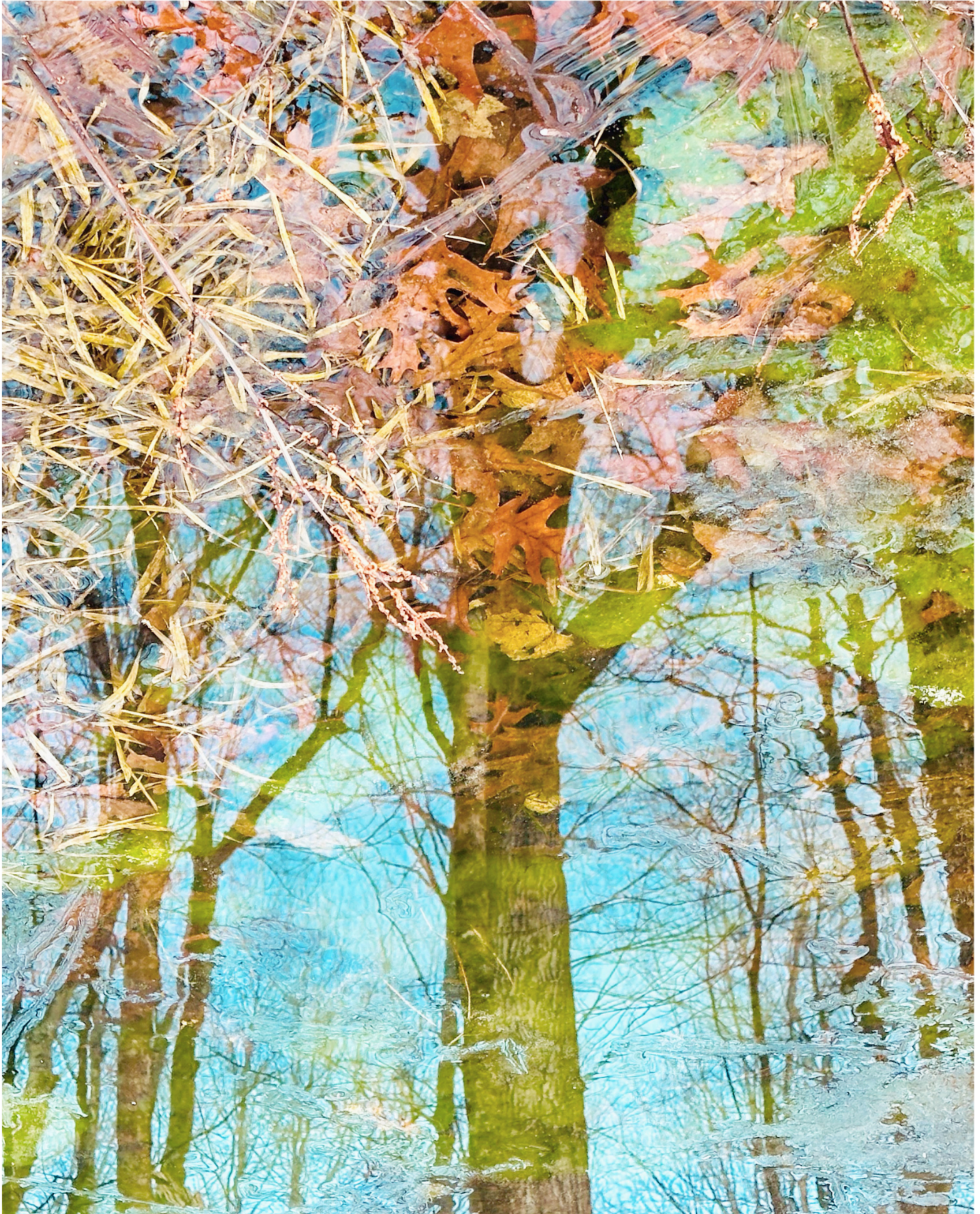


# COOL BEANS LIT



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 3

SPRING 2024



# Cool Beans Lit

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# *Cool Beans Lit*

Volume 1, Issue 3  
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**COVER ART**  
*Tree Joy* by Kelly DuMar







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# Editor's Note

Spring 2024

Welcome to the third issue of Cool Beans Lit!

You will surely savor the beautiful words and images of the creators within these pages. As our magazine grows, we have seen a large uptick in the amount of submissions received from around the globe. This is, of course, a boon but also makes it even more difficult when selecting pieces for each edition.

In this issue, we have emerging authors as young as 17 years old who are still attending high school as well as established ones, such as a former CBS News correspondent who once covered the September 11th attack and the O.J. Simpson trial, and an improv actor from Saturday Night Live who is a wonderfully talented artist. Please support all of our contributors by reading the Contributor Bio section and visiting their websites and social media accounts. It is always our goal as a publication to promote this community and stand against artificial intelligence replacing original thought.

Cool Beans Lit is a not-for-profit enterprise that exists solely for the purpose of promoting literary arts. We truly appreciate hearing from university-level English professors who have used our past magazine issues to teach writing to students. We hope this issue inspires you to string together words and create stunning images of your own using the unique code embedded in your mind. Then send it to us for publication!

**Lauren Avedis**  
Editor-in-Chief

**J.L. Stagner**  
Art Editor











LOUIS EFRON

## Asphalt Gardens

like choreographed pixelated stills  
capturing splashing raindrops  
on pristine cotton-white daisy petals  
we cut out

spray-painted dumpsters  
our pimpled and pockmarked skin  
and crooked teeth

desperately wanting to be seen  
as someone else

through angled lenses, apps, and filters  
pulling radiant light  
from strained faces  
into untouchable realities

framed on wafer-thin electronic mirrors  
pumping flat cherry-red hearts  
from unfamiliar crowds  
slightly curl the corners of our mouths  
heavenward  
into soft smiles

for a world that only briefly loves us  
trying to stand out  
like wild daisies growing  
in alleyway asphalt cracks  
never safe  
from being trampled  
by those who  
fail to see  
our unaltered beauty



TATJANA KRILOVA



Tea Rose Early Morning



J.R. SOLONCHE

## Truth

I asked my mathematician friend  
if mathematics is an invention  
or a discovery, for I had been  
wondering about it a long time.  
It's both, he said. First it was a  
discovery and then it was an  
invention. I thought so, I said.  
It's just like poetry, which first  
was a discovery and then was  
an invention, except that poetry  
keeps reinventing itself while  
mathematics doesn't. It's done.  
That's because mathematics has  
already discovered the truth, so it  
doesn't need to keep reinventing  
itself as poetry does, he said.  
The trouble is that you poets keep  
looking for the truth in the wrong  
places. Oh, where's that? I said.  
In your hearts, he said. You'll  
never find the truth there. You'll  
only keep finding the same old lies.  
Maybe so, I said. But you have to  
admit that you guys need us. For  
what? We already have our one  
beautiful truth, he said. Yes, I said.  
But you need us and our thousands  
of beautiful lies to let you bear your  
one and only beautiful truth.



JANE VARLEY

## iPhone

Always nearby, screen black like the surface of a pond. Your case tells about who owns you—ensconced in colored plastic armor, sprinkled with sparkles or cute animals, inscribed with hard ironic words, shimmering in 3-D like an ocean in another world, a symbol of how we want you to take us away, soothe us, entertain us, connect us, take us up into the Cloud where the vast storage of information has memed out into endlessness, erasing individuals and creating one airy blob of humanity, with our selfies, vacation pics, and stress-relieving videos of animals doing cuddly, inane things. You have shape yet you are dimensionless, as if you refuse to have contours like other objects of daily life, glasses and shoes and coffee cups. Just one single soft touch opens your color and light, and you become more than you really should be, full of the world's perspicacity along with its hysteria, and you deliver it all with ease—it doesn't bother you a bit. I see you riding along in my daughter's back pocket, your screen agitated with the many messages tinging her mind from the universe, and I know there is no stopping this, this magnetism of the colossal oracle revealing our truths to us, inasmuch as truth still exists, in pixelated codes that rise to the oxymoron of your depthless face, your montage of timelessness, the conscience-lessness of your insistent presence, oh, how we can and cannot do without you.

JAWN VAN JACOBS

## the remembering tree

these branches have thorns  
that leave scars on my arms –  
or wherever else i try to ascend  
my body in reaching toward  
a new way to forget

his seesaw on my spine  
my reason for deciduous  
susception to suicide

these branches bare no fruit  
only occasional leaves –  
each with veins that scalpel  
a name or face from shade

some days i go between  
wanting to chainsaw it all down  
or hang alone from its branches  
where no one would find me for days

i could even use it to build  
a house and raise my own family –  
only at dual price of being reminded  
everyday of what happened to me  
when time didn't move so fast as it does now

if you took an ax to my mind  
you'd find more than the twenty-  
four rings on the inside  
to account for all the years  
a child could not comprehend  
what this tree overcasts.



JACK BORDNICK



Clo

STEVEN DEUTSCH

## Having Grown Apart

Now that I need not  
wake for work  
I rise at first light,

tired but present.  
It is my time  
for contemplation,

although my frivolous thoughts  
might make the Buddha  
chuckle. Sometimes

I think of you.  
How close we were  
and how the distance

has grown past reconciliation.  
Would you even recognize  
me now without prompting?

I've thought of writing to you.  
I imagine you  
still in your childhood home

anxiously opening the envelope,  
worried it might be bad news.  
I've tried, halfheartedly, but find

I have few words to share—  
unsettling for someone  
who made his way with words.

But, there is a slowing here—  
I fear I won't conquer  
the world after all.

Have you?  
I don't suppose so.  
Another class graduated

this week—so many plans,  
so much horizon,  
hourglass be damned.



HOWARD KAPLAN

## In Time & Art

This all happened between time & art,  
in a painting, she viewed of a dancer  
wearing a fruit basket hat of purple plums &  
yellow bananas, while twirling  
a long fashionable beaded dress.  
He was performing a rain dance  
to cover the dry land in warm water,  
a colorful stained-glass sun overhead.

Among the glazed-eyed watchers,  
guests crowded green velvet tables  
adorned with gold filigree & treasures  
of sculptured busts & ivory bosoms.  
Food of plenty overflowed as  
if spilling out of the ornate frame.  
She admired the many shapes of pasta &  
the diamond-patterned on the seared steak.

She was seduced by the large white pearls  
worn by a red bird that perched on the shiny  
grand piano while singing along with  
the man's gliding fingers in harmony.  
Watching the pianist's foot bouncing  
between the sostenuto & damper pedals,  
she wished to be the bird, &  
contribute seeds for the orange soil.

She felt that she could be among it all &  
call herself art.



TATJANA KRILOVA



Bon Appétit



KELLI WELDON

## Coffee Shop

the doorbell chimes and you stand in a line  
a pastime you have come to treat as sacred  
latte or Americano, oat or almond, the special, an excuse  
to look at another face, a nod, swirls and edges of local art  
bulletin board posts speaking your language  
bassist needed, co-op garden, yoga classes,  
grief groups, *Cabaret* showtimes, *love is love* stickers  
savor a kiss of steam from a cup, heat in your hands  
hear the whirring grinder, hum of baristas' voices  
sure hands pouring out hot milk  
comfort and calm amid the bustle  
*welcome in, here you go!* buzzing  
look over there, *stay awhile*  
there's a seat saved just for you.

