

PICTURA JOURNAL



December
2025

Pictura Journal

December 2025

Pictura Journal, December 2025

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www.picturajournal.com

ISSN: 3065-6621

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JC Alfier
Departure

John Muro

Stone Walls of Eastern Connecticut

I often think of them as sage-blue streams,
dividing the landscape with their silent
tributaries of granite, sometimes intersecting
as they meander and fall away near the
periphery of pasture down into the drooping
underbrush where there's no further place
to move on to, reining in whatever presents
itself – vernal pools of water, a limbless
tree, the few deer that often dot the fields
or low-creeping fog that settles between
them – while I stand apart on a dog-eared
day in mid-November and consider the
mystery of these spaces that are half-
erased by mists and where stones were
lifted and stacked with each row's cracks
and crevices sealed from both above and
below, replacing those deciduous borders
that are leaf-fringed and subject to decay.
Better to find a way back into the earth
and forgive the mind's want to confine
and partition things, and let the stones,
with their crust of frozen moss, rusty
needles of pine and asterisks of blue-
green lichen, traverse this land and
try to restrain what little is left of the
wilderness until it eventually finds its
way back and nature reclaims her own.

Betty Stanton
Thrush, Fallen

Here you are, tumbled from branches when the nest
did not hold; eyes still a blinding gray caul, and now

the dulled yellow of a mute beak, a fragile flight shattered
and spread out around a flurry of broken bones, the soft

brown and white of feathers that refused to be made wings.

Here is the chest that would have reddened, plumped,
here where the beak might have gone black and called

the *peek* and *tut* of alarm, the *whinny* of agitation, or
a cheerful, animated *chirp* from a squat throat, faster

at dawn than when the sun is high. Ten clear whistles.

Michael Lauchlan
Losing a Friend

in memory of Art Ritas

We know coronal ejecta
are hurtling at blink speed
to ignite the magnetosphere

and baffle our cell towers
so we shift on cold feet
waiting for what surpasses

a day's ordinary light. Until
brilliance arrives, the bass note
between dusk and night

is music enough. My friend
has left our conversation
for the blue opacity of memory.

He doesn't inhabit our sky
any more than his Everglades,
but he might linger in

the watchful tilt of our heads
as we scan the vast,
incandescent dark.

Sarah Whitacre
Sunup in Ohio

corncountry morning re-dews
the clover lawn. the sun turns fawn fur
from roadside half-hollow deer carcasses
into spun gold,
breaks through holes on tattered flags,
casts cross-shaped shadows
on barnsides. inside,
hooves of steel and keratin kick
at sawdust, rising in air like the dirt
from driveways with their rusting Fords
sputtering awake.
a matted, muddied dog
tethered to a porch beam, circles endlessly
making his bed on body-flattened ground.
a leaf-logged river sludges past
rapids and pushes the floe
of northern geese forward.
the sun pushes forward, spreading
over downtown clocktowers and cop shops,
the Ohio Byway and algae-bloomed Erie,
silos of grain from fields
harvested before the early fall frost.

im there, i could be
anywhere but im staying
with the midwestern morning
reaping the late july sun
in silence scented
of burnt coffee
and blacktop worms
swollen from the last evening rain

Sarah Whitacre

High School Sweetheart Gender Envy

How he wore his white tees, boxy and all-american
A shallow impersonation of Hollywood greats

His giant hands, splayed, climbing a tree
Shucking dried cicada shells in his wake

When he'd kneel by the nightstand, praying
A pale, lamplight halo hovering above

Beach-going, wrestling with the undertow,
Leaving victorious with a crown of sand-crustled curls

His careless motion, his cocked-elbow arms
Flinging loose like a switchblade

A squared jaw propping his puppet-mouthed smile
Reaching forever outward, satisfied

Joseph Geskey

In Praise of the Common Yarrow

The yarrow was my childhood flower.
The perennial battle between aphids
and spittlebugs versus wasps and hoverflies
had a decisive winner one summer:
a field filled with white flat-topped flowers,
providing shelter and nectar for both the winged
and the wingless. Good enough for Achilles
to carry into battle to treat wounded soldiers
by compressing crushed leaves against wounds.
The stalks of the plant could also be used
for divination and to serve as protection.
Hung over a doorway, or loosely strewn
in the shape of a cross on the steps
before walking into my house, I prayed
my father wasn't drinking, prepared just in case.

John Ballard

Hope

It's the sort of day
when the mirror snips
stop staring, a cloudburst
thunders its slick *don't*
get wet advice, and then
a man sauntering past
the queue I'm in
chides *don't just stand there—*
glib comics all. Or
on my way here
that putrefied boxcar
in the twilit trainyard,
its graffitied bubble-art *hope*
droll enough for a quick
drive-by titter, but also,
let's be fair, the first decent
herald of my day.
The sense of a beginning
clearly owed me
by the world (*hell*, the universe!),
my dues-paying no longer
in arrears, all caught up
I'm more or less sure.
Now the line I'm in
at last edging toward
the wizard in her festooned
tent off the circus midway.
It's said she knows her way
around a palm, can trace

each groove and rut
to its illogical, blessed end.
And up next, my own sweaty,
chafed mitt, un-held
for days and days,
though modest whiz
in its own right
at grasping at straws.

D. Frederick Thomas

Litany

Neighbor sneezes, neighbor
complains that other neighbor is
bothering her, neighbors
lie together on the bed,
blinds open, lights off, only
visible through the open
window by the glow of their
phones held above
their faces.

Neighbor across the street has
monitor around her ankle, walks
heavy on each alternating step,
little dog follows her
around, she cut her hair
short and bleached it,
comes and goes, relaxed
restrictions.

Last night, sounds of
running outside, J. thought
it was cops, crept out
onto the deck to
see but everything was
still, only a light mist
in the air. Neighbor
next door has a woman
clean his house
every Monday.

Neighbors through the
wall just moved in, so
loud. Are *we* that loud?

Ran into an old
neighbor the other day,
kids didn't remember her,
French accent, couldn't
remember the name of
her son, she was
shopping with her mother, mother
wandered off, just talked for
a minute or two, old garden
a mess though the wall
is still there.

Poetics of interruptibility. Secrecy
is vulnerability's precondition.

Brother still alive. Parents
in therapy. Paused reading
Carson when the neighbor
sneezed. The sixth
tango. Crushed grapes.
Crushing grapes.

Litsa Dremousis
Sweet Murder

The crows caw
outside my window
and to me
it sounds like a symphony.
I'm quite ill
and each day
muster my dwindling strength
to walk
my dog Jordan
through this fentanyl foil
neighborhood.
Back home,
we play
hallway fetch
and I sing
his praises—

—Good boy, Jordan!

Good boy!—

while the pain further encroaches
with no remedy.
I think
maybe the crows know
and stop by to keep us company.
Perhaps that sounds foolish
but as loved ones
become more frightened
the sicker I become
and I still manage
to find
redeeming qualities

in most of them
it doesn't seem ridiculous
that the crows
understand it all
at least a little bit
better.

Either way
it's lovely to think
maybe Jordan and I
are less
alone.

Jeff Cove

Sleeping on Your Side

There's no moonlight
just the pale blue wash of the TV
casting slow-moving shadows
on your back.

You've curled inward
like a comma left
at the end of a thought.

I'm not thinking much—
just tracing the slope of your ribs
with my eyes,
mapping the valley
between shoulder blade and spine.

It looks like the track
I built as a kid—
foam hills and reckless loops
where my favorite car
always stuck the landing.

If I had one now,
I'd send it soaring
off your hip bone,
make it jump the mole
below your shoulder,
land softly between
the sheets and your breath.

You stir.
And the whole landscape shifts.

Claire Lee

The House in Which I Live

The house in which I live will never be safe from the bomb. It hums beneath the floorboards, a restless murmur as ordinary as heat itself, rising from the sidewalks like a warning no one hears until after. Some days it sounds like condensation slipping down scaffolding, or the hush of air bracing itself against its own weight – others, it's something too patient to be named. The house in which I live is a gentle ruse, tilted towards young couples who mistake the exposed brick for scripture, the stucco ceiling as a kind of inherited sky. They do not see how the walls lean inward, as if listening for the sound of breaking. The family hums lullabies that blur into slogans, songs that vanish halfway through. These days, the house is beautiful in the way a carousel is beautiful: always leaving, always about to arrive. People drift in and out, promises echoing behind them like coats outgrown by trend. They discuss motion like it's synonymous with salvation, like stillness is a shirt that never fit right. My friend says everywhere I touch explodes. The house has a cement cellar with no ventilation, only the sound of a breath that I can't name as mine. They would find my body on the floor if I didn't have the bomb. The house was constructed by a man who I would later realize preferred me dead to talking. He fell in love with my unique quality of being around. I fell in love with the way his collarbone protruded from his shoulder. In my sleep, I tear it loose with my teeth. The bomb goes off every time I open my eyes. I wake with blood in my mouth and nothing to show for it but morning and debris. I can't figure out how to be alive and intact all at once. How to exist without bracing for the aftermath. The house in which I live was built from what was left. I gather the rubble like offerings, sharp enough to leave scars, but I love the way the blood tastes. I rebuild my house the way others go to church – again and again, knowing how it ends. I blow it up like a prayer, not with a fuse but on my knees.

