

3rd Wednesday



Autumn 2023

Third Wednesday Magazine
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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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Editor's note for Autumn, 2023

The autumn issue is our annual flash fiction contest issue, and we're excited to share the results! We received over 100 submissions, and our fiction editor, John F. Buckley, had a tough time narrowing it down. But in the end, he chose three winners and three honorable mentions.

After reading John's selections, and I can honestly say that they're all fantastic. They're funny, suspenseful, and thought-provoking. Even if you usually read us just for the poetry, I encourage you to check out the flash fiction this time around. You won't be disappointed.

In addition to the flash fiction, this issue also features some great poetry and art. Our art editor, Judith Jacobs, has assembled a stellar lineup of visual artists, including Ken Weichel, who will be gracing our winter cover. Ken recently wrote to Judy to say:

"I keep reading the updates to the poems that I receive in the email. That is such a good way to distribute and share the work. You and your staff are doing a great job. I know how much it takes to keep things going and getting all the work done in putting out a print mag – let alone a digital one too!

“Thank you again Judith. I can't tell you how much it means to me to have my work not only appreciated and understood, but to have it used in a publication.”

I'm grateful to Ken for his kind words, and I want to thank Judy and all of the artists who make our pages beautiful.

I hope you enjoy this issue of our magazine!

Sincerely,

David Jibson, Editor

***Featured Poet* / David Chorlton**

David Chorlton is a longtime resident of Phoenix, Arizona. He moved there after spending seven years living in Vienna and he recently had a nonfiction book published by New Meridian Arts, "The Long White Glove." It is a true crime story of a wrongful conviction in the 1960s that has a connection to the Austrian side of David's family.

Mahler

In the company of foxes, with the leaves
turning their silver side to the wind,
a thread of water murmuring
over stones, and grasses trembling
in the advent of a storm,
the composer closes his eyes
and sees it all
from inside the earth.

Had the world been a better place,
had people been less cruel,
had we only had a government of birds,
how could he have stretched
the sinews of the spirit so taut
that the best we can do

is seek the fellowship of animals
and imagine the music
running through their minds
where words cannot grow?

Holesovice Station

Oriental music is woven into the rain
that falls on the tarpaulins
covering the market
on the station forecourt
where plastic imports are for sale
between arrivals and departures.
Leaves and water

drip into the mud
where concrete ends
and reflections of the glass
facade are distorted.
Passengers with hours to wait
lie with their heads resting heavy
on suitcases,

tickets in their hands,
and foreign languages sleeping
in their mouths,
while stepping around them
are the red-faced men
with nowhere to go

except to the kiosk
for beer. The trains
steal away, whispering
through their wheels
so as not to interrupt dreams
in the ticketing hall

where a flower-seller yawns
and the vendor beside her
offers wallet and rings
for the keys to a kingdom
at the end of the line.

A Vienna Dream

I return to the city with unanswered questions
for luggage, unpack them
on arrival, and begin handing them out
to strangers. Everybody reads
what I give them, but tells me
they can't help. I keep trying,
humiliating myself
from person to person with requests
for information so intimate
they elicit blushes
even from the taxi driver who has heard everything
and the priest whose memory for confessions
is impeccable. The old monuments
are still standing, although
they have been rededicated. I follow streets
whose twists and turns are mapped on my palm
only to end up at the place
I set out from, holding a ticket
paid for years ago, so I get on the next tram,
sit down and look out of the window
as snow falls and music
begins: the familiar melodies
that made Vienna famous
now played on fairground instruments
instead of violins. The ticket inspector
boards at the next stop, looks at a list
in his notepad, approaches me and places a hand
on my shoulder. He has a benevolent face,
with features similar to mine. First
he announces the penalty for an outdated ticket,
then he whispers that he slept once
with my grandmother, that it was good
and it was shameful, and he will forget about my fine
if I can keep a secret.

David Chorlton / Phoenix, Arizona

Annual George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest

The editors of 3rd Wednesday are pleased to honour the memory of George Dila, friend of Third Wednesday and the editor who originally brought fiction to 3W.

We are proud to have called him friend and colleague. To this end, we proudly announce the Fourth Annual George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest.

This year our judge was our own fiction editor, John F. Buckley. John holds graduate degrees in creative writing and English literature from the Helen Zell Writers' Program at the University of Michigan and San Francisco State University. He lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan with his wife Raquel, where he teaches writing at the University of Michigan.

John has selected 3 winning stories and cited 3 more for honourable mention. Each of his selections is preceded by a short comment from the contest judge.

A Clean Horizon / Mary Switalski (winner)

On and off, sunrise and sunset, flashes of angst yet what may be a steady final resolution — this story deftly navigates what we don't know about others and ourselves. — John F. Buckley

The house is between renters. Full keg, empty rooms, renovated kitchen.

She's in a side room pulling the chain of the overhead light – on off on off on off—rings on every finger, some of them look important, or at least old and sentimental and what's the difference really?

Satin scarf and overalls. She lets go of the chain –on – and reaches for me. I hold out my hand and she goes for my beer, drinks half, passes it back, whispers “Namaste.”

“I don't have my cards with me,” she says, eyes closed, hand swimming, “but who is Hope? I'm sensing a Hope. Or a Nadia.”

“Maybe that's me,” I say. She says “No” as if she knows me.

(I came with my brother. He knows the contractors in the kitchen with the keg. Be nice to my weird little sister he said and I flipped him the bird.)

“I can feel everybody who walked in tonight,” she says, “and I needed some peace.” I think I know what she means. In the next room an oily man in cutoffs is swiveling a butterfly knife around his fingers, talking about who he's going to poke. And Christ can we go one damned night without this much Skynyrd?

I reach up and pull the chain –off—“So how do I feel?” I ask her. “Orange gold,” she says, “far away and getting closer, like a sunset.”

We cross the dark room to the blushed window.

“All these old girls are haunted,” she says, referring to the house, a Queen Anne partitioned for apartments. “Worst thing about the ghosts is how disappointed they are.”

