

The background of the cover is an abstract, painterly composition. In the upper right, a person's face is partially visible, rendered in soft, blended colors. The rest of the image is filled with vertical, wavy lines and numerous small, dark, jellyfish-like shapes that appear to be floating or falling. The color palette is dominated by warm tones like orange, yellow, and red, with cooler blues and purples interspersed.

# Ai

m a g a z i n e

issue 12. spring 2020.

## IN THIS ISSUE

Ken Harrell  
Melissa Crim  
Mike McNamara  
+ many more



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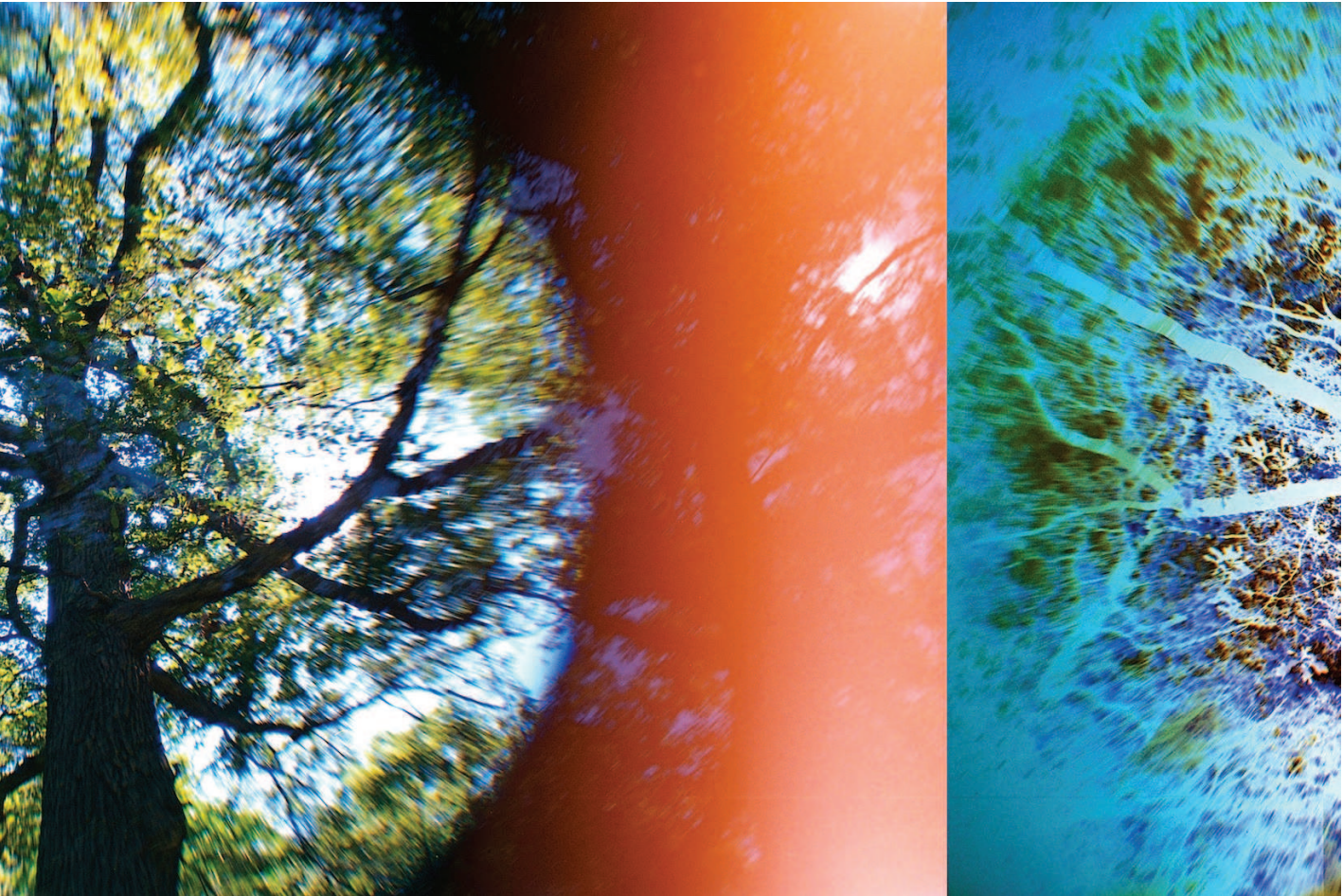
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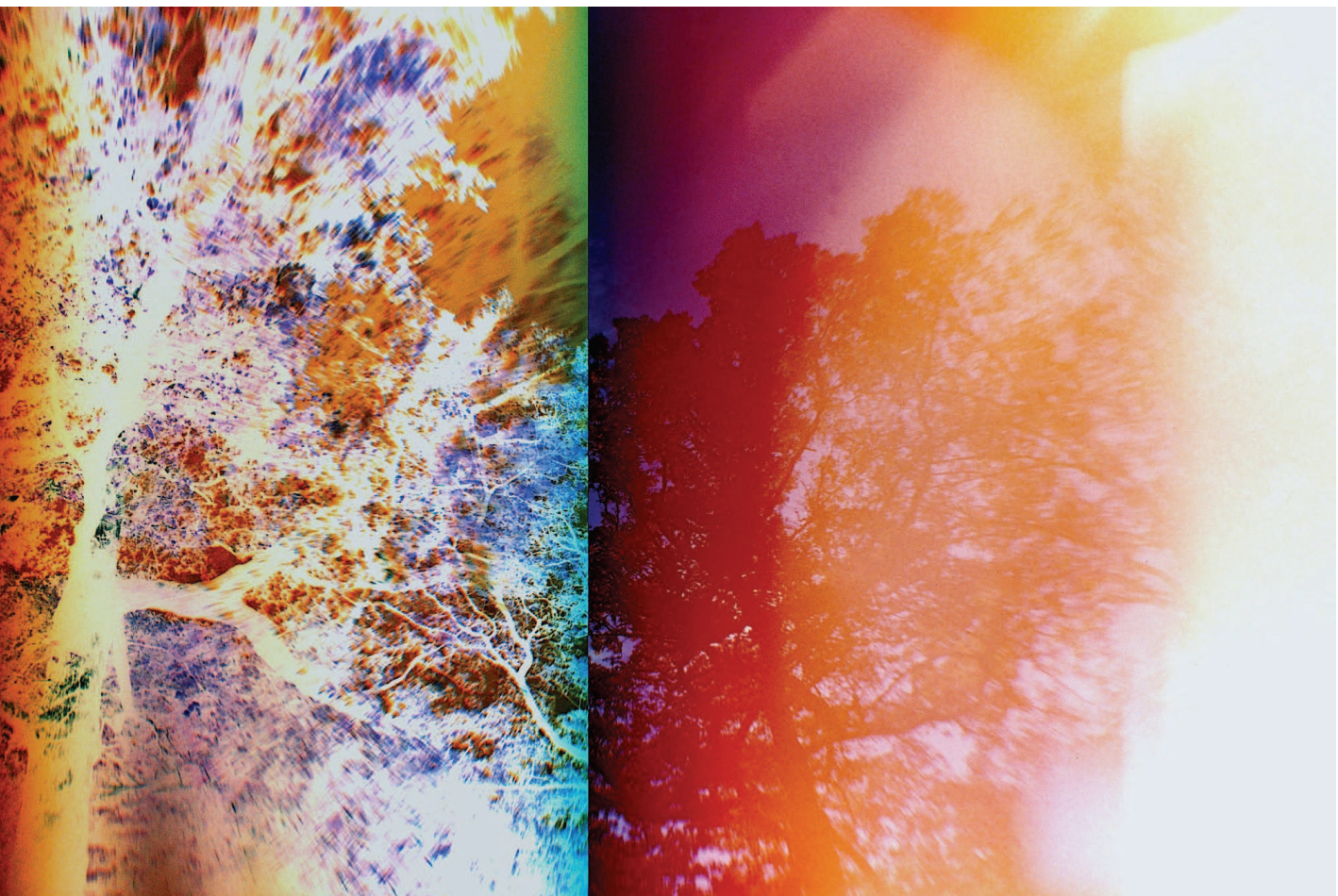
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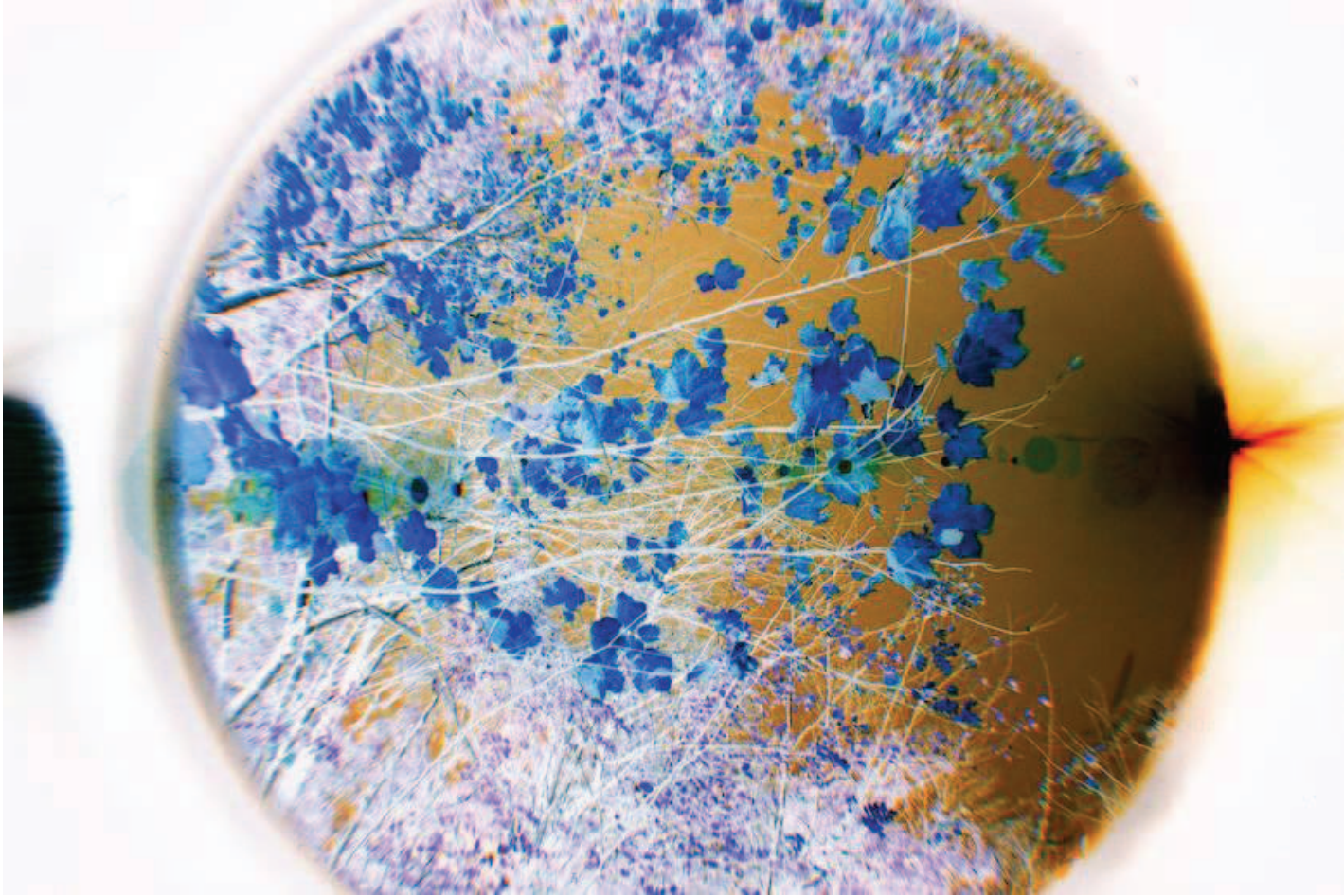


*Artist: Leah Oates, Transitory Space, Toronto, Canada, Don Valley #10, Color Photography, 2018-2019*

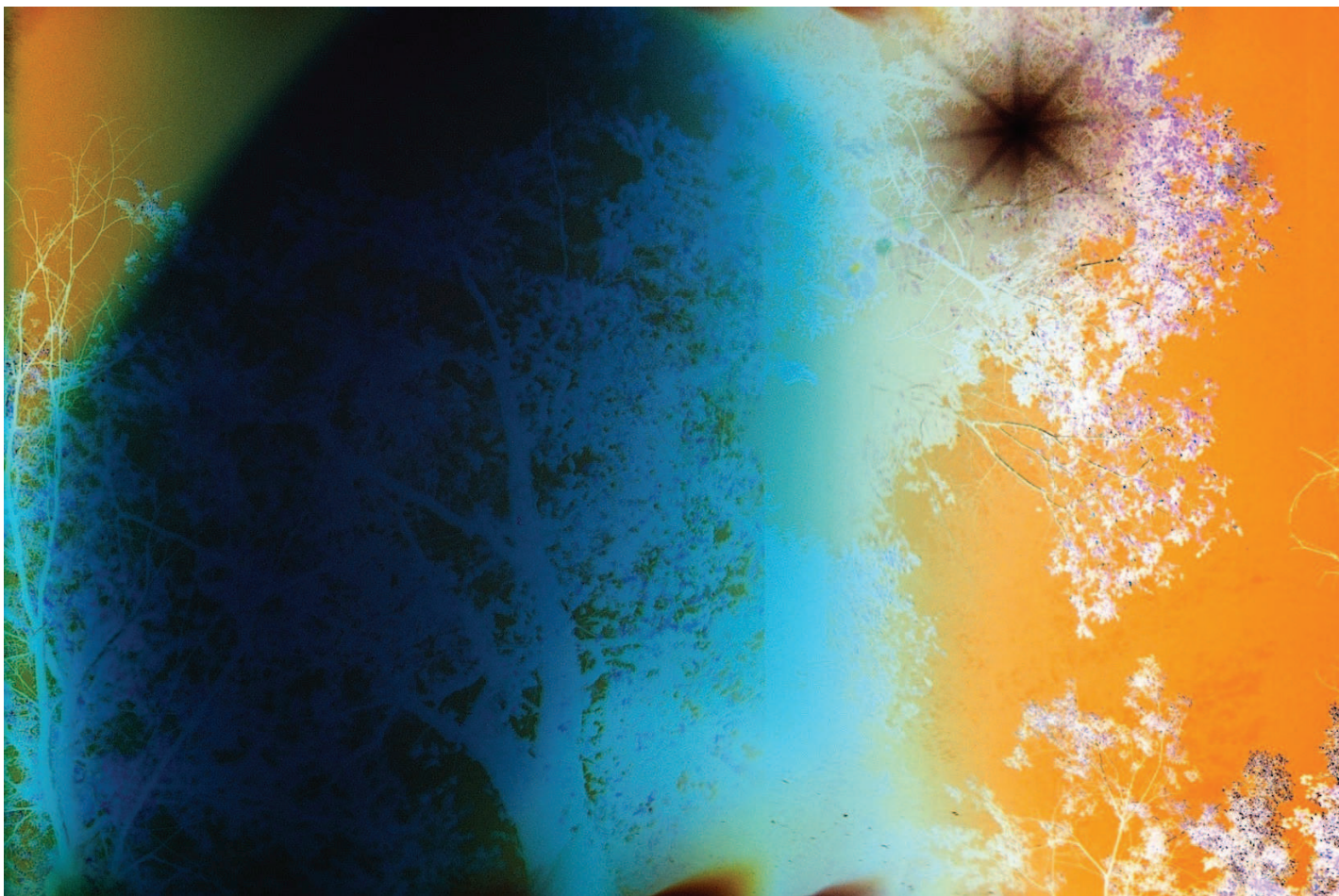


*Artist: Leah Oates, Transitory Space, Toronto, Canada, Don Valley # 15, Color Photography, 2018-2019*





*Artist: Leah Oates, Transitory Space, Toronto, Canada, Don Valley # 14, Color Photography, 2018-2019*



*Artist: Leah Oates, Transitory Space, Toronto, Canada, Don Valley # 2, Color Photography, 2018-2019*



# Artists & Authors

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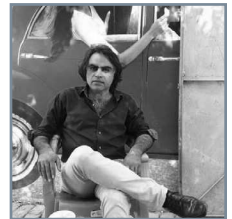
## Carolyn Adams

Carolyn Adams' poetry and art have appeared in *Pangolin Review*, *Willawaw Journal*, *Topology*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Skylark Review*, among others. She has been nominated for a Pushcart prize, as well as for Best of the Net, and was a finalist for 2013 Poet Laureate of the city of Houston, Texas. She is currently a staff editor for Mojave River Review. Having relocated from Houston, she lives in Beaverton, Oregon.



## Rizwan Akhtar

Rizwan Akhtar's debut collection of poems, *Lahore, I Am Coming* (2017), is published by Punjab University Press. He has published poems in well-established poetry magazines of the UK, US, India, Canada, and New Zealand. He was a part of the workshop on poetry with Derek Walcott at the University of Essex in 2010.



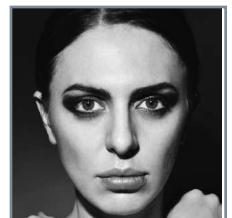
## Carol Alexander

Carol Alexander is the author of the poetry collections *Environments* (Dos Madres Press) and *Habitat Lost* (Cave Moon Press). Her chapbook *Bridal Veil Falls* is published by Flutter Press. Alexander's work can be found in various anthologies and journals--*Bluestem*, *The Common*, *Cumberland River Review*, *One*, *Poetrybay*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Third Wednesday*, and elsewhere.



## Karyna Aslanova

Karyna Aslanova is a Kyiv-born Ukrainian multimedia artist, director, and photographer. Karyna studied Theatre Directing at The National Academy of Government Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts, Kyiv, Ukraine and although photography is her principle medium, Karyna also uses video, painting and illustration, and poetry to further her exploration into a multitude of subjects. Karyna's art photography projects often use other-worldly imagery to reflect modern social issues, with a vague but familiar base note perceptible through a haze of the strange and incongruous.





# Artists & Authors

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## Paul Bluestein

Paul Bluestein is a physician (done practicing), a blues musician (still practicing) and a dedicated Scrabble player (yes, ZAX is a word). He lives in Connecticut with his wife and the two dogs who rescued him. When the Poetry Muse calls, he answers, even if it's during dinner.



## Randy Blythe

Randy Blythe lives in north Alabama. His first collection, *The Human Part*, was published in 2014 by FutureCycle Press. His poems have appeared in many little magazines, among them, *Tar River Poetry*, *Northwest Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Pleiades*.



## Carl Boon

Carl Boon is the author of the full-length collection *Places & Names: Poems* (The Nasiona Press, 2019). His poems have appeared in many journals and magazines, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Posit*, and *The Maine Review*. He received his Ph.D. in Twentieth-Century American Literature from Ohio University in 2007, and currently lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches courses in American culture and literature at Dokuz Eylül University.



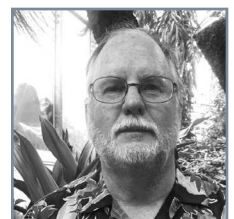
## Michael Brosnan

Michael Brosnan lives in Exeter, New Hampshire. His most recent poetry book is *The Sovereignty of the Accidental* (Harbor Mountain Press, 2017). He's also the author of *Against the Current*, a book on inner-city education, and serves as the senior editor for the website *Teaching While White*.



## Chris Bullard

Chris Bullard lives in Philadelphia, PA. He received his B.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from Wilkes University. Finishing Line Press published his poetry chapbook, *Leviathan*, in 2016 and Kattywompus Press published *High Pulp*, a collection of his flash fiction, in 2017. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Nimrod*, *Muse/A Journal*, *The Woven Tale*, *Red Coyote*, *Cutthroat* and *The Offbeat*.

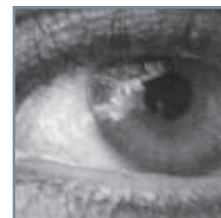


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## Renée Cohen

Renée Cohen is a freelance writer and artist from Canada. Her artwork has been exhibited in group and solo shows and has been featured in *Sonic Boom Journal India*, *3 Elements Review*, *The Spadina Literary Review*, *Flash Frontier New Zealand*, *Headlight 22 Anthology*, and *Montreal Writes*. In 2019 she won The Fieldstone Review's Banner Art Competition.



