



Ai

m a g a z i n e

issue 13. fall 2020.

IN THIS ISSUE

Jerome O'Connor
Mitchell Grabois
Serafina Bersonage
Gordon Skalleberg
Mark Terrill
40+ authors & artists

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Artists & Authors

in this issue

Serafina Bersonsage

Serafina Bersonsage received a doctorate in English literature from the University of Rochester, where she specialized in seventeenth-century British literature. Her work has appeared in a number of publications, including *Antiphon*, *About Place*, *Fire Poetry*, and *Boston Accent Lit*.



Starrla Cray

Starrla Cray is a creative writing MFA candidate at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism and spent 10 years working as a reporter and editor. Her writing, photography, and artwork explore the natural world and the human experience.



Barbara Daniels

Barbara Daniels's *Talk to the Lioness* was published by Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press in 2020. Her poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Mid-American Review*, and elsewhere. In addition, she received a 2020 fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.



Juditha Dowd

Juditha Dowd's most recent book, *Audubon's Sparrow*, is a verse biography in the voice of Lucy Bakewell Audubon, the naturalist's wife. Besides previous publication in *Aji*, Dowd's work has appeared in many journals and anthologies including *Poetry Daily*, *Poet Lore*, *Rock & Sling*, *The Florida Review*, *Spillway* and *The New Verse News*. Find out more about her and her work at judithadowd.org/



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Kelly DuMar

Kelly DuMar is a poet, playwright and workshop facilitator from Boston. She's author of three poetry chapbooks, *Girl in Tree Bark* (Nixes Mate, 2019), *Tree of the Apple* (Two of Cups Press), and *All These Cures* (Lit House Press). Her poems, prose and photos are published in many literary journals including *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly* and *Tiferet*. Her nature photo/creative writing blog is kellydumar.com/blog



Kathleen Frank

Santa Fe landscape artist Kathleen Frank, raised in Northern California, has a Baccalaureate of Art in Design from San Jose State University, a Masters of Art from Penn State, and has studied woodcarving and printing. In Pennsylvania, she taught printmaking and costume design and co-founded the Printmakers Studio Workshop of Central Pennsylvania. Frank shifted to painting, seeking light and pattern in Pennsylvania farms, California scenery from mountains to sea and now the unique landscapes of the Southwest.



D. Dina Friedman

D. Dina Friedman received two Pushcart Prize nominations and has published in many literary journals. She is the author of one chapbook of poetry, *Wolf in the Suitcase* (Finishing Line Press), and two award-winning novels, *Escaping Into the Night* (Simon and Schuster) and *Playing Dad's Song* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux). Learn more at <http://www.ddinafriedman.com>.



Sarah Gish

Sarah Gish lives in Chesapeake, Virginia and has worked in public service for the police department for 18 years. She loves to travel, taking photos of the natural landscapes she encounters along the way. She has been to or through 49 of our 50 states—East Coast to West Coast and from Canada to Mexico. She has travelled to the beaches of Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Costa Rica.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Robin Gow

Robin Gow is the author of *Our Lady of Perpetual Degeneracy* (Tolsun Books 2020) and the chapbook *Honesuckle* (Finishing Line Press 2019). Their poetry has recently been published in *Poetry*, *New Delta Review*, and *Washington Square Review*.



Mitchell Grabois

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over 1400 of his works appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad, including *Aji*. He has been nominated for numerous prizes and was awarded the 2017 Booranga Writers' Centre (Australia) Prize for Fiction. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition.



Cheryl Green

Cheryl Green has earned her PhD, DNP, RN, LCSW, CNL, CNE, ACUE, MAC, and FAPA. Dr. Green is a professor of nursing at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut, a practicing nurse, and a licensed clinical social worker. She writes contemplative prose that reflects the human experience.



John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet and U.S. resident. He has recently published work in *Midwest Quarterly*, *Poetry East* and *North Dakota Quarterly* and has work upcoming in *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Hawaii Review* and *Dunes Review*.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Stella Hayes

Russian-American poet Stella Hayes is the author of the poetry collection *One Strange Country* (What Books Press, forthcoming in 2020). She grew up in an agricultural town outside of Kiev, Ukraine and in Los Angeles. She earned a creative writing degree at University of Southern California. Her work has appeared in *Prelude*, *The Indianapolis Review* and *Spillway*, among others.



Kevin P. Keating

Keating's first novel, *The Natural Order of Things* (Vintage 2013, was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prizes/First Fiction award and received starred review from Publishers Weekly and Booklist. His second novel, *The Captive Condition* (Pantheon 2015), was launched at the San Diego Comic Con International and received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal*.



Kate LaDew

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, North Carolina with her cats Charlie Chaplin and Janis Joplin.



Sheree La Puma

Sheree La Puma is an award-winning writer whose personal essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in or are forthcoming in *WSQ*, *Chiron Review*, *Juxtapose*, *The Rumpus*, *Plainsongs*, *Into The Void*, and *I-70 Review*, among others. She has a micro-chapbook, *The Politics of Love*, due out in August and a chapbook, *Broken: Do Not Use*, due out in the fall.

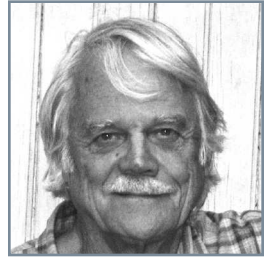


Artists & Authors

in this issue

Richard LeBlond

Richard LeBlond is a retired biologist living in North Carolina. His essays and photographs have appeared in many U.S. and international journals, including *Montreal Review*, *Redux*, *Compose*, *Concis*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Trampset*, and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*. His work has been nominated for “Best American Travel Writing” and “Best of the Net.”



Katharyn Machan

Katharyn Howd Machan writes poetry on her dragon patio when weather allows and everywhere else when it doesn't. As a full professor in the Department of Writing at Ithaca College she mentors students in fairy-tale-based creative writing courses. Her most recent publications are *What the Piper Promised* (AQP, 2018) and *A Slow Bottle of Wine* (The Comstock Writers, Inc., 2020).



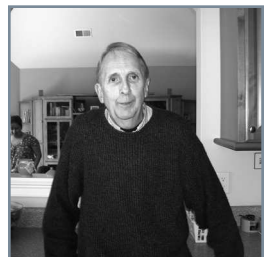
Glen Mazis

Glen A. Mazis teaches philosophy and humanities at Penn State Harrisburg. He has published many poems in literary journals, including *Rosebud*, *The North American Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Willow Review*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Reed Magazine* and *Asheville Poetry Review* (best of 1994-2004). His poetry collection, *The River Bends in Time* (Anaphora Literary Press, 2012), was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His poem won the 2019 New Orchard Press National Poetry contest [The Malovrh-Fenlon Prize] and a chapbook, *The Body Is a Dancing Star*, is in press with them.



John McKernan

John McKernan – who grew up in Omaha Nebraska – is now retired after teaching Poetics & Commas for 41 years at Marshall University. He lives in Florida. His most recent book is selected poems, *Resurrection of the Dust*.