AIMEE GREEN

## Together, Alone

Deep in their own worlds, yet  
sitting side-by-side.  
Paperbacks, immaculate, grasped  
between thumb and fingers, propped  
like masquerade masks  
in front of their faces. Their gazes fixed,  
attention unwaning. Coffees going cold.

In good company, they read.  
When I notice them I wonder how often  
they spend their days like this:  
in each other's company... *yet*.  
Yet totally alone, treasuring words,  
worlds, characters, stories  
more than their companion.  
Sitting by myself, I can't help but judge.  
I long for the conversation, the warmth,  
the comfort of my one other:  
the physical presence of someone else –  
someone else in particular –  
giving me their undivided attention.  
Why would they waste this moment?

Every so often they break away,  
discuss something just read.  
An excitable summary  
of the past twelve pages;  
deep discussions  
of character motivation.  
Take sips of their drinks,  
exchange friendliness,  
reposition their paper masks.

I turn to my sketchbook,  
adding lines and colour to pages  
that only I will see.  
My companion.  
I bury myself within a blank page,  
wondering: would they judge me for being alone  
if their gaze happened to stray my way?  
Or would they long for my lonely solitude  
as much as I long for theirs?



STAN SANVEL RUBIN

## How I Spent the Morning

After I unified  
quantum field theory  
with relativity,

I thought of unifying  
my family, only  
they exist

in the past, which  
we know is a kind  
of existence

like the understory  
of forests  
we never see

with its own  
gravity, density,  
and light

buoyed by  
the darkness which  
we run our fingers over

in the urgent  
non-locality  
of dream.

Everyone  
gets lost there,  
and I often am,

waiting  
for the smiles  
through the leaves.



ANNIKA CONNOR



Head in the Clouds



ALYSSA TROY

## Bridesmaids Dresses

These robes, I fear, are relics that reserve  
little sentiment for me.

I still have visions of the tape measure that  
dressed my body before them,

snaking itself around my chest, my waist,  
and my thighs,

slowly suffocating me until I collapsed under  
the pressure I applied to myself.

I never felt welcome in these garments.

While listening to my friends exchange promises  
of love, I stood there, stabbing my

stomach with a bouquet, trying to murder my  
insecurities. I worry they can never die.

Now I stand in my closet, glancing over  
the gowns of autumnal colors,

knowing quite well that if I slipped into one,  
I'd be swimming in satin,

grieving the figure I sacrificed just to remain  
unsatisfied with the martyr in the mirror.

JOHN MURO

## The Quelling

I've often longed for an evening  
such as this when moonlight gilds  
the pathway with bronze splatter  
that washes past the woodshed  
and floods into pasture before  
pooling beneath a dry-stone wall  
where a few leafless trees seem to  
hunker, weak-kneed, in prayer and  
I hold certain, in the damp stillness  
that follows dusk, that this night,  
even with its raw silence, will never  
know loneliness or lack for wonder  
with its delirious ballet of bats, a  
wood-pecker's rapid-fire ambush  
of a bark-less tree, the divine presence  
of slowly emerging stars and the  
purr of wind pulling down cooler  
air that tastes like ash upon the  
tongue and will be taken in and later,  
deep in sleep, enter the blood.



STEVEN SCHUTZMAN

## The Driver

The road behind closing  
in the rear view mirror  
my unlived life is tailing me  
not bothering to hide anymore  
baring its teeth in high beams  
aggressive and close  
to the sound of dragging chains  
My past self is angry  
as if I were its father  
blinded by teaching  
And I am angry at him  
as if he were my child  
who could never learn a thing  
Two perfect dunces  
There is no exit  
What did I expect  
I made a wrong turn somewhere  
and then another and another  
to the soundtrack of happy jingles  
advertising myself in my brain  
delusions of grandeur  
maddening habits of mind  
ten car pile-ups of distractions  
left smoking on the side of the road  
My ex-wives sleep in the back  
arms around each other  
entwined with warm feelings of disappointment  
that I fell so horribly short  
of being more than I was  
I am the driver  
who will never sleep again  
not lined up with myself anymore  
my body like clothes  
that don't fit at a ceremony

Amazing how you can keep up appearances  
to the very end  
Dogged as I am  
Tired as I am  
Sad as I am  
There is no place to pull over  
no rest area no vista  
The shoulders of the road  
are crowded with refugees  
hanging with seaweed  
dragging bent bicycles  
and goats on leashes  
useless firewood piled on their backs  
out of habit  
I can't even stop and give away  
the little I have left  
I need it to bribe  
the guards at the border

R.H. NICHOLSON

## Low-Hanging

did she at least pluck a ripe  
Red Delicious  
or a nice Gala  
maybe a McIntosh  
or a perfect Honeycrisp,  
probably not a Winesap, those are hard to come by,  
nor a Granny Smith, which are better for pies and such,  
but a sweet, juicy variety,  
the nectar  
running like a mountain stream  
down the contours of her arm,  
meaty and satisfying,  
infusing her with  
satiation and  
satisfaction-  
that husky snap  
when you take a bite,  
on a crisp Autumn day  
when the sun is determined,  
eeking out the evaporating warmth of goodness,  
clinging like a desperate leaf,  
a cool breeze harkening the imminent darkness;

or did she even consider the downside,  
the mess, the stickiness,  
or how really pissed he would be  
because the tree wasn't hers  
and she'd been warned-  
he'd drawn a line in the dirt  
and made his position very clear;

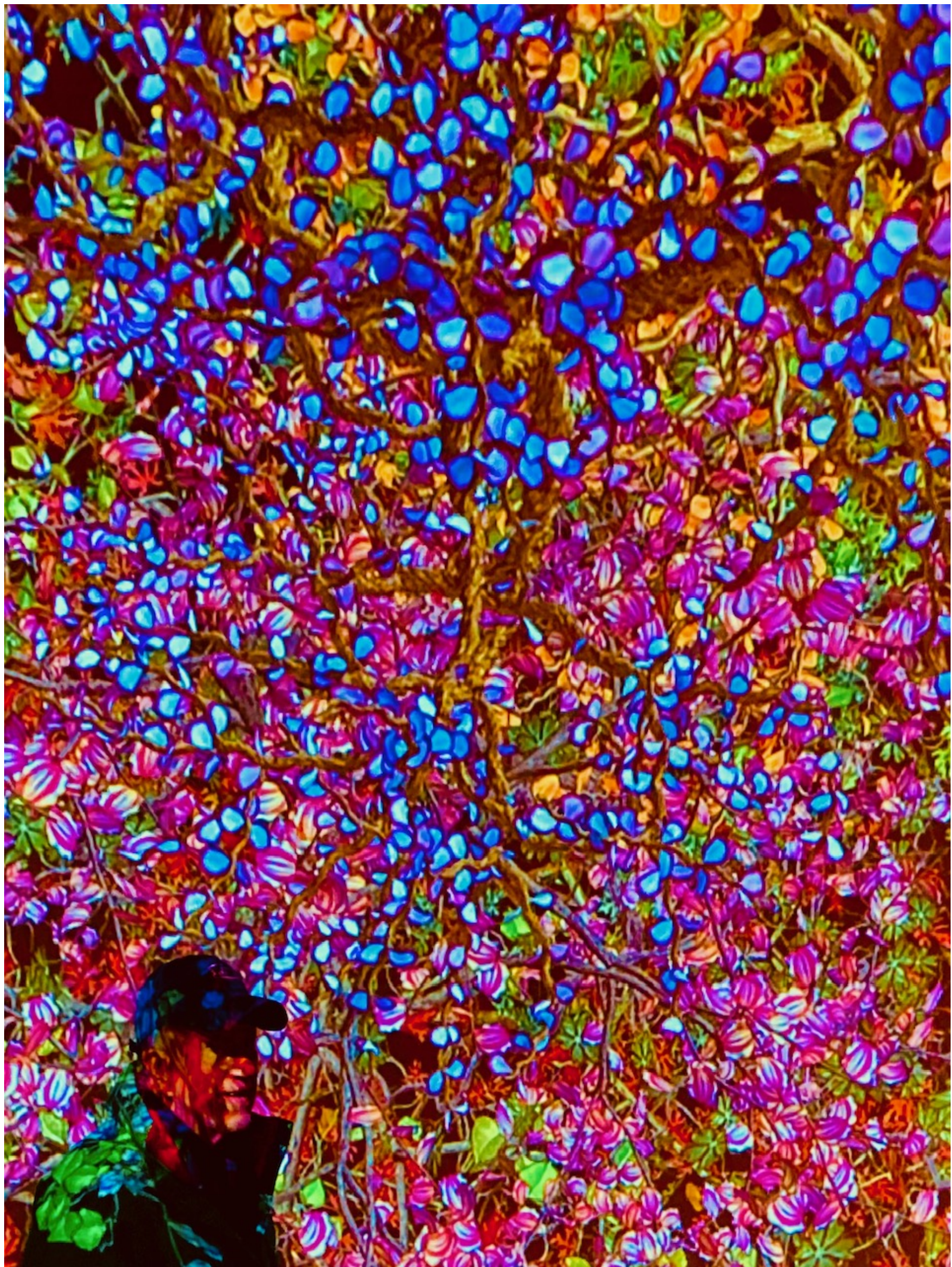
was she really that naïve,  
or just careless  
or dazzled by the pastoral scene  
that smacked of a still-wet Titian?

whatever her excuse, she sure caused a bruhaha

and people just will.not.let.it.go.



JACK BORDNICK



Only Our Shadows Know



LARISSA LARSON

## Father, the Games We Play

Were you happy when you found out  
it was me? Not born biological boy but

girl bloom from her womb, your young  
hands cradling this bald, mucus babe

bawling for the first time. I know you  
cried as you do now after 30 years of

goodbye hugs to kindergarten to college  
to only holiday visits. You had three

older sisters, so tenuous, but were you ready  
for me? Your DNA duplicate, carbon

copy of an offspring. I think I was ready  
for you, my eyes the same rain-soaked

blue. Our favorite game was monster,  
extreme hide & seek. You'd hide and

I'd try to find you in the dark corners  
of our house, but before I could claim

my victory, you'd jump out, teeth bared  
and tickling talons prepared to trap. O I loved

how you scared the shit out of me. Was it  
the same for you? Laughing in the face of

monstrosity, not knowing when I'd find  
you or that you would see the real me?



JERI LEWIS EDWARDS



Experimental Orange







# *Fiction*





NICK YOUNG

## Snow at Twilight

He tried to move as little as possible, shifting only enough to wrench free his right hand which the fall had left partially pinned underneath his backside. The pain in his left leg was excruciating, sending blinding white light pulsing behind his tightly closed eyes. The leg was grotesquely twisted and broken. He knew without looking that the fracture was compound and he could feel he was losing blood.

Opening his eyes and turning his head slowly he saw the sky above, darkening, the angle of the sun slanting very near to the horizon. There was perhaps an hour of light remaining. He wondered if that much life was left to him.

It began to snow, a sifting of fat listless flakes. Through the haze of pain his memory flashed on a snow globe his mother had long prized—tiny Currier and Ives Christmas carolers gathered beneath a street lamp, silent mouths open wide amid the swirling blizzard. He winced and let out a low moan, one that carried as much despair as agony.

