

3rd
Wednesday



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

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3rd Wednesday's Annual Poetry Contest for 2026

Contest judge, Marilyn L Taylor, former Poet Laureate of the city of Milwaukee (2004 -2005) and the state of Wisconsin (2009 – 2010), is the author of six poetry collections. Her award-winning poems and essays have appeared in many anthologies and journals, including Poetry, American Scholar, Able Muse, American Life in Poetry, and Measure. She also served for five years as a regular poetry columnist for The Writer magazine. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where she continues to write and teach.

Winning Poems:

"A Portrait of Narcissus with his Phone" / Pedro Poitevin

Countless "portraits" of Narcissus have appeared in western art and literature over the centuries, but—to my knowledge, at least—very few, if any, have portrayed the young god as he poses for the ultimate selfie. This poem is also a very gracefully constructed Petrarchan sonnet, well-realized both metrically and by virtue of the meticulous word choices. Finally—and rather surprisingly--the poem's overall tone lands somewhere between formal eloquence and unpretentious clarity.

"Between Light" / Jennifer Burd

This relatively brief poem is ostensibly about a garden, but one that wastes no time finding its way, quietly and unexpectedly, into a very dark domain. Borrowing from the vivid vocabulary of more predictable poems about gardens, the speaker describes instead an environment in slow decay, while providing a warning that we, the observers, are blithely "deadheading in the clarified air." I consider it a jarring but undeniably memorable poem, infused with the grim inevitability of mortality.

"Self. Deception." / Dick Westheimer

It's a rare moment when a finicky reader happens across a villanelle that is not only flawlessly constructed (no small feat!), but that also presents a sensitive self-examination to which virtually anyone might relate. These successes are insightfully sustained through the

poet's use of precise metaphors, well-handled allusions (notably to Marianne Moore), alongside a few unexpected, startling details-- for instance, "my heart's hardened to the mice and the beetles". Also noteworthy is the wonderful, self-effacing tone maintained throughout.

Honorable Mentions:

"Gracie" / Patricia Wallace

Poetic tributes to beloved dogs nearing death are too often subverted by sentimentality, but this poem—about an ailing pooch named Gracie—takes a close and clear-sighted look at her imminent demise, and does so without a single mawkish moment. Tactile details are used effectively and gently throughout.

"String Section" / Kevin Shyne

This may not be the first poem ever written about a love affair between a musician and his instrument (in this case a rather spoiled and untrustworthy cello), but it's certainly one of the wittiest and most effective. The story is absurdly romantic, even a bit erotic, and the denouement is very gracefully expressed.

"Body of Memory" / Vincent Casaregola

An extraordinary poem about memory, and how it subtly reveals the substance of the self. What starts out as an evocative paeon to bone and flesh, the speaker quickly expands his perspective to include the senses, the spirit, and the multi-faceted fulfillment provided by his beloved. Exceedingly well done.

A Portrait of Narcissus with his Phone / Pedro Poitevin

Narcissus bends, transfixed before the screen,
his index finger drifting, as though sailing
the surface of this new Anthropocene
the global neural network keeps detailing.
And when, by chance, the fingertip rests still
over the fickle border of the present,
the sunny breeze gives way to lunar chill
and twilight spreads its gray-scale, strangely pleasant.
The screen, reflected on his dreamy eyes,
grows pensive, likewise reaching for a clearer
reflection of itself in paradise.
Its grasp of it fades out as it grows nearer,
like zooming renders pixels imprecise.
This pool is but the mirror of a mirror.

Pedro Poitevin / Marblehead, Massachusetts

Our garden is gangling
and yellowing, growing
into the first long shadows
of autumn. The petunias
are on the cusp. The impatiens
have stopped waiting. A last rose
nods absently after everything
the wind says. We forget ourselves
deadheading in the clarified air.
We forget how much earlier darkness
will come. The crickets remind us,
remind us. The lavender bends deep
under the weight of late bees.
The sunflower still has business
with the sun. But before
it can be finished, bit by bit
the goldfinch carries it away.

Jennifer Burd / Ann Arbor, Michigan

Self. Deception. / Dick Westheimer

There's a very real toad in my very real garden
and while I attribute no human emotions to it,
I scoop it up in my hand and ask its pardon

for wrecking its home with the hoe I've sharpened
to mix compost in the spring soil and improve it
for seeds and a very real toad in my very real garden.

Beneath winter's mulch there's a rotting milk carton—
a shrew's made a nest underneath and all through it.
I scoop it up in my hand and ask its pardon

for turning it out from its home in the bargain
I make between the devil of doing and knowing I do it
for less than the very real toad in my very real garden

who lives here. I don't. I just grow corn and Swiss chard in
the home of so many creatures, and to prove it
I scoop them up in my hand and ask their pardon.

I don't. The truth? Like Pharaoh, my heart's hardened
to the mice and the beetles in the soil and I knew it
was the death of a very real toad in my very real garden
who I don't scoop in my hand and don't ask its pardon.

Dick Westheimer / Batavia, Ohio

Blind now, she knows me by touch
and smell. Sunk in her cushion, she's content
to let me stroke her head. Her love
for carrots and rice remains unabated.
When she was a pup, she felt weightless,
a rocking chair runner might have crushed her.
Later she learned to fling herself over a river
of carpet onto someone's lap, twisting her wiry body
mid-arc, in a fillip of joy, as if to bark, the impossible
Is easy. Unfazed, she'd nail the landing.

Now I feel her bones through her winter coat
as she's curled in daytime sleep, her muscles twitching,
as if she replays the leaping: suspended again,
the wood stove embers a radiant glow
beneath her. So much slips away, and still,
impossibly, the body remembers

Patricia Wallace / Santa Fe, New Mexico

I've held you tenderly below my chin
or upright on a telescoping spike.
You lead me round your cabinet of sound
that never fails to take me in,
as close as polished wood can come to skin.

Yes, I've known your scroll and pegs
your curving waist
the ribs and bridge
the variation of your voice
from quaver of the softest bow
to surges of fortissimo.

In post-recital afterglow
within my workshop of emotional repair
you recover
protected by the velvet lining of your case,
each implement — the bow, the rosin block,
spare strings, a cleaning cloth —
perfectly in place.

