



# **TULANE REVIEW**

*A Literary Magazine*

Fall 2025



**Tulane Review**  
**A Literary Magazine**

The Tulane Review is a literary and art journal published by the Tulane Literary Society. Submissions are judged in an anonymous selection process, and final choices are made by the respective editors.

Funding for the Tulane Review comes from the Tulane University student activity fee and the Tulane Literary Society. The works published in the Tulane Review are not the expressed views of the Tulane Literary Society, Tulane University or its Board of Administrators.

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Cover art: *On The Streetcar* by Ali Saunders

ISSN 2166-5001  
ISSN 2166-501X



“Where are we going?”  
“I don’t know man, but we’ve got to go.”

Jack Kerouac



# The Editors

## Editor-in-Chief



OLIVIA SEGURA

Olivia Segura is a senior studying English and Political Economy from New York City. As the Editor-in-Chief, she has enjoyed collaborating with fellow editors and crafting a publication full of diverse and unique works. In her free time, she enjoys writing creative nonfiction, improv comedy, and exploring New Orleans.

## Art Editor



ALI SAUNDERS

Ali Saunders is a writer and photographer currently studying English at Tulane. She is from Harvard, Massachusetts and is a Javelin thrower on the Track & Field team at Tulane. Saunders is passionate about film and documentary photography, writing, and documentation. As the Art Editor of the *Tulane Review*, she gets to use her passions and work with fellow editors to create a beautiful curation of work.

## Poetry Editor



**TOBY DAVIES**

Toby Davies is a freshman at Tulane, pursuing a double-major in Anthropology and English, with a concentration in Creative Writing. They feel incredibly lucky to be part of a team that gets to read works from people from all over the world every day. In their free time, they do karate, play roller derby, and collect coins.

## Prose Editor



**OLIVIA McCABE**

Olivia McCabe is currently pursuing her master's in English at Tulane University. As Prose Editor, she loves reading and crafting short-form stories and enjoys helping shape each issue's collection of voices.

## Publicity Chair



LIZZIE LURIE

Lizzie Lurie is a freshman at Tulane, pursuing a degree in Legal Studies in Business with a minor in English. She aspires for a career as either an intellectual property attorney for TV and film production companies, or as a comedy writer for adult cartoons. As Publicity Chair of the *Tulane Review*, she has been grateful for the opportunity to have coworkers with such great grammar.



## Design Editor



JASON MULVIHILL

Jason Mulvihill is currently pursuing a master's in English at Tulane. As Design Editor of the *Tulane Review*, he enjoys approaching the arrangement of each issue like a music album. He is very grateful to be working with this year's team. Outside of the *Tulane Review*, he writes for *The Tulane Hullabaloo* and coaches middle school debate.

# Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

Over the summer, leading up to this semester, it occurred to me that beyond my physical diploma and some odd number of awkwardly placed book-stacks around my bedroom, I didn't have much to show for my degree in English, or my involvement in the department in general. So I decided to join the Tulane Literary Society at the beginning of this semester as an on-the-way-out-the-door attempt to immerse myself in the writing community at Tulane and hopefully create some semblance of a literary legacy for myself in my final year. It turns out the Literary Society was experiencing its own "revival era," with goals to revitalize the Tulane Review in the years following the pandemic by digitizing archival reviews and growing submissions and readership. And to my luck, somehow, miraculously, the current members of the group entrusted me with the honor of being the Editor-in-Chief of this wonderful review.

The Literary Society has been producing this review since 1968, publishing works of prose and poetry, and later art, by creatives from all walks of life. We celebrate a diverse array of talent, publishing works by writers from all over the world and our very own peers at Tulane. I am absolutely astonished and deeply proud of the overwhelming amount of incredible work that was submitted this year, as we received over 1000 submissions cumulatively of prose, poetry, and artwork. In this edition, we are excited to feature original work from authors and artists from 16 states, in addition to Canada, Japan, and Nigeria.

I owe a big thank you to our contributors, who made this edition possible. Please see more information about all of them in the back! And of course, this review would not be what it is today without the hard work of our team. I can't imagine anyone else I would rather do this with. Thank you to Tel, Jason, Olivia, Ali, Lizzie, and Toby.

I hope you enjoy reading and viewing these pieces as much as I do.

Sincerely,  
Olivia Segura

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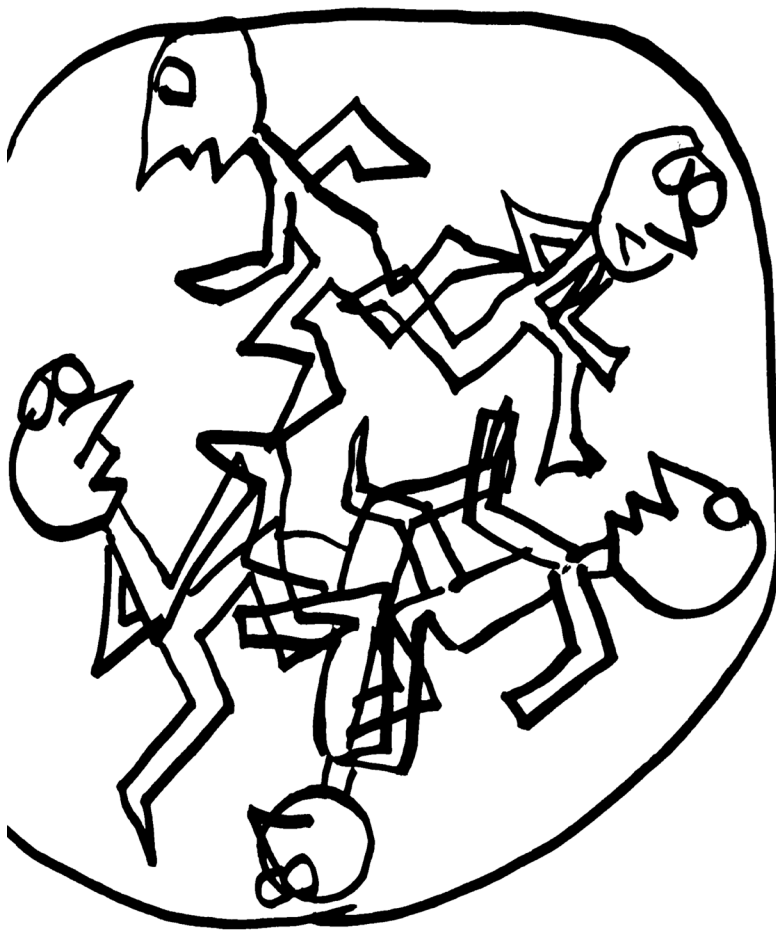






# It's Happening

ALLEN FORREST



It's  
happening.  
Right now.  
All around  
us.  
Day after  
day we  
speed  
towards it.  
We can't  
stop it, we  
can't  
understand

FF

it, try as we might.  
Everyone around us, we're all hurling along.  
It's happening.

History has no shelf life. History speaks volumes.

It's going faster and faster and more latitude in its developments.  
More longitude in its consequences.  
More everything in its evidence.  
More people fighting for their beliefs.  
More people hiding from the truth.  
More people starving for justice.  
More people killing their competitors.  
More people speeding towards the cliff's edge.  
It's happening.

Civilizations have fallen and disappeared from the records.  
Humanity is older than we know.  
Humans are a cosmic conundrum.  
Neither good nor bad nor in between.  
As we speed towards our fate many try to predict the unpredictable.  
They sell more potions to save humanity.  
To remedy the world's ills.  
They run down the road paved with good intentions.  
Hoping their good deeds will not be punished.  
It's happening.

Look out. Be aware. Pay attention.  
You can only save yourself.  
Perhaps that's an illusion too.  
Saved from what?  
A worse or better outcome?  
A life lost or in vain?  
A world you didn't make but contributed to,  
participated in.  
Faster and faster the wheel turns.  
Until it becomes a whirring blur.  
Until we lose our tenuous footing.  
Until we find ourselves in free fall.  
We look around us and what do we see?  
A world with or without reason, screaming a madness we all feel and ponder when we have time.  
Don't shut your eyes,  
Open wide and watch the show—because—  
It's happening.



*Vancouver Chinatown Intersection at Pender*

Oil on canvas panel, 12 x 9 in.

Allen Forrest



# INKSLINGER

AARON POPE

The night is my cocktail. Double shot of darkness with a sodium vapor chaser.

Skin is my canvas. I paint with 200 needle pricks per second. I am an artist. And a businessman. And a father. And a son. And. And. And.

Tonight, the city buzzes like neon. Tonight, they come in fits and spurts and waves. Tonight, they brave the needle and join the painted masses.

The bell above my shop door jingles. Over and over and over again.

Two muscleheads want tribal. Means nothing to them but a way to draw eyes to their biceps. They think they're badasses until the needle comes alive. Then I see who (what) they really are.

A black-haired Betty melts into my chair. Peels back a tight denim waistline with painted nails. Locks eyes and reveals her world. That's where she wants it. That's where I give it to her.

She doesn't flinch.

A kid slinks in. Old enough but not really. Not ready. Thinks it'll make him a man. Thinks he needs it. He doesn't. I send him packing.

He'll be back.

A rail of a woman. Breathing words more than speaking them. She's afflicted. HIV. Can I do it? Is it safe? Please, she whispers. Please. A name and a date, she asks for. A lover, I assume. A lover lost to the night, I'm sure. It's safe as long as you do it right. My ink stains her skin. Her blood infects my needle.

I dispose of it in the red sharps bin in the back. State regs for used needles.

A drummer wants his sleeve completed. Adding to another inker's work, not normally my style. But I do it because the art is good. The artist is good. We are anonymous to one another. But tonight, we play a duet.

The moon slumps across the sky. Midnight fades into the rearview. One a.m., one-thirty, two. Future becomes present, then past.

The bell above the door goes silent.

I pull the chain on the window sign. Red neon goes dark. I twist the deadbolt.

A hand presses against the glass. A voice – dark, heavy, bold – asks if I can stay open late.

No, he doesn't ask. He tells.

Four of them push in. No uniforms, no badges, but I make them for cops in zero-point-zero seconds.

They lock the door behind them. This is a secret. The night just got darker.

The big one twists at his collar, stretches fabric, reveals fading ink. A knight stabbing a long sword into blood-soaked soil.

I've never seen this art before. But I know it. Everyone in my neighborhood does. It is legend. Spoken in the hot, sticky air of the late hours. A tale of instant injustice. Of the powerful preying upon the weak in the name of law and order.

Few who see this art are ever seen again.

The woman flashes her ink too. Fresher, sharper than the big guy's. The knight's sword stabs into her cleavage. The pool of blood spreads wider than the big guy's too.

Now it's the angry one's turn. His eyes full of life and death both at once. I can't even see where his blood pool ends.

I wonder if my cousin saw this ink before his last breath became one with the night air. I don't know. But the neighborhood believes.

The knights of the night executed him.

The fourth cop sheds his shirt, bares his chest. A blank canvas ready to be painted.

He's one of them now. He's been judge, jury, and executioner. And he's to be rewarded with art.

The others slap cash on the counter. Green, speckled crimson. Blood money. Truly.

I should walk away, tell them I'm closed, can't do it.

I don't.

Because the night is my cocktail.

I push into the back room. Snap open the red sharps bin. Hunt for a needle  
I disposed of hours before. A needle that stamped a name and a date into an  
HIV-infected body.

I paint my masterpiece. Pulse venom into his flesh as I draw freestyle. He  
doesn't even know that I'm killing him slowly.

My throat burns. My insides warm.

I am drunk on the night.

# Joining Up

JOHN BECK

Table Nine / Two Diners

Pu Pu Platter (for 2)  
Wonton Soup  
Hot and Sour Soup  
Beef Lo Mien  
Shrimp with Chili Sauce

*The Recruit*

There really is nothing  
else to do in this town,  
may as well see the world

for a while, before college,  
career, marriage, family.  
I think that a life

in the trades later makes sense -  
plumber, electrician,  
carpenter - a future union job

when I get out. Now,  
the army will train me.  
I think that duty is important

and I like how veterans  
stand and salute,  
and get saluted,

at the 4th of July parade.  
I've talked to the recruiter  
about all the possible things

I might get to do, how he met  
his wife and great friends  
in the service.

Dad worries too much  
about this four-year hitch,  
but I just have to hope



that no one attacks us  
and that I never have  
to truly deploy,

use the gun.  
Dad doesn't  
have Mom

and I am all he has,  
but he'll have me home  
in no time flat.

"There is a prospect of a thrilling time ahead of you"

*The Conscientious Objector*

I never wanted  
to even touch  
a gun. I watched

all the draped coffins  
arrive back from Vietnam  
and knew that I did not

want to die for my country,  
any more than I wanted  
to kill for it. When my number

came up low in the draft,  
I had already applied  
for conscientious objector status.

My folks didn't like it,  
but after a few tense exchanges  
at the top of our voices,

we reached an uneasy truce.  
My father had served  
in the Pacific, the Philippines,

never telling us much  
about his time at war. As children,  
we looked through the box

of old black and white photographs,  
snaps of young men in tee shirts  
and khakis under the palm trees.

No tales of combat,  
a few coat buttons  
and ribbons as the only tokens

to show he'd served.  
Maybe it was an easier decision,  
a just war, a nation attacked.

I was interviewed to see  
if my moral compass was bent  
only in my own direction,

a coward and not a true religious  
man of unwavering belief,  
simply holding

convenient, situational ethics.  
The local draft board felt the weight  
of My Lai, too many years

of dead, young Americans.  
There were too many others  
willing to serve, to show our town

was ready to meet  
its commitment  
and the moment, fill the levy.

I was given CO status and waited  
for the call, but it never came.  
No hot wars right now,

the Gulf War recently past,  
just a police action in Kosovo.  
Any future deployment, though,

will still be a deployment,  
involving my son, gun in hand.  
I can't make any more decisions

for him. He's an adult.  
His Mom passed now three years,  
no one else to say to him - be careful,

I love you,  
I am already proud.  
I beg you to come back

to me unhardened,  
still innocent of others' blood,  
unhurt, intact.

