

# *All the Lives We Ever Lived*

*A Lighthouse Writers Workshop  
Community Anthology  
Volume 3*

Edited by Darya Navid, Marissa Morrow, and Marianne Manzler

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## *Introduction*

The past two years have left many of us worn down and exhausted from the swelling tides that surround us all. Human connection has risen to a whole new level of importance and as a result, so has our need for creative expression within the literary arts. The power of creative expression is always bolstered by the writer's own vulnerability and honest reflection. Without this type of bravery, our world would surely be a darker and lonelier place. Deciding to take the leap and share our personal experiences, traumas, hopes, and dreams makes the human experience tangible and should never be taken for granted.

You'll see that honest reflection and bravery within these pages created by writers in the Community Engagement programs at Lighthouse Writers Workshop. These writers have poured out their hearts and turned life experiences and creative inspiration into stunning pieces of poetry, prose, fiction, and nonfiction. The authors of each piece in this anthology all come from different backgrounds with different goals and intentions. But they have all chosen to use their words to turn the universal human experience into something beautiful, something that can and should be cherished by anyone who comes across them.

Some of the writers featured in this collection are part of our Hard Times program which is hosted in partnership with the Denver Public Library and Jefferson County Libraries. I have seen with my own eyes the power and strength that exists within this program. It's all made possible by Lighthouse and library staff and our dedicated faculty: Sydney Fowler, Twanna LaTrice Hill, Lara Jacobs, Malinda Miller, Cipriano Ortega, Joy Sawyer, and Sarah Elizabeth Schantz. You'll also read pieces by participants in our Writing in Color program, facilitated by Twanna

LaTrice Hill, which is a source of community and inspiration for BIPOC writers in Colorado and beyond. To our faculty and all those who have supported these programs in the past and present: thank you. Without your dedication and passion for the Community Engagement programs at Lighthouse, this collection would not be possible.

As you read through this collection of works we hope you find connection, hope, understanding, and a reason to keep bringing light, love, and creativity into what can often be a very heavy and dark world. We hope that what resonates with you can serve as a reminder that human connection is just a few words away.

—Marissa Morrow  
Community Engagement Program Manager  
Lighthouse Writers Workshop







AMY WRAY IRISH

**Amy Wray Irish** has been published recently by *Tiny Spoon*, *Waving Hands*, *We are the West* (Twenty Bellows), *Chiaroscuro* (Northern Colorado Writers), and *Food for Thought* (Broadway Press). Her 2020 chapbook, *Breathing Fire*, received the Fledge Award from Middle Creek Publishing.

*Dear Frida*

Lo siento.  
For my Spanish—no buena.  
For my skin—soy una gringa.  
For my country—la terrible América.

Lo siento.  
For my painting—a withered tree.  
For my promises—broken branches.  
For my pain—the usual poison.

Lo siento.  
For my body—siempre enferma.  
For my loneliness—llamandote.  
For my prayers—pertubando sus sueños.

Lo siento.  
For my need—a strangled thirst.  
For my roots—latching onto you.  
For my words—all that remains.

*Dear Frida (II)*

Let me catch you up.

Los Estados Unidos is still a machine  
eating the earth, squeezing work from flesh,  
and cutting children into pieces  
too small for a coffin.

Los Estados Unidos still smiles  
and wipes the foam from its lips  
after the gift of its rabid bite.

Los Estados Unidos still infects  
your Mexico, the Americas, the world  
with its razor-wire money.

Every year, Los Estados Unidos shakes it head  
at another story  
of workers abused and in revolt  
somewhere far, far in the distance.

Every year, Los Estados Unidos shakes it head  
at another story  
of mass graves and genocide  
it somehow knows nothing about.

The only change is the name:  
they now call it "America."  
Erasing the Central, the South,  
and every grain of your México.

But especially Los Unidos.

The United struggle, continue to be stripped,  
their flag hanging in ragged shreds.

So in summary  
you missed  
not a thing.

*Dear Frida (III)*

My daughter says she dislikes you.  
By which she means  
what she knows of you.  
By which she means  
the broken poetry of your paintings.

Why is the skeleton above the bed? She shudders. Whose is it?  
Why are Frida's eyes and the monkeys' eyes  
so blank? She asks all the right questions  
but doesn't want the answers  
So she calls you scary and dark

To be fair, she also dislikes me.  
And I am scary  
when I waste away in bed for months  
and my skeleton seems to rise from my skin  
and my eyes are too big for my head.  
And I am dark, so dark,  
in the paintings I produce  
with my words.

Who is the skeleton  
floating above the bed?  
She asks, but she already knows.

STACIE BOOKER

*The Rabbits*

Her belly is still big  
here in the nursing home  
modern food, poorly digested.

Her perpetual black hair  
and white pale skin  
still scare me.

Remembering her large imposing body  
filling the chair of my grandfather-  
Her father  
Oh how we hold on;  
How we remember;  
How we honor the dead.

Remembering now  
her being friendless with epilepsy  
and being bullied  
with small town religion  
and assumptions of right.

Remembering her gait  
walking in the chicken pen  
still covered by honeysuckle vines  
that (in another season) flower.

Remembering  
the barn door  
latched by the inverted metal piston  
the smell of hay bales for cows  
and chicken feed that make possible

the collecting of the eggs  
still warm from the hen's sitting  
and barley pellets for the rabbits...

Remembering  
the smell of the resulting oval-ball feces  
piled below cages  
made of hexagon wire

Remembering  
the sound of metal balls  
at the end of thick plastic bottles  
hung upside down  
releasing water when licked.

Remembering  
her expressionless face  
of survival & known responsibility  
and what now may be called self care.

Remembering  
the knife she held by the barn  
as the bunnies hung upside down  
for the fresh stew  
with carrots & potatoes-  
No onions.

*lighthouse wildfire*

i was a member of the georgia wildfire cloggers  
metered rhythms  
Ga Wildfire dance  
to country music clogging  
at craft festivals

but these aren't the wildfires we speak of now

wildfire with smoke flecks  
blow particles in the air  
yes, lovely sunsets

but these black out my stars  
for observations

a milky way seen clear  
camping near astronomers  
who better know light

But this light isn't what we see...

This little light of  
mine, I'm gonna let it shine  
when all fails, i dance!

long skirts, feet on earth  
drum circle finds rhythms shared  
around fire-not wild.



*Beer Bottles & cans outline the labyrinth*

Beer bottles and cans  
outline the labyrinth I walk  
here in the new moon light.

\*\*\*\*\*

now Working backwards ...

he does refi research  
while I put pen to paper  
on recycled mosaic table  
with a forced ideal  
of a vase of roses and a cat on her leash.

The hard times zoom session  
is live on the phone  
as i sit in the middle  
of an organically laid Riverstone ring  
around an amoeba shaped tree mulch bed.

Before that ... an awkward backyard of uncertain intention

Before that... pine trees were topped and raised with their stumps  
ground by Mexican Tree men who skillfully used lines & chainsaws  
to down large limbs without hitting the roof and fences.

Before that ... The back neighbor complained of the split tree leaning  
over her rental property.

Before that... The side neighbors install the chain-link fence...

Before that... The side neighbors took down their poison ivy cover trees that blocked block the sunlight from the yard...

Before that... Depression yielded beer bottles and cans that outlined a Labyrinth I walked in the moonlight...

Before that... Broken plates are crafted by someone else into a mosaic table.

*On ADHD in the Kaiser system...*

Today my time to be focused  
on yet another job application  
has been frittered away  
with details unplanned...

oh! i forgot my appointment—  
thankful the kaiser doctor calls  
checking on my lack of attendance on zoom.

across state lines,  
care & meds are complicated  
edema and anxiety... what a mix.  
wait! that was yesterday!

