

3rd  
Wednesday



Fall 2024

**Third Wednesday Magazine**  
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Third Wednesday is an independent 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 Fall 2024

The fall issue of 3W includes the winning stories and honorable mentions from our annual "George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest, judged this year by our own fiction editor, John F. Buckley.

John is the author of five books of poetry, including two collaborations. He 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. John lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan with his wife Raquel, where he teaches writing at the University of Michigan. His website is <https://johnfbuckley.net/>

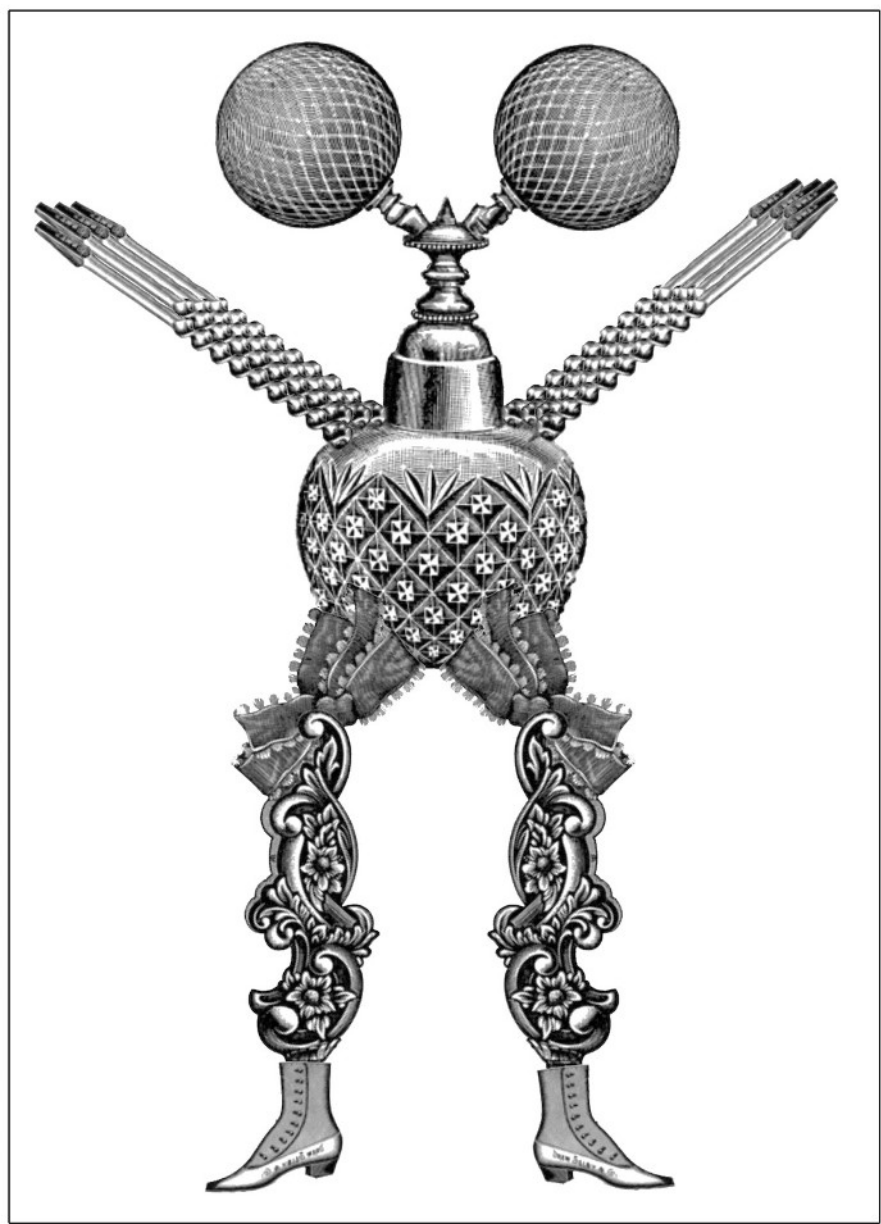
John read through over a hundred stories to bring the best pieces of flash fiction (1000 words or less) our contributors sent us during the four month submission period.

For poetry, we were joined for this issue by guest associate editor, Dana Johnson, who is our regular copy editor. Dana works in corporate philanthropy and enjoys reading and writing poetry in her free time. She earned her English Degree in Creative Writing – Poetry from Central Michigan University in 2013. A student of yoga, Dana loves to share the practice with others and teaches classes in Detroit.

We hope you enjoy what John, Dana and our usual cast of characters cooked up for this issue.

David Jibson, Editor  
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*The Mirror's Promise* / Bill Wolak



Collage  
Bill Wolak / Bogota, New Jersey

## **This Apparition / Kateema Lee**

we aren't all as solid as we seem  
we walk through each other

trying to find solace in shadows  
losing ourselves in imaginary angles

we try to walk through all things matter  
we continue to test the realness of things

like breathing like swimming like walking  
like finding footing after a fall like learning

that innocence is measured by walking  
through walls unscathed

Kateema Lee / Germantown, Maryland

*The Ghetto Heart of Dusk* / Elina Kumra

In the sweet-rot of Mumbai,  
The sun bares row after row  
of serrated teeth.

On the horizon, the moon watches, eyes rolling, as if  
behind a blue Picasso print.  
Saying I smell the flesh of poverty.

I swallow pills  
  feel happy,  
forgetting what it means to live,  
reeking of dusk's jostling creatures—  
men and women cramming the Dardar TT,  
while finches dart above.

In the hospital, the news shows  
a building on fire  
on Dharavi Street—the ghetto heart,  
where daily, hands thrust  
Into scents:

Turmeric,  
Fenugreek,  
Cardamom,

The gaps in my teeth.

Elina Kumra, San Jose, California



*A Summer Evening* / Shamik Banerjee

The sky begins to cloak its face,  
    Removing every streak of red.  
Above, two weary fliers trace  
    The way back to their bough-held bed.

A boy, awash with joy, returns  
    Soil-vested from a football field.  
To celebrate the victory earned,  
    He swaggers with his pride revealed.

Along the lined tobacco stands,  
    Pen-pushers at long last release  
Workloads with cigarettes in their hands,  
    Exhaling little rings of peace.

Now earthen lamps begin to glow  
    In homes—it's time for evening prayer.  
Sweet wafts of scented incense flow,  
    Cleansing the jaded summer air.

Shamik Banerjee / Assam, India

*We Are Eclipsing\** / Sophia Smith

You only take notice of me  
as I'm gliding  
throwing a shadow  
below; I take a tiny bite  
and eat more and more as  
my face flushes with hydrogen,  
a light that only I can see,  
around my figure, slipping  
in mountains and valleys  
of you. I whisper  
you never said goodbye  
but you don't hear, so I  
watch you softly  
from this distance.

at this moment,  
above your surface,  
over a slab of the Earth  
from your edge  
our bodies meet,  
and you burn with  
a thin white halo  
through the bumps and spaces  
as I surround the full shape  
and drift out of your grasp,  
(because you know I'll return),  
shrink back into the void and  
glow

Sophia Smith / Salisbury, Maryland

\*Eds. Note: A contrapuntal poem, it can be read in columns or lines.