Shannon Dunn

fruit anatomy apropos of a human mouth

the brambles produce the
sweetest berries, whose
seeds grit in my throat and

juice i lick off my fingers—
sticky as the southern air that
clings to me like a lost child.

sometimes you're both the
loneliness and the hand holding
it, and though i find comfort

i still ache for connection—
want suffering off my lips like
syrup from a too-ripe peach:

i clamor desperately for a taste,
but could never get my tongue
to sit just right between my teeth.

Dan Bodah

I believe that coy dogs exist

"Scientists say there's no dog in the mix."

—Brian Mann, *North Country Public Radio*

1

the river's skin bends above
rocks just beneath
the surface
ripples, then
warps and
finally
tears
into rapid foam
around a stone
tooth

2

bored moon
rubs its face
with witch hazel
in the mirror
a hint

who cares
about these prayer
flags of clouds
frayed
October
winds

3

ribs
the susceptible
kid hungry
for success
grey hunger

echoing
laughter
among the scotch
pines

4

you call it a coy dog
call it a coy wolf
coy teeth
the grey
to the coy heart

5

what I know
piles up at the belly
over the noble brow
tail at the back
and April
shears

Marisca Pichette

Art museum: a study in six senses

Faded flowers *step* translucent
 birds old, orphaned *step*
red & black distance taken from **Kanien'kehá:ka**
 lavender tears, still *step* life
Alive, in plain sight
 mobility leaves berries
bare, dry,
 a talisman far away—
old old old *echo*
 Lilac. **Kanien'kehá:ka** oasis, stone desert
summer, oil & colour. Grass
 beams humid, in profile.
Camouflage *echo* hiding **Kanien'kehá:ka** proximity.
 Time & infancy, family
sleep a scale a god
 Kanien'kehá:ka etched in distance,
pocket portable purple earth,
 & sun top travel—**Kanien'kehá:ka**
bright, imposing, large *echo echo echo*
 labels close.
Turn sunshine *step* into
 marbled reflections.
Six *step* palettes, tiny **Kanien'kehá:ka**
 cradle, *step* bottom beetle room.

Glenis Moore

Plums

My husband is cooking plums.
Rosey gold in their ripeness,
he slices each one in half,
with clinical precision,
before prizing out the stone
and discarding it onto
the soiled worktop.
He will stew them without sugar
over a slow heat while
the kitchen fills with the sweet
smells of summer and the threat
of winter's cold.
But when we eat them it is
autumn that I will recall
with its ageing quiet sun
and the smoke that follows
a year's decay.

Sean Wang
Settlement Report

Stabila chirps once, sets its red coin down.
Plumb reads true; the jamb won't take a door.
The elevator lists, its numbers hold their story.

Unit 4B hums. The pulse-ox holds at ninety-two.
A green line learns the corridor as conduit,
baulks at the corner, drags its green memory.

Scissors lift a sleeve. Chlorhexidine wakes,
cold as a coin under the tongue.
Under the tiles a pocket gathers heat.

I kneel and thumb the grout. The mastic shines.
Dark threads vein each seam. I want the grout to hold.
My mother's ring ('95 inside) tests the gap.

It skates, catches, ticks against the edge.
The nurse dots skin for the drip, says, Pressure
on the vein. I sign where they point. I sign fast.

Chart writes stable. Survey: minor movement.
Hinge of the day: corridor to room, room to sill.
At the threshold a hairline opens and runs.

It isn't hunger. It's settlement, slow as sleep:
joist by joist the room forgets its weight.
The line keeps its curve, the monitor keeps its green.

We wipe the tile, prime the site, set tape, count drops,
listen for the lift to stop. The red coin wobbles,
goes slightly oval, works the crack, rings once,

Wang

a laser penny trying to learn the floor,
circling until the floor admits its fall.

Sean Wang
Queue Rope

Salt on our tongues as we cross.
Passports scraped, edges clipped.
Gravel burns west underfoot.
A guard on break says, Move the line,
lighter clicking as he watches the drag.
Smoke knots; birds lift, flushing the lane,
only birds, the aisle they open.

Wind rakes the field. Salt crusts skin.
Hair pulls toward the cut river's gloss,
diesel lays its leash of slick.
Threat and tether, the rope keeps its heat,
a coil we share, teaching its first country.
Not the center lane, the one with chevrons,
kept for vans that never stop.

Up the road, at the state sign shop,
welders feed flux into turnstiles, hammer arrows
bright enough to say where bodies feed.
The scanner ticks. We merge. We wait.
Ink squares dry on our wrists.
A body is proof, not a metaphor.
I kept the number. It burned easy.

Processed, not welcomed, we shoulder together,
lift the checkpoint bar by its cold teeth,
not how the pamphlets say, but here.
One body takes the weight,
hands hot on rope, voice rough with the grit
the rope makes, then keeps,
line after line, holding.



Michael Shoemaker

Storm in the Morning / Funningur, Faroe Islands

Shivani Sivagurunathan

100

My skin is the skin of old fruit and my flesh is fat but I am not a frog. I croak only when it is five in the morning and Lepoh wheels me to the bathroom to souse me in water. Then I will sing about cicadas and cumin and grief. Lepoh listens although she doesn't know my language and later asks for a translation. 'Cicada flies from leaf to leaf / His legs are strong but his heart is not / Cumin heals the grief / When the body is hot / The days, my child, are long / Oh so long.' Lepoh never replies. I don't think she understands. She says one thing and I don't know it. I say one thing and she nods. I am waiting for my grandchild to pleat my hair and burn garlic for me.

The child comes after I hear the engine start softly, loudly, then softly again. She is a thin, sedate sort of child and they think she is slow but she ties a good braid. She sits next to me like a dog and speaks only to me. With the rest, she hides underneath my sarong. She has made it into a tent. I know this child. She will become dangerous and face danger later in life. Her questions are not big and bold. She asks, "When will that mango drop?" I pat her head and listen for the fruit's agitation. The child must always be covered with a blanket and sung to so she knows she is made of glass. Stained glass from St. Mary's church on Jalan Gasing. She is gifted at burning garlic. We smell pungent together. Lepoh has bought her two pairs of socks and a packet of Jujups. Lepoh must be dreaming of other things again. When the child goes, Lepoh spins my wheels and we exchange notes about our old

homes. “Fried fish,” she says. “Cold dawn,” I say. “Baby skin,” she says. “Strong sea,” I say. I am forced into her language. A shaky thing but she nods and picks up the broom and banishes dust from my nose which is becoming stuck every day while I wait for my fifty grandchildren.

Thirty have come today. I know exactly what each one will become. Three will die before they are half-old. Twenty will die before they die. Seven will make the most of things and be happy for a few days each year. But you cannot tell them these things. Sometimes I take Kasturi aside and tell her about how things start. She is the oldest and is going away to better her brain. “The worst fun is the kind that makes you like it so much that you can’t stop. No one deserves too much of one thing,” I tell her. But it is no use. She is one of the three and she will kill the fun in her fun years and she will never have children and will forever be lost. My glass child doesn’t know how to talk to the others. My sarong becomes a tent until Raju arrives and the child goes to him to be teased. There is laughter and cake and pickle and my spectacles are thick but I can see clearly. This is the party of my last days. They are telling jokes and farting and they don’t speak of love but they are breathing in my house, right in front of my glaucoma eyes, and there, I see it, the mango has dropped. “Anura,” I say and my glass child runs to sit at my feet. I send her out to the mango and she returns with a clean aura. The mango can’t feed thirty grandchildren and a grandmother. I don’t have to tell Anura to hide it under Lepoh’s bed. I also don’t have to tell her to bring out the biscuit tin from under my

bed. A biscuit tin can feed thirty grandchildren and a grandmother. Later tonight Anura, Lepoh and I will eat mango and burned garlic. I am weeping but I tell them that it is what old eyes do. Kasturi will be in a coffin not long after me. And Raju will be lying on a sanatorium bed with his head on a pillow. And this sunlight that comes into the house as they cackle and sing and eat will be bent the other way. This will be the house of their past to which they will return in daydreams when the clouds are low and there is thunder. They will think of me and the green glass windows and the rat-eaten zinc roof and the lumpy floor and wonder what had become of them. They will think of the smell of sweat and incense and weep in double-locked toilets. And then the coconut trees will sway more and the color green itself will change to become thick like our blood. They will see god in the crumbled walls of this house and remember the giant ants in the holes of our trees. Kasturi, Dev and Sanjay too, as they unknowingly reach death, will think of themselves sitting in these old wood-smelling chairs eating monkey nuts and tilting back to laugh. Wild, loose laughter. This house will be their country.

