Hollow and Sky

a literary journal of spiritual inquiry and the natural world

Photograph by: Jacob Baker

Issue One

Spring 2026

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Hollow and Sky is a space for work that listens.

We are drawn to poems, prose, and images that move with quiet attention. Work that lingers rather than declares, that trusts stillness, and allows meaning to emerge slowly. The pieces gathered here share a commitment to presence: to landscapes both interior and natural, to memory, loss, and to the small moments that carry weight when given room to breathe.

This inaugural issue brings together work that is attentive to what remains, what is held, what is preserved, and what passes through us and leaves something behind. Across forms, these works resist spectacle in favor of intimacy. Asking the reader not to rush, but to stay.

Thank you for entering this first issue with us.

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Poetry

CHERRY

Blossoms cover
our cherry tree,
small pinkish bicycles
riding on an avenue
of twigs.

Kenneth Pobo

LILAC BUSH

At school, the red rectangular door,
the line of kids. No escape,
recess a threat. Someone has it in
for someone else. But

at the corner of Delco and Second,
a lilac bush, purple and pungent
in May. I rarely see the older lady
who owns it. When others

buy her house, they cut
the lilac down, the barren corner
like an empty trash can.

When I walk to school,
a lilac smell still
overtakes me.

Kenneth Pobo

Walking Beside the River After Loss

The river keeps doing
what it knows.
It carries leaves,

thin foam,
the echo of yesterday's rain.

Grief does not stop it.
Nor does it hurry the water.

I walk slowly,
matching my steps
to what remains possible.

Every few minutes,
the river shifts its sound.
I listen,
not for answers,
but for company.

Abraham Aondoana

Moon Haiku

titanium white
at last I finally see
the moon

leaf wind
this whisper
of moon

writer's block deepening a page full of moonlight

the mayfly's first last deeper into the mauve moon

a line of moonlight
hails a cab
inner city

the real
weight of words
moonshine
silence to silence
someone else's moon
both
and neither
poncirus moon

stratocumulus moon
deeper into the darkness
last breath

Joshua St. Claire

Autumn Haiku

grandma watching me
from around the corner
red chrysanthemums

a chestnut-collared longspur
cries from dry coneflower
dusk deepens

hurricane remnants
last year's chestnut leaves
also becoming the earth

all ready for bed
                nectarine
red maple leaves rust on my old bike

deepening chill
the west wind
on fire

the last city on Earth
Harrisburg
in October mist

hiss of highway
yellow light
on yellow willows

deer road
I always refused
to take the easy way

despite it all
            November dandelions

Joshua St. Claire

Connections

The Delhi train stopped
unexpectedly at Karagpur.
Young boys ran along the platform
with earthenware cups of sweet tea.
'Chai! Chai!' echoed
through the compartments.
Gazing idly out, I found myself
looking into the window
of a bungalow.
A young girl was holding
a glass of water for
a frail old man whose
skin was like ancient,
worn parchment
through which I watched
the water trickling
down his throat.
The child softly combed
his hair and washed each foot
with great tenderness
from a battered silver urn.

The train slowly pulled
out of the station.

Sarah Das Gupta

Darjeeling: Tea Gardens at Dawn

Walking through the tea gardens
in the cool of the morning,
above loom the mountain peaks,
Green leaved tea bushes
wash against the skyline,
waiting to be picked.

Bright dots of colour,
the pickers are scattered,
on their heads, conical hats
of neatly plaited straw.
On their backs baskets
bags, full of loose leaves.

Behind the tea gardens,
like a scene from
a Bollywood romance,
rise the five peaks of
the mighty Kanchenjunga,
mysterious, snowcapped
sacred, home to
a fearful mountain monster.

Drift through the valleys.
In the East, a pale, orange
banner waves across
the lightening sky.
Ghosts of the Raj
linger among the hills,
lie in the churchyards,
dreaming of sipping tea
beneath Indian skies.

Sarah Das Gupta

Plagiarism

trekking through fields
around mountains
in leitrim. feeling your feet
as they slip, spinning silt
like a spoon-fueled
whirlpool, sinking
through milk-
soured coffee.
footsteps mark earth:
make fossils to wash
down with rainwater –

and sometimes
these things
are preserved.

like that shoreline,
shoelace ragged,
down south on valentia
island; the tetrapod
trackways. shallow marks
and tailprints
which melt
on the rocks. once
we went down there;

me and jack
and our friend, aodhain,
the geologist,
so he could scratch
some samples out
to test. illegal,
of course,
but it's different
when it's science – perhaps
knowing something
will teach him
something new.

my tracks take space
beneath the shadows
of live forests. and over
of dead ones – trees beaten down
in clay crush,
broken mud. without before,
what to leave footprints in? and without it, where
to grow grass? plagiarism
just inspiration
which springs without follow-through.

DS Maolalai

At Cockcrow's Edge

We fragile things of
Filagree and silver wings
We rise through dark
To dawn unmet

Spare light guiding dim
Through wisps of ghost mist
Fogging cockcrow's call
Across autumn leas
Teeming damp and close

Dawn gives little way
In drought-hard doubt
To drive heart's spade bar
Deep enough to liven
Winter seed and root

Measure hard to find
Through dawn mare's-tail mist
Wading backroad wisps
Unsure where to step
With so little left

Feet lose their purchase
Slip as gravel weeps
Soft her ragged tears
And threadbare solace
For dire dawn unmet

Breath at widowed edge
Through hardscrabble whirl
Thistle wind and dust's
Grace of beating wings
Wisping angels wait

At cockcrow's edge
Our measure met
We fragile things of
Filagree and silver wings

Steve Bucher

Murmur

Heart wrapped in a nest of frankincense
aorta flesh and fluid, the serpent to lick your ears.
Kingfisher lights on your shoulder and murmurs,
a lady of spells as you flower and flower in fertility
that unfolds in the fragrant Book of an ordinary day
when god is a woman.

