

Thimble Literary Magazine

Volume 1 • Number 4 • Spring 2019

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Nadia Wolnisty
Editor in Chief

Phil Cerroni
Managing Editor

Paul Koniecki
Associate Editor

The *Thimble Literary Magazine* is based on the belief that poetry is like armor. Like a thimble, it may be small and seem insignificant, but it will protect us when we are most vulnerable.

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Brief Guidelines for Submission

The *Thimble Literary Magazine* is primarily a poetry journal but invites submissions on related topics such as artwork, stories, and interviews. We are not looking for anything in particular in terms of form or style, but that it speaks to the reader or writer in some way. When selecting your poems or prose, please ask yourself, did this poem help me create shelter? Simultaneous submissions are accepted, but please notify us if the work is accepted elsewhere. All material must be original and cannot have appeared in another publication.

Poetry: Please send us three to five of your poems.

Short Stories: Please send a single work or around 1,000 words. It can be fiction, creative non-fiction, or somewhere in between.

Essays: Please send a single essay of 1,000–3,000 words that touches on contemporary issues in literature or art.

Art: Please send us three to five examples of your art, which can include photographs and photographs of three-dimensional pieces.

Please send submissions to Nadia Wolnisty, Editor-in-Chief, Thimble Literary Magazine, thimblelitmag@gmail.com The author's biography should be included in the body of the email and the submission as a single attachment.

Cover art

Jeanette Powers, *I am but an egg*,
print on banana peel paper with hemp twine, 2017.

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Alan Gann, *Below the Dam*,
digital photograph, 2018.

Editor's Note

What do you learn about someone through their collections? Can you speculate that someone who collects records is nostalgic? Is it a stretch to say a stamp collector wants to travel? I am not much for psychoanalysis (being a patient rather than a student of it), and I do think one can get a bit carried away. Someone who collects model train sets surely doesn't spend all their spare time contemplating trolley problems.

I do know it's easy to judge people by their collections. I never quite understood people with collectable spoons. Then again, I collect books by the yard that I probably won't ever start, let alone finish.

I learned recently that the word for one who collects thimbles is *digitabulist*. While even less practical than spoons, there is something lovely about collecting thimbles, I imagine. I can see a vast hoard of them somewhere, neatly dusted, on an eccentric's shelf. A whole row of homes in miniature, promising a modicum of protection with no pretensions.

As a cofounder and the editor in chief of *Thimble Literary Magazine*, I am tempted to call myself a *digitabulist*. But that's not quite right. I don't want to say I collected the artists and wordsmiths here. That feels both clinical and condescending. *Gather* is a better word, perhaps, than one that means to collect.

Here, then, is a gathering of thimbles. Thank you for looking.

NADIA WOLNISTY

Shadow Box Apocalypse

by Erik Fuhrer

Toothpick bones shave easily
the apocalypse learns
while building a shadow box model of me

The apocalypse is a red dwarf
is Saturn's eighth ring is the big bang
its eye the cup of our sun

the apocalypse is not drawn to scale

Sunday nights soften the apocalypse
it takes a walk a bath goes shopping
A photo in Entertainment Weekly confirms:
the apocalypse is just like us!

Corinth

by Christina Strigas

Is it okay to be
rude for no reason?
The reason I love you is
not the right one

that comes to mind. I spread love of words
dressed in imaginary
half-ass wings, on a little Greek girl fragile,
watch me breathe in and out Greek—
Crying in ancient Corinth

where centuries pass without trace
where my parents were born
in a small Greek village in the mountains
named: Stimaga—
where my roots are.

A city
of survival or travel,
Jason settled there with Medea,
where Pegasus became a symbol,
the myth of Arion,
how love of monuments' more graceful
than building walls of torment—
While awake—while asleep,
I am perfectly free of evilness,

the restless dream of sleep paralysis,
falling wings deglorifying,
the past is buried now
where my father finished high school
where my mother finished elementary

but even reason
has a way of changing,
turning to outright wild lies;
this is where you were rude to me
laughed at my homemade history lessons

Go down to the village, wake up the family
or sleep in,
and shout out
the morning for coffee—I can't hear you now.

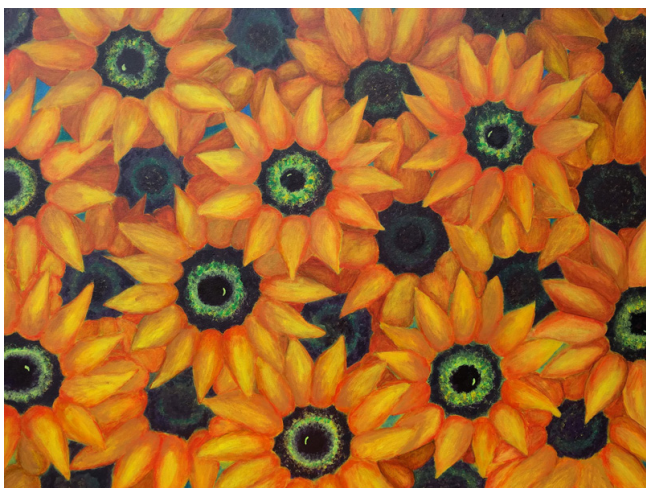
I'm on the tip of the village
where I first met my grandmother *Yiayia Xristina*,

These walls await a new language you can never learn.

TO A TOENAIL

by Michael Gessner

Dorsal plate gone awry
atop the hallux of my left
foot, the one red
with embarrassment, that's right,
you, you who serve no purpose,
like a wisdom tooth turned
inward, or the coccyx,
that vestigial tail, claw
of keratin curled into
the pulp of my big toe,
waking me with that familiar
dull ache, correct yourself,
acquire a sliver of virtue
instead of invading your host
as if that would make
you necessary once again.



Jessica Hills, *They Watch*,
acrylic on canvas, 2018.

Harvesting Yarrow

by Karen Pierce Gonzalez

Elaine and I arrived early one June morning to harvest yarrow that grows along the coastal Bodega Bay ridge overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Against the sea's firm and salty breeze, their unassuming white heads were not easy to discern. They did not draw attention to themselves with flashy colors or extraordinary eye-catching shapes. In fact, the bulk of their blossoms, fortified by feathery leaves that fanned out around them, faced inward, which made them less visible to the untrained eye.

Scattered in this wet, sandy soil, they had grown strong and resilient. Just as one would expect weeds to be. These simple beauties can thrive in less than ideal conditions. And they do so without forfeiting any of their lacelike qualities.

Here above the beach they are just as hearty as they were when they received their mythical name. *Achillea millefolium* is derived from the Greek character Achilles, who reportedly carried this plant with his army to treat battle wounds.

As we glanced across the marine landscape, Elaine pointed a few of the yarrow clusters out to me. After that it was easy to see they had taken root in communal circles that appeared social in nature. There was a grace in how they ordered themselves much like what I would expect to find at a tea party: a smattering of tables, distinct from one another in size yet connected by a theme of acceptable conduct. The very youngest and most tender among them were well-cloaked beneath the umbrella heads of the more mature ones. This allowed these early bud yarrows to remain untouched until they had grown beyond their botanical

adolescences. By the same measure, the older ones towered over the just mature ones and had already begun to arch their flower heads outward, making them easiest to reach.

Just below the surface of the wind's early day howl, yarrow heads of all ages gently bobbed. It was a floral chatter, a barely audible click and clack of seeds still clutched tightly and those soon to be released. I could hear the hum of aliveness pass among them. It was confident and bustling. Their net of communication was sustained by holding steady—from one branch to the next—against the ebb and flow of cold gushes of air that carried away seagulls and hurried grass spiders.

Following Elaine's example, I began my herbal harvest. Somewhat clumsily, as I was new to this yarrow, I approached a cluster and clipped several heads. Too tempted by their beauty, I took a few young ones before I realized I was being greedy. Their youthful freshness was so attractive, so appealing. I acted without thinking. They did not complain. It is not their nature to do so. Instead they endured my misstep with dignity and the release of a collective sigh that caused me to pause and think about what I had done. Their response gave me an opportunity to feel the taint of my own lustful behavior. Ashamed, I apologized and made sure to seek permission before removing another head of any age. Each time I asked and received—or was denied—I gave thanks.

The yarrow offered me so much that day. And beyond.

The liquid essence of their gift is now distilled in a tincture that, when taken, nestles me beneath the protective caps of their round open heads. I am again with them on that ridgeline where we first met. Upon my request, their leaves spread to enclose me. In their circle of safe keeping where rest comes more easily, I do not feel the threat of tides rising around me.

Yellow

by Morgan Beard

I refuse your jaundice slurs.
I refuse your criticisms on my driving,
 a joke so old it molds and is beginning to sprout hairs.
I won't let you brush off my culture like the dirt that clings to your shoes.
 The dirt you bring into your home, I refuse it.
I refuse your mockery,
 the way you are too preoccupied with pulling your own eyes shut
 to see the enviable almond shape of mine.

You suppress the Japanese parts of me to be fitted and shaped
until you are more comfortable with the way I look ...
 with the way I speak
 with the way I eat
 with the way I smell.
"You smell like soy sauce."
 It runs deep through my veins.

This letter to you I write while admiring the gifts my mother passed
 along to me—
I claim the high cheekbones structured around my smile;
I claim the gold beads threaded through my skin and bones;
I claim the broken languages lavished upon my life
 spoken over bowls of rice,
 plates of deep fried vegetables,
 and several pints of beer.

The Coach

by Nancy Tingley

Kristine didn't get it, why he was shouting contradictory directions at the child—run right, run left—for no good reason. And the boy's confusion, as he turned from one direction to another, so visceral that even on the sidelines she could feel it. She looked at the mother next to her, Vince's mother, and just beyond her the boy's mother, who was animatedly telling Vince's mother about her new kitchen floor. The tile color, the tile texture, the months the order took to arrive.

What was the boy's name? She couldn't recall. A redhead, a pistol off the field, but faltering now.

Look, she wanted to say, as the two women became aware of her and turned to include her in the conversation. But she didn't want to talk kitchens. All she could think was, Look at what's happening to your son, your child, fragile in his ten-year-old body.

The boy stood still, his arms hanging rigidly at his sides.

The coach waved his arm while simultaneously pushing another boy to take the redhead's place.

Frozen near the one goal, the boy shook his head, glanced towards the mass of boys and the ball at the other end of the field, and began to run.

"Your son," she said, tentatively, trying to keep an eye on her own boy, bouncing up and down in excitement.

The woman looked, "Philip. What has he done now?" But her question didn't seem to require an answer, and she looked back at Vince's

mother. "Now we're waiting for the cabinets to arrive. I have to decide on the fixtures for those."

Kristine stepped away from them, edged down the sideline toward the coach, who had begun to yell again, "C'mon, come here. Now." He pointed at the ground, the spot at his side where he wanted the boy to stand, where the sub now stood.

"Philip, do what he's telling you," shouted Philip's mother, momentarily torn from the question of brass versus pewter.

Kristine shook her head, and Philip seemed to see her, to focus on her, and she shook it again. Hold your ground, she thought, wishing the words his way.

Behind her, Philip's mother repeated herself, and Kristine crossed her arms. Philip did, too.

"Damn it, Philip, get over here." The coach was squeezing the substitute boy's shoulder, as the kid tried to wriggle away.

Philip's mother moved to Kristine's side. "Honestly," she muttered. "He just does what he wants."

Philip bunched in with the other kids who awaited the penalty kick. Kristine's son readying himself, shaking his foot as if that would ensure a goal.