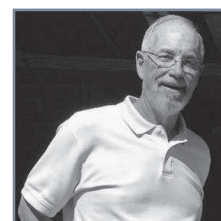
## Melissa Saner Crim

Melissa Saner Crim graduated from the University of Nebraska – Omaha in December of 2019 with a Bachelor's of Multidisciplinary Studies. She is currently on the Art staff for the University's literary journal, *13th Floor Magazine*. Melissa was a winner for Best Artist at the 2012 Rochester, New York Public Market's Artists' Row.



## Paul Dalmas

Paul Dalmas is a freelance writer who has made his living as a boilermaker's helper, a fry cook, and a high school English teacher. His work has been broadcast on KQED radio and published by *Newsweek*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Berkeley Daily Planet*, and *California Magazine*.



## Barbara Daniels

Barbara Daniels' book *Rose Fever* was published by WordTech Press. *Talk to the Lioness* is forthcoming from Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press. Daniels' poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. She received three fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.



*photo by Mark Hillringhouse*

## Holly Day

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *The Tampa Review*. Her newest nonfiction books are *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Tattoo FAQ*.



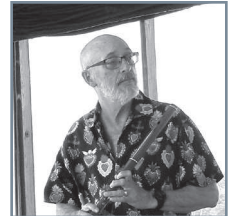


# Artists & Authors

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## E.J. Evans

E. J. Evans has contributed poetry and prose-poetry to *Poetry East*, *Confrontation*, *RHINO Poetry*, *Rattle*, *New Mexico Poetry Review* and many other journals. He is the author of the prose-poem collection *Conversations With the Horizon* (Box Turtle Press) and the chapbook *First Snow Coming* (Kattywompus Press).



## Melanie Faith

Melanie Faith is a poet, fictionist, photographer, editor, tutor, and professor. She holds an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. Her photography recently appeared in *Harbor Review* and *The Moving Force Journal*. Get her artwork at WritePathProductions at Etsy. Her latest book is *Photography for Writers* (Vine Leaves Press) <https://www.vineleavespress.com/photography-for-writers-by-melanie-faith.html>. Learn about her latest projects here: <https://www.melaniefaith.com/blog/> and [https://twitter.com/writer\\_faith](https://twitter.com/writer_faith).



## Jodie Filan

Jodie Filan is 28, from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the prairie of Canada. Self taught, she can be found at [www.jodieFilanArt.com](http://www.jodieFilanArt.com) or [jodiefilan@gmail.com](mailto:jodiefilan@gmail.com).



## Amy Haddad

Amy Haddad is a nurse and ethicist who teaches at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. Her poetry and short stories have been published in the *American Journal of Nursing*, *Janus Head*, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, *Touch*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and the anthologies *Between the Heart Beats* and *Intensive Care: More Poetry and Prose by Nurses*, both edited by Cortney Davis and Judy Schaefer, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa. She is the co-editor of *The Arduous Touch: Women's Voices in Health Care*, Purdue University Press.



## James Hanna

James Hanna recently retired from the San Francisco Probation Department, where he was assigned to the domestic violence and stalking unit. He has had over sixty story publications, many of which involve the criminal element. His books, three of which have won awards, are available on Amazon.



# Artists & Authors

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## Ken Harrell

Ken Harrell is a ceramic artist and illustrator residing in the Denver metro area. He has a Bachelor's degree in Art Studio with a concentration in Drawing and Illustration from St. Mary's College of Maryland and a second degree in Graphic Design from Front Range Community College. He has worked professionally as an illustrator and graphic designer, but has recently rediscovered his long lost love of clay.



## Richard Hedderman

Publishing credits include poems in *Rattle*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *CutBank*, *Chautauqua Literary Review*, *Kestrel*, *Skald* (Wales), *Blue Collar Review*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and the anthology *In a Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare* (University of Iowa Press). My latest book of poems, *Choosing a Stone*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.



## Kathleen Hellen

Kathleen Hellen is the author of *The Only Country was the Color of My Skin* (2018), the award-winning collection *Umberto's Night*, and two chapbooks, *The Girl Who Loved Mothra* and *Pentimento*. Nominated for two Pushcart prizes and Best of the Net, and featured on *Poetry Daily*, her poems are widely published. For more on Kathleen visit <https://www.kathleenhellen.com/>.



## Beth Horton

Beth Horton holds a degree in creative arts therapy and majored in health science at Niagara University, graduating in 2000. Beth began working with monochrome imagery in her late teens, but her love for art began as a small child, watching her father paint into the wee hours of the morning. Her father was a prolific abstract artist working mostly in acrylic. She still enjoys abstract art but prefers graphite pencil to acrylic layers. On weekends, she ventures out into the world around her to document the shape of her space in black and white.



## Estrella Del Valle, translated by Toshiya Kamei

Estrella del Valle, originally from Córdoba, Veracruz, now lives in El Paso, Texas. Her most recent poetry collection, *Calima: CAution LIve aniMAIs*, was published in 2018. Her poems have appeared in venues such as *Isacoustic*, *La Canasta*, and *Rogue Agent*.





# Artists & Authors

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## Sean Lause

Sean Lause is a professor of English at Rhodes State College. His poems have appeared in *The Minnesota Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal* and *Illuminations*. His latest book of poems is *Midwest Theodicy* (Taj Mahal Review, 2019).



## Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee is the author of two award-winning collections, *Intersection on Neptune* (The Poetry Press of Press Americana, 2019), winner of Prize Americana for Poetry 2018, and *On the Altar of Greece* (Gival Press, 2006), winner of the 2005 Gival Press Poetry Award. Her poetry has appeared in journals internationally. Her website is [www.donnajgelagotislee.com](http://www.donnajgelagotislee.com).



## D.S. Maolalai

D.S. Maolalai has been nominated four times for Best of the Net and three 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).



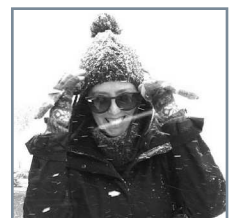
## Robin Michel

Robin Michel is a poet and writer whose work can be found in *Bird's Thumb*, *Rappahannock Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Cowboys & Cocktails*, *Poetry from the True Grit Saloon* and elsewhere. The founder of *Raven & Wren Press* (est. 2019), she lives in San Francisco and teaches English at a small international high school.



## Leah Oates

Leah Oates has a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design, an M.F.A. from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and is a Fulbright Fellow for graduate study at Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland. In 2019 Oates had work shown in the REVEAL Art Fair in Saratoga Springs, New York with Susan Eley Fine Art, and in Toronto 2019 a solo show at Black Cat Artspace, group shows at Propeller Gallery, Xpose 2019 at the Papermill Gallery, Arta Gallery, Neilson Park Creative Centre, Connections Gallery and was part of the 2019 SNAP Photography Auction. Oates has a solo show in spring 2020 at Wychwood Barns Community Gallery in Toronto.



# Artists & Authors

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## Steven Ostrowski

Steven Ostrowski is a poet, fiction writer, painter and teacher. His work appears widely in literary journals, magazines and anthologies. He is the author of five published chapbooks--four of poems and one of stories. He and his son Ben are authors of a full-length collaboration called *Penultimate Human Constellation*, published in 2018 by Tolsun Books. His chapbook, *After the Tate Modern*, won the 2017 Atlantic Road Prize and was published in 2018 by Island Verse Editions.



## James Penha

A native New Yorker, James Penha has lived for the past quarter-century in Indonesia. Nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry, his verse appeared in 2019 in *Headcase: LGBTQ Writers & Artists on Mental Health and Wellness* (Oxford UP), *Lovejets: Queer Male Poets on 200 years of Walt Whitman* (Squares and Rebels), and *What Remains: The Many Ways We Say Goodbye* (Gelles-Cole). His essays have appeared in *The New York Daily News* and *The New York Times*. Penha edits *The New Verse News*, an online journal of current-events poetry. Twitter: @JamesPenha



## Stephen Policoff

My first novel, *Beautiful Somewhere Else*, won the James Jones Award, and was published by Carroll & Graf in 2004. My essay, "Music Today?" won the Fish Short Memoir Award, and was published in *Fish Anthology 2012* (West Cork University Press, Ireland). My 2nd novel, *Come Away*, won the Dzanc Award, and was published by Dzanc Books in 2014. I am currently Clinical Professor of Writing in Global Liberal Studies at NYU.



## Bruce Robinson

Recent work by Bruce Robinson appears or is forthcoming in *Mobius*, *Fourth River/Tributaries*, *Pangyrus*, *Blueline*, *WritersResist*, *Spectrum*, *Common Ground*, and *The Maynard*. 'And still there are harps and whippets on the castled and pit-headed hills.'



## Rae Rozman

Rae Rozman is a middle school counselor in Austin, Texas. Her work, which often explores themes of queer love (romantic and platonic), brain injury, and education, has been published in several literary magazines and anthologies. You can find her on Instagram @mistress\_of\_mnemosyne sharing poems, book reviews, and entirely too many pictures of her two rescue bunnies.





# Artists & Authors

*in this issue*

## Rikki Santer

Rikki Santer's work has appeared in various publications including *Aji*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Poetry East*, *Margie*, *Hotel Amerika*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Slab*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *RHINO*, *Grimm*, *Slipstream*, *Midwest Review* and *The Main Street Rag*. Her seventh poetry collection, *In Pearl Broth*, was published this past spring by *Stubborn Mule Press*.



## Fabio Sassi

Fabio Sassi makes photos and acrylics. He uses tiny objects and discarded stuff. He really enjoys taking the everyday and ordinary and framing it in a different way. Fabio lives in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at [www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com](http://www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com).



## Robin Schauffler

Robin Schauffler is a writer and retired teacher based in Portland, Oregon. She has recently finished a memoir of three years. She and her husband lived and worked in Mexico, and several chapters have been published. She has contributed feature stories to *Street Roots* and her writing in various literary quarterlies has earned two Pushcart nominations.



## Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb

Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb's work has appeared in *About Place Journal*, *Front Range Review*, *Lullwater Review*, *AJN: American Journal of Nursing*, *Terrain.org*, and elsewhere, with work forthcoming in *Weber—The Contemporary West*, *Utopia Science Fiction*, and others. Her work received Honorable Mentions in 2016 from Port Yonder Press and Erbacce Press. She is co-founder of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit Native West Press.



## Daryl Scroggins

Daryl Scroggins has taught creative writing and literature at The University of Texas at Dallas and The University of North Texas. He now lives in Marfa, Texas. He is the author of *Winter Investments*, a collection of stories (Trilobite Press), and *This Is Not the Way We Came In*, a collection of flash fiction and a flash novel (Ravenna Press).



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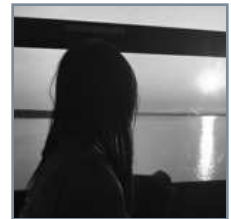
## Margarita Serafimova

Margarita Serafimova was a finalist for the Christopher Smart Prize 2019, Erbacce Press Prize 2019 and 2018, Summer Literary Seminars 2018 and 2019, Hammond House Prize 2018, Red Wheelbarrow Prize 2018, and Montreal Prize 2017. She has a chapbook, *A Surgery of A Star*, forthcoming by Staring Problem Press and three collections in Bulgarian. Her work appears in *LIT*, *Agenda Poetry*, *Poetry South*, *London Grip*, *Waxwing*, *A-Minor*, *Trafika Europe*, *Noble/ Gas*, *Obra/ Artifact*, *Great Weather for Media*, *Origins*, *Nixes Mate*, *Writing Disorder*, *Orbis*, and more. Visit: <https://www.facebook.com/MargaritaISerafimova/>.



## Dorsía Smith Silva

Dorsía Smith Silva is a Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Her poetry has been published in several journals and magazines in the United States and the Caribbean, including *Apple Valley Review*, *New Reader Magazine*, *Portland Review*, *Rock & Sling*, *Heartwood Literary Review*, *Stoneboat*, *Misfit Magazine*, *Nassau Review*, *Shot Glass*, *Moko Magazine*, and *POUI: Cave Hill Journal of Creative Writing*. She is also the editor of *Latina/Chicana Mothering* and the co-editor of six books.



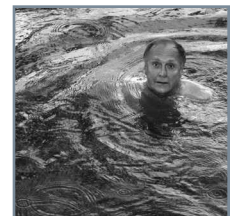
## Patty Somlo

Patty Somlo's books, *Hairway to Heaven Stories* (Cherry Castle Publishing), *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil), and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), have been Finalists in the International Book, Best Book, National Indie Excellence, American Fiction and Reader Views Literary Awards.



## Bill Wolak

Bill Wolak has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled *The Nakedness Defense* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, *Barfly Poetry Magazine*, *Pithead Chapel*, *The Wire's Dream*, *Thirteen Ways Magazine*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Rathalla Review*, *Typehouse Magazine*, and *Flare Magazine*.





# Artists & Authors

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## Nicole Wolverton

Nicole Wolverton is a Philadelphia-area writer with a B.A. in English from Temple University; she is currently pursuing a masters degree at the University of Pennsylvania. Her short fiction has been published at *Black Heart Magazine*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, and *Penduline*, among others. Bitingduck Press published her psychological thriller, *The Trajectory of Dreams*, in 2013.



## Judith Yarrow

Judith Yarrow has had short stories and poetry published in, among others, *Edge*, *Women's Words*, *Cicada*, *Bellowing Ark*, *New Mexico Humanities Review*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *Backbone*, and *Pilot Rock*, and has had poems included in the Washington State Poet Laureate's 2014 collection, *The Far Field*, and the 2017 collection *Washington 129*.



## Jim Zola

Jim Zola is a poet, photographer, children's librarian, husband, father and dedicated dog lover living in North Carolina. He has published poetry and photos in many journals. His book *What Glorious Possibilities* is available on Amazon. He has never danced with Ruby Keeler.



# Editor's Welcome

It was fall of 2013; I had just accepted a new administrative position at a university, and I was sitting in my office looking at data and graphics when my muse tapped me on the shoulder and whispered in my ear: wouldn't it be fun to start an online literary magazine? Where did that come from, I wondered. While my day job at that point involved quite a bit of number crunching, research, and meeting, the poet in me was longing for community, for a commercial free space where creative minds could meet to inspire one another.

I ended up quitting that job after 2 years. But thanks to hundreds, even thousands of bright, generous minds, *Aji Magazine* has steadily grown, our first issue going online in the fall of 2014, and each subsequent issue has improved in quality and in scope since then.

It seems like an excellent time to thank all the people who made this little magazine possible. Let me begin by thanking the first team, the people who, upon receiving my original email, didn't say (not a one) "I'm too busy" or "Another small magazine—really?" Katie Redfield, Lisa Redfield, Melissa Gish, John Garmon, Brian Dudak, Dayna Defeo, Lane Nevils, Patricia Gillikin, Betty Fleming Hendricks, and Marie Johnson, all of whom I admire and trust, every one of these people said, "Sure. I'm in!" Imagine being able to work with your own, hand-selected dream team, and every single member agrees to work solely on a volunteer basis. Although some have gotten busy with other projects and have moved on, without them, this magazine would never have been born.

Next, I need to extend gratitude to Louie Crew Clay, Professor Emeritus of English at Rutgers University. Clay kindly allowed us to post our first call for submissions on his Rutgers page. An open, generous spirit, a leader in so many ways and an accomplished poet as well, he didn't charge us any money. He didn't ask us for our credentials. We weren't taking money to read submissions, and that was good enough for him. Clay passed on in November of 2019, yet his legacy will live on indefinitely. If you're unfamiliar with his life and work, I encourage you to look him up. The world would be a better place if everyone were as genuine and as empathic as Clay. I never met him, and didn't know him personally, but I am just one of the countless people whose lives he changed by saying yes instead of no.

After a few years, when submissions and the reviewing load began to increase, we realized we were going to need additional help. We decided to place an ad on NewPages asking for volunteer reviewers for art, prose and poetry. To our amazement, several highly qualified people volunteered. It seemed too good to be true, and yet these people graciously followed through, reading hundreds of pages of work, carefully reviewing dozens and dozens of graphic images, writing careful commentary on the strengths and challenges of each piece reviewed. Erric Emerson, Erin Schalk, Gwen Mintz, William Nesbitt, and others have given countless hours of their own time to *Aji Magazine*. Without their careful reviews, the magazine would lack the balance and the objectivity and diversity that



# Editor's Welcome

have emerged as core values of our team. I am offering a heartfelt thanks to these reviewers who have consistently met deadlines and approached their work with admirable professionalism—and they are not being paid.

Finally, I want to thank every person who has submitted an article, poem, essay, story, or image to *Aji Magazine* and to every artist and writer who has been featured in an interview. The positive energy generated in your correspondence has lifted my spirits time and time again.

In *The Paris Review*, September 2015, David Orr wrote that readers misunderstand Robert Frost's most famous poem on hindsight, "The Road Not Taken." According to Orr, Frost intended for readers to see that when we say our choices have made "all the difference," we are placing way too much emphasis on our own actions, forgetting all the other uncontrollable factors that have lead us to where we are. When it comes to *Aji Magazine*, I'd have to agree. If we have achieved in terms of our own goals, it is only because of the kindness, the intelligence, the generosity, the creativity and the goodness of all of you. The future is unknown, but it has been my distinct honor and pleasure to work with each and every one of you, and I treasure every positive connection in this incredible network of writers, critics, and artists now more than ever before.



Erin O'Neill Armendarez  
Editor in Chief





# MAKING MONSTERS

## an interview with sculptor and illustrator Ken Harrell

**Erin O'Neill Armendarez (EAO):** Please tell us a little bit about yourself – where are you from? What is your background with art? How did you get started?

**Ken Harrell (KH):** I was born in Seoul, South Korea on a U.S. military base. As a child, I was always obsessed with drawing. I used to carry around a composition notebook filled with comic book characters and fantastical creatures. I made little dogs and animals out of polymer clay and sold them to other students and even to a couple of teachers. I was far more interested in my monsters and superheroes than I was with schoolwork.

After serious injuries ended my college football career, I transferred to St. Mary's College of Maryland and decided to pursue art. The art projects I worked on there honed my skills but weren't my preferred subject matter. I wanted to make fantastical creatures and to work on graphic novels, but my professors didn't consider that fine art. I graduated in 2006 with a BA focusing in illustration.

After graduating, I travelled for 8 years and worked odd jobs in 13 cities. I managed to get a second degree in graphic design and designed displays and packaging for a pet supplies company in Colorado. At some point, I realized I didn't really love art as my main source of income, at least not working on other people's projects to do so.



Through all my travels and career paths, I ended up working with data in the nonprofit sector in Denver, Colorado. I also managed to find the love of my life. My wife helped me get the Little Atrocities project started. I had not worked with clay since high school, and, as a birthday gift, she surprised me with a couple of months in a ceramic hand building class at the Art Students League of Denver. Five years later, here we are.

**EAO: What mediums do you work in?**

**KH:** Currently, I work mostly in clay. About 5 years ago I rediscovered my love of ceramic sculpture when taking an intro to hand building class at the Art Students League of Denver. Before that class, I was primarily a 2D artist doing mostly illustrations and paintings. I do still love to draw and use 2D media to come up with new ideas for sculptures.

**EAO: Can you describe the Little Atrocities project for our readers? How did you settle on this theme?**

**KH:** The Little Atrocities project is really a culmination of all the years of imagination and sketches of creatures and monsters. Even more so, it is me trying to tap back into that mentality I had when I was a child with a sketchbook that accompanied me everywhere.

**EAO: Where do you get your inspiration for each creature?**

**KH:** A lot of the creatures are recurring characters from drawings over the years. Sometimes, they are inspired by animals I see or imagine being merged with other animals. Sometimes, I just grab a lump of clay and start molding it until it looks like something; then, I just roll with it. My wife thinks all the monsters are inspired by our family boxer pup and her personality. I will admit some of the atrocities have traits that are inspired by the dog.

**EAO: Can you describe the process to create one of your sculptures? What materials do you use?**

**KH:** The pieces I consider to be the most successful are the ones that come from a clear idea I sketch out first. Whether it is fleshing out a creature I created a long time ago or putting a newly imagined idea onto paper, having the blueprint is the best way to start. Using the sketch as a guide, I start building the creature. Stoney White has been the clay I find works best



*Soulful Slugster*



*The Professor*



*Fat Tree Frog*



*Chicken Little*



*Little Hedgie*

for me. After the clay has dried out, it goes into the kiln for the bisque fire. Once the creature comes out of the kiln, I apply the first round of stain. Using combinations of different stain colors, I will usually complete 2 rounds of staining. Then I do a final firing after applying any glaze that is needed, usually just on the creature's eyes to make them shiny.