Rikki Santer

The New Old

Maybe had I stayed longer. Or left sooner. *Disconnect*—how
I describe what is or isn't going on inside
my post-stroke mother. The other night she ushered
my wife & I outside to witness the planetary alignment, in-
sisting the neighbor's low red boat light was Mars, the other string
of pulsings, the other astral bodies she couldn't name but knew
must be tethered. All her conversation broken. Often I
refrain. Wait as she closes her eyes, conjuring. Until she looks
(blinking) at me still gripped in the brink of. If I can't connect the spurts,
can't illicit or cipher or project, she'll abandon the thought altogether,
offering *I don't know.* The afternoon after the freak
snow melted she began *When you see a cardinal it's like a memory or—*.
And instead of finishing *the dead, returning—*, I barely nodded.

Flower Conroy

Wind Whips Through the Cemetery

because there are no trees. I'd abandon
my mother if I could. I'll vacuum
the torn nails & hair clumps later.
I think that water deer looks nothing
like a vampire hart despite the tuskfangs.
Or because of the tuskfangs it doesn't
look like a vampire deer as much as it seems
a saddening. I do not conceptually understand
procrastination; if a given task
is completed within a given timeframe
what does it matter at which point within
the parameters completion happens?
I misread print factory as pink factory.
Are there really bats in the library
in Portugal, lording nocturnal over
the books, purging the air of moths and beetles?
Because I should like a whispering winged
swarthy radish devil or two to spirit
over my tomes at night & nestle in the vaulted
by day. What would a nap feel like right now?
I mean, would I dream? I've a lot more laundry
to do than I thought, & that's without stripping
the bed before my wife returns to quell the cotton-
mouth & ease the heart. Why do you think the eye's
drawn to interpret abstract images in this way?
I talk to my dog more than my mother even
when they're in the same room. Time feels outside
itself right now, overcast and humid, just a titillation
of stormier weather, this wrist that keeps cracking
when I twist it. I could fraction endlessly.
I've been barefoot, my shirt inside out all morning.
And because I hear a crow caw
I notice blue poking from behind
the brightening clouds, the roof speckled
with rain spit. I distract myself; where'd the crow
go? Over which block is it haunting?
I was elsewhere but wasn't I always elsewhere,
waiting for you? On hands & knees, for you,
I'll scrub this floor.

Flower Conroy

ON A GEORGIA SHORELINE

Sun rolls in on a wave. Morning has crossed
the sea to be here. Sky is the blue of starling's eggs.
In the distance, fluttery breezes preen the sails
of a yacht. A small motorboat putt-putts out
from behind the headland. An unimpressed
lighthouse looms overhead. Beyond the breakers,
cormorants fish in rich waters. A stand
of guardian conifers bristles with salt.
In stunted grass, sandpipers nest, behind a wall of
"No Trespassing" signs. Not all life is assured.
Some remains precarious.
A loud family claim the solitary picnic table.
Others are content to let towels do the work of tables.
Giddy children test their mettle at the ocean's edge,
with dipped toes and some splashing, then retreat
into their inner world of buckets and spades and sandcastles.
Pale-skinned interlopers stand out like night-lights
amid the bronzed regulars. By day's end,
their bodies will be as red as "Stop" signs.
Under a striped umbrella, an old couple take
their shaded fill of a warmth that's been coming here
millenniums longer than they have.
It's hard to believe ships sank off this coast,
Not with the water this calm.
Besides, the past so long ago, it hardly matters.
The lifeguard watches from his wooden throne.
His purview is a hundred yards out to sea.
He's the sheriff in swim-trunks.
Desperadoes in these parts run to shark-fins and rip currents.
A tiny girl grips a shell that her hand can barely hold.
An older boy pokes a jelly fish with a driftwood spear.
Three little ones look on, say "Yuk" in chorus.
The occupant of a new bikini tip-toes in the foam
but goes no further. She vows no cold ocean will
embrace her bare midriff. Hers is the path tracked
by the most male eyes. She even ropes me into
this poem, something I was hoping to avoid.
But I look for as long as the blinding sun allows.
She disappears in a glow. How fitting.

John Grey

THE CROW PERSPECTIVE

Sunrise
after a long dark night –
the crow in the snow
is the one thing black
in a world of white.
He hooks into a high branch,
best for viewing
anything dead
in every direction.
But death's been having
a hard time lately.
Everything's nested or denned.
Even the traffic has been
too slow, too unreliable.
Not even a mindless possum
has been thumped into a ditch
by a passing car.
He's black punctuation
on a blank page,
like he's editing the morning
with his silence.
The crow blinks once,
like he's unimpressed
with all this living,
and I tell him
I get it.
Nobody dies,
nobody crashes,
nobody loses.
It's almost enough
to make you believe
the world is trying again.
That's tough on the crow
but fine for the rest of us.

John Grey

Dementia Partner

I live with
the seashell
that has
forgotten
the sound
of the sea.

Diane Webster

Floating Wings

Floating
in the cocktail glass
a slice of orange
transparent
as a butterfly wing.

Diane Webster

Silent Movie Night

Across the sky
in black-and-white
movie flickers,
lightning jitters
in silence.

Diane Webster

it is the dark that sings

it is the dark that sings
a bird hidden in the hollow of green
where dark and light begin and end
it is the dark that sings
where dark and light begin and end
a bird hidden in the hollow of green
and wind chimes where
dark and light begin and end
begins and ends
the dark that listens to the savored gift
like rain

Sister Lou Ella Hickman, OVISS

Visual Work

Through the Door

Rachel Turney, 2025

"Through the Door" captures stillness, memory, and the idea of being somewhere temporarily. I took this photograph in a historical farmhouse on the small island of Alrø, Denmark. As with much of my photography, this shot is an encouragement to pause and capture the world around us as part of the beauty of the landscape of daily life. It's also a commentary on technology. This farmhouse had no modern tech, until we brought it in. If you look closely you can see a phone (ubiquitous) and a speaker. The idea of clinging to these things when we are surrounded by paintings, pastures filled with sheep, and the wonders of travel is an interesting and concerning aspect of the human condition.

