



# Flights

the literary magazine  
of Sinclair Community College

2023





## ABOUT *FLIGHTS*

Flights is the literary magazine of Sinclair Community College. It is published annually in the fall. Information and additional copies are available from the English Department. Send inquiries to [tracie.puckett@sinclair.edu](mailto:tracie.puckett@sinclair.edu) or call 937.512.3078. Flights is also available for purchase through our website.

We accept submissions of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. We may on occasion accept work that falls into other genres, but please query before submitting outside of our usual genres. Our reading period extends from January to May. Work received outside of the reading period or via standard mail will not be read. Submissions should be sent through our online submissions manager, Submittable, which can be found at our website: [www.flightsscc.wordpress.com](http://www.flightsscc.wordpress.com). Prose submissions should be double-spaced with one-inch margins. Poetry submissions should be formatted as you wish them to appear in print.

Email submissions will be accepted only from Sinclair students, faculty, and staff, and must come from a [sinclair.edu](mailto:sinclair.edu) email address. If you submit via email, please put “Flights Submission” in the subject line and send your work as a .docx attachment.

We do accept simultaneous submissions, but we ask that if your work is accepted elsewhere, you notify us as soon as possible. Work that is not withdrawn will be considered available for publication. Submission of your work constitutes permission to publish unless it is explicitly withdrawn prior to acceptance.

For more information about submissions and to read previous issues, please visit our website: [www.flightsscc.wordpress.com](http://www.flightsscc.wordpress.com).

# *Flights*

2023

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### **Cover Art: *Joyous***

**Susanne King** is an abstract expressionist painter. Her non-objective art combines the flow and movement of paint creating strong textures, colors, and energy. Her entry into the world of painting came out of a long experience with garden design. Applying many of the same elements of this design, she puts brush to a canvas rather than shovel to the earth. She tries to achieve an organic feel to her paintings with a strong emphasis on abstract shapes, brush strokes, tones, and textures to create expressionistic visual poetry. Susanne has been strongly influenced by mid- century painters Robert Motherwell, Joan Mitchell, and Hans Hoffman.

Susanne began painting seriously in 2004 while teaching writing in Dayton, Ohio. She quickly reached a level of accomplishment that led to shows in Dayton, Columbus, and Philadelphia. Her work was briefly interrupted by a serious automobile accident in the fall of 2011 and a diagnosis of leukemia in 2013. Once she was able to paint, it became a part of her recovery.

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AMANDA HAYDEN

*Snuff Clouds in South Carolina*

Southern Baptist Jesus hung in the hallway  
Me-ma's Irish spring and fresh powder  
fleshy arms clean and soft as baby legs, hands  
that rolled biscuits in the army bowl  
hands that cooked collard greens and boiled  
peanuts from the Piggly Wiggly  
"the Pig" she called it, hands that dried and tied  
tobacco from the fields, snapped  
string beans under pine trees, hands that dipped  
peach snuff, powdery brown clouds lingered  
from each laugh as she passed gas in morse code  
across her chicken fried kitchen  
hands that stirred aprons and stiff shirts  
in lye with a long wooden stick  
in the cast iron black cauldron  
her granddaughter's hands now fill  
every May with purple petunias  
and yellow marigolds  
*Lord have mercy*

JOHN BALLANTINE

*America Was Great Until it Wasn't*

America was great back then IF you were White, male, and played baseball. Of course, Mickey Mantle could drink a pitcher of beer before the game and hit the ball a mile; Willie Mays could disappear into deepest center at the Polo Grounds with his back to the plate—some 420 feet away—and catch the ball over his shoulder. We all remember being there. Pivot on one leg and throw a bullet to second base, stopping the runners from scoring. And Bob Gibson would brush you back with his wicked fastball—and I swear there was a smirk on his face as he struck you out again with the cut fastball right down the middle of the plate.

**Beach Boys – “California Girls”**

America was great back then, as *Brown v. Board of Education* began desegregating schools over the shouts of many. And then the shit hit the fan, and we never recovered, did we?

April 1968, MLK, two months later June, RFK; both shot dead by some lone gunman. August 1968, Russian tanks roll into Prague, and Daley's police beat many of us back right in front of the Chicago Democratic Convention. Hippies, Yippies, and Black Panthers protest as Nixon squeaks by the happy warrior in November 1968. Herbert Humphrey's ebullient smile is gone. The dream that carried me forward to my eighteenth birthday and draft registration was deeply scared as the wounded and dead in Vietnam filled the TV screen. Walter Cronkite could not reassure us that all was okay.

America was great back then as Neil Armstrong took his step on the moon when the USA won the space race, the Voting Rights Act

passed in 1964 with Southern democratic support thanks to the magic of LBJ's skulduggery. America was great as the Beatles reminded us that "all you need is love." Yes, I bounded into the 1960s full of the promises ahead. We were great until we weren't...

I swayed to the rhythms of the greatest hits late into the night—"Hey Jude," "Sympathy for the Devil," "Sad-Eyed Lady," "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," "Rainy Day Woman," "Born to Be Wild"—from dorm windows before we cooled down with Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*.

### **The Mamas & the Papas – "California Dreamin'"**

Back when America was great, the Mamas and the Papas took me on a jet plane, and the Beach Boys serenaded all to the delights of California Girls. It worked like a charm. Aretha turned respect upside down, reminding Otis of a thing or two, and we were dancing in the street. Big Sur and Haight-Ashbury were the happenin' places, full of dreamers.

Back when America was great, we could beat back the struggles staring us in the face and not see the terrors to come. I still believed that running fast, good schools, working hard, and playing by the rules would get me and you where we wanted—even if the road forward was not clear. Baseball player, astronaut, fireman, president...and family.

Maybe even a good job, a chicken in every pot, and the picket fence home of *Leave It to Beaver*. FDR's fireside chats resonated in the America that raised me.

## **Simon & Garfunkel – “Bridge Over Troubled Waters”**

Back then, the shooting galleries of Harlem basements were dark with Laura Nyro’s plunge into smack. An eerie, not-quite-real world that I visited—black-and-white Madonna with child. I still believed that protests—opposition to war, yes that C of O essay drafted in the UU Church in Cambridge—was my patriotic right. No more war, no more poverty. Yes, LBJ’s scar curved like Vietnam—the guns and butter economy came crashing down.

I did not know the America that raised me. I did not know the hurts of my fellow students, soldiers, protestors, women, parents, or those caught in poverty’s grip.

## **The Beatles – “Let It Be”**

Back then when America was great for some of us, I really believed that all we need is love and that some pretty girl—like Baby Jane—would warm my bed with sweet songs. Love was the antidote. I really believed if we could stop war, then we could change the world. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll were just the beginning.

I had no idea that hate and bile were waiting, ready to stop us, precinct by precinct. Back then democrats were on a roll, even as the wheels on our car fell off. Back then, when they, the National Guard, shot the antiwar protesters at Kent State, I did not know that this was just the beginning. I did not know America needed more than soft dreams to navigate the roads ahead.



## **Aretha Franklin** – “I Say a Little Prayer”

If I only knew back then what was coming.

In the summer of 1968, I sat in front of the TV, watching day and night the chaos at the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Something turned when others applauded as Daley’s police crossed the street with billy clubs and tear gas to protect democracy. Bull Connor was hero to many voting for George Wallace—the South was heard—and Nixon won with 43.4 percent of the vote. The realigned Republican party was centered in the South after LBJ’s supposed missteps. Humphrey could not say “No More Vietnam War” loud enough or why civil rights was a right. Many of my young compatriots did not vote.

I watched the TV screen flicker. Back then music turned before we did...

## **Jefferson Airplane** – *Surrealistic Pillow* – “White Rabbit”

When America was great, we believed—I believed—all was possible for anyone who sat down at the lunch counter. Black, White, Brown. When America was great, I saw prison farms turn the profits back to chain gangs sleeping three deep in the sweltering dorms. Three full meals a day, prison libraries full of books, and no rats in the kitchens. I believed Cool Hand Luke’s smile when he said we had a failure to communicate as he escaped. Back when America was great, I believed there was a fair chance for all, for most, for some. But now I ain’t so sure.

## **Bob Dylan – “Like a Rolling Stone”**

Back when America was great, I was not dancing in tear-gas streets, but swaying with the soft melodies of Hare Krishna chanting peace in orange robes. Back then Love was everywhere and then it wasn't.

Nineteen sixty-eight was bad, but we had hope in 1974 as Richard M. Nixon stepped on the White House helicopter for his final journey, waving his V hands in disgrace. I still held the promise of the American Dream, and the laws that govern the land. Silly me, “what a long, strange trip.”

## **Grateful Dead – “Truckin’”**

But today, we are not so great, except for the mobsters who hustle us with lies as gangs storm the Capitol. Armed and ready to search out congressional halls to hang and kill the infidels. This cannot be, I say, as January sixth hearings play on TV.

America is no longer great because piles of books are burning, ideas are banned, and our bodies are not our own. People cannot breathe as police skip their beats. I do not stand in the bodies of those beaten down, but the system is rigged in so many ways. I stand silent more than I like to admit. I order my cappuccino, and mutter, “Oh no, this cannot be.” This is my America today.

## **Bruce Springsteen – “Born to Run”**

Our dream of greatness stumbled along the way.

Today, the ugly face of complicity stares at us on the screen—

how could this be happening? Getting along, looking the other way, pretending that law-abiding, patriotic citizens would not go this far. My conscience does not sit with the treason of January sixth, the tyranny staring at us. My eyes are open wide. I watch the dream of greatness fade. I stumble like Hamlet when words fail. I know not what to do.

My dream of America does not lift me when I wake.

Meditation and Buddha bowls calm me, but that is not the way out of here. I must learn to fight like the gallant knight guided by a golden star and lovely Guinevere. Valiantly slaying the dragons like St. George, staring down the mendacity that snarls so many. The rainbow of hope should guide me through the storm, yet the sea is high and the winds fierce.

America's soul—its promise of better days—is not great today. The caws of crows fill the morning air.

How do I rekindle the flames of hope, the sparkle in the eye, forge the steel sword, build windmills good enough, and find a way out of the valley of death? We have danced these steps before.

Back when America was great, I knew that my country would take us to the moon as I listened to the Japanese radio on the playground, and that Luke Skywalker would beat back Darth Vader. I knew the stories I recited were not quite true, yet I believed we could do great things back then. Today, I am not sure.

I do not fall into dystopian tales that my students recite, but the joy that wakes with me does not stay.

Back when America was great, I brushed aside Bruegel's visions of the Valley of Death when one-third of Europe perished in the plague. Back then the Black Death or Spanish flu were footnotes to the progress we made. Back then the Catholic Church and Martin Luther's proclamations were premonitions of the fierce battles to come. Beheading, inquisitions, and excommunications ushered in the great years that fill history books.

Today the age of greatness that they write about—after all the troubles—does not hold when we scratch the surface.

Back then, I believed the Enlightenment, I took the light from Dickens’ tales of darkness, and the coal-fired furnaces of the Industrial Revolution gave us steel, tall buildings, and the war machines to destroy. Presidents promised a chicken in every pot, as so many stood in food lines with one worn wool suit. The vote to all—women, Blacks, and new citizens—was the way forward, until it wasn’t.

Today the tyranny of the mob is in front of us. Jesse Owens may run past the Aryan stormtroopers in 1936, but not in 2022. Today the propaganda is part of what we read, say, and do. Today the TV stories are dismal. What to do, where to march, how to weave a happier tale? Today Noah’s floods are near.

**Katherine L. Bates – “America the Beautiful”**

*O beautiful for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!*

*America! America!  
God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
From sea to shining sea!*

I hope it will be so.

DYLAN BRADSHAW

*The Invisible Man*

A longing gaze into the mirror  
reveals only the ugly patterns  
of the peeling wallpaper behind him  
covered by his breath,  
glazing the glass in front of him  
His clothes  
not suspended by so much as  
a hobby, or favorite color  
much less the possession of even a  
single original thought or opinion  
fall through him  
to the sound of a pathetic thump  
hitting the floor

AMANDA BANASZAK

*Mystery School*

There are pictures now of small greyscale human faces  
pressed against silk strong fibrous folds of tissue canvas.  
They are inches away from the outside world, this  
you-fill-in-the blank  
Earth.

Look, here capitalization matters-  
as in small m mystery or  
Big M Mystery.

Like, a woman sweating and crying and heaving  
in a room where there are 4 others, and with a  
shout or a whimper, there are now 5 others.

A glistening example of many of the good m words-  
mighty, magical, majestic, miraculous  
even monstrous.

Listen, a woman is not a flesh tank,  
and a baby is not a sea creature waiting  
to be fished out with a soggy mesh net.  
The catch of the day dropped into joyful  
or frightened or elated or resentful arms.  
The first Mystery- that there is anything at all.

A few of the next:

The womb, a scarlet mauve satchel,  
(but also a nebula)  
stacks and folds itself back to nearly its  
former size.

The heart, a muscle, measurable in mass  
and out put, smooths and stretches the  
material of the universe,  
so the edge  
(unreachable already)  
is further away.

DANILA BOTHA

*From the Belly of the Whale*

I gave a talk at a synagogue today. The building was the color of milky earl gray, the clouds as heavy as tea bags. I could feel the moisture pooling in my knees and hips. They wanted me and two others, a woman from Poland and a man from Slovakia to give a talk about our experiences in the war. I was the first one there, dressed down in a blue dress shirt and slacks.

I reached for one of the free black satin yarmulkes and placed it awkwardly on my head before walking over to the stage and taking my seat. For years, I refused to talk about any of it, in public or in private, but recently, I've started agreeing to it sometimes.

I stopped by at my son and daughter in law's house after. They live two streets away, only about a seven- minute walk. They've been having problems with their oldest kid, my grandson, Benji. He had insomnia and night terrors, screaming at the top of his lungs, sleep walking, and now, they said, he was starting to get into trouble at school.

Benji was lying on his bed, comic books spread out everywhere, staring up at his ceiling which was covered in stickers of the planets that were starting to peel off.

I sat down at the chair at his desk, staring up at his school books on the shelf above me, workbooks, science, math, books of Torah.

He asked me what I talked about tonight, and I offered to tell him, if he was sure it wouldn't make his problems worse.

He laughed and said I should go ahead.

"I grew up in a home where everyone was proud to be what we were. My father was an accountant and my mother taught literature. My dad's parents died before I was born and my mom's parents were more



religious than us, but we were all proud to be Jewish.

