

The Mocking Owl Roast

Issue 4, Volume 1

Jay

Fiction
True As the Canticle
Moon

Poetry
Transport

Poetry
Performer in Flight

Featuring

Essay
Extravacats

Essay
On Being Divinely
Messy

Fiction
Bad Hair Day

Masthead

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Editor's Note

For 2024, I selected four “words of the year” for myself. Play, delight, music, and adventure call me to this year. Our theme for this issue aligns with these words beautifully: joy.

When grown-ups remember how to play, when they know how to delight in small things and large, when they dance to the music no one else hears, and they know how to turn everyday moments into adventures, they are truly joyful.

This year has not naturally lent itself to joy yet – we’re four months in, and my closest friends and I have experienced losses, tragedies, significant stress, and financial difficulties. Yet, with these words singing over us, we have found joy in the small moments and have found release from the stresses of life.

Many of the pieces in this issue are small moments of joy. Anticipation – like that found in “The Human Torpedo” or remembered delights from childhood, like in “Opening Day at the Community Pool” are great examples of this.

Life is hard naturally, thanks to human nature and an imperfect world. But joy may be found even in the darkest places, heaviest moments, or most stressful circumstances.

So, though the year has tried hard to tear us down already, we here at the MockingOwl Roost have found delight and wonder, beauty and excitement in the little things, the big things, and the expectant things to come.

As you read this issue of the MockingOwl Roost, may you find your own joyful moments and be reminded of the good things in life in which you may seek that exuberance.



Rita Mock-Pike, Editor-in-Chief



The Dream and the Waking Fiction

Sue Paterson



Navigating darkness, the owl flies quietly through the night, the slow sweep of her broad wingspan the only sound. Moonlight dances through the tall pines, flickering gold and silver sparkles on her wings as she glides over the river, the cool air tickling the downy feathers underneath her body. A harbinger of truth, watchful and observant with her microscopic eyes; the stillness of night foretells of the coming day's endeavors. Stories ripple in the water beneath her shadow, revealing the bigger picture floating on the airwaves of life.

Ancient ones call her the Night Eagle. As she flies along the river, her asymmetrical ears receive messages of the night in stereophonic sound. She holds each truth in her being, tucked away, seamlessly and invisibly clearing misspoken words and chaotic thoughts that clutter the world, creating a density in the air like smoke from a fire. Whatever does not serve the coming day trickles away and is offered to the depths of the river, down into the roots of the earth, where it is metamorphosed into light.

Like the goddess Athena, this is her process as she moves through dreamtime, using the strategy of discernment without knowing why or having thought about it. Born into this life for this very purpose, the Night Eagle opens the door to hidden realms. The only way to reach them is through the truth, free from distractions and the clutter of life.

"What does your heart want?" the Night Eagle muses as a new day tiptoes into the distant horizon. As she clears the spidery webs around your own truth, she asks you to be still and let your dreams inform you of what is essential.

May 8, 2022



Branches from the tall pines reach out as she speeds by in her sensible car, brushing away the outer edges of the heavy energy from the patients she treated that day. Each one brought their unique bag of pain. Laying it at her feet they say: "Heal me."

"What needs healing?" She asks, her kind eyes open and inviting, genuinely curious. With grace and a light step, she navigates the heavy energy of the stories, imbalances, angst, heartbreaks and physical pain which she witnesses and absorbs throughout the day. Somehow, she herds their words into the time frame allowed with pointed questions, stated with such gentleness that her patients don't realize their depth. One day's work, a perfect mirror of the pain in the world, the doctor understands it is more than can be carried by one human, especially the small sprite of a woman she is.

Whether there be sun, rain or snow, every Tuesday and Friday, at the end of the workday, the doctor heads to mile marker eleven on River Road. She hikes down the steep path to the river, contemplating the patterns unwoven that day, allowing balance to replace pain and suffering.

She takes a deep breath and gasps at the cold as she steps into the fast-running water, letting the stories unravel into the icy ripples, offering it all to the river. As the water cleanses her, she notices how each ripple shifts, eager to take heavy energy away, infusing it with light, alchemically turning it from lead to gold, bringing greater healing that ripples out into the world, like hands joining around the globe, united, whole.

Life has taught her that the river loves to take heavy energy. Qualities worth keeping sparkle on top of the water in the crystalline sunlight. Heavy, dense energy no longer available for the vibrancy of life is drawn down into the roots of the earth, using this same energy to shore up the caverns, pathways, waterfalls of the underworld, now filled with a sense of usefulness and purpose.

Tossed and churned with tiny molecules of air, the circle of healing is fulfilled, shooting the energy to the surface, to the ripples that flow down the river of life, to another day.



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Performer in Flight

Hummingbird's wings
thrum, they beat fast
as the small bird moves
flower to flower
I feel the wind against my face
hear the murmur of those wings
watch the glitter of feathers
as the bird performs circus feats
in the air

Poetry

*Ammanda
Selethia Moore*



Sue Cook

Tonight I dance in the moonlight
the stars commune with my soul as I lift my arms to the heavens.

The spirals of life dance within me
consuming all that is anger and grief
leaving the happiness I once remember.

I twirl like the Dervish in a dance of ecstasy
regaining my joy, my understanding, my soul.

Dance with me, my ancestors.
Sing the ancient song of becoming.
I long to hear your words.

This year has tried to strip me of them
but arms with light aloft will bring redemption back to my body.

I am light –
I am power –
I am joy.

Ancestral Dance

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True as the Canticle Moon

Fiction

Rita Mock-Pike

Soft spring winds, highlighted with sea salt and the scent of melaleuca, swept over the boat as we neared the shore. I'd smelled the heady evergreen many times before but never here – never on the island of the “rat’s nest.” The little critters that hopped around with tiny joeys in pouches, accompanied by peacocks, oystercatchers, parrots, and turtles, draw crowds of daytime tourists. They also tug at the hearts of the lucky few who win a holiday on the tiny island in the Indian Ocean off the coast near Perth.

I'd always dreamed of making it here – where the happiest animals on earth show off smiles as big as a human hand. I didn't expect to win the lottery to do it. But, on a whim, I decided to throw my name in, expecting to never hear an answer.

I stepped off the boat and found myself surrounded by tourists waiting to exit the island and head back to Cottesloe. Sunset approached. My temporary abode, a short walk from the lighthouse, called to me. I hefted the backpack higher on my shoulders, cinched the waist strap, and floated on the golden hour magic along the trail leading to my private hut for three days.

The startling “quokka!” shrieks of the little marsupials disarmed me. I had startled a group of the hopping macropods as they headed out for night ‘hunting.’ They startled me more, I think, with their bizarre screams.

“I’ll call that even.”

Once they settled down, the critters looked up at me and seemed to implore me for something – to do something. Should I follow? Or am I just anthropomorphizing these fuzzy dreamboats?



I should continue towards the huts but how could I leave the little beauties behind? Oh, the fascination of them! How often does one receive an invitation from wild animals to tramp behind them into the gloaming?

They repeatedly looked back at me as they hopped away. Hop, look back. Hop, look back. Pause. I stepped in their direction. Excitedly, they hopped on, then looked back. I kept following; they sped up the hopping.

I had lucked out by being alone on the island save for the staff family that currently held residence in some of the few buildings. They had inquired if I was okay with this. Of course, I was! I could roam early in the morning without fear of disruption by annoying tourists also seeking refuge on Rottnest Island.

Thus far, my adventures had fulfilled dreams! I met a little family of quokkas almost instantly. What more could I have asked for?

We rounded the bend, heading away from the lighthouse, nearing the opposite beach where a host of melaleuca plants rustled together in the breeze along the boardwalk. Beneath the shrubs, mobs of the furry marsupials hopped about, practically sparkling in the golden embers of the rapidly vanishing sunlight.

Inching along behind them, I noticed more and more of the tiny macropods clustered beneath branches, in shallow burrows, or lying beneath the trees. A lone tree stump sat amid the gathering place.

As I approached, the quokkas hopped and chirruped – singing, almost – their wild “quokka” squeals. Like a court of royals, a smaller troop gathered in around the stump, whilst the rest hopped to their feet and shifted toward me. Are they herding me?

I sat on the stump, unsure of what I might do. The court swirled in around me, the last dying rays of the sun glistening on their amber fur as the largest, purplest moon I’d ever seen speedily presented its ascent in the sky. As I sank onto the stump, the court rose to hind haunches, chirruping louder and softer rhythmically by turn.

The creatures sat like this, gazing at me as dusk swallowed the sky and filled the atmosphere with nighttime trills and coos. The torch in my pocket would wait. I knew I’d need it to find my cabin. But for now, I would sit here among my tiny mammal adelphoi and join their rising psalm to the heavenly orb. Hesitantly, quietly, I trilled the gentle song my mother taught me as a young lass.

"Nighttime comes with pretty bows
looping 'round the sky
as stars twinkle, shine alight
and welcome such as I.

"With songs of love and songs of hope,
bell miners tinkle in the night.
Sing now your song, my little friends
and make sorrows near take flight."

The quokkas seemed to approve, for they lifted their own songs higher into the sky. As their chorus lifted, the whole island burst with a wildlife grand opera. The sharp, awkward squawks of peacocks rose among the rainbow bee-eater twitters. Frog chirps, croaks, and ballads stirred in. I lifted my song louder, higher, tapping into my previous lyric soprano range long unheard. As if by some miracle of the animal accompaniment, my range returned, shimmering into the night, almost visible in silver strands.

We sang together, I one with these dazzling beings of far off dreamworlds grounded in the real-world ecospheres. For how long? I'll never know. I didn't think to look at my watch or tune into the silenced mobile phone tucked into my pocket. I only know that the song lasted as long as my soul needed, and my vocal folds held out.

Then, stillness as the symphony faded and the moon rose higher. A peaceful quietude draped across the clearing like an electric blanket covering limbs with comfort on a chilly night. The quokkas drifted away; the bird songs dimmed. I was left alone on the stump with naught but the light of the moon for company.

No music necessary, I danced along the path toward the lighthouse the next morning, where seashells promised discovery on sands beside washed ashore hydrozoa and skate-egg pods. But there was music. Soft, empyrean ballads of songbirds blending with the distant stringed sounds of a slightly too-sharp violin.

As I neared the lighthouse, the source of the music became apparent. A young man, about Fifteen years old, stood on the cliff above the spray, bowing and stroking the catgut with precision, if not exceptional skill. Below, a boat pattered along, adding to the cacophony of the island's morning soundtrack. I crept close, ignoring the sharp notes, uncertain how to announce myself without startling the young man. A silver gull swooped down, dazzled by the flash of mother-of-pearl on the bow, and drew the boy's attention away from himself to the world around him.

Feeling self-conscious, I acted as though I hadn't seen him. "Good morning!" he shouted at me above the din.

I looked up and smiled back. "Good morning."

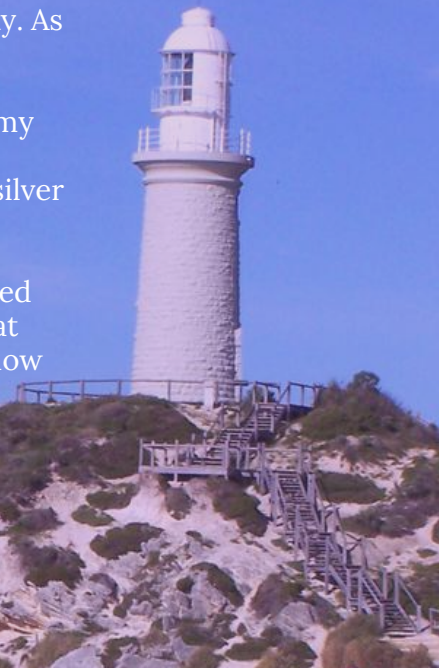
"You must be the lady staying this week?"

"I am." I nodded and stepped closer.

He laid the violin down in its case and came toward me. "Mum says you're a singer?"

I nodded again, this time feeling both flattered and humiliated at once. *They must have looked me up.*

"She has all your albums," he continued, much to my blushing.



"That's..." I saved myself by tripping over an awkward rock caught betwixt the sand and another, larger stone.

The boy reached out a hand and kept me from a harsh landing.

"You don't mind being on your own?" he asked.

"Not at all." I paused, entranced by the vision of gurgling foam on the barnacle-encrusted rocks below. "Do you?"

The boy shifted his weight towards me. "Not at all."

We smiled at each other. Despite the age disparage, we sensed kindred souls afoot.

"Did you get to see the moon last night?"

Raising my eyes to the beacon atop the lighthouse, nearly imperceptible at this angle, I breathed in the salty air like my lungs should burn without it. "I've never seen a purple moon before."

"The canticle moon," the boy said.

I looked back now. "Canticle moon?"

"Mum says it only appears over Rottnest when someone with a bit of magic in their bones is here."

"Magic."

The boy smiled again, softly now, with bright dreams dancing between his lids. "I heard you singing."

"Did you?" I had no intention of coyness but couldn't help it to save myself from the profound embarrassment that fluttered in my chest.

"With the quokkas. And birds."

"And frogs," I interjected.

The boy's eyes crinkled with silent laughter. "They're my favorite. Especially the ones that sound like sheep."

"They're my favorite, too. Of the frogs, anyway."

"You prefer the quokkas?"

I nodded. "Exotic for me."

"Exotic for anyone but me, I reckon," he teased. About 20,000 quokkas hop this globe, with half of them on this tiny island and most of the rest on Bald Island nearby.

"Fair."

"Mum said you're not performing anymore," the boy went on.

"Not really."

"Why not?" He prickled slightly at his words; I sensed his curious nature often got his mother's chiding for asking intrusive questions of strangers, of which he must meet thousands annually.

"I don't know," I shrugged. I knew better. "No, that's not true. I do know."

The boy gazed back, solemnly anticipating some great tragedy or deep revelation.

"I haven't wanted to, not for a long time."

"Did something happen?"

"No." I shrugged again, releasing tension I'd carried in my shoulders for longer than I could recall. "Life. The world. Sadness."

"No more magic?" he asked.

"No more magic," I nodded.

"Until last night."

I smiled. "Do the quokkas always sing?"

"Only under the canticle moon. When magic returns to the island with someone new. Someone, I think, who needs it."

I bit back the tears that instantly rushed my eyes, burning my nose.

"Would you mind if I sat and listened to you play?" I asked.

The boy smiled softly as he inhaled deeply. "Something about the sea."

For an undisturbed hour, I listened to the young man playing the violin, slightly off-tune, slightly too sharp, slightly too much allegro bouncing across the strings. I didn't care. My perfectly pitched ear relaxed and the scenery of the island, the enchantment of the place, the beauty of the mist and the crash and the songs of the waves filled the void between.

Then the tourists arrived, and we parted ways, he in search of his family, I in search of solitude.

"I've never witnessed two canticle moons in a row."

The voice, a strange, mature male's voice, hit my ears like a hammer against a nail's head. *The dad*, I thought, waiting for the mother's voice to follow. But no one else spoke.

"Never?" I asked into the shadowy realm where silhouettes of dancing quokkas collided with silver-purple streaks of moonlight playing across the trail. My voice had faded an hour ago after the long song joined with the wildlife murmur once more on Rottneest Island.

"I've been here twenty years and never," he echoed the sentiment. "You must have an extra dose of charm in you."

I laughed. "Hardly."

"Oh, no. I'm sure of it," the man laughed lightly. "Your voice casts the spell. Your soul creates the enchantment."

Ignoring his outlandish praise, I looked up at the violet moon. "What makes it so purple?"