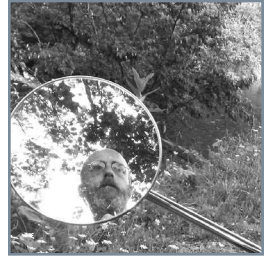


Artists & Authors

in this issue

Jeff McRae

Jeff McRae is a writer, drummer, and teacher. He earned an MA in Writing from the University of New Hampshire and an MFA in Poetry from Washington University, St. Louis. Recent poems appear or are forthcoming in *Salamander*, *Ascent*, *Cider Press Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and elsewhere. He lives in Vermont.



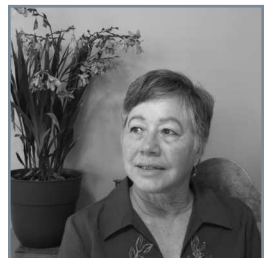
Mark J. Mitchell

Mark J. Mitchell's novel, *The Magic War*, is published by Loose Leaves Publishing. He has also published three full length collections and several chapbooks. He has been a working poet for forty years. He lives with his wife, the activist and documentarian Joan Juster. Before, he made his living pointing out pretty things in San Francisco. Now, like everyone, he's unemployed.



Susan Morse

Susan Morse has lived in California, rural Maine, and she moved to the Willamette Valley of Oregon in 2016. She has a Masters degree in Literacy Education from the University of Maine, Orono, and completed a summer internship for the Maine Writers' Project. She taught English/ Language Arts at the middle school level before retiring. *In the Hush*, her first chapbook, was published in June 2019 by Finishing Line Press.



Susan Narayan

Susan Narayan is a Minneapolis writer and ESL teacher with an MFA in creative writing from Hamline University. She has lived and worked in three countries: Costa Rica, The Yemen Arab Republic, and most recently, Turkey. Her essays have appeared in *The Levantine Review*, *REAL: Regarding Arts and Letters*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Minnesota Medicine*, *The Star Tribune*, *Colere*, and others. One of her essays was a finalist in New Millennium's 2015 Nonfiction Contest.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Soonest Nathaniel

Soonest Nathaniel is a poet and spoken word artist. He is the author of “Teaching My Father How To Impregnate Women,” selected as winner of the 2017 RL Poetry Award. He was Poet Laureate for the 2014 Korea Nigeria Poetry Festival. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Rattle*, *Silver Blade*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *FIYAH*, *Silver Blade Poetry*, *Northridge Review*, *Praxis Mag*, *Raven Chronicles*, *Wiki Column*, and many more.



Homero Pumarol

Homero Pumarol (Santo Domingo, 1971) is one of the Dominican Republic’s most important contemporary poets. He is celebrated for his vibrant poetry that employs the Dominican idiom with humor and allusions to pop culture, as well as North American poetry and Modernism. He is the author of three collections, and his work has appeared widely in the most important journals and anthologies of the Spanish-speaking world.



Kevin J.B. O’Connor

Kevin J.B. O’Connor is currently pursuing a PhD in English at University of Kentucky. He received his MFA from Old Dominion University and has published poetry in *Slant*, *Anderbo*, *Bayou*, *Bluestem*, *Flare*, *Literary Juice*, *Glassworks*, *Fourth River Review*, *Luna Luna*, *Midway*, *The Tulane Review*, and *The Pinch*, among other journals. He lives in Lexington, KY.



Jerome O’Connor

Until 2017, Jerome O’Connor was the Executive Director of the Institute of Bridge Engineering, University at Buffalo. He is an engineer with an interest in art.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Lynn Pattison

Lynn Pattison's work has appeared in *Smartish Pace*, *Rattle*, *Pinyon*, *Tinderbox*, and *Moon City Review*, among others, and has been anthologized in several venues. She is the author of three poetry collections: *Tesla's Daughter* (March St. Press); *Walking Back the Cat* (Bright Hill Press) and *Light That Sounds Like Breaking* (Mayapple Press). Her collection, *Matryoshka Houses*, debuted in June 2020 (Kelsay Press).



Suzanne S. Rancourt

Ms. Rancourt is of Abenaki/Huron descent. Her book *Billboard in the Clouds*, Curbstone Press (2nd print with NU Press), received the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas First Book Award. Her second book is *Murmurs at the Gate* (Unsolicited Press, 2019). She is a USMC and Army veteran. Her poetry and non-fiction have been published widely. For more information, go to www.expressive-arts.com



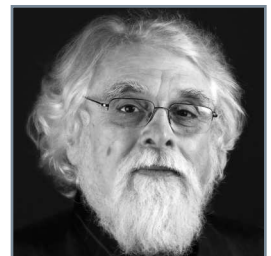
Rick Rohdenburg

Rick Rohdenburg attended the Writers' Workshop at Brown University, then spent thirty-five years working as a systems analyst. He did not begin publishing until past sixty. His work has appeared in the *Chestnut Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Raleigh Review*, and others. Now retired, he lives in Atlanta, Georgia.



Stan Sanvel Rubin

Stan Sanvel Rubin lives on the Northern Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. His fourth full-length collection, *There. Here*, was published by Lost Horse Press; his third, *Hidden Sequel*, won the Barrow Street Poetry Book Prize. His poems have been in many journals including *Agni*, *The Georgia Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *One*.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Christy Sheffield Sanford

Christy Sheffield Sanford is an artist-writer living in North Florida near the Atlantic Ocean. She holds a Masters degree from Antioch University in Creative Writing and Interarts. Sanford's digital animations, housed at Vimeo, have appeared at *Atticus Review* ("Poe's Purloined Molars"), *AMP* ("Nadine's Shoulders in Moonlight") and elsewhere. She has won cover competitions for *Bacopa Literary Review* and *Chestnut Review*.



Sebastian Santiago

Sebastian Santiago is originally from San Juan, Puerto Rico, but grew up just outside of Detroit, Michigan. He attained his English degree from Central Michigan University, where the focus of his studies was creative writing with a concentration in poetry. He has work featured or forthcoming in *The Emerson Review*, *Poetry South*, *Up North Lit*, *BMP Voices* and *Rigorous*.



Anthony Seidman

Anthony Seidman (1973) is a poet translator from Los Angeles who has lived for significant stretches of time in Ciudad Juárez and Mexicali, Mexico. His most recent full-length translation is *A Stab in the Dark* (LARB Classics, 2019) by Facundo Bernal. Earlier this year, Spuyten Duyvil published his collection, *Cosmic Weather*. His work has appeared in such journals as *Aji*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Poetry International*, *New American Writing*, and *Huizache*, among others.



Hibah Shabkhez

Hibah Shabkhez is a writer of the half-yo literary tradition, an erratic language-learning enthusiast, a teacher of French as a foreign language, and a happily eccentric blogger from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in *Black Bough*, *Cordite Poetry*, *Ligeia*, *Nine Muses* and a number of other literary magazines.



