All the Lives We Ever Lived

A Lighthouse Writers Workshop
Community Anthology
Volume 3

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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 inferma.
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.
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 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
eemail 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 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 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 prickers 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.
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.”

“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 have 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 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
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 phemelanin. 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 glistening 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.
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
tyey 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

dthis 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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