Anura was born on the day they told me I would never use my feet again. I didn't mind, especially when I heard they were sending a woman called Lepoh to spin me around in the chair and take me to places I wanted to go to. When they placed Anura in my arms at two weeks old I knew she would be maimed when the house was no longer my house where the others ran and dug for gold. She would have to dig for gold somewhere else, maybe in her nose. I looked deep into her

small fruit-face and stroked her back until she fell asleep and all I could feel was her small, hot breath just above my breast. Every day, until now, she comes to see me in the house, 100, not named by my late husband, but by his children. To us 100 is all crooked tap and leaking roof and elephant ants and fish curry and mangoes and jokes and cobwebs and incense and dead lizards and storytelling. I've told them about ghosts and the boat and the Japanese Occupation and how I became a widow. Anura will invent these stories again later, much later.

They leave in clumps until finally only Anura, Lepoh and I are left. We sit on the front porch while Anura counts the stars, loses her concentration and then begins again. I don't tell her she can never know how many stars there are. She must learn to count them. We don't eat the mango yet. It lies on Lepoh's lap and she looks at me now and again to ask, "Mama, when to cut?" Not yet, I tell her, not just yet. I sing in Tamil about stars setting fire to fields and when they ask me to translate I move on to my next number. I sing about Sri Lanka and my mother and the green morning hills. This time they don't ask for a translation. They have gone sleepy and the child sits on Lepoh's lap, above the mango, her eyes fluttering. Lepoh, half asleep, half awake, sings along with me. She sings about Indonesia and her son and cockerels. Soon they are both asleep and I am left awake alone. There is lightning and thunder but the rain hasn't come yet. I have never been frightened of this but tonight I am. The lightning comes again and again and I feel it sting me. It nips the plants and flowers and trees and stray cats. The world is bright like I have never seen it. We are all being

electrocuted without even knowing that this electricity is going into the bones and the blood and we will see other things after this. I want to go inside but Lepoh is snoring and the child has fallen into a good sleeping position. And then, as if something is being violently pulled out of somewhere, I hear the loudest sound I have ever heard and in seconds the windows are smashed and the bricks are collapsing. Lepoh wakes up and the child screams. She spins me around and turns me towards the side of the house. There we see the mango tree, split in two, lying one half here, the other half there, on fragments of brick. I look at Anura and correct myself. Yes, she will be dangerous but she will be no thug or thief or killer. After all she is a witness and she's the fiftieth and if you double that you get a hundred and I can see her flying around in the white holes of zeroes. I will teach her what to do when tragedy happens, now that she has her first full tragedy to deal with. I will show my glass child how to let go of the mango tree and find new roots.

Ben R. Lockwood

Cartography

Richard closes the door of the hearse and in the window's reflection he sees his tie is loose. He'd re-tied it twice at the funeral home, but it's loose again, and he stands there looking at himself, watching the tie flap in the wind and wondering whether he's Charon or Sisyphus while the dead man's family members gather around the burial plot.

The mourners all have the same look on their faces—somber, respectful, always nodding and saying, “I know, I know.” For some reason he's reminded of the time a grieving woman asked him to drive the body of her father past his old farmhouse before the burial. He'd told her that unfortunately, it wasn't something the funeral home could accommodate, but afterwards he'd driven to the address out of curiosity and found nothing but empty countryside and an old, abandoned barn with the words “Where are you going?” spray-painted on the side.

Once the family have all made their way to the plot, Richard summons the pallbearers and meets them at the back of the hearse. The dead man's family members are all tall and lanky, and the men have to take short, awkward steps while they carry the casket. After they secure it onto the pulley straps, he makes a joke about putting them to work for free. It's the same joke he makes every time, and he always thinks nobody will laugh but they always do.

When he steps back from the casket the wind picks back up. Dresses and jackets and leaves are all momentarily caught up in the breeze before it dies down, and then the cemetery is still again. He looks around and notices the priest has left, then he realizes the family members are all staring at him, as if they're expecting him to say something. He looks at the headstone that reads Paul Brunsmeyer, but he didn't know the man and no words come to him and the clouds turn gray and he can feel his tie loosen.

“Thank you all for coming,” he eventually says. “Judith and the family are all glad that you could be here with us today to honor Paul's memory. We carry our lost loved ones with us, and there's a grace in being here to memorialize their departure. And I believe there's a dinner to celebrate the deceased after you leave the cemetery?” He isn't sure if it was enough, but several of the family members nod and begin discussing the details, and he wonders who has authority over the dead as he gazes out across the grounds, watching leaves fall from the trees.

The family members stay for the respectable amount of time before wandering off towards their vehicles, two or three at a time. A few of them smile and thank him, and more leaves fall from the trees when he tells them how honored he is to be here with them today.

After the last of them is gone, he signals to the grounds workers to begin lowering the casket. The pulley system creaks when they start cranking the lever and it takes them a few tries before it catches and begins to lower. He watches the casket sink into the

ground for a while, then he hears a large bird screech overhead, and he watches that instead.

As the workers are nearly finished, he feels a presence beside him and flinches when he finds an older man standing there, staring at the headstone. The man turns to him and nods.

“Palmer,” he says.

Richard nods back. “Richard.”

“I knew him,” the man says, nodding his head toward the hole this time, then pulling a pack of cigarettes from his front pocket and lighting one.

“Yeah?” Richard says. “What was he like?”

The old man puckers his face like he's about to spit, but doesn't, then says, “Was in an accident some years back, hit his head hard, wasn't quite right after that. Couldn't read a map or remember directions. He was always getting lost.” The man holds his hand up and turns it, like twisting a knob, and says, “Dislocated his spatial fix.”

Richard tries to think about what life would be like without spatial awareness but can't really imagine it. He thinks about being perpetually lost, located in time but not in space, and the two of them stand there in silence for a while, before a gust of wind picks up and a nearby flag clangs against a pole in the breeze. Eventually he says, “Well, at least he can find his way now.”

“To where?” the old man says, then he drops his cigarette butt, steps on it, and walks away.

Later, when he gets into the hearse, Richard looks out over the empty cemetery grounds. Leaves are still falling and swirling in the breeze, and he wonders if the patterns they make on the ground are a map he can't read, directions to a place he'll never find. Then he takes off his tie and starts the car.

Bill Cook
Montana Sky

Marty lowers her head to the train track. She presses her sunburnt cheek to the warm rail.

“You can hear them,” she says, “long before you see them.”

Down the slope, in a shaded coulee, is a dead sparrowhawk. We found it earlier; its wings are like petals pressed neatly together. We touch the bird anyway.

Marty says, “It's okay. It ain't gonna hurt you none.” She pokes it with a stick.

“What about Aunt Hilma? She said dead birds will make you sick.”

Marty walks ahead, arms out like wings. She tiptoes along blue steel. “Mamma said that yesterday.” She slips onto the gravel, smiles. “And you won't tell her, right?”

She means lying in summer grass. Salt and dry earth on our damp clothes—sun reflected in her long hair.

I hold my hand to my brow. It's so bright, the Montana sky.

“Like it dares us,” I say.

Marty tumbles into the grass.

Then I do.

Joel Tomfohr
Korean Superette

I am in the bathroom trying to punch the lights out of me. Coffee tastes weird after you cry. Some exquisite caramel you've never had before.

I am at my intake reciting my personal history. I sit on a couch in an empty room with pale yellow walls. Empty except for a standing desk with a PC on it and a social worker taking dictation. She has thick black glasses and a red mesh blouse. My story is a cadaver being wheeled out onto the floor of an anatomical theater.

On my way home, I drive past the Korean superette. I see my eyes in the rearview. I see that I am punching myself out. When I am a boy, my eyes sting while I drown in the chlorinated water of a pool. I release my own neck and the crown of my head breaks to the surface. I am dripping wet, and I am gasping for breath and now I am reborn.



