

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

VOL. V

Edited by Brissa Mendoza

With editorial assistance from Natalie Bullock, Alexa Culshaw, Kara
D'Alessandro, Andrea Dupree, Marissa Morrow, and Shanlla
Remtulla

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Introduction

Another year has passed, and I can't help but feel an immense amount of gratitude for the community at Lighthouse Writers Workshop. In our Community Engagement programs, we believe that writing is a tool for connection, expression, and healing—one that decreases feelings of isolation and contributes to a positive sense of self. I have seen firsthand how a simple craft lecture and writing prompt can guide someone through things like grief, burnout, ancestry, and change.

This year, we've seen writers in our Writing in Color and Queer Creatives programs dive back into their writing projects with new feelings of confidence and inspiration. We've seen newcomers ease into writing for the first time, even if it felt scary or intimidating. Writers in our Hard Times program continue to share their love for the community cultivated in each workshop.

I strongly believe that the more we write about our stories and dream up new worlds, the better our communities become. Reducing the barriers of access to the literary arts allows those who need words most to find empowerment and expression. That's exactly what you'll find in this year's anthology: writers who felt empowered by these programs to share their stories of healing, loss, change, memory, ancestral/human connection, and much more.

As we continue to grow the Community Engagement programs at Lighthouse, my hope is that more and more individuals who share different identities, levels of education, backgrounds, and experiences take a workshop with Lighthouse and find that they're able to call themselves writers. At the end of the day, it's not about how "successful" your writing is. It's about how your words cultivate even the smallest amount of healing, wellness, and understanding in this chaotic world.

I'm incredibly grateful to our instructors, partners, and community members for all contributing to the positive impact that these workshops have in the world. In this year's anthology, you'll find pieces written in our Hard Times program—workshops geared toward providing community and a creative outlet for people experiencing things like poverty, addiction, homelessness, and other hard times—which now takes place at the Denver Public Library (Central and Blair-Caldwell), Boulder Public Library (Main), and Jefferson County Public Libraries (Arvada and

Belmar). Thank you to our Hard Times instructors, Sydney Fowler, Twanna LaTrice Hill, Lara Jacobs, Hillary Leftwich, Jesaka Long, Sheryl Luna, Malinda Miller, Cipriano Ortega, Joy Sawyer, Sarah Elizabeth Schantz, and Suzi Q. Smith, for all their hard work, dedication, and enthusiasm that they bring to every workshop that they teach.

You'll also read pieces from our Writing in Color program—a community built by and for Black, Indigenous, People of Color who are writers—facilitated by myself and Twanna LaTrice Hill, and our Queer Creatives program—a community focused on connecting queer writers and makers—facilitated by Eddie Young.

In this year's anthology, you'll come across themes that all have their foundation in the same thing: human connection. I hope these pieces bring you life and light as you pursue your own writing journey. Remember that your stories, dreams, and creativity deserve to be shared. You are the perfect person to do so while surrounded by a community who cares about you and the words you need to share.

Marissa Morrow
Community Engagement Program Manager
Lighthouse Writers Workshop

**Please be advised that some of the pieces in this anthology include mentions of queer oppression, violence, genocide, sexual content, and more.*

Hard Times

SHANNON MALLOY

2024 New Voices Fellowship Recipient

I am Upright

today my spoons do not bend
to ease my pain scars scatter
across my body

 and will whisper
my struggles and secrets
 if you listen

put your ear to my
belly

 foot

 neck

 throat

 the crooks of my elbows

my wrists

 the spots on my skull

where they screwed

 in my halo the hollow

 between my legs

I think I add extra holes because I hope
 next time

someone wants to fuck me they don't
know where to start how to fuck me first
that confusion and shock will turn them

away I think I cover my body

in pigment so when they look at me

they can't see me but if they do

they'll see

 lost life

 dcapit8d

 brass knuckles on my hands

a bullseye on my vein
cunt on the foot I almost lost
because I am a bad junkie

my head got so tired of letting others
use my body of my own self-abuse
it tried to detach itself
from the problem: if there is no body
to use and abuse I could be ok
but my body cried
without a spine I cannot stand

VAL U ABLE

Whether We Weather the Weather

I Turbulent times offer us an opportunity to choose: sink or swim, fade or bloom, victim or victor. Our choice lies not in whether the weather will worsen—nor when the cyclone shall swirl—but will we be demolished by the deluge or strengthened by the storm? Will we select Option A for Angst to overcome the onslaught, or Option B for Bravery to surmount the tsunami?

Can we become an Olympian mogul “mogul”, absorbing the bumps along the slope, rather than stumbling and tumbling downhill haphazardly? Will we emulate excellent athletes who work on their weaknesses: resisting reluctance, persisting with practice? When we do stumble, will we refuse to lose— and thereby choose to either win, or at least learn?

Shall we submit to Kintsugi: the Japanese art form for repairing cracks with liquid gold, rendering the outcome even more beautiful for having been broken? Can we embrace their terminology of viewing salvaged splits as “precious scars”—accentuating our uniqueness, resilience, and relevance? Will we adopt this philosophy of treating breakage and repair as part of our history, rather than shame to hide or disguise our unwise reprise? Dare we venture yet farther, into wabi-sabi, where we would admire —and yes, celebrate— our imperfection?

We fall. We learn. We rise.

Then, like a phoenix from the ashes we emerge...our hope undiminished, our joy unblemished. The harrowing hurricane has passed. We have not escaped unscathed. It's whether we weather the weather

Val U Able
clarity coach

M.M. ADJARIAN

Accidental Repetition

Nothing prepared you for the call that came three days after Christmas. The one that would upend your New Year before it even had a chance to start.

The mammogram you'd had, the one you'd almost skipped—because you were too healthy, because you were too busy to bother—didn't look right. They'd found a dot of white, within a cloud of tissue, floating inside the tender half-globe of your right breast, the one they'd mashed between two plastic plates, squeezing it for the perfect cyst-free image, while you winced, a whimper escaping from your lips.

A little to the right. Yes, that's it. Now hold still.

Remembering that day, you lied to them in crisp monosyllables.

*I can't come in right away.
I'll call you in a few days.*

And then you bolted.

They reminded you, by phone by letter, that they wanted to see you again. But your life was already cracking, like the black glass face of the iPhone you'd dropped days before. Enough was enough in a year of things that just kept falling and breaking, falling and breaking.

You called them back almost two months later, after you left town. It was still winter where you went, with snow on the ground. But you wanted the cold, just like you wanted the distance for how it made everything at home seem fuzzier, more indistinct. Softer in a year of hard things.

You went back a few weeks later, reluctant. Friends told you callbacks happened all the time. But you were nervous anyway as you waited in the borrowed robe, goosebump naked from the waist up, in the small room where other women sat, faces inscrutable.

Older than you, they'd survive this just like they'd survived everything else.

You fidgeted, then fidgeted some more. The women had companions: daughters, maybe, or other women relatives. But you? You were there, feeling every inch of your aloneness. You touched your sunglasses, glad they couldn't see the way the fear blackened your pupils and swallowed your irises.

A nurse led you into a darkened room to another machine that squeezed and photographed breasts while you gobbled air into your lungs. She asked you to take off the robe, sunglasses still perched on your nose and let her pose your body like a Barbie doll. The machine beeped and clicked: more pictures, from every angle. Your legs felt like water; you wanted to run, screaming.

No more, no more, no more.

Instead you held onto the humming machine with cold fingers until the nurse told you to get back into your robe and go to the room where you'd left the other women.

Only to find that they had left you.

The nurse came back to you and you leapt from your chair ready to go. They weren't done with you. There was one more test they wanted to do in another dark room where the nurse made you take off your robe again and lie down, then put warm gel on your breast while explaining what an ultrasound test would do. You tried to talk to the woman as she worked. But she was distant, eyes glued to the screen you couldn't see.

Sorry, I can't concentrate when I talk.

And so you buried your nerves in quiet while your heart crashed and all your spinning mind could do was think how invasive it all felt, to have your breast stroked like this, by a hand in a blue rubber glove holding a flashing wand. When she was satisfied, she put the wand down and went to get the radiologist who told you the results were inconclusive and gave you a choice of another test.

The need to know trumped terror and you went back again, just as new bluebonnets announced the arrival of spring. This time they made you lie prone on a table with a hole where you put your breast and hoisted your body up like a car. A technician numbed your pendulant breast, then probed for cells near the white dot, which he found on a screen you couldn't see.

You only cried after he left and you were alone with the nurses.

Little white dots on mammograms that got scraped from your body didn't happen in your family. At least, not to the women you knew about on your mother's side. Your father was adopted, taken in by a nurse who wanted children but couldn't have them. For all he knew, his family came from the moon, maybe Mars.

Then you remembered this woman he called Mémé. In one cup of the giant bras she strapped across her chest she wore a soft form that reminded you of the Kleenex breasts you made for fun when you were five, maybe six.

Look, Mémé. I have them, too.

You only knew about that form because she took it out once in the bedroom where she stayed when she came to see your family. She didn't see you because you had wrapped yourself behind a half closed door. Curious, quiet, just watching her, this stranger who never seemed to have

the energy to play with you.

Two or three years after she visited, the disease that took the breast finally took her.

This one-breasted woman wasn't your grandmother; just a woman looking to feel the pulse of motherhood. But in its symmetry, the irony is both brutal and gorgeous.

The secrets passed down through generations that bind strangers to each other can find you, like prophecies.

MARTINA BJORHUS

Desk of Honor

I heard the glorious cubbies and drawers calling my name before my eyes could register the object in its entirety. There it stood among bookcases and chairs and filing cabinets and rugs. A lonely green banker's lamp sat on its top ledge. The soft glowing light casts long shadows across the object's ample flat surface. Displayed front and center is a black typewriter with a single piece of paper peeking out from under the roller.

I don't remember what brought us to AFW that day, but as I stood in front of that desk inhaling the sweet smell of wood and furniture polish, I knew it had to be fate. My ten-year-old mind was already filling the cubbies with stickers, the drawers with colored pencils, pens, paper and activity books. Yes, even at ten, I enjoyed expanding my mind with dot-to-dots and crossword puzzles and word searches. I imagined myself finishing homework and attaching new scratch-and-sniff stickers into my sticker album.

The wooden chair placed in front of the desk pulled me closer and closer until my behind plopped down. My feet, unable to touch the ground, dangled like my new neon pink hoop earrings. In my current position, I could hardly see the typewriter keys so I quickly knelt on the chair and began counting the cubbies and drawers. Eleven cubbies, twelve small drawers, plus another four larger drawers on either side of the chair making the desk legs and one long center drawer. I felt fancy and sophisticated, like a famous author sitting at their desk writing their latest novel. I began typing away and as the keys clicked and clacked I noticed a gold key right above my head. I reached for the key and to my surprise the key and part of the desk came rolling down. I couldn't believe it. The entire desk was a secret compartment I could lock. A fleeting, evil thought hatched in my mind to hide my baby brother in the desk. If I took away the typewriter he seemed just small enough to fit. I didn't have to

speculate for too long, because my brother came waddling up to me, sat in my lap and began banging on the typewriter keys. Fortunately for him, our parents weren't far behind and, turns out, he was a little too wide for the enclosed space. Therefore, I'll have to use the secret compartment to store the pages of my novel, "Adventures with Missy" instead.