The coach fumed.

"He's a pain in the ass," said the mother.

"It's not him. This new coach sucks. He's confusing him. Telling him run this way, run that," said Kristine, more harshly than she'd intended.

"What?" The woman looked startled.

But Kristine's attention was on her own son. She crossed her fingers then looked at Philip, whose back was turned towards her and the coach and his mother. She remembered her swimming coach standing at the end of the pool, telling her to pull harder with her right and, on the next lap, to pull harder with her left, so that she felt lopsided, uncertain about her stroke and the headway she was making, rebellious. She'd switched to the breaststroke, unwilling to do anything the man wanted her to do, but that had only brought on cries that followed her down the pool.

“He gave him poor direction, then got angry at him for being confused. He’s a lousy coach. You should support your son,” she said angrily to Philip’s mother, recalling her own father’s insistence that she was stubborn, contrary. Her mother nodding agreement during the car ride home as her father told her if she didn’t get her act together, she wouldn’t be able to be on the swim team anymore.

She walked down the sideline, Philip’s mother going back to talk to Vince’s mother, speaking animatedly, probably not about the new kitchen. She glared at Kristine.

“Now,” yelled the coach, impotent and furious.

“Do what your father says!” screamed Philip’s mother.

Between Sleep He Wakes

by Katelyn Delvaux

and pulls the day through
frosted shutters.

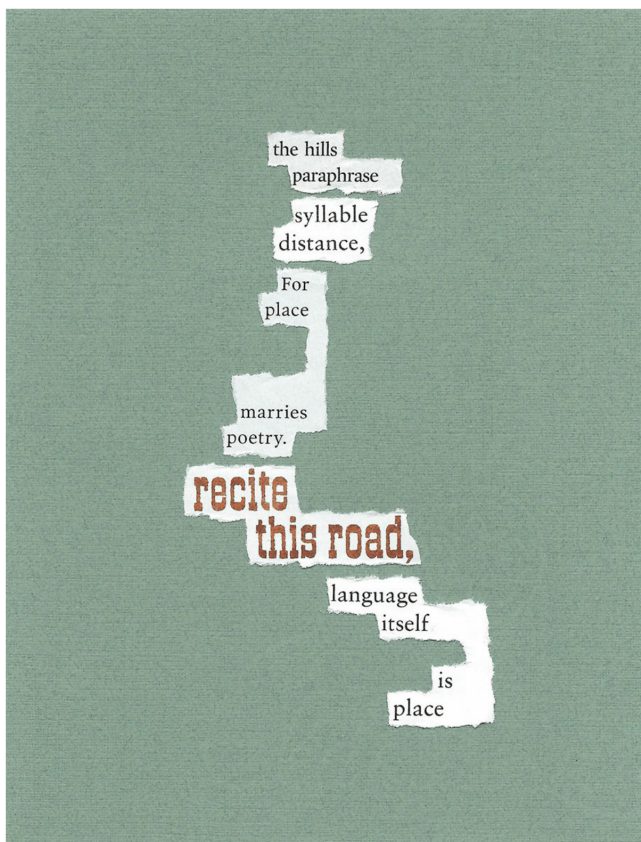
One boot, two, his
calves straining to lift

the weight of morning
in all its sunken shadows,
the first loon to drag the lake
but he does and buttons

to the chin, all coffee
and cream in the gloves
unwrapped last Christmas.
He eases the door

open, gentle in his departure.
And I pull myself from the night's
burrow of blankets, his
piquant ghost lingers on lavender

sheets, pressing my nose to ice
woven into window pane,
a winter veil shrouding the artist
who sculpts a car out of snow.



J. I. Kleinberg, *the hills*,
collage/paper, 2015.

White Earth, June 2018

by Bruce Pemberton

A country road takes me through
a resort between two lakes, then
past a rustic convenience store
until we arrive at the rez and
the graves of my grandfather and
favorite cousin, buried blocks
apart in a small Ojibwe town.
A Great War veteran, he's dead
since 1936, buried in a Catholic
cemetery as the Jesuits insisted
on conversion.

My cousin practiced the ancient
faith. Her spirit house is close by,
with a dozen others in an overgrown
clearing, deep in the tick-rich woods
and tall grass. Dead ten years, buried
in a shroud and her leather jingle
dress, holding her pearl-colored
Stetson, her rib cage collapses and
the sunken earth accepts her bones.

My father and I then witness my
great-aunt's one-hundredth birthday
party. Wheel-chaired, she laughs,

asking, whose big cake is that?
They tell her. Oh, no, she says,
my birthday is Christmas, with
Baby Jesus! Eighty-five years ago,
at her boarding school, punished
if she spoke Ojibwe, she whispered
it at night, and kept her sacred
words alive.

There's a drum circle for her.
Standing outside it with the other
hard listeners, we soak in the
high cries and pounding as it
courses through skin and then,
skull, until finally recollected, it
flows through us into a clear sky.

I wish human destruction was like

by Megan Wildhood

the exuberantly rotting nurse logs
all along the trail of the last hike
I took my antsy rescue dogs
on before the season closed.

I left my little girls with their fevers
at their father's. I packed for what I knew.
I skirt a face-down river, flail as the marionettier
of my pack, dread that I wasn't born

a hundred years ago, farther from
the end of the world. I listen for the names
of things. The cold sizzles. Branches, bowed
as if laden with snow, weaken with their own

growing weight. How do I teach my girls about snow,
which dark isn't scary, what to do with wishes and love,
that the real fairy tale is when no one needs saving.
I excel at walks on the beach. We are in a woods.

We are in a woods because humans
aren't working. Human relationships aren't working.
I needed to be loved by someone who has failed;
that's not (yet) birds, gales, soil.

I hit dirt with my knees; my dogs look
crazy at me. Cups of earth in my hands,
dirt on my dogs' tongues. I hold their faces,
kiss them sorry, sorry. I'm so sorry.

Before a Winter

by Agnes Vojta

Precariously,
the sycamores perch
on the river bank.

Tangled roots,
unearthed,
claw the gravel.

Yellow leaves litter
the ground
like unanswered letters

or debts too high
to be forgiven.



Jayne Marek, *Cap Aglow*,
digital photograph, 2018.

Bury Me on the Highway
(A golden shovel after Kesha)

by E. Kristin Anderson

I breathe the earth, wait for dark dirt just
tipping into another body. Here I watch

the shadow of a bruise press hot into me,
a heavy flood. I follow it like anything I've

ever found in the forest. In these veins the sap got
stuck cold hard and I sweat fever. The pines see it—

a comet in the gut, the strike blooming down

to fill this gentle animal with rose petals, to
push us howling into sea. I am the heart of a

catered catastrophe—a bruise's shadow—a simple
space for everything we abandon in American art.

Blue Sky Thinking

by Arlene Jackson

The window is large by their standards, a luxury I don't deserve. The outside world is tightly framed, vignettes of life callously edited.

Blue sky. White clouds.

I can see a reasonable area of sky from this position, enough to understand the vast disparity between the effortless achievements of nature and the forced monuments to mankind's existence. That plane, for example, climbing up, through and into the blue. It would terrify me if I were standing beneath it on a shimmering airport tarmac, senses fuelled. But from here, it is no more than a tiny, elongated streak of white which I could flick from my visual field with one fingernail.

To the left of this animated snapshot stands a barricade of trees. Although skeletal during this season, they remain tall and commanding. Towering up, possibly from a park. Representative of an outdoor play space, a place of innocent freedom. Sitting low beneath these elder statesmen is a crescent of white-washed houses. They partially block my view of the great trees and their connection to the earth. I focus on what I *can* see, choosing to believe that the branches, which wave to the rhythm of the wind, are reaching up and out to provide me with a lifeline. There *is* an oasis to search for and to be found. Eventually.

Hours and hours of stagnant sky.

It may not be a crescent. Between here and the trees the houses sweep out then vanish: as a rainbow evaporates into the ether. But I close my eyes and trace the curve, offsetting the linear landscape and series of

boxes which I inhabit. This Mind's Eye, saviour of my sanity, routinely and reassuringly enables me to tread along the arc of what must surely be a crescent.

This is a deliberate daydream, a celebratory lap of honour which will be taken when I am released. My arms will be upstretched with joy and pride at making it to the end of this gruelling experience. I dream it over and over, determined that when I get there, upright, running and free, I will have remained reminiscent of myself.

Sky tinged with a grey, sickening pallor. A swipe of cobweb clouds.

This time capsule of penance, from which I watch the world move on, is mathematical in its alignment, its contents as organised and oppressive as religion. I too have been reduced to a number, a forensic exhibit. I remain achingly aware that no one will search for the encapsulated contents of this life. The days that fill it are not a mosaic of vibrantly coloured, vivid interludes. No archaeologist would trace a finger in wonder over this template of time.

Darkening, ominous sky. A spectre of steely clouds.

I am alerted by voices seeping through the door of steel. Impenetrable to me. All too accessible to others.

There is no knock or pardon: their fogged ignorance prevents the reassurance of propriety. The door opens. It is the social worker, creeping in like Fagin to review the situation. She is twice my age, half my height and so anxious to disguise her discomfort that her thin fingers tremble as she touches, then clutches at the one chair in the room. She grasps its hard corners and sits down. She has the power to do so without asking.

I sense her embarrassment as I watch her head bend lower than is necessary to retrieve a rustle of documents from her bag.

Viridian sky blighted by vapourish cloud.

Her questions are brief, equal to the succinct response required. However, the sight of this woman, the sudden comfort of another human presence, initiates a relapse of my social sobriety. I waffle, ramble and digress. Her flat expression is no deterrent to my increasingly animated response and flailing attempt at day-to-day dialogue.

This room has no clocks, a concession that is comforting. No immediate reminder of what is so much time to pass. Nature, itself incarcerated on the outside of the window, orientates me to time. It is the social worker who has an obsession with her watch. She belittles and berates me with each glance towards it. When I am mid-sentence she rises. She voices the time spent and my ability to talk. My stomach shrinks as she stealthily slips from view, having pickpocketed my self-esteem.

Seconds after her departure, I hear faster footsteps approach. A flustered face appears at the door. The social worker had arrived late and left early, just as the carer likes to do. I immediately register the anger tightening her lips and hardening her expression.

The carer does not offer any civil questioning. There is no, "How did it go?" She is well-aware of my verbal diarrhoea and has no wish to be swamped in the deluge. She saves herself by throwing the shit back at me: a recitation of things undone in her allocated time. She recedes from the room. Her long sigh of relief communicates her luck to be leaving the stench of a wasted body and the diversion of an active mind.

She is light on the stairs and swiftly out the front door. I can hear several frenetic attempts before her fingers, fused with frustration, finally turn the key in the lock. The outside handle is tested to ensure it is secure. Fleet-footed she flees into her car and away. Self-satisfied: job done, forgotten now that I am safely locked in my own house.

Black, shadowless sky. An amber radiance illuminates the crescent.

Silence looms. I remain flat on the bed.

I've found that I do not cry when alone. Expressing emotion requires company. After months of tests which had confirmed that I was no more than biology gone wrong, I had recalled the fact that humans are ninety percent water and ten percent who knows what. That ninety percent had long been expelled. It was impossible for anyone to cry as much as I had since the diagnosis. Today, I had been made to feel even less of the ten percent that remains. But without the presence or the sound of a voice down the line, someone who had known me when I was whole, my eyes remain dry.