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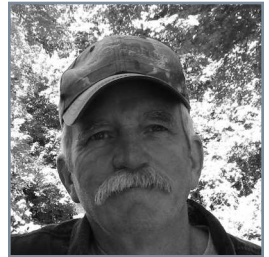
Gordon Skalleberg

A native of Arild, Sweden and now residing in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Skalleberg transitioned to full-time artist after years in the family's business. His relocation to New Mexico inspired new imagery, a distinctive twist on Southwestern features - desert landscapes, mountains, open skies - in a semi-abstract landscape-style. Skalleberg has shown in gallery and exhibitions in Sweden since 2007, more recently in New York and Santa Fe.



Phillip Sterling

Phillip Sterling's most recent books include *Amateur Husbandry*, a series of micro-fictions narrated by the domestic partner of a yellow horse (Mayapple 2019), and *Short on Days*, a series of February aubades (Main Street Rag 2020).



Wally Swist

Wally Swist's books include *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), selected by Yusef Komunyakaa as co-winner in the 2011 Crab Orchard Series Open Poetry Contest; *A Bird Who Seems to Know Me: Poems Regarding Birds & Nature* (Ex Ophidia Press, 2019), winner of the 2018 Ex Ophidia Press Poetry Prize; *The Bees of the Invisible* (2019), and *Evanescence: Selected Poems* (2020), both with Shanti Arts.



Laura Tanenbaum

Laura Tanenbaum has published short fiction and poetry in publications including *Catamaran*, *Cleaver*, *Narrative*, *Aji*, *Entropy* and *Juked*. Her essays and book reviews have appeared in venues including *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Republic*, *Dissent*, and *In these Times*. She is professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York.



Mark Terrill

Mark Terrill is a well-traveled American poet, translator, and prose writer who has resided in northern Germany since 1984. His most recent book is a new collection of poems and prose poems, *Great Balls of Doubt*, illustrated by Jon Langford (Verse Chorus Press). Drawing en plein air is a favorite pastime, an analog antidote to the digital distractions.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Emery Veilleux

Emery Veilleux is a Boston-based writer and recent graduate of Emmanuel College. Her work has appeared in *Pure Slush*, *7 Deadly Sins* (an anthology) and *Severine*. She represented her school in the 2019 Greater Boston Intercollegiate Undergraduate Poetry Festival. In her spare time, she can be found reading and looking at trees.



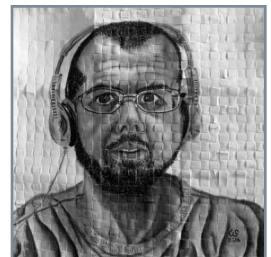
Donna Weaver

Donna Weaver's work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *American Journal of Poetry*, *Drunkenboat*, *Colere*, *Poetry Motel*, *Lit Noire Publishing*, *Pavement Saw*, *The Crucible*, *Kota Press*, *Loop Journal*, *Big Toe Review*, *Controlled Burn*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Fringe Magazine*, *GhotiMag*, *Conte*, *Whimmpersbang Journal* and others. She is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and founding editor of Caketrain Press.



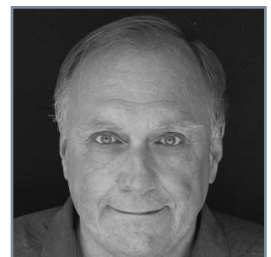
Sean White

Sean White arrived to prison in 1997 at the age of nineteen. His short fiction and poetry have appeared in a number of journals, most recently *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Rosebud Magazine*, and the *Normal School Online*. He has received awards from PEN America's Writing Awards for Prisoners several times in various genres. His first graphic novel, *Tales of Relatable Cynicism*, was recently published.



Bill Wolak

Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, *Barfly Poetry Magazine*, *Ragazine*, *Cardinal Sins*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *The Wire's Dream*.



Artists & Authors

in this issue

Brenda Yates

Brenda Yates is the prize-winning author of *Bodily Knowledge* (Tebot Bach). Credits include *American Journal of Poetry*, *Mississippi Review*, *City of the Big Shoulders* (University of Iowa Press), *Local News* (MWPH), *Southern Poetry*, *Tennessee* (Texas Review Press), *Fire and Rain* (Scarlet Tanager), *Unmasked* (Weeping Willow), *Waters Deep* (Split Rock) and journals in Australia, China, England, Japan, India, Ireland, Israel and Portugal.



Covered Dream: Jackson, New Hampshire by Sarah Gish



Editor's Welcome

*I'll take your part, oh, when darkness comes
And pain is all around
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down¹*

“Bridge Over Troubled Water” was, according to Dorian Lynskey, “a song written when the brightest promises of the 1960’s were turning to ash. . . .”² When *Aji* staff settled on a bridge theme for this issue, we had no idea that 2020 would become a year of incredible pain for so many in our nation and around the globe. Now, it seems important to remember that there have been other dark times, some much darker than these, and that artists and writers have often painted, photographed, or written their way through, offering others a “bridge” to remembrance, to understanding, to dialogue, and to peace in the face of catastrophic uncertainty.

Reviewing final selections for this issue, I noticed much of the work speaks from alternative perspectives and experiences, echoing the misunderstanding and even the violence prevalent in today’s headlines. From domestic abuse to mass shootings to gender discrimination, through the eyes of children and the grieving, this issue speaks of the needless harm so many have endured. But it also celebrates the resilience of the human spirit and our genuine desire to build not only durable, beautiful bridges over raging rivers (see the feature with Jerome O’Connor for inspiration there) but also to bridge the gaps in knowledge and understanding so crucial to ensuring peace and justice for all.

Mitchell Grabois, Serafina Bersonsage, and so many others in this issue prove it is possible to express one’s truth, even to satirize and to vent anger and frustration in a way that is potentially constructive, challenging readers to reflect on some commonly held assumptions that inhibit and even oppress others. Susan Narayan’s essay describes a mother’s attempt to bridge the ocean between herself and a young adult child all the while discovering new purpose in her own life. Kevin Keating’s short story gives us a private school teacher who reconnects with dreams of becoming a novelist after a hectic field trip with a vindictive student and a few drinks with a fully-costumed Camelot’s Court bartender.

William Carlos Williams said it best and is thus oft quoted: “It is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die every day/ for lack/ of what is found there.”³ Can art and literature actually bridge anger, confusion, hatred and despair? That’s a pretty tall order, I admit.

Editor's Welcome

But world history proves musicians, artists, photographers, and writers certainly do play an essential role in awakening human consciousness and imagination toward a more just, a more beautiful way of living.

Thanks to every contributor and especially to *Aji's* amazing staff, each of whom devoted countless hours of time to bring this exceptional issue to readers. During this chaotic year, you have indeed been a bridge to my own confidence in humanity and to my own sense of well-being. It is my sincerest hope that these pages will be the same for you.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Erin O'Neill Armendarez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Erin O'Neill Armendarez

Editor-in-Chief

¹ From "Bridge Over Troubled Water, Paul Simon, 1970

² Lynskey, D. (2020, 24 Jan.) The forgotten political roots of Bridge Over Troubled Water. BBC Culture. Retrieved Jul. 17 2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200122-the-forgotten-political-roots-of-bridge-over-troubled-water>

³ From "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," 1962, retrieved from <https://poets.org/poem/asphodel-greeny-flower-excerpt>



TO BUILD A BRIDGE

An Interview with Jerome O'Connor

Arthur Ravenel Jr cable-stayed bridge over the Cooper River Charleston, SC

Aji editor, Erin O'Neill Armendarez, interviewed expert bridge engineer, Jerome O'Connor so our readers could learn all about bridges in this issue. Jerome shows an eye for beauty with his photography, proving that engineers can be creative in both how they approach technical problems, as well as how they see the world with an artful eye. Included with this interview are some simply stunning images of bridges he's visited, some strong and sturdy, others shortly after collapse. All images in this story are courtesy of Jerome. We hope you'll enjoy his unique and seasoned perspective on bridges as much as we do.

