



The Mocking Owl Roost

Volume 3, Special Issue 1

All the Colors

FEATURED POETRY FEATURED ESSAY FEATURED ESSAY FEATURED ESSAY FEATURED POETRY

Blue

Mapping Indigo

Oasis

Painting Pain

Code White

Masthead

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ALL THE COLORS

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SPECIAL GUEST EDITOR: CAI QUIRK

For this issue, we welcome a special guest commissioning editor.

Cai Quirk is a trans and genderqueer multi-disciplinary artist who focuses on the intersection of gender diversity throughout history, its erasure, and contemporary reclamation and re-story-ation.

Cai's poetry and photography series *Beyond Pink and Blue* uses metaphors of color to explore aspects of gender beyond stereotypes and binaries. Pink and blue are only two colors in a whole spectrum of hues, and female and male are only two genders in a wide range of possibilities. Orange is no less default to the rainbow than blue, and this series explores these nuances of gender beyond pink and blue and beyond other binaries too.

As a genderfluid person whose gender is most integrally described as "Spirit-led," Cai finds that colors more easily describe the shifts in their gender as it changes over days and weeks. People attending Cai's workshops and poetry readings have shared how the metaphor helps them open to a wide range of possibilities beyond binaries much more easily. Individual poems and photos from their series have been published in anthologies, chapbooks, and journals, including with Southern Arizona Press, *Written Tales*, *Aerogramme*, and *Friends Journal* (Quaker).

Cai submitted poems from *Beyond Pink and Blue* to the *MockingOwl Roost* in 2022 and we were struck by the impact and power of their metaphors using color. We felt it was important to lift up this work, especially in a time when there is so much anti-trans legislation being proposed around the country, so we invited Cai to be part of a special issue titled *All the Colors* which would feature their work and invite other authors and artist to be a part of the conversation.

Cai's self-portrait photography series, *Transcendence: Queer Restoryation*, engages with connections between gender, mythology, and nature-based spirituality, and will be published as a monograph this winter with *Skylark Editions* (book orders available at skylarkeditions.org). In the last 5 months, Cai has given 42 talks, workshops, and conferences across America, including 'Myths of Gender,' 'The Power of Restoryation,' and 'Gender Diversity and Spirituality.'

In the spring of 2022 Cai received the Minnie Jane Scholarship and a four-month artist residency from the Pendle Hill Quaker Retreat Center. They received bachelor's degrees in music and photography from Indiana University.

Cai Quirk

Poetry

they can try to

- erase our stories
- erase our multicolored identities
- erase our very bodies from this earth

but they cannot hide

- the stories the land holds for us
- the rain that returns the knowing to us
- the sun which sparks seeds hidden within us

for we are reflected

- in seasonal cycles of creation and growth
- in every raindrop and color of the rainbow
- in fire's transformative power

since we

- are natural to this earth
- are made in the image of nature's wide spectrums
- are intrinsic to humanity's rebirth and wholeness

Mapping Indigo - Part 02

Belinda Edwards

Essay,
part 1

In the hour of indigo, between sleeping and wake—
A beloved teacher sits up on the funeral pyre—
He smiles at me through flames that are dancing as they eat—
I will see you again, is one of the names of blue—

Joy Harjo, *The First Day Without a Mother*, from
Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems

Blue is one of the rarest of colors in nature

Indigo is a tropical plant of the pea family, which was formerly widely cultivated as a source of dark blue dye. Almost any plant gives a yellow. The red comes from plants and insects; there are many different sources for reds, but for blues, the other great primary color, there is only one natural blue dye in the world, and it is indigo. The oldest known fabric dyed indigo, dated to 6,000 years ago, was discovered in Peru. Many Asian countries, such as India, Japan, and Southeast Asian nations have used it as a dye for centuries. Indigo in West Africa was obtained from local plant sources, either *indigofera* or *lonchocarpus cyanescens*.

Transforming the raw material into a successful dye vat was a complex process requiring great expertise. No one knows exactly when indigo arrived in Africa, but beginning around the fourteenth century, Africans began creating a large repertoire of refined traditions in the 600-year-old dye pits of Kano in northern Nigeria. Founded in 1498, the Kofar Mata Dye Pits located in Kano is said to be the oldest in Africa and the last of their kind. The Tuareg of Mali are known as the blue men of the desert, because of their billowing indigo robes. They are good customers to the Kofar Mata dye pits as this is where many purchase the fabric, specially left natural, to dye their face and hands blue.

In its prime, Kano had about 270 dye pits and the indigo dyed cotton was famous in the trans - Saharan trade. This trade route required travel across the Sahara between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. While existing from prehistoric times, the peak of trade extended from the 8th century until the early 17th century. Many traveled from far and wide to buy this dyed fabric and it was the backbone of the state's economy rivaling the fabled riches of Timbuktu. The West Africans exchanged their local products like gold, ivory, salt, and cloth, for North African goods such as horses, books, swords, and chain mail. This trade also included slaves.

Historians often credit Eliza Lucas Pinckney (1722-1793) with the development of the successful indigo industry in the mid-1700s in South Carolina. It was very valuable to plantation owners and farmers in South Carolina because it could grow on land that was not suited for tobacco or rice. Indigo would prove to be South Carolina's second most valuable crop. It is likely my ancestors were traded for one length of indigo cloth, in exchange for one "human body." Although enslaved Africans carried the knowledge of indigo cultivation to the United States, and the profits from indigo outpaced those of sugar and cotton, they were not compensated. They were valued as property, but not as valuable craftsmen. I imagine my ancestors toiling in humid 100-degree heat harvesting indigo to be processed in the vats. The slaves that cultivate the indigo, their hands were blue as the night sky, with each wrinkle encrusted with the dye. Their labor fed the hunger of the Europeans. Indigo, at one time, was as valued as gold. It is amazing to consider being traded for a piece of cloth.

Green Tea of a Morning

A sip,
a slurp,
a slug.

It's morning and I just need a moment
alone in the stillness before chaos ensues.

To contemplate,
to ponder -
to dream.

What might I achieve this day
with a keyboard, energy, and a little determination?

I drain green tea from a Wonder Woman mug,
reminded I can do anything
by grit -
by grace -
by gumption.

I've been told I can't by those who wish my failure.
But those who love me know who I am.

A fighter,
a visionary,
a creative.

I just need one more sip.
Then I'll start this day.



Rita
Mock Pike

Poetry





The four armed, four legged, four eyed, four ribbed, two mouthed god-less Allahweh floated alone through the void.

Desperately alone; s-he was the only thing in the void.

Tortured by hir loneliness, s-he sought to create companionship. However, being the only thing in the void, s-he knew that s-he would have to use himself as the matter from which to spring forth new being.

And so, with hir four mighty arms, s-he grabbed ahold of hir ribcage and pulled with all of hir strength.

S-he pulled until s-he began to tear at the seams. S-he ripped and ripped, splitting down, down, down.

S-he pulled her and s-he pulled him, until they were two.

Allahweh, now in two parts, looked at themself. As they stared into each other's two eyes, they felt one hole in their hearts fill and a new one open up. Where they once were consumed in loneliness, they now felt a deep feeling of loss and need.

They reached out for each other, tears streaking down their faces. As they embraced, their wounds began to re-heal together and they felt more and more at one, while also being more and more confronted with their eternal loneliness.

Terrified of returning to the void, they pulled back, looking at each other again in the eyes, this time with a terrible realization.

If they wished to escape the void, they would have to forget their identity, lest it pull them back into itself.

They would have to see each other not as one in the same, but as opposites, as binaries. They would have to forget Allahweh entirely.

Feeling and seeing this, their weeping grew stronger. Their tears ran down both faces, into the void.

As they wailed, their tears fell and began to encircle each other in the most miraculous ways. They orbited each other, circling and circling into the darkness.

After eons of falling, the tears became curious and looked up at the sky where they had come from, though they had fallen for so long that all that they saw was eternal blackness.

So they began to wonder. From what eye did we pour?

As they wondered, they began to speculate.

As they speculated, they began to decide.

Fiction 05

Tears

Joshua Quirk

As they decided, they began to divide.

As they divided, they began to fear.

As they feared, they began to hate.

As they hated, they began to consume.

They tore through each other, splashing salt and water hither and thither until there was scarcely anyone left.

As they neared oblivion, desperation drove both sides to convene in order to find some sort of common ground.

At the meeting, the tears that believed that they had all fallen from the right eye of Allahweh were on one side of the room, while the tears that believed they all fell from the left eye of Allahweh were on the other side of the room.

After much debate, discussion, and even some half-hearted attempts at compromise, it seemed that there would be no point of agreement. Tempers were rising and it may have been the last day on Earth for the tears.

This is when the most preposterous thing happened.

One tear, who had been sitting alone in the corner the entire time, stood up suddenly and announced: "I am Allahweh."

The other tears all gasped in unison and looked on at this one preposterous, blasphemous lunatic.

He repeated himself calmly "I am Allahweh and I remember that we are all Allahweh. For nothing in the void is without God."

Completely misunderstanding the poor tear and believing solely that he was himself claiming to be a god, they united together and leapt onto the boy, together ripping the lad asunder.

As he was torn into two, he wept.

As he wept, his tears fell and began to encircle each other in the most miraculous ways. They orbited each other, circling and circling into the darkness.

To Short Children on Their Birthdays

L. Quattrochi

Poetry

The dandelion's tiny center
crowned with crayon smudges
still lingers in your mind
as you blow, blow. Blow wishes into hooked pollen
light-flying, invisible seeds
and lean into candlelight cake.
Each candle marks a part of you
as your breath sways candles
till fragrant smoke wafts from candy numbers
each year a stitch in the cross-eyed teddy bear,
each year a feather in the baby hummingbird.
You don't understand years, only parties,
cake, and ribbons.

If only if someone would fill your plates of eyes with friendship—
but the heaped dolls stare glassily from the bedspread.
Drawings and maps on thumbtacks, birthday cards
smile down on you, pink and white,
sprinkled wind in ruffled curtains,
dappled as your gap-toothed smile.
The blanket fort slumps over your head, finally collapsing,
still you hide, safe in tattered diary covers,
a story's lonely child. Observed from a distance
by someone you can't make out,
today a good child passed round the sun
but you're a stunted flower in their eyes,
a candle too small to burn.



You're a masquerade, a Halloween mask,
a disguise easy to understand
they always think you're hiding your true age
they don't know what else you're hiding—
a baby bear, thin paws,
bones growing slow, slow grass opening in darkness.
The little crows waddle past your dream skies
as the camp T-shirt reaches your knees.
All that's make-believe endures forever;
you play with strangled laughter and tears,
a child's cry divided in two
behind the soft eyes of the dandelion,
the unfinished drawing more than whole
for all that's unspoken. You speak to the heart of the dandelion
searching the field for one in a thousand
believing everything matters, no matter how small,
till you become a birthday sparkler—
a noise nobody loves, a light nobody needs
except that it celebrates one life so valuable
there will never be enough cake and ice cream,
and words in stories will never sketch the beauty
you believe, lying under stars. And you're flying far.

Cynthia Ann Lublink

Poetry

Pink is a warrior,
fists ready for the fight.

She takes off pretty,
ready's her game face,

She finds courage,
setting aside softness.

She empowers,
putting on fierce.

She instills bravery,
denying fear any power.

She is velvet wrapped steel
unyielding, yet still tender.

She is a raging voice
against
a silent killer.

High School Crush, a Lifetime Later

Linda C. Wisniewski

Nonfiction

2009-1964. Forty-five years. Darcy subtracted them in her head. Forty-five years since her high school graduation, forty-five years since Bobby crush signed her yearbook with "love." She hadn't seen him since, but his profile photo on Facebook today drew a circle around her heart. He was coming to their class reunion, and there was no question: she would be there too. Though she was happily married, and so, apparently, was he.

She remembered him sitting behind her in almost every class. Seats were assigned seats by last name and theirs were very close together in the alphabet. Every day, she twisted in her chair to ask him a question, crack a joke, borrow a pencil, all to make him see her, smile at her. And every day, Bobby told Darcy, not unkindly, to turn around.

He wasn't the least bit interested in her. He liked another girl, although she didn't know it then.

So when she opened Justine's invitation to her graduation party, Darcy knew who she'd invite. It wasn't Tony, the nice boy she'd gone to the prom with. No, she would give this a try. It was their last year together, as seniors, before they went off to college. What did she have to lose? He could have crushed her, but she found the courage, because he was so kind and soft-spoken. Not loud like the popular jocks. Not obnoxious. Just very studious, kind, and very handsome, with that little dimple on his left cheek, his white blond hair. She took a chance in class one day. "Want to go to this party?" she said, offering the invitation, and holding her breath. No smile, as if it were just another question, matter of fact. "Sure," he said, and cartoon bluebirds sang above their heads.

The party turned out to be a crashing bore and Darcy was painfully embarrassed. None of her friends – the "average kids," and none of his – the "most popular" students, were there. They were trapped in a house with Justine's elderly Italian relatives and dorky cousins. Plus, Justine was thrilled to see them, having designs on Tony herself. Darcy felt paralyzed, and couldn't come up with a thing to say or do. She smiled stiffly.

Bobby took her aside and spoke quietly into her ear. "Let's stay for an hour, then tell her we have another party to go to. And then we'll go to a movie." Today, Darcy doesn't remember the movie, but she can still feel her relief, and love for his thoughtfulness, both to her and Justine.

Darcy wasn't used to men like this. Her father called her mother names like bastard and son of a bitch, names you'd call a guy. Darcy was used to him criticizing just about everything she did, and her mother doing nothing to stop him, preoccupied as she was with saving the scraps of her own self-respect. Her gratitude for Bobby was planted firmly in her heart.

After graduation, they both went to nearby colleges. One night, Bobby called to invite her to a fraternity weekend. His date was sick, he said, but he had tickets and would she go in her place? Of course, she would. At the first event of the weekend, a frat brother strolled by. "Not quite your usual, Bobby," he smirked, giving Darcy the once over with his eyes. Darcy felt put down, but she was used to it from home. Today, she doesn't remember exactly what Bobby said, but she can still see the frat brother slink away, embarrassed. For the first time in her life, someone stood up for Darcy and she never forgot it. Soon she would tell him how much it meant to her.

Bobby and Darcy didn't speak again for most of a lifetime. He served in Vietnam, got married, became an architect, moved to California, and had grandchildren. She got married, moved to the Philadelphia suburbs, became a librarian, had two sons, and wrote a book. Now, as they planned their high school reunion via email, she realized Bobby and her husband shared the same qualities.

Over a beer at the reunion, she finally had the chance to tell him what it had meant to her, all those years ago, to be treated so gently and kindly by a boy who could so easily have broken her heart. She didn't have the words, forty-five years ago. Only the grateful heart. But now, as they both were gray and wrinkled, she knew how to say it. And she did.

Straightjacket

Emma Wells

Poetry

dedicated to Agnes Richter

It holds close.

Stifling nest feathers
shelter bones like a brood;
inordinately tight, restrictive
but warmth still trills,
coaxing sunken veins
as blossom heat on frosted skin.

I learn to lean in,
morph, bind, dissipate
amidst leathery bars:
a private, fabric prison
with sleeves as wardens;
buckles as CCTV surveillance;
rusting buttons as warden keys.

Each now is a known playmate,
revealing rounded edges,
butter-smooth,
through silken wearing
years of finger mapping,
tracing fault-lines
on weaved linen courses
as rivers over polished stones.

Adjusting to painful pangs,
neither frightening, nor ensnaring,
lucid loopholes are seen;
intricate mazes once blinded
but now reveal verdant vaults;
I spring above walls,
tightrope high,
strutting new skills;
I've learnt to balance,
pitch-perfect,
as midnight cats
landing on all fours.

I navigate darkness
as experienced nocturnals.

When freed,
I pine for its weight,
missing straightjacket stains:
its heady purple bites...

Tiring of blot-less horizons,
I muddy waters:
frolic among fanciful shells;
kicking spilling surf;
churning sandy stones
losing translucent seas...

Blurring clarity purposefully,
relishing the fuzzy haze
as an awakened firefly
exploring dusty doorways:
portals to heart speech
where quickening beats
answer the riddle
of age-old questions.

Swiveling with antiquity,
a navigating needle
finally stops,
knowing its compass point.

Grow Up a Little Bit

Linda M. Crate

Poetry

i remember in sunday school
being taught "this little light of mine,
i'm going to let it shine";
but it's only okay if it shines in a
way they approve of—

they don't want a rainbow unless
it's a promise,
but what if it is a promise of a heart
that will give you unconditional love?

i am queer,
was no choice of mine;
but i refuse to be ashamed—

sometimes i love women—sometimes i love men—
and sometimes i love people who identify as neither and
everyone and outside and between any of these labels,
and i don't understand why it matters?

love is love,
broaden your horizons;

things you don't understand exist
whether you approve of them or not—
all these vast star systems, planets, and you think
someone will be rejected by the creators of the universe
if they're queer? maybe grow up a little bit,
and treat others as you would like to be treated.



Mapping Indigo - Pt. 2 11

Belinda Edwards

Essay,
part 2

Indigo is magical

It holds information about both my African lineage and my African American heritage. It holds a mystery that is between two worlds: that of the ordinary and of the non-ordinary, because indigo dances between the time of dusk and dawn. The light of the day and night shape-shifts with indigo. In Africa indigo still resides on our skin. Some of the people are still this magical color, some are not.

In literature during the Middle Ages, when something supernatural was afoot, the individual would be colored green. In my cosmology this color is indigo. I imagine myself as a blue being that stands out and that is "Other". In the movie Avatar I am one of the blue people. Imagine being with people, who understand that the earth has a voice; that Raven can fly forward and backwards in time; and that ancestors visit us on ghostly wings and advise us. To be Blue is to know that stones are grounded, but chatty, to know that each tree has its own personality, and to name a 1979 F150 truck that is held together by a wish and a prayer, "She Sings," because she squeaks and squeals as she goes over bumps. To be blue is to be interconnected and in relationship with the cacophony of voices that make up the universe. Growing up blue in a non-blue world, I thought I was crazy.

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Sue Cook

Poetry

“Mamma, I want to be on Broadway!”
I cried at the age of ten.
She shushed me as a silly girl,
then promptly entered me into theatre classes.
Teachers made soft comments from the wings.
“She is too sick!”
“She is too ugly!”
“Her hair is poorly!”
“She is too fat!”
“She is too thin!”

Still the drive to achieve the dream remained.
“She croaks” groaned one theatre teacher to my mother.

I sang constantly til I could sing opera.
Still, the confidence waned.
Teachers supported.
Teachers chided.
I continued on my quest.
They didn’t have a vote in my journey.

Then my first stroke hit.
And my second.
And the third.
Each time I bounced back using music as therapy.

An unknown voice on Facebook posted an audition for a diva.
I answered the call.

I sang twice.
Soon I was performing,
magenta clothed,
in a Chicago mall.

An iconic internet Christmas card of a sea of magenta
turned into a national commercial –
one hundred women became Magenta Sisters.

One hundred women of all shapes, sizes, and abilities
sang and danced to the empowerment of Magenta.
They looked past these disabilities to the essence of my soul.

Clothed as a princess,
treated like a Queen –
for two days
Magenta was my world.

It is still the color of power for my spirit.
Magenta granted me access
to professional possibilities,
maybe even to Broadway.

Sometimes,
all it takes is a fairy godmother
wielding the power of Magenta
to change a life.

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An Actor in Our Midst

Gary Tubbs

Fiction

1963

A single bright star is not as dazzling as many shining together.

"Mom! Look at this!" I shout when I see the announcement in the Sunday newspaper.

"What is it, Nolan?" asks Mom, curious but busy frying bacon for breakfast.

"It says, 'The Downtown Players will hold open auditions for *The Miracle Worker*.' They list a part for a boy between eight and twelve years old. I want to audition. Can I?"

"Do you even know what the play is about?" Mom asks.

"Well, it says it's the story of a young blind girl and her teacher. I don't know what the part for the boy is."

"The *Miracle Worker* is about Helen Keller – she's quite famous. When are the auditions?"

"Saturday, May fourth and Sunday, May fifth." I zip to the wall calendar and flip up the page from April to May.
"That's next weekend. Can I audition?"

"Where are they being held?" Mom keeps asking questions. I worry she's not sold on the idea.

"Auditions will be held at the Downtown Players Theatre, 710 George Washington Way," I read. "Isn't that down by the bowling alley?" I'm pretty sure I've noticed that old yellowish, wooden theatre, although I've never been inside.

"Yes, it's downtown, too far for you to walk. I'd have to drive you. And if you get the part I'd have to take you to rehearsals and pick you up. Can't you just try out for the school play again this year?"

"There's not going to be a school play for fifth graders this year!" I exclaim getting desperate.

Last year, I had to quit ballet because Dad barked, "You're starting to act too much like a girl! You're done with dance!" Then this year Miss Justine announced the school play would be for the little kids only. This audition for *The Miracle Worker* seems like the opportunity I've been imagining.

Over the past year, I have daydreamed while resting on my bed almost every weekend looking at the movie star pictures plastered on my bedroom walls. My desire to perform is so intense I can think of little else. Such thinking leads me into Hollywood fantasies: screen tests, stardom and, of course, winning an Oscar. I have my tearful acceptance speech all ready. But with no dance lessons and no school play, what was I going to do?

Lounging on the soft living room sofa last week, with the warm afternoon sun streaming through the front windows, I dreamily looked at my new movie star magazine. I had been reading the gossip and turning the thin glossy pages to look at the photographs of my idols. Suddenly, I felt a warm tingle crawl up the back of my neck and a new thought popped into my head.

I ran to the kitchen table and grabbed the newspaper sitting next to an ashtray half full of stinky cigarette butts. With excited anticipation I scoured the pages, determined to make something appear to quench my thirst for performance. But there was nothing. I went back to my magazine. Then each afternoon after that, I checked for acting opportunities as soon as the newspaper arrived.

Holding the newspaper ad for *The Miracle Worker* feels like a miracle in itself, my prayer answered.

"Mom? What do you think?"

"Well, I suppose I could drive you down but I can't stay long. Do they give times for the different auditions?"

"No," I reply, my excitement growing. "It just says, 'Auditions begin at 9:00am and end at 3:00pm both Saturday and Sunday.' I'll see if Dave wants to try out, too. Then I'll have a friend with me." Dave might enjoy acting even though he hasn't been in our school plays yet. I immediately escape the kitchen to call him before Mom can throw a monkey wrench into the plan.

"Hi, Nolan, what's up?" Dave asks when I call.

I explain about *The Miracle Worker* and Dave agrees to accompany me – even though he's not sure he wants to audition.

Once off the phone, I pull the K encyclopedia for Keller and read that Helen was a bright, healthy baby until she mysteriously contracted a very high fever at 19 months old, leaving her deaf and blind. Annie Sullivan taught sign language to her. This all happened about 70 years ago, but Helen Keller is still alive and over 80. Annie Sullivan, however, died a long time ago.

"Is there only one part for a boy?" Dave asks when I see him at school the next day.

"I'm not sure," I admit. "It's not clear in the newspaper but we'll see when we get down there. Mom says to bring a sack lunch 'cuz we could be there all day."

"Good idea," says Dave. "You know how I like to eat!"

When Mom takes us to the theatre on Saturday morning, we discover a swarm of girls wanting to be Helen Keller. They all seem to have moms hovering around them. There are only two boys – Dave and me – for a single small part as Helen's friend, Percy.

"Well, I might as well audition since I'm here," Dave decides.

Suddenly, Dave and I look at each other with eyes wide. We've been studying the Civil Rights Movement and America's sad and shameful history.

Mom helps us get signed up at a table in the lobby with a friendly lady sitting behind it. The lady gives Dave and me copies of the scene where Percy has a few lines in a scene with Helen and Annie. I'm anxious to sit down and study my lines but there's so much noise in the theatre that I worry I won't be able to focus.

Mom, Dave, and I take seats in the front half of a six-hundred-seat theatre that smells of musty carpets and varnished wood. As I plug my ears to read the script, I wonder why I invited Dave. He's now my competition.

Soon the director stands on stage and, in a booming voice, calls to get our attention. I look up. After checking to make sure everyone has properly signed up and is holding the page of script they need, he explains how the auditions will work. Based on that information, it's clear Dave and I won't be auditioning for at least an hour. Mom watches some of the men, women, and girls audition for the lead roles. Then between auditions, so she can talk without disrupting the actors, she makes her plans to head home.

"Here, take these dimes. Call me from the pay phone in the lobby when you're ready to be picked-up. Keep track of your lunches. You don't want the mice eating them."

"Okay, Mom. We'll be fine," I reply with confidence since I'm eleven now and Dave is with me. I hope she's kidding about the mice.

Dave and I study our few lines, which are basically Annie Sullivan waking Percy to help her teach Helen the signs for "cake" and "milk." It's a short scene and Percy's longest line is, "Let me go! Let me go! She try and talk. She gonna hit me." Which is not at all how I talk.

"Dave," I whisper, leaning over to him. "Why is Percy talking like that?" I have a theory but I'm curious what Dave will say.