"Alchemy?"

"All these druid quokkas chanting recipes to the wizardly turtles who stir the cauldron of wonder."

"With a plainsong refrain to confuse the black art sorcerers."

I knew I shouldn't – the spell would be broken – but I had to look over my shoulder into the face of the man who spoke with kindred silliness.

He seemed familiar yet foreign. His son must look like him.

"I hear you met Lachlan today."

So, that's his name.

"Playing a lovely violin concerto by the lighthouse."

"He said I needed to meet you."

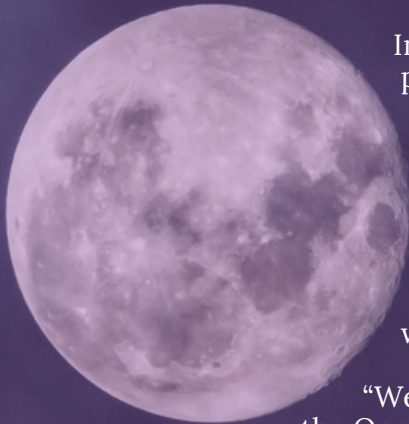
My blush was thankfully hidden by the darkness of the atmosphere.

"He's a sweet young man."

"With an instant crush on you, I reckon."

I laughed. "On this old biddy? Oh, dear. The boy needs to get out more."

"Well, he is kind of stuck on this island..." Then he laughed. "But he was wrong. I didn't need to meet you. We've met before."



Instincts dictated that I ask when or where, but my fascination with this place – this island filled with dreams and prism-colored fantasias – held my tongue with intrigue. Why wouldn't we have met? After all, quokkas sing, and I've got a double dose of magic!

A cloud filtered across the lilac moon, tossing shadows around us in rippling waves. Waves. As if by miracle of the island's hymn, the man before me came into sharp focus twenty years earlier on a quiet path through the Royal Botanic Gardens, where I'd been watching the waves of the Sydney Harbour dance artfully with their sunlight partner.

"We have!" I exclaimed, unable to keep my mouth shut. That afternoon, at the Opera House."

"An enchanted garden..." His voice trailed off as he seemed to drift backward in time.

"You never wrote to me," I commented.

"I didn't think you meant it."

"Of course I did! I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

But how could he have known? A happenchance meeting in a garden on the opposite end of the country. A startling afternoon filled with thunderstorms brought on suddenly by a storm we hadn't expected. Sheltering beneath an awning in a garden for an hour. Parting ways as I headed to the Sydney Opera House for my single performance in the venue that night. How could he have known?

"I'm a romantic. I thought..."

"Why wouldn't you?" I conceded.

"You, a famous singer. Me, a humble lighthouse keeper..."

"Don't exaggerate the story."

He laughed. “Still.”

“Still.” My lips formed the echo before my emotions could tell the brain cells to stop.

“You’re the one who got away,” he said.

Now, I laughed. “Obviously, you got over it, Calen.”

“How so?” he asked in a teasing voice that now sounded so familiar that I questioned not recognizing him instantly. Yet, it had been 20 years, and this was, as this man might incant, magic. A twinkle of pleasure at my remembrance of his name flitted across the clean-cut face.

“Your son. Birthed by presumably a girlfriend or wife...”

“Lachlan?” A rumbling laugh that started in his belly and rose to his nose erupted in a near-manic explosion. “Sister’s ankle biter.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sure you’ve had your share of romances since, with men of repute and fame and stature, Ms. Adelaide Jett.”

“Never been bothered.”

“Come now. It was a rainy hour in a distant garden with a bizarre man who didn’t know your face despite listening to all your albums. I can’t be the one who escaped your romantic grasp...”

“No one knows my face,” I said.

“I do.” His tone of voice shifted, softened, sweetened. Almost huskily, he added, “Every crease, every freckle.”

Embarrassment, confusion, intrigue all burst from my soul in awkward laughter. “Every wrinkle?”

“I’d like to get to know them,” he whispered. “Your publicity shots tend to hide them from curious eyes.”

“Publicity shots?” I laughed again. “Haven’t had any of those in years.”

“I know.”

Another cloud rippled across the moon, casting lavender shadows over his face. “Do you now?”

A chuckle accompanied a gentle glance, almost secretive in nature. “I’ll write you that letter now.”

An unholy snort escaped my lungs via nostrils. I ducked my head and stepped off the path.

“I’m sorry. I—”

I looked back into those shining eyes reminiscent of the ocean on a stormy afternoon. “No. It’s all right. I don’t mind. I’m just — embarrassed.”

“Is my flirting that bad?”

The flush of red screamed upward from my neck to my forehead. “No. No. I’m — just out of practice, I suppose.”

It would be lies to say no men had ever pursued me. It would be lies to say I had never thought of letting some of them. But, indeed, it would be a lie to imply any had ever gotten past my daydreaming nature that sought a kindred soul as silly, as enraptured by beauty, as attuned to nature, as ravenous for music and art as myself. Singers, musicians, dancers, actors — many of these artistic men had taken me on a date or two. Accountants with a penchant for novel writing (though, of course, the great novel had never been freed from their minds) and their ilk had also tried to win my affections. But none had ever taken. And eventually, I gave

up. I had never pined – despite my romantic nature – and never thought about this man with me now, here, again in the past ten or fifteen years. Only the first five or so.

Perhaps this canticle moon, sprinkling us with dazzling amethyst light, caught my soul in my hand and my heart in my throat. My own hot breath felt like a fever burning my tongue. I half-gasped, opening my mouth to speak and breathe and laugh and choke and cry all at once.

“I lied to Lachlan.”

The man before me paused. He looked down at me, gentle shining eyes deepening into radiant pools of green gems.

“He asked why I stopped singing. I said I didn’t feel like it. But nothing happened, I just stopped.”

Calen leaned in, almost drinking in my words like a man caught in a dinghy lost at sea.

“It’s not true. Something did happen.”

Patience has never been my strength, but I saw it reflected in Calen’s eyes. He would not pressure nor coerce.

“It is why I have never had a long-term partner.”

Calen’s silence welcomed my tears.

“No single thing caused it. No horrific moment or terrifying encounter in a dark alleyway. Rather, a long series of disillusionments and broken relationships over nonsensical moments. My passion never left me, but she’s been hiding for a long time.”

“Ten years?”

A subtle nod couldn’t be picked up in the dark, but he knew.

“A culmination of sorrow, of feeling lost, pooling into a pit of loneliness,” I said. “A passionless wasteland of inactivity, dullness, forgotten joy.”

“And now?”

“I think I’m beginning to remember who I am. Thanks to this place. And the quokkas.”

“The canticle moon.”

“I know I’ve no right to ask, but would you walk with me? Listen?”

“I’d even sing with you,” he whispered.

I laughed now, no snorts or awkwardness. “Maybe even sing with me.”

We walked for a time, as I poured out the heaviness that had taken over my soul. No deep tragedies, like losses or deaths or assaults, had taken over my passions to hold them ransom. But things – being unique, being unconventional, unsupported, unusual – had compiled to symphonize a silent movement in my life.

As dawn broke and the canticle moon sank beneath the Pacific rim, I felt myself again for the first time in a decade or more. A song escaped my lips, unbidden but delightful.

“Dance freely my soul in the shine of the sun,
with rays prancing ‘round with the flowers and birds.
Lift eyes to the heavens and witness the sound
of nature as one with itself in sweet winds astir.”



The art song was the first I recorded, back when I was just a young lass of seventeen. My first album, my first single, my first love. I'd written the piece as a child and spent years crafting and honing it into a teenager's art song that somehow caught the attention of the music world.

"Kangaroo paws and bee eaters sing,
banksia blooms with dust in the air,
fragrant for spring,
fragrant for love,
fragrant for ere."

Calen joined in the song with a strong baritone harmony. Every word poured from his lips like droplets of dew soothing a parched earth.

At daybreak, when the sun broke free from the horizon's edge, we let the song fade and found ourselves holding hands by the lighthouse.

"Join me for a cuppa?" he asked.

I nodded, nearly voiceless now and breathless at once.

"Ever had Rooibos?"

"I love it! Fell in love with that brew in South Africa on tour one year."

"When did you tour? I was there for a while in 2008."

"2007. Sorry."

We sat with a cuppa Rooibos, both filled to the brim with sugar and milk – as any proper Aussie and not South African would do – and watched the waves from Calen's doorway for a while.

"Two more days," I noted.

"And not much sleep to run on," Calen smirked.

"What are you up to today?" I asked.

"Gotta bit of maintenance to do on the fences and boardwalk by the eastern gate."

I had only 36 hours or so left of my holiday. Should I? "Want some company?"

"I'll put you to work."

"I won't mind."

Calen's gaze told me what he'd rather be doing. I blushed and looked away.

Matilda called and I listened for a few hours, but later I joined Calen at the eastern gate to do some repairs. We spent the day picnicking and mending fences, drinking strawberry wine (how he knew this was my favorite, I'll never know!), and filling in the missing years between our chance meetings.

By sunset, we'd made our way to the clearing where the quokka sang. "Think we'll have a third one?"

Calen shrugged. "Never seen two in a row before. Never know."

No canticle moon painted us in violet shadows and the quokkas hid themselves away. "I suppose one person can only sprinkle so much magic in three nights."

A large, warm hand found its way to my shoulder. "You have more than enough enchantment for me."

I turned to face Calen while the tingles of romance fluttered up and down my spine. I hadn't kissed anyone in a long time – maybe he hadn't either. We hesitated, both checking with the other, until questions of romance and sorcery, quokkas and music beneath a canticle moon deserted my dome and melted into the softness of his embrace.

Dusk to dark to moonlight to midnight to sunrise to sunup to sleep in the hammock outside his hut.

My final day on Rottnest abated as naturally and gently as the glimmering rain that sent us inside the lighthouse for shelter an hour before my departing boat should make land. "I thought visitors weren't allowed in here."

"Only if they don't have the key."

We climbed the spiraling stairs up what seemed like a million steps – most likely not even a hundred. At the top, I leaned toward the window overlooking the island. Calen leaned towards the sea. "Does anyone ever win the lottery twice?"

"You're always welcome to stay with me."

I looked over at him in time to notice a blush rise in his ruddy cheeks for the first time since we'd taken shelter from rain on our previous happenchance meeting. "I suppose I could pitch a tent and trip you up in the middle of the night when you come out to check on the quokkas."

"The hammock's pretty nice, too, may I remind you?"

"Except at moments like this."

"Fair."

Too soon, the boat landed, and needs must met us at the dock, backpack in tow, memory cards filled, and a bundle of Calen's garden flowers tucked safely out of sight in a filmy paper sack.

"Didn't know you were friends." The boatwoman nodded toward Calen as he set my pack in the hold.

"I didn't know he was here."

"I saw her coming a mile off, though!" Calen teased.

The boatwoman glanced between us, a smile peeling her lips apart. "Finally found a bird worth courting?"

I should have blushed.

"And sings like a forty-spotted pardalote," Calen grinned.

"High praise, this one," the woman laughed. "Now, unless you're coming with me back to Cottesloe, off. Make eyes another time. I've got a schedule to keep."

Calen sighed and leaned toward me.

"Eh, no snogging in front of the kids!" one older man teased. No ankle biters had been ashore that day.

A quiet kiss and away the boat. Breakers of emotion pounded against the shore of my heart. I couldn't leave – and yet I couldn't stay.

"Promise me you'll write?" I called from the bow.

"This time, I will."

"Promise?"

"True as the quokka sings and the canticle moon rises."

On Being Divinely Messy

Alda Cheng

Essay

“You are gay, aren’t you?” My brother yelled at me as I hung up the phone. It was a call from a classmate. He called to wish me a happy birthday. It was March 5th 1983. I was a Freshman in college. In Taipei, Taiwan.

I didn’t jump up and down screaming in excitement. I said, “thank you,” in a gentle voice.

My brother heard everything on the other line. He was puzzled that I didn’t treat that phone call as if it were a birthday gift from God. I should have rolled over on the floor in ecstasy. After all, a young man just called the house.

My brother inferred from that conversation that I was a lesbian because I didn’t sound too enthusiastic. I mean, how could I? The phone call woke me up. I was not a morning person. I was too sleepy to be grateful.

Gratitude was the exact sentiment he felt I should have displayed. As a young woman, an unattractive one at the time by the normal standard of Chinese/Taiwanese femininity, how could I not appreciate any attention from just anyone from the opposite sex?

I was a tomboy, acting like a boy/man and desperately wanting to be one too. My masculine demeanor and temperament didn’t fit very well with my female peers and their seeming comfort with femininity: the slender figure, the graceful posture, the gentle gestures and movement, the perfect fitting of dresses, the delicate ankles, the long hair flowing down their back, and the sweet innocence of their soft voice.

I was the opposite of all those things.

I was failing as a girl/woman. What was my way out?

If I had had the vocabulary then, I would or could have identified myself as gender fluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming. I didn’t. I didn’t fit in, and I couldn’t find my way out.

When confronted by my brother, I neither confirmed nor denied my sexuality. I would have done either if I knew anything about myself. I only knew enough to be critical of him.

“Wait. You think I am gay simply because I don’t give him attention. Just one man?” I mocked his hasty conclusion about my sexuality based on the unfitting performance of my gender.

Years later when I looked at my own photos around that time, I realized that I would have labeled myself gay or queer too if I could see myself the way others saw me. For everyone around me, my tomboyishness was the clue to my sexuality.

Except I was clueless within an environment decisively cis-heteronormative in every way then.

I liked women. I just couldn’t pinpoint my feelings toward them. I only knew this. I was drawn to women with short haircuts. I would stare at them as they passed me by. I kept wondering why their heads were so well shaped, and their haircut was so beautifully done. I blamed my mother for letting me sleep on my back, which caused the back of my head to grow unevenly. I didn’t know I was simply drawn to a certain type of woman, boyish-looking butch woman. My own reflection.

Naming requires language and conceptual categories. We organize our experiences using existing linguistic categories and conceptual tools. Without them, we simply know we don’t fit.

Looking back, I am amazed that I was more concerned about the consequences of how he came to claim that truth about me than the consequences of that truth about myself. My approach to sexuality or everything in life is very similar to the way I approach religion: I am agnostic. You neither confirm nor deny anything until you know. Knowing is a path and an infinite process. You question the claimed truth as well as the path that leads to the claim. At that age, I got a critical mind. I loved deconstructing everything.

My tendency to deconstruct did not subside when I finally fell in love with a woman for the first time at the age of 31, a butch woman to be exact. J and I were involved as a butch-femme couple in 1995. That was the first time I felt I could be the woman in a relationship, a feeling I never did have when I was involved with men. Yet my critical mind wasn't letting me off the hook.

We were sitting in her room at her house in Manila, the Philippines. On that December morning in 1995, as we were looking into each other's eyes and feeling deeply in love, I said to her, "That's it? I am a lesbian now? Isn't what we are doing reproducing the patriarchy though? This butch-femme thing."

I just reduced our love to "this thing." I experienced the cognitive and the emotional dissonance between being critical of our couple dynamics and feeling right at home with it at the same time.

By then I was well versed with feminist theories having been in graduate school in the United States, particularly critiques toward butch-femme dynamics and relationships. As I was getting to the truth about myself, I was also actively deconstructing the path that led me to it. I was telling myself the relationship didn't measure up to the most "woke" critique of the time even though everything felt so right and real.

It was too binary, too patriarchal, and too heterosexist. In essence, not intellectually cutting-edge or theoretically forward-looking enough.

