



# SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES

Issue 8 Shift: A Journal of Literary Oddities

Issue 8





# SHIFT

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Dear Fellow Oddlings,

When we tallied the submissions that *Shift* received for this issue, there was a sense of disbelief, and perhaps a touch of terror, among all of us on the Editorial Board. This year, which marks *Shift's* 8th issue, produced a record-breaking slush pile: more than 800 works of prose, poetry, and art, a number both daunting and awe-inspiring.

The Editorial Board managed to power through this tower of words and images and emerge on the other side with our sanity (mostly) intact. That would not have been the case if the Ringling College of Art and Design community had not come together. Thanks to some wise and generous first readers, the Editorial Board was able to give each piece the time, care, and attention it deserved during a busy semester. Although not on the masthead, Professor Jeff Grieneisen's Poetry Workshop also donated a class to lend us a much needed hand (or, rather, eyeballs).

*Shift* has always valued the art of human connection, so it is not surprising that we have carried that community theme into our current issue. We read blindly and spent hours interrogating why certain submissions found their way into our hearts. Later, as we unmasked bios and marveled at our spreadsheets, we were thrilled to discover that our contributors came from across the United States and around the world, from Alabama to Zimbabwe. As a literary journal run by the students and faculty of Ringling College, we want to make sure that *Shift* reflects the global creative community, not just the one we foster here in Sarasota, Florida.

Needless to say, we could accept only a small percentage of our submissions. Yet so many words and images will stay with us, lingering in the back of our minds. Dear readers, we hope that you, like us, will find yourself roused, moved, delighted, or challenged when you dip into these pages.

Oddly yours,  
*Shift* Editorial Board 2026



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# Chemical Offering

**J.D. Dresner**

Scratch this poem.

Bring it to your nose.

Inhale . . . .

And again . . . .

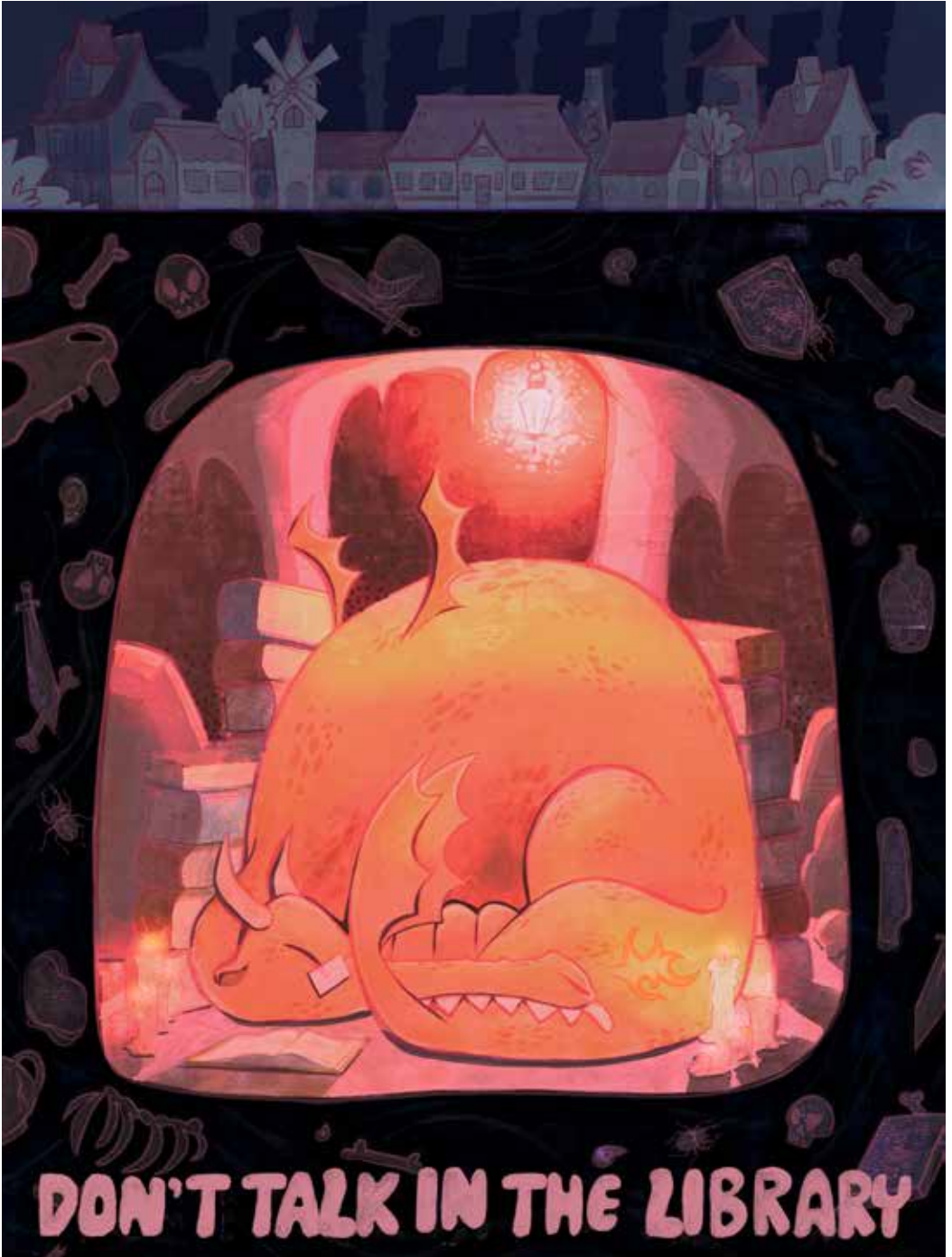
Absorb the bountiful nostalgia  
budding from the page, the spine, the ink.

Inhale. Fresh, new book.  
You smell ethylene-vinyl acetate  
mixed with hydrogen peroxide.

How addictive,  
that chemical offering,  
firing axons  
in a gas-station flashback  
of Magic-Marker memory.

Inhale. Weathered, old book.  
Breathe in the mature, musty furfural and toluene.  
Ages of almond odors,  
slow decomposition.  
Taste grass.  
Taste vanilla, moss.

Inhale. The literary world has a term  
for people like you.  
They're called  
Book Sniffers.



***Don't Wake the Sleeping Dragon***  
Lindsay Lippincott

# *The Fountain Pen*

**Mathias Dubilier**

Dear Paul,

I can't help the fame. But when it comes at the cost of my relationship to Lucas, then I wish it all undone.

You would have known how to access him. After all, he's from your loins. You would have found his wavelength. He never lets me forget that I am his "other" dad.

God, I miss you. Fifth anniversary coming up. Five years of you dead and yet still getting these letters from me.

Yesterday, a reporter from one of the magazines asked me what it felt like to be publishing my 25th novel. I asked him what it felt like to put on his pants in the morning. I know, I know: I shouldn't have been so snarky. I hear your admonishment. But they don't get it. It's just work. We're all working. How many loaves, the baker? How many bridges, the engineer? We wake up. We go to work.

This being human among humans—it takes constant effort. It's exhausting. You always were the perfect mixture of accepting me as I am and encouraging me. I am not as good a human without you.

As I said, the fifth anniversary is coming up. I know, I know. You want me honoring your birthday rather than etching the departure deeper and deeper into my psyche. But I'm sorry, that's just what you did to me.

Etched yourself into me.

I love running my fingers over my body and feeling where you used to love leaving welts. I've tried to do it myself. It's not the same. It's not by your hand. It's not accompanied by your whispers.

The beauty of forever is how it transcends the permanence of death. Forever shows how laughable death is when it comes to love.

Here I am, several graphs in, and I haven't yet said it.

I love you forever.

Back to Lucas. He is a mystery to me. I try. I promise I try. It's not just the asexuality. That I could accept—with effort, but I could begin to imagine it—but what I fear is that he is aromantic.

He is 15 and never has expressed any interest in either sex. Is that normal? I didn't, until I met you, but I know I am not normal. I fear he is becoming me.

Funny, I wish that what I was dealing with was trans. Of all the modern variations, I can relate to that one most. What bothers me these days is—get this—that in some circles one is chided for being “merely” gay. Or even using that word anymore.

I don’t understand this world, Paul. You would have. And you would have been my translator. You always helped me see.

Goodnight, my Love,

-Max

~~~

Dear Paul,

I love you forever.

I started to talk about Lucas in my last letter, but I didn’t continue. Sorry, but when I write to you, I get so distracted. I enjoy how our conversations meander. Weave. Rorschach ink blots that I keep thinking about long after I’m back to my daily chores.

So his 15th birthday is coming up, and once again, I am at a loss for what to get him. His only interest is your piano. Well, to me it’s yours. To Lucas, it’s just a mechanical slave that he keeps trying to bend to his idea of how it should sound. You would be so amazed at how masterful he has become.

You will remember that last year I got him the complete LP set of his great-grandmother’s work. When I think now of how much I am at a loss about what to get him, I wonder if that will be the last good present I will ever be able to give Lucas. God, I hope he and I find each other someday.

Goodnight, my Love,

-Max

~~~

Dear Paul,

I love you forever.

I have decided on a fountain pen.

Now hear me out: Actually, I got nothing. It’s just a gut feeling that he might like one. I know, I know, I am imposing my German upbringing on him. It is true, but what’s a more personal gift to give? It was with a fountain pen that I found my salvation. The ability to take what I was feeling inside and put it on paper was . . . like I said, my salvation.

I know, I know, they have their devices, but it’s just not the same. He’ll understand when he sees that ink coming out wet and instantly drying on the page as he loops letter to letter, sentence to sentence, emotion to words.

Then he'll see.

Goodnight, my Love,

-Max

~~~

Dear Paul,

He could have done it in any number of ways. But he deliberately tried to be hurtful.

Well, tried anyway. Actually, I had to keep myself from laughing. You'll love this.

Granted, it was a bad day. No, it was a bad week. Three days before his birthday, a magazine wanted to come to the house and do a shoot and an interview. They wanted a shot of me and Lucas, but he refused. He stormed out of the house, trying to embarrass me. I was able to shrug it off in the moment. Later, I typed a three-page letter to him and told him that whenever given the choice between righteousness and love, he should choose love.

To which he has, of course, not responded, just as he has never responded to any of my letters.

Anyway, by the time his birthday rolled around, we had already spent three days in silence around each other. A celebration felt kind of forced, but I put on (as we say in Germany) a good face to a bad game. I was determined to make a jolly birthday breakfast.

To keep a long story short, he opened the box and never even took out the pen. Didn't touch it.

When I asked him if he didn't like it, he said, "I don't need your Freudian shit." And he stood up and left.

Oh God, Paul, I nearly burst out into laughter right there. Thank God, I kept it together.

A fountain pen is Freudian shit? What has gotten into this generation?

Maybe the pen is trans! Or wait, didn't I buy a cis-gendered pen?

Paul, I'm laughing, but in all honesty, I'm terrified. I really don't understand, and I need you so badly to explain all this to me. I can't ask Lucas. He already interprets any admission of ignorance by me as just a beard for arrogance. I can't seem to tell him that I am genuinely lost. All I was trying to do was find a gift that had meaning for me and I was hoping could become meaningful for him. How do I make this right?

Goodnight, my Love. I miss you.

-Max

~~~

Dear Paul,

I meant to tell him. You know that. How many times had I already promised you that I would tell him about you? About us?

Did I promise to do it on his 15th birthday? I don't remember what I had for lunch yesterday, much less what I may have promised three years ago.

Anyway, instead of telling him, every birthday I just find some new failed present. Remember that fountain pen?

You should see him now, Paul, at 18. He is handsome and so talented, though both are qualities one is no longer allowed to praise.

Anyway, I've always meant to tell him.

In early photos, when he would ask who that was, I would say Paul, and he didn't ask any more questions, so maybe some part of me always thought that he kind of guessed.

And if he had wanted to know more, he would have asked.

I never would have guessed that he didn't know at all. How could he not have even suspected? And now I'm not just talking about you and me. I'm talking about Lucas never even knowing I was gay.

Paul! How is that possible? Who have I been to him? Some opaque cutout? Some nebulous vapor? How could he not know that I am gay? As you know, I don't flaunt, but I don't hide.

Is it possible, oh God, that our boy is "neurodivergent," as we now say?

He is, yes, still single. At 18. Still single. I fear for him, Paul. I do.

Anyway, I'm getting off topic.

He found out.

I was gone for a weekend at a book fair in the city, and during that time, he snooped around and found my letters to you.

"Why didn't you ever tell me that you're gay? You were married to Paul? Why didn't you ever say, 'That's Paul, the husband to whom I am a widow?' Why have you lied to me all my life?"

Lied to him? My Love, he says I lied to him. All his life, he refused to see me for who I am, and he says that I am the one who has committed a sin?

I was livid. I admit: I overreacted.

First I accused him of being a snoop. I said that at 18, he should be old enough to control himself. And then I just went on a rant. I raved. I accused him of being a thief. I said he had stolen from me by reading these letters. I asked how it felt to steal emotions from me.

I was yelling at him. It was bad, Paul. I'm sorry. I promise I will tell Lucas I am sorry.