I’d been wandering the rooms with my Solo cup, noting the moldings and the watermarks, the marble mantel, the burn marks on the oak floor. She says, “What are we but our stains and our embellishments?”

The house is on a hill, the lake a few blocks down. The summer days so long sometimes you wish they would just end already. So you go to a party. You want to touch somebody.

I take her hand and read her palm, pulse to heart line. “Here the life-line branches. Maybe that’s your empathy,” I say, “or maybe you’re free to fly.”

She says, “You know why people leave? To get out from under these houses, repairs and evictions, baby pictures, empty luggage, bones in the attic. Some drunk punches a hole in the wall and we break it open. I’ve found marbles, skeleton keys, cards, jewelry, pipes, coins, button-hooks, teeth. [‘Teeth?’] And today, hanging drywall, I found this little hatpin, look! Who was she?”

She pulls the pin from her twisted hair, brass filigree engraved with H or N, I can’t tell, but it feels dangerous.

“Fragments to shore up against your ruins?” I say.

“What?”

I tell her what little I know about the long-dead modern world.

“So that’s what they teach you.”

“That’s one thing.”

She says she's getting tired of holding hands with all these phantoms. She says "How about a clean horizon?"

She's tapping the pin on the sill.

I take it, I encircle her, I twist her hair and thread the pin through. I say, "Everything is connected now — cause, consequence," and I press my palm to the light on her face.

She covers my hand with her own, tender as wash over sand, and I want to kiss her when...

We hear screaming out there. Impacts and gravity. There are boot steps and a man appears in the doorway in paint-splattered jeans. He's tall. I can smell him. I see the veins in his paint-splattered arms. Big hands, brace and vise.

He says, "Babe we gotta go, Vance dropped his knife through his foot and got blood in the new grout."

She says, "I told you they don't want us here," her hand sweeping the dusty air.

"Then let's fucking go."

And then she's gone with her man and her vestiges.

I am wrong about everything I think.

It is *still* the modern world.

The sun has sunk below the ornament. An orange gold beam hits me in the legs, pushing my shadow toward the door. I open the window, step through to the porch, see how it anchors the old girl to the hilltop, wraps like an arm around a shoulder. Sun-gilt clapboards, missing balusters, staircase to the street, coppery light rolling downhill.

I follow the light to the lake. The sun goes down burning, a clean horizon.

I look at the lake and I think about both oceans, the spin in the solar day. If I am the sunset, I am the sunrise too. My time is coming. When I turn toward home there's a light in the window of the house on the hill. It goes on off on off on off on off on off.

Mary Switalski / Takoma Park, Maryland

***Twitter What? Twitter Who?* / A. Grifa Ismaili (winner)**

Rich with imagery and anaphora, taut with poetic compression, this vignette vividly captures a fraught sociological moment without leading the reader too much by the hand. — John F. Buckley

During the summer of Ramadan and *Icees*, our eyes, dry and itchy, willed the seconds to hurry by. The temperature on the Walgreens sign ticked higher and higher, but the seconds took their time. The solstice had been dead a week, and we spent those long hours of 2014 jonesing for cigarettes, trying not to say cuss words in front of the kids—not before breaking the fast when the sun dipped below the Mississippi and the petroleum skylines bloomed like hibiscus flowers.

We tried to lead by example. Like the old lady with the wild hair across the street, her grouchy pit bull mussing up the concrete, her sun-faded Obama posters curling off the front door. She'd mow her lawn in her white church dress at strategic times during the day, all to avoid the heat. Gospel music gushed through her window screens. We didn't know what she was jonesing for, but we imagined it was peace and reprieve and probably a lawn service.

She tried to lead by example just like the ladies running the no-name halfway home down the street. A steady stream of visitors dropped off the aged, the unmanageable, the touched, the untouched and weary. The ladies, the aides, were jonesing for more funding, jonesing for a damn volunteer, just to sit some time on the porch in that rare moment a breeze gathers some gumption.

They tried to lead by example just like the shirtless men playing basketball in the BREC Park with the kitty litter sandbox and the scalding hot aluminum sliding board. They sunk hoop after hoop, jonesing for someone to see them, to recognize them as the somebodies they hoped to be. Raising their heads, they would nod at us as we stomped through the weeds to buy *Icees* for the kids, passing the damn time till we could break the fast.

We tried to lead by example. That summer of *I Can't Breathe*, of *Hands Up Don't Shoot*, when the Twitter feeds and the Buzz-feeds blew up and exposed our corroded American sins, the hatred spewed toxic soup held too long in a cankerous belly.

And no, we will not get along. No, we will not.

Some of them shouted to us. Some of them shouted at us.

Never sure who was the real threat. The real ISIS—a goddess of magic, of healing, of mothers—chop your damn head off, man.

That summer we wore our USA t-shirts made in Dhaka.
We rooted for Tim Howard in the World Cup between
the day and night shifts.
We planted begonias and tomatoes in discarded truck
tires. We mowed the damn lawn. Watched the little
kids squirt their meemaws, cold water rushing through
garden hoses, and not a drop to drink before sundown.
Said prayers. Read Qur'an. Listened to Gospel cascade
all the colors of the rainbow through open summer
windows because the damn AC was coughing up Freon
again. Played sweaty basketball. Said sweaty prayers.
And bought icees for the kids, the unmanageable, the
players. Lips and cheeks and faces—blue raspberry,
sour apple, sweet cherry. We counted. We waited. We
witnessed under the relentless Acadian sun.

A. Grifa Ismaili / Baton Rouge, Louisiana

In Green Waves / Ruairidh MacLean (winner)

This tale of appetites and silence artfully charts an entire lifetime, from conception to death, without seeming either rushed or glib.
— John F. Buckley

Cormac was conceived in the heather on a Sunday. With a cloth laid upon it, there is no bed softer. Finbarr MacDonald fucked Ellie Campbell on such a bed, and she snarled at the thistle burs that poked worse than Finbarr dared. She laughed, though, when the bells rang in the kirk:

“What a fucking sin!”

And Finbarr laughed too—but when she grew round like a hill, the church had its revenge and wedded them to their frowns for three sinless years.

