

# Hollow and Sky

a literary journal of spiritual inquiry and the natural world



*Issue Two*

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## **Hollow and Sky**

### *Issue Two*

There are works that arrive loudly, and works that wait.

The pieces gathered in this issue move through memory, weather, distance, longing, and the quiet practice of attention. They return to what cannot be fully held: the vanished, the half-remembered, the quietly enduring. Again and again, these works ask us to look closely toward what remains at the edges of attention.

A feeling carried forward. A gesture revisited. A landscape altered by light, season, or time.

Thank you for spending time with these pages.

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POETRY



## *January Lilies*

Smashed lilies  
of January  
do not foretell  
The mad lemon infused  
beauty of July

We are both  
breathing shallow  
heavy boot on our neck  
We grasp for clues  
in the winter dawn

All that is left of the lily  
a few straight rod stalks  
blanched to sand color  
easy to break

All that is left of me  
is buried near my ribs  
I can count my bones  
but I cannot read  
my interior

Myriad of velvet curtains  
and doors, shut boxes  
and rivers wild above me

How does the lily know how to come home?

Clusters of her leaves emerge  
in hard soil of March  
Stay their place  
through the delicate dogwood petals,  
daffodil's urgency and fanfare,  
delphinium's triumphant appearance,  
even the apple blossoms  
come and flutter downward  
before much from lily

She works alone  
concentrating on her green clusters  
getting those spears upward

Some late July night  
one rod like stem leans  
straight to the moon  
holding a golden message  
tiers of lemon petals  
wrapped tightly  
into some dream

Lily opens her petals  
each flower  
has just one day  
to make a  
sun like life  
her lemon scent  
stopping all travelers

How will I call myself home  
from the forest of troubles?

I do not think I possess any gold  
like the lily  
unsure whether there are any petals  
left within me to unfurl

it is no matter  
for in this moment  
we are equals  
bent and broken  
barely breathing

Margarita Bonifaz

## *The Weight of A Life*

After I see one ant carrying another  
on its back across my bathroom wall,  
I find myself googling do ants grieve?

It says with certainty that, no  
ants do not grieve or feel sadness  
like humans  
and I don't believe it. It tells me  
about chemical reactions and all the reasons  
an ant would logically want

to hold that heaviness on its bare back.  
It says that ants do not have a concept of life  
and death, and I wonder for a moment

what it would be like to live  
without grief.

What it would feel like to hold  
a lifeless body and not feel crushed  
by the weight  
of a life.

Melina Charis

## *The First Lesson*

Why can't I love the rhododendron  
for not being forsythia? Why do I clothe them  
in their differences and not say they're both flowering shrubs?  
Rather, I wait for the flower of the rhododendron  
and for the chance to see, huge and round,  
its differently-shaped flower-bud against the thinner spike  
of the earlier forsythia's baked-on yellow color.

I've learned nothing is ordinary in ordinary days  
when I thought ordinary was rarely worth waiting for,  
but each begins with the steadfastness of blue-green cypress,  
the cycling of mourning, winter's blank spaces  
where emptiness still lives, and in spring, each flower  
will come to yield its color to lush green leaves and confirm  
color is never endless. Yet color thrives

before their end. For the moment, I wish I were a flower—  
when ordinary is treasured, however briefly,  
and bows to just the way it is. In their care,  
I see myself, my children in each moment,  
yet know just how briefly color stays,  
how loss is loss, especially when taken early,  
but how much is always part of what continues.

SR Inciardi

*Red Sky Woman*

She is the gift of the eventide sky.

A cirrus composition  
of crimson clouds,  
dyed,  
on the backdrop of a fading black canvas.

She tints the forest saffron,  
laying her brush  
upon  
mountain and pine.

As paint turns dry,  
Red fades from  
the pines.

She disappears with the setting sun.

Christopher V.B. Lazzaro

*Foot to Ground*

Someone gifted me a pair of brown shoes  
in last night's dream. A simple act  
weighted with untapped meaning.

The way we experience birdsong,  
not understanding the green language.  
Or how gladness is laced with grief.

Nesting robins twine dry grasses  
packed with mud. Things stay themselves  
while becoming something new.

Inside out, and upside down,  
roundabout and sideways, dream logic  
plays with us without our minding.

Color of leather, color of dirt—  
new shoes start a school year.  
The old ones no longer fit.

Heads tilted, robins listen.  
Watch for subtle movements of  
night-crawlers in wet grass.

My bare toes stretch and contract.  
Burrowing worms wriggle in leaf litter.  
Feet vibrating, I begin

imagining what's below this floor,  
beneath the basement and earth's crust  
as the eyes in the soles of my feet open.

Rhett Watts

## *Returning*

Nothing could stop my photographer father in his tracks like a tree.  
I remember, as a child, our car slowing  
then stopping beside a field.  
We would watch as he circled his subject,  
finger-framing different viewpoints.  
Despite my boredom, I grew to understand what was worthy of worship.

My mother can be found in the evening sky.  
She comes to me at the end of the day  
with her head tilted back, reminding us to *look*.  
*What a beautiful sky*, she'd say.  
Did she mean to draw our focus away from ourselves?  
Either way, I am grateful.

Today, in a valley domed by a cobalt sky,  
we are celebrating my birthday.  
Children and grandchildren.  
Framed by a window, I notice a tree—my doppelganger—  
gnarled and woody yet valiantly sprouting green growth.  
Two birds appear in its branches.

On their honeymoon, my parents rode on horseback through this valley,  
staying at a guest house.  
After breakfast, their host appeared with a rifle.  
It was wartime, food was scarce and rabbits were a plague.  
When the gun fired, my parents were walking ahead.  
A crimson rosella fell at their feet.  
*Parrot pie for dinner*, lauded the host.  
I remember them telling me of their grief—  
Crimson Rosellas, an Aboriginal totem,  
represent a connection to nature.  
They mate for life and despite my parents' bent over the ancestral bird,  
its mate flew down to groom its feathers.

When the pair of crimson rosellas alight on the tree,  
I know it is them—my feathered kin.  
The next day they flit beside three generations  
riding through the valley.  
How will I return, I wonder, and what stories of attention  
and significance have I told?

S. E. Street

## *Mountain Prayer*

It does not take much to amaze me.  
My ten year old and I walk the dog  
up the road and come to a skunk  
which we smell before we see it.

Dead. A crow and three vultures  
take turns swooping down with their  
curved beaks and slowly, beakful  
by beakful, take it away. In Tibet

they call this *sky burial* and I  
pause but my daughter  
turns away, so I go with her.  
The dog pulls toward home.

Behind us, wings thrum;  
our shadows stretch ahead. I look  
back, then up. We talk about  
our own bodies, how we too will die,

how in America we use embalming  
fluids. Anna wants to be buried straight  
in the dirt, but I will not let her  
die, and as for me, I want my body

picked clean away so in that way  
I can fly many times, on many  
wings. For days it does not rain  
and then does. I go alone

to the empty place where the skunk  
once was, and while the sky rains  
over my hair, into my blinking eyes,  
I make a soft and wordless

prayer that it rain blessings  
into my heart, into all our hearts,  
here on this dusty road, rain, rain  
before the coming of the crows.

Courtney Schroeder

*Before We Give Back the Keys*

Dragging the hose through the kitchen,  
I stand behind the window screen  
and aim at the mud-dauber nest  
sealed to the sill—a small clay room.

*Forgive me*, I say,

as water opens it.

You ask if it was empty.  
I tell you no one was home.

Later, pruning the roses,  
I hear a buzz catch  
in the leaves.

Under the cherry tree,  
split fruit sweetens in the grass.  
The parsley burns  
at the pot's dry rim.

I keep looking

until you call twice  
from the front porch.

At the doorway, lifting the last box,  
I see where the couch struck the wall  
the day we carried it in.

Kimmy Chang

*What to Make of This*

Up the morning trail  
to the pinyon on the rim rock  
someone, or *something*,  
placed a cow skull.  
The skull just lies there,  
teeth resting on bare dirt,  
three-quarters turned  
to the forward momentum of the trail;  
lies there like a placed rock, motionless,  
lifeless, propped on its teeth,  
on the ground.

The empty sockets  
stare blankly into space,  
forever;  
in the old, oblong, eroded, lonely shape  
the eye sockets form an *O*,  
a new moon, a silent and empty hole,  
vacated space in ochre bone.

*It was not there yesterday,*  
the old man says to himself,  
but, already, cracks in the bone scatter pieces,  
heat shatters the teeth, splinters  
litter the trail.

*Yet, he thinks, with strength,*  
*even in death,*  
*the skull persists*  
*in juniper shade.*

Postscript: two days later,  
the skull was gone.  
The old man searched for it,  
devoted a week to looking,  
but never found it.

Benjamin Green

*Triptych, Notes from the River*

1.

A line of salt  
water creeps  
upriver daily  
closer to oyster beds  
and groundwater  
we all need to live

2.

Storms and songs have shown  
this river for what it is  
a hundred years now  
It's inconceivable a drunk  
tourist's mind could fathom  
swimming across it

3.

This river doesn't want  
to stay its course  
trapped between levees  
Given the smallest crease it would  
offer itself to floodplains and  
church steeples with abandon

Jack B. Bedell

## *Mangrove*

A turtle's heart can beat  
for hours after butchering.  
I wanted to be that—  
to keep on loving  
after your body stopped.

To end your pain  
before your body gave out—  
the blue cap clicks:  
clack, clack  
on tile.

