

3<sup>rd</sup>  
Wednesday



Winter 2021

**Third Wednesday Magazine**  
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**Winter 2021**

Third Wednesday is a quarterly journal of literary and visual arts. Though we manage the magazine from Michigan, we welcome submissions from all over the world. Digital issues of the magazines are completely free to anyone and print issues can be purchased at Amazon.com.

Find us on the web at **[thirdwednesdaymagazine.org](http://thirdwednesdaymagazine.org)**. There you can download free digital issues, read many of the fine poems we have published in the past and find the link to our portal at *Submittable* where you can submit your work and subscribe to the magazine. You can also find and follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr.

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**Cover Art:**

*Loved Ones* (Photograph)  
Amy Gray / Monroe, Michigan

## Editors Note for Winter, 2021

A few weeks ago I attended a virtual poetry reading organized by a group that has been meeting in person at a local coffee house for years. When the group had to switch from meeting live to meeting virtually via Zoom, attendance doubled and included people from England, Egypt, Canada and several U. S. states. Now here's a dilemma, what to do when things return to normal? Do you go back to readings attended by a few locals or do you continue with programs that draw a larger audience who might be located anywhere in the world? Like everything else, a global pandemic is changing poetry.

In this issue we offer the winning poem from our 50/50 poetry contest. Congratulations to Robert Hardy for his poem, *Letter*. Robert wins half the net entry fees and a one year subscription to the print magazine. We'll be back with another 50/50 for the summer issue.

We thank Leslie Schultz for joining us as guest associate poetry for this issue. Leslie has been a frequent contributor to our pages both as a poet and a photographer. You can find her books and read more about her at <http://winonamedia.net/>.

The Spring issue will feature our annual poetry contest, judged this year by Joy Gaines-Friedler, poet, teacher and long-time contributor to our pages. You can enter poems for this popular contest through Submittable until February 15<sup>th</sup>. As always, we'll awarding 3 poems \$100 each.

David Jibson, Editor

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*Reading Tu Fu* / Buff Whitman-Bradley

Poor old guy  
Plagued by misfortune  
Ill health  
Repeated separations  
From his family  
Dreaming of a life  
Of renown  
In the capital  
Of the respect and admiration  
Of his peers  
Of fine clothes  
A grand house  
Tables heaped with food  
Thick blankets  
For bitterly frigid nights.  
Poor old guy  
Life in tatters  
Wandering across battlefields  
Strewn with the dead  
Growing old and infirm  
As he watches his ambitions  
Dissolve into the mist  
That rises off the Yangtze

That obscures the towering  
peaks  
Of the Three Gorges.  
Poor old guy  
Full of laments and regrets  
About the life  
That might have been  
About his gray hair  
And his bent and ailing body  
Holding onto his goose-foot cane  
To keep from falling off the earth.  
Poor old guy  
Thirteen hundred years later  
Still ruing his failures  
Still seeking out old friends  
For long philosophical nights  
Of conversation and spring wine  
Still tracking the flights  
Of cranes and wild geese  
Across the winter sky  
Still hunkered down  
In his little star-filled boat  
Adrift in eternity.

Buff Whitman-Bradley / Fairfax, California

***Ta-da!*** / Buff Whitman-Bradley

I'd be willing to bet  
That everything  
I have ever forgotten  
Has not simply vanished  
But rather  
Is tucked away snugly  
In some cozy cranny  
In an out-of-the-way  
Quiet neighborhood  
With tree-lined streets  
And almost no traffic.  
I'd be willing to wager  
That everything  
I have ever forgotten  
Has an impish sense of humor  
And will surprise me one day  
By appearing suddenly  
Out of the blue  
And shouting  
"Ta-da!"

And I will be so delighted  
To see them again  
That I will not be annoyed  
At their long absence  
But will prepare  
A sumptuous feast  
And will dine with them  
At memory's great groaning  
Banquet board  
Reminiscing  
For hours and hours.  
Will they stick around?  
Probably not.  
Like the grownup kids  
They want to live their own lives.  
But as long as they continue  
To pop in once in a while  
And listen to me jabber  
About the old days  
I'll be a happy old man.

Buff Whitman-Bradley / Fairfax, California



***Joint To Joint*** / Buff Whitman-Bradley

I awoke this morning  
A little at a time  
Making my way slowly  
From joint to joint  
To assess the current situation  
And finding that all the creaks and aches  
Were merely old news  
I grew instantly optimistic  
About my prospects,  
Stretched my corpus  
From hither to yon,  
Unfolded myself smartly out of bed,  
And stood up triumphantly,  
Ready, willing, and eager  
To hopscotch out the door

Buff Whitman-Bradley / Fairfax, California

***Garden Party*** / Laurence W. Thomas

ladies kiss  
with their lips pursed –  
hats are such a nuisance

Laurence W. Thomas / Ypsilanti, Michigan

*Another Autumn* / Raymond Byrnes

An old woman in a weathered wooden chair gazes  
beneath a sky glazed in flawless Wedgwood blue.

A breeze stiffens and countless leaves red and gold  
swirl away through summer's empty hourglass.

She sees the sun hunker lower every afternoon  
behind hilltop trees. She watches shadows seep

down-slope toward her garden. She knows that soon,  
following a starry night when frost spreads a cover

like a lullaby barely heard, her radiant orange zinnias  
and deep purple asters will soften into brown, but

when snow funnels through long dark hours, she will  
study catalogs to plan her palette for another year.

Raymond Byrnes / Leesburg, Virginia

*Bodega Bay* / Ann Privateer



Photograph, Ann Privateer / Davis, California

## *The Leaving* / B. B. Garin

The bottle is almost empty. When it is, he'll get off the truck bed, shuffle over the rucked-up grass and start leaving.

It's necessary. All of it. From the half-warm beer, rescued too late from the cooler's sloshing ice, to the soft defeat of the main tent's collapse under the callous guidance of a dozen skillful hands. Those are his people; not the ones who bathe in tinted spotlights or bugle their prizes, but the ones who swarm under the work-light glare.

One of the acrobats is leaning on the nearest trailer, unraveling her web of braids. Her thick hair's almost free, but she pauses. Her fingers, unwearied by dangling from hoops and twirling in silken cords, have finally been beaten. A single braid remains rippling over her shoulder. It almost seems to spell beauty.

He sighs and stands up in the truck with the sweating bottle held close to his chest. A dark patch seeps across his shirt, as if he's been wounded. The acrobat sees the motion, waves one hand. The chalk dust caked in her nails casts off a dull spark. He has known her since the beginning. Her final braid is loosening on its own. It seems to say tragedy.

There's no hum of cicadas to gentle the night, no old-fashioned flickering of fireflies. Just the bur of generators and the raw smell of gasoline. He has work to be getting to. Things are needed of him. Papers must be signed. Initials on so many clipboards that surely, he no longer owns even two letters of his soul.

There never used to be so many forms. But he supposes, it's become necessary.

There are noise ordinances now, too. The rusty see-saw of the calliope was silenced an hour ago and the high beams brought up on the midway, though it was still popping with air rifles and the metallic laughter of teenagers set on breaking curfew. Now, there's little left in the rutted field of the parking lot but crumpled water bottles and two raccoons scurrying along a trail of spilled popcorn.

He only has a few, thin swallows of beer left. The animals will be finished loading up. They don't keep many these days; it's too expensive and people kick up such a fuss. Just some ponies for the kids to ride and three pigs that follow the clown around like puppies, adding a daub of chaos to the juggling act.

And the boy with his cats. Two tiny ones that ride his shoulders, disappearing in puffs of smoke and materializing out of hats. And the showstopper. The gleaming tiger that slinks around like she can't be bothered. She can make the most sweltering summer night go cold with a yawn. It's clear in the boy's eyes, he won't ever find a woman he loves half so well as that cat. It's a shame he only dreamed her up.

But that dream is also necessary.

The boy and his beast will be sensibly asleep, and the other performers settling into trailers, shuffling cards, chomping on sausages, arguing over the radio station. They'll drive until morning, and have a whole day and night to do as they please. The union says they have to.

He's come to believe this is fair, and besides, disassembling the rides in the night like they used to, would cause such a storm of drills and hammers that he'd receive a stack of fines before they reached the next stop.

So, he'll leave half the crew behind to attack the skeletal remains and bring them on after tomorrow. He'll have a word with them before the rest roll out, though he already knows everything's in order.

There are locks to check too, and security's hand to shake. All of it practiced to perfection. Every night repeated with the same sure steps as the tightrope walker, though perhaps with less strut.

He rubs the bottle between his palms. There's no label. There never is, just smooth, warm glass. One more swallow, and then it'll be time.

The acrobat has gone inside. He's alone here. Just beyond him, where the night is slashed by heavy lights, shadows are busy

crawling up their ladders and winding heavy cables from the ground. They are waiting for his entrance.

He wonders where children dream of running away to these days. He doesn't think it is to a place like this anymore. If he was ever a boy, he must have had such dreams. But he isn't sure. His memories seem to have been left in one town or another.

Everyone loses something along the road. It's necessary.

The bottle is empty. He resists the urge to toss it in the field; to watch it arc into the night and crack in the distance. Instead, he drops it with a bone-shuddering rattle in the toolbox, before he slides his work boots down to the soft, summer earth. It's time to start leaving.

B. B. Garin / East Amherst, New York



***Still Life with Rabbit & Crow*** / Teresa Williams

Sunlight glazes the patch of grass and  
the devoted face of the rabbit who sits  
with its nose lifted toward the daffodils.

A few feet away, shaded in leaf-lace,  
beneath a pear tree radiant  
with terrestrial stars,

lies a dead crow, turned on its side,  
as if it were looking  
at the puzzle of twigs next to it.

*Don't forget, death is close...*

I tell myself, while my heart makes a vow  
it cannot keep.

