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Dearest Dreamer,

Shift into the astral wordscape of our journal. Each piece is a fragment of the subconscious mind—a mosaic of the wonderful and absurd.

From front to back, this issue is interspersed with literary oddities—prose, poetry, and art—strung together by our team of dreamweavers. These pieces were selected for their unconventionality in structure and content, encouraging an expansion of the sublime. A sense of liminality lingers from page to page. Submerged in vulnerability, this issue delves into darker ideas many journals shy away from.

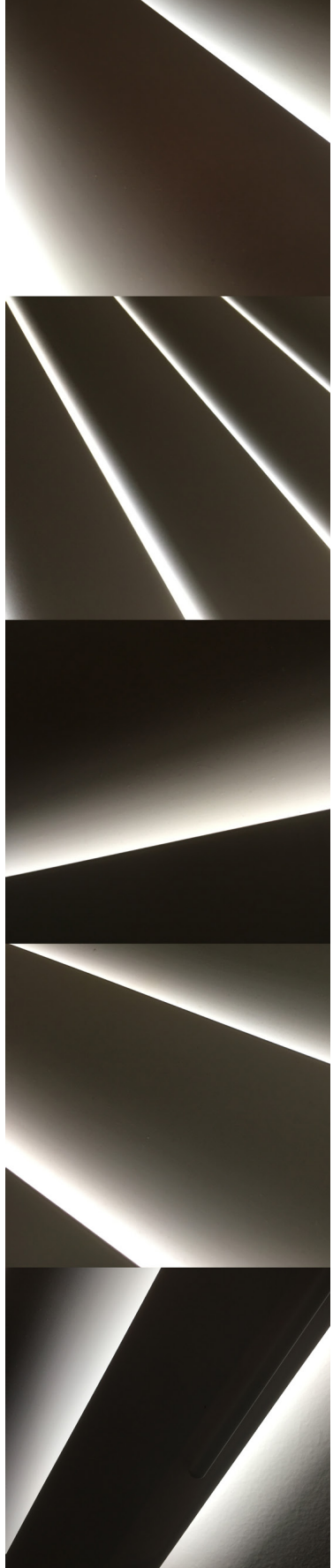
No sleep is void of nightmares, but remember: You have agency. If elements are displeasing, you can always wake up. There's a story for everyone. Ample universes to be discovered.

Do you see it? The moon is out now—the stars are there, too. The world has gone to bed, and it's just you with these pages.

Sweet dreams,
Shift Editorial Team

Studies of Light

Janis Butler Holm



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A Minute of Your Time

Jonathan C. Ukah

If you lend me a minute of your time,
something in the wind would remind you
that tomorrow will be no more a tactile dream
and yesterday and today melt into one another,
the same way the stars merge with the sky
and there is nothing to remember about the change,
except you agreed to lend me a minute of your time.
There is no explanation for the madness I feel,
apart from the glory your presence bestows,
a sense of immeasurable pleasure and happiness.
I would sit on a ladder in the sky to kiss the moon
and make your forehead the shape of light;
I would stop to listen to every birdsong
whose lengthy lines resemble your first name
though I know the cloud's lamentation never ends.
I could make history the foe of our permanence,
the stronghold of eternity where nothing counts,
neither today, yesterday, or tomorrow,
but only now that we link hands, hearts, and blood,
that we are tenants of the cosmic pole,
with the rays of the sun pinning us in its masts.
I could make time disappear, reshape our memories,
so nothing remembered would contradict our past,
stop the flow of sand in the aged hourglass,
which counts every second, minute, and hour,
until days rebuild into the passage of years,
and we see wrinkles and freckles on our flesh
that reflect our bodies' decay and rotteness.
Days of dilettantes, moments of coyness and wiles,
would dissipate like ashes into the abyss of fire,
where nothing lives except tactile, invisible eyes
lamenting our loss of the ability to feel time.
If you lend me just a minute of your time,
eternity would be but a fingertip away.

The Pufferfish and the Eel

Sydney Allison Hinton

When I was little—maybe 4 or 5 years old—I loved fish. My parents had a 50-gallon freshwater tank filled with a bunch of fish that my sister, Maggie, and I picked out over numerous trips to the pet store. I remember I would sit in front of the tank, hands and face pressed up against the glass, and would imagine I was small and swimming around with my fish. I swam around the rocks and in between all the live plants to play hide-and-seek or tag with the other aquarium life.

One day my parents came home from the pet store with an unusually large bag filled with water. If it contained more rainbow tetra or tigerfish, the bag would have been much smaller. They placed the bag atop the tank water to help match the temperatures before cutting it and releasing the new creature. It thrashed back and forth in a pattern new to the tank—an eel. It was much longer than the rest of the fish, and it had a jugged lower jaw. It seemed its mouth was always open, waiting for the closest thing to snatch up.

My face said my worries before my mouth could. My parents assured me it was safe for the other fish, and it wouldn't eat them. I think it had spines all along the top and bottom of its shimmery, grayish body. It had small beady eyes that were hazy and nonfunctioning. I can't remember if it really looked that way, or if it's slowly changed in my mind over time.

I stopped imagining swimming with my fish after that.

I matched with this guy on Tinder, and it seemed too good to be true. I didn't think he was real at first since he lived over 3,000 miles away at the time, and we had so much in common. There was no way this wasn't a bot looking to exploit my emotions and hack my credit card or something.

I was scammed once because the grifter exploited my love of books and preyed on my hopeless-romantic longing. He stopped me as I was going back to my dorm and asked if I wanted to donate money to buy books for children in need. I don't remember his name now, but the more he explained—with his seemingly authentic pamphlets—the easier it was for me to give him money. Eventually he began flirting with me, saying with my donation, he would make it to some gala ball for his fundraising group and would need a date. How appropriate it would be to bring the woman who helped him get there. I went

to my ATM (alone—thankfully I had enough foresight for that), took out \$100, and chose the story collection some child in need would receive. He said since he already had my phone number, he would text me later to plan our first date at the ball. I ran back to my dorm and told my roommate all about the philanthropic stranger who was taking me to a gala. With every sentence I told her, I heard the absurd story more and more, ultimately deciding for myself that I had been scammed before she could say it. I never got his text or went to the ball.

After discovering my new match's cross-country move was imminent and he changed his location to meet people, it made more sense to me. With everything we had in common, it felt like stars aligning or something else cliché. We quickly switched from talking on the app to texting.

Him: Do you have any other deal-breakers? Let's get 'em out of the way lmao.

My Anxiety: *This seems to be going too well. There must be something wrong.*

Me: If you're not a feminist, and if you're a dick to animals.

Him: I'm a feminist and I LOVE MY PRECIOUS BABY KITTENS.

Me: I figured as much. I mean, that was the vibe you're giving off anyway.

Anxiety: *He could just be saying that since you mentioned it first. You set yourself up for that one.*

Him: The pictures are of Charlie and Basie! Can you guess the naming theme? Lol, hint: my two prior cats were Louis and Ella.

Me: You're gonna shit.... My dogs at home are named Bix (after a local jazz musician, Bix Beiderbecke) and Louis (obviously).... We had a golden retriever (who has since passed) named Jazz, so all our dogs after her have been jazz musicians.

Him: SYDNEY I HAVE GOOSEBUMPS.

Me: What?

Him: BIX IS MY NEXT ANIMAL'S NAME.

Me: SHUT THE FUCK UP.

Anxiety: *He's definitely just saying this to get to you. He could've easily Googled that. What are the odds that he would know. Aren't your palms sweaty thinking about that?*

Him: OTHER PEOPLE KNOW OF BIX BEIDERBECKE?

Me: YEAH! He was from Davenport, IA, and I'm from the Quad Cities, part of which is Davenport.

Anxiety: *You told him where you're from? That wasn't a smart idea. Your*

palms are sweating now; I can feel it.

Him: Are you—literal goosebumps, I never thought I'd meet someone who'd get that reference and now you BEAT ME TO IT.

Me: I guess it was just meant to be!

Anxiety: *Was it? We're not convinced. Try ignoring me and wipe your hands on your pants to dry them off. You'll find out sooner or later.*

Pufferfish—also known as puffers, blowfish, blowies, toadfish, toadies, honey toads, sugar toads, bubblefish, globefish, balloonfish, swellfish, and sea squab—are among the most poisonous creatures in the world, with more than 120 different species. Their coloring varies between vibrant to muted colors—either to warn about their toxicity or to help camouflage. Their eyes move independently from their bodies to spot predators. No matter the species, pufferfish have several unique defense mechanisms to fend off predators. They tend to move slowly but can use their tail as a rudder for quicker bursts of movement, along with their other additional fins—pectoral, dorsal, anal, caudal, and tail. If a pufferfish is still too slow or clumsy, its second defense is inflation. Pufferfish are fragile, delicate, and simultaneously dangerous.

Him: BRUNCH TIME!

Me: Hell yeah! What's your go-to brunch order?

Him: First, I ask you to rank these: waffles, French toast, pancakes.

Anxiety: *You've been talking for too long via text. You haven't had a video call, or even a phone call. He's going to show his true colors soon. Something's not right.*

Me: Tough choice. I think depending on the day the placement of pancakes and waffles switches some, but French toast remains the same.

1. Waffles, 2. Pancakes, 3. French toast.

Him: YOU HAVEN'T HAD MY FRENCH TOAST.

Me: Haha fair! All the French toast I've had just seems like soggy bread.

Anxiety: *You've been talking to a screen for too long. There's no way this man is real and interested in you. He's either a very intelligent bot, or a catfish.*

Him: Oh, HELL no, never mine. I also have several secret ingredients. Only ONE of which is love.

Me: I'm definitely interested in your French toast then!

Him: Brunch-off in Fresno soon?

Me: Are you asking me on a date, because hell yeah! I know this amazing breakfast place I'll take you to.

Him: It's absolutely a date then!

Anxiety: *Bold of you to plan a date with someone you haven't seen or heard yet. Feel that sweat under your arm? What about the pounding in your chest?*

Very soon after the introduction of the eel, my parents needed to clean the walls of the tank. The fish flopped around helplessly in the net and tried to squirm free until they plopped into the bucket with relief. The last fish was the eel. I don't think my parents thought to get a larger net to accommodate its length, because when it was out of the water and just about to get to the bucket, the eel flopped out of the net and onto my bare feet. I thought I could feel the individual scales on my feet, and the spines from it wriggling around. I don't remember my parents scooping it up, placing it in the bucket, finishing the cleaning, or tending to my injured spirit and kissing my metaphorical wounds. I can't remember if this really happened, or if I dreamed it. Since that day, I have sworn off the existence of aquarium fish in my life. Every time I swim in a lake, I always make sure I'm constantly moving so that I don't feel any scales or fish near me.

We finally talked on the phone after some convincing on his part. I don't know why, but talking on the phone to someone I have feelings for is so difficult for me. I mean, for fuck's sake, I worked at a business where I almost exclusively answered phones for over a year and talked to stranger clients every day. Yet, without fail, the lead butterflies slam and race each other around in my stomach until the phone clicks off.

Him: P.S. When I got home from my drive, Charlie hopped on the bed and sat there purring. Then he climbed on my chest and nuzzled my face with his face. I'm a lucky cat-dad.

Me: I'm glad you made it back safely. They're lucky cats!

Him: I'm lucky that you swiped on me.

Anxiety: *What's that? He's just telling you that to keep you on the hook. It's working, though, isn't it? Those butterflies are back.*

Me: I think I'm pretty lucky too.

Him: I truly enjoyed talking to you on the phone. Let's do it again soon?

Me: Yes! I'd like to do it again soon too. And to think I almost didn't

swipe just because I saw your distance was like 2000+ miles away and I thought PFFT this dude can't be real or interested in me.

Him: Oh no, I AM real, and spectacular. And very interested.

Anxiety: *Your cheeks are flushed; you're giddy and have a stupid grin on your face again, don't you? This won't end well for you if you aren't more careful. Keep that wall up until I say so.*

The body of the pufferfish has evolved to accommodate inflation above anything else; they have no ribs, lack many digestion properties and functions within the stomach, and have extra muscles to seal off the stomach cavity during inflation. Because of this, puffers are known to die from excess stress. During bloating, a pufferfish takes in anywhere between 10 to 15 gulps, and its internal organs are slammed to the walls of the body to make room for all the water or air in the stomach. The stress from this, the imminent danger from the predators, and shifting organs are often too much for its body to handle, and it dies.

Him: I have a huuuge headache, raincheck our phone call?

Me: Of course. I hope it feels better soon.

Him: I was thinking about you a lot today, FYI.

Anxiety: *The heat in your cheeks is back. You're developing feelings for him before you even meet in person. This exact scenario is why Catfish was such a success and has, like what, eight seasons and a feature-length film? But he followed you on Instagram and appears real. Nev Schulman would be proud you at least thought about that.*

Me: You were thinking about me?

Him: I'm looking forward to walking through the city holding your hand.

Anxiety: *That's exactly the thing they say in romantic comedies. He's playing the part. You're falling for his act, but you'll be devastated when he exits stage left.*

Me: Now I'm smiling like a big fuckin' goober. But same here.

Anxiety: *You're in trouble now. You're daydreaming about what it would be like. He's got a hold on you. Are you listening to your gut?*

Him: You're gonna LOVE my babies. My fur babies.

Me: Yes, I'm excited to meet them! You're gonna LOVE my (plant) babies too!

Him: I'll protect your babies from my babies lol.

Anxiety: *You better be careful, girl. The curtain falls before you know it.*

If inflation doesn't scare the predator from consuming a pufferfish, its spines are its last defense. The spines aren't always visible, depending on the species, but are always present. Tetrodotoxin is found in the ovaries, liver, skin, and muscles of different puffer species, so when the predator's body begins digestion, they both die. One pufferfish has the ability to kill 30 adult humans, with no known antidote, and is 1,200 times more deadly than cyanide.