The tide reaches,  
then retreats.  
Waterlines  
ring my trunk.

Outside, a buoy tolls  
every third breath.

I hold the pen; voices lean.  
Initials darken the corners.  
Two copies spool.

When I was small,  
I dreamed of growing  
into a tree—  
heavy with blossoms.  
Then red fruit.  
Then petals in the water.  
By morning  
the mist came back cold.

A mangrove  
cannot survive  
even mild freezes.  
I was snow  
settling there.

Morning frost rims  
each breathing root.  
I face the empty crate.  
The bed.  
The corner.

Brackish air salts wood.  
Your collar on the crate.  
The bowl sweating.  
The cap turns.  
Silence.

Kimmy Chang

*Lifeguard*

Dock

boards slick, slivered—  
toes rising,  
falling.

In the lake,  
Mt. Jefferson and clouds  
swollen with gray.

Thin air needles.

Water holds its shape.

From shore  
their laughter  
travels farther than the wind.  
Their arms thicker.

My wrists bone-thin.

Noise  
gathers behind me.

Body clenches.  
Cold waits  
without malice.

Below—  
pale  
among mud, weeds,  
and rotted wood—  
a stone.

I dive.

A moment of warmth  
as nerves  
shocked into life  
scramble for purchase.

Cold.

I kick for the bottom.

The lake closes  
around my ribs—  
tightens—  
a discipline.

In brown water  
and shadows  
flesh shrinks  
to sinew—  
mind narrows  
to its work.

Under—  
there is no happiness.  
Only pulse.

Here—  
breath holds.

I pull the rock  
to me—  
heavier  
than it looked above.

I push from the bottom.  
Legs working.  
Arms locked.

Up—  
the promise of breath.

Around—  
the promise of pressure.

To quit  
would be so easy.

The surface breaks.  
Noise returns.

Legs pumping,  
I lift the rock  
above my head.

Hold it there—let  
them see it—let  
the weight fall  
back to water.

Hands on the dock.  
Wood under my chest.

I pull myself up,  
hunch over  
against the freezing wind.  
Water streaming.

My mouth  
finds its smile.  
A towel around my shoulders.

I still enter cold water  
more easily  
than a room.

Curtis M. Revis Seubert

## *Magic Infusion*

Joy Boy bounces on pointy rocks,  
springs coiled in his fidget feet,  
eyes two ducks as they bop, up  
and down, in Narraganset Bay—  
their buoyance a breath-beat  
in his little lungs.

His father approaches me  
on my walk along the rim.  
I say, *Pure joy, he dances  
with ducks!* Father says,  
*He knows everything about birds!*  
Joy Boy leaps towards me, points  
to House Sparrows, tells me,  
*They come from Europe –  
they're not indigenous.*  
Indigenous – a word too large  
for his small O-shaped mouth.  
He swerves his legs, spindles  
beneath a rubbery spine. Sputters  
a story of how he heard birds  
in their drying machine vent.  
Made his father open it – saved  
House Sparrows who flew free.

His father shows me Merlin  
on his phone – Merlin the bird App,  
that identifies all birds surrounding us:  
ducks, egrets, swallows – coded  
by bird calls, songs, chirps, tweets.

I remember my two grown sons  
when they were boys,  
how one could tell you every fact  
about a pearl and its formation,  
how the other ran like wind across  
meadows, balance-beamed on stone  
fences as if shattering bones  
was not a thing.

I want to be a boy infused with joy,  
Merlin – holding all bird music  
in his electronic magician's beak,  
an elegant egret flying high in a berry-blue sky

Sandra Beth Levy

## *The Bouquet of Shiuli*

Now I can't walk past the hospital  
bringing a bouquet of *shiuli*<sup>1</sup> flowers,  
a few pieces of amber placards,  
a white handkerchief in my pocket.

Let us venture outside, away from  
the odour of nurses and patients,  
seamlessly sowing hope into the  
slits of our minds with no knowledge at all.  
Those tired-looking gentlemen sitting  
on the cool hospital floor look dazed  
as the footsteps of other patients pass by  
with agonizing voices—they soothe  
their minds, compelling them to say:  
“Everyone is suffering in Kolkata.”

Let's walk a while and find a restaurant  
on the hospital premises, order *two dosas*<sup>2</sup>,  
two plates of *maach bhat*<sup>3</sup>, and sing for a while  
of our quaint past shattered by gnawing illness.  
So I draw this liminal space of happiness.

Can you see Death playing a piano,  
writing our names on the placards,  
wiping our tears with the handkerchief,

while the exquisite odour of shiuli  
compels us to forget our afflictions.  
Let's finish the meal soon—the petals  
are scattered on the restaurant floor.

I can see how our closing eyes look exactly  
like those frightened nights. But at least  
we have no worries about how the waiter  
would carry away our leftover food and plates.

*shiuli*<sup>1</sup>: a fragrant autumn flower native to the Indian subcontinent.  
*dosa*<sup>2</sup>: a popular South Indian fermented rice-and-lentil crepe.  
*maach bhat*<sup>3</sup>: a traditional Bengali meal of fish curry and rice.

Suman Mondal

## *Seasonal Girl*

My gynecologist told me I need to touch grass,  
that my vitamin D was the second lowest  
she had ever seen: 9.6 out of 100.  
I laugh as if that number isn't a quiet confession,  
"You don't go outside anymore do you?"

I used to be feral, the barefoot garden girl  
who climbed every tree,  
who caught toads in cupped palms  
and fireflies in mason jars  
until her fingers glowed.

They'd have to drag me inside,  
mosquito-bitten and mud-slicked,  
a walking thorn bush with skinned knees  
and a grin that meant trouble.

These days I watch through a window.  
Outside the bugs still kiss  
the underside of leaves,  
the mushrooms still split bark  
like stubborn old truths,  
a squirrel dies or a deer gives birth,  
wind shakes loose a bird nest;  
I will never see hit the ground.

None of it needs me  
and there is comfort in that.  
I am not the sun.  
I am not the sky.  
I am not the thing holding the roots in place.

I am just a girl with too little sunlight in her veins,  
who melts like sugar when the heat rises,  
who learns slowly to call this stillness belonging.  
Because even now, even here,  
I am part of it: the quiet, the crawling,  
the not-quiet-deadness of a tree waiting out the winter.

Kaycee Painter

*Things Buried in the Georgia Red Clay*

ground beetles  
tree roots  
quartz  
cicada shells  
eviction notices  
Black-eyed Susans  
lost marbles  
army men  
that girl on all those missing posters  
arrowheads  
pottery shards  
deer bones  
railroad spikes  
bottle caps off beer bottles  
three generations of cigarette butts  
septic tanks  
the reason Aunt Linda doesn't speak to her sister  
shotgun shells  
my father

Kaycee Painter

*Still Life with Passive Penciling*

The mannequin's arms came off at the seams.  
Roses stripped to fit the mouth of the vase.  
A black scrunchie in the drapery.

You set my hand  
and called it composition. Stems  
cut on the bias.  
Thorns pared to nubs.  
The vase shaded, never filled.  
Light left white.

Years nicked the table beneath us.  
My left hand learned the pause before your nod.  
My other hand kept to landscapes:  
ditch grass, wire post, a hill  
creased by plow lines.  
Eraser crumbs caked at my wrist.

By November the room had gone metallic.  
Heat withdrawn. Graphite honed and laid down.  
I learned your mahlstick:  
how to hover a hand  
just clear of the page,  
how not to touch  
what you mean to alter.

Petals pinned open.  
Water changed before it clouded.

I pulled the pins,  
took the flowers,  
and left.

Kimmy Chang

## *Sculpture Park*

sit me on a rocky out-cropping  
sopping in-ward tears  
that tear my thread-bare fabric  
once synchronous into separated parts;  
my pallid palms plead to palpitate a heart  
resuscitate ruptured riddles  
of my mother gone  
buried deep in clustered grasses

i walk a sculpture park  
with: Earth & Sky  
Adam & Eve  
Clouds Mirrored in metal ellipses  
nature meets art on forest trails  
and a verdant green meadow

how luminous the blue sky  
deciduous frolicking leaves  
Don Quixote holding a flower  
opens prismatic rainbows in my eyes  
my shadow pinned in an archway  
to a gorge gorgeous mother gone

she sweeps mysteries with bristles  
burnished by time  
echoes memories with refracted light  
i hear her haunted hum in the wind  
call to me *devoted daughter*  
devoid of her fingertip lullabies—  
a chill scrapes skin on my scalp

*come sit with me mother on this rock  
rock me once more as an infant  
wrapped in linen in your sweet fleshy arms*

when i depart may wildflowers kiss my feet  
return me home as a sapling soaked  
in shimmery summer trees together  
we will weave a vibrant cooling breeze  
sculpted with hands that no longer bleed

Sandra Beth Levy

## *Anointed*

All the gifts you brought over the years:

bottle green pyjamas with white satin piping  
a recipe for oats porridge with cinnamon and berries  
the cornflower blue stoneware mug  
a ceramic vase the colour of the ocean with lavender from the garden  
a cream linen cloth embroidered with hoopoe and fish eagle, pelican and toucan

All the gifts you left:

fancy shampoo in the guestroom bathroom  
smelling like acceptance, like listening  
virgin olive oil beside the stove  
I pour a drop into my palm, dip my finger into the well  
and draw an ancient whorl on my forehead –  
a spiral of life – saying to myself  
with your strong, clear voice:  
*I will stand in solidarity with you*

