

ALL THE LIVES WE EVER LIVED
A LIGHTHOUSE WRITERS WORKSHOP
COMMUNITY ANTHOLOGY

VOL. VI

Edited by Marissa Morrow

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Introduction

Writing in community. Holding each other's stories. Finding liberation and healing through the written word. This is what Lighthouse Writers Workshop is all about.

When we write together, we connect in a unique way with our fellow travelers in this life. We craft, learn from, and expand our storytelling skills, all while caring for the writers next to us. This type of connection and support is exactly why Lighthouse is honored to host community writing workshops for adults in Colorado and beyond. Over the last year, writers in programs like Hard Times, Writing with Cancer, Writing in Color, and Queer Creatives engaged with intentionality and excitement as they sharpened their writing skills *and* built their community connections.

Taught by talented Lighthouse faculty members, Community Engagement (CE) workshops at Lighthouse are accessible to writers of all backgrounds, identities, and skill levels. Some writers enter these spaces ready to pick up their writing practice after setting it down for many years, while others might be diving into the craft of writing for the very first time. No matter what goals an individual may have when they come into these workshops, our faculty and community partners do everything they can to ensure that these writers have a meaningful experience.

In 2025, members of our Writing in Color (WIC) and Queer Creatives (QC) programs dove into topics like the craft of writing, resource sharing, and community building. Each meetup topic was cultivated to tap into the extensive knowledge and wisdom of Lighthouse faculty while also connecting WIC and QC members with new sources of inspiration. Through our monthly meetups, these writers have had the opportunity to learn from published faculty members and meet fellow BIPOC+ and LGBTQIA+ writers. Our hope is that both of these community groups will help writers of color and queer writers grow personally and creatively.

This year, our Hard Times program for community members who have experienced things like poverty, addiction, homelessness, trauma, health challenges, and more, expanded and is now offered at five different partner locations including: The Gathering Place, the Boulder Public Library (Main), the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, virtually through the Jefferson County Public Library, and the Belmar Library. Each week, these workshops bring together a diverse group of writers and creatives to

tell their stories of triumph, hardship, and healing, and they encourage each other along the way. The consistency of this program, its partners, its writers, and its faculty members continues to inspire me.

We're also incredibly grateful for our Writing with Cancer program, hosted virtually in partnership with UCHealth, and in person at Lighthouse, thanks to Colorado Associates in Medical Physics (CAMP). This program is a resource for individuals who have been diagnosed with cancer and their caregivers. Each session focuses on how writing can be used as a tool for healing and expression no matter what part of their health journey an individual might be on.

In short, the Community Engagement program at Lighthouse exemplifies the power of writing and *specifically* of writing with others who share similar experiences and identities. Now more than ever, we need to cultivate meaningful opportunities to hear each other's stories and to care for one another in intentional ways. The impact of CE at Lighthouse goes far beyond the words these writers get down on the page. The impact blooms when writers bond over a favorite poem, when they resonate with a line in someone else's personal essay, or when a tender memory is transformed into a speculative short story. Through the written word, these writers bring us into their worlds and connect us to the beauty of being human.

Thanks to our dedicated faculty for all their hard work, flexibility, and enthusiasm that they brought to every workshop that they've taught during this last year. And thank you to our community partners for helping Lighthouse continue to "provide the highest caliber of artistic education, support, and community for writers and readers in the Rocky Mountain region and beyond." The impact we get to have in our community through these workshops only occurs because of your enthusiasm and support.

The writers in this anthology and all of our Community Engagement workshops continue to inspire me every day. I am surrounded by joy, laughter, hope, vulnerability, and honesty. All of these workshops and writers remind me to feel gratitude for this sweet, simple life. I hope that the following stories in volume six of *All the Lives We Ever Lived* help you feel something similar.

With light,

Marissa Morrow

Community Engagement Program Manager

Lighthouse Writers Workshop

**Please be advised that some of the pieces in this anthology include mentions of cancer, death/loss, body horror, self harm, and sexual assault.*

Hard Times

SYDNEY SOLIS

2025 New Voices Fellowship Recipient

Imagine

My mother doesn't arrive scowling and looking like a bag lady when she comes to see my newborn daughter. She doesn't bring for a present a crumpled brown paper bag, its dark bottom lined with a few bruised apples, a sanitary napkin and a broken bracelet made of Roman coins that she found at a garage sale 40 years ago.

She doesn't thrust the bag in my hands and then proclaim, "I'm ready for a pizza. Mushroom."

Instead, my mother throws a big party for my daughter and me. My mother looks young and beautiful with perfectly coiffed brown hair, wears a 1950s dress. I've had a photograph since childhood of her wearing that dress seated at a piano, smiling, her fingers perfectly poised on the keys as she looks over her shoulder at the camera. The dress is crisp, clean white with blue flowers, like Dutch Delft dishware.

At the party, my mother talks with guests. She laughs, and her shaking head makes the diamonds that dot her ears flash. She's drinking champagne, urging everyone to enjoy the fine catering. "Try the stuffed mushroom caps!" she cries. She's having a normal conversation with others. She's not insulting them or calling them whores and dirty bitches or making them feel like shooting something up in their veins. She's not criticizing my hair or beating me on my arm with her fist. She's even wearing white gloves.

VAL U ABLE

A Cup of ClariTEA

“What’s a clarity coach?”
follows each “What do you do?” inquiry
to which I cleverly reply,
“Sounds like you need some clarity!”

“I wipe smudges from your spectacles
so you can clearly see
often outdoors in nature
where your mind and heart feel free!”

“Next time confusion floods you,
a mere call or text to me
sets the wheels in motion
for a cup of clariTEA!”

HUMPHREY ARCHER

Shannon's Story

My name is Shannon, I am a very unlikely survivor, and this is part of my story.

I survived an injury with almost impossible odds. But my injury is not the whole of me. It left me profoundly changed, but not all of me. My injury, my disabilities, and my condition are not all of who I am. I am not the sum of my suffering, but my injury certainly was a pivot in my journey. It has also been a lens through which my art, poetry, and writing is filtered. My injuries have also shown me the best in people and exposed their worst.

My memories of the day of my injury are shattered fragments. I have little shards of recall, and some don't fit nicely into a jigsaw puzzle. I remember us leaving the bar and I remember arguing with Gram because I thought—I knew—that he was too drunk to be driving. But I was young, and he was loud and forceful, and sometimes his bluster got him what he wanted. Sometimes it got him things he didn't want, and ultimately pushing me out of the way and ignoring me got him killed.

I remember part of the ride, trees and a diner flashing by, and then I have an image of the back of a big dirty white truck. It's like a black and white Polaroid image, detached from any context. It's just there, and sometimes I see that image in my dreams. It doesn't haunt me, or make me feel anything. It's just there. We hit that truck. Leastways, I hit it. Gram didn't have time to brake, but he did swerve so that he wasn't in the direct path of impact. But I was. Gram called out to me a few times that I remember, but I couldn't answer because somehow, my face was between my boobs, and I couldn't move my mouth and all I could do was gurgle. Then I remember faces. People with helmets, caps. Serious faces. I remember stinks. Rubber, metal, gasoline, blood. There was shouting, machinery, tearing metal. I remember a lot of blinding light. I remember hands doing things around me, touching me, and then being lifted. The back of an ambulance, and faces talking to me, asking me things, and hands all over me. They cut off my clothes and found the nipple piercings and just cut them off. Same with the four belly button piercings I had spent so much cash on. Then they asked if I had any more, and I had to gesture because my voice wasn't working. They cranked my legs open, and cut those

piercings out too. I passed out again, and then woke up and I was cold, and I was in a hospital, and lights were zipping past above me, and another face was smiling at me, and for the first time, a voice that made sense.

"Hello Honey, I'm Julia, you have been in a car accident, and we are going to help you." From then on it was mostly quiet, and the faces all smiled down at me.

The memories get clearer after that, and the jigsaw puzzle of my experience is a more complete picture, and is filled with people who were busy and focused. They explained, in slightly excited terms I thought, that I had been "internally decapitated" and that the chances of surviving it were tiny tiny tiny. I wasn't quite sure what to think of that. Lucky, I guess? But I also sometimes felt like a lab specimen or a museum piece for people to gawk at. And boy, did they fucking gawk. I couldn't count the number of people in serious faces and white coats that stopped by to look at me and my Meccano crown. Oh yes, let me tell you about that. Because my skull bone was no longer anchored to my spine, they had screwed metal rods into my bones all over the place, and my head, spine, and chest all moved together because metal rods were screwed into the bones and bolted together. Into the bone! Looking into a mirror was so weird and it honestly creeped me out. They had also attached me to a drug machine, and occasionally it would make a faint hum and click, and happy juice would go into my drip, and I would be sliding down into sleepiville. Click, hmmm, bye bye Shannon. I got to know the nurses really well, and the f-bombing doctor, and the techs who used spanners and a screwdriver to adjust the cage of rods around my head.

When they allowed visitors to see me, there was Gram and his buddies, and a few of my friends. Gram's buddies just stank the place up, and they were rowdy. Two of them ducked off with a packet of weed that they said they'd brought for me, but like the fruit and candies they gave me, Gram's crowd went through them like locusts. I was already tired by the time the nurse came to tell them to buzz off, and the pain had started up again. It was clawing like rats in all the places they had cut me open or screwed things into me, and Gram was nattering on about how unfair this all was to him, how his wheels had been totaled, how he got a DUI charge, and on and on and on about himself and his suffering. Not one apology for being drunk at the wheel. Not even one mention that here I was still on

the edge of the pit of death, because of him. Not one stinking word of empathy, sympathy, or even that I was pretty banged up. It was all about him, all about how this hurt him, and he started telling me that I owed him for the rent and for replacing his wheels. I was reaching for the call button to ask a nurse to just make this guy shut up and go. Just shut him up. Just make that stupid face of his go away. But my hand found something else. I had closed my fingers around the handle of the screwdriver the tech used on my cage. The pain was screaming at me, and Gram's face just kept yapping at me. Then my arm just moved, and then click... hmmm... and a second or two later, it was bye bye Shannon, and everything was warm and billowy and quiet.

When I woke up, the pain was way out at the edges, it was feeding time, and the nurse was looking solemn. She said Gram was dead, one of his friends had stabbed him, and had done a runner. It was a shock, but my last real memory of Gram was this floating face yapping and complaining, so I must admit that the news was more relief than sorrow.

A few weeks later I was at home again, and eventually my cage was removed, and my crossed eyes were fixed, I could walk, I could brush my own hair, and do pretty much everything for myself again. People always want to hear about the accident, and many are a bit freaked out by the trache, but I learned to live with that. My life is filled with my poetry, my writing, my art, and with living my life. My life is full of the people who also do those things, and all those things make it a far bigger universe than just being a really lucky survivor. So, my message to you is to acknowledge your injuries, pay gratitude to those who lift you up, and to live your best life. Maybe also, surround yourself with interesting people, never climb into a car with a drunk, and if the occasion arises, stab that motherfucker in the head and move on.

My name is Shannon, and this was part of my story.

MARTINA BJORHUS

Five-Hundred Beats per Minute

It all began on her fifth birthday, when she asked for a vacuum cleaner. Before she could tell time, every Saturday morning her cherry red Dirt Devil would devour the nasty dust bunnies lurking beneath her head, clouding the corners of her mind. Dust bunnies terrified Sophie. She could feel them twitching under her bed, gathering energy to consume her crayon shavings. Absolutely alarming. Her grandma always said they were the product of chaos and neglect. Not only do they produce clouds under your bed, they cloud your mind, too. Once she blew out her five candles, Sophie built a life following a meticulously organized home and a flawless routine.

Decades later, Sophie returns to her hometown and visits her grandmother once a week on Friday morning. Invariably, every day she follows the same route. Some things never change. She leaves her city-center apartment at 7:34am, just as the crisp morning air begins to warm, like the freshly baked roll she stops to purchase at 7:39am from the corner bakery. She greets the baker by name and begins to order her usual, only today, the baker interrupts her to say he is out of her favorite braided rolls sprinkled with salt and caraway seeds. Instead, he can offer her a braided roll with salt and poppy seeds. Sophie happily accepts the substitute, not terribly disturbed by the modification, and bids the baker farewell. Sophie's life runs on automatic. The same everyday. Her meals, her work, her family, her social life all precisely assembled along a production line continuously manufacturing the same existence. Just the way Sophie likes it. Or does she?