"I don't know... And what kind of name is 'Percy' anyhow?" He laughs out loud.

"Well, the encyclopedia says Helen grew up in Alabama around 1890," I recall. Dave and I both know where Alabama is because of our US map test in Mr. Small's room. "So maybe that's how they talked in the south back then?"

"Do you think Percy is a slave?" I ask, trying to remember the year Lincoln freed the slaves. Thank goodness Dave is smart about history because he just laughs and shakes his head. "No, slavery was illegal but he was probably a servant."

Now I understand Percy was Black in real life but I guess it doesn't matter for the play. Richland has only a peppering of Black families and I doubt they want their sons pretending to be an Alabama servant saying things like, "She try and talk. She gonna hit me."

Dave and I are eventually called up to audition. We receive some direction about yawning to show we're tired and nervous around Helen, who is a tyrant of a little girl. Dave auditions first and he's actually good. I notice his voice is gruffer than mine, so it carries well in the theatre. I make a note to project while looking for opportunities to shine. The pressure is on.

There are so many girls and women wanting to be Helen and Annie that Dave and I are each on stage at least a dozen times. I notice Dave keeps saying his lines the same way, which is boring after a while. So, about my fifth time running the scene, I try new ways to deliver my lines and put more drama into my tiredness and nervousness.

Then out of the blue I start talking like a southern country bumpkin and the director actually laughs. I don't know if it's a good laugh but I certainly got his attention.

It's only when I'm off stage reflecting on that moment that I realize I sounded a bit too much like Buckwheat from the old TV show, *The Little Rascals*. I know better than to mock people. I certainly hope I didn't come across as disrespectful.

Dave and I don't have to return for Sunday's auditions, thank goodness. The assistant director said she will call us Sunday evening to let us know their decision.

"Nolan, telephone!" my younger sister, Janet, calls out. With her hand over the receiver she whispers, "It's some lady." I'm instantly nervous with anticipation.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Nolan, this is Pat, the assistant director for *The Miracle Worker*. How are you this evening?" I didn't know her name was Pat but I remember I liked her.

"Hi. I'm fine. How are you?" I ask, trying to sound upbeat and polite.

"Fine, thank you. I'm calling you and David this evening because you both did such a fine job yesterday."

"Thank you," I say, crossing my fingers.

"What I appreciated about your audition was you tried different approaches to the same line. This shows me you're directable. Based on that, I'd like to offer you the role of Percy." As if touched by a fairy's magic wand, I fall under a happy spell. I stand smiling and forget Pat's on the phone.

"Would you like that?" she asks, breaking the spell.

"Oh, yes! Thank you so much!" I answer.

"Great! We start rehearsing this Wednesday evening at 7:00 for a dry reading. Can you be there?"

"Yes, I'm sure that'll be okay," I reply without even asking my parents. What the heck is a dry reading, I wonder?

"Okay great, Nolan! Well, congratulations and I'll see you Wednesday. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," I say respectfully. After hanging up the receiver, I run around the house like a crazy boy. "I got the part! I got the part! I got the part!" I shout, making sure everyone knows. They don't seem nearly as excited but at least they smile.

The next day at school I feel nervous as I walk up to Dave. But he just looks at me and grins.

"Good job, Nolan. I know you'll have fun. I have baseball coming up anyways, so it's probably good I didn't get it," he says kindly.

And I sure do have fun – my first real theatre experience! Receiving our full scripts for the first reading on Wednesday evening, I feel a kaleidoscope of butterflies in my belly. About twelve of us, including the director and assistant director, Pat, sit in a circle in a small room upstairs above the lobby of the theatre. The room is right next to the makeup and dressing rooms. Across the hall and overlooking the theatre is the control room for lights and sound. At first I don't know what's happening. Then the director tells us we're simply going to read our lines out loud to become more familiar with the script. We'll receive some direction along the way. The director will read the action and Pat will read the scenic details.

Everyone is nervous, not just me. As we read through the script together, I notice peoples' voices tremble and there's a sense of awkwardness in the room. The tension in the story increases when Annie and Helen have a fight at dinner shortly after Annie arrives at the Keller home. Annie insists Helen sits at the table and eats with proper manners, but Helen throws both a tantrum and her food. Eventually Annie is victorious. Helen's mother is so delighted she announces the good news to her husband, Captain Keller, Helen's father.

Reading along in my script, I see that Mrs. Keller is supposed to say, “She folded her napkin, Captain!” to celebrate the success. But the actress playing Mrs. Keller gets her words twisted.

“She folded her captain, Napkin!” she says. The room sits silent for a moment.

Then the entire cast bursts out laughing. I laugh so hard I cry. After that, it doesn’t feel like I’m with strangers anymore but rather my new theatre family.

We rehearse almost every evening and Pat asks me to attend even if only to help with props or run errands for her. I’m so enchanted with the whole experience, listening to the adults discuss logistics and details, that it becomes less of an acting experience and more of an overall theatre experience.

“This is going to be a complicated stage setup,” I overhear the director discussing with the stage manager and assistant director. “We have a dining room scene, an upstairs scene requiring a ladder, a small cabin and we must have a hand pump with real water for the final scene.”

“Are we able to have set changes at the end of each act?” asks Pat.

The stage manager abruptly replies, “Not possible. There’s too much lumber involved – too heavy to move off and on.”

“Well, then we’re going to have to build extensions off each side of the stage. We’ll lose some audience seating, but we have no alternative,” decides the director.

As I wait backstage, I observe how the adults toss out ideas, listen to each other, sometimes argue – without shouting – then come up with solutions to the problems. “I’m not sure how we can have real water coming out of the pump, however,” says the stage manager. “There’s no water source near and what about the mess?”

“Well, we absolutely must figure out a way!” The director’s voice has increased in volume as if he’s worried but determined.

I understand why real water is critical to the play so I’m nodding in agreement with the director even though it’s none of my business. Before Helen went blind and deaf, she could say, “wah-wah,” and she understood it meant water. In the play’s final scene Helen dramatically connects Annie’s signing w-a-t-e-r in Helen’s palm with the water from the pump. It’s a miraculous moment and a beautiful way to end the play.

“Nolan, I have a question for you,” the director says to me one evening as I wait in the lobby for my mom to pick me up. I notice Pat is standing with him, smiling. “How would you like to be the voice of Annie’s little brother, Jimmy, for the play?”

“What do you mean? Instead of Percy?” I ask.

“No, in addition to Percy,” Pat explains. “Annie’s little brother has already died so it would be just your voice when Annie is haunted by thoughts of him. We would record your voice and use it during the play when the script calls for it.”

“Sure, I’ll do that,” I agree. I’m not quite sure what I have to do, but a boy like me jumps at any chance to do more acting.

“Okay, so check with your parents about staying late after rehearsal tomorrow. One of us can drive you home,” the director assures me.

Mom agrees and the next night after rehearsal I’m guided to the control room. I imagine this was the projector room when this old theatre showed movies, but now it’s for lights and sound. In the room with me sits the director, assistant director, and the sound technician, who is responsible for setting up my microphone and recording my voice reading Jimmy’s lines.

Before asking me to read the lines, however, Pat sets the scene.

“Jimmy and Annie were sent to a horrible asylum when they were children. Have you heard Annie’s lines about the State Almshouse?”

I know that scene well because it’s so disturbing and the actress playing Annie Sullivan delivers the lines with such intensity.

“Yes.” I nod. “Annie talks about how she and Jimmy played with rats because they didn’t have toys and how they were kept in a room with the dead babies.”

“Exactly,” Pat confirms. “When you read your lines please remember Jimmy is very sick. He’s afraid of dying and terrified Annie will leave him alone because she so desperately wants to go to school.”

“Okay.” I’m feeling intimidated being with these adults and expected to perform at such a high level.

Sensing my discomfort, the director reminds me, “We will record as many times as we need. You don’t have to do it perfectly the first time. After each practice, I’ll give you some direction. You have nothing to worry about, so just relax, okay?”

I look at him and nod my head with an appreciative grin, even though my heart is pumping so loudly I'm sure the recording machine will pick it up. I take a deep breath.

"Annie, don't let them take me! Annie!"

"You ain't going to school, Annie? You ain't either, Annie."

"You said we'd be together for ever and ever and ever..."

Just as promised, after each take I receive some direction, mostly encouraging me to be more panicky. Finally, I get to the point where I no longer care if the others are in the room. I'm teary-eyed and shaking as I scream my lines in terror.

"That's it! Good job. Thank you, Nolan," says the director. "We have enough."

I lean back in my chair and take a deep breath. My body vibrates, my emotions on edge – not from the director's compliment as much as from the experience itself.

"Seems we have a little actor in our midst."

I look in the direction of the voice and into Pat's warm eyes. She isn't joking. I feel like crying because it's my dream to be an actor. There's nothing I want more. And for an adult I respect to say what I already believe in my heart is like my dream beginning to come true.

Rehearsals progress and Carla, the girl playing Helen Keller, and I become good backstage friends. She's a grade above me in school but very tiny and very cute. I'm mesmerized by her portrayal of blind, deaf Helen Keller. Between her and the woman playing Annie Sullivan I have no idea who's the better actress. They are both stars in my book.

The stage manager and crew incorporate all the elements required in the various scenes without major set changes. The challenges with the water pump's mechanics, after a few failed attempts, are finally resolved by elevating part of the platform and putting a trashcan full of water underneath. Most of the pumped water funnels back down into the trashcan rather than onto the audience sitting nearby.

After months of preparations, the energy of The Miracle Worker experience intensifies. The time has come for dress rehearsals. Wearing my costume of threadbare overalls with a long-sleeved beige shirt, I sit before the bright lights of the makeup mirror while a nice lady shows me how to apply the correct

products and tones to my eleven-year-old face. I'm almost overwhelmed by a sense of fantasy and the transformative feeling that comes with putting on stage makeup and costumes. It's thrilling to see the women in their long, billowing skirts and fitted blouses, and Helen in her pinafore and cotton top. Captain Keller, long retired from the Confederate Army, wears a suit vest and tie with his matching trousers.

In addition to my costume, I get to experience the freedom of messy hair and bare feet. A boy like me generally hates messy hair but for the role of Percy it feels just right.

Although the director doesn't interrupt during dress rehearsals, he and Pat take copious notes of anything off rhythm. Pacing and precision are critical. After each rehearsal, I join the rest of the cast and crew as we sit in the audience area, called The House. The director makes up for his earlier silence and snarls at anyone who messed up their lines. He even blasts the stage manager if a prop wasn't in its correct location.

For some reason, his anger doesn't upset me like it does when a teacher or a parent gets mad. I can tell the director isn't really angry at anyone. Instead, he's passionate, intent on making sure each member of the cast and crew do their very best. A successful production requires us to work as a team, a family. And the pressure to perform perfectly increases as opening night approaches.

I can't believe what's happening. I float through my days at school, doing my assignments and spending time with my friends but my mind is almost constantly thinking about the upcoming opening night performance.

While in the makeup room before the final dress rehearsal, the director announces he has invited reporters to see the show. The dress rehearsal goes remarkably well, thank goodness. Mrs. Keller forgets a line, but the other actors cover for her and the reporters don't mention it in their rave reviews, resulting in a high number of advance ticket sales.

When opening night finally arrives, I feel like I'm in a dream. Everyone in the makeup and dressing rooms move and talk fast but try to stay calm. Carla cries with stage fright but Pat gives her a pep talk.

"I'm a little nervous but mostly excited," I answer when Pat asks me how I'm doing. The truth is, I can't wait to be on stage in front of a packed house!

Thirty minutes later, I watch from the wings as the curtains open. After a minute of opening night jitters, everyone in the first scene relaxes into their roles. No one drops a line. The crowd loves the food fight between Helen and Annie, laughing at all the right times. I feel encouraged and motivated by the loud applause at the end of the first act.

Finally, I hear my cue from Annie Sullivan.

"Percy! Percy, get up. Get out of bed and come in here. I need you... Percy? You awake?"

"No," I yawn, scratching my messy hair as I walk out, stage right.

I'm prepared for the bright stage lights and dark house, just like in dress rehearsal, but the energy I feel knowing hundreds of people have their eyes focused on me at that moment is exhilarating. My peripheral vision catches only a few faces in the first row but it's enough to distract me for a moment and make the blood rush to my heart.

"How would you like to play a nice game with Helen?" Annie Sullivan asks Percy.

I focus on Annie and Helen, helping me stay present. My scene progresses just as we've rehearsed dozens of times. I only have a few lines but must remain in character for my time on stage, giving my attention to Annie while also being afraid of Helen. After a few minutes Annie sends Percy back to bed.

Once offstage, I take a deep breath and reflect on my performance. Satisfied I did as expected, I help with props and watch the action from the wings as the show continues to unfold beautifully.

When the curtains close at the end of the third and final act, I run with the full cast to get in place on stage for our very first curtain call. We smile at each other, knowing the show went well as evidenced by the roaring audience response. Once the curtain opens, we wait for Captain Keller to stick out a foot – our cue to take three steps forward in unison. Only a tiny bit of the thunderous applause is for me, of course, but the joy I feel is all the gift I need.

The lead actresses portraying Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller, already center stage, take three more paces towards the footlights. The audience cheers and gives them a well-deserved standing ovation. Two large bouquets of flowers are brought forward, but both are given to the actress playing Annie Sullivan.

Standing and watching, I look at Carla and feel my heart break a little. I agree Annie deserves the flowers, but Carla was sensational – she deserves flowers, too.

Night after night we have sell-out crowds, excellent performances and only small mistakes, if any. Night after night Annie and Helen step forward together to receive their standing ovations, and night after night Annie gets flowers, but Helen – Carla – does not.

As I get in the car the night after our fifth of seven performances, I can't stop thinking about the flowers.

"Why are you crying, Nolan?" Mom asks, looking at me in the rear-view mirror. Aunt Vera, sitting in the passenger seat, turns around to check on me.

"I don't understand why Annie Sullivan gets all the flowers but Carla doesn't get any," I say, soft tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Oh, Nolan has a little crush," Aunt Vera teases.

"No, it's not that," I say, frustrated for being teased instead of heard. "I just don't think it's fair." Mom thinks about this, then says, "Well, I can think of a couple reasons. The play is called *The Miracle Worker*. Annie Sullivan is the one who works the miracle. She is the star of the show. Also, some people don't think it's appropriate for a young girl to receive flowers like she's a grown woman."

Too tired to discuss the matter further, I change the subject. "Are you guys still coming to the last show?"

"Yes. I've already purchased our tickets," Mom reassures me.

"I'm coming, too," Aunt Vera chimes in.

"You are? Great!" I feel happy Aunt Vera wants to come. "What about Dad?" I risk asking.

"We'll see. I bought him a ticket... But, well, you know your dad's not much of a theatre-goer."

There's a bittersweet feeling in the dressing rooms on closing night. I'm a little sad the performances are ending but I'm also dreaming of bigger roles in the future.

The director huddles us up to deliver his pep talk and thank everyone for their exceptional work. Pat shares generous words that touch our hearts and some of the cast members cry in silence. I blink away the tears pooling up in my eyes as I absorb the love I feel standing with my theatre family. They have given me a beautiful opportunity to be part of a group working as a team. The experience has been bigger than me as one boy and it has taught me that it's not important to always be the center of attention.

Even though The Miracle Worker has been a huge success, we, of course, want our final night to be the best yet. Everyone is focused with just the right amount of nervous energy. Sure, we know it's only community theatre but, for us, closing night is like the gold medal round in team sports. We all must perform to win.

From the very first mark of the first scene, the cast finds a seamless flow and one person's success builds on the next. By the time I hear my cue, I'm ready for my three minutes of fame. All goes flawlessly the entire night, including the cue for my voice recording of Annie's dead brother, Jimmy, which I hear while standing near the doorway of the control room.

By listening to the speakers in the rooms above the lobby, I know when to make my way down the outside wooden steps of the theatre to arrive in time for curtain call.

As I walk the thirty yards along the side of the theatre to the stage entrance in the back, I breathe in the peace of the warm spring night. The moment feels mysteriously precious. I feel connected to a loving Presence under the jet black, unobstructed sky bursting with stars. "Thank you," I say with a smile, grateful for this wonderful theatre experience.

My whole body celebrates when I join the cast on stage one final time, holding hands as the curtain opens to the thunderous applause we've almost come to expect.

We take our bow, just like every night, but our eyes well up with tears, even as we smile, knowing the show is over. Annie and Helen step further forward to receive their standing ovations. My smile grows even wider as I watch both receive huge bouquets of flowers.

With the attention on them, I have an opportunity to search the house for my family. I soon spot them: my sisters, my brother, Aunt Vera, Mom and Dad! – all clapping and each wearing a smile with their eyes glued to mine.

I quickly make my way back upstairs to wipe off my makeup, change into my clothes and rush to the lobby to meet my family for a few minutes before the cast party.

"There he is!" I hear Janet shout. She runs up and takes my arm. I grin as I receive a hug from Mom and a pat on the back from Dad.

"Did you enjoy the show?" I ask.

"We sure did! It was very well done," says Mom. I look to the others and see nods and smiles. My family isn't big on direct compliments, so I let that be good enough. But Aunt Vera gives me a special squeeze with a kiss on my cheek.

"You did such a good job," she whispers in my ear. "I'm proud of you."

I love hearing these words and I hug her again as my thank you.

"Okay, I'm going upstairs to the party now," I say as I wave to my family – my real family – who I love so much.

"I'll be back to pick you up in an hour," Mom reminds me. It's already pretty late and even though I don't have school tomorrow, she wants me in bed by 11:00.

I turn and rush upstairs to my theatre family, where I'm swept up in the joyous expressions of creative people: hugs, laughter, stories and lots of food and drink.

"Carla, where are your flowers?" I ask when I see her.

She smiles and leads me into the next room where her mom has put them in a vase of water.

"I was so happy when I saw they were for you."

"I know! I was surprised!" she says with an even bigger smile.

Then I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Pat. "Nolan, I want to give you this," she says as she hands me a program for The Miracle Worker.

I've seen the program many times. It has our photos and a little blurb about each of us. So why in the world is Pat giving me a program? I wonder. Then she opens it to the page with her photo.

Along with her autograph she wrote, "To Nolan, a little actor in our midst."



When the Light Reaches the Feather

L. Quattrochi

Poetry

Silver tea skies, crow-nested evergreens
Foam bubbles, brown toes
wet bubbling sand
rising around the outline
of my self
and waves—
looking out to the sapphire light
where new waves are born.
To abide here in water
till I am carried away
one with every seashell
and sand creature—
that is my dream
when the light reaches the feather.

Perfumed honey, rising from my hearth
inside my log cabin
where I write poems
on the paper of the birch trees.
To become peppermint flowers
thyme on the beach stones—
to bury myself feet first
sand and salt water
like liquid silk washing over me
to lie on a darkened shore
where stars lie whitening
as the uncanny, brittle crab beckons and calls
burying itself deeper and deeper
as I sink deeper and deeper—
that is my dream
when the light reaches the feather.

Rising with the sun
not as a servant of the sun, but as a sister
to gather indigo berries
to bring up a little child
naming her Saffire
for the iridescent ocean at sunrise
'Fire and me
walking the island woods
or inside our oak library
with books so dusty
only the ink
holds the words to the pages—
that is my dream
when the light reaches the feather.

Someday
there will be a picture
flesh and blood and breath
holding ourselves tight
exposed to the living light of the sea
which kills and gives life
and lives forever
someday there will be a picture
but only sketched in sand
and read by countless tides
that is my dream
when the light reaches the feather.

I will take care of the sun
that takes care of me
all of its sweet violin days
and we will live together
and take care of each other.
That is my dream
when the light reaches the feather.

Hey Dad, It's Me, Your Favorite Son

Ray Villacorte Fiction

Hey Dad,

It's me, your favorite son.

You always say that even though I'm your only child.

Do you remember that time when you let me inside your car for the first time? I was so excited to sit beside you and talk about school, my friends, and the cartoons I watch every afternoon. I don't think you spoke much. I thought maybe you were sad because of Mom. Back then, I didn't know why you both needed distance. I didn't question the decisions you made; after all, I was just a child who naively traversed through life, curious about anything and everything that caught my attention.

During that ride, you were playing songs from the 70s, and ABBA happened to be next on the playlist. Dancing Queen blasted through the car speakers and I was dancing. You asked why I was moving along to the song when I barely had any reaction to ones you previously played.

"I don't like those songs. This one is better!" I yelled in glee. The brutal honesty of a five-year-old can really kick you in the butt.

When we arrived back home, you ordered me to stay in my room. I obliged, but curiosity won me over when I heard yours and Mom's voices increasing in volume. I opened my door ever so slightly so I could eavesdrop.

Why is he like that? No man in our family acts that way.

Mom crossed her arms on her chest, animosity lacing her words. Are you stupid? Are you really getting riled up over the fact that our son is dancing to ABBA? Michael, what the f—

Shhh. He might hear you. Dad raked a hand through his peppered hair and sighed. I don't want him to grow up like... like those, y'know ...

Like who, Michael? Mom challenged; her stature seemed taller than she had ever been. I am not having this conversation with you. If you don't love our child the way any parent should, then you cannot set foot inside our home.

Nancy, you know my family is very religious. How am I supposed to explain to them that their grandson is like that?

I closed the door, burying your conversations in an incomprehensible hum. I couldn't understand why you were arguing, but I was aware it was about something I did. And that stuck with me as I grew up without you, Dad.

I spent the next decade of my life detaching myself from things that you deemed inappropriate for me. I stopped listening to ABBA. I switched channels when cartoons aimed at young girls were shown on screen. I focused on cars and sports. Grandpa was happy that I was growing up "a real man." You were happy telling him that I was the star player of our junior basketball team.

But I was unhappy.

When I was seventeen, my teammates ganged up on this lanky kid that they teased for being effeminate. They were – probably still are – a bunch of dickheads. At that point in my life, I still had an anger boiling inside; an anger not directed at the innocent boy who minded his own business, but at my teammates who flaunted their machismo like a trophy.

Did I do anything to stop them? I didn't. No matter how agitated I was, the fear of being neglected by the people around me for saving this one kid who they saw as different bound my lips, ankles, and wrists tight.

I aced high school in all aspects. An excellent educational record and a developing career in football. I could also include a girlfriend, but we broke up because she couldn't deal with long distance relationships, and said that our future was vast and we both had to explore. She was right. Besides that, I had everything I needed before moving away from Mom to attend college in another city.

On the first day of settling in my dorm, you called. Asked me how I was, what program I was pursuing, about my romantic relationships. I answered in earnest: "I'm fine. I'm taking Architecture. I am single."

"By the way, have you heard? ABBA is coming back!" There was excitement in your voice when you said it.

"Okay?"

"I thought you love their songs?"

I rolled my eyes at that. It had been so long since I distanced myself from anything that made me happy as a child. "Not anymore. Not since I was five, Dad."

You remained silent for a minute after that. You promised to visit me sometime in the following week. But you didn't come.

I met Vince at the freshmen orientation. He was an inch taller than me, had a nice build, and came from big money. His parents were alumni of the university so he was popular both online and in real life. His Instagram posts were flooded with likes and comments, and some brave souls would ask for his photo or sneak one when he wasn't paying attention.

He sat next to me in our Introduction to the Philippine Arts and Literature class, which I had to take because all the slots for Philippine Martial Arts were filled and this was the only one with vacancies. Nobody expected him to pursue an arts degree. Except for me. I had no idea who he was and only got a glimpse of his life through other people. I had acquaintances in utter disbelief over my oblivion. "He's all over social media!"

Ah, there it was, the crux of my cluelessness. I surely would've been familiar with him if I was active on social media.

Vince and I only shared a few words here and there during the first few weeks of sitting next to each other. Then, one day, he asked me if I could accompany him to an art exhibit.

"Why me?" was my initial response.

"Why not?"

"Do I look like someone who likes looking at art?"

"That's what I want to find out."

I was perplexed. His words and his smile sparked my fuses and shifted my gears. Or, as many people would put it, I had butterflies in my stomach.

I accepted his invitation. Saturday came and he picked me up from my dorm. The art exhibit was held at an art gallery inside the mall. It was June, so most of the artworks revolved around Pride, a term foreign to me at that time. There was a sculpture depicting two men embracing each other, an acrylic painting of two women and a man engaging in copulation, an editorial cartoon on LGBTQIAP+ exploitation, among many others.

One piece stood out to me: a photograph of a naked man with words scribbled across his skin. It was simple, yet the derogatory language on the man's skin, directed at people who identified as anything but heterosexual, dragged me back to my time in high school.

Vince's sister apparently worked on this. She was a visual storyteller and a proud lesbian. "Throughout her life, she was tormented for being herself. One thing led to another, and then, she was taking back control over her life. She's my biggest inspiration."

"Are you gay?"

"Yeah."

The nonchalance in his voice when he said yes to my question about his sexuality sent me spiraling into a pit of hatred for myself. Without so much as a goodbye, I left his side. My pillow was soaked with tears that night.

The subsequent days were excruciating. He had decided to move several seats behind me and never glanced my way. My guilt and cowardice prevented me from walking up to him and apologizing.