Erin O'Neill Armendarez (EOA): Please share with us a bit of background information.

Jerome O'Connor (JO): My career consisted of two primary blocks of time:

- 1) 20 years with New York State Department of Transportation, where as a Bridge Management Engineer I was responsible for the safety of all existing bridges in our region (the Southern Tier of NYS).
- 2) 15 years with the University at Buffalo, where I was Senior Program Manager for Transportation Research, which was a federally funded program to improve the performance of bridges during earthquakes. This role evolved into leadership of the Institute of Bridge Engineering, which had a broader goal. We fostered collaboration among university professors who conduct cutting edge research, practicing engineers who applied the knowledge in real life, and the next generation of bridge engineers, students who ask fresh, insightful questions which also help to advance the state of the practice.

EOA: How and when did you first discover your interest in bridges?

JO: To be honest, I fell into it. I was in Brazil as part of a Rotary Group Study Exchange when I saw on TV news that a major interstate bridge had collapsed back home in the US. People there were shocked that this could happen in New York, the “Empire State”. That event changed things. To reduce the risk of future tragedies like the Schoharie Bridge collapse, legislators created jobs dedicated to bridge safety. My job of Bridge Management Engineer was one of them.

EOA: In your opinion, what are the essential features of a well-designed bridge?

JO: Although bridge users don’t think about them much, there are really too many features of a well-designed bridge to try to name. People may notice the beauty of a signature bridge, but I doubt they consider that a large part of the bridge (and cost) is underground. The foundation not only supports the weight of cars and trucks, but also its own weight, which consists of huge amounts of steel and concrete. Besides those “live” loads and “dead” loads, bridges need to be designed to resist rigorous shaking from wind or earthquakes that can occur. The last thing someone wants is a disaster. Not only can people die, a bridge failure severs a lifeline that is essential to the public for economic and social reasons. There is also a whole science dedicated to protecting bridge foundations from floods that can undermine these foundations.

Aside from the above, a bridge design team needs to be conscious of the communities being connected. They strive for a “context-sensitive design” that enhances the area while minimizing negative environmental impacts. For instance, it wasn’t long ago that some bridges were designed exclusively for motorized vehicles. Now, it is almost expected that a bridge needs to



Bridge damage from Hurricane Katrina, September 2005



A man with his fishing boat after Katrina



A man stunned by Katrina after he rode out the storm in a fishing boat

be wide enough to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists. Unique features like observation decks are now incorporated into new bridges. Since bridges are built to last 75-100 years; bridge engineers need to anticipate future needs as well.

EOA: You've taken photos of many bridges over the years, including bridges damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Was that kind of damage predictable?

JO: Katrina's worst damage came from tidal surges, the likes of which had only been seen in other parts of the world during a tsunami. Climate change is likely the reason for seawater coming ashore sixteen feet higher than had been recorded before. Bridge designers can't predict what will happen in the future. Fifty years ago, when those bridges were being built, no one would have anticipated that the water would get that high.

EOA: Given a probable increase in future flooding in New Orleans and in other cities, both coastal and inland, can bridges be built or modified to sustain the inevitable 500 year deluges we've been experiencing?

JO: The trouble with building a bridge to handle inundation can be visualized by looking at photos of New Orleans after the floodwalls broke. Neighborhoods were flooded even though bridges in the area



Bridge failure in Kenya, 2017

were “high and dry”. Eventually a bridge has to touch down on the ground where people live and work. If those areas are under water, it does not serve any purpose to have a bridge.

A bridge cannot function as a bridge if both ends of the bridge are underwater. It seems superfluous to say but the definition of a bridge is to connect two areas of refuge (i.e. dry land). One can say, just build a longer bridge, but in order for it to be useful, it eventually needs to come down to earth. Functionality and economics both come into play when trying to defy mother nature.

EOA: How do you partner with engineers in other parts of the world to assist in solving structural weaknesses or failure in bridges?

JO: Like any profession, bridge engineers and those in specialties within the field share ideas by writing professional journal articles, convening at conferences, collaborating on projects, learning from failures, etc. At the University of Buffalo, we hosted international meetings and workshops with counterparts from various states and countries. In 2016, I went to Ecuador after bridges were tested by a strong earthquake, the kind that we don’t typically get in the US. Observing how our designs perform is an opportunity to validate the results of laboratory experiments. We can always learn more.

EOA: Please give us an example of how the failure of a particular bridge impacted a community and the surrounding environment.

JO: First, the catastrophic collapse of any bridge leaves us feeling vulnerable; we grieve the dead but also think “it could have been us”. A perfect example is the 2007 failure of the I-34W truss bridge in Minneapolis. It physically came down, but it also put a dent in our nation’s psyche; it made us doubt the safety of our infrastructure. All at once, traffic on this major transportation link stopped. That meant an immediate change to people’s commuting habits, long-haul trucking, and local commerce. No one could tell how long it would last. It was cleaned up and rebuilt in a year but that kind of speed is not typical. Normally, a major project like that would take 13 years to go through the environmental review and design process. This was completed in a year under the declaration of emergency. I can’t help but wonder if funds flowed and procedural steps were slashed to erase the memory asap and patch up our psyche.

EOA: What do you find noteworthy about the River Trail Pedestrian Bridge in Redding, California?

JO: The “stress ribbon” design has a certain beauty in its simplicity. It’s ingenious in that it’s draped between the concrete piers like a rope, instead of being stiff and flat like a beam. It’s an efficient use of materials and works well on trails like this.

EOA: And the Gothic Bridge in Central Park?

JO: This bridge obviously has a timeless beauty, but is also interesting because of what we do not see. It is made of cast iron, a material which is not used anymore because modern steels are seen as much more superior. I think of this bridge as art and its art defies its technical obsolescence.

EOA: And the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge in Charleston, South Carolina?

JO: Cable-stayed bridges like this have become the bread and butter of medium-to-long span bridges. They are incredibly good at what they do and look graceful in the process.



A stress-ribbon trail bridge in Redding, CA



Cast iron bridge in Central Park, NYC

EOA: What innovations are in the works for bridges in terms of materials and/or structural design?