At twenty-five, I thought I knew
the range and timbre of your art
until I met the lute who did me in
bewitching me with her fretted fingerboard
her cunning lure of double strings.

In the end, she joined a Renaissance revival
leaving me naive, undone.
Little did I comprehend the price I'd pay
for notes that once I could not play
deeper, richer, measured sobs
felt more keenly than before.

The anguish faded after tearing me apart.
Stringed instruments — like lovers —
must not be left alone, unnerved, neglected.
What else to do
but adjust fine tuners,
draw the bow,
an art that can't be rushed
no more than learning how to love again
after being crushed.

Kevin Shyne / Princeton, Illinois

This body is my true house, perpetual home,
scarred, old, and run-down as it may be,
no fixer-upper, nothing to flip back to youth,
but for all its flaws, a familiar place
through which I meet the night and day.

Long dead Saxon poets, called scops,
once bent words as smiths bent steel,
phrased it, formed it as the “bone house”—
so be it, built for but a time, bone and flesh
with my thatch of hair grown thin.

It carries the impress of every touch,
each fleeting brush with pleasure or with pain,
and even when the mind retracts, forgets,
the body keeps its records safe and clear,
nerves vibrate with sensation now long past.

But touch, still, is not for skin alone,
more so for the subtle spirit whose power
then ripples energetic through the blood,
down then to the marrow deep within
the bones aching, rejoicing, grieving.

You there, beside me now so many years,
you in silent sleep as I still wake and stare,
your multifold touch and tremor over time,
your reaching, your holding on for comfort
or for giving solace during my dark hours--

your bones, your house with mine of bone,
be safe with me this night, this day to come,
as we feel the wind more fully now, leaning
like old trees, bending but still upright,
made firm through weakness side by side.

Vincent Casaregola / Crestwood, Missouri



Photograph
Rachel Turney / Erie, Colorado

I laugh at life's tempest,
its folly of making porcupines prickly,
birds that sing sassy songs at summer sunrises
when my eyes try to stay shut against the sound,
cars that explode from a green light
only to brake hard at the next red,
and you, my love, who've waited 45 years
for me to be more like your father, as I, a recluse,
wait for you to stop sounding like a pastured cow
mooing for no reason in the mid-afternoon.
But here we are, broke as a wagon wheel
displayed in a run-down museum, tired
as runners climbing Boston's heartbreak hill,
old as Willie Nelson, as he gives the last
of his last concerts for the 17th time.
I love you with my leaking heart in need
of a valve replacement, with arms
that can no longer tie my shoes,
and kisses, dry as a desert afternoon.
But through it all, I laugh
knowing that laughter is better
than being the last one out
of the bar at closing time.

Peter Witt / College Station, Texas

Among the Redwoods / Peter Witt

I walk among their pillars,
trunks wide as silence,
roots older than prayer.

The air hums with what they remember,
fires that came and went,
fog that nursed them century after century.
Their bark holds the scent of rain and ash,
their crowns dissolve into clouds.

I press my hand against one,
feeling my pulse echo faintly
in its cool, corrugated skin.

I am the restless and bruised pilgrim,
come to borrow calm and breathe
the ancient medicine of their patience..
They fear me rightly, we who harvest
what we should bow before.
Still, they stand, taller than grief,
as I listen for forgiveness in the wind.

Peter Witt / College Station, Texas

The lawnmower splutters and stops
leaving only the taste of fresh grass on my tongue.
It is the last time of the season.
There were no lawns to mow where I grew up,
just paved squares between ugly concrete blocks
with an occasional apologetic palm tree
wedged next to a postcard of green.
I don't remember seeing anyone ever mowing that grass,
had no idea if it was bermuda or clover,
although I do remember taking spoonfuls of dirt in a glass jar,
shaking and gleefully watching the layers settle,
humus, clay, silt, sand,
just like in my geography book.
It was reassuring I imagine for a twelve-year-old
to see how his piece of land was Earth,
to watch floating debris in yellow supernatant
wondering if it came from an old banyan
living vicariously through her great-grandchildren
or the pelt of a lone Royal Bengal
roaming silt plains at dusk. I imagine the boy
looking over that unmowed patch on a summer evening,
cats licking offerings of rice milk at a generous doorstep,
a muezzin's call to prayer soaring over dusty trees,
bringing together the old and the new.
Did he ever wonder what else lay buried
beneath that worn brick, what prayers,
what hands, what lost songs,
what homes swallowed by bitter swells,
what unburnt shards from ancient pyres.
I wonder the same here. in this shorn yard
in the shadow of a great monolith
for weren't we all river-folk once?

Apratim Mitra / Takoma Park, Maryland

Snow from Snow / Heather Hallberg Yanda

Each evening, deer enter the silver peace
of my front yard. They nibble the shambles
of pachysandra, brush past maple leaves
quivering, seek old fruit among brambles.
They part snow from snow beneath my window,
which glows from my lamp: it ghosts on my page
and throws downward stark, angular shadows.
The deer look up: our eyes meet, so engaged
in the stillness we share. There's a silence so
resonant I can hardly breathe. Not far
from here, an owl calls. It begins to snow
again. The deer remain. My entire yard
enfolds a calm I have found so rarely --
with brambles, with leaves that fall sparingly.

Heather Hallberg Yanda / Alfred Station, New York

I Threw Away My Neck Tie / Sean Cho

Forgive my unpleasantness;
It's rained for three days, and now no one wants to talk about God.

Like magic: morning dew coating each blade of grass.
Cattle grazing to get fat and die.
Forgive my unpleasantness.

My friends call it science and spend their days at hot yoga.
No one wants to talk about God.

We pour vodka in our water filters and fall asleep in the living room.
Forgive my unpleasantness.

Everyone is half drunk at noon.
I'm sober drinking tonic and lime.
No one wants to talk about God.

The sun doesn't know it's setting.
The moon has been here all along.
Forgive my unpleasantness.
No one wants to talk about God.