Tinamarie Cox
Window Nap



Tinamarie Cox
Hardly Working

Candice M. Kelsey
1-800-GOT-JUNK

charges by the pound,
 so I'm burning what's left.
Torching my mildewed garage-library,
 90s book-stack education, in the fire pit
 of this rental sold to be rendered
 a pile of rubble like
 the crumpled body of Francis Macomber
 or a marriage.
I gaze into the deep wordlessness of this day.
See how much we cannot own.
Annotations become ash, and words once loved
 sing a final perfume. Heat
 shadows from white hills, Havana cafés, a muleta.
Papa would note the sexual mimicry of flames,
 pen falling to page this brush-fire moment
 as I would very much like to do.
At the very least, I am sure he'd be pleased
 I turned Faulkner to ash, right after Stein.

Candice M. Kelsey

Current

Most days
I am the Volga,
west then south
in the darkness,
powerful mother,
long-suffering.

But today
I am insatiable.

A lover sprawled
across this carnal
basin, impatient
to reach the salt
and foam of your
Caspian Sea.

Miranda R. Carter
To Live With Fire

Beautiful L.A. is on fire.

I type these words beneath a digital photograph of Los Angeles on my boyfriend's couch in Indiana, where I live now. It is early January, and the neighbors are snowblowing their driveways, the below-freezing atmosphere shelled-out and blank over the lookalike houses and clotted cornfields while California, the rib of America, burns.

It seems incomprehensible when living anywhere frigid and snow-laden that there are fires in January, incomprehensible, I have learned, to young Indianans that there is such thing as "fire season" whatsoever. Here houses may burn or crashed trucks may catch fire or farmers may blacken their fields after harvest, but there are no oversized suns glaring red over reedy grasses. There are no strawberry sunsets syruping the heavy grey haze, no stopping of the lungs, no charred chunks of ash barreling toward windshields on blue morning drives.

It is difficult to explain what it is like to live with fire. As a daughter of the West, fire season happened annually—a slender bookmark between the end of summer and the start of school. Smoke rolled in from all corners of the western frontier, often from wildfires but sometimes from crops and buildings, too, lodges and wineries and

occasionally homes. During a family reunion once in Seeley Lake, the Jocko Lake Fire crept too close to the township and threatened to jump the water; we were evacuated, and my father bought a caffeinated drink at a gas station so he could drive all night without tiring. The first days of school often began with quick darts from cars to our buildings. We'd guzzle water to prevent headaches and soften the linings of our nose and throat, eyes itchy and bloodshot. Post-college, I was living on a mountaintop when the smoke came in—grey so thick and textured it behaved like winter fog, bending back the luminosity of headlights and shrouding vehicles before and behind me. I drove tentatively to work and wore wet t-shirts to bed, unable to crack the windows at night to cool the house of its summer temp. Only from the crown of the mountain could I glimpse the sun and see the way the smoke layered over the earth: softening the prickle of pines and wildflower stems, glazing the rash and scatter of summer blooms and spindly trees in a warm, suspended haze.

In other words: To live with fire is to live among upendings, to straddle the bizarre space between regularity and emergency. It is going to work or dropping mail or chopping vegetables in the kitchen while the windows grey from transient smoke, assuming normalcy while being vaguely alert to public announcements and ringing phones. The world narrows and canopies and dissolves a little, shrinking human focus from the borders of the tangible and instead widening to humbling realities: the power of a raging land and our smallness inside of it, a lesson in limited control.

It is also learning that the word “evacuate” is not always synonymous with “escape.” As a child at nightfall in the backseat of that car evacuating Seeley, the sky was opalesque, reflecting dully on the water, the air dry and hot and hard to breathe, the fire near enough to push us to the highway but not close enough to show flames. We drove a smooth and dark five hours then fell into beds enveloped by cleaner air. Comparatively, a video from six years ago of a woman escaping the Woolsey Fire in Southern California by car is hellish. Fire everywhere. Her pleas to God layer over the scarlet smoke roiling against her windshield, the scorched hills arching into a tunnel ablaze. Sparks spit; she gasps and sobs. It’s a wonder the tires don’t melt, that the belly of the car doesn’t cook and explode.

Lightning storms caused the Jocko Lake Wildfire near Seeley, while electrical equipment caused the Woolsey Fire, which proceeded to ravage nearly one hundred thousand acres in Ventura and Los Angeles Counties over the course of thirteen days. Three people died in addition to the eighty-five that perished as a result of the Camp Fire in Butte County that year, also caused by an electrical concern.

Electricity, lightning, and human blunders are the top causes of fire in the West, but it is the climate, specifically the winds, that prime the earth and carry the fire across it.

Joan Didion famously wrote about the Santa Ana winds and the way they “affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability.” The 1960s essay reveals a nihilistic

view of California, using words like “catastrophe” and “apocalypse,” and describes a view reminiscent of the viral Woolsey Fire video: “For days one could drive the Harbor Freeway and see the city on fire, just as we had always known it would be in the end.” The final sentence: “The winds show us how close to the edge we are.”

In other words, the fires are not new. But there is something ominous and symbolic about them, something existential.

This felt particularly true this year. I first heard about Los Angeles burning from a man at Barton’s whose family originated in California but did not understand the severity until the day after. Photos of the initial damage flooded newsfeeds. My cousin, a fire chief in Portland, dispatched with a team to help California crews contain the flames. Pictures circulated of bright pink fire retardant falling from helicopters onto suburban roofs, coating classic cars and mailboxes. I texted the people I loved there. None of them had been forced out—yet—but they lived among the fire apprehensively, poised and waiting. I read a caption by Dr. Jacqui Wilkins from Xálish Medicines in response to the fires in which she writes: “Fire is a part of Nature, part of our environment, a relative...we ARE Nature.... When will we collectively remember?”

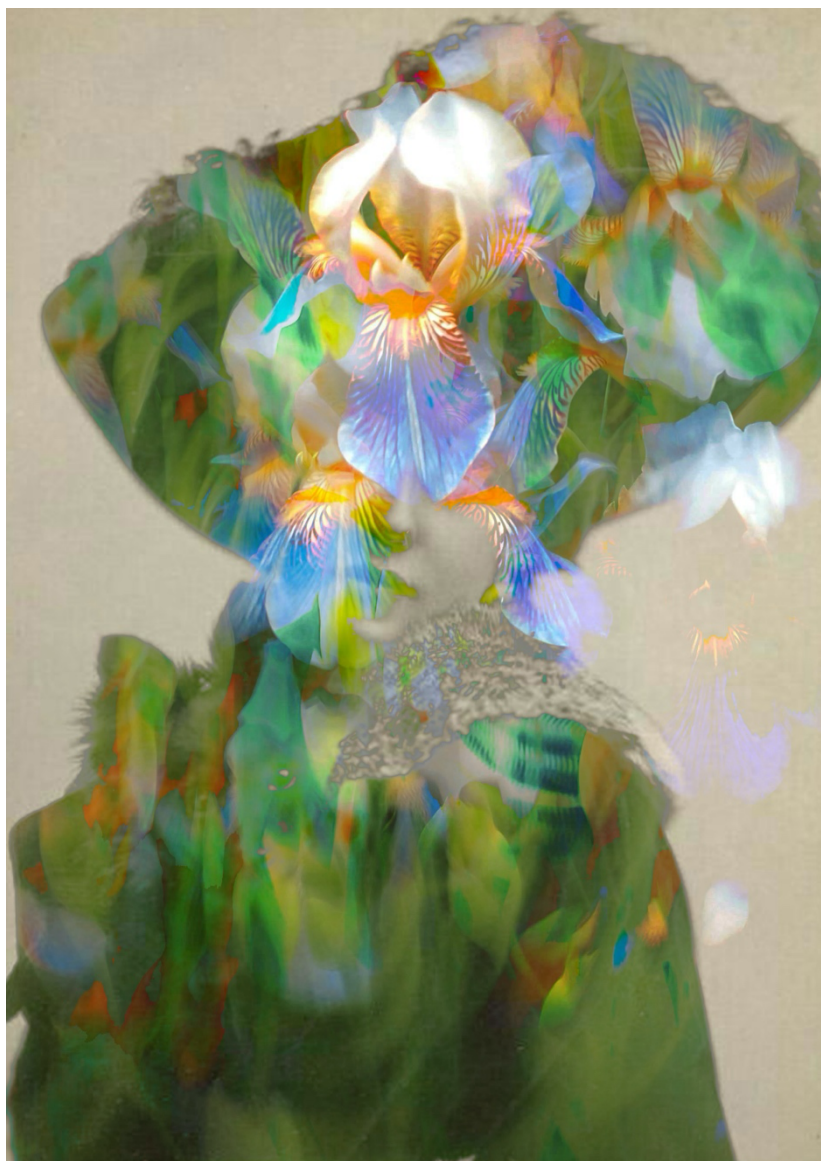
Since, I have spent wide windows of time processing what it means to expect fire, to know that it is not new, nor an enemy yet feel so gripped this particular year by these particular fires. I have concluded it is due in part to recognizing that the city burning is a

glimpse of our dismal future if the climate continues to evolve. Another part loves California as if it were a person, and aches to protect its golden arms and oceanic eyes, its aliveness, its aura of perpetuity. Lastly it is because I do not want these fires to be what they are, which is an admission that a place so kept can burn before it sinks into the sea; that perhaps we have entered a time in which we in so many ways are close to the edge—no longer part of a rupture-repair cycle, but an end.