Liesl Jobson

## *Cleaning Out the House*

The stairs and the storm door and the porch and the door  
the fridge and the faucet and the untouched china.  
The piles of boxes, the books, the covid test, the diaries  
shoved between box store books. Your body found by the police,  
your checkbook buried under old prayer manuals, the bird  
in the attic left dead and desiccated between boxes and your father's  
journals. I picture myself on the porch still the young, oversized nephew  
clutching books in hands still sticky from the candy dish.  
The porch is the stage of desire, and I am the Greek actor  
turning, masked to cry out the dissolution of the family.  
Instead, I am the laborer, the scholar-critic left with your last  
texts, the map that draws the lands between diapers and the grave,  
the nun's habit and the sweater and rosary for the casket. When I wrote  
your eulogy, your obituary, your prayer card, I was the bearded  
evangelist of your death. I put endings and form to the bric-à-brac  
hoarder's mansion in which you lived. Each of your diaries under trash  
or tissues, old sweaters or discount romance novels, glowed to my  
eyes through the dust. I am the grave-robber, the colonial Egyptologist  
whose lungs can take the risk. I open a window, turn to a page.  
How your cursive widened with age. The piles of books and trash  
and the unwalkable labyrinth from chair to bed made the police  
suspect the worst. Your diary settles the matter. On the last page you write:  
Please lord let me feel better. Every final prayer  
must be unanswered. I know so many who would  
toss the journals unread, ignore the transcripts of hospital  
confessions, aborted treatments, but the door was unlocked and the dust  
and forgotten treasures moldered like a Pharaoh's tomb.  
The house is sold, the dumpster was delivered immediately,  
but now, like an apostle, I run from your corpse  
with a version of your story and the promise to write.  
I catalogued the volumes in a library built to flee.  
They are not all read.

Timothy Duffy

### *Listing Price*

An insurance check arrived for my daughter's life. Which began. Ended. Began again because the doctor made a mistake. Her breath stagnated by his hands. A mile offshore in Lake Superior, an island is for sale. The listing price equal to her calculated mortality table, her projected life. A pancake of earth covered in white pines. No cliffs or chasms. Every day for a year, I took off my clothes, swam limbs numb. Nearly drowned. Gulping lungs of pebbles, I pressed my belly into shoreline. I tried to stay here. Dug, scooped the sand, molded it to her infant shape. But I couldn't rally enough wood. Couldn't keep a fire. Couldn't summon a single morsel to eat. With only a handful of agates, I plunged back into cold. Now on my bedside table, a jar of rocks in water. I can't swim that distance again.

Regina Gort

# VISUAL WORK





*Gray Heron in the Wind – photography by Emma Byrne Hickman*

### *Old Age*

*--- For my father*

We took you back to the heronries where you were born,  
high up in treacherous treetops; you fell three times along the way.  
We noticed your long legs tremble, no longer able to balance a stoic stance in shallow waters.  
You fly with slower wingbeats and glide for longer distances.  
You've stopped offering sticks to pretty women, although you watch them intently.  
Now you rest along the water's edge, contemplating in the wind, offering advice  
to those who survived the first winter. You are a thriver eager to teach what you know  
if only the marsh would listen.

Nancy Byrne Iannucci



*Diaphanous*

Roberta Winters



*Erosion*

David Capps



*Someone you were hoping I might be (113)*

Willy- O'



*Someone you were hoping I might be (24)*

Willy- O'

PROSE



## *Blue Edge*

When we painted the house from yellow to blue, I stood close by to watch your expression. You told me not to eat all the donuts, and just stared when I said there were always so many extra by the end of gatherings. My mother asked me to refill the water jug with the hose. I went quickly so no one would take my spot. Behind the fence a field went on for miles in grass slopes, housing rabbits and snakes. You caught a striped garter once and showed it to me. I used my paintbrush as a fidget toy and painted loops between your edging. I drew a blue sun on the chocolate frosted's empty box. My father warned me not to spray you with the hose or I might mess up the paint. You said you wouldn't be able to come back to help again tomorrow. You invited me to the park the next day, but I wasn't allowed to go. I sent you home with a dozen glazed donuts. You told me you were probably moving soon, but you had said that many times before. When I called you on the phone and was informed this was a new number, now belonging to a stranger, I wished I could see the edges you painted, permanent in an outline. The house looked so solidly blue.

Autumn Williams

## *Rakpabon* (รักป่าบอน)

There is a fence on Koh Lipe that nobody talks about. It runs behind the dive shop on Sunrise Beach, chain-link gone the color of rust, and under the grass inside it are graves the island has agreed to forget. Tourists step over its shadow on their way to sunset yoga and never look down. I lived a hundred meters from that fence for three years before I learned what was under it.

An old man told me. He mended nets in the shade behind the shop where I bought my coffee every morning, and one evening, I asked him about the fence because I had run out of things to say about the weather. His people were Urak Lawoi, the people the brochures call sea gypsies, and his mother lay somewhere under that grass, and a resort had fenced the land before anyone thought to ask the family. He told me this plainly, the tone of a man who had made his peace with it, because peace was the only thing left on the sand.

Over the months that followed, he told me more. That four Chao Ley villages used to sit along this stretch of coast, and now there was barely one, the rest folded into staff quarters behind the same resorts standing on what had been their beaches. That his grandchildren couldn't speak the language his mother had spoken to him, a language built entirely around reading the reef, because nobody saw the use in teaching it to children who'd grow up parking jet skis instead of reading the waves.

Then, one night, he told me something he hadn't before. His youngest daughter had married into the Banthad Mountains, to a Maniq family. They didn't call themselves Chao Ley, or Thai, or anything I recognized. Maniq, he said. Forest people. He said it once and stopped talking, a man closing a door he had not meant to open. When I asked how I might find them, he sat with the question a long time, and then wrote a name and a district on the back of a receipt, and told me there was a driver he trusted, if I was serious about going.

I did not go the way people go to see hill tribes further north, paying an entrance fee to photograph a woman weaving a basket. I went because a man who had lost almost everything told me his youngest daughter was about to lose the rest, and trusted me to reach her. He wanted nothing in return, and I couldn't spend one more sunset on that beach pretending I hadn't heard him.

The boat to the mainland left at five, before the island had put its face on for the day. Pak Bara pier was still wet from the night's rain, longtails knocking against each other in a wind that hadn't decided what it wanted yet. The driver who'd agreed to take me was younger than I expected and wouldn't say exactly where we were going. He kept his eyes on the road the whole way and his answers shorter than my questions.

The pavement gave out an hour past La-ngu district. After that it was red laterite, the kind that turns to grease the second it rains, and it had rained a lot. Twice the truck slid toward a ditch deep enough to swallow the wheels. We got out and pushed, both of us silent, mud closing over my sandals to the ankle. The driver kept checking the mirror longer than the empty road behind us needed. When I asked why, he only said that not everyone who came out this way was welcome, and left it at that.

An hour later came the rubber trees, rows of them where forest used to stand, planted in lines a ruler could have drawn, the canopy thinned to let the whole white sky through. We left the truck at the plantation's edge and walked the last stretch, the driver a few paces ahead, glancing at the trees like they might be listening. Smoke first. Then the shape of a lean-to, palm thatch lashed over bamboo, and a woman crouched at a fire so small it looked like it was trying not to be noticed.

She didn't stand when we entered the clearing. She took her time looking up and read the day off our faces before either of us spoke. A girl, maybe six, sat close to the fire, drawing something into the dirt with a stick and didn't look up at all.

A second woman stepped from the trees carrying a bundle of split bamboo on her shoulder. She looked older than the old man had led me to imagine, though perhaps that was only the forest. The driver introduced us, and she stopped when I told her I'd come from Koh Lipe. Before she could ask why, I mentioned her father, in the broken Thai three years on an island had given me. The years left her face all at once.

She said her father never stopped going to the same stretch of beach, even after the boats got louder and the nets came back lighter. The words had a long way to travel before they reached her mouth, and she let each one make the trip alone. I told her nothing had changed there, except the way the water sounded now, and for a moment she looked past me, not at the forest, but somewhere far behind it, like she could still see the line of the sea if she tried hard enough.

Of everything I said in that clearing, that was the only lie.

She asked if he was still alive. I told her he was. Still mending nets behind the dive shop on Sunrise Beach. Still choosing the same patch of shade every morning. She closed her eyes, nodded once, and said nothing. Then she turned to the older woman by the fire. "This is Rakpabon," she said. "My husband's mother."

The driver spoke to her in Thai. She answered in Maniq, a language that shares no root with Thai or Malay and is running out of children to inherit it. Then she said a name. Not the one her daughter-in-law had used. She said it once, in her own language. I nodded. The conversation moved on. I did not ask her to say it again.

When the driver asked if she still had her card, she reached into the thatch and pulled out a plastic sleeve gone cloudy with damp. Inside was a laminated ID, her photograph washed pale under fluorescent light, her name printed beneath it in the tidy certainty of government ink. The card and the woman had never met.

The driver dropped his voice to translate it, like the word itself embarrassed him. It means protector of the forest. I've read a lot of ugly bureaucratic language in my life. None of it ever stopped me cold on a dirt floor the way that word did.

Somewhere in an air-conditioned office, a person had typed Protector of the Forest onto a card belonging to a woman the state could fine, arrest, or relocate for existing inside the forest the card named her to guard. It wasn't written as an act of cruelty. That's the part I still can't get past. It didn't have to be.