Me: When do you make your move out here?

Him: Within the next two weeks. Just wrapping up some work before I head out.... Are you any-percent Italian heritage, or do we have to fib to my grandparents?

Anxiety: *He wants you to meet his family. Maybe he is genuine and does like you. You have been talking for over a month now. You have regular phone calls and communication throughout the day. Remember when he serenaded you for your birthday, and he was actually a good singer? Maybe we can relax a little bit....*

Me: My grandpa is 1/4 Chickasaw Indian, but aside from that I think the rest is white Europeans? I'm not 100% sure. I guess I'll have to lie. BUT! With the amount of pasta I consume, I could be Italian by proxy?

Him: WE'LL TAKE IT. Plus you're more than pretty enough that they'll overlook.

Anxiety: *But then again, maybe he's not. He didn't give you an exact date when he moves. You're sweating again just thinking about that, aren't you?*

One species—the white-spotted pufferfish—is known for its intricate mating ritual performed by the males. They will construct geometric designs in the sand with their bodies to attract females. The females will inspect their creation, pick the one they're most impressed with, and swim off with their chosen one. The patterns were first discovered in 1995 near the Ryukyu Islands, and white-spotteds are believed to be the only puffer species to practice this ritual. However, the white-spotted puffer wasn't attributed to these designs until 2013, when a diver finally captured it on camera.

The designs are around two to three meters in diameter, in stark contrast to the 10 centimeters of the puffer. They will almost throw their bodies into the sand and paddle their fins around until the design starts to come together. A

small fin on their bellies helps create the small, fine details after breaking up the sand. Eventually, males will use their mouths to move shells and clear the area, then use them to decorate the outsides of their creation. Once complete, males will continuously move in the same inward-outward movements to maintain the design from the ever-changing current. It's presumed that this ritual is important for female choice—some scientists speculate they can judge the peaks and valleys in relation to the health of the males, as well as sand texture and color—but there are no known factors to influence females' choices.

The final design looks like several rings within each other, like a target. A nest. The hills and hollows within the rings are symmetrical in height and width all the way around. The center circle is less precise, but still pristine. The valleys are thick and look like veins. The small puffer gently floats to correct the pattern, and almost vanishes in its vastness. With the complexity and perfection of this ritual, nowhere in nature does another animal construct and constantly maintain something as precarious.

Him: This was me and the animals yesterday.

Me: Ugh I can't wait to meet them, and you too.

Him: What's up?

Anxiety: *He changed the topic. He didn't say he wanted to meet you. This is the beginning of what I warned you would come. I'm not wrong.*

Pufferfish are also a delicacy in some countries, known as *fugu* (meaning river pig) in Japan, *bogeo* or *bok* in Korea, and *hétún* in China. The most popular dishes are sashimi, soup, fried fugu, or hotpots.

A specially certified chef—requiring three to five years of additional training and testing—must carefully prepare the fugu for safe consumption. If the chef doesn't carefully remove the toxic portions of the fish and doesn't avoid cross contamination, it's lethal for everyone involved.

Within five years of each other, there were two different chefs convinced by the recipients to prepare and serve them fugu liver, one of the most toxic portions. No one died, though both were rushed to the hospital in critical condition before making a full recovery. Each chef lost their job and certification to prepare pufferfish since it's against Japan law to serve the poisonous organs. Supposedly, the government is easing up on these restrictions.

Typically, each pufferfish is around \$100, but the price varies depending

on size and gender, since male genitals are reportedly the best tasting portion.

In late-17th-century Japan, the toxic organs were often used for suicide.

Most current deaths stem from inexperienced fishermen preparing pufferfish, not restaurants serving them. In Japan, between 2006 and 2015 there were 356 patients with poisoning, but only 10 died. Only two of the 356 cases were from food poisoning, and neither patient died.

When a person is infected with tetrodotoxin from a pufferfish, the first symptom is muscle paralysis. The person can't move and eventually can't breathe. With medical attention, death is unlikely. A benign symptom from eating fugu is a numb mouth and is said to be part of the appeal of the delicacy.

Me: How're you today?

Him: I'm okay. Been run ragged between NJ, PA, and NY the last few days. And my dad is in the hospital.

Me: Damn, that's a lot of travel! How's he doing? Is there anything I can do to help?

Anxiety: *He didn't text you all day yesterday, and will probably only say this today.... You know exactly what that means. Don't start sweating now. I warned you about this.*

Back in my childhood home, after the eel incident, I peek around the corner of the living room where the fish tank resides. My little colorful fish dart back and forth and then hover in front of the glass. I think they see me. I'm back in the tank with them and swimming around when I spot the eel. I feel myself bloating. I'm gasping but keep swallowing water instead of getting air. I feel my body taking over, my thoughts unable to calm. Gasping and thrashing back and forth in the water, I try to regain control.

Me: Hey I'm thinking about you (and your dad) and hope you're holding up okay.

Him: I'm sorry, work has been crazy lately AND my dad... I've just been overwhelmed to be honest.

Me: No, it's okay! Don't apologize for that. I've been in a similar situation this year, so I get it. I wanted to make sure to give you space but I'm still thinking about you.

Anxiety: *This is the point where he ghosts you, and you never hear from*

him again. The curtain is falling and will crush you under its weight.

Me: Good evening, handsome!

Anxiety: *He said he was overwhelmed, and you sure didn't help.*

Me: Happy 4th of July! I hope you're well and I'm thinking about you.

Anxiety: *He posted on his Instagram he's on a boat with some friends. Face it, he ghosted you. I was correct. Again.*

I wake up with a gasp, in a sweat, panicked. Another anxiety dream. This time, the guy in my dream changed his whole dating profile with brand new pictures. The tell-tale sign of someone moving on from one online situation-ship to the next.

He wouldn't do that to me. We've been talking for a couple months now. He said he wanted me to meet his family. We planned dates together.

I know deep down there's only one way to know for sure.

I go to his online profile.

My heart begins to race, and my eyes tear up.

New pictures. Different location.

I blink the tears away as quickly as they come and get ready for work.

I don't remember anything I do until I realize I'm ringing up a customer. I text my boss to tell her I need to go home; I'm not feeling well, and I can't focus. When my coworker arrives, I leave with few words exchanged.

Me: I haven't heard from you in a couple of days so I'm just checking in to see if you're still interested. I know you've had a lot going on, but I'm worried about you and wanted to check in for some peace of mind.

Anxiety: *How much time has passed? Better accept the truth now. Just add him to your mental list of all the dudes who've ghosted you for one reason or another. Feel that pang in your chest? It happened again, and you're left wondering, and questioning, without an answer in sight.*

I remember when my family rented a hunting lodge on a lake for a miniature family reunion. I hated seeing all the taxidermy heads covering the walls. The only room with any reprieve was the bathroom. A pheasant hung above my bed in the room I shared with my siblings. All their eyes watching

us, following us, as we went about our weekend greeting family and friends we hadn't seen in years.

A relative would do a fish fry with everything we caught that weekend. I swore off fishing long ago when he made a rule that we had to bait our own hooks. I sat in the grass near the dock in the shade while my mom helped my youngest sibling, Bee, fish with a cane pole. The *real* poles were reserved for adults serious about fishing, rather than throwing shit into the lake to watch the ripples and how far we could cast. I listened to the water lap around the support beams of the wooden structure and watched the water glisten in the sun by other nearby docks.

In a short amount of time—the adults marveled at how quick it was—Bee, the 6-year-old, caught the biggest fish of the weekend. Mom yanked it out of the water and held it as it squirmed. I shivered thinking about how the scales felt in her hands and against her skin. Mom told Bee to help her hold it while they both posed for a picture that's now framed and hanging in our home.

I thought, *What would happen if the fish got free?*

Without a hook and line, or a net and pole, the fish is free to do as it pleases. The idea of being caught—suffocating—in an environment it's not meant for, or accustomed to, gives it the fight-or-flight reaction. It literally takes the bait, which entices it to swim closer and swallow the hook hidden by the carefully threaded treat. It's yanked from the familiar depths and into the air. Several hands squeeze to keep it from slipping free. Its eyes gloss over and fixate on one object—within reach, but also miles away. It realizes death is imminent. Its breath becomes shallow and labored. Its eyes permanently fix.

And then it's gone.



Graveyard
Emily Kang

day sail

Sean Minogue

He dropped a twenty
in the drink. Shut up
about it. Suffocate the
fine droplets of mist
in your beard.

Taut wires tremble
on silver masts. This
man was only ever

just
a
man.

Rehearse the words,
their timing. A hull
will expose its belly,
anticipate a hit between

wind
and
water.

Walkways see-saw
beneath his weight. He
admires the hermit, his
boat's quivering halo
of algae.

Kelp stipes,
medieval
clubs, taunt

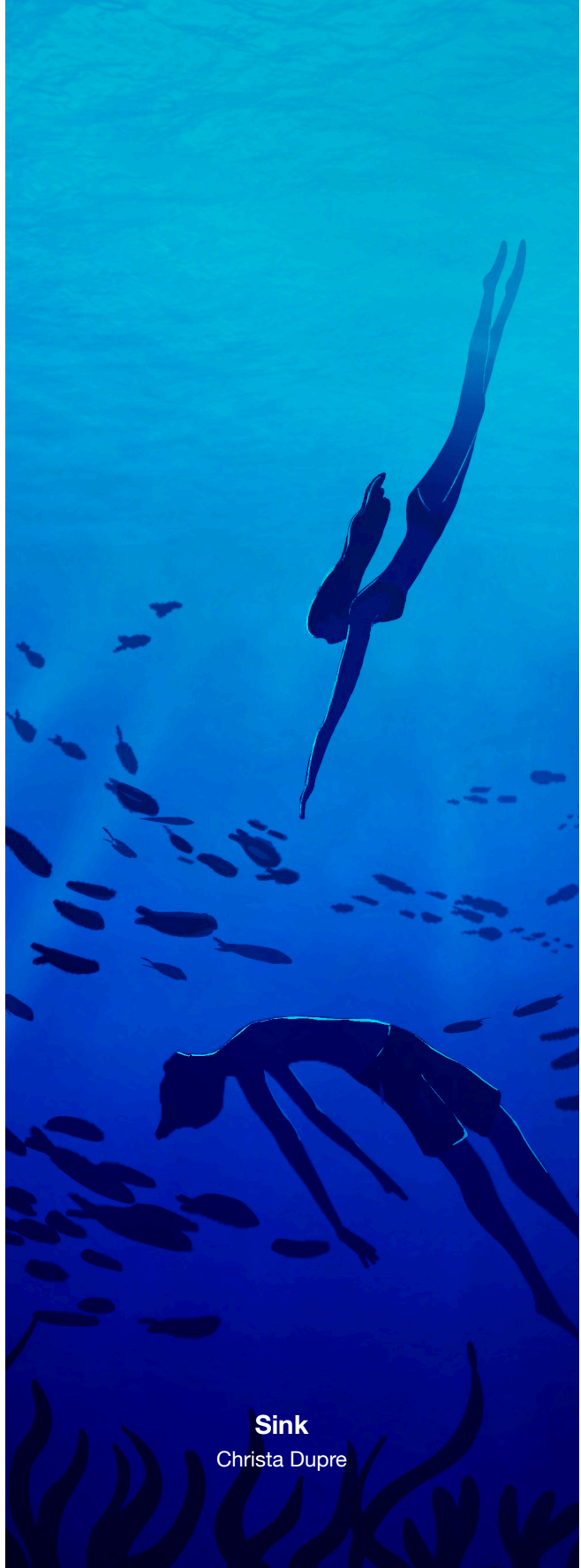
with gentle
knocking. His
meaty fist
occupies
the tiller.

See the reducing shore.

Now, over
the motor's cough.
Remind him.

Now, under these
sugar-powdered clouds, as
a coil of ocean contracts
your spine, summon that
someone.

Be so small.



Sink

Christa Dupre

about Sardines

Diane Pohl

I always thought Sardines were named for Sardinia,
but in fact
they were named first.

Also, Sardines are actually many species of small fish, not just one.

They have melodic proper names and common names that I believe
might also describe the cosmos.

Escualosa elongata, Escualosa thoracata.

Rainbow, White, or True Sardine.

Sardina pilchardus.

Goldstripe. Indian Oil.

Sardinella aurita.

Sardinella marquesensis.

I like to think of them as cousins, and they all know one another,
and I hate to think of their small exquisite bodies packed in tins.

I remember being 8 in Florida and swimming in salt water—and
an inflatable boat
that we rough-housed in, and it turned upside down. When we
up-righted the boat,
it was filled with a glitter of small silver fish,

and when we tipped the boat over again they swam with us, our
smooth little bodies
all touching and flickering, free like the watery sun.

The City

Dominik Slusarczyk

I watch the rabbit wander slowly across the grass. His ears are floppy, and he has a cute white ball on his bum. I wonder where he is going and what he wants. I wonder if he is sinner or saint, bigger or smaller than the burning fire of hate.

“I want to move closer to town,” I say to Mary, my wife. She is 40, but she could pass for 30. I like the way she sits on the right side of the sofa every time she gives in and sits. “We live too far out. It takes 40 bloody minutes to drive into town. I want to live somewhere within walking distance of the center.”

“So we’ll move,” Mary says. “We’ve got enough money saved up.”

I lock the door; then I walk away from our small, terraced house. The walls are brown stone, and the door is dark blue. The house is significantly smaller than the one we had in the country. I like it anyway.

It only takes 10 minutes to walk to the shops. I buy a jumper and a computer game. I spend ages looking at a phone but eventually decide against buying it.