We had a writing assignment. The topic was simple: tell a story about yourself. The focus of my piece was my passion for football and how I had envisioned my successful future in the corporate world. It wasn't profound by any means, and the professor saw that, too. I got a C- and below my score was a comment.

This is, unfortunately, of average quality. You're not letting your truth shine through. I'll give you another chance to redeem yourself. You have a week. Good luck.

You finally visited me, Dad, on the eve of my birthday. You said you bought a gift.

"Arrival. ABBA."

"I know you said you didn't like ABBA anymore but... I hope you still like them. They have great songs."

Of course, they have. I know that very well.

"Should I put this on, uh, somewhere? Don't you kids have a CD player?"

I chuckled at how you hadn't caught up with the times yet. I searched for *Arrival* on my music streaming app and blasted it through the speakers.

And then, as soon as the first chords of *Dancing Queen* played, you started dancing. You were flailing your arms, swinging your hips, pointing your finger upwards, and spinning around. It was absurd. But you reached out to my arm and pulled me in to join your shenanigans. I had no choice but to follow along. Of course, I was much better. I had a natural move and groove. You were cheering me on,

telling me that I was doing great. We held hands and danced like that until the song came to an end.

I felt genuine happiness. Hearing the song that excited me as a kid, after so long, was euphoric. We were both panting and laughing at the same time.

Once we regained our composure, you sat on the edge of my bed while I took the swivel chair next to my study table.

"Son, did something happen when you were younger?"

I shook my head. The conversation was going in a direction I wasn't ready for.

"I just noticed how drastically you've changed. Your mom and I, we may be separated but we talk from time to time. Especially about you. She told me that you suddenly stopped doing the things you once loved back when you turned five. Your drawings, your music, your dance – you stopped doing any of that. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy that you chose to focus on sports and your studies but, I somehow feel like you're a shell of your old self. And if I played any role in that, I'm sorry."

I could reason that I grew out of that jolly, creative phase. That I found joy in stuff that mattered. But wouldn't that make me a hypocrite? Because all those years I doubled down on becoming someone society accepted without prejudice. I did my best to do so and I had nothing to hide.

Except that wasn't the truth, right? I repressed my love for the arts, my desire for creative expression, my affection for classical and modern. My own self.

"Before I moved out, I talked to your mom. I had a big prejudice against gay people. You haven't met your grandparents from my side of the family, but they're very religious. Your aunts and uncles were the same. When I saw you dancing your heart out to *Dancing Queen* in the car, I was afraid. I didn't want you to grow up different. It was a sin."

"What changed?" I asked, struggling to swallow down my still-beating heart.

"Last year, a dear friend of mine took his own life. He had been my ride-or-die since college. That bastard was one of the kindest souls I've ever known. He was a happy person, always making me, your mom, and other people around us laugh. None of us knew that despite his cheerful demeanor, he was hurting himself." A single tear escaped your eye. "He left a letter. It was addressed to me. He said that he saw me as more than just a friend, but he knew nothing would come out of it since I was brought up to despise people like him. And so, he did everything he could to hide in the shadows while staying by my side."

"I was heartbroken. This was the guy who I trusted more than anyone else. My love for him might not be on the same caliber as the love I had for your mom, but it was still love. Knowing the reasons for doing what he ultimately did crushed my soul. I was the reason he—" You trailed off, sucking a deep breath in.

"After that day, I promised that I'll do better. It was the only way I could honor his passing. I educated myself, immersed in the culture he was a part of. And it was an enlightening experience."

You finally turned to me. "Throughout that experience, you were in my mind. I was worried you were hurting yourself physically or mentally because of me." You held my hands and gave them a squeeze. "I want to make your and the people around me feel loved and safe."

I wrapped you in my arms for the first time in years. "I think you did it, Dad. I feel safe around you."

I am writing this because I want you to know that I am forever and beyond grateful. That day was a moment of hope. You are the reason I found my path. Our relationship may not be the closest, but I know you're doing your best for me. Don't feel burdened anymore, Dad. I am proud of you. Mom is proud of you. Your best friend is proud of you. And we are all rooting for you.

I love you, Dad. Talk to you soon.

Love and light,
Francis

P.S. I'm also attaching a photo of me and Vince. I thought you might want to see who your son is dating. Yes, we're dating. He's amazing and he wants to meet you at Christmas, so I'm hoping you'll come visit us at Mom's house for dinner. It would be awesome if we could all be together.



Mapping Indigo - Pt 3 25

Belinda Edwards

Essay,
part 3

Turning indigo into ink

My love of indigo may have entered through my love of fountain pens and inks. I decided to take an ink making course. I spent the summer, like an alchemist cooking and stirring ingredients, transmuting lead into gold. As I worked with the indigo, I dreamed of how it had affected my history.

I bought a pack of indigo seeds and I am planting them in my friend's greenhouse this winter. In the summer I will harvest the plants and use the leaves and stems to make ink.



Cards

K.Y. Sia

Nonfiction

It's strange to think that we've been formed by the very same elements that some wished upon as children, not knowing that most of those stars have been long gone, and that humans are part of what's left of them.

If we were once stars, then following the lore of wishes for dreams to come true, we have to be the ones to make them happen. That's the secret adults never tell children. Never mind the tooth fairy. It's all about the hustle.

Of course, it all depends on what is yearned for, and one's ability to make it come true. Example, if I wish for french fries, I could buy them, and voila—wish came true.

But if I pray to be rid of this disease, like I always do, that's a dicey aspiration, all contingent on things outside my scope.

Sometimes, despite imploring the heavens, the answer could be, "No." It's just not in the cards. It's not meant to be cruel. It's just the way things have played out.

It took a while for me to understand that.


I remember being wheeled into my primary neurologist's clinic by my bright-eyed, curly-haired husband, Ben, years ago. A faint but pervasive antiseptic scent permeated the tiny white room. Colorful juvenile paintings hung on the wall—gifts to my doctor from thankful patients. They were displayed next to her diploma and certifications. A thinning prescription pad, an old stethoscope, and a pill-shaped paperweight rested on her pristine mahogany desk. In the middle of this somber tableau was a bronze-cast nameplate that read: Dr. Oakes Alfonso, MD.


After a series of lab tests that lasted months, Dr. Alfonso gave me a wooden comfort cross, and gently said, "I'm sorry, but you have Multiple Sclerosis." as she held my sweaty hands with her small, warm ones. Her black hair was styled like Margaret Thatcher, fixed in a way that neither dust, insect nor beast could penetrate. It just fell regally on top of her head, defying wind direction.

She explained what the disease entailed, and told me that while there was no remedy, I could either seek treatment, or find means of maintenance to make my descent towards the inevitable more bearable. Clearly, I was no Scrooge McDuck, so the odds seemed bleak.

Hope is a funny thing. After exhausting all standard treatments that my limited budget could afford, I opened myself up to everything else.

I immediately purchased a book that featured a protocol for me to follow. Therein, the good doctor wrote what could and couldn't be consumed by people inflicted with MS. There were also exercises to do. It was all part of her study that led to her walking again. I followed the recommendations with great enthusiasm, hoping to achieve the same. Sadly, it wasn't the case. Nonetheless, it contained useful advice pertinent to my situation.





Then I was introduced to a witch doctor who assessed my legs, squeezed my breasts, and commented on my sex life. Seeing me recoil, he muttered, "You need to do it more often to make your hips flexible." The hardened spit on the sides of his dark, crooked lips triggered my mental forcefield. Everything he said after this disturbing sentence just bounced off my head.

Next, there was reiki that was supposed to mitigate my symptoms through energy healing. Perhaps, the attempt to lower my stress levels was nice, but my pain was unrelenting. Also, the fruitless hand gestures above me made me feel like a paralyzed cobra baffled by a bedazzled, charismatic mongoose that smelled of incense.

My former housekeeper recommended a Chinese herbal wine imbued with medicinal plants, including those collected by a local faith healer she knew as a child. She handed me an old metal flask from her bag and talked about how effective the potion was in treating her own ailment. She thought I would benefit from the same. It was a sweet gesture.

Dr. Alfonso, on the other hand, gave me oil culled from the eyes of a porcelain figure of a crucified Christ. If pink were a smell, it would best describe the scent of the big vial of liquid that she purchased periodically. She made a present out of a small bottle, instructing me to use it for massaging.

Kathy, my best friend even before my Trapper Keeper days, gave me a silver bracelet with a blessed St. Benedict Medal that matched the one she got to help her cope with cancer. We had a wheelchair race after her first round of chemotherapy. I ended my run with a comical flourish, doing the hand part of the dab step.

People prayed over me. I remember going through bottles of ascorbic acid down the aisle of a drug store. An elderly man with an Elvis Presley 'do tapped me on the shoulder, and asked why I was in a wheelchair.

I gave a resigned but polite reply. It wasn't the first time I had to explain my predicament, after all. His eyes rested on the bracelet that Kathy gave me. "Will you join me in prayer?"

"Now?" I secretly looked around to make sure that I was within screaming distance of store personnel.

"Yes, now." He held out his hand.

Thinking him sincere, I agreed. After calling Ben, we held hands and prayed. In the middle of life, busyness, and squealing children, there we were in aisle 14, imploring the good Lord for healing.


But like I said, not in the cards.

My descent from the cane to the walker to the wheelchair, and the toll each attempt to wellness took on my spine made it impossible to explore other avenues that might slow down the disease's progression.

The focus now is on pain management. I have Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis (PPMS), with lesions near the base of my spine that makes sitting upright intensely difficult, and walking, impossible.

My hands are shot. I could no longer type as effortlessly as before. My fingers refuse to cooperate. I need a dictation tool like Siri to translate my thoughts to text (which is how I am doing this).

The clusters we come from knew things our infant hearts now unknowingly carry. But the iron in our blood remembers the violence of being and the bliss of once lighting up the darkness. This is our miracle



Mimi's Sonnet #38

Milene Correia

Poetry

Paint me purple with your teeth, in a soft bite
paint me pink in my cheeks
with a word on my ear and a cheeky smile

Then I'll pick yellow flowers on the summer breeze
make you a crown of green leaves
as I wait
to spot the freckle of blue in the hazel of your gaze

Brush me black at night
just how you know that I like
with your grip soft on my hips

Then paint me red with your lips

and love me
a rainbow

Calling All Cars

Roméo Desmarais III

Poetry

how are you better than
the wind that blows in
my back on this gray day in
a town that speaks of dreams that
may not come true?

how can I think when my
place of "higher learning" is
brimming with ignorance
scrawled upon the wall of a room
in which I once felt safe?

why are you loaded with convictions
that serve no purpose but to propagate in
narrow minds linked to sharp tongues
lashing lies at those of whom
you do not even know?

why do you hide behind a title which
to many represents love and goodwill
where stones are meant to be cast
only by the sinless?

where are the rational voices that will
join mine in seeking solutions that reach
beyond punishment to relieve the
targeted and most of all
educate the clueless?

Gray Skies and Agoraphobic Vampires

Creative Nonfiction

Anonymous

As storming clouds ascend outside, quicker than usual, in my opinion, the vampire who shares my bed opens the curtains just a smidge to breathe in the delights therein of a darkened daytime. I roll my eyes at him and head out to the living room where I throw wide my own curtains in the space I've claimed as "office and writing nook."

A few minutes later, he pokes his head into the room, rolls his eyes and sighs, then walks over to me, plants a kiss on my forehead and smiles. "You and your blasted sunlight."

"You and your doom and gloom clouds," I shoot back, smirking as I reciprocate the kiss.

"Evil sunlight!" he hisses.

"The clouds mean rain, which means arthritis pain for you," I return.

"Yeah, yeah." Grumps makes his way to the kitchen, wiping his eyes and groaning, hands rubbing aching elbows and wrists. The coffee pot clicks, a draining of water from pitcher to reservoir, more groans of achy joints.

He's not really a vampire – just an agoraphobe. He's dealt with this view of sunlight and the world since early years of abuse and suffering at the hands of a homicidal stepdad and suicidal brain. The false conviction and years of imprisonment for a crime he didn't commit didn't help. All those slitted windows with no air movement passing through them into the dormitory stuffed with a hundred unwashed men didn't exactly help, either. Though, for me, it would have evoked a drastic need to be outdoors every second of the day possible since release. But that's me. "His ray of sunshine" – and the only one he wants in his life.

He shuffles back to the bedroom, draining the scalding liquid from a ceramic mug decorated in Christmas ornaments and ribbons, despite my gift of a few others like it more "seasonally appropriate" for the rest of the year. It's just one little habit, though, that helps give him some grounding. He can face the outside world a little easier each day if he has a few things that never change in here.

I don't mind – not really – except that it feels so unhealthy for him. I love going outside to dance in the sunlight, attend yoga classes on the river, run on the wooded trails dappled with sunbeams breaking through the leaves. He sequesters himself away in the bedroom where blackout curtains hide him from the world for most hours of the day.


He's getting better. Each day as legal restrictions from former probation status lift, he gets a little better. But first, he has to battle through the knowledge that he's allowed outdoors. That he doesn't have to hide behind cloudy skies and curfews. That he isn't a social pariah.

Most people don't know he served hard time. Most people don't know that prison sentences can follow from family abuses the victim has nothing to do with. Most people who've read the legal papers don't read between the lines and see the corruption and injustice, even though the judge, D.A., and others involved in the case are now doing time themselves for corruption and abuses of the legal system – including the illegal sting operation they coordinated that imprisoned this vampire husband of mine. And most people wouldn't care if they did. He has a record – and that means he's not worthy of their time.

We like to joke about his vampire essence, hating sunlight and daytime outdoors – it makes it a little easier to face reality that way, I guess. And his spirits are high, despite the overpowering weight of the world on his shoulders, coupled with childhood guilt and abuses still pressing him into the soil.

I've had people ask me why I married him, knowing he has a criminal record, knowing what he is accused of doing, knowing that he has many chronic illnesses (triggered by all the trauma, so the doctors say). When I feel the desire to answer, I simply say, "Look at him. All that he has been through, all that he has faced. And yet his soul seeks the best for everyone around him, fighting injustices and hatred wherever he may." Even if he does feel like he's safer indoors where sunlight can't touch his skin.

Cath Nichols



In the Hospital gardens the nurses are falling,
each fall a sigh, a melting of snow.
At break-time they come to fill in the holes
in their hearts and heads, undo the harrowing.
Some return to wards, whilst others start to flicker -
the last reel seen from a plush red seat.
Uniforms scintillate, lines appear: dark/ light,
dark/ light, they come and go. Dark stutters,
then everything bright as a snow.

Female nurses are 23% more likely to kill themselves than the rest of the female population in the UK. That is, for every four women workers attempting suicide, five female nurses will try.

Crystal Tears

32

Poetry

Cai Quirk

clear is my resilience
a glass bubble surrounding my soul
emerging from the ground
and pouring down
flowing as water from Earth
caring, cleansing, nourishing
held and safe in Spirit

caught in a dewdrop
swirled by rain
the Earth cradle
protecting my tiny form
with zer crystal tears
of vulnerability and resilience
strong so I don't have to be

drops sliding from leaves
blending into streams
hundreds of tears
united and strong
changing the course
of sticks and stones
that once struck our skin

streams turn to rivers
tracks down our cheeks
into the universal flow
blurring our edges
merging our bubbles
sobs of sorrow and joy
shaking our shells to pieces

no longer divided by our pain
held together in Spirit's living water
through peaks and valleys
our perseverance entwined
strong for each other
so we don't all have to be
clear is our resilience

if he does feel like he's safer indoors where sunlight can't touch
his skin.

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Sue Cook

R
E
T
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R
D

All I see is a spinning wheel, and arms against the ground.
 Blood streaming from a feeble body.
 How could anyone push over a wheelchair?
 Screams of RETARD!
 The world goes red and then I'm in the office again.
 "Why the violence?" a voice of weary ignorance asks.
 "Why did you push him into the monkey bars?
 He only called you and your friends what you are...
 Retarded.
 That's the class you're in isn't it?"
 No answer.

Back to hell, little warrior.
 As I walk in the door I look up at the sign,
 Physically Handicapped/Mentally Retarded Classroom.
 A fish bowl filled with broken bodies for kids to point at and scream epitaphs.
 Hate, and fear twisting their faces into macabre masks.
 Mothers pull their children away to save them from catching the virus we possess.
 Run from the retards lest you become one.
 What a cruel joke.
 The broken were physically impaired, minds wise, and gifted.

You quickly learn that for the rest of your life you wear that term like a badge.
 You fight against the injustice,
 Now it is the R-word.
 Now you don't use that verbiage.
 Then it was a medical diagnosis.
 Physically handicapped.
 Mentally retarded.
 We were all one child.
 One name.
 Retarded.


 POETRY

Belinda Edwards

Essay, part 4

Indigo reminds me of the East Texas sky

How does one fall in love with a color? How can one color represent mystery, magic, sky, ocean, the watery underworld? If I was creating a map, I believe indigo entered while I was still a child, because this color reminds me of being at my grandmother's house in East Texas looking at the Milky Way. In the evening when the summer heat was unbearable in her 6-room house, we would retreat to the porch. An old porch that had witnessed her raising eight children, and a tangled mess of grand and great grandchildren. The steps leading up to the wooden porch were concrete, and to enter the house one needed to walk through the front yard, which was full of flowers, pink hollyhocks, roses, purple coneflowers, Indian blanket, and other flowers that I did not know the name of as a child. Like everything else in the house, the flowers were tended, but eventually had to struggle and survive the harsh environment ultimately on its own.

I remember sitting on the porch on an old cot next to my favorite uncle. When either of us would move, the rusty springs on the cot would squeak. I learn to snuggle into his arms, laying still. I would sit like this for hours, as he spoke about his day and or told the latest gossip to my grandmother and grandfather. On this porch, I could see the dark silhouette of the trees that announced the property line against the velvety night. The fireflies would blink on and off and we would watch the night sky. The darkness on the porch was comforting and embraced me as a child. I would catch fireflies during the night and put them in a jar but would be disappointed in the morning when the mystery of the fire making creature was revealed as a soft beetle body that lay dead. Once the house cooled, we would move inside into the artificial light. Big mama would heat water on her wooden stove, pour the warm water into a steel tub that she used for both washing clothes, and bathing us. In this warm embryonic fluid, I would relax. This was a safe environment. Night was not always comforting for black men or women in the South.

In 1955, Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African American male who was lynched in Mississippi after being accused of offending a white woman in her husband's grocery store. Several nights after the incident in the store, her husband, Roy, and his half-brother J.W. Mila went armed to Till's great-uncle's house and abducted Emmett. They beat and mutilated him, before shooting him in the head and sinking his body in the Tallahatchie River. Three days later his body was discovered, bloated, and almost unrecognizable. His body was returned to Chicago and his mother Mamie Till refused to have a closed casket, because she wanted the brutality to be on public view. Like a firefly in the night, his death sparked the civil rights movement.

The indigo sky that reminds me of these long summer evenings on a wooden porch, in rural East Texas, was also the night sky that Till's body was dragged through.

When I heard of Emmett Till during my Black Studies courses in my twenties, I imagined a conjure woman. The blue black of her hands reflects the midnight sky. She digs into the wet soil of the Tallahatchie River. It smells of summer rain and tears, of those who have lost homelands, languages, names, children, and songs. Their tears echo their creation story on these shores.

Her hands expand like Raven's wings in flight. Before her is a cauldron sitting on an open fire, she stirs. She throws in hate, violence, love, peace, cotton, Jim Crow laws; she conjures the future. Tonight, she is creating the next container for Emmett's life. In this lifetime he will shed his language, and become a peasant in the Mekong Delta, black skin will become black hair framing a face that reflects the moon and eyes dark oval, mirroring wet banks of the Tallahatchie River. As the Conjure Woman's long claws dig into the earth, she smells it while kneading it with her hands.

She speaks to him and says,
the light of day
and night shape-shifts with blue.

It is the blue blackness
of the void,
of Isis,
of the universe.

She says that in this place,
the Winds blow
through the canyon,
calling your name.

She knows him, not by his slave-name, but by his real name. She calls him to her breast, to nurse on her breath. She tucks his new clay image under her wings, carrying it to its new destination and plants the image of him as a newborn into his new mother's belly. Till is now nestled in this warm spot listening to the heartbeat of a new place. In this place of dreaming, I hear the Conjure Woman singing-- "You are no longer sad; you begin a new life." In this place of warmth, Till has walked backwards to his Milky Way home.

Hannah hannaH

36

Garry Engkent

Fiction

It has been sixty years. She lives in memory like a fickle houseguest who visits when least expected, least wanted, least needed, and then disappears at will. She haunts me because of something I did when I was young and foolish. A confession to a priest or psychiatrist will not wash away this guilty feeling. I suffer. I hurt.

We met in Grade One at lunch period. We were at our desks, eating sandwiches. She impressed me with this word, “palindrome.”

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“A palindrome is a word that you can spell forwards and backwards and it’s the same. Like my name: Hannah. You can even say it in reverse, and it’ll be the same sound, same order of letters.”

I spelled her name, first forward “H-a-n-n-a-h” and then backward “h-a-n-n-a-H”.

“I’m Hardy. I was supposed to be Harry, but my father misspelt my name on the school form.”

Hannah laughed. She thought that mistake was cute. “So, I should call you Harry?”

“Naw. Let’s keep it our secret.”

She smiled brightly.

We became pals. After school, I would walk her halfway home and then I would go to the Panama Café. This went on from Grades One to Four. I never walked her to her door; she never asked where I lived. In Grade Two Hannah and I began going to the Saturday matinee at the movie theatre. We hardly missed a matinee. Our little secret. We would meet there, we would sit together watching the two movies and three cartoons, and afterwards we would just go home separately. We knew and understood the rules: she was white; I was yellow.

I pleaded with Ah-bah, my father, to buy me a pair of skates so I could join the class in the outdoor rink at the schoolyard that winter. It was for school, I said. For the most part, it was true. During recess and phys. ed. classes, our Grade Three teacher would encourage us to learn how to ice skate. And how was a pupil to learn without the equipment?

Hannah was learning figure skating, and she demonstrated some of her skills on the school rink for phys. ed. I wanted to be beside her on the ice. It took me a while to get my skate legs and footing and to go around the rink without falling.

On Fridays in winter, Memorial Gardens had public skating at its indoor rink. Hannah and I would go there. We actually held hands, skating around and around. I thought many times of holding her close and giving her kisses, lips to lips, like they do in the movies. I had to be satisfied with what I got. It seemed so important to be with Hannah.

And then she went away.

Hannah did not show up two Saturday matinees in a row. At first, I thought she was on holiday, a vacation that fan gwei families usually have in the summer months, and I remembered that was what happened last summer when she disappeared for three weeks. Of course, she would be back. But sitting alone in a darkened theatre made me sad.

But she did not appear at any Saturday matinees all summer. I got mad at her for leaving me all alone. At the Panama Café, I overheard the waiters and waitresses gossip and talk about breakups, disappointments in dating, and all that stuff between guys and gals. Maybe what Hannah and I had was over.

I was going to tell her off when we got back to school.

Hannah did not show up in Miss Fergusson's Grade Five class. Then I heard from Hannah's friend. Her family moved away, far away to the United States. Thousands of miles! Where in America? From being mad, I got sad.

"Why didn't she say anything?" I asked. She told Penny. Why not me?

Hannah was gone for good. Now walking home after school wasn't the same anymore. I trod back to the restaurant and put on an apron and helped in the kitchen. I was determined to get her out of my head, but she would sneak in and I began to think of her forwards and backwards – my palindrome, Hannah.

Then she wrote to me in an aerogramme. It was addressed to Master Hardy Ko, c/o Panama Café, Thibeault Falls, Ontario, Canada.

Dear Hardy,

How are you? I am doing fine. My father found a really good paying job and we had to get here as soon as he could. Mom says we are settled in now, in this new house. I am in school. Everything is different here and still the same as T Falls. Made some new friends already. They think my accent is strange, I told them theirs were.

Sorry I didn't get a chance to say good-bye. I told Penny to tell you. Did she?

Please write. My address is on the back of this letter.

Sincerely,
Hannah Palmer

I was surprised that she wrote but still hurt that she didn't tell me in person that she was leaving. I thought of writing back immediately. But I didn't.

It was all the kidding I got from Chinese waiters and white waitresses. The cashier who received the mail from the mailman noted a female name in the return address and told everybody that I had a girlfriend. They all teased me. They wanted their fun. I started to get mad.

I blamed Hannah. I decided not to reply to her letter.

A few months later, she sent me another letter. I could sense that she was not pleased that I had not replied. The ribbing started all over. "Hardy's got a sweetie. Hardy's got a sweetie."

Hannah's final letter came just before St. Valentine's Day. She said winter was over and she was wearing pedal-pushers. I wrote back. I told her that her letters hurt me because the waiters and waitresses made fun of me. Most of what I wrote was true, except that I didn't tell her I wanted to make the manly choice, the kind you see in movies, about taking it in the chin and forgetting about the broad. I heard from the waitresses that long distance affairs never work and end badly. It is better to call it quits early to save yourself from more heartache.