My Zaidy once said it was our job to be a light unto the nations, so it made sense to me that we had to wear a bright golden star, to remind everyone.

I was proud when they told me I was old enough to wear it, to watch my mother sew it onto my jacket pocket with careful precision.

Then one day my Zaidy vanished. He'd refused to shave his beard and was found outside a few minutes after curfew. We never saw him again.

My parents always loved nature, and one night they took us on an adventure in the woods behind our house. We packed some food and wore our warmest clothes even though it was spring. My mother peeled off our stars and my father dug a deep hole and buried them. My sister and I left a small trail of breadcrumbs behind us at first, so we could find our way home, but our mother picked them all up. We didn't want to get caught by the witch and end up burning in the ovens.

It was safer to disappear.

My father had a farmer friend who owned a small store and over time let him and his friends build a bunker underneath.

We walked into one of his barns, inched down a thin, narrow hole.

The earth yawned and we climbed down into its dark, giant mouth. It was impossible to see much, aside from a small blow hole at the back, the shape of a pair of tonsils. I could feel the cool air, see patches of light and passersby's feet, but I knew if I found my way outside I'd be swallowed whole, like my namesake Jonah.

It was dusty, and the floor was a mix of wooden planks and soil. Still, compared to where we'd lived before, we felt warm and safe.

My sister and I called it the Cave.

A big rat we saw on our first night became the White Rabbit. We

followed him to a small bent twig we called the key, and pretended it led us to a beautiful garden. We could feel the freshly cut grass under our feet, see the yellow tulips and smell the roses. When we drank our water ration, sometimes it made us grow so tall our heads touched the ceiling or made us shrink so much we could ride on the White Rabbit's back.

The wood under our feet felt rough, like a cat's tongue, and we used them to set up makeshift beds, but the soil felt soft and velvety. The farmer's wife had given us a blanket, and we spread it on top of the soil, and pretended it was the magic carpet in a Thousand and One Nights. We could fly into the night, feel the fresh air, see the glittering stars and coloured lights below that shone like candies. We could fly out in the daytime, see the kids playing soccer in the green field, fly our carpet down and I could join in, my limbs vibrating, giddy in anticipation.

The farmer's wife would bring us potatoes and bread.

My mom would drill us in the alphabet. She'd trace the letters and the sounds in my palms and as fast as we could, we'd tell her all the answers. My Bubbe would drill us on the rules of Shabbat, the Jewish calendar, what holiday was coming next.

We had lice and my mom told us about a story called Leiningen Versus the Ants. We had to catch the lice and squash them. We had to count to ten and see how many we could get. "We have to get them before they hurt us," she would say, and we'd try our hardest to pick them off the fastest.

One night, we heard the farmer get arrested and we knew we had to escape. We went back to the forest, opening our mouths as wide as possible to drink the fresh, cool air. Our knees buckled but we kept walking.

Along the way, we found one of our uncles, and he found

another hiding place for us, this time in an attic, with another family. It smelled like sweat and fear, and we had to be much quieter, but we were only there for two months until we were liberated.

It felt like being vomited from the whale's belly, being squeezed against its intestines and its throat, feeling its heart pound as we slowly pushed our heads out, one by one.

First glitter and gum and cigarettes were rained on us by the soldiers. They fed us and checked us for diseases and found us places to stay.

Then the shadows came back. People who were living in our house were sorry that we survived.

My mom died not long after that.

It took a few years, but eventually the rest of us came to Canada. For a long time I hid, like the original Jonah, from being Jewish. It had only ever caused my family problems. When people asked me what it was like to be a survivor, I told them I was a kid, I didn't remember anything.

But eventually, it caught up with me. It wasn't a question of what I believed, just a statement of who I was, and if I denied it, I realized I was hurting myself."

I was speaking loudly, I realized, but when I looked over at Benji, I found that he was asleep.

I gently covered him up to his chin, whispered a prayer about the angels protecting him, like my Zadie used to sing to me, and quietly turned out his light.

PATRICIA BRAWLEY

*She's Let Herself Go*

That means others think she's fat  
That she doesn't bathe  
Or fix her hair.  
They think she doesn't use makeup anymore  
And wears old, slouchy clothes.  
She doesn't care what others think  
And so they do.

Truth be told, she did let herself go—  
Away from disappointment  
And broken dreams  
And a scarred heart.

The one who talks is the one  
Who created her  
Smugly, he says  
"She's not the cute little thing she used to be"  
Ignoring his paunch  
Denying his part in things.

He felt no guilt when he  
Plowed over her life  
Replanting the way things were.



LYNN GLICKLICH COHEN

*Labor Day Weekend*

Granite steps lead  
to the cabin, surrounded by  
a grove of birches  
and firs. Pine cones leave  
sap on our windshields in streaks  
like drizzled crystal.

A late summer breeze hums  
a choppy wave, fresh  
lake-water lullaby.

Loons and crows, coons and deer—  
my dog is riveted;  
tiny muscles in her nose  
tell her what's true out here.

Inside they deal  
cards for a fast-paced game  
I never learned how to play.

I drink alone,  
a disease of isolation, they say.  
So explain why I often feel  
less alone by myself,  
or maybe I need to  
choose different company.

I once gave up alcohol and clocked  
six years without a drop,  
but despite all the promises,  
I missed the kick and swoon  
of keen feeling.

My dog rises  
to all fours, quivering,  
paw on point. I follow her focus  
to the squirrel.

My breathing stops. I could but won't  
break the spell; I understand it's not my place,  
and I need her to show me what it means to be alive.

ALAN GARTENHAUS

*The Halo*

Riding in a beat-up old junker of a truck bothered Joe's wife. She thought it unsafe and embarrassing, but he was proud of it. Though the engine grumbled, it had always managed to get them where they were going. And the rattling didn't bother him. He told her that it was a classic, and besides, money was tight.

Before sunrise, Joe loaded the truck's bed with twelve crates of just-picked apricots and covered them with bedsheets. Direct sunlight would melt the fruit into jam in no time. He turned the key. The fan belt let loose a high-pitched whine of complaint. "Can't say as I blame you," Joe said to the truck, patting its dashboard and nodding. "It's hot already." The trip to the wholesaler would be a race against time, west from the valley and over the mountain pass. Even at this early hour, the temperature had reached the mid-80s.

Leaving the swirling dust of his farm road behind, he stopped to roll down the windows. They were the manually cranked kind, the type one rarely sees anymore. He preferred taking the county roads rather than the interstate because his slow pickup coughed out an oily blue exhaust. That didn't earn him the goodwill of those who raced past in their sleek new cars and menacing-looking diesel trucks. Some people cursed as they sped by, without a thought about the apricots they would soon enjoy thanks to him. He was simply an obstacle, undeserving of a place on the road.

Joe watched the heat shimmer off the asphalt as the sun rose in a cloudless sky, thinking this was how mirages are born. The air surging through the open windows provided little relief, though it did remove the stench of some unfortunate creature that had crawled under the



truck's hood, died there, and remained unfound.

The radio had quit working years ago, but he'd rigged up a tape deck and installed it in the glove box. His music collection was only slightly older than the truck. He liked listening to The Rolling Stones. "You can't always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes you'll find, you get what you need." He wondered. With age had come reflection and restlessness, and the knowledge that he was running out of time.

As a young man, before taking over his family's farm, he'd dreamed of living a bohemian life in a city, maybe writing books. He and a school friend had written science fiction stories about interplanetary travel, and to this day he kept a journal, even though his wife teased him about it. "Pouring your heart out in a diary is something young girls do."

He and Maria had been married for thirty-six years. They continued to go through the motions but rarely connected with each other, especially since their two daughters had grown and left home. They coexisted—peacefully and respectfully—but without passion. He spent most evenings watching sports on television. She poured her affection into cooking. Making food was a solitary escape she could easily justify, even to herself. Baking reminded her of happier times. For today's journey, she had given Joe two of her empanadas.

Driving uphill toward the pass required a certain amount of faith. Changes in elevation tested the truck's engine, transmission, and brakes, while today's excessive heat taxed its radiator, hoses, and coolant. Once at the summit, he breathed easier, claiming a moment to enjoy the sweeping views of dry grasslands, stands of eucalyptus, and neat orchards that stretched out below, under the turquoise sky. He grabbed one of the empanadas to eat in celebration. Peeling away its wrapper required both hands. He considered pulling onto the shoulder,

but his cargo required that he keep moving, so he pressed his knee against the steering wheel. Traffic was light and the air noticeably fresher here. The road angled down. As he swallowed his first bite, a thud and loud metallic clang startled him. Afraid that he might have lost the tailgate and possibly the apricots, he unbuckled his seatbelt and swiveled to look back. Immediately, the clanging grew louder, and the steering wheel began shaking violently. He pounded the brake, but instead of slowing, the pickup skidded sharply to the right. He turned the wheel, but it didn't respond; the truck swerved off the road, onto the shoulder, and sailed over the edge. For the briefest moment, he felt weightless. The empanada crumbled between his fingers as he braced himself for impact. The truck crashed down on its driver's side, slamming Joe's head against the metal frame. Dirt and debris pummeled him through his open window. Flashes of light, like sparklers, ignited behind his tightly closed eyes.

When the sliding stopped, there was an eerie quiet. Joe's battered body went slack. He tried to assess his situation but couldn't think clearly. He couldn't move either; the pain was too great. Before blacking out, he heard people yelling to him from above.

•••••

Hours, days, even weeks might have passed; he had no idea. Unable to distinguish between dreams and reality, he accepted without question the parade of people who appeared before him. His father, who had passed away years earlier, told Joe he was proud of him and grateful that he had continued working the family farm. "It's an honest living," his father said. "Growing food is a contribution to the greater good."

The childhood friend he'd written stories with came by too. Joe told Manny how much he admired him for moving to Chicago and

living the life of a writer. But Manny said that he'd been unprepared for the constant rejections and sacrifices demanded of writers. That he'd become disillusioned with the disappointments and financial distress and wound up taking a job at an advertising agency, proofreading ad copy and composing jingles for automobile dealerships and grocery store chains. He told Joe that he'd saved the stories they had written together as boys and would read them whenever he felt low. They made him laugh, and also smile.

Andrea, his high school sweetheart, made an appearance looking as pretty as she had all those years ago. Joe told her he'd continued to pine for her even after marrying Maria, and more so lately. She laughed dismissively. "You're so lucky we broke up. I would have made you miserable. I made all of my husbands miserable. I was never satisfied with what I had. I was always sure there was more or better."

Joe knew he was awake when a nurse told him he'd been in the hospital for several days. He had broken three vertebrae in his neck and fractured his skull. She reassured him that he had no paralysis but had been fitted with a structure to prevent him from moving his head, neck, and shoulders. He was trying to envision what such an armature might look like when she held up a mirror. Frankenstein's monster! Metal rods had been bolted into his head and attached to a ringlike collar surrounding him.

"It's called a halo," she said calmly as his focus began to dissolve. Considering the dreams he was having about Andrea and several other women, he thought being fitted with a halo more than slightly ironic. "You'll wear it for a few months while you heal; then it will come off, and you'll be better," the nurse told him. "Once it's removed, you'll never even know it's been there."

Horrified by his reflection and yet somehow relieved as consciousness dissolved, he attributed the odd mix of sensations to the

pain medication pumped into his arm. Sometime later, awareness returned when someone squeezed his hand. He opened his eyes. “Joe?” It was Maria. He tried to nod, but the halo prevented him from moving his head. He grunted. Tears spilled. She leaned forward, radiant, and kissed the air an inch away from his injured and bolted forehead. “I’m here,” she whispered, her voice comforting. “For better or worse. In sickness or in health. Whatever you need.”

AMANDA HAYDEN

*Questions of Soul Surfing*

Outer Banks, North Carolina

Can one wave sincerely discern itself from another, distinct from rhythmic symphony heaving in from all corners of the world? can bony ankles and knees dissolve into sand and sky? do spirits ascend, whole, *atman*, when bodies die, as Hindus believe? once we realize “I” eternal, our fear of death fades away? or/and when our bodies die, is there is no “I” to transcend, no-thing to mourn or lose, as Buddhists say? once we realize eternal *no self*, our fear of death disappears? Can Great Mystery have one ethereal eye in water and one on dry land? is there only *One True Surf*? or are all maritime mysteries, above and below, folded into an eclectic playlist to tap dance to at sea’s biggest jamboree? is what matters that you RSVP? do all swells, no matter where they roll from, eventually make their way home? Does God shake Her head at our stubborn contention over which is the *right* curl as we stand over shiny waxed boards lifeless on hot shore while we shout at the sun and each other, missing the sea for the waves?

ROBERT GUARD

*Robin*

1.

Late February in Ohio, a mild day drops in  
At a time of year that's anyone's guess  
If a spirit is staying or leaving.  
South, east, north, west; those who flew  
With a handful of feathers have disappeared.  
Old souls in the wind entered a cave,  
Roamed for days, knowing deep inside  
Which way north, what time of year, left  
Their stories etched in sandstone.

2.

An early spring morning in Ohio,  
I sat at a bar in my own years ago,  
Drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes  
When one of those old souls,  
Smelling of bacon and beer,  
Who sometimes come over us,  
Leaned in and hinted, *Look over there.*  
He was right: For a moment,  
The indifferent love of the world  
Was perfect in my eyes.

3.

Shaman, *one who sees in the dark*;  
One foot in this world, one in the other.  
I scan the field of a woman on my table,

Her root chakra turning backward,  
Spinning to a floating anxiety,  
Typical of IBS and other gut instincts.  
She doesn't know how she got here;  
Nor do I, but I trace the trail of her  
Misgivings, clear as the back  
Of my hand in a darkened cave.

4.

She has that serenely startled look  
Of waking from one dream to another,  
Her face ten years younger.  
She asks what it's like out there,  
How does the maple know  
To curl its leaves before the rain?  
It's late February in Ohio; a robin,  
Coming or going, stops by my pond,  
A clear sign to open the door.

## *Who*

You say now is the time  
of tall trees,  
time to hunt or be hunted.  
You, the voice of the long vowel,  
open the book of night.  
The stars have pulled me  
out to my backyard  
with a question as high as the moon.  
In one lonely word, you tell me  
how deep this night is,  
how long it will be, everything  
except who called us here.



