He was hopeful.

The man crossed the foyer and left the Center for Performing Arts bursting with pride. That's my DNA, he told himself. Well, maybe not all my DNA, he admitted. But without her, she might not be as talented as she was. An opportunity at his twelve-step recovery meeting that evening would allow him to share his story about his talented daughter. He'd show the group how he was working to bring his family together again.

\* \* \*

The twelve-step recovery group meeting followed its usual procedure. Attendees sat in a circle of steel folding chairs in a drab church basement, many sipping coffee from stiff paper cups, some scanning the bare church basement walls. The man in the olive sport coat, absent his necktie, sat giddy in anticipation. He'd get to boast about his daughter's piano recital in the Grand Hall at the Center for the Performing Arts.

An introductory moment of silent prayer began the group session, followed by business announcements, and a recitation of the twelve steps. Each member of the group read aloud one of the steps in turn from a card circulated among them. A self-introduction by a first-time visitor was next: a first name and an admission of alcoholism. Each person in the circle greeted the new member stating the same.

The story-sharing portion of the meeting followed. The man in the olive coat was first to raise a hand. He had prepared his presentation well. It was going to be the first step in reconciliation, he would tell the group. He'd mention the call he would make to his daughter after the meeting. His would be an inspiring story, he thought.

He was keyed up for this. He set his paper cup on the floor next to his chair. He stood and gave his first name. He related his experience at the Center for the Performing Arts. He omitted the part about listening to his daughter play through the narrow gap between the double doors. The members of the twelve-step recovery group would be impressed by his daughter, he'd thought, and they were.

"You're lucky," one member complimented. "You have a very, very talented daughter."

"Truly," another agreed. Others nodded.

Regarding reconciliation with his daughter and family, one member said, "Keep at it."

Another member asked what piece his daughter had played. The man in the olive sport coat removed the **recital** program from his coat pocket and opened it. "Beethoven Sonata 29 in B flat major, Second Movement," he read. And with that he now noticed that the pianist listed with the piece was not his daughter. His daughter's name was nowhere in the program for the recital in the Grand Hall. The man felt his face grow warm. He swallowed hard in front of his audience. He felt like he had been cornered. Silence overcame the twelve-step gathering. The group members began to feel uncomfortable.

The man closed the recital program and noticed on the back of it a list of pianists and their pieces for Mrs. March-

and's students in a smaller recital venue below the Grand Hall. He saw his daughter's name preceding "Moonlight Sonata" by L. Von Beethoven. He was completely emptied by this discovery, and the group in front of him saw it on his face. Many in the circle of chairs turned to sipping coffee. He felt heartsick. He had missed his daughter's performance. What'll I tell my daughter when I call? he thought. Do I lie to her? The members at the twelve-step meeting could see the man was crestfallen, and they applauded noisily to spare him embarrassment. The man slowly returned to his folding chair. He sat with his chagrin and took a deep breath. He thought maybe a gin and tonic would be good after the evening's meeting.

\* \* \*

As the man in the olive sport coat rose to leave after the meeting, two women approached him.

"How about coffee with us across the street," one of them said. "They have good cake, too," said the other.

"Oh, thank you," the man said. "I think I need to get back and call my daughter before it gets too late."

He knew he wasn't going to call his daughter, but he didn't want coffee to keep him up all night thinking about his disappointment.

## Need

Cheyenne Marco

Know who you are:  
praised piece of the bone break artist  
who loves to carve idols from the flesh of laurels.  
Find no danger in creation.  
Young wood yields all to the storm.  
Learn from that violent dance,  
And stretch naked into my wind.

## Reckoning

Cheyenne Marco

*for the Big Sioux River*

I.

Water washes overland,  
filling our veins with poison.  
Raindrops suck sin from soil  
and corrosion from concrete.  
They whisper deadly secrets of  
turbidity and turmoil.  
Maybe tomorrow they'll revolt.

II.

I sit on the riverbank and  
liberate my feet from a winter of socks.  
My skin aches  
for the icy caress of an open spring stream.  
What would happen  
if I broke the milky brown surface?  
Would I dissolve?  
I consider the chemical touch.  
I wonder at a world before  
consequence.

III.

Nature swims in circles,  
roiling to come out on top.  
She's no longer a warning but  
a reckoning.  
Destruction is a process that compounds.  
In the spring, the floodwaters rise.

## Spring Thaw

Cheyenne Marco

The sun killed my fake flowers,  
so we abandon the small space,  
suffocated by the loud furnace and aliens on TV.

We head for overland, finding freedom in the fields.  
Open spaces of shit and mud, shit and mud,  
turning toward the horizon like pleas and prayers.

Snagged on barbwire,  
you guide me to the right of the right of the right  
until I'm left at nowhere.

You unravel the hem,  
unweaving the shirt to avoid a tear,  
and I spin for you, dance to the hand you offer.



## Of the Seven Deadly Sins

David Allan Evans

### *Lust*

Some days, well past 70,  
he still has in his brain  
enough of it to run a train.

### *Anger*

Warning: fly into its trap and it'll wrap  
you in your winding sheet. Make sure to veer  
away quickly. Keep practicing.

### *Envy*

His backhand's better, I confess,  
if not his forehand. And yes,  
he's got a lot of money.  
But my love's the honey.

### *Gluttony*

Picture yourself 50,000 years ago,  
40 pounds leaner, stuffing as much grub  
into your gut as you can find, and fleeing predators —  
that was pretty much the daily scenario;

now look around you: no bikes,  
no cars, no buses or trains.  
To keep alive means to never quit  
taking long, perilous, barefoot hikes.

And so: we were sired  
by those lean, alert athletes of the Savanna.  
In other words, when it comes to grub,  
we're wired.

### *Pride*

I'm no church goer, yet I may  
step inside one if, some day  
I notice on its marquee:  
"Vanity, Vanity, all is Vanity."

### *Greed*

Rhymes with *need*,  
as in *I need*,  
*you need*,  
*we need*.

### *Sloth*

He may seem at times a creature  
as unhurried as a glacier,

but slothful? No, sir.

Just watch him climb  
out on a ridiculously high and elongated limb reaching for a  
rime.

## I Am

David Allan Evans

“I think; therefore I am.”  
— Rene Descartes

“The consciousness that says ‘I am’ is not  
the consciousness that thinks.”  
— Jean-Paul Sartre

*I am*  
standing in a shower at the health club with newly-rinsed hair,  
my eyes have opened and watching my right index finger  
slowly moving from left to right and touching and counting  
small wall tiles, 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10, and estimating  
the number of water beads (in the hundreds) on each tile . . .

*I am*  
when my finger drops down one row and comes back,  
counting forward even as it’s moving backward,  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 . . .

*I am*  
even as my finger is counting all the way up to 26, 27, 28 tiles  
or beyond; and then sometimes stops on a single tile  
in the middle of a row, and (just as they’re  
disappearing) keeps on counting beads . . . .

## When it Comes to Finding Words to Say

David Allan Evans

what it was like driving in a fierce July rain storm  
on a country gravel road close to midnight, with Jan  
beside me, after a family reunion in rural Nebraska . . .

so in my squeaky desk chair the next day, I came up with  
*windshield wipers, squeaky, dividing line, white, glimpses,*  
*narrow shoulder, unblinkingly* – all of which was not even  
a thousandth of a percent of what it actually was like . . .

that is, being bent over the wheel and straining to see – yes  
unblinkingly – squeaky windshield wipers – and getting  
only – yes – glimpses of a – yes – white dividing line and –  
yes – a shoulder – that was – yes – way too narrow even  
to see at times; and at times too scared even to keep driving.

But as long as I’m still alive and breathing, I’ll keep on  
being one hundred percent privileged to be able to put  
down words to try to say what may be impossible to say.

## What If?

David Allan Evans

What if, on a morning in May, as you're pushing your baby in her stroller, and with so many what if's in your head, you take a turn you've never taken, and begin to panic because you believe you could be lost? And what if your baby, sensing the tension in your body, starts crying uncontrollably? What if, just then, you picture the frown on her mother's face – framed by the kitchen window – looking out and wondering why you've been gone so long? Or what if she's peeved at what you said about your own sister last week at the party? And what if you stumble on a rock and fall and twist an ankle, and can't walk?

But what if, instead, your baby stays quiet and often smiling during the outing? And what if, at one point, turning your head and seeing a robin land on a branch with a limp worm in its yellow beak, you realize that, after all, it's a beautiful spring day and everything is going to be just fine? And what if you turn your head again and see all of the what if's walking briskly out of your mind, and what if their exiting means they have left, if not for good, for at least well into the day, the week, the month?