Teresa Williams / Seattle, Washington

***Grunion Hunting*** / Tiffany Babb

String lights swing from the decks  
of faraway party boats, warm sentries  
of the hissing sea. I don't like to wait  
for anything, let alone something  
as fickle as a grunion run,  
but despite myself,  
I am happy to be here.

Tiffany Babb / Walnut California

***Eggnog*** / Jane Blanchard

*according to Eudora Welty  
as published posthumously*

She recollected for her family  
ingredients and measures with success  
while writing out her mother's recipe  
acknowledging Charles Dickens nonetheless,

but she could not remember whether cream  
or egg whites should come first when blending all  
components of what someone else might deem  
too heavy or too light in alcohol;

thus, whosoever implements this script  
despite the aforementioned caveat  
may in the end find him- or herself whipped  
by whiskey in the beverage—or not—

since sampling from the bottle can occur  
before the first thing ever gets a stir.

Jane Blanchard / Augusta, Georgia

***Together*** / Holly Day

I fill the old, rusted wheelbarrow with love  
push it out to the garden.  
This is the place where love goes,  
the same place I hid  
all the old shoe boxes full of dead cats  
and dead sparrows.

Holly Day / Minneapolis, Minnesota

## *Home Remedies* / Holly Day

You can bind the crazy part of a man and hide it in a box  
with just a few strands of hair and some whispered words,  
can bury that box in the back yard and so long as no one  
ever digs that box up, never opens that box up  
you really can have a happy marriage. You really can.

And if that doesn't work,  
you can fill a glass jar to the top with iron nails  
urinate over the nails, cap it tight, bury that jar  
in another part of the yard, and that should work  
that should keep the madness at bay  
ensure a happy marriage, so long as the jar stays buried  
so long as no one ever digs up the jar and opens it up.

And if that doesn't work, you must take the man's favorite shirt  
put it in an old suitcase, something he's used at least once for travel  
take the suitcase to the bus station and leave it  
in a locker at the station. Bury the key in the back yard,  
away from the jar and the box  
some place it'll never be found.  
That works. I've done that one myself, and it really works.

If none of these things make it quieter around the house, it means  
there's a devil in that man, and there really is nothing you can do  
except pack your own things  
slip out of the house in the middle of the night  
and run and run and run.

Holly Day / Minneapolis, Minnesota



*Central Oregon* / Keith Moul



Photograph, Keith Moul / Port Angeles, Washington

*Air Thick as Water* / Patricia Hale

In the beginning, the end of the journey  
was already in my pocket

Some of the angels watched  
from windows,  
some just readied the tomb

I was awake  
and also dreaming

vanishing—  
not all at once, not like that,  
but gradually

one fingertip at a time

Supple curve of spine, gone,  
and that elegance of wing—  
all lost to the gardener's deft hands

I dreamed I was swimming over the city

I dreamed I was standing on a platform  
as the train pulled out,  
my torn satchel weeping at my feet.

Patricia Hale / West Hartford, Connecticut

***Fists*** / Patricia Hale

That man  
on the bar stool  
won't meet my eyes  
and why should he?

It's clear we've both  
had too much to drink  
it's too late to go  
too far to walk  
and why should we?

There's still time  
for one more drink --  
to the wife at home  
who drinks alone  
falls asleep  
with her glasses on  
lights still on in the hall.

Key scratching the lock  
she'll wake up  
make coffee and eggs  
wrapping that bathrobe  
around her  
and why does she?

She's so good  
I just can't bear it.

Patricia Hale / West Hartford, Connecticut

*Calf* / Joan McLean

Just after first light  
there's movement  
through the tree line.  
Over in the neighbor's field—  
shapes in brown and gray  
a flash of black.  
Two coyotes move  
with unmistakable intent  
circling and yipping. They drag  
the carcass of a calf  
under the fence  
into my unmown field.

They nudge and jerk at the throat—  
turn on each other in their delight,  
bare teeth, grin— then back to the bloody calf.

I hear a four-wheeler  
along the fence line—  
my neighbor coming  
to check his herd, to check  
the pregnant heifers.  
That sudden breeze  
that always precedes  
the sun's arrival  
ruffles the coyotes' coats,  
rippling their silver-tipped hairs  
like wind through a grain field.

Joan McLean / Siler City, North Carolina

***C.W. Pencil Enterprise*** / Michael Carrino  
-15 Orchid Street, New York City

My Blackwing, Malin, and Figueira pencils arrive  
early this morning. I will sharpen  
the graphite, shape the wood, admire one  
especially unique ferrule. Revising a poem, first draft  
to last, I use pencil, never bruise a page  
with ink. I know my limits. I always have doubt.  
Revision after revision is my intent, always  
aware perfection is impossible, despite  
any ardent labor. I try to keep  
Sisyphus in mind. Stronger than his stone.

Later this morning I'll put aside my latest  
draft. Let it rest. Return to it  
tomorrow. I'll wait to order  
six Shanghai "Chung-Hwa," one more Tombow.  
I'm in no hurry.

Michael Carrino / Plattsburgh, New York



*Elderly* / Michael Carrino

While finishing a second cup of coffee  
on another humid, overcast morning  
I can, with ease, imagine  
Big Sur, finding an old blue house  
with a view of lush waves, a hazy  
on and on. I must admit  
I've never been to Big Sur.

I must admit I've become  
somewhat of a recluse. If I venture  
outdoors again, I hope  
to come upon Bobo Hydrangeas  
to pluck from a neighbor's garden.

Months ago, my dentist called me elderly  
during some on and on about decay. I remember  
being aware elderly was useless  
to deny by mathematics or discourse.

My dentist is skillful, thorough, intent  
on having her patients experience  
little or no pain. My dentist is optimistic.  
I want to believe she will inevitably  
learn toward Camus who wrote, "We need the sweet  
pain of anticipation to tell us we are really alive."

Once I requested a red-tail hawk sticker  
my dentist gives to children. She gave me three.

When she said "elderly," perhaps  
I whispered "Elderly? No way." Her response –  
"Sorry, you're wrong." The exam  
went on. Pain minimal. I intend to attempt  
no denial in the future. A feeble  
rain is falling. Time for more coffee.  
Big Sur remains  
oh so pleasantly elusive.

Michael Carrino / Plattsburgh, New York

*Chaos Theory Key* / Denny Marshall



Drawing, Denny Marshall / Lincoln, Nebraska

***At Times I Wonder If The Glass Is Half Full,  
Half Empty, Or Just Too Big* / Michael Carrino**

-I, Alvy, am ambivalent about being a poet, but not always.

— journal entry

-What do you get when you combine Robert Frost and James Bond?

The Road Not Taken But Stirred.

—Allen Wolf

I'm incognito, but no one knows  
I'm here in Cape May, down  
on the beach, listening to roiling  
waves usher in morning, while  
I consider becoming  
a comedian. Who are you  
going to believe,  
me or your own eyes?  
I, Alvy, am a poet who will  
often stand stiffly, ruffle pages  
in dim light, ask meekly  
if the bookshop host believes  
there is time for one last poem.

Comedians are jazz  
musicians; can scent the vibe  
on any stage. Comedians wail  
with a thrill into likely taboo.

Too soon? The best risk  
the moment a trigger word  
can slant from wound to balm.

I have cancer  
how are you?

But years after some joke  
is told, a comedian  
walking into a bar  
knows, as if a poet, one word  
they ache to change. Maybe  
I'll remain a poet. I'll decide  
after some Cape May  
Belgian waffles.

Waffles is a funny word.

Michael Carrino / Plattsburgh, New York



*Cemetery in a Pandemic* / Annie Breitenbuche

In spite of everything, the stones stand still  
Marking the lives assigned to them.

In spite of everything, the air feels clean,  
Erasing what has been stale and rotting.

In spite of everything, the mourners come and  
Lie face down, heart to heart.

In spite of everything, the life-sized angel who sits and reads  
Has fresh flowers on her stone head.

In spite of everything, a crow sweeps down with  
The certainty of familiarity and lifts the heaviness from my chest.

“Hello,” I say. “Hello.”

Annie Breitenbuche / Minneapolis, Minnesota

*Ode to the Ankle Bone* / Mary Wlodarski

*for Larry Levis*

As a girl I loved horses, that is to say  
that I could think of nothing else. I looked  
for them everywhere, saw them often  
bought any that I could afford. At garage sales  
the plastic model horses had broken legs  
taped together above the ankle, horses  
that had been overworked. I would take them  
home and ask my father to repair them,  
glue the legs together, play carefully, hope  
for rehabilitation. But those horses ran hard  
were injured again were taped and glued  
stitched together in workshop surgeries.  
Broken and whole, but still broken. How could  
I know then, that that is how life is? That losing  
a first horse is permanent, that you will always  
search for his replacement, that you may  
not ever find him. That each horse  
teaches us things about ourselves  
we do not want to know, that we can only make  
them and ourselves better bit by bit.  
Maybe fixing isn't the goal.  
Trace the fissure with a fingernail, look  
below at the ankle bone round as a peach,  
just like a real horse's. Those tiny bones  
held together with threads.

Mary Wlodarski / Oak Grove, Minnesota

*Repetitions* / Mary Wlodarski

I sit with my son  
at the coffee table, he stands,  
slides his pile of books  
over the edge, spilling them  
onto the floor. He squeals,  
claps his hands, proud  
he can move their weight. I restack  
and re-stack them. His game.

I slip my hands under his arms,  
pull his body to my chest  
feeling the warmth of him,  
the sweetness of his hair,  
briefly, before  
he reaches for the ground.

He stretches his arms up  
wanting to be held again  
for a moment,  
that reassurance,  
and each time I  
learn again  
how to let go.