When she was fat with Cormac, Ellie ate like a horse. Apples and oats, not cooked but a plain brose of water and salt and the apples mashed in like punishment. Raw oats and apples, stalk and seeds, and salt-sour as brine.

The oats were grown in the valley below the heather. When the hills blushed purple and were full of forgetful Christians, the crop blew like green waves. When Finbarr had weakened and beached onto his back, those fields spoke the words of the earth to her. Hush they said, and she could never think of a more intelligent thing to say.

The apples came to the island from beyond the Minch. Good apples, sweet apples. Finbarr brought them all the way across the channel, to make up for running away there in the first place, and the second place, and the third and the fourth. Ellie had always liked sweet apples, and Cormac craved them sweeter still. She ate nothing but apples and brose for Sundays without counting—anything else made her sick like the devil.

So whatever Cormac was made of, it was mostly to be found in apples and oats and the body of his mother. He gained nothing from the insides of his father's head, because all of his opinions died in a shipwreck before Cormac could get to know about them. When he wondered why, his mother would just repeat the incantation of the earth.

"Hush. Hush," she'd say. It was her spell against every eventuality. When Cormac turned his ankle on the hillside. When Cormac got the strap at school for lying. When Cormac asked if he was a bastard, and if his father was really dead and if the minister really heard the voice of God.

"Hush. Hush," she'd chant, because unlike the minister, she had heard the voice of God and this was all God had to say.

When she told the words of the spell, he felt something warm in his stomach. It was the ghost of the apple seeds and the corn husks in his body, remembering the sound of the earth. Even so, eventually he grew tired of the quiet. When Cormac was seventeen years old he enlisted.

Cormac MacDonald did not know how to shoot, shooting was for stalkers and friends of the laird. But he did know how to use a spyglass, and to make a rod from almost nothing, and to read the sky and the ground and the secret word of the earth that means silence. Like a lot of such boys from the Hebrides he was told to admit to eighteen and made a scout. He fought in the Empire's war with the Germans for three very long years. In all that time he killed three men that might have been Germans, although he shot at dozens of them, five times without trying to miss.

Every time he shot he felt the seeds in his belly twist like a knife, but he knew the spell to silence them.

"Hush," he'd say, and turn invisible—so quiet even God could not find him.

That is how he could kill those men who might have been Germans, and with each life the seeds grew heavier until no spell could silence them. That was when God found him on reconnaissance west of Flanders and sent a bullet to make him quiet. It hit him in the stomach, and all the seeds inside him leaked away.

While he was recovering in hospital, Cormac became hungry—but he could eat nothing. They gave him bread and eggs but his stomach had been mashed to pieces and everything tasted of bullets. He prayed for God to let him die, but he lived for a whole year. In the spring he saw an orchard from his hospital bed, not far from where he was shot. The apple trees were full of white blossoms, and as he lay there, he watched as the wind tore their petals free and the branches swayed, like they were lapping at the sky. There was a scent, and he knew it. It made him hungry again.

Another year later fifteen hundred boys would return to the island after the Great War. You could not see them when they came, they were invisible and stepped lightly and spoke the word of God. Ellie looked for them from the heather on a coarse blanket. When the tears came, she watched the green waves below, and listened for the voice of the earth.

Ruairidh MacLean / London, United Kingdom

***The Sadness of Black Kittens* / Geraldine Ann Marshall
(H. Mention)**

I appreciated how one small moment, a tiny tragedy, resonates within the speaker's mind until the story becomes a larger reflection on loss and hope, on the ambivalence of not knowing.

— John F. Buckley

Driving your village road, you pass and then back up to observe all of the sadness in the world. You hope schoolchildren have already walked by—before sadness simply stopped by, waiting for witness in a driveway. The lifeless black kitten lies at the driveway's edge. Without evident blood, the injuries must have been internal. You guess when she was hit, the driver moved her from road to driveway. A kindness. But gazing at his dead companion, is a twin black kitten. Is the live kitten confused by still sadness, or do animals know long before people, "It is what it is."? All you know to respond to such comforting words is to wordlessly nod.

Would it be your own kindness to take the dead kitten, bury it in the shop's garden? But you imagine someone calling, calling for Blackie or Fluffy, never knowing. Which would be worse? The faces of the missing children that used to be on milk cartons still haunt you. When you make the mistake of turning the news on, there are nineteen, nine, or three faces of children killed in a school shooting, parents clutching a framed photo. Would it be better to hold onto that container of hope?

Or those survivors of war-torn areas? Do people really want to emerge from basements or borders to see fragmented remains of their lives, find a loved body waiting to be buried in the front yard?

How could you know? You know that at the shop, there will be, waiting in ten minutes, someone hoping for your wise-woman-flower wisdom passed down from all of your grandmothers to ensure a good outcome. If white roses are substituted, when their petals fall, angels are praying for you rather than unlucky falling petals of pink or red roses. Arriving at your shop toting a dead kitten would not be good for business.

So, you leave the kittens, arriving on time at that curlicue sign of petals and leaves, Language of Flowers, you painted with your niece when she was little, when she needed a home with cousins. All of these years, you have touched up the paint, still imagining the feel of her child hand under yours, still hearing those high giggles.

You walk past the sign. But the sadness of black kittens does not leave you. When you sell the pot of rainbow tulips you have forced into bloom, you wonder if you should tell the woman buying them for her friend who has had a miscarriage that those petals will fold at night—to tell the friend that they will open again in the morning.

Sometimes, you tell how Eve was able to steal a thornless rosebush as she was driven from Eden, but when planted in her new world, all roses had thorns. Grandmother said the story symbolized life—we have to accept thorns with beauty. But today, when the young woman buys rosebushes for her first garden, you do not tell this story. There are so many sad rose stories. You tell how the first rosary was made from beads of rose petals for their fragrance of prayer.

Finally, you are ready to go home, where it is now too quiet. In the busy years, you longed for quiet. Now, you think again of adopting a pet. Maybe the black kittens were strays and you could take the surviving kitten home.