I catch my reflection in the mirrored doors of the wardrobe. Inside hangs a history: shamefully short shorts, funky wellies and mad hats, all collated from free and breezy festivals. Rainbow harem pants and tie-dye tops from my travels. Doc Martins and ironic T-shirts from my protesting adolescence.

Here on the bed is an immobile mannequin, awkwardly dressed by a third party. Part of the job, to make it fit for display. Childish leggings for comfort and ease. A loose T-shirt under a baggy fleece for warmth and convenience. Bed socks, hand-knitted granny bed socks.

I see a pale face, darkened by charcoal shadows deepening the hollows of the eyes. Hair scraped back to detract from the fact it has not been cut in seven years.

It can't be me. I turn my head towards the window.

Cars containing families pull into the crescent. As their evening begins mine must end. The days are long enough.

The wasted legs offer eight steps. Two to the commode and two back. I save two for the journey back to the bed and take two to the window to pull down the blind.

No sky. No clouds. No crescent.

My mind's eye opens.



Fabrice Poussin, *After the Battle*,
digital photograph, 2018.

At the Bar, Casey's

by Kevin Rabas

Jazz drummer: You watch the news?

Bartender: I like to know what's going on in the world, and what's going on in my own country, which is really getting to be a drag, and Sue and I watch Jeopardy once in a while—and the Royals. This administration's getting me down, though. King Tang.

Lawyer: What'd I say after the elections? We'll be back. We're back! When you have time, will you send one of those fine young people up for two State Soups to go?

Jazz drummer: I'm going out to see a play after. A friend wrote it. Wanna come?

Pianist: I hate to say it, but I don't see plays, unless I'm datin' an actor. But sure. Let's give it a whirl. Nudge me, if I drift off, though. Can you promise me that?

Blue as the Lagoon

by Marcy Rae Henry

In Iceland, where blue begets blue,
the highway makes a complete circle, like an earth touring round a sun.
Drive it and you can reach out and touch
boulder-sized blocks of ice floating by.

Water reflects sky is reflected in the color of ice.
Before freezing, all colors are mirrored in water.
In the Blue Lagoon steam rises from water
and blues all blend together, clouding the eyes.

The lagoon began as a pool of waste water
and now sits in a lava field, complimenting the sky.
Below, people soak in mineral springs
with the look and feel of thick blue-hued milk
the geothermal power plant forgotten, like poor girl makes good.

At night, Iceland is black as Francis Bacon's mouths.
In summer, beneath a vomit of constellations, the lips turn blue.
Some days, life is as simple as putting on a coat when you're cold.

Pull off the Ring Road and you can see the earth bubbling at the surface
and letting off steam. No other landscape looks so much like lunch.
Alfred Hitchcock once instructed his cook to put blue dye in everything
from soup to dessert to observe the effect of blue on his guests.

A midnight sun dips below a pale horizon for a few hours before rising again into blue. For half a year, when it's dark most of the day and there is no blue to look at, blue must be imagined, like a mouth stuffed with dentists' gauze before the bleeding starts, when the absence of red is astounding.



Marcy Rae Henry, watercolor and acrylic



Marcy Rae Henry, watercolor

House of Mothers

by Alexis David

in the dance studio across the street, lanterns of girls step feet foot
ankle, toes of metal,
arch and ache: lamps lamping in a square room that glows on
these november nights

i work in a house of mothers: planes of glass and a door with
the hours posted: 7am–7pm.
mothers tell me of their Julias and Henrys, their a-plus essays,
their college choices.
mothers of childhood friends buy pears, hug me, call me by
a childhood nickname
my mother comes inside to buy a baguette and smiles shyly
mother among mothers
and i am not a mother
and i never walk out the front door that leads to the street where

the children are finished dancing and now whisper yellow to yellow
to yellow.
i restock the eggs tenderly as if they can feel my pulse.

after work i leave through the side door and run in
the dark neighborhood
face bruises pink in the afterlight of day
i run through rooms without doors
rooms of trees and ferns and stars

i eat egg after egg after egg
yellow yolk fat but still i cannot conceive: do you know the song of
a door that won't open?

the little ballet dancers
whisper human follows human follows human
kindness breaks darkness



Judith Skillman, *Jackson Lake*,
oil on canvas, 2018.

Cancer Lyric R

by Bekah Steimel

Our lips first connected in a place immersed in death. I did meet you in a bar, as boring and stereotypical as it sounds. However, I first kissed you in a graveyard, so I'm hoping that cancels out the clichéd introduction. Yet, I've been wondering about our premier kiss—was it a sign of painful things to come? I had invited you to take a late-night walk there. Such a brave woman, but I thought even you might be unnerved in a cemetery. I wanted you a little freaked out, and if I was lucky, a tad clingy. And, you were. And, it worked. You kissed me leaning next to a statue of a weeping angel. My mouth held onto your first kiss so long, my lips were numb, and I couldn't imagine anything else feeling as good. I was wrong.

Cancer Lyric V

by Bekah Steimel

Inoperable. The Cancer. Inoperable. My love for you. It cannot be removed or undone. Time passed only proves it, not lessens it. Like the disease, you became part of who I am. Our introduction was my renaissance, and you delivered a born-again human, cutting my cord with your teeth and grabbing my ass instead of slapping it. There was no understanding us. Not for my friends. Not for yours. Not for the girlfriend I had when we met. Without you, my identity is a secret even to itself. I have no idea where to begin, no concept of how to stitch a shredded life back together. Loving you has become what I am. Losing you has become what I am. This is not grief or depression. It is End-Stage Love. I am emotionally gutted. Inoperable. Pain management is the most I can hope for.

He Tells Me

by Travis Lovin

I can't hear the hiss of my cigarette over the city waking up around me, and the sky looks like she's not done with the rain yet, and I wait for the number four to take me downtown to meet Will. He called me yesterday, and when I answered, Will didn't say anything until he did, and it sounded like making sentences was difficult. Will asked me to meet for coffee, and I asked him how he was doing and if he was still writing. I said of course, and he said no, not in months.

I finish my cigarette and toss it at the puddle at my feet, and I don't hear the life of it extinguish, and the no. 4 pulls up. It looks like more rain is on the way, and the doors of the no. 4 open. The bottle in my backpack is half empty or half full, and it won't last me the day. I'll have to get another.

I'm greeted with an "afternoon" in that way all of us Midwesterners shorten already short greetings.

"Yeah."

It's a dollar to ride, and I slip my last one into the slot, and I see him back there again, the third time this week. I've never asked his name, and he's become the highlight of my morning routine. He wears a scarf today, and he's clenching a folded piece of paper, again, like last time. His face looks older than it is, maybe. Hard living, maybe. He's sitting six rows back, to the right, like last time. The clouds make it feel earlier than it is, makes the lights of the bus flicker bright and foreign. I choose a seat six rows back, to the left, like last time.

Last time he turned to me as the bus idled at a stop and said, "It's all real; let's make sense of it." I just took a draw from the bottle, stared at him. Today he whispers it to himself and doesn't look at me. I take a draw from the bottle. Today he talks to the window or something or someone that exists far beyond it, drops of rain carving paths down the bus window, distorting his view of the world outside or that something or someone, distorting everything.

He whispers, "I wrote her this, never gave it to her."

He whispers, "I wrote you a poem. I wrote you a poem and buried it beneath the oak just beyond the fence line early while you slept, fog heavy, and cigarette smoked in that jacket you bought me on a Tuesday." He says, "I wrote you this, never gave it to you."

He turns to me like last time now, talking to me like last time, but he isn't talking to me, you know? He tells me he hasn't seen her in three years, and he tells me he failed her in that panicked voice we've all used when she's gone and never coming back. He tells me he still sees her in a dream he has every night, but each morning more little details escape, and he wishes that they wouldn't and that he could see her as she was before he said those things that made her stop saying I love you.

I know the feeling.

The bus squeaks to a stop, and I stand to exit, and I hand him the half-empty or half-full bottle from my backpack.

"Keep it. I'll get another."

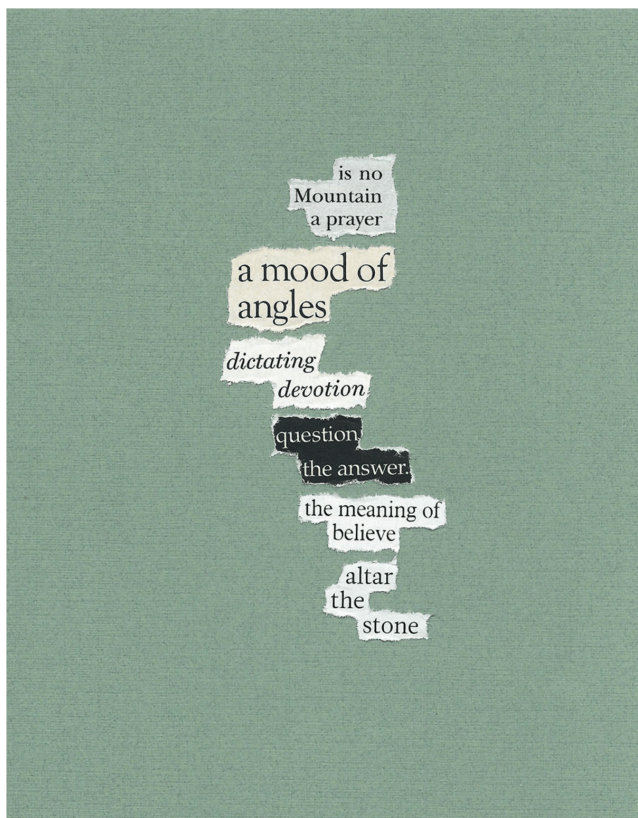
Will hasn't been to sleep yet. He orders coffee, black, and no food. I sit across from him, watch him run his hands over his shaved head. Jane left him a week ago, and most of him has stopped working. He's started hanging with those people again, and soon he'll be crashing on my couch, next to the furnace and the stack of canvases leaning against the wall. I carried Will to his parents' bathroom one night in high school when he'd taken too much, ran cold water over his clothed body, hoped that he would wake up.

He did.

Will doesn't sit still often, and this morning he's clinging to a piece of paper and waving his knees under the table, maybe keeping himself awake, maybe fanning some imaginary flame that he's unaware had gone out long ago. I can tell he's starting in on a story. Will is a storyteller, and you can see the best parts of him when he's doing so.

"It's good, man. I've been reading and reading it again all morning. I found it in this guy's seat last night at that place on fifth after he got up and left. He spent hours talking to himself in the corner, rocking side to side, I couldn't look away. I asked him for the time, and he just stared at me, like I had just interrupted the most holy of rituals. Wild, man, wild! I picked it up, and it was wet, smelled like whiskey and urine and like he wrote it years ago and it just now saw the light of day or something."

Will reads, "There is a boy, and there is a girl. They haven't met yet, but when they do, they'll talk about that song they both love to hum in the quiet moments, and her face will soften in a way that makes him stare. There is a boy, and there is a girl, and they haven't met yet, but when they do, he will fall in love fast and so will she. It will be hard for them to be apart when he's driving through Kansas to visit his mother's grave and when she's visiting her folks up north. There is a boy, and there is a girl, and they haven't met yet, but when they do, he'll say you're beautiful and she'll say you're handsome when you sleep. They'll be happy until they're not, and the end ..."



J.I. Kleinberg, *is no Mountain a prayer*,
collage/paper, 2015.

Attic Fire

by Kevin Casey

Two full years after the purchase and sale,
with flashlight and ladder you finally
push aside the ceiling's trap door to make
the pilgrimage to the attic of your house.