PETER GRANDBOIS

*But now the rain*

falls silent and these are not your hands  
folding the ocean toward pain, not  
your hunched voice raised above the din  
of flies buzzing about vacant eyes  
or the failed translation of your heart  
torn apart by the artless language of belief  
and the dusky river swells into ears  
old as loam where you sit carving  
your fears toward an altar other than  
the body until a tiny sliver of grief  
pricks your finger and you're reminded  
how soon we leave this ruined home, how quick  
the breath that unsticks the world, how wondrous  
the labyrinth unfurled the moment you begin to wander

JAMES P HANLEY

*The Widows and Widowers Group*

Jimmy Maxfield, the owner of a photography shop, was a joiner: the Knights of Columbus, the local Chamber of Commerce, and recently the Widows' and Widowers' Group after his 38-year-old wife died of cervical cancer.

The once-a-week surviving spouse meeting, led by Raymond Albanese, a church deacon, was held in the basement of St. Edward's Catholic Church. The cavernous room consisted of folding chairs set in a circle, with one slightly separated for Albanese. On Thursday evening, three women sat beside each other in their proprietary places and were immersed in a low-tone discussion as the others arrived. Charlie Sutter, the only other male in the group of twelve, sat between two empty chairs. Jimmy sat next to Eleanor Watkins, a somber, frosted hair woman who sucked on cough drops. The remaining members arrived before seven, except for Claire Rollins, who always came late, walked through the center of the circle, and dropped dramatically on the metal chair.

Albanese explained: "We have a new group member, and as I usually do," his hooded eyes moved across the room as his thick neck turned, "I encouraged our newest participant to arrive later so I can give you some background. Theresa Tunney is a recent widow who lost her husband to a car accident eight months ago. She's a bit younger than the average;" turning to Jimmy Maxfield and smiling weakly, he added, "except for you, Jimmy. She has a daughter in college, and as I'm sure I don't need to explain to all of you, she is still suffering the loss of her spouse."

As if cued, a woman entered the basement area and walked hesitantly toward the chairs. Theresa Tunney was a small woman with

pale features, gray-streaked brown hair, and round eyes. She wore a dark skirt extending below her knees and an orange blouse that seemed over-washed, fading in color. Jimmy watched her as she walked to the chair across from him, pressed her skirt against her legs, and looked toward the blank wall.

“I just gave the group an outline of your background and recent loss. Perhaps you’d like to add more,” Ray said to Theresa.

“No,” her voice was barely above a whisper. “I’m sure you told them enough.”

“Okay, Group, say hi to Theresa.”

Before the others could answer, one of the early-arriving women shouted, “Ray, they do that in your A.A. meetings, not here.”

The group laughed, and Ray shook his fist at her in mock anger.

Theresa reddened, and suddenly her eyes lit up, and a subtle change formed on her face; “This is not the A.A. meeting?” she said.

Ray smiled and nodded as the others chuckled. The usual somberness returned as each member described their often-mentioned struggles with loss, sometimes interrupting their story to calm their fluttering lips or wipe their eyes. Someone would describe an emotion, and the others would shake their heads in agreement as silent applause. Eleanor Watkins took a notebook, read her jottings, and closed the book. After reading, she went off script and said, “I think I remind friends of death; they avoid talking about Aaron, which angers me at times, but other times I’m glad.”

Periodically, when the discussion went to complaints, Ray reminded the group that the meetings were intended as a sharing to create a sense of camaraderie in solace and a recognition that they were not alone.

Lucy Nelson jumped to her feet so suddenly that her shoe twisted, causing her to grab the metal seat. “Don’t you have a wife and

children at home? You can't use the word *alone*; you have no idea of the word."

The woman next to her put her hand on Lucy's arm. "I'm sorry," Lucy said as she sat down. Her eyes filled, and she lowered her head.

Breanne Whiley put her fingers in front of her mouth as she listened, lowering the digits before speaking. "I read about soldiers who lost a leg in war yet still feel the lost limb when covered in bed, knowing the part of their body is gone but still sensing the severed piece. Sometimes when alone, I think I hear the shower running, footsteps on the floor above, or his voice calling me."

Charlie Sutter was stoic, recounting the loss in a flat, factual tone. Theresa told her story in disjointed tidbits that only by paying attention to each small revelation could the tragedy in her life be pieced together. At the close, some of the women hugged.

Midway through the next week's meeting, Ray said that the attendees could ask each other questions. "What were your husband and marriage like?" asked Amelia, a gray-haired woman wearing no makeup, which exposed her deeply cut wrinkles and her dry lips cracking when she spoke. She was looking at Theresa.

"We find the description helpful to know you better," Rosemary, a heavy woman whose thighs filled and overhung the metal folding chair, explained in support of Amelia.

Beginning hesitantly, Theresa spoke of her handsome husband, constantly fighting a paunch by running, their comfortable marriage—wed at a young age, his work as a stockbroker, a child, now in her first year of college, their jointly purchased house. As she moved to the explanation of his death from cancer, her voice slowed, and her eyes filled. There was silence in the room when she finished.

Finally, Martha Beacon spoke up. "Theresa, you've shown great intrepidity."

“Martha’s been reading the dictionary again or bought one of those word-a-day calendars,” Tina Silverman said aloud.

Martha bit her lower lip and said, “I’m expanding my vocabulary, not staying stuck in ignorance, like some.”

Ray intervened by announcing the next circle topic: to explain the week’s struggles, what lingering recollection impeded their days, and what sorrow haunted them. “Jimmy, you’ve been quiet.”

Jimmy said, “I miss her in bed.” Eyes widened at the remark, but the curiosity and anticipation for detail lessened as he continued.

“The presence in bed, the weight of her body on the other side of the mattress. Sometimes I roll onto her section and want to apologize for limiting the space available to her, but I realize with a jolt there is no need.”

Claire, a lively woman who often joked as a deflection when conversations were heavy, smiled mischievously, “I miss the sex. Even with arthritic hands, he could....”

Ray interrupted her, “Claire, let’s not go there.”

Bernice, a wigged woman, said, “No wonder you outlived two husbands.”

Ray had to shush the group.

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Jimmy attended the next meeting and looked at the two new members: a stooped woman, frail and pale-skinned, dressed in a gray dress that seemed a step down from mourning black, and a tall, regal woman who sat stiff-backed, chin lifted, and wearing enough makeup that it could have masked her identity. Their stories were similar: married ambitious men who lived only a short time after their careers ended.

Ray asked what the others did to keep their mind occupied.

“It’s important to keep busy. I’m on a woman’s group at church,

and we embroider or bake things for sale,” one woman said.

Theresa said, “I work as a teaching assistant, but....” She looked around as if waiting for someone to complete her sentence.

Jimmy added, “Being busy during the day makes the contrast with an empty evening starker.”

Theresa smiled at him.

“Very profound, Jimmy. Was that to help Theresa or what you feel?” Ray asked.

Jimmy shrugged. “Maybe both.” He was looking at Theresa. “But these questions and an explanation of feelings can be just a momentary relief.”

Ray scanned the group, “How many of you feel the way Jimmy does about being here?”

Two in the group raised their hand slowly.

Jimmy saw that Theresa didn’t lift her arm.

“See that, Jimmy. For many, this helps, and not just for the time here. In all the years I’ve been doing this, I’ve sensed people are fortified when they leave, maybe for a short time but we can’t do much more.”

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At the next meeting, Jimmy noticed that Theresa had taken the seat to his left. He saw nothing flirtatious in her proximity as she kept her eyes on Ray while he announced the topic was photographs: “Do you keep photos of your spouse around the house; are they recent?”

Laura Metten, as was typical, jumped in first, digressing so that Ray had to tactfully encourage her to abbreviate her input.

Jimmy chuckled at the topic when it was his turn and explained, “I’m a photographer as well as the owner of a shop, so naturally, I have numerous pictures of my wife.”

“But where do you keep them?” a voice from across the room

asked. Jimmy didn't answer, and when there was silence in the room until Charlie Stutter spoke.

“I scattered pictures all over the house, mostly of when she was young. That’s the way I want to remember her.”

His comment sparked debate over the value of focusing on images from the past or maintaining more recent photographs which depict the fresher recollections of features before being altered by illness.

“We have time for one more topic. I know days can be difficult, but what day is the most difficult to get through?”

Hands shot up, and Ray pointed to Bernice Platen.

“Anniversaries,” She stood when she spoke but sat down after her one-word pronouncement. Ray looked toward another section of the circle, his eyes drawn by Allison Renshaw’s waving arm.

“His birthday. I told him on his sixty-seventh birthday, get the fuckin' colonoscopy.” Edith slurred her words. “Sorry,” she said.

At the close of the meeting, Ray announced, “We'll have our usual open discussion and sharing, but the question will be to talk about your family's support to you, especially your children's, after the passing.”

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The morning of the next meeting, the clouds had smothered the sun and, blending with a cold wind, cast a gloom over the day. The group assembled except for Agnes Palmieri, who, according to Ray, was home with a cold, and Jimmy, who didn't call. He didn't show up for the next two meetings.

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The following month, Jimmy was unpacking camera supplies when Theresa entered the shop. She looked around the space and at the photographs on the wall, some frameless and others with metal borders.

Jimmy had a days-old beard and wore an unpressed shirt.

“Were you given the task of reprimanding me for failing to show up at the meetings?” he asked.

She leaned her head and said, “No, of course not, but you were missed.”

“Okay, so why are you here now?”

“I’m not here to check up on you,” she paused, “well, maybe I am.”

“I’m fine, I assure you.”

“Was it because the weekly question was about family support, particularly children? I know you didn’t...”

“It’s more than that, and I’m not sure I’m coming back. I’m not consoled by the fact that others are grieving. Most have had full lives with their deceased spouse; I didn’t. They’re older and have had people they know, peers even, die; they’re more accustomed. For god’s sake, my parents are still alive. Grief is singular and solitary, and there is little to be gained by understanding what others do to get by when you can’t repeat their ways. Your marriage also got cut short but, frankly, not as much as mine. We were married for ten years, with two years disrupted by illness. I’m convinced you can’t know someone completely in that time frame. I never saw changes in her from being together in different stages of our lives or experienced changes in me for the same reason. I expected to feel the loss, to be pained, but never that I can’t figure myself out any longer.”

“People change in front of us, and we don’t know it, and they have secrets. After my husband died, I went through his clothes before donating, found two unused concert tickets in an old suit he hadn’t worn for years, and wondered why he bought them. At the wake, a man from his job spoke kindly about my husband but described him in a way I never would, as if he was talking about someone else. In all the photos



in a computer folder, I found a picture of a young woman likely for a college yearbook and had no idea who she was or why he kept it.”

After a brief silence, Jimmy said, “You have the same gray-blue eyes as my wife.”

Theresa blushed. “Are you flirting with me, Mr. Maxwell?”

“I’m a photographer, so I notice color. Just an observation.”

“Are the photographs on the wall yours?”

“Most are; I haven’t taken many shots lately.”

“Show me which ones are yours.”

They walked around the store, and he pointed out his works, adding the background of the shot. When he proceeded to the next photo on the wall, he saw that Theresa was still standing in front of a picture on another wall.

“That's your wife, isn't it? It's the only photograph of a woman in the store. Did she help you set up shop?”

He nodded to her first question. “I set up the store just before she became ill; she had a job for as long as she could. I rent the building, rely on hobbyists and semi-professional photographers, and compete against two other businesses like mine in this town. It could go away quickly. I still live in an apartment that we could barely afford with two salaries.”

“I’m not going to convince you to come back, am I? You’re not giving the process and the others enough time or enough credit; promise you’ll think about rejoining.”

He answered, “I guess the meetings help you; that’s good. I appreciate you trying, and I’ll think about going to the next meeting, okay? You know they expect you and I would have a relationship. They probably think grief establishes the bond like a shared interest in books or tennis.”

Theresa laughed, “You’re not my type.”

She started toward the door but was stopped by Jimmy's words. "Will you tell me about him sometime? Not the round-the-circle summary."

She smiled, "As long as you do, too."

When she arrived at the meeting, she looked around the room for Jimmy, but he wasn't there.

The evening showers were light, and she chuckled at the colorful umbrellas stretched open in the corner of the room. Bernice Platen looked at her. "I gather you couldn't convince Jimmy. I thought an attractive woman would have a greater chance of success. "

"I went to convince, not seduce him," she retorted.

A few weeks later, she telephoned Jimmy, but the call went to voicemail.

The meeting began as usual, with Ray selecting a broad theme for discussion, but as always, the direction of dialogue moved away from the plan. Theresa listened and sometimes failed to answer a directed question.

Jimmy didn't come the following month; the seasons passed, and he was rarely mentioned. The group was distracted by the death of one member. At a meeting in early summer, Theresa told the group that she'd walked to the neighborhood of Jimmy's store. She'd peered through the wide front window at the vacant interior, her view blocked partially by the paper sign taped to the window: *For rent*. Theresa said she had stared at the space where they'd stood when they spoke of coming back and had recalled how he'd looked, but the image was shaded as if his features were in partial darkness. For a moment, no one spoke, then Edith Carlson mentioned that her husband's headstone had fallen over in the evening storm.

FRANK JAMISON

*Wintering*

Temperature near zero and mists over the river look like the Wise Men returning eastward, weary, hoods drawn, pondering a memory ill-understood.

This is Christmastime with its incertitude, horned and ready to do battle, its notion of peace on earth flayed and unlikely, it seems.

The mists seem to stumble then fall to their knees. This is frost-on-the-rocks time; this is prayer time; this is the lack of prayer and the need for prayer.

This is the unsettling of self on the season's message. This is the new year's motor rumbling this way, bearing its burden, heavy already.

CHRISTOPHER KUHL

*Searching For Frank (1962-2019)*

You shook the hand  
of a dead man. I  
shook the hand of

a dead man, but  
neither you nor I knew  
until Friday;

the dead man didn't  
even know until he  
sent me a poem,

and then, while talking  
to his wife in Connecticut,  
he became dead on Thursday

and nobody could do  
anything about it except  
resist believing. First

he was, and—

. . .

Where is he?

He must be here some  
where: he told me once  
there is no

not-being

JACQUELINE HUGHES SIMON

*Should I Try to Listen More?*

But all I hear are  
leaves and occasionally  
a Lesser Goldfinch.

Speaking of senses or  
the dream I had last  
night where a man drove

me through a river to  
have sex with him  
even though I didn't

want to have sex with  
him. I smelled him  
as he climbed over me

and I apologize if this  
makes you uncomfortable  
but it's the only way

I could think to tell you  
that my favorite men  
are teen-age girls.