At 7:49am, her street is beginning to fill with the sounds of the city. Ahead she hears the *vroom* of cars speeding to work and school children running to catch the tram. A couple, seated at a cafe, stir their coffee while they read the morning paper. She listens for the crinkling page turn and straightening thump as she witnesses the sun's strut along the cobblestones.

Sophie loves the mornings. Her tree lined street catches the muted morning sun scattering the light in mottled patterns on the ground. The hazy morning light casts shadows on her favorite

apartment building, illuminating a Greek statue above the ornate front entrance. Here she picks up her pace to catch the 8:04 tram.

8:29am. Right on schedule, Sophie arrives to find her grandmother leaning out her front window waving expectantly. Today, her grandmother is especially excited, because she's found an old box while she was rummaging in her attic. Her excitement isn't anything new for Sophie, her grandma loves to comb through her things and give them away. Last week, she gave away old, possibly used, ear plugs. The week before, wine glass markers she thought were earrings. Sophie took a deep breath and walked through the door, hoping the box didn't contain the remnants of a previously living thing, like a fox tail hat or a rabbit's foot keychain.

The small wooden box, thankfully dust free, lays open on the kitchen table. Inside, Sophie sees a peculiar compass. Its needle doesn't point north but instead spins unmethodically, like a helicopter seed whirling to the ground. Intrigued, Sophie holds it in her hands, and to her astonishment, the needle steadies. Her grandmother, wide-eyed and teary, says the compass belonged to her grandfather. He acquired it during the First World War fighting in Siberia. He claimed the compass led him through the forests of Russia and Ukraine and through the forest beyond this house to a crystal clear lake. "No one has found this lake," her grandmother beams. "But you should follow the compass to see where it leads you.

Sophie looks at the time, 8:59am. She adores her grandmother and devotes a large chunk of time to hearing her stories. She's heard the crystal lake story many times, however the detail of it not existing is new. When Sophie was younger, she and her grandmother would walk along the forested pathway to the lake every Sunday, but it's been over thirty years since she's seen the pristine lake. Curiosity compels Sophie to humor her grandmother and follow the broken compass's direction. She travels along familiar trails and then deeper into the woods among the towering pines, the sky peeking through the tree tops like her grandmother's blue crocheted tablecloth. She begins to feel nostalgic for the large, bright, grassy knoll with picnickers next to a gleaming sunlit lake, but as she wanders further, the forest becomes unfamiliar and overgrown. Thick foliage blocks the sunlight. As darkness settles around her, Sophie pauses, worried she may have taken a wrong turn. Glancing to check her watch,

9:54am, she notices a chipmunk scurry across a lichen-crusting boulder, abruptly freezing for a moment. Just before the chipmunk disappears into a dark crevice, a sparkle catches the corner of Sophie's eye.

As she walks toward the glimmer, dry pine needles crunching beneath her soles, memories surface—dreams she abandoned, pain she buried, parts of herself she lost, and moments of joy she's forgotten. She peeks at the compass and to her surprise, the arrow steadies into an uneasy tremble.

At last, she reaches the grassy knoll by a lilypond. Her phone chimes 9:59am. A futile reminder to catch the 10:04am tram. Turning off her alarm, she refocuses on the pond. Amazing how five minutes can rearrange your entire perspective. It's because of these five minutes Sophie finds herself bewildered standing next to this untouched murky pond. The glimmer: a new steel culvert diverts runoff into the pond. Deflated, Sophie criss-cross applesauce by the water, takes a deep breath and unlocks the access to her mind. A rhapsody of creaks, croaks and rustles fills the air with poetry. With each beat Sophie inhales the ancient scent of wet earth and the sweetness of honey. The same spindly willow branches caress the water's surface, energizing the pond's inhabitants. For once, she's lost track of time and when she looks at the compass, she's mystified by the stationary needle. Eventually, lost in her memories, Sophie is filled with tranquility and calmness. She then realizes the compass no longer finds directions on the Earth's surface. Amusingly, the needle points directly to Sophie's heart. Her soul? Her mind? Didn't she move back here to find her balance? That brazen compass guided her to confront those life altering five minutes.

Perhaps change isn't so intimidating. What once sparkled under the hot sun is now teeming with vitality. Surrounded by aromatic linden trees and cattails, a family of ducks disturbs the pond's flat surface. Waves of determination appear behind their brown tails that reach Sophie's mind, too. Sophie simply needed to stand still and her grandmother knew exactly where the compass would lead her.

Sophie's automatic life has turned her into a robot reminiscent of Bobbie Markowe, from *The Stepford Wives*. She didn't cry enough. She didn't laugh enough. She didn't feel enough. She didn't stand still enough. Stretched out on the grass, finally taking a respite, Sophie reflects on the five

minutes that burned her life down, a fiery inferno that torched her carefully constructed existence. It's time to submit to the pain. Sophie needs to acknowledge—no, feel—her heartache. 10:04am.

Five-hundred reminders she missed her opportunity to resume her routine. Her heart pounds in her chest, so powerfully she feels every beat in her throat. *Thump, thump*: shame strangles her torso like kudzu, suffocating the oxygen from her veins. Sophie watches air bubbles drift to the pond's surface, gurgling to release their tension. A blustering *ba boom, ba boom* penetrates the air, her dynamic heartbeat infiltrates the calming rhapsody. With each beat, her pain accosts every cell in her body. One, two, three, four...five-hundred. A scream pounds out of her throat, like a thunderous timpani rattling on stage, overwhelming her senses. Afterward, her throat throbbing, she exhales the dust bunnies clouding her mind. 10:09am. Absolutely alleviating.

She looks at the compass, confidently pointing due north, and walks back to her grandmother's house. "You're right, grandma. The lake doesn't exist," Sophie says with a twinkle in her eye. Her grandma smiles, pats Sophie's hand and replies, "Of course not, dear. It only exists in spirit."

KATHRYN BROMLEY

As if It's a Game

I am dismayed at the suffering on tiny faces, in so many lives.
Amazed, I face the bright morning pouring through my window.

I am dismayed at the long window of time ahead of us, stretching endurance.
Amazed, I stretch my body through morning exercise, a miracle in action.

I am dismayed at political action leading to harm and cruel greed.
Amazed, I greedily settle into the peace of quiet meditation.

I am dismayed that every meditation includes releasing anger, fear, and contradiction.
Amazed, I wade through the contradictions of each hour, day, week.

I am a dented ping pong ball
a battered shuttlecock
a beat-up puck

but I'm still in the game
dismayed/amazed.

GIULIANA BRUNNER

Their Secret is Safe with Me

My single bed, a blond wooden frame
has a simple bookshelf as the headboard
No books there as the lil people need the space to roam about
They only come out at night when the regular people are asleep

I always make certain there is a thimble full of water for them,
(mom has several in her sewing basket and won't miss one)
since it is after dinner they won't need any food,
(though maybe they do wander into the kitchen
but am not awake to know for certain)

Oh and yes the closet door absolutely must be kept shut
as King Kong lives there only at night
(have no clue where he is during the day)
He could come out and even unintentionally
(as I do know he is a caring soul)
hurt them (and me) as he is so very big
I have not a clue how he even fits in there,
but believe me he does

Another critical factor is
I never ever dangle my legs over the bed
(no matter how warm I am under the covers)
as crawling things from under it can then climb
up my legs and hurt the lil people (and me)

Mom doesn't know about them as she tucks me in
and shares another story of her life in LaValle
and together we always say her beautiful simple prayer in Italian

Then I must stay very still as I fall asleep
so I don't hurt the lil people as they come out
to romp and play and climb about me
I'm their keep of safety, the place for their joy,
and their secret is safe with me.

JIM GURLEY

A Real Enigma

An earnest woman in our group shared her quest to recover after a family tragedy. Her experience was compelling. She mentioned desiring new friends and memories. I offered her a card with information on a small dinner social group, explaining that I had friends there who shared her desires. “I’m still with someone,” she replied, then smiled. “But I’m keeping your card, thank you.”

In an earlier time of life I’d learned to be respectful of “gut feelings” after encountering an Enigma. “Enigma,” that was my impression of the smallish, dark eyed, dark haired young woman I’d observed in the downtown church’s adult singles venue I attended. Her distant image suggested a vague familiarity—reminiscent of someone I’d once known in other circumstances. She never smiled, limited conversation with others, and her gaze could have been a still photo. She’d be walking somewhere, never seeming to connect with anyone. She moved purposely, perhaps looking at but not seeing others. I’d had work encounters where engaging with total strangers was necessary, but the right opportunity never materialized with her. The large church was busy. Perhaps she was there for some purpose not related to socializing or fellowship. But I still sensed that feeling of living with ambiguity.

Then, one Sunday morning I noticed her walking toward an exit—she had been injured and didn’t look well. There were bruises and bandages on her face and arms. The injuries suggested she’d received a beating, as opposed to minor surgery, an accident, or mishap. While there were others nearby, she didn’t interact with anyone—and kept moving without looking around.

I was also in a church class learning right-brain support and advocating skills. One of my classmates was an older woman and longtime church member. Our styles were different, but we were friends, basically on the same page. Then, a shocking event demanded our attention—a homicide with very non church-like overtones. Sadly, the victim was my Enigma. That subject was not covered in the course syllabus. My classmate had once been in a women’s group with our Enigma. But, once again, their interactions had been superficial and general in nature. The victim’s body was found in the

adjacent downtown area. Police and the media revealed the young woman's apparent secret life. Detectives reported she had been an "out call" sex worker, a call girl going to patron's locations. Outside the church, the homicide received very little local attention. Inside, more questions than answers.

A vintage fifties Abbot and Costello movie scene showed a woman walking up to the clueless Lou Costello, slapping his face while exclaiming, "How dare you look like someone I hate?" Even seeing that scene as a preteen, I understood that one must always be cautious about unfounded assumptions. The assumption I made about the young lady was only that she was an unknown, an Enigma. The truth gave credibility to her perceived detached presence but the experience still remains an unsettling memory. A memory of issues unresolved but with no clue what they were.

PAULA HAGAR

A World of Small Wonders: From *The Apprentice Thereto*

I. Wild Raspberries

When my cousins and I picked the wild raspberries on our Adirondack land each summer, there was a short window to gather them when ripe. It was either us or the bears, and since the bears lived outside with them, they knew better when the berries were at peak ripeness. The bears and we checked the bushes each day. We never saw them, but we knew they were there by the matted-down ferns and chokecherry bushes, where bits of bear fur clung to the flattened bushes, where they spent nights bedded down, dreaming of raspberries. The bears got most of them, but Aunt Jean knew exactly when to arrive. We could never pick them all—there were hundreds of bushes, scattered across the biggest holes of sunlight filtering down onto the shadowy floor of the forest. So as long as we got out there before the bears, we'd get our share. If the bears got there first, they wiped out every single berry in a day.

Never have I ever tasted sweeter, juicier raspberries than those from the wild bushes deep in that northern hardwood forest. Between Mom, Aunt Jean and we nine cousins, we collected buckets full. The berries rarely made it into pies or tarts or anything else unless Aunt Jean hid some away. The berries never even made it into the next day. We ate them by the handfuls, the sweet red juice dripping down our chins, staining our fingers, our lips, our tongues, our shirts. Our hands would be red for days; our arms covered with hives from the pricklers on the bushes.

When we went back two days later to gather the raspberries that hadn't quite ripened, there was not a berry to be found. I couldn't really be sad. The bears loved them as much as we did, and they needed that sustenance more than we did. For days afterward the bear scat in the woods would be loaded with tiny red seeds.