*Green Stamps* / Robert Carr

I slide around the back seat  
of Gram's Bug. She takes

sharp corners, pulls in  
Sinclair with the long neck

dinosaur, fills the tank  
and gets our Green Stamps.

We've searched the Idea  
Book. Gram is saving

for a set of lawn chairs  
she calls elegant.

At the intersection,  
men are tarring, raise

stop signs up to Gram.  
Out of my way you ape!

she shouts. Down the road,  
Gram points to a big car

with darkened windows.  
Will you look at that?

You want that car  
when you grow up?

It's hot. The stink of gas  
and road tar fills the air.

I let Gram know, I don't want  
a car, I want a driver.

Robert Carr / Monmouth, Maine

## *Faded* / Elizabeth Birch

February-March 2022

My dog dies and only one week later,  
Russia's stacked troops cross the line we thought  
they would never cross, breaking the dam  
of war. Early morning news spreads like radiation  
from the light of my phone in the dark of my bedroom  
– shelling overnight  
launches rubble through Ukrainian windows  
and into my stomach, stuck  
like a heavy tumor even after I check with my team in Kyiv.  
Are you okay? No  
response holds certainty.

My dog dies and I crumple,  
a piece of me forever carved out, my body  
throbbing around the gaping hole.  
The war brings me back upright, my limp limbs  
tied to strings of adrenaline, pulling me  
through phone calls and airy attempts  
to help. Brief moments of normalcy  
seep into my day — cooking dinner, opening mail, driving away  
with no part of my heart left behind — and my dog's death  
rushes back to me like a giant fist  
wrapped around and crushing my breathless body.

My dog dies and I cry  
every day for days, unsure  
who for — my dog, myself, or Ukraine.  
Knots in my hair grow old as I learn  
my anguish allows for washing but not  
unraveling, soap piling atop tangles, good enough  
in a time of war.

My dog dies and I hear echoes  
of my dad's voice from high school: "happiness  
is a choice." I decry his misunderstanding of mental health  
yet choose to be happy today. I pray to a god I don't believe in  
for happiness to be as obedient as my dog.

My dog dies and everything continues,  
especially the war. But for months I leave  
Milo's bowls untouched in the kitchen corner,  
water evaporated, kibbles  
losing their color.

Elizabeth Birch / Plymouth, Massachusetts

*Nearing Midnight, 3/24/24* / Nick Conrad

lunar eclipse

Jade luminous, surface  
larval white, the disc,  
unaware that the earth's  
penumbra lurked just over  
the horizon, slow spun  
skyward toward zenith,  
the air cold, the sky cloudless,

as the stroboscopic lamp  
reduced the cedar to frayed  
silhouettes that glistened  
in the ice white light. The moment,  
of course, did not last. We turned  
to take in two old spruce  
already cloaked in darkness.

Nick Conrad / Sylvania, Ohio

*Garden* / Jay Daar



Drawing  
Jay Daar / Berkeley, California

## *The Anatomy Lab* / Douglas Twells

Yes, that's where I plan to spend my last days.  
Months actually. And not me, but what's left,  
this body. Tagged, numbered, laid out carefully.  
Stainless steel tray. Draped respectfully  
when everyone's away. But when they're there,

those First Years, timid, hesitant, uncertain,  
and their instructor, seasoned in lifting them,  
they'll help me fulfill my final duty—case study  
in dreams, disasters, the here and hereafter,  
whatever was and might have been.

Picked, poked, explored, separated, enumerated—  
each organ assayed and weighed. Untangled,  
the brain's plaques and tangles. Newbies,  
challenged by the conundrum of me, I'll be  
your silent confidante, patient, nonjudgmental.

The remains at semester's end—parts, pieces,  
tendons tethered or untethered, sinews  
pulled up and named, moth-eaten frame—  
all this at last will be returned to ash;  
honored by the assembled students,

their mentors, perhaps some family members;  
mixed with flowers; then strewn across  
a patch of earth imagined sacred. No place  
to inscribe an epitaph, let someone merely say  
“So long,” recite the Gayatri, or some such.

Semester's end, writing reports late at night,  
seasoned from handling the likes of me,  
ready to approach the bedsides of the living,  
may one or two look up and reflect upon  
our brief journey through time together.

Douglas Twells / Saint Louis, Missouri



*The Blind Man's Nose* / Arvilla Fee

The corner diner  
sits just two blocks  
from his home,  
easily walked  
with his white pole  
and the chirping signals;  
he enters the narrow room  
    inhales:  
he's here, the construction man  
who smells of concrete dust  
and freshly cut lumber;  
she's here, the teacher  
who smells of books  
and students' anxiety;  
the toddler and mother are here,  
carrying the scent of diapers,  
baby shampoo and fretting;  
he waits—gently sniffing;  
ah, there she is,  
the woman who smells of lilacs  
and Tuscany suns,  
the one who pats his hand  
and tells him good morning.

Arvilla Fee / Dayton, Ohio

*Climate Change* / Michael Milburn

I mistook  
acceptance for indifference,  
my need to hear  
whether my stock

was rising or falling  
based on the belief  
that it was always doing  
one of those things,

until age taught me  
to trust in steadfastness,  
measured as if by  
gauges under sea ice

requiring readings  
over many seasons  
before a marriage qualifies  
as being in retreat.

We don't talk  
a lot about love,  
but each sounding  
makes a better case

for ours advancing  
like an ocean  
than receding  
like a shore.

Michael Milburn / Hamden, Connecticut

*Martha Stewart Invents My Kitchen* / Michael Minassian

She's all business  
as she steps through the door,  
cleaning the counters  
of forgotten appliances,  
empty cereal boxes  
and take out cartons.

She washes the dishes,  
empties the fridge,  
and sweeps the floor  
until the kitchen  
is as tidy as a jail cell.

When I ask her  
when I can start cooking,  
she smiles and says, never,  
like a blind date  
that went on too long.

All day and half the night,  
she chops vegetables,  
grates cheese, whips cream,  
and kneads bread,  
filling dish after dish,  
readying a banquet  
for a dozen guests or more.

When she finishes,  
I help her carry  
everything out to her car,  
What now? I ask,  
sneaking a cookie  
while her back is turned.

You're on your own,  
she says, but keep  
that kitchen clean  
or I'll be back.

Typical Jersey girl,  
I think, glad to see her go  
and have the kitchen to myself,  
the happy chef of catastrophe.

Michael Minassian / Providence, Rhode Island

## ***Release of the Monarch Butterflies*** / Caitlin O'Halloran

Inevitably, when the crowd's countdown ended  
and the park ranger unzipped the mesh enclosure,  
not one butterfly came out.

It seemed their natural instincts  
had been overwritten, chiseled away  
by time spent in captivity.

It was as if they could not bear  
to leave the place where they were born,  
where each one grew from egg to caterpillar,  
formed their chrysalis, then sprouted wings.

After some coaxing and cheering,  
the children chanting "Fly, fly,"  
and people holding their phones aloft,  
hoping to capture the moment of first flight,  
a single butterfly ventured out.

