

# SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES



ISSUE 1





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# The Fish Gods

by William Todd Seabrook

It was a hot day when Olly and I went out to find the Fish Gods. We packed the boat and pushed off from shore, rowing with one paddle after Olly lost the other in the water slapping at some bass.

On the shore there was a man in a straw hat sitting in the cattails, one hand tucked inside his half-open shirt, the other propping up his chin, a wandering mind that could not readily tell the difference between the water and the sky. The sun had tanned his bare feet and long, cracked hands. Every so often he would spin the stalk of a cattail between his fingers, but he did not touch the water, or whisper into the wind, or give any sign that he acknowledged or loved or despised those tiny creatures.

And still, he stole our fish.

They gathered at the edges of the river, swirling under his shadow,

squeezed in so tightly he could have scooped them up by the handfuls. But he only sat there, his hand under his chin, motionless, as if the weather had carved him out of the Earth over the eons, his eyes weary with the weight of it all.

Olly carefully plucked a pencil from the box, saying, A love letter, I think, and leaned over the side of the boat and began to write on the water's surface. As the letters rippled into the current, the fish swam away from the muddy riverbanks of the old man, because fish always fall for romance, them being fish, although only one of them—a trout with only half a fin—swam up to the water's edge and nipped at the pencil tip as Olly wrote.

*My darlings, my cherished creatures, there is not time enough for us in this dismal world, so please let us laugh together and love together before all else falls before us.*

He signed the note with his name and kissed the water with his chapped lips. I lifted the net, but Olly threw his hand into my chest. There's only the one, he said. There is time enough, and I will have them all.

After a moment, the one-eyed fish swam back to the shore, followed by others, but not all.

Goddamn you, old man! Olly yelled, but the man did not stir.

You have to be sincere, I said, grabbing a pencil out of the box. The sun had grown hot, very hot, and the sweat ran into my eyes.

I hooked my foot under the wooden seat and leaned over the water, dipping my pencil into the surface.

*Young Lords, flee before the world sees your end. I love you too much to watch your gills grow green and your scales harvested for their silver. Your lives are filled with dread, I know, and there is nothing to be done. Die slowly, or die quickly. That is the offer.*

I signed it, but realized I had not been honest enough, so I added: P.S. I am not a fish.

The fish scattered, then reformed in their clusters, a handful of them floating in front of me now, too, although the bulk of them had returned to the shore.

Well that didn't work, I said.

Just hold on for a few minutes, Olly replied. You want them to dwell. It shakes their souls loose, and gives them a sense of purpose. You have to give them purpose before you can expect them to sacrifice for a higher cause.

What higher cause? I asked.

The only higher cause there is, he said, twirling his pencil between two fingers. The cause of the passionate, whatever it may be.

An hour passed, and then another. The sun grew even hotter, burning us to our cores, but still the old man did not move. The fish, however, had slowly returned to us, swimming in circles below our boat, their tiny minds swirling too, their mouths gulping it all down. After the third hour they had all amassed in one large clump under the spot where Olly's words had stained the water.

I told you, Olly said, picking up the net. They'll die for passion.

On the shore, the old man unhinged his arm from under his chin and dipped his finger into the water, twisting it in a circle, but writing no message.

The fish began to swim toward the old man, but Olly was quicker,

scooping them up in one motion and dumping them into the cooler. The slippery fish twisted in the ice, their backs breaking and their eyes spinning in their sockets. No matter how I tried, I could not feel sad for such ignorant beasts. Before Olly closed the lid, he kissed his fingertips and extended them to the pile of fish bending in agony. When he did so, they all stopped moving and lay still.

Simple as that, Olly said.

Death is only complicated for the living, I said, shielding my eyes with my hand. It's brutal out here. Shouldn't we head in?

But there are more fish out there! Olly yelled, tipping the boat side to side. All the fish in the world are out there, just waiting to be scooped up! Isn't that right, old man?

On the shore the old man had his hand under his chin again, but made no acknowledgement of us, or the boat, or the river for that matter. As if none of it were there. By his feet was a single fish, the half-finned trout, flitted between the cattails as if searching for a way to come ashore.

It's better not to dwell, old man! Olly yelled, pointing to the cooler. This is what'll happen to you.

But the old man in the straw hat did not reply, or even look our way, looking elsewhere, at a more interesting or less interesting place.

A true God, I thought.

Above us, the clouds slowly curled themselves into letters. They said: *I am not a fish, either.*

# It's Vending Men

by Dorothy Chan

I'd love a man vending machine  
in the hallway of my celebrity home,  
and I know this sounds like an '80s  
high-concept film starring Andrew McCarthy  
in his puppy-dog-eyes-golden-boy-prime  
shrunk inside a vending machine  
in a department store in Hong Kong,  
because this is my version, and have you seen  
vending machines in Kowloon malls  
with their Korean beauty products  
and knickknacks you just can't live without?  
And the lead actress puts in a coin,  
and Hottie McCarthy comes to life  
as they have high tea in the mall, and honey,  
if we're going to play make-believe,  
I'm going all out, with this man  
vending machine in the middle of my celebrity home  
that's complete with high ceilings  
and koi pond with Zen garden  
where I drink jasmine tea in the mornings—  
*Good Little Asian Girl*, champagne  
in the mini fridge of my walk-in closet,  
like Cleopatra in the cartoons  
who had absolutely *nothing* to wear, ever,  
and I'll need a room that's all white,  
save for the vase of red roses on the center table,  
and I hate flowers—stop bringing them to me  
when you're asking for forgiveness, but everything  
in life needs a woman's touch—how I love  
playing dream girl to the beefcake-of-the-moment-  
ripped-out-of-the-stud-calendar-let-me-  
melt-butter-on-your-abs, sir, you stud  
that I got out of the vending machine after swiping

my black AMEX, and sure, I was craving  
sea salt and vinegar chips and red licorice and a cold cold  
cold cherry cola to rub on my breast  
because it's getting very very hot in here,  
and you're looking like a snack this afternoon,  
you stud, and I love telling you what to do  
as I pose on this faux-fur-polar-bear-carpet  
shag, snuggle by the fire, eating rare steaks  
and red wine, bloody as hell  
in front of the fireplace—classy,  
and will you just turn around for me, bend over,  
and I like this view, I like this view,  
I like this view, and let's roll around  
the rest of this lazy afternoon, a little bit tipsy,  
but before your shirtless scene,  
why don't you go to the vending machine,  
get me a bag of chips and some strawberry licorice  
but always remember—there's more of you  
where you came from, but let's have fun for now,  
and suck on each other's tongues,  
sharing this piece of licorice  
*Lady and the Tramp* style, and there's more of you  
where you came from, in my celebrity home,  
complete with heart-shaped hot tub,  
and you hunk of man, you, we'll have a little  
afternoon fun before I'm done and I move on  
to the next one, insert my coins  
for the next flavor, wow this candy tastes good  
in your mouth.

# Don't You Wish She Were Dumber

by Dorothy Chan

In my grandparents' home in Kowloon, Hong Kong,  
my mother's sister flat out asks my father,  
"Don't you wish she were dumber, so she'd be married  
by now?" and my aunt points at me

sitting in the corner, pretending not to understand  
her Cantonese, I'm 23, in a home I go back to  
once a year, and in this moment, in this home,  
my father gets flaming mad, leaves the room,

taking me to the McDonald's down the street,  
and I chow down on a Quarter Pounder with Cheese  
because we've been in Hong Kong for two weeks  
and I'm craving some greasy meat

and cheese, meat and cheese, and I think about my aunt,  
*Yes, this is my American ass,*  
*and why do all my relatives have to comment*  
*on my weight, my height—my tanner skin,*

*the way I like heavier jewelry and short shorts,*  
and my father and I sit in silence, the ultimate  
sign of comfort between two people, and I keep thinking,  
*It doesn't matter how many Marc Jacobs*

*watches or designer t-shirts my aunt buys me,*  
because in the end, I'm not shallow like that,  
because I'll never get over that moment,  
she talked down to me, like I'm some young

bride that's supposed to be married off  
to a nice Chinese boy whose only credentials  
are that he's a nice Chinese boy, but really,

where's the charisma, the raw sex appeal  
in all that, the way you want to tear  
your lover's clothes to shreds and make him  
make you a sandwich, a fancy grilled cheese with Swiss  
and prosciutto and butter and mayonnaise.

And I look at my father sipping coffee—  
the way he defended me, which reminds me  
of my dreams, and I love my parents equally,  
but my mother once told me that before I was born,

my parents visited the family fortune teller,  
who said I'd always be my father's symbol  
in life, and vice versa, and now, in this McDonald's  
in Kowloon, my father asks me if I want

soft serve, and as he talks, I remember how  
in all my dreams, when I'm leaving,  
it's my father I say goodbye to last, like he's the one  
whose luck I need the most,

the Tiger to my Snake, the one who'll buy me  
ice cream and defend me, and it's true,  
sometimes all you need is that one person.  
We walk back to my grandparents' home.



# Triple Sonnet for the '80s Whirlpool of My Mother's Childhood

by Dorothy Chan

I'm walking around Kowloon with my mother  
when we see it: the San Diego Hotel,  
gold letters on black marble, Porsches and Bentleys  
parked out front, and yes, it's swanky,  
and my mother tells me that hookers had their hotspots  
back in the day, eating dessert  
with their clients after hours, and now, the hotel's  
faded sign of a woman in an updo,  
sitting in a Jacuzzi, stares—she's from the Scarface  
era of snorting cocaine in hot tubs,  
the era of bubbles in your face, bubbles in your glass,  
bubbles over the replica Roman statue  
in your bathroom, plus the five Greek ones  
as you dial your gilded rotary phone, splashing.

It's a time of blue backless dresses  
worn at bars filled with mirrors, and you order milk  
because you're so tired of champagne  
and sushi, and back to now, the hot tub woman's  
picture is now faded into blue-green,  
and it's no longer my mother's Hong Kong of the '80s,  
the Hong Kong of family stores  
selling tea and medicine, of dessert shops across  
the street where hookers with their men  
meet in the seedy After Hours of dessert  
after dessert after dessert. I'm at the pork stand,  
looking at the women across the street, their breasts  
spilling out the tight red fabric, handing  
out "beer flyers," gesturing to the staircases above.

I think about the blatancy of it all, the *Let's get  
the job done and I'm not treating you*

*to ice cream afterwards*, and I think back to a time  
in college when I wanted to slap  
a date after we passed a parking lot and he told me,  
“Why don’t you meet men here?  
You’ll get your work done faster. I’ll give you  
the power you want.” Or that time  
in a nightclub when an expat-Ivy-Leaguer pointed  
at me, telling the bartender I wanted  
my martini, “Dirty, dirty, dirty,” and men—  
their amusement, and as I look back across  
after buying my pork, I see another man’s  
bought a shift. Up the staircases she goes.