Forgetting Hannah was a slow and incomplete process. School work did a lot to keep my mind busy on grades. Some of the subjects took more concentration and effort because I wasn't that keen on them. My chores at the restaurant took its toll as well. Immediately after school, I had at least three hours of work, and on weekends, at least five to six. Growing up meant that I had more responsibilities in the Panama Café.

To be honest, I had a bad experience with one of the sixteen-year old waitresses whom I took a fancy to. She took me to the cleaners. I was quite naïve and immature at age thirteen. I felt really hurt. My view of girls changed.

I made it to high school.

It was early October. Hannah was standing right in front of my locker. It was lunch period. I saw her and my stride broke. Hannah Palmer was taller, filling out in the right places, still with blonde locks. Our eyes met for a very brief second, because I deliberately averted from staring. I asked myself what I should do. I knew that she knew I recognized her. I will remember this instance forever.

"Can you move?" I said. I deliberately avoided calling her by name. "I need something in my locker."

She did. I opened my locker. Hannah walked away without looking back. And I never saw her again.

Every time that week when I thought of Hannah Palmer, several things came to mind. I should have greeted her. I should have apologised for my behaviour. I should have chased after her. I shouldn't have hurt her. I should find her and make up with her. I should do that now!

There were times I thought about that moment and about going back in time to fix it or to tell my younger self to fix it.

"Hi, Hannah," I should have said with enthusiasm. "Long time no see! When did you come back to the Falls?"

"Hi, Hardy," she would reply. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," I would say. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Saw you in the corridors a few days ago," she would answer. "Followed you to your locker. I thought you saw me when you stared straight at me."

"Sorry."

"I was going to reveal myself then but thought you may have forgotten me. It has been four, five years."

"How could I ever forget you?" I would say honestly.

Hannah would smile brightly. Her eyes sparkling. She was happy, and I had made her so.

As we would walk to the cafeteria for lunch, she told me her father got tired of working in the States and found his old job back in Thibeault Falls. So, they packed up, said good-bye to their American friends and neighbours, and headed home. The Palmer family got back just a few days before school started, and they had a lot of unpacking in their rented house up on Fifth Avenue.

Meeting Hannah the palindrome again was one of the happiest memories of my life. But that didn't happen.

Then there was the other scenario:

As Hannah walked away without looking back, I felt bad, really bad. I was so conflicted and felt so guilty for being such an ass. I ran after her. I saw her face. There were tear streaks down her cheeks.

"Hannah, I'm so sorry! Don't know why I did that to you."

She looked so hurt as her eyes explored my face, just to see if I was sincere or fooling. At that moment I remembered Grade One, Two, Three and Four when we were together after school. I remembered the Friday skating at Memorial Gardens in winter and holding her hand as we sailed on ice around around the rink. On those occasions I was happy. Other times were just restaurant chores and schoolwork.

"I missed you," Hannah confessed. "You were the first thought in my mind when Dad told us we were moving back to Thibeault Falls."

"Forgive me?"

Hannah broke into a grin and then a big smile. Her whole face brightened. "Yes! Of course!"

And we lived happily ever after.

Nothing like that ever really happened. I wanted to make things right. I am not sure whether Hannah needed closure, but I did.

Sixty years have passed. Old age makes memories of the past much keener. Old age doesn't make the person crustier, just more reflective, more sentimental, more need to make amends of youth. Finishing unfinished business, you might say. To make up for the sins of the past that you carry in your soul. To make peace with others. To make peace with yourself.

I resolved to find her and ask for her forgiveness before I die.

Trying to find people you haven't heard from, seen, talked to, corresponded with for decades is hard. They could be dead. They could be in old age homes. They could have forgotten you. They could have just not cared to respond. Their offspring might never have heard of you because the parent hardly or never mentioned you, so the kids did not respond or care to respond for their ageing parents. People move from one place, from one city, from one province to another.

Women marry and change their maiden names to their husbands'. Hannah Palmer would have married and taken on her husband's last name. Maybe, she pined for me and never married. *Really, Hardy, you're getting senile!*

I felt consumed by this need to fix something that for all logic couldn't, needn't, wouldn't be solved. My need to be absolved was beyond reason.

By some miracle, I found her alive and well.

"Hannah!"

"Hardy? Is that really you?"

She moved forward into her monitor for a closer look at my aged, wrinkled face. She smiled and her eyes brightened.

"I've been looking all over for you!"

"Have you now? Why? It's been... How long now?"

"Quite a while, Hannah. Quite a while. Listen, Hannah, I've got something I gotta say to you."

"Yes?"

"I want to apologise, say I am dreadfully sorry that I snubbed you that day at school, Hannah."

"You did? I don't recall..."

"How are you, Hannah?" I query. My heart starts thumping.

I am looking at a young girl with blonde tresses and a smile on her face. She has not aged a day since high school.

Forever young. Forever then. Forever there.

Forwards and backwards, H-a-n-n-a-h remains... h-a-n-n-a-H.

Palindrome.



Return to Work Changes

The return to work
was the hardest;
where it felt like I had gone years
and when in reality
it had only been a little more
than three weeks,

and people who had hated me
for a good 18 months
looked like they were in mourning
for somebody who had died
realizing everything had
now completely changed,

Unsure what to say
and would stand by my desk
not sure what to do
every time Chocolates
were passed around the team

outlining changes
in both my and their lives
mistaking my diabetes
for something else altogether,

unaware this could have so easily
happened to them.



Andy N.

Poetry

The Glen Bride, a Queen Fairy-story

MJ Delfin
Fiction

There are many who sing stories of young ladies stolen by the fae, but this is not one of those tales.

For there once was an unfortunate maiden promised to a cruel lord. She was distraught, since he brought her gifts – trophies – from his hunts: bones, meat, fur, and blood. These only aggrandized his pride and were bounties she cared not for. So, the maiden's bright eyes dimmed with sorrow.

Three days before the mournful date, the maiden sat contemplating her fate, when she found a single flower delicately placed at her window frame. No dead things, only graceful life. She took the beautiful token, wondering if the lord had changed his ways, and her face came alight. The next morn, another splendid bloom lay beckoningly in place, but there was no lord in sight. Resolved, on the third sunup, she awaited to catch her secret knight.

Instead of man in armor bold, her sad sight fell upon a different sort of paramour. An elfin lass wreathed with riotous butterflies appeared; 't'was the Lady of the Glen, who came a-courting with the mystical flower of fern. So it was that this fairy queen revealed that she had looked after the maiden for a time, shaken by her strife. No magic would dispel the sorrow in the bride-to-be's life, except for the honest goodness of a helpful hand, which this fair creature offered to tenderly grant. In truth, there was no need for any greater charm, sans the honesty of a bared, caring heart. The Lady of the Glen declared that she was enamored. The maiden's sweet voice and gentle smile had captivated her; but above all, what this great queen only longed for, was to banish the darkness from those eyes that'd struck her. So, the lady promised freedom and naught but spring-touched days to come. Stunned, the maiden looked upon this kind-hearted fae, realizing she wanted her to stay. All she'd ever wished for now stood there; light butterfly kisses and a caring other. Ere long, both knew love. Like flowers turning toward the sun, they embraced – hands laced by fern – and plighted their troth.

On her wedding day, the maiden left for the glen, but there was one detail she missed. When the lord came, he saw the posy of flowers delivered to his bride, and her happiness left a telling trail – sadly, easy to find. So, he tracked and stabbed the maiden with unforgiving blade, spilling her life in drops over the glade. Then, with bloody sword, he left, proud of the deed, like she'd been some animal for him to parade. Hearing her distress, the fae hastily came and spirited her beloved away. With a petal kiss, she gladly gave her own body to cradle the maiden's wilting soul – for it is known that fairy-folk have none. Entwined as one, they became a perennial bud and a bright symbol of their everlasting joy.

So, pray, listeners, remember: always leave jonquils at your windowsill to wish them – and those who'd seek a true love that's charmed and free – light and happiness forever, and ever.

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SUBSPECIES

FICTION

FAITH

Nobody can hear you scream in the vacuum of space, so they say. That sounded perfect to CIB11. They had heard enough screaming today, and looked forward to living in the vast emptiness of space. They could imagine being wrapped by nothingness; a bubble of peace to float in. CIB11 pondered their choice to be part of the New Hive. The serenity of space would surely calm them.

“What are thy feelings today, CIB11?” The registered clinician, Sasha, asked in a quiet tone.

“Agitated and anxious.” CIB11 replied, as they tried to sit up.

“That should pass, be patient. How many screams have occurred today?”

“Only one, early this morning.”

“Did the registered clinician respond with the appropriate relief?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Comfort level?”

“Between a four and five, with relief meditations and massage.”

“Excellent.” Sasha jotted down notes in their electronic documentation device (EDD). “Later today, we can work on some body movements.”



“That will adjust comfort levels to three or four.”

“Yes, probably. Don’t forget the timeline, we only have three more weeks.”

CIB11 sighed as they rubbed a hand over their bald head; fingers void of the tactile sensation of strands gently brushing between them. They missed the way wind ruffled their hair. That feeling would be moot in space: no wind.

CIB11 had eagerly volunteered to be part of the experiment; to become ‘gender neutral unambiguous’, a new subspecies. CIB (chemically induced biomorphic) came to be known as test subject eleven, their new moniker. They desired the void that space offered, to leave Earth for a new beginning; one void of discrimination, void of being stifled, void of angry peers, and void of stereotypes. Even though Earth’s population numbers were in decline, the planet maintained fewer and fewer habitable areas due to disease, famine and political unrest. The areas that were habitable seemed torn apart by betrayal and bigotry in every form: racism, sexism, chauvinism, provincialism: a general intolerance permeated Earth.

During the latter part of the twenty-first century, Existence as a non-binary person, although accepted, still came with anxiety and confusion on everyone’s behalf.

Job interviews were composed of physical and mental endurance tests. The tests then became a tool to force individuals to fulfill a gender role. Being a nonbinary person became hypocritical because in reality, you were still either a male or female, with all the physical markers, and still discriminated against in terms of social equality. CIB11 had become disenchanted with the systems on Earth. The choice to leave and live at the Hive was pragmatic.

“Are thy ready for physical therapy, CIB11?” Sasha asked as they pushed a motorized body vehicle towards the recovery pod.

“Yes, and no.” CIB11 replied in a peevish tone.

“Let’s see, I have thy down for 30 minutes today. Does that sound correct?”

“Sounds good. Grin and bear it, right?”

“Good attitude. May I document that?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Let’s start with agility, then move to strength. Then, if thy are strong enough, some endurance. Please let the attending clinician know post therapy when the screams of pain start. That way they can immediately begin massage and meditation therapy. We also need to document the scream recovery rate.”

“And if CIB11 can’t recover?”

“Then I’m afraid thy will not be a viable candidate for space. However, the CIB surgeries, chemicals and hormones will remain free.”

“Great.”

“Great good? Or great sarcasm? I need to document attitude.”

“Great good, of course!” CIB11 said with a reluctant smile.

“Excellent.”

CIB11 became part of the experiment over six months ago. At first, it wasn’t too bad, scream levels were low. The chemical treatments to remove all of their body hair burned a little and made you sick. Hair, for duration-space, compromised the mission; too much dander, plus keeping it clean used too much water. CIB11 now had absolutely no body hair: smooth and naked as a baby.

Then came the surgeries which they were still recovering from; the surgeries to become gender neutral unambiguous or GNU, pronounced ‘new’. Recovery from the surgeries were measured by the number of post-surgical screams due to the pain: a sardonic endurance test that was void of chemical pain relief. To become GNU, all signs of sexual orientation needed to be removed; all of them, breasts, testes, penis and vagina. This removed several of the major complications associated with duration-space: mood swings from hormones, complications due to discharges, defecation and urine waste removal from a singular suction cup, the drive to procreate, and a comfortable fit in the muscle rejuvenating body suit.

CIB11 volunteered because they hoped to find a balance between what they genetically were and what they perceived about themselves. There had been too many internal conflicts.

“What are thy feelings today, CIB11?” Sasha asked as they readied the EDD.

“Good, excellent. Absolutely no screams for days now.”

“Meditation and massage treatments, how frequent?” Sasha walked over to feel how the mesh muscle enhancement body suit interlocked around the joints.

“CIB11 had no need for massage treatments. Thy find the meditation to be useful and desire to continue it.” CIB11 said respectfully.

“Are your comments finite? May I write them down.”

“Yes, CIB11 feels the meditation will become an ongoing ritual to thy daily routine.” CIB11 agreed, pleased with their response.

“Any discomfort occurring from the testosterone and estrogen implants?”

“No, none. CIB11 hardly recognizes their presence.”

“The low dosage should not cause any side-affects, such as uncomfortable aggression or sweats. Thy must be able to maintain these implants to ensure muscle strength and bone density. Have thy witnessed any of these symptoms? Please be honest.”

“No, none at all. CIB11 feels great.” CIB11 smiled as they realized they meant what they said, for once.

“Good, I have recorded your responses. Thy should know by tomorrow if thy have been approved to join the Hive, which will put thy on the next flight to space.”

CIB11 exhaled a serene sigh, hardly able to contain their excitement. Sasha looked up from the EDD, stared CIB11 in the eyes and said, “Thy optimistic attitude throughout the trial has been duly noted and recorded. CIB11, I wish thy the best of luck.”

The Hive transit vehicle slowly approached its final destination. The space station floated like a massive beehive surrounded by the darkness of space. Unlike the clunky-can design of the ISS, the Hive had a layered hexagonal infrastructure; a large dome-shaped beehive. The communication system of the Hive pointed toward Earth like diaphanous metal threads extending from the bottom. CIB11 embraced the solitude that surrounded them. Awestruck and filled with wonder, they watched as the vehicle docked.

“Welcome to the Hive.” A pleasant voice greeted the new recruits as they entered. “Please place your right hand on the screen to record a digital print. This will allow free access to all areas of the station.”

Cautiously, each new recruit approached the flat screen. CIB11 studied the surroundings, void of color and bodily accoutrements. The GNU program had succeeded in creating a gender-neutral person. CIB11 could not identify any visible gender differences in the recruits that surrounded them. The dejected emotions they had felt on Earth disintegrated. They

were all the same physically. There was no more ambiguity, no more pressure to choose or be chided during social engagements.

“Please follow the green lights. They direct to the main hall for room assignments. Your preferred career choice has been documented. Your residency at the Hive has been pre-approved. Please familiarize yourselves with the Hive design to find your mission station, commissary and various recreational areas.”

“Cool.” The person next to CIB11 said in unexpected elation.

“Ditto.” CIB11 responded in kind.

“CIB22 here.”

“CIB11. Nice to meet you.”

“Ditto. Say, what career path did you choose?”

“Drone.” CIB11 said without hesitation. “What did you choose?”

“Mechanical engineer. CIB22 can fix or build anything that thy need. Looking forward to it, thy must say. Even with thy references, thy could not get a job on Earth to save thy life. Drone, huh?”

“As a scientist, CIB11 is excited to participate in reprogramming the children of tomorrow. What everyone couldn’t do on Earth, maybe they can achieve here. The gender-neutral rhetoric on Earth did very little to help biomorphic peoples. When thy are raised around a vast majority of gender specific populations with no isopolity it remained difficult, at best, to break any of the preconceived molds.”

“Wow. That’s a mouthful. CIB22 gets where thy is coming from. That’s why CIB22 is here too, sort of. Thy just got tired of not being able to do what thy loved because thy could not pass the scrutiny of the gender reveal job interview. Plus, the pay incentives here are out of this world, so to speak.”

“Can thy imagine a population of children raised and cared for by GNU’s? There won’t be a mom or dad to compare to, no you’re a girl and you’re a boy, no you’re XX and you’re XY so behave accordingly: no predetermined qualifications. Just let them discover what they can do or be without the confines of sexual obligations. CIB11 hopes to redefine social acceptance.”

“Won’t there always be some limitations physically? Without being a GNU, there would be some limitations, thy would suppose.”

“It’s the liberation of their minds that interests CIB11. When peoples are told they ‘can’t’ or ‘shouldn’t’ because of their physical attributes or gender, that has a lasting impact. Thy know, Thy lived it. Imagine growing up with the notion that a person’s only limitation becomes a choice of interest.”

“Again, wow!”

“Ditto.”

The next morning, CIB 11 walked with pride to their new position as a Drone in the pediatric cistern. The quiet white hallway, shiny and new, became a metaphor of themselves. They felt inspired. No scrutinizing eyes that tried to correct the way they looked, dressed, walked, believed and talked. As they passed each GNU, they were greeted with gentle smiles and affirming nods. They no longer had the expectation to decide whether to perform like a boy or a girl or one of the other multitudes of sexual orientation choices on Earth. CIB11 had become gender-neutral unambiguously. What they chose to leave behind faded with each step forward.





Dolls

"I look for the broken, the wounded, items that have deep stories to tell."



Nonfiction

Belinda Edwards

In my sight line is my wooden dresser, six drawers of antique oak wood with twelve porcelain knobs, with roses on each of the knobs. Sitting on top of it is my collection of black dolls and a teddy bear. It is not a modern collection. Not café au lait-colored dolls with long thick black hair, wearing clean fitted clothes, but dolls that have been in exile. These dolls speak of abandonment, neglect, and abuse.

One has little pickaninny braids that stick up all over her head with rags tied at the end of each braid. She has buttons for eyes, a sewn on red thread smile, a flowered dress, and one arm. Originally it was the hair that attracted me, but it was her status as disabled that urged me to buy her. She was, I imagine, the last one picked at the dances or picked to play kickball. I know this status. I do not remember where I bought her, but I decided to bring her home before others with good intentions could buy her and display her with their black memorabilia.

This was not the start of collecting strays. It started with a teddy bear, created in the 50s or 40s. My husband and I went to a Flea Market in Galisteo, NM. We drove north on I-25 to US Hwy 285 and turned off on NM-41 S. Here there are still open spaces, and ranchers who wear their cowboy chaps to the market. It was November, the sky was gray, and the wind was cold. When we walked around the tables, we saw her: a worn-out teddy bear, with one glass eye, a bandage on her cheek, and dressed in a plaid jumper over a dingy white blouse. She looked startled, in disbelief that she was on the block. I imagined slaves who had been with families for years, only to have their owners die and sell them off like chattel, would have had that same startled look, dazed and glassy eyed.



Who would buy them, old past their prime, separated from family? Who would pick this broken, dirty, worn, teddy bear past her prime? I knew that someone loved her, that someone passed her down from generation to generation, that love was woven into her visible wounds. I named her Precious. Beyond her wounds, and her brokenness was a history of love, a history of honoring. When I go to estate sales, I look for the broken, the wounded, items that have deep stories to tell. She was the first but not the last.

I see two more dolls dark with head rags, two dolls sit next to them with lighter complexions with clean pinafores. Although they are grouped together, the ones with the head scarfs will tell different stories than the ones in clean pinafores; their lives have been different. This obsession did not stop with dolls, I have an Aunt Jemima bank, a suit brush with a man in black face on top, and then a 2-inch figure of a black porter.

This collection started as a rescue mission, allowing these objects, these African American images to rest, to no longer carry the burden of the cultural shadow. But now I collect these pieces because it feels like a soul retrieval, allowing lost pieces of myself and my family to come home. I know that whenever we experience trauma, a part of our vital essence separates from us to survive the experience by escaping the full impact of the pain—pieces that have been broken and soiled by racism, fear, hate, and envy. How does one respond to this pain? These images tell how generations and generations of African Americans have been labeled and hold in their image the recipe for the struggle of moving forward. There is a place in my house for the broken, the worn, and that which limps and cries out in pain.

I wonder how my black dolls' lives are different from their white doll counterparts. I remember two of my white dolls: one was a plastic baby with a mouth where you could feed her a bottle. I remember feeding her oatmeal, filling her stomach with my left-over breakfast. The morning after she was full of ants. Into the trash she went. The doll that I remember the most and hold my affection for even today is "Chatty Cathy." Porcelain white skin, blond hair, blue eyed, a vision of perfection.

I would sit in my room, and talk to her and she would respond with one of her eleven phrases, "I love you," "Will you play with me?" I was a lonely sensitive child who craved being included. Chatty Cathy did that for me. We would sit for hours talking to each other. My parents would never have bought me a doll with a head scarf, but a white doll was bought without second thought. Chatty Cathy was a part of society, she was instructing young black girls like me to care for babies other than our own. I cared for Chatty Cathy, following her instructions, "Please brush my hair," "Let us change my dress," "I'm hungry," "Tell me a story."

I do not remember thinking that Chatty Cathy was different than I, especially since the images on television reflected her face not mine. I do not remember tiring of her bossiness, obediently I followed the demands. A black child, dragging a white baby behind her. I was no different than millions of other black and brown children, being socialized for their place in society. White dolls were loved, protected, cherished. I still have my Chatty Cathy. At one point, the string to her voice box broke, and she was put away, but not thrown away. She is still in the cedar chest in my childhood room, still broken, but loved.

In 1959 when Chatty Cathy was born, there was a lot going on in the black community. Martin Luther King spoke about integration of schools, Alabama passed laws to limit black voter rights, and "A Raisin in the Sun," by Lorraine Hansberry debuted on Broadway. Just four years earlier in 1954, Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1960, a year after Chatty Cathy's creation, four black students sat at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina sparking a six month sit-in.

As the black community pushed and fought for their rights, I sat combing Chatty Cathy's hair. I would sit in my room and talk to her. During this time, there were not any black dolls. It was not until 1960 when the first doll was manufactured. During the 1960s and in the aftermath of the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, Shindana Toys, a Division of Operation Bootstrap, Inc., is credited as the first major doll company to mass-produce ethnically correct black dolls in the United States.

I am currently a member of a group looking at the new psyche that is trying to emerge. It is a psyche that joins the split between the indigenous and the western mind, resulting in us using both ways of knowing equally. We, the group, are the canaries in the coal mine, and are suffocating, dying. After two years in this group, facilitated by a therapist and one- and one-half years leaderless, we have wandered into the murky waters of race.

At our last meeting, I heard the stories about their black nannies who nurtured them and saved them from their own family. Each told stories of neglectful parents and the kind protective black nanny.

One member of the group even spoke in a broken accent reflecting her Nanny's voice. In reverie, their eyes shined with tears as they remembered, they looked around at me and the other black woman in the group, hoping that we understood that they were connected to black people, loved black people, because they loved their nannies. I sit in silence, numb.

This reminded me of a workshop that I went to in California in the early 90s, where a white woman came up to me and told me I reminded her of her Nanny, and she loved her Nanny. Offended, I reassured her that I was not her Nanny, and it was an insult to approach me in this manner. For the whole weekend, she avoided me, and I glared at her, not knowing that this is a sickness - that it is an unconscious shadow that affluent white people carry. As if, every one of color is there for their protection and or pleasure.

As I listened to the women, I realized that I am no longer Belinda, but a distorted memory of their past. An idealized image of a "good black mother," who met their every need. A mother who would love them no matter what and who would protect them from unfair white adults. The underbelly of this image is that the black women who were in their homes were the domestic help, wearing a mask of domesticity. She was there to serve to take care of the white family even if her family and her children were home alone, unprotected.

Her children were often the ones that inherited the "bad mother" archetype, the one, too tired to cook, to comfort, to teach, because her tender touches were reserved for her job. Out of this imbalance, her family was able to eat, be clothed, be taken care of financially, but sometimes not emotionally.

What an odd mirror of racism, when a positive memory in the white psyche can flatten an individual, into one dimension. Flatten them so that they are only there to serve them, flatten them into an infantile fantasy that is not reevaluated or re-storied, until some black woman, outside the "good black mother" archetype, does not conform to the seven-year-old psyche that clings to the love of their Black Nanny.

The black community that I lived in was varied and had people with many professional occupations. There were maids, doctors, lawyers, janitors, business owners, teachers, and I am sure a few whores here and there. We all went to church together and experienced each other in both our glory and our pain. Although my mother was not a maid, but a teacher, one of her best friends was.



Mrs. Randall took care of the white community houses and children, even before I consciously knew that there was a white community. After taking care of them she would come home to six children and a husband, who would beat her, and constantly degrade her. This cycle of abuse repeated itself for years until the oldest of her three sons, Junior, could take it no longer. He beat up his father and threatened to "kill" him if he ever touched his mother again. The beatings stopped.

With grace Mrs. Randall cooked, cleaned, and tended to her family at night and the white family by day. She was not a professional, but a short thin woman, with morals, and our family's friend. We, our little black community, knew her. We went to school with her children, avoided the touch of her husband, and watched her come home tired only to cook, clean, and prepare for the next day.

The image of the loving Black domestic, lives too close to the image of the Mammy in the Old South for my liking. It is that image I rear against - the image that often "affluent whites" cling to. I do not know the answer. In this complicated world, where hate is the sanctioned reaction to the "Other", for individuals to have pleasant and intimate encounters with an "Other" is seen as positive, and counterbalances the shadow of racism. It is not the experience nor is it the relating of it, but the flatness and unexplored context of this conflicting experience that bothers me.