## The Evolution of Zebra Stripes

David Allan Evans

“Conventional wisdom says a zebra's black-and-white stripes camouflage the animal in tall grass – the better to evade the colorblind lion. But a new study says the pattern scrambles the vision of a tinier biter: the bloodsucking horsefly.”

– Rachel Kaufman, for *National Geographic News*

There they go again suddenly *whup-whup-whupping* across the savanna.

What started them, lions? (watch out for those deft and deadly hooves).

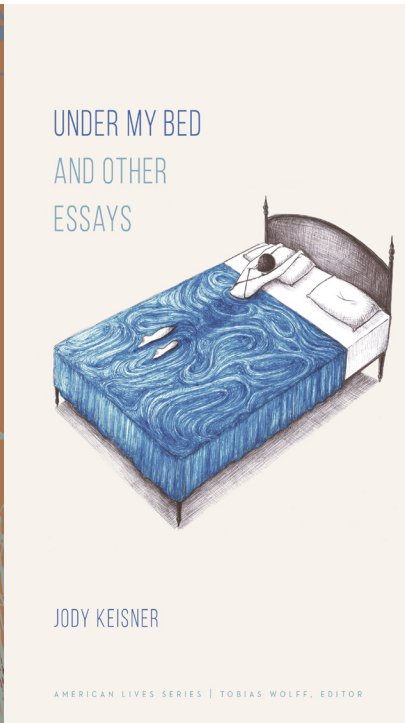
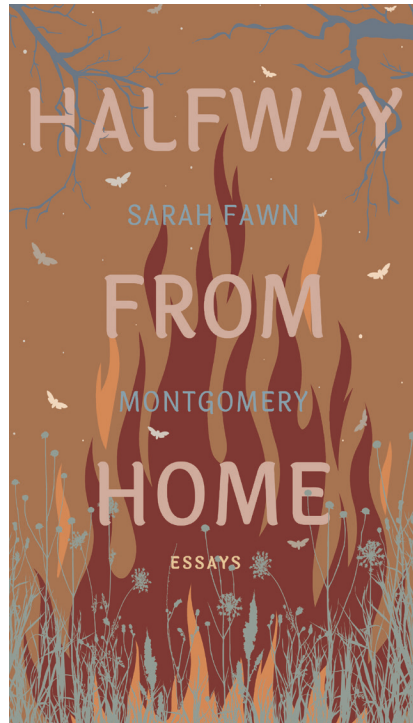
But the lions are gone, and anyway, they've suddenly stopped, and are once again grazing, indifferently, as if nothing happened.

But look again, closely: it was a swarm of tiny, winged predators (watch out for those flicking, hurricane tails). But keep looking:

now those little beasts are buzzing around, confused, wondering:

*Black's white? white's black?* Meanwhile, their jittery-footed prey,

any second, may suddenly be *whup-whup-whupping* across the savanna.



## Writing the Midwest: Sarah Fawn Montgomery and Jody Keisner in Conversation

In prose that is as stunningly sensuous as it is sharply intellectual, Sarah Fawn Montgomery searches for home in her new essay collection, *Halfway From Home*. Braiding memoir with social and environmental criticism, Montgomery has written a lyrical love letter to her “dusty” California hometown, the “lonely” Massachusetts winters and New England woods, and the “quiet comfort” of Nebraska. Finding a home is not the same thing as finding solace, though, which seems impossible while the world is aflame with political and environmental upheaval, and a virus has sent nearly everyone indoors to isolate. She writes, “Everywhere was a throbbing hurt and I missed the homeland of my youth like I missed my actual home, neither of which existed anymore.” Yet, through her literal and metaphorical excavations of these geographies, Montgomery reveals that there is possibility for humanity’s reconnection and rebirth. Contemplating the prairie grass roots, she writes: “Hardy, unrelenting, their descent below should teach us something about survival and resistance, about working within a system rather than opposed to it, about looking to the past for succor and strength, to understand that what thrives is not simply what is easy.” In similarly wise, beautifully written passages Montgomery illustrates how nature has provided a guide for humanity’s path toward resilience and healing, if only we’re willing to follow.

Montgomery and I recently chatted through email about our shared Midwestern histories, mutual devotion to the geography and people of The Plains, and the parallels in our working-class origins.

**Jody Keisner to Sarah Fawn Montgomery:** Folks often equate the Midwest with small, rural, factory and farming towns and forget or ignore the fact that the Midwest has large urban cities, too. Can you talk about your experience of the Midwest? Is there such a thing as a Midwestern sensibility or humility? And how did either play into your most recent collection, *Halfway From Home*?

**SFM:** *Halfway from Home* is about my search for home across the West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast during emotional and environmental collapse, and the challenges of trying to find your place when human connection is disappearing and trying to live meaningfully when our sense of self is uncertain in a fractured world. When I first left my California home, I moved to Nebraska and found that the Midwest was entirely different than what I'd known on the West Coast, but also entirely different than what most media portrayed. Living in the Midwest for many years brought me to rural towns, but even more urban cities. I came across the quiet idyllic plains and old factories and farms that are often used to portray the Midwest as a place set back in time, but just as many bustling cosmopolitan places that defined the region as progressive. And these images and experiences varied widely from place to place – Kansas to Wisconsin, North to South Dakota, Minnesota to Indiana. Though close in distance, the Nebraska sandhills where cranes have returned to nest for millions of years and Red Cloud where there is a stretch of native prairie that has never been plowed are quite different from one another and vastly different from places like Lincoln or Omaha.

Learning to love a place – as I write about in *Halfway from Home* – requires deep work and humility. You must explore natural and human histories, the fossil record and soil strata, the many human hurts and hopes. You must learn about plant and animal species, how they survive in lean times as well as times of abundance. You must learn about weather patterns, about geology, about art history, about cartography. Living in Nebraska taught me lessons in humility because it is a place of contradictions and extremes – weath-

er, seasons, social and political views, a place that is farther from the ocean than anywhere in the country yet was also once home to a Cretaceous sea. It is a place that does not care about human satisfaction or even survival. When you live in a place where the sky stretches up seemingly forever and the roots of prairie grass stretch unseen for miles underground, you have to accept your insignificance. It is easy to love and even claim popular tourist regions that exist, it seems, for human entertainment and ease, but the Midwest is not easy to love, and that complexity is precisely why it is such a rich region, and one that for me – no matter where I am from or where I go – has always felt like home.

**SFM to JK:** The essays in *Under My Bed* weave personal prose with thoughtful research about fear, anxiety, and the social and psychological impacts on women living with the constant threat of violence. Seamlessly blending personal stories of her Nebraska upbringing with cultural reflections on the impact of chronic stress on children, the hypervigilance of young women, and the ways motherhood impacts fear, Keisner questions “the distinction between reality and appearance” in order to examine where our terrors come from and how they shape us. Keisner’s panic is deeply rooted in place – the rural towns where she watched horror films as a child, the Omaha suburb where she discovered as a young girl that a serial killer had murdered children, and her working-class family that moved frequently and faced violence depending on her volatile father’s fluctuating employment. “I, too, worry that voicing my fear might summon it,” writes Keisner, yet she beckons these stories because “We carry on with true grit in the face of the knowledge that our bodies are predisposed to both wound and pain, for what choice do we have?” But though this collection is an examination of fear, it also offers hope. Keisner poignantly and powerfully probes worry and devotion, anxiety and empowerment, facing her many fears – intruders, a young aunt’s drowning, a life-changing diagnosis, raising her daughters – and revealing to readers that there are many things we can endure.



The Midwest is a central figure in this collection. How did place influence the writing in *Under My Bed and Other Essays*? How did it inform your fears?

**JK:** My formative years were spent frolicking on several acres of land near our earth home in Louisville, Nebraska, and later after we'd moved again, on my grandmother's lake near the murky Platte River. Which is to say, I spent much of my childhood exploring the mysteries and pleasures of nature. It makes sense then that the natural elements intuitively became metaphors for exploring my greatest fears. For instance, water becomes a conduit for understanding my hypervigilant behavior as a new mother, afraid my newborn daughter will be hurt (or drown!) because of something I did wrong. Water, of course, is a natural symbol for the womb and motherhood in general. In another chapter, the wildfires in Spokane, Washington, where my parents had recently moved, provide the context for exploring the psychological firebreaks people build to form protective boundaries between themselves and what they're most afraid of. And, the underground earth home where my family lived during some of the most tumultuous years of my childhood becomes a symbol for the trauma I buried in my brain only to have it manifest physically and mentally in my adulthood as both a chronic autoimmune disease and a mental illness. In *Under My Bed*, place represents different points of conflict in my life that have led to self-discovery.