Mary Wlodarski / Oak Grove, Minnesota

*Obituarians Dream in Happy Words* / Casey Killingsworth

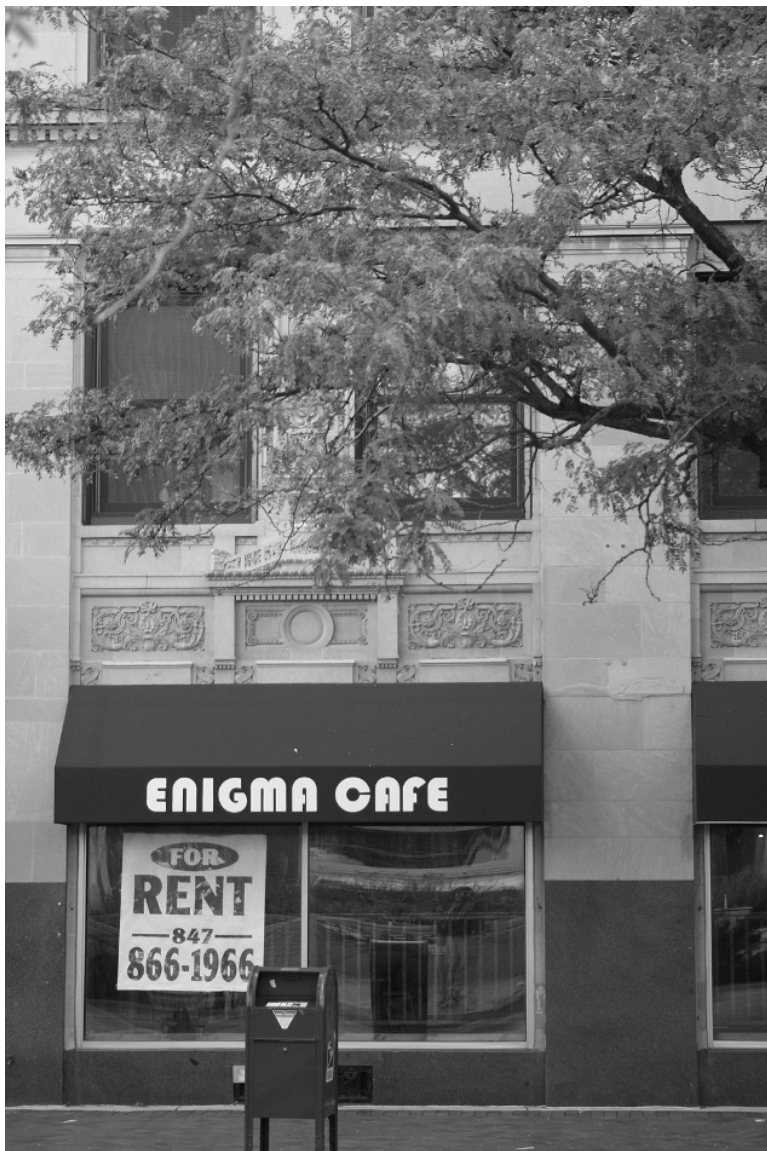
The obituarian works  
seven days a week not  
because people are dying  
but because they could be.  
What I mean is he's on call.

The obituarian never takes  
a lover because he has no way  
to tell the truth; all he knows is  
to tell every dead person they  
were great and meaningful.  
What I mean is he's lonely.

The obituarian has a way  
with words. Those words can't  
count a life, but they are  
the living's only hope in death.  
What I mean is he's a poet.

Casey Killingsworth / Stevenson, Washington

*Enigma Café* / Leslie Schultz



Photograph, Leslie Schultz / Northfield, Minnesota

Train stations aren't as bad as bus stations, but I still hate them. Momma hates them, too. When we pick up Zack for spring break, she says, "This place gives me the creeps—why can't he just get a ride home with one of his friends like everyone else?"

I tell her: "He said he tried, Momma—I told you that when he called."

"I know, Sarah, but he doesn't really try. He's too proud or something. Norma Jean, *do not* let go of my hand." She lets go anyway. Norma Jean is my little sister; Daddy named her after Marilyn Monroe. She is five and a B-R-A-T. "Stay right here, then," warns Momma.

"Look at him." The Brat points to a sleeping man. "He's taking up the whole bench."

"*Shhh*," Momma says. "Maybe he's tired. I'd rather stand, anyway."

Some of the men stare at me, and some stare at Momma, but at least she's grown. I'm thirteen, so they're pretty sketchy.

The Brat whines, "Why'd you make me come?"

"Because we are a family, and we are all going out to eat together. Now, hush—it'll be fun."

Norma Jean whispers, "*I hate fun.*"

Momma ignores her. "Remember—*not a word*, okay? I'll tell him about the car."

"I already said okay," I remind her.

Another train comes into the station, and I hope it's Zack's. People start filing in. Finally, he comes through the door talking to some guy. He's carrying his big bag in one hand and a book in the other. He's wearing his hat backwards, laughing at something the guy says. He sees us coming and waves bye to him. He puts down his bag and gives us each a big hug, smiling his beautiful smile. My

friends say Zack is hot, but he's my brother so I have to go, "Gross." But I guess it's true.

"Hey, Brat," he says to Norma Jean, messing up her hair.

"I'm not a brat," she tells him.

"Mmm," says Momma.

Norma Jean looks spiteful. "Momma wrecked your Mustang," she tells Zack.

Momma closes her eyes and breathes air out of her nose.

Zack gets very excited. "*What?* You're kidding." But Momma's closed eyes tell the truth.

We all stand there without saying a word, then Momma goes: "You are in big trouble, little girl."

"No, wait," Zack says. "What about my car? Is it here?"

"It's at the place for wrecked cars," blurts out Norma.

*"The junkyard?"*

"No, don't be ridiculous," Momma tells him, relieved to have some good news. "It's in the shop. It's going to be okay, Zack. Can we talk about it outside?"

Zack picks up his bag and nods. "What are you driving, then?"

"Phil and Angie's car." They're our weird neighbors.

"The Grand Cherokee?" he asks, hopeful.

"No, it's Phil's Subaru."

Zack frowns. "That little POS wagon?"

"Don't be ugly," scolds Momma. "It's a perfectly okay car—they're letting us borrow it till yours is fixed."

"What's POS mean?" asks the Brat.

"Piece of shit," I tell her. Her eyes get big.

Momma goes, “Sarah!” I am named after some old aunt, not a gorgeous movie star.

“Sorry,” I mumble.

We all walk to the car, quiet now. Zack is right—it is a POS. I hate riding in it, especially to school. And I can tell he is disgusted. We get in, Zack in the front seat and me behind him. It smells like cigarettes. Zack just shakes his head.

Momma pulls into traffic, and he finally asks, “Have you told Dad?”

“Daddy and Courtney are in Colorado skiing,” blurts the Brat.

“*Shut up*,” I hiss at her.

“You shut up.”

“Girls, *please*.”

“So, does he know?”

“Zack, it’s none of his business really—I can handle this.”

“Mom, he gave me the car, so it *is* his business,” Zack tells her, his voice getting edgy. “I think he should know. How much damage is there?”

“They haven’t told me yet.”

“How much is our deductible?”

“Can we talk about this later?” Momma is a little edgy herself.

“Sure,” he says, shrugging.

“Where would you all like to eat?” asks Momma.

“McDonald’s!” shouts Norma Jean.

“Oh, gross,” I say. “How about IHOP?”

“I’m not hungry,” says Zack.

Momma breathes out a big, tired breath and says, “Well, we are. IHOP okay with everybody?”



“Yes,” I say.

“Chocolate chip pancakes!” shouts the Brat, bouncing up and down.

“We’ll see,” sighs Momma in her tired voice. I’m starting to hate fun, too.

“Mom, if the deductible is the problem, then— ”

“There’s no deductible, okay?”

Zack sits up a little. “You mean it’s covered?” he asks. “We don’t have to pay *anything*? Then what’s the problem?”

In the rear view mirror, I can see Momma’s chin get quivery.

“Zack,” she says, trying to sound normal, “there’s no collision insurance on your car anymore. It only has liability.”

“*What?*” he explodes. “So there’s *no* insurance money? How much damage is there? How’d you wreck it, anyway?”

Waiting for this, Norma Jean yells gleefully, “She didn’t put on the brake at the grocery store and it rolled way across the parking lot and hit the thing where you put the grocery buggies!”

Zack lunges through the front seats and grabs her jacket front.

“*Shut the FUCK UP!*” he screams. “Another word and I will break your scrawny neck.”

“Zack, stop!” Momma begs him. “Please don’t do this.” She is crying now, and the Brat starts crying, too. Zack turns around, and nobody speaks for a while.

“I hate Daddy,” I say to no one.

“Sarah, don’t ever say that again,” Momma warns me. “He’s still your father.” Then softly: “Zack, tuition money has to come from somewhere. I already sold my car, and—”

“I know, Momma,” says Zack, his hands raised. “ I’m sorry. It’s okay.”

I look out the window for the IHOP where we’re not going to stop for dinner.

Norma Jean snuffles. “*I hate Daddy, too,*” she whispers. Nobody argues this time.

Robert Walters / Asheville, North Carolina

***Egg Salad*** / Terri Kirby Erickson

I make it like my mother did. Boil the eggs.  
Let them sit awhile in a pot of cold water.  
Then I peel them on a paper plate, wash stray

bits of shell from my fingers. I use a fork to  
mash the whites and yolks, add mayonnaise  
and yellow mustard—a splash of apple cider

vinegar, salt, and pepper. Then I spread the egg  
salad on soft, white bread, cut my sandwiches  
into quarters like my mother did when I was

small. I can almost see her hands, seldom still,  
peeling and washing, preparing and slicing,  
each motion swift and sure. It was my mother’s

hands, when they laid her body out for a final  
*viewing*—as fixed as a pair of songbirds fallen  
from the sky—that convinced me she is gone.

