Aji magazine

issue 15. fall 2021

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Underwater Love

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Alan Bern

Retired children's librarian Alan Bern is an exhibited and published photographer with awards for his poems and stories. Alan is also a performer with dancer/composer Lucinda Weaver as PACES (dance & poetry fit to the space with musicians from Composing Together). Find *Lines & Faces*, his illustrated broadside press with artist/printer Robert Woods, at linesandfaces.com

Steve Brisendine

Steve Brisendine lives and works in Mission, Kansas. He is the author of *The Words We Do Not Have* (Spartan Press, 2021), and his poetry was included in the third 365 Days Poets anthology. His work also has appeared or is forthcoming in *Flint Hills Review*, *Book of Matches*, *Speckled Trout Review* and elsewhere.

Susan DiRende

Author/artist Susan diRende travels the world with no fixed abode. Her writing awards include the 2017 Special Citation for Excellence by the Philip K Dick Awards. Her artwork has had exhibitions in New Zealand, Belgium, Mexico, and the US. Most recently, she has had writing and artwork published in *The Dewdrop, the Pine Hills Review,* and *The Gaze Journal.*

Joel Glickman

Joel Glickman is Professor Emeritus of Music at Northland College where he continues to teach music, including jazz studies, part time. He is a previous contributor of poems to *Aji* and several other publications. Other endeavors include those of singer-song writer, banjo player, clarinetist, fisherman. He lives in Ashland, Wisconsin with his wife Susan and their bichon, Madeline.

Joyce Goldenstern

Joyce Goldenstern writes and lives by fiction; she has been published in many journals and anthologies and has a collection of short stories, *The Story Ends—The Story Never Ends* (ELJ Editions, 2015). "Chester in Another Dimension" is a chapter of her novel *In Their Ruin.* The novel has been accepted for publication by Black Heron Press.

Artists & Authors

in this issue

Mark Hurtubise

During the 1970s, Mark Hurtubise published numerous works. Then, he engaged himself in family, teaching, two college presidencies and was CEO of an Inland Northwest community foundation. After a four-decade hiatus, he is attempting to create again by balancing on a twig like a pregnant bird. Within the past four years, his writing and photography have appeared in numerous journals.

Andrew Gudgel

Andrew Gudgel is a freelance writer and translator living in Maryland. His essays have appeared in *Under the Sun*, *Brevity* magazine's blog, *Blueline*, and other publications. He's a graduate of both Johns Hopkins University's Science Writing Program and the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop.

Michael Hettich

Michael Hettich has lived in upstate New York, Colorado, Northern Florida, Vermont, Miami, and Black Mountain, North Carolina, where he now lives with his family. His books of poetry include *The Mica Mine* (St. Andrews University Press, 2021), winner of The Lena Shull Book Award ; *To Start an Orchard* (Press 53, 2019); and *Bluer and More Vast* (Hysterical Press, 2018).

Mary Beth Hines

Mary Beth Hines's poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction appear in journals such as *Brilliant Flash Fiction, Crab Orchard Review*, *Eclectica*, *Madcap Review*, and *SWWIM Every Day* among many others. She writes from her home in Massachusetts and is thrilled that Kelsay Books will publish her first poetry collection (November 2021). Visit her at www.marybethhines.com.

Michelle McMillan-Holifield

Michelle McMillan-Holifield is a recent Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. Her work has been included in or is forthcoming in *Boxcar Poetry Review, Jabberwock Review, Sleet Magazine, Stirring, The Collagist, Whale Road Review,* and *Windhover* among others. She hopes you one day find her poetry tacked to a tree somewhere in the Alaskan Wild.

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Susan Johnson

I teach writing at UMass Amherst and my commentaries can be heard on NEPM.org. *Rhino, SLAB,* and *In The Void* have recently published poems of mine.

Jen Karetnick

Miami-based poet and writer Jen Karetnick's fourth full-length book of poems is *The Burning Where Breath Used to Be* (David Robert Books, September 2020), an Eric Hoffer Poetry Category Finalist and a Kops-Fetherling Honorable Mention. She is also the author of *Hunger Until It's Pain* (Salmon Poetry, forthcoming spring 2023) in addition to six other collections.

David Kern

D. E. Kern is an author and educator from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in *Appalachian Review, Limestone, Rio Grande Review, Sierra Nevada Review*, and *Big Muddy*. He teaches English at Arizona Western College.

J.I. Kleinberg

J.I. Kleinberg's visual poems have been published in print and online journals worldwide. An artist, poet, freelance writer, and three-time Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, she lives in Bellingham, Washington, USA, and on Instagram @jikleinberg.

Tom Laichas

Tom Laichas's recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Evening Street Review, Monday Night, Spillway, Oddville Press,* and elsewhere. He is the author of the collection *Empire of Eden* (High Window Press, 2019) and of *Sixty Three Photographs at the End of a War* (3.1 Press, 2021). He lives in Venice, California.

Steve Legomsky

Steve Legomsky is a former mathematician, Washington University law professor, and Obama Administration official. He has held visiting positions at universities in twelve countries. Steve has published three nonfiction books (Oxford University Press and West Academic); numerous academic articles; a novel, *The Picobe Dilemma*; and ten short stories. His website is https://law.wustl.edu/faculty-staff-directory/profile/stephen-h-legomsky/.

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William Littlejohn-Oram

William earned a degree in fiction from the University of Houston and is pursuing a Master's in Poetry from Texas Tech University. He can be found in Lubbock, Texas wearing brightly colored shoes. His work has appeared with or is forthcoming with *The Shore, Inkwell Journal, Amethyst Review,* and others.

Linda Logan

Linda Logan is a writer and painter living near Chicago. Her art work has been exhibited by Margin Gallery. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* and *Outside Magazine* and academic journals.

Mario Loprete

Mario Loprete was born in Catanzaro, Italy in 1968. While painting is his first love, he is also a sculptor. He used his own clothing, plaster, resin, and cement to create his Concrete Sculptures, works that transform viewers into post-modern archaeologists studying his works as if they were urban artifacts.

Katharyn Howd Machan

Katharyn Howd Machan writes poetry on her dragon patio when weather allows and elsewhere when it doesn't. As a professor in the Writing Department at Ithaca College, she mentors students in fairy-tale-based creative writing courses. Her most recent publications are *What the Piper Promised* (AQP, 2018) and *A Slow Bottle of Wine* (Comstock Writers, Inc., 2020), both national-contest winners.

D.S. Maolalai

D.S. Maolalai has been nominated eight times for Best of the Net and five times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019).

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Bruce McRae

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician and multiple Pushcart nominee, has had work appear in hundreds of publications around the world. The winner of the 2020 Libretto Chapbook Prize (*20 Sonnets*), his books include *The So-Called Sonnets, An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy, Like As If, All Right Already*, and *Hearsay*.

Cindy Maresic

Cindy Maresic is a Chilean American poet who lives in San Diego, California. She works as an elementary school teacher and supports her district's writing needs. She has an MFA from San Diego State University, and her poetry has appeared in *The Evansville Review, Apeiron Review, Mapping Me: A Landscape of Women's Stories, Belletrist Magazine, Synesthesia Literary Journal*, and *Goldman Review*.

Bob Meszaros

Bob Meszaros taught English at Hamden High School in Hamden, Connecticut, for thirty-two years. He retired from high school teaching in June of 1999. His poems have appeared in *The Connecticut Review, Main Street Rag, Tar River Poetry, The Red Wheelbarrow,* and many other literary journals.

Andrew Miller

Andrew Miller is a poet, critic and translator with over eighty publications to his name. His poems have appeared in such journals as *The Massachusetts Review, Ekphrasis, Iron Horse, Shenandoah, Spoon River Review, Laurel Review, Hunger Mountain, Rattle, New Orleans Review* and *Aji.* In addition, he has had poems appear in anthologies as well. He lives in Denmark.

Guliz Mutlu

Guliz Mutlu, born in Turkey, earned a masters degree on the Homeric Family and a PhD on the Peloponnesian War and Euripides from the University of Ankara. Her post-doctorate degree is on Romaticism and Tenebrismo (Pompeu Fabra University, Spain). She is the author of *Les Paroles Saphiques* (Les Éditions Apopsix, France, 2011) and has won several prizes for her literary works and calligrams.

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Jason Okanlawon

Jason Okanlawon is an intellectual property lawyer living in Lagos, Nigeria with his family. He dreams of a better tomorrow. He is a singer/songwriter on most days and a poet on every other day.

Steven Ostrowski

Steven Ostrowski is a poet, fiction writer, painter and teacher. His work appears widely in literary journals, magazines and anthologies. His most recent short fiction appears or will soon appear in *Arts & Letters, American Short Fiction, Midway Journal, Cloudbank* and *Toho Journal*. Steven is the author of five published chapbooks--four of poems and one of stories.

Jimmy Pappas

Jimmy Pappas won the 2018 Rattle Readers' Choice Award for "Bobby's Story." His book *Scream Wounds* contains poems based on veterans' stories. He won the 2019 Rattle chapbook contest for *Falling off the Empire State Building*, which includes "The Gray Man," nominated by Rattle for a 2021 Pushcart Prize. His interview with editor Tim Green is on Rattlecast #34.

Madari Pendás

Madari Pendás is a Cuban-American writer, painter, and poet living in Miami. She has received literary awards from Florida International University in the categories of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction, as well as the 2020 Arkana Editor's Choice Award for Creative Non-fiction. She is the 2021 Academy of American Poets Prize winner.

Silas Plum

At age 12, Silas Plum won the East Coast POG tournament. The prize was 500 POG's, small collectible cardboard circles, each with an identical red and blue design on the front. From that moment on, he became obsessed with the question of Value. Why were these important? Judge his worth at silasplum.com.

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Tamizh Ponni

Tamizh Ponni worked as a Design Facilitator in the International School, Bengaluru, India. She has a bachelor's degree in Computer Engineering, an MBA in Human Resources and a Masters in English Literature. She is currently pursuing her M.Tech, PhD integrated course in Data Science. She has worked as a Professional Development Coach and as a Tech Integrationist.

Cathy Porter

Cathy Porter's poetry has appeared in *Plainsongs, Homestead Review, California Quarterly, Hubbub, Cottonwood, Comstock Review,* and various other journals. She has published several chapbooks over the years, including her most recent offering, *The Skin Of Uncertainty* (2020) with Maverick Duck Press. *The Dash Between Us* is her upcoming third chapbook from Finishing Line Press. Cathy lives in Omaha, Nebraska.

Fabio Sassi

Fabio Sassi makes acrylics using the stencil technique. Sometimes he employs an unusual perspective that gives a new angle of view. Fabio lives in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com

Dan Sicoli

Dan Sicoli authored two chapbooks from Pudding House Publications, *Pagan Supper* and *the allegories* and is also an editor with *Slipstream*. His poems have appeared in numerous litmags including *San Pedro River Review, Santa Fe Literary Review, Bop Dead City, Angry Old Man, Red Paint Hill Poetry Journal, Chiron Review, Nerve Cowboy,* and *Ethel Zine*. Learn more at www.pw.org/directory/writers/dan_sicoli

Erik Suchy

Erik Suchy is an emerging photographer/digital artist currently attending Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he plans on majoring in Creative Writing. His digital art has been featured in or is forthcoming in *Penumbra Journal* and *Sink Hollow Magazine*.

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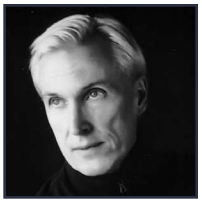
Sharon Tracey

Sharon Tracey is the author of two full-length poetry collections, *Chroma: Five Centuries of Women Artists* (Shanti Arts Publishing, 2020) and *What I Remember Most is Everything* (All Caps Publishing, 2017). Her poems have appeared in *The Banyan Review, Terrain.org, SWWIM, Mom Egg Review,The Ekphrastic Review*, and elsewhere. Learn more at www.sharontracey.com

Dennis Vannatta

Dennis Vannatta is a Pushcart and Porter Prize winner, with stories published in many magazines and anthologies, including River Styx, Chariton Review, Boulevard, and Antioch Review. His sixth collection of stories, The Only World You Get¸ was published by Et Alia Press.

Richard Vyse



Internationally collected artist Richard Vyse has shown in galleries in Manhattan and Honolulu. He has studied at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan and taught at Pratt in Brooklyn. His art had been featured in many international art magazines. His art is in the Leslie Lohman Museum collection. For bio and published art, visit https://manartbyvyse.blogspot.com.

Kristy Webster-Gonzalez

Kristy Webster-Gonzalez is a queer, Latinx writer and the author of *The Gift of an Imaginary Girl: Coco and Other Stories*. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific Lutheran University and a Master's in Teaching from Heritage University. Her work has appeared in several online journals such as *Lunch Ticket, Pithead Chapel, The Feminist Wire, Shark Reef Literary Magazine*, and *Pacifica Literary Review*.

Diane Lowell Wilder

Diane Lowell Wilder, poet, mother, former competitive ice skater, lover of jazz piano and languages, grew up in Vermont. She attended Swarthmore College and has had a long career in institutional advancement. She lives outside Philadelphia and is active in the city's creative writing community. Her first collection of poetry, *Leap Thirty* by June Road Press, will be published in early fall 2021.

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Vernelle Williamson

Vernelle Williamson spends most of her time studying forms in nature and the science behind human behavior. She lives and teaches in Virginia. Her biggest critic is her dog.

Ellen Roberts Young

Ellen Roberts Young has two full-length collections, *Made and Remade* (2014) and *Lost in the Greenwood* (2020) as well as poems in numerous print and online journals. Her third chapbook with Finishing Line Press, *Transported*, came out in early 2021. She is an editor of *Sin Fronteras/Writers Without Borders Journal*. Learn more at www.ellenrobertsyoung.com

Jim Zola

Jim Zola is a poet and photographer living in North Carolina.

Editor's Welcome

. . .So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

-Robert Frost, "Choose Something Like a Star," 1916

Robert Frost's poem, which I first encountered as a child singing selections from Randall Thompson's *Frostiana*, has often comforted me since. Frost reminds us—and I believe it is true—darkness really does bring out light much more clearly. The noun constellation is actually derived from the verb "to constellate," or, according to Merriam-Webster.com, "to unite in a cluster." I stumbled across the verb reading the works of Jeffrey Raff, a Jungian psychologist, who has used the word to suggest the ways in which thought and belief can form patterns that predetermine what becomes possible for humans as individuals but maybe even as societies. We constellate—our inner constellations become our realities, our frameworks for understanding, for thinking, for acting, and for imagining. Hence the constellations in this issue encompass more than those observed in the night sky, although those are included as well.

As you read through our feature interviews and the prose and poetry in this issue, and take in the graphic images, I invite you to consider the inner constellations implicit in each work, projections of light and shadow exquisitely shaped by our contributors. Presented together, these works do not compete or conflict. Rather, they offer us alternate ways of viewing or experiencing our shared reality. Our featured poets, David Kirby, Simon Perchik, and Ty'Sean Judd, have approached prosody from completely different starting points and have embraced divergent goals as poets. I must thank William Nesbitt, David Kirby, Simon Perchik, Rich Soos, and Ty'Sean Judd, all of whom have given considerably of their time and work to make this issue possible. In addition, thanks must go to Kaya Davis and the team at Ability Now (specifically, Alva Gardner and Andre Wilson) and also Helen Fukuhara and Erin Schalk for their time and effort in putting together such wonderful features in graphic design and art this round. To all who submitted, I send out the sincerest thanks; I wish we could have accepted more work, but this issue, as you can see, is already packed! I must once again thank our reviewers, Melissa Gish, Erric Emerson, Gwen Mintz, and Erin Schalk, and our graphic designer, Kate Redfield, for all the hours they have freely given to make this issue possible. You are, quite honestly, the star that keeps me staid, gives me ongoing faith in the goodness in the world, and in the relevance and importance of the creative arts in addressing our current social ills. To all of you—submitters, contributors, reviewers, writers, designers—I send out my sincerest thanks. I hope this issue inspires you the way all of you have inspired me.

Erin O'Neill Armendarez, Editor in Chief

Heaven, Hell, Loss, Laughter and the Waffle House : An Interview with David Kirby

Interview conducted by William Nesbitt

David Kirby's collection *The House on Boulevard St.: New and Selected Poems* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2007. Kirby is the author of almost forty books. A Johns Hopkins PhD, Kirby teaches at Florida State University, where he has taught for over fifty years, won five major university teaching awards, and is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English. Kirby has won fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Recently, the Florida Humanities Council presented him with a Lifetime Achievement Award in Writing. He lives in Tallahassee with his wife, Barbara Hamby, a poet and fiction writer who also teaches at FSU.

In this interview we discuss his latest poetry collection, *Help Me, Information*, as well as his new book on writing poetry, *The Knowledge: Where Poems Come From and How to Write Them*, along with heaven, hell, loss, laughter, and the Waffle House.

William Nesbitt (WN): *The Knowledge: Where Poems Come From and How to Write Them* weighs in at almost 500 pages. I'm figuring you didn't crank that all out on a rainy Tuesday morning. When did you start the project? What was the idea behind it? How was assembling the poems and writing the book different from writing poetry and what about the process of putting together *The Knowledge* is like writing poetry?

David Kirby (DK): Truth to tell, I wrote that book in a little over a month. Or I wrote it over 50 years, if you want to put it that way: I had a big data base of prompts and another big one of classrooms tips that I'd accumulated, and I shuffled those two files together like a deck of cards. Then came the fun part, which—oh, wait, I see that's question #2.

WN: How did you go about selecting the poems to include in *The Knowledge*?

DK: This, too, was a process that had two parts. I just picked 50 or so poems that I adore without thinking too much of the lessons they taught, figuring that if my readers liked them as much as I did, they'd be self-starters and wouldn't worry so much about having to learn or making mistakes. They'd just be enjoying themselves. After that, my publisher sent the manuscript to four readers, and those readers told me what else they'd like to see in *The Knowledge*, part of which was suggesting additional poems, so I added another 20 or so.

You asked earlier how writing *The Knowledge* was like writing poetry, and the answer is, it was exactly like that: you gather your materials, you sequence them, you do a draft, you get readers' reactions, you revise accordingly. All writing's like that, don't you think?

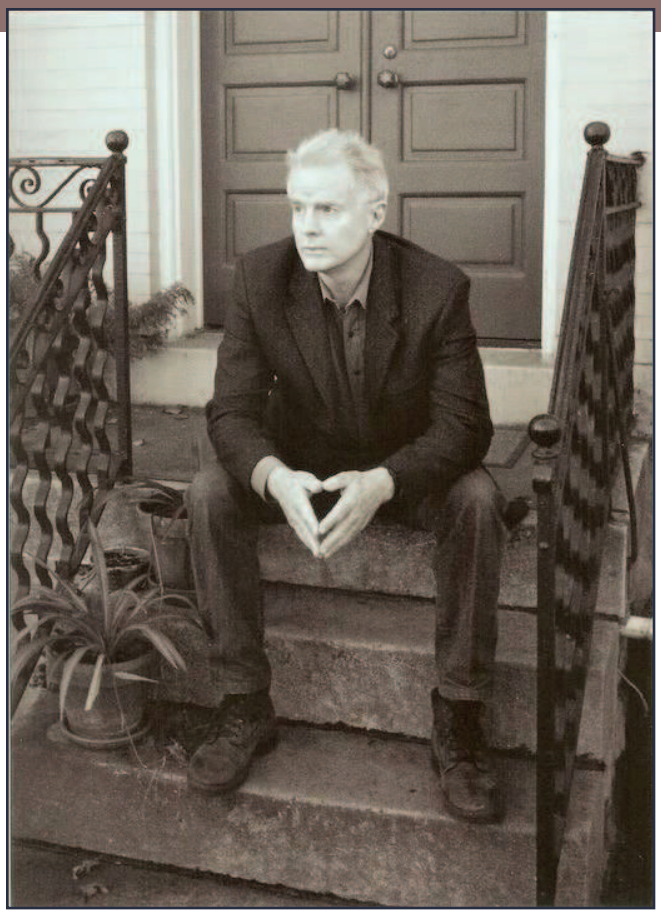
WN: What poem would you most suggest when teaching and/or reading to a new-to-or-not-that-into-or-maybe-even-hates-poetry-audience-but-this-poem-will-get-deep-into-them?

DK: Uh-huh, yeah. Well, I think I'd send the students on a chase and tell them to go to two websites, the Rattle site and the one for The Writer's Almanac. Those are two sites I consult every day, and half the time I end up copying and pasting poems from one or the other or both so I can use those poems in class. But this kind of thing works best if the student makes the discovery rather than getting an assignment from their stuffy old teacher.

Now if someone said, "Who should I read this weekend?" I'd tell them to read poems by George Bilgere. Tomorrow I might recommend another poet, but right now, I'm saying George. Take a look at his work and you'll see why.

WN: You state, "if it works, a poem is more likely to be half understood rather than fully comprehended." Is that true of all art, or is it unique to poetry?

DK: Well, all art is a game, isn't it? And it invites the reader to play, promising to be not too difficult and not too easy but just right. Thing is, the game doesn't have to ever end. And it probably shouldn't. Don't you go back from time to and look at a poem or a painting or a novel or movie and say "Dang, I never noticed that the first time"? I could read Keats forever and come up with new pleasures every time. Or listen to the Cowboy Junkies.



David Kirby

WN: You bring high art, philosophy, and European locales into your poetry, but you also mix in popular culture, especially music. You've kind of got one foot in the Louvre and one foot in the Hard Rock Cafe. Why do so many people view high art, say, Shakespeare or classical myth as something hard to understand and dull and why do so many academics think comic books, popular music, and television/movies are trash no educated adult should waste their time on?

DK: Most of us stay in our own little boxes, but man, you got to get out there and eat the world. It's going to eat you one of these days, so don't you want to get your chomps in first? There's good and bad Shakespeare and good and bad pop music as well. Point is, there's tons of both. Find the Shakespeare and the songs you love and forget about the rest. In the end, it doesn't matter what you love as long as you love a lot of things. If you want to be a real person, that's mandatory. Be an omnivore, damn it.

WN: Your most recent poetry collection is titled *Help Me, Information*, which makes me think of Pound's oft-quoted definition that "Literature is news that stays news" and Mr. Aaker in "Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator Ode" from *Help Me, Information* who says, "Facts don't work. People counterargue. They're skeptical. But if you tell them a story, all that goes away." News, facts, stories, information—they are not always the same thing, but they might overlap and intersect. What is the meaning of the title *Help Me, Information*?

Shoot, I knew you'd ask me that.

[Laughs]

Let's see . . . okay, the first thing is that that title comes from "Memphis, Tennessee" by Chuck Berry, who, along with Little Richard and Fats Domino and Jerry Lee Lewis and a hundred others whose names we barely remember, were the pioneers, the artists who invented the music that changed the world. Other than that, everything is information, isn't it? The odor a dog smells on your pants leg is information to that dog, as is a radio signal or a note you find on the sidewalk or a childhood memory or a space rock that pings you on the head while you're walking along thinking about your childhood.

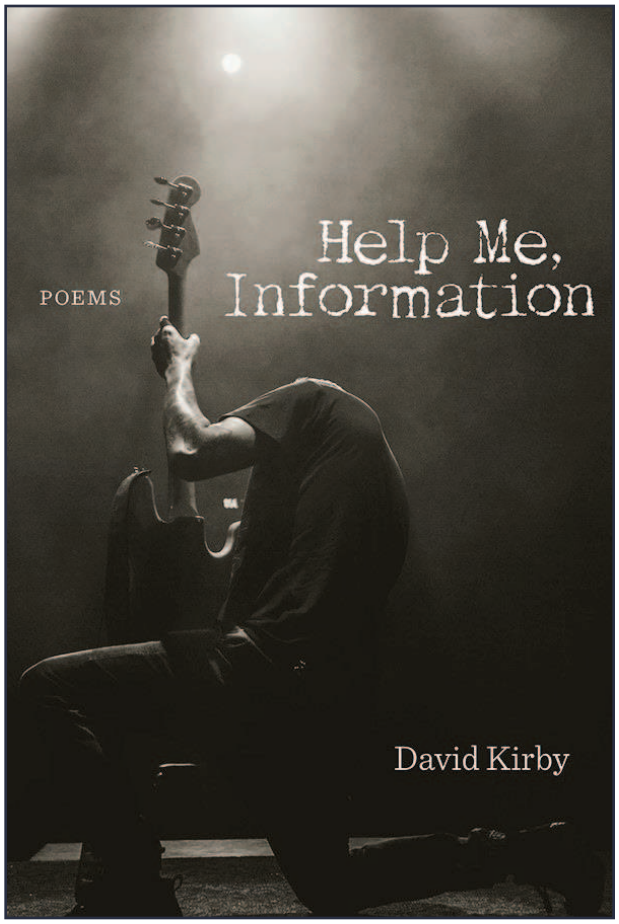
Look back at question #5 and my answer to it. The world is made of information that'll help you be your most three-dimensional, so get out your catcher's mitt, because it's all headed your way. By the way, I had to get permission from the Chuck Berry estate to use a couple of lines from his song. It took months, and they were going to charge me $300, but in the end, they said, "Wait, we're talking about poetry here, right? Hey, those lines are yours—no charge." Who says poetry doesn't pay? Or at least it doesn't cost you anything.