“Soon, someone will make you very proud”

# Magnetic Poetry Kit

DAVID ROMANDA

She'd leave little  
love note haiku  
on the fridge door for him.  
She'd also leave reminder haiku:

*call mom  
thanks for the card  
always a good son*

When she up and left him,  
he didn't get a haiku, just:

*I am not coming back*

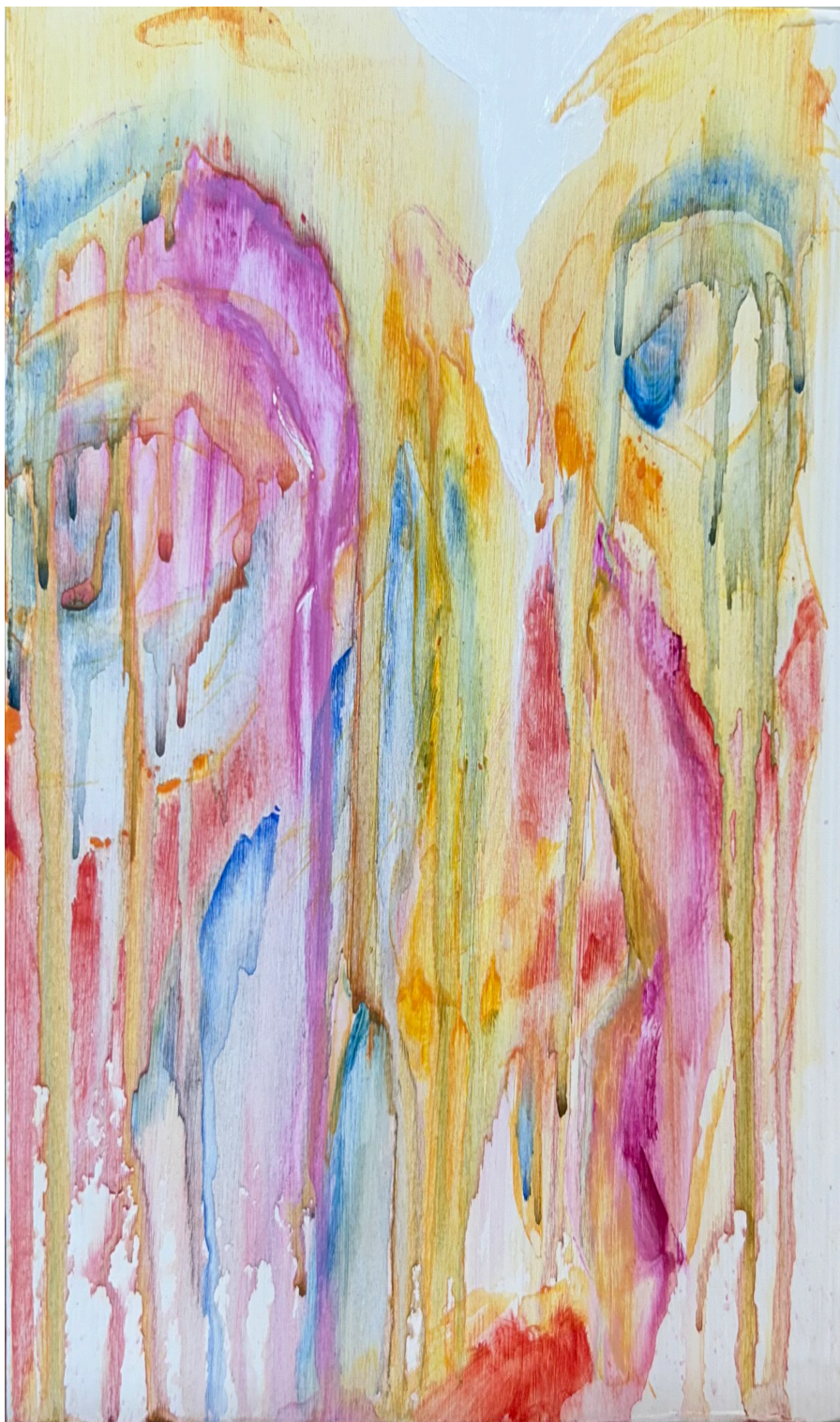


*Untitled I*

Acrylic on panel, 6 x 6 in.

Beverly Lindberg





*Untitled II*  
Acrylic on panel, 6 x 6 in.

Beverly Lindberg

# The Water

CRAIG HARRIS

A mud puddle is different from dishwater in the sink. A river is different from early morning dew. Water from Yellowstone's Old Faithful is hot even as it snows and the cascades of Everest run cold while the sun is blinding. Sip some clear waters of the Rocky Mountains and be refreshed, then turn North to go for a friendly float in Utah's great Salt Lake but heed that warning posted there, "Caution: Drinking This Water Will Induce Vomiting." So what we call water is something different everywhere. Look closely enough and see that it is not unlike those sister snowflakes, no two drops of water are ever the same.

Water is known as *agua* in Mexico. *Wasser* in Germany. *Voda* is how they say it in Russia. It goes on and on, a word in almost every language but nowhere is water actually defined. Try to hold onto it, try to say what exactly it is. It is beyond all expression. Water does not originate in the clouds, nor the sea and neither gives the mountain spring its source. No one knows how it came about. Some say it is as timeless as the stars.

Many live under the misconception that water is their friend. They drink it up, bathe in it and visit it whenever they can. Some are so attracted to a body of water that they travel for miles to stand near it and stare. They photograph it. Paint it. Some make a church of the sandy shoreline and lie for hours in prostration before the waves. Understand that theirs is no benevolent deity. The core of our hydrogen bomb and the heat of all the suns in the heavens is here in this sea.

Some tend to underestimate or ignore their water but I have looked into the Grand Canyon and seen what it can do. It eventually destroys all that it touches. Even a drop on the strongest steel begins its wasting away. Why is it that Italy's famed Tower in Pisa leans over? Water in the surrounding soil has tipped it so. Cold is cold enough but add a little water to it. The wet cold is unbearable. Heat too is hotter once it's wetted, humidity stokes the impression of our sun. Pavements and floors will not safely hold a step when water is there and floods cause far more damage than fires each year all over the world. Dried fruit or meat does not rot but add a little water there and watch. Something firm and delicious quickly turns to inedible gel. Airborne illness is a misnomer too; illness comes not from the air itself but from the droplets of water carried there. Water. Seventy percent of all deaths are somehow brought on by the stream. Now ask any chemist. It is no metaphor to say a sea of people fills our city, we are mostly salty water flowing back and forth. Eventually all that we touch will become sand.

## A Visit To The Waterworks

*Some are coughers, some are sneezers, some are young and some are geezers. There are drivers, there are walkers. Some are quiet, some are talkers. Some are sweet and some are mean. These are people I have seen. Tango, Four Step, Cha Cha too, these are dances that we do. Some can Mambo, Swing's the rage but all are Tappers on their stage.*

Not necessarily dancers as the popular children's rhyme above suggests but certainly we all tap our share of water. Take a moment now to count the number of water taps you have in your home. Count them all, then think. Likely, you forgot a few. Did you remember your refrigerator there? It taps. Each of your toilets is a water tap. Do not forget to count the water heater. Washing machine? Of course it taps. An outside faucet is a tap. Count them up. Statistically you are tap poor if you have under ten of them. Think of them all. Do you appreciate them? Have you ever thanked a water worker? Has your heart gone out to any ever as you bathed? Water workers are mostly overlooked and go unsung. What would we do without our water? Let us now make a special note to our water workers everywhere.

THANKS TO YOU ALL, DEAR WATER WORKERS. WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT YOU.

Perhaps you have never encountered one, a water worker. This is unlikely. Rather, they went unrecognized or simply were not memorable. There are three water workers for every firefighter in our land. The police too are outnumbered nearly three-to-one by the unsung men and women who toil at the Waterworks. Ask any where the police or nearest fire station can be found and most can say but while all know a Waterworks exists somewhere, very, very few know where this somewhere might be found. Mind that this facility is huge.

So water working is a mostly thankless job and those who do this go unknown. Perhaps they have a policy, "Do not be seen, do not be heard." Find just one, a water worker if you can. They wear no badges or special hats. A simple yellow raincoat is but a sometime supplement to their casual attire, so neatly blended in that to find one you will have to ask around.

*"By any chance are you a water worker?"*

I made it my challenge to find one once. Presuming water workers, like all, need to eat and drink. I first looked for them in coffee shops and restaurants, I asked shoppers at the market too.

*"By any chance are you a water worker?"*

Sadly, they were not. None of them at all. Thinking then that their job might be stressful, I figured water workers must congregate somewhere after work to let off steam. I checked for them in bars and nightclubs, all the ones



with fitting names, The Watering Hole, The Trough, Puddles Tavern, Lake's Westside Bar and Grill. I went there and I asked around.

*"By chance are any water workers here?"*

A woman slapped me in the face at one of these places and I never knew why. I checked in dive shops too and nothing. Not one water worker could be found. But where were they then and why? Not only would no one I encountered claim to be a water worker but no one would say that they ever knew one. I began to wonder if water workers actually existed and then it came to me. I missed something in front of my nose. I could simply go to the Waterworks to find some. So this I tried.

There was a winding drive nine miles from town through the surrounding hills. Then down into a valley and onto an access road. At last I arrived only to find a place, much like a prison, surrounded by a chain link fence topped with coils of barbed wire. Affixed to this fence were signs. No Trespassing. No Public Admission. But I could see it, the facility was there in all its splendor. Large buildings with pretzled pipes adjacent. Some, the largest pipes I had ever seen. I heard the clanking. Things were going on. I was at the Waterworks, at last. I took some pictures with my phone. Oh boy!

I repeatedly called for someone to open the gate. Not by phone, there was no service there. I was shouting. There was no use in this, there was no answer. I was left alone, standing in gravel, unheard outside a fence too high and dangerous to climb. Still, I was determined. I waited there to find someone coming or going. This proved fruitless too, none would stop and many simply honked at me to stay out of their way when they went in or as they left. Then security guards came to firmly send me on my way. I never even got to ask anyone,

*"What is it like to be a water worker? What stories can you tell?"*

So I was turned away that day but this was not all a waste. There was a silver lining there. I learned something. Plates. Some drive in government cars with government plates. I realized this. I saw. Now I began looking for government license plates on otherwise unmarked cars that I could spot parked outside of various residences in my town. When I found them, I was not shy. I was excited when I knocked on these doors and when someone opened I asked them,

*"By any chance are you a water worker?"*

One in thirty-eight answered yes. I found one! But they did not let me in. I asked their secrets and was dismayed. They kept these secrets to themselves and would not share a bit. None would ever know perhaps of the contamination narrowly averted by an unsung diver with a pipe wrench or the two floods prevented last winter by split-second emergency diversions.

I can only imagine there is a chemist at the Waterworks with a centrifuge and a microscope in a lab. They have test tubes and a dropper. Perhaps they wear rubber boots in case of spills. I wonder if there is a microbiologist with a test kit out in the field somewhere today. Waders are not for fishers here. This scientist is not only a thinker; likely there is a wet suit in the trunk of their car.

I imagine a man in the shower alarmed now, his water shut off without him touching a knob. But it was only for a moment. It came right back on again without any call. A trusty water worker somewhere was on the watch.

Now beneath a mask and in a thick hazard suit a water worker slowly walks alone into a dark pipe much taller than a man. The job requires this fellow to wear flippers instead of their shoes. They bring with them only a flashlight and a specialized trowel. But what will they do? When the clog clears, the water will flow again swiftly. We now must imagine that many water workers are body surfers too and highly trained. Go with the flow may be their motto.

Young people often dream of becoming a uniformed member of the police or fire department. Perhaps now water working will also have some allure. Likely they are hiring where hundreds are employed but do not falsely check that box there on the application. At the Waterworks they will learn soon enough if you cannot swim.

# Ode on New York

MATTHEW FREEMAN

You felt  
as if you were walking  
through a frozen and horribly  
referential landscape.  
But now you know that wasn't true.  
Now you know that it's just you.  
Everything's available. Everyone's so kind.  
So don't you love it when  
literature lasts so much longer than  
pop songs.



*The boys from 2015*

Acrylic and newspaper collage on canvas, 48 x 66 in.

Prosper Aluu

# Walking Encounters: A Fifty-Year Marathon

JIM ROSS

Walking—anything that kept me moving, elongated the muscles, and sent endorphins flying—provided both fabric and fuel of life. It structured everything and connected all the dots. In the course of walking (and sometimes running), I had my share of near misses reflecting the ways violence in its varied manifestations muffles voices and stifles growth.

After running dropped out of my repertoire, I became a dedicated walker. As my walking became slower, it ceased releasing endorphins but began secreting other things science scarcely grasps. By connecting slower walkers to nature and each other, I believe it brings out heart and shakes us loose from any lingering propensity for conflict.

## HARLEM'S STREETS

Every day, I walk between five and seven miles all over Harlem. That doesn't count the 39th story walkups I race up to when the elevator is out. Today is easy street. I arrive at a five-story walk-up and vault three flights to Apartment 301. I knock three times, anticipating civility. In one motion, the door swings open and a machete finds a groove against my throat.

Fear I smell, taste—acidic yet sulfurous. Mine or his? I'd never learned to defend myself using kicks or fists. Would it matter against a strategically-placed blade? I reach within to discern how he and I might extricate *ourselves* from this untoward predicament, dignity intact. Not knowing why, I scream, "Banzai," once, ear-splitting loud, like Japanese suicide pilots in the Ungreat War. A peal of laughter bursts from my assailant's throat. Still holding blade firmly against mine, he becomes possessed by waves of laughter, crashing. He relieves pressure of blade, places the machete to his side, stands at attention, laughs, half bows, laughs once more, and with fanfare waves me in.

I survey my surroundings: A faded family photo hangs over the sink with a black-and-white of my host in fatigues on the opposite wall. MLK holds a place of honor above the kitchen table. My host points "sit there" at the corner spot. I comply. Without asking, he boils water for tea, slits open a box of Social Teas with a paring knife, and places two stacks of three on a lunch plate. Back erect, keeping both hands above the table, he offers me the first Social Tea. We drink oolong—strong, clarifying—and eat three each. He answers every question with the clarity of gunshot.

All fields marked, I stand and say “Thanks,” wanting to say, “I’m sorry I caught you off guard,” knowing I mean, “Why the hell’d you do that?”

I glide toward my exit.

He catches me with a phrase as sharp as his paring knife: “It’s like that.”

Clueless, I ask “What’s like what?”

He says, “You can make yourself fear anything, anyone. I don’t know how to stop.”

I say, “We just did.”

I reach out to shake his hand. He holds our clasped right hands with his left.

And in the doorway he remains, like a perched hawk, until I escape shooting range.

### DOWN GEORGIA AVENUE

A new grad student at Howard University, I wander at lunchtime down Georgia Avenue toward the old market. My plan is to take pictures of the market and of the Kennedy Playground across the road. I carry my camera in a brown paper bag because I’m a stranger here and don’t want to invite trouble. As I approach the market, a police car whips around the corner. Two cops jump from the car, leaving its doors open wide.

“What’ve you got in that bag?” one barks as they come at me.

“A camera.”

“Likely story,” he says. “Let’s see.”

I open the bag, take out the camera, and dangle it out by its strap.

“What’s *inside* the camera?” he asks.

“The same thing that’s inside any camera, film.”

“Open it,” he orders.

“But that’ll expose the film.”

“Ask me if I care.”

“Okay, d’you care?”

“Open the damn camera, *now*.”

I open the camera.

He tears the camera from my hands, inspects it as if it’s a nuclear device, and sees there’s nothing else inside.

“What you doing in this neighborhood?” asks the second cop.

“I’m in grad school at Howard.”

“Does he look Negro to you?” the first cop grins to the second.

“I wouldn’t want to say no right off,” says the second, “but I’m not ready to say yes either.”

“Prove it,” the first cop orders, aiming at me with the barrel of his index finger.

“Prove what?” I ask.

“You’re trying my patience. Prove you go to Howard.”

“My ID is in my pants pocket. You want me to take it out?”

“Show me your damned ID.”

I reach into my pocket. The first cop flinches. I keep my hand still until he relaxes his trigger hand. I pull out my photo ID and display it. The first cop snaps it from my fingers, stares at it, and brusquely hands it back.

The second cop says “I don’t ever want to see you again in this neighborhood. You understand?”

I nod.

“I couldn’t hear you. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

### THE Y PARKING LOT

It’s jarring to see two men sleeping in an older model car in the Y’s parking lot. One snoozes upright in the driver’s seat. The other sleeps behind the passenger seat with his legs propped up. In twenty years, this is a first. Still, I tell myself, “Chill,” shrug my shoulders, and look the other way.

When I leave the Y an hour and a half later, they’ve scarcely changed sleeping positions. I begin walking in their direction. I rehearse, “You guys okay?”



You got a place to call home?" I also mean, "What're you two doing here?" Something tells me: "You're no Good Samaritan. Walk on by." I hightail my way to work, but don't let it go.

Days later, after a series of shootings not far from home, my wife Ginger blurts out, "Right in our own backyard."

I try to convince her to go walk with me.

"You crazy?" she asks, after four people were killed in two hours? "I was caught right in the middle of it all with no place to hide, right around the corner."

"I'm going. I need to check in with neighbors."

Ginger says, "Don't walk on Randolph. Walk the neighborhood."

That had been my plan. Usually, from 5 to 6 p.m. is peak after-work dog-walking, running, before-dinner-strolling time. Hardly anybody out. Dobermans usually barking behind cyclone fence notably absent.

Y members start walking to cars in groups to reduce odds of being singled out.

A man walking on Georgia is shot and killed after dark. Witnesses report a blue Caprice. That information bit gets lost and they search for white vans.

Death count for twenty-seven hours: six, each by a single bullet.

Ginger says, "Maybe your walks aren't such a great idea."

The day after, many stay home rather than facing the risk of flying bullets associated with loading or fueling a car, lawn mowing, walking, eating out. Some keep children at home sick.