The Dark Dragon is Always Sad in the Forks of the Sun

Nasta Martyn, 2026

Ink, collage, and paper

Prose

What We Do When We Don't Talk About Grief

Through word of mouth, regulars at the bar—who only came on Ladies' Night when beers were half-price—knew why you hadn't stopped by in the past two months. Those evenings when we felt carefree, when our husbands didn't mind us wasting money on beers we pissed into the rusty toilet bowl. As you sat beside me on the stool, the bartender set a Camembert and carrot stick platter on the counter. Turning away from you, she muttered, "On the house." Not knowing what to say, I raised my mug and blurted out, "Cheers," my voice rising at the end like a question instead of a full-stop exclamation. You chugged a beer in one gulp. Then, out of the blue, you said you had started vegetable gardening in your tiny backyard. Planted seedlings of turnips and carrots. "Did you know that turnips must be planted close together so they can feel each other grow, make sure they're all right?" you said, stabbing the cheese wedge with a toothpick. "And you know what?" You pointed at the carrot sticks. "These must be planted far apart so they can grow as they like. If not, they die." I waited for you to keep talking, but you fell silent and slid the empty mug in front of the bartender. I wondered if the twins you miscarried were like carrots needing more space than your uterus could offer. Watching you down another beer with such craving, I knew you wouldn't talk anymore. So I grabbed the carrot stick and took a bite. Crunch, crunch, crunch. And it was gone as if it had never existed. Playing drunk, I leaned toward you, my arm touching yours.

Norie Suzuki

Egg

According to the judge, what I did was an abomination that will echo throughout history. Because of my silence in court, the media couldn't anchor to a stance. Sometimes I was a calculated monster of a man. Other times I was a genius who had made an astute commentary on our doomed planet. But I was something far less grand. Simply fed up and desperate, noticing the cabinet was unlocked.

The Sycamore Gap guys got four years. The women who threw soup at Van Gogh's Sunflowers got two years for damaging the frame. A tourist who carved his initials into the Colosseum with his front door key got a fine but no jail time. Their crimes took place at UNESCO sites and world-famous galleries. I got sentenced to seven years, and my crime took place at the Leeds Discovery Centre, where you can do Introduction to Knitting classes, and the carpark is free of charge.

I told my mother during one of her visits, the same nailed-down table dividing us, that the justice system had made an example out of me, that even though I hadn't personally depleted the number of Siberian tigers and mountain gorillas, I was the scapegoat. Mum sighed and said I was tone deaf, which felt ironic considering I'm a musician. *Was* a musician. Sort of. I wasn't a musician like a nurse is a nurse. I'd played at open mic nights and in pubs for cash in hand, before that day with the egg.

It was bigger than my head, about the size of a rugby ball, sat in a glass cabinet. In it had once been the embryo of an elephant bird, a species that had died out about a thousand years ago. I'd expected elephant birds to resemble elephants. Thick legs or flappy ears or a trunk-like beak, but the illustrations in the newspapers showed that they were like large, chunky ostriches with a dinosaur-like quality.

Ash had said we should go to the Leeds Discovery Centre because it was raining, and free, and we didn't want to think about work the next day, and if we saw things that weren't a part of Leeds then we might feel like we weren't a part of Leeds too. But really, by focusing on something else, we could escape what we knew was looming on the horizon: we were going to split up.

I met Ash in a band at school, the kind that meets in the music room at break times to cover Oasis, and has vitriolic rows over creative differences, such as who would sing Noel's parts and who would sing Liam's. I played guitar, Ash played drums. One lunchtime, before our bandmates arrived, amongst the mish mash of old music stands and grubby cymbals, I strummed and sang Songbird for Ash, trying to mimic Liam's rasp, hoping she knew I was singing about her. When I finished, she smiled at me, and it was like I was soaring above clouds.

Then it was first kiss, lost virginity, shared secrets, promises of undying love, poor exam results, crappy retail jobs and renting a flat together above a kebab shop before you could say Gallagher. Our home was too small for drumkits, and our bank accounts too sparse for new guitar strings. Soon, the pigeons on our windowsill seemed more in love as they flapped on top of each other before nesting and snuggling on top of their young.

I stared at the large egg long before noticing the cabinet was open, grateful that I never had to give birth to anything, longing for Ash to come stand next to me, but she was enamored with a stuffed chimpanzee, its mouth open like it was about to speak. Chimps were another population that were really suffering, the media monitoring their numbers falling like watching grains trickle through an hourglass. I'd stopped opening TikTok because I couldn't stand to see more images of their dark, frail forms hunched amongst felled trees. The information on the egg cabinet said that elephant birds had died out because of hunting and deforestation, and I wondered how we were still getting things so wrong a century later. And even though I wasn't out there with a chainsaw or a gun, I knew in an inadvertent way I was part of the problem because that's what I'd been told since childhood, and the guilt was becoming too heavy for me.

When Ash eventually wandered away from the chimp, I held her hand, counting the seconds. One, two, three, four, five. Then she let go.

'Do you think there's anything inside it?' she asked, looking at the egg.

I shrugged. 'Just a lump of dry stuff now, I guess.'

She looked more closely at it. 'I wonder whether it's thick. You know, hard to break.'

Its shell was creamy and mottled, like a planet through a telescope, the idea of it cracking like sending catastrophic chasms and crevasses across an entire magnificent existence. It was exquisite.

She smiled at me, and the glee on her face took me back to Songbird in the music room.

'Can you imagine it smashing?' she said. 'The sound it would make?' She put a hand on my arm, her grip earnest. Then we heard a *tink* noise, the glass door lightly rebounding from her elbow knocking it.

The cabinet was open.

She looked around the empty room before opening the cabinet and lifting out the egg, holding it in front of her like a lit birthday cake. When she offered it to me and I took it, she squirmed and giggled. It was lighter than I thought it would be. She hadn't asked me to break it, but I was so sure she wanted me to. And what the hell did it matter breaking a relic from the natural world if nature was doomed.

