

3rd Wednesday



Summer 2023

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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 magazine are completely free to anyone and print issues can be purchased at Amazon.com.

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Editors Note:

Since we started publishing nearly 15 years ago, 3rd Wednesday has been committed to compensating artists for their work. While we operate on a non-profit publishing model, we understand the importance of acknowledging and valuing the work of our contributors. Occasionally, we receive requests from poets, writers, and artists who prefer not to receive a payment along with their copy of the magazine. When we transitioned to Submittable, we introduced a checkbox on our submission forms, allowing submitters to opt out of token payment as a passive donation to 3rd Wednesday. This simple option has been well-received, with many hopeful contributors choosing to support us in this way.

We recognise that some of our contributors may not want monetary compensation or may find the process of depositing a check for less than ten dollars inconvenient. In this digital age, visiting the bank may not be a common practice. On the other hand, we have generous individuals who genuinely enjoy our magazine and wish to contribute to our success. To all those who choose to check the box, regardless of their reasons, we express our gratitude. For those who don't, we still thank you for submitting your work and encourage you to continue doing so. We are thrilled that you have selected us as a platform and are delighted to provide you with a few dollars when we accept your work for publication. We understand the satisfaction that comes with being paid for creative efforts, and it brings us joy to support that.

Twice each year, we hold fiction and poetry contests that offer the opportunity for more substantial compensation in the form of prize money, typically one hundred dollars per winning piece, with no limitations on the number of entries. To ensure accessibility, we keep our entry fees low at six dollars per entry. This approach allows us to generate some funds to support our web presence, while also rewarding the exceptional work contributed by the winners. Your participation is incredibly encouraging and warrants another heartfelt thank you from all of us.

David Jibson, Editor

The Witch / Mykyta Ryzhykh

the witch was burned on such a huge log
that if a crossbar were added
it would be a cross

a time for crusades and disbelief is ahead

my cat is purring
and with my eyes closed I conjure
an end to the war outside the window

the cat smiles knowing that wizards do not exist

the future has arrived
now it is spring
and the graves remain

Mykyta Ryzhykh / Nova Kakhovka, Ukraine

Gentle On My Mind / Andy Roberts

Another friend has died of cancer –
Pancreatic. Three rounds of chemo.
We've reached the age where it's
always on our minds. Not gentle though.

John Hartford wrote that song,
not Glenn Campbell, who made it famous.
You can never go back, they say,
you can't repeat the past.
But I've lived there most of my life.

Thinking about Doug as I
Fry three eggs, stir some oatmeal.
Doug only lasted nine months
after he retired from Ohio State.

I sit down to my breakfast and newspaper,
scan the obituaries.
I should go to the funeral
but I can't get off work.
Nobody can retire anymore,
it seems.

I'll go to my mind,
where everyone lives
forever and the songs
are so much better.

Andy Roberts / Columbus, Ohio

Void / Josh Markham

She brushes her hair like a canvas.
When she giggles, I try to laugh with her.
Threads fall to the carpet with a sigh,
like snow off a dying breeze.

When she giggles, I try to laugh with her
about the times I collapse. I hear silence.
Like snow off a dying breeze.
Birds are sleeping in the grass. They don't even snore.

At the times I collapse, I hear silence
in any room I'm in.
Birds are sleeping in the grass. They don't even snore
for me. Eyes can close, but ears have no lids.

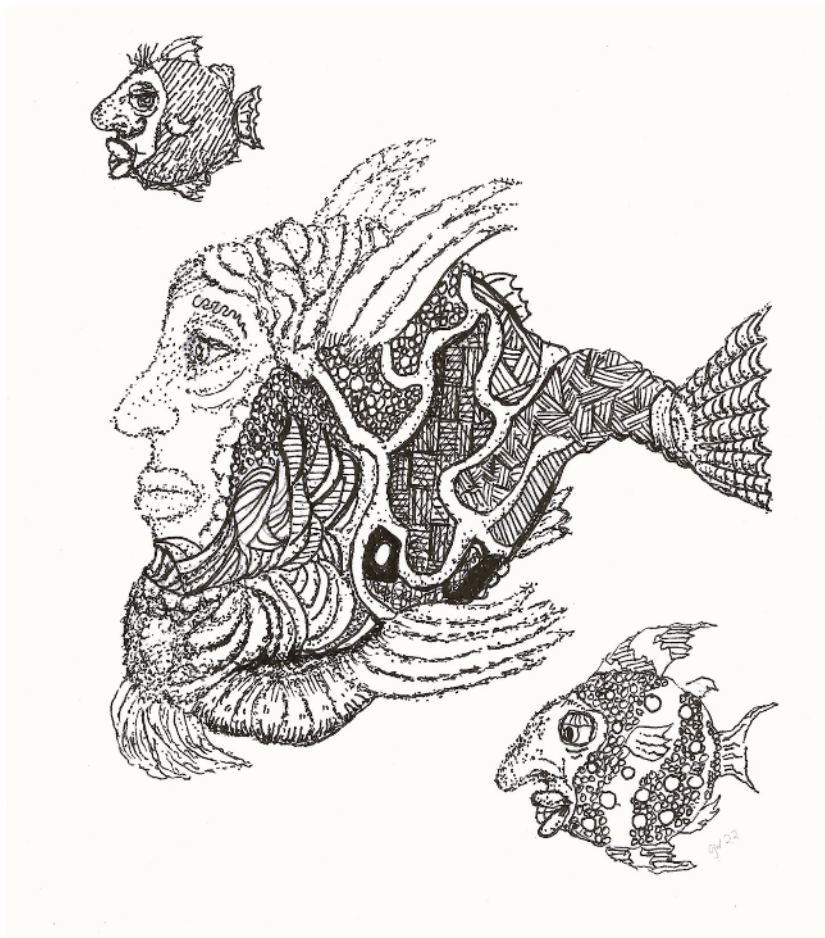
From any room I'm in
I walk after the first noise calling
for me. Eyes can close, but ears have no lids.
A falling wave, like wine poured into a glass.

I walk after that first noise calling
for attention,
a falling wave, like wine poured into a glass,
lavish flares over a violin's strings.

For attention
she brushes her hair like a canvas,
lavish flares over a violin's strings.
Threads fall to the carpet with a sigh.

Josh Markham / Raleigh, North Carolina

3 *Fish* / Gary Wadley



Drawing
Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky

The Creature from the Black Lagoon / John Tustin

I'm like King Kong
or Frankenstein's Monster
or The Creature from the Black Lagoon –
always infatuated with some human female,
chasing her down,
picking her up when she faints at the sight of me;

then taking her to my safe space
 atop the world's tallest building
 or my mad creator's castle
 or even on over to my black lagoon
where I lie her down in my bed,
stare at her until she awakes,
then have not the foggiest idea
what to do next.

John Tustin / Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

Here / Becky Boling

I belong here, the odd duckling
swimming along the edge of the lake.
I'm tolerated, maybe even liked.
I stir the shallows and insects rise.

Each day, I shed a mossy feather.
In its place, one emerges a different shade.
I swim the eddies in the others' wake.
Each day, I come a little closer.

Becky Boling / Northfield, Minnesota

A Haunting / Rachel Guvenc

In a land filled with Western lust for ghost cowboys
and dead Indians, we see the poverty of the people here.
We see the way they mask this for the tourists.