But when you pass that driveway, both the dead kitten and the living kitten are gone. You look for a little grave, then at the window of the small house, hoping to see the face of a living black kitten. Nothing but curtain and slant of late light, and you know whether the surviving kitten is safely curled into a home, is another thing you will likely never know.

Home, you stop at the mailbox, hoping for another postcard. You think the cards are from your niece, running always. She is in a world of trouble, not running from you. She surely sends the postcards, your name and address only, always written by a foreign hand. The last was from a tiny, Turkish village—a sketch of the only natural black rose in the world. Flower sites say this black rose is a myth, but you bookmark the site claiming it is truly black due to the special soil of one village. You want to believe there is one place she's found home, where the color of mourning has been resurrected into unbelievable joy.

Geraldine Ann Marshall / Paducah, Kentucky

***Broken Arrow* / Ben Rose (H. Mention)**

*This is the most arresting testimonial
by an anthropomorphic weapon of
mass destruction that I've ever read.*
— John F. Buckley

I fall from the sky at a rate of 700 miles per hour, slam into a tobacco field, burrow 180 feet into the loamy earth, and fail to detonate. Rather, I break. And in breaking, I remember the earth the way a child remembers gestation when chewed into shrapnel by her mother's teeth and swallowed into her body. In breaking, I exhale myself and become location, become gamma, a ripple expanding across a pond's surface.

I expand across fields until I reach woodlands, until I pass through long dull radio waves to find their source: the transmission tone from the AN/ARC-34 radio dangling from the pilot's shoulder. He hangs upside-down by his parachute, snagged on a bald cypress. I infiltrate his sweat-sheened skin, his epidermis and skull, and find in his unconscious mind a childhood memory.

In fifth grade, his mother bought him a pair of walkie-talkies. He liked that the world hummed with invisible waves, like one massive ghost with innumerable mouths, and one mouth was his father at the Air Force base, and another the president, and another an astronaut. You could never truly be alone. He waited until dinnertime, right before his father would come home, set one of the walkie-talkies on his father's dinner plate, and ran out the back door into the humid evening air. He waded through knee-high switch grass dying gray and into the surrounding woods where, behind a bramble patch, he watched the headlights of his father's El Camino crest the hill.

His father kneaded his thick neck with a meaty hand as he stepped out the car and disappeared behind the front of the house. The boy rubbed his thumb over the radio's rubber stem, its yellow plastic body, and pushed down on the call button. He imagined the chirp from inside the house and watched the yellow square of the kitchen window. He waited for the simmer of static to snap into life. He waited. He hit the call button again. He waited. If he listened closely, under the blanket of static, he could hear a man's voice not unlike his father's calling for his coordinates, for an immediate status report, demanding the status of the damn cargo. When the boy looked up, the burnt cloud was like a spider against an overcast sky.

I expand into the sleepy town, one that, in detonation, would always be withdrawn from my knowing. But I am a slow and tiny death now and I cling to the metal mesh of screen doors, to the lead paint of the post office wall, to the bone marrow of its waking residents. I become the skin of the town's muscle and bone so as the military helicopter flies low over the roofs and the shudders and walls shake, I ripple like a windswept wheat field. The shadows of the helicopter blades over the wood-board houses are hovering fingers over a piano, already touching.

Ben Rose / Oak Ridge, North Carolina

The Wrong Bus Home / Kevin Broccoli (H. Mention)

Magical realism? Dream logic? Grace Paley mixed with Borges? With some successful degree of the fantastic, we travel with the main character towards and perhaps beyond a crossroads in her life.

— John F. Buckley

There is nothing irrevocable about getting on the wrong bus.

The next stop offers you the chance to hop on the proper bus home. You get on the right bus and you'll only be home fifteen minutes later than usual. The chicken will be defrosted. Matt will have finished his homework. Christy will still have hers to do, because she's on the phone with Erica. You'll have to chide her, but not by much. She's a good girl. They're good kids. You're happy that they're good kids. The other night you were laying in bed and Richard turned to you and said "We have such good kids" and you agreed. You gave him a peck on the lips. These days you peck. These are pecking days.

"Excuse me," a voice interrupts your reverie, "I think you're on the wrong bus."

The interrupter appears to be your dead grandmother. She looks just as you remember her--old, although today she doesn't seem quite so old. Her hair is in curlers and she's wearing the blue terry cloth robe she asked to be buried in, but your mother refused to comply. She's not smoking, but you can tell she wants to.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I'm doing here," she inquires, "I am dead after all. Goodness, Rose, you could look a little surprised. Or glad to see me. Or something. You were always my second-favorite grandchild. I was expecting a little more fanfare."

You get up and sit next to your dead grandmother. She smells like talcum powder and dried figs. She never smelled like this when she was alive, but death changes so much biology, it's no wonder smells would be altered as well. It's then you realize nobody else is on the bus with you except a gentleman at the front who appears to be Harry S. Truman. The bus driver isn't anyone you recognize.

"The bus driver is Ernest Hemingway," your grandmother informs you, "I can't believe you don't know who Ernest Hemingway is."

"I know who Ernest Hemingway is," you reply, "I just didn't know it was him from the back of his head. That's understandable. Would you know who F. Scott Fitzgerald was from the back of his head? I bet you wouldn't."

You're happy to talk about deceased authors rather than what's really going through your head. You got on the wrong bus. You did so intentionally.

"This isn't going to solve anything," your dead grandmother singsongs out, which was always her favorite way of stating the obvious, "You have to go home. You have to go home and tell Richard you want a divorce. You're going to have to tell him that you need some time. You're going to have to think about things like custody and marital property. You're going to have to make peace with all of this. Riding the wrong bus isn't going to get you anywhere, Rose."

Harry S. Truman gets off at the next stop. You do not. Your dead grandmother shakes her head and from deep within her bra, she pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

“Not wanting to stay miserable doesn’t make you a bad person,” your dead grandmother says, pulling out a lighter from the pocket of her robe and lighting up with a notable amount of pleasure, “I wanted to leave your grandfather. I dreamt of it every night. Me packing a suitcase and getting on a train. Going to the end of the line. Winding up in the Florida Keys where I could open a detective agency and solve crocodile murders. That was the life I wanted.”