WN: What did we lose when we lost Aretha Franklin whom you mention in "My Girlfriend Killed James Brown" and "Hitchhike"? When I read the end of "My Girlfriend Killed James Brown," I wonder: do we ever really, completely lose people?

DK: We didn't lose a damned thing. Somebody asked Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead if he missed Jerry Garcia, and Weir said, "I see him in my dreams all the time. I hear him when I'm on stage. I would say I can't talk to him, but I can. I don't miss him. He's here. He's with me."

Oh, and here's another quote, this from Septimus Hodge in Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, who tells a grieving character:

We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language. Ancient cures for diseases will reveal themselves once more. Mathematical discoveries glimpsed and lost to view will have their time again.



Cover Art for Help Me, Information

Nice, huh? By the way, I hope you don't mind the quotes. When I find that someone has said something better than I can say it, I let them have the floor.

WN: The way I read "My Girlfriend Killed James Brown" James Brown accompanies the girlfriend in heaven's waiting room and then escorts her into her personal heaven where she finds her parents sitting at a table in the house where she grew up. Insert yourself into the end of that scenario. Who escorts you into the next room and who is seated at the table?

DK: Man, do I love these questions. In 1967, Otis Redding was touring Jamaica, and one night he walked unannounced into an after-hours club where Bob Marley was playing. Otis appeared "like a god," as eyewitnesses say, and when Bob Marley looked up, he stopped what he was doing and went right into "These Arms of Mine." Wouldn't it have been wonderful if you'd been one of those in the club that night? The bartender points you to a seat and hands you a bottle of Red Stripe, and you think you'll listen to a couple of songs and go home because you need to get to work early the next day, and the door opens, and in walks the Big O. Yeah, I'd know I was in heaven then.

WN: "Europeans Wrapping Knickknacks" suggests that there are physical ways we can give ourselves to others or carry others with us. What are the non-physical ways? Can the poem or the song be both a physical and a non-physical item or entity that endures?

DK: Well, any words can, can't they? The words of a poem or song or just something someone says? Think

about the dozens of snippets of language that you've read or overheard or dreamed up on your own over the years that recur to you constantly and that are almost forgettable, but not to you because you've charged them with meaning.

An editor took a poem of mine recently and said he and the other editors at the journal were wowed by the fact that the poem is so "straightforward," by which I guess he means that most of the poems they get are not straightforward. So, yeah, a good way to work is find something around you that's pretty trivial and make it the most important thing on this earth. If you can pull that off, your readers will start looking at the world differently. If you want to see what I mean, look at "Today," that short poem by Frank O'Hara that turns the ordinary things of this world into sacraments.

WN: In "Having a Chat with You," the narrator asks, "When you die and I still want to talk to you, / will you hear me?" What is the answer to that question? Can the dead hear us and vice versa?

DK: As far as I know, no one's ever heard back from that "undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (*Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1), but we can keep in touch with the departed. When the poet Edward Field lost his partner, he put up the most extraordinary Facebook post, saying, "we were together for 58 years. it was so wonderful i don't mind being by myself for a while and reflecting on our life together. i am so grateful." May everyone who loves someone else feel this way when their time comes.

WN: "Hitchhike" explains that according to Simone Weil, "Hell isn't endless suffering; it's endless monotony." In "Legion, for We Are Many," the devil himself explains that "hell's just boring." We learn in "This Magic Moment" that "Bravery is doing / the same thing every day when you don't want to. / Not the marvelous but the familiar, over and over again. / Do that, and the magic will come." Is this the secret, then, to getting out of hell whether it is spiritual or physical, real or imagined? Is poetry a passport out of hell?

DK: It is, but it's not the only way out. I never want to come across as one of those people who says there's something wrong with you if you don't read poetry or you're not a poet. There are plenty of ways to add to the world's beauty. Jack Gilbert has this wonderful poem called "The Abnormal Is Not Courage" in which he describes a Polish cavalry charge against German tanks in the early days of World War II. Fine, he says, but attacking armored troops on horseback is not courage. Courage consists not of single king-size dramas but of basic decency over the long haul: the whole marriage, Gilbert says, not just the rapture of the first month. Go for the beauty "of many days," of "normal excellence, of long accomplishment."

I read a piece recently by a man whose father's last words were, "Take care of everybody." That's a way out of hell. That's heaven right there. And you don't have to write poetry to know this, but I will say that, given its concision and precise use of words, poetry is the best way to get the message across. And what's the message? It'll be different for different people, but one possibility is "don't just be kind—be kinder than you have to be." In other words, when you're in the drive-thru line, always pay for the person behind you. Don't look at their bumper stickers, and don't dawdle when you're done in hopes of getting a wave and a honk. Just pay.

WN: "The 1909 Air Show at Brescia" says that "the things you love can kill you." The baby in "A Baby in the Piazza" says, "Nothing's worth loving unless it can kill you." Is that a contradiction or an explanation?

DK: I take it more as a definition of what's important in this life. Nothing really counts unless it has power, and to have power, there needs to be power for good and evil, power that'll make you dance with joy or knock your teeth out. Take the internet: now you can chat with Aunt Gracie in the comfort of your own home, but you can also convince your fellow dimwits that Barack Obama was born in Kenya. Yeah, I like to order crap online, but I was also able to walk into Sears and buy stuff back when Sears was a thing and not pay delivery fees. I could get along fine without the internet as long as I wasn't the only one who didn't have it.

WN: I see this sort of baseball diamond in *Help Me, Information* consisting of death, love, God, and sex. What's that all about? Are those just topics that poets tend to write about, or do you think you focus on them more? If that baseball diamond metaphor is accurate, which one is home base for you?

DK: I'm thinking now that those four words just might be synonyms. In *Howards End*, one character says, "Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him." If we lived forever, we'd probably think ourselves so excellent that we'd be, like, "God who?" And love and sex would just be things that drift in and out of our life. No, no: death makes you sit up and take notice. It makes you get busy, makes you think, "Okay, time to come up with some priorities here. No more reality TV and bong hits for this slacker: I'm going to make my time on earth count for something—I'm going to make my time on earth count for something, by God."

WN: Blake, Whitman, and Ginsberg are recurring presences in your poetry. I also notice works by them form the top three of your list in *The Knowledge* of the ten books you regard as "essential reading for young poets" and you describe the trio as "dithyrambic." Why do you dig them so much?

DK: Well, they're exuberant, aren't they? They celebrate. They make a lot of noise. In the EQ department (or "emotional quotient," for those who don't throw that term around as much as I do), they're the most emotionally healthy poets out there. Every optimistic cliché applies: they see the glass as half full, they make lemonade out of lemons, they turn mountains back into molehills.

Frank O'Hara works the same way. Check out "Today." I'm always dreaming up new classes, and I'm putting one together now called "The Daughters of Frank O'Hara," because, for whatever reason, I notice that a lot more young women than young men are trying to match O'Hara for sheer exuberance these days. Hera Lindsay Bird and Chessy Normile are two who come to mind.

WN: I had a student who said of Ginsberg's "Howl," "When you read 'Howl,' you know where you are." When you read "Howl," where are you?

DK: I'm right there on the back of Big Al's motorcycle. I have to admit, I'm a sucker for just about any kind of come-on. What a masterful poem, huh? The poet only has to utter those first few words of invitation. Who could resist?

By the way, he and the other poets I mention in my answer to the last question aren't just exuberant about chocolate sundaes and back rubs. They're boisterous and excessive about everything. Take Blake: he's as political as all get-out, but he's never sour or resentful. He lived in a day before two-stroke combustion engines, but he invites you to clamber aboard his cosmic Harley and head out on the highway, see what's going on, celebrate it if it's far out, kick its ass if it isn't.

WN: "Three's Company" lists, explores, and documents the power of three in subjects such as politics, history, and America. There's one heart, two eyes, and four seasons, but three appears an awful lot. Morning, afternoon, evening. Youth, adulthood, old age. Heaven, purgatory, hell. Past, present, future. Id, ego, superego. Lower class, middle class, upper class. The three *Star Wars* trilogies. The three Fates. The Three Stooges. Blake, Whitman, Ginsberg. Small, medium, large. Why is three such a powerful number and why does it show up so much?

DK: Gee, I don't know. I guess it's a Goldilocks number, isn't it? Just enough and not too much? You always want choices, but don't you hate those BuzzFeed article with titles like "23 Ways to Cook a Chicken Breast"?

My last two big decisions were to buy a car and get a new roof put on the house. I looked at two cars, a Toyota and a Honda. And I called four roofing contractors to get estimates. In other words, I had a little less or a little more than three options in each category. I was thinking three-ishly. Works for me, and if there's anything to the poem, that way of thinking works for the general run of mankind as well.

Besides, three ingredients are just about all you can remember anyway. And a three-part list is punchy: you can nutshell life aboard a British naval frigate with just "rum, sodomy, and the lash." So why would you say, "rum, sodomy, the lash, scurvy, body odor, lousy rations, bad teeth, sadistic officers, and surly bunkmates, not to mention that I haven't heard from Molly in the two years I've been at sea"? Too many details can rob a punch line of its power.

WN: Now that we've gotten *The Knowledge* and some *Information*, let's talk Wisdom. With all of the instant and constant access the internet and other connective technologies have gifted/unleashed on us, it's also become proportionately difficult—for me, at least—to unplug or know when I am done working for the day or week. How do you figure out the work/life balance and allow yourself to take a break?

A break to me is an event. It's just as important as a bike ride or a meeting with your lawyer. It's not that I get up and write

1. Get up.
2. Exercise.
3. Breakfast.
4. Write or at least get ready to write.
5. Take a five-minute nap.
6. Write more, using ideas that came during nap.
7. Eat lunch and nap again

and so on. You need to be aware of what both body and soul need, but you should try to satisfy them in a way that's as seamless as possible. The ideal would be glide through life as though you're on roller skates, moving from one worthwhile activity to the other with as little self-consciousness as possible.

I'll add two codicils to this pronouncement. The first is that you should throw in a worthless activity from time to time, though by doing so, that activity automatically becomes worthwhile. The second thing is that I'm talking the talk here, but I don't always walk the walk. There are days when I write nothing, days on which I skip one or both naps, and other days still when I throw my head back and yowl like a cat with its tail caught in the door. I try, though.

WN: I was glad to see you giving Waffle House some love in "Waffle House Index." Over the years, Waffle House has been sanctuary, retreat, social club, entertainment venue, shelter, headquarters, make-out station, hideout, and study space for me. I probably wrote half of my undergraduate papers after midnight in the Waffle Houses of Georgia. I don't know that I have a question in here so much as a thank-you, but please riff on Waffle House anyway. Oh, and I saw what you did there at the end with the take on section 52 of "Song of Myself." I think Walt Whitman would have enjoyed the diversity, the American-ness, of Waffle House.

DK: Jeez, Waffle House is like the Vatican, isn't it? Or Buckingham Palace. Or Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wisconsin. It's the center of the universe. But whereas those other places are ground zero for particular populations, Waffle House is like that Emma Lazarus poem on the Statue of Liberty, saying come one, come all.

Waffle House is to greasy spoons what Shakespeare is to the rest of us. Man'll tell you a great story, but he never stops there; he always throws in lots of useless beauty as well. Therefore, to fully activate the potential of your local Waffle House and have it radiate its magic throughout your entire region, remember the one thing you must always do, which is to get a waffle. They serve other stuff there, but even if you just want a cup of soup or a salad, order a waffle as well.

WN: If I went into a bar and ordered a "David Kirby," what ingredients would the bartender put in the drink?

DK: Again, I've loved every one of these questions. I do a lot of interviews, and I'd rather drink a glass of gasoline than be asked "where do you get your ideas?" again. But this one stumped me, so I called in a consultant, my most mentally adventurous grad student, Brett Cortelletti. Just as I knew he would, Brett gave me the formula you're looking for, complete with hand gestures. I'm thinking we should make an instructional video.

Anyway, what you do is tell your barkeep you'd like a David Kirby, please, whereupon this mixologist of many years' experience makes you a martini but neither shakes nor stirs it. Instead, he hands you the drink and a couple of quarters. You take everything over to the jukebox, put the drink on top, slip the coins into the slot, select "Long Tall Sally," and let the machine's vibrations marry the gin to the vermouth in a gentle and nuanced way. In just two minutes and ten seconds, your icy beverage is finished to perfection. Enjoy!

David Kirby

Waffle House Index

Snooty British economics journal *The Economist* says, "Waffle House, a breakfast chain from the American South, is better known for reliability than quality."

Yeah, well, fuck you, snooty British economics journal *The Economist.*

Waffle House is awesome, also tasty and cost-efficient, since your meal there will be so filling that you won't have to return to your or any other Waffle House for at least 24 hours.

Notice I said "your Waffle House," like "your doctor" or "your church," for just as there are many doctors and many churches, so there are many Waffle Houses, although only one is yours, that is, the closest one, for as every Waffle house is the same, why drive all the way across town to another Waffle House when you can get the same fine food at the one just down the street?

Waffle House food also heals you, just as your doctor does, and it nurtures your spirit, as does your church, and in this way are Waffle Houses even more like these other venerable institutions.

Too, Waffle Houses are uniform in their offerings. Nobody ever drove past a Waffle House and said, "Gee, I wonder what they have there."

For they have everything: cheesesteak omelets, steak and eggs, Texas melts, sandwiches of every kind, and, of course, the eponymous dish that no less an authority than Henry James called an "oblong farinaceous compound, faint yet richly brown, stamped and smoking, not crisp nor brittle but softly absorbent of the syrup dabbed upon it for a finish."

Henry James and his siblings "ate sticky waffles by the hundred," and you can, too, reader, at your friendly neighborhood Waffle House.

And you won't even have to do the dishes, though I suspect the James family had plenty servants on hand for just that sort of thing.

The James family lived in Boston 150 years ago, so no Waffle House for them, because even though there are 2,100 Waffle Houses in 25 states, mainly in the South, the company wasn't founded until 1955.

Life in the South can difficult and unpredictable. For one thing, we have all those hurricanes, also Billy Powell.

When I was 11 or 12 and Billy maybe 16 and smoking a cigarette, we walked up to our neighborhood fireworks stand, and Billy talked to the proprietor for a bit, and then he flicked his cigarette into the Roman candle display. The owner cleared his counter like an Olympic high jumper and chased us across the railroad tracks as his entire stand went up like World War III.

Life can be like that in Kentucky or Alabama or anywhere, really.

It can be like that mother-in-law race you see at some of your down-market speedways on Saturday nights, in which the drivers wear paper bags over their heads as they whip around a figure-eight track, getting directions from their front-seat passengers, who are also their mothers-in-law: "Left, you idiot! Left left left! Pull back pull back pull back – not so far! What're you, deaf? I told Kay Lynn not to marry you."

In this way do driver and passenger alike live out their time in the spotlight like characters in a novel, which genre is defined by ace philosopher Martha Nussbaum in one of her many excellent books as a "complex narrative of human effort in a world full of obstacles."

We become more merciful when we read novels, says Nussbaum.

And when we eat at the Waffle House we become more merciful as well, certainly to ourselves: at the end

of each day, the Roman philosopher Seneca reflected on his misdeeds, says Nussbaum, before saying to himself, "This time I pardon you."

And when you order a grilled chicken melt or a Texas steak lover's BLT, is this not an act of self-pardon, reader? And therefore I say order away, for surely those who pardon themselves are more likely to pardon others.

After the food, the best thing about Waffle House is the people.

At Waffle House, you will encounter the same people who were at that club last night. What was its name? I don't remember, either.

There was a forty-watt light bulb hanging from the ceiling, though, and a Circle K's worth of cigarettes smoldering in the ashtrays. A cooler full of 40s. A hotel ice bucket with a jar of maraschino cherries to the side. Drinking glasses for set-ups with tiny napkins tucked inside.

I think that club was called the Pair o' Dice.

It had a sign that said NO DOPE USE ALLOWED, which everyone ignored. And at the door, an old man you could knock over with a sneeze who had a Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver with a six-inch barrel tucked into his waistband who frisked everybody as they entered.

No, wait, it was called Up Jump the Devil.

Anyway, there was every kind of people there: big ones, fat ones, tall ones, small ones, bikers, queens, tweakers, black ones, white ones, café au lait ones, people who came from nowhere and are heading there again.

This is Walt Whitman's America. So is the Waffle House.

At the Waffle House, the waitresses call everybody "honey."

No less an authority than Harold Bloom said that *Leaves of Grass* are America's "secular scripture."

If *Leaves of Grass* are this country's Bible, then the Waffle House is our church, as previously stated.

Waffle House's scalding hot coffee is our communion wine, and its biscuits are the host.

The biscuits at Bojangle's are actually better, but if you get a sausage, egg, and cheese grits bowl at the Waffle House, you're going to need a biscuit to sop it up.

I guess you could bring a Bojangles biscuit to the Waffle House, but that sounds stupid to me, also blasphemous.

Too, whereas your individual Waffle Houses are known for their chicken biscuits, pork chop platters, and pecan pie, the Waffle House corporation as a whole is renowned for its sound business practices.

In fact, so reliable are Waffle Houses that the Federal Emergency Management Agency or FEMA uses a metric called the Waffle House Index to determine the severity of a storm.

The index has three levels, based on the extent of operations and service at the restaurant following a storm.

GREEN means the restaurant has power and offers a full menu. YELLOW means there is no power, and therefore only a limited menu is offered, and RED says that there has been severe damage and therefore the restaurant is closed.

No sausage, egg, and cheese grits bowl for you! Come back tomorrow, though, we'll probably be open then.

It occurs to me that if you applied the Waffle House Index to America, it would be yellow most of the time.

Certainly America was red in Whitman's day when rivers ran with the blood of men and boys, some still in their teens, boys who would never kiss another boy or a girl or even hold another person's hand, though someone decided they were old enough to die.

Then again, America is green, well, never.

Okay, it was green before the Europeans got there.

In *The Tempest*, you can just see the Old World leaning to the west, its soft shopkeeper's hands shading eyes that strain to pick out the murmuring pines and hemlocks, the empty Eden where life can begin afresh because there are no kings and armies, just a blank slate where Paradise will be inscribed anew.

"O brave new world," says Miranda.

"'Tis new to thee," says Prospero wearily.

At least *The Economist* got the part about Waffle Houses' reliability right.

The Economist does not identify individual writers, the result being that its articles seem to be written by a single author using dry, understated wit and precise language.

The Waffle House menu is never dry or understated, though its language is very precise.

Take those hash browns: you can them have them scattered (strewn across the grill to become crisp all over instead of cooked in a steel ring), covered (with melted American cheese), smothered (with onions), chunked (with bits of ham), diced (tomatoes), peppered (jalapeños), capped (grilled mushrooms), topped (chili), or country (smothered in sausage gravy).

Diners can also order their hash browns "all the way," although often you'll hear a customer say, "Aw, to hell with it—all the way."

What does that mean, though? It could mean to hell with snooty British economics journal *The Economist*.

Or it could mean to hell with food snobs—snobs of any kind, really.

On October 23, 2015, globe-trotting gourmand Anthony Bourdain visited a Charleston, SC Waffle House with local chef Sean Brock, who tells Bourdain he should get a pecan waffle and then demonstrates how to slather a butter-like product over every inch of the waffle before drowning it in syrup.

Suddenly Chef Brock seems to be assailed by doubt—after all, this is Anthony Bourdain he's talking to.

Chef Brock says, "You don't come here expecting The French Laundry," alluding to the Yountville, CA establishment which has twice been recognized as The Best Restaurant in the World and is famous for, among other dishes, its $85 signature soft-boiled egg appetizer with caviar.

Anthony Bourdain shovels a forkful of waffle into his face and says, "This is better than The French Laundry."

This is the same Anthony Bourdain who once said, "Your body is not a temple. It is an amusement park. Enjoy the ride."

Another notable date in Waffle House history is December 3, 2017.

That's when Alex Bowen, a former army medic from West Columbia, South Carolina, had a craving for Waffle House fare after a night of drinking with friends.

Mr. Bowen entered his local Waffle House at around 3 a.m. but found the sole employee sleeping, so he cooked himself a Texas bacon cheesesteak with extra pickles, ate it, cleaned the grill before he left, and posted pictures of his late-night adventure on Facebook.

A Waffle House spokesperson said that, for safety reasons, customers should never go behind the counter,

but added, "obviously Alex has some cooking skills, and we'd like to talk to him about a job since we may have something for him."
As for the sleeping employee, he was suspended for a week.
McDonald's or Burger King would have fired him on the spot.
Can you imagine what would have happened to him had he worked for *The Economist*?

There should be more Waffle Houses in other states, especially the northern ones, where it is even colder and darker in the winter than it is in Nashville or Texarkana.
At such times you'd think an original Angus cheeseburger or bowl of build-your-own-chil would be welcome, especially if accompanied by endless cups of scalding hot coffee.
Waffle House management should put more Waffle Houses in New York, say, or Ohio.
It'd be like the Civil War, only in reverse.
It'd be a sweet Civil War, a nice one, a war fought with waffles instead of muskets.
The bluebellies would be happy that we've invaded them, and the rebs wouldn't come in second this time.
We wouldn't even keep score!

Oh, Waffle House, how I love you.
How I would love to be worthy of you.
I bequeath myself to the syrup that adorns my waffle.
And you, reader, I love you as well.
The last bacon cheesesteak melt of the day holds back for me, it coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.
I depart as air.
If you want me again, look for me at the counter, menu in one hand, cup of scalding hot coffee in the other.
Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged.
Missing me at one Waffle House, search another.
See? There I am, second stool from the left.
I suggest the all-star breakfast consisting of a waffle, hash browns or grits, two eggs, and bacon, ham, or sausage.
The best thing about the all-star breakfast is that it is delivered in waves: your server brings you three plates one at a time, as if you were royalty.
There, things just got a little greener, didn't they?
Check, please. You can give it to my friend here.
Just kidding. This one's on me.
I stop somewhere, waiting for you.

Europeans Wrapping Knickknacks

They're so meticulous, aren't they? They take such care
that I am ashamed for my country, that impatient farm boy,
that factory hand with the sausage fingers. First there's
the fragile object itself—vase, jewel, ornament—then tissue,
stiff paper, bubble wrap, tissue again, tape, a beautiful bag
made from something more like gift wrap than the stern brown
stuff we use here in the States, then the actual carry bag

that has a little string handle but which is, in many ways,
the loveliest part of the package except for the object
you can barely remember, it's been so long since
you've seen it. In America, we just drop your trinket
in a sack and hand it to you. Oh, that's right. We have cars
in this country: whereas Stefano or Nathalie has to elbow his
or her way down a crowded street and take the bus or subway,

you get in the car, put the bag on the seat next to you,
and off you go, back to your bungalow in Centralia or Eau Claire.
Of course, this doesn't mean you're culturally inferior
to Jacques or Magdalena just because, as Henry James
said in his book-length essay on Hawthorne, we have no sovereign
in our country, no court, no aristocracy, no high church,
no palaces or castles or manors, no thatched cottages,

no ivied ruins. No, we just do things differently here:
whereas Pedro and Ilsa take the tram or trolley,
you have your car, and now you're on your way home
to Sheboygan or Dearborn, probably daydreaming
as you turn the wheel, no more aware of your surroundings
than 53-year-old Michael Stepien was in 2006 when
he was walking home after work in Pittsburgh, which

is when a teenager robbed him and shot him in the head,
and as Mr. Stepien lay dying, his family decided
"to accept the inevitable," said his daughter Jeni,
and donate his heart to one Arthur Thomas
of Lawrenceville, NJ, who was within days of dying.
That's one thing you can say about life in the US:
we have great medicine. Mr. Thomas recovered nicely

after the transplant, and he and the Stepiens
kept in touch, swapping holiday cards and flowers
on birthdays. And then Jeni Stepien gets engaged to be
married and thinks, Who will walk me down the aisle?
No cathedrals in America, says Henry James,
no abbeys, no little Norman churches, no Oxford or Eton
or Harrow, no sporting class, no Epsom nor Ascot.

"Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent
things in American life," says James, "the effect of which,
upon an English or a French imagination, would probably
as a general thing be appalling." It gets worse: James then
says, "The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such
an indictment, would be that if these things are left out,
everything is left out," but then "the American knows that

a good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is
his secret." As the wedding approaches, Jeni Stepien
thinks, book the venue? Check. Order the cake? Got it.
And then she thinks that it would be incredible to have
her father there one way or another, so she writes Mr. Thomas,
who says yes, of course, he'll be happy to walk her down
the aisle, though when he says he's afraid his emotions

might get the better of him, Jeni tells him hers might, too,
but not to worry, because "I'll be right there with you."
When they finally meet, Arthur Thomas suggests
that Jeni grip his wrist, where the pulse is strongest:
"I thought that would be the best way for her to feel close
to her dad," he says. "That's her father's heart beating."
At the wedding, Jeni is photographed with her hand

on Arthur's chest. They dance together, the guests mingle,
the two families vow to meet up somewhere down the road,
Jeni and her husband start their new life together,
and Arthur Thomas returns to his home in Lawrenceville.
"I felt wonderful about bringing her dad's heart to Pittsburgh
that day," he says. "If I'd had to, I would've walked."
Talk about a knickknack. What must it be like

to have someone else's heart in your chest,
taken from his body years earlier and placed in yours,
beating there now as it beat for its owner. You were days
from death, and now you can do anything you want.
In your new life, you are a citizen of no country
but of the world. It's your heart. Your secret.
Most days you don't even know it's there.

SPOKEN SILENCE: Abstract Art and the Poetry of Simon Perchik

Interview conducted by Erin O'Neill Armendarez

To think I almost missed him. I was reading through poetry submissions (I read all submissions several times on different days for exactly this reason) and I stumbled upon Simon Perchik's poems for the third or fourth time. This time, as I slowly read the poems, something happened, some kind of, what? I felt a deep emotional connection, a pathos. I reread. What exactly was I feeling, and why? Based on the words, the syntax, the lines, the stanzas—I couldn't figure it out.

Somehow, through the miracle of black shapes on a white page, words, Simon Perchik had compelled me to look, to think, and to feel more deeply, although I'd be hard pressed to explain what his poems are "about". I knew we had to include his work in the spring 2021 issue. After I sent an acceptance message, he offered to send a review copy of *The Weston Poems* (2021), and before long I had received a hard copy of that wonderful collection but also a wealth of information on Perchik and his poetry from Rich Soos, Editor in Chief at Cholla Needles Arts and Literary Library in Los Angeles, from whom I was fortunate enough to receive a digital review copy of Perchik's magnum opus *The Family of Man Poems.* Through Soos, I learned that Perchik had spent 8 years tirelessly working on this book, which was published April 1, 2021, by Cholla Needles Arts and Literary Library in honor of National Poetry Month.

Soos hails Perchik as a "national treasure whose work has appeared in over 700 magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, [and] *North American Review*. He is 97 years old (born December 24, 1923) and over 30 of his books have been published since his first book of poetry, Bomber's Moon, in 1949."

According to *Library Journal* (Nov. 2000), "Perchik is the most widely published unknown poet in America…." All these years, he has been relentlessly honing his craft, and his goal? From the poet himself, of *The Family of Man Poems,* to testify to humanity's "overriding need to comfort one another."

Maybe that's what I was experiencing that day when I paused for a careful reading of Perchik's submission, comfort in recognizing that these poems, while they refuse to speak of anyone in particular, spoke of us all, of things that, while almost inexpressible, are possibly more important than anything else. Interested? If so, I invite you to read on.

Erin O'Neill Armendarez (EOA): Your latest collection of poems, *The Family of Man Poems, 1982-1990*, represents eight years of intensive work, a true labor of love. Please share with our readers a brief overview of this book and what it means to you as a poet at this point in your career.

Simon Perchik (SP): You asked what, if any, meaning *The Family of Man Poems* has for me. I don't know the answer to that. I never considered the book as a whole. Just wrote a poem prompted by the first photograph (in the collection published by MoMA) and kept on going. I never considered the photos as a whole, nor my poems as a whole. But I now think I was wrong. On reflection the 482 photos are really 1 photo. And maybe I too, have written just 1 poem (in 482 stanzas.)

EOA: Most poets reading this interview will be jealous to discover that Charles Olson, the famous Black Mountain poet, actually wrote a blurb for the cover of one of your books. You have known so many esteemed poets and artists over the years. Which would you say was the most influential on your career as a poet, and why?

SP: You mentioned the blurb Charles Olson gave me for my first collection. Have a great story to tell you. Though I wrote in college, after admission to the bar in 1950 I didn't write for about 10 years while building a law practice. When I began to write I found a copy of *Black Mountain Review* in the house and sent them some poems. I got back a letter saying the magazine had folded some five years ago. It was signed by Olson who went on to ask, "Did Corman get in touch with you?" What a welcome back! That he remembered my name, that he ever knew it had a lasting impression. He was a very generous man. But don't think I know many poets. I don't.

EOA: You have described your process for writing poetry in previous interviews, first writing several pages on a selected photograph or image, and then writing several more pages on disparate topics drawn from your readings on subjects in philosophy, mythology, or science. The poem itself spontaneously emerges as you attempt to resolve contradictions, finding your "hook", which signals the beginning of the budding poem. Do I have that right? And has this process evolved or changed over the decades, and if so, in what ways?

SP: Yes, you have it right. I confront a photograph with a contradictory, irreconcilable image or idea from myth or science and then reconcile the two. Exactly what a metaphor does for a living. And it never fails. A perfect cure for "writers' block" I hope your readers will agree after reading "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities".

EOA: You are on record as one who eschews narrative poetry, and also as one who is deeply moved by the abstract painting of artists like Mark Rothko, the sorts of paintings that sometimes leave skeptics standing in museums thinking, "This is art?" In your opinion, how are abstractions depicting the intangible able to inspire such deep power and pathos?

SP: You mentioned Mark Rothko. He's my role model. He knows that when you stand in front of his painting there is nothing of the real world in it. To cope, the brain will shut down. And the viewer's unconscious

Simon Perchik

tries to make sense of it. What we have in this art form is the artist's subconscious talking to the viewer's subconscious. I try to do that.

EOA: The philosopher Wittgenstein is famous for having said, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." In an interview with Tim McLafferty (*Forge Magazine*), you defined poetry as "words that inform the reader of that which cannot be articulated." Hence, your poetry seems to try to express the inexpressible. Why, in your opinion, is this preferable to telling a story?

SP: You ask why not telling a story to reach into the reader is preferred over telling a story. The answer is simple: one is prose, the other is poetry. And poetry has the power. If I say "Your mother died" and you start to cry, if I ask you why you're crying, you say, "You just told me my mother died." Makes sense. But if you are listening to Max Bruck and you start to cry, if I ask you why, you have to say, "I don't know." Music is the most abstract art form. Maybe poets should move a bit closer to the unconscious composers work with.

EOA: I am curious about one thing, so I have to ask to gain a better understanding, if only for myself, but possibly also for readers. I completely understand what you're saying about why you have chosen to use abstraction in your poetry. Your poems operate much differently than do narrative poems, and you accomplish what you set out to accomplish with them, which is, to me, quite mysterious, given your process.

It seems to me that there is prose that could be considered abstract as well, i.e some of Virginia Woolf's work, some of Gertrude Stein's, maybe some metafiction or magical realism. Or think of that ambitious, perplexing work Ulysses, by James Joyce. As you said in your essay, there are varying degrees of abstraction, given the writer. Hence--surely you do not mean to say that the narrative poems of Robert Browning, Robert Frost, Keats, Yeats, or Tennyson are not poetry?

SP: I agree with you that prose can also be abstract. And you have listed 3 of the greatest. I guess, being a lawyer, I feel the literary world needs to more clearly define what words may be called poetry and what may be called prose. Thomas Wolf uses the paragraph form for some very moving poetry. So "prose-poem" could also use a more exact definition. Maybe it's hopeless. Writers write and let others decide where to slot the work. Maybe definitions are OK for law but have no business in art. As you see, though, as I have opinions, I also have nothing but doubts. Wish I could be more sure of my ideas.

EOA: In the same interview, you mentioned the collective unconscious, saying, "If I'm dealing with my subconscious, I'm dealing with yours, so that would be the connection." When I read the submission that inspired this interview, although I had not yet read about your process, I felt that connection as I read your poetry. So—is your process and purpose more intuitive? When you find your hook, is it something you feel, or something you know, or both?

SP: You ask about what happens once I get "the hook". Though you need a "starter" to make yogurt and "the hook" to begin a poem the similarity ends there. The "hook" more often than not will disappear. It served its purpose and got the ball rolling, so to speak. Once the poem has a footing, I pretty much let it go where it wants. At the end I'm as surprised as anyone.

EOA: Your poems communicate powerful feeling, yet I noticed you seldom, if ever, use words like joy, anger, courage, fear, sadness—the nouns that represent inner states of being. Do you consciously edit those words out, and if so, how does this help to create the intended effect on readers?

SP: Yes, I edit out the words that tell the reader how they should feel. I try to use words that will suggest it in a round-about way.

EOA: You seldom read your poems aloud in public, so let me ask you this: should readers attempt to read your poems aloud? Is it important for them to experience them that way? Do you read aloud to yourself as you revise? Or is it better for readers to focus on careful exploration of the visual and mental images along with the careful punctuation (or lack thereof) and shifts in syntax to fully experience each poem?

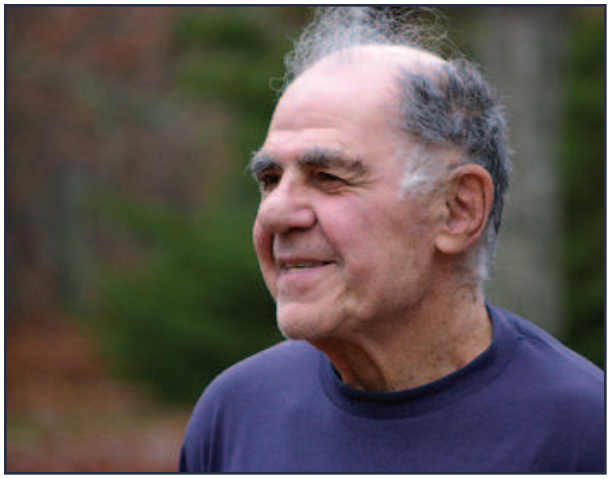
SP: I don't like to read my poetry in public because it's too personal, comes with a lot of baggage. Once I read a poem and froze on stage at the 4th line. I couldn't finish the poem or the reading. Who needs it! If others find pleasure in reading the poems out loud, I'm happy. Very happy. I do not read the poem aloud while working on it.

EOA: In another interview with McLafferty, you said, "There are so many reasons why a poem is rejected. And what makes you think that the editors know what they are doing anyhow?" I laughed when I read that, because I know that it is true. We editors may miss some of the most unique, most profound work looking for something in particular, reading when we're tired, pushing deadlines, etc. We, too, are human. What other advice do you have for aspiring poets?

SP: You ask if I have any advice for aspiring poets. Yes, I do. Don't take anyone's advice. Just read the poems. Just get to know the territory, what's out there.

EOA: Are you working on another project now, or are you resting for a bit after completion of *The Family of Man Poems*?

SP: Yes, I am working on a new collection of photographs. I'm about halfway finished. I better be careful. I'm pushing 98 and the one thing the gods don't like is hubris. So I won't say more.



Simon Perchik

Selections from The Family of Man

1

Into that shaft all angels
weightless and pleasant, seeds too
want it warm
milling around my window
as a record where its dust
lies close to its tightening song

—if I could make this window wider
sing from the beginning
wherever you are lowering a shade
to wipe away another galaxy

—if I could rub one finger on the glass
and from this window that feeble tune
couldn't, just couldn't
be coiling around my throat

—it would sing, the words would come
you would hear my breath
still warm in your throat
singing out loud till your heart

wherever you are lowering the sun
and in that shade
count from the beginning, with zero
the vague words :the dust
till my breath gives out.

5

With each handful the obedient daylight
covered —side by side
their grave already warm

—no path curls here
no one cuts the grass or a voice.
You hear the sun learning to bark, the dirt

plays too —between my fingers
as if I were combing something
as if I were folding this letter
to tell you the news :I left some flowers

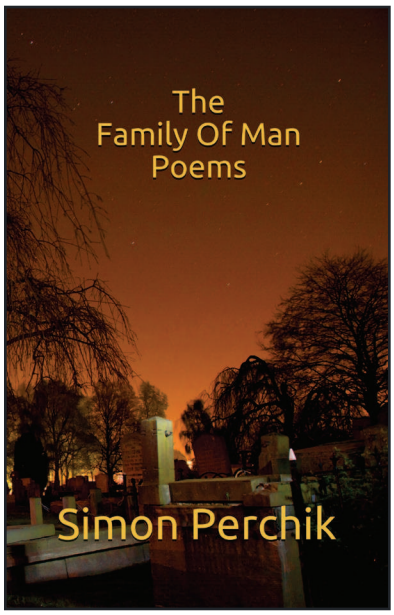
petted the air, wept
so the rain won't forget
what it has to do —you

will see no sun over those blooms
but underneath
in the light laid down
barking to come in —you

will need a brighter lamp
to read at night and your breath
like a towel thrown down the hall

—you will look up as if your hands
were bathing something
—you will hear me walking back

weeds one side, to another :the sound
my arms made when they opened
side by side.



Cover art for The Family of Man Poems

Untitled, Helen Fukuhara

"'Believing is Seeing'"

An Interview with Helen Fukuhara

Interview by Erin Schalk

Helen Fukuhara began her visual arts education at the Braille Institute in 1987. While being blind from birth, Fukuhara has pursued the fine arts in earnest, dedicating her university studies to music. Today, she remains a prolific and passionate artist who works in ceramic, mosaic, printmaking, and fiber arts. In addition, her print *Dancing Fingers* was recently awarded an honorable mention in the American Printing House for the Blind's (APH) annual art competition *InSights*.

"I like the feel -- the tactile qualities -- of mixed media projects since I use my hands to see. I also like how multimedia allows me to work independently. When I'm in the process of making a piece, I can feel and experience the design fully as I create it section by section. In my work, I also am open to letting things happen rather than sticking to one specific plan. However, when I finish a piece, I feel somewhat sad because my entire surface is covered, and I cannot experience each part of the design as well. So, I create again. And again." -Helen Fukuhara

Helen Fukuhara holding her art

Erin Schalk (ES): Please share with us how you came to be a visual artist:

Helen Fukuhara (HF): I started at Braille Institute in Los Angeles during the end of September of 1987, when I moved from New York to California. That's when I started taking art classes because the art teachers at Braille made it comfortable for me to do art, since art is generally done with your hands. Basically, it involved the colors and materials being explained to me in more detail.

I also learned from *Hailstones and Halibut Bones*, which is a children's book. It takes colors and puts them into poetry so I have something concrete to relate to, for example, black is the color of licorice. I like to associate art with music since I was a musician originally. For example, I might think of the bright colors as piccolos in an orchestra. The lower notes would be the darker colors, and so on.

I used to do sewing when I lived in New York, so naturally, I worked with fabrics in different colors and textures. I was aware of colors, and I wrote the color combinations on a braille sheet to remember the combinations that go together. Sometimes if I am in the mood, I'll make something unusual, which you can do in art!

I love doing art. I love the making of it rather than the completion because once it's done it's finished and hurrah. But when you're doing it, I think it's more fun.

ES: You studied music during your college days. How did your practice evolve into visual art? Is there overlap?

HF: I studied music at Hofstra University in Long Island, New York. I didn't have any idea that one day I would be moving to California and go to Braille Institute, nor did I know that Braille even had an art or music program.

In time, I realized art and music work together in certain ways. I read music history books, so I figured there must be art history books! I began reading art history, took art history courses, and received six credits from Cal State Northridge. In art history, I had opportunities to do some art projects related to the class such as a beehive tomb [from the Bronze Age Mycenaean civilization].

If I'm working on an art piece, I've thought about how to make the piece connect to the sound of music. Some people can do that, but I find that's difficult for me to do. When I try to make shapes, it's never the same as what I'm visualizing in my mind. For example, when I saw the movie *Chariots of Fire* and they played the running music, I didn't picture somebody running. I don't know what that feels like or what that looks like visually. I can't compare music with art that way. However, one thing I have done is take poems that people have written and put them to music.

School of Fish (top), Image 2236 (middle), Springtime (bottom) by Helen Fukuhara

ES: What artists, contemporary or classic, influence you most and why?

HF: It's an interesting question. I mainly go by era more than individuals, since I cannot see or touch the work or have it in my hand. I prefer Renaissance and Baroque music, so I tend to like art of that nature as well. The difference is I do know I could write in the style of Beethoven, or I could change a song to fit a composer.

When it comes to art, things become a bit more complicated. If somebody says, "Do a piece like DaVinci or like Picasso," it can happen sometimes. One time, I made a piece at my friend's house, and she said, "That actually looks like a scene from Manzanar!" I said, "What do you know? It just happened!" Likewise, if someone says a piece of mine looks like a Monet or similar, I wouldn't know, and I'm quite surprised because I don't have anything touchable to compare.

I can do abstract art more than abstract music. With music, I'm used to rules. So, when I wrote music, I preferred writing music with rules, whereas music now can be more freeform, so you can do anything you want.

In regard to art, I like mosaics. I'd also be fascinated to try more paper mache sculpture sometime in the future.

ES: You grew up in an artistically rich environment in New York City, and your father was acclaimed watercolorist Henry Fukuhara. How have these influences shaped you as an artist?

HF: My family was supportive of me, and my parents and family came to my concerts. My dad was always fond of watching the conductor more than listening to the music!

My father really became influential to me as a visual artist once I started taking art classes. Before that, we would only talk about art once in a while, and

I didn't know I was going to be taking art at Braille Institute at all. For a long time, I didn't ever think about doing art myself. Also, my father didn't know how to teach me art then, so we didn't discuss it much. However, I went to his art workshops and demonstrations, and I found it interesting to listen to the art demonstrations if they would talk. And some of the people at the workshops would ask questions. I always enjoyed the questions.

Two Sea View by Helen Fukuhara

I began taking art classes at Braille Institute because I knew you could do art with your hands. Things opened up and my father and I would discuss. Sometimes my dad would be painting and have music playing. I would ask him, "What kind of orchestral piece did you do today?" and he would laugh. So I could understand, he would say, "Well, I have violins here, and I have trumpets there. This one is a mixed orchestra."

As time went on, I really wanted to do an art show with my father. First, he arranged for me to have a solo show. Later on when he became totally blind and still painted, he finally agreed to have a show with me. That was exciting!

When we had our show together, I imagined a 50-50 setup. But, my dad suggested I submit more pieces to the show and he would enter just a few. He was a well-known artist by then, and he didn't want to dominate, rather, he wanted my art to be the highlight of the show. That really surprised me!

Later on, my father became fully blind and still continued to paint. He confided in me that he was more sure of himself as an artist even when he lost his vision, because he knew all that I was capable of as an artist.

ES: What are some of your favorite artistic media and why?

HF: I like them all. I like doing mosaics because you can use different shapes and different textures of pieces, and you can make your own tiles if you want. You can also incorporate found pieces to create an image. I've done mosaics that are freeform and ones more like a realistic picture. For example, I once made a mosaic artwork of my neighbor's birds. He had a picture taken from a magazine so we had something to work from. Someone helped me because I couldn't cut out the feet since they were really tiny, but I was able to put them in place. That was a challenge!

I also like paper mache. You can mix materials into the paper mache to give it different textures. For example, I've experimented with adding in sand and sequins. Of course, you can put in a variety of paint

colors as well. I like that paper mache is light, versus clay which is heavy. I also like basketry because you can add a range of materials like beads, whether they're commercial or handmade. You can have different patterns and shapes of baskets, as well as wide or narrow reeds. Mosaic, paper mache, and basketry...I would say these art forms have been the most successful for me.

ES: You once said about your ceramic and mosaic combo works, "When I'm making a piece, I can experience the design as I create it section by section." Tell us more.

HF: Some of the clay medallions or shapes were found or abandoned in the studio. With the ceramic and mosaic pieces, they're not in my head originally. It's a matter of what I have to work with, and then it's placement and glazing. So, I just do them as they come. I may have nine ceramic circles of a certain size, and I begin to arrange them. Once I can say that it feels like a nice arrangement, I begin fitting ceramic or glass mosaic tiles in between and so on.

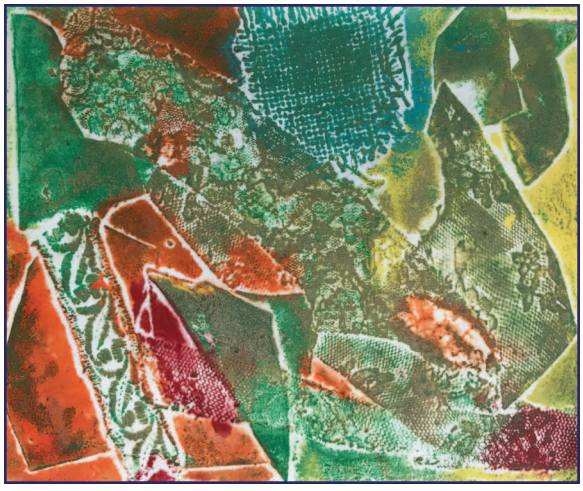
Sometimes I work in sections, and sometimes I don't because I have the whole board to work with, unless it's a particular section with a particular color of tiles. Then, I might try to do a border first, then fill the inside.

ES: What do you hope your audience will gain when they encounter your artwork?

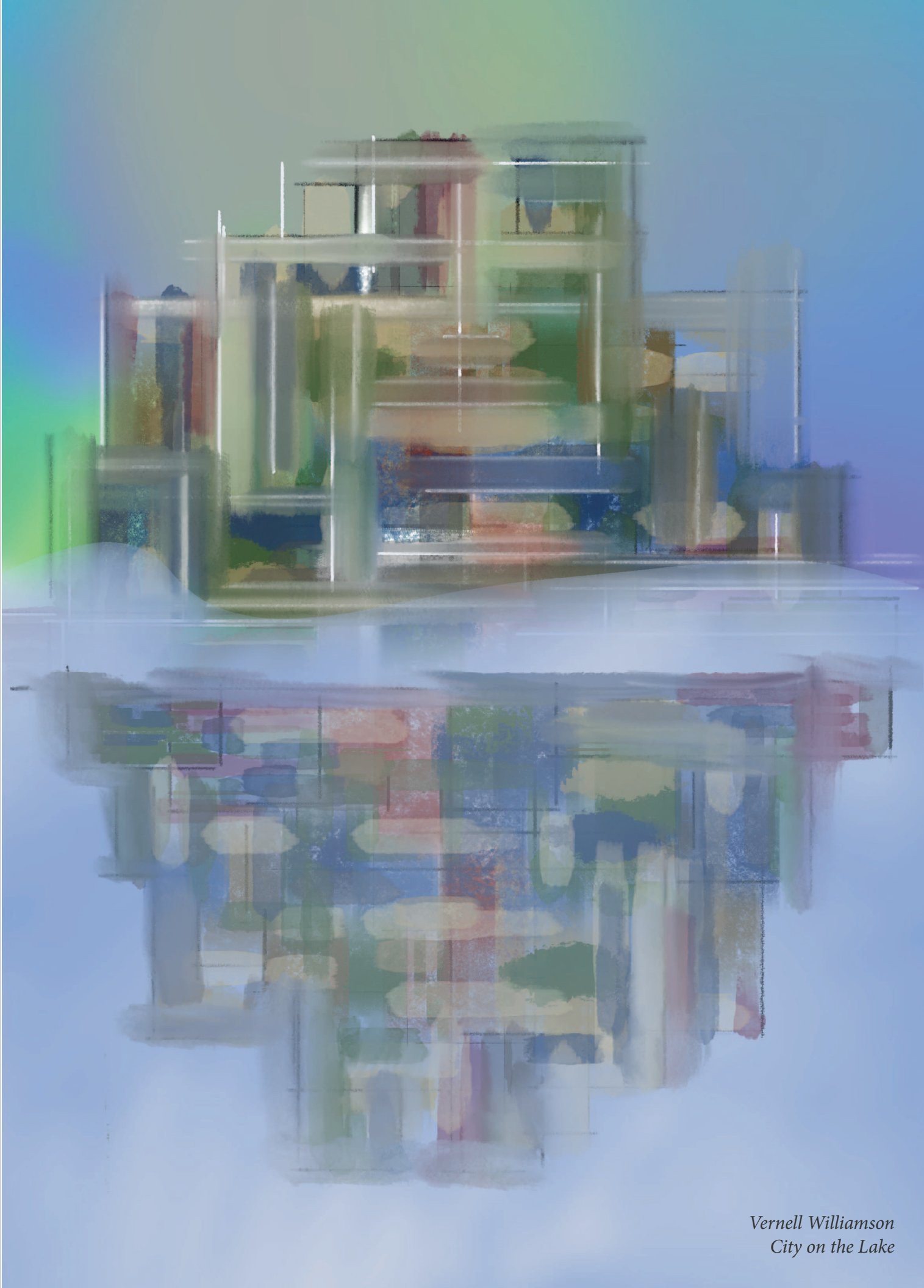
HF: I leave it up to the eye of the beholder. That's why a lot of my work is untitled. Viewers have to look for it. When people ask me about my art, I don't have a list of all the textures I used, where I placed them, or what colors they are.

