

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

VOL. IV

Edited by Marissa Morrow

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Introduction

The last year has been one full of exciting changes for Lighthouse Writers Workshop and its community. At its core, any kind of change can bring about uncertainty, but many times in the end, this change leads to beautiful growth and sacred moments of reflection. Moving into our new home in the Clayton/Cole neighborhood of Denver and expanding our existing writing communities helped Lighthouse staff and community members continue to grow deep connections, forming a passionate pocket of the literary world. Over the last year, we've been able to reflect on how this—a set of intentional writing communities and partnerships—all started, where it currently sits, and where we want it to grow in the coming years.

The writers you will encounter in the following pages have all experienced the power of writing. In their own ways, they have embraced reflection and let their artistic selves run wild and free so that they can grow. Whether they attended a weekly workshop through our Hard Times program or dropped by one of our many generative workshops, these writers have found community and the inspiration to write about the things that mean the most to them. In a world that often profits from our self-doubt and distraction, we must follow in these writers' footsteps. We must prioritize sharing our voices with the world while pausing to take in the magnificence and fragility of this thing called life.

The pieces in this anthology have all been contributed by participants who have taken classes through the Community Engagement programs at Lighthouse. You'll find pieces written by members of our Hard Times program. In partnership with the Denver Public Library, Arvada Library, and Belmar Library, the Hard Times workshops are led by Sydney Fowler, Twanna LaTrice Hill, Lara Jacobs, Malinda Miller, Cipriano Ortega, Joy Sawyer, Sarah Elizabeth Schantz, and Kimberly Sewell.

The Hard Times community continues to be one of overwhelming support and encouragement for anyone who has recently experienced or are currently experiencing poverty, addiction, homelessness, and/or other hard situations.

You'll also come across pieces written by members of Writing in Color, a program specifically designed to be a source of community and literary growth for BIPOC+ writers and is led by Twanna LaTrice Hill. Thanks to Twanna's passion and dedication, the Writing in Color

community has been reignited post-pandemic and is ready to continue to grow in Colorado and beyond. Our Queer Creatives program, led by Sydney Fowler, has grown so much over the last year because of Sydney's ability to build a strong and caring community for folks who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ communities.

Finally, you'll see a few pieces by writers who have attended some of the generative workshops we host in partnership with History Colorado, the Denver Botanic Gardens, and the Denver Art Museum. Writing in the Museum workshops at History Colorado were taught by Trent Hudley and inspired by specific exhibitions at the History Colorado Center. Nature Writing workshops at the Denver Botanic Gardens, led by Azar Khozadi, have bloomed (pun intended) into one of our most popular programs as folks get to use prompts and the beauty of the gardens to inspire their writing. Drop-In Writing at the Denver Art Museum, led by Dino Enrique Piacentini, Hakeem Furious, Theresa Rozul Knowles, Franklin Cruz, Aerek Francis, and Manuel Aragon, brought writers to a diverse group of exhibitions at the museum. They were then able to use the art to inspire their poetry, fiction, and nonfiction writing.

To all of our faculty members, I want to personally thank you for all of the hard work and dedication you've given to these programs and our participants. Each of you inspires me when I get to see you teach, and I know that our participants are incredibly grateful for your wisdom, passion, and care.

Thank you to our many community partners who have trusted Lighthouse to bring the power of writing to the populations you serve. Your trust and excitement for what we do allows us to touch the lives of many.

I hope that everyone who reads this anthology finds inspiration and that it nurtures their own humanity. May this anthology serve as a tangible reminder of all the lives we ever lived.

Marissa Morrow
Community Engagement Program Manager
Lighthouse Writers Workshop

**Please be advised some of the pieces in this anthology may mention incidents of violence, self-harm, addiction, and mental illness.*

Hard Times

ERICA BLUMFIELD

2023 New Voices Fellowship Recipient

The Facility

When the psychiatric hospital's social worker says I am being released to a residential facility, I do not expect it to be worse than the hospital. It's a halfway house for the homeless with mental illness called the Excelsior House. It is like a zoo in there if all the animals had been given meth. I had been committed to the psych ward for drinking a bottle of red wine and taking a bottle of tranquilizers. There is a frenetic woman named Suzanne buzzing around me. She's in her late 40s, her face is tan and leathered, the lines are deeply etched, and she has piercingly intense blue eyes. On the surface, we can't be more different. She's spent most of her life struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. Suzanne has often been homeless and constantly in and out of government-funded rehab and mental health facilities. I went to NYU, worked at 5-star hotels, and traveled to Amsterdam to act in a film. I am 28, have never been in a hospital or facility before now, and have never been homeless till now. But my mind is unraveling. I couldn't tell fact from fiction anymore. I thought my life was a reality TV show, secretly filmed 24 hours a day and broadcast live. But the doctors and other health professionals were telling me it was merely my psychosis. They say soon the medication will help and I'll see things as they are again. Suzanne and I may seem very different. We do have some things in common. We are both bipolar, come from abusive families, and only have ourselves to depend on. We hang out and smoke cigarettes, and Suzanne explains how you can tell between a crackhead and a meth head—a crack-head is passed out in the dumpster while a meth-head is taking everything out of the dumpster and putting it back in, taking it back out, and then back in. She tells me about “dumpster diving” behind supermarkets, especially Trader Joe's, to get the “gourmet” stuff. When Suzanne hears the group of tough-looking women at the halfway house hiding a razor blade in a pair of rolled-up socks, planning on cutting me. But she turns them in, risking her safety.

They are evicted. We spend much of our time in the backyard singing at the top of our lungs Alanis Morissette's breakup classic, "You Oughta Know." Suzanne is trying to help me forget my ex-boyfriend, who broke up with me because he said he didn't want to be with someone with a mental illness. She blames him for my breakdown. After a few weeks, I was transferred to a longer-care home. I am terrified to be without Suzanne. She assures me I will be safe. When I'm in the van about to be taken to the new facility, Suzanne is there to wave goodbye, her intense blue eyes are watery. "I'll be seeing you," she says in a scratchy smoker's voice. She continues, "I'm going to do it this time, you know, stick to the program. You helped me see a light at the end of the tunnel, kiddo." The employee driving me to the new facility says it is time to go. As we pull away from the curb, I feel tears streaming down my face. I lean out the window and call out, "I believe in you!"

My Face to the Sky

It is a sweltering 103 degrees in Brooklyn. We've been too broke to buy an AC. We take turns cooling ourselves in front of our hip, yet impractical, barely functional 1950s vintage steel green bedroom fan. The fan is like our relationship, a thing of the past. We are fighting as usual.

He says he regrets the day he met me, and I'm crying. I have to get out of there. I grab my keys and bolt down the stairs. Out the door onto Box Street, the dead-end street littered with hypodermic needles on which we live, the wave of heat is like walking into an unknown dimension. The scorching pavement burns through the soles of my sandals. The heat distorts the sound and the traffic noise is like a warped record playing. The hot tears and sweat droplets running down my face boil in the heat. I pass the Polish market. I smell the kielbasa hanging on the hooks, cooking in the heat. I can hear it sizzling. I quicken my pace. I feel sweaty. I feel dizzy. I feel faint. And I think I'm going to fall. I stop and lean against a tree. I tell myself to breathe, head between my knees. In the heat.

When suddenly, I feel a change in the air. A rain shower out of nowhere, breaking the heat.

I exult in the cool drops pouring down, and then break into a skip, laughing and luxuriating. I turn my face to the sky in thanks. I see a vibrant rainbow. A miracle running along the NY skyline. A gift. A reminder of the present. A hope for the future.

The Swan and The Octopus

The neon red vacancy sign bulbs are burnt out, and only C-A-N is illuminated, casting light over the beads of rain on the car window, rendering them rubies. Jackson and Alice have just pulled into a dilapidated motel in the middle of nowhere. There is a dim light coming from the Front Office. They park in the practically empty parking lot in a faded, chartreuse Lincoln Town car with burgundy velour seats and black fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror. “We’ve Only Just Begun” by the Carpenters plays quietly on the radio.

Jackson is in the driver's seat. He wears polyester pants, a brown leather blazer, a silky button-down shirt with an open collar, and a solid gold chain link necklace. He looks older than his 27 years, with deep lines around his eyes and mouth from a rough life. As a child, he constantly worried about the next explosion, the next time he would have to step in and protect his mother from his father. A scar ran down the side of his face. His nose was crooked from taking punches. But his father looked worse because Jackson grew up to be tougher, taller, and broader. It was a life that led to stints in jail for theft and larceny. Now he is trying to turn his life around. Alice sits in the passenger seat. She’s tiny. She wears a faux leopard vintage coat, and underneath, she wears a worn-out beaded burlesque costume. Her face is painted with heavy blue eyeliner, black mascara that makes raccoon rings around her bloodshot eyes, and bright blush, but her silky deep brown hair somehow still falls in soft waves. She is skin and bones from amphetamines but still looks beautiful and younger than her 25 years. She’s like an Elizabeth Taylor type, something Alice attributes to her dedication to Noxema, which her grandmother (the only person who ever loved her) taught her to lather on her face every night.

Alice is nervously smoking a long, skinny cigarette, her red lipstick staining the filter end, the ash threatening to fall, and she is sobbing between her deep drags. “Alice, everything is going to be ok, try to relax.” Jackson is sincere.

“Jackson, what are we going to do?” Alice is on the verge of getting hysterical.

Jackson pulls a fifth of the store's cheapest whiskey and commands her to take a swig. Reluctantly, Alice follows his gruff demand. Jackson lights a Lucky Strike and turns to her in frustration. She coughs as the warm liquid slides down her sore throat, soothing after all the yelling at Jackson she did on the long ride from Atlantic City to the middle of nowhere.

“Better?” Jackson asks, genuinely concerned.

Alice softens, “Better.”

He leans in and kisses her tenderly. Every time Alice is kissed in a car, she thinks about the story her mother once told her. Before Alice was born, her baby cousin was rushed to the hospital. Her parents were there for hours, waiting and praying, but the baby didn't survive. She was pronounced dead from a rare heart condition. On the drive home from the hospital, Alice's parents were distraught. They pulled over to the side of a deserted road and comforted each other by making love. That was the night Alice was conceived. Her mother knew because she didn't have her birth control with her.

It always fascinated Alice, the idea of one soul passing to another. She felt like it made her special. Sometimes, it helped her feel less alone. She had a guardian angel.

The news comes on the easy listening station playing, interrupting the music. It's an update on the Mafia hitman, Joseph "Mad Dog" Sullivan, who just five hours before had escaped from the Attica Correctional Facility. The report confirms he's still on the lam.

Alice is upset again. “Jackson, what the fuck are we going to do? I told you it was all a bad idea.” Alice trembles.

“Attica is supposed to be impossible to escape from, how could I have foreseen this?” Jackson implores.

“You know Mad Dog. He's capable of anything.” Alice is in a daze of shock.

“Come on, we’ll get a room; get some sleep, everything will look better in the morning.”

They get a room. The rain has now turned into icy snow. It hits the window of their motel room, playing along, rat-a-tat-tat, to the jazz playing low on the radio. Alice sits on the edge of the bed, anxiously wringing her hands. Jackson paces the room.

Alice finally speaks, “You’re positive Jimmy The Brick didn’t see anything? Jackson?”

“I told you. He didn’t,” Jackson barks back. “Alice, you’re like those swans in Central Park.”

“Like a swan?”

Jackson stomps out his cigarette with unneeded force. It’s still smoking in the amber-colored ashtray. Alice rises from the edge of the bed and extinguishes the cigarette.

“Yeah, a swan because swans sit there looking pretty and innocent, but they are highly unpredictable.”

“You know swans only attack when their mate is threatened,” Alice says.

“And how do you know that?” Jackson mused.

“I know a lot of things,” Alice replies cheekily.

“That is the truth.” Jackson is sincere. Alice tries to cozy up to him.

She’s hard to resist. He half embraces her, gently putting space between them. They are quiet, gazing into each other’s eyes. And then Alice breaks the quiet. “Jackson, you remind me of an Octopus.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because they have nine brains and three hearts,” Alice says.

“So what are you saying?” he asks, unsure where she is headed.

“Jax, I’m saying that you’re brilliant and have much love to give.”

As he lets Alice move close, he leans in to kiss her. She pulls away and starts squawking and acting like an agitated swan. Jackson tries to capture her, but she evades him. Until he can grasp her gently around the waist and topple her onto the bed. They lay there laughing till they are out of breath. They are side by side. He takes her hand in his.

“I promise you, Alice. Everything will be okay.”

“I believe you, Jackson.”

A knock comes from the door.

MARYA SUMMERS

2023 New Voices Fellowship Recipient

The Honest Word

It matters to me what it's called.
It doesn't matter how you feel about it,
that you feel better about it, more
morally upright, less judgmental,
when you say unhoused.

I don't want to be housed—that is,
“contained or stored.”

Homeless is the right word.
I want you to feel all the
contempt that comes with the word.
Why should you feel better while we
are discarded, forgotten, despised, abused?

I don't want a new word.
I want the honest word.

I don't want just four walls, a roof, and an address.
I want what I never had: a safe place to belong,
a warm place meant for nourishing and nurturing,
a loving place where hands aren't raised against each other,
and where, if voices are raised, it is respectfully—
even when full of pain and anger.

A house is something you can break into,
squat in, sell. But a home?
That's a sense of safety and belonging,
something you take with you,

something that many people
in houses don't even have.

I don't yearn to be housed,
though a house would be nice.
I yearn for home—four walls and a roof, yes.
But also a dining room table long and strong
and stable enough to host holiday meals
and to plot a revolution or write a manifesto.

I don't want to tidy up the language.
You diminish the impact of belonging nowhere
and to no one when you say unhoused, and
you erase the humanity that is
at the heart of suffering.

There are doghouses and greenhouses and electrical housing.
But I am not a dog or a plant or a live wire.
I am human.
I am homeless.

In This Landscape

The American Dream masquerades
like Mardi Gras, gluttony
proceeding in a dazzling parade as black
dog nature is made to heel. She's a bitch,
beaten when she dares to break
for it, put down when she grows too wild.

The Church has drenched itself in red,
white and blue, and shadowed hues
of its gravestones fall evenly across
the deadening land. The once ecstatic

gardens have been drafted to serve,
uniform rows of green fatigue, an army
expected to salute at harvest. Trees are
hostages, separated to prevent a coup.

Ticky-tacky dominates the hillsides,
betrays the souls inside, pretends at
value, destroys our inheritance in the grind
and swallow of vegetable wisdom.
In this landscape of artifice and indelible
marks, where is humanity?
Boxed in their borrowing, carrying a balloon
mortgage like a grenade.

Even child's play is rounded up,
meted out, mass produced, until rosy
imagination blanches to mere amusement.
Assembly line fences make the sign
of the cross—endless white crosses
double crossing the Black Madonna Earth.

HUMPHREY ARCHER

Stacey and the Perfect Spring Evening

Stacey sat on a faded wooden bench outside the ER, and watched the last of the setting sun dip below the chapel roof. It was her last shift, and she let the tension flow from her hunched shoulders and tired legs. She breathed in the deep purple scent of grape hyacinth in the beds around her, and it filled her mind.

Her bags were crammed into the trunk of a hail-pocked car resting rusted at the far end of the staff lot, her apartment key and paperwork were in the office drop box, and she had no chores left between her shift and the road. It had been a furious week, but a final one, one with no glancing back to see if she was pursued.

The revelation that her online stalker had been admitted for elective surgery had been a shock, but she had recognized him instantly, as prey usually do. To him, though, her face was just one among many uniformed and flitting beings who orbited him in the hospital. She paused to see if recognition would dawn, and perhaps some contrition now that he was faced with the living person whose life he had scavenged, twisted, and broadcast for cheap and passing fun.

She had thought to confront him, to demand recognition and justice, but she understood that for him it would be theater. He would bend her outrage, turn it on her, and leave her empty and charred. She had considered publishing his medical records, but that would be tawdry and just the kind of thing he might do. Many women whose private moments of intimacy or lust had been leaked, he had spread and amplified, just for a laugh. Leaking his intimate medical information would be picking up his tools, his way, and seeking redress using his logic. She almost didn't do anything.

She almost let it pass, but standing behind him as he settled into his private suite, she heard him boast to one of his helpers, one of his jackals. She heard him describe "the stupid bitch" whose secrets would be so much fun to reveal. It changed her mind, shifted her thought, hardened her will.