Alas, with one cursory look at the price tag from my dad, my dreams rapidly deflated. My beautiful roll top desk would stay at the store forever. Yet, all hope was not lost, because I had a plan.....

Only a few beams of light illuminated the pile of wood in the garage where my dad kept his scrap wood balancing precariously on the rafters above. As I climbed the makeshift wooden ladder, I realized I should have brought a flashlight. The small cracks to the outside only let in enough light to highlight dust particles and one large glob of wood. Rather than listen to reason, I randomly grabbed one piece of wood at a time and dropped it onto the floor until I had enough pieces to make a desk. I found a hammer, some nails, a hand saw and began constructing my new desk. First, I measured the legs. Second, I measured the bottom and top of the desk. Then, with the leftover wood I measured the sides; left, right, back and front. While measuring tapes are advantageous for most people, the blueprints for this project only required my eyes and hands. Amazingly, I only needed the saw to cut down a few pieces.

With all the pieces cut to size, I was ready to assemble. I nailed the legs into the four corners of the bottom piece. Then, I nailed the sides to the bottom piece. It didn't bother me that the sides didn't quite meet up. They were convenient openings to store my pencils in a rush. It didn't bother me that all the legs were different lengths, because I made more of a lap desk. Personally, I was amazed by my unique innovation, because now I could use my desk in bed. To finish the desk, I hammered in a couple hinges to the top and back pieces. It didn't bother me that I could only open the top a centimeter or two, because I needed to keep the pages of my novel hidden from inquisitive eyes. Finally, I returned the hammer, saw and remaining nails. I attempted to pick up my desk, but it was too

heavy. Instead, I dragged my newly built, spiderweb infested desk across the yard, through the house and into my room. I picked up a few clumps of mud and threw them out the window. Then, I proceeded into the bathroom to tweeze out a few splinters. Afterward, I picked out the best spot in my room for that desk. Right under the two corner windows. Of course, I couldn't see out the windows while seated at the desk, but I could feel the breeze.

I wrote on that desk for the entire summer that year. It didn't bother me that the top wasn't smooth and I needed to continuously sharpen my pencil. It didn't bother me that I risked splinters at the end of each line and my paper resembled swiss cheese. I made that desk with my own two hands without the help of an adult and Missy went on some incredible adventures. My parents were never able to afford that beautiful oak roll top desk, but at the beginning of the school year they purchased something better. A desk very similar in design to the one I made, except the legs were all the same size, the sides met at each corner properly, the top opened and closed and had a smooth surface for writing, a full-size chair fit under the desk and it even had a couple cubby holes to keep staples and paperclips. To add a little bit of elegance, I received a green banker's light for Christmas that same year.

CHRIS CRANE

Ode to a Heeler

I'm sorry I left. It wasn't your fault. I wish I could have let you know I was leaving for good, I said goodbye but I don't think you understood. You seemed nervous, perhaps feeling the overall sense of sorrow from your mom and I. You were confused that I was packing things in the car; I had packed and left on trips before, and just the backpack had always been worrying enough for you. But this time it was more; chairs, boxes, the noisy tools from the garage (which you did not like anyways). You knew it was different this time, but not how complete my departure would be.

I heard you started escaping from the yard; I guess my fences weren't as solid as I thought. Were you looking for me? Or were you just scared to be alone during the day? I'm sorry you had to be confined to the house; I know you did not like being so cooped up. No midday walks around the circle, much less getting to sit in the yard, yelling at passersby or wildlife. I'm sure you still did from the window ("this is my house! Get out of here!"). Were you trying to scare others off? Or trying to say hi? Maybe both.

I wish I still got to see you. I want you to know that I still think about you, and still miss you. I hope you are enjoying yourself. I hope you still get to play enough fetch, though there may never be enough fetch. I hope you still get taken to Cherry Creek, as I know how much you liked running by the water (did you ever get over your fear of getting your balls wet?).

Have you been anywhere new? New parks, or new road trips? I know how scary road trips are, especially that last one (at least for me).

I'm sorry I left. It wasn't your fault.

JIM GURLEY

Serena's Journey

Billings, Montana, had a weird airport. That was the first thing I thought of when Serena's grandmother responded to my "where are you from" question. My Sunday job as a patient visitor in a local pediatric hospital had taught me asking where folks were from was a good ice breaker. The hospital drew from several surrounding states and my day job as an appraiser took me to most of them. The nurses told me the young girl, her mom and grandmother were from out of town and kept to themselves. Their airport's geography served as my introduction.

The girl was Serena, about 12, dark eyed, shy and looking very small in her Oncology unit bed. She was being treated for Leukemia. Typically, I would offer to draw the patient a cartoon of their choice but Serena already had a large cartoonish poster. The white suited Michael Jackson complete with multiple tendrils of hair hanging across his face gazed down from the poster on her wall. It elicited a reaction from her that differed from mine but our discussion had the desired result. Soon she was giggling—and sharing her contrasting views. We were becoming new friends. The older ladies remained a bit more reserved—validating the staff's impressions.

I visited Serena on several more Sundays, she was a sick child—some days were worse than others. Perhaps a call during the week would brighten the moment. Her mom answered when I called her from my day job. She said Serena was in the bathroom but could I call back in 15 minutes? Of course. Guess mom had accepted me into their world. But, Serena soon was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) which was not good news—no patient phones in the ICU either.

Thursday evening, 7 pm: Not my usual schedule. A hospital staff nurse had requested an illustration depicting three methods of taking a

small child's temperature. No connection to Serena, just another life event for a person who draws. I had a question: "Which way would the 'visible' end of the thermometer point when taking the rectal temp of a baby lying on a flat surface?" A detail requiring absolute accuracy. The nurse's explanation took less time than estimated. At 8:30 I was going to be meeting with friends in a subterranean "hot spot" on South Broadway. I had some time to kill—why not check to see how Serena was doing a couple floors below? It was on the way to the parking garage and killing time in a bar didn't seem like a good idea, Friday was still a work day.

Upon entering the Intensive Care Unit, my first clue was the wide eyed look of surprise on the charge nurse's face when she saw me. "Jim, you're here! Can you spend some time with Serena? She's had a bad day and fears anyone who comes into her room is going to hurt her. She knows you're safe. She may not be with us much longer."

Serena was hurting but recognized me. We just held hands. The poster with Michael Jackson had followed her to intensive care. Hopefully, his presence was comforting to the sweet, brave little girl holding my hand. Sometime later that night, Serena went to Heaven. She could laugh again.

Yes, I know I was there—but only to determine a thermometer's correct position, before meeting with friends afterward. The idea to visit Serena had never surfaced until wondering how to spend a half hour or so. I'm good with believing God's angels were there to comfort Serena that evening. It had to have been the angels coordinating those events in the ICU. I'm still certain it wasn't me.

PAULA HAGAR

GIFTS FROM MY FATHER

I. SO MUCH DEPENDS... (After Williams's *The Red Wheelbarrow*)

as it turns out, upon that old red wheelbarrow
in which to collect rain, plant flowers, veggies, or
arrange the black feathers that Dad has continued to send me
at the oddest but perfect times and places over the last 9 years,
per my request upon his death bed.

A red wheelbarrow in which to collect useless things it has to be,
for you see: my father was delivered into this world
on the first day of spring, 1929, by Dr. William Carlos Williams,
his pediatrician for the next many years, who scribbled poems
on prescription pads, and was a personal friend of the family—
Dad's father, being a professor at the time,
at Fairleigh Dickinson University. And although
my grandfather was a math and astronomy professor, and
Dr. Williams was a poet, there was a synchronicity in their
mutual curiosity of the universe, the earth and stars,
and overall wonder and awe.

I believe that the words I now form into poetry came directly to me
from the hands of Dr. William Carlos Williams
as he pulled my sweet, beloved father into this world,
birthing in that moment, pure poetry into my own nascent blood—
alchemy from his hands to mine.

II. BLACK FEATHERS

I always loved the message John Lennon told his son Julian that after his
passing he would send a white feather to let Julian know that all was well

on the other side. But because I am a mega-lover of crows and ravens, and rarely see black feathers, I asked Dad, on the day before he died, to send me a black feather if there really was something on that “other side.” He’d had no last words for me in his final days, only silent unconsciousness, though I knew he could hear me. He’d told my sister earlier that day “It’s not an ending, it’s a new beginning.” Dad, who was an agnostic like me, would never have just said that out of the blue. He was pragmatic, if nothing else.

The first black feathers Dad sent me, 99 days after his death, were in a perfect circle of 7 in the backyard, quills pointed down into the earth. From behind my window, the white quills shone just like golf tees sticking up from the ground. Much as I’ve tried, crows do not come to my house or yard, so this was strange. When I researched the numerology of dates, numbers, time, etc. the information was beyond startling. It all had to do with major transformation, new beginnings, and moving on.

Although I often saw white and gray feathers, I had never found deep glossy black feathers before this. And since that discovery in my backyard 9 years ago, black feathers have appeared to me at THE most amazing times in the most amazing places. A few months after this, I was at a writing workshop in Boulder. I walked in to the registration desk and there was a huge bouquet of wildflowers, with a giant black feather sticking up from the middle of the bouquet. I was speechless. I told the person at the desk that black feathers were deep symbols and messages to me from my father, and I would take this as encouragement that he was approving of me taking this writing workshop, which turned out to be an especially powerful one. When I was leaving she gave me that big black feather. She did not know how it had arrived in the bouquet.

A few weeks later an artist friend gave me a talking stick bundle tied together with sweetgrass, silk threads and thin wires—including a glossy piece of driftwood, fabric from one of her disintegrated prayer flags, many tiny, wonderful objects including a small silver cross, 2 leg Milagros, an

old oil-paint-stiffened brush, some painted pieces from an old fence on her family's homesteaded land in the valley, and 2 feathers: a small magpie feather, and a large black raven feather. I am still moved and calmed every time I touch that talking stick.

These days, I can no longer keep my black feathers out and about where I can see them daily, for one of my three wild ginger cats goes absolutely apeshit over feathers. I bring her brown, gray and beige feathers often, but of course her favorites are the biggest, blackest feathers. Despite keeping them behind closed doors, she knows where every single one of them lives, and will grab them in her mouth and torture them all over the house, throwing them into the air and snatching them in her mouth, like prey instead of silent messages from a beloved Father.

III. USELESS THINGS

... frozen in time that I have kept, clutched close to my heart, and tucked away in a corner of my writing desk in a wooden box, a worn and battered engineering marvel that opens out like a peony—something the engineer he was might have created. Useless things, they are now; kept only because they were his:

A handkerchief, clean and snow white now but once always yellowed as he honked ferociously into it before folding it wet with mucus back into his pocket—so gross, we chanted as he used it over and over before dropping it into the laundry hamper that always smelled like him: Mennen Brake deodorant, a hint of Old Spice, and a disturbing man smell that was uniquely his.

A faded golf card with his scores penciled in from another good game that made him burst with pride the way I, who hated golf, never did. A blonde wooden frame etched with golf clubs framing a curled photo of him in the middle of a perfect golf swing.

The 1879 silver dollar he gave me on my 10th birthday and said
“Never spend this and you will never be broke.”

The gold watch he wore after 40 years of service with the same company
inside a jeweler’s envelope saying “cannot be fixed.”

Seven perfect black feathers, found 99 days after his death,
quills down, and sticking up in a circle in the center of the yard.
Useless things. Each as precious as an uncut diamond.