**JK to SFM:** How do we transcend our identities--or the stereotypical identities others thrust upon us--as "Midwestern writers" into something more universal? Or should we even want to? Kristine Langley Mahler writes, "I've found the Nebraskan Midwessay to be goldenrod personified: understood only through its oppositional references while its author patiently undoes misconceptions."

**SFM:** While I write nonfiction to share universal stories and struggles, individual identity is precisely why and how the reader connects. I am less interested in transcending identity than I am in embracing it, utilizing it to share with readers the rich regions about which I write, the dynamic

places about which they might have static views. We write to claim space on the page, so it does not serve our stories or ourselves to write with the goal of changing people's minds because that means our stories exist to serve those who do not value our identities. Instead, I write to claim my place on the page, to claim a place for Nebraska on the page, and in doing so, in being specific and honest about our experiences with this place and the many vibrant places of the Midwest, we will rewrite the stereotypical stories that have never served us, and replaced them with our authentic experiences.

**SFM to JK:** Your work is less about the geography of the Midwest than it is about the "rural" working-class people you were raised with. Why was it important for you to celebrate these people in your writing?

**JK:** I'm most interested in the geography of the people who raised me, as opposed to the geography of land. Symbols of a working-class life pepper my writing; my father and his grease-stained steel-toed work boots. The well water at my grandmother's home that my mother complained smelled like rotten eggs. The Union Pacific locomotives painted with shields the color of the American flag. The septic tank buried inches from the snap peas in my grandmother's garden and the sign above the toilet—*If it's Yellow, Let it Mellow. If it's Brown, Flush it Down*. Because the life my partner and I have built for our daughters is very different from my childhood—we live in the second-largest city in the Great Plains states—these details are not a part of my current life, so I remember and celebrate them in my writing. These symbols do a lot of the heavy lifting toward characterizing certain aspects of my family and where we're from.

Ultimately, my intent is to contrast these outward signifiers of Midwestern, working-class life with nuanced stories that convey my family's complex, rich inner lives. Yes, I've waited in an unemployment line with my father, and we wore cut-off jean shorts far too often at family gatherings. But underneath this, my family was far from fitting some mold for "Midwestern," which has often translated into this

notion of someone who is content with their lot in life, conservative, evangelical, and lives and works near cornfields or a factory. My grandmother, for instance, was an eccentric woman who had a deep understanding of reincarnation and made a study of “prophets” like Edgar Cayce. She was open-minded and progressive. She told me to never get myself into a situation where I had to rely financially on a man. She wouldn’t have used the word “feminist,” but she most certainly planted the ideals of feminism in my mind when I was very young. Another example, my father – a high-school dropout – became a poet at the railroad, saying things like, “Listen, and the train will tell you. I can close my eyes and *feel* what’s wrong with it.” People from the Midwest are as complicated as people who live anywhere else. Contrary to popular belief, we do not live a simpler life! Beyond that, I hope the stories I tell about Midwesterners illustrate universal truths that ultimately transcend place and economic class.

## A Year’s Turning

Ruth Harper

*O may my heart’s truth  
Still be sung  
On this high hill in a year’s turning.  
– Dylan Thomas*

There is no high hill on this prairie,  
yet there is the heart’s truth,  
overheard in deepest silence,  
observed in the ever-flowing river of stars  
across a darkening December sky.

My grandson is six, and I walk with him,  
point out visible planets and familiar constellations;  
the lamp of a half-moon illuminates our snowy path.

*I whisper, look up, Max, look up!*  
wanting him to notice every sunrise, sunset,  
and especially a star  
that someday may be me sending him love.

The truths my heart sings are of these things:  
the awakening of each season in its turn,  
the stories constellations sketch,  
white chalk on blackboard sky,  
the love I will carry for this boy  
until Orion, warrior of winter, remains the lone  
witness to our wonder.

## Erasures

Alayna Steckelberg

“Do you remember much about Del?” My grandma asks, her green eyes scanning my face. A glitch in facial recognition software. Or maybe in internal storage. I glance at my mother and aunt in the kitchen, too deep in conversation to hear their mother’s confusion.

Dad tells me that when he was in high school he took his grandmother to the hairdresser. When he came to pick her up, she squinted at him.

“Are you the same young man who brought me here?”

Young man. Not “Mike.” Not “my grandson.” A lost connection.

Sometimes archived memories appear out of nowhere.

“We’ve got to pack the lunches, head to the track,” my grandpa insists to my grandma in a moment of mental time travel.

He’s back to my father’s days throwing discus in high school. The previous day, we visited him in the nursing home. Dad had told him that my brother and I had just finished track practice, that we are distance runners. Grandpa is running diagnostics, unable to fix the problem of forgetting and remembering, remembering and forgetting.

“When I was younger, there wasn’t a word for it,” my dad says, “it was just ‘old age.’” Now, these losses have names. My dad’s dad? Alzheimer’s. My mom’s mom? Dementia.

When my grandmother turns to me, asks me if I remember much about my grandfather, “Del,” I’m at a loss for words as her memory blows a fuse. I don’t know how to say he died fifteen years before I was born. How to say I never met him. How to say all I know are pictures and stories. As her gaze traces my face, I wonder if she even knows who she is talking to. I wonder how the family tree’s branches have

tangled in her mind. How the wires – the tau tangles in her brain – cross, short circuiting.

Will my own memory eventually crash? Will it buffer beyond febrile seizure blackouts, anxiety-induced forgetfulness, repressed memories? Will my mental RAM wear with age? Will it be too late to restart to retrieve data I’ve stored: words, images, sounds, emotions? Will I feel frustrated by forgetting or will I be too confused to feel frustrated – have my grandparents felt this way? Maybe pictures, written accounts will be enough to remind me – maybe they won’t – their contexts blurring, my brain becoming a blue screen of death.

Maybe memories are the only things we truly own. But there is no flash drive we can save them on. No IT department to fix the issue. Both too confused to know they’re confused, I’ve watched my grandparents look through empty files. Content: Erased.

## The King's Birthday

David Larsen

Hans Pedersen sat at the oak table and watched the eighty-seven-year-old man eat his oatmeal. In spite of the absurdity of the past twenty-four hours, Hans couldn't help but smile. Today, like every day, was the king's birthday.

Now that senility had taken over what was once a sharp, perceptive mind, Hans's father believed every day to be the monarch's birthday. Each morning Hans's wife, Joanne, treated the old man to hot chocolate with his breakfast, his two pieces of buttered toast and a bowl of oatmeal, what he called "mush". Every day became a special day, the day that all of Denmark celebrated, the day to commemorate the birth of the head of the royal family. But this isn't Denmark, thought Hans. This is Iowa.

In better times, before dementia gripped the poor man in a strangle hold, Hans's father had shared tales about the old country, tidbits about customs and celebrations, tropes about what life was like on the family's impoverished dairy farm in Denmark, quaint little curiosities such as the peculiar notion that Danes – at least this Dane – believed it was incumbent on them to have chocolate on the king's birthday. Hans thought it an odd tradition, but he'd been born in Iowa, not in the old country. If Danes wanted to celebrate the special day by treating themselves, while honoring the king through the consumption of "*chokolade*," so be it.

That his father was at that stage in life when he couldn't remember conversations or events from one day to the next, but could accurately recall the most miniscule details of his youth in the cold, damp finger of a country, was nothing more than a fact of life, although tragic in Hans's eyes. Let the old fellow live out as much of his remaining time in what must be a happy place. Let him be pleased, day after day, to discover a hot cup of cocoa before him and say, "Oh, choc-

olate, today must be the king's birthday"; it had to be better than just okay – it's had to be pretty damned good.

Twenty-four hours had passed since, in the sterile, disinfected air of the doctor's office, both Hans and Joanne were too stunned to ask many questions. Other than the obvious questions they had for Dr. Richardson after he'd given them his diagnosis. And the doctor's matter-of-fact replies.

"How could he get it?"

"I think we all know how he got it. We just don't know the details."

"But when?"

"That we can't know. These sores can come and go. It could have been decades ago."

"Will it kill him?"

"It hasn't yet, but it might help explain the dementia."

