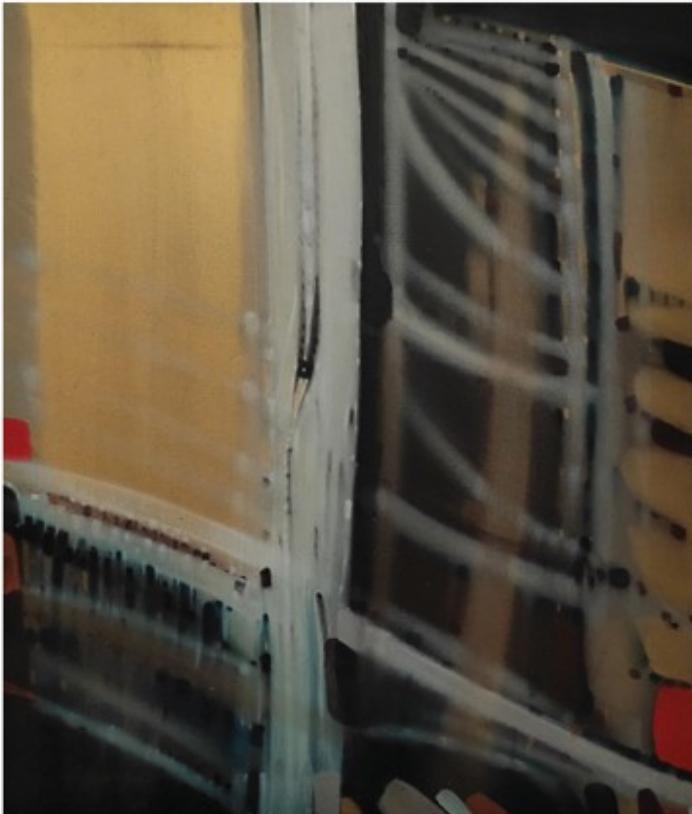


3rd  
Wednesday



Winter 2026

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**Third Wednesday Magazine**  
**Volume XIX, Number 1**  
**Winter, 2026**

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

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## Editors Note for Winter 2026

We're happy to present this issue of 3rd Wednesday Magazine. Each quarterly issue feels like a gathering around a big table, where writers, poets, and artists bring their stories to share. Some pieces will make you smile, some might stir a memory, others may challenge you to see things in a new way. That mix is what keeps this magazine alive and vibrant.

Putting together each issue is a bit like making a quilt. Every voice adds its own patch of color and texture, and when they're stitched together, the whole picture is richer. We hope you'll find something here that speaks directly to you, whether it's a line of poetry that lingers in your mind or an image that gives you pause.

As always, we're deeply grateful to our contributors for trusting us with their work, and to our readers for being part of this community. Your support is what makes this ongoing conversation possible.

So settle in, take your time, and enjoy. May these pages bring you warmth, inspiration, and a reminder of how art connects us all.

## *Retiree / Larry Levy*

My books are bound in corrugated boxes,  
each sealed with irrevocable tape.  
A younger man stacks them onto his truck,  
hauling with an effortless step.  
And, effortless, I recall the students,  
hopeful, eager, frequently sad  
as they offered me their pasts and futures  
and heard or did not hear what I said  
or did not say, but sat with me, silent,  
trying to plumb the questions of their lives.  
Sometimes this was all, this was enough,  
to witness their articulating selves.  
They surround me now, their faces  
undecided, the way they were then.  
I hear their hesitant voices  
resurrecting one by one:  
the one unsure she would make the grade,  
the one trembling over a loss,  
the bruised one, growing a thicker hide,  
the one confused by a kiss,  
and all wondering what next?  
Do I hear another's words, do I heed  
the guide to the perplexed  
welling in my heart and head?  
In such memories I am least alone.  
They are like a song's refrain  
I hum all day, my discordant tune,  
but they are irrevocably mine.

Now it's just me with the silent shelves,  
the drawers having surrendered their pens  
and paper clips, each scribbled note  
crumpled in recycling bins.  
I've no schedule pinned to the board  
nor an interjected one last  
thing! I've offered my final word  
and transform down the hall like a ghost.

Larry Levy / Midland, Michigan

## ***Plum Rain / Liu Min***

The rain arrives  
before grief is finished,  
daring to fall—  
turning incense ash  
into smudged script

Beneath the eaves  
I watch the droplets line up  
like obedient children  
then hurl themselves  
into last year's  
hollow pot

Once you said  
rain was a god's ellipsis  
Now I know:  
even silence  
has a breaking point

In the back alley  
stray cats begin to wail  
a rusted saw  
tearing back and forth  
through the night's seam

I can't decide  
whether to curse their noise  
or thank them  
for trying, at least  
to split apart  
this thickened stillness

Liu Min / State College, Pennsylvania

## ***Porthole* / Giulio Maffi**



Photograph by Giulio Maffi / Buti, Italy

## *Escape to Duckburg / Ron Koertge*

Huey, Dewey and Louis follow a smiling star to a campground just outside of town

where Mary, Joseph, and the baby are resting.  
The triplets stop squabbling and peer

wide-eyed. Their gifts are melon, peas and dandelion greens. Mary is used to miracles.

It's 90 difficult miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Along the way, wolves lowered

their eyes, bandits gave up when their horses wouldn't budge. Nothing surprises Mary now.

She's still worried about Herod, of course. If he could see the three bedazzled waterfowl

he might become even more ruthless. Ducks on their knees. But not in front of him.

Ron Koertge / South Pasadena, California

## ***Clock of Pines* / Robert Carr**

Pollen doped, the air is thick.  
The shy light of September  
peeks around white pines.

Hoping not to startle,  
I raise my hand, invite the sun  
to settle on a knuckle.

Needle silhouette, branches  
like the cracked face  
of a clock.

Through squint the frayed  
rays perch. Gold band on my  
finger or a hummingbird?

Robert Carr / Monmouth, Maine

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## ***Peas on Earth* / James Huff**

I can't help but wonder how long it's been  
since our backyard garden, endless hours  
shelling peas and cracking puns, making  
believe we had a future. People change  
between daydreams. We were already  
elsewhere, our hearts no longer in it.  
It's no wonder nothing else grew  
besides peas and tomatoes—  
we sure weren't going to.

