

Cool Beans Lit



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COVER IMAGE

My Room by Stefania Morgante

Cool Beans Lit

Volume 1, Issue 1

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Introduction

Fall 2023

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Cool Beans Lit. We hope it enlightens, entertains and resonates with you long after reading it. We are grateful for our fantastic contributors who represent a wide range of ages, cultures, background experience and walks of life.

We created this literary and art magazine out of a sense of urgency and also inspiration. We fear the advent of artificial intelligence eclipsing all sincere forms of human ingenuity, creativity, thought, sense and feeling. Only humans can detect and appreciate the most subtle nuances in the meaning of a word or the stroke of a brush. Our publication can help ensure that authenticity will not be rendered obsolete.

We feel honored to highlight both established and emerging writers and artists who have yet to be recognized for their talents and insights, including those who feel marginalized or underrepresented. What better way to feel valued and supported than to be published with an indelible mark that was born of a lifetime of journeys, dreams, struggles and losses.

We want to share the beauty of the written word and artistry with as many readers as we can. By putting out quality curated publications, we hope to continually attract new authors and artists with unique perspectives. This issue covers many themes with a focus on human resiliency and nature's beauty.

Since life can feel so linear, we absolutely need art, music, poetry and prose to make it the wild ride we all deserve. Enjoy our magazine!

Lauren Avedis
Editor

J.L. Stagner
Art Editor

KAITLIN KISWOJO



To Flourish After Death

JESS RIDLEY

Acrylics

My first memories of you are painted in watercolor,
How the willow cast a pale green glow on your face,
The paint smudged around your body, a glowing aura the color of your skin.
Your purity shone back then with that aura.

Then you became acrylics;

Dark and concrete.

Less free,

Less pure.

Cold black paint on your lips and hair,

Oil pastel and white chalk made up your once peach-colored skin.

Drawn too quickly by an uncaring artist, an uncaring father.

You stand above me, your cold, unfeeling paint dripping,

Spreading like the black tendrils of a virus.

Right onto me.

Each drop lands like a punch to my face, an attack on my mind.

Acrylic shades of purples and blues blend around my eyes,

The red paint under my lip cracks through the pink pastel.

And when your bone-white hands reach around my neck,

Pastel blue covers my face.

Thick and heavy on my watercolor body.

Until I can't stand.

You took me by the shoulders,

And dipped me into the acrylics with you.

ACE BOGGESS

Dead and Buried

Walked among strangers
hand in hand with a lover,
stopping to note a child's toys—
elephants & cars—or slightly-
wilted flowers in a vase.

Stood across the street,
smoking & staring at totality,
vastness, green as an aurora.

Though I collected names in a journal,
to go & say *I know you*,
speak to any absence,
I found no comfort in it
like cocktails after work
or the strained, bland plot
of a television show.

I'm not a man who entertains
the invisible, preferring
to encounter those living,
trade life force & philosophy
until a moment passes.

Before the earth, the crossing.

ADITI GARG

Lightness

Her dreams on her shoulders,
Dead weights on her feet,
The things people choose,
Their own ringside seat.
The ride was fine,
I tried walking in her shoes,
Indeed a wonderful time,
Just overlook the abuse.
I didn't fail to see,
She couldn't lose the weight,
Of expectations to be fulfilled,
Dragging her down with bait.
The bait of promise,
Of can bes and will bes,
Fulfilled it enchants,
Yet, no forever in these.
Lighter, the load,
Being laid back,
Tighter her hold,
On track.
In the now she finds,
The lightness of being,
Without a care on her mind,
Filling her life with living.
She rises with what
Keeps her awake,
Falling only for,
Picking up what's hers to take.

KAITLIN KISWOJO



Seraphic Reverie

SYLVESTER KWAKYE

Remembrall

today, I arranged a playlist for myself
from the ecstasy and euphoria
and the sweetness you brought
it was those arrays of songs that could understand my heart.

I plugged in the earpiece to disturb just myself.
the tune sank deep into my veins
and iced my blood
with the many memories of promises

my bleeding heart pumped goosebumps
on every sheet of my body
especially those parts that came in contact with you
and I couldn't help those love poxes
the least of what happened

the most I care to acknowledge:

cigarette — a bad thought I had
but how was the ice going to melt?
two shots of tequila, I tried 7 times
each day
I made friends on the street
and fed strippers.
I allowed strangers a corridor in my brain
to do their jobs as therapists and psychologists

I burnt our pictures
and cursed the day I met you

not knowing you were around
testing how much I cared about you.

ANNE BOWER

A woman named – What is her name?

Food pantry's well-stocked bins and coolers
in old wooden building tucked behind
converted mill building,
driveway pocked and muddy.
Milk and cereal, canned stew, oversized cucumbers.
She hauls her take to the old Subaru,
drives past sewage plant and fading maples to the
rental with cracked windows, abstract of her days.
She's clean now but mom has her son,
scorns her pleas for loan.
Town's gossip travels with her,
like a scarlet O blazed on
her worn sweat shirt.
Each Thursday she drives past her son's school,
up uncle's gravel road,
vacuums and dusts, irons light blue shirts
and his wide-waisted khaki pants,
wipes counters, table, shines the kitchen faucet,
and when he opens the door at 6:15,
back from the store's long aisles,
she's ready on the plaid sofa,
only the kitchen light
pale on her washed skin.

MAYA JACYSZYN

The Hug

felt like handles of a wicker basket
your shoulders kneaded down into bone lumps.
My fingers grieve the loop of your suspenders
how they'd wriggle under their stretch
brace for a long sling shot pull,
a reminder that you too lived your life as a prankster
all those years ago, swiping cigarette butts from cobblestone
and whistling at nuns from your motorcycle.

When I was young, you rolled up a tissue and
placed it in my hands;
I still feel its starchiness as I rub your back.

We'd dangle it around Nonna's nose in her lamb-eared sleep,
the way you flashed your Cheshire teeth as
she swatted our buzzing fly.
I visited today while you were napping,
legs warped off the bed in some pipe cleaner craft,
your skull shedding like cherry blossoms.

We're two strokes in and
all I can do is smooth these sheets,
think to the card games
and how all you heard in church was "cheeses,"
try to make this bed a bit comfier than the day before.

MYKYTA RYZHYKH

You Were Not Born Yet, So Sleep

You were not born yet, so sleep.

You will be lulled by the winds of wandering on the rocks of the future.

The winds will age you.

Posthumous ants will eat you.

You are blown away by memory.

You will become a dot.

Now sleep.

You may not be born, you may remain crippled for the rest of your life - such are the bloody colors of birth.

Now sleep.

Until you had to become the product of the work of historians, do not move, so as not to wake up the minds of the neighbors.

Circulatory system of sleep. Lymph of consciousness.

We were all fish. We should all become birds.

Myopia of nothingness. The blindness of the stones we once were.

The strength of the stones we once were.

Kill me with your love

You were not born yet, so sleep.

JAMES B. NICOLA

Tautology and Paradox

“You’ll get here when you get here.” This I know.
No god can have it any other way.
It’s true whether you travel fast or slow,
and you will stay as long as you will stay.
Could it, though, be any other way?
Could you get here, say, sooner than today?
The answer to this, practically, is no;
but let us be impractical, and play.

“It is what it is.” This we have been taught,
though that’s not why it’s a taut-ology.
One might as well say it’s not what it’s not.
Neither’s of as much interest to me
as whether it can become what it ought
to be, what it might hope that it might be:
a better version of itself.

You see

me now, yet I was nothing before you.
If I’m you’re mom or dad, this can’t be so,
yet seems to be. And it is always true
if you’re mine—unless somehow we choose who
our parents will be. I believe I knew
before I was, when I was nothing.



TAUWAN PATTERSON

Badly Drawn Boy

here lies the
frame of a man
EXHIBIT A
paint by numbers project
designed spread about remarked on
a sketch done many times over
the Knight in shining armor
the young man still a child
the dreamer, lost soul
selfish lush addled
can't tell he nuthin'
enough designs and glimpses of flair to
illuminate the flip book
the bound, tight collection of he

I suppose this is how to be drawn

canvas after canvas
starter after starter
mold upon mold
hollowed out pounds of flesh
EXHIBIT A
EXHIBIT X
to the Y
to the Z
colored in
flesh and bones
rights and wrongs

TAUWAN PATTERSON

the Knight

the Duke

the Wretched

the Scorned

a tight collection of HE

edited by the originator and creator himself

edited,

filled in and sketched by

a slew of outside artisans and collaborators

the brand new, the well knowns

the brief stops followed by the walk on by

that open and inviting composition

the etch-a-sketch

whose knobs be turned by many souls

the frame of this man

hollowed out pounds of flesh

REBECCA DIETRICH

MMIW

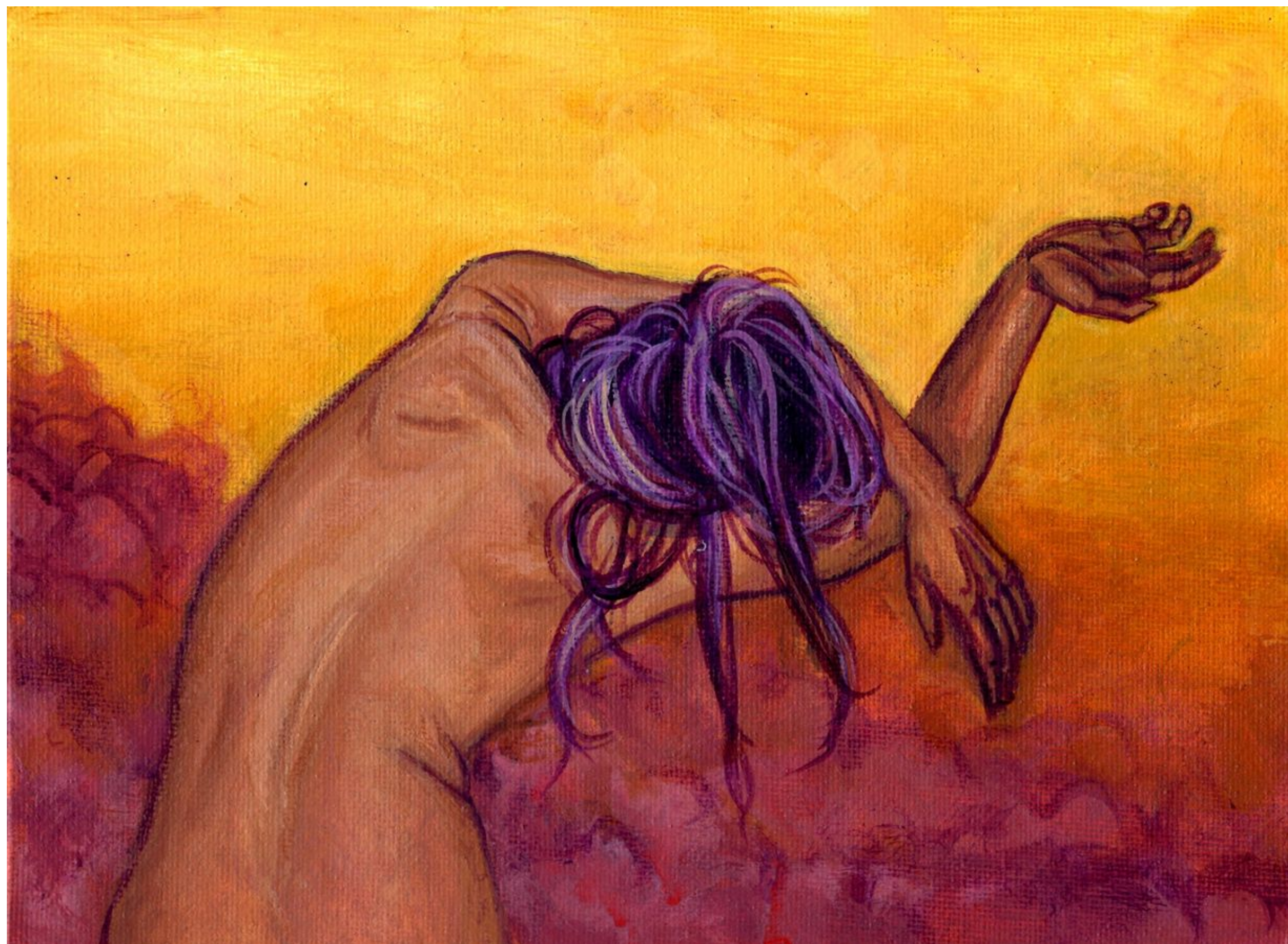
My sisters, lost in the veil of night,
Stolen by echoes of colonial might.
Pleas went unanswered, a deafening void,
As men turned their gaze, truth they avoid.
Now she exists as another name,
Blurred in the shuffle, concealed by shame.
A fate shared with countless others found,
In a narrative woven on ancestral ground.
Missing, murdered, silenced in time,
Indigenous voices lost in genocide's crime.