# Seabird

by Avanti Tulpule

& like windswept seagulls, swelling / into a white sky, until it  
heaved / low-bellied & congested /  
fell to its knees / & held up by the raucous clutter of wings,

our mothers gathered at the edges of the sea / until the  
oceans were littered with their bodies /  
push-pulled & thrust back to shore / holding one mouthful of  
static.

this is how i imagine i am born; frothing lavender & milky  
mucus; white wiped away to blood-  
browened life. under the sterile moon / my mother: wet wings,  
fluorescent halo.

hunger chokes out my childhood; i call the emptiness girl.  
so my mother cups me in her palms / calls me blessing.  
so my mother crushes her blue teeth / into powdered  
grievings / & i swallow. / & i swallow until  
my belly is water-logged and bursting / until water seeps out  
of my ears & floods the house with  
the stench of desire.

so my mother flees from water-body to water-body.  
so i call this lingering home.

i drown my mother; i haul her to the frayed horizon and cast  
her to shore.  
earth does not accept her / i try to bury her, & she rises from  
its depths / a mouthful of sea-salt.  
& the ocean push-pulls her / to shore, murmurs she has  
spent too long forgetting how to drown /  
to surrender.

this is how i imagine a future; in which i emerge, whole /  
overflowing. sea-salt lingers on my lips  
& crusts over my fingernails; i choke on static / call her  
daughter.  
the moon, somber, a baleful eye.

i kiss women who fill me with their want / who fill my mouth  
with wildflower promises / until i  
know why my mother could never go back to the sea. /  
water gnaws my body until i am stripped  
to my girlhood / night holds me in jagged silence /  
streetlights carve my body into flame.

& i am left a name, a hungering.

# Mammal

by Sarah Gerard

Dear Mammal,

Your star moved over me in opposition. You implanted yourself in the walls of me. Your father held me in the bathtub and we watched you spread around us, light diffusing. There were all the days after. I'm taking a bus to the mountains.

Science is unforgiving but we return to it. It's been weeks but time is relative to feeling. I let in the air. I let the air in again. You're a monochrome smudge on a screen.

We stop at an onramp. I read by the face of my watch. The passengers sleep and I hear them by the echo you left. Gunpowder is poisonous. It deprives us of iron, making us bleed.

I know the meaning of reproduction. A man pins a sign to the shirt of a small child, then leaves her. I

find versions of you in a comma, a shadow, a curve, a tadpole, identical movements, any creature, a rabbit, an earthworm, a virus.

We wait on the shoulder. We're stuck in a dark place and we've returned to our old repetitions. I eat my placenta. I constellate versions of history. You were mistaken.

To love is to orbit potential if you love nothing. It's raining in the mountains and you will never have to learn that pain is profit. I find a cabin. There's a dark ring circling the lot. The river is named for its origin. Taking a man is also killing him. I will never forgive your father. I attach myself to the mountain's breast and drink the milk of the future.

There is no end to deconstruction. Time is immense and fabric, so we are together. I go before you to clear the way for futility. I cleared you from the weave. We returned to the

source and discovered its brutality.  
It's beautiful here on the mountain.

I carry you as two lines and an  
absence. A dog comes out of the  
woods looking for food. I feed and  
bathe him. I sweep my absence into  
corners, cover it up with inattention,  
drift toward a bright center. We  
use light to measure distance. An  
animal robbed of her young will call  
it making sounds she's never made.

Repetition breeds habit and  
comfort. The dog and I pass each  
other at predetermined times of day  
and pass back. Leaves fall. Cold  
clears the sky. From the ground,  
we see stars.

I had delusions. I believed in the  
power of two and feared the zero.  
I no longer fear what the mountain  
can do. I feel that I did it for love. I  
learn to cook with fire. My body is a  
tool. Time is a loom with ten strings.  
I lift one to make a story.

Mammal, I see your face as  
translucent. I leave the cabin open  
and walk toward a distant hum. I  
have written you, now send you.  
The road is wide and milked over.  
At its end there's nothing.

Your mother,  
Mammal

## In Latest News from the World of Poetry

by John Grey

The poem remains unwritten.  
The poet is now incurably insane,  
and sits alone in a white cell  
draped in a white gown,  
screaming that phonaesthetics,  
sound symbolism,  
meter and metaphor  
were out to get him.  
If only he'd known that the word  
he was looking for was  
"evanescence."  
I knew.  
But then there was "seren...  
something."

# The Accountant Longs for Attention

by Laton Carter

He stood up and smoothed his tie. Nobody in the office seemed to notice. There it was again — that gentle-but-piercing high-pitched siren cry from the network of outdated computer monitors.

*I am The Institution of The Holy Land of God*, he declaimed. Once again, the tops of heads — nobody seemed to notice.

*I am The Rhetoric of Those Once Lost*. Silence. He would have to up the ante.

*I am The Perilous Thundercloud of Importunate Subliteral Foreboding!* That one might not have made sense.

*I am The Magic Wand of The Apocalypse, The Stinking Rod of Life!* The metal tops of the cubicles, it was clear, needed dusting. Why did no one ever open a window? The place smelled from burnt coffee.

Across the fanned out stack of paper on his desk, all the same numbers were still there, waiting. He knew what to do with them, what to do with how they married or divorced each other and became different numbers, and what to do with the lonely white spaces in between, glowing their own private language.



## Preventative Maintenance

by Colleen Mayo

Long before you made a habit of hating me, your mother proposed. We were at a steak place. I wore a suit. She, a red dress— my favorite color on her. She kept swirling her finger along the rim of her wineglass as if it might sing. My head about flew to the ceiling when she popped the question. She said she loved how I made her feel. It all sounds so corny until it's directed at you.

"Like I have nothing to hide," she said.

"Oh, Dawn, me too, me too," I whispered. If the boys back in Little Rock could have heard me coo like that, they'd have doubled over. I'm not known for being an emotional guy.

Still, your mother's finger, around and around. Back then, the flesh off her pinkie was rougher than

the callus on my big toe. I never minded it. I've got rough hands as well, made thick from working the machines at Remington 13 hours a day. I believe all good hands should tell a story.

Then she looked up at me, nothing but eyelashes and trust. I knew then what it feels like to be so happy that your heart aches. The both of us sensed this was some kind of moment, a picture we'd forever return to in our minds.

"When should we do it?" I asked.

She leaned her fork over my plate and shoveled up a heap of garlic mashed potatoes—Dawn's appetite back! I'd trade in three years just to see her go to town on a basket of fries and onion rings.

"After I talk to Sally," she said.

“For now, we’ll move in together.”

She touched my leg underneath the tabletop. I paid the bill quickly. My stuff was at y’all’s place by the end of the week. You weren’t thrilled, but you seemed to get over it. I was once a simple man, easy to live with.

Quickly, Dawn got me into the jewelry business. I started crafting metal baubles that sold well at all the fairs. We’d work the Central Texas circuit clean from December to June, then we’d pack up our camper and take you out on adventures the whole summer long. Moab, Yellowstone, White Sands—it was downright glamorous. This pattern for six years. We’d joke about my life before and after Dawn, B.D. and A.D., which we all thought was pretty cute.

B.D., I worked as a Preventative Maintenance Specialist out at Remington in Lonoke, Arkansas. I was good and we had a decent crew, but one slipup is enough to bring the whole assembly line to a halt and—*rip*—a limb or worse can be lost in two seconds. It’s quite stressful. I don’t have to tell you that. The lot of us used to head down to this joint Smokey’s once or twice a week to drink it out and share stories. Some of the men could get competitive

about the gore, which I never liked.

I had this coworker named Christian. We were both on shift when a bad batch got cased. The explosion made national news. Two guys dead, five banged up badly. Christian lost his left eyebrow hair, yet, to hear him talk about it, you’d think he survived Afghanistan. Sitting at Smokey’s night after night while Christian reenacted our dead buddies’ faces melting off didn’t go down well. I’m a vet myself. I started to feel a bit offended. I’ve surprised myself much more than the night I crashed a pool stick against Christian’s head. Let me be clear: I wasn’t surprised, but I wasn’t proud either. I woke up the next morning, called in sick, and beelined it for Texas. The goal was Houston, then in Austin I really did surprise myself.

You were 15 the summer she started misplacing shit— normal things at first, like keys and receipts, the sort of stuff you chalk up to a bad night’s sleep. Meanwhile, you’d turned difficult, all slouch and sarcasm. But we made it to Jackson Hole in time for snow. When you saw it all, you looked back at your mother and me as if we’d given you a great gift. I felt for a moment what it would have been to see you as

a child. You cartwheeled around the white hills, pausing to lick the wet off your hands and smile at us with a disbelieving, magical grin. You ran up and pulled us both into a hug, pressed your cold fingers against the back of my neck while Dawn kissed my cheek. Life had become something I'd never even known I wanted. But I wanted it, you need to know that.

Names started to get funny shortly after your 16th birthday. She'd call you "Susan," or me "Barry," or sometimes her mind would go somewhere else entirely and she'd talk to me like I was her father or ex-husband. Then her temper started to flare up something evil. That's when we really started to worry. She'd ask me to pass the salt, then throw a knife at my head if it didn't come fast enough. Your English teacher called the cops after she ate three fingers of chalk and turned over a chair over during their parent-teacher meeting. I couldn't trust her at the booth alone for fear she might lose it at a customer.

It was sometime during this period when I left. I was gone one and half days. I'd driven back to Arkansas, parked myself up at that familiar corner in Smokey's to throw back more beers than

my stomach remembered how to handle. It'd been nearly a decade; no one outright recognized me. I knew some—Christian, yes, and a few others—and I shut my eyes to listen to them share their stories, which hadn't changed a beat from the gore and other talk. I left a good tip.

I swear, every exit called to me—from I-30 to I-35—and maybe if I'd been soberer I might have turned around back to Arkansas. I hope you never make a habit out of the stuff, but sometimes drink does give you courage.

When the diagnosis finally came, your mother was stoic. She sat in front of the doctor and nodded at the charts. "Yes," she said softly. Her eyes stayed locked on the series of lines and numbers while her thumb stroked the back of my hand. "Yes," she repeated with a terrible, patient smile, "this makes sense."

We told you. You didn't cry. You did nothing. You walked away.

I guess you could call the time it is now A.A.D.: After, After Dawn. She's still physically here, of course, and sometimes the film of this sickness slips from her eyes and she looks up at me from her bed at Eastwatch with a near-sane intensity like *are you*

*fucking kidding me, Gary?* This is how it turns out? I love-hate these moments. It'd be easier without them. I've let myself imagine what it might have been to like to grow old with her rather than grow old taking care of her, what a fantasy, what a useless mindfuck.