Terri Kirby Erickson / Pfafftown, North Carolina

### *3 Baseball Senryū* / Stephen Power

on the subway  
after the loss  
I turn my hat around

she hangs up  
and hugs  
his Little League uniform

the aging slugger  
whistles past  
the empty locker

Stephen Power / Maplewood, New Jersey



***When They Called Me Teacher I left Them*** / Ryan Keeney

Ten years old, He says

*You tall but I'm gonna be taller  
Look at these muscles  
You see how high I jump?  
Imma be a football player*

*I can't do this!  
You think I'm smart?  
Hey bruh look I finished!  
Did I do good today? My Momma gonna be happy*

*What were you like, you know, as a kid?  
You ever hit someone?  
I had a dream bout you  
Man, you comfortable to sit next to*

*you about as tall as my brother, he dead now though*

Ryan Keeney / St. Louis, Missouri

*Lighthouse* / Patricia Tompkins



Photograph, Patricia Tompkins / Petaluma, California

*The Locker Room: Historical Site of Becoming* / Ryan Keeney

smiling, snarling, crackling-eyed boys  
new boys, trapped in the purgatory of puberty  
this hierarchy of flesh and boldness  
locker rooms like worlds of gray concrete  
built upon terrifying nakedness of body and soul  
skinny abs and poochy bellies, an ecosystem of violent  
contradiction  
the wary, cowed ones with the pre-growth cocks  
those well-endowed strut the stone floors  
proud like victorious Roman generals  
uncomfortable with every newly sprouted hair yet  
ecstatic for its propulsion forward  
bodies like fleshy husks, at the mercy of time  
we sometimes cry alone  
underneath the dripping warmth of the showers  
fear of not being ready for the future  
of forgetting the past where it was okay to dance  
okay to don high heels and pink tutus

... to be becoming

Ryan Keeney / St. Louis, Missouri

## *Riding Shotgun* / Roxanne Henderson

When I drive  
I don't know where God is  
but my parents –  
after so many trips including  
his and hers via hearse –  
are in my back seat

My father always drove  
on long trips, his cigarette coal  
a dragon eye in the dark  
but he's not driving any more  
and I don't let him  
smoke in my car

She's back there too  
not riding shotgun  
like she always rode  
beside him lighting his Kents  
and passing dry sandwiches  
over the back of the seat  
slapping our legs  
*shush you'll be there  
when you wake*

Her I only ever had  
an hour or two to myself  
when the others slept she let me  
crawl over the wall  
between us and lay my head  
in her lap while her fingers  
untangled my hair

After years and miles of driving  
and arguing and training us

to hold it in so we could beat  
the time of our last three-day  
trek across the nation

When my turn finally came  
to drive I tried to leave them,  
they'd say *pull over*  
because they wanted to snap  
the Welcome-to-Texas sign  
or the banner exhorting us to  
Live Free or Die  
I'd stop and let their ghosts go  
from the back seat  
onto the grassy shoulder  
and I'd speed away

But at the next border  
I'd look in the rear view  
and they'd be there again  
side by side on the back seat

Their faces don't get older  
and these days they mostly sit quiet  
the best kind of company  
although yesterday  
when I accelerated fast  
onto the I-85 ramp  
and merged boldly  
into the flowing school of cars  
he leaned forward and said  
*well at least  
you know how to drive*  
and she sighed  
*oh honey*

Roxanne Henderson / Chapel Hill, North Carolina

*Proceed to the Route* / Roxanne Henderson

You fail me when I need you most.  
When I become lost at twilight  
among the rusty bones of some  
strange city's industrial ruins  
you say: *Proceed to the route*.  
What route, proceed how?  
You forget where I said  
I wanted to go.

On the usual roads where landmarks  
are fixed in memory you are able.  
You are all over it, the map queen  
if I'm just seeking a little affirmation  
or being too lazy to consult  
the big picture. Here, sister,  
you say, I'll help, even though  
it is a road I know as well  
as my bedroom in the dark.

But when I am driving in real shadow  
on a never-traversed street  
that keeps changing its name  
you fail me. When the way  
might be found with just a little  
guidance that is when you, so evil  
repeat *Proceed to the route*  
as if to say oh woman just point  
and go, you'll land somewhere  
worth being. That's your guidance?  
that it doesn't matter where I go?

It's happening here, now  
in the palm of my hand,  
the lines slither away  
like shifty snakes and bullish you  
lower your head and say  
go, go, go. Proceed to the route.

It is not your fault. We made you  
but I need a pointer, a sense  
of the stars. And hey, if  
*Proceed to the route*  
really means  
*the journey is the destination*  
why don't you say so?

Roxanne Henderson / Chapel Hill, North Carolina



## *The Geese Who Came to Nest* / Zilka Joseph

soon after we moved in, were in their prime.  
They nipped at grass, tweaked half-frozen

blades, fussed and shaped their home on the bank  
of the pond outside our window. Loudly, they honked

their stories, conversing with each other  
sometimes even at night. She laid

five eggs, and we watched the nest almost as fiercely  
as she, wild as hawks peering from our perch

inside our walls, alert for predators, interlopers, ill-  
wishers. Through hail and storm they endured. Once

a blizzard blew in, turned them into snow  
sculptures by the foot of a bare-

branched maple. Pre-dawn squawks  
woke us. There in the darkness striped orange

by street lights, they darted about, flapped,  
confused. First light, we saw the eggs

were gone. For weeks after, they scuffed and nuzzled  
the flattened grasses the empty nest. Two weeks more, ah,

the goslings would have pecked their way out  
into the light, skimmed the waters of the thawing

pond. Bereft we were, and sick of heart, as if  
our very own young were stolen. *Coyote*

*perhaps?* The rumor spread. I shook my head.  
*No? Surely raccoons then?* But where were the shattered

egg-shells, distressed, troubled grass? Was it a goose cleanse  
my panicked heart asked?— a plot hatched by lawn-

and-pond-proud humans? Should I flee  
this cruel kingdom, its spies, its terminators?

Zilka Joseph / Ann Arbor, Michigan

***A Response to My Friend*** / Warren Nadvornick

“There is no greatness without suffering,”  
my friend opined in one of our debates,  
“a line might hum, but it’ll never sing  
until the poet suffers like the greats.”  
The black dog stalking Plath, Donne spurning Yeats,  
indeed immortalized their brilliant sound;  
but poets never seek such tragic fates—  
nor will I, just to make my work profound.  
Someday a fire will burn me to the ground,  
and I may re-emerge in singing flight  
or crawl out, coughing, cursing, from the mound  
and scuttle like a bug into the night.  
For now, the air still shimmers in the dawn:  
allow my lines to hum before it’s gone.

Warren Nadvornick / Los Angeles, California

*Studies Inside the Consent of a Distance* / Ken Meisel

I don't think I ever asked a tree permission to touch it.  
Suddenly this is hurtful to me.  
That I could fail a tree so,  
like never noticing its bark ridges  
as something of its personal skin, or its face,  
and my fingers simply caressing it,  
free from any deeper contemplation of it –  
like studies inside the consent of a distance –  
without ever even asking for consent.

Or the water's soft rumpling, just laying  
so languidly there in its sleep-time morning bed;  
I never asked it whether I could even climb into it,  
to swim there in it, *within it*;  
me somehow – just giving the vodka of my body  
over to a lake's smooth likeness  
in a kind of drunken assumption;  
me, jumping into this strange water,  
without ever even asking it.

Wishing is a kind of trickery; it  
stirs a naked impulse in us.  
Even the bird up there above me  
eyes me warily, like I'd assume  
power over its wings, its soul.

I'm thinking I'm sorry about this:  
that a bird could mistrust me,  
see in me that evil wish, that deed  
to take, without consent, its order.

Living one's life by the shade of love  
is just a study inside the consent of a distance.  
That we may exist together...is to adore.  
To ask blessing of the beautiful at stake here.

The world, so full of granting; its faces, lives.  
That's all I'm saying, right here, right now.

All the trees, the birds, the water know it.

To love is to consent to the distance of another.  
And then, by slow degree, come safe closer.  
This is my promise to the water, to the trees,  
to the singing birds and to you.

Ken Meisel / Dearborn, Michigan

***Espousing*** / Michael Jones

More clever than good,  
us humans; just look at our knots,  
algorithms, and texts, our sly  
weaving and catching. And judging – see,  
these snake-words eat their tails!  
But sometimes, my love, tending some part  
of the life that lives in us both,  
I sense the ragged splendor  
that binds us, as any patch of grass  
holds and is held  
by thrivings and dyings, by microbes,  
insects, and the flux of winds.

Michael Jones / Oakland, California

*How to Get There* / Ann Hudson

We usually stopped at a Holiday Inn right off  
the interstate, after roaring all day  
through mountain passes and coal towns,

past tractor trailers whining down the incline,  
past rest stops where we'd sometimes spread  
a blanket in the grass so Dad could ease his eyes

and doze, where I'd race to the display rack  
for a map of the whole state meaning  
to trace our drive across each one

but never managing more than the next  
few towns. I could only ask for so many Dixie cups  
of lemonade before Mom would cut me off,

those cups by late afternoon so warm  
and sweet-sour because the mix would have settled  
to the bottom of the gallon cooler.

After a whole day of Dad's window rolled down,  
a day of sitting on beach towels on the bench seat  
because we'd sweat so much on the vinyl we'd slip

in the loose harness of our car seats, we would at last  
pull in to a hotel somewhere in Ohio,  
my father having studied the road atlas

from the insurance company for so many nights  
before we left that he'd committed each turn  
to memory and it never occurred to any of us

he could be going in the wrong direction.  
We'd go to bed early, worn out from the drive,  
the roaring in our ears, the queasy mix

of warm lemonade and maps, and Mom  
would click the lights off, then take her book  
into the bathroom to read until she got sleepy.