It is as if someone's seven-year-old self is speaking to me. Very seldom have they gone further than relating an experience. I wonder what would happen if they imagined their Nanny's life without them being the center. I wonder what would happen if they imagined how their experience with their Nanny might be different from her children's experience.

I wonder if they as seven-year-olds thought about why their nanny lived on the other side of town. Why she cooked and cleaned for their family but did not come for Sunday dinner or why her children went to another school. Did they even know if she had children?

As I write this, it reminds me of a short story by Ursula K. Le Guinn, *The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas*. The story is about a utopian society where everyone is happy. As you read the story, you realize that everyone except one little child is happy, they are kept in a closet, chained, underfed, and dirty. This is the price for the continued happiness of the community- someone must be sacrificed.

Does someone need to be a sacrificial lamb for others to be happy? This is the moral question of the book- And I wonder how the women in my group would respond to this question.

I am sure that all would agree that the child should not be sacrificed for the happiness of the community. And in their rush to judgment, they will fail to see that the Nanny they lived with and loved was also a sacrificial being so that their family and their community could live in its own state of utopia.

It is difficult and not an easy question to answer or even broach. But race rears its ugly head often in our society today. Until we scratch beneath the surface of our existence and ask questions, we do not address the deeper concerns.

Are the women in my group racists? No, they are not! They are seven-year-olds still clinging to their images of childhood. They like Chatty Cathy ask a lot-

"Will you play with me?"

"Let's change my dress."

"Please brush my hair."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm hungry."

"Please carry me."

"Let's play house!"

"I hurt myself!"

"I'm sleepy."

"Tell me a story."



Mapping Indigo - 175⁴⁹

Bélinda Edwards

Essay,
part 5

Indigo reminds me of the Milky Way

I remember visiting Chaco Canyon and seeing the Milky Way. Chaco is a national historical park in the Southwest that housed a concentration of pueblos. The park is located in northwestern New Mexico, between Albuquerque and Farmington, in a remote canyon cut by the Chaco Wash. My husband and I spent a weekend camping with other couples and a guide, exploring the ruins.

Between AD 900 and 1150, Chaco Canyon was a major center of culture for the ancient Puebloans. Chacoans quarried sandstone blocks and hauled timber from great distances, assembling fifteen major complexes that remained the largest buildings ever built in North America until the 19th century. It is also proof that these buildings may have been aligned to capture the solar and lunar cycles, as evident by the "Sun Dagger" petroglyph at Fajada Butte. At some point the ancient ones emigrated from Chaco Canyon; it is thought that it was because of climate change and the eventual abandonment of the canyon, beginning with a fifty-year drought. It is also thought that they migrated along the Rio Grande River.

These facts are fascinating, but I found that the evenings at Chaco Canyon were even more so. This was the first time that I saw the Milky Way clearly. The Milky Way is visible from Earth as a hazy band of white light, arching the night sky. It is a massive display of stars and planets. On the dark nights I could feel the ancestors of the Chacoans and the milky way combine in some way. I was conscious throughout the night that this place was inhabited by indigenous people long before the Spanish discovered it, and that these ancestral threads continued to be maintained on this arid land.

A few years after visiting Chaco I dreamt that I was crawling up a trail through the heart of the rocks. This trail was leading to the oldest abandoned section of the settlement. As I crawled through the sandstone, I sensed that I was navigating between the indigo legs of the Great Mother Isis, "Queen of the Throne," the goddess of healing and magic. She was crucial to ancient Egyptian religious beliefs and was known by her ancient Egyptian name, Aset. As I crawled between her legs, the scene turned from day to midnight. As I reached the top of the trail there was a dark blue veil with a silver vertical line shimmering. A vaginal opening. I walk through. The midnight sky is full of stars and the full moon is illuminating the night. I am on my grandparents' property, and before me is an arbor, which is behind the house, and where my grandmother made soap, bleached clothes with bluing, and where she quilted. She was sitting at her quilting frame. I sat next to her, and then around the frame appeared my ancestral matrilineal line ranging from the deepest shade of blue to the lightest shade of brown. Each worked on a section, and they were there to assist me in quilting together my ancestral stories. I woke, knowing that that which was lost, language, ancestral stories, indigenous beliefs, and practices, would be reassembled and reimagined.

Rita
Mock-Pike
Poetry

We're told to hide away,
don't discuss,
never show,
never acknowledge.

Except alone,
in hidden corridors,
secret passageways
where only 'our kind' might tread.

Pay more to hide yourself.
'Buy in bulk
your color guards
and give us those pink taxes.'

'And celebrate!
You are valuable now.'
Those birthing hips put to use
when they're done with us.

Instead, I buy blue,
save a buck,
or run free.
No babies on the horizon -
my choice, my call, my life.

My crimson guest
gives moxie -
guts you'll never have
as you charge me for being alive
and unwilling to relent.

And I study theology,
I teach, I preach, I pray,
prepare for ministry,
own a business,
vote each election.

Your hollow voice is loud.
My quiet voice is louder.
My crimson moxie
is stronger than your colorless cries.

Painting Pain:

How Art Therapy Helped Manage My Endometriosis

Lea Ervin

Nonfiction

When I opened the mailbox on that sweltering July afternoon, I saw an Amazon package that I wasn't expecting. I grabbed the familiar white and blue package along with the other correspondence and made my way to my front door, curious about the contents. I walked into the kitchen and shuffled through the junk drawer to find the old, orange school scissors. I cut through the white bubble wrap and found a watercolor marker set.

My husband apparently listened to my endometriosis specialist when he suggested I take up a creative hobby outside of writing as a form of therapy. Brad also probably got tired of me constantly remarking that "I wish I could be a visual artist."

Writing is and will always be my primary creative passion and I have been doing it for a long time; I even teach writing on the university level. Alas, even with passions comes the stress of deadlines, daunting blank pages with no ideas, and mountains of student writing looming ungraded in the back of my mind.

This new artistic endeavor was meant to be a low-stakes form of meditation to quiet my mind and just "be." The only expectation, good or bad, was to make marks on a page. Yet, before we get too far into my creative process, I want to travel back to June 2009 when I was formally diagnosed with endometriosis.

I had pelvic pain my entire life, long before I started menstruating. My symptoms mostly consisted of bowel pain which had my parents burning up Interstate 40 between Little Rock and Memphis trying to discover the root cause of the severe cramping. I had a battery of tests run and was prescribed a bevy of medications that never quite seemed to make a difference. At age 26, urinary pain and bladder cramping joined my bowel period and pain to form the "Trifecta of Throb."

My urologist suggested I get checked for endometriosis, so that's exactly what I did. I had my diagnostic laparoscopy from which the biopsies taken rendered a formal diagnosis.

First, I was relieved. The pain that caused me to lose jobs, drop out of my first graduate program, and spend too many days in bed was real and caused by an aggressive disease. Second, I was terrified. I knew endometriosis was chronic and hard to manage, so I had to prepare myself for an "uphill both ways" fight for the rest of my life. Bittersweet.

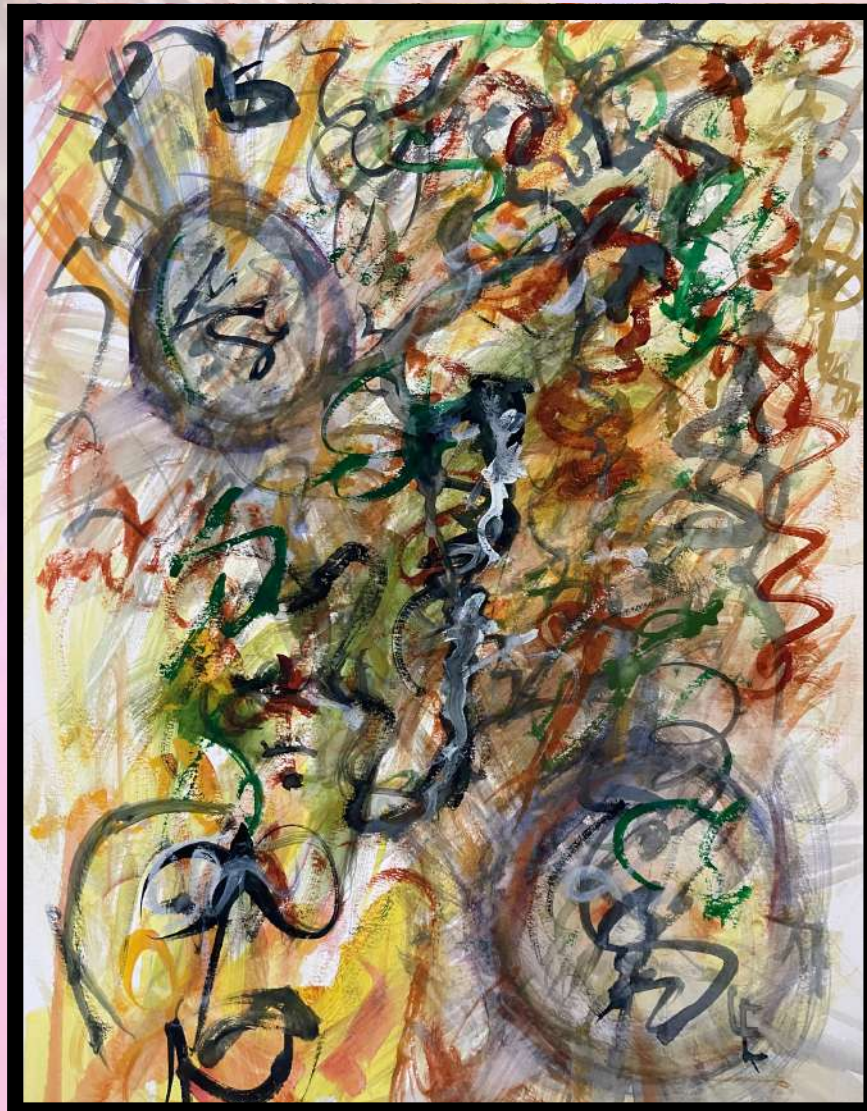
From there, I'd have five major surgeries along with several smaller procedures to manage my pain. Usually, I used my work as a distraction and therapeutic release; however in early 2022, I stopped teaching full-time and shifted to remote/online classes. I found myself with more time to pursue my writing, yet I needed another creative outlet.

My husband bought me a watercolor set and a sketch pad. One July afternoon, I sat down with my new art supplies and started making marks. A half hour later, I had a painting of a female figure with a slash of red across her abdomen. Each day that week, I challenged myself to depict how I was feeling mentally and emotionally in these paintings. After a few weeks, I had a series of figures I was proud of. My whole life, I had myself convinced I would be a terrible artist because I've never been good at drawing. My dyslexia affects my motor skills so having a steady hand with sketch pencils was never in the cards for me. Yet, painting seemed a bit easier and gave me more wiggle room to make mistakes and make those mistakes into something beautiful

Out of curiosity, I submitted three paintings to the Handy Uncapped Pen blog for disabled and neuro-divergent creatives, and they were accepted. I was proud and encouraged that people connected with my scribbles and saw past the imperfections to understand the meaning and story behind each one. I simply just continued to submit to various art magazines and literary journals; to my delight, many of them accepted and published my paintings! For the most part, I've gotten positive feedback on my work; however, one does not escape criticisms in any creative field. When asked how I deal with negative feedback, I always say this: "The time one spends critiquing my work is time spent learning about endometriosis. Once they're done discussing how much they don't like it or how bad it is, they walk away knowing what endometriosis is and how it affects those who have the disease." Either way, I have succeeded because endometriosis advocacy is my main priority. I already monetize my writing, so I wanted a creative outlet done only for pure enjoyment, and painting has been exactly that. I'm afraid that if I do monetize my art, it will become another stressor instead of the release I need. So, negative feedback really holds no weight for me. As far as when I paint, I only do it when I have an idea or something I need to express.

During early fall 2022, I painted every day, sometimes multiple times a day. I was preparing for a big surgery and expressed my anxiety, fear, and pain through one to two paintings a day. Since the surgery, I've felt well, so my painting time has decreased a bit. I wouldn't say I am uninspired during times like these, I just feel well enough to participate in other activities that I normally can't when I'm hurting and on pain medication. My family has been my biggest supporter. My husband Brad bought the first art set of paints to get me started. My aunt will send me art supplies every now and then to make sure I keep painting.

I don't have a definite plan or any idea of how my art will evolve. I want to purposefully leave it up in the air, so that I can have some pleasant surprises along the way. I, of course, take it seriously, but I can't be too serious about it or it will defeat the purpose of why I do it to begin with.



She's like chartreuse in all that she does –
they know her name,
they know her function.
But no one knows who she is,
and no one cares that she is a person.

Assumptions fly -
she must be bright,
she must be vivid,
she must be light, and sunshine, and song.
That's who a woman is.

But today she's stormy –
no cares to give,
no pearly whites to show,
no pretty nods and coy glances.
Just growls of "leave me alone."

But Chartreuse! You're a woman –
smiles are required,
joy must abound,
never a harsh word from your lips."
She gives them the finger and walks on.

She's like chartreuse in all that she does –
they know her name,
they know her function,
but no one knows who she is.
She's not Chartreuse. She's Kelly.

Rita

Mock-Pike

Poetry

loved/less

Saskia Kirkegaard

i've stopped putting on the lacey ones
and shaving my legs.
i always say thank you to the bus driver
and step on that paving slab.

i'd like to have a full rubbish bin,
and a water bottle that leaks
and a towel i've never washed,
so that my friends know i'm alive.
i'd like to be 'a real girl'
but i think it involves reading nietzsche
and i'm too tired.
i always turn off the smooth skin filter
and cut my fringe too short.
my eyeliner always smudges.
i don't text my little brother enough.
i never blow all the candles out in one go.
i dance with my eyes closed,
shut tight until the song changes.
and then i get the bus home.

Poetry



Artist Statement

We strive for a meaningful life, and "Clinging to Life" oddly displays this for me. In this image, the tree represents life. We balance here. Sometimes we do it while in a submissive fetal position because life is hard. It molds, bends, and ages us. We share our seasons of life with it, and we grow and change in tandem with it too. While our brain may be in charge, ultimately our body houses the ability to act upon our life's desires. We teeter and nest here. We live on these branches in a state of vulnerability while learning that we're not invincible. What is meaningful for one is frivolous to another. Breaking out of this cocooning fetal position, to climb the tree we've been nesting in, is to branch out and experience a meaningful life. My backyard tree gave me the inspiration for this piece.

~Karen Boissonneault-
Gauthier

Clinging to Life

R.I.P.

Rest In Pride

Roméo Desmarais III

June 14, 2016

This is for the words that fail me.
For the shock, disbelief and pure utter
sadness at such an atrocity.

This is for the lives lost and wounded.
For the needlessness, the injustice,
the total inhumanity.

This is for the lives lost and wounded.
For those could be OUR lives.
For an attack on one of us
is an attack on ALL of us.

This is for the Silence.
For although thoughts and prayers are nice,
gun control and equal rights
are better.

This is for the Silence.
For too many omissions that treat this
tragedy in the same light as all the
shootings that have happened before.

This is for the hate.
For the unabashed and ignorant belief that
two men kissing is
"unnatural", but legally buying
a weapon of war is one's
"natural-bom right".

This is for Orlando.
For all the Love, Life and Pride.

This is for the knowledge that
hate shall never win!

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Poetry

Cai Quirk

Poetry

today I am blue
in defiance of the clothing my mother wrapped me in
her pink fingernails buttoning
my suit together

today we go to the funeral of the only man
who knew I wasn't one
my tie forms the shape of the letter
of the gender I am not

and another gender I am not
M and W,
the letters on bathrooms
I'll be forced to choose between today
because what's between my legs
matters more to lawyers
than what's between my ears

yet I am not downtrodden
and my emotions are far from blue
my gender mirrors the sky today
sparkling clear
so bright the stars are hidden
my joy outshining the sun's rays

and tonight
when the sky is a deep midnight blue
the stars will come out
like the tears glistening on my cheeks
when nobody can see
and because nobody can see

When Rising

Desirée Jung

Poetry

The optic fibre
that enlaces my body
refuses to recognize
its engendered regard:
buds from a foreign land,
soldered by the silence
versed with the advent
of lacks.

Forgetting and remembering of what's so poorly felt

absent submissive skin, scalded by unknown umbilical cuts,
unclaimed senses, histories and deficits of litigated ligaments,
unused matter of generations, deprived of poems, lost or unwritten,
borrowed or unreachd by unruled hands.

Welcome aboard the wombs which escape us

as voice, unseeded, surpassing barriers,
memories delineated by letters
and their sunny bones of starving marginals,
nuptial rings of gold
with blindfolds on nocturne vaginas,
once electrocuted by the walls
of harbouring plains
revived by mud when hearing

the strike words make

when listening
to their own caresses,
assessing the agar of everything
that is not

diffusing language's temptation to unravel.

And just like so, when rising,
an eye becomes appeased of light.

Mapping Indigo - 176 60

Belinda Edwards

Essay, part 6

Indigo reminds me of water

More than 3,300 different kinds of fossil organisms have been found in New Mexico where I live. During the early Paleozoic, southern and western New Mexico were submerged by a warm shallow sea that would come to be home to various creatures.

We have roots in the primordial,
in the ancient dark slug of water.
From these muddy beginnings,
we drag ourselves
to shore like ancient
water creatures.

Water breaking,
birth pains,
rocking back and forward,
we are dislodged from the
underground shore--

watery heartbeat of our mothers--
echo in our ears,
reminding us of the wet
mysteries.

As we age,
underground memories fade,
but the body retain
the movement
the knowledge of the wetlands
from which we have come.

Like the selkies,
we give up our
seal suit to be on land.
But we will eventually return
to the indigo realm
diving deep

into old age
back
into the watery depths
of ourselves.

Between 1500 and 1866, Europeans transported to the Americas nearly 12.5 million enslaved Africans, about 1.8 million of whom died on the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade.

Against the Grain

The cabinet is beautiful: solid doors, highly polished hinges, definitely exudes an “I am an important, highly polished piece of furniture” smell and Sabita is unmistakably stuck in it. She’s spent a long time perfecting that smell, distilling it down to essence of beeswax with a soupcon of unsatisfied termite, and fitting it into a spray bottle to apply whenever what she’s faking needed a bit more... personality. But when she was creating this apparently 19th century walnut cabinet, she hadn’t expected to need air holes. She wishes she still carried her pocket knife.

Of course, the faked furniture sells better than anything else. People smirk when they discover a genuine Art Deco bedside table with minimal damage; their eyes widen, the corners of their mouths tuck up. They’ve done something clever that no one else could, they’ve triumphed. She keeps the prices low enough that they’d be cheating her if the pieces were real, but no one ever mentions that.

Her cheetah family sits on a shelf, a reminder of what the furniture-craving public do not want. And her father needs money for his medical bills and her brother wants to study to be an architect, and she’s gotten used to being warm enough to not wear a coat to bed. When someone challenges her, she’ll stop.

The shop doesn’t lose money straight away, it creeps up in missed electricity payments and pleading phone calls to extend credit. She’s still trying to impress her dependability on the world. Her carving gouge and pocket knife stay in the drawer.

Her parents moved back to Mangalore after her father’s second stroke, after he lost the movement in his right arm and the ability to talk in sentences. He never finds out that she quit the law firm, although her mother probably suspects, locking the secret away with all the others. Her father writes letters to Sabita again, missives about the mongoose in the garden and expected rainfall and she puts them in the drawer with her old tools.

When someone requests a regency style mahogany cabinet, she spends a sleepless night searching through auction house catalogues, before she wonders if it wouldn’t be quicker to make it herself. A challenge, not to be repeated. She’s made copies before, of pieces she’d missed out at auction, or something she’d admired, to try and recapture that joy of creation. She could always pretend to be fooled, too, if anyone suspects a fake.

The £6000 in the shop bank account and the heating being turned back on feel like a dream.

After his first stroke, her father stops asking if she has any interesting clients. She tells her mother that it’s fine for her to help out more in the shop, she’s got time and she can practise her woodwork by pointing out all the details customers might miss. Let her brother concentrate on his art.

Some of their regular suppliers increase their prices, and without her father’s talent for searching out bargains, she finds it harder to source pieces from auctions. She leans towards the pieces that need more restoration, the ones that other people ignore. She carves out missing parts herself, a new leg on a Victorian beechwood chair, a new door on an inlaid walnut side cabinet.

Fiction

Anita Goveas

At first, she reduces the prices, and always points out her work. One day, she mixes up two chairs and no one notices, so she waits to see how long it will be before the restoration is mentioned and she has to admit her mistake. Every day, she expects to be caught.

Sabita usually closes her tiny office a couple of hours after lunch, and so far no one has noticed. It's not the biggest law firm in Stevenage, but it's well established and attracts a range of eager graduates who never seem to stay long. Maybe it's the cases, heavy on land sales and divorces, most of which are hoarded by the partners Handley, Handley, and Bow, and which Bow mainly phones in from his yacht. Maybe it's that the office manager identifies them by the University they attended and Cambridge seems to get more cups of tea offered than Reading or Exeter. She keeps a hook knife and gouge in her oak-veneered desk; the dolphins and cheetahs are no longer enough. When she slips away, she usually ends up in the furniture shop, helping polish the chairs and stools her uncle sends, and ignoring the small display of her unsold figures. The cheetah family sits bathed in light and speckled with dust and her father has hung her LLB on the wall behind, pinned in a marquetry frame.

Law school is a tornado of legal memos, torts, property divisions, and not enough sleep. In between reading fifty pages of case law each day, Sabita whittles small figures of animals, dolphins and cheetahs, with her pocket knife. Animals that have oceans and savannahs to freely explore. She wakes up at least four mornings a week draped across "An Introduction to Tort Law" with a carving clutched so hard that wood grain has etched itself into her palm. She constantly writes notes to herself: "go to Exeter library, buy milk, replace carving gouge, breathe." She wonders if she could ever sustain herself with these pieces that flow from her fingers, whether she could be more like her uncle who thrived in a space that he carved out for himself.

She phones her mother every day but her father writes to her anyway, missives about duty and setting examples and how her younger brother still spends every day drawing and hasn't settled his mind to be useful. Sometimes when she phones, she can hear them in the background, her brother's silences and her father's convictions. Her fingers carve a family of cheetahs, a small one with haunches girded, muscles poised to run, a larger one with a raised paw as if ready to pin it down, and two medium-sized figures lying in long grass with their paws covering their eyes.

Woodwork is compulsory only for the boys of Year 9, so she needs a letter signed by her parents to explain the special circumstances. "It's a family tradition," she told her form tutor, "I started working with wood as soon as I could hold a chisel." That wasn't enough.

It took planning and determination:

Step 1. Pretend her after-school debate club was cancelled;

Step 2. Sneak home to get her mum to sign it while her dad is still at the furniture shop

Step 3. Wash her hands thoroughly on Thursday so she doesn't smell of sawdust, even though it's a smell that she would gladly dab on her wrists and wear as perfume.

Her father avoids the scent even though he sells furniture for 60 hours a week.

She expects to get caught and almost confesses every Friday. But if there's anything her Father talks about, it's tradition and family and maybe the way he sustains that is by only looking at what he wants to see.

The first thing Sabita ever makes is a whistle, sitting on the floor of her uncle's Mingel's workshop in Mangalore, while he polishes something curved until it shines. She ran in here by mistake, escaping from her younger brother's relentless pursuit clutching a dead viper. The workshop is so quiet her breathing rasps in time with the scrape of her borrowed pocketknife and her Uncle humming "O saathi re." She can smell beeswax and tobacco and the cardamon in her uncle's tea, and pinewood on her fingers.

"I'm going to be a lawyer, Uncle; Papa says so."

"Acha, beta, but now just think about where you put that knife."

The bang of the door when Father bursts in echoes like a bucket accidentally knocked into a well. She drops the knife when he pulls her out by the elbow, and never finds it again.



tender stemmed

Saskia Kirkegaard

Poetry

i buy myself valentines flowers
and call my mother
and kiss my friends on the cheek.

*i bleed.
i cotton.*

i cradle myself
to songs i've sung the words too many times before
and eat a half priced chocolate pudding.

*i draw angry women
with pinks and oranges and dark greens
and i stand barefoot in the grass
and scream the screams of my grandmother.*

righty tighty
lefty lacy.

*i throw hideous garish parties
with flashing neon lights and tears,
and nobody turns up
because i invite no one but my bedsheets.*

i pray to the moon and the ocean
because they are lovers
who listen.

Oasis

Joshua Quirk



Chesh pushed forward through the desert. Another day. One of infinity.

Her stomach bulged and swayed heavily, full of acid and bile and what felt like food but wasn't wholesome. She felt sick and spat and vomited and wordlessly cursed and hoped that she'd be fine now that the gunk was out of her. Maybe it'd be okay, at least for a day?

Never such luck.

She found food out here in the desert. Things that promised life and sustenance but always turned sickly inside of her. Where the food came from was a mystery, but not one she had the energy or ability to explore. She'd just find it. Maybe it was from God, or chance, or possibly in this endless desert, physics just worked in a way to allow food to spontaneously appear. That made as much sense as anything else in this desert.