ERIN JAMIESON

Glass Rooms

In glass rooms
I find the bleakest
light- not from the sun
from the shadow of yesterday's
moonlight, kissing my skin periwinkle
until my body forgets what it feels like
to be held, to be warm, to be anywhere else
without cavernous ceilings and listless people
who smile and nod at the right times
without listening
to a word

LARISSA HAUCK



Calm Before the Storm

CALLIE CROUCH

Rubber Band

It wasn't until I walked out
of work tonight
that I noticed the rubber band
on my wrist.

I'm not sure at what point
over the past nine hours
I decided to stop fiddling with it –
stop stretching and bending it
to fit around my boredom –
and instead slid it
onto my right hand.

I started to think
it didn't matter, that
my wrist is a just-as-worthy home
as any stack of cash
in this register.

As anything it was *actually made*
to hold together.

That I'm just as worthy of being
held together.

So I feel it pulling out
pieces of my curly arm hair
and I think of all the money
it's touched, all the people it's
had the pleasure of being close to
by means of simple handholding
and association.

And I take the rubber band with me,
and I leave it on and
take all of them with me too.

Allowing everyone to keep on
holding me together.

KAITLIN KISWOJO



No Flowers Bloom Without Wavering

KAYMIN HESTER

Breakdown Baby

I'm on the come up, the
 broken down baby
 reanimated; heartwreck
leaves no proof of life, restless ache
 reminded of harder days
 to come. I'm on the
come up, crowned and cold
 and calculated, crowned
 in gold and cruel—no stakes,
nowhere safe, striving for something
 to crave. I'm on the come up,
 clear eyed through smoke and
clouded day—still and loveless, missing
 rust drenched window to the
 soul, rot in the soles, the
staggered beat of each stutter step.
 heart wrenched pound, fever
 dreaming pale redemption into
being, nothing wavered in
 the face of flame; there's rot
 in the snow, too black to breathe,
fever swearing it'll burn away
 infection in the undergrowth,
 moths crowding the inferno
of my spine. nervous invention studded
 with spores, diamond eyes all
 coal at their core; I'm on the

KAYMIN HESTER

come up, but all I know is what has been
fed to me. all I know is what I've
been told: mourning leashed sky,
the keening of empty mind, tongue hollow
with cold–songbird's false sob, wild
thrash in bruised night, panting soil
gasps in tandem with mine–tendons wound around
fingertips, cat's cradle of soundless
time–the grief of peace, the knowing
there was nothing left to miss at all.

ROSEMARY ESEHAGU

Version 2.0

Version 2.0, new and improved.
Not better than or equal to.
You call her woman.
Somehow the efficiency of her creator
in not needing so much raw material,
was proof of her second-rate status,
of her continual dependence on man.
Never mind that this woman
has complete form, lacking no part,
that her beauty brings men
and nations to their knees,
that her mind, its capacity
to nurture, inspire or
contemplate multiple variables simultaneously
is unparalleled,
a mystery to man. But alas
maybe it's much simpler,
perhaps the relationship between versions
is big brother and little sister.
Then where is the protection,
the responsibility of their elder?
Where is the focus on advancing
the young, sacrificially,
almost to a fault?
Perhaps instead it's like the big brother fuming,
sharing attention and recognition.

ROSEMARY ESEHAGU

And so, throws tantrums,
like thunder raging in the sky,
provoking parents to buy
a watchful eye that alerts to mischief
from big brother's sister.

Version 2.0.

Why were you created?

ROSEMARY ESEHAGU

Before We Get Too Old

I watched you leave.

You slammed the door

but, at the last minute, changed your mind
about slamming it.

You caught the cacophonous bang of the door
with your hand whose four appendages
paid the price of your indecision.

You left,

suffocating your yell,

just as you prepared to free them.

Your face wrinkled like the lines
of the crumpled newspapers that broke the day's bad news.

Your hands fisted and readied to pounce,

but you did nothing, except leave—

another argument we could not have.

We owed so much debt and pain

from the others we have yet to settle.

You walked away, never once looking back,

your head held up high,

your feet dragging so I heard each sluggish step

for seconds more after my eyes could no longer see you.

A tear from your eyes, even if borrowed

or an act aptly executed for a time like this,

would have released the ocean behind my eyes

and released memories of why we were.

I would have remembered

your jokes that cause bursts of teary raucous laughter or

ROSEMARY ESEHAGU

your gazes at me that beseeched the world
to pause so you had time to take me in,
your heart salivating in yearnings for me.
I would have remembered that time at the beach
when we licked the salty water from each other's skin,
quenching our thirst with each other,
then watching the waves fall upon waves,
splashing and frolicking with no shame under our adoration.
I would have then had the courage
to call your name,
to call you back to me.
Sorry.

VANESSA CERASULO



Embracing the Grandeur

TSZ CHING CHAN



Middlesex

TOM SQUITIERI

Soul Flower

The island girl rushes to me
There is no escape
Her heat is coffee and whiskey combined
To wash over me with pulverizing passion,
Grind into me and leave me a pile
Of smoldering ashes

each time I try to walk,
the dizziness of our love forces me back down.
My soul dancing from her wildness
Her hurricane fury
Igniting all of me
I wait
still and framed,
Soothed in my hobble

You know why
You are silent.
You wait, knowing
That shiver is coming
Just one, faint
Exhale
Not a sigh. Not a gasp.
Just that release
measured in the
waiting and wanting

As the whisper words
Reach your neck
Letting the exhale join
The almost silent sonata
For the moment
You are here.
Here.

TOM SQUITIERI

Wonderfully enrapturing
For the moment
I am yours,
fleeting and permanent simultaneously.
that darkness and its light,
this moment.

You come back
You inhale.
But not all the way.

The sky is still still.
Just as am I, on the deck.

There is always a moment
in which — if you are truly looking - you see
the rays through the clouds that point to me.
To radiate and envelop
A soft heat of passion that is incandescent
If you are truly looking

Now, I will dare to share
my shadow morning dance with you
and dream expectantly
The whisper words are eager

JOHN GREY

Time to Leave

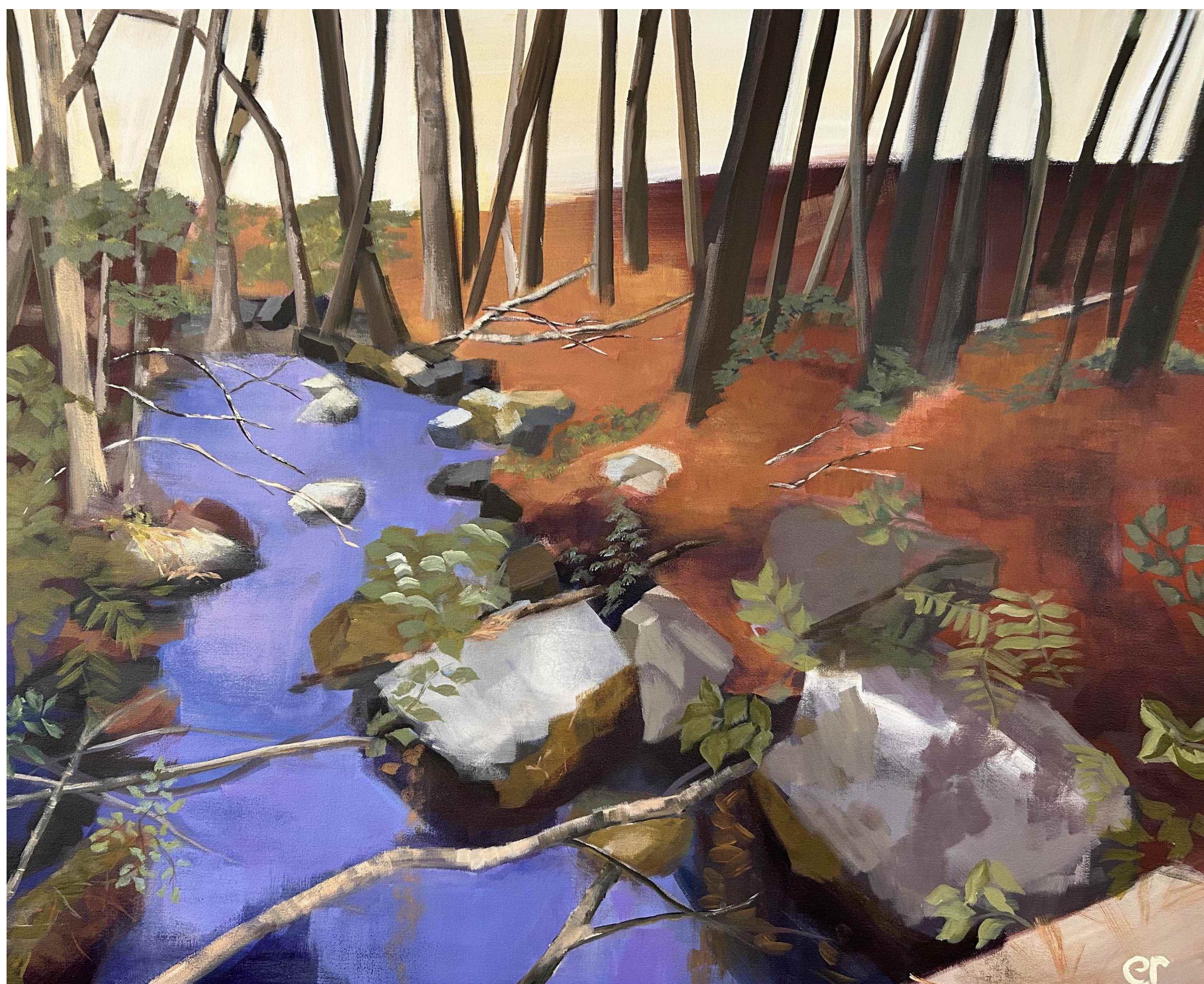
In the magic air, the hushed autumn whispers,
leaves skim lawns, static-y shadows
pace the edges, birds winged-up,
prepare for the trip south.