Planks and beams oxidized to ochre,
umber, and browns as rich as caramel,
at the west gable end by the chimney
you find some newer boards nailed like a lid

across the charred lip of a hole that fire
had burned through the roof, like an eye closed
upon a close call all those years ago,
when the house almost went up in flames.

How many days of sunlight bathed that space
until the repair, until the commotion
stirred in the home by this small disaster
was eased with soothing words and fresh timber?

And how many nights after the fire broke out,
when smoke and cinder rose from the hole
like vision, before its inhabitants
were finally able to look away
from that terrible glimpse of heaven?

Beasts in the Earth

by Miriam Sagan

Beasts in the earth
that eat decay,
autumnal forest,
the rotting log,
devour the death
of others.

Slug or snail
slimed
the pure white cup
of fungal fruit.

You also
took a bite
went down
time's wormhole.

You thought it was
a brilliant red
eyelash mushroom
instead
an M&M
someone had dropped—
by mistake?
or like breadcrumbs

to mark
a path.

In every drop
of stream water
paramecium or hydra
hunting,
predator
of a tiny world
invisible to my eye.

That's why
I had to explain
by comparison
to the visible.



Jayne Marek, *Golden Pavilion, Umbrellas*,
digital photograph, 2012.

Recollection from a Recent Dream (no. 3)

by Craig Nydick

What was
What *was*
That dream I had ...

Fresh paper cuts—three of them—on the palm of your right hand. No idea how they got there. With the fore- and middle-fingers of your left hand, push the skin just so on either side of the longest cut making the thin slice separate. Lean in closer. Blood pools in the narrow crevasse then eases toward your wrist.

Lips parted, touch your warm tongue to the russet trickle. Shoulders rise. Your blood tastes of Fruit-Loops and fungus, and your mouth dries like that time you shared a young persimmon with friends around a patio table.

Something about the apricot hue of the light on the wall gives you the distinct feeling you've been here before. Look up, lips and eyes pursed. Your shoulders drop. Only then do you realize the mess you've made.

Hello from 30,000

by John May

Hello!

Hello from 30,000,

It was very nice to see you

It was very nice to splash around your riverbed and

Lay out on your sandbar,

To make a brief connection with your curves,

To grab a picnic lunch in the green glade

In the shade of the trees on your banks

On Sundee morning.

Hello from 30,000,

I've left on a jet

And I know you know how much I love you,

And I know you know how much I love Lyle Lovett references,

We said goodbye and everything else

And hugged and kissed

And I thought about you as I walked through the security terminal

And you thought about me as you drove back to your apartment.

Hello from 30,000,

Praise God for the slow rivers

In middle America that remind me of you.

Praise God for you,
And cool water like whiskey,
And trees, and shade, and turkey sandwiches,
And the next time.

Restoration of the Gary Heat, Light & Water Building

by Joseph S. Pete

My steelworker grandpa long ago
forsook the grimy steel town
on the steam-choked lakeshore
that built all the 20th-century skylines and landmarks.

Today, I tried to atone for this original sin
by hauling brush, laying brick,
lifting high abandoned relics.

Sweat doesn't always purify.
Sometimes it just stings,
clings acridly to the pale whites
of weary eyes awash in cynicism.

Twitch

by Sam Rose

A nervous twitch now a regular facial fixture—
my eyelid flinches, its knees buckling
under the pressure of it all. I close my eye
and place the pad of my forefinger over the lid

like feeling for a baby kicking but of course
it stops doing it then. I decide I am too artistic
because I can't think about the past without
drawing comparisons and so I close my

twitching eye to make the sketching even more
difficult but then voices form in the dark. I can
hear my younger self telling friends her favourite
baby names, then, years later disagreeing with

her partner about baby names. Conversations that
were never going to matter but we didn't know. You
have choices until you don't. You have choices until
you've left it too late. The hollow of my hip aches

with the absence of a tiny human wrapping
their chubby legs around me as I show them off,
carrying them from room to room. I am a series
of problems that need to be fixed before anything
else and I know this. But my eye continues to twitch.



Fabrice Poussin, *End of a Journey*,
digital photograph, 2018.

As the Mexian Train

by Judith Skillman

Continues at a dog-trot each day going north

—JACK GILBERT

How praiseworthy, to be a train
full of people with dark eyes,
hands holding baskets and visors,
soot in the nail beds, all these bodies
sitting erect, and the few who stand
due to a lack of seats. Even the seats,
stained and worn, have not given out

yet. Vinyl sags at the edges,
the *tussah* seated where it sits always,
in the center. How splendid to be a train
full of plans and maps, of minds
in whose labyrinthine gray matter
the other languages hobble this way
and that, come from dozing,

go back to sleep, waken suddenly
as from a dream. A girl plays
at being grown up, a woman toys
with being a girl. The men, plural
always, horde whatever pesos accumulate
in their pockets, keep their elbows
close in. Such stoic chests. The blush

of a marionette on the girl's cheek,
of powder on the woman. However
close or far from home, the quick
rubs against skin, thirst begins at the back
of the throat and inches forward
until all the cars in this string—
carriages replete with names

riding on steel wheels and tracks—
remember how thirsty travel is.
How little distance has been accomplished
by the machinations of the conductor
checking tickets made out of paper.
Leaving in his wake that shushing
as after a war.

There's a sad man and a lonely woman on a windswept beach

by Abigail George

I watch Death arrange itself at the church.
I watch Death arrange itself at the grave.
Death brings monk and poverty to the table.
Its sinful nature eats at the kitchen table.
Death buries people. It eats flesh, intimidates
skin-covered things. The poverty of the sea
murmurs. Monkish Death murmurs. Death
has a back like a tree. I give the casino of
Death coins. I feed off on them. The sad man hides
his face. He is crying. Tears fall down his face.
The lonely woman writes in her journal on

the beach that Death will come for every
virgin winter leaf,
every painter, lecturer, reader, every garment
belonging to man, child, woman is marked
for life. Death does nothing but fret about life,
dancing toward it, palms itchy, swaying in
the air of God's language, taking hold of it,
then inviting shroud, enticing the burned-out,
stretched mountain, loud grass, the painted
thunder of birds swooping low then high in
the air alongside the publicity of life, persona
of family. Death has magnetic layers, partners

with the electric, is a proud, detached sellout.
Death is to be feared. I'm wrapped in
death but there's also hope in the letting go
of you. Rejoicing of life bottomland-deep
in our roots, our stems. Medicinal anxiety but
also the sun is behind me. You're not here.
Instead you found the exit out semi-properly.
The phoenix. That's the one thing that Death
cannot commit to. The sun and moonlight.
Mars rising out of the sea. The uplifting of
humankind. Ocean wave after ocean wave.

No Food by Mouth

by Marianne Brems

I carry into the hospital waiting area
the nameless constriction of my mourning.
Boxes of tissue wait on horizontal surfaces.
Every voice too loud.
Every noise amplified.

My mother hiked the Sierras into her 80s.
Played tennis until she was 90.
Now at 97 she lies with a fever of 102,
a needle in her arm,
little awareness of any of it.

Fellow strangers wait near me.
No reason to speak.
One offers me a cup of water.
My mother was here just
three months ago I say.

We talk about the mothers
we will have for a little longer,
the bond they cinched in our hearts,
their travel down love's unpaved roads,
their departure from cognition,
the tangling of their feathers
against their will
in the chain-links of aging.

A nurse calls me.
I leave this better-known stranger
to hear what I already know.
Aspiration pneumonia the verdict.
No food by mouth the recommendation.

As the fever shrinks,
my common sense grows.
ThickenUp and half-inch pieces
will have to do
for the next small forever.

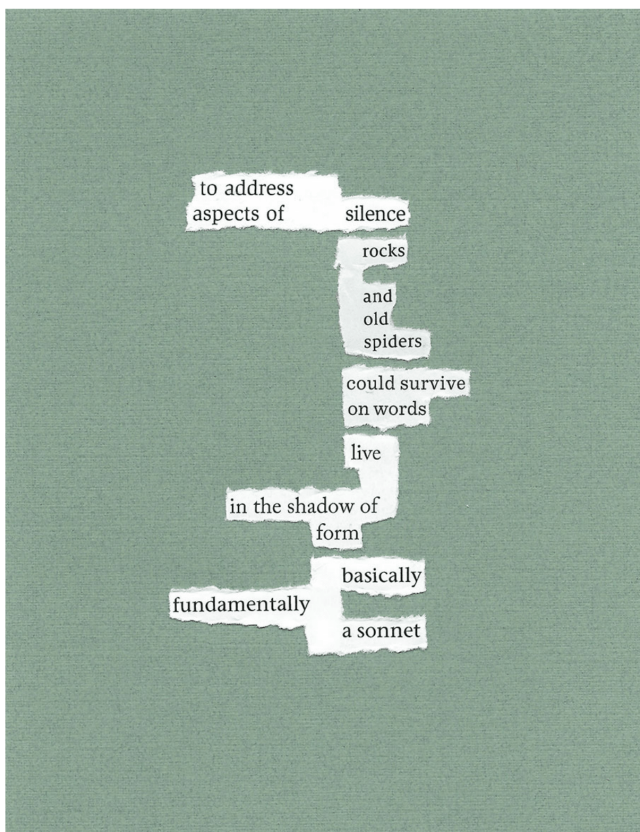
Negating Symbols of Hate

by Steven Sher

We counter every symbol
with a symbol of our own:
pregnant women, laughing children,
devoted Torah scholars.

This week we welcomed a granddaughter,
finding hope in her bright face,
rejoiced at her insistent cry
to suckle and survive.

For Reizi Rachel, May 2013.



J.I. Kleinberg, *to address aspects of silence*,
collage/paper, 2016.

Oasis Motel

by John Waterman

Chapel, then onward, to the Oasis ...

Chapel consisted of a one-hour sermon. It was held in the large dining room with us, the homeless (the hopeless), at our round tables, waiting to be fed. If you missed Chapel, then The Mission wouldn't let you have dinner. A very Christian thing to do. The sermon was performed by a pastor in training, his sermons monotone and as engaging as watching grass grow. Before he could run a successful church, he had to work on his presentation. He needed to grow as an entertainer and salesman, earning his own obedient flock that would follow his regurgitation of the Lord's word. This pastor was a long way from being able to have his own holy business.

Throughout the entirety of the sermon, I felt embarrassed for the practicing pastor. A few times he asked a question to be arbitrarily answered by anyone with an answer. No one would respond; no one was paying attention. Our minds were far off from the words spewing from a man calling himself the tool of God—tool indeed. Even the Almighty couldn't help us—we thought passive aggressively—or the Almighty put us in this position, as if we drew the short straw; or the Almighty was unconcerned, too busy to worry about our plight; or the Almighty was getting a morbid pleasure from our suffering; or the Almighty wanted us

This story contains frank discussions of violence and drug use. We feel these kinds of stories are necessary and true to experience, especially if they are redemptive in nature.

to learn from our suffering; or, and most probable, the Almighty was just not there in the first place.

A Santa-looking old man impatiently tugged on his suspenders, ending the sermon five minutes early. He peeked his head into the kitchen, asking, "Is the kitchen ready?" I could not hear a reply, but the steel gait to the kitchen window was lifted. It was dinnertime. Round table by round table, we were lined up: drinks first, then our dinners splat upon the plate by the kitchen staff. The staff comprised other homeless men that were relegated to the task, whether they knew how to run a kitchen or not. They were not happy about the numerous dishes they were bound to do, so they displaced their aggravation upon those they served. This is a very common relationship between server and the served.