“I want kids,” Mary says. She has barely touched her food. “We’re getting old; we need to have kids now.”

“We’ve discussed this,” I say. “Neither of us really wants kids.”

The red-faced baby screams at me so loudly I fear my eardrums will pop. His face is scrunched up, stressed, scared of the loud sounds we shriek in his face.

I smile at him. He screams back. I look around for a doctor or nurse to pass him to. I like holding him, but I worry I am doing it wrong.

“I want a brother,” Max says. He is 4. He likes football even though he isn’t very good at it. I take him to his games every weekend. Whenever the ball comes near him, he gets too excited and trips over his own feet.

“Me and your mother want only one child,” I say. I reach out and ruffle his hair.

“I could have another child,” Mary says absentmindedly without taking

her eyes off her magazine.

The baby screams at me. I rock him gently. I used to do that to Max. It doesn't work. I reach out and offer him my thumb. He grabs it and grips it tightly. The wailing slowly quietens, and the baby opens his eyes. When he sees me, he lets out a little laugh of joy. I smile at him, and he smiles back. I turn to Mary and see she has fallen asleep on the hospital bed. She is surely dreaming of danger, how best to avoid the taxman who raps on our only door.



Supermarket

Elena May binti Saini Jeffery

Psychoanalysis

Tess Schwarz

I want you to psychoanalyze me
because you are so good at it—it is all you do.

Pick me apart, hair by hair,
until you understand me.

I want you to ache with the pieces of me
in your hands, stuck under your nails.

I want the world to crumble when you pick it all up;
tell me I can let go now.

I want you to analyze me,
chewing on every piece and feeling it burn
as it slides into the abyss of you.

I am screaming along back roads because you never listen.

I want all that I am to be so clear it hurts
to look at.

I want to confuse you, to make you wonder.

I want you to share my confusion;

I need you to scream with me.

Nothing makes sense,
not this poem, not the falling apart.

I love the way autumn comforts,
breathing into my lungs when I can't do it myself.

This is what falling feels like.

Take the weight of the world off my shoulders, I beg you.

Psychoanalyze me until I am everything
you've made me out to be.

Tell me who I am, who I should be
because I do not know.

I want you to tell me that I'm afraid of commitment

because my parents weren't.
Tell me I'm holding on
because I wouldn't know what to do if I let go.
Tell me the world isn't as scary
as they made it out to be, as I did.
Lie to me and tell me it's all right; convince me it will be.
Tell me who to be because I cannot figure it out on my own.



Time Stasis

Emily Kang

More Than This

Maggie Iribarne

His mother did not approve of peeing near the house, so he made sure to do it with the dilapidated structure out of sight. Flashes of the night before poked into his thoughts as he relaxed into the steady stream of piss. Finished, he approached the shack, startled and saddened by its smokeless chimney. In the yard, the wood pile, the picnic table, the sittin' chairs as his mother called them, all appeared as they had always been. Their clothes hung on the line, flapped in the breeze like pinned birds desperate to break free.

He held his back tight against the wall outside her first floor bedroom. He inhaled to gather the necessary courage, turned to peer inside. There she was—as he had left her—on her side, mouth and eyes half open. Dead.

“George, start the fire. George, sweep the floors. George, get the water.” Her voice, always commanding him, telling him what was next. “The cold is setting in; we must stock up,” she’d say. “The harvest time is here; we must pick everything!” Dutifully, unrelentingly, he did as her voice instructed.

Inside, he froze at her work table. His soft weeping eclipsed by torrents of tears, great gulps and sobs. His shoulders caved, his arms locked, crossed before his stomach as he bent, wailed into the silence of the house.

Finally, he approached the settled body, snipped a lock of gray hair, slipped it in his pocket. He closed his eyes, placed both hands on the corpse, pushed it onto a blanket spread on the floor. He dragged the body out, rolled it into a hole dug by the water pump. Shovel by shovel, he covered the body, his mother. He knew no prayers, so he said none.

The schedule. He must get back on it.

Middy. His mother would be disgusted by his laziness. He must make lunch. He hadn't had much besides berries and water for days. A powerful hunger churned in his gut.

There was still enough meat from the smokehouse, still the tea mixtures they made from their own herbs. He checked the half-full sugar jar, the bread box with its two stale loaves. He still had some of the bread his mother baked, now rock hard, but edible. He'd have to look for her recipes. He'd seen her make bread but wasn't sure how she made sugar. Had she told him it had something to do with sand? She'd spun it out of sand? She added honey to

sand? He'd read books about the sea with sand beaches. There was no ocean here, no sand. Is sand edible? The memories and questions blurred in his dull mind. If his mother were alive she'd explain it, like she had before, and it would make sense. He was certain of this. He believed she was some kind of witch, a powerful sorcerous, like Merlin in the King Arthur stories.

He boiled water on the fire, made his tea. He set the table, resisted the habit of setting her place.

"These things matter, they do. Civilized living."

It occurred to him that his mother had spoken to him almost entirely in adages, words of advice, words to live by. Although she'd forgotten something important, maybe the most important thing: how he'd live alone, without her. He pushed back the onslaught of tears. He sat down, stared at the utensil poised above the sugar bowl. Afternoon sunlight filtered through the window, shimmered on the silver spoon. One of his many chores was to polish the silver. The thought broke through, a log busting through a dam. Once the hole was opened, he tried in vain to push the question back, but it flooded his mind, overtook: Where'd we get this spoon?

By the end of summer, he grew tired of the schedule, of everything. He missed his mother. The loneliness ached relentlessly, starting at his feet and rising to his head.

"I'm all you need!"

"Well, I ain't got you, Ma!" he shouted, throwing a glass canning jar against the wall.

"Wasteful!"

Self-consciously, he tried speaking to the squirrels, but it felt wrong befriending creatures he killed and ate. He began seeing shadows lurking behind the trees, inside the barn, even in his bedroom at night. First, he burned extra candles to keep his room lit. Then he decided to sleep beside the front door sitting up, holding his knife.

He revisited a long dead question: Where did he come from? Where did his mother come from? Did they have any other family? He read and reread *Robinson Crusoe*—his mother's favorite book. He longed to see a footprint in the dirt of the yard, dreamed of a Friday coming to save him. No such luck.

He held a jagged piece of glass in a shaking hand to his neck. He begged his mother's spirit to give him the courage to dig into his flesh, allow his troubled insides to pour out on the kitchen floor, but she did not comply. He

heard only silence, and the steady thump of her beliefs playing in his head.

“Who’s going to clean up the mess, George, when you’ve gone and killed yourself?”

What if she wasn’t really dead? He went to the spot marked by the round stone he’d placed. He pushed it away and dug with urgency. The weather grew colder and colder. He needed to find her before the ground hardened. He dug, sweat seeping through his shirt. Finally her rotting corpse appeared in front of him. Joy and relief bubbled up from his core.

He jumped into the hole and picked her up. She broke into pieces in his arms, dissolved back into the dirt. He swept the specks of her off his neck, his chest. The anger he’d been holding in for months came out in shouting. He retched beside the open hole. He thought of all the questions that had come to the surface of his mind, all the questions with no answers.

“You. Are. Nothin’. But. A. Liar,” he said. He threw the compost heap on top of the body—moldy onion skins and apple cores. He tossed the stone marker in the hole too, smashing his mother’s skull.

The next day, he rose up out of bed, ignored his breakfast, left the house an untidy mess, and walked with purpose to the edge of the Okay Places and passed deliberately into the Off Limits. He brought only his knife and some smoked meat, stuffed in the pocket of his winter coat. He marched forward across the frosty leaves and made his way deep into the forest. He followed the stream, walking for what seemed like hours.

He grew tired and cold and hungry. He stopped to piss and take a drink of icy water, gnaw on some of the meat. He continued with only the slightest regret for embarking on such a pointless journey. Part of him hoped it’d quench his desire for death. He half expected to collapse onto the cold ground, fall asleep, freeze to death, melt into the dirt. So far, he saw nothing out of the ordinary in the Off Limits, the same squirrels and chipmunks and trees and leaves that inhabited the Okay Places.

Summoning his last bits of energy, he stalked the edges of a house, noting a wide dirt path leading up to one side. Pushing the door open without effort, he stepped inside the shadowy space. Crate-filled shelves surrounded him. He climbed a ladder and began prying them open, finding supplies of every kind—sugar and flour and clothing and even the little lemon birthday candies his mother gifted him each year. He couldn’t open his eyes wide enough to absorb it all. He turned around in wonder. Reaching for a lantern on

the shelf, he jostled a protruding side lever. He gasped as it flickered and lit, without a flame. George stood in the brightened room, gaping.

For years afterward, George spoke of a sister he never met. He told strangers encountered on the streets or the camp where he lived, "I've got a sister. I've got a likeness of her on paper. She'll be here soon," his voice echoing in the darkness, the smell of dead fish rising up from littered water. He searched in the river's current for a glimpse of her brown curls, welcoming eyes. Most of the time, he only caught reflections of his own rippling beard and long tendrils of hair. On bad days, his mother's stern expression emerged, her watery mouth moving, forming orders, rules he could no longer hear. Again and again, George turned away from the river that led to the woods of his first home, the one he had with his mother. Again and again, George walked up the bank to the safety of the home he found later, the tent under the bridge.



In Defense of Melancholy

Ati Gor

Made in April

Peter E. Murphy

Where do your thoughts go, your feelings go,
your ego go, the things that make you, you, go,

when the world becomes the absence of you,
the flip-flop of you, the very, very no of you,

as the box of you clunks into a slot dug in the earth?
Or worse! When the molecules of you disperse

in flames that rise into the air no longer inside you?
What happens when the words of you blur backwards

as if pressed into a parchment of you? How soon will be
forgotten the glory of you? The story of you?

Does your consciousness flow into some great sea?
Into a sewer of memory? Or does it just...go?

Oil Slick Feathers and a Silver-Lined Coffin

Mars Asher

We as people love the idea of love. It's so easy to romanticize romance ... glamorize it, paint it pretty in a nice little frame to sit atop the mantel for years to come. Make it look beautiful and perfect, virtuous like the virgin on her wedding day, clad in white and unveiled with pride. When people talk about love, they don't talk about the darkness. The ache. The dread that grows slowly over time from the second those butterflies in your stomach set to fluttering.

For as long as I can remember, books have set my tactless and unrealistic expectations for romance up for doomsday-level failures, but I learned that the hard way. All my life, I've read of lovers so infatuated with one another that they'd travel anywhere in the world at a moment's notice to fight or kill or die for each other. But that's thinking for a hopeless hopeful, isn't it? Who could ever actually be so unrelenting?

Books. Teachers who have bestowed upon me the gift of going further than I can fathom for those I love and the curse of never being given the love I give. The bad habit of either building no boundaries or breaking them unceremoniously for those I deem worthy and the great skill of uplifting the worthy to the point where they fear my love. It is too much for those people. They run after seeing how bright the spotlight really is when its full glow is thrust upon them.

And then there's a new fight. The fight to not let the hurt make me bitter to the idea of one day finding someone who makes me feel as though my brokenness is actually beautiful and all the cracks in my porcelain characterize my perfection. Don't worry, I know healthy people see all this in themselves—believe me, I try—but how hard it becomes when the person you love most doesn't see it too. Or how much harder it is when they make you feel like you are right to love yourself and they do see the beauty in your flaws but choose to leave you on the shelf with new fractures littering your surface from being played with like a regular old toy, nothing special at all.

And I may not be bitter, at least not yet, but the dread. Oh, how it grows with each new person and then each new day. How the butterflies have turned to moths over the years, going from graceful and hopeful to clumsy and desperate, fluttering about a light, just waiting and knowing that sooner or later

it will go out. How the longer they make me smile, the bigger the inevitable fear of losing them will grow. The tsunami overtaking the dam that I build anew each time larger than the last and still to no avail.

Even when I say nothing. Keeping silence like a devout follower keeps a deity, just so that I may not give it power or life—not speak it into existence...I fail. Even when I speak. Employing forthcoming honesty to entrust to another my heart's safety, gently requesting a carved box with lock and key from them to me...I fail. And just as love is ever-present, so is my dread. Just as my fondness grows, so does my weariness. Each striding down my winding roads hand in hand or playing hide-and-seek together in my hedge maze like school children.

When he looked at me like that...as if it were all too simple to see me...to know me...maybe even to love me...my love and my fear kissed. A kiss that I'd only ever read about in books.



Guest Art for The Lovers by Studio Heartbreak

Jojo Dela Cruz



A BASEBALL PLAYER, DARREN MACKENZIE, WALKS DEJECTEDLY BACK TO THE DUGOUT AFTER STRIKING OUT.

SIGNS

SCRIPT BY PATRICK MCEVOY
ART BY RODO BUSCAGLIA

HE GOT CHEWED OUT A COUPLE TIMES FOR MISSING VARIOUS SIGNS FROM COACHES AND IT'S GOTTEN IN HIS HEAD.

SIGNS HAVE BECOME SO IRRITATING TO HIM, STREET SIGNS ALONG WITH EVERYTHING ELSE.

THEY ALL SEEM TO OBFUSCATE MATTERS INSTEAD OF CLEARING ANYTHING UP

HE EVEN STARTS READING INTO THINGS HIS WIFE IS DOING, WONDERING IF SURFACE SIGNS ARE REVEALING SOMETHING UNDERNEATH.

AND HIS GROCER, NO LESS.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

UH, JUST RUBBING MY HEAD...

THE SIGNS PERMEATING THROUGHOUT SOCIETY DO NOT NECESSARILY ADHERE TO STAYING WITHIN ANY CONFINES EITHER, JUST PERSVASIVE INDICATORS FROM OUR MINDS TO HOW OR WHERE WE MIGHT GO.