Thousands of parents decide to pick up their children rather than allow them to walk or take the bus. Under the best conditions, Ginger hates bus duty, says, "Must've been bloody hell."

Media starts advising public to minimize time spent "exposed" outdoors. Suggests walking stutter-step, like football or basketball players: fake running one direction, then go another. Also recommends crouching while stutter-stepping or fueling cars.

Ginger adopts stutter-step without crouch.

From my office window, I watch people stutter-stepping to/from cars. Gruesome.



Chaplinesque. Not for me. Instead, I park in the lot's farthest corner, where woods buffer the Interstate, and motion to the woods, "Come out and meet me."

Over the following week, teachers tell students: "So the sniper can't shoot you, take the bus—even if you usually don't—if you live more than two blocks away. If you've got to walk to or from school, then run all the way."

One day I suggest to Ginger we walk in Brookside Gardens—a place she loves to visit, especially in October.

Shaking her head, she says, "You still don't get it."

I defy fear and walk anyway.

After three rampaging weeks of terror and carnage, they're finally caught napping in the blue Caprice just like the morning I first saw them in the Y parking lot.

Ginger and I take a quick neighborhood walk. People and dogs everywhere. No matter what people say, it sounds like, "The war's over! We can go outside again." You can hear Roman candles going off in their voices. Dogs do their circle dances with abandon.

Dobermans! Dobermans!

### SURRENDERING TO THE WAY

A dire threat, bereft of conditions for its execution or cancellation, from the most implausible and implacable source, threw me careening off balance. I seek to restore balance not by ruminating but by surrendering to The Way and letting The Way do its magic. I carry a backpack, but no sleeping bag, trusting that daily I'll find "a hot and a cot" by sunset.

I grow accustomed to walking twelve to fifteen miles daily. The pilgrimage trail knits together roads—often the ancient pilgrim's route paved over—with dirt or grassy trails cutting through forests and farmers' fields. Most of the old villages along the way were built during the Crusades, when everyone was expected to travel eastward in war or westward in peace. One day, I opt to take an ancient route now considered a variant. At my destination, the brown eyes of a tired German shepherd say, "Follow me."

We walk together up a long, muddy hill. Periodically, she looks back to confirm I'm still there. Atop the hill, we approach a small stone chapel dedicated to St. Roch, patron saint of dog lovers (and dogs). She leads me into the chapel and sits in the second pew to the right, with me behind. After a few minutes, she wanders toward the rear door. Again. I follow.

At a picnic table, I share my lunch of hard cheese and dried blueberries, then stand and say, "Good to meet you. Thank you for bringing me here. I've got to be on my way." However, by walking right alongside me, the shepherd says, "You're not going anywhere without me."

She and I walk together along a rolling, asphalt road. Occasionally, she scoots under barbed wire and runs across vast green fields in wide, interlocking circles. If she runs ahead, she either waits for me or runs back to place herself like a shield between me and oncoming cars.

Once I stop to take a picture of a mottled cow, which kicks up wads of grass with her hind hooves and charges. I'd been warned that barbed wire won't hold a cow charging full tilt. The shepherd darts under the barbed wire and counter-charges. The cow rears up on hind legs and makes an exit, stage right. The shepherd glides under the barbed wire as if nothing extraordinary had occurred and walks by my side.

We only encounter two bent-over, smiling old men and an old woman donning a sunhat. "Mon cheri," one addresses her. If other dogs pace and bark furiously, my dog does not engage.

Signs for The Way direct us onto a dirt road. Apple and pear trees growing wildly along the roadside invite me to help myself. My dog picks over fallen fruit as if she'd hunted it down.

With residual light diminishing, we follow the signage directing us into a forest. Unperturbed by darkness, my companion senses barbed wire and scoots under it.

Repeating "steady now" keeps me calm. She leads. As we approach an "electric fence" sign, she strolls beneath safely, so I follow. As long as I focus on my connection to my companion, my feet somehow elude danger.

"My dog is my shepherd. I shall not want," I repeat, followed by, "Dog is love." Just as my adrenaline dips, moonlight makes the tips of the tall, pampas grass surrounding a house look like flames. "We're almost there," I tell my companion, feeding her dried blueberries.

We come upon a lighted asphalt road. If my companion wanders into the road and a car rips through, she doesn't have the sense to move. One driver sees her late, swerves, temporarily loses control, slams on his brakes, shouts at us, and drives on.

I try an experiment. After I sense a car coming, I command, "Come here now." My companion runs to me and stands by my left side as I face the road. When it's safe, I tell her, "It's okay now," turn, and walk forward, thereby granting her license to roam freely. I add an element: when she comes and

stands by me, I take my walking stick—my *shepherd's staff*—and hold it in front of her to demonstrate, symbolically, that I'm protecting her. She then cuddles my leg for the first time. That became our *modus operandi*.

When we finally reach town, someone at the first bar says that they're closed but not to lose hope, there's another bar down the block. Two minutes later, when we reach the next bar, a mug of beer waits for me with a two-liter bowl of water for my companion.

Momentarily refreshed, we continue walking as if the sun were rising. I have no glimmering of how to find shelter or what to do about my companion, who has wandered far from where we met. Would she be safe alone at night? What if she wanders back to the busy road? Will she find her way home come morning? Is someone worried about her? I prefer the prospect of snuggling with my companion in a cold alley over finding a warm bed and being separated.

A car pulls up on my left, driven by a staff member from the Monastery where I spent the night before. She asks: "Why are you out so late? D'you need help?" She jumps out and puts my walking sticks and backpack in the hatch. As I sit down, she says, "I don't know what to do about the dog." My companion whines, jumps into the car, squeezes into a ball, and seeks refuge beneath my legs. "I guess that settles that . . . for now," she says. I hold my frightened companion.

After finding the town's only two inns are shuttered for winter she says, "We have one more option." We drive to the priest's house, she speaks with him, returns to the car, and says, "You're in. I'll take her home and tomorrow I'll bring her to the neighborhood on her collar."

I squat down, hold my companion, read her name, and say, "See you again, Zita."

The priest leads me upstairs, gives me a sheet of yellow bubble-wrap to use as a mattress, leads me to the kitchen, and points to the spot where I'm to sleep. Often during the sleepless night, I tell myself it would have been softer, warmer, and kinder huddling *anywhere* with Zita.

Come morning, my first thought is, "Where's Zita?" Then, I remember, we're no longer together. I wonder, was she home safely by now? Would I be safe without *her*?

### TOWPATH REVIVAL

After losing a job and spending months at home under what I perceived as house arrest, I begin to venture out with Teddy. He could give a catatonic the courage to dance and sing. We've been going to the towpath as frequent visitors. We walk about five miles which, given the length of his *bichon havanese* legs, equals 40 people miles. After that he's ready to play.

The first people we encounter are two rather tall women about 35. One has a baby strapped to her chest. The other wears a broad-brimmed straw hat with a blue ribbon tied around. When the straw-hatted one sees Teddy, she bends over, rubs his head, and oohs and aahs, "He's absolutely wonderful. Nothing in life could be more perfect!" I know she's talking about Teddy, but it makes me feel good because Teddy's my dog.

And he really is just about perfect. When someone tries to pet him, he cooperates, even encourages. When we meet someone new, he often rests on his belly to show he's in the mood for rubbing. Sometimes, he even flips over onto his *back* to show he's the gentlest dog ever.

Teddy encounters his first seeing-eye dog—a beautiful animal, half collie, half shepherd. "We gotta let them do their dance," says the walker. We keep passing leashes back and forth as our dogs circle and sniff. Once, we pass the leashes *under* the dogs. As his wife walks their dog, the blind man walks alongside, using his cane to determine where walking is safe.

A four-year-old boy bends over to pet Teddy, who immediately stands up and starts licking the boy on the lips. The boy licks him right back, which is somewhat cute when it isn't disgusting. The boy's parents aren't fazed because, "We have two dogs at home. We do this every day." Later, using the element of surprise, today Teddy tries the same maneuver on a three-year-old girl who nearly topples over once for each year of her life. It would seem Teddy is least gentle with those who need the most gentleness.

Over the crest of the hill, we see a 70-year-old woman pushing a baby carriage alongside a 40-year-old woman walking a miniature bulldog. When they see us coming, the younger woman ducks 20 feet off the path and gives her bulldog treats while repeating, "Good dog," until we pass. Teddy, of course, wants to go see the bulldog to make sure he's all right. I convince him we need to walk on by.

At the end of our walk, when we reach the refreshment stand—just past the restroom with the doggie water bowl—we again encounter the women with their miniature bulldog. The younger woman again takes her bulldog 20 feet off the sidewalk and feeds him treats. I call out, "Not socialized?" Gaping at us, the old woman laughs, "Socialized? He's a sociopath! Dogs can be sociopaths too."

### PANDEMIC SURVIVAL

I go to Brookside, now "The People's Park," even though it's pouring rain. I started walking here when the pandemic began. I'm a veteran walker here, not just a homebound desperado seeking escape from obsessive thoughts about COVID and whether masks truly make us safer. I'm one of those desperados too, but I had prior experience before becoming one.

Because it's raining, hardly anybody else is there. I have the park almost to myself. *I don't need to wear this mask. I don't have to push myself. I can stop at will to take pictures if a weeping cherry, the roots of a cypress tree, or a sheltered heron demand my attention.*

As I complete the first loop of a figure eight, which ought to take thirteen minutes but with pictures in the rain takes longer, I'm about to cross the bridge of sixteen strides. To my right I see the smile of a tall woman, black, mid-30s, wearing an Army-green hooded rain jacket. *Her smile gives me a feeling of completeness.* She turns and says, "Hi." Her "hi" is different from most. *As people walk the park's pathways, their hi's feel more like "hi-byes," more like departures than arrivals. But her "hi" feels like for a moment we're pausing and recognizing each other in our solitariness.* She crosses the bridge ahead of me, probably in twelve strides.

Soon, she is out of sight. As I make my way through the formal garden, the tulips look especially beautiful in the rain. I stop at one where one of the petals had fallen outward. *Yesterday, as I approached that tulip bed, a woman was crouching down to photograph a tulip popular with photographers. I wasn't deterred, I got her picture and when she moved on to another tulip bed, I took her picture three more times. She turned, smiled, and resumed her work.* Today, nobody is photographing tulips drenched in raindrops except for me. I finally get to photograph the red tulip with the one petal falling outward, pooling rain.

As I finish the garden bed loop, I see the woman in the green hooded rain jacket with whom I shared "hi." She is running across the bridge in eight strides. After she crosses the bridge, she comes to a halt, then resumes walking. She turns to head up the hill toward the parking lot. As her path crisscrosses mine, from 50 feet away she yells, "Are you okay?" *I'm probably crouching over more than usual because of the rain.* I yell back, "I'm okay. I'm just slow." As she continues walking up the hill, she says, "I was trying to run." I say, "Running is just a distant memory." And she disappears behind a flowering cherry tree.

I head for the bridge of sixteen strides *perhaps it should be sixteen sighs* and cross, this time from the opposite direction. *It's raining more heavily now.* My last loop, which normally takes 13 minutes, takes longer even though I don't stop for pictures. I walk in the center of the path as if I owned it because there isn't anybody else to make room for. A couple I don't see coming toward me jump off the path and walk on the sopped grass to maintain social distance. *I should stay more alert, I shouldn't have forced them off the path.* I reach the nearly empty parking lot, wetter than I expected. *I can't wait to get home and out of these clothes.*

I glance to my right. *There she is, the woman in the green hooded rain jacket. She should be long gone by now. What's she doing here?*

As our eyes connect, from 100 feet away, she yells, "You're not slow."

I laugh, "I am slow, but it's okay. You run every day?"

We begin walking toward each other. From 50 feet, she says, "I'm just trying to learn. I was meeting two other people here, but they gave up before I did."

*How could the fools leave?* I say, "My body gave up on running long ago."

She says, "It's hard on the knees. I feel it already." She lifts her left leg and touches her knee.

I say, "My knees weren't a problem. My back gave out."

From 20 feet away, she asks, "Is running even a good idea?"

*I still dream about running highs.* I nod, "Oh, yes. Take it slow. And remember to stretch."

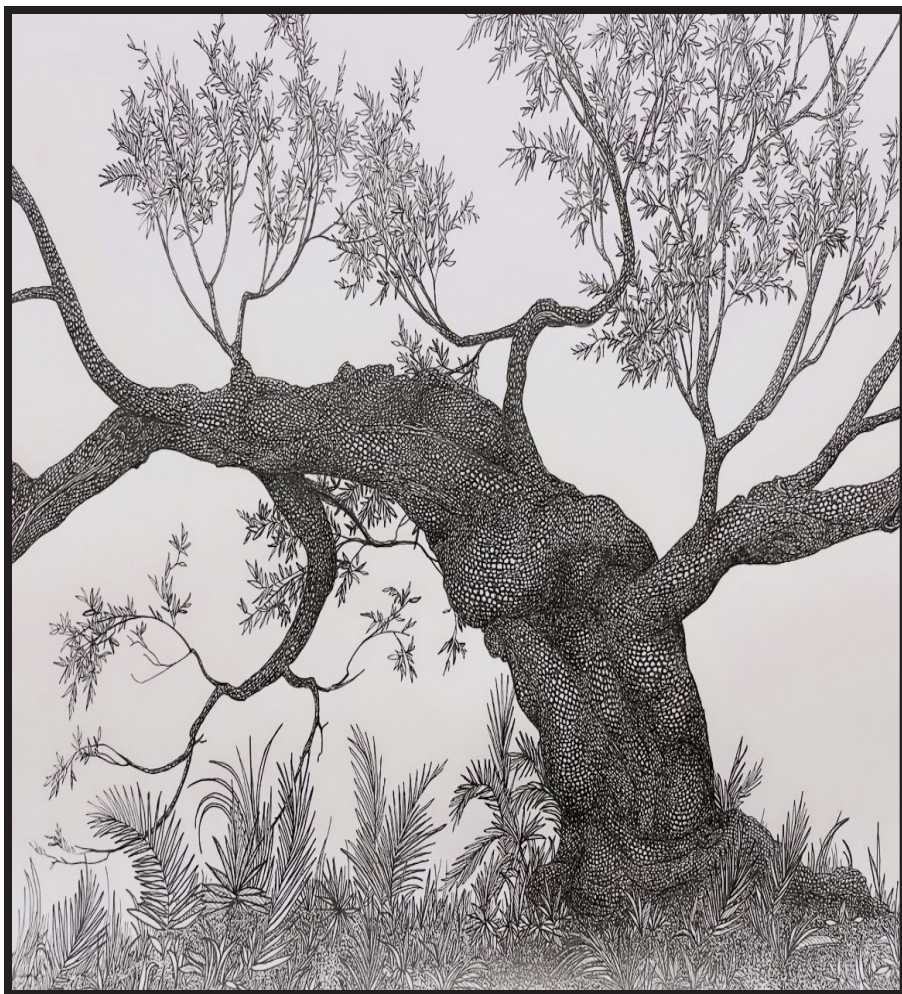
From six feet away, she says, "I will." *Ah, there it is, she's giving me another one of those smiles like she did before, a smile that says here we are, alone, together, in this moment.*





*Life in the Park*

Ali Saunders



*Bent Tree*

Charles Bowers

Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.



# *From a park bench*

ELIZABETH WADSWORTH ELLIS

From a park bench in Washington., D.C., one little old lady said to another, "Dressed like that and she got dirty knees!"

Overheard, an attorney said to his client, "You *found* yourself in Minneapolis?"

From a park bench an elderly gentleman said, "If I take off the official robe I'm just another gray-haired guy."

From a young woman in Warsaw, Poland, when asked for directions to the Jewish Cemetery, she said, "They're not the only ones who suffered."  
A woman said about her father, "He died on my birthday. He did it on purpose."

From a man who said "Prince?!" (when Prince died) "This isn't Sinatra or the Beatles we're talking about here."

From a gray-haired lady when told where lonely guys hang out, "Which Wendy's?"