II. The Pear Tree

When we bought our house 25 years ago, the gnarled old pear tree produced a bounty of the sweetest pears I'd ever tasted. It was a feat of timing to get to the pears before the yellow jackets did, but we shared the fruit with the bees and squirrels. Five years later, already decades old when we moved in, the pear tree died. Old age, we assumed, and not enough care from us.

We have kept the dead pear trunk in place because it has a wonderful twisted gnarly shape, and the squirrels love chasing each other up and down, leaping from the neighbors' big ash trees onto the pear trunk. It's part of their route from tree to roof to fence and back to tree. Chickadees rest there in between their boppings to and from the bird feeder, pausing to devour sunflower seeds, one at a time. Each autumn the frantic squirrels, cheeks full of nuts and birdseed they are compelled to hide and hoard, stop briefly to rest on the stark trunk. Over the years, the pear tree skeleton is now surrounded by the aspens we later planted. We could never bring ourselves to cut the trunk down. It is a twisted, silvery-blue nature sculpture that wild creatures love—especially lovely in autumn when surrounded by twinkling golden aspen leaves and crimson sumacs.

Last fall I noticed a thin red-leafed sapling had sprouted up close to the trunk, and found it odd, but didn't give it much thought. There are numerous saplings surrounding it, including aspen, sumac, and ash trees from our neighbors' abundant golden ash seeds. With the arrival of spring's warmth last week I noticed it had grown five feet, and there were ten delicate white blossoms at the end of one tiny branch floating out from the thin sapling into the greenery. Pear blossoms! The first I've seen in 20 years! The long-dead pear tree has come alive again – a gift reborn and blooming after two decades of being a jungle gym for birds and squirrels. And if we're lucky we may see a few pears later this fall! Oh, what a wonder!

III. Winter

The cold blue wonders of winter are not stirring my blood the way they normally do in these dark times approaching solstice. Our current winters are far, far too warm now, and I am out of sorts. When snow is on the way, my body shivers with anticipation as I wait and watch for the first flakes to fly. If snow is expected in the deep night, I wake up often and run to the window to see if it's snowing. Is it here yet? When will it start? WILL it start? On the rare chance I do not wake up at night, I run to the window at first light to see if it's a winter wonderland outside. Each year I am increasingly disappointed by too many mornings.

Snowy days have always seemed pristinely clean and magical to me, and each chilly gray day I wait, just as I did for Santa on Christmas Eve, just as I wait for rain in summer. But too often nothing happens. No snow, and no Santa. I turn on my small twinkling light trees, and light all my blown glass candle lamps so the room is edged with the warmth of tiny flames, but outside the sad brown crisp leaves still cling to the trees—they too are waiting for snow to take them down.

These endlessly sunny, 50 degree winter days are not right. My body knows that something is amiss. It craves the cold and snow and ice it was birthed in, and sighs over the increasing annual world-wide decrease in all things winter. My feet miss walking in sheepskin lined boots. My hands long for warm woolen gloves and snug hats. My eyes have been missing frost on windows for decades—a truly rare thing now that everyone has better insulation in their homes.

As I prepare to celebrate the coming solstice and the slow slow return of the light to our world, my body and soul simply feel OFF. I wear shorts and walk barefoot in my house. My body remembers snowsuits, snowballs, snowmen, frigid air at ice skating rinks thick with the smell of wood burning in the warming shacks. The last time I laced up a pair of ice skates, eager to spin around the ponds or lake as I did near-nightly as a child, my ankles fell inward, flat to the ice, and I could not move.

My heart remembers that winter meant being active outdoors in the North Country. My butt misses toboggans, flexible flyers, flying saucers, or coasters as we called them as we zoomed down snowy hills. My legs remember long days of shushing down ski slopes, back when I had knees that still worked and thighs that would hold me up.

As I wait for snow, I focus on how very much I love the bare tree shapes against the sky this time of year, each one as original as we all are; each one as unique as a fingerprint, or a snowflake.

IV. The Pinyon Tree

Once I had a pinyon tree whose lower branch-tips scratched the glass lightly and rubbed against the peach brick like a ghost haunting that southeast corner. It was here when we bought the house, a stunted, scraggly pinyon pine that was never beautiful, except when the wind blew. It had a bonsai quality, but one that was created and tamed by a 5-year-old; not cultivated prettily like the pinyons in the Japanese Garden at the Botanic Gardens. The branch whose arm and fingers reached out to the house must have loved connecting with the brick and with me too, for no matter how often we trimmed that branch, its arms were back the following year, scratching and begging me to come out and play. So many nights the whoosh and whisper and sometimes downright howling pushed me into delightful sleep where I dreamed of long days seeking out and sitting in the shade of old pinyons in the Utah canyon country. My skin, which turned a deep rich brown beneath a hazy northern sun as a child, no longer tolerates even a few minutes in this dry desert air. Pinyon shade is my respite as I sit and paint the dramatic red rock spires and sculptures of the desert southwest. The pinyon just outside my bedroom window carried the memory of desert breezes into my dreams, and spoke to me in wind songs, always reminding me that the wind remains my muse.

I would never willingly cut down a live tree of any kind, but after a heavy snowstorm tore the branch down to its heartwood, it did not regenerate. I cried for days. I have mourned and cried over the death of more trees in my life than people.

V. Feather

A Speckled mallard wing feather, the color
of pond light falls to my feet.

My delight erupts like a giggle.

What is the sound of one feather falling?

Wind, wonder, and wildness.

LORA HANSEN-BEARD

Untitled

We were, the grown-ups
said, a hundred miles from
the fire. Yet the reek

of scorched, dry sage belched
from the ochre-singed, thick, gray
smoke. This sage forest,

old as the hills, had
conflagrated many a-
time before (said Gram-

pa) and was holding
in the summer's heat like a
woolen blanket. So

cozy in winter,
a fire and quilt but so not
wanted when sparse shade

hits ninety degrees,
and the air seemed thick enough
to butter your bread.

Rain came—but the stench
of burn stayed; soaked into the
skin of earth, and ours.

WALTER "PETE" HOWARD

Life

Life is this funny thing,
Like a trip we are on.
As we live inside twists and turns
Evolve in this way.
Within a path, we walk
Our roads going somewhere
Or nowhere. Either way,
But living within our thoughts,
Going somewhere or nowhere.
Walking this path of life
Or that inside.
As we do without a guide.
Jesus is a way of life
Inside my mind.

Relaxation

When sunlight hits the waves of water on the lake,
You get a soft feeling, a relaxation in your thoughts,
A poem of release from the prisons of your day,
Troubling you when you are off balance in your thoughts.
Feeling nowhere.

When My Life is a Shadow

When my life is like a stranger,
A shadow I have never met,
In the past,
Following me everywhere,
I cringe.

A shadow in a past life
I'd like to forget.
A shadow watching me,
But not forgetting me,
Still cringing.

But still a part of me,
I want to forget.
But still knows me,
In my past and future footsteps.

Because when the sun goes down,
My shadow turns into my past,
Again, following me.
Stalking me.

Where does that leave me?
Am I following myself?
A past still here.
A shadow of myself,
Still living in me.

JANE LEWIS

Before You Were Born

I knew you before you were born and lovingly carried your portrait from place to place. A minimalistic lifestyle adopted the last few years left mostly bare walls in my dwelling and regaled the rendering to the garage, gathering dust. A recent foray into cleaning out the garage brought you back into the light—immortalized in a painting.

My sister Laura discovered the painting back in the 60s. She kept it in her room throughout her high school years. When she left for college, my mother placed it in the farmhouse attic where all castoff things were sentenced to a life of neglect, and often forgotten.

On a search for wool my mother needed to make one of her beautiful, intricate braided rugs, I saved it from the clutches of the dark, damp storage space. The connection was immediate and spiritual. The painting has traveled by my side for over four decades.

There was an intimate bond. I felt I'd known the girl in the portrait my whole life. Reddish hair pulled back revealed a round face and expression-filled eyes that bore right through to my soul. In the painting, she stares straight ahead with a confident, determined look daring anyone to get in her way as she takes on the world. Her plain clothing and crossed arms reminiscent of our German ancestors and their body postures captured in old photos. Who was she, I wondered, and why did this painting cast a spell on me?

The mystery ended the day my daughter was born with her round face, reddish strawberry blond hair and other facial features uncannily like the young girl in the picture. I wanted to name her Scarlett after the strong female lead in the movie *Gone with The Wind* until I received an impassioned letter from my mother begging me not to name her that. Think of the book *The Scarlet Letter* and what the word scarlet means in the Bible. It would leave a mark on her life. Being young, I chose to heed my mother's advice and instead named her Rebecca. The name suits her, but in retrospect the name Scarlett would have better captured her strong, adventuresome spirit.

Rebecca crawled at four months and walked at ten months. She began speaking at a noticeably early age and could climb to dizzying heights, much to my dismay. Puzzles and blocks were her favorites. I quickly discovered my daughter was an analytical person. She could address a problem and fix things easily. As a teenager, she dreaded when I would ask, “Can you fix the vacuum cleaner?” “Again?” she would moan in reply. Rebecca’s nickname growing up was “Fact Woman.” Being well-read, my daughter could answer the most atypical trivia subjects thrown at her. These traits have served her well as a wife and mother. She’ll tackle any challenge and receives immense joy in teaching her two sons how to do things. Laying a tile or laminate flooring—no problem. Installing a toilet and sink and fixing plumbing issues—no problem. Electrical issues—no problem. Her artistic side is displayed in the items lovingly created for their home, including a coffee table made from pennies and a beautiful hanging lamp in their living room.

My daughter has climbed the corporate ladder. She started out in the billing department and worked her way up to becoming a project manager. Despite not having a college degree, the company waived that requirement whenever she applied for a new position. Top-notch analytical skills continued to be invaluable tools she used to dissect data and problem solve project issues. Management often gave her tricky assignments that co-workers were unable to resolve. An honest reputation, people skills and her intelligence have been the hallmarks of her success.

Rebecca was sitting on the couch the other day with her arms crossed and hair pulled back. She transformed before my eyes into the portrait of the young girl. The painting that captured my interest and heart as a teenager was a premonition of the fiercely independent, beautiful daughter that would grace my life in the future. I was meant to know you before you were born.

SHANNON MALLOY

Originally published in *We've Got Some Things to Say: Reshaping Narratives Around Sexual Violence*, December 2024

needlework

she files her nail to needle-point	threads	
raveled ribbon through the brittle ridge	begins	
to sew herself shut:		
		whip
stitch	loose lips to savor all	
	the no's never left her tongue	
		chain
stitch	tight to her torso bruised	breasts bound
	together to disfigure desire	from eyeballs
	should have been plucked	
	and pierced pious	
		lock
stitch	to seal shut and latch tight	
	in indestructible	self destruction
	the folds and cracks in her cunt and for good	
	measure	she punctures pieces
of inner thigh	runs a ribbon through to	corset
	herself	
	closed	

ANNE MCWHITE

Gimps With Guts

I remember it well when I first learned the fact
a titanium rod now holds my femur intact.
Being so used to walking about,
this accident left me in great doubt.
Now, I'm living with this new version of me
So awkward and lacking symmetry.
My doctor gave me an alloyed clone
flexibility lost to a metallic bone.
With this arrangement I then became
a gimp of sorts with a made-up frame.
This was when I began to notice others
not by choice if I had my druthers.
Legs bowed out and legs bowed in
backs with braces like a shark's fin.
One leg shorter makes an uneven gait.
This is seen as a handicap trait.
Others have no apparent defect,
it's with an oxygen tank they connect.
Some ride in chairs, others walk with canes
used to support their unsteady frames.
A mounting list meant to describe
as I officially joined this growing tribe.
Collectively we are known as gimps,
what you might see at first glimpse.
Upon further investigation I knew,
actually, this may not even be true.
Take the word gimp, it could be a ruse.
Then it depends on what you would choose:
an enthusiastic gimp with a fighting spirit,

or a limping lame person is how you would hear it.
And what about the guts of the matter,
is this in reference to getting fatter?
Does guts mean bodies eviscerate
helpless and lost to a lonely fate?
Or are guts more about determination
displaying for all our adaptation?
Wherever I look there are gimps that I see.
They are now an aberration to me.
Braces, walkers, crutches and canes;
these are merely helpful chains.
I stand in awe at the courage it takes,
no longer bound, we up the stakes.
Handicapped folks are gimps with guts,
not to be seen as a faltering klutz.