What kind of end I am not sure, but in the background of my own driving and dropping and chopping in Indiana, I am mentally drawn back all the time to the one dry August I drove to Montana and smelt the smoke before I saw it: the aisle of fire that swallowed the embankment and the mountain beyond. Patches of flame reached toward the car, glittering in blazing black patches of perishing trees and grassland. Firefighters used the road for emergency vehicles, and a helicopter whipped overhead. I could feel the blunt heat inside the cab of my car, and for a moment the whole world was the enormity of that seared hillside. I considered turning around but hurried along.



Mirjana Miric
Suburban Riddle



Mirjana Miric
Flowering Twilight

Lisa Brodsky
The Seat Beside Me

We were driving west, towards home, down a two-lane memory, the sky painted in strokes of peach and smoke—seven hours to go. My mother sat beside me, shifting in her seat as the car gently hummed beneath us. She tugged the seatbelt away from her collarbone, tucked her soft, floral pillow behind her neck—the kind that always smelled faintly of lavender and a hint of bleach—and patted it twice with the edge of her hand.

She let out a sigh, long and low, the kind that seemed to come from somewhere older than her lungs. Her eyelids fluttered, heavy with sleep, but not yet surrendered. She nestled deeper into the seat, her fingers laced in her lap like a prayer someone forgot to finish.

She spoke the street names as we passed them, one by one, like she was reciting Kaddish.

“France Avenue,” she said, her voice clear, steady.

“Normandale Boulevard.”

Each name landed gently in the space between us, like a stone placed on a grave.

“Eden Prairie Road,” she called next, her tone softening, so soft I was not even sure of the words, only the rhythm of her voice,

like a half-spoken prayer. The names floated like mist, no longer signs to follow, but echoes—holy and vanishing—slipping into the space where the soul lingers, just beyond the veil, listening.

“Angel Crest,” I think she said next.

Her voice was thinner now, as if traveling from further away.

I kept my hands on the wheel, my eyes on the horizon, but I could no longer make out the words—only the cadence, like wind through reeds or the fading bars of a lullaby in a dream. Inside, I was chasing the echo of her voice, the music of it, already slipping from memory like a song half-forgotten.

I thought about asking if she wanted a snack, or if she needed a bathroom break—but something in me held back, as if I knew not to interrupt whatever space she was drifting into.

“Opportunity Drive,” she whispered.

“Last Chance Lane...”

Each name grew fainter, dissolving into the air between us like breath on a winter window.

When we passed Silent Grove, she said nothing at all. But I heard it anyway; heard it in the hush that bloomed inside the car.

I kept driving. Maybe she had fallen asleep. I didn't turn to check. The silence didn't ask for questions. The hum of the engine filled the space where her voice had been, and I told myself she was just resting, that any moment she'd stir and say something like Bluebird Lane or Lost Creek Road, and I'd smile and nod.

The road unwound ahead like a thread from an old spool. The trees thickened. The sky darkened. The names on the signs began to blur, their letters curling into shadow, so I started naming the roads myself—End of Trail, Baba's Bay, Fading Light Road—names that felt older than asphalt, as if sung by the stars or passed down from stories no one tells anymore.

And then, without deciding to, I looked.

Her seat was empty.

The window was down an inch, letting in the hush of dusk and wind and what remained—the trace of her perfume, the warmth she left behind, and the faint hush of something not quite gone.

Still, I kept driving—through the dark, past Memorial Highway, past Hemlock Lane.

And I began to speak the names aloud, as she once did. Not to guide the car, but to guide the grief. To name what had passed, and what still lingers. As if by naming them, I could keep her near. Because in our tradition, we say: *To remember is to keep alive.*

Brotsky

So I said the names.

I said them for her.

I say them still.



Mirjana Miric

Sojourn

Marie-Eve Bernier
A Poor Man's Cake

Google is autocorrecting *pouding* to *pudding*. I roll my eyes as I am used to French being anglicized. From my name to my accent to the words I use, it seems it is never hard to find an anglophone who wants to correct me. I'm searching for a classic pouding chômeur recipe. My go-to contribution for potluck dinners, celebrations or when I just miss home.

The family I nanny for is throwing me a goodbye dinner party. They are leaving Oxford, U.K. to move to Germany, and it is my last week working for them. 'Working' is an exaggeration; 'the greatest pleasure' is more accurate. Their baby is the sweetest and his mothers are the best employers I've had. I'm eternally grateful to them. Tonight is bittersweet, but we are turning something sad into a celebration.

The recipe is not necessary, as I pretty much know it by heart. But it reassures me; this is a special recipe for people I care about, and I don't want to mess it up. I make my way to the basement kitchen. I live in a giant Victorian house share for Oxford students and their partners. At this time of day, it should be quiet, and hopefully I won't disturb anyone. The kitchen can get crowded with PhD (or DPhil as I am often corrected) students making a quick bite to eat in between their demanding schedules.

I take out the ingredients I had previously bought from the little Tesco Express from around the corner. For the sauce (arguably what makes the cake): $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of maple syrup; $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of water; 2 cups of brown sugar; I ignore the risk of diabetes. For the cake batter that sits at the top of the pan: $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of flour; 2 teaspoons of baking powder; $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of salt; $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of room-temperature butter; $\frac{3}{4}$ cups of sugar; 1 teaspoon of vanilla. I do a *mise en place* and lay all the premeasured ingredients on the counter, I see my culture.

Pouding chômeur, which directly translates to *unemployed pudding*, is more commonly known as *poor man's pudding*. Other than being the epitome of comfort food, it has a history as rich as the cake itself. During the Great Depression, ever resourceful working-class women created this rich, filling cake out of readily accessible and inexpensive ingredients. For such a humble beginning, the result is impressive.

But the magic in this cake is that it is self-saucing. The cake batter is placed over the bottom sauce layer. The batter cooks as the sauce integrates itself into the batter, almost doing a switch-a-roo. The result is a gooey sweet mess of a cake. It's a delicacy that Québécois take pride in. What was once a poor man's cake is now served in sugar shacks, restaurants and, today, Oxford.

I preheat the tragically dirty oven in my house share. I don't own my own cake pans so I have a one-use grocery store cake tin. I take a saucepan and delicately measure the maple syrup. I can't waste a single drop as it is excruciatingly expensive here in the U.K.,

especially for someone like me on a nanny salary. I hold it tight for all it's worth.

I found it in the foreign section of the grocery store sandwiched between sauerkraut and Oreo cookies. It's a comical-looking bottle, bright red and shaped like an oversized maple leaf. The price reflects its extravagant packaging and how far it has travelled. Like me, it is a long way from home.

At home in Canada, I would have bought a canned version—the classic one with an image of a wintery sugar shack scene. For as long as I have consumed maple syrup, this image has not changed. I'm grateful, but disappointed in the maple syrup I have found here. It's thin and light in colour, and I suspect it was harvested earlier in the season. The flavour will be milder and delicate—not ideal for pouding chômeur. My preference would be an amber syrup, with its accompanying bold taste.

To the maple I add the brown sugar and water. I patiently wait as I bring the temperature to medium heat. I want it just simmering. The sugar dissolves almost instantly and I can already smell rich aromas reminiscent of a sugar shack: sugary and caramel-like. I'm taken straight back to my childhood. As soon as it starts to make small bubbles, I quickly take it off the heat and put a lid on it. I resist the urge to have a lick, and I leave it to the side; that magical sauce will be for later.

For the cake batter, I grab the dry ingredients and measure the flour, baking powder and salt. I don't have a whisk, so I use a fork. I lack all the basic baking equipment, but where there is a will, there is a way, just like the cake was originally created. Luckily, pouding chômeur is forgiving, and I'm confident it will be great despite some improvisations. I need to cream the butter, sugar and vanilla. I don't have an electric mixer, so I take a deep breath and use all my strength to mimic one by hand. Once my arm starts getting sore, I can see my ingredients have turned into a lightly tinted smooth, cream-like texture. Even manually, I did a decent job. I add the eggs and beat it one last time.

Now for my favourite part: the assembling of the cake. I retrieve the maple sauce and again hold the highest level of self-control, not consuming any, not even a little taste. I take a deep sniff as my eyes roll back. Pure bliss. I pour the sauce into the bottom of the tin and do my best to delicately spoon the cake batter over it. I leave it to float on top and don't mix it. During the baking process, the cake will magically rise whilst the sauce thickens and incorporates into the batter. Some may call it an upside-down approach. I call it pouding chômeur.