From an emancipated college-aged girl said, "I didn't know ham cost that much."

From the retired airplane employee who said, "I gave them 30 years of my life!"

"Who am I?" an exasperated woman said, "I'm the one who's going to get you thrown off this bus, that's who!"

Sitting at the edge of the Potomac River on a bench I watched a man play fetch with his dog. He'd brought a young woman with him and when he threw, the dog in his enthusiasm to get the stick barreled into her, toppling her ass over teakettle.

In Washington, D.C., I was surprised people even *had* kitchens. When I opened my kitchen cupboard doors the cockroaches and I both jumped.

\*&\*&\*&

# *Eight Green Apples Fall into the World*

JC REILLY

In a crystal bowl, eight green apples  
calculate the odds to avoid  
perishing by pie.

Eight green apples toss darts, shoot marbles,  
and jump rope. They hang off  
a jungle gym like marmosets.

On Thursdays, eight green apples roll  
down a mountainside and melt  
into snow.

Eight green apples play cutthroat mahjong  
extracting tiles the way a dentist  
pulls teeth.

Just because eight green apples sing  
in tune is no reason to stop  
cleaning the house.

When eight green apples go fishing, they're careful  
to bait their hooks with sarcasm  
and annual reviews.

Like philosophers, eight green apples dictate  
a manifesto on the Socialist nature  
of heirloom varieties.

Buying tickets with miles, eight green apples  
fly to the Maldives and bask in the sun  
with mai tais and SPF 50.

Eight green apples have been known  
to write poems, like you or I,  
lyrics crisp as melancholy.

At bedtime, eight green apples say their prayers,  
pleased they've kept eight doctors away.  
They dream of trees.

# *My Daughter Plays with a Rock that Turns Out to Be a Moldy Bagel*

ERIN AUBE

All gangles and sinews, she raises arms above her head. As the bread boulder strikes the driveway and shatters, she hollers like Sisyphus taking his revenge. Green, furry fragments spray. Those cobbles

are destined for a repeat performance, but the gravel morphs to sidewalk chalk. Hands snatch up a chunk, scrape a heart on the concrete — the bottom too round, the lines at the top missing their mark.

Inside, we wash the spores off our hands. She tips her toes to catch a glimpse of her short self in the tall mirror. Unprovoked, she makes a muscle. *Rock hard*, I whisper, giving her baby bicep a pinch.

She is stronger than what she must smash.

# *Letter from the Abstract*

MATTHEW FREEMAN

I don't know if I believe  
in free will and I certainly  
don't want to argue with anyone  
because I can see  
that everything's passing away

and I can hear footsteps  
and I can hear my name being called  
and I just walked to Starbucks  
in the late October cold  
wearing only a T-shirt  
because I can no longer tell  
one season from another.

# *sometimes zippers for lovers*

MIKE SLUCHINSKI

sometimes zippers for  
lovers we close  
them on summer afternoons  
and like a central park  
autumn day they open up  
do they blow away  
open and close  
turnstile whispers  
leaves dry up  
sleep gently on grass  
and sidewalks  
trampled by  
waiting carriages  
no longer paid for  
horses with blinders seeking  
delirium and  
soft hay between  
57th street and 59th  
sometimes zippers for  
lovers and closing doors  
perfumed like money  
and a slow taxi ride out  
to the bronx  
and a montauk memory  
kissed in sand and  
parasols  
you never looked at  
me that way  
again and the sandman  
closed my eyes  
zipped us up  
and ended the  
cloudy day

# July

JAK KURDI

On the last day, we inchwormed  
our toes deeper into the velvet  
muck of the lake bottom, as if failing  
to cement ourselves there meant  
we might float away from the sinking  
dusk, splashes of laughter, and cracks of full  
Pabst Blue Ribbon cans, water-warmed  
and golden like us in this ruddy Texas twilight.

Discarded orange-slice smiles  
littered the beach under the hackberry trees,  
and the air, spiced with bonfire  
and sunscreen, almost masked the mosquito  
zing. The fuzzy gray dock groaned  
and swayed beneath us as we grappled  
with the fizz pop of Roman candles, and the stars  
burned like marshmallows.

# Late-Night Slices from the Pizza Truck

DANIEL DONAGHY

\*Kensington, Philadelphia, circa 1986

My daughter has figured out how to flick the hammer  
on her trike's bell

and now she won't stop, so

our driveway rings with summer, rings

until I'm 15 or 16 again,

until my crew cut's back,

my earring, my gold chain, my two pairs of socks

soaked from running ball

until the last court's lights

snapped off and my friend Buddy and I slump again

on his front stoop or mine,

bored those midnights

we turned from dirty box fans and torn screens

and the sticky spirals of

bedroom fly strips

to bullshit until that one-note,

metronomic *ding/ding/ding*

turned the corner,

that windshield spotlight, that hand-painted

pepperoni slice

sending us

into our sneakers for rolled-up singles

we flattened on the curb

and held up

to the beautiful college girl with purple nails

and the first lip ring we ever saw,

our jokes

clanging off the side of that truck before

she pinched our sweaty cash and said

she'd call us *boys*

when our pie was done--us *boys*, us bored,  
    awkward, pimpled *boys*,  
                    metal-mouthed, clumsy-thumbed,  
content to wait and trade more  
    slack-jawed back-and-forth  
                    in that truck's light

bright as the strobes we'd soon  
    windmill under behind empty houses  
                    on Huntington,

bright as the El's when we shimmied  
    its girders and hitched rides  
                    to each end of the line,

as the cop's high beams  
    when he pulled up on our vice-gripped  
                    hydrant flow just

as it arced above my fingers and soaked  
    whoever wanted a waterfall  
                    to wash over them

on Lehigh Ave in the drug-dizzy racing heart  
    of Philadelphia--toddlers in bloated  
                    diapers, day workers

in wifebeaters and jeans raising their hands,  
    dancing, shrieking, screaming  
                    *Bring it on! screaming Yes!*

to a summer something that made  
    living alright for a little while,  
                    like a neighborhood

slice fresh from the oven,  
    greasy, yeah, and yeah, pretty  
                    much cardboard,

but edible enough to lure us  
    from all that trouble  
                    calling from doorways

and idling cars,  
    to hold the last of our long night's  
                    attention



when finally the college girl  
    called for us and we shouted  
        *Amen* like we learned

those eight years of First Friday Masses,  
    altar bells shaking in our hands--  
        *joyful noise to the Lord,*

Father Flatley called it--our heads leaned back  
    when we held our folded slices  
        into the light, summer

street Communion we squeezed our eyes against,  
    our mouths inviting that dripping cheese  
        and sweet sauce,

that grease and garlic, that thin, crisp crust  
    to save our souls, burn our wet  
        and waiting tongues.

# A grandson blooms a paper flower

ALBERTO URIBE

in a sunless prison cell, each lignocellulosic leaflet fitted in the grooves of a neighbor, trembling thumbs terrified transient shapes come undone in the envelope cradle addressed to his grandma.

Two strikes siphoning any traces of life from his almond skin, each cell keratinizing resembling the cold concrete walls killing the melanin no amount of rec time can revitalize.

Visitation hours come and go, but his name never gets called.

A grandson stores Jolly Ranchers anywhere he can, collecting each stain glass gem, making sure to get multiples of each color, warming water he drops them one by one in the rippling pool.

A grandson's fingers blister at the tip as they take each softened saccharine stone, malleable made orbs, he uses the wrappers as a binder to string them together into his own rosary.

A rosary and a paper rose keep his letter to his nina company.

En la carta un nieto pide perdón por un pecado que no cometió, le manda una flor a la flor que descuido pero siempre la amó, y una humilde petición, *Nina rece por mí, mandeme su bendición.*

*Ni la jaula de concreto la detendrá.*

In isolation a pandillero finds faith not in forgiveness, but in the inevitability, a cross always meant to hang over his neck, *built for it*, a burden weighs less if it means others are free of it.

Two strikes, third hanging overhead like a knife lodged in the ceiling above where he sleeps, never blames his family for not visiting, hugging them tight cause he never knows if it's the last.

A cholo dies in that prison cell.

An OG walks out, fractal of a tear collecting beside his eye as he leaves a part of himself behind, unlikeliest of martyrs, he promises the cholo he once was to never let anyone follow their steps.



*Untitled*  
18 x 9 x 32 in.

Bobby Spencer

# *Skeletons in the Cabinet*

WILL NEUENFELDT

Champagne Lady is a staple at the liquor store. Her appearances are a litmus test if the shift's good or not. If she stops in with her wine bag to stock up on 6 or so bottles, it's temporary hell. She slaps down her old receipt from the store across the street demanding the price match discount along with the buy-six-get-one-free bottle sale. My boss Barb yells at me the first time I gave her both, then Champagne Lady yells at me the second time when I tell her about the one discount rule. After that I only enforce the rule if I'm paired with Barb for the evening which never happens because she's busy taking care of her pill-head daughter's daughter in the evenings. I let it slide until the head of the grocery store in charge of the liquor store yells at me for giving all these discounts to the Champagne Lady and if I continue, then I have to find a new job.

Tonight is another dead Thursday in the summer. The kids won't be back on campus for another month or so and the Fourth of July has long passed. I can only make so many six packs of Bud Light before running out of the twenty-four packs so I train for party games in the fall, tossing a quarter into anti-theft caps or spinning that same quarter on the checkout counter. The bell chirps and here arrives the Champagne lady as doors slide open like they do on the Death Star. Those greasy gray curls and grenadine cheeks scan the counter to see if I'm working. I know why she's smiling and I hate it. Little does she know that I like this job just enough so I don't lose it, so when she stops at the counter dropping her faded receipt from New Line Liquors beside two wrinkled twenties,

I warn her, "Sorry, but I can't do both discounts anymore?"

"Why not?"

"The boss said so plus it's company policy."

"Well, can you give it to me one more time for old times sake?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't."

Her wrinkled cheeks flush with more grenadine. "Fine you pansy," she slams all six bottles onto the counter only after swiping back her receipt from last October. "This is what I get for being a loyal customer?"

"Again, I'm sorry, he said I would get fired."

"Well, you're going to get fired anyway after I file a complaint because of

how rude you are to the customers.” I hand her a new receipt, and she continues her rant. “I’ve been shopping here since before you started working here and sure as shit I’ll be shopping here long after you are fired.”

“Have a good night,” I respond with a quiver.

“Fuck you,” she storms out as the automatic doors close gently behind her.

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Off work at 10pm with nobody to go back home too, I drive around town starting north at the Holiday for gas only to meander south through neighborhoods toward the Kwik Trip so I can grab a cheeseburger and Choco Taco before bed. Eating my late dinner in the dark, I watch the nocturnal world drive by from the side parking lot where a white pickup parks in front of me and next to the building. He doesn’t exit out of the truck and instead waits around like me until he opens the passenger door for none other than the Champagne Lady.

After the cabin light window turns off, I watch their silhouettes talk only for her head to disappear below the rear window. Panicked, I turn the ignition to my Saturn Vue not putting into account that the headlights would also light the white pickup’s cabin. Both the man and the Champagne Lady’s eyes glow, hissing like possums in a dumpster as I speed off onto the highway back home where I should have been hours ago.

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The following Thursday night, I’m back at the liquor store making nine bucks an hour spinning quarters when she enters the store. We lock eyes before locking eyes again for an extra second and her scowl flattens while grenadine spills out of her cheeks. She does grab the usual six bottles but goes into my co-worker’s line even though my register is open.

“Miss,” my co-worker addresses her while bagging another customer’s Captain Morgan, “Will can check you out at the other register.”

“Oh no, that’s okay, I can wait,” Champagne Lady responds politely.

I look on as the Champagne Lady tries pulling the same trick on my co-worker to no avail, even yelling and threatening to get her fired. She would continue this charade with other co-workers of mine for the next year I worked there but never again with me.

# Beatitude of the Quietly Scorned

DREMA DRUDGE

My sister asked me to watch her girls  
while she ran to the food pantry.

We both knew  
her clothes, her voice,  
would tell on her for being a smoker  
before the food pantry asked.  
And they would.

“When you’re poor, you gotta  
have something to look forward to,”  
she said, once home  
as she unloaded the box  
I knew was begrudgingly  
handed to her as if the workers had  
hailed the meager groceries  
out of their own pantries:  
two cans of corn, two of green beans,  
two boxes of off-brand mac and cheese,  
a pouch of tuna,  
a single can of Kroger sweet peas,  
a stick of margarine that read:  
“Not for individual resale.”

Her girls approached the table.  
Their mother pushed the long blond strands  
of her youngest daughter behind her ear.  
“Mac and cheese, see? Your favorite,” their mother said.

The oldest opened her mouth,  
but my sister shook her head.  
Things had been this tough  
these three years  
since their father had died.  
You just know the Christian woman  
with the cross and the permanent judgy face  
at the food pantry  
had smirked at the smoker,

as if my sister was the only one  
being duped.

At least my sister knew  
she was targeted by the tobacco industry.

What was the keeper of the peas' excuse?



*Yarumo/Grow Where You Are Planted*

Sofia Lovera

38 x 48 in.



# The Cycle

MICHAEL BARRY

I watched as my sisters got dolled up. They put on pretty pink dresses that I could only wear on Sundays. Father sat at the kitchen table with a toothpick hanging from his lip. He was watching them too. His face wasn't happy. His brown eyes looked tired. I don't think today is the day, I tell myself. Of course, yesterday wasn't the day, nor the day before... or the day before that. I dig my fingernails into my palm, frustrated.

"Okay, we are off." In her gaudy blue dress, my mother walked over to the table as my sisters giggled and ran out to the car. "Work hard for your father today," she said as she kissed my forehead. The kiss was disgustingly damp and made my fingernails dig a little deeper.

"Why can't I go? I never get to go." The words slipped from my lips. I wished I could reach out and swat them away as I felt the tension in the air rise. I heard the toothpick in my father's mouth snap.

Mom looked at me, a concoction of pity and disappointment on her face. "You need to help your father out around the farm today, you know that."

I didn't say anything but lowered my head in understanding.

"Ruth, you are the oldest, and so strong. I know it seems unfair, but your sisters would just be in the way," Mom said and then promptly left.

"Let's get to work," my father said while standing at the window watching the car kick up dust on its way out. He reached for another toothpick, but his hand stopped halfway to the jar. Instead, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He slickly flicked one up and into his mouth. He lit it, and soon the kitchen was full of smoke. "You want one?" He held out the open pack towards me. I shook my head, and he closed it with his thumb and slid it back into his shirt pocket. "We've already wasted too much time this morning. The work isn't going to do itself."

"I just need to use the bathroom first," I said.

As I headed upstairs, I heard him say, "You may look like a man, but you gotta piss every half hour like a woman."

As I looked into the bathroom mirror, I thought to myself, I am a woman, you idiot, but he was right. I did look like a man. I had his broad shoulders and square jaw. My face always seemed to be dirty. My large hands were cracked

and tough to the touch. I picked up my brush and ran it through my long blonde hair. It was the same as my mom's and both of my sisters. And yet, it wasn't. It wasn't as shiny as theirs. It wasn't as pretty as theirs. It was filled with split ends, and the cut was unflattering. Mom cut mine herself, but they all went to a salon once a month. My stomach dropped and my heart skipped a beat when I saw tears starting to build in my eyes. No... stop... I can't cry... I wiped the tears away and dug my fingernails into my palms again.

"Will you hurry the hell up! For God's sake, Ruth!" My father's voice echoed from downstairs.

I walked down, praying he couldn't tell I was crying, but he didn't even turn to look at me as he waited at the door. "Bout time. Now go clean the coop and feed those damn chickens." He put another cigarette in his mouth, lit it, and took a drag before continuing. "When you're done with that, come help me finish the fence."

"Yes, sir." I already had my overalls on over my plain white T-shirt. I slipped my muddy old boots on and went about cleaning the coop.