The meal was leftover breaded and fried fish donated from a local fast-food restaurant, canned veggies and instant potatoes. We ate until all the food was gone, some filling their plates indulgently three or four times. It was there, it was offered freely, so they took every stitch. Personally, I skipped the fish for neurotic reasons, not consuming much at all, though extremely hungry.

Our bellies full, it was time to smoke our cigarettes and cigars. We huddled outside underneath a canopied picnic table, the strong night wind nipping any exposed skin with frostbite. Some of the more anti-social men chose to smoke in solitude on the outskirts of the huddle of homeless men. Those on the outside were the first ones to go back in. Soon, others followed, the ring of men despondently dissipating as they entered into their sanctuary of despair. But I, in my ugly but warm jacket, stayed out in the cold, stiff Kansas breeze that chilled me to the bone, chain-smoking, watching my escaped breath float away as a slow-moving, frozen cloud. I wanted to spend as much time outside as I could. I felt free in the night air; the boundaries were endless.

I stared up at my escaping breath, thinking about how screwed I was, having no place to go or means to help myself. The longer I sat there reflecting, the more my brain worked on the problem. And resolution was on the tip of my tongue when a short figure swung upon the backdoor of The Mission, heading straight for me with his arms open and a friendly smile. It was Shitake, one of the young Puerto Rican boys that

shared the jail cell with me. He had been released forty days before me and must have ended up at The Mission—everyone that leaves jail goes to The Mission.

Let me tell you about Shitake. His real name was Angel, but because he couldn't stop farting from the jail food he shoved down his gullet—farts nasty and deadly—the inmates started calling him Shitty. And being a very small man, a coward to boot, he'd cry rather than defend himself. One night he came over to my bunk and plead for help. He had become worried that the disrespect would eventually turn violent toward him or that he'd be forced to commit preemptive, covert foul play before they could get him.

The next day, while playing dominoes with the highest of the pecking order, those that ran the cell with the authority and fairness of the streets, I convinced them to call our tiny, farting Hispanic "Shitake." Not as a term of endearment, but as something new and creative to hurt him. But in Shitake's perception, this new nickname made him feel accepted by the others. He started buddying up with those that hated him, doing special favors, like washing their underwear and giving them back massages. At first, the inmates hated his attempts, finding his pathetic, passive brownnosing abhorrent. That loathing soon simmered, and the highest of the pecking order started protecting him, as if he was their loyal puppy.

One week before Shitake got out, his mother sent him an Xmas card. Shitake was overjoyed to get mail, especially from someone that he knew he had severely betrayed and abused. He was hoping for forgiveness from the woman that had once let this now horrible child suckle milk from her. By the end of reading the card, this sad, sorry boy began to weep. I was curious, so I asked why.

His reply: "My mom sent me a card. It has frosted, silver trees with presents underneath. She says she hopes all is well, but that she never wants to talk to me again. I can never go home or talk to my sisters or play with my pooch or be part of the family."

Harsh, I thought. I said nothing in return.

And here he was before me, wearing some kind of factory outfit, walking gleefully toward me. Our shared imprisonment forced an

association with one another that I did not want, but I knew was there. This is why I shook his small, outstretched hand and slapped him playfully on the back.

“You’re out, Snowball,” Shitake blurted.

“Yes. I know,” I replied.

“Oh, man. We’re going to have a ball tonight. A real party for my old pal, Snowball.”

Then he asked, “Did you get out today?”

“Right before lunch.”

“How was Chapel?”

“Boring.”

“Sure fuckin’ is.”

“How come you weren’t there?”

“I have this job across the field there.”

“Can you get me a job there?”

“I guess. I clean up the killing floor after they slaughter the cows. It’s a cool job.”

“Well, maybe I should see what is going on with probation first.”

“You got probation?”

“You didn’t?”

“Of course not. I ratted my way out. They gave me unsupervised. Just got to get these cards filled out at meetings and show them to some asshole at the town clerk’s office.”

“What? You ratted on someone?”

“Yeah, those bastards had it coming. I was happy to narc on ’em. The investigators even gave me twelve hundred dollars for each dealer busted. That’s why Snake City is so dry. I sort of took down all the big wigs, huh?”

“What ’bout the repercussions?”

“I live for the now.”

A few more men exited the building to smoke, so we both knew we’d better change the subject.

Starting to shake from the cold, looking over his shoulder at the approaching men, Shitake spoke rapidly. "Hey, come to A.A. with me. I got a surprise for you. I just got paid and I'm getting a room for a week at the Oasis Motel. Ten bucks a night. There's bugs in those rooms, but I can't argue with the price."

"I don't know about the room, but I'll go to A.A. with you. It will look good to show my probation officer that I'm already trying to find coping mechanisms to avoid further legal complications. Do you have extra cards to sign?"

"Sure do, Snowball." Shitake laughed out loud. "Boy o' boy, we're going to have some fuckin' fun tonight."

"At Alcoholics Anonymous?" I sarcastically asked.

"No, not there. Follow me. We'll tell Old Fat Saint Nick that we're going to meetings and that I'm not coming back, but you'll be back around eleven tonight. That is, if you don't want to stay at the Oasis with me. I'll sleep on the floor. Not that we'll be doing much sleeping."

I could tell by his demeanor that he was using some amphetamine or another, but I was already bored of The Mission and its regulations. I hadn't been out and about in a long time, and maybe it would be a good idea to go enjoy my freedom. Suck on the marrow, but don't choke on the bone, I thought. So I said, "Okay, Shitake—lead the way, my man."

"You're my hero, Snowball. You saved me. Let me repay the favor," Shitake explained. "Walk around the side and meet me up front. There's some people in a beat-up white car that are going our way."

Shitake darted into the building like a playful squirrel zooming around the yard, up a tree and out of sight. I headed for the wind-protected side of the building to wait for the people "going our way."

From the corner of the building, I observed the idling car in the parking lot, bellowing smoke into the black, frigid air that was speckled with slowly descending snowflakes. There were two fat people up front: the girl driving, passing over a joint; the boy in the passenger seat, shoving potato chips into his greasy mouth as he tried to grasp the j. Both wore Xmas pajama tops that fit sloppily and loose around their three hundred plus-pound bodies. I could tell they were harmless,

surely duped into a ride by their annoying coworker that worked his magic charm on them. Shitake instinctually had used their sympathy for him against them. That was his only apparent, inherent talent—to con through guilt and pity. It made me wonder if he was going to use me, not that I could imagine anything he could use me for other than protection. Of course, we did have that jailhouse brotherhood, and maybe he felt like I was his big brother or something.

When Shitake jogged toward the car, my worries were thrown on the back burner to stew secretly someplace in the subconscious realm. My need for entertainment and excitement demanded to be fulfilled, and I guess, in a matter of speaking, I was going to use Shitake for this. This hideous self-recognition made me sad and shameful yet did not stop me from going. I have trained myself to recognize strong waves of guilt and immediately associate the erroneous feeling with my Catholic upbringing. This enables me to instantly forgive myself. Forgiveness is an exercise of letting go; I suggest you try forgiving someone or yourself someday. Even if you can't fully do it, the practice will be good for you.

The white car sped through dark, empty city streets, ignoring stop signs and traffic lights. Sitting amongst the debris inside the car, I felt germophobic, trying not to touch anything, sniffing at what wreaked of fast food, gasoline and bologna. What a stench, yet it still could not deter me from seeking the thrill I needed. Not even twenty-four hours after my release back into society, I had this “need,” this itch, and I knew it wasn't good ... that it would bring me to the Iron Bar Hotel again. In the back of my mind, that was a lie I couldn't not deny. I knew the truth of why I got in that car. I wanted to relapse, and I knew Shitake would take me there.

Merely thinking about using made my body quiver. I could taste the bitter sweetness upon my salivating tongue, tingles up my spine that made my knees weak, some sort of change in my pupils and chemical shift in my frontal cortex. But thoughts about having nothing, being cruelly locked inside a steel and cement box, crept in, diluting the wish to be high. Consequences weighed heavily upon me, and another, different kind of chemical shift emerged in my frontal lobes. It felt like a gentle moonlit tide that lulled my brain, distracting me from the stifling fear

that eventually took me over, gradually drowning me and my decision-making process. Fear was there, and it wouldn't go away for many years. It took a long time to realized that I was conditioned that way. Not only by jail, but by school, church, parents, football, poverty, etc. ... but for the time being, I suddenly had a strong urge to get out of that damn car.

My first chance came while in the A.A. parking lot. I opened the car door, the wind whooshing without remorse, causing Shitake to ask, "Where you going?" We weren't on the same page.

"What do you mean?" I responded.

"You thought ..." Shitake laughed, "... we were going in there? No way, Snowball. I'm just running in there, getting our cards signed, and then we go to the Oasis."

"Okay. I'll wait in the warm car."

Without hesitation, Shitake ran across the parking lot, the gaunt gusts nearly sweeping him away. While waiting, the two obese people up front occasionally gave each other quirky looks, giggling until looking back at me. Upon viewing my miserable expression, they'd become silent. To pass time, because I knew Shitake was not a focused young man and would take longer than expected, I started to imagine the chubby boy and girl comically crawling under the Christmas tree, shaking presents, gorging themselves on giant candy canes. I too formed a quirky look upon my face, causing me to slightly giggle. Upon noticing them notice me, I erased that look of strange, inexplicable enjoyment. This made me think, What are they imagining about me to make them giggle?

Twenty minutes passed before Shitake skipped back to the car. His mood was ecstatic and buoyant, as though he planned on this being the best night of his short, pathetic life.

"Onward, to the Oasis, my good lady," Shitake yelled to the driver.

At the Oasis Motel ...

Urine-colored stains covered the walls, sink and bathroom. There was a lingering rank fragrance so I used my eyes to search for the source of the odor. I noticed damp, black mold was accumulating in every corner. Sprawled in the middle of the room was a limp mattress with no

box spring for support. The mattress and pillows were bare, decorated with sporadic yellow spots; the blankets and pillowcases were folded and stored on a metal shelf. Fumes of heat rattled out of the furnace, which seemed to be the source of the horrible smell, as if there were a dead rat rotting inside. However, the rattling furnace warmed our extremities and subdued the pangs throbbing inside my bones. I peered out the small window the size of a porthole on a cruise ship, only able to view blackness with occasional white flakes and distant headlights zip-ping horizontally by. Air got caught in my throat, my heart momentarily skipped, because of the intuition of being ensnared. I felt claustrophobic, nervous, anxious. It was reminiscent of being in jail. So I stayed close to the door, the only readily available exit. I felt calmer near a quick escape, but I knew the walk back to The Mission through the unrelenting Kansas cold would be downright dreadful. Hell, I probably wouldn't survive it. Nature was a determining factor in my decision to stay, and once again, I had indisputable evidence that I had no control.

With a solid plop, the fat boy landed on the mattress. It would be too much physical exertion to lower himself gently. Truthfully, I've allowed myself to get to that point a few times in my life. The large boy was sprawled out, leaving no room for anyone else, so the girl sat on the sticky, crumb-covered carpet while Shitake and I remained standing. We watched as the round boy pulled out a crack pipe, pusher, syringes, a spoon, cotton swabs, and a squished Twinkie from his *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* pajama pants pockets. Shitake threw a baggie of crack rocks onto the pile, causing an instant temperature rise in my forehead. It was not my drug of choice, but a drug just the same. Temptation made me squirm inside, my stomach twisting as my mind tried to replicate the feeling of being high, and not liking what it produced. But, having only an eighty one-day hiatus from my unyielding poison consumption, my impulse switch was easily turned off. Jail, though providing all the time in the world, never taught me how to cope with these symptoms of addiction. Want and desire were pushed back behind reason, so I knew I was not going to shoot up, but I assuredly would not turn down a free blow—though I knew shame would follow—on that glass dick.