Goodnight, my Love,

-Max

~~~

Dear Paul,

I keep wondering if this will be my last letter to you. They say it's a matter of days now.

I'm so sorry Lucas has to see me like this. I know how much he suffered from watching you slip away, one neuron at a time.

It's these letters that are keeping me alive. I'm so excited I get to write you this one.

He did it, Paul. He did it.

The performance was flawless. They wheeled me in there in a chair. The applause, Paul. You should have heard it. It went on and on, and in the paper this morning, it said the applause was rare in intensity and length. And our Lucas, oh dear Paul, kept standing there. Bowing. Over and over. So handsome, our Lucas. You would have been so proud.

And then he found a microphone, and he said something that made me cry. He said he wanted to thank his father, and his eyes found mine in the first row.

And then he said, "My father, Paul."

The knife slid in while he held my gaze. He knew what he was doing.

It was supposed to be Brutus's dagger, and it was, Paul. It cut deeply and will leave a scar for the rest of my shortened life.

But as I was lying in bed last night, equipment beeping away, I saw it from a different perspective. What if the hardest thing to do is to admit to me that I'm not enough for him? And that he misses you? And that, possibly, he might have loved you more than me? Was his dedication to you a way of coming out of that closet? Admitting something he can't say to my face?

Now I'm glad for that scar. That needed to happen.

Then he added, "My father, Paul, made me fall in love with the piano."

Oh, Paul, I remember him sitting on your knee and, in later years, the two of you, endless hours and tunes I came to know by heart.

When I hugged him later, I was crying. I thanked him, my Love. For us both.

Goodnight forever, my Love,

Max

~~~

Dear Dad,

I'm writing you with a pen that Max gave me years ago and I have never used.

I've started this letter a dozen times already, and who knows if this one will finally say what I want to say. *Need to say.*

There is so much.

Too much.

Where to start?

What to include?

But we have time, right? Maybe I don't need to get to all of it in this letter. There'll be others.

First: I miss you. I love you. I am mad at you that you left. I know it is not a nice thing to say, but I'm mad that you allowed that disease to rob everything from you, trait by trait, ability by ability, until you were nothing but a vegetable to me. You didn't die. You withered. And you made me watch you wither.

There! I said it.

I'm sorry.

I love you.

And while I'm on "sorry," I'm sorry I snooped. It was years ago, but I snooped and found Max's letters to you. And yours to him when you were still here.

I know I shouldn't have, but I did, and I'm glad I did. It was so helpful to me to see how you loved. I mean the sheer mechanics of it! How you interacted with Max. The ways in which you cared and how you expressed that care.

You taught me.

You taught me how to accept Max and sometimes even show him that I care about him, but more importantly, you taught me how to love music.

In those early days, with me on your lap, you taught me the fun of it. Chopsticks. You even made the etudes fun.

But it wasn't until I read your letters to Max that I understand how to love. How to show care.

That's when my relationship to the piano changed. I had enough of playing it. I started to listen to it. Feel its vibrations. Care for it. Polish it. Every key individually!

I performed today. In Carnegie Hall, can you imagine! Thank you for boosting me to get there. Today, I played for you. Of course Fanny's #1, but the way I played it, I wasn't playing. I was imagining how you might love. I was loving. You. The piece. Even Max. It was so beautiful.

The hardest part about losing one parent is that you are expected to have everything with the other. I don't want everything with Max. He can't give it, and I don't feel like I need to teach him. I miss you, Dad.

I love you. In whole new ways.

Yours,

Lucas



## **Query on Unanswered Correspondence**

JC Alfier

## ***Gentleness***

### **Solar Branka**

I set out  
to heal you with  
my tenderness  
as much as  
you heal me  
with yours

our auras intertwined  
whisper on heat-shaped satin  
colliding, reacting  
healing words  
healing touch  
the tangible me  
seeks the tangible you

I set out  
to heal you with  
my tenderness  
as much as  
you heal me  
with yours

## *Lunar Surgery*

**David Anson Lee**

Last night the moon cut me open  
with a scalpel of silver light.

Not in anger:  
in quiet curiosity.

She wanted to see  
what a human heart looks like  
after a year of unspoken things.

I lay on the roof,  
a patient too shy to name  
the ache beneath my ribs.

When she peeled me open,  
softly,  
like turning a page  
she feared might crumble,  
she found not ventricles  
but attic rooms:

dusty boxes labeled  
**DON'T TOUCH,**

old birds sleeping  
with their heads tucked  
under worn wings,  
and a jar of rainwater  
I've been saving  
for a feeling I can't yet name.

The moon nodded.  
Sutures of wind  
closed me.

She left nothing but a whisper:  
*Clean the rooms  
before they collapse.*

I woke with a scar  
shaped like a crescent,  
a reminder  
that even the sky  
practices medicine  
when we refuse  
to name our wounds.



# **The Silent Farewell: The Loss of a Dream**

## **Story Chokurongerwa**

The physics laboratory at Makumbi High was a place of beautiful compromise. The Bunsen burners were perpetually out of order, powered by bottled gas that was bought only when the school fees trickled in. The only working thermometer was a relic, its mercury column smudged where it had once been dropped. Yet, for Mr. Shava, the lab was a sanctuary—the only room in the school where the laws of the universe were immutable, even if the laws of the country were not.

And within that sanctuary, there was Kudzanai.

Kudzanai, whose name means “worship” or “praise,” was, in Mr. Shava's estimation, the nearest thing to pure genius he had ever come across in his 20 years of teaching. He wasn't just smart; he possessed an intuitive, metallic understanding of how things worked.

While the other O-Level students struggled to grasp the difference between velocity and acceleration, Kudzanai was sketching schematics for a low-cost gravity pump to pull water from the well during dry spells.

His dream was explicit, unwavering, and visible on the worn cover of his exercise book: *Aeronautical Engineering, University of Pretoria*. Mr. Shava saw it not just as a dream, but as a promise—a rare, tangible piece of hope that could break the cycle of poverty and despair gripping their high-density township of Hatcliffe.

The anchor event was the Provincial Science Fair. With no budget, Kudzanai and Mr. Shava spent weeks scavenging for parts. They found old car batteries, stripped copper wire from abandoned shacks, and salvaged bicycle parts. Kudzanai's entry was a functional, self-regulating solar tracker, designed to maximize the output of a single cracked photovoltaic panel.

The tracker didn't just win the top prize; it stunned the panel of judges from Harare.

"The ingenuity!" one judge exclaimed, adjusting his glasses. "Using a simple solenoid coil and the heat differential to adjust the axis! It's elegant. It's affordable. The boy must have a scholarship."

The word *scholarship* hung in the dusty air of the auditorium, shimmering like a mirage. Kudzanai stood next to his creation—a boy of 17 whose threadbare shirt and shy, brilliant eyes were suddenly the focus of all

local ambition. Mr. Shava felt a triumphant, almost unbearable sense of pride. This was it: the ticket out. The dream was no longer an aspiration; it was a certainty, sealed by the judge's decree.

The decline was not sudden but gradual, like a battery slowly running flat. Kudzanai started missing school, not for one day, but two, then three. When he returned, he was paler, slower. The intense focus that had defined him was replaced by a kind of weary resignation.

"You were ill, Kudzanai?" Mr. Shava asked after the third prolonged absence, trying to keep his voice neutral and professional.

"It is the cough, Sir," Kudzanai mumbled, turning his head away. "And the long trips. I am better now."

Mr. Shava knew that cough. It was the dry, rattling sound of too many close bodies, too much shared, unventilated air. It was the sound of endemic illness in a community where antiretroviral drugs were expensive and clean water was a luxury.

But the "long trips" were the real thief.

Kudzanai's father, an honest man who worked in construction, had been injured months ago. The small piece-jobs Kudzanai was finding—crossing the border into Mozambique to carry small goods or hauling bricks at the local market—were now the family's only income. The boy who needed to be calculating torque and resistance was instead calculating bus fare and the price of maize meal.

"Kudzanai," Mr. Shava insisted one afternoon, catching him before he left, "your final exams begin in six weeks. The scholarship contacts are waiting. You cannot afford to miss another lesson. I will stay late; we will review the optics."

Kudzanai did not meet his eyes. He slowly pulled out a worn textbook, the cover of which had Kudzanai's engineering dream scribbled on it. He pushed the book across the desk. It was heavy with the weight of unread pages.

"Sir," his voice was barely audible, yet carried the finality of a court judgment. "I cannot come back. Not now. My mother is worse. I must go to Musina. I must bring money for the medicine. The sun tracker . . ." He stopped, rubbing his chest. "It does not feed a family, Sir."

Mr. Shava looked at the textbook. He looked at the inscription, *Aeronautical Engineering*. The weight of the world, which Kudzanai had tried to defy with logic and ingenuity, had simply pressed down on his chest until he could no longer breathe.

"The scholarship," Mr. Shava whispered, feeling a sudden, cold panic. "I told them you were the best. That you were ready to write your papers. We can ask for a deferment. We can try to find aid, temporary help . . ."

Kudzanai shook his head, a gesture of profound, adult wisdom. "There is no temporary help, Sir. Only now. My mother is now."

He picked up the canvas bag. This was the moment of The Silent Farewell. There were no tears, no dramatic declarations. It was an acknowledgment of defeat delivered with the quiet dignity of a person who knew the arithmetic of survival better than the arithmetic of the stars. He did not say goodbye to his classmates. He simply walked out of the classroom, turned the corner, and was gone.

The loss was not officially recorded. Kudzanai was not deceased; he had not migrated to an overseas university. He had merely been consumed by the economics of his own survival. On the school register, Mr. Shava quietly marked him as "Withdrawn—Family Circumstances."

The grief was, therefore, not allowed. You could not mourn the loss of a student to the pervasive, grinding machinery of national *nhamo* (trouble). To grieve Kudzanai's absence was to protest the very condition of life for 80% of the community—a condition that everyone accepted as inevitable.

But Mr. Shava mourned anyway. He mourned the death of the engineer. He went to the cupboard where the science-fair projects were stored. Kudzanai's solar tracker was there, dusty, but still elegant. Mr. Shava stared at the mechanism that Kudzanai had built, designed to capture the maximum power from the sun.

The irony was brutal: Kudzanai had mastered the science of energy capture only to have his own energy entirely drained by the demands of the immediate. Mr. Shava locked the cupboard. He couldn't bring himself to show the tracker to the next class, not yet. It felt too much like showing a promising seedling that had been crushed by a passing truck. The lesson he was forced to internalize was that in this place, brilliance was fragile and the most profound losses are the ones you cannot name or openly bury. They are the futures that simply vanish into the daily grind.

That year, Mr. Shava taught with a heaviness that had not been there before. When he drew circuit diagrams on the board, he would look at the empty space where Kudzanai used to sit—the brightest student who had become a casualty not of a war or an accident, but of a broken dream, silently surrendered to the desperate needs of his family. The dream, unlike the Bunsen burner, could not be fixed with spare parts. It was simply gone.



**Roses**

Shannon McGuire

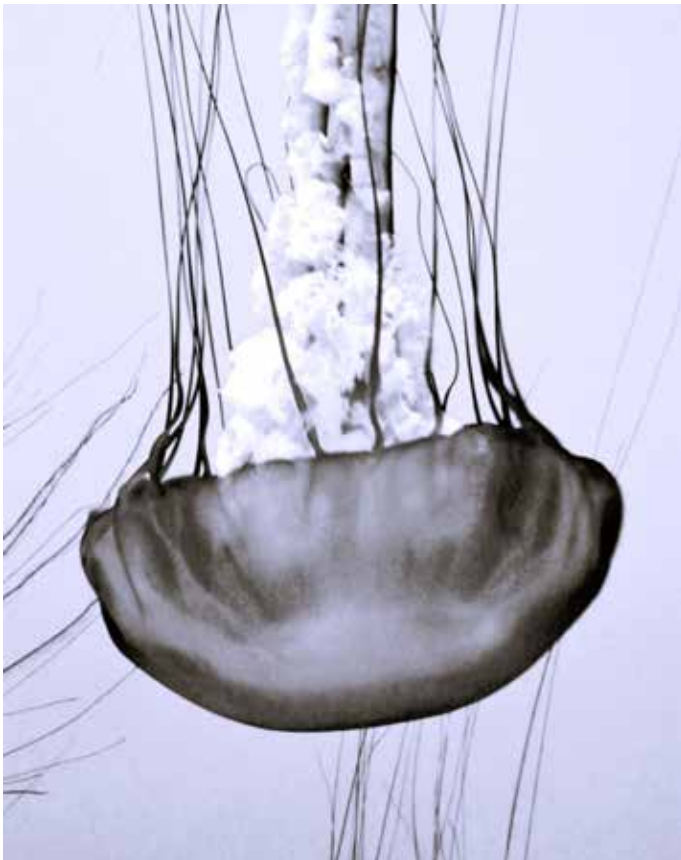
## *The Years of Elegies*

### **Sean Thomas Dougherty**

Add up as the dead.  
I said I wanted my end  
to be of my own making,  
the way my friend Stan,  
whose nickname  
was Slumpie, took a rope  
& tied it to his neck,  
or Kelly who took a jar  
of pills, to be an elegy  
at the edge of one's breath.  
& how I carried their names  
in my mouth for so long,  
barely able to speak of them,  
until one day I wrote down  
the way Kelly tossed her hair  
by moving her head,  
never with her hand,  
& the way her laughter  
was like eating bread.  
Or how Stan would suck  
a blunt & hold the smoke  
in his cheeks puffed out  
like Dizzy Gillespie  
& make a kind of mutter  
like a trumpet playing jazz.