Sean Cho / Grand Rapids, Michigan

When the mom flipped me off for chiding her
too-wide turn, I didn't respond because I've
also miscalculated angles, reacting as if saving
face were greater than safely entering fast food
parking lots, and the men's Bible study group
that meets at the coffee shop each morning
talks about being patient, so I wonder if there's
an offshoot group for hungry women driving
large cars. I'm learning which foods lower my
blood pressure, sodium-free tortillas insult
authenticity, and how a cheat meal a week is
key to inducting a bland diet into my new
familia. I eat my healthy popcorn and wonder
if the study group will discuss Lot's wife being
turned into a pillar of salt as the origin of
hypertension, written in the books of Genesis
and Genetics. And I recall the mother who
F-U'd me in front of her kids because we all
deserve a break from the stresses that cause
spikes in our systems as we place our orders
at the counter, awaiting the flavor of French
fries and forgiveness.

Daniel Romo / Long Beach, California

I was 135. Then 125. Then 99. My big sister graduated and left for college. Ma said it from the sink—hands wet, eyes down: You'll join her in two years.

Ma dressed me in my sister's old clothes. Sleeves that swallowed my wrists. Cuffs worn soft where her fingers had worried them. I made Ma pack my sister's usual lunch for me. At school, I dismantled it. Bread, cheese, ham, bread. The ham came off in a damp sheet. The cheese left a pale sweat on my fingertips. Her homemade cupcake—whipped peaks, chocolate curls—something I couldn't separate without ruining.

A thick binder waited on my desk, rings yawning. The papers inside had my sister's cursive in the margins. I pressed my pencil until the lead snapped. I reached for the eraser again.

At dinner, I practiced with my fork. Peas to one side. Potatoes to the other. Dill pinched between my nails. The clean space shone back at me.

Inside the binder, a museum postcard of a painting—glossy, thin border, neat corners. A yellow seam that might be sunset. Curved water. A sky scraped raw. Below it, hands—only hands—thrown up by the waves. No faces. No bodies. I stared until the red fell from the sky. I rubbed my palms together, but they stayed cold.

Ma said she loved her daughters equally, eyes fixed on the drain. Then she ladled my sister's go-to soup into my bowl—the same orange smell that clung to the house. She set it down and said, You love this. Then went back to the sink. Drying her hands, before wetting them again.

I visited my big sister's college. I sat in the empty lecture halls. The campus looked scrubbed clean: brick, clipped grass, a bell tower keeping time.

In the dining hall, a girl from her dorm sat across from me. She held her plastic knife like a pencil and sawed at dry chicken until it frayed.

She smiled. You're so small. So cute.

Then, as if it belonged with the compliment: What's your last name again?

When I told her, her eyebrows rose. Oh. Like—are you her sister? My hands lay on the table; I tugged my sleeves down. I shrugged and poked at the applesauce.

Back home, my head filled with counts: the next meal, the ounce, the tipping point, the imagined hand on my shoulder. I stepped on the scale at exactly seven, naked. Between seven and the next seven, the numbers kept tallying themselves.

SAT prep. Soft paper, solid weight. The faucet dripped, steady as a metronome. I could hear Ma laughing on the phone with my big sister. I gripped the pencil tighter, squeezed the eraser hard.

Week of application deadlines. Classmates clustered outside the college counselor's office with coffee, token chocolates, and stacks of paper.

Across town, in an exam room, a nurse slid a compartmentalized tray toward me. Snack time again. The heart-rate monitor chattered, thin and robotic. A milk carton sweated; a bead ran down and pooled in the crease.

My hands hovered, tendons up, then pulled back.

The door clicked shut—the same hard snap as binder rings. A week of being watched. Edit. Eat. Submit. Gain.

My sister came back for the holidays. Hands in her pockets. Brow knotted over her laptop. Ma's voice threaded through her keys. My sister pulled up the course catalog with me: first-year requirements,

gen-eds, the classes everyone takes. I hated how her sweater kept brushing up against me.

The acceptance came on Ma's birthday.

Relief, at first. A mala hotpot celebration. A call from my big sister saying she knew I'd get in.

Staring at my bowl, I thought of the postcard painting again: hands. The yellow seam. The red smear where sky becomes ocean. Birds cutting circles above the water.

I'd slipped the postcard into a cheap frame—thin wood, corners holding.

I trace the rim of my bowl. My hand rises in the refrigerator steel, lifting a taro chunk gone limp from being overboiled, and for a moment I think I might be able to enjoy it. No thought to its numbers.

Then everything went black—my right cheek finding the table.

"You want the worst part?" Ma said to my big sister. "I didn't even feel like celebrating. It was nothing new."

I kept my eyes closed. The light above me smeared the room.

"She can't do anything the normal way," Ma said, and I heard the faint drag of her rings against the bedrail. Metal on metal, like binder teeth finding their holes.

Beep, beep, beep. Somewhere nearby, a timer went off for the next snack.

Kimmy Chang / McKinney, Texas

A Winter's Tale / William Ross

The book is open to an empty page and
soon the stories will be weaving, crisscrossed
and threaded through the pristine white.

The story-tellers come and go, oblivious
to what they write in passing.

The reader, walking through the falling sky, sees
characters emerging from the tracks: the heavy
man, the strider, heel-scufters in a group and
here, an angel in tiny shoes, as buoyant
as the air.

She passed by not so long ago, and now the sky
is editing—erasing proof of angels.

Softly the Sky / William Ross

Thick, the black sky, alive with white
down, a field of hypnotic swimming,
a blanket, cracked like a wave over
the land and floating on a pocket
of air, comes to rest on the hips of
houses, the long furred arms of tree-lined
streets, as the blue light of the last
electric eye closes.

Softly, the night is a black cat curled,
the furnace brain blinking on,
blinking off.

William Ross / Toronto, Ontario

After two weeks and two thousand miles apart
I miss the way you snap
your dental floss, how you pour just one-half cup
of coffee at a time, the trail you make
with ginger cookie crumbs from the kitchen
to your reading chair.
Actuarial predictions threaten me with two years
after you—
I imagine silence echoing off walls. What would it be like

to not be able to tell you
I saw an osprey dive, snatch a fish from the river,
swoop to feed its hungry chicks?
And what about those dark minutes before dawn
when you turn in your sleep,
when the shift of the mattress rolls me toward you,
when I wake to remember
the joy of two—
and the grief that it is a divisible number.