The unyielding granite wall of the fissure pressed hard against the left side of his face. It was a cold reminder that in a heartbeat his life had pivoted irrevocably. Such an event was no longer either an abstraction or a fiction's plot device. It was an errant step on a mountain trail he had traversed before, a small patch of friable rock. His footing lost, down he plunged, thirty feet until trapped by the narrowing vee of the crack. And as he struggled to raise his right hand—almost surely broken—to brush the falling snowflakes away, he silently cursed his folly.

It was to have been a late-afternoon hike, just above the tree line for twilight pictures of the rising late-October moon, then down and home. He was no back country tenderfoot: he had made the trek before, more than once; but this time he allowed his judgment to be clouded by hubris. He would forego anything he did not deem vital. For such a short trip, this time he would take only a bottle of water, a handful of trail mix and a camera. Nothing more. The cell phone that could have been his salvation he had locked in the glove compartment of his Jeep a mile down the mountainside. There would be no rescue—there *could be* no rescue. His wife would not grow worried until well after sunset and it would be hours more before a search party found him. By then he would be gone, bled out or frozen.

So now, with each throbbing stab from his shattered leg, he could see before him with great clarity what most men are not privy to—the imminent coda of his life. In the crepuscular light he marked the snow's quickening descent. He thought of his parents, relieved that neither of them was alive. His mother, especially, would have had her heart broken to know her son had died so young and in such circumstances, mortally injured and alone on a mountainside.

He was her first-born and she had idolized him as the pride of the family—from his glory days as a star athlete and student in high school through law school at Yale, marriage to a beautiful, intelligent woman, two great kids embarking on their own lives in the world, partner in a fine law firm, the respect of his peers. At the age of fifty, he'd had the world knocked.

All thrown away.



As his life ebbed with the light of the day he was brought through the pain to take stock of himself. Yes, there were his many successes, what the righteous among his parents' church-going friends would term "blessings," but he knew there was deep within him a singular, poisonous moment that he could neither erase nor atone for, a sin that ate at his core during his darkest hours of self-doubt and loathing. And he knew that he would soon leave this world with the stain still on his soul.

It was a beautiful, mild day in early September, one that brought a respite from the summer's oppressiveness. He always remembered that clearly—the sunshine, the gentle breeze stirring through the branches of the big willows that flanked the family farmhouse. He was eleven years old, just home from school and ready to ride his bike up the road to the next farm to play baseball with the neighbor boys. His father was in the fields, his mother at the kitchen sink preparing the evening meal when he spotted the dog slowly trotting up the long gravel lane leading to the house. He'd never seen the animal before. It appeared to him to be a border collie, with mangy dark-brown fur, its head hung down and tongue out. As it angled off the driveway and up toward the front of the house, he leaned his bicycle against the wall of the garage and quickly followed.

His mother had also seen the dog and by the time he reached the porch, she was at front door trying to shoo it away.

But it wouldn't go. It backed up a step or two with each wave and shout, then moved closer again. He could see by the dog's matted, dusty coat that it was not someone's indoor pet. His mother had brought with her a broom, opening the door enough to try to push the dog back and send it on its way. But it would not leave, instead sitting back on its skinny haunches and looking at his mother with pleading eyes. It was clear it was hungry—for a bit of food and a small measure of human kindness.

He called out to his mother to give him the broom, and when she handed it to him, he began to swat at the dog in an attempt to force it off the porch. Still, it would not go, bearing up under his swings, by circling around and beginning to whimper. For a reason he never fathomed, his mother found this amusing, chiding him to stop harassing the poor animal while snickering at the same time. This caused to well up within him a delight and he renewed his blows, turning the broom and using the handle to beat the dog. The poor creature's distress, its pitiful yelps, only fueled his mother's mirth and his inchoate fury. At length, after landing several hard blows, the dog retreated, ran off the porch and back down the driveway.

He handed the broom to his mother, who made a small show of her displeasure with him, but her insincerity was thinly veiled and he quietly reveled in the satisfaction his act—and her response—had given him.

The dog did not return, and through his youth he gave the episode no thought. But as he grew into manhood, it returned, shadowing his dark days, rising up to haunt his dreams.

Now, as cold and pain gripped him, he saw the creature again—hungry and tired and lonely, asking so little yet receiving only brutishness.

Why had he succumbed so readily to cruelty? *Why?*

Clouds had drifted over the moon as it edged past the lip of the crevice, casting down a dull ivory glow. The snow was falling heavily. No longer did he bother to brush it from his face but closed his eyes and wept.





KELLY DUMAR



Blue Beauty Brook Abstract



# TERRY SANVILLE

## Distractions

Walter groaned as he climbed from his Toyota, arthritis reminding him of his age. He grabbed his knapsack and joined the other hikers at the trailhead. Walt hadn't seen them in thirty years. Way back when, they all had been part of the same law firm. Now with gray hair and artfully disguised paunches, including the lone woman, they sipped Starbucks coffee and stared at Walt as he approached. *Hey, I don't look any worse than these fools*, he thought as they exchanged greetings.

"So how often do you do these hikes?" he asked Chet, his former boss.

"Once a week. We hike for a couple of hours then go out to lunch."

"Yeah, after arguing about which restaurant," Larry piped up.

"This is my first hike with you guys. So go easy on me."

Linda grinned. "If you can't keep up we'll just push you off a cliff."

"Like you did on the Bradley Case," Walt said. "I still have the bus's tire marks across my back."

Linda continued grinning, but her eyes weren't smiling.

"Come on guys," Chet said. "No talk about history until we have a few cocktails over lunch."

"Yeah, that'll make it so much better," Timothy said. He and Walt had worked cases together with Tim doing the grunt work and Walt handling the trials and settlement conferences. Walt liked the guy but didn't think much of his legal acumen.

He stared at the mountainside trail that snaked upward across chaparral-covered slopes, a 1,300-foot climb to the ridge top. The reward: spectacular views of the city, coastal valleys, and the blue-green Pacific to the west. He checked his glucose meter. His blood sugar level had risen after breakfast but stayed in the normal range. As an insulin-dependent diabetic for close to fifty years, Walt always worried about heavy exercise and the lows. Cans of fruit juice and granola bars filled his tiny knapsack, there just in case he needed a sugar boost.

They started the hike slow enough and Walt felt his muscles loosen, his breathing regular. It felt good. The joint pain backed off, helped by the Norco caplet he'd downed before leaving home. *Better living through chemistry*. Walt laughed to himself at DuPont's old advertising slogan. In the '60s some of the hippies used it to refer to their drug culture.

The trail steepened but Chet didn't back off the pace. They traversed a series of switchbacks and continued on without taking a break. Bringing up the rear, Walt grabbed for his water bottle clipped to his belt and gulped a few mouthfuls. The group pulled away and disappeared around a bend. He hurried to catch up but failed to close the gap.

His glucose meter beeped a warning and he downed a can of pineapple juice, never stopping, continuing to push forward. Ahead, he saw Linda step off the trail onto a flat boulder and look



back at him. Their office affair had been a cliché – sex in the supply room or in the boss’s office on nights they worked late. She had been hot, demanding, controlling. Afterwards, Walt felt as spent as he started to feel hiking the mountain. *Is she throwing me under the bus again, with the old crew watching in glee? Was I that arrogant? Were any of them really my friends?*

Linda waved and hurried to catch up with the others. He continued plodding, one foot in front of the other. *Fuck ’em. I’ve never failed to finish what I started.* His sugar-starved mind thought back to his time in high school, running cross-country races, never winning but always finishing, just on the verge of passing out. He knew how to empty the tank and run on fumes. He’d felt that way when he’d quit the firm thirty years before. He had the best record of any of them, most favorable outcomes in court or out-of-court settlements. They despised him for it, for getting the good assignments from Chet, for the annual bonuses, and for his dalliance with Linda.

But it had all come crashing down with the Bradley Case and he got sold out and quit soon after.

*So why did Chet ask me on this hike . . . and why the fuck am I here with these guys? What did I think would happen – we all go off into the sunset singing “We are the World?”*

His thinking about past messed-up relationships provided a momentary diversion from the pain. But the pain won out. Then a pebble worked its way inside his left hiking boot. He tried shifting it to a position where it didn’t hurt, without success. It provided a new distraction from the way his entire body felt. He remembered reading a story somewhere about a man who smashed his finger with a hammer to distract himself from the pain of a fractured leg. That’s nuts. *But maybe this hike is my finger and my fucked-up history with these guys is my leg.*

The trail steepened yet again and Walt struggled, placing a hand on a knee and pushing down when climbing over boulders that straddled the trail. He removed his sunglasses and stared upward. The narrow path continued to climb, seemingly into the scudding clouds high above, a real stairway to heaven, or more likely to the deepest circle of hell. Wiggling heat waves rose from its surface. Yet Walt felt a chill run through him. He checked his glucose meter, its screen outlined in red, signaling a very low reading. He quickly downed another can of fruit juice, shivered, and sat on a huge rock, arms wrapped around himself. Nausea washed over him and he vomited into the bushes. His old-man bladder cut loose.

*I’d better ask for help.* He gazed up the trail. The group had disappeared, swallowed by the head-high chaparral that baked in the sun. He grew colder. Out of nowhere, a thick sea fog rolled up the valley and engulfed him – a genuine whiteout. He curled into a fetal position and squeezed his eyes shut. But the whiteness invaded his brain.

He lay on the knife-edged ridge of a snow-covered mountain. A gale-force wind threatened to push him off his tenuous purchase. Ahead, the crew of old retired lawyers stood on the peak’s summit. They passed a bottle of champagne between them while Chet took snapshots with his iPhone. The crew looked happy, jubilant at reaching the top. Walt lay in the snow unable to move, a failure. *Maybe this is how they felt about my successes. I had no idea how they felt . . . I never asked, too busy savoring the wins.*



Walt raised an arm and waved but none of the celebrating crew noticed. He struggled to his knees and sucked in deep breaths that burned his lungs but did nothing to revive him. He checked his oxygen supply, the gauge showed it near empty. He removed his mask to shout but the blast of Himalayan air froze his lips and the saliva in his mouth. He forced himself up and waved frantically. The crew stopped celebrating and stared but didn't make a move toward him. He sank onto the hard snow. The light faded.

"Walt! Come on man. Sit up. Drink this," somebody yelled at him. He opened his eyes. Four old lawyers surrounded him, his head resting in Linda's lap. Larry held a can of juice to his lips. Walt forced his hand up, took it and downed the liquid.

"You scared us for a minute," Chet said. "We got to the top and looked down and saw you curled up."

"Yeah, and you were shaking, like you had some kind of seizure," Tim said.

Walt sat up and shook himself, his clothes soaked in sweat. He checked his glucose meter; blood sugar levels were still below normal but climbing. The nausea had disappeared and the rubbery feeling in his muscles had slacked off.

"Thanks, guys. You really saved my ass. I just couldn't keep up with you."

Tim smiled. "Yeah, well we've been hiking together for years, know our abilities, know when to slow down and when to press on."

"Chet wanted you to join us," Linda said. "He thought maybe . . . maybe you had changed and we, I mean all of us might reconnect."

The group removed their knapsacks and sat next to the trail, breathing slow and easy, waiting for Walt's response.