We're changing meds again...  
may we address the swelling edema of sleep lines of sheets imprinted  
on my face,  
anklets of sock lines,  
and lines on my wrists  
from a truly too-tight  
jacket three sizes too small.

dehydration  
black coffee  
black tea  
astringent  
sour of sliced lemons  
puckering lips  
tongue on roof of mouth  
white distilled vinegar  
witch hazel

bitters with gin  
pickles  
olives to soothe  
focus

yesterday pharmacy closed before i arrived;  
i need to pick up the meds today...  
errands after an application  
application... focus

phone call  
anxiety  
ice cream  
balancing foods would be better...  
make rice & black beans  
where are my keys?  
finding, then losing them,  
then finding keys again  
now before i forget, get the rice cooker from my camping supplies in  
the car  
oh look! here are potato chips!  
crunch-crunch  
now what was i doing?!?

rice... we'll start there, then get the meds  
...  
i'm back...  
now writing on blackberries-  
my experience lands differently  
than Mr. Galway Kinnell...  
my reflections are of  
cultivated blackberries- thornless;  
13 rows of vines

carefully pruned into walkable aisles  
...while different “large peculiar words”  
but like “strengths and squinched”  
familiar  
“many lettered, one-syllabled lumps”  
so familiar  
prize winning large legacies  
topping chef’s culinaries  
like cheesecakes and tiramisu  
...our booker family blackberries  
that land in the buckets  
before sold in pint flats  
today yield  
a family cobbler...  
hot heaven from the oven  
blackberries in butter—  
topped traditionally  
with breyer’s vanilla.

my next doc appointment is two months from now; in theory i can  
email my doc, but how often do i actually remember to do THAT?!?  
perhaps my focus will improve  
and perhaps i will have a new job by then.

LOUISE BROWN

*Cricket Luck*

Black cricket sits huge on the mat.  
I startle, then smile, imagine  
a black knight dressed in his best armor—  
shiny, iridescent, blue to green.  
Our encounter is brief for he scuttles  
away between mat and step.  
His stridulations keep me company  
in the approaching autumn,  
music to my ears, invitation to his lady.  
his reputation for luck, reliable.  
I flip a coin skyward—  
it becomes that high white moon  
in autumn's darkness.  
Sing cricket!  
We don't have long.

## *Outside In*

Tree shadows from late afternoon sun lie  
on my bed, on my desk, in my mind.  
I've been winding down through the day;  
my marble of energy nears the bottom of the  
spiral.

When I look out, I say the sun is shining  
but I know the day darkens soon.

Now, quieter, a return home.

I've reserved this end of the day for myself -  
to play, to write, put thoughts on paper.

Part of me says I should attend to household  
duties,

but I do the only thing I can, I will.

I cannot be silenced any more  
than the insistent dog barking outside.

Tonight I rest on a pillow of poetry,  
my moon in a satisfied sky.

*Le Bon Vin*

You listen,  
I listen,  
we listen—  
seem to distill  
the same wine  
of beyond-meaning  
to share, a feeling  
dense and complex.  
Nothing's said.  
We harmonize to the same  
earthy, internal note.  
Beyond agreement  
differences balance on  
a yielding scale.



GIULIANA BRUNNER

**Giuliana Brunner** writes poems, short essays, and memoir pieces when her heart speaks to her. Raised by a mother who came from the rich world of storytellers, as books were unheard of for personal use in those days, no one had money for that luxury, she grew up knowing the Italian side of her family in a deep personal way. Her gratitude is also immense for several who opened new paths, starting with her father who told her more than once to “write—just write, write anything, but write.”

*Wind at Buffalo Peak Ranch*

Pushing against you while pulling you towards  
the unknown?  
or does it unconsciously ask you to trust it  
letting it guide you where you need to go

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

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

Though at this moment the fields are alive  
with gracefully swaying grasses, sage, & willows  
dancing in the wind.  
They hear its song as it passes  
singing through small clusters of trees.

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

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

I have not yet learned to accept the fierce moments when its  
pushing, shoving, prodding,  
makes even vision difficult.

I am not yet able to accept the loud demand it makes  
telling me  
what?  
Guiding?  
well, not even guiding  
roughly shoving me to a new horizon,  
a new path?  
Boldly yelling (its own manner of speaking)  
for me to listen  
to what—?

MARILYN R. CHAMBRON

**Marilyn R. Chambron**, who is from Illinois, is a transplant to the Denver metro area. After years of using the analytical side of her brain, she has branched out to pursue creativity in the areas of writing and other artistic expressions. Covid was the impetus and she is grateful for the opportunity to explore the myriad aspects of these two complimentary creative outlets.

### *Ancestral Voices*

Enter your soul to retrieve the distinctive voices which whisper across  
the divide of the then and the now.

Listen as they tell their stories.

Stories which were relevant before and are relevant today.

Do not allow fear to drown out their lessons.

Lessons that matter even as they shape and form your decisions, your  
choices.

Learn their secrets, dreams, disappointments and unfulfilled desires.

You were thought of eons ago.

With pride they imagined your accomplishments,

The imprints you would leave wherever you ventured.

The large and the small spaces you would someday occupy.

Practice, in order to hear the ancestral smiles.

See their laughter cheering you onward.

Onward to a destination not yet defined.

Not defined, because today you are the ancestors

Forging the voices which will be heard by future generations  
examining their own primeval souls.

## *Earth Speaks*

This blue orb when seen within the cosmos,  
Glow with a beauty unmatched celestially or terrestrially

She is the third planet from the sun  
In a solar system bursting with wonders

Her oceans teem with exotic and colorful aquatic life

Creatures both great and small roam  
Her steep mountains, rolling plains and deep valleys

Her human caretakers also exist  
In every shape, size and hue

They lack this understanding  
The relationship is symbiotic

Her demise, means their demise  
They have been her blessing and her curse

Consider the pollution of her soil, air and waters  
Waters which consist not only of oceans but lakes, rivers and streams

Oceans and rivers once pristine  
Now troubled by oil slicks, toxic waste and other debris

Mistreatment has even torn her ozone layer  
Ultraviolet radiation now pierces through

Her belly quakes, as she belches ash and forms acid rain  
Still, they disregard her distress

What will it take to awaken them?

Melting polar ice caps, plastics with indeterminable life spans  
Some may take centuries for decomposition

Drought and the conflagrant nature of her forests erode once fertile soils

Deforestation within her rain forests upset her ecosystems

She weeps like a wounded whale who has lost her pups  
Still, they disregard her distress

Wake up, wake up  
Can you hear her?

Time heals or time disintegrates

Her human caretakers are on notice  
Take heed before her distress turns to disaster  
With permanent damage which cannot be reversed

*H-O-M-E*

Habitation that evokes homage  
Outlooks that launch opportunity  
Memories that can mesmerize  
Evidence that proves existence

LISA GIBSON

**Lisa Gibson** is a writer of fiction and poetry. She has spent most of her time as both a mother and a public servant. Only recently returning to her first love, that of words and poetry and seeing how the two dance together on the page. Her poetry has been published in the Denver VOICE. She lives in Littleton, Colorado with her adult son and their amazing Shiba Inu.

### *Heart Aflame*

The sky shifted from azure to cobalt  
While we laid in the embers of me  
You warmed yourself by the light  
Preening in the ashes of my love  
Little regard to the fire consuming me  
I sweep the soot from the rooms of my heart  
As you pontificate about your dreams  
They are little origami birds whose wings are singed  
Folding in upon themselves over and over  
We're all living among burnt landscapes  
I can't be who you want me to be  
Continually setting myself aflame  
To give you light to bask in  
I don't want your souvenirs of love  
Tiny paper birds that will never know flight

## *She Knew Not Why*

He touched her and the sparks began to fly.  
She loved him at that moment,  
though she knew not why.  
Through her life he came and went.  
She always remembered that first touch.  
She loved him at that moment.  
She wondered if it always required so much,  
giving and giving until she could give no more.  
She always remembered that first touch.  
Unfortunately, she's begun to feel like a whore.  
His coming and going much to blame.  
Giving and giving until she could give no more.  
Then it washed over her, the shame,  
for letting it continue through the years.  
His coming and going much to blame.  
She held her head up and dried her tears.  
She made her decision and told him goodbye,  
not letting it continue through the years.  
Though she knew not why.