\*\*\*

I had just cut myself on a piece of wire I was twisting around a post when our red sedan rolled up the driveway. For a moment it was like time had stopped when they passed. I could see so clearly how they all laughed together. They all had curls that bounced with each bump they hit on the rough gravel driveway. The dust the car kicked up as it went by came flying into my eyes and mouth. I spit like Dad does, a huge wad of dirt and saliva.

"Get a move on, would you? I would like to eat at a respectable time tonight," Father yelled from three posts down.

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I sat in silence at the dinner table, just like him, while my sisters and mom went on about the things they had done in the city. Everything I ate that night tasted like dirt.

"Did you get a lot of work done today?" Ida, my sister, asked.

"Of course she did! She is Daddy's favorite worker bee. Ain't that right?" My mom smiled brightly and placed a hand on top of Dad's.

"Would've gotten a lot more done if she wasn't busy crying and staring off into space," Dad said.

Again, I dug my fingernails deep into my palms.

"Oh, Alfred, cut her some slack. She is tough for a girl."

My father's chair slid back abruptly, making a horrible scraping sound against the wood floor. "I'm off to bed. Ruth, you go on to bed too. We've got a long day tomorrow." He stopped by the liquor cabinet and poured himself a whiskey before heading up the stairs.

"I wish I could help Daddy, but I'm not cut out for that rough work," Karla said.

The sight of Karla with her bright blonde hair, her perfectly pointed chin and bright blue eyes, and her dainty hands with pink painted nails made me so angry. I hated her. It was my chair sliding back this time that made a horrible screech. I didn't mean to do it, but I heard it thud loudly as it hit the floor. "I'm going to bed."

The next morning I took a cigarette when he offered it to me. He gave me a rare smile and said, "Now don't let your sister or mother see you smoking that."

We were out by the barn getting ready to milk the cows. We sat together against the barn, and he lit the cigarette for me. It tasted horrible, but I liked how it made my head dizzy, yet clear. I felt good that day as I grabbed udder after udder and squeezed.

The next day I smoked another cigarette, and once again it helped the day pass. The day after it took two. On the third day, I asked for three.

"You got money to pay for all these smokes you're puffing away at? Don't get carried away now. We got church tomorrow, and I don't want you stinking up the place any more than usual," Father said, then snorted at his own joke.

I felt my face get hot, but damn, that just made me want a cigarette even more.

\*\*\*

At church the next day, I kept catching the new pastor's son staring at me. He was a scrawny boy. His arms looked like the toothpicks Father was always chewing on. Whenever I looked at him, he would turn pink with the goofiest smile I had ever seen, and then look away.

"I think he likes you," Ida, sitting to my right, whispered to me.

"What does he like about her... her huge biceps? Maybe he thinks she's a boy...." Karla whispered back.

It was true, in my church dress my mannish arms looked as if they were

about to tear the sleeves in two. My huge calves looked unnatural coming out of such a girly dress.

After the sermon, all the other girls were sitting around in the reading room gossiping. I tried to take part, but their circle conveniently didn't have enough room for one more, so I stood on the outside of it. Mom had joined some of the other wives in helping to prepare for Bible study. Father was chatting with the new pastor. His son, with his patchy facial hair and twig legs, stood next to them. He continued to glance over at me every so often. My father must've noticed this too. He said something to the boy, and he turned pink again. The pastor nodded, and my father gave the boy a not-so-gentle pat on the back that slightly lurched him towards me.

He hesitantly walked my way. I started to feel butterflies in my stomach. Not because I thought he was cute, but because I hadn't talked to many boys before.

"Hi there... My name is John." He reached out his hand, which looked more like Karla's than mine. I took it and shook his hand as Father taught me. His handshake was like a woman's. He winced a little bit when I gave him a firm squeeze. It felt awkward.

"My name is Ruth." I suddenly became more aware than usual of my deep voice.

"Your dad says you like to sing?" John said.

This caught me by surprise. Did Father really say such a thing? I did like to sing. I thought I was pretty good at it—better than Karla or Ida, even better than Mom. "Yeah... I do... What about it?"

"Um... well, my mom wants us to have a choir to lead in the hymns. She is looking for people to join."

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The seasons passed, and finally, it was winter. The time of year when most of the work involved breaking the ice in the watering bins for the animals and cutting wood. I did join the choir after that day. After the first time, I was given compliments that I never imagined I could receive. "You have such a beautiful singing voice." "You have real talent, you know." "You could become a famous singer." But none of the compliments mattered to me as much as the compliments from John. We started spending a lot of time together after church. He was a city boy and didn't fit in with the country boys. He told me all about growing up in a city. How many things there were to do. About all the different kinds of people. He was kind too. He always told me how pretty I was. He told me how cool he thought it was that I could do all the farm work on my own. Before I realized it, I was falling for him.

"I love you," he said to me just about a year after we met.

"I love you too."

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"I forbid you to go running off with that boy!" Father was beet red. His third whiskey of the night sloshed around in his cup as he walked around furiously. Mom sat at the table sobbing.

"Well, you can't stop me. He asked me to marry him, and I said yes. That's that."

My father slammed the whiskey down on the table. The glass shattered, and my mom let out a whimper. "You are my goddamn daughter. I damn well can stop you."

"Fuck you!" I screamed at him. "Fuck you! Asshole! I'm not your daughter! And I'm not your son either! You treated me like a man my whole life because you didn't get the son you wanted! I hate your guts!" The words I had been holding back for years seemed to flood out of my mouth. "I hate you too!" I pointed at my mom. "Looking the other way all these years while treating Karla and Ida like princesses!" Tears started to drip down my long nose.

"Don't you cry!" My father pointed his finger menacingly at me. "You know I can't stand it when you fucking cry."

"I'm leaving!" I started to move toward the door with blurred vision.

"Like hell you are!" Father grabbed me by the back of the hair and yanked me hard to the ground. Pain pulsed through my skull. Suddenly he was on top of me, pulling his brown leather belt from the loop.

"Stop!" Mom cried out.

A surge of anger fueled me, and I pushed him off. He fell to the ground, his belt half on his blue jeans and half on the wood floor. I went for the door again but heard him stand up. His belt was now in his hands. He went to swing at me, but Mom grabbed him by the arm. He quickly swung her off, and she flew into the kitchen table. I turned and swung at him with everything I had.

He hit the floor like a sack of grain. My hand ached almost as badly as my scalp. He was out cold, sprawled on the ground, a little bit of blood trickling from his mouth. That was the last time I ever saw him.

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John and I moved to Salt Lake City with his parents. And for a long time, I was happy. We didn't have much. We both worked at a motel. I was a housekeeper, and he was a bellhop. We went to my father-in-law's new church every Sunday. I still sang in the church choir. His parents were far better to me than my own ever were. John didn't need much out of life. He just wanted to be loved. I thought at times his consistent and unrelenting love for me was suffocating. "You know how much I love you, right?" "Is everything okay? Can I get you anything?" "Whatever you want, I want." The only thing we ever fought about was my nicotine addiction. "I don't want to lose you." I did eventually stop smoking when I got pregnant. I never really wanted kids, but all John wanted in this life was to have a family. It seemed selfish of me to refuse a man who was always giving his all to me. So, I conceded.

Our first son was named Michael. John wanted to name him after himself and his dad, but I couldn't stand the idea of him being named John Jones the Third. So we picked a different biblical name that we liked. Michael mostly looked like John, but the parts of him he inherited from me were all from my father. I couldn't help but see him in Michael.

I told John that I only wanted one kid. I insisted. I was exhausted from being a mother. It didn't suit me. I wasn't motherly in any sense. However, John wanted more. "Michael needs a little brother or sister," and so I compromised—just one more, I told him. Then I found out I was pregnant with twins. Michael ended up getting both a brother and a sister. John was ecstatic, even as he watched me go through hell in that second pregnancy. We named our daughter Kimberly and our son Christopher. Kimberly was the spitting image of Karla. Christopher was the only one that I found unfamiliar, and I loved him for it.

Two weeks before they were born, I got a call from my mom. Dad had died of a sudden heart attack. John kept waiting for me to have some kind of mental breakdown, but none came. I was even a little surprised by that myself, but in truth, I didn't feel anything when I heard the news. I always imagined I would feel regret or anger, maybe even relief. "I don't care," I had said to my mom, and hung up the phone.

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After the twins, for the first time in my life, I stopped working. I sat around and played my role as the bored housewife. I started smoking again shortly after—it provided me with a much-needed change of mental state. John didn't like it, we argued, but I won. John could feel something building in me before I realized it myself. He was constantly reassuring me that I was a good mother. I wasn't, though. He did all the cleaning, the cooking, the childcare. The best I could manage was to slap together cheese sandwiches for lunch. I had never spent much time in the kitchen before and didn't feel like starting now.

Michael constantly cried. "He has big feelings," John would always say. And

he did. He was also always getting angry. Unnaturally angry for being at such a young age. I can't say he wasn't a good big brother, though. He would always get the twins snacks and make lunch for them if needed. He was mature and smart for a six-year-old.

My days were filled with screaming kids, and all I could do was scream back. John would get home and try to repair the damage. Then we would fight about money. I begged John to let me go back to work. I'm sure he could see that staying at home was slowly eating away at me. We found a cheap babysitter, and I started working at the hotel again. They were happy to have me back. I was a hard worker.

I felt better for a while after going back to work. It was a blessing to be away from my children and interact with other people. It was around this time that I kept having a recurring thought. I'm trapped, and I always have been. I had never been free. Chained down by my dad, then John, and now my children. I want something else, something more.

Our new assistant manager was always flirting with me when John wasn't around. His name was Donald, but he went by Donny. He was the polar opposite of John. He confidently shaved his head bald; meanwhile, John was desperately holding onto his thinning hair. His big muscles filled out the leather jacket he was always wearing. He had a black Harley, something I never realized I wanted for myself. Donny offered to take me on a ride one day. John was standing right there, and I couldn't believe he let me. The rumble of the bike, my arms wrapped around Donny's muscular body, the face in my wind and hair.

Donny continued to flirt, and I started to enjoy it more and more. "I'm having a party this Friday, you guys should come."

I talked John into staying home with the kids. I could tell he was worried, but once again he said nothing. Then the next party came, and again I talked him into staying home with the kids. He looked like he wanted to say something, but I think fear was holding him back. He probably knew he already lost me. He was scared if he said anything that would be the end of it. He was right.

At these parties, I realized that for the first time in my life, I felt free. At first, it was just cigarettes and beer that helped me achieve it. Then it was a little bit of weed mixed in. Then a little bit of coke. One night Donny even passed over his blackened crack pipe. I resisted Donny's advancements for a long time, but one night found myself asking, Why? Scared to do something you want?

I thought I would feel guilty about it, but when I saw John the next day I felt annoyed instead. Donny knew what I wanted, and he gave it to me. John knew what he wanted and pathetically clung to it.

"It's okay. We can get past this... Don't do it." John was on his knees, tears in his eyes, begging me to stay. I had come to resent everything about John. His stupid soft face, spineless demeanor, and that constant desperate look in his eyes.

"I cheated on you, and this is all you can say? God... stop crying! I can't stand it when you cry!"

"I'll do anything... I'll be more adventurous... I'll smoke more... I'll drink more... whatever you want!" John cried out.

Michael, now seven, stood watching. He was crying, but he was always crying.

"God, why did I have to have such a crybaby for a son!"

The sound of his tiny footsteps was all we heard for a moment. First, they pattered up the stairs, and then the creak of floorboards from above. I let out a long sigh, and for a moment I did feel guilty. "I'll go talk to him," I told John.

I reached the kids' room, and the door was slightly cracked. I peeked in to see the twins comforting Michael as he lay in bed curled up in a ball. My hand reached out to push the door open, but it didn't make it there. It felt heavy, as if chains were beginning to be placed around it. My chest felt tight, and my head spun. I took a step back, and the chains were gone. The weight with them. My chest relaxed, and my head was clear.

I walked down the stairs. I passed John, who was still sobbing, and without a word I walked out the front door. The cold night air felt so refreshing. I pulled out a cigarette and took a few drags while gazing at the starry sky.





*Agnus Dei*

Carmen Alcocer

Acrylic, oil, beadwork on canvas, 54 x 32 in.

# Strangers Once Again

SAM SPRING

“Keep your head down for momma, okay?”

“But I don’t —”

Rebecca reached back and shoved her youngest’s head down to the crumb-covered, soda-stained floorboards. The three of them ducked down in the beat-down sedan. It was not the first time that she was thankful for her ex’s paranoia, tinting the windows to almost full black.

The older girl held her brother’s head down. “I got him, Momma,” she said in a serious tone. Immediately, Rebecca let go, her jaw clenched. *She was rubbing off on them. How much damage had she already done?*

“I want to play something else,” cried the boy, trying to look up at his mother with china-blue, empty plate eyes.

“Shhhh. We’ll play another game soon. Just let momma think.” After a few minutes, Rebecca turned over the ignition and they were off. Down the Tucson back-roads, sun vapors rising off the pitch-black asphalt.

Screeching into a parking spot, Rebecca turned around once more. Holding her quivering lip in check, she said, “Alright. We’re here! Sammy’s Scoops —”

“Yay!” Both kids cheered in unison.

“Hey! Hey. Stop that. I need you to behave for Momma. I need you to be grown-ups, okay? Can you do that? Can you do that for Momma?”

“Okay,” the girl pouted.

“Grace, hey, look at me.” Gently Rebecca pulled her chin up with her forefinger. “None of that, okay? You have to be strong for your brother. Can you be strong?”

“Yeah, I can.”

Rebecca turned to her son. “And James, can you be strong for your sister?”

“Yeah I can do that easy,” James smiled, flashing prideful, yellowing teeth.

“Good. Now, because you are both so strong and going to be on your best

behavior, let's get two scoops on our cones, yeah? Anything you want."

"Ya—" Grace and James stopped in their tracks, remembering that grown ups don't cheer and they don't get excited. Momma taught them that.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now, tell me some things that you learned from your momma," Rebecca waited patiently with a forced smile, her eyes drifting back and forth from her two beautiful children. The whole of their existence had been within her arms. She was their world — all they knew. *What would happen to them?*

"I learnt that... um, I learneded that you should never answer the door if you are home alone. Even if the they say they know you. And — and to wait until you get home to open the door." James lit up as he pulled the sage-wisdom from deep in his memory banks, all the while licking his double chocolate-chip-cookie-dough scoop.

"That's really good, James. But there's other adults you can trust, too — if momma tells you they are okay to trust, like Daddy."

"But I don't like Daddy. He's mean whenever he's around," Grace chimed in. She crossed her arms but still proceeded to lick her Rainbow sherbet, strawberry sorbet stack.

"I'm scared of Daddy when he gets mad," James covered his face with a little hand.

"I know, I know," Rebecca sighed a heavy sigh. She continued, "Daddy's trying the best he can — just like your Momma is."

"No, he's not!" James cried out with a mouthful of ice cream.

Rebecca raised a hand and James flinched. She looked at her son, then at Grace, then to her open palm, saw the detail in the lines embedded in it, and the smooth, baby-soft skin of her children's faces. Finally, she placed her head within her open hand, fought back the tears.

"Oh, are we playing the head down game again?" Grace clasped her hands tighter to her cone, "James is no good at that game."

"Hey, be nice to your brother," Rebecca sighed.

"But you aren't nice to Daddy," Grace shot back.

"And he's not nice to you," James added, shoving his sister's shoulder.

"That's just us talking. That's two adults figuring things out."

Now, Grace. "Do you have to be so loud when you do it?"

Rebecca sighed again and bit the webbing between her thumb and forefinger. Then, softly she spoke, "You know how you are seven and you are five," she started, ruffling the hair of her two worlds in front of her, "and you know how you haven't been eight or six yet?" Their eyes widened.

"But I'm gunna be soon! My birthday is —"

"Right, James your birthday is next Tuesday. But you're not six yet. You don't know what it's like being six." Tears pooled at the bottom of Rebecca's deep, sad eyes. "Just like Momma and Daddy don't know what it's like to be twenty-three or twenty-four, either. This is our first time being this old and we have a lot to figure out."