The word itself made Hans queasy. Dr. Richardson had been a little too casual, almost flippant, in his startling declaration. "Every doctor has seen this too many times. Your father has syphilis. We'll do the lab work, but I can guarantee you I'm right."

The ride home in Hans's new Chevrolet was mostly silent. Joanne asked the old man how he liked the doctor. The always-pleasant old guy just smiled and broke into his signature response to any question posed to him: he told the story about coming to this country. How the man in the uniform at Ellis Island asked if he had any money. "Sixteen dollars," he answered. "Oh, then you're one of the rich ones," the officer told him. Hans had heard the story every day for the past half dozen years, sometimes two or three times a day, as well as all the times he'd heard it growing up. Grocery clerks, salesmen, total strangers were treated to the story whenever they asked the old man how he was doing. Hans had discovered that whenever he took his father out shopping or to the park, people wanted to be nice to the old guy, they just didn't expect to get such a scripted response to their pleasantries. It wasn't such a bad story – the first fifty times Hans had heard it. But it had become a little tiresome, especially on the ride home from Dr. Richardson's office.

Hans went immediately to the encyclopedia when they arrived home from the appointment, but what he found was far too clinical. A small sore was usually the first symptom—appearing within a short period after the initial infection. He read on. Penicillin, if administered shortly after the infection, could solve the problem, but obviously that wasn't the case with his father. Hans wondered if perhaps he might have become infected before penicillin was discovered—maybe even back in Denmark before his father, a wide-eyed twenty-one-year-old, crossed the Atlantic to start his new life on the vast plains of northwestern Iowa. But wouldn't the customs officers check for this sort of thing? From what Hans read, symptoms may have come and gone through the years without his father ever having a clue that anything was amiss.

"There's not much we can do," said Joanna at lunch, "we just have to be careful not to touch the sore without latex gloves, and, I guess, wash his linen and clothing separate from ours." Hans was somewhat hurt that his wife wasn't as distressed as he was; but, then, it wasn't *her* father they were talking about. Joanne's parents, both dead a dozen years, after having lived out their tidy little lives in Minnesota, devout Irish Catholics, could never suffer this sort of indignity. No trauma of this magnitude in her family. While Hans had frantically pored over the pages in the Britannica, Joanne, seemingly unperturbed, prepared lunch for the three of them as if nothing had changed.

"I just don't know how he could have done this," said Hans. "How could he have done this to my mother? And to us." His father, asleep in front of the television set in the den, was content after having gotten to go out for a ride. The doctor's visit, already forgotten, lost in the fog inside his head, had worn the old man out. The oldster loved to nap through the soap operas on channel nine. He didn't like the ones on channel four. How could he tell the difference? Hans had no idea. Hans and Joanne were free to talk; even if his father was awake, he'd have no idea what they were talking about.

"He didn't do anything deliberately to anyone." Joanne shook her head, then smiled. Hans could tell she found the

whole thing amusing. Or she found his reaction to it entertaining. Damn her. "It just happened," she added.

"What do we tell Karl and Beth? How do we tell them their grandfather is some kind of a degenerate?"

"Your father is still the same kind, gentle man he's always been," she said, shaking her head at what Hans knew she considered another overreaction on his part. "It just shows he's human. That's all. This doesn't make him some kind of monster. As far as Karl and Beth are concerned, we just tell them their grandfather seems to have a venereal disease and that they need to make certain their children don't get too close to him. But they never get that close to him anyway. You're all a bunch of Scandinavians, not the warmest and the fuzziest people in the world."

Easy for Joanne O'Leary to say. The Irish spent too much of their time hugging, and weeping, and laughing, even kissing—carelessly flaunting their emotions in front of the whole world, a world that would appreciate a little more restraint on their part. Everyone in her family had been that way. Hans found it more than a bit troubling. He cringed every time one of them embraced him. He suspected they sensed his discomfort, and delighted in making him cringe.

"He was a married man, for heaven's sake. He probably infected my mother, his own wife."

"Has it crossed your mind that maybe he's the victim here? Don't get mad, but maybe your mother infected him. There are all kinds of possibilities. If you were to ask me, I wouldn't put anything past your mother."

Hans thought about it. It was too baffling. His father had always been a man of rather strong principles, a good Lutheran, a substantial citizen of Branston, Iowa, a steady businessman, the operator of the local creamery. A gentleman. Yet, Joanne had a point. His mother did have a way about her. She had the more strident personality. But he couldn't imagine either of them fooling around. How had a small sore on his father's foot become the catalyst that led to his entire world being turned upside down? If that's what was really happening. Hans knew Joanne found him a prude



about this sort of thing. Her attitude was “What’s the big deal? Your mother’s dead. Your father seems to have a medical condition, one that no one need ever find out about. Just get over it.”

“Maybe it’s time to consider a nursing home.” Hans decided not to go into it with Joanne about his mother. She was possibly right about the woman. If anyone had messed around, and obviously somebody, at some point, had, it would more than likely have been his mother. But Hans couldn’t go there. There had always been bad blood between the two women.

“Holy cow, listen to yourself,” said Joanne. “You’d punish your own father for just doing what people do? This is as old as mankind. People have been having sex for quite a while. You need to get out more, or read the papers, or, perhaps a novel every once in a while. Hans, don’t you remember when we were dating? I had no idea whom you’d been with. You didn’t know anything about me. It’s called passion. Something you Danes, with the exception of one of your parents, seem to know nothing about.”

Hans let this pass. It was a ridiculous thing for her to say. He understood passion. She was the one who was a little too blasé about the whole thing. “In the nursing home it would be their problem,” he suggested, “not ours.”

“But it is our problem. It’s a problem we’ll live with. We’ll take care of him as long as we can. If he gets to be more than we can handle, then we look at other options.” She was riled up. Hans always knew when it was time to back off. And they’d reached that point.

Hans stepped outside, onto the back porch. It would be best to get away from everything for a moment or two. He thought about his father, back to when Hans and his brother were boys; they both admired their parents, especially their father. All of the farmers would bring their milk into town to the creamery their parents owned.

Karl Pedersen was well liked; every single farmer, with the exception of a few ornery jerks, trusted and felt good doing business with him. Both of his parents talked fun-

ny; their Danish accents never faded. But there were other accents, the Germans, the Swedes, and, oh God, those quirky Norwegians. His father was an honest man who dealt with everyone fairly. A pretty good thing to say about anyone.

“I’ll fix supper,” Joanne said behind him, “then we’ll watch the Twins game, and get a good night’s sleep.” Hans hadn’t heard her when she came out the door. She stood beside him and looked across the lawn with him. “You’re right. Everything will be okay.”

Joanne laughed. “Of course, I’m right. Tomorrow’s going to be a big day, so we’d better rest up tonight and be ready for it.”

Hans turned to her and stared into the same green Irish eyes that had enchanted him forty-five years ago. She had the same smile now that she had then. “What’s tomorrow? Do we have something special going on?”

She smiled. “How could you forget? Tomorrow’s the king’s birthday.”

## Grandma

Kristin Gifford

Ninety-three years old and just now she says she might be feeling it. Late light sneaks past plastic blinds, pulls her

face further into its labyrinth of wrinkles. She is so beautiful. She holds her years loosely now, rattling them like stones in her

fossilized hands. These small cairns orient her, they orient us, in the growing dimness. Here is crumbling Dakota sandstone. She

can sense the shuffling of Virginia shale. Mineral-rich  
Minnesota  
quartz tumbles from her fingertips in a sparkling,  
indistinguishable

heap of grandsons and great-grandsons. There's northern  
granite too,  
rising cool on memory's edge with its deep molten fissures  
long cooled.

I feel my strangeness here, as the sunlight skips past my body  
to tug  
at hers, as my plate of sandwich slips on my lap and crumbs of  
news

fall from my lips. We do not belong in the way she belongs  
to the disappearing, to the long labor of marking these last steps  
towards center.

## Foxglove in Late September

Kristin Gifford

I'm learning, like foxglove, to let my top,  
showy blooms go brittle and break.

Instead, I thicken and darken down where  
scalloped leaves are low, layered, sheltered

in coolness. Un-blossoming requires a  
secret joy, one much closer to the dirt.

Even without blooms, the world  
pockets infinite beauty. Today,

when he asks worriedly about death,  
I mean to say change is life. But

there is no denying the bees and their  
busy tunneling are long gone. They moved

all summer through freckled flower lips, emerging  
victorious and kissed all over with pollen.