Cindy Buchanan / Seattle, Washington

Not a salon. No low white sofas in this fluorescent space
where clothes can be both cleaned and altered. Today,
when I go to drop off a blouse, a young Latina,
the age my daughter was when she left,
stands before the full-length mirror
in an off-the-rack wedding dress. The ghost
of adolescence spills down her back, shimmers
in the polyester satin of the unhemmed train.
Too long? Too short? The seamstress's Chinese accent
harmonizes with the bride's Spanish-seasoned words.
Pins are taken out, put back in, taken out again.
The bride shyly asks my opinion, and I have to tear my gaze
from the way her unblemished dark skin glows
against the volumes of draped white, push away
desire for my own daughter's alterations.
I stitch a smile onto my face and join the dance
of seamstress and bride, hear that the girl misses
her mother in Peru, that she dreams of children,
house, home—but the missing, *es un dolor*
de corazón. When the pins hold just the right
length and the train's swoop echoes the curve
of the bride's lower back where her strong spine
flows into the softness of her hips, we fall silent.

Cindy Buchanan / Seattle, Washington



Drawing
Anne Reiner / New York, New York

Growing Old / Claire Scott

And so days happen
one after another
today's left hand holds
the hand of yesterday
while her right reaches
for the day ahead
still smudged in mist
an unbroken strand of days
precious as a string of pearls
or does each moment stand on its own
unconnected to the past, to the future
just this candle light supper
just this sparrow song
just this moment
shining

Claire Scott / Oakland, California

Little Love / Tayler Mercil

Whenever my grandmother
leaves for church, she first
sits on my grandfather's lap
and hands him her necklace,
which he gently clasps around
her neck, his calloused,
oil-stained fingers draping
the silver chain on her delicate,
sun-freckled skin.

Tayler Mercil / Kalamazoo, Michigan

Mom says I ask 1,000 questions a day and she can't think straight and it must be like a pinball machine in my head with all those questions ricocheting around. Mom says if I put the questions in my pocket like loose change one day I can buy an air fryer. She saw an infomercial on the television for an air fryer and now she walks around the kitchen like her life is petering out. Mom says she could lose 100 pounds if she had an air fryer because there's no oil. She says some people have dead-end lives and some people don't and next year in second grade it's time to buckle down. Mom is supposed to read to me 20 minutes every night but my mom isn't like that. There's nothing to do at our house so sometimes I go out back and hang upside down on the tree branch and watch the ants be ants. Mom says if I hang upside down too long my heart will get lopsided like a giraffe's. Mom watched a documentary about giraffe's last summer and says it has to do with getting blood up the long neck to the brain. She doesn't know that when I hang upside down the questions fall out of my pocket and I cover them with dirt and pretend they're seeds.

Michelle Matz / San Francisco, California

In my zeal to downsize
how could I have tossed these garnet-red buttons,
this baby-wale corduroy soft
as milkweed down in my hands
on this bitter January morning.
Wasn't it necessary balm,
beauty for this winter
season of my life—
what else is there, what else
have I rashly labelled must go?

Andrea Potos / Madison, Wisconsin

My Magical Chinese Garden
was small:
tiny willows
pagodas
and mulberry trees
emerging serenely
from the mist
pastel-wise
like Shangri-La over and over
on the far side of
an equally diminutive stream
under a parchment sky.

Slipping unnoticed over the footbridge
at the top of the stairs
I'd wait alone under the willow
overhanging the bank
ribbonfluttering silvergreen in the breeze
where their wintry silences couldn't reach me,
hoping that maybe
I'd meet another child
like me
escaping into the garden
through the wallpaper in her house
but we moved away
unexpectedly
before that happened.

Roxanne Christiana / Alton, Illinois

Every morning
when out father got up
the first thing he'd do
was squish his thigh
and stick a needle in.

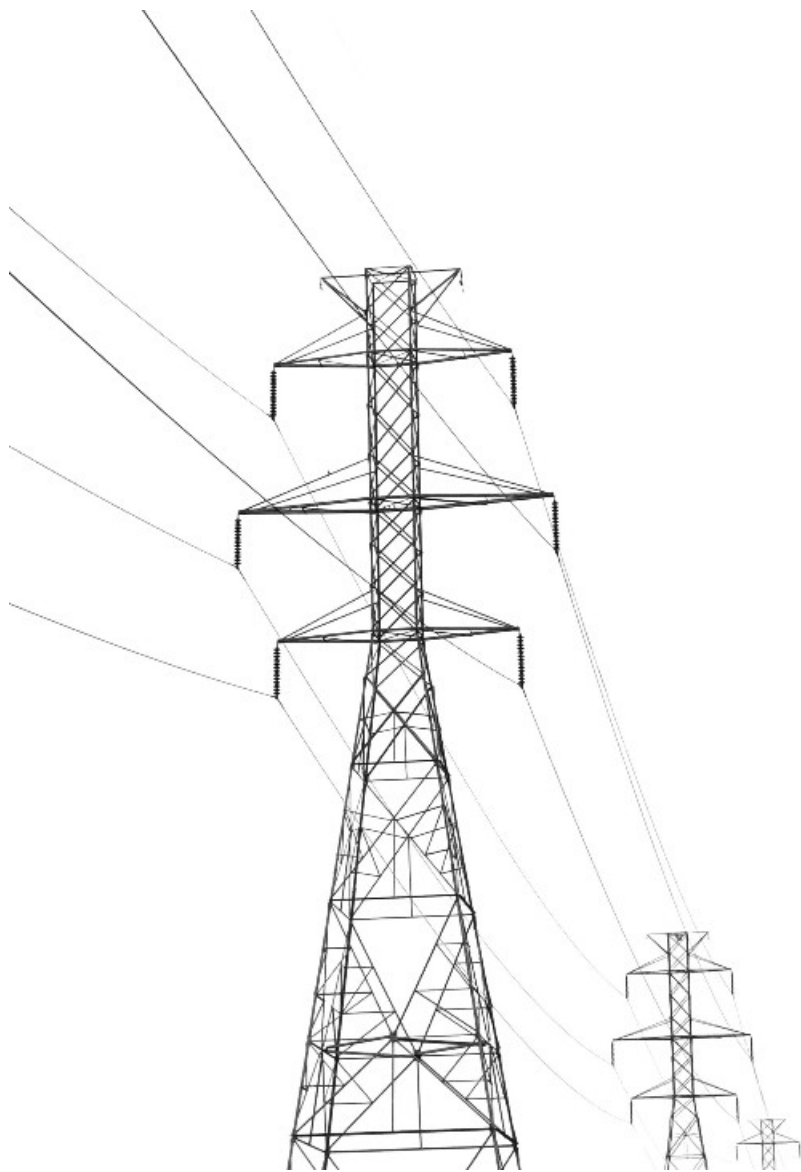
Maybe at first he grumbled
to our mother
or to his doctor
but we kids
were usually asleep
and never heard him complain.