Hospitals are busy and dangerous places, and things can go wrong. Many ampules look alike, many dosages look the same. The little glass vial that she dropped into his medication trolley would seem identical to a nurse who was harried and hungry, and needed the restroom. Soon, the vial was empty, and the nurse bustled on in a cloud of busy, thinking ahead to the next patient in a chain of many.

So here it was, her perfect spring evening. The scent of freshly mown lawn, emerging life, and a cool breeze as the sun sank from view. By the time her break was done, and the sun gone, the drug had begun its path, and there was no returning. Stacey rose and returned to the hectic press of patients needing her, things to do, smiles to give, and the taste of revenge.

V. beRt

Dreamer of Dreams

Dreamt of a café filled with poets, complete with double espresso, background screens, paper hearts.

Some rapping words, some grieving, some erotic, some empowering, some revolutionary—an exposé of tarnished souls, release of pain, pleasure, calls to action.

A tempo of words heaving in and out, wet words, spewing colorful twisting mental paths to traverse. Applause ensues, finger snaps, and give-it-up requests.

One of us! One of us! shouts someone over and over—accepting a new poet into their exclusive circle. Odd sounds, piercing words encircle my brain, pausing, reflecting, absorbing other's journey's.

Aficionada!

SHE! is a poetry aficionada.

Mentally fondling the elocution of words coming from her computer.

Earworms... of euphonic beauty, sadness, and laughter slither to and fro.

Relishing in a whirlpool of prose that eases her mind in her trivial world.

Day to day, hovering over a labyrinth of gallery pics on Zoom.

Immersed in a journey of haikus, tankas, rhymes and sonnets that buttress her soul for days—until the next meet up.

All year I have felt like, a bobble without a head, an abra without a
cadabra No cadence
in my walk---no magic in my steps.
Solitude has washed over my world, but I really don't mind.
My solitude creates questions on what will happen tomorrow?
Where will I land? Should I move? Live smaller?
This world of mine keeps getting microscopic, and the lens keeps
clouding up. Some
answers appear in muddled visions and then disappear only creating more
questions the
next day and the day after that.

An Artist's Journey

Stepping out from primordial soup into a projected live motion Van
Gogh painting, "The Starry Night" surrounds and bathes me in swirling
blue and yellow.

Flushed downstream, flowing past Ophelia, I land inside a Bob Ross oil
canvas with happy little

trees and happy little clouds dancing above my head.

Spinning through the clouds I fall on naked Adam, reaching out to touch
another man's hand. Is this the beginning of Creation right in front of
me? I am thrust from the warm lap of Adam and gently float down on a
farm, where I am nearly impaled on a pitchfork held by an elderly
American Gothic couple. I grab the rusty pitchfork and hunt for the lost
Pearl Earring that Mr. Vermeer's girl lost in the hay. But instead I find
myself on a bridge with a scary bald headed human shrieking from the top
of their lungs, I swear, The Scream could be heard from miles away. How
unsettling is that? Where would this floating journey take me next? The
Blue Boy around the corner directed me to a wall of 32 Campbell Soup
Cans, where I gladly took one, opened it and ate it. I realize this was not a
mistake, but all just a happy little accident, and I wake from this crazy
artist's dream.

My Soul

Some people would call me a guarded soul, and they would be right. More times than not, my antennae is attuned to plastic souls, ones that mold and transform to fit envelopes that are way too small. Stay away from me, as your aura melts faster than your foolish smile. Your wretched chill haunts my dreams, and you are not allowed there. Go away and deceive others who lack sensory quivers when you arrive at their door. Stay far away from me and never place your mucky boots near my portal.

MARTINA BJORHUS

Big Mac and Cheese

After using a copious amount of conditioner, her blonde hair dried silky smooth after swim lessons. She now sits across from me on her knees, too small to reach the table otherwise. Mostly we sit in silence, but manage a few rudimentary sentences.

“Do you like your swim teacher?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your favorite part of swimming lessons?”

“Jumping. Can I eat my cookie?”

With wide eyes, she sighs as I tell her not yet. Her shoulders and chest rise as she takes in a deep breath. Her Fifi wobbles between her teeth as her bottom lip begins to quiver. No tantrum this time, as her eyes are focused solely on her cookie, carefully selected for its tulip shape. The cookie’s perfectly smooth yellow royal icing shines under the canned light and just for a moment, with her head slightly bent down, her blonde bangs shine, too. Her demeanor, however, dulls in comparison. Her face, crinkled like a dried apple, shattered my attempt at any response to her pouting. Experience tells me my words would be ignored. I lapse into silence and listen for my name.

I don’t remember why we began eating at Panera. There isn’t a precedent in my life to eat out at restaurants. Certainly not every Wednesday, just mother and daughter. Going out to a restaurant was a special kind of stressful treat during my childhood. Before the simplified number menu, no one received a happy meal during our family road trips. Upon arriving at McDonald’s in Anytown, USA, we’d immediately crowd around my dad reciting our orders repeatedly. The chaos of three voices and an incomprehensible menu fueled his inner ogre.

His transformation would begin with clenched fists. The energy from his white knuckles traveled to his mega schnauz, his nostrils flaring with each inhalation, the veins around each nostril visibly blue. The anger in his blood reached his eyes, now wide and red, the lower lid twitching ever so slightly. The final transformation settled on his bald head.

His veins bulged in a zigzag pattern from his forehead to right under his combover, barely touching his precious salvaged hair. By the time we reached the cashier, he was thoroughly confused and furious. With a harsh accent, he ordered us all Big Macs, fries and four “cocks” to go around. Carrying one paper bag containing our meal, we’d pile back into the car and eat our burgers and fries without complaint. Instead, my brother softly whimpered in the back seat while eating his enormous Big Mac, wishing he had a Happy Meal more suitable for a five year old. I wished for a simple cheeseburger, while my mom wished for a fish sandwich and a Sprite.

Finally I hear my name and as I’m carrying our lunch to the table, I wonder why I chose to dine at Panera. Their menu is not simple and the only numbers present are their inflated prices: \$2.99 for a cookie, really? Is their menu healthier than McDonald’s? Perhaps. Is it worth the extra cost? Probably not. In hindsight, I believe I was searching for mac and cheese other than Kraft. I don’t remember how many restaurants we tried before settling on Panera, or if Panera was our first. I know I tried different types of mac and cheese, from Annie’s, to homemade on the stove, crockpot, Instapot and oven. Nothing compared to the mac and cheese at Panera, not even the mass produced store bought Panera containers. I must not have heated it properly. As I mixed at home and drove around town, I wondered: Was I wasting time searching for the perfect mac and cheese, or was I searching for more than comfort food?

Over the years, Panera became a memory just like her beloved Fifi. In the chaos of life, we traded our lunches at Panera for Lunchables and Domino’s Pizza. Our life was spent juggling boy scouts and girl scouts, school, soccer, cross country, track and field, golf, dance, volleyball, guitar lessons, violin lessons, and work.

Not all at once, of course, but it seemed the only constant in our lives was a maelstrom of activities. Family dinners were reduced to once a week or once a month at a random restaurant in a random city. Until one day a middle school fundraiser transported us back in time to Panera.

Our weekly Wednesday lunches have been replaced by weekly Wednesday dinners. She's added chicken soup to her mac and cheese and instead of a juice box she gets a "regular" drink, which she fills with Mountain Dew. Her hair is not quite as shiny. In fact, at the moment, her hair is purple. She sits on her bottom, eats, and looks at her phone. This time she's allowed to eat her cookie first, but it too is not as shiny and the royal icing is not as smooth. We still sit in silence, but on occasion I'm privy to her high school drama. Panera Wednesdays is our one constant, a place to connect and find comfort in consistency. In our search for the perfect mac and cheese, we found the perfect place to bond as mother and daughter.

Lingering Autumn

As I sorted through my laundry basket full of jeans, yoga pants, and sweatshirts today, I found a pair of shorts and a couple of sleeveless shirts hidden among my cold weather clothes. The pleasant, warm autumn air lingered way past its expiration date. A refreshing sojourn from the howling wind and frosty air made loiterers out of my summer clothes, which remained at the bottom of my hamper as evidence of a subtle change in the atmosphere.

At the peak of fall colors, I walked along the Peak to Plains Trail, enjoying the kaleidoscope of colors as the leaves shimmered in the sunlight. The clear, baby blue sky allowed the sun's rays to paint a beautiful portrait, using vibrant colors of red, orange, yellow and gold. I wasn't alone appreciating the Earth's slow transition from shades of green to shades of silver and pearl. I watched dogs on leashes eager to splash around in the creek, people in shorts, capri's and short-sleeved shirts tying jackets around their waist, and even a daring river tubing couple floating along the current of Clear Creek. I wondered if they lost a bet.

Like the warm weather, the leaves seemed content clinging to the trees until soft breezes urged them to let go of their branches. On their descent they slowly twirled and pirouetted to the ground, surrounding the trees like a quilt made of glowing ember-like patches. While the trees shed their layers, I put mine on. The warm breezes changed this week to icy gusts of wind, until finally, the trees stood naked under a blanket of snow. As I fold and neatly store my shorts and sleeveless shirts, I yearn to bundle up under a blanket and read a book.

The Haircut

Age 12 was the last time Joey's hair had seen a pair of scissors. His long hair was a source of contention between the adults in his life and always a source of comedic relief. Many a time, he was mistaken for "Fabio" when walking downstairs. Hilarious. Over time, his long, thick, brown hair tied in a ponytail along with his camo clothes and rad 80's hand-me-down t-shirts became his signature style. Instantly recognizable as "Joey." Today, on his 17th birthday, he cut all that hair off. I had some reservations and shed a couple tears, but he seemed comfortable with his decision. I've always encouraged his unique sense of style and this drastic haircut felt like a loss of identity and the end of the "camo rock" era. His long hair was a sign of his patience and growth over the last 5 years. However, I won't grieve too long, because he'll still wear camo and play his guitars. "Camo rock" will continue with short hair. The best part, he was able to donate 18 inches of hair, which weighed in at about a pound, to Wigs for Kids. It may be the end of his long hair, but it's the beginning for a child who needs the hair he was able to grow.

SUSAN BLOSTEN

My Family Left Many Hearths Upon the Earth

My Phoenician ancestors crossed the Iberian Peninsula and found refuge in the Dordogne region. There they built fires on the perches upon the stone cliffs of Southern France in their troglodyte dwellings. They fought the ice age with fires at night when they were not moving during the day. Many fires and years later they settled in Doggerland, which now lies under the English Channel.

I have lived in and visited many old family houses. The house where my father was born is a charming hotel in Philadelphia, surely heated once by fireplaces. Dad was a toddler when my grandparents bought a very big townhouse near Rittenhouse Square.

My grandmother's house in Center City Philadelphia—built in 1856—smelled of dust, and the electric scent of the trolley that clattered down Spruce Street when I was a young girl in the 1950s. I felt the ghost of her father who died there in the 1930s. Particularly after I'd climbed the leaning stairs to the third floor library, where gold framed oil portraits of my grandfather and my grandmother's father stared at me from opposite walls of the 60 foot long book lined room, and a fireplace set between two windows anchored the far short wall.

My parents married in front of it in December of 1946. The library smelled of dry books and the soot of fires lit and smothered since the mid 19th Century, when the house was new along with rows of others surrounding Rittenhouse Square. The scent of shame only I can sense remains.

By the time I was six months old, my parents rented their own house in the country. Our rented house, a former toll house in the 1600s, certainly held ghosts of travelers coming through the Pennsylvania State Road in rural Media, Pennsylvania.

The stuccoed house had long been a tenant farm house on the estate owned by friends of the family - Cedar Hill Farm. There, a stone-lined walk-in fireplace held the crane that once cradled cooking pots from which the tollkeeper or the tenant farmers took their meals.

Winter travelers must have been glad to warm themselves by the fire after paying for the tollkeeper to turn the pike away from their wagons to let them roll or trot on.

The first house my parents bought was built in 1792 and still has five fireplaces. We lived in that house all my school years. The study holds the hearth where family gathered surrounded by four walls filled with books. My father loved to start a fire with cannel coal that burned in sheets and layers. The black coal contained all colors of the rainbow and it flared hot, clean and bright. I remember my much younger brothers playing in the soot of the hall hearth, crawling to climb up on the blackened iron log holder. The living room fire provided warmth for us to bathe after a hurricane doused the electricity for a week. My mother transported water boiled on the 1920s Chamber gas stove in the kitchen to a large pan in front of the living room fireplace, which was rarely used. The oldest bedroom had a small fireplace between shallow closets with pegs inside to hang clothes.

In the house in Wales—built by our Lloyd ancestors and fitted out as a hotel—one of my brothers, my daughter and I enjoyed our cocktails and hors d'oeuvres sitting where the fire once burned within a giant inglenook fireplace. I sensed little of our family who built the hall in the 1400s. Many people since their occupancy had stayed in the room where sleep eluded me.

In Princeton, New Jersey sits an inn that was my great grandmother's growing up home. A cozy fire still anchors the front hall. My father loved to start a fire in the fireplace when winter guests visited the last house in which he and my mother lived.

I live in a red brick MidMod house whose main exterior feature is the blond brick tiered chimney breast adjacent to the front door. Smoke billows under the mantle of the corner hearth so much so that I don't light fires there any longer.

The original 1957 furnace continues to heat the house. No doubt it will not last as other hearths by which my family gathered. I will call the furnace my hearth. Though not as efficient as a new furnace, it works and I hope it will heat for a long time to come.

PLAY

Hey say play yay
Dance, prance
Jump, bump
Pump the swing
Shout and sing
Zing a sling
Sling a dart
Stop and start
Laugh and giggle
Wiggle a finger
Feel the sun and
Have some fun
Smell a rose and linger
Longer than usual.

Twirl and teeter
Catapult and somersault
Start and halt
Slice the air
Break a stare
Don't prepare
Hop and skip
Give some lip
Slip and slide
Push aside
Skip and rock across the creek
Simon says, "Take a stride"
"Mother May I" go outside?
Hide and seek
Spin the bottle
Kiss a cheek

Squish some sand
Build a castle
Dig a moat
Float a boat
Pound a drum
Hear it thrum
Tag you're it
Never quit.
Launch a kite
Lick a cone
And take a bite
Hula hoop
Spy and snoop
Cross a log
Catch a frog
Step on a crack
Break your mother's back
Talk and tease
Make a breeze
Ride a wave
Feel the air
Without care
Freeze then fly
Flee this place
Make a face
Blow a bubble
No toil no trouble
Splash the water
Shake a branch
Smash a pumpkin
Toss a ball
Think of something
Think it up

Stir the muck
and make a pie
Mud in your eye
Twiddle your thumbs
Shake your bum
Enjoy amuse
Take a snooze
All work and no play
Can't rule the day
Shout or say
The word "Hurray!"
Reach to the sky
Touch a star
Wherever you are
Climb a tree
Skin your knee
Carve on bark
Leave your mark
Quick sit in a chair
If the music isn't there
Then run round and round
To the sound
Until silence makes you stop
And plop on a seat
When it skips a beat
Tug a horse's mane
Whisper down the lane
Tell a tale of make believe
Full of actions that you weave
Heave and ho like a pirate
Or speak of

royalty if you admire it
Seek a well and make a wish
Drop a dime in the deep
or up the ante to a quarter
or quite simply go and fish
Explore a cave
Rant and rave
Ready or not
Stir a pot
Chase your shadow
Wade in shallows
Pick the nick of time
For rhythm and rhyme
Round a bend
Time to end
Cross your heart
And hope to stay
Ready for another day.

GIULIANA BRUNNER

Colorado Renewed

As Denver will soon be no more, I still hold

Gratitude

bowing down with a deep sense of such abundance in
discovering your small town magic forty plus years ago—combining city living, mountain hikes,
cross country skiing, plays, writing classes, college, and treasured concerts at Red Rocks way
back when. Short tastes of discoveries into the deep peace of your mountains & forests.

Yet now, sadness twinges the move soon to come into the peace of a forest full time.
Trusting the fates that led me to this land, and the deep stillness feeding me when I am there.

Denver

you have now brought sadness into my days for several years now, too long,
packing herds into every nook and cranny where another building can go. Your skies darkened not
by nightfall, but with the ever disappearing sky due to buildings, buildings, and more buildings.