James Huff / Springfield, Missouri

## *Singing to the Cows* / Buff Whitman-BRADLEY

When the beautiful Holsteins  
Are grazing close to the fence  
That separates their pasture  
From the path where we often walk,  
They look up from nuzzling the grasses  
As we pass by with the little dog  
And come nearer  
To hear the day's news.  
Some days we sing little songs to them  
Because we have seen videos  
Of musicians performing in meadows  
For grazing cattle  
And have watched as the cows  
Stop what they're doing  
And come closer to listen.  
We begin singing "Red, Red Robin"  
And "Home on the Range"  
And they arrange themselves into a line  
By the barbed wire  
To be a front-row audience.  
They stand very still  
And listen very closely.  
They make us think  
Of the tenderness of grandparents  
Adoring the grandchildren  
Whatever they do.  
It is a wonderful feeling  
To be so thoroughly appreciated  
By those large, kind-hearted bovines  
Who don't mind if we sing well or ill,  
And who are quite pleased  
To have something new to chat about  
Later today at the salt lick.

Buff Whitman-BRADLEY

## **Wood Duck / Nancy Huggett**

I have come to the bend in the river  
to cast off this darkness—caring  
for my daughter who flings  
her fear against my body,  
bruising skin that has thinned  
over these long years. My hands  
like my mother's—vein-roped,  
fingers bent by mending, hold  
the railing that splinters down  
to the water where awe startles me  
with her diamond flutter—stones rippling  
sunlight, crackling the winter-cold current  
that slurries downstream. The stutter  
of wood ducks through the swirl  
of sodden leaves, iridescent heads  
emeralded in green, chestnut breasts,  
ringed ruby eyes bobbing. All of it  
edging toward freeze.

Nancy Huggett / Ottawa, Ontario

## ***Heron*** / Sarah Tate

It was used to clouds  
sweeping shadows  
like twilight  
over the wooden bridge.  
When the floods came,  
waves of silt  
strong enough  
to earthquake  
cement walkways,  
it never  
saw it coming—  
the snap  
of its slender neck.  
Rain as  
the baiting saint  
of death:  
come, come  
into the water.  
Another day  
to be safe  
in the reeds.

Sarah Tate / Partlow, Virginia

***Utah Aspen* / Sydnee Peters**



Photograph by Syndee Peters / Kalamazoo, Michigan

## *A Moment In April* / Cynthia Pratt

I.

First, the smell. Moist, drippy soil,  
but the beginning scent of flowers.

As a child, it was Ceanothus, wild  
lilac, that drifted briefly up the hill  
as I walked home from school.

Today, I start seeing shoots of daffodils,  
the tips of bushes sprouting leaves.

My children were born in spring.  
Here in the rain damp Northwest,  
the surprise of sunshine

casts a hope for dry days.  
Light would shine on their tiny heads.

Their milk-sour breath remembered  
against my skin, the silk of their cheek  
I still wish to touch.

2.

Leaves open like ladies' fans  
spreading to the sun.  
Petals unfurl into flat stepping  
stones for lady bugs  
while water coddles in a flower's cup.

Hummingbirds' proboscis' reach  
into a flower's mouth like a sexy kiss,  
drawing up nectar.  
Nature's symbiosis.

3.

I watch the Procession of the Species  
Parade while sitting on Safeplace's porch,  
a shelter for women and mothers to hide,  
turning this imaginary animal night  
into safety, where paper mâché,  
whistles and drums abound.

Here come the paper flowers, then crows  
and ravens in flight.  
The street sweepers brush  
everything away including fear.

### ***Mirror Mirror / Cynthia Pratt***

I surprise myself looking at my reflection  
where hidden behind my ear, there is light  
from somewhere I don't see. And my cheek  
glows in that perceived profile. I might be

beautiful, if only I stayed sideways, a twist  
of magic. Of course, I must picture myself  
walking crab-like forever showing the  
perfect side, the one without wrinkles or

brown spots that tell everyone I no longer  
claim youth as my best feature. Today,  
I try to change the aspect of me, a Janus  
that is truly two-faced and tells the mirror

I am kind. I am what you believe. I am  
glowing with whatever you want to make of me.

Cynthia Pratt / Lacey, Washington

## ***Let Me Be Wrong*** / Maureen Clark

did you miss me when I was just star dust?

today I want to be wrong  
about the dirt they gather at the site of past lynchings

let me be wrong about  
native American children killed at religious boarding schools

the bone bare children      in Gaza  
with extended bellies      flies walking on their eyelids

their eyes more empty      than their stomachs  
today I want to be wrong

about the children crawling into lightless mines  
to set the dynamite

children barefoot in winter fields among the flower petal mines  
left by the Russians in Ukraine

let me be wrong about the near extinction  
of the bison      and turtles      and the Dodo

let me be wrong about witches  
burned and hung

let me be wrong about all religions  
and their many sins      let me be right

about the Fibonacci patterns in pinecones   and pineapples  
let me be right about   the deep humanity of bees

the compassion of elephants  
who adopt the motherless calf

let me be right about the visitation  
of deer in the meadow

and when I am wrong about where you've gone  
let a window open in me

Maureen Clark / Bountiful, Utah

## *Winter Scene, Pen and Ink / Julian Koslow*

Crows on a branch,  
blots on a wavering line  
where you keep hesitating  
over what to say until  
the ink soaks

through the page.

Tree silhouetted black  
on a white field of snow;  
bare branches mirror  
exposed roots: conscious  
thought,

and its opposite.

Meanwhile, two tails  
twitch round the trunk:  
or are they merely  
one  
chasing its own?

Note the use of negative  
space,  
which, unlike  
negative thought,  
lends quiet to the scene.

Or would if only  
we  
weren't in it.

Julian Koslow / Fair Lawn, New Jersey

## *Land of Frost* / Wasima Khan

The first snow  
was small,  
a hush,  
a lightness  
on the roof tiles,  
as if the sky,  
having run out  
of things to say,  
decided to whisper  
instead.

It came  
as a kind of gift  
one must unwrap  
slowly,  
with hands  
still aching  
from warmer days.

Children ran,  
gathered it,  
piled it  
into something  
that looks  
like laughter  
and threw back  
light.

The city,  
usually so quick  
to turn its back,  
paused.

Strangers smiled  
over scarves,  
shuffled past  
each other  
like cousins  
at a funeral  
who suddenly  
remember  
how to laugh.

There is joy here,  
but not the loud kind.

It is the joy  
of soup warming  
on the stove,  
of boots drying  
by the door,  
of someone  
lighting a lamp,  
not because it is dark,  
but because  
you have come home.

In winter,  
you cannot bloom  
so you remember.

And in the  
remembering,  
comes a truth  
wrapped in wool:

That even  
cold hands  
can hold warmth.

That even  
in a land of frost,  
the heart  
does not forget  
how to thaw.

## **Hope / Wasima Khan**

The morning came,  
no announcement,  
just light  
on the windowsill,  
soft and unhurried,  
as if it had always  
meant to return.

The tea steamed.  
The bread was enough.  
Someone in the next flat  
played an old song,  
its words long gone,  
but the melody  
held something  
close to warmth.

Out on the street,  
a boy kicked a can  
down the pavement  
as if it might  
take him somewhere.