"I'm scared. Being grown up sounds scary," Grace blurted.

The sirens slowly wailed over the distance.

"No, no, baby, come here," Rebecca pulled her in, "and you too, James, come to Momma." Rebecca held her children tighter than the knot that was forming in her chest. "It's not scary being a grown up. Momma and Daddy just had a tough go of things, but you two will have such a better life, okay? You will be happy and healthy and grow up big and strong. Remember what I said about being strong for each other? You're going to have to be real strong, okay?"

"I'm scared, Momma. What's going on?" Grace dropped her ice cream on the floor. James stared down at it, then looked up at his sister and dropped his on the floor, too.

"Yeah, Momma, what's going on?"

The sirens grew louder.

"Remember what I said about trusting strangers that Momma says are okay to trust?"

They both nodded in her bosom, wiping tears from their cheeks. She felt them nestle against her, feeling safe and protected in her arms for the last time.

"Okay, in a minute there will be some friendly strangers that you can trust — Momma says so. They will take you to live somewhere new with a new Momma and Daddy that will love you so much until Momma can take you back. You'll be safe with your new family for awhile — only for a while." Rebecca stared up at the ceiling, desperately trying to keep the tears from spilling over the edge.

“But I want to live with you and eat ice cream and dance and be happy.”  
Grace pulled back. Rebecca broke.

“I don’t want a new momma and daddy. I want —“

The ice cream shop door swung open. Three freshly pressed blue uniforms, badges gleaming, strutted in and the children Rebecca had held in her arms on the day that they were born — when they could fit within her two, creased palms — these new strange beings, eyes wide with understanding, staring up at their world, at her, those happy days in the hospital years ago, learning that Momma was safe, Momma wasn’t a stranger, Momma was home. Three souls, pulled from some cosmic plane, intertwining, becoming known, seen and understood — strangers becoming family, became strangers once again.

END





*The Road Ahead: A Woman's Journey of Reconciliation* Prosper Aluu  
 Acrylic and newspaper collage on canvas, 24 x 36 in.

# *Everyone is Beautiful*

HANNAH AGAPÉ RHODES

Layla knew she was beautiful.

The shape of her face and body had no bearing on how she looked at herself in the mirror. Like how soda tastes better in a glass bottle, the arrangement of her facial features was just a matter of fact. Wide-set almond-shaped hazel eyes, high cheekbones, sparse blonde eyebrows, a jagged nose, thin lips, and a cavernous dimple when she smiled. Layla knew she was beautiful because, after all, wasn't everyone?

"Oh, look, it's Hocus Pocus! Yeah, Hocus Pocus, throw me the ball!"

"I'm gonna add some pencil to your eyebrows, hon. They're invisible!"

"You know you have a double chin when you laugh?"

There was no stabbing insult that could penetrate Layla's hard exterior. She was raised by a warrior named Brenda.

"Everyone is beautiful."

Brenda and Layla looked in the mirror every night before bedtime and repeated this phrase as they looked into their reflected eyes. They weren't a religious family, but this was as sacred a ritual as Eucharist or Salat. Even as Layla got older and Brenda worked late into the evening, Layla spoke the words into the glass. Layla never doubted Brenda's mantra. She was the most beautiful person Layla knew.

"Everyone is beautiful."

Sure, the third-grade teacher who told Layla she was useless for not knowing the difference between "there," "their," and "they're" had eye bags that took up half her face. There was the postman who spent the night in Brenda's bed for five months and yelled when he drank and had his two front teeth missing. And who could forget the camp counselor who stared too long at the legs of grieving campers and had acne scars that went from his chin to his forehead?

"Everyone is beautiful."

The third-grade teacher let the class choose the book for storytime. She had rosy cheeks. The postman gave her mini Snickers when Brenda turned her back. He had an Affleck jawline. The camp counselor shared his bed with Layla when

the nightmares wouldn't let up and promised that he would never let her go and told her she wasn't the reason for Brenda's drug relapse. He had kind green eyes.

Everyone is beautiful, but what about Layla?

Twelve days after Layla graduated college, Brenda killed herself. "It just seems like the most appropriate time to get it over with," read the suicide note. Layla never questioned this and a quiet part of her appreciated the foresightedness. If Brenda thought it was best to die just as Layla was beginning her life, then so be it. Layla scanned the lines of shaky handwriting, searching for the one thing she wanted to see. Not the I'm sorry's and not the I love you's. There were plenty of those. Layla was looking for the one thing she knew she couldn't live without: beauty.

But it was nowhere to be found.

Beauty was buried alongside Brenda.

Layla's first action after her mother's death, for no discernable reason other than the narrowmindedness of sorrow, was to reach out to the camp counselor from grief camp. It had been seven years since their last point of contact, and age had made her well aware that what he had done to her was criminal, at best, and irrevocably life-ruining, at worst. But, she reasoned he was the only one who knew the depth of what she had gone through. She had given it all to him.

He responded with "idk a layla. sorry bout your mom, tho"

Layla stood at the mirror and noticed her left eye was one centimeter lower than her right.

In college, she dated any man who showed interest in her. Her therapist said it was because of her Freudian desire to have a father figure. Layla said that would be her last session. After the loss of Brenda, it took Layla three years, eight months, and twenty-seven days to go out on a date.

Spencer, a man she met on Hinge, messaged her first, moved their conversation over to Instagram, paid for their first date, and invited her to his apartment. She declined; it was too early for that kind of thing. He told her she had adorable freckles. She woke up beside him the next morning.

Two months of pure beauty turned ugly when she surprised him at work only to find him making out with a coworker in his car. Brushing her teeth the next morning, Layla wondered what it would be like if she had fuller lips.

Spencer begged her to come back. Layla refused. He told her she was the most beautiful girl in the world. Layla moved into his apartment a month later. What if there was someone else he thought deserved his attention? After all,



everyone is beautiful. Layla just happened to be the most beautiful. That's what he said, at least.

"Mommy, you have stripes on your belly!" Oli's sticky hands pointed at the stretch marks on her exposed stomach, yelling so loud that all around the hotel pool could hear. Layla wanted to take the moment to educate her son on the miracle of a mother's body, but he had already splashed into Spencer's arms a million miles away in the shallow end. She placed the half-empty applesauce Oli had been sucking on into their cooler.

"How old is he?"

Layla answered the voice impulsively. Oli was three and a half. She shut the cooler and turned toward the speaker. Tall, skinny, blonde. Layla was not quite any of those things. This was the same woman Spencer was eyeing when they first walked onto the hot pavement of the pool area. He thought he was so careful to look only when Layla was occupied with their son, but "fool me once."

"I have two myself. Four and eight, almost nine."

Layla doubted this, taking a look at the woman's perfect figure one more time. Not a single stretch mark on this woman's frame. Layla chuckled and remarked that she couldn't imagine the woman having two kids.

The woman leaned in, tipping her sunglasses over her nose. "You don't have to imagine it." She dug in her beach bag and pulled out a small business card. "Take this."

On the front was a phone number. On the back, the card read:

OSWALD SANCTUS, M.D.  
COSMETIC ENHANCER  
"Everyone is beautiful."

Twelve years had gone by since she had heard her mother's words. It took everything in her not to book an appointment right away. To leap into a hospital gown. To force this Dr. Sanctus to make everything right in her, on her, again.

But, she waited. "Decisions should not be made too hastily." That was another Brenda saying. Oh, what a delight it was to know her mother was back in her presence. Sending signs and reminders of the principles of life Layla so cherished, so desperately needed as she raised a son with a man who equated fidelity with a wedding ring.

When Spencer found Dr. Sanctus' card on the kitchen table as Layla cleaned out her purse one evening, he could not hold in his delight. Like a kid

overwhelmed by the endless number of toppings they can get on an ice cream cone, he dreamt about all of the possibilities of his wife's new appearance. He found pictures of celebrities whose features he thought would look good on her. Emma Stone's eyes, Margot Robbie's cheekbones, Kate Middleton's nose, and "No, don't get rid of the dimple. I like that about you."

So, the appointment was set.

The sweat of her thighs bound her to the waiting room chair. She watched an episode of Judge Judy, halfmindedly staring at the defendant's perfect eyebrows. She wished she had brought a cardigan to cover her arms. It was cold, and her arms were untuned.

And then, she smiled as she realized that after surgery, she would never have to worry about her flabby arms or gapped teeth or sparse eyebrows or uneven ears or large calves or dry palms or broad shoulders or ugly feet or

"Everyone is beautiful."

No, Mom. Not me.

Not yet.



*Abel Tasman 1 (top) and 2 (bottom)*

Olivia Segura

# *The Labyrinth of Homicide and Healing*

EROS SALVATORE

\*Some names have been changed to protect the innocent and the guilty alike.\*

How I met Tawnya had everything to do with how she was murdered. The year was 1998. Fentanyl was unknown, Columbine had not yet happened, 9/11 was unimaginable, and Donald Trump wasn't even a reality TV star. Still, tragedy was always lurking somewhere in Humboldt County. Locals call it living behind the Redwood Curtain, its thousand-year-old sequoias witness to numerous crimes against humanity—from the 1860 massacre of Native Americans on Indian Island to present day homicides. The Netflix series *Murder Mountain* was not just sensationalized, it was true: a friend of a friend was found enslaved on a black market cannabis farm on Murder Mountain a few months after the show's 2018 release.

I was an undergrad at Humboldt State University, doing a social work internship with the Public Defender's Office. Jamie was my boss. And he was good. Too good. Respected by many, but hated by a few. Once a probation officer told me to tell Jamie to "Go to hell." I let him know Jamie was already there with a subpoena awaiting his arrival.

Juvenile Hall was my beat. Once a week I visited the over-capacity, aging facility with its cinder block walls and wired safety glass. The county was short on violent young thugs, so they filled most of the beds with drug addicts and thieves. These youthful offenders ranged from a foul-mouthed ten-year-old boy who demanded more rights than he had, or deserved—he was a pest, even to me—to a naive eighteen-year-old girl who put in a request to transfer to the adult county jail in hopes that it would be better there. It wasn't.

The jail guards, euphemistically called Youth Counselors, ranged from the joyous to the malevolent. There were the helpers, like Judy, who brought a pack of divination cards that featured wild animals to work. Every child got to pick a card when they were taken out of handcuffs upon arrival, then listen in awe as Judy would tell them about their totem animal. And there were the haters, like Sam, whose hobbies included badgering detainees and eschewing professionalism. One day he picked on the wrong child, a skinny little boy named Jose. Jose punched Sam in the face and broke his nose. I was nearby when it happened. Sam deserved it. He couldn't stop yelling at the kid. He got a thirty-day paid vacation for his troubles. He didn't deserve that.

My job was equal parts interviewing and handholding. I reassured the mischievous children of Humboldt County while trying to find the best placement for them—family, foster care, drug rehab, group homes or the now defunct California Youth Authority.

Ten percent of my clients were Native American. They ranged from Ted, the Hoopa boy who stabbed a schoolmate in the leg with an Exacto knife, and wanted to go back to the rez to take care of his sick uncle, to Gina, a girlish gang member from Eureka, the largest town in the Redwood Empire. She was the perfect combination of traumatized urban Indian and 1990's criminal chic. Minority: dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes. Pretty: bangs, nails, tattoos. Aggressive: hit, steal, inhale. Addicted: weed, cigarettes, or meth.

Nonetheless, I loved them. Their cheerfulness made my overcast life brighter. Then I met fifteen-year-old Tawnya Leavitt, a typical strawberry-blonde, blue eyes and heart-shaped face kind-of-girl topped off with a heavy dose of risky behavior. She was the dare in Truth or Dare, and Gina's best friend. I was coming back from winter break. Tawnya was coming off a Christmas detox in jail. But now she was smiling and filled with excitement; I was the first person who had come to juvie to help her. That was the only present she would get during the holidays.

I had no illusions about her future. Her mother, Rhonda, had been an addict before becoming sober when Tawnya was eight. Dutiful daughter took up the torch with marijuana at nine, graduated to speed at eleven and had recently tried heroin. The mental health professionals wondered if she was molested, because she was rumored to be trading sex for drugs. She had spent the last half of 1997 in a therapeutic foster-care home for girls. One of the workers could still recall her personality over twenty-five years later: nice and pleasant unless you offended her. But she did well. The most important rule they had was that you couldn't come back if you ran away. So she ran away.

Now she had been arrested for narcotic possession, and I could tell she wanted to use again. She had a lust for adventure in her eyes, oblivious to tragedy. I tried to steer her away from trouble, but as soon as she got out, she ran away for the last time.

A couple of weeks later, I was perusing the aptly nicknamed *Sub-Standard*, our local newspaper. Over the weekend a teenage girl's half-nude body had been found by an airstrip on the coast. Her head had been bashed in. There was a photograph. I didn't recognize the face, so I turned the page and kept reading.

Then the phone rang. It was Jamie.

"Are you going to the funeral?" he asked.

I froze, connecting the dots in slow motion, as I flipped the pages of the

periodical back to a picture of Tawnya's dimpled smile. "Everyone's going to be there," Jamie continued. "Staff from Juvenile Hall, the police, probation, city officials, activists, friends and family; even some of the kids in juvie will get a pass to attend."

"Of course, I'll be there," I replied in a voice not my own.

I gave Jamie my weekly report. Then I hung up. I had never known anyone who had been murdered. A few days later I was back in juvie interviewing clients.

"I know who did it," Stacy said.

Stacy was another friend of Tawnya's and the epitome of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. Black hair, black eyes, pale face. Short, thin, slashed wrists. Stacy had used her weekend furlough to smoke meth, and was eager to talk. Unfortunately, I was unable to discuss the murder because of my role with the Public Defender's Office, so I referred her to the appropriate detective. I should have let her talk. I wanted to know. I spent the rest of the day consoling Tawnya's other incarcerated friends. I even wrote a poem with Gina.

At the funeral cousins cried, mothers wept, and delinquents spoke—reciting lyrics that praised the deceased. Teens with warrants were given summons by probation officers to appear in court. No arrests were made. Not the place to make a scene. Incredibly, three hundred citizens showed up in peace.

But I didn't go. Numb, I shuttled between school and home. Work, study, eat. Rinse and repeat. Tawnya's friends fared no better. Gina was released from juvie and would show up at Tawnya's house wasted, just to go to her best friend's room and collapse on her bed in tears. It seemed that Tawnya's soul wouldn't leave, trapped by a community bereaved.

In the following weeks the newspapers were full of articles about the murder: "Killer On The Loose," "Police Not Talking," and "The Last Movements Of A Slain Teen." Her friends asked why. Her family grieved. Her mother pleaded for justice, blamed the police, the courts, the system. No one had the heart to tell her the truth: that Tawnya's chaotic life mirrored her mother's choices. They were both wild and free in all the wrong ways.

In search of relief, I signed up for a religious studies class on the healing power of labyrinths. These were intricate paths made by medieval Christians in Gothic Cathedrals like Chartres and Reims for prayer and meditation. Carved into the stone floors beneath movable pews, the labyrinth outlined walkways that meandered back and forth, like a coiling circuit inside a circle. Not to be confused with a maze, their mysterious layout was the secret to their success: the seeker couldn't get lost; with no dead ends, there was only one way to walk.



At the center of the labyrinth lay a six-petaled rosette, each leaf capable of holding an individual walker for an extended moment in time. There they could pray ceaselessly in a trance-like state. Then, supplications satisfied, they retraced their steps back out. It was like an inner pilgrimage for those who weren't able to travel to Jerusalem or Rome. By reaffirming their journey of faith, the devout could visit God closer to home.

Labyrinths spread all over medieval Europe as people sought to supersede the authorities when they hungered for more of God than the Vatican would allow. The Reformation stopped their growth as the Church struggled to maintain control. Eventually, the pews remained in place permanently, covering the sacred circles for centuries. Then, just before the dawn of the new millennium, walking the labyrinth was rediscovered by the Episcopalians of San Francisco. They ended up laying its blessed lines into the polished limestone floor of Grace Cathedral—where public and parishioners alike participated in quarterly ceremonies marking the seasons like a pagan rite.