Now absence & shadows  
at the edges of the rooms,  
they return when the light  
is at a certain slant,  
or the wind a scent  
of spring, or the way  
the lake will shimmer

from the moon,  
the three of us—younger  
than my oldest child is now,  
drinking on a tenement roof,  
& Stan who wore the bruises  
of his father's fists,  
& Kelly who heard voices  
in the trees,  
& all of us high  
on tabs of mescaline,  
tracing the clouds  
until they were gone  
& I was left to carry on.



***Below the Surface***  
Clarissa Cervantes

## Opuntia

**Jake Dennis**

Desert seaweed, you wild señorita,  
you lift your untamable arms, lanterns raised,  
call to me in the sunlight like honeyed amber,  
your soft flames unfazed by the wind's tides.  
Am I a bear or gentleman to you? Your prickly hairs  
vaccinate my sweating skin. You draw out the beast  
that bends and stretches to twist your pears;  
or this giant lobster who, with this forked branch,  
claws flowers from your shoulders.

Ants carry your fallen moans from the dirt.  
Even señoras are tempted to taste you,  
unable to forget and escape you,  
your blue-green nopals welcoming and deceptive  
as a smiling peddler or a politician's open palms,  
drawing everyone into your court  
until you surround us, a tornado of tuna.

Tall and dangerous, sharp as tequila,  
you would leave me drunk in your prickly lap,  
unable to forget you, your tiny glochids  
more penetrating than perfume.

Drawn by your flower's bloodworms, I return  
again and again, salivating for the sunshine  
of your watery flesh. You always leave me  
with splinters, and I leave your shovelled husks  
on the gravel around you like condoms  
or like plastic bags under waves of desert dust.

## *She Ain't Playing*

**Tobi Alfier**

One more song  
fills the corners  
of the room

the lyrics sweet  
voice gravelly  
like heels on hearthstones

her late night habits  
living rebuttal  
of any standard of moderation.

She's a realist,  
undreamy to the core  
even as she watches the moon rise

through the faux antique  
mirror over the bar.  
She's a faux antique

but she dares you  
to call her that.  
She will damn you

to hell,  
to the streets,  
to a different melody.

Her hiss strikes your face  
like a sting, like a slap,  
and with that, the song is over.

## *Salt on Your Eyelashes*

**Robert A. Cozzi**

The best part of working Sunday mornings is coming home to you. As soon as I drop my bag, I head for the beach, knowing you have been out there surfing all morning, letting the ocean rearrange you.

I spot you immediately, moving through the water in long, easy strokes, lifted and lowered by the waves. Your blond hair catches the sun and glows almost red, as if the light has chosen you. When you see me at the shoreline, you swim in and kiss me without hesitation, not caring who is looking. Maybe no one is. On this stretch of Folly Beach sand, everyone seems busy with their own small universes, so for once two men can kiss without any rustle of judgment.

After we pull apart, I watch the droplets clinging to your eyelashes, tiny perfect beads of saltwater that refuse to fall. I have always loved that about the ocean, the way it lingers on the body, the way we carry it even after we have walked away from the water. You shake the drops from your face like your dog, Tugger, and I laugh as we repeat the cycle: You dry off, I run in and drag you back to the surf, and we're both soaked once more.

We float on our backs past the breakers, sharing silent moments under the open sky before turning to look at each other. I love observing the little details about you, like that familiar brow wrinkle and the way you shield your eyes like a sailor scanning for land. Following your gaze is a joy because you notice everything, from the grand to the minute, like the flying fish flickering in the distance today.

I study you just as I always have. Your features are clean lines and clear angles, yet when the sun momentarily fades behind a cloud and the shadows slide across your skin, you do not vanish. You glow from within. That's always been your way.

When we finally step out of the water, you wrap your towel around your shoulders like a cape. There is something heroic in the gesture, but also something boyish, a childlike ease you have managed to hold onto. Most people lose that softness by their 20s, but not you. I love that about you. I still have some of mine too. I hope we keep it, the way other people keep heirlooms.

Evening finds us on the deck, where the river stretches out like a ribbon of green fire. You sit quietly beside me while I write, and I find myself

wondering if you study me with the same intensity that I study you. The way I catch you watching tells me you do.

The river slows me down with its sounds, the water tapping against the dock, the palmettos sighing when the breeze turns their leaves, the nightbirds calling from the marsh. Beneath the surface, the neon fish navigate their world with an easy, natural confidence. Behind us, I hear the ocean, the waves returning home in the dark.

Earlier today, floating beside you under the wide Carolina sky, my heartbeat filled my ears, steady and insistent, reminding me that I am alive and happy and in love. The quiet felt weightless. Just like now.

You reach for my free hand, a small gesture that somehow acts as an anchor, as if I could ever forget you are here, as if you ever fade.

The moonlight settles over the palmettos and turns their leaves silver. Your hair mirrors that same glow, blond shifting into silver and something softer. Wouldn't it be something if we could live inside this glow forever? Just stay here, unhurried and uncounted, while time slips quietly past us like the tide.



***The Boy Becomes a Man***

Laurie Hollman

## **Crow Feet on Zinc Roof**

**Arthur Neong**

There's nothing quite like crow feet  
on zinc roof, the roof zing with  
skittering, like drum stick on metal skin.

Only this time, it's a kampung chicken with  
scrawny bone, ramrod feet, lean meat  
filled with tough living

in the big bad city, scrounging for food:  
rat carcass, rice pellets, chicken, beef,  
pork, fish remnants, skewered from bones.

There's much to admire in these crows  
black as night, bold against the white sky  
sharp, intelligent eyes, handsome beak.

They will steal to survive, but never beg,  
grovel, flatter, they ask with their eyes  
deep pools of dignified indifference.

They people the city as much as you and me,  
They take what they need and make love up in the trees,  
They drop down dung on metal stone and skin.

What you do or say matters not to them.  
They eat to live and live to fly,  
Their feather a gift dropped from the sky.

*\*kampung* – village in Malay. In this context, kampung chickens are the chickens that roam free in the village.

## ***Blackness***

**Steve Denehan**

Snowflakes land weightlessly  
on my hair and shoulders  
as I walk  
through Dublin City

no wind, no breeze  
not too cold  
though my breath  
is mist

dark at half past four  
I reach the bus stop  
stand, wait  
watch

people like me, and  
not like me  
walk along  
without expression

behind them is the Liffey  
a twinkling blackness  
it must be cold  
it must be very cold, and yet

a part of me aches  
to step forward, to burst  
through the people  
into a run

to fling myself  
over the river wall  
to fly, to fall, to be taken  
by the water

instead, I watch the snow  
angel white  
melting, turning  
into grey-brown slush



**Hourglass**  
Ana Veselova

## *Half-Birthday*

### **Mark D. Bennion**

You forget about it  
when you think it's no longer cool  
for your parents to pick you up from school.

Every year, though, you still wear it,  
comfortable like a favorite belt,  
unnoticed like a hair on your arm

until your children point it out  
and you celebrate with crackers,  
cucumbers, and pepper jack cheese.

You feel enough chutzpah now  
to tell the next person who asks  
you just turned 41-and-a-half,

you've contracted liver cancer  
and your oncologist says  
you'll be lucky to get another six months.

Mark the movement  
of this guy's chin. Share with him  
you know he's sorry and there's

a pinprick attached to every word  
left. Forget that 42  
is the year of bad luck in Japan.

As you leave, give him a present—  
a black tie, a familiar hymn,  
a boutonniere. Invite him

to your next birthday party  
where you'll lie down on the kitchen table,  
a half-shell of your old self,

cake crumbs in hand, teenage daughter  
at your side, ceiling lights dimming,  
and everyone forgets how to sing.



**Family Photos**  
Nicole Meise

# *My Mother Sleeps Around . . . a Lot*

**Abby Remer**

*What happened to Mom?*

At eight years old, I look over at the empty bed in our Miami hotel room. I squint, confused at her unmade bed. We're on vacation with my grandparents, and my mother, who went off triumphantly with the pool boy for drinks last night, hasn't returned.

At breakfast, my grandfather demands, "Where is your mother?"

I'm the one who carries the news that she didn't come back. I don't understand his response: "She's being a whore." But by the tone of his voice, I know it's bad, and I swallow her shame whole.

This is just the first of many times that we are away in the early years and Mom disappears with younger men. A rough stone sits in my stomach each time I wake up alone. Knowing my mother is having sex feels slimy.

Her insatiable desire becomes harder on me as she ages and I grow older. As the men approach my age, things become more complicated.

By 16, the crossover of who is desired cracks open. I ache with the teenage longing to be loved. I'm surrounded by adults only somewhat out of my league. My mother's colleagues, who populate my world since she lives and breathes her career 24 hours a day, tend to treat me as a woman. My budding sexuality comes after me. I am titillated by their attention. I yearn to be desired—but not too much, as the men want sex, and I'm not yet willing to go that far. I'm saving myself for my romantic dream of true love.

One night, I wake up and find John, another of my mother's conquests, sitting on my bed, the mattress sagging under his weight. John has just emerged from her bedroom after their booze-filled evening. I am terrified, not so much for my safety as he starts groping me under the midnight blue covers, but because of the dire need to stop him without Mom knowing that this man desires me right after her. *She's going to be furious at me*, I think, while sweet-talking him out the door.

"Next time, I promise, I'll be here. Go home to your wife now," I say as the elevator opens and carries him away.

Heart pounding, I crawl back into bed. With no place to put this incident and the burden of protecting everyone but me, I walk around shell-shocked for days, shaking and biting the inside of my cheeks until raw.

That winter, we travel to Club Med in Martinique and meet Alain, a Frenchman with dirty brown locks and a handlebar mustache. He and my

mother sleep together, but in the hyper-sexualized paradise of the 1970s, Alain surreptitiously makes it clear that it's me he wants. While sauntering down the sweet-smelling bougainvillea-trimmed path, Alain, walking between Mom and me, slings his arm over each of our shoulders. Within moments, he lightly caresses my skin just out of her eyesight. I keep my gaze strictly forward, pretending to ignore the secret message.

Two years later, Alain visits us in New York. We three gather in the living room and catch up, the two of them chattering away in French. I sit silently until he asks me to show him to the bathroom. As soon as we walk into the hallway, he shoves me against the wall. His sharp aftershave leaves its mark long after he assaults me with his penetrating kisses, his hand on the small of my back, pulling me against him so both his belt buckle and hard-on indent my pelvis.

Pulling away, I stammer, "The bathroom is just down this way," taking his hand to lead him far from where my mother might find us.

I leave for my father's house as soon as possible, a refuge after my parents' divorce. The next morning, when I return home, Mom graphically describes her debauchery of the night before.

"You know, Alain couldn't even get it up in bed," she says derisively, making me feel guilty holding the secret knowledge that it was me he desired.

But that summer at the Club Med in Playa Blanca, Mexico, it turns out Alain is working there, and the secret is out. He is blatant about his preference for me over her.

"Come join the water aerobics at the pool," he yells from down the beach. He yells for every other event he runs, too.

One afternoon, Alain saunters up to us as we lie sunbathing.

"Let's go to dinner at this little place I know up in the hills outside the Club," he pointedly asks only me. Heat scorches my face. I am no longer able to protect Mom from what is happening, and thus, not myself. I desperately don't want Alain's advances.

Sure enough, my mother responds with unadulterated hatred . . . toward me as soon as he walks away.

"Mom, of course, I don't want to go. This is our vacation," I try to soothe her.

"Oh, go the hell with him. What are you so scared of?" she seethes, fury gushing from every pore.

Ironically, while eluding Alain's advances, I meet a breathtaking tennis pro one night on the dance floor. Alex, a drop-dead gorgeous, Japanese Canadian, is just a few years older than I, and over the next two weeks, we fall hard for each other.

My mother becomes overly invested in the relationship, responding when I speak of my intense feelings, "Why don't you sleep with him? What are you waiting for, anyway?"

As a virgin, I hadn't packed my diaphragm, thinking I'd never meet anyone I'd be serious about at a Club Med.

"There's not that much of a risk for Christ's sake. Stop being such a prude," my mother chides.

But Alex and I agree: We want the first time to be perfect—and safe. He holds our love sacred, and we decide to wait. That winter, when visiting me during my first year at Oberlin, Alex indeed becomes my first. It is intense. It is beautiful. He is kind, loving, and dreamily romantic. And despite the pain, it is everything I could have wished for.

And whom do I call after that weekend? My mother. I don't yet understand how unhealthy a move that will be, as these sorts of confidences loop her inextricably into my love life for a good many years to come.