CHUCK MESSER

Filthy Grief

I stand here at your grave not knowing how to feel. The grave is freshly filled in. The headstone hasn't been put in place and there's no sod on the dirt yet.

I skipped the funeral, of course.

So, here I am, trying to figure out how to feel about your demise. I feel your absence. I also feel relief. A great weight has been lifted.

I feel your absence. I feel an empty space where you once were. A great weight has been lifted.

I feel its absence. I guess you get used to the heaviness after a while. It becomes part of you.

One thing's for sure. I'll never forget you. You'll always have a rent-free place in my mind, even if I've moved you to the basement.

Damn you for that. Damn you for gouging that hole in me to make a place for yourself.

God damn you for making me miss you, even though you made me miserable for years. I won't waste any spit or urine on your grave, but only for my sake. I won't debase myself for you or anyone.

I just wanted to say goodbye.

Forever.

At least I can now be at peace.

After I grow a protective cyst around your memory.

TIM A. MILLER

Before there was the Belmar Hard Times writing club

Before there was the Belmar Library Hard Times writing club
there was the Arvada Library Hard Times writing club

Before there was Star Wars
there was 2001: A Space Odyssey

Before Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones
there was Elvis Presley

Before there was pro football star Tom Brady
there was NFL Hall of Famer Johnny "U" Unitas

Before there was Tim A. Miller (me)
there were my parents

Before there was light
there was dark

Before the telephone
there was the telegraph

Before there was t.v.
there was the radio

Before there was the internet
there were books

Before there were cell phones
there were land lines with cords

Before there was A.C.
there was hell

Before there were movies
there was storytelling

Before there were jets
there were trains

Before there were cars
there were horse carriages

Before there was electricity
there was nothing

Before there was the microwave
there was the oven

Before there was the bathroom
there was the outhouse

Before there was a stove
there was the fireplace

Before there was plastic
there was glass

Before there was aluminum
there was metal

Before there was pickleball
there was tennis

Before there was a butterfly
there was a caterpillar

Before there was the Civil War
there was the Revolutionary War

Before there was e-mail
there was snail mail

Before there was Fairview High
there was Boulder High

Before there was DIA
there was Stapleton Airport

Before there was popcorn
There was corn on the cob

Before there was chocolate
There was the cocoa bean

Before there were CDs
there were cassettes and 8-tracks

Before there were refrigerators
there were iceboxes

Before there were highways and freeways
there were old dusty country dirt roads

Before there was gasoline
there was steam

Before there was carbon dioxide
there was oxygen

Before there was The Colorado Rockies
there was The Denver Bears

Before there was football
there was rugby

Before there was Sunday Night Football
there was Monday Night Football

Before there was shaving cream
there was soap and water

Before there was the mountain bike
there was the Schwinn 10-speed

Before there was steel
there was wood

Before there were mirrors
there was sand

Before there was digital
there was analog

Before there were computers
there were typewriters

Before there were tablets
there were notebooks

Before there was a ball point pen
there was a pencil

Before there was paper
There was a tree

Before there was computer graphics
there was free hand drawing

Before there were 20,000 color cable tv channels
there were 5 black and white channels with no remote

Before there were 8 planets in our system
there were 9 planets in our solar system

Before the beard
there was the face

Before the shag haircut
there was the crew-cut

Before there was gray hair
there was dark hair

Before there was man
there was a boy

Before there was the rifle
there was the musket

Before there was death
there was life

Before there was the chicken
there was the egg

BENJAMIN ERIC NELSON

Ritual of Lost

The Terror Of Michigan Denver...

The Terror Of Detroit Denver...

Falling To Pieces...

Looking To Undo Face...

A Finding Of Peace...

Tracked Down And Found...

Holding Terror Close To The Heart...

When Wishing For Technology...

Food Is Lacking...

A Blessing To Go Over...

Over And Over Again...

Does Not Still The Anger Of Goats...

Recoiling From The Pain...

A Sense Of Vertigo...

Falling Descending Into Hell...

Sending Prayers Out...

A Ritual Of Lost

ALEX SCHELL

A Ferry, a Chauffeur, and a Plane Ride

We hug tightly, then stand back looking at each other eye to eye,

we notice the tears in each other's brown eyes at the same time and embrace once more.

Even though I just spent four days helping you pack up and move your life across the country, I struggle to let you go now.

The hardest part was not hoisting heavy storage bins into a hot U-Haul,
or carefully wrapping a dozen heavy snake enclosures in moving blankets.

It was not helping you pack at least 20 snakes into individual linen bags,
or holding one that was too cold for half of the three-day trip on my lap.

It was not packing until midnight when you said you were ready to load at six o'clock,
or seeing you appear with two thumbnail sized geckos that hatched while you packed.

It was not striding into a hotel lobby with your two dogs, while we hoped no one would notice as we smuggled your cat in the side door—

Nevermind the two storage totes loaded with deli cups and small plastic tubs of reptiles, spiders, insects, and scorpions.

It was not driving through five states over 20 hours,
or pulling over to wait while you got a speeding ticket.

It was not unloading 22 years' worth of items into an 8x10 room,
or hoping your new roommates would love and care for you.

It was not seeing your biological dad for the first time in nearly twenty years,
or meeting your grandparents for the first time.

No, the work of a thousand-mile move was not the hardest part.

The hardest part was walking onto the ferry while you returned to your car and eventually drove away from the port.

It was asking a hustling Uber driver where to find Ahmed, the chauffeur you prearranged for us, and letting him rush us to the airport in his large gray SUV.

The hardest part was boarding the plane to go home,
and recognizing that home would become something new without the possibility of you showing up whenever you needed us—but at least once a week for family coffee and lunch.

The hardest part was leaving you behind to make a new home, even if it is what's best for you.

MICHAEL SINDLER

damn good barbecue

we didn't drink
the Kool-Aid
but we drank a lot
of mushroom tea
and ate a lot
of damn
good barbecue
and ran laughing
through the streets
day and night we
danced and played
and fucked and drank
and slept wherever
the spirit beamed
and whenever
we careened
and all too often
with whoever
was in the other
half of the dream
we could have
built a house
from stems
and seeds
we could have
lived inside
harmonies
but too much
of a good thing
will always end
by crashing
in run-down
Victorians

and a long string
of shotgun shacks
making installations
out of knickknacks
and detritus
that led to lots
of nothing
which was perfect
when you think
about it
sometimes
even
making art
that literally
flew away
it might have
been nice to take
a picture but it
doesn't matter
anyway
it was all about
the moment
we let go

MARYA SUMMERS

A Begrudging Nomad

Originally published in *Rise Up Review*, Fall 2024

I never imagined my urban life
would collapse, taking the shape
of my ancestors' lives: nomadic,
claiming space only to cede it,
more visitor than inhabitant,
paying rent to mice and squirrels
in food scraps, making conversation in the language
of ravens and doves, discovering new land
and leaning into love only to leave,
taking the memory of momentary
belonging like a snapshot souvenir.

Every dawn is an invitation
to move on, every evening a surrender
to the rhythms that call to rest.
When I lived in foster homes, other
people decided when I moved,
who I lived with, whether I liked it
or not. The only thing truly fostered: a sense
of my own intrusion and impermanence,
a knack for packing light and quick.

Today, every campsite, rest stop and driveway
is a foster home—for a day, a night, a few
hours or months; belonging has become
something I must find a way to carry with me
like healthy water and hand-washed underwear.
I trace my origins not in roots and branches,
though families of trees are the best hosts,
but in the wheel: turning and returning, never arrived,
once solid stone, made lighter by the spoke.

BARBARA WICKHAM

My Mutti, My (S)Hero

I am so thankful for memories. Recalling memories of good times spent with a loved one can help ease grief and provide comfort. I cherish the memories I shared with my beautiful Mutti during her 8-week terminal illness. It was a precious gift to my sister Susan and to me knowing we were making these final months the best for our Mutti. Every moment became even more special, more precious, more priceless. I tried to remember every minute detail. I refused to think about her finality because that would only steal from the precious memories being created.

She loved seeing all the beautiful cherry blossoms in Washington, visiting quaint shops in Middleburg, and seeing friends for coffee, cake, and conversation. These were all firsts following a year of Covid. Mutti was so happy being with her daughters, enjoying friends, and seeing crowds. These may seem like small things, but they were the big things to my Mutti.

Mutti graced me with a special gift. Over breakfast burritos and coffee at IHOP, she shared stories I never heard before. I taped her recollections for the next hour. She was a little girl named Renate Wilden during World War II, the youngest of seven kids in Zweibrueken, Germany. Her two eldest brothers served in the Deutsche Wehrmacht, Heinrich a pilot and Richard a chef. Both were POWs in Russia, yet survived the war despite severe malnutrition and torture. The Allies bombed almost her entire industrial town. Her Mutti took Renate and sisters Elsa and Trudel to Southern Germany, which was mostly farmland and not a target. Her Vater remained in Zweibrücken to work in the factory. Renate still remembered the sirens and shelters. There was no school. She gardened, learned to cook, knit and sew from her Mutti, who was very loving.

Renate loved going back to Zweibrücken. “Everyone pulled together after the war. If someone needed meat, or vegetables we just shared. We gathered bricks and everyone helped build again. It was a happy time. The war was over, my brothers came home. I played in the streets. No more sirens, no more bomb shelters.” The U.S. Army occupied Germany to help rebuild the country. As a peace offering, the Americans planted the world-renowned Rosengarten in

Zweibrueken. It was also my favorite place to walk my baby sister on Sundays.

Renate got a job at Kreuzberg Kaserne and met my Daddy Sergeant William D. Jacobsen in May 1959. She said he was very handsome, “like Frank Sinatra when he was young.” They dated secretly at first because Americans weren’t accepted just yet. William eventually met Renate’s family and was easily liked. He was gregarious and fun. They married later in 1959 and I was born in 1961.

Mutti’s first trip to the U.S. was to Camp Drum, NY, where she also became an American citizen. “This was the proudest day of my life, well after marrying Daddy, and Susan and you being born (smiled). I loved America right away. Everything was so free, big, open.” But sadly, Daddy’s side of the family wasn’t as keen to celebrate her newly-earned citizenship. “I never told you this Barbara, but Daddy’s family didn’t like us right away because I only spoke very little English and you only spoke German. They called me ‘Kraut’ and you ‘Little Kraut.’ I don’t know why they were so mean. I was a child during the war. I had nothing to do with Hitler.”

She loved being an Army wife. It reminded her of growing up in Zweibrueken. “It was an easy life living on bases. Everyone helped one another. It was like a big family. We made life-long friends in the Army.” Vietnam was a different story. Mutti and I lived in Zweibrueken for 2 years when Daddy was a CPT in Vietnam. Susan was born in 1969 after he left for the war. Mutti told me wives had to accept being alone. “That’s just the way it is during a war.” She was quiet for a moment and then told me, “He changed after Vietnam. Bad things happened to him over there. He had nightmares. Night sweats, terrors. I told him to put it all away and focus on our family.”

This was the last bit of information my Mutti shared with me as the tape was running out. It helped me understand my Daddy so much better. He struggled with PTSD just like me from my Desert Storm experiences. And in that moment, I also realized what a very strong woman I was sitting across from at IHOP. This resilient woman was a survivor, never a victim. She deliberately chose the better road, rather than the bitter road. She rose against prejudice and adversity. She helped advance her husband’s career and raised daughters to be strong leaders with conviction. She met her challenges head on, whether her husband’s Vietnam PTSD, Agent Orange illnesses, or

surviving breast cancer 25 years earlier. This remarkable woman was my Mutti, whom I am so very proud to call my forever (s)hero!

J.L. WRIGHT

Funk

Funk! What a word. Thick and absurd.
think green goo, ripe and brash like moss with a ‘stache
or unwashed gym shorts that’s given a rash
It’s sticky, it’s slick, it clings to your parts,
like armpits post-volleyball or old crotchety farts.
A tang in the air, a punch to the nose,
the kind of smell only your closest friend knows.