This uncomfortable place between history and now:
of raids and rampage, of false glory, god, and gold,
driving through, we cannot unknow it, we become

complicit. The black hills, a feast for the eyes,
hearty and majestic, but they are not mine.
Strangers carved into this rock, the semblance

of moneyed men, of slave owners, leaders
who justified the degradation of peoples;
leaders I was taught to admire. On our tour

we visit a grandfather mountain degraded,
we stand over a scenic sweep of stone and pine.
In red paint reads *Stolen Land*. I ask a small rock

to come home with me, enticed in the way
its black shines, the way thin layers form solid,
but the rock says *no more, so* I leave it, but I admit,

a few others find their way into my pocket. I justify
my theft somehow. And it's no wonder that
on this vacation we took to heal, we bring home

not only stolen rocks from a stolen land, but
an unexplained itch that wakes us up each night.

Rachel Guvenc / Minneapolis, Minnesota

Memento / Corey Bryan

My grandfather made a gift of his pocket knife. It wasn't in his will or anything, he just quietly took my hand, put the silver knife, shining after all these years, into my palm and folded his wrinkled, work worn hands around my twelve year old fingers. The handle was cool and smooth to the touch. It didn't come with a card; no words were spoken—just the knowing look of a shared secret.

cutting through
the summer breeze—
silver blade of grass

Corey Bryan / Atlanta, Georgia

The Gardener's Dispensation / John Middlebrook

Keepers of landscapes,
 we envy your green grace:
when your cuts are mistakes
 your dear ones still mend.

While the vines that bind love
 can strain just so much
'til they snap and unbraid,
 fall limp and suspend.

John Middlebrook / Yardley, Pennsylvania

January Thaw / John Muro

Weeks into the first month of
the year and winter's just departed
for holiday, leaving to us a flawless
basin of blue buttressed by dense
boughs and a changeable breeze that's –
how best to describe it? – medicinal,
warming ice-hardened furrows
and rutted roads and itching to
transform the terraced hills into
a tracery of green that's just this
side of cypress yellow when the
afternoon air offers up the milled
fragrance of freshly cut cedar and
the sudden refrain of bird-song
that trips down the air, not unlike
the way that we, against all reason,
come to hope that an obstinate grief
will somehow ease and leave our
hearts, in some strange way, refreshed,
even near-grateful, with a discernible
diminishing of hurt and the fear of a
life-long pain without reprieve or purpose.

John Muro / Guilford, Connecticut

Torn / Cynthia Ventresca

for Ben and Toni

I climb the steps to your front door and collect the mail from the box.
Your son asked me to make sure it doesn't pile up, voice broken

through the phone. He sounded like you. You outside Saturday morning
in that orange shirt drinking tea from a convenience store cup.

When was the last time we talked over the fence of politics or plum
tomatoes, the dogs around your feet?

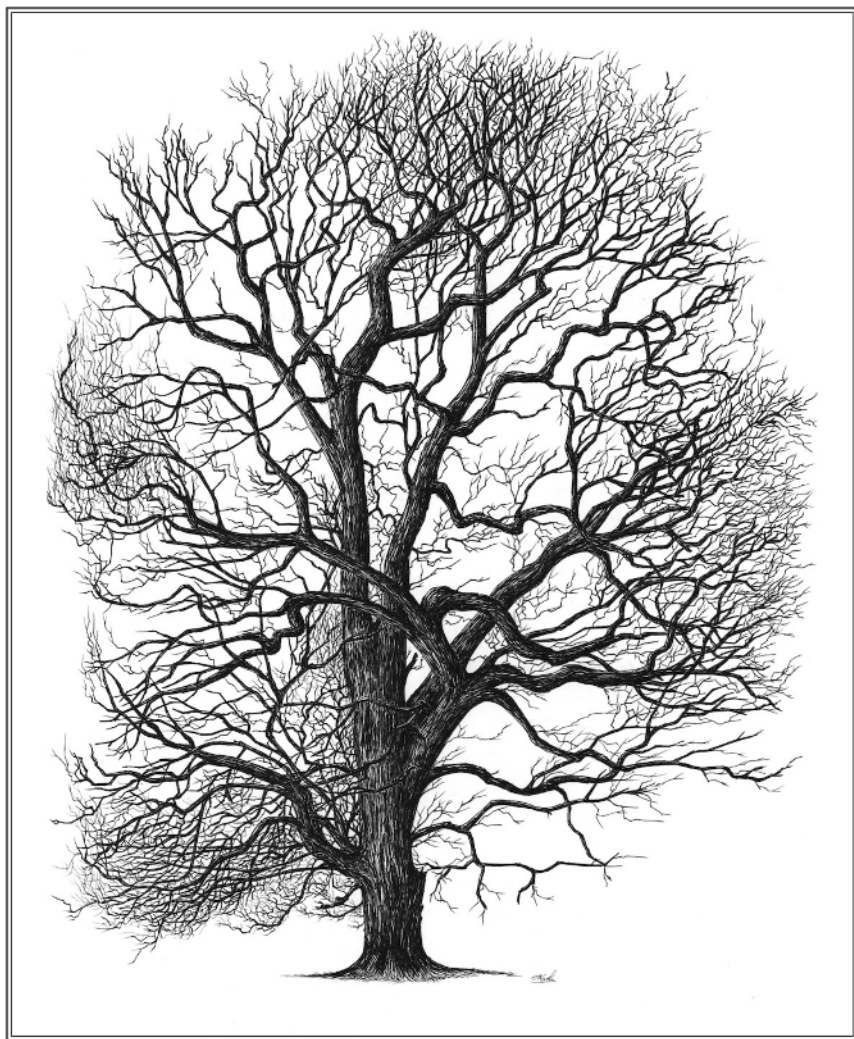
There's a space between cars where you used to park because someone
was outracing the train -- now nothing is the same here

but your house: kitchen rug swinging from a line out back, little flag
that says *Autumn* staked in the garden.

A lamp is still lit upstairs. It shines on the grass at night, as if you just
parted a curtain.

Cynthia Ventresca / Wilmington, Delaware

Oak Tree / Tabitha Marsh



Drawing
Tabitha Marsh / Warwickshire, United Kingdom

Fighting Dinosaurs / Robert Fillman

"Apparently locked in combat, these two fighting dinosaurs were remarkably preserved in this action pose some 80 million years ago." — American Museum of Natural History

Protoceratops and Raptor,
two specimen found together
in Mongolia, bodies wrapped

around each other, their posture
forgotten for millions of years,
what terrible writhing there must
have been, that long sickle gashing

at the gut, a great beak cracking
through bone, just a horrible mess
of striking and jawing when poof—

the dune collapsed, breath suddenly
crushed from their lungs until they were
closer than skin on skin, womb mate
prisoners scratching out their years.

When I discovered this photo
in my picture book as a child
I would trace my finger over

every hump and horn, wanting to
understand. I pretended they
were hugging. I had to believe
each mega-annum was a small

slap of water under the bridge,
all just a misunderstanding,
no longer enemies, instead

a famous still life duo etched,
kinship destined to be displayed.
I was trying to be hopeful.
After all, I had a brother.

Robert Fillman / Macungie, Pennsylvania

Off Course / Salvatore Difalco

The lake water ripples from a single stone I skipped.
It didn't skip; it plopped and tore open a blue-green membrane.
Frogs and birds quickly ornamented the soundscape,
as if they knew I'd missed the mark and overcompensated.

I'm serene here on this margin, at peace
with my absolutes and mental monuments
to myself, the trembling water mirroring a universe
in flux above us: everything is on the verge of something.
Even a stone follows a sequence, anticipating the next thing.
Down here, I am nothing but a passing stream of thoughts.
I wonder if that stream will continue up there.
Then dusk creeps up without warning
and suddenly there is no here and there.