## *Word Bouquet*

In the basin of gibberish, the rains bloom,  
Dripping words of no meaning on my pad.  
I am perplexed, yet scribble away.  
Searching for deep meaning that's impossible to find.  
I rant and rave and rewrite some more.  
I read and read and finally see that as  
I pluck each bloom, when arranged just right  
I present a bouquet for the reader's delight.

PAULA HAGAR

**Paula Hagar** lives and writes in Denver, Colorado. Her passions are writing, photography, painting, reading, hiking, and driving around the U.S. entirely on back roads while writing and photographing her adventures. She writes primarily short non-fiction essays, and has been published in several anthologies, including *Gifts from Our Grandmothers*, *Bicycle Love* and 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.

### *September Liminality*

September has always been a season of beginnings for me, along with being my favorite month of my favorite season. Even though school was sheer torture for me socially, I was always excited to start a new school year, always hoping that somehow this new year would be different, better—maybe even a year when boys would finally notice me. It never was until high school, when the discovery of pot and alcohol gave me a false sense of confidence. But decades later school is a dim memory, and September remains my favorite month.

This particular September is both an ending and a beginning. It is the ending of the best summer I have EVER EVER HAD in my life, with 2 whole months of doing nothing but reconnecting and laughing with childhood friends I haven't seen in over 33 years—being a social butterfly and the center of attention—roles I have never played before - as well as reconnecting with the lush watery landscapes of my childhood, so completely and utterly different from those of my current home in Colorado's semi-desert. It has been every bit the pilgrimage I'd hoped it would be. I have driven every single narrow back road I once knew like the back of my hand, but had long ago forgotten. How could I forget how rural and isolated this area truly

is? And how much water once meant to me, and now does again? I have discovered that memories are not always anywhere accurate, and because of this, it's largely true that you can't go home again, or at least I haven't been fully able to. Not a single thing is as large as I remembered it, and I am eager to see how my dreams of my childhood home and roots will change after this summer.

This week I am saying goodbye to water, lush farmland, old gray limestone houses built by French settlers here 200 years ago, and my oldest friends that knew me when I was young, stupid, and full of plans, promise and poetic ambitions. And as the maple leaves slowly begin their brilliant crimson death knells, my skin and bones know that summer is over, and it is time to hit the road back to Denver. Since I got here 2 months ago the corn has gone from barely knee-high to 8 or more feet tall; the lush green farmland from emerald to gold; and I've eaten so many tender ears of the sweetest New York corn that I am unlikely to ever forget the taste of that. I have a gallon of THE best cider on the planet from the Burrville Cider Mill, freshly pressed New York state apples so sweet they bring tears of joy to my eyes, and make my gums hum. I've purchased well over \$100 of the oldest 16-year-old extra sharp cheddar made just up the road, and my cooler is full of crispy McIntosh apples. I even discovered a brand called Paula Red!

As I slowly wended my way today on one final cruise down Burnt Hollow Road, I passed by thickets of blackberries 12 or more feet high, and denser than anything I've seen before. I could see, smell and dreamily taste those blackberries—some still red, but all way too far out of my reach to pluck. Even the sensuous delights of this poem [the prompt was based on Galway Kinnell's "Eating Blackberries"] are not enough for me to bare my tender skin to the pricklers protecting those juicy balls of tart-sweet berries. I will have to imagine what they taste like and satisfy myself, instead, with the ripe blueberries I bought at the farmer's market.

This summer has forever seared the new memories and the reconnections into my bones and I no longer think I can live without water in my life. These waters. The cold silver-green river waters of the St. Lawrence, and the warmer umber waters of Lake Ontario. Yes, this has been the best summer EVER but I have most definitely been living in a liminal state throughout, and do not expect the liminal to disappear when I return home. Because now am again wondering just WHAT IS HOME? It's a topic I've explored so often in my journal, and I thought coming here for a season would put that question to rest, but all it's done is add more water and liquid to stir into the question, and I still don't know the answer. In fact, I have no answers of any kind right now, only questions, and as Rilke said: I have to love the questions. I have to "Live your questions now and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers."

JANET HILDEBRANDT

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

*Piano Dreamscape*

When sleep gives me the finger  
I listen to a Beethoven Sonata  
phone pushed under my pillow  
a brainwave direct-connect  
an audio frittata

Velvet phrases swell my throat  
each chord each note  
in tandem with my heartbeat  
I breathe  
I float

behind my eyelids  
shapes drift  
brown to blue with prickle lights  
I wait for voices  
nonsensical  
ineffable  
first dreamscape of the night.

## *Pillows in a Storm*

Parcheesi board between us  
on the living room floor  
bare legs crossed  
sticky in the August heat  
clack of rolling dice,  
plastic pieces yellow red blue  
march around the board.  
Cool air sifts, then gusts  
rattles the screen door  
Distracted, we watch  
the birches dance and sway  
the willow branches whip in waves  
the slant of our spindly apricot tree  
nearly sweeps the ground.  
The room has gone dark  
we hear  
we smell  
the pock and splat  
of raindrops on the back porch.

Our breath in short puffs,  
we rush stumble room to room  
grab pillows from seven beds  
ricochet down the narrow hall,  
feathers flying  
dump them atop couch cushions,  
climb aboard our raft.  
Whistle mouth-breathing  
we grin and bounce,  
and wait.  
With the first strobe flashes,

crack claps of thunder vibrate our bellies  
we dive under the pillows  
press fluffy armor against our ears  
legs scrunched sweaty beneath us  
Our shrieks louder than the thunder  
louder than the downpour  
Again and again we startle in delight,  
the thrill of nature's might.

AMANDA HOWARD

## *Tiny Town*

When Katrina hit, Patrick was living in one fourth of a two-story double shotgun house in the Faubourg, a house that should have been condemned years before. The floors were collapsing, the stairs were detached and sagged away from the house, and the entire building leaned to one side, giving it a rhomboid shape. For weeks after the storm, I had no news of him. He is not someone who would evacuate, and I was sure that he had been crushed in rubble. I stumbled through my life numb with horror until a mutual friend emailed me a news article featuring a picture of Pat yelling from his balcony. He and the house had both survived. For years afterward, the doorbell would ring, and Pat would shove his feet into combat boots and stomp shirtless onto his structurally unsound balcony to find brightly dressed over-earnest disaster tourists on the sidewalk below, asking with solemn eagerness if they could take pictures of the hurricane damage.

“It’s been like this,” he would bellow, and sometimes he would spit over the railing before crashing back inside, jouncing the balcony alarmingly with every step.

Sixteen years later, the neighborhood has gentrified, the old house has been demolished, and Patrick lives unwillingly with his niece in a Metairie apartment behind a funeral home. “Like the projects but not the projects,” is how he described it to me. When I pulled up the street view on Google Maps, I see what he means—a cluster of green-roofed one-story buildings with identical indifferent architecture set on an expanse of featureless asphalt like Monopoly pieces. But they seem sturdy enough, so I am not as fearful of hurricanes.

When Ida hits, it’s been months since I’ve talked to him. I’ve been ducking his calls because they usually last about two hours, and I spend a portion of that time pinching the bridge of my nose and sighing while he tells me Obama’s mother used to do porn. I feel slightly guilty for avoiding him, and it’s a relief to hear his familiar cautious “Amaaaanda?” when I answer a call from an unfamiliar 504 number. I ask if he’s still in town.



