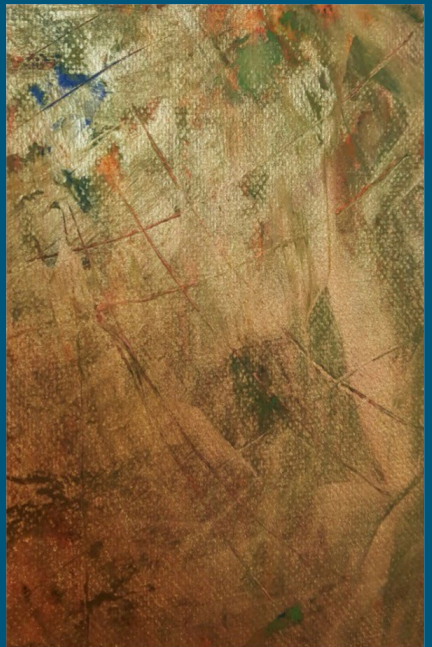


Kelsey Review



Volume XLIV
Fall 2025

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Cover photo, *Diptych #5503 and #5449b* metallic watercolor on paper, courtesy of Ellen June Wright.

Upon request, *Kelsey Review* is available in alternative format for the visually impaired.

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As a community-based publication, we welcome sponsors and supporters interested in joining *Kelsey Review* and other MCCC endeavors.

From the President

Mercer County Community College is delighted to once again share with you the work of many local writers and artists in *Kelsey Review*, the College's literary journal. This year marks *Kelsey Review*'s 44th issue, and it is a pleasure to see how this journal continues to serve the community—especially in these challenging times—by sharing the work of talented individuals who live and work in the larger Mercer County region. This journal is just one of the many ways the College highlights and shares the cultural wealth of our area.

MCCC directly serves thousands of county residents, and indirectly tens of thousands through its many ties to the community and state. County residents can be a part of *Kelsey Review*, and they can also appreciate the many other community offerings that MCCC has to share. WWFM broadcasts quality programming that listeners can enjoy in Mercer County and all over the world by listening online. Kelsey Theater stages a wide range of dramatic performances for county audiences, who also have access to the college's Art Gallery. Our nationally-ranked MCCC athletic teams offer chances to root for stellar athletes. Learn more about the College and Mercer County at www.mccc.edu.

Continuing into this issue, The *Kelsey Review* editorial team has expanded the geographic scope to other parts of New Jersey to ensure the highest quality literary offerings. *Kelsey Review* is also available [online](#), where it can be shared worldwide. To keep up with the *Review* year-round, please follow and “like” the publication on [Facebook](#).

Each edition of the *Review* presents professional-quality poetry, fiction, nonfiction, art, and photography that provoke thought and spark inspiration. Enjoy what you find here.

Sincerely,
Deborah E. Preston, Ph.D.
President
Mercer County Community College

From the Editors

Here we are again, another new year, another new issue, and we're still excited to serve as co-editors of *Kelsey Review*. We're continuing the longstanding tradition of publishing the works of some of the Capital County's brightest literary and visual artists, while also expanding our submissions to surrounding New Jersey counties. Of course, we're also looking toward the future, in the planning stages of exciting changes yet to come for the Mercer literary community. Some include an expanded website, a bigger presence on social media, as well as live and online community events. To learn what's coming, follow us on Facebook, (www.facebook.com/MCCC.KelseyReview).

For Issue 44, we have included the work of many returning area contributors of photography, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Familiar names include Lauren Fedorko, Julia Cuddahy, and Stephanie Cuddahy with their visual artistry, and we've highlighted Ellen June Wright's watercolor *Diptych* on this year's cover. Christine McGoey follows up last year's fiction with a surprising sequel, and Linda J. Parisi adds another heartwarming short story. As always, we showcase an eclectic and diverse range of poetic voices from Virginia Barrie, Vida Chu, Lois Marie Harrod, Lavinia Kumar, Ilene Millman, Wanda Praisner, Maureen Riggi, Steve Smith, Maxine Susman, Shaoyan Wang, and others. Among those new to this issue are Steven Fromm in fiction, Bill Waters in nonfiction, and Svea Barrett in poetry.

We are grateful for the support of many people in the county for helping us publish Issue 44. Many thanks to Mercer's Liberal Arts division executive assistant Lyndsey Goehrig for her tireless support, as well as the Liberal Arts Interim Dean, Dr. Christopher Cruz Cullari, for helping us bring our vision of *Kelsey Review* to life. Thanks also go to the College's Marketing and Communications department for design and production. Also within that department, we thank Tim Fitzpatrick for keeping our website current with the online version of *Kelsey Review*. We must thank Denise Ratti and Karen Cerra in the college's Grants Office for their assistance in applying for grants under tight deadlines and to Theresa Palughi for grants accounting. Of course, we thank Dr. Debi Preston, MCCC President, and Dr. Robert Schreyer, Provost, for their continuing support of this project.

Finally, we thank the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission for a generous grant that enables us to print our literary journal. It is more important than ever to support the arts, and these many people have shown their support for *Kelsey Review*.

Gwen Weerheim Jones, MFA
Professor, Liberal Arts

Barbara Krasner, MFA, PhD
Associate Professor, Liberal Arts

Contents

From the President	3
From the Editors	4
March Eighteenth.....	8
In Your Winter	9
Another Little Piece of My Heart	10
Snowstorm with Children	11
Her Exquisite Bobby Valenzuela.....	12
Black-and-White Photos	24
The Goddess of Democracy, in Tiananmen Square, 1989	26
Lost Hope	27
How to raise a child	29
Pianoscape	31
Between Raindrops.....	32
Once I Was Water.....	33
What Would Annie Do?	35
Arthur Miller Gave Me Shingles	42
The Heart	45
Eyes	46
Golden Layers.....	47
Falling in love with you in Big Sur.....	48
Honest.....	49
Farm Flowers.....	50
Poetry Path.....	51
My Glass Edges	52
How I Was Taught to Play Harmonica.....	53
The Raven's Sermon.....	54
Magical Thinking and the First Snow of Winter.....	55
Building Icarus	56

The Tide Is In	57
Our May Souls	58
September Fury	59
October Hike	70
Solstice	71
...the fire... ..	72
Therapy	73
The Loss of Two Mothers	74
Happy Day	76
Scissors and Tape	80
Contributors.....	81
About the Editors	86
Submission Guidelines	87

WANDA PRAISNER

March Eighteenth

Crocus, daffodils
and hyacinths rouse
from winter sleep,
so too, peepers
in ponds below Ski Hill.
A hungry bear feasts
at my feeder. Would
that you too, my love,
could so awaken.

WANDA PRAISNER

In Your Winter

Woman, do not ache
for the spring days of desire.
Move on to a sunlit window,
allow golden warmth
into your fragile bones
like butter melting on toast,
tomorrow's forecast always
for more storms.
And woman, know
that in your summer and fall
you were the starlight
in a man's eyes—his passion.
Death has not left you alone.
Look at the green bulbs
rising ardent from snow,
promise of coming ripeness
and hunger. Forget the lies
of the looking glass.
In the fullness of time,
in the seasons of your life
you were adored,
you were devoured.
There was a man. There was
a man who loved you.

ILENE MILLMAN

Another Little Piece of My Heart

a bloody
electric muscle throbbing
in its bony cage
the 70 beat-per-minute music
machine ever so quietly pumps
2,000 gallons of blood through
my body tha-thump, tha-thump
but I never know when
some electric misfire sparks
the start and my unchained
heart is off
150 beats like the flashing
feet of a flamenco dancer
improvising
unsynchronizing rhythms I feel
stomping in my chest
the electric frenzy unspooling
fueling my dancer
castanets clicking faster
how long
will it last for
deep-breathe then deep-freeze
my face in a bowl of ice water
162 beats per minute
pop a pill, couch-chill
legs weak when
will it peak
no more warning
marks the end than the start
of this heart improv
a switch flicks something clicks
and the interior music returns
tha-thump tha-thump
the quiet song of me

**Atrial fibrillation is an arrhythmia affecting 2% of the population*

ILENE MILLMAN

Snowstorm with Children

Clamoring at the bay window
like a row of chittering birds,
three pairs of hands

pressed to the window as if fingers had eyes
they celebrate the furious erasure
first grass, then the black driveway

with luck, curbs, and streets
everything growing
higher, softer, whiter

soaking up the pollution
of color beneath—
and they're off

puffed up like Sumo warriors packed
in fairground-colored snowsuits,
a revel in the romp

laughter echoing something more
than joy, they stomp it
taste it, ball it, throw it

dig it, roll it, wiggle into it like angels
toss it heavenward,
their woolen hats and eyelashes

threaded with snow
I'm thinking to call out to them.
Remember this, kids

*you once were creations
who knew
how to fly.*

STEVEN FROMM

Her Exquisite Bobby Valenzuela

Belle is bursting. As we approach the bus stop she leans in close and squeezes my arm.

“You can look,” she whispers, “but just don’t, you know, look.”

She’s always like this, a coil of elation flicking from one fascination to the next. Last week the subject was how scientists determined the sun’s lifespan (*They found stuff called rejeantamenta. Where’d they get that name?*). This week the mysteries of the cosmos have taken a backseat to Bobby Valenzuela. More specifically, to Bobby Valenzuela’s eyes. (*His irises. They’re Bisque. I Googled it. Bisque with maybe just a bit of almond.*)

The bus stop comes into view. Since we’re running late most of the kids are already there, flanked by parents staring groggily into their cellphones.

“Is he there?” I ask.

“I can’t tell. I’d have to look.”

“Where does he usually stand?”

“If I tell you that, you’ll look without being, what’s the word I want to say?”

“Subtle?”

“Yeah. Subtle. With a silent ‘b,’ which makes subtle such a subtle word.”

We cross the street and ease our way into the group, a scrum of little people burdened with oversized backpacks flashing Barbie, Bart Simpson, and Tommy Pickles. Belle’s pack displays pictures of Rod Serling. I hear bits and snatches of talk among the kids, the worst teacher (*Mr. Thompson; his garlicky breath*) and favorite video games (*Crossy Roads, Cuphead*).

I recognize Becky Blemens, one of the parents from our court. She glances at me, looks down, quickly corrects herself, looks up and tries to smile. I smile back. We haven’t spoken since Olivia’s death. I get it. People don’t know what to say, so they say nothing.

The bus swings into view at the corner. The kids adjust their backpacks, the adults pocket their phones.

“Ok,” Belle whispers. “Try now.”

I take a few looks that I hope are deemed subtle.

“I’m not sure what I’m looking for.”

“Exquisite bisque-brown eyes.”

I try not to smile and keep looking. The bus pulls up.

“Next time,” Belle says.

The doors open with a swoosh. Belle gives me a quick hug and files onto the bus. The doors close and the bus pulls away. The parents scatter without a word. Another day has begun.

On the short walk home my cellphone pings. It’s a text from Allison, Belle’s mother.

e/thing ok?

I text back a thumbs-up emoji.

Allison and Belle’s father, Matthew, need to be at work hours earlier than Belle’s bus picks her up. They asked me to shepherd her to the bus stop each morning. Allison offered to pay. I refused, but that’s when I had a job. Now Allison discreetly leaves cash on the kitchen island, and I just as discreetly take it. My cell pings again.

can u talk?

yep

My cell rings. I swipe into the call.

“I’ve given in.”

Allison starts calls in mid-conversation. It saves time.

“The test?” I ask.

“It’s called the Wechsler-something. Next Tuesday.”

A posse of teachers have been lobbying for a battery of IQ tests for Belle. Bright children have questions about the sun’s lifespan, but few explore rejeantamenta and Isochron dating. Lots of younger kids become avid readers, but few knock off Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* in fourth grade, then ask for a copy of *The Golden Notebook*.

“What happens after the test?” I ask.

“They’ll want her to take special courses, maybe skip grades.”

“You could have worse problems.”

The call goes quiet. We both know I’m an authority on worse problems. Allison breaks the silence.

“You know what I mean. I want her to go to ballet. I want her to believe Barbie is *real*. I want her to have a *crush*.”

“Bobby Valenzuela.”

“Who?”

“A boy in Belle’s class. She’s agog.”

“Thank *God*. What’d she say?”

“He’s *bisque*.”
 “Huh?”
 “His eyes. They’re *bisque*, with a hint of almond.”
 We start laughing. I turn into our court. I live two townhouses down from Allison.
 “Almost home,” I say.
 “Ok,” she says, but I can tell by her tone there’s something else.
 “Jess?” she asks.
 “Yep?”
 “Is he still texting?”
 She means my ex, Alec.
 “Yeah. Got one last night.”
 “And this started happening last week, out of nowhere?”
 “It’s coming up on one year,” I say.
 “I see,” Allison says. There is a pause, and then: “What’s he want?”
 “To try again. Or to try to see if we should try again.”
 “What’s that mean?”
 “Back to a therapist, I guess.”
 “Do you want to?”
 “No.”
 I’m surprised by how fast I say it. We tried a therapist for months. All I can remember is a cramped office smelling of lilac potpourri and Alec and I sitting side-by-side on a couch. We sat so close our shoulders touched, but we were a universe apart, floating in the ache of our hangovers.
 “So what’s next?”
 “I don’t know. I guess we’ll meet.”
 “Is he—” she lets her voice trail off.
 “He says he is. The Program. I’m not sure which one.”
 “Is there anything I can do?”
 We know there isn’t. I reach my stoop. We say goodbye and I swipe off the call.
 The court is quiet. Most of the cars are gone for the workday. My plan is another cup of coffee, checking emails for responses from prospective employers and a quick run through the empty neighborhood. I’m about to go in when I spot Skinny Marie across the court, sweeping her porch. I don’t know her last name. Everyone calls her Skinny Marie. She’s in her mid-eighties and has lived in the court since it was built.