First, a golden fog descends on the lake.
A shimmering stillness follows; my coppery shadow drapes
across the rocks and I fight the urge to close
my eyes and sleep right there.

Then darkness comes in heavy metal mode,
the wilderness responds with raucous whistling and applause.
I can't see my hands or toes, but the sky
has turned on its photon sprinklers and meteor showers,
has fired up its constellations and quasars.
From the velvety blackness below I am watching
a preposterous light show, so stirring and beautiful
I like to think of it as the work of some supernal artist.

The wolves belong to another side of the spectacle.
Their howls make me hug my thermal sleeping blanket
and add a branch to the campfire. And gazing out
on that black impasto nothingness, it's hard to believe
it's all still there, the lake, the rocks, the trees
and the rest of the resident flora and fauna.

And if I close my eyes, a real darkness comes,
that blackens the woods and the glinting lake
and blots out the starry sky and any aspirations
I have to make it out of there alive.

Salvatore Difalco / Toronto, Ontario

Silent Hearing / Lynn Gilbert

It's often said, and true:
we all hear poems' sounds
in our inner voice, though we
read them in silence

just as Beethoven,
deaf as a stone, heard
his late compositions
in his mind's ear

and was moved to tears
by the simple pathos
of the "Cavatina"
in his third-to-last

string quartet, whose
four soft *legato* voices
sound to us like
"farewell, forever."

Lynn Gilbert / Pflugerville, Texas

A Poltergeist Haunts a Person Rather Than a Place /
Stephanie Frazee

My mother used to tell me
about hauntings
only she
could see.
The shadow of a child in the hallway
lights flicking on and off
doors opening and closing
tiny fingerprints in dust
piano keys moving silently.
I would nod
and try to sound grave:
So scary
Terrifying
and
It must be a burden
to be the only one
who can see such things.

She called
to tell me
a glass of orange juice
slid across the table
on its own,
and I laughed.
I couldn't stop myself.
It was funny,
to imagine a spirit
concerning itself
with my mother's orange juice.
That was the last time
she told me
about her ghost.

When I think of her
ghost stories
I think of her
as a child:
lonely and strange,
pale and fragile,
bruised easily
as an apricot.
In a photo,
hollow eyes
cheekbones of cut glass
and the grimly set mouth
of a too-late Victorian,
the freckles on her nose
the only proof
she was real.

Stephanie Frazee / Seattle, Washington

Shigar / Andre Privateer



Photograph
Andre Privateer / Davis, California

First Meeting: Parkinson's Support Group / William Palmer

1

Lee tells us
he was a concert violinist
with the Chicago Symphony.

His long fingers tremble
too much now
to play.

When he sleeps,
his bow arm sweeps out—
his wife sleeps in the spare room.

2

Work around it, Marsha says,
like a sea captain who knows these waters.

It's likely not terminal, she says, holding
the wheel. *Work around it*.

This is what I will tell myself, I decide.

She still makes clothes
for our women's shelter.

She still takes care of her husband
with dementia sitting beside her.

William Palmer / Traverse City, Michigan

Alpacas / Jim Tilley

A fieldstone hut where all five live year-round,
three wearing brown fur, two dirty white.
Pack animals, you once thought, until you
noticed that one of the white always grazes
alone, lies alone, stands apart, is even absent
at times, presumably having chosen to stay home.
She's the first to gaze at you as you walk by,
and if you stop at the wall, she will approach

for a closer look, probably interested in anyone
who is interested in her, a creature like you
who walks alone, grazes alone, often stays home
rather than chance meeting a person you might
have to talk to, as happened the other day
when a beater of a car stopped beside you,
and the driver rolled down the window to ask
if you knew anybody in these parts who could

use part-time help. You looked at him and he
looked back at you, each of you holding
the other's stare for several seconds. Another
lone alpaca is what you thought, and yet you
didn't know the first thing about his particular
circumstances, where he hailed from, where he
might end up. In these parts, he certainly wouldn't
find what he was searching for. You couldn't

find the right words, but managed to say that,
as far as you knew, all your neighbors still had
the workers they'd hired years ago. He thanked
you for being kind enough to speak with him,
and you each held the other's gaze for a few
seconds before he drove off. You turned around
and walked back down the road to the solitary
alpaca to tell her you understood her better now.

Jim Tilley / Bedford Corners, New York

Red Sky in Morning / Jim Tilley

Whether there are leaves on the trees, the start
of a day under a cloudless sky brings a red tinge
to the western hills, dawn feeling like autumn's
auguring the end of something, a last hurrah before

the bareness of winter sets in with crisp air to
clear the head. Brings to mind the maxim about
taking warning, and today there is momentous news
of red collaborating with red, two autocracies

putting warheads together to settle the war
that is not a war, though it has already spilled
hundreds of thousands of soldiers' and ordinary
citizens' blood. Still to come—the ultimate battle,

some say, East versus West. We can't help but
think of horizons at both ends of the day, wonder
whether victory will be won on land, in air, or at sea.
For whose delight it will be red sky that night.

Jim Tilley / Bedford Corners, New York

The Full Bouquet / Nancy Huggett

Just when I think I am stuck in this hole of care-making,
when every endeavor is disturbed by need – a wipe, a pill,
a tuck, a fix, a phantom to be dispelled – a new disruption
tumbles in. It's you, Ellen. Not the truckers or the salesmen
(always men). But you. Beaming, bouncing,
bringing bagels, books, strong dark coffee,
conversation. Detouring from some doctor
(because we are of that age) to deliver a quick fix
to carebound me bemoaning constriction.

You unwind what ravel's me, make me laugh,
a sound like spring pushing up through my throat,

like those daffodils that laid dormant in our front
garden for 5 years and then erupted, a flock
of flaming yellow, an effervescence. I sing
it all into bloom. Laughter, loss, the cat
that sprayed my car, the melting snow, the stroke,
the four Common Goldeneyes at the turn in the river,
my mother's last breath, how we first met
when your ex abandoned you, and now
how we prop our aging souls with Nordic walking poles
and words. The full bouquet of being.

Nancy Huggett / Ottawa, Ontario

Flight Plan / Nancy Huggett

On the edge of the log that I almost overturned
wanting a perch to watch the rising sun,
a nymph hangs, anchored
a steady gray you'd almost miss,
that being the purpose: to cling to stillness
as form cracks open at the weakest spot
just behind her head, emerging
pale green and whole, swallowing
air to bellow her body, slowly pumping
hemolymph into limp wings
that fall flaccid over her abdomen
like a chartreuse shroud as I shift
the log to get a better look, ignoring
the need for gravity's full power
to plump wings, hinge flight.
Log quickly righted,
ecdysis continues.

How vital
the weight of this world.

Nancy Huggett / Ottawa Ontario

*(ecdysis: the process of shedding the old skin or (in insects and other
arthropods) casting off the outer cuticle)*

The Crossing Guard / Roger D'Agostin

“Give Mike a chance.”

“He picks his nose.” Heather walks right past me. When she reaches the curb, she takes a deep breath, like she’s steadying herself for a test, then continues to the front entrance of Ridgewood Elementary.

That afternoon I tell her, “People change. Everyone changes.” Heather looks at me with one of those you’re really annoying stares only a kid under the age of seven can give and still look cute. It’s especially not offensive since she’s bent under her backpack and I want to ask how many books and notebooks first graders are responsible for these days. But this could worsen her mood.