**EAO: How long do you typically spend creating a piece? How do you choose which colors and glazes to use?**

**KH:** It depends on the complexity and size of the piece. Every piece takes a few weeks because I use the kilns at the studio, and I am at the mercy of the firing schedule. The actual construction of the sculptures varies from about an hour for a simple, smaller piece to about 15 to 20 hours for a larger, more complex piece. Sometimes, I need additional time for sketching and brainstorming and then a few hours between rounds of stain and glaze.

**EAO: The eyes and gazes of your pieces are so expressive. What do you think is the key to creating work that is so effective in that way?**

**KH:** I hear about the monster eyes being expressive and having personality a lot from people. I think it is because I have a personal interaction with every creature as I am making it. The gaze and the relationship created are unique for every little atrocity.

**EAO: What are some of your creative habits or rituals for when you are blocked?**

**KH:** It always comes back to drawing. It's the first skill I trained in as an artist, and it's still what I am most comfortable with and what helps ground me when I am finding it hard to come up with new ideas. Ideally, I like to be sketching every day.

**EAO: What challenges have you encountered as an artist? How have you overcome them or moved past them?**

**KH:** I think all artists and creative people, myself included, find it challenging to put our work out there for the masses to consume. I still feel self-conscious about sharing every piece. There are some creatures that never get to see the light of day because I don't personally feel like they are up to my quality standards. I have been selling my artwork at summer art markets and online on my Etsy shop for the past couple of





*Sketch and in-process photo (left) and finished piece, Bug-eyed Boston (right)*

years. It has been a positive experience for me, especially when I've realized that a piece I viewed as a failure ended up as someone else's favorite. I guess I have overcome my reservations around sharing my art by forcing myself to just let go and let the viewers decide what is good or bad.

**EAO: What do you hope viewers will experience when looking at one of your finished pieces?**

**KH:** I hope that the people viewing my pieces can experience a little bit of what I am trying to experience when I create them. I hope they give people a sense of wonder and memories of child-like imagination. I also hope that the whimsical and at times peculiar creatures I create can bring a little happiness and make people smile. A big part of the reason I sell my work at art markets is to get to see people's reactions to the monsters I create. I feel a great sense of accomplishment when people of all ages view my work and smile or start laughing.



*Eyeball Dude #3*

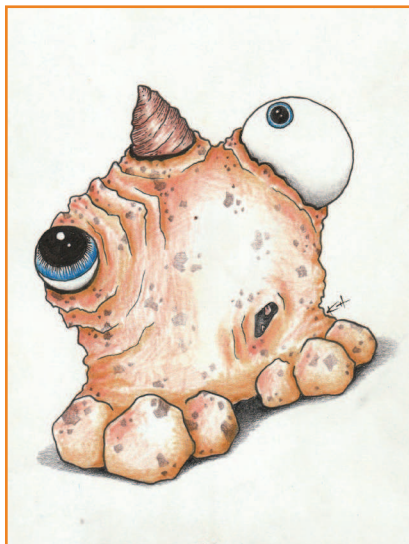
**EAO: What is one of your favorite pieces and why is that piece so special to you?**

**KH:** One of the first pieces I made and deemed a "Little Atrocity" is of an Eyeball Dude, a creature whose entire head is a single eyeball. I don't know if it is necessarily my favorite piece, but the character was originally created when I was very young and has been the subject of sketches for years, so it is definitely a significant character. Eyeball Dude #4 is currently in process. I guess others like eyeball dudes as well because I keep selling them and have to make their successors.

"Despite how challenging it can be at times, having an outlet to push the boundaries of creativity and to explore my imagination is something I wouldn't trade for anything else in the world."



*Evil bunny*



*Big Eye, Little Horn*

**EAO: How do you usually share your work with others?**

**KH:** I recently started sharing my process and completed work on Instagram. I also have an Etsy shop online where I sell Little Atrocities. In addition, I have had a booth at the ASLD Summer Art Market in Denver the last few years and have been looking into displaying my work in other art markets.

**EAO: Who are some of your mentors?**

**KH:** Several teachers and professors along the way have encouraged me and guided me towards becoming a better artist. Most recently I have been taking a hand building class at ASLD with a Denver-area professional artist, Dean Goss. He gives me just the right amount of instruction and has helped me to push boundaries with the work I create. He also has a solution and a home-made tool for any situation that might arise.

**EAO: What is the best advice you've ever been given?**

**KH:** In regards to art, probably to avoid custom commission pieces. I have done commission work and still do from time to time, but trying to create someone else's vision exactly how they imagine it is nearly impossible. I will take suggestions of what kind of creatures people would like to see and make them available to purchase for those who have requested without a formal commission. I think my best work is made from my own imagination and from working on my own timeline.

**EAO: What other artists inspire you?**

**KH:** I am inspired by other Instagram artists who create creatures and cartoons of the unimaginable. M.C. Escher has always been one of my favorite artists because of the way he was able to make viewers think about things in a different and often perplexing way. I have always appreciated the magical worlds Jim Henson, Stan Lee, and Dr. Seuss were able to create.

**EAO: What do you hope to accomplish in the future?**

**KH:** I want to continue to create. Whether that is continuing to make ceramic monsters for the next 30 years or not, who knows? I just always want to be pushing myself to produce more art.





*Manateal*



*Rhino lizard*



*Sea Otter*

**EAO: What is the most rewarding thing about being a fine artist?**

I think being able to express myself using a medium that others can relate to. Whether people like or don't like my work, they still have an opinion about it, and it makes them feel something. I am grateful that I am able to communicate with others this way. It really is something special that I try not to take for granted.

**EAO: What would you like to share with our readers about living a creative life?**

I guess that it is more challenging than most people probably believe. Having creative abilities and talent is only part of it. So much time and energy go into any creative process, and it's not always easy to set the stage. Sometimes, work does not come out the way it was intended, and sometimes, it gets broken in the kiln and you have to start all over. Despite how challenging it can be at times, having an outlet to push the boundaries of creativity and to explore my imagination is something I wouldn't trade for anything else in the world.



## FOLLOW KEN

### Instagram

@LittleAtrocities

### Etsy

<https://www.etsy.com/shop/LittleAtrocities>

### Website

<http://www.littleatrocities.com>





# All About Embroidery

## an interview with artist Melissa Crim



**Katie Redfield (KR):** Your embroidery work is really unique. Can you tell us a little bit about how you came to work in this style? Also, is embroidery the best description of the medium or is there a term you prefer?

**Melissa Crim (MC):** Thank you! I started working in embroidery around 15 years ago. I grew up in western NY watching a lot of Saturday morning cartoons and reading loads of comic books, Mad Magazine, and coffee table books about modern art. I grew to love drawing and painting, especially with vivid, unexpected colors, and I still draw and paint. This work just feels, to me, like an extension of all of those things.

I love embroidery because it's such a tactile art; I love the texture of the knotted and stitched cotton floss against the smoothness of the fabric. I love playing with textures and light and colors in unexpected ways, and embroidery is so great for that.

**KR:** You have a fun and seemingly very deliberate use of color. Do you plan the pieces out before you start stitching them or do you design as you go?

**MC:** I always have a direction for the design in mind, but I try to be as spontaneous as possible in my color choices. Most often I don't sketch my pieces out first, I just have an idea and start stitching. I do like



certain vivid color combinations, and so usually drift towards chaos over color choices that are more controlled and soothing. Mostly, I just look in my pile of threads, and reach for colors that jump out to me in the moment. There's always one that's kind of raising its stringy hand to be used!

**KR:** As a follow up to that, can you elaborate on your use of materials, including the selection of threads/yarns and the fabric you use as a backing?

**MC:** One thing I love to do is use fabric and threads that are either passed along to me, or picked up at estate sales. I see so much embroidery floss, fabric, buttons, lace, doilies and so on at estate sales, and it makes me think of the projects planned that didn't get to be completed. There's something soothing to me to be able to use those things to make something beautiful, so that they didn't go to waste. My superstitious side feels like someday I'll be a ghost who wants my art supplies picked up by someone who'll use them with the same enthusiasm!

Beyond that, I lean towards natural fabrics and cotton thread, although I play with that as well and will try stitching just about anything I can get my hands on. Lately, I like stacking multiple layers of cotton muslin and stitching through that, it creates a lot of fun dimples and interesting texture.



*Rise Up*



*She Was There*



“I don’t know what I’d do without the outlet of making art. It might sound cliché, but it’s true. As hard as life gets sometimes, and it can get very hard, I always have this.”



*What is in the Water?*



*Getting Ready*

### **KR: What inspires you to create?**

**MC:** Life. Everything does, I don’t know what I’d do without the outlet of making art. It might sound cliché, but it’s true. As hard as life gets sometimes, and it can get very hard, I always have this. Whether it’s embroidery or painting or doodling on napkins at breakfast in a diner, I’m almost constantly working on something.

### **KR: How do you find new inspiration to keep your work moving forward?**

**MC:** I’m always my own worst critic, I think, and that really pushes me to keep learning and growing in my art. Every time I finish a piece, I’m thinking about how I can make my next one better and more personally satisfying.

I never stop learning new stitches and embroidery techniques, as well. There’s just a never ending education out there in libraries and online for this type of art, and it’s one of the reasons I love it.

### **KR: What is your workflow like? Can you describe your workspace and any rituals you might have around creating?**

**MC:** Embroidery, by design, is so easy to set down and return to, which lends itself well to a busy life. I have a lot of things to juggle outside of making art, so my workflow is, really, taking moments that I have free and using them to stitch. Those breaks from embroidering help me refresh my eye, too. It might take me days, weeks, or a month or more to finish a piece, depending on the size.

I don’t like to be tied down to a work area, so I keep everything portable and stitch wherever I feel motivated to. I’ll pop in my headphones and listen to music, or just sit and soak in whatever’s going on around me. If I’m home and it’s nice outside, I love to stitch out under a tree in my yard, listening to the birds. I have a few canvas totes that I use for project bags, and an old Trapper Keeper (also from an estate sale) where I store design ideas and small scraps I’m using.



**KR: What challenges have you encountered as an artist? How have you overcome them or moved past them?**

**MC:** Worrying too much about marketability. That is an anchor to creativity, for me. I clear my mind of those kinds of thoughts when I'm working. If I don't, I always end up being dissatisfied with the result.

**KR: How do you share your work with others?**

**MC:** I share it on Facebook and Instagram, and I sometimes participate in art/craft fairs.

**KR: What is one of your favorite pieces and why? (If you didn't submit it for this issue and it is available, we'd love a copy to share in the magazine!)**

**MC:** My favorite piece is always whichever one I'm currently working on, really! I like to keep moving forward and trying new techniques, so I'm always most excited about what I'm stitching at the moment.

**KR: What do you hope to accomplish in the future?**

**MC:** I hope to learn more. I'm really excited about the idea of doing tapestry lately, I think that's next.

**What is the best advice you've ever been given as an artist?**

**MC:** Use whatever you have. My late Aunt Liane told me that once, a long time ago, when I was talking to her on the phone about being in a slump, not having the money for paints and so on. She said that was no reason not to do what I wanted, to use cardboard and ballpoint pens if that's what was laying around. I never got hung up on having "proper" supplies, after that.



A macro view reveals lovely little details.



*Microscopic, work in progress (above) and up close view of same piece (below)*





*Morning*

### **What other artists inspire you?**

**MC:** Some embroidery artists that I adore are Jenny Hart, Danielle Clough, Cayce Zavaglia, Alaina Varrone; there's so many more. I also love the work of comic artists like Jack Kirby, Wally Wood, Mike Allred and Charles Burns. I love lots of modern artists, especially in pop art and surrealism. The sculptures and paintings of Yayoi Kusama are inspiring to me. My brother, Eric Saner, is an excellent tattooer and his drawings and tattoos inspire me.

### **What feelings do you hope your work evokes in a viewer?**

**MC:** Happiness, I hope. At least a spark of it. I try to put a good energy in everything I do.

I also hope that it inspires more people to try embroidery, or to use whatever vocabulary of creativity they use to make something themselves.





*Lost at Sea*

### **What is the most rewarding thing about being a fine artist?**

**MC:** It might sound gauche, but the best moment for me as an artist was the first time I made a sale at an art event. It wasn't about the money, really. It was the feeling that my work was appreciated enough by a complete stranger that it was worth something to them, and it was a total thrill.

### **Is there any advice you'd like to give our readers interested in pursuing the creative arts?**

Dive in! Don't be afraid to make mistakes. The best way to learn and grow is to make plenty of mistakes. And more than anything, be authentic and true to yourself in anything you do. Whether it's embroidery, dancing, writing poetry or making music, whatever your passion is. Be true to yourself and don't get too hung up on how it'll be received. If you do what you truly love, your people will find you.



## **FOLLOW MELISSA:**

Instagram: @Seahorsepopsicle

Etsy: [www.etsy.com/shop/SeahorsePopsicles](http://www.etsy.com/shop/SeahorsePopsicles)



*Melissa Crim, 2020*

# POETRY SPOTLIGHT

## Review of Mike McNamara's *Dialling a Starless Past*

by Aji Magazine editor, Erin O'Neill Armendarez

In his poem “Metafuckingphysical,” Mike McNamara, musician and poet, poses a question for the academy. It’s a question that echoes a sentiment from Walt Whitman’s “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” where the poet, upon hearing “much applause in the lecture-room,” went outside “In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,/Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.”

McNamara boldly asks the question:

Has poetry been hijacked by academic sheaf shufflers?  
Is it only the well adjusted who have a tale to tell?  
An articulate description of tameness  
waned into meaningless sameness.  
Where is the irrational, (fuck the international),  
the mysterious, the occult,  
the esoteric and the mystical,  
the metafuckingphysical?  
The magic?

(Lines 14-22)



In “The Hard Man’s Grave Revisited,” where the narrator goes to visit the grave of a dead comrade, the same question is presented. Speaking to the dead man, the narrator speaks his heart and mind:

Since you went I’ve had a stint  
in the city university but didn’t stay.  
They liked those lines about you; sharp  
tutors talked of sympathy, underdogs, destiny.  
They’d have felt the same, of course,  
if they’d crossed you, drunk and bloodied  
on some misspent giro night.

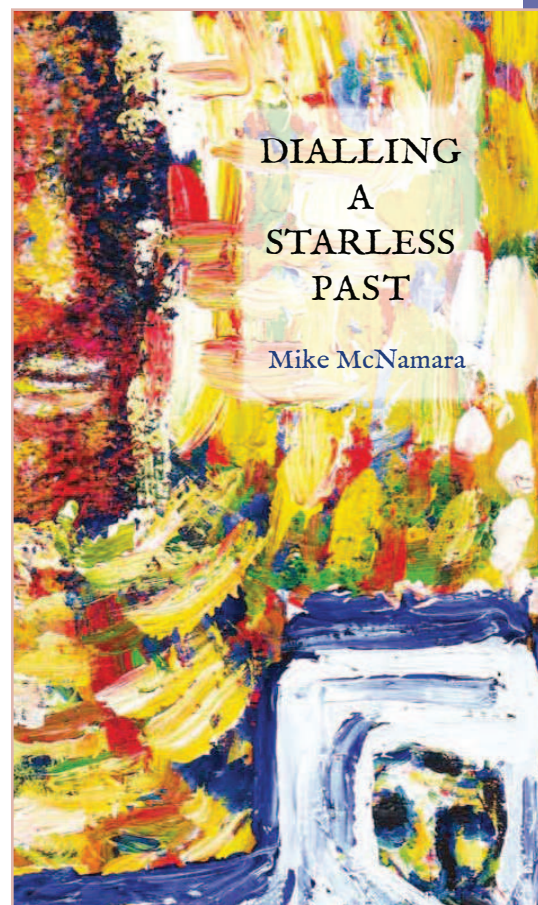
(Lines 20-27)

Apparently, some of McNamara’s experiences in the grove of Academe left him in doubt. Was it them, him, or both? Truth is, the academy of his time didn’t know what to make of Whitman. Chances are excellent he’d be like a bull in a china shop at your next wine and cheese party. But that doesn’t mean you can’t appreciate the brilliance in *Leaves of Grass* (I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel qualified to presume Whitman needed a good editor, as effusive as his lines may be—who *else* spanned both time and space to speak directly to you, dear reader?).

McNamara makes no pretension of refinement, whatever that is. Even so, he is the author of some undeniably beautiful lines.

If you decide to sojourn into the pages of *Dialling a Starless Past*—I hope you do—you will indeed find magic, and you will find in this work that traces the poet’s memories from childhood to a sort of final epiphany a journey of chaos, debauchery, madness, moments of beauty and transcendence that will cause you to both respect and admire the honesty and the empathy in McNamara’s reflections upon his life. While on that journey, you will encounter some lovely passages, tightly crafted poems of varied type. The lexicon from which McNamara draws is impressive; *Dialling a Starless Past* creates the convergence of a pantheon of voices, lost names and faces, stories of those that would have been dismissed or forgotten without this lyricist to bring them back to life like the shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave. And the character most carefully scrutinized seems to be himself.

The poem after which the collection was named, “Dialling a Starless Past,” begins with the question, “Were those November nights starlit? I only sought the darkness. . . .” Thus begins the narrator’s journey of a “boy who rarely looked above the street signs.” The poem ends, “Tonight, I would share my now starlit secrets with you/that shine beyond the bottled backstreets I once walked,/ but prison, grave and forty years divide us.” That forty years is bridged in the subsequent pages of the book, where the narrator, a boy “caught/ briefly in the dying clutch of common roots” (“Schooldays”, lines 29-30), begins an odyssey of confusion,



Cover art for *Dialling a Starless Past*

“ . . unread, untutored, a fermenting brew/of pop culture, wholly Roman lies, True Crime, Marvel comics,/ detention, pitch and toss, one night stands, acne, Parade, Cockade, amphetamines, barbituates [sic] and Spotlight bitter”(“Adrift in the Asylum,” lines 19-23).

This is no quick read—it takes time to unravel the lines, to consider the characters and situations encountered. In “Skinhead Girls,” the poet unflinchingly describes the young women who, like the young men they attract, end up too soon “marrying some straight backed lad/who’d eagerly drank himself to an early grave,/waistless and wasted, a dead ringer/for his old man” (lines 28-31). The starless world of this distant past is populated by cycles of naïve youth thoughtlessly hurtling themselves into an adult world that has no apparent moral order, a world in which they quickly drown, losing their original beauty and innocence all too quickly.

By the middle of the collection, the narrator is already looking back in regret, realizing that what has been lost can never be regained:

I could have read to you  
if I could have given some me to you  
if I could have wept like you  
if I could have lived to  
only be with you. . .  
what then might we have discovered?  
(“Missed,” lines 21-26)

The poem recalls the laughter of the narrator’s lover as “Church bell clear,/untinged with malice or smugness. . .” realizing that simple, youthful joy is gone forever.

Next, in “The Hard Man’s Grave Revisited,” the narrator visits the grave of a friend as he reaches the age at which that friend had passed on. He goes alone, telling his friend the news, and it is in poems like this that a reader gets a taste of the lyrical power of McNamara’s lines as the narrator speaks above the worn grave:

A god’s found Gail.  
I hear her pray for you and me,  
the living, dying, dead. The undead.  
Though spring’s come round again  
and ripe globes swell on young green trees  
our home still reeks of old neglect.  
I’m ageing in the flesh alone,  
as old as when the Christ went up on  
one fruitless, springtime tree.  
(lines 27-35)



The story is as old as time itself, but these lines are achingly exquisite, crafted carefully with alliteration, quiet rhyme, image that resonates perfectly with the mood of the poem. And the beauty of the poetry renders dignity to the lives lost, tossed into the hungry maw of a naturalistic culture that never seemed to notice the number of casualties it had carelessly spawned. Such lines answer the question posed in “Metafuckingphysical” with respect to who has a right to be called a poet, and what subjects might be suitable for immortalization in song or in print. These questions have already been definitively answered by other poets, of course. But it seems as if McNamara feels compelled to answer them for himself.