When she spots me she stops sweeping and genuflects. She does this every time. I usually ignore her. This time I smile and wave. She shoots me a startled look, turns abruptly and goes inside.
 I start laughing. It’s the first time in months. I sound strange to myself but it doesn’t matter. There’s no one around to hear.

I go to the northwest sector, find the blue-pearl granite mausoleum that I remember from a year ago, then turn left.
 As I walk through the headstones I notice a three-man crew digging a grave about 20 yards away. They’ve already erected an olive-green canopy for the upcoming service. I go four more rows, turn right, count off six graves and stop in front of her stone. It’s what they call a slant marker, made of black granite. The letters are etched in off-white Vivaldi font. I don’t know who chose it. Maybe Alec. Maybe one of the in-laws. I’m not much on Vivaldi font.
 I stare at the stone, making sure to concentrate on her name, not the dates. The idea of talking to a stone seems absurd, so I stay silent, hands clasped in front of me.
 I can’t remember much about the funeral, only the vague sensation of not being in myself, of floating slightly above me and to the left, looking down at Alec, the in-laws, the friends from work and the neighborhood all clustered around the small, precisely-dug little grave.
 One year. 8,700 hours. 525,000 minutes. 31 million seconds. Tick-tock. It keeps nudging us forward, relentlessly forward, even if we don’t want to move.
 My cell phone pings. It’s a text from Alec.
where are u?
 He knows where. I put the phone away and stand in front of the stone and although I still think it’s absurd, I want to say something aloud. Her name was Olivia but I always called her Olly. *Olly, Olly oxen free*. I sang that to her during baths, feedings, changings. I said it so often Alec Googled it. It’s a catchphrase in children’s games. It can mean come out from hiding. It can also mean the game is over.
Olly, Olly oxen free. I say it out loud, soft and sing-song. And then I say: *I know you’re not here. But someone has to be*. I take a deep breath and look around. One of the three gravediggers is

looking at me as he smokes, while the other two install a casket-lowering device over the grave. Our eyes meet. He looks away. I want to go over and bum a cigarette, but don't. He may misinterpret the request. Even in cemeteries, women have to be careful.

My phone pings yet again. I'm sure it's Alec. He'll want to meet sometime soon. I'll say yes. It's been months since we've seen each other. It's time to come out from hiding.

Olly, Olly oxen free.

"If wishes were Wechslers, parents would ride."

Belle keeps repeating this as she sits at the dining room table, sketching away. It's a play on words from that old saying: *If wishes were horses, beggars would ride*.

It's been her mantra ever since she took the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children two weeks ago. Allison told me she scored a 141.

"That means Belle's exceptional, right?" Allison asked the teacher.

"No," she replied. "It means Belle's from a different planet."

So Allison is precisely where she didn't want to be: making tough decisions about special programs and skipping grades.

"If children were parents, Wechslers would ride," Belle says without looking up.

I walk over to the kitchen table to see what she's drawing. Belle's been preparing for the upcoming Stowker Elementary Art Show, sketching ideas non-stop and studying the work of her favorite artists, including Jennifer Packer and Jordan Casteel.

"Where'd she even *hear* about them?" I'd asked Allison.

"She just knows," Allison said with a shrug.

This morning she's working on figuration with a pencil. I look over her shoulder at uncannily detailed figures walking, running, stooping, stretching. There are also doodles and sketches of faces, including Allison's, Matthew's and mine. None of us are smiling.

I look at my watch.

"Ten minutes," I say.

Belle adds some shading to a figure, then goes to the bathroom. I put snacks in her backpack, grab the money Allison has left and wait for Belle by the door.

"When's the art show?" I ask as I help her sling her pack.

"Two weeks."

"You decided what you're gonna paint?"

"It's kinda congealing aesthetically," she says. "Does that make sense?"

"Believe it or not, yes."

We head out the door and start toward the bus stop. I wait for her to mention Bobby Valenzuela. It takes all of two minutes.

"He should be there today," she says.

I haven't spotted him yet. Belle said he was out three days last week with a virus.

"Can you kind of point him out to me?"

"Better not," Belle says. "It wouldn't be discreet."

She's dropped subtle from her vocabulary. (*It's too soft sounding. Discreet has sharper edges.*) We turn the corner and the bus stop comes into view.

"Is he there?"

"Yep. At the end. To the right."

I glance casually to the right side of the little cluster of kids and parents. There are two boys there. I can't tell which one is him.

"Monarch butterflies," Belle says out of the blue.

"What about them?"

"Bobby told me about them in the lunch line a few weeks ago," Belle says. "They migrate two thousand miles from Canada to Mexico."

"That's quite a trip."

"Scientists say the ones with the most dots on their wings have a better chance of making it," she says.

"Why's that?"

"Maybe the spots make it easier for them to fly," Belle says. "But that's not the truly amazing thing."

"What's the truly amazing thing?"

"That an exquisite boy named Bobby Valenzuela actually took the time to tell me about Monarch butterflies in the lunch line," Belle says. "I mean, can you *imagine*?"

I can: Belle and Bobby Valenzuela huddled close and whispering to one another about the flight of Monarch butterflies, thousands upon thousands floating south in shivery waves of deep orange and black. I can see Belle's face tilted up, smiling, enchanted, absorbing his every word.

Belle's voice cuts in. "Be sure to order the mantecadas."

“Hm?”

“When you meet. Order the mantecadas.”

I’m meeting Alec for coffee later in the morning at a local café and bakery. Belle probably overheard her mother and I talking about it.

“Why should I order mantecadas?”

“Because no matter how bad a thing is, they’ll make it better.”

“Did Bobby Valenzuela tell you that?”

“Of *course* he did,” she says. “Who else would come up with such a wondrous thing?”

I’m about to reply when Belle shooshes me. We’re close to the bus stop. As we join the little crowd, several of the parents look up from their phones and give me a quick smile. Becky Blemens is there and does the same. It almost looks natural. Maybe she’s been practicing. All I can think of is a version of Belle’s mantra: *If lies were wishes, phonies would ride.*

I wait a few moments and take a look over the heads of the huddled kids to where Belle said Bobby Valenzuela stands. I see the back of a little boy’s head, ruffled with short, black hair. He’s about to turn when the bus swings into view at the corner, triggering the usual ripple of shifting backpacks and parents stooping to give quick goodbye kisses.

The bus coasts to the curb and the door opens. The children file on, with Belle bringing up the rear. She stops on the first step and turns to me.

“Remember the mantecadas,” she says. “The best ones taste a little bit like orange.”

I watch the bus drive off and think: *If wishes were children, beggars would feast.*

Alec is seated at a table in the back. I wave and motion to the counter. I want to order coffee first. The place smells of hazelnut and cinnamon. Jazz is playing softly in the background. I order the house arabica and mantecadas. I don’t ask for the kind that taste like orange. Maybe they’re all made that way.

When I get to the table Alec stands and we give each other a quick peck on the lips.

“Hey there,” he says.

“Hey.”

As I put down my coffee and take off my jacket, I notice Alec’s wearing an aqua blue polo shirt. I’ve never seen him in a polo shirt. His arms look pale. We sit in silence for a few moments, taking each other in. His clean-shaven face is fuller and softer, his hair shorter.

“You look good,” he says.

“Thank you,” I say. “I think we both look better.”

I’m not sure what to say next. Neither is he. We sip our coffees and smile at each other but what I’m thinking is: *Why am I here?*

“What is that?” he asks, pointing to my dish.

“Mantecadas.”

“What?”

“A Mexican pastry. I was told they make any situation better.”

“By whom?”

“Belle.”

“Allison and Matt’s kid? How is she?”

I tell him about the Wechsler.

“Wow. She’s headed to NASA.”

“She’s headed somewhere.”

Our conversation falters. We sip more coffee. Alec clears his throat.

“Thank you for coming.”

“Sure.”

“You’re probably wondering what I want.”

He looks at me. I stay silent.

“I’m not really sure,” he says. He shrugs. “It just felt like it was time. You know? Time to at least see you.”

He takes a napkin from the dispenser and starts tearing it into little strips. It’s the kind of thing he used to do when he needed a drink. My tics were different. I’d grind my teeth and sweat.

“Is this part of your thing?” I ask.

“Thing?”

“The Program.”

He looks at me for a moment and then laughs.

“You mean like a make-amends thing? No. This isn’t that.”

We started up a month after Olivia died, when the numbness wore off. We were dazed and flailing and something else. Angry. Angry that the world was craven enough to carry on without

her. Alec chose bourbon. I went with tequila. He drank to feel nothing. I drank to feel something. Neither of us got what we wanted. Every time we laid eyes on each other, we could think of only one thing. Alec solved that problem by moving out. His law firm staged an intervention and got him into a program. The graphic arts firm I worked for had its own solution: they fired me. I've been surviving on handouts from the in-laws and freelance work ever since.

Alec takes a sip of coffee, clears his throat.

"Did you?" he asks.

"Did I what?"

"Get into a program?"

"No."

"Some kind of therapy?"

"No. Nothing."

"And you just stopped?"

"Yes."

He looks at me, waiting for details. There are none. I woke up one morning, retched away in the bathroom for a half hour, washed my face and looked into the mirror. That's when it happened. Something fell out of me. Fell right out.

I pick up the mantecada, then put it down without taking a bite. I'm not hungry. I want this to be over. I want to leave.

"Does it feel like it to you?" he asks.

"What?"

"A year. Does it feel like a year has gone?"

"Some days it feels like a week. Some days it feels like a decade."

"Yeah. I get that."

He tears another strip from the napkin.

"Lately it feels so long ago, it's like it happened to someone else," he says.

"It didn't."

"I know. But I keep waiting for it to start feeling, I don't know. Different."

"It won't."

He shoots me a look. It's disappointment. He wants to hear something hopeful, but it's not in me. Not today.

Alec looks away, his eyes roaming the little room, at the people sipping coffee, nibbling croissants and muffins, absorbed in their iPhones and laptops.

"Look at them," he whispers. "Just look at them."

His eyes return to me.

"Do you think there's anything left?" he asks.

"Of what?"

"Of us."

This is why he wants to meet. To ask that question. He knows the answer but he has to ask. He sees the expression on my face. That's all the answer he needs. Alec sits back in his chair and lets out a long, low exhalation. It's the most relaxed he's been since I arrived. We trade a bit of small talk for a few minutes. In the silences I listen to the music. It's a clarinet. Maybe Sidney Bechet.

Alec glances at his watch. Time to go. He gets up, leans over and kisses me on my cheek. We say goodbye. I don't watch as he walks out the door, but stare down at my cold coffee. After a few minutes I pick up a mantecada and take a bite. It tastes of orange. I chew slowly and wait for it to make things better.

Little faces drawn in crayon, blowing bright gum bubbles of red and yellow and green.

"These are my absolute favorite," Belle says, leading me by the hand.

We're in the first-grade classroom viewing exhibits for the Stowker Elementary Art Show. The event started at three. Allison and Matthew can't break away from work until four. They've asked me to take Belle to the show, where they'll soon join her. Belle insists on viewing the exhibits in chronological order, starting with the first graders.

"You see how they did it?" she says of the bubble-gum blowers. "They drew their own faces, cut tiny holes in the mouths, inserted the balloons and blew them up."

She leads me past watercolor paintings of solemn owl vignettes and pink handprint flamingos to her next favorite: bubble-wrap sheep.

"See? The bodies are little pieces of bubble wrap glued to the paper," she says. "They just draw in the legs and heads."

She looks at them in silence for a few moments, then turns to me.

"I guess I'm just a passionate devotee of mixed media," she says.

I start laughing, but Belle doesn't notice. She's tugging me toward the door. We pass the blackboard, which displays an aspirational saying written specifically for the show: *Broken crayons color*. Belle stops and cautiously peers out into the hallway.

"Anything?" I ask, referring to a potential sighting of Bobby Valenzuela.

"No. He's probably in our class."

Belle means the fifth-grade classroom, where her exhibit is displayed. She's saving that for last. We go into the hallway and move toward the second-grade class, passing groups of children and parents on the way.

The second- and third-grade classes contain colorful menageries of watercolor fish, paper caterpillars and tissue-paper snails. The third-grade blackboard asks, *If you're not here, where are you?*

The art displays in the fourth-grade class include color-pencil peacock feathers, origami swans, and Koi fish drawn in charcoal. But Belle walks by them, pausing only at the saying on the blackboard: *Will you reach up, up, up and shake the stars?*

She reads it aloud, then grimaces.