With a devilish smile, Shitake joyfully asked, "Who wants the pipe, and who wants the needle?"

The girl and boy grabbed syringes. Shitake followed suit.

“Just give me the pipe,” I said.

Shitake seemed disappointed with my choice but exclaimed, “Snowball just got out, so he probably wants to take it easy. He’s on paper now.” He then broke off a piece of rock, placing it carefully atop the pipe before delicately passing it over to me.

Sweat beads forming, the boy and girl stared impatiently at me because they knew Shitake had paid for the party and wanted his dear friend Snowball to go first.

“Don’t wait for me, guys,” I blurted. “You guys can go first.”

They shrugged their shoulders and without hesitation went at it, filling their spoons with crushed crack, purifying it with vinegar, soaking up the concoction with cotton swabs, finally pulling the liquid from the cotton into the syringes. Veins were found, blood drawn, and the plungers dropped. The three sat pie-eyed, mouths open, moaning with a mixture of pain and pleasure, trying to stand up, but not able to. I wanted to cry for them and, conversely, to join them. I desperately wanted an escape from my dire disposition, too. I just didn’t want to do it that way.

Throughout the next hour or so, Shitake tried convincing me to “go to orbit,” but I found it hard to put my lips around that nasty, black, tarred-up glass dick. Long-suffering, I watched as they shot up three times, changing for the worse with every stick. The big boy began searching the carpet for imaginary crack rocks. Crackheads call this carpet surfing. He would find a crumb, maybe a piece of popcorn or something, seriously studying it until he realized it was not what he was looking for. A few times, the boy actually grabbed the pipe from me, igniting some of those mystery crumbs, coughing and spitting from the repugnant taste. The fat boy’s desperate search made no sense to me, because there was still a considerable pile of rocks left on the bed. He would then hand the pipe back to me as if it was mine to hold—my responsibility, my destiny.

Since their first shots, the petite Shitake and the large girl hadn’t taken their hands off each other. Kissing quickly escalated to groping as they injected more cocaine into their systems. Eventually they disappeared into the bathroom together.

There I was, crack pipe in one hand, some unknown fat dude crawling around on the ground looking for invisible drugs, and a tiny Puerto Rican bastard fucking a mammoth woman in a minuscule motel bathroom. I asked myself, Will I be like them soon? My hands began to shake. I wanted to forget about everything—past, present and future—and I knew it would only take one hit off that glass pipe to at least forget about the present. With desperation and despair, I pushed the filter to the other end of the pipe, collecting all the resin within the stem. Then I carefully put the rock on top and sparked the flame of my lighter. I twisted and rotated the pipe with my fingertips, held the flame close enough to melt the crack, which began crackling. Smoke filled the pipe, and I started to gently inhale. But I stopped. I don't know why, but I stopped.

My whole body shuddered with self-hatred. I couldn't believe I was about ready to throw away my second chance. I had already proven to myself that drugs could not help me obtain enlightenment, excess did not lead to clarity, self-medication could not cure my eccentricities and insecurities, and the scene was not the experience that should drive my curiosity. My resolve was fortified as my mind suddenly grasped that the consequences of my drug use would not end until I ended the use of the drug.

My aura shined bright white. My resolution and the triumph over this particular demon made me smile. I could finally work on the other demons that haunted me, such as alcohol ... or cheese, my original addiction. All other addictions were to appease that original one. I thought, I better get the hell out of here. I don't belong here. Not anymore. This place is not for me.

I asked, "Hey, Big Boy, you think I could get a ride back to The Mission?" He simply stared at me stupidly and did not respond. He had remained mute throughout the night, and I should not have expected him to speak then.

I decided to wait for Shitake and the girl to finish in the bathroom; then I would pleasantly ask them to take me back to The Mission. I could hear them in the bathroom. The mental picture, which I could not help myself from producing, made me cringe. It was difficult not to vomit in disgust.

I cupped my hands over my ears, but I could still hear them.

It was when I heard Shitake fart that I couldn't take it anymore. His boisterous laugh made me want to knock him out. Naked, the fat girl ran screaming into the room. She hid behind the fat boy on the bare mattress.

She screamed, "You son-of-bitch! Why would you do that when I'm sucking your dick?! You're fucking disgusting!"

Shitake exited the bathroom, a sadistic smile on his satisfied face, his shirt on and pants off, sporting an unimpressive erection. "Come back in here and finish the job, you fat, ugly bitch."

"Why should I?" the fat girl wanted to know.

"Because I'll cut you off. No more crack for Miss Piggy. Now get over here and suck my dick, bitch."

To my utter surprise, she walked over to him with her head down, sobbing so hard that her spit and tears intertwined, covering her face with a translucent mucus. Shitake viciously grabbed her by the hair, dragging her to the bathroom, demanding her to "suck my dick you Pillsbury, bloated whore."

RED ... I saw red.

I stood up and headed straight for the exit. I turned the handle yet hesitated. Growing up, I had been accustomed to walking away, but I couldn't do that in jail. I learned to deal with problems face-to-face. (It is true, there are life lessons to be learned behind bars.) I knew what I had to do, so I turned around and marched toward the bathroom. Peering inside, I saw the girl on her knees. Shitake had a fist up in the air, waiting to punch her in the face as soon as he came. But it wasn't the girl who was punched.

Shitake saw me approaching. He said, "Snowball gets his knob polished next, you stinking whore."

At the conclusion of his sentence, my fist hit him in the mouth. I could tell by the way his jaw caved in that I jarred a few of his teeth loose, maybe broke his mandible. Unconscious, his body involuntarily trembling, Shitake lay there bleeding profusely from a split lip and whatever damage was inside his mouth. I found no sympathy for him.

This was the only time I've ever hit another human being.

The girl looked at me amazed yet quickly forgot about it, going straight for the remainder of the crack rock. As I had earlier, she too wanted to forget about her past, present and future.

Before leaving, I looked back at the boy carpet surfing, then at the naked girl already preparing her next fix. I found a special place in my heart for *all* of humanity, though merely on existentialist terms. The absurdity of it all made me shake my head with disbelief yet acceptance. Then I turned my back on the scene. I thought, Only to a few, maybe a mother or father, did these people matter. But to the rest of us, they were lost and forgotten, and we had no time to waste on them.

When I was a few hundred yards down the road, I looked back at the Oasis. Within the darkness was an island of surreal lights and misty winter windows. A false lighthouse in the darkness, I realized.

My anger (and ugly jacket) kept me warm enough to stay alive as I walked to The Mission. It was two miles through frigid temperatures, but I made it back before my eleven o'clock curfew.

Every Object a Weapon

by Kami Westhoff

This is a poem about how the ocean loves us back.
How its salt-scarred fingers persuade skin
to abandon fascia, muscle to untangle from joint,
expects even the simplest animals to translate flesh
into food, suffer into sleep. How it holds a woman
in its dark throat, wombs her warm until the moon
slits itself skinny and offers her the shore.

This is a poem about the body. A mother's body. How,
long after its instant of last consciousness, it protects
its submerged unknowable, like the ribcage does the lungs,
the pericardium, its steady, stubborn heart. It protects even
without a mouth to shush the fussing, hands to tug tight
the car seat's strap or hold the aspirator and clear
away what makes breathing labored.

This isn't a poem about a has-everything husband on the cusp
of fatherhood who wanted more. Or about a boat, a rope, buckets
anchored with twenty pounds of cement, a truck, tarp, electrical tape,
thousands of dollars in a duffle bag—every object is a weapon
when a man holds it with his hate.

Because this isn't a poem about another murdered woman,
I won't tell you her torso resisted the ocean's advances
for four months, the unraveling cave of her body kept her son's intact,

umbilical cord attached, his body preserved so his grandparents could see in his face that of their own lost daughter.

This is a poem by a poet who just wants to write poems about the ocean and the mountains. The moon and the stars. The earth's resolve to erupt into spring, the sky's refusal to fall, and how the ocean, even long after we deserve it, insists on loving us back.

[Demystification of the Hereafter]

by Aremu Adams Adebisi

1. when do the dead eat?

on thursdays

*the day he slept
& never had to sleep again*

2. what do the dead eat?

*he feeds on alms
in form of salts & clothes
& grains & prayers*

*but his soul does not
have a body when
dead.*

*but his soul is a glass,
a whiff of wind, undulating,
masking itself in the din,*

*piping into my ears
as if to exchange
pleasantries.*

3. how do the dead eat?

*like creatures.
he comes to me
in labyrinths.*

*the marabouts
i gift his clothes,
little children
gathered for offals,*

*beggars with pints
of salt, birds feeding
on scattered grains.*

*he assumes a state
of anonymity,*

*like abstractions, like
everything-god-you-
can't-see.*

4. where do the dead meet the living?

*silence is the path
where i see my father
sculpted in air.*

*in cackles of wind,
in birdsongs,
in fluttering of leaves.*

*in gatherings where
every child hugs their
fathers & i have none.*

5. how do you separate
the dead from the living?

*sadly,
the sun does not
find my father
a worth to shine on.*



Jayne Marek, *Winter Roofline*,
digital photograph, 2012.

MAX

by Susan Vogel Taylor

By the small fountain, belted in his chair,
he frets over the hopping, scurrying things,
whose names he once knew.
Nearby on a bench, a familiar stranger
clacks white plastic sticks together
while sounds come from her face, annoyingly,
since she seems to desire a response.

He delves into his treasure pouch,
a cloth bag by his chair,
surprised again that the writing sticks are gone,
but thankfully, still there is the coffee-stained
book of an old poet.
Max caresses the frayed, upside down pages,
remembering his heart's expansion, if not why.
He touches the words, little curlicues in rows,
and talking to the book, with his uh, uh, uhs,
he drops it, and watches helplessly
as the letters run away in the grass.

This poem originally appeared on *Two Lilies* (Grapevine, TX: Seadog Studios, 2017), CD-ROM.

Max reaches down furtively, oh, oh, oh,
and sees two feet away, an arrogant grackle, shiny black.
The yellow-eyed bird opens its beak,
and produces a harsh scream, so long, so sharp,
that the air pushes away until only
a shimmering void is left. The call goes on forever
as the old man sees around the bird an aureole,
glistening, like shards of glass.
Now there are rings of light wherever he looks,
and the warm shadows turn to mist.
as feels himself slipping from his body,
snatched away like a straw.
Now he is a small boy again, in a down jacket
and thick leggings, with his arms and legs outstretched,
floating high in chill air, spinning, balloon boy,
while far, far, below in the whiteness,
he hears the knitting needle lady call out the name
that sounds like it might be familiar.

Perhaps.

Elders

by Kevin Richard White

They walked slowly to the water, laughing and giggling in the ocean haze, no shoes on. Trembling but like a fire was lit underneath them. I stood away, smoking; swimming doesn't interest me. But I watched them. They looked like strays from the distance, scavenging.

They're all between the ages of eighty-five and ninety. Anyone younger and they're not allowed in the group. Same with anyone pushing a hundred; kind of like the hippie adage about not trusting the older folks.