She told us she'd been born under a tree at the river's edge, not far from where we stood, though not somewhere she could walk to anymore, not legally. Her mother had delivered her alone, the way her mother had delivered her, no clinic, no paperwork, only water and leaves and a cord bitten through with her mother's teeth. That was, until a few decades ago, simply how it had always been done here.

Then the government drew a line around the forest to protect it, and the line went straight through the place she was born, and one side of that line became a national park with a gate and an entrance fee for people like me, and the other side became a rubber tree plantation, and she stood where she had always stood, on the wrong side of a border that hadn't existed the week before it did.

Twenty years, the paperwork gave her family. The land had belonged to her people for thousands of years. The paperwork offered them twenty. Her granddaughter would be a grown woman before that number reached zero and the next generation would be born with fewer years left than the last.

Her husband had buried his blowpipe under a stone the year before, after the forestry department began calling it a weapon instead of a tool. In the whole of their marriage he'd used it twice. Once for a bird. Once for a squirrel, the night their granddaughter couldn't sleep from hunger and the traps came back empty. For that, some form in some office now lists him as a poacher.

The girl's drawing, when I finally looked down at it, was a house. A square with a peaked roof and a curl of smoke rising from a chimney she'd never stood beside, copied line for line from a government workbook, the only shape anyone had put in front of her and called a home. She'd spent her first years in the green dark under the canopy and slept now in a borrowed lean-to at a stranger's mercy, and neither had made it into the book.

Then the engine.

Not close. Not yet. But the driver was already moving, telling me it was time to leave without saying the words. The woman flattened the fire with the back of a stick until it was nothing but warm ash. Around us, the clearing rearranged itself for a danger that had not shown itself. A truck somewhere on the logging track below. Brown, government issue. Nobody had to see it to know its color. It didn't come closer. It didn't need to. Everyone in that clearing had run the maths, and the driver had my sleeve in his fist before the arithmetic reached me.

We left the way you leave a room where somebody's sleeping. The woman didn't walk us out. She stood at the edge of the clearing with her granddaughter's hand in hers and watched us go, unmoved, someone who'd been leaving all her life.

I walked backward through the rubber trees so I could keep looking at her. She had survived a hundred versions of that engine and would survive a hundred more, right up until the year the paperwork said she would have to leave.

We didn't talk on the drive back. The rain started again past La-ngu and the driver didn't slow down for it. By the time the boat pulled into Lipe, the island had put its face back on. Fire dancers on the beach. A string of paper lanterns between two bars. A bachelorette party doing shots off a tray shaped like a surfboard, all of them laughing at something that wouldn't survive the night.

I walked past the fence on my way home. I hadn't planned to. My feet just went that way. The old man will be behind the dive shop tomorrow, in his patch of shade, mending the same nets he mended the morning I left.

And one of these mornings he is going to ask me how she was. I have decided what to tell him. That she asked after him before she asked anything else. That she closed her eyes when I said he still went down to the water. All of it true. None of it the thing he will want, which is to know his daughter is going to be all right. That is the one sentence I did not carry back down the mountain. I still do not know what a person is allowed to carry between two people the same country has decided not to see.

I don't know her real name. Not the one on the card. The one her mother gave her at the river, the one she said once and did not repeat. I could have asked. I nodded instead, and the conversation moved on, and that is the part I cannot put down. Some things you are only offered once. That missing word has outlasted everything else I carried down from the clearing.

Rakpabon. Protector of the Forest.

I keep waiting for the irony of it to wear off. It hasn't. I don't think it's going to. Somewhere behind a dive shop on an island people fly across the world just to photograph, there's a fence over a grave nobody asked permission to build on.

And somewhere in the mountains above it, a woman named Protector of the Forest is standing beside the line that will soon move over her.

Ashley Mangtani

## *Fledgling*

Ana sits beneath a drawing table. Her back slopes but straightening it wouldn't matter. Even at its lowest point, the table top is too high for her head to bump. Xylene thick & delicious curdles in her nose. She breathes in and holds the breath until its holding tilts her forward. All around her the attic floor is a splintered mess of cat hair and broken pastels. All the best colors. Taffy blue, fuchsia and Lake Erie green so rich her mouth drops open to taste the biting fullness. Hours she's been sitting here. Idling like a rocket before a blind date with the moon. Her forearms press into micro artifacts of grit. Again, she inhales. Pushes against the floor and lifts herself from under the table.

Wringing sweat from her bangs, she passes another minute. Dawdle is the word her grandmother uses. Her mother, too. Though she knows her mother holds moments when they dawdle together close to her ribs. The sun is so insistent, choking through the single-pane window, boarded up since before Ana can remember, that it lasers the Picasso print hanging on the wall. Another slope of another woman. She turns to the Matisse and the Lam. Then the series of small Kahlos in gilded frames. These each could fit in her hand and so she likes them best. Tacked up with silver pushpins, the only unframed print in her father's studio is the Magritte. A brown-haired girl eating a black bird. Blood on her collar. Is it a girl? Ana remembers being very young and praying at her bedside for the bird's impossible escape. She presses against the drawing table. Her palm slips and a marker backflips through the air. Warm grey. Airy like a cat's heartbeat. She likes it. Lets its spin dwindle on the attic floor then replaces it at the edge of the table.

The drawing table slants and never ends. Adorned with the same strewn of Chartpak Ads, most of their caps tight, for eleven months. 5B pencils buttery black and a kneaded eraser intersect with the cells of a storyboard. Six cells, one unfinished. A man and woman sitting together at breakfast. First across from each other and buried in newspaper, then side by side. No cereal box and no carton of orange juice. The girl can't conclude a product or campaign. Months ago, she stopped trying. She runs her fingers across the images. Smooth and gliding and still burning fragrant in her throat.

A boy called Solomon once said her father pays the devil's bills. "Only foreigners understand foreigners," her father later told her. "When can I be a foreigner?" she'd asked him with an ember in her eye. He only laughed and promised one day he'd take her back home. His home. She understood. Last week six starlings abandoned their nest in the boarded window. All season she watched from under the drawing table as the mother bird threaded herself through the slats to bring them food. Ana slides her thumb along the cracked paint on the ledge. The attic leaves her alone to wonder. She does because she's like her father, the girl.

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Her mother was once her age. She lights a cigarette and perches by the window. The day the starlings left their nest she pulled apart a slice of potato bread and took Ana out to scatter it in case they came back hungry. Solemn as she stood tossing crumbs. She's always so solemn. Was she like this even before?

Her mother ashes into a small dish spattered in silver. What's left of the lusterware she discovered years later was heavily leaded. Above her the drop-door to the attic crumbles closed. She snuffs the filter and leaves it. Rinses her hands and opens the window to let the breeze neutralize her mind. The girl's footsteps creak then silence. Then creak again until they shadow down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Nibs got into the nest." Ana pulls a glass from the lowest cabinet and sits at the counter.

"The birds have gone."

“They’ll come back next season and I don’t want their nest to be ruined.”

“They’ll build a new one.” Her mother pours Ana some Ovaltine and drops in an ice cube from the freezer drawer. She stirs it with a fork she rinses and replaces on the drying rack.

“I saw them,” says Ana. “Five of them by the blue bushes. The mama bird was feeding them bugs. I don’t know where the other one was.”

“Who knows,” says her mother. “When you’re that young nothing’s guaranteed.” From the window above the sink, she looks out on the small yard. “Anything can happen.”

“Anything can always happen.” The girl finishes her glass and places it the middle of the sink for her mother to rinse.

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Walls move in the attic. Ana never catches it happening. When she’s focused on a book or studying the drawing table, she might notice their quivering in her periphery. They stop the moment she looks up. Her father never spoke about the walls but cared for them in his way, searching an hour for termite holes to slide in a nail. The silver pushpins appeared only after the walls’ perspiring caused gobs of Fun-Tak to melt into uselessness. The girl would wait. Not often, but every now and then. The last time she waited for the walls to move was 11 months ago. Maybe to the day.

Her father was finishing a sketch in velvet curves of magenta. A hand-drawn birthday card for a cousin she’d seen in photos. Bougainvillea tendrilled down the F and C. She recognized it. Often, he’d described to her these brilliant tumbling vines, and the tiny purple flowers that veil his city in blossoming fairy dust. The woman wasn’t her cousin, Ana had known for a while. She breathed the rich vapor just to hold in the breath. “See,” he’d said, blowing dry the marker strokes. “When I stop thinking about home, it always delivers me.” He placed her fingertips on the image, lightly so the ink wouldn’t stain. “One day we’ll plan our escape.” He always spoke about his home in words of shelter. His refuge. From what, she never asked.

The card arrived nine days later and one day too late. Now Ana sits under the drawing table and stares at the wall of prints. An empty swaddle of quilts and sheets gives the pullout couch a half-welcome presence in an unlit corner of the room. She breathes out. Her eyes center the bird in its moment of torture. As the sun drops, the sliver of light forced through the boarded window dims to dark.

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Weekend nights are disarming. They arrive without invitation. Ana had disappeared from downstairs when the yard was still dream lit in lavender and orange. Now and then her mother hears movement in the attic. She ashes and eyes the microwave. For more than an hour it’s been past the girl’s bedtime. She sits another minute without lighting another cigarette. The girl reads, she knows. How much and how often impresses her though she keeps quiet on it. These days the girl spends chapter books of time in her father’s studio while her mother scarcely passes by the drop-door, even when it’s closed. Sighing walls, scattered pencils, stench of ink. Everything up there scrambles her thoughts until she hears only the distant part of her mind repeating, “Release him.” But night’s been night for a while. She dumps her ashes in the compost caddy and leaves the kitchen without flipping off the light.