I spent the little time we had as a couple in a cross-border long-distance relationship mulling over our legitimacy as a lesbian/feminist butch-femme couple. I was still trying to fit in even as I crossed "borders" and entered a space that was supposedly meant for me.

I never did ask myself: "What if this butch-femme thing is my only turn-on? What's my way out then?"

I was deconstructing myself as I felt I was finally making it as a human in this world amidst border-crossing. I was denying myself the pleasure of just living and being because I felt I was full of contradictions. I thought I got to live a life filled with consistency between my ideals/concepts and my practices. I thought the paths I traveled had to be neat, right, and perfect.

I am not arguing against having a critical mind here. The problem is: that I have prioritized my mind over my bodily or emotional experiences. Instead of fully embracing the lived experiences and letting them be the source of my knowledge, my mind overrides them. I doubt; I analyze; I critique; I debate. I use categories and vocabularies built by different bodies and experiences to measure against the deep feelings of my own flesh and blood. Through and through, I try to fit my experiences into conceptual boxes that don't always work well.

Existing language and categories are also a double bind. You need them to organize your experiences, but they are also limited and not always consistent with our messy human experiences.

Nothing is wrong with having a critical mind, except we forget to also respect our often-messy thoughts and feelings and give them the space and power they deserve. It becomes a problem when being critical and analytical is more important than just being real in our own skin.

It became a problem of mine because I spent more time fitting myself into boxes than simply letting myself fall in love and love someone. Or more importantly, to simply love ME, the messy one with an imperfect path.

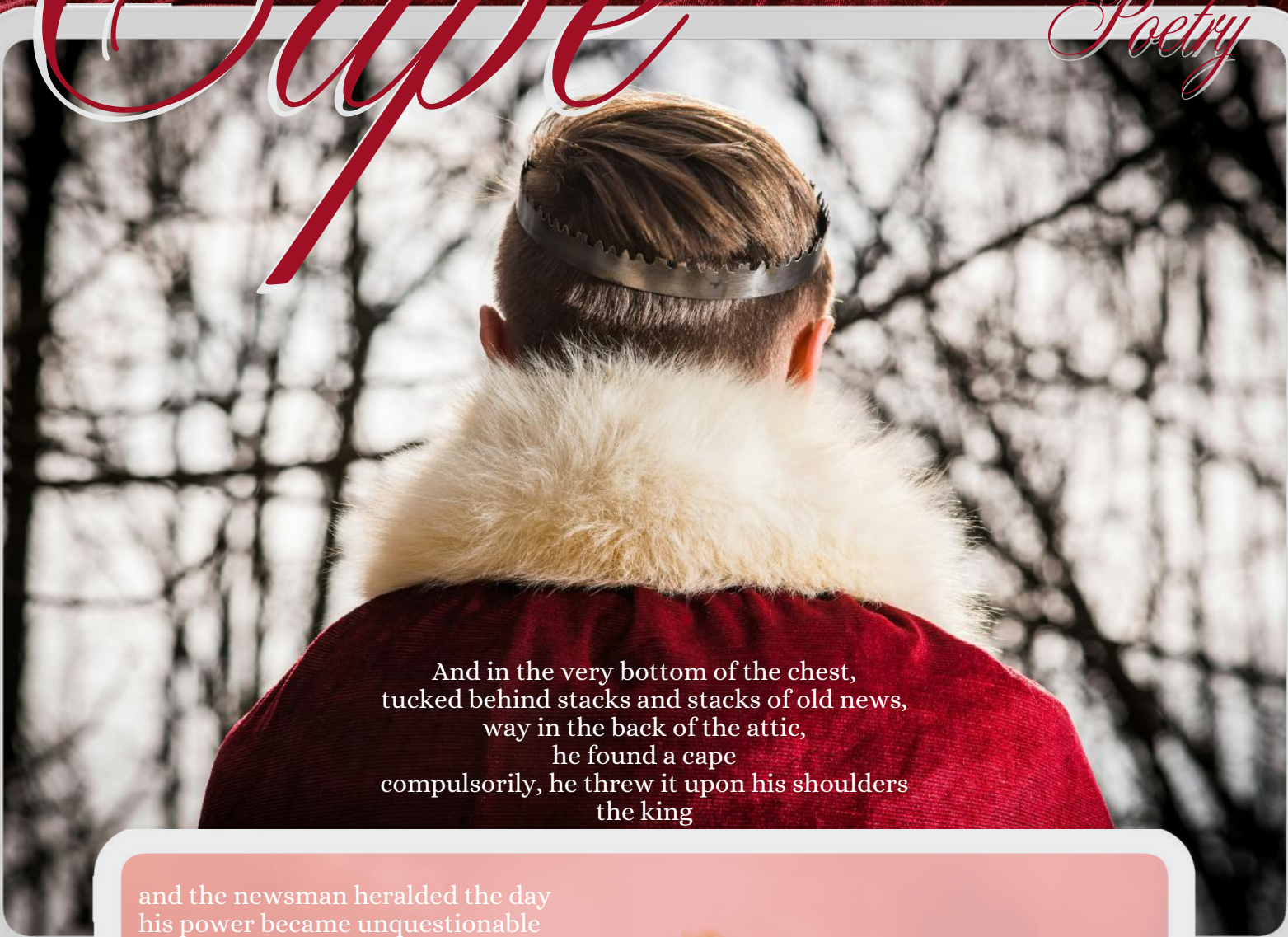
Looking back, that pretense of fitting somewhere feels dishonest and hypocritical to the bone. Now I have learned to give power and space to the embodied truths I claim without completely delegitimizing the paths I have traveled even if they may not have been perfect. I simply learn to live with the dissonance that is doomed to happen between my mind, my body, my practice, and what the world deems right or perfect. I simply let the journey unfold on its own without having to fit anywhere.

That dissonance? That's called being a human. And that's simply God.

Cape

Eric Velleux

Poetry



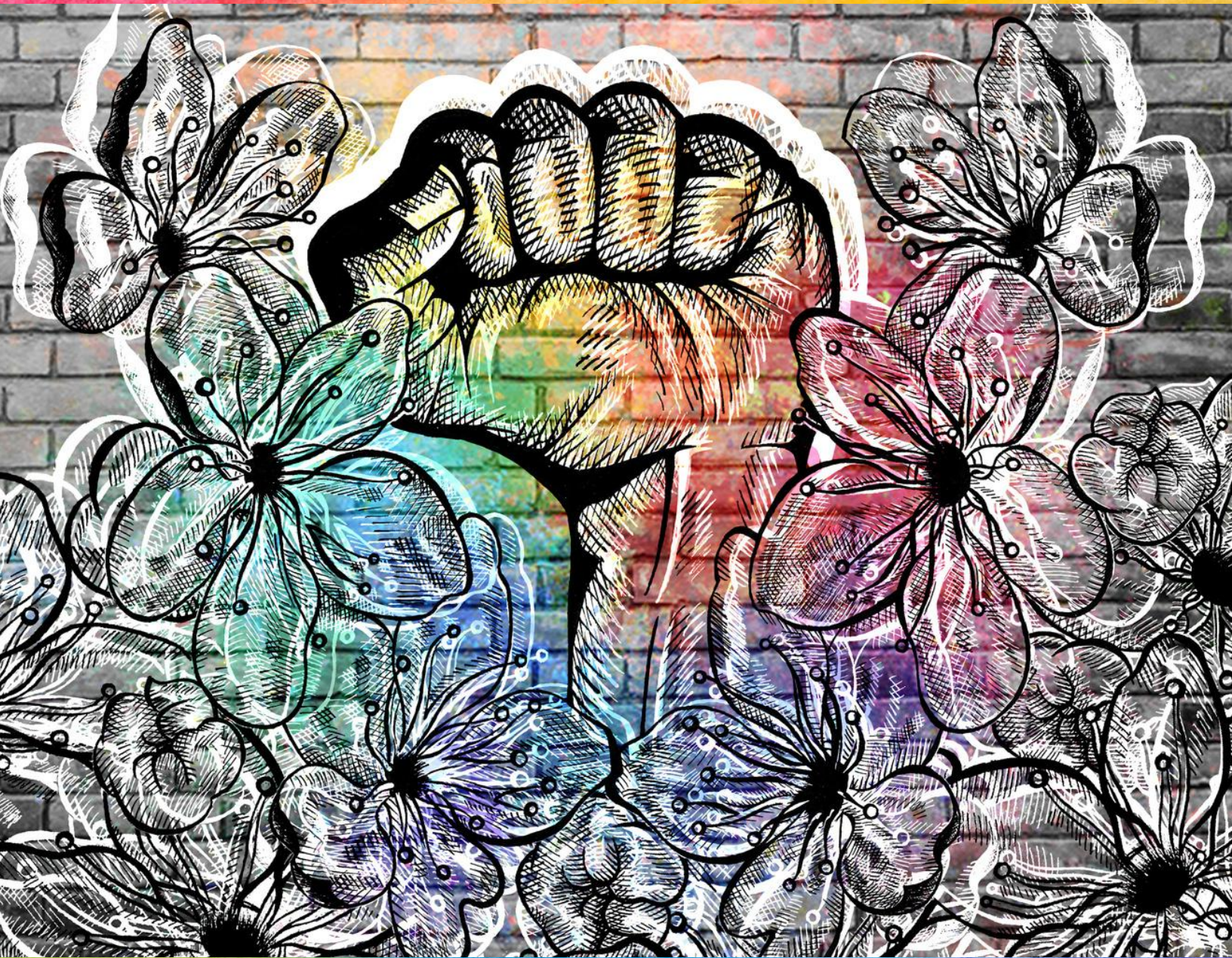
And in the very bottom of the chest,
tucked behind stacks and stacks of old news,
way in the back of the attic,
he found a cape
compulsorily, he threw it upon his shoulders
the king

and the newsman heralded the day
his power became unquestionable
and his heart was pure
and the coffers were full of jewels and gold
his wealth became unimaginable
and his intent was pure
and from the very front of the attic
faintly heard was a knock, an entrant to the court
and the king ruled
and his justice was pure
and the cape was returned
but the king, just as pure, remained



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Blooms of Empowerment



Alyxander LaBranche

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Canal Fishing

D. Dunn-Carr Poetry

Relaxing in the backyard, you and I
sit side by side
in our matching Adirondack chairs.
Our sunburned flip-flop feet,
warmed by the rays of the summer sun,
rest on top of the stone firepit.
Quietly we admire the sun slipping low
in the evening sky.
We are awed by the broad splashes of pink, orange, and red reflecting
across the canal's calm surface.
Too quickly, the sun slips under the horizon; the rays
disappear as dim dusk replaces the colorful light;
we welcome twilight.
A tug on the catfish line creates a bend
that brings us both to our feet.
Ecstatic, you reel the line.
And at the same time
Above us, a trio of bats
their flight resembles, at first glance
a jagged dance.
As if on instruction.
On the smoldering horizon
hungry stripers jump and belly-flop away
from our outstretched rods.
As if to say, "Not today."
When it's too dark to fish, we smile happily
and silently
collect our gear.
Time for a cold beer.
We don't have to say
that we can't wait to spend our days
together with quiet nights like these.
The cool breeze tousles my hair, and we are pleased
as thousands of pinpoints of stars appear.
A luminous moon reflects in the water, and we're
sharing a smile, a feeling of contentment
knowing our home is heaven-sent.

Cartwheeling Down the Beach

CLS Sandoval

Poetry



nearly every time we go to the beach
my mom reminds me of when I was little
and would cartwheel down the beach in a straight line
especially on our vacations to
 Florida
 the Caribbean
 and even the banks of the Danube River

I'm sorry I haven't taken you
on any lavish vacations yet
there are so many reasons
we haven't been very many places

But when we do go to the local beach
like when we went with your troop
I'm not cartwheeling alone
your six-year-old body still makes perfect little wheels
and can go for 20 or 30 in a row
before feeling the slightest bit of dizziness
I'm grateful in my early 40s
I can still make it five or six
before my equilibrium screams at me to stop

You giggle
so happy that your mommy
can cartwheel beside you

Once impressed by how perfect mine were
and now showing me how
perfectly you can cartwheel down the beach

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Bad Hair Day

Perri Dodgson

Fiction

The school run was done. I'd come home and washed the dishes and frying pan. I'd wiped down the kitchen tops and mopped the lino floor clear of crushed cornflakes and slimy baked beans. With the windows now open to let in the fresh air, I went from room to room 'waking up the house' with the morning chores.

Every weekday, the routine was the same. Usually I kept myself entertained with planning and overseeing a craft project. Lately though, I had started to feel heavy with the mundaneness of it all, so I would perk myself up by redecorating a room in the house. I'd go through them, one by one, and at the end each would have a totally new style or colour scheme. My husband would encourage me to run riot with ideas and I'd end up painting furniture or wall murals or experimenting with mixing and matching wallpapers.

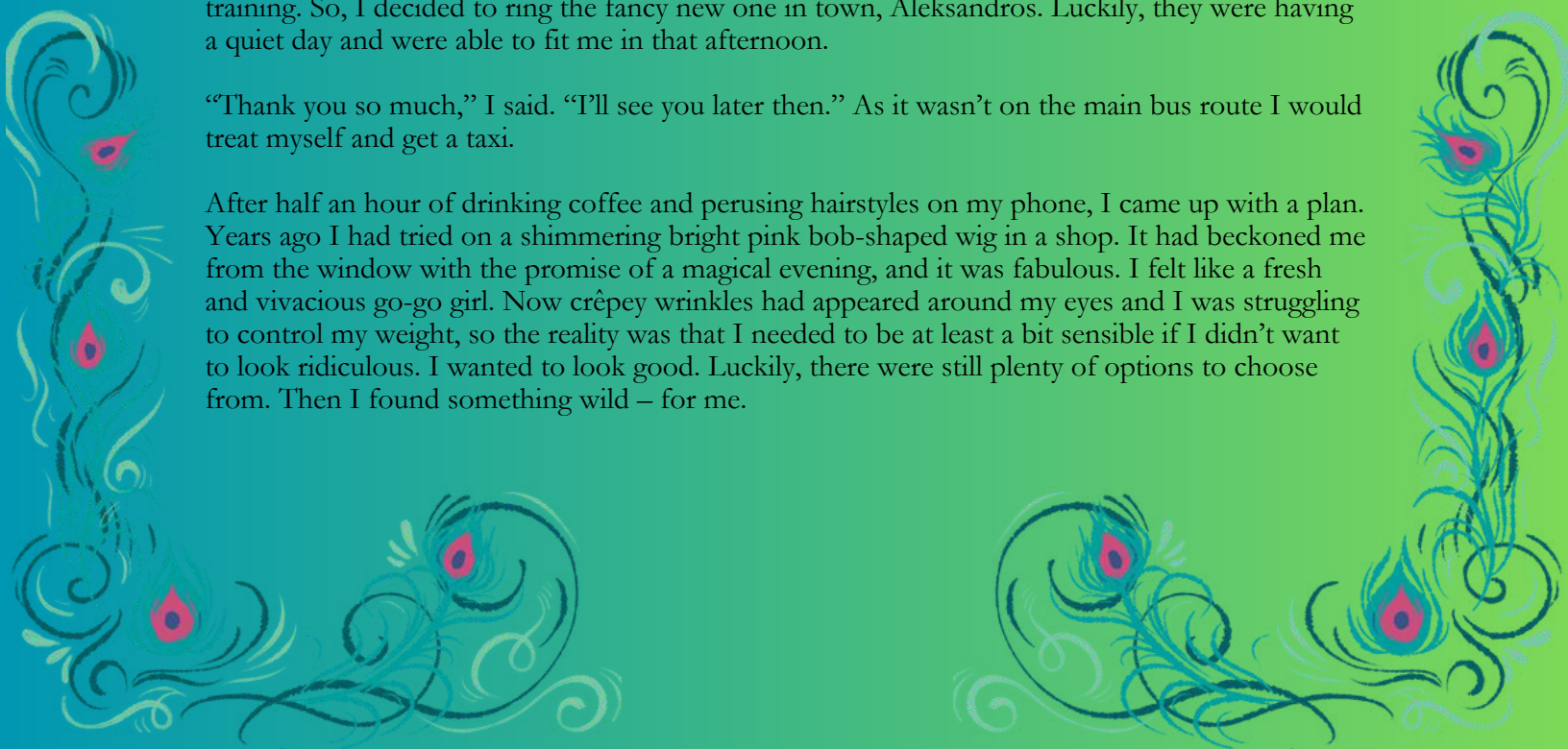
On this particular day, I was feeling less energetic than usual. I slumped into an armchair. "Maybe I'm coming down with something", I thought. Knowing my own ability to sink into a sticky bog of a black mood if I didn't keep myself going, I wondered what to do with the day.