“Why didn’t you do it?”

“I get sick on trains. Too much motion.”

“Is that the only reason,” you ask your dead grandmother, “A little motion sickness?”

“You know how much I hate stomach trouble,” she counters, “As soon as I feel those butterflies, it’s game over until I can go lie down somewhere.”

Outside the bus, buildings turn into balloons. Street signs turn into spaghetti sculptures. The city becomes the country and the country becomes the ocean and the ocean gives way to magma and various forms of rock--sedentary and rudimentary and sentimental and other parts undiscovered. You see a dinosaur. He waves to you. You don’t wave back.

“You’re being rude to the dinosaur,” your dead grandmother says, waving at the dinosaur to try and make up for your poor etiquette, “You hating your life is not the dinosaur’s fault, Rose.”

She’s correct. It’s not the dinosaur’s fault.

The bus stops. You look out the chilled window to see your house. You've arrived. Early, even. Who would have thought? The bus is idling. Through the open living room curtains you can see Matt on the couch watching a horror movie you forbid him to watch. Two windows down you see the light in Christy's room on and you know that she's confessing to Erica that she made out with not one, but two boys in the library during study period. The small slit of a window at the bottom of the house gives off a blue light meaning Richard or Rich or Rick has given up on air hockey and is now on the desktop computer he has down there watching YouTube videos all about a phenomenon known as "masculine prospering." There are two thousand videos about it and everyone who watches them becomes slightly less of a person than they were before they watched.

You call out to Ernest Hemingway. "Could we maybe do one more time around the block?"

A barely perceptible nod from Papa. The engine kicks in and the bus makes its way back into the depths of the sentimental rock. Your dead grandmother lights another cigarette and offers it to you. You tell her you quit years ago. She scoffs.

"Wow," she says, trying not to smirk, "You're just full of great ideas, aren't you?"

Kevin Broccoli / Johnston, Rhode Island

Glancing Up / KJ Hannah Greenberg



Photograph
KJ Hannah Greenberg / Jerusalem, Israel

A Lifelong Bachelor / Brian Kates

I met my favorite uncle when I was eight years old, and only once. My parents told me he was a *lifelong bachelor*. I thought it just meant he never got married, like Detective Joe Friday on “Dragnet,” though he looked more like Stan Laurel, tall, gangly, deer-in-the-headlights eyes.

I had two other uncles, my rich uncles, neither lifelong bachelors, both having married and divorced more than once. They dined on steak and lobster, smoked cigarettes from engraved silver cases, hobnobbed at nightclubs. One once gave me a summer job and paid me weekly in silver dollars.

Uncle Oliver did not hobnob. He was quiet, bookish, wore slightly frayed suits, climbed five flights to his flat in a five-story walk-up on Manhattan’s West Side. My parents never spoke of how he spent his money or his nights. He was a *lifelong bachelor*.

Dad and I picked him up at the train station in the family Studebaker and drove him to the tidy Pennsylvania Dutch farm town where we lived, past endless rows of corn and wheat, pastures dotted with Holsteins, pristine white barns painted with hex symbols to bring good harvests.

Let’s go for a walk, just you and me, Uncle Oliver announced after breakfast. Off we went, across our unpaved street and over a wire fence into the pasture next to our house, just me and Uncle Oliver, walking in the short grass, avoiding the soft, aromatic leavings of cows.

He fished into a pocket and pulled out a “Field Guide to Wildflowers.” I’d pluck a flower and he’d look it up, then read the description. *Buttercup, chickory, purple astor, Queen Anne’s lace, bee balm*, I’d hand the flower to Uncle Oliver, he’d press it between the pages.

The next day he gave me the book, hugged me and was gone. A week later, he was dead, murdered, the newspaper reported, in his bed. The obit noted he’d been a corporal, decorated for bravery in combat. It called him a *lifelong bachelor*, as if that explained everything.

The other day, trying to identify a weed blooming in my backyard,
I found Uncle Oliver's half-forgotten field guide. The spine cracked
as I opened it and a faded flower fell from between pages.
The book identified it as a cornflower, also known as a bachelor button.

Brian Kates / Pomona, New York

Indus River / Andre Privateer



Photograph
Andre Privateer / Davis, California

Omar / Roxanne Doty

A man walks toward my gate as I water sunflowers in my backyard that rise seven or eight feet from the ground, deep burnt orange-red the color of a blood moon, the first that have grown for a long time in this parched desert soil and feel to me like a sign from the earth that makes me smile when I look at them in the morning to see if more have bloomed and watch bees buzz from flower to flower covering themselves with pollen and the man wears a pleasant smile as he asks in a slightly-accented voice if I want to buy some tamales, \$20 for a dozen and I open the gate as he tells me he has pork and chicken that his wife made and I say I'll take a dozen chicken, which he retrieves from his van and says *have a nice afternoon* and I say the same to him and for the rest of the day I think of his face and smile and the sound of his voice and they feel familiar as if I have known this man before and later as I'm eating one of the tamales I remember that ten years ago he was one of the workers who installed tile in my house and his name is Omar and a few weeks after the tile job he knocked on my door to see if I needed any other work done and I pointed to the rotted, warped wood of my front door which barely closed and said jokingly that the door was the only thing that needed work and he laughed but a week before Christmas he showed up again, told me he had a door in his truck from a home where he installed a new one and the old one was still in good condition and looked about the same size as mine and he just gave it to me and it was a perfect fit and I so wished I had remembered this and his name while he was in my driveway selling tamales and I thought of all the people who flit through our lives like fireflies who produce their own light and only live a couple of weeks before they die, these fleeting encounters often erased from our memory, but sometimes they remain with us and we cross paths again and it gave me comfort to know that Omar was still in the world, had survived the pandemic and gun violence and economic precarity and the menaces of our broken times and still had his smile and pleasant way of speaking and I hoped he would show up again with tamales or a door or whatever had come his way that he thought I might need, maybe just a smile and a hello that we both might need.