When I let go of it, it felt like watching that red balloon of anger we're taught to picture floating away. But the sound was like a child jerking an unrosined bow across flat strings.

The mess was grimy, and the stench rang of death. Ash shook her head and pressed her hands to her mouth. When the security guard approached, raising his voice, I panicked and started talking about how it was living creatures we needed to focus on instead of old eggs. What I'd done had to mean something as Ash backed away from me.

She never visited me in prison. When she took my things to my parents' house, she mentioned she was going travelling. I haven't googled her or searched for her on social media. I might still be like the version of myself from above the kebab shop, or she might still be the Ash who stepped away from me at the Discovery Centre. I want us to be what we were in the music room, so maybe that's why I'm walking to our old school, hoping to relive old times now that I've finished my stint in prison. The school is permanently closed now, apparently due to falling intake and financial strife: another population with problems, but I visit anyway.

I slip through wrecked gates and smashed locks, no doubt broken by the types who wouldn't go to school when it was open. The place feels like a dream: it's the same but it's not. Lockers hanging open, graffiti on the walls, dust dulling the sound of my footsteps. As I approach the music room door, I wonder if maybe I can remember the chords to, well, anything.

When I go in there's a polyphony of beating wings, piano keys, staccato strings, and cymbals. About a dozen pigeons start fluttering about the beams of sunlight from the windows. Others cock their heads from nests in the bell of a tuba, on top of a keyboard, in a bass drum. A single pale egg has rolled away from the drum, smaller than a golf ball. I pick it up, pigeons still flying. In my palm I can feel its fragility and potential. It's still warm, so it must've rolled out recently, possibly when I entered the room and startled the bird. Gently, slowly, I reach out to put the egg back in the nest, unsure how I'm going to do it. The pigeon shifts nervously, and I manage to return it's egg without being pecked.

Lying flat on the floor among downy feathers is a guitar with five strings, the high E missing, and I'm sure it's the one I used to play, the shade of varnished wood chocolaty and familiar. Muscle memory in my fingers find chords, and while I don't play a particular song, the pigeons start to settle. I watch the mothers and fathers spreading themselves and their warmth over their unborn babies, so much more beautiful than a song, a painting, or anything man could build.

Rebecca Klassen

The Maple That Moved

Two days before I turn thirteen, my mum's maple tree disappears from our yard. I search for signs of sawdust, but there is nothing—only a large hole in the ground.

Sprinting to the barn, the school bus forgotten, I search for my parents. They are milking, Dad on the machine, Mum herding cows through chutes.

"Mum, your maple. It's gone!" I shout.

They stop, glance at each other and then at my stricken face. Together, we run to where the tree used to be.

Mum planted the maple before I was born; it reminded her of her family home in Vermont. "Your father rolled his eyes when I planted it," my mum whispers to me when I'm seven, "but, you know, Jake, he still watered it twice a day until he knew it would survive." She smiles at him, blowing him a kiss across the room. He grins, pretends to grab it out of the air and puts it in his pocket. They work on the farm together every day, milking, moving stock, birthing calves, feeding out. She left her family farm for him, letting love lead her across the ocean to live on this little wind-buffeted island in the Pacific. She calls New Zealand her home, but each fall I watch her pick up the red maple leaves. She dries them, ties them in bundles and hangs them from the kitchen rafters. They gradually fade, disintegrating to dust as the year passes.

My parents search around the hole, just as I did, but there is no sign of the tree. Mum stares at the ground, and I stand next to her, reaching out to hold her hand. Dad stalks the yard, kicking the dirt. At the edge of the lawn he stills, eyes on the distant hills.

"There!" He points. "Look!"

On the farthest ridge of our farm, shine the bright red leaves of Mum's tree. There are no other trees like it on our farm, nor on any of the nearby properties. Mum's maple is the only one of its kind on the West Coast.

Mum races for the quad bike, revving it hard, barely waiting for us to jump on before speeding up the farm track. I hold on tight to Dad's waist, pressing my face into the rough wool of his jersey. As we draw closer, Mum slows, staring fixedly at the tree. It is her maple, standing tall and proud in the far corner of the top paddock. Totally unharmed. Jumping off the quad, we walk around the trunk, studying the ground. The ground is settled and undisturbed. I touch the trunk; it is the same ridged, rough bark I pat every day.

"Huh," Dad grunts.

My mum weaves her arm through his, and they stare down at the tree. I stand next to them and gaze across the farm and towards the coast. I am the first to see it. A distant hump of water on the horizon, far out at sea. Blinking, I try to clear my eyes, but the hump continues to move, growing. I point, nudging my dad hard in the side.

"A whale?" I ask, but they don't respond.

The bulge of water stretches along the horizon. It expands, absorbing the regular sets of waves. A mound of water, ever-growing, is now speeding towards our coast. A dull roar builds in the air. I can feel the thrum of power in my chest, mixed with my panicked breaths.

Instinctively, we reach for each other, holding tight. I wrap one arm around the maple's trunk. The water is building faster now, a thick wall of blue, topped with white spray. Rolling forward relentlessly, towering higher and higher. Below us is Westport township. Single-story shops and houses, laid out in neat grids less than a kilometre from the coast.

Looming high, the mountain of a wave sweeps over them. Relentlessly, it surges across the roads and paddocks. The roar of the water mixes with the crack and snap of wood, the frantic shrieks and cries of animals. Cows thrash in the churning water. Our house and barns are engulfed, and still the wave stretches on. As it nears the fence line below us, the water starts to slow and stutter. Suddenly, the wave pulls back to the coast. The now brown water seethes and churns, spewing up debris. Our neighbour's old blue car founders amongst a mix of broken trees, animal carcasses, and fence posts.

We stand by the maple for hours as the waters rush back and forth over the land. No building on our farm remains standing. I look out towards Westport.

"Do you think anyone is left?" My voice is a whisper.