And, yes, I've let myself imagine what it might have been like

never to have met you both. Never to have these bills, this commitment, this terrible dearth of love from a daughter who shares none of my blood, from a woman who doesn't remember my name.

Sometimes I wish I'd actually made her my wife, you my daughter. It wouldn't have made a damn of difference.

# That October

by JD Scott

You wore white slacks and shoes in my bed,  
jumped out the second story window  
on a bad moon and broke both ankles.

My pubis was a deck of cards with all  
the heart suits removed. Climbing  
vines grew out my wrists like worry beads.

These are our conjunctions. A boy who comes  
and goes as he pleases. An untimely Labor  
Day joke. A parable, which starts now:

you will not be permitted my restless hands  
which hold each other like the ouroboros,  
that dragon who swallows himself forever.

I threw my phone in the ocean, built brick  
walls around my bedroom. I saw a psychic  
in an alley downtown; she wanted me

to tell you this: you will marry a woman  
who warns her children of the dangers  
of hair dryers, and I will give birth to wolves.

# The Night Tempest

by Sioned Ellis

Once the snow-drift of the duvet,  
goose feathers, socks over socks and all  
was where the world turned off.  
Branches playing limpet with window panes,  
pressed tight against glass, clinging on through a storm;  
you could peel off the leaves in the morning  
soaked like shirts left on the line too long  
and the trees would sigh.  
Or there'd be owls,  
cries echoing over rooftops  
as long as your bedside lamp soaked walls in butter  
and your eyelids flickered.

Years on are faces buried in pillows, stained grey  
like you can't wash out the feeling of despair  
that has pledged itself as your bride  
to follow you to bed each night;  
trails a miserable teddy bear behind,  
nurtured by sleepless nights and nail-biting.  
Dark is no haven.  
Hot water bottles – dressing gowns –  
slippers – have become cold,  
comfort lost,  
when all sleep brings is tomorrow.  
After the gale dies, it is so loud in here.

# Sometimes I Think I'll Die in This Washing Machine

by CL Bledsoe

Breath comes.

It leaves.

Time is a circle no one remembers how to read,  
carved on the leaking walls.

Fear of mildew is my midlife crisis.

Breath comes.

Sometimes it's so loud I can't hear  
the spin cycle until the buzzer.

In some countries, they don't have  
buzzers, clothes, water, anything  
but bodies.

I climbed in to hide from the noise.

I climbed in to get clean.

I didn't climb, I fell.

If I die here,

please don't ask

what I want for dinner.

# The Executioner Is Drunk and the Ropes Are Too Wet for Strangulation

by Mike McHone

attention  
there will be no hangings today  
the executioner is drunk and the ropes are too wet for  
strangulation

please proceed to the nearest injection center in a calm and  
orderly fashion, single file

after you've arrived at the center you will be directed to a  
private stall

once you are in the stall, please reach above you and grab  
the needle from its overhead position  
and place it directly into your arm

one of our customer service representatives will be on hand  
should you need further assistance

please secure your own needle first before helping your child  
with theirs

once the needle is injected snugly into your arm please lie  
down on the table provided for you  
assume the christ-like pose and wait for the fluids to be  
injected into your body

to repeat:  
there will be no hangings today  
the executioner is drunk and the ropes are too wet for  
strangulation

we apologize for any inconvenience you may have caused



## Where The Ducks Go

by Obi Calvin Umeozor

On your deathbed, this is what you think of:

You think of the night, years before, when Uloma's call disrupted your sleep. The night the network was so sketchy you ran out the door of that one-bedroom shack-on-a-hill you called home to get better reception; to hear – above the crackles from the other end of the line, above the croaks of frogs belching hard into that cold November night – your Americana sister say the words you had been waiting 30 years to hear.

“We found him.”

In Tallahassee, Florida, of all places. And your knees buckled, and you sat there on the bench of weathered wood beneath the mango tree in your front yard, beyond the glow of the bulb above your doorpost that passed for a security light, and you swiped at mosquitoes and

sand flies as you listened to your sister in Baltimore tell you how she had gone down to Tallahassee to visit Ezinne, her daughter, at your alma matter; had gone to the South Hill Baptist Church that Sunday and beheld him preaching fire and brimstone from a pulpit of fiberglass. “We found Emeka,” Uloma said over and again, her voice cracked with disbelief, with three decades of pain. And there in the cold and the dark, with your sister's raspy voice in your good ear, you had already begun calculating how much damage a plane ticket from Lagos to Florida would do to your savings. You were 49. And even then you had an arthritic knee and an inhaler in the breast pocket of your pajama top. And an octogenarian mother in a hospital two hours out of town. So your itinerant days were well over, you knew this. Yet, more than anyone else, you also knew how badly you had to – needed to – see your brother again.

The next morning you called your boss, the principal of the local girls' secondary school and told him you wouldn't be showing up to work for the next few weeks. You hung up on his protestations because you hadn't once missed a day of work in the 10 years you had been teaching there, and so you felt entitled to this break of sorts. You took your American passport out of the cellophane bag in the briefcase behind your dresser and you stared at that picture from '93, from a far happier time; when there wasn't a streak of white in your hair; when you still had a smile, one that tugged at the left side of your face; when your eyes still had a glow in them. You thought again of Paunise, your Haitian-American ex and what could have been. You mounted your old Yamaha motorcycle and you rode, in a trail of red dust, down to the cybercafé in the middle of town to book the earliest flight ticket you could find.

You headed down to the psychiatric hospital to see Mama.

She was in bed when you walked in and she smiled. But you ignored it as you took the chair beside the bed because you knew her smile wasn't for you. Mama was battling late stage Alzheimer's then, and you'd grown weary of telling her over and over, "It's not Emeka. It's me, Obinna. Remember?"

Nevertheless, you took her frail hand and stared into her deep-set, weary eyes and asked how she was. Then you told her you were flying back to the States. No, not to Baltimore to see Uloma or her husband, Salim, but to Tallahassee to find Emeka. Her eyes lit up at the mention of his name but she said nothing. She slowly pulled her hand out of yours and gave you an awkward smile, her eyes flitting from side to side. You sat with her a while, as you had done every week of her stay up to that point, and you looked out the dust-filmed window at the udala tree waving its branches in the Harmattan breeze out in the courtyard, at the fruits the size of tennis balls, and you wondered if you could reach out the window and pluck just one, and suck its fleshy seeds and juice the color of milk and let it slap the inside of your cheeks till you smacked your lips together like a baby tasting lemon for the first time. You imagined this would drive off the smell of disinfectants and air-fresheners that hung heavy in that hospital room. Mama dozed off before long and you got up to leave. But at the door, her voice reached you, frail and wiry, from the edge of her dreams. "Emeka?"

On the flight to Jacksonville, you didn't sleep a wink. You ignored the entertainment system in front of you, because you hadn't watched

TV in years and you weren't about to start then. Instead, you looked out the window and feasted your eyes on the vast blue blanket spread across the sky over the Atlantic, far as the eye could see. The buzz of the plane engines and the snores of the heavysset man in the seat beside you began to make you drowsy.

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So you closed your eyes and you were 17 again, and Emeka was chasing you through the football field behind your house on the outskirts of Port Harcourt, yelling for his stolen jersey back. You kept whipping the damp thing above your head like it was a rotor blade as you sprinted beyond his reach, the cheers of the other kids on the field spurring you on. Till Emeka got close enough to lunge at you and pull you down into the dusty turf with him. You exchanged smacks and nudges with your brother before he slipped his arms underneath yours and tickled hard at your sides till you began thrashing around on the ground like a distressed fish. Of course Emeka had always known that was your weak spot and he never failed to exploit it whenever you both got into one of your many tussles. Just then Uloma – 10 at the time – who had come out earlier to tell you both that Mama had asked that you come into the house because it was getting dark, ran out the back screen-door of the house yelling, “Mama is coming!” at both

of you. A few seconds later, Mama came pelting out of the house toward the field with a Koboko cane in her right hand, her soiled apron flapping against her knees. You and Emeka knew the drill. You were both up in a flash and headed for the opposite end of the field. And the roar from your playmates in stitches drove you on till Mama was winded and ground to a halt with a shake of her head. And she continued to give you both the death stare over her shoulder as she trudged back into the house, with Uloma giggling and snapping at her heels. You had no worries because you knew that as long as you were with Emeka, Mama wouldn't mend your butt. You and Uloma knew Emeka had Mama wrapped around his finger and you both used it to your advantage all the time.

Mama had given birth to Emeka in Houston, one year after she had married Papa, two years before they moved to Nigeria and had you and Uloma. But Mama always had a special attachment to Emeka, maybe because he was her first, maybe because he was a very lovable boy, with his quaint ways and voice deep beyond his years. That attachment only grew stronger after Papa died in a plane crash a couple of years after Uloma was born. In many ways, Emeka became the man around the house and he would often use that

position too eagerly. And though he was only five years older, he would hover over you like you were just as much a toddler as Uloma. And though you knew he meant well, you somewhat detested the way he would poke his nose into your feuds, looking to fight your battles.

You didn't know how much you would miss the horseplay and the tussles and the hovering until the year you turned 19, when Emeka began seeing Sandy and practically moved in with her. He was on the verge of completing his electrical engineering bachelor's at the University of Port Harcourt, which was about an hour from home, and so he wasn't always available anymore for Mama to stick her nose in his business. He told her he was in the middle of his final project and had to stay on campus more often to take care of it. Mama believed him, as she always did, but you knew better. As your brother grew scarcer, you grew to loathe his girlfriend – frail, gorgeous Sandy – even though she was very mild-mannered and easygoing. It was all a game to her, you said to yourself. You knew she was trouble, everyone did. She was the only child of the Education Minister, Chief Nwosu, a widower who had spent much of his hustle years teaching biology in some of the most desolate places in southern and eastern Nigeria, until a policeman beat him sense-

less during a traffic stop for refusing to drop a bribe. He sued the police for millions in damages and won, and after the much publicized court victory, no one was worthy enough to sniff his filthy laundry, much less hold his princess's hand. Emeka knew all this, knew what an erratic man Sandy's father was, but it didn't faze him. He was sure – he told you so – that he was being discreet enough in public, that the Chief didn't know his daughter was dating a broke engineer.

All this had Mama so worried she took a couple of days off her work at the State Secretariat to drive down to Emeka's campus apartment to look for him. He was nowhere around. In fact, the landlord told her that he didn't live there anymore. Said he lived with his girlfriend now, in an upscale apartment in the Government Residential Area of Port Harcourt. You had to calm Mama down when she got back. You even took over the handling the smaller affairs in the house to take the load off her.