“Yeah, I’m still here. People say, oh, why didn’t you evacuate? My niece, she weighs about six hundred and fifty pounds. Her daughter’s about four hundred pounds, got blue hair and a red beard. That’s a thousand pounds in one car plus my eighty-one-year-old sister. What were they going to do, tie me to the roof? There’s lots of power lines down, some trees the size of the ones in City Park.”

“Sounds exciting,” I say, and he scoffs.

“Shit, it’s like watching paint dry. It was over in twenty-four hours. After Katrina—I call it the Big K—I used to go out and feed dogs. All these stray dogs in the street. Somebody took my picture, put it in the paper. St. Pat feeding dogs on the neutral ground. This time, I’ve seen maybe four dogs.”

“Do you have power?” I ask.

“No, no power. Miss my TV. I got this TV now, it gets free movies. I’ve watched a hundred and forty-seven movies in the last couple months. All kinds of movies—*Cabaret*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, *The Maltese Falcon*. I’ve seen *The Maltese Falcon* about a hundred and forty times. I can recite all the lines like *Rocky Horror*. I showed my sister this movie, *The Terror of Tiny Town*. You know that movie? It’s got an all-midget cast. It’s a western. They’re all riding Shetland ponies. This one midget girl, she’s pretty hot. Monkey Boy would have liked her, she’s even smaller than he was. My sister was freaking out. You should check it out. I can play music on the TV. I can play ‘Psycho Killer’ any time I want, it’s all free.

“It’s like a thousand degrees here. They spent fifteen million dollars re-doing the French Market so it looks like Liberace’s carport. Spent sixty million on a streetcar along the riverfront. Four times the Louisiana purchase for a streetcar takes you eight blocks, but they can’t keep the fucking power on.”

I ask if he’s getting enough to eat.

“Yeah, same Holy Joe show as after Katrina. Barbecue beef with shitty mashed potatoes. Need butter, salt, something. We got MREs too, not as good as the ones after Katrina. No dessert now and no way to heat them up. Fucking Democrats. There’s no buses, so I can’t go anywhere, and if I do, there’s nothing there anyway. There’s about fifty empty stores in the French Quarter. That one strip club closed. The

one where Sara worked? You remember Sara? She dyed her hair blond, cut it kind of short? I walk by that strip club one day, and I see her lying naked on this big mirror. I couldn't see her face, but it was her. Monkey Boy asked me, 'How you know it's her if you can't see her face?' I said, 'Because I pay attention to details.'

"After Katrina, my friend Roberto and I went to the Holy Joe show for breakfast, greasy scrambled eggs and bacon. Preacher comes over, says 'Can I pray for you?' I said, 'I'm not a sinner. I haven't sinned in so long, I've forgotten how. But maybe you can pray for my friend Monkey Boy.' He goes, 'Monkey Boy?' I go, 'Yeah, that's his name.' So he says, 'Oh, Lord, please take care of Monkey Boy.' And I know Monkey Boy is up there or somewhere laughing his ass off. Haven't seen him in a while. I see ghosts sometimes. Saw Rex's ex-wife, the one that croaked herself. Saw Monkey Boy once at his funeral. He was wearing that little vest and tie he used to wear, just nodding his head and smiling. I miss that miserable little bastard.

"So when you coming back to town? Haven't seen you in years. Don't you have any more dying relatives? Any funerals to go to?"

"Maybe when Covid dies down," I say.

"My brother keeps wanting me to get that vaccine. Hysterical fucking people, scared of a virus you can't even see. I already had COVID, no big deal. Hurricane was no big deal either. I had more fun after Katrina. Rode my bike on the highway a few times. Coasted down the ramps. Okay, my brother wants his phone back, so I'm gonna let you go. You be good. Check out The Terror of Tiny Town."

And I promise I will.

*Tuesday, April 28, 2020, 10:16 a.m.*

At the blond brick house on the corner, the man with the baggy red face hoists a Trump flag onto the pole in his front yard with a few long effortful pulls and stumps back across his smooth green lawn.

A passing runner with a precisely curled ponytail narrows her eyes at him and clenches her jaw. She runs faster to distract herself, improving her time by several seconds.

A block away, a large bearded man with a freshly shaved head shuffles onto his cracked, weed-choked driveway with a can of beer in one hand. He watches the runner go by, takes a swallow of beer, and pops open the hood of an ancient Toyota Tercel.

Next door, a plump woman realizes she's lost the thread of the discussion as she stares at the grid of faces on her screen. Through the window, she can see her two small black-haired sons in the back yard, playing a game they invented involving a broomstick and a great deal of shrieking. In the kitchen, her mother is heating a cast-iron pan to make tortillas.

A sleek black-and-white cat watches the boys, wide-eyed, from within a hedge of still-green bridal wreath, until she is first startled and then fascinated by a vole scuttering past in the rotting leaves left from autumn.

A pale green leaf twirls slowly, suspended by a single thread of spider silk. In the next yard over, a thin man with three days of beard growth plunges a shovel into the dirt, grateful for something to do. He steps on the edge of the shovel to drive it deeper into the clay soil. Somewhere a rooster continues to crow, as it does every day from dawn until sundown.

In the severe grey house in the middle of the block, a man wakes up in a bedroom with blank white walls and blinks at the ceiling several times. This is his favorite moment of the day—the blank space between waking and remembering. In the living room, his wife has been awake for hours. She hangs up her phone and lets it fall as she drops her colorless face into her hands.

A stoop-shouldered woman with hair dyed matte black trains a hose on the roots of a massive cottonwood tree at the white house that needs paint. She looks up at the leaves, one hand on her hip, and thinks, as she always does, of when she and her late husband planted the tree, and she could encircle its trunk with her hands.

Her daughter pulls a faded blue pickup truck into the driveway and flaps a hand in greeting as she stumbles into the house. She is greeted by two grizzled tan chihuahuas frisking as joyfully as their aching joints allow and tells them, “Soon,” as she collapses onto the sagging couch. A young schnauzer digs under a fence and wriggles out onto the asphalt-paved alley, shaking himself once before trotting toward the smell of dead bird. He stops to bury his nose in a clump of urine-soaked Virginia creeper.

A glossy black crow lies face down on the sidewalk. The sun makes rainbows on his wings. A woman wearing a blue windbreaker over pajamas emerges from the house with the tilted chain-link fence and scoops him into a garbage bag, careful not to touch him. She tells herself it’s ridiculous to cry over a bird and stands out back by the garbage bins until she can collect herself, so as not to upset the children.

A man in a tall stark rectangular house snaps his laptop shut when his wife enters from the garage and gives her a wide, artificial smile meant to deflect suspicion.

A small grey spider glides down the wall and disappears through a crack into the crawl space.

In the sage-green house with the fir tree, a woman FaceTimes with her mother, while her son jumps up and down, repeatedly singing the first two lines of “Feliz Navidad.”

Across the street in the house with the rail fence, a nearly spherical brown tabby stretches and points her toes. A thirteen-year-old girl watches an instructional YouTube video and sponges onto her face a steady impenetrable beige. Her younger sister skips onto the pavement outside in glittering pink shoes clutching a box of colored chalk. She takes long steps, pretending she is on the moon.

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat walking a fluffy red corgi-ish dog passes a man walking a boxer in the opposite direction and steps into the street to give him room. She smiles and says, “Good morning,” to show she isn’t being unfriendly. She is not someone who usually greets strangers, and for the next two blocks, she wonders if it sounded natural. While the dog stops to press his nose to the bark of an elm tree and sniff deeply, she kicks a few rounded light-grey rocks back into a flower bed.

Several blocks east, a man pulls a gleaming blue Subaru into a parking spot at the lake and turns off the engine. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel and wonders how long he can stay before he is needed at home. Another man walking past eyes him suspiciously.

A large yellow dog catches a frisbee and runs happily in circles, ignoring his owner’s cries of “Bring it!”

A red-winged blackbird gives its odd mechanical cry from within a clump of cattails.

A dandelion nods under the weight of a bumblebee.

A single car whispers past on the highway with a sound like a distant tide.