I think things change in people's minds when they view my work. Why did I use a certain color in a certain place? Not seeing, I have no idea. I just hope that when I'm able to see them - if I get my sight back while on Earth - that I would enjoy seeing as much as I enjoy doing them.

My father used to say to me, "Seeing is believing." And I would say in return, "Believing is seeing."



Sporano Melody by Helen Fukuhara



Vernell Williamson
City on the Lake

SMALL BUT MIGHTY: The Vision of Kaya Davis

Interview by Erin O'Neill Armendarez

From the start, *Aji*'s art reviewers were intrigued by the unique, compelling creations of Kaya Davis. How, they wondered, could she fashion anything so tiny? Thanks to staff from Ability Now and to Davis herself, their questions were answered.

It's clear that Davis is deeply focused on her craft, and on reaching a wider audience that will appreciate her work. Her drive is an inspiration. She has followed her own imagination and intuition into a pursuit that can only grow as she devises her own miniature tools and aspires to learn animation one day. Are you wondering whether your own wild idea could ever become a reality? Ask Kaya Davis. She has an answer for you.

EOA: Please share some basic background information about yourself with our readers.

KD: My name is Kaya. I am 28 years old, have autism, and am an artist from California. I grew up in Berkeley with my parents, as an only child who was adopted at birth. My hobbies are drawing, knitting, and origami, and I do it on a very tiny scale. I am a cat lover and I collect my drawings of dolls, specifically Barbie and Blythe dolls.

EOA: How and when did you discover your artistic talent?

KD: I have always loved to draw. I've also always preferred smaller toys, such as Polly Pocket and Barbie, over bigger toys like American Girl dolls. There were often times that I found myself wanting clothes and accessories for my dolls that I couldn't buy in the store. As many children do, I would use art to express myself, but as I got older, I discovered that I could make a career from my skill of drawing people and crocheting or knitting the doll clothes and accessories I had always wished I could buy. That was when I was about 14 years old and knitting and crocheting miniatures has been a passion of mine ever since. Throughout high school, I improved my knitting, crocheting, and doing origami skills, and when I turned 21 I found that I wanted to focus only on miniatures.

EOA: What first attracted you to miniature forms?

KD: I have always seen my dolls as real people, not as dolls at all. I've also always been interested in fairytales about fairies and other mythical creatures, as well as the spiritual world. I would sit and draw the fairies, their tiny houses, and the tiny worlds I was imagining in my head. Once I started drawing and painting on a small scale, I realized that was my preference because of the control it gave me over my fine motor skills. The more I drew, the more interest people showed in buying my work, so I figured, why not make money doing something that I love?

EOA: How did you find Ability Now, and how has the program supported your art and your business?

KD: I found the program through a referral from Regional Center of the East Bay, a non-profit agency under contract with California to coordinate supports and services for people with developmental disabilities like me. Because I have autism, I tend to have art ideas all over the place. Before attending Ability Now's Small Business Development Center, I was struggling with how to turn my passion for tiny art into a business. I couldn't have gotten to where I am today if it wasn't for Ability Now's Small Business Development Center. The staff at Ability Now have helped me focus on my goals and given me structure.

EOA: Who are your mentors?

KD: Andre Wilson, the Small Business Manager, and Alva Gardner, the Small Business Vocational Coordinator, and all the small business staff at Ability Now have been mentors and supported me along the way. However, my iconic role model as an artist is Walt Disney. I'm very fascinated by animation and making a drawing come to life with a series of images, and am interested in learning animation in the future.

EOA: Please describe your process as an artist, from idea to finished piece.

KD: This varies depending on what I'm making. I often take walks to get inspiration. Then I usually think about what I want to make and sometimes how. While I'm walking, I visualize how I want the finished piece to look. Then I will sit down and draw or paint. Because of the small scale of my work, I often also make some of my own art supplies including tiny watercolor pads, paint palettes, and knitting needles. When I sit down to draw or paint a miniature, I try to complete the whole thing in one sitting.

Star Earrings (above) and Crane Earrings (middle))made by Kaya Davis, Photo of Kaya Davis (bottom)

EOA: Of all of your accomplishments, of which are you most proud, and why?

KD: Learning how to work on a tiny scale. Mastering my skills, I would say, because without being able to do that, I wouldn't have my business or passion.

EOA: What are your short-term and long-term goals?

KD: My short-term goal is to make more work in a shorter period of time. Long term, I would like to be well known for my art – to me, this would mean having lots of followers on my business Instagram and YouTube.

EOA: What advice do you have for novice artists and entrepreneurs hoping to attract interest in what they have to offer?

KD: Find your passion and what sets you apart from everyone else. It's important to market yourself in a way that makes you stand out. I still struggle with this, I must say, so just remember that it's a process and takes time. Don't give up on your passions and dreams – if something isn't working, get advice from family, a mentor, or someone you look up to. Follow your passion and remember to always do what you love.

LEARN MORE about the work of Ability Now

https://abilitynowbayarea.org/

SUPPORT KAYA AND SEE MORE OF HER WORK

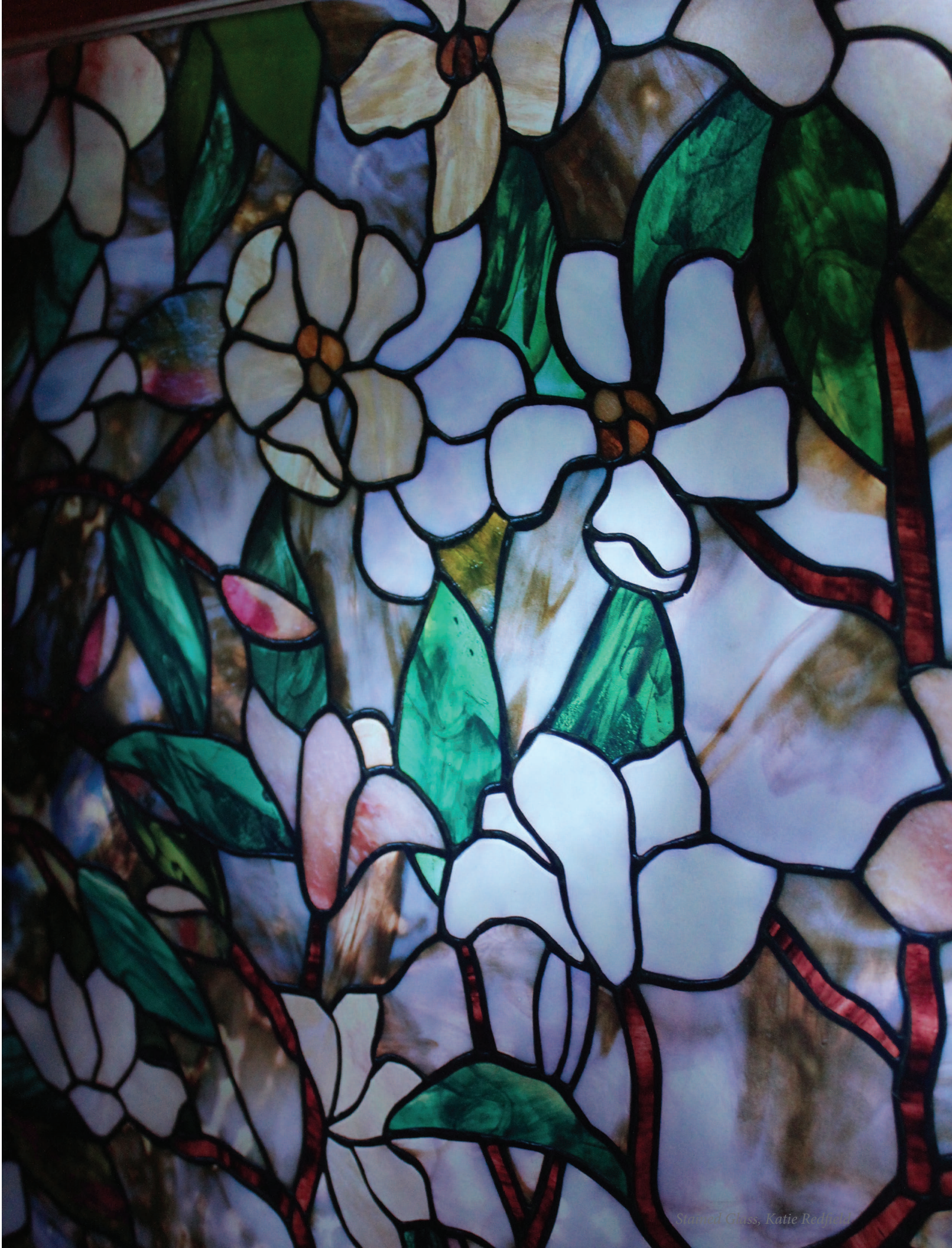
https://www.makersparadise.org/shop/origami-star-earrings-by-kaya-davis

Butterfly Earrings

Heart Earrings

Star Earrings

Miniatures by Kaya Davis



Stained Glass, Katie Redfield

Joyce Goldenstern

Chester in Another Dimension

novel excerpt from In Their Ruin

Chester stood naked before a stand-up mirror and contemplated mathematical reiteration and the fourth dimension. Standing before the mirror provided him with a tenuous link to the reality he was leaving behind, for the reverse image in the glass, though mysterious, was in accordance with the laws that governed that real world. Once, years before, it had occurred to him that it would be uncanny to have a mirror-identical twin, so that when they looked in the mirror together each could see his true image in the other's image, not just his own reverse image. Now, however, that wish to see his true image had come true and was driving him mad, for he saw his true image in many places.

For example, he might look out the window and see an exact replica of himself walking down the street or he might hear a voice tell him to look up from the mirror to a high corner in the room, and there he would find his other true self perched like an angel. He understood this to mean that he was losing his individuality and was becoming part of a pattern, the same type of pattern one got by charting imaginary numbers with real numbers and squaring some of them to show a complex number pattern on graph paper: bubbles reproducing, crowding together until they became foam or a dragon curve turning in on itself in the endless feedback of chaos with colorful embellishment and precise duplication. He saw such images clearly in his mind repeating and repeating, zooming in and zooming out.

Once for a period when Hank was nine or ten, by which time Hank very seldom even spoke to Chester, indeed, avoided him at all costs, Chester found a way to draw him into a conversation through items of mathematical interest. One day he sat at the dining room table with a telephone book opened before him at the white pages. He showed Hank the column of telephone numbers on the right-hand side and told Hank he would add them in his head, which he proceeded to do and within a minute or two came up with the enormous sum.

Of course, Hank had no way he could readily check his father's gigantic claim, so he asked him to do the same with only five rows, which Chester did in a few seconds. When Hank checked and found his father's sum correct, he deliberately muffled his wonder so as not to let his father think he was impressed with him.

Another time, Chester introduced Hank to the concept of a mobius strip: a strip with width and height but due to a twist, only one surface. Hank had to admit the phenomenon amazed, but strictly the phenomenon, not the teacher, impressed him. When Chester talked about the Klein bottle, a curvature with width and height and depth, but only one surface due to a mysterious twist that one had to imagine being possible in the fourth dimension, Hank seemed to understand the problem and even took a paper towel tube and practiced the twist (albeit approximately, since he could not inhabit the fourth dimension), but he did this alone, away from Chester's supervision. Samuel, on the other hand, showed some respect for his father's knowledge and savant abilities, but not any real interest in trying to understand them. Chester barely acknowledged Samuel's appreciation but continued to long for Hank's approval, for he could see that Hank had inherited some of his obsessions and unique gifts.

Chester now stood without any clothes on because he was finding it harder and harder to attend to hygiene and daily tasks like dressing and making the bed and eating food. He knew that he should take a shower, but taking a shower meant one not only had to remove one's clothes, but also find a washcloth and

towel and soap, run the water , adjust the temperature, enter the shower stall, and so forth. To find a clean towel and wash cloth meant one would have to wash clothes and then hang them out to dry. In order to wash clothes, one needed to find the laundry detergent and fill the washer with water and soap and dirty clothes, turn on the agitator, and then rinse the clothes, wring them and hang them out to dry. For one thing, he was not one, he was many, so why should he be expected to do what one must do? And where was his wife who was supposed to help him?

Over the course of two days, Chester had managed to remove all his clothes in preparation for a shower. (He found it both mildly alarming and humorous to see from the window his true image walking down the street below with no clothes on.) He had yet to gather the washcloth and towel and soap. He smelled bad, even to himself. And yet a sense of necessity did not propel him; rather, it led him to find relief through distraction.

He began to heed voices telling him that he now needed to contemplate the finite and the infinite. Before him spread a seaside beach: finite in area, but infinite in its parameters. He found a tape measure in Gladys' sewing drawer and dropped with it to his hands and knees to measure each irregular jotting along the shoreline to find the parameter, but the voices told him he must do more. He also must measure each granule on a grain of sand, a task that could go on forever and ever and for which he must find a new measuring tool. The tape measure wasn't working too well. He was busy at work when he suddenly stopped and erected his naked body from the floor to its full height: 5 feet 8 inches. It had occurred to him with great urgency that he wanted to tell Hank about the infinite in the finite.

However, he had not seen Hank for at least a month, and he avoided going down to the basement, even avoided going to the basement door, for he did not want to be reminded that he no longer earned money, that he no longer had a work office down there from which he could earn money; he did not want to be reminded that Gladys was the one to earn money now. He knew his brother-in-law had removed the telephones he had used in the basement office; he knew that Hank had taken over the office room for a private bedroom and that Samuel and Hank ruled there now.

He was supposed to leave them alone and keep an eye on his youngest son, Felix, while Gladys was at work, but he often forgot or had a hard time finding Felix. Was he inside or outside? And then he remembered as you followed the surface curve of a Klein bottle in the fourth dimension the inside was the outside and the outside was the inside, making the location of Felix a mathematical uncertainty, maybe even impossibility.

Andrew Gudgel

All the Times We Almost Died

Nearly everyone who has made it to adulthood has almost died several times. As a toddler, it may have been a peanut that went down the wrong way but was coughed up and out of the windpipe in time. It may have been a cool, enticing swimming pool whose gate happened to be locked that particular summer afternoon. As a teenager, it may have been a skid while driving that straightened out at the last minute; a skid initiated by a random patch of wet leaves and a curve taken just a little too fast by an inexperienced driver. Or perhaps the just-missed fall through a glass door owing to a trip over suddenly longer legs. Our adult lives are also full of unrecognized near-deaths. The car that flashed by just as we were about to step off the curb. The mole that we decided to show to the doctor just because it looked a little funny and was removed before it could progress to something worse.

Thinking about almost dying is uncomfortable and so consideration of our mortality rarely surfaces. We act as though death could never come to us. Besides, if we lived our lives in constant awareness of how precarious life is, we'd never leave the house — even though after automobiles, the most common place for fatal accidents to occur is at home.

But if we think about the uncomfortable for a moment and ponder the randomness of our near-death experiences, it turns out that some of them are blessings in disguise. Because of them, we stop drinking. Or smoking. Or decide we're going to get more exercise or stop bungee jumping or get the brakes on the car looked at *today*. Life sometimes takes with one hand and gives with the other.

And humankind is just the individual writ large. There have been a number of times we all almost died, but didn't. A number of times that our species (or more broadly, all life on Earth) dodged a bullet we never saw coming. Yet depending on how you look at it, they all also ended up being blessings in disguise. Places where nature, like life, took with one hand and gave with the other. And some might also serve as lessons to guide us in the future.

Life got an early start on Earth; there's evidence that it began only a few hundred million years after the earth formed and cooled to the point where the seas could support life. The seas teemed with numberless organisms, mostly in the form of bacteria that powered their primitive cells through chemical reactions. Then around two and a half billion years ago, everything changed. According to a 2005 paper published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, a group of bacteria found an entirely different way to produce energy. Now called cyanobacteria, these organisms figured out how to break down carbon dioxide and water and to convert it into energy using the power of the sun. They discovered photosynthesis.

But this new technique for producing energy created a powerful toxin as a waste product: oxygen. For all the bacteria that used chemicals — principally iron — to power themselves, oxygen was deadly. Oxygen combined with iron in the oceans to form rust, which precipitated out of the seawater and rained down to coat the seabed. The chemosynthetic bacteria that relied on iron starved and died, as well as any organism that couldn't tolerate the presence of oxygen.

It didn't end there. Once the cyanobacteria had poisoned the oceans with their waste, the oxygen began escaping out of the sea and into the atmosphere. At the time, methane, a potent greenhouse gas, dominated the earth's atmosphere. But now, oxygen and sunlight began breaking down that methane into carbon dioxide and water. Carbon dioxide is also a greenhouse gas, but one less powerful than methane.

The loss of methane and the change in atmospheric composition caused the earth to cool. Temperatures dropped, and ice began to form in the oceans. The whiteness of the ice reflected sunlight back into space, causing the earth to cool even more. Which caused even more ice to form, reflecting even more sunlight, until the entire planet's surface was covered in ice. (Though there's some debate whether a small band of open water might have remained at the equator.)

During the next four hundred million years — the time it took for volcanoes to vent enough carbon dioxide into the air to raise temperatures to the point where the ice melted again — all life on Earth could have easily been frozen out of existence. Yet cyanobacteria endured and made it through that first "Snowball Earth."

The freezing of the earth was the first time nature took with one hand and gave with the other. The dominant forms of life at the time were nearly wiped out by cyanobacteria, and for a while it was possible that *all* life might follow. Yet without cyanobacteria and their poisonous waste, life as we know it today wouldn't exist.

A series of at least five Snowball Earths subsequently occurred, the last of which ended roughly six hundred and thirty million years ago in a period known as the Edicaran. According to Dr. Richard Bambach of the National Museum of Natural History, the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere had risen by that point from the one to two percent of the time of the first Snowball Earth to become abundant enough to permit multicellular life. A few of the life forms in this period, like algae and sponges, would be familiar to us today. Many, however, were unlike anything before, or since. Some looked like flat fronds anchored to the rocks and the mats of microbes that covered the sea floor. Others lay like quilted mattresses scattered about. None had discernible mouths or guts, so according to Bambach, it's likely that they absorbed their nutrients directly from the seawater or lived symbiotically with other, photosynthetic organisms. This was life in the "Garden of Ediacara."

Then around five hundred and forty million years ago, life took a turn in a new direction. An organism appeared that was unlike any other on Earth. It has no name and no one knows exactly what it looked like because no fossilized remains have been found yet. And in fact, fossils of it may *never* be found, because it was most likely a soft-bodied, worm-like sea creature. However, we know this new organism existed because it left behind trace fossils: casts of the burrows it made as it dug its way through the mud and microbial mats on the bottom of the sea.

As plain and uninteresting as this organism sounds, it was nevertheless revolutionary. For it had a body plan like nothing else on Earth. Burrowing requires muscles and muscles require an extra layer of cells lying between the organism's outer skin and its inner gut. That design — surface, middle, gut — is known as "triploblasty," and is the one followed by almost all multicellular life today, from worms to human beings. But at the time, it was brand new.

There was a second adaptation that also gave this unknown organism a distinct advantage: a head. Moving forward while eating implies one end with a mouth and one without one. Food goes in the mouth and out the not-mouth, giving an organism a preferred direction of motion. Sensory organs, be they eyes or antennae or taste cells that were clustered near the front would help find food and avoid danger, and so a head and a tail come into being. Moving left and right is merely a matter of choice and so the two sides develop equally. The result is a body plan known as bilateral ("both sides") symmetry, which almost all animals on Earth now possess.

With the advantage of muscles and a head, this unnamed creature and its descendants not only out-competed the simpler Ediacaran organisms, they stirred up the ocean bottoms, forever changing the nutrient balance between the ocean water and the mud beneath. Ediacaran organisms quickly disappeared from the fossil record.

The Cambrian-period animals that replaced them proliferated into an incredible variety of shapes and lifestyles: swimmers, burrowers, crawlers, predators, prey, grazers, those that lived on the sea bottom and those that lived closer to the surface. According to Bambach, fully half of the modes of life we see today appeared during this Cambrian explosion. Almost everything that's alive today is a descendant of this era when life suddenly ran riot.

Life became more complex as the millennia and eons rolled by. The ancestors of fish appeared. Around four hundred and ninety million years ago, plants first moved onto land and flourished in their new environment. For a while the seas were ruled by six-foot-long, predatory sea-scorpions. Fish finally evolved jaws to chew with. The composition of the atmosphere changed once again as more, and increasingly evolved, land plants pumped more oxygen into the atmosphere. The increased oxygen helped vertebrate animals move onto land, where they, too, adapted to the new environment.

The proliferation of life seemed unstoppable. Then around two hundred and fifty million years ago, at the end of a period known as the Permian, life was dealt a blow so heavy that it almost undid everything that had come before. It's believed a plume of heat from the Earth's core rose up, melting the crust above it and creating a volcanic region in modern-day Siberia. The Siberian Traps erupted for a million years, oozing out almost seven hundred and twenty thousand cubic miles of lava, enough to cover present-day Western Europe in a layer more than a half-mile thick.

Along with the lava came plumes of gas containing similarly huge quantities of carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide. The carbon dioxide trapped heat in the atmosphere, raising the surface temperature of the earth to the point that the seas reached the bathwater temperature of more than a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Oxygen doesn't dissolve as well in warm water as in cold, so the percentage of oxygen in the oceans plummeted. At the same time, an increased amount of carbon dioxide from the air dissolved in the seas, turning the waters acidic. On land, the sulfur dioxide may have caused widespread acid rain, killing plant life and destroying terrestrial ecosystems. Close to ninety percent of species in the ocean and two-thirds of land-based species disappeared in less than forty thousand years. The extinction was so severe that for millions of years afterward, a single genus of dog-sized reptile called *Lystrosaurus* may have represented as much as ninety-five percent of all vertebrates on land.

According to the evolutionary biologist Leigh van Valen, "The Permian extinction reset the clock of community evolution." The end-Permian mass extinction event reshuffled entire ecosystems, putting species into competition with species that otherwise would have had nothing to do with each other. Life struggled for a long time after to just survive, and millions of years passed before biodiversity rebounded. But in that time, life took a different direction, one which set the path for the ancestors of both dinosaurs and mammals to appear.

Life continued to evolve. As the Earth went around the Sun, the gravitational tug of Jupiter and Venus and the other planets caused its orbit to stretch and contract every hundred thousand years or so. Dinosaurs appeared, as did birds, flowering plants, and early mammals. Roughly sixty-five million years ago, Tyrannosaurus Rex and its kind went extinct, making room for mammals to thrive.