And then that night happened. You heard it all from your hysterical mother as she held onto you and Uloma in the backseat of the taxi speeding towards Braithwaite Memorial Hospital in downtown Port Harcourt. Witnesses said Emeka and Sandy had left a birthday party – he had told you he was attend-

ing – in a hurry. No one knew why. They both ran out of the house, hand-in-hand, and got into Sandy's Peugeot sedan. They both were more than a little drunk, but Emeka insisted on driving, and on a dark deserted road at the edge of town, an approaching headlight was a little too strong for Emeka and he veered off the road, driving straight into an electric pole. Sandy, who didn't have her seatbelt on, was thrown from the car, and she died in a cluster of wild ferns by the roadside. But Emeka survived, with all but two broken arms and a cracked rib. From then on, everything went downhill fast. The distraught chief promised to get his hands on Emeka—told Mama to her face at the police station where your brother was being held that she wouldn't even find his body when he was through with him. Mama didn't wait for another warning. She sold the house, used half the money to bail Emeka out and the rest to send him into hiding with some of her relatives in Houston. And she gathered you and Uloma and left Port Harcourt for Lagos, never to return.

It was two weeks after Emeka settled in Houston that he reported seeing some suspicious figures outside his window one night. And by the next morning he was gone.

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You got into Jacksonville on Friday

at 12 noon and you immediately bought a Greyhound ticket to Tallahassee and called your sister. She said she would call ahead and tell Ezinne when to pick you up at the station. You were at least excited about that. The last time you had seen your niece was two Christmases ago, when she had flown down to Nigeria to get some of what your sister called "cultural experience." Uloma had always confided in you about how worried she was that Ezinne had become too Americanized, how she even knew a lot more about her Persian heritage – courtesy of her father's relatives there in Baltimore – than she knew about Nigerian culture. Uloma told you how this had become a source of constant bickering between her and Salim. So you had taken Ezinne under your wings those three weeks like she was the daughter you never had, and you brushed up her Igbo, even as she practiced her Farsi on you. She rode with you on the back of your Yamaha to see her granny at the hospital, and you hid your smile as you watched granny play with Ezinne's luscious hair and call her "nwanyioma" even though – you were sure – she didn't recognize her granddaughter. That was the Christmas you advised her to accept the offer from Florida State.

At the Greyhound station in Tallahassee, Ezinne looked a lot more

mature than you remembered. She had her hair up in a bun and was sporting large hoop earring with the map of Africa inscribed within. And her fair skin glittered like it was resistant to the biting cold. Something about how she held herself up, hands on hip, reminded you of Sandy. She flashed that wide smile of hers when she saw you, ran up and crushed you in a hug. And after the hellos, after she quizzed you about your knee and you lied and said it was ok, she asked where it was you wanted to eat. And you remembered the restaurant by Lake Ella where you had met Paunise during the protest against the Muscovy ducks' roundup in the early '90s. "Hungry Sailor," you said as Ezinne's car, a Kia Forte, pulled out of the station.

But it turned out Hungry Sailor had been closed down years before, and a coffee shop had sprouted up in its place. So you ordered a chicken wrap because it was the closest thing to a Nigerian meat-pie on the menu, and you sat with your niece on the swing bench overlooking the 12-acre lake. You marveled at how much everything had changed since you were last here: at the rocks on the banks, at the green-roofed gazebo, at the ducks floating unperturbed in the gleaming water.

From the corner of your eye you no-

ticed Ezinne watching you tear into that wrap, and at once you knew Uloma had told her the real reason you were in town.

"You know when I was here, there was a campaign to capture all the ducks and give them out," you said, to deflect the question you knew was coming.

"Oh I read about that, Uncle. It's a good thing I wasn't there."

And you snickered because you knew how much your niece loved a fight.

"I'll take you to the church on Sunday," Ezinne said after a while. "I've been there a couple of times before." You smiled and you gave her knee a pat. And she leaned over and wrapped her arms around you, planting a peck on your bulging cheeks, and her head on your shoulder.

"I'm not giving you a bite of this, if that's what you want," you said between mouthfuls and the buzz of her laughter rattled your jet-lagged bones.

You swung on that bench with your niece and you tried to forget that Sunday was only two days away. You tried to forget how much things had changed since the last time you saw Emeka, at the departure

lounge of the Murtala Muhammed Airport still holding onto Mama's weeping form even though he had already said his goodbyes to her, to Uloma, to you. But it isn't all that easy to forget. You remembered most vividly Mama's meltdown when Emeka went missing; she was sure the Chief had gotten to him. You remembered how quickly Uloma ran out of there the moment she got the Fulbright scholarship. And of course there was your own escape to Florida State University, an escape so complete you married Paunise for the green card and you bought an apartment too – not even Uloma knew about that. Until you got the news that Mama had "gone mad" and you moved back home to be with her. They said she had Alzheimer's and that it was, on some level, hereditary – and you remembered Mama saying something about a "crazy" uncle – but deep down you knew the reason she fell apart as quickly as she did.

"Did you hear about the Category One that came through here last month?" Ezinne asked after a while.

Of course you hadn't. "I think so."

"Well, I was really bothered about them," she said, lifting her head off your shoulder and pointing toward the ducks dawdling in the water. "But when I came to check the next

morning, they seemed just fine. And then I began thinking: where do ducks go in a hurricane, Uncle?" You were damned if you knew.

You spent the next two nights on the couch in Ezinne's cramped apartment overlooking the school stadium – an imposing red-brick affair that still hadn't changed all these years – and on Sunday morning she insisted on driving you to the church. You hadn't really talked about Emeka with her, but you knew you would when the time was right. On the way there, in the passenger seat of her car, the knots in your stomach were screwed so tight you could barely breathe, barely keep still. The back of the white starched shirt you had donned for the occasion was soaked through, even though it was only 60 degrees outside.

The service didn't start until an hour after you both got there. You sat with Ezinne all the way in the back, behind a screen of feathered hats and silk hand fans. You tapped your feet to the choruses sparked by the choir on the raised platform by the altar and picked up by a drone of eager voices. You watched your niece sing along to the worship tunes that came after, you watched her wave her hands in the air with her eyes shut tight and you wondered if this too was a phase, like the Hindu one she went through three years before.

And through all this, you scanned the altar for any sign of your brother.

And then one of the ministers, after a rather dour prayer session, called up to the pulpit a Pastor Matthew Walker and the congregation erupted as a lean, somewhat bent man climbed the steps of the altar and walked gingerly towards the pulpit. And you couldn't help but hold your breath.

In a navy blue suit stood what looked to be a much older version of your brother.

But you weren't sure until he opened his mouth to speak about the Sermon on the Mount, about how it was incredibly important to be peacemakers in a turbulent world. And that voice, though croaked and much deeper than you remember, though bearing a heavy Southern American accent, took you back many years to a time you weren't sure you wanted to remember anymore. Ezinne slipped her hand in yours and held on, and it was only then you realized how wet your face had become.

And as you made your way toward Pastor Matthew after the service was done, with Ezinne by your side, you noticed how much of his hair was pearly white even though, by your calculation he couldn't have been more than 54. His smile was

still as disarming, and he flashed it at the church members lined up to shake his hand and congratulate him on a great sermon. As you waited your turn, your heart pounding furiously in your chest, a woman who looked to be about your age walked up to the pastor from behind, handed him the child in her arms, and pecked his cheek as she rushed away. You hesitated, watching the pastor grin as the girl, no older than two, stroked his chin. But Ezinne nudged you on without a word and soon you were right in front of the man you had been searching for most of your adult life. At first he smiled without a fuss and extended his free hand to you and Ezinne, and apologized for the toddler's "chin-stroking fetish," but then as he searched your face when you didn't immediately respond, you watched the realization hit him like a block of brick; you watched his jaw drop open.

"Obinna?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

You nodded because your lips wouldn't stop quivering. You took his hand gingerly as he stretched it out to you again. You watched him struggle to keep his cool right there in the front of the altar, with the crowd pressing in around you, eager to have a word with him. Your brother stooped to drop the kid he was carrying and he told her to go



find her mother. He looked at you again, the shock still drawn across his face. "That's my granddaughter, Lulu." You already thought as much, so you simply nodded again. You saw him fix his eyes on Ezinne beside you; you heard him gasp, "Is that Uloma's...?" You nodded yet again as he took Ezinne's outstretched hand and shook it eagerly.

At that point you wanted to get it over with. You knew deep down that the burning question wasn't, "Why?" You weren't there for that. The only reason you had held onto his memory all those years, the reason you had flown so far from Mama, from home, was to tell your brother how sorry you were. How you hadn't meant to tell the Chief that he was going to be at that party with his daughter. Well, you had meant to but only because you wanted to get him back to Mama who was hurting so bad, only because Sandy was bad news. You wanted to tell your big brother how you had no idea it would all turn out the way it did.

But you can't quite find the words. And when a church member tapped Emeka's elbow to introduce the lady on his arm as his wife, you took that window and you spun on your heel and made a beeline for the door. You didn't stop when Ezinne called out to you; you didn't stop

for the deep, familiar voice screaming, "Obinna!" over and again. You cut through the crowded parking lot where you almost got run over by a Cadillac the size of a tank and you hit the sidewalk, leaving the church's giant spires pressed hard against the blue skies behind you. You broke into a trot; you ignored the bite in your knees and the frigid breeze grating your face, and you ran, as you have always done, from your troubles. You passed the old town cemetery and the post office. You didn't care where you ran to, so long as the old fig trees kept their shelter above you.

You flew back to Nigeria the next week, and you burnt your American passport as soon as you got home even though you had promised Ezinne at the airport that you would be back to see her. Uloma didn't speak to you for weeks; and when she finally forgave you for coming into the country without stopping by Baltimore, you asked if she had spoken to him yet.

"Who?" she asked.

You could tell she still hadn't forgiven him for what he put Mama through. Of course you were not going to tell her what you had done; that was between you, and your God, and perhaps Emeka.

So you went back to your solitary

life in that house on the hill, and  
you buried your mother beneath  
the mango tree in the front yard  
and buried that secret deep in your  
wrinkled heart, where no one could  
see it, not even the doctors that  
found the lump in your chest.

## Two Moments, Back to Back

by Mary Ann Samyn

By six, I was a little ruined.  
Mornings, wet grass, September—  
Now I go back to look for you  
among the sweet smart boys of elementary school.  
I have yet to forgive my mother *taking pity*;  
she called it that, spinning me around.  
See—the metaphor goes—  
this is where the needle entered the cloth—

I

by Mat Wenzel

In the airstream & the engine, in the de-icing,  
juniper, & fumes, you, ghost of x-mas, are there to  
keep us from falling. For five hundred years I wet my  
lips with zero kisses; I held this pose for 900 winters;  
my flesh sought only you, El Niño, for 730,000 days. But now  
nine of my heads—this one I drowned; this one I severed with an  
open pin; this one cut by windshield; this one starved; this one got  
pinched off with a leather belt; this one, by a rail; this one  
quit; this one, beheaded; this one I froze off like a wart—  
rot in my roll aboard in the overhead compartment with  
so much to say, not a lot of breath left to say it.