He was whistling.  
Not a tune I knew.  
But he kept at it  
as though the air  
needed filling.

I read no news that day.  
Did not speak much.  
Hung the washing,  
watched the wind  
carry it forward,  
then back.

A friend once said  
there are kinds of silence.  
This one was not empty.  
It held breath.  
Waiting, maybe.  
Or not even that.  
Just being.

And I thought  
of how little it takes:  
a cup held out,  
a voice from the other room,  
a door not quite shut,  
to feel the world  
turn gently  
towards you.

Wasima Khan / The Hague, Netherlands

## ***My Daughter Texts Me* / John Jordan**

from Scotland, she's in school there telling me  
*Jimmy Page looks cool* in the trippy photo  
she attaches from 1972. She's a throwback  
art history major texting her ancient father  
*Zeppelin is the quintessential 70's band*  
like I didn't know.

Her random messages are sporadic - she lost her phone  
but found two days later in the bathroom.

Who pees with a phone in hand?

She attaches a Spanish painting from Copenhagen  
of a weary Christ crucified. She asks me  
if I've read Camus' *The Stranger*, do I know  
Tracey Chapman's "Fast Car" and  
can I send her some cash, *I'm short this month.*

I picture her by the North Sea, the wind  
in her hair, her earbuds in, skipping  
her Italian class. I see her walk the beach humming  
Chapman's mantra, *I had a feeling*  
*I could be someone, be someone, be someone.*

John Jordan / Wilmington, Delaware

*Anxiety* / Gary Wadley



Drawing by Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky

## *Sister, Cisternae* / Raymond Trunk

In biology class we are told to memorize the difference between cristae and cisternae. We are told cisternae can aid in synthesis; they can still parcel something new. Cristae cannot. Cristae are wrinkled; they take up more space. Cristae blanket the mitochondria. Cristae set a bad example. Cristae want their sisters to reach old age. Silly, dying things. Cristae are jealous; they don't like the mitochondria to look young. Cristae don't let her be seen. Cristae want power like God, cisternae just want to be the disciples, the sisters. But cristae catalyze. Cristae overreact. Cristae will tell you to fuck off and keep things moving. Cisternae will only ship out what they need to. They can pack light on vacations and still find new maxis to wear for dinner. They can hold their water weight and still stay flat after dessert. They can rub your back and still give you advice over a bowl of ice and miso broth. Anyway, I took the exam and read the question: cristae versus cisternae. It was open-ended. I couldn't remember which sister did what, so I drew a frowny face and wrote sorry beneath the lines. Later the professor told us no one could remember the difference, and she took the question off the test. I haven't heard from either sister since.

Raymond Trunk / Morris Plains, New Jersey

## ***Love on the Run*** / Pamela Miller

*for Richard*

Love runs across the world like an ostrich,  
its sturdy legs clacking.  
It hops on one foot from hut to hut,  
pressing couples together like paninis.

Love gallops in frantic circles  
around the hearts of squirmy teenage girls,  
of kings who no longer wish to be kings,  
of marine biologists who used to prefer  
the company of kelp.

And now, my darling, love races to your door  
and howls because you're not there.  
So it hotfoots across America to fetch you,  
it zigzags like a pinball  
through the jittery dazzle of Times Square,  
it barrels all the way down Route 66,  
past the famous neon blare of the Munger Moss Motel  
and billboards for Sparkling Jungle Water,

it zips down the Sunset Strip,  
shoving food trucks out of the way.  
When love finally captures you,  
twiddling your thumbs on some petulant beach,  
I'll hear it croon into your ear:  
*Climb aboard my back  
and ride me like a rocket  
as I zoom you home to where you belong.*

Pamela Miller / Chicago, Illinois

## ***Something is Screaming*** / Nathaniel Lachenmeyer

Something is screaming.  
I don't know if it's me  
or the world this time.  
Last time it was me  
and the time before that.  
So I figure the world  
is due for a turn.  
But then I happen to cough  
and it stops. So it was me  
again. How embarrassing  
as my mother would say.  
But that's a different poem.  
In this poem the one where  
I was screaming but now  
I'm not...there it is again.  
I cough on purpose three times  
and it's still going on.  
That's a relief. I'm glad  
the world has finally joined in.

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer / Marietta, Georgia



Photograph by Michael C. Roberts / Anthem, Arizona

*Ortho Surgeon* / Andrea Potos

Blue-masked and wrapped,  
he peers into my wrist  
and names it inflamed,  
The bright lantern of his gaze  
finds where to snip,  
free the tendon as if from  
some corset gone wrong.

I feel a far-off prickling in my skin  
like stars blinking on and off—  
the whole sky opening,  
the pain being free to go.

Andrea Potos / Madison, Wisconsin

By day we tend the gardens. At night we work on our almanac of underground possibilities. The farming is just theater for the elites, who drive through on weekends, sub woofers blasting. “Lovely broccoli,” someone shouts from a passing cavalcade. I hold it up for admiration, tiny yellow flowers lacing the edges. What we all know is this food is riven with plastic, inedible. But they like to see us pulling it up, as if this were all fine.

The only future is deep beneath us. Caves, tunnels, dugout places left over from wars and ancients. We are building a world there. There are waterfall pools, rivers, amphitheaters that when lit up, show off magnificent stalagmites, shiny with minerals. We try to make it nice to be without sunlight. LED helps. Solar flashlights. But it’s always going to be a shadow land. We are coming to accept it.

My son Roger is devising a way to farm in the dark! It’s quite ingenious. Using a cavalcade of mirrors from above he pulls light down a tube to the darkness, then spreads it like butter over a field of carrots and potatoes. These foods, fed by underground springs and planted in soil untouched by pollutants, are edible. “Dirty little secret,” he likes to say.

Isn’t it funny that the poorest humans are living quite happily and well while everyone else is sealed in plastic container houses, eating cardboard food spat out by machines? I like that. I like justice. We never even had to stage a revolution. We just kept acting like the poorest souls, while digging.

For now, we just have to keep pretending we are the homeless, untouchable class they think we are. We must continue standing out here in the fields in rags a few hours a day and act like we are farming so they can see us and pretend there is still such a thing as a farm.

BubEEP! A sleek vehicle of foreign vintage honks its horn and the little children in backseat wave and wave. My daughter, Marcella, waves back. She knows the truth. They live inside plastic. We live in the earth. Every day is getting better. Soon we will know how to grow everything. We will farm the underneath as well as we once farmed the above world.

Someday, we will walk down our hidden staircases to houses that will be lavish pockets of safety. The above world is dying. The monster tornadoes alone can take out a city in an hour. We will be the safest. One day we will go down to the deep places which will be quite livable by then, and never ever come back.