**Golden Medusa**

Faye Levy

## Coal Miners' Country

### MD Bier

One of the seven wonders of the world. Rolling green hills of Appalachia. Pumping ice-cold well water. Coal turns to diamonds. Mary was birthed a diamond. Mary's grandmother's wrinkled hands hand over her Social

Security check. The stepfather hollering *red-headed brat* followed by a slap. He devours them all with his fist, boot, and mouth. No kaleidoscope-colored coat to safeguard. Beer cans, whiskey bottles, baby formula litter the house.

No pink nail polish for her. Her stepfather's rage, bottles have wings, knives find their mark, hands break arms. It's loud and scary like bombs detonating. He screams *I'm gonna kill you. Kill you all*. Three-day rampage, he finally blacks out. Mother

says *I need you to shoot him*. Mary's stomach knots like a shoelace tied too tight. She's hot and small. Mother hands Mary the .22 rifle. *Shoot him in the head*. Mary's hands tremble. *Can't do the head. What if he jumps up*

*and grabs me?* Points at his chest. Her 11-year-old chest constricts. Tiny fingers quiver against the trigger's slim cold metal. Mother says *Pull the trigger*. Mary holds her breath. No sound echoes through the house.

Releasing all air. She gasps. Pulling *that* trigger transformed three generations of women. Coal dust. Shotgun casings. Beer cans. Hard living for the young. Heal-all plant doesn't grow till spring and cicadas don't wail in February. Diamonds are not made of coal.

Hands fold together asking God's forgiveness. Is death a consolation? Are children one of the seven wonders of the world?

## *Don't Bite People You Love*

### **Naomi Guevara**

Leo was the first boy I ever kissed. We sat in his 2001 Silver Lexus in the parking lot of a church, and he was so scared that I made him close his eyes. His lips tasted like Ritz crackers and cheese. It lasted a total of four seconds as he pulled back and told me that he found my fangs a little gross. As a 19-year-old part-wolf girl, I hadn't considered that, of all the strange parts about me, it would be my fangs that made me unappealing.

The second boy I kissed never said anything about my fangs. I remember him more clearly than the first. His name was Ryan, and I had been waiting all semester for him to come up and talk to me. I would sneak glances at his shaggy black hair that was long enough to touch his crooked nose. He had a gap between his two front teeth that I found adorable. When we did kiss, I ran my hand up his chest and made contact with the skin under his silver necklace before he stopped. He asked me not to touch his neck because he thought the hair on my hands and arms was a little gross. He asked me if I wanted to be his girlfriend, to which I promptly responded yes. I went home afterward and shaved my entire body.

The third boy I almost kissed was short and pudgy and four years older than me. I don't quite remember his name. I matched with him on a dating app three weeks after Ryan broke up with me, and, looking for a distraction, I agreed to meet him. I remember he was super nice and wore a black-and-silver hoodie that hugged his body in a way that made me wonder how he breathed. He looked at me with his eyebrows knit together and his hands stuffed into the pocket of his hoodie and told me I should feel lucky that I was going out with a human boy at all. I don't think he meant any harm by it, but it hurt my feelings, so I made up an excuse to leave.

I cried in my bed because part of me thought that what he had said was true. My mom knocked on my door, and I tried to compose myself before she came in. It felt wrong for her now 21-year-old daughter to be crying in her room.

The bed sunk a little from her weight as she sat down next to me and ran her fingers through my unruly, curly hair. It seemed stupid, but the moment she asked me what was wrong, I burst into tears. Her eyes didn't move from mine as she continued to run her fingers through my hair and rub my arms that I was ashamed I had forgotten to shave. After I finished telling

her about the terrible date I'd experienced, she put both hands in her lap and didn't say anything. I looked up at her, hoping that she would say something, anything that would take the pain away.

"Those of us that are born with fangs and claws have them for a reason. And, darling, if you need to use them, then use them. But," she paused, making eye-contact with me, "be careful. Don't bite people you love."

I didn't talk to or kiss a boy for a very long time after that.

I was 25 when the fourth boy I ever kissed asked me out. We were standing in line at the grocery store, and while we exchanged numbers, I remember noticing his receding hairline and his hands with silver rings on every finger. When I texted him that night, he asked if I wanted to come over. It was late, but not too late, and even though my chest felt heavy, I drove to his house.

When he opened the door, his eyes were tired and red, and he looked down at the poppy seed muffins I'd bought with a little bit of confusion and something I thought was surprise. I took off my shoes at the entrance and sat down next to him on a couch that stank of sweat and marijuana. We didn't talk; I had this eerie feeling I should stand up and leave. Instead, I sat back and watched him turn on the television and pick a movie I had no interest in watching. He asked if he could turn off the lights, and because I also watch movies with the lights off, I told him it was fine.

Everything was okay at first. He wrapped his arm around me and began playing with my hair. My hair kept getting caught by his rings, and I apologized for the wildness of it—it was a wolf trait I couldn't seem to tame. He said he liked it, and that made me feel good. But then he began to touch me and hold me in places where he first should've asked. Because I thought he didn't know, I told him we needed to slow down but that he could keep playing with my hair. At first, he did, and it was nice, but less so than the first time. He asked if he could kiss me, and I blushed as I nodded, trying to focus on him rather than the smell of his couch. But then he started touching me again, and when I tried to move his hand, he wouldn't. An overwhelming panic came over me when I couldn't push him away, so I plunged my fangs into his shoulder.

He howled in pain, and maybe I should've stayed to at least make sure he was okay, but instead I grabbed my shoes and ran out the door. As I cried on the way home, I thought I should've grabbed the muffins too.

I didn't mind biting men after that. Perhaps I should've been more cautious about whom I spent my time with, but there was something nice about knowing I could make someone hurt as much as they hurt me.

At 26, I kissed a boy who wasn't good at it, and when he told me I was the problem and girls like me were never good at this kind of stuff, I almost bit his lips off. That felt better than kissing. At 27, I bit a boy who tried to tell me all the ways I should act more human, which included sleeping with him. I promptly bit his forearm, hoping he would need stitches afterward.

I was 29 when I bit the boy I thought I was going to marry. He was a lovely man named George. I had stopped shaving my body, which he didn't seem to mind, and he frequently complimented my hair and lean frame. He said he loved that he was dating a strong, intelligent woman. The fact that I had gotten into and graduated top of my class in law school was something of a plus for him. We made plans to go to his mom's for Thanksgiving, and it was around this time I was thinking of how my décor would fit in with his, and where he would propose, and whether or not we would be combining our DVD collections, and if so, how would we go about doing it—having two copies of the 2002 version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* seemed excessive.

It was the week before we were going to drive to his mom's house. We were being playful, and I really was just trying to make him feel good. But while I was kissing his neck, a fang broke through the skin. Not enough to damage any arteries, but enough for him to push me off and look at me with wide eyes. I did my best to bandage him up, but by then it was too late. His hand shook as he took the bandage away from me and told me that it might be better to take some time away from each other. I pretended that he would text and tell me he was picking me up, but that never came. When I sent a text message a week later, he told me that he couldn't be with someone who might hurt him.

I always thought it would feel good when guys would finally fear me. All I felt, though, was a desire to never allow myself to hope like that again. I decided that having a partner in crime was just not in the cards for someone like me.

Henry was someone I didn't mean to meet. He was almost a foot taller than me with a wide smile and short blond hair. He also was one of the most pretentious people I'd ever met. We'd been trying to outperform each other the day that we had met. I didn't mind friendly competition, but he made a point to come by my desk at least once a day and discredit something that I liked or try and one up me on something stupid.

"*Fanny and Alexander* is wannabe art," he said one day, leaning over my desk.

I glared at him. "Did you actually watch the movie all the way through?"

He straightened up, or more like towered, and gave me a half-smile. "No, I watched about 30 minutes before I got the gist."

My eyes went wide, and it took my willpower, and the support of my half-wolf ancestors and God, not to stand up on my desk and slap the man across the face. "Well," I began, using my attorney voice, "if you can't watch the entirety of a three-hour masterpiece then perhaps Ingmar Bergman is a little too advanced for you. Perhaps try something more digestible."

He folded his arms, smirking. "Like what?"

"*Sesame Street* seems like a good choice. Especially because it gives great life lessons on how not to be a dick."

I immediately regretted my unprofessional choice of words, and although his face faltered just slightly, the man was a stone wall.

"Well, maybe we can watch it together, and you can explain to me the genius of Ingmar Bergman."

He left with his hands in his pockets, undeterred, and I vowed never to spend more than 10 minutes alone with this man.

But then, he came to my 33rd birthday, and I about died.

I invited people from the office out of courtesy. There were a couple of friends from law school that I was more excited to hang out with. We went to my favorite bar, a place that was more friendly to part-wolf girls like me than other places in the city, and the beginning of the next year of my life seemed so promising. Until he walked in the door.

He saw me and made a beeline for our group. I was about to tell him off. Maybe make a witty joke about his appearance or tell him that he wasn't invited to try and ruin one of most important days of the year. Instead, he handed me a bag, and I didn't know what to say.

"Is there some kind weird prank in here?"

He shook his head and put his hand in his jacket pocket. I narrowed my eyes and took out the tissue paper. A small black velvet box lay at the bottom. I opened it carefully and immediately felt blinded by a dainty gold necklace.

I immediately felt shame for wanting to insult him in front of our coworkers.

"It's nothing. I just got a bonus, so it was no big deal."

And there it was. The one up.

I snapped the box closed. "Your commitment to showing me up instead of buying nice things for your girlfriend is really telling about the kind of man you are."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? What kind of man does that make me?"

"An arrogant one."

He leaned onto the tabletop. "And if I don't have a girlfriend?"

"Okay," one of the other girls interrupted, bringing shots. "Let's celebrate!"

I hastily began drinking.

I don't remember much after that. I woke up in my apartment the next day face down in my bed with my shoes off and a nasty hangover. I heard a knock on the bedroom door. A sigh of relief escaped me. I was grateful to have such great girlfriends who made sure I got home.

"Jordan, you didn't have to stay here all night."

A voice deeper than Jordan's rang in my head. "Here's something for your hangover."

I quickly looked up at and saw Henry standing over me with a glass full of questionable liquid. I just about screamed.

"What are you doing in my apartment?"

He put the glass on the stand next to me. "You didn't look like you were going to make it home, and the other girls had to get Ubers themselves. I promise I was just going to drop you off, but then you started acting weird, and I thought it was better if I kept an eye on you."

"That's creepy as hell."

I looked up at him, and I was taken aback by how nervous he looked.

"You know you can't drink as much as a full human. That was honestly really scary."

"Henry, you're not my dad. I can do whatever I want."

He blinked once and awkwardly started patting his pockets pretending to look for his keys. "You're totally right. I am so sorry for overstepping. I'll just let myself out."

I followed him out of my room, cursing the pounding in my head, and as he headed for the door, I noticed the TV was paused. A still frame from *Fanny and Alexander*.

"Sorry, I tried to occupy myself last night so I wouldn't fall asleep on you." He gave me a small smile, his hand still on the doorknob. "You're right. It's actually a pretty good movie. I don't know about genius, but still good."

And then he was gone.

That Monday, I felt awful. I had, in fact, drunk too much, which by this age should no longer be a problem, and I knew that for all my flaws, *Sesame Street* had taught me how to say sorry. So, for the first time in the history of my time at Osford & Sons, I dropped a note off at Henry's desk. By lunch it had been returned to me. When I opened it, I smiled at the marked box next to "Yes," and my eyes fluttered over my apology, "Friends?"

The first order of business was to finish *Fanny and Alexander*. He dutifully listened to my rant for two hours after the movie concluded. This turned into weekly movie nights where he showed me Adam Sandler movies, and I showed him serious ones. We both agreed that *Punch Drunk Love* was by far his best performance.

At first, when he wouldn't leave, we'd just talk about the movie we'd watched, but then that turned into hour-long conversations about work and our families. I told him about my mom and my three sisters, two of whom were like me—part-wolf. He told me about his cousin who also was part-wolf who died from alcohol poisoning. I talked about shaving my body for a boy and what happened with the boy with the silver rings. He told me about the ex he had been engaged to but then she cheated. He told me to never be ashamed; I told him that he was a good man.

Then, we weren't just watching movies at my apartment. We alternated who was hosting, and we would arrive early to cook dinner together. He'd spend the night on my couch when we had too much to drink and it was too late to go home. I watched his dog when he went out of town, and he was the first person I called when my appendix burst.

And then, I messed it up.

We were on his couch watching *The Apartment*, and maybe we both had a little too much to drink, which wasn't true, but I'd like to pretend.

I should've known what was about to happen because part of me wanted it too.

He sat up and looked at me.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded and cleared his throat a couple of times, but no words came out. He ran his fingers through his hair, his hands shaking, which for some reason created an anxiety in the back of my mind.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

He nodded at first and then shook his head.

Blinking, I didn't know what to do. "Are you sick? Do you need to eat something?"

"Maybe later," he finally said.

"Okay," I said slowly.

I turned to watch the TV again when I felt his lips press against my cheek. I slowly looked at him, and although he was leaning toward me, there was hesitancy in his eyes. He looked down at my lips, and I leaned in and kissed the corner of his mouth. His whole body seemed to sigh, and before I could say or do anything, he kissed me in the way I've always wanted to be kissed.