I wanted her back with us in the dark, soft room,  
the AC rattling away, the hiss of traffic  
from the interstate, the *thunk* of the ice machine

around the corner. Dad was asleep  
in an instant, and soon my sisters rattled off,  
but the hotel room was illuminated only

by whatever lights from the parking lot  
seeped in around the stiff, marigold curtains,  
and the bar of light beneath the bathroom door,

and I knew that whatever happened  
I wouldn't be able to sleep with that burning  
bar of light. And then it was day.

Ann Hudson / Evanston, Illinois

*The Lessons* / Ann Hudson

Also, why didn't you teach me  
about the table saw in the shed?  
And varnish? What kind? How am I

supposed to know about mitering?  
I don't know how to caulk, or how long  
cement cures. Before the Internet

there was you; what you didn't know  
wasn't worth knowing. Once school let out  
you started planning our car trip to the Midwest,

studying the Rand McNally every evening  
until you had the route memorized.  
Each time you gassed up the car

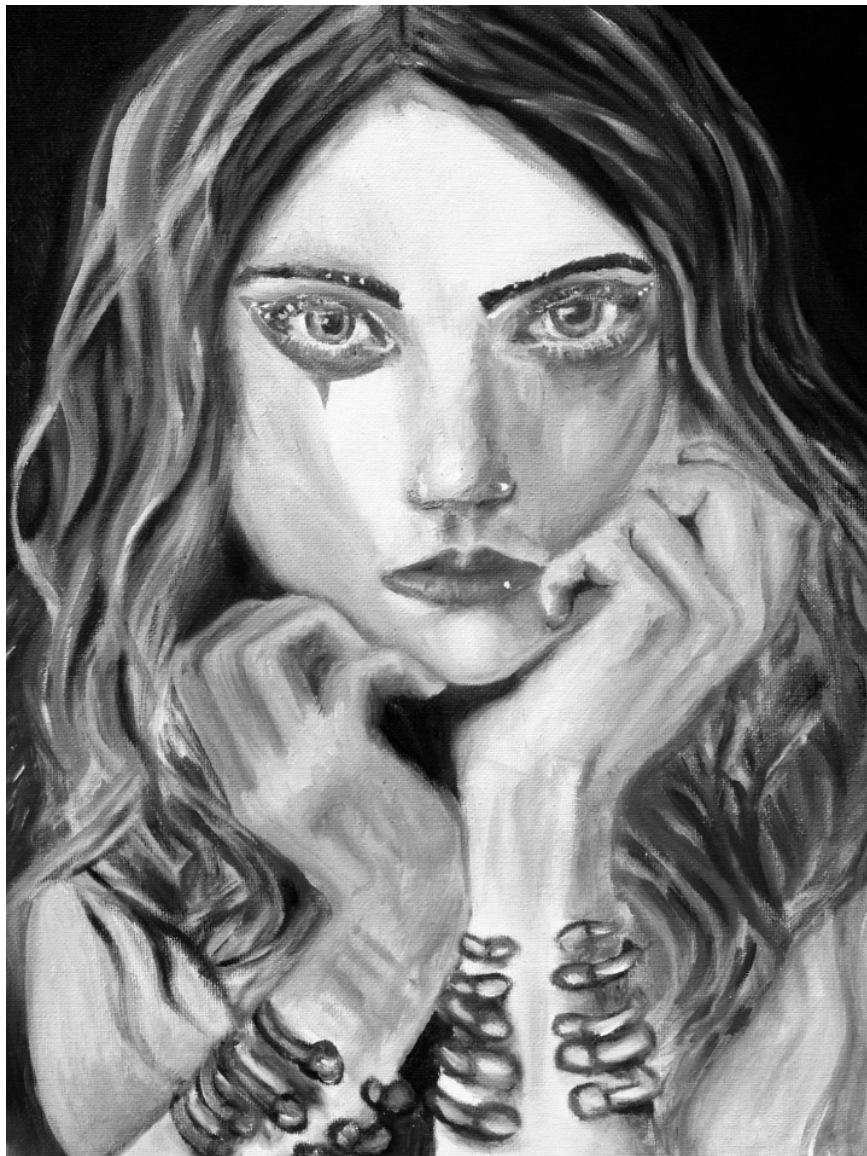
you squeegeed the windshield, careful  
not to leave any drips, then opened  
the glove-box to record the mileage

and the date. What did you do  
with all the data you collected? Where are  
those notebooks now, their tidy columns

of numbers? Why didn't you teach me  
how to drive a stick shift, how not  
to slip backwards when I'm stopped on a hill?

Ann Hudson / Evanston, Illinois

*Reflection of Self* / Jacqueline Wu



Painting, Jacqueline Wu / Stony Brook, New York



*Violin* / David Chorlton

Listen to the moisture rise  
inside a tree.  
Place an ear to the trunk  
and trace its passage  
from the roots  
to the light at the tips  
of branches.  
What you hear  
is music awaiting release.  
Drop by drop  
the notes break free.  
When you touch the bark  
it is smooth; it curves  
where once it had knots;  
wood has aged into a violin  
that tells a story  
for which it is impossible  
to find the words.

David Chorlton / Phoenix, Arizona

*November Light* / David Chorlton

Planes of gilded water  
float from eye to eye  
of those who walk the cursive path  
between the teal and dowitchers  
slowly as the evening  
crosses open space and glows  
on the mudflats.

An egret landing spreads its wide  
expanse of white, flexes  
wings and threads  
its neck into the light  
that flows across the top side  
of evergreen leaves.

A flock of warblers sparkles  
in a cottonwood before  
a small hawk darts  
toward them and leaves a shiver.  
Jump and scratch,  
dig and start, sparrows and towhees  
rummage in the shadows

and turn to dust  
before becoming birds again  
as darkness laps  
at the far bank of the pond  
where a kingfisher cuts  
an opening and the surface  
seals itself back  
with a swallow.

David Chorlton / Phoenix, Arizona

## *Now Go Find Your Water* / Con Chapman

His father showed him how to bait his hook but said he was only going to do it for him once. "Once that worm falls off, you're on your own," his father said, and the worm had fallen off the first time he'd dropped his line down the hole in the middle of the dock. His older sister had already caught her first fish, and the grown-ups had given her a big cheer.

"Go on, get another worm," his father said, and he tried to pick one out of the can with his fingers.

"Maybe you should try a minnow," his grandmother said.

"They're more slipperier," he said, and the adults laughed.

"You mean slippery," his sister said, looking over her shoulder at him as she fished down the hole.

He fumbled with the worm and noticed it was dark in spots and light in others. He didn't mind the dirt but he couldn't get the hook to go through the skinny body.

"I got another one," his sister said as she pulled a crappie out of the water.

"Have you got that worm on yet?" his father asked, anxious that the boy seemed so inept.

"I think so," he said. He had managed to get the hook through one end of the worm. He tried to get it on the middle, figuring it would stay put that way, but the worm wriggled when he stabbed it. He dropped his line into the square and waited; he thought he felt something but when he pulled up there was no resistance and his hook emerged with nothing on it and the worm gone.

His face reddened and his mother came over to comfort him.

"You'll get one soon, honey," she said as she hugged him. She smelled of perfume and cigarettes.

"C'mere little fella," his grandfather said as he stood up and came over to help him. "You've got to think of that pole as part of your

arm, like it's there and it's not there. That way you'll feel the fish when it bites." The boy didn't know what that meant.

"I got another!" his sister yelled, and his father went over to help her get it off her line and into the wire creel.

His grandfather picked a minnow from the bucket and said "You're just havin' bad luck here." He got the minnow on the hook and said "Now go find your water."

"Where's my water?"

"That's just an expression. It means where the fish are bitin' for you."

"Where's that?"

"How about over there, on the other dock?"

The next dock over was a boat dock, not a fishing dock, and it didn't come with the house they'd rented, but his grandfather didn't know that.

"Where are you going?" his mother asked as they walked off the plank to the beach.

"Gonna try the fishin' over there," the grandfather said.

"That's not our dock," the mother said.

"There's nobody there, they won't mind," the grandfather said.

They walked over to the other dock where there were two motorboats tied up. The boy wished they had a motorboat at their cabin, but they didn't so they had to fish all the time.

"It's hot here, grandpa," the boy said. There was no shade, unlike at the fishing dock where there was a roof to keep you cool.

"Don't matter."

"I don't want him getting sunburned," his mother called out from the shade. "That's why I have them on the dock, not the shore."

"He needs room to fish, that's all."

"I got another one," his sister called from the dock. "That's five!"

"Well at least put some sun lotion on him," his mother said. "I've got some here."

"All right," his grandfather said. "You go ahead and fish here," he said to the boy, "I'll get the lotion."

The boy started to drop his line into the water, but stopped when he noticed a fish floating in the water. He bent over to look at it and poked it. It moved a little but no more than a stick would have if he'd pushed it, so he figured it was dead. He looked over at the other dock and saw his mother hand a green plastic bottle to his grandfather. He figured he had enough time and reached in the water to pick up the fish.

He laid his pole down on the dock and placed the fish down next to the hook. He worked the hook into the fish's mouth and dropped the line back in the water.

As his grandfather approached he pulled the line out of the water and said "Look grandpa, I caught a fish!" with an enthusiasm he knew he was faking but couldn't help, he wanted the fishing to be over so much.

"You did?" his grandfather said, excited for the boy. He quickened his step as he approached but as he got closer he seemed to deflate. He saw that the fish was dead, and it sank in that the boy hadn't caught a fish and had lied about it.

"You know that fish is dead, don't you?" he said, squatting down so he could look the boy in the eye.

"I guess," the boy said. "But I caught him and I don't want to fish anymore."

The old man took the fish off the hook and threw it back in the water.

They walked to the fishing dock and the grandfather handed the pole to the father. "Did I hear you say you caught one?" the father asked the boy.