It veered up towards the sky, only to return to perch  
on the ranger's wide brimmed hat,  
to the tune of much applause and laughter.

A moment later and all at once,  
they began to spill out, the urge to migrate  
finally overwhelming the desire for the known

Caitlin O'Halloran / Rochester, New York

*Tradeswoman With Cutting Torches / Vic Cavalli*



Drawing  
Vic Cavalli / Langley, B.C., Canada

## *In Praise of Pelicans* / John Vanek

Let us praise the present-day  
brown pterodactyls that  
pierce the thin air  
in rippling  
lines

gliding through this world as slow as  
Wilbur and Orville, lumbering  
like undulating demi-gods  
above a blue-green altar  
of sea.

Let others mourn their distant cousins  
the dodo bird, the little engines  
that couldn't  
didn't  
died.

I choose to meditate on these  
slow determined creatures  
gliding through today  
while  
we

earth-bound caveman relics  
hurtle through our lives  
in cars, on the internet  
worrying about  
money

jealousy, politics, yet  
fail to throw back  
our heads and  
swallow life  
whole.

John Vanek / St. Petersburg, Florida

*You Might Find Yourself* / Sarah Snyder

Thirty-seven years into a marriage  
& wonder if years are actually seconds.  
You might find yourself among the 600,000  
words in the Oxford English Dictionary,  
the way you name the shadows  
in that nightly map of sleeplessness.  
You might find yourself in the print  
of your fingertips you peeled off  
once the Elmer's glue was stiff & clear—  
how you're always lifting layers carefully.  
If only you'd saved all those pieces  
you might find yourself.  
You might find yourself hiding  
under the porch when no one found you.  
You might find yourself in the gilt-edged  
pages under Sarah, her laughter at being pregnant,  
for one, or maybe Eve, how you keep fluttering  
back to the garden and exile as some kind of testament.  
You might find yourself in the images  
you've scrolled through of cecropia moths,  
those dark brown & rosy wings,  
banded with white stripes, the dark spots  
on each wingtip like snake eyes,  
each roundness a different story—  
the caterpillar who lives for a year  
& then turns in the slurry of a cocoon  
to a moth with no mouth, alive only days  
to mate & lay eggs & then starve to death, I guess.  
And moths turn into nothing or some into powder  
in your cupped hands when you try to save them.  
You might find yourself if you could transcribe hunger,  
listen to those narrow seconds again & again  
in a black box you'll never find—  
that time you reached for an apple.

Sarah Dickenson Snyder / White River Junction, Vermont

## *Basketball — Age 7 / Bradley Samore*

I didn't know any kids in my neighborhood  
so in my driveway I invented a game  
that if I made enough shots in a row  
I'd win the attention of the girl I liked

then after the game I sat on the porch  
tired from a victory nobody saw  
and noticed a lizard come out from the shade  
I threw the ball and it struck its body  
the ball bounced into the grass and was still  
I ran to my father and cried for his help  
Dad I don't know why I threw it at him

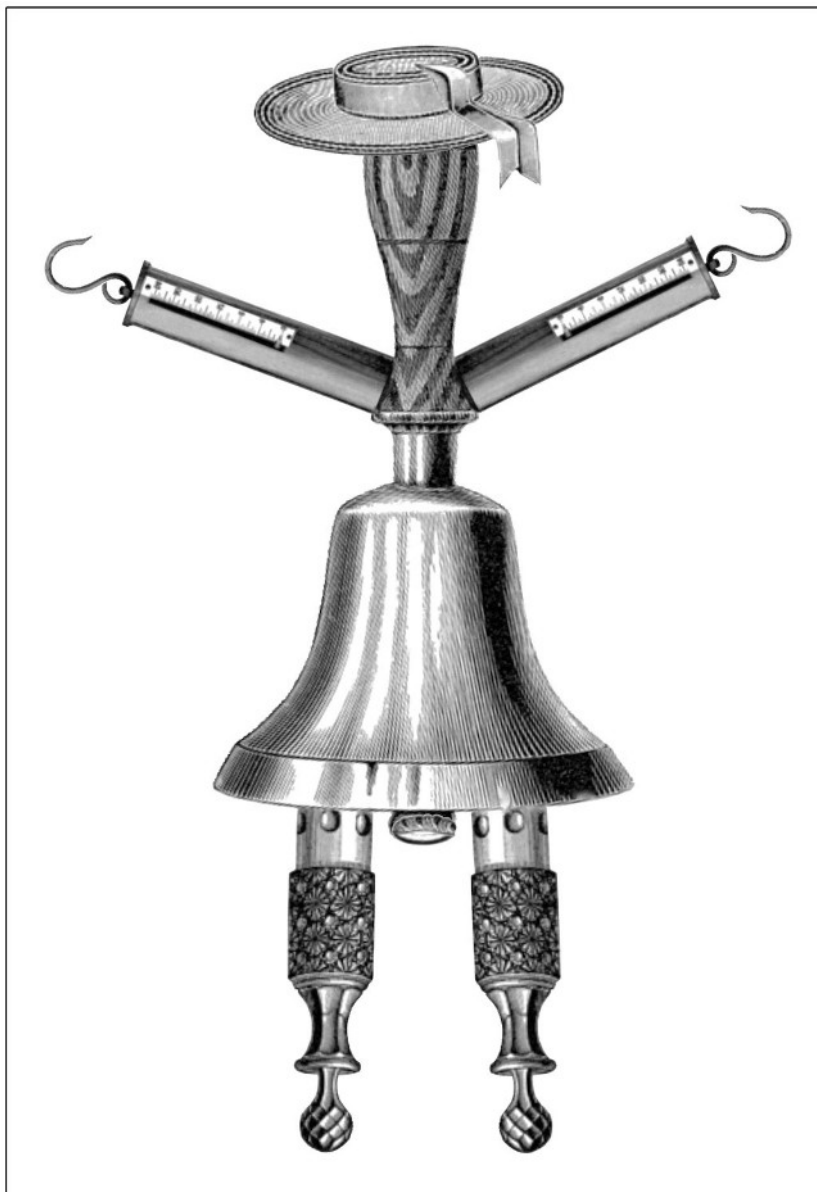
he held the lizard and told me it was dead  
listened to my futile cries of remorse  
I asked my father What should I do  
he asked me What do you think you should do

I went to the garage and got the shovel  
then picked up the lizard afraid of its touch  
we walked to the back and I dug its grave  
my father returned to the weekend's chores  
I stood there and stared at the broken grass

Bradley Samore / Plano, Texas



*The Pendulum's Beckoning Scars* / Bill Wolak



Collage  
Bill Wolak / Bobota, New Jersey

## *A Green Anole Lizard* / Ida Marie Beck

Heavy sun, molasses air,  
sticky thighs against the vinyl seats  
of your Volaré, old even back then,  
though not to me in that summer  
of firsts. We were headed out of town,  
past kudzu-smothered empty lots,  
to the botanical gardens,  
soon to be our place, eased into  
like a second skin, smooth and blank.  
All was new. Passion vines  
with frilly, purple flowers—  
and I unsure how to claim  
their extravagant beauty.  
Sensitive mimosa plants  
proffering baby-pink powderpuff  
blooms and fernlike leaflets  
that withdrew demurely  
at the touch of my finger.  
Would I ever tire of that?  
Thunder clouds rose  
on the horizon, and your blue  
linen shirt clung to your chest  
in the garden's hush,  
the air sweet with pines.