My religious studies class included a weekend field trip to Grace during spring break. I anticipated it like a witness to the Resurrection, overcome by fear and wonder. During a rainy day in March, I drove south to the city—a modern pilgrim seeking the ways of old. On my arrival I was still in the clutches of emotional denial. Nevertheless, the gothic sanctuary welcomed me at the top of Nob Hill, its spire piercing the sky, its body decorated with stained glass panels that portrayed the lives of saints. Praise the Lord! a rose window exclaimed, as I ascended the stairs. A gilded bronze copy of Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise glazed the front doors, marking the threshold between the sacred and the secular.

The Cathedral was laid out in the shape of a cross, and with all the artistic adornments cloaking it like a burial shroud, I felt like I was at a funeral. I pondered the meaning of the Eucharist. Body of Christ, body of Tawnya, both a mother's loss. The interior was lit with an ambient light that cast hushed shadows upon muraled walls.

The labyrinth lay in the nave near the entrance, just behind the pious pews. Its lines were arranged like the notes of a geometric chorus whose melody led to the heart of the divine. Pilgrims walked in somber solitude, lit candles arranged ceremoniously along the sides. I watched the scene in silence, a statue of St. Francis watching me nearby.

I entered, itinerary planned out by fate. My feet fell at a snail's pace, and with each step, the haunting atmosphere lifted the veil between the living and the dead. As time slowed, Tawnya's murder loosened its grip, and I released the pain I had been unable to feel. When I reached the center, I stood on a rose petal and attended the funeral I had long avoided. But no tears came. Instead, my gratitude for knowing Tawnya became the eulogy, and my sorrow was exchanged for grace.

As I turned to go, I could feel the remnants of Tawnya's spirit leaving me for the world beyond. In the Heavens, the Angels sang Hallelujah! Death is slayed!

At the end of the semester, I left the Public Defender's Office. I had learned enough. A few weeks later my replacement, a young woman whom I had never met, was held at knife-point by two Native American kids, a brother and sister. They forced the Youth Counselors to unlock the Juvenile Hall doors, so they could escape. Then they proceeded to steal the lady's car and make their way out to the rez where they were duly arrested.

Tawnya's murder was one in a number of senseless deaths and disappearances that have taken place behind the Redwood Curtain. Some, like Eureka's Karen Mitchell, a bright sixteen-year-old from a middle-class family who vanished on a busy street in broad daylight, were well-documented and have become infamous Humboldt lore. Others never saw the light of day, particularly when they involved Native Americans, because no one cared about them or even knew they existed.

Tawnya was white enough to get in all the newspapers, but poor enough to be forgotten. Her case, although still open, has gotten little traction after an initial strong push. Her relatives have complained that Tawnya's name doesn't appear on lists of unsolved homicides in Humboldt County, nor does it get much attention on internet sleuth websites. There were some suspects. One was a guy nicknamed Stabby Joe who died in prison, but I couldn't find anything definitive. When I emailed the detective in charge of the case, I received the following reply: "Tanya's case is still open and actively being investigated. With that being said, there is not much I can tell you."

I still wondered what had gone wrong in Tawnya's life, so I reached out to any living relatives. Her mother was in a nursing home from a stroke and couldn't talk, while others were still too devastated to tell me much. But Elisha, one of Tawnya's cousins, filled in the missing pieces. It was true Tawnya had been molested. Her step-father was responsible, and Tawnya had spent her childhood running away to Washington State to get away from him. There, she stayed with Elisha and her mom and formed a close bond. Elisha was four years older than Tawnya. She had been kidnapped and abused at age fifteen, so she understood what Tawnya was going through. Just before she went to juvie, Tawnya had begged Elisha to come to Humboldt to live with her, but by then Elisha was nineteen and had a baby. Her mom wouldn't let her go. When she found out Tawnya had been murdered, Elisha tried to jump out of her mom's car while traveling seventy miles an hour on the interstate.

Eventually, Elisha's life turned around, but twenty-seven years later she, like the rest of Tawnya's family, still wants closure. Something that is unlikely to come. I understand why Tawnya died though. It wasn't any one thing or person that killed her. It was a multitude of systemic failures and the frailties of human beings. May Tawnya Marie Leavitt rest in peace.

*\*If you have any information regarding the murder of Tawnya Leavitt please contact the Humboldt County Crime Tip Line at (707) 268-2539.*



# goose down miracle town

MAGGIE McGRATH

Chews me up and swishes me around with its gold plated tongue and spits me out  
Peering down on me with its diamond eyes.

*I don't want to be seventeen forever.*

I'll wear flowers in my hair,

On the road, windows down,

Reefer madness to the wind !

I want to chase it I want to feel it I want to be held by *it*

I implore it! See what shall be in my magical goose  
down miracle town, a collection of trinkets like a hoarder's wet dream!

We've got paint chips and feathers, buttons galore!

An electric kool aid fever dream of colors and trash, right here! Just for you! Yes you!

February falls like a too thick quilt,  
down feathers poking you in the neck.

*Rough and tumble rough and tumble...*

Dryer settings, ruining the stitching each go around

My mother asks me if I killed a goose in my room.

*No, please don't be angry.*

It makes the outline of a small child wounded, putting her toys back into the chest, back up onto  
the shelf.

Nice and tidy, never a mess.

She asks me if I've been smoking pot, or if I've been

Swept up and tossed away,

Swept up and tossed away.

# *The Delivery of the Farm Preceded Its Occupants by 19 Days*

ERIN AUBE

The ants arrived separately. Two vials — crowned with black rubber, crowded with red bodies mostly thawed, just translucent enough for eyes to catch the almost imperceptible wave of legs — delivered in an unpadded manilla.

Opening the hatch of the patiently waiting home, I sprinkled the girls over their yellow sand, like paprika on a deviled egg. The instructions promised I would wonder at the ants' anatomy. And, indeed, these fiery ladies were exceptionally segmented —

abdomen, thorax, head with snapping mandibles leading the way, uncomfortably noticeable gaps in between, drawn together by the slightest filaments. As deeply as the manufactured sand and rigid plastic walls would allow, tunnels immediately appeared.

Ignoring what I had hoped would be the bedlam-inducing four drops of water and three breadcrumbs, my gals instead set to work tidying their farm. Each hoisted fragments of a sister who did not survive the travel or the shake and marched her

to the designated tunnel, the one first finished. No curves or flourish, this hole plummeted from the top of the fluorescent green frame to the bottom.  
The Body-Bits Pit.

Each following day, skittering right to left and down to up, backtracking, clambering, climbing over, always straightening up and making home. The gossamer could not hold against the trampling and whole bodies broke apart, leaving a never-ending trail of pieces

like breadcrumbs. I briefly considered releasing the final few into the wilds of the yard but, fearing a resurgence and resulting insurrection, quickly dismissed the notion. The next day, I turned away as the last girl marched herself down the pit, the only whole left in the farm of parts.

Express shipping for replacement vials is offered at no extra cost.

# Morning

DANIEL DONAGHY

Every morning, when our new neighbor opens her front door, her two dogs sprint into our yard. No fence between us. No money for me to build the one we'd need to stretch into the woods, where the labradoodle taller than my waist and his shadow, the tiny Shih-Tzu, bark at us whenever we pull in or drive off. We've talked to her about boundaries and the barking and the shit. We've shooed her dogs back toward her house when they've circled and growled at our guests. Once, we heard her muttering to herself that she never should have gotten them. Then she went back into her house and left them to bark on our porch. When we talk to her, it feels like she's not fully there. We don't know her. Maybe she's high or shy or sad. Our town's animal control officer won't return my calls. It would be so easy to slip back into how I was raised and throw her a Philly shitstorm--threats, ultimatums, alliterative curses for her and the dogs. The only thing those old fights ever got me, though, was a next fight to lose sleep over, a new argument that would never play out in real life like it did in my head while I was driving or eating or talking with a friend I'd trapped inside my little whirlwind of self-righteousness. How good it's been to close that door. I don't know how this issue with the dogs will get resolved, but I trust that it will. They're dopy, annoying, all bark and no bite. Still, I keep the water turned on and hose-spray nozzle handy. Still, I ordered today a dog-barking deterrent with 38k positive reviews that gives off a harmless, ultrasonic sound. Every morning, I step into our yard of oaks and white birches and recall the absence of trees on my childhood's blacktopped city street of sirens and syringes and sex workers. Every morning, I'm thankful that street let me go. Every morning, after the big one yaps and hops and the little one yips along in parody, they eventually get bored with me and stop barking, stop even looking my way, then at last take my repeated advice and head back home.



*The Story of Gamblers on a Monday Morning*  
 Acrylic and newspaper collage on canvas, 36 x 48 in.

Prosper Aluu

# Ivan's Cow

REX BROOKE

There is a way to solve this, he thought. The mind is flexible and can bend in any direction, and can fit through a keyhole if necessary.

Ivan Ivanovich set down his morning mug of black tea and sharpened his pencil with a kitchen knife. He looked out his window to the wide and wrinkled Volta as it twisted slowly between the last of the snowbanks. A brisk Spring wind was flickering across the ice-grey water. To the east, in the soggy meadow, the blanched sun gleamed off a white wooden cross that marked the grave of his wife.

Ivan fit the pencil between his thumb and forefinger and lowered it against the crisp sheet of paper. He needed the proper symbols. Once he had them, the problem could be attacked with a more precise vocabulary than mere words, and these symbols would reveal the solution.

Damn Petrovich. You should always know the neighbors before moving in.

The river erodes a new course.

Ivan had spent his entire life fishing the Volta. He had known every eddy and sandbar for 15 miles. The Nikita days. Sturgeon the size of dogs. But that was much farther south. Where people with a civilized culture lived. Here, at Lysva, the only thing you could catch in the river was dead wood for heating. And in the twenty years he had lived there, Ivan had pulled a lot of dead wood from the river, laying the bleached branches out on the banks like twisted corpses to dry. Even though by the time it had reached Ivan's shore, the river had leached the wood of most of its life-giving fire, Ivan had found early on, that if the flame gets hot enough, even dead wood will burn.

He stopped writing and rubbed his knobby fingers.

God damn Petrovich. Damn his arrogance. Damn his fences. And damn his bull. She might die down there. And then what would be left? He picked up the pencil and began to write furiously, the pencil making a scratching noise as he filled the paper.

*There are two ways of solving problem, he began: in a hierarchical manner, moving down from the general to the precise until the problem is pinned, much like a hunter spearing a salmon from a school. This is The Spear Method.*



*The alternative is The Net Method--scooping up a myriad of possible answers and tossing back the chum. It's not unlike sculpture, where you carve away everything which is not true.*

*Now if we look at answers as being fish in the sea of the universe, we have the obvious advantages and disadvantages of both methods. Is there a one-to-one correspondence between answers and problems? Of course not. This is the disadvantage of the spear method. The advantage is that you have only one fish to deal with.*

Ivan stopped. He was hungry. Pickled herring, a chunk of hard bread, and an onion for lunch. And a glass of vodka. He returns to his problem:

Early last November, after the first of the snows, Ivan bought this yearling cow, Mynka, named after his dearly departed wife, into the stable on the lower floor of his dacha, which was built into the side of the hill in the peasant tradition of the farm animals living on the bottom floor, and humans on the top floor. That was before the record snowfall, and the record snow-melt, and the record flood. Now the double doors to the stable were buried under the 5 meters of mud and he needed to get Mynka out. To complicate the matter, it was obvious that during the fall, one of Constantine Petrovich's bulls had broken through the pasture fence and settled Mynka, who was obviously pregnant. She had grown wider than she was tall. When confronted, Petrovich claimed that Mynka had enticed his bull, and added that it takes two to make a fence, and finally, not to worry, that he wouldn't charge a stud fee.

He opened the door and looked down the stairs into the manger. There she was, patiently standing on the straw floor, shitting, plop, plop, plop. Like the sound of sparrow hitting the windshield of a twelve-row combine. It would take Ivan a month to remove the pile of mud covering the double doors of the manger, and by then most of the Spring pasture will have been eaten by the damn sheep from Constantine Petrovitch's farm. "This is what they call free enterprise," Ivan mumbles. "The right to loot."

If he couldn't get her out, he'd have to purchase extra hay and grain. He couldn't purchase shoelaces on his pension, let alone a season of food for a pregnant cow. How he had dreamed of living in the country, free to earn his own living, free from his job as a cartographer, where nothing was definite, where he had had to tactfully redraw boundaries every time the criminals in charge decided to annex some poorly defended territory. He had toiled thirty years remapping the fluid boundaries of the world for this, this dream. How foolish he had been. His whole life coming to this. Ivan finished his lunch and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. He leaned back in his chair and concluded: "All we have are models of reality. Never the thing itself. In the end, all we have left is the illusion of truth."

He looked out the window. It was starting to rain again. He could have saved his wife. He should have taken her to the doctor, but he thought she would get better on her own. He takes another drink.

He'd have to get her up the stairs. She was an amiable cow, so that wouldn't be too much of a problem. The real problem was that she was too wide to fit through the door at the top of the stairs. He sat back down and picked up his pencil again.

He'd have to remove the door frame. His dacha had been built in a time when houses were constructed to last for generations. A single beam, running between two corner posts, supported his roof, and was also the top of the door frame. Two more stout posts formed the sides of the door frame. The beam was a full 8 meters long and a good 1/2 meter thick. It was hewn from a single tree and probably weighed close to 1000 kilograms. To move either side posts of the door frame would mean the collapse of his roof. Ivan put his pencil down and rubbed his eyes. He tugged at his white beard, and combed through the tangles with his arthritic fingers. With his knuckle-sized pencil, he figured the trigonometry. A brace here, at this angle, another here to transfer the lateral thrust of the load. His design was fragmented by, of course, the limited amount of bracing material--which was the dead wood he had been using to heat his home. He would need much larger pieces than he currently had. But surely the river would bring more. Once he had the bracing timbers in place, the vertical load would then be transferred to this floor member, which was made of oak, and where it hadn't been worn down by decades of pacing, was at least 5 centimeters thick. It seemed sound enough, but who knew what was under the floor-boards. Ivan got back on his feet, and jumped up and down. Breathing hard, he sat back down. There was no give, but there were always risks.

He carefully taped the corners of the drawings to the table, and stood back. He stretched, and did a partial deep knee bend. His bones cracked and he sat back down, and lay his head on his forearm.

It is just past dusk when he woke in his chair. Above him, in the dark, shards of white and silver flashed across the ceiling and there were clouds of fish schooling in the corners. He turned up the kerosene lamp and the fish were gone. He stood, stretched his legs, and went to the table to re-examine his drawings. A moth the size of a baby's ear attacked the glass lamp shade. Its shadow danced across the white paper.

His plan was a good one. If the floor-boards could support the load, he should be able to free Mynka with only a small reliance on her good will, and her ability to climb the stairs. He re-checked his plan by following the force of gravity down to the opposing force--the Earth itself.

He stoked the fire back to life, feeding it with small branches of driftwood. Tomorrow he would wade through the mud to the river's edge, searching for larger timbers.

He glanced at the faded, sepia-tinted photograph of his wife, smiling, even after 44 years of marriage.