I know, I'll get my hair done! I thought. And, having recently admired a girl in the street with peacock colours framing her face, I decided to go rogue. I'll get some colour put in. Oooh, exciting! Lights came on in my head as ideas started popping up into my brain.

I rang my local salon to make an appointment, but a recorded message told me it was closed for training. So, I decided to ring the fancy new one in town, Aleksandros. Luckily, they were having a quiet day and were able to fit me in that afternoon.

"Thank you so much," I said. "I'll see you later then." As it wasn't on the main bus route I would treat myself and get a taxi.

After half an hour of drinking coffee and perusing hairstyles on my phone, I came up with a plan. Years ago I had tried on a shimmering bright pink bob-shaped wig in a shop. It had beckoned me from the window with the promise of a magical evening, and it was fabulous. I felt like a fresh and vivacious go-go girl. Now crêpey wrinkles had appeared around my eyes and I was struggling to control my weight, so the reality was that I needed to be at least a bit sensible if I didn't want to look ridiculous. I wanted to look good. Luckily, there were still plenty of options to choose from. Then I found something wild – for me.



At that moment, with shoulder length frizzy hair of a dirty blonde colour, I decided to shock my family and friends by going pixie! And more: A silvery white colour overall and with electric blue spiky sections and emerald on the tips!

Sitting at the mirror in the salon, I showed my stylist the picture on my phone. "Would you be able to copy this for me?" I asked. "I know the colours are a bit mad."

"No problem," she said. "We like a challenge, you know! Are you happy to sit here for three or four hours? We laughed, and I nodded assent. "Are you thirsty?" she asked. "I can get you a coffee or tea."

"Coffee please," I replied, and she trotted off to get me one before settling down to the job at hand.

Exactly four hours and thirteen minutes later, my accommodating stylist sprayed the last wayward tendril into place and stood back to admire her work. I sat there with a huge grin looking at myself with utter delight. My hair now had long peacock blue spikes with emerald tips, bouncing quiff-like to the side of my brow. White delicate feathered ends curled slightly down the back of my head, tickling my neck below the hairline.

"I feel like Peter-Pan," I said, and smiled. "It makes me feel quite joyful!"

I rose from that swivelling black hairdressers' chair feeling like an exciting new woman. Empowered and confident in my new look, I held my head high and proudly walked the three miles home to show myself off.

"I can't wait for Jonathan to see it. He'll be so shocked," I laughed. Knowing I had a while before my daughter got home, I marched into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

"Oh no!" I cried. A pool of water smelling unpleasantly of greasy eggs was puddled on the floor in front of the sink. I stood aghast. If only it would all disappear if I went out and came back in again! But out came the mop and bucket, and I did what I had to do to clear it up. On my knees, now soaked, I wiped back and forth with the J-cloth. The back of my neck and forehead began to glow with heat and I knew my feathery tendrils were beginning to join in a clump. With my electric blue quiff starting to flatten, I opened the cupboard door to find where the leak was coming from.

Great, I thought. I could hardly believe it. The U-bend had popped out and its stinky contents had poured all over the bottles of cleaning products. I had no choice but to kneel down and get my hands and head inside to pull everything out from the back of the shelf. And so it began; sloppily wiping, scrubbing, standing up to the sink to squeeze out the cloth, then back down on my knees again. My new hairdo kept rubbing against the base of the sink and became matted with the gunge down there. It soon resembled a mop more than the mop itself did.

"Hello, Darling," I wryly said to Jonathan when he came home early. At first he was shocked, but then smiled at me in his soppy way, took my hand and led me upstairs for a shower.



Your Scent

Diana Raab, PhD
Poetry

I want to smell your fragrances
wisps of you
from head to foot
the smell of your shampoo
your after-shave cologne
what you rub on your chest
the powder you sprinkle on your privates
the cream you rub on your legs
and notice how your toes
curl up whenever I touch any part of you
all in honor of the synchronicities bringing us together.

Interview

James Hancock Fiction

“Please take a seat.”

Darkness encircled the room, with a central light shining upon a plain wooden chair. I stared at the chair, unsure of how I came to be in the room.

The voice came again. “Please take a seat.”

There was something soothing in the tone and it felt less like an instruction and more like a friendly request.

I sat down.

“I have a few questions. Not many, but questions I feel are important. May I ask them?” The voice sounded familiar. Not dissimilar to my own, yet different. Younger. More peaceful.

I nodded my agreement.

“Work or play?” the voice asked softly.

I thought on it for a moment. Both were important in life but if I were to make an honest decision of one or the other... “Play,” I answered.

“Love or money?” the voice came again.

“Love,” I answered. Money enabled play but love made everything worthwhile. “What’s the point of money if you don’t have love?” I added. A rhetorical question and I got no answer.

There was a pause. Was the voice considering my answer or the next question?

“Friends or family?”

My friends were important to me. I had picked them and they suited me. We had things in common. My family had been allocated. Randomly assigned. We disagreed on most things and often argued. But my wife was family and she was different. I had chosen her and she had chosen me. We were happy. We were in love and we wanted to bring life into the world and share our love. We wanted to be parents and hoped, like everyone does, to be good ones.

“Family,” I answered. I was certain of my answer.

“Last question.” The voice was calm, giving no indication whether my answers pleased or displeased them. “Boy or girl?”

I considered the question for a moment, unsure of its exact purpose and meaning. “I’m sorry?” I said. “I don’t understand the question.”

There was no way of knowing, but I felt a smile. Somewhere there was a smile upon the face that made the voice. A smile to trump all smiles. The greatest and most lovely smile ever formed upon the most precious face of the most loved being. I felt it warm my heart and fill me with eternal happiness. The smile, the life which made it, was everything.

“Would you like me to be a boy or a girl?” The voice sounded younger now, innocent and playful; passively demanding, with a touch of mischievousness.

I was speechless. The voice, the child, knew it and gave a loving giggle.

I woke up as sunlight warmed my face through open curtains. Stretching in bed, I smiled at my wife, who stood in the bedroom doorway.

“Are you sitting down?” she asked, grinning from ear to ear under a tumble of curly morning hair. She glowed.

“Just waking up. Everything okay?” I asked through a yawn.

She held up a pregnancy test and laughed excitedly. “We’re pregnant!”



Opening Day at the Community Pool

We're waist high in cold water. Cold from the water hose cold. The air is still chilly from a half-year winter but we shed clothes and offer fresh skin to the scattered rays of the sleepy sun. We float on the smell of blue sky and melted snow and chlorine to the water's edge. Flat and glassy at our feet, a window to the big blue bottom. We're convinced an ocean must be a pool for the moon.

We shiver. Fingertips fade into blues and purples. We want to stay in. We also want out, want to be wrapped in light-warm towels with taffy stripes, want to be kissed on tender foreheads by our mothers. But we can't because everyone is there with us, where we are all alone, hugging ourselves in the company of others.

We giggle through teeth clink, clink, clinking and the momentum carries us deeper and we're sure we're going to die, freeze into statues of children dreaming too big, too soon, with open-book faces caught in time. But we chatter away, dancing to our mouth song, goosebumps sprouting soft hairs because we're growing, we're alive. So alive.

Melanie Maggard

Fiction

The Human Torpedo

Julian Walker

Fiction

As well as having to wear glasses and being called Andros Merryweather, he could not swim. There was little he could do about his name. 'Andros' was just weird since his family had no connection to Greece, other than that his parents had been on holiday there sometime before he was born. 'Merryweather,' as far as he could see, could only be dealt with by his whole family being wiped out, giving him a good opportunity to forget his name and choose a new one. Having to wear glasses was just proof that when life was shit, it could get worse. You lost your glasses. You broke your glasses. You scratched your glasses. Boys laughed at your glasses. Girls sneered. Teachers expected you to be clever and were clearly disappointed when you were not.

Being unable to swim might be handleable. He imagined swimming, length after length, diving from a raft into the cool sea, jumping from rocks while admiring teenagers pointed and smiled while girls gasped. He tried, he tried hard, pushing his body to its limits. He put his face under water in the bathroom and tried to blow bubbles but the shock of the cold made him gasp and swallow. At the local pool, he jumped in the shallow end and slipped but did it again. He went all the way to the deep end, holding onto the rail. He began earnest dreams in which he swam underwater from Dover to Calais, lifting his head above water only to grab some air; starter dreams in which his way of twisting his body in the water while angling his feet won him the name of the Human Torpedo.

He went to the swimming pool alone and swam widths in the shallow end, gradually pushing out till he was ten yards from the end of the pool. On one occasion, he managed two widths without stopping, and, feeling chuffed, he gave himself the Wagon Wheel Award, at the cost of his bus fare home. It meant an hour's walk in the dark. The thick chocolate biscuit lasted only three minutes but the taste lasted most of the way.

When he got home, his mother was about to send his father out to look for him, which spoiled his chance to talk about his achievement. But it was no big deal really, as this was a major step forward to the realization of himself at the Human Torpedo. Nobody would need to know that he was Andros Merryweather; he was not going to have to hear that from anybody again.

"Mr Merryweather," started the television presenter.

"No, we don't use that name," he replied. ("We' because he had a team behind him, not for support – he didn't need that, except to help him get his costume on – and warn the shipping and the coastguards.

For short, he might go by THT. By the time they said "The Human Torpedo, formerly Andros," he would be out of sight, a ripple shooting towards the horizon, breaking the record for the Channel crossing by four, five, six hours.

Glasses? No problem. His team would have a spare pair waiting for him. No need for glasses on the swim, it would be three or four straight lines, and a sonar buoy at each change of angle.



A friend of his mother's offered to teach him to swim.

"Go on, it will be good, she was a champion swimmer, I've seen her photographs, so many cups and shields and whatnot."

"But Mum, I'm learning already."

"And not very well, by what I hear," she said. "You go with her Saturday morning, she'll take you there and back."

What had she heard? And from whom? It could not get worse.

It could.

"You won't be the only one. She's teaching her daughter as well."

He sat down and put his head in his hands.

"But Mum," he said.

But he knew that his story would be one of overcoming obstacles. He would have to learn to encounter and defeat tides, currents, gales, storms, and massive waves. Maybe he would learn the basics with this friend of his mother's, and then, having taken it all on board, he would adapt it to his own latent talent, and the Human Torpedo would emerge from the water dripping and smiling, ready to swim the Channel.

The pool was crowded, and the woman and her daughter were already in the water when he approached the edge. He tried not to look at the girl. He tried to get into the water without concern. It was too cold. He caught his breath as it reached the top of his swimming trunks and his stomach. He held his arms and shoulders above the surface and walked on tiptoe.

"Wet your face," the woman said, smiling.

He did as he was told.

"Show me what you can do."

He grimaced, splashed about, and lifted one leg off the bottom.

"Shall we try?" She said, holding out a hand to each of them. The daughter turned away.

"Come on then Andros," she said, holding out both hands to him.

He looked at her. She was old – almost thirty, perhaps – with a rubber hat and a black swimming costume that was tight about her body. She was confident as if the water was not there; the water was just something that was on top of some of her like she was an island he could climb out onto if things went wrong.

"So, all you need to do is hold on and kick your feet. I'll be swimming backward so you can see me all the time."

The island gently ebbed away from him.

He held her hands. He looked at her face but was aware that between her face and his were her breasts, just beneath the surface. It was a worry.

He held her hands tighter, his stomach knotted, water got on his face, and he couldn't wipe it off, and he forgot to kick. She smiled and mouthed the word 'relax'. He panicked as he realized he was out of his depth. He shook one hand free, but she caught it back and held it tight. He tried to pull himself closer, aware of the deep darkness beneath him, but he found his face closer to her black chest.

"Kick," she said, but he was doubling up, and he did not know where his legs or feet were, and he was afraid he would kick her breasts.

"Kick," she repeated, so he kicked but felt no resistance and then pain as the side of his foot smacked the water.

"Under the water," she said, and he panicked again; he had done it wrong. She was disappointed, so she was going to drown him before he had had a chance to perfect the Human Torpedo's breathing pattern.

"Help!" he managed through the water that poured into his mouth.

"And back we go," she said. "And kick."

He did not know what was happening at all, it was just a blur of echoing splashes and children squealing.

When they got to the side, the daughter said, "That was a mess."

"That'll do missy," said the mother.

He was holding onto the side rail so hard that the ends of his fingers hurt. He got his breath back. It was alright. The Human Torpedo would learn to withstand pain. And the breathing, he would need to work on that hard. Ten-foot waves would no doubt slow his progress to Calais, but he would overcome it all.

There was no Wagon Wheel that day, but she bought him a hot chocolate “in recognition of his efforts because he was out of his depth and trying hard,” she said.

He did not talk to the daughter, who gave him a fake smile every time their looks met and who once mouthed the word “mess.” They sat at a table overlooking the pool while the mother commented on the swimmers going up and down.

“That one’s good. Look how she opens her mouth to the side every other stroke. It’s so much easier that way.”

It looked hard. Surely, you would scoop water in as well. But at high speeds, you wouldn’t need to breathe; air would just rush into you if you lifted your head ever so slightly above the surface. And people could hold their breath for five, ten, maybe fifteen minutes with training.

“And him, look. You can tell he’s been doing this a long time. Not fast but he knows his speed and his endurance. He’ll be able to carry on for hours. Endurance swimming. Pacing himself, like Channel swimmers do.”

Andros looked. The man was old, ancient, way older than the mother. He was pale and lumpy. He was swimming in a clumsy, slow way, his lower jaw jutting out. But at the end of each length of the pool, he did not stop; he just turned and went back again. He was still swimming when they left.

Andros told his mother that if it was all the same with her, he’d prefer to go on learning by himself.

“But she was a champion swimmer. You’ll learn how to swim properly with her, and you’ll not be afraid of getting out of your depth.”

“Why do you think I’m afraid of getting out of my depth?” he asked.

“Oh, just something I heard.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, that’s good then, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. It’s not a problem at all.”

“So you won’t mind if I come and watch.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Maybe I’d like to.”