But in August,
every day in August,
when he came home from work,
he'd go out to the garden
and pick a tomato,
the plumpest, reddest tomato.

As mother served dinner,
he'd slice it,
a slice for everyone,
the thick middle one
always for himself.

Then he'd say,
he'd always say,
"This isn't a good idea,"
and sprinkle sugar
on his slice.

William Aarnes / New York, New York



Photograph
Michael C. Roberts / Anthem, Arizona

even flannel sheets aren't warm enough
to cover your hollow in our bed.

your brother isn't dying as fast as winter comes
nor slower than a decent age would make.

i had to leave you for home—for cats and more of
our socks and underwear.

perhaps the perfect rhythms and buoyant beeping of the machines
pester ICU patients to pay attention to the last echo of flowers.

maybe they keep ICUs extra warm to gesture unfriendly at eternity;
the best finger we can unfurl before hands curl nyctinastic—

or one last razor's draw—a close and final shave before
the coarsest shadow creeps over our every effort for more.

tomorrow, i will wake without you to radiators ticking and humming
a diffused aleatoric music,

but when you're here, we'll pull the blankets closer
even in the unshaven, swelter of summer

long after we've stapled up the ache
of burying our brother.

David J. Schast / Elkins Park, Pennsylvania

Tavel slumped against the elevator wall opposite the two other people—an older couple, the man tall, stout, and toupéed in slick black hair, the woman harshly thin, blonde, with a smooth face over a wrinkled neck. The elevator wasn't moving. It hadn't moved for five minutes, frozen between the 14th and 15th floors of the condominium high rise.

“Would you like a chocolate, dear?” the woman asked Tavel.

Tavel looked up from her dead phone. “Tavel,” she said.

“Sorry?” the woman said.

“My name is Tavel, not Dear.”

“Well, pleased to meet you, Tavel. Such an interesting name. Is there a Saint Tavel? Well, perhaps you're not of the Christian persuasion? Anyway, I'm Lucy. This handsome young gentleman next to me is Luke, my husband.”

“Going on forty-four years of marital bliss,” Luke said. He winked at Tavel. “And with that beautiful yellow hair and those lovely blue eyes, this cute little gal must be of the Christian persuasion! She certainly can't be of the religion whose practitioners crucified our Lord! Or a raghead, pardon my French!”

Tavel clenched her fists and began box breathing— she inhaled through her nose counting to four, held her breath for a count of four, then exhaled to a count of four. She did this a few cycles, visualizing the lines of a box as she inhaled, held, exhaled. Then she punched the elevator's emergency call button again. She'd pushed it many times, without any response. Pushing the button was supposed to connect to a 24/7 response person. Tavel sighed. Her cell phone was either dead or in a dead zone. So close and yet so far. Her one-bedroom condo was only three floors away, on the 18th floor. The old couple, upon entering the elevator, had pressed the button for the penthouse on the 30th floor.

Lucy held out a foil-wrapped square of chocolate. “No thank you,” Tavel said.

“Chocolate now, stress later,” Lucy said.

“I’m not stressed,” Tavel said.

Luke removed a stick of gum from his shirt pocket and held it out.
“Gum?”

Tavel forced a smile and, hoping to annoy the creepy old bigot, said.
“Only if it’s cannabis infused.”

“Ah!” Luke exclaimed. “Cue the confetti! We have found out what makes you smile! And you have a lovely smile, my dear. Such charming dimples!”

Lucy shot a frown Tavel’s way. Tavel shook her head. Typical, she thought. Blame me for your icky husband’s flirts.

“Alas,” Luke said. “This stick is a simple Juicy Fruit. We don’t do drugs, I’m afraid, though I enjoy a daily cold IPA, and my bride, as you kids say, do like her chardonnay.”

Lucy added a tongue click to her frown. She removed a rosary from her handbag. “How about we pray together? For the elevator to resume its journey?”

“I’m good without God,” Tavel said. “And alcohol is a drug.”

A gasp from Lucy, a head shake from Luke.

“Beer is more a food than a drug, my dear,” Luke said.

“And a glass of chardonnay is a civilized social lubricant,” Lucy added.

“And no one is ever good without God,” Luke said.

“Look, I’m sure your time is as valuable as mine.” Tavel pulled a notebook and pen from her backpack. “I have work to do. What say

you two just go ahead with your prayer beads and let me get my words written.”

No one spoke for long minutes. Tavel scribbled words in her notebook. Silently read them. Scribbled the same words again, adding three exclamation points, a chai, and a Star of David. Then, once again Tavel pressed the call button. Once again nothing happened. Tavel sat in the corner as far from the old couple as she could get. She closed her notebook, then her eyes. She heard the clink of beads. She heard the old couple begin reciting Glory Be’s and Our Father’s and Hail Mary’s.

She heard a thump. She felt a jolt.

The elevator started to ascend.

“Glory Be!” Luke exclaimed.

“God answered our prayers!” Lucy proclaimed.

The door sighed open on Tavel’s floor. She hurried out, then turned to face the couple. She wanted to shoot them a middle-finger wave, but the door closed. The elevator began whirring up, then suddenly another thump. The overhead lights showed it once again stalled between floors.

“Glory be,” Tavel murmured as she strode down the hall to her condo. “Cue the confetti. God answered my prayers.”