The hallway to the stairs is short and wrapped in paisleys. Plans to strip & repaint the walls are long discarded. She'd wanted the two of them to work together on something. On anything. Her fingers trace a large paisley. They smell like tar.

"Mom!" The sound is sudden. Ana's voice, sharp and high. Her mother grabs the bannister and hoists herself over the first five steps before she takes off running. "Mom!"

"I'm coming." The words only murmur. She clears the drop-down steps in twos and threes. Inside the attic, Ana is standing by the wall of prints. "God." Her mother's hands drop to her thighs and she lifts her head. "What happened?"

"It's gone," she says. Still now, she stares at the unframed print by the boarded window. "Look." Her mother dispatches something buried so deeply it had almost stopped being. She's not in his studio. The walls aren't coughing sawdust. The naked bulb isn't swaying over the drawing table. The room's incandescence tightens her throat as she crosses the floor. "Look," the girl whispers. They stand shoulder to chest facing the Magritte, blood drops staining its young subject's curling fingers. The faraway look perverting her eyes. Ana's mother squeezes a blink.

"Where's the bird?" She steps back.

The girl steps forward. She runs her fingertips across the image so lightly they don't feel the wall behind it. Then, a mutual surge of something — adrenaline? — breaks their breath, and in the only synchronized moment they'll ever share Ana and her mother turn and rush the boarded window. There, in the rumpled nest a small bird roosts. Is it a bird? Feathers cottony and slick. The attic light slides like liquid through its tucked wings. It's not a blackbird. Not a starling, Ana's almost certain. She reaches out her hand to touch its oily softness. Her mother grasps it. Pulls her back.

"It might be hurt," says Ana.

"It's sick." She releases the girl's hand.

"How do you know?"

"The others have gone. This one's dying—"

"No." The girl steps forward. She turns to the print on the wall. First unsteady, she closes in on the space where the dying bird should be, her shadow lapping over the image until it stills. "It's home." Her mother places her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Nibs can stay downstairs for the night," she says. "Ana." She squeezes and releases. "This is all we can do." With her hand wrapped meekly around the girl's shoulder, she leads her from the center of the room. They leave the attic one after the other.

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Morning doesn't feel like morning but the two are used to it. At 5:30 the girl gathers herself and tiptoes through the hall in her socks. No one closed the drop-door the night before but she can see the cat gate in place on the downstairs landing. The hallways are dark. Nibs is prowling or sleeping, she guesses. Ascending, Ana separates her feet on the sides of the plank steps so the middles won't creak.

Inside, she glows amber. A crack of morning light diffuses on her figure and the sighing walls. She crosses the attic floor, her steps light and even. Shadow shrouds the drawing table but the man and woman in the storyboard remain strangered. The markers lie about, tightly capped. Ana almost turns as she passes the wall of prints, keeping their splintering umber in the sharpest point of her periphery. The Magritte is unchanged. Thank god. She reaches the nest and peers down. Her mother was right. The bird isn't moving. Its feathers are stiff. She lifts the nest from the window ledge and gently wraps the bird in the cotton of her night shirt.

In the yard, the sun's a vine glittering up the sky. From the kitchen window, her mother exhales a plume of frosted smoke. She ashes in the dish. Observes her daughter kneeling between bushes. Each solemn movement, she watches in secret. The girl removes her shirt and lays the bundle beside her in the damp earth. As she lowers her head, her hands begin to dig.

Stephanie Jones

## *The Expiration Date*

"I mean it this time. This is my rock bottom."

You give me a look. Your *I don't believe you* look, this time punctuated by an eye roll so subtle, it would be just about imperceptible if I didn't know you as well as I do.

"I'm serious," I tell you. "I have never been more devastated in my life."

"That's what you said when you went on that date with the guy you swore was 'The One,' at least until you heard him use the term 'alpha male' unironically," you say.

I press my lips together. "I thought we swore to never speak of him again."

"You said you were never going to speak of him again," you say. "I didn't promise you anything."

Liar.

You did.

You said you'd stay with me forever.

Evading your gaze, I pull the sun visor down so I can fix my smudged eyeliner. The tissue you handed me is so old, the fibers are practically dissolving between my fingers. Dust motes float around us like tiny gray fairies.

For a while, we say nothing. We do this a lot. After all this time, we're okay with empty air. We still work to fill the silence sometimes, lobbing stupid questions at each other—"If you had to become a fish, which kind would you want to be?" "If a zombie bit your hand, would you try to cut it off, even if you didn't know for sure that it would keep you from turning?" "Do you think ants see us as gods and, if so, are we benevolent, malevolent, or ambivalent?"—until we eventually lapse back into silence.

There's nothing wrong with that. The silence. It's rather comfortable.

With you, I mean. Not with anyone else. With my boss, for example, it's more painful than the time I accidentally dropped the paper cutter's deathly arm onto the side of my hand. I didn't become a zombie, but I did wish I were a fish, if only because they don't have hands to nearly chop off. When I texted you about my near-death experience, you said only: *the ant gods must have been looking out for you*.

"I really don't see what the big deal is," you say now. "It's just an expired coupon."

I turn to you, half exasperated and half thrilled. There's nothing wrong with silence, but God, I love to talk.

"No," I say, drawing out the O. "It is not just an expired coupon. It's an expired *Nugget Shack* coupon. We could have gotten two free chocolate chip cookies with that thing."

You scratch your ear. You were the one who told me if you time it just right, the scratching sounds like Pac-Man eating all those little dots. You claimed you had read about this online somewhere, but the conspiratorial voice in my head—the one that persuaded me to grow out my bangs because I had convinced myself my forehead wasn't as big as I remembered it being—secretly believes you were the only one to notice. You're the type to pick up on things like that. The weird things. The little things. The things so obscure, it's as if you live in a slightly different universe from the rest of us.

"You know," you say, "we could just *buy* two chocolate chip cookies."

I sigh. "I guess. But it wouldn't be the same."

You slow-blink at me. This, I know, is your way of requesting an explanation.

"First of all," I say, happy to oblige, "things just taste better when they're free."

"Not true," you say. "What about the time you got free pizza at the office?"

I wince.

You're right.

You usually are.

"That's different," I say. "It's not the free pizza's fault that my boss is a sadistic freak who makes an entire floor of corporate drones share two medium pizzas. Plus, that pizza wasn't even free. Not to my boss."

You shrug, as if to say, *Fair enough*.

"Second," I continue, "I have this theory that employees secretly hold a grudge against anyone who uses coupons and gift cards and punish them by serving them slightly worse versions of whatever they were supposed to get for free."

You furrow your brow. You do this often. I've urged you not to do this, especially since we're almost thirty now, but you're not hyperaware of every expression you make, the way I am. You haven't even invested in any anti-aging serums. Last I checked, you still wash your face with whatever bar soap you buy on sale at StarMart.

"Doesn't that mean the cookies you could have gotten would have been worse than cookies we could get"—you glance at the dashboard like you need to check the time, as if Nugget Shack isn't a liminal space open twenty-four hours a day—"right now?"

"Yes," I say, "but we wouldn't have complained because it would have been free."

You close your eyes, likely wondering how such a smart, promising individual (you) could have ended up best friends with a certified disaster (me).

I turn my head, my fingers twisting around each other like I'm weaving a net out of my own bones. "I just thought it would be nice, you know. One last great hurrah."

Your eyes flick to me, then back to the parking lot. Your hand is draped over the top of the steering wheel, your fingers curled like the fronds of a fern.

"It's not forever," you say.

When I smile, my bottom lip cracks. I raise my tissue to my mouth, anticipating blood. "Even if it were, you'd never get rid of me. Unlike this worthless thing"—I lift my hand, the coupon clamped between my index and middle fingers—"we have no expiration date."

"I mean, technically, we do." You pause. "We're going to die someday."

I frown. "Gee, thanks for the reminder."

"I'm just saying." You drum your fingers along the steering wheel. "Our friendship, though? Good for life."

Silence. A long one. The dust fairies fade.

I look at you. I see it. The lump in your throat. I have one too, a big knot. Best friends always match.

I clear my throat. "I'm just saying. I had this whole thing planned out. Take you out. Have an adventure. Finish the day off with free chocolate chip cookies. Except then you went and changed the day of our outing on me—"

"Because the movers changed things on me first," you interject.

"And now," I continue, "the coupon is expired. By *two days*. Just... expired. And sure, we could pay for the cookies ourselves. It's just... not what I pictured."

None of this is remotely like what I pictured.

Mostly because I didn't think you'd really go.

"It's just a coupon," you say.

"No, it's not," I say.

You take a breath. Let it out. Outside, a mother straps her baby to a shopping cart. I wonder if your mom ever did that with you. I've seen pictures of you as an infant, but to me, you look like every other baby I've ever seen. In my mind, you weren't really you until the moment we met.

I wonder, now, if we will still be us even once we're apart.

"You're right," you say. Then: "You usually are."

My hand drops to my lap, my knuckles hitting the door on the way down.

"I'm sorry," you say. "I'm sorry we had to change the date."

*That's not what you should be apologizing for.*

I don't say that. I can't. I shouldn't want you to say sorry to me for deciding to move. It's what you have to do. The only way you'll be happy.