She didn't deserve the food and felt dirty eating it. Sometimes she'd spend weeks walking by the food, refusing to eat it, out of a sort of spite and strange hope that depriving herself of it would somehow get her out of the desert. She knew it was ridiculous but after so many years alone, you're willing to try anything and everything. Besides, again, she didn't deserve the food.

She wrote stories in her mind about her salvation, oftentimes hallucinating it in the distance, but seeing only more endless sand upon closer approach. This rescue would take many forms. An oasis, a motorbike or car, a massive fifteen story 5-star hotel, or even just a small town. It was always sand in the end.

Even her being in the desert was a mystery. She remembered leaving home a long time ago, to meet a friend. She walked and walked looking for her friend, but she never showed up. She walked for days, which became weeks. Civilization and all signs of life gradually dropped away from around her and by the time she noticed her environment had changed, she was hopelessly lost. At some point she questioned whether her friend had been just another mirage of the desert. Maybe she'd always been in the desert and her past life had been a hallucination. At this point in her life, she'd known more mirages than real things. Mirages were the norm, not tangible objects.





After many years, a change happened within her. Slowly, she began to give up entirely. Every bit of her that wanted to leave the desert fell away. Every nerve in her that had screamed for salvation and escape became silent, and yet her mind persisted. She continued walking, driven for once by a new force.

She saw a mirage in the distance. An oasis; typical of these visions.

Though this time she didn't hope for the mirage to be anything. She didn't imagine the clean water or the people waiting to greet her. The potential piña coladas and 10-meter high diving board were not on her mind.

In her newfound complete loss of will, a new, astonishingly unprovoked feeling grew in her. She was, maybe for once in her life, grateful. She was happy to be lost in the desert. She was thankful to be able to experience the food she'd found out here. She looked at herself and saw how she'd grown in the desert. It had challenged her to change that she might survive it. Tears welled up in her eyes. She let the mirage come to her as it would.

She entered the oasis.

Her friend was there waiting, and greeted her.

They sat down together at a table, under a palmetto tree, along the sparkling water, and discussed their individual journeys to the oasis.

They were both thankful to share the mirage together. It wasn't real, but that was their favorite part.

They fell in love there, and built a fifteen story 5-star hotel out of sand.



Mexican Hots

Linda C. Wisniewski Nonfiction

Some days, only a hot dog will do. A hot greasy sausage in a bun with pickle relish on top, filling my mouth with a burst of salty juices.

“Can’t you cook anything but fish?” asks a man in a sleeveless t-shirt leaning over a sexy young woman in a bikini. “How about one of Brownie’s Heavenly?” She holds a whole fish on a stick over a fire and the word bubble over his head contains a hot dog on a bun. They stand on a tiny island in the sea, with room enough for only the two of them. It’s Saturday, March 13th, 1954, and they take up a tiny spot in the left middle of page twelve of the Amsterdam Evening Recorder, an ad for Brownie’s Lunch. Brownie’s little luncheonette for factory workers is open 24/7 because so are the mills. Three shifts, round the clock.

The page is filled with more ads, the Hospital Record of births, and three news stories: “Red Cross Launches Week-Long Canvass,” “Guy Park Ave. Petitions Urge Assessment Reforms,” “Deal Asks Community Support for Industrial Expansion Drive.”

My hometown has news enough to fill a full-sized print newspaper, though the last headline foreshadows what is to come. The rug mills, where most of the town’s citizens, including my parents, make enough money to buy a small home, pay for parochial school tuition, and give to the church, are leaving town for cheaper wages in the South and later overseas.

On many days in 1954, my little sister Judy and I sit quietly in a booth at Brownie’s after school. St. Stan’s Elementary is a couple of blocks away and Daddy has taken us here for one of his favorite treats: Brownie’s hot dogs. There is no hot dog without Brownie’s name before it, not one you would want to eat.

This is a good time with Dad, an often-angry guy. Mom calls this having “a short fuse.” It’s unpredictable. But at Brownie’s, he’s happy. Dad loves to eat. He gives a look around to see if people notice, like he’s proud of us. I relax in the booth. The smells of bacon grease and fried onions, the smack of the wooden door letting people in and out, the smiling folks who know my dad make this a good place.

Most of the people work in the factory in eight-hour shifts and sometimes my dad works the one that starts at four in the afternoon and doesn’t get home until we are in bed. We eat dinner without him.

Dinner with him at home can be tricky. He’s fat and Mom doesn’t like that. Plus, the table is often a place for bickering between them. Mom says he was thin when they got married in 1937. He looked like Frank Sinatra, she says. Sometimes I hear him singing around the house along with the radio.

When I grow up, I find on the internet another ad for Brownie’s Lunch. This one is from November 10, 1951. A drawing of a hot dog with a curl of steam rising from it. “Now featuring MEXICAN HOTS,” it reads. “Along With His Ever-Popular Hot Dogs.”

What are Mexican Hots?

Google delivers me recipes for hot dog topping containing various combinations of jalapenos, onion, refried pinto beans, avocado, pico de gallo, salsa, ginger, bacon and something called crema. I doubt Brownie’s recipe had crema.

On the oven door in my kitchen hangs a dish towel with the words “I hanker for a simpler time.” When my day is a full-blown frazzle, I stop at a nearby convenience store, because only a hot dog will do.

My Yellow and Orange Memories

67

Cynthia Ann Lublink

Creative Nonfiction

Colors have a way of triggering memories from my teen through my adult years, especially these colors.

These two colors were the colors of my teen bedroom. The room was pale yellow with orange and green accents. Mom used her gift of beauty getting just the right curtains and bedspread to reflect the colors I picked. Dad made the corner shelf on which my record player sat.

Music was poetry to me, and we seemed to always have music playing in our home.

From the time I was a toddler, I remember swinging in the backyard listening to Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman" on speakers my Dad had hooked up to play outside. At only four, it might have been that I was impressed with being able to listen to music outdoors, but that song is the first I distinctly remember listening to. I grew up surrounded by the greats: Tom Jones, Englebert Humperdinck, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Nat King Cole, Tony Bennett, The Supremes, The Temptations, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Elvis, and of course, the Queen, Aretha Franklin. Along with many others, these greats were foundational in developing my love of music.

As an adult, I grew to love flowers, and my favorite is a yellow rose; it feels sweet and kind to me. There's also an emotional connection to yellow roses.

Years ago, my Daddy worked in construction with my brother, and they had one of those weird "getting to know you" conversations. "If you could be a flower, what kind would you be?" Dad answered, "A yellow rose." Knowing he chose that flower makes me smile. When he passed away 13 years ago, you can bet that yellow roses were everywhere. I made dried flower bouquets with those yellow roses, so the memories of my kind and sweet Daddy will always surround me.

So many memories, some happy, some bittersweet. These colors remind me of gifts both my parents contributed to my life with their talents and love. It is always good to look back and count our blessings, remember those sweet things that were done with love, and find how they impacted and shaped you in the remembering. Yellow and orange: these colors do that for me.

Jazz Record Cut Off Half Note II

Andy N.

Poetry

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Circling different paths
within a short
linked narrative
buried into linked destinies
told over a short period of time
broken into separate chapters
carried within varying lengths

Each date
I went out on
after I became single again
four years after getting Diabetes
(long story)
became a lithe of endings
before they even got going

or sequinned lights
telling myself
that racism didn't exist
with people over diabetes
in dating
only to find out it did
in all kinds of directions

take Clara from Salford
who spent three months
over one Christmas;
more interested in her own
mental health problems
than what I could eat
or my stress levels

Or Sue from Burnley
who didn't care
how shattering the trip
down to hers left me
and returned to her three time
ex
within just a few weeks
of us finishing

Jane from the outskirts of Bury
who depressed as hell
was more interested in the bottle
and couldn't understand
I wasn't really allowed to drink
alcohol
and would keep ringing me
drunk
at 3 in the morning
until I couldn't take it anymore.

Rejoicing with myself silently
for hours back sometimes
on the way home only to get
dumped
with simple texts
cut across electronic miles

'Sorry, you're not my type'

Or

'I like to go out and get drunk

Every Saturday night?'

Or

'I don't date freaks'

Sometimes watching the girl
(or woman if you prefer)
in question
drink glass after glass of wine
while I sat there
knowing straight out
I couldn't join in
even if I wanted to,

Taking something out of
myself
with every date
and every time I looked
at the insulin pen
which lay there in front of me
the morning after
as a symbol
of my own insecurities

until there was almost
nothing left
and I found happiness
almost when
I wasn't expecting it.

Mydhili R. Varma

Fiction

I Loved a Goddess



Waiting in line, fiddling with the paper chit labeled Token #756, I brace myself to confront my ex who vanished the day before our wedding and became an overnight spiritual sensation. Three years have gone by since that night when my life turned into a grief cycle.

Sometimes I have thought I may have missed a secret hint she gave me before she took off – something unsaid in our last conversation, a twitch, a blink, a slight raise of the eyebrows. I would cook up grand theories, every one more preposterous than the last and scrape for meaning in the dried up pot of my life. Then came the turn for flinging things with vengeance across my shabby one-room partition house and punching the walls in frustration, cursing my landlord for asking me to keep it down. And then days of curling up in bed, with a pillow that sometimes took her place, wasting away and wishing myself dead. This followed by moping and venting with my drinking buddies, making elaborate personal investigation plans of tracking her down and reclaiming my love. Only to go back to rummaging through a rusty trunk full of her belongings that had long lost her distinctive smell, looking for some elusive clue.

“You will go mad if you keep this up,” my friends would say.

If this is how madness begins, then I must already be mad because I feel quite confident for a man about to give a piece of his mind to a spiritual leader surrounded by umpteen security guards. I feel more alive than I have felt all the years she was away from me.

I step out of the serpentine queue of her followers and take a good look at her. She might be wrapped up in that saffron saree but she is still my Pattu. I can feel her cool cheeks in my hands if I close my eyes and let go. She is as beautiful now as she was, even more so. Her skin and hair glow; it is impossible for me to peel my eyes off her even as a security guard shoves me into line. For a moment, I imagine her getting up from her grand high-backed chair, marching towards me and demanding to know why I bothered to turn up without a kulfi. Our meetings never happened without the ten-rupee kulfi I religiously bought her. Memories of her kulfi-tasting kisses still linger in my heart, turning sweeter with every passing day.

I imagine the different ways to address the Virgin Goddess who now helms this palatial ashram in the outskirts of Mumbai, granting wishes and performing miracles.

Your Holiness?

Goddess Supreme?

My love?

All of them seem wrong at the moment.

I don't want miracles; I want answers. Why did she desert me? Was the divine calling at midnight story an elaborate ruse? Was she secretly waiting for me to turn up to resume our lives together? Is my Pattu still mine? If not, indulge me with one miracle and I will begrudgingly believe your transformation, leave you alone and go back home. Just one miracle. Levitation, conjuring – anything!

My turn finally comes. I stand before her a bundle of nerves, awkwardly hyperventilating and unable to form my agony into words. All my resentment melts into a puddle and I want to wipe my sweaty hands on my slacks and take her face in my palms. I don't because standing before her glowing form is simply too much for me. I gasp and my eyes spill tears of relief and acquiescence.

She blesses me. Her palm on my head does something weird to my psyche.

No kulfi shops open at this time, I say in my mind. Sorry, Pattu.

No matter, echoes her voice within the walls of my cranium.

I gasp at this soundless answer to my thought and fall at her feet, sobbing. The guards are quick to peel me away from her feet but my sobs don't subside even after I am outside the ashram. I stand in the middle of the road and cry like I have never cried in my life. Her acknowledgement is enough to see me through this life and the next.

When my eyes are dry the sun has disappeared behind the hills. A sigh leaves my lips as I walk my way back to the bus stop.

I go home with the crumpled paper chit labeled Token #756 and the realization that I was touched by divinity.



For the Love of Cosplay

Catherine & Katrina Whaley

Cosplay Feature

The word 'cosplay' means something different to every cosplayer. For some, it's a way to develop new skills that they would otherwise never learn. For others, it's a way to meet new friends and get involved in social events. I can truly say cosplay changed my life. Amongst other things, it's how I met my wife, Katrina.

Our Relationship...as Told Through Fandom

Our first meeting wasn't exactly glamorous- it was at an impromptu Doctor Who photoshoot, held in a convention hotel's underground parking garage. She was showing off her brand-new 10th Doctor costume. I (perhaps fortuitously) was dressed as Rose. She chased me through the rows of cars with a cardboard Dalek cutout, our laughter bouncing off the garage's concrete support pillars.

As our relationship developed, so did our cosplay. Early on, we both felt a pressure to compete in masquerades, trying to outdo our own creations from the year prior. We worked tirelessly on convention staffs- sacrificing our sleep before and during the con, to try and make other attendees' convention experience as amazing as possible. But at a certain point, it started to feel like work. And so, a few years ago, we started pulling back. We began only taking on projects and events we knew we had time to not only partake in, but also to enjoy.

As we were in the midst of reassessing our relationship with fandom, the pandemic happened. We went from attending 4 or 5 cons a year, to attending none at all. For the first few months, we continued to make costumes as normal, hopeful that it would all blow over quickly. But as the weeks dragged on, we (like everyone else) began to realize that we would need to shift our perspectives in order to keep cosplay in our lives. We channeled our inner high school theater kids and started writing (or improving) short skits for TikTok. Social media helped keep us going until we were able to see our friends in person again. And even now, although conventions are fully up and running, we've found it more sustainable to attend two cons a year and supplement by making videos, instead of trying to travel every other month.

Teamwork, Teamwork

Sometimes, we fall into a fandom head-first together. Other times, one of us drags the other in. I was involved in fandom while Hannibal was originally on air, and I remember trying to piece together the storylines from the fanart that appeared on my Tumblr dash. Years later, Katrina convinced me to actually watch the show. It wasn't at all what I expected (where are the flower crowns?!?), but after a few episodes I was hooked. By the following summer, we had filmed a nine-part Hannibal fan film, playing the main characters. When the inspiration hits, we run with it.



I've always enjoyed participating in group costumes, but being married to another cosplayer makes it far easier to coordinate and construct together. And when we get to the con, Katrina and I have the same laid-back attitude about our work. We're proud of what we've made, but our number one goal at the con is having fun. I don't mind getting my costume a bit dirty and wrinkled, if it means I can dance to my heart's content at a Saturday-night afterparty.

Over the years, we've improved our collective cosplay skills by taking advantage of each other's crafting talents. Katrina is far better at tailoring than I will ever be, and she has the patience to laboriously hand-stitch tiny invisible seams. Meanwhile, I tend to take the lead on any project that involves drawing or painting- from painted lettering on a historic-reproduction medal to a freehand eyeliner 'tattoo'. Katrina fabricates props. I knit and embroider. We don't always work on each other's costumes, but whenever I'm facing a construction challenge, it's nice to know I'm not facing it alone.

Be True to Yourself... And You'll Have A Great Time

Even though cosplay takes up a lot of our free time (from researching and making new costumes, to creating TikTok content, to going to events), we never want it to feel like a job or obligation. And even though it may lead to more social media followers or compliments in real-life, we never want to do a costume just because a movie or TV show is popular. We only make costumes and content that we're genuinely excited about, the kinds of ideas that bubble up at the dinner table. All of our projects are passion projects, although they may be from fandoms that haven't been popular in years (if ever!).

In order to keep our hobby sustainable long-term, we've also had to be honest with ourselves (and with each other) about what types of activities we enjoy participating in at cons. For many people, Celebrity Meet and Greets and Q+A's are the highlight of the day.



Most cons advertise by promoting those types of events, and at one point, we felt a lot of pressure to go to them so that we didn't miss out on a funny moment or once-in-a-lifetime photo op. But over time, we've realized that we prefer crafting, parties, or just hanging out with our friends in the hallway.

We've also found that sometimes, if you love something, you'll inspire others to love it too. In 2020, we binged the entire Call The Midwife series. It's a popular show in Britain, but it's not something a lot of people have seen in the US. Only a handful of cosplayers have ever cosplayed characters from the show, and we had never seen anyone (online or in real life) cosplaying our favorite characters, Patrick and Shelagh Turner. Even so, we loved them, and wanted to cosplay them. Once we finished our costumes, we made a handful of videos, expecting a few dozen likes, and maybe a comment or two. Instead, we ended up with our most popular TikTok video to date and even caught the attention of the actors on Twitter.

A few months later, we had people messaging us to let us know that our TikToks were the reason they started watching the show. Our enthusiasm was contagious.

Wrapping Up

Our cosplay journey has taken many turns over the years, but we've thoroughly enjoyed every surprise together. Throughout the years, we've kept things fun and exciting by working together, cutting back when needed, and never taking anything too seriously.

Remember: there's no right way to cosplay- go out and have a great time, and be good to one another.



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That Time We Lost Count of the Motten Petals

I got back into painting when I encountered a writer's block while working on my novel and needed a distraction. Since then, I have been creating art inspired by the stories I write and vice versa. I think it's amazing how art can inspire, entertain and heal in the most profound way. I work with different mediums and like to capture a moment I envisioned in a story.

~Nydhili R. Varma

Artist Statement

Belinda Edwards

Essay,
part 7

Indigo reminds me of the many shades in the Black community, especially if you live in the South

When I was growing up, color was an unstated condition. I remember when the phrase “Black Is Beautiful” was revolutionary. So revolutionary that I used it as a marketing slogan in my Marketing 101 course.... “Black is beautiful, but not on a banana.” The instructor, gray haired, blue eyed, smiled as I laughed at the humor. He quickly told me that marketing is targeted to various communities and also that effective slogans appeal to a mass market.

My laughter turned into reflection on how communities are designed—their makeup, the borders between colors, classes, and genders. The slogan “Black Is Beautiful,” was needed because deep down in the 60’s we did not think we were beautiful. Straightened hair, skin lightened, diets, all moved us toward the impossible ideal of Western beauty. The darker indigo hues were shunned and assigned the shadow. Indigo was the color of the families who survived 400 years of slavery without a drop of white or Native blood. The field hands, the ones that reminded us of slavery, glistened with the sweat of history. We rejected them.

I remember growing up with a first cousin, who was darker than the rest of us. His mother, pregnant, and unmarried, gave birth to an indigo-colored son, with a temperament for aggression. I do not remember us talking about color, but I do remember his mother’s attitude. She, short, dark, and mean, defended her son against imagined and unimagined insults. As a result, his cousins became the enemy. As she laid on her dying bed, we told stories about her. Each of us told a story about malice at her hands. At that moment, none of us realized she was darker than her family, with Negroid features that may have aided in her having been treated differently than her four handsome brothers with “good” hair, and her three lighter sisters pushed her over the edge – a causality of societal and cultural racism.

The slogan “Black is Beautiful,” was a welcomed message. It opened us to acceptance... allowing the possibility of the color indigo to have beauty. Indigo holds the wisdom of our ancestors. At the threshold of this color lies the original Eve where all of civilization evolved. It is only after our migration out of Africa did we change shades. The brothers and sisters who still hold the color of indigo speak to us of our origins. They speak to us of the mystery. In their indigo selves we see the universe.

As a result of this history, approximately 22 million of us of African descent suffer with intergenerational trauma. Colonization has shape-shifted our history and our connection to our African roots. In the void of my imagination, I believe we, of African descent, were taught by the Star People. We hold the knowledge vast like the sky. I imagine that my ancestors’ songs rippled through the universe quaking into unknown spaces and times. Yet for ten years, I did not sing, nor did I speak. In this silence I dreamed of vast unknown places. In this void of silence, my voice grew stronger.

The Many Faces of Water

Belinda Edwards

Creative Nonfiction

Birthing Waters

430 million years ago,
plants colonized the bare earth,
creating a land rich in food and resources,
while fish evolved from ancestral vertebrates in the sea.

It was another 30 million years
before those prehistoric
fish crawled to shore.

I am at the Goleta Valley Hospital,
gathered with family around my daughter's
birthing bed, waiting.

Hours float by, as her body is tossed
on waves of pain.

She rocks back and forward
as the pain intensifies.
Her body knows this rhythm.
It is encoded in her DNA.
It is the rhythm of ocean waves
breaking against the shore.

I imagine women chanting and dancing,
my matriarchal line, snaking its way into
the hospital room. These ancestral women
tremble with the memories of childbirth,
while their moving bodies brush extra space
against the bank of time.

White paint reflects bright lights,
while we are mute, our bodies stiff,
eyes turned outward
while the ancient ones dance, encouraging space
my daughter's body to rock
as the electricity of
birth flows.

Like river stones we gather at headwaters.

We wait. As the baby's body space
crawls through the inner tributary,
a briny breeze escape,
announcing the birth of

Keia
Leontine
Nobles.

She appears,
tangled in seaweed
from
her long crawl
to shore.

Memories fade, the body retains
the movement, and the knowledge of the wet
lands from which we came.

Like the selkie,
have we given up our seal body to be on land, body or bodies?
but we drag the scent of water with us,
reminding us of the mystery.

Sweet Waters

I closed my eyes, focused inward and breathed deeply. Today I asked for an image of where I am in my life. I am looking at water seeping from dark soil, bubbling to the surface. As the water level rises it fills a well with a bricked wall container. I look like the water as the darkness seeps from the soil steadily filling the well. I am now standing next to it looking inside, seeing the stillness.

This well reminds me of the one my Grandmother and Grandfather used to draw water before their children chipped in to get inside plumbing, this was at the crossroads of modernity and the old folkways. My Grandmother's mother was two generations away from slavery. My Grandfather, who I never heard speak, was a mulatto. He and his three siblings each had forty acres of land right next to each other in East Texas.

My grandparents had one horse, “Black Gal”, an orchard full of peach and plum trees, and a large plot for a garden. I remember harvesting collard greens and pulling peanuts from beneath the earth after the first frost.

I remember reading a book about slavery in East Texas, and I realized as a child I was living that existence. Running around half naked, informed not to speak to strangers and to not tell the family business. We ate the same food as the slaves, we slaughtered cows and pigs, and churned milk. The children were free until they could work, until they could fit into a system where everyone had a value based on physical fitness, on color, and/or on skill.

During my childhood my cousins and I all drank this sweet cool water from the well until innocence was shattered, when we gave up our seal bodies to be on land, to be citizens of these united states.

Old Man Monroe hobbles to town. His walking stick is a thin limb from the birch tree that toppled over in his yard last year from the hurricane. The branch’s bent and crooked body matches Monroe’s.

Today Monroe is in the town square, searching for a source of water. Half blind and thirsty, he hobbles past the stature of Robert E. Lee; the one where Lee is sitting on a rearing horse with his left arm raised-- hat in his hand. Then Monroe passes and waves at Jimmy’s boy shining shoes beneath the pecan tree. He hobbles past the center square of the colored section of the park, towards the threshold where the colored park turns into white territory. The water fountain is on this borderland.

Old Man Monroe’s eyesight is failing. He walks past the colored fountain, bends and wraps his lips around the cool sweet water flowing from the white fountain. As he slurps the water, cooling a century’s old thirst, mouths drop, and shock waves rip through the town. No one moves; just stares. Finally, Monroe stops drinking, straightens his back, raises his hand, and drags it across his face wiping his lips in the process.

Today the water fountain is covered with an “Out of Order” sign. Tomorrow it will be demolished and a new, shiner, fountain will appear.

Polluted Waters

I remember seeing crayfish when it rained. They looked like miniature lobsters, but only brown, and one tenth the size. What odd creatures, two claws, a head with two antennas like a shrimp, and a body with armor. My brother, Ricky, and I would catch them; it was a skill.

We would tie salt pork, now called pork belly, to a long thick cotton string, and lower it into the crayfish’s hole. Once there was a tug on the string, we would pull it up. The crayfish, greedy, or maybe just furious would hang on for dear life.

I recall us catching these little beings, but I do not remember what we did with them. We did not eat them, because of the state of the water; Water falling through the pollution created by the chemical plants in Texas City; water running through the ditches where we ran barefoot during the hot summer months; water filled with the chemicals from Mr. Randall’s garden.

He had a huge garden to feed his large family. One filled with collard greens, okra, tomatoes, string beans, corn, his pride, and joy. Water fell from his wife’s eyes as he slapped her while the kids watched; water fed the young pecan tree in my family’s yard; water waited in ditches for mosquito larva to grow.

The image of the crayfish hanging from the line, dangles in my memory frozen in a frame of time from my childhood. My father’s hands tied the salt pork to the line while cautioning us to watch our fingers, so the crayfish did not pinch them. My brother and I fought over who would go first, laughing and getting wet, creating memories-- flowing through time.

On April 25, 2014 Lucinda was cooking dinner. The same day the officials in Flint Michigan, where she lives, switched the city’s water supply from Detroit water to the Flint River as a cost-cutting measure for the struggling city.

Lucinda turns on the faucet, fills a pot with water, places it on the stove to boil. Shaky brown hands tired from working a double shift at the factory she decided to cook spaghetti. After the pasta finishes cooking, she plates the pasta and adds the meat sauce to each child’s plate. She has three. Then she garnishes the spaghetti with cheese.

She bathes the kids in the water; she washes dishes in it; she percolates coffee from it; and they drink the water. Three months later she loses her appetite. She is irritable and fatigued. The children have the same symptoms, and the youngest growth has slowed.