The planet kept changing, as well. While the dinosaurs came and went, the tilt of the earth's axis increased and decreased in a forty-one-thousand-year cycle, while the direction that axis pointed — currently toward the North Star — wobbled in a circle lasting twenty-one thousand-years. This interaction alternately increased and decreased the amount of sunlight that reached the earth each year, leading to periods of warm and cold, wet and dry climates. Each change of climate favored some species and caused others to go extinct. Four million years ago, some of the animals in Africa affected were the early ancestors of modern-day humans.

Because the interactions between the earth's axis and orbit are complex, there were periods when the climate was relatively stable and periods when the climate varied drastically. In Africa, moist forests and lakes sometimes gave way to dry, grassy savannas. At other times, savannas turned into moist forests. In between were periods of mixed or "mosaic" ecosystems.

Some of humanity's ancestors adapted better to moist forests; some to drier savannas. For those who found themselves in the wrong ecosystem it was tough to survive. And yet, during periods of rapid fluctuation, living in the wrong ecosystem happened quite a bit; often within just a few generations. Yet some of these early hominin (literally, "of the tribe of man") ancestors learned to adapt to the periods of rapidly fluctuating conditions. Dr. Richard Potts of the National Museum of Natural History called this the "variability selection" hypothesis, which argues evolution ultimately selected not the individuals who were best adapted to one or another climate, but those who were the most adaptable *in general* and best able to handle near-continuous change.

When Potts matched his hypothesis against Africa's geologic record over the past few million years, he found that the periods of longest and greatest fluctuation in climate coincided with the development of the very traits that make modern humans what we are today. According to a 2015 article Potts co-wrote for the *Journal of Human Evolution*, the following events all happened during periods of maximum climate instability: Hominins develop the ability to walk upright. The first evidence of tool use appears in the fossil record. A human ancestor called *Homo Erectus* comes into being and expands out of Africa and across Eurasia. *Homo Sapiens* appears, then also spreads out of Africa.

A rapidly changing climate must have taxed the resources and limits of individuals, family groups, and the hominin genus as a whole. Many species of both animal and hominin went extinct during these periods, and it wouldn't have taken much for our ancestors to have also died off, perhaps in search of water holes that had dried up years before. Yet without wildly changing climates in the past, we might not be here. It appears that instability may have been what made us human. Little wonder, then, that we're such mercurial, restless beings, afraid of, yet always yearning for, change.

When I think about all the times I almost died, the moments fall into two categories: ones that were random and ones that were ultimately under my control. The bullet that snapped past my nose when I was a soldier in Somalia was a random event, and the only thing I could really do was plan ahead to mitigate the effect that random event might have upon me. Hence the Kevlar helmet and body armor I was wearing at the time.

The near-miss car-accident-that-wasn't, on the other hand, was entirely my own doing. I was running late to get to the train station and should have waited to make the left-hand turn at the light. Using a little foresight before I made a bad choice would have prevented the whole horn-blaring, heart-racing incident from happening in the first place.

And when I think about all the times we, as a species, almost died, it makes me wonder what we are doing to prepare for disasters that could impact the entire human race. At any moment, an asteroid or a series of volcanic eruptions or some new disease could potentially spell the end of us all. While humans can't foresee all possibilities — just as the person who never goes out their front door can't make their life completely accident-proof — I had to believe we are doing some planning for events out of our control. A little more reflection made me realize that humanity's precautions, like my own, would fall into two categories: mitigation and forethought.

So I searched online to see what humanity is doing to prepare itself. I was relieved to find organizations on several continents taking steps to deal with the effects of planet-wide disasters. One is the Svalbard Global Seed Bank, which stores backup copies of plant seeds from national seed banks in an underground facility halfway between Norway and the North Pole for use in regional or global emergencies. Another is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "Plant Genetic Resources Unit" in Geneva, New York, that maintains stocks of different varieties of plants including apples, cherries, and grapes. (Their catalog of just apple varieties runs to seventy-seven pages.) Keeping stocks of seeds and "heritage breeds" alive permits humanity to literally re-seed areas devastated by disaster and to turn back the genetic clock on today's increasingly genetically bottlenecked domestic plants and animals.

And though it seems science fiction-y, I think establishing a colony on the Moon or Mars would also be useful, so the inhabitants could come back to Earth if there was a disaster that otherwise might wipe out all humanity. The re-introduction of European beavers in the UK and California condors in the U.S. has brought these species back from the brink of extinction. I'm pretty sure it would work for humans, as well.

It was much harder to find examples online of historical forethought. I stumbled upon the delightful myth that Oxford University planted oak trees five hundred years in advance of needing new beams for one of it buildings, but not much else. Perhaps lack of foresight is a dim echo of the evolutionary forces that shaped our ancient hominid ancestors to *react* to changing climates rather than anticipate them, but for some reason, humans just seem to be bad at long-term planning.

Yet I'm not hopelessly pessimistic. Humans have killed off more than a few species in our time: the dodo and the Tasmanian wolf, the auroch and the Japanese sea lion. But now that we're beginning to realize how easy it is for a species to die out, humans have also started working to preserve the ones not entirely lost. For example, those European beavers are being reintroduced four hundred years after they were hunted to extinction in the UK, and now their numbers seem to be growing. When it comes to rescuing species, I believe in the old saying, "As long as there's life, there's hope."

The strongest emotion I feel when I think about all the times we all almost died is gratitude. If any one of those historical near-disasters had gone differently, we wouldn't be here. Or we'd be very different beings than we are today and "human" would mean something different than it now does. It's a miracle of statistics and chance that humans are here at all. As a result, I'm grateful that things happened as they did and that it's been granted to me to see sunrises and to run my fingers through the cottony wool on a sheep's back and to taste the juicy sweetness of a ripe apricot.

I realize that, inevitably, there *will* come a time when humanity has run its course and come to an end. But I also know that won't be the end of life itself. It will continue along just fine without us. Eventually another creature will evolve to take our place. Perhaps their kind will be born during a period of upheaval and rapid change, making them adaptable and curious, like we once were.

Dennis Vannatta

Dead Heroes

Running in a dream, you can't catch up,
you can't catch up and you can't get away.
—The Iliad

What a joke: a dream beginning with an epigraph! Yet here I am, not an epigraph hanging over my head so much as I am the epigraph, inhabiting it, running. Running across the hot dusty plain toward the great city on the hill with its sloping walls, beneath which he slouches, his polished shield leaning against the tower. Hector.

He eyes me dourly as I approach.

"It won't work," he says, "stripping off your armor." I look down at myself. Yikes! I'm buck naked. "They won't spare you."

At the "they" he nods at something behind me, and I turn and look. There, drawing nearer and nearer, come the vast host of the Greeks, center-front in all his terrible fury, Achilles!

Turning his head toward me without quite being able to take his eyes off the son of Thetis, Hector asks, in the tone of one just making conversation while waiting for the bus, "What are you, then? Achaian or Trojan?"

What language are we speaking, Greek or Trojan? Ah well, I've labored through this night of dreams long enough to know that dreamers speak all languages.

"I'm neither. I'm a messenger sent by the gods to bring you good news."

He lurches up from the wall.

"Sent by Apollo? He's going to come to my aid again?"

"Well, no, that's not the good news, exactly . . ."

I hesitate. What is the good news I bring Hector—heroic and cowardly, loving and cruel—my favorite of all the great heroes who fought before the walls of Troy?

"Bah!" he spits and, thick wrists and shoulders as broad as a linebacker's, shoves me aside as easily as I'd push open a shower curtain.

In fact, I doubt he's even aware of me now, not with Achilles standing there a stone's throw away, rocking on the balls of his feet, sunlight flashing on his god-made helmet and shield, the long ash spear poised above his right shoulder, all set to let fly.

Hector—short sword dangling from his waist, shield (Achilles' old one, remember) clutched in his left hand, ash spear held aloft—advances a step, then another. Then he hesitates, and I see it in his eyes: fear.

I know what he's thinking. Haven't I read the lines to my World Lit classes a score of times? Buy my way out of this. Give back Helen, give back all the loot my deadbeat brother brought back from Sparta, nay more, offer up the coffers of the city, hold nothing back, as long as he spares me, me, Priam's darling boy.

But then comes the realization: No. What use are words now? I strip off my armor and go to him naked as a girl and beg on bended knee, and he'll just kill me anyway. Better to go down fighting like a man.

So he hefts the spear once more, takes a step forward, looks Achilles in his terrible eye, wavers. Then he turns and runs.

And now comes the most bizarre moment in this bizarre dream, for who should go running stride for stride with Hector, in addition to Achilles, of course? Me.

Hey, I'm seventy. I don't run. Oh sure, not so long ago I'd chase the grandsons around the basement for a minute or two before pooping out, but even that's in the past since I developed bursitis in my hip. Trust me, if Achilles had lived long enough, he wouldn't have been "swift-footed," either.

But I'm running. We're running.

We run past a big rock and a fig tree blowing in the wind, past two pools fed by Scamander, one hot and one cold, near them stone-lined basins where Trojan women in long flowing robes would wash their clothes. On and on we run, we three, until the rock comes once more, the fig tree, pools and basins. We zigzag our way around the city, Hector trying to lure Achilles near the walls so Trojan archers can get a shot at him, Achilles every time cutting off the angle, driving Hector back out into the plain.

I'd always wondered how Hector, oldest of Priam's fifty sons (not all by the same woman, one hopes!) could run so long without swift-footed Achilles, mid-twenties, probably, catching him, but now I see it. Achilles could have caught him at any time, but he's enjoying this, nipping and yipping at Hector's heels like a playful puppy, mugging for his buddies lining our path.

Hector is too terrified to notice me huffing and puffing beside him, and the only time Achilles does is when I clumsily get in his way and he stops long enough to pick me up by the waist and set me aside as one might a tiny child. "Careful, old man," he says. "Yessir, sorry," says I. Then we run on, the Greeks hooting and cheering, Trojans staring down from the walls exhorting, lamenting.

We're approaching the great rock for the fourth time when, high up on the tower, a warrior calls down: "Brother! Remember yourself! Stop running! I'll come out and fight beside you, and together we'll win glory for ourselves and our father!"

It's Deïphobus the hero, favorite brother of Hector. Aha, I'd always known that stuff about Athena appearing as Deïphobus to trick Hector into stopping was donkey feces. Makes much more sense that Deïphobus really would call down to the older brother he idolized, would try to go to his aid, but then what? Maybe his comrades grab hold of him, prevent him from going out onto the plain and dying needlessly. Or more likely, by the time he fights his way through the jam of soldiers clogging the passageway to the great western gate, it's all over.

Whatever. The fact is, Hector stops running, but his brother does not appear, and Hector faces Achilles, alone.

Well, there's me, of course.

They pretty much ignore me, though, except Achilles waving me aside when I stumble into his line of vision and Hector snorting with disgust when I suggest, "On second thought, maybe you should try running a bit more."

"I've run three times around the walls of Troy. No more. Let's do it, Achilles. God is on my side. How can I lose?"

Achilles says nothing to Hector but instead turns to his fellow Myrmidons, hefting spears and drawing nearer, and commands, "Stay back. He's mine."

It's enough to send a visible shudder through Hector, though. He tries to strike a gentlemen's agreement with Achilles, I'll treat your body with respect if I win if you'll blah blah blah.

Achilles' only reply (and you won't find this in the Lattimore translation) is, "Fuck you!"

They fight. It doesn't take long. Hector throws his spear, misses, and Achilles throws his, gets Hector through the neck.

Homer tries to justify Hector's dying oration by saying the spear got him through the fleshy part of the neck without cutting the windpipe. I don't know about you, but if I've got a spear just about

anywhere through the neck, I'm not going to be doing a lot of talking. And Hector doesn't, either. He thrashes around like a gigged frog, the only sound coming from his lips a combination croak and bloody gurgle.

Achilles prances, cavorts, does the duck walk three times around the dying prince as his buddies howl their laughter and beat their shields with their sword butts, while atop the walls of Troy high above us they wail, they wail.

Finally, Hector ceases his thrashing. Only his eyes move.

I kneel beside him, remove his helmet. With my Kansas City Royals ball cap, which apparently I've been wearing all along (with my scant hair, even in dreams I worry about skin cancers), I wipe the sweat from his eyes, the blood foaming from his mouth.

"This is the end," I say. "None of us can escape his fate. Take heart, though. I bring you good news. Your destiny is not to be remembered as a coward who ran three times around the walls of Troy, Achilles nipping at your heels. At least not in the World Literature classrooms of Professor Vannatta. There you'll be lauded as a good man, the best of the men who fought on the hot, dusty plains of Troy. And not because you were the greatest warrior. Come on. We both know it didn't come natural to you, as it did to some I could name. Heck, you couldn't have beaten Patroclus without Apollo's help, much less Achilles. But if we judge men by whom we'd want all humanity to model themselves after, wouldn't it be you, Hector, who said his greatest sorrow at dying in a losing cause wouldn't be his own pain or the deaths of his brothers and comrades but the thought of his wife, led away in slavery? Your most memorable scene in the nine years of warfare isn't on the battlefield but at home with your baby boy, Astyanax, when you reach for him but he recoils and cries in fear of your great helmet with the horsehair plume. You laugh, and lay the helmet aside, and take up your son, so gently, and pray that he'll be a better man by far than you. Of all the Greeks and Trojans, only you have a love greater than your pride. Would it were so for all men."

Is he listening? Does he hear me? His eyes are on me, at least.

But then a shadow covers us, and I turn and look up. Over us stands Achilles.

"Does the bastard yet live?"

Instead of answering, I lean down and whisper in Hector's ear, "Guess who kills Achilles. That lazy lover-boy brother of yours, Paris. With an arrow in the heel!"

Hector dies with a smile on his face.

I stand up and back away from the two of them. But I can't keep my mouth shut—an old failing of mine. I point a trembling finger at Achilles and say, "Don't get too cocky. One day you'll admit it's better to be the poorest beggar, alive, than the greatest hero, dead."

This seems to amuse him. He chuckles and says, "But look who's alive and who's dead."

Then he turns to one of his men and commands, "Bring me my chariot. Tie Priam's whelp to it. I'll take him for a few circuits around Troy. At least he won't have to run this time. After that, turn the dogs loose on him. Should be enough Trojan meat there to feed a dozen of them."

I can't bear to look. I send up a prayer to the great god Sandman, and he spirits me away from Troy in a fog of dreamless sleep.

Steve Legomsky

The Rejection Collection

Aurora removed her long thin fingers from the keyboard and sat back, quite pleased with herself. It was a long time coming, but she had now finished what she believed to be the final tweaks to her first short story ever. Alone in her bedroom on the second floor of her creaky old wooden house, still in her old flannel pajamas that kept her "toasty," as she liked to describe it, she gazed at the wondrous scene framed by her window. The late morning sun was reflecting brilliantly off the snow that had accumulated through the night. The branches of the magnolia tree in her front yard were dusted with a thin layer of glistening flakes.

She took another sip of her coffee and re-read the masterpiece displayed on her laptop screen. Not for the purpose of still more editing. Just for the sheer pleasure of it. Life was good. No, not good -- great, phenomenal.

Aurora was not without plentiful writing experience. After graduating from Penn State with a degree in communications, she had landed a job writing digital advertisements for a local fashion magazine in Delaware. Three years later, she was ready to try her hand at a different kind of fiction.

"Many short stories are called, but few are chosen," her boss had warned her. "Don't be disappointed if your story isn't accepted." Aurora wasn't fazed. She knew her story was good. Really good. She could even visualize the excited facial expressions of the editors when, after having slogged through hundreds of mediocre submissions, they finally got to read her piece. "This is the kind of story that makes it all worth it," she could picture them saying.

Her story was a tragedy entitled "What Fate Held in Store." The plot was compelling. The protagonist was a young woman. Depressed, the young woman thought that Trent, the charismatic stranger who had rescued her from an oncoming train, would never get around to expressing his love for her. To her surprise and delight, he finally did. Only later would she discover that he had a rare, incurable, contagious disease that she was now seeing the strange symptoms of in herself.

Aurora's next step was to read about the submission process. She googled "advice for short story writers." Hundreds of promising websites popped up. One of them, written by an editor of a leading literary magazine, was entitled "Ten Tips for Submitting Short Stories."

One tip immediately caught her attention: "The very first sentence has to grab the reader." This prompted Aurora to review her first sentence: "Veronica unfortunately got stuck on the railroad tracks and was very worried that she would be run over by a train." That didn't seem "grabby," so she re-wrote it: "As Veronica stumbled onto the railroad tracks, she heard the deafening sound of the train barreling toward her."

At that point, Aurora had a revelation. She hadn't read many short stories herself, though she remembered that she had read one in high school and that she'd really liked it. So to get a better sense of the kind of story that the literary magazines tend to publish, she decided to read a few of them. Most charged a subscription fee, but she found some that didn't and read one story from each of those.

The first pattern she noticed was that almost all of them were chock full of similes and metaphors, which she had learned about in her freshman English class. So she rewrote her first sentence: "The train that was careening toward her trapped body was a behemoth about to devour its elfin lunch."

"There," she figured. "I now have not just one metaphor, but two." Then she decided that the sentence would be better still if it also included a simile. So she added, at the end: "like a forest fire swallowing up a bunny rabbit." Smiling to herself, she knew she had nailed it. "This will be irresistible," she whispered to herself.

But then Aurora read those same magazines' submission guidelines. They clearly wanted something intellectual. Electron Magnet, for example, called for "**r**ationality inherent in the contextualized essence of oneself, a preference for apophatic theological tradition and a rejection of scientific materialism." Morphology wanted stories "driven by a perception of transcendent reality."

So, right after the opening sentence about Veronica getting pinned on the railroad tracks, she added a new sentence: "This, Veronica realized, was an existential moment." For good measure she found a place to insert the word "taxonomy." She didn't know its precise meaning, though she knew it had something to do with stuffed animals.

Aurora was now ready to submit her story. Off it went, to sixteen journals with open submission periods. As the guidelines requested, she included a third person bio:

"Aurora Savage writes promotional materials for Fashion Trends Magazine, one of eastern Delaware's most widely-read fashion reviews. Her most recent contribution, an advertisement touting the magazine's forthcoming article on the pros and cons of men's no-tuck shirts, was described by one of her colleagues as "really good." Aurora lives in Wilmington with her cat, Buttons. Her favorite color is peach."

Now there was nothing left to do but wait.

The first rejection letter stung. Worse still, it arrived after just one week, despite the clear statement in the submission guidelines that this journal's average decision time was six months. That struck Aurora as unfair and, frankly, insulting.

"Dear Aurora,

"Thank you for submitting 'What Fate Had in Store' to Thigh High Boots. While it isn't the right fit for our magazine, that doesn't mean it's not a terrific piece that a journal with lesser standards might well find very interesting. Every journal is different. Ours, for example, looks mainly for quality writing, while other publications might prioritize font style or margin width, to pick just two of many possible preferences. So don't give up. We wish you much success in your writing, such as it is."

Aurora knew that this first rejection letter was an anomaly. She understood that like anyone else editors can be idiosyncratic. So, after the initial shock, she shrugged it off and resolved to wait calmly for the acceptance message that she knew would appear in her inbox before long.

Sadly, the editors of the other journals proved to be equally obtuse. A stream of additional rejection messages began to appear.

Aurora accepted the reality that the editors were unable to fully appreciate her work as it then stood. Eager to improve her chances, and before sending her story to the next-most-highly ranked group of journals, she decided she needed to get inside the heads of the editors. For the first time, she scanned the "about" sections of several journals' home pages and read their editors' bios.

Almost all of the editors had MFAs and had published several short stories of their own. Often they had interesting personal backgrounds. The experiences of Jeremy Swift, an editor with the prestigious literary magazine "The Classy Tramp," included big game hunting, writing poetry, mountain biking in Turkmenistan, mathematical puzzles, and southern French cuisine." He "likes classical music and hard rock; his favorite authors are Ayn Rand and Hunter S. Thompson; and he voted for Ronald Reagan and Bernie Sanders."

Then Aurora re-read a number of submission guidelines. Monkeys at the Keyboard announced it wanted "writing that makes our spirits soar." Aurora made a note to herself, "make spirits soar," and quickly added a sentence about "birds flying overhead as Veronica struggled to free herself." Fly in the Soup wanted "stories that we feel not just in our heart and our brain, but in our bowels." She jotted down "in bowels." That reminded her, however, that she needed a bathroom break, which she then took.

Resuming her survey a few minutes later, she came across one guideline that initially gave her pause. They wanted her to convince them that "we've found something no one else could have written." She thought "hmm, actually, I think Marjorie could have written this. But they don't know Marjorie, so I should be good."

The guidelines of another leading journal, Spoon Fed, also concerned her. They acknowledged the need for a writer to be "self-aware" but cautioned that editors have feelings too. The cover letter thus needed to include warnings about anything in the story that might cause the editors emotional distress. To be on the safe side, the guidelines added, the author might wish to enlist a sensitivity reader to vet the story. Aurora realized that her bio reference to her advertisement for no-tuck shirts might cause discomfort to an editor who doesn't like to think about the body parts that a traditional tuck-in shirt might touch. So in her bio she changed "no-tuck shirts" to "a certain style of men's shirts." But there was also the opening story line describing Veronica about to get run over by a train. That line too might be stressful for some readers. Ultimately, however, she left that line intact, because she couldn't think of a way to eliminate the stress while still "grabbing" the reader.

Shaken by the stream of rejections but buoyed by the improvements she had now made, Aurora submitted her revised story to eleven more literary journals.

The first response was from Word Stew:

"Dear Aurora,

"Thank you so much for allowing us to read <u>What Fate Had in Store</u>. Knowing how much of oneself a writer invests in a short story, we feel honored that you entrusted it to us. In the end, however, we have room to publish fewer than 1% of the stories we receive. Sadly, that means we must turn away many fine stories, though to be clear, yours was not one of them. Still, these judgments are always subjective, so we encourage you to submit your story elsewhere. Perhaps Ranger Rick or Fun with Legos would be a good fit.

"Although we are sorry that your story is not right for us at this time, you will soon be able to read and enjoy the wonderful stories that we accepted instead of yours. We are pleased to offer you a full year's subscription to Word Stew for the special introductory price of $12.99. We know you will treasure these readings as you peruse them again and again."

After an avalanche of additional rejections, Aurora contemplated what to do. "Maybe I'll try my hand at macramé. I'll bet I could create a pattern as intricate as the soul and as delicate as a butterfly."

Michael Hettich

Star Gazing in Darkness, and in the Light of Day

I felt I would live in a lovely animal timelessness, but now I see it is time itself that gives me the pleasure, and the passing of time, and the living again—which I call pleasure.

-Gerald Stern

On a warm summer evening in the middle of July, my wife and I sit outside as the light slips away; we watch a bat zigzag through the clear sky above our house, soon joined by others as the woods slowly darken. Fireflies loop gently up into the canopy. Soon enough it's too dark for us to see each other, though the sky stays light until well after 9:00. Watching the dark with our night-adjusted eyes, we're surprised at the number of satellites we see drifting across the darkness. Jets pass more quickly, too high for us to hear. Down here, night insects chatter like a new kind of silence, though the highway groan is a constant in the distance. I try not to tune my ears in that direction. And as the night deepens, the insects' song drowns out all other sounds, the way the music of day-to-day life mostly drowns out the confusions that ache us at our cores. We sit in the middle of their music.

Now thousands of stars clarify and brighten, constellations we might be blind to if we'd just walked out from a well-lit house. We stare up without talking, growing slowly sleepy. As we head in for bed, we notice all the small lights that punctuate our domestic darkness, about the size of the stars we've just seen but more garish in their luminescence: smoke alarms and computer switches, clocks and appliances, printers and cell phone chargers. We're plugged in all the time, of course, even in this darkness. I wonder what those bats must feel as they follow their radar-ears through the sky above our house, buzzing as it is with its fields of energy and chatter.

If dolphins and whales are disoriented and injured by the noises of our ships and underwater contraptions, aren't bats similarly confused by the humming of our houses, which we can hardly hear? Maybe part of the very power of our human tribe is located in how oblivious we are, how profoundly we don't even notice the alterations—usually destructions--we wreak on our local environments, how rarely we bring anything positive to the real world, by which I mean the world beyond our own narrow human-centered urges and desires.