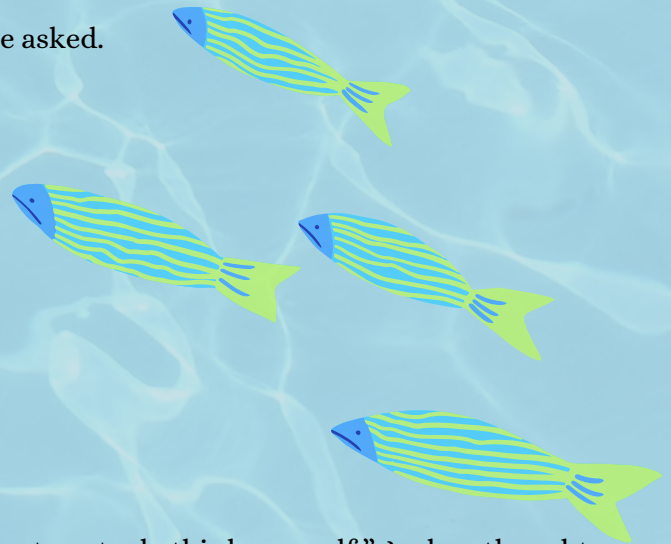
“Maybe you’d like to stop teasing me. Maybe you’d like to trust me to do this by myself,” Andros thought.

“But you suit yourself. Would you like me to see if they have after-school classes at the pool? So you can improve your technique?”

“I suppose,” he said and then went upstairs to think about where he could find out about breathing techniques. Maybe a swimming class might be a good place to start.

When the woman phoned Andros’s mother that evening to ask if Andros would like to go swimming again the following Saturday morning, Andros’s mother said he had got so excited that he wanted to do classes at the pool.

“That’s fantastic,” she said. “Best thing for him. And we could practice at the weekends too.”



It was about eight o'clock but his mother phoned the pool to ask about classes and was told that, yes, there were classes for beginners on Thursdays and Fridays, but that the pool was closed because there had been an accident, and they'd had to drain it, and it wouldn't be ready again for a week or two.

"Oh dear," she said. "What happened?"

"Just an accident," the person on the other end said, saying anything else.

"Was anybody hurt?" Andros's mother asked.

"No, it was just an accident."

"Oh dear, I hope nobody was hurt."

"No, it was only an accident. The pool will reopen again soon. Please phone again in a week."

Andros's mother realized she was not going to get any details. 'Just an accident' could mean somebody falling through a glass window or somebody having a heart attack, or pooing themselves or being sick in the water, or a child falling over – but that wouldn't mean having to drain the pool unless there was a lot of blood, not even enough to change the colour of the water – or maybe less. Poo or vomit most likely. That's why they didn't want to talk about it. Nobody would want to go there again, ever, if they thought about poo or sick in the water. It might be in the local paper.

"Andros, the pool's closed," she shouted up the stairs.

"Good," thought Andros. "Or maybe not good. At least I don't have to go swimming with her again, not there. And her daughter. Maybe I just concentrate on the breathing for now."

He took off his glasses, shut his eyes, and stood in the middle of his room, right arm above his head.

It was stormy and dark in the Channel. Ten-foot waves crashed as the Human Torpedo turned and scooped a breath of air as he twisted through the water, undeterred by the weather, attempting both the fastest Channel crossing and the first using his new technique. Amazed watchers pointed from the helicopter overhead at his black figure clothed in rubber polished with vaseline powering through the water, shining in the spotlights. His diagonally turning arms, working with his feet at the perfect angle, pushed him on at a speed most people thought impossible. The coastguard said it was too dangerous; experts did not believe it could be done. But where were they now? It was amazing, incredible, but it was happening in front of the world's television cameras. This extraordinary young man, from an ordinary family, who had taught himself to swim at his local pool, no less. Disdaining cups and trophies, he had set himself to reinvent swimming. It was real, it was happening. Just incredible.

All he had to do was wait, wait for the pool to reopen, to get the technique right, to get his breathing right.

Twist. Down. Round.

Out. Hold. In. Hold. Hold. Hold.

Twist, down, round.

Out. Hold. Twist. In. Down. Hold.



Column: The Corner Table

31

Cynthia Ann Lublink

He Will Quiet You

The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing. Zephaniah 3:17

I love this verse, even though I didn't fully understand what it would mean to me over time. Notice how the beginning and end anchor the truth God wants to show us: that He is with us, that He is able to save, and that He takes great delight in us. This part always gets me: "He will quiet you with His love." What exactly does this mean? I admit that it can mean different things to different people. I don't assume to know where you are right now, but I do know that wherever it is, God can use this verse to bring about peace, trust, and a quiet assurance of His love as you trust in Him.

For me, this verse is a profound reflection on the process of tempering, and finding balance in life. The dictionary defines 'tempered' as 'brought to a place of hardness,' while 'temperance' means 'brought to moderation.' I see this as a journey of both softening and strengthening. It's about recognizing the need for both, and allowing God to work within me, softening what is hard and strengthening what is soft. It's a journey that requires a listening ear, a willing heart, and a soul guided by my Savior. I am still in the process of being tempered, and I know it will take a lifetime to master the art of temperance in my passion, boldness, speech, and actions, and becoming a more balanced version of myself.

It's important not to confuse temperance with being held back. Instead, think of it as an essential ingredient for cultivating wisdom. The two are intertwined, with temperance providing the framework for wisdom to flourish. Knowledge, understanding, and discernment all operate within the boundary of temperance, allowing wisdom to grow and mature.

The final part of this verse, "He will rejoice over you with singing," offers a beautiful expression of God's joy and assurance. It's a reminder that God is with us, can save us, delights in us, and can bring us peace. But more than that, God rejoices over us and does it with singing! What a wonderful image of His love and care for us. God reveals Himself to us, not just so we can know Him, but so that we may also experience His joy and assurance in our lives.

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Furry Joy

Sue Cook Poetry

Eyes that sparkle in the moonlight
you are my love.
Touch of fur to hand
the scent of freedom
my soul runs to your side.

Away from the cadence of horns and screams
no child cries this night.
We are free and run as we must,
the pack ready for all things primal.
I am now one of your pack

Eyes of gold –
Has it been that long since you
communed with your own?

Jumping on my lap
to give a kiss before slumber.

Tiny puppy
once a wolf,
now a ShihTzu.



Mute

Rebecca D. Martin

Essay

You were the girl who didn't speak.

You were the girl who spoke before her time. Look: four years old and already feasting on little bears flying to the moon or the monster at the end of this book. In a year and a half, the kindergarten teacher will be annoyed that someone in his class has learned to cipher words without his help.

"It makes things difficult," he tells your mother, with consternation. She doesn't know whether he's referring to his teaching job or your young life.

You were the girl who listened, who saw. There! The classmates, the cliques, making a certain sense of high school striations. "She's so quiet." And hearing, you understood:

Secret.
Inscrutable.
Strange.

If you could have seen your own self, you'd have let their "not normal" and "kind of weird" slide away like water off a duck's back. You'd have shaken your wings and laughed, the whole world of the English language activated in your mind. You carry buoyancy like the words of millennia, of very Beginning. Who could ground you to pass mere folded notes across rows of desks, or to talk boys or hair?

Ninth Grade English: The girl in the desk next to yours. Sound emerges from her moving mouth like the teacher in Charlie Brown. You were the girl who shook her head again and again, trying to parse the words into sense.

"Never mind." You hear the scorn. That classmate still shakes back her silk curtain of hair down the soundwaves of decades and turns away, sniggering, "Definitely weird."

Your dad has boasted all these years about teaching you to read on his knee in the first annum of the Nineteen Eighties, but this is the truth: You were the girl who held words like blown glass, like a fire, like water coursing through your hands since the day you were born.

Selectively Mute, they call it. Also, Hyperlexic. How can anyone say anything when meaning hangs in the very air, refracting light into every mote and cell? Enveloped in language, you are the woman who listens, who sees. Most days now, dismissive words roll right off your back. Your mallard feathers shimmer in the sun, transcendent under the bounty of silent speech.

Extravacats

Essay

Angela Townsend



I have communed with cats my entire life. I have longed to be like them.

Yet just when I think I've glimpsed their wisdom in full, they surprise me.

Feline wisdom occupies fat slices of my mind and hours. I am paid to blog about the residents of a cat sanctuary, and I've spent a decade honing the craft of presenting them fairly.

The portrait follows certain contours: they are tiny despots who know exactly what they're doing at all times, persnickety chaplains with degrees in metaphysics. They are meat-seeking mindfulness on four legs, plush egos heavy with empathy.



It appears that they don't ask much — fleece and fish, snuggles or not. One may dream of a secret identity as Luigi Bermuda, purveyor of prosciutto; another may have a five-year plan to become CEO of Arby's. But their yearnings are finally simple.

And if I really believe this, I am a simpleton.

I'm coming to wonder if these creatures, lithe and impulsive, with brains full of hunches and thunderstorms, have desires that dwarf our own.

They only want the most opulent, outrageous thing under heaven.

They want to be loved as they are.

Show me a cat who considers himself inadequate, and I will search your room for rainbow mushrooms. This is simply not in their constitution.

From the docile dumpling to the fire-breathing feral, cats believe they belong here. One-eyed, beady-eyed, greedy or screaming, they expect to be welcomed. They are their own acceptance letter, signed by the First Ailurophile.

The more I witness this, the more I glimpse the holy in the domestic.

We have a knobby, mottled urchin with an autoimmune disease and a holler that scares six-winged seraphs. She greets you as though the planets have aligned and the deserts have bloomed. She anticipates reverence but will settle for hugs and fur mice.

We have a one-eared tumbleweed with eyes like Al Pacino, darting like a switchblade when you appear. He has no intention of welcoming your affection, but this does not mean he can't decipher love. He expects provision and poultry. It would never occur to him to earn his world.

We have a hundred cats with a hundred histories, and not one knows how to limit hope.

Their arithmetic is elegant: if the One has put them here, there is zero cause for doubt. They were meant to dwell upon this earth, behind these whiskers, inside these quirks and contradictions. To be is to be lovable. Bring forth the fish nuggets.

Some would say that this is instinct, mere self-preservation from a brain the size of a scallop. But I tell you, the cats commune with God.

How else to account for the holy “click” of humble care, the way it feels right to do right by the rugged and rumpled? When we love cats as they are, the morning stars clap their hands. When we meet wild expectations, we expand into our own.

It is a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of the unconditional. Give up easy old inadequacy, and things get complicated. You may spill light like a bowl of cream. You may neuter your darkest fears.

You may surprise people who thought you were tame.

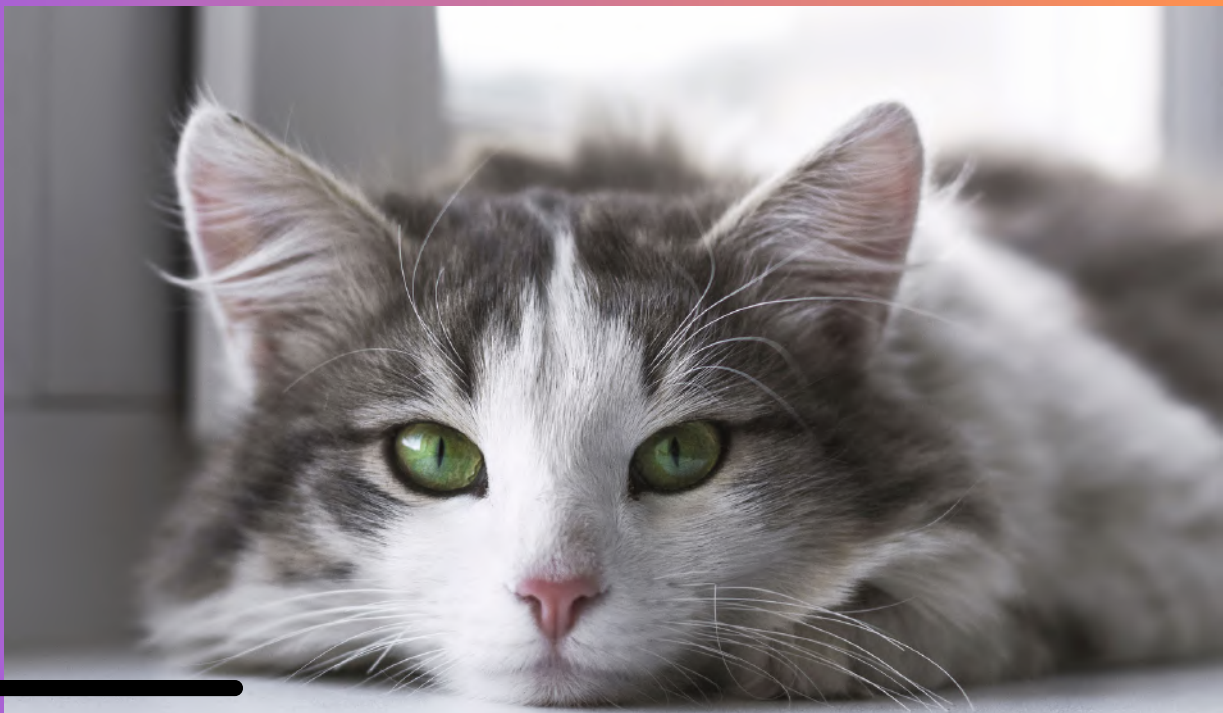
You will get your tail caught in doors, and the craven and calculating will crimp your whiskers. But lift your head. You are a cherished cat, exactly as you are.

Your expectation is not in vain.

Your exultation cannot be taken.

Your extravagance is heaven’s open secret.

Go tell it in the streets and sanctuaries. If you don’t, even the cats will cry out.



Between the Silence

Cynthia Ann Lublink

Poetry

I see you standing in your darkness.
Your struggle to trust is one I know.

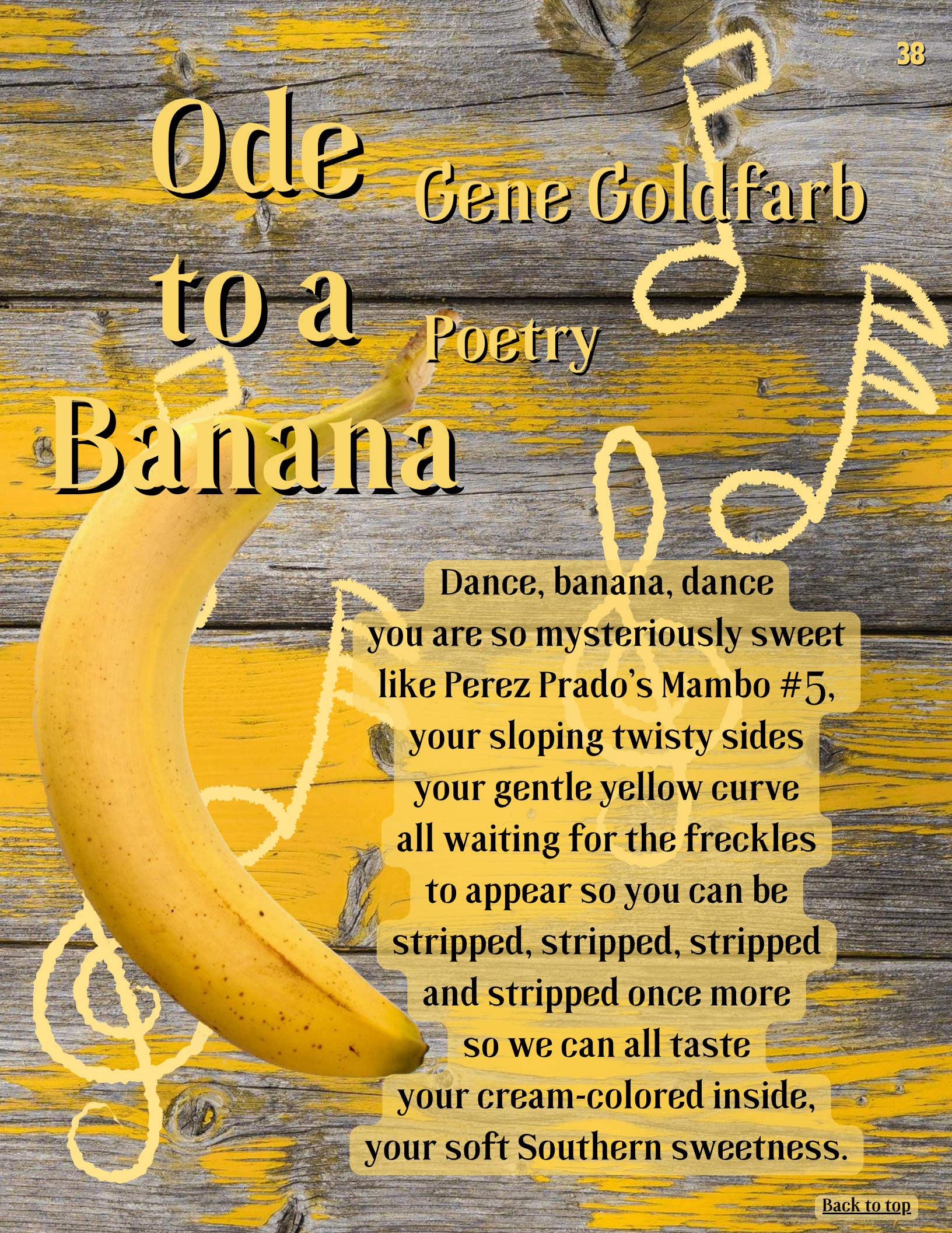
The need to put scattered pieces together.