Roxanne Doty / Tempe, Arizona

Orpheus / Mary McCarthy

Knew the world was music
from the smallest
intervals of atoms
to the great waltz of galaxies
in their eternal dance

He thought
to unlock the puzzle
of death's iron gate
to break the silence
with music sweet enough
to sing his one beloved
back to breath

He keyed his lyre
to death's harmonics
the earth opened
and his music carried him
through granite halls
glittering with mica
past crystals blooming
like glass flowers
and galleries of pillars
grown over centuries
from the hardened
tears of stone

Thick darkness
stopped his tongue
but let his lyre speak
reaching Eurydice at last
with its deep vibration
prying her loose
from her flinty bed
inspiring her with motion
until she rose and followed
wrapped in her winding sheet
he thought could swaddle her
through a second birth

Then, almost free
eager to embrace
and claim his victory
he broke the only rule
he had been sure of
turned back to her
before they crossed
the unforgiving
boundary of hell

And in one swift glance
before she disappeared
forever
he saw his beautiful
lost bride
staring back at him
with eyes of stone

Mary McCarthy / Edgewater, Florida

What's Getting Lost / Heather Hallberg Yanda

Here in the laundromat, a gathering
of strangers who will remain strangers, intent
on our own chores, filling or transferring,
pressing or folding. Maybe it's meant
to be a solitary business, one
place left in the world for what's getting lost --
silence, meditation. No longer one's
need to speak, need to hear, just the clothes tossed
about in the dryer, old shirts and prized
vibrant skirts dancing with joy. The machine's
doors are mouths caught in *ohs*, as if surprised
by what people own. Such intimacies
they hold; they have held; certainly will hold --
and each promises not to tell a soul.

Heather Hallberg Yanda, / Alfred Station, New York

My 80th Spring / Buff Whitman-Bradley

Old watering can filled with rain.
Blueberry plants loaded
With tiny bell-shaped blossoms.
Weathered wood-slat fence
Threatening collapse.

First day of my 80th spring.
The winter has been wild
With storm after catastrophic storm
Bringing hillsides to their knees,
Causing roads to cave in on themselves,
Houses to slide into the ocean.
And meteorologists tell us
We're not done yet.
But no rain today
When my wife and I walk in the watershed
With two granddaughters,
Hunting for wildflowers,
With scant success
Because we need a few more sunny days
To bring out the poppies, the lupine,
The sticky monkey and hound's tongue
And wild irises,
In all their vibrant colors.

My 80th spring.
Not hobbling exactly,
But slow and cautious
Going up and down
The muddy hillside trails,
Stepping over fallen trees,
Crossing swollen creeks,
Which I can no longer
Confidently accomplish
Without the aid
Of my indispensable hiking poles.

Eighty spring times.
Who knows how many more?
I never imagined I'd be this old,
Older than my father,
Older than Tu Fu and T'ao Ch'ien,
Older than memory.

Vernal equinox of my 80th year.
Wooden fence leaning precariously.
Blueberry plants flowering in profusion.
Banged-up old watering can filled with rain.

Buff Whitman-Bradley / Fairfax, California

Library / Lisa Yount



Digital Collage
Lisa Yount / El Cerrito, California

Apophenia / Claire Scott

*A tendency to mistakenly perceive connections
between unrelated things.*

We make stars
into a bull.
a bear. a dog.
even a vain queen.
we see elephants
in the clouds.
faces
in the moon.
tea leaves
& Tarot cards
send us messages.

We are dot connectors.
meaning makers.
because my phone said 6:00
I bought the six hundred
dollar Prada shoes.
if I wear striped socks,
we will win tomorrow.
meaning
makes us feel
safe.
in an unsafe
world.
makes it possible
to get out of bed.
& begin.
Again.

Claire Scott / Oakland, California

A Forest of Broken Clocks / Carella Keil



Photograph
Carella Keil / Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Meanwhile, Hermes / Alfred Fournier

overflowing with news of our burning, flooding world,
flew on sandaled feet to the feast table where the gods
convened, and was welcomed with meat and wine.
He told, urgently, of our imminent, self-imposed demise,
which amused Apollo, strumming his lyre in a corner.
He explained the invention of gun and atom bomb,
the mining of million-year-old bones and trees to feed
our beastly machines, how we'd cluttered the sky
with a thousand eyes yet could not see what was plain
before us. Zeus shrugged, pulling a young nymph closer
while Hera rolled her eyes. He plead for suggestions,
but the gods grew bored, Apollo sleeping in the corner.
Artemis wept when he told of the felling of the forests,
how the creatures were slain, or fled and could find
nowhere to raise their young. As she collapsed in grief
and disbelief, Hermes knew he would find no help
among the gods, so he returned to smoking Earth,
consoling himself in his role: to guide our errant souls,
one by one, into the underworld.

Alfred Fournier / Phoenix, Arizona

Nesting / Elizabeth Schneider

I've been browsing
the Humane Society's
adoption listings again.
I'm allergic to cats,
or else I'm sure we'd already have one.
We both love dogs,
but that seems daunting:
the walks, the training, the barking.
And so I find myself daydreaming
about the guinea pigs,
the parakeets.
Looking up care instructions
for these small creatures.
Wondering whether we could fit
a pair of either one
into our lives,
whether that would fulfill
whatever longing
has me lying in the dark,
daydreaming
about guinea pigs
named Marshmallow and Peanut,
parakeets
named Lupin and Tonks.

Elizabeth Schneider / Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sisters / Juan Mobili

For Sophia & Scarlett

To consider how young they are
might ignore the ferocity of their faith

on being themselves, although trade offs
will come soon. Someday

they may surrender their thorns
to have their roses loved.

Now they sail the world on pure instinct, the sun
still rising with their *no* and setting with their *yes*.

These are things only grandparents notice
unencumbered with raising good girls,

free to drive away after inciting rebellion,
leaving their parents to negotiate the unrest.