JO: The emergence of advanced materials and computer analysis tools is making new things possible in the field of bridge design. Not only in terms of strength but also in terms of durability, or the ability to last a long time while being resilient to the effects of extreme forces and environmental conditions. Although Ultra-High Performance concrete (UHPC) and new types of stainless steel are exciting, the one that I see great promise in is carbon or glass fiber-reinforced polymer (FRP) composite materials. They are used for their strength and light weight in the newest jets and watercraft, but they are especially useful for bridges because the material does not rust, the curse of both steel and concrete. FRP can replace steel rebars in concrete to make it last longer. Sheets of FRP can even be applied to the outside of concrete to add strength and increase the safety factor. In New York and Puerto Rico, an entire bridge superstructure was built with FRP. These will serve for a long time, just like that composite in your tennis racquet (wink wink).

EOA: When it comes to bridges, what keeps you up at night?

JO: I sleep well at night. Bridge inspectors are working year-round to keep us all safe and are trained to close a bridge before it becomes unsafe. That said, unforeseen disasters can happen so Congress needs to put more money into maintaining our infrastructure so we can rest assured that our families are safe. Many in-service bridges were never intended to last over 50 years but are still in use. Eventually, things rust or wear out and need to be replaced. China seems to realize that good infrastructure is needed to be considered a first world economy; why don't we?

EOA: How do engineers create bridge designs that enhance the landscapes they occupy?

JO: Two ways: They can try to get a bridge to blend in so it gets lost in the natural surroundings or they can highlight its magnificence as a work of art as a technological wonder.

EOA: In your opinion, what makes a bridge an object of beauty, a work of art?

JO: It is art if it enhances the surroundings and is a pleasure to look at. If it causes you to gaze in wonder, we've done a good job.

EOA: Of all the bridges in the world, which is your favorite? Why?

JO: It's hard to argue with iconic bridges like the Golden Gate or Brooklyn Bridge. I'd pick the Brooklyn Bridge because it was built by Roebling men and women⁴ of great vision and fortitude in a time when the nation was demonstrating its uninhibited ambition and confidence to the world.

I'd also comment that my favorites are the many being built by Bridging the Gap Africa to help people who live in a walking world to give them the ability to get food, go to school and get healthcare.

⁴ John Roebling designed the Brooklyn Bridge. His eldest son Washington and wife Emily oversaw completion of the bridge after Roebling's death.

GUILTY PLEASURES:

THE NO HOLDS BARRED, IN YOUR FACE APOLOGETICS OF MITCHELL GRABOIS AND SERAFINA BERSONSAGE

After the summer of covid-19 and social upheaval, you might be wondering: Can we all just get along? The obvious answer seems to be no, and the poetry books of Mitchell Grabois and Serafina Bersonsage point to some of the reasons why. It's clear that neither is interested in relentless niceness, the ubiquitous standard of good taste that often smothers honest conversation. Instead, Grabois and Bersonsage offer gloves-off honesty as they scrape the veneer from a status quo that punishes those who live outside implied conventions. According to the experts, if you scrape correctly, veneer should come off in one nice piece. If that doesn't work—and apparently it sometimes doesn't—it's okay to use a heat gun, a hammer, just go with your gut. Get it gone. Veneer is always covering something. If you really want to get it out of the way to discover what's underneath, you might have to dispense with plan A and go with whatever works. And when Plan A falls apart, the frustration, ineptitude and downright savagery that can emerge can be, what else can I say, funny in a deeply disturbing way, and these two are not apologizing. Not sorry. If you're a bit uncomfortable with their narrators' predicaments, it's all on you.

Brief Review of Mitchell Grabois' *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face*

(Pskī's Porch, 2019)

Virtually all of the poems in Mitchell Grabois' *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face* were previously published in small magazines. Robin Ouzman Hislop, editor of *Poetry Life & Times*, characterized Grabois' poems as "lucidly readable. . . delivered in a paced, snappy, even raunchy style, a mix of compassion with often hilarious black humor." To fully appreciate Grabois, one must tear off a layer or two of political correctness. The author's main quibble appears to be with the way we cling to our assumptions on how things should be all the while ignoring the obvious facts of how things are. Grabois playfully and sometimes despairingly forces readers to contemplate the things we'd rather not think about: Are wind farms an energy solution, or just another serious threat to avian survival? Are any of us actually sane, or "good"? Most of Grabois' narrators could use some therapy. One has an infatuation with female dentists, while another, a farmer, brings pesticides in his suitcase for his stay in the "nuthouse." Still another describes Latilda, a cult member obsessed with wafting the smoke of her father's cremated remains toward awaiting archangels. If you cannot take a joke, *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face* is not for you. But if you'd rather laugh than cry, you'll definitely come away

from this book with less neurosis and more empathy for the anything-but-ordinary people searching for God, love, whatever, in this book. The harder they try, the more ridiculous they seem. Is this us? Read the book. Watch the news. You decide.

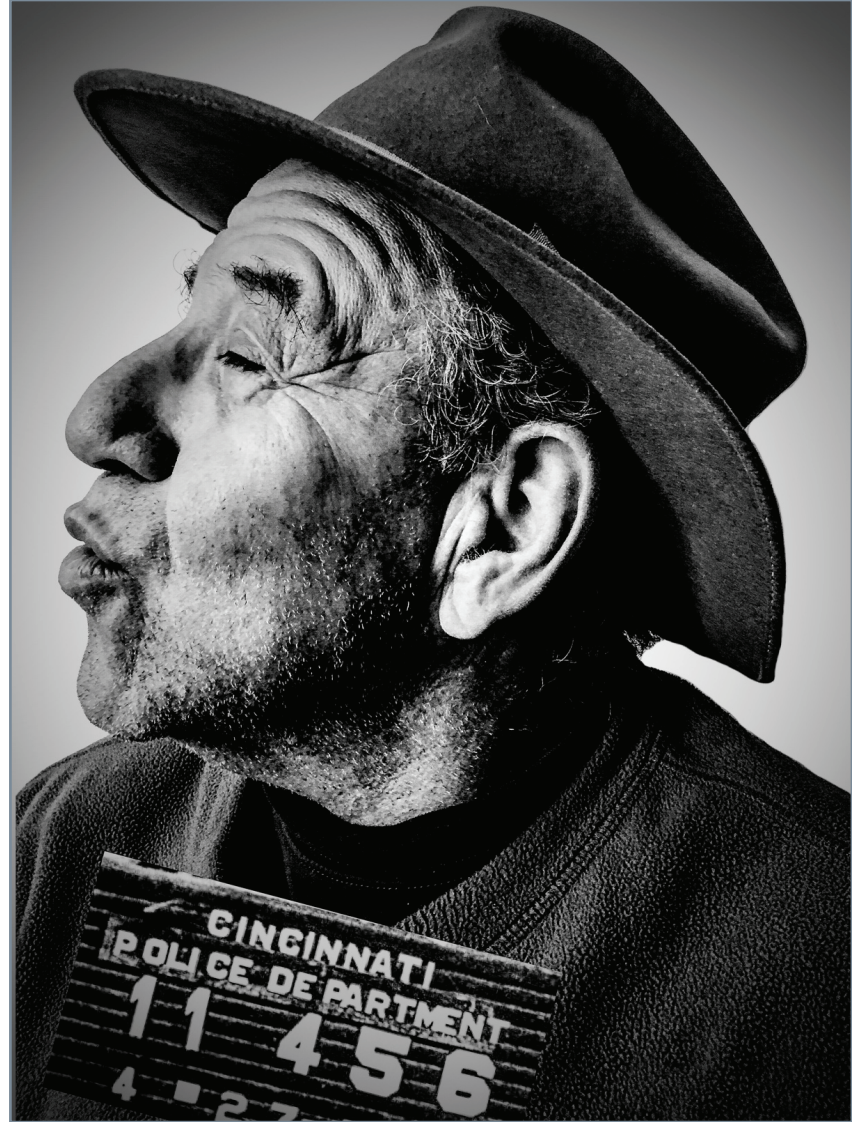
An Interview with Mitchell Grabois

Erin O'Neill Armendarez (EOA): Please share some background information with our readers.