BUT DARREN SEES ONE SIGN HE WANTS AFTER A SUCCESSFUL AT-BAT-- HIS WIFE STANDING AND CHEERING.

AND AFTER THE GAME, HE TRULY FINDS HIMSELF HOME IN HER EMBRACE.

THE END

Signs

Patrick McEvoy and Rodo Buscaglia

My Mother Used to Say

David P. Miller

“Tissue? I hardly even know you!”
if we had to blot around our nostrils
or flush our sinuses. She’d reply
to a callout for the missing tissues
with her shocked maiden’s protest.
How dare an overbold boy presume?
She skipped the joke when there were tears
and someone purged a miserable nose.
Her own tears were out of bounds.
Then family banter froze.

I sometimes think of her
as a junior-high girl, all sighs,
sniffing her heart away, shut in
the record store’s listening booth,
waterworks set off by “Full Moon
and Empty Arms,” Rachmaninoff
rendered in skinny Frankie’s croon.
Hanky prepared in her purse.
Does this half-invented memory of hers
take place before she and Dad were steadies,
decades steady till the last goodnight kiss?
And their first—how many months
was it for them both till hardly
melted into *maybe, yes, why not, now?*

The Last Fly of September

Mary Zelinka

On the dining room table across from me there sits a housefly. She watches me. At least I think she does. Her head is facing in my direction. Flies are disgusting. They carry diseases, and I read somewhere that they are constantly pooping. I start to get the swatter, but it's clear on the other side of the kitchen, and that seems so far away.

I've been up most of the night crying. That's true about every night since Gracie called.

My sister has her own story. She'd have to. Otherwise, how could she go on? I could say she estranged me because I finally told her not to yell at me anymore. Maybe Gracie would say I turned on her. I'll never know for sure because during Gracie's phone call less than two weeks after Mother's funeral, she refused to discuss it. She just said she wanted nothing more to do with me.

I'm embarrassed to say I took notes during that phone call. Her words were so hateful, I was afraid later I would believe I imagined them. I was sobbing, "Don't do this, Gracie!" as she hung up.

The fly and I stare at each other. I don't remember seeing a fly this late in the year before. She must be the last fly of September.

I narrow my eyes at her. "If you don't land on me, my bed, or touch my food or anything in my kitchen or bathroom, I won't swat you," I say.

She rubs her front legs together.

My sister's gifts torment me.

Especially her hooked rugs. She bought 100% wool skirts—Pendleton was her favorite—from thrift stores. After washing, she cut the wool into long strips and dyed them.

She designed three rugs for me. For my 40th birthday, two potted flowers facing one another, with "G 2 M" hooked at the bottom—"Gracie to Mary." One Christmas, a flying angel blowing a trumpet. An oval "Welcome" rug honored my first visit to her new home in a San Ramon, California, gated community. I hung each rug on a wall in my home—even the Christmas angel,

though I had stopped celebrating Christmas years before.

Now the rugs weigh my house down. I roll each one in tissue paper and put them in my garage. I add other gifts she gave me. The folk-art wizard a North Carolina artist carved. The antique heart-shaped pillow embroidered with “Nothing you do shall ever cause me to stop loving you.”

Mother thought I started stuttering because Gracie talked so much it was hard for me to get a word in. That I stuttered my words as a “placeholder” before I knew what I was going to say. That doesn’t ring true for me, but it could have been.

Until I was 4, maybe even 5 or 6, Gracie, three-and-a-half years older, was the only one who knew what I was saying. I asked her once why no one else could. We were sitting on the floor in our bedroom, playing with our Madame Alexander dolls. She thought for a minute. Her puzzled face. Her looped hair braids. She shrugged her shoulders.

What I could not know was how much I would miss my sister. Or what is probably more accurate, the concept of my sister. Maybe that’s true for anyone who has been disowned by their parents. That you cling to relationships even if they are “relation-less-ships” as my therapist calls them.

I have learned that the most enduring family is the one you cobble together from the random people who happen into your life and then stay. The people who have seen you at your worst and still love you. Who have copies of your advanced health care directive and will demand its enforcement. Who will hold your hand when you die.

Even so, I miss my sister.

Consider this: My mother has died. My sister’s mother has died. We have each lost our mother.

The fly follows me. Like she doesn’t want to be alone. She’s always in the same room I am. I had no idea flies were so needy.

Gracie is the only one who shares memories of our childhood. Except without Gracie, now I wonder how accurate these really are.

Like the brick wall that disappeared. One afternoon, playing in the woods

near our house in North Carolina, we came to a brick wall. The woods were dark and quiet. I picked at the rough mortar between the bricks. The bricks were red. The wall was much higher than either of us. The next day the wall was gone. Gracie was sure we were in the right place, and I believed her.

How Mother gave us each a spoon of Philadelphia cream cheese before she brought out our dinner. We perched on little wooden chairs at a little wooden table in front of the *Howdy Doody Show* and sucked on our cream cheese. When we were grown and spoke of this, we laughed and asked each other, “Why cream cheese?” and laughed some more.

How we crawled through the drainage pipe that went under the street. We weren’t allowed to do this—Mother said it might give you polio. So many things might give you polio: eating the snowy ice slivers you scraped off the sides of the freezer with your fingernails, dunking your head under your bathwater, eating mud pies, being held down and getting Gracie’s dirty socks rubbed in your face.

How one rainy afternoon after we had moved to Miami, Mother slipped her engagement ring off her finger and let Gracie and me take turns cutting our bathroom mirror with it so we could see how hard diamonds were.

How we ate Karo syrup on white bread for breakfast. Gracie’s favorite was the brown Karo, but I liked the clear. Though I imagine they both tasted the same. They were just sugar after all.

Who am I without my sister? We came from the same womb. We share the same DNA. My therapist points out that I also share DNA with a banana. Maybe I do with this fly.

When I was in 7th grade, I came home from school to find my entire china horse collection smashed. I didn’t remember the look of satisfaction in Gracie’s face until long afterwards. As adults, at least once during every visit she shouted or threw something at me. Each time I tried to be invisible until she returned to herself again. Though I knew she was “herself” then too.

It’s been my experience that if a fly gets trapped inside, they lurk around windows. Like they’d rather be outside. This fly seems completely uninterested in the outdoors.

Gracie and I didn't really become friends until I was 30 and our parents disowned me. Gracie called when she heard. She was crying. "I want you to come for Thanksgiving!" It was August. I cried too.

I did visit, not for Thanksgiving, but the month before when I was driving around the country looking for someplace I might be able to call home.

She was living in Texas. I stayed at her house for two days. We didn't sleep—just talked and cried. Her husband and daughter tiptoed around us with worried expressions. After I left, when I looked in the mirror in my motel room that night, I was surprised to see my face and not Gracie's.

Gracie had remembered how I liked my scrambled eggs. Overcooked. The "scrapings" I had called them when I was little.

I thought she was so brave—risking our parents' fury by befriending me. It wasn't until many years later that I understood she saw me as an ally in her grudges.

It's true: I was angry at our parents for a long time. But it was wearying, all that anger. A couple of years after I was disowned, Mother and I started over with one another. This time as friends, equals. That was never possible with my father. No one could have ever been his friend or his equal, not even Mother.

Twentysome years later, as Mother languished in intensive care before her death, Gracie called most nights. Updates on Mother's health, cruel things our father said and did. The conversations then deteriorated into a litany of all the grievances we'd carried against our parents since we were children. It was exhausting, those conversations, and after a while I lost sympathy for both of us. I told her I needed to stay in the "here and now," that all the talk of the past just made me too sad. After that, Gracie had no time to chat.

How long do flies live? My fly has been skulking around for days. Why can't she be a sweet little ladybug instead?

As I'm walking into the post office, a mother is leaving with her two little girls. One is probably 4, the other 7ish. They are both wearing yellow sweaters and red rubber boots. The younger girl looks up at the older and smiles. The older girl smiles back. They hold hands. All this as they follow their mother to their car. An ordinary moment. So ordinary that probably neither of the girls will even remember it.

I wonder: Which one of them will shut the other out when they are adults?

Without my sister, I feel unmoored. Although these past months, years, maybe my whole life, we weren't close like I see other sisters being.

I tell my therapist that Gracie and I are different in most ways, but our basic values are the same. My therapist is quiet for a moment. "What evidence did she give you of that?" she asks.

As a child, I asked Mother if she loved me. "Of course I do," she always said. Every night when she sent me to bed, she called after me, "I love you mighty good." Still, this question always loomed beneath my thoughts. Maybe because I suspected the answer could change depending upon my behavior.

When Gracie flunked out of college, Father didn't allow her to come home. She had to live at the YWCA in downtown Miami while she applied to other schools. All the walls were an old yellow color, paint cracked and chipped. A ceiling fan stirred the humidity with a tired rattle. The whole building smelled like the bottom of an ashtray. The only job she could find was clerking at Richards department store, a tacky store Mother would never have stepped foot in. It's a wonder Gracie didn't kill herself.

When my parents disowned me, they sent a letter. They mailed it special delivery.

Humans are pack animals, like wolves. Early humans lived in groups, hunting and gathering food together. If an individual was abandoned, it meant death by freezing, starving, or being eaten by a saber-toothed tiger.

Last night I dreamed saber-toothed tigers were chasing me. Their breath was hot on the back of my neck.

My fly moves as though her ponderous weight has become too much for her wings to bear. As I walk through the house, I unconsciously slow down for her. Oh good grief, I think: She's a fly. Still, I wait for her.

I tell my son about Gracie's terrible phone call. He says that a few years before, he called her with some questions about our ancestors. She said she was busy and would call back. But she never did. That once my father had hung up on him.

"What is it with those people?" he asks, genuinely perplexed.

One of my friends suggested that I forgive Gracie. I don't know what, exactly, to forgive her for. She doesn't want to talk to me. She doesn't want me to be her sister. She doesn't want me in her life at all. It seems like this is more a matter of acceptance than forgiveness. And I don't know how to accept that my sister doesn't love me as much as I love her. This is different than losing a husband or lover. My sister has always been there. Even before I was conceived. When Mother was pregnant with me, she said Gracie sold me to the mailman for a nickel. But after I was brought home from the hospital, she gave the mailman his nickel back.

Whenever I mention being disowned by my parents, I feel like I should explain why. Like the listener might wonder what I did to deserve it. Though what could possibly justify disowning? I've tried, but I can't think of anything—anything—that my son could do that would make me even think of cutting him out of my life.

I'm tired of the story. Explaining. Maybe the story is just this: My parents and Gracie didn't know how to hold on, and I don't know how to let go. Besides, the story doesn't matter. What matters is the outcome. What matters is there is nothing that would have made me sever ties with my sister.

From now on, if anyone asks why I was disowned or why Gracie estranged me, I will say, "Does it matter?"

When I wake up, my fly isn't on the bedroom windowsill. I search everywhere: the windowsills, the walls, the floor, on top of and underneath and behind the furniture, the kitchen and bathroom where she knows she isn't allowed. She must have died during the night. Maybe a spider whisked away her abandoned husk.

My house seems emptier without her. Lighter somehow.



Blue House

Sam Loiseau

Ghost Apples

Emma Wells

Gothically sublime
as Frankenstein's monster,
they hang as fruitful impostors,
bending boughs under icy loads:
ghostly, phantasmagoric impostors
like poltergeists in new homes
built upon disused graveyard soil.

Blasts of frozen winds
thrash once glossy skins,
scorching internal fleshy cores
as medieval witches
burning fast with charred hearts
upon patriarchal wooden stakes.

Globular worlds drain hollow,
morphing to echoey spheres
where abstraction overpowers;
concrete nouns slip, frozen-apple elusive:
unsteady upon slippery surfaces.

Fairytale poisoned, spectral apples
dangle in eager expectation,
awaiting an outstretching princess hand—
to enshroud internal, melting madness.

A fair maiden approaches,
entranced by watery planets
spinning as malevolent underworlds.

A slender, frost-kissed arm
reaches out, eager to pick, hold, bite....

She melts away as Eve (Eden: a mere figment).

Time passes....

Ghostly apples refreeze,
primed as villains for new victims....



Demon in the Park

Stephanie Hunton

Fine Dining

Al Taylor

“Thank you for joining us tonight, Miss Cline.” Our waitress smiled, showing off every single yellowed tooth in her mouth.

Her black hair, inky and slick like the mold on rotting fruit, spilled over her boney shoulders. She was all angles and paper-thin skin, face blotted with a foundation that didn’t quite match—a bruised peach.

Alison had been reviewing restaurants for almost four years; she’d amassed the sort of online influence that meant she could get a seat anywhere. The place she’d taken me to this time was some experimental fine dining establishment.

“And the blindfolds are—?”

The waitress’s neck bent toward me. Her eyes had a glassiness to them I hadn’t noticed before.

“Our chef believes food to be the most primal aspect of life. It’s the fuel for our minds, yet so frequently, we push garbage into our gaping, unyielding mouths without a cursory glance at the ingredients. People eat, but they do not appreciate. This establishment’s purpose is to reclaim the act of digestion. Trust a stranger to cut your meals so they may fit perfectly on your tongue.”

“It’s a blind menu,” Alison said. “Well, it’s a play on the idea of a blind menu. Diners are always supposed to blindly trust the chef that the food is good and that there’s no arsenic in the pannacotta. So here, we’re literally blindfolded. Right?”

She gestured expectantly to the waitress, who gave a slow, thought-through nod.

Alison continued. “Since you’re blinded, they have assigned staff members to feed you. It’s the whole point of trust.”

“If we may begin?” The waitress held up two fingers, and the lights dimmed.