"Yeah, about that. It's . . . it's occurred to me that . . . that I may have been a real asshole back then."

"May have been?" Linda said and broke into loud laughter. The group joined in. Linda continued, "I thought sabotaging The Bradley Case for you was the most righteous thing I did. And Tim taking it over when you bailed worked out for the client and all of us. But now it's something I regret, because I became you for just a moment and it's bothered me ever since."

"Yes, well one of me is enough."

They sat in full sunlight, listening to the sounds of the high chaparral. Red-shouldered hawks floated on the thermals as the mysterious fog cleared away to expose blue infinity.

Walt pushed himself up onto wobbly legs. "How far is it to the top? I'd like to see the view, take some photos."

"Forget that," Chet said quickly. "I'll email you photos. Besides, we're ready for lunch, a nice place downtown that serves good wine and Italian food."



“Not that place again,” Larry complained. “I need protein, preferably a big ole burger with cheese.”

“Yeah, and with enough grease to lube your car,” Chet said.

On the fast trek down the mountain the group argued about where to eat lunch, finally settling on a sloppy hamburger joint that had a full bar at the north end of town. Walt stayed silent, thinking about what had been said. *Is everything better now? Have all the loose ends been tied? Do these guys really want me to join their group? Or will we fall into the old relationships? We can't undo bad memories.*

In the parking lot they scattered to their cars.

Chet took him aside. “That was a killer hike. Probably should have done something different for your first.”

“No, that was okay. I'm just not in as good shape as you guys.”

“Are you joining us for lunch? Our next hike will be easier, I promise.”

Walt stared at his old boss and extended a hand. “Thanks for the invite. But I don't think so.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. You guys are a group of friends. I don't want to intrude on that. I'm . . . just a sad memory.”

Chet grinned and nodded. “Yes, you are. But it doesn't have to stay that way. Call me if you change your mind.”

“I will.”

Walter climbed into his Toyota. His arthritis pain had disappeared, leaving him to think about the broken leg and not the smashed finger.





# ISRAEL SEGALL

## The Train

Faces in bodies that don't belong there. Senses covered with headphones, screens behind which emotions, dreams and a hundred lives are hidden. The little space left by the underground train is filled with spent oxygen and tired eyes after the end of the working day.

Each being is engrossed in their own personal territory. Instagram stories full of paper smiles, of forced phrases imitating that thing called happiness, pass in front of the gaze of humans who are no longer human. Defeat is palpable. Minutes that are scattered on public transport, that no longer manage to cage the feelings of the recipients of affection. Temporary units that have dissipated, that have been transformed into an ignoble gas. What is time without love?

It is impossible to love being in that tin can with wheels that moves forward along uncertain paths, through pains and sorrows. Automatons who only know about responsibilities, who have forgotten what a caress is. Any physical contact is a threat to precious privacy. There are rumours of people who have spent years in that metro carriage and who have become accustomed to the clattering of the railway lines. That is their home, because they no longer remember where theirs is.

Existence is losing its meaning. Memories are yellowed photos in a newspaper from centuries past. Absolute dedication to what the mobile phone spits out, devotion bordering on the religious, which generates more content without content.

A mythological entity is sitting in a place reserved for the brave. His right leg is resting on his left. A posture worthy of a king, the monarch of unreachable lands. He pauses with a sigh as he turns the page of the worn book he holds with a ceremonious gesture. The movement is gentle, as if it were the last rose in his garden at the arrival of autumn. Its exhalation is accompanied by the silent liquid of emotions. The tear rolls with the slowness of a small snail. It runs through the space between the eye and the lip, looking for a place to die.

It drinks from the protagonist's experiences, makes them its own, treasures the steps that were taken for this specimen to be given birth. A powerful story, which is not inert, but in a maelstrom of letters written with drops of blood, of life. It rescues the smell of the meadow in which his imagination wanders, the wet grass allows him to soak the touch of the hand of the soul. He wakes up because there is someone else who does and cries disconsolately. In absolute silence, but disconsolate. He knows that this sadness is what keeps him away from the zombies that swarm between orange seats, uncertain tunnels and the lines of light that fly behind the window.

The story absorbs him, penetrates the nooks and crannies of his childhood, of the years he has inhabited the world that tends to darkness, to the scars that tattoo the spirit. Between sobs he puts the book down, perhaps to breathe. It loses its armour, crammed with grammar, verbal conjugations and broken illusions.

A jolt of the wagon moves the man standing in front of him. It opens up a luminous space. An uncertain path to a woman who weeps like him, sitting in lunar phases and in the swell of the tides.



Their watery gazes collide. For a second they perceive each other, their pupils touch. They cease to belong to that starless universe, the one shaped like a creaking vehicle, the one that does not stop because it travels aimlessly. They get on a swallow to travel a shared feat.

She lifts the book, a little to apologise for so many tears, for allowing her heart to soften and beat again. She lets out a rueful smile. She holds up the cover of the novel to the disdain of the audience present and the attention of the stranger who can't take his eyes off her.

He imitates the gesture, shows the cover of the copy and releases his version of a sad smile. From a distance he kisses her forehead, touches her with the tips of his hair and coordinates both breaths.

In a crowd of dull spirits they meet in a book, the same one multiplied by two. They know each other because there is magic in them. It is the same cover, engraved with the same name over the same image, perhaps from the same edition.

Through the wind he murmurs a name to her, the name of the main character of the story. She releases another bit of cry and moves her lips to form an equivalent word. He stands up. Without letting go of the book, he places his right arm at stomach level and his left arm behind his back. He gives her a movement of eternal respect, a bow charged with all the humanity that the surroundings had lost.

She shakes her head in respect, gladly accepting her interlocutor's permission. It is a dance of butterflies that had the good fortune to find themselves in a dreary wasteland. Proving that life and love can exist in the most inhospitable places.

Both return to the pages they had left on pause, reviving the story, letting the torrent of contained emotions flow, taking hold of the spirit of that tale that does not belong to them, but which they help to complete by devoting their gazes to the paper.

The faces illuminated by the screens are still asleep. Nobody notices what is going on around them, because nobody cares. Abulia is powerful. The opportunity to appreciate two people with their souls stripped bare by a book on the miserable train of idleness has been lost.





ALISON BOULAN

## An Ordinary Girl

Steve O, my last patient of the day, stands to leave my office, and I check my emotions, finding both guilt and relief. Guilt for not helping him, and relief because he went over by ten minutes and his non-stop complaining gave me a headache. His therapy will never be productive. Like so many before him, he reserves blocks of time to blather on about topics that would bore a broom handle: the movies he's seen; the coworkers he'd like to screw; his struggle to be happy; and the rash on his elbows. And Steve O *always* mentions his visits to the mall, where he watches girls from a coffee shop.

Another therapist stops to say goodnight. Six of us share a third-floor suite, and I have a cozy office at the end of the hall. There's a large window next to my desk, and I can see the top third of a dying maple tree and three cooling units. The therapist, Mr. Hennessy, is an elderly widow; he's also our senior-care specialist and the only male.

"Have a nice weekend," he says, giving me a toothy grin. "Tell Griff I said hello."

"Thanks," I say, smiling back. "I will."

I'm lying. My husband doesn't like Mr. Hennessy. He declined an invitation to watch the Super Bowl at our house ... eight years ago.

With Steve O behind me, I open my laptop to enter his progress note, a meaningless document no one will ever read. For each of his three goals I write, "Patient making adequate progress," and then I elaborate with social-worky jargon that fills the space provided. His first goal, "Improve ability to relate to others," is something we could work on for years, because the fix is buried deep within his personality, and he lacks the intellect to uncover it.

I glance at the time: it's 4:30. Griff, a wiry seventy-two-year-old with a snowy goatee, is at the senior center playing gin rummy. He's older than me by nine years, but could easily outrun me if we were getting attacked by bees. (Griff would also win a neuroses race ... by a long shot.) My husband usually calls at 4:30, and I'm hoping and praying he doesn't, because he'll only talk non-stop about his friends at the center. Everyone has had a "life-saving" surgery and is "blessed" with a grandchild who's an attorney or a gifted musician. And at least one "connected" grandchild knows Elon Musk, or knows someone who knows him.

Griff and I have been married for thirty-eight years — no children, just two megalomaniac Chihuahuas, Cleo and Charlie — and I'd assess our relationship as stable, reasonably harmonious and vacillating between dull and predictable. We're just two ordinary people living ordinary lives. You could even say our introduction was ordinary: we met at a wedding reception while reaching for the same piece of cake. Griff's got "senior-style" — he wears a bowtie, suspenders and a black beret — but there's nothing remarkable about me. I have an extra chin, and my hair is dyed a confusing shade of red that currently looks *skunky*. And look at these clothes, my "uniform:" khaki skirt, white blouse, black shoes with gummy soles and cat-eye glasses favored by twenty-somethings. You should be able to look up "ordinary" in any dictionary and find a picture of me. And there might be a second picture of Griff holding the Chihuahuas.



Luckily, he doesn't call, and my sanctuary remains undisturbed. I've always needed a sanctuary and first learned this in junior high. My parents let me sleep in the buggy basement, and I claimed a storage room, only because the door had a lock. After smashing every crawling creature with a rolled up magazine, I dragged in a square of old carpet, an air mattress and a fluorescent-green bean-bag chair I found in the garage. I'd spend hours in that chair, in just my underwear, listening to George Michael, Michael Bolton and Madonna through headphones. The underwear-only habit actually began when I was three. Our household was loud, chaotic and unpredictable, because I had older twin sisters and a father with untreated bipolar disorder. So when the madness peaked one Christmas Day, I found a way to cope: I stripped down to my underwear and ignored everyone. No tantrums, no crying — I just walked around in skivvies, a too-small T-shirt and dirty socks.

I was freezing, but I was in control.

My office is much more colorful than that dark basement. It has rose-colored walls — law enforcement calls the color “Drunk Tank Pink” — and a wall-hanging made of fisherman's rope that Griff gave me on our anniversary. Aside from my desk, I have a blue winged-back chair, a love seat and a bookcase. The bookcase contains books on anxiety, depression, personality disorders, codependency and three on meditation. Most of the books haven't been opened in years, though I recently loaned something to Max Q, a teenager with anger issues, and he filled it with vampire drawings.

I should really get up and walk the halls. Griff wants me to exercise more (he bought me a Peloton for my birthday), but I'd rather spend an hour with my most annoying patient, Arnold K, who talks nonstop about his five cats. I avoid using the Peloton, because when I ride it, I sweat enough for two people. This means showering twice, getting wet twice, drying myself twice and viewing my menopause-mashed-potato belly twice.

No, thank you.

I'm anxious to wrap up my work responsibilities, because my patients' love seat waits across the room. If I could communicate with this chunk of furniture, I'd say, *Be patient, my friend ... I'm doing my best. And it would respond, Hurry, Nancy! Hurry!*

Now Griff's calling. His ringtone is a recording of our chihuahuas barking at the mailman, and he won't let me change it; he insists the “voices of our children” must be part of my work day, and by changing it I'm rejecting their existence. As the yelps of these crazed children fill my office, I hold my breath and wait. And then when the noise stops, I empty my lungs and relax again.