I wish it well and place it in the oven for 30 minutes.

My first memory of eating pouding chômeur is in St-Hubert, a popular Québécois restaurant chain, famous for its rotisserie chicken. My grandparents religiously ate there; their delicious food and well-

priced lunch set menu kept them coming for more. My grand-papa, known for his sweet tooth, would request the largest piece of pouding chômeur they had and never leave a crumb behind. I have fond memories of this.

It's not my first time sharing this cake. When I was an undergrad in Ottawa, I once brought it to a Thanksgiving lunch. After the meal, some students argued that it was a caramel cake and even claimed it was the same one their grandmother had made. As the only Québécoise, I felt outnumbered and politely let it pass with the greatest disappointment.

Today is not so different. Now on the bus on the way to the dinner party I am proudly holding my pouding chômeur. Its divine smell draws attention from the other passengers. Children are enviously looking at me and trying to guess what my dessert may be.

A church lady approaches me. I assume she is a church lady. The prayer book in her hand seems telling. She asks about my treacle tart. I tell her it's pouding chômeur. She doesn't believe me. After some small talk, it quickly escalates to her telling me French Canadians should pay taxes for speaking English. She gets off the bus, but not before telling me to enjoy my treacle pie.

When I arrive at the dinner party, I show off my pouding chômeur with a *tada!* I don't get the reaction I am hoping for. In fact, it seems that I have caused some confusion. The Canadian thought I

was bringing a pudding cup, like they call it in Canada, and the German thought that by ‘pudding’ I was just generally bringing dessert, like the British call it. The gap in language and cultural differences is ever so present in this moment.

When we get to the dessert, I get the usual comments and questions: is this really a Québécois dessert? There are strong suggestions that I may be confusing this dessert for something else entirely, but the consensus is that it is delicious, and I am grateful we can all agree on something.

French Canadians have a complicated history with our English counterparts. When I make pouding chômeur, I feel protective. It’s attached to my history, culture and my very own memories. It’s my heritage in cake form. But in this moment, just like the self-saucing cake, I do my own flip. I realize that no one is pointing out the differences; what they are showing me is the similarities between my culture and their own. No one is taking away from pouding chômeur glory; they are sharing it with me.

My usual annoyance is replaced with a strong urge to connect. If we don’t connect over cake of all things, what chance do we have to live peacefully? I go from furious to curious and ask them to tell me more about the cakes they grew up with. I even ask for recipes to take home with me, which they gladly share. And now I am full in belly and richer in cake recipes. More cake is never a bad thing.

The entire pouding chômeur cake tray is gone. It was warm and gooey and perfectly overly sweetened, just like it always is. In between servings, I even got to do my little speech on how Canada has two official languages, English and *French*, and I feel pleased with this newfound middle ground.

After all, cake is cake, wherever it is from, and it is best when shared.



Kathleen Deep

Echo



Kathleen Deep

Phoenix

Gabrielle Marchese
Cabbage Moths

The collard greens have carried
my garden on their back all
through the winter and soon
the cabbage moths will
be making their return. I don't

know where the moths go
when the air gets cold but I do
know with them they bring
the kind of warmth that sends
me running and I am waiting
with my mouth pressed to the
ground sipping from the last
reserves of winter hoping
her cool waters last me through
summer's sharp peaks before

I am smothered by the steady
proposition of pleasure sugar
spoon fed long after my body
is sick from the sweet heavy
heat and the cross step of a town
orbiting a house with no lungs the
moths in my garden chewing
away at what it took
all of the year after them
to grow.

Letty McHugh
Clement Conditions

I went outside
for the first time in a while and saw

the first yellowing leaves
on a self-seeded hawthorn tree

a bramble in the car park
weighed down by fat blackberries

some types of beauty thrive in neglect

crossing the footbridge home
the sunlight hit the windows
of the under-dwellings across the valley

and everything I was sure would kill me before I left the house
suddenly felt survivable

Letty McHugh

*The BBC website describes multiple sclerosis as a
tragic and incurable illness.*

Aware my illness has this reputation people rush to tell me:

They don't know how I get up in the morning.
If they were me, they'd never get out of bed.
If they were me, they'd kill themselves.

Ornithologists describe a curlew's song as a *mournful, haunting cry*.

Unaware of its reputation the curlew still lets loose:

A joyous three-note whoop
that rings across the moorlands
to usher in the spring.

Kat Kluegel
the rooster

*Some plants have nectaries
that keep secreting pollen even after the petals have gone.*
-Diana Khoi Nguyen, *A Bird in Chile, and Elsewhere*

the cursive invoked by her hands conjures so precisely,
elegant & troubled like an Alice Neel painting & her reckless
laughter, immobilizing.

push it down like birth, down to abyssal plains, among
the viperfish, isopods, cusk eels, bloodybelly comb jellies
& giant spider crabs. push until they vaporize.

express your suffering as transparently as possible,
go rogue as a crow, prepare the skin to excrete black glue,
purify the organs & let their effluvia run downstream.

*

find a spot in your yard & mark it with rock, build a nest
with twigs & sprays & fan them out to give them room
to breathe. when people go, the secrets in their hearts explode

into shards of light, so prepare to receive otherworldly postcards
or none whatsoever, except for wafts of chocolate & butter from
her baking zucchini cake. Great Grandpa Ernst made a red-eyed

rooster out of metal who stands guard in the driveway. the rooster
watches as the car pulls in too late & sees a man shuffling, muttering,
stumbling. because the rooster is always watching & the rooster is god.

Kat Kluegel

Dendrochronology

Following George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From"

I am a piece of the Berlin
wall, an incomplete *Twin Peaks*
VHS tape collection & a Jenny
Holzer T-shirt that says
Lack of Charisma Can Be Fatal.

I am the number 8, epigenetic
trauma, a pub cat named Peeper
in Amsterdam & two chestnut
braids doing floppy cartwheels
in a field of dandelion tufts.

I am in the spirit of *Salt-N-Pepa*
lumbar scoliosis, *umeboshi* &
a compulsively-purchased monthly
subscription to deeply-discounted
luxury beauty products.

I am from Dresden, from brewmeisters
& artisans, conscientious objectors,
off-kilters, stubborn farmers & nervous
nellies.

I am an unfinished PhD, an earnest
exclamation point, an androgynous waif
& your hungover gender studies instructor
wearing a dirty baseball hat from the
Flamingo casino.

Cluegel

I am stuck in the liminal phase, *TGIF!*,
an edible trifacta of dark chocolate,
fruits & nuts; fear incarnate, the booby
prize & a glittering red daiquiri at the
swim-up bar in your all-inclusive resort.

I am big-boned, a collection
of diagnostic criteria, a reluctant
cultural anthropologist, an unreluctant
feminist, the cherry on top,
your #1 fan, a proud pedestrian,
soaking in my own hot
flash, the word *crabwise*
& a sweet green slice of
Minnesota Nice.

I am a condiment maximalist,
a member of the subspecies
homo sapiens sapiens, an overstimulated
feline, deeply depressed, a translucent
sea creature, tamarind chutney,
lost in my shows,
& no bark & no bite.

I am not wearing pants.
I am the Big Bang.

M.R. Lehman Wiens

Ekphrasis for Standing Glass Fish

Herald of humanity's hubris, humongous
Separate from the stream.
The tail contorts as if in the final
Ecstasy of death.

Piscis ex machina, life calcified
Anchored and netted.
Effigy of glass, metal, wood, an idol
Missing its altar.

If grandeur were the artist's goal, then
Gehry's vision stands gratified and tall.
But in the dripping
of caulk and dusty glass panels
holes drilled and abandoned like scars
Skin pierced by Ahab's rebar darts,

Nature has fled.

To think that we could have held it
tight in our fist like a caged bird.



Sandrine Jacobson
Beneath the Surface



Sandrine Jacobson
My Next Breath

Kate LaDew

Virginia and Leonard Turn on the Radio
(1937)

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 gets up, goes to her bedroom at the back of the cottage, 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 names 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, 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 wasn't right, had 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 the 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 did all the necessary chores of life to allow her to do the essential task of hers: write. Why on earth was she standing here, listening to this drivel, when all she wanted was just steps away? It would pass, it would all pass, it must, and sanity would reign once again and all the good people

of the world would tell the little man with his little mustache and his little flared-hip breeches just what he could do with all that rot he shouted at them, and everyone could go back to the lives they knew, 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 tulips 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.