And then the lizard—  
perched on a fence,  
long-tailed and vibrant green  
with sticky toes, a pink dewlap  
pouch under its chin. I stopped,  
you stopped, put your hands  
on my shoulders. Another first.

There he is! you said,  
and we stood in tender silence,  
the two of us and the tiny,  
benevolent dragon  
the color of spring leaves,  
its watchful eyes, beady, black,  
looking back at us as if waiting  
for us to make the first move.

Ida Marie Beck / Livermore, California

*Atlantic Cape Community College* / John Arthur

this fuckin' guy, my boss at the sub shop  
every time he saw me spacing out he'd say  
quit philosophizin' and laugh and point  
to the grill where I was burning  
a cheesesteak and the whole place smelled  
like sautéed onions and I smelled  
like the whole place, my apron covered  
in canola and cheese whiz, my coworker  
beautiful as hell taking breaks every hour  
to pray to the savior, said if everyone  
else got to go outside and smoke  
why couldn't she go outside and talk to God?  
No argument from me, I had my American Spirits  
and she had Jesus, both blazed in our mouths  
and turned to ash as we stood side by side  
listening to the seagulls circling overhead  
waiting for us to take out the trash  
and at the end of each night I'd give her a ride,  
we'd sit covered in sweat in our post-shift  
sacred silence inside my old gold Taurus,  
my favorite ritual until I was taken off the grill  
sent to the back to do the dishes, which I left  
so greasy that first day that my boss gathered  
up my shit from the break room, came out  
holding my copy of *The Metaphysics*  
shoved it into my chest and said  
take your Aristotle and go

John Arthur / Summit, New Jersey

*Us Younger Kids* / Sara Burant

To us what mattered about Baldwin Daly  
wasn't his business interests or business suits  
or that he'd been a village alderman & drove  
a long blue car & had long ago built for his wife  
the nicest brick house on our block, house  
she ushered us summer-weary kids into,  
seating us in armchairs upholstered with pink  
velvet, serving lemonade or lemony tea  
with ice, letting us roam through rooms painted  
pastel shades. What mattered wasn't the lawn  
their German gardener Leo kept lush & free  
of weeds, expanse we cartwheeled across  
& from opposite ends of which we called  
Red Rover, Red Rover. What mattered wasn't  
the warm brick wall we did handstands  
against on muggy afternoons while Mrs. Daly's  
cleaning woman brought in the wash & fried  
bacon for BLTs. No, what mattered was the battered  
but shiny red trunk we'd found in a basement  
closet: Oh that old thing, it's full of Baldwin's magic.  
What mattered was how Mrs. Daly promised  
& kept promising he'd perform a show, those  
beastly-hot days, nights we slept backwards,  
our heads at the foot of the beds believing  
this would cool us. Rioters smashed windows,  
torched flags & cars, policemen brandished nightsticks,  
threw tear gas & dragged screaming people away.  
My brother listened to LeadBelly & read Marx,  
my sister sewed an American flag to the seat  
of her bell-bottom jeans. Our suburban mothers  
wanted us younger kids out of their hair,  
anywhere but in front of the TV asking why  
& who & were they coming for us too?  
What mattered then was putting our faith  
in golden rings & silken scarves, wands, doves  
& vanishing things, doors & windows opening

inside a sleeve or in mid-air, Baldwin Daly  
no mere businessman but Ladies & Gentlemen  
presenting the Magnificent & Ambidextrous Balthazar!!!  
Whom I'm sorry to say he didn't become,  
the show forgotten as fall came singing its  
grid-iron, back-to-school songs. Suddenly  
we were older, mischievous, ringing doorbells  
on Friday nights & running away, laughing,  
imagining the old people, worried, trembling,  
Mr. Daly in his nightshirt calling who's there?

Sara Burant / Eugene, Oregon

*Not So Different* / Gary Wadley



Drawing  
Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky

## *Looking Up* / Keith Gorman

I spot the braided bird's nest, the leftovers from last year, interlaced with flat grasses and fortified by things that an old man with a dog can see if he really looks, like cellophane string and Easter Hay, a purple plastic cable tie.

I can see the colorful courtships that once rocked the high branches, the ruffed grouse landing below, drumming his wings to allure the hens to his breeding perch. At Porters Creek, a moth is passing close to the cinders of campfire,

floating along the farmstead trail, the split-log bridge, where we shared a lunch by the cemetery stones and cooled our feet in the shallow stream. I recall the gnats, the coo-woo of a dove, and the Rhododendron blazing above.

Keith Gorman / Alcoa, Tennessee



## *When We Notice* / Mike Chrisman

The thirtieth of November I wear  
sandals to walk into town  
– a bold statement in Northampton,  
where it snowed four inches Thanksgiving.  
It's still cold, but touched  
by a low slant of sun that seems  
more northern than this place,  
where last July we fought  
and swore in unaccustomed heat.

My wellspring flows near a trail  
where deer pass, and once a moose  
– once known to me, at least, by breaking  
through the tin corrugated cover  
that supports the lighter beasts.  
I think of this while walking  
in sandals forty miles from home,  
along a concrete sidewalk  
where for two days now, or three,  
a penny lies wedged in a crack;  
either no passerby looks down,  
or no one wants the lowly thing.

Our paths run often near a place  
favored by hidden items,  
while we stride toward something else,  
and block the memory of sweat,  
the sign of hoof, a coin's glint,  
the pull between us we shrink  
from naming – all the province of miracle,  
if miracles be what I think:  
common, widespread, public  
enough, but overlooked in our haste  
to take urgent steps in this week's  
routine. Miracles come daily  
before our eyes, but we notice  
them rarely, and then through grace.

*Puerto Escondido, Mexico* / Mike Chrisman

I'm sitting halfway out  
the balcony door, legs extended  
to receive the blessing of seaside  
rain, while my notebook rests  
in my lap, dry as yesterday's  
tortillas. You've seen photos like this:  
palm trees, roof tiles, palapas,  
green, red, pink walls, and rain  
drawing a gray curtain across  
its lover's face, the sea.  
Thanks to a phone app, I know  
the tree just to the right  
is a sea almond. I sat under it,  
back before it rained.

And just  
now I wonder what a reader  
will think next century: "phone app?"  
the way a kid today might go,  
"Haberdasher?" "Victrola?"  
We're so much in our time  
we don't notice it passes.  
Not that long ago, messages  
raced via Morse code, the world's  
first binary thrill: dot, dash.  
My grandma used to tell  
how as a teenager she hitched  
the horse to a buckboard to attend  
a party a few miles down the red  
clay road; they all stood around a piano  
to sing popular songs. 1903.  
And she lived to see the moon landings.  
A kid today says, "Buckboard?"