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. In 2022, Jane partnered with a writing friend to start up a storytelling group at the Standley Lake library in Arvada. Reading, cultural events, historical houses, and hunting for unusual treasures at garage and estate sales round out some of her many interests.

*the stem*

settled in with a cup of steaming hot green tea  
morning ritual in motion  
news flash of another shooting  
that happened the day before  
fingertips poised and ready to type  
now motionless and hovering in mid-air over the computer  
as details spilled out of the newscaster's mouth  
escaped through the tv screen  
and landed with a plop in the living room  
they pooled on the floor in a glutinous mass  
then rose up like a demon materializing before my eyes  
leaving a bloody question mark afloat in the air  
disbelief helplessness anger rage sorrow  
for the students drafted into a war they didn't want to fight  
hand to hand combat  
with guns thrown in for good measure by the enemy  
dark troubled twisted souls  
their minds filled with unrelenting anguish  
leaving three heroes in the wake of the sneak attack - one a casualty  
soldiers who took cover under desks and  
retreated to safety

bear unseen battle scars  
PTSD and survivor's guilt lifelong friends  
hearts cry out for answers  
mental illness—always at the root of the stem  
tomorrow  
i'll pay a simple act of respect  
to Kendrick and his family  
joining in a celebration of the life  
of a teenage fallen soldier  
immortalized forever as a man in his heroism  
bearing witness to his sacrifice and those  
of others who've lost their lives around the country  
in school shootings  
they should never have been drafted in the first place



## *Why?*

The psychopath is on the move walking steadily towards us with forceful determination. The weapon of choice gripped tightly in his powerful hand. Our concerned faces and trembling bodies reek of fear. Why pick us? The evil shadow looms above as the tool of destruction is plunged savagely into us one by one. Limp bodies tumble to the ground. Silent screams of “Murder! Murder!” ring out until no massacre witnesses remain. A wicked smile of accomplishment spreads across the lunatic’s face. The compost pile becomes the paupers grave for unloved rejects. We demand equal space for weeds in the garden.

ANNE MCWHITE

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

### *Managing Fashion*

I was born in a generation halfway between garter belts and the invention of the pantyhose. Now, hosiery is an outdated commodity. Young legs, flawless, rich in tone, left bare are the new fashion statement. We ladies cast off all sorts of apparel: girdles, bras, granny underwear. We cast it all off for the natural look; a toned abdomen, tempting show of cleavage, and scanty thongs. While it is the calling card for the newly minted ladies in the making; a large subset of people never quite fit the profile.

A case in point was my preparation for the Colorado Authors Book Awards dinner. But what to wear for a black-tie affair? The hunt began in earnest. Form fitting dresses accentuating a less than toned belly would require an ancient girdle to hold flabby layers at bay. There were dresses with plunging necklines necessitating special bras or no bra at all. Having not worn a dress in about twenty years, you cannot imagine the discouragement of dress shopping.

Tucked on a rack away from the evening wear section, I spied a dress that had potential. The perfect dress with no plunging neckline, slightly form fitting enough to look stylish and yet not reveal my anterior flab. Black lace layered over a blush rose silk fabric exposing my legs from the knee down.

Herein lies my dilemma regarding bare legs and hosiery. At this point in my life, you could say, "Well her legs are certainly nothing to write home about." Don't get me wrong, I am grateful for a working pair of legs. They are not, however, the flawless, toned legs younger ladies'

tout. I needed a band aide of sorts to make this dress work.

Old habits die hard. Tucked away in my dresser was a pair of pantyhose from years ago. I thought, “Fashion be damned,” to complete this outfit, hosiery is needed. Reality, however, is a daunting task master. Now, I am seventy years old and don’t bend or contort my body as I once did. Back in my twenties, there was no problem. Now, assessing the task before me, the situation was almost comical.

Trying to put on a one-piece suit with two leggings attached to a nylon bodice wasn’t so easy anymore. Crossing over one leg, I pulled up the stocking onto my foot, but how far can you pull up? The crotch of the nylon panty doesn’t allow any latitude to switch legs. Attempting to pull the stocking over your other foot, you must bend over with both your feet flat on the ground cautiously lifting each foot without sliding off your chair. I can’t stress how little room there is to navigate with the top half of the hosiery hampering your efforts. Finally, I was able to get the hose started on both feet, and then, trusting that the pantyhose wasn’t twisted in my attempt to pull up the stockings for correct placement. Fully dressed and presentable, I went to the dinner.

I can understand how the pantyhose went out of fashion—a most impractical piece of attire requiring limber limbs and acrobatic precision. Every generation makes its own fashion statement shocking the next. Considering how women dressed over the ages, I am on board with the natural look—stretchy blue jeans, a comfortable shirt and anklets with tennis shoes. Any further gala affairs, and I might have to employ a chambermaid just like the ladies in *Downton Abbey*.

## *For Better or For Worse*

These words are the sticking point for any marriage contract. Obviously, the better part of the contract is just that—better. Conversely, the worse part of the contract is just that—worse. You can be rich or poor together, a joint ownership of your combined efforts to succeed. Sickness or health, however, isn't a shared given.

In my case, I have health and my husband does not. Now, just exactly who can make the claim that their version of worse is the worst of all. Every best-case scenario takes a nosedive as illness impacts the haves and have nots.

He was once strong, intelligent, dependable and capable of understanding complex problems: he could figure it all out. He took a small-town Kansas farm girl on adventures with sailing, astronomy, camping, canoeing; a solid wealth of knowledge regarding any subject that would arise. I could always depend on him to do the right thing. Increasingly, over time, he became less so as age and ill health sent him spiraling ominously down.

Funny thing about illness, it drains your kindness reserves, they now appear only sporadically. New body aches and pains keep arising with no let-up in intensity or veracity, just a constant draining of optimism replaced with an abundance of pessimism. Pain is a terrible taskmaster, this all-encompassing stronghold on your waning psyche.

Me, I am in the grips of fighting disease and pain. My life revolves around how to make his world more tolerable. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, managing finances, and all the mundane tasks associated with just living now present front and center robbing me of my time and energy. Every sentence starts with a need that requires attention. My role is now deconstructed from wife to full-time caregiver. Chronic pain necessitates being on call 24/7 to fetch a glass of water, help with dressing, an arm for support while walking, laying out all daily medications, being available to listen to a litany of daunting issues he faces

every day, filling in forgotten words he is unable to remember, and the list goes on and on.

Loss of independence is a tragic toll that subtly erodes a once capable, highly intelligent, witty man. What an unspeakable horror! Having to rely on another person for even the most basic things. How frustrating is it to become increasingly dependent on those you once used to show such strength? This becomes a nightmare that never ends till you die with no breaks in between.

This same nightmare carries on with me. A never-ending circle of duty mixed with love which often tips precariously to duty while losing the core of love I once held. "Do you still love me?" he asks. Of course, I do." I say in the most convincing voice I can offer. Please don't make me love you to my own peril. I need to take care of myself too. I need time away from you. I need to be able to laugh and share friendships, join clubs, take walks, read books and write stories without the constant 24/7 reminder of my contract for better or worse. I know he feels bad. I know he doesn't want this to define his life or mine. Illness breeds helplessness when there is no ending point where it all gets better. There are no easy solutions. Who suffers more?

MYRA NAGY

**Myra Nagy**, having gone through homelessness, and recovery from substance misuse and behavioral health conditions, she is maneuvering through these struggles with counseling and creative therapies. Myra volunteers her lived experiences to advocate for those unheard. She strives to show people of color, all ages, all experiences, and through their own struggles that it is possible to move forward in life.