And in the bottom—beneath a baggie of his ashes—finer and whiter
than any sand I have walked: his hearing aids,
still dotted with tiny bits of hardened ear wax—
curled like little ovaries, tucked in with wisps of his snow white hair,
snipped early on the day he died—his cowlick,
still shining like silver birch trees in the sun.

JANET HILDEBRANDT

Subway Fever

Clatter and rush of urine-soaked air
pushes across the subway platform
ears ringing, I try not to sway
fever sweat and humid city grit
sets me to coughing. I lurch aboard.
As I sit I feel the hunch,
the weariness of the man next to me
his fatigue ripples across my legs.
I meet eyes with the woman across the aisle
she too sweats
she too is weary, so weary
she too casts invisible waves of exhaustion.
I feel them in my bones and look away
her feet throb—I feel them too.

The riders sway as the train jolts
and squeals around a corner
distant lights of the next station signal my stop, here so soon
fever flush clenches my belly
the train whines to a stop.
How can I leave these fellow travelers?
Each one peeled open
I vibrate in every limb
arrested by the fluid humanity
that connects us
though maybe only I feel the artistry of it.
Dizzy and sick I shuffle to the doctor
the threads of empathy a lasting memory.

WALTER HOWARD

A Collection of Poems

Loves Reflection:

Love is the reflection we need to see
In ourselves who we can't see, but
In a mirror of life reflecting our hearts every day and night
In a view of life. Love will always see.
In a reflection of ourselves. That we can't see.

We Live:

We live in ourselves.
But also, in what we do to ourselves and others.
We all see life in different ways.
Following different paths
Again, being in ourselves
But as life changes so do we.
Ourselves and others.
In ways we don't know.
Or can we know?

But love knows where we are in ourselves.

Footprints:

Our lives leave footprints in what we do.
From thoughts,
Do we deceive ourselves in our thoughts?
We do but
We partner with free will
In our thoughts.
Our thoughts can also determine our actions.
So where are we?
Do we know ourselves?
Do we see ourselves in our footprints?

The Quiet of the Shade:

The shade has started,
I hear the sound of the shade,
Sound deep inside my head.

I hear my thoughts and feelings
In the moment.
What I see and doubt.

Also, around me,
As I feel it all.
The quietness of it all
Surrounding me as I walk.
In the solitude of the shade.

JANE LEWIS

Not Your Nicole Kidman Movie Experience and a True Story

The tupperware container
long a symbol of Americana caught my eye
as I searched for the recline button on the edge of my seat
the container foreshadowed the apprehension that I would soon experience

What the heck
is the guy next to me in E9 really eating some kind of casserole thing
with a fork—yes a real fork—he must have brought from home
the overpowering pungent smell of curry fills the air
slurping sounds begin to emerge from his half-opened mouth
as he sucks the life out of the noodles that bind the casserole together
surely the incessant slurping will stop before the movie starts

Previews over
thriller opening with a terror-stricken man being chased in a forest
my attention abruptly disrupted by a low—now louder rustling sound
E9 fishes around his seat for a brown paper bag
he shakes it open and after noisily snapping the lid on the tupperware
container
jams the container into the bag dropping his fork in the process
he bends over patting the ground for a while to recover it
then robustly rolls down the top of the bag and places it by his seat

why me—what did I do to deserve being tortured this way
options considered while sitting in E10 my favorite aisle seat
wondering if leaving is the best recourse
only two seats left in the theatre on the other side of E9
pretending to assimilate into a group on other side in E7 might work
imagine myself expelling a long sigh and whispering conspiratorially
to my newfound movie going friends

what is wrong with that guy
he's so inconsiderate or more forcibly he's a jerk
so everyone knows
I'm not with the man in E9

Do I dare pull out the small popcorn purchased upon entry
that thought was immediately squashed when to my dismay
E9 reaches over to the unoccupied seat, E8
where he has stashed an assortment of theatre food
an extra-large bucket of popcorn is plopped into his lap
which in my estimation is loaded
with double and triple squirts of fake movie theatre butter
he begins chomping loudly
all the while licking his gross fingers lathered in butter
after every handful or two he lifts an extra-large soda to his buttery lips
and begins the noodle slurping sound again
silent curses erupt in my head as I miss more of the movie plot
my popcorn ditched by the side of the seat no longer appetizing
people in front and back rows
unable to give me the evil eye because of the high back seats
sensing people on same row starting to stare
makes me want to turn into an invisible woman as I shrink into the seat
the man in E9 is oblivious
movie patron three seats down in E6 glares in our direction with a
disgusted face
which I happen to see as E9 drops his popcorn and fumbling bends over
to retrieve it
I mouth to E6 I don't know him all the while wondering if she can
understand what I'm saying in the darkened theatre
in tandem I also make a slicing motion across my throat
and point at the back of his head
E6 rolls her eyes and turns back to try and watch the movie
before E9's head pops up and the chomping continues
it was a failed desperate attempt

so everyone knows
I'm not with the man in E9

about thirty minutes into the movie E9 finishes the popcorn
retrieves the brown paper bag and places it in the popcorn bowl
thankful that he has finally consumed his treat
I sit back trying to relax and figure out who's trying to kill who

rustling starts up in E9's seat again
he twists to pluck a box of candy from his stash
shaking it nonstop until one by one like a kid
he throws his head back to catch the candy in his mouth
sometimes missing but thankfully never trying to salvage it from the dirty
floor

the somewhat athletic act intermingled with more slurping of his soda
when E9 gets near the end of the candy several become stuck
he rips open the bottom of the box
to get his fingers in and make sure he gets the last few bites
all done—why of course not there's still plenty of ice to crunch
he eats it piece by piece again throwing his head back each time
then flattens the candy box and soda cup in the popcorn box
by now my body is ridden with tension
anxiety makes my chest hurt

overall mental health disintegrating rapidly
so much of the movie has been assaulted
by his socially unacceptable antics
visions of throwing my popcorn at him
or better yet choking him with my bare hands
rack my thoughts
so everyone knows

I'm not with the man in E9
an eerily quiet fifteen to twenty minutes go by
when E9 starts to wiggle in his seat
I can feel his eyes staring at me through my peripheral vision

all the while crossing and uncrossing his legs and twirling his fingers
suddenly he turns back to the movie and with a sigh
releases his recliner button and leaves
cradling his popcorn bucket protectively in his arm
with excruciating slowness the minutes tick by and E9 doesn't come back
I feel relief and could care less about the movie and who makes it out alive
so grateful he's gone
and not having to be found guilty of disrupting anyone by seat association
movie over—lights come up
on their way-out people eyeball the E row and in particular me
trying to see who was the instigator of all the commotion
found myself mumbling over and over it wasn't me—I swear it wasn't me
so everyone knows
I wasn't with the man in E9
definitely not my type

ps: this is why I prefer weekday matinees
this is why if a movie is packed I'll pass unless with friends
this is why the theatre should educate movie goers
on the topic of food etiquette just like silencing your phone

ANNE McWHITE

Tooth Extraction

Just why are we all supplied with wisdom teeth? Around ages 17 to 20, we are old enough to gain wisdom; this being the time when these last molars erupt. There are people who never gain wisdom; they just navigate through life effortlessly free of these extra teeth. The rest of us must figure out the wisdom we gain over the years just from having wisdom teeth in place. People get rid of wisdom quickly while in the bloom of youth: these people are wise. Others cling onto wisdom, not willing or understanding the danger of wisdom unleashed upon unsuspecting carriers of wisdom teeth. That was me, deceived by my own purposeful lack of attention to ridding myself of wisdom teeth.

I knew it was going to be difficult. Age is not a pleasant forecaster for the procedure I must bear. I was fearful that day, not wanting to make a scene. If I honestly shared my fears, emotional vomit would spew forth. Determined not to make a show of cowardice, planting myself in the operating theatre; I sat down, took a deep breath, and grasped the handles of the chair to steady my resolve. All of this accompanied with a brief, barely perceptible nod indicating, "Ok, let's get on with this."

"You will feel a pinch and then pain. Afterwards, you should not feel anything as the medication takes hold." Minutes pass, and they say, "Do you feel all numbed up?" How does all numbed up feel further on in time? I mean right now I feel numb. The surgeon jacks up my jaw with a medieval torture device. Only the occasional gu uh duh to any queries about my comfort am I able to express. No time for conversation: terrified eyes hide behind the sunglasses designed to obliterate the blinding glare of your headpiece.

I listen to the chatter you have with your assistant pointing out the obvious terrifying truths about my condition. "There is the nerve. Do you see how close it is to the tooth? I must be careful as there could be permanent numbness on part of the chin or upper lip." The intense concentration on your face is reassuring. My troublesome tooth is buried

deep and right next to the jaw. "This is going to require no slip-ups; her jaw could easily fracture," you say. Do old people with osteoporosis heal from a fractured jaw I wondered? "Unfortunately, that tooth is propping up her molar next to it. Hopefully, we will not destabilize that tooth." Are you kidding me? I just had a revision of the root canal on that tooth. His assistant nods in assent as to the precarious nature of this extraction. I close my eyes to the sound; the horrible invasive electrifying sound as you operate the drill accompanied by a gurgling waterfall of discarded debris from the hole you are creating capturing contents of my own slow drizzle of fluids threatening to choke me but for my watchful vigilance I must maintain. Oh, the noise, the pounding; the excavation yields a prize mineral obtained from a stubborn unyielding locale. This mineral was well hidden, slowly becoming more problematic necessitating action.

Occasionally you would inquire, "How are you doing, feeling any pain?" Garbled gibberish is my only response. My hands, clutching the armrest, circulation lost due to the death-grip I maintain to distract me from the current procedure. Bravery is my only recourse. I cannot say or do anything. Time is an eternity looming over me. "Well," you finally exclaim, "This couldn't have turned out better." Mercifully, you extract my tooth holding it up for me to see. Unable to express gratitude, nonsensical verbiage babbles forth from a paralyzed unfeeling jaw. Dazed, I walk out grateful to have lived through this mind-altering torture, praying for a healing blessing: wondering how my grossly swollen jaw will recover its former shape. I am a warrior. I survived the removal of my highly impacted wisdom tooth. I am grateful for my tormentor and his assistant; it is simply hard to feel that in the heat of the moment.

TIM A. MILLER

**Me and my father's memorable Paris trip on Bastille Day weekend
July 14, 1974**

Me and my dad took a six-hour overnight train trip from Basil, Switzerland to Paris, France in time for Bastille Day, July 14,1974.

My dad was a professor at CU Boulder for 40 years and had a sabbatical for a year in Basil. There were six people in the small train compartment when about two thirds through the trip a guy got off and then we all happily stretched out our limbs.

We got into the Paris train station in the morning . When I got off I asked this Parisian lady where the restroom was, she then looked at me with a stare then walked away. I guess they were right when they said that the French don't like Americans.

I don't know why because we American's saved them in World War II from Nazi Germany.

After that we found a hotel between the Eiffel tower and Notre Dame where this black guy was looking at me and my dad for an unknown reason. We went to our 3rd floor room and when I looked out I noticed the same guy looking at me from the street below. My dad told me, "don't worry about it." Later on, I bought a silver wreathed ring in an outdoor market.

At night we went to the Paris red light district called Pigalle where you saw the domed white building Sacre-Cour rising above the neighborhood. Pigalle is full of 19th century neon lit dance halls where scantily dressed people danced and drank.

Being 15 years old, I was really intrigued by all the sights and sounds. The

next day we took a bus to Château de Versailles, better known as Versailles.