EVALYN LEE

*The Open Sesame of My Mouth Rains*

bright, intestinal red inside a green station  
wagon digesting gas storage tanks,

harbor cranes, the New Jersey Turnpike.  
We are a family between arrivals,

not allowed to call New York City home,  
or say I love Grandpapa but not Grandmere.

I look back to see how far we've come.  
I look forward, afraid to move, waiting for a car

door to open, a dog to bark, hello,  
your run across a frozen river,

empty-handed, longing to be saved.  
We drive to Damascus—for decades—

all our eyes flick the rearview mirror,  
blind to the dark overcome by the light.

*The Titles on My Floor Say It All*

Stop Missing Your Life, Leviathan,  
The Lost Spell, The Modern Middle East,

Come Join Our Dream, Elektra,  
Stop Reading the News, Writer at War,

This America, Without Precedent,  
The Legacy of the Civil War,

The Book of Disquiet, Carrying Things,  
Writing Begins with Breathe, Work Your Way Free,

Atlas of the Invisible, Saudade,  
From All This, Fold in the Day,

When We Come to Understand the World,  
Things Hidden, Pity the Reader.



*No One Came To See Our Ice Experiment*

The city sky rides in a bowl of water  
on the roof of the Heavenly Rest Church.

Jungle-gymmed, trapped into learning  
the unspoken grammar of bodies,

from a boy's mouth the tooth drops out alone,  
a crocus head cut white, curved, lonely,

a thin thread of blood like the water  
in the bowl thickens, grows a city, skin

iced. The freezing wind licks the life be-  
tween my legs, blue underpants grounded,

by the grate, beside the bowl of icing  
water. You do not get to touch me.

The school calls my dad. I hear him say:  
she must have had a reason. Ask.

EMILY MCNALLY

*Idea Guy*

He splashed water on his face from the cold tap, letting it run through his shaking hands. He thought of the company-wide email encouraging all the workers at Cuttlefish Marketing to be part of the solution in stopping the slow boil of the earth by saving water. It had been mostly a self-congratulatory note about how much the company did for the preservation of the environment in the way of repurposing gray water, using solar power, and so on. At the very bottom there was a line about taking shorter showers in the company gym and making sure to use the light flush on the toilet because, in spite of all the best intentions and cutting-edge technology, they were still 15 percent over their advised water usage. As cold water dripped into his sweater collar and he avoided his own eyes in the mirror, he thought how the whole notion to do this wasteful, idiotic thing had been born from images culled from film and TV. From watching digital heroes wash away hysteria into steely resolve for the battle at hand. He had no battle. He had a 2:30 meeting to review his pitch for Fortuna Chardonnay. He seemed lately to be always looking for something like wisdom or guidance in the hollowest of places and then being surprised to come up empty.

2:20. He dried his hands carefully. Took out his phone and typed out a quick series of notes to himself. A knock at the door sent his heart spiraling into an abyss. Stop. Breathe. He finished his half-formed notes. This is how he worked now. In frantic dashes of attention. The times when he'd spent long hours shading the side of a woman's cheek, finding the truth of where light hit water, felt like they had been available to a person he had never known.

He forced himself to meet his own eyes. Everything was going to be fine. Well, aside from the slow boil of the earth, which had begun to infiltrate his thoughts with a vivid regularity. These thoughts leaked in and out all the time, and he was only free of their sloshing poison when he was with his daughter, Macy, who'd turned two on Sunday.

The party had been extravagant. Purple and white balloons, a caterer, all real plates and glasses because, of course, again, the environment. But what about the balloons? What did those become rotting at the bottom of a landfill? He imagined their plastic flesh, purple scraps turning to toxic muck. The image bloomed in his mind, and his fingers itched for a charcoal pencil.

No time, he reminded himself. The work piled high, and it made less sense all the time. He no longer understood what his job actually was.

“You’re an old-school idea guy,” his boss, Brandon, had said at his last review. “We need the arty types to fuel the vision, you know, man?” Brandon was from New York City. He’d gone to Yale for undergrad, Wharton to get his MBA. He dressed like he was homeless, and his scraggly beard was worn long. It felt like another coded message he could not crack.

No, he’d wanted to tell Brandon. No, I don’t know what you mean, man. But, instead, he sat through meetings where he offered images for marketing campaigns for herbal supplements, cleaning supplies, organic skin care, a chain of gourmet taco trucks. He talked very little and watched as the images were taken up by other, cleverer project managers and digital artists who gave the glass of beer he’d drawn and scanned an anime twist or found the ironic slant in a sprinkle donut. He understood none of it and accepted the praise for seeding the creative germ with a silence that was taken as modesty. He seemed to fill a void, his job was safe for now, and he knew he should be grateful

that he could support his family in this teeming city, but he felt a growing sense of disconnect that he was now trying to splash away in the second-floor, single-occupancy restroom.

“Just fucking get it together,” he whispered to himself. This instantly made him feel much worse. Hearing the waver in his own dusty voice pulled him into full shade.

He walked out of the bathroom. He was relieved to see no one waiting. He closed the door on his sick quavering and felt the temporary resin descend with relief. It came for him at times of immediate pressure. The veneer of control. He walked briskly to his office and grabbed his computer. He went to the conference room, where Brandon was regaling the junior copy writer with stories about Burning Man.

“We built like a huge blimp—I’m not even fucking kidding. Like however big you’re picturing it, it was like three times bigger. Inside we set it up like a steampunk bar, you know?”

The young woman—Chloe? Carrie?—nodded rapidly several times.

“Hey, Dom, you’ve been to Burning Man, right? She has to go. Tell her.” Brandon was spread out at the end of the table, his phone, iPad, computer jockeying for his attention.

He’d been. He’d hated it. It had rained the whole time. The mud sucking him in practically to his knees. He’d been wet and cold, as well as brutally high on mushrooms. He’d puked behind a tattered tent, and an old woman had come out and laid her hand on his forehead. He remembered her map of wrinkles, her gentle eyes.

“Oh, yeah. You have to go at least once. To see it.” Dom’s voice sounded tinny and distant.

“Yeah. I mean it sounds amazing.” She kept up the vigorous nods, even though they were wasted on Brandon as his eyes flitted between devices.

“I mean it’s not what it was. You missed the golden years, but still...gotta check it out, kid.” Brandon picked up his phone, his mouth tightening as he began texting in earnest.

Chloe or Carrie met his eyes. She stopped the incessant nodding and gave him a tiny smile, followed by the faintest of eye rolls. He smiled back.

The small exchange of humanity picked away a corner of the protective resin. A hot wire lashed through him. He sat quickly, opened his computer, and pretended to prep.

He closed his eyes and pictured Macy. He’d sung her a Shins song the other day, from across the room, as she played with what he called her Wurlitzer, a noisy plastic thing covered with buttons. He’d longed to chuck it in the trash, but Maddie, his wife, insisted it would aid in her learning when she started school. *Who cares? She’s fucking two*, he’d wanted to argue. But he did not. What was the point? The whole conversation spooled out in front of him, and there was nothing to say, nothing that hadn’t already been said in some other version of the conversation.

Instead he sang and was buoyed when Macy’s eyes flashed to his, her fine strawberry blond eyebrows rising. He’d kept singing and the corners of her mouth quirked up, her arms rising to be lifted as he came closer. He’d picked her up and pulled her to him as he finished the song. When he stopped singing, Macy pushed away from him to look at his face and thumped his chest with her open palms, fluting what sounded to him like bird noises mixed with the words “sing” and “dada.”

People filled the room. He nodded to them, flashed smiles. Added to conversations when he could. Did people avoid his eyes? Was his voice too loud? The resin chipped away a little more.

He pressed his hands together. Pressed hard his feet into the

floor. He took five deep, slow breaths, concentrating on relaxing his neck and shoulders, his face and hands. These were Google's suggestions when he'd entered the single word: panic.

A sick grinding started up when he thought again of the water pouring down the drain—all flowing away, leaving a husk of planet floating lightly through the black universe. Showers, sinks, obviously water flowed from those, but also hoses, water fountains, dripping pumps, and spigots coming out of brick walls. The images rose, and his fingers wavered beside him, itching again for the tools of his childhood. The earth a giant, round blue bottle, open at the bottom, all the water flowing out into the dark void of the universe, waterdrops filtering through the glow of the Milky Way.

“Great, great, great to see you all.” Brandon set his phone aside with a flicker of annoyance. “So I think we’ve got a lot to get through this afternoon. I know we all want to get back to it, so let’s be efficient. Dom. Fortuna Chardonnay. What have you brought to inspire us?”

He flicked through his slideshow too quickly. A bottle growing from the dirt, grapevines wound around it. Another bottle glinting in sunshine, a single drop of water sliding down the side, flowers of gold and bronze surrounding it. A glass of butter-colored wine setting off a platter of fruit. The fruit looked plastic, artificial. He wished he remembered how to take the time to find the perfect shade of green for the apples, to create the spark of life in a blackened purple plum, a fragile, translucent grape.

“All very good, of course,” Brandon said with a grimace. “But I wonder if the last two aren’t too sweet somehow? Too idyllic, I think. And the first one is like super ominous, right? Like earth sucks bottle into the abyss. But I’m thinking the poetry of execution might exist in combining these somehow? What do we think?”

The table clattered with thoughts and insights. Dom tried to take

notes, to get some kind of grip on the shattering chorus of comments.

“Great. Dom, you sorted? Meet with Carly to generate some copy. Meeting next week with clients. Touch base if needed.” Brandon sometimes talked like he was sending urgent texts. Dom had little idea how to proceed. But Carly. At least he knew her name.

Back in his office, his hands began to shake again. He didn’t understand the mechanism by which meaning had slipped and the veering shadows had taken over, so he had no idea how to reverse it. He could hear a rough voice rumbling through him but couldn’t make out the words. The rumble taunted him with something he could only make out in fragments. As he wiped his sweating hands on his jeans, the rumble increased. He closed his eyes, pressed his feet into the floor. *What? What?* he called silently into the whirl of his own head. *What are you trying to tell me?* He thought about dropping to his knees to show how willing he was to face the full weight of his dread.

Behind his eyes he saw a series of quickly flitting knowings that had the knife slide of truth. It amounted to something like this: If he were happy in his marriage, if he liked his job, if he felt even a shred of community anywhere, if he were certain he could ensure the safety of his own child, he would not probably care nearly so acutely about the fate of the environment. Well, he’d like to believe he would still turn off the sink, recycle, and maybe donate to the Sierra Club, but he was not at all certain he would feel confined to blazing scenes of hairless animals, ribs like etched glass, of packs of humans scuttling like rats from one abundant dump to another, of thick water churning with corpses and filth.

He thought of Macy.

He’d taken her outside after the song, to their thin patch of garden with its overgrown grass, and plopped her down directly on it. Sitting across from her, he watched as she sunk her hands into the earth

and ripped up a chunk of it to investigate. She'd babbled in delight, those delicate eyebrows rising again as she met his eyes. The clutch of earth started making a slow journey to her mouth, and he'd stopped her with a gentle "No, no, honey, not to eat." Her expression had wavered for a moment as though this was, perhaps, an obstacle that should be met with tears. He waited and, instead, she turned to look at the grass in her hand and said in a soft, firm voice, "No, no, no, no, no." She looked back at him for confirmation. "That's right, angel," he'd replied. With great care, she transferred the grass to him, placing it in the center of his open palm, dirt-side down like the grass could root itself in him and live again.



RICHARD T. RAUCH

*Reunion Text*

hey u ol bastuds  
time we got 2gether  
over bloody portohos & vino  
2 grumble over  
worlds gone wrong  
& 6 decades gone  
w/ only 1-2 2 go  
lemme know...

JODDY MURRAY

*Cassini-Huygens*

Snails so small  
they are ring dust  
around Saturn, just  
so, glued and  
eternal in that way.  
We don't think  
of the journey  
or the steps  
around tombs,  
around curvatures.  
Pulses like yours  
and the blinding  
punctuation you  
police into corners  
can be swept  
into hairstyles,  
cosmic reflections  
of every excuse  
for solemnity. None  
try defeat like you.  
Thoroughness  
and ripe harvests  
defy us. Hello  
passing orbiter.  
What are your dreams?

## *Blood Tissue*

Connection, like tears and warm baths,  
is an areole and sunburst of distance. It  
circulates and pauses and escapes. It  
is the moment and lifetime combined.

Somewhere under your stare are shrimp  
blinded by growers, by harvesters. You stomp  
in the leaves to see what is underneath.

Night sweats and traffic gather in our faces,  
collect to an end that's not a comet's tail or cat's  
grin—it's woven with cells and tincture

and so many afternoon reflections—breathless  
but breathed anyhow. Fluids never outrank  
solids. Grips require some kind of pressure.



LEE VARON

*Kestrel*

With pointed wings  
and fan-shaped tail  
the kestrel flies  
at speeds of  
39 mph

The males have  
gray-blue heads  
the color of a bruise

The kestrel can dive  
for prey  
at 200 mph  
This is how  
fentanyl swoops down—

One minute you're  
moving among the brackish  
waters of life—

the next gone.

KIMBERLY NUNES

*A Steller's Jay Calls from The Woods*

behind the wrought iron chair  
    beneath the strawberry tree—  
its orange-red pom-poms  
    ripening, while

in the other chair, the cat, long and melted  
in late October sun, stretches  
    and cleans his claws—

I grab him and wrap  
the feline round my neck,  
    kiss the thin, always cool  
layer of belly fat. The jay

hops closer on the rocky slope, pokes for grubs,  
    dark mandibles arcing in pause—  
as the cat and I make love.

Then, as if sensing the recklessness  
of autumnal passion, the nearby oak tree,  
    long abandoned

for what it gives—perhaps in need  
of touch too—drops its fruit, useless  
    at my feet.

I drop the cat  
to pocket the acorns; they are  
smooth and capped,  
each one a tree.

DEBORAH S. PRESPARE

*The Decadel*

It was an accident.

She repeats this to herself, like she does each evening, when she inspects her mask. First, she pulls the mask apart where its clear, gummy membrane sticks to itself. She'll need to be able to put the full-face mask on quickly if the green lights turn red.

It was an accident.