I wish I could explain fully how it happened, and even though I'm sure I know why it happened, that's probably less important than the fact that it did.

Henry was kissing me, and even with my eyes closed, I could sense the moment he reached up to touch my face. In a word that I could only describe as instinctual, I grabbed his hand and sank my fangs into it.

I looked up at him, and he just stared at me. Horror and shame filled my entire body, and I felt a fear I had never felt start to settle in my chest. I opened my jaw, and for a small second, Henry didn't move his hand. I looked down to see two small dots of blood begin to pool from the punctures I'd caused, and I ran to the kitchen for his first aid kit. I immediately started disinfecting his wound.

"Henry, I am so sorry. I didn't mean . . ." My words trailed off as I felt my face grow hot. My fingers couldn't coordinate themselves to open the Band-Aid.

"Stop." His voice was gentle, and I could hear a note of finality in the cadence of his voice. I knew what that meant. I knew how this story ended.

I let him take the Band-Aid away, and after he opened it, he handed it back to me. I put it on his hand, and without hesitation, I grabbed my things.

"I'm so sorry. I don't—" I stopped before I started making excuses. "It's okay if you don't talk to me at work on Monday."

My vision felt blurry as I hurried toward his front door, but before I could open it, a hand covered mine. This time I really began to cry, and I hated myself for it because I had no right to. I turned around and stared into his chest. I thought maybe he was going to keep me in his apartment until he could call the police, or maybe he was going to get back at me by doing something equally terrible. Instead, he grabbed my hand and led me back to the couch, where we sat down, this time a little further apart. I looked down at his hand, still holding mine, and I stared at the Band-Aid.

"Is it okay if I turn the movie back on?"

I nodded. I felt awkward as the strap of my purse was falling off my shoulder and my hand was beginning to sweat from how hard I was clutching my jacket. After a few minutes, I tried to pull my hand away, but he held on. Not forcefully but in a gesture that said, "Please." He rubbed the top of my hand with this thumb, and the faces of every boy who couldn't love me seemed to disappear in that gesture.

When I looked up to meet his eyes, they were soft, and for the first time I didn't feel afraid of the person on the other side of the couch. He looked back at the television and said: "It's okay that you bite. Just stay long enough to see that you don't need to. I'll wait."

And he did.

As the silence grew more comfortable, Henry waited and waited and waited.

And I stayed.



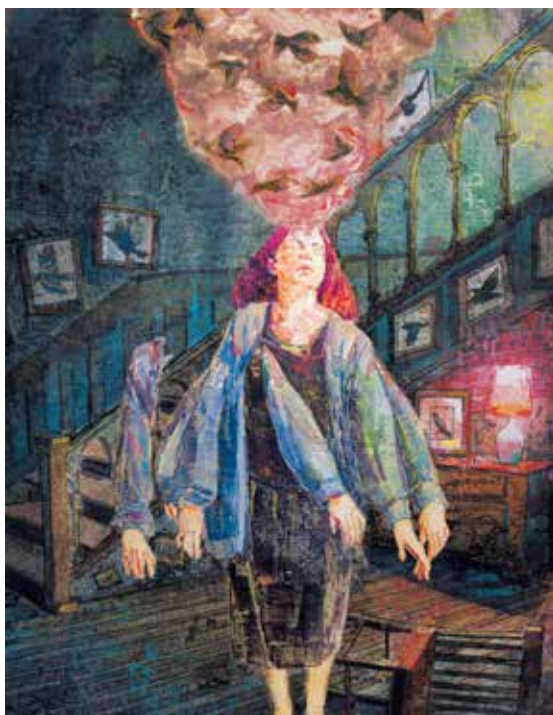
## **Foxes**

Xioanny Santiago Ortiz

## *How Was Your Day?*

**David Romanda**

You're not going to believe this,  
but I watched some old school mafia shit  
on the train. Two guys in their 40s  
in suits were having words. A bit of shoving,  
and then one of them removes a shoe.  
Bashes the other guy in the face with it twice—quick.  
Blood coming down from the bashed guy's cheek.  
A couple people gasp, but nobody does anything.  
The train stops, and the victor calmly slips on his shoe.  
He's in no rush. Straightens his suit and grabs his briefcase.  
Exits the train. The bleeding guy sits down,  
and someone hands him a handkerchief.  
Nobody did anything—nobody stepped in. It was crazy.  
And I was right there, too.



***Sparrows on Fire***  
Finn Wilson

# *The Mirror That Remembered*

**Gabrielle Munslow**

The mirror breathes before I do.  
Glass fogs—  
not from warmth,  
but from memory  
trying to find its way back  
into a shape that fits me.

I lean close.  
It leans closer.  
We are two creatures  
studying a boundary  
that used to be obedient.

A crack runs through the silver  
like a timeline snapping.  
Something falls out—  
a version of me  
I don't recall inventing.

She looks tired.  
Or furious.  
Or free.  
The mirror can't decide,  
so it keeps all three  
stacked inside the reflection  
like a triptych that refuses  
to close.

When I blink,  
she doesn't.  
When I swallow,  
she opens her mouth  
as if to speak  
in the dialect of broken glass.

I place my palm to the surface.  
Her hand arrives late,  
as if travelling through  
a different century.

And then—  
the moment shifts.  
The mirror remembers me,  
but incorrectly:  
a face rewritten,  
a body loosened from its gravity,  
a woman mid-transformation  
between myth  
and malfunction.

I step back.  
She follows.

Memory has a spine,  
and today  
it cracks.



**The Oval Portrait**  
Trinidad Monteagudo Jackson

# ***Umbrella Rhapsody***

**Suzanne Heagy**

A woman cannot have too many umbrellas. Umbrellas are a thoughtful, small gift for special people in our lives. Purse umbrellas can be so useful in many weather conditions. A large golf umbrella can provide shade at the beach.



One of my worries is a coming umbrella shortage. The majority of umbrellas sold around the globe are manufactured in China, and currently, there are tariff tiffs. The city of Shangyu alone has more than 1,000 factories that produce all types of umbrellas. At some point, I've probably owned, and then lost, a product made in Shangyu.



On a single day in 2006, I lost two umbrellas in Milwaukee. A downpour threatened from the low blanket of gray clouds, so I carried an umbrella into the grocery store. I promptly left it in the shopping cart because it wasn't raining when I walked out. I didn't know I lost my umbrella until I reached my next stop, a now-defunct K-Mart, I think. A downpour continued to threaten, so I carried my emergency car umbrella into the store, and dang if I didn't walk away without that one too.



I've observed people walking voluntarily in a deluge with no umbrella. They look soaked to the skin. Their wet, heavy clothing looks terribly uncomfortable. Often, they hunch over as they slog through puddles. What drove the walkers into the pouring rain? Did they fail to check the weather report? Maybe the walkers had lost their umbrellas, or never had an umbrella in the first place, not a happy thought. Maybe the walkers are harbingers of a looming umbrella shortage.



The basic black umbrella is like a little black dress. Umbrellas come in all colors. We own a large sunshine-yellow golf umbrella that doubles as a walking stick. I lost my leopard print umbrella, and my red pansy umbrella. The umbrella that stayed with me the longest was a basic black number purchased on a rainy night from a street corner vendor somewhere in New York City. It cost \$5 (2008 prices) and saved me from getting drenched. I held

onto the black umbrella for ten years until its cheap nylon was tattered and shredded.



I do not care for inverted umbrellas. Once I was forced to purchase an inverted umbrella in a hospital gift shop in West Virginia. I was at the hospital when an unexpected storm blew in and separated me from my car in the vast parking lot. Inverted umbrellas open inside-out, the ribs falling from the top. All the gift shop had for sale were inverted umbrellas, and they cost \$25. The one I purchased had a beautiful, brilliant peacock design. In theory, an inverted umbrella prevents drips from falling on you or your belongings when closed. I was all thumbs with the contraption and got wet. When the inverted umbrella went missing, I didn't grieve its loss.



In movies, and in real life, umbrellas can be more than they seem. An umbrella can be a dance partner in the rain, or screen a secret kiss. The tip of an umbrella can shoot out a switchblade. Its handle contains a hollow hiding place for contraband, weapons, or poison. The spiked umbrella in *For Your Eyes Only* seemed like an innocent umbrella until it was activated, shooting deadly spikes from its ribs. James Bond never activated the umbrella because its potential violence would have earned the film an R-rating.



I was obsessed with cocktail umbrellas as a child. The ornamental paper umbrellas were a perfect accessory for my Barbie dolls. I sacrificed a week's allowance to buy a packet of cocktail umbrellas at a downtown hotel gift shop in Greenville, Texas. My Barbies had office jobs in cities, lots of boyfriends, a convertible, and an umbrella to match every outfit. My Barbies didn't own a wedding dress. I never pretended they married.



I've lost umbrellas, and I've found umbrellas. Finding and claiming an abandoned umbrella sometimes makes me feel like a thief. Twice, I have discovered umbrellas in offices I was assigned in English departments at universities. Previous inhabitants usually left debris like assorted office supplies, papers, and books. Once I opened my "new" desk's top drawer and found a filthy hodgepodge, including old plastic forks and spoons crusted with food. When administration assigned an office, I inherited the room and its contents, for better or worse, so, technically, the abandoned umbrellas were mine. More questionable was when an umbrella leaned lonely

in the English department office in a corner for an entire semester, although on and off it rained. I asked around about the umbrella, and no one claimed it. One day, an unexpected rain caught up with me, and I took it when no one was watching.



Imagine an umbrella that could infinitely expand to shelter the un-umbrellaed during a monstrous monsoon! Imagine umbrellas with targets on top so no drones could single us out. We'd all look the same from a bird's-eye view, a sea of roving bull's-eyes! There are all kinds of umbrellas, but the world could use more. Umbrellas that cater to different needs. There should be a tarot card about it: *When you lose an umbrella, you'll find one.*



**Woman Lying in Flowers**

Floyd Liu

# *The Man Who Fished for Shadows*

**David Anson Lee**

Every morning at the river's bend  
he arrives with a spool of thin wire  
and a net woven from spider-thought.

He casts not into water  
but into the air beside it,  
waiting for dusk  
to thicken into something catchable.

Locals say he used to fish for trout,  
then grief struck sideways,  
hard as a river stone,  
and he began to notice  
how shadows twitch like minnows  
when the sun leans west.

Today he reels in a long one:  
thin, trembling,  
blue-black as unspoken apologies.

He cradles it gently,  
sits cross-legged on the bank,  
strokes its back  
until it stops shivering.

*You can let go now,*  
I once heard him say  
to the dark sliver he held.

The shadow wriggled free,  
slipped into the river,  
finally touching water  
for the first time  
in its brief, borrowed life.

For a moment I understood:  
Some people fish for answers,  
some for food,  
and some for all the silent things  
their hearts cannot carry alone.



**River**

Finn Wilson

## **Virginia and Leonard Turn on the Radio (1937)**

**Kate LaDew**

It's light and lovely, the sun streaming in, and the flowers outside cast their own light, every shade of blue that exists, through the streaky windows, fingerprints dotting their edges. Virginia thinks of Vanessa, the bold indigos and ceruleans she manages to mix into every painting, her sister's eye wide enough to fit in the whole world. And then, there he is again, that staticky shout, invading their home, the corners and angles of it. There he is again, invading their minds.

It's been like this for years, hard to remember when it wasn't. The little man and his little mustache and his little flared-hip breeches, always shouting, always gesticulating. Sometimes Virginia wishes she'd never studied German, wishes she'd never studied anything at all, afternoons now spent translating, eyes closed, so she can't see Leonard's face go grim every time "Juden" sparks the air.

With a sigh, she gets up to call him in. She goes to her bedroom at the back of the cottage and opens the door, the only one they ever use, the front entrance of Monk's House too ostentatious, too much, and besides, this is where the garden is, the reason they live here at all. Where the orchard is, the apples and figs and plums and cherries and pears, the lily pads on the pond, the newts and water snails floating lazily just under the surface, the dragonflies, a curious electric blue, darting and landing, darting and landing, busy to be here but not there, there but not here. Sometimes Virginia thinks she and Leonard only tolerate the rest of the world because they know the garden exists in it, red roses and lilacs and chrysanthemums, blue globe thistles and delphiniums, flowers she doesn't even know the name of that shoot out of the ground and bloom of their own accord.

Virginia gives herself a moment, standing in the doorway, breathing in the air that is different from air anywhere because it leads to the garden, and shouts out, "Leonard, Leonard, he's on the wireless again!" Waits a moment more, begins to turn.

"No!" she hears her husband shout back. "No, I shan't! I shan't come! I'm planting tulips, and they'll be blooming long after that man is dead!"

And Virginia lets out a laugh, loud and unhurried, keeps laughing,

head tumbling over her belly, because, damn if he isn't right, has to be. And how many hours has she spent listening to ravings, to veiled violence and threats? How many hours has she spent inside, away from the place she loves most? Away from dear, sweet, gentle Leonard, who brings her breakfast in bed, who sits by the edge of the tub reading aloud the latest pages for her novel while she soaks until the water grows chill and her hands go blue. Leonard who does all the necessary chores of life to allow her to do the essential task of hers: write.