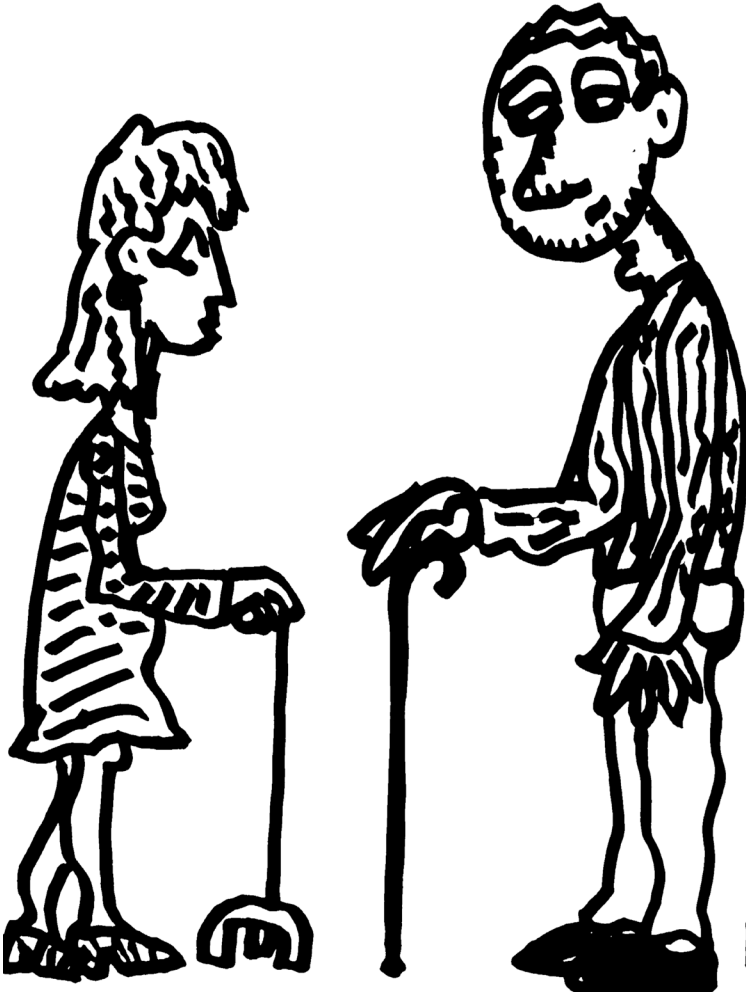
He went to the door again, pulled it open, and looked down at Mynka, who was shifting her weight from one side to the other in order to relieve the weight of her unborn calf, her one bad eye facing him, the color of dirty snow. “And if there are no fish,” he told her, “We will eat meat.”

“Moo,” she replied.



# Aging

ALLEN FORREST



It  
happens  
when  
you  
look in  
the  
mirror,  
or when  
you  
exert  
yourself  
with  
more  
than the  
usual

**F**effort

and don't get as far, as fast, as well  
as you used to.

You are reminded you're aging.

More than wrinkles, more than brown spots  
on your skin or blood vessels coming to the surface  
making a purple veined road map on your feet and other parts.

It happens when you realize you don't feel the same  
way about certain things you used to deem so important.  
Now they are quaint reminders—you're aging.

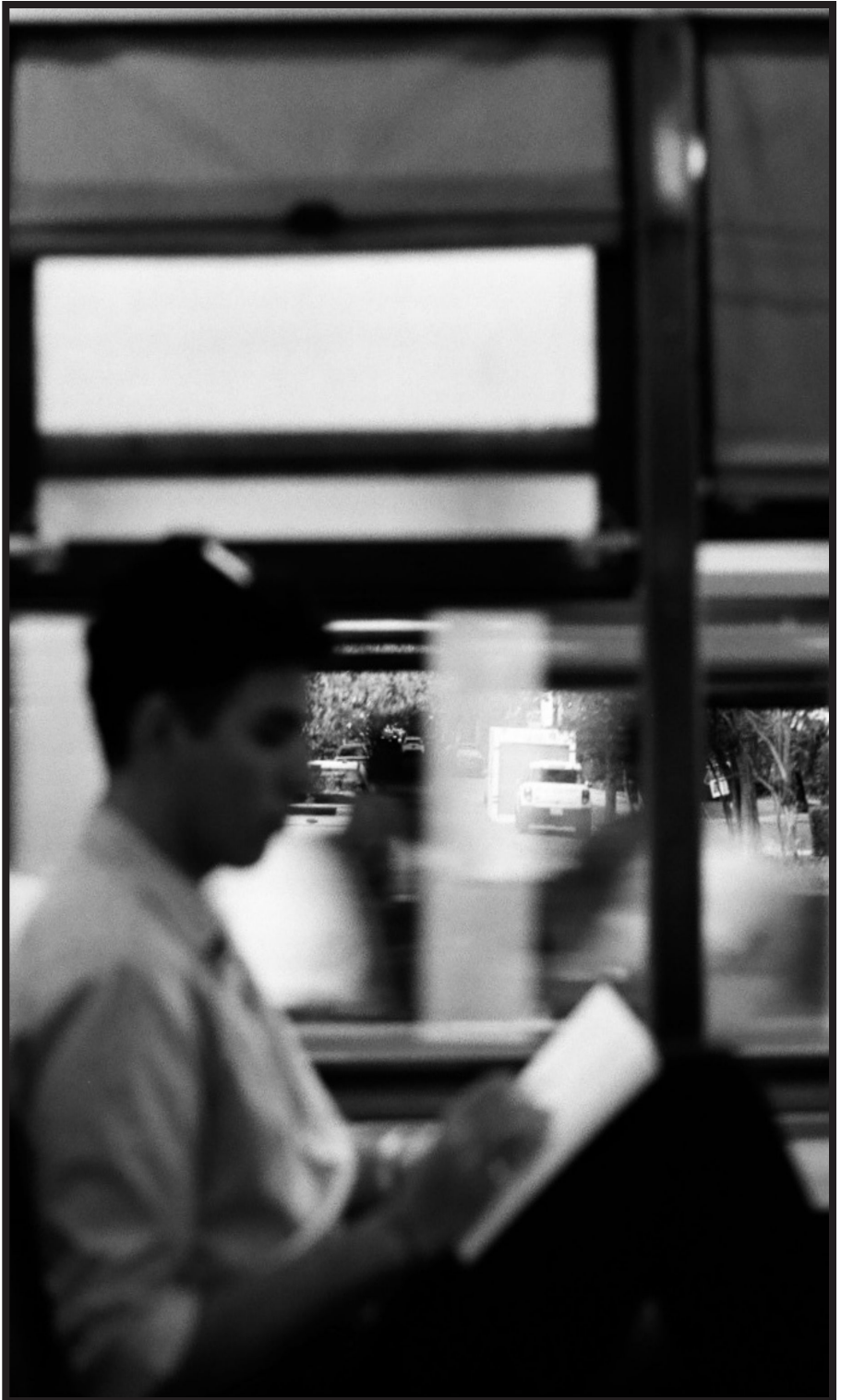
Some people begin to give up a little day by day.  
Others focus harder to hold on.  
Refusing to let go, refusing to submit to gravity.  
Now is when all those caveats of the life ahead  
come in handy.

I watched my father, so robust and capable, decline.  
I was around him, living with him, near the end.  
It taught me a lot. I was lucky to see with my own eyes  
the process—of aging.

One day it will stop.  
One day it will flash before us.  
A life. Lived.  
A time for everything.  
Until there's no time left.

Dreams to do this and that.  
Some became a reality and some stayed  
the way they were: a nice fantasy.  
We discovered so much and learned perhaps not enough.  
But we were part of the experience.  
We strutted about the stage.  
We played out the plot of our life.  
Now as we look in the mirror  
we see—we're aging.

Sharing an understanding.  
We who are aging.  
Smiling a sardonic grin.  
Knowing we're not as we used to be.  
Knowing we are—aging.



*On the Streetcar*

Ali Saunders



# Contributors

PROSPER ALUU is a Nigerian contemporary artist and creator of Abfillage, a mixed-media technique that fuses abstraction, figuration, and collage to explore themes of memory, identity, and collective transformation. Aluu's work has been exhibited internationally, including solo and group exhibitions in Lagos, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and the United States, and has been collected by institutions such as Fondation Société Générale Côte d'Ivoire and Afrexim Bank.

CARMEN ALCOCER is a New Orleans-based artist.

ERIN AUBE is a recovering attorney turned high school English teacher. Originally from a valley in Tennessee, she lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband, Charlie and daughters, Zelda and Marigold. Her work has appeared in *Poetry South*, *The Emerson Review*, *Door is a Jar*, and *The Atlanta Review* and was chosen as a semi-finalist for the 2025 Red Wheelbarrow Prize.

MICHAEL BARRY is from Green River, Wyoming. After several years of teaching, Barry decided to pursue a lifelong dream of becoming a writer. Barry is currently submitting short stories and poems for publication while continuing to work on a novel.

JOHN BECK is a recently retired professor in the labor education program at Michigan State University where he still co-directs a program that focuses on labor history and the culture of the workplace, *Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives*. Raised in a milltown on Lake Michigan in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, his poetry has been published in a number of journals including *The Seattle Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Louisville Review* and *Passages North* among others.

REX BROOKE is a former public school teacher currently living in Southern California.

CHARLES BOWERS is a Virginia-based author and artist. His work has appeared in numerous print and online publications, as well as Hollywood movies. He exhibits in Richmond, VA. A full catalog of his work can be found on Instagram @\_coffee\_13.

DANIEL DONAGHY is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *Somerset*, which was named co-winner of the 2019 Paterson Poetry Prize. His previous poetry collections include *Start with the Trouble* (University of Arkansas Press, 2009), winner of the University of Arkansas Poetry Prize and the Paterson Award for Literary Excellence and a Finalist for the Connecticut Book Award and the Milt Kessler Poetry Book Award, and *Streetfighting* (BkMk Press, 2005), a Paterson Poetry Prize Finalist. He is a Professor of English and the 2023 University Distinguished Professor at Eastern Connecticut State University, where he edits *Here: a poetry journal* with his students.

DREMA DRUDGE is a novelist and poet whose work blends emotional candor, intellectual inquiry, and the everyday with longing. She earned her MFA from the Naslund-Mann Graduate School of Writing. Her work has appeared in *The Louisville Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, and is forthcoming in *Suspended Magazine* and others.

ELIZABETH WADSWORTH ELLIS is currently published in *Literary Reviews*.

ALLEN FORREST is a painter and cartoonist, winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's *Reed Magazine*, and his Bel Red landscape paintings are in the Bellevue College Foundation's art collection. He lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Forrest's expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh, creating emotion on canvas.

MATTHEW FREEMAN holds an MFA from the University of Missouri-Saint Louis. Freeman's eighth book, *Dopamine and the Devil*, has recently been published by *Coffeetown Press*.

CRAIG HARRIS is a published poet and playwright. His first novel, *Someone Must Come To Take Us Home*, is scheduled for publication in February of 2027 by Natl Publishing. Craig loves literary humor and satire. He is currently hard at work on his second novel.

JAK KURDI, a recent "Best of the Net" nominee, has been published or has poems forthcoming in *The Citron Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Radar Poetry*, and others. After completing his master's in Creative Writing from Texas Tech University, he now works as a middle school English teacher.

BEVERLY LINDBERG decides to let paint drip and flow and mix as it desires in an effort to further abstract their paintings.

SOFIA LOVERA is a Colombian-American artist. Magical realism is a Latin American literary movement that presents fantastical elements as part of everyday life. I use this idea as a starting point in my work to achieve a balance between accurate representation and fantastical elements. Through my art, I am continuing to build on the complex feelings of being a tourist in the country your family is from, loss of permanence, a warped sense of place, and the interplay of hope and confusion when hearing stories from locals about a place with such a recent history of both violence and resilience.

MAGGIE MCGRATH is a poet, artist, and puppeteer based in New York, and a Tulane Alumni with a degree in Digital Media and English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Her work explores the intersection of peculiarity and comfort, with an appreciation and love for all that is bizarre and avant-garde. She has been featured previously in the *Tulane Review*, and has several awards for experimental film. She currently lives on Long Island with a 9-5, writing 5-9 or whenever she can.

WILL NEUENFELDT studied English at Gustavus Adolphus College and his poems are published in *Capsule Stories*, *Months to Years*, and *Red Flag Poetry*. He lives in Cottage Grove, MN, home of the dude who played Steven Stifler in those American Pie movies and a house Teddy Roosevelt slept in.

AARON POPE has been published in *County Lines Literary Magazine* and the anthology “Lost in Lust,” has had 13 feature screenplays produced, and written for three television series.

JC REILLY has work published or forthcoming from *Connecticut River WReview*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *White Winged Doves: a Stevie Nicks Poetry Anthology*. She lives in Marietta, Georgia, and serves as the editor of *Atlanta Review*. Follow her on Bluesky @aishatonu.bsky.social or on IG @jc.reilly.

HANNAH AGAPÉ RHODES is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in English (Creative Writing) at the University of South Alabama. Hannah’s prose and poetry have been published in a multitude of publications. Hannah is also a producer, writer, and on-screen character (Johanna Brooks) for Diamond Championship Wrestling. When not in the classroom or the wrestling ring, Hannah spends her days hanging out with her husband, Dawson, at a multitude of coffee shops.

DAVID ROMANDA has appeared in places such as *Columbia Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. He is the author of three books, including *Your Lover Stabbed in the Streets* (Frontenac House, 2025). Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. Check him out online: [www.romandapoetry.com](http://www.romandapoetry.com).

JIM ROSS jumped into creative pursuits after a rewarding research career. With a graduate degree from Howard University, in ten years he's published nonfiction, fiction, poetry, photography, hybrid, interviews, and plays in 200+ journals on five continents. A Best of the Net nominee in nonfiction and art, Jim's writing publications include *Barrelhouse*, *Columbia Journal*, *Ginosko*, *Hippocampus*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Manchester Review*, *Newfound*, *The Atlantic*, and *Typehouse*. Text-based photo essays include *Kestrel*, *Litro*, *NWW*, and *Sweet*. Recent interviews include *Full Stop*, *Atticus Review*, an

EROS SALVATORE is an author living in Bellingham, Washington. They have been published in the journals *Anti-Heroic Chic* and *Boudin* among others, and have a forthcoming book on Gaza refugees. They have a BA from Humboldt State University and a foster daughter who began life living under the Taliban. Their work can be seen, heard and read at <https://erossalvatore.com>.

MIKE SLUCHINSKI is grateful to the editors and readers of *failed haiku*, *inlandia journal*, *kaleidotrope*, *eternal haunted summer*, *the wave (kelp)*, *the literary review of canada*, *the coachella review*, *welter*, *poemeleon*, *lit shark*, *proud to be vol. 13*, *the ekphrastic review*, *mmpp (meow meow pow pow)*, *the fib review*, *syncopation lit. journal*, *south florida poetry journal (soflopajo)*, *freefall*, *pulpmag*, *in parentheses*, and more coming!

BOBBY SPENCER is an interdisciplinary studio arts major at Tulane University with a focus in glassblowing and design. His work revolves around movement, the natural world, and memory.

SAM SPRING is a 29-year-old nomadic writer working to save up for a van. He dropped out of SMC to start a glassware company and is the lead singer of the band "Tennis Club." His work has appeared in *The Wisconsin Review* and *The Denver Quarterly*, among others. You can find him at [www.samspring.me](http://www.samspring.me).

ALBERTO SALDAÑA URIBE is a high school dropout, a college graduate, and holds an MFA from Fresno State. His work can be found in *HAIS: a literary journal*, *Flies*, *Cockroaches*, *∅ Poets*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Slippery Elm*, and *HeartWood Literary Magazine*. Find him and his work on instagram @titiosog8.



# Submission Guidelines

Poetry and prose submissions should be included as text-format attachments (.doc or .txt). Please submit no more than five pieces of poetry, and limit prose to one piece no longer than 4,000 words. Please begin each new poem on a separate page. Text should be in Times New Roman, 12 pt. font, double-spaced. Any experimental formatting should briefly be justified in your cover letter (excluding poetry). Please number document pages.

Artwork should be submitted in a high-resolution format, and of megabyte size or larger, and named in the following way: Lastname\_Firstname\_Titleofwork.JPEG. Please include dimensions and media with all submissions. Limit ten pieces of art/photography per person.

Please include a short bio of no more than 100 words in your cover letter. Name, address, email, and phone number should also be included in your cover letter.

The Tulane Review only accepts previously unpublished work.

We accept simultaneous submissions, but please notify us and withdraw your work if it has been accepted elsewhere.

If you have any thoughts or questions, please contact us at [litsoc@tulane.edu](mailto:litsoc@tulane.edu).

The Tulane Literary Society normally acquires first North American serial rights, but will consider second serial publication.





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