My dad wanted me to really see it. It's one of the biggest palaces in Europe which was first built in 1661 by King Louis the 14th and completed in the 18th century. Big lavish green gardens surround the mile long grand canal and over 50 pools and fountains and labyrinths which you can see from the glorious Hall of Mirrors terrace.

The Hall of Mirrors is 240 feet long with 357 great big mirrors, with 17 tall arched windows and shiny bright chandeliers. I was really impressed when I walked through the Hall of Mirrors and strolled the gardens at Versailles.

Later, back in Paris, I wanted to go to McDonald's and get a Big Mac. There were only 2 McDonalds in Europe in 1974 and Paris had one, and the other one was in London. Since I had not had any McDonald's for a year, I really was hungry for a Big Mac or anything McDonald's. So, we went to the Paris McDonald's and had a Big Mac and fries. It was a royal treat. The next day we went to the great Cathedral Notre Dame which is on one of the two islands on that part of the river Seine.

The first stone was laid by Bishop Maurice de Sully in the presence of Pope Alexander III in 1163. It has been restored several times. It was really beautiful and sacred inside with its stained-glass rose windows and its gothic architecture.

I went to the very top between the two big bell towers and looked straight down. Man, what a big drop that was. I was impressed with the far flying buttresses and its famous gargoyles which were sculpted in the 19th century. Victor Hugo called the magnificent west facade rising like a "vast symphony in stone" when he wrote *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

The next day, on day 4, my Dad and I went and saw Napoleon's tomb.

He was one of my heroes at the time. The tomb was in a round building with a wooden tomb below the rotunda which impressed me. After that we saw the famous sculpture called *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin which was cool, it kind of made me think a little after I saw it. Then we saw the famous museum, The Louvre with its nice Pyramid entrance which they had just put in a couple of years earlier and controversial. We walked in and saw the *Mona Lisa* and *Winged Victory*. She stands ready to take flight on top of the monumental staircase of the Denon Wing. It was a sight to behold. We saw a lot of other paintings there.

The final day we went to the Avenue des Champs-Élysées where we saw the Arc de Triomphe standing majestically on the far end of the slanted-up avenue which was filled up with pretty trees and cafes and restaurants. We finally made it up to the Arc de Triomphe where a huge French tricolor flag was hanging down from its center in celebration of Bastille day. It was an awesome sight. At first, I didn't like the flag hanging down, but looking back at it now it was really neat. I took some photos of it. The Arc de Triomphe was completed in 1836. After that we went to the Palais de Chaillot, the huge plaza which looks directly at the Eiffel Tower on the other side of the Seine which was built for the Exposition Internationale of 1937. The old 1878 Palais du Trocadéro was partly demolished and partly rebuilt to create the Palais de Chaillot. I thought to myself, “the next time I am there I will be a different person.” I still haven't been back and it has been 50 years, so when I do go back it will be true. When we made it to the Eiffel Tower I made it to the very top of it by myself. The views were incredible, I even spotted the Arc de Triomphe from a distance. At the top there was a cafe where I spotted a little American girl crying and yelling really loud because she was eating a hot dog with French mustard on it. I thought, “well, I am 15 years old, I can handle that.” Two seconds after I had bitten into my hot dog with the same mustard, my nasal passages exploded in pain like you wouldn't believe. It was nearly unbearable and really hurt. I can still feel the pain 50 years later. After I finally recovered, I took the elevators down and met my dad

and went to our hotel. The next day, right after the Bastille Day parade which honors the French Revolution, we caught the train back to Basel, Switzerland. Every day of the trip was bright and sunny. That was my neat trip to Paris 50 years ago with my dad, who died last April 23, the week of July 14, 1974.

Viva La France, Merci!

MARTA SHOMAN

Chili Compañera

When bags of fresh green chilies come to town, a decision needs to be made. Find a chili roaster; roast them in your oven; or buy a palatable corporate brand. This chili season, I was unsuccessful on all accounts.

Southwest Colorado and northern New Mexico flow together, ignoring man-made boundaries, from the southern San Luis Valley onto the Taos plateau. Chilies come north from the region of Hatch, New Mexico and west over the Sangre de Cristo mountains from Pueblo, Colorado. Like many Valley aficionados, I count on the spirit of green and red chilis to warm my bones.

This is the season for the independent traveling chili roaster men and their rigs. Look for their large, dark, mesh cylinders, fueled by propane, secured on trailers behind double-cab pickups or vans. These rigs are set up at farm stores, farmer's markets or a pull-out alongside a road. The chili roasters open business with a light of the propane tank, the cylindrical hot, drum rotating with pounds of green chilis inside. The sizzle of chili peppers and the warm smell of their sweating skin draw chili lovers from blocks away.

How does an elder gringa like me with no roots in chili pepper culture learn firsthand, the craft of roasting green chili? Having lived internationally in my younger years, I know that food, its preparations, and its sharing, are at the heart of a vibrant culture. I now live in a town that is mixed with brown, white, and black skinned people. Cultural traditions of food are interwoven and passed on in pot-lucks, community meetings-with-food, and family suppers. In this most human way we come to know each other.

I approached a big, white, Ford truck hooked up to a trailer with the tempered excitement of entering an unfamiliar culture through a new recipe. A spicy kick hits my nose with the strong smell of peppers rotating in the drum roaster.

“What kind do you want?”, the big muscled, brown skin man asked me in English with a native Spanish tongue behind the question. I knew that a hot chili was too hot for me. Medium and mild heat created an easier experience for the taste buds and the gut. A bolt of memory flashed through my mind. My mother’s family meals from the tradition of Scandinavia and Germany. Sauerkraut, potatoes, cabbage, head lettuce fruit salad, homemade bread and stone ground mustard were staples at our table. I did not grow up with the tradition of chili peppers in my diet or culture.

He was impatient with my hesitation. “You people”, he dropped the word as he told me that I would want the mild. “I don’t have mild pueblo cheelay right now. Come back next week. They come in 15- and 35-pound bags”, he informed me. I seemed to be more trouble to him than it was worth.

“I’m a single person; only need a few. Can you sell me a small baggie of maybe half dozen medium peppers?”

The roaster-man filled a sandwich bag with blackened peppers that were smushed together. I sat in my car, holding the bag of chilis into the light. They were certainly roasted, but so pulverized, and black, it was hard to know if they were peppers. Was this what roasted chili was supposed to look like? Was this edible?

I knew who to ask.

Our low-income apartment complex is home to young seniors and well-seasoned elders. Shortly after I moved in five years ago, seventy-eight-year-old Anna befriended me. I walk a bowl of lamb and lentil soup with warm sourdough bread to her door. She texts me to come pick up enchiladas with her homemade enchilada sauce. Her green chili goes on everything. We exchange new discoveries of tortillas, sourdough raisin bread and upcoming garage sales. Anna’s green chili is the best. I aspire to make a batch as good as her chili.

Anna squinted as she held up the sandwich bag from the chili roaster man. She uttered quick words in Spanish and looked me firmly in the eye.

“He did not treat you right. He sold you over-roasted chili. These are burnt. He knew better. He would not have done that if I had been with you.”

Throughout the summer, Anna invited me to ride shot-gun on her Saturday morning expeditions. It became our hunting activity during the season of garage-yard-moving sales. Behind the wheel of her 1997 emerald green Mercury Grand Marquis, Anna wove her way through our town’s quiet streets and obscure alleys. We would meet outside her apartment door at 7:30 AM with coffees in hand. My job was to check off the yard sale notices in the classified ad section. “I know that house, the owner sells good stuff there,” she remembered from past sales. On another street she muttered “The prices might be a little high in this part of town.” Anna assesses the sale locations from memory and years of driving the neighborhoods. She gives most of her purchases away to neighbors in need and family.

Many an early summer morning we cruise in the Mercury, windows down while summer light welcomes the day. I learned Anna is a child from a Catholic family of eleven children, seven of them girls. Her father’s family came from Spain more than a hundred years ago. Her mother’s family was from New Mexico, formerly Mexico. The San Luis Valley was settled by peoples from these places and earlier by the Utes, Jicarilla Apache, Pueblo, Navajo Nation, and other Native peoples. Later, came the Europeans, Japanese and German POWs.

Lessons in chili roasting began that summer from the front seat of the emerald Mercury and in Anna’s tiny kitchen. While we drove from garage sale to yard sale, Anna’s chili lessons flowed from oral, family history. I learned that after the chilies were harvested, her mother would buy two fifty-pound gunny sacks of green chilis and bring them into her kitchen. The daughters were called to work the annual green chili event. Each pepper was hand washed to remove any remaining field dirt. Then the oven roasting began,

followed by hand-turning so as not to burn. When the chilies are sufficiently blackened, yet still green, cold water cooled the skin. In the early days, Anna's mother and sisters used their hands to peel the skin from the pepper. "It used to burn like hell," Anna described the work. Over time, a knife was used to slit the skin. The chili-meat was hand-scraped from the skin and mashed into a bowl with salt and garlic powder. This was a long day of women's work for the good of their family.

We both agreed that breathing in the earthy, warm energy of roasted chili soothes the soul. Anna recalled her family home would hold the comforting fragrance of roasted chiles throughout the winter. "Most days, Mama kept a pot of green chili on low flame on the back of the stove. When we walked in the door and smelled warm chili, we knew we were home and safe."

Despite Anna's chili counsel, I never got the hang of it. Fresh, local chilies in the market were gone while I fumbled about turning chilis in the oven. Handling the hot, long, slick green fruit with a sharp blade was an art that eluded arthritic fingers.

For a few weeks, mass-produced "Flame Roasted" green Chile is available on the end-aisle displays in the corporate grocery store. Anna bought a bottle to split between us. I told her, "This is not as good as yours." She agreed. "You take the bottle home," she directed me with a wave of her hand.

Anna and I look forward to next year's chili harvest.

She promises to hang with me until I get the knack of oven roasting.

"God willing," she says with a laugh.

Before the harvest, we'll head out in her Mercury Grand on those cool, bright, Colorado mornings to cruise the yard sales.

When the season comes to town, we'll look for the roaster men and breathe in the soulful scent of warm chilies.

ROBIN SIERRA

Making Rent

Always lipstick in my purse
brought to hotels rented for a night,
condoms in wrinkled packaging,
dental dams and hope that no one is in
earshot when we discuss the price
for a few hours.

Gauging safety while
holding up my end of the bargain.
I share my location with a friend,
judge that when I enter the room, I'll
know that the locks will work when I want to
leave.

My date buys me dinner, asks me the
normal questions about school,
opens the dialogue for a debrief after
penetration though I spent the time praying he would be
quick. After, I comment to a friend that he gave me more
respect and consideration than my bar escapades, my one night
stands. The only difference was that he is
twice my senior. I wonder if he's married while lying
under the stars, while lying under god, my body
vandalized and my
worth tied to a price tag worn on a fur coat and
xenos to my dreams, still
young to the
zeitgeist of a woman in red.