Yet torn
 between giving into fear
 or
 trusting the truth
 your heart wants to believe.

Scrambling for neutral ground,
 where healing mends the wounds of battle,
 and possibilities begin to whisper,
 and the chance to believe again,
 breathes
 between the silence...

Ode to a Banana

Gene Goldfarb
Poetry

A banana is positioned diagonally across the left side of the page. Several yellow musical notes are scattered around the banana and the text. The background is a rustic wooden surface with horizontal planks.

Dance, banana, dance
you are so mysteriously sweet
like Perez Prado's Mambo #5,
your sloping twisty sides
your gentle yellow curve
all waiting for the freckles
to appear so you can be
stripped, stripped, stripped
and stripped once more
so we can all taste
your cream-colored inside,
your soft Southern sweetness.

Grandma

James Hancock

Fiction

There was something strange about Grandma's recliner. An electric reclining chair, which was plugged into the wall and operated by a simple remote control on the end of a curly cord. A bulky object which dominated the living room of Grandma's apartment. Small television, polished oak wall unit for displaying photos from yesteryear, a coffee table with a lesser chair against it, and the beast: a large block of green cloth sewed over chunky arms, thick seat cushions, and a deep and sturdy back. So what was strange about it? In the ten years my grandma had the chair, it never suffered wear and tear, and always looked new and unused. But it was used; in fact, she sat in it most of the time.

Once I heard my parents mention it cost eight hundred dollars but was never used properly, and there was no point in having it. True, I can't remember ever seeing it in the reclined position and Grandma with her feet up. The electric chair, she called it. She didn't trust it, and her old-fashioned ways meant she'd never tested its full potential or even give it a try. She was stubborn.

"Those things are death traps," my grandma would say.

Crochet blanket under butt, she almost always sat in her throne-like seat, but not once did I ever see it turned on. Or even plugged in, come to think of it. A normal chair would have sufficed and given the room, well, more room.

An old checkers set was always laid out on the coffee table, ready for play, should anyone want to challenge my grandma. And they did. Strangers would pop in for ten or fifteen minutes and try to win a game against the master. Sometimes they were gone in a little over five minutes, not even stopping to take off their coats or shoes. My grandma was notorious for her speed and ferocity when it came to dispatching opponents on the checkers' board. Many challengers – mostly teenagers or twentysomethings from the neighborhood – and all of them were in and out victims.

After destroying each opponent, my grandma would pull out her little notebook from under the seat cushion, and write in the details of yet another victory. Hundreds of vanquished foes reduced to a name, date, and time.

"The list of losers," my grandma called it.

Loneliness wasn't the stereotypical conclusion to my grandma's life journey; she had a lot of guests. Every time I visited, at least two came calling, and they were obviously gluttons for punishment, as I saw the same faces returning for more. They were always in a hurry, eager to sit in the challenger's seat and get the game started. Some of her opponents would use colorful language, so Grandma would send me to her bedroom until they were gone. I'd sit on her bed and endure the sweet smell of lavender powder whilst occupying myself with one of her many jigsaw puzzles. And when it was just the two of us again, she would give me a cookie from the jar on the shelf beside the coffee. That was the best bit and worth the interruption by Grandma's many callers.

"Another one bites the dust," she would say, and then nod towards the kitchen and give me a wink. I knew what that meant, and I'd immediately dash off and fetch the cookies whilst Grandma pulled out the little book and made another entry.

I often wondered if the games were more than just 'games', and if bets were being made. Grandma was often folding five or ten bucks into her small purse as I brought the cookies into her living room. Was there such a thing as a checkers shark?

My grandma was a kind old lady, a respected person, and a great friend. I looked forward to the hour or two we'd have together, and my parents knew it was important for me to spend quality time with her. She had wisdom, and I was there to benefit from it. She had fascinating stories to tell of her wild and adventurous youth, making go-karts out of old baby carriages, building camps in her local woods, and sneaking into movie theaters, swimming pools, and clubs without paying. My grandma was a tomboy and quite rebellious in her day; but now she was just your typical quiet old lady. Well, so I thought.

You see, there was a lot more to my grandma than I knew, and when she died at the young age of seventy-seven, I learned an interesting secret about her and that great chair of hers. A secret to which my parents were also blind.

She was a formidable checkers player that much was true, but the local lads weren't as interested in the game as I'd been led to think. In fact, my memories of the clack-clack sound of wooden checkers pieces being played were false; my mind had lied to me and remembered sounds that were rarely made. The games of checkers were a red herring, a bluff, a diversion, and Grandma's great chair held the secret of what really occurred in her quiet little apartment. And had been occurring for quite some time.

After the funeral, when my parents were clearing through her belongings, and quite by chance, they discovered a 'something' hidden behind the fabric covering at the back of the recliner, past a Velcro-sealed slit in the cloth and hidden within the sturdy frame and working guts of Grandma's electric chair. Four 'somethings' to be exact. Clear plastic resealable bags, and each one-half full of pink and white tablets. Ecstasy tablets... the party pill. For every so-called challenger from our neighborhood I had witnessed, there were ten I hadn't, and my grandma's side business had gone undetected for nearly nine years, for most of my youth. She was both notorious as a checkers player and as a drug dealer. A very successful drug dealer. My parents were clueless and speechless.

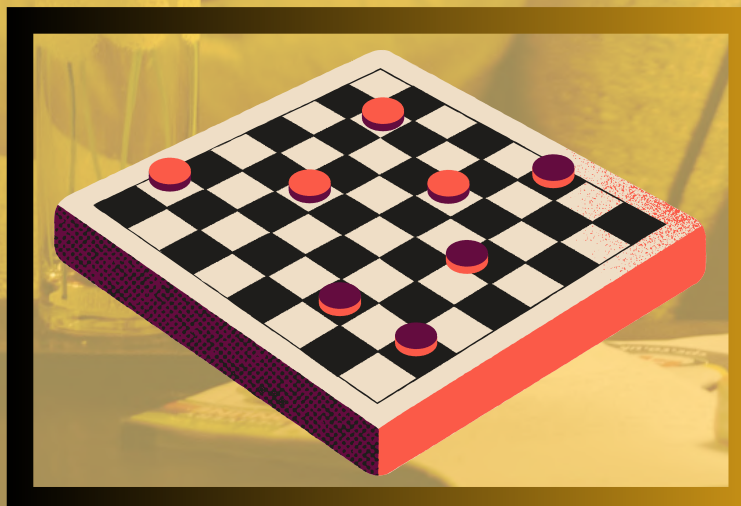
As shocking as the revealed secret was, all was quickly forgiven when the inheritance money cleared and Grandma had considerably more than anyone had expected.

The police couldn't confiscate the money as all payments to Grandma's bank were cash, without a record of how she got it. They took her little book, though. Full of names, dates and times. Not checkers wins but drug sales. Carefully entered without mention of money, the police were interested nonetheless. Lots of names from our town and several towns nearby. Grandma's way of cleaning up a bad neighborhood and making it a better place for me to live in. The book of losers led to many surprise arrests in the months that followed.

When the recliner came out of police evidence, we donated it to a local retirement home. I kept the checkers set and have become quite good at it. As for the money, my grandma and her clients paid for my first year of university. I'm studying business.

I learned a lot from my grandma.

Never underestimate the ingenuity of a bored old lady. And never judge a chair by its cover.



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The Painter and the Sea

Petrouchka Alexieva

Poetry

He comes every weekend to the same rocky place,
sits on the boulders and stares away
talking with no words to the running waves.

He puts a big canvas on his left knee
and starts the portrait of the morning sea.
He mixes the paints in the palm of his hand.
and then magic starts, stroke after stroke.

The sea is his model; the sea is his muse,
sometimes impenitent, sea changes its moods.
Seagulls grab the brushes to paint on the sand
the sea waves sing to him mysterious songs,
the waves whisper stories of journeys
they made to shores,
tales of battles and tempting sirens.

Sometimes the sea gets ugly and mad;
It roars and throws its waves at the rocks.
Then comes the rain and majestic storm.
The painter collects his scattered paints.
And whispers, "Goodbye, goodbye, my friend.
I'll see you tomorrow when you feel better."

In the morning, a new painting is born
two souls as one on the framed canvas.

Still Excited

Essay

Angela Townsend

To my great delight, I like re-watching late-night monologues.

To my great delight, I am still a child.

This was by no means a guarantee. My exuberance had been with me all my life but I had never insured that neon calling card. It hadn't occurred to me that such a thing could be lost.

I was the toddler who sang "Sunny Days" with a 105-degree fever. I was the child who clapped for comets. I was the teenager who glimpsed the giddy heart of God by singing "I Will Walk 500 Miles" with my father in the kitchen. I was the 30-year-old who jumped literally up and literally down in public for used books by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

I have felt the ecstasy of seraphs over getting my grandfather to laugh or encountering a town called Manunka Chunk, or finding chocolate pudding during a power outage.

I have been uncool at the molecular level, enabling me to bounce like an electron for tie-dye scrunchies, and grocery coupons, and the delicate pleasure of hearing "Whoomp! There It Is" on the radio.

I am the unsinkable goofus who caused a coworker to declare, "You are Jimmy Fallon. You love everything."

My default setting has been wonderstruck and thunderstruck. I have an Easter egg of ebullience where my amygdala belongs. There were times I wished I could play it at least five degrees cooler, to no avail.

I never thought my festivity was fragile. But you never think you'll be the one who gets into a fiery crash with a cement mixer. You don't expect the highway to split open in front of your Subaru, erupting dinosaurs.

You neglect to buy insurance for your own jubilation. And then you learn what can and can't be stolen.

When the lights went out with a scowling man, I thought I knew what to do. I sang "Three Little Birds." I strapped on my miner's lamp and dug for my pink torches and 96-hour flashlights.

Where were my flashlights? Right. He had discarded my flashlights. I did not need flashlights. Also, could I please stop with the song just for a minute?

OK! It was OK! Candles. Candles! Candles that smelled like cake, and long lighters to keep my spindly fingers from burning. OK!

No. Those vanilla candles, they're cloying. Cloying, hmm. That's an interesting word. Do people ever call you cloying, Angie? No, no, I'm not saying that. Just asking. Just curious. Cloying, hmm.



OK! It was OK! I can do darkness! I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I know. I gush too much. I don't shut up. I'm sorry. Can I have a blanket? Do we have any pudding? No? OK! OK!

The lights came back, and everything was OK! again. In time, I gathered contraband pink lanterns and shelf-stable puddings, Spotify playlists where Bob Marley and Bobby McFerrin could fortify me with songs before and after storms. I worked hard to whoop in my heart. I prayed. I prayed. I prayed.

I found tea lights and poured cups of comfort. I curated stories and splendors, hot from the oven when he growled home at 5:30 pm. I bookmarked jaunty articles like "The Fantastically Weird World of Photosynthetic Sea Slugs" and "Labyrinths Around the Globe."

I regretted letting my vanilla candles go out.

I repented of veiling the moonlight, narrowing my eyes, scorning the sweetness.

I mourned the courage to say, "no," and, finally, "yes!"

Yes, I really do like that music, even though it is "garbage."

Yes, I really do want Jell-O and Cool Whip.

Yes, I really do believe God is actively involved in our lives, every day.

Yes, I really am a bouquet of Yes, cloying or no.

Yes, can lead to no.

No can lead across dark skies.

And one night, the scowling man was gone, I ran out of Tonight Show episodes and had to start re-watching them. I loved them as much as the first time. I realized I was home.

I giggled unafraid, uncorked dorkiness on my own couch. I felt the warm cats flanking me and winked at the lights on my year-round Christmas tree, here in my valiant, vanilla life.

I was the same child who couldn't get enough of The Brave Little Toaster and Oliver!, over and over, blessing this baffling life with my yes.

I was the skipping simpleton, all heart and no brains, who had yet made it through grad school and a decade of independence without causing a dryer fire or breaking the world.

I was a child of God, the Doodler who G.K. Chesterton claimed leans over each sunrise and each daisy as though it were the first, whispering "again! again!" with an uncool flame of love.

I was still me, forever young.

Every little thing's gonna be alright.

Alabaster Dreams of the Black Orb

Sue Cook

Fiction

Millie looked back into Gar's eyes and saw her life at The Black Orb flash quickly by, before the alabaster whiteness of the Rift became her home.

In that brief second, she thought, "Odd that only eight hours ago I never thought about the Rift, at least not in a concrete way."

The day started like any other day, Millie and Annabelle making delicious baked goods in the industrial kitchen that Millie had added to the Black Orb.

Millie was putting the finishing touches on the chocolate muffins, a tune she had heard long ago humming on her lips.

Annabelle went about rearranging the tea in the coffee and tea section of the shop. She called out to Mille. "We're running low on black licorice tea. You know that's Gar's favorite. We have to keep the caretaker happy." Annabelle grinned to herself.

Then, in a sing-song tone she added, "Must keep the caretaker smiling, otherwise we will be saddled with that bat forever." She gave Draco's coffin a sideways glance.

Millie called down from the kitchen, "Ah, Draco is good most of the time. He does have to stretch his wings once in a while, you know."

Diao shook his head and chuckled. "Oh yes, the gargoyle must have his tea and the bat gets a pass for landing in people's hair."

Millie came around the corner carrying a tray of blueberry and chocolate muffins.

"Diao, you know that Gar has been most kind with security and helping us decorate for holidays and events. He even brought us a mermaid!" She placed the tray of baked goods next to the coffee and tea.

"The least we can be is accommodating." Millie winked at Diao.

Diao's beak dropped open. "Well, that is what I was worried about. Your, erm, accommodations!"

Millie ruffled his feathers as she walked back to the kitchen.

“One would think you are jealous, Diao.”

He sputtered his usual “nevermore” as Annabelle made her way to the front counter.