Today, I go to make a wish for all of them.  
Undercarriage, tarmac, drive shaft, constant-  
velocity joints, dull glitter falling in stream  
white light. A deer hangs from a tree, agape from  
xiphoid to groin, heartless & anusless, swinging &  
yellow gold illuminated by your halogen, our scratchy  
zombie ray. The teeth on the mandibles & craniums gristlebite  
against the silence & their blackened tongues probe the  
briny cranberry mist we sail in. I dream unzip their

cold lips in the house prepared for me.  
Demoniac, my itching navel is unravelling.  
Every calorie is burning. Inverted &  
fetus, tail wagging sperm,

grunt, mount, hunt, scent,  
heard.

# Holding Onto

by Gloria Muñoz

How compression keeps the heart  
beating but too much stops it  
even while I sleep the drumming  
throbs The heart a Battering  
Ram that breaks  
out of instead  
of into castle doors

The body a mote  
curled around dreaming

Recognizing the movement of someone else's heart  
is like a chill or a burn always new How a gasp feels  
less like a filling of  
and more like a diaphragm double  
knotting itself  
into a fist

But the body is not punctured  
by heartache organs stay stacked  
and the heart beats on through shitty soft rock requests  
on the late night radio for the heartbroken  
where a woman with a dove  
voice says tell me *everything*

How in a doorway I gave  
the reasons why a relationship  
would work to a face that was bedecked  
with secrets  
like a disco ball  
silent

I'm reminded of my frailness  
when all the air is sucked out  
of every container of my body

Because even emptiness requires attention  
A vacant office building  
lit up at night is monumental

The climate controlled units  
where we keep our stuff cradled  
in bubble wrap to sleep  
in the city of memories  
Is there a more sublime example  
of human nostalgia Everything  
seems to be made to hold another  
thing

How all our past  
relationships were kept  
in boxes A life span  
of inside jokes  
compacted  
into a shoebox

The body a mote  
curled around dreaming

Recognizing the movement of someone else's heart  
is like a chill or a burn always new How a gasp feels  
less like a filling of  
and more like a diaphragm double  
knotting itself  
into a fist

# No Tomorrow

by Brad Rose

It's a circular night and my blood is itchy. As soon as the  
now is over, I'm going to disentangle  
the amnesic kilowatts nestled inside these invisible particles.  
The house is still as a sleeping  
animal, and I've had it up to here with working the swing  
shift. Before we moved in, I used to  
frequent this neighborhood every now and then, but nobody  
told me about the transgalactic data  
replication. It's worse than the groundwater. I told Janine,  
You'd need a handwriting expert to  
detect that secret scenario, but she said, Eugene, you're no  
fool. Nobody pulls the wool over your  
eyes. I said, I'm still going to monitor my immune system,  
whether they're watching or not. I  
might even download the ambient collateral vacuity  
organizer. You can't trust anything you  
hear, and only about a third of what you know. Just then,  
Janine passed me the gravy boat. It was  
like nothing had happened. I told her, Next week, when I get  
a few minutes to myself, I'm going  
to put the dog to sleep. She flashed me a smile like there  
was no tomorrow.

# Brakes

by Hugh Behm-Steinberg

I've been having problems with my brakes. They've turned mushy; I try to stop and they act like stopping is some flexible state everyone gets to have an opinion on. Sometimes they're ok – I press the pedal, I stop; other times I sort of slow down as I mash the pedal harder and harder and my wife goes, "Omigod omigod fix the fucking brakes already!" Most of the time it's not a big deal, but after several near accidents and one or two light collisions, I decide to get them looked at.

I go to the mechanic, he takes one look and says, "You need to see a specialist."

"Really?" I say. "They're just brakes."

He says, "Oh no, you have a set of these computer assisted brake booster bellcrank pivot systems on your car. Let me show you what happens when I go near it."

He takes a screwdriver and points it towards the exposed, glistening brake, and zaps of electricity shoot out. It looks like something out of *Star Trek*.

The mechanic says, "You could go to the dealer, but I don't think this is covered by your warranty. You clearly got an aftermarket braking system here." He gives me that look mechanics and repair people always give me. "Have you been drag racing or something?"

He writes down an address. "Go here. Talk to Lisa. And drive very carefully; avoid competitive donut making if you know what I mean."

I tell him sure, even if I haven't made a donut in days, let alone a halfway competitive one, and after many twists and turns, I arrive at the specialist's shop.

Lisa boosts my car up a little on



the hydraulic lift and takes the wheels off, exposing the brakes. "Good Lord," she says. "You have a complete set of signed Barbara Kruger antilocks here. Do you have any idea how much they're worth?"

"A lot?"

"They're worth more than the rest of your car put together. You have a full-on neo-conceptualist anti-pop lock braking system – they're the only braking system ever made with critical analysis baked into them."

She shows me the readout. It's obvious how frustrated they are with the abuse they've been receiving.

"Lay off the drag racing, ok?" Lisa tells me, the way a doctor would tell someone to ease off on their drinking.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say.

"I can fix your car for \$3500," she says. "And you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Two hours later, I'm driving home, and I'm being very good, I'm just driving home. The brakes work great, everything's great. But just when I'm turning the corner to my house, I'm tapping the brakes to

slow down and instead I keep going. Fortunately I know how to use the emergency and I only fishtail a little bit and exactly park in front of our driveway.

My neighbor Bill runs out. "Are you ok?"

I tell him about the brakes, about Lisa, the \$3500, and he stops me. "Go see Chris," he says and scribbles down an address. "She knows everything about brakes. Unlike some people."

I'm pleading with my Barbara Krugers, please, please, get me to the new mechanic's without running over anybody, and in the meantime I'm driving painfully, dangerously slow to get there. I'm driving so slow it feels like I'll never get to Chris's garage, that the rotation of the Earth is pushing her further away than my superslow brakeless car can drive to catch up to her.

But I get there, and I ring the buzzer, and out walks Lisa, except she's wearing a mechanic's blue jumpsuit that has the name Chris embroidered on it.

"You look just like Lisa," I say.

"She's my twin sister," Chris says.

"I'm worried she didn't properly adjust my brakes," I say. "I thought I'd

get a second opinion.”

“Let’s have a look,” Chris says.

Up goes the lift, off goes the tires, clang clang clang goes all the cord plugins from the braking system to the monitors. I’m thinking maybe Lisa put the brakes on backwards, or maybe my car really doesn’t want to stop all that much, but Chris just gives me a look.

“Your brakes are fine,” she says.

“Lisa’s a great mechanic, and you have no business riding around with a set of Barbara Krugers on a jalopy like this.”

“I just want it to stop.” I tell her. “I just want to stop when I’m supposed to stop.”

“No you don’t.” Chris shows me the readout. *Stop stop stop stop STOP Take your foot off the gas STOP Slow down STOP!!!!!!!* Page after page after page, with a couple capitalisms for good measure. Just like at Lisa’s.

“You like it,” Chris says. “You’re just a jaunty little motherfucker; all you want to do is go faster than everybody else. Why should I protect you from what you want?”

For a bit I let myself feel embarrassed. I mean ok, I’m one of those assholes, the type who’s always

weaving in and out of traffic, who cuts in line even when he’s not in a hurry, always shaving seconds by going just a little bit faster than the guy next to me. But then why not be honest? It’s all pointless. Nobody’s fast enough to outrun themselves.

“I think you can go a lot faster than you think you can,” she says.

“How much?”

“\$30,000. Come back next month.”

I give her all my credit cards. “I’ll call you when it’s ready,” she says. “Don’t bother me before then, or there’ll be a surcharge.”

A month and half goes by before Chris calls me. I’m dying, Uberring (the drive-like-a-maniac option is really disappointing) or borrowing my wife’s car to go anywhere, always getting wherever slowly, slowly, slowly.

I get a ride with Bill over to Chris’s, and I can barely make small talk I’m missing my car that much. I send him off and go inside, where Lisa and Chris are working on someone else’s car.

My own’s next to it, gleaming in a way it’s never gleamed before. Lisa and Chris walk over to me, although now Lisa’s jumpsuit says Connie,

and Chris hands me the keys and with a philosophical tilt says, "I think this will take you where you want to go at the rate you think you need to get there."

I get in. I drive slowly out of the garage, and it is with all the restraint I can muster I don't smash the pedal to the floor to see how fast I can go.

But then I do.

I don't feel like I'm going fast so much as me and the car have become ghosts, driving through a frozen world. I get home, but even though literally no time has elapsed, it feels like it takes forever to get there.

It's a miserable experience. Worse,

when I get there, there I am waiting for me, with an "I told you so" look. "Fucking time machines," he says.

"Making copies every time you go anywhere," I say.

"You don't have to say that again," he says.

"I bet Lisa and Chris aren't really twins," I say.

In front of me, another one of me pulls up, and that me says, "Don't try to go a little bit fast either, it's all or nothing."

We all look dour when our wife comes out.

# I Saw the Light

by Amy Lemmon

There is nothing

like a mandolin

full gospel

unless it is you,

in my grandmother's

in 1988

on guitar

your holey mustard-

stirs the soul

opening into

bluegrass heaven

singing "Shady Grove"

living room

my uncle

your quavering naïf baritone

colored sweater

# Change Is the Only Constant

by Amy Lemmon

*after Thomas Terceira's Metamorphosis 2*

The flying squirrels are back, creeping and leaping  
to join the game / A needlebeak is poised to peck  
the bud of Anais Nin's tightly folded hand

*Ordinary life does not interest me  
I seek only the high moments*

Imprisoned by their freedom to change  
*human beings place upon an object or person*

You have a history of disappearing / you thought I was boring,  
you thought I was repressed / I've changed / moulting season

That exotic loving creature with its long curved bill  
is only a common house wren / brown creeper  
they breed in conifers / Ponderosa pines stripped of foliage

Four missed calls, three voicemails  
*I wanted to respond to a couple things* / of course I missed you / your call  
*you brought up* / you use old maps, having no mobile

*Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh* / aloe vera nearby won't soothe  
the burning burning flesh / pheasant / random grosbeak

We prayed with our whole bodies, rose up on shared wings  
We wanted to avoid old-fashioned Sturm und Drang

Here to tell / *the familiar story of the unfortunate woman  
whose life is brought to ruin through love of the wrong man  
but with a twist and pungency* / oddly touching

Piano music of Erik Satie / look up *gnossienne*  
in the *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* / *an unfinished attic*

*that will remain maddeningly unknowable to you*  
You told me I had the voice of an angel  
feathers, tongue—what's the difference?