Marie Anderson / Western Springs, Illinois

days constrict
as though an anaconda
has swallowed whole
the useless paper sun

naked trees
shake knobby branches—
inky silhouettes
against a mouse-gray sky

wind's fingers
slip through window sills
and I push them out
with swaths of kitchen towels

flames sputter
beneath a pot of tea—
I pull my wool sweater
around my too-thin frame

I'm not made
for this cruel season—
depression's razor edge
cuts far too deep, too long

so I hide
inside a blue cocoon,
gauzy layers thick
with hope for coming change

butterflies
emerge in honeyed spring
as do I—wings still wet
but gratefully alive

Arvilla Fee / Beavercreek, Ohio



Photograph
Michael C. Roberts / Anthem, Arizona

Four walls enclosing a blue-floral duvet and old-fashioned shag carpet floor. No violence. No locks trapping me inside.

Bathroom off to the right. Decorated. Privacy.

Stone dining table, glass chairs leading into marble counters lining a peninsula kitchen. Choices. Pizza for breakfast or cereal for dinner. Don't have to protect my plate.

My phone trills and a mechanical voice is in my ear. Inmate 483549 from Danville Correctional Center. My son speaks softly, asking when I'll visit again and can I send some money and I want to be angry but I know him and he's being selfish but I know that sound in his voice. Like that time I told him he couldn't go outside to play but he snuck out anyway and got hurt but didn't want to tell me. That look in his eyes. The guilt and shame only a child could carry and I was supposed to make sure he was safe and keep him away from those bad kids in the neighborhood.

I promise to visit this weekend, and I call my boss because I'll be late this morning. I drive the full distance to the only local store with Western Union to chip away at my dwindling savings because I should have taught him better.

I wait in a serpentine queue. Inch forward in line until it's my turn and I fill out the form to send money. The teller reads it so she can do her job and I look away because she has my ID and she'll see the matching last names and know I'm a failure.

But her voice is warm, no sign of pity, just sympathy. "I hope your family is doing alright."

My gaze is on her as I rub away tears I refuse to shed. She types the information into a computer, meeting my eyes as I talk. He really was a sweet boy and then he met some friends at school and then the drugs. She listens. I tell her that I tried conversating and punishments and moving away and tough love and soft, supple love but it was already too late. She works quickly because the line still grows but she never rushes.

Before I could say it out loud, admit to her, to the world, to God, that somewhere, somehow, I caused this—I did this to him, she says, “He made his own decisions.”

She smiles and it’s not smug or joyful or judging or sad. It’s merely human. I exhale, something attempts to escape but my heart holds on, tries to force it back into place but it doesn’t fit like it used to. I thank her. Simple words that would never convey how much I needed her. I leave and decide to never forget her face.

Danielle Ellis / Davenport, Iowa

Almost Forgiveness / Betty Stanton

A lone heron stands ankle-deep
in the shallows where the night

thins, holding this place where
reflection breaks, where the day

learns how to arrive quietly. In,
the dawn, her still shadow lingers,

refuses to step fully into light. She
stays where dawn keeps revising

its answer and the morning light
almost forgives. It stops short and

hovers, touching the edges without
moving, without trying her wings.

Dark Pines / Betty Stanton

The branches sing in fractures,
each limb a mourning song so cold
the sky forgets its own breath and
holds itself open without sound.
Dark boughs lift their veils to show
how grief can glimmer, a sheen of
moonlight that only appears when
nothing is left to hide it. Her shadow
lingers, half a breath away from dawn.
Night rain falls in the quiet pines and
each drop remembers the sound her
silence leaves behind, the way quiet
can still move through needles, bark,
through the long patience of wood.

Betty Stanton / Broken Arrow, Oklahoma

Some days I walk on, & nothing touches me.
No cotton candy, no bumblebee.
I walk past a place where ampersands abound
& batteries are sold separately
& there's a dog in a dither barking in the distance.
Some days I'm not incarnate, exactly
but a soul bouncing inside a flustered body
walking on amid the gratuitous turbulence of this place
& the eyes of my heart are bleary
& the ears of my heart are waxy.
Some days my only skill-set is stripping
memories down to one naked
thought I can't think because of all the loudmouths
vying to be heard, crying to get a word
into the universe, which is quite quiet
if you take the time to listen.
Some days the sun is nailed high,
others feel like night all day long
and I'm more prone to being prone,
prone to ransack my bones and find nothing there.
Some days love looks like a house salad,
others just a tomato, bruised and saladless.
The dude was right, he who stores up knowledge
stores up grief. Those are the best days
to leave your lighter parts billowing in the breeze.

Brian Builta / Arlington, Texas

They had a name for him
so we called him that.
What did we know of him
smiling in silence
high on his wagon seat
pulled by his slow motion horse
through our alleyways
in our city of fast cars
as we burned through
the games of summer?

We would go on with our ways.
Somebody would say
“Where’s he been?”
Then we would hear him coming.
Then appearing with his horse cart
us begging for him to stop
when there was nothing there for him
but he did stop giving us his time.

We thought he came just for us
clomping through our alleys
a junkman & a slobbering tall animal
giving us a new world and fun
but giving us something else
our education of what was coming
big noisy wheels marking time
hooves nailed with steel shoes
dancing in clip clop repetition
wagon piled high with the unwanted
traded for dollar bills & coins
at mysterious unknown junkyards
with the sad eyed horse enduring
teaching us our lessons.

Mark James Andrews / Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan

How to Get Lost / Eileen D'Angelo

for Aimee

It begins with an unbroken line bending out of sight.
The road is unfamiliar, yet you pressure the pedal,
confident you are on the right road. No stops
or bathroom breaks, because you're making good time.

You never see it happening as you drum your fingers
on the steering wheel to the sound of Radar Love,
leaving crowded beltways and choking smokestacks
behind, oblivious to the subtle replacement
of cities by small towns— of small towns by trees.
And you, you are foolish enough to enjoy the ride
as you disappear into the wide mouth of open country.

There is no warning that soon it will be only you
and a handful of horses, the occasional silo,
a pile of gray rocks from an old foundation.
The fields around you have never even dreamt
of a gas station, let alone a rest stop,
and as the car carries you into oblivion, you wonder:
Isn't that the same bale of hay?

There, in the heart of desolation, as though
you alone survived the bomb—
It is you and the sound of crickets.

You fumble for road maps in the glove box,
pull the car to the pebbly shoulder of the road.
One crow on the wire above you
throws back his head and laughs,
as you spread a map on the hood
to the curious stare of cows, the car sheepish
as if it should have known something.