We all know time marches on.  
Lucky for us it sometimes  
also strolls and dawdles  
and occasionally twirls on one foot  
to show off its red sequined  
gown, hat at that rakish angle,  
while it raises a crystal cup  
toward us with a wry smile  
and a whisper it's too far to hear,  
but might have been, "Salud."

Mike Chrisman/ Brooklyn, New York

*I Prefer to Leave Early* / Carla Schwartz

after Szymborska

Until then I prefer to stay inside  
where it's warm in my chair

until then I prefer to sit here  
and watch TV—until then

I prefer to speak to my daughter  
on the video. Sometimes I let her

coax me to sing. I prefer not to sing.  
I prefer to rest. I prefer to close my eyes.

I prefer not to eat anymore—not even  
smoked salmon and cream cheese

and when that day arrives—  
and that day can't come too soon—

I prefer to go to sleep  
and never wake again.

Carla Schwartz / Carlisle, Massachusetts

*Shoreline Meditations* / Carolyn Chilton Casas

Six a.m.—light of a new day just beginning  
to illuminate patches  
of distant waves through a dense haze.  
Tide-line dotted  
with clam shells, some closed and whole,  
others opened  
or cracked—morning feast for the gulls.  
Their exclamations  
a sermon on letting go.  
A few surfers  
barely visible, one man fishing in waders,  
another conquering  
the beach tentatively with a cane.  
Shore adorned  
with deep plum-colored sand dollars,  
some with barnacles still attached,  
recently left behind by a retreating tide—  
Star of Bethlehem  
stamped on their rounded tops,  
doves of peace held within.  
Pelicans fly in formation over the ocean  
for a morning repast,  
then back to their nests on the cliff.  
North end  
of the shoreline enveloped in fog  
and my long-time love  
walking out ahead into the mist.

Carolyn Chilton Casas / Arroyo Grande, California

## *The Journey* / Diane Wald

There you go.  
I'll come along.  
Those words you whispered  
make sense now.

There you go.  
I'll catch up with you.  
Then you'll catch up with me  
and we'll make some lunch.

There you go.  
I'll take care of you.  
Don't be alarmed  
if you hear me singing.

There you go.  
I'll be along soon.  
I can't wait to find you.  
Send me some stars.

Diane Wald / Dedham, Massachusetts

***Grandmas Got Lilies at Easter, Maybe Tulips* / C.J. Giroux**

Hyacinths went to aunts. Mom found their fragrance too much, elongating odor into oh-dur, as if it were an insult, or, depending on her mood, oh-dear. As she puzzled over the best blooms, I'd guess at color, hoping for purple, light yellow, lilac-wannabes. Blooms already opened were never enough. Today, far from Easter, I bury the bulbs, mostly to keep rabbits away from the tulips. I plant thoughts of you and prayers they'll produce squat globes the color of acorn squash. Your childhood stories surface: of jonquils and an old clapboard farmhouse; of the Laurium mine burrowing in the background; yellow finches losing their voices. I toss aside errant pebbles, slip random roofing nails and gutter screws in my pocket. Metal still rises through clay, out of place, like a grosbeak blown off course. When your birthday coincides with the hyacinths' height, I think it good luck. I think of you again, in May, after the magnolias peak, when pink and white have become rust on the sidewalk, still bodies at a crime scene. I clear these petals with a snow shovel, cherry red, inherited from your brother-in-law. I lower them, the fallen twig into the grave of the compost pile, wishing for returns.

C.J. Gioroux / Saginaw, Michigan

*Cartouche* / Gary Wadley



Drawing  
Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky



## ***George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest***

Notes from contest judge, John F. Buckley

### **Winning Stories:**

*Sisters*, Shanley Kearney, San Francisco, CA — Relegated to a "stuffy boarding school in Massachusetts," many miles from their blood relatives, the adolescent girls within this story explore the limits of ersatz sisterhood. What do we ultimately owe the friends we consider "like" sisters, and how can faux siblinghood conceal underlying power dynamics that undercut the bonds we assume to have built?

*Snow Country*, Peng Ngin, San Francisco, CA — This story revolves around the way we assign meaning — sometimes sentimental, sometimes more abstrusely aesthetic, often both — to what we see and by whom we are seen. How can we transmute our grief into art, whether we are the artist or the subject, and how much do both roles require an audience?

*Galveston*, Stuart Ziarnik, Austin, Texas — In this story, we watch relationships redrawn within an understated handful of moments. And it feels especially poignant, at least to me, that this realignment involves the same sort of nonverbal cues to which the person newly ostracized may characteristically remain oblivious.

### **Honorable Mentions:**

*The Tweet*, Mark Connelly, Milwaukee, WI — It might be problematic to ask me to go on the record with an official evaluation of this piece. Not that I mean to equivocate. Sometimes, it's just hard to virtue-signal properly, especially as I balance the diverse needs of this outstanding institution...

*Bovinity: Theme and Variations*, Jennie Bricker, Portland, OR — It's easy to presume that the people we implicitly despise can't understand our contempt. This piece helps put that arrogant presumption to rest.

## *Sisters* / Shanley Kearney

Discrepancies are fickle things. Poking their heads out after years have passed. Seasons unfortunately long and gone. Subtle deviations in my memory, the honest and plain retelling of transgressions, come forth in the dark. The goings and endings of my friendship with Hannah.

She didn't have a sister and I found this to be an extraordinary advantage for myself, also without a sister. Being the friend of a girl with a sister is much too difficult. You are always second, third, or fourth fiddle, depending on how many girls her mother popped out. Sisters are always fighting and making up. Speaking in marginal glances and holding unspoken alliances made in cradles and strollers. There is little way in.

Hannah had a brother, and I was an only child. I figured we'd be perfect for each other, both a thousand miles away from home at a stuffy boarding school in Massachusetts. And we were. Finishing each other's trains of thoughts before they could be spoken aloud and braiding each other's hair.

But she also could be fickle. Terribly righteous at times and ambivalent at the other. Lecturing me about the dangers of fooling around with the upper boys, "They only want one thing." Then, one day, she was entangled with Thomas McAvoy. "It's casual, no strings." All of her decisions became tinged with sex, no more braids in the morning, she wore her hair long and down. Her backpack dangled off one shoulder, and she ignored my questions. "You wouldn't understand, Anna."

Then there was the business with Lucy at the end of our first year. She'd also liked Thomas, who, contrary to both of their beliefs, didn't really care who he was kissing. Hannah spread a rumor that Lucy liked girls and ogled at her roommate, Julie, often. This was a dreadful lie and had no legs of evidence to stand on, even Julie disputed it, red in the cheeks, but it spread like wildfire that month.

Luckily, Lucy had a sister. An older one, too. She'd barged into

commons during breakfast one morning and made her way to Hannah and me. I'd always wondered if Lucy had given her instructions on where we sat, for she made her way to us without hesitation. A bullet out of a gun held by an expert marksman. This is my most distinct detail from this memory. Then, well, she reprimanded Hannah.