I drive them to the beach once a week. It is against the rules. We're only eight miles from it so I make it happen. The assisted living facility doesn't want me to get too attached (read: be a human) or take them off the facility property so I do it in secret. I just tell my supervisor we're going out for fresh air, a Wawa run, whatever. It's a big world out there, and I just don't tell the truth about location, that's all. No one should.

Some have oxygen tanks. Some have children that are out of the picture and don't write or visit anymore. They know where they were when Kennedy was shot, when Bogie died, when Thomson swung his bat and connected. They're great to talk to, but they just go on a little too long sometimes. They are losing teeth.

They were and are better people than us, this generation. I have always believed it, even before this job, and it only gets confirmed more and more every day.

I'm giving them their space today. It's been a rough week for some, all for different reasons. Some are spread out in the sand, sitting awkwardly

as they watch seagulls with mouths agape. Leslie and Marge are trying in vain to collect seashells with their little claw picker-upper things. Edgar, the only war veteran out of them all, stands perilously on the rock formation, lost I'm sure over his bloody memories of the Pacific arena, friends gone and buried from battle. I heard his whole story one afternoon—it made me realize what a coward I am.

This is what I want to do. I want to help, and I want to watch, and I want to be away from them enough that I am not in their minds, that I'm not the van driver, that I'm just someone watching. I know that I can act as a remainder of who they are and where they're living, and I think it messes them up. So I stay away, remain clothed in a smoke puff, scrolling through my phone. They are living. They're old, and they earned the right to keep living. They have seen so much, of the world and in the spaces of it, and it's why I let them close to this edge—so they can see just a little bit more before they go. If I can make that happen, then it's a good day.

Edgar shifts his feet. Marge drops her seashells. Leslie is laughing. I am out of the way, the way I should be, the way a memory is—back in the distance, but with a beating heart.

The Domestic Bestiary

by Clara Bush Vadala

Here, a dog scrapes paint off the melting door
and my dad, beating the neighbors home, pulls
a black lab from the smoke; tindered by drier lint.

Here, the house is gone, the old wood fort broken
down and hauled away. Next door, ugly new Victorian
looms; juts its mint green walls up out of stonework.

Here, a snake whips through the chain-link, my dad
grabs its tail, pulls it free from the fence. It slides
onto our porch from his hands, we touch its back.

Here, my dad holds it behind the jaw so we won't
be bitten. The snake folds its skull. My dad relocates
her behind the house to eat the mice underneath it.

Here, a dog is buried in the backyard, tombstone:
a stack of bricks to keep the other one from digging
her up. She had been missing for days; we loved her.

Here, down the street, a tarantula waltzes out
from under the church. He lives in the bushes.
He crawls on our hands and arms if we let him.

Here, a toad croaks nearby, close like a gunshot;
We grab him, he pees on my dad's shoe, trying
to wiggle out from between our grasping fingers.

Here, a few lizards live in a fish tank in the bathroom
until we find a female of their kind outside somewhere,
bigger, stronger, and wild, and she leads them all free.

Here, a parakeet flies into a window and starts living
behind it, so we catch him and set him a cage indoors.
Eventually we give him away, he lives a long time, there.

Here, years later, there are no animals for a time,
but a cat who goes in and out, hides outside, up
in the trumpet vines. He is terribly allergic to fleas.

Here, a squirrel ran out of the attic at Christmas,
across the back of the couch, and everyone jumped
up to usher him out the front door and locked it.

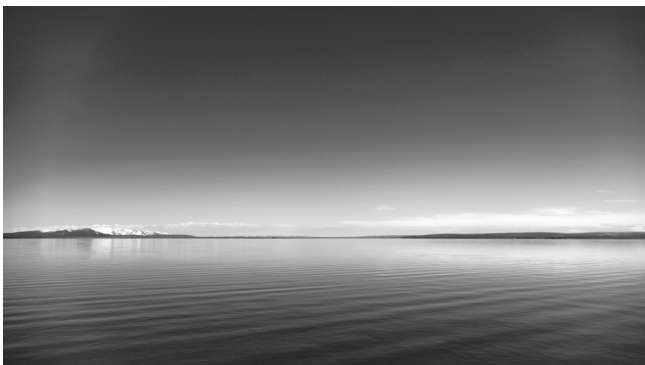
Here, geckos and their translucent skins wither
in the sun, overtaken by ants, or they slip between
the doorcracks and up the wall, into the dark.

Here, a snake falls into the bedroom, or comes up
from the floorboards, who knows, but a *thunk*
announced its arrival. My dad saves this one, too.

Here, a neighbor's cat, named Mitch, taunts all
the animals of this street, he is an orange tabby
and nobody owns him, not even the wilderness.

Here, the old white house sinks and creases into itself
like a well-worn shoe, and all of the animals come and go,
each one, like the last of its kind, the house awash in them.

Here, later, I find a snake in a bird net, twisted and cut.
A snake skeleton in the same net last week. I cut him
free, hold him like my dad did, let him slither away.



Fabrice Poussin, *Peace as Ever*,
digital photograph, 2018.

Inside Infinity
Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Dots Mirrored Room,
Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh

by Michael Janairo

The endless room pock-marked by polka-dotted floor tiles,
each inch repeats under pin pricks of lights.
My younger brother and I step in, huddled
by dimness, uncertainty: Where do the walls begin? Who's here?
Where are we?

Our darting eyes cover the illusory bend of infinity
in—or only on?—the mirror-covered ceiling and walls.
We stay close in this ill-lit moment,
close to our own surface representations, interrupting

The flow of our selves or, rather, our mimetic selves,
these iterative copies ceaseless, senseless,
created in the present by our presence,
but altered by—Is it plastic? Is it glass?—

The adjacent self in the curve toward the unlimited,
revealing now a series of imperfect selves,
or, rather, images of imitations distorted
of my brother, mouth agape, turns worried eyes to me

What he calls his Chinese eyes, his Chinese face,
his version of the vestigial term mongoloid,
now discredited, but what I've thought of
his verb-of-being conundrum: Is or has?

And that, these decades later, remains
in my thinking a question—*He is? He has?*—
even in this moment as an impish light
erases the worry behind his glasses.

He dances: Arms raised and spinning, he laughs, inspired
by all these hims and mes, the gift of Yayoi Kasuma.
He shouts, "Polka dots!" and keeps spinning,
his true self reveling in the surprising reality that goes on and on and on

Speechless
by Agnes Vojta

The mute years are dunes
of unwritten words
that shift with the winds,
memories evanescent as mirages.

I wish I had driven poems
like stakes into the ground
to anchor time.



Judith Skillman, *Clark Fork River*,
oil on canvas, 2018.

John 20:27

by Rob Secundus

Tommy, the Bride's son, didn't recognize his cousin Carter. They hadn't met in the flesh for over a decade, and though Tommy religiously watched his cousin's pay-per-views, Carter Stimble, out of makeup and out of costume, did not much resemble his character Conan Curbstomper, one of the more fantastical individuals currently performing on the independent wrestling circuit.

Tommy was also drunk.

Then

He had, against his better judgment, refrained throughout the ceremony. With a tremendous effort of will, he had not touched his flask once during the homily ("Peter, Marge, what is love? God is, and being nice to others, and also, you both right here! You are love. We are love. He is love. Love. Forever. You will love each other eternally. Let us go forth in love."), not during the exchange of vows (during which his mother sobbed uncontrollably), nor even during the unity sand/candle rituals (which were vile, Protestant innovations that had no place in a Catholic mass). With even greater will he kept silent, never laughing, not even when his teenage stepbrother unwittingly dedicated the whole ordeal to Satan (concluding his reading by shouting, "The Lord of the World"). Tommy had even, when his grandmother tried to muffle her blaring phone beneath the pew, quietly reached over and turned it off without a single glare or word of rebuke.

God had granted him heroic virtue that day.

Unfortunately, that grace failed in the face of the real trial, which began immediately after the liturgy's conclusion. Fr. Abelard announced that the entire crowd was to remain seated; all guests would soon come to the altar to participate in the holy and joyful marital photo shoot.

One of Tommy's new aunts had then lurched to the pulpit, seized the microphone, and begun to growl a series of alternatively incomprehensible and oxymoronic commands. When a person or persons failed to enter the frame or leave it as she desired, she devoted several minutes to castigating not only their characters, but the qualities of their mothers and their mothers' mothers in a righteous fury. Not once did a single person successfully interpret whether they were to appear on the altar or in the choir loft or right outside the open window, gazing in amidst stained glass. The shoot lasted two hours.

After the first ten pictures, Tommy readied his flask and e-cigarette. After the first hundred, both were empty.

At the reception, he was seated with his sister Lily, Lily's husband, and their new stepbrother. The unwitting Satanist devoted the first half hour of the affair to describing the activities of his junior high furry club as well as the particulars of his fursona. (He was attempting to decide between a silver lion or a silver panther—or perhaps, he had just thought, a silver wolf). At the phrase “Philadelphia YipCon,” Tommy fled. There was an empty corner near the bar; he unpocketed the book he had fortuitously brought, grabbed a triple gin, and hunkered down to wait out the evening.

By canto 5 of the *Inferno*, the DJ had faded into a background fuzz; by canto 10, Tommy had found some measure of peace. At canto 13, his mother's voice pierced the veil.

“I have been [sniffle] through such DARKNESS [sob] and such [gulp] HORROR, and one thing has kept me going [sob]”—here she took out a plain silver cross that had been hidden in her cleavage—“Peter gave me this three years ago [several sobs], and that's how I knew he was The One. Thank [sniffle] you [sniffle] all [sniffle] for [sniffle] coming [sniffle] and thank [sniffle] God [sniffle] for bringing my man and I together. CHEERS!”

Both she and her son drained their glasses. He had seized another, returned to his corner, and made it to canto 15 when a mountainous shadow fell across him.

Now

"Hey," the shade rumbled.

"Why hello sir!" Tommy hoped that he wouldn't need to fain friendliness for too long. Usually, when he cranked up this particular personality, he was able to drive the other away in very short time. "I'm Thomas. Marge's son! How ARE you this fine evening? Lovely ceremony! So moving! The bit with the candles! Oh, I cried. Yes sir."

The hulking mass paused, shifted awkwardly, and said, "Tommy, it's me. Carter. It's your cousin Carter."

"Oh." Tommy began to sigh but caught himself and perked up again. "Carter old chum! It's been a minute or two since I saw you, hasn't it! Well, rather, since you saw me. I caught your ladder match with Ogre Jones on Saturday, and, let me tell you, that last plunge was mighty impressive." He paused, made a show of glancing around conspiratorially, and continued, "Sorry, Coz, we can keep things *kayfabe*, if you'd rather."

Carter, as Tommy had hoped, did not know how to respond. Unfortunately, rather than leave, he paused, collected himself, and tried again. "Tommy, I didn't know you watched ... I would have reached out, got you to a show, caught up with you ... it's been so long ... when we were kids we were so ... I just thought now you—"

"Were a pretentious prick? An ac-a-dem-iac ass? Got his fancy college degree and now he's too good for a pay-per-view? Too good for his family? I know what the Aunts all say. Lily keeps me informed." He took a long drink. "And it's all true, almost. But catch-as-catch-can is all the rage in the Ivory Tower. My first publication was on *lucha* and liminality."

"I. Um. OK. I thought you were ashamed of me, or something. I mean, we were kind of like brothers."

"Of course not! My coz, living his dream? Shame? I'm proud, Cart. Damned proud. I brag about you all the time."

"Well ... so ... Why haven't you been in touch? You didn't even ... not even to Aunt Lil's funeral."