Still, we sat out and savored the darkness tonight. I kept my eyes closed much of the time, so I could hear the night sounds more clearly. Colleen, right beside me, kept exclaiming at the shifting colors of the twilight, calling out in joy with each new star that showed itself. Her enthusiasm, as always, was big-hearted and transparent. There's a pool of innocence at her core, a willingness to feel deeply, even at the risk of pain. She has taught me how to live more fully in my breath and eyes, more deeply in what trembles and lies silent.

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We met each other on a summer's afternoon in Denver, in 1979, when I came to her house as part of my job interviewing volunteers for a youth-mentoring program she was involved in. The very next evening, after we'd spent the day backpacking, she suggested we keep our heads outside the tent, even in the chilly summer night at 10,000 feet of altitude. So we lay on our backs to look up at the stars. In the morning we still lay there, faces wet and cool with dew.

I remember myself then as cramped and furious, emotionally ungracious and temperamentally alone, though I hid those things pretty well behind the bravado of a self-styled poet, someone who lived just far enough outside the mainstream not to have to suffer the consequences of true idiosyncrasy. By contrast, she was open and generous--and totally devoid of sarcasm or irony, those calling cards for the falsely sophisticated and snobbish. She knew how to do things with her hands—car-repair, sewing, printmaking--and she was honest to a fault.

That is, she spoke her mind.

That fall, with Jasper, her big unruly dog, we took a month-long trip back east in a VW camper bus we'd bought from one of her friends. I wanted to show her the beauties I had grown up with--a lake in Maine, a small town in upstate New York--and to show her that the east wasn't all paved and citified, which she took as a given, having made a few trips to Manhattan. Beyond that, I think, I wanted her to meet my family, and to visit old friends--and just have an adventure together. So we pooled our finances and set off.

Only a few hours east of Denver, in Nebraska, the rickety old bus shuddered and broke down. I probably would have turned back right then and there; Colleen got out her *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive* book and located the problem. For the rest of that trip, she climbed under the bus and connected wires every time we started up. I sat in the driver's seat and deftly turned the key.

We argued passionately for that entire journey, over simultaneously profound and silly questions: *Who is more essential, the mechanic or the doctor; who is more deftly skilled, the carpenter or the lawyer; who creates healing, the nurse the shaman or the surgeon?* On and on we argued, growing ever more passionate—never, of course, reaching any semblance of agreement. In downtown Chicago in the midst of a fierce debate, she jumped out of the bus and stormed furiously into the crowd, while I continued driving around the block in rush-hour traffic and Jasper barked and clawed at the window, desperate to leap out and follow her.

I couldn't have parked or driven off on my own even if I'd wanted to, since I had no idea how to start the bus by myself. After I drove a few times around that block, she jumped back in with hardly a word, and we continued on our journey.

How about homeopathy, past lives, the *Seth Material?* And she didn't even know where Wallace Stevens had lived!

But she certainly knew things, and she certainly had gumption. A few weeks before we'd met she had returned to the US from Mexico after months in San Miguel de Allende—before it was overrun by tourists—studying printmaking, not at the American school but at the Zenteno Belles Artes, the local Mexican art college. She worked night crew at King's Soopers, stacking shelves of soda pop and 50-pound bags of dog food. She was Phi Beta Kappa BFA from University of Colorado and had paid for it all on her own. The Phi Beta Kappa part impressed me more than it did her, though I wasn't quite sure exactly what it meant.

Now that I think of it, Jasper was named after Jasper Johns. So much for lack of sophistication.

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By the end of our journey east the bus had in fact nearly expired; 30 miles per hour was its top speed. We drove 1-70 through Kansas with the sliding door open, Jasper leashed tightly so he couldn't jump out. When we finally got back to her falling-down cottage, now *our* falling-down cottage, so picturesque in its

decrepitude, we found that all the kittens we'd left in the care of a friend had been somehow forgotten and left to die—their flattened, desiccated bodies littered the back yard. There was a mouse drowned in the chewed-open honey jar in the kitchen.

Though our house sat just a few steps from a small riverside park and bicycle path, the neighborhood itself was dodgy and mean. A half-mile in either direction on that bike path government housing projects sprawled along the river. When I jogged, gangs of bored young kids leered and insulted me. Joggers had been shot at and even killed further down that path. One morning a young punk sprayed graffiti-paint in my face as I ran past; luckily I was quick enough to dodge it.

But our rent was dirt-cheap, and the cardboard house was roomy.

For a while, a plump woman who called herself Sunshine lived in a car parked in front of our house, which sat next to a boarded-up building next to the highway embankment. Sunshine told us she just lived there, in her car—she didn't know how to drive. During the winter, she walked around barefoot in the snow. Since we didn't lock our doors, she took to letting herself in and taking a nap on our bed, which sat in the front room by the house's single heater. She'd put the tea kettle on the stove, then lie down on our bed for a snooze. I'd hear the teapot wailing as I sat upstairs trying to write. I could look down and see her through a hole in the floor. When I stomped down, fuming at her presence and repulsed by her sweetly-funky odor, she looked at me with a scowl, told me to *cool your jets, mister* and pretended to spit on the floor in disgust. Then stomped into the kitchen to pour her cup of tea.

For some reason I can't fathom now, we never told her to leave us alone.

Our neighbor on the river side had a little dog, a Chihuahua, which he kept leashed in his side yard when he went to work. The dog yapped and fussed all day. Every few hours it would jump over the fence between our houses and hang by its leash on our side of the fence, panting and squeaking but too lightweight to strangle itself. It would try to nip me when I went out to lift it back into its own yard, then stand there indignantly yapping.

That scowling neighbor thought we let Jasper poop on his packed-dirt front yard; we'd occasionally see him tossing shovels-full of desiccated dog turds in the direction of our house. Across the street a combination car mechanic and junk yard sprawled; at night, skinny mongrels paced behind its barb-wired fence, growling half-heartedly at Jasper, and at us. Across the river, loud-mawed machines crushed junk cars into squares of steel and loaded them onto hissing freight trains. Beyond them, smoky fires smoldered.

The Platte River ran deep there, beside that little park. The water as it rushed by smelled ancient and industrial, like the twilight in the middle of a dripping highway tunnel. There was something I liked in that water's funk, especially after a summer thunderstorm when Jasper leaped in to fetch a stick or chase a gaggle of bedraggled geese up into the sky.

The truth is, those days shimmer in my memory now like some foreign country whose language and customs I once knew as my own, a strange-familiar place I haven't visited in years. It's a dream that slips away as I blink and slowly waken.

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On August 2, 1980, Colleen and I were married in a sweeping field of tall grass in Red Rocks Park in the foothills outside Denver. A few days later we moved to rural Florida, and after only a year there,

we moved again—this time to Vermont--fueled by picturesque dreams and naive optimism. With a small inheritance I'd gotten from my grandmother, we started *Art Works,* a gallery and tiny small-press bookstore. We swam naked in the West River. We started to make friends. That first summer, life in Vermont felt potent with promise for the lives we yearned to live.

We'd made the right move, we thought; this place felt like home.

The summer idyll ended abruptly in September, with the crisis that nearly broke us individually and as a couple, when we lost our first baby in a botched home birth and Colleen nearly died after a brutal episiotomy. I did little to help except hug her and cry out and fumble around like someone drugged or half-asleep. To be fair, there was little I *could* do.

The whole tragedy seemed to unfold between one breath and another, amid soothing music, scented votive candles and chamomile tea. The future that had beckoned so sweetly was crushed in a matter of hours, irrevocably lost and torn asunder.

At the darkest moment, amid blood and shrieks and loss, we both felt Colleen's spirit rise up out of her body and hang above us in the dusky room. I felt her fading in my arms. Then I felt her pull herself back down into her body and come alive again. She did it by sheer force of will.

After the police came and took Audrey to the emergency room, and after the midwife ineptly stitched Colleen's wounds; after the doctor called to get our permission to stop resuscitation, we drove to the hospital in the grainy light of dawn. We stood in a tiny, brightly-lit room and tried to say goodbye to our beautiful baby, lying so still and perfect and cold.

I remember her hair and her delicate hands with their perfect little fingernails.

We scattered Audrey's ashes by a bend in the West River, in the tall grass there, near the beach where Colleen had so proudly displayed her pregnant belly when we'd sunned and swum that summer.

Colleen's physical wounds lasted for years; the emotional wounds, even more profound, became shared scar between us.

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The following summer, after I'd found a teaching job in Miami, we moved away quickly, letting our friends know only as we packed the truck. Somehow we felt we were letting them down. I remember our shared grief as we crossed the border into Massachusetts: we were leaving our first child there, in the tall grass and chilly river. We loved each other differently now. But we were immensely relieved to be leaving—even to move to a hot flat city best known in those days for its 50's-style glitzy hotels and its old people lined up in rocking chairs in the Art-Deco hotels in South Beach. It was a place we would never have imagined visiting even a few months earlier.

The actual place we moved to was still roiling from the Mariel Boatlift; it was the Miami of cocaine cartels and car hijackings. It was also the Miami of sunny beaches and turquoise waves, of Everglades and the ghosts of wilderness and panthers, where we could swim in the ocean year-round and drink wine under the stars in all seasons. That winter Cristo wrapped the slag islands in Biscayne Bay. Book stores and the avant-garde were beginning to emerge. The city was starting to come into its own. It was an interesting, vital, richly-messy place.

In Miami we put our lives together as individuals, as a couple, and eventually as a family; it was there we finally had medical insurance for Colleen's wounds to be re-sutured and repaired; it was there we had our children and found solid ground to walk on, in that sub-tropical landscape of porous limestone and sand, a teeming, tenuous and temporary ecosystem, one that will soon enough be lost to rising seas.

But that's a whole different story.

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The first time I walked into Colleen's house, way back when I hardly even knew her name, I was struck by the light and beauty of the rooms she lived in and by a number of just-completed silkscreen prints she had hung on a wire across a large airy room that looked out onto her overgrown back yard. They looked a little bit like a row of flags, so colorful and bright. Oddly enough, they also reminded me of the slaughterhouse across the street from my old apartment on West 15th street in Manhattan: slabs of naked white bodies hanging one after the other, moving slightly in the breeze made by enormous refrigeration fans.

One of the prints showed a group of racehorses running full-tilt toward a window behind which this woman I'd just met sat laughing in open abandon, obviously unaware of what was approaching. I'd never seen anything quite like it before. Its truth was deft and unflinching.

When I turned to compliment her, I found the room empty; she was outside running after her dog.

So I went out and waited for her on that concrete-slab front porch, aware of an unusual energy in the air, not sure yet how to embrace what I was feeling.

It seems to me now that there are periods in our lives when we lose ourselves in searching for who we truly are. Sometimes these periods are hazy in our memories; we were so befuddled by our search we didn't see the world around us, or else we were so blanked-out by grief or confusion our whole being resembled some sort of dark matter pulling all our experiences into its core.

We disappear into these bedrock experiences, and bedrock lets no light shine through.

Or maybe it's simply that we were so close to what was happening: the experience burned too clean to make smoke, or leave behind any ashes.

Maybe the moments we are most alive are in fact those moments we forget, moments when the light shines through us, moments when the air we breathe is alive, like a breeze that's blown for a thousand years. We take that air into our bodies and it makes us somehow new.

And new things by definition have no memories. They make themselves up as they go.

Now this woman is waving to me, laughing with her dog. She's holding a stick up and throwing it into the river. The dog bounds in to retrieve it. She's calling me over to join her at the river's edge, asking me if I want to take a walk with her, or maybe a bike ride to the art museum downtown. How about a hike in the mountains tomorrow? We could camp there and tell each other stories and secrets. We could lie on our backs, and look up at the stars.

Madari Pendás

Miss Pronounced

I have two names. Two ways. Two sounds that are linked with my being. One is far more commanding,
the other demure, secret, intimate. American. Cuban.

I take two names—one that is easy for power to pronounce. One that doesn't make them strain or wince.
I am like a stream that bends with the rocks and crags.

There are Madari and Maddie, two women who access the world
through different entrances. Maddie can go through the front door; Madari takes the side route.

My mother tells me I was almost named Ashley or Madison; how different that life would be.
Would Ashley or Madison get detained, and strip searched at the Portland airport?

My teachers call me what they can, what their mouths can afford
to pronounce.

You can't correct someone who does not think they're wrong. No, in fact,
they look at you as the aberration, the thing that needs correcting.

I try to decipher who I am by studying the composition of my names,
the way curators of art x-ray the layers of paint, seeing what was before.

One girl will decide the name is too hard to pronounce & call me *Mandarin*.
Before class, she'll also place a Clementine sticker on my arm, and grin.

It's the name on the attendance sheet that gives them pause
because I've learned to recognize the grimace that my name elicits.

In Chapter 17 of Genesis, Yahweh renames Abram to Abraham, and Sarai to Sarah.
Do we all have heavenly names? Names by which only our God calls us?

There's the name my mother calls me, so distinct from what I hear now.
I write my name for the first time on a brown paper bag, her hand on mine, guiding the shaky lines.

When she says it, I recall childhood, a life where I was all Spanish, and didn't need an alias.
How many of my choices have been out of a desire to ease my own life? Am I a coward?

My happiest memories also seem to come from childhood.
I miss when I was simply *mah-dah-ree, where I was only what my mother called me.*

In Cuba, they say the only freedom you have is in choosing your own name.
So you end up with marvelous creations: Yusimi, Yotuel, Usnavi, Usmail, Yunislaki, Decembre.

When Jacob wrestles an angel, he demands to know the spirit's name but is denied.
Instead, *he* is renamed Israel, meaning *he wrestles with God* (El).

I learn that *Madari* is also the name of a Sufi Muslim community in North India.
They practice dhikr, repeating the names of God in prayer.

I repeat my name, hoping to make it holy,
hoping I can be courageous and correct others when I'm renamed.

Inventions, mélanges, rearrangements, *un chiste* all the machinations of a people
with *trucos*, tricks, ways of getting by, experts at staying alive. An unkillable people.

I learn in college that my resume performs
much better when I put a sobriquet, Maddie, instead of *Madari*.

Maddie gets me through the door. She's polite, smiles, and has no traces of an accent.
She lives without needing to give explanations or to "earn" her keep in America.

They want to hear Maddie. It's a cute, curt, symmetrical word that won't bother anyone.
With Madari, they think of affirmative action; Maddie has earned her birthright.

In Scandinavian mythology, mythical beasts like Nix could be defeated by calling their names.
An encounter with the true self, a reckoning of identity, kills the monster.

The new pronunciation begins to overtake my mother's voice.
I don't remember when it first happens, but I start referring to myself as Maddie.

My teachers were my Ellis Island.

Ms. Hill marked it wrong when I put the accent mark in my last name.

Each time I added it, the infinitesimally small glyph above the 'a',
Her red pen slashed through it: *unacceptable*, *we don't use that here*.

If I am in *their* spaces, I should be grateful that I am tolerated, welcomed, permitted,
an example of fine assimilation.

I take my new name like I am Israel,
Baptized in the new faith of America, blessings uttered through clenched jaws.

A classmate will ask me if my name is green, confusing it with *Midori*,
And I'll try to imagine what green feels like, its hues and values, and say "yes."

In my family lore, there's the myth that my illegitimate grandmother
had no last name for five years; she was a suffix-less sound.

In my own private mind, as I speak to myself,
I call myself by their name, I repeat it in the privacy of my thoughts as truth.

My mother's voice is gone. I can't call it forth without conscious effort.
She'd look away when a friend called to ask for *Maddie*. "Who?" she asked.

In India, the Madaris are those who train monkeys to perform tricks on the street.
When I'm at dinner and cocktail parties, I expect the guests want a show, as well.

They are the truth makers, the ones that don't have accents or blistered hands,
I want to be like them in every way. I jettison all the parts of me that separate us.

I study their lips, mouths, maw, jaw, even the gaps in their gums,
to see if theirs are incapable of stretching in the way that my mother's mouth can.

But they gleefully, overweeningly pronounce Dostoevsky, Nabokov, Kierkegaard,
so it's a choice—maybe this is what it means to make a name for yourself.

Fame, I dream, allows one the courtesy of reclaiming a name, of making demands,
the liberty to speak without interruption, interjection, or correction.

In school, when I correct a famous writer on how to pronounce my name,
he gets upset as if having a name like mine is a crime.

In a graduate fiction class my professor will re-name my characters.
The lecture turns to "high art," and I refuse to believe names like mine don't belong.
My name is a mestizaje—
It is the marriage of the names of the women in my family.

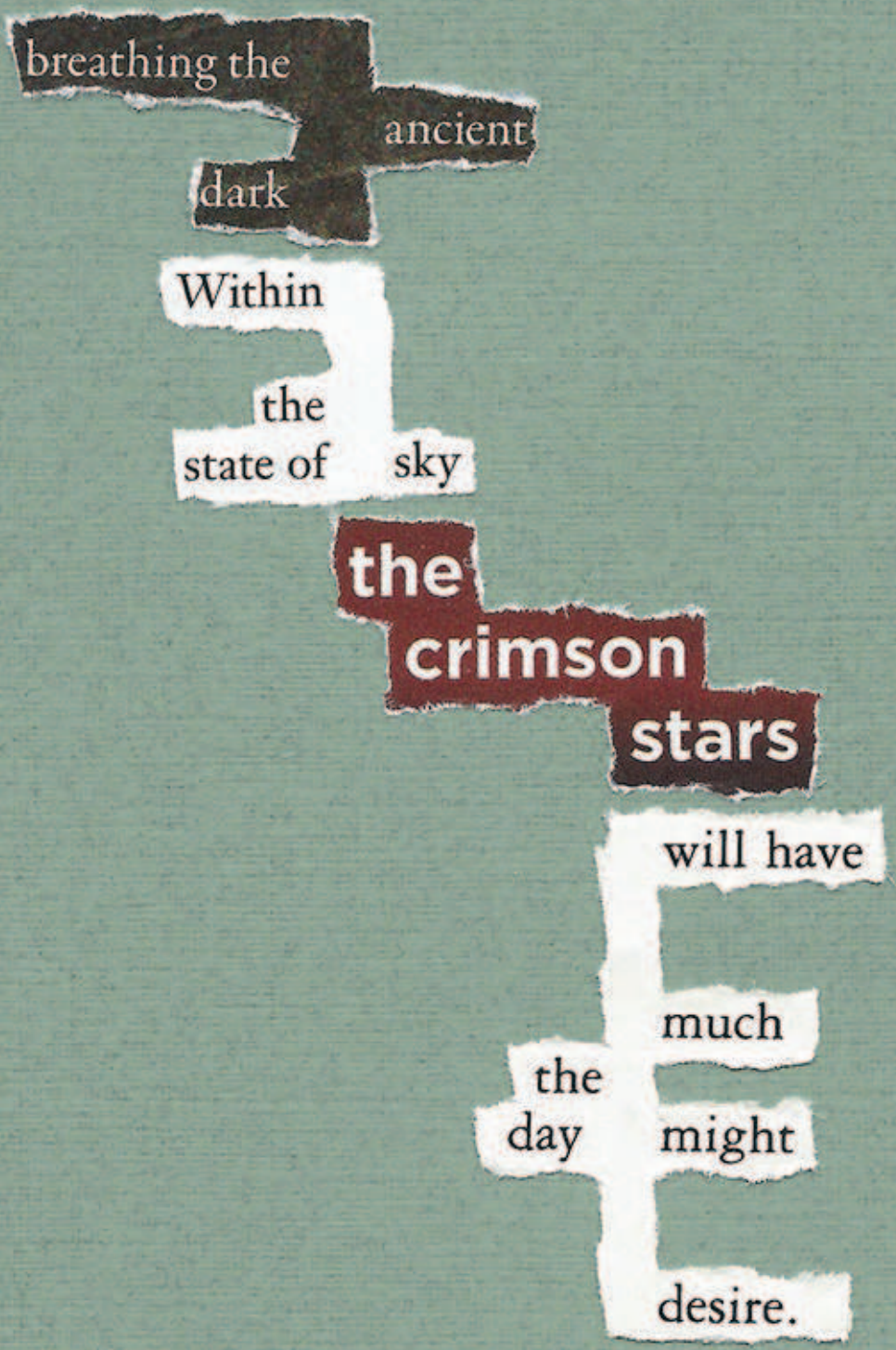
Margarita, my abuela, a mulatta who filled her home in El Vedado
with queers, brujeria, parties, and santeros dressed in all white.

Dania, my mother. A woman who could argue with a hurricane,
decked in gold, as if to convert herself into a living temple, a body of worship.

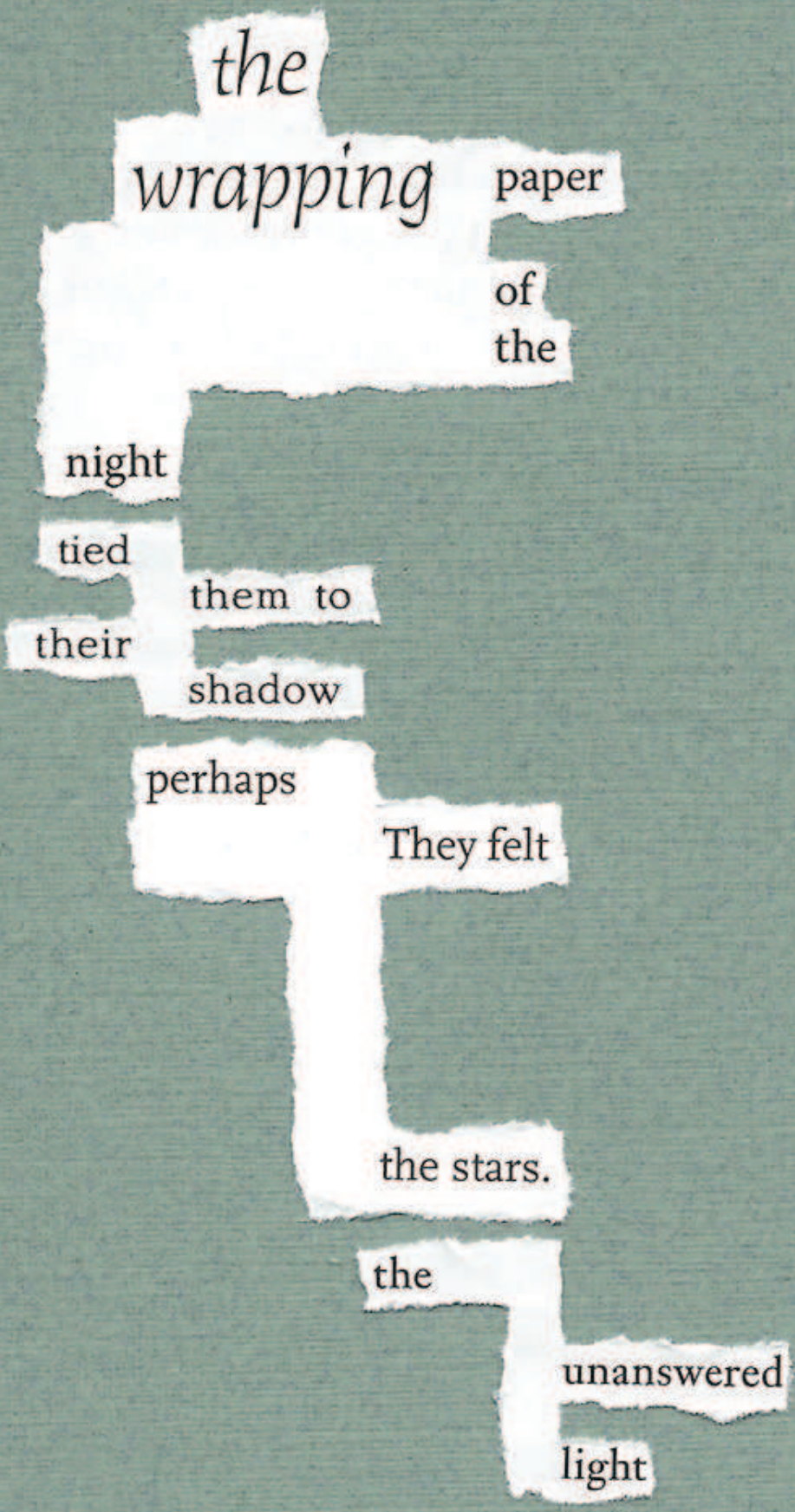
Rita, my other abuela, timid, small, soft spoken, a loving-chasing nymph.
She leaves one child behind, to get her two children off the island.

I will correct, honor these women, honor my culture,
And speak my name in my mother's voice.