Denver

your city skies no longer allow me to speak to the stars,
as bright lights from ads, cars, and buildings burst forth to hide them
from view. So little credence you give to the importance of conserving water, the land, the night
sky, and bits of silence. Over 4,000 new neighbors in what was once an area that supported
families content to be in small brick bungalows, raising families even without granite countertops,
three car garages, or even (can you believe it?) dishwashers.

My soul has been lost, yet still I stay with you, Colorado, to soon discover daily living in a
protected forest with the peace, the mysteries, and unfolding of life there, as the carpet of stars
will light my way to sleep blessed in the rebirth of my soul and the grace of it all.

Wind at Buffalo Peak Ranch

Pushing against you
while pulling you towards
the unknown

Does it unconsciously ask you to trust it
letting it guide you where you need to go

Sense
its depth
while looking deeper
searching deeper
feeling deeper
seeing deeper

Listen as it speaks softly
though in a blink of an eye
it can be incredibly loud,
rip roaring loud in these parts,
as the plains is where it is most at home.

Though at this moment the fields are alive
with gracefully swaying grasses, sage, and willows
dancing in the wind.

They hear its song as it passes
singing through small clusters of trees.

A gazillion shades of greens and soft tans
come alive in new ways as the wind moves through them
gifting me as they scent the air.

I embrace this wind
when its gentleness moves through the plains,
moves around me,
embracing me,
bringing new breath into the day.

I have not yet learned
to accept the fierce moments when its
pushing, shoving, prodding,
makes even vision difficult.
I am not yet able to accept the loud demand it makes
telling me what?
Guiding?
Well not even guiding
roughly shoving me to a new horizon
a new path?
Boldly yelling
(its own manner of speaking)
for me to listen
to what I have not yet heard?

FALL-ing

They gently fall,
as the trees release
their leaves to the earth,
the setting sun
falls slowly
as it vanishes behind the mountains
and the raindrops fall
nourishing the garden,
Inside
the candle reflects peace
as its beeswax travels
gracefully falling
down its sides, enhancing its amber glow,
Now tears fall—
tiny streams down my cheeks,
as deeper tears fall
unseen unheard on my heart,
snowflakes fall
as prisms of design
melding into the white
carpet of earth.
Is death a fall
onto and into the earth,
or is it a transparent ascent
for one to rise above all
we've ever known?
Perhaps both?

MR CHAMBRON

A Big Sister

Allows me to whine, sometimes
Believes I can do anything
Cares enough to ask me hard questions
Dares to challenge my decisions
Even when I resist her input
Fawns over my every accomplishment
Gives out hugs freely
Hears me when I'm sad or mad
Insists that I have what it takes to overcome
Jumps in to help when I need it
Knows when I'm insecure
Leaves me little notes of encouragement
Makes me soup when I don't feel well
Never neglects me for others
Openly shows her affection
Praises my worst efforts
Questions my thought processes
Resists my desire for a fight
Stays available when I'm afraid
Tells me I'm beautiful outside and in
Understands me more than anyone
Validates me often
Wants only the best for me
'Xplains love and limits when I become overwhelmed
Yearns to know I will be okay
Zeroes in on the concerns I try to hide
A big sister is someone I want to emulate as I navigate my own life

Reflections I and II

I

Yesterday, the sun awoke and so did you
Each breath shallow from a dream
It was only a dream?
Today you conquer every thought
Seconds morph to minutes

II

Love, abused by some, is still beautiful
The heart flutters, the mind is giddy
Compassionate
Allow yourself to trust with guarded abandon
Fulfill the desire to be free from fear

TERI GARROD

Gash

The crater is opening up. Dirt is sliding down the sides, making the gash wider and deeper. I can still smell him here but he is fading, and I'm afraid the dirt will wash him away. And now I'm tired. Too tired to sit up. So I slump down on the seat. And I'm sobbing again. Now, I am laying down on the backseat. Mac is driving us to a church where we can talk to God about serenity and courage and grace.

We get to the meeting, but I don't get out of the car. I can't get out because my legs are too heavy and I am very tired. If I could just close my eyes for one minute. And we are at the church, but I don't think God lives there anymore. Now I am trying to remember where I saw him last? God. I can't remember when that was because there are too many time zones. Mac gets in the back seat with me. He has two tear drops on his face. I try to remember why he is crying. But the teardrops are blue and that's because he was in prison. I think it is because he hurt people. But I am pretty sure that you can't not hurt people even if you don't want to.

And the little boy is turning two. The terrible twos. There are two bells on the church where God isn't receiving visitors today. The air is hot, but it's a dry heat here in the desert. And how come people who aren't from Arizona don't know what a javelina is? Mac is trying to comfort me but his arms keep turning into water when he tries to reach out and he can't hold on to anything. He is saying something but his words are falling on the ground. Ghost guns are solid; they have weight and form, but people ghosts are in the air and you can see them but you can't touch them. And sometimes if you fall off a wall they can't put you back together again.

Mac is shaking me hard now, searching the insides of my arms, "What did you take? Tell me what you took!"

LISA GIBSON

Drowning

I saw you today
as the strangers flowed past
me like a swirling sea.
You appeared like an
apparition from my past.
Looking just as I remember.
Your strong confident strides.
Your eyes washed over me
as if I were an empty glass.
Looking but not seeing.
Leaving me parched
for your blue-green gaze.
Your eyes only drink
others in now.
I wish things had worked
out differently—better.
I tuck that wish into my pocket.
Watch you go,
pulling the tide with you
and like the moon
moving away from me.
I, drowning in all the
words left unspoken.

Roller Girl

My car, swift, like the tiny go-karts
of my youth, rounds the corner.
The wind in my hair and setting
sun in my eyes, I enter the
neighborhood of my youth.

Memories march down every street.
Ghostly echoes of a distant time.
Nostalgia so thick I can barely swallow
around the lump in my throat.
To the right is the creek where
we fished for crawdads, whiling away
the suburban summer afternoons.

Half sticks of Doublemint gum
from Mom's purse, accompanied by
lint and perfume smell.
Skinned knees from bike wrecks
while chasing the Ice Cream Man.
Iodine that burned like the
devil and elicited sympathy.

The giant hill of Grand Ave may still
contain some of my blood, a failed
skateboarding attempt, that only briefly
dissuaded me. The bends in my street
where I would roller-skate past the
older boy's house. "Skateaway"
playing in my ears—trying to be
nonchalant as my eyes did a
tango between traffic and his porch.

The tree is still there,
like a landmark to the past.
Once a social beacon for teens
to gather and smoke.
Spilling all our misplaced gravitas
as if it were the corner bar.
The streets where I learned to drive a stick.
A few lurch-lurch-dies
before I could get it right.

Time passed before
I realized how swiftly it goes.
The house where I grew to
adulthood now looks foreign.
Occupied by no one
that I love, no one that I know,
but there's a longing
that pulls at my heart.
I look away and roll on,
carrying it all with me
even as I leave it in the rearview.

Poetry Is

Words and ideas dancing
just out of view.

 Their shadows
flicker in the candlelight.
At times coupled,
other times solo.

 Rarely a buxom burlesque beauty
that my fingers can't fly fast enough
to commit to paper.
Often a young dancer drifts by,
 the soft edges of her skirt
 chasing her,
 just as I'm chasing
 the next idea.

PAULA HAGAR

Waiting for Darkness

For the better part of 26 years, I was unable to experience one of my favorite contemplative activities: watching daylight darken into night. I saw no twilight, no dusk, and no dawn either. I worked 5 p.m. to midnight during those years on the 46th floor of Denver's tallest skyscraper. My office had no windows, so I would try to time my office strolls so that I could see at least a few moments of twilight. But I was only able to fully sit with twilight on weekends and vacations.

I promised myself that once I retired, I would sit outside and watch darkness come on as often as I could. I retired on March 13, 2020, the day the world shut down from Covid-19, and during that long, lonely summer I sat in my backyard every evening for hours—as long as it took to watch daylight completely disappear. I was gleeful when twilight began to fall earlier each day as autumn approached.

I always notice the night sky, no matter where I am. In the winter, I watch Orion move westward each night until he disappears below the mountains when spring arrives. I watched Orion rise each night in Chile, lying flat on his back with the Magellanic Clouds for pillows. He was not standing up straight the way he does above my house in Colorado.

I stayed up late many nights in Chile, waiting for the Southern Cross to rise—a new sight in an antipodal sky I'd never seen before. I sigh, always, in delight over all stages of the moon, from the tiniest fingernail sliver of new moon to its fullest bright roundness in the sky. I find it particularly beautiful in the winter, when it's framed by the branches of bare trees, whose slender skeletons of wooden bones against the sky are each so very unique, just like us.

As my pupils widen, memories of other winters drift through me. I remember the sound of water gurgling like bamboo marbles beneath ice in the Rockies and looking at the natural art of ice patterns etched along the edges of a stream. When I worked in the North Dakota oil fields in the early 1980's, I always volunteered to take the night shift.

I loved driving to the rig on the back roads in the deep night, especially in the frigid winters when the Northern Lights would force me to pull over and lay on the hood of my car, gazing upward and warm beneath the down sleeping bag I kept in the trunk for just such nights. I gaped in awe at the majesty and miracle of those shimmering curtains of light. I swear I heard them whisper tales of deep space and places I often explore in dreamtime.

Maybe it's the time of year when night is longest, when even mid-days hold onto some darkness. But this week all the writing prompts that have come my way are about life in the darkness, and they feel like a warm fleece blanket I can wrap myself into along with a cat or two, and move toward the solstice. As our planet and spirits spin into the heart of darkness, my dark-suckling self craves to write in the fertility of deep night, when my imagination most easily weaves memories into words.

On this snowy, sunless day, just days away from the solstice, when all the world is a monochrome of pearlescent white snow and black bare tree skeletons, each minute adds another darkening of the palette. I watch all of my world's hard edges soften and blend. I watch the qualities of blue-gray snow light meld into a monochrome, knowing that later, the overcast sky will glow softly pink with reflections of city lights against sky. Unseen house finches "breep-breep" near the feeder. The cats' outlines are dark in the window. Thin smoke from chimneys swirls around bare trees veiny against gray sky.

The thing you should know about me is that darkness has always been my very best friend. As an infant, I was awake all night and slept all day. During my first working year after college, I had a full-time 9–5 day job and another part-time job at night for a local newspaper, where I typeset copy from 7 p.m. until midnight. I often stayed until 2 a.m. to use their black and white photo printer. Over that year I printed hundreds of black and white photos while alone at the newspaper late late at night—and this aligned perfectly with my love of darkness. The red bulb was the only light in that black interior cave of the darkroom. That job was the first of many night shifts to come.

The darkness knows all of me. It knows the darkness in me that blooms and blossoms like a night-blooming cereus, the sweet jasmine and the evening primrose. I am and have always been a moonflower. Loneliness creeps in like darkness.

The Snake Tree

We called it “the snake tree” because supposedly thousands of garter snakes lived beneath the thick lower branches that fell to the ground, surrounded and protected by the tall wild timothy grasses that grew nearly as tall as me. My boy cousins would capture the snakes and chase my sisters and me around the land, trying to put those slimy, wriggling things with forked tongues down our shirts.

I believed it was the tallest balsam fir tree anywhere in the Adirondacks. Every Labor Day, when we closed up camp for the winter, I snipped off the ends of dozens of branches to make my annual balsam fir scent pillow, which I kept atop my big pillow at home so the scent would woo me to sleep, or at least rest—for even at age 11 I was an insomniac. One whiff of that balsam was all it took to bring back the entire summer when my sisters and I roamed free over our 600 acres of land with our boy cousins, seeking tiny fairy cups nestled in the thick mosses on the dense forest floor, orange salamanders beneath almost every rock, and round pellets of deer poop used as bullets for our stick guns. I woke up each winter morning and pressed my nose into my soft balsam needle pillow. I filled my nose with that piney scent, so much more fragrant than other firs and pine trees.

Last summer I bought a pouch of ground up balsam fir needles from a souvenir shop which I keep next to my bed. Why? Because sometime soon after we left the North Country in 1973, my uncles cut down that balsam fir that grew on the edge of the spillway, just below the pond, whose cold, clear water helped grow the balsam. Also home to frogs and fat brook trout, the brook gurgled down from the high peaks, rousing the lunkers down from their cold homes beneath the granite boulders and fallen logs upstream, to bask in the sunny pond waters. Even in the sun the pond was rarely above 40 degrees, and the high-country snake tree lapped it up.

The first time I revisited the land after many years and saw the balsam tree was gone, I wept. It had been over 20 years since it was cut, and my cousins couldn't figure out why I was so distraught. They barely remembered it. But to me, that tree was and is an icon that remains rooted in my soul's memory. It is still there in every dream I have about the land, invisible to all but me. I still gasp and mourn its loss every time I turn into the homestead or look at recent photos. I will never get used to not seeing it there. The giant snake tree they said was too tall and too sick to survive DOES survive always and forever, in me.

That snake tree was the first of dozens of beloved trees I have fallen in love with and lost over the course of my life: the huge elm tree on Olive Street, whose supple limbs bent and swayed like sea kelp in the wind, and whose main branch tore off deep into the heartwood during one of Denver's wet spring snowstorms. Then the gnarly pinon tree just outside my bedroom window that whispered its whooshing windsongs to me on windy nights – another tree lost to heavy snow. Last summer it was the honeylocust in our front yard – one saw cut through its knees and down it came, leaving the once-shady front yard a dirt pile of sun and weeds. The snake tree was the first of many trees whose loss I would mourn more than some people in my life.

I Am From...The Place I Still Yearn For

I am from The North Country—the northeast region of New York state bordered by Lake Champlain to the east, the Adirondack Mountains to the south, and the Canadian border to the north. I am from the junction of where the warm brown waters of Lake Ontario spill into the cold forest green waters of the St. Lawrence River, where over a thousand islands are scattered across fifty miles of river. I am from this land of water, where sugar maples turn crimson in my blood each autumn, two cultures and wet mountains to the south. Although I've now lived in Colorado for forty years, more than twice as long as I lived there, my roots are planted deep there, and parts of me never left.

I am from a tiny home built in the 1920s at the feet of a spectacular hilly city park, designed by Olmstead in the heart of a small city, rising upward just one block from my house. I am from the toes of “the Park Hill” where we spent many a winter's night sledding and tobogganing down a tiny hill that seemed as big and as steep as Mt. Everest to my childhood self. I am from summers spent as a mermaid in the waters of the big Lake and River, and vacations up in the Adirondack Mountains on the 700 acres my grandfather bought in 1910. I took all that water for granted, and I always called myself a mountain girl. Now that I am living as a mountain girl, I know I am really a Water Girl. My parched skin cries out each summer for that pure cool clean water.

On nights when it rained in Denver this summer, I crawled into bed and listened to the rain and wind and tree branches dancing outside the window above my bed, and drifted back to the unforgettable best-summer-of-my-life two years ago, when I took a three-month road trip back to my hometown and those watery childhood roots. It was the summer after Covid, and a year after retirement. It was a pilgrimage back to that place of big lakes, river water, hardwood forests, and lush green fields that stretched on for miles. I had not returned once in 33 years. I spent those weeks in a mobile home just two miles from where the river and lake waters form the border between the U.S. and Canada—a border that floats down the center of the River.

So many mornings that summer I lay in bed listening to the rain fall on the metal roof of the mobile home, sometimes a gentle sigh and other times a loud roar. Most mornings and evenings I was lulled either awake or asleep by the sound of rain I had not heard for months in my desert southwest home. I've missed rain every single day of the 38 years I've lived in Colorado, a beautiful but waterless place where so many would love to live, and I have been smitten and overjoyed by the near-daily downpours this summer.

Each night I ache for the river and lake that shaped my mermaid self then, and for the emerald green cornfields and fresh veggie stands beside the road, all spilling over with vegetables picked that day. You'd put money into a wooden box based on the honor system. Each night I yearn for more time with my oldest childhood friends in the world I had not seen in decades, for the nights we laughed and laughed around a campfire, or at the many restaurants along the river. I want to be surrounded by water again. I want to laugh like that again.

JANET HILDEBRANDT

Prickly Pear

Beneath the snow we sip earth juices in succulent slumber
flat pear-shaped paddles hug the sandy ground
edges shriveled, we feign death.

Scattered across the field, we grow in family clumps,
near the creek or between cottonwoods, where we spy on passersby.