Eileen D'Angelo / Glenolden, Pennsylvania



Photograph
Susan Lin / Vista, California

We decide to spend the day
at the festival downtown;
it's been years since we did this,
years since we joined
a noisy crowd
on a blocked-off street.
We mill around the food trucks
and kiosks and stands;
small children run
in tipsy patterns;
an old dog watches
a frisk puppy.

Someone takes a picture,
and I cast my mind forward
to a distant future
when these very children
might study this image
as an artifact.

It will show them a world
they can barely remember—
the clothing, the hair,
the cars—antiques—
what passed for technology,
the look of the sky.

I'm becoming a ghost,
blowing through the crowd
and leaving no trace.

Ruth Bardon / Durham, North Carolina

I wanted to ask him, my farming
neighbor, if he left it in the far
corner like that on purpose or
because that's where it finally died.
It's too late now. Either way, it sits
out there, a monument to the history
of labor, the work they shared, just
as much a team as any horses or
oxen ever were. Now it's a quiet
agreement between rust and rain,
the red paint a blurry memory, a map
of all the seasons it has lived through,
an end-in-itself. The wheels are an
iron fact, and the grasses grow up
around their heavy, dead, brute bodies,
touching them as though for the first time.

J. R. Solonche

The woman at the hardware store said, "Can I help you?" as I wandered down an aisle of paint brushes "No, thank you," I said. What I really needed was a different kind of brush, one that could cover the cracks in my memory. She moved on to another customer, someone who actually knew what they came for. But the question stuck with me, a fleck of paint on a thumb. "Can I help you?" Help with what? The years piled up, drying paint cans on the shelves of my brain, and none had the right color. Some were labeled, The Summer of '82. Others, My Daughter's Laugh. Most were just a vague, unhelpful shade, like "off-white" or "beige." I picked up a brush, a cheap one and held it up to the light. It felt useless. I felt useless. I bought it anyway just for the sake of having done something. "I see you found what you were looking for," she said as I paid. "Yes," I said. Her smile was useful. It was exactly what I was looking for.

J.R. Solonche / Blooming Grove, New York

Telephon Home / Susan Lin



Photograph
Susan Lin / Vista, California

Slush Pile / Matthew King

The snow is getting soggy and this guy
is out there hauling load on load on load
to build a mountain, must be twelve feet high
by twenty-five, on my side of the road.
He says he needs to get it off his land;
he doesn't mean offense, and I take none.
A thing I think he means is it'll stand
a monument to all the work he's done.
No one but him and me'll ever know
he did it; point is, though, I won't forget.
July comes, I'll still see that dirty, wet,
and freakish solitary mound of snow.
You laugh, but if I understand his game
it's only 'cause I play it just the same.

December Zinnias / Matthew King

Two zinnias are stuck in states of bloom
amid the cobwebs on the windowsill
atop a whiskey bottle I refill
with water neither will, it seems, consume.
They live, but day by day they leave the room
enlivened just a little less. The chill
that's seeping in is not enough to kill
them but consigns them to their growing gloom.
They've long survived the ones I left outside;
I cut them on an afternoon when frost
was dead-set to deny them one more day—
so how's it hard, seeing them here, half-dried
and doubly faint, to feel I've only cost
them something they were losing anyway?

Matthew King / Marmora, Ontario

I spent my mornings waking slowly
to the music in the wren's song, the gradual
unfolding of the colors of a season.
Weather was my delight. I stepped outside

still dressed for sleep to search for lightning
in thunder or raise my face to rain
or snow in the gentler, early stages
of a storm. I read the future in the clouds,
light days and dark, and wondered

what the wind had stirred up coming west
from the coast or down from the mountains--
a gust ruffling the hackles of a moose or teasing
a bear cub with a pinwheeling leaf. I learned
to live alone, and to love silence equally

with the anticipation of company--a gang
of friends hiking a muddy trail, a night
in a restaurant, glasses raised to togetherness,
but always home to solitude, quilted kingdom
of dark windows, lighted lamps and music.
I loved the buzz of flies on windowsills,
the dust of webs in corners. My body

challenged me, another gradual unfolding--
every day the possibility of a permanent good-bye.
I learned to love the pain of failing knees
and tired feet because of all the miles traveled.
I loved my grieving heart, its angry memories

and gallery of faces almost close enough
to touch. I never expected to be old or happy
or to understand how the two joined up
to guide me every morning, right up until the last,
which came disguised as any other.

Pat Daneman / Exeter, New Hampshire

It's hard to feud with the dead.

They ignore your entreaties,
your threats, your feeble attempts
at reconciliation.

It's as if they've moved on, made tracks
to distant valleys, there over
the furthest horizon.

They refuse to negotiate
because you have nothing to offer.

When you try to call in the night
the ringing echoes in your heart.

Robert Penick / Louisville, Kentucky

The Lures of Adulthood / James Lilliefors

Before the briny foreglow of daybreak
weighted the coastal fog with summer light,
my father took me trolling.

Out beyond the mud flowers, the dark-watered
widgeon-grasses and wild celery was a fertile islet,
he said, where striped bass rose at first light,
hungry for baitfish or topwater lure.

The day before, he let me handle one,
its smooth, shiny surface counter-shaded
with the natural camouflage of herring or shad –
silvered belly and steel-blue back. In water,
the lure mimicked the rattling skip
and erratic underspin of wounded prey.

He slowed his troller to a purr that day
and we dropped our lures in the current – giving them line,
then giving them time, our attentions trailing in twin Vs
behind the boat, though nothing rose for nearly an hour
but the slow, indifferent glare of the day.

Mine was the line that finally went first – a hard yank
followed by the panicked swings of a fish attempting
an underwater escape. My father steadied the rod
and we reeled it in together, the thrashing gold-green colors
of the striped bass glistening beautifully in the sun
before my father killed it with a small fish-priest:
one hard blow to the brain, just behind the eyes.

It was boyhood we went out there expecting to find,
but what we caught that morning would never come in.
I still see those lures nearly every day, though now from underneath,
skimming the surface with their fraudulent, wounded shine.