My first thought was that I didn’t see anyone approach with a blindfold. It suddenly got dark—as if the waitress’s fingers summoned the darkest blanket of shadow across the entire restaurant. The fabric was light enough; I could barely feel it.

“First course,” a voice said from behind me.

I was made aware of the presence of a fork against my lips. Cold metal was sharp next to my mouth, and a sweet smell engulfed the air I breathed.

Reminiscent of vanilla, round and earthy with a sharp saccharine to it. So familiar, but I couldn't place why.

Across from me, Alison moaned in delight.

"Babe, you've gotta try this." She spoke with chew in her words.

I opened my mouth, and the fork delivered dinner.

It was bread-like in texture, furry and soft with the padding of flour dusting around its crust. Lipid in nature, with some kind of jelly filling in the center. A savory eclair with lactic notes. When I swallowed, it felt like cotton lodged in my throat. Like I was a child with strep.

"Do you think it's a type of emulsified bread? A soy base, maybe?" Alison sounded delighted.

"What do you think—"

"Second course." The same voice cut me off, hovering right above my ear.

As I opened my mouth to be fed this time, I thought of Pavlov's dogs.

Oil splashed against my tongue like bile as I bit down. Viscous and piquant, coating the teeth with a layer of fattiness that made me crave a toothbrush to pair with it. There was a crunch between my teeth, and the outer coating splintered in every direction across my palate. The shell had no discernible flavor, just a delicate crunch and a slight nuttiness. The thick, mucus-like center beneath the top layer was acrid, a juxtaposition to the sweet appetizer served moments before. A rough swallow but undoubtedly a treat for Alison.

The third course hit my nostrils in a wash of pinched vapor. Pungent and caustic, heavy in the way grease traps beneath parking lots of failing fast food chains are.

"Can I ask what that is?" I spoke blindly into the air before me, hoping my dinner assistant might take pity.

"Wagyu, ma'am," the assistant answered.

I'd had wagyu before. Several times before, actually, at several different restaurants. This wagyu was unlike anything else. A thick gelatin marbled through the bite, too easily malleable in my tongue without needing to chew. Liquid seeped from the folds of the meat, and I thought I might gag. It was sharp and moldering, with a putrid, rancid flavor that overpowered every other sensation I had. No seasoning, no butter or oil. A perfectly cooked and measured bite of rotten meat.

"Are you tasting this—this fermentation? I've never had anything like this. Astounding, really," Alison gushed.

The waitress's voice reappeared at our right, "Fourth course is even better, Miss Cline."

That sweetness was back. The vanilla thick and choking as it clung to every surface and flew within your lungs. A heavy, suffocating smell of treacle and honey. It followed the staff, the waitress, and the cool metal of a fork pressing itself to my lips. I could smell nothing but syrup as my mouth trembled, barely opening enough for the first drops of rot to hit my lips.

I could compare the texture to tapioca pudding.

Thick and pulsing, the nauseating sweetness of vanilla curled up and around my tongue as each individual grain squeaked its way through my teeth. I chewed; what else could I do? I chewed as the candied crunch and squelch of mucus splashed against my gums. The pieces were so small and squirming I couldn't mash each one unless I focused individually on how my molars burst them open, popping with each movement of the jaw. Their bodies writhed through my throat as I swallowed some of them whole.

"Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. I'd love to meet with the chef afterward and get some quotes for my review if that's all right?" There was excitement in Alison's voice. "First things first. I'm dying to take a peek at that last course."

"Of course, Miss Cline," our waitress said.

I'd never thought of eating maggots before.



A Recipe for the Internet

Janice Park

Zeno's Library

Tamas Dobozy

If the heads of state ever put me in charge of enacting surveillance—and let's face it, with my voting record that's never going to happen—I'd try to capture the most inconsequential of moments. The ones that are truly lost, and probably should be lost. That's the record I'd keep. The second's pause between chopping the carrots and then chopping the peppers. The frittering away of hours sitting on a curb waiting for a taxi not so long in coming that it's worth getting angry about. The split-second longing, almost unconscious, for the cigarette you last smoked in 1995. The woman's face on the stairs that passed too quickly to make out—it doesn't matter anyway, who cares, it's part of the long smear of faces passing in such numbers we can subtract them from the daily record. The whole inventory of that incremental leakage of time, drip by drip, lost not only to history, but even to personal awareness, to memory as such, that feature not even in the story we tell when we put one together to explain a life to itself. Collateral time, like an injury so slow and soft it's impossible to measure, the life that's lived in other words, or life itself, lost amidst the highlight reel, which, to be honest, is never life as it actually was, except for maybe the sex scenes; those are real, thank God. That's what I'd like to keep track of, what I'd like to carefully file in appropriate folders, what I'd like to police.

Imagine me, of all people, in that archive, a vast repository of audiovisual material, where it's all kept and added to, sorted into bins. Imagine the place itself: Nobody ever visits; it's stuffed to bursting, each stored file unopened, unvisited, uncared for eternally. If I could dedicate my life to that, I'd be a happy Dasein: in charge of all the indifferent hours, watching them multiply by the second, every lost instant regained, an eternity in the making. There isn't much I wouldn't give up—weddings, christenings, anniversaries, children's birthdays, the last moment with a loved one—for supreme authority over that. My bureau of inconsequence. My office of the immaterial. My ministry of loss.

Milk Cartons

Donald Illich

The wilderness boys picked out walking sticks.
They shot invisible darts at squirrels.
They sang noises they called a dwarf's song.

The boys crossed paths to other forests.
Bats swooped down on midnight valleys.
Wolves surrounded them, but they cast a spell.

Witches' houses burned and burned.

When the real kids showed, the boys hid.
Behind bushes. Into myths. Through dreams.
Those kids would put a dagger into their existences.

By not writing down what they discovered.
Consigning the boys to blank wooden pages.
And the photos they'd taken for milk cartons.

Pictures people would pretend not to recognize.

The boys slipped into the conscience of a creator.
Who cried he'd ever thought them up.
His face pasted atop all their faces.

Looking through their eyes in the dark.

Dream Evil

Jarret Keene

Before his shift began that night, Kobran remembered something amusing. A minor starlet from the hit movie *High School Musical* had visited his AP English class earlier that semester to discuss the power of creativity. She asked the students to write down their dreams. Kobran jotted his list on a sheet of notebook paper using his missing father's Aspinall of London sterling-silver-and-leather pen.

Become an evil magician

Marry Beatrix

Give her babies

So the moment of reckoning had arrived for Kobran, and he was rendered inert, thwarted by the dumbest of reasons. He couldn't find his hot bag for the extra-large three-top ordered for delivery by the most beautiful girl at his school. Beatrix loved vintage Norwegian black metal as much as he did, making her perfect. Hell, she was Norwegian, her surname Hertenberg. She was also into Ouija boards and astral projection, which increased his certainty that they were soulmates. Her skin was deliciously translucent, her hair sunflower-yellow, her eyes crystal-blue. He wanted to explore every part of her. He hoped that, after providing such a sweet deal (thanks to his employee discount) and driving far beyond Slices' delivery zone to bring Beatrix a pizza, she'd go with him to see Dimmu Borgir next weekend. Yet standing in the way of realizing his fantasy was a paltry, yet necessary, sack of black insulated polyester. In a frantic effort to find it, he knocked over the cardboard boxes, pre-folded and stacked in the stockroom.

"Hot bag!" he yelled in desperation. "Anyone?"

"Check your trunk," said his boss, Natalie, ladling tomato sauce onto a garlic-crust base.

Of course! He'd forgotten to bring it back into the store after his last delivery. He ran outside and, with the key, popped open the hold of his impossible-to-kill 1999 Toyota Camry. The trunk lamp had died long ago and the lights in the parking lot hadn't come on yet, so he used his phone light to examine the contents.

"Thank you, Satan," he said, locating the bag.

With a triumphant grin, he sprinted back into the store, causing the

ribbon-strung brass bell that hung from the door handle to clang loudly against the glass. He slid and almost fell in a puddle of Fanta Orange a child had spilled near the entrance that Natalie had asked him to mop 20 minutes ago.

“Slow down,” said his middle-aged boss, shoving another pizza into the conveyor oven. “You’ll break your neck before you even get to kiss her.”

He let up not an iota, throwing brown paper towels on the spill, then grabbed the pie, which was steaming in its box, off the aluminum cool-down rack. He shoved it into the bag. “Can’t give a hot girl a cold pizza.”

“Fine, give her your icy corpse then.”

Kobran mock-gasped. He opened the fridge to grab a liter of soda. “Too bad she’s not into necro. Gosh, you really want me dead, Natalie?”

“On any other night,” she said. “But it’s Friday, so I’m giving you 30 minutes to impress that metal chick in the boonies. If you’re not back, I’ll send Lou out on deliveries and your last check will be waiting for you.”

“Huh. That’s an empty threat, if I ever heard one. Lou doesn’t even have a car,” he said, hurrying past the register and into the lobby. He halted to check his reflection in the store window. He thought his long dark hair looked clean, yet very metal. He’d have to ditch his Slices polo, though, before handing Beatrix her pie.

“He can borrow mine,” Natalie called after him.

Carrying the bag by its straps and with the soda pressed under his armpit, Kobran propped open the door for a gaggle of pot-scented college students.

“You’d let Lou drive the Charger?”

“Just make it quick, Romeo!”

He laughed and scampered to his Camry. The driver’s side door fell off its hinges, which ended up costing him a full minute as he struggled to set it right again before it closed properly.

He cranked his favorite disc, Emperor’s *In the Nightside Eclipse*, and hollered along with the gnarly vocals that blazed atop a fury of serrated guitars, ghostly synths, and blast-beat drums comprising the song “Into the Infinity of Thoughts.”

Then he noticed his fuel gauge, needle sitting on the E. He cursed and pounded the steering wheel. Why hadn’t he gassed up before his shift? A Shell was situated conveniently on his side of the highway up ahead, but he’d lose precious minutes. So he stomped the accelerator and got on the interstate.

There had to be a gas station near Beatrix he could hit on the way back.

She lived on the edge of the valley, the northern limits of North Las Vegas. Her house was the only one whose construction was complete, nestled dead center within a labyrinth of unfinished, sprawling, cookie-cutter tracts called Playa Estates. He heard her father was a contractor who'd struggled to secure work in the aftermath of the recession. Now his business was thriving again, going gangbusters in Las Vegas, Phoenix, and St. George. But the recovery remained stalled in this part of the valley.

Kobran could see her enormous home glowing alone like an eerie beacon as he took the last exit and entered what felt like a lunar landscape patch-lit by dim, sporadic, solar-powered street lamps. The sagebrush took on the appearance of spaceborne anemone, rustling strangely in the winds of a growing dust storm. He could make out something flickering in what looked like the backyard—probably a bonfire.

Suddenly, the shadowy form of a coyote, eyes burning like diamonds from the headlights, darted in front of his car and across the road. Kobran foot-tapped the brake out of instinct, then kept driving.

“Freakin’ zoo out here.”

He was running on fumes when he pulled into the cul-de-sac, cramped with at least six cars. She'd told him she was hosting a get-together, but he'd assumed it involved the few metalheads and punks she tended to hang out with during lunch and study hall. The number of cars made him anxious, concerned he hadn't brought sufficient food. Would she ask him to go back to Slices for more pizza? That would be a disaster. She had a loner streak, though, so maybe she planned to scarf the whole thing in her room with the door closed while everyone else thrashed away on the Xbox.

He approached with the bagged pizza and soda, intending to ring the bell. Ascending the brick staircase, he looked up to see her waiting for him in the doorway. She was a vision, backlit by a radiant chandelier, wearing the shortest denim cutoffs and black Bathory half-shirt that exposed her flat tummy with pierced navel. He didn't normally care for bony girls, but the shape of her slender limbs revved his libido. She was barefoot, her painted toenails causing his throat to constrict.

“Nice uniform,” she smirked, crossing her arms.

Crap, he forgot to change! He'd wanted to greet her in his Mayhem shirt. He had no choice but to follow his dear old dad's advice: Act like you couldn't care less if a woman admires you and she'll crave your company.

“Thanks,” he said. “I can get you one if you’d like.”

“I’ll pass,” she said. “But you can pass me the pizza.”

Kobran shook his head. “I’m not a charity worker. Five bucks for an extra-large pepperoni, sausage, and mushroom. That’s an 80% discount.”

She haughtily cocked her hip and dug into her back pocket for the money.

He reached for it, looked at it, scowled, and still holding the bag said, “Tip?”

She shrugged. “Out of cash.”

“You can make up for that by coming with me to see Dimmu Borgir.”

Her eyes went big. “You have tickets?”

“I’m pretty awesome.” He unsheathed the pizza box and gave it to her, but she seemed uninterested in food. “Hey, don’t drop that, Beatrix. It’s the best in Las Vegas.”

She balanced the edge of the box horizontally against her stomach with one arm, dangled the soda with the other, and looked at him. She was now, he could see, considering him in a new light, silently reappraising his value to her. He wanted to be judged favorably without letting on that he liked her. He noticed himself trembling, so he ran his fingers through his hair, feigned a yawn, surveyed the grounds, and sniffed the air. “Your fire smells weird,” he said. “Barbecue?”

She opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, then took a step toward him. Her features went anime-soft as she said, “We’re performing an evocation. You should join us. Actually, you must.”

“Can’t,” he said, turning away, about to head back to his car. He hesitated, taking out his phone to glance at the time. He had exactly 14 minutes to make it to Slices. “Working. Pick you up next Saturday, yeah?”

“Kobe,” she pleaded, her hand grazing his wrist. Something about the vulnerability in her voice and the touch of her skin jolted him. “I need you to stay for a moment. The grimoire we’re using ... it’s partly in Latin? You took Latin? You did that illusion for the talent show? And I know you know everything about the history of sorcery—”

“Not everything.”