Elizabeth Cohen / Albuquerque, New Mexico

## *Le Plus Ça Change* / Ellen Roberts Young

So much in France stays the same,  
except a new museum in Paris, new ads

in the Metro offering high tech  
solutions to problems I don't have.

Then Canada's mustard crop fails, causes  
a shortage painful to France's cooks.

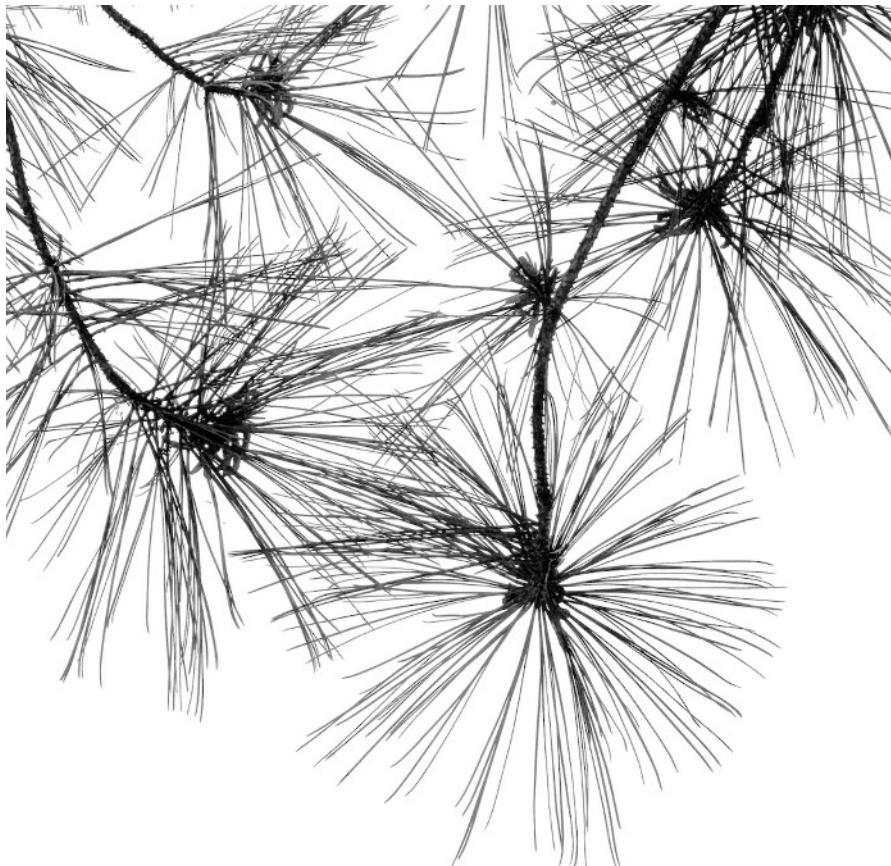
Mustard plants grew in the orchards of my  
childhood. Would their seed make Dijon?

A useless question: that ground is paved over.  
What language can lament these changes?

“New normal” is already frayed, a towel  
worn too thin to dry the empty pots.

Ellen Roberts Young / Oakland, California

*Art of Nature 2: Pine Needles in Cavallion France* / Michael C. Roberts



Photograph by Michael C. Roberts / Anthem, Arizona

## *Prairies* / Mark Hamilton

Prairies are pink  
amber envelopes of quietude,  
the inhalations of spaciousness,  
exultant and warming  
with fresh earth and sunrise,  
bird song, and the wide river  
glossy or heaving  
with a towboat headed upstream  
pushing its prop wash back,  
the horizon rippling on and on,  
quick to change the sky  
beyond the hem of its  
dancing wake along the shore.

I pass cabins  
and weekend get-a-way trailers,  
friendly folks suggesting I troll  
a sand toad for dinner,  
the river bending into backwaters  
speeding me along  
under trees flying on fire,  
trotlines strung  
tugging with pan-fish  
in the fog, wispy  
and cool  
with the moist leaves  
of soft light  
in the palm of the river.

In a valley of knolls  
near the Omaha Reservation,  
I ripple the gritty sand banks  
studded with driftwood and birds,  
and rabbits and deer in the dusk,  
floating on the sharp points  
of a scything moon.

Mark Hamilton / Richmond, Indiana

## ***Old Man / Arlene Weiner***

When a sparse snow fell in January,  
the season's first, my neighbors  
scraped together enough to build  
a snowman, three feet high,  
long carrot for a nose.  
It stood for a day on a green lawn.

I admire New Hampshire's refusal  
to rebuild a rock formation,  
The Old Man of the Mountain,  
famous enough to appear  
on the state quarters and license plates,  
when it fell. Let fall what falls, take your losses.  
Live free or die, the state motto.

Or die? Do we have a choice?  
Perform the rites of winter, then.  
White-headed eagles  
have returned to our skies.

Arlene Weiner / Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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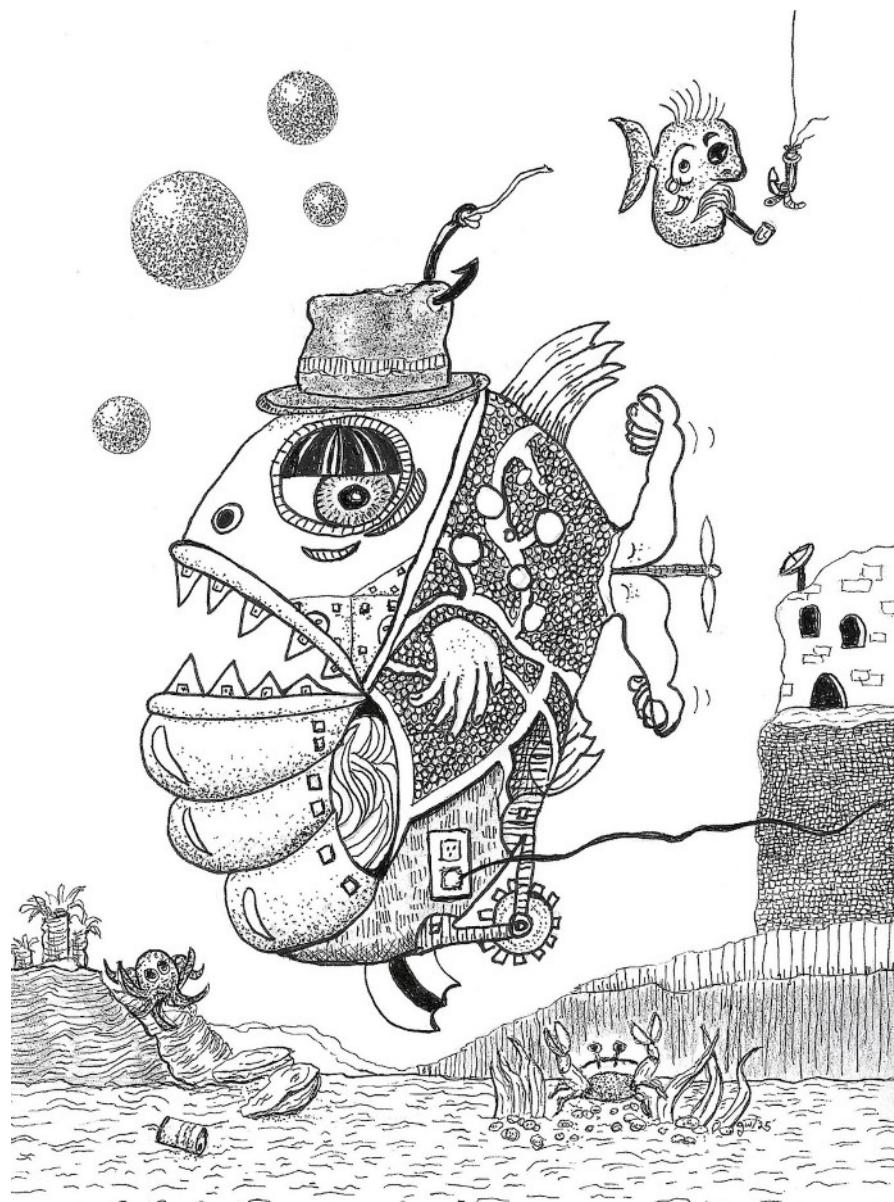
## ***Black Spider on My Thumb / Ace Boggess***