We feel the snow melt between our spikes, our protection,
pool around our base, soak our roots with mineral nectar.
We wake to warm air, stretch, and expand as we drink,
extend wisps of pale petal-winged blossoms to flutter and entice bees.
We push our children from our shoulders toward the sun,
send roots outward to exchange nutrients, share vital secrets.

In summer our red fruit tempts the mice, squirrels, rabbits.
They spread our seeds, ensure community.
We listen to hikers puff and chat,
watch dogs and their walkers, bicycles whizzing too fast,
morning runners, and baby carriages avoid the heat,
push past our silent forests near their feet.

Storms carve runnels in the sand, scour the creek banks
Some of us are swept away or buried head first with roots splayed,
but most hold tight, rouse each other, and survive the night.
Humans and houses will age and sag,
but we will endure forever in sand-speckled light.

Cradle of Summer Sound

Our long hair flips and flies in the breeze as we lean forward,
haul back, rhythmic dip and shush of paddles
as the canoe rides moguls of water, slides toward the opposite shore.

Multi-tonal whine of cicadas, high buzz to low shirr,
the syncopated sound moves over and through us in waves,
humid heat on water, the conductor of our song.

Sweet smell of sweat, sunscreen and cigarettes; our breath puffs, our
paddles pull water into whorls, plonk of oar against aluminum, a
kettledrum thrum. We glide to the protected bay, where skitter bugs skate
and redwing blackbirds trill their call.

Our paddles at rest before us, we lean back, lift faces to the sky as we
breathe to the drip, drip of oar tips not yet dry, whisper our thoughts,
enchantment bound, rocking, rocking in a cradle of summer sound.

First Night in Hanoi (for Jennie)

It's the middle of our first night in this old town Hanoi hotel.
You are nestled between us, your new and strange parents.
On my other side, big brother (still a child), pajama'd arm loose on the
floor: palm up, fingers curled, a blossom cup.

Foam mattress on bare wood in a narrow, shiny green room.
Geckos skitter from behind picture frames and the smell of mold is
pervasive. Wood smoke seeps through loose panes, hangs humid, mixes
with our breath. Muffled scooters on the street below send soft speckles of
light across the floorboards.

Named Van Thi Le by your birth mother, you are hungry and cry out. I'm
fully awake and want to nurse you, but adoption doesn't create milk. Your
mother for only one day, I press you to my heart, smell your skin, kiss your
cheek, whisper and soothe your rapid heartbeat.

The night staff brings a giant dented aluminum thermos of hot water. Its
rickety wood handle speaks of a long history.

The spigot lever squeaks open so Daddy can mix the shrimp protein
formula; there are no cows here. You take the bottle, alert and curious in
my arms,

despite the bronchitis, ear infections, infected scabies bite, undiagnosed
tuberculosis, and remnants of Hepatitis B. We will all get scabies, a small
price to pay.

Bottle empty, we scoot down and I pull the covers close. You settle, sated
and drowsy. Your ribcage barely moves as you breathe, then I join you in
deep sleep.

You will laugh tomorrow—your first bubbling laugh. Your brother will sail
Squishy Bear past your head in flight, as we fly home, new future in sight.

After the Fire

Ash sifts through burnt strips of screen
Bereft, she screams at the sight:
Charred beyond recognition, her piano stands
Doubtless the bass strings snapped last
Entwined they tangle beneath the wreckage
F sharp tinnitus accompanies her collapse.

Grief will chase us with piercing arpeggios
Haunt us with weighted bass thrums
Images of wholeness feel impossible
Junctures of hope improbable
Kind words from kindred folks help
Loneliness, but the

Majority of empathy and support
Never seem to emerge from expected sources
Onward, they tell us
Pray to the kingdom of God they compel us
Quiet moments are a better salve than
Rousing, keep-your-chin-up chatter.

Stay with yourself, I tell those who ask
Tend to your inner voices, for only they know you
Unequivocally
Verdant growth will return to this sooty ruin, though
Who knows what or how soon?
Xanthin yellow Forsythia may take root
Yonder, past the post office that is no more
Zestless though you feel now, compared to before.

AMANDA HOWARD

Clock

The rain clatters down
in solid sheets
like a car wash,
stopping traffic, scattering
shrieking pedestrians.
The smell of rain nearly
covers the smell of
jasmine and sweet olive,
nearly covering the smell of
cayenne pepper, thyme,
and chicory
coffee,
nearly covering
the smell of oak pollen and
pecans smashed underfoot
on a sidewalk
buckled by tree roots, nearly
covering the smell of
moss-covered brick, mold,
hidden mice and cockroaches,
nearly covering the smell of
the river, nearly covering
the smell of the earth, nearly
covering the smell of dust, which
shimmers in the single beam
of returning sunlight
that slowly moves across the floor,
the only thing in our house
that tells time.

WALTER HOWARD

Days in My Years

Life in Pages:

Lives in pages in a history book of life,
We live out in our pages.
Life is in pages, pages of time,
We live in pages, torn out of our lives,
We live inside out.

Life in pages, pages of life
We have missing pages,
Where did they go?

Maybe gone in time.
In what we have done,
In stages of life.

Ink Blots:

What do we see?
Dogs, cats, butterflies, elephants, clouds.
Or just ink thrown on paper for no reason.
Just do it maybe?.

A reason we make up images,
Different for everyone,
Or just ink thrown on paper hoping for a design.

Life is more than ink thrown on paper.
Maybe it is dreams,
we see in designs we make up or real,
but still on paper.
Just dreams hoped for,
but lost in how we see them.

Maybe we wanted pets the pets are gone again.
Just ink on paper
Now what?

Maybe our lives on paper cry for help
But no answer.
Just ink on paper where do we go now?

Lenses of Life:

We all see through a different lens of life.
Because life changes as we do in life.
Like frost on a windowsill
Melting in the sun
Or having fun watching paint dry.
'Cause life changes watching in different lenses.

Life in a Jumble:

When life is a jumble
And all we do is mumble.
Lack of words
Lack of thought.

When words of thought are caught in a jumble,
Do we mumble again life in a jumble of life?

Words no thought.

Where is the jumble in our thoughts and hearts
From a life in a jumble?

Do we know where to go?

To the one in truth.

When life is a jumble in a jungle of life,
All jumbled up.

When life is short:

When life is short,
Time steals our love.
In what we have lost,
Our memories.

In a life too short to see
The love we had when time steals our life
In what we had lost
Our love in our lives when life is too short.

Days in my Years:

Years of my life walked through these halls,
Days I forgot.
Days I remembered.
In good times and bad,
Happy and sad at Lake.

In my years walking through my life, we learn.
The teachers I met,
Friends I made,
One teacher, Pat Seagull.

Being a teacher's aid in her class,
I received cards from her students
As I am retired.

Life goes on in days of our life.

LANAY JORDAN JAMES

Release

Why did I expect that at this age, finally, I would have an easy, level path? This expectation has grown stronger as, one by one, I have achieved different personal goals in life and embraced the unexpected. I had finished my schooling, gotten jobs and married—and then I had to get on my feet after a divorce I hadn't wanted or needed—and left the career that didn't satisfy. I did have deepening friendships, got my house paid off, and married a second time to someone greatly different from me, but that being a better union... it would all become level and stable as I approached 80 next year, right?

Enter some years of illness, and then the loss of my husband. Being alone after 35 years of improving together. Our son had been left by his wife. He changed career direction and eventually moved to the opposite coast from the one I had known, exploring a new relationship and making a new life. Enter Covid, increasingly volatile and divisive politics, our country's social, economic, environmental, and immigration struggles with tensions mounting throughout the world.

I have experienced a sudden series of health changes, mirrored by differing but similar challenges in the lives of friends around me. I find I want to move to a smaller and simpler living space. The book about Swedish death cleaning is temporarily my favorite book!

Life—

not smooth and stable—
instead constantly leading in new directions,
fraught with challenges.

Life—

ever changing for me,
and generationally
and yet... much the same!

JANE LEWIS

4.29

I spied on him from across the room. He was leaning sideways against the wall surrounded by a circle of friends. Long blondish brown hair and a face reminiscent of James Dean, wearing that sultry bad boy look, drew me in. Engaged with friends in conversation, he didn't notice me studying him. "He's so cute," I whispered with my hand covering my mouth. "Forget it. He's older than us," my friend responded in a conspiratorial tone.

I sighed and turned my attention back to the packed dance floor, where there was no hesitation by couples to show off their dance skills. It was People Watching 101 at its best. The intricate and sometimes hilarious dance steps combined with the sound of boots shuffling and heels clicking on the worn wood floor, always a source of entertainment. It was also amusing to observe the senior girls positioned to the right of us who flirted and exchanged come-hither looks with the guys.

After a round of fast songs, the dance floor cleared to make way for a slow one. The James Dean understudy slowly sauntered across the room. It was tense, as all the girls anxiously hoped he'd ask them. To my amazement, he stopped in front of me.

"Wanna dance?"

I felt a rush of heat and color flood my cheeks. A quivery "sure" came out of my suddenly dry mouth. I tried to play it cool even though inside, I silently screamed, Me! He picked me! Instead of walking side by side to the dance floor together, he took my hand, and we strolled out to the middle in front of everyone. My head rested on his chest as he pulled me close, and we started to dance. Our arms were wrapped around each other at first loosely, and then tighter as the song played on and on and on. We barely shuffled our feet during the four minutes and 29 seconds of unadulterated bliss.

When the song ended, he released me slowly while holding hands, locked his eyes with mine and flashed a dreamy, almost shy smile. He then walked me back to where my friend waited, this time with one arm around my waist. “Thanks for the dance.” An engaging smile and confident “Sure,” was my warm response. A friend shared at the gathering that he thought I was a little younger but was utterly disappointed to discover I was only 15.

Years later when I needed a new ringtone, I was elated to find “The House of The Rising Sun” as a song choice. It reminds me of my youth and my first slow dance with an older guy. He haunted my adolescent daydreams.

Thriller 101s

RUN

“Run!” screamed Mia, flinging the screen door open. “I’ve got his keys and phone!” Reaching the truck, she and Meadow pulled away, jerking the passenger door shut as they peeled out. The sickly smell of fear filled the space between them as Meadow, fumbling the phone, dropped it between her legs, sobbing. “Where are we?” Surveying miles of nothingness before them, Mia screeched in terror. “I don’t know! Do something!” The sadistic kidnapper was pursuing them on his Harley brandishing a shotgun. Noticing the low fuel gauge, Meadow googled “gas station near me” as the phone died in her trembling hands.

BUT THEY DID

She lovingly gazed at his chiseled face, crisscrossed with wrinkles. In old age, he looked as handsome as when they first met. He was a good man, beloved by his children and well respected in the community. Who could ask for more? But they did. He could still hear her shrill, piercing screams and with no regret had killed the stranger who raped his wife and lay buried in the cornfield. The child she carried was raised as their own. Each night ever since they saw the commercials for 23andMe, they prayed, “Please God don’t let them take that damn test.”

BON APPE'TT

Oh, how I missed his cooking! Being pampered with meals paired with wine and titillating conversation was our aphrodisiac. Gourmet dishes made from lamb, venison, bison, and game birds complimented the mouthwatering sauces. We rarely ate out. The eventual parting of ways drove me back to the land of frozen food. Years later, his somber face flashed across the TV screen with the headline “Cannibal Serial Killer Captured.” I froze as acidic vomit flooded my gaping mouth. Realizing human flesh was part of what I unknowingly craved and shared with a killer left me mentally shaken. Officially registered now as vegan.

Face Coverings

It was that sudden gasping-for-air head jerking movement that awoke her from troubled sleep. Oh my God, she realized, this must be what it is like to die. One could say she was almost dead from a clinical standpoint. Deep, rhythmical steady breaths eased away this near-death experience, but it left a terrifying impression of what those final agonizing breaths would be like. She did not die, instead she joined the ranks of the walking zombies: those minions of sleep-deprived souls diagnosed with sleep apnea. A sleep study revealed moderate to severe sleep apnea; she was in disbelief.

She had friends dealing with the fallout of obstruction and the horrible unbearable snoring that made them undesirable bed partners. Now here she was, blissfully snoring, unaware of her own chaos she created with her husband. There is a limit as to how much a marriage can withstand with endless nights of disturbed sleep. Goodwill soon became a distant memory, as her trumpeted notes occurred with greater frequency. With all that said, now the challenging work had started. She recalled seeing all those “poor people” trying to adjust to wearing a cpap mask. Thank God I do not have to deal with all those problems, she thought back before her new reality came front and center in her life. Reality, however, came blazing in along with the host of eventual complications if she did not address her new norm: high blood pressure, enlarged heart, heart failure, heart attacks, let alone mental decline from lack of sleep. Assessing all the future damage that could destroy her what she once thought of good health; she went in search of the mask and machine that would make her whole.

Oh, but to find the right mask. “So, you are a mouth breather, well that means nothing but a full-face mask for you,” her therapist spoke these words and condemned her to a lifetime of sleeping interruptions.

Placing the mask as suggested and turning on the machine, she lies down literally face-to-face, manipulated by a pressurized auto setting forcing her airway open. Ok, fine, but can anyone just lie in one place and not move all night? I think not. Turn to the right, then left, then back and your tight-fitting mask has developed an air leak. Just as she would drift off, air hissing and blowing would erase any benefit from her supposed “solution” to the crisis. Now, two people are the recipients of her sleep-disturbed nuisance—take off the mask or fix the problem.

Could it be the straps that hold the mask in place? Those straps wrap around the top of her head, down the back and around the sides. Assessing the situation, she starts at the top, trying to fine-tune the head gear. The strap is too loose, so fixing the Velcro to an even tighter grip, she reapplies her mask. Now in a vice-like grip that provides an agonizing and acutely aware feeling that will not allow for sleep, she tosses and turns with her head at the forefront of the battle. That annoying hissing begins just as she is about to drift off to sleep. It was not the top but the sides that are the problem she thinks. Again, up and readjusting the top, she pulls even tighter the side straps which does seem to cement the mask in a no holds barred grip. All these adjustments left her with two perfectly shaped craters on either side of her cheeks. Worse still, the dreaded eye bags under the eyes; was that from lack of sleep or the pressure of the mask on her face? Could it get any worse?

An appointment with her hairdresser gives her one more thing to consider. In casual conversation, she mentions her diagnosis of sleep apnea and the difficulties surrounding wearing a cpap. She is now joining the growing number of clients, her hairdresser confirms, who are experiencing significant hair loss due to pressure from tight headgear.

The choices are clear: a sleep deprived person clearly headed for a multitude of health consequences; or an aging face with pronounced eye bags, thinning hair, but still able to maintain her mental acuity? What if, she and all other cpap wearers, should join the cast from Network, look out their windows and yell, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not gonna take it anymore.”

TIM A. MILLER

Man Chasing the Years

The man is chasing the years
as they go down the horizon

He is trying to catch up with them
but never realizes that he can't

He's living in the past which is
full of memories some happy some sad

He wants to reconnect the present emotions
to the past visions but the years keep sailing by

He finally stops and looks over his shoulder
and sees the years coming over the horizon towards him

The years contain secrets and keys to his future and destiny
and it's also where the memories are waiting

As they come he is finding out more and more about different
and incredible things about himself and life

All of a sudden the years are coming faster and harder
and he finds himself changing more and more

He's getting older and older but there's nothing he can do about it
so he's making the most of it now realizing that life is short

All of a sudden the last year appears on the horizon getting closer and closer
So he starts running for the other horizon trying to soak up all he's done and
saw

He soon realizes he can't run anymore so now he's walking briskly
trying to find the true meaning and purpose of life

Finally the last year has nearly arrived and he is weaker now
and the brisk walk has become a slow crawl

He looks at his hand and it has become wrinkly and gray
but he still needs to do things he hasn't done yet, although it's too late.

He finally surrenders and lifts his head to catch his final glimpse
of the sun sinking over the horizon

As the last year finally catches up with him
his life is snuffed out

So the man's life is being carried over the horizon with his previous years
and purpose of life unknown although he did make a difference in the
world

The man didn't find out the purpose of life but he did make a difference
as the years finally carries him over the horizon into the pleasant
unknown

The final year has disappeared with the sun over the horizon
just as fast as the previous years had gone.

Inspired
from the Pink Floyd song
"Comfortably Numb" while it was played on Kurt's
car radio
with memories of Dave Edward and Kurt
Preston
riding along in his car in the winter of 1989
in Denver.