"The nearest stars are 4 million light years away," she says. "You think fourth-graders *know* that?"

"I think it's a metaphor."

"Metaphor," Belle repeats. And then she laughs. "I like that word. It's round and soft and absorbs things like a sponge."

Before I answer Belle takes my hand and leads me out the door. We stop just outside the fifth-grade classroom.

"Let me look first," she whispers, stepping quietly to the door and peering in. "He's not here. Maybe he's wandering around."

The fifth-grade exhibits show a clear artistic jump from the earlier grades: pastel rainbow trees, abstract color wheels and Georgia O'Keeffe-style flower drawings.

But a painting mounted on the center blackboard seizes the room. It's a large oil portrait of a smiling boy with ruffled black hair, light-brown skin and, yes, bisque-colored eyes. Each detail of his face is so finely etched the image appears multi-dimensional and floating just above the canvas.

"What do you think?" Belle asks.

I don't answer. I stand there staring and know I'm meeting Bobby Valenzuela for the first and last time.

"It's like he was hiding in a corner," Belle says. "I had to reach in and, you know, pull him. Pull him into the light."

I still don't answer. I don't have to. After a few moments Belle takes my hand.

"C'mon," she says. "Let's find him."

We go into the hall and start walking from room to room, some filled with art displays, others empty save for tiny desks lined up in neat little rows. Belle leads on. I follow in silence. Stray images drift through my head: Skinny Marie's genuflections; Becky Blemen's glacial smile; Alec's thin, pale arms. And Olivia. Would you have skipped down these hallways? Conjured origami swans? Reached up and shaken the stars? Olly, my Olly. Would you have had your very own exquisite Bobby Valenzuela?

We keep walking. Soon we're in a part of the building where the lights have been turned off for the day. There is no art. There are no people. I don't ask where we're going. I just keep going.

VIDA CHU

Black-and-White Photos

The summer my sister Doreen died, a big package
of forgotten memories jammed my mailbox.

I tore the envelope open, black and white photos spilled,
confetting the kitchen floor. In a photo, I saw

Mother, my younger sisters, and our dog, Fluffy,
picnicking near a small waterfall.

Though passers-by might think it was a weekend outing,
in truth, it was our weekly ritual since Mother moved out.

It would be another six days before we could meet again.
In the next photo, I was seventeen, at Kai Tek Airport, waiting

to take off to a new life in a new country. I never thought
that one day Hong Kong would be swallowed by China.

Quietly I collected and returned all the photos in the envelope,
then discovered a photo of my father's mother under my chair.

She was the only grandparent I met.
I had not thought of her for over sixty years.

In the photo, she plays mother hen, with her arms outstretched,
protecting her grandchildren, from their uncle, the hawk.

Grandmother and I were never close. She spoke Ning Bo dialect
that I could not follow, and she refused to tell anyone her name

unless they were her age or older. Grandma had very bad vision
and had to use binoculars to read the wall clock.

In the last few years of her life, Grandma moved in with us. She
lived on a queen bed with iron railings,

and it took two helpers to feed and clean her daily.
She recognized no one, not even our father.

Grandma screamed day and night till the day she died.
I had always wondered why. Now I am her age, I know.

She was telling us that old age was no picnic
and warned us to be prepared to tough it out.

VIDA CHU

***The Goddess of Democracy,
in Tiananmen Square, 1989***

At first glance, the sculpture seemed
to be a white Styrofoam version
of the Statue of Liberty.
Yet she wore no crown,
her hair motionless in the wind.

Tall and proud, she stood on the scaffold,
eye to eye with Chairman Mao's portrait
on top of the Forbidden City's gate.
With both hands she held the flaming torch high,
challenging whatever came next.

This thirty-three-foot statue, created
in three days by students, transported
section by section in three-wheeled carts,
assembled in Tiananmen Square
by midnight of May 30
just in time for Gorbachev's visit.

On June 4, troops entered Tiananmen Square
to clear out the protestors by force.
A military vehicle toppled the goddess.
She was swiftly demolished and removed
together with hundreds of lifeless students.

Twelve years later, my family traveled to China.
Tourists and pigeons crowded Tiananmen Square.
The older generation dared not mention June 4, 1989.
The younger generation never knew.
Chairman Mao's portrait stared
from the Forbidden City's gate.

LISA COLL NICOLAU

Lost Hope

Both my daughters made me wait.
For twelve long days past their due date,
I tried to find comfort,
with pillows under my legs and behind my back
to take the pressure off my enormous belly.

Despite the fear and discomfort, I was excited,
knowing that a baby was coming and that happiness
would probably be arriving.

My daughters are grown now, in their twenties,
but I remember the heft of their bodies in my arms,
heavy but healthy, tipping the scales.

The days before the election I remembered
that anticipation and hoped that the threat
of these last eight years might be ebbing.

Instead, the scales of justice tipped
and unleashed a horror that even those
with great imagination
could not imagine.

Nothing can take the pressure away.
We wake each day to a growing tide
of unkindness and will soon be drowning
in an ocean of sorrow.

I worry for my daughters,
our daughters, those daughters
who were once sons,
all of us.

When I stand in my kitchen
and listen to the news,
I ask the ghosts of my grandmothers
for advice and even they,

women who survived so much,
have nothing hopeful to say.

LISA COLL NICOLAU

How to raise a child

Orchids need sunshine but very little water.
They need attention and care, but not so much
that they forget to blossom.

Some orchids continue in a dazzling display,
others wait a long time to produce a single bloom.

I have learned to be patient with my orchid plants,
talk to them about the little triumphs
and big tragedies, turn them gently
so they can benefit from the sun
as it reaches my bay windows.

Sometimes my orchids need to be left alone,
to recover from all the effort it took them
to flower and so I carry them in my arms
the way I so naturally carried my babies,
bring them to the kitchen where they convalesce
for as long as they need.

Sometimes, there are surprises.
As I'm rushing past, I see a giant blossom
or a string of tiny ones and I smile,
so proud I am of my plants.

Recently, my daughter posted that her most
important memory of childhood was the way
I smiled at her every morning when she came
down the stairs and turned into the dining room,
where I sat with my mug of coffee and newspaper,
awaiting her arrival.

I showered her with love, the way I turn my orchids
to the sun and never rushed her into becoming
but waited until she was ready to bloom.

She is grown now but I feel her
invisible heft in my arms.

That memory belongs to me
even though now I must share
her beautiful bouquet with the world.

STEPHANIE CUDDAHY

Pianoscape



JUDITH SALCEWITZ

Between Raindrops

Walk between raindrops, Mother said.

My six-year-old self
laughed at the silliness,
jumped into puddles,
and pretended to be a duck.

Walk between raindrops, Mother said.

My teenage self
scoffed at the absurdity,
and strode from the room
like an indignant monarch.

Walk between raindrops, Mother said.

My adult self
pulled my daughter close
after the fetal monitor
failed to detect a heartbeat.

Mother knew that
even in life's greatest downpours,
it's possible to breathe.

SVEA BARRETT

Once I Was Water

When I was water I rained and rained,
grew mini-ponds in the driveway.
Maple seeds and pollen floated in me,

adding orange and tawny brown to the
violent green of Upstate New York spring.
When I was water I slid down the tiny

throats of plump house sparrows
as they unbeaded me from each new
needle on the evergreen hedge. When I

was water I made everything shine,
slaked all thirst, wiped the world of its
dust and grime, but when I was water I

didn't know to stop watering. I washed
the roads and then washed them out,
nourished the yards and swamped

them, cleaned the roofs and filled the
gutters when I was water, so abundant
that downspouts splashed me against

foundations, and I seeped into basements,
ruined boxes of photos, memories. When
I was water I finally receded, though it was

way past time I left, leaving behind mold
and rot until the empty wet spaces were
tended to, the soggy scrapbooks trashed,

old rugs torn away. When I was water I
fed and shined and you drank and washed
and lived until I became too much. When

I was water you needed me, and I was
too much, you couldn't live with or without

me, you said, and you never remembered

all the times in between dehydration and
drowning, when I was water and I was enough.

LINDA J. PARISI

What Would Annie Do?

“Hi!”

A woman with long flowing Farrah Fawcett hair bounced into the room and hopped up onto the chair next to me.

Filled with trepidation, as if the white walls, monitors, and machines weren’t enough, I replied, “Hello.”

“I’m Annie.” A wig, I realized. Which she seemed to feel slip as she moved, for her hands straightened the hairpiece slightly then fluttered away to hide the motion.

“Jennifer.”

The atmosphere in the room seemed too severe for her innate joy. No one looked happy to be on the fourth floor of the hospital. With good reason.

“Hey. You’re new here, aren’t you? I haven’t seen you before.”

I nodded. “First time.”

“*Squeeee*,” she cried. “Everyone, listen up.” The room seemed to still at her command. Heads turned. All talking ceased. “We’ve got a chemo-virgin here.”

Everyone clapped and cheered. Even the nurses. My face flamed. A total couch-swallow was in order. Annie seemed not to notice. Or care.

She gave me the once-over and winked. “Wait until you pop your cherry,” she said with a grin. Or did the look in her eyes seem to be at odds? More stoic perhaps? Still, she carried on. “What a rush.”

Horrificed, I simply stared. Rush? All the descriptions I’d read online. The somber face of my oncologist giving me the details of what was to come. The nurses, sweet, gentle, but unable to help.

My hands wouldn’t stop trembling. My heart would pound then completely hollow. “You seem—” Lord, I had no idea how to describe it. “Happy to be here.”

“You bet I am,” she exclaimed, nodding emphatically. I watched her wig slip again. This time she didn’t hide the fix. “Three and counting.”

Huh?

Bewildered I replied, “But the treatments make you sick. They make you lose your hair.” I paused, absolutely,

unadulteratedly terrified of what awaited me. “Make you lose your mind.”

She smiled. I’ve never had to try to describe beatific before. Infused with something else. Something knowing, kind, and confident. “Ah. They also kill cancer cells.”

I nodded, with not a clue on how to answer. And then, this amazing woman did the most amazing thing. She stared down at her chest and cried, “Die, you little buggers. Die!”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

Of course, reality struck as I walked into the fourth floor for my next round. I didn’t want to do this anymore. I was only on my second treatment, and I didn’t want to continue. My hair was gone. My appetite dead. I’d seen enough of the inside of a toilet bowl to last a lifetime.

I sat down on the edge of my chair feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders.

“Hi, Cherry!”

Annie bounced through the door, her energy filling the room, her blue eyes bright and shining. “How’s it going?”

Cherry? I burst out laughing. Annie joined in. Once we sobered, she said, “Repeat after me.”

“I know.” In unison we looked down at our chests and cried, “Die, you little buggers. Die!”

Every time I hugged my toilet bowl, I repeated our mantra. Every time the thought of food made me want to hurl, I repeated our mantra. Every time I tried to roll out of my bed to get to the bathroom, I repeated our mantra. But the reality of it was that I was struggling. Each treatment became harder and harder to bear. So when hers were complete, I dreaded having to face mine alone.

Sure enough, though, I refused to let go of the tradition. I sat down on the reclining chair and lowered my eyes to my chest. All of a sudden I heard, “Die, you little buggers. Die!”

“Annie?”

She smiled and tears of gratitude filled my eyes as we hugged. “Hi, kiddo.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

She shook her head. She wasn’t wearing a wig anymore and I rather liked her hair short. Funny, she really was a blonde.

“Hell, I’d be lost without visiting this place.” She raised her voice as she hopped onto the chair next to me. “Someone has to keep these nurses in line.”

Greetings and grouses rang through the air.

In spite of being an accountant, in spite of running her own business, Annie was there for every one of my treatments. And when we were both done, we went out on the town, got stinking drunk, and bitched to each other for the next several days about how hung over we were and how chemo never made us this sick—ever.

Life has a way of intruding and time has a way of healing. At the very least, it stops the bleeding. Annie and I made it a point to meet once a month for lunch or dinner to catch up with each other’s lives. We even managed a couple of holidays.

But shopping days were the best. We’d earned the right to gritch (grouse and bitch) about drug therapies, estrogen suppression, and trying to find bras that fit. But we reminded each other that lopsided was beautiful and life was exactly that—life.

For which we were both very grateful.

I managed to make it to dance recitals; she threw a party for me when I got my big promotion at work. But once a month turned into two, then three, then four. She did take me out to celebrate my divorce, making it a point to remind me what a dumb bastard the man was. And that blonde was blonde and didn’t hold a candle to a hot redhead like me.

Soon visits to the fourth floor simply meant being reminded of how much weight I’d gained in the past year. On my last visit, or what I hoped would be my last, I walked up to the doorway to hand in my paperwork and overheard two nurses talking. My heart stopped beating and my blood ran cold. Tears flooded my eyes, dripping silently down my cheeks as I turned away. I stabbed at them with the back of my hand. I wanted to rail. I wanted to scream at the heavens. Instead, my spine grew a sheath of titanium. I straightened my shoulders and dried my eyes. No one would ever know the fear I carried inside.

When the time came, I found myself on the fourth floor of the hospital, bouncing into the room, hopping up onto the chair next to Annie, and calling out to all the nurses in the room, “Hey, everyone. We have a chemo-whore here!”