“Just give me, like, 10 minutes. I need you to pronounce a few phrases.”

“Why are you summoning?” he asked, unable to resist her lilting speech, her feminine presence. “Wait, what are you summoning?”

“We’re calling forth a minor demon of success.” She squatted to place the box on the ground, so she could open the lid and remove a slice of pizza. Then she stood up to take a bite. “Mmm.” She sensually put her gorgeous

lips to the dough, catching the strings of melted cheese with her fingers, then licking them clean. It was erotic and absurd to watch a beautiful girl eating greasy food and moaning. He suspected he was being played, but his body responded, and he lost the ability to speak.

After a beat, he said, “Ten minutes.” He picked up his phone and quickly text-pleaded Natalie for more time. Then he said, “Where did you find a grimoire? If it’s that goofy *Greater Key of Solomon* book, you might as well—”

“No, no, this is dual-translated into Arabic,” she said. “It’s an unholy text that Faridah—the girl with the pink hair from biology?—well, she found it in her dead grandmother’s lockbox. She’s in the backyard. Faridah, I mean.”

“If the text is legible, I can pronounce it.”

“Thanks,” she said, stooping for another slice. “You’re right, this pizza is fierce.”

They walked into the house, and Beatrix left the pizza box on the granite kitchen island. He brought along the soda in case they got thirsty and the bag so he wouldn’t leave it behind. It was a normal Las Vegas luxury-suburban home with SKS appliances, and West Elm furniture, and a wall-sized Samsung screen in the living room. Completely unsurprising—save for the conjuring in the backyard.

“Parents gone?”

“They’re in North Carolina for High Point,” she said. High Point Market was an annual furnishings-industry trade show, and Beatrix’s parents were from that part of North Carolina; at least that’s how Kobran understood it.

“They’re super-upset about my test scores, which aren’t yet good enough for Duke, so I just need a boost.”

“You need a demon for that? Just get a Ritalin script like everyone else.” Then study, he didn’t add.

“My brother had a terrible experience with that stuff. He ended up playing *Call of Duty* for five days straight and forgot to eat and sleep. He had a stroke and nearly died. He’s 20 years old.”

“Sure, I guess an evil spirit is safer.” He imagined kissing lovely Beatrix and touching her pale breasts in one of her house’s many bedrooms, but pushed aside the image. He wanted to impress her. He wanted to possess her. He’d been tasked with summoning a demon, though. Just another Friday night in Las Vegas.

They made their way through the back door and into the desertscape backyard. He put the bag and soda on a picnic table. The fire was raging,

and he could see pieces of furniture in the blaze. He was going to ask where the furniture came from, but decided to let it go. Some of his classmates gathered around in a half-perimeter, their backs to the house. When Kobran approached, there were no introductions. A few waved and said hey, but most simply nodded at him once, hypnotized by the dancing flames.

Wearing a Misfits skull shirt, skinny black jeans, and black Chuck Taylors, Faridah, the Moroccan-American punk chick, said hello. She held a book to her chest. "I know you," she said. "We were in bio together."

"Kobran Hammett," he said.

"Hammett, like the crime writer?"

He nodded.

"You know about old texts?"

"My dad's a rare-book collector."

"That must be cool."

"Haven't spoken to him in years," he said with a shrug. "What's that?"

Faridah handed him the grimoire. It looked bound in leather, but when he touched it, the book felt alien, repulsive.

"Interesting," he said. "Made from human skin?"

"We're not sure," said Faridah.

"Stop," said Beatrix, elbow nudging her. "Don't creep us out. Let's see if he manages the evocation. He doesn't have much time."

"I have to get back to work," he clarified, pointing at his shirt's Slices logo. His phone dinged, and he looked to see that Natalie had texted him a poop emoji. Then a knife emoji.

Faridah nodded. With a finger, she indicated they should move closer to the fire, so he and Beatrix followed her. He could feel the heat snarling at his face when he opened the book and, relying on firelight, found the page marked *INVOCARE*. The Latin was calligraphic with sinister flourishes. The script troubled him viscerally.

"Beatrix," he said, squinting. "More light."

She drew close to him and turned on her phone's flashlight, holding it over the pages. They coughed when the wind suddenly changed direction, engulfing them in a heavy cloud of firepit smoke. They fanned the air crazily, then took a few lateral steps, adjusting their positions so they could see and breathe again.

"I feel nauseated," he said, whether from the smoke or the book, he couldn't tell.

“Can you pronounce it or not, Harry Potter?” huffed Faridah. “I take the SAT on Monday.”

He turned his head to clear his throat and spit. He didn’t bother explaining that Latin pronunciation had changed over centuries and that since English took its alphabet from Latin, you spoke individual letters as you did in English. “I’m ready.”

Beatrix again held the flashlight, and he was about to begin when the crickets stopped chirping all at the same time and a giant blanket of silence seemed to descend on the abandoned suburban neighborhood. He hadn’t noticed them until they went quiet.

Neither had Beatrix. “This book is legit!” she exclaimed.

“A coyote scared them is all,” said the fat kid with the NIN shirt.

“Hush, Ryan,” said Faridah. She rolled her wrist at Kobran, urging him to begin the evocation.

He licked his lips and began. “*Et veni, paulo diabolic,*” he said. “*Fac mihi somnia vera facit.*” He translated in his mind as he read aloud: *Come out, demon. Make my dreams come true.*

Nothing.

“Well, that totally sucked,” chuckled Ryan.

SUCK.

The voice was horrible, dripping with hate. Kobran’s spine went completely numb. The pages of the book he was holding came alive, fluttering like a captured pigeon. He fought the instinct to drop it. He suspected he would need it to contain whatever had arrived.

The demon slowly hobbled out of the fire on stumpy misshapen legs. Its body was a sewer-lid-sized mass of oozing gray flesh, patches of flame burning on charcoal-like tumors strung across its sickening uneven shoulders and back. Its eyes were like pustulent vaginal slits, its mouth a clutch of broken yellowed teeth. The creature looked less like hellspawn, more like a damaged extraterrestrial that had crash-landed in the desert and learned to stoke fear with its disgusting voice. It smelled revolting, a portable toilet stuffed with rotting flesh and set on fire.

“Gross,” said Faridah. She and the others began slowly, carefully, walking backward, away from whatever it was Kobran had summoned from an inter-dimensional hell.

The demon catapult-hopped directly in front of her, so fast it resembled a game glitch. She yelped, pinched her nose against the odor, and continued her

gradual retreat.

DREAMS, the monster gargled, stumble-wobbling toward her. *TELL ME.*

Kobran found himself desperate to muzzle it. No one else could do it, so he started flipping through the book, whose pages had now settled, looking for a cage of confinement or a banishment spell. But all he could see was the Arabic translation, and he knew nothing of that alphabet.

DREAMS!

"I ... I want a perfect score," Faridah relented, whimpering. "On every exam I take. From now until I die."

FIRST BORN. I WILL HAVE IT.

"What?"

"No, Faridah!" Beatrix warned. "Don't agree to that. It wants your kid!"

"What kid? I'm not even—"

"It means any child you have in the future," explained Kobran, finger-tracing a sentence on the page—difficult, since Beatrix was no longer shining her light on the pages. He'd found the spell in Latin, though, and was cramming it into his brain so he could paralyze this talking dung heap.

Faridah stopped walking backward. She held her ground for a moment to say to the demon, "No deal!"

It growled with bestial dissatisfaction, then launched itself against her face, searing her skin with the ferocious heat of its grotesque flipper-arms, toppling her into a sagebrush stalk. They thought they could hear the hissing of her flesh as it burned—or maybe it was just the demon's noise. But her scream was nightmarish.

Everyone except Kobran and Beatrix was racing to the house. It had to be now.

"*Adhuc manere, maccus,*" he intoned. "*Tu properas in quisquiliae inclusae sint.*"

The creature dropped from the girl's face and emitted a glass-shattering shriek.

"*Tace,*" Kobran added.

Like the crickets before it, the demon went mute. Its gash-like eyes were bulging as it strained against the containment spells, its body smoldering.

Beatrix tended to the wounded weeping Faridah as Kobran shut the book and rushed to the picnic table for the bag. He shook the soda violently, then opened it, angling the bottle so he was spraying the demon with carbonated liquid. The ploy seemed to work, cooling down the creature's temperature. Then Kobran used a nearby shovel to scoop-push the soaked gobbet of evil

into the hot bag.

The demon barely fit, and Kobran nearly singed his fingers sealing up the bag. He carried it gingerly, afraid of getting scorched, and walked over to where Faridah was lying on the ground. He knelt to examine her. Her tear-soaked face was mildly scratched. The burns were mostly confined to her neck and looked first-degree, not serious enough for major scars or surgery.

“I don’t think it’s life-threatening,” he said to Beatrix.

She nodded.

Ryan, the boy in the NIN shirt, brought over Ziplocs of ice to treat Faridah’s blistering.

Beatrix and Kobran stood up, and she placed her hand on his chest.

“Thank you,” she said with an expression of regret. “That was really dumb, and I’m so glad you were here to help.”

“You know,” he said, “it was kind of fun. Until it went sideways.” He went to kiss her.

She turned her blonde head and leaned back. “Um.”

He looked at her sharply, as if to say, seriously? Not even a quick kiss? Then he did an abrupt about-face and started toward the house, intent on driving back to Slices to finish his shift with a new grimoire, a cooling minor demon in his pizza bag, and a tender heart broken by the ultimate rejection.

In the distance, a coyote was howling.

He found a gas station and kept his job. That night, he delivered 10 more pizzas, each house well within Slice’s area of service. He made 100 bucks, but the cash felt like so many dead leaves in his wallet. There was no pleasure—without any hope of Beatrix in his future.

Shift over, he stepped into the walk-in freezer and shut the door behind him. He heard the sacked demon’s teeth chattering like silverware during an earthquake.

Kobran opened the bag and said, “*Dico, qui stulti.*”

DREAMS. Its voice was a toxic secretion, but the teenage wizard wasn’t about to let the monster move of its own accord.

“I want Beatrix,” said Kobran. “Forever.”

POSSESSION.

“And I want her to desire me. Forever.”

SUBMISSION.

“One more thing: Five children.”

IMPREGNATION.

Kobran arched an eyebrow. “And what do you require, little fellow?”

The demon didn’t hesitate. *FIRST BORN. I WILL HAVE IT.*

He weighed it, but only for a moment.

“In that case, make it six children.”



Road Trip

Ryan Huang

Lifeline

Diana Raab

She sits on the California beach edge
as words pour from her pursed lips:
musings of lost lovers,
decisions gone wrong,
and decisions gone right.

She wonders about
her life's next chapter,
who will care for her,
who will lay down the picnic blanket
that she needs for respite.

Nostalgia grasps her monkey mind
when she suddenly touches
lifelines from lost lovers and people
who also sit on distant beaches
gasping to be noticed

and wanting to be saved
as they watch the world dissipate
before their eyes,
as sunken ships emerge
from lost generations,
and she's still unable to hold on to one thought
as waves crash and dissipate into the shore.

Extinguishing

Clay Waters

o god of one word
do forgive me my misshape
flick away this eye-speck of a history
scrawled so sudden in ash

hollow socketed
I still see
the rogue light
spread its chaos
the surging circus capture me

the crush of frantic flesh
hopes bonded to hemoglobin
dumb lungs begged the poison
skin smoked blue

black demonheads
in greased cloaks
bobbed through my acrid sleep
every long dream disintegrated
before You
who sweeps the four corners clean

was it Your icy stars that predicted
those foolish minutes
of rendering fat?

o god of one word
the only thing ever
ignore my ludicrous bones
curling into question marks
before your final insult:
how quickly a life
becomes a shape
in Fire

Ode to a Point in Time

Lis Anna-Langston

Moving a decimal in math
changes meaning, simplifies.
It's why everyone loves math,
flocks to it, complicates it with equations
to separate particles of infinity.
Just kidding.
Nobody likes math.
Except my husband.
Tallying totals for tips in his mind.
I can feel his fingertips waiting,
hand poised just above the check
for the signal from his brain,
like a race car revving its engine at the start line,
waiting for the flag to drop,
the pop of the gun to ring out,
the big bang that sets everything in motion.

Fifteen 20 30 percent
calculated by service,
measurable but not exactly higher math.
Three refills of San Pellegrino, one creamy artichoke dip
with warm pita wedges, one glass of Beaujolais Villages,
one prime rib medium rare, one olive baked cod, two potatoes,
loaded.

Adding zeros to the tip
begins to signal toward infinity.
A googolplex somersaulting across the rounded tops of zeroes,
out to the edge of space time
like a mad harlequin in motion
writing numbers until he gets tired.

Yet love is bigger than all of the atoms in the universe,
and a decimal is but a mere point in time,

a placement to distinguish value.
Love is like the number 12, an ancient mystery, a full circle.
Think of 12 like a clock, the hand going from 12 to 12
and back again.
Think zodiac,
think day and night blocked out in units, noon to midnight,
midnight to noon.
The ancients called this Danna.
Because back then math was poetry; poetry was math.
Twelve wasn't just a number.
It was a mysterious tool used to divide the flow of time.
Insert a single decimal point as an Egyptian goddess places stars
in the shimmering night sky
and everything changes.
The tip to the server.
The numbers in a bank account.
The day of the week.
The placement of Venus next to the moon
the night we fell in love.
Add a decimal
and separate the 12 into two groups of six
and divide down to a union. That's the math of falling in love.
In school we learned the duodecimal system,
a form of counting using base 12,
which is just a fancy way of saying
we can never find anything in the library
because the decimal point is always changing,
beginning and ending on empty aisles
filled with books, unopened, unread
along with multiplication tables
we forgot to study
binge watching *Breaking Bad*
because Walter White moves his decimal point
with every batch he and Jesse cook up. Fat stacks, yo.
Yet it brings an intriguing thought.
If time were a decimal point,
we could move forward or back at will

and change the meaning of a moment, increasing or decreasing its value.
We could relive the sun setting over the Potomac in a staggering
display of aliveness,
the glowing orb pulled to the vanishing point by golden chariots
driven by gods who can move their decimals anywhere they want.
Perks of the job.
Divining their future with flecks of paint chipped from the railing.
Promises abandoned. Layer after layer, moving closer to the center.