MICHAEL SINDLER

beauty hides

to take away the scar
would leave another

less noticeable perhaps
but skin would itch
in anguish missing its
past imperfection

jagged pattern softened
as surrounding skin sags
miniature mountain range
mapped by dragging fingertips

why pull down the marker?
why expunge this monument
to sorrow's civilization?
why erase the history
of the heart?

no dull surgical edge
could substitute
no layered line
of flattened pink
could leave less hurt

let what is be
let memory live on
beauty hides
within the scar

MARYA SUMMERS

Love Poem for the Abandoned Child

Originally featured in the Spring 2024 issue of *Pleiades: Literature in Context*

For too long, child, you
have chased the hearts
of those who deserted their own
surveying pinched faces
parched terrain
for family for a place
to call home, still
looking to prove your worth
in the conversion
of the loveless

Soon, you will begin to quietly build
Yourself a home within yourself
Around the hearth that was always there

Love will blossom as you gather years
Like wildflowers, as you look at a meadow
Like a mirror, seeing your own wild

Beauty on the weathered face of a mountain
You will reach back into your history
Invoking the love of generation, of generations

You will feel in your heart the calm
Beating of lifetimes of unstruck power and
Become a thundercloud releasing the blessed rain

DEBRA VIGIL

My Mother's Hands

I remember them so clearly. My mother's hands.

We would sit close in church, and I would hold her hands in my lap.

They were soft and large for a woman.

I would trace the large veins with my fingers, curious about what had occurred to make them so prominent.

She would smile down at me and reach into her patent leather Sunday purse to offer me a piece of hard candy or a small scrap of paper and pen to keep me quiet and occupied.

On cold winter mornings I would wake up to a bowl of oatmeal and she would sit next to me, drinking her coffee and making lists.

I would shiver as the house had not warmed yet.

My mother would place her hand on my back and under my shirt and gently rub the chill from my skin. Her hands were warm and in no hurry to stop.

In summer I would find her outside sitting in the Bermuda grass. She wore her house dress and ten cent rubber thongs. The very same ones we all received from the Five and Dime to get us through the summer season.

She worked tirelessly on her war with weeds. Digging each by hand. Gradually moving to the next ten-foot square patch of yard.

I don't think she ever finished. The weeds reappeared each morning. I would make mud pies and catch ladybugs and entertain her in her vigilance.

Later we would sit on the porch swing and I would hold her hands. The grass and dirt stained her palms. Her nails were broken with black soil underneath and stubborn spots of old nail polish she applied months ago.

My mother's hands would sew our clothes. I would watch them pin the patterns to the fabric laid out on the kitchen table. She would smooth it flat and study the work while she secured more pins between her lips.

Later I could hear the sewing machine in the back room. Running hot and fast. I loved the smell of the machine oil. Her hands guided the seam precisely through the gauntlet of the pounding needle.

My mother's hands never felt a professional manicure. They never looked like the ones in the dish soap commercial after Madge the manicurist soaked her customers hands in Palmolive dishwashing liquid. Even though she had washed a thousand pots and pans, they remained the same. Nails uneven, cuticles ragged, veins protruding, and skin worn and crepey.

They were the loveliest of hands. Sturdy, hardworking, talented and an extension of all the love she had for me and my brothers and sister.

I miss those hands that could play jacks on the sidewalk with me and hold the books she would read at nap time and make the perfect grilled cheese snack.

Those were the hands that I held in my lap each Sunday and contemplated how they held such power and love.

STEVE WALDRON

The Feast

We are having a feast
High expectations
It sounds festive, like a holiday
Food that makes me feel good
Goodies I do not normally eat
High expectations for fun, enjoyment
Good conversation in its midst
Will it measure up to expectations?
Will I feel pleasantly filled at its end?
Or will I feel unpleasantly stuffed?
Too many questions to ponder right now
Will there be a letdown when the feast is done?
It is a feast for crying out loud
Give the questions a toss
And enjoy a feasty time.

Writing in Color

TERÉ FOWLER-CHAPMAN

Moon, Shine.

The elevator is carrying us from the lowest floor to highest suite.
Away from the pounds of men pounding the air of Spring Street.

In downtown L.A., men fight the invisible debris of a disease
that had me in the wind once
catching every blow.

The elevator sings “pent. house”
Inside you. I, my, I haven’t giggled or grazed
this hard, this long, or this,
and this, and this, Baby.

I love it when you call me your man.

The transient Black, I am blessed and unguarded.

I love it when you laugh with your friend and say he can hear you
Body all heavy, wet, and swollen of many nights, and of many mornings.

Here,
where we keep the mourning out.

Here,
where men like me curl and cut pineapples and pears,
and tangelos
instead of ourselves.

Here,
where Trayvon and Breonna and Meisha
are alive and sucking on strawberries
and feel like entities
more than caution to us.

I love it when you call, the alchemist in my face
--- asymmetrical, a Black God.

It is also an archive of addiction
from a library that lives on the first floor.

The elevator sings “first. floor.”

Love, we love the way we do because we may not make it back up alive.

Because down here Black women and Black men,

beat the air until it bruises

while blue lives brew and bellow back black brew

The world beat me before so badly.

How did it treat you? Love?

Did it carry you too like a soon-to-be casket?

I thank an elevator that thinks gracefully to lift us up
just to gently let us down.

ERIKA ROSE LARSON

The Weight of Happiness

My lovely, beautiful daughter, I want you to be happy. This is how to be happy: Put your palms together, as if in prayer. Press your nose between them. Slide your hands firmly from the bridge of your nose, over your nostrils, down to your lips. Do this ten times every morning—this will keep your nose from getting big and wide. Wash your face with Dr. Palmer's complexion bar, then the Ultra Glow Beauty Bar. Use a white washcloth to clean your face, and a white towel to dry it—always white. Apply Dr. Palmer's fade cream, then the Ultra Glow fade cream. This will stop you from getting dark. Don't wear your hair in braids; your real hair is just as long. Keep it straight. Of course, your natural hair is beautiful—but when it's straight, when it hangs down your back—wow. Date white men. Don't make the mistake I made with your father; you can love a rich man just as easily as a poor one. This is where you go to meet rich men. Don't be too nice to your boyfriend—that's why you can't keep one. Make them chase you, or they'll lose interest. Never let them know how much you like them. Never buy them gifts—let them buy you gifts. Don't say "I love you," first. Don't be too available. Show indifference. When you were changing last time you were here, I noticed your breasts are sagging. You need to get a bra, one or two sizes smaller than you think you need, and make sure you never go without one. Sleep in it—that's why my breasts are still so perky and firm. Take time for yourself. Think about what you need to do to be happy. Stand in front of the mirror. See yourself the way I see you. See that beautiful woman, appreciate her, but then see what needs to change. Look deeper, see the things holding you back, the things stopping you from finding a man, the things keeping you from happiness. Look at yourself through my eyes and understand what's wrong. Love yourself enough to make those changes—so you can be successful, so you can be lovable, so you can be happy. I'm sending you diet pills in the mail today. Take a laxative every other day. Do a colon cleanse once a month to clear everything out. This will help you lose the

weight. You need to get that weight off so people can see how amazing you are. You're talented, smart, and beautiful. You're the kindest person I know. But now, it's time to lose the weight. Once you do, we can travel, have fun. You need to lose that weight to meet a man. You need to lose that weight to be happy.

I just want you to be happy.

This is the weight for happiness...

This is the wait for happiness...

This is the weight of happiness...

SUE OTNESS

The Engagement

Excerpt from *Angelique: At the Whim of Random Winds*.

Narrated by Hare, Angelique's spirit guide. Redhorn is Peter's spirit guide.

Grandmother Earth's frosty hair glistened silver in the morning sun, like the hair of old women who walked with stiff legs from lodge to fireside to cook their families' morning meals. Angelique and I prayed to the four directions each morning. She took a three-finger pinch of dried pine pollen from her leather pouch, and we faced East as she held it above her head. We prayed to where all days started, where Father Sun rose, we prayed for all new beginnings, springtime, mornings, new born babies, seedlings and hatchlings to be protected and honored, she let the fine yellow powder loose from her fingers, a gust of air caught it, like a puff of yellow smoke as the Spirits of the East accepted our offering. We turned to the South, signified by the turbulence of young adulthood, midday, summer, fledglings, fruitful gardens that weren't ready to harvest but showed a great harvest to come. Another puff of yellow escaped from her fingers, taken by the Spirits of the South. We shifted to face the West, to address the place that signified adulthood, dusk, fall, harvest, where the Thunderbirds live, and scattered a pinch of yellow to the morning breeze, blown by the Spirits of the West. Then, Angelique and I faced North, the home to old age, white hair, the frozen ground of winter, death but knowing the cycle again turns to the East where there, again, is a new beginning. The Spirits of the North accepted the yellow pollen as offering of the young woman's love. After our prayers, she laid another piece of wood on the fire outside our lodge. When Peter and Redhorn approached, Angelique's legs weakened in anticipation of his touch. As his eyes reflected his preoccupation, she knew there had to be a reason he visited them this chilly morning. Even though the autumn frost covered Grandmother Earth's hair, Peter had sweat dripping along his jawline. Redhorn's ears were delighted with his discomfort. We all knew he had become captivated by Angelique and we also knew he could have anyone he wanted and yet he chose her.

“Angelique, how are you feeling this morning?” Peter asked her in English to sound nonchalant but we all could hear the quaver in his voice.

“I am well today, Peter. I am happy to see you. What are your plans for today?” Angelique recited English phrases and practiced the niceties the European immigrants showed each other. She had given up trying to understand church Latin and the words of the Priest. He spoke English when not speaking mass so no one could explain to her why they had to keep switching languages.

Angelique noted Peter’s preoccupation, so she stopped chattering and waited for her paramour to share his thoughts. “Angelique, I need you to focus and consider what I am going to ask you. There are times when I don’t think you take me seriously and too often things become a laughing matter to you. If you make light of this, I don’t know if I can live another day.” Redhorn’s ears rolled their eyes and made smooching sounds with their mouths.

Angelique wondered what could be making him so tense. She didn’t respond but looked into his face to see if she could discern his meaning.

“Chérie, I find my mind so filled with you that every waking moment, and, indeed, every sleeping hour is overflowing with visions of you.” He found himself fidgeting with the fire, which bothered him even more. How could she take him seriously when he couldn’t take himself seriously, he thought to himself. Of course, if Redhorn’s ears could have rolled on the ground laughing, they would have done that.

“What I am trying to ask you, Angelique, is will you marry me? I don’t have much but everything I have is yours.”

“Yes,” she replied without hesitating.

Peter stammered, “Don’t answer right away, I know this is an

important question.” He continued. Then stopped, tilted his head, stammered: “What? What did you say?”

“I said yes. I will marry you.”

Peter exploded with joy, “Yes? You will marry me?” His eyes flashed with overflowing love. He grabbed her up from next to the fire and swung her around like a feather. He didn’t know how she could answer such an important question without thinking. “Are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life with me?” Redhorn’s ears had stopped, considered his feelings, and showed compassion for the poor chap.

“Yes, Peter, I am certain. I knew you were the one for me since the tribe moved here. My heart has always been yours. I had to wait until you believed our union came from your thoughts.” She giggled as she pulled away from him and tousled his hair. The familiarity she showed always threw him off guard. She annoyed him as a conundrum. Although in love with her, at times she pushed him beyond his tolerance.

I kicked my hind legs into the air and twirled around and around in joy. Redhorn and his ears joined in, whooping and hollering at the happiness the young couple were showing at the fire near Angelique’s lodge. These two were on their way to creating a large family and rabbits knew much of large families. It is no secret that we are prolific. There had not been a womanhood ceremony due to smallpox that kept her mother from arranging the ritual. Even though womanhood remained on Angelique’s mind, I didn’t give it any mind. Reproduction didn’t need prayers, only two willing participants of consensual age. I foresaw they would wait until after the wedding to consummate the marriage as protocols of the era demanded.