They all burst out laughing. The look of utter surprise on Annie’s face turned to infinite gratitude. Tears filled my eyes, but these were good tears, the kind that needed to be shed. My cheeks hurt from smiling and my hand from her grip as we reached out to each other.

And together we looked at her chest and cried, “Die, you little buggers. Die!”

Later she asked, “How did you find out? I didn’t want you to know. Stuart didn’t—”

I shook my head no. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Just chalk this one up to a higher authority and leave it at that.”

She gave me a funny little look and shrugged. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I am too.”

I’m not really a believer in paying things forward but I am a friend. She’d wanted to help me, protect me, by not telling me the truth. Now it was my turn to help her, even if I had to carry her on my shoulders to do so.

Miraculously, I managed to make it to every one of her treatments. She went into remission for a short period of time, and though we didn’t get stinking drunk this time, I did take her shopping. Just like old times.

Then we found out the cancer had returned. A light dimmed in her eyes as the truth won out. There’s only so much a body can take, no matter how feisty the spirit. I stayed with her through the third round of chemo and afterwards, bringing dinner every Friday night so her husband could take their daughter out for a while.

Annie lost her battle with cancer on May 22, 2010, seven years and two months to the day after we’d met each other. And a shining light went out in my life. Which was why I was still up past midnight a month later, unable to sleep, and unable to find that spirit I once had. Otis, my black pug (so much better than a husband), could have cared less about the time, he simply wanted to go out.

We walked for what seemed forever, me wishing that fate didn’t have to be so hard or so unfair, and Otis having a grand old time sniffing every bush in the development.

All of a sudden he stopped dead and refused to move.

Huh?

I looked up, not fifty feet from my new neighbor’s lawn, and watched a man in nothing but a low-slung pair of basketball shorts perform Tai-Chi. Transfixed, I stared as his arms and legs turned and slid through the air with the grace of a ballet dancer and the force of a karate master. Corded muscles rippled through the moonlight, the shadows of the evening adding a sensuality to every movement.

Caught, I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to say hello. I dared not because that would break the spell.

What would Annie do?

How bittersweet to hear her voice ring through my mind. *You’re kidding, right?*

Did he know I was there watching?

I answered, certain that a long stay in a sanitarium might be in order. *He’s a stranger. It’s after midnight.*

Otis started dragging me towards him. *Lousy excuse.*

You want a better one? He’s got to be—at least—ten years my junior.

Otis “poofed” and I expected the man to stop and glare at me for interrupting. He didn’t.

And your point is?

My heart sped up. Otis pulled, I yanked back. *This is crazy. Any crazier than the two of us on the fourth floor of the hospital?*

She had a point. *I don’t know.*

Don’t know? You’re pulling on my leg, right? A gorgeous hunk of masculinity is standing not thirty feet away and you’re hesitating?

Yes. He was a complete stranger. But Annie was also right. The point of life was to go out and live it every day to the absolute fullest. *This idea has cradle-robbing written all over it.*

Sheesh. Didn’t I teach you anything? There’s a difference between being scared and being stupid.

But—

Not buts, butt-head. Not everyone gets a second chance.

Otis pulled, but this time I let him drag me. *Go for it.*

My new neighbor couldn’t help but be disturbed now. Otis was jumping up and down and “poofing” at the poor soul, on his hind legs, front paws pin wheeling in the air. He turned, ready I was sure, to glare at me. Then his arms relaxed by his sides. His stance opened and I sensed an innate honesty in him that I’ve only felt from one other person in my life—Annie.

I could feel her smile.

“I’m terribly sorry if we’ve disturbed you. Otis is—” My voice trailed off as Otis was rolling in the grass at the man’s feet. Which had just been properly sniffed and licked to my utter mortification.

He seemed a touch exasperated as he choked back a laugh but hid it well. “No problem.”

“My name is Jennifer.” Holding out my hand, I also held onto my breath, wondering if he’d take the offering.

“Scott.” His touch sent a light shiver down my spine.

His stare seemed to see right through me. Then a feeling seemed to settle inside. “You’re new to the development, aren’t you?”

He smiled. Knowing, kind, confident. I knew this type of smile well. “Just moved in a couple of weeks ago.”

Since teasing came naturally I asked, “Do you do this all the time?”

“Tai Chi?” he asked. I nodded. “Not outside,” he replied, rolling his shoulders. I watched his muscles flex in abject fascination.

“Good thing,” I said, laughing. “Because Mrs. Bernicky will have a field day if you do. Especially at this time of night. Probably call the police and tell them you’re a thief or something.”

“Or something?” he asked, as if to accentuate what he was not. Then he shrugged and grinned. “Thanks for the warning.”

Otis had had his fill and yawned loud enough for both of us to hear. Scott stepped over to him and scratched him behind the ears. Right where Otis loved it. Amazing.

I had to be going. I’d taken up enough of his time already. “It really is late.”

“I guess so.”

Don’t fail me now, girlfriend. “Do you like coffee and crumb buns? I mean, you’re not a health freak, are you?”

He laughed. “Yes. And yes. But I’m open to suggestions.”

I swallowed then plowed ahead. “I live in the gray house. 20 Apple Tree Lane. You up for breakfast tomorrow?”

As the seconds ticked by, waiting for his answer became a lesson in fortitude. “Sure.”

“I make a mean mocha latte. And not Starbucks either.”

“You’re on.” He grinned. “But you had me at crumb buns.”

Funny, how we both hesitated. My feet didn’t want to move. A warm silence filled the air. Then Otis rolled and jumped up as if he’d scared himself silly and the moment was over.

With a yank on Otis’s leash, my dog started running laps—right around the current object of my attention. Getting untangled brought his face close to mine.

He’s got really blue eyes.

“Wait until I get you home,” I muttered. Unconcerned, Otis started pulling me forward.

Obviously Scott heard because he began laughing softly. “Good night,” I called over my shoulder.

“Good morning,” he answered, and there was that grin again, the one I knew deep inside. The one I’d seen on the fourth floor of the hospital on my very first day of chemo, the one I’d seen as she lay in her bed at home right before she passed. A smile that said, I don’t know the word pity, but I do know commiseration. A smile that said the universe was infinite and we were but a small part of it. A smile that screamed, *I am here, I belong here, and I’m not going away quietly.*

And as I walked away, or rather, as Otis dragged me away, I could feel Annie clapping me on the back, her voice ringing with a mixture of love and pride.

Live, you little bugger. Live.

MARIAN CALABRO

Arthur Miller Gave Me Shingles

You never know where you'll find inspiration and aggravation. At a family party, I happened to sit next to a distant cousin who said, "Your dad told me you're a writer." I was in my 20s at the time. He took out his wallet and showed me a picture of his son. "My son works at the Southbury Training School in Connecticut," he said. "It's not a regular school. It's an institution, a place where people with Down Syndrome live. Arthur Miller's son lives there. Arthur Miller, the famous writer. The mother visits every week. The father, never."

This curious fact stuck with me. I had a second cousin with Down Syndrome about fifteen years older than I. Dickie's parents placed him in a state institution. That was common advice in the 1940s: "Don't let the troubled child ruin the family," in essence. Yet Dickie knew his family. They all visited him. They brought him home on holidays. I saw him at Christmas. Even that small amount of contact was enough to sensitize me, which helped when I later wrote two books about the history of organizations that helped people with Down Syndrome and other developmental disabilities.

If my Uncle Dick and Aunt Annie could accept their son, why couldn't Arthur Miller? You know, that Arthur Miller, "the moralist of the twentieth century." *The New York Times* anointed him as such in his page-one obituary, where only the big *machers* go. The obituary didn't mention Arthur Miller's son, whose name is Daniel, just as Miller had omitted Daniel from his autobiography, *Timebends*. At its publication he said he couldn't write an autobiography until he realized he didn't have to include everything. Well, you can't include everything, but you should include the big things. His biographer did include basic information about Daniel's existence, but it attracted little attention.

Arthur Miller wrote *All My Sons*. Just about every one of Miller's plays has a pivotal father-son relationship. *Death of a Salesman* certainly does. How about this son?

The week he died, *The Charlie Rose Show* reran interviews with Miller. Charlie had his daughter, Rebecca Miller, the sister of Daniel, as a guest. "I loved your father," Charlie said, his eyes shining, as he went on about Arthur being the moralist of the twentieth century.

Something blazed in me. I shrieked at the TV: *How about his son?* The next day I started a play about a mother who visits her son weekly at the Southbury Training School. The father never visits. Her marriage continues only because she accepts this situation. There's a daughter who is a go-between, but who also acts out.

I worked on this play for what felt like centuries. I couldn't let it go. I dragged it to a playwriting conference where no one understood it. My bad; it wasn't well written. Again and again I'd hear, "this feels more like a novel." Finally I accepted that. Novels are not my favorite genre, either as reader or writer. So I signed up with a woman who coaches budding novelists and has you write X number of pages a week. Accountability, guidance—just the thing. I even rented a little studio space in Montclair to work only on this novel.

At the gym one hot summer day, I happened to pick up an issue of *Vanity Fair*, a magazine I don't normally read. A cover line grabbed me, something about "The Secret Life of Arthur Miller." Not wanting to spin out of control on the treadmill, I slipped the magazine into my bag. Afterward, in my old Toyota, with the door open and my legs stuck to the vinyl seats, I sat in the parking lot and absorbed the whole story. It was as my father's cousin had described. Except that Arthur made nominal efforts toward the end of his life to accept Daniel, who functioned at a higher level than Miller could have imagined. Naturally, Miller kicked in financially—he could afford to, and it probably soothed his conscience. Naturally, the mother, Inge Morath, was the hero of the story. And she was no slouch in other ways. Miller divorced Marilyn Monroe to marry Inge, who was an internationally renowned photographer.

A few hours after reading the article, I felt an itchy spot on my ribs. It was August. I was sweaty. When the spot didn't go away, I figured it was poison ivy. But why on my ribs? Finally I looked at it in the mirror. Weird blisters, and they tingled.

At urgent care the next day, the diagnosis came in two seconds. "Shingles."

"But I can't have shingles. Only old people get it!"

The doctor laughed. "I have teenagers in here with it. Anyone who's had chicken pox is fair game."

To write a good villain, you have to understand him. Many times I have tried to understand Miller's behavior and my inability

to let it go. I never wanted children, for many reasons, one of which is that I dreaded the chance of having a child with a disability. That happened to a few friends. It changed their lives forever. Arthur Miller didn't want his life to be changed that way, it seemed, and neither did I. On the whole, however, he still repulses me.

My finished play and unfinished novel are still in the attic. The shingles spot still flares up. It is starting to tingle now.

BERNARD FOYUTH

The Heart

They snaked something or other
up a vein in my colleague's groin,
to purge rebellions in his cardiac tissue
for a second time. How flippantly I've been
writing about the heart, which isn't really
a big icicle, not really a cluster
of too much stained glass blocking the light
that craves it. The heart is a bomb,
the real kind whose effects don't wear off
when you close the singing card.
I'm not going to snip it with safety scissors
into metaphor. Have you ever seen raw violence,
the leg in the middle of the road, the sneering
remains in the burned out truck? The heart is real,
and sometimes reality is a thing I love you
against. My passion isn't strong as death,
only kinder. It's not a sparkling city,
minted from years of blood and grief
I won't belittle. It's just the fruit of a dream,
harvested each night and carefully lifted
into the hard world to fill your beloved hands.