DR. JAMES MOSES

That's Life

September 3, 2023

In eight days I will be eighty-five-and-a-half years old. A milestone for me, as each day becomes another milestone. I have an amazing wife and a wonderful life. No complaints there. With aging and living in Denver all of my life, I have accumulated many, many, long-term relationships with friends for eighty-plus years, as well as fond relationships with several patients that I served for forty-seven years. I also have served the community I loved in olden times and tried to give back to it.

At this age, I wait for the grim reaper to come after me. So far I have ducked his clutches. A few close calls, but luckily they passed me by. My health is slightly remarkable, but I don't want to brag about it. I have one superstitious bone in my body. At this age, I also have lost many, many wonderful friends and members of my family. But I say, although sad, it is simply the result of a passage of time. I have no control over it.

I vividly remember my mother saying quite often, "I have seen the airplane, television, etc. etc. Now as I look into the mirror each morning I say, 'Good morning, Mom.'"

And shake my head seeing how much I resemble her in her old age.

I have seen a lot of change and many remarkable new things in my lifetime, too numerous to write about. Among the most prevalent changes has been climate change. I guess Al Gore knew what he was talking about. It sure is making its mark around the planet. I am sad for the generations that will follow me. A frightening world ahead.

Most preventable in my thoughts at this particular moment is the illness and loss of special people. A song has been out for many many years entitled "That's Life," a Frank Sinatra favorite. Everyone should hear it at least once. It eases the pain of loss.

I never seemed to have time to write. I flunked the test at the University of Denver Law school for my inept reading skills. Luckily, I did get into dental school, my very first career choice, always fighting for total comprehension of the material.

My only sibling, my brother, passed away at age 47, leaving a wife and three kids and very little money.

We were not close until he became ill—then we saw his illness to the end very close together. Another story told.

I decided that I would seek the relationships of younger men to supplement the loss of my brother. It has paid off for me in spades. Another amazing thing that has happened to me is being able to express myself by my writing skills I have gleaned from being one of the first members of the Hard Times writing group. I have learned so very much from the wonderful facilitators and the amazing people that I have come into contact with over the years. Although not a superstar, writing has enhanced my life to the point I say to myself, “Self, what did you do before you learned these wonderful new skills from the amazing teachers and fellow writers?”

I call myself a memoir writer. My special efforts have gone into writing about “The Amazing Gallagher Moses,” our wonderful dog we lost a few months ago, after eleven years of bliss and wonderful happenings. Very few animals are as special as Gallagher was. I have many chapters to store and go back to, remembering his time with us. I seem to be having difficulty telling the story of his final days at this time. We will be burying his ashes in front of a wall at our cabin, so he can join the company of his other brothers that have gone before him.

MYRA NAGY

Colfax Parking Lots

There are people dying on the streets
Mental health, substance conditions, homeless
Money is used for property and treats
But empty property lots are dome-less.

We care about devices, money, hierarchy
Living through a worldwide pandemic
This shows those values are malarkey
No place to rest is an epidemic.

Not everyone has courage to voice
Expression of issues takes time
Trauma is deep, not choice
It's a wound with juice of limes.

Start with someone near
Help them through their story
Relinquish our fear.
Adopt a mission for their glory.

Let's build gardens of food
Tiny home villages on lots
Thrift stores to infuse the mood
Community lead art spots.

Creativity is key to life
Art is reflection
Writing is strife
Sewing is my protection.

Give It Back with Gratitude

I feel that I am always giving
I feel overwhelmed with blame.
I hold regrets
Because of my ties to failure and shame.

Release your pain
Open your heart
Keep your thoughts refrained
Embrace and be apart

The world is filled with beauty
Adventure is on the rise
Hope is at your door
Open and welcome your prize

You can still own your life
Fill it with things you love
Creativity is unlimited
Inspiration comes from above

Accept who you are
Stay in the here and now
You are the author of your story
Stand up and bow!

JANIS OLSEN

21 March 2022

oh, loathsome sacrifice
that you would have to give up
so much
so I could appreciate the "what"
that I have
puts me
in a different place
with different concerns
and different worries
five years ago
I'd look under bridges
and into shallow ravines
asking myself
"Could I *live* there?"
"Is it a safe place?"
"Would the canine patrol
find me and bark out
my whereabouts
to the law
and to the order?"
a sigh of relief, a deep exhale
I hear myself utter
camouflaged in silence
"Your sacrifice is substantially real,
life-changing,
while mine remains in my mind."

Hot Summer

A hot Denver July morning
zoom dragonflies, helicopter
in the foreground maneuvering

A hot Denver July morning
distant downtown buildings sweating
search for the water importer
A hot Denver July morning
zoom dragonflies, helicopter

The Positive Side of Attraction

awestricken
besotted
carrying a torch for
dazzled
enraptured
fascinated
giddy
head over heels
infatuated
je t'aime
keen on
lovelorn
moonstruck
noetic
obsessed
pining
quickenened
ravished
smitten with
twitterpated
under the spell
very taken with
wild about
XOXOXOXOXOXOXO'd
yearning
zealous

Your Crush

Your crush once ate a leftover hamburger out of the trash.
Your crush felt responsible to clean up the bathroom floor in the restaurant where she couldn't stop drinking one glass of fine pinot noir after another.
Your crush had stinking vomit mixed into her long beautiful blond hair.
Your crush felt, oh, so empty inside.
Your crush didn't know who she was.
She didn't know about your crush.
Your crush could hold onto a grudge better than she could grasp reality.
Your crush had many science experiments she never turned in as valid research.
Your crush became so hopeless that she downed a month's worth of prescription pills.
Not wanting the 911-ers to destroy the front door,
Your crush roused herself to answer the door with a winsome smile.
Your crush didn't know who she was.
She didn't know about your crush.
Did you want her to know your secret?
Would you have been there if she did? For all the "theres" she's lived through?
Your crush didn't know who she was.
She didn't know about your crush.
They say that suffering can teach one a lot.
You can learn if you don't die first.
So, your crush thanks all those who let her know that she means more than a crush, that she is valuable and loved right where she is, whether it be in high Heaven or the depths of hell.

MARTA SHOMAN

Face of Gratitude

The family reunion had a built-in challenge. Within an hour after flying into town for the event, my sister asked, “Can you get our mother to shower?” Showering had become a conundrum for my father, who lives with our mother, Lilah. Laura, my sister who supervises their care, had no better luck. Mom has lost interest in her hygiene, with no sense of the frequency or thoroughness of bathing. With age comes the fear of falling, bruising and skin tears that cause elders to avoid getting into the shower. Our family viewed Lilah’s hygiene resistance to her aging, affected by dementia and inherent stubbornness.

Dad washes the king size sheets weekly; he is sensitive to Lilah’s body odor. Laura smells that “old person odor” in the apartment. This sensorial experience, described by some as “musky and grassy,” has nothing to do with bathing frequency, rather the body as we age. Nonenal odor is the result of a hormonal imbalance and a decrease in antioxidant protection by the skin, both side effects of aging. Despite these facts, our family believed our parents should shower at least once a week.

Mom responds with, “I’ve done that. I will do it later. Not today. Maybe tomorrow.” Lilah’s dementia distorts her sense of time and memory. She was always diligent about daily hygiene and dental care. She dressed well with matching accessories in that crisp, put-together style of her era. All that is behind her now.

On the first day of the reunion, Lilah did not angrily accuse us that no one told her of the event. She forgot that she forgot we were coming. Like a surprised child on Christmas, Mom is happy my brother and I have arrived from far off places. All her living children are present. She announces that the spirit of our deceased sister “is with us.” After lunch, Lilah rests in her recliner with a soft, red blanket covering feet to heart. She gently watches me pull the ottoman up to her chair and reaches her thin hand to squeeze my arm. “I’m so glad you are here,” she says with a frail smile.

“I’m very happy to be here too,” I reply, looking into her clear, blue eyes.

She is alert and present. I thank her for showing me, as a child, the pleasure of a warm washcloth pressed against my face.

“That does feel good,” she nodded with a faraway look in her eye.

“Mom, I’d love to help you feel the pleasure of a warm washcloth in the shower. How about taking one this afternoon?”

She withdraws from the conversation like a turtle retreating to her shell. “I will do it later,” and her eyelids drop shut. The conversation is over.

Witnessing our exchange from his recliner, Dad shrugs with a quiet reserve. “This is how it goes.”

The second day, Lilah is awake by noon and joins the family for lunch at the small table in the apartment. She listens intently to the stories of family trips in the tank-like 1960’s station wagon that pulled the pop-up camper. Scott fondly recalls the hike with Dad to Jenny Lake in the Grand Tetons. Laura recounts canoe-camping in the Adirondack chain of lakes. Mosquitoes, campfires, and freshly caught fish were part of evening entertainment. For Lilah, memories are more precious than gold. After lunch, when both parents move to their recliners, I approach again and fail to nudge my mother from her position. She adamantly tells me she has taken a shower. Her closed eyes signal we are done talking. Dad’s hands work the TV remote to turn on his favorite old western rerun, Gunsmoke. Silently, he gives me the look, Now you see what Laura and I have been dealing with.

It is the third morning of the reunion, the day of John and Lilah’s seventy-first wedding anniversary. The family also celebrates their respective birthdays at ninety-three and ninety-two years old. About an hour before lunch, I approach Mom with a sense of conviction and readiness.

“Mom, today is the day the family is celebrating your anniversary with Dad.” I pause to let the news sink in. “And we want to celebrate your birthdays. We will go to a restaurant for an early dinner. Let’s get ready with a shower and head wash.”

She is not convinced that such preparations are necessary. “Later.” She waves her hand at me to dismiss the annoying daughter. I hold my ground.

“Mom, this is not easy to say, but you smell. Daddy can smell you.” Lilah’s eyes open wide, a look of horror growing over her face. I press on, “Laura says the apartment smells like an old person. We are going out to dinner to celebrate your anniversary and birthdays. We need you to shower. You will feel better after a shower. Your scalp will feel better. I can help you, if you’d like.”

Lilah’s demeanor sharpens like a polished sword. She confidently reaches for her walker, pulls it toward her as she stands, and walks determinedly to the bedroom. I wait a few minutes before I peek through the crack in the door.

“Get out. I can shower myself.” Her raised voice is strident.

Dad and I prepare lunch with a quiet sense of expectancy. He has spent decades pacifying and dodging his wife’s moments of unleashed anger. The fallout from this confrontation could break loose an icy hell in his direction. Eventually, I hear the sound of the bedroom door opening, the walker moving in our direction. Lilah stands before us, her hair and skin shining. A freshness radiates from her.

“Mom, you are sparkling. You look squeaky clean.” From her tied brown shoes to combed damp, short hair, she is my mother. A force to be reckoned with.

Lilah looks me in the eye. Her gaze is steady. Her dementia momentarily on pause. With a courteous, business-like demeanor, free of anger and resentment, she steadies herself. Dignified, Lilah stands in front of her husband and me, her daughter. We await the matriarch’s proclamation.

“Thank you, Martha.”

“You’re welcome, Mom.”

No more words need be said.

Agency and dignity are preserved.

Now, time for lunch, a nap, and a celebratory dinner of well-lived lives.

The final moments of the reunion are bittersweet. “What day is it?” Mom asks as we move like a slow barge filling the width of the hallway with our round bodies. Holding her hand, I walk side by side with my mother, pacing myself to her slow, deliberate movements. Her blue jacket hangs open over her red and white striped blouse. Her blonde hair, a proud signifier of her identity, once regularly permed and styled, is now acceptably unkempt.

Lilah has asked this question only five times since I arrived two hours ago. I gently remind her, “Today is Friday, Mom.” She is determined to make it to the outdoor bench and sit next to her daughter. When we find our spot, Lilah moves the cane toward her while she backs into the seat. Collapsing onto the wooden bench, Mom sighs, “Whew, we made it.”

“When are you leaving, Martha?” she asks. This is the second most frequently asked question of the morning. “I go back to Colorado tomorrow morning. This is our last visit before I go home.”

On the bench, our bodies organically turn toward each other. Our faces look directly into the familiar and the ancestral. Her crooked, arthritic, index finger lightly traces my cheek with her unpolished short nail. I remember my mother filing and polishing her nails at the kitchen table under the large orb-shaped, hanging light. Quiet time for herself was late in the evening. She was her own manicurist, as was the way with many women who entered the middle class in the post WWII era. She used her bag of manicure tools on her cuticles, the shapely nails, and finished with the red or pink polish.

Her hands are a part of who she was long ago. When she was a nurse in the 1950s in Wisconsin, a relator in the Hudson River valley, and a recreational therapist in the valley psychiatric hospital. She raised four children while her husband traveled extensively for work. She was 49 years old when she graduated with her Bachelor’s degree. Now, when she remembers, she takes an emery board to her hands. Her finger traces around my nose, up the cheekbone and over my lip. I hold the hand she has curled in her lap. “Mom, I love you. Thank you for being my mom.” The words spill out with a tenderness greater than my mind can fathom. Only the heart knows these depths.

Her eyes are timeless with intensity. For the moment, the advanced dementia is in a state of grace. She continues to draw her finger around my ears, mouth, and chin. She is both far away in memory and very present in body. As her finger traces my face, thoughts glide through my mind.

I may never feel my mother's touch again. Feel this. Remember this.

Her words interrupt my mental chatter. “When you were a baby, you laughed and laughed.” Suddenly she is full of early mother memories that only she knows. Her finger stopped tracing my face. She leans forward, her forehead touching mine.

“I hope I was a good mother to you,” she whispers. “I know I did not always know what to do. I didn’t always do it right. You were the first one. I learned how to be a mother to you.” Lilah’s face floods with waves of question and love.

I lean into her as I whisper, “Mom, you gave your best. You are the best of Moms.”

MICHAEL SINDLER

A You-shaped hole

"every love story is a ghost story" - David Foster Wallace

You are still in my heart
look—it's a You-shaped hole
right here—see it?

I tried to fill it in—it doesn't
work—whatever and whoever
they just slip right out—fall away

it's like that stupid fairytale slipper
made to order—too precise a fit
for another foot—why is that?

my heart keeps beating—but there
is a faint murmur—a flutter
a short stop—a pause for thought

an echo in the chamber—if you
didn't know the sound—if you
hadn't rested an ear to my chest

so many times—if you were
anyone else—you wouldn't
notice—couldn't notice

it would seem as solid as
any other—no missing form
exposing sore muscle

in each ventricle—chambers
of sorrow
a temporal disorder

a custom cabinet—you could
slip right back in it—ease into
the warm welcome

but we know better—your home
is not here—this You-shaped hole
always available—always unfilled

pick the pepper from the stew

I tried to pick the pepper from the stew
so I could sprinkle it on something new
but you can't pull a seasoning from the past
and put it on the tongue or the plate
once it dissolves it simply will not wait
its subtle fragrance is too delicate to last

the precious saffron blossom of desire
turns bitter when held too close to fire
a waste of effort for the farmer and the chef
the rows of spices resting in clear jars
voices of flavor plucked from near and far
trapped too long become a song without a breath

I tried to hang a picture in the air
hoping that it would return my stare
but the gravity of the moment let me down
what remains in time is invisible and yet
we think we see just what we want to get
leaping to reach we only touch the ground

the portrait we remember posing for
time spent that once seemed such a chore
an image precious if only half remembered
days and weeks waiting for paint to dry
shadowed ghosts reflected in our eyes
are a lost map to unrecoverable treasure

I tried to distill wine from vinegar
the astringent bitter taste had no allure
but at least there is some sweet left in the sour
I tried to pick the pepper from the stew
so I could sprinkle it on something new
delicacies stay fresh for but a fleeting hour

beneath our heels

beneath our heels
heavy booted or barefoot
a conversing lace of root
and mold of lines and lives
interconnected and electric

lay prone or supine
clothed or naked pressing
against earth eyes shut
breathing in rhythm

feel the language of terra
firma as it dances flickering
from flora to flora
a vernacular of vegetation
so unlike our own

its vibration filling forests
laughing under lawn tied
together in tender
terminology indecipherable
undetermined telepathy

press yourself into soil
or soft grass carpet
hide between tall grain
stalks hemmed into rows

that reach like telegraph
lines bearing news
of nature along acres

forget all that you can
of surface even as insects
curious creatures crawl
in inspection searching
new mass for sustenance

focus down into firmament
feel yourself grow roots
feel them dig through dirt
to meet and mingle

with mushroom and oak
sassafras and chinaberry
rhododendron and viburnum
iris and ivy and all that is green

let your soul sing with substratum
let bacterium germinate
a flowering sense of wonder
bloom and blossom in awed
awareness of mutual
dependency and community

open eyes and rise—stand tall
stretch to sky—a shoot turned
sapling turned tree drawing
inspiration returning adoration

romance of root entwined in heart
stride on and carry love subtle
song of earth forever in your ear

holes in space

sweet child—
as you look back in time
to see the holes in space where
friends and family should be
short lives that should have left
longer shadows across experience
kisses, hugs, and lessons never shared
know that they would now embrace you
in communion transcending span of days
these holes you see still let in light
pattern woven round them stitches all to all
echoes' flowering song exhales sweet scent
from memory and momentum—they are you
and you contain in you at least a part of them
those known to you or lost before your arrival
these holes may tunnel down to grief
but they fill with wonder

oh child, dear child—
do not fear to peer deep
and discover marvelous
tales that mirror your new trail
living loved ones may falter—falling
into mourning—dipping arms into openings
attempting to pull last treasures from well
of tears—hold them tight—do not allow them
to fall in and be lost—an occasional drink of salt
water passing lips will wake tired taste buds
and summon recollection of shared feasts
but these waters of grief do not
bubble up to be bathed in

sweet little one—
we wish—as all who have lost
will always wish—you could have known
or heard the singular spirit encased in each—
lost opportunity deprives us of the sweet
and the tender—the hilarious and melancholy
character each snuffed candle's once-dancing flame
contained—look into the eyes of the living behind
puddling saline falls—that candlelight still
flickers undimmed—let them kindle
and pass on the incandescence
let the light that emanates from
these holes in space that mark your past
that invisibly led you to now stay strong

sweet, dear, gentle child
be all the sum their lost promise
allows—for you have life and that is
what their paid price bought
and you are worth it all

VAL U ABLE

Peace of Release

May I serve you a piece of...Peace? This holiday season you've likely indulged in a piece of pumpkin pie or pecan—or, if you're fortunate: red velvet cake—and, if you're unfortunate: dreaded fruitcake! I offer you a slice of a healthier option: a piece of Peace. (Whipped cream optional!)