“They Buried Her Today The Girl Who Loved the Beatles and The Stones” offers a tender portrait of a girl who searched for something to believe in. “On the Brow of the George Street Bridge” eulogizes yet another girl lost too soon:

Early morning butchers  
from the market with  
coffee to go. Striped  
aprons and stall.

People who have things.

She always had that little princess smile  
but no king to cherish her.

Heroin was the only thing  
to love her.

On the brow of The George Street Bridge.  
Silence.

The poet seems to be eulogizing an entire generation. He possesses an intuition for the length and pace of a line, the type of sound; the repetition of sound often brings emphasis to the end of a line, and it is so quiet, a reader hardly notices it on the first reading. It’s that subtle, yet admirably effective.

A couple of the poems, like “Theater” and “I Lean on the Door Jamb,” offer simple images, impressions, the sound of a voice from a hill, a muffled response, barking dogs, to capture a moment’s glimmer before it’s lost in the long halls of memory forever. “Military Prisoner Cholchester.March-Nov. 1976” laments the fleeting nature of youth and its loss, “Insane for freedom/We made Gods from shadows/and worshipped. . . .” At the same time, the poem seems to acknowledge that the pursuits of youth were perhaps vain, misguided.

The poem “Father” is, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful in the collection. It reads like a silent, almost detached exorcism, one that releases the narrator from the dark cycle of the past:

Father

I saw him just once more,  
on that winter's night before  
he left with the secret dead on Inver Hill  
for one last October's long eclipse  
wherein shadows all stand still.  
Above dark Ireland's coast traced sea  
it seemed he almost noticed me,  
and, for a moment, looked to say. . .  
nothing. Raised a finger to his lips,  
turned, and softly ebbed away.

The pacing of the lines, the rhyme and repetition of sound—such a poem, such a poet, deserve our attention.

The book ends with the hopeful poem “This Wayward Way,” where the narrator has begun to realize the purpose of his path:

Walk me home now  
old Gods of the Broken Bottle,  
Kings, Jesters and Priests of The Sharing Rooms;  
walk me home through the by-ways  
of this sober world anticipating the guttural lies  
and dark denials of spirited slaves

In a million stars above Llandrindod tonight,  
in the open spaces, in the misty twilight  
where once I would look up at the skies  
and see nothing  
but the reflection of my eyes  
trapped in a vacuum.

I turn, humbled. Homeward bound.

(Lines 17-28)

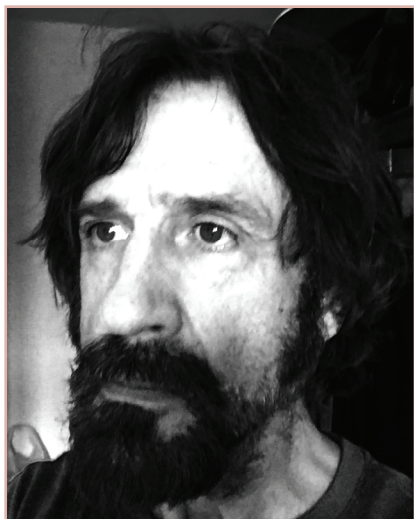


Gazing up at the stars he'd missed before, the narrator "awoke and knew:/I was meant to be/led home this wayward way."

What more could a reader expect from a book of poetry? There may be technical imperfections here or there, yet there is more complexity, more sophisticated word play, more lyricism than can easily be found in the pages of many a literary magazine, and so, I have come full circle.

I recommend you purchase your own copy of this book and read it carefully. It will challenge you to read aloud, to think carefully about each line; it will pull you into the starless past the author invoked in the early pages of the book. If the goal of poetry is to transcend ordinary experience, to somehow lift our minds and emotions beyond the everyday, then *Dialling a Starless Past* is certainly a masterful work of poetry in spite of its lack of "meaningless sameness." My opinion may not count for much, but for what it's worth, I believe this poet deserves his passport into academe, the place where the experts set the standards for everyone else.

He should be read, heard, appreciated, and most of all respected. If Mike McNamara is not a poet in the truest sense of the word, then Shakespeare "never writ, nor no man ever lov'd."



Mike McNamara was born in Ireland but lives in South Wales, UK. *Overhearing The Incoherent: Selected Poems* was published by Grevatt and Grevatt in 1997. His poetry has been read on the radio and published in dozens of magazines from *Acumen*, *Orbis*, *International Times*, *October Hill* and *The New Welsh Review to Tears in the Fence*, among others. He also had a selection of poems published in *The Pterodactyl's Wing* (Parthian, 2003). His ebook *This Transmission* was published by The Argotist Online (September, 2019). McNamara is a singer and published songwriter. His band Big Mac's Wholly Soul band have played all over the UK and have shared the bill with acts such as Billy Ocean, Van Morrison, Earth Wind & Fire, Sister Sledge, and many others.

## READ MORE FROM MIKE McNAMARA

<https://www.arenig.co.uk/product/dialling-a-starless-past-mike-mcnamara/>

<https://www.argotistonline.co.uk/THIS%20TRANSMISSION.pdf>

## *The Toughest Job*

When we all graduated from Berkeley in 1967, what came next was not grad school, not a job, and surely not the draft. What came next was the Peace Corps. All three of my roommates joined, and two of our girlfriends tagged along. We expected adventure and planned to change the world. We had a chance to avoid a pointless war in Vietnam, to make friends for America and to face exhilarating challenges in Jamaica, Guatemala, Niger and, for me, Kenya. It would be all the ads promised: The toughest job we'd ever love.

That is how I found myself in Nairobi. My attempt to avoid the Vietnam war with Conscientious Objector status was behind me. A stream of letters to my Orange County draft board had failed to convince anyone of my C.O. eligibility, and, while I was still determined that I would never be a soldier, I was not yet ready to abandon American citizenship for a life in Canada.

Still jet-lagged two days after my arrival, I made my way on a warm January morning from my seedy hotel to the Nanyuki Bus Station. I was dressed in freshly laundered Levis, immaculate desert boots and a yellow, button-down, short-sleeved shirt. In my wallet was a new Selective Service card guaranteeing an occupational deferment. I was eager to make my way up-country to the school where I would teach history. There, I expected, I would serve my nation without contributing to Cold War rancor or carrying an M-16. I would live as simply and peacefully as Thoreau. I would walk under the African sun with Africans at my side. I would teach, and my students, who otherwise would have no teacher, would learn. I would broaden their vistas, and they would broaden mine. I would make friends and spread the word that America was something other than a war-mongering imperialist superpower.

At the bus station, amid rusty Land Rovers and other battered vehicles of all description, I found a bush taxi heading a hundred miles north to Embu where the tarmac ended. There my headmaster would meet me and drive me the last twenty miles to my school in Siakago.

A Peace Corps administrator had told me that in Kenya taxis were the elegant way to travel--more reliable than hitch-hiking and far more comfortable than the huge, lumbering "chicken busses" that farmers used to carry livestock to market. The taxi that I found was an ancient Peugeot station wagon, a diesel that smelled of exhaust and spewed a dreary cloud of black smoke into the clear air. The back-seat accommodations were typical: four passengers jammed into a space meant for three. As the driver roped my luggage to the roof, I opened the door to squeeze myself on board.

That was the moment I first laid eyes on Joseph Odhiambo. He looked at me, frowned, then turned as if to measure the immense man in a business suit and the wide nun, rosary in hand, already crowding his seat. Ignoring his constricted plight, I squeezed myself into the space between him and the door, slammed it shut and merrily introduced myself.

"I'm Paul Dalmás. Good to meet you."

"I am Joseph Odhiambo," he replied. He took my hand in a limp grasp, a Western gesture of friendship Kenyan males practiced but did not understand.



“You’re heading for Embu? Why the trip?” I asked.

Joseph sighed and eyed me up and down. He shook his head, decided I looked harmless and began to unburdened himself.

“It is a mistake, a major mistake. They will have to correct things.”

He was about my age and wore a crisp white shirt and freshly pressed slacks that made me feel scruffy in my jeans. His eyes had the redness of a man who had done a lot of drinking, his speech the slow precision of someone who didn’t want to sound drunk.

“Four years I spent at the University of Moscow to complete my bachelors degree,” he continued. “Then two more years in New York City to receive a masters degree in political science from Columbia University.”

“Impressive,” I said.

“I return to my home in Kenya, and they assign me to a shabby bush school where the students don’t even have shoes. You must believe me, I am going to Embu only to refuse the posting and insist on an assignment worthy of my education.”

I had no idea how to respond. I was a foreigner, advised by the Peace Corps to stay away from local disputes. Should I sympathize with his indignation? Or should I tell him what I really thought? At his bush school, like the one I was assigned, he was likely to accomplish much more for his students than at a school that was a remnant of British rule, a colonial attempt to recreate Eton. Where was his sense of *harambee*, of cooperative Kenyan nationalism? Where was his awareness of his moment in history, his chance to make a difference for his young country? I was puzzled, a little shocked, and I decided his plight had nothing to do with me.

“Well, good luck. I hope things work out for you,” I said and turned away.

The taxi lurched out of the station, and I spent the trip watching the marvelous green landscape roll by. I craned for a glimpse of Mount Kenya and its snow-capped peaks at the equator. Tiny *shambas* with mud-and-thatch houses and plots of maize or cabbages dotted the hills. Trucks burdened with pineapples or sisal swayed past, and women in their fifties plodded along the roadside stooped under massive bundles of firewood. Shoeless children in school uniforms made their way home. The air smelled of wood-fire smoke and the red earth. It was all I had hoped for: exotic, exhilarating, inspiring.

When we got out of the taxi in Embu, Joseph plodded off to the district education office, and I met my headmaster as planned. He was a Roman Catholic priest, an Italian missionary, not the African I anticipated. Why, I wondered, was a European running an African school? Where was the new Kenya? Father Romano--paunchy, sun-tanned, gray-haired and balding--wore a frayed white cassock covered with the same red dust that was to coat all my possessions for the remainder of my stay. My Catholic upbringing, long abandoned, informed me that this was a man who prayed daily, believed he could turn bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood, and devoted his life to spreading God’s word--all endeavors in which I had no interest whatsoever. But he exuded good will.

“Welcome!” he exclaimed with a rich Italian accent. “I’m so glad you’re here!” I threw my bags into the back of his car, and we rumbled off down the rutted dirt road to Siakago.

We bounced along and we talked. Father Romano had been in Kenya for thirty years. He said that he missed espresso and real stone-ground polenta but had no plans to return to Italy. He loved Africa and he loved his new front-wheel-drive car (another Peugeot, which, he insisted, provided excellent traction through the deep mud of the long rains), but he hardly ever drove to Nairobi. And he loved Peace Corps volunteers.

“They never complain about anything,” he said. “They’re happy to be here and just do their job.”

An hour and a half later we came around a curve and I arrived at my new home. Siakago Secondary School was an assortment of ill-matched structures just down the hill from the Catholic Church. Its two low classroom buildings were cheaply constructed of cinder blocks. The two dormitories, kitchen and refectory were mud-walled, patched and crumbling. Beyond them stood a series of ramshackle showers and a half-dozen latrines that served two hundred students. It was a boys’ boarding school, but it was not populated with the wide-eyed youngsters I had imagined. Some of the “boys” were older than my 24 years, and a few were rumored to have been active in the Mau Mau resistance to British rule that brought independence four years earlier.

My house was luxurious by Peace Corps standards: two small rooms with walls of corrugated metal sheeting. A ventilation gap beneath the eaves let hot air out and cool air in. I had a flush toilet, a cold-water shower, a butane cooker, a kerosine refrigerator that produced tiny ice cubes, and a Red Chinese pressure lamp. This last would have been contraband in the United States, where, during the Cold War, there was a strict ban on all communist goods, but it was to provide the light by which I read student papers long into the night.

I prepared for my assignment as history master with trepidation. My degree was in English literature, not history, and certainly not African history. I tried to convince myself that I could bluff my way along by staying one chapter ahead of my classes. The students, it turned out when classes started a few days later, seemed polite, obedient and quite tolerant of my fumbling attempts to teach them their own history.

Sometime during the first week, Father Romano held the only staff meeting I remember. As I entered the room, I was astonished to encounter Joseph Odhiambo, my taxi seat-mate, for the second time. There he was sitting across from me, slouched in his chair with his arms crossed. His attempts at a transfer had apparently proven fruitless, and we were now both assigned to the same shabby bush school that had been such an insult to his education. We were colleagues, but he made no move to be collegial. All through the meeting, while Father Romano went on about the high cost of uniforms and textbooks, Joseph stared at me with an expression that was neither hostile nor friendly. After the meeting he disappeared, and I saw him only occasionally going to and from class during the following weeks.

As time passed, I learned more about Kenya, and more about Joseph’s plight. He was isolated from the school, not only by his education and cosmopolitan background, but also by his ethnicity. Odhiambo was a Luo name, and the Luos were a Nilotic tribe native to the area around Lake Victoria, hundreds



of miles away. Our students were all from local Bantu tribes: Mbeere, Kamba, and Kikuyu. Joseph was probably less at home in this part of Kenya than I was.

I was also learning something of the housing arrangements for staff at the school. Father Romano had apparently sustained the colonial practice of separating housing by race. Just as there had once been a color line segregating neighborhoods in Nairobi, so there was one now at the school. Father Romano, of course, lived with a couple of other Italian missionaries on the hill at the rectory next to the Catholic church. Not far away, my house was grouped with two others. One was occupied by a freckly young Irish math teacher who vanished between Thursday and Tuesday for hard-drinking R and R in Nairobi. In the other lived a middle-aged British biology teacher and his wife. She had expected that secondary teachers would be part of the Kenyan diplomatic social whirl and had brought a wardrobe of elegant gowns perfect for embassy parties. Far away on the other side of the school, lived Mr. Mehta, our only Indian teacher, with his wife and two daughters. Their existence was confirmed each day by the aroma of pungent curries drifting toward my house from his side of campus.

I hadn't yet learned where Joseph Odhiambo and the handful of other African teachers lived. They were off-campus somewhere, scattered in homes Father Romano had found in the nearby village. There was little opportunity to talk or become friends. Except for my students, I spent my days dealing only with Europeans. I planned my lessons, taught my classes, graded tests, and, like my Irish neighbor, made a getaway to big-city excitement in Nairobi every chance I got.

Then late one night, just as I was finishing the next day's lecture, there was a loud banging at my door. It was Father Romano in his dusty cassock.

"It's Odhiambo," he said, his English fragmented with anxiety. "He's gone crazy. You have to help. Come with me." He was out of breath, and I had no idea what he had in mind, but I grabbed a flashlight and followed him. As we walked the hundred yards to the school, he tried to explain.

"One of the students finally came and told me. It's been going on for a week. After school Odhiambo goes into the village. He drinks and drinks, then, after dark, he comes back to the dormitories and makes trouble."

I imagined the squalid buildings downwind from the latrines where the students slept--mud walls, dirt floors, tin roofs. A hundred bunk beds in two buildings housing two hundred restless young men.

"He spends the night talking to them, shouting, ranting. It's all politics and hatred. Tonight is the biggest show. He's got half the school outside the dormitory. He yells, they applaud, they cheer. He tells them what a terrible place the school is. How I'm stealing money from their school fees. How they paid for my new car. They love it. They yell some more. And you're part of it. He says the Peace Corps is full of CIA spies."

I still didn't know what he expected from me, but I wanted nothing to do with it. I thought of the tribal police. "The *askaris*," I said. "They should come and take care of this."

"Yes, they came. Fools! Just fools! They stand and watch him. I think they're afraid of him. Or maybe they enjoy the show, too."

By now we were nearing the dormitories. I could see the crowd of students, howling and clapping. As we approached, the crowd parted. In the middle stood Joseph Odhiambo, staggering, swinging his arms and bellowing in Swahili. Behind him were three *askaris*, tiny men, lost in the huge overcoats of their uniforms and carrying long police clubs. Their eyes were wide with fear and they were as absorbed by Omaplepu's tirade as the students. He pointed at me and at Father Romano. My Swahili was scanty, but I understood a few words: *pesa*, the word for money, *wazungu*, a usually derogatory term for whites, and *mwanapizkorps*, the a cognate for Peace Corps.

Father Romano turned to me.

"You see," he whispered. "the *askaris* do nothing. You have to get him. You're big. Stop him. Knock him down. Then maybe they will take him away."

I looked again at Odhiambo. His eyes were bloodshot and wild, his face slick with sweat. I turned to Father Romano.

"Get him! Throw him down! Stop him!" His voice was almost hysterical.

The noise from the students continued, but now their eyes were fixed on me. They shouted, clapped, hooted. Was it worse for me to fight or to retreat in fear? Where were my anti-war convictions, my Peace Corps idealism?

Father Romano shouted again.

"Get him! *Get* him!"

And suddenly my Berkeley agnosticism, my pacifism, and my decade of lapsed Catholicism vanished. I was a ten-year-old boy being told what to do by a priest. He was God's surrogate and it somehow became imperative that I obey him.

I stepped into the circle and faced Odhiambo, a white man about to battle it out with an African. He crouched like a wrestler, fists tight, eyes challenging me. I had never been in a street fight in my life, but I had six inches and at least forty pounds on him. Following an instinctive and probably cowardly impulse, I dodged around him and seized him from behind. My arms encircled his chest, immobilizing his arms. His body felt tiny, weak, like a child's.

Then he went entirely limp, a crumpling sack in my arms. He slipped from my grasp and fell to the ground curling like a fetus. He whimpered quietly, drunkenly.

Now the *askaris* knew what to do. They pounced on him, cuffed his hands, forced him to his feet. They led him away, one on each side and one prodding him with a club from behind. With them he staggered into the darkness.

"Well done, Paul. I knew you'd take care of him."

It was Father Romano, his amiable demeanor restored and his patronizing hand on my shoulder. I just wanted to get away. With the show over, the students drifted off to the dormitories, and I headed back to my house.



I was confused by everyone that night--Father Romano, Odhiambo and my students--but subduing an alcoholic teacher for a missionary priest was not the work I'd come to Kenya to accomplish. I felt cheapened and ashamed. I slept fitfully, wondering how I would face my classes the next day. In the morning I approached the school remembering the angry clamor of the night before. How could I ever maintain a shred of credibility? I decided to abandon my lessons. I tried to talk to my students about why I came to Kenya and how much I wanted to build friendships. I even tried to explain that I believed disagreements should be settled by talk and mutual respect, not force. I told them that Mr. Odhiambo and I probably agreed about many things: America's role as an international bully and the injustices of colonial rule to name two. But I was afraid, and I'm sure my words sounded hollow. The students, normally eager to talk about anything that delayed a history lesson, met me with rigid stares and stony silence.

Days passed, and my students and I retreated to our comfortable classroom routine of lectures, reading assignments and tests. We never talked about the night outside the dormitories and I never understood what the incident meant to those young African men. Was I a white man deftly overpowering a helpless African? The rightful victor in a test of strength? Or just a fool doing what a priest told him? Together my students and I tacitly agreed to pretend the night had not happened.

I never saw Joseph Odhiambo again. The wheels of Kenyan bureaucracy creaked and somehow he got what he wanted, a transfer to another school.

As my months in Kenya passed, I created an imaginary life for Joseph that explained his behavior. It began with an impoverished childhood on the shores of Lake Victoria, then success at his local school, a scholarship to Moscow, and finally a taste of American prosperity at Columbia while living in a Harlem slum. My fiction accounted for Joseph's outlook, actions and anger. Whatever his life had actually been, it certainly created expectations a bush school would never fulfill. Soviet Marxism, American racism, and Kenyan tribalism, all blurred by a haze of alcohol, had destroyed his presumption of ascendancy to Kenya's ruling class.

Yet somehow we were alike, Joseph Odhiambo and I, similarly bewildered by a world more complicated than we thought. I had spent my high school years immersed in Catholicism and Orange County conservatism, only to be seized by the dizzying turmoil of Berkeley radicalism, student strikes and peace marches. My draft board had failed to recognize my changed values, and I sought escape to a simpler life in Africa. When I met Joseph, we had both lost our footing and dangled precariously between nations, between cultures. On that dark night by the dormitories, we were both possessed by forces we didn't understand.

I continued my stint as a volunteer: ramshackle classrooms, dusty roads and weekend escapes to Nairobi. I knew I was never going to change the world. The Peace Corps would not be, as their ads promised "the toughest job I'd ever love." It would simply be the toughest job I'd ever have.