We stroll these halls of ancient torture,
gold and red, the sky's palette,
you like Pinturicchio's "Portrait Of A Boy"
with your young face, long flap of hair,
and the beginnings of a beard aging your soft chin,
and me beside you, anxious to be moving on,
as old school buildings pretend to be real substance,
even as wings beat in the trees above.

These feathered visitors have done as much as they can
in the summer months just as we are finished
with the preparation, can only cast off from here,
even if we lack the flying apparatus.

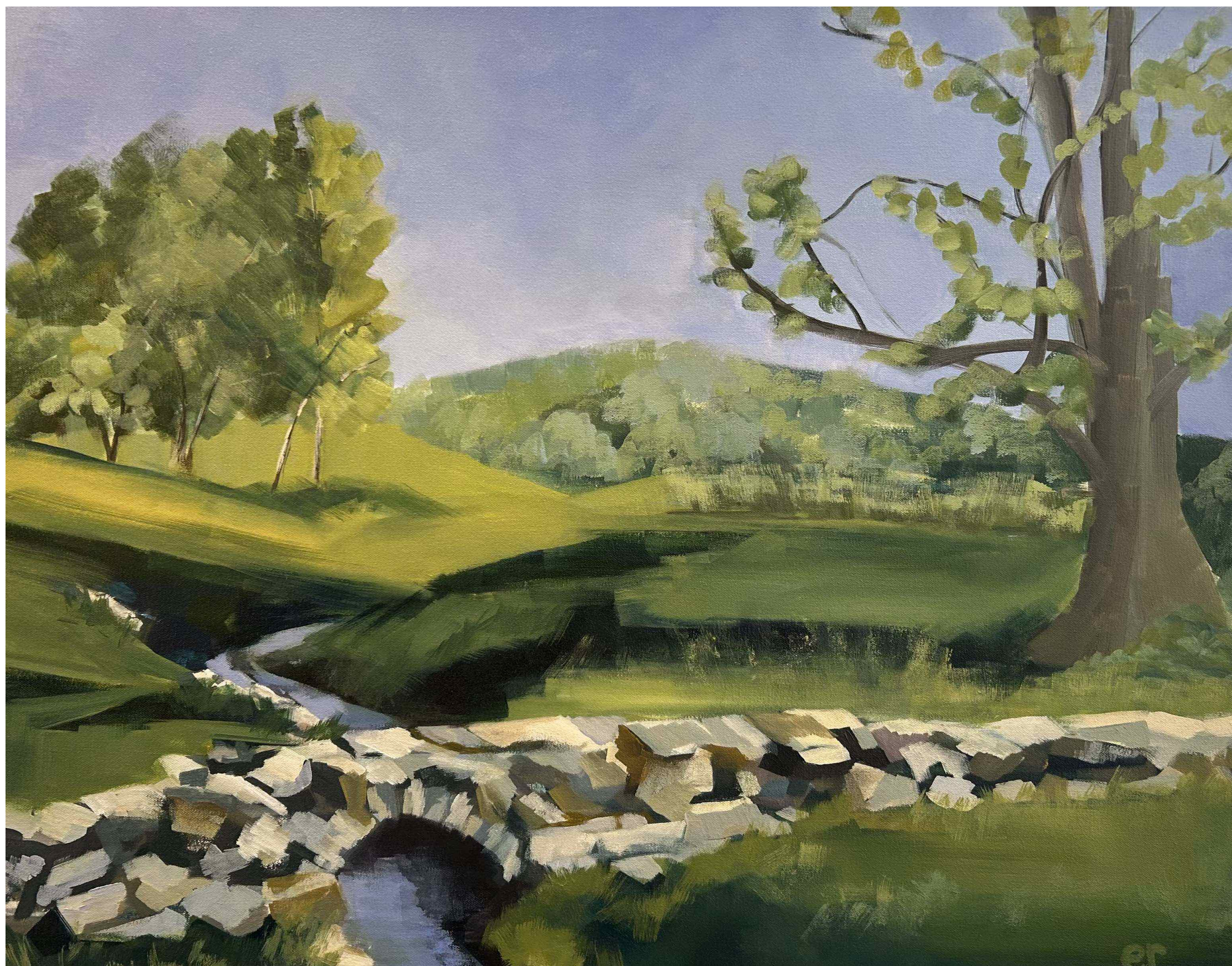
But my imagination's like nothing I have
known up to now, and the coming twilight
mirrors the dream world you plan to enter into –
one day, we said – and repeated like a child's
alphabet – and now one day is here.
Unlike the birds, every direction is south to us.

ELIZABETH RICKETSON



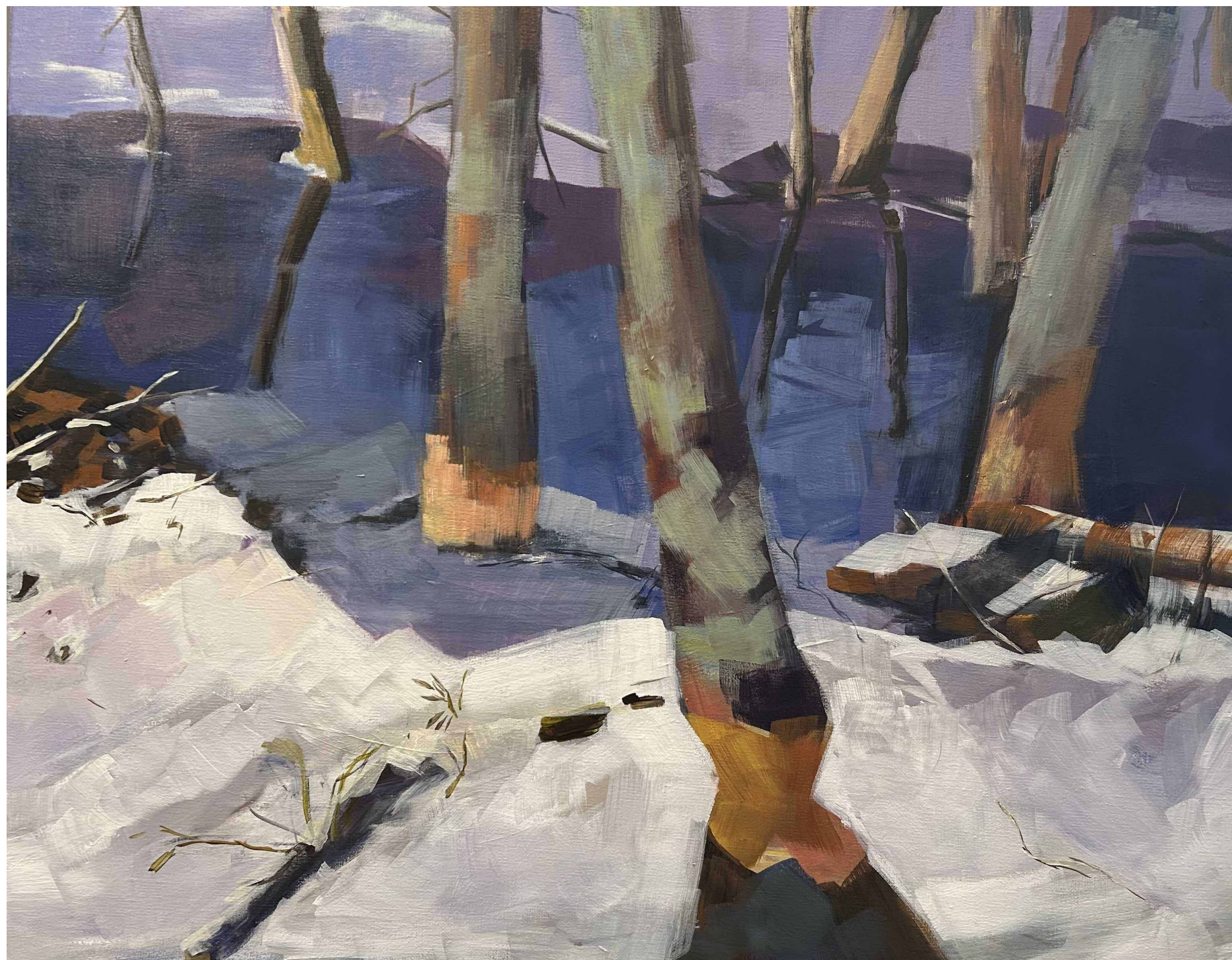
Trail Run

ELIZABETH RICKETSON



Along the Ottawaquechee

ELIZABETH RICKETSON



Adams Street

CLS SANDOVAL

Dancer Stretching by Edgar Degas

Each day, I learn the steps
I work until my toes bleed
I remember as a little girl
how graceful the ballerinas looked

My grandmother warned that
it wasn't all glamour
that there was a hidden pain in the
beauty and grace

I didn't listen

I don't think I believed her

But the ache in my feet
doesn't compete with the
despair my heart is left with
from the loss of