Stephanie Reddoch

Shattered

21:00

Broken glass crunched under the coroner's boots as he entered the apartment. The scent of a doused fire. Acrid. Humid. Then, the stench of ignited plastics and paint and synthetic chair upholstery. But it was the unmistakable sickly-sweet smell of burnt flesh that drew the coroner's attention. The deceased was charred beyond recognition in the living room. He had melted into the easy chair. Muscles contracted in a pugilistic pose. According to police, two suspects escaped with only minor burns.

17:30

Carl and Jumpy leaned over their work. Jumpy poured the sticky liquid into a glass dish and set it atop a pot of boiling water. Bubbles began to rise, the butane evaporating. Carl leaned in. "Yo, next Top Chef!" Within minutes, chemical fumes filled the apartment and Jumpy's eyes began to water. "Do you remember how long we're supposed to cook it?" Coughs and hacking erupted in the living room. "Jayssuschrist, open a goddamn window!" Jumpy's father shouted. His last words, just before he struck a match to light his Marlborough.

17:08

Stacks of half-eaten takeout and opened cans of pop littered the kitchen counter and stovetop. Carl waved away the flies coming out of containers of garlic spareribs, fried rice and moo goo gai pan as Jumpy

rearranged them into new pyramids, making room for them to cook. They ignored Jumpy's old man asleep in the La-Z-Boy, a near-empty bottle of Jack sitting next to him on the coffee table. Jeopardy's think music played from the flat screen while Carl filtered the butane-steeped weed through a paper filter.

17:00

Jumpy entered his father's apartment, above what he called the Chin Buff Win Hi, the Chinese Buffet Wing Hing, whose illuminated sign always has the same burnt-out letters. When he saw his father asleep, Jumpy went to the window and knuckle-tapped on it to get Carl's attention below and motioned to bring the supplies upstairs. Jumpy's father would not bother them. He'd been like that since the cab company fired him after his accident with the school bus, which he swore wasn't his fault, swore that a bee flew in and distracted him. And that the cops lied about the breathalyzer results. When his father lost his license, his mother moved out, and Jumpy followed.

15:15

Carl and Jumpy pulled out of the Walmart parking lot in Carl's 1996 Impala which doubled as his "office" when his girlfriend Amy kicked him out of her bed. They were stocked with the three things Vince said they'd need: Pyrex dish, canister of butane and coffee filters. Carl's right hand rested over the steering wheel and his left hand adjusted his ball cap so that its flat bill pointed to ten o'clock. "Can already see the guap rolling in, bro," he said over the thrum of the subwoofer. "Factory job my ass!"

11:30

Outside the bacon processing plant, Vince darted his eyes left then right, scanning for eavesdroppers during their shift's break. "Shatter—concentrated weed—pure as glass when done right." Carl, watching heat ripple above the factory chimney, took a drag of his cigarette. His thoughts drifted to the unpaid bills in his car, to Amy's ultimatums, to how things that seemed solid could turn brittle so fast. As the gears turned noisily in his head, Carl stared blankly past the tin can ashtray at his feet, past the pavement where cigarette butts smoldered and died. His own lit cigarette traced a lazy arc through the air, landing in the parched grass. "Oh yeah? How?" While Jumpy listened in, he knew the perfect place—his father's apartment above the Chinese restaurant, where the air always hung thick with cooking oil and nobody paid attention to smoke.

Philip Katsampes

Dog Walk

The man walked the dog. It was night, the moon provided light. The dog was a terrier named Christian. The man never liked terriers, but the dog had been his wife's pet. Before his wife died, she had dementia and fussed over the dog. The man intended to bring the dog to a shelter after his wife died but never did. The dog was thirteen years old now and had lost most of his eyesight and sense of smell. The man had to help the dog navigate his walk, tugging on his leash to guide him.

At first, the man and the dog had come to an understanding. The dog would no longer be fussed over and the man would let him continue living at his house. But over time, the dog wore the man down and the man treated him as his wife had before she died. Toward the end of the walk, the dog stopped and sat down. There was a bench next to the dog and the man sat down as well. The man looked at the moon.



Sandrine Jacobson

Dancing With Her Freedom

LD

mile-long train in the window

what happens here and what it sounds like are stretched the way a map seems wider in the middle

it's set up for the long haul and even though we try to keep in line with modernity the songs are long and the moon is slow and folks give in to the momentum of the generations

you might sit at a bar and yawn or call it movie night when you're just dozing off with a bulb on but if you're listening you can tell the distance between rough times and fire flies and the lightning

the train you see is a perpetual machine that trips light like a star can hide behind a table fan

we've still got love and hating in the forever or in the reflection but the track is laid for speed don't need a bottle but i've a corn pipe and the smoke curls through the window in its own time a long train on its own steam can make the light trip so that it may seem like a perpetual machine

Kale Hensley
The Easter of Wuther

Don't ask me about the church, about the sermon,
about the disciples investigating hands (where the hell have you been?)
See me curled as a character, a roly-poly deprived
of dirt, yet surrounded by the laughter of fake flowers. Call it true for
prodigal fashion, call it a skirt rimmed with ketchup,
call it expulsion into a quiet known as dark, or call it a supply closet—
yes, I was coughing too much. My mom told me to
excuse myself, and I ended up in the closet. Now, I would not say this
was the genesis of girl as interruption, girl personif
-ied as villain, but it did sharpen my perception, it did take me to new
heights (the second floor) and new doors, the one
that held all the embellishments: a rotation of nativities, stacks of sour
obituaries, and a carpet that knew bubblegum more
intimately than tread. For three days, Christ got to play dead. For just
a morning service, I too got to pretend: laid a thumb
upon the switch, chose a sight where I could only listen, listen, yes—
it could have been then I saw the angels, all wing yet
no skin, no halos but hiss unmistakable; it was never a mistake when
I awoke that Sunday, my heart eclipsed by tightness,
made to understand I was in a room, yet there could still be this wind.

Kale Hensley

Redneck

T'was nothing more broiled than the hotdog
that dad would slog 'tween ketchup & Wonder
Bread, popped in the microwave so science
could work its hot magic. Well, except for me;
religious in the way that I like reading novels
about nuns who trace the slit of Christ Jesus,
and when I see a man's hands I am prepared
to go to them trenches. For king and country I
stand when I'm doing laps around a Whopper
Jr. while listening to Alan Jackson, just a local
chatty hoochie who keeps it high, keeps it tight
only for her darling wife. July means we survive
in nightgowns with the shades down, hosing pink
perennials while bare heels flirt with a perimeter
of scorch and sting. I'm tit sweaty with no brand
identity; when I'm all flush you could mistake me
for a vined thing, hopeless in my creeping. Yes,
all blood and no body like my father before me,
a slow burn like Azusa Street, shame-flung, no
panties on; this is the woman I was born to be:

Hensley

hem-hitched to let a little breeze in, lemonade
but a tributary conspiring with my dimpled chin—

and if you got something to say about it, go on,
say it. I'll be darling and let you pick your switch.

Contributor Bios

JC Alfier's (they/them) most recent book of poetry, *The Shadow Field*, was published in 2020. Journal credits include *The Brooklyn Review*, *Faultline*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *River Styx*, and *Vassar Review*. They are also a collage artist after the styles of Francesca Woodman, Deborah Turbeville, and Katrien De Blauwer.

Jon Ballard is a Michigan-based author of two poetry collections, *Possible Lives* (Kelsay Books, 2020) and *Where It Hurts* (Kelsay Books, 2025), and a novel, *Year of the Poets* (Loose Leaves Publishing, 2014). His work has appeared in *Cimarron Review*, *Midwest Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *DMQ Review*, *New Plains Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Flint Hills Review*, and many others.

Marie-Eve Bernier is Québécoise and works as a nursery teacher. She has previously published in *Montréal Writes*, *Quail Bell*, *LitBreak Magazine*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *Afterpast Review*, *The Amazine*, *Hungry Zine*, *Juste Milieu Zine*, *Scraps Magazine*, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *Elixir Magazine*, *Pictura Journal*, *Honeyguide* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

Dan Bodah works as a poet and host of *Vocal Fry*, the 5th most popular show on WFMU radio. Dan's poems have appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Modern Haiku*, *Ghost City Press*, *tinywords*, *Blueline*, *Lost and Found Times*, *Adirondac*, and many other forums. His two chapbooks are *Inside the Dream Flap* (Ghost City) and *Eyes & Roots* (Many Moons). In his downtime, Dan is an attorney and policy expert working on police accountability, safe and fair traffic enforcement, and data transparency.

Lisa Brodsky holds a Master of Public Health and is completing her MFA in Creative Writing at Hamline University. She is a two-time winner of the Patsy Lea Core Awards for poetry. She has numerous published poems in several literary journals, including *Otherwise Engaged*, 2022, *The Talking Stick*, and *The MockingOwl Roost*.