*The Heart in Exile*

How did my heart get exiled  
Who put it there  
Why is it hidden  
Is my rib cavity bare

Is hurt the main reason  
Does disappointment play a part  
Did someone play with it  
Did they use a dart

Is it safe in exile  
When can it return  
Are there rules in place  
Will they stop the burn

Does it need a comfy spot  
Just apply tender care  
Can it be left open  
I wish I had a spare

Please return from afar  
I will guard you in kind

The process will be intense  
I will practice with my mind

I will warm you at night  
I will invigorate in the day  
I will stimulate with music  
I will create for play

I will protect you from strain  
And keep you strong  
Keep you warm in the rain  
So nothing goes wrong

BENJAMIN NELSON

**Benjamin Nelson** was born in Minadoka County Rupert Idaho near Boise. He went to high school at New Vista in Boulder. Having interned at a computer graphics studio—Rembrandt Studio in Boulder—he earned a year of college credit and learned photoshop. He enjoys poetry, music, artwork, and is a fan of the guitar and electronic beats. He loves writing sonnets, haikus and Tankas.

*“Confidence In Sky,”*

Confidence In Sky  
A Night Of Moonlight And Stars  
Blessing To See Life  
Explode Like The Forgotten  
Bitter Sweet Taste Of Nature



JANIS OLSEN

*Antidote to Fear of Death*

It took my mother's death  
to change the way I think of it.  
Now I tend to think of all deaths,  
well, certain ones,  
as, "they got out of here."  
Not that all things about being here  
on Earth, experiencing gravity,  
seeing beauty in the golden  
embroidered edges of clouds at sunset,  
or the friendly tip of the wing  
on a fly-over by a yellow tiger  
swallowtail butterfly I'd want to escape.  
These are momentary and worth  
all the painful moments of  
aching back, sore knees,  
and just plain being tired  
—and the worry-and-fear—  
inducing news.  
A young couple, woman and man,  
walking their dog,  
a common enough activity,  
were shot, her to death,  
him to a hospital bed  
to await surgery,  
and who will ever  
be able to mend his broken heart?  
Surgery for the physical, the visible—  
but what about the guilt of the survivor?  
"You got to go to that beautiful place  
and here I am being poked,  
and awakened at all hours,

and fed food I don't like,  
and the dog we shared  
I'll have at home, like a party favor  
while you got the 'Presence'  
in a difficult to appreciate wrapping.  
Perhaps it was your time:  
your year,  
your month,  
your day,  
your hour,  
your minute,  
your second  
to slip from this known world

to the unknown, blissful one.  
I still must deal with the weight:  
the 'Why not me?'  
the 'What if we'd said this?','  
the 'What if we'd said that?','  
the 'Why you, you, you?','  
the 'Why the beautiful, young capable you?','  
the 'Why you?,  
headed for the stars?'"

## *Loneliness or Connection*

I am alone  
and then not alone  
I sit or stand  
at a bus stop  
I get on  
rarely looking around  
grab a seat near the front  
because I have a cane  
and don't wish  
to walk through strangers.  
I get off  
with hesitation  
because of some intuition  
that the grocers will be closed.  
At the door which doesn't open  
there is the schedule of business,  
Sunday something to 8:05pm.  
My phone says 8:36pm.  
I am alone.  
I make my way to Colfax.  
It's dark even with lights.  
The beat of the music from the flamingo bar,  
the assorted conversations  
of people walking by,  
the flashing lights of a police car  
parked on the sidewalk up the street,  
the hum of passing cars,  
  
the smell of exhaust,  
the smell of tobacco smoke,  
and the bus rolls down Colfax

the other way.  
At first I stand  
but I'm tired,  
so I sit on the bench.  
This isn't smart, I thought.  
I can't see behind me.  
I get up and stand against the wall  
pulling my sunglasses  
over my eyes to look unapproachable.  
A man walking by asked,  
"Was there a stabbing over there?"  
"I don't know," my reply.  
Some women walked by, one asked,  
"Did somebody get shot?"  
pointing in the direction of the police car.  
Again, "I don't know."  
came from my lips.  
No one else was waiting.  
I look into the emptiness,  
into the lack of joy and light  
and imagined briefly  
if I weren't at Earthlink,  
if I wasn't part of Hard Times Writing,  
if I didn't sing at church,  
if I didn't live at the Cottage,  
Who would know me?

Who would expect me to do things?  
Who would care if I disappeared?  
While I was lost in this destructive reverie,  
two men came to sit on the bench.  
One man walked up and stood, waiting.  
Ah, finally the 15 bus came—

as I carefully stepped toward the open door—  
one of the seated men said, as if he'd heard my thoughts,  
“Jesus loves you!”  
I smiled and returned,  
“He loves you too!”  
I wasn't alone.  
I ascended the stairs,  
showed my bus pass,  
and sat down, smiling and grateful.

*To Be a Writer . . .*

I feel that it is an honor to be entrusted with words for they have power—  
power to build up—power to break down  
power to encourage—power to criticize  
power to inquire—power to correct  
power to illuminate—power to desecrate  
power to paint a picture with loving strokes—  
power to scribble it unrecognizable  
power to instruct—power to humiliate  
power to share—power to obscure  
power to understand—power to remain lost  
power to shine—power to put in a dark dungeon  
power to present—power to hide  
power to express goodwill—power to express hatred  
power to grant forgiveness—power to inflict hurt  
power to love—power to be indifferent  
Over and over again—a choice of what to write—the words to use, the  
mood to create, the  
emotions to tease out of my reader, and how do I wish to leave them?  
Hopefully the better for  
having read the carefully selected and powerful words. It is indeed  
an honor to be chosen as writer.

BOB PETRICH

*Homeland*

We abandoned our entrenchments,  
joining those who got out ahead—  
migrant hunters following mammoths and bison,  
immigrant farmers fleeing blight or drought,  
refugees seeking sanctuary on higher ground,  
their shining cities submerged and dark.  
Caught in the currents of an expanding universe,  
we sought shelter among other stars.  
Miles became light years between us,  
until we crossed a horizon frozen in black.  
We collapsed back into what we came from,  
remnants waiting for God to say the word  
and create new heavens and a new earth.

MARTA SHOMAN

**Marta Shoman** participates in the Hard Times weekly writers group and Lighthouse classes through zoom. Her writing leans toward creative non-fiction, memoir, and poetry. Her work has been published in the *Denver VOICE*; *The Crestone Eagle*; *The Willow Creek Journal*; *The Conejos Circle Book: A Conejos County Anthology*; and *Messages from the Hidden Lake*. She lives in the San Luis Valley of southwest Colorado, within walking distance to the Rio Grande River where she can be regularly spotted on a ramble with her walking stick.

### *Worry Be Gone*

I am a renter in senior public housing.  
Growing old with failing vision and spotty hearing,  
supported by a personal economy of constriction.  
This, a formula for worry, fear and fret.  
I worry. And worry some more.  
What does it take to let go of slippery, anxious, worry mind?  
To hear its' monotonous beat each day  
and give it a kick?  
Worry:  
You may be familiar,  
like the dripping faucet whose washers are not replaced.  
Drip, drip, drip the worry until it runs dry.  
Worry:  
Who invited you?  
An unwelcome companion  
who messes with my emotional navigation system.  
Worry:  
I call you out for what you are:  
a despot of distraction, determined,  
to derail confidence and hope.



Worry:

I see you now.

An empty frozen force  
that chokes courage from the heart,  
stirring jagged knives of doubt in the mind.

Worry:

You, who has out-lived your droning mission.

I give gratitude for your daily lessons, sharp and numbing.  
They now lie behind me.

Worry, I pass you by.

As I go, I feel your metal breath across my neck:

It is only worry.

It is not me.

Worry, your memory no longer haunts me.

Adios, worry.

I leave you and

head out into the morning sun to sing.

MICHAEL SINDLER

**Michael Sindler's** compositions span numerous genres. He's appeared in various regional and national print and web publications and numerous anthologies including *2020: The Year America Changed*, *New Beat Poets*, and *Caesura*. He's also collaborated in a wide array of media bridging projects and performances and facilitated workshops virtually and in person across the globe.