She examines the mask's red sealant edges. No nicks. She searches for any gaps where the membrane connects to the mask's view-through shield. The smallest gap could expose her to the endotoxins released during the phage surges. Low-level exposure causes muscle spasms and teeth grinding, unpleasant symptoms that, if a person is lucky, will diminish over time.

Anything more than minute exposure leads to violent convulsions and then—

She didn't mean to.

It was an accident. Her mother's exposure last year. It's the only version of what happened that's possible to live with.

Her inspection complete, she hangs her mask on the hook by the door. Squeezing her purse's strap, she turns to face the apartment, a place she dreads now. The poly-nano walls and ceilings with their cheery shades of yellow are especially painful.

The rooms weren't always yellow. Her mother insisted once that the walls and ceilings be programmed to match historic oceanic blues despite her father wanting yellow. Most people want yellow. The color soothes a longing for a sun that rarely makes an appearance in this part of the world. But her mother insisted on blue back then. She argued that



her father needed walls that induced a cooling effect to give him relief at home. Being a Recycler, her father spent countless hours in hot hazard suits at work. Her mother read somewhere that blue could trick the mind into feeling frostiness, so she experimented with the options in the color app. When her mother was satisfied, she remembers vaguely (she was only seven) her father laughing and saying that he was glad her mother demanded blues.

Months later her father's hazard suit, a product of recycling itself, failed to shield him from the contaminants released from melting scavenged items. Her mother, incoherent with grief, insisted on brightening up the space. As she manically entered and modified color codes in the app, her mother muttered that she should have given her father the yellow he wanted, that she shouldn't have been stubborn.

Maybe her mother was right, because while most people use yellow, the shades of yellow her mother conjured in the living room capture the sun on a bright spring day—at least how her mother imagined the sun on a spring day—better than anything else she's seen. Maybe her father would have appreciated this cheeriness more than the blues. It's hard to say.

From where she stands, she can see the foot of her parents' bed through the open door to their room. She sees the edge of the blue bedspread her mother found when she was creating the oasis of cooling hues for her father. For their bedroom walls, after her father died, her mother opted for softer shades of yellow that capture how she imagined the sun's light glowed at dawn.

And there's the bathroom. She can see a sliver of a wall through the cracked-open door. There her mother added hints of green to the yellow because of what she read about rain forests. When her mother imagined the sun shining through trees and vines, she was sure the yellow light would have picked up verdant hues. Her mother loved the

bathroom. She would stand for her allotted minutes under the metered shower, imagining the call of birds in a rain-soaked forest. There are no birds now. Not wild ones at least. But her mother said she could imagine how wild birds sounded. And she was sure the water dripping from the showerhead was how a light rain in a forest felt against skin. Even though blisters and burns are the result of rain on skin today, her mother had no trouble imagining how things might have been.

She can see her bedroom from here too. She can't sleep in it anymore. Her mother's distinct way of seeing colors is most evident in this room. During her mother's frenzied urge to lighten the place after her father died, her mother paused long enough to ask her what she wanted for her room. "Maybe how sunlight looked at the peak of day?" her mother asked. "Or maybe how sunlight ricocheted off clouds?"

She supported her mother swapping the blues with yellows at first. But the sudden merriness of the other rooms, even at her young age, was jarring. She didn't understand it then, but she needed space for grief, so she asked if instead of yellow, her room could reflect the moon on the cloudless nights her mother read to her about.

"It's your room, Sola. It can be however you want it."

Her mother closed her eyes for a long moment; then she tapped in the app. The foot of the walls became black night. The darkness gradually faded until the walls met the ceiling. From there the ceiling transitioned through shades of shimmering silver with hints of bright white.

"Beautiful, Sola," her mother said. "Good choice."

It was no surprise that her mother's interpretation of the moon's light surpassed Sola's imaginings. In that moment, Sola finally understood her mother's insistence on the power of color. The walls gave her night. They gave her solace. After her mother's death, the colors her mother chose assumed even more power. Everywhere she

looks, Sola sees her.

These walls.

She closes her eyes. She reminds herself to breathe. She tells herself to stop thinking about the walls, about the past, but like always, a memory seeps in. This one is of her father. He's on the couch. She's sitting next to him asking why they can see windows from the outside but not on the inside. He's explaining how interior and exterior poly-nano tech layers were installed over every floor, wall, and ceiling in all homes and over all exterior facades during the Great Retrofitting to protect people from the phage surges and the burning rain.

"The Preservationists," he said, "require the exterior poly-nano layers to stay clear, so everyone can appreciate the buildings' original designs."

"But inside," Sola said, "people can do what they want?"

Her father yawned. He was always so tired after a shift. "That's right," he said. "And most people don't want to look out at rain all day and night."

He told her then about her grandfather, about how when he was a child, rodents not only dwelled deep in the subway lines like today, but they lived in building walls too. "When the layers went on," her father said, "the rats and mice became forever trapped in the walls. Your grandfather used to say people could hear them clawing and squeaking for weeks."

She shuddered.

Her mother, entering the living room with a tray lined with mugs of tea, shuddered too. "Really, Adem," she said. "That's a horrible story." Handing her father and Sola their tea, she said, "Let's focus on the positive, shall we? Isn't it marvelous that we can color these walls?"

For her mother, the poly-nano layers were merely canvases. She lamented the Preservationists' verdict that the exterior layers must

remain clear. On their walks, her mother would gush things like, “Wouldn’t that building look marvelous in reds?” or “That building demands pink stripes. Wouldn’t that be much more enjoyable than that drab brown?”

Her heart aches for her mother. Her closest friend. No one makes Sola laugh as deeply as her mother did. No one makes Sola feel as safe. She misses her father too, even though he’s more distant in her memories. He was kind. He laughed as intensely as Sola did when her mother would say or do something silly and charming.

This apartment is them. It’s hard to breathe. The walls. The gray floor with its scratches from their dancing. The poly-nano tech can be damaged by footfall, so laminate was installed over the poly-nano floors during the Great Retrofitting. Many evenings her parents would dance, her father twirling her mother, their shoes scuffing the laminate, their laughter booming louder than the music. At night now, when she lies on the couch waiting for sleep, she sometimes thinks she can hear them laughing.

There’s the wine stain on the couch arm from a spill during a laugh-filled dance. There are the rings from her father’s tea mugs on the coffee table that her mother scolded him about (he always forgot to use the coasters). And there are the bookcases with shelves that sag from the books her mother collected to gaze at and wonder. While AI-generated images and scenes were too sharp to her mother, old movies and footage weren’t sharp enough. For her mother, reality lay somewhere in between, and this in-between was best captured in the tactile turning of pages in old picture books from before publications were all digitized. Despite their increasingly hefty price, her mother couldn’t get enough old books.

So many books. So many stories that her mother relayed. So many memories. Everything in this apartment suffocates. Even if she

had the strength to empty this place of its contents and change all the colors her mother programmed, she'll never exhume the past interred here. She understands this. She needs to breathe. She needs a clean start. And she's hoping she'll get one tonight with The Decadal.

Like clockwork, her phone rings.

"Answer on screen," she says, dropping her purse on the coffee table.

The black screen of the wall-mounted viewer in the living room dissolves into an image of her grandmother. Although they speak daily, her grandmother's face is still wrinkled with confusion.

"Hi, Gram," Sola says.

"Sola? You there?" Gram asks, pressing her face to her camera.

"I'm here."

The viewer blinks off in the living room, and the one in the kitchen turns on as Sola enters the space. Her breath catches. It always does when she steps into this room. The walls and ceiling are yellow here too, but here her mother added orange and pink hints to mimic imagined sunsets. When rubbing their plates with sanitizing cleanser, her mother told her of stories she read where people sat outside at long tables with friends, and as the sun descended, they enjoyed the breeze and indulged in natural foods and drinks, like handmade pasta and aged wine.

"That must have been heavenly," her mother used to say.

"Sola?" Gram says. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you."

"Oh, good," Gram says, sitting back in her usual armchair.

"How was work?"

"It was good."

Being a Caregiver is exhausting, but she's fortunate to have this work, and she has her mother to thank for this. Her mother was an

Administrator and urged her to pursue work that was more meaningful than marking tax and utility payments received or missed, so that's what she did. There's satisfaction in being a Caregiver. She first trained to care for children. Ten years ago, she had eleven children in her class. Two years ago, she only had two. She trained for eldercare then. There's no fear of not having work anymore. Not in her lifetime at least.

"A movie. Titanic. It's on the Classics Channel," Gram says. "I saw it on TV when I was little. Let's watch it."

They do this often since her mother's passing, watch a movie while on a call together, and while they watch, they debate the same thing: were human actors in the classics more capable than the AI actors today? They always disagree. For Sola, AI actors are consistently convincing. For Gram, human actors of the past, convincing or not, make richer scenes.

"I can't," Sola says, filling the teakettle from the water distiller. She doesn't want to tell Gram that she's watching *The Decadel* tonight. Gram wouldn't understand. She can't tolerate change. The odds aren't good that Sola will get picked for a new home anyway, so she sees no reason to upset Gram over something that likely won't even happen.

"You have plans with someone?" Gram asks, smiling knowingly.

"How was your day, Gram?" Sola asks, ignoring her question and the note of hope in it. Gram knows finding a partner is challenging, but that doesn't stop her from routinely asking Sola if she's met someone.

"Fine," Gram says. "What are you making?"

"I'm not sure."

Sola sets the kettle on the induction burner and assesses the contents of the cupboard. There's the white paper-wrapped loaf of flaxseed meal bread (fortunately, people with know-how figured out how to cultivate flax at scale hydroponically). There are the

nourishment cubes in their white wrappings—the small beverage cubes, medium snack cubes, and large, full-meal cubes, all of them labeled and stacked in clear, vertical dispensers. Although she knows she should reconstitute a full meal for nutrition or have flax toast at least, she’s too nervous to eat. The Decadel will be starting soon. A new life is potentially just minutes away.

Thinking it might calm her nerves, she selects a tea cube and drops it, wrapper and all, in a mug.

“What did you decide on?” Gram asks.

“Tea.”

“We drank loose-leaf tea,” Gram says. “When I was young. There were whole fields where tea plants grew. Can you imagine?”

Sola can’t imagine despite how many times Gram has told her this. She turns off the burner. As she fills her mug, the wrapper dissolves, and the cube bleeds into black water-staining tendrils.

“I’ll make tea too,” Gram says. “And we...”

Bewilderment settles on Gram’s face again. It won’t be long before Gram will need to move to a caregiving unit where she’ll be under the watchful eyes of Caregivers like Sola. Her heart heavy with the thought, Sola takes a sip. She wonders if loose-leaf tea had this same metallic taste.

“Titanic,” Gram blurts. “How could I forget?”

“I can’t.”

“Right. You have plans,” Gram says, smiling again. “With whom?”

“I’m just tired. I’m going to take a shower and—”

“Get ready for an outing?” Gram winks.

“I saw an astronaut this morning,” Sola says to change the subject.

Seeing the person in the historic suit on the street this morning

was startling. She's sure her grandmother will be intrigued. Her mother certainly would have been. She would have reveled in the suit's concealing bulkiness. Her mother hated that outerwear and masks must be clear to comply with The All-Clear Security Directive. Because everyone must wear outerwear suits to protect them from the burning rain, and masks to shield them from the phage surges, her mother felt there was such a missed opportunity for more colorful variety.

"Just imagine what this street would look like if everyone could decorate their outerwear and masks as they wanted?" her mother often said.

Her mother would have also bemoaned how the astronaut suit, which according to history books was a bright white, became a dirty gray like everything else in the rain.

"A what?" Gram asks.

The viewer blinks off in the kitchen and blinks on in the living room when Sola, mug in hand, sits on the couch.

"An astronaut," Sola says, tracing the wine stain on the couch's arm.

"An astronaut?"

"Someone dressed as an astronaut. Like the suits in history books. The bulky white ones. With the giant helmets. I wonder why they did that."

"People do strange things," Gram says. "When I was little, I remember—I guess you'd call it a fair. We didn't need to wear outerwear then. The sun was out. It was hazy. But it was there. And so many people wore all kinds of outfits. Outfits crazier than an astronaut suit...maybe not. I can't remember. I do remember all kinds of food. And the smells..."

Gram gets that dreamy look when she loses herself in history. This is usually when Sola can ease herself out of the conversation.



“I’m tired, Gram.”

Gram’s forehead pinches in confusion again. “There was…” She smiles when the confusion lifts. “Titanic. Let’s watch it.”

“I can’t.”

Gram’s smile slips into a teasing one. “Plans with some—”

The lights dim. The familiar hum of a brownout fills the apartment.

“The inner loops have fewer brownouts and blackouts. Another plus for trying my luck in The Decadel,” she whispers to Gram’s faded, frozen image.

Hoping no one is stuck in an elevator—it’s a horrible experience, one she avoids now by always taking the stairs—she turns off the viewer. Voices blast or there’s a jarring beep of a call ended if the viewer is on when the power is restored.

With its self-energizing nanotechnology, the protective poly-nano layering over the walls, floors, and ceilings remains intact. Maybe someday someone will figure out how to apply the self-powering concept to the entire power grid. It’s been decades with no advances there, so she doesn’t have much hope.

The green light above the clear door she hangs her mask by is still lit, thanks to batteries. Green means no dangerous phages indoors. The green light in the space beyond the clear door is on too. Her mother called this space the foyer. A foyer sounds welcoming. Grand even. There’s nothing welcoming nor grand about the sanitation box that keeps the world out. Each evening when she steps through the heavy gray door that seals the apartment off from the other apartments on the floor, the ultraviolet lights and sanitation blower snap on in this box. After the disinfecting, it’s here where she hangs her outerwear on the scavenged coat tree her mother bought for its irony—with the heat, no one wears coats anymore, and there are no more trees in the city either

—at least not outdoors. To see trees a visit to the Botanical Museum is required.

Satisfied that the batteries for the phage detectors have sufficient charge, she goes to the power box in the kitchen and flips the power off to the kitchen appliances—the water distiller, icemaker, toaster, ultraviolet sani-dish box, and induction burner—because turning off appliances helps prolong their life. She leaves the power on for the apartment lights. Bulbs are engineered for fluctuating currents, so no risk of them blowing. And it’s good to have a visual cue when the brownouts are over. She leaves the power on for the white air-chiller boxes in each room too. They’re also designed to withstand power variations because air chilling, even at partial capacity, is necessary. With blackouts, if they last more than thirty minutes, people are forced to wear their outerwear with its cooling nanotech fabric indoors. At least with brownouts there’s only mild discomfort.