Miranda R. Carter is a writer and wanderer. Her debut essay collection, *The World and My Body in It* was published in 2023 and her work appears in *Idaho Magazine*, *River Teeth Journal*, *On the Seavall*, and more. Though a daughter of the West, she currently resides in Indiana where she teaches journalism at Franklin College.

Bill Cook is a writer residing in a small community in the Sierra Pelona Mountain Range. His work has appeared in the *Tin Parachute Postcard Review*, *Juked*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The New Flash Fiction Review*, *Stonecoast Review*, and elsewhere.

Jeff Cove is an emerging poet based in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He works by day as a software engineer. His recent work has appeared in *The Daily Drunk*.

Tinamarie Cox lives in Arizona with her husband, two children, and rescue felines. Her written and visual work has appeared in a number of publications under various genres. She has two chapbooks with Bottlecup Press, *Self-Destruction in Small Doses* (2023), and *A Collection of Morning Hours* (2024). Her debut full-length poetry collection, *Through A Sea Laced With Midnight Hues*, arrived with Nymeria Press in 2025.

Kathleen Deep is an artist, analog photographer and writer most known for her highly textured mixed media works inspired by her walks alone in the wetlands and landscape. She uses natural dried raw material, clay powder, collaged old photographs, mixed media, found object, items from the hardware store, hydrophobic methods she's developed, hand ground powders and sprayed solutions to recreate the scene from memory. Samples of her nature writing can also be seen written in some of her works.

Litsa Dremousis (she/her) is the author of *Altitude Sickness* (Future Tense Books). *Seattle Metropolitan Magazine* named it one of the all-time "20 Books Every Seattleite Must Read". Other work appears in *The Believer*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Esquire*, *Flare Lit Mag*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Jezebel*, *The Literary Underground*, and elsewhere.

Shannon Dunn (they/them) is a queer and trans writer in Charlotte, NC. They earned their Bachelor's in English Literature from the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, and their work has appeared in *Chaotic Merge Magazine* and *Rivets: A Queer Literary Collective*.

Joseph Geskey is a physician who resides in Dublin, Ohio. His first book of poetry, *Alms for the Ravens*, was published in 2024 by Main Street Rag Publishing Company. Broken Tribe Press will publish his second poetry collection, *Vigil*, in 2026. His poems have appeared in *Poetry East*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Roanoke Review*, *Verse Daily*, *The Dodge*, *Cloudbank*, and many others.

Kale Hensley is a poet and visual artist from West Virginia. Her work appears in *Gulf Coast*, *Booth*, *Evergreen Review*, and *Epiphany: a literary journal*. She lives in Texas with her wife and clingy pets.

Sandrine Jacobson is an Australian-born Californian whose work has been a finalist in multiple international art competitions, selected for juried art exhibitions, and featured in art publications online and in print for a global audience. Shas diligently refined her craft with unwavering passion, tenacity, and commitment to growth. Layered techniques imbue her creations with depth and emotional resonance.

Philip Katsampes is a retired educator who has completed writing workshops through the University of Colorado, Boulder, and Gotham Writers Workshop. He lives in Denver, CO. He is endlessly fascinated by dogs. And people.

Candice M. Kelsey (she/her) is a poet and educator living in both L.A. and Georgia. She's developed a taste for life's absurd glow, long skirts, and juicy opera podcasts. She roasts vegetables like it's a sacred ritual and wears mostly black because her late father-in-law said it's not her color. Somehow her work has received Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations, and she woke up one day as the author of 8 books.

Kat Kluegel (she/they) is a poet from Minneapolis, Minnesota who is interested in what it means to be human. She almost completed a PhD in cultural anthropology and gender studies, and her work has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *The Tangential*, *MPLSZine*, and *The Masticator*. She loves film festivals, exotic fruit, & David Lynch. She is a

condiment maximalist.

Kate LaDew graduated from the UNC Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, NC with her cats, Charlie Chaplin and Janis Joplin.

Michael Lauchlan has contributed to many publications, including *New England Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The North American Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Lake Effect*. His next collection is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press.

LD has been publishing poetry on a personal blog with 4 followers since 2007.

Claire Lee is a young writer and filmmaker hailing from Memphis, Tennessee.

Ben Lockwood is a writer in central Pennsylvania. Ben's work has been featured in *Weird Lit*, *Seize the Press*, *ergot.*, *Maudlin House* and others.

Gabrielle Marchese is a poet and writer based in San Diego California. Her work has been featured in *KingFisher Magazine*, *Last Leaves Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Letty McHugh is an artist and writer based in West Yorkshire. She is currently researching what healing practices in medieval monasteries can teach her about living with chronic illness today. In 2023, *Book of Hours*, a collection of poetry and lyric essays, won the Barbellion Prize for Literature and was featured on BBC Radio Fours Front Row. Her installation, *Anchorage*, a reimagining of a medieval hermitage for the modern-day sick artist, was shown at Attenborough Arts Centre, Leicester.

Mirjana Miric (they/them) is a digital artist and writer from Belgrade, Serbia. Their work focuses on exploring the juxtaposition of various elements through mixed media of photography, double exposure, textures and light. Their work most often explores concepts of duality and has appeared in *Gulf Stream Literary*, *The Good Life Review*, *Broken Antler*, *Spellbinder*, *New Limestone Review* and elsewhere. They are also the author of three poetry collections.

Glenis Moore is a poet who currently lives in the flatlands of the fens just outside of Cambridge, UK with her partner and three rescue cats. When she is not writing, she reads, makes beaded necklaces, knits, cycles and runs 10K races slowly. She is the author of the poetry chapbooks *Pond life* and *For Paula and Rum Babas*, and has had previous work published in a variety of UK, US and European publications.

John Muro is a resident of Connecticut and a graduate of Trinity College, Wesleyan University and the University of Connecticut. He has published two volumes of poems, *In the Lilac Hour* and *Pastoral Suite*, in 2020 and 2022, respectively. His third book, *A Bountiful Silence & Other Poems*, will be published later this year. John has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Award and has received several literary awards. His poems have appeared in *Acumen*, *Cool Beans Lit*, *Delmarva*, *Sky Island*, *the Valparaiso Review* and elsewhere.

Marisca Pichette is a queer author based in Massachusetts. She has published more than three hundred pieces of short fiction and poetry, appearing in *The Razor*, *Door is a Jar*, *Room Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Full House Literary*, and *Plenitude Magazine*, among others. Her 2023 poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, was a finalist for the Bram Stoker and Elgin Awards. Their cli-fi novella, *Every Dark Cloud*, is out now from Ghost Orchid Press.

Stephanie Reddoch has been published in *The Pinch*, *The Emerson Review*, *The Citron Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *the Dribble Drabble Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in rural Ontario with her husband and menagerie of rescued animals.

Michael Shoemaker is a poet, haikuist, photographer, writer and editor and writer from Magna, Utah where he lives with his wife and son and enjoys looking out on the Great Salt Lake every day. His photography has appeared in *Writers on the Range*, *Sea to Sky Review*, *A New Ulster*, *the Denver Post*, *the Salt Lake Tribune*, *Yahoo.com* and elsewhere. Michael is the author of three poetry/photography collections and is a nominee for the 2025 Best of the Net anthology for his photograph “Flashflood Waterfall.”

Shivani Sivagurunathan is a Malaysian author. Her first novel, *Yalpanam*, was published in 2021. Her poetry collection, *Being Born* and her book of fiction, *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?: Two Novellas* came out in 2022.

Betty Stanton is a writer who lives and works in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals and collections and has been included in anthologies from Dos Gatos Press and Picaroon Poetry Press. She received her MFA from The University of Texas at El Paso.

D. Frederick Thomas is the author of *Exhibition Text* (Vagabond Press). Their work has appeared in publications such as *FENCE*, *Island* and *Heavy Feather Review*. They live in Brisbane, Australia.

Joel Tomfohr is a writer living in the Bay Area. He is the author of the chapbook, *A Blue Hour* (Bottlecap Press). His short stories can be found in *Short Beasts*, *Bending Genres*, *Joyland*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, *X-R-A-Y*, *BULL*, *Hobart*, and others. He teaches English to immigrants from around the world at Fremont High School in Oakland, CA.

Sean Wang is a poet and PhD student. His recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Cerasus Poetry Magazine*, *Remington Review*, *Stone Poetry Quarterly*, *Eunoia Review*, and others.

Sarah Whitacre was born and raised in Bowling Green, Ohio. She currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

M.R. Lehman Wiens is a Pushcart-nominated writer and stay-at-home dad living in Minnesota. His work has previously appeared, or is upcoming in, *F(r)iction*, *Short Édition*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *The Wild Umbrella Literary Journal*, and others.