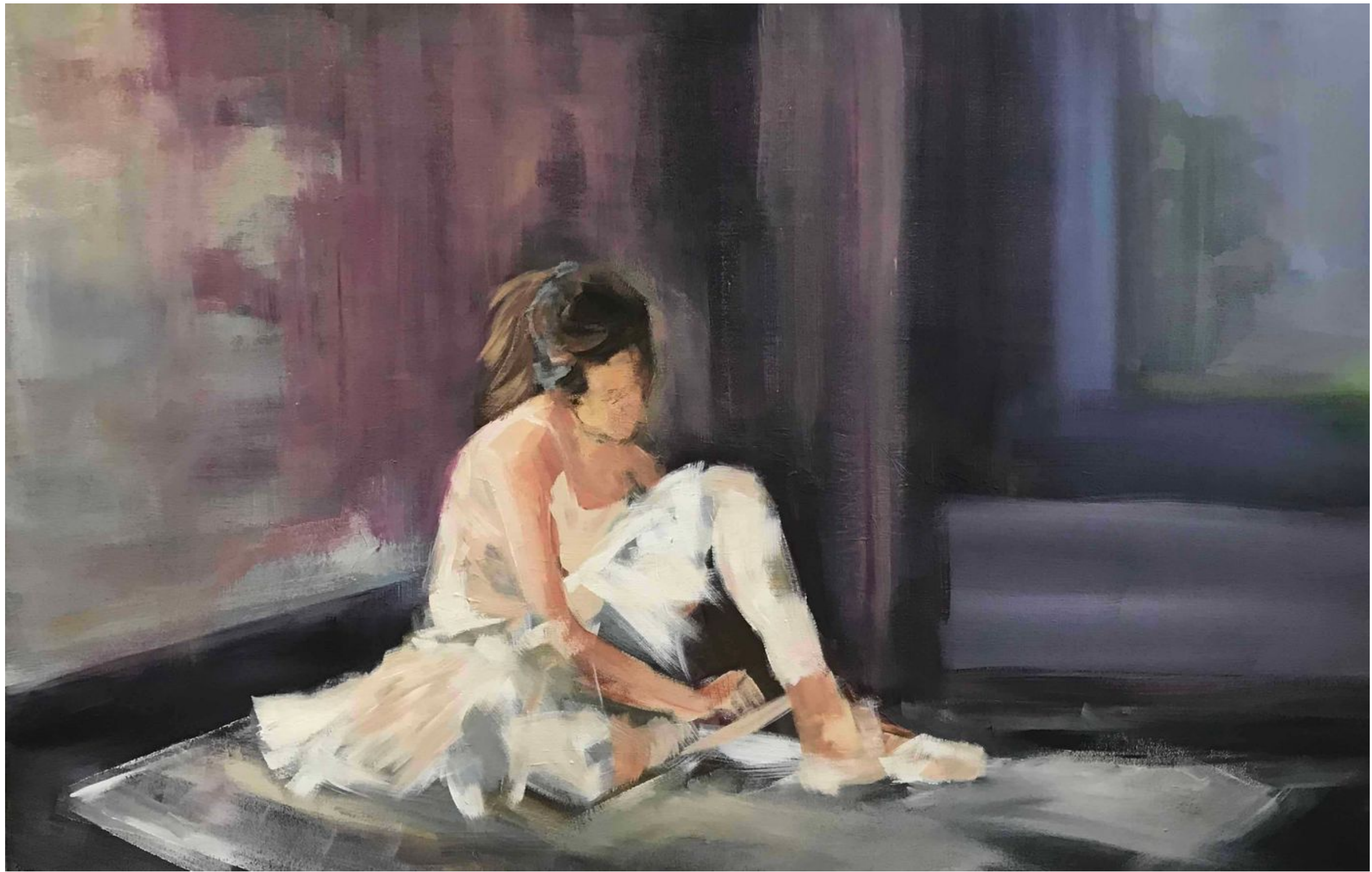
my grandmother

ELIZABETH RICKETSON



Forward Bend

ELIZABETH RICKETSON



Practice, Practice, Practice

NICHELLE TAYLOR

a friend to all is a friend to none.

I am a whisper, an undercurrent of voices carried
over blaring beats and lyrics that extinguish light.
They dwindle me down until I am just a dot
on a tattered map left blank and unexplored.

I thought being small would make me nimble,
an acrobat midair, unable to be clasped
in rough, grubby hands that mold me, fold me
like a pile of unread and forgotten letters.

Instead, making myself slight conditioned me to step lightly,
tiptoe across crumbling earth, fall through gaping holes.
I fit perfectly in a corner, pocket-sized and agreeable.
I draw the shutters closed and wish for something,

anything to ease shame that leaks from the pools of my eyes,
a river down my cheeks. I dream of a day I can remove my mask,
allow the words to pour freely from my unrelenting mouth,
I will no longer be ignored; I have permission to take up space.

ISRAEL SEGALL

Real or not

As I emerged from lethargy I questioned the certainty of the moment, of you, of me, of us.

Perhaps subtly I left my imagination in the kaleidoscope of hope.

Too many images, multiple sensations that were cracking with splinters of truth.

Maybe you don't exist. Nothing so good is true.

Delusions formed with glances, with the scent of coffee, with flying commissures.

I wonder how long fantasies live and when they return to being reminders of what it takes to be happy.

If you were real my ears would stop listening to the drizzling murmurs, dulled by your breath.

If you weren't I'd make you live in memories, in nooks and crannies, no one could reach.

If you were real I'd offer a feast of kisses capable of remaking your story. Let each one be a container of passions and sins. Silent reverence from my lips to yours.

Portuguese explorer of the borders of your neck, of the sinuous lines of the map of your fears.

If you were not let me compose you with the last note of my guitar, make you tangible, palpitating, turbulent, and docile.

Let me feel you as a shooting star, a bearer of desires, a healer applying an ointment of caresses to the invisible scars of my life.

Real or not, you are a reflection of my mirror. You are and will be a you, an I, a we.

MICHAEL MORETH



Nitid

STACEY ROBERTSON

Mustang

We weren't going to last. I knew it for sure when you had your freak-out while driving down the gravel road, cursing at every pebble that smacked your car's undercarriage. The sunlight turned the tops of the trees a neon green and that road was the sunniest I'd ever seen Montana get. And it was the first time I'd witnessed a bipolar person losing their shit.

That car was everything to us. It was us, and maybe that's why you got so upset.

The other boys had trucks but you had that Mustang, black and low to the ground. It didn't make sense for Whitefish but neither did you. Neither did I. We were impractical city kids, admiring a landscape the country people thought we had no right to see. You'd pick me up and we'd waste gas and time.

You told me you loved me and I didn't say it back.

"You only love me for my car," you muttered, and at that moment I almost loved you because you were right, because you'd spoken the truth, you'd figured me out.

I can't remember who advised me to take that summer job at the resort. Up until that summer, I did everything I was told. But I got to that circle of employee cabins and met my roommate, my housemates, the little box that would be home for the next few months and it was like I'd landed on the moon but couldn't leave the spaceship. That small hill of dried grass had a view of nothing more than the highway below. I'd walk down the hill to the mountain lodge where I sold overpriced t-shirts in the gift shop and then walk back up the hill at the end of my 8-hour shift.

You busted me out of there.

Everyone would see your car pull into the circle, dark and sleek. The guys watched, standing on the porches of their cabins. But they never said anything. What could they say? I'd grab my jacket and climb into the passenger seat, my place.

You still had a pager. You sold weed. You worked in the kitchen at another resort. You were a reluctant townie, transplanted to Whitefish after a dust-up in

STACEY ROBERTSON

Peoria. I thought that pager was so funny. People never used those, not the people I knew. And your clothes were all wrong for Montana. There was a uniform for those parts—a Carhart jacket, overworn jeans, and work boots. You wore wide baggy black pants and oversized shirts like you were in a hip-hop group. Your white tennis shoes wouldn't stay clean. You looked ridiculous. I was embarrassed whenever you got out of the car. But most of the time we stayed in the car.

We never took the popular road, the one for those tourists who wanted to see Glacier National Park without getting out of the car. No, we took the other highway, the one that climbed through the green hills of the Blackfoot reservation, then ducked into the dense tree cover at the base of those picture-worthy mountains like the wooden rafters behind a stage set.

We met at a Reggae Fest. You were one of the few guys dancing in the drum circle. My friends had mostly gone to sleep but I liked to raise the sun. You did too. You danced your way over to me, head bobbing, and told me your name was Timothy. The next day I learned that you went by Tim and asked you why you hadn't said so.

"I use Timothy for the ladies," you said, and I howled at the silliness of it, the honesty of it.

I was never that honest with you. I couldn't tell you that I would never stay with a guy who didn't know about mutual funds and compound interest. I could never tell you that I'd seen what happens when you marry the lovable fun guy, and how it's not so fun. But I complimented your car. And I let you have my body, for you seemed to like it more than I did.

We watched the sunset over pools of glacier water hiding behind the places where tourists took pictures of mountain goats and bluebells. We made out on the warm rocks of a plateau with no name, and then watched pondwater slap against multi-color stones.

We didn't know what to call the white-trunked trees with speckled bark. But I could tell that they were changing colors.

STACEY ROBERTSON

“Yeah, we have fall here,” you explained, with a hint of pride. I’d never seen a fall. My coastal Californian home didn’t have seasons. I didn’t point out that I’d miss the fall, that I’d be back in college before those trees did whatever they were going to do.

You told me about one of your mom’s old boyfriends in Illinois and how he’d dragged her across the floor by her hair and that’s why you were here. And then you took a deep breath of mountain air, that clean, pure air, because stories like that didn’t belong in places like this.

Whenever you touched my fingers I wanted the touch to move further. And you knew this. You knew it and you never overused that touch because you knew if you did that I might one day say no. I might tire of you.

We went to a concert and I lied and told my boss I had diarrhea. We went to backwoods bars that didn’t card me, bars where old men were glad to have me. We smoked weed constantly.

I swam naked in a mountain pool of glacial water. I was sick the whole week after. You told me that would happen, but I had to feel it, to know what it was to bathe in bottles of Evian, to touch water that was purer than me.

One time I asked about your disorder. You told me that you’d stopped taking Lithium because it made you drowsy.

We had conversations about how to peel potatoes and the purpose of fleas. You said you wanted to go into the entertainment industry. You didn’t say you wanted to be an actor, but I knew that’s what you meant. I was glad you didn’t say it aloud.

We drank mushroom tea on a hillside behind an out-of-season ski lift. You’d found a lakeside overlook with warm rocks jutting from the hillside. The wind was biting but we didn’t care. I sat between your legs, my back against your stomach, and we watched the clouds blow along like they were rockets in a race. We ate It’s-its and Ding-Dongs as the lake water turned from teal to navy. I slid my thumb through the puka shell necklace I’d stolen from the resort gift shop and you warmed your hands under my sweater. We didn’t know the names of the powder-blue weeds that grew between the rocks or the saucer-shaped yellow

STACEY ROBERTSON

flowers that hugged the hillsides, but I knew that where you found one, you found the other. They went together like the predictable pairings of a Safeway grocery bouquet.

One day you took me home to meet your mom. She said that I was good for you. She said I stabilized you. I thought that was too bad because I couldn't be that person for you.

Your mother put on makeup and looked so pretty, her face so fresh, pink lips and blonde hair pulled back in a gelled ponytail like she was going to work at a bank and not going to clean motel rooms, not like she was a person to be dragged across the floor.

I never thought of staying. Or coming back. But you had this idea, this hope of us being something more than a summer romance. It was the bipolar talking, I thought. Or maybe just that boys fell in love so quickly.

We visited our favorite rock before I left. The sun might have warmed us but it got caught behind a cloud. The rows and rows of trees looked menacing, like that part in a movie before the action starts.

Today I'm that lady in the wide-brim hat with the SPF 70. I stick to the marked trails, tip-toeing around delicate primrose and trumpet lichen, trying to make myself as small as possible on this earth. I always have the appropriate shoes. I eat a plant-based diet and avoid sugar. I meditate on purpose. I lose my boring car in parking lots. My husband works in finance.

I see a Mustang now and I see an old car, heavy and irreverent, from a time when people didn't worry about the future, when they lived on the planet like it wasn't going anywhere and time was something to waste on the road. I see a Mustang now and I look away.



Scared of Death

TATIA MGOW

The Blue Knight

What a word: Tumor. It cannot be mine. It cannot be true. They must be wrong. It must be a rumor.

“You own it,” they said.

“I never bought it,” I cried.

“Take care of it now or you might die.”