She returns to the living room. Sipping her tea, she pulls her phone from her purse. She charges her phone at work. There’s constant power in City Center. For the other city loops, the elected Planners got the best minds to design access to the network even during power shortages, and on this, they delivered. Sky buoys ping out reliable connections, so when she says, “Geoluphone, go to The Decadel,” her phone’s screen brightens.

There’s a stage with a dark backdrop. The counter on the bottom of the screen shows thirty seconds. There’s no time to change out of her work clothes, the standard Caregiver’s black slacks and yellow smock, into more comfortable sleepwear. It doesn’t matter. Soon, if she’s a lottery winner, she may be more at ease than she’s been in months.

Jubilant music plays. An AI man, the most popular Information Anchor, Erix Crisp, walks onto the stage, wearing a yellow suit and an orange tie. Every morning and evening, wearing duller colors, like

grays and tans, he conveys information to the city's citizens—subway line delays, known blackout schedules, fires put out or burning.

His attire and bright smile tonight remind everyone that The Decadel is a special occasion. He raises his hand, and the music stops.

“Good evening and welcome to the seventh Decadel,” he says, sweeping his arm to the backdrop behind him. A map of the city lights up.

Only eight loops ringing City Center are illuminated.

Sola stares at the map. She almost spills her tea when she sets her mug down on a coaster. She doesn't understand what she's seeing. There should be nine loops. With each Decadel, only the outermost loop is rezoned for scavenging and recycling.

Erix Crisp, his face grim, looks at the map and back to the screen. “I know you're wondering why two loops have been rezoned in this Decadel.” He shakes his head. “The Planners regret that difficult decisions had to be made to ensure our sustained comforts.”

Sola waits for him to explain, but Erix Crisp just smiles and says, “We have a wonderful evening ahead. Many people's lives will change tonight. Isn't that exciting?”

AI applause erupts.

With her and Gram being in the seventh loop now, it's good that she entered The Decadel, she tells herself. If she gets selected for a new loop and her new apartment is big enough, Gram can move in with her to put more distance between them and the new outer ring, where power disruptions will be more frequent, where Securers will be a rare sight.

“Adding to tonight's excitement,” Erix Crisp continues, “is that our great city has accepted ten thousand refugees. Folks, people are in trouble out there.” Erix Crisp pauses and his smile shifts to a grim one. “Desert regions have expanded. The global superstorm zones have widened. The world out there isn't like here.”

He clasps his hands to his chest, and his smile shifts back to an upbeat one. “Here we have everything we need. Sure, there are phage surges, but we have our masks. And sure, the rain is constant, and it burns. But it isn’t violent. And we have our outerwear. Yes, folks, there’s much to be grateful for. And we have the greatest minds in the world in this city solving problems, giving us hope. What do we say, folks?”

As he holds his hands out wide in front of him, the AI audience shouts what’s blasted in subway stations all day: “Know-how. Optimism. Gratitude. This is the way forward.”

“That’s right,” Erix Crisp, smiling widely, says. “Know-how. Optimism. Gratitude. Just think, ten thousand people, people with talent, with know-how, in a short while will be feeling the gratitude and hope we all feel now. It’s amazing that ten thousand lucky people in addition to many of our other fabulous lottery entrants are going to find their new homes tonight.”

Sola’s mouth dries. When she entered the lottery, she only skimmed the rules because everyone knows the possible outcomes of The Decadel: you either (1) stay where you are (the usual outcome), (2) stay in the same loop and move to an apartment that’s either smaller to free up space for a family larger than yours or bigger if your family has expanded (the second most common outcome), (3) move to a loop closer to City Center if you’re lucky, and if you’re doubly lucky to an apartment that’s family-size appropriate, or (4) you strike it big with a spot in City Center. If you’re extremely lucky, you could even land a residence in the Aguille building, the last building built in City Center. Even if you get a closet-sized apartment in the Aguille, it’s worth it. There’s a saltwater pool (there are only two swimming pools in the city now), and the building has its own power supply—something unheard of.

Two zones for Scavengers and Recyclers instead of one. An influx of outsiders seemingly on equal footing. The rules are fluid tonight.

“Let’s begin,” Erix Crisp says with a clap of his hands. “First, our winners for our new outer loop, Loop Eight.”

Her phone vibrates.

This can’t be.

Virtual confetti explodes on her phone’s screen.

“Congratulations, Sola Waverly,” Erix Crisp’s voice says through her phone. “Your new home awaits in Loop Eight.”

Moves never go in the outward direction. Stunned, she doesn’t listen to the rest of the message. She doesn’t read the information about relocation support scrolling across her screen.

How can this be?

The Decadel continues. Rollicking music plays. There’s AI-generated applause again. Erix Crisp is on to the next loop, her current loop, the one she thought for sure she would at least remain in.

Sweat dots her forehead. She goes to an air-chiller. If there’s air blowing, she can’t feel it. Panicked, she taps the poly-nano layers’ color app on her phone. Her father said everyone blots out their windows to forget what’s out there. But Sola needs to forget what’s in here. She needs to forget what she’s done.

She can feel her parents’ worry: Sola, what did you do? What were you thinking? You got yourself in the outer loop! It’s dangerous!

She can’t breathe. The walls are closing in. She needs to feel space. There must be a way to unblock the windows. Hidden deep in the app’s settings, she sees Show Windows. She selects it.

Three clear squares appear in the wall, revealing windows that used to open to the world. Her head spinning, she goes to one of them. Struggling to catch her breath, wishing she lived in a time when she

could open the window to let in air, she focuses on the cracks in the white coating of the window frame, a frame forever encased now between the interior and exterior poly-nano layers. It's easier to focus on the cracks than on what just happened. The all-clear lights outside pulse green. She focuses on them next, then on the green-hued raindrops.

It'll be okay.

She repeats this. Trying to breathe, she weighs her options. She can't move in with Gram because her studio is barely big enough for herself. And while she had the thought earlier that Gram could move in with her, she can't bring Gram to the outer loop. When it's time, a caregiving unit will be better for her, better than anything she could have offered her in an inner loop even. She tells herself this. Gram will have constant companionship in a unit. She'll be safe.

Everything will be okay.

She watches the cars wade through the rain-filled road below. She watches the people on the sidewalks. From this higher angle, with their bodies fully enveloped by their clear outerwear suits, the people look like giant walking raindrops (or teardrops). Her mother would have found this amusing. Sola thinks again of the person in the astronaut suit from her morning commute and how her mother would have loved the sight. Even with the suit's bulkiness, she could hear her mother commenting on how wearing something other than the standard outerwear must be so freeing.

She needed to be freed. She needed a fresh start. And she got one. It's not the one she wanted, but there will be new walls. Her breathing finally slows.

And there's a waitlist she can join for vacated inner loop spaces. There's always the next Decadel in ten years too.

Everything will be okay.

Sirens blast from outdoor speakers. The green lights outside turn red.

Again?

There was a phage surge just before she got home. They're more frequent now. She looks over her shoulder. The green lights inside hold steady.

Looking outside again, she sees the people on the sidewalks scrambling. Inside their outerwear, they pull their clear masks from belts and bags and reach up under their enclosed hoods to secure their masks over their faces. She watches as they pull straps over their heads and press their masks' red sealant edges across their foreheads, along their cheeks, and under their jaws.

Across the street, a man leaves a building. After a few steps, his shoulders shake. She doesn't see the red borders of a mask haloing his face.

She wasn't like him.

It was an accident.

The people on the sidewalk skirt around the shaking man. They ignore him and his jerking body. He stops under a flashing streetlamp. The drops of rain on his outerwear catch the lamp's light, making his suit shimmer red. The man looks up. She can't make out his expression through the glare of light bouncing off the rain on his hood, but she can tell he sees her. He keeps looking in her direction. She must be a sight, she realizes. No one looks out windows anymore.

His arm flails in his suit.

Is he waving?

As if sensing her doubt, he struggles with his arm and jabs it into his outerwear suit's armhole to unfurl the sleeve's fabric. Looking up at her again, his head twitching, he manages to lift his quaking arm high and wave.

She waves back, thinking her mother would have loved the sparkling effect of the rain on his suit under that throbbing red light. With all that twinkling and his flopping and wrenching motions, her mother might have commented that he looks like some beautiful, otherworldly creature doing an exotic dance in a cloak of radiant red garnets, a stone her mother read about and adored.

Beauty in the grim. Like these poly-nano layers, the canvases that her mother loved, sealing in rats and mice. She remembers a story her mother used to tell of a far-off place, both in distance and time, where rulers loved garnets, and when they died, not only their precious gems but their loved ones too, dead or alive, were entombed with them. Remembering this, Sola keeps waving as the man, convulsing, falls to the ground. She keeps waving even after he stills.



SANDRA RIVERS-GILL

*Night Vision*

They scarcely make a sound. Still  
antennae ears tune into the  
frequency of road hazards.

A muzzle of white fur encircles  
their brown eyes and throat.

They are watching —  
foraging flora and low hanging fruit beneath  
the penumbra of their province.

The world is full of risks —  
brawl or break free like frightened deer.

Headlights blind the narrow roads black  
as forests swaying leaves in the bulk of air.

The scent of peril is a wide-open wound,  
the bleat of wheels still turning.

***Tick-Tock***

*for Trayvon Martin and others*

Clocks are a community of watchers.  
I have seen their hands evict souls  
from the freedom of homes  
and declare the bodies buried.

He is a tree in the black forest  
standing in front of a hose in fire;  
his fingers dialing back a memory.

To say 400 years is not premeditated  
is to say that perpetual mourning  
is life on even playing fields.

I stand under the flicker of streetlight  
casting eerie shadow on my lawn.  
But home as safe as Breonna;  
as careful as Elijah's rhythm  
becoming a stopwatch.

DANA ROBBINS

*The Long Hallway*

From my seat in the waiting room,  
I watch them walking down the hall  
to radiology; she a tiny, frail woman,

head covered by a cap pulled low, he,  
her husband perhaps, a lanky, open-faced  
white-haired man; they hold hands as,

caterpillar-like, she inches forward.  
For each step she takes, his foot draws  
a circle in the air

before it touches down, in an effort  
to restrain his loping gait to her slow  
steps, like how a parent

walks behind a toddler, bent, holding  
the child's hands as she takes her first  
steps. As they disappear through

a door, I pray that when I take those  
halting steps, someone matches  
their pace to mine.

DIANE SAMMET

*The Landscape of the Unfinished Heart*

The landscape of the unfinished heart,  
snowcapped, jagged, rough,  
slippery river rock,  
ice melt cold,  
racing to the sea,

stops by trillium and bluebells.  
“Which way east?” she asks.  
The answer blows, spring blizzard.  
A frozen bitter scrapes.

The landscape waits—snowed in.  
What else can she do,  
as the sound of distant surf,  
a million grains of hope,  
keep atoms warm within?

The landscape of the unfinished heart  
gives herself to time.  
Edges rasp, erode, expose—  
ashes from the stars.

Ice melts.  
She's free to go.  
But now, her landscape's level.  
Can't rush toward the sea.  
Trillium and bluebells bloom,  
turquoise, topaz, quartz.

Glacier made and clear.  
The landscape of the heart  
looks up.  
Connects to constellations.  
The ages kiss her veins.

## *Marble Races*

It started with the picture hanging on the wall.

Tilted.

The nearby table too.

Then the books, not one straight.

The windowsill—

a ramp for marble races.

Nothing perfectly 90 degrees.

Nothing right-

angled.

I screamed, “Fix it.”

Then wondered why.

Why is L perfection?

What’s wrong with X and V?

Are S and C and G

somehow less than I?

R

U

O

K

with this?

Decision made.

More lean or curve—than don’t.

Perhaps it's straight that needs adjustment.

L is hard to hold  
onto—corners poke.

I slope,  
balloon, and billow,  
envelop and enjoy

tilted pictures,  
crooked tables,  
angled books,  
and marble races  
down my windowsill.

PAMELA GAYE WALKER

*Violet's Visit*

Violet, my beloved, almost five-year-old granddaughter extraordinaire, slept at the bottom of our California king last night. For fear I'd hurl about and accidentally nudge her head, I lay wide awake for what seemed like days. This morning, ruffled but alive, I curl up, half remembering last night's actor's nightmare, where I was stumbling around on a mammoth movie set not knowing where to report, how to fill out paperwork, or right a costume that was awry. Massive ships were mangled in the harbor; extras were peeling away as everyone rehearsed most seriously to get the blocking right. I was in the middle of the action, sitting in a miniscule bathroom with no doors, aiming for privacy, but everyone was way too busy to care. And then I woke up in the fetal position, tired, feigning sleep, and half remembering.

I think of my firstborn, Violet's momma, Peachie, who is away for a work function. No doubt I'll forgive her anger over some minor infraction that spontaneously erupted from my gob as she left. "Gob" being "mouth," a word I used in some Irish play.

I hear Violet and her grandpa talking in the other room:

"Come play with me, Gwandpa."

She's unable to say her Rs.

"I just woke up. Let me make some tea..."

"But, Gwandpa," she insists.

"Shh, your grammy's still asleep."

I hear Violet counting to one hundred. She sounds cheerful at 6 a.m. The circle of life begins again. The sun pokes around the corner as I emerge from the bathroom, heading toward the espresso maker. I try



making myself invisible 'til coffee, though I love her so. Half in dream state, I long to stay there, allowing the subconscious to create what it will.

Books are flung about on the floor: *Outings to the Beach with Grandma*; *Kids on Stage*; *Where's Waldo?*; *The Dharma under the Bed*. They're all there from last night's read and the subsequent talk we had. Raggedy Ann and Zippy, the monkey; stuffed pigs; Candy Land; and a copy of an old play I starred in, right where we left them.

All had an okay night, including Violet's darling grandpa, who is shoveling bunny pancakes onto a plate. Violet's brown hair falls in waves about her shoulders. She's half Filipina, part Irish after Grandpa's side of the family; part French and English, like me. Just yesterday, she jumped on the scale in the bathroom, fully clothed, and we weighed her—thirty-nine pounds.

What glory, this most youthful display of innocence making doodles and circles with a red marker upon some giant art paper. Just last night she was coloring a butterfly. The brown and orange in the wings overlapped, and she said, “Look, Gwammy! They've connected. Evewything's connected!” Where does that come from? When does one lose that innate wisdom and why? Will the world make her crazy? Oh, I hope not.