## *Arcs and Half Circles*

Daddy salvages old lumber, yanks his claw hammer hard against the nails and saves them too. “Straighten these like this,” he says. He shows me how to hold them curved side up against concrete, to tap with a hammer until straight. But I am three, and only manage to hurt my fingers.



They show me letters, and give me a book in which a girl’s hair and chin are like bees visiting flowers above a reverent dog. I never let on that I immediately grasp this power. I make mistakes as cover. At home, I secretly read the books my father has said I am not to touch.



Taking aptitude tests, I always feel someone watching. Always a father-man. Burnt log-cabin glasses.



A circular intersection in a Texas city; someone has been to Italy. Drunk high-schoolers see it as a place to circle perpetually while drinking. Caught there.



Leaving a vast inland suburb for another near an ocean, then heading back to the first one. In New Mexico, I wait out the morning cold under a bridge after ice mocks my motorcycle. I build a small fire of twigs. There—when a truck hauling a dozen horses goes through the rail above. Already I know the creation story of how horses came to us from cloud lands touching the tops of mountains, galloping down. Troopers weeping, shooting, weeping, shooting. One driver almost out of the cab.



Fifteen years old, long hair and already a decent beard, I pump gas into my motorcycle in west Texas. “We don’t like your kind around here,” the sheriff tells me. “I don’t have to kick your ass, I can have it done.”



To return is to find the same faces, but a different universe. The teeth. Many things already forgotten. And hugs coming around with the feathers of shadow boxing in them.



A South Vietnamese helicopter pilot, in training on an Air Force base in Texas, hovers above the field and won’t respond to radio calls. We security police get the call and go stand beneath him. For two hours, not a word. When the fuel is gone he descends from his place between continents, and we take him in. I’m eighteen. “What a dumb-ass thing to do,” I say. “Nobody will want him now.”





The shape of every box holding memorabilia is much the same.



I watch a white-haired man paint with a bamboo brush. The paint is mostly water, and the brush tip trembles above the paper's grain. But when it moves down and away it holds no hesitation in its sweep. The shapes suggest animals dreaming of skies and ice.



Until I'm almost fifty, I can leap straight up and touch my knees to my chest—and at that instant swing my hands, linked fingers never parting, from my front to behind me.



Retired, in a garden. I turn soil. Children are geese two blocks away on a schoolyard. But the sound changes to one of human suffering, the glint of vermiculite opening light from other skies. A tsunami lifts and moves a city; a man of dust shouts down into earthquake rubble; a woman stands still, after a bomb blast. In my dirt the undulating gray flesh of a slug, eye-stalks waving, marks a history of salt. I mutter words into seed holes. Press them shut.









*Artist: Karyna Aslanova (from the collection Mood Cells)*  
*Cyan & Green (above)*  
*White & Yellow (left)*

## The Day of the Dead

Peter and I went to Mexico to live, for a time: to learn about life in Mexico. But one of the first things we learned was about death in Mexico. That sounds as if something terrible happened and we witnessed a death—but it wasn't that. It was that we learned how the living live with the dead.



Our first hosts were Gregorio and Leticia, the school principal and the first-grade teacher in a town so small it wasn't even a village. They called it a *rancho*: a few blocks of paved streets around a small church, low concrete-block and stucco houses in bright colors, two or three little shops, alongside a busy two-lane highway.

On our third day Leticia—we already knew her as Leti—served breakfast at their long dining table: instant coffee and pink-sugared pastries. Over breakfast, Gregorio told us they were going to the cemetery in the bigger town just down the road, to clean the tomb of his grandmother, his *abuelita*. It was November the second; *El Día de los Muertos*. Would we like to go with them?

Well, of course—our policy was to say yes to everything, to experience it all.



We had prepared for our move. We'd learned some Spanish, we'd studied maps, we'd read deeply about Mexico's history, politics, traditions. So in our heads we knew all about this celebration, the Day of the Dead, and we knew that it was especially famous here in Michoacán. We'd seen dreamy photos in tourist guides: dark misty nights, shimmering golden candlelight, women in long black skirts and blue-and-silver-striped shawls, graves festooned with marigolds.



But Zinapécuaro, the town where the cemetery was, did not match the misty, candle-lit images from the photos. In bright daylight, it was a hurrying little city of narrow streets, people jamming the sidewalks and spilling into the roadway. Everyone passing had dark hair, dark eyes, brown skin. My light brown hair—which I learned was seen as blond in Mexico—and Peter's six-foot frame and even blonder hair, and our pink faces, were distinctly out of place.

We jostled past men in jeans sporting baseball caps with logos of NY Yankees and *Diablos Rojos de Toluca*; young slick-haired guys in pearl-buttoned cowboy shirts; boys in ragged T-shirts advertising East Norwich Humane Society and Mickey Mouse; giggling teens in GAP knock-off jeans; and here and there a silver-haired grandma in that traditional blue and silver shawl, the *rebozo*, that we'd seen in photos. Peter asked, "Do you feel like everyone's staring at us?" But I didn't; I was watching so intently myself that I didn't feel eyes on me. I was the starrer.

A little boy hugged a chunk of raw meat as big as his chest, wrapped in a clear plastic bag. A short, slim woman bore a long spray of red gladiolas strapped to her head with a wide scarf; they fanned behind her like a peacock tail.



Voices rang, a constant music, in the confusing syllables and rippling rhythms of Spanish. Vendors called out their wares: washtubs, candies, plastic toys, candles in tall glasses decorated with roses and saints. Children swung pairs of acrylic clack-balls on strings, filling the air with a steady percussion sound. Slow buses, horns blaring, pushed through the crowds into the side streets. The buff-colored stone tower of the colonial church, half a millennium old, stood tall and steady over the hubbub.

I had trouble connecting this chaos of sound and commerce with the vision I'd had of the Day of the Dead. Looking around, I didn't see anything solemn; nothing about *death*. The streets were overflowing with *life*.

Gregorio and Leti negotiated with vendors, selected flowers: dahlias, chrysanthemums and baby's breath, elegant white lilies, and a sack full of marigolds and white mums, pads of damp bright green moss. Soon we all hugged giant bouquets wrapped in paper. I walked intoxicated by the scent, feeling a tiny bit more part of the scene now that I too bore flowers.

As we climbed the wide stairs into the cemetery, our arms full of flowers, Leticia explained, in Spanish, "*Hoy es un día feliz. It is a time to remember the good things about the dead, to spend time with them, to celebrate them. It is a joyful day.*" Her eyes glistened as she told us this, but all around me was the proof that what she said was true. It was a festival of vivid color and sound.

It was hard to understand that this *was* a cemetery—it was so unlike cemeteries I knew, with their manicured green slopes and precise lines of stones. Here, miniature concrete temples, two or three feet tall, stood close together on the hillside in the November sunlight, like a little neighborhood of churches painted in bright pastels. These cheerful-looking buildings, tucked side by side, rested on the tombs. The paths between them hummed with activity, with grandmothers and moms and dads and teenagers and little girls in frilly dresses—arranging flowers, laughing, picnicking on the scraggly grass.

Gregorio and Leticia led us to his grandmother's tomb; her own miniature church. Her name was painted on white tiles in black calligraphy with pink and blue flowers. Below, the names of relatives in nearby tombs.

Gregorio took the buckets of water offered by two little boys and slipped a few coins into their muddy hands. He stood silent a moment, looking down at the tomb of his grandmother. He said to Peter and me, or maybe to the grandmother, "*Before Leticia married me, I had to do this alone. Because the family have all gone to the United States.*" He glanced up, looked at his wife, and looked away. She touched his hand.

The rest of his family made the hard decision, years before, to leave the village. Gregorio was the most educated of them all, a respected leader in his community. His brother, a groundskeeper in the US, made more in a day than Gregorio, as school principal, made in a month.

"*When they die they will come back home,*" Leticia said, "*to rest here with the abuelita.*" I wondered: What would it be like, to be so rooted in a piece of ground?

I asked Leti, "*¿Y tus abuelos?*"

"*Today my mother has gone to her village, very far away, on the other side of the lake. She will go with*

*her mother to the panteón where my grandfather is. In the village where she grew up.*” Again her eyes were shiny with tears. On this day, her duty was to her husband’s family.

Our hosts cupped their hands in the water and began to bathe the tiles. Leticia nursed moss into the earth at the base of the tomb, then garnished it with marigolds and white daisies, chrysanthemums and lilies. Peter and I joined in, caught up in the importance of the moment. I felt privileged to be permitted to be part of this.



I see that day in the cemetery in Zinapécuaro as the time when I began to understand death in a new way; the beginning of a deeper, more intimate relationship.

Years ago, on Haro Straight in Washington’s San Juan Islands, I watched my father row his father’s ashes out to sea. A silvery summer evening, clouds low on the horizon. I stared a long time, burning the shape of the clouds into my eyes. My father bent to the oars, alone in that expanse of salt water. Far out, when he and the boat were very small, he slowed, stopped rowing. I couldn’t see the moment when the ashes went into the sea. He turned and rowed back toward the shore as sea and sky darkened. There would be no ground to lay flowers upon, no grave to decorate.

My father is now ashes, in a wooden box made by a friend, on a side table in my mother’s living room. When she’s ready to turn him loose, his ashes will follow his father’s into salt water. My mother will also become ashes—hers will be taken to the mountains she loved so well. Her parents are in the Finnish cemetery in the Minnesota town where they were married and lived and raised their daughters. There is no family grave I go faithfully to visit.

We lived when I was young near a green, tree-shaded cemetery that curved over sweeping hills, with fine old stones in orderly rows. We treated it as a sort of park, a place to stroll on a sunny day. In the winter we skied on those hills, and as a teenager I necked with a boyfriend behind the stone angels. On Memorial Days little red, white, and blue flags sprouted in careful rows on the velvet lawns, and bouquets of flowers appeared in green metal cups sunk in the ground.

At the church cemetery in New Jersey where Peter’s grandparents are buried, a groundskeeper mows the lawns and poisons the weeds and waters the grass to keep it smooth and green. Peter’s grandfather and the other veterans have staid military crosses beside their gravestones. The place is kept neat and regular—under careful control.

When I was sixteen a young uncle died, a favorite cousin of my father’s. When he told us kids, my father apologized for having to share such news with us. He looked away from his family, as though ashamed. This was how I learned not to talk about death.



I wandered away from Gregorio’s grandmother’s final home, and drifted among the narrow aisles.

I was in a world I didn’t understand, but I sensed its strong hands reaching out to me, taking my hand and guiding me. I felt breathless. There was too much to take in, as if my lungs that had always done



their job for me were failing me now. My ears vibrated with music and talk and shouts; I let the Spanish flow over me like another sound of the day, lyrical and sweet. The scents of fresh flowers and smoky cookfires and dry grasses floated in among my cells and mingled with the colors, and slowed my steps.

Every little church-tomb had its floral display, the deceased's favorite foods spread out, candles burning, the family gathered there, the children laughing and hopping about, the young uncles in white cowboy hats passing a hip flask.

But then I saw: no, not every tomb.

I stopped in front of a rough concrete cross almost buried in tall grass. Weed-covered, dry and sad in the heat. No tiny church, no flowers, no candles, no family nearby. Crudely hand-carved into the concrete: "Federico – 1950-1972 – *Hijo*." I stared down at the grave of the son who had died too soon. In the midst of all this life, surrounded by the sounds and colors of the fiesta for the dead, Federico was alone. I bowed my head to him—just to say someone knew he was there. I regretted I had no flowers to give him.

Chilled, I retreated to my own group. Gregorio and Leticia stood quiet beside the tomb. Peter was a little away, watching the scene.

I turned to Gregorio and asked, in my clumsy Spanish, about the graves that had no decoration.

"*There is no one left to care for these people,*" he explained. "*Perhaps everyone has died. Or they have all gone to the United States, and no one comes back--no vuelve nadie.*" He left those words hanging in the air, but I could read the rest. If he and Leticia left Michoacán and followed the others to the US, the grandmother's grave would be covered in the weeds of the cemetery, the white tiles would crack and fall, strangers would pass by it and turn away.

I looked again toward Federico's lonely grave, and then I turned to the brightness, the rafts of flowers. A snatch of scratchy *banda* music slipped into my eager ears and I was back in the joyful celebration.



Of course, we would learn, not everyone in Mexico celebrates the *Día de los Muertos* in the traditional way—some entirely ignore it, particularly in the big cities. But we found that many of even the most modern, urbane families often create an altar at home, with candles and marigolds and photos of the their own *muertos*. University students celebrate by holding contests to build the most elaborate altar, traditional or political commentary; and by writing rude, taunting poems—*calaveras*—describing in lurid detail the deaths that will befall their friends. Tourists from Mexico City drive out to the mountains of Michoacán to walk among the graves and see the beauty of the glow of hundreds of candles on the *Noche*. There is an awareness of the purpose and meaning of the holiday: to join with those who have gone on before, to enjoy their company. And there is in Mexico an underlying attitude that life includes that final step, the step of dying and moving on. Mexicans are, as Octavio Paz wrote, "familiar with death."

There are two Spanish verbs that we translate into English as "to be." You're taught in Spanish 1 that *ser* is for permanent states, and *estar* for the temporary. Although that distinction isn't entirely accurate, it works in many cases. But the verb used with death is *estar*: *Mi padre está muerto*: that's where he is now. I

like the sound of it. It reminds me that in Mexico, in Spanish, Death—*la Muerte*—is temporary: it is part of a process.



People would stay in the cemetery, Leticia told me, and after midnight the Dead would come to party with them, to eat the bread and the *tamales* and drink the tequila and *charanda* left for them. Tomorrow, she explained, those things would have no taste, for the dead take the soul of the bread even as death takes the soul of the person and leaves the body here to be mourned, to be celebrated, to be remembered.

In the United States we honor our dead with decorum, with solemn formality; we keep our cemeteries neat and orderly. The dead are quiet. The Mexican dead rise up and party with us, buy a pair of noisemakers at a street stall, dance all night and disturb the stars and the moon with their boisterous music.





## Poison Headache

### 1.

The flophouse on Creston Road was painted a remarkably ugly shade of green; the siding was warped and cracked in places. Probably, no one had bothered to regard the exterior of the house for years.

It was a big old split level, a relic of the post-war housing boom, with five bedrooms, and a living room featuring a giant window which looked out over San Francisco Bay. Sometimes, you could see tendrils of fog creeping up the Berkeley Hills, like some spooky effect in a 50s horror film.

Probably, a large family had once lived there, but now it was occupied by my oldest friend Alan, who was trying hard not to work on his dissertation, two other grad students, and an ever-changing, random assortment of airline stewardesses, drifters, and long-lost acquaintances wandering through the bright landscape of northern California.

When we lurched into Berkeley in my college friend John's blue Ford minivan, the bedrooms were all temporarily occupied, so the five of us crashed for a week on the living room floor. It was far from the worst place we had slept on our meandering, largely pointless cross-country sojourn.

John and Ellen, who had been high school sweethearts, were hoping to find teaching jobs in some Bay Area alternative school. Joel would be heading back to New York for an acting MFA, and had been starving himself all the way across country, because he did not wish to be a fat actor. I had no real plan but felt that wandering across the country might be romantic in a *poet maudit* sort of way. That my parents recoiled in muted horror from this idea greatly enhanced its dubious appeal for me. My girlfriend Paula was always up for an adventure; she dropped out of college to join us.

Although the five of us immediately set about doing California-hippie-tourist things (tripping in Golden Gate Park! The Grateful Dead at the Fillmore!), our merry band was quickly dispersed. John and Ellen got offered jobs at a not-so-alternative school on the Maryland shore; Joel took a train back to NYC, to grad school at Columbia. Paula and I lingered in Berkeley, and soon moved into a bedroom vacated by one of the airline stewardesses, who were the original renters of the house. I never learned the names of any of these alarmingly cheerful young women; they were rarely around for more than a night before they jetted off again.

Securing an actual place to live seemed a hopeful development. I had vague ideas about writing for *The Berkeley Barb*, or some other underground newspaper, which I had done a little of in college. But almost immediately, I came down with an epically bad case of mononucleosis. I spent all of September and most of October hoarse, feverish, dispirited, encased in a dark cloud of lethargy which felt almost metaphysical.

Paula got several part-time jobs, buzzing in and out, but for a month I lay on a mattress on the floor, too weak to write, or even to read. Mostly, I listened to local FM stations on the brown clock radio left behind by the stewardess. Because we were pretty far up in the Berkeley Hills, the reception was spotty, with music and voices wafting in and out of my consciousness. One afternoon, an angry DJ announced

that he doubted anyone was listening and would play the same song over and over until someone called. It was Dylan's "Pledging My Time." The opening verse—*Early in the morning/Or late at night/I got a poison headache/but I feel all right*—resonated through the room again and again. It felt like the theme song to my life.

2.

When my fever receded and I finally arose from my bed of languor, I was bored out of my mind. I took many morning walks around the misty Berkeley hills, and once saw a fox frolicking under a stone bench on Euclid Avenue. I watched a lot of Perry Mason reruns on the ancient black and white TV in the living room. I went to a lot of movies with Alan, whose principal occupations at the time were smoking cigarettes, avoiding his dissertation, and reviewing films for a Berkeley paper. We saw a strange mélange of Hitchcock and the Marx Brothers, laced occasionally with midnight specials (the original *Night of the Living Dead*, Betty Boop cartoons, *Reefer Madness*); we were often high.

In college, where I was much-lauded writer, I developed the peculiar notion that I could make a living writing short stories. How this delusion emerged (and persisted) I cannot say. But when my torpor began to fade—and because I had neither desire nor aptitude to get a job—I rekindled this earlier flame of yearning to write fiction, pounding out surrealistic fragments on the beat-up Smith-Corona which someone had flung into a closet.

At the time, I was besotted by Donald Barthelme, and all my early fragments sounded like the work of some less talented Barthelme cousin. But the very first story I completed and sent out received a rapturous note from an assistant editor at *Esquire*, who told me she had shown the story to everyone in the office and while, sadly, the senior editor would not be buying it, she believed I had a GREAT FUTURE, and could not wait to see the next story.

I dashed off two more stories; her enthusiasm waned. When I finally wrote a trim, less derivative piece, a piece I believed was the finest thing I had yet written, she sent me one terse line: *Do not send me work that is not your best effort*.

This remains the core truth of my writing life: *I love your work but I can't use it* and/or *I liked your previous work better* are the twin motifs of my alleged career.

Discouraged, and with dwindling savings, I cast about for other writing gigs. I answered an ad to write an erotic film. I had as much experience writing erotic film scripts as I had writing commercial fiction, but the ad actually stipulated *young scriptwriter preferred*. I was pretty young, and for my senior thesis, I had written a rock musical, which had been an unlikely smash at my college theater.

"I can do this!" I exclaimed, though Alan was skeptical. Rich, the most sullen of the three grad students, just glowered at me. He often glowered at me, one of the very few people in my life who took an instant dislike to me. "They want sleaze," he chided. "Is that what you want to do?"



I wanted to do pretty much anything at that point, and on the long bus ride to San Francisco, eager and hopeful, I imagined what the interview would be like, how I might charm the producers with my youthful enthusiasm.

The office for this endeavor was a small, fetid cubicle on Geary Street. The producer, who had cartoonish mutton chops, was not especially charmed by my youthful enthusiasm. He glanced at the script I had brought with me, pointed to a small metal table where a battered black typewriter sat, and said, "OK, kid, write me a sex scene."

"Now?" I managed.

He shrugged. "Always a good time for a sex scene."

So, I sat at the typewriter and tried to write a sex scene, but as so often, I could not keep myself from making fun of what I was doing at the same time I was doing it. The scene was like an unsexy outtake from *Candy*. The producer took one look at it and said, "Don't think you're kinky enough for us, kid."

That this observation was completely true did not dull the sting.

Demoralized, I decided to hitchhike back to Berkeley, standing tentatively at the entrance to the highway. Eventually, a canary yellow sports car convertible screeched to a halt right beside my foot. The driver gestured to me, and I got in.

"Going to Berkeley?" I asked.

He nodded curtly. He looked familiar but I could not place him. He had a semi-shaved head, like a disheveled marine, and enormous dark glasses. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a blazer, and protruding from a black cigarette holder was a thick joint, pointed jauntily upward, like FDR, if FDR had smoked weed.