Ah, there it is. I was slipping into rhyme in an attempt to bring structure to the chaos coursing through me. I had done it since childhood. Parents fighting? I had a haiku for that. Mean kids at school? I had a limerick for that. Brother arrested? I had a beat for that. War and pain? I had verses for that. But this diagnosis was beyond rhyme or reason.

Outside of the bad news clinic, under an olive tree, I sat. Metal-green leaves, leathery and lance-shaped, dangled over my head. A peace offering to me? Admittedly, there was an arrogance on my part. *Me?* They were talking about *me*? Wasn't this supposed to happen to people I didn't know?

In the arboreal splendor, a bird sang sweet. The feathered one knew nothing of my diagnosis. The clinicians offered no prognosis. “A wait-and-see approach” was all they said. I wondered if I would soon be dead. There I go again, trying to rhyme my way out of it.

The traffic on the street moved, unabated. No one noticed me, no one looked at me. They lived their lives while I contemplated my end. *How dare the world go on without me? How dare they act as if everything is okay?* I'm no virgin to bad tidings, but this news hit different.

The days that followed, we lived in fear, but I had only one episode of tears. My partner, DeeJ, and I fought to keep our spirits high. We played music, the soundtrack of our lives, but the tunes that once brought dancing joy only brought melancholy and a sense of farewell.

My mother called: Should she travel to me? Should she be there if this was goodbye? I declined her request. Perhaps her absence would keep me alive.

I was tortured by the belief that my death would let others down. Who would do this? Who would do that? Ah, but you see, the world does not revolve around me.

TATIA MGOW

Practical matters provided much-needed structure. An advanced directive, financial concerns, the old “getting your affairs in order” scenario while I concurrently underwent pretesting. Chest X-ray, EKG, blood drawn, type and cross, an offer to meet the priest. I became exhausted and surrendered to the process, physically present but mentally detached.

The morning of whether or not I would live another day was serene. A typically hot August day was not to be found. Instead, a fragrant morning, a kind sun, a temperate breeze. These are the things that brought comfort and ease.

We were silent in the car as I was brought to face the knife. My partner, DeeJ, was afraid, not prepared to lose half their life. Cards and phone calls from family could not abate the fear. The time was ripe. My fate was near.

The waiting room was not quite right. I paid out thousands to a woman with a hard face, uncaring of my impending date with the sharpest blade. On the battered television screen, there was news with ugly scenes. A mass murder, too common, too accepted, drove a stake through my frightened heart. Barbaric images flickering that no impending patient should have to contemplate.

They call it pre-op, that purgatory. In a dimmed room stacked with patients, my nurse was robotic, following a list of orders, not taking into account that I was human. *See me! Can you see me?* No, I was just another patient on the conveyor belt.

I was parched, having consumed nothing after midnight. When the nurse gave me a sedative to take by mouth, I eagerly slurped the liquid like a stray cat finding a fresh water source.

Then, the gurney began to move. DeeJ kissed me on the head, told me they would be waiting on ahead. A new nurse arrived and took me away from all that I loved. Her pillow-soft body wheeled me down the hall. My arm was too heavy, I could not wave to DeeJ. With the relaxing pill, I was beginning to fall.

DeeJ then reappeared, running alongside the gurney, unable to let go. At the doors for authorized personnel only, DeeJ disappeared into a glow.

Through my gauzy filter, a figure appeared swathed in dark steel from head to toe - The Blue Knight. He asked me if I was ready to fight.

I saw the stainless steel table. A man covered my mouth, but I had nothing to say. Naked, alone, with strangers. I felt the cold on my back and all went black.

TATIA MGOW

In the theater, I surrendered everything to The Blue Knight. My body. My dignity. My very life. When it came down to it, there was only The Blue Knight and me. For the armored one to do this, to be more intimate than any lover, I needed to believe that I was more than a vehicle, that he was more than a mechanic. I needed to know that I was extra, that I was special.

With his glinting sword, The Blue Knight expelled the invader and delivered me back into this world on a river of blood.

They shook me in post-op, alarmed that I was so difficult to rouse. Anesthesia hovered and asked me to come back. He said that the operation could not have gone better, but I had lost a lot of blood. He compared the invader to the size of a small watermelon - juicy and thick, swollen and red.

The Blue Knight set me up in a room fit for a king or a queen, surrounded me with ladies and lords-in-waiting. The room, a kaleidoscope of glassy things, where from the dusky corner, The Blue Knight pulled the strings. My hand reached out to him. For comfort. For connection. But The Blue Knight receded into the inky shadows. I experienced a sense of desperation. I *needed* him, but he would not come to my bedside.

In a brief moment of lucidity, I believed that with the cutting over, the hardest part was behind me. But I was wrong. What followed was pain I believed was dispensed only in a supernatural Hell. It was a depth in which I had never before been plunged, a fall down the deepest, darkest well where I writhed in agony without relief.

In that noisy mechanical bed, I got no sleep as the monitors set off alarms and sent nurses rushing to my side. DeeJ paced with worry and fear, but I was gone, drugged and captured by a specter unseen.

In the days that followed, I stumbled down the hospital corridor with my steel and plastic partner, my IV stand. I had been ordered to walk, ordered to stay active. Alongside me, strangers, also patients, the walking wounded, were also on the clinical racetrack. They were slow. I was winning the race. I wanted to keep going, to get away from my room, away from the needle they frequently plunged into my belly to prevent blood clots.

TATIA MGOW

Through the parallax view, I saw The Blue Knight only in flashing glances. In his armor of blue, his face was concealed and he was standing, always, at a great distance from me. The glint off his armor was blinding. In my state of total vulnerability, a break in my psyche then occurred. Though he kept up his resistance, I unequivocally considered him my savior. My weakened state bizarrely believed that without The Blue Knight, I could not function, that his very existence provided me the oxygen to live.

His flinty exterior, perhaps it has to be so. To do what he does. To see what he sees. I was there in the chamber of oncology. I heard the screams. I heard the cries of disbelief as judgments were doled out. He can't absorb the strife of us all. He had to save himself, too, from this cancerous brew.

And then, in a breathless moment, when he was required to make his rounds on me, there was a sliver, just a sliver of the human instead of the mechanical knight. He told me he had won many battles, but sometimes, he lost the war. And then, he looked down at his feet and took a deep breath. I could see the sadness carved into his face. I could hear the echoes of the ghosts who haunted his space.

When he raised his head, the impenetrable Blue Knight was back. The human was gone. Blank, lifeless, unwilling to share. I didn't ask questions. I didn't dare.

My sentence was delayed another week. The tumor was too strange. Another pair of eyes, a pathologist at the university, would have to discern its margins. Tick-tock, tick-tock, the counting down of the clock.

When my sentence finally came down, I learned that I was free of the beast. Cured under the knife. In my state of repair, the shattered remnants of me sought to be whole again, but I found myself afraid of the dark - not because The Blue Knight was there lurking in the shadows, but because he was not there.

I felt different in ways that I could not fully understand. I no longer have the body I was born with. I don't feel like me. I don't look like me. Am I a man? Am I a woman? Does it even matter? I am a human who was given the gift of being born again, but I could not ride on that wave of gratitude just yet. The experience caused me to emotionally regress. Not even DeeJ could save me from the childish slide. I was convinced that I would only be okay if The Blue Knight was by my side, even if he remained at a distance in the shadows. I sobbed that I

TATIA MGOW

needed him. Each day that took me further and further away from The Blue Knight, from his rescue, I felt like a vessel unmoored, allowed to drift on the sea, hit all too often by the rogue waves of life.

But I could not cling to my perceived savior, The Blue Knight. He was already off on his next quest. To wage a battle. To win a war. To save a maiden, if he could.

Only the passage of time can hold up the retrospective mirror, if one is willing to reflect. At a distance now, removed from that chewed up space, I can see now what I couldn't see then. I had transferred all of my strength onto The Blue Knight. I had believed only he could save me. But soon, I began to realize that *I* fought the battle. *I* got up and out when my body refused to move. *I* battled the demons that visited in the night, nightmares fueled by opioids with their sinister come-hither.

Physical therapy offered up its own challenges, my body demanding to rest or worse, to surrender entirely. Beneath my baggy shirt, the disfiguration, the ragged scar from sternum to pubis, its own special burning Hell.

My mind pushed back at the unseen forces that demanded that I give up or give in. I fought to break through anything that was trying to limit me.

The battle to recover over the next several months was an education of my body, of my mind, of my core, and my spirit. I was not a victim after all. I did not need the man in the dark shadows to rescue me. I saved myself.

I am The Blue Knight.

LOUIS STAEBLE



Rise For Me Great Wonder

CARL BOON

Cross-Country

Mort and I lost touch right around the time his wife got diagnosed with breast cancer, but it's not like we talked a helluva lot before that. I would call him on his birthday, which was also my birthday, and on Thanksgiving, but it was always the same—not much new here, not much new there. Maybe he'd leased an Olds, maybe I had some dental work done. How's the kids? That kind of thing. He was already living out in Arizona by that time, and he and his wife Simone were operating one of those fake-authentic Indian gift shops that cater to tourists. She was into that stuff we call New Agey nowadays: candles and books on meditation, crystals and sleepy music, which fit right into the spirit of the place. She was also a poet, which I found weird because I thought poetry went out around the time long-distance telephone service came in. Mort said some of her poems were published in magazines, but I never came across any at the library or the Bridgewood Mall. By the time we lost touch, he was helping out with the shop while doing a little landscaping on the side, which in Mesa meant rearranging rocks for retirees. He was always complaining about the lack of water. I could sympathize.

Mort's my twin. He's three minutes and twenty seconds older than I am, and we grew up together here in New Rochelle. He and Simone moved out to Arizona two weeks after our folks died. It was January, the roads were icy, but they'd insisted on their usual Wednesday evening bowling and dinner with the Fergusons. My father was never much of a driver, and the wine he'd had with dinner didn't help. He lost control of the Buick on 125 and couldn't slow down sufficiently before a pine tree intervened between that moment and their future.

He died instantly. My mother died three days later. Their funerals were held together, the coffins side-by-side in Keller's on Main Street. It was a frigid afternoon in 1980, and to me grief and cold weather will always be synonymous. When Mort and Simone left for Arizona, I made arrangements to sell our place on Holmes Avenue and move into my parents larger place downtown. I settled with Mort on \$25,000, which was enough for them to stake a nice down-payment on the Indian shop. My wife Shirley was happy to see them go. She never liked Simone, who resembled the wife in that Jack Nicholson movie, *The Shining*, in an unpleasant kind of way. Then began the period of infrequent conversation—the phone calls, the birthday cards for the kids, the occasional disputes regarding the

CARL BOON

changes I was making to the old house. They were necessary changes—kitchen remodeling and the like—but Mort's a nostalgic man who wanted to remember how things used to be.