“Do you remember,” you say suddenly, “the time I dropped my soft-baked cookies at after-school care?”

I glance up at you. Back down. My legs are trembling.

“I started crying,” you say, “but as soon as I did, you came over and handed me one of your cookies instead. I was so surprised and confused and, honestly, hungry, I stopped crying and stuffed your cookie right into my mouth.”

Liar. You liar. You did no such thing.

I mean, you stopped crying. That much is true. You didn’t stuff the cookie in your mouth, though. I know you didn’t. You have always eaten so deliberately, an archaeologist trying to pick your way around a fragile fossil. People teased you sometimes; I never did. It was just one more thing about you that I noticed, then kept. My most sacred oath.

My nails sink into my skin. The marks I leave resemble boomerangs.

Boomerangs come back.

I’m afraid you never will.

“Do you still want to go?” I ask. Then, when pain flashes in your eyes, I rush to add, “To Nugget Shack.”

You close your mouth. Think for a moment. “I don’t know. You’re the one who wanted to go in the first place.”

I’m not.

That’s you.

You’re the one who chose to go.

I pull the tissue away from my lip. It comes back clean, but I swear I’m bleeding anyhow.

We tumble back into silence. Not a comfortable one.

*I should head home*, I try to tell you, but the words just won’t come out.

“Okay,” you say, yanking the parking brake. “I’m not ready to take you back yet. What do you say we get some full-priced cookies?”

I look up at you, my jaw clenched. My heart pounds in my ears.

“Come on.” You smile. “I promise I won’t drop any this time.”

I swallow. Swallow hard. My fingers have gone numb. In my mind, high above, a great god smiles at his ant-sized creations, tiny and mighty and so, so alive.

Teary-eyed, I crumple up the expired coupon and buckle my seat belt. In a voice as thin as your tissues, I say, “It’s okay if you do. I’m sure I can share this one last time.”

You take my hand and hold it and do not once let go.

Kelly Murashige

## *Four O’Clock*

The chart calls it a chief complaint, which always struck me as a strange phrase, faintly accusatory, as though the patient had a list and this one was the only one they were willing to lead with. Mine is back pain. Six weeks. Add the fourteen pounds I had not meant to lose and the half-sandwich in April I could not finish, and you have a cluster I would have read off a stranger’s face in under a minute—would have, in fact, written the order before they finished the sentence. People come to me when it is already clear. No version of me does not know what those three things are when they stand together. I knew. I simply declined, for six weeks, to look at the one patient I have ever had the option not to look at.

Priya read the film. I trained her—she came up through my program, and she has a good eye, better than I was at her age. She did not call me with the result. She walked the length of the hall, stood in front of my office, and did not sit down. I have a chair on the other side of my desk for exactly that purpose, for sitting, and she stood next to it with her hand on the back of it, and I understood the entire situation from that refusal. The staging was in her posture. I taught her that too, probably, without meaning to. We learn to stand a certain way when we are about to take something from someone.

Patient is a fifty-eight-year-old oncologist, no significant history, presenting with metastatic adenocarcinoma, primary pancreatic, with spread to bone and liver. I could write that asleep. I have written it a thousand times, in that order, primary and then the spread, because the order is the trick of it—you name the origin and then the territory, and somewhere in the grammar the person stops being a person and becomes a map of the thing using them. Subject. Verb. Lesion. It is a good sentence. It works on everyone.

It does not work on me; I have spent two days trying to figure out why, because I wanted it to. The words are the same. I am not finding new ones. But they have a weight in the mouth now that I never knew they had, the way you can say a person’s name for years and then say it once at a funeral and hear, for the first time, what it actually sounded like.

They keep telling me that knowing will help—the other doctors, my friends. At least you understand what is happening, they say. At least it cannot ambush you. And I have wanted, each time, to take them by the collar, because it is the exact thing I used to believe and the exact thing I used to offer, and it is not true, and I cannot account for how I went thirty-one years without learning it was not true. I had every finding in my body for six weeks. I could have read myself in an afternoon, the way I have read so many strangers, yet I did not turn around to look. That is the first fact I have learned in this that I did not already know: that knowing and turning to look are two different acts, and I had spent my whole life certain they were one.

There was a single mother eight months ago. Dahlia. She had a daughter, six, who drew pictures in the waiting room and brought them to her mother and me. Dahlia asked me if she was going to live. Not in the bracing way, but plainly, the way you would ask for the time. I told her she was going to make it because I believed she would. The numbers were not great, but numbers are populations, and she was one woman, and I had seen the unlikely happen before.

Six months later, she died.

I did not lie to her. That distinction has come to matter more to me than it should. I wanted her to make it; I believed she would. I sat with her through the afternoons when the unit was quiet, and we talked about the tiles she was going to put in her kitchen, a particular blue, and which of her daughter’s school trips she would be well enough to go on. I was good at those afternoons. I knew what she was asking and what she was not. The longer we sat, the less the chemical smell of the room reached me, until I stopped noticing it at all.

This is what understanding gets you. I know exactly what will happen to me and why it will happen. I know the regimen they will start me on. I helped write the local protocol for it. I know the third night is the bad one, that the nausea comes up from somewhere underneath thought, that water turns to metal, that there is a window in the third week that counterfeits being well so convincingly that people plan their lives inside it. I can tell you the median in months and the shape of the curve I currently reside on, and the long, thin tail on the right side, where a few people go on living as if it were a dream.

I knew all of it before Priya even looked at me. None of it was waiting for me on the other side of comfort. The knowing stayed knowing. The fear arrived completely separate from it, fully grown, asking for nothing.

I thought the fear was about dying. I built whole conversations upon that assumption—soft rooms, my hand flat on the desk, tissues angled towards the patient, the word death produced at the right moment like a key I had been trusted with. I was wrong about the size of it. Dying is large and far and abstract, and you can be brave about large, far things; people are, every day. The fear is about the next ten minutes. It is about the half-second before the contrast goes in and the warmth arrives in the groin, and I, who have ordered that scan ten thousand times, am afraid of the warmth, the body afraid on its own, underneath every fact I own. The fear is small and close, and it has no interest in the future, where all my expertise lives. My expertise is in the disease. There is no one left to correct me anymore. The fear is about Tuesday. They never touch.

There is a thing we say—goals of care. I have said it to families in the worst hours of their lives and felt, saying it, like a competent man. I understand the phrase from the inside now, and it is grotesque, because the goal is not complicated and was never complicated, and I pretended it was complicated so the conversation would take a manageable shape. The goal is more. That is all. A little more. An afternoon. The particular light that comes into my kitchen around four o'clock and lies across the counter, which I have seen a million times and never once observed, and which I now want with an appetite that frightens me more than the scan does. If a patient had told me that was the goal, I would have nodded and thought, privately, kindly, that they had not yet done the work. As if there were work. As if acceptance were a task you completed and were issued a certificate. I made that up. I think I made it up so I could leave the room by five.

I signed the consent this morning. I have handed that form across my desk so many times that I had stopped seeing it as anything, a formality, paper. My hand shook holding the pen, and I watched it shake from somewhere slightly above and behind myself, and I thought, with what I can only place as astonishment: it was never paper. Thirty-one years. It was never once paper, for any of them, and I passed it across the desk like a check at dinner.

It is late now. I am writing this instead of sleeping because sleeping has become those last ten minutes. Lying still in the dark with nothing to be an expert about.

I have been the doctor my entire life. I am very good at it, and that does not come from a place of pride, but precision; I was not careless, I did not earn this by failing at anything, there is no lesson in it, and that is the part no one can stand, and so everyone keeps trying to instill one. I was good, and it made no difference. I leaned over a great many people in a great many beds, and I brought them everything I knew, the names, the numbers, and the gentle correct order of words. There were a few who lived, who went out along the long, thin tail, and I told them it was them—their fight, their attitude—because it was unbearable to tell them it was luck, and because they wanted it to be them. They looked up at me with a particular expression that I caught for one second at a time, ten thousand times, from above, and then I straightened up and went on to the next room because I got to straighten up. That was the whole of my advantage. Not the knowing. I got to straighten up and leave.

I am making the expression myself, at two in the morning, at no one, and there is no one leaning over me to catch it for a second and carry it out of the room. I want it written down by the one person who finally has it from the inside and can be trusted on the matter.

I know everything about my disease. I know its name and its order and its mechanism and every road for the next few months. I keep going over it. I have not missed anything. I have checked, I keep checking, there is nothing in it I have not already held, and it does not help, it was never going to help, and I am so afraid, I am lying here in the dark, and I am so afraid.