He did not say a word to me and drove about a hundred miles an hour, tearing across the Bay Bridge, weaving in and out of traffic, grinning lopsidedly, while the wind whipped through the sleek car. When we got to Shattuck Avenue, he slammed on the brakes, nodded again, and I got out. I turned to thank him, but he was already gone.

A few weeks later, I saw his picture in *Rolling Stone*. It was Hunter S. Thompson, whose *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was about to bemuse the world. This was as close as I got to any kind of Bay Area literary life in that forlorn and wasted year.

3.

In the 10 months that I inhabited that house, there were easily 15 or 20 people who passed through its undistinguished rooms. I was never certain who was actually a resident and who was a temporary boy/girlfriend, or how they knew about the house, or what they were doing there.

The various stewardesses always had friends and lovers over. One, a drug dealer, stayed on once his girlfriend was gone. He kept a mysterious suitcase under a table, and during his brief tenure there, visitors arrived at all hours then withdrew to the downstairs bathroom. Also, small objects of value began to disappear—a watch, a ring, a fancy ashtray. Eventually, Rich, the tallest and angriest of the grad students, persuaded the drug dealer/boyfriend that he should depart.

Rich was often angry at me, as well. I think he had a crush on Paula, or was offended by my curious blend of melancholy and insouciance, or resented that I wanted to be a writer, or...who knows why? He liked to lecture me about effort and responsibility, which I usually deflected with a joke, but one evening, I just said, *Oh shut up Rich*, and he bellowed in rage, took a swing at me, and had to be restrained by Alan from punching me out. After that, we rarely spoke.

But there were plenty of fleeting visitors with whom to engage, including Amy, Debbie, and Jeannie, three women I had known since childhood, who appeared, left, then reappeared, as if the house was on some Albany, New York listing for lost souls.

But probably, the most memorable of the temporary housemates was a young man who called himself Ragtime Willy. He showed up one day lured by a faded room-to-rent card from a kiosk on the Berkeley campus. He had wild curly hair, and a scruffy beard, but was wearing a jacket and tie, had a soft, restrained manner.

Since I was still primarily engaged in hanging around the house, and he seemed to have no actual interests, we spent hours listening to records, trading quips. One afternoon, he began to tell me his recent life story, how he fled LA because his wife had, as he put it *turned dyke*, leaving him for a woman a few months earlier. He felt humiliated, felt it must be he who had *driven* her there. He thought all the time about killing himself, he told me.

I listened, appalled. I tried to respond but really had no point of reference, no advice, no experience with which to counter his quiet self-loathing. I was sufficiently out of touch with my own emotions that I was not so much horrified by his monologue as puzzled that someone could feel so strongly about something.

For the next few days, he sat in the living room, staring out the window at the Bay. Now and then he would talk about various methods he might use to kill himself. He was particularly enamored of jumping off a bridge. Of course, I should have called some suicide hotline, or his family, or a doctor, but he would laugh after each melodramatic remark, repeating, *Just kidding! I would never do that!* like a mantra.

One morning in early spring, he stood up suddenly from the couch, said, “I’ve always wanted to walk across the Golden Gate Bridge.” He flung on a jacket, strode out toward his wreck of a car.

I hesitated, then leaped after him. “I’ll come with you! I’ve always wanted to walk across that bridge myself,” I lied.

I did not have any idea of what I might do if Ragtime Willy tried to jump. I don’t think I even had that thought. It was more like an inchoate notion that he should not be allowed on the Golden Gate Bridge by himself.

We walked about halfway across. “It’s a big bridge,” he muttered, leaning over the side.

“It’s a long way down, too,” I pointed out.

He teetered there for a moment, staring out at nothing. Then, he sighed loudly, pivoted, walked back to the car. We drove in silence back up to the Berkeley Hills. A few days later, he took off to LA. I never told anyone else in the house about that walk.

4.

Although for a number of years, I stumbled from one home to another—I lived in 10 different buildings before I was 30—I have now lived in this NYU faculty apartment, looking out over noisy Bleecker, for almost 20 years. My wife Kate and our fatally ill daughter Anna both died while we resided here. My younger daughter Jane will soon be off to college. The whole dance of permanence/transience, the futile struggle to slow time’s frantic forward motion juxtaposed with the biting thirst to now and then speed it up, these are the tunes running through my head every day now.

But not then. Then, I was merely beset with the notion that I was sad, that I had no clue how to make a life happen, that the house itself was part of the problem, the chaotic ambience setting me off like a strobe light to an epileptic. I began to think over and over: *somewhere else*. But with no destination in mind, it became just another phrase in my whispered musings.

On my birthday, Paula and I took psilocybin, sent to me by my friend Michael, a connoisseur of intoxicants, and frolicked lightly through the leafy expanse of Tilden Park, only a mile or so up the road from the house.

While we were lolling around the weather-beaten carousel, I noticed that we were being first watched, then approached by a small, shaggy man with John Lennon glasses. He seemed to sense that we were tremendously high, but he appeared harmless enough, and began chatting. Paula, always more outgoing than me, told him we were celebrating my birthday. “Oh!” he said, “come with me, I’ll help you celebrate! I have something amazing to show you. I am a wizard.”

He said this solemnly, with no hint of menace, but still it creeped me out. “Let’s do it!” Paula announced, before I could even suggest we might wish to leave.

This is many years ago, and I was certainly buzzed out by the drug and the day and all my tumultuous thoughts, but I still recall that the house he brought us to, somewhere in North Berkeley, resembled a hobbit house, was covered in vines, and had a small red door, as if in some fairytale.

The wizard poured us orange juice, put on some music. His living room was filled with consoles, microphones, keyboards, radios, telephones. “You see,” he said. “All this is part of my wizardry. Shall I demonstrate?”

He sat down, turned on various devices. He spun around in his desk chair like a happy toddler. He typed something on a keyboard. “Wizard number 7? This is Wizard 5,” he blared into a microphone.



“Yes,” came a faint voice from one of the radios. “You have visitors?”

He punched a few letters on a keyboard. “Happy birthday to you...” this disembodied voice began to sing. “Happy birthday dear Stephen...”

I sat bolt upright. I did not recall telling this strange gnome my name, though maybe Paula had and I did not notice. I am not an especially paranoid person, but in this quavering moment, it all felt wrong. There was a roaring in my ears, I felt pressed down by anxiety, my heart was pounding. I yanked at Paula’s arm. “I need some air. We need to go for a walk, right?”

She looked up at me, puzzled. “Right.”

Years later, I came to realize that these wizards were doubtless early internet engineers, when the World Wide Web was still a concept from science fiction. But at the time, I was so unsettled by this experience—enhanced by my troubled year and the whirl of the psilocybin—that I could not sleep that night, and hardly slept at all for the next few days.

About a week later, I got a scrawled note from my friend Fritz. *Doing Summer Theater Project at Wesleyan*, it said. *Need you & Paula to help me run it. Come back! Will pay and find you housing!*

“I want to go,” I said. “Do you want to go? I hate it here. I didn’t think I would. But I hate it here.”

“I kind of like it here,” she said. “But sure, we’ll go.”

5.

“So you’re really out of here?” Rich asked, not looking at me. His tone was in the realm of *good riddance* but I did not rise to the bait. I wordlessly shook his hand. Although Alan and I remain close friends, I never saw any other denizens of that house again.

I had the feeling even then that the 10 months I spent there would someday feel like a distant dream. That I had a headache for most of that year remains one of my only sense memories of this sliver of my life. And while even my most fraught relationships often evoke in me a sense of longing once ended, I felt no nostalgic tug as Paula and I packed up our few belongings, paid our last rent check, then watched as a parade of potential housemates was inspected and interviewed by Alan and Rich.

On a ride-share board, Paula had found two Berkeley students from Long Island looking for others to share gas and tolls for their trip back east. Without even meeting them, we agreed to the deal.

They were pleasant, ordinary-looking students. The owner of the car, whose name was Eddie, and who called everyone *pal*, was popping Dexedrine like salted peanuts, and drove for almost 24 hours without stopping, babbling all the way like a suburban Jewish Neal Cassady, while everyone else dozed, or listened to the radio. Carole King’s “So Far Away” had recently been released, and it seemed to be on every station, all the time, all the way back east.

We only stopped once, at a roadside diner in, I think, Oklahoma, where a giant cowboy statue

bestrode the parking lot. Paula scandalized the diner's patrons by skipping in barefoot. As we wolfed down breakfast, we were glared at by every pair of eyes in that joint, as if we were truly the hippie scum we must surely have appeared to be.

Before we took off again, I sat down next to the cowboy statue and tried to jot down meaningful thoughts in a notebook. Mostly, I doodled flowers and bearded faces and wrote the words *finally going* all over the page.

"Happy to be heading home, pal?" Eddie asked me.

"Sort of," I said. "I needed to get out of there. That house was a circus. I'm sure my life will be better, calmer now."

Not even remotely true, yet it seemed so true, so sweetly true, as I sat in the shadow of the giant cowboy.



## The Pilgrimage

The November wind drove Emma through the door of *Chiesa della Santa* as though she were made of paper and twine. She stumbled past the narthex. A single person sat in the pew nearest the altar. The hair was dark, curly, the narrow shoulders draped in black. A woman. She didn't even look up.

Despite the maelstrom outside, the church was still and silent—even beyond the motionless lady at the front of the church. Emma imagined that nothing in the building had changed in the last three hundred years. The stucco reliefs, the yawning ceilings, the worn wooden pews. It was as though she'd walked into a spiderweb of enduring calm, and it stuck fast to her skin.

She rubbed a thumb over the shiny street map in her hand. What she wouldn't give to live in this moment, at least for a little while. Since Mom's funeral only a week ago, every second had been distorted—stretched and swelled and warped—until suddenly it was Monday morning, and she was due at the airport.

Emma stared at the crucifix at the front of the church. The urge to cross herself itched like grit beneath her skin, which was both strange and miraculous—strange because she'd never crossed herself before in her entire life, but miraculous because maybe her family's history was a genetic *thing* that magically surfaced when triggered. Like maybe deep in her DNA, Grandpa Joe's Catholicism perked up its head at the sight of Saint Catherine slumped on her gold throne to demand Emma go through *his* particular ritual of crossing himself: spectacles, testicles, wallet, and watch. Not that Emma had testicles. Or glasses, for that matter.

She hadn't been to a proper Catholic church since she was a little kid, when Grandpa Joe had taken her every Sunday for mass. She only remembered holding onto his big hand and the butterscotch candies in his old man pants pockets—not to mention the scent of candle smoke, furniture polish, and incense. It was a musty smell that she picked up here at the *Chiesa*, too. Maybe all Catholic churches smelled the same. Perhaps it wasn't decades of use at all, but a special perfume that came in a spray can, another embedded signifier of family history that drove the DNA to respond.

Emma took a deep breath. A small wooden door nestled in a dark corner just to the left of the *Chiesa* entrance. She didn't have to see it to know it would be there. She'd talked about this church with her mother a lot over the last few months, since they'd found out Mom was dying.

"Go visit Saint Catherine of Bologna," Mom had commanded in her worn voice. "Eat all the gelato. Kiss all those handsome Italian men. Resist no temptation." And then she cackled and coughed and laughed some more until she said, "Saint Catherine is the patron saint of resisting temptation, you know." She paused. "Your grandfather always wanted me to see Saint Catherine, but I was too stubborn—and you know me and church and your grandfather." She'd patted my hand weakly. "Sometimes I wish I would have just forgiven Daddy before he died. Not just for me, but for you."

Emma cut across the nave and steadied herself in front of the door in the corner. Of course Mom would have regrets on her death bed. Wasn't that normal? Emma had always thought that her mother had a way of discarding the things that didn't matter to her. But maybe those things Mom discarded meant more than Emma could ever know.



She pressed the tiny nub of a bell set into the wall and waited. A dim buzz sounded, and she pressed open the door to a small dim room with a narrow passageway. She emerged into a murky chamber and blinked rapidly at the sight of Saint Catherine.

The saint's body was housed in an enormous glass box. It was like an oversized reliquary—really, what else was a reliquary for but to house a holy relic? The ancient nun wasn't quite a skeleton, but the desiccated skin was stained dark, nose worn and eyes gently closed. Leathery fingers clutched a shiny gold cross and a Bible. Her black habit and white wimple were immaculate, as gleaming as her throne.

Mom probably would have said something snarky if she were here, but Emma was fascinated. Was it an honor to polish the gold and dust the saint and make the wimple perfect? Or was it a punishment? Did the older nuns in the order assign the novitiates to clean the reliquary, or did they fight over it themselves, eager to be *the chosen one*, ready to lovingly polish the mummy's fingernails, smooth her skirts, and wipe down the glass?

Was it blasphemous to think about it?

Emma didn't know much about blasphemy *or* nuns—it was Grandpa Joe who'd been the expert. Maybe the nuns hired cleaning people for that sort of thing, so they could concentrate on praying and doing other nun things. Did incorruptible saint cleaners exist? It had to be a specialty gig, like those crime scene cleaning companies.

She stepped closer to the glass box.

Her hand twitched again. As much as Grandpa Joe or her DNA might have wanted her to make the sign of the cross, Emma clenched her fingers. She shook her head, and the corner of her mouth crimped into a half smile. Saint Catherine *was* the patron saint of resisting temptation. Maybe *that* homage would be good enough to satisfy her genetic legacy.

It wasn't just the Catholicism that ran through her blood, it was her mother's rejection of everything her grandfather stood for—and the animosity between them. Mom might have *said* she wished she had forgiven Grandpa Joe, but Emma saw no evidence that she'd come to any peace on the matter. Two days before Mom had breathed her last, she said, "I never regretted you, Emma. Daddy never approved of either of us." The words were still soaked with bitterness.

Emma thought maybe coming here to the *Chiesa* could create a truce between Mom and Grandpa Joe in death—not that she was sure there was an afterlife. But she could almost feel the forces inside her, still arguing and hurting the other's feelings and turning away. Maybe that *was* the afterlife: the spirits of those you loved living in your blood, in your body—in your DNA—forever influencing and interrupting.

She glanced up at Saint Catherine, right into her gaunt face. The nun's mummified mouth almost seemed to smile down at her. Emma grinned right back, more of a reflex than intention. In the shine of the dusty overhead lights, she could almost convince herself that the saint *winked* one dust-dry eyelid, brown as a batwing, like they were in on an inexplicable private joke about funerals and family feuds and existential angst.

Grandpa Joe might have been horrified that she dared think of Catherine as a normal human being, doing normal human things, but she must have been once. She breathed and laughed and had her period, like anyone else. Grandpa Joe had just been Joe the plumber at once point, too, instead of her stodgy grandfather. She imagined him as a young man, all cocky and full of jokes, rather than a man with a wrinkled forehead who was always worried about the state of Emma's immortal soul.

It was her grandfather's attempt to have her baptized when she was six that finally broke things with Mom. He'd told Emma, "You're enslaved to sin. Baptism cleanses you of that, makes you part of God's family, and gives you eternal salvation. Wouldn't you like that? You'll go to Heaven."

"With you and Mommy?" she'd said.

He'd shaken his head. "Your mother will go to Hell. She refuses to repent."

That was the last time she'd seen her grandfather—ever—but she still had the Saint Catherine of Bologna medal he'd given her for Christmas the year before. His favorite saint, her mother had said once. The medal was safely in her jewelry box back home. She didn't know why she'd not thought to bring it with her on the trip to Italy.

Saint Catherine still appeared to be smiling. Emma looked away and followed the line of the reliquary glass to the sumptuous red brocade drapes, the gold-flaked cherubs playing harps that flanked the throne on either side. Beyond that, a frame. She bent closer and smothered a gasp—it was filled with bleached bones, wrapped prettily in red and gold ribbon and mounted neatly as a collection of bug specimens. Human bones. A row of fat molars, yellow with age. A spattering of pitted kneecaps. There, a fragment of what looked like an arm bone. A skeletal finger or two.

"What on earth?" Emma muttered.

"Ah, *signora*," breathed a heavily accented voice from behind her. "Do not be alarmed by our relics. They are a blessing."

Emma whirled and almost fell into the case of bones. There stood a middle-aged nun with a round, pale face framed by a stark wimple, as pure white as Saint Catherine's. Her habit was the color of ash. One dark eyebrow was raised, and her brown eyes were wide and serious.

"I'm sorry—I thought I was alone," Emma said.

"No one is ever alone here." The nun gestured at Catherine's glass box. "Our Saint Catherine always watches."

"What is she watching for?" Emma said.

"Those who need her. She is the patron saint of Bologna itself, you know. She watches over all of us. We are an exuberant city of the young and passionate and hopeful." The nun seemed to move closer to Emma even though she hadn't taken a single step. The woman loomed. She was tall with broad shoulders until the mantle of her habit.

Emma's mom had been like that—a presence that overwhelmed, that commanded attention. In life

and in death. Last week's funeral had been a ridiculous affair, exactly to Mom's specification—a hot pink coffin, Mom dressed in white leather, hair teased up into a bouffant. The heart disease had made her look blue in life, but in death that skin had been pink and perfect, like her mother had just been running an errand and decided to keel over, mid-laugh. If Mom had thought of it, perhaps she would have insisted on being propped up on a gold throne, just like Saint Catherine.

*"A chi bene crede, Dio provvede,"* the nun standing beside Emma said.

Emma startled, and heat rushed to her face. "I'm sorry?"

"I said, 'God listens to those who have faith,' child. As will Saint Catherine. You look . . ." The nun paused. She took two quick steps backward. "Unsettled."

"I *am* in a room with a mummified saint and a bunch of bones."

The nun laughed. "*Si*, I suppose it must seem so. I have grown used to it, but I forget how the incorruptible body of my sister may affect some. She is not mummified, you understand. Her body is simply touched by God. You are Catholic, yes?"

Emma shook her head. "I'm not religious. My mother asked me to come. She recently passed away."

"Ah, she is dwelling now in light yet ever near." The nun gestured to the chairs lined up before the glass reliquary. "Sit, child. I would hear about her and why she sent you to Saint Catherine in your grief."

"I'm not grieving." Emma sat in the nearest chair, almost automatically. Part of that DNA, she supposed—a nun gives an order, and the body reacts. But she wasn't grieving. Mom had forbidden it. It was part of the reason that her mother had insisted on such an insane funeral.

"Funerals are for the living," Mom had said. "You make the whole thing a party—celebrate life. Death isn't a sad thing, sweetie. Dad—your grandfather, I mean—said the same thing, you know. You might not remember this, but he wanted to be buried at an amusement park, right under the Ferris wheel. I know it doesn't sound like him, but it's true. And I may be just a pile of bones and dead flesh to you when I go, but I want the party, too. You laugh and enjoy it, and then you can't be upset that I'm gone."

Emma was trying to live up to her mother's wishes. Sitting in front of a mummified nun was certainly a good distraction, no matter what might be running through her veins.

The nun—the living one—bowed her head. "Losing a parent is a terrible thing. Do you yet have the comfort of your father?"

Emma shook her head. "My mom raised me alone."

"And your mother was Catholic?"

"When she was little. She and my grandfather used to a fight a lot, so she left the church and, well, my grandfather, too, eventually."



"Just so." The nun bowed her head for a moment. "But you seem more comfortable here than those not of the faith."

"My grandfather took me to mass a lot when I was little."

"And so it was your *nonno* who told you about the incorruptibles?"

Emma nodded. "People who are so holy that God preserves their bodies after death."

"*Bene*. Although in some cases, the body may decompose, but a *part* of them does not. St. Vincent de Paul, for instance. His heart and bones are completely incorrupt."

"But bones don't decompose."

"The tongue and the jaw of St. Anthony of Padua are incorrupt as well." The nun turned her gaze back to St. Catherine. "But my sister, God smiled on her. And these other relics keep her company, the same as we do. The same as she does for us."

"My grandfather said Catherine was visited by Jesus and the Devil."

"*Si*, she wrote about it. She said virtue is achieved only through struggle."

"It sounds like the exact opposite of Buddhism, doesn't it?" Emma's mother had embraced Buddhism in the last several years, just as she'd spent a few years as a Quaker, studied the Koran for a few months, and then there was that very strange week when Mom declared herself a Pastafarian. Emma had to hear all about it, every time Mom found a new obsession. And then there would be the inevitable rant about Catholicism and Emma's grandfather and his superstitions.