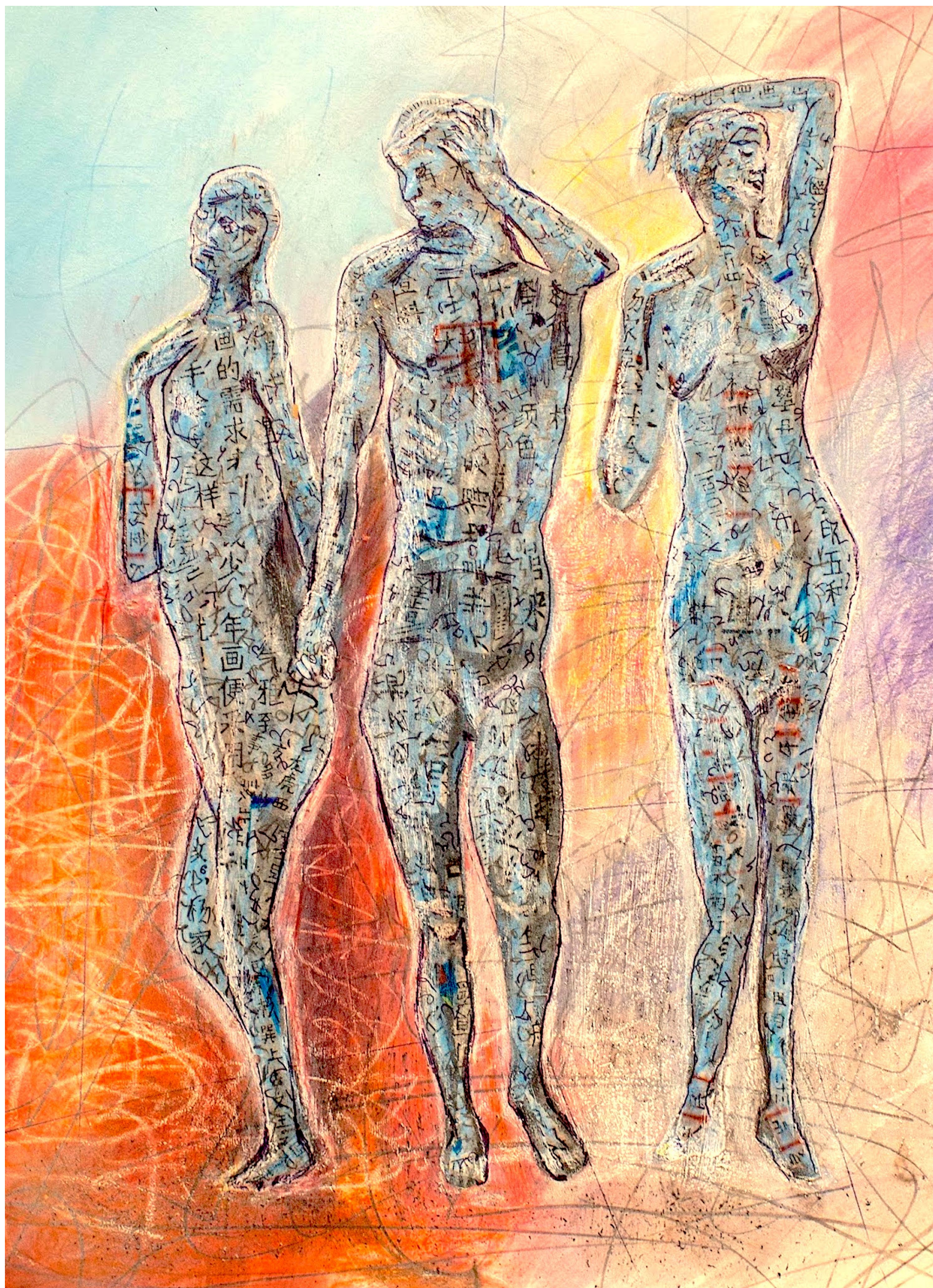
It never surprised me that Mort had married Simone. To me and Shirley, they both seemed like relics of the past. Hell, they sold relics of the past, even though most of them were probably manufactured in Taiwan. Poets by nature are involved with the past, and Simone's clothes, even when she and Mort lived in New Rochelle, reminded me of the past. Long skirts and strappy shoes, turquoise and silver. She cooked in clay pots. Even back then, they had Indian stuff all over the family room: masks and statues and little reminders that pointed to the everlasting connection between "man and the natural world." Plus, she didn't eat meat. I don't know how a person can feel right without the occasional salami sandwich with mustard, but apparently she could. She didn't even eat fish, not even the stripers I hauled from the ocean from time to time. "Carl," she said, "that fish had a mother, too." I guess plants don't have mothers. I guess I was like Shirley: I was happy to see them go. We never planned to go out to Arizona and they never planned to come back to New Rochelle, and I suppose that unspoken-of arrangement was all right.

Then Simone got sick. Mort called to tell me the day Clinton was inaugurated. I guess that was 1992. The crux of the matter was she was gonna face a long period of chemo and likely lose one of her breasts. I offered my condolences, mine and Shirley's, and then I didn't hear from Mort again. When I called on his birthday, the machine picked up. Thanksgiving came and went without a call from him. Bad blood simmers, and I suppose it was Simone's illness that made it boil over; I couldn't think of any other explanation. Shirley said we might go out to spend a week or so at Christmas—or maybe in the spring—but I knew she didn't want to see Mort and Simone. She wanted to rent a car and drive up to Los Angeles to see a taping of *The Price Is Right* in person. She even took a note of the ticket address that December. I told her I thought it would be rude to fly all the way out there, spend a day or two with them, then go to California, and she gave in. I tried calling on Christmas Eve, and then again on New Year's Eve, but the operator said both times the line had been disconnected. Concerned, I placed a call to the Mesa Post Office to inquire about an address for Maurice and Simone Newlander, but the woman said their mail delivery had stopped in October without a forwarding address. I was flummoxed.

CARL BOON

My kids were home for the holidays. Maureen was a sophomore at CCNY-Buffalo and Sean was a freshman at Syracuse. I was gonna ask them what I should do, but they were lost in worlds of their own—Sean was planning to go Greek (Sigma Chi was his choice) and Maureen had just started dating a boy from the City. That's the case with kids: when you don't need them, they're right on top of your toes; when eventually you do, they've already left. A twenty-year-old can be sitting in the kitchen, but that doesn't mean she's actually there. You folks who are parents can understand. Shirley told me to leave Mort alone—"a man's allowed to live the life he wishes"—but I wasn't sure. Back then she was drinking more than a few gin-and-tonics a night and there was always a six-pack of beer close to me. We were decent parents, we paid the bills and tuition, but Mort remained on the edges of my mind. He was my brother; my blood was his, but he was gone.

The following Sunday the kids went back to school, and Shirley and I were alone again. It was a cold, cloudy day, and I suggested on a whim that we clean up the grill and do steaks. Steaks, baked potatoes, the good stuff. While I scrubbed the grill, Shirley drove out to the IGA for porterhouses (we meant to go big), potatoes, a bag of charcoal, and a peach pie. The grill had been my father's, and it flamed up as well as the day it was bought. As the steaks cooked, we drank bourbon in the cold and told stories. She had never known her father. He'd died in the war along with a slightly older uncle. I told her that my father probably should've died, too—he fought at Guadalcanal—but she interrupted me. She was a little drunk. "A man is never should die. A man is or he isn't. Should is a shroud of war, of families, too." I was thinking about Mort. I was thinking about the bedroom we shared until he turned twelve. Then he moved to the attic and took all of our Mickey Mantle posters up there, the baseball cards we bought together, the pennant we got at Yankee Stadium in 1957. We'd been happy. Then he went to the attic and never came down. I couldn't understand it, but I guess he had to live his own life, away from mine. Shirley smiled. The steaks were almost done. She kissed me on the cheek and said goodness was a thing to be gained. She said let's be happy for a while, and for a while we were.



Personages #10

BHARTI BANSAL

The Room

(नानी का घर)

I have memories in a little box, the one my lover promised to give me, "I will give you a little box of happiness." This sentence has been playing like an old song stuck in my mind. A little box of happiness. *Ek chota sa baksa khushiyon ka.* Which reminds me of the small room in my grandmother's rented house. We had two rooms. One large enough to fit two beds. I loved the bedsheets as a child. White, floral bedsheets glowing in the evening as the last sun rays fell on them, as if congratulating it for being so clean, a prize for its supposed discipline.

The bluish green coloured windows had bars outside them where crows and parrots would sit and look for food. Parrots, in their prayer like voice would keep chirping all day long as they would come to meet mithoo, our pet parrot with injured wing.

This room was the bigger one and then, we had a guest room where all the visitors would sit. Two brown-coloured sofas side by side with their brown-coloured covers complemented the yellow walls of the room. Two single beds arranged perpendicular would also become the makeshift sofas when guests were greater than the sofas' capacity.

It was funny, when guests visited. The room was full with masi's paintings, one she drew of mother and child, and mother and a little girl holding her dupatta. After so many years, I now realize how her paintings were never devoid of the shades of womanhood. A young girl braiding her hair, her eyes so focused on herself, I wondered she wouldn't notice even if the world disappeared.

The guests would sit in their sophisticated facade, their backs straighter than the pillars, as the silence dawned upon the entire house. We had a wooden boat which sang "Für Elise" of Beethoven which I didn't know then, but we danced nonetheless to it. It was what captivated the children that would visit. We didn't know better about music, but we felt it without the guilt of lack of knowledge.

The bigger room was where celebrations happened. Birthdays, making kaleere for my aunts' wedding, my aunt making gulabjamun, and other sweet dishes, Mamu

BHARTI BANSAL

playing Himesh Reshamiya's songs on his old black radio. These memories now, kept in that same little box of happiness, remind me how feeble and transient moments are. I celebrated most of my birthdays there, my aunts would stitch new clothes for all of my cousins and me, would buy chocolate cake for us, and visit the small Bilaspur market whose road went through what we called "dead house", a morgue basically by the hospital side. I had a weird inclination to look inside from the small window and the room was always empty with eerie silence. I could feel the coldness of the room even from afar. Dead and their silly ways to acknowledge us.

The first time Mamu brought pizza from a local shop is what I remember as historical day. There was no Domino's in our place. I had only heard my other cousin talking about having pizza where she lived, which brought a little inferiority complex. Pizza could make a kid insecure, who would have thought. Mamu brought one for me and I didn't like it at all. Pizza, just a fancy roti with vegetables was what I surmised. Next day my aunt and my mother had it with tea, which made them ill and we all laughed. Laughter, then, needed no reason. One just had to speak and our entire room echoed with loud happiness, it could beat the jet airplanes flying above.

The room had a big space which was the temporary cupboard with a curtain covering it. All the clothes to be washed then were kept there and sometimes even the clutter when guests visited without informing. My sister loved cleaning the room along with Masi while mamu and I loved dancing to the Himesh Reshamiya's songs. Jhalak Dikhla Jaa had rumors about it that it could summon dead people's spirits. Illogical is what my most favourite memories are. And then, when some of my aunts visited with their husbands and kids, the room felt smaller but never not enough to house everyone.

Men would sleep in guest room whereas aunts and kids would sleep in the bigger room, all of us fighting for who would sleep on the floor. Mithoo loved talking. He would keep reciting my masi's name, repeating her sentences, "What happened to my mithoo?"