“Hush you squawking feather duster, before Gar uses your tail feathers to clean the shelves.” Her voice sarcastic, but eyes smiling

Diao glared at Annabelle and said a bit louder. “Nevermore!”

The day was uneventful. People came and went as usual. The baked goods met with approval and the tea shop was almost completely cleaned out.

Annabelle made note of all the teas and coffees that needed to be replaced but was quite happy that the people of Tutty’s Port seemed to enjoy the delicious treats.

“Millie,” Annabelle called to her. “I believe we need to carry sourdough pretzels with dark chocolate bits to go with the cinnamon coffee.”

Behind the counter stood Diao dressed in a sparkling white shirt and black pants, raven no more but a well-dressed gent. A bright blue fedora rested on his dreads and he had a cane in hand. Sidling up to Annabelle, he whispered, “Psst. Do you think I look good tonight? I am thinking of hitting the town, Mon. See what’s shakin’ in this place.”

Annabelle laughed. “You have been flirting with the sweet little thing in the jewelry shop again. Do you really think she will be interested in a shifter?”

Diao shrugged. “Perhaps.” He smoothly strutted towards the door, then added a twirl, cane aloft as he looked back at Annabelle. A singing hiss escaped his lips: “Puttin’ on the ritz, Mon.” Then he disappeared through the door. His laughter filled the night as he headed away from the store.

Annabelle, hands on hips, just stared at the door muttering, “He’s getting worse everyday.” She then called up the stairs to Millie, “And you are making him that way!”

Millie called back as she came down the stairs, a spring in her step, “Hogwash! Diao is – Diao.” Dressed in a beautiful flowing champagne-colored dress and heels, she stopped to twirl at the bottom of the steps.

Annabelle whistled softly. “Well, well. Looks like Diao isn’t the only bird flying the nest tonight. What are your plans?”

Millie smiled and ran her fingers through Toby’s fur as he entered the room. “Gar is taking me for a picnic tonight.” Toby glanced up at Millie and then studied his paw.

“Don’t go Mommy,” Toby begged. Millie looked down at her little piece of chocolate heaven.

“Why, Toby? What’s the matter? You like Gar.” Toby shifted his weight and shook himself. “I just feel something –something is going to happen.”

Suddenly, Draco flew once around the room and landed in Annabelle’s hair with a splat.

Surprised, she let out a squeal as she frantically tried to flick him away. “Stupid bat, get out of my hair!”

“Sorry!” Draco squeaked, dropped down, and then burrowed into Toby’s thick fur.

Draco’s soft squeaks came out, “I agree with Toby., We don’t want to be alone. Don’t leave us!”

Millie was surprised by their concern. “I am just going to have a delightful picnic with Gar. Really.”

“At night?” Toby asked.

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “Okie-dokie, Smokey. Have fun. I am going to bed.” Shaking her head, she walked up the stairs. Over her shoulder she called down, “That gargoyle better treat you right or I will plant a boot firmly in his stoney bootie.”

Everyone laughed but the tension still hung in the air.

Millie stroked Toby’s head until Gar appeared, picnic basket in hand

“Hey everyone. Family meeting?” Gar asked softly looking at the gathered souls around Millie. “If this is not a good time maybe we should make it another night.”

Millie shook her head. "No, everything's fine. They were just worried about the black licorice tea. It's almost all gone."

Gar took Millie's hand lightly and smiled as he led her up the stairs. "You'll have to order more. You know how much I love it."

Draco climbed onto Toby's head. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Toby nodded. "Me too. Oh well. Ready to do our security work?"

Draco nodded and launched himself into the air.

Meanwhile, Millie leaned into Gar. "So, where are you taking me? I mean, we are still in the building."

Gar smiled. "We are that and it's a secret place known only to gargoyles."

One floor below the roof, Gar came to a small unassuming door.

Millie laughed. "All this stair climbing and you're taking me to a maintenance closet for our picnic?"

Gar smiled. "Yes Ma'am. After you." Millie shrugged and stepped into a different world. Her mouth fell open as she looked at a red-orange sky. Cliffs and caves surrounded the landing and a deep drop with clouds rising out of the center.

"What in the --?" She gasped and walked forward a few steps.

Gar came up beside her. "It's the Rift. My world – my domain."

Millie blinked several times, adjusting her eyes to the dimmer light.

"It's absolutely beautiful, Gar." After a moment, she said, "Wait. This can't be in my – No way!" She opened the maintenance door and stepped back into the hallway, then stepped back inside the closet, closing the door slowly. "A world within a world."

"Yes, of sorts. I mentioned it long ago when you first moved in." Gar spread out the blanket he had packed. "Hamburgers, PB and J, or sardines? That is what I could get without raising too much suspicion. I also have a variety of

baked goods."

"So that's where the baked goods went," Millie said with a hint of frustration in her voice. "Annabelle has been picking on Diao all day for eating them."

Gar belly laughed. "Good, I am sure the shifter deserved it for something."

Millie shook her head and looked around. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, covered in glittering crystals of amethyst and diamond. The light coming from the Rift captured in the facets of the crystals covered the chamber with specks of colored light. Clouds floated freely within the Rift along with gargoyles which flew in and out among the glittering rocks. The twinkling crystals shimmered like stars in the night sky, reflecting off the wings of the gargoyles, alluding to angelic beings.

"To think, this is all in the Orb. Unreal!"

As dinner progressed, Millie and Gar talked at length about the worlds contained within. The Rift, complex and multilayered, held its own linear timeline time within its dimension. Everything existed at the same time, allowing those within to shift their timeline by their energy.

Suddenly the quiet was broken by a female gargoyle. The tiny cherub she held slid out of her hands and began to fall backward into the void. This little one had yet to learn flight and its small wings could not keep its stone body aloft.

The mother dove for the child but Millie's vantage point was closer. Without thinking, she leapt after the child. As she plummeted, she heard Gar scream, "No, Millie! No!"

Millie's hands gripped a little stone leg tightly. She turned her body fluidly in the air to toss the child upward, a skilled learned while playing flag football in school. The mother caught the baby and pulled the little gargoyle into an embrace. Her eyes turned to Millie who still fell.

That is when realization dawned on Millie. She was plunging into the Rift without wings to catch her. Still, the beautiful alabaster white clouds swirling around her mesmerized her, filling her with a sense of freedom. She was light and one with the light. She was free to be fully Millie! Joy rushed through her being.

She turned her head to see Gar flying toward her rapidly. Millie gave him a wink and streamlined her body as she slid into one of the Rift's many worlds.

Gar could have sworn that before she disappeared Millie tossed back her head, as large white wings appeared from her shoulders.

Wings! No, she couldn't become a gargoyle. Gar's mind must be making things up to help him cope with his anguish. He stopped mid-flight to look for her but she was gone. "Millie!" He cried.

No answer.

He would find her. She could be anywhere in the Rift and probably – hopefully – the clouds broke her fall. Or perhaps the wings. "Wings?"

Distraught, he flew up to the landing, sat on the blanket and stared into the crystalline chamber. Would he tell Annabelle that her daughter was a hero? That she had saved a life, forfeiting her own in the process? Annabelle was bound to press him about the details of Millie's disappearance. He couldn't for certain say the word "death." That was too final and the Rift was far from final. His eyes moved to the swirling colors and the clouds. "Bring her back to me. Do you hear me?!" His words sank into the Rift, to which he directly spoke. "Bring her back to me!"

The Rift obliged him but not the way he thought it would be. The Rift has its own way of dealing with love and loss.

The next day was like any other with a few changes at the Black Orb.

"Millie has taken an impromptu shopping vacation," Annabelle told patrons. Annabelle took charge of baking, making the hot beverages for the tea shop and ordering the inventory to keep the shelves full.

Diao, rarely the raven, managed the store with a sad countenance, while Toby and Draco ran security. Gar fixed the building and guarded the store by night from his loft.

The only new thing to be added to the Black Orb was next to Gar's loft. An alabaster white gargoyle with long white wings watched over the store. The face, perfect in every detail, wore a breathtaking smile, though every so often, the eyes came to life to watch over the Black Orb.



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An Bennelong Point

Precious curves, swoops,
arches, peaks;
winner of contests, hearts,
ears

Waves shuffle, dance below the line
with gulls and cockatoos
screeching, squawking,
puttering, tripping under
feet

Garden beds filled with kangaroo paws,
banksia, grevillea,
waratah, Sturt's desert peas,
blooming in unrivaled glory
for onlookers with quiet
eyes

You, my love, my quiet hill of solitude in crowds and song, you, my love, my roaring mound, tell stories old and new.



Shimmering scales, cream,
angled, perfect in form,
covering heads and seats
and stage and sound;
built for brilliance,
covered in mystique for
hearts

Onlookers gaze with sea-filled eyes,
love you, know you,
see you, feel you.
Dazzling symphony, dance,
performance, gowns,
shadows then and now.
Evening glow, nighttime watch for
souls

You, my love, my treasured spires of song for lonely soul and spirit, you, my love, my compelling peaks, lift desolate hearts once more to song.

Rita Mock-Pike

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A Touch of Grace

Sarah Das Gupta

Essay

Many Saints are associated with love and devotion to animals. Foremost among them is St. Francis of Assisi, who is said to have preached to the birds. St. Gertrude of Nivelles was the patron saint of cats and St. Blaise the patron of wild animals. And then there is my father. He had no conventional religious affiliation or devotion, but animals seemed to respond to his touch. You might call it grace or magic. I call it love and respect.

Once upon a time, far back in history, my family had a garage. Perhaps it once housed a car, but for as long as I can remember it sheltered a menagerie instead. Opening the doors required alertness and at times a degree of courage. You never knew what to expect – an injured hawk, a grass snake, hedgehogs, bats, stray puppies, young badger cubs – anything but a car! Most of the village's 'walking wounded' in terms of creatures ended up in the sanctuary of our garage.

One winter for about six weeks, our garage was ruled by a kestrel with a broken wing. The bird had been treated by a vet but needed a convalescent home. Where better than our garage? During those weeks, the garage was out of bounds to everyone except my father. Shut in this concrete prison, the bird was aggressive and would fly at anyone and everyone. But not Dad. During that time, Dad transformed it once again into a bird of prey as he served up dead mice, shrews, and other tasty morsels he found in the fields and garden.

I must admit that the rest of us were glad to see it fly away freely into the twilight of an April evening. But my father was certain the bird remained in our woods and fields long after its release.

This act of compassion was characteristic of my father, who was known in the village as 'the animal man'. The case of Bobby, the Shetland pony, was another example. Bobby was a black pony of unknown age and history. He was under ten hands – about a metre – which is very small.



We first saw Bobby as a forlorn, neglected pony in a January field, ninety-nine percent mud. His hooves were so overgrown that they were beginning to curl up at the ends, more like Greek tsarouchi slippers than normal hooves. He could barely hobble around. Brambles and leaves tangled his dark mane, and through his thick coat his ribs and backbone showed prominently beneath his skin. Dad traced the owner, who was only too willing to give Bobby to a good home, and for the rest of the winter, Bobby stayed in our stable; the blacksmith trimmed his feet and Dad's many helpers regularly brushed and groomed him.

By spring, Bobby was unrecognisable in every way. He galloped around the field bucking and rearing with other horses following, and asserted his power over horses twice his size! Seventeen hand hunters turned to putty in Bobby's presence.

He was too small for me or my sisters to ride, but occasionally he gave rides to young cousins or neighbours. We had to keep him on a short lead to stop him from nipping their all-too-inviting backsides or chubby legs! Bobby also proved to be a good guard out in the fields: Despite his size, he charged – head down, teeth bared – at trespassers who would otherwise have left gates open or pulled down fences.

Dad enjoyed pointing Bobby out to visitors. "There goes one of our successes!" he'd tell them with a proud smile.

Then there were 'the Lizzies', which we named after our ever-clucking, fussing Great-Aunt Lizzie. These poor hens had spent their whole lives in barns and had never known the light of day. They looked a sad sight when they first arrived in their cages. Almost featherless, they were plainly terrified, and huddled together as they shrank away from the sunshine.

At first, they were shut in an empty stable with both the top and lower doors closed so they would feel safer. Then gradually day by day, Dad began opening the top door a few centimetres at a time, helping them to become accustomed to the light. He opened the doors fully after a month, but it still took several more weeks before the Lizzies felt confident enough to forage outside.

By the end of summer their beautiful new feathers had grown in. They were unrecognisable, pecking and clucking around, even venturing into the open field. They wandered about in that fussy, seemingly pointless way that hens do, and rewarded their rescuers by laying fine, brown eggs – often hidden in inaccessible places!

My father's love and compassion extended not only to creatures cuddly and cute but also to those large and bumbling. His friend Alf, a baker by trade, was a committed breeder of pigs. Alf kept his pigs clean and happy, allowing them to roam freely in the fields during the day. My father often helped with the farrowing and resuscitation of any runts or weaker piglets.

One evening, unbeknown to the rest of us, Dad came home with a tiny piglet in his pocket. He opened the door to the slow oven of the Aga Cooker and deposited the little piglet there so it would stay warm. Then he went to feed the poultry.

A short time later, there was a piercing scream from the kitchen. My mother was an incredibly tolerant woman, but even she was shocked to find a live pig in her oven! Both she and the piglet survived the surprise, and Dad let my younger sister bottle-feed it for a few weeks before he returned it to Alf.

But of all the creatures shown grace and compassion by my father, the dogs were the most loyal. Over the years we shared our home with many dogs – Basset Hounds, French Bulldogs, Pugs, and others. The most intelligent and devoted were our 'Frenchies'.

Boo-Boos was probably the brightest dog I have ever known. My youngest sister trained her so well that she could order Boo-Boos to 'wait' by the entrance to a hundred-acre field – over a mile from the house – disappear across it into the distance, whistle, and watch as Boo-Boos bounded down the hill, raced up the other side of the valley, and leapt into my sister's outstretched arms.

Yet it was to my father that Boo-Boos gave absolute devotion. When she gave birth to her first litter of puppies, she became unbalanced. She seemed to believe someone would steal them from her. Every evening as soon as it grew dark, she would grasp each puppy in turn by the loose skin of its neck and carry it to a special hole she had dug in the middle of the delphinium bed. And every evening, Dad would retrieve them and try to convince Boo-Boos that they were safe in the kitchen. After a couple weeks of this, Dad began to sleep on a camp bed in the kitchen with her and the six puppies on top of him.

Sometime later, my parents went on a rare holiday. Boo-Boos seemed to accept their absence and attached herself instead to me and my sisters, trailing after us and sleeping in my youngest sister's bed. We never suspected what would happen. On the night they were to return, we heard the disturbing crash of shattered glass. We crept nervously downstairs, expecting to confront a burglar, only to discover that Boo-Boos had

heard the car returning and had leapt straight through the dining room window! We stared through the gaping hole in the glass and watched as she leapt into Dad's arms and frantically began licking his face.

My sister folded her arms. "If one of us had hit a cricket ball through that window," she said, "there would have been hell to pay."

Dad only laughed. "Boo-Boos is such a clever girl," he said. "She managed to go through a whole window without cutting herself!"

But the compassionate moments I loved best about my dad were often those smallest, simplest ones – the moments that get missed unless one watches for them everyday. One of these was the day I looked through the front glass of the incubators as a large goose egg slowly cracked open.

A faint chirping came from inside, though the other eggs showed no signs of hatching. Little by little he emerged, a tiny gosling looking bewildered by the challenge of this new life ahead. Gently, I picked him up and put him under a warm lamp to dry off.