Why on earth is she standing here, listening to this drivel, when all she wants is just steps away? It will pass, it will all pass, it must, and sanity will reign once again and all the good people of the world will tell the little man with his little mustache and his little flared-hip breeches just what he can do with all that rot he shouts at them, and everyone can go back to the lives they know, and Virginia can go back to hers, right now.

And she turns off the radio, puts her hands on her hips and thinks, it must pass, surely, though, not surely, she has never been sure of anything, but hopes all will set itself right and she and Leonard can have this cottage and this garden and this marriage and this life for years and years as the flowers bloom in all the blues imaginable, bloom and bloom and keep blooming long after that man is dead. She will finish the novel and Leonard will finish his and they will finally mend the fence and she will attend more luncheons, she will meet more writers, more of her own kind who think too much and tell everyone about it. She will get out and back into the world, she will fight this forever melancholy and become strong.

As she looks at the silent radio, Virginia hopes all this and does not dare look up at God, lest she hear him laugh.

She hopes for things that have not happened yet, but might, because it is tonight and not later, it is now and not after. Virginia is not yet submerged in the River Ouse, body smalt blue, one heavy stone weighing down her overcoat. Leonard is not yet lying on Monk's House floor, blue veins throbbing at his neck, slowly dying from a stroke. Prayer shawls are not yet towering in heaps, techelet blue tzitzit twisting in the open air, knotted fringes a reminder of God's commandments. Bodies of men and women and little children are not yet tangled together, filling up the earth. The air is not yet brimming with the smoke of souls.

None of this has happened yet. It is only Virginia and Leonard, on a late autumn afternoon, azure sky deep and wide. It is only the sound

of flowers cautiously opening, little by little, then all at once, the sound of roots weaving their way through the dirt. It is only Virginia, hand curved to fit the slope of her husband's shoulder. Only Leonard, fingers cupped to scoop up the soil, tulips brushing his cheekbone, lifting in a smile. It is only the low hush of the world turning, awaiting things not yet dreamt of, things unimaginable, the world hanging in the forever of the universe expanding around it, star by star burning bright and winking out, the only sound God's intake of breath and the sigh that follows.



**Lovers by Lake**  
Alisa Nikishin

## *Blood on the Flower*

### **Joe Cappello**

It started as a harmless gesture, a thumbs-up as one driver attempted to pass another on a two-lane road. The passing driver misinterpreted the gesture, seeing it as a chiding middle finger instead of a harmless, pudgy thumb. He became outraged.

Gabe Martin saw the driver in front of him having a meltdown as he passed, head bobbing like an ocean buoy in a storm, mouth spitting invectives he couldn't hear. Gabe flexed his fingers, not quite sure what could have caused such a reaction. He didn't have time to consider how his innocent thumb had been inadvertently mistaken for its raunchy middle neighbor before he noticed the car slip in front of him, then slow down.

Gabe thought about pulling out and passing him, but a steady flow of traffic roared past in the opposite direction. He watched the car buck to a stop and the bright red taillights go dark. The car door opened and the driver stepped out. That's when the normal course of things altered as suddenly as flicking a switch.

Despite the clearness of the morning and the sun lighting up the road like a movie set, Gabe could not make out the form striding quickly toward him. He knew it had to be a person, but the mass in front of him morphed into a shape unrecognizable to him. He looked for some semblance of a human—arms, legs, a torso—some outward appendage of sinewy muscle and pinkish flesh that Gabe could recognize. Nothing. Not even a face to stare at and pick up on a wordless message as humans instinctively do. He tried to describe it in his own mind, but words failed.

Gabe shook his head, opening and closing his eyes repeatedly before focusing again on the mass moving closer toward him. As he struggled to comprehend what was happening, he became aware of another change. Instead of time moving in the usual straight line, it became choppy, like a heart gone into an irregular beat. Seconds slowed to split seconds, each one revealing the altered image moving toward him in ultraslow motion.

He felt strangely disconnected; nothing mattered now. Not the cars surrounding him nor the puerile list of errands in his phone. Not the empty grocery bags in a pile on the rear seat waiting to be filled. Instead, he focused on the gray asphalt pavement, crinkled like an elephant's trunk, the

gravel lining its shoulder marked by gooey gouges looking like black, gaping wounds. A wildflower grew defiantly out of the center of the roadway. He wondered how it managed to survive.

His mind drifted to the present, or fragments of it. As the slowed image came closer, Gabe thought he saw something on the side of the man where a hand should be. The image of a tire iron flashed before him.

Then the sound of shattered glass accompanied by screams. He ducked as if he were still sitting in the car, though he no longer had a sense of occupying that physical space. The scene reversed, like one of those early VHS tapes you had to rewind before returning to the store. It played forward, only this time, the hand held a gun.

*Pop, Pop, Pop.* Shots pierced the stillness. One after the other, the sound of each exploding as Gabe winced while covering his ears. Again, shattered glass and screams, panicked faces from the cars all around. Yet not a single bullet penetrated him.

Another rewind, and this time the hand held a bucket. In one motion it tossed the contents through the opened window. Gabe thought he saw something flicker. The subsequent explosion lifted the car off all four wheels, bouncing it on the pavement a few times before it came to rest. Flames shot in the air, the smoke rising in a cloud, gray and heavy.

Gabe's physical boundaries began dissolving. He found himself hovering above the scorching flames, straining to see below while the sense of sight was still available to him. People darted in all directions, looking like ants crawling around the car; flashing lights bathed everything in red and blue colors; flames subsided, licking what was left of the charred remains of his car.

He passed through a whirligig of scenes, a spinning tunnel extending from that moment to an infinite past. It slowed, and he could make out similar scenarios, where assorted masses of energy held weapons of all kinds, some made of stone, primitive in design, but equally lethal. Others, more sophisticated, metal axes, swords, and knives meant to maim, smash, and disembowel. Finally, guns exploding with a deadly force indiscriminate in their selection of targets. Weapons and destruction, violence and rage, a circularity repeating itself from a distant past to a beleaguered present.

He managed one more glance at the scene rapidly fading from his consciousness.

But it wasn't the chaotic aftermath of his encounter with the passing car that caught his attention. Only the wildflower growing impossibly out of

the middle of the wrinkled roadway, proudly holding its yellow face upward, looking as if it were painted on a canvas and worthy of hanging in a gallery. Defying the odds of survival, fluttering, barely alive, and splattered in blood.



**Electrical Pole**  
Arielle Combs

## *I've Never Been to Florida*

### **Mona Mehas**

Hemingway's home would be nice to see,  
polydactyl cats lounging on the porch.  
I'm not a strong swimmer, but I can dogpaddle.  
I like to eat fish—I don't want to catch them—  
but I've never been to Florida.

Hotel and bar ads show live bands.  
I'm deaf in one ear; that makes it tough,  
and swaying with a walker isn't fun.  
I don't get seasick on a boat,  
but I've never been to Florida.

I've always wanted to drive down the Keys,  
but I'm afraid time is catching up with me.  
My body screams on long road trips,  
dizziness hits in sand and waves,  
but I've never been to Florida.

To travel now requires more planning  
and mapping out places I want to explore  
without a partner; I travel solo,  
visited more states than most people I know,  
but I've never been to Florida.

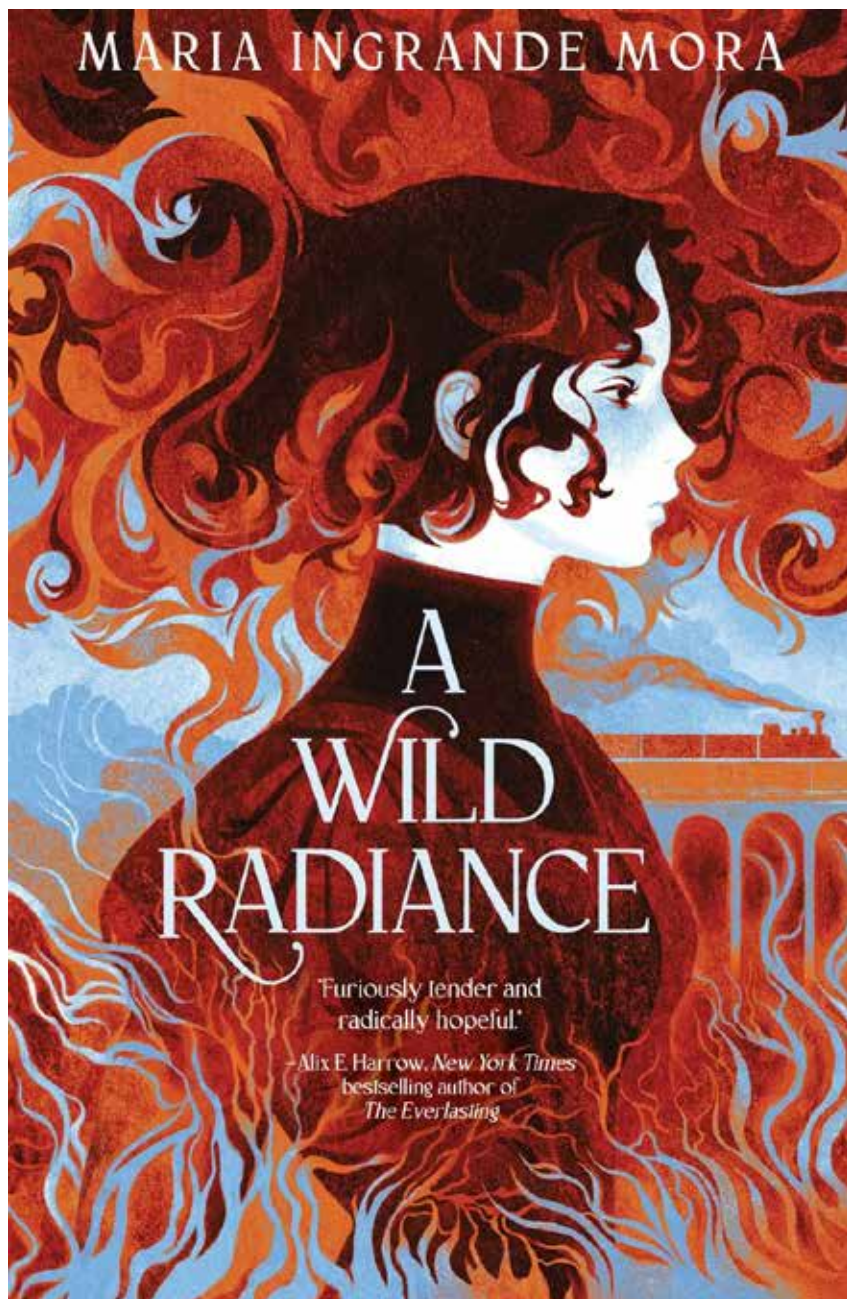
I should have made this trip 30 years ago,  
a drive down south until the road ended.  
I loved the water, music, and dancing.  
Life got in the way, a child and career,  
so I've never been to Florida.



# INTERVIEW

**Interview:**  
***Sitting Down with Maria Ingrande Mora***

Interview by Emily Rasmus



Every writer brings a different tone, technique, and perspective to their work. While learning the fundamentals of craft is important, that knowledge should never come at the expense of following your instinct.

No writer demonstrates this better than award-winning author Maria Ingrande Mora (they/she). As an outspoken member of the LGBTQ+ community, Mora is also neurodivergent and lives with an anxiety disorder and chronic pain. Their career as an author reflects their lived experiences, and their work is richer for it.



Photo courtesy of Maria Ingrande Mora

Mora's YA debut, *Fragile Remedy* (2021), a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection, explores how family can be found while facing seemingly impossible barriers. Their next book, *The Immeasurable Depth of You* (2023), tackles the heavy issue of coming of age with mental illness and earned a spot as an Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award finalist. Mora's comic series *Ranger Academy* (2023) broke new ground by featuring one of the first nonbinary characters in the Power Rangers universe. And in 2026, *A Wild Radiance* has already drawn praise from *Publishers Weekly* and *School Library Journal* as a fresh dystopian story that appeals to young adults. Mora never had the luxury of following someone else's blueprint. That, more than anything else, is what makes their work so successful.

### **Rasmus: I figure we should start at the beginning, so could you tell me where your ideas come from?**

**Mora:** Honestly, that's one of the hardest questions to answer because it's always so random. Sometimes, I'll be driving, in the shower, or even just listening to a song, and then I'll start to get an idea.

Oftentimes, I'm inspired by a sense of place, such as going on a trip or changing my environment, and that really gets my imagination going. What I don't do is sit down and say, "Okay, I need to write another book." I wish I did that. I feel like successful professionals probably do that. For me, it's just random.

**R: Once the idea does find you, are you more of a plotter or a pantser?**

**M:** I'm definitely not a plotter. I wish I were. I do a lot of unstructured imagining before I ever start writing, and that phase can be anywhere from a week to six months. Currently, I'm six months into developing an adult book I want to write, but it's still being nurtured. It has to reach its fullest form before I can start writing. I think of it like evolving a Pokémon. If it's not ready yet, it's not ready yet.