Juan Mobili / Valley Cottage, New York

Guitar / Gary Wadley



Drawing
Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky

This is What You Want to Hear / C. Walker

I know what you want to hear:
The squealing tires of a hundred anxious cars
Racing to their spots by the corporate office
The people yelling profanities about the game
That the celebrities were betting on; watch that money
In the eyes of the gray and smog-eyed citizens
Nothing is enough except what they can do,
And sometimes, that much isn't even enough
The twisted metal spires filled with heavy business
Pierce the wasting atmosphere with authority
And below them scramble a million briefcases
And needles, and hookers, and you as well
This is the truth that you live, it is life
Green means go, means money, means pot
And you mean to whimper in your bubble
Of dirt and broken glass and cigarette butts
But you wait until it pops, because you will find
That the now, the fast-paced, new and rule-breaking
Is what got you there in the first place
Where you can hear but a siren in the distance
And a gunshot five past nine on Sundays

C. Walker / Wolcott, Connecticut

Seagrass / Richard Matta

See the silent wisdom of time and tide
garnish the steep seashore—
these grasses once captured carbon
secured seashores
but now they're jumbled strings
of sunburnt script.
But for the flies
I'd try to untangle the grass,
hop along the shore like a seabird
to spread the seagrass messages for all those
sandcastle builders to read,
but the castle walls are high
and the tide is rising.

Richard Matta / San Diego, California

Myopia / Gregory Calabro

Myopia will oftentimes impeach
the integrity of objects out of reach

as blurring colors soon begin to blend
into an image one can't comprehend

and rigid borders once taken for fact
have deconstructed, never to go back.

But distant sights were always bound to change,
since new perspectives tend to rearrange

an early glance—initial points of view
and expectations found to be untrue.

So understand: myopia's no curse;
it doesn't make my vision wholly worse;

it places emphasis on *here* and *now*,
lifting the burden off the why and how.

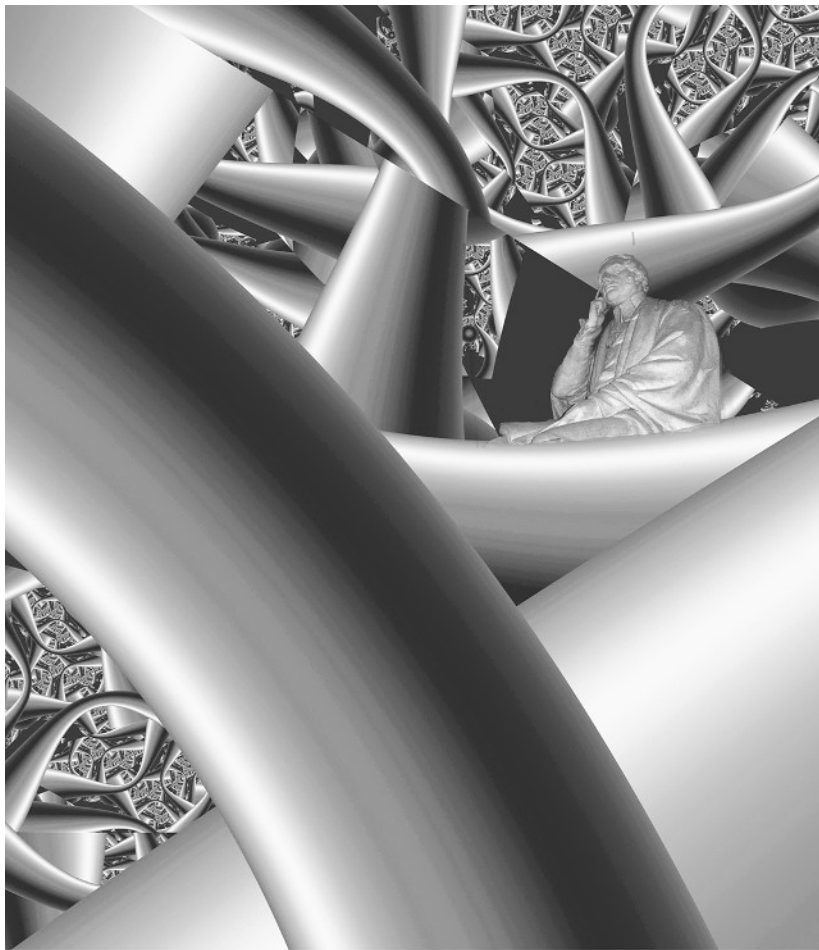
Gregory Calabro / Gainesville, Florida

Replenishment / John Muro

Caught in the cold holler
between seasons, I'm greeted
by a week's worth of forty-
degree days and the morning
air's just cold enough to
discourage dawdling, pushing
me past the eerie stillness of
the marsh, a desolate shoreline
and the soft drawl of tides towards
a horizon that's starless, full-
ominous, and a few breaths
shy of splendor, when dawn's
pale, preemptive light labors
for lift from beyond the tree-
line like a fledgling rising
furtively from its nest before –
there it is – the all-in ascent
westwards with wings extended
in a burst of incendiary scatter
brushing past the ruffled edges
of some cast-away clouds and
giving way to what's left of
a waning moon and an evening
sky while I stand in dumb elation
before it with a tired, shrunken
heart that had given in to the
weight of the world and fallen to
a place that was near empty and
something so much less than whole.