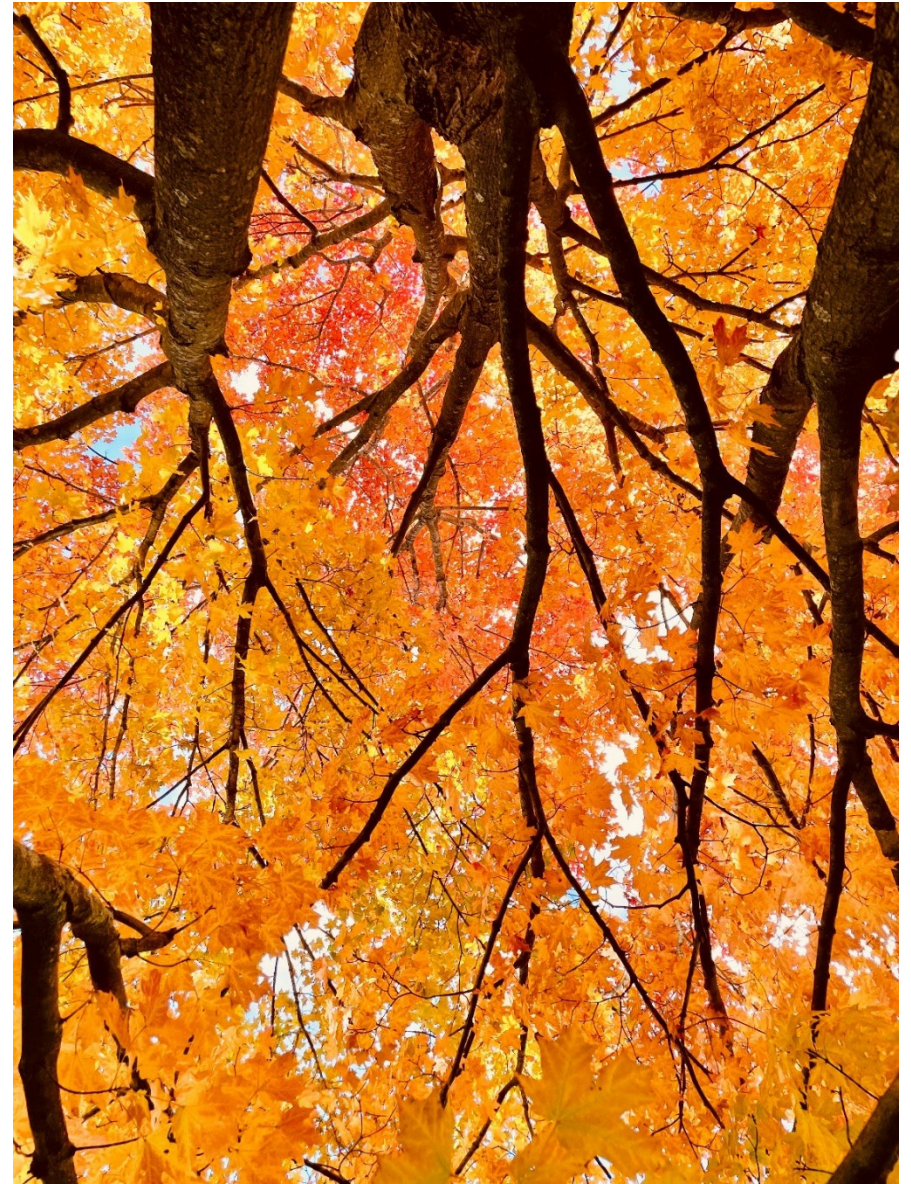
VIRGINIA BARRIE

Eyes

Orange-yellow eyes sit on my bureau
blinking at me in the darkness
I toss and turn in my bed
wanting sleep to come
I turn over again
green eyes sit on my dresser
staring at me through the dark
my hearing aids are charged.

LAUREN FEDORKO

Golden Layers



LAUREN FEDORKO

Falling in love with you in Big Sur

moments before the star unzipped itself into
the bottomless blueblack sky
I realized I was right side up
in the spotlight of the brightest full moon I'd ever seen

and in a millisecond
the star snapped itself
out of the depths of another universe
into our own

midnight mountainside
so luminescent I could reach into it
through the moon-shrouded glory wall of time

you held me to your chest and the star seam-ripped itself into a
supernova boom bang bam bliss your heart pounded against mine
as we looked up to the boundless sky

I want to remember
a l w a y s
this miracle

JEFFREY SCHIELI

Honest

The bottom of North Street
taped off like a crime scene.
Before breathalyzers and M.A.D.D.
Eddie the cop asks me:
Were you drinking tonight, son?
Steam still rises from my '66 Mustang's
straight-six, its Signal Flare Red chassis
spun like a boardgame arrow, faces south
bleeding black fluids down River Road.

The eighteen-wheeler's foghorn still blares out
its warning, the thundering crush of steel-
on-steel concussing my awareness.
You need to answer me.
I am tempted to scratch
my ankle where a fat joint
is tucked deep into my sock.

My father steps out from the gathering crowd,
pulled from his bar perch
by a Borough Tavern buddy,
reeking of Schaeffer and cheap Coronas.
He leans in close: *Son,*
tell him the truth.

My mother appears, pale. We grasp
hands. Eyes locked, the chaos suspends.
You look like you've seen a ghost, I joke.
Over her left shoulder, a wall of crushed bluestone
where my car could have cradled my remains.
I turn to Eddie. *No sir, I'm good.*
Honest.

JULIA CUDDAHY

Farm Flowers



SHAOYAN WANG

Poetry Path

Nestling in the fluffy spots
Let the soft become softer
and the hard stay hard.

Let the road be free and clear
and business continue as usual.

Let pragmatists drop their shovels
and head out to work with no troubles.

Idealists, meanwhile, prefer to linger
to study the snow's meticulous intention.

And how it cradles the dynamic
while embracing this immense quiescence.

Behold this red-brick path
framed by a pure white hue

an aesthetic so sharp and clear-cut
that no matter where it leads to

even a stray deer dancing upon it
could create a beautiful poetic line.

ATHIRA JACOB

My Glass Edges

Today I woke up, made myself tea,
and decided to let you go.

For everything that led to nothing.
The way your eyes lingered on mine,
as we stood a breath apart, in the middle of the hallway,
the way your fingertips brushed against mine,
each time you walked by me,
the way you waited for me, awkwardly
making small talk, waiting for them to leave,

and my heart tripped each time, falling
down a chasm, your touch like the oasis
you stumble into, lost in a desert
that turns into a mirage, sapping up
the last of your will, fighting
this unreasonable, indifferent universe.

You leave each time, and I cease to exist,
wilting, disappearing in the absence of your light,
measuring shadows, counting
the transgressions that led us here,
and I think of your girlfriend back home.

I search for the remnants of my being,
scattered by your whirlwind presence.
I put them back together, like a kaleidoscope,
each glass edge sharpened by the breaks,
forming light into a million stars,
the stars that want for nothing.
Tomorrow, I let you go.

STEVE SMITH

How I Was Taught to Play Harmonica

On a Hohner key of C Marine Band blues harp, same as the one my father had, its comb made of double-lacquered pear wood, brass reed wrapped in nickel plates. It sits silently in the pocket of my cargo pants patiently waiting for me to put on a compilation of John Mayall's *Blues Breakers* or Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee's *Long Way from Home* to begin tapping my foot while I try to blend, blow and draw notes in imitation of them. Even though I'm rusty from a lack of practice, I'm still happy to commune with them and try to get as close to them as I can, then finish up with a tribute to my father by practicing *Red River Valley*, the song my father loved so much.

I remember him playing that tune to me out on the front porch stoop over and over when I was a kid desperate not to let him see me cringe while I listened to his tentative pauses and the shrill squeals of his off notes, trying not to think about the constant fights we were having, but instead paying solemn respect to the comfort it seemed to bring him, despite the visible sadness it churned up.

Now every time I try to dig down and touch those notes I wish I could go back and be on that porch with him again our harmonicas wailing and crying in a mournful duet.

STEVE SMITH

The Raven's Sermon

Strolling on Princeton University campus with my wife
I noticed a sky full of screeching ravens, barrel rolling
and swooping between the gothic spires
of the University chapel where a sermon
was being conducted inside. The solemn sounds of pipe organ
wafted out through the arched entrance as though calling
me in... inviting my seventy-seven-year-old lapsed Catholic self
to come in, repent my fallen ways and be saved.

Inside both of us got dazzled by the brilliance
of the stained glass as we took a seat in the back pew
and listened to a young pastor sermonizing
up on the ornate oak pulpit.
His impassioned voice echoing throughout the soaring apses
lamented the scourge of human hatred and endless war.
He quoted Blaise Pascal, *When you give to God you lose nothing,
but gain everything*, and I was deeply stirred by the words,
imagined going up on the pulpit myself to share
my memories of being a muddle-headed teenager
who went to church mainly as a way to wait out his hangovers.
Eventually I decided to stop going to church, but now I was glad
to be here until I noticed my patient wife shooting me looks
that said she'd had enough; we walked back out
onto the campus square where we were immediately
confronted by screeches emanating from another raven
wrapped in his black robe of feathers perched imperiously
on the chapel's highest spire, blaring his own inscrutable sermon
into the fathomless reaches of the ashen winter sky.

STEVE SMITH

Magical Thinking and the First Snow of Winter

The snowstorm turned the fields and farmland into a wonderland
as I drove in heavy rush hour traffic, winding cautiously
on the slick country roads, my wipers thwacking
to the beat of slow jazz on the radio

Thinking of the friend I just got done visiting in hospice
when suddenly two ghostlike deer darted
out of a cloud of spindrift in front of me, wide eyed
with confusion and fear as I cringed and choked
the steering wheel as though it were a talisman
that could help put a stop to what was happening,
hoping beyond hope that I wouldn't hit them.

Then I felt the impact of their bodies on my front fender,
saw a tan blur disappear in the rear-view mirror,
recalled the fleeting shapes of the deer so graceful and ethereal
while I drove, until another image superimposed on it,
that of the doe and her fawns who had recently taken up
residence under my back porch because (I liked to think)
they could tell I was charmed and therefore they would be safe.

All the way home I struggled to absorb the fact that I had lost
the special magic that up until now had kept me from ever hitting
deer with my car and that I had fallen out of favor somehow
and when I finally got home and pulled into my driveway I jumped
out to check the front of the car hoping for a brief moment
that my special status might still be intact
when at first I didn't notice any evidence of what I feared,
but my heart sank when on closer inspection I saw
the clumps of bloody light brown fur clinging to the car's grill
like indisputable evidence, that no matter how much
I wanted to believe in magical thinking,
I was just like everyone else, bound and wrapped up
in the implacable earthly cycle of life and death.

MAUREEN EGAN RIGGI

Building Icarus

I have spent your childhood building wings,
feathered them meticulously, and outfitted you
for flight. My gaze is always skyward,
face to the heavens with prayer you will soar.

One day these wings will be welded to bone.
In the pain of adolescence, you will test them,
gingerly at first, a flap here and there,
hover mere inches.

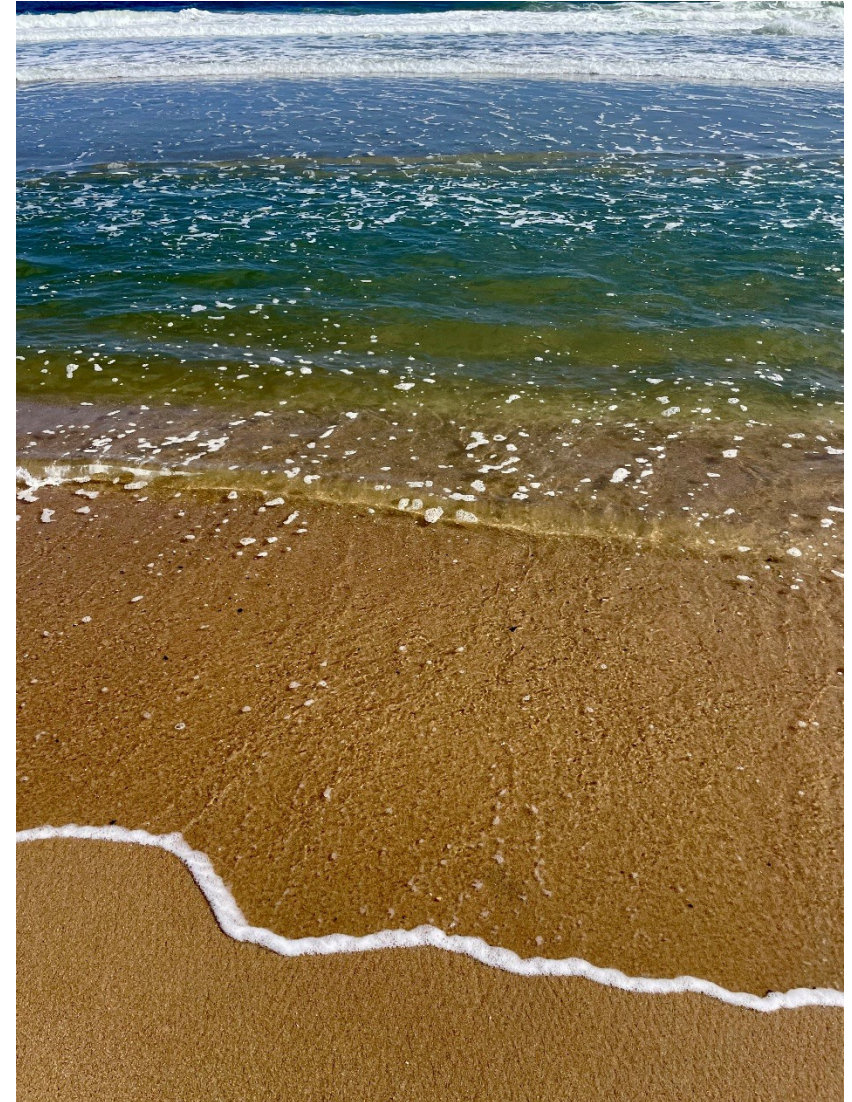
Ah.

No longer satisfied folding feathers
beneath pajamas and ceilings, you go outside,
fan your feathers like a pheasant.
The breeze picks up, you sprint and are off.

I'll watch until you're just a speck on the horizon,
the expanse before you
and between us.

MAUREEN EGAN RIGGI

The Tide Is In



LAVINIA KUMAR

Our May Souls

*Our souls (which to advance their state
Were gone out) hung twixt her and me*

John Donne

That morning, apple blossoms of our separate trees
blended, and, on the blown dandelion seed fluff,
soles of my feet hovered as a sudden breeze
pushed clouds of petals and seed wisps to a white fog.

We—the divided, the together—tried to grasp
our parents' confusion, their nagging yet again
of *our incompatibility*, an old stamp,
old leaves limiting our view to a world gone past.