*He is good enough sexually to cause you to cancel  
your other assignments / Is that a gardenia I see?  
California's first flowers blooming in December*

Bring the whole thing home / a batch of my home recordings  
How many years, how many  
changes

whirling / No one has ever loved an adventurous woman  
like they have loved adventurous men / maps no one can read  
turning into something / I am not always in what I call  
a state of grace / Singing along with Roky Erickson

*It's a clear night for a kiss* / waiting for a cab on Sunset

I only do MP3s these days    /    *Send back the CDs*  
not checking email    /    *if you're not going to listen to them*  
no answering machine    /    *away away away*

*It's a clear night to give myself to you*

Behind my alabaster back / fly  
eyes downcast with guitar / *where are you going now?*  
bring me along.

## The Molting of Cyrano

by Joe Manus

I received a phone call in the stovetop summer, following my sister Tracie's diabetic death. At the time, I lived in an Athens apartment complex, in cube number 217, with a New Yorker with New York cats. I was redundantly confined to its walls from 4:30 pm until 7 am. Ordered by a judge who wished me to change. Enforced by a pistoled probation officer who wished I would not.

The call was from her friend George. He was old and gentle. He looked a little like Santa, but instead of Christmas cotton, his beard was matted and yellowed from cigarettes and sweet tea. His jolly had vacated, leaving him like a hitchhiker home. He worked alone, in the night, in the water treatment plant. He called to let me know I had inherited Tracie's boa constrictor and he was ready to let it go. He brought it to me the following week. He had it in a pil-

lowcase, displaced among other alien articles, on the back bench seat of his LTD. He once again became Kringle when he handed me the bag of serpent.

George had always wanted to lay with Tracie. He never did or she never would. He chased her with cached kindness while she, in literal blindness, chased criminal country boys with bad haircuts and blown-up muscles. He cried old, stale tears when he confessed his postmortem love for her. He had wanted to cry every time she confided in him her broken hearts, from broken promises, from broken men. He had wanted to cry while he watched her combat death back like a cat cornered. That day, in that parking lot, he soaked my shirt shoulder with every tear he was too scared to expose to her, when she was living. He handed me the last living trace he had of hers: a snake in a bag.

He drove away. I went inside and shut the door.

I never heard from George again. I built the snake a home inside a gutted 1950s television cabinet. I hung my dead sister's silver emergency alert bracelet on a nail above it. She had worn it on her wrist every day she lived. Its raised emblem of two snakes climbing a winged pole to nowhere. I did not

inherit a name for the snake, so my future wife named him Mowgli. In her innocent homage to Kipling, she embraced how George had become the Bagheera that saved my sister's orphan and how I would become the wolf that raised him.

The snake shed its skin that night. Turning itself inside out, in a concertina movement by moonlight. I woke up wishing I had as well.



## James Taylor Esperanto

by Jim Daniels

*And hey babe the sky's on fire, I'm  
dyin'*

Mowing a quietly extravagant  
lawn. You don't know whose.

Somebody nice maybe—  
rich too. Maybe beautiful.

Cut grass twitters out softly  
behind an old reel mower.

Shirt unbuttoned, trailing.  
Grin squint. World

tuned medium high.  
When the woman, or man,

emerges from the house naked  
with lemonade for you,

sweat on your skin cools  
with a cloud's strange, slight  
regret.

# Already Taken Everything of Value

by Elisabeth von Uhl

Wedded to your out-of-date textbooks,  
your yellowed newspaper clippings, your shirts

with missing buttons, your accidental infidelity. How much  
of it could I dump on the curb late

one cold night as the concrete  
glistened, the air fraught with sorrow,

disappointment tender and wide inside?  
I don't own this shame, this peppery disgust:

this fruit too ripe to eat — this person too soft to fuck.  
Now, my handwriting is a condensed scratch on streaked windows

that have been covered with plywood, the nails  
oxidizing over warped vinyl siding. Inside,

my grief is a graying leftover in a plastic container  
placed next to expired ketchup darkening beside

the smooth white refrigerator walls. This filthy  
kitchen next to a living room hosting house flies

with unfurled flypaper coated in sticky faithfulness —  
its hurt is threaded through this house: a mortar

of sorrows smoothed between its bricks. Now, the bedroom  
nightstand is covered in dust, a stink of sweat that sinks below

sleep next to a hallowed mattress alone in anger. You've  
burned down the house, setting the pillowed bed linens

afire. I must mourn. My weight is sadness.

## I Is for Inchworm

by Ryan Scariano

If I could, I'd fly away to a place where every single  
Night doesn't press down with an angry thumb. If I  
Could fly, I'd forget how well groveling suits me and  
How much unanswered devotion calls. If I could forget, I'd quit  
Working so hard to plot small ways of taking back my  
Offerings. If I could quit, I'd see that all my impulses  
Reflexively contract with doubt. If I could see, I'd  
Make from my life's repeating *if* a beating set of wings.

## U Is for Unicorn

by Ryan Scariano

Utterly lost in this world. Like a horn,  
Nothingness spirals out from my third eye.  
I've searched high and low,  
Covering all the most likely offices and  
Orifices: dirty stalls, stolen cars, many an empty bottle.  
Reality pulls, time speeds or slows, and yet,  
Not even once, have I found myself.

## Stormy Weather

by Barbara Poore

The garbage trucks finally arrive in our neighborhood at seven o'clock in the evening, taking away what remained in my refrigerator. Things that weren't exactly spoiled but had hung around too long— capers, Louisiana hot sauce, artichoke hearts, salmon I had been ignoring in the back of the freezer. The curbs are piled with plants chopped into fragments by the wind, hand-shaped spindles of oak twigs clutching leaves, the petticoats of a palm, tangles of ballmoss. A whole banana plant toppled over, its veins overloaded with water sucked from the storm.

So this is what nobody thinks about while waiting for the storm. Who gets to clean up the mess?

The windows are open—there is no power. The neighbors' generators roar to life, disturbing my sleep. I brush my teeth in the dark.

From my back porch I see the four sentinel trees still standing behind my fence line. Live oak, slash pine, live oak, slash pine in a row. I have been watching these trees for a decade while the corky stem passion vine climbed up to smother the crown of one of the pines. The other trees are awkward amputees, losing limbs every year to the taciturn men who invade in June with their hard hats and bucket trucks. They speak to the trees with their chainsaws. One oak limb, fat as a man, looms over my tropical corner, shading the ginger and bananas. If it had come down during the storm, it would have hit my bed. I often think about having it trimmed. That would be prudent. Maybe next year.

I count the number of wheelbarrows of debris I carried to the curb today. Twenty-three. There's a Facebook post from a city councilman extolling the city workers

who are helping in the clean up. Tomorrow I'll go to the free clinic to hand out canned green beans and plastic bottles of water in the dark to those who have less than me. A friend texts from Tennessee. "Is my house okay?" We were supposed to be hurricane buddies but at the last minute she called to say she was evacuating with another friend. Now she's on her way to Bulgaria.

I think about Bessie Smith singing *Stormy Weather*. "Life is bare, gloom and misery every-

where...I'm weary all the time." I try to sing it, but can't land the notes. Ah but this evening, the sky is unaccountably blue. Storm clouds are stacked up in the west toward the setting sun, but in my paradise there are mere wisps of cirrus. I crane my neck. Over the house drifts a cloud like the faint x-ray of a lung.

The cicadas begin to sing. They almost drown out the generators. The dog in the grass gives me a look—let's go in.

## A Holiday

by Kevin McLellan

I returned after decades to my first bed, slid my hand across the wallpaper and remembered that covered bridge on fire. Families assembled on their respective sides in the otherwise dark. The river's a mirror and an ash collector. Men discussed alternative roads. And boys, once impressed by the flames, returned to their bikes.

# The Man without Eyes

by Erric Emerson

sees nothing. Sees something  
askant—illuminating oculus  
source—a figure obscuring.  
Sees it vacillate—gaunt form  
starkness—tresses fuming  
forth. Sees only the stymying  
shadow of it—her—shrouding  
focal point. Mouth  
agape—utterance.  
Beg.

Coroner notes TOD.  
Presumes negligence—oversight.  
A malady—a man—and the girl.

To be.

Stheno animates—the man an  
effigy.  
The Harpy preys on ruptured  
stone.  
The Graeae pries eye and tooth.  
The Gorgon sees—the Scylla  
devours.  
The Coquette sits stitched and  
sewn—a smoke in a hand—his  
in the

other.

She murmurs thanks—obliged.  
Ears pricked—he listens.  
*Am I hearing this?*



## Ampersands, 1967

by Rita Ciresi

### Hot & Cold

If you're rich, your bathroom sink has a single spigot.

If you're poor, then it has two spigots. Cold water comes out of both.

### American & Italian

Your father's wallet is sometimes skinny and sometimes fat.

Inside it's stamped

VERA PELLE

MADE IN ITALY

As if the genuine leather, just like Da, can't make up its mind whether it's 'merigan or 'talian.

### Blank & Blank

Your mother's wallet always has more coins than bills inside it.

A white card in the plastic slot reads

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, CONTACT \_\_\_\_\_

IF LOST, PLEASE RETURN TO \_\_\_\_\_

Both lines are left blank, as if Ma & Da don't really exist.

### You & You

Upstairs there's a dresser with a triple mirror. When you bend the two side mirrors inward, you multiply yourself over and over.

You marvel at the dozens of you, the hundreds of you, until Ma smacks the back of your head.

One of youze to feed, she says, is enough.

## Song and Dance

by Christopher Davis

We stood, unseen, at the saffron floor's edge,  
witnessing the buff theophany. Earnestly,

I mumbled, my most moving moments  
usually take place in solitude, you, the

prince of your master of fine arts program  
again, so you sighed, touching my hand.

Some hot hit single, by Madonna, or  
Danielle Dax, featuring a fake sitar

solo, forced, no,  
seduced us on,

\*

laser beams, red, flickering, etching  
temporary rectangles—quick now,

disintegrating, gone, replaced—  
around our pogoing, kicking.

Beloved, we pretended wild  
peregrines, cosmopolitan,

visible, God willing,  
inside us, helped

our cages shatter,  
our veins scatter.