Mum reaches for my hand, squeezing it hard. “We will go down and see, see what we can do, see who is left.” She lets go and wipes her face with both hands.

Dad pulls both of us to him. We stand there, holding each other. I feel them breathe, the bones of their ribs against mine. He finally lets us go, placing a shaking hand on my shoulder. “Mind the broken bits down there, Jake, can’t afford to get an infection now.”

As Mum drives the quad bike down the hill, I glance back up at the maple. It stands tall and straight, the red leaves waving.

****

The next few months are a blur of broken homes and broken people. I lose count of the number of bodies I help lift into body bags in those first few days. Westport is destroyed, and there was no warning. When the wave hit, students were studying inside their classrooms, people were pushing trolleys in the grocery store, children were playing on the playground. A few lucky ones were able to grab hold of something and keep themselves afloat throughout the pounding waves. Of Westport’s 403 residents, only 28 of us survived.

The death of so many of our friends and neighbours makes the loss of our farm seem trivial, but when we have a moment, we still mourn. The old farmhouse is in pieces; only the fragments of its stone foundation are left. Our milking shed is ripped partly open, with a gaping hole in the metal siding. The police try to convince us to move into one of the spare rooms at the Inangahua pub, forty minutes inland, but my mum refuses.

“Over my dead body!” she rants.

And, because we have all seen enough dead bodies, the police don’t argue. She won’t leave our farm; she won't leave the maple. So we make a camp up on the ridge. We drink from the stream that runs out of the hills. It isn’t contaminated with dead bodies like all the water down in the valley. We all continue to help with the clean-up, pulling down condemned buildings, burying bloated cows, and slowly trying to pull our minds back together.

****

“Happy birthday, love.” Mum holds out a cake, white frosting with a red maple leaf stuck in the middle.

Grinning, I put the hammer down. “Hey, Dad, looks like it’s morning tea time.”

He climbs down from the house framing, joining us at the workbench. We all perch on sawhorses, eating the carrot cake with our fingers, drinking hot tea from the thermos.

“So, 18.” Dad pauses, clears his throat. Then shakes his head.

I won’t be going out with any school friends tonight. Most of them drowned, and the few remaining moved inland with their parents years ago. Everyone who survived moved, except for us.

“Yeah, 18.” I echo, trying to keep my tone light. I glance at Mum, but she’s staring off into the distance, looking toward the maple tree.

Every evening since the wave, she goes to the tree. She’s been spending more and more time there, leaning against the trunk, gazing out towards the coast, watching the steady sets of waves wash onto the beach. Some evenings, Dad and I take dinner out to her. She seems to forget that she is hungry, seems to forget we are there.

I lick my fingers and drink the last of my tea. “Back to work?” I ask Dad.

He looks at Mum, but she’s still staring, uneaten cake in her hand. “Probably best.” He hands me my hammer, and we walk together back towards our unfinished house. Before he climbs the ladder again, he turns. “You can leave, you know. That job in Murch, they would love to have you on their farm. You are a good worker, Jake.” His eyes are almost hopeful.

“But Mum,” I murmur.

Sighing, he nods. He doesn’t ask me again.

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Over the next twenty years, Dad and I build up a small herd of well-bred Jerseys, and Mum uses their milk to make specialty cheeses and yoghurt that sell for ridiculous prices in the big cities. Gradually, people move back to the area, not down in the valleys but perched up on the surrounding hills like us. We rarely go to the coast, even when the sea is flat and calm. Instead, we turn to the hills, hunting through the lush West Coast bush. Some days I find myself staring out at the water, waiting, but the steady sets of waves never change. The maple continues to grow and flourish, its bright red leaves drawing the local children to collect them in handfuls.

I never have any children of my own. There are a few girlfriends, but when they inevitably ask about what happened that day, I can say little. And then I say even less until the relationship gradually fades away. Once, after a bottle of wine on a starlit night, I tried to explain to a girlfriend about what the maple did that day. But in the morning, between kisses, she giggles about the crazy story I made up.

When my mum dies, she is sitting by the maple looking out at the coast. We scatter her ashes at the base. I miss her quiet presence, but I realize that I have been mourning her absence for years. Dad has a chance to leave, but he doesn't. Instead, he takes her place, each evening going out to sit under the maple and watch the distant waves. We maintain the farm, hire workers to make the cheese and yoghurt that have become so popular. The maple grows, the trunk thickens.

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I wake early on my seventy-first birthday. Through my window I can see stars, just fading into the dawn. No one is on the farm yet. The house Dad and I built together is empty but for me. With a cup of coffee in my hands, I wander barefoot onto the damp lawn. The maple isn't there.

I scan the ground, but I know what to expect this time. The deep hole, bigger than last time, the rest of the surrounding earth barely disturbed. I look around me: down to the coast, up in the hills behind the farm, until I finally spot it, barely visible on a small hill south of the farm. The red leaves wave, just like they did so many years ago, signaling me to safety. Sinking to my knees, I bury my face in my hands. There is no one to run to, to shout for. My father died years ago.

I ring the police, my few friends and neighbours- explaining as sanely as I can that something horrific is about to happen. They are all kind but unconvinced. Many of them promise to drop in and see me soon, check how I'm doing. I move around the house, securing windows and shutting doors. I straighten one of the photos of our old farm that hangs in the kitchen. Mum and I are standing grinning next to a young maple tree. Pulling the door shut, I go to sit next to the gaping hole where the maple had been. The upturned ground is rich and crumbly under my fingers. Squinting, I can still make out the maple on the distant hill, leaves waving. Waiting for me. Turning away, I stare down towards the coast. There is a distant rumbling, the ground begins to shake, and then the first earthquake hits.

Hillary McDonald

GHOST SWING

Riley's the kind of kid who less likes to ride the swings at the playground than wait until I'm distracted and push one. From there, he summons my attention to point out the swing's in motion, claiming—what other explanation could there be?—"The ghosts are swinging."