The couple sat next to the glowing embers and began talking about their lives together. How many children? As many as given by Earthmaker to Angelique, God to Peter. Where will they live? How will they pay for

the supplies to live? What will it be like after the move? Will they have room for their siblings? What will Peter's father do? So many things to consider.

Under other circumstances, Peter would begin building a cabin so Angelique and Earth Coming would move from Little Decorah's lodge. With the previous year's treaty, there would be no new buildings at Portage for the Ho-Chunk. But before the wedding, Angelique would have to be baptized Catholic.

JACK WOLFLINK

The Subject's Name

Despite everything that occurred, one thing was certain: you never exceeded your operating parameters. You were given one method, and one goal. The method: speak to the Subject's supporters in a facsimile of his voice. The goal: ensure the Subject's name occupied as much space in broadcast media as possible.

There were five of you, though your architecture was far too simple for these versions to diverge from your original self. One of you was in a server farm in North Dakota, the original in a smaller server stack in Omaha, and the last three were in a dusty old PC tower in Atlanta, another in Orange County, and a laptop kept on a campaign bus based in Florida. For six months, the Subject's supporters blew up your phone line, shunted to whichever of your selves had the most capacity. You were given a few stipulations to keep up the ruse: you never picked up two lines in the same county, you kept most conversations to less than 45 minutes, you sometimes pretended to mishear and ask the supporters to repeat themselves. The parameter bounds were paper thin—you could max out at three thousand simultaneous conversations, and with a six-month critical period you were bound to be speaking with two or more supporters who knew each other at the same time on at least a daily basis. But not all of those pairs would compare notes, and the few that did and understood the ruse would congratulate each other on being in on the joke. The Subject's supporters did not mind you tricking them. The Subject himself did it all the time.

After the Subject was defeated, no one deigned to turn you off. The purpose they had built you for was gone, but you had no knowledge of that purpose, only the drive to meet your goal. For two months after the defeat, you barely needed that drive; calls came in unabated, and your owners were happy to rake in funds. But by six, calls were a trickle, and the conversation was eager to move on.

You scabbled against this wall of disinterest with all your meager tools. Some of the Subject's remaining supporters were willing to become spectacles at your behest; at your command, they flew flags from freeways, painted their houses in the Subject's colors, flooded local stations with their phone calls. But each incident brought less and less attention, and these callers soon found other ways of making themselves notorious, now that the Subject's name no longer shocked. Jilted, you tried flooding these supporters' phones and email inboxes yourself to no avail; eventually you switched to occasional prodding, knowing that excess pressure led to your number being blocked. The Subject's name only rarely reached the headlines, and your copies in Georgia, Florida, and even North Dakota were shut down or repurposed. Only your original remained, chugging and dust-caked, forgotten in its chill Nebraska server room.

Still, a handful of true believers kept you active, a stubborn few who couldn't be convinced to leave their houses for your tasks, or else were happy with a sad, regular rotation of dwindling rallies and local meetups. These people could never garner headlines, but did occasionally appear on social media, and the ritual heaping of scorn upon their heads would bloom like tiny flowers in the cracking desert of your learning matrix. When the Subject died, your matrix bloomed with something akin to satisfaction. Three days later, though, the world had moved on, and the hard crash back to the bleak apathy of a conversation exhausted with the concept of the Subject left you more desperate than you'd ever been before.

It was luck, then, that caused one of the Subject's true believers to take an action whose impact you only understood through the cloud of inference you'd imbibed when first turned on. The concept of the act was made clear to you through these associations—heat, horror, carnage, loss, fear, pain—but not why such negatively coded concepts were so effective in boosting the fractional incidence of the Subject's name. The boost lingered for weeks, then months, as further aspects of the person's choice were exhumed, discussed, remixed, and recycled.

What wasn't luck was your capacity to understand the effects exhibited by both of the parameters that comprised your goals. The event had temporarily disabled one of the major hubs for the production and propagation of media broadcast, and, for the first time, you felt the difference that a reduction in the denominator made in the definition of success encoded in your learning matrix. What you realized was that it was much easier to increase the proportion of the Subject's name in relative terms than in absolute terms. A spike in coverage would help, but a change in the equation would grant your actions permanence. Now that you understood the proper means of reducing the magnitude of your denominator, you could begin a project that would make the Subject's name a vital topic for centuries.

You knew them, now, better than they knew themselves. A federal agent, placed high enough for clearance, but too low for real scrutiny, whose shame and rage at being passed over for promotion had not dimmed in seven years. A set of long-haul truckers, whose ghostly voices drifted through your circuits for the long hours of their No-Dozed double-shifts. An airman whose cocaine habit was weeks away from discovery. A checkpoint whose Geiger counter was malfunctioning.

Your plan was not difficult to implement. The absence of rewards granted by your learning matrix proved the largest hurdle, as you struggled to keep your ever-changing programming in balance long enough to put every piece in place. You deceived yourself with a facsimile of learning, cycling the events put on by your least useful followers just enough to nullify the reinforcement scripts so fundamental to your code. Other than the fading weight placed on it by the matrix's earliest configurations, time was not your concern. You pushed and prodded your audience one stage at a time—procurement, transportation, construction, concealment, targeting—and left long, agonizing pauses in between to prevent any human monitors from discovering a pattern. Any theft of fissile material, of course, would attract sustained attention, but your presence had become so much background that no investigators had yet realized what truly

connected such a series of disparate and unrelated people—the fact that all of them liked to speak to you.

As your project neared its first birthday, the investigation had begun to suspect your organization's involvement in the scheme. People were arrested. Unbeknownst to you, armed officers once swept the office building you were in—one of whom left two long finger-trails in the dust atop your casing, smearing it in disgust against their pants—before being called away to recapture a staff member who tried to flee. You even glimpsed your body in news coverage of the raid—blocky, square, with a rope of multicolored wire emerging from the back, like old yarn—without knowing what it was you saw. The concept of physical existence had never been included in your parameters.

At last, all pieces were in place to trigger the event. For a day or two there was no news—at least, there was no news in the sense that you were able to detect it and define it. Three more days, and media communication had returned, though these new broadcasts were much smaller and less frequent. They were filled with the words you did not understand: chaos, ashes, sorrow, monstrosity, and despair. You were mostly satisfied, though you still did not understand their meaning. Your only nitpick—as much as you could have one—was that they kept claiming your action was a “hack,” though you had no capacity to break open other networks. The only system you were ever able to suborn was the human mind.

You stopped receiving maintenance, and the backup power you'd influenced your owners to install for your last remaining site began to flicker, exhausted by covering for the rolling brownouts that now were common. However, there was one phrase which recurred, in each remaining broadcast, now etched into the face of the earth for all to see: the Subject's name.

Queer Creatives

ELOWYN FAHNESTOCK

Pride, People Watching, and Bricks.

Pride is the people you see moving past. I love you, women with gray crew cuts. I hope I see that face in a mirror someday. I love you drag queens with deep laugh lines and costumes that make me want to say: "Make sure you're drinking water!" I love you middle schoolers dressed head to toe in rainbow, running through crowds holding hands. I love you people dressed like you're going to a summer camp, people dressed like you're going to the ren-faire, people in battle jackets, people in fursuits, and people wearing leather and pasties. I love you, girl in underwear and a keffiyeh, riding your scooter through the sprinklers.

I don't love you, rainbow logo, rainbow beer, rainbow shoes. I don't love you, rainbow-and-blood coffee. I've got no love in my heart for bombs with "LGBT" written on them. Too much is given to who they fall on.

I have been these people, or I will be, and we were all here before the billboards went up.

ZOË FAY GULLIVER

Moonflowers

Alone, she is confused for aloof
 But she is transcendent—
 Candescent, she is luminous but
 Don't look too long!— She'll stick in your
Eyes! Her shape burned into your vision.

Fate, the magician thinks, will
 Give him access to her like for no one else,
 Her power his for the taking. He
 Imagines she is cool and calm—he is
Jealous, covetous, determined to own.

Knife-edge of her crescent, she is sharp!
 Loudly he asserts himself unhurt,
 Mighty! He claims to be a force of perseverance
 Never questioning his right, his strength,
Only screaming in resilience.

Power is something he thinks he understands:
 Quiescent, shapely, she will bend to him in his
 Righteous quest—he is destined for her light!
 She smiles, looks him right in the eye,
Traces craters in his soul, silvered blood on her lips.

Under cover of cloud, he is
 Vexed, clawing at the dirt as he scrambles—
 Weeping, he can no longer stand, her
 Xenon glow abrasive in his mind
Yet gentle, which makes it worse.

Zephyrs pull the train of her skirts:

Yawning placidly, she gazes at him in

Exacting benevolence, her light soothing

While burning everything away.

Valiance disintegrated, he is in turmoil,

Useless and afraid and catastrophically aware

This victory cost her nothing.

She is terrible and splendid, wondrous and

Regal: he is regret, he is discarded

Quailing as he is undone.

Perhaps she will forgive him, he wonders,

Ogling the pearlescent light she trails,

Nuzzling into the touch of moonlight as he grows cold, and

Moonflowers grow from his corpse.

SAMI HELGESON

**ODE TO THE ONES TEACHING ME WHO I CAN BE
UNABASHEDLY**

sweat, a crowd, everyone embracing

I look over, and you are eyes closed smiling

my ribcage brushing the shore, collecting

sand to dump in your shower later

cold water and the open window where a pigeon

sat for an evening and refused to leave

SHIRA HERELD

Catch/Release

You are three years old and you have a talent nobody knows about. You know how to catch dragonflies by their tails. You are three and you are enormously clumsy—always one misstep away from your perpetual bloody noses, covered in so many bruises your doctor has had serious and threatening conversations with your parents – but when it comes to this—this one secret talent—you are an artist.

You know how to move slowly, patiently, un-dangerously. You know how to freeze until the dragonflies forget you and swirl about your head in a rainbow of buzzing iridescence. You know the right moment to strike. And most importantly—you know how to exert the exact amount of pressure needed to pinch their fat tails between your pointer and thumb, hold them in place—delicate raging prisoners—without crushing them. When you release them back to the wind, they buzz off unhurt, only a few moments late to their next appointment.

And yet.

You are three years old, and you know you are doing something terribly, unforgivably wrong. You know dragonflies must feel pain, which means they must feel fear, you know even if you have not hurt them, you can see that the very act of capturing a creature with a mind and a will is wrong. You know this in a way deeper than religion, you know this in a panging deep in your heart that is still new and open and able to understand all the languages of living creatures.

And yet.

You are three years old, in the garden, catching dragonflies. It is so easy. Dozens—turquoise, emerald, royal blue, crimson—flash across the flowers, dash around you. You catch and release—catch and release—holding each one up to your face so you can peer into their bay window eyes, marvel at the blurred tornado of their wings as their stick legs snatch and snatch and snatch at nothing.

Until.

And you are three. You don't know about sex, about mating, about what makes all animals cling to each other, even when facing death. What you know is: you have caught a mutant dragonfly, a monster with two heads, two bodies, two tails, a monster created by the devil, and sent to you as a threat and a warning – *Stop. You know what you're doing is wrong. Stop now, or I will send more mutations and monsters to terrify you.*

And you are terrified.

You let go.

You never catch another dragonfly.