Mitchell Grabois (MG): The term “background” is limitless. Increasingly, I think of myself in terms of the 14-billion-year history of the Universe. When I walk around the lake and witness the sunrise filtering through the trees, when I work in my garden, when I help raise my young granddaughters and see them unfold, almost as if in time-lapse photography, I am often filled with appreciation and awe for the unimaginable timeline and the processes of physical development that led to the world existing exactly as it is, with the mountains and seas and all the plants and animals, and that humans evolved to be capable of appreciating every bit of it. Maybe there’s nothing more exalted in my experience than watching leaves being illuminated by the sun, or following the rotation of the blooms in my garden, daffodils to irises to day lilies and spirea, and on. But I also feel exhilarated when I look at the imperfect line of Quikrete Grey Concrete Crack Filler I laid down this week to keep water from percolating down through the walkway directly in front of my house and unsettling the foundation. All that means more to me than literature, written by someone else or by myself. It is unmediated experience, requiring consciousness but not requiring mind or language.

To use a baseball term, I know that this an elaborate wind-up for the discussion of poetry and being a poet, but in a literary world filled with clamoring narcissists, perhaps we could use a little more of this sort of reflection.

Moving much closer to the present, my people were Jews, which means that my history includes a couple thousand years of persecution. My paternal grandmother was born in Barr, Russia, the site of the first pogrom (anti-Jewish riot). My grandfather was born in Kishenev, Moldova, the site of the largest pogrom in Europe up to that time (1903). His father, my great-grandfather Saul, was a farmer whose land had been taken by Russian decree in 1891. He moved to Kishenev and became a wagon maker. Luckily, his partner was a Christian, who hid Saul and his family in his cellar during the pogrom. The brutality of that event made news around the world, and there was much condemnation of it in many countries, including the U.S.



Artwork courtesy Mitchell Grabois

In response to that condemnation, the African-American community protested that African-Americans had been, and were still being, subjected to worse injustices. It was eighteen years later that the infamous Greenwood Massacre, a violent anti-Black riot that destroyed the “Black Wall Street,” took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, an event that has received increased attention in the wake of the public execution of George Floyd. As I observed in one of my flash fictions, “Doberman Empire” (written some years ago): The ghosts of the brutal past animate the present as the ghosts of our brutal present animate what-comes-next.

Fortunately, the eddies of European persecution caused my grandparents to flee to the U.S. in advance of the Holocaust. Of my grandfather’s siblings, only one of eight survived. Even for those who did not directly experience it, the Holocaust continues to influence modern Jews (as slavery and ongoing racism influence modern African-Americans), in ways both subterranean and closer to the surface. It is an influence on my poetry, even when it is nowhere in sight.

EOA: How and when did you discover your interest in poetry?

MG: I started working on my elementary school magazine when I was in the fourth grade. By the time I was thirteen, I considered myself a serious poet. I’m now 67, so I’ve been involved in this enterprise for over half a century. As I recall, even despite Wallace Stevens being an insurance executive and William Carlos Williams being a physician, the prevailing models for poets (and writers in general) in my youth were quite different than what they are today—the poet was a sort of Thoreauvian character—a loner finding his own way. That was consistent with my personality— brooding and introverted.

EOA: Which poets, contemporary or classic, do you most appreciate and why?

MG: I’ve actually read far more fiction than I have poetry, and I’ve written nine novels. The first was in my mid-twenties. I acquired agency representation but the agent failed to get me a contract with a publishing company. The comments of the editors to whom she submitted all ran along the same lines: too literary, too strange, too feminist. In my fifties, I wrote six novels, and also got an agent (for five of them) but, though he was able to get contracts for some of his clients, he failed to get one for me. He held the bizarre belief that his inability to get me a publisher was proof of how good my work was.

I’m still trying to get an agent for my last novel. I’ve recently reorganized, retitled and repackaged it, so I remain hopeful. However, my relationship to publishing my novels is probably unlike that of most writers. I feel like an old Brooklyn shopkeeper with shelves full of dusty inventory that he’d like to unload.

But to answer the question: some poets I’ve appreciated have included John Berryman, Wallace Stevens, James Wright, William Carlos Williams, Diane di Prima, Gary Snyder and other beats, Charles Bukowski (whose poetry I find more exemplary than his prose), Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, Tony Hoagland and Zen Master Ryokan, “the great fool.”

EOA: How has your life experience shaped your writing? Is there a strong correlation, or do you prefer to write from observation or imagination?

MG: Many people have had far more difficult lives than mine. However, without going into detail, my childhood was psychologically challenging. In fact, at age 17, approaching high school graduation, I felt dead. I wasn’t suicidal—I felt that I was already, literally dead. It was... disconcerting. It took me many years

to surmount that. I believe that the impetus for many poets to write is to try to make sense of emotional realities that they experience that cannot easily be understood and explained. That was certainly true for me. Over the years, as we all do, I developed my own blend of life. Sensitivity, cheerfulness, suffering, compassion and black humor are elements of that blend, and it comes out in my writing in ways that can't be programmed or predicted.

EOA: How has your craft evolved over time? Have peers or mentors assisted in honing your process?

MG: To my benefit or my detriment, or both, I've been largely isolated and self-contained as a writer, and "self-taught." I have no English or Creative Writing degree. In college I took a couple of writing courses. One of the instructors harped on "writing organically," which made sense. The other instructor was Jim Dodge, the novelist and poet and friend of Gary Snyder. After reading many of my poems, he told me, "Despite Gary Snyder, English is not an idiographic language."

I don't know if I can speak to how my craft has evolved over time. I've never been good at identifying what writers have influenced my work and that sort of thing. I guess that's because I'm neither a literary person, an intellectual or an academician. I don't believe that you have to be those things to be a good writer. Certainly, you don't have to be those things to enjoy your writing process and what you've written. After writing a lot of long fiction, during the last ten years I've focused on poetry and flash fiction, and lately I've gone back and started compiling a lot of it into book form. I've cringed at some of the work before deleting it. However, on rereading, most of the work feels fresh and: Hey, this is good shit. I believe that, ultimately, that's the prize that you get from being a writer—the understanding that you've engaged in a creative process, which is valuable, perhaps even sacred, in its own right and, rereading your work, you have a feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment.

EOA: How did you decide upon a publisher for *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face*?