We, though young, reached for slivers, for glints, of light
between the pink blooms—that apple rehearsal dress—
our feet curled together as roots, our trees yoked tight,
petals flown over our lips, arms stronger than twigs,

bodies and souls entangled till there was no cleave.
And, from germ to blossom, life was ours to conceive.

CHRISTINE CLEMETSON

September Fury

The red and white buoy echoed from Barnegat Bay.

Clink, clank. Clink, clank.

A God-awful sensation of déjà vu sat inside Denise
Mellon's chest. The September air felt colder than usual, more
personal. She tightened the belt on her long sweater.

A fishing boat rambled out toward the inlet, its steady lights
peered through the fog into the pre-dawn horizon.

She inhaled the salty air and walked back up to the RV
campground, which sat in the pine trees, skirting the shoreline.
Their family came every year to soak in the waning minutes of
summer.

But this time it felt different.

Her husband Nick rolled his bike to the path. "Need to go."

The sound of his voice put a funny ache in her throat. "You
sure? The race isn't for two weeks."

"C'mon, hon." Nick straddled the ten speed and adjusted
his helmet strap. "You know I need to do this."

Seagulls croaked from the nearby rocks.

"One morning off isn't going to mess things up."

A gust of wind pinged dirt against the metal bike frame. Of
course, she understood. But today didn't feel right, more so than
usual.

Nick stuck his foot onto the toe clip on the pedal. "We'll
make a fire later, toast marshmallows, whatever you and Charlie
want."

Clink, clank. Clink, clank.

"Okay . . . okay." Denise twisted her wedding band. The
rumble of thunder out on the bay added to the paranoia building
inside her. "But can you do fewer miles?"

"I'll be back before Charlie even wakes up."

"Umm." Denise gestured to the dimly lit window in the RV.
She could picture Charlie's cell phone glowing through the crochet
blanket over his head. "He must've heard us get up."

"Read your book or maybe sleep some more." Nick
fingered her cheek. "Wasn't relaxing the idea behind this whole
vacation?"

"Promise you won't be long?" Desperation leaked into her
voice. "I'm thinking—"

“What is all this, Dee?”

“I . . . don’t know.” A dull throb grew in her head. She edged closer, tugging on his jacket sleeve. “I don’t feel good about this ride. I’m afraid something bad will happen, or you won’t come back.”

“I’ll always come back to you. You hear me?”

“I know. I’m being silly.” Denise leaned in closer, kissed his cheek, and let her lips linger on the woodsy scent of his skin. She let go and stepped back. “Be careful, okay?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.”

As the crunch of the bike tires on the dirt faded, images flashed in her memory. She saw herself inhaling a plastic bag against her tongue, clawing and fisting and screaming, her lungs bucking for air.

What is happening?

She gripped the RV’s bumper and wiped a sleeve across her forehead.

What is this?

She had to get back to Charlie.

Inside the RV, she forced a normalcy into her voice. “Dad left for his ride. Put the phone away and let’s get more sleep.”

The blanket didn’t move.

“Charlie?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

Her hand wobbled on the faucet handle. Uneasiness swelled quicker than the water filling the *World’s Greatest Mom* mug. There had to be an explanation. A reason. Had it been her imagination?

She wiped her face with a wet paper towel and gulped some water.

Am I totally losing it?

She cut off the idea, buried it, not wanting to go down that path. She’d always been the rock of the family, the one setting the morning alarm, making lunches, getting everyone off to work and school. The one who planned vacations.

These visions couldn’t be real.

She massaged the knotting at her temples. Dr. Lupin said migraines could cause weird things.

Once Nick got back, the three of them would have a night together, and things would be back to normal. They needed this family trip.

She needed it.

She flicked open the medicine cabinet above the sink and rooted through the toothpaste and antacids. Nick’s hair gel fell on the counter.

Where was the prescription bottle? Had she forgotten it?

“No, no, no.”

She needed something to help with this pain, now.

But she didn’t trust herself to drive. Maybe the campground store would open early for an emergency.

“Get your shoes on, Charlie. We’re going to the store.”

“At night?”

“Please just do what I say.”

“Can’t I stay here, Mom? Gotta get through this level.”

“It’s four o’clock in the morning. I’m not leaving you alone.”

Charlie shoved the blanket off and rolled his eyes. “I’m ten years old.”

“That, you are.” She smoothed a hand over his crew cut.

His lips twisted in a hopeful smile. “Please, please, please. And can you get me a good snack?”

Denise couldn’t say no. Not this time.

Pine branches scraped the RV’s roof, working through her system like an alarm. “Storm is getting closer,” she murmured. “You sure you’ll be okay alone here? I’ll be right at the top of the path. You went there with me yesterday for firewood.”

Charlie’s gaze was stuck on the screen.

“Charlie? Do you hear me?”

“Let me just...” His thumbs moved fast on the game.

She tilted the phone from his face. “I should only be ten minutes or so. Lock the door behind me.”

“K.”

Outside, she waited to hear the lock click. Cooler air smacked her face, moving the pain into her eye sockets.

She glanced back at the camper but forced her legs forward. She refused to let this headache ruin their plans. A few more minutes and she’d feel better.

A rain drop hit her nose and she walked faster up the path. An illuminated tattered wood sign hung from the log cabin.

Meadow Campground Sundries. Est. 1955.

Recessed lighting bathed the porch. Bundles of stacked firewood butted against the far wall.

A college-age kid in a Stockton University sweatshirt with the hood up, stepped outside the main door, yawning. He tacked a Storm Warning bulletin to the corkboard.

Watch for severe storm conditions and high winds.

RVs: Take down awnings and outside fixtures.

The porch steps groaned under her feet. "Do you know when it's supposed to hit?"

The kid pulled out an earplug, and the *thump thump thump* of his music banged inside her head. "Sorry, what?"

"When is the storm coming?"

"Dad said it's gonna get bad real fast."

A shiver grew on her arms. Nick always had one rule on a camping trip. No listening to news. Why? Why hadn't they at least checked? Her cell phone for emergencies sat right in her purse the whole time. If they hadn't made the stupid pact, she would've seen the weather report, and Nick may not have gone on the ride.

"Does the store open soon?"

"Not until six am. Just getting this sign up for my dad."

Denise looked past him to the darkened windows. "Is there any way I can just buy ibuprofen? Do you have that? I promise it'll only take a minute."

"My dad is at the other side of the campground doing storm prep."

"Please? I have this awful migraine."

He hesitated and yanked a moose key chain from his pocket. "I'm sure it'll be alright."

Inside, from the section marked *Personal Care*, Denise grabbed an individual packet containing four pills. "I'm getting worried. My husband left for a bike ride and doesn't have his cell."

"Don't worry. He'll be back soon." He pushed buttons on the register. "These storms off the water let you know they're coming."

But what if he doesn't come back?

She scooped out a handful of sour patch candies from the jar. Charlie's favorite. She pushed a ten across the counter. "I should've made him take his phone."

"We'll keep an eye out. I'll tell my dad when he gets back."

"Thanks." Nodding, she stuffed the change in her jeans pocket. "His name is Nick Mellon. We're in spot six."

"Will do."

Raindrops pattered the store windows. Could she really trust this kid who barely shaved? Would he even remember the name?

Outside, the clouds rumbled, weighing the fog closer to the ground. Rain pelted her face. She yanked up the hood on her sweater, and half-walked, half-ran.

Lightning flashed in the distance.

How could she have left Charlie? With her free hand, she rubbed the base of her neck and moved faster.

Up ahead, she saw their RV door swing open. What felt like a brick dropped into her gut. A man with a red snake on the back of his black shiny jacket strode up the steps, disappearing inside.

The sour patch candies fell through her fingers.

"Charlie!" She sprinted, mud squishing under her sneakers. Finding the door locked, she slammed her fist against the unforgiving metal. "Charlie!"

A latch sounded, and the handle was released. Charlie stood in the opening, his eyes wide. "Mom, what's wrong?"

She pushed past him. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The man who just came in here."

"No one's here." He pointed to the inside. "See? I've been playing my game since you left."

Her gaze darted from the small kitchen to the sleeping area, to the stall-sized bathroom, and back to the table. She swiped moisture from her cheek. "I . . . I'm . . . sorry, sweetheart. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You're scaring me, Mom."

She was scaring herself more.

And seeing things.

And thinking I'm going crazy.

"C'mere." She kissed his forehead. "I'm being a worry wart."

"When will Dad be back?"

"Soon, buddy."

"Then can I play more now?"

"Yeah, sure."

She paced to the front windshield, hugging her arms to her body. Wetness from her sweater soaked into her thin t-shirt.

Across the soggy path, a man detached a hose from the neighboring RV and stuffed it into a compartment. The red snake on his back glowed with wetness.

The same man she had seen going into her RV.

The pulse hammered in her neck. A memory of that man tying Nick to a chair leapt to her mind.

No.

“Did you get me a snack at the store?” Charlie asked.

Store? She couldn’t think. Couldn’t focus. Something was happening she didn’t understand. Maybe she needed a doctor, or someone who could tell her what the hell was going on. These had to be hallucinations.

The man forces Nick’s head into a plastic bag.

Oh my God.

And tightens.

Her body froze. She swayed, clenching the top of the driver’s seat.

“Mom? Did you get me a snack?”

“Yes... I don’t know.” She stared down at her empty hands. “Maybe I dropped them outside?”

Charlie jumped up. “I’ll go look.”

“No . . . no.”

His mouth dropped open. “Why not?”

“Play on your phone. I need a minute to think.”

She ripped the binoculars from the glove compartment and directed them to the front window. The snake guy latched the side compartment on his RV. Sheets of rain deluged the sodden ground beneath the tires. Why would she hallucinate about a man she had never met before? Maybe she had unconsciously seen him earlier in the day? Maybe he had been at another campsite before and talked to Nick?

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

She crouched between the front seats and tightened the binoculars to her eyes. A chain of lightning bolted across the inky black sky, branching into tentacles.

Where had he gone?

“Mom?” Charlie called. “What are you looking at?”

“Checking for Dad.”

Bloodshot eyes suddenly filled the lens, staring right at her, like a hunter marking its prey. The binoculars dropped from her hands, cracking on the linoleum floor.

She blinked the image away.

It’s not real, Denise.

“Mom, you okay?”

“Yeah, honey.”

She crept closer to the steering wheel. Snake’s RV drove out of the parking spot, the taillights dulling in the gray wall of mist. The air trickled from her chest.

All of this will be fine.

The sky snarled.

“Dad’s out there.” Worry grew in Charlie’s blue eyes. “You think he’ll be back soon?”

“It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay. How about we do a puzzle?”

Charlie tossed the phone on his pillow.

Denise stretched on tippy toes to reach the overhead compartment above the driver’s side and tugged out the puzzle box with the picture of the Statue of Liberty. How many storms had this lady endured with nowhere to go?

As she stepped down, her vision caught on the windshield.

Snake stood in front of their RV. His eyes glinted in the downpour.

Wanting something from her.

A breath away.

She threw the box on the floor and scrambled backwards.

Something was wrong.

“Charlie, hide in the bathroom.”

“Why?”

“Do what I say.” She turned off the main cabin lamp.

“Now.”

He scurried from under the covers and got into the bathroom stall.

Another peal of thunder shook the vehicle, rattling the dishes in the cabinet.

Where the hell was Nick? Why wasn’t he back?

She crouched and dragged her purse off the counter, the contents spilling out. Lipstick rolled under the table. She pawed the floor and snatched her cell phone.

The battery was dead.

From the storage compartment underneath the bed, she grasped the small metal box. Her fingers trembled on the combination lock. She released the lid and yanked out the gun.

“I won’t let you hurt us,” she called.

She darted from window to window, searching the darkness. The haunting, empty eyes jumped into her memory. The smell of dirty flesh. The chipped tooth.

She knew him.

She climbed onto the flimsy bed, her knees sinking into the thin mattress. Outside the back porthole window, the monsoon shook the flagpole on the path leading to the other campsites.

Wind roared in her ears, as if the RV walls disappeared, leaving no barrier between her and Snake. She hurled herself off the bed and faced the front cabin.

And everything looked different.

This isn't my RV.

What sounded like footsteps outside stomped up the RV's entry. Denise turned the gun in that direction, her arms trembling.

"Nick?" Nick?

The door opened and Snake's shoulders spanned the entry. He reeked of stale beer and body odor.

Denise clenched the air in her lungs and fired. And fired again. The handle breathed hot against her palm.

Noooooooo.

But Snake kept coming. Wearing the same jacket.

Claps of thunder growled.

She plunged forward, riddling him with bullets.

But he snatched a black garbage bag from the bed and strode to the bathroom area. As though he hadn't even seen her.

Where is Charlie?

Snake's gaze created a noose around Denise's neck, constricting her ability to think rationally or breathe. He reached the bathroom door, but something drew his attention to the window.

"Shit," he grumbled.

The ugliness in his voice triggered a memory of their last camping trip. Nick had returned from his bike ride and found Snake waiting in the RV. She had already been tied up, but Charlie stayed hidden in the bathroom.