# Each Astonished Breath

by Gaylord Brewer

If you admit the day defeated  
before it's properly begun,  
might this unlock

a door to a room  
of silence, useful or not,  
a stillness of mind and hand

with every appearance of meaning?  
Anyway, your thoughts  
are your own problem,

your geography of unkind dreams.  
And the sudden rain  
outside the tall windows

surrounding where you lie,  
learning each astonished breath?  
The beat of storm lessens,

then unsatisfied gathers force again.  
Soon the whole show will cede  
to shapes in an open sky

you may interpret, or not,  
then give way wholly  
to bullying sunlight and birdsong

above a greening too bright  
to believe, too absurd  
to argue. Soon, thunder

having forgotten you, the beast  
will emerge from beneath  
the bed, shake herself, grin,

and growl quietly  
at something in the air  
only she perceives.

Then just you, and her,  
and the leftover world,  
and what happens next.

## Watch Tom Freeze to Death

by Tom Hunley

Tom C. Hunley leapt off the bridge  
between a bridge and the word *bridge*—  
sturdy enough to give the word meaning  
and the structure a name, not unlike  
the name Tom C. Hunley, itself  
a bridge between an aggregate of letters  
and a man of letters whose hair turned  
white and blew off—picture seed fuzz  
floating away from a weed—no, picture  
snow, now picture Tom C. Hunley  
leaping off an actual bridge  
only to land on snow and then  
the desire to die thaws as life begins  
to almost make sense again as he imagines  
almost connecting with other people  
the way some words almost rhyme—  
forever and moreover for example  
so he decides he wants to live forever  
and moreover it seems possible  
but then he sees blood leaping  
from his head onto the snow  
feels his knees going on strike  
screams *I can't get up*  
as the sky darkens and the ground  
hardens and his words echo  
off the ice, coins tossed  
to the ground from a bridge

## Ask about Our Daily Specials!

by Michelle Brooks

At the Molotov Cocktail, we serve  
Irish Car Bombs all day, and our  
napkins are rags soaked in kerosene.  
Disasters unspool on our high-definition  
televisions in surround sound—floods,  
riots, mass shootings. Take your pick.  
This Throwback Thursday, watch  
Watts explode into flames at the bar.  
Follow us on Facebook to discover  
more vintage disasters and other special  
offers. Leave a comment on our Instagram  
if you have a suggestion for a disaster  
you'd like to see. You can be anyone  
here—lady killer, femme fatale, innocent  
bystander. No one is a victim here. This  
place only has so much room, and we  
reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.

# Thirst

by Katherine Westbrook

The desert sits still tonight. Mary Magdalene stuffs cough drops in her pockets, picks up her pistols and drives out of the county. She sweeps her bones beneath the Iron Curtain and becomes the modern housewife my grandfather likes to stare at on channel 56. *That's how it's supposed to be*, he snaps his thick throat like a horse whip and grimaces. *Things used to be different around here.*

Between life and death are highways, strained red and seeping muscles peeled from prepubescent shoulders. Dragged over the desert and converted into pavement like an artificial Red Sea parted. I line the corners of my ribcage like a canyon's valley, fall from the ledges of my adolescence every night.

My mother stopped calling when she couldn't pay for my college tuition. I wait for her in the lungs of Sedona, like a rain that never falls. My

father works a nine to five of buying lies, America close your eyes like an upturned bible. Mouths will keep bleeding and begging.

Last year's receipts started sleeping on my couch cushions. The wind drips on the air like a steamed footprint. It's hot in the basin of the sun, a little leftover yolk still stuck in the eggshell. I wait, and I pray, and I still don't have running water in my apartment.

America shifts its body in the west and there are more houses on fire today. I lick the ashes and taste foreclosure carpeting my gums. Marrow in the real estate of the Earth's body.

My brother is stillborn beneath the dirt; I visit him on Tuesdays. He sleeps beside the baby I couldn't carry at 13, an embryo of my strangled wrists and my mother's absence when her husband came home. The lower cases of my body

cross themselves out at the headstone. I am a woman now, channel 56, with foreign hips and slanted stares to match.

No one has ever picked up the baby bones I lost. No god has ever lifted my curtain arms from empty wells. We are drying up, like the sky, like sand people. America, Flint needs something to drink.

Highways are always getting bigger, we all run to them now. It's hard to drive the Red Sea section around 8:30, esophagus still congested with morning traffic. One day, asphalt is going to swallow us whole.

The women on fifth street come to doorsteps in the hundred these days. Crumpled paper angels, but only on Christmas Eve. They approach with palms outstretched and full of yellow baby teeth. Their desert sky bodies throw bloody halos at my ankles. *Don't bite the hand that feeds you, no one ever forgets biting the hand that feeds you.*

Mary Magdalene cradles a baby girl in the soul of her shoes. Places her in a reed basket and pushes her down the river or drinks her blood and tosses the carcass into one of the empty recycling bins. America waits for the nothing-rain to fall, I'm still waiting for my mother to come home.

America dreams with three eyes closed. If it rains in Arizona, it'll be a miracle.

I will go running tonight, I will dress up in my American Dream and cross the Iron Curtain. My youth is still sitting somewhere in this desert of a country, shade to a saguaro and weight on the atmosphere's back. I drink from the depths of hell slowly. America, dine with me, get a stomachache from eating too fast. Let's take Nyquil and call the day night.

A girl in Michigan tells a boy no. Congressmen drink from the wells in Saudi Arabia. A dog in New Hampshire, searching for a tennis ball to chase, prods his nose into the street and is flattened on impact.

This is how it goes: A moody Mary Magdalene holds the hand of a man she loves. Her swollen lungs fill the seas so that no God can part them, no matter the crooked bible or the Jesuits from last week.

I lose touch of my linear plane. I say, hey, Zeus, what's with all this rain? Mary's man looks up from his crossword beside me. Pronounced Jesus, he smiles. And it hasn't rained since I got here.

The strings on the ends of our ropes get tighter, America scratches the sky in search of breath.





INTERVIEW  
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INTERVIEW

## An Interview with Jane Yolen

by Sydney Nichole

The Visiting Writers Forum ([www.visitingwritersforum.com](http://www.visitingwritersforum.com)) at Ringling College of Art and Design has been a way for young writers like myself to hear from seasoned writing professionals such as Pulitzer-winner Robert Olen Butler and Cuban-American poet Virgil Suarez, among others. Children's book superstar Jane Yolen kicked off the spring 2018 series, but before she took the main event, she joined me for a quick chat.

**Sydney Anderson:** Three hundred plus published books is an impressive number. What's your motivation to keep writing?

**Jane Yolen:** Well, possibly because at almost 80, I don't know anything else. I love to write. I love to find out what I'm thinking, and the way I can find out what I'm thinking is to write. I also come

from a family of writers. My father was a writer. My brother's a writer; my mother was a failed writer – she sold only one short story in her entire life. But she made crossword puzzles, and my great-grandfather, in a small shtetl – which is a Jewish community in the old country – had an inn, and he used to tell stories around the fire to people. So we are a long line of liars.

**SA:** Your picture book *Stranded Whale* deals with death. How important is it to incorporate serious topics into children's books?

**JY:** I do some lightweight stuff, and I do some funny stuff like *Commander Toad in Space* and *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?* But I also do serious things in picture book form. I've also written three Holocaust novels

– my latest comes out this year – so I write everything. It's the story that I want to tell that dictates in which sub-genre it's going to be and how dark it's going to be; how light it's going to be. If I start writing something in bouncing rhyme, I'm sure not going to make it into a Holocaust novel. So there are limits to the number of changes you can make in something. But when I'm writing, in the beginning, I'm not always sure what it's going to be. Sometimes I am, but most of the time I try to get my ideas down and see where they take me.

**SA: A few of your books have made it onto banned books lists. What advice do you have for writers who want to write for a younger audience, but fear they may be banned?**

**JY:** If it's banned, you'll sell more copies. You'll get a lot of press, and people will want to see what they're missing. But I think if there's a serious issue that you want to write about, you write about it. If you want to write about it because you think it's going to make money? That's a bad reason. You want to write with your heart. Not with your pocketbook.

**SA: How has today's current climate affected your writing?**

**JY:** I've been thinking about writing

a Women's March picture book, though I have a friend who's doing it, so I probably won't. But I've been certainly writing poems about that. I think that if you look at my body of work, you'll find a lot of feminist stuff. In fact, a book of mine that just came out last week is about the women and girls in the Hebrew Bible, a feminist take on their stories. It liberates them out of the men's stories and lets them live on their own.

**SA: So we can expect to see more of that in your work?**

**JY:** Yes, absolutely.

**SA: I'm writing a musical about the Black Lives Matter movement. It's going to be about a black girl who is adopted—both her parents are white and her dad is a cop and how she perceives race in today's history.**

**JY:** Interesting, good take. I wrote a musical – two musicals for kids. One was performed in Boston and performed again in Massachusetts. And the other one was performed in Northampton, Massachusetts, and it is that kind of cooperative venture that picture books are, too.

**SA: How are picture books cooperative?**

**JY:** Your first cooperation is not

only between an author and his or her words. Instead of “how is that story?” you say to the story, “Come on, cooperate with me.” But then you’re cooperating with an editor, then you’re cooperating with the illustrator. Then you’re cooperating with a copy editor. You’re cooperating with all the promotion people. Ten who want to sell your book to teachers and librarians who want to know what you really meant in your book. Most arts are cooperative – even though we think of ourselves as this lone wolf sitting there day in and day out putting down these magnificent words on the page. But in the end—like the musical—it’s very cooperative.

**SA: I’m also working with a documentary group as the writer. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the documentary film *Thirteenth*, about mass incarceration in the U.S. A local elementary school showed it to a bunch of fifth graders and the students wrote spoken word poetry based off what they saw. Our goal is to capture both how they felt about the subject matter and their experience with writing poetry.**

**JY:** So where do you want to go? Do you want to do all these things or do you want to narrow it and go after one?

**SA:** I kind of like everything, but

**right now I’m more focused on screenwriting. I’m taking a lot of screenwriting classes because I like film and television, but I also want to write a musical and I like books. I’m a little all over the place.**

**JY:** Don’t think of it as being all over the place. Think of it as being easily bored, so you want to follow your passion and never narrow yourself because you don’t know right now what you are capable of. I still don’t know now what I can’t do. I want to be able to write anything I want. Maybe excluding porn. Who knew 40 years ago that I could write graphic novels – which I have. Who knew 50 years ago that I could write fiction? I thought I was a nonfiction writer and a picture book writer and suddenly, I became a fiction writer as well. Who knew I could write musicals? Who knew I could write movie scripts? All of those things I did because I didn’t tell myself I couldn’t. If somebody says, “Can you do this?” my answer is always, “Yes, I can.” Maybe I can’t, but I have to find that out for myself. Don’t narrow yourself before you know what you can’t do. Let every moment be a can-do instead of a can’t-do.





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## Biographies

**CL Bledsoe** is the author, most recently, of the poetry collections *Trashcans in Love* and *King of Loneliness* and the novel *The Funny Thing About...* He lives in northern Virginia with his daughter and blogs with Michael Gushue at <http://medium.com/@howtoeven>.