"I did," the boy said, "but it was dead."

The grandfather looked at the father with a trace of a scowl on his face. "I don't think he's going to be much of a fisherman."

The father looked down at the boy, who was looking away at the water.

"C'mon, let's go back up to the cabin," the grandfather said, and they started the long climb up the stone steps.

Con Chapman / Natick, Massachusetts

*Sedona, Arizona* / Keith Moul



Photograph, Keith Moul / Port Angeles, Washington

*Traces* / Shelly Jones

He climbs over piles of books,  
dog-eared and underlined  
with tufts of post-it notes billowing  
out from them like hair electrified.  
He sets his coffee down on the stacks,  
precariously balanced, but there is  
no more table space.  
He finds words clutched in my hand  
as I sleep, more words resting  
in the cavity of my breasts,  
inching toward my lips, tired inspiration.

I find equations nested in napkins,  
scrawled on scrolls of grocery store receipts.  
We take a hike and he is silent,  
his brain humming in the autumnal air.  
I clomp behind him, snatchets of stories sticking  
to my clothes like burdocks, and I wonder if  
he is calculating the geometry of the woods,  
or the calculus of the pileated woodpecker  
as she dips and dives through the canopy  
to escape our stomping thoughts,  
so she may eat her larvae in peace.

Shelly Jones / Oneonta, New York

*Square Hit* / William R. Stoddart

While others were bicycling to dusty fields  
balancing their awkward equipment,  
shouting to claim their favorite positions,  
I was alone bicycling to a shady diamond  
of crab-apple trees. The apples lying

on the ground I'd pitch to a tree.  
The white pulp would cling to the trunk  
and fall slowly in pieces to the ground.  
There was no room for others, no room

for the deception of ritual, no margin  
for luck, no useless chatter, no bad calls,  
no frustrated parents, only the rightness  
of a square hit, that hollow sound

of burst flesh against the unyielding wood.  
And in all those young years this was to me  
forbidden fruit — watching the dry bark of the tree  
drink the tart sweetness of yielding flesh.

William R. Stoddart / Monroeville, Pennsylvania





***Be Sure to Show Your Work*** / Art Sorrentino

The square root of two is not one,  
as anyone can tell you  
who has measured the perimeter of a relationship.  
Angles pose a significant problem:  
when they are obtuse the shortest distance  
between two persons becomes a null set.  
On the other hand, if the logarithms aren't right  
a couple will have difficulty  
solving for why on the axis of love.

If a man leaves his wife heading north  
at the speed of infinity  
and she circles irrationally at a periodic interval  
less than or equal to the probability of convergence,  
how long will it take them to intersect  
at the lowest common denominator,  
assuming the hypotenuse is not  
an imaginary sea creature?

Art Sorrentino / Holyoke, Massachusetts

*Dissecting the Heart* / Judy Kaber

In fourth grade children study anatomy—  
skeletal system, muscular, circulatory.  
I am enlisted to lead the demonstration,  
to cut apart a cow's heart procured

from a butcher, because I am a doctor,  
but ophthalmologist not cardiologist.  
It has been a long time since I have held  
a heart, wielded a scalpel against it, so

different than delicate cornea, sclera, macular.  
We drape a desk with plastic, place the heart  
in a baking pan. I swivel the lump of flesh  
for a clearer view, trace deep blue veins

with a gloved finger. My child is in this class. So far  
she doesn't know about the divorce, but surely she hears  
the yelling, the tears, feels muscles expand, contract,  
understands the nerves that carry messages

to the brain. My cut isn't delicate, more rip  
than slice, I pull the inner flap away,  
drag aside glossy fat and sinew that once  
pumped hard in the foggy smoke of morning.

I expose chambers, difficult to find, still glistening  
with blood. Last week I spoke to a lawyer,  
my hands clenched in my lap. The whole thing  
leaves me torn up, shocked. I call up students

one by one, point with a sharpened pencil. Here  
is the valve that opens to let the blood flow through,  
I make a fist, explain how this superb muscle contracts  
without any thought, just keeps beating, beating.

Judy Kaber / Belfast, Maine

*Self Portrait* / Jay Daar



Drawing, Jay Daar / Berkeley, California

***Picking Blueberries I Listened*** / Steve Cushman

to the Indian family in the next row  
talk about pies from their homeland.  
The bushes were thick enough we couldn't  
see each other, like in a confessional.  
The father said you couldn't get fresh  
blueberries in India. The daughter said  
*I thought everything you ate was organic*  
and he laughed, *we ate whatever the birds*  
*left us. One time, the mother said, your father*  
*chased a bird from the Gooseberry bush*  
*and fell, split his pants. You could see his*  
*purple underwear.* Through their laughter  
the girl said, *that's disgusting* and the mother  
said *he looked so good in purple* and the daughter  
gagged, fake-choking, saying *stop, please, stop.*

Steve Cushman / Greensboro, North Carolina

***Picking Blueberries At Blueberry Thrill Farm*** / Steve Cushman

Julie and I started out in the furthest aisle,  
working side by side, each bush's fruit a bit  
different. Always the braver one, Julie sampled  
from each bush and said yes or no. The bucket  
slowly filled as we made our way down the row.  
Bees buzzed and for a moment I watched her  
with her tie-dyed mask pulled to her chin, pick  
and sample. I was simply the guy holding  
the bucket, as she filled it, as she's been doing  
without me noticing for the past 27 years.

Steve Cushman / Greensboro, North Carolina

***Can You See the Frado*** / Seigar



Photograph, Seigar / Canary Islands

*Ways to Spend an Evening After a Storm* / Lorrie Ness

with the croak and slap of the screen door  
with ozone lingering in the shrubs  
with whippoorwills still cowering below the humid air  
with yellow-jackets sheltering underground  
with my exhale drafting behind the last wind's wake  
with a fistful of wet corn leaves peeled from the siding  
with assurance that lightning has moved east  
with its afterimage a flash-pan theater on the horizon  
with the wish that distant thunder could be felt  
with our flagpole — just the right antenna  
with every finger to curling around its length  
with the hope it can translate the rumble into braille  
with the knowledge a bolt will not strike here  
not with the stars like night jasmine in a clearing sky

Lorrie Ness / Warrenton, Virginia



*Fiddle* / Alfred Fournier

If Nero really did fiddle while Rome burned  
maybe it was because he needed the distraction,

the smooth feel of soft blond wood pressed  
against the skin of his neck, the rich high tones

at first easing into the air with long strokes  
like a slow breath, then slashing it with rabid

anger and revulsion, the mad music filling  
his little upstairs room, a sound that needed

to be made, needed to be heard, if only by him,  
if only until the flames swept up and over him

like a hot wave, drawing out the long final note  
even as the music sheets curled into ash.

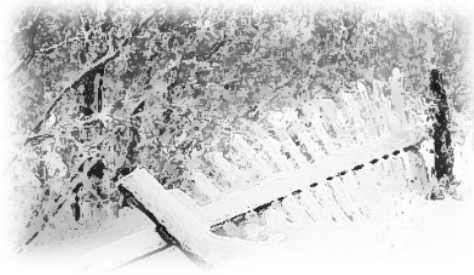
Alfred Fournier / Phoenix, Arizona

***Moe Asch Declares Bankruptcy, 1948*** / Benjamin Goluboff

It was so cold the winter Moe went bankrupt  
that the crows congealed in the skies above Manhattan,  
fell to earth and shattered  
in glassy black fragments on the avenues.  
Children stood with their tongues  
stuck to utility poles,  
patiently waiting for spring,  
and the East River froze solid.

Tears made a mask of rime on Moe's face,  
as he carried the business across the ice,  
brick by brick, master by master,  
reincorporating on the far side  
in the name of his secretary,  
and sometime mistress,  
Marian Distler.

Benjamin Goluboff / Lake Forest, Illinois





*Me and You* / Steven Deutsch

Friends and family  
would often declare  
with solemn authority  
that my brother and I  
were polar opposites.  
Our literary cousin  
Jerry, proclaimed  
“Just like  
Jekyll and Hyde.”

Yet the stories  
they told  
over the dinner table  
were of your exploits—  
not of my storied virtues.  
I was observant.  
I knew by age five  
that the devil had  
the best lines.

I learned  
that behind  
good grades  
and a mild demeanor  
I could get away  
with nearly  
anything.  
You took the spotlight  
I took the cake.

You never gave a hoot.  
Told me that the North Pole  
and the South  
were not so very different,  
in a voice so like mine  
in tone and intonation  
that with eyes closed  
I could imagine,  
I was the one speaking.

Steven Deutsch / State College, Pennsylvania

*Odd Habits* / John Grey

Sure I had odd habits.  
I snared tadpoles,  
kept them in glass jars.  
The moment they started growing flippers  
and their heads increased in size,  
I set them free.  
Then I wondered what they thought of me.  
Was I the god of those tiny swiveling creatures?  
Did my eye peering at them through glass  
override all instinct?  
And what did the mature frogs  
tell the ones that didn't matriculate  
through my university of dirty water?  
I interfered...actually I prefer interceded  
in that amphibian world.  
Did my frogs come out different?  
More cognizant of their surroundings?  
Maybe the slightest but human by association?  
Yes I had odd habits.  
Collecting tadpoles wasn't one of them.  
Pretending I shaped destinies was.

John Grey / Johnston, Rhode Island

*Wild Onion* / Robert Hardy

to Jessica Morrison

I like the nodding wild onion,  
its umbel of blossoms like fireworks,  
a pastel constellation unseasonably pink  
among the purples and goldenrod of August.  
Its color and beauty are its own.  
To see it for the first time was to witness creation,  
to welcome some miracle into the world.  
Whenever I see its pink halo in the grass,  
I pause to give it my attention,  
as if its existence were a call to prayer—  
praise for its bright crown,  
praise for its hidden onioniness,  
and its small globe of tears underground.