Even Saint Catherine seemed to laugh this time.

The nun smoothed her ash-colored skirt. "Buddhism. Ah. Adjust your desire so you do not struggle—and only that way lies peace. *Si*, of course. How marvelous. But I do not think Catherine would have seen it that way."

"My mother said—"

"But what do *you* say, child?" The nun asked.

"I struggle," Emma said, her voice going squeaky.

"So do we all." The nun's mouth turned up at the corners. "Some people, they come and go. They look. They do not sit and allow themselves to be filled by Saint Catherine's spirit. Whatever happened between your mother and her father, you are more open to the church than you think. Forgive them. Forgive yourself. It is the way to peace."

"What does that even mean?"

"You *are* sitting. And you come here on a pilgrimage. Your mother set you on a journey, and here you are." The nun clapped her hands once, softly. "You come to find answers, perhaps. Or maybe just to find

a place to spend time with your mother and grandfather.”

“But both of them are buried in the States.”

“That is not at all what I mean.” The nun nodded to Emma. “But while you are the sum of all those you love, you must always remember that it is *you* that must find a way to live. Open yourself to the idea that others may help.” A bell rang faintly. “I must go. You—you should stay. Let Saint Catherine keep you company in your grief. You will see, you are not alone.”

The nun crossed the room, and without a backward glance, she pushed through the door.

Emma glanced up again at Saint Catherine, still smiling.

*Grief.* Whether her mother willed it, Emma supposed she *was* grieving. Mom couldn’t get her way all the time, especially not now. Not now when, as Mom had said, she was just a pile of bones. Or would be.

Emma held up her hand and turned it over. She counted her bones and traced the path of her veins to her wrist. She had broad, square hands, just like her mother. Like her grandfather. Another trick of genetics. She stared at St. Catherine’s leathery hands, gripping the crucifix and Bible. Maybe she’d had the same hands as well.

The DNA-deep Catholicism itched in her again. Or maybe it was just the genetic legacy of everything in her past, as a whole. She really was the sum parts of Mom, Grandpa Joe, the arguments they’d had, the love and the bitterness and the lost opportunities to forgive. But she was here and finding her way and she could absolve them all. Saint Catherine watched, and the smile on her leathery face appeared to widen.

This time when her fingers twitched, Emma gave in. Spectacles, testicles, wallet, and watch. She bid Saint Catherine farewell, then ducked out the door of the chamber, back to the watery November sun and the maelstrom of life.



## *The 167-Pound Champion of the Hargrave Invitational Wrestling Tournament*

My wife Mary does not know what a reverse cradle is. Nor can she define a whizzer, a Granby roll, or even an inside switch. Yet these were the moves that contributed to my greatest athletic achievement—a day when I stood upon Mount Olympus and broke bread with the gods. A day when angels sang my praises and girls swooned at my feet. The world was in my pocket that day, and God smiled down on me from heaven. I had triumphed in my weight class at the Hargrave Invitational Wrestling Tournament.

All right, the tournament only consisted of four small military schools. Yes, the wrestling mat was torn and a stray dog hobbled across it. But the drama of my title match was truly the stuff of legends. Trailing by two points and riding time with thirty seconds left in the bout, I sank a tight reverse cradle and won the match with a pin. To this day, I recall my swarthy opponent trying to kick free from my grip. To this day, I remember being mobbed by my teammates after I staggered from the mat. Not only had I snatched epic glory from the fangs of yawning defeat, I had also sealed the team championship for my little known alma mater, a tiny prep academy that had never won anything big.

It was after I told Mary this story for only the seventh time that she clucked her tongue and gave me a look she reserved for incompetent drivers. We were sitting on the back porch of our Florida home, watching the sun go down. The horizon had bled to the color of parchment, and the first stars were starting to wink. They say when you look at the stars you are gazing into the past, but I harbor the stubborn conviction that those lights are still alive.

“That was *fifty years ago*,” Mary snapped as she sipped a glass of iced tea. “Was it really that big a deal, Hulk Hogan?”

“Look at it this way,” I said, “I put Washburn Military School on the map.”

“Why are you so proud of putting that school on the map? You never speak well about it except for the wrestling meets. Hey, didn’t your parents send you there because you weren’t achieving in public school? Because you kept writing science fiction stories instead of hitting the books?”

“It was a reform school for upper-class boys,” I admitted. “It was *supposed* to build character. But they just made us march around all day and play at being soldiers.”

“And yet you ended up there.”

“I did. Thank God for the wrestling team.”

Mary put down her glass of iced tea. “It’s time I enlightened *you*,” she said. “If you had told me that story the first night we met, we’d have never had a second date. I’d have written you off as a dodo bird who had forgotten that it was extinct.”

“I was *undefeated* that season,” I insisted. “I had thirteen wins and no losses.”

“If that’s what made you a living fossil, you’d have been better off *losing* those matches.”



“Athletic glory lasts,” I persisted.

“Does it have to last *fifty years*? My god, you’ve had bigger triumphs than that.”

“But none more memorable.”

“I just don’t get it,” she said, her voice becoming tight. “I can’t *imagine* why you haven’t let go of it by now.”

“That would make sense,” I said, “if there were sense to be made. But the memory grows more golden with every passing year.”

“You were a decorated peace officer. I *know* you saved some lives. On top of that, you’re an author whose books have won four awards.”

“What if I saved the wrong lives?” I said. “What if the people I saved went on to do evil things?”

“Your books have won awards,” she repeated.

“Those awards were nice enough,” I confessed. “I got some polite applause. But not the cheers that filled a gym when I pinned an opponent flat. The most thrilling award I ever received was the outstanding wrestler award.”

“You’re hopeless,” Mary said, folding her arms. “You live in a petrified forest.”

Since my forest was still in bloom, I could not let the matter go. “I had other big wins that year, you know? You could even call them upsets. I outpointed the captains of Culpepper and Virginia Episcopal School.”

“Will you please stop talking about it,” said Mary. “You’re only making things worse. How can we enjoy the moment if you keep prattling on about that?”

“Well, *excuse* me for being a champion,” I snapped.

“A champion *bore*,” Mary scolded. “I hope your memories keep you warm. *I’m* going into the house.”

“Have you got something better to do?” I scoffed.

She cocked an eyebrow and shrugged. “Maybe I’ll watch some Happy Days re-runs. I find them so entertaining.”

Unaffected by Mary’s sarcasm, I sat as she entered the house. I then slapped a hungry mosquito and watched the stars grow bright. The sky had turned into the color of slate. Crickets were starting to chant.

It wouldn’t be long until she got over her huff—Mary quickly gets over her huffs. But would I ever get over my championship win at the Hargrave Invitational Tournament? Ask me in twenty years.



## *If Vinnie'd Only Left Me*

When I asked Vinnie why, he didn't answer. So I asked him again.

"You're too fat, Marie."

*Too fat for what?* I wanted to ask. Luckily, I kept my mouth shut.

I knew what Vinnie would say or what he'd be thinking. Too fat to love. Too fat for everything, except cleaning the toilet and cooking breakfast, lunch and dinner, doing two loads of wash on Saturday, darks and lights, then flopping down into the big puffy olive green chair, wanting to talk to somebody or get dressed up and go out for drinks and dancing or have somebody say, *How ya' doin', Marie?* but nobody does because there's nobody here to say it. So I walk in the kitchen and grab the family-sized Doritos and a Diet Coke and come back, turn on the t.v. and eat chips until my lips get puffy from the salt.

The minute I got up this morning, I started bawling. I was crying so hard, I had to call in sick. Left a message on the office voice mail. Stuffed up from crying, I sounded sick. 'Course, they don't let you be sick just because your husband of thirty years has dumped you for a girl who looks like she's still in high school.

I couldn't go into the office and act like everything was fine. Heck, the lights are so bright, everybody woulda known I'd been crying.

It's bad enough all the girls talk about is their kids. Kayla blah blah blah or Ethan blah blah blah. As if we know those kids, which we don't. Not one ever asks, "So, Marie. You got kids?" Oh, one or two maybe did, but they never bothered to find out why.

In between crying, I've been stuffing whatever I could find in my mouth. Tortilla chips. Peanuts. Oreos. Cocoa Puffs. A gallon of chocolate almond fudge. Digging out lumps and shoveling 'em freezing cold into my mouth so fast I barely taste the chocolate. I feel sick and disgusted with myself, which makes me start bawling all over again.

Then I think about everything I did for Vinnie. And what I gave up.



I knew I shouldn't go up to the attic. But I couldn't help myself.

Huffing and puffing up those steep little stairs, I was glad I hadn't got too fat to fit through the skinny spots where the stairs curve before you get to the top. Vinnie and me talked about making real stairs there a couple of times and finishing the attic. But what was the point? It was just the two of us. What did we need another room for?

We left the attic like it was, all rough. Kept our memories there, boxed up.

If Vinnie'd only left me, that would have been bad enough. But he had to say the thing about me being fat. And something else he didn't let out right off.

When I got to the attic, dust like small white bugs was floating around, as if it'd been waiting there

to choke me. At the top, you have to crouch down, because the ceiling's not very high. I inched forward, in a duck walk. Otherwise, I would've had to crawl.

It'd been years since I'd last climbed up there. Maybe I didn't want to see who I'd been once.

Lines of sweat were running down my face. I got to worrying that the sweat would mix with the dust and I'd end up a mess. That almost made me start bawling again. I had asked Vinnie did he want anything from the attic and he said, "No. It's just a bunch of junk."

The girl Vinnie left me for looked a little like I did once. I thought this after I'd duck walked over to the little window and started digging through the first box. Vinnie's girlfriend's hair was different, though, dyed a reddish brown.

Vinnie loved my hair, in the days when it was thick and dark. He played with it all the time. Made me mad because I'd spend a good hour heating up the curling iron and rolling – front, back, bottom, top – then combing and spraying and checking myself out with the hand mirror – back, front, sides – in the mirror on the closet door.

The photographs were stuffed in a manila envelope that had turned a yellow-brown. I'd meant to do something with them, buy a couple of albums and slide them into those little black corner stick-ems. But every time I thought about it, the project seemed like a big fat waste of time. People with kids made albums, so everybody could gather around on vacation with the grandparents and revisit old times.

Pictures had stuck together. The awful heat of that attic in summer had melted them into a glommy mess. I could see right off I needed to be careful or I'd lose Marie forever. I held a stuck pile in my hand, sure the minute I tried separating them, Marie's pretty face would get lifted off, leaving bits of colored paper and goo on the back of Vinnie's photograph.

Before I started, I thought, yes, that's right. That's what happened to Marie who was me once. Pretty Marie. Thin with dark curled hair and straight white teeth, who could wear anything. Short skirts. Tank tops.

And thinking this I got the hugest lump in my throat when I heard myself whisper, *bikinis*.

Vinnie plopped himself down on that beautiful girl and erased her. He grabbed her hair and smile, her fabulous body, and even the laugh that everyone liked, and glued himself on top. Then he stepped back and Marie was gone, little bits of her stuck to his backside. After thirty years of marriage, he decided one morning to brush her off.

Well, that did me in. There I was bawling in the attic, not caring if I got those dammed pictures all wet, so I made whatever was left of Marie run off. The sobbing welled up from my flabby gut that sometimes made me uncomfortable to sit and I was always yanking my blouse away from it, as if you might not notice how fat I was if I could get that material to stop sticking. I didn't need to try and pull those photographs apart. I knew from that very first clump. Seeing them stuck together like that. I'd ruined Marie. Totally screwed up her life. And I couldn't go back and fix her now. Not even to make myself feel better, to float around in the dream that I was Marie once, a girl that Vinnie and a thousand other guys could've loved.



I knew somewhere in that pile, a few inches down, I'd find the photographs of Marie when everything stopped. You might not even see it. Yes, that's right. We went to the shore, I remember that. Walking on the boardwalk, Vinnie had his camera. You couldn't tell yet but I knew and I'd told Vinnie. He'd said the right thing at first, "We'll get married, Marie." Only later, he changed his mind.

"I think we should wait," he said then.

So, we were walking on the boardwalk, and later that night in the car, when we'd gotten back to my house, Vinnie said, "Don't worry. I'll pay for it."

Just like that. I didn't know which way was up.

"We'll get married, Marie," he promised, seeing how I'd started to look. "But later. Later when I've made some money and we're more settled. We'll have kids then."

I didn't say anything, so he said, "We'll have two. A boy and a girl."

You can cry about something and think you're done but you're not. I'm Catholic and I might say that because I sinned and then made matters worse by sinning again after Vinnie said, *I'll pay for it*, God punished me the best way he knew how.

Oh, everything went as planned, I remember, my hands open and ready to dig through the frozen moments of Marie's life and find each place when that girl might have stopped. But I can see that beautiful sweet Marie was stuck to Vinnie from the start.

There he is on top. Like Marie, Vinnie was beautiful once. That wavy black hair he always made sure to comb. Those strong arms. And who could forget his smile?

Vinnie held Marie's hand, looked at her and smiled. And Marie lost whatever made her the girl that she was. The perfect hair. A figure to die for. High cheekbones. A size six shoe. Marie dribbled away into Vinnie. Or maybe it was the other way around, that Vinnie melted into her skin. And then they stuck. Whenever Vinnie wanted to get away, wanted out, all he had to do was step back and take Marie along with him, taking her skin and eventually that perfect hair and figure.

I wanted to cry again, because in a strange way the sobbing made me feel alive. If Marie had cried, maybe she would have changed her mind. I can picture her now – and I know there's not a single photograph of this – sitting at the edge of the bed, looking out the window. It was late October and the leaves on the maple tree had turned a deep red. She could feel the baby inside her, thought of it all curled up, naked, like a newborn kitten. Marie knew right then that baby was part of her, no matter what Vinnie said, that she was stuck to that baby even more than she was to Vinnie. And Marie felt happy, really happy, that she had made something truly miraculous happen. A miracle, like what she thought only saints could do.

But do you know what she did then? She told herself that she shouldn't be happy. There was a time and place for everything, wasn't that also what the Bible said, and this was Vinnie's time to get himself established, build up his sales and make something of his life. This was not the time for Marie to indulge some fantasy. Something needed to be done and Vinnie would pay for it, and that was that.

Marie's happiness turned into a dull ache that never really went away.

She didn't cry. Not that day or the day they went to the clinic. Not the rest of the afternoon when she bled or the day after when the bleeding trickled down to a few thin drops. And she didn't cry later, after she and Vinnie were married and the babies refused to come.

Instead, Marie ate. She ate three meals a day and snacked all day and night in between. She ate like there would be no food tomorrow. There was an empty place in her gut, and she kept eating and eating and eating, chewing and swallowing, licking and slurping, trying to fill that place. But she couldn't.

*Pregnant*, Vinnie said. Of everything, that one word hurt the most. The girl was *pregnant*. Vinnie felt it his duty to marry her. Plus, he wanted a child. We both knew I couldn't give him one.

I wanted to cry again but I couldn't. It was like when I was a kid and I'd cry and cry in my room, louder and louder, trying to make my mom feel guilty for not giving me what I wanted. If I could only cry long enough, eventually she would come. I was sure of this but it never happened. The crying exhausted me and after twenty minutes or so, I'd have to stop and yawn. Eventually, no matter how much I wanted to go on, there were no more tears left and, besides, I was too tired.

So, I thought, *Okay. What is it that you want?* You can't go back and save Marie or be her again or make it all right. You can cry the rest of your life and Vinnie won't give that girl up. Even if he did, you might not want him.

I pulled the top clump of photographs apart, easing the corners away from each other first, then gradually moving down. I cleared a space, and one by one, I set the separated photos on the floor.

Yes, I could see. Marie was a pretty girl and she'd had her time. She might have been me once, but then again, she might not.

I could give her an album now. I had time to kill, now that Vinnie was gone. There'd be nights I could sit and gaze at her. Drink a glass or two of wine. And bit by bit, I'd climb up to the attic and separate her from Vinnie a little more. Give her a chance to breathe. Away from all that dust.



## *Honeymoon with Pinocchio*

His naïveté so serialized & cagey & we fumbled like stray  
cats on acute angles. Honey, let your head drop way back &  
Timber. I believed his nose when it nuzzled the hinges of my  
knees we wailed like delirious oaks, chandeliers blazed  
in the divinity of our tarantella our pillowcases numb  
with indigo even crickets agreed that our once upon  
a time had more braying syllables than usual but I felt  
like a code breaker stuffed with canary feathers  
stumbling into the shadows of dreams this piecemeal  
map a white camellia behind each ear & the balm of his  
bread hat soaked with seawater to pat my throbbing temples  
how much can I fake in a field of miracles when  
he's plaited me with the slow snare of childhood.



## *Distill*

#

We're drinking tonight  
and thinking

about the drinking mind  
thinking.

It's all slop,  
but

so heart-  
forward.

# #

So the light  
through the glass,

through the whiskey,  
through the glass,

feels providential.  
The liquid gold

settles into  
golden summary,

offers clear proof  
of time's potential.

# # #

And there's the allure:  
the steady presence

among the dizzying  
spill

and swirl  
of everything.

# # # #

Do you love  
the irony?

The two of us  
slowly consuming

what has taken years  
to perfect, while

what has taken years  
to perfect

is slowly  
consuming us?

## *The Dry Season*

Can you name those brown birds?  
They've taken the last of the blackberries  
from the strangled patch by the fence.

In the eastward slide of shade,  
we sit on this patio, slumped,  
watching the birds come and go,

while in the garden, pale lettuce  
has gone to seed and beans hang limp  
like fingers of fallen angels.

You stir your iced tea, lazily  
and lazier still. Some droplets  
of condensation on our glasses

mirror tiny images of the two of us  
warped again by weather.  
The droplets hold, the droplets hold,

then let go and slide to the tabletop,  
dampening the micro-thin blanket of dust,  
then drying slowly into nothing.

The droplets can't speak, of course.  
But since we are in them, partially,  
for their short downward journey,

I want them to carry some kind of truth,  
as I want the clouds sliding seaward  
to chime in with some kind of certainty.

We are so drought weary, you and I.  
It's as if, trying to measure the difference  
between what is and what can be

in this time without rain, we've quietly  
crossed the heart's continental divide  
and called love something less.

Sweetheart, the world wants us to believe  
the worst of what we've done.  
I can't say why. In every dry season,

the world encourages us, in subtle ways,  
to cave to the old hankerings  
of our tongue-flicking reptilian brains.

But the birds, these small, brown,  
beautifully feathered beings, speak  
in opposition, say, *Hold steady*.

Remember how breaking in broken moments  
worked out for us the last time?  
Wait for rain. Wait for rain.

Hold steady. Watch the birds rise  
and fly and settle. Watch them.  
Watch them work this terrain.



## Sunday

We stress the stress  
we feel in the strained world.

The quick and the tense silently  
sidling against the slow and luxuriant.

A priest presents the delicate host  
in a soft, droning, sing-song voice,

*The body of Christ* sounding  
like a lonely plea against the void.

We kneel, we stand, we kneel, we stand.  
We clamber over the mind's stone scree

between embitterment and awe,  
our footsteps following the daylight's dark,

aiming to link body and imagined soul,  
dust and gold. In the evening,

the tired plowman turns  
at the end of a furrow and digs again,

row by uneasy row,  
while out on the gray-green sea

the wind rakes the heaving waves  
into broken ocean spray and sky.

We study these varied couplets,  
as we feed and shift with the day,

aiming to discern why this world  
always seems to love linking

rhythm and ache.

*Artist: Beth Horton*  
*Contemplation*



## *Hands Fall Like Dying Butterflies*

Let's call this love: the waves folding over your head  
like the wings of a tent flap, the suffocating confines  
of warm blankets in a morning you don't remember entering  
the heavy arm of a stranger thrown over your chest that won't let you go.  
This, let's call this last breath: home, the sinking resignation

of concrete boots pulling you across the threshold into the kitchen  
the anchors that tie you to the stove, the ballast bags of screaming children  
that know who you are and why you're here  
even if you don't. Here, this place you belong

we'll draw a circle around it on the map  
so you know where you're supposed to be, a tiny point engulfed  
in winged possibility that you will never know, those dreams  
will not be allowed to hatch.  
There are alarms set to different times all through this house  
and your feet know when and where to take you to answer them all.