As I finish Steve O's progress note, I think back to our conversation. He described talking with his father about taking over the family business, a thriving produce market with three locations. Steve O said no and watched his father cry, which left him questioning his worth as a son. Looking out at the dying tree, I pinch my bottom lip and wonder when he'll have the maturity to make better decisions. He's like the dozens of other patients I've seen over the years, those with maturity levels anchored in high school. (Some elementary school.) Many are driven by impulse, and if they're lucky, will tame those demons by the time they turn fifty.



I've evolved well in my own life, and my therapist of twenty-four years would confirm it. Even though I'd assess my personality hovering around the midpoint on the continuum of normalcy, I have had my "quirks" like most individuals. There was a phase of pica in elementary school — I ate pencil erasers and construction paper (only yellow) — and then a few years later I started biting my nails and wore gloves to bed. But these harmless hiccups were only manifestations of my focus and determination, which served me well in grad school.

Several therapists say goodbye in the hallway, and I begin rolling my chair over to join them. But this requires more effort than it's worth, so I roll back while watching my warehouse-worker shoes do the work. I feel embarrassed every time I see these shoes because they remind me of my lack of individuality. I recall treating a good-looking man three years ago. He seemed to have everything, including his own business and a Tesla, but he'd been saddled with a personality that made life challenging. (Unfortunate for many patients.) He asked me to call him "Wexler," his surname, instead of his first name, and I found this delightful. Even though he was *extremely* difficult to work with, Wexler was his own person, a true one-of-a-kind, and I admired him for that.

I impulsively open my laptop to check my upcoming appointments, a habit that's difficult to break. As I scan the names my eyes fall upon "Janet B." Her burden in life is guilt and it seems to be in her DNA. She'll say things like, "guilt is my favorite emotion," or "I feel guilty owning a car," or "guilt is a shadow that follows me everywhere." Of course Janet B has something she *should* feel guilty about, but she shouldn't let it ruin her life. Many other patients struggle with guilt, and I'd give anything to have a magic wand that cured it, even though this would "heal" so many people that I'd have to switch to career counseling. And what if this wand also cured everyone struggling with sexual issues. During my career, I've heard it all: women wanting less; husbands wanting more; husbands wanting a *lot* more; conflicts created by sex positions, hygiene, food choices (one couple uses chocolate pudding in their love-making), pornography and toys; and the woman with plushophilia, Amy E, who prefers having sex dressed as a stuffed animal. One day I'd like to say to Amy E, who's like a daughter to me, "Listen, you need to let go of this plushophilia nonsense. It's not dignified. Are you going to wear a rabbit suit into your sixties? No. Absolutely not."

It's time to return Griff's call. If we don't talk every two hours, his emotions turn into balls of rubber bands. But it's after five, and I still need to visit the love seat, and then there's the most therapeutic event of my week when it's over. Postponing Griff's call, I get ready for the love-seat visit and unlock my bottom drawer to retrieve my collection. I collected things as a child too, most notably insects. My family lived on a farm and bugs were everywhere, not just in my bedroom. Enormous flies smashed their heads against window panes; armies of ants prowled our kitchen counters; and tiny beetles crawled over shoes, pillows and toothbrushes. (I won't mention the spiders, because I don't want to have those dreams again.) I'd trap these insects in a thirty-two-ounce Mason jar, and then seal the lid to watch them die. Their tiny bodies would shrivel and become papery corpses, and then I'd transfer them to a smaller jar for safe-keeping. When I abandoned this hobby at thirteen, I had over three cups of smelly insect flakes.

My therapist told me that killing insects and collecting their body parts was an attempt to control the chaos in my life. (I never told her about the underwear business; we patients always keep something in our back pockets, just in case we need new material.) If she had the full picture, I'm sure she'd write the following progress note: "Nancy murdered insects and practiced non-compliance as a child." And hopefully she'd add, "But she kept it together."



Griff's big brown eyes hover in my thoughts, so I give him a call.

"Hi, honey," I say. "No, I'm still at the office. I didn't see your messages, because I've been stacked up with patients. You know how it is — everybody wants to see me before the weekend. Yes, I ate the energy bar you bought at COSTCO. Honey-almond was a very good choice. Of course — let's buy them again. Did you enjoy yourself at the senior center? Good, I'm glad. Playing gin rummy with friends can be very rewarding, and it helps to create a balanced lifestyle. No, don't worry — I'll be leaving soon. I just have to finish some paperwork. Do I plan to ride the Peloton? I'm not sure. I'll let you know when I get home. Maybe we could consider another option, like getting ice cream. Okay, then. Love you, too."

I end the call and heave a sigh — I've channeled my "therapy voice" again. After thirty-two years as a psychotherapist, it's difficult to turn off and, honestly, I'm not sure where Nancy-the-Therapist ends and Nancy-the-Person begins. Few of us are willing to discuss this phenomenon, something I call "the curse of professional programming," which left untreated, turns your personality into low-fat milk. And some days, I'm drowning in that milk.

The charts are finished, I've talked to my husband and it's now "me-time." I've unchained myself from my patients' psyches and won't have to face Griff and the psychotic dogs for another hour. I slip off my shoes, wheel my chair over to the door, pull it closed and then turn the lock. Just as I'm wheeling back, my office phone rings. The noise drills into my skull and elicits a hate I sometimes feel for my job. All the whining, patients pleading *Help me! Help me! Help me!* and the glaring ingratitude. How many people stop to thank me? How many say, "Nancy, you really helped me change my life."

I could count them on my fingers.

The ringing ends, and the call, thankfully, goes to voicemail.

I reach into the drawer, lift out a shoebox and place it on my desk. It holds my archive, the objects I've scavenged from the love seat over the years. I rake my fingers through the glorious stuff, the flotsam and jetsam of my patients' lives and remind myself, for the umpteenth time, that I should buy a diary to record my findings. Digging through my treasures, I find a sticky purple pacifier, three mini vibrators, a gold fountain pen, a hearing aid, dozens of tampons (one nineteen years old), buttons, buttons and more buttons, a diamond earring, \$17.48 in change, a handful of condoms (two glow-in-the-dark), a pink rabbit's foot and a charm bracelet adorned with teddy bears.

Glancing up at the window, I see that daylight is fading — it's time to get to work. I lift myself from the chair, which requires an alarming amount of effort; gravity tends to be passive-aggressive, and it usually wins. Grabbing the shoe box, I walk stiffly past the winged-back chair and over to the love seat. I then lift one of the four red accent pillows and give it a sniff, finding lingering scents of dirty hair. On the next pillow, I smell a mix of Old Spice and dryer sheets and assume it belongs to Morgan G, a delightful man with Aspergers. The third pillow has traces of Rebecca W's lily-of-the-valley perfume, and I pull it into my breasts and smile. (Rebecca W has mother issues; I'll be seeing her until I retire.) I'm disgusted when I pick up the final pillow: it's filled with the subtle stink of cat urine.



Arnold K — it's got to be Arnold K.

I drop to my knees and wince. The pain is getting worse, and I may have to abandon my searches in the coming months, instead of the coming years. Tossing the throw pillows to the floor, I slide my hands under the two bottom cushions and find a flash drive. I'll set this aside and view its contents later with a glass of wine, when Griff and the dogs are sleeping. Flash drives are my most prized possessions. One contains a video of Jennifer A, a math teacher with OCD, tap dancing in nude, another has fifty dandelion photos taken by Charlene J, a depressed seamstress with alopecia. A third contains a half-written novel, which might belong to Madeline K or Sonja B ... I'm still figuring this out.

When I shift to the right, my knee pops. It's a disquieting noise, like a golfball hitting drywall, and I hope I'm not trapped on the floor until Griff calls the police. Hurrying to finish, I make one final sweep, which yields old gum wrapped in a store receipt, a yellow pill — I have a baggie filled with medication and will add this to the mix — and a heart-shaped locket etched with "I love Pookie." I struggle to stand which, thankfully, isn't being filmed, and then rearrange the pillows and pack away my treasures.

I'm now ready to make a stand against the madness of my life. But then my cellphone rings and sends a hurricane of high-pitched barking around my office. Each sharp yap pelts the side of my head and makes me blink, and I wish I had a hammer to destroy something. Then it stops. And seconds later starts up again. As my heart slams my ribs, I have a breakthrough that's like getting poked in the eye with a stick — the barking represents every stressor in my life: Griff, the fucking Chihuahuas, the Peloton, my patients. Arnold K and his goddamn cats.

I suck in a breath, wait, and then suddenly it's quiet again.

Laying my phone on the desk, I then walk over to the darkening window, unzip my skirt and let it drop to the floor. Air swirls around my legs and into my crotch, tickling me with a million tiny fingers. The sensation is heavenly, and I feel three again: happy, in control, free. I savor this sweet moment, until barking begins ricocheting off the walls and ceiling. I want to run through the window, but instead, pick up the phone and calmly say, "Hi, honey."

Griff tells me that Cleo bit his finger. And then he says he's going to the ER.

"Oh, honey," I say, "that sounds stressful. You must feel frightened and worried, and I'm sorry you have to go through this. Don't go to the ER. I'll be leaving in a few minutes and can take a look at your wound. Honey, I'm sure that's not true. You'll still be able to play gin rummy if you're injured. Just remember — things *will* change, and this injury is *not* permanent. I promise we'll figure out this finger problem as soon as I get home. Yes, honey, I'll hurry. Love you, too."

We hang up, momentarily severing our tie, and I turn back to the window. It's now a black mirror, and I can see myself: an exhausted therapist at the end of another long week. But when I look closer, I see a girl, and she's terrified. I can almost hear her saying, *Help me, Nancy. Help me. I can't pull my skirt up ... please don't make me.*





## Warmth

The cat gazes at me in what I imagine is an expectant sort of way, orange eyes blinking slowly now and then. I oblige in staring back, a forgotten coffee in hand. I needed a break from my mind, anyway. The cat, however bored with its decision, stretches out its front legs and leaves me alone to my thoughts, once again. I sigh and turn my attention to stare at the collection of colors swirling at my feet. Oranges, reds, and browns, whimsically create a sound like tinkling bells. I took another sip from my cup, cold coffee bringing me back to the present, and continued walking. The trees I passed had lost most of their beauty if you were to see the greenery as such a thing. I did not, and my admiration of the bare branches reaching towards the sky was evident in my eyes. I have always loved this time of year. The cold is what tempted me to go outside, finally feeling comfortable in my skin, as much as I could. I diverted my attention toward my feet, watching the steps I took along the carved path of the forest.

I watched my boots drop on each dead leaf with a crunch. Kicking small pebbles forward as I passed them. Occasionally, I would look behind me whenever I heard the light steps of tiny feet on the dirt that were not my own. I was always alone. As the wind blew, it would whisper its secrets to me and blow through my hair almost like hands tickling softly in play. Each time would leave me shivering through my thick, winter coat. The clouds danced carelessly across the setting sun in the sky. The dark passings made the chill in the air harsh against my skin. Choosing to ignore the cold, I continued walking down the path farther and farther into the woods. Eventually, I came across a slightly overgrown start of a path. The shrubs created a barrier just tall enough for me to not be able to look ahead. I lift my gloved hand to the leaves and graze my fingers across the rubber greenery. The need to see what was on the other side was overwhelming. I began to wedge my way through the thorny bushes that were using all of its strength attempting to keep me back. As I could begin to see the other side, a small branch holding me snapped under my weight and a small yelp was all that I was able to release before I hit the ground. The cold air made the pain in my wrists feel much worse and my coffee cup burst open upon contact, precious coffee seeping into the dirt, but the feeling all but disappeared when I looked at what the shrubbery was protecting.