Numbers unfold like waves, an infinity of energy.
We live on light, learn to photosynthesize.
The iron core of the earth pulls us close.
Subatomic particles, deities, buddhas, nothingness, poetry, simplicity,
mystics, light.
We are billions of subatomic particles
all assembled together to create right now.
We are but a decimal point in time.
We float while rocks soak up radiation.
While mosquitoes hover in primordial swamps.
There was quite a buzz in the beginning.
We call the first time we met the big bang.
Meeting is not the same backwards and forwards, hence the decimal point.
Not simply a reversal of events.
Knowledge travels faster than light. Fact.
Atoms move through the void. Fact.
The laws of thermodynamics exist.
The second law states the total amount of chaos and disorder in the
universe always increases.
If we knew the exact location and velocity of each molecule,
we could violate the Uncertainty Principle,
who is just a tricky bastard that likes to keep us guessing.



Tree, House
Lauro Palomba

Everything Must Go

Nick Friedman

Customers who wandered into Moishe's Relics squinted soon after closing the door behind them as if the shop's air itself was yellowed and faded. They gravitated first toward the vintage lighters. Then they'd rifle through the heaps of orphaned cuff links and campaign buttons of long-forgotten candidates, flipping them over once, twice, before plinking them back into their baskets. Stringless acoustic guitars. Road maps from before the interstate. Electric alarm clocks with hands stilled at the moment their plugs were yanked from the wall. For 50 years Moishe had bought it all and sold it all. His most recent acquisition was a sign he had taped inside the front window facing the block of shiny new cafés and cocktail bars. "Going Out of Business," it said. "Everything Must Go."

As he set out on his morning walk to the shop from the apartment he shared with his wife, Rifka, Moishe found a sidewalk repair crew blocking his usual route. He detoured to the far side of the street, which took him past the old Essex Street Theater, long boarded up and now a bank. A pair of fleeting memories tagged alongside his reflection in the glassy façade. There were the boyhood afternoons spent in the Essex's balcony, where he would steal off after yeshiva to watch the dancers and singers and comedians who glowed like tiny animated jewels on the stage far below. And there was the day the Essex shuttered, which coincided with his father's sudden passing and his duty as the eldest son to assume the family business.

Five blocks later, he was at the shop. He stepped inside, wiped his feet on the mat, and crossed off another day in his head: *15 left*. He hung his heavy wool overcoat on the hook near the door along with his black Borsalino hat—a gift from Rifka on his 50th birthday 25 years before—smoothed his yarmulke, and took up his spot behind the rear counter. Like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, he scanned the shop, taking mental inventory of his goods. When he reached a low shelf with various shoeboxes, he fixed on a blue box. It was scuffed at the corners, but unlike the others, unfaded. He rested his elbows on the glass countertop to take it in more fully. The moment broke with the arrival of Yvonne, the Dominican girl from upstairs he had hired two weeks before to help him liquidate as much as he could before closing up for good.

"Good morning, Mr. Zeligson," she said.

“Oh. Good morning, Yvonne.”

“Should I keep working on the cups and plates, Mr. Zeligson?”

“Hm? Yes. The china. Keep working.”

Few words passed between the two throughout the day. Yvonne stationed herself at the china display and pulled the unchipped plates forward and marked down the price stickers on the backs. Moishe visited the pocket-watch case to wind the laggards. Each trip out and back from behind the counter took him near the shoeboxes. A slight and recurring smile kept his wispy mustache busy above his full white beard.

The afternoon sun lingered, taking its sweet time vacating the shop. Finally, with winter’s early darkness settled in and stray customers sure to be no more, Moishe sent Yvonne home, popped open the cash register, and scooped up the day’s few bills. He pulled on his overcoat, donned his hat, and worked his way back to the shoeboxes. He picked up the blue box—which had sat out of sight behind all the others until Yvonne unearthed it late yesterday—and tucked it under his arm. Out into the slushy streets he went.

The spring hinge on the heavy apartment door was tight, and the door banged shut behind him before he could catch it. Rifka looked up. Moishe yanked off his hat, hung it on the hook, and coughed into his gloved hand to distract her from the box. “Cold out,” he muttered. “Nobody shopping.”

The next morning, Thursday, Moishe dressed for work as usual, tying up his salt-stained wingtips. Rifka bound a scarf around her hair, gave him a peck on the cheek, and headed out to meet the wives’ klatch for gossip and cake.

Moishe picked up the phone, dialed Yvonne at home, and told her he was running late.

“I’ll be there in an hour,” he said.

He hung up the receiver, grabbed his hat off the hook, and opened the door to the spare bedroom. He flicked on the light. A dark spot on the glass shade covering the ceiling fixture reminded him that one bulb was still out. The must of sagging boxes stuffed with tattered books and unsold ceramics filled the room.

He lowered the window shade facing the air shaft lest the nosy young couple across the way looked in. He grunted as he rolled back the square of green carpet to expose the parquet floor.

Placing his hat on the bed, he sat down on the edge and pulled the shoebox out from underneath and lifted off the lid. A booklet with a cover photo of a tall, slim young man in a white tuxedo with perfectly even teeth rested on top of light-blue tissue paper.

Moishe thumbed through the booklet, and in 10 minutes, he read all he wanted. He flattened pages four and five so they would lay open on the bedspread, untied his wingtips, and placed them out of sight under the bed.

Parting the tissue paper a panel at a time, he lifted one shoe out and wiggled it onto his left foot, being careful not to jam the tongue back, and pulled the laces tight. A glimpse of white mustache against black patent leather caught his eye as he tied up the right shoe. He stood up.

Peering down at the diagrams on page four, he read out loud.

“The single tap: Raise your right foot off the floor and step down on the ball of the same foot. Makes one sound.”

He lifted his right foot and set it down.

Tap.

“Repeat with the left foot.”

The left foot went up and down.

Tap.

“The brush step: Swing your right foot forward, striking the ball of the foot on the floor. Makes one sound. May be taken in any direction.”

He swung his right foot forward.

Tap.

“Repeat with the left foot.”

The left foot swung forward.

Tap.

He nodded from booklet to floor and back again to follow the diagrams, lifting a foot and striking it again and again, swinging a foot and striking it again and again. The tricky weight shift to lift one foot followed by the other threw him for a bit. But the crisp, rewarding sound of the tap when he got it right kept him at it.

He turned to face the far wall and took a few careful steps forward as if inching out onto thin ice. The clack of the sole contacting the floor sent a charge up his spine, and he peered down at the shoes in wonder. Taking a deep breath, he set off toward the wall. *Clack, clack, clack, clack.*

Three excursions out and back and he was bedside again, breathing quickly and reading page five.

“The flap step: Brush your right foot forward, striking the floor with the ball, then step down on the same foot. Makes two sounds.”

Moishe turned and set out again, this time circling the dusty imprint left behind by the carpet square. The distinctive retort of the flap step’s two

sounds—the brush of the ball followed by the step onto the foot—came easily. But generating a steady two-tone rhythm eluded him. The forward momentum of the brush simply carried his lead leg too far out in front of him, and he wobbled after landing the foot. He tried a shorter stride, but the sweet spot of balance would not come. He glared down at his feet.

He clacked back toward the bed, peering in the direction of the booklet. As he did, the image of his bald head flashed by in an antique mirror propped against the wall.

My hat.

In one continuous motion, he swept up the hat and placed it on his head as he passed by the bed and continued out onto the open floor. He picked up his pace, and the room filled with an improvised clatter of taps, clicks, clacks, stomps, and scuffs. Whatever sounds his feet wanted to make now, however they wanted to make them, wherever they wanted to take him, he followed along. When the mirror arrived again, he paused. Panting, he stepped back, then again, to take in his body in full. His reflection was distant and gauzy in the cloudy old glass. He ran his gaze from head to toe and back again, tipped his hat, bowed, turned around, and danced on. Three round trips later he was back at the bed.

He plopped down and untied each shoe. He checked the toes for scratches, then returned the pair to the box, covering them with the tissue paper. He dog-eared page six of the booklet, placed it on top of the paper, and propped the lid on. After sliding the box back under the bed, he tied on his wingtips and decided to lie down for a few minutes.

Around noon the apartment phone rang. Rifka picked it up.

“Mrs. Zeligson?”

“Yes?”

“It’s Yvonne. You know, from the shop?”

“Yes?”

“Where’s Moishe?”

“What do you mean, where’s Moishe? He’s with you at the shop, isn’t he?”

“No,” Yvonne replied. “He said he was going to be late, but he hasn’t come in.”

Rifka hung up the phone and glanced around the apartment. She stopped on the overcoat hanging at the front door. She rose and moved to the spare bedroom and cracked open the door.

“Moishe? What are you, sleeping?”

Yvonne kept the shop open at Rifka's request during the week of shiva, save for one day when Yvonne stopped by the apartment to pay her respects. Three days later, Rifka arrived at the shop toting a pair of white shopping bags. She set the bags on the floor by the rear counter next to the others.

"Two more," she said.

Rifka turned and worked her way to the front of the store and opened the door. She looked back to Yvonne, who was already digging into the bags.

With the sounds of the street suddenly inside the shop, Yvonne stopped and looked up. Rifka offered a small smile, then stepped out and closed the door behind her. Yvonne resumed her work. She pulled out a few books, a small flower vase, and placed them on the counter. She drew the blue shoebox out from the bottom of the bag, opened the lid, and set the booklet aside. As she lifted the shoes out to appraise them, she found a small, folded slip of paper under the tissue paper. She opened it.

"Essex Street Theater" was printed in Gothic font across the top. Underneath, written in hand:

"Closing sale. Tap shoes (new) \$15."

At the bottom, stamped in large red letters: "ALL SALES FINAL."

Yvonne refolded the paper and tossed it back into the box. She clamped the booklet shut with a binder clip, curled it into the left shoe, and slid the pair onto the shelf next to the alarm clocks.

Memory Care

Clay Waters

Consider
the pity of photographs,
their fat-fingered, greased grasp on the past,
never studied without a wince of regret
(though no one takes a picture to forget).

From that lost world
your wolfish eyes signal
untranslatable messages, a glittering gaze
now honeyed and glazed.

Am I still behind there somewhere,
another silverfish slipping by at sunset?
Is it teeming where you are?
Is that why you shake?

Put your hand here, huddle
close inside the carriage;
the creaking bridge is only distant thunder.

Remember:
you married the fire-eater
whose stomach soured every month,
the return customer
fretting outside the tent?

Remember:
the dockside bartender
with ambivalent tattoos
and blue smile,
who reversed you for a time?

Your last love,

the pet who crossed the tracks
never seen again.

Must everything be material?
Must I speak of the yawning mouth,
snapped strings,
that inner tubing so intricate
now calcium-clogged?

Draw the curtain behind.
You've paid your dollar.
Stand straight where the planks end
beyond all jabs and cuts.

Sit beside the snowman
who stares at the sunrise
that looms over the ocean.

Let him know we are all melting.



Dee
Patty Paine

INTERVIEW



Gloria Muñoz

Photo by Stephen Zane

Voice, Puzzles, and Playfulness on the Page: An Interview with Gloria Muñoz

Delaney Driscoll and Joshua Thomas Bray

DD: Getting into your poetry book, *Danzirly*, I wanted to ask how you decided on the book's layout. How did you choose which poems went in what order?

GM: It was hard, and sometimes it feels random. Jay Hopler, my mentor who recently passed away, taught me about being really physical with poems and putting them in my world—like taping them around the house or laying them on the floor. He said to take a bunch of piles and throw them up in the air. Catch them. See how they land. Treat them like a tarot card where you pull up a poem and read it. Ask, What is this poem telling me? What is the essence of this poem for where I am today in my life? Then decide where the poem goes depending on that message, theme, and concept.

It feels very woo-woo or wacky writing, but it actually helped a lot to think of them this way instead of as the super flat, almost slate-like things that exist only on my computer. I started weaving things together based on themes, age, pop culture, or subject matter—braiding themes within a section.

Some poets do it totally randomly. Some say, "I'm just putting them in this book in the order I wrote them." That, to me, wouldn't work because I'm always in love with the last thing I wrote, as opposed to the first thing. So, my first poem in any collection will always be a newer poem because I want to start in a place I'm really excited about.

DD: How do you approach structure? Is it something you plan ahead of time, or is it something you look back on when you finish the poem?

GM: I like to think of the field of the page. The page is not something that is just a piece of paper. It is something that can be heard, that can be reimagined, that can be re-experienced. If a filmmaker wanted to look at a poem, they could figure out the space between words, line breaks, and stanzas. They could figure out what that space is doing.

So, I often try to think of white space as an active participant in the poem, as opposed to just dead space or a mandatory aspect of the medium.

It happens a lot from the get-go. It changes a lot in revision, too, but it starts in a space of breath. Here is an image; here is where I want to go. I don't know how to get there, but I have an idea. And that breath—that space, that playfulness on the page—helps me figure things out. Then in revision for sure, I'm like, Ah! I got it! And now this is a pattern, or it's not, or it's totally random. Sometimes I have bizarre rules that make no sense in terms of established forms but work for the poem itself.