The next morning, Heather tells me I look tired.

“I’m not tired.”

“I said you look tired.” She shakes her head in frustration.

At 9:15 I go to my car. No one comes after 9:15 but I’m supposed to stay at the crosswalk until 9:30. I spend the entire fifteen minutes examining my eyes in the rear view mirror.

That afternoon Mike’s by himself. I think this is a good time to address the Heather situation. “Why don’t you wait for Heather, and then the two of you can cross together?” I don’t add that there will be five or six other kids and she might not even notice.

“Heather doesn’t care if I wait.” He’s buckled under his backpack. “I have to get home and study for my spelling quiz tomorrow.”

Being a crossing guard was my wife's idea. A friend of hers was volunteering and said they needed people. "What else do you have to do with your time? And you'll get some exercise." Six months in I find out she's having an affair with "the friend." That was late November. By Christmas she had packed all her things and moved in with the guy. She even had the nerve to tell me the crossing guard idea was really hers and she was trying to get me to be more like him. "Fred walks the mile to his crossing guard spot. You drive. If you go into the middle of the street in front of our house I can see where you have to stand. But you drive there."

"I keep stuff I need in the car. Extra depends, a pair of pants, my cane."

"That's the problem. That was always the problem."

On Friday, When I ask Heather if that's her dad on the other side of the street waving she answers, "Yes, I'm going to his house this weekend." I ask how the spelling quiz went and she says better than this weekend will.

Monday it rains. I do my best to keep my umbrella over the children. My shoulder aches.

I ask Heather if she had a nice weekend. She says she likes her bed in her mom's house better. I tell her I know what she means and she asks how often I sleep at my dad's house? I say it's not like that and she doesn't wait for an explanation which is good. I don't want to tell her that after my wife left, I thought it best to buy a new bed.

But I still can't sleep.

In the afternoon, Michael tells me he got a fifty on his spelling quiz and I say next time he'll do better. I want to add that spelling roll and robe and rob is not essential to any good job I can think of, and besides, things could be worse. You might find out after forty-two years of marriage your seventy-one-year-old wife is having an affair and insists she's been unhappily married for the last twenty-five. But I tell him Heather got a hundred and maybe she can help him.

On Tuesday I mention to Heather that Michael didn't do so well on the spelling quiz. She's searching for her mom, and I remind her, that yesterday her mom said she might be a little late and she was to wait here. "You could test him over the computer or maybe the phone. You could say a word and he could spell it back." She brightens up with this last idea. "Is that what you did with your wife?" she asks. I notice one of her front teeth poking through her gums. She doesn't look old enough. "No," I reply. "No we didn't."

Michael's walking with Heather on Thursday. He's just behind her. He's picking his nose but she doesn't see. Michael has no problem talking and picking. I think none of my advice helped. Regardless, I don't think it will hurt to start offering him packs of tissues. The dry winter air will be gone before you know it and the boogers won't be easy to flick. The tissues will help.

Roger D'Agostin / Norwalk, Connecticut

Viceroy Butterfly / Rana Williams



Photograph
Rana Williams / Hayesville, North Carolina

Forkful / Laurie Kuntz

You tell me:
I don't clean the bathtub drain.
My hairbrush is dirty,
and you hate that I'm planting
coleus by the driveway.
Then there's that fork,
with crusted food in a corner prong.

One day, perhaps by surprise,
I will be gone, and you will mourn
that you complained about a drain, a hairbrush,
a plant that I planted too close to the driveway,
and that dirty fork.

No one will ever write you
a bittersweet love poem.
No one will ever make you a perfect affogato,
or black forest torte,
and no one will ever wash the forks,
and leave a few crumbs of what nurtured us,
a reminder that I was here in all my *imperfections*,
the word *perfect* embedded in its flaws.

Laurie Kuntz / Greenacres, Florida

Graceland / Birute Ruzga

Today is the five-year anniversary of my abortion.
I'm on my way to Graceland to forget about it.
I think Elvis is the most handsome man that ever lived.
I imagine my five-year-old son to never be sitting in the passenger
seat,
buckled in tighter than he should be.
We drive through the cornfields of Illinois and the rolling hills of
Kentucky.
He stares out the window and says nothing at the change of scenery.
He has the profile of Elvis.
His bangs are long and dirty blonde,
like Elvis' before he dyed it all black.
We stop off at a Waffle House in northern Tennessee.
I watch him eat blueberry waffles.
His nose is an inch above the waffles.
His bangs cover seductive eyes.
I try talking to him, but he eats and says nothing.
I think about his father, who's in jail.
Elvis's father was in jail when Elvis was a boy.
This will make us closer.
We'll be as close as Elvis and Gladys.
When I'm on my deathbed, he'll fly in from wherever he is
stationed,
no matter how busy he is changing the world,
to be at my side as I die.
The new motel room smell in Memphis excites me.
"Isn't this fun?" I ask him as I jump on the bed.
He sits at the corner of his bed and says nothing.
All I see is the Elvis profile of his face.
His full lips stuck in one place.

As I try to sleep, I don't hear him at all.
I want to hear him move in his sleep,
cough, sneeze, anything,
so I can ask him if he's okay.
I wait to hear him cry in the night.
But there is no sound.
In the morning he is gone
and I go to Graceland by myself.

Birute Ruzga / Chicago, Illinois

Our Bedroom / R. A. Allen

sits empty now, but a rectangular contrast
in the sun-faded wallpaper
recalls where an armoire once stood.
Four dents in the hardwood floor mark
the corners of a bed we never moved.
Donating the oriental rug has exposed
a stain where the fish tank leaked
that summer we camped an extra week
in Los Padres. It meant death by
dehydration for Bonnie & Clyde. Just two
dumb goldfish, a facile obligation that
we accepted at the pet store, but with time—
like this marriage—gone from neglect.

R. A. Allen / Memphis, Tennessee

Blank Legal / K. Carlton. Johnson



Woodcut

K. Carlton. Johnson / Lake Lindon, Michigan

Saxman's Tune #2 / Kathlene Barrett

for Doc

play jazz
the boozy kind
the kind entwined
 in the haze of cigarette smoke
which creeps in blue stage light

where the saxman blows out sadness
and the drum beats a single rhythm
 moving his riff along

*I want to hear songs
that I listened to alone
where I thought too much
 laughed at nothing
and inhaled unspoken words*

let's both listen to the piano
as it searches for a way out
I will be the smoke in the music
and you can be the last note in the saxman's tune

Kathlene Barrett / Ludington, Michigan

***Going to the Movie with Elvis* / Niles Reddick**

“Did I tell you about the time me and Elvis snuck out to see a movie?”

“Yes, you told me.”

“We were in high school then, living at the Lauderdale Courts in Memphis. We went to see a late movie at the Loew’s State Theater on Second. We walked and Elvis wanted to listen to Sister Rosetta Tharpe on a replay of a gospel show on his transistor radio. I got in about two, but my parents thought I was asleep in my room. Mama got me up for school and said, ‘You look like you didn’t sleep well.’ Then, the doorbell rang. I couldn’t see who it was from the kitchen, but Mama uh-huh’d, came back in the kitchen, and said, ‘That was Elvis. Said you left your coat on a bench outside and figured you might need it. You’re grounded now for being out late. ‘But,’ I said. ‘No buts,’ she said. ‘You need to quit hanging out with boys like Elvis. Thinks he’s gonna be somebody.’ ‘He’s just a guy who wants to be a singer,’ I said. ‘We all sing,’ she snapped. Mama walked to the sink, washed the leftover grits from our bowls, and sat the bowls on a dish towel to dry. Mama didn’t remember having said that when Elvis hit the big time with *That’s All Right*. You know, he was only 42 when he died. He’d be in his mid-80’s like me if he were still around. Wish he was.”