I have this sweet, unique child in my presence until she leaves for preschool and then it's my day again until 5:30. This rare opportunity is the blessing I long for, when Covid has bereaved me with loneliness, lost opportunities, and doubt.

Violet's winsome curiosity cuts through my ruminations with a simple question: “What do you want to be when you gwow up?” she asks. “What, Gwammy, do you wanna be?”

I should be asking her this, I think, as I move with sluggish brain in slow-mo for a coffee mug.

I contemplate various ambitions. The characters I played on stage have saved me, I think. Franny, Nora, Blanche, Audrey, Gwendolyn, Georgia O’Keeffe. A hundred-plus others have become a part of me off-stage. I emerge from a creative source, and they mix and mingle in the mind, protecting that innocent bystander that is I alone. I am the tapestry of many “she’s.”

“I know what I don’t want to be. Harassed,” I mumble with a teasing grin.

Violet asks what “harassed” means. Gingerly, I give a simplistic answer. She probes further and then I say, “Hopefully, you’ll never know.” Violet scribbles as the dogs, Tallulah, an old Maltese, and Buddy, a Cavapoo, yawn and stretch.

Out of the blue she says, “A boy at pveschool knocks me down.”

“Do you get mad?” I ask, feeling the heat under my pajama collar. “That must make you crazy.” She fixates on a puzzle piece.

“I get up.”

I’m about to dig deeper, to find out more about the little bully, but Violet takes me up short. She looks at me through all-knowing eyes and asks, “Do you get mad, Gwammy?”

What do I dare to answer her, knowing that often I feel the need to be in the world in a more expansive way, rather than locked into my 5’3” body and sweet-ish face. There’s my badass-i-ness waiting in the wings, resentful of an assignment to behave behind the exterior in a cutesy way. When I did not bow to this stereotypical behavior, friends would ask if I was mad. I loved to say, “Why, yes, I am! I’m being true to my inner crazy.” If people think you’re crazy, then you can get away with acting any way you please, and who cares?

I remember wishing I could take a magic pill that would put me over the edge into madness, once and for all—and another that would

take me out of it—so my looks did not define how I was supposed to behave. Circumstances must have driven Fitzgerald’s wife, Zelda, mad, and Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath. My subconscious alter-ego bestie, who I’ve played on stage for many years, Georgia O’Keeffe, was unhinged numerous times. Many women throughout history have gone mad from horrific oppression. I know I almost did, but relative to them I’ve been fortunate—sexism and misogyny, misunderstandings and judgments have only driven me to the brink now and again.

“When you gwow up, Gwammy, what do you want to be?” Violet is still waiting for an answer, edging me further into the realm of wakeful reality, and herself away from any more talk about the bully on the playground.

I wonder how she’ll hold onto the self she brought into the world, the self that nature provided in her DNA that is so beautifully confident. How can she build a force field around her to protect her from the bullies, from the onslaught of negative messages, like the character Violet in *The Incredibles*?

“Well, I can’t tell yet,” I offer my wee grandchild. “I’ve tried lots of things and gone down one path or another. But I still have questions. Even gwammys have questions! Eventually, I think it’s ‘what can I leave behind to show that my life had meaning for the greater good?’”

Does she accept my attempt at an answer? I amble toward the coffee, the fascia of my feet crying out in pain. I open the back French doors to let in some birdsong. Buddy and Tallulah thunder out the door to chase squirrels, momentarily detracting from the effect of my partially awake performance.

A couple of hours later, Violet is off at preschool. I’ll talk to her mother, Peachie, about the shoving incident when she’s back from her meeting. I down the last of my afternoon serenity tea and think about

the trees outside my office window. A California oak looks different from the oaks I grew up with in the Midwest. My office feels like a tree house, wedged between the loving branches of these three mighty oaks in my front yard. I've noticed the green moss that climbs its way up the nodular, craggy limbs. One such moss is wedged between the intersection of two branches, making it look like an upside-down naked woman. Maybe this is a kind of Rorschach test. Me, revealing myself ever deeper in my creative endeavors. Disrobing to get to the naked truth but turning myself inside out and upside down to do it. Crazy. What a relief it might be to be mad as a hatter and, therefore, shunned, and all that was left to do was create with abandon, without social norms to impede you—without the sexism that traps you in rigid roles, without the family expectations that warp your dreams.

I pat a pillow and hurl myself into the cushions of the couch, knowing meditation is the cure for painful memories. I use the image of tree roots to connect myself to the center of the earth, empowering me in my hope to be strong through whatever the day brings.

I wonder again over the wisdom of an adorable girl of almost five years who says “I get back up” after she's been knocked down. I envision the discerning baby-crone, not even three feet in stockings, as she smiles and breathes deep. It overtakes me as I succumb to a deep relaxation, voices talking to myself, child to adult, adult to child.

As I sink further into my meditation, I recall a little biopic of David Bowie, who came from a family of schizophrenics—his mother, his brother. He wondered if madness might have touched him, and he used it in his artwork. He said sometimes he was channeling his brother who died of schizophrenia. And Amadeus Mozart—another genius/madman.

For a moment I'm back at the St. Francis Hotel, downtown San Francisco, in 2006. I approached actor Ed Harris, who was being

honored, and wanted to tell him about my Georgia O’Keeffe project, just to pick his brain. He gave me his madman look, which I supposed was a way of fending people off. Maybe he even growled. I’m sure he’s used that face before for a character—Pollack, or some other crazy he was privileged to play. Made me angry, as I think of all the times I was talked over, talked down to, my style was cramped. I’ll never forget the first time I said, “Excuse me! I think I was talking!” And all eyes looked at me, as if for the first time. I’m sure I quivered, wondering if I had something to say of import amid those dominating the scene. It took practice, but slowly I became less invisible. I got over disrespect when I began to *get* mad. Otherwise, I might have *gone* mad.

“I miss the stage,” I whisper to the room. “I miss that community, theatre folks.” If Violet were here, I would tell her all about it. What would she teach me to do with that sorrow, wise child? Would she yell, “Get back up, Gwammy!”? I hear a voice that almost makes Methuselah seem young as my meditation morphs fully into a dreamlike state.

“Maybe you’ve outgrown it.” It’s Violet’s voice, childlike yet ancient. “After many moves, you have no history here that they honor. You made sacrifices for Momma and she forgave me. We love you.”

I contemplate her with my third eye, hoping she’ll stay with me in this hazy, almost somnambulistic flurry. I need to listen. My inner Violet speaks again, her “R’s” magically liberated.

“There’s no grasping for outcomes, remember, Grammy? As Virginia Woolf said, there’s no need to hurry, no need to sparkle, no need to be anyone but oneself.”

Virginia Woolf. I imagine I’m leaning on an emerald marble counter, marveling—not even five! Yes, a granddaughter extraordinaire!

Calmly. Effortlessly. Her words continue to resonate within me.

“You’ll know when you’ve fully forgiven; the memory and the story will unstick, allowing your creative instrument to flow. Chicago, LA, New York, they will always be a part of you, but we are ever changing. You’re bringing it all with you into the present moment with new projects. You have grown into a new part of yourself, which is even richer with experience and memories.”

Then wise Violet says, “The life of the creative knows no retirement. She knows her experiences have purpose, and nothing is for naught. It’s all fodder. Practice right action, right everything. Write with your powerful words; use them wisely. Slowly. Use all your tools. Don’t let fear stop you from knowing the deepest joy. But wait!”

She beckons me to a mirror. “Your eyes have looked into the pane, into pain, and seen a face you did not know, overcome with the sadness of a stranger...”

“Stranger?” I ask for clarification, hugging me closer to the mirror in extreme close-up.

And there *is* my sorrow. Wake up, I think. But I cannot. There is a depth that comes creeping; one that I’m loath to bring to the surface. Oh, the times I’ve misjudged. The rejection I’ve endured. The times I’ve tried too hard—to be funny, to be loved. No need to hurry, to sparkle, to be anyone but myself. I think of the joy too. Violet must detect that right now because of her blessed countenance. Oh, I could sleep forever.

“What about all the characters you played on stage, Gram? The characters that you helped create, who began and ended in your body which makes up all there is in you? There’s Georgia and Winnie, Lola, Audrey, and Scarlet, Penelope, Gwendoline, and hundreds more... In all your uniqueness, they must all be counted. You’re a rainbow of strong colors, Grammy. There’s that.”

“Yes...there *is* that,” I echo as Violet sheds her elder mantle and

slowly begins to take on the image of her impish four-year-old self.

Suddenly, she throws one of her stuffies into the air—the cherry-red octopus—and skips in circles around the great room like the Pied Piper. Buddy and Tallulah frolic behind her.

“This will have been another happy day!”

She’s quoting Beckett now, one of my favorite playwrights! She knows Beckett!

“You know Beckett!” I cry.

“Last night, you read Beckett while I was pretending to sleep—part of the one-woman play you did, *Happy Days*. You must read *Happy Days* again,” Violet says as she skips off to play with the paper dolls abandoned in a heap on the farm table, in the city of Skittles, on the avenue of Delight.

Crinkles, deep from years of questioning, form on the outer edges of my eyeballs as I emerge fully awake, thankful for subconscious creativity.

“I must read *Happy Days* again,” I whisper in awe. “This will have been another happy day! I’ve had a visit from Violet!”

AMANDA HAYDEN

*School of Athens*

frescoes, not paint at all, not surface coated, instead colors mixed into wet plaster, *fresh* images birthing the wall itself, landscape, institution, Pope's library and thin paper volumes, and the rope is pulled open and I walk into the slight room with theater screen sized paintings, a Vatican Grand Canyon I want to climb, backpack, donkey ride into, walk up to Plato and Aristotle center stage with their otherworldly and worldly yin and yang tomes, Heraclitus, his fire and flux and Buddhist-you-can't-step-in-the-same-river-twice impermanence, Pythagoras and his vegan harmony of spheres, immortal souls, women as equals, but only in his pocket, not in the astronomer's corner of Ptolemy and Zoroaster, where Raphael himself is antisocial artist, awkward in any social setting, desperately looking for a dog to pet, exiled Diogenes laying on the steps below, barking with brutal honesty, *there's nothing shameful about being human!* Mojo Risin' of ancient philosophy in stank tatters instead of leathers, growling *you're blocking my light!* to Alexander the Great, agreeing with Socrates, happiness cannot be bought, speaking of there he is, gadfly taunting question after ironic question as truth's midwife, offense burning their faces, his sworn, cave-emerged duty to examine and escape, if only Nietzsche, Sartre, or Beauvoir were here, but not a cynical glimmer yet in 1511, maybe a 20th century Hopper version of *Nighthawks*, their arguments and *Je ne sais quoi* stirring in their cigarette smoke, and I can never teach



Kierkegaard without thinking of that one student who swore, *If I would have met Kierkegaard, I would have said, don't ever let go of what you love, you dumbass!* referring to Regina, but everything else too and Plato looks like Leonardo, pointing to metaphysical forms of *Good*, no one can teach us anything that is not already buried somewhere inside of us waiting to be unearthed, Gibran said this too, so there must be something to birth trauma shaking all knowledge to the ground, a loose sack of change turned upside down, spending our whole lives picking up the pieces, which is exactly where Aristotle points for truth, your feet in the dirt, don't miss the real forms by staring at Plato's Sun, and there is patient Hypatia, Neo-Platonic Smurfette of Athens, only one besides Raphael who looks directly at us, wonders where Clea, Thecla, Sosipatra, Diotima, Macrina, and the thousands of other unnamed brilliant word-filled women are at, Hypatia knows she would be blamed for a male ruler's actions, did she know she would be torn apart, literally dismembered piece by piece by an angry Christian mob in the street, and I think it was Socrates who said an educated person is defined by their ability to entertain an idea *without agreeing to it* and 2500 years later, we still look at those who climb out of the cave, dirt still under the nails, in fearful disgust, offense burning our faces

## AMANDA HAYDEN

### *2023 Featured Artist*

Amanda Hayden is Poet Laureate for Sinclair College and a Tenured/ Full time Professor who teaches Humanities, Philosophy, and Religions. She has received several pedagogy awards, including the SOCHE Award (2017), Chicago Interfaith Core Award (2018), Humanities Professor of the Year (2019), and League for Innovation Teaching Excellence Award (2020). Her chapter, *Saunter Like Muir: Experience Projects in Environmental Ethics* was recently published by Routledge (2022) in *Eco pedagogies: Practical Approaches to Experiential Learning*. More than 30 of her poems have been published, both online and in print. Her debut poetry collection, *American Saunter*, was chosen as a semi-finalist for the Meadowlark Birdy Poetry Prize and has just been accepted for publication by FlowerSong Press (2024). She lives with her family on a small windy farm with many rescue pets including pigs, cats, goats, chickens, and a very special blind, three-legged dog named Vinny Valentine.

### *Artist's Statement*

What motivates us to write? I don't know if I'll ever know for sure, but I *believe in* it like a religious ecstatic devotee, believe in its mystery, its tenacity, its pure place of origination, and its ability to never, ever give up on the conduit it chooses (even if the conduit herself throws her hands up from time to time).

For me, it started at 5 years old, when I was given a little diary

by my great aunt at Christmas. Forty plus years and a trunkful of journals later, I can't imagine *who* I would be if I had not been writing through all these decades. Even so, I never called myself a "writer" or a "poet." I was afraid to say those words because I knew the weight of it. I respected the "real" writers who dedicated their *lives* to the craft. I did not go to school specifically for writing, it was not my major, and as a Humanities Professor, I did not get my MFA. Who was I to say "I'm a poet" to those who spent their *entire academic careers* pursuing writing as its own discipline? Truthfully, I did not feel worthy of it. So, I did not call myself this, however, *I never stopped writing*. I journaled religiously, wrote short stories by rivers, composed hundreds of poems and snippets, kept written lyrics of favorite songs, read everything, wrote daily. It was just *what I did*, but when anyone asked, I would immediately wave my hand, clarifying *no*, I'm not a "real" writer. Because for me, that meant someone professional, someone who had been...*published*.

My life became heart-full with a career I love, a little farm/rescue sanctuary, and three amazing kiddos. Though I still always wrote, I felt guilty to focus on my "hobby." In the scheme of priorities, publishing was certainly on the backburner. I appeased myself with the vision that after retirement, much like my heroine Laura Ingalls Writer, I would finally sit down and write it all. *Then*, I would be a real writer.