Funk is messy, yucky, yet oddly hearty
a stank that crashes your personal party.
You try to escape, but it rides in your sock,
a stubborn squatter who won’t unblock.
A wipe with a cloth? Nope, big mistake—
it just drags the funk down your elbow’s lake.
Now you’re marinated, top to shoe
Congratulations, you’re funk stew.

So what now? A cleanse? Full immersion in
a spring-fed lake, the coldest version you can take
Let the water bite, let it pull you through,
til it chills not just your skin but your insides too.
Float in the sun, prune like a pear,
jiggle your bits without a care.
Let the funk unspool in waves of blue—
that’s exactly what a funky you should do.

Put on your summer gear, let it all shake,
those castle-builders? Let ‘em fake their lake.
You’ve got real waves and a stank-earned grin—
funk in your bones, and the sea on your skin.

Queer Creatives

CODEX O'HEALEY MELCHER

I Misheard the Prompt: A Hike to a Vulpine Lake

My ears are clogged with the sounds of stomping feet, snapping twigs, and barking foxes in the distance. They dolphin in and out of each other like a movie where you turn the volume up because you're straining to hear what that elderly Welshman is saying and then suddenly walloped by an off-screen explosion-transition to a battlefield baking in blood and bass.

The gentle whispers of the foxes increase their conversation with our feet as we approach—a mass of orange and white before us. It undulates in recognition—something new has arrived, its wild waves imply.

Intermingling with the canid cacophony are my own thoughts: what do I smell like to a lake of foxes, do they even know what humans are, what does our arrival insinuate to them, and how do the ones in the darkest depths breathe?

PLUTO Q ROAN

Tarot for Tarot, Trans for Trans

The last thing Lucas wants is an adventure. The very last thing Lucas wants is an adventure of self-discovery. The Tarot reading had shown him that he has a problem with intimacy. No shit. And a problem connecting with family. Old news. And an aversion to his own identity. Fuck that. You'd think in a world of magical realism where witches and werewolves were hunted for poking their heads beyond the veil that there were bigger things to deal with than intimacy, family, and identity. He can be intimate. He is intimate. With anyone looking for a fun night of physical, sensual, sexual exploration, he is intimate as hell. And it isn't his fault that most of his family is warmongering transphobic lycanthrope assholes.

But it *is* his fault, somehow, deep down, that he can't form a romantic relationship, even a quick fuck, with another transman. That's what this whole thing is about. It isn't that he hates himself. Being trans is a high point for him. A howling *fuck you* to the whole bigoted pack. You'd think in a world of magical realism where fae and vampires dance across the veil that there would be less concern with maintaining human gender norms.

Lucas glares at the picture on his phone showing the card spread. The witch had said that The Miser card represents him: stubborn, inflexible. She had pointed to The Mascareri card, saying it represents the person he needs to find who is hiding their true self and projecting a false confidence. He needs to help them to help himself. Whatever the fuck that means. It all sounds like a load of centaur-shit to him. He hates riddles.

Three days of following magical breadcrumbs makes Lucas irrationally angry beyond belief. But he is finally standing waist deep in a pool in a cave in a mountain across from another transman who looks thoroughly bemused. His name is Micah. He is taller than Lucas, most people are, and had built up his chest after surgery so it is more than pleasing to look at. What hormone replacement therapy has robbed from his head has gifted him a full ginger beard. Lucas envies the latter. He has thick black hair but can't grow anything on his face to save his life. The other transman is a werecoyote,

which fits The Mascareri card but not his bearish physique. Tattoos of dancing curves decorate his fair freckled flesh just as scars of battle cover Luc's taut tawny tinted skin. They are both naked from the waist up, the cold cave water dragging at their pants and shoes. Having about five-percent body fat means his skin is covered in goosebumps and Micah's plushier frame radiates an intoxicating heat.

"Now what?" Lucas asks, squinting at him in the eerie blue light of bioluminescent glowworms that cover the ceiling and the walls.

"That's up to you. This is your journey."

"The witch said we are *both* responsible for this journey of self-discovery."

"That you're supposed to be intimate with another trans guy?" Micah wiggles his brows.

"Consent, dude. Consent is more important than the fucking cosmos."

"Are you saying you don't want me?"

Luc's complexion isn't so dark as to hide his blush. Micah's musk is strong, clean, heavy in his nostrils. "No. You're hot. But it's more complicated than that."

"How so?"

Lucas groans, "I don't know. Like, to have a relationship with another transguy means I have to confront myself as a transguy? Am I man enough, am I anti-patriarch enough, am I queer enough? I love sex. Vanilla, kinky, it's all great. But for some reason with other transdudes I feel competition? Comparison? Like I'm only special when I'm with other genders."

"I get that," Micah offers. "I *prefer* relationships with other transmasculine folks. I love the differences, similarities, camaraderie and not having to explain as much, if anything, about gender. It's not comparison in a negative way. It's solidarity. It's empowerment. It's celebration."

Lucas feels his stubbornness and inflexibility begin to soften. But still present, he deflects, "You said you got a reading, too? Any idea why we have to stand in this damn water?"

"It's a saltwater cave. Something about the healing properties of that. But no sense in freezing. May I?" Micah opens his arms.

Lucas nods, too cold to care about the complexities of self-discovery at the moment and cursing his werewolf physiology for not keeping him warm. He becomes enveloped in luxurious body heat and sandalwood scent, so much so he rests his head against Micah's fuzzy chest.

"You're a good hugger," Lucas confesses and feels the quiet laughter reverberating through the other transman's chest.

"You, too," Micah says. "So, the cards I got were The Forgotten for my own missed opportunities and fear of failure, and The Fate for accepting help and guidance. From you, I assume. The Forgotten card also has to do with my... secret."

Lucas twists his head to look up. "Your secret?"

Micah takes a deep, shuddering breath. Going on a magical quest doesn't suddenly tear down all your carefully constructed armor of years upon years, layers upon layers.

Feeling his courage fail, Lucas wraps his arms tighter around him and soothes, "You don't need to tell me. We can just go our separate ways."

"Is that what you want?"

Lucas sighs. "No. No, I need to do this. I want to do this. Whatever this is. Already I don't feel as awkward? threatened? by being skin to skin with another transdude."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Micah teases. "So, my secret..."

Drips echo far off in the caverns.

"Take your time. It's not like we're standing half submerged in cold water."

Micah chuckles. When the words finally come it's like a free fall. "I'm a virgin. That term is highly problematic. What I mean is that I've never had sex with anyone else. Oh, lots of self-loving, I own every toy imaginable, but I've never connected intimately, physically... with another person. Sure, I've had cis-guys make me feel unsafe in my own skin, for real who hasn't? But it's really about being vulnerable, raw, messy. Sex is complicated. Every time I've tried my brain locks up, my body freezes, I can't speak. And so far, no one's been patient enough, open enough, communicative enough. So, I stopped even trying and instead put on a big, confident show. Cuddling and making out is one thing, but beyond that I'm... scared."

Lucas listens, guessing Micah's age to be around his own, early thirties. He briefly tightens his embrace before pulling back, glancing up. He empathizes. "I feel that. Not in exactly the same way, but I think with other transguys, I feel too vulnerable, too raw. I'm scared, too."

Micah's smile is wholesome, his eyes leaking.

Reaching up to wipe a palm gently over Micah's cheek, Luc says, "Maybe we try something together, then? Take it slow. Your virginity is nothing to be ashamed of. My internalized transphobia is nothing to be ashamed of. We both want to heal, yeah? We're both attracted to each other, at least on a physical level, having met, what, thirty minutes ago? You can say no, though. I won't take offense."

"You think I'm attractive?"

Seeing Micah's teasing grin, Lucas calls his bluff. He lifts up on tiptoes and kisses him. In an instant, he is lifted off his feet as water sloshes when Micah picks him up to bring their lips more level and deepen the kiss. Fears subside as Lucas tastes the other transman, shares saliva and this intimate moment in a glowing cavern.

They break apart, Micah lowering him back down, both breathing heavier than before. Lucas loves touch, body contact, lip contact, indiscriminately, but even more so when sharing something special with someone else. He leans up to kiss him again.

Micah pauses him, a finger on his lips. "Let's not do this in dirty, cold cave water."

It's Luc's turn to laugh. He admits, "Sex underwater is not as romantic or sexy as the movies and pornos make it out to be. And I'm hungry. Let's get the fuck out of this cave and back to the real world. We can grab take-out and head over to the mansion I'm watching while this vampire is out of town."

"Love this plan."

Lucas takes Micah's hand and feels him squeeze.

Together they exit the saltwater, gather their items from the shore, and journey away from their fears.

ROBERTO SANTOS

Nang & Tang/Håfa

They always rolled up to his tin house, into the red dirt shaded by the corrugated tin roof, in his dad's Isuzu pick-up truck.

"Håfa?!" Tang would yell out. Sinåhi had always been taught that "håfa" meant "what," as in the question. But Tang would yell it out excitedly to his youngest son, Sinåhi's father, with a huge smile on his face, his eyes singing, as if they hadn't seen each other in years. But it had only been a day.

His English brain supposed it was their funny little game. Tang was supposed to be threatening, "What do you want?!" and Sinåhi's dad would respond with "Tåya!" Nothing! And they'd shake hands and hug as Sinåhi and his brother hopped down from the truck.

Nang would be at her door after having heard her son was in the driveway, grinning through thick, thick spectacles through which her irises looked almost grey. She would disappear into the house behind her and reappear momentarily.

"Malagu ha ke'ki?" Yay, candy time! But their excitement was always tempered by the possibility that "candy" from their conservative Catholic grandmother—whose introduction to the West had been the world war she had survived—might more often than not be sweetened azuki bean curd, mmmmm, or a single stick of Doublemint chewing gum.

Nang was the top of her class during the time when the Japanese were colonizing Saipan and the other Mariana islands, using the islands' resources to process sugar cane and coconut into cubes, copra, and sake, which was illegal for the non-Japanese Chamorro and Refaluwasch people to drink at the time. Being a dedicated student at this time, pre-WWII, meant you were advanced beyond the third grade and sent to more comprehensive institutions in Japan, where Sinåhi's grandmother learned to be a nurse.

She loved Japanese culture, the language, and visiting with Japanese people who often came to the Marianas to pay homage to their own relatives who had lived there during the Japanese

administration, or to their own fathers or grandfathers who had fought and died in the lagoons and jungles.

She spoke Japanese and Chamorro. Some Spanish, as they were taught to pray to the Catholic mother of God and her son. No English.

Today, the ke'ki '(Japanese for "cake", Chamorro for "candy") is azuki bean popsicle. It is cold and sweet, even if it was weird eating beans as a dessert. The boys knew better than to refuse a treat from their well-intentioned grandmother who was educated by Spanish nuns, Japanese administrators, and war, who attended mass morning, noon and night. She would sometimes invite them into their home, where they would kneel on the plywood floor elevated above the red dirt and pray with her in Chamorro. Or sometimes she would have an Elvis movie on. She adored Elvis.

Sināhi adored her combs, fans, and veils. Fine-toothed combs of bone, wood, and mother-of-pearl, inlaid in shapes of flowers and arabesques that she would prop against the bun in her hair after combing coconut oil through it. The folding fans she would receive from Japanese visitors, hand-crafted from sandalwood into thin, delicate panels, each carved with elaborate designs, the smell so mysterious and intoxicating to him; he would press them to his nose every rare chance he had. He didn't even understand how the wood was fragranced, that there was a tree that grew a wooden core that manufactured such a magical scent. It was as if he was transformed into a bug. He is suddenly the exact species of insect this tree needed to communicate with in order to pollinate and propagate. And the intricate black lace veils she would cover her head with for mass, her brightly-colored plastic gem earrings would show through in shades of orange, emerald or amethyst.