Combined, *Madari*. I am the result of these women,
Rabid sounds, a throat clearing, a word mispronounced-- a mouth clarifying itself.



J.I. Kleinberg
Breathing



J.I. Kleinberg
The Wrapping Paper

Mary Beth Hines

Cold Moon

I carry the boy, two years heavy
to the street so he can see
the moon unencumbered
by the tangle of December trees.

He hikes himself up above my head
and reaches. The moon looks small, as if
it might fit, a dime, inside his hand.
He unleashes a flurry of words.

Ight means light. *High up* means too far off
to touch, like a *pain*—a plane absent
the ever-difficult letter L. He arches higher.
Peace means please. I shift and soothe.

He presses his head into my neck when I turn
to go inside. *Bye Moon*, he names and waves.
I follow suit—a hedge against the day he tires
of this—the clasp, stretch, yearn, plead, repeat.

Mary Beth Hines

The Window's Word

"…inmates spend all but an hour or two a day alone in a cell…with access to only a sliver of sunlight through a 4-inch by 42-inch window…"— Inside a 'Supermax' Cell, Wall Street Journal, 7/17/19

Guards rouse the inmate, shackle and lead him
from the 7x12 poured concrete box
through a dog run to a pen
for his hour of exercise.

I watch—long, thin eye of Colorado
sky—as three bored officers manhandle
the man-child. He has a name
but no one speaks it in the impassive quiet.

I blink, sunrise, when they haul him back,
clang shut two steel doors. He curls, fetal,
on the slab floor. In half-sleep, half-recalled
colors, seasons, places drift from his tongue—

Cholpon Ata, blue, Lake Issyk-Kul, snow-
covered mountains, and a throaty August flock
of demoiselle cranes preparing for flight
across the Himalayas. He gives them names.

Later in the day, I'll sliver sun for him,
stream forty remembered rays from beyond
the Rockies across his face, toilet, the floor,
rouse a stream of shadows in glint, in gray.

Mary Beth Hines

Taylor Interns at the Planetarium

The David Bowie Experience, January 2019

I load the universe,
pilot the ride—Ground
Control to Major Tom.

We lift off. Flash in a tin
can. Zigzag through stars.
Hover & sprint.

Starman behind the curtain.
I synchronize flare
to Fame and Fashion.

The old folks sway
to remembered blues. *Ooh*
& *aah* through my Milky Way.

I turn 'em to the right. Turn 'em
to the left. Whip through eighty
moons to Saturn.

We spin together. High
& fast. Swim with dolphins
through cosmic tie-dye.

Lazarus looms on a silver
screen. Reverse & slow.
Coast to Blackstar.

Crown of jewels on a grinning
skull. The gloaming dark's
a strung out buzz kill.

These ancient groupies deserve
a party. I whirl them home
to Golden Years.

Diane Lowell Wilder

Forecast

I'll blow you away,
that's what she said, her pointer finger
and thumb playfully gouging clouds
plucking cumulus like a dog gutting
a stunned teddy bear.

On our backs, lulled by
the images she forms then
tears, we share penumbras
of expectancies. Our chortles of
joy, as she reveals the peeks,
replaced by jolting surprise
as they disappear.

As her hand does its thing
— cock, trigger, spring —
midden billows spread.
Oh, It's a deer! She shoots again.
Now a passage of sparrows,
a swan boat, kegs of beer,
a murmuration of Black Friday shoppers

conjured as our teacher parses sentences
shimmering overhead. *Wait*, she cautions,
look again.

Barreling toward the ground, as inescapable
as the fust of my sweating pits, and the
moldering troposphere, I watch
what she has wrought upon us:

tumbling school busses
lunchboxes pouring out the windows
weeping sandwiches cascading.

How did she:
— make the clouds go square;
make the children disappear? —

Mario Loprete
Concrete Scuptures, Untitled

Mario Loprete
Concrete Scuptures, Untitled 2

Jason Okanlawon

I Come

I come not for glory or fame
But for realization
A need to unmask the self
The Id; the psyche of a being forgotten
I come not for friend or foe
But to stoke an ember into
A raging inferno, burning brightly
From within, I come
Fresh reins made for wild stallions
Cannot repress, diminish or vanquish
My need to epitomize the ideology
Of a will making a way
Through sandstorms, typhoons, and Jericho walls
I come
Over shards of glass and through fire
I come
My feet dance around obstacles
Like musical chairs made of stone
Yet I come
The tears in my eyes turn to flame
As my feet catch fire
Yet I come
When you see me, sing a prayer, write an ode to times past
For I will be your here, your now, and your after
Prepare yourself, as I come.

Joel Glickman

A Winter Night—Absent the Poet, Seamus Heaney

Heaney would have known how best
to write this piece but Heaney's gone,
and so, therefore, it falls to me

because I went late out of doors,
just past the crest of twelve o'clock
and saw a coyote trotting down

the walk, or so I thought it was,
and not somebody's dog let out
to roam and forage garbage cans.

It turned the corner down the block
and northward then by what was once
the Pentecostal Church but now

re-purposed as an agency
to feed and house the poor, and I
went back inside, because I could,

but still not knowing what I'd seen,
and took my evening pills and went
to bed. Mid-winter's beasts ran through

my head which I keep well propped up
these days to ease my sleep. I count,
though not obligatory sheep,

but endless coyotes in a strand,
invading February's dark,
picking along the alley ways

and side streets of this little town
which shares only its latitude
with Dublin, far across the Pond.

I guess it was a dog. I'd much
prefer this night had sung a song
more ancient—Grendel and his mom

now come to mind. I'd like to talk
with Heaney, while the moon's still out,
about all this, but Heaney's gone.

Sharon Tracey

There Was Nothing but Land; Not a Country at All

There was nothing but land; not a country at all,
but the material out of which countries are made.

—Willa Cather, My Antonia

Where no one thing or person
blocks the view—
where you can almost fold
the sky and land in two

the grasslands a sea—
the sky-wind blowing through—
Prairie is her name or call her
Plains if you prefer.

She goes about her modest business.
Needs no preacher man to wash
the sins away.

When I stepped off the bus
in Western Nebraska
I tried to take everything in.
The scope and prospect. The solace.

But nothing is simple.
Some things are too vast—
so I stood there with Prairie.
I shut my eyes and listened—

Alan Bern
Different Paralleling

Tamizh Ponni
Sunshine

Sharon Tracey

Midpoint: Lebanon, Kansas

Between two, always another.
Tunneling in, magnifying.
As you move closer, you move farther.

In. Out. In.

The car thumps, a heartbeat on concrete.
The head holds an invisible map.
Hands steer the heart.

About two miles northwest of town
You will find the historical marker,
The geographical center of a contiguous country.

Can sign the guest register and leave a note.
There's even a tiny white chapel.
Why are we drawn to the center of things?

The way forward is inside.
Or maybe it's outside on the next road.
Leaving town we can't help but look back—

Anchored to a mirage of terra firma,
Atoms of field-lake-cloud in different phases.
All of us matter, burning stars.

Susan DiRende
Fjord

Sharon Tracey

The Eallu

Time is not passing. Time is coming.
—Anders Oskal, Secretary-General of the Association of World Reindeer Herders

Oskal says, *we follow them;*
they don't follow us,
tundra or taiga,
the herders follow
the Eallu.
He reminds me that
light keeps coming
with the time
that is coming,
which I find reassuring
in a world of reindeer
being reindeer
and the herders following
as time keeps coming
to meet
the reindeer.

Tonight, I'm giving up
the habit of always
looking back,
of adding up
the past.
I'm dreaming of reindeer
and counting.

Tonight, the winter sky
seems brighter.
Three sisters—
Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka—
strung in a clique
of sparkling holes
in the belt of Orion
are sending their light
as time keeps coming
and the Eallu keep moving
to wherever it is
they are going,
the lichens growing
the permafrost thawing
the glaciers melting
as time keeps coming—

William Littlejohn-Oram

Simul Justus et Peccator

If the role of the wisemen
is to be royal in the face of God,

bringing gifts of some high price
to a babe in swaddling cloth,

then the director
was wrong to cast my hands

as the ones to present frankincense
to our baby doll savior

laid at the marble altar,
decorated in Christmas color felt,

super-glued cotton ball stars,
and gold-silver sequins.

I was sweaty, itching under the collar
of green fabric and purple ribbon

when the boy next to me
played his handheld game system,

using the great multitude
of heavenly host to shield him

from the expectant congregation.
So, I apologize—

for when the angels sang
in shrill voices, I wanted,

so badly, to take the plastic,
gold-glittered halo hanging

over baby doll Christ and snap it
in two as the church sang—*Alleluia*.

David Kern

Sistine

So there are portals, these niches I find
between sagebrush and the acacia trees,
that force me to get my head out the way
so I can get to where I need to be.

These passages, even in open air,
make sense to me—help keep my gaze
on the best places for my footfalls, lend
light, shade a sprinkle of vital splendor.

They cast fantastic ribbons on my path,
so I tumble ahead—a forest sprite—
until I pass through the low, modest door
then stand in the broader sanctuary

gazing at brushstrokes pulled into clouds
runnels mirroring the flight plans of gulls.

David Kern

My Favorite Sound

My favorite sound of all is my wife laughing
while talking with her family or a friend and
letting her voice carve away the distance,

so I hear it pass through a door as if to make
a joke of the idea of division or obstruction.
My favorite sound of all is my wife laughing

as I look up from my chores, these means I
craft to keep the world at bay; I'm inspired
by how her voice carves away the distance

between all of these contending points of view
until the sharp edges of each barb and insult
are awash in the joy produced by her laughing.

Sometimes when I'm alone in the wilderness
or pressing across miles obscured by windblown
sand, I use her voice to navigate the distance

between these points of desperation and home.
Here we break smiles under the miraculous
weightlessness that comes with her laughing,
cutting the distance between everyone she knows.

Cathy Porter

Colomba

I looked for you today, in the bottom
of a stack of old paperwork,
piles of facts and numbers to prove
I fulfilled my duty as guardian.
I traced your ghost upstairs
to the old bedroom, then back
down to see if you were in the kitchen,
cooking up the *colomba** I never
learned to make – your voice in
every room telling me that someday
I'll turn around and you'll be gone –
and how right you were -- as I still
look for you in every corner of this
house: in the back of a stuffed
closet, behind a door -- listen for
guidance as I search for all your
secrets in the blush of cold silence,
behind every nook and cranny only
the left behind are privileged to know.

**Colomba is traditional Italian Easter bread*

Cathy Porter

Health, Deteremined By

Wealth, can slide around the ledger,
In deficit or asset, cloud-lust or sun –

Updated as cash allows. Gold, or
The onset of rust,

As clear as night divides day;
the push back, a fire in the hole

Of cost versus ability. At midnight,
Someone is facing their soul –

And there isn't one star in the sky
that understands

I Must Say

My last poem will include everything –
asparagus, needles, sirens, hogs.
It will hold Paris and Venus equally.
Physics and philosophy will vie for honours,
my last poem containing a burning house
and smattering of incontinent gods.
You'll find a cat walking in snow
and bittersweet deathcap mushroom.
Tire irons. Vitamins. A selection of vinyl 45s.
There'll be plenty of the past in my last poem.
Lost loves. Mammoths. Missing silverware.
I'll be writing for a month of Sundays.
The eternal flame and belching cow –
all manner of chaos shall be routed.

Bruce McRae

Building A Better Scarecrow

Begin with a single stitch.
Take a switch of willow
and tie it to a stone.
Weave blades of sawgrass.
Add a crown of hawthorns
on a Sunday morning.

For eyes, two poison berries.
Various feathers for hair.
A mouth like a sinkhole.
Wear a dead man's jacket.

Next, enter the cornfield
at the height of August
and plant a fishbone
in the sweltering earth.
Imagine the upstart crows
and a valley of weather.
Place your arms into the air,
as if holding up the moon
or light's gracile embrace.
Put your mind under this cap.
Dream of thunder and harvests.
With your very first breath,
become someone.

Peacock

In the first month of the plague, the bird escapes a yard and all year long he pulls his dreamy gown along the streets.

The neighbors post their photos of the sightings. Here he is on Strongs. On Tivoli. At the Grand Canal, Marina side. At Redwood Av, Northstar, Mast, Victoria, Marine, and Dewey.

One neighbor writes to all the others: *Saw him crossing Venice Boulevard today. One car had to swerve. Came close to killing him. He's walking everywhere these days. Someone up there must be watching over him.*

The neighbors name him and wonder if there's others. Someone says she's seen the hens. No noise complaints, though they scream like newborns, peacocks.

A friend says, *Remember, what's it, "Amarcord"? Small Italian town. First snow of the season. Every face chin-up to catch the flakes. A fountain on the plaza, falling water frozen. And then, from nowhere, a peacock flies in! Lands right next to the fountain.. Fans his feathers like it's spring. In the movie, it means something.*

Later, online, someone says, *we need this beauty now.*

Someone else replies, *What beauty? He's a dirty bird. More crap to clean.*

Another: *He's beautiful, but he's not safe. There's psychos here who hacksaw bills off pelicans. Last week, someone drowned a clutch of ducklings at that park in Playa. People are insane and no one gives a shit.*

Another: *Wild dogs could kill him just as easy. Doesn't take a lunatic.*

Another: *You mean the homeless, right?*

Another: *The Council should just trap the bird. Palos Verdes traps its peacocks all the time and takes them to the Arboretum.*

And that's just what the Council does.

Later, when the plague year ends, the homebound talk of watching from their windows.

It was magical, a neighbor says.

Iridescent green and midnight blue: they want their moment back.

Marine Ct

A red light on Marine. No break in traffic.

Beyond the traffic light are beachside parking lots and bike paths. Beyond these, tractor-groomed sand. Then water — turquoise out to the white horizon.

What's beyond that edge? The Pillars of Hercules. The Garden of the Hesperides. The Slumbering Sun's Summer Palace.

There's not a wife in Venice who paces a widow-walk, straining her eyes towards a mainmast's return. Not one neighbor in a hundred knows a fishery from a bathtub.

We live in a beach town.

Ocean is a foreign country.

Driving west, we stop the car well short of drowning.

Michelle McMillan-Holifield

Camerawoman: On Ancestry

"We all see our own moon." – from The Lost Art of Reading Nature's Signs

So let's make up a 1700s historian—Gilderfeld—and give him all the qualities of a human tracker. And let's envision the civilization he inhabited and all his tracking mechanisms—dimpled mosses along the conveyor belt of a trail, the chalk of a muddy footprint leading to the reddish underworld where men who stab men in pubs are left to their own imaginings, half buried in darkish peat bogs and those men are untraceable after the bog swallows them whole as they (bound by the rope of some vengeful family member) watch the slow-fading moon die out. And let's say that Gilderfeld was healthy in most respects except the cold places of his heart. But let's just say he envisioned for his lineage a way to live forever, and let's say I signed up for ancestry.com and traced my heritage back to a woman, who traced herself back to a woman, who was traced back to a woman who was traced back, and so forth and so on, so that long story short, I'm Gilderfeld's great great great great grand-grand-grandniece. And let's just say I want to live forever, not literally in body, but I want a legacy. And let's say that Gilderfeld's papers were found in an old half-rotted trunk, and the beetles got to most of them so all that remains are half-declarations of these underworlds where men disappear and women have always been invisible. And let's just say, after reading those papers, that I am now of two minds – to leave a legacy and to shrink into the darkish wave of anonymity—invisibility has had its advantages—but we all know, in the 21st century, there is no such thing as *untraceable*. So let's just say I am a wildlife camerawoman for Nat Geo and let's say in my field research, I have found places where inhabitants are scarce enough one could die alone and let's just say that frightens and excites me. So say I have a list of places I want to go to die and say, one of them is Alaska, and one of them is home with my cameraman. Say when I die it's just me and the Lord. Say I am afraid of dying. Say I am frightened of the dark. Say the last video I take, while on my back, is of the moon, darkening into nothingness before my eyes, but say you don't see what I see. Say you see the moon's inhabitants, say you see the outline of their ancestor's footprints, say what a visionary camerawoman I was, say how brilliant and precise and infinite my camera. Say what a legacy.

Silas Plum
Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor Op. 64

Michelle McMillan-Holifield

Camerawoman: Crew Instructions (Every Town, Every Village)

"This is not about you. The point is the story the subjects tell about each other. The point is not how they react to your being among them, about your camera in their nests, their caves. And the point is never how you feel. Do not gasp at the ripped throats. Do not dare reach out with your smudged fingers to soothe the dehydrated cub who lost its mother in the sandstorm. Leave the body. It becomes food for something else. This is not about you. This is not about your silent wailing once the stars nudge into the sky. The point is the animals, their natural course of life, their inhuman rawness. This is not about you. Your rawness will get you killed. You are the job. If your heart gets in the way, if you get weary, if you step all over yourself to prevent a death, consider a new profession. Get the shot. Stay as long as it takes then get out. Kill your impulse to speak. Kill your impulse to hum. Learn to speak by blinking, with brisk nods and invisible turns. Your footprint, your breathing, the loose hair you leave as you shake yourself awake: this is carnage. The human condition is carnage. Do not bring you with you."

Richard Vyse
Man Mood, watercolor 14" x 17"

From the Sky

Why do you fall so slowly today?

My name is made of wax.
I love my father.
Who are you with a face of salt?

Call me Coin. Call me Breath.
I have always known your story.
Why do your fingers play air like a lute?

My grandfather invented music.
He dreams an electric tambourine.
Why is your mouth widening now?

It is time for you to splash and sink.
We have been here a thousand times.
Look: wind has torn a feather for your hair.

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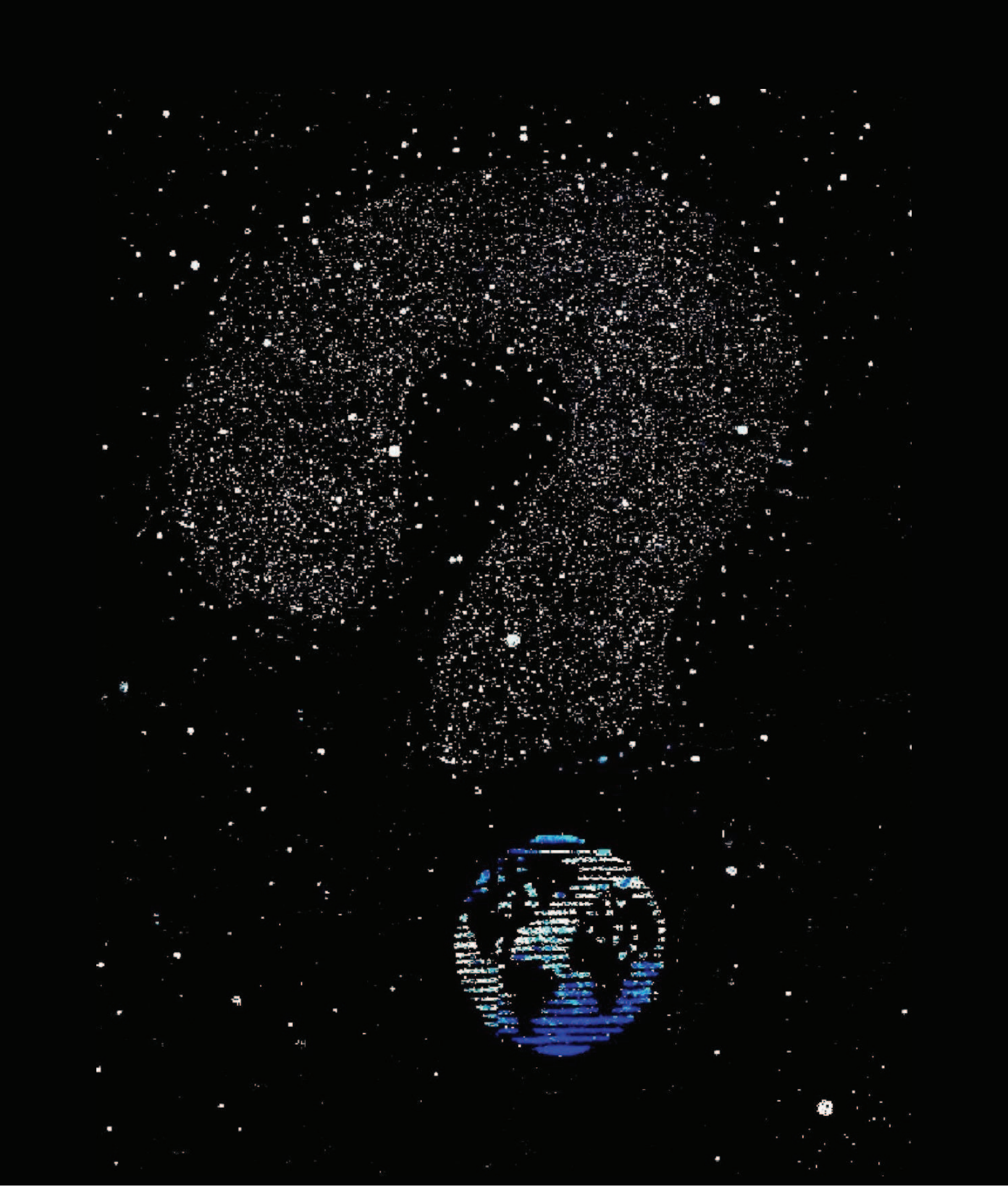


Fabio Sassi
The Future

Fabio Sassi
She Earth

Dan Sicoli

Scattered Showers

open sores combine

when we walk
our rhythm is
a thousand days of starlight

mercy
we bend at the knees
mercy
all this eternity unspent

you enlist
the weight of a forgotten promise
we bow at every tide

why is a pockmarked moon complacent?
beaten with sacred rocks
of indignation

in rain we cower
in wind we fold

this town
of water and debt

tomorrow
a long sigh
a lone traveler holding a sign
along the drenched highway

Andrew Miller

Heron

Her combed head studded
With rabbinical eyes,
She reads the mud's Midrash.
What tender connotations lie
Beneath the curl of a casual eddy,
Are hers to note.
The exegesis of ripples magnifies
There is always something deeper:
Trout or pollywog sculling
Beneath the flotsam emits a cabala of rings.
They rise beneath the dark page of the spring,
And as hers is the power of interpretation
And slow time,
The waters' lines are no mystery.
A hermeneutic beak selects
With nothing less than expertise.
So, sleek and wet as ganglia,
Incautious legs hang.
Hacked in her scissoring beak,
The frog bulges down a telescopic throat.

Ugly

Why is 'pretty' so underrated?
—Stevie Smith

Why is ugly so underrated?
In November the spent stream's mud takes
the gore of a man's step,
and it is ugly, the face that seems to form:

the mouth torn open by the boot sole,
fat lips pressed up and something like a nose
and wincing eyes dye-cast in the slime
and shut against themselves.

They will stay shut against themselves
and so stay ugly until the rain falls straight down.
This too is ugly,
this rain falling in grey rods

adding water to mire and stones,
sheeting the pasture with a lead lake,
interrupted here and there
by drowned manure.

And the worms are ugly.
They finger up through the drenched earth,
wet and dead-white:
torn between the air and drowning.

Yes, "torn," for the worms mind—
what thing would not mind—
scissored-death in the beaks of jackdaws,
those shoe-polish black birds,

who are, in fact, ugly: their molting backs
like graying newspaper, their wings
shiny as hair-dye in the overcast.
All this is ugly, it could be uglier.
No, it could not be uglier,
the eye diminishes becoming an eye
that does not tire of finding
but blunts from all this adding

of what's there to what else is there,
until ugly things stand carelessly
the one beside the others and so stay ugly
in these additions that botch October.

Erik Suchy
Dawn Escapes

Ellen Roberts Young

Cosmos

Amid worlds, galaxies, twelve
signs, four phases of the moon,
I am consumed by one relationship,
your Parkinson's the black hole
my galaxy is sucked into,
though unknown years
from its final swallowing.
*This the evening of our day*s,
sing the Yeomen of the Guard.
Our twilight is darker
than a total eclipse.

Jen Karetnick

Evaporating Villanelle for a Declining Pet

The old dog pants and twists in pain all night.
His spine degenerates, collapses.
A cold fog wants its fist to gain in might.

A wild hog, he shifts terrain to fight
this time that enervates, prolapses.
The old dog pants and twists in pain all night.