Sage Micah

## *How to Make Peace with Your Dead Cousin When Sorry Isn't Enough*

Pick up a pen. Start with the easy stuff. *Dear favorite cousin, even though you hit me with a bat before we got on the kindergarten bus, I forgive you because it was an accident unlike the time you struck that match on the bus and we both got paddled by the principal.*

Maybe next you want to bring up the time in your fort in the woods he tried to prove his masculinity by French kissing you in front of the neighborhood kids, who never liked him. *You embarrassed me. I was mad. You weren't like the other boys. You didn't fit in. Your laugh was softer. You flinched when they shoved and tumbled. On the walk home, I said you weren't invited to the fort again.*

Don't be afraid to write the next part. He's been dead thirty years. Tell him to stop haunting your dreams. *Remember all those weekends we hung out eating takeout in that rat-infested room you rented, me helping you prep for your high school equivalency test? In my dreams, I see myself driving away in my sporty car to party with my college friends. Your smile and your waving hand saying, "it's okay, I'm happy here." But the silence that fills the next decade when you disappear to the West Coast tells a different story. Mom says she sent mail to a post office box. I was too absorbed in my perfect life, my happy memories of you and me cranking Prince on high volume and getting high, all my hopefulness that time would settle your nerves or straighten you out or fix whatever needed fixing without requiring any sacrifice from me for you. And when I stood to say a few words at your memorial service, my hypocrisy was a stone caught in the base of my throat, but my smile probably looked like yours in the doorway the last time I saw your face.*

Tell him you're sorry, and let it be enough. *I planted an evergreen shrub beside my front door. It blooms in early March in time for your birthday. I stand on the porch and tuck one of the Barbie-size bouquets behind my ear and strike a match. I remember you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

Tracie Adams

## *Once, a Gate with No Fence*

Rolls of rusted barbed wire, rotted fence posts, plenty of bent, burnt orange staples and nails. Once, in the badlands, a gate with no fence, freestanding, like a question. Droppings of sheep; droppings of bear; droppings of elk; droppings of mule and white-tail deer; droppings, once, of an owl, dry and crumbling with small bones.

A moose once stepped onto the trail to face me, as if inviting me to joust, and my horse spun and bolted without my asking, snorting at me afterward as if to say: “That was some creature!”

I’d tell that story to dudes who white-knuckled their saddle horn down a steep single-track, tell them not to worry because a horse has four legs and doesn’t want to fall either.

Once, a dude asked me, “Are you always this calm?” I thought back to times I’d sat on horses and given in to panic, learned that it usually earned me a deposit into the dirt, costing me years of visits to my chiropractor. But I didn’t tell dudes about horse wrecks. Not while in the saddle, when I needed their their heels down, their shoulders back, their hips loose.

Tiny forests of wild chamomile, sunbleached cowbones, a calf’s eartag, the toppled beams of a homesteader’s cabin, eerie in its precarity. Once, while I was riding in the Fourth of July parade, a man stepped in front of my horse and said, “What’s your name, Squaw?”; if only all such encounters were on horseback, where my spur-tapped gelding nearly plowed him over.

In a thrift store, a pair of fleece-lined boots with rubber soles and rabbit fur-lined tops, a flower-shaped mother-of-pearl belt buckle with only one petal missing. Every week on a mountain ride, a bottle of Jack Daniels that we’d all take a pull from, the heat of the whiskey spreading our chests. Far-off heartache, and how someone told me, “He’s in another time zone. I wouldn’t worry too much about that.” How I eventually let my head be tipped back by tan and cracked fingers, slipped my tongue into joy and the anonymity of the vast land and my puny life upon it.

Tiny angular stones, sharp and sturdy as horseshoe nails, fashioned by some human hand hundreds of years ago and affixed to spears or arrows. Freshly shed antlers nestled in sagebrush; the wallow of a calf under a hot iron; a warm beer while sitting on a straw bale on the back of the flatbed. We’d have to roll the windows up as we kicked hay off the back; the boss would yell at us if the cab got filled with green flecks. Once, a deceptively small saddle sore on a sorrel gelding that we pricked with a syringe, squirting puss in an arc across the corral. Up Button Draw, a headless, skinned bear, left to fester. How I learned, over time, to retrace a trail back that I’d taken out too far, looking for the markers and cairns I’d left to mark my way, or how sometimes just wandered till I wound up back at the saddlebarn.

Early dark mornings, the yank of boots and slough of jeans over my calves, the lasso-like tying of the day’s silk scarf. The cabin where I slept in the handmade bed and mattress thin as a saddle blanket; the mice that once ran through my hair as I slept, which woke me but I was too tired to care.

I told myself when I came to the ranch that I would only stay one season. I must have known this to be a lie, even though once I found a petroglyph on a boulder—a large, horned figure that seemed to dash after two puny people-shapes, who ran along the rock’s crevice. Sometimes that valley downright chased people out of it, if they couldn’t take all it had on offer: washboard roads, a single feedstore that sold expired dewormer, a bar where you could still smoke inside, and a winter that was only endurable by attending the occasional fish fry.

I tried to leave once. Said I wasn't returning. Had important things to do. Came back anyway, starved. Eventually I did leave and didn't come back for twelve years. When I went back to visit, one man I worked with was still there, still singing Ian Tyson songs and putting dudes on sturdy Mexican stock. Long after that, he left, too.

Once I rode beneath a herd of bighorn sheep for a full five minutes before I looked up to see them—serious and almost translucent against the sandy spires of the badlands.

Marin Smith

## *What This Place Has Saved*

We're nearing what landscape photographers, like my late husband, Richard, call the golden hour, when we spot the cars. Lined up along both shoulders of the narrow two-lane road, the dozen or so stopped vehicles have caused traffic, which ought to be moving, to grind to a halt.

At first, I fear there's been an accident. What else would cause a pile-up of cars, basically stopping life and movement in its tracks?

Kurt, our kind, smart driver and guide, explains. When you come upon a scene like this, most likely it has to do with a bear.

A few days ago, I met my fellow passengers and an equal number in a second van, after a jaw-droppingly gorgeous drive from the Bozeman, Montana airport. My third-floor room in a modest motel has a balcony that looks out over a roaring river. To the left and right, majestic snow-covered peaks edge up into the sky.

For the past three and a half years, I have been following an unfamiliar path, lacking a single guidepost or sign. I've done this because the life I'd known, both familiar and adored, was gone.

Three and a half years ago, the love of my life, my husband and best friend, Richard, died. For nearly thirty years, Richard had accompanied me on hikes up and down mountains, on paddles down rivers and around lakes, and on drives to the nearby Northern California Coast, east to Yosemite National Park, and north to remote cabins in the Cascade Mountains. When he left this earth, he also took with him my life.

My remedy for this achingly awful blow has been to join groups of strangers on trips into the great outdoors. I have lost count of the number I've taken so far. Until I found myself in a van wondering why all these cars were stopped along the road, I wasn't sure if these journeys were helping me create a life in place of the one I lost. But sometime after Kurt added our van to the line of vehicles on the shoulder, I came up with a response.

The motive for why these drivers decided to pull over to the side of the road and park appears oblivious to all the attention. He stands in a meadow of bright new grass, a safe distance from where we are on the road's shoulder, his enormous head down, while he silently eats. Every so often, he raises his head, apparently checking on how many more sweet greens there might be to enjoy. He lifts one paw and then another, which gets him to where he can sample the bounty a few feet away.

He is, Kurt says, a grizzly bear guy. His dark brown fur looks full and soft. Yes, he does resemble a toy.

Though I have spent a lifetime hiking trails in national and state parks, I have only seen a bear once, at a distance across Lake Mary, while on a boat in Glacier National Park. I have hiked in several places, including Glacier, Waterton Lakes, and Banff National Parks, where trails have been closed to protect visitors from bear attacks. In this very place, Yellowstone National Park, a young man and teenage boy were attacked by a mother bear with a cub a few weeks ago. The area where that happened is still closed.

Every so often, the grizzly looks up and I see his face. He doesn't appear to be looking at me or anyone in the crowd, which is following his every move, with binoculars held up to their eyes or scopes set on spindly black legs above the ground. Unlike we humans, frequently angling for social media attention, the bear's lack of interest in us is a clear sign he would feel perfectly fine to be ignored.

As excited as I am to stand and admire this handsome creature, something else about the scene has touched my heart. All these people are here because of him. They stand silently in awe. Strangers offer strangers a look through their binoculars or scopes. At a time of darkness and deep division in this country, here we are, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, country of origin, religion or political beliefs, sharing profound and grateful wonder over what this magnificent place, the first national park in the United States and the world, has saved. We are celebrating the fact that this land belongs to us, not some billionaire who added these acres, blessed with bubbling water, magnificent mountains, herds of bison, elk, and pronghorn antelope, plus wolf packs and solitary black bears and grizzly, to his collection of homes and yachts.

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The morning after our grizzly sighting, Kurt drives us to the trailhead for the next hike. Snow was in today's forecast, and sure enough, as we make our way up and around the winding road through the park, white flakes begin swirling all around. The higher we go, the more the ground is buried under clean white powder. Pine trees wear several-inch-thick layers draped across their elegant arms.

We begin the hike at the bottom of a snow-covered rise, bordered by tall lodgepole pines. Following a short climb, we see we're not alone. One dark brown, nearly black, bison plods through the snow and mud on our right, joined a moment later by a second matching one. These animals were hunted almost to extinction before indigenous preservation, conservation efforts and laws, and protected public spaces caused the population to rebound. Through my phone lens, the picture of two bison standing atop a field of white, their huge heads bowed, looks like a scene from a public television nature documentary.

Snow continues to fall, mostly light, as we hike. At one point, I walk alongside a second guide, Julie, and we talk. I tell her I lost my husband a few years back. She shares that both her father and a dear friend died this past year. She's still experiencing the awful dark grief over not one but two huge losses.

I express my condolences, then relate some of what I've learned in my three and a half years of widowhood. Unlike what people who haven't lost a great love sometimes say, that time will heal this wound, I offer a different take. What softens the grief, I say, are moments of joy. It's such moments with the people we loved and lost that we miss most.

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The next morning, a black bear ambles across the road, stopping traffic in both directions and not giving a hoot. Everyone in the van with me is excited, as am I. I imagine that folks in the other stopped cars, who might be upset if delayed by an accident or road work, are delighted that this oblivious being has silently forced them to pause and take in a glorious vestige of the wild, only possible to encounter in a few special spots.