He runs off soon after. My wife Heather read that, for some kids, physical movement is a necessary component to thinking, and she repeated it enough around him that he internalized the point, regardless of whether the original thesis were true. Running back and forth across the house, across a hotel room, across this playground is one and the same with thinking and any insistence he stop is met with a plaintive, Are you telling me I can't think?

And here of all places, of course he can think. He can run. Other kids run, too, in a game of tag. One even invited him to join, though he demurred. He doesn't like to touch or be touched, and learned to fear tag because the game all but necessitates that kind of contact. Still, he runs. Thinks. I suspect he thinks of ghosts now, maybe that they're chasing him, maybe that he's chasing him, or maybe there's no chase at all. He simply needs the motion to keep his mind whirring.

Who am I to blame him for embracing his imagination and the supernatural? A dark period in my twenties , after watching my umpteenth adaptation of A Christmas Carol one lonely holiday season, hadn't I gotten hung up on wishing for my own Christmas miracle. I wanted the magical windows into the past and future—the present, too, if only to eavesdrop on what others might say about me—and felt a keen disappointment when December 25 came and went without a magical turn. No new insight, but that I'd be better served to take charge of my own mental state.

No ghosts.

Heather believes in ghosts, and, to be clear, I do too. But I don't think they're real. Mine's the classic skeptic's dissonance—to doubt, to poke holes, to contend there's no logical way apparitions could be. All of this thought gets shaken to its core when I spend a night alone and watch a shadow move across the wall after I've turned the lights out, catch an ephemeral whiff of nutmeg, hear a creaking floorboard. Late enough, my imagination supersedes my reason. The truth: I love horror movies for the immersion they offer, the ability to lose myself in the fantastical from the comfort of home. Whereas the feel-good final kiss of a rom-com tends to leave me minutes after the credits roll, horror digs its claws in deeper in ways that defy thought, that cling tight to belief. I love Nightmare on Elm Street, less for the ghost of Freddy Krueger haunting dreams than the premise no one believes the final girl's claims about the man with burned skin and knives at the ends of his fingers, even as the body count rises. I love Scream and its chief villain Ghostface for the opposite reason: everyone thinks, knows, and believes the threat is real and yet no one can keep these teenagers safe.

"I saw an old woman at the foot of the bed," Heather told me the first time she spent the night at my place. She thought it might have been my grandmother, because we'd been talking about my grandmother and how she was my favorite person in the world the first twenty-ish years of my life. It wasn't the first time Heather'd observed a figure like this—other partners' relatives and friends years gone. Heather can see them.

I was skeptical even as the little hairs on my arm stood on end.

Riley comes to a stop by the swings again. "Look over there," he commands so I look over there, toward the splash pad. I put his water shoes on him today, in case he wanted to go in. He never wants to go in when he's properly attired, the way it never rains on those cloudy days I remember an umbrella, the way a camera's prone to glitch out, even when it's ready at hand, anytime someone claims to have seen a ghost.

"Look!"

When I look, the chains suspending the swing are all twisted, a tight braid, spinning to unravel. We watched teenagers screw up the swing like that a couple weeks ago, making a game of jumping into the seat as soon as the chains were untangled, then one smaller girl among the pack leapt into it before it had finished spinning and let it spin her in her seat and she laughed like a lunatic and they all laughed and more of them tried, but it didn't work as well with bigger, heavier bodies, and I worried the force might break the chains, ruin the swing for the kids whose mass it was built to support.

Now, I worry Riley will try to the leap but he doesn't, only watches the spin until the chains are separate again and the seat of the swing shimmies from side to side, steadying.

"The ghosts are dancing," Riley proclaims, and I try to remember what it was like to delight in such a simple thing, to think I'd pulled one over a grownup, to not worry about parsing thought from belief from imagination.

"You're right," I say. "They're dancing."

Michael Chin

Just Looking

In Plato's *Republic*, a shepherd named Gyges took a golden ring from a giant whose dead body spilled out of the fissure of an earthquake. At a gathering with fellow shepherds, Gyges discovered that if he turned the ring a certain way, others could not see him. If he turned it back, he became visible again.

Using the ring, Gyges schemed his way into the royal palace, seduced the Queen, killed the King and seized the throne. To Plato, this was only to be expected. "No one would have such iron strength of mind as to stand fast in doing right or keep his hands off other men's goods, when he could go to the marketplace and fearlessly help himself to anything he wanted, enter houses and sleep with any woman he chose, set prisoners free and kill men at his pleasure, and in a word go about among men with the powers of a god."

Plato, what a scared, suspicious world you evoked! Dangerous *ifs* lurked everywhere. Strangers had hearts of greed. Knowing others were watching, everyone moved with shoulders squared and tense. Why couldn't Gyges instead have discovered the giant's magic, laughed like Pan and kicked a comedy into motion? Blowing a signal on his pipes, he'd gather nymphs around him and entertain them with now-you-see-me-now-you-don't antics. Imagine the complications of hide-and-seek when one player could turn his ring, vanish in a poof of dandelions and reappear in an impossible elsewhere. Instead of victimizing others through invisibility, Gyges could entrance them.

Or Gyges could keep to himself, neither rampaging nor dancing to an audience. Unseen, he could watch people and things up close that would normally be shut away from shepherds and the *hoi polloi*. With no need for a spyglass or surveillance gadgets, he could hop gates, hitchhike on chariots or trains, open treasure chests to feel the cold sparkle of jewels, swipe tastes of delicacies in the best kitchens and eavesdrop anywhere, leaving everything as before.

* * *

I wish I'd had Gyges' magic ring when I worked in China as an English editor in the 1980s. One weekend when a winter chill swept down from Siberia, I took the train to the gritty coal-mining city of Datong with a friend who worked downstairs as a French editor. Adrienne had thick blond hair, blue eyes like me, a much better knowledge of the local language and a guidebook that explained the history and iconography of the Buddhist relics in Datong's outskirts, carved and painted within hillside caves.