Nick pleaded and told Snake he'd give him his job back at the plant with a raise. Or any amount of money Snake wanted. No one would ever know.

But Snake took Nick's life anyway.

And then it was Denise's turn. She fought and screamed at God until her lips sucked the last of the oxygen from the plastic bag. She died praying the monster wouldn't find her son.

A sob lurched from Denise's throat. The gun thudded to the floor.

Oh, my God. Nooooooo.

What had happened to Charlie?

Someone banged on the RV door. Snake stood straighter.

He hesitated, strode to the opposite end, and peered out the side window.

From outside, a voice called. "Open up. Mike Bender, County Sheriff's Office."

Snake slicked back his hair with a grubby hand and cracked the door.

Bender tipped up his hat, water dripped from his jacket sleeve. A thick mustache weighed his upper lip. "You okay in here, sir?"

"Yeah."

"Bender, you there?" A female voice came on the officer's shoulder radio. "Did you cover sites seven and eight?"

"On six now. Be back soon." Bender clicked a button and looked up at Snake. "You mind if I come in?"

Snake paused but then opened the door wider. "I'm fine in here, sir."

"Bad storm on the way." A wet haze followed the officer inside, drips puddled on the floor. "Lightning struck west of the campground and started a fire. We're warning all campers to stay put until the storm subsides."

"I'm fixin' to leave soon," Snake said.

Denise clutched her throat. The crazy thoughts she'd never understood whirled through her insides. The fear. The unknown about her son.

All of it suddenly became clear.

Is this why she hadn't moved on with Nick?

"Charlie!" The bathroom handle slipped through her fingers. "Are you in there?"

Bender glanced around. "Keep your RV in place until you get the word. Too dangerous to be unplugging right now."

Snake swatted the air. "I'll be fine."

Lightning flashed, brightening the inside of the RV.

Bender gaped and Denise followed his gaze. Large black garbage bags were scattered on the floor. Newspapers, take-out containers, food crumbs, and paper plates littered all visible surfaces.

“Whoa.” Bender smoothed the corner of his mustache.
 “Looks like you had one hell of a party.”
 “Apologize for the mess.” Snake stepped on a plastic bag.
 “I’ll be outta here soon.”
 Denise pounded harder, her knuckles burning. “Please, please Charlie. Say something. Yell! You have to answer.”
 The bulb above the stove flickered.
 “Unfortunately, staying put is not a request, sir.” Bender tipped his hat. “We’ll let you know when it’s safe to pull out.”
 The officer was leaving.
 Snake couldn’t have her son. Not this time.
CHAAAAAAAAAARLIE
 Her guttural, blood-stricken rage tore through the walls.
 The wind whistled outside, swirling with her echoes.
 The officer turned back. “What was that?”
Charlie, scream!
 “It’s the radio.” Snake nibbled on his pinkie finger. “I turned it on for the storm.”
 When Snake turned and gestured to the front of the RV, Bender’s eyes opened wide. As if he recognized something.
 Bender pulled out his weapon and held it on Snake. He slammed the button on his shoulder radio. “Peg, get backup.”
 Snake stepped forward. “What the hell are you doing?”
 “Anyone else in here?” Bender called.
 No answer.
 Denise heaved.
Charlie!
 Bender’s gun stayed steady, but he maneuvered closer to the bathroom. He flipped open the door. Guns and tasers hung from the inside wall. A New York Giants long sleeve shirt was balled up, the name Mellon partially visible on the back.
 Nick’s biking shirt.
 Snake lunged. Both men thudded to the floor. The gun blasted between them.
 Blood soaked Snake’s jacket and seeped onto the floor.
 Denise closed the space between them.
Is he...dead?
 Bender crawled off, his face dazed.
 Denise felt herself getting pulled.
 No, not yet.
 She had to find Charlie.

The blare of sirens outcried the waning thunder. Red and blue lights illuminated the RV in a kaleidoscope of color.
 A man with the name Detective Shack printed on his jacket, joined Bender. They stood over the man’s body.
 Bender rubbed the side of his face. “I don’t usually help with rounds... but with the storm...I recognized the snake on the jacket.”
 “Four years on the run roughed him up, but he kept the jacket.” Detective Shack crouched, looking closer. “We need official ID, but looks like we finally got the shit who killed that couple.”
 “A miracle their son had gotten away.” Bender nodded.
 “If it wasn’t for that kid, we wouldn’t have had a sketch of the jacket.”
 “Silver lining, I suppose.”
 Charlie had escaped.
Thank you.
 Through the RV window, she could see Nick now, standing next to his bike, waiting in the woods.
 With wet eyes, Denise felt the pull intensify.
 She didn’t have to fight it any longer.
 She took hold of Nick’s hand and squeezed. The air warmed, the sunrise between the pines begged them to come closer. But the rustle of leaves forced her to look back. A figure stumbled and thrashed through the thicket, as if searching.
 Cold crept up from the dirt, prickling the skin on her arms.
 Then she saw it.
 The snake on the back of the newcomer’s jacket.

MAXINE SUSMAN

October Hike

My oncologist says I'm fine, the
accountant says not to worry
yet it gets harder as we go higher,
the streambed narrows, sharpened
by the glacier that plowed it
and sowed stones—neither of us

sure-footed as we used to be
but we won't cede our ground—
footing gets trickier, we hopscotch
rock to rock, dodge trip-roots
poking like aging veins, breathe
dank pungent cinnamon scent
of leaves and soil, the smell of fall

while couples, troupes of friends,
families with backpacks and dogs
climb past us—fine, we're glad
we got this far. We turn around
to head downhill, laughing to watch
kids scamper up the trail.

MAXINE SUSMAN

Solstice

This sad year ends
the new one flaps its wings

drafts seep through the sills
the dog lies curled on her rug.

Last night solstice eve
six widows at a feast

a table set with friends
we talk of clay and kiln, travels

of the spirit, pagan hungers.
Nothing has been killed for us to eat.

I drive home, snow lashing the dark
by morning trees sheathed crystal

a blue-bellied sky gusting in.
From now on the light will grow—

time to bundle up, face the cold,
brave the ice, walk the dog.

DAN ZIBMAN

...the fire...

3 February 2016

260 days after Your death

As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
When it was just You, Baby Girl, and me
I stood at Your side, gazing, drifting
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
With soft motion, I bent, placed my lips on Yours, stood, gazed
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
Family arrived, friends, colleagues, neighbors
They ushered past, some knelt, prayed, some stood, gazed
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
I wandered along the line, speaking, embracing,
I drifted
Family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, tears
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
We walked slowly behind Your coffin into the church where You
wanted a service
The pews filled as though it were a high holy day
It was
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
The priest, in his resplendent robes, began
Prayers, hymns
The speakers were family, the readings were of Love
Death was not mentioned
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
Baby Girl delivered her eulogy, voice soft yet strong
The pews flooded with tears
I drifted, yet heard the songs from the vocalist, melodic, soothing
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You
At the service's end, we walked beside Your coffin,
the pews emptied
Standing outside, the hearse ready,
I approached, placed my hands on Your coffin
I drifted, stood, gazed as they drove You away
As You lay in the coffin, before the fire consumed You

LOIS MARIE HARROD

Therapy

Over our veggie lasagna and eggplant rolatini
our meatballs and arugula, my friends

were talking therapy, one shared
the Al-Anon meetings she sat through

while the man she loved was in recovery
and another, the youngest, about going

to a workshop in Spain where there were gruntings
and writhings and gurglings

very much like the therapeutic ruttings and sighings and burblings
in the movie we had just watched—

runnelings, dry-flingings and worblings
which the youngest, who was beautiful, said,

were very helpful, especially *pressing your hips
into the floor so hard they were bruised,*

*you know, you hold a lot of stress in your body,
that needs to be released,*

and I was thinking I didn't want sex with the floor,
but I didn't say anything

because though I have been sad from time to time,
lonely as a louse without a cocker-doodle-poodle,

I have never been in therapy—
though the youngest woman has told me more than once

I need to stand up for myself
and say what I think.

ROBIN CORNICK

The Loss of Two Mothers

“He’s not the father of my kids,” my mother says with uncertainty as she holds up a photo of herself and my father, her tone forming a slight question at the end of her sentence.

“That’s Daddy,” I reply.

“Oh,” she says as she gently places the picture frame back on her mantle.

My eighty-nine-year-old mother had become a fraction...a mere ghost of herself. Dementia—thief of mind, memory, and soul—had robbed her of nearly her entire being.

For the first sixty years after I was born, I knew another woman. That strikingly beautiful mother had flawless skin and perfect white teeth.

In the 1960s, she sped around in her Mustang convertible, top down, with my two younger brothers and me along for the ride. She regaled friends and acquaintances with stories of her years working at CBS for the *Ed Sullivan Show*, where she’d met Vic Damone and a young Elvis. She hosted holidays and dinner parties for upwards of forty guests, serving homemade lasagna or chicken soup or chocolate mousse or spiked Scorpion Punch in the big glass bowl with the silver ladle.... depending on the occasion. She was the belle of the ball at galas during dental conventions with my father—dressed to the nines in sparkling gowns and fur wraps with matching shoes and handbags. She was Mensa-level smart with humor as quick as a whip. She planned cross-country vacations for our family that lasted weeks: scheduling hotels, visits to National Parks, stops at rodeos and meals at local restaurants.

But at eighty-nine, her mind had been reduced to rubble. No longer was she able to recall exactly what she’d worn on her first date at the age of fourteen in 1949.

And so I learned to temper my expectations. Scale back on the responses I anticipated. Hide my heartbreak behind a facade.

I learned not to flinch when she asked whether Gary, my youngest brother, was older than me.

I learned not to be offended when she asked, over the phone, if I would be visiting that day—even though I’d just left her apartment an hour before.

I learned not to cry as I held her hand in mine, walking slowly down the hall in her senior community to the apartment that she could no longer navigate her way back to.

I learned not to get upset when she told stories of how much she adored Ruby—the man she had been engaged to before meeting my father—and how he was her one true love.

Ten weeks ago, in her sleep, my mother quietly slipped away.

She is no longer here to gently pat my hand and tell me — after decades of being my toughest critic—that “everyone should have a daughter.” Or that I “am the best.” Or that there is no way she “would still be alive” without me.

I miss my mother.

Both of them.

CHRISTINE MCGOEY

Happy Day

Sheila stood behind Mary, pulling her hair into a tight ponytail, and twisting it into a bun, fastening it down with clips.

Mary grunted and reached for her head. "Not so tight, ma," she complained, but Sheila batted her hand away.

"It has to be tight. Not a hair out of place. That's how they all expect you to look. Just like you standing on the podium getting your medal after a win." Sheila's face relaxed into the memory. "I know this is Piper's night, but we must remind them that you already have contributed much to the glory of the State."

Mary took this in with the practice of someone used to not reacting to criticism and simply said, "Don't worry about me, Mom. I will be okay."

"Somebody has to worry," Sheila said too quickly. "You can't expect to avoid your birthing obligations forever. You will age out of competition at some point, and you will be able to eat again, and gain weight, and your periods should come back. And when that happens, people will start asking how long before the famous Mary of the National Gymnastics team settles down and starts having her quota of babies."

Mary reasoned she had a few more years before competing with the team was over. "Athletic service has bought many women relief from the quotas."

"Yes, we will hope others remember that too, but the rules are getting harsher, so we will continue to present you as the young gymnast. Wear your blue dress. It will remind everyone of the blue leotard you wore last competition, and they will forget you are fifteen next October."

Mary thought perhaps she could argue exemption from the four children per fertile woman quota because her family had already had enough children to fulfill the quota for the three sisters. Piper was getting the Silver Mother Medal for having five children. Their older sister Emily was on her way to a gold with seven. Together that was already twelve. Enough to cover Mary's quota if you counted the twelve as a total covering the three sisters. Mary could hear Piper and Emily downstairs, moving between Piper's twins in their baskets and the other little ones playing with toys on the floor.

Sheila called down to her two older daughters, "Piper come up and let me give you a hand with your hair. Emily, can you please watch the children?"

"Of course," Emily called back, "and the babysitters are on the way."

When Piper came into the bedroom, she did not look at Mary directly but instead met her eyes in the mirror. "My turn," Piper said, spinning the chair Mary was sitting in and pulling her out by her wrist. Piper plopped down, taking Mary's place. "It's my night; my turn for glory," she said. Piper smiled at her reflection and smoothed the front of her blouse, wrinkled from holding the babies, and thought how right it would feel to wear the medal near her shoulder at the start of the crease. "For to mother is your single duty, your right, your honor," she murmured, repeating the charge all girls learned in school, and which she would repeat tonight when she received her medal. "As others fall to the wayside, you will remain faithful and flower."

Later that night, Mary sat wedged between Sheila and Emily in the District Auditorium, while a choir of young girls repeated the same lines in song from the stage. She looked around at the rows and rows of women invited to the celebration of motherhood, vaguely noting the absence of children, due to the mandate that mothers leave their children at home, tended by government sitters.