*Gentle Gardener (for Jane Thatcher)*

"I visit the orchards of spheres and look at the product,  
And look at quintillions ripen'd and look at quintillions green."

—Walt Whitman

Tending a garden of forgotten flowers-  
an unforeseen explosion of blossoming colors-  
seeds from far and wide, blown by rough winds  
in need of attention and gentle care  
carefully, subtly, lovingly cultivated.  
Every hue, shade, shape, and texture-  
thick stemmed and thorned, and delicate strands-  
tall, strong, free standing stalks and  
gently creeping vines in need of purchase  
clinging for support against the elements.  
Week by week - roots watered and nurtured-  
turned sunward, steadied by well-placed supports-  
letting patterns play and form a harmonious whole  
dazzling in its rich array of details  
full of fragrance evoking wisdom and desire.  
Without the effort of the gentle gardener  
rare disparate blooms oft seen as weeds  
transplanted from the far flung wilds

could never have joined to become this  
interconnected majestic maze of delight.

Does it seem a simple act to prepare the ground  
and, season by season, harvest sweet fruits?  
It is not—we must give the gardener due praise-  
whose diligent steady touch sensed in each plant  
unique potential and birthed a sweeter, better world.  
This is not to the only garden to be thus blessed.  
Leaving these budding growths in others' capable hands  
the gentle gardener now moves on to furrow new fields-  
to bring forth crop after crop of wonder and rapture  
as this strong, sheltered oasis remains and thrives.  
Every future blossom and fruit bursting forth  
will owe its grandeur and radiance in part  
to the tender green-fingered cultivator's loving labor.  
Spores will flutter off to land and grow in plots and tracts-  
new germination continuing the gardener's never-ending gift.  
Hands, heart, vision and a few simple tools used well  
are all it takes the gifted to enrich shared experience.  
Exquisite gardens will grow - feeding spirit and soul  
all indebted and thankful for the gardener's care-  
all reflecting humble compassion in graceful design.

## *Goddamn Resilient*

I will not be washed away.  
I will not be broken.  
There is no wind strong enough.  
Nor can all the water in the ocean  
take away the memory and life  
of this, my crescent jewel.  
Anyone who bets against me  
is nothing but a fool.  
Cultures blend in this delta  
and flow outward like the water  
to fertilize the entire globe  
from this, my maze-like quarters.  
The music beating in my veins  
that trumpets through the streets  
is stronger than mere rains and tides-  
with its triumphant beat  
my wards full of survivors  
will patch me back together.  
I'm the Spirit of New Orleans  
and there's nothing I can't weather.

(Inspired by "Mississippi Goddamn" by Mark Bradford, 2007.)

## *Color My World*

First...color my world with the invisible—the essential—the incorruptible. Grab the widest of brushes and dip it deep into compassion, swirling it until every bristle is saturated. Make wild, sure strokes across the background of being. Cover it thickly like viscous gesso, grounding all that will float and flow upon its surface. Let it dry slowly with the warm breath of love freeing the vapors of longing rising and disappearing into the waning clouds of thought. Sand it gently with empathy until its soft smooth surface contains no crevasse, crack or outcropping in which the dusty particles of doubt may find purchase. And then...

Color my world with all shades of human, every hue born from every clime. Color my world with the cross-pollination of lovers who leave convention behind. Color it with the shape and shade of every tribe. Color it with strands and curls and ringlets, fuzz and stubble and wild cowlicks. Color it with eumelanin and pheomelanin. Color it with freckles and tans and birthmarks, with rashes and sunspots and scars, with albinism and vitiligo. Color my world chocolate, color it saffron, color it annatto, color it peach, color it oat, color it wheat, color it cumin, color it pecan, color it chickpea, color it delicious. Color my world raw umber, color it burnt sienna, color it smooth amber, color it saturated coral, color it burnished copper, color it dimpled bronze. Color it pale chalk, color it glimmering sand, color it fragile rust. Color it hard and strong, soft and malleable, cold and warm, and always beautiful. And then...

Color my world with every color of plant and plumage. Color it deep forest green and shocking chartreuse. Color it swaying poppy, slithering salamander, and fluttering cardinal red. Color it bold sunflower and tart citrus yellows. Color it ripe cut melon, darting goldfish and roaring tiger orange. Color it resting robin's egg,

scampering scarab, Morpho wing, and clear waving water blue. Color it drooping wisteria, plump grape, and slow sea snail purple. Color it striped and spotted and spiked and rounded. Color it kaleidoscopic; color it subtle and brilliant, pastel and iridescent. Color it contrasting and complementary. Color it microscopic. Color it vast. Color it a rainbow encircling the horizon. Color it wisdom. Color it passion. Color it intellect. Color it faith. Color it action. Color it thought. Color it everything. Color it now. But most of all, with every stroke, every movement, every touch—color it love.

NICOLETTE VAJTAY

**Nicolette Vajtay** started writing in 2003 and studied Advanced Playwriting under Leon Martel at UCLA Extension School, with Terry Dodd and Michael Catlin at the Lighthouse Writers Workshops. Her writing is deeply influenced by her spiritual curiosity about this thing called life and the exploration of the human condition. She yearns to touch people's hearts, and inspire them to live their best lives, something she aspires to do as well (often successful, sometimes not). Her seventeen titles include two full-length plays, many one-acts, a handful of ten-minute plays, and her first novel, *The Lone Pine*. In 2021 she joined the weekly Hard Times Writing Workshop with Lighthouse and is playing with the short story and poetry, which she likes to call, fractured storytelling.

### *The Green Pontiac*

her white hair  
rough like dried wheat  
falls into her eyes  
as she bends down  
reeking so  
specifically  
like nothing else  
of ashy mothballs  
from her closet  
the smell bends with her  
as she kisses Suzie's cheeks  
without a touch  
or even a pat  
on her little back

his skin stinks of gray  
a smell that

oozes into the foyer  
from the kitchen  
where he sighs  
a rotten breath  
already exhausted  
as the little one  
scrambles up  
onto his couch  
legs swaying  
they won't touch  
the ground  
for another four years

a whole weekend  
without parents

quickly whisked into  
the green Pontiac  
as if sitting too long  
would anchor the little one  
to the spot  
and a fear pounds  
in his heart  
that she  
might never leave

not knowing what to say  
they talk quietly  
staring at the dashboard  
as he drives  
while the little one  
fidgets in the back seat  
wondering



if she can stop  
being quiet

tst tst  
spits from his lips  
splashing the windshield  
with a demand  
that Suzie  
stop laughing  
as if  
she can  
ignore  
the zebras and elephants  
the prince waving his sword  
the witch weaving magic spells  
the giant tripping over his massive shoes  
in the creases and folds  
of the tan pleather seat

she unbuckles  
turns around  
and glares at  
the little one  
a terrifying stare  
that freezes Suzie's smile  
and quiets  
her uncontrollable outbursts  
all done in love  
to keep her safe  
even from her own  
imagination

because  
their lives had been  
without color  
or freedom  
way back then in the 40's  
in another country  
so terrifying  
they had to leave everything behind  
including their own little one  
their son  
who couldn't get penicillin  
because while  
discovered  
it was not available

an ear infection

she has them  
every summer  
Suzie  
swimming in an icy lake  
in the Adirondacks  
and fevers  
and flus  
and fists of poison ivy  
in a first world country

tst tst  
sizzles across his lips  
she sits up taller  
and faces forward  
shaking with their fear  
instead of staring out the window

in youthful wonder at the passing by of the  
trees and farms and flowers and horses

and while they couldn't  
hug the little one  
or let her scream with joy  
or laugh with curiosity  
or run around with too much energy  
they at least  
took her to the zoo