But if I give them a second look anymore, it's only a glance
before I take to darker waters, hungry for what's real,
rooting for what I know hasn't a chance.

James Lilliefors / Naples, Florida

Beside the barn, a pair of horses watch
a dozen anvil-blue barn swallows graze
the shaggy pasture grass for horse flies.
Their feathers flicker in the dragging light
as, one by one, they swerve and leap and loop
across the field like split-tailed sparks emitted
from a welder's torch. Yet it's the grass
the horses hanker for, the sweet, tall grass
fenced off these many weeks. As dusk settles,
the swallows arc back to their pellet nests
below the eaves, leaving the horses in
the gloam. I wouldn't tell them if I could,
that the grass is being kept for them. I want
to see their faces when the fence comes down.

Cameron Brooks / Sioux Falls, South Dakota



Photograph
Rachel Turney / Erie Colorado

Charlotte Collins sits cross-legged on a mat in a meditation room at Santosa Springs, a wellness retreat tucked in the misty Berkshire Mountains. Kel the guru is cute—Charlotte's age, thirty, give or take—the type of guy Charlotte would have loved in her twenties, an enlightened, touchy-feely feminist in the body of a mountain biker, but those guys wanted to *know* her, wanted to look into her eyes and understand how she was feeling. Charlotte had no interest in swimming in the deep end of that pool.

"There's a difference between chest and belly breathing," Kel says. His biceps wink from his fitted hemp T-shirt.

Charlotte raises her hand, feeling her ponytail dance on her shoulders. "Breathing doesn't usually work for me. I've tried, but it makes me more stressed."

Charlotte's inability to breathe is why her boss, Diana, VP of Commodities at JP Morgan, called her into her office. "Have you seen that PSA? Khakis and golf shirt type of guy, but then he starts fentanyl, and his face turns ashen and his skin becomes thin as cellophane."

"Am I the fentanyl guy?" Charlotte asks. She reaches for her face, noting the tender skin on her cheeks that used to be plump like dim sum buns.

"You're a little worn down," Diana said. "I'm sending you for some forced fun."

"Keep an open mind." Kel explains that breath work can take you to the same places as psychedelics, and if done properly, one's consciousness can be altered.

Charlotte wants to be transported to her happy place, an inflatable blue raft adrift her childhood swimming pool, the sun on her face, the terrifying thrill of Tony sluicing beneath her, the menacing *Jaws*’ anthem—duh duh, trilling in her ears.

"You may even talk with a deceased loved one," Kel says.

Tony's biting the gold medal hanging around his neck. He's pointing at Charlotte, as if to say, "This one's for you, Sis." Charlotte squeezes her eyes until the vision of her brother pixilates to dust. Although Santosa Springs is alcohol-free, Charlotte has packed a bottle of Tito's for tonight. She'll settle into her room with a vodka tonic, Chex Mix, and Red Vines she smuggled in, study the markets, and respond to client emails.

"The quickest way to get there," Kel says. "Is to do two major inhales through the mouth, and then one long exhale. He exaggerates the breathing, and the class mimics him.

Charlotte can think of an easier way to get there: the bottle of vodka in her room.

"Now let's lie on our mats," Kel says. "Use the bolster under your knees. One big inhale. Another inhale. A giant exhale."

Kel covers Charlotte with two blankets, and when he kneels and places a folded towel over her eyes, he presses ever so lightly, and she feels his breath on her face. Wintergreen. "Inhale. Inhale. Exhale." Charlotte wells from his gentle touch like an abused shelter animal.

The music begins. Drums. Primal howling. Water whooshing. "Match your breath to the music," Kel suggests.

The chanting continues, the monkeys hoot, the wind whistles. Charlotte imagines a jungle like the one in *Apocalypse Now*, a movie her dad made her and Tony watch when they were little kids. Scared them to death. It's not lost on Charlotte that money is the only idol she worships these days. Charlotte hears herself exhaling audibly, with guttural moans; her breath has taken on a rhythm of its own, like the natives beating drums as the water buffalo is killed.

This isn't so bad, Charlotte thinks. At minimum, she's in for an hour-long lap, like the nights she treats herself to an Ambien and a heavy pour of wine. The blankets on her body are comforting, and Kel has burned a sage smudge stick, and Charlotte seeks it like catching a whiff of coconut suntan lotion.

The heat and vibrations begin in her thighs. Energy moves. When she runs, she often gets a runner's high. This must be something like

that. The tingling ramps up until she's in a calcified state, as though Prometheus has fashioned her out of clay, and she is drying in the sun. Charlotte is prostrate with legs that no longer work, with arms and hands that have contorted into lobster claws.

Take a deep breath and hold it. Starfish your arms and legs. Tony buoys her with one hand on her back as he teaches her to float. *Pretend you're frozen.*

Charlotte cannot move.

She is paralyzed.

She accepts her crustacean body and stares into the darkness of her shut eyes, seeing the turquoise pool water lap against the Spanish tiles, smelling the chlorine, feeling Tony's smile as he lets go. *You're floating.*

She's ten years old, maybe the last time she was happy, before her father moved out (fire bombing their family like napalm in *Apocalypse Now*), before Charlotte and Tony learned the magic of Dad's abandoned liquor cabinet—Let's try the Johnny Walker, before high school and boys grinding into her and then ignoring her the next day, and before Tony on the diving board—the booze, the accident, the wheelchair.

Ten was the best.

She's ten, and they're in the backyard swimming pool. Tony swans from the diving board, and Charlotte sails on a blue raft. "Race you," Tony says, pushing off the wall and swimming the length of the pool underwater, gracefully, his lithe body like a dolphin, while Charlotte strokes and slaps the water like a seal attacked by a polar bear.

Before Tony reaches the wall, he feigns drowning, as if a sea monster is pulling him to the trenches, flailing until his little sister taps the edge first. "You win," he cheers.

Dad is at the grill, flipping burgers. Mom is fussing over the side dishes of potato salad and watermelon triangles. The sky is embarrassingly blue. Laughter rings.

Charlotte thinks of her New York apartment building and the rooftop swimming pool. In five years of living there, she hasn't once been there.

Jennifer Handford / Middleburg, Virginia

Bird on a Wire / Rana Williams



Photograph
Rana Williams / Hayesville, North Carolina