But this practice suddenly struck Mary as very odd, as though the idea of children was more important to the State than the actual children. Which led her to think of herself as an abstract idea. She had no real substance or importance as a person to the State; only her role was important. Her whole childhood had been twisted and spun and flipped onto gym mats and hung across beams as a sacrifice to the Dear Ruler, Dear Father revered as he who mattered above all, the one who held them altogether, who fed them, and clothed them, and educated them, and ensured their safety from the terrors of the world. She had been able to travel outside of the limits of the Dear Father, if not his reach, into other lands only as a representative of his greatness.

Even now her gymnastic performances were an extension of the needs of the State and its aging leader, although he could not lift his feet to step upon a mat. These thoughts startled Mary, and she was afraid her face might give her away as a doubter, even a traitor, an affront to the audience of proud families, the pure, angelic choir, and the beautiful mothers

with full eyes and tears on their cheeks. In that moment she knew, *I am not one of you. I will never be one of you. I do not want this.*

How odd then to clap and cheer when Piper's name was called and she stepped forward from the long line of mothers spread out across the stage. There was Piper. There was the medal bestower, a blood daughter of the Dear Ruler, in a glimmering gold, satin suit, pinning the medal to Piper's blouse. And then Piper reached up to pat the medal on her chest, and then out to receive the rose that followed without touching the other woman's fingers, because those of the Dear Father's blood must never be touched by common hands. It was enough honor to hold what one of his blood had held and feel the same green stem. Mary could see Piper was moved because she cradled the flower softly on her bent arm, as if to prolong its life with gentleness. And all through the bestowing, Mary marveled at how she could continue to clap and cheer while inside she withdrew deeper and deeper to a previously unknown corner of her heart where she felt big, and true, and brave because of her secret.

When the ceremony ended and the photographers finished with the medaled mothers, Piper came down off the stage to her family for hugs. Piper was a bit manic with the largeness of her moment and the stress of being so close to the blood daughter. Sheila thought Piper looked pale and sweaty.

"Was it hot up there, with all those lights?" Sheila asked.

"It was, it was," Piper nodded, taking a tissue from the pocket of her skirt to wipe her upper lip, "but so worth it."

"So," Sheila said, "Let's get you out of here and into the cool air. Let's all go for milk shakes and grilled cheese sandwiches. You used to love those when you were a girl."

The mother and three daughters gathered up their things. Emily carried Piper's flower and Mary flung Piper's coat over her arm. Piper linked arms with Sheila, and they led the way through the big glass exit doors. As the four women passed through onto the sidewalk, the wind pushed fallen leaves around their feet. The leaves were past the point of high color and were withering to browns, some spotted with mold. Sheila was not an overly vain woman, at least she did not think herself so, but the leaves caught her off guard. She thought of her own face that afternoon in the mirror as she did the girls' hair and felt her dismay at the growing wrinkles on her cheeks and the age spots near her hairline. What

value did she have now? She might have finished the thought, but Piper slipped on a wet spot, and they lurched not to fall.

"What was your favorite sandwich when you were a girl?" Mary asked Sheila.

"I have to think a minute on that," Sheila replied. "You all know I didn't grow up nice and cozy in a family like you did, with a mama and daddy who knew what you liked and tried to see you got it. I used to pray morning and night to the picture of Dear Father hanging over the door in the children's dormitory, let me be a good mother. I will give everything to be a good mother."

"Oh, Mom," Emily said laughing, "you can be so dramatic."

"You didn't live then. You don't know what it was like," Sheila said, surprised by the sharpness that leaked into her voice. "All these normal things we do, living in a house, going to the District Auditorium for an event, walking down the street to a sandwich place, all that stuff was gone. Food was scarce, power was scarce, water was off most of the day. People walked around in dirty clothes, smelling dirty. Everything was rationed during the war. We were always ready for lockdown because of attacks or what have you. My own mother, I barely remember her." Sheila went quiet as they came up to a crosswalk and stopped for the light with other people. "Let's not talk it about. This is a happy day! Now my favorite sandwich is grilled cheese with milkshakes and my three girls. I am getting a chocolate shake with extra whipped cream." The light changed and Sheila stepped off the curb, restored to the present.

The Sandwich Spot was to the right after the corner. It had been operating in the same place on and off for a hundred years. The Dear Ruler's face on the medallion above the door certified the place and food as wholesome. Emily and Mary went in first. Sheila had booked ahead.

"There you are!" Ernest, the owner, greeted them as they entered. "Congratulations, Piper! Congratulations all around! Sheila, you must be so proud of your girl!" Ernest was in love with Sheila.

Mary thought Sheila would see it, but Sheila never let on. When anyone suggested Sheila should find a second husband, she would say her one true marriage had been to the girls' father. But she would be with him after death. Mary even wondered if her mother liked being on her own. *That would never do.*

BILL WATERS

Scissors and Tape

Way back when I was in high school, there was a sort of analog-tech enchantment to movie projectors that lodged in my psyche, and I think it was rooted in the sheer physicality of the machines. First, someone—the teacher or an A/V specialist—had to either lug the thing out of a closet or roll it into the room on a special cart. Next, the cover needed to be unsnapped, and the reel arms raised and locked into place. Then, the can of film had to be pried open and the reel attached to the projector. A final moment to thread the film onto the take-up reel, and *voilà*: the show begins—and then abruptly ends as the reel jams and the bulb melts the film. “Splice!” someone yells, and the teacher gets out scissors and tape and literally reconnects the burned edges.

That enchantment was enhanced by the sensory qualities of the way those projectors ran: the *clickety-click* of the reels turning, the smell of celluloid warming as each frame passed in front of the high-intensity light bulb. Even the flickery quality of the image, projected perhaps a bit distortedly on the pull-down screen at the front of the classroom, added to the effect that the whole experience was something special—special in the way that all things are that consist of two parts technology, one part luck, and one part improvisation.

I do love digital video, but it takes no special skill to turn on a TV, log in, and press “play.” Technology is amazing, for sure, but it’s all so impersonal, so black-box—nothing you can tinker with if something goes wrong, nothing you can fix with scissors and tape.

Contributors

Svea Barrett lived and taught public high school in New Jersey for almost forty years until her retirement. Her poems have appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Lips*, *Griffel*, *The Rat’s Ass Review*, *Molecule*, and other journals. Her chapbook, *Why I Collect Moose*, won the Poets Corner Press Chapbook Competition in 2005, and her book, *I Tell Random People About You*, won the 2010 Spire Poetry Award. She tied for first place in the Allen Ginsberg Poetry contest in 2013, and her newest manuscript, *Before There Was So Much Sky*, was a finalist in the 2022 Laura Boss Narrative Poetry Book Contest.

Virginia Barrie started writing poetry at a very young age. She has had the pleasure of being published several times and heads up the Senior Poetry Group based at Lawrence Library Headquarters. She is a local actor and director and has resided in Mercer County for more than forty years.

Marian Calabro writes poetry, essays, plays, and history books. Her work has been aired by NPR and published in *Brushfire*, *Italian Americana*, *Kelsey Review*, *Peregrine*, *The Smart Set*, and the Rutherford *Red Wheelbarrow* annual anthologies. Based in Bergen County, New Jersey, and a Rutgers graduate, Marian leads creative writing workshops through the Montclair Public Library.
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Christine Clemetson is the author of thrillers and mysteries. Her latest work appears in *Tick Tock: A Stitch in Crime* anthology and *Christmas Cookies Mysteries: An Anthology Inspired by the Oak Ridge Boys Christmas Cookies Album*. When she’s not writing, you can find Christine reading on her beach chair with a coffee in her hand. She lives at the Jersey Shore with her family. Visit her at www.christineclemetson.com.

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Lois Marie Harrod's recent publications include her eighteenth poetry collection, *Spat* (2021), and her winning chapbook, *Woman* (Blue Lyra, 2020). Dodge poet, life-long educator, and writer, she is published in literary journals and online ezines from *American Poetry Review* to *Zone 3*. Find more info and links to her online work at www.loismarieharrod.org. Her collection, *The Bed the Size of a Small Country*, is forthcoming in Fall 2025 from Kelsay Books

Athira Jacob grew up in India and now lives in Princeton, New Jersey. She divides her time between her worlds of science and poetry. A regular at local open mics, she enjoys all things art and nature.

Lavinia Kumar has published a prose book, *Spirited American Women: Early Writers, Artists, & Activists*. She has three poetry books, four chapbooks, and three anthologies. Recent poems and prose are in a wide variety of journals about a wide variety of topics. Her website: laviniakumar.net; Social: [@commastop.bsky.social](https://commastop.bsky.social).

Ilene Millman writes poems about memories, mud, music, modern times. Her first poetry book, *Adjust Speed to Weather*, was published in 2018, and *A Jar of Moths* in March 2024 (Ragged Sky Press). She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2022 and 2024. A speech/language therapist, she published two language therapy games.

Linda J. Parisi enjoys creating unforgettable characters. She's won the New Jersey Romance Writers Golden Leaf Award and the HOLT Medallion for Speculative Fiction. She just released her debut novel with Harlequin Heartwarming, *Reunion with the Single Mom*. She's the President of Liberty States Fiction Writers and is a mentor for Romance Writers of America. She loves to travel, tries to bake, and lives in New Jersey with her son Chris, daughter-in-law Sara, and Audi and Archer, a pair of pooches who had her at *woof!*

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Maureen Egan Riggi is primarily a poet, but photography is the way she locks in memories. On her phone camera, Maureen loves to capture spontaneous moments with family and friends. Using her DSLR, she loves composing dramatic photographs as well as close-up images of plants and insects.

Riggi writes about motherhood, loss, self-identity, and relationships. Recent works have appeared in *Kelsey Review*, *US 1 Worksheets*, and a self-published chapbook, *A Mother's Heart*. Maureen received a Pushcart Prize nomination from *Kelsey Review* for her poem, "Casting the Stone," in 2024. She graduated from Stockton University.

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Steve Smith earned a BFA at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Steve's poems have appeared in *Kelsey Review*, *US 1 Worksheets*, *The New Jersey Journal of Poetry*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *The Barefoot Muse*, as well as the *Midwest Prairie Review*. Steve resides in Pennington, New Jersey with his wife, Fran.

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Dan Zibman is the grieving husband of a remarkable woman who died in 2016. He is the father of a darling daughter, a father-in-law, and grandfather. He has a BA in Religion and an MBA from Temple University. He was an amateur and semi-professional soccer player for twenty years and is a veteran of the US Army (1965-1968). This is his first publication. He lives in Princeton Junction.

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Barbara Krasner holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a PhD in Holocaust & Genocide Studies from Gratz College. A Best of the Net, Best Microfiction, and multiple Pushcart Prize nominee, her literary work has appeared in *Nimrod*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly Press*, *Cimarron Review*, *Consequence Forum*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *LIPS*, and elsewhere. She is the author of four poetry chapbooks, *Chicken Fat* (Finishing Line Press, 2017), *Pounding Cobblestone* (Kelsay Books, 2018), and the ekphrastic *Poems of the Winter Palace* (Bottlecap Press, 2025) and *Insomnia: Poems after Lee Krasner* (Dancing Girl Press, 2025), as well as three novels in verse for young readers, including *Ethel's Song: Ethel Rosenberg's Life in Poems* (Calkins Creek, 2022), co-winner of the Paterson Prize for Books for Young Readers, Grades 7-12. Forthcoming in 2025/2026 are a Holocaust survivor short story collection, *The Color of Time and Other Stories* (BlazeVOX) and an ekphrastic poetry collection, *The Night Watch* (Kelsay Books). She is the recipient of the 2024 Fiction Prize by *Folio Literary Review* for "The Newcomer," and the 2022 Miriam Rachimi Microchapbook Award for poetry, *Miss Emma Lazarus Enlightens the World*. She serves as Director, Mercer County Holocaust, Genocide & Human Rights Education Center housed at Mercer County Community College, where she is also Associate Professor in the History and English departments. Visit her at www.barbarakrasner.com.

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Submission Guidelines

Kelsey Review is published each Fall. Submissions are open from January 31-May 31. We respond no later than August 15. The *Review* considers submissions from those who live and/or work in the larger Mercer County area.

We accept all submissions through our online submission system, Submittable, at <https://kelseyreview.submittable.com/submit>. We no longer accept submissions by postal mail (or email!). We welcome simultaneous submissions, but we ask that you please withdraw your submission (or send us a message through Submittable if it's poetry or art) if your work has been accepted elsewhere. All rights are retained by the author. *Kelsey Review* remains available online after publication.

COVER LETTERS

Every submission must be accompanied by a cover letter that states your connection to Mercer County and/or New Jersey and a third-person bio of no more than 75 words.

GENRE GUIDELINES

Prose (Fiction, Nonfiction)

Length: Maximum of 3,500 words

Although we accept nonfiction work on any topic, we are especially interested in essays and articles about the people, history, businesses, educational institutions, artistic traditions and/or government of Mercer County and the surrounding area.

No multiple submissions

Poetry

Send no more than six pages (submit all poems in one Word or PDF document, Word preferred)

Artwork & Photography

Upload as a jpg file

Multiple submissions allowed

Except for art and poetry, *Kelsey Review* generally only accepts one item per author. This means a submission may include multiple pieces of art OR poetry. A writer may not submit in both the prose and poetry categories.