Every morning, every noon, every evening, Nang would slowly, step-by-step, over the crushed coral and clay road, around puddles when it had been raining, make her way to the little village church, dedicated to San Roque. The saint was imprisoned, presumably for being Catholic, fed by a dog who brought him bread every day. And this was a complicated matter for Sināhi when he was a little boy. The only dogs he knew were the skinny, starving dogs in the swordgrass, the skinny, starving dogs who barked at and bit little boys walking too close to their masters' chickens, and his father's dogs, who

were not skinny and starving, but were work dogs, so they couldn't be bothered to feel sorry for prisoners. On the contrary, these work dogs were trained to put men in prison. Maybe they could smell the Catholicism or the crime. In any case, being brought food that isn't spoiled and dirty by a dog seemed enough like an act of God.

María and José. The saint and the carpenter. Nang and Tang. But as much of a saint as Nang was, Tang was as much Tao Tao Tãno. The earth. He cultivated it, he commanded its beasts and he built them and all his family homes to shelter them from the rain, wind and coconuts. He raised his sons to do the same, and to raise roosters to cockfight and to celebrate with beer and tuba, wine from the coconut flower nectar. "Hãfaaaaa?" he would yell loudly to greet his sons. And his sons learned to speak proudly and loudly back.

He was raising Sinãhi and his brother as tao tao tãno. Before long, he started to scold them for playing with the goat kids and wearing their girl-cousins' skirts that they loved wearing when jumping up and down on the old spring mattress behind the house, the skirts flapping up and down like squid tentacles.

One night, they were rudely awakened by Sinãhi's father to "get up, let's go." That was it. No explanation, no "Dress warm; are you hungry? We're bringing snacks." It was all an incomprehensible waking dream for little 7 year old Sinãhi, who could barely stay awake, and suddenly he was in his dad's pickup, and then suddenly on the cold sand of the beach in Tanãpag.

Then he realized Tang was taking them and all the uncles and his father fishing.

"*Why* so early," he whined, knowing better. The gigantic, sea-smelling net was stretched between the men on the beach before they slowly and quietly spread it into the shallow water, just deeper than the shore, everyone dipped in the soft blue light of the moon. Sinãhi's older brother was far too excited to help the adults, but poor little Sinãhi was still overwhelmed with drowsiness.

He and his little brother weren't allowed in the water, anyway. "Stay here," might have been the very next thing he'd heard after "get up" earlier that morning.

The two fell asleep on the sand, because apparently you have to wait a long time before any fish float into your net. And Sināhi, in spite of the freezing sand and morning air, must have completely fallen asleep because being woken up again was torturous.

Their job was to sort the fish from the net into the big white bucket or back into the ocean, and this meant picking up every single fish, crab and eel. Every. Single. Slippery. Scaly. Stinky. Slimy. Shaking. Fish.

Tang and his father refused to take Sināhi fishing after that.

Writing In Color

MIGUEL DEJESUS

Bread and Butter

The floor of my mother's living room bowed under the weight of our entire family, moments after dinner. The oven door gave off a lingering warmth, a threatening gesture from the perspective of the frozen pie lying on the adjacent counter. Remains of each dish sat on the dining table; an imaginary smoke rose from the impact zone, a result of my family's hunger. A hunger that could only be satisfied by an annual feast coinciding with a government-sponsored holiday such as Thanksgiving. Halloween had recently passed, but that was more like an appetizer. The candy we taxed from the kids' trick-or-treat hauls only served to whet our appetite while we binge-watched scary movies. On Thanksgiving, we gathered around to focus on one thing: eating.

This year, we didn't have Thanksgiving on the actual holiday. Our American work schedules rarely allow more than half of us to celebrate a national holiday during the workweek. So the Saturday after Thanksgiving, we were all able to make it work at some time. We served ourselves at the dining table and sat in the living room. My TV tray strained like Atlas to support the heaping pile of gravy, potatoes, turkey, and stuffing. By the time I saw the bottom of my plate, I was so full I couldn't hear another word. My girlfriend pushed the last few bits on her plate toward me in defeat. My brother was heading back for another serving while his two youngest kids poked their veggies around. My teenage nephew scrolled on his phone contentedly behind two clean paper plates that I swore had food on them at some point. My mom chuckled at the creepy claymation Christmas movie while twirling a final bite of turkey on her fork. There was a faint outline of where my sister used to be before she disappeared for a catnap.

My grandpa reclined into his La-Z-Boy, initiating a household countdown to his naptime and household quiet time. Surveying the scene, my mom asked that my nephew, AJ, start cleaning up. AJ set down the empty cup he cradled while scrolling on his phone, and took his empty paper plates to the trash, his eyes not losing a moment with the screen. I was astonished at the immediate response. My mom explained that he'd offered to do chores in exchange for a video game she'd bought. One of the few limitations to the boundless internet access that kids have nowadays is that they don't have their own credit cards. I'm sure there is a bank ready to sponsor legislation to change that. We all turned in our plates, cups, turkey bones, forks, and napkins like resignation papers, sad we couldn't pack in any more. Just as the last plate was stuffed into the garbage, AJ bounded up the stairs with wired earbuds

running under his shirt, disappearing into his sports pants pocket. With one earbud in his ear, AJ locked in focus.

I snagged a beer from the fridge and moseyed around the kitchen while AJ did his work. Then my brother came into the kitchen with his last-minute contribution to the garbage. AJ reached to pick up the trash, but his dad waved him off.

“I got it, son,” he said, yanking the bag out of the bin.

“It’s alright, I can take it out,” AJ said.

“You don’t budge in on another man’s job,” his dad said, cinching a tight knot on the bag. He held the bag at arm’s length away as he rushed out of the kitchen. My nephew shrugged and moved on to another task. I took a sip of my beer and thought about how old my nephew had grown. Sixteen is an interesting time to live through, so I figured I’d ask him some questions about it.

After the typical starter questions about how school and sports are going, I started down a more personal line of questioning. Girlfriends, fights at school, illicit materials, you know, the standard conversation points for an uncle. He blushed, he laughed, and he deflected some more sensitive topics. He may or may not have snuck a sip of beer just before Grandma walked into the kitchen like the town sheriff busting up the party.

“What’s this I hear about you having a girlfriend?” she asked.

AJ went to washing the dishes as if he’d never lost focus, though I could see he hid a smirk.

“He’s sixteen, Mom,” I pleaded. “Besides, we were talking about him getting to know girls, not that he actually has a girlfriend.” I glanced at AJ, who eagerly nodded in approval, forearm deep in suds.

“What do you know about women?” Mom asked me, with a hand on her hip.

“Uh-oh,” said my brother. He slipped between her words into the kitchen, grabbed a beer, and posted against the fridge.

“I really don’t know much,” I said, shrugging. “What would you tell AJ about having a girlfriend?”

“Well,” she paused to consider what she was going to say, and then, “never eat a bite of her spaghetti unless you watch her cook it.”

AJ’s head cocked to the side like a confused puppy. My brother’s face failed to contain surprise. I instinctively looked at my mom as if she’d diverted from a preconceived plan.

“What do you mean?” AJ asked.

“There’s a myth or something,” I butted in before my mom could explain. “I don’t know how to describe it, but it’s a good rule of thumb, nonetheless.”

AJ shrugged.

“It’s like a superstition, right?” asked my brother.

“No,” said Mom, taking the frozen pie out of the box. “A superstition is like putting salt in your shoes to grow taller.”

The three of us shared a puzzled look as she put the pie in the oven and shut the door.

“A superstition is like,” I mused.

“Like walking under a ladder?” AJ asked.

“Yeah, but lemme think of a good one,” I said.

My girlfriend walked into the kitchen in search of a glass of water, but aborted the mission when she saw how we had already crammed the small kitchen.

AJ finished drying off the last few dishes. My mom secretly flashed my girlfriend a bottle of wine like she was the only kid with a vape in the class. With their thirst awoken, they enlisted AJ to grab the wine glasses from the very top shelf of the cabinet. The poor kid had barely dried his hands before a step stool was in his hands. He teetered with one foot on the stool, a knee on the rounded edge of the counter, and his middle finger inching a wine glass forward by the base. I finally returned from my thoughts.

“You ever heard of ‘bread and butter’?” I asked.

“What?” AJ grunted back as he reached to retrieve a second glass.

“Bread and butter, like the splitting the poles thing?” my brother asked.

“Yes, exactly,” I said, pointing to my brother like he had just been called down on *The Price is Right*.

“What is bread and butter?” asked my girlfriend.

I felt betrayed that she didn’t know.

My brother chuckled and took a sip from his beer. As AJ stepped down with the second wine glass, my sister walked into the kitchen. No doubt she was stirred to consciousness by the ribbon of cooking pie and noisy chatter that streamed from the kitchen. My mom turned AJ around to retrieve another wine glass for his aunt.

“Bread and butter,” I lectured to my nephew, “is what you say when you’re walking down the street with someone and you split a pole.”

“Why? What happens?” asked my girlfriend.

"I don't know," I said, looking to my brother.

"I think one of you dies, or something like that," he said smoothly.

"Damn," AJ said, returning the step stool to the closet.

"What are you guys talking about?" my sister asked, holding her glass steady while Mom poured her wine.

"Superstitions," my girlfriend said.

"Like, if someone sweeps your feet, you'll never get married," said my mom.

"Or, if a girl dreams of fish, then she's pregnant," my girlfriend said. "Or if you set your purse on the ground, you'll lose all your money."

"And don't buy your man shoes, or else he'll walk out on you," my sister added.

The ladies raised their glasses in salute. My brother, AJ, and I shared the kind of glance people share when we sense danger and need to check in.

"I think another one could be never turning on the overhead light in the car while it's moving," I uttered.

"That was just something we told you kids," my mom said as she went to get the pie out of the oven. The warm scent of pie rushed through the kitchen. The oven door clanged shut.

"Oh, another one," my brother said, pointing to AJ, "never flash your lights at a car whose headlights are off, or else they'll come and kill you."

"I thought that was just in Montbello," I said. My grandpa walked into the kitchen, but stopped at the entryway.

"What's going on in here?" he asked, suggesting interest in the conversation, but his eyes indicated more interest in the fresh pie on the counter.

"Superstitions, pop," my sister said.

My grandpa nudged his way over to the counter.

"It's not ready yet," my mom snapped.

Grandpa turned around like nothing had happened.

"Do you know any superstitions, Papa?" AJ asked.

"Uh, yeah," he said. He nudged over to the fridge after spotting the beers that my brother and I had. "If you're a bad kid, La Llorona will come and get you."

"La Llorona?" my girlfriend asked.

"You don't have that in Puerto Rico?" my grandpa asked. "This lady drowned her kids 'cause they were bad, and she goes and gets other bad little kids."

“Yeah, even old kids who try to eat the pie before it’s done cooling,” said my mom, going to cut the pie.

AJ brought the stack of paper plates she had asked him for. By now, his younger siblings were drawn to the kitchen from their games and cartoons. We all lined up behind AJ like organized mosquitoes waiting to touch the zapper. Mom cut the biggest slice for her first grandbaby and served health-conscious portions to the rest of us.

“So, it sounds like all these superstitions you guys said are just pieces of advice to not get screwed over,” AJ said.

The room chuckled behind mouthfuls of pie.

“Like, I don’t know what you meant about the spaghetti thing, grandma,” he continued, “but I figure somebody got screwed over by their girlfriend’s spaghetti one time.”

My sister looked at my mom with the same bewilderment I had when hearing the topic of spaghetti. Grandpa and the kids ate their pie without a care. The rest of us bobbed our heads, impressed with the reasoning from the young man. We knew it to be true that these superstitions were more than just a myth or a silly way to pass time, but if we acknowledged it, the dress of innocence draped over life would be stripped away. You’re supposed to say ‘bread and butter’ when you split the pole with someone you care about, because you don’t have the luxury of walking with carefree awareness.

“So, what superstitions would you tell your kids, if you wanted to give them advice?” I asked, gesturing with my fork like a YouTube philosopher. Everybody looked at me like I was the only one who didn’t know I farted. “For example,” I said, “you could say: ‘never eat food that has passed through a window or else you die in 11 years.’”