Comics are actually the exception to my normal writing process. Because of the strict structure of the format, I plot them out page by page. With novels, I'm a complete pantser, so it's almost the opposite experience. I can follow wherever the story goes. But with comics, it's very hard to wing it and very hard to revise if you make mistakes. Simply put, comics are a format that demands plotting.

**R: Back to the novel side of things, once you finally start writing, how do you make sure your characters feel like different people? *The Immeasurable Depth of You* and *A Wild Radiance* are both written in first person, and yet your narrating characters, Brynn and Josephine, always feel completely distinct from each other. How do you pull that off?**

**M:** Part of being able to write a well-developed character like Brynn or Josephine is that percolation period. A character has to start to congeal in my head before they feel real. From a craft perspective, I think about voice. Does this person use short, self-deprecating sentences? Do they have asides? Do they have a sense of humor? Brynn and Josephine are wildly different humans, so part of it's just a natural follow-through of that. But it's also understanding their motivations, their insecurities, what makes them angry, what makes them afraid, and what makes them laugh, and then making sure the voice on the page matches how that person actually thinks.

**R: How do you get yourself into that character's headspace when you sit down to write?**

**M:** Walking. Driving. Going to the beach. Anything that uses your body enough that your brain can go into autopilot. Music helps me a lot. But the

key is no computer, no hands on keyboards. You have to spend time just walking with the character, thinking with them, and letting them blossom. And then, maybe after the first quarter of a draft, they've become a real person, and you're just flying along with them.

**R: That feeling of a character being a real person is something I think writers understand immediately, but it's really hard to explain to someone who doesn't write.**

**M:** Totally. And I think being neurodivergent, and having gotten into writing from telling stories to myself as a very young child, has helped me access this rich imaginative state that I use to approach writing, almost like improvising. Of course, the downside to that is that it can be hard to sit down and get to work. It's almost like you have to summon a demon before you can start writing. Is the character with us in the room? There's a "woo-woo" element to the process that makes discipline really hard because you're not just sitting down to work; you're waiting to be met by someone. And that introduces thoughts like, *What if they never come back? What if I can't do this?*

**R: That sounds terrifying. Especially when your whole process depends on something that feels outside of your control.**

**M:** It is. I think that's part of the internal struggle for a lot of writers, not just me. You're dependent on something you can't force. You can't manufacture the feeling of a character being alive in your head. You just have to keep showing up and hoping they meet you there.

**R: And when that fear shows up, what do you do?**

**M:** I find that trying to shorten the periods between writing sessions helps. If I go a whole week without writing, that's a whole week for me to spiral into dread. If I stay consistent and write almost every day, there's less downtime to fill with doubt. Procrastination really does invite bad thoughts in. More often than not, once I'm actually in it, I'm like, *Why was I so scared?* And then the next day, I wake up scared again.

**R: When you're building a fantasy world, what do you start with? The magic, the politics, the characters?**

**M:** All of my fantasy worlds so far are built around the idea of the commodification of magic. Human beings are just going to exploit whatever's in front of them. And I think that comes from growing up watching technology get commodified and abused in real time. I was born in 1980, so I've been basically sentient throughout that entire process. Watching what started as something incredible become a tool that systems use against people probably does inform the way I think about magic and about characters who want to reclaim it.

**R: So your fantasy worlds are kind of a mirror for the real one.**

**M:** Yeah. It's not always a conscious decision, but when I look back at the work, it's pretty clearly there. People are going to find a way to exploit a good thing. That's just kind of the human condition, and I find it endlessly interesting to write around.

**R: Your work gives life to so many different communities, sapphic and nonbinary characters, polyamorous relationships, and people living with mental illness, and yet when other readers and I pick up your books, none of it ever feels like a stereotype or representation just to check a box. How do you approach that responsibly?**

**M:** The most important thing is knowing when I'm the right person to tell a story and when I'm not. I try to stay in my lane. I'm queer, I'm nonbinary, and I'm neurodivergent, so those identities show up in my work because I'm writing from inside that experience. For anything outside of that, I use sensitivity readers because I don't want to get it wrong, and more importantly, I don't want to cause harm.

**R: But how do you keep from feeling like you have to speak for an entire community?**

**M:** Just reminding myself that I'm not. I think people forget that sometimes, even with the best intentions. A queer author writing a queer character isn't

speaking for every queer person on the planet. I'm telling one story. It's not the whole story.

**R: Your books don't shy away from really heavy subject matter for a young adult audience: police violence, mental illness, and sexuality. Where do you draw the line?**

**M:** Honestly, I just don't believe in talking down to teenagers. They're living in the same world we are. They've got access to the internet, and they're grappling with heavy things every single day. To soften that too much would feel dishonest and, honestly, a little disrespectful. I'm also not the first person to push that line. *Twilight* and *Iron Widow*—so many books had expanded what's possible in YA long before I came along. But that doesn't mean I'm careless. You can cause real harm if you're not intentional. These readers are still forming their understanding of themselves and the world, and that matters.

**R: *The Immeasurable Depth of You* was banned in Florida schools in 2023. Does that change anything about how you approach writing for young readers?**

**M:** It makes me want to keep going, not pull back. The kids who most need to see themselves are often the ones being told they can't, and those are exactly the readers I'm writing for. Knowing that some of them might not be able to get to my book because of where they live—that weight doesn't make me want to soften anything. It makes me more certain that the work matters.

**R: Have there been other moments where you found yourself second-guessing whether something was going to be allowed?**

**M:** I added a scene very late in revisions to *A Wild Radiance*, a scene involving masturbation on the page, and I texted my editor, Ashley, "Did you read that?" And she said yes. And I said, "You didn't comment on it." And she said, "I would've said something if it wasn't okay." So I lean on that relationship a lot. That trust with your editor is everything. You need someone in your corner who'll tell you the truth.

**R: That trust in the reader really comes through in *A Wild Radiance*, which does something that still feels rare, centering a polycule relationship not as a spectacle but just as the way these characters love each other. How did that come about?**

**M:** It came from wanting to honor and then subvert the traditional love triangle. A girl meets two people, has to choose one, and that's the end of the story. I didn't want to do that. What I wanted to portray was expansiveness. The idea that queer relationships aren't limiting, that love doesn't have to work inside those narrow boundaries. And to me, that's in conversation with the idea of revolution itself.

**R: And it never reads like a statement. It just feels like teenagers trying to figure things out.**

**M:** That's exactly what it is. These are stressed-out teenagers surviving in real time. They're not inventing healthy communication strategies for poly relationships. They're just trying to make it through. And I think it's also an unusual poly relationship because they're not a threesome. They're not all sleeping together. I think with adults, everyone immediately assumes that, like, oh my God, a throuple, and the assumption itself says something. I just didn't want it to be salacious. I wanted it to feel like what it actually is, which is just people loving each other in whatever way makes sense to them.

**R: Alix E. Harrow called the book "furiously tender and radically hopeful." Even in the heavier material, there always seems to be this thread of hope running through your work. Is that intentional?**

**M:** The hopefulness is always intentional. Even when I'm writing something heavy, I'm always looking for that thread inside it. I write for the kids who didn't see themselves on shelves. I was one of those kids. And I never want to leave them without something to hold onto at the end.

**R: I want to close on something I think a lot of writers, especially early in their careers, really need to hear. You've talked about building a process that works around your actual life, your neurodivergence, and your chronic pain. How did you figure out what that looked like for you?**

**M:** Honestly, just stumbling into things and realizing what worked and doing them more. Short playlists, never longer than an hour, that I play on repeat for the entire time I'm writing a book to stay grounded in that emotional state. A candle I only light during that project to create a scent that belongs only to that book. A standing desk, because of my chronic pain and heating pads, so I can move around while I work. Word count goals instead of time-based goals because time-based goals don't work for my brain. None of that came from a handbook. It came from paying attention to myself.

**R: That feels like such an important distinction from finding the right system compared to finding your system.**

**M:** Exactly. And I think a good place to start is looking at the accommodations that disabled people use. But it doesn't have to be framed around disability, either. It can just be framed around what you need as an individual. Because if you don't stand up for what you need to support your creative life, nobody else ever will. Permit yourself to build the atmosphere that you need. What works this year might not work next year. Just keep paying attention and keep showing up.

**R: What would you say to a writer who feels like their brain is getting in the way of their writing?**

**M:** That what they might think is a disadvantage could end up being exactly what's unique about their writing and their process. As somebody with autism and ADHD, I could make the argument that it makes things harder, and yes, it does, and I've built accommodations that help me get the work done. But I think my perspective is a unique blend of the way my brain works and the way my imagination works. Those aren't two separate things. They're the same thing.



**The Acrobat**  
Emily Elbaum



**JC Alfier** (Query on Unanswered Correspondence) (they/them) draws artistic directions from photo-artists Toshiko Okanoue, Deborah Turbeville, Francesca Woodman, and Katrien De Blauwer. Their most recent poetry book, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *Faultline*, *Fugue*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *River Styx*, and *Vassar Review*.

**Tobi Alfier** (She Ain't Playing) has published in such journals as *Arkansas Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Cholla Needles*, *Gargoyle*, *James Dickey Review*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Permafrost*, *Ragaire*, and *Washington Square Review*. She is co-editor of *San Pedro River Review* ([www.bluehorsepress.com](http://www.bluehorsepress.com)).

**Mark D. Bennion** (Half-Birthday) has taught writing and literature courses at Brigham Young University-Idaho since 2000. Author of four books, he has recently published poems in *Aethlon*, *Catholic Poetry Reading Room*, *Irreantum*, *Maryland Literary Review*, and *The Twin Bill*. He and his wife, Kristine, are trying to figure out gardening and grandparenting. They welcome your advice.

**MD Bier** (Coal Miners' Country) is a binge reader who always has a book or camera in hand. Her writing reflects her passion for social change and social issues. She is an MFA candidate at William Paterson University and participates in several writing communities where she writes and studies. Her work has been published in various literary journals. She resides with her family and dog in New Jersey, where she enjoys gardening and walking.

**Solar Branka** (Gentleness) writes prose and poetry. It is during lockdowns that she invested more resource into writing. A volunteer moderator and post-processor, she's also working on a narrow-focused dictionary in English. Words in *Neon & Smoke*, *Freedom Fiction*, King River Press, and elsewhere. Find Branka at [solar.branka@gmail.com](mailto:solar.branka@gmail.com) or on Mastodon @[@solar.branka@mastodon.world](https://mstdn.social/@solar.branka)

**Joe Cappello** (Blood on the Flower) lives and writes in the picturesque desert country of Galisteo, NM. His short stories "Running Errands" and "The Codex of Lady Lucy Bugg" placed second and third, respectively, in the *New Mexico Press Women's 2025 Communication Contest*. Another story, "Peabody," appeared in the December 2025 anthology *Heartwarming Stories* published by *The Brussels Review*. He invites you to read more of his work at [joecappelloauthor.com](http://joecappelloauthor.com).

**Clarissa Cervantes** (Below the Surface) is a photographer /researcher. Clarissa's photography gallery includes images from all over the world. She finds inspiration to share her photographs with others through her creative lens, inviting the viewer to question the present, look closer, explore more the array of emotions, and follow the sunlight toward a brighter future.

**Story Chokurongerwa** (The Silent Farewell: The Loss of a Dream) taught English literature and history for 34 years before retiring into writing. His nonfiction explores themes of memory, regional history, and the evolving landscape of education. This is his first submission to *Shift*. Story lives in Bindura in Zimbabwe.

**Reena Choudhary** (Frozen Forest) has published artwork in such print and online publications as *The Perch Magazine* (mental health and substance), *The Climate Art Collection*, *Aunt Lute*, *Judy Magazine*, and *Farm Girl Magazine*, *t'Art*, and *Wildscape Literary Journal*. Her Art Axis Project Organizing Committee won the Silver Medal in India Art Contest (Khula Aasmaan) and *January House Literary Journal*.

**Arielle Combs** (Electrical Pole and Star People) is an illustration student at Ringling College of Art and Design. She grew up on Long Island, NY, and currently lives in Sarasota, FL. She likes experimenting with a variety of media such as paints, digital, and ink. Arielle enjoys plein air painting, murals, product design, as well as story-based illustrations. In her free time, she loves making tea, watching movies, and exploring the natural beauty of Florida. Her environment is a big inspiration for her work.

**Robert A. Cozzi** (Salt on Your Eyelashes)—New Jersey native, six-time eLit medalist, William Shakespeare Book Award finalist, and Story Monsters Dragonfly Award winner—is an established voice in contemporary poetry. He is the author of six published collections, including *Tide Pool of Words*, *Sky of Dreams*, *Blanket of Hearts*, and *Kaleidoscope of Colors I & II*. Educated at James Madison University, Cozzi has kept a daily handwritten journal since ninth grade, a practice he shares regularly with readers online. His work has appeared in publications such as *Bending Genres*, *Squid Literary*, and *Cosmic Daffodil*.

**Steve Denehan** (Blackness) lives in Kildare, Ireland, with his wife, Eimear, and daughter, Robin. He is the award-winning author of two chapbooks and seven poetry collections.