“Mr. Adams, you want some green or red Jell-O today?”

“I want some ice cream.”

“The doctor won’t let you have ice cream.”

“Did I tell you about the time me and Elvis snuck out to see a movie?”

“You just rest a while, and I’ll be back with your Jell-O.”

Niles Reddick / Jackson, Tennessee

Shiva / Sarah Etlinger

I crack two eggs to make a little dinner.

The yolks in the shallow bowl quiver
like golden hearts.

The evening sun peers out like a deer
emerging from the woods into a snowy clearing,

not like the swans in the winter river,
all out in the open, white against black.

The swans still have secrets.
Places to grieve together.

In my hands the eggshells are brittle as the moon.
When I look up, its silhouette glistens, then fades

behind a cloud, as if it saw what it wanted to see:
my face upturned, watching it in the sullen winter light.

Sarah Etlinger / Milwaukee, Wisconsin

On a Chilly Night / Ace Boggess

Are there more stars
burning infernos
in frosted sky glass

or viral-variant copies
inside me,
lighting little candles

to commemorate
the birth of their galaxy
a mere four days ago?

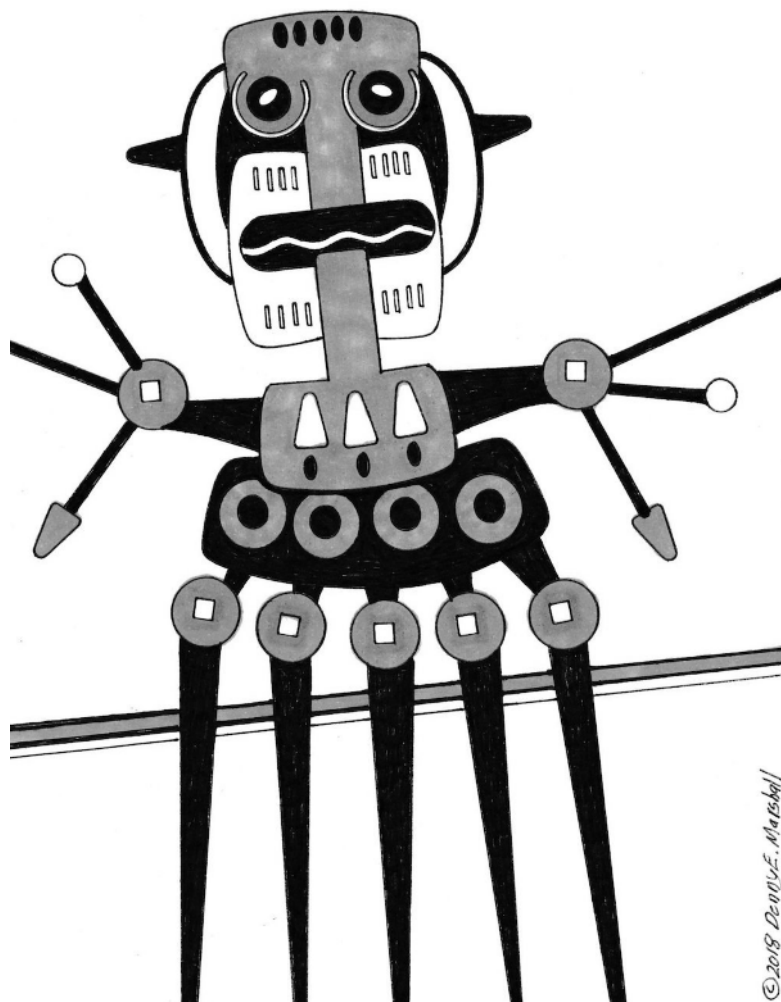
Ace Boggess / Charleston, West Virginia

Sometimes / Ace Boggess

I suspect the poem I'm writing
is no more than a personals ad
encrypted in code
for which I no longer have the key,
but someone does.

Ace Boggess / Charleston, West Virginia

Mixer / Denny Marshall



©2018 Denny Marshall

Drawing
Denny Marshall / Lincoln, Nebraska

A Woman's Life / Kaecey McCormick

Geri sits on the edge of the waiting room chair looking at her phone. She is waiting for the dentist, who is running late.

Geri is thinking about calling her mother, who turns eighty-nine tomorrow. She is also thinking about calling her brother. She is also thinking about her dead father who collapsed at work one day when Geri was in high school. (They told her he had a heart attack.)

Geri's head starts to throb. Then pound. Then thunder claps inside her skull. She tries to ignore it. Then she asks the woman at the front desk for Tylenol. Geri is sure her head will explode. (She is not wrong.)

The woman gets up to look for Tylenol, and when she gets back, Geri is on the floor. The woman drops the Tylenol. (Geri doesn't notice.)

Geri is on the floor because a blood vessel in the front region of her brain burst. It began to weaken when the backs of Geri's hands were smooth and she was studying French literature as if her life depended on it. (It didn't.)

Over time, blood flowing to her brain pooled until it exploded and she collapsed, like her father all those years ago. The blood bores through her brain like bullets. As it moves, it floods her neurons, perverting connections and disrupting Geri's neural clock, spreading like shot from a gun, increasing cranial pressure and irritating the delicate tissues. (It is efficient and ruthless.)

The blood bullets speed Geri toward her last breath. She doesn't mind. Time expands as she lays on the cold linoleum floor. Pictures come. Sounds like recording. She looks at her mother, whose hair is still blonde and back still straight, in her black funeral dress. "Stay strong for your brother, Geri," she says to her daughter. (Geri will.)

Her father walks through the back door, kicking off his grass-covered shoes. He grabs a beer, turns on the television, and flops onto the sofa. He lights a cigarette and inhales. Geri follows, hair is in pigtails, yellow sundress sticking to her sweaty skin. She climbs into his lap, inhaling the mix of sweat and beer and smoke. "Papa." She cups his face in her hands. He kisses her nose. "Game's on Ger-Bear, so be good and watch." (She watches him watch the men run after a ball.)

Then Geri's wife is walking down the aisle toward her, and she is also yelling in the kitchen, tears streaming down her face. She is also lying naked on a beach towel while Geri rubs sunblock on her back, then she is throwing Geri's books out the front door. (One is the Baudelaire she gave Geri their first Christmas together.)

It is Geri's first day of kindergarten and she is also wearing a robe with a hood and wishing she'd worn flats as she walks across the stage. She is fourteen and watching the other girls in her high school class instead of the boys, then she is seven and at a girl scouts meeting learning about first aid. (She will use the information when her wife falls and breaks her arm trying to put the star on their third Christmas tree.)

Her parents are bringing her brother home from the hospital, a tiny bundle wrapped in blue. Then her brother is calling out to her in the middle of the night when the nightmares about their father's death come. Geri runs into his room, singing the song her father sang to her when she had bad dreams. (The sleeping pills keep her mother in the dark.)

In the time it takes for her final breath to move from her lungs to her nose, she watches as her mother and father sing around a cake lit with candles as her brother watches from his high chair across the table. Her father lights a cigarette from a candle. "Make a wish, Ger-Bear." Geri closes her eyes and opens her mouth to blow out the candles. She opens her eyes and wishes her wife and then her mother. She tries to hold the wishes in her mind, but the blood bullets drag them away. (They are slowing.)