Logic leads me to assume letting go is simple. Experience convinces me it's quite complex.

Human nature craves familiarity—a sure thing, even if that sure thing is painful ... and destructive. A

leap into the unknown is terrifying, at best. What if the devil I know is better than the devil I don't?

But what if the unfamiliar devil is no nymph at all, but instead an angel of emancipation?! With this hope in mind I alter my mind, loosening my grip on past baggage, to free myself for new horizons, an exciting adventure!

I've learned that which I clutch onto clutters my space...yet what I willingly release returns to me later if it's mine... and flows freshly to me when it's time.

There's Peace in the release.

Rest in Peace

I expected the most sleepless night of my life. I experienced the most peaceful.

Laying down in unfamiliar surroundings, all alone, having fled my home—for the 2nd time in as many decades—should have made me unsettled, at best. Yet the freedom of escaping my tormentor released my mind & body—and very soul—into placid rest.

Sleeping with the enemy was no picnic at all. He left the cage door open and the feathered unfettered flew free. The caged bird had sung long enough.

Now, 5 years later, I once again find myself laying my head on the pillow in a place of pain and loss – yet resting in perfect peace. This time my best friend & faithful companion of 16 years was left behind at the animal emergency clinic—her last day of life on this earth. As she died in my arms, my phone died, too, forcing me to return home this dark, stark night to total silence/isolation. Yet I slipped into slumber promptly and slept well.

I rest in peace from a soul at peace with what comes and what goes. It's liberating to go with the Flow... and slow with the Flow. I live a life of surrender—to something bigger than myself and a Purpose higher than myself. May my precious pup Rest in Peace as I do.

Emphasizing the “u” in Thankful... and the Thankful in You

Having heard it's nigh impossible to be blue and thankful simultaneously, I decided upon a purposeful selection of the latter.

Following a series of intentional exercises to retrain my brain for a default setting of gratitude, I realized the success of my endeavor when the crisp "ding!" tone of an incoming text abruptly interrupted my afternoon siesta.

Instead of irritation, my mind chose appreciation. I have functional auditory skills to hear the sound, I own a fancy new cell phone (gifted to me by a generous soul from an attitude of gratitude of their own, ironically), that someone is thinking of me at this moment and took action to reach out!

The ultimate test may have occurred when upon being hit head-on by the second of two trucks within a few months' time, my first thought was, "Who will be able to take me home from the hospital, when I'm living in hiding from domestic violence?" Immediately followed by, "What am I grateful for in this moment?"

My retrained mind promptly replied to its own inquiry...which then led to a life-empowering response from the ambulance EMT holding my hand.

J L WRIGHT

I don't like the heat

But I can

bake in sunshine
what life is like
ruminate
made as
the throne

anticipate
without you
about the life we
you abdicate
I placed you on

someone illuminate
overworked
celebrate the love
the life we

my
heart
we had
wanted

shall I concentrate
great life was as
me by walking
and handing me

on how
you castigate
out the door
a lemonade

Friday 500

LARA HUSSAIN

Lavender

It was in the sacred clime of the university natatorium that I inhaled my first breath of him: wheaty hair, oil and brine. In the water, he was godlike: part man, part fish. By the time I realized he was merely a mortal, it was too late.

His carved arms pulled, his legs pulsated, his muscled back and chest rose above the waves, his torso arched and then submerged again, and again, and again. The precision of his movements unleashed a prehistoric hunger, one I didn't know I possessed.

Hot-faced and heart thudding so fast that it made me dizzy, I asked a lifeguard for help. She turned and looked at me, impressed, and immediately agreed.

"Thanks," I said, in full body relief. "I've never done this before."

The next day the lifeguard extended a scrap of paper with 10 digits scrawled in thick blue ink, fresh enough that I could smell its camphor-like oiliness: the scent of his pen and phone number. I didn't have the nerve to call, but I had done enough. I had awakened him, to me. He slipped into my swimming lane. His smile was all teeth, long, white, and straight. He stood fearlessly close, so close I could smell the warm skin of his heaving chest.

"Dinner, Thursday?" he asked. A date. He already knew my answer.

In the outside world, we floundered at first, if only for a moment, struggling to find footing in a different atmosphere. He lured me to his home, with promises of sweets. In his treehouse garage apartment, he made mint tea. We fed each other candied chocolate in stages of undress. The tea went cold, forgotten.

His smooth skin and thick muscles belied a nearly 12-year age gap. He was brawn and musk, a dissertation defense away from a career. I was wide-eyed and dewy, fresh from the cocoon of a fatherless childhood. He enveloped me, mind and body, with his intense attention and broad grin. I gasped for the balm of his collarbone and neck, where my head nestled perfectly. He swam in my adoration.

He was hot cotton and marbled green soap, an intoxicating combination after fast bike rides. He was sour lemonade after a day of teaching, amber oil after an afternoon on the beach, dry wool on rainy days indoors. I came to know his smell when it was infused with campfire smoke, salt from the ocean, sweat from a run, jasmine rice from shared dinners. He never wore cologne. He lived. His was the best kind of scent.

There was a summer of delight, house sitting together on a beach, the tang of salt-soaked towels persistent on the balcony. And another summer apart, savory independence with my big city internship and his long days away on the coast. There were lusty mistakes: an infidelity I admitted to. An infidelity he did not.

We found an apartment meant for two, the glossy one that smelled of fresh paint and a new start. We still walked to buy candied chocolates for long nights of studying, though I found I was losing my taste for sweets. Winter descended. There were acidic months of separation while he finalized his thesis. There was pungent disagreement over my position in a published article. Then there was slow, saline sorrow when his mother left the living.

The world pulsed with fragrant promises as my graduation grew near. But he faded bitterly into his laptop, the library, not home. I realized, too late, that his scent was too often absent, and changing. He was acrid anger, acerbic frustration, and mildewed boredom. Then there was lavender. Another woman.

“I love her,” he confessed at last.

He didn’t have to tell me. And I didn’t want to know. But maybe he knew the admission would end my intoxication. Maybe he knew it would drown my senses. He wasn’t wrong.

“She was my girlfriend in high school. We got pregnant. And there was an abortion. We regretted it, that we didn’t try and make it work. Then I saw her again...”

He must have seen my face.

“But I don’t regret this, us,” he said, pointing to the space between us. “I’m glad this happened.”

He was already using past tense. It was over? I slid to the floor, unable to speak.

“We reconnected. It just... happened. She’s pregnant again,” he continued. “We’re going to try to make it work this time.”

“When—” I started, after a long pause, not sure what it was that I wanted to know. “When is she due?”

“Three months. I’m moving in with her, to get things set up before the baby comes. A boy.” Despite himself, he smiled.

My exhalation was long, acquiescent, anguished. Fat tears rolled down my face and plugged my nose. And then, blessedly, anosmia.

Losing my sense of smell was the punishment, or gift, for falling in love with the scent of a god-turned-man who chased life, but was never quite willing to make a lasting life with me.

The world was odorless as he packed boxes of books and tools, taped them closed, and filled the moving van. Even as sweat stains blossomed beneath the arms that had once cradled me.

He waved his hand over a mound of clothing. “I don’t need those anymore...” spilled from his mouth, on a breath that had always carried rice noodles and chamomile. What did that breath smell like now, with her, another life, a baby on the way?

“Would you mind donating them?”

I chewed on the edge of my nail, gulping back hot anger and hurt. I nodded.

“That’s all,” he said as we stood over the clothing. My face burned, standing near him and his still-tantalizing flesh. I held my breath. He side-stepped around me. There was ear-ringing silence.

The red glow of the van’s backend lit up the driveway. The slow roll of tires picked up speed, and my legs carried me into the street to watch. The tail lights shrank, blinked, and disappeared. I inhaled and found I could smell again: the bitter exhaust of the departed.

A wake of wet tissues followed me into the bedroom. I knelt and scooped the unwanted clothes into a plastic bag. The navy and brown striped shirt was on top. I knew this shirt. I had embraced it on summer evenings with friends and hoppy beer. I had removed it from him time and time again, in the woody treehouse apartment, in the wafting smoke of beach campfires, in a piney mountain lodge, in the seclusion of an old truck bed.

When I crawled into the bed that night, I brought the shirt with me. For days, I would wake to his scent and wait for him to curl around me, until I remembered that he was gone.

It was many weeks before I could return to the pool. My own swimsuit, which smelled of dry chlorine even after I washed it, made me weep. But on one dew-scented morning, I began again. Tears gathered in my goggles in the locker room. On another day, I made it into the pool dry-eyed. And then another. And another.

Loneliness faded in measured breaths, counted strokes, and hundreds of laps: the watery distance between what was and what could be. But as far as I swam, I could not forget him. My heartbeat stuttered when I smelled warm Lycra on the body of a stranger. I drowned in the desire it evoked. Other men inhabited my bed. The sheets floated in the redolence of unfamiliar sweat.

The weather turned cold and then warm again. I moved to another town, accompanied by his clothes. The summer was long and hot, leisurely stretching into fall. At the cusp of autumn's chill, I realized it had been months since I retrieved his shirt. I found it in the space between the mattress and headboard, the cloth flattened and stale, his scent long since faded.

I returned the shirt to the plastic bag and knotted the top. Finally, I gave the clothes away. They were for others to sort, wear, and fill with their own scents.

Writing in Color

ENRIQUE GAUTIER

A Poem that refuses a name part 1

*Like an arm that always hurts
From too many bullets that it packed
But it is the left arm that hurts
Not the right but the left
Maybe it hurts from cigarettes
it never held*

Knowing pain

like acetylcholine living
in the synaptic cleft
panicking, looking for a mate
like cicadas in the summer
screaming, hollering
ignoring time
as the Sun ignores the musing
of mundane men
is like a shot,
a shot at a nicotine receptor
to cause a cascade
to forget to breathe
and relieve or relive
the moment a brain lost its way
of sodium to
enter the cell
knowing that this dance will begin again

Loving pain

like a cigarette loves new prey
slowly oxidizing
subsidizing
ostracizing
dimerizing
every thought
hope
of DNA to repair itself
to only release the mind
from the prisons of the day

Children of the Night

When Enrique was a child

Enrique saw

The children of the night
crawling on the rivers of the Arauca
riding horses

d-a-y-a-n-d-n-i-g-h-t

marrying the light of night
with the beauty of their skin
perfectly golden brown
as if the most perfect cacao
bitter and sweet
holding nothing
and everything supreme

subtle

When Enrique was young

Enrique hid

From the rain as it
caressing mountainsides
Enrique hid, ran and cried

like a child,

with a bike running from the ghosts
of the day

Hating the dreams of the night

W-i-s-h-i-n-g-t-h-a-t-E-n-r-i-q-u-e-c-o-u-l-d-b-e

Anything other than an Enrique,
a brown man

In a sea of milk

like a spider's web
covered in the morning dew

dangling, shining

always the reminder of a pest
scrapping toilets
to feed *the mess*
from the cops walking the streets

eyes darting from left to right

like a viper running from men with machetes
for the crime of eating mice
as if a viper that gets rid of vermin
has any fault for being born a viper in the first place

When Enrique was lost

Enrique hid

Like rain, thunder and lightning and thunder
like a horse without any reins
runs free, pure and insane
at the sight of fire
knowing that the night was my friend
much like a tranquil lake is a friend
to anyone not knowing what is in *Lake's* depth

When Enrique was a young man

Enrique breathed

Relief like a man on his knees
feeling the holy ghost pulse through my veins,
like a bird I could fly free, feel the wind under
wings of lead
like a convict is free in a jail
with light for 15 minutes a day
like a child drinking chocolate milk in the middle of the day,
for a job well done my face lit.

When Enrique was older

Enrique gagged

like a fish breathing air for the first time
like a man lost in space
without sound
without knowing what is *right* what is *left*
there is nothin' left, nothin' right
like drinking milk in the raw
or sushi for the first time
puke coming out of Enrique's nostrils
and realizing for the first time that Enrique's tongue and lungs
share the same space for a time!

FELICIA HAURY

Crab as a metaphor for don't F*** with me

The steadfast crab
In the sink knows
What I am up to
With his caviar eyes
He sees me coming
From all directions
Returning my gaze
Like a monocle
With a kaleidoscope view
En Garde!
I fence with tongs.
Toying with him
He snaps back.
A venerable rival
I pause in awe of his rock-ribbed courage.
I too am a crustacean.
Cornered and alive
A worthy foe
I have sharp, red claws
And a tough shell
Formidable as teeth
I see all the ways
You have plotted my demise
A fugitive from the sea
To a quaint aquarium
Crowded and cloudy
Trapped, ogled, and fed.
A pot of boiling water
Is waiting for me.
And I will scream.
Come at me if you dare!
Even in death
You must work to enjoy me.

Desert Cemetery

A visit to my spiritual and childhood home just south of the border city of El Paso is never complete without a stop at Socorro Mission's historic cemetery. The actual mission, Mission Nuestra Señora de la Limpia Concepción del Socorro (Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception) is part of the historic Texas Mission Trail. The National Park Service describes this cemetery as one that has recorded a century of life and death in the 17th century settlement of Socorro del Sur. This church, which survived floods and fire, has served this community for over 300 years.

This cemetery is ancient and only marginally maintained. It doesn't have a manicured lawn like a golf course for the deceased. There is no plot you can purchase with a shady leafy canopy that you or your grandfather can have as your final resting place. World War II veterans like my father are identified with tiny flags on their graves, unlike the austere white graves lined up, saluting the skies in military cemeteries. There are tumbleweeds, caliche pathways, ambitious ant hills, unmarked crooked crosses and cement tombstones that threaten to sink with age. A chain link fence marks the cemetery's border with Socorro Road, the designated Mission Trail, and on the southside there is a hodgepodge of adobe casas with an assortment of cars and car parts out front.

Honoring my parents is the primary reason for this stop, but this cemetery is part of a living memory where parishioners were once actors in Catholic processions with pageantry. As my sister's car passes the stark wooden optic white cross in the entrance, I can almost hear the Mexican Jesuit priest call out the stations of the cross in Spanish on his bullhorn during the enactment of the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday morning. Community members, including my sisters, dressed up like the women of Jerusalem and the local farmers were centurions complete with horses. Santiago Fresquez was Jesus Christ, wearing a modified crown of thorns. During one dramatic moment Veronica Candelaria, who played Veronica, went up to Santiago to wipe his face like the legendary woman, showing the participants that it had an image of Christ. The local TV station once captured this whole religious spectacle as newsworthy, which I found commonplace.