Brush & crush—did I get it? Did it get me?  
Check my hand for punctures, redness,  
swelling, prophecies of end times.  
Is that a bump? Is that a gravestone  
rising from mist at my wrist, knuckle, palm.  
Where has the assassin been waiting with poison?  
Can't say it's been a good life;  
I want more of it before the shoe comes down.

Ace Boggess / Charleston, West Virginia

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*Escape* / Gary Wadley



Drawing by Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky

## *Inherited* / M. Anne Avera

Brother Amos said last Sunday that the heat during the summer is God's reminder of what sinners feel in H-E-Double-L. He's the type to think up catchy sayings — stuff adults want to write, words people can live by.

And he's right. Outside is miserable, even in the mornings, and it gets worse throughout the day. Despite the constricting air, there's a palpable energy. Green is everywhere, covering the lattices around the church, scraping up towards the sky. Crops in the outer parts of town thrive, waving to you on your walks.

Imagine the sensation of growing towards the sun. Imagine the greed.

Your normal routine stays the same — walking Gibson, taking care of the garden with Mom, pretending to go to sleep every night at 7:30 like you're supposed to, even though it's still light out.

Mom says you're getting bigger, about to be a teenager, so you have to wear even more. With each change in your body, there's an extra layer. A training bra for your chest, an added wrap for your shoulders. Even in the dead of July, you wear a cardigan when you step out of the house. She still tries to pull your neckline up to the top of your throat, as if you should be ashamed of its shape and line.

Schools in the county are out. In the town next door, teenagers swarm the Walmart, the Piggly Wiggly, the McDonald's until they are bored. With nowhere else to go, groups of them drive into Pine Grove and wheel around, taking their sweet time on the easy road towards the lake, curved to what you imagine is perfection by the town's founders.

You watch them sometimes, when you can, as they trot in and out of the corner gas station, wearing their shorts and tank tops, tanned skin, and lake water hair. The gasoline tank in your hands threatens to tip onto your skirt, and you hug it to your chest. They're laughing, one holding a bottle of juice that could dye fabric, and the sight sends spit to the back of your mouth. The drink is what rubies taste like, maybe.

They don't look twice at you.

To study them, their mannerisms and their language is to experience something close to envy. Wanting what they have, what they enjoy but don't care to share, and knowing it'll get you set on fire, eternally. It aches though, iron knitting into your stomach.

"Is being jealous a deadly sin?" you ask Dad, swinging your feet at the kitchen table. A sheet of too-easy math drills lies neglected in front of you. Though county schools are out, your school never stops, ticking on and on throughout the year.

Dad puts his steaming coffee on the table. He scooches his foggy glasses up his nose to rest on his hairline. You watch him and get the strange sensation of seeing him eye to eye. His squint gives him a rodent look, his features small. You don't lock into his stare, fear bubbling inside your head.

"Well," he starts the lecture. "Evie, the Bible condemns envy as a deadly sin. And jealousy is another word for it. So what do you think?"

You hate it when he makes you parse things out like this, everything a teachable moment. Placing your hands in your lap, you parrot the last Sunday School lesson. "When we do a deadly sin we have to repent."

"That's right. Have you been jealous?"

Your chest expands, contracts. Past whoopings dance in your head, visions more than memories, all hateful. "I don't think so."

"You don't think so? If there's a chance you could sin, darling, you need to confess it," Dad says. He moves his glasses to his nose, crosses his arms and pulls his chair back. The distance is like a mile.

To confess would mean absolving yourself of it, of making idols of the secular life, the teenagers and their clothes and their privileges. God would forgive you if you confessed.

But it means that you'd get bent over your bed again, and you've never taken to the belt before, so you won't start now. It always just made you angrier, greedier, uglier inside.

Maybe that's you. Maybe you were always an ugly thing, this emotional mess. You can't tell one from another, mixing sadness with sloth and curiosity with lust. At the last youth meeting, Brother Amos said that most people start to sin in their teens and keep going until they die.

Decide now. Tell Dad whatever you can get out of your mouth. Confession or not, it's not gonna change a thing.

"I haven't," you say. Confidence comes out of you as Dad nods to the words. He's looking at you through his eyebrows now. "I'm just worried about Josie from Sunday School. She said she was jealous of the boys."

He hums. "Why is that?"

"They went outside and played football," you say, hopeful that he won't slap your wrist for stammering. "And we stayed for another lesson."

"You shouldn't be around that Josie," Dad says. "Envy is the root of many evils."

As he lifts his coffee back in the air, you sit, numb. In one sentence, you've disobeyed Dad and the laws of God, like plucking a blade of grass between two fingers: curious, probing. He couldn't tell you were lying.

Does that make you a liar? Is this what Brother Amos means when he talks about little add-ups in your life?

You go back to your math drills, jotting down numbers, your brain half-on and your attention set everywhere but the kitchen table. In the corner window, a fly buzzes, knocking itself against the glass. If you stare real hard, you can hear each individual wing flap.