When the woman at the front desk moves to her side, she thinks Geri is dead. But Geri is sitting on her mother's lap listening to her read in a language she can't understand. Her mother kisses her forehead and pulls the sheet to her chin. "Bon nuit, ma poupée." (Good night.)

Kaecey McCormick / Cupertino, California

Imagine a Life / Joan E. Bauer

Dry climate, high desert for stargazing.
Turquoise & the Hillerman novels
with Navajo detectives Leaphorn & Chee.

My history with Albuquerque goes back fifty years.

Old Town. Sandstorms.
At Casa Ruiz, a bowl of green chile, chicken soup, posole.

Earth-toned adobe walls, Pueblo-Spanish flat roofs,
the blue-green doors, the pottery, the weaving.

Route 66 runs right through as does the Rio Grande.

*

My friend & lover devised a plan. Fake address
in a rural outpost where his medical, etc
might be enough.

We drove straight from Berkeley.
I waited hours in his old Buick for the military bus to return.

My friend lucked out. The medics found him if not crazy
exactly, unfit for service & I was his accomplice

& what about the young man who took his place?

Where did he grow up?

On a ranch? On the rez? Did he go to Vietnam? Did he come back?

& how easy to say all that now with showy earnestness—

But what did we feel then?

Nothing but relief as we headed back
to Berkeley to our studio on Hillegass near People's Park.

We hurtled back, not stopping in Gallup or Flagstaff.
We drove & drove & we didn't stop.

Joan E. Bauer / Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

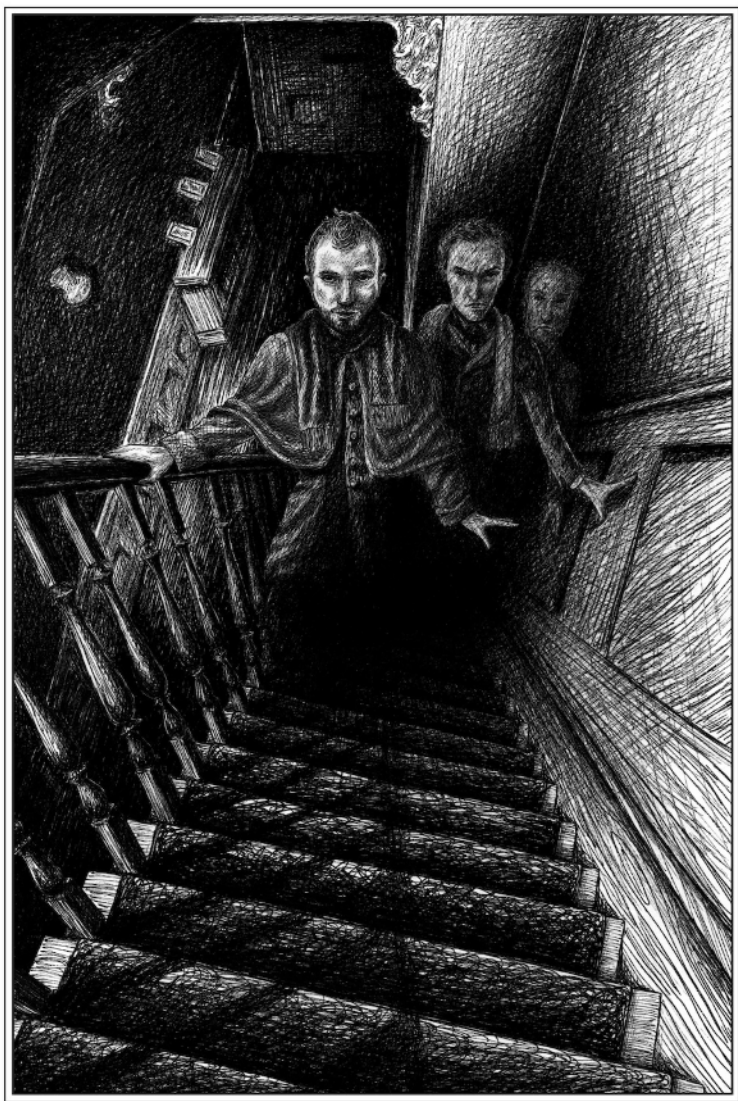
Mom in the kitchen, 1967 / Alfred Fournier

after Ted Kooser

Today, from a distance, I saw you
as you stood once in the kitchen
holding a metal spatula like a baton,
slim and elegant in your black apron,
strings trailing like coattails behind
as you stepped to the podium
of another day, another breakfast for eight,
ignoring off-key tones as the players
assembled at the table. A portrait
of composed grace, reaching for the eggs,
cracking each with a wave of your arm,
wrist flick at the edge of a glass bowl,
twirling the whisk, pouring liquid gold
into a sizzling sonata of onions
in a cast iron pan. Maestro
of the madhouse, your gliding hands
unwinding the discord, directing
the rabble toward a more tuneful world.
At least making sure
we never went to school hungry.

Alfred Fournier / Phoenix, Arizona

The Staircase / Tabitha Marsh



Drawing
Tabitha Marsh / Warwickshire / United Kingdom

More a Nothing Than a Something / Michael Cocchiarale

Joplin locks, jeans chopped off, legs dark light speeding out from Birkenstocks. That was Ray, an 8X10 beside Dad's mantle clock. Years ago, he'd been one of the CB friends who was almost always over. Beer and bourbon bashes, Cribbage and Ouija boards, guitar-strapped drunks laying waste to Bob and Baez. The last time, I crept downstairs and found Ray shatter-eyed in the den, sliding vinyl from a sleeve.

"You know Floyd?"

I shrugged.

"They're far out," he said, Lotus style on the braided rug, head afloat upon eerie sounds emerging. "Far as possible, without going over."

In the kitchen, Dad loudly deplored the draft.

Ray said, "You were nothing for billions of years. One day, you'll be nothing ever more."

"You're something else," said Mom, appearing in the archway, tugging her miniskirt.

He winked. "Set the controls for the heart of the sun."

*

Wednesday, Ray stopped by, hair tailed, suit and tie, clutching walkie talkies.

"Aren't you handsome," Mom said.

"Interview. Last chance."

After shooping me upstairs, Ray said, "Breaker, breaker 1-9."

"10-4 good buddy!" I exclaimed.

“Hold on. Gumballs in the rearview. Hammer down!”

From the landing, I spied Mom, head landing like a capsule on the surface of Ray’s shoulder.

*

The following night, I answered the phone to a woman sobbing about her Raymond, whose cycle swerved past one truck right into another. Mom appeared, saving the receiver before it struck the linoleum.

Hours after, Dad cracked my door. “Your mother’s crushed.”

Ray had been. A real something.

“Want the light off?”