**Jake Dennis** (Opuntia) @PoetOfJazz is a Burmese-Australian Boorloo-based entertainer (singer/poet/actor), carer, and educator. A soulful jazz crooner shortlisted for the 2025 Noel Rowe Poetry Award for his debut collection *Journeying* (Fremantle Press, 2027). A 2025 WestWords Academy graduate, Writing WA Emerging Writer, and City of Swan Writer-in-Residence, Jake was recognized by judges of 15 competitions between 2023-2025 with prizes from *eMerge Magazine*, *Poetic Christi Press*, *Red Room Poetry*, and the *Rocky River 'Riters*. Jake loves animals, art, cooking, film & TV, gardening, literature, op-shopping, and travelling. Recently published by *Frogpond*, *Poetry Aotearoa*, *Quadrant*, *Rabbit*, *Splinter*, *Suspect*, *Wasafiri*, *Westerly*, etc. <https://www.PoetOfJazz.com/>.

**J.D. Dresner** (Chemical Offering) writes speculative fiction fueled by caffeine, chaos, and an alarming number of open browser tabs. His work has crash-landed in the pages of *Polar Borealis*, *Fission*, *Spectral Realms*, and other fine publications that haven't yet revoked his contributor status. One of his poems was even shortlisted for the Aurora Awards, which he now brings up at parties far too often. His upcoming fantasy series, *The Talisman Series*, launches in 2026, assuming reality holds together that long. He lives in British Columbia, where he also provides book layout and typesetting services for publishers. Visit him at <https://www.jddresner.com>, or check out his monthly newsletter for updates and free content at <https://jddresner.com/newsletter-signup>.

**Sean Thomas Dougherty** (The Years of Elegies) has recently published his book *Death Prefers the Minor Keys* from BOA Editions. New essays and poems are forthcoming in *Midway Journal*, *Mount Hope*, and *Poetry Ireland*.

**Mathias Dubilier** (The Fountain Pen) is a writer and mariner living in Burlington, VT.

**Emily Elbaum** (The Acrobat) is an illustrator pursuing a degree at Ringling College of Art and Design. Originally from the Seattle area, she now calls Sarasota, FL, her home. Her artistic style is characterized by abstract forms and a focus on organic, flowing shapes, often challenging traditional anatomical representations. She has spent her time since high school honing this art style in hopes of achieving its fullest. In addition to her illustration work, Emily specializes in costume design and enjoys delving into historical fashion trends. Her experience in technical theater, particularly stage management, has honed her organizational skills and attention to detail.

**Naomi Guevara** (Don't Bite People You Love) is a current MFA student at Wichita State University. She earned a bachelor's degree in English. Her work can be found in *Mikrokosmos* and *Canyon Voices*.

**Suzanne Heagy** (Umbrella Rhapsody) is a writer, reader, and editor. Her first novel *Love Lets Us Down* (All Nations Press) was released in November 2015 and recognized as a finalist in the 18th annual *Foreword Reviews' INDIEFAB* Book of the Year Awards. Her work can be found online at *BlazeVOX*, *Midwest Review*, and *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and in *The Anthology of Appalachian Literature* and elsewhere. Suzanne served as fiction editor of *Kestrel*, the art and literary journal at Fairmont State University, from 2008-2024. She writes a monthly column for the women's collective, Gloria Sirens, at <https://thegloriasirens.com/>.

**Laurie Hollman** (The Boy Becomes a Man) is a portrait, landscape, and abstract artist exhibiting in New York. She was recently awarded "Best of the Net 2024-2025" by *Pithead Chape* for an oil painting that will become the book cover for *We Are All in All of Us in Love and War*. She has written many award-winning parenting books in her capacity as a psychoanalyst, and *Are You Living with a Narcissist?* (2020), translated into four languages. Numerous shorter works (articles, poems, short stories, paintings, photography portfolios) are in magazines, from *The Huffington Post* to *The Brussels Review* to *The California Quarterly*, including two excerpts from her upcoming debut novel, *The Impasto Effect*. More at [lauriehollmanphd.com](http://lauriehollmanphd.com).

**Kate LaDew** (Virginia and Leonard Turn on the Radio (1937)) is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in studio art. She lives in Graham, NC, with her cats, Janis Joplin and James Cagney.

**David Anson Lee** (Lunar Surgery and The Man Who Fished for Shadows) is a Texas-based physician-poet born on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He writes into the strange apertures where body, landscape, and imagination blur, territory where precision meets mystery. His work has appeared in *Right Hand Pointing*, *Unbroken Journal*, *The Scarred Tree*, *Braided Way*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *The Orchards*, and other journals.

**Faye Levy** (Golden Medusa) majored in illustration and minored in art history at Ringling College of Art and Design. Previously she has worked as an art teacher at J's Art Studio and as a glass apprentice at Jordan Taub's Glass Studio. Currently she works as a student studio monitor at Ringling College. Her works focus on fantasy elements, combining attributes of dark and whimsical worlds through sculpture, painting, and more. Her work has been shown at several art fairs and exhibitions in Texas and Florida, including Wildflower! Arts and Music Festival 2024 and 2025 and The 2025 2nd Annual Creatures, Characters, + Curious Places Ringling exhibition.

**Lindsay Lippincott** (Don't Wake the Sleeping Dragon) is a third year illustration student at Ringling College of Art and Design and a freelance artist working to break into children's publishing. She has always had a passion for creating things and is inspired to have her art spread the same joy she feels while making each and every piece. The bright colors she uses are what set her apart from others; being able to integrate bright and fun hues in a way that is visually pleasing is her favorite part of the creative process.

**Floyd Liu** (Woman Lying in Flowers) is an illustrator interested in cultural and historical subjects. Her work focuses on visual storytelling rooted in history and tradition, often drawing on symbolic imagery and quiet, restrained compositions. Growing up in China, she developed an early interest in visual narratives shaped by cultural memory. She later pursued formal training in the United States and graduated from the Ringling College of Art and Design with a degree in illustration. Her practice reflects an ongoing engagement with the relationship between past and present through image-making.

**Shannon McGuire** (Roses) is a general illustration student studying at Ringling College of Art and Design. She was born and raised in Orlando, FL, and has pursued the visual arts throughout her life. She balanced competitive athletics and academic excellence, and continuously works to improve her creative skills. Her work has a special focus on the different forms of light and shadow and how color is interpreted through it. She uses both digital and traditional mediums such as sculpting, colored pencil, scratchboard, and oil painting. Shannon also works on a variety of illustrated book covers, children's book spreads, concert posters, and more.

**Trinidad Monteagudo Jackson** (The Oval Portrait) is a third-year illustration student at Ringling College of Art and Design with a deep appreciation for traditional art. Seeking to honor the techniques of the Old Masters while expanding beyond their limitations, Trinidad recreates traditional processes in digital form to push artistic boundaries. Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait," Trinidad created a conceptual book cover for the story using the traditional steps of painting within a digital platform.

**Mona Mehas** (*I've Never Been to Florida*) (she/her) is a retired disabled teacher in Indiana with eight published chapbooks. Twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize (*Paddler Press* 2023, *TV-63 Project* 2025) and Best New Poet (*Lucky Jefferson* 2024), Mona's work has appeared in multiple publications and online museums. She works with Cicada Song Press, and *Engage!*, an online *Star Trek* fan magazine. She's a former president of the Poetry Society of Indiana and is Indiana co-leader for Authors Against Book Bans. Mona is editing her second novel while perpetually distracted by her next chapbook.

**Nicole Meise** (*Family Photos*) is an artist/illustrator from Flemington, NJ, and a graduate of Ringling College of Art and Design. Inspired heavily by nature and her upbringing, she incorporates her love of the outdoors into each piece. Through the use of shapes, color, and texture, she strives to create work that feels fun and comforting, like pulling out a box of crayons and doodling to your heart's content. When she's not working on multiple projects, you can find her looking for all sorts of critters around her apartment, junk journaling, or being a homebody, cuddled up with a good book.

**Maria Ingrande Mora** (they/she) is the acclaimed author of *Fragile Remedy*, a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection; *Ranger Academy*, a queer Power Rangers comic series; *The Immeasurable Depth of You*, Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award finalist, which earned three starred reviews; and *A Wild Radiance*, which earned two starred reviews with Kirkus calling it a "fast-paced, romantic, abundantly queer historical fantasy." A graduate of the University of Florida, where they studied English with a concentration in poetry, Mora lives in St. Petersburg with three cats and two teenagers.

**Gabrielle Munslow** (*The Mirror That Remembered*) is a UK-based poet writing at the intersection of myth, grief, and transformation. Her work fuses the cosmic with the visceral, often inhabiting voices that are fierce, fractured, and defiantly alive. Her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Sky Island Journal*, and *The Lake*, with recent acceptances from *Half and One* and *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*. Her poetry leans into emotional intensity, surreal and mythic imagery, and the strange beauty of survival and becoming. She is at work on a body of mythopoetic and speculative poems exploring identity, memory, and loss.

**Arthur Neong** (Crow Feet on Zinc Roof) is a Malaysian Chinese. Having taught for 11 years, he now delineates the maelstrom of thoughts and visuals, hoping to make sense of it all. His works have appeared in *Mediterranean Poetry*, *Hemlock*, *Epoque Press*, *Eclectica*, *Ink & Ivy Lit*, *Parcham*, *Lunae Literature Review*, *PoArtMo*, *WayWords*, *Eksentrika*, *Five Minutes*, *Particle*, *Men Matters*, *Everscribe*, *Porch Litmag*, *SARE*, *Borderless*, *Tiffinbox Review*, *Tap Into Poetry*, *Malaysian Indie Fiction*, *ZiN Daily*, *Alien Buddha Press*, *Haiku Shack*, *Wise Owl*, *Black Glass Pages*, and several anthologies: *Chasing Sunsets*, *Malaysian Places And Spaces*, and *Contours of Him*. More work is forthcoming in *HOOT*, *ANMLY*, and *Suburban Witchcraft*.

**Alisa Nikishin** (Lovers by the Lake) is a freelance illustrator and designer based in Sarasota, FL, who works on nature-inspired digital and traditional illustrations, bringing imagination to life for magazines, murals, stationery, visual development, and more. She recently graduated from Ringling College of Art and Design with an illustration major and graphic design minor and is currently working at Disney as a creative design intern.

**Emily Rasmus** (Sitting Down with Maria Ingrande Mora) is a creative writing student at Ringling College of Art and Design who writes horror, science fiction, and romance. Her work explores gender, sexuality, and missed life lessons because she needs to understand them, creating a place where misfits feel seen. A devoted fan of feminist body horror and monsters as metaphor, she brings a melancholic, minimalist sensibility to each project. Her piece "Synthesize" was published in *Blood+Honey* in February 2026. To learn more about her and keep up to date on what she is working on, find her on Instagram @writtenbyemilyteresa or at emilyteresa.com.

**Abby Remer** (My Mother Sleeps Around . . . a Lot) left behind a 35-year career in the arts and education in 2017, at the age of 57, to pursue her thirst for writing. With publications about women artists in Western and non-Western traditions, along with three other books, she became the award-winning lead features writer for the *Martha's Vineyard Times*. For the last three years, Abby has found her true passion in writing powerful personal essays.

**David Romanda** (How Was Your Day?) has work in places such as *Columbia Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. He is the author of three books, including *Your Lover Stabbed in the Streets* (Frontenac House, 2025). Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. Check him out online: [www.romandapoetry.com](http://www.romandapoetry.com)

**Xioanny Santiago Ortiz** (Foxes) is a Puerto Rican artist and illustrator currently attending Ringling College of Art and Design. She specializes in creating colorful paintings of animals, fantasy, nature, and anthropomorphic characters. Her work has been selected for the 2025 and 2026 Best of Ringling Illustration Show, as well as the 2024 and 2026 Society of Illustrators Annual Student Competition. When she isn't illustrating, she enjoys using her camera to capture the beauty in surrounding everyday life.

**Naomi Van Putten** (Secretary Bird, cover) is a recent graduate of Ringling College of Art and Design. Majoring in illustration with a minor in creative writing, she loves to put narratives in her work. She has a love for any form of storytelling, historical and modern fashion, and vibrant colors.

**Ana Veselova** (Hourglass) considers this hourglass painting one of her proudest pieces before she attended Ringling College, drawn during senior year of high school. Now, she's in visual studies focusing on 2D animation, visual development, and the business of art and design. This painting was the start of it all. Looking back at this piece of work, she's able to see how much her skills have developed over time. It was done completely on Procreate, a practice piece of one of the items in her room.

**Finn Wilson** (River and Sparrows on Fire) is an artist from Portland, OR. He studied illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design, where he learned to use drawing and painting to communicate his ideas and to combine his artistic passion with his love of nature. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest gave him a thoughtful, imaginative view of the natural world that has greatly influenced his artwork. Finn uses imaginative humor to draw the viewer into his worlds, illuminating and bringing life to ordinary subjects. He is dedicated to using the drawing and painting skills he is developing to connect with the world.

Cover art: Naomi Van Putten

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