MG: Lacking connections, and acting according to my long-held principle that I would never pay submission or contest fees, I simply found a list of poetry publishers and sent out the manuscript. Subsequently, Pski's Porch Publishing, a small press in upstate NY, accepted and published it.

EOA: Are you satisfied with your publishing experiences thus far?

MG: Despite my natural aversion to marketing, I marketed *THE ARREST OF MR. KISSY FACE* to the best of my ability, and there were some sales. The publisher did little marketing. Poets should know that there is a very small market for poetry (though I understand that there's a stronger one in Britain). If you can manipulate social media in innovative ways, you have a better chance of some success. But any writer nowadays, poet or otherwise, who nurtures the old dream of becoming "rich and famous" through his or her writing is some kind of moron. The market for literary work in general has significantly shrunk. I read an interview with John Irving not long ago in which he stated that if he were starting out now, he would never get published.

EOA: What advice would you give to other poets contemplating publication of a first collection?

MG: I was excited to have a bona fide publisher publish my poetry, but really, what does that matter? It means that one other person (or maybe a committee) liked my work well enough to put it on paper. Is that

important? I think that in the future I will simply self-publish my work, as I did with one of my novels, *TWO-HEADED DOG*. (By the way, both that book and *THE ARREST OF MR. KISSY FACE* are available for purchase through my website, wordsbymitch.com, in which you can also find many of my poems and flash fictions which you can enjoy free-of-charge.) Self-publishing short-circuits the waste of time and the hassles of trying to find a publisher and then dealing with the publisher. Considering only my poetry and short fiction, I probably have ten books worth of work. It tickles me to imagine a great-grandchild or great-great grandchild or a descendent even further in the future, reading some of my work and thinking: My ancestor, Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois, was an interesting dude.

Making this decision puts more responsibility on me—if the only decisions about which poems will appear in my books are my own, and if I’m committed to quality, then my decisions better be well-considered and sharp. Also, let’s not forget the other meaning of “submission.” Why bow your head and accept your fate as a subordinate when you can embrace freedom and take your place as a fully self-determining being?

At this moment, I’m on, maybe, my sixteenth revision (typical for me) of these responses to the *Aji* editor’s interview questions. I revise until I am fully satisfied with a piece. I revise even after a piece is published. And that’s certainly something that any writer should know—as many, many writers have said previously: Writing is Revision.

EOA: What do you hope readers will gain from reading your book?

MG: I’ve never really thought about my writing in that way. I’ve never written with a reader in mind. I guess I hope that some of it might give readers pause, might give them a deeper sense of humanity, might amuse them.

EOA: What advice do you have for other poets when it comes to pursuing a desire to write and publish poetry, to find community and an audience for their work?

MG: Just do it?

If they’re young, they might consider acquiring academic degrees, like the MFA. There’s been a lot of criticism of the MFA, but human beings operate in clubs, through networking, so acquiring degrees, with all the consequent contacts, could be helpful. Getting published requires a combination of talent, hard work, and luck, and luck usually comes through association with other people.

Two Poems from *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face*

The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face

I kissed the woman who slices lunch meat
at King Sooper’s
She shoved smoked turkey at me
leaned away
and cried: Next!

I kissed my doctor
I'd been wanting to do it
since she first told me to stick out my tongue
and complemented me on its smoothness
and the elegance of my taste buds
I kissed her and she asked
On a scale of one to ten, how have you been feeling this week?
I kissed her again
Have you been seeing or hearing things that aren't really there?
I kissed her a third time
Have you been feeling suicidal or homicidal?
I kissed her more deeply
really sent my tongue to a remote locale
Do you have access to weapons?

I said:
How can you ask me that
after everything we've been through?
Anyway, this is America

She called Security
Security knew me
from the days when I was a high school football star
and an amateur boxer and cage fighter
who went by the moniker Destructo
They were afraid of me
called the cops
warned them: Be sure to bring your stun guns
your billy clubs
and chemical weapons

The first cop who entered the room—
I kissed her
She yelled FREEZE!
Hands where I can see them!
Get down on your knees!

I happily complied

Jet Fuel

Sometimes I wish I were still out
on the back porch, drinking jet fuel
with the boys
--Tony Hoagland

Gasoline smells like gin
sweet and clear
I've loved that smell
since junior high
when me and Pollo Murillo and Hector Delgadillo
huffed it from the jerry can
in Pollo's dim garage

Isn't "jerry can" an incandescent phrase
transcending its simple language?

Delgadillo said I was Mexican
I said, I'm a Jew

Delgadillo said: You may be a Jew
in your shaved-off prick
but you are Mexican in the soul
unpredictable, combustible

Then he passed me the jerry can
no worries about bogarting that
there was plenty for all

Murillo ran off a mountain road
Delgadillo went to prison
and got shanked by the Aryan Brotherhood
Fuck them

I'm Mexican
and will wait for my chance for revenge

Brief Review of Serafina Bersonsage's A Witch's Education

(EMP, 2019)

Serafina Bersonsage's *A Witch's Education* delights in smashing inane, restrictive social norms, particularly those that punish women for following their natural inclinations, one of which is to use their brains. Her ironies, often understated, are downright wicked. Imagine a high school girl troubled by dreams of a hot night with "Dubya," the most disturbing part of which turns out to be her "certain affection" for him. Many of these poems, which move from childhood home to graduate school and finally into the "woods," portray the unfair, oppressive rules applied toward female sexuality. Previous societies have often labeled women who question or ignore these rules as witches, shunning or even executing them. Bersonsage's point? A contemporary American woman's going to need a few spells to thrive in this world, and when she is found out, the punishments are still apt to be quite harsh. Like Grabois, Bersonsage has no fear of offending the obtuse keepers of the status quo. True to the assignation "witch," her narrators conjure images of Republicans who shouldn't be eaten ("they can hardly be organic") and psych wards where desperate patients wonder how to get a room ("a full psychotic break," the narrator induces). Depending upon your worldview, these poems will either horrify you, or they will bring you a distinct, guilty pleasure. As for me, I stand with the witches. If you are world weary, as an alternative to banging your head against the wall, I prescribe just a few of Bersonsage's pages. Trust me—you'll feel better.

An Interview with Serafina Bersonsage

EOA: Please share a bit of background information about yourself.

Serafina Bersonsage (SB): I'm a Michigan-based writer with a penchant for poetry, fantasy, and more or less unpublishable ephemera: fictional lexicons, made-up annals, detailed descriptions of places that don't technically exist. At six, I caused a small panic in my first grade class by convincing half of the students that I was a vampire. My mother introduced me to T.S. Eliot, socialism, and Bloody Marys; the precise order is hazy.

Random facts: I lived in Philadelphia for a year; I read tarot on a regular basis; I married a man who is at least as much a bibliophile as I am; I enjoy studying languages and once asked for a Latin textbook for Christmas, but was utterly trounced by Old Irish grammar. I learned to shoot tequila in my fourth year of grad school, and I once stayed awake for so long during finals that one of my professors thought that I was possessed because of all the burst blood vessels in my eyes. I can't do math, play a musical instrument, or play sports without risking serious injury to myself and others. In high school, I refused to date anyone without a half-decent plan for world domination.