Now, we hear the hollow crunch as he pulls  
the empty bells off, undoes the buttons

of the stem. He is small against September  
sky's gigantic blueness. He tunneled

his way through me only six years before, pink  
lips pursed. His mouth opened again and again

wider than all the hunger in the world. Somehow  
joy flowered to meet need. Somehow, he grew

when I was a dry, empty stalk. He finds one bloom  
nestled low, the hole of it ravenous for what comes next.

## Panhandlers

Peter Colson

He appears Easter morning ungodly  
on your way to Target. Late for church,  
you barely judge his whiskers and mane  
under a Joe Camel cap, his trespasses recorded  
on cardboard: *homeless, jobless, God bless.*  
None apply, so you cast your stare ahead  
and speed toward your lot.

Departing, you crack the window, inch out  
a few ones and the confession, *it is all I have.*  
Your angry spouse tears open the wipes.  
You palm fifty from the collection plate  
and buy more wipes and Prozac.

In July heat, you spot him in flocks  
sharing Perrier and bags of cheeseburgers.  
They grin as the Tesla slides-by. You crank  
an evangelical station, tint the windows darker.  
The assemblymen you grease  
spin taxes on fast food and bottled water,  
offer endless rides in Jaguars and Bentleys.

He vanishes late fall, and you robe  
your conscience in the gospels: *he owns  
a house in Arizona, spent it all on booze,  
...won't be back.* In a nightmare, he spurs you  
naked into a desert, dismounts and switches  
your backside to wander free.  
You console yourself counting threads  
in the sheets then invest all in Egyptian cotton.

In winter's recession, you hoard Amazon  
boxes and black and brown crayons  
the kids never color. When the market crashes,  
you trace sin after sin but cannot spell *poor.*

The bottles of Rothschild's never turn.

Like margin calls, you dread Lent  
and a second-coming. He catches you driving  
out the back gate, you pray you go blind.  
The words he mouths you cannot read,  
but the question burns from the speakers,  
*and when it is your time to pass through the eye,  
are you the camel or the rich guy?*

## On Donating My Body to Science

Peter Colson

As in life, I seek in death  
not to pointlessly occupy space  
so, I consider options –  
mushroom suit, tree pod, body farm –  
fitting but without the legacy I crave.

Time expires, and I commit my body  
to science and a tattoo parlor inking a life  
hereafter, a colorized script for perpetuity  
then chill until I roll out in a theatre.

A first-year med student undrapes me,  
her red hair lights our proclivities.  
She reads aloud *Love me Forever*  
*and a Day* illustrated below my waist.  
Women google incantations resurrecting  
the defunct, the men grow still.  
The dissection ends unconsummated,  
but that night she wakes naked clutching  
vegetables in front of an open frig,  
her scruples thawed.

Word gets out, and liberal arts and animal  
science profs pack the cooler, share  
readings of Plath's *Daddy* descending  
my torso then exit coupled like species  
joined in jest. The PhDs persist unrequited.

Underclassmen bootleg my designs,  
but imitation breeds homogeny,  
and coeds bore quickly reanimating  
the living dead. The university president  
departs when TikTok challenges post,  
and the regents terminate the gift.

At the crematorium, the mortician hangs  
my tramp stamp *I Knew Your Mother*  
in her gallery of carnival sideshows  
and circus tragedies, tempers the flames  
before flattering, *Well-done, mon chérie* –  
there is no gratitude like hers.

And after I am gone, I query their dreams,  
*How do you miss me?* – steady respirations  
from lovers precariously annoying.

## It's Kind of a Weird Story

Haley Winiarski

This is how you find out your family's farm may have been subject to UFOs in the 1970s. You're in fifth grade, a painfully awkward year if ever there was one. One year before braces, one year before the outright battlefield of middle school. It's a year filled with clumsy games of basketball and gangly limbs that don't quite fit yet. You're far from athletic, but your dad is coaching the girls' team, so here you are. Your school is as small-town as it gets, resources so limited that the girls' and boys' teams practice in the same gym, splitting the court.

After hours of gasping during ladders and heavy-toed shuffling, and one successful layup punctuating endless shots that go wide, you finally slug down a Gatorade and call it a night. But a surprise awaits you. As you emerge from the locker room, fresh-clothed but still red in the face, your dad announces that he promised to drive home two of the most popular brothers in school. Oh, the humiliation. Panic floods your veins and your eyes widen. Boys, riding with you and your father? While you're still wearing a sweat sheen from practice? This means certain hell. You can't find a casual way to reenter the locker rooms to douse yourself in perfume, so you shrug on your coat, sigh dramatically, and stomp to the car.

Minutes later, you're riding shotgun and throttling the seatbelt strap as your dad's white Oldsmobile chugs dutifully down the moon-soaked road. After some small talk about practice, an awkward silence descends. You refuse to break it. Instead, your father does. "You boys want to hear a scary story?"

They do. You don't. The wheezing heater and rumbling engine provide a soundtrack to the ghost story. But no, not ghosts.

Your dad begins the tale: Years ago, when your mom was only 19 years old, her family's farm ended up in all the local papers. One morning, your uncle, only in his twenties at the time, saddled his horse and trotted out to the pasture. He left the house in the early hours as usual, ambling past the out-buildings and sprawling hills, horse bouncing beneath him as they neared the pasture where the cattle grazed. Absent from the crisp morning air was the familiar bellowing of the cows. But your uncle didn't notice that. Not at first. He was distracted; once he reached the fence line, your uncle's horse refused to go one step farther.

The horse's eyes widened, breath coming in quick pants. Your uncle tugged insistently at the reins, murmuring assurances. His horse uttered a shrill whinny and reared up onto its hind legs, entering a full-blown panic. This had never happened before. Your uncle looked around and realized the farm dogs, usually so quick to tag along for chores, were nowhere to be seen. Like the horse, they refused to enter the pasture. He swung down from his saddle, goose bumps rising on his skin. He strode into the field alone, eyebrows raised and his steps slow. What he found ended up in all the local papers. What he found didn't make any sense.

"What did he find?" the boys demand from the backseat, voices eager. You're clutching the edge of your seat, wondering the same thing. Your dad turns on his blinker and continues the tale, baritone voice filling the car. You wonder how you will possibly explain such an odd story to the other kids in school tomorrow, but you don't pipe up, listening.

Your uncle, he explains, discovered some of the cattle had been killed and mutilated in a bizarre manner. Three cows lay dead on their sides in the grass. Their genitals had been removed, missing from the scene. Another thing gone were the cattle's jawbones, completely removed from the cow's skulls with bare bones whitewashed and bereft of skin. The bones were placed next to the carcasses, crossed over top one another. The rest of the herd was untouched, clumped together at the farthest boundary of the pasture, separate from the dead. After he took in this sight, your uncle ran.



Legs pumping beneath him, he blew past his horse still whinnying near the fence post, not bothering to ride, and sprinted across the fields and through the yards and past the driveway. He barreled into the farmhouse to alert his father and brothers, explain the situation to his mother and sisters. To try to describe something impossible, something that could not have been done overnight.

“What did the jawbones look like?” One of the boys interrupts the story. He speaks in an awed whisper. You were wondering the same thing, but didn’t bother to ask. This couldn’t be an actual story. Your dad must be making it up. How embarrassing. This couldn’t be real. Why couldn’t he have just talked about basketball?

“Twisted,” your dad answers. “Almost into the shape of a T.”

“An X?” the other boy pipes up hopefully, searching for more drama.

“No, a T,” your dad insists.

“No way,” the older boy proclaims. But not in a dubious way — incredulous, impressed. The boys fall into silence again, waiting for more. The car is still miles from their home. Your dad slows for a deer, honks at it a few times, prolonging the suspense.

Finally, he straightens his baseball cap and continues on. Your mother’s family was puzzled, to say the least. They phoned the police, who immediately visited the farm. They, too, brought dogs to the site, hoping to pick up the scent of the culprits, to unearth any sort of explanation. But the police-trained dogs wouldn’t so much as leave the cruisers. Like the horses, like the farm dogs, like the surviving cattle, they wouldn’t go near the pasture.

The police had no answers — only additional questions. The mutilation was far from the only one reported in 1974. The press pointed fingers at a string of similar cases around South Dakota as well as Kansas and Nebraska, some more bizarre than others. This mutilation was unique, the only site in which the carcasses of the cows were found within sight of the house, and the only carcasses reported to be missing

jawbones. Other sites claimed a hodgepodge of absent appendages, some cows without lips or tongues or tails.