She took it in stride, though. Changing her tune to the notes of "Boys aren't worth anything" by the time lunch came around. And then she was complimenting me again. Hannah gave beautiful compliments. Always knowing exactly what marginal change you'd made to your appearance and placing a spotlight on it. There were many days I made revisions to my outfit (within the bounds of our dress code – blazer, collared shirt, skirt) simply to garner one of her lovely compliments. My point is, she always noticed. The inverse of this, of course, is that when things were not mentioned, there was a reason why.

There was a day in our lower year, or what is known primarily as one's sophomore year, that I remember particularly well in this case. It was the first week after we'd all returned from Christmas break, and I'd been gifted a pair of charming red flats. You see, our dress code was strict, but as long as your shoes were formal, there was room for creativity. I was so excited to receive Hannah's compliments that I sent her down to Commons first so that when I arrived later, she'd see the flats in front of our table. In retrospect, I'd made a bit of a fool of myself – walking through commons so dramatically, egging people on to drift their eyes down past my ankles. But I was sixteen.

Hannah made no comment about my shoes. She sipped on her coffee demurely, biting into a piece of plain toast every couple of minutes. I was despondent. Frantically, I looked in between the other girls who sat with us, begging them to throw me a compliment. But Hannah's silence had given them the confidence and ammunition needed to go mute. It was then that Hannah suggested we go take a walk before class. In the snow.

She was jealous. To be fair, we were all jealous of each other in varying ways, but jealousy can make you do ruthless things, and we

could already be ruinous to one another, parentless.

There were fewer of these instances the next year. College admissions loomed, and we were all busy trying to build ourselves into the ideal students after two years of mediocrity. At school, people only cared about Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. I would have been delighted with a Cornell or Duke admission, but that was not certainly a dissent from the rest. Including Hannah.

It had been hard for all of us to come up with a personal essay topic – kids sheltered far from the world inside dorms and classrooms. After I decided on mine, a piece exploring the tumultuous relationship dynamics that come with boarding school, she'd asked for it. When I say "asked for it," I mean just like that. Her eyes expectant and hands cradling mine. "Can I have it? I'd consider it a great gift." I faltered. "Please? We're like sisters."

*Sisters.* There it was, that magic word. But the operative word there, upon further reflection, was "like." Meaning, almost.

"Yes, of course."

Looking back, I didn't know what it would feel like to have a sister. I was stumbling through a dark room, fumbling for the light switch, and once my hand grazed something hard, I assumed it was what I was looking for.

At the end of the next year, Hannah got into Yale, and I got into Duke. But the gravity of the hypotheticals that laid between us drifted us apart easily and with finality. Something that I assume would never happen to real sisters, but I wouldn't know.

Shanley Kearney / San Francisco, California

## *Snow Country* / Peng Ngin

A woman who has not left her apartment in days and her neighborhood in months decides to visit an art gallery on the other side of Central Park. She used to live several blocks from this gallery. Wearing a thick wool coat, she is prepared for the blustery February morning, but swirls of snow still blow onto her face on her walk through the park.

The gallery is showing a well-known photographer's prints from his travels in Japan—street scenes, landscapes, a few portraits. The last photograph the woman sees is a snowy village scenery. It was taken from a high vantage point and looks down on several hunched figures, trudging through deep snow. In the foreground, a boy with an uncertain gait looks up at the camera with a blank expression. The photograph is meticulously composed: the snowy street is framed by the black tiled roofs of the village houses and the gray roadside stone wall, and a wisp of smoke rises from a chimney. The woman can feel the near-silence of the scene—the soft opening and closing of a door, an errant whisper of conversation, the distant bell of some temple. She walks around the gallery to look at the other prints again, then returns to the winter landscape. It is titled, “Snow, Iwate Prefecture. 1975.” She studies the boy's face, the grainy details of his unfocused eyes, his slightly opened mouth. He looks about ten years old. She wonders, why isn't he home with his family? Is he running away from something?

Out of habit, the woman turns right instead of left when she leaves the gallery and walks to her former neighborhood. She passes the Greek restaurant she used to frequent, its blue awning now faded, a reminder of the four years that have passed since she lived here. The corner grocery where she used to shop is now regrettably a wine bar. But she soon realizes she was on the wrong block, that the store is up ahead, its front counters laden with papayas and mangos with the same grocer piling a pyramid of oranges. She wonders if the doorman at her old apartment, Gregory, will recognize her when she passes by. As soon as she turns the corner of the block where she used to lived, she sees the housekeeper who lives below her old apartment, walking two dalmatians. There is a hint of

acknowledgment on the housekeeper's face, but it vanishes when one of the dogs tugs at the leash and she has to attend to the canines. The woman now sees the familiar apartment entrance, her home for over twenty years. Gregory is nowhere to be seen; there is now a new doorman, who nods when he sees her. She is glad word won't get to her ex that she was outside the building.

It comes to her suddenly. Stop, Mom—her son said when she tried to hug him at this very spot. They were waiting for their ride to the medical appointment on that bright Fall morning, dappled sunlight on the sidewalk. He had returned home from college the previous week after collapsing from a seizure. Diagnosis to death took exactly twenty months and five days. A year after the funeral, she left her husband; they never found a way to describe their sorrow to each other, let alone console.

But now she did it—she had gone back to her old apartment, and nothing worse happened.

As she heads towards the park, it occurs to her the boy in the photograph reminds her of the adolescent boy in Francois Truffaut's "The 400 Blows." The misunderstood boy in the film gets into increasing trouble with his parents and is sent to a detention center, where he escapes and runs to the seashore. He is ecstatic to see the ocean for the first time and runs along the beach but then realizes there is nowhere to go and turns away from the sea to face the camera. The film ends with several freeze-frames of his blank face.

Instead of heading back to her apartment, the woman finds herself taking the subway to the Brooklyn Bridge. She walks up the bridge's icy steps, holding on to the cold railing. In the middle of the bridge, she peers down at the swirling water. How many minutes can someone survive in that water? And wasn't there a movie with some kids running along the truss, daring each other to jump. Did anyone leap? Or drown? Maybe it was a different bridge. If her ex saw that movie with her, he might be able to tell her, and she wishes she could ask him. She now wonders about him. Was he upstairs when she walked by the building earlier?

The woman gets off the bridge on the Brooklyn side and makes her

way between the road and river, a snow-covered patch that used to be a parking lot and is now being developed. Construction and excavation equipment sit between mounds of ice-speckled weeds. The sound of someone shouting makes her look up at people standing on the bridge. Are they shouting at her? And now they are laughing. No, they are not laughing at her, she is quite sure of that, as they are now talking among themselves. What do they see if they were looking at her? She would not mind if they saw on her a baffled expression, like the boy in the snow or the runaway French boy at the seashore. And she won't care if they noticed that her eyes are focused on the near and the far and, thus, nowhere. More important to her on this cold February day: is anyone looking at her?

Peng Ngin / San Francisco. California

## *Galveston* / Stuart Ziarnik

The bay spread before Alice a brown plain, flat and dull except where it broke on the sand in a foaming wash. They'd come here every summer as far back as she could remember, at least ten years; there was the picture of her on the fridge, her curly head poking out of the plywood crawfish cutout on the jetty. It had always been the four of them until this year. Her mom had found a big house by the water and invited Aunt Leigh and the Shreveport cousins to stay with them.