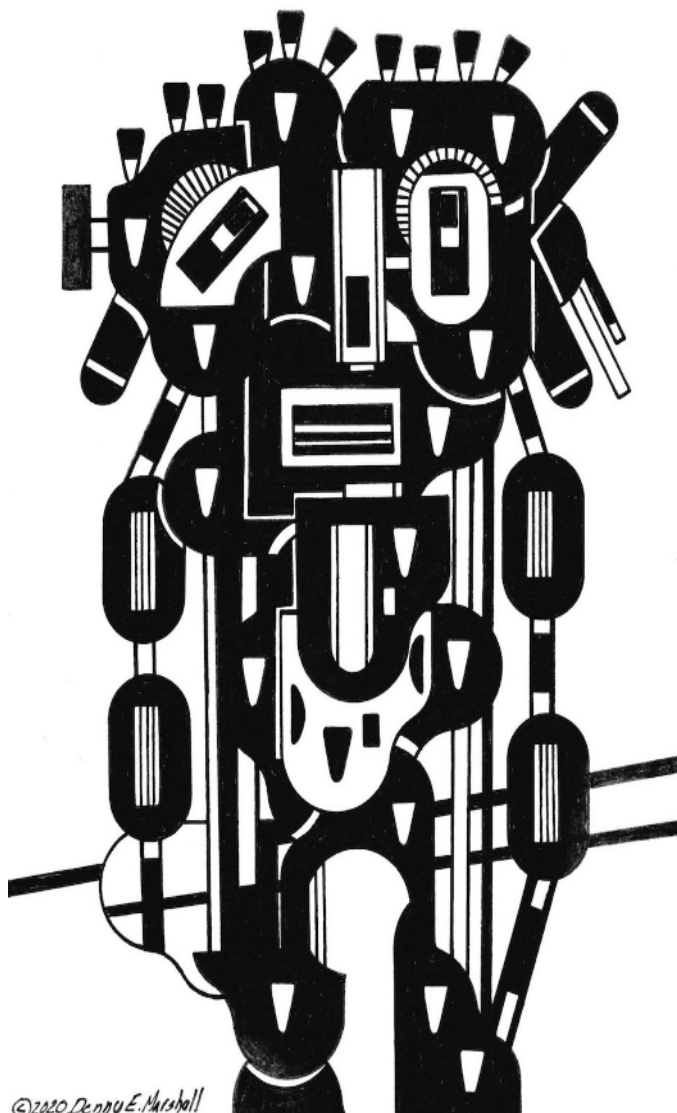
Eyes closed, I spun the dials of my imagination. Pictured the swerve, the glare, the smash. The nothing.

“Son?”

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Discrete they were, like invisible sheep—one after another, up and over, colliding with more nothing on the dark side of the room.

Michael Cocchiarale / Chester, Pennsylvania

Permanent Scars / Denny Marshall



Drawing
Denny Marshall / Lincoln, Nebraska

Change / Sharon Scholl

Fall comes whistling softly
like one who wants to be felt
but not yet seen. It's like holding
and holding a door ajar,
hoping the cat will choose in or out..

After long, sweaty months
with night settling in by ten p.m.,
dawn knocking us awake,
a flash bulb at six a.m.,
the long dusk folds its gray curtain,
shaking out cool morning mist.

Time that held its breath
for days while heat rose in waves
expels it with a sudden wind
that causes windows to fly open,
houses to inhale, cough out mildew.

We shed a season's lassitude,
gearing up brain and bones
for some slow forward movement.
We are on the verge, perched
between skin and sweaters.

Sharon Scholl / Atlantic Beach, Florida

It's Terrible, the Things We Do to Each Other / Salena Casha

She's coming home from work and it's that time of fall where the leaves are grounded longer than they should be and, for weeks, there's been a browned maple seed in the right-hand corner of the kitchen. You end up bending on crunchy knees to get to it by hand.

The woman we're watching has had a shit day. Cheryl sent her a passive aggressive email about the back copy of a developmental algebra book and she's still rolling that stupid woman's words under her tongue when she sees it.

The box rests on the top step just outside the storm door even though most people who know her know she never goes into the house that way. I chose its placement carefully.

Like an unlit match is in short stories. Like an unfired gun.

This particular box hasn't been through the mail; she can tell because it's a box people use when their office moves to another building or when they get fired. She'll wonder, correctly, if I took it right from the publishing house store room.

Maybe she looks over her shoulder.

Maybe she thinks she sees my shadow curve at the end of her street.

Maybe, she thinks briefly about the email she sent that ended our friendship once and for all.

Sometimes, so I don't have to see her face again, I picture the box stolen. I see her walk past the steps and I wonder what we would do if we found ourselves together in the last rocketship to Mars at the end of the world with the box never having been a thing.

She'd probably punch me in the face anyway and I'd probably deserve it. You'd agree. But we'd still be stuck on a rocketship to Mars so, I'm sure we'd talk, out of boredom at the end, obviously, and also, because someone forgot to bring anything to read.

You can tell that she thinks about leaving the box there. Literally no reason to bring it inside to her turquoise kitchen that smells like cardamom and open it. She wonders if whatever's in the box has become anemic in winter light.

If the cat inside is dead. The apple, rotted.

Still, I'm sure she's curious. She probably thinks, panicked, that if she unboxes it, she'll find her things in pieces. The Eddie Izzard DVD snapped in two. Her six books torn into one-inch squares of confetti. The scarf she gave me from Cincinnati unraveled thread by thread.

The only thing inside that would surprise her is a red-lined print out of our last text exchange about the guy at Golden Temple. There were a lot of things I shouldn't have said.

She braces herself, squats low to take the weight of it with her legs. We have both grown old, you know, and must be careful.

She rises.

She brings it into the house.

She puts it on the counter.

She takes off the top.

She doesn't look inside the box. Instead, she closes her eyes and reaches in and pulls out a black rectangle, a yellow sticky note taped across the top.

Immediately, we know it's a matchbox. That there are golden letters embossed that say may the bridges I burn light the way. We watch her read the note first.

Sometimes it says: Do whatever you want with my things; they stopped being mine when I gave them to you.

Sometimes it says, burn my shit, I don't want it back.

Or just, you reminded myself of me and it was too hard.

Or, even rarer, I loved you.

There is always something else in the box, sometimes a prepaid phone and other times, the leftover ink flakes from the tattoo her husband put on my ribs. Once, I even dropped in the cross my grandmother gave me at my first communion.

I don't pray anymore and she'd know that and know what it meant. Anyway, she never looks inside, no matter what timeline we're in.

She closes the box and moves into her living room where we sat drinking cucumber vodka to the sounds of Purple Rain, duck feather ends from over-embroidered pillows pinching the fat of my arm. She gathers a few things: a hardcover book eight hundred pages long, notes on how to upload docs to our work FTP site, an image her husband drew of me once for the women's rights blog we never published.

All paper, these things.

We see her grab a steel trash can from the bathroom. She'll throw in a pinecone and a few twigs and even though it's illegal, what she's about to do within ten feet of her semi-detached house in the city, she doesn't care. She has the matchbox in her hand and she'll make light on the gritted edge.

It'll take a few goes.

Together, we'll observe as she tries to burn these things to ash, but we both know she doesn't have the hours, not on a work night. The book will linger and, at the end, she'll just trash it. The smell of broiled ink will get in her hair.

Some days though, she never brings the box inside and never reads the note. Some days, she takes the box and dumps its contents on my doorstep. Some days, she calls me and tells me to leave her alone and she wishes she never met me.

Some days, she weeps until her husband holds her and they think together about how people can be so awful. That they're just trying to survive, that we're all just trying to survive and forget if we can, if life would be so kind, and that this day was harder than all the other days but somehow, they'll make it to the next.

Sometimes, she comes back.

But always, something burns.

Salena Casha / Cambridge, Massachusetts

Day and Night / Paige Mandy

Day and night
windows thrown wide.
Cattle sounds filled the house like music.
The fence line mossily slumped
right up to the backdoor
so that if you were
in the pantry rummaging through
noodles and mason jars, you might hear
a cow happily chewing out in the field.