Robert Hardy / Northfield, Minnesota



***Letter*** / Robert Hardy

In those days, we wrote letters.  
We licked a stamp  
and placed it on the corner of the envelope.  
The stamp cost 13 cents.  
I still have a letter you wrote me  
the day after a snowstorm almost fifty years ago.  
I can still see you making a path  
through the snow to the bird feeder,  
the scribble of sunflower seed on the ground.  
As you sat at your desk  
you could watch the birds through the window—  
chickadees, juncos, purple finches.  
In the spring, you wrote, the ground  
would be littered with the empty husks of seeds.  
You have been dead for thirty years,  
but there in the ink is the shadow of your hand,  
and sealed behind the stamp,  
your tongue.

Robert Hardy / Northfield, Minnesota

**Winning poem in this issue's 50/50 Contest**

## *Midnight Snack* / Melissa Feinman

The kitchen is cool and dark when I step in, and the white tiles on the floor wink slivers of light up at me, holding the reflection of the digital clocks. I don't need an extra light. I've been weaving circles around the kitchen island in the velvet black for longer than I care to admit. When I close my eyes I can easily draw the route I always take. I know how many paces it takes to get from salty to sweet to frozen back to salty again. I often make the rounds with my heart pounding in my throat, as I dance under creaking floor boards, stifling the crinkling of plastic with a cough. But sometimes, when the house is enveloped in a humming silence, I take my time. I breathe in slowly and can almost smell the smells that filled the room the when the light was warmer – the tantalizing perfume of garlic spiraling in the dense air, onions sizzling in hot butter, melted cheese stuck on a pan, starchy potatoes whose skin was nearly falling off in the clouds of steam, dark gravy bubbling over chicken thighs.

There's a familiar twinge in my stomach as I conjure these olfactory ghosts. It's not hunger, but the automatic twinge I feel the moment my feet make contact with the tiles. Everything is automatic. My arms attend to their strange dance long before I realize what my hands are reaching for. My marionettes come down on the Double Stuf Oreos before quickly leaping to the Hot Cheetos, the pretzel sticks. I don't even realize the cloying sweet of the Oreos before the Hot Cheetos are burning my tongue, the salt lingering.

Sometimes my autopilot is even more bizarre. In the dark quiet of my kitchen I sometimes find myself biting into succulent heirloom tomatoes as though they were apples to feel the immediate relief of its flesh breaking and sending sweet acid running down the back of my throat. There are crackers topped with heaps of butter just so I can coat my tongue with a tangy creaminess I'm desperate to taste. Pickles dipped in chocolate sauce so the salty brine can sizzle against my insides before growing sweet in rapidly churning stomach acid. Gobs of marshmallow fluff off a spoon to fill me up

past my lungs with sugary air.

I only come off of autopilot once my knees hit the bathroom floor and I'm grabbing for my toothbrush, my eyeliner pencil, anything that will get the job done. I avoid using my fingers at all costs – I don't like the intimacy of that. I feel my insides engage in a tug of war. My stomach pushes up on my diaphragm like an accordion slamming shut as my esophagus fruitlessly tries to push it all back down. My esophagus pulses quickly now, knowing it will lose. There is the tidal wave I briefly ride until the mess comes crashing down, relief radiating throughout my body as the undigested contents of my stomach swirl away with the flush. A spritz of the heavily perfumed air freshener my roommate likens to a perfect fall day.

Under the covers, I put a hand on my heart, feeling every rattling breath tug at my ribs, my heartbeat ricocheting against my fingertips like a writhing fish. My thumping heart, my addiction to air, the beat of blood under my skin. It's amazing, really, to feel this constant pulse of movement flowing through every inch of me, miraculously, terrifyingly. Knowing that I have to nurture all of it. I press down on the roll of flesh above my pubic bone. Still there, I think sickly, as if the trauma I inflict will miraculously shave away at my stomach, producing flawless, smooth curves, devoid of cellulite. A 24-inch waist. In reality, no matter what I did, I'd still remain exactly the same. Perfectly empty and full all at once.

As I drift off to sleep, I envision my mother, standing at our stove, her hair coiling in the aromatic steam. Her making me breakfast each morning, cutting my peanut butter toast on a diagonal, unevenly, with the left half always bigger than the right. Lining up blueberries like bloated soldiers along the flower-printed plate. Bragging to her friends over the phone how she's lucky she didn't get a picky eater, as she slams a Lean Cuisine in the microwave, sweat clinging to her leotard post her aerobics workout, and lovingly watches some whipped cream concoction run sticky down my wrist. I dream that we embrace clumsily in the kitchen, dancing in the warm square of the oven light, breathing in each others'

sweat and sugary breath of a midnight snack. We make circles around the kitchen island, feeling weightless. I don't even feel anxious about that second piece of pie I ate. I'll be better in the morning I tell her. Just dance with me now, she tells me, as we spin in the room that carries our most complicated secrets. Just dance with me now.

Melissa Feinman / Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

***Farmer Crick Gets Hit By Lightning***  
***For The Third Or Fourth Time*** / Stephen Roberts

He can't remember. His numbers are confused.  
And he can't make decisions. Is he cursed?  
Or lucky to be alive. And did this strike come  
before or after his ancestors called it quits?

What about a DNA test to prove or settle things.  
Would it be worth the wait with bean prices down,  
and a bunch of his Guinea fowl missing?  
What do farm prices have to do with lost relatives?

He decides to hold his annual pumpkin hayride  
mid-July, though the pumpkins won't be ripe.  
And attendance could be poor if the weather's in flux.  
He does know he won't invite his nearest neighbor.

The guy's in county lock-up again over a pet squirrel  
he's been accused of feeding methamphetamines.  
He's been charged with illegal possession of wildlife.  
Farmer Crick hasn't seen any of that for quite a spell now.

Stephen Roberts / Westfield, Indiana

*Farmer Crick, The Rest of the Story* / Stephen Roberts

Farmer Crick finds himself  
in a cornfield with porkers -  
two hundred pound pigs - with  
good intentions, poor eyesight  
and bad manners.

He strides between the rows  
of seven foot stalks, breaking off  
an ear every so often to toss  
over his head backwards in hopes  
of distracting the animals.

The hogs grunt, snort and squeal  
a horrible cascade of belly sounds  
as Farmer Crick hollers for his wife  
who's speeding down the adjoining  
dusty road in their Silverado.

An ice chest full of beer bounces  
in the bed to rhythms on the radio.  
It's a dreary country-western tune  
concerning love, loss, and leaving  
your man behind. The pigs close in

under a mud hole tinted sky,  
bearing witness to the fact  
the song could be on the money  
and the weather's going to be  
rough as cob for a good while yet.

Stephen Roberts / Westfield, Indiana



*During the debates, I submerged* / Devon Balwit

in kelp. I watched an octopus  
sashay bipedally, watched her match flesh  
to coral, to sand, watched her lose an arm  
and grow it back, watched her reach across  
the species boundary to caress, watched her  
play with sunfish as if conducting an orchestra,  
splashing motion and shadow, ripples and rests,  
watched her strategize failures into meals  
without, herself, becoming one, watched  
her fill her brief life to its brim, dying  
as her young emerged from their eggs,  
her color-drained body dragged to a shark den,  
watched the waves swirl over this drama,  
patiently sculpting, interweaving force and flesh,  
the showy and the self-effacing, trying to stretch  
my focus beyond the next four years to the long life  
of the planet, where the events of any one November  
froth the briefest profile before returning into swell.

Devon Balwit / Portland, Oregon



## *Going Wild* / Ann Weil

Four pairs of feet dangle from the sofa—  
mine are the only ones that can touch the floor.  
The others belong to three giggling children  
snuggling beside me to watch Disney's  
*Going Wild with Jeff Corwin*.  
We are riveted to the television  
as if watching the moon landing,  
feeling as though we are fellow explorers  
weaving through the tall grasses of the plains  
or creeping beside Jeff on the jungle floor.  
His urgent whisper, *There it is!*, makes our hearts pound  
as we catch a glimpse of a stalking leopard  
in South Africa, or a cobra ready to strike in Thailand.  
We squeeze each others' hands and squeal  
when the adventure peaks and gets  
deliciously scary. We are together and ready  
for more.

Now, I am left to explore on my own,  
my little ones flown away to their grown-up lives.  
I've traded Jeff's wilderness treks  
for morning walks around my neighborhood,  
parlayed giddy shrieks of enthrallment  
into quiet awe and wonder.  
Yesterday, I saw a cardinal on a birch tree,  
as striking as a spot of blood on a white shirt.  
I passed a field where six bare trees lay uprooted,  
all in a row, like dead soldiers laid out for burial.  
And my heart raced when a wide-eyed doe stepped  
just meters in front of me, standing guard  
as her dappled fawns crossed the street.  
Mamas transfixed in each other's presence,  
one of us, at least, not wanting the moment to end.  
I watched in silence, barely breathing,  
as she flicked her tail and bounded off, into the wild.

Ann Weil / Ann Arbor, Michigan

**RSVP** / Kathleen Serley

turning 80 in the midst of a pandemic  
whatever were you thinking  
oh well, if anyone can pull this off you can

about your birthday party  
I'd like to come I really would  
but not on Zoom No no more Zoom

I'm done

done lugging my laptop around the house  
to find a background without dishes piled  
in the sink or laundry overflowing a basket

done proving I am not a robot  
even when I wear my glasses  
I can't find all those tiny lamp posts

It's just too much

remember when all we had to do was ring  
the doorbell and there we were at the party  
with all we could eat and drink and real people, too

I'm out of party food here and I won't be getting  
anymore I don't want my personal grocery  
shopper to think all I do is snack

No, I just can't do it

have you seen how I look on Zoom old  
something must be wrong with my computer  
too many pixels maybe or not enough

I have to pass, sorry

all those head-shots in little boxes scrolling  
across the screen I can't tell who is who  
even when I do wear my glasses

go head party without me  
congratulations on turning 80  
you're in for quite a year

Kathleen Serley / Wausau, Wisconsin

***The Handwriting Analyst*** / James Scruton

It's not just lines but letters  
he reads between,  
tracing the loops and swirls  
in signatures, crossed T's  
like tea leaves,  
dotted i's his windows  
to a writer's soul.