EOA: When did you start to write poetry? What was your inspiration?

SB: I started to write poetry in high school, a couple of years after I began writing fiction, mostly because I found it easier to work on poems than novels while pretending to pay attention in class. I can't really



Artwork courtesy Serafina Bersonsage

speak to the inspiration behind my earliest poetry, because I tend to avoid rereading it at all costs. I seem to recall that some of it was vaguely Arthurian; I was obsessed with Merlin and Viviane. This was a time when I listened to a lot of Loreena McKennitt. I aspired to be an elf.

EOA: How did you hone your craft? Did you take classes or attend workshops? Did you have mentors?

SB: My formal training is in criticism—I did a PhD in English at the University of Rochester, where I wrote my dissertation on microcosms in seventeenth-century British literature. This involved reading a huge amount of rather sycophantic country house poems and trying to make sense of the stage directions for masques—Ben Jonson could be very catty about special effects!—and at one point I developed a small crush on Margaret Cavendish and crashed a stationary bike. And I think that all of this was very beneficial for my writing, because it allowed me to live in another world for several years, and also helped me to get over any lingering preoccupation with

the notion of voice. For the first two years, I didn't write any poetry or fiction at all, and, after that, I worked on my dissertation, and wrote poetry and fiction to please myself.

Eventually, I began to share my work, and the feedback that I've received from others has absolutely had an impact on how I approach certain things. I can tell that a piece of advice has really struck a chord when I find myself applying it to other projects—not even necessarily in the same genre. My doctoral advisor never saw my fiction, but some of her comments on my academic writing still come back to me when I'm revising a novel. Remarks on a novel manuscript by my agent (the brilliant Connor Goldsmith) have led me to poems, and various editors' comments on poems have sometimes informed my fiction. My husband reads everything that I write. He's an insightful and ruthless reader—a far better critic than I ever was, when I aspired to such things.

I tend to get a lot out of other people's comments; nonetheless, I remain mildly allergic to workshops. (I can see how many writers find them helpful; I just tend to avoid formal groups on principle.) I did take one undergraduate writing class, at the University of Michigan-Flint—but, as I was also taking the GRE that semester, I'm afraid that I wasn't terribly engaged. The most useful advice that I can recall was to aim for three hundred words a day—a strategy that has its limitations, of course, but one that served me well when I was just getting back into fiction, a few years after that.

EOA: A Witch's Education seems to be, at least in part, a response to cultural assumptions about gender and women who refuse to conform to them. What do you hope readers will take away from this “wicked” little book?

SB: It depends entirely on who those readers are. If they've been marginalized in some way, if they've been slut-shamed or judged for failing to meet cultural expectations or otherwise pushed into the woods,

then I would hope that this book gives them a sense of being somewhat less alone in that, assuming that it resonates with any part of their experience. If they've been privileged enough to avoid such things, then I would hope that it broadens their perspective a bit. And, if they're Trump supporters, then I would hope that it gives them a paper cut. (But I very much doubt that anyone from the third category will read my book.)

EOA: Along with irony and some delightfully sharp edges, your poems also imply some understated humor. Does that humor seem helpful in dealing with some of the especially difficult topics treated in the book?

SB: I think that the tendency to turn to humor when confronting difficult topics is a habit that I picked up from my father, who has been known to improvise some truly top-quality comedic monologues in hospital rooms. I also suspect that a certain kind of dark humor tends to be more prevalent in Michigan, or at least in the parts of Michigan where my parents and I grew up (Detroit, in their case; the suburbs of Flint, in mine). When things go badly enough for long enough, you start to turn to the mordant, the wry, the sardonic. There's a protective quality to it, certainly, but it's also a way of reaching outward—connecting with others by finding a way to make light of something that's objectively not great. (I recently learned the etymology of the word “sardonic,” by the way. It involves poison and laughter and quite possibly senicide, and is definitely something that I would encourage your readers to look up.)

EOA: The copyright page in *A Witch's Education* pokes fun at the standard copyright credits. What was your process for selecting EMP as the publisher for your book?

SB: I believe that the copyright page in question, or a version of it, is one that EMP uses in all of their books. I was pleased to include it in *A Witch's Education*, because I think that it's admirably honest. Very, very few people are making (significant) money in this business. Obviously, I do think that artists should receive credit for their work, and I support the enforcement of copyright laws insofar as those laws allow artists to make a living. But I also think that it's good to push back against the proprietary urge when feasible.

I submitted the manuscript of *A Witch's Education* to relatively few publishers. I understand why so many small presses have made contests such a central part of their selection process, but it's deeply frustrating, because a \$28 contest fee isn't a trivial expense for many people, and multiple contest fees can be prohibitively expensive for those of us who prefer to live by Erasmus's words. (“When I get a little money I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes.”) So it was a short list, and EMP was on it because I felt that the press's unapologetically anti-establishment ethos would be a good fit for my project. Happily, my publisher agreed.

EOA: What are you writing now?

SB: I'm writing poetry on a fairly regular basis, and I'm also working on a draft of a fantasy novel, which is about four-fifths complete. The latter project tends to involve the generation of large amounts of worldbuilding material—some of it, very sketchy and utilitarian; other parts, less so. I feel tremendously fortunate to be able to spend so much time in another world, especially given the state of this one.

I'm writing this in July, when the pandemic seems to be on the wane (at least for the moment) in Michigan, but spiraling out of control in many other parts of the country. Writing during the pandemic has been an interesting experience. When my husband and I rented our current apartment, we had never expected

that we would both end up working from home— He spends a good part of the day on the phone, so noise-canceling headphones were a necessary investment! Tuning out the news proved to be rather more challenging, and I've had to become considerably more disciplined about when, and how often, I check the latest numbers. It's been stressful, but I feel grateful to be able to keep writing during these times.

EOA: Who are you reading these days?

SB: I'm currently reading Anne Carson, whose "Essay on What I Think About Most" I particularly like. I've also managed to find my way back to Donne, as I do at least a few times a year. As far as fiction goes, I'm reading Anita Desai's *The Artist of Disappearance*, and I've just started *The Lord of the Rings* in Spanish. (My Spanish comprehension is better than it was, but I'm still in the process of building up my confidence by reading books that I've already read in English.) Assorted nonfiction from the stalagmites that appear on most unused surfaces in my apartment: Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*; John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; and *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*, by Robert M. Sapolsky, whose lectures on YouTube are absolutely fascinating. (I don't think that I've enjoyed science class so much since baking soda volcanoes passed as cutting-edge research.)

EOA: What advice do you have for aspiring poets?

SB: Take a break if you need it! I think that it's difficult to overstate the importance of fallow time, perhaps especially where poetry is concerned. Sometimes it's best to let things sit—a poem or a project, certainly, and, at times, it can be beneficial to take a break from writing (poetry, fiction, anything at all), in order to find your way back to it. But that advice runs counter to the narrative of perpetual optimization that seems to dominate more and more of our waking hours. It feels nice to have goals, and sometimes it can be beneficial to aim for a poem a day (50K words in a month, etc.), particularly if you're struggling to cultivate a consistent writing practice. But it can also be a fine