The abandoned adobe shelters that border the cemetery were once nicely painted stops on the Corpus Christi procession, for which us girls would don our white virginal dresses resplendent with petticoats and lacy veils. Our dresses were those we wore to receive one of the seven sacraments, holy eucharist. The slow and painful deterioration of the adobe shelters is indicative of the apparent abandonment of such rituals that were so important to the community just a generation ago.

My parents' side by side graves are located on one of the corners where the adobe shelters melt away. They have custom-made cement slabs like many of the old families. The date on my mom's side has been corrected since her long-time caretaker provided an incorrect birthdate to the person who created the cement slab. To be fair, no one really knew my mother's exact birthdate due to the loss of her baptismal certificate when her childhood church in Mexico burned down. My father's side of the grave recognizes his years as a proud soldier.

The morning of my father's funeral and burial, Fort Bliss soldiers stood at attention and played taps to say farewell to our family's patriarch. At my mother's funeral, her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren walked in procession behind her with Mariachis playing songs of tribute and farewell. My parents' glorious farewells from this world seem so distant as I kneel to pray on their simple concrete graves.

The next step of the visit is the los inocentes section, dedicated to those infants and children who passed suddenly and tragically. I have family here—a brother and sister who died tragically in the 1950s by illness and accidental poisoning. Those younger members of the family, like me, did not know them but for a lonely picture of the infant boy who stared out from an antique frame. This picture was in my parents' bedroom as if he was transformed into a santo that they prayed to for redemption. Walking to this section amidst the ant hills and sunken graves, I remember that my father always knelt before both graves adorned with cherubs and shed quiet tears of remembering. Another presence in this section is that of my infant niece who died after my sister's aneurysm during her 7-month pregnancy. This gravesite recalls a family struggle to bury my sister's child in the cemetery.

The all-male parish council refused to allow the child's burial here because technically, my sister no longer was a La Purisima parishioner.

The council saw the light after being reminded that my father spent many hot Saturdays hoeing the prickly tumbleweeds bordering the cemetery. Cemeteries document a family's history.

This is a place where I remember the elders of my childhood. As I walk further to the newer periphery of the cemetery, I see names on graves that I used to see in mailboxes: Fresquez, Carbajal, Apodaca, Lujan. Couples are buried together or apart, depending on the nature of their passing and what resources the family could pull together.

Devout kneeling angels and Virgen Mary plaster statues are abundant on these dusty graves. Elaborate engravings on cement gravestones declare the children's never-ending devotion to their family patriarchs and matriarchs. The Dollar Store vases with yellow and pink plastic flowers and groomed graves indicate someone is remembering those earthly borne commitments.

In my mind's eye, I see neighbor's faces, not graves. Tito's sun and wind burned face; characteristic straw hat tilted just so as he waved to all who passed on the dirt camino by his house. Julia, his glamorous country wife with golden skin and Elizabeth Taylor sixties-styled eyebrows, who invited you to her kitchen to try her cheese, homemade with their dairy cows' milk. Juan Fresquez, a postman by profession, always stately and formal as he helped the parish priest serve Communion, pray endless rosaries, and ring the bells during the consecration of the Body of Christ. Elizario, "Chayo," another community servant who lived down the road, headed the church council and had an elementary school named after him. Strong and sturdy grave markers that will withstand the Spring Lenten winds, showcasing the people they once were when they walked about this desert community.

The church has survived floods and fire and has undergone a full-scale restoration with 22,000 adobes added to stabilize its walls. But its camposanto remains forgotten by locals. As I say my adios and take my final stroll among the deceased, my head buzzes with questions like the flies around here. Why is there a section full of weathered crosses with no names marking those who are here? Why the sunken graves and multitude of weeds that my father used to tend? Who has forgotten? Where are their descendants? I drive away in disturbed silence and hope that my community's history will not be blown away by the unforgiving desert wind.

CAROL TRUJILLO

Hooked, Eyes wide open after Margaret Atwood

When I see you
I just know we'd fit.
You'd glide into
& slide onto me.
I know you like
leaves on a fall day, a
bubbling brook, you'd long to hook
that brown scrappy dry foot into,
around my every curve. An
afternoon look, locked eye to eye
right there under that blue sky. Me: a
March Pisces, a rainbow fish
on a dangling hook.
You: July Cancer, an
angler you are, open
mind, waiting for my deep dark brown eye

lashes, flickering you
remind of that time, long ago, fit-
ting me into
narratives of an old me-
andering, river winding like-
ly stories unfolding, a-
nother life we lived, hook-
ed to other poles, into
separate journeys. Never an-
ticipated this intersection; eye-
lined and crinkled, a luring smile, you again. A
man now, no longer teen-aged, quite the catch. Fish
for me again. I want you to hook
me on your line, that an-
gry girl from back when, open
hearted with baited breast. Swim to me through our third eye.

Writing in the Museum at History Colorado

Ellie and the Grasshoppers

Elizabeth stood in the doorway of the house her husband had promised her back where the wind blew a breeze that smelled of fresh flowers. She had been balancing on her tippy toes, trying with all her might to attach an old sock to the short hanging line that could fit in their backyard, if you could call it that. He had emerged behind her without her noticing, and calmly took it from her hands and clipped it himself.

“There’s more room for laundry in Colorado,” he had said, his eyes squinting in the bright glare of the sun.

That was seven months prior, and this big Colorado house was spacious, there was no doubt about that. Room for what, that’s what Elizabeth wondered to herself. Room for grasshoppers drowning in dust, so completely covered that they looked like little mounds of sand, dancing and animated like they might be from your dreams.

In her right hand, she held a mug of coffee that had taken a whole morning to prepare. Though, as expected, a grasshopper had mistaken it for a warm pond, letting his worn out muscles recover their strength. *If grasshoppers even have muscles, Elizabeth thought. Those little beasts, they’re stronger than John, and John can wrangle the most misbehaving horse on any outfit.*

With her left hand, and without any hesitation, Elizabeth picked the grasshopper up by his left wing and lifted him, dripping and burnt, out of her coffee mug. He was twitching, and so she dropped him on the floor and pressed her boot on top of him. She then gulped down the coffee in under three seconds, eyes squinted closed. If you don’t drink things quickly, the dust gets inside and you have to wait a whole midday siesta for the dust to settle at the bottom. If you do wait, you’ll need to gulp it even faster, before the dust has a moment to catch the current and swim down your throat to collect in your belly.

Elizabeth’s belly was bigger than last week, and she had half a mind to think it was all dust. Just dust, and maybe some grasshoppers that hopped right down her throat when she wasn’t awake.

“Ellie?” John croaked from what looked like one hundred miles away.

Elizabeth could only see his figure like a dot on the oversized plow he was maneuvering solo. With nothing but dust and grasshoppers, sound travels fast and far.

It makes you feel that you can't get lost. Travel forever in any which way, and you'll just need to hoot a little hoot before your family finds you again.

It was one of the reasons why Ellie didn't just get her things together and start trekking back east herself. She would only get a few hundred feet away from the house before John recognized the melodic crunching of soil as his wife's and before he galloped behind her and scooped her up with his arms and plopped her down in the wagon like a misbehaving child. In the morning, John wouldn't mention it, and neither would Ellie, though she'd think about it and wonder how she might have been more quiet and gotten farther.

"Ellie?" John repeated, emphasizing the e sound, sending it rolling and rolling.

"What?"

"You got anything for the throat?"

"You're gonna have to come over here and address me within a normal distance if you want me to understand what in God's name you're saying."

This was just one way that Ellie had some control. He wanted something, he had to come get it. She stayed still by the doorway, not averting her eyes as John galloped over, the whole thing taking around five minutes. When he stopped, the horse looked beat, sweat dripping off his eyebrows, but not wet because of the dust. Ellie almost felt bad she had called him over, as it wasn't the horse's fault they were living with dust for floorboards and not another soul for morning conversation within ten miles.

"Coffee maybe?"

"One grasshopper got my coffee," Ellie said. "By now, I'd say ten have got yours."

Moving her body aside slightly, Ellie let John in the house, noticing his dusty, dirty boots blended into the dusty, dirty surroundings. John limped to the coffee mug, dropping his whole hand in like a shovel and bringing out more grasshoppers than you could count. These ones weren't baked yet, and clung to his arm, nibbling away at his arm hairs and hopping into his shirt to start their munching. It was too late for this coffee, and Ellie knew that already. She had already put on another pot on the stove to start the process all over again.

VICKY BRADFORD

Angel

Her name is Angel. I learned that after I had spontaneously described her as such. On that sunny day in March, this “person from the streets” renewed my faith in humanity with a single gesture that meant my world to me.

It happened in the most unexpected way. I was hurrying to a writers’ workshop held at the History Colorado Center. After having mastered the complexities of the new parking system, I was feeling relieved. I was, after all, going to be on time! I paused for a moment on the sidewalk to be certain my phone was in my small black purse. It was. Everything was there. Everything was perfect! I was on my way to a good day!

It was when I checked in at the museum’s front desk that I realized what had happened, and panic set in. My small black purse that looked like a very small suitcase was missing.

“Have you seen my purse?” I asked the friendly History Colorado staffers at the front desk.

“No,” a worker named Trevor said, expressing concern. “You didn’t have it when you checked in, I’m just sure.” Megan, his coworker, agreed. Dashing out the front door of the museum, I retraced my steps to the garage. Nothing! No small black purse on the sidewalk, in the gutter, or on the low wall in front of the museum. It had simply vanished into that unknown space where all lost purses go.

The rest seemed like a blur. The contents of the purse flashed before my eyes: My phone! The sizable amount of cash I’d just gotten from the bank! My credit cards, driver’s license, insurance cards, and some irreplaceable personal treasures. My LIFE was in that purse! And now it was gone.

Returning to the museum, I hastily made my way to the Security Office. David was on duty. His sincere concern helped me calm down a bit, but all I could think of was HOW do you begin to replace your life?

“Is your phone in your purse?” David asked.

“Yes! *Everything* is in there!”

“Well, let’s call it. Maybe, if someone picked up your purse, they will answer.”

We waited breathlessly as I heard him dial each number.

This isn't going to work! I thought. The phone is locked!

Then the miracle occurred. A voice answered!

David told this voice, "The lady who lost the purse is standing right here. I'll put her on."

"Hello," I said, shakily.

Her very fast response was so rapid I could not understand what was being said. And my relief, disbelief, and shock also clouded my ability to think.

"Can you please slow down a little," I asked. "I can't understand you."

Then "my angel" explained. She had found my purse and was on her way to the police station to turn it in.

"I didn't open it at all until the phone rang," the voice said.

"Everything is in it, I promise."

After arranging to meet in front of the museum, I went outside to stand in the sun.

"I'll be there in about ten minutes," she'd said.

I'd told her I was wearing a bright red sweater, but I realized I had no idea how I would recognize her. I needn't have worried. After almost exactly ten minutes had passed, I saw her. She was wearing a bright pink velour jogging suit and was pulling a large backpack on wheels, overflowing with what appeared to be most of her worldly possessions. Her companion was pushing a beat-up bike, and he had a most engaging, bright smile.

"Here it is!" she said, holding my purse up high so I could see it. She repeated that she hadn't opened it. I stuttered an expression of gratitude, totally inadequate for the waves of relief that were sweeping over me.

"You are such an angel!" I said, meaning every single word.

"That's my name," she said softly.

I was stunned. Yet, given all that had transpired, I was not surprised. Her companion confirmed her name was Angel.

Mumbling what seemed like weak expressions of thanks, gratitude, and appreciation, I said, "I know you didn't do this to get anything in return, but I hope you'll let me give you something." I held out two crisp fifty dollar bills, fresh from my stop at the bank.

She staggered back a little. Her eyes widened.

Her companion said softly, “God bless you. God bless you.”

“Please use it to do something nice for yourself,” I said.

Without hesitating, she responded, “Tonight I’ll stay at a hotel.”

We embraced. We laughed. We all agreed we were indeed blessed to have met. With one last thank you, I went up the steps to the museum. I could hear them talking softly as they walked away.

Somehow, I feel my life was changed that day. I found I could believe once again that there are good people in this world, and I am grateful for this reminder. It was a small moment in the great expanse of all moments, but I’m so very glad it happened to me.

I had many “angels” in my life that day! Trevor and Megan at the front desk, whose instant concern and unfettered gladness framed these events. David, the Security Guard, whose natural empathy and quick thinking were pivotal in the day’s happy resolution. The “companion,” whose name I never learned, but who shared the experience with such warmth and loving kindness. Most of all there was Angel, whose inherent honesty and ability to see, without hesitation, the “right thing to do” made all the difference.

As I think back on what transpired, I have one wish for anyone who reads my words: When trouble comes your way and you don’t know what to do, I hope for you, too, that a special angel emerges to change your life.

Queer Creatives

MELISA JOURNEY

These Heirlooms Are Not Mine

“You can cut the cord but you can never cut the connection”

 mom always announces
 every year on my
 birthday like clockwork with tick-tocks
 as loud as the echoes of my childhood backyard
 and its gigantic weeping willow
 that we never thought would fall until
 a hurricane brought it down like
 a wolf blowing on a straw house

An unsevered connection besides
the time mom read my diary
disconnected abruptly
like a 1983 curly phone cord ripped
from its wall jack,
the conversation cut short while
I focused on ripped out pages
that had never been offered

“I love you more”
 her always response when we say goodbye

Except for that time
I lied
And lied
And lied again

Like a broken record stuck on the worst song
Love paused
An elongated silence of a phone call crowded
with static and buried half-truths eavesdropping
on the noise its half-lie sisters make as they dig
themselves out of impossibly charred ground

“I want you to follow your dreams”

Aside from when I disappeared into the New Mexico wind
like an aimless red balloon
She begged me to return
Unrelenting with brush strokes of guilt the way
a generous painter pours color, dark blues overflowing
Onto a stained yellow floor

“I just want you to be happy”

And I believed her
I still want to believe her

Messy piles of things unsaid
Stay locked away
In a vault of heirlooms
Disguised as a box of treasures.

This treasure box is not mine.
These heirlooms are not mine.

She tossed the key
Glittering secrets put to rest
About her
About me
Secrets wrapped in generations of wool
Holes the size of lemons
Woolen years devoured by moon moths telegraphing
silk messages with instructions on
how to keep dreams alive.

Step One: hang the coat in front
of a sunny window

Step Two: Let sunlight float through
its jagged openings like feathers slicing through dust

Step Three: Check the pockets for a faded, crumpled note

Step Four: Learn how to mend

A round tin sewing box covered with shiny apples its pin
cushion overstuffed like a subway car at rush hour

She showed you
Remember?
How to mend.

Sunlight
Shining prisms on heirloom walls
Light refracted
by every word never spoken.

ROBERTO SANTOS

Tãno & Sinãhi

Tãno suddenly realized where she was again with the cracking of the rocks under the wheels of Uncle Rod's truck as he pulled onto the road to her house. The searing reflection of the sun on the coconut fronds forced her eyes into squinting, the only movement her body would make. Her seat was wet with sweat, her hair stuck to her forehead, her throat was dry.

"Be good, ah," Uncle Rod said. Tãno tried not to cringe visibly at his smile, crooked on his oily face. She couldn't get out of the truck fast enough. She flew to her room as quietly as possible and dropped her backpack on the floor. She didn't want to sit down. Her blood was surging, her breath pulled from her lungs. She crept back out into the carpeted hallway, easing the bedroom door shut, hurrying on her tiptoes to the backdoor of the house. As soon as she could see Uncle Rod's pickup turn out of sight, she ran down the hill over the wet grass and tore through the field of bananas, the leaves slapping her arms, toward the back of the cliff and across the grove of elephant ears.

She climbed up the limestone boulders, her slick zori slipping off her heel over a sharp edge that sliced through it. Her fingernails scraped at the moss for a grip as she ascended to the caves. She hoped Sinãhi would be there and she also hoped he wouldn't.

The wings of the sali broke like a million black leaves through the still air. Her primu was not there. Tãno stood frozen again as the light changed. The shadows disappeared. She felt the chill of the wind pushed through the cave up the cliff by the coming squall. And in three loud breaths, it poured over the rocks and in so many little waterfalls over her head and shoulders, down her arms, steaming over her hot skin. And she cried. She cried and cried in the presence of her ancestors and all the ghosts of war.