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A few days ago, one of the trip leaders, Deborah, prefaced her introductory talk about the wonders of Yellowstone National Park with an admission.

"I'm not supposed to be political," she said.

Deborah went on to explain that the current administration in Washington was, at that very moment, attempting to take our public lands away.

"We all need to do whatever we can to stop it," she urged.

Deborah gave us this warning before we'd stood next to strangers, enthralled by a grizzly who didn't have to bolt away to save his life. This happened before we hiked in lightly fallen snow along the rim trail overlooking the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, gazing down at Yellowstone Falls pouring into the Yellowstone River, which over millennia carved this canyon. Her admonition came prior to our witnessing the Grand Geyser, the tallest predictable geyser in the world, shooting streams of water high into the air, before pausing, and then erupting again.

This was also before I'd added an untold number of joyful moments into my life, moments that softened the edges of the sharp dark stone of grief I carry in my heart. Her words, along with the hope, awe and wonder I experienced in this treasured place, set aside for bears, bison, wolves, elk, moose, antelope, marmot, and "the benefit and enjoyment of the people," as the 1872 act creating Yellowstone National Park stated, will nudge me to do my part, to ensure our public lands remain places of preservation and protection for all the generations of wildlife and humans to come.

Patty Somlo

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



## Dayan Visser

Dayan Visser is a photographer based in the north of France, creating dark and ethereal imagery exploring solitude, grief and melancholy.

## Margarita Bonifaz

Margarita Bonifaz published her first piece, “Fairy Toast,” in *The Phoenix* at age seven. Her work has also appeared in *Peregrine* and *Lime Square Poets*. After a career in teaching, she now writes fiction and poetry.

## Melina Charis

Melina Charis is a poet who writes at the intersection of grief, womanhood, and the natural world. She is a *Phil Lit* Poetry Prize winner and her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Opol*, *The Faoileánach Journal*, *The Wild Roof Journal*, and others. She lives with her family in Los Angeles.

## SR Inciardi

SR Inciardi is a New York City-born poet whose work has appeared in journals across the United States, Europe, India, and Australia. He is the author of three poetry collections, with a fourth forthcoming.

## Christopher V.B. Lazzaro

Christopher V.B. Lazzaro is an educator, writer, and poet whose creative and academic work explores themes of perception, environment, and human engagement. His writing reflects an ongoing interest in how we witness and interpret the natural world.

## Rhett Watts

Rhett Watts is the author of three poetry collections: *Willing Suspension*, *The Braiding*, and *The Double Nest*. Her poems have appeared in *The Worcester Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *The Best Spiritual Writing 2000*. She regularly facilitates writing workshops in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

## S.E. Street

S.E. Street is an award-winning writer and poet. Her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have been published in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

## Courtney Schroeder

Courtney Schroeder is a poet, elementary school teacher, and student of Vajrayana Buddhism. She lives with her family in Northern California. Her work has appeared in *The Dickinson Review*.

## Kimmy Chang

Kimmy Chang is a McKinney-based writer and computer vision engineer. A 2026 Writers' League of Texas Fellow and Pushcart Prize nominee, her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Apple Valley Review*, *wildscape. literary journal*, *Qu Literary Magazine*, and *Third Wednesday*, among others.

## Benjamin Green

Benjamin Green is the author of twelve books, including *His Only Merit* and the forthcoming collection *Old Man Looking through a Window at Night*. He resides in Jemez Springs, New Mexico.

## Jack B. Bedell

Jack B. Bedell is a Professor of English and Coordinator of Creative Writing at Southeastern Louisiana University, where he edits *Louisiana Literature* and directs the Louisiana Literature Press. The author of several collections, including *Fight Nights*, his work has appeared in *HAD*, *Heavy Feather*, *The Shore*, *trampset*, and *Best Microfiction*. He served as the Louisiana Poet Laureate from 2017 to 2019.

## Curtis M. Revis Seubert

Curtis M. Revis Seubert is a writer and educator living in Japan, where they teach interdisciplinary studies at the National Institute of Technology. Heavily influenced by deconstructive philosophy, experimental fiction, and quantum physics, they write from a small room crowded with books and a sleeping bag.

## Sandra Beth Levy

Sandra Beth Levy has published poetry widely, both nationally and internationally, in various literary magazines, journals, and anthologies. She had two poems shortlisted for the 2026 Rough Diamond Poetry Prize. Her debut poetry chapbook with Finishing Line Press is forthcoming.

## Suman Mondal

Suman Mondal is a poet and English literature student from West Bengal, India. His work has appeared in *The Statesman*, *Exclamation Mark Literary Journal*, *Spillwords*, and *Literary Yard*, among others. He was shortlisted for the 2025 Young Writers' Journal Weekly Prize.

## Kaycee Painter

Kaycee Painter is a disabled poet from Dalton, Georgia, and the web editor for *Mouthful of Salt*. Writing directly from the body, her work explores themes of endurance and accessibility. Her poems have appeared in *TrashLight Press*, *The Atlanta Review*, and *The Nonbinary Review*.

## Liesl Jobson

Liesl Jobson makes art in Zeekoevlei on the Cape Flats where hippopotamus once roamed. Her writing is forthcoming in *Pink Ochre*, *Silkworm Poetry*, *Quibble Lit*, *Literary Cocktail Magazine*, *Full House Literary*, and *brief+incorrect*. She plays contrabassoon, teaches writing, coaches women's rowing and is a community activist in Cape Town.

## Timothy Duffy

Timothy Duffy is an educator and poet whose work has recently appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *Pleiades*, *trampset*, and *Salt Hill*. He teaches at Utah Valley University and lives outside of Salt Lake City with his family.

## Regina Gort

Regina Gort Betances is a retired chef who grew up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. She currently resides in Puerto Rico, the island of her heritage. Her work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Rova*, *Deep Wild Journal*, *The Journal of Latina Critical Feminism*, and *The Dewdrop*.

## Nancy Byrne Iannucci

Nancy Byrne Iannucci is a New York-based writer and the author of four chapbooks. A two-time Best of the Net nominee, she was shortlisted for the 2025 Poetry Lighthouse Prize. Her work has appeared in *Thrush*, *Maudlin House*, *Glass*, and *Belladonna's Garden Literary Review*, among others. Her first full-length poetry collection is forthcoming in 2027.

## Emma Byrne Hickman

Emma Byrne Hickman is a nature photographer based in the English countryside. Her work has appeared in *Floating Acorn Review*, *Belladonna's Garden Literary Review*, and *Blue Rivers*. Her photography seeks to capture moments of wonder and attention within the natural world.

## Roberta Winters

Roberta Winters is a writer, photographer, and artist. Born and educated in New York City, she currently resides in Sacramento, California.

## David Capps

David Capps is a writer living in Connecticut.

## Willy-O'

Willy-O' is a self-taught, pseudonymous artist whose work primarily utilizes found objects collected while wandering. He currently resides in Vancouver, Canada.

## Autumn Williams

Autumn Williams is the author of the chapbook *Waves* and the bestselling collection *Clouds on the Ground*, which earned a silver medal in The Wishing Shelf Book Awards. Her poems have been featured in *Flare Magazine*, *Wildscape*, *Nettle Literary Journal*, and others.

## Ashley Mangtani

Ashley Mangtani is a slipstream writer whose work explores ecological and social collapse, and the roles people inhabit in moments of crisis. Drawing on an M.Sc. in Environmental Science and his experience as a long-form fiction reader for Ploughshares, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Litro*, *Washington Square Review*, *Boudin*, *Expat Press*, *Thieving Magpie*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Hawkeye*, *Mobius*, *Literary Garage*, and *Empyrean Magazine*, among others.

## Stephanie Jones

Stephanie Jones is the daughter of a Mexican immigrant and a Mediterranean Jersey girl, with bylines in *The New York Times*, *HuffPost* and elsewhere, and literary works appearing/forthcoming in *The Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Midway Journal*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Nulla*, *Encyclopedia Prismatic* and elsewhere. She's a 2026 Rhysling Award finalist.

## Kelly Murashige

Kelly Murashige is the author of the award-winning YA novels *The Lost Souls of Benzaiten* and *The Yomigaeri Tunnel*, as well as the forthcoming adult novel *Milkiverse*. A nominee for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, she was born and raised in Hawai'i.

## Sage Micah

Sage Micah is currently a pre-medical student at UCLA. He enjoys many hobbies, including writing, reading, and being immersed in nature. He currently resides in California's Central Coast and is new to publishing his works.

## Tracie Adams

Tracie Adams is the author of *Our Lives in Pieces* and *Not Finished Yet*, which was a 2025 BookLife Prize Finalist. A nominee for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Best Microfiction, her work has appeared in *Pithead Chapel*, *Stanchion*, *Fictive Dream*, *Hippocampus*, *Cleaver Magazine*, and elsewhere.

## Marin Smith

Marin Smith is a poet and essayist whose work has appeared in *Split Rock Review*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *CALYX Journal*, and *San Antonio Review*, among others. She holds an M.A. in English from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, and is the Editorial Director and Co-Founder of *Abraxas Review*.

## Patty Somlo

Patty Somlo is the author of *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, *The First to Disappear*, and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace*. Her books have been finalists in the International Book, Best Book, National Indie Excellence, American Fiction, and Reader Views Literary Awards.