Then, the universe handed me a golden ticket - from some mystical alchemy of otherworldly shamanism, I was asked to be the new Poet Laureate. Never in a million years would I have thought myself worthy of applying for such a highly respected position. I took it very seriously. I was understandably hesitant, *What if I wasn't good enough? What if everyone hated what I wrote?* Fortunately, incredible individuals, other phenomenal writers themselves who knew my work, believed in me, and wholeheartedly

said, *you absolutely can do this*. I still wasn't sure, but I made the decision to trust them.

After accepting, I had a vivid dream of being in a grotto of an ancient temple in a natural spring. As I stood in the water, root vegetables (turnips mostly) began churning up from below, hundreds of them, bubbling up, thick and violet with curved fingered roots, appearing in the water all around me. As a lucid dreamer, I remember thinking, *this means something*. The ideas, creativity, core anchor of who I am, which had been beneath murky water's surface of self-doubt all these years, finally could bubble up all around me in abundance. (P.S. don't neglect your dream imagery – lots of great ideas arrive asleep!)

I began sending out to the publishing world at 45 years old. Besides birthing my children and jumping out of a plane (not at the same time), truly it is one of the scariest things I've ever experienced.

It is a great honor to write for this issue of *Flights*. I am always aware that I am in a room, sharing the space with AMAZING, EXPERIENCED writers in this world. Writing is a constant, beautiful, sometimes agonizing process- it's worth it. Believe in your voice while always practicing openness to learning and strengthening your craft - it's worth it. If you feel like writing is your core, your anchor, your being, your salvation, your voice, your breath, your reason - it's worth it. Writing helps us reach further, stretch beyond the horizon, get to those sticky, messy spaces in between, engage life from its uncertain blinding pain and utter rawness to its so-beautiful-it-hurts-I-am-going-to-burst sublimeness and radiance. Writing *wants* to be written...and read. Let your turnips bubble to the surface all around you.



## CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN BALLANTINE is an emeritus professor at Brandeis University. He received his bachelor's degree in English from Harvard University, then earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in economics from University of Chicago and NYU Stern, respectively. His economic commentary has appeared in *Salon*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Conversation*, and other more academic publications. He is a long-time member of writing workshops with Barbara O'Neil, following the "Writing Down The Bones" method. He loves the discovery of the creative process.

AMANDA BANASZAK really tries to pay attention. She finds her inspiration from many sources including a lifetime of being an avid reader, two plus decades of motherhood, and 17 years in careers working with humans both birthing and dying. The poem *Mystery School* was written in the fall of 2022 for an in-person poetry class at Sinclair and won First Place in the Adult Poetry category for the 2023 Spectrum Awards. *Mystery School* was also the 2nd Place poetry winner in the League for Innovation Student's Literary Awards contest.

DANILA BOTHA has had two collections of short stories published, *Got No Secrets*, and *For All the Men (and Some of the Women) I've Known*, which was a finalist for the Trillium Book Award, the Vine Award for Canadian Jewish Literature and the ReLit Award. She has a new collection coming out with Guernica Editions, called *Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness in 2024*. She is also the author of the novel *Too Much on the Inside*, which won a Book Excellence Award for contemporary fiction and was recently optioned for film. Danila has a new novel coming out in 2025 called *A Place for People Like Us*. She

teaches Creative Writing at the Humber School for Writers and at University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies.

DYLAN BRADSHAW studied Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Sinclair and recently earned his Associate's Degree. He is now studying English Rhetoric and Professional Writing at the University of Cincinnati.

PATRICIA BRAWLEY's work has been published in *Magnolia Quarterly*, *Junto*, and *Page & Spine*, and she won first place in the Pike County Literary Contest for short story and poetry. A psychotherapist and university professor, Patricia has presented her research on the use of poetry in therapy at conferences in Perugia, Italy, and Tokyo, Japan. She has attended the San Francisco Writers Conference and the Mississippi Book Festival. Patricia holds a PhD in psychology and has maintained a private counseling practice for over 30 years. She writes using the pen name Patricia East Spring.

MARTE CARLOCK's fiction has been published in *American Literary Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Diverse Arts Project*, *The Griffin*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Glint Literary Review*, *The MacGuffin*, and many other publications. Her poetry has been published by *Avalon Literary Review*, *DASH Literary Journal*, *Door Is a Jar*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Green Prints*, *Hobart*, *inscape*, *Moon City Review*, and *Penumbra*. For almost 20 years, she was a regular contributor to *The Boston Globe* and other publications. Marte is the author of two editions of *A Guide to Public Art in Greater Boston*. She writes for *Sculpture and Landscape*

*Architecture* magazines, and reviews fiction and nonfiction for the *Internet Review of Books*. She is also the author of a collection of poems, *How It Will Be from Now on Out*.

ALAN GARTENHAUS, after a thirty-year career in the museum profession, now lives on the Island of Hawaii, where he farms and writes fiction. His work has been published in *Avalon Literary Review*, *Broad River Review*, *DASH*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Entropy Magazine*, *Euphony Journal*, *The Evening Street Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Ignatian Literary Magazine* (recipient of the Editor's Choice Award), among others. His short story "The Outing" was a winner of Living Springs Publishers' national competition for baby boomer authors. His novel, *Balsamic Moon*, released by Atmosphere Press on October 25, 2022, is now available.

LYNN GLICKLICH COHEN lives in Milwaukee, where she writes poetry, plays the cello, takes her dog on long walks, feeds birds and squirrels, and tries to remember to count her blessings. Her poems have appeared in *Saint Katherine's Review*, *El Portal Literary Journal*, *Oberon Poetry Magazine*, *Cantos*, *Trampoline*, and others. She is grateful to *Flights* for supporting her work.

PETER GRANDBOIS is the author of thirteen books, the most recent of which is the Snyder prize-winning, *Last Night I Aged a Hundred Years* (Ashland Poetry Press 2021). His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in over one hundred and fifty journals. His plays have been nominated for several New York Innovative Theatre Awards and have been performed in St. Louis, Columbus, Los Angeles, and New York. He is a poetry editor at *Boulevard* magazine and teaches at Denison



University in Ohio. You can find him at [www.petergrandbois.com](http://www.petergrandbois.com).

ROBERT GUARD has been published in *Harpur Palate*, *Amoskeag*, *Chaffin Journal*, *California Quarterly*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *DASH*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Poet Lore*, *riverSedge*, *The Round*, and others. Robert attended the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop and studied under David Baker and Rosanna Warren. He worked for thirty-five years in advertising as a writer and creative director. Robert teaches yoga and has an energy healing practice. He also conducts workshops on various health and fitness topics including meditation and stress reduction.

JIM HANLEY's background includes careers in the military, Human Resources, and as an adjunct professor. He has had over ninety short stories published in print and online magazines. Transitioning to the novel, Jim has had six novels published by independent, small publishers.

FRANK JAMISON's work has appeared in numerous literary journals, most recently: *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Arkana*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Big Muddy*, *DASH Literary Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Glint Literary Journal*, *Literally Stories*, *The MacGuffin*, *Moon City Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Penmen Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *The Phoenix*, *Plainsongs Poetry Magazine*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and many others. His book of poems, *Marginal Notes*, was published in 2001, and his book of poems, *Songs of Unsung People*, was published in 2021. His poems have won the *Still Poetry Prize*, the *Robert Burns Terry Semple Memorial Poetry Prize* and the *Libba Moore Gray Poetry Prize*. He has also been nominated for a *Pushcart Prize*. Frank is a

member of the Tennessee Mountain Writers and the Knoxville Writers' Guild. He lives and writes in Roane County, Tennessee.

CHRISTOPHER KUHL's work has been recognized by *Writer's Digest* and in numerous other contests. In August 2017, he released his poetry collection, *NIGHT TRAVELS*. He has been published in numerous literary journals, including *Amethyst Review*, *Big Muddy*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *California Quarterly*, *Carbon Culture Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *Crack the Spine*, *OVS Magazine*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Euphony*, *Forge Journal*, *Grub Street*, *Prairie Schooner*; and others. His short story "Wade" was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize, as well as being named the Annual Editor's Choice of Best Work in Fiction by *Inscape Magazine* for 2016. His book of poetry, *Blood and Bone, River and Stone: Memoirs of Lewis County* has been published. You can learn more about his work on his website: <http://www.christopherkuhl-poet.com/>

EVALYN LEE is a former CBS News producer currently living in London with her husband and two children. Over the years, she has produced television segments for 60 Minutes in New York and for the BBC in London. Her broadcast work has received an Emmy and numerous Writers Guild Awards. She won the Willow Review prize for short fiction for 2016. She is currently at work on her first collection of poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Letting Go: An Anthology of Attempts*, ed. Martha Hughes; *Hawai'i Pacific Review*; *War, Literature, and the Arts Journal*; *Broad River Review 2016*; *After the Pause*; *Amarillo Bay*; *The Broken Plate*; *California Quarterly*; *Carbon Culture Review*; *The Chaffin Journal*; *Cider Press Review*; *The Courtship of Winds*; *Crack the Spine*; *Dash Literary Journal*, among

many others.

EMILY MCNALLY's work has been published in *HerStry*, *The MacGuffin*, *Sensitive Skin Magazine*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Salon*, *Red Typewriter*, and *PUNCH Magazine*. She studied writing with Karen Bjorneby and holds a master's degree in drama from San Francisco State University. Emily cofounded The Shee, a theater company that produced new work by women playwrights. You can learn more at [www.emilysmcnally.com](http://www.emilysmcnally.com).

JODDY MURRAY's chapbook, *Anaphora*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2020. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in over 70 journals, including, most recently, *The Torrid Literature Journal*, *Wrath Bearing Tree*, *The Fourth River*, *Prism Review*, *Nude Bruce Review*, *OxMag*, *Perceptions Magazine*, *Cape Rock*, and *Sou'wester Literary Magazine*. He currently lives in Marion, Illinois.

KIMBERLY NUNES's poems have been published in *The Alembic*, *Blue Light Press Anthology*, *California Quarterly*, *Caveat Lector*, *El Portal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Mantis*, *Marin Poetry Center Anthology*, *The Madison Review*, *Sweet: A Literary Confection*, *WomenArts Quarterly Journal*, and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*. She has attended numerous writing workshops and studied with Marie Howe, Sharon Olds, Ellen Bass, and many others. Kimberly sits on the board of Four Way Books in New York City. She received her MFA in poetry from Sarah Lawrence College. Her hobbies include bird-watching, gardening, swimming, golf, and tennis.

DEBORAH S. PRESPARE earned her Master of Arts in Writing at Johns Hopkins University. She now works and lives in Brooklyn, New

York. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Amarillo Bay*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Common Ground Review*, *decomp*, *Diner*, *Diverse Arts Project*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *The Fiddleback*, *Front Range Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Grub Street*, and *The MacGuffin*, among many others. Her short story "Selvage" was nominated for the 2021 Pushcart Prize.

RICHARD T. RAUCH was born and raised in the New Orleans area. He lives along Bayou Lacombe in southeast Louisiana. A graduate of LSU, he received his PhD in theoretical physics from Stony Brook University. He has lived and worked in New York, Los Angeles, Washington DC, and currently test rockets at NASA's Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. His poetry has appeared in *Big Muddy*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *Brushfire Literature and Arts Journal*, *The Cape Rock*, *Confrontation*, *Crack the Spine*, *decomp*, and other literary journals, as well as in *Down to the Dark River: An Anthology of Contemporary Poems about the Mississippi River* (Louisiana Literature Press). Flash fiction credits include *Infective Ink* and *Aspen Idea*.

SANDRA RIVERS-GILL is a native of Toledo and an award-winning poet. Her poetry has appeared in or is forthcoming in journals and/or anthologies including, *Poetry is Life Publishing*, *redrosethorns*, *Hope Springs Eternal*, *North of Oxford*, *Rise Up Review*, *Open Earth III*, *As It Ought To Be*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *Poets Against Racism and Hate USA*, *ONE ART*, and previously in *Flights*. Her debut poetry collection is forthcoming in Fall 2023. <http://www.sandrariversgill.com>

DANA ROBBINS, after a long career as a lawyer, obtained an MFA from the Stonecoast Writers Program of the University of Southern

Maine. Her books of poetry, *The Left Side of My Life* and *After the Parade*, were published by Moon Pie Press of Westbrook, Maine, in 2015 and 2020, respectively. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in many journals or anthologies, including *DASH Literary Journal*, *Door Is A Jar Magazine*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Euphony Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Existere Journal*. Her poem “To My Daughter Teaching Science” was featured by Garrison Keillor on the Writers Almanac in November 2015. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and recently was featured as Poetica Magazine’s poet of the week.

DIANE LEE SAMMET was the first-place winner of the Writers Helping Writers Fight Club Story contest (2022) and has been published in *AppleSeeds Magazine*, *Loch Raven Review*, and *The Phoenix*. A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, Diane holds two master’s degrees from Columbia University and the University of Hartford. You can learn more at [dianeleesammet.com](http://dianeleesammet.com).

JACQUELINE HUGHES SIMON’s writing has appeared in *the Apricity Magazine*, *The Cortland Review*, *El Portal*, *Ghost City Review*, *Boaat Journal*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *New South*, *Okay Donkey*, *Perceptions Magazine*, *Pine Hills Review*, *The Rail*, *The Round*, *Stirring: A Literary Collection*, *Vagabond City*, and the anthology *Ode to Our Undoing* (Risk Press). Jacqueline received her Master of Fine Arts in poetry from Saint Mary’s College of California. She is a volunteer and board member of an environmental education nonprofit, where she works with and trains donkeys.

LEE VARON is a social worker and writer. Her poetry and prose have been published in various journals including *Constellations*, *Pleiades*,

*Atlanta Review, Briar Cliff Review, Fox Cry Review, Lumina, Permafrost, Sensitive Skin Magazine, So to Speak, and Ibbetson Street.* She has a master's in social work from Boston University. You can read more about her work at <https://www.leesvaron.com/>.

PAMELA GAYE WALKER is an actor, writer, and director for theater and film. Her writing has been published in *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. Her acting has received a Joseph Jefferson Award nomination, and she taught acting at Pixar Animation Studios and Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago. Pamela adapted and directed the film *Trifles*, which was screened at numerous film festivals. She also hosts artistic retreats in Lake Tahoe, Berkeley, CA, and NYC. Pam is president of Flown the Coop and Ghost Ranch Productions.