A lake came into view with a sheet of thin ice covering the surface. There was a small rusted bench near the bank facing towards the lake. The wood had rotting holes in the planks and vines had risen up to claim the bench before the air turned chill, essentially killing the vines. Small rings of mushrooms had grown at each leg of the bench, the rings growing a few inches away from connecting. It was a mystical kind of quiet, and all I could think of to describe it was 'beautiful.' I walked past the bench to stand at the edge where the sand met the icy lake. I slowly bent down and wiped away at the frost to look at my glassy reflection. We stared at each other for a good while, making critical remarks against the other. *Her nose is too bumpy. Her hair is too frizzy. Her lips are too pale.* The ice began to shoot back. *All you ever do is comply with others. You never have an original thought. Your desperation for affection is what forces people to turn away.* I scowled at the other woman in the ice and stood back up to look at the vast space. The lake was large. It went on for miles, the forest emerging again on the other side, a deep mystery to solve if you were to make it across the ice. It was difficult for me to see the opposite side clearly. I was curious about what I would find if I were to make the journey.

I observed the area, contemplating this absurd idea. With the wind nuzzling against my back and encouraging me, I decided on the first independent choice I had ever made and took a step forward. The ice crinkling beneath my feet but never delaying my pace. I only stopped walking once I estimated myself to be at the center of the lake. I looked at my surroundings, forcing a small laugh at the fish I could see swimming around at arm's length, if not for the cold barrier separating us.

I brought my eyes back up to the shore, noticing a black figure making its way to the bank. The cat gazed, once again, sitting down on its haunches in anticipation. I stared back, tilting my head slightly to the side as I observed the cat's actions. The cat's eyes held an intensity that could be seen from across the lake, igniting fear in my heart.



The cat released a slight sound, its eyes seeming to bore into my soul, seeming to talk with me, now I realize it was foretelling of what lay ahead. Wanting to walk towards the cat, I shifted my stance and heard the crinkling sound of spider-webbed cracks racing across the lake.

I stared in horror at my feet, moving as small as possible, only bending my knees slightly for balance. The cracks made their way towards me at an antagonizing speed. All I could do was watch. Watch as my fate has been handed to me. Watch as one decision changes everything. The gravity of a single choice. I seemed to have been standing there for too long, staring at the freshly formed cracks under my boots. The ice breathing in wait, patient enough for its opponent's next move. It was too silent. I carefully looked back up at the cat who, in retrospect, had not moved once. We looked at each other for a little bit, talking with our eyes. I begged for any sort of assistance while the cat did not blink. Only observed. That is what frightened me the most.

My balance swayed a little with more weight on one foot than the other. The lake created a deep crack that stole me with it. My coat and boots acted as heavyweights dragging me down farther and farther until it was too dark to see which direction was up. The water enveloped me in a strangled hold. I struggled at first, of course, but once I was deep enough time stopped. The cold water felt warmer, like a silk caress. I moved slowly down, the fish choosing to swim around me and continue on their way. All I did was float. Calm surrounds me. I was growing content, gaining acceptance. There was nothing I could do and I was okay with that.

A faint light could be seen from where the ice cracked, but my vision was blurred to the point I could barely see what was in front of me. If I could, I would've seen a small, black figure pop its head over the light watching me drift away. All it ever did was watch.

Hours had passed, possibly. My eyes had closed, focusing on the feel of the water against my skin. It did not feel cold anymore. It felt warm and inviting. The endless water wrapped around me as if it did not want me to leave. It wanted to keep me company during this long winter. It wanted to dance through the lake all day and night. I was tempted to let it.

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Night had consumed the earth, the Moon rose to its zenith shining its light down as a comfort to those who came alive under her glow. She gazed down at her land. The admiration flowed through her as she looked upon her children. She could see the young couple parked in a field a few yards away, sharing kisses and secrets under the stars. The small group of deer frolicking along the grass, without a care in the world. The owls fly from tree to tree swooping down to catch their prey, then flying back into the safety of the leaves just as quickly. The nocturnal rodents waddling through the trees. An opossum carrying three tiny babies along her back as she walked, sparking a feeling of relatability in the Moon. The small, black cat frequently seen by the Moon sitting on a rock in a field looking up towards her shine. She took her gaze to the lake nearby, which had since frozen in the change of the weather. The iridescence of the fish scales softly reflecting through the ice along the lake. The algae swaying with the movement of the water. The woman slowly sinking into the abyss opening her mouth one last time, bubbles floating to the surface. The Moon followed as the woman's eyes fluttered closed. She watched in agony as a human so young could never gain the promised experiences one should have. The ones the Moon herself had watched take place throughout the centuries.

She made her way until she could see directly down into the collapsed ice, past the fish, past the dark, to almost the bottom of the lake. The woman flowed in the dark, hair waving around her head like a halo of light against the murky water. She ventured into the depths of the woman's soul, watching fluttering images of her life. The Moon felt the happiness of the girl she saw before the tragedies of life chipped it away. Until the sorrow was all that was left. The loneliness of the woman appalled the Moon. She rewatched the memories until all she could feel was the throbbing pain in the woman's heart, slowly losing its beat.



The Moon was a mother and a strong believer in second chances. She provided a home to every creature in her care. She decided she would let the woman into her world, give her the choice to be reborn into the wind carrying the leaves. To gain the chance to feel a part of something. She carved away the last bits of heartache hiding the Spirit that defined the woman and began to carry her back to the surface. The woman's soul gave some resistance at first, clinging to what was comfortable hiding from the unknown, but change can never be avoided for long.

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I knew I was out of my body as I felt the soft touch of the water move past me. I still felt a small connection to the physical prison I was leaving behind. A slight tether of serenity attaching me to my body threatening to break if I moved away any farther. I knew if I wanted to be let go to avoid this separation, all I had to do was ask. I was curious, however, and wanted to see who had saved me from the confines of my body. I remembered the water was supposed to be cold and how I had fallen deep into it, but all I could feel at the moment was warmth and relief. No one knows how Death is going to be when he comes. For me, I was greeted by Death with joy and peace. The neverending gasp for air was relinquished with the loss of my life. I could finally breathe again.

I opened my eyes to see a pale light surrounding me. It was holding me tight along my lower back, dragging my limp Spirit through the current. I turned my head to see a fish swimming idly by. I reached out my hand to touch the fish, missing it by a few inches. I continued to ascend towards the surface and left the fish behind me. The light became more intense with each passing moment as I got closer to my savior. I did not feel the need to shut my eyes against the bright light, but it blinded me, nonetheless.

I felt the energy shift as I burst through the barrier of the dark lake into the light of the Moon. The Moon created a pleasant shine to keep my soul warm, for which I was thankful during these cold winter months. I drifted up until I was face to face with her. I could feel her beauty and gentleness in my heart, knowing she was looking down upon me with an unbreakable love that I remember wanting when I was alive. Flinching momentarily, I felt a hand I could not see hover over my cheek and swipe away a tear I did not realize I had cried. I began to lean into the touch, grateful for the warmth behind the act. The feeling in my chest bloomed into a welcomed light of bliss and a soft smile formed on my face. The Moon let me go midair but I did not fall. I looked around and felt the wind whip my hair as playfully as a child. Looking a bit closer, I could see the Souls of children and adults alike. Some of the children ran around with dogs who jumped to snatch clouds in the air. They beckoned me to join them in their antics. To become one with the wind. I turned toward the Moon, nervousness consuming me as a remnant of my old life and who I was. She encouraged me to run and flourish in the joys of the afterlife and what I can become. She gave me one last loving touch and I turned back to the sky. I chased and played with the other Spirits who became one with the wind. We blew through the trees, producing songs few could hear. I was finally where I needed to be.





ANNIKA CONNOR



Reach for the Stars







# *Creative Nonfiction*





JANE VARLEY

## My Mother's Belly

had a map of pale, rutted tendrils, marks of the 60s when she was pregnant all the time. *That's just what you did back then*—she said of work, miscarriages, and babies, though the distance now makes those years, she says, seem they happened to somebody else. Let's say it's autumn, '68. We are 8, 4, and 3. Mom gets back at dawn, after her shift. I watch from the window. Station wagon pulls in. Car door slams. I watch in the kitchen. Side door knob turns. Cool morning air puffs in. No words, but sounds of the morning, stretches and sighs. I wait for her touch. Purse on table. Dad at the sink, rinsing his cereal bowl. Do they kiss? On the lips? The cheek? There must have been words, a sentence or two, how was work, what time home later, kids okay. Dad pats her pregnant belly. *Won't be long now*. He has a buzz cut and soft blue eyes shrunk behind thick lenses. *Have a good day guys*, on his way out. One block walk to the high school to teach classes and plan the afternoon's practice.

Everything is white, her dress, pantyhose, shoes. She has a new hairdo, a pixie cut with blonde streaks, flattened at the top from the nurse's cap, which is carried home in her purse. *Don't mess with that*, she says when I reach for it. I love the smooth surfaces, the stiff arc of the brim. *You're going to miss it, get going*, to my sister pulling on her red sweater and adjusting her pleated skirt like the cap I like to touch, things from the bigger world. She goes out to the corner, where sometimes, when the sun's out and Mom's in the mood, we walk along to await the yellow bus, an even larger item of the world, though usually it's right back to the bedroom, Mom's thin nightgown, and the laundry basket of toys. She takes her place on the floor, pillow, blanket, her body barricading the door. As she sleeps I enter the dream of that room. Everything high, bed, matching tables, dresser. Squatty phone clicks when you spin the dial and let go. Clock radio with buttons on top and a jar of soft silver gel. Stacks of clothes, folded and ready for the drawers. The slatted, hinged wooden doors of the closet and the dark pod of shoes, studied one by one. I am so deeply inside

that fifty years later I still see it with the same mix of feelings, of wonder, the memory of actual thought—*I am alive. I am here*. There was nowhere but there where perception flared and grew so acute I could see back, back to where I came from, telescoping through to a time that existed before those scars of my mother and the warmth of her body, the mix of our blood, before even houses were built and rooms arranged, back to when I was a pinpoint of light in the universe of my mother's belly.



DAVID RIESSEN

## Entangled

The Holocaust was boring. My dad used to make us watch documentaries on PBS of weeping Jewish families, skeletal Jewish prisoners, and piles of Jewish corpses. It's a lot of Jewish tragedy, but none of this ancient history meant anything to me. (When I was a little kid, the Holocaust was about 20 years in the past. Like I said, ancient history.) If we need to learn about World War II prisoners, can't we watch *Hogan's Heroes*? Sergeant Schultz was the funniest dummkopf ever.

Then when I was 15, we went on a family vacation to Europe. And while in Germany, how about a day trip to Dachau? Are you kidding me? Who wants to go to a Nazi concentration camp on vacation? The real question, of course, is who wants to be on a Riessen family vacation when you're me?

As we entered through the gates of Dachau, my dad pointed to the weather-worn sign overhead: *Arbeit macht frei*. "Work sets you free," he translated. I didn't understand it then, and I don't understand it now. (I think the Nazis might have been confused about a few things.) Once inside, we watched a film on the Holocaust. I had seen all these gross scenes too many times, and I was not going to pay attention now.