"I used to act like it was quicksand," said Robbie, her brother. They were kneeling in the sand together, scooping a hole to bury her in. The cousins had slept late and their parents were shopping on the boardwalk, so it was just the two of them. "The water's so brown it really looks just like wet sand, like the beach doesn't end, so I would pretend that's what it was. I'd walk into it and fall over and start screaming 'Help, help, it's quicksand!' You were just a little baby so you didn't get it, but you still thought it was funny. You'd sit there laughing while I was getting pulled under. Dad'd get so mad at the screaming, he'd tell me to shut up and quit it cause he didn't like how people looked at us."

"I remember. I loved that." The deep sand where she dug was starting to dampen.

"Aw sure you do; you were just a baby," said Robbie. He wasn't smiling but she could see he was happy. She loved her brother, how even though he was five years older he'd play with her, he didn't want to go swimming or play football or anything, he was happy to play in the sand with her.

"Alice, sweetie, would you go get a snow cone with Reagan?" There was Aunt Leigh, stooping down under their beach umbrella, big sunglasses black. Farther back Alice could see her cousin, Reagan, standing in the sand. Reagan was fourteen and had worn flared jeans and a zipped hoodie every day of the trip.

"She woke up in a bitchy mood," Aunt Leigh said as she lowered



herself into a chair. She opened their cooler and felt around in the ice. “I told her, ‘We’re at the beach, we paid for this house, we’ve paid for everything you’ve done here, what have you got to be a little bitch about?’ I would *love* a break from her for fifteen minutes.”

Alice looked back at her brother. Next to where they’d dug he was patting pies of sand into the foundation of a castle, wavy hair covering his face. It didn’t look like he’d noticed Aunt Leigh. He was like that – he listened to *her*, but with other people he’d just shut down, act like they weren’t there.

“Robbie, I’m going over to the boardwalk with Reagan. You want me to get you a snow cone?”

“Blue raspberry,” he murmured without looking up from his sandcastle. Aunt Leigh handed her twenty dollars and Alice jogged across the beach. Reagan uncrossed her arms to take the bill from Alice.

“Your brother’s not coming?”

“No, I said I’d bring him back something.”

The boardwalk was almost empty, the open shopfronts like caves. The air was salty and she could feel the grit under her flip flops. How did they ever clean all the sand between the planks and mounded on the steps? Even when people weren’t tracking it up the wind blew it all in from the beach. It never ended, she thought; if they gave up cleaning it, it wouldn’t take long for the whole boardwalk to be buried. It’d turn into a sandcastle like one of Robbie’s.

The stand was painted with a snow cone in Astros stripes. An old woman took their order and started scooping shaved ice into paper cups. Alice watched her pour the syrup over the one, red staining out across the white ice. When the snow cones were ready they took them to the railing and Reagan scraped at hers with a plastic spoon. Far down the beach the family looked tiny. Aunt Leigh had opened a green can of beer, and she could see Robbie walking back from the water with his hands cupping some mud.

“Your brother’s so weird,” said Reagan.

“Yeah,” said Alice, though she didn’t know why.

“Mom thinks he’s autistic.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s some kind of retarded,” said Reagan. A gnat had gotten stuck in her snow cone. She scooped it out and flicked it at the ground. “He gives me the creeps.”

They stood up and walked back towards the beach. By the time they got to the umbrella the syrup had drained to the bottom of Alice’s snow cone and the top tasted like ice. Aunt Leigh asked Reagan for the change; she said there wasn’t any and dropped onto a beach towel.

Alice passed Robbie his snow cone. His fingers were covered in sand, and he licked at the cup where a streak of blue juice ran down the side. He didn’t stop licking even when the sand from his fingers got mixed up in the juice. She couldn’t look at him, and while Robbie ate his snow cone she turned to go sit under the umbrella with her cousin.

Stuart Ziarnik / Austin, Texas

## *The Tweet* / Mark Connelly

"I'm calling this a conference, not a meeting," Dr. Green announced to the icons on her screen. "We have an open meeting policy, and I don't think any of us want to go on the record with this."

"I'm not showing my face on this one," Catherine Lancaster said behind her initials. There was a raucous series of barks in the background. "The dogs, I have to mute."

Green glanced at her watch. "She's going to join us at ten-thirty. I thought we could discuss what we want to say."

"Delete the Tweet!" Burt Mitchell boomed.

"It's too late for that!" Lancaster posted in the chat. "Screenshots are on Fox and MSNBC and all over Facebook and Instagram."

"Students smashed windows in Folsom Hall last night and spraypainted the president's house. The dean's gotten calls from the *Times*, CBS, *Newsweek*, you name it, wanting a statement. People want her dismissed, fired." Mitchell's camera was askew so that only his torso and hands appeared, his extended index finger and raised thumb rocking back and forth like a pistol.

"And she's up for tenure this semester," Cameron Bach interjected. "I'm glad I'm not on that committee! She gets tenure, we get crucified. She gets denied, we catch hell from the other side."

Green sighed. "Well, we need to address this Tweet today. I've always stood for free speech, but those pictures of dead children she posted were extreme. There are issues of professional taste and decorum here. Not the expression of an idea."

"What she called those people! . . ." Catherine texted.

Mitchell's hands made chopping motions. "You know the blowback we're getting? What *I'm* getting? I got emails and texts from people

I haven't seen in ten years. Do you know what Admissions told me this morning? Four high schools dropped us from their visitation lists. Twenty percent of our students come from local schools. We already have enrollment problems."

Green coughed. "It's worse than that. The Women's Center's budget was cut this year. I spent months getting corporate and foundation grants to make it up. All my internships are privately sponsored. Now I'm getting calls from companies. They're being pressured by management, employees, shareholders, customers. They're afraid of boycotts if they don't pull out. They don't want their name attached to the college. I may have to lay off staff if Glencoe pulls their funding."

"This whole thing," Bach muttered. "I've never seen anything like this. You can't say anything without getting canceled by somebody. It would be nice if there was calm nuance, some rational discourse..."

"We have to address this now. Today," Mitchell insisted. "Get her to put out a statement."

"She's not going to apologize," Green insisted.

"No, no, not an apology," Bach suggested. "An additional statement, a clarification. Something showing some balance, some empathy for the other side, just something to calm the waters. Or just calling for the demonstrations to be civil, maybe deflect the anger and call to raise funds for the victims. . ."

"This is too toxic for that. You can't ask for a dime for a kid on one side without being called a Nazi by the other," Mitchell sighed. "But we need her to say something. Her statements as they stand sound like a call to arms. That "by any means necessary" statement. What does that imply? Have you seen those kids on TV making Molotov cocktails? They wanted to torch a library and block the Thanksgiving Day parade."

"Take Santa hostage," Green muttered. "Damn, she's going to join us in two minutes, what do we want her to do?"

"We all believe in free speech and academic freedom," Bach suggested. "We make that clear first. We don't attack what she said, just ask her to put out another statement calling for non-violent expression. Gandhi never wavered in his goals or demands just the methods employed. . ."