M. Anne Avera / Auburn, Alabama

*Friends in Shadows* / Soleil Ponce



Photograph by Soleil Ponce / Ann Arbor, Michigan

## *Clinic After Dusk* / D. Anson Lee

The last patient has left,  
chairs folded against the wall,  
fluorescents humming low,  
a map of the reservation faint  
in the waiting-room light.  
I trace the rim of the refractor,  
its lenses cold in my palm,  
and think how vision is never just sight:  
how each cornea holds a small sky,  
how pupils swallow the world  
and return it, altered.  
Outside, prairie grass folds in the wind,  
a coyote's wail sharp as glass.  
I see the buffalo grazing there,  
the eyes that witnessed what we cannot,  
and in the clinic's hush  
I glimpse them again:  
not through machines,  
but in the patient silence  
between one blink and the next.

D. Anson Lee / Bellaire, Texas

## *Early September / K. E. Duffin*

Could this be the landscape I saw six weeks ago?  
I never thought late July could be outdone—  
It seemed the peak, acme of the prevail of the sun,  
with its profusion of greens, and fireflies' syrupy glow.

But this. Like a watercolor glazed with a halo  
of oil, everything magnified by an aura green-golden,  
trees taller, fuller, with darker densities that deepen  
to new leafy concealments. Colors so

saturated, gleaned from a children's book.  
Mid-summer surpassed by the growth spurt of August.  
What seemed maturity only meant that more

was in store: the greatest reach, the deepest look,  
achieved as the Equinox nears, when burgeoning must  
concede to dwindling, and dreams of before, before.

K. E. Duffin / Somerville, Massachusetts

## *The Minor Poet Decreases His Paper Usage / Lois Harrod*

In an effort to get poets  
to write less and read more,

the Poetry Institute declared a ban  
on self-published books.

All minor poets were limited to a half-sheet  
of paper a day and one dull pencil.

Poetry must be responsive to climate change  
for paper was destroying trees

as well as birds and bees, but not those ants  
attracted to electricity

that were invading televisions,  
computers and dishwashers.

The endowments for those  
taking a low residency MFA were eliminated

as well as all fellowships  
to moldy rooms in writers' retreats.

Eventually it was clear  
that all poets who had not gone

to Hereford, Primpstown or Yell  
would be downsized and dismissed.

When challenged, the Supreme  
Court of Poetry ruled it wasn't discrimination.

Under-represented poets  
would be allowed a paper towel

once a week and had as good a chance  
of becoming famous as anyone else.

They advised those who thought they had to write  
to write for themselves.

Weren't there already enough grains of sand  
longing to become worlds?

Lois Harrod / Hopewell, New Jersey

*Laval* / David Chorlton



Watercolor Painting by David Chorlton / Phoenix Arizona

*Why Are You Calling Me After 40 Years? / Jeffrey Johannes*

Here we are talking as if nothing,  
instead of everything, has changed.  
You say there is a thread  
in the shape a seagull  
on the sleeve of your blouse,  
share your love of parrots,  
and ask if I am still painting.  
I tell you I paint in the mornings,  
describe the bugling call  
of sandhill cranes behind my house  
and the quiet depression that  
lifts in the buttery light of dawn,  
but I am wondering why  
you have called after all these years.  
When you ask if I remember  
the night we met,  
I don't know if I want to tell you  
how often I call to mind slow dancing  
on a sandbar,  
the Little Plover River swirling  
around our ankles,  
little brown bats  
eating the weight of the world  
one mosquito at a time.

Jeffery Johannes / Port Edwards, Wisconsin

## *Every Evening Should Be Like This / Jeffrey Johannes*

I will wear a hat like Goya wore  
with candles blazing on the brim  
and the dusty moths of July  
fluttering to the flames.  
You will only need a light sweater;  
you could wear the alpaca one  
the color of moonlight so our cat  
will jump into your lap to knead,  
a memory of crickets under her paw.  
We will sip whiskey,  
and when I drop another cube  
into your glass, and you brush  
a strand of hair from your cheek,  
I will think that if I die tonight  
these quiet moments,  
this quiet life,  
will have been my joy.

Jeffrey Johannes / Port Edwards, Wisconsin

## ***Metamorphosis Denied* / Kate S. O'Connor**

Only a moment earlier  
You'd turned your radiant face toward mine.  
Mom, you revealed,  
I'm a butterfly.

Then the country decided it  
Despised butterflies.  
They elected an exterminator king.

I felt it then:  
The terrible stillness of you, grounded,  
Barely daring to twitch your antennae  
Young wings pressed together like  
The tightness of my jaw,  
Like a back against the wall.

They snatched us and pinned us  
With fear, imagining  
Over and over again  
The shredding of your wings.

Kate S. O'Connor / Madison, Wisconsin

## *A Trail Remembers / David Chorlton*

Javelina prints downslope  
cross paths with those coyotes leave  
beside the pellets coughed up  
by an owl. Green

by day is mystery  
at night, questions rooted  
in desert: who sleeps behind the shaded  
openings in arroyo  
walls? who wakes up

to sip moonlight  
from the sky?  
who passed this way

and wanders off at daybreak  
leaving no tracks of its own?  
One winding trail wants always  
to continue, to be entangled in the boughs  
of dead mesquite,

crawl into the core  
of a fallen saguaro, to spread itself  
wide and to fly  
with golden winged flickers. Another

is content to soak  
into sand and gravel  
that bear no trace of the darkness

whose way back home this is  
and wears no shoes.

David Chorlton / Phoenix, Arizona

## *Centerpoint* / Jane Hertenstein

After checking Facebook, Instagram, and Tiktok for the 200th time that morning, she decided she needed that new miracle drug. Ozempic for the brain. She needed to take control.

Yes, the injection started out as a cure-all for another terrible disease: obesity, which was a detour from the original intention to treat diabetes. But researchers had discovered that it also curbed one's use of the Internet by taking away all interest, as it were, slacking the appetite. The addiction to constantly checking, then after checking the endless scrolling, the doom-scrolling where one sucks up all the bad news like a vacuum cleaner in a black hole. The obsessive looking at the screen of her phone, actually not letting go to put it down, holding it as if it were a talisman against . . . What?

She didn't know, but she would Google right away. What am I afraid of?

Sometimes, late at night, she'd awake or—more often than not—she'd been unable to fall asleep—and type into her Kindle Fire by the bedside: Tell me the future. Once she asked the universe, more specifically: What is that blurry thing off in the distance that looks like trees waving in the wind? And the ChatGPT came up with an answer: You're off your rocker.

That's how it felt. Askew. Does anyone ever use that word anymore? Yes, bounced the bot. 9006884 times a day.

It was her phone that recommended Ozempic.

The rectangle dinged one morning, and she jumped out of the shower to see a message. She quickly towed off and sat on the couch wrapped up with nothing else on, rivulets streaming from her head and onto the device screen. Finally someone cared enough to reach out and help. Or something. Never mind.