They stared blankly, chewing pie. Then, my girlfriend said, “Don’t shop at Target while hungry or lonely, or you’ll get bad luck and lots of debt.”

“Yes!” I turned to the rest of the family, urging them to pitch in.

“Always choose ‘White’ on your job application, and let them figure it out later,” my brother said. His kids giggled.

“Uh, yeah, okay,” I said.

“You have to pet every dog you encounter or your family is cursed for four generations,” AJ said. We all chuckled.

Mom said, “Somebody in our family must’ve broken that one!”

“Don’t talk to cops or you’ll get a lifetime of bad luck,” my grandpa added before eating the last of his pie. Nobody laughed.

After eating pie and a little more chit-chat, my grandpa called it a night and retired to his room. We played UNO and Just Dance until the kids went downstairs and my sister vanished into thin air. My mom, brother, and AJ wished us well as my girlfriend and I hauled our leftovers to the car. On the ride home, I thought about the superstitions that might be useful to my future children.

KRISTINA LIZARDY-HAJBI

in third person | body

each day i sit and write
she beckons to me, *stay*
my fingers pause over the *j* and *r* keys
we both smile at the hummingbird
windchime just beyond the cracked window
but that means different things to us

it's nearly harvest time, ideas flow
her brows marked by vibrations
like burdened zinnias
she is coffered for the moment
bleeding from sores blessed as tribute
coveted by another perhaps
though i am all she has left

sometimes i am courting curtains
hues of purple, polyesters encasing flesh
darkening over time, softening over lines
how she survives the loneliness
in between flirtatious caresses
that's the miracle between her pleats

RUDY MICHAEL MELENA

Cielo

Chinga mi mamá. I don't belong here. Not so much the dying; that doesn't matter, my peace made on Terra Firma before my demise. It's Heaven that rankles me. In my last moments, I had looked forward to the beginning of the peaceful rotting in the ground. Me turning into comida for worms, pushing up dandelions. During my life, I didn't tolerate anyone preaching to me and was a content atheist without guilt.

A gate doesn't exist. No pearls. Not so white. I float along a path; words are inscribed on the floor. It's a long list: Ojo por ojo, Auge um auge, Occhio per occhio. Near the end, an archway delineating an entrance, the English commandment is last, barely discernable: Eye for an eye. I hover before a threshold.

"This way, Terrance Smith." A woman dressed in white grips my wrist and pulls me forward, alluring. She sparkles. Stubborn me, I try to resist, but this levitating shit doesn't allow me traction.

"I'm Trujillo, ma'am, Rafael Trujillo. Can't you even get that right in... heaven?"

Blond hair fluttering waves of barley, blue eyes the clear waters of the Caribbean. She looks down at a glowing clipboard and makes a correction. "This ain't heaven, True-gee-low." She laughs, and her maw opens to a black hole that sucks in light. That sends needles of fear through my dead nerves.

I'm led into an arena, a gigantic courtroom. A gallery of spectators takes up most of the space, row after row of seated people dressed in white. I feel them waiting impatiently for me. In the distance, to the right, the two-tiered jurors' box is already filled. Selection must have happened while I was dying, experiencing that white-light shit.

The hubbub is deafening. I'm led down this gauntlet by the female who becomes darker with each step. My hand is purple in her grasp.

Seated to my left, with angry eyes and clenched fists assaulting me, I recognize people I have wronged in my life. To my right, fawning kisses and heart-shaped hands are flung my way from acquaintances who adored me.

As I reach the front of the gallery, I count the jurors, thirteen in all. Black blindfolds cover their eyes. My breathing becomes a pant.

I'm shittin' bricks. My belief system doing flips. Seated at a table to the right is El Diablo, my prosecutor. He's suave in lawyery suit, sharp horns peeking through his haircut.

The woman has turned charcoal with indecipherable features. She leads me to a table to the left with a single seat and releases me. She disappears in a burst of pixels.

The judge is Jerry Garcia with a Fender Telecaster strapped across his shoulder; the ten commandments attached to the wall behind him in perfect symmetry. I'm thinking, *Where the fuck is God?*

The procedurals of the trial begin. Blah, blah, blah. Jerry Garcia breaks into "Friend of the Devil."

And I set out running but I take my time

A friend of the devil is a friend of mine.

El Diablo begins his opening statement. "Fallen angels and Beelzebubs," he bellows, the odor of sulfur spewing from his trap, "my intent is to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that"—he turns and refers to his notes—"Rafael True-gee-low belongs in the deepest catacombs of my inferno. I will convince you that he broke every commandment without remorse."

I stand and scream, "Objection," and the black demon woman materializes, sticks a midnight finger between my lips, and fills my mouth with hot tar. It doesn't hurt, but I feel it harden inside, my speech stifled. A smile, ear-to-ear, spreads across El Diablo's countenance.

"I will supply sufficient evidence that, before his descent, an addendum will be added to his sentence that requires his limbs be torn from his corpse to pay for his transgressions. An eye for an eye." El Diablo turns and winks at me. "We'll roll him to hell." El Diablo laughs open-mouthed. Never has a more sinister sound thundered forth.

A raucous tsunami of cheers erupts from the hateful gallery behind me. Boos and jeers ascend in a cacophony from my allies.

I want to yell, "What about my defense?" but I am mute.

This calamity is pressing me with a dread deeper than I ever felt while alive. Swirls of emotions kill me anew. Heaven and Hell, what the fuck? From my melting head, tears do not come. My heart will burst, but it doesn't matter. I am dead.

Una pelea breaks out across the aisles, and my friends and enemies clash with fists and knives and guns and baseball bats. A bloodbath ensues. Milk white apparel reddens. Blood flows in rivulets. The odor is rust and sin. El Diablo laughs with glee.

Jerry Garcia's guitar becomes a shotgun, and he fires it into the crowd. "Out. Out," he sings.

It takes days, maybe weeks, to clear the vast area. I feel no hunger nor thirst. I persevere, imagining how my expired appendages will be separated from my body. The demon female scoops up the hardened blood with a broad shovel. If I were alive, I would estimate a season passes before the gallery is cleansed. During that time, not a judicial nor private word is spoken to me.

Jerry Garcia orders, "Let the sentencing begin."

I want to ask, "What are my transgressions?" but the brick of tar fills my mouth. The demon female pulls me to the center of the staging area between Garcia and El Diablo. I'm shackled.

Jerry Garcia decrees, "Release Cerberus." El Diablo claps his crimson hands in jubilation.

A three-headed canine monster sprints toward me with growls that rattle my chest, its long incisors dripping thick, acid saliva. It is difficult to focus on the multiple jaws snapping at my arms and legs. I kick out with every iota of energy in my deceased body. I pummel the snapping jaws.

And, then, with a flutter of an eyelash, the slightest alteration in the fabric of this purgatory or whatever the fuck it is. I continue to kick, but the gnarling and gnashing recede. The threat remains and I lash out at this netherworld that gradually fades.

Ay yi yi, I am in my bed exhausted. Layers of sedimento de sueño wash away from my reality. Alone again in every sense of the word, all my loved ones departed. I gathered myself onto my walker. En el baño, en el espejo, I exalt that I am still Mexican. My throat burns, and my wrist is bruised and chafed.

I ponder. Everyone is dead. Transgressions beyond redemption. No one to hear apologies. The potency of secrets dissolved with time. I blow out a breath of resignation and go back to bed.

Dedicated to Gloria J. Browne-Marshall

KANYE WALDON

POEMS TO KNOW ABOUT ME

The Gun Called Beautiful

Somethin about the craftsmanship
And the wooden handle
Lining, elegant and polished
I imagine a name etched in cursive
All along its jaw

I guess the kind that cops have
'Cept nicer
Somethin a rich man
Or a hunter
Ought to own

Considering the word used
The bullets might as well've been gold
I've never thought of it in that way
That a weapon could be lovely
That a gun could be beautiful.

For Chop Cheese Bodega In Fresno

I'm lookin up Willie Perdomo and my mom calls
 Facetime for usual, she's obsessed with it and i don't know why
 She in Spanish, and goin about some bodega place next town over
 Yeah, Fresno's a city, but it all feels like my country
 Anywho, she bein real cryptic and i'm thinkin she kidnapped
 By who? I dunno. Some cartel or somethin or not
 But back to the narrative,

Ella 'ta hablando de nachos y papas y otras cosas
 And i'm over here wonderin' if she okay
 She just mad excited, so everything's sporadic or whatever

Apparently, she bought a whole buncha stuff, on purpose
 And she's bringin it back for the house
 I say I'll go for the papas, but I'm on my end with my bowl of chicken pot soup
 So, I think I'll eat it for later when she gets back

.....
 So she get back with the stuff and im nonchalant
 Look over from the island and go ooh
 She tell me again all the stuff she got

She didn't leave the philly steak fuh me
 She left that fuh Nana, and we agreed
 I bit into mine, its ground beef, its peppers
 Its jalapenos, and wild cheese

Deliciously, this speaks to me
 This is lava, and I'm laughin at it
 Makin it a fool

Sidekicked with fries,
 Seasoned with seasons and seasons and seasons
 They skinny and lanky fries
 And they aight

I agree with this
 Kudos to Mom
 This mess is good.

When I See Nombre, I See Mine

Or not mine, per say
All I know is that I can't sit quiet when someone mispronounces a name that isn't English
Martinez, Acevedo, DuBois, De Valois
I can only call things by what they are
I won't let them be twisted out my mouth
I think because I don't think I have one
A name that cradles me like family ought to
All I have is borrowed or born on a whim
I don't own anything, really
Not yet anyway
Spanish is Spanish in my mouth and American doesn't change it
French is the same
I'm particular and exact, or picky, or whatever the word for unnecessary
I think I might be compensating
Sometimes, I try to give myself the benefit of the doubt
That I'm not as bastard, as creole'd as I think
Or'd like to be
But God is a witness and He can give me my name
I'm looking for home in words as special as these
I want them unadulterated
I want them to be true.

JACK WOLFLINK

The Burned-House Horizon

This year, a Lighthouse class gave me the privilege of discussing Toni Morrison's only short story, *Recitatif*. I was prompted by the use of worldbuilding as a lens for representing any marginalized identity, not just expositing the sci-fi and fantasy realms in which the term originated. For although *Recitatif*'s world is our own—a rural Southern town that possesses an orphanage, a diner, and a music hall where one character goes to see Jimi Hendrix—Morrison constructs this world in the only way that could possibly underpin the story's central paradox. She gives us two main characters, one Black and one white, as they grow up amid the struggle for desegregation. Morrison serves generous details about their personalities and lives, but never specifies which one is which race. In the story's world, racial positioning structures every scene, but it is impossible for the reader to tell where these characters stand.

Recitatif, in a way, inverts the ironies of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Published in 1912, Johnson did not reveal his authorship until 1927 for fear of backlash. The novel's world is bleak, yet vivacious. Its biracial narrator travels first across the Eastern Seaboard and then to Europe, detailing the cultures of each city, while constantly maneuvering around the artificial limits of his privilege. Finally, the narrator returns to America after years abroad only to witness a brutal lynching. Terrified, he exits Black society and decides to pass as white. From there, it is the reader who possesses knowledge of the narrator's identity, and the other characters who are ignorant. Unable to speak of his identity to his children, and to his new friends and colleagues, his dream of becoming a scholar of Black musical culture fades.

Yet, in the interstices of Jim Crow America, and in the complexity and musical innovation that produced ragtime, *Autobiography* finds and highlights strong, joyful communities, thriving without regard for the oppressive boot which bears down on them. The narrator lives among Afro-Cuban cigar rollers in Florida, university students in Atlanta, craps shooters in New York City, and high society in Washington, DC. Across classes, regions, and cultures, he sees Black society and culture in the process

of full bloom (albeit restricted to where it was shaded from the burning gaze of racism). He drinks, gambles, dances, and everywhere engages in erudite debates about the future of Black America after the end of slavery. This travelogue serves as Johnson's perspective on "the race question," as he calls it: nothing less than the reckoning with this nation's original sin. Though Johnson conceptualizes the race question in terms of "civilizational advancement," long out of fashion more than a century after *Autobiography*'s publication, I couldn't help but find those terms resonant after watching the state of our country this past year.