## *Landscapes of the Disregarded*

My mother collected the ordinary—  
bobbins and broken corkscrews,  
salmon bones and blurry  
photographs of corn fields—  
to make one day her masterpiece:  
“Landscape of the Disregarded.”

She sprained her back one morning  
in July to nab an RC Cola bottlecap;  
it felt heavy in her hands,  
heavy enough to have conveyed  
the wishes of a boy who later died  
from cancer in Nebraska.

I recall her sitting on a lawn chair,  
sipping iced tea and forming stories  
out of nothing—signed plaster  
someone had forgotten, a recipe  
for turnips and onions brought over  
from a century a continent beyond.

She labeled mothballs and hoarded  
Topps commons, remembering  
the housecleaner’s husband  
and her first and only trip  
to Fenway Park, where Ted Williams  
hit a slider so hard the world,

she said, winced. There was so much  
she needed, so much of use to her  
I felt myself small, a boy in a footnote  
in a library book, some chapter  
some minor author had discarded  
in a windstorm decades before.

As a very old woman she counted  
grains of rice and kernels of corn,  
certain each contained a history,  
and if she waited, if she were wise,  
great symbols would rise. Jerry Lewis,  
Billie Holiday, or Eydie Gormé.

The bygone beckoned to her  
like a flimsy kite; it forced her to see  
what we could not: beauty in detritus,  
cigarette butts, alabaster limbs,  
the sky over Omaha bursting  
into one last thunderstorm.





Artist: Bill Wolak  
*A Fleeting Temporal Displacement*



## *Forbidden Fruit*

“Instead of sex,”  
his father cautioned,  
“eat an orange.”

It seldom worked.

Many years later,  
he tells me of his father’s  
disregarded advice,  
as I peel away the knobby,  
firm skin of a blood orange,  
*(his gift)*

surprised to find pockets  
of juice the color of  
pomegranates running  
through its fruit.  
Ruby juices trickle  
upon my fingers,  
and into my startled mouth--  
the taste is sweetly bitter,  
and unlike any orange  
I have eaten before.

I think of Eve,  
suppress a shudder,  
and lick the juice  
from my hands.



## *What the Poet is Supposed to Write about a Hurricane*

What the poet is supposed to write about a hurricane  
should be skylights of horror,  
not skip rocks of beauty in wailing walls of wind,  
affixed to the purple puzzle pieces of the vortex eye,  
spinning like a lost continent's soul.  
How the lively whips stun the mouths of gravity,  
hissing without hesitation,  
engulfing the stench of uprooted dirt and grass.  
But, the poet is not supposed to write that.  
The poet should decode the stanzas,  
shudder the names Irma & María,  
into frail syllables:  
to wish hurricanes fast and gritty deaths,  
not say their stubborn slow dances  
held pretty possibilities and mysteries.

## *The Day Off*

It begins with a simple sigh that had turned sour,  
a dangerous desire for your yelling to bleed through the universe.  
The army-green prophet writes it down:  
First: skip teaching classes at the university;  
Second: ditch your French lessons too;  
Third: go to the early show at the movies and buy the jumbo popcorn, pretzel, and cherry Icee;  
Fourth: binge read those grab bag books; skip toss the happy endings;  
Fifth: saunter to the gardens and stroll through the mazes like a lost balloon;  
Sixth: eagle-eye the street vendors as they battle bargain with customers;  
the night comes rather suddenly, without edges;  
Seventh: look: the dark matter of the moon.

## *The Egret in San Juan*

On my way to campus in the cool calm dark,  
I spy a flash of white along the ragged concrete:  
an egret looking like a lost child.  
How we ended up in such a foreign place, I wonder.  
Yet, we have carved this world into our own image  
like Wordsworth's yellow daffodils folding  
themselves into burnt orange blossoms  
in Caribbean gardens.  
I see us this morning as tandem souvenirs of survival—  
you: the graceful wanderer,  
me: the marching explorer.





*Artist: Fabio Sassi, Imaginary Map 1 (top), Imaginary Map 2 (bottom)*



## *Wedding Day*

*-for Robin*

Rain blurred the windshield  
as we drove north through a landscape  
we'd never seen before, spring pastures

brimming in the evening light. And if, as they say,  
rain is good luck on a wedding day, then we shall  
be deluged with an embarrassment of fortune.

Love, let me sleep in the wipers' metronome  
while you drive us through this new land  
through which we pass like strangers.

## Grandfathers

### *two oral mysteries*

I should have asked my mother's father  
how he dared to leave Naples alone at twelve  
or did he have to? and what? pay his fare how?  
or stowaway on a ship until at Ellis Island  
he charmed or rushed or waited or dealt to enter  
America and went where? a little Italian boy  
lost in the lower East Side of Manhattan  
I had heard from my aunt when we went  
to see *The Godfather* he found jobs 'cause *Pop*  
she swore without my asking *madonn!*  
was no Mafioso; he worked until he owned  
a haberdashery—and sent for his sisters  
and brothers from Italy, saved his profits  
until when the market crashed he bought  
the real estate that made him a millionaire.  
That's all I know because I never asked him  
in between courses with decanted glasses  
of Gallo jug wine and his White Owl cigars  
at Sunday dinners how honestly he did it all—  
enough that the fortune's dregs still spill my way.

I should have asked my father's father  
about his Dutch East Indies Army  
years suppressing, with his back  
to Singapore, Aceh's freedom  
fighters who would turn out to be  
my husband's own forebears,  
and about the campaign in Algeria when, a  
Foreign Legionnaire, he captured a band  
of Arab brigands dangerous enough to earn  
the Legion of Honor button he wore  
on the three-piece suits he donned every day  
in our basement where he settled eventually,  
about where he was born and bred to war,  
about coming to America, about marrying  
the beautiful Swede and if he saw her drink  
herself to death, about how he fell in love  
with the operas he listened to every Saturday  
on the radio with Milton Cross at the Met, but  
he was just a retired bellhop who knew little  
of the literature and philosophy I studied so  
what I thought had I to learn from him?



## Generation

I will tell you about creation, yours—  
this is our pleasure, a way of feeding the fragile volute heart.  
This is a woman's thing, dreaming of a bird flown into the mouth,

maybe a crossbill overlapped by heredity quirk. It does not study sex  
but starves for want, like any quickened being.

The waters were rising though we didn't hear because of flocks and gales,  
salt we threw over our shoulders, soft swishing of a broom  
and in our palms, tender heads of roses, garnet drops of blood, that fairytale.

You grew by candles left virgin but glowing in a foreign dark.  
Under the skin, a seed swelled into lungs, brain, a whole island apart.

With the pride of a generation, I keep telling you of birth,  
how you slid in a pulsing mass from me, who was blooded and queened.  
What sorrow to bask in a cold future, seeking another kind of light.



*Artist: Bill Wolak*  
*Breathless as the Softest Kiss*

## *Choosing the Best Option*

There are too many choices  
off the trail, and he considers  
them all—behind the scrub brush  
for privacy, under the juniper tree  
for shade, down by the stream  
for cleanliness, or up  
in that large crevice between  
those boulders because no one  
would look up there, so I could  
take my time—as if leisure  
were a priority here.

He is about to point to another  
possibility, obviously absorbed  
in the options. But this is my  
choice; I am all about expediting  
relief and have a better plan,  
telling him to turn around  
and keep guard, while I face  
the opposite direction  
to scout for oncoming hikers  
in the middle of the trail.



## *Snowy Egret*

Unmoving as a palace guard.  
Only the afternoon wind  
ruffling the feathers of its crown  
and a blinking eye  
betray the egret's statue ruse.  
Braced on golden slippers  
against the swirling current,  
poised to strike it bides its time,  
unmindful of the osprey circling overhead  
or the cat that roams the shoreline.  
Waiting for a destined fish to keep  
its appointment in Samarra,  
this egret knows nothing of philosophers or saints,  
but it does understand the geometry of tides  
and the symmetry of survival.  
I could learn the secrets  
of patience and silent devotion  
sitting beside a pond in spring.



Artist: Renée Cohen  
*Arboreal Reflections of a Distant Sea*

## *thanks, and godspeed—*

*after the spacecraft Cassini*

you did not know that you would not return  
The best of us, collaboration of the finest parts that traveled  
far beyond the warm worlds to the snow line—the endless  
tumult of the early gases raining diamonds, a world of sculpted  
rings a billion miles away, of pure white ice and ice clouds,  
of doomed moons, extraordinary forms—the ever closer  
orbits into gravity from which you can't return, no surface  
you can stand on, the spike and then the tumbling, running  
out of fuel, the final dive, spectacular, the rupture catastrophic,  
the last command a final thought of home—the fly-by  
that will find in highest resolution  
suffering is a circle

## *sometime before long he'd been here*

left  
on the ledge  
my pair of patent shoes  
—left  
the paper I was writing  
on the desk—left  
the page at the chapter  
where I slept—left  
on at the desk  
the little light in my head—left  
footprints in the kitchen—left  
his mouth on the sink—left  
a glass of water  
half or full—left  
the drawer of the chest  
hanging open—left  
his fingers in the silk—left  
scent where he pleased—left  
the burden, bed

## *Dream of a Different River*

*"I don't believe in boundaries..." -Stephen Hawking, Brief Answers*

Homes, David, may be where the hearth is, but  
crossing Susquehanna was too much

for either of us; we should have sought  
recumbent fords where the water

felt too deep, a swollen bridge  
too slack to skirt past an eddy, we should

have crossed by night only, by the seams  
of the frosted moss, by the folding eddies

of that flow blue white in its melting light  
forgetting we could have bathed - could we have? -

was it here? - fathoming only depth.  
David, listen: what's a river but

covert flow? Or hidden purport, current's dither,  
canny depth repelling all that's light?

Or is it because what we think we know  
we've simply grown to expect

that we see barely the suspension  
of a surface: like a hyperbolic

lens, like a home we needn't get to,  
at least not too soon. We should

have thought of this, I think: not now,  
nor ever, will we catch that light below.



## *A Black Hole Where My Mother Was*

socks and keys friends' names kids  
pitch from recognition over the edge  
of this flat world handkerchief sized  
and horrifying yes though anything  
you wanted gone also disappears sins  
debts and hurts swirling like maple  
helicopters weightless yet compelled  
into that immense consuming absence  
that reverses your history days years  
every fact compressed into invisibility  
interring what's you and never filled  
though a residue of childhood hovers  
at the horizon a beginning light before  
the chance of an afterwards went missing



*Artist: Jim Zola  
Melting Image*

## *Primping for Tests in Radiology and Nuclear Medicine*

I stare at my bare face --  
the equivalent of worrying  
about clean underwear  
after a car wreck. No one will  
see me but bored technicians  
and other patients robed  
in identical gowns, yellow booties.  
I feel I should make an effort,  
a bit of foundation,  
some blusher to fake good health.  
I ponder what to do about my eyes.  
My eye shadow palette offers  
fashion tips for just the right guise.  
*How to be beautifully nude  
for your bone scan! For a smoking  
hot Stage IV Cancer look, blend  
buff all over the eye lid from lash line  
to brow, then dial it up for your CT  
of the abdomen and chest  
with a shimmery shade in the corner  
and center of your eyelid.  
This instantly makes your eyes appear  
bigger and brighter so you can say:  
"What Cancer?"*



## *Daddy's Bait*

If I'd lived in the Florentine scheme  
instead of being a 12-year-old from Alabama,  
I might have treated insect souls worse--  
penned them in rings where they'd clamber over each other  
smeared with shit and dodging fire--

but this little homemade box  
set just inside the camp house door,  
wood-framed, wire-meshed, 1' x 1' x 1',  
was enough *Inferno* for crickets  
doomed to wait for a fish hook through the gut

and enough to make me puzzle over  
where to move the hellacious chirruping  
so I could sleep at least  
part of a May night in Etowah County.

Not outside on the blackberry-winter porch  
where I feared half might die of exposure before morning,  
trapped in the open, so to say,

so I thought to put them in the next room of the shack  
I slept in some nights, on the empty bed,  
and we'd huzz to sleep in tandem.

But a half hour later,  
my eyes grown itchy at a scraping of legs,  
I changed my mind, took the bait  
in hand and outside, released  
and returned them to grace after all,

left them to find their own warmth in the early greening.  
Latchhook lifted, the chance that I might  
see my father's wrath unlocked  
at losing his power to let things die  
made the risk worthwhile.





## *Explosions*

the books on his shelves  
were all owls perched in daylight  
and he roamed the room  
with a frantic mad energy  
as if everything outside  
were on fire with wolves.

and the day was sinking  
into night on a wire;  
those evenings like photographs  
of falling brick walls.  
and his fingers played his arms  
like an off-key piano  
and fiddled uncomfortably  
with the cuffs of his sleeves.  
and the bed sat empty  
with the air of a broken car.

she had told him  
she'd had enough  
and he'd told her  
go home  
and she'd gone home  
and that was it - a bottle of wine  
open for dinner  
which he drank, watching himself,  
imagining life in a movie.

things end - they do -  
without any explosions. he had planned  
such a wonderful week.



*D.S. Maolalai*

## ***Brass Bells***

she came in  
angry, banging at 1am,  
and things didn't get better  
even after she'd knocked over a chair  
thrown away her coat  
and kicked closed  
the oven door. she never  
normally  
wore shoes in the house,  
so keeping them on  
you could tell  
she'd been planning  
to kick things. I'd been on the bed  
but had to get up  
and say something,  
try and stop her  
before she put her hand  
through a painting  
which was drying in the sink  
or deleted from my computer  
any more poems.  
might as well  
try to stop  
brass bells from clanging  
by rattling them.



*Artist: Melanie Faith  
Knock Knock*

## *Ghost of the Post Office*

*Translated by Toshiya Kamei*

Maybe memory finds you around that corner,  
then you can't walk through the Alameda.  
With just your eyes to shield the sun,  
you can't turn it into luminous dust  
and spread it on your lover's body in turn.  
You can't fill it with light, you, or your fears.  
You need to go away  
somewhere else like a postage stamp.

## *El fantasma del correo*

Quizás en aquella esquina el recuerdo te encuentre,  
entonces, no podrás caminar por la Alameda  
sin más recipiente que tus ojos para esconder el sol,  
no podrás tornarlo en polvo luminoso  
y esparcirlo en el cuerpo de tu amante en turno,  
no podrás llenarlo de luz, de ti y de tus miedos.  
Es necesario huir  
como timbre postal hacia un destino incierto.

## *Seventh Summer*

I am sitting in a chair in a yellow room,  
in a house in a village at the end of an orbit  
swept around the sun these many times.  
The memories, the many people I used to be,  
cannot keep up and they fall away  
but the house rings deep now with variations  
of light and shadow and your nearness in this space.  
Reading and sitting by open windows, waiting for breezes.  
We drink iced tea, we watch the deer eating our garden--  
late greenery, the edges of the leaves  
already starting to change.  
Somehow we have always been turning.





*Artist: Jim Zola  
Collage with Bird*

## *Fourth Base*

Our diamond was gold and soft as rosin,  
good for sliding,  
yet for every run we made we nearly died.  
For our diamond had a single flaw,  
a fourth base no one ever touched,  
but each had to pass on his way to glory.  
I loved the sure, straight lines,  
the sweet smell of my pitcher's glove,  
the sound of crickets written through the grass.  
The rules we knew by heart,  
but when you passed that fourth base,  
you crossed yourself twice or you died.  
A perfect line, invisible but there,  
to St. Gerard's fire escape, where  
Mary Croix hanged herself in mystery.  
That was fourth base.  
Still I return here, late at night,  
when moonlight wounds my heart to memory,  
cross myself, forgive that metal skeleton,  
then walk the bases, one by one,  
those high and hopeful errands we once ran  
that seemed to forever promise home.

## *Endless This War*

A decade ago  
Heidi and I stood with protest signs  
declaring this war  
endless  
with collective action and snippets  
of verse on posterboard and sticks  
our arms were tired  
we were tired

My students have never lived  
in this country at peace  
they were born in conflict  
absorbed war in their bones until  
violence was as routine as breath

And the street sign in Austin  
has been graffitied  
STOP the war  
and the tanks are tired  
and the Jeeps keep rolling through

Not hearing the poems  
Not seeing the children



## *Name*

I called myself a former name that night  
as if a stranger stood with me, and wrote  
the words I read aloud. I shed my skin  
to stand there on my own within the world.

A better man would understand the cause,  
placing blame on something dark and strange,  
power that cowers back  
and shrinks from the day's full light.

Or maybe it was just a simple fluke,  
power surging in the chemistry  
that builds our cells and brings to mind  
what we think we have forgotten.

Perhaps the truth is somewhere in between,  
like clouds inverting from a sky  
to wash a steaming city clean  
after long and fallow years.

## *Kissing the Buddha*

I wasn't kissing the blarney  
stone—not lining up to climb  
to that spit-stained rock. I wouldn't

kiss dogs, their teeth shining,  
their little spiked feet scraping  
my legs. Boys, yes, I loved

brown eyes and hands speckled  
with paint. All summer boys carried  
paint cans and pulled stray corn

out of fields of beans. Who was  
the guy with a red heart instead  
of a shift knob and a pair of linked

hearts embossed on the inside roof  
of his car? That's the deep past now,  
that insouciance, that I'll-keep-kissing,

giddy, full of blarney phase. I remember  
hugging my plastic Buddha, telling it  
secrets, kissing its belly and laughing face.

## *For a Poet Dead Ten Years*

She walked like a duchess in exile,  
shoes wrong for the snowy day, glance  
like a snake's unblinking gaze.

I thought the world was enough,  
browned leaves, yards crowded  
with trees, snow's willful disregard.

Her shadow flew toward me  
and caught me. She was whistling,  
caroling, song carried by wind.

Today the Bradford pears bloom,  
lovely and ominous, ready to blot out  
the native pears. I read the last poem

in the last book. I kiss the page. I hate  
the forms hope takes, weights  
on the floor, piles of books beside them.

That tinny ringing must be blood  
sinking and rising. Light slides over  
the door jamb. Petals fall like snow.





*Artist: Steven Ostrowski  
After the Trail Beyond the Path*



## *Autumn*

Autumn is like a preamble  
laconic in intent but prevails  
over passages strewn with  
contradictory flourishes and  
steals upon a reader's choice  
to stop and contemplate the  
stasis in which leaves collect  
in circles wedging footsteps  
memory is a bare branch  
a sentence unable to complete  
bark's reluctant embrace  
saving it from a wind  
shutting a book behind  
a window where brown ants  
continue spading cervics,  
chapters invented along  
a shadow waiting on nude  
pages without any closure.

## *Type Writer*

From the start, we should have seen it  
coming, the letters flying forward, pressing

their impressions onto the paper, the motion  
of the hand changed. As if it were no longer

unmechanical, but yet . . . how we loved the sound  
of the *click-clack*, fast faster, as if the sound blended

together. And then, do you remember the reach  
for the cigarette, the journalist's prop?

Or was it? Was it,  
rather, remembering the hand reaching for the pen,

feeling the paper underneath? As if that break—the breath,  
the exhale of smoke—were time to ponder before

the writing started again. That leaning back  
as if into the past, with its ink and well, with its

curved letters that morphed into art. Can we type  
art? Can we blend the human act into the machine?

Have we?



## Origami

In the womb, cells  
multiply, divide,  
morph  
into familiar shapes—  
a head, a tail,  
tiny paws that paddle

in the amniotic fluid.  
A creature turns  
at the end  
of its tether.  
Pushes into air,  
and still the cells

divide.  
The body expands,  
and its brain,  
folding  
and unfolding,  
neurons extending,  
pruning back,

and re-extending,  
filling up  
the skull.  
And the life that's  
formed, the dreams,  
the various realities

that ramify—  
travel, affairs,  
divorces—  
creating  
a world,  
creasing and folding

and refolding me,  
shaping my  
creaturely self.  
Do I become a wolf  
or a frog  
or a crane flying?

## *Grief of Light*

On this blinding day, on this sun-whitened Sofia street,  
I see this city will go on after I die  
just as it did - and does - after my father died.  
And July will return as many times as it takes to make  
permanent  
light.

## *A Friday in October*

The morning after we had recovered our love, the sunrise  
had raised unseeable sheets of gold in the air.  
The light had bathed in the heavenly river.

For those who have entered its water,  
no end is there, only  
a wreathing of a door.





Artist: Jodie Filan  
All Seeing Eye



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