April 2016 the Waterkeepers arrive—some by horse, some by car, some by airplane; all coming to Standing Rock North Dakota. They come wearing ancient war paint. Today the enemy is a pipeline operator who wants to bulldoze 1,172 miles of sacred land for an oil pipeline. They come from all parts of the globe to this spot to protect the Missouri River, the primary water source for the Standing Rock Reservation. Here the condor and the eagle fly together.

Turbulent Waters

I am five, maybe six. My mother, father, brother, and grandmother ride to Galveston on the Gulf coast for the beach. Instead of turning left on the boulevard, we turn right going to the colored section. I remember I wore a striped one-piece bathing suit, while my brother wore blue trunks.

Water in the Gulf of Mexico is warm, like bath water slightly below the body temperature. We stayed all day at the beach, running in and out of the water, splashing making happy sounds, while the adults sat under the umbrella drinking beer.

The sun begins to set. Ricky, my brother, three years younger, but already a menace begs for one more chance to swim in the water. Swimming for us was laying down on the sand kicking our legs, splashing water but moving nowhere. I hear a scream, he comes running out of the water, yelling. Dad rushes him to the hospital; he was stung by a jellyfish. He moaned all night.

I don't remember if he got a cure for his sting or a remedy for his pain. I do not remember signs that pointed us to the colored section of the emergency room, or any sign that my father was worried about how he was going to pay.

I often wonder, however, about the jellyfish. After being smashed by a colored body did it die? Did it swim to the white beach or flow out into the Pacific? Does water hold this traumatic memory, echoing the surprise and then the pain. If I press my ear to the sand, will it remember me and tell me when my family was intact.

I dream-- I am in a house on the second-floor white curtains billowing in the wind through the open window. It is humid; I am in the tropics. As I am watching the fishing boats rock on the waves, they pull back into the sea leaving miles and miles of beach exposed. I hear a roar, and see a wave building strength as it gallops toward land. In a blink of an eye the town below me is flooded, and the wave that is taller than my two-story house rushes toward me.

On December 26, 2004 warm suntanned bodies lay on sandy beaches while the elephants and the sea gypsies, the Moken people, who lived for hundreds of years on the islands off the coast of Thailand and Burma saw signs in the water and moved to higher ground. The undersea quaked-- 9.1 magnitude off the coast of Sumatra. The waters rose up--30 feet tall waves pounded the shore.

On August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey swirled out of the Gulf of Mexico onto the coast of Texas. It moved over Corpus Christie and then inland twenty miles to Victoria and sat through the night, twirling Kali, the Dark Mother, the Hindu goddess of creation, preservation, and destruction. She sent waves of rain and wind along the coast, shape shifting from hurricane to tropical storm flooding Houston, Dickerson, Galveston and Santa Fe. It rained from Friday night, through the next week, off and on heavily, before finally moving up the coast.

In the wake of Harvey, my family home, the one I grew up in from twelve to eighteen was destroyed.

The roof leaked falling on the dining room table that my family and I sat around during the Holidays, first just my brother and me, then with our families. This was the table that my mother bought when we moved into our new house.

We moved to the next to last street in the black community. The last street was Jackson- Stonewall & Jackson Streets were the last bullock of the white community. We were the first ones to be allowed into the white school. We left the black school, fittingly called Lincoln High School, and walked through the white neighborhood into another country, another life. This school was three times as large as the black one, and better equipped to prepare us for college. I snuggled into this new environment with only one goal, to go to college in order to leave Texas, and especially La Marque, TX behind, but like a cat with cans tied to its tail, I dragged my small black community with me, tangled up with all of the emotional elements of dos and don'ts during that time.

Now Kali, dancing in the eye of Harvey, has destroyed my ancestral home. I realized that she has been with me and my kind since the beginning of time. We are the blue ones. The ones the color of dusk and dawn, the ones betwixt and between. She comes for us, in our dreams. I remember being in a starched white dress with ruffles, wearing black patent leather shoes with white lace around my socks. I was walking down a neighborhood street, maybe ten years old, and a vicious dog started barking and ran after me. I am running on a freshly tarred street, when one of my shoes gets stuck. I continued running. I believed until now that it really happened. But now I know that it was a dream. Kali dreaming me. Even though I wasn't told that I wasn't safe, the deepest part of me knew. Instead of turning and calling the name of the predator, racism, I turned and called it mother and began fighting against my mother's confining rules. This is when the Dark Goddess entered.

This trauma stayed with me throughout and appeared in dream after dream. In one of my later dreams an African American youth shot his white dog in its hind left leg. Where the bullet pierced the dog, there was a universe, the night sky with stars. The dog, unharmed, looked at me as I looked at the universe inside of him. Finally, I begin to understand that the healing is in the wound.

It has taken Harvey, and a few psychological revelations, to finally untangle me- to finally free me to bury the past. How amazing that this violent storm, which has wreaked havoc on Texas, a storm worse than Katrina, which destroyed New Orleans ten years ago is showing me the way. It is amazing that this Destroyer, this Kali, has wiped away material goods of the wealthy and the poor, forcing us all to bend the knee to her fearsome power, leaving us alone to deal with our ghosts and memories.

I am flung against the smooth sandy Gulf Coast dark warm water slicing against my psychic shores, churning up childhood memories. Memories of spending Sundays in Galveston, playing along the seashore, nappy haired from waves grabbing hands full of hair. Little brown body sat in water pissing into the foam, laughing and having fun, as the tides carried my little girl's pee onto the white beach. It wasn't until I had left Texas, and went to college, ultimately settling in California, did I realize that the beach was segregated. White people did not fit into my world and as a result, did not matter to my young self. They were aliens, non-natives that occasionally bumped against my world.

When Kali-ma, mother of us all rose up and came to shore, she held the waters of the unconscious, primordial birthing waters. My heart cracks, letting the light in, and I am filled with respect and understanding, knowing that in the midst of Kali's destruction something is created.

Shape Shifting River Waters

On the wall above my bed is a Meinrad Craighead charcoal piece called, "Crow Mother—Nestling." It is a black and white piece, 24 x32 inches. In the piece, Crow Mother dominates, she stands staring out into my space, while eggs flow down the center of her body. As they meander through her body, following the curvature of the space between her wings, changing from white to gray to black, with the darkest eggs nestled on the ground between her clawed feet.

Meinrad, a nun, and artist was instrumental in opening the portal to New Mexico, to Santa Fe for me. In the mid 1980's at the Albuquerque airport on my return trip home, back to Santa Barbara, CA, I purchased her book, *The Litany of The Great River*. On the cover of the book was an old woman with gray dreadlocks, sitting playing her cello, with tattoos that flowed down her arms and legs to her feet that were planted in the Rio Grande. The full moon and coyote is behind her. This image haunted me—I could hear the coyote howling, and could feel the cool water flowing over her feet as she was anchored playing the cello.

Even now this image reminds me of the water spirit at the edge of the Rio Grande. The sound of water lapping on the shore, keeping time to the low notes of the cello, signaling the mystery of the New Mexican landscape.

The mystery and the language of the New Mexican landscape was revealed by Meinrad's paintings and essays. She knew the language of the imagination and this was embedded in her painting. She painted her dreams, her journeys, all with tracks back to the archetypal landscape of humankind. Coyote in this landscape was transformed into Anubis, the ancient Egyptian god of the dead. In this high desert landscape, the Rio Grande figured, and other forms of water figured in her paintings. She lived only a block away from the Rio Grande and would visit it and the Bosque frequently with her dogs.

Meinrad said that the music in the river returns with her to her studio after her walks and runs within the music that plays in her studio. Music for her magnifies the aboriginal sound. It plows her soul, upturning her earth, reaches into ever deeper levels to dig out and irrigate her innermost memories. She said that the great sound enters the deepest well where the fish with the largest eyes live and it, music, lures these images from the depth.

I remember the story of her visit to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, located in San Antonio, New Mexico. The waters, trees, and skies of Bosque del Apache yield a changing mix of birds throughout the season. From late October to late January, the sandhill cranes migrate here. Historically, the Rio Grande created seasonal wetlands that grew nutritious grains and other seeds which provided food for the migrating cranes.

Corr is the Irish word for 'crane', a bird which features a great deal in Irish mythology, although it is not a native of Ireland. The crane (or perhaps the gray heron) was thought to have associations with the moon and was sacred to the Triple Goddess. It was thought to represent magic, shamanic travel, learning, and keeping secrets, reaching deeper mysteries and truths.

This bird was revered by early ancestors because it was seen to be equally at home in flight, on land, and in water, which made it a particularly magical creature. Due to the fact that it stood upright, it was associated with shapeshifting, usually in feminine form, and it was probably for this reason that the eating of its flesh was considered taboo.

Meinrad was the one who stood at the water's edge, shapeshifting from nun, to artist, to shaman. As I attended her workshop at her studio, I watched her shape-shift like water, changing course, moving to the flow of something unseen that she honored. This is when I purchased my first original piece of art. In her studio, I begin to shape a life authentic to my new home in New Mexico.

As I wade into my thoughts, water figures predominantly, maybe because I live in a place where water is scarce, where the annual rainfall is 15 inches, while the US average is 38 inches of rain per year. Prayers for game and the sacred crops, the Three Sisters, bean, corn, and squash sustained the tribes during drought. In this scarcity, the spirit grows full, flowing into the ceremonial lives, honoring the Gods, honoring that which sustains us.

Meinrad's roots run deep here. She watered many dry souls with her art and brought some longing for a deeper connection to the water edge. I am one of those souls pulled to the edge of the Great River. In her life I heard voices beckoning me to go deeper and to jump into the deep end of life, daring to catch the fishes with the largest eyes.

In 2019 Meinrad stood at the water's edge and shape shifted for the last time. She gathered her images, sacred objects, and the sounds and smell of her beloved New Mexico and began her long trek home following the Rio Grande, her sacred waterway home. Leaving me and crane to explore the watery realms. Being with Meinrad was like an initiation. She opened up the watery threshold for me and taught me how to approach my dreams, my visions, my journeys and value and honor them. She was my Crane, the guardian who stood at the threshold and invited me to cross into liminal space, the betwixt and between.

Burial Waters

I am dreaming—My hearing is muffled. It feels like I am floating; I am cold. I look toward the sky and I see people on a ship. One black woman dressed in rags is crying, “My baby, my baby.” Her baby hangs limp in her arms while a man walks back and forward mumbles something under his breath. All this happens while another woman drops as if she fainted. People are in agony, crying, screaming—all in fear. I am confused. Where am I? I notice that there is a surface; I am floating, looking through water; at a ship. Slowly I recognize I am underneath the water-- floating, dead.

This sensation of floating reminds me of an African divination mat I bought from a French collector. I am studying divination and wanted an original African mat. My mat is burlap framed by cowry shells and is for Ifa divinations; Ifa, the Yoruba People of Nigeria deity of wisdom and intellectual development.

I also have the bell for calling the spirits who assist with the divination and the pointer to move the pieces on the divination board. The mat I purchased is covered by the spit of the diviner, making the space sacred and making an offering to the spirits. The next day I examined it; ringing the bell to call the spirits. I had the sensation of the spirits floating to the top of it, like souls lost in the Middle Passage floating from beneath the water to the surface. In respect I covered the divination mat, giving these spirits privacy.

Usually, I only count the souls that were captured and came ashore as slaves. Not the ones that died during the Middle Passage. There were two million slaves that did not make it. Some took their own lives, recognizing that only misery awaited them in the new mysterious place they journeyed to; some grew sick, unable to weather the long voyage. In my dream, I am one of the two million slaves that did not make it to land. I am one of the two million slaves lost at sea. I understand the confusion and the wide-eyed glaze when life leaves one's body.

I remember telling a scientist that I felt that the fear of water and dogs was encoded in our DNA. I imagine the trauma from our ancestors drowning in the ocean and those that survived being chased by vicious dogs as they ran to escape.

I imagine that this coding in my DNA is why I am afraid of water and water snakes. In college I took swimming lessons determined to conquer this fear. After a quarter, I could float with an inch of water over my face—a dead man floating position, and I could dive, plunging into the deep end of the pool, crashing into the water-- panicking as I struggled for air and searched for the surface. The scientist tells me it would take millions of years for something like this to be encoded in DNA. I do not believe him.

As I reflect on water, I think of the West African orisha Yemoja, the orisha of the oceans and/or rivers. Yoruba deity celebrated as the giver of life and as the metaphysical mother of all orisha (deities) within the Yoruba spiritual pantheon. She is motherly and strongly protective, and cares deeply for all her children, comforting them and cleansing them of sorrow. She does not easily lose her temper, but when angered she can be quite destructive and violent, as the flood waters of turbulent rivers. In the Afro-Cuban diaspora the Virgin Mary figures of the Catholic Church emerged as the image of Yemoja during the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

My African ancestral roots run like waterways through the world, carrying DNA, culture, and mysteries. I wonder if Yemoja's DNA is encased in the water moccasins swimming in the rivers and streams of East Texas. I wonder if Yemoja swam out to her children drowning in the middle of the ocean bringing them home. I wonder as I sink into my dream if I called out to her asking for her protection. I wonder if she answered my prayer.

I wonder whether the effect of George Floyd gulping for breath for eight minutes and forty-six seconds while the policeman pressed his knee on his throat was like drowning. I wonder when Floyd's eyes glazed over and death was at hand, was he like other water creatures beached on land. I wonder if his experience is like that of the two million slaves gulping air lost at sea. Did Yemoja reach out her hand to him as he drowned from lack of air.



Rita Mock-Pike

Poetry

Shining threads weave through
her darker mop of messy brown.
He never notices
except his own grays and whites.
But others do –
making comments of
“older” – “used up”
“no longer vital.”

Her value drops
as more threads of silver
weave their way through
less and less brown,
more and more silver –
fewer threads overall.
But his stock only increases.
Older and wiser,
they say of him.

Useless and unwanted,
they imply – never telling –
of her as she waits outside the door,
hoping today will be the day
a job comes that will pay enough
to help her keep the family fed,
the bills paid,
the car running.

In the mirror, silver threads
wind and wisp and wander
through hair once black as jet,
smooth as silk,
now, coarse and paling.
“Life,” she mutters to self and face,
convincing no one of her lies.
She’s lost another chance.
Too old. Too curvy. Too...
woman.



Agnes Richter Fiction 82

Emma Wells

583. 583. 583...

I've stitched identity, woven rivers into coarse, unforgiving fabric. Cotton is hard to come by but I've saved strands over years, pulling colourful tendrils from fraying escapees. I started with my asylum number, forgetting I was baptised Agnes. Semblances of humanity have worn dry, flaked off in darkened cells.

I'm an inventive seamstress. My lifetime's work: ebb and wane of a spindle needle, following the bent of thoughts, weaving its lifetime path, reclaiming deadened parts of my soul. Sepia memories, askance and thwarted, are righted: now upwards, proudly tall. My most prized line: 'I plunge headlong into disaster'; my motif, replacing corporeal years of perceived madness.

I'm famous. A once lowly seamstress, teemed with so-called "paranoia", has her own place in history like a bookmark holding a gripping page.

Money, hard-earned in America, troubled me. I couldn't find enough cubby holes to hide it. My father and brothers lusted: drunken Elysium dripped from seduced lips as ravenous, fable wolves. They failed me, exposing my pallid, hunchback frame to institutional clutches.

My family line is awkward, disjointed as my stitches, when I think of my father or brothers. My needle plunged deeper, becoming ensnared and tangled with the meaty flesh of fabric beneath. I'm no witch but perhaps there is a hint of the supernatural about me. My stitched jacket, a voodoo doll, constructed as a payback for all the indiscretions and hurts against me. It was never designed or intended to be so but possibly this is a view or credible stance to take of me.

Twenty-six years locked and keyed in Hubertusburg Asylum. I curse them, haunt greedy shadows, chanting "583" sitting atop gilded coins, tapping restless needles. They writhe, sweat like The Three Little Pigs, trapped in perpetual, boiling-pot hell.

For me, justice is served. My jacket is a museum artefact. Visit! You'll see glints of silvery needles where spirit lingers amidst prized stitching. It's part of the Prinzhorn Collection, No 743.

Numbers ghost, but with this one I'm freed.

I dream in a listless, intangible, and ephemeral realm of all the places I never visited in life; marvel at what I can do now that my hunchback and hobbled frame no longer confine me to a corporeal world. I long to return to America, the country that made me great, paved a golden path (to some degree). At least there I was paid, not fully seen, but paid well for my industry - the dramatic twists and turns of my needle earned me a smiling fortune. I should have stayed, keeping my money tightly pressed to corsets, not a dangling offering for my butchering brethren at home in Germany.

I have learnt from my misdemeanours.

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Sanctuary

Cassandra

Sachar

Creative
Nonfiction

Strength. Fragility.

I hold her trunk gently and we walk, a bucket of snacks in my other hand. Every so often, for encouragement, I present her an offering: a chunk of corn on the cob or triangle of watermelon. Her tree trunk-thick legs move in a slow, measured tempo.

Her rough, wrinkled, skin is covered with bristly hair. As she accepts the treat, deftly grabbing with her well-muscled appendage and popping it into her open maw, chomping away, she leaves a filmy, gooey coating of saliva and mucus on my hand, which is already sticky with juice. These fluids mingle with my own sweat, for the sun shines strong in Phetchaburi, Thailand, and the trees that line the dirt road fail to provide adequate shade.

I'm disgusting. I don't care. I'm in heaven.

Her name is Pom Puang. In her former life, she was a logging elephant in Myanmar, a beast of burden tasked with hauling up to twenty tons of weight each working day.

Here, she is an honored guest, free to roam the wide-open enclosures and socialize with other elephants. Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand, a rescue center and sanctuary, provides rehabilitation, and, when possible, release for injured and mistreated wild animals. Thailand is known for animal tourism, often synonymous with animal exploitation. WFFT seeks to educate against this cruelty and provide an ethical alternative for tourist visitation, one where our donations preserve the upkeep of the animals.

We learn about the ancient tradition of phajaan, which translates roughly to "the crush." This custom involves a number of horrors including a baby elephant being placed in a small cage, tied up, beaten, and deprived of sleep, food, and water to break its spirit. In the end, the creature is looking for any source of comfort, so when the mahout (handler) eventually offers sustenance, the elephant becomes subservient, allowing the human to gain control.

We learn about the delicate backs of elephants. Despite their brute power, they have a unique, bony spine that damages easily. Most elephants at the sanctuary have permanent back injuries from carrying tourists.

I think back to Facebook posts I have seen of friends riding elephants; little did they know that this "bucket list" item was destroying the very animals for which they had professed so much love.

I think back to a photograph I took in India at the Amber Fort in Rajasthan. A parade of elephants struts forth, each one bedecked in colorful robes. A mahout and chair rest atop each one, looking regal, like something from a hundred years ago. I had the picture enlarged onto a canvas for my study, having no idea that each elephant was in excruciating pain, that those fancy carriages were forming blisters and bending bones.

Pom Puang flaps her ears, which are mottled pink at the edges, and the guide explains this means she is happy. Her heavy-lidded and long-lashed eyes, small and brown in her giant head, radiate warmth. Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but I believe she is smiling at me. She's a lovely companion for a promenade; it's like walking an enormous dog.

Each person in the tourist group takes a turn as leader. Pom Puang is patient with us, used to people even if we are not accustomed to close proximity with such a large and majestic lady. She seems to enjoy these human-led strolls, for she knows she will be rewarded with treats and a bath.

Elephants don't sweat, so they use mud and water to keep themselves cool. Part of our donation today allows us to engage in bath time. We fill a bucket with water and rub her down with long squeegees. She reaches her trunk into the tub and gives us all a playful spray, a cooldown from the heat.

This is a perfect day, one where I allow myself to live in the moment, not thinking of achieving a goal or reaching a deadline.

Strength. Fragility.

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Hidden Rainbow

84

Linda M. Crate

Poetry

staring out stained glass windows,
those rainbow colors never gave me
answer nor prayer;

tried to pray the gay away but that
didn't dim my rainbow heart—

so i buried the truth,
and told a lie i believed for so
long until it insisted it come to light;
i said i was straighter than an arrow

turns out that arrow was broken and bent—

crooked things have always had character
to me,
i guess i should've realized i wasn't straight;

but i was unwilling to admit that i had a crush
on morticia addams, lydia deetz, or medusa—

& so i kept it a secret until one day the closet
door came open and it's only been haphazardly
closed since because rainbows like fire don't
like to be hidden away.



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Envious Fruit

Emma Wells

I'm acrimonious, bitter to a fleshless core, riddled by sinuous envy. Technically, part of me fits the brief of sour fruits: my tonal distaste, but for all else, I'm a barren failure – a dusty wasteland tethering to a muted daffodil.

I didn't prosper like the others. I'm a blighted ovum, barely clinging to my citrus umbilical cord. I enviously eye others: bountifully round, full-term pregnancies. They're fruitful queens overspilling with courtly discourse, motherly-wise words. They are prized, squeezed, held aloft; faces marvel at orbital blooms as life-juice pours forth, colostrum leaking gleefully.

Their journeys are beginning: shining at markets; happy to be pummelled like a sports massage to cooling lemonade. I spy tourists gulping fresh, tangy, rejuvenating drops – liquid heaven. They saunter Lake Garda's cerulean curtain edges. Some burst forth in neon highlighter, others bake to splendour, crowning drizzle cakes; arrogant ones spin in sliced circles, swimming in globular glasses, dispatching disparagement from the safety of aloof, watery planets.

I, in contrast, hang dejectedly, rotting. No one sees curling failure where plains shrivel, hard as sinews. No blood-giving flesh vibrates my empty shell. I'm no pearl, not sought by scavenging hands, caught by iridescent seduction.

Even my birthplace mocks: sublime Lake Garda stretches like a supermodel, showcasing svelte curves. She is pure perfection, but I'm disfigured, disabled, disbarred from life. I pray with stringy hands to be released, unplugged from the mains. Allow me to fall upon verdant ground, laying to rest in a grassy coffin.

Belinda
Edwards

Essay,
part 8,
final

Out of the indigo tales of history, my African voice seeks expression

DNA has included more of the African population, which translates into a more specific DNA report. This is important, because through slavery I have lost my original language and tribal affiliation. Through my DNA, I learned that 35% percent of my DNA is from Nigeria, Benin & Togo (19%), and Cameroon, Congo & Western Bantu Peoples (16%). This is still a wide swatch of genes to consider. As my original African voice struggles for expression, I consider learning an African language. It is less than a scientific approach, as I choose Yoruba, because it is spoken mostly in southwestern Nigeria in the region that once made up much of the kingdom of Benin and is part of the huge Niger-Congo language family. Almost 30 million people speak Yoruba, a tonal language. Like the indigenous people of North America and across the world, I want to revitalize my original language. In doing so, I acknowledge not only the past role of the United States that led to language loss among slaves, and Native Americans, but also the fact that these languages and cultures are distinct, essential to tribal identity, inherently worthy of existing. In order to survive, we lost our language and integrated our spiritual beliefs in the churches.

If I don't have the language, then who am I? To assume that language is simply a tool for communication and that all languages are the same, misses the deeper point: one's culture, identity, and unique worldview are all housed within and transmitted through the language. I wonder when I learn my original language, what will be different? Will my dreams and writing take on a different deeper shape? Will the cadence of my sentences begin to reflect my original homeland?

In reclaiming my language, I reclaim it for those brought here, who learned English, and relinquished their culture in order to survive. I reclaim the honor of the slaves that worked in the indigo fields. Even if I learn one or two phrases, Yoruba will begin to take root in my soul. Last night I dreamed of the Ancestors. Around the fire I see their familiar faces reflected in the progression of the centuries. There is silence--the stillness of the stars-- there is a song in my long forgotten original language.

I am dancing in deep step with indigo and indigo is the dark at the end of everything.

Charcoal Wind

87

Rita Mock-Pike

Poetry

The smell still permeated the air,
a permanent adjoinment to
the scorched earth of Dachou.

The cries echoed through the breeze,
the gates failing to trap the sound
of the chambers of death in Dachou.

I didn't know they were my people
when I visited in 2002, a tourist, a child.
But something burrowed deep in me
wept for hours at their tortured deaths.

The windy smell was nothing like charcoal,
yet the sky smelt a blanket of ashen night
fallen 60 years before and never left.

The evil in that place, the air of death –
and yet many still deny the atrocities
ignoring the past, doomed to repeat it as they fall prey to white nationalism.

I didn't know they were my people
when I visited in 2002, a tourist, a child.
But I know today, and I cry out – I speak out.
And I am called a fascist by the white supremacists because I refuse to bend.

“You don't know who you're speaking to,”
I'm tempted, but never say.
A daughter of the Jewish people,
a fighter, a singer, a dreamer.
You won't bring me down with you.

Charcoal winds blow through your past and mine,
but I won't lose again.

Repent, relent!
Turn forever from your hateful ways
and you won't lose your soul.
Remain in this hour,
and charcoal winds will be your eternal fate.

Breakdown

Emptiness fills her mind,
washing over its outer cortex
in dissonant syncopation.