When did it start? Was it after the unexpected passing of her mother at only age 54? One day she was great, the next she was in the emergency room, and two weeks later dead. Didn't the universe know that even though she—a college graduate in an only okay job but more importantly with health benefits—perceive that she still needed support. To be able to call her mother up and complain. If her mom called her, she'd complain that she was calling. "I need space, Mom," she'd say. Well, guess what! She got space and so much more. Loneliness. Now no one calls.

Not even her brother, who disappointed the relatives and her biological father by coming out trans and wearing a dress to the graveside service. He's got his own fish to fry (according to Grandpa). Her family was too busy with their own stuff to ask what's up with her. She was considering getting a rescue cat, except she was allergic to fur.

This drug was her chance to get back her life, seize agency, move forward. Despite the side effects.

Dry mouth.

Dry eyes.

Dry vagina. (Oops, maybe this one, but no—there were creams to fix that)

Dry heaves.

Weight loss.

Loss of interest.

Love loss.

Lost (the TV series)

Streaming.

Stream of consciousness.

This was a partial list. She made an appointment

\*

No longer storming out of the shower to the sound of her phone, no longer binging on social media, she was dry. Empty. Her days devoid. From, you name it. Packages of Perfectly Pickled Pups from Trader Joe's, bread rolls with flakey salt, take out from Ms. Egg Roll. The freezer and coffee table were wiped clean.

The desire for coffee suddenly diminished. She lost the remote for the TV. No more Lost.

Her mornings were a blank slate with only the sun peeking, peeping, creeping across the length of the floor. Toward the bonsai garden, where she daily rakes the tiny pebbles with a miniature rake. Her Word-a-Day calendar introduces palimpsest. A manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain. Truth, she thinks. There are traces, but, at the same time, room for new. She ruminates, Life is every bit like this. Palimpsest.

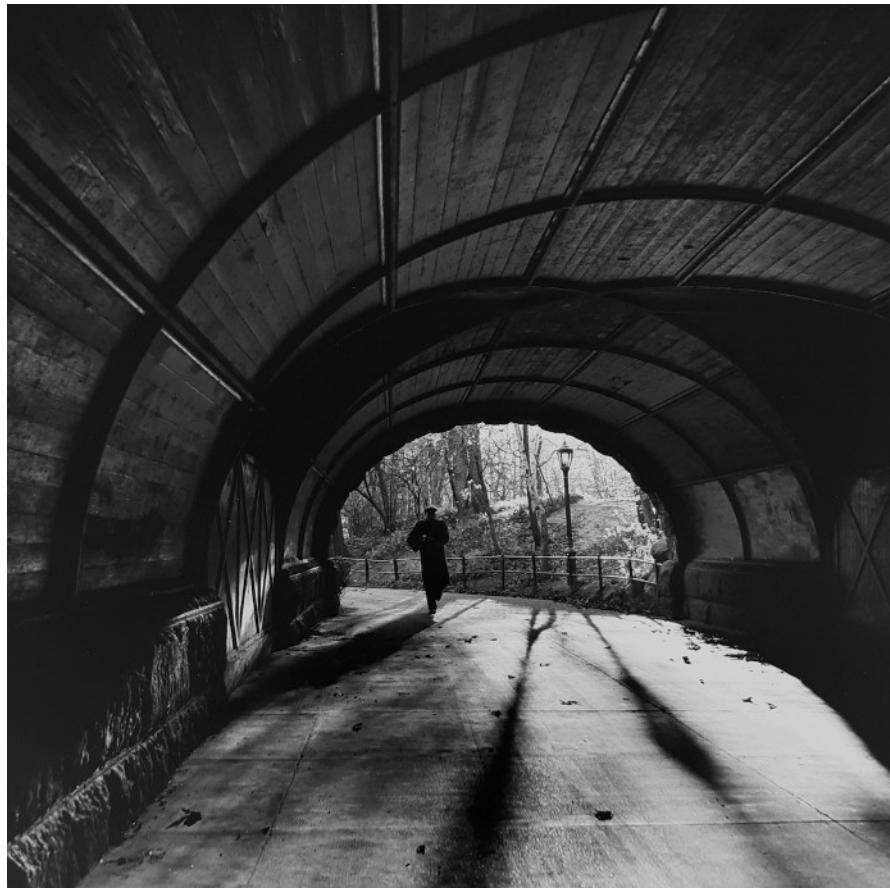
There's the morning walk to her car which she never noticed before. The birds that gather in a tree adjoining the bank parking lot. The tree itself, changing according to the seasons. She remarked to the new guy at work, the one glued to his phone in the break room, that the tree was aflame with autumn gold. And he said, What tree?

But later, after work, they both stood in the parking lot and watched the leaves dance the mazurka in the evening breeze. And, even later that month, they drove to the forest preserve with lawn chairs to catch a late afternoon symphony.

Nothing happened. Nothing at all.

Jane Hertenstein / Okemos, Michigan

*Echoes of Sunset* / John Schiano



Photograph by John Schiano / Las Vegas, Nevada

## ***Moonwatch*** / James Scruton

Scientists estimate that the moon is straying away from Earth  
by about 1.5 inches (3.8 centimeters) per year.

—NASA

It's another of those troubling discoveries,  
like learning of Earth's increasing tilt,  
our planet more and more wobbly on its axial pin.

Or like those inches a jetliner lengthens  
during flight, and the half-million skin cells  
each of us loses in a day, that epidermal dust  
over everything, in any afternoon sunbeam  
a swirling galaxy of our shed selves.

Now the moon is going, going,  
if only by a few centimeters a year,  
and who could blame her, edging away from us  
as from some loud, tipsy guest at a celestial party?

And a few eons on, NASA says,  
our own diurnal spin will stop for good,  
the same hemisphere forever facing  
whoever may be living lunar by then.

On clear nights, perhaps, they'll point  
to The Man in the Earth,  
a nursery rhyme cow jumping over,  
the dark other side of this world  
having long since become proverbial,  
so mysterious, dusty, and distant.

James Scruton / Brookville, Ohio

## ***Many Lives To Go* / David August**

A loud noise woke her up, and he woke with her. He could see what she saw: a dirty tent, the mat on the ground where she had been sleeping. He could feel everything she felt, and at that moment, it was mostly fear. People were shouting nearby, their voices filled with despair. One of them cried out her name.

Another terrible noise shook the ground. The bright light temporarily blinded her, so he couldn't see either. When she opened her eyes again, there was fire everywhere. He choked on the smoke along with her as she struggled to find a way out. But the tent was made of cheap plastic; once it caught fire, there was no escape.