She felt every small muscle in her face flexing as she sobbed. She felt hot tears and sweat as it mixed with the rain, warming every drop as it rolled and poured down her skin.

She prayed in her heaving to Tan Guela and Tun Guelu and imagined it was them consoling her in their warm, wet bosoms between them. She invoked her name, Tāno, willing the earth and banyan roots to envelop her and disappear her in dead leaves, geckos and millipedes.

Tāno. It was not the name her father gave her. The name her father gave her was Spanish, meant to blend her into those around her. It was her mother – her mothers – who called her Tāno, to remind her of where she came from and who she is. The women, the aunties, the baklas, the effeminate teCHa who recited the rosary and helped at the church. They were every warmed drop of water, washing her tears into the mud.

She wished she could see into the future, and if only she could, it would have made all the difference. Years later, when they were drunk after a party, home earlier than they wanted to be, even though it was midnight, they drove like fools down to Paradise, hiked giggling through the dark through the forest and down the stout cliff, threw off their clothes, fragrant mwáár of ilangilang and kalachucha still on their heads, flowing toward and from each other in the dark waves.

At Unai Bapot after a warm afternoon, a bunch of bare butts they pretended to be secretive about when a group of Korean tourists walked cautiously up the sparkling sand to take photos in long dresses and sport jackets. The sky just kept getting more and more beautiful and filled with pink and ultraviolet and indigo, they couldn't leave! So they piled up the driftwood, offered coconuts to the taotao mo'na. The stars came out and they shone on their queer, magical, naked dance around Chaifí's gift, i guâfi, fire.

It was often so much easier for Sinâhi to be alone as a queer little highschooler than to be around other people. He hiked every day he could to the waterfall at Talofofu and the beach of Forbidden Island, where he could be a spirit among the taotao mo'na and the hilitai and the fanihi, and a mermaid dripping in shells and sea foam, singing in the caves below the white, swallow-tailed seabirds, alternately and simultaneously.

He stayed up late, waiting for everyone else to fall asleep while he sat on the picnic table outside. He wrote love letters and poetry to the moon, shuddered with teenaged longing to be seen but also invisible. He masturbated and prayed in shame for forgiveness over and over again to a white god.

Just like the sunset, it was so hard for him to leave the sight of the moon, that luminous pearl over its opaline ocean bed. It electrified him. It kept him alive. It was too beautiful to give up. In spite of so much loneliness and longing and shame and endless begging to be changed and be forgiven, he could never convince himself that life would be more beautiful any other way.

But for both Tåno and Sinåhi, their mothers saved them. The mothers they found in their rebellious aunties, their nosy cousins, and the protective queers who were used to risking their lives.

The rain finally softened and settled over the mud and rocks and leaves, and it turned pink, reflecting the last of the sun's rays painting the lightened clouds. Tåno realized the sun was sinking below the cliff behind her, below the ocean past the sandy white beaches on the west side.

Soaked to the bone and now exhausted after the self-pity had all but drained out of her body, Tåno steadied herself over the slippery, sharp rocks and roots as her eyes followed the fading blue streaks of twilight that shone dimly on the path out of the old forest.

Sinåhi's mind races even as his eyes remain closed, his head still on his pillow. Visions of the dragonfruit ripening, turning purple through the green skin. The large rat hopping across the overgrown grass of the back yard. Tåno's pale face dripped in the flashes of rain. Where did she just come from that she was standing so long in the torrents of rain? Why didn't she come over to his house after school as usual? Where is she now? Why hasn't she called?

Yelling in his parents' bedroom, Sinåhi's mind is hyperaware, sharp, and he is awake. But he knows he is not getting out of bed. He is wishing his bed would absorb his body and he would become a sheet with no ears and no eyes. Things are falling to the floor. Doors are slamming. Dishes are breaking. Sinåhi still has eyes, because now they are watering. He still has a heart, because it is breaking.

Something is stirring over the ocean this evening, sweeping waves of saltwater upon the coasts and more rainwater over the forests inland. The bamboo leaves and coconut palms swish, and the voices of the seabirds ricochet in and out of every hole in the cliff face behind the house.

CONTRIBUTORS

HUMPHREY ARCHER

Humphrey Archer is a 60+ three-time immigrant, whose life in Africa, Australia, and America, work with industrial and medical quality and safety, and obsession with mortality data and accidents, results in morbid short stories.

V. beRt

V. beRt, a Colorado native, has always enjoyed writing. Her poems have been published in *The Denver VOICE* and in Volume 3 of the community anthology, *All the Lives We Ever Lived* produced by Lighthouse Writers. She is inspired by the online Hard Times Writing Workshops moderated by Lighthouse Writers talented instructors, and enjoys all poetry Zoom classes, open mics, cooking and spending time with her little dog, Buttons.

MARTINA BJORHUS

Martina BJORHUS was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia and raised in Arvada, Colorado. Coming from a family of avid readers, she learned the blissful importance of the written word at an early age. If she wasn't reading a book she was searching for one. One of her favorite pastimes as a young girl was browsing her grandparents' bookshelves. She found translated versions of *Jane Eyre*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Desiree*, *Three Comrades*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and many others. These stories transcended language and connected her to her grandparents well into adulthood. A year ago, she began her writing journey interviewing her grandma and preserving her stories on paper. She's taken several classes at Lighthouse and enjoys Hard Times because it takes her out of her comfort zone.

SUSAN BLOSTEN

Susan Blosten began to imagine short stories before she could write, as a three year old she was sent into the woods behind her house to entertain herself. The trees, stumps, and plants became characters that interacted

with each other. She saw it in their “body language” whether falling down in prayer or beseeching or strong and confident. For many years she had selective mutism and would only speak to people she knew very well. Her parents bought her a manual typewriter and she spent hours typing stories on it. Susan has a B.A. in Liberal Arts. Her major was English, minor: French. She has read plays, books, etc. in each language. She continues to be a peripatetic reader and has enjoyed writing with *Hard Times* for several years.

ERICA BLUMFIELD

Erica Blumfield moved from NYC to LA with one vintage suitcase and hat box and began performing her true and personal stories on shows, including *Storytellers Project*, *Risk!*, and *Storysmash*. She hosts the monthly storytelling show *Revealed* at The Glendale Room. When not telling stories, she teaches children reading and writing, enjoys hiking, and spending time with friends.

VICKY BRADFORD

Vicky Bradford, PhD, has been a writer, a speaker, an educator, a trainer, and manager of associate communication. She has authored numerous articles and a top-rated book on customer satisfaction in the medical setting. She is currently the Assistant Editor for the History Colorado Volunteer Newsletter, *the Possibles Bag*. Her work as a writer has spanned all forms for written communication: prose, poetry, essays, fiction, historical fiction, qualitative research results.

GIULIANA BRUNNER

Giuliana has been writing since her teens when her heart speaks to her. Some of the journals are gone—back to dust—due to a house fire, but her heart still holds all she has written still. Via the Lighthouse organization and various connections, she has had a few pieces published in local magazines, newspapers, and books. She must give enormous credit to Lighthouse Writers and the original *Hard Times* group first established at the Denver Library for opening up the road to writing in larger ways. A gazillion times she gives thanks to those peers who weave

in and out of various classes, sharing their turmoil, joys, scars, and souls with a level of trust and beauty not often (or easily) found. This would not have been possible without the incredible facilitators who moved us, opened us, and gave us the space to be vulnerable with such integrity and depth, in the beginning Dan, Jane, Joy and a few others (you ALWAYS will be in my treasured memory file of the heart). Also, including Simone, the original library facilitator who manifested this possibility and originally teamed with the Lighthouse to birth this vision to light.

LILY CAPSTICK

Lily Capstick is a writer and editor based in Denver. She strongly believes that everyone is an artist and just needs to find their way back to their innate artistry (thank you *The Artist's Way*). Beyond art, writing, and creating, Lily is passionate about criminal justice reform and facilitates restorative justice circles in Denver. When she isn't fixated on her latest creative endeavor, you can find Lily practicing her French for the day she moves to the land of cheese and wine. You can find her at sirenstoryhouse.com.

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MR is a Colorado transplant by way of Illinois. She considers herself a late bloomer who believes there is a bit of 'ham' in all of us and has been pursuing artistic forms of expression since 2019.

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Enrique is an MFA Candidate at Naropa University, US Navy Veteran, and OEF Vet.

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Lisa Gibson is a writer of memoir and poetry. She has spent most of her time as both a mother and a public servant. Only recently returning to her first love, that of words and poetry and seeing how the two dance

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PAULA HAGAR

Paula Hagar lives and writes in Denver, Colorado. Her passions are writing, photography, painting, reading, and driving around the U.S. entirely on back roads while writing and photographing her adventures. She writes short nonfiction essays which have been published in several anthologies, including *Gifts from Our Grandmothers*, *Bicycle Love*, *All the Lives We Ever Lived III*, and *Who Am I Today?*, as well as the American Western Museum's annual anthology of ekphrastic writings. She was one of the first writers to take classes with the newly formed Lighthouse Writers back in the late 1990s. She is currently working on two nonfiction collections: *The Apprentice of Wonder*, a nature-based series of vignettes on wonder and awe, and *Back Roads of Grief*, about the dying and death of Small Town America.

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Felicia Haury is an emerging writer from San Diego, California. She writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction and is an avid antique shopper.

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Janet Hildebrandt retired from research administration in 2021 and returned to writing after a 20-year hiatus. She received the 2022 New Voices Writing Fellowship from Lighthouse Writers Workshop, and two of her poems were included in the 2022 *All the Lives We Ever Lived* anthology. Raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan Janet lives in Denver with her husband where she incorporates her experience as a mother, personal chef, teacher, dancer, voracious reader, and nature lover into her poetry and memoir-based pieces.

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Amanda Howard is a New Orleans native with a Master's Degree in Linguistics. Her work has been published in the *Denver VOICE*, *Birdy*, and volumes 2-4 of *All the Lives We Ever Lived*.

WALTER HOWARD

Walter writes to encourage people, to make people think, and to help people enjoy life.

LARA HUSSAIN

Lara, a former environmental journalist, teaches sustainability to graduate students in Denver, Colorado, and writes fiction. In her free time, she swims and surreptitiously stocks Little Free Libraries in her neighborhood. She recently finished writing a speculative novel called *Rubber House*.

LANAY JORDAN JAMES

Lanay James earned a PhD in biology in 1972 but left her research career in 1980 and has worked in a variety of areas since. She treasures her husband Howie of 35 years, who died in 2019, her beloved son Daniel, and his wife Sarah and son, and family and friends.

MELISA JOURNEY

Melisa earned a M.Ed from the University of Denver and has a B.S. in Fun. Seriously—Recreation Management from NAU. She wore a white pants suit first at her Bat Mitzvah in 1985. She traveled solo through the Middle East long before 'solo women travelers' was a Facebook group. She was rescued by a 70lb bulldog, loves and hates technology, and is a hippie at heart. She's been holding 'women's rights' & 'save the trees' protest signs for decades and she's not putting them down any time soon. Her words: "I'll know I've 'made it' when someone puts my book on their nightstand." Even though she's done a lot of hard stuff like running a marathon, a ten day silent Vipassana retreat, and getting sober, the hardest thing remains getting her dog to stop eating poop.

JANE LEWIS

Jane Lewis is a retired construction project manager and art consultant who enjoys writing memoir and poetry. Reading, cultural events, visiting historical houses, and hunting for unusual treasures at garage and estate sales are some of her interests.

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Anne McWhite is a retired nurse who started dabbling in writing nominating fellow nurses for the prestigious Nightingale Awards. Since joining Lighthouse Hard Times writers, her main focus is writing personal humorous stories as well as parodies to songs.

TIM A. MILLER

Tim A. Miller, a Compton California native, went to grade school, Jr. High School, and High School (Fairview High) in Boulder, Colorado. He got his A.A. degree at Community College of Denver. He was an online sports writer for 10 years reaching out to 1,000 people in 50 states and 50 countries. He has been writing poetry and other stuff since 1975 including a couple of articles for *The Colorado Daily*. He has written 8 books including his 100-holiday poem book, 300 poems about *California* titled *Californian* and is working on a book about man's last moon mission called *Apollo 17: Man's Greatest Flight*.

DR. JAMES MOSES

Dr. James B. Moses is an original Hard Times Writer. He is the third generation in his family born in Denver. He retired from dentistry after forty-seven years.

MYRA NAGY

Myra is an older Black person who has gone through homelessness. She is in recovery from substance misuse and behavioral health conditions. She is maneuvering through these struggles with counseling and creative therapies. Myra uses some of these items to sell for extra income, and enjoys helping others. She volunteers her lived experiences to advocate for those unheard and strives to show people of color, all ages, all experiences, and through their own struggles that it is possible to move forward in life.

PAULINE NÚÑEZ

Pauline began reciting poetry in third grade when she won 1st place in the Interscholastic League Poetry Interpretation contest in West TX.

While she resides in Colorado, her essays and poetry are based in the TX/MX Borderlands. For her writing provides the ability to create social change and heal the soul.

JANIS OLSEN

Janis Olsen is a native of Denver, Colorado. She graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts studio which she credits with her variety of work experience. She loves the natural world where she feels at peace and garners endless inspiration. As a seven-year veteran of Lighthouse Writer's Hard Times Writing Workshops, she has found a niche in the World of Words. Currently she lives in Denver, draws on travel experiences from "bus adventures" in the Denver Metro to eight foreign countries, writes, sings, is learning about red wiggler worms, and tends honey bees.

ROBERTO SANTOS

Roberto Santos is from the Northern Mariana Islands where he lives on the island of Saipan, where he spends much of his free time in the ocean. He is passionate about the representation of queer people and of the Chamorro and Carolinian people of the Marianas.

MARTA SHOMAN

Marta Shoman participates in the Hard Times weekly writers' group on zoom and Lighthouse virtual classes. Her writing leans toward creative non-fiction, memoir, and poetry. Her work has been published in the Denver VOICE; The Crestone Eagle; The Willow Creek Journal; The Conejos Circle Book; Messages from the Hidden Lake; and All the Lives We Ever Lived, Vol 3. She lives in the largest high-altitude desert in North America, the San Luis Valley of southwest Colorado. Living a short distance from the Rio Grande River, she is regularly spotted with a notebook, pen, and binoculars.

MICHAEL SINDLER

Michael Sindler is a Denver resident and a native of South Carolina. He is the current Beat Poet Laureate of Colorado. His work crosses genres including poetry, fiction, non-fiction, memoir, theatre, and songwriting.

He has been published in a variety of national print and web venues including *2020: The Year America Changed*, *All the Lives We Ever Lived Vol. II, III & IV*, *New Generation Beats*, *Caesura*, and numerous other anthologies. He has collaborated with and participated in a number of media bridging projects and productions with museums and arts organizations throughout Colorado. He has featured in and facilitated virtual (and IRL) poetry readings, performances, and workshops across the globe. He is one-third of the Beardo Bards of the Bardo, a Zoom-based transcontinental poetry performance collective.

MARYA SUMMERS

A Lighthouse Writers 2023 New Voices Fellowship recipient, Marya Summers lives with disability caused by environmental toxins, which has taught her a deep respect for Life and an intimate relationship with the natural world. Her work has appeared in *Tiferet*, *Kaleidoscope Magazine*, *New Times*, *Freedom to Speak: National Poetry Slam 2002*, and *National Federation of State Poetry Societies' 2023 Contest Winners* anthology, and is forthcoming in *Soul-Lit Journal*. She lives unhoused with her adventure cat, Perceval.

CAROL TRUJILLO

Carol Trujillo is a retired pathologist originally from Belen, New Mexico. She has lived in Denver for the past 20 years and loves poetry and dance.

VAL U ABLE

Val U Able's series of staggering setbacks have empowered her to encourage others from a depth of relatable relevance. Rather than a victim, she chooses to consider herself a surTHRIVER! Both her prose and poetry are uplifting and positive, born from her desire to inspire!

J L WRIGHT

J L Wright is the author of two poetry collections, *Unadoptable Joy* and *Homeless Joy*. She has written poetry most of her life. As a student of poetry, she shares her wealth of knowledge collected from workshops and courses from the International Writers Program, Lighthouse, Poets on the Coast and many others with fellow poets in order to advance the art for all.

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