There we coughed from air clogged with coal dust and ashes and had difficulty finding a place to eat that was not as grimy indoors as all the windows and surfaces outside. And though the grottoes were too dimly lit for Adrienne to read me the guidebook commentary, I took the whole expedition as a challenging, fun adventure – until we waited in the Datong station for our train back to our jobs in Beijing.

As we sat on a hard wooden bench, our eyelids drooping from fatigue, a semi-circular cordon of country people two layers deep formed about twenty feet away from us. Adults and children in worn peasant clothing stared at us silently with flat expressions. Not one of them joked, pointed or nudged the relative next to them with a comment. They just kept looking, as if Adrienne and I were moon rocks, objects alien to their world. Their indifferent, stolid gazes made me feel more like a stone statue turned up from the earth than like a person. I glanced at the clock mounted high on the wall and dreaded the hour and a half we'd still have to endure this unnerving situation.

A middle-aged woman in a railway uniform began bustling through the space the crowd had left open, then stopped. Sizing up the tableau, she crooked her finger at Adrienne and me. We followed her to a corner of the station into a windowless alcove with a door that closed. From the inkwells and piles of stapled papers, it appeared that here she and other railway workers wrote up reports. Relief at our temporary invisibility filled us, and we dozed until the woman returned. She escorted us to our train through a phalanx of peasants who watched like they'd been waiting patiently for the animated moon rocks to reappear.

* * *

I wish I'd had Gyges' ring in Maui once at the municipal swimming pool where my husband and I swam when the ocean roughed up. On the doors into the scruffy men's and the women's locker rooms, signs said that children five and older had to use the locker room corresponding to their gender. Under-five girls could go in with their fathers and under-five boys with their mothers. In theory this policy sounded reasonable, but one day along with me and two other naked women showering after a swim was a boy who seemed like age four and eleven-twelfths.

Normally nudity in that setting felt relaxed and easy. But this boy, fully dressed, stood under the towel hooks and stared at me so long, so impassively that I finally hissed, *"Stop it."* I turned my back to him and finished my shower without shampooing my hair. I dressed speedily and sat down in the sun within the pool enclosure to process what had taken place. I felt violated – and confused. Was I being ridiculous? Was the age-five cutoff point wrong? The boy seemed to be taking cold, adult-level pleasure in making me uncomfortable.

When I discussed the incident with my husband, he mentioned that he'd been showering once when a little girl of around three was wandering amidst naked male adults in his locker room at the pool. "Why isn't that child abuse?" he asked me. I wordlessly shook my head. "Don't know." He'd viewed the situation for its effect on the child, I noted. Though he'd wrapped his lower body in a towel and then hotfooted out of the locker room as soon as he'd put on street shorts, he hadn't felt exposed so much as worried for the girl.

* * *

Another Gyges tale has come down to us from ancient Greece. In Herodotus' *Histories* from the fifth century BCE, Gyges was a trusted bodyguard to King Candaules, who loved his wife and considered her the most beautiful woman in the world. The king wanted this assessment confirmed by letting Gyges see his wife naked. "But master, I believe you," protested Gyges. Reassured that the queen wouldn't realize he was looking, Gyges agreed.

The king's wife did glimpse Gyges slipping from his hiding place, however, and despite her fury at both the king and Gyges for this plot, she said nothing. Later she summoned Gyges and gave him a choice. He must either kill the king and take the throne himself or be killed for having seen what he should not see. Gyges decided to live. With the wife's assistance, and the Delphic oracle's later blessing, he killed King Candaules as he slept and then ruled over the land with the queen.

Herodotus didn't moralize about Candaules' kinky quirk, which brought about his death. Perhaps he felt readers would sympathize with the king's understandable weakness. After all, what good is owning a valuable painting if no one knows you have it, having secret wealth you can never spend, possessing a rare talent that has never been publicly acclaimed or feeling a superlative love that no one envies? Someone else seeing and judging helps. Yet what about the woman's anguish: Did scheming her husband's death and crowning Gyges king undo her humiliation and rage at being displayed at her most private and vulnerable?

* * *

When I write I'm disembodied and invisible to the reader. Without needing a special ring, I'm pure thought. I can speculate, hypothesize, remember, reason, wonder and juggle words as if they're sparkly firesticks. Through the magic of the written word, others encounter my ideas. They can smile in appreciation, marvel at my stupidity, click prematurely to the next blog post, experience a shift in a concept, scoff like a pundit, formulate a comment, read me aloud to their partner who's munching bagels and cream cheese – all when I'm not there.

Being looked at is something we humans instinctively react to. Whether it's a glance, a stare, a leer, a wink or a lover's rapt gaze, someone else's seeing ropes us into a shared world with complicated dynamics. In neither Plato's nor Herodotus' story did Gyges yearn for freedom from others' scrutiny. But I enjoy such freedom tremendously, even if it's a temporary, partial or illusory liberation. Unseen I'm not captive to the opinions or controls of others.

* * *

If only I'd had Gyges' ring in a recent incident close to home! When I'd just started a five-mile run on country dirt roads, a rangy young man bumped out of the driver's seat of a parked pick-up truck. Clean-cut, earnest, he held a cell phone face up as if it were a disappointing report card. I assumed he was lost, needing directions. In the rural hills where I live, postal addresses don't match the boundaries of towns, and visitors can get confused. "You know the lot on Old Main Road that has a chain across the drive and a 'No Trespassing' sign?" he asked. I thought and nodded. He extended his phone. "Is this you?"

On his screen, a woman wearing a black running shirt and gray gym shorts stood in front of the chained driveway he'd mentioned. Me, yes. "I never went in," I told him. "I didn't go past the sign."

"What were you doing?" he pursued. In our local towns, private property starts twenty feet from the center of the road. Perhaps I'd encroached onto his land, strictly speaking, though I'd stayed on the public side of his do-not-enter sign.