Now, he was stumbling barefoot through the debris, dragging a bucket and searching for water. He laughed at something one of his friends did, and before long, they were all laughing. Distracted as he was, he didn't notice the sniper aiming at them from a distance. A precise shot to the head killed him on the spot. The other presence, still confined to his body, had to stay there until the next jump.

Before he knew it, he was on a beach, walking fast and trying to keep up with his father and uncle. A few paces ahead, his father glanced back and yelled, "Hurry up!" His words had barely left his mouth when he vanished into a cloud of smoke and sand.

The blast knocked him down, but he quickly got up and started running. Survival instinct was the only thing driving him forward. His mind had yet to process what had just happened or register his injuries.

He didn't pause to check if his father was with him, never doubting that he was. But the silent witness inside him, connected to every sensation, knew otherwise. As an experienced veteran, he could identify the drone hunting them down without looking at it. He knew exactly how many seconds it would take to adjust the targeting system for the final strike. He was not wrong.

More final moments kept coming. Being operated on without anesthesia and not surviving. The roof collapsing after the building was hit by a missile. Another sniper shot. Another bombardment. Then another, and another, and another. He couldn't shut himself off from any of them. He had been able to before, but now it was impossible.

At last, the commander made it back to his hospital bed. He had lost count of how many times this had happened, though he still remembered how terrified he had been when he first arrived. Cancer had finally caught up with him, the one enemy he had never been able to eliminate. Now, however, returning to this sterile room was a relief. It was the only place where he could be himself and face death alone.

A man in uniform was sitting on the couch near the bed. In a feeble voice, the patient asked, "How many more?" The lower-ranking officer stood up quickly and said, "Sorry, General, what did you say?"

"In that last campaign, how many?" the sick man said with difficulty. "How many children did my division kill?"

The other man, who happened to be the general's nephew, went from looking worried to looking embarrassed. In a soothing tone, he said, "Don't think about that now. You should try to rest."

The general narrowed his eyes and demanded, as forcefully as he could, "How many?"

His voice lacked any hint of his former authority. It was only his nephew's desire to prevent the ailing man from overexerting himself that prompted him to say, "There were twenty unfortunate victims. All accidents, of course."

"Not the official number, damn it," the general said. "The real one." The junior officer chose to ignore the question. As he turned to sit down again, his uncle grabbed his hand. "How many?" the general insisted, refusing to let go despite having no strength left.

With the utmost reluctance, his nephew replied, “Five thousand.” It was not the correct number – he couldn’t bring himself to say that – but rather a modest estimate.

“Five thousand,” the dying man repeated, bracing himself for another jump. “Five. So … maybe four. Maybe four thousand to go.”

David August / São Paulo, Brazil

## *Wintering* / Cynthia Ventresca

The cedars bend towards one another under snow,  
speaking through the slow, raspy inhale  
of February. Do they ever pause

in their stirrings, gather strength to stand it?  
My mother used to say this was her hardest month—

everything peeled to bone, shorn,  
a sort of reckoning. These ancient green gloves  
cannot warm me enough and it goes on this way,

morning hardly making it  
through morning. The cats I feed out back have curled

into tiny spaces under porches, in sheds  
while my bare skin is wrapped so deep in layers  
it's a pale notion and I am knocked back

by the wind that comes from nowhere, its sudden slap.  
A sting that hits quickly, takes too long to leave.

Cynthia Ventresca / Wilmington, Delaware

## *Confluence* / Michael Kolb

Where stone meets water,  
evening drifts in ripples,  
soft as a page half-turned.

The heron waits.  
Neck folded like a sprung hinge,  
eye rimmed in gold,  
its shadow lengthens,  
a blade under the surface.

Pebbles cool beneath bare feet.  
The wind carries petrichor,  
metal and moss,  
the storm's first breath.

Sun sinks into the bird's wings,  
feathers lit like solder,  
a body balanced where  
water strains toward air.

Then one step,  
not motion but incision,  
a ripple widening out,  
shiver of light  
cut clean into the dark.

Michael Kolb / Littleton, Colorado

## ***Our Future President*** / Linda Lamenza

First grader Faith  
struggles to read  
a name in her decodable  
book. Decides it's not worth it,  
instead, calls the person Nunya.

Who's Nunya, I ask,  
my head tipped in curiosity.  
An onion, she replies  
in her matter-of-fact manner.  
I don't know him, I tell her.  
She's a girl! Faith shouts.

Linda Lamenza / Maynard, Massachusetts

## *Afterlife* / J. R. Solonche

It's not streets of gold. It's not pearly gates. It's not anything you'd hang in a museum of bad taste. It is, perhaps, the dust motes you stopped noticing still dancing in a shaft of ordinary sunlight, or it might be the uncomfortable chair on the porch or a book you meant to finish, its pages turned by a breeze you can no longer feel, or it could be the silence after the last word of a long and complicated sentence. Maybe it's a quiet, peaceful space where nothing is asked of you, not even attention, especially attention. Maybe it's the ongoing, quiet business of the world you left behind, the rain still falling, still falling on the grass.

## *Du Fu* / J. R. Solonche

Du Fu, I listen to your complaints, the price of rice, the sound of rain, your white hair falling out. You had many worries, about the country, the emperor, the people, the war. I nod, I smile, I understand, but this mustn't be one way only, so I tell you of my worries, about the country, the people, the wars. We are not so different, Du Fu, you and I. We both looked at the moon, we both felt small, we both wrote it down on whatever paper we had at hand. No, my hair is not white and is not falling out, but when it does you, Du Fu, will be the first to know.

J. R. Solanche / Blooming Grove, New York

## ***The Porto Market / Debbie Collins***

The vibrant fruit clamors for attention, trying to elbow the saffron and ginger out of the way,

while the spices, fragrant with promise, mingle with the smell of pungent cheese.

Plump in rinds and wax paper,  
the cheese sits by the tulips and lilies,  
the flowers looking smug and haughty,  
secure in their elegance.

Above it all, voices sing with wants and desires,  
bartering with greedy words and grasping hands.

The colors and voices merge in a  
tumultuous riot while I stand,  
captivated. What gorgeous chaos.

Debbie Collins / Porto, Portugal

## *I Want To Be Like Michelangelo* / Dianne Mason

Not the genius who created,  
on a great cathedral ceiling,  
a muscled God reaching down  
and sparking life into humankind.

Not the one who carved  
a mother's grief as she held her dying son.  
A grief so real we can't help  
weeping with her.

I want to be like the one who stood  
before that blemished block of marble  
and saw David inside.

I want to look at flawed things—  
a weedy garden, scarred hands,  
a twisted piece of driftwood,  
my own petty heart—and see  
the beautiful thing aching to be set free.

Dianne Mason / Matthews, North Carolina

**Dudo Snowlight / Giulio Maffi**



Photograph by Giulio Maffi / Buti, Italy