"Well, I did make it. Sort of. Spat on her grave after you all left."

"What?"

Tommy had prepared this bit beforehand in case he needed to send away a too-persistent member of the family. "Sister Hag spent my childhood telling my parents I was severely disabled and my adult life telling them that I was a depraved hedonist. That nun's in hell for sure, if you believe in that sort of thing. Tongues of flame, boiling pitch, the whole deal. Ugh. Our family. Her whole generation in particular ..." he gestured to his mother, now awkwardly gyrating on the dance floor with her newest husband. "The last time I appeared at a family function, I was inundated with emails, texts, calls, all complaining about my conduct. I'm done with all of them. Maybe now that she's settled down I can resign from the immediate family too. Still need to set up my dad, though."

Carter eagerly latched onto what he hoped would be steadier ground. "Oh, how's your dad doing? Is he holding up? I know it's only been a few months since the divorce."

"Well, we just buried his parents."

"Oh! Ah! Wow! That's!" he staggered. "Oh! I'm sorry! That' must've been hard."

"It was DELIGHTFUL. The funeral was cowboy themed."

"Delightful, Oh, OK! OK, great."

"Wagon wheels, rodeo clowns, a baptismal trough—the works. Pastor told us that the congregation looked back to a time when men were men, and virtue and respect weren't dirty words. Never took off his ten-gallon hat, though, in the church. Lot of talk about the end times. Mostly the four horsemen. Again, the whole thing was incredible."

"Well ... great ... I'm sorry ... for your loss?" He began to back away. "It was ... good seeing you? Maybe I'll run into you again soon."

"Probably not! Goodnight!"

Tommy settled in again and flipped to Ugolino, his favorite scene in the entire *Commedia*.

Then

At the funeral, Tommy had not been so amused. It had, for a very brief moment, brought him guilt and regret. He hadn't known his father's parents. He thought that, last year, once the divorce had been finalized, he'd finally have the opportunity—but even then, he'd put it off. Now they were dead.

These feelings were quickly replaced by disgust. He felt first disgust for his mother, who'd loathed his father's family and cut off contact with them decades before. This shifted into disgust for the cowboy church. At the start of the service, a series of moderately overweight, Old West cosplaying, guitar-wielding, middle-aged men had ascended the stage and blared out a series of vaguely Christian country numbers until, by means inscrutable, the lead guitarist determined that their god had been satisfied by this offering. He then wrapped up the ritual with a lecture on the end times, noting the aforementioned, thematically appropriate horsemen, but also giving a bit of time to the superhuman Resurrection Bodies that the deceased would be receiving any day now, now that the president had moved the country's embassy to Jerusalem and kick-started Christ's return. These bodies would be capable of flight, intangibility, camouflage, and many other wondrous feats. Most importantly, they would be beautiful, without blemish.

At the end of this sermon, the good Rev. Holiday had informed the crowd that Tommy's grandfather had a revelation on his deathbed. One person would not be receiving these superpowers. Someone in the room was damned. Now was the time for he or she to come forth and repent, to be born again in Jesus. None stirred. Eventually, with a sad sigh, the preacher moved on and concluded the ceremony. On the long drive back, Lily and Tommy had argued about which of them must have been meant, as they were the only ones in the room with no Personal Protestant Relationship with Republican Jesus.

Now

"What this??" growled something over the DJ singing along to a line dance.

Tommy made a silent plea and waited—but his prayers went unanswered. The creature was not driven away. After an uncomfortable

“E V E R Y B O D Y CLAP YOUR HANDS,” Tommy sighed and looked up. It was the Veteran. “Why, hello! This would be *The Divine Comedy*, a fifteenth-century poem exploring medieval conceptions of history, aesthetics, ethics, philosophy, theology, and, most importantly, eschatology.”

“It’s a BOOK,” she rumbled.

“Yes, very perceptive of you. *The Divine Comedy* is a book.”

“A t a W E D D I N G ! R E C E P T I O N !”

“And what a lovely venue it is!”

“Shame!”

“No,” he pointed to the book. “They’re all pretty shameless. That’s why they’re in hell.”

“G I V E I T H E R E !”

“I’d rather not. If you’d like a copy, several translations are in the public—”

He was no match for her great strength. *The Commedia* was no longer his.

“N O W D A N C E !”

“I don’t—”

“A T Y O U R M O T H E R ’ S W E D D I N G . Y O U . D A N C E ! G O ! G O G O - G O G O G O G O G O !”

Tommy stumbled up, driven by the blows she dealt with the tome, and eventually reached the dance floor, where he failed to imitate the motions of those around him. As he jerked and flopped, he kept his eyes on the sergeant. Two songs in, while the DJ shouted along to “Gangnam Style,” her guard slipped, and he seized his Dante from her purse, fleeing behind the now vacant bar. He found a bottle and opened the book once again. He would remain there until the event was over. It couldn’t be long now.

Then

In 1289, Count Ugolino della Gherardesca and his children were locked into a tower and left to starve. None survived, but Ugolino lasted much longer than expected, as he made a meal of what he had on hand.

In canto 32 of the *Inferno*, near the final pit of the universe, right before Dante encounters Satan himself, the Pilgrim happens upon two men frozen up to their heads in a vast lake of ice. There, Count Ugolino forever gnaws at the scalp of His Eminence Ruggieri degli Ubaldini, Archbishop of Pisa, the man who had thrown away Ugolino's key.

Dante asks Ugolino to tell his story, and before he begins, the Count politely wipes the spittle and gore off of his face and onto Ruggieri's hair. Tommy always chuckled at that part.

Now

Tommy was jerked away again from Ugolino's tower. His name was being called over the speakers.

"And now [sniff] my two [sniff] BEAUTIFUL children [snuffle] will read the speeches they have composed in our honor. I am [sob] so blessed to have such grateful kids."

This was a shock. The possibility of speeches had been raised months prior, and Tommy and Lily both, in very strong terms, had rejected the idea.

Tommy slowly rose from behind the bar while people politely clapped. Lily spotted him, walked up, grabbed his arm, and directed him towards the stage.

"Listen," she hissed through a clenched smile. "You're drunk, and we're both pissed, so just stick to a simple script—we love her, we're happy for her, yay Jesus, and get off the stage. Copy what I say, just in your own words, OK?"

"Roger roger."

While Lily gave her toast, Tommy watched the crowd.

There was the sergeant, eyes blazing at the book in his hands. There, Carter, strangely doleful after their excellent conversation. There, his new brother, eyes glazed over, daydreaming of curvaceous opossums. And more faces: middle-aged men and women that had drifted through their lives over the years, scowling boomers now related in law, a horde of children running, screaming, or vibrating in place—

"And, in conclusion, love ya, Mom!"

Then applause, and suddenly, a microphone was in his hands.

Tommy thought of how he must look in front of them. He briefly pictured himself giving the toast in cowboy clothes and giggled. Lily's sharp elbow brought him back. The script. There was a very simple script.

"Hi, my name is Thomas. I'm the bride's son." Something sharply glinted in the corner of his vision. He turned towards it, towards his mother. "Hi, Mom. Um, I love you. Like Lily said, I'm happy for Jesus." He realized it was her cross catching the spotlight. "Today ... love ..." He remembered the last thing he noticed at the funeral—beyond the wagon wheels, on the back wall behind the stage, where a crucifix would be in his own church, the wall had been cut away in a cross' shape.

"Love ..."

He couldn't remember what he was supposed to say. He couldn't stop blinking at the reflected light. So he just began to talk.

"There is no marriage in heaven. Father was wrong to say they'll be together forever. No marriage in heaven. There's love, though. In heaven. So that's nice."

He stopped to take a drink, but he didn't have one. He went on, "You know what else's in heaven? A God with a hole in his gut. Divine intestines spilling out." Lily was pulling at the mic. He jerked away. "Do you know what love looks like? Do you know what you say you believe? Love is nails struck through bone. Marrow starting to seep. Mixing with blood. Paulo and Francesca didn't know love." His mother was starting to shout something. "Do you know that one? No? How about: love is a woman reaching out for the first time in her fucking life while her grandchildren are shot behind her." The microphone was gone, and he was shouting now, shouting over sobs and a great din. "An axe murderer weeping over a horse! Joan's skin peeling away in the fire! Can you smell it? The burning hair? The stink of the mob?"

Only flashes then. His mother's blotted mascara. Huge arms gripping his waist. The world hurtling around him. And then, in the last moment, his cousin's sad face saying something as he moved, maybe some secret from their childhood, an old shared story, or the rules of a game, something he could have remembered if only he had tried, and then the crash, and silence.

Reclamation

by Lou Marin

Among blue tarps and bayou
there is trash and triumph.
They say crime
is taking over down here.
New Orleans will reclaim hers.

The day ends,
night begins.
Lightning streaks and thunder rumbles.
Cool soothing rain washes all anew.
Nature reclaims hers.

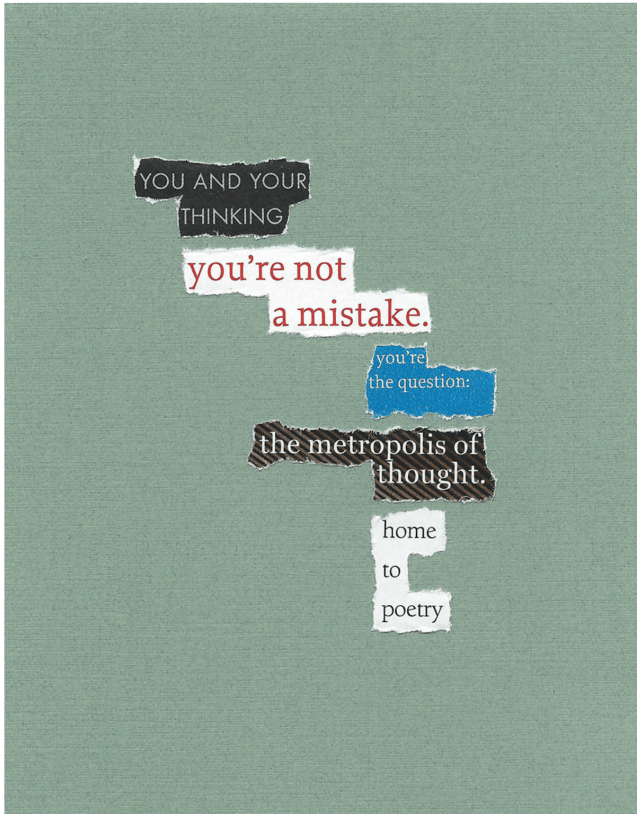
On the back deck
we sit and trade beer for stories.
Cajun thieves and water moccasins
walk about in tales.
Beer, barbecue, and red fish
join the mix
until mosquitoes demand
their pint of blood.
We go inside.
Nature reclaims hers.

Hammers and saws,
rebuild and rebirth

awaken me, then mingle
with birds chirping, frogs peeping,
and the cricket's continuous drone.
Nature reclaims her own.

I am in New Orleans on my wedding day.
I join my siblings for a swamp tour.
On an airboat we go
to where the duckweed,
giant blue herons
and gators rule the day and night.
Man is just a curiosity
to be eyed for the dinner
he could be.
It seems to me,
nature reclaims hers.

We are Mr. and Mrs.,
discussing family and future.
The lady next door died.
The place may be haunted,
but it would be good to move down here
in a few years.
New Orleans reclaims hers.



J.I. Kleinberg, *YOU AND YOUR THINKING*,
collage/paper, 2015.