Both *Recitatif* and *Autobiography* end on notes of cautious hope. In *Recitatif*, the protagonists—divided by their ambiguous, yet contrasting races over the question of school integration bussing—come back together by reconsidering their painful childhood memories. Though the readers will never know which of them, in the end, was white and which Black, the protagonists at last recognize the wicked streak lurking in each others' hearts. That is, they recognize their shared flaws, the flaws intrinsic to being human. And in *Autobiography*, the narrator does not mourn for a Black future that will wither without his efforts—he mourns that, as the oncoming Harlem Renaissance hits its stride, he will only be able to watch it from afar. And the narrator, perhaps, was right. After all, through his work with the NAACP, and authorship of *Autobiography*, he built a house which made it possible for writers like Toni Morrison to bring their talents to world literature.

But now, it seems, that house is burning. The President's lackeys have begun purging the armed forces of nonwhite soldiers both living and dead, defunding cancer research, gutting disaster response, and salting the country with concentration camps. Fissures appear in the economy as Trump prevaricates over import taxes and interest rates. Our government launches surprise attacks against nations we're not at war with and government officers free murderers from prison to make room for harmless grandmothers and hardworking day laborers. Today's flames lick hungrily at the nation's foundations, and we feel it teetering, on the verge of crashing into ash. In the thickening smoke, we see the specters of failed civilizations—for some, these are the whirling infernos of Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire*; for others they are the normalized brutality of Octavia Butler's *Earthseed*.

To me, the smoke is a shadow cast by the world's very first civilizational collapse—one which so far predates cultural memory that its *dramatis personae* are known only by the clinical designations applied by modern archeologists, five thousand years after their demise: the Cucuteni-Trypillian culture, after the twin excavations in Romania and Ukraine that revealed them. Though Trypillian cities dwarfed their more famous contemporaries in Sumer, these people did not build the towering monuments to inequality that so dominate our image of early societies. Instead, their people built homes to more-or-less equal size, and left surviving artifacts distributed evenly between families. These features, and their production of thousands of beautifully sculpted feminine figurines, gave rise to the hypothesis that these societies were idyllic, mother-worshipping matriarchies.

At the end of their tenure, two thousand years after first emerging, Trypillian cities were left as blackened husks, torched by flames so hot they turned clay walls to glass. Replacing them was a culture of chariot-driving warriors. At first, it was thought that these newcomers had destroyed the Trypillians, looting and burning like countless invaders have done ever since.

But underneath that first burned layer was a second, whose flames burned just as hot and whose destruction was equally complete. Below that, another, and another—until archeologists determined that this had happened to Trypillian cities every couple generations, for all of their existence, with no outsiders intervening until the very end.

What the Trypillians had done was stack kindling against the walls of each house and set them alight. Then, when the flames had cooled, they would rebuild their city, exactly as it had been before—sinking new posts into the charred holes vacated by their predecessors, daubing new clay atop the vitrified old. The same doors would face each other across the same pathways, and the same families would peer at each other from the same small windows.

Archeologists have theorized that the practice kept disease at bay, or hardened the foundations, but how exactly the Trypillian people had conceptualized the practice will never be discovered. All we can be sure of is that, for two thousand years, they had wiped their cities clean and then painstakingly rebuilt them, street by street and wall by wall.

The protagonists of *Recitatif* and *Autobiography* are defined, in part, by their exiles from home. *Autobiography*'s narrator leaves his home so completely that he cannot even tell his children of their origins. The women of *Recitatif* grow up in an orphanage without being orphans (their mothers judged too sickly or indolent to raise them)—outsiders even in a house of the abandoned. What would it mean to the Trypillian families to immolate their cities—to exile their homes from themselves, when so many humans fight so hard to find them?

There would have been rituals, certainly. Most of their possessions would be evacuated, but some would be intentionally left—particularly their famous “goddess figurines,” red clay marked out by spiraling designs. There was change, too. Art styles, burials, trade, and diet, even spirituality and worship all shifted over centuries. And yet, all of this change occurred within the rise and fall of houses of the same design, each iteration building upon the piled ashes.

For as far as the protagonists of *Recitatif* and *Autobiography* drifted from their homes— as critical and alienated as they became from the world they grew up in—all three come to understand that the only way to grow would be to make a return to those walls. In *Recitatif*, they reunite in guilt over their own childhood bullying, accepting that the stamp of privilege left a mark on their own souls as well. In *Autobiography*, the narrator laments that he'd “sold his birthright for a mess of pottage,” having frozen himself out of the flowering of Black culture. In our America, voters seem desperate to escape the weight of history and compromise that kept our creaking house from falling, keen to either forget the trauma or be miraculously washed clean of it. But perhaps the Trypillians, as they calmly watched their homes reduced to rubble, realized the truth—that our truest homes cannot be built except upon the ashes of the old.

Writing With Cancer

J B BISHOP

One Special Night

The sunset felt different, more beautiful and special. I had seen the sun set here probably 50 times, the same red sky glowing against the black mountains. Tonight, my new puppy, Lena, cuddled against my leg and I felt a blanket of gratitude envelop me. The feeling of being grateful reminded me of the happy news I received today from Dr. Bernson. My cancer was in remission. This warmed me thoroughly, guarding against the sudden chill in the evening air.

It was a long walk home. I had been contemplating the bright sky for about 20 minutes according to the Apple watch my daughter gave me, its strap bright like the sunset, glowing red on my wrist.

I picked up Lena. We started home. The street was dark now, such a contrast to the bright red sunset. Facing this way, the darkness seemed almost impenetrable, and the road was hard to see. How quickly things change, I thought, from light to darkness, and from health to disease. It had happened a few times in my life. Would it happen again? The sense of gratitude left me. The only sound I could hear was the lake birds circling, flapping their wings as they readied for the night, gathering their last bits of lakeshore food.

Lena cuddled against my chest, almost concave now. She was a gift from my granddaughter. Everyone thought I should have a pet. As if the brown bottomless eyes would heal me.

Maybe Lena had helped move me into remission. I would never know. Did she?

I had seen a magazine about the genius of dogs. Did genius include a special healing power? I didn't buy the magazine so I would never know.

My black rubber boots made squishy sounds in the soft dirt. And a car, coming fast on the narrow road, sounded its shrill horn, warning me, I suppose. Did I look like a crazy woman? Middle-aged, a bit overweight, knee-high boots, blue jeans, mint green jacket, clutching a puppy,

squirming at the sound of the horn. Did I look like some miscreant sea creature having lost its way near a lake?

Lena barked her throaty woof and I looked back at the sunset. It was about gone now, just a tiny red ribbon above the mountains and suddenly, I felt cold.

The road was dark, it wasn't well traveled, but remembering my new diagnosis rekindled my gratitude, my warmth. I walked home with new purpose.

CAROLYN JENNINGS

The Wife

The husband and wife enter the cozy French cafe in Vieux-Montreal for their last breakfast, met by a clamor of conversation and a clatter of plates. Only one table is empty. The cadmium yellow metal table and chairs sit in the front window. The middle-aged wife is glad she can rise up the single big step to get into this seat, elevated above the cafe and set to be seen by all passersby on the cobblestone street. The wife knows she will need her husband's hand for the descent after breakfast. The husband's middle-aged muscles remain strong, though his weightloss shows in the bagginess of his clothes. The waitress greets them with a smile and hands them menus.

The husband and wife indulge in glasses of champagne. The husband and wife toast each other, the charms of this city, the pleasures of their time here together. The clunk of the cheap glasses is far from the ring of fine crystal. The wife giggles. The wife giggles again, glimpsing the oversized Ferris wheel on the water's edge. The husband and wife rode it their first morning here, rising above all the stone buildings. The wife delights again in saying how exhilarating it was to be on a Ferris wheel for the first time in decades. Afterwards the husband and wife bought ice cream cones, a treat avoided for years in favor of watching their blood sugar. What a relief that medical tests and doctor's advice don't matter anymore.

The husband and wife turn their attention away from the street of tourists. The wife, almost always glad to be with her husband, is today nearly giddy in his company. The wife reaches her hand across the table to rest her fingers on her husband's hand. The husband opens his hand to hold his wife's. The wife does not feel sad. She is grateful. The husband does not feel sad. He is content. The husband and wife talk of travels, friends, the good times of their life. The husband and wife banter with the waitress. She brings them poached eggs, croissants and fig jam. The husband and wife savor and linger.

The waitress warms to them, absorbing their love and delight. She doesn't mind that they sit here so long, plates cleared, coffee refills gone cold. Sunlight floods through the plate glass and over the husband and wife, seeming to wash them away, almost to flow through them as if they are made of tissue paper, as if they were dissolving into white light. Though she works here at least five days every week, the waitress has never seen this trick of the sunlight.

The wife pays the bill and leaves an exorbitant tip. The husband helps her off their dining platform. The husband and wife walk hand in hand toward the boutique hotel to pack. On the way, the wife answers the expected call. The oncologist confirms that his part of the paperwork has been sent to the state. The woman is relieved that this last requirement is complete. The husband and wife had ridden the cancer conveyor belt for years and then devoted themselves to the medical and legal hurdles to allow his medically assisted death set for two weeks from today.

The wife is committed to be by her husband's side, to comfort, to embrace until his last breath. The wife has known since the day they received the terminal diagnosis that she will hold her husband until the last trace of warmth leaves his body. The wife has planned a ritual to wash her husband's body and anoint it with oils. The husband and wife have together planned his funeral and burial.

The woman alone knows that there will be an excess of drugs after her husband's comfortable death and how long the drugs will last if stored properly. The woman knows exactly where she will store them but not yet if she will use them.

The husband and wife enter their hotel for the last time. "Bonjour," the concierge greets them, sitting at her antique desk in the petite lobby.

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Lora Hansen-Beard is a long-time writer and social critic. Born in Lovell, WY in 1966, she spent most of her childhood alternating between Casper, WY, and Boulder, CO, providing a wide range of life—and Life—views as “grist for the mill.” Taking Pearl S. Buck at her word when she said, “Anyone who lives to adulthood has enough material to fill a twelve-foot bookshelf,” Lora ranges the gamut in her work from poetry to prose, fiction and nonfiction for all ages and stages. When not writing, Lora can be found finding things to write about! Dancing, singing, and various meditation techniques, along with church work, are just some of her other interests.

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Lighthouse Writers and Carolyn's poetry launched about the same time. Mike Henry's classes ignited her path to writing *Hunger Speaks*, a memoir told in poetry. Writing With Cancer and Imran Shah gave her a liferaft through rough waters. Now, Carolyn facilitates expressive writing workshops (<https://writingourwings.com>).

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Shannon Malloy is a neurodivergent crip poet. After severe injuries left her temporarily voiceless, and with a brain injury, she fought hard to find language again. She was the 2024-25 Lighthouse Writers Workshop New Voices Fellow and has work published in *We've Got Some Things to Say: Reshaping Narratives Around Sexual Violence*, and *All the Lives We Ever Lived, Vol. 5*. Shannon lives in Denver with her pups, Gertie Stein and Fanny Howl.

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Colorado native Sydney Solis is an award-winning author, poet and artist. A former journalist, Sydney is the founder of Storytime Yoga® and Mythic Yoga programs for children and adults that connect storytelling and the body. Some of the publications where her work has been published include *The Haibun Journal*, *The Caribbean Writer*, and *Kyoto Journal*. She has taught at Kripalu and The Omega Center and performed stand-up comedy from Madrid to Buenos Aires. She is the 2025 Lighthouse Writers New Voices Fellow. www.SydneySolis.com

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Barbara Wickham is an active participant with two Lighthouse Writers Workshops programs: Hard Times and Veteran's Creative Writing. She retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army after 27 years of service. Barbara is finally writing bits and pieces of her story, previously hidden, with the hope now to write her entire memoir. Thank you so very much Lighthouse Writer's Workshop for the many writing opportunities you offer our community, including veterans.

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