John Muro / Guilford, Connecticut

Lost in Thought / Robert Erlandson



problems
twists, turns, dead-ends
let me think

R Erlandson

Digital Collage with Senryu
Robert Erlandson / Birmingham, Michigan

Hate Crime / Lisa Lewis

Nowadays when someone dies it's hard to keep him dead.
You keep thinking he's going to walk in any minute.
You brush your finger across the cell phone screen,
surely you missed a text but you didn't, it's all time
and date, a clutter of symbols for pressing and flicking,
and what's going on with him he hasn't bothered
to type in his usual ridiculous spelling, words reduced
to sticks and stones? He is not unharmed, he is
dead, except it can't be, he's cute, he's got years,
he hasn't even started counting, another bristly, gristly
gay boy posed without a shirt, going out dancing,
staying till last call, wobbling somewhere afterwards,
falling down drunk or maybe full of bullet holes,
maybe so disfigured in the face it's too bad he sometimes
forgets to take along ID, but they know him there,
he's of legal age and he's one of them except when his face
is gone he's hard to pick out of the crowd on the floor
where he slipped in a spilled drink and went down
but a young guy like him can just pop back up
laughing and next day wonder how he got that bruise.
Look at his picture, you can still count the hours,
he's just late. He took it himself, that's what the kids do,
smiling everywhere without shirts, hair dripping
into their goofy eyes posing for the camera and the legions
of fans, friends he hardly knows but he will in a minute,
it doesn't take long when they're all alive and talking,
and fresh, maybe a little sweaty but only for the slick
of it and it's fun and it's busy and the night's winding
down except for the people who have somewhere to go
and someone to murder but that doesn't happen
among good friends in popular places, not in late spring,
not in June when the parties are hot and the drinks
are on special, are you kidding, not here, we know
everyone here, and then he has to take a leak, brb
he'd say on the phone he forgets on the table
and the screen lights up and the music is loud

and the next day it's quiet like nobody sang here
and there never was dancing except for the phones
with their dead personalities, jokes and melodies,
screaming do not be dead you must not be one of the dead.

Lisa Lewis / Stillwater, Oklahoma

Right There / Gary Wadley



Photograph
Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky

Belief / Susan Kress

You know I don't believe in anything
I can't bump in to.

Tables and chairs, beds and brooms
—all those are on the list.

Clocks, too, I grant you, with their old
tick tock. The space between

things is a different matter. Negative,
the painters call it.

But I prefer not to contemplate
what separates

one thing from another
or what the empty spaces

signify. My doctor tells me falling
is a danger now.

Hold on, she says, meaning this is not
the time to go it alone.

But what if you are gone, leaving
nothing for me to grasp.

Faith is like
the modesty drapes

on naked statues. I'm too old now
to be talked

out of unbelief. But I do believe
the sounds

your voice makes
when you try.

Susan Kress / Saratoga Springs, New York

***The Knotweed Speaks* / Susan Kress**

Behave me if you can.
Spray me with toxic from
your secret covet. Burn me.
Cut me to the quicken. See if you
can halter me. Call me invader?
You with your property lies,
your cages, hates, and little fences.
You can numble me
for a while but when that beamy
sun sprawls warm upon me, I put out
feelings. I yen to wangle up your walls and through
the windy cracks. Let me
at your kitchen stable. We could
stalk each other. I could frond you.

Susan Kress / Saratoga Springs, New York

Alpine Balconies / KJ Hannah Greenberg



Photograph

KJ Hannah Greenberg / Jerusalem, Israel

The Bird Nests in Bloom Fingers / Liskin Van Pelt Dus

The robins have to re-learn to trust us
every time we venture out to our deck

under which their nest perches
on an artfully messy cascade of twigs

camouflaging its lines—
our big ungainly bodies alarming by default

until we prove ourselves
inconsequential. Then they stop

their insistent *peek peek peek*
and go back to listening

for worms, cocking their heads
and peering at the lawn,

hop-freeze-hop-freeze.
We crane our necks to see the eggs,

make out instead, on the beam alongside—
two sky-blue shells, cracked open.

From inside the nest come tiny chirps
we must hold very still to hear.

Liskin Van Pelt Dus / Pittsfield, Massachusetts

Note: title from Joan Miró

Easter 2020 / Liskin Van Pelt Dus

This is the day our forsythia will open,
the day our neighbors will leaf-blow their yard,
the day, they say, Christ rolled back the stone

and the last Sunday before the first anniversary
of my mother's death. This is the day
of the goddess Eostre, a day of springtime

we have been given to rise once more
and help each other live, grass greening.
Today is a day many will die

to be recorded as *x, y, z* in the ledger
of those taken by the plague
and when they run out of alphabet

they'll just start over, like hurricanes.
This day Christians proclaim joy
at victory over death –

but he still had to go through it.
This is the day a year ago we sat and held
my mother's hand –

I don't know what to do, she said.
We stared out at the daffodils together,
knowing nothing of how to finish dying.

Liskin Van Pelt Dus / Pittsfield, Massachusetts

At Nazaire Notre Dame de Lorette French Military Cemetery / Jennifer Phillips

This is the boundary you cross
and there is no marker
into no-one's land. These
are the crosses marking
the boundary with no other side
visible. They stepped across
and it felt to us like erasure.
We spat out this city of white lines
crossing, not liable
to be erased, wanted
to declare these lives named
that were left in their beginning like wind-
snatched wheat. Rowed husks now
not liable to further speech.
Mud their intimate
marked boundary faced down.
No man's crossing. These are
outliers under smoked-out stars
with their din-erased whispering.
Their tormented tedium
of crossing and recrossing wire-
taut lines going nowhere past here.
Near, mass graves of the horses. Erasures
of orders. Foiled signals. Missed men. Borders
closed, all signs crossed
out. Unmarked ground from here.

Jennifer Phillips / Barnstable, Massachusetts

Listening to Elgar's "Variations" / Ken Hada

4:30 under dark sky,
stars dappled above
the dark silhouette
of oak trees,
a cicada keeps cadence,
a cricket counters
the soothing, sometimes eerie
mysticism of his music.
The red tip of a cigar
glowing, sweet smoke
circling me – I look up,
I look inward. Prairie sun
will soon appear.
Illumination always arrives.

Ken Hada / Ada, Oklahoma

First Day at the Career High School / Zebulon Huset

Flocks of freshmen murmur
in undulating waves of birdsong
as the more experienced sophomores

chatter in uneven clusters along
roosting spots whether bench
or garbage can and the upperclassmen

float through the halls in susurrations
avoiding distractions that might
slow their pace toward graduation.

Zebulon Huset / Grand Prairie, Texas

Deja Vu / Carella Keil



Photograph
Carella Keil / Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Wait! This issue of 3rd Wednesday isn't complete. Here's blank page for you to add your own poem, story or artwork. It also gets us to an even number of pages, which the printer likes.