"I want this to stop," Green insisted. "I just got another text from Glencoe. People...the most extreme. . . are including her Tweet in propaganda videos. This has to stop now! She has to show some concern for the rest of us. For the safety of our students."

"That's a good point, lead with that," Mitchell suggested.

"Good idea!" Lancaster texted. "Mention the vigil last spring. That KC thing!"

Green nodded. "Good, thanks."

A new box opened on the screen. Jane Smythe appeared, calm and composed.

Green took a deep breath. "Dr. Smythe, everyone here...just last spring...spoke at the vigil after that mass shooting of students in Kansas City. We all vowed that colleges must be safe places for the exchange of ideas. Well, now we have students asking to finish the semester online because they don't feel safe on campus. . ."

"I stand by my statement," Sym said quietly.

"We are not asking you to withdraw or even alter your Tweet," Green said softly. "We simply think a follow-up calling for peaceful demonstrations would be helpful. . . for all concerned."

"May I suggest," Mitchell ventured.

"My statement stands."

Green pursed her lips. "Look, we are not asking for you to change

your views. . .”

Jane Smythe cleared her throat and picked up a book. "Professor Green, in the preface to your book *Women and the Male Machine*, you wrote, "When speaking truth to power, the truth must never be suppressed, sanitized, or compromised. The truth is often ugly and inflammatory and always inconvenient and troubling. The truth questions assumptions, challenges long-held values, and shatters beliefs because it is the truth. It reveals ideals to be prejudices and standards to be barriers." I stand not *my* words, Professor Green, but your own."

Smythe's screen went black.

Catherine Lancaster shouted over a chorus of barking dogs, "Now, what are we supposed to do?"

Mark Connelly / Milwaukee, Wisconsin

*Bovinity: Theme and Variations* / Jennie Bricker

Helen's tongs pause, hover over the stuffed mushroom caps.

On the other side of the buffet table, the line bunches up, and two women halt—thin 40-somethings, white but tanned as over-baked sourdough. “Oh my God!” says the taller one. “Christmas is the worst, not to mention New Year's!”

“Still dieting?” the shorter one asks. She bends over the mashed potatoes with a sigh of longing. She inhales the steam.

“Always.” The tall woman narrows her eyes at the tub of potatoes. “But I did lose the holiday weight. Finally.” She glides past the mushrooms, where Helen's tongs are poised. “Honestly, Linda. I looked like a cow.” Her eyes lift from Helen's belly to her bosom, float up Helen's neck, catch on her face. The short woman, Linda, smiles at Helen. Helen, who weighs 310 pounds in her underwear, smiles back. The cutlery clinking and conversation hum go silent. The earth tips onto its side and everything slides. Linda turns to stone.

1.

Helen's plump little body hides in a forest of corduroy legs and the floral understory of many-pleated skirts. Helen examines dust motes on the hot-already California morning, the pea gravel in the driveway, pink cement, thirsty blue beetle on the cinderblock wall. Helen's mother calls it baby fat. Helen's rage is a tornado salted with dusk.

2.

Helen's body is too big for the dainty desk and too big to melt into the wall at the high school dance but not big enough to smash the gymnasium and flatten the classmates and shatter the windows after being laughed at, laughed about, laughed up and down the mustard yellow corridor.

3.

Helen's body is an iron machine bolted to concrete. Helen's body is a fist. Helen's voice is a harsh bristling wind in the palm trees.

4.

Helen's body is a house. She moves her furniture inside. She paints

every room yellow. She turns on every light.

5.

The bovine ruminant digestive system is tricked out with four chambers. With acres of tender meadow grass, buttercup garnishes, the last measure of malty feed to lip up from the burred planks of the manger, sometimes clover, sometimes a taste of the tongue-sculpted speckled pink salt block, lunch could take days.

6.

Helen is a swirl of fur on the broad white Hereford forehead, where she wheels all day easy like a hawk in the mind's blue sky, then roosts on a wind sheltered branch in the pasture's only tree, its trunk polished by stolid furred bodies massing in the dusty shade. She rests.

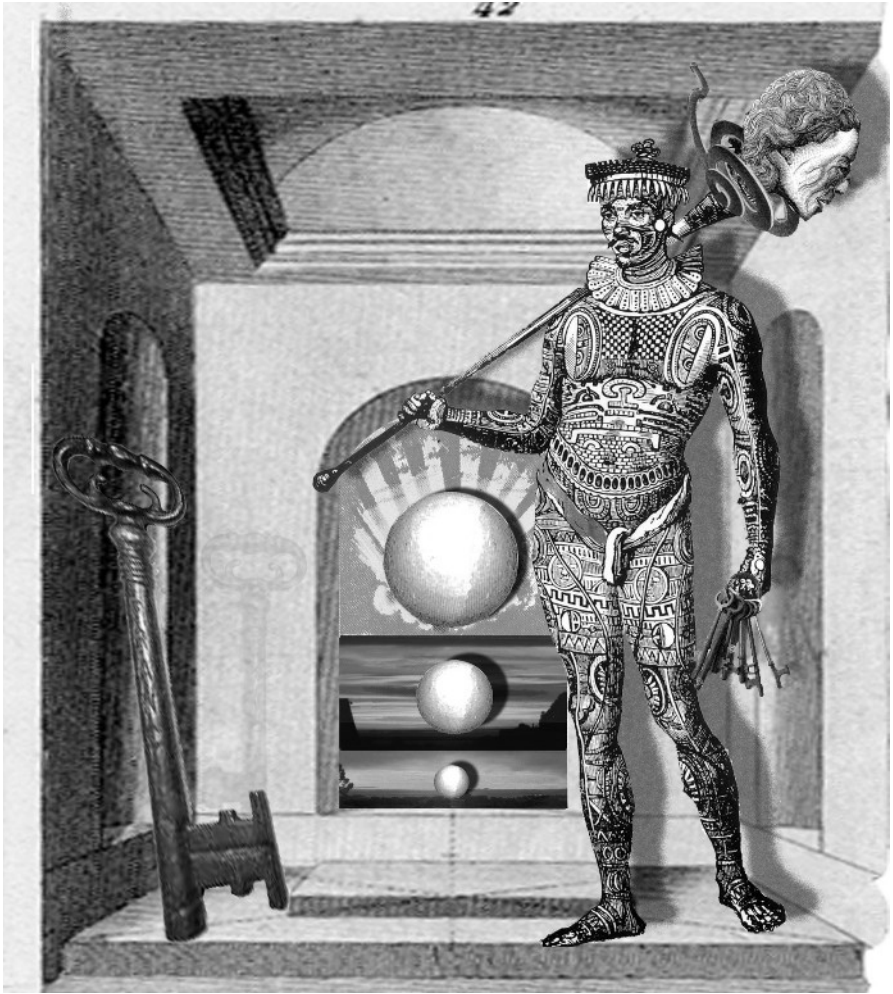
Reprise

Helen pinches a mushroom cap and the tongs click against her plate but her eyes never leave Linda's face and her smile stretches wide before her lips curl into a circle. "Moo," she says.

Jennie Bricker / Portland, Oregon



*Keeper of the Keys* / Ken Weichel



Collage  
Ken Weichel / Benicia, California