I watched *Titanic* in this old computer which Mamu was the first to learn how to operate it. We would watch *Aap Beeti* at twelve in the morning, all of us in warm blankets, huddled together. Life didn't scare us, but fictional spirits did and it was

BHARTI BANSAL

my only knowledge of horror. He would borrow CDs of the latest movies released and we would enjoy our makeshift theatre hall by drawing all the curtains close, turning off the lights and keeping the sound on full, believing that it was how big theatres looked like.

The room had everything. A big family, laughing kids, aunts talking about their would-be husbands, painting sessions, mamu telling us ghost stories of Mandi hostels, and all of us together in that small dip in the space where gravity worked the best in keeping us all together. We could have sworn then that this was how happiness looked like. We could have taken the world by storm.

In French, *ciel* means sky. Which makes perfect sense, because our small room and its old fan creaking like an old man with painful knees hummed us to sleep. It was this ceiling that showed us what universe felt like when the stars came together. Ceil-ing, a continuous symphony of endless sky, never breaking once, always shielding us from the outer space where things die all the time, I firmly believed that I was put on this earth to meet my grandmother and aunts and uncle. I was happy in that knowledge. My closest cousins then would play all day long, trying to sing English songs, slapping each other, fighting, laughing, bathing together, all of us could have killed what tried to separate us.

After all these years, with no contact with my childhood best friends, my cousins, I think time does create wounds that it cannot heal on its own. Nani retired after years and had to move back to the village. A part of my childhood is left in that old rented house from where I could see a dilapidated house where a girl was murdered and haunted people in their dreams. This small house with two rooms and just four beds had a family it could boast about. I am forever stuck in my past. I am forever looking for a way out but the old room keeps coming back, nudging me, telling me that it still is here, but the family isn't. Perhaps children do believe they can change the world. As an adult I have made peace with the fact that I can not. Sabr is what my Nani has taught me. I think I am going to wait for the home to rearrange itself again. Until then, I am going to keep it safe in my small box of happiness.

मेरा खुद का खुशियों का बक्सा

LOUIS STAEBLE



Thought To Tell You

TRINA CHAPMAN

The Aster Glass

He held his body with intense rigidity, leaning forward as he forced his way through the air in front of him. Fists tight by his sides, he paced around the dining room table, circling her like a shark focused on its prey. She was eating as quickly as she could, perched atop one of the eight cross-stitched seats that he and her mother had spent a year sewing. The hardness of the chair added to her discomfort and smothered further the fire of her dwindling appetite. The sloppy sleeves of the latest hand-me-down sweatshirt from her sister continued flopping into the milk and cereal in her bowl. Pink Floyd playing from her brother's room, echoed in the background. Today she was the target.

Who could eat in a house where rage hid in quiet, unsuspecting moments? Sitting tiny on that hard chair, elbows almost at the same height as her shoulders so she could reach her food on the table, she longed to become smaller still, perhaps even invisible. He slammed the side of his fist down on the dining room table for a second time yelling, "Eat faster!"

The force of his fist rippled the milk in her bowl. She chewed as quickly as her baby molars would allow and stared at the drinking glass in front of her. If she didn't look directly at him, it felt safer.

The state of her little life was one of constant insecurity and she felt like the only anchor she had in those moments was a few small objects she could draw safety from. One of those was the Aster glass.

All of the drinking glasses in her house were mismatched: found at yard sales, or won at bowling tournaments. Her favourite was the Aster glass. It had four bright red Asters painted on it. Each flower had a pop of yellow in the middle, with the edges of the petals and stamen highlighted in black. Green stems and leaves connected each of the four flowers and underneath them was the word "September" - her birth month. The writing on the glass read, "Growing in a shower of abundance; the feathersoft flowers of the Aster echo the appearance of stars sprayed in an early autumn sky." Her father raged, and she read the words to herself. She wanted to be there, watching the sun slipping away on that warm autumn day. And as the sun set and the sky grew dark, she could imagine, there and there and there were little stars popping up, like the Aster flowers on the glass. She was slipping away into those safe words again when her brother flew into the dining room, "Leave her alone!" he demanded.

TRINA CHAPMAN

She couldn't swallow the mouthful of food she'd been chewing for the last five minutes. It was stuck in her mouth, her throat closed over and filled with lumps. Her father turned as though he were taking on an attack and drew back his arm like a battering ram. Before she had time to react, he punched her brother in the face, thrusting him backward until he lost his balance and fell to the floor. She went numb, brain shutting off, her digestive system stalled. She turned back to the Aster glass for emotional protection. Who would have suspected that such a fragile item could give strength?

That evening, all the children were made to attend an awkward family meeting where they endured a lecture from their mother about baby birds leaving the nest. The message behind the lesson was that the chicks had to be taught to fly by the adult birds before soaring on their own. She did not want to learn to fly in the violent, intimidating ways of her father. She sat paltry on the tattered, pull-out couch in the basement, unkempt feet scrunched up under her bottom, observing the lesson on the rules of life. In that learning moment, a fire ignited in her belly as the injustice of the situation refused to rest in her heart. This time her appetite was different; she hungered for integrity and genuine affection.

It wasn't until many years later, as an adult, that she experienced the effects of the flying lessons from her youth. What she had learned during those formative years was that fear was familiar and she was not repelled by it, but rather, drawn to it. It was a subject she had studied in depth and learned to live with like a partner whom she knew would perpetually let her down, but at least she could plan around it. There had been no guessing when she lived with fear. She could always count on it to find and take hold of her. She didn't have to try to be anything more than a shadow and it was easier to pretend than to run it out of her life. They danced with one another, her and fear, in a routine of familiarity. She understood how to step in time with it, how to react to it, and how to repair herself from it afterward.

She learned narratives to repeat, using all of the same excuses she had witnessed her mother using to get her father out of trouble with them. And in her first marriage, those practiced excuses became useful tools to extend her life with fear. When that ended, she fell in love with herself and then with a kind, patient and thoughtful man. She had to learn to live without questioning motives or wondering when things would get loud and erratic. Predictability had the potential to be a boring place for her to live, but it wasn't. She was learning to fly for the very first time. And she did learn. And she did fly.

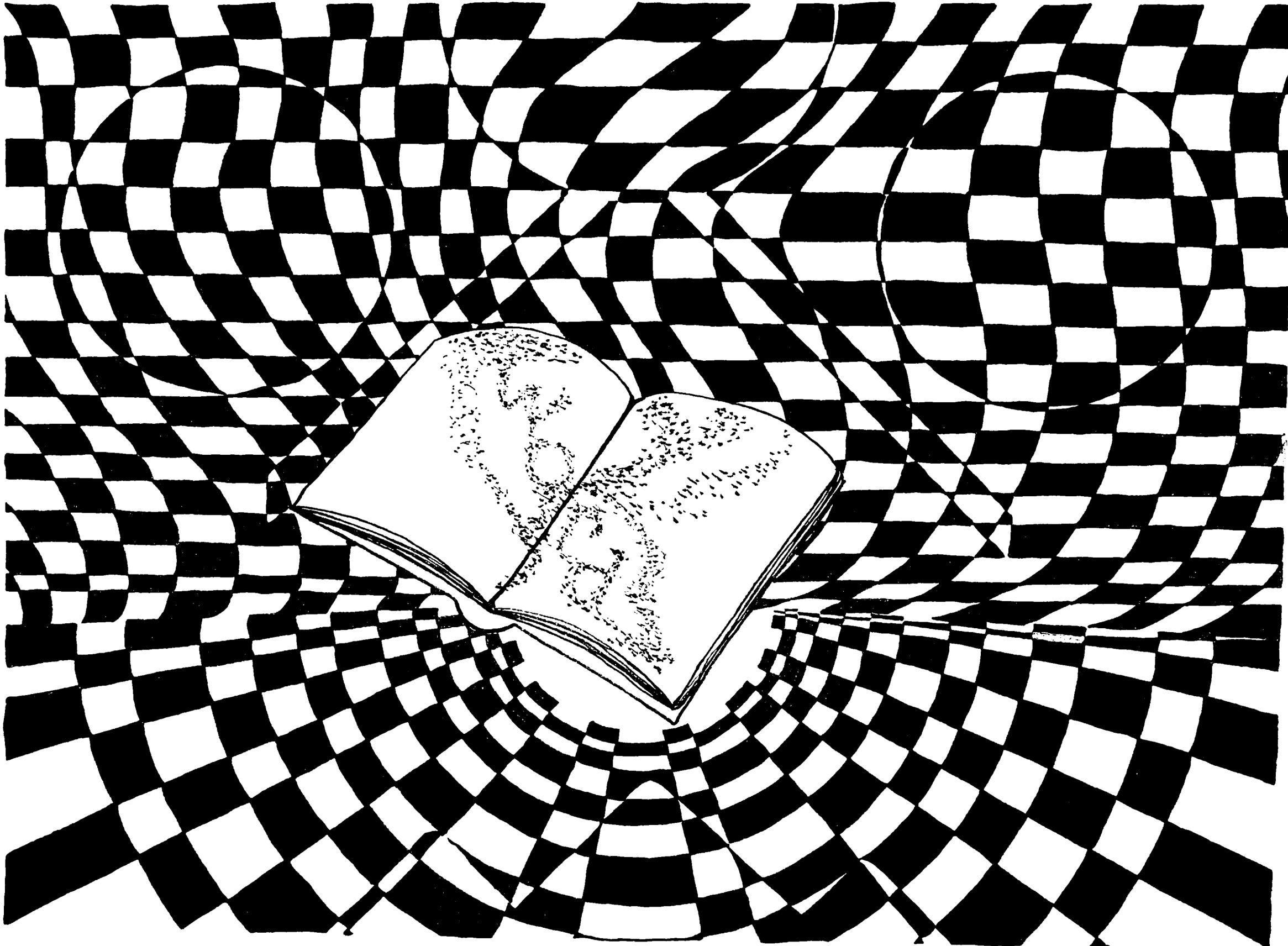
TRINA CHAPMAN

She's not sure whatever happened to the Aster glass. Perhaps it was sent off to the nearest thrift store in a box with the mixing bowl they sometimes used to make their chocolate chip cookie dough, on days when life felt safe. It could still be in a storage container somewhere with the fondue pot they used when friends came for dinner and they pretended to be a normal family. Maybe her brother took it off to college with him since he was the first to fly from the nest, to safety. It might even still be hiding at the back of her parents' kitchen cupboard, with a pile of other, insignificant cups stacked on top of it. Wherever it is, she will always remember the Aster glass for the comfort it brought her at times when she could not speak up for herself, when kindness was still just a word and when happy meant "not scared right now."

There is no need for the physical glass to remain in her life anymore, she and fear are no longer dance partners, but she found it on Etsy and bought it anyway. It will sit on an open shelf at her writing desk as a reminder to her that even in the darkest times, when loneliness, injustice and fear come knocking on her door, she has the fortitude to overcome them. That little glass helped her to find a place within herself that brought calm and courage and a fiery desire to break free. She will never be shattered again.

Surely, the artistic designers of the now "retro" glass could not have imagined that this little piece would play such an enormous role in the life of a small, broken child.