“Gross!” The boys in the backseat sing out, thrilled by the gore as only boys can be. “But, wait, so they never caught anyone? They never found out who did that?”

“Nope,” your dad announces cheerfully, nearing the boys’ driveway. You peer out into the path of the headlights and feel uneasy, wondering if the boys will be full of stories at school tomorrow about your family. You really wish the car ride had passed with stories of layups and free throws. Annoyed, you pull your sweatband away from your forehead and release it, the fabric snapping back into place with a slap.

The car reaches the boys’ driveway, at long last. They thank your dad for the cool story, tossing you a quick goodbye and jabbering about the spooky dead cows. You breathe a sigh of relief as the car reverses from their drive in blissful silence.

Silence you break: “Thanks a lot!”

“What?”

“Why did you make up some weird alien story to tell them? Now all the kids in school will think we’re freaks.”

“It’s not some story,” your dad says. Once you’re home, he unearths a yellowed newspaper clipping from the basement, laminated and encapsulating grainy, stomach-churning photos.

From an article titled “Mutilations Leave Area Farmers Jittery,” you trace your finger over the passages that call out the farm, reading over the quotes from your mother twice to make sure it’s not a practical joke: A carcass found within sight of the unsuspecting house, bizarre indentations left in triangular patterns around the body of the cow.

Some believed the acts to be the work of an unnamed religious cult; others insisted it was merely an animal predator. A few hysterics from surrounding states even spouted rumors of UFOs, only adding to the oddity of the 1970s. Despite the realistic point-of-view most took up, the officers insisted your family not permit any visitors or looky-loos to

visit the pasture; no need to increase the local panic. No one came up with an explanation, but all circled back to the same questions: How? Why? Who? Such an atrocity could not have been perpetrated overnight, let alone without raising the alarm of the family of seven sleeping in the farmhouse nearby.

It's not a story to repeat often, you decide. You put the article away in the drawer from whence it came, hustling to tattle to your mom about dad's storytelling in front of the boys. You shrug it off, as does the entire family for generations. Though there are no resolutions, the story is told less and less frequently over the years. Occasionally when the group gets together, your aunts and uncles might bring it up, the event creeping in inexorably. They swirl coffee, shake their heads, and one of them digs up the story with the same opening tagline: "That was just the weirdest thing..."

## Things the Internet Has Ruined (Gift-Giving)

Donna Kathryn Kelly

The giving was once as  
magical as the receiving,  
such that I was thrilled to find  
that gold and black floor-to-ceiling satin wall shroud of The  
Lizard King  
before The Material Girl had become immaterial,

(Oh, how I had loved the musky moon-scent  
of her irreverent cassette tape back in her Brunette Age!)  
Objects had meaning then:  
they were desired, displayed,  
perhaps, even respected in some way

such that when my mom's friend's husband  
proudly showed us his basement collection  
of Marion Morrison commemorative treasures  
a few months before he was sentenced to the federal  
penitentiary  
for a paper crime of some sort,

I was not able to search online and find out  
that there were hundreds,  
or even thousands, of these so-called limited-edition prints,  
faux bronze-busts, and oil paintings available,  
and that these precious pieces were really

worthless, to everyone, but the pre-trial releasee,  
(who probably ended up selling these images of a  
late-middle-aged man  
in a cowboy hat and a pink bandana  
at a garage sale in the south suburbs  
for under a hundred dollars- cumulatively!)

But now, we have Bezos, Facebook, and eBay,  
and we can all check on the price of things —  
instantaneously —  
so pretty much nothing has value.  
We can search for the worth of a gift in a second:

swap it,  
sell it,  
return it,  
or throw it away.  
There is nothing mysterious about *any* object anymore.

Before I had my driver's license  
my mother would drop L. and me off  
at the Crystal Point Mall;  
we would flip through the album covers at the music store,  
LP after LP at our fingertips.

Sometimes I couldn't find the new release —  
the one I had seen on MTV at L.'s house —  
and when I would ask about it, the store clerk would look bored.  
He would say it was "Sold Out,"  
and that it would be days,

maybe even a whole week,  
until the store would get a new shipment,  
from New York or California,  
or some other place that sounded really far away,  
and really was.

In truth, there was something magical  
about that want of a material thing,  
being followed by deprivation:  
the desire to possess an object that was unattainable —  
not because of its price — but because of its inaccessibility.

In the present, everything is available on-demand,  
such that when I go to buy elk sausage in downtown Sioux Falls,

to ship to an Illinoisan for Christmas,  
and learn that it is out of stock,  
I simply go online and order it from another store.

The gift is supposed to be true.  
South Dakota:  
prairie-pure,  
unbroken.

Instead, for all I know the gift may be shipped  
from Elk Grove Village to Palatine,  
so that there is nothing unique about this computerized order.  
We have become  
an isolated, robotic, world market.

The glow of gift-giving has been diminished in some way.  
The connecting of human face,  
human hand,  
human soul,  
is forgotten:

just as the days when there were full-service gas stations,  
and men in jumpsuits with names like "Lou" or "Rick"  
would come out to your car to pump your gas,  
squeegee your windows,  
and put air in your tires,

and there are things like this  
that you only miss  
when you randomly  
come across  
something that once brought you minor joy,

but is now obsolete,  
though it was once commonplace,  
before the Internet destroyed humanity;  
kind of like last summer when I pulled  
into the Sinclair in Pierre

and I discovered that full-service is not extinct  
and I took out my stupid cell phone  
to film the guy cleaning my windshield  
as though I had found the remains of some  
great prehistoric shark fossilized beneath the gas pumps,

and I kept repeating,  
"I didn't know they still had these."  
I was simply ecstatic.  
It was like the moment I saw the bald eagles  
flying outside of Lacrosse above the bluffs,

or when a bobcat jogged across my path  
at dusk along Bull Valley Road  
or the time I spotted Joan Jett  
stepping into a limo at the Des Plaines Oasis  
and I wasn't quite sure it was her,

because it was drizzling and dark  
and I was a hundred feet away,  
and all I could see was a slim body  
and black leather  
and hair the color of the night.

So, I called out, "Hey, are you someone famous?"  
and her voice globe-saluted at me,  
strong and distinct  
like a double-axed cherry bomb,  
taunting the tollway traffic, "Don't you know who I am?"

And when I shouted, "Joan Jett!"  
she pointed a finger,  
fired, and said,  
"You've got it."

Then, she just disappeared:

this shapeshifting raven,  
deliquesced into the dark vehicle,  
down the exit ramp,  
onto I-90,  
into the wet night.

I didn't take a video of this to post onto Facebook  
because there weren't cell phones back then,  
and this was years before some politician invented the Internet,  
such that I did not sprint over to Joan Jett to pose alongside her,  
to take some awkward photo to impress all of my not-really  
friends.

Instead, I have this:  
the voice,  
jagged and defiant,  
the crow's wing bangs,  
the parking-lot lights,  
kicking against a shock  
of might and beauty.

You see, the memory holds  
such things still,  
and it will always be better than a cell phone.

## Contributor Notes

**Storm Ainsely** was born in South Dakota. Family folklore states she kicked the moving truck out of gear from the baby seat on the way to the next state – her first attempt to drive. Storm expects some of her interest in origin stories and memory comes from having moved from her birthplace so young – as well as the feeling that she is more from fiction-land than any of the nine states she’s now lived in, no matter how long she stays put. Storm’s work has appeared in *Sleet Magazine*, *Cardinal Sins*, and *Wild Roof Journal*.

**Suzanne Allison-Albers** is a native of Spearfish, South Dakota, and graduated from BHSU with a bachelor’s degree in Secondary Education and English. After teaching high school English for over twenty years, she began teaching college composition and public speaking at Sitting Bull College at its North and South Dakota campuses. Suzanne recently completed her Master of Mass Communication at SDSU where she rediscovered her interest in writing poetry. Although determined to disregard poetic meter and feet, a very determined professor challenged her to test the beauty of ideas woven into specific syllabic confines. She is now a true believer.

**Saige Anderson** is a young, creative mind from Forest Lake, Minnesota. In 2020, she returned to the Great Plains – where her parents grew up – to study at South Dakota State University. Saige draws inspiration from the feelings of love and life lost, as well as from the beauties of nature and the night; the strong winds of the plains have greatly influenced much of her recent work. Saige’s love of literature and creative writing have driven her to pursue a career in English Education where she hopes to inspire and foster the growth of young readers and writers.