The cement floor stayed so cool
we began calling it The Rink
and pretending to skate its icy surface-
slip-sliding around in thick socks.
The cats watched our clumsy twirls and leaps,
oval eyes flicking back and forth like
windshield wipers in a downpour.

Piper, the inkblot bat catcher,
would splay his sleek paws
to swat at our blurry forms.

Paige Mandy / Stuarts Draft, Virginia

Doves / Katie Mora

There are so many of them I don't know what to make of it,
and I think there must be a reason they're there,
even if I never get to know what it is,
and they of course have the right to self-determination
 same as I do
and I should hate to think of myself under the paranoid gaze
of someone I have seen only from a distance
 or not at all
demanding, not from me but from inside their head,
a justification for my presence.

But still, it's odd, isn't it,
for they come to my feeders in pairs and quartets,
and their swollen crops and brittle legs humanize them,
sequester them to the ground,
gray on green.

Now, here they are, more than I can count,
a bible's worth of bodies,
expanding every roofline on the block,
and against the downy sky they aren't gray at all,
they're lightly weathered wood, silky blue, dusty pink,
each cheek smeared with iridescence,
and it seems impossible that I haven't noticed before.

Later, when I return home and my fingers have thawed,
I look up what it means to see so many doves,
and amid the machine-spun treatises about hope, fate, love,
I find a single page, a white background,
 a lone centered column,
a dithered grayscale photo of a dove, captioned simply—

The Mourning Dove

—and the page, stark and sincere, tells me this:
the dove mates for life, raises six broods a year,
and then the fledged families converge, congregate in flocks,
some of which can block out the sun.

Katie Mora / Delmar, New York

Finally Here / Kenneth Pobo

The sound of wind
chimes, glass
hanging on thin
strings. After
a long summer day,
rain comes slowly—
the storm pushes
forward. Music
breaks all over
the porch floor.

Kenneth Pobo / Media, Pennsylvania

Called / Joanne Esser

At four a.m. he rises, startled awake by a dark sound.
He slips out wearing just a robe and slippers,
slides open the glass door onto the deck.

Neighbors asleep, shades drawn, lights out.
Snow falls in soft clumps. From just across the pond,
a deep hoot once again echoes in the night

through birches and oaks over to where he stands.
He has never seen its shape, though he scans branches
in the moonless mist. The call haunts him -

a solitary plea, deep silence after. Is it an admission
of loneliness? The great owl waits, as if for a reply,
an answer to its question, sent out into shadows.

He, too, waits. He holds his breath, but tonight
there is no other creature awake besides him and the owl,
or none willing to reveal itself in the dark.

He pulls his robe tighter around his body
against the cold, stands awhile longer, amazed
that something so wild should be so close.

It comes again, piercing the silence, those low
plaintive notes. They resonate deep in his bones,
strike something there - a memory? A premonition?

What has he forgotten that he once knew?
The owl's cry tugs on what's unreachable,
a solitude without words, an unnamed ache.

Then the feathery hush of wings lifting off
and the owl is gone, gliding invisibly
to a place he can't see, can't follow.

He will go back to his warm bed beside his sleeping wife,
try to reenter the ease of dreams.

One night, he is certain, he will catch a glimpse

of that dark phantom, as if seeing it at last
will solve the mystery of the owl's desire
and perhaps of his own.

Joanne Esser / Eagan, Minnesota

Spring Canticle / John Muro

With the season's cold in liquid retreat,
I welcome the few migrant birds that
have returned to populate pasture and
woodlands where the abrupt profusion
of crimson buds are scattered like tiny
tassels across the boughs of maples,
then head spun by the textured air that
carries shards of river ice mixed with
resin and pine-duff as all unfolds
beneath the splendor of a cloudless
sky while colonies of crocuses emerge
from their shallow graves and push
through layers of convulsing snow
with shawls of madras that could
just as easily be wings unfolding,
rising up and calling out the rightness
of days such as this that will long
inhabit the empty chambers of our hearts.

John Muro / Guilford, Connecticut

Horse Sense / Michael Dwayne Smith

You can tell a horse anything.
Barn swallows scatter from rafters
in high-throated song when you open your mouth,
but a horse listens just right.

Such is the nonchalance of the stall. Outside,
the riverbed fills with blue fog this morning, and I run a brush
through the white mare's winter coat,
my stories streaming through her ear, and what a luxury for us both:
to not have a common language,
to not let subtleties dam the way of understanding. I can't see the
scrub along the riverbank, only the shape waters have worn
into the earth, and glassy eyes of houses from the other side
glaring down at everything untamed.

Some things hidden are best not discovered.
Some days best begin just brushing your horse in a fog.

Michael Dwayne Smith / Apple Valley, California

A Beginner's Guide to Loving a Poet / Sarah Mills

All the vases in the house are empty
when I tell my lover I know it's not easy, loving a poet.
I cried the last time he brought me roses.
We walk to the garden and I show him
the flowers I like—pink rhododendrons
with their pom-pom blooms, tight-fisted ranunculus.

Once, during a thunderstorm,
I asked if he'd want me to write a poem
from inside the death zone of a tornado
and he just shrugged, turned away

as if the question made him smaller.

He says he loves me but he knows it's not enough,
so he whispers the names of stars against my neck—
Capella, Polaris, Sirius, Vega.

He counts the split seconds in between heartbeats
and makes a humming noise in my ear,
traces the half-moons of my fingernails.

This is how you do it—how you love a poet.
He excavates every inch of me like a rare artifact,
brushes away the dirt, devours me with interest,
reads me like a poem where the pauses in between
matter as much as the words.

What would you do without me? he asks
after we make love in the garden shed.
I almost say *I'd figure it out,*
but I know that's not what he wants to hear.
I've already thought about it many times,
fall asleep in his arms thinking about it,
surrounded by bags of potting soil.

I wish they made greeting cards that say
I know it's not easy loving a poet,
but you're doing your best.
I'd leave one on the counter for him in the morning
and shower him with clichés: a dozen red roses,
fresh-squeezed orange juice, heart-shaped pancakes
with a zigzag of blueberries down the center.

The next day, the vases are full again.
But not with flowers—with strips of words
cut out from the newspaper.
Words like *aurora* and *plethora*. *Reverie*.
I trim them. Close my eyes. Inhale their scent.
Put them near sunlight so I can watch them open.

Sarah Mills / Denville, New Jersey

Elegy for a Majorette / Virginia Smith

The morning that is your last,
I make breakfast for your family,
peel avocados' pebbled skin from
flesh flashing a green that hurts.
Your sons, now fathers, slide egg yolk
like sunrise over seeded toast,
recall after-school cookies still warm
from your oven. They speak of the new
stage to be named after you as I move
to your stillness in the living room's
hospital bed. Your succulent on the windowsill
wrinkles with water's lack, your coral
t-shirt dampens your breasts, your breathing
steadies, measured with morphine.
I kiss your forehead, rest my mouth
on the moist field of your skin, look
past your theaters, cities, decades:
back to the West Village's No Name Bar
where we danced on tables sticky with beer,
back to our hometown parades, football game
halftimes, your tanned, shapely legs alive
with kicks and struts, your fingers twirling
figure eights like magic tricks, your eyes then,
as now, wide and blue with beyond.

Virginia Smith, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Old Girl / Ann Privateer



Photograph
Ann Privateer / Davis, California

Annual George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest

Until August 15th, 2023 we will accept entries of previously unpublished fiction under one thousand words in length (including title). Three winning stories will receive cash prizes of \$100 each and a print copy of the contest issue due to be published in September of 2023. See our website for details.

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