After a short time away checking the other incubators, I returned and was surprised to find the gosling in exactly the same position as before. His orange legs were splayed out uselessly on either side of his now dry, downy body. I tried to help the gosling stand, but to no avail. Every time I stopped supporting him, the little bird collapsed yet again.

After I'd attempted this at least six times, my father appeared with the usual gang of dogs at his heels. "What's the problem with this little chap?" He asked, and began to examine the skinny legs.

"He just can't stand," I said. "I've tried but every time I put him down, he collapses. Can't we help him or at least give him a chance?"

Dad nodded. "You wait here a minute. Keep an eye on young Gregory Peck. I'll be back." He was as good as his word. Soon I saw the familiar figure in the old mac and the Russian-style fur hat appearing through the mist. He had a bunch of old match sticks and a reel of string in one hand, and scissors in the other.

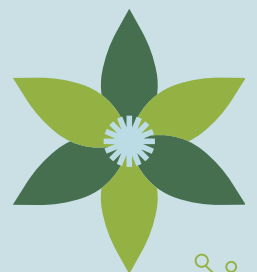
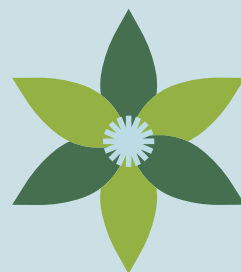
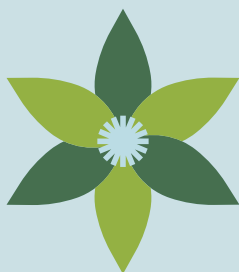
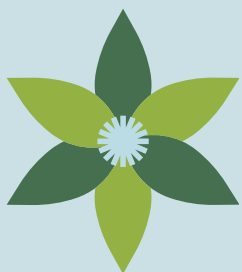
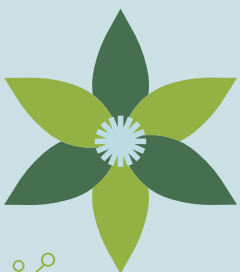
"Now," Dad said, settling down beside the incubator, "You hold him, so I can deal with his legs."

I held Gregory – a soft, yellow powder-puff – in the palm of my hand while Dad carefully tied a match stick to each leg. It worked! Once I released him, the little gosling began wandering around the warmly-lit pen, chirping and waiting for one of his cousins or siblings to join him. Gregory looked rather striking with his improvised splints.

Dad nodded again as he gathered his tools. "Birds and animals have a sixth sense. They know if you're on their side."

I like to think he passed this gift on to my sisters and me, though I have to admit our love of creatures remains more limited. We would still not keep a wasps' nest in the attic just because, as Dad said, "They're happy and we're not using it."

Now that is truly saintly.



Towards Cape Elizabeth

John Muro Poetry

Flying east towards Cape Elizabeth pitched in purgatory time when day goes down darkly and the earth below is set adrift upon a moonless tide; now passing coves of calm and suddenly hurling past a neon necklace of coastline that is Old Orchard Beach and banking north; the muzzled wheeze and hiss of landing gear stirred from sleep; the grating arc of axle locking into place and an easing up of thrust so that a certain lightness settles in and we draw into, and then out of, ourselves – souls in freefall before a hastening homewards that's far stronger than the tides, our open-eyed descent or gravity.



Transport

Eric Velleux

Poetry

With music in its mind and money on its back,
The gentle train slowly danced around its yard
Eyes closed, transported to a secret place
Off the rails
With but the song in her head and the fire in her heart
She was alive
The whistle of train brakes
As soft as they sounded from afar
Were enough to startle those nearby
And break the train's trance
Until next time

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Baby Brother

Melanie Maggard

Fiction

After dad had taken us trick-or-treating, we went to the hospital, not because we were ill, though our bellies were already stuffed with Skittles and Whoppers, but to see our mother and new brother, who my sister wasn't happy with because that meant she was no longer the baby. But that didn't matter because dad finally had a son and I had a brother. So, while the full moon watched us, we stood outside our wood-paneled station wagon, teeth chattering, pulling thin coats around our tiny bodies, crisp leaves sprinting across the pavement on invisible tracks, dressed as Wonder Woman and Annie, our discarded masks and wigs on the dashboard. Our matching sandy bobs fuzzy with wind and static electricity, we waited until dad pointed to a window on the third floor of the large brick building where both of us were born, his smile glowing in the middle of his frizzy brown beard. He fanned his arm in large arches above his head and I mimicked him, swinging one arm, then both, while I jumped up and down, giggling until my eyes watered and I couldn't breathe. Then we gazed at the twinkling silhouette of my mother, holding my baby brother, waving down at us.



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Contributor Bios

PETROUCHKA ALEXIEVA – CALIFORNIA, USA

Miss Petrouchka Alexieva is well-known as a feminist and a love poet, distinguished scholar and TV persona. She is a Cum Laude graduate at CSULA (2009) and “All American Scholar Award” recipient (2008). Speaking 8+ languages, her literary and scholarly works, photo-documentaries were highlighted in varieties of venues, on “Daheli Live!” TV show, opening ceremonies and numerous open mics. For her outstanding life-long achievements, Ms. Alexieva’s name was included two times among the most distinguished Earth’s citizens list of NASA’s Mars Exploration Rover (2003) capsule and Science Laboratory Rover (2011) list, for which she has been awarded with honorable certificates.

ADA CHENG – CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA

An educator-turned artist, speaker, and community builder, Dr. Ada Cheng has utilized storytelling to illustrate structural inequities, raise critical awareness, and build intimate communities. Committed to amplifying and uplifting marginalized voices, she has created numerous storytelling platforms for BIPOC and LGBTQIA community members to tell difficult and vulnerable stories. Dr. Cheng has been a speaker for Illinois Humanities Road Scholars Speakers Bureau since 2019. She is named 2023-24 Lund-Gill Chair in the Rosary College of Arts and Sciences at Dominican University. Her interests encompass academia, storytelling/performance, and advocacy.

PERRI DODGSON – ENGLAND

Perri Dodgson was born in 1959 into an RAF family. Her early life was spent in permanent transit making her school life rather chaotic. She studied graphic arts, worked in banking, did layout design, and worked in the care sector. Now retired, she lives in Wellingborough, England. She realised how much she loves storytelling and creating characters when she joined her local writing group early this year. Writing flash fiction, fiction, and poetry. She is enjoying the learning process and also planning her first novel.

D. DUNN-CARR – NORTH CAROLINA, USA

Deborah Dunn-Carr is a retired middle and elementary school teacher. She currently works part-time as the Vice President and office manager for her family’s fabrication and welding shop. Deborah studied creative writing while attending Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, where her poem “Strands” was published in the University’s journal: The Dominion Review. Deborah shares her love of writing with her husband of 30 years, Chip, who is her first critic. Together, Deborah and Chip have two children and four furry friends.

GENE GOLDFARB – NEW YORK, USA

Gene Goldfarb lives in New York City, where he ponders, love, hate, mortality and what’s up with the guy who hangs around the building. He loves movies, books, travel, and international cuisine. His poetry has appeared in the small press including: Black Fox, The Daily Drunk, The Gorko Gazette, Rat’s Ass Review, Bullshit Lit, and Stoneboat.

Sarah Das Gupta – Cambridge, UK

Sarah Das Gupta is a retired teacher who started writing last October after a long stay in hospital. Her work has been published in magazines from ten countries, including US, UK, Canada, Australia, India, and Nigeria.

JAMES HANCOCK – UK

James Hancock is a writer/screenwriter who specializes in bizarre comedy, thriller, horror, sci-fi and twisted fairy tales. He takes readers down strange and seldom trodden paths, often dark, and always with a twist or two along the way. A few of his short screenplays have been made into films, his stories read on podcasts, and he has been published in several print magazines, online, and in anthology books. He lives in England with his wife, two daughters, and a bunch of pets he insisted his girls could **not** have.

ALYXANDER LABRANCHE – MICHIGAN, USA

Alyxander LaBranche is a mixed race, trans, Mass Communication BA and Graphic Design AAS student born in Detroit, Michigan. A defining aspect of his life was growing up surrounded by supportive educators who nurtured his creativity fostering a commitment to art. With the whims and woes of life, he found his spark flickering, which was reignited by the adoption of his kitten Bynx (Thackerie). The fight for economic equality and food security is a cause that he cares for personally, making conversation about what those terms mean to individuals within the community and volunteering at local food pantries.

MELANIE MAGGARD – SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, USA

Melanie Maggard is a flash and poetic prose writer who loves dribbles and drabbles. She has published in Cotton Xenomorph, The Dribble Drabble Review, X-R-A-Y Magazine, Five Minute Lit, and others.



Contributor Bios

REBECCA D. MARTIN – VIRGINIA, USA

Rebecca D. Martin is an autistic writer living in Virginia with her husband and two daughters. Her work has been published in the Curator, the Brevity blog, Proximity, and Isele, among others. Visit her website where she talks about some of her favorite things, including poetry, houses, and neurodiversity. On Thursday, she feeds bearded dragons at her local nature center.

AMMANDA SELETHIA MOORE – USA

Ammanda Selethia Moore (they/elle) is a non-binary poet and writer who also teaches English at Norco College. Their poetry has been published in Synchronized Chaos, Literary Yard, and The Journal of Radical Wonder. They live with their partner in sunny southern California.

JOHN MURO – CONNECTICUT, USA

A resident of Connecticut and a lover of all things chocolate, John Muro has authored two volumes of poems – In the Lilac Hour and Pastoral Suite – in 2020 and 2022, respectively. He is a three-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize, a nominee for the Best of the Net Award and, more recently, he received a 2023 Grantchester Award. John's work has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including Acumen, Barnstorm, Delmarva, Moria, River Heron, Sky Island and the Valparaiso Review.

SUE PATERSON – WASHINGTON, USA

Sue Paterson is a writer, nurse and farmer. She and her husband live in the Northwest with chickens, ducks, cats and dogs.

DIANA RAAB, PHD – CALIFORNIA, USA

Diana Raab, PhD, is an award-winning memoirist, poet, blogger, speaker, and author of 13 books. Her new poetry chapbook is, An Imaginary Affair: Poems Whispered to Neruda (Finishing Line Press, 2022). She blogs for Psychology Today, Thrive Global, Sixty and Me, Good Men Project, and The Wisdom Daily.

CLS SANDOVAL – CALIFORNIA, USA

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

ANGELA TOWNSEND – PENNSYLVANIA, USA

As Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary, Angela Townsend bears witness to mercy for all beings. Angie has an M.Div. from Princeton Seminary and a B.A. from Vassar College. She has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 32 years, giggles with her mother every morning, and delights in the moon. She lives in lovely Pennsylvania with two shaggy seraphs disguised as cats.

ERIC VELLEUX – MINNESOTA, USA

Eric Velleux is an aspiring artist and poet from Minnesota. Most days, he can be found out in the world, experiencing nature and people. On other days, out in the world, writing, painting, and making music. He has two children whom he loves dearly.

JULIAN WALKER – UK

After a career as an artist and educator working with museums, publishing several books on social history, and the history of the English language, Julian Walker started writing short fiction at the age of 68, continuing a fascination with vignettes and the miniature. Combining this with his other main work, as a printmaker, he started the imprint Stuff Like That, to publish his own work and that of others, as handmade books. He lives and works in London, UK.

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Staff Bios

ANNALI CARMEL - CO-FOUNDER & CREATIVE TEAM

Annali Carmel (she/her) enjoys her life in rural New South Wales, where she listens to a lot of music, does some singing, and welcomes the occasional affection of Aria the cat when she deigns the peasant worthy.

SUE COOK - STAFF POET & WRITER

Sue Cook (she/her) lives in Freeport, Illinois with her husband Randy and two dogs. Her passions include assistance dogs, rescue dogs, music, acting, theater, poetry, and Doctor Who. She's been in both film and theater and is a regular cast member of the podcast Doctor Who's Line is it....Anyway? Sue is an advocate for the use of Service Dogs to assist their disabled handlers to maintain their independence. Quigley's Quest, her first children's book, addresses how a dog becomes a Service Dog.

MILENE CORREIA - REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Brazilian multidisciplinary artist. Major in English Language and Literature, taking a specialization course in Teaching of Drama. I write, rewrite, draw and compose and expose because my heart can't fit all these feelings. Leo, Queer, 92.

KATIE DANIELS - STAFF WRITER & INTERVIEWER

Katie Daniels is a lifelong Florida kid, where she still resides with her husband and their pup-child. She loves reading, meeting new people, and seeing new places. If you need anything, just bribe her with a donut.

CYNTHIA ANN LUBLINK - COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CREATIVE TEAM

Cyndi (she/her) is the mama of two grown children and Oma to eight grandchildren, all of whom she adores. She's a biker chick with a lady's heart and forty tattoos that tell some of her life story. Not just a cancer survivor, she's a life thriver. She also loves painting and finds the process like solving math equations. She has been a writer/poet since the age of nine, her first poem being about God's Hands. She wrote for Christian Biker Magazine for five years.

EMILY MACKENZIE - COPY EDITOR

Emily MacKenzie is a Canadian-born writer who currently teaches Secondary English in Scotland. She studied English and Creative Writing at Carleton University in Ottawa, although her love of writing developed long before that. Emily loves exploring different narrative formats and styles in her own writing, and while she tends to stick with long or short prose fiction, the odd poem slips through from time to time. She can most often be found tackling one of several young adult fantasy stories she intends to publish, both on her tablet, and on the walls with stickies, markers, and poster paper.

TANDY MALINAK - HEAD COPY EDITOR & STAFF WRITER

A Seattleite by birth, Tandy Malinak loves mountains but not rain. So she escaped to Chicago to learn what 'winter', 'summer', and 'real thunderstorm' mean, and she decided she liked them all. Tandy earned a BA in Education specializing in English and now spends her days homeschooling, nannying, and helping to lead her church's kids' ministry. In her free time, she writes fantasy and sci-fi, solves crosswords, and plays Nintendo. She lives with her husband, two dragon-loving kids, and three black cats.

NANCY MOCK - PROOFREADER

Nancy was born in Montana, raised in Ohio, and moved to Florida almost 30 years ago. Mother of Rita Mock-Pike and her two siblings. Nancy learned to make computers "dance" in the early 1970s, with her husband's encouragement, before most people had computers in their homes. She's had a lot of experience formatting magazines, flyers, etc. throughout her life. As a retiree, her favorite hobbies are still crafting (mostly sewing) and reading.

Staff Bios

CO-FOUNDING EDITOR-IN-CHIEF & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/PRODUCER FOR MOCKINGOWL STUDIOS

Editor-in-Chief of The MockingOwl Roost, Rita Mock-Pike (she/her) is the granddaughter of aviatrix, Jerrie Mock, first woman to pilot an airplane solo around the world. Rita has found inspiration from her grandmother's life and flight and pursued many of her own dreams in theatre, podcasting, novel writing, and cooking up delicious food from around the world. She now writes on food, travel, pets, faith, and the arts. She's happily married to Matt, and faithfully serves the very fluffy kitten queen, Lady Stardust.

CO-FOUNDING COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER FOR THE MOCKINGOWL REALMS

Soren Porter – He/him, INFJ, 30s-ish I think?, happily forever taken (sorry lads and ladies!). Writing reflections of faith and philosophy. LGBTQIA+ ally and sworn enemy of white supremacy. You might hear Soren ranting against evil policies, sharing ridiculous pop culture, or tossing around some theological thoughts on Tumblr or Twitter.