In bold font, his limbs arrange
in lines I can't interpret.
A cold fog wants its fist to gain

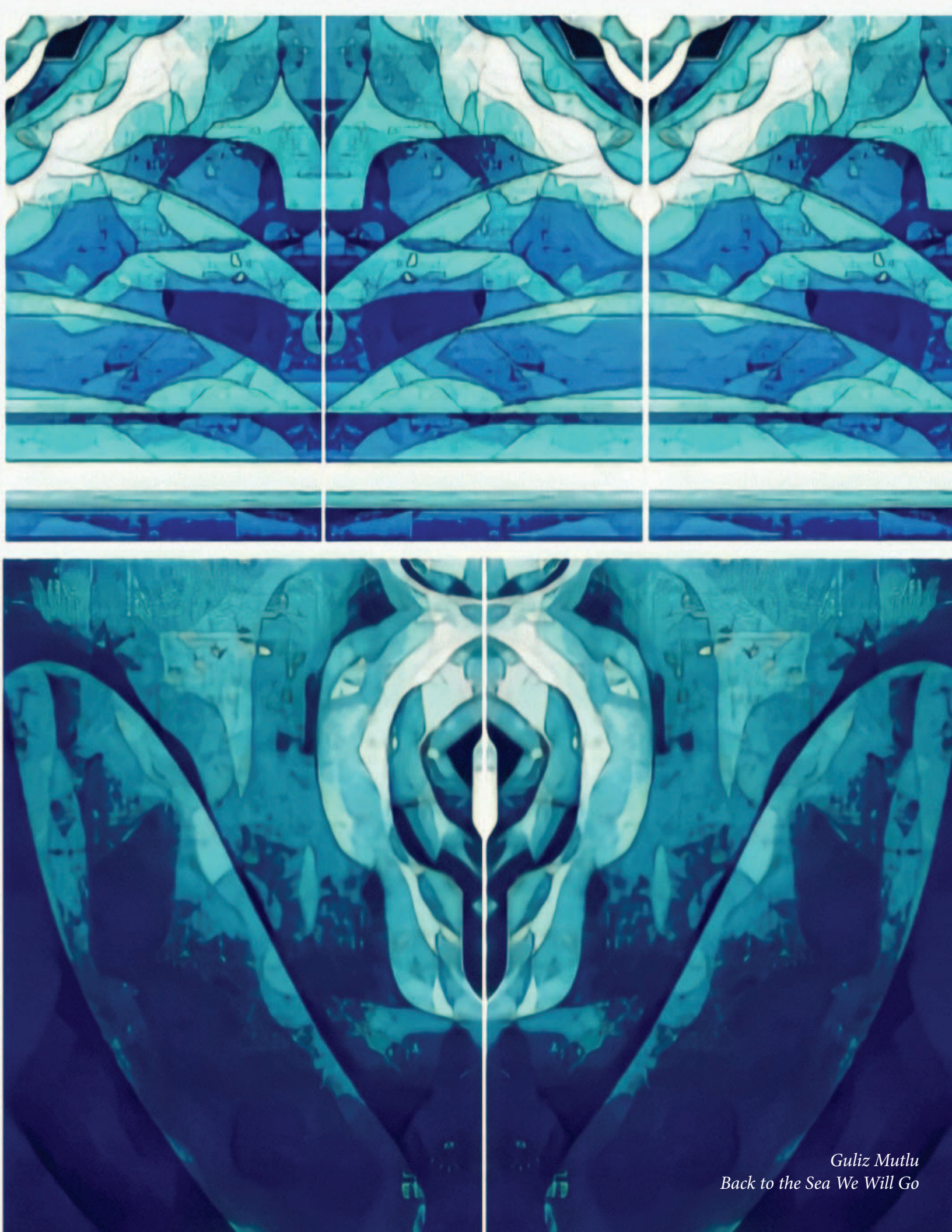
a hold, dig in. Its haunts are plain.
Each fine dent apparent,
the old dog pants and twists in pain.

The road clogs. Blank mist.
A crime without end,
a cold fog wants its fist

to find and dismiss.
To mine and break.
A cold fog wants.
The old dog pants.

On Track

A deer stops in the middle of a trail
to stare at a woman in the middle
of a trail. A woman in the middle
of a trail stops to stare back at the deer.
Neither steps aside. I have an extra
peanut butter sandwich, says the deer,
if you'd like. I have an extra handful
of acorns, says the woman, if you'd
like. Same color hair, same eyes,
same height, same flair. Years pass;
white birch and hobble bush grow
up around them as sunlight turns
the trail back into mountain. I was
on my way to the summit, says
the woman. I was on my way to
a career in finance, says the deer.



Guliz Mutlu
Back to the Sea We Will Go

A Little Hungry

A woman and a seal are alone on a beach.
The seal with its row of tiny triangular teeth.
The woman with her cold hands tucked
into sleeves. I'm waiting for fish to swim
up the canal, says the seal, what are you
waiting for? The woman has no idea what
she's waiting for. A warm fragrant breeze?
A washed up fifty dollar bill? I'm just walking,
says the woman. But you're not walking,
says the seal, you're just standing there.
I'm thinking then, says the woman, it's how
I explore—and ignore the buzz of bees
trying to pass on the right. I like looking
out at the sea because there's so little to see,
the woman says. That's because you don't
know where to look, says the seal. People
search for answers in deep space but oceans
remain a mystery, says the woman. They're
not a mystery to me, says the seal, it's you who
are strange, with your pondering and wandering.
The world is anxious and petty, says the woman.
The world is wet and frilled with kelp, says
the seal. How do you know where you are
when you surface? the woman asks the seal.
The same way I know where I am when I dive,
says the seal. You remind me of a puppy, says
the woman, I'd like to take you in my arms.
You remind me of a shark, says the seal, ready
to take me in your maw. I am a little hungry,
says the woman. Hunger is dope, says the seal.

Steven Ostrowski

Trees as Lovers (or, I Look Deeply There)

They make no bones about it,
their love. They tangle limbs
and sway full-bodied; they host
bright babbles of birds
just because they're pleased
to be up and out;
they live like wishes granted,
and they wave to the smallest
wild creatures with a breezy swish
of their loose-leafed hands.

*

Let's root ourselves
in wooden wisdom, babe,
here, amid pillars of bark
and papery green sheets painted
in cool shifts of dappling, knowing
their veins commune beneath us.
Let's slow down and breathe back
love to these towers of earth's faith
in itself. Let's walk in, deeper,

deeper,

deeper.

Poem for the Reader of this Poem

Thank you. I know you've put your destiny,
or your lunch, or the reading of some other poem,
maybe by someone you've actually heard of,
on hold for me.

I sure don't want to disappoint you. I myself
have kissed a thousand faces of disappointment.
I've skipped words, lines, stanzas
impatient for a payoff, only to skim
the dry lips of disappointment yet again.

Reader, I feel like telling you my secrets.
Secrets about my great inadequacy, my less-
than-noble reasons, why my eyes are closed.

But even more, I feel like asking you
to tell me one of yours, one of the ones
that most needs letting out after being so long held in
like breath under water that hurts
almost to death.
Let now come the secret-telling
that's like the saving gasp of air.

If it's easier, you can tell me like this, using my words
to count as yours. In fact, let's say it together:
I haven't loved enough.
I know selfishness like a sister.
If sin is real, I have been weighted to stone with it.

But reader, listen: I love you no matter what harm you've done.
I love you even if you've murdered a starfish.
I love you even if you've closed the door and shut the lights.
I love you in your thick rolling fog and on your lonely sand dune
and during those nights when you're shuttered on the other side
of every window against storms of your own sadness.

Reader, are you still here?
Many would be gone by now. Most would never have come.
Thank you for coming, staying. Thank you for the kindness
of the attention of your eyes, your mind, your heart.
Here we are, one line from the end,
and I miss you already.

Silas Plum
Joan

Kristy Webster-Gonzalez

Pulse

In memory of those who lost their lives to hate, June 12, 2016, the Pulse Nightclub Massacre

Today I Googled:
"Can I be a follower of Jesus
without being a Christian?"

Because the last time
I felt the Spirit
was in a gay club and I
swear I saw him,
--Yeshua, Messiah, Lamb of God--
in the blaze of neon lights,

I thought I heard his sermon
in the laughter of the drag queen
in purple heels, the men fused
together at the lips.

Because when I was fifteen,
I thought everyone loved like me:
beyond gender, beyond the sum
of our intimate parts.

I read the Gospels and came
to know the Son of God
like an older brother,
something real I could
lay my head on without
losing my mind.

But each time I let
a man push me
beneath the surface
of a Holy puddle,
my benevolent brother
disappeared.

And all I ever heard about sin
strangled him inside of
what was left of my
rising Exodus-

Until I felt the pulse of his love
among the queer and kindred,
the hunted and battered,
inside the last rainbow of our
mortal collapse.

God Loves Whores

When I asked too many questions
about Our God and Our Religion,
Mother sent me to my room,
assigned me another report about
a faithful woman from the Bible.

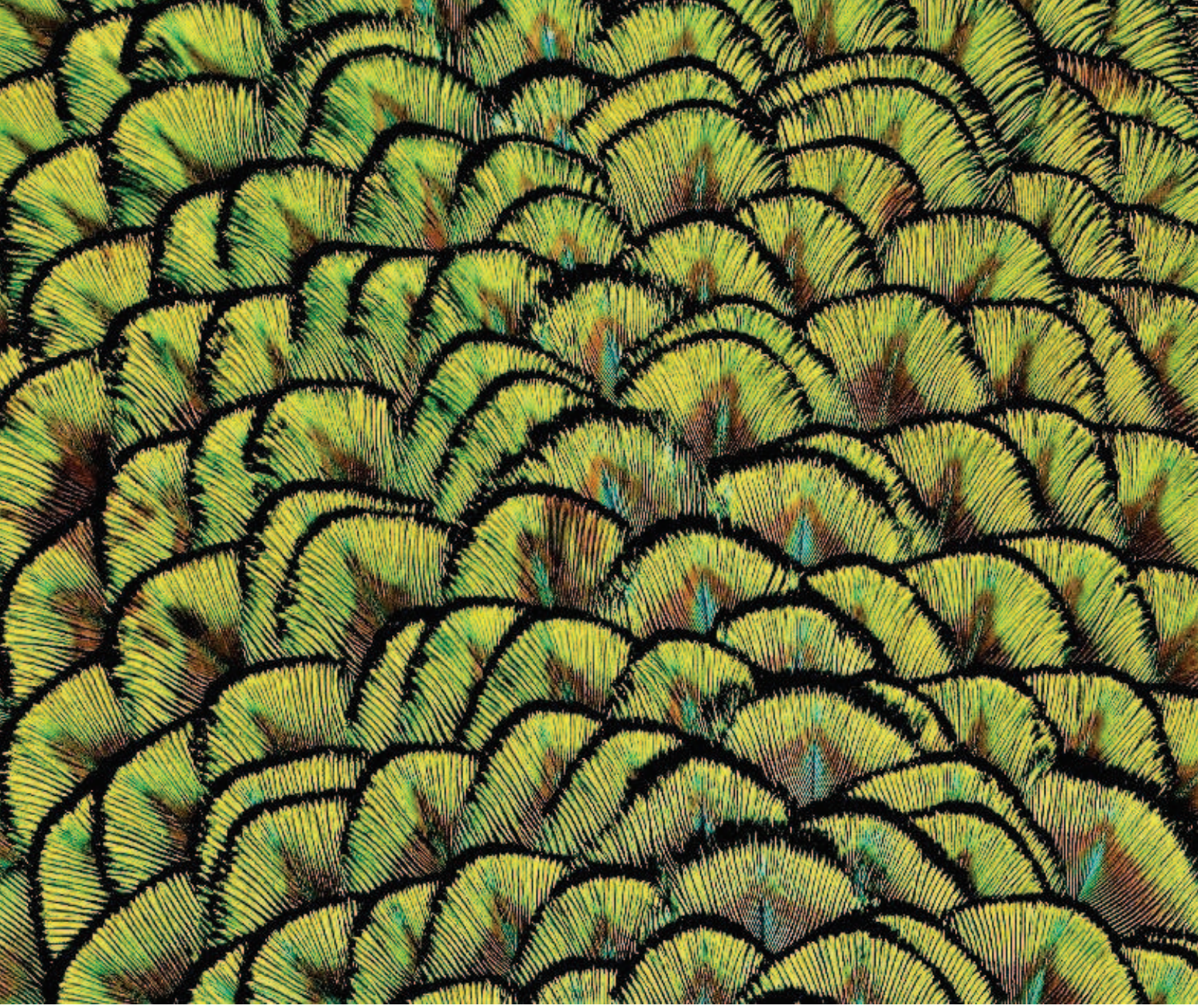
She asked for Esther,
and I delivered Queen Vashti.
She asked for Sarah, I lifted Jezebel
to my shoulders. She asked for Mother Mary,
I praised Delilah running with scissors.

The biggest mistake she ever made
was asking me to read about Rahab,
Beloved prostitute, loyal whore, the only pillar
deemed worthy of standing in the wake
of another one of Yahweh's tantrums.

Rahab I made a second skin.
Rahab I birthed and nursed and cast out
only to resuscitate her between my legs
under cover of my baptismal quilt,
the nauseating reminder of my twin bed,
hidden whoredoms, hidden saviors.

Once, Mother barged into my room
her face flushed, her eyes dark and angry,
demanding to know if I was a lesbian.
I shook my head, held my hands
behind my back.

Later, I sat there cross-legged
pressing two naked Barbies together,
their lips and hips and thighs,
Quietly singing to myself,
God loves a whore,
God loves whores, God loves me.



Mark Hurtubise
India

It's Okay

To kiss me here, outside this tawdry dive,
below those staggered city lights that shred
like neon whiskers into the night.
That plane has long since descended into mud.
Our drunk friends have shivered into the street
and it's just the two of us;
two question marks scribbled in some margin of a book;
two imponderables addicted to the slum.
Still, I like the newness of your skin,
the blue silhouette of summer in your eyes,
and when you touch me with the burden of your soft lips,
only the man across the street will turn
as he peddles away barefoot on his bike.

Cauliflower Boy

I scooped / my first son / out of the toilet /
with spaghetti tongs / placed him / in a colander /
to drain / before sealing him /
in a plastic / container / to refrigerate.

The doctor called him / a blighted ovary.
It brought to mind / the Irish famine /
caused by / a potato blight.

My son / was now / a root vegetable /
a carrot / a yam / a rutabaga / a turnip.

But he / appeared to me / to be /
a member of / the cruciferous family /
perhaps / a head of / cabbage.

If he grew up / he would become /
a walking boil / a benign tumor /
with arms / and legs.

He would eat / from a cauliflower patch /
I would plant / in my backyard.

On some mornings / when a fog / or mist /
shrouded my view / I would look out /
of my back window / and say / *What is / that?*
Is it / a head / of cauliflower?
Or is it / the head of / a young boy /
resting / on a bed / of leaves?

Bob Meszaros

Pandemic Mixed Metaphors

Day after day, month after month
I dreamt of streets lined with cast-off
face masks, of pictures of the pathogen
on television and computer screens.

Tonight, below the second floor
bathroom window, two white-tailed
deer are feeding on our soft touch
ornamental Japanese holly.

It is late at night, mid-winter
and bitter cold. The bathroom lights
are off. Moonlight on a recent snowfall
fills the house and yard with light.

Through the window curtains,
I watch the two deer browsing, their long
snouts grabbing and ripping each soft
green leaf from its stiff brown twig.

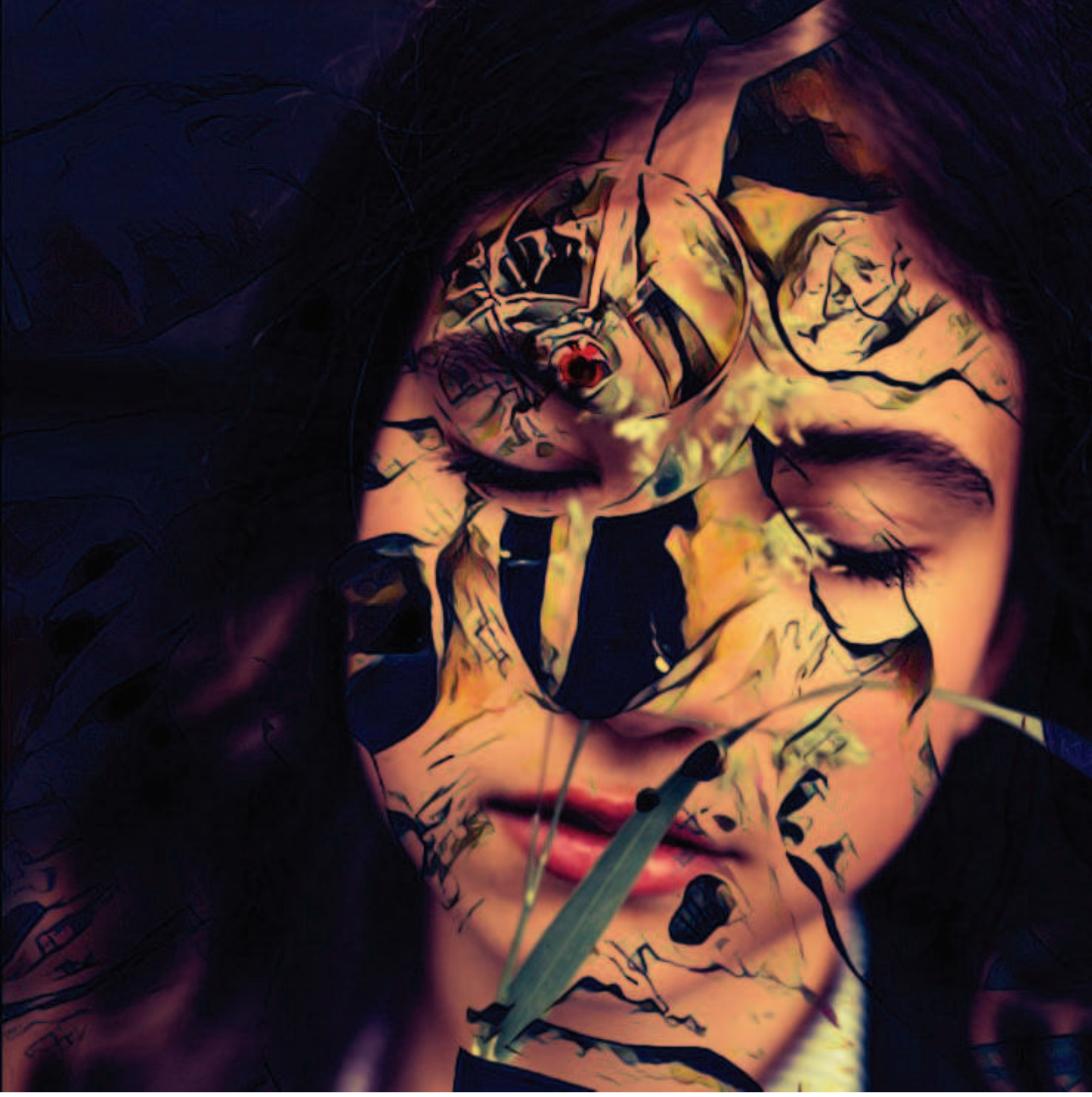
An opened window, a sudden
porchlight, and they are gone: two
wind-blown face masks bounding
through the land trust trees
littering the night.

Linda Logan

Taking A Fix

"All navigation involves knowing where you are and how to get where you want to be."
-Museum of Science, Boston

If only it were that easy
to find a course and stay on it
guided by the stars
and lesser instruments.
I've been weaving all my life
like the dazed circling of
a crash survivor.
Every time I fix my gaze
upon a lode star
—parent, husband, child—
I forget its brilliance is the last light
of a doused and darkening star.



Jim Zola
Untitled

Swans Fail to Take Flight

they are shackled,
in their way, by physics
and the structure
of river-built cities.
the bricks around
bodies, their wings
and their feathers
and ungainly feet.
like heaving potatoes
from a shopping cart
into a car-boot. rising
on the liffey, just to fall
when their strength
should bear up.
it's embarrassing,
frankly – this decision
they make. like easter,
and a bishop tripping
over his robe. swans fail
to take flight in great
numbers. I watch
their attempts
from my balcony:
how their wings
strike the water
like confident
drummers.
how they run at the bridges
and shy.

Signs Behind the Times

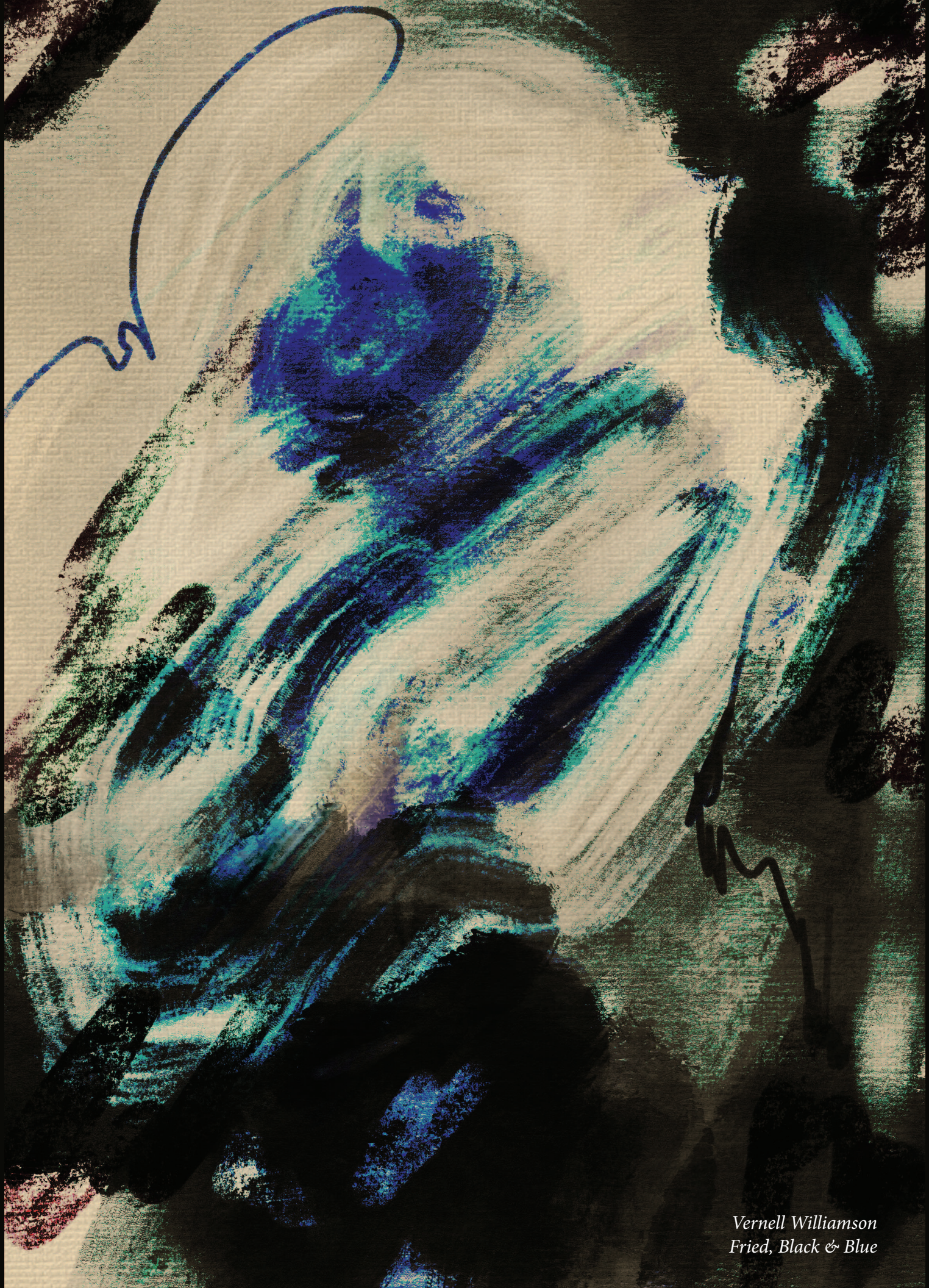
all the stones we have
        raised over millennia –

ziggurats, passage
        tombs, pyramids, megaliths –

in attempts to read our next
        chapters by the lights

above, when all of them speak
        to us from the past;

even the moon's pale advice
        arrives a second too late



Vernell Williamson
Fried, Black & Blue

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