Next, we took a tour through the barracks. Whatever – nothing interesting there either. And then I touched a wooden bunk bed, and everything changed. Suddenly, the history lesson came alive. You mean they lived here? They touched the same piece of wood I'm touching? They slept in these beds? Then we walked through the "showers." They stood where I'm standing? They walked into these showers expecting clean water and getting poison gas? What was it like when they realized what was happening? For the first time, I understood the horror of the Holocaust. Turns out it was not just some stupid show on TV. It was real.

I was thinking about this experience the other day when I read about the three quantum physicists who won the 2022 Nobel Prize for their experiments with entangled photons. They proved that two particles that are linked together in a particular way can stay linked no matter how far apart they become in space. Einstein didn't believe in this kind of thing and mocked it as "spooky action at a distance." I, like subgenius Albert, don't really understand any of it, but it's one of those things that give me hope that life is more than it appears to be.

I wonder if this entangled particle phenomenon is somehow related to the physical and emotional jolt I felt from the bunk bed at Dachau. Maybe our spirit lives on in objects that we touch. Some kind of electrical energy or something. It's a far-fetched theory, but so was quantum entanglement until it was verified.

Our son Sam died suddenly four years ago, and in my basement office, I have all kinds of Sam treasures: early artwork, posters, CDs, pictures, music awards, dozens of guitar pics, and his gorgeous, cherry red Gibson ES-335 Semi-hollow body Electric Guitar. At the funeral, we



placed this guitar where a casket would normally be. And when his band played an impossibly beautiful song, they put the guitar in front of Sam's empty space.

Sam's empty space. I hated writing those words, and now I've written them again.

But here I am with Sam's much-loved guitar on my lap, and I feel no spooky entanglement at all. Maybe if I start trying to play (which I don't know how to do), Sam's spirit will guide my fingers somehow, and music will magically emerge. Nope. No music. And no physical and emotional jolt. But I wouldn't say that I feel nothing. In fact, I think I might have discovered a whole new area of physics. Or maybe metaphysics.

I wonder if they give a Nobel prize for longing.





ELINA KUMRA

## False Recollections

For nearly thirty years, I clung to a memory. At forty, I fell for an Alaskan bush pilot. Rugged, unique, fearless. He found me amusing—a true California hippie. Invited me over, showed me his world, then sent me packing. Blinded by his allure, I chased him shamelessly. Discovering his affair, I felt mortified, angry, then moved on. Learning of his death in a crash brought sadness. And that was it.

Or so I thought.

I've kept journals since thirteen. They stack in boxes along my closet's back wall—essential, yet unnoticed, like a toothbrush or shoes. Occasionally, I'd dive into those notebooks, scribbles on napkins from truck stops, margins of maps. Yet, often they stayed shut, sometimes for years.

Somewhere in the continuous narrative of my life lay the brief, intense story of my affair with the bush pilot. I kept it to myself. The embarrassment of foolishly pursuing a man as I neared middle age was a chapter I preferred to forget. Yet, on a cold December afternoon, with northern California Pineapple Express blurring my windows and the dog refusing to step outside, nostalgia took over. I retrieved the journal from its box, wrapped a shawl around my shoulders, and settled on the couch to revisit my Alaskan adventure.

In the spring of 1989, I felt fragile. My long-term relationship had ended, leaving me without hope for love. I professed independence from men, yet, deep down, I longed for companionship. Distrustful of the singles scene, its risks and deceit, I stayed alone until a magazine caught my eye. It catered to women seeking romance with Alaskan bachelors—where men outnumbered women three to one. The prospect of meeting someone from afar seemed safe, controlled. I found him in those pages—a lanky, shaggy-haired Alaskan, reminiscent of Crocodile Dundee. Reading my journal, I smiled, remembering how I gasped at his photo. He stood barefoot on his floatplane's pontoon, a summer day around him, shirtless, innocently holding a slippery, freshly-caught salmon by his navel.

I wrote, he replied. My journal lacks the exchange, but his response electrified me. He wished to speak. My heart raced as his voice first reached me over the phone.

Our correspondence through calls and letters began. I'd wait by the mailbox, eager for his letters, photos, and tales from Alaska's unforgiving lands. Yet, flipping through my journal, the story twisted away from what I recalled. A sense of alarm and confusion whispered to me. I had been captivated, imagining a life with this adventurous spirit in the wilds. But what was this entry, written weeks after we first spoke?

May 20, 1989

He called last night at 11:30 p.m.; we spoke until past 1 a.m. I think about his phone bills and cringe. He's interested, but I complicate things. His voice carries a long, grainy drawl from Georgia. Did his father support Wallace? He was of age in '72. Perhaps he even voted for Wallace himself. And his daughter, named Sheena Kay, whom he insists on calling by her full name. It's as if he's setting her destiny towards square dances and karaoke nights in biker bars.



I had lost these doubts, this mockery, in my memory. Swept up in the fantasy, love blinded me to his indifference. The tone in my journal surprised me, unsettling.

Four months in, Rusty invited me over. I remember prepping like a giddy schoolgirl, hitting camping stores and thrift shops for Alaska-appropriate gear. The flight north filled me with anticipation, convinced of our mutual falling. Yet, reading my journal, the love story it tells differs from what I remembered. Two days into Fairbanks, I sat on his deck under the noon sun, journal in lap, and wrote.

August 16, 1989

Alaska has seeped into my being, its true magnitude hidden like an iceberg. Standing by the river near his cabin, the landscape shifted, awakening. A darkly feminine force in the woods, the brooding clouds, the rhythmic water, felt alive. It mirrored falling for a stunning, elusive woman, always out of reach, never an ally. I longed for her acceptance, then the feeling faded, dismissed as imagination. My thoughts shifted to Rusty, with his lumberjack look, auburn hair, and green eyes. Yet, turning back to the river, the presence returned, dispassionate, watching.

I realize my love isn't for Rusty. The divides between us—social, cultural, spiritual—are too vast. His arms, flying above Denali, offer brief escapes, but our differences in beliefs mark the true distance. Alaska, not Rusty, consumes me. I try to capture her essence, but she defies me, leaving scars or withdrawing completely. Exhausted, I turn away, indifferent. Yet, in sleep, she approaches, indifferent to my existence.

Reading my journal, I'm reminded of developing photos with my father in a darkroom. Dipping exposed paper into the solution, an image would slowly emerge—faint at first, then sharply defined.

August 21, 1989

Last night, in jest, I mentioned how my presence seemed to fill his cabin, unsure how I'd gather myself to leave. He echoed my sentiment, noting my essence lingered everywhere—writing on the deck, gazing into the river, beside him, challenging the bed's integrity. "I dread seeing you pack. Could you stay another week?" he asked.

This entry contradicted my recollections so starkly, I doubted its authenticity, questioning the fidelity to my journaling rule. Yet, his voice rang true as I read. My journal revived the intensity in his gaze as I faced departure. "We're not done," he assured. "We'll meet again."

Back home, my writings, though not explicitly, reflected a shift. Rusty's quirks, once subjects of my mockery, now felt charming.

October x, 1989

Our phone conversations have grown so frequent, I'm catching his Georgia accent. Soon, I might echo a character from "Gone With The Wind," my favorite film. I savor its unhurried cadence. Tonight, Rusty took his phone outside so I could listen to the birch trees falling, work



of beavers at their dam. Their persistence and effort captivated me. Rusty believes such traits are essential for survival there, both for animals and humans. Could I belong?

He invited me back, sensing not just my love for Alaska but potential in us. "Give us a chance," he proposed. Our differences were secondary to what our hearts held. And winter in Alaska? He painted it as an exotic experience, akin to tasting raw oysters, best enjoyed with someone who knows the way. His descriptions of autumn's touch on the forest and the light dancing on the water were invitations, extending a welcome to his home, his arms. Why had my memory recast me as the one pleading? A throbbing pulse took hold in my throat.

November 10, 1989

Rusty sent a hefty package yesterday. Photos, a letter, and the Anchorage Daily News help wanted ads circled in red. He might be onto something. Better pay in Alaska, and I can envision a life there with Rusty as my guide. Thinking of returning, my veins pulse with excitement. Dana wept over the phone, warning my life would change irrevocably. My parents are wary, dubbing Rusty "that man." To them, Alaska is mere geography. To me, it's a realm of ancient magic and raw nature. Rusty gets this part of me; it's in him, too.

Reading, I paused, letting the room and reality drift back. If my altered memories ever clashed with this truth, the fabrications won. These reignited truths sparked more, lurking just out of reach. What more might I uncover?

December 22, 1989

Home now, Rusty in the past. Alone in the cabin, a dawn call revealed his double life. A woman spoke of a house they were buying. A bag hidden behind coffee cups held countless letters from women misled by Rusty. From poetic to simple, each believed in a unique bond with him. My letters were among them. Rusty's calls, often not from Alaska but various West Coast locations, deceived me. Were his vivid descriptions of Alaskan seasons just lies?

The dog, sensing my shock, looked up. I reassured her, though doubtfully.

Each woman received photos, some even the job ads, all duped into thinking they were his one. Learning another was planning a life with Rusty shook me to the core.

Packing in fear, I fled to neighbors, lied for a ride to the airport. No note for Rusty; the letters on his table and the unanswered machine spoke enough.

That was the heart of the true story, hidden from myself for years behind a cushion of denial. Duped by a narcissist, or worse, a sociopath. I never understood his motives, the pleasure he found in deceiving vulnerable women. Did any seek revenge? My journal revealed more, including his death, details I'd forgotten. A clipping from the Anchorage Daily News, sent by a neighbor, detailed the crash off Ruby, Alaska, on April 21, 1990—two dead, including the pilot.

A witness described the Maule M-5's sudden, fatal maneuver into the Yukon River. The pilot, license revoked in 1988 for drunken flying, had a blood alcohol level of .195 percent at the crash. The passenger's identity remained undisclosed, awaiting family notification.

I rose, unsteady, to brew tea. Memories of flying with Rusty over the Kahiltna Glacier surged, the landscape sprawling beneath us. Merely months after my escape, he had been drunk at the helm, crashing into icy depths. Fate, perhaps divine intervention, spared me from being that unidentified passenger. In Alaska, where small planes outnumber bikes in the lower 48, and where bravado often masks recklessness, flying drunk breaches an unspoken code, met with stony silence even in jest.

The teacher from Oregon haunted my thoughts more than Rusty. Had I not stumbled upon the call and letters, our fates might have intertwined in tragedy. My journal reflected frequent ponderings about reaching out to her, sharing our woven lies and manipulation. Yet, I held back, unsure if I was protecting her heart or mine.

After a turbulent period, my journal ceased to mention the pilot and me. Life in California took a brighter turn; I found love and never returned to Alaska. Its influence dwindled to my cherished copy of Robert Service's "The Spell of the Yukon," a reminder of the land that once called to me.

By dusk, I closed my journal and returned it to its spot in the closet. The following weeks found me eyeing those journals warily, half-expecting more revelations. Yet, with time, I reconciled with the altered memory. We often reshape our pasts, crafting versions that sustain us. Without these narratives, raw emotions—foolishness, pettiness, anger—might immobilize us. When exactly the truth about Alaska began to blur, replaced by a protective illusion, I can't say. But I've come to see both versions as facets of my history, integral to my story.