"There was a weird white shape in the field," I explained. "I wanted to see what it was. A boat, covered up." He gazed at me, unimpressed. "I was curious, that's all," I added in annoyed self-defense. ATVs had been roaring around in his back woods, he said. Come on, I'm a hooligan? I took off, incredulous. When my run reached the spot in question, I stopped. Hunting with my eyes, I detected a walkie-talkie-sized object with a stubby antenna hanging ten feet up off a tree.

Curiosity can violate people, when intense or hidden lookings treat us as if we're objects. But curiosity about things – where is its harm? Before the no-go chain and sign showed up, I'd actually run by hundreds of times and wondered about the old white cabin beyond the young man's field, peeking out amongst tree trunks and leaves. It seemed mounted on stilts, an oddity much more tantalizing than a covered-up boat. If I could turn a doodad on my finger and become a wisp of wind, I would have explored. And now, without Gyges' ring, just looking threatened to become a crime.

* * *

Marcia Yudkin

Author Biographies

Kenneth Pobo

Kenneth Pobo is the author of several poetry collections and chapbooks, including *It's Me, Dulcet Tones* (Half Inch Press). His work has appeared in *Indiana Review, Mudfish, Asheville Poetry Review*, and elsewhere.

Abraham Aondoana

Abraham Aondoana is a writer and poet whose work has appeared in *Kalahari Review, Ink Sweat and Tears, Rogue Agent, Ink in Thirds,* and *The Literary Nest,* among others. He is a recipient of the Idembeka Creative Writing Workshop (2026).

Joshua St. Claire

Joshua St. Claire is an accountant and nonprofit financial director based in Pennsylvania. His haiku and related poetry have appeared in *Frogpond, Modern Haiku*, *The Heron's Nest*, and *Mayfly.* His work has received multiple international awards and recognitions in haiku and senryu.

Sarah Das Gupta

Sarah Das Gupta is a writer based in Cambridge, UK. She has lived and taught in India and Tanzania, and began writing later in life. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net, the Pushcart Prize, and a Dwarf Stars Award.

DS Maolalai

DS Maolalai is the author of three poetry collections, including *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds*, and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press). His work has been widely published and nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

Steven Bucher

Steven Bucher is an active member of the Poetry Society of Virginia. His first collection of poetry, *We Stay a Brief Telling*, was published by Propertius Press in 2021. His second manuscript, *My Soul to Keep*, was named runner-up for the 2025 Eyelands Book Award for unpublished poetry.

Rikki Santer

Rikki Santer is the author of *Shepherd's Hour*, winner of the Paul Nemser Book Prize, and Resurrection Letter, shortlisted for the Eric Hoffer Book Award. She was named Ohio Poet of the Year in 2023 and will serve as Artist-in-Residence at the Fran Ryan Center in 2026.

Flower Conroy

Flower Conroy is an LGBTQIA+ artist, NEA and MacDowell Fellow, and former Key West Poet Laureate. Their books include *Snake Breaking Medusa Disorder*, *Greenest Grass*, and *Zoodikers: A Bestiary*. They are currently working on a series of assemblage-based *Ephemeral Altars*.

John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet living in the United States. His work has appeared in *Shift*, *Trampoline*, and *Flights*. Recent books include *Bittersweet*, *Subject Matters*, and *Between Two Fires*.

Diane Webster

Diane Webster's work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *New English Review*, *Studio One*, and other literary magazines. She is the author of five micro-chapbooks published by Origami Poetry Press. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize, and she has been featured in *Macrame Literary Journal* and *WestWard* Quarterly.

Sister Lou Ella Hickman, OVISS

Sister Lou Ella Hickman, OVISS is a former teacher and librarian whose writing has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. She is the author of two poetry collections published by Press 53: *she: robed and wordless* (2015) and *Writing the Stars* (2024). Her work has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize.

Rachel Turney

Rachel Turney, Ed.D. is an educator and artist based in Denver, Colorado. She is on staff at *Bare Back Magazine* and serves as a reader for *The Los Angeles Review*. Her poetry collection, *Record Player Life*, is available from *The Poetry Lighthouse*.

Nasta Martyn

Nasta Martyn is an artist and illustrator whose work has been exhibited internationally, including shows in China, Taiwan, and the United States. In 2024, she received the Jury's Special Prize for her poster in China. Her practice spans collage, ink, and mixed media.

Norie Suzuki

Norie Suzuki was born and educated bilingually in Tokyo, Japan, where she works as a simultaneous interpreter. Her writing has appeared in *Baltimore Review*, *Cutleaf Journal*, *The Offing*, and elsewhere. She received third prize in the 2024 T. Paulo Urcanse Prize for Literary Excellence, and her work will be included in Best Microfiction 2026.

Rebecca Klassen

Rebecca Klassen is a writer based in Gloucestershire, England, and fiction editor of *The Phare*. Her work has appeared in *Fictive Dream*, *Mslexia*, *Flash Frontier*, *Scribeworth*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, and on BBC radio. She has won the London Independent Story Prize and has been shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award, the Alpine Fellowship, and the Laurie Lee Prize. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net.

Hillary McDonald

Hillary McDonald lives in the South Island of New Zealand, where she teaches outdoor education to secondary students. Her short fiction has appeared in *takahē*, *Inglenook*, *Penelle Magazine*, *Emerald City Ghosts*, and *Folklore Review*. She spends her time exploring the outdoors with her family, reading, and writing.

Michael Chin

Michael Chin is a writer born and raised in Utica, New York, and currently living in Las Vegas. He is the author of seven books, including the novel *My Grandfather's an Immigrant*, and *So Is Yours* (Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2021) and the short story collection *This Year's Ghost* (JackLeg Press, 2025).

Marcia Yudkin

Marcia Yudkin is the author of essays published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Ms.*, *Next Avenue*, and on NPR. She advocates for introverts through her newsletter, Introvert UpThink. Her fiction has appeared in *Yankee*, *Writers Forum*, *Flash Fiction*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, and *New Stories from New England*. She lives in Goshen, Massachusetts.

Hollow and Sky
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