**S. D. Bassett** was born, raised, and currently resides in South Dakota. She considers the prairie her true home: the place that nourishes mind, body, and soul. S. D. lives on an acre-

age with her husband where they raised three sons. A registered nurse and nursing instructor, S. D. writes poetry as a way to meditate, process, and explore the meaning about this amazing life we live and the world in which we live it.

Born and raised in the high-plains city of Cheyenne, Wyoming, Montana poet **B. J. Buckley** spent her young adulthood in northern Wyoming ranch country before moving first to southwest and then to north central Montana. As an Artist-in-Schools & Communities for nearly five decades, her residencies in schools; on the reservations of the Crow, Lakota, Navajo, Blackfeet, and Assiniboine; and in healthcare settings, senior centers, libraries, and museums have taken her to hundreds of mostly rural small towns throughout the Dakotas, Nebraska, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana. Her chapbook, “In January, the Geese,” won the 35th Anniversary 2021 Comstock Review Poetry Prize.

**Benjamin D. Carson** was born in Creighton, NE, and raised in Yankton, SD. He received his BA from the University of South Dakota and his MA and PhD from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is now a professor of English at Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA. His creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in many literary publications, including *Cactus Heart*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Rumble Fish Quarterly*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Waterwheel Review*, and *South Dakota in Poems*. His chapbook *We Give Birth to Light: Poems* was published by Finishing Line Press in June 2021.

**Sharon Chmielarz** was born and raised in Mobridge. She is the 2021 South Dakota Poet of Merit. *Kirkus Reviews* has described her poetry as “Thoughtful, bold, humorous, earthy, and humane.” *Kirkus Reviews* named her *The Widow’s House* (2016) and *The J Horoscope* (2019) on the lists of the 100 Best Indie Books of those years. Her latest book (Spring 2023) is her fourteenth, *Duet in the Little Blue Church, New and Selected*. Visit her at [www.sharonchmielarz.com](http://www.sharonchmielarz.com).

**Aaron Cloyd** is an associate professor at University of Jamestown, teaching American literature, film, and writing.



His scholarship considers images of wilderness rewilding in contemporary literature, and his most recent work can be found in *Geoforum*. He lives with his wife and son in North Dakota, where he pretends to be more than a hobby farmer.

**Peter Colson** grew up in Brookings, SD, and received his writing education at Interlochen Arts Academy, South Dakota State University, and the University of Montana. Peter recently relocated back to Brookings after living in Alaska but splits his summers between fly fishing the alpine lakes of the Bighorns and writing poetry in his favorite brewery in Ten Sleep, WY, where nobody seems to mind his ponytail. His poems have been published in *Pasque Petals*, *Midwest Review*, and the anthology *South Dakota in Poems*.

**David Allan Evans** was an English professor at SDSU for 39 years and was South Dakota's poet laureate for 12 years. The author of nine collections of poetry, he has a poem going to the moon next year in a NASA project – The Lunar Codex – to create a museum of contemporary art, music, and poetry from all of the world's continents.

**Erin Flanagan** is the author of two collections of stories and three novels including *Deer Season* (University of Nebraska Press), winner of the 2022 Edgar for Best First Novel. She is an English professor at Wright State University and a regular book reviewer for Publishers Weekly. For more information about her and her writing, please visit [www.erinflanagan.net](http://www.erinflanagan.net) or say hello on Twitter at @erinflanagan.

**Ruth Harper** is Professor Emerita of Counseling & Human Development at SDSU, where she coordinated the master's degree program with students going into college counseling and student affairs. Ruth's Midwestern roots are deep: she grew up in Minnesota, earned degrees in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Kansas, lived for some time in Nebraska, and now has resided in South Dakota for almost 30 years. In retirement, Ruth reads and writes poetry. Her first chapbook, *Uncertain Seasons*, was just published by Finishing Line Press.

**Roger Hart** earned his MFA in creative writing from Minnesota State, Mankato, then lived for ten years in Storm Lake, Iowa, before moving to Havre, Montana, where he is working on a novel under the supervision of his wife and two large dogs. He loves the wind and winters of the Plains States. His stories and essays have been published in *Natural Bridge*, *Tampa Review*, *Passages North*, *Runner's World*, and other magazines and journals. His story collection, *Mysteries of the Universe*, will be published by Kallisto Gaia Press in the spring of '23.

**Jordan Heisler** spent most of his formative years living in Sioux Falls. Upon graduating high school, he attended the University of South Dakota where he studied English and Spanish. After receiving his B.A. in 2013, he eventually went on to pursue his M.Ed. from Colorado State University. He then taught secondary English for a few years in Colorado and overseas in Kuwait before returning home to South Dakota in 2019. Jordan has since graduated with an M.A. in English from South Dakota State University. He currently lives and teaches in Sioux Falls.

**D.A. Hickman** grew up in Pierre and lived in Brookings for 12 years. South Dakota – the place, the people, and the culture – inspires her poetry and nonfiction. She writes in a 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of her first book, *Always Returning: The Wisdom of Place*: "Insights we call wisdom must be learned repeatedly – each time, at a deeper, more profound, level." Hickman holds a master's degree in sociology from Iowa State University. Her poetry has been published by *Red Coyote Journal*, *Pasque Petals*, *South Dakota Magazine*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. Currently at work on new poetry, you can find Hickman's blog @ SunnyRoomStudio.com.

**Arystan Jurgens** is a Kazakhstan-born, South Dakota raised writer. His love for literature and creating his own work stemmed from elementary school. Arystan is working toward his bachelor's degree in English in hopes of continuing his education in law. He hopes he can use his career in law to help reform the foster care system in the United States.

**Jody Keisner** is the author of *Under My Bed and Other Essays* (Sept. 2022). She is a writer, teacher, mother, first-generation college graduate, and ex-waitress. Her essays have appeared in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Fourth Genre*, *Cimarron Review*, *Post Road*, *Brevity*, *VIDA Review*, *So to Speak*, *Brain, Child*, *Assay*, *Threepenny Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *The Rumpus*, *The Normal School*, *Adroit Journal*, *Literary Mama*, *Hippocampus*, *Essay Daily*, *Women's Studies*, and many other literary journals and magazines. Her essay "Runaway Mother" is a notable Best American Essay 2022. She writes for AARP's *The Girlfriend* and is the Editor-in-Chief of *The Linden Review*, a journal of creative nonfiction focused on health. She is an Associate Professor at UNO, where she teaches creative nonfiction. She lives in Omaha with her family.

**Donna Kathryn Kelly** lived in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for three years, when she served as the Chief Civil Deputy State's Attorney of the Minnehaha County State's Attorney's Office. Kelly is a member of the South Dakota State Poetry Society, and she was awarded First Place in the 2018 South Dakota State Poetry Society Annual Contest (Portrait Category). A virtual first-reading of her script, *Not Quite Love in Sioux Falls in a Time of Coronavirus*, was performed by the Monstrous Little Theatre Company in 2021. Kelly is the author of the suspense novels *Cop Eyes* and *In Heels, She Goes*.

**Dallas Kelso** is originally from the small town of Chadron, Nebraska, approximately 100 miles south of Rapid City. She's a member of the Oglala Lakota tribe studying English with an Education Specialization, American Indian and Indigenous Studies, and her Native tongue: Lakota. Dallas's future plans include a high school teaching career and reforming educational standards to feature more accurate Indigenous knowledge and history at all grade levels. As for now, Dallas is focusing on continuing her exploration of her Lakota identity through poetry and personal narratives as her work continues to be featured.

**Matthew Knippling**, like many who have grown up in South Dakota, finds beauty in the colors of our sunsets and

the greens of our pastures, and even in our harsh winters. He feels blessed to be able to share his passion and creativity with his children and with his wife, who encourages him to set aside time to make art.

**Brandon Krieg** is the author of *Magnifier*, winner of the 2019 Colorado Prize for Poetry as well as two other collections of poems. He teaches at Kutztown University and lives in Kutztown, PA. Though he has never officially lived on the Great Plains, his family on both sides has lived in Dickinson, ND, for five generations. He spent time there in the winter and summer every year of his youth and continues to visit whenever he can.

**David Larsen's** grandfather immigrated from Denmark in 1911 and settled in the northwestern Iowa town of Mallard to work on a dairy farm until he was able to open his own creamery. Larsen's father was born in Mallard before the family moved to Spirit Lake, Iowa. He was the first in his family to be born in a hospital, in Des Moines. They moved to Texas when he was six years old but returned to his uncle's farm outside Spirit Lake every summer.