*October 31st*

a hundred and twelve degrees  
on October thirty first  
teen girls saunter  
in skimpy costumes  
while young boys kill them  
with pistols full of tap water  
a battery-operated fan  
pushes around heat-soaked molecules  
failing to cool  
my daughter's sweat stained skin  
I under an umbrella  
thirsty for shade  
my four-year-old grandbaby  
only knows  
only loves  
the brilliant heat  
she will never feel  
a fall chill pinch her nose  
or frost her breath  
or hear  
the crunch of fallen leaves  
under her feet  
rose red, plum purple, sunrise yellow, sunset orange  
stunning carpets of death  
littered on the sidewalks  
nor claim her favorite smell  
a tree  
smoldering in a fireplace  
red pimples erupt under my arms  
detoxing the chemicals of Duraflame

in a bright pink two-piece bathing suit  
the color of summer  
sinched at the waist with a bushel of tulle  
my grand-baby twirls and leaps in the sunshine  
through the sprinklers  
that cool the Halloweener's  
the grass is never green anymore  
her skin tinged by the sun  
browned by evolution  
so different from my  
Swedish complexion  
my light eyes  
shielded by dark glasses  
her black eyes  
squint into slits  
like a cat's  
she thrives  
while I survive

chocolate offerings melt in the pillowcase  
long before we rest again  
in our air-conditioned home  
candy corn hurts my teeth  
but she's happy  
like I was when I was four  
celebrating all hallows eve  
with beef stew and hot chocolate  
today we'll sip iced tea  
dip carrots and cucumbers into hummus  
and suck on popsicles

none of us will sleep  
my grandbaby hyped on sugar  
me tossing and turning  
afraid that next year  
there won't be a day of dress up  
or candy  
or cool water that spills from sprinklers  
just the ghosts of Halloweens past  
haunting the blistering streets

*with the world demanding she feel too much*

at nineteen  
the world demands  
she take the shape  
of an adult  
imposes its burdens  
presses them upon her soul  
like a piece of coal  
buried under rock and rubble  
a million years in the making  
her facets not yet formed

wishing she were three again  
snuggled on her father's lap  
with her ear pressed  
against his muscled chest  
feeling the vibration  
of his smokey voice  
weave the magic  
of the never-ending story  
of the fairy queen Raye  
who wore wooden shoes  
in the made-up land of  
Zulu Zulu Cuff Cuff

born  
on the same day  
nineteen years apart  
the same day  
her mother left her  
nineteen years ago  
gifted with his name

and her mothers in the middle  
Stevie Raye  
the three of them  
inexorably  
inescapably  
destined  
from the other side

on his thirty-eighth birthday  
and her nineteenth  
they  
assume  
her voice is her own  
they  
urge her voice into autonomy  
they  
who lack knowledge of their own selves  
tell her she must  
decide  
she must  
choose

wishing  
on a candle-less cupcake from the vending machine  
to be eight again  
to be driving  
through the night  
to the mountains  
red faced and laughing  
the two of them belting  
Lynn Anderson songs  
of love and gardens and roses  
driving through the night



for a powder-day  
of fresh tracks in  
bunny white snow  
over bumps and through trees  
sipping hot chocolate  
his steaming with whiskey  
hers cooling with  
a mound of marshmallows

at nineteen  
still too young  
with the world  
demanding she feel  
too much  
she drives through the night  
alone  
away from tubes and needles  
and sad faces  
windows down  
the winter sting  
freezing  
the tears in her eyes  
she drives  
to the scary part of town  
where there are  
no streetlights  
where they  
don't know her  
don't see her  
where they  
scrounge  
like animals  
beg

like roaches  
for a hit  
a meal  
a friend for the night

the scary  
is easier to feel than the truth

a quick pin prick  
and she dives into  
black bliss  
leans back  
loses focus  
of the diamonds  
dripping wet  
on the high-tension wires  
euphoric obscurity  
quieting all needs  
drowning out  
her father's  
slowing rhythm  
a rhythm that  
waltzed her around the dance floor  
in her first evening gown  
at the father/daughter dance  
set up tents and built fires  
in the backyard  
on humid nights in Jersey  
won in chess  
every game but one  
when she was twelve  
on Christmas morning

electricity screams through her veins  
her soul  
begs to be set free  
a rusty nail  
pierces her wounded heart  
it thumps too fast  
like the drum  
once used in ceremony  
over her mother's dead body  
boom boom boom  
hammers in her head

and  
on her nineteenth birthday  
rain  
christens her forehead  
washing her of all her sins

he is there  
by her side  
and the songs of  
Godspell  
burst into her lungs  
and she sings  
"you are here  
by my side  
by my side"  
he picks her up  
out of the gutter  
with healthy  
arms of steel  
out of the rush of piss  
and blood

and water  
stands her on wobbly legs  
and she  
and he  
giggle  
together again  
she wraps her tiny fingers  
all five tiny fingers  
around  
his calloused thumb  
and together  
they stroll along  
JFK Boulevard  
toward the tunnel  
filled with the amber  
glow of all the  
streetlights in the city

V. BERT

**V. beRt**, a Colorado native, holds an MBA from Regis University, and has always enjoyed writing. Her writing includes, scripting ads, editing, technical writing, marketing articles, creating news stories for local newspapers, and most recently, poetry. She enjoys online Zoom meetings, classes, open mics, cooking and spending time with her little dog Buttons.

*ODE to a Flower*

Your brilliant color expands the iris in my eyes!

I watched you and nurtured you to keep you vibrant in my space.

As the days passed, your colored edges browned, your head bowed down and seem tired from the earlier days when you first arrived so proud and perky.

I carefully cradle your fragile leaves and brittle stem, and place you in the garden to enrich the soil for new life tomorrow.

## *First Glance*

She saunters across the room towards the handsome man in view.  
Tickling his back with her slender fingers.  
Like an electrical shock he turns and looks.  
Her smile awakens a newness in his heart.  
Time halts, only the aura of their space is lit.  
They spin into a vortex where each soul is harvested into each other,  
bound for eternity.

## *Being a Child*

All summer, we frolicked in the water sprinklers cooling off from the dry heat,

no concern about drinking from the outdoor hose.

All summer, we played on lush green lawns, never worried about weed killer on our bare feet.

All summer, we had deep brown suntans, not using any sunscreen or fears of exposure to the scorching orb above.

All summer, we bounced a tiny red ball playing jacks, shooting marbles on dry dirt, skipping hopscotch on colored chalked sidewalk squares.

All summer, we heard the latest Beatles vinyl from our neighbor's patio on their portable record player.

All summer, when the sun had gone down, we waited for the Mister Softee truck, cooling off with soft serve ice cream, twisted chocolate and vanilla dipped in a rainbow of colored sprinkles on a cake cone.

All summer, we never had a care in the world, no planning for the future,

just having fun being a child.

KYRON RASHAD

*Sad Eyes*

She told me that I had sad eyes  
tiny globes of history  
cocoa brown and mysterious  
a melancholic symphony  
gaze cut thru her like wind  
wielding katanas like branches  
ripped away from trees  
She says I'm a storm



*public display of arson*

With a kiss

Like a lit match

We can be unruly and

Irresponsible

Let's start a fire in a public place

*All That Jazz*

I watched as it was my very first time  
the live band made me feel alive  
my foot tapped along uncontrollably  
and some beautiful women asked for a dance

though I declined

I wanted to,  
I did. I pondered gliding  
cutting the air like them  
those exuberant folks

this loft home to locals  
out-of-towner's  
lowlifes, maybe high rollers  
but no strangers  
yes, maybe people who've never  
met but with every hand in dance

was an intimate Lindy Hop,  
a passionate Balboa and I found  
it all fascinating—

the singer,  
crooned with vigor  
and finesse  
with the uptown swing  
from the stage to me,  
it stretched

Harlem, oh Harlem  
Where everybody's feeling fine  
Streets are lively every time  
Whether winter or in summers prime  
It's Harlem Harlem Harlem

It can't be renamed  
And it will remain

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