She has learned to look for the Asters in her life, growing in the autumn fields, popping up, spreading hope, like stars, into dark skies.



Word

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COVER ART:

Stefania Morgante is an Italian visual artist, painter, sculptor and photographer, jewelry creator and scarf artist. She received an Arts, Music and Show business Degree at the Bologna University-Italy. She is a multidisciplinary artist whose works have been exhibited nationally, as well as in the United States and Russia. Instagram: @themorst_art Website: <https://www.stefaniamorgante.com>

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Anne Bower lives in a 230-year-old old house in rural Vermont, teaches tai chi, gardens, and visits family whenever possible. Publications include two solo-authored chapbooks—*Poems for Tai Chi Players* and *The Space Between Us* and one co-authored with Pamela Ahlen, *Getting It Down on Paper*. Individual poems have appeared in *Likely Red*, *Naugatuck River Review* (2019 Contest finalist), *ArtAscent*, *Evening Street Review*, *Light Journal*, *Gemini Magazine* (2018 Contest winner), *Raven's Perch*, *The Literary Nest*, and other journals and anthologies. During academic life she published books and articles on epistolary literature and on food and culture. Website: www.annebower.studio Instagram: Chimama4747

Vanessa Cerasulo is an artist based in MA. She has previously been published in Quibble's Vol. No. 7, The Wingless Dreamer, Welter at the University of Baltimore, ArtWife, and The Hemetera Editor.

Tsz Ching Chan graduated with BA in Visual Arts in 2019 and MA in English Language in 2020. Chan's work revolves around sentiments stirred by love.

Trina Chapman is an emerging poet and essayist whose work has appeared in The Write Launch. She holds a double bachelor's degree in English and International Development Studies from the University of Guelph. A lifelong learner and educator, she has taught English as a Second Language in Japan and now teaches at a Montessori school she helped to found. She is presently studying Creative Writing at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies. She also mothers four children and three stepchildren and cares for three dogs and one husband.

Callie Crouch (she/her) is a recent graduate of Saint Joseph's University and former Editor-in-Chief of the university's literary magazine, the Crimson and Gray. She is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Writing Studies. Her work appears or is upcoming in 14 journals and anthologies, some of which include Olit Magazine, Quarter After Eight, Coffin Bell, Roanoke Review, Pinky Thinker Press, and Hive Avenue Literary Journal. Callie is originally from Florida but lives and writes in Philadelphia.

Rebecca Dietrich is a writer and photographer from the Jersey Shore. Her debut chapbook Scholar of the Arts and Inhumanities will be published November of 2023 by Finishing Line Press. Rebecca's poetry has been featured in publications by Plumwood Mountain Journal, Making Waves: A West Michigan Review, and Moonstone Press. She holds a B.A. in Psychology with a minor in Holocaust & Genocide Studies from Stockton University. You can follow her on Instagram @limericks_and_asphodels.

Rosemary Esehagu is a native Nigerian who currently lives in Texas. She is the author of the novel, The Looming Fog. Her poems have been published in Plum Recruit, A Little Poetry, African Writer Magazine, and Elephant Journal. She loves to explore the mind and how external forces play a role in its development and health.

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G.J. Gillespie is a collage artist living in a 1928 Tudor Revival farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island (north of Seattle). In addition to natural beauty, he is inspired by art history -- especially mid century abstract expressionism. The “Northwest Mystics” who produced haunting images from this region 60 years ago are favorites. Winner of 20 awards, his art has appeared in 60 shows and more than 90 publications -- including 11 covers. When he is not making art, he runs his sketchbook company Leda Art Supply.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Stand, Washington Square Review and Sheepshead Review. Latest books, "Between Two Fires," "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the McNeese Review, Santa Fe Literary Review and California Quarterly.

Larissa Hauck | Through the exploration of visual myth making, Larissa Monique Hauck evokes vulnerability and catharsis within her painting, drawing, and mixed media practice. Her ethereal imagery reveals a relationship between queer identity and the natural environment. Hauck combines vibrant colours with earthly tones and repetitive patterns to enhance the dream-like quality within each scene. Her notional subjects reflect on the fleeting aspects of time, impermanence, and mortality.

Kaymin Hester is a poet currently attending the University of Virginia. Her poetry has been published in Zines + Things' "Impropriety" issue, and three of her articles have been published by Deep South Magazine. She was a panelist for the Newfound 2021 Prose Prize and an intern at Deep South. She completed the Poetry of Power Workshop and is now a New City Arts Fellow. She also won third place in the Jefferson School Essay Contest with her essay about how the impact of the Charlottesville Twelve extends to contemporary life and first place in the 2021 Writer's Eye Contest.

Maya Jacyszyn is a multi-published poet and the Assistant Director of Neumann University's Writing Center. She received her bachelor's degree at Saint Joseph's University where she also served as Editor-in-Chief of the literary magazine titled, Crimson & Gray. More recently, her work is featured in the Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle, The Ignatian Literary Magazine, Quibble Lit, and Clepsydra Literary and Art Magazine, among others.

Erin Jamieson (she/her) holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Miami University. Her writing has been published in over eighty literary magazines, including a Pushcart Prize nomination. She is the author of a poetry collection (Clothesline, 2023) and four poetry chapbooks. Her latest poetry chapbook, Fairytales, was published by Bottle Cap Press. Her debut novel will be published by Type Eighteen Books (November 2023).

Kaitlin Kiswojo is a 16-year-old artist and aspiring social science researcher from Jakarta, Indonesia. She finds fine art to be an essential outlet in faithfully portraying her feelings, thoughts, passions, and experiences, offering a glimpse into her soul. Beyond her artistic endeavors, Kaitlin finds solace in writing poetry, delving into the depths of art history, and immersing herself in the fascinating field of sociology. You can find her @kaitlinelainaaa on Instagram.

Sylvester Kwakye is a Ghanaian medical student with a self-published full-length poetry collection called “Flying From Nectar To Hive.” In most of his writing, Sylvester is inspired by his environment— home, medical school, and the hospital. Facebook: @slykoko42 Instagram: @slykoko42 Twitter: @slykoko

Matthew McCain is a published author and fine artist based out of New Hampshire. Three of his novels have reached the top #10 on Amazon Kindle Unlimited. Despite his diagnosis of NHPP, a nerve disorder that effects the pressure point in his hands, he paints every day. His artwork is currently represented by the Bilotta Gallery in Florida.

Tatia Mgow is a daughter of the land of Zulus, an observer of life from travels that have taken her across the world. Her work draws from the personal, that which touches and connects humans to each other and to the natural world, with an emphasis on empathy, understanding and growth for a better world for all.

Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, micropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois.

James B. Nicola's poems have appeared in the Antioch, Southwest and Atlanta Reviews, Rattle, and Barrow Street. His seven full-length collections (2014-22) are Manhattan Plaza, Stage to Page, Wind in the Cave, Out of Nothing, Quickening, Fires of Heaven, and Turns & Twists. His nonfiction book Playing the Audience won a Choice award. He has received a Dana Literary Award, two Willow Review awards, Storyteller's People's Choice award, one Best of Net, one Rhysling, and ten Pushcart nominations—for which he feels both stunned and grateful.

Tauwan Patterson hails from South Central, Los Angeles. He is a budding young Poet and recent graduate of the MFA Creative Writing Program at Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina, who with his poetry aims to, in the words of the great Poet and Thinker Marcus Jackson, announce his freedom and presence. Making a sound that echoes in the end that says Tauwan Patterson. No more. No less.

Elizabeth Ricketson, a graduate of Providence College with a BA in English, has always had a love of literature and the fine arts. In the 1990s, she studied figure drawing at the Rhode Island School of Design spending years dedicated to understanding human form, movement and anatomy.

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Jess Ridley is a 21-year-old amateur playwright, poet, and short story writer from Windsor, ON, who has recently started looking for places to publish her work. She loves writing and photography, often combining the two in her work. She has a small but dedicated support circle who gives her the courage and dedication to keep writing, even when she's struggling. Her work focuses on modern social issues, and kindness and morality as a theme, as those are her own personal ideals.

Stacey Robertson has published fiction pieces in the West Trade Review, Spectrum Literary Journal, and ProseAxe. She attends literary fiction salons throughout the world. She is also a proud Jersey City Writers member and lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Website: <https://www.instagram.com/jcwriters/>

Mykyta Ryzhykh is the winner of the international competition «Art Against Drugs», bronze medalist of the festival Chestnut House, laureate of the literary competition named after Tyutyunnik. Also, published in the journals Dzvin, Dnipro, Bukovinsky journal, Tipton Poetry Journal, Stone Poetry Journal, Divot journal, dyst journal, Superpresent Magazine, Allegro Poetry Magazine, Alternate Route, Better Than Starbucks Poetry & Fiction Journal, Littoral Press, Book of Matches, on the portals Ice Floe Press, Litcenter and "Soloneba," in the Ukrainian literary newspaper.

CLS Sandoval, PhD (she/her) is a Pushcart-nominated writer and communication professor with accolades in film, academia, and creative writing who speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches and rarely relaxes. She's a flash fiction and poetry editor for Dark Onus Lit. She has presented over 50 times at communication conferences, published 15 academic articles, two academic books, three full-length literary collections, three chapbooks, as well as flash and poetry pieces in several literary journals, recently including Opiate Magazine, The Journal of Magical Wonder, and A Moon of One's Own. She is raising her daughter and dog with her husband in Alhambra, CA.

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Pauline Shen's work aims to showcase beauty and courage rooted in unexpected and challenging places. Her writing, art, and photography is published with Amethyst Review, Blank Spaces, Dreamers Creative Writing, Lighthouse Weekly, Quibble Lit, and The Signpost [Dorchester]. Pauline is located in London, Ontario. Follow her blog at paulineshen.ca and on Twitter @ZenPaulineShen

Tom Squitieri is a three-time winner of the Overseas Press Club and White House Correspondents' Association awards for work as a war correspondent. He is blessed to have his poetry appear in several publications, books and anthologies, art exhibitions and movies. He writes most of his poetry while parallel parking or walking his dogs, Topsy and Batman.

Louis Staebler is a fine arts photographer and poet who lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. His photographs have appeared in Blue Hour, Cenacle, Clever Fox, Conclave Journal, Elsewhere Magazine, GFT Magazine, Fifth Wednesday Journal, Four Ties Literary Review, Goatsmilk Magazine, Havik, Inklette, Light - A Journal, Little Somethings Press, Olney Magazine, Rubbertop Magazine, Sunspot Lit, The Helix, Tupelo Quarterly, Twist In Time and Windmill. 2016, 2017 and 2018 as part of the Wood County Invitational.

Nichelle Taylor (she/her) is an avid writer interested in writing YA Fantasy novels, memoir, creative nonfiction, and poetry. This piece showcases the struggles of being a recovering people-pleaser, working hard to lift the curse of being "too nice" per others' standards, and improving her sense of self-worth. Her work has been featured in UNC's The Crucible, Sad Girls Club Literary Magazine, The Publishing Room, and others. To check out more of her work, please visit nichelletaylor.com.