**Hannah LeMair** was born and raised on an acreage just outside of Madison, South Dakota, where she gained an early appreciation for tree-climbing, frog-catching, and camping. She credits this upbringing for an unrelenting curiosity that she attempts to carry into every facet of her life. Accordingly, Hannah now attends SDSU, where her studies range across the fields of English, History, Music, and Museum Studies.

**Grace Lundeen** is a Minnesota-born writer who uses her writing to normalize mental illness. As someone who struggles with many mental illnesses, Grace sees the important need to inform and validate how others may feel. She started writing in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and shares her work with everyone she can. Aside from writing, she is graduating in May of 2023 with a degree in Spanish and hopes to teach ESL in South America where she can use her bilingual abilities to help as many people as she can.

**Freya Manfred's** tenth book of poetry, *When I Was Young And Old*, will be published by Nodin Press in May of 2023. A longtime Midwesterner who has lived on both coasts, her poems have won a Harvard/Radcliffe Fellowship, an NEA Grant, and the 2009 Midwest Booksellers' Choice Award. Her memoir about her father, *Frederick Manfred: A Daughter Remembers*, was nominated for a Minnesota Book Award and an Iowa Historical Society Award. She taught Creative Writing at the University of South Dakota in the '70s, and poems reflect her deep connection to lakes and to the prairie. [www.freyamanfredwriter.com](http://www.freyamanfredwriter.com)

**Cheyenne Marco** lives in the great state of South Dakota and enjoys writing about the challenges facing the Northern Plains. Marco currently serves as a Lecturer of English at the University of South Dakota's Sioux Falls campus. Her works have appeared in *Quarterly West*, *Rathalla Review*, and others.

**Rosemary Dunn Moeller** has written about life on the farm, prairie perspectives, and environmental issues for years. She and her husband have traveled to all seven continents following bird migrations and making connections with cultures and history.

**Sarah Fawn Montgomery** is the author of *Halfway from Home* (Split/Lip Press), *Quite Mad: An American Pharma Memoir* (The Ohio State University Press), and three poetry chapbooks. Her work has been listed as notable many times in *Best American Essays*, and her poetry and prose have appeared in various magazines including *Brevity*, *Catapult*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Fourth Genre*, *Literary Hub*, *New England Review*, *The Poetry Foundation*, *The Rumpus*, *Southeast Review*, *Terrain*, and others. She is an Assistant Professor at Bridgewater State University.

**Abigail Muller** is an undergraduate student in her third year at South Dakota State University majoring in English with a Writing Specialization, Spanish, and History with minors in Religion and Professional Writing. She considers writing and the personal discovery therein to be one of her greatest passions, and she draws much inspiration for her

work from her family history and personal experiences as a child growing up in Austin, Minnesota. After graduation, she intends to attain a master's degree in creative writing with which she will pursue a career in the publishing industry.

Born and raised in Chicago, **Noreen Oesterlein** believes her move to Minnesota as a young bride inspired her to begin to write poetry in her olding years. Now in her late seventies she knows her exposure to expanses of flat lands, grassy prairies, and the people who provide food and energy to so many fuel her writing. She collects memories of her life in the Great Plains and puts them in poetic form. She is published in *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *Grand Little Things*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, and *The Raven's Perch*.

**Adrian S. Potter** is the winner of the 2022 Lumiere Review Prose Contest and author of the poetry collections *Field Guide to the Human Condition* (CW Books, 2021) and *Everything Wrong Feels Right* (Portage Press, 2019). Some past or forthcoming publication credits include *North American Review*, *Collateral*, *Obsidian*, *The Comstock Review*, and *The Maine Review*. An Iowan-born-turned-Minnesota resident, he blogs about creativity and motivation at <http://adrianspotter.com/>.

**Bruce Roseland** is a fourth-generation cattleman who grew up on a ranch in northcentral South Dakota. Roseland is the author of seven books of poetry, including *The Last Buffalo*, 2006 (2007 Wrangler Award), *A Prairie Prayer*, 2008 (2009 Will Rogers Medallion Award), *Cowman*, 2018 (2019 Will Rogers Medallion Award), and *Heart of the Prairie*, 2021 (2022 Will Rogers Medallion Award). Roseland attended SDSU, Brookings, SD, '70-'72 and received an M.A. in Sociology from U. North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND, 1980. He is President Emeritus of SD State Poetry Society and a SD Humanities Scholar. Roseland still works his family ranch outside of Seneca, SD.

**Wynn Sandman** is a sophomore Psychology and Criminology student at South Dakota State University. Born near La



Crosse, Wisconsin, Wynn was heavily drawn to the Great Plains area as she considered colleges. She has a deep appreciation for undisturbed nature and kind-hearted people, making the decision to move to South Dakota fairly easy. Wynn's favorite pieces of writing are those that value honest expression above all else, valuing the unsightly as much as the beautiful. In her piece "One, Just One," Wynn attempts not to shock or convict her readers but rather to show them a truth that many women share.

**Alayna Steckelberg** has lived in the Great Plains region her entire life and holds fond memories of growing up along the Missouri River. She is an instructor in the English department at South Dakota State University.

**Laurence Snyder** is a poet, musician, and retired teacher. Mr. Snyder was born in Minot, ND, and grew up in Williston, near the Montana state line. He has published more than a hundred poems in magazines such as *Caperock*, *Spillway*, *Columbia*, and *Steam Ticket*. His work has also appeared in many anthologies including *Visiting Frost*, *The Poets Grimm*, and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Some of his poems have been performed in Baltimore and NYC. He lives in San Jose, CA, with his wife Susan.

**Terese Svoboda**, a Nebraska native, has just published her 19th book, *Dog on Fire*, with U. of Nebraska Press. A Guggenheim recipient, she's also won the Bobst Prize in fiction, the Iowa Poetry Prize, an NEH translation grant, the Graywolf Nonfiction Prize, a Jerome Foundation video prize, the O. Henry Award for the short story, and a Pushcart Prize for the essay. Three-time winner of the New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship, she has been awarded Headlands, James Merrill, Yaddo, MacDowell, and Bellagio residencies. Two new books of fiction, *Roxy and Coco* and *The Long Swim*, winner of the Juniper Prize, will be published next year.

**Edward Voeller** has a background in journalism and college English teaching, with 15 years in Oman, Japan, and Thailand. His writing includes fiction and nonfiction for children and young adults, including two YA novels, and

he has contributed to *NUNUM* (Pushcart nomination for "The Periodicals Room"), *Scribes\*MICRO\*Fiction*, and others. He currently seeks a publisher for his historical novel set in Manhattan during the yellow-fever epidemic there in 1822. Although a resident of Minnesota, his German kin immigrated to South Dakota from the Black Sea area, and the state has provided him many personal connections in his genealogical research there.

**Steven R. Vogel** graduated from Bemidji High School and Bemidji State University. He has lived, worked, and written poetry on farms and in villages, midsized cities, suburbs, and metropolitan areas. He is a Mayo Medical School alumnus and has served in medicine (Family Medicine & Geriatrics) and the academy (Anatomy & Physiology) for more than four decades. He spent his early childhood in Kansas, and he has traveled extensively in each of the Great Plains states and provinces. Many of his family live in Kansas, Iowa, South Dakota, and Minnesota. His home is Rochester, Minnesota.

**Zac Walsh** was brought up by his grandmother who was born and raised in Leola, South Dakota, during the Great Depression. She instilled in him two main ethics: to avoid sloth at all costs and to fear God because existence depended on that fear. "If I Live, I Work" and "the words of the gods" speak to each. The poems were accepted by *Oakwood* on her 99th birthday. He gratefully dedicates these poems to Betty Lou Walsh, a true daughter of the Great Plains.

**Cole W. Williams** is a poet, nonfiction, and hybrid writer. She recently was recognized by *The Florida Review's* Humboldt Prize. She was born in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, in a rural farming community where her grandmother, 91, still runs the family farm and her extended family in southwestern Minnesota dedicates their lives to the care of horses, crops, and family. Williams grew up around Saint Paul.

**Haley Winiarski** is a Communications Coordinator with the SDSU Foundation, where she enjoys writing about all things SDSU. A 2015 alum of State, she received her bachelor's de-

gree in English with a specialization in writing and a minor in French. Haley resides in Brookings with her husband Patrick and their dog Luna, who runs their household with an iron (and furry) paw. In her free time, she writes both fiction and nonfiction, wanders the library, and frequents any and all coffee shops.