GERBURG GARMANN



Heartsease





# CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

## COVER ART:

Our cover image for this issue is *Tree Joy* by Kelly DuMar.

**Kelly DuMar** is a poet, playwright and workshop facilitator from Boston. She's author of four poetry collections, including *jinx* and *heavenly calling*, published by Lily Poetry Review Books in March 2023. Her poems and images are published in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Thrush*, *Glassworks*, *Flock* and more. Kelly teaches a variety of creative writing workshops, in person and online, and she teaches Play Labs for the International Women's Writing Guild and the Transformative Language Arts Network. Kelly produces the Featured Open Mic for the *Journal of Expressive Writing*. Reach her at [kellydumar.com](http://kellydumar.com)



## CONTENT:

**Ammalia Ball** lives in Gainesville, Florida. as a full-time college student and employee at a retirement home called The Village at Gainesville. This is her first time being published.

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**Jack Bordnick** - His sculptures and photography incorporate surrealistic, mythological and magical imagery often with whimsical overtones aimed at provoking our experiences and self reflections. Aiming to unbalance our rational minds, the predominant imagery deals mostly with facial expressions of both living and “non-living” beings and things that speak to us in their own languages. They are mixed media assemblages that have been assembled, disassembled and reassembled, becoming abstractions unto themselves. He is an Industrial Design graduate of Pratt Institute in New York.

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**Alison Boulan** is a writer and photographer living in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Her writing has appeared in *Lucid Stone*, *WordWrights*, *Carriage House Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *jerseyworks*, *Pindeldyboz*, *The Dogwood Journal*, *The MacGuffin* and *Oyster Boy Review*. Alison fills her days with walks in the city and long conversations with strangers who seem to enjoy her colorful personality.

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**Annika Connor** is an artist, actor, and screenwriter. A modern-day Renaissance woman, Connor is primarily known for her watercolor and oil paintings. Connor uses strong symbolism and passionate imagery to ignite the imagination. In addition to her work in the studio, Annika Connor is a SAG-AFTRA actor, member of the New York SAG-AFTRA Board, and writer working in film, TV, and voiceover as well as the founder of Annika's Art Shop and Active Ideas Productions. For more information about her work, please visit [www.annikaconnor.com](http://www.annikaconnor.com) or [www.annikasartshop.com](http://www.annikasartshop.com).

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**Steven Deutsch** is poetry editor of *Centered Magazine* and is poet in residence at the Bellefonte Art Museum. Steve was nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize. His chapbook, *Perhaps You Can*, was published in 2019 by Kelsay Press. His full length books, *Persistence of Memory* and *Going, Going, Gone*, were published by Kelsay. *Slipping Away* was published this spring. Brooklyn was awarded the Sinclair Poetry Prize from Evening Street Press and has just been published.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS (continued)

**Kelly DuMar** is a poet, playwright and workshop facilitator from Boston. She's author of four poetry collections, including *jinx* and *heavenly calling*, published by Lily Poetry Review Books in March 2023. Her poems and images are published in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Thrush*, *Glassworks*, *Flock* and more. Kelly teaches a variety of creative writing workshops, in person and online, and she teaches Play Labs for the International Women's Writing Guild and the Transformative Language Arts Network. Kelly produces the Featured Open Mic for the *Journal of Expressive Writing*. Reach her at [kellydumar.com](http://kellydumar.com)

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**Jeri Lewis Edwards** is a naturalist, published poet (literary journals include *Poet Lore*, *Quiddity*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Wee Sparrow Poetry Press Anthology*, among others), a visual artist and a self-proclaimed camp director for her two rescue dogs with whom she hikes and plays every day. Her goal every day is to have fun! Instagram: @Jerizravensstudio

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**Louis Efron** is a Pushcart-nominated and award-winning writer and poet who has been featured in *Forbes*, *Huffington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Ginosko*, *Jasper's Folly*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *A New Ulster*, *Flapper Press Poetry Café*, *PentaCat Press*, *Words and Whispers*, *Bourgeon*, *The Deronda Review*, *Young Ravens Literary Review*, *The Ravens Perch*, *POETiCA REViEW*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *Literary Yard*, *New Reader Magazine* and over 100 other national and global publications. He is also the author of five books, including *The Unempty Spaces Between* (winner of the 2023 NYC Big Book Award for poetry), *How to Find a Job, Career and Life You Love*; *Purpose Meets Execution*; *Beyond the Ink*; as well as the children's book *What Kind of Bee Can I Be?*

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**Gerburg Garmann** is a painter, poet, and recently retired professor of Global Languages and Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Indianapolis, USA, is now fully concentrating on the arts. Her scholarly publications appear in English, German, and French in international journals. Her artwork and poems have appeared in various magazines and anthologies around the world. She specializes in creating art for women. For more information, please visit her website [www.gerburggarmann.com](http://www.gerburggarmann.com)

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**Aimee Green** is a graduate of the University of Birmingham, UK, with an MA in Creative Writing. Initially a prose writer, she rediscovered her poetic voice shortly after the birth of her young daughter. Her poetry has been published by *Porridge Magazine*, *Aloka Magazine*, and more recently as a daily offering on *Poetry Breakfast*. She writes confessional poetry inspired by her own experiences and shares some of her work over her website: [www.aimeegreenwriter.wordpress.com](http://www.aimeegreenwriter.wordpress.com)

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**Howard Kaplan** is a poet and visual artist. Recently, his work has appeared in the online magazines *SWAMP* and *Mad in America*. He received a BFA from Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota Florida, and an M.Ed., and Ph.D. from the University of South Florida, in Tampa, where he currently teaches. When he is not reading romance novels while listening to heavy metal, he can be found relaxing with his mini schnauzer, Princess Leia, his wife Andrea, and daughters Hyla & Kinsey.

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**Tatjana Krilova**, born in Latvia, is a contemporary visual artist living and working in Toronto, Canada. Having received a higher education in architecture and civil engineering, she studied painting and sculpture at the Latvian Art Academy and at the Art Studios of the Latvian artist Yuri Cirkunov and professor sculptor Igor Vasiliev. Tatjana works in oil, acrylic, watercolour and oil pastel. Reflecting the inner harmony and unity of the opposites of the world using metamorphoses in her art, Tatjana developed her own conceptual style. She has achieved recognition as a winner and participant in international and local art competitions and exhibitions.

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## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS (continued)

**Elina Kumra** is a young poet from San Jose, California. She is Reed Magazine's 2024 Emerging Writer, a fiction finalist for *Quarterly West*, *Fractured Lit* and *TABC Poetry*, 2022 Sunnyvale's Youth Poet Ambassador, Honored by Scholastic Writing and published in over 15 literary magazines. Her primary goal is to tackle illiteracy by promoting equity and accessibility within the educational system. @velvetpoets and Twitter (X): ElinaKumra1

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**Larissa Larson** (she/they) is a queer poet who lives in the Twin Cities and recently received their MFA in Creative Writing. They have served on the editorial board of award-winning literary journals such as *Water-Stone Review*, *Runestone Literary Journal*, and *The Briar Cliff Review*. Larissa works at a used bookstore, explores the many lakes with their partner, and watches scary movies with their cats, Athena and Midas. Their poems have appeared in *Gyroscope Review*, *Welter Online*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Kelp Journal*, and forthcoming in *Great Lakes Review*.

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**John Muro** - A resident of Connecticut and lover of all things chocolate, John Muro has authored two volumes of poems—*In the Lilac Hour* and *Pastoral Suite*—in 2020 and 2022, respectively. Since that time, he has received three nominations for the Pushcart Prize, a Best of the Net nomination and, more recently, he was a 2023 Grantchester Award recipient. John's poems have appeared in such literary journals and anthologies as *Acumen*, *Barnstorm*, *Delmarva*, *Moria*, *Sky Island* and the *Valparaiso Review*.

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**R.H. Nicholson** taught writing for forty years but is now (finally) focused on his own work which has appeared in *Ignatian Magazine*, *Adelaide Literary Journal*, *Echo Ink*, *The Blue Lake Review*, *The Back Porch*, *Big Window Review* and elsewhere. He and his wife live in a small Ohio River Valley town with their geriatric cat Fezziwig.

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**David Riessen** has been writing plays, screenplays, novels, and TV scripts on and off since he was a teenager. In the wake of his son's sudden death, he has focused on creative nonfiction, which seems to suit his new reality. A few of these stories are featured in *Defenestration*, *Moon Park Review*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, and elsewhere. David lives in Larchmont, New York, with his wife Debi and dog Raven.

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**Stan Sanvel Rubin**'s work has appeared in numerous U.S. journals, including *Agni*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Georgia Review*, *Lumina*, *La Piccioletta barca* and others as well in China, Canada, and Ireland. Four full-length collections include *There. Here.* (Lost Horse Press) and *Hidden Sequel* (Barrow Street Poetry Book Prize). He lives on the north Olympic Peninsula of Washington state.

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**Terry Sanville** lives in San Luis Obispo, California, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His stories have been accepted more than 550 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The American Writers Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated four times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in *Best of the Net* anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

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**Steven Schutzman** is a fiction writer, poet and playwright whose work has appeared in such journals as *The Pushcart Prize*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Night Picnic*, *I70 Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Gargoyle* among many others. He is also a seven-time recipient of a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Grant, awarded for creative writing excellence. Website: steveschutzman.com

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## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS (continued)

**Israel Segall** is a Chilean writer, Master in Arts (Creative Writing), journalist and teacher, based in Melbourne, Australia. His work has been published mainly in the press and he is starting a new career as a storyteller.

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**J.R. Solonche** - Nominated for the National Book Award, the Eric Hoffer Book Award, and nominated three times for the Pulitzer Prize, J.R. Solonche is the author of 36 books of poetry and coauthor of another. He lives in the Hudson Valley.

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**Alyssa Troy** is an English teacher in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She has a B.A. in English and Secondary Education from Rider University, an M.Ed. in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment from Cabrini University, and an M. Ed. in Reading from Eastern University. She will be featured in an upcoming issue by the Blue Unicorn Journal, and her first book *Transfiguration* was self-published in 2020.

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**Jawn Van Jacobs** is currently enrolled in Rowan University's MA in Writing program and has previously worked as a poetry editor for Glassworks magazine.

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**Jane Varley** is the author of three books in three different genres: Creative non-fiction [Flood Stage and Rising—U of Nebraska], Poetry [Sketches at the Naesti Bar—Finishing Line], and Memoir [You Must Play to Win!—McDonald & Woodward] with NCAA Hall of Fame fast-pitch coach Donna Newberry. She has a Ph.D. in poetry from the University of North Dakota, and she is a professor of English and head of the Arts & Humanities Division at Muskingum University.

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**Kelli Weldon** (she/her) was born in Louisiana and now resides in Texas. Find her poetry in Black Moon Magazine, Boats Against The Current, Duck Duck Mongoose Magazine, Eclectica Magazine, Frost Meadow Review, In Parentheses, and Rewrite The Stars Review.  
Instagram: @kelliwritespoems

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**Nick Young** is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in more than thirty publications—journals and anthologies. His first novel *Deadline* was published in September. He lives outside Chicago.

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