**Gaylord Brewer** is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he founded and for more than 20 years edited the journal *Poems & Plays*. His most recent books are the cookbook-memoir *The Poet's Guide to Food, Drink, & Desire* (Stephen F. Austin, 2015) and a 10<sup>th</sup> collection of poetry, *The Feral Condition* (Negative Capability, 2018).

**Michelle Brooks** has published a collection of poetry, *Make Yourself Small* (Backwater Press), and a novella, *Dead Girl, Live Boy* (Storylandia Press). Her poetry collection, *Flamethrower*, will be published by Latte Press in 2019.

A native Texan, she has spent much of her adult life in Detroit.

**Laton Carter's** *Leaving* (University of Chicago) received the Oregon Book Award. Previous work has appeared in *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Posit*, *Profane*, and *Western Humanities Review*.

**Dorothy Chan** is the author of *Revenge of the Asian Women* (Diode Editions, Forthcoming March 2019), *Attack of the Fifty-Foot Centerfold* (Spork Press, 2018), and the chapbook *Chinatown Sonnets* (New Delta Review, 2017). She is the editor of *The Southeast Review*. Visit her website at [dorothy-poetry.com](http://dorothy-poetry.com)

**Rita Ciresi** is author of the novels *Bring Back My Body to Me*, *Pink Slip*, *Blue Italian*, and *Remind Me Again Why I Married You*, and three award-winning story collections, *Second Wife*, *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, and *Mother Rocket*.

She is professor of English at the University of South Florida, a faculty mentor for the Bay Path University MFA program in creative nonfiction, and fiction editor of *2 Bridges Review*.

**Christopher Davis** is the author of three collections of poetry: *The Tyrant of the Past and the Slave of the Future*, *The Patriot*, and *A History of the Only War*. He is a professor of creative writing at UNC Charlotte.

**Jim Daniels'** recent poetry books include *Rowing Inland* and *Street Calligraphy*, 2017, and *The Middle Ages*, 2018. He is the author of five collections of fiction, four produced screenplays, and has edited five anthologies, including *Challenges to the Dream: The Best of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards*. His next book of short fiction, *The Perp Walk*, will be published by Michigan State University press in 2019.

**Sioned Ellis** is a young writer whose creative work is strongly influenced by her academic interest in psychology. She is particularly concerned with mental health and child development, often writing poetry, short fiction or music with these subjects in mind.

**Erric Emerson** is a poet residing in South Philly, PA. He is a founding

member of *Duende* literary journal for which he also served as poetry editor for the inaugural issue. He currently guest edits *Aji* literary journal. Erric is a graduate of Goddard College's Bachelor of Fine Arts Creative Writing program. His first collection *Counting Days* was published in December 2017. His published work and book can be found at [erricemersonpoems.com](http://erricemersonpoems.com) He has published 40+ poems in 20+ magazines including *TL;DR*, *Crab Fat*, *The Black Napkin*, *The Disconnect*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, *Beautiful Losers*, *Prairie Margins*, *Neon*, *The Hungry Chimera*, *Control*, *Mead: Literature & Libations*, *Angry Old Man*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Gingerbread House*, *Willawaw*, and *Visitant*.

**Sarah Gerard** is the author of the essay collection *Sunshine State*, a *New York Times* critics' choice, the novel *Binary Star*, a finalist for the Los Angeles Times first fiction prize, and two chapbooks. Her short stories, essays, interviews, and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Granta*, *The Baffler*, and *McSweeney's*. She's the New College of Florida 2018 - 2019 Writer-in-Residence.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, U.S. resident. Recently published in the *Homestead Review*, *Poetry East* and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in *Harpur Palate*,

*The Hawaii Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

**Tom Hunley** was a 2002-2003 Kingsbury Fellow at Florida State University. He is now a professor of English/Creative Writing at Western Kentucky University. His latest collection is *HERE LIES* (Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2018).

**Amy Lemmon** is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *The Miracles* (C&R Press, 2019). She is Professor and Chairperson of English and Communication Studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and co-editor (with Sarah Freligh) of *The CDC Poetry Project*.

**Joe Manus** is a lifelong resident of the South. He was educated in the public schools of rural Georgia, receiving his high school diploma in 1992. Joe is an award-winning furniture designer and builder. He believes in living the best and worst of the human experience and writing about it.

**Colleen Mayo's** writing has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Sun Magazine*, *The Rumpus*, and others. She was a 2017 winner of the FSU Creative Writing Spotlight Award for Nonfiction. Born in Texas, Colleen now lives in Tallahassee where she recently

graduated with her MFA in Fiction at Florida State University.

**Mike McHone's** work has previously appeared in *The Onion*, *The AV Club*, *Playboy*, *The Detroit News*, *Neo-Opis Science Fiction*, and numerous independent and online publications. He lives in Detroit with his wife, two cats, a nephew, and a beta fish named Trevor.

**Kevin McLellan** is the author of *Ornitheology* (The Word Works, forthcoming 2018), *Hemispheres* (Fact-Simile Editions, forthcoming 2018), *[box]* (Letter [r] Press, 2016), *Tributary* (Barrow Street, 2015), and *Round Trip* (Seven Kitchens, 2010). He won the 2015 Third Coast Poetry Prize and Gival Press' 2016 Oscar Wilde Award, and his poems appear in numerous literary journals. Kevin lives in Cambridge, MA.

**Gloria Muñoz** is a Colombian-American writer and translator. Her writing has appeared in *Lumina*, *The Rumpus*, *Best New Poets*, *Acentos Review*, *Forage Poetry*, *Sweet*, *YES Poetry*, *Juke Joint*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *Entropy*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the chapbook *Your Biome Has Found You*. Gloria teaches at Eckerd College and she is a co-founder of Pitch Her Productions, an organization dedicated to women in film.

**Sydney Nichole** was born in Columbus, Ohio where she originally went to school for engineering. Instead of doing her engineering homework she found herself writing stories. Switching paths, she found herself at *Ringling College of Art + Design* for Creative Writing focusing on screenwriting. In her free time, she likes to do puzzles and pretend that she's a late-night TV Show host.

**Barbara Poore** is a research geographer specializing in environmental issues, natural hazards, and coastal change. She has published in leading academic journals, but *Stormy Weather* will be her first personal essay in print.

**Brad Rose** was born and raised in Los Angeles and lives in Boston. He is the author of a collection of poetry and flash fiction, *Pink X-Ray* (Big Table Publishing. [pinkx-ray.com](http://pinkx-ray.com) and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)). His two new books of poems, *Momentary Turbulence* and *WordinEdgeWise*, are forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press. Recent examples of his work can be read at *The American Journal of Poetry* ([theamericanjournalofpoetry.com/v5-rose.html](http://theamericanjournalofpoetry.com/v5-rose.html)). Brad's website is [bradrosepoetry.com](http://bradrosepoetry.com). Selected readings can be heard at [soundcloud.com/bradrose1](http://soundcloud.com/bradrose1).

**Mary Ann Samyn** is the author

of six collections of poetry, most recently *Air, Light, Dust, Shadow, Distance*, winner of the 2012 42 Miles Press Prize. She is Professor of English in the MFA program at West Virginia University.

**Ryan Scariano's** chapbook, *Smithereens*, was published by Imperfect Press. Some of his recent poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Phantom Drift*, *Basalt*, *Heart of the Rat: An Anthology*, *Verde Que Te Quiero Verde: Poems After Federico Garcia Lorca*, and *Bright Bones: Contemporary Montana Writing*. He has an MFA from Eastern Washington University and teaches at Eastern Oregon University. More at [ryanscariano.com](http://ryanscariano.com).

**JD Scott** is most recently the winner of the 2018 Madeleine P. Plonsker Emerging Writer's Residency Prize, selected by Lidia Yuknavitch, which will result in a debut short story collection published by &NOW Books. Recent and forthcoming publications include *Best American Experimental Writing*, *Best New Poets*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Salt Hill*, *Sonora Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. Recent accolades include being awarded a 2018 Lambda Emerging LGBTQ Voices fellowship, attending the Poetry Foundation's inaugural Poetry Incubator, and being awarded

residencies at the Millay Colony and the Edward F. Albee Foundation. They are also the author of two poetry chapbooks. More about JD can be found at [jdscott.com](http://jdscott.com).

**William Todd Seabrook** received his MFA from the University of Colorado, and his PhD from Florida State University. He is the author of four prose chapbooks, and his work has appeared in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Phoebe*, *The Volta*, *Tin House*, *Mid-American Review*, *PANK*, *CutBank*, and *Quiddity* among others. He is the editor of *Cupboard Pamphlet*, a prose chapbook press.

**Hugh Behm-Steinberg's** prose can be found in *Gravel*, *Sand*, *Grimoire*, *Joyland*, *Vestal Review*, *Western Humanities Review* and *Pank*. His short story "Taylor Swift" won the 2015 Barthelme Prize from Gulf Coast. He is chief steward for the adjunct faculty union at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, where for 10 years he edited the journal *Eleven Eleven*.

**Avanti Tulpule** is a high school senior. She would like to thank her family and friends for their support.

**Elisabeth von Uhl** has earned an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. She has earned scholarships to the Prague Summer Writer's Conference and the Postgraduate Writer's Conference. Her work has

been published in *Lunch Ticket*, *The Cortland Review*, *Cream City Review*, and other journals. Her poetry has also been anthologized in *Two-Countries: US Daughters and Sons of Immigrant Parents* (Red Hen Press, 2017). Her chapbook, *Ocean Sea*, has been published by Finishing Line Press.

**Obi Calvin Umeozor** received his BA in English from the University of Port Hartcourt, Nigeria, and taught English literature before moving to the States in 2015, where he obtained an MFA in Creative Writing from Florida State University. His work has appeared and is forthcoming in the *New Orleans Review*, *adda*, and others. He was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize in 2018.

**Mat Wenzel** is a PhD student in Poetry. He was a 2015 Lambda Literary Fellow. His work has appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, *Glitterwolf Magazine*, *Penumbra*, *Guide to Kulchur Creative Journal*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Off the Rocks Anthology*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, and *Carve Magazine*. He earned an MEd from Lesley University and an MFA from Ashland University. He currently has 36 stamps in his National Parks passport.

**Katherine Westbrook** is a literary artist currently studying creative

writing in her senior year at the Mississippi School of the Arts. She is attending the University of Iowa for a degree in English & Creative Writing and History in the fall of next year. She would like to write professionally in her future.

children's books, fantasy, and science fiction, including *Owl Moon*, *The Devil's Arithmetic*, and *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?* She is also a poet, a teacher of writing and literature, and a reviewer of children's literature.

**Jane Yolen** is an author of