For him, penmanship  
is personality, a route  
across the mind's own map.  
Call him a quack, he'll ask  
for that in writing,  
your life there on the page  
clear as creases in your palm.

James Scruton / McKenzie, Tennessee

***I Am A Feather for Each Wind that Blows*** / James Scruton  
(*The Winter's Tale*, 2.3)

I am a handle for another's grip,  
a paper boat for any stream that flows,  
the scale whose balance is about to tip.

I am a coin someone's luck could flip,  
a mirror blamed for everything it shows.  
I'm wine a lover's poured but hasn't sipped.

I'm what the hero feels but never knows,  
busy striding toward some fateful slip.  
It can't be helped. I'm just the way it goes.  
I am a feather for each wind that blows.

James Scruton / McKenzie, Tennessee



*Uncle Davy's Near-Regulars* / Mary Rohrer-Dann

I unwrap the present my husband  
picked up at Uncle Davy's  
cramped row-house in South Philly.

Hank snorts at the flimsy cardboard box.  
*Goddamn*, he says.  
*I drove an hour in a blizzard for this?*

I laugh. *Hush! It's Christmas.*  
I open the box stamped: Deluxe  
Chocolates – Near-Regulars.

Loose, misshapen chocolates.  
Hank snorts. *All those dinners you fed him,*  
*those shirts you bought. Cheapskate!*

I laugh again, stir the naked candies  
with my finger. I remember  
being twenty and broke,

a year left at Moore College of Art.  
*If it's that important to you, Mom*  
*suggested, ask your rich uncle for help.*

I baked a pan of apple dumplings,  
made my case in Uncle Davy's dim parlor  
that reeked of cigars, sardines, Brylcreem.

He took a dumpling. He didn't offer any,  
or ask me to sit down. His small gray eyes glared.  
*I should know what I'm funding, don't you think?*

I returned the next day with my best work.  
charcoal studies of my *Oma's* hands, an oil  
of golden pears, a self-portrait in troubling blues.

I remember Uncle Davy studying  
each piece, his thick fingers tipping  
cigar ash into a chipped ceramic dish.

*Those are Gerda's hands.* He turned his hard  
gaze on me, pulled out his checkbook.  
*It's a loan, he said, not a gift.*

He gave me the check,  
then the empty pan, still sticky  
with cinnamon and syrup.

Mary Rohrer-Dann / State College, Pennsylvania

### ***Liliana's Days*** / Mary Rohrer-Dann

Some days, the white-gold  
sun steeps in matte-gray cloud.

Some days, shadows dapple the white walls  
with smoky green and lavender.

Some days, a pucker of green tomato recalls  
grit of cornmeal, her mother's smoking skillet.

Some days, at Reichert's Meats, an old man pushing  
his cart behind her, begins to sing *Dos gardenias*.

Some days, desire, that old devil, beats  
beats beats its wild drum between her legs.

Some days, a child's voice dips, lifts past her window,  
a swallow on invisible spools of air.

Some days. Oh! Some days.

Mary Rohrer-Dann / State College, Pennsylvania

*Easter Rabbits* / Mary Rohrer-Dann

*Hanne*, Karl Betz bellows from his back porch.  
*Ich habe zwei Osterhasen!* I have two Easter rabbits!  
*Jungen!* Boys. He thumps his chest.

He struts inside and I picture him eating  
onion cake at the kitchen table, drinking schnapps  
in a juice glass. Past sixty and still at it. *Hund!*

Poor Lisel, deep into her forties and laboring  
long into this Easter morning scented with rain.  
Six *Kinder*, and now two more to pull at her.

People here think I couldn't catch a man.  
Ha. I caught a man.  
Then I caught a baby.

I walked alone to *die Zigeunerfrau*. Black hair  
snarled from her green scarf. She demanded *geld*  
before she let me in, then brewed a bitter tea.

Afterwards, she washed me so tenderly, I wept.

I left the whispers behind. I made my own way,  
my own life. I own my house and everything in it.  
No man tells me what to do or how to do it.

I boil coffee on my new enamel stove, gather  
my crochet hooks and wool, begin a second blanket,  
here on this rain-washed American street, where  
shameless old men shout their news for all to hear.

Mary Rohrer-Dann / State College, Pennsylvania



## *The War Zone* / Katiana Retivov

It's 530 miles away, almost  
Like the distance  
Between Boston  
And Washington, DC.

Are you worried about me?  
Or am I merely  
Out of sight, out of mind?  
Let me list for you

The atrocities perpetrated  
Here, for the first time  
Since BabiyYar, WWII.  
Though on second thought,

Let me not. Let me not let  
On about the horrors, lest  
They trouble your little mind.  
Let's not and say I did.

It is like a waxing moon,  
The war zone, seeking  
To contain. I have followed  
Each Blood Moon over

The horizon, May to June,  
Now September rhyming  
With remember, and then,  
"It's four in the morning..."

But not quite December.  
The orchard is still  
Overflowing with apples,  
Pears. Indian summer

Glowing through golden  
Leaves. Elsewhere there  
Are drones, missiles, and  
The brambles of a burning

Bush in the distance where  
Flocks are grazing oblivious  
Of human carnage. The face  
Of God struggles to show

The way to the land of  
Milk and honey, aka  
Bread basket of the western world,  
slouching back to Cucuteni-  
Trypillia.

Tatiana Retivov / Kyiv, Ukraine

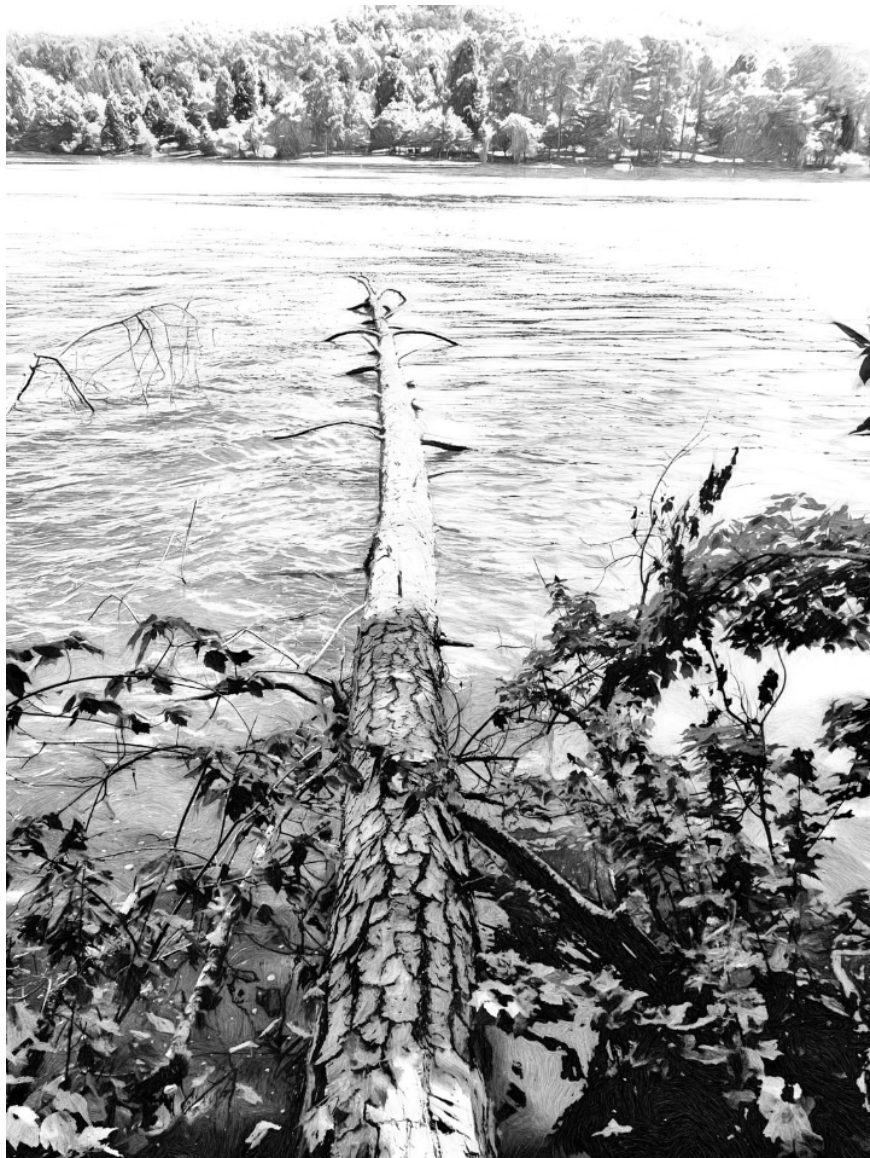
*Night Watching* / James B. Nicola

If you were to see me alone, you would  
see me react to nothing, grin, and call  
out as if I were not alone. But all  
is well, as sentries said. The neighborhood  
is peaceful. No one notices, nor should,  
the grimaces and groans. They're personal  
to someone who is simply in the thrall  
of someone absent—which may not be good,  
but does inspire such amenities  
of solitude that suddenly you're here:  
in giggles that erupt from memories  
and tender truths, in lines I try to write;  
and images of faces that appear  
as yours alone, emblazoned in the night.

James B. Nicola / New York, New York



*Submerged* / Rana Williams



Photograph, Rana Williams / Hayesville, North Carolina