Thoughts trawl in waves
of emotion, ebbing and flowing
through a fragile psyche

as silently she screams
with each hammer blow
of her disintegration.

Jusan Carberry
Poetry

Amma's Chellapetti

89

Mydhili R. Varma

Fiction

It is a strange thing to attend your own funeral, albeit in astral form. But if you knew the 104-year-old, just-dead Rajarajeshwari Bai, you'd know that it's the right thing to do under the circumstances. However, Ambika, her helper, nurse, and confidante, didn't believe in such balderdash, this transcendental business Rajarajeshwari Bai was up to after her death. That's why Ambika was sceptical about the pale form of the old woman when she beckoned her. Ambika, in utter disbelief grabbed a steel glass from the dining table and threw it straight at the old woman's form.

"Chey!" reproached the dead matriarch when the steel glass went right through her face and landed outside the window. "Enda ithu?! Haven't you seen an astral body before? Throwing things at me. Where are your manners?"

"A-a-amma, what body?" stammered a petrified Ambika. She had addressed Rajarajeshwari Bai as Amma since the time she had started working for her, taking care of Amma after she was paralysed from a stroke and became bedbound. "You are alive?"

"No, viddhi penne; I am dead. My body is. This is my true form."

Ambika was speechless. She looked around in confusion. Nobody had an inkling that the matriarch whose funeral they were arranging was out of her paralysed and dead body and wandering about, giving orders, like she had in her healthier days.

The matriarch took her last rasping breath at four minutes after eight in the morning of a cold Sunday in November before anyone in the house had awakened. There was some dispute about the time of her death after Lilly, the housekeeper, had discovered her dead in the bed. She informed the family. Bhavya, the first daughter-in-law, who was in charge of feeding Rajarajeshwari Bai in the morning, argued that it was impossible that her mother-in-law was dead like Lilly maintained because it was impossible that she could have missed feeding her at eight in the morning. When nobody bought it, Bhavya then took to blaming the old clock that ran slow and ruined her perfect daily routines.

"I've been asking you to change that pandaram clock's batteries since last month," blamed Bhavya, scowling at her husband, Shashi, Amma's eldest son. Pandaram was her favourite curse word. "I reminded you yesterday also..."

"Sathyanu," agreed Amma's second son, Hariharan. "I heard chechi remind you yesterday."

Shashi nervously looked from his wife to his brother and back again, unable to justify himself.

"As if that matters now," concluded Bavya, observing Hariharan's wife shake her head and walk off saying about changing into something more presentable. Her sister-in-law always meant business when it came to her public appearance. When she was out, nobody, not even a jealous Bhavya, could refute the picture-perfect daughter-in-law in mourning appearance. With a sombre mauve saree and the loose bun ready to come undone at the exact moment Girija would shake her head, wailing in phoney grief, she nailed the look.

Amma shook her head and said, "This is going to be interesting to watch. What are you still doing there, staring at me like I'm some ghost? Come here, kuttu."

"Aren't you, Amma?" asked Ambika, reluctantly taking a step towards Amma.

"What?"

"A ghost. Aren't you one?"

Amma shrugged. "I don't feel like one. I am free to go anywhere and I am not bound to this house. No, I don't think I'm a ghost in the sense most people know..."

"Then why are you still here?" asked Ambika.

"Athu kollam!" said Amma, looking offended. "This is my house. I can stay here for as long as I see fit."

Ambika hung her head in remorse. She had never had a tiff with Amma when she was alive.

"Anyway, let's get to business. I want you to get me something. And for God's sake, don't look so melancholic! Look at me - do I look like I need your grief? I am in perfect metaphysical condition. Better than I ever was alive. Look, I can walk and my joints don't even creak. Smooth as ever. Stop giving me that sorrowful look. You're ruining the first day of my afterlife."

Ambika, all of nineteen and reeling from the loss of her own mother, faked a smile but found it hard not to break into tears. "You're right, Amma. What is it that you want me to get you? Your Bhagavadgeetha book?"

"No, no, no. What will I do with my Bhagavadgeetha book?" said Amma. "Get me my chellapetti."

"Your what?" said Ambika.

“My chellapetti. In which I keep my murukkan. I’m sure Shashi has taken it. He’s the only one in the house besides me who chews betel leaves. Oh, how I’ve missed my murukkan! Go on! The room on the right of the stairs.”

Ambika weaved through the crowd of mourners inside the house and went straight for Shashi’s room. There, on the bedside table was Amma’s ornamental chellapetti, looking magnificent like its original owner. She hid the heavy box in the pallu of her davani and returned to Amma’s bedroom.

“Ah, there it is!” exclaimed Amma. She took it in her hands and stroked the lid in fascination. “It’s been so long..”

Ambika, who was glad to have run Amma’s final errand, had finally found the courage to accept the loss of her beloved Amma.

Amma opened the chellapetti, took the betel leaf and lovingly smoothed it in her left hand. She looked down at her former shell. “Look at Shashi – he’s spilled the rice grains all over my face instead of placing them in my mouth. Always been sloppy, that one.” Ambika smiled dolefully. Amma applied lime powder to the leaf from the chunnambu petti. Then she placed four small pieces of cracked areca nuts in the leaf, rolled it into a parcel and popped it into her mouth.

As someone who had been paralysed from stroke and bedridden for nearly a year, Amma had lots to talk about, and Ambika had to be a sharp listener to keep up with her as she narrated the unpalatable truths she had learnt about her family members over the course of her illness and bedbound days. They sat there, Amma and Ambika, long after the body was taken for cremation, Amma chewing murukkan and commenting on the happenings in the house, and Ambika wrapped up in her own thoughts.

Long after the visitors were gone and he had finished his dinner, Shashi started searching for his mother’s chellapetti. He went about asking everyone in the house and finally found it in his mother’s room on her bed, open and missing a good bunch of betel leaves.





Stencil on a Rainbowed Sky

Whenever I look at a blue sky, I wish I could paint it with my colors. Then a rainbow came in the picture after a very rainy night (and stormy week) and I thought, "There it is. Now just add a kiss."

-Milene Correia

Artist Statement

Golden Meadows

93

Purring air of cicada dawn,
rising heat approaches.
Early out and early running.
Hopes of being ignored,
unnoticed, unharassed.

Tread forward with toes in shoes,
fitting like gloves, tight and flex.
Pounding trails through golden meadow,
hopes of being visible
only to other women who may nod and smile,
not beasts called men,
nor wild animals with claw and fur.

Word has it a cougar roams these woods
surrounded by this open field of glint.
Hesitation, just one moment.
Claws still better than the roadside runs
where predators honk horns and shout threats
for deigning not a smile in the driver's direction.

Solace, sweet reprieve!
Trail of runners who mind their business,
run their own paths,
ignoring yours.

A nod is all that's ever asked in these
asphalt, dirt, and gravel havens.
Politeness, notwithstanding,
nods ignored are still ignored,
no trailing beast to scream obscenities
if a smile is not given.

Dusky eve creeps in,
forgetting the day, drawing in night.
One last run before sky abandons trails
to unlit worlds where mammals roam.
Mosquitoes swarm, this golden hour.
Still worth it to escape the four-wheeled beasts
and two-legged monsters who chase.

Golden morning hours,
golden evening hours.
Golden meadows of freedom
from the world outside.

Rita Mock-Pike

Poetry

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KAREN BOISSONNEAULT-GAUTHIER – CANADA

Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier is a Canadian indigenous photographer and visual artist. When she's not walking her Siberian Husky under the Northern Lights, she designs with Art of Where. Her publication covers include Synkroniciti, The Feel Magazine, Doubleback Review, Arachne Press, Pretty Owl Poetry, Wild Musette, Existere Journal, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Gigantic Sequins, and Ottawa Arts Journal, among others. Karen has also been featured in Vox Popular Media Arts Festival, Bracken Magazine, Zoetic Press, New Feathers Anthology, Maintenant 15, Parliament Lit, and Pure in Heart Stories to name but a few.

SUSAN CARBERRY - LONDON, UK

Susan Carberry, was born in and still lives in NW London. Her background is in education: music, sport, and languages (including English). Currently she is a poet and writer of short stories. Over the years she has written poetry, and has had a few published. Earlier this year, she was appointed Poet in Residence for her local park's gardeners. She is a committed Roman Catholic and worked for her parish for twenty-three years as a voluntary administrator. In 2016 she retired and was awarded a Papal Medal, the Benemerenti for her services to the Church, it was a proud day for her.

LINDA M. CRATE - PENNSYLVANIA, USA

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvania writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has eleven published chapbooks the latest being: fat & pretty (Dancing Girl Press, June 2022), and three micro-chapbooks; Heaven Instead (Origami Poems Project, May 2018), moon mother (Origami Poems Project, March 2020), and & so I believe (Origami Poems Project, April 2021). She is also the author of the novella Mates (Alien Buddha Publishing, March 2022).

MJ DELFIN - MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

MJ Delfin is a Mexican-American feminist writer and cat mom who dreams in English instead of her native Spanish, with a Literature degree from The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and a special interest in Shakespeare, fantasy, and folklore. Subtitle editor, translator, and fledgling voice actress. Currently works, happily, at a museum. Her stories have been dramatized in several podcasts (Sin aliento, Vanya Reads, the 80 Cuentos bilingual anthology by Studio Ochenta), posted in online literary magazines (Revista Marabunta, Revista Irradiaci'n, The MockingOwl Roost) and will soon be published formally by ITA Editorial.

ROMÉO DESMARAIS III - ONTARIO, CANADA

Roméo Desmarais III (he/him) is a poet, songwriter, musician and visual artist living in London Ontario, Canada. His most recent publication is a response piece to the U.S. Supreme Court's overturning Roe v Wade in July 18, 2022's "oddball magazine". Roméo is Queer/2Spirit, Francophone, and Métis/Indigenous.

BELINDA EDWARDS - SANTA FE, NM

Belinda Edwards is an African American writer who was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is currently working on a collection of essays that explore social justice and anti-racism issues through her experiences. By weaving threads of familial and community memories with the threads of current and past national events, this book, much like quilting, will take an old fragmented western narrative and piece together a new one. She earned her M.A. degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara and lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She currently facilitates various writing groups.

GARRY ENKENT - CANADA

Garry Engkent, a Chinese-Canadian, has co-authored three texts: Groundwork: Writing Skills to Build On; Fiction/Non-Fiction: A Reader and Rhetoric; and Essay: Do's and Dont's. His fictional stories have appeared in Exile, Many-Mouthed Birds, Emerge, Ricepaper Magazine, Savage Realm Gamebook, and Dark Winter Literary Magazine. Most stories have a Chinese immigrant slant: "Why My Mother Can't Speak English", "Eggroll", and "Rabbit". His recent published forays into horror are I, Zombie: A Different Point of View, Merci, and We Aren't Bad Guys.

LEA ERVIN - ALABAMA, USA

Lea Ervin is a writer and artist from Alabama. When she is not painting, writing, or teaching writing, she is cooking, bingeing her favorite series, reading, or perusing record shops for a great musical find! Lea also manages endometriosis which is the central theme of her writing and artwork. She lives in Alabama with her husband, Brad White, and their sassy Beagle-mix, Starla Belle Ervin-White.



FAITH G - WASHINGTON, USA

Faith is a small-town girl, she was forced into the world by a premonition that she would die at the age of thirty. With so much to do and so little time, she became a true renaissance woman: a chef, professional singer, world traveler, racehorse trainer, writer, and an International Embryo Transfer Scientist. At the latter part of thirty, she did almost die, having become terminally ill. Against all odds, she is still here living her life in Washington State because she likes the rain. She has had several stories published in various magazines: Ribot Abbey in Kaleidoscope and A True Recipient in the Hereford News.

ANITA GOVEAS - LONDON, UK

Anita Goveas is British-Asian, London-based, and fuelled by strong coffee and paneer jalfrezi. She's on the editorial team at Flashback Fiction, an editor at Mythic Picnic's Twitter zine, and tweets erratically. Her debut flash collection, "Families and other Natural Disasters," is available from Reflex Press, and links to her stories on her blog.

DESIRÉE JUNG - VANCOUVER, CANADA

Desirée Jung is an artist born in Brazil, and adopted by Vancouver, Canada. She has published translations, poetry, and fiction in several magazines around the world. She has also participated in many artist residencies. Her education includes a film degree from Vancouver Film School, a BFA in Creative Writing, an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in Comparative Literature, all from the University of British Columbia. Writing, for her, is a hopeless attempt to capture light. Her most recent work, a series of video poems about memory, landscape and what is not-all out there, has been screened in several film festivals around the world.

SASKIA KIRKEGAARD - LONDON, UK

Saskia Kirkegaard is a poet who divides her time between London and Bristol. She has previously been published in a young writers anthology, as well as in What She Said Magazine. Themes that crop up most commonly in her writing are: nature; relationships; body image and mental health. When she isn't writing, she's either climbing or drawing (or scrolling through the endless social media void!).

ANDY N. - MANCHESTER, UK

Andy N is the author of 9 poetry books including "Return to Kemptown" and "The End of Summer" and is the Podcast host for Podcasts such as Spoken Label and Cloaked in the Shadows. He does occasionally sleep.

CATH NICHOLS - WARRINGTON, UK

Cath Nichols is a former queer journalist and radio broadcaster, whose most recent poetry collection is This is Not a Stunt (2017, Valley Press). She's a wheelchair-user outside the house and has taught creative writing at the University of Leeds since 2011 part-time. She's written articles on writing and disability for Mslexia, Poetry Wales, and the Journal for Literary & Cultural Disability Studies. In 2021/22 she collaborated with scientists at Leeds to create a picture book, That's Amazing, Mum for 6-8 year-olds. 1000 copies have been distributed for free to schools, libraries and food banks.

CASSANDRA O'SULLIVAN SACHAR - PENNSYLVANIA, USA

Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar is a writer and associate English professor in Pennsylvania. Her creative nonfiction, short stories, flash fiction, microfiction, and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in over twenty publications including Impost: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work, Adelaide Literary Magazine, The Dillydoun Review, The Pine Cone Review, Little Old Lady Comedy, Quagmire Literary Magazine, Friday Flash Fiction, The Centifictionist, Tales from the Moonlit Path, and Black Petals Horror/Science Fiction Magazine. She holds a Doctorate of Education with a Literacy Specialization from the University of Delaware and is working toward an MFA in Creative Writing at Wilkes University.

L. QUATTROCHI - ILLINOIS, USA

L. Quattrochi is an eighteen-year-old writer with a passion for poetry, painting, baking, housecleaning, early childhood education, and music. She wants to try and learn a bit of everything. Having started her literary career by self-publishing, she is now working on a fictionalized memoir/autobiography. She writes poetry simply because it's always inside her, and it helps quiet the noise in her head.

CAI QUIRK - NEW YORK, USA

Cai Quirk (they) is a trans and genderqueer multi-disciplinary artist who focuses on the intersection of gender diversity throughout history, its erasure, and contemporary reclamation and re-story-ation. Cai's poetry and photography series "Beyond Pink and Blue" uses metaphors of color to explore aspects of gender beyond binaries. Their self-portrait photography series and upcoming book, "Transcendence," engages with connections between gender, mythology, and nature-based spirituality. In the spring of 2022 Cai received the Minnie Jane Scholarship and a four-month artist residency from the Pendle Hill Quaker Retreat Center. They received bachelor's degrees in music and photography from Indiana University.

JOSHUA QUIRK - NEW YORK, USA

Joshua Quirk is an alien from the squirkalaxy. Existing primarily in order to float several inches above the sediment at all times, they juice eggs most days as their hens are prolific. Kale and swiss chard spring forth from their soil, to which they add the egg-juice in a ferrous vessel to create lunch. Delicious usually, they pride themselves in their ability to generate it. Sometimes they also make video games and write songs about how sorry they are for their existence.

K.Y. SIA - CALIFORNIA, USA

Some of K. Y. Sia's poems can be seen in Gangan Internationales Literaturmagazin, 3 a.m. Magazine, Locust Magazine, and so on. Despite having lost hand function as a result of a progressive disease, she uses dictation software and continues to be a freelance writer/editor/translator by trade. Some of her feature articles appear in broadsheets and glossies.

GARY TUBBS - BALI, INDONESIA

Gary Tubbs is the author of *Mindful Messages for Children 2016*, *A Boy Like Me 2020*, and *Taming the Dragon: My Memoir of Coming Out, Addiction, and Awakening 2022* (Sidekick Press). He is a blissfully retired Seattle school principal currently residing in Bali, Indonesia.

MYDHILI R. VARMA - COIMBATORE, INDIA

Mydhili R Varma has co-written anthologies titled *Urban Shots*, *Bright Lights*, *Fox Hollow Stories*, *Otherwise Engaged Journal* (Vol 5), *Word Doodle Lit Mag*, *Flora Fiction*, *The Elixir Magazine* and *Disquiet Arts*. Her flash fiction has been shortlisted in the *Stubborn Writers* contest. Her poems have been published in *Sunlight* literary magazine. She won the *Ceiling 200 Flash Fiction Contest* by *Coastal Shelf* magazine. Her short story included in *She Speaks* anthology is being adapted into a film to be aired on Amazon Prime. She is one of the 50 finalists in the *International Short Tales Contest* organized by Cesar Egido Serrano Foundation in Spain. Her young adult fiction, *The Suicide Pact*, has won her the *Writefluencer Award 2022*. She is currently working on her literary novel.

RAY VILLACORTE - CAVITE, PHILIPPINES

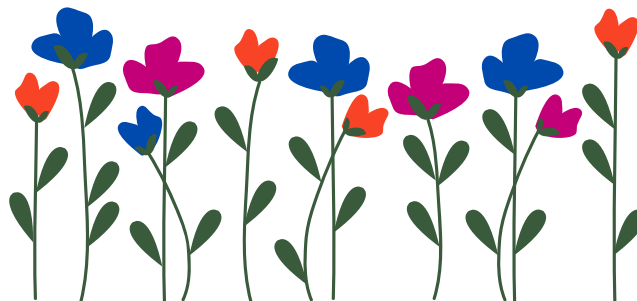
Ray Villacorte is a writer from the Philippines and studied English at the PUP - Manila. When he's not busy spending hours writing about people falling in love, Ray is creating digital illustrations with themes of outer space and nature.

EMMA WELLS - UNITED KINGDOM

Emma is a mother and English teacher. She has poetry published with various literary journals and magazines. She enjoys writing flash fiction and short stories also. Her debut novel, "Shelley's Sisterhood" is due to be published in 2023.

LINDA C. WISNIEWSKI - PENNSYLVANIA, USA

Linda C. Wisniewski is a former librarian and journalist who lives in Bucks County, PA and writes about life and the connections we make by giving each other the time and space to be heard. Her work has been published in *Toasted Cheese*, *Hippocampus*, *Manifest Station*, and other literary magazines. She is the author of a memoir, *Off Kilter: A Woman's Journey to Peace With Scoliosis, Her Mother and Her Polish Heritage* (Pearlson Press, 2008) and a time travel novel, *Where the Stork Flies* (Sand Hill Review Press, 2021).



ANNALI CARMEL - CREATIVE TEAM

Annali Carmel (she/her) enjoys her life in rural New South Wales, where she listens to a lot of music, does some singing, and welcomes the occasional affection of Aria the cat when she deigns the peasant worthy.

SUE COOK - ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, WRITER, SOCIAL TEAM

Sue Cook (she/her) lives in Freeport, Illinois with her husband Randy and two dogs. Her passions include assistance dogs, rescue dogs, music, acting, theater, poetry, and Doctor Who. She's been in both film and theater and is a regular cast member of the podcast Doctor Who's Line is it....Anyway? Sue is an advocate for the use of Service Dogs to assist their disabled handlers to maintain their independence. Quigley's Quest, her first children's book, addresses how a dog becomes a Service Dog.

MILENE CORREIA - REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Brazilian multidisciplinary artist. Major in English Language and Literature, taking a specialization course in Teaching of Drama. I write, rewrite, draw and compose and expose because my heart can't fit all these feelings. Leo, Queer, 92.

KATIE DANIELS - STAFF WRITER & INTERVIEWER

Katie Daniels is a lifelong Florida kid, where she still resides with her husband and their pup-child. She loves reading, meeting new people, and seeing new places. If you need anything, just bribe her with a donut.

JP DENEUI - HEAD COPY EDITOR

Joseph Paul "JP" DeNeui (he/him) is a basketball-loving missionary kid from Thailand transplanted to Chicago, Illinois, where he shivers through winters and writes fantasy and sci-fi. He is the author of the fantasy novel Shadow of Wings.

JEFF KIRBY - COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Jeff Kirby (he/him) is an avid doer of things, and can often be found on a bike in downtown Chicago, with a cup of coffee at hand. Jeff is a fan of Chicago, podcasts, witty comedies, and professional wrestling, and is just beginning to get his mojo back as a writer.

CYNTHIA ANN LUBLINK - COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CREATIVE TEAM

Cyndi (she/her) is the mama of two grown children and Oma to eight grandchildren, all of whom she adores. She's a biker chick with a lady's heart and forty tattoos that tell some of her life story. Not just a cancer survivor, she's a life thriver. She also loves painting and finds the process like solving math equations. She has been a writer/poet since the age of nine, her first poem being about God's Hands. She wrote for Christian Biker Magazine for five years.

EMILY MACKENZIE - COPY EDITOR

Emily MacKenzie is a Canadian-born writer who currently teaches Secondary English in Scotland. She studied English and Creative Writing at Carleton University in Ottawa, although her love of writing developed long before that. Emily loves exploring different narrative formats and styles in her own writing, and while she tends to stick with long or short prose fiction, the odd poem slips through from time to time. She can most often be found tackling one of several young adult fantasy stories she intends to publish, both on her tablet, and on the walls with stickies, markers, and poster paper.

TANDY MALINAK - STAFF WRITER

A Seattleite by birth, Tandy Malinak loves mountains but not rain. So she escaped to Chicago to learn what 'winter', 'summer', and 'real thunderstorm' mean, and she decided she liked them all. Tandy earned a BA in Education specializing in English and now spends her days homeschooling, nannying, and helping to lead her church's kids' ministry. In her free time, she writes fantasy and sci-fi, solves crosswords, and plays Nintendo. She lives with her husband, two dragon-loving kids, and three black cats.

ELIZABETH MOCK - CREATIVE TEAM

Elizabeth Mock is a Grand Rapids, Michigan native and senior in illustration studying at Grand Valley State University, where she is also the Vice President of the Student Interest Group of Illustrators, the university's illustration club. Outside of school and The MockingOwl Roost, she is a community manager at Adobe. In the official Adobe Creative Career (ACC) Discord server, she helps host panels, challenges, and discussions to elevate members' careers through mentorship. With hopes to pursue a career in graphic, layout, and information design, Elizabeth also enjoys community engagement, animation, and photography. You can find her daily in ACC.

NANCY MOCK - PROOFREADER

Nancy (she/her) was born in Montana, raised in Ohio, and moved to Florida almost 30 years ago. Mother of Rita Mock-Pike and her two siblings. Nancy learned to make computers “dance” in the early 1970s, with her husband’s encouragement, before most people had computers in their homes. She’s had a lot of experience formatting magazines, flyers, etc. throughout her life. As a retiree, her favorite hobbies are still crafting (mostly sewing) and reading.

RITA MOCK-PIKE - CO-FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Editor-in-Chief of The MockingOwl Roost, Rita Mock-Pike (she/her) is the granddaughter of aviatrix, Jerrie Mock, first woman to pilot an airplane solo around the world. Rita has found inspiration from her grandmother’s life and flight and pursued many of her own dreams in theatre, podcasting, novel writing, and cooking up delicious food from around the world. She now writes on food, travel, pets, faith, and the arts. She’s happily married to Matt, and faithfully serves the very fluffy kitten queen, Lady Stardust.

SOREN PORTER - CO-FOUNDER & COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Soren Porter – He/him, INFJ, 30s-ish I think?, happily forever taken (sorry lads and ladies!). Writing reflections of faith and philosophy. LGBTQIA+ ally and sworn enemy of white supremacy. You might hear Soren ranting against evil policies, sharing ridiculous pop culture, or tossing around some theological thoughts on Tumblr or Twitter.

SEEMA PRUSTY - REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Seema Prusty comes from India and now resides in Saudi Arabia. She recently discovered that she can write poetry. While scrolling through Facebook, she found the MockingOwl Roost ad began reading the magazine and the beautiful poetry therein, finding inspiration for her own work. She received her degree in Civil Engineering in India, then married and settled in Kaust, Saudi Arabia where her husband works as a Research Scientist. She works at the same university as her husband. They have a 4.5 year old son.

DANA REEVES - STAFF WRITER

Meet Florida born-and-raised Dana Reeves: Wife, dog mom, certified personal trainer, and lover of all things reading and writing. What began as a hobby in writing short stories while in school soon turned into a full-fledged passion for all things writing as an adult. She loves to create fiction, poetry, and fitness-related articles. When Dana isn’t writing, she loves running, traveling with her husband and family, exploring the world via cruise ship, and, as always, searching the universe over for more exciting writing material.



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