JTB: Speaking of revision, how long do you spend revising? And do you ever get obsessed going deeper, where you have to say, “I need to let go”?

GM: Yes to all of those questions. I can revise for a really long time. When something is done, it's when I cannot figure out what else to do with it. When it feels like, Okay, this is what this poem is saying, and that's it.

In terms of poetry, I revise in a couple of rounds. I also love distance, so I like putting it away, not looking at it for a while, and then coming back to it or sending it to a friend and saying, “Hey, I'm going to submit this somewhere. Can you look at it one more time? Is it garbage? Where's it at?” And that's really helpful. I like having another set of eyes, or even my own. I have a few close friends who will do that with last-minute things, and we're always open to anything like that from each other. Whether it's a poem, a grant thing, or anything else.

For fiction, I revise for a very long time. I have a novel right now that I've been revising for almost a year and a half. I don't always recommend revising for this long because it can feel a bit muddy sometimes. I like to think, Okay, where's this revision going? But with this book in particular, I've sat with it for so long. I wanted to read more. I wanted to watch more. I wanted to listen more. I wanted to be more of a part of the world when thinking of this revision and then return to it.

DD: What advice would you give to writers and poets just starting out? What advice would you give them to dig deeper and produce what they want to create?

GM: The digging-deeper-down question is one that's difficult for students because you're just starting out. It's all very exciting, but you don't want to write your greatest hits in college. You're going to do it later. But I

do think that college, as a whole, and those years afterward are a great time for experimentation—for trying things. So, if you're a hardcore poet or fiction writer, write a play. Do something outside of your lane, to stretch yourself and to also discover. There's something beautiful to that almost blind faith we can have in ourselves when we're willing to just be experimental and try things.

So try things, but also—even more than that—write about the things that feel difficult. The things that might feel scary, right? Even if it's not writing that's shared.

There's so much emphasis on output in college—on the finished thing and what's shared. I think there's value in exploring those spaces in a way that still feels like self-preservation. If it's something that you're like, Oh, this is a hard line for me. I'm not going to be ready to write about this for 25 years. Then not that, but other things. Write about the things you feel you're not supposed to write about. Those questions you might have where you feel like, Eh, these are contentious or can make people feel prickly. What if we just went there? I think we all carry those things.

You also have time. I think you feel so rushed in college and then grad school or whatever comes next. Writing is long. Life—knock on wood—is long. So, give yourself time.

I think projects, as we spoke about earlier, sometimes require—demand—that time. So just know it's not so much a race. The writing world is so big and so small at the same time. You're not really in competition with people. You're writing, and you can lift people up, and you can ask for help when you need it, etc. There's very much a community there. It's just offering yourself some space to grow.

JTB: I love music. Most people do, right? You recently started a music company. How does that affect your writing? Does it significantly impact your work?

GM: Yes, it impacts my work. It requires chunks of my time per day now. Like that pie-slice graph, life is now slivered in a new way. It requires time. It also makes me write fast, which is a new thing for me. I'm a very slow writer. We work for a company that will sometimes ask for a very quick turnaround of a couple of episodes for a kids' show. And they'll ask, "And can you include two songs in there?" So it's made me write off the page more, which is something I really like doing as a writer anyway. Where you're walking, driving, on the spin bike, whatever-ing in your life, but still writing in your head. You're

still thinking.

Sometimes, I drive and think of a character, for example. Okay, in this scene, she walks into her roommate's room. She walks into her roommate's room, and she sits on the bed. She sits on the bed, and then, what happens? What is the mood? What is the light like? I'll be driving and thinking about this. Sometimes, I'll take the wrong exit. It's not always a good thing, but I just try to focus on where the scene is going. I know it's between siblings, family members, or people in a workspace. So I tried to think of that setting. I'll think about that list and go through it and ask myself, Okay, they want this kind of character. How can I build out this kind of character? Who—what are they? Are they an animal? Are they human? That's been really helpful.

Writing fast has taught me to push the edges of what I believe writing is. But it's made me also be like, Well, you gotta write this episode in 20 minutes before school pickup.

It has made me quicker and less precious, but also it's made me think about writing in a different way. It's made me less of a perfectionist because now we get immediate rounds of edits, which is great.

DD: You do a lot of translation work and a lot of editing for other writers. How do you approach translation and the times when words don't precisely meet when traversing languages?

GM: I love translation. It feels like figuring something out. I'm also a writer who likes math. I just always have. I was part of the Trigonometry Stars when I was in high school; I like math that much. I think this side of me—which is also sometimes the poet side of me because poetry has a lot of math in it—loves figuring out the problem of a translation. It's fun. It feels like a search.

There's so much that's untranslatable. One could argue that almost every word—even when it feels like it has a direct translation—because of its etymology, weight, and history in a different language isn't ever a one-for-one swap. Borges talks a lot about every word being a metaphor, right? W.S. Merwin said that there's no direct translation. Everything's an impression of another thing. I think it should be playful. Why look for the direct thing when it could be something better or something closer to the actual truth of the piece?

So, yeah, I love translating. I feel like the problem-solving part of it is something I'm so enriched by. I highly recommend it if you're ever interested in receiving or envisioning writing in a different way. I recommend translating

something, even if you don't speak the language of the original text. Translate for yourself in the worst possible way—like Google Translate, dictionary, or whatever—and then go from there. Think about where the words are coming from.

DD: What would you say has been your most rewarding writing experience?

GM: Fortunately, I've had a lot of rewarding writing experiences. I don't think I would keep writing if I hadn't. It's hard work; writing is difficult. I think finishing a novel was really rewarding. I had never felt that feeling before and didn't even think I could do it. So, a couple of years ago, when I finished my first novel, I was like, And, done. Somehow this is a book. It was garbage. It was a first job, but it was a finished thing.

I'm also working closely with people. I have a fantastic writing group. For *Danzirly*, they saw every poem in that book multiple times. Having a set of very good, creative, trusted, and loved minds work closely on something is totally amazing. I love talking with writers where we speak the same nerdy craft language. That's always gratifying, refreshing, and amazing.

DD: Speaking more about writing groups and finding those people, I wanted to discuss further how helpful these groups have been.

GM: I can't recommend it enough. I think if you don't have some kind of group you're writing with or some kind of community that you connect with as a writer, it can be pretty solitary. Technically you just need yourself and a computer to write and a bunch of books and stuff like that: inanimate objects. You don't necessarily need people. But you do need them in the biggest way.

It's important for having a deadline and having someone be your sort of consistent writer or gym buddy—that accountability is amazing. But it also helps you become someone who's able to talk about writing and sit with writing and show up even when you don't have work.

So, it's like contributing to a community. It's the best, and also, that group of people gets to know your voice. That's something else I recommend: Don't be in a writing group with people who are exactly the same as you in terms of their writing. You don't want an echo chamber in what you're writing. You want people who challenge you, who question, who see new things that maybe you weren't seeing, who bring light to things.

WINNER OF THE AMBROGGIO PRIZE OF THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS

D A N Z I R L Y

D A W N ' S E A R L Y

D A N Z I R L Y

D A W N ' S E A R L Y

D A N Z I R L Y

G L O R I A M U Ñ O Z



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Patrick McEvoy, a former writer and editor for several sports publications, has had stories included in various comic book anthologies. In addition, his short plays were chosen to be performed at the Players Theatre in New York and the Emerging Artists Theatre's New Works series in 2021 and 2022. His photography has also been exhibited with the *Greenpoint Gallery*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Molecule*, *riverSedge*, and *Good Works Review*.

David P. Miller's collection, *Bend in the Stair*, was published by Lily Poetry Review Books in 2021. *Sprawled Asleep* was published by Nixes Mate Books in 2019. His poems have appeared in *Meat for Tea*, *Solstice*, and *Paterson Literary Review*, among others, as well as in several anthologies. "Add One Father to Earth" was awarded an honorable mention by Robert Pinsky for the New England Poetry Club's 2019 Samuel Washington Allen Prize competition. He lives with his wife, the visual artist Jane Wiley, in Jamaica Plain, MA.

Sean Minogue has written for theater, film, television, and magazines. His work most recently appeared in *ARC Poetry Magazine*. He lives in Toronto.

Gloria Muñoz is a Colombian-American writer, translator, and advocate for multilingual literacy and writing. She's the author of *Danzirly/Dawn's Early*, which was selected for the 2019 Ambroggio Prize by Rosa Alcalá. She's also the recipient of the New York Summer Writer's Institute Fellowship, a Creative Pinellas Artist Grant, the USF Humanities Institute Poetry Award, and a Think Small to Think Big Artist Grant. She has worked alongside botanists, musicians, dancers, historians, classicists, visual artists, conservationists,

and neuroscientists. A co-founder of Pitch Her Productions, she's half of the songwriting team Moonlit Música.

Peter E. Murphy was born in Wales and grew up in New York City, where he managed a nightclub, operated heavy equipment, and drove a taxi. He's the author of 11 books and chapbooks of poetry and prose, and his work has appeared in *The Common*, *Guernica*, *Hippocampus*, *The New Welsh Reader*, *Rattle*, *The Sun*, and elsewhere. He is the founder of Murphy Writing of Stockton University in Atlantic City. www.peteremurphy.com

Patty Paine is the author of *Grief & Other Animals*, *The Sounding Machine*, and three chapbooks. Her writing and visual work have appeared in *Blackbird*, *Adroit*, *Gulf Stream*, *Waxwing*, *Thrush*, *ctrl-v*, *The South Dakota Review*, and other publications. She is the founding editor of *Diode Poetry Journal* and Diode Editions, and is director of liberal arts and sciences at VCUarts Qatar.

Lauro Palomba has taught ESL and done stints as a freelance journalist and speechwriter.

Janice Park is a Korean-American artist currently studying illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design. She works with traditional and digital media, passionate about making art that sparks curiosity in the viewer. When she's not creating art, you can find her journaling, organizing her music playlists, or running away from cucumbers.

Diane Pohl lives and writes in Cambridge, MA, where there are books along the sidewalks. Her recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Slipstream*, *The Lake*, *The Bookends Review*, and *The MacGuffin*, among others. Her prose poem "When you were 9" won an Allen Ginsberg Award.

Diana Raab, PhD, is an award-winning memoirist, poet, blogger, speaker, author of 10 books, and contributor to numerous journals and anthologies. Her two latest books are *Writing for Bliss: A Seven-Step Plan for Telling Your Story* and *Transforming Your Life and Writing for Bliss: A Companion Journal*. Her poetry chapbook *An Imaginary Affair* was published in July 2022 with Finishing Line Press. She blogs for *Psychology Today*, *Thrive Global*, *Sixty and Me*, *Good Men Project*, and *The Wisdom Daily*, among other sites. Visit: www.dianaraab.com.

Alyzea Rodriguez, illustrator/visual development artist: “As an artist, creating an engaging character or a convincing scene by only visual means creates a new challenge to take on and overcome. To push our understanding of character and connection through visual development is the driving force of my work. Growth, change, and diversity in my art is what I strive for.”

Hoyt Rogers is a poet, writer, and translator. He translates from the French, German, Italian, and Spanish; he is known for his English versions of Bonnefoy, du Bouchet, and Borges. He has published many books; he has contributed poetry, fiction, essays, and translations to a wide variety of periodicals. His edition of Yves Bonnefoy’s *Rome, 1630* received the 2021 Translation Prize from the French-American Foundation. His forthcoming works include a poetry collection, *Thresholds* (MadHat Press), the novel *Sailing to Noon* (book one of *The Caribbean Trilogy*), and a translation of Bonnefoy’s *The Wandering Life* (Seagull Books). For more information, please visit his website, hoytrogers.com.

Tess Schwarz is a creative writing student from southeastern Pennsylvania. Her poetry focuses on finding beauty in the mundane and pulling emotion from the depths of life. Tess spends her time learning new languages, reading, and taking pictures on disposable cameras.

Dominik Slusarczyk lives in Bristol in southwestern England. He is an artist who makes everything from music to painting. His poetry has been published in *Dream Noir*. He has self-published 10 books in a variety of subjects, including fiction, poetry, and philosophy.

Sami Sulzer is an illustrator and painter from Dallas, TX, currently studying illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, FL. Her work has appeared in animations, fundraising events, galleries, zines, and on wallcoverings. She enjoys experimenting with new creative challenges, exploring color, and creating artwork that evokes emotion from an audience.

Al Taylor is a queer horror writer from Florida.

Jonathan C. Ukah is a graduate of English and law living in the United Kingdom with his family. His poems have appeared or will soon appear in *Last Leaves Magazine*, *Zoetic Press*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Boomer Literary*

Magazine, Ariel Chart Literary Press, the Journal of Undiscovered Poets, New Note Poetry, New Reader Magazine, etc. He is a winner of the Voices of Lincoln Poetry Contest 2022.

Clay Waters has had poems published in *Green Hills Literary Lantern, The Santa Clara Review, Poet Lore, and Roanoke Review*. He lived in Florida until the age of 4 and recently returned to find it hasn't changed a bit. His website is claywaters.org, featuring his self-published cozy mystery novel, *Death in the Eye*.

Emma Wells is a mother and English teacher. She has poetry published with various literary journals and magazines. She enjoys writing flash fiction and short stories also. Her debut novel, *Shelley's Sisterhood*, is scheduled for publication in 2023.

Mary Zelinka lives in Oregon's Willamette Valley and has worked at the Center Against Rape and Domestic Violence for almost 35 years. Her writing has appeared in *The Sun Magazine, Brevity, Eclectica*, and others. She has not had any flies as houseguests since the time of this essay.

Cover art: Sami Sulzer

Shift is published by
Ringling College Press
Ringling College of Art and Design
2700 N Tamiami Trail
Sarasota, FL 34234-5895
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