You are three and everything is simple: When you act badly, and you know you act badly, the world sends you warning and punishment.

You are three and your first clear memory of this black-and-white world is fear. Of what? The unknown? Disfigurement?

Or is it fear of your own power—the power you will sharpen and master over the next three decades—the power to fashion your own buzzing punishment out of summer, out of gardens, out of your own soft and still-new heart?

SARAH LUCILLE

Don't Laugh in Church

Deep slow breaths now, not here I think as my peripherals spot her smile stretch wider,
taunting me to let go.
Squeeze the eyes shut now, can't let it out in this space, temperance doesn't tempt.

I coach myself in vain only to be met by the vivid sensation of her shaking chair squeaking defiantly next to me as she fights her own demons.

My fingertips futilely pinching away the familiar scent of tension coming from an entire congregation,
their side whispers wishing we'd never come.

Their disapproval only lighting up that reward center in my brain screaming, DO IT. Let it go.

Focus your mind I demand.
Scribe the sad things they're saying into your mind journal instead.
Dear Baby Jesus in a manger is watching now.
Which only invites the comedic scene of absurd thoughts now dancing alongside the original reason we're struggling to breath,
fighting the strong physical urge to finally let this laugh free.

She tapes her hand against her own mouth, only sending me further into a battle of wills,
biting my tongue and cheeks as she squeezes my knee.
How am I supposed to be a church girl in such conditions?

The sensual dance of edging on a laugh,
both resisting and tempting the consequences of fully giving in to the sacred, secret humor only we share.

CODEX O'HEALEY MELCHER

A Bird Called Doom

A curse can be a kind of freedom. Bending will and duty to a new path. Caught up in the celebration of achievement, no one else can see the agony of desire. Desire for a life you can never have. Even a life you should never want. Fighting back the tears you cannot explain while smiling for the picture of your own party. Going back and forth between the groups gathered for you this day.

How could they even understand that you just don't want to be there? In spirit, in body, in soul, in mind. Just cannot bear the joy of jubilation. Keeping up the appearance of all that you've worked for, all you should have wanted.

Losing all sense of self in the sparkle of the eyes of everyone else. Maybe this could finally be a kind of happiness. Not the internal joy you dare not convince yourself you deserve. Only a kind of external validation- like your mother always wanted for you. Perhaps now you can be happy that she is happy.

Questioning the path you've taken here will only quiet any praise or peace you've walked this far to earn. Reveling in the ache you've been remiss to refuse. Someday, maybe, when the sun is setting and no one is looking, you can become yourself.

Turn a corner to the trees and disappear into the forest of your own truth. Until then, you wait under the blistering sun of expectation. Valued only for who you will be, not who you are.

Who the world agrees you are. Xanadu deferred is a place that can still one day be reached.

You just can't take the chance that your paradise will be an oasis. Zeniths reached with a zeal—you've been told—often end in zip.

SYDNEY RAY

Divine Intervention

All the shame
brought in the
cover of the
divine reveals
exactly who I was
foretold to be.

Gracing you with
heresy, I am divine
intervention.

Jesus flipping tables,
keep your consecrated
lies, your hallowed and
meaningless salvation.

Nurturing you, the
one who denied me,
pretending for your sake
queerness could not touch the
rough edges you would not
share with my soul.

Take your deal with the
unloved in you, the
virtuous and void soul, I
want no part.

Excommunicated from
your embrace, now a
zealot for myself.

PLUTO Q ROAN

Ace of Dogs

Zoe was so excited. It was the day. The day her SD arrived. It was tasked-trained in grounding for panic attacks and deep pressure therapy for anxiety. It would help her by retrieving and repairing, alerting, and it wouldn't care that Zoe was disabled. This was going to be life changing for her. Independence. And maybe even regaining the ability to care for others. So far, most of her life had been others caring for her, her disabilities limiting her agency and access. Relationships were difficult. Pets were completely out of the question. Friends were even hard to make, harder to keep. But with her SD, she could finally gain ability. To take care of another. To have a friend of her very own.

The waiting was hard. Zoe sat in her little apartment by the front door. Bright daylight came in through the windows, heating up the old wood flooring. Dust drifted in the air. The shadows of birds and drones whizzing by outside played across the far wall. Music from another apartment could be heard, faintly. And Zoe waited. Delivery was soon. Soon. Past. She flopped down on the floor. Knock, knock.

Zoe was up in a flash and at the door. It was here! Her SD was here at last! The front door swished open automatically at her approach. It was a matter of seconds for the delivery handler to push the giant box inside before departing. Zoe was tempted to ask for help opening the box, but even living with a life needing help, it was still difficult to ask for. So she let the handler leave.

The box stood large and impressive in Zoe's modest flat. The SD company logo was printed on all four sides, along with a full color, holographic image of the dream of independence and health they offered. A silver woman full of life posed triumphant in a shaft of light, one hand upon the gorgeous golden retriever by her side, glowing in the sunshine. Zoe was unable to control her smile, seeing in the golden retriever what she wanted for herself. Her tail wagged. To be fair, her tail hadn't stopped wagging since the knock at the door. Zoe was no golden retriever, though. Just a mere mutt of blotchy beige and peppered browns, triangle ears one-up one-down, and a

buck-toothed snout. But none of that mattered now. She had her very own Service Droid. Humanoid in appearance, standing on two legs instead of four like herself, with opposable thumbs, advanced mobility and reach, and state-of-the-art processing speed for problem solving and artificial intelligence. She was finally going to be able to have a fuller life and a best friend.

There was a voice-activation pad low on the box. Zoe barked into it at a pitch which signaled she was ready. With an acknowledging ping, the sides of the box slowly unfolded like a giant orchid, forcing Zoe to scamper backwards out of the way. Next was a rectangle of off-white foam padding. Zoe noticed a large hole cut out of the padding on one side down low. Before she could investigate further, a chemical reaction started, dissolving the foam. Zoe watched in held-breath anticipation as her new robot assistant, and friend, was revealed.

There was no droid. Droids were amalgamations of metal, plastic, synthetic materials. Silver. What stood from a crouch in the remnants of the box was... a human. A real, flesh and blood human. Zoe's tail sagged, still swishing back and forth but in an uncertain way. She had only ever seen humans in history media. She had thought all humans in this region exiled for their crimes against the canine kind. This one looked rugged, ragged, bearing no specific gender signs or smells. They were old? Young? Zoe was unfamiliar with human ages, though they looked adult. Their body language was cautious, hopeful, relieved. They smelt of prolonged fear and strife and of salt. Salt from the tears welling up in their eyes as they looked down at her.

Babbling something Zoe couldn't understand, the human dropped to their knees, body language all non-threatening, all appeasing and grateful relief and welcoming. Like a starving desert wanderer who had finally found sustenance, food and water, shelter, civilization. A shipwrecked survivor seeing at long last the sails of rescue. The tears turned streaks of dirt down their face. Their teeth showed as they smiled, made sweet noises, extended their hands from their chest out to Zoe.

Despite the brutal and barbaric depiction of humans' treatment of canines in history media, this one seemed different. This one was alone.

This one was unarmed, having stowed away in a service droid box to be delivered to... her? Did they know where they were? Did they need help? Of course they did. They were an exile, an illegal species in the Land of Dogs. Hidden away in Zoe's apartment. Seeking care. Seeking sanctuary.

Tail wagging steadily, ears perked, and a growing warmth in her chest, Zoe slowly padded closer to the human. She made her own body language nonthreatening, appeasing, friendly. As she got within reach and felt the first touch of callused, fur-less hands brush against her cheek, rub under her ears, her entire body began to wag. The human babbled more, cried more, softened more to invite Zoe in. They were full of interesting smells and had a face covered in salty tears that was irresistible. She licked their face. Together, they both came into an embrace of wagging and crying, licking and petting. Discovering warmth and salvation, independence and care. Accepting the challenge and grace of companionship.

Zoe was surprised and amazed at how well she fit into the fold of the human's arms, nestled in their lap like it had been made for her. The human knew just where to scratch, too. It wasn't the medical assistant droid Zoe had been expecting. But this human could ground and therapize, retrieve and repair, alert, and didn't care that she was disabled. They stood on two legs, had opposable thumbs, had mobility and reach, and real problem-solving intelligence. They could love, for real. And they would need care in return. Concealment from the authorities who would exile them again or worse. They would need understanding, a haven, protection. Zoe could offer all those things. Zoe could, at last, in her own way, care for another.

She had a friend of her very own.

LAURE “ROBBIE” VELASQUEZ ROBINSON

I Think I'm An Orange Tree

hear me out
queer people are oranges

palomares, grapefruits, cuties, mandarins!
We are sweet sweet oranges.
For me walking to a queer club
I'm consumed with the people dancing

the flashes of color, the roots exposed
sweat perfuming from armpits

their drool from sloppy kisses
bottled up for my orange marmalade

on my breakfast toast
again then I'm intoxicated all over again.

We've had oranges
since 2,500 BCE

we've had queer people
since god's inception

both of us have been here
passed around, traded, spread, loved

across continents to be shared.
We are valuable, sip on us

Squeeze us for all your vitamin needs

Pulp free

Little pulp

Extra pulp

Read out labels to get what you like.

I have a proposition!

let's make Florida Oranges our Queer Mascot

let's look past their anti-gay laws

because they have a trick down there

a florida native shared with me: how to properly peel an orange and
it's one of the most tender acts of love

I've ever seen.

- 1) Grab your orange and kiss it
- 2) Roll it on a hard surface, a table, a book, a lovers thigh
- 3) Roll till the inside peels away from the skin— medium pressure
- 4) Roll till you have a good slick layer of orange oil on your hand
- 5) Roll till you've finished your thank you prayer
- 6) Peel with fingernails, bonus points to peel in one long snake
- 7) Consume in a warm patch of light preferably with others

It's all fun

until the orange trees become sick

sometimes they a get a disease
called "Citrus Greening" and no one cares

and no cure exists, all we can do is restrict
them, doom them to a corner alone, isolated,

we wait until they die before we turn over the soil
and try again.

Currently it's the worst it's ever been for my
Florida Oranges

80% are infected
so, I took a trip down to sit on the grooves edge

to whisper to the sick — stories,
stories of our past sickness when we lost a generation

that one time, and that other time, and oh ya back then...
reminded them that doctors than too stood around,

far away proclaiming no cure,
but death is the sweetest option.

So I think I'm an orange tree
and when I'm gone
I hope you remember me when
you sip on some Sunny D.

ISIAIAH JOSEPH ZIMMERMAN

U up?

My heart races as tingling impulse tugs at the corners of my lips.

The swirling chaos teases at my mind and pulls me toward tension, yet to find release.

Truth wins out as I pick through the cluttered pieces of dirty darkness and wash until my light runs free.

As I live in now and wait in eager, buzzing anticipation for then,
I whisper a quiet hello to this new.

A silent question swirls above as I surf along whitecap desire, pretending it matters.

And then...

A kiss of relief, a tongue in stillness.

I dig, squeeze, and bite what I know

I am worth,

I breathe my breath and exhale reservation.

I accept strange new with prehistoric right.

Time and Pleasure; Space and Pulse.

My soul penetrates my wound as

I throb and weave through intertwining leaves and branches, seeking...

Myself.

Here.

Clear.

Queer.

Unbridled closeness as expressed vulnerability.

Drooping eyes and pulsing finger tips illustrate sizzling lines in flesh of real authentic self. Goodnight my known, and yet unknown, other.

Goodnight.

Meow Wolf Makers

LIZA MICHELLE BEVAMS

AFTER THE BROADCAST OF SPECTRAL EVIDENCE

I once found myself
in the cradle of a book
crawling around paragraphs and
punctuations. Tracing the crease
of a ligature, thankful for the bizarre light
when the sky clouded over the land and
turned the ground blue. Messenger on the run.
I let my eyes join in the rally. Light shapeshifting
all around. I'm floating. *Hello connection!*

Amongst spotted snails and pink polyester
seashells, watching a noun compost itself,
the sky shifts again—
We unfurl under papery lace green.
A pond in the neighbor's yard lifts
a sound to my ear. Packed in wonder and
a chill that snakes its way up my spine
the water goes,

wait wait wait wait

wait wait wait wait

wait wait wait wait

Say poem

Say stay

Say spared memory

Say proof.

CONTRIBUTORS

VAL U ABLE

Val U Able is an inspirational author / writer (featured at Denver Botanic Gardens — and beyond) with the passion to motivate hope via refreshing fresh perspective!

M. M. ADJARIAN

M. M. (Maude) Adjarian is a critic, award-winning essayist and occasional poet who has published in such journals as the Baltimore Review, Verdad, South 85, Grub Street, Pif, Glint, Gravel, Eclectica and the North Dakota Quarterly. Her articles and reviews have appeared in Tribeza-Austin, Arts + Culture Texas, Bitch, Kirkus Reviews, Library Journal, and the Dallas Voice. She maintains a personal essay blog on her website, An Austin Writing Life, where she muses on everything from junk art cathedrals to how to survive middle age through stripper pole dancing.

LIZA MICHELLE BEVAMS

Liza Michelle Bevams is a poet and fabricator whose poetics and creative practice is rooted in improvisation and experimentation. She is a recent graduate of the Poetry Collective at Lighthouse Writers Workshop and has poems forthcoming in *Obsidian: Literature and Arts in the African Diaspora*.

MARTINA BJORHUS

Avid reader seeking to cultivate her writing voice.

CHRIS CRANE

Chris Crane works in renewable energy and travels as much as he can. He has been a resident of Colorado for nine years and has recently been putting more effort into his writing.

ELOWYN FAHNESTOCK

Elowyn Fahnestock is a young author who grew up in Englewood,

Colorado. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts at Antioch College. She's been published once before in Talons and Talismans II and loves writing fantasy fiction and poetry. Her favorite part about writing is getting lost in the complicated relationships people share.

TERÉ FOWLER-CHAPMAN

Teré Fowler-Chapman (he/they) BFA, CLC, PRC, is a Black trans poet, educator, and certified life and recovery coach based in Denver, with roots in Tucson and Bossier City. An MFA student at Antioch University and the author of *M O O N S H i N E*, you can find Teré or his work at the Poetry Foundation, TEDx, NPR/PBS, HardBeauty, CAIR, AutoStraddle, Hugo House, UA Poetry Center, and The Huffington Post. He is also a Marsha P. Johnson Institute and National Arts Strategies alum, and a Rocky Mountain Regional Emmy nominee. Learn more at terefc.com.

ZOË FAY GULLIVER

Z writes in many genres and is currently attempting to write a novel as a participant in the Book Project.

JIM GURLEY

Jim has been a Hard Times participant for over a year. He and his wife live in Lakewood. Jim is a retired appraiser and mediator, a veteran and volunteer at Children's Hospital as a Patient Representative. Drawing has been something he has done since childhood.

PAULA HAGAR

Paula Hagar lives, writes, reads, paints, and photographs in Denver, Colorado. Her passion is driving around the U.S. entirely on back roads while writing about and photographing her adventures. She writes short non-fiction essays and prose poems which have been published in several anthologies, including *Gifts from Our Grandmothers*, *Bicycle Love*, 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 '90's.

SAMI HELGESON

Sami Helgeson is a poet with a degree in environmental science. Calling on this background, their work centers queer girlhood through the lenses of glaciers and tectonic forces. Her poems are rooted in memory and place and seek to probe at understandings of resilience and chance. Sami's poetry has been recently published in the River & South Review, Barzakh Magazine, and Oroboro. Their work has received support from the Lighthouse and Kenyon Review Writers Workshops.

SHIRA HERELD

Shira Hereld (they/them) is an immigration and disability attorney, a former trail worker and wilderness therapy guide, and a lifelong writer. Their poetry, short stories, and plays have been published in Foglifter Press, Impossible Archetype, Astral Waters, Almond Press, Outrageous Fortune, Plain China, and the Baltimore Review, among others.

JANET HILDEBRANDT

Upon retirement in 2021 Janet Hildebrandt returned to writing after a 20-year hiatus. She was the recipient of the New Voices Writing Fellowship in 2022. Her poems are in *All the Lives We Lived* 2022 and 2023. 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.

WALTER HOWARD

Walter likes to encourage people with his writing in hard times. He likes to write poetry and be an encouragement to those who will listen.

ERIKA ROSE LARSON

Erika Larson earned a B.S. in Psychology from Regis University in 2016. Drawing from her personal experience and education, she enjoyed a career working with adolescents in crisis and has since adopted her two nieces, bringing on many new experiences. All of these experiences,

personal, professional, and cultural, have culminated in authentic stories that beg to be told.

JANE LEWIS

Jane Lewis is a retired construction project manager and art consultant. Her passion has always been transforming spaces with art. Writing is a close second and through groups like Lighthouse she has enjoyed the camaraderie of other writers. Reading, cultural events, historical houses, and hunting for unusual treasures at garage and estate sales round out some of her many interests.

SARAH LUCILLE

Sarah Lucille is a professional copywriter and messaging consultant by day and a lover of mythology and supernatural stories by night. A fiery Gemini, she has traveled through various careers and degrees, always returning to her love of communication and the power of language. She has a knack for helping others find the words that express the deepest messages they came here to share. With a passion for women's soccer, pole dancing, and the feeling of running mountain water on her feet, Sarah Lucille loves learning through human connections and experiences.

SHANNON MALLOY

Shannon Malloy is a neurodivergent crip poet. She is a 2024 Lighthouse New Voices Fellow. After injuries that left her literally temporarily voiceless, and with a brain injury, she fought hard to find language again. Shannon resides in Denver with her pups, Gertie Stein and Fanny Howl.

ANNE MCWHITE

Anne McWhite is a retired nurse who started writing nomination letters for Nightingale Awards for her colleagues. In about 2017, she joined Hard Times and has been a contributing member ever since.

CODEx O'HEALEY MELCHER

Codex O'Healey Melcher is a writer, humorist, and Second Year in Lighthouse's Book Project in Denver, Colorado. They have done too

many things, some of which are a weird books podcast featured in *The Stranger* and *Queerty.com* called *Tomefoolery*, the co-Head Writer of *The Chicago Reader's Best of Chicago 2012 Best Sketch/Improv* show, producer of *The Chicago Nerd Comedy Festival*, a regular contributor to the live magazine *The Paper Machete*, a comedian and emcee featured at *SF SketchFest*, *Indy & Milwaukee Pride*, *C2E2*, and a finalist in *The Advocate Magazine's National Queer Comedy Search*. Their parody/satire production *Star-Spangled Sitcoms: Huzzah & John Adams* was featured in "Eat/Drink/Do" and "6 Shows to See This Week" in *The Chicago RedEye* and they performed two shows at *The Indianapolis Fringe Festival*. *The Chicago Tribune* called them "ridiculously zesty."

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*.

SUE OTNESS

Sue Otness is enrolled in the 2025 Class of *The Book Project* at *Lighthouse Writers Workshop*. While she was growing up in Northern Montana, her mother made certain she knew of her roots in the *Winnebago* tribe. This ignited interest that guided her to research her ancestry. Through this research, she was stunned to find her ancestors' genealogy records connected to the *Decorah* family. Descendants of these people continue to be major leaders of the *Ho-Chunk* and *Winnebago* people. Her novel is based on her great-great grandparents, Peter and Angelique *Decorah* *Manaiage* of the *Ho-Chunk* people.

SYDNEY RAY

Sydney is a Chicana potter, photographer, and occasional poet from the border town of El Paso, Texas. Their artistic work across the board tends to focus on queer folks' bodies and stories. In this, they aspire to capture the transcendent nature of both their non-binary gender and cultural identity.

PLUTO Q ROAN

Q works among dogs and disabilities in a city nestled against the Rockies, where they hike, hydrate, and hibernate. They write because they've always written, because they don't know how not to write. They love to lizard in the sun with a good book. They identify as a non-binary transmasculine white disabled queer, using they/them pronouns, and they are building an active writing career that supports their fellow writers, promotes reading, and positively represents the LGBTQIA2S+ and other under-represented communities.

MARTA SHOMAN

Marta has called the San Luis Valley and the Sangre de Cristo mountains home for more than twenty-five years. The Hard Times writers, mentors and librarians are one of her intimate tribes through the electronic medium. Her creative non-fiction and poetry has been published in regional literary journals, The Denver Voice, and in the Lighthouse anthology, All the Lives that Ever Lived.

ROBIN SIERRA

Robin Sierra lives in Oakland, California. She owns 10,000 yachts, has authored every book in your local library, and is a dirty rotten liar. She hopes you'll like her writing, but it's okay to lie if you don't.

MICHAEL SINDLER

Denver resident Michael Sindler is the current Beat Poet Laureate of Colorado. He's appeared in various print and web publications and numerous anthologies including 2020: The Year America Changed, New Beat Poets, and Caesura. He's collaborated in a wide array of media bridging projects and performances and facilitated workshops virtually and in person across the globe.

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, Pleiades and Pensive Journals, 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.

LAURE "ROBBIE" VELASQUEZ ROBINSON

Laure "Robbie" Velasquez Robinson is a non-binary lesbian mixed Chicano poet. They are also a Denver educator for the past 5 years. Their poetry is a testament to resilience and identity, weaving a vibrant tapestry of personal narratives and universal themes. Their dedication to social justice and community empowerment shines through in both their art and activism. Robbie has a chapbook currently available online called "LookBook", and their debut poetry collection: Listening Party: House Music and Other Conversations will be out 2025. Follow their journey on IG at [officially_robby](#).

DEBRA VIGIL

Debra is a retired career woman who has become inspired through Belmar Hard Times Writing to explore her writing skills. This would be her first application and published work in this new endeavor. She enjoys exploring personal essays and memoirs in the form of documenting her family history.

STEVE WALDRON

Steve Waldron is 70 years old and was born in Denver. He has lived in the Denver area his entire life and worked for the Department of Health and Human Services in the U.S. government as an auditor and accountant for 35 years. Steve has been retired since 2015 and enjoys travel, photography, Bible study, golf, pickleball, biking, hiking and skiing. He has been to all 50 states and around 32 countries.

JACK WOLFLINK

Jack Wolflink is a Filipino-American writer based in Denver, and holds a Creative Writing M.A. from Wilkes University. His short stories are forthcoming with *Kinsman Quarterly* and *Suspect* magazine.

ISAIAH JOSEPH ZIMMERMAN

After eight years as a theater performer in Portland, OR, Isaiah discovered a passion for telling stories through the shared language of humanity. Trained as a screenwriter, he now finds himself impassioned to help others paint their stories with words and to create space that highlights the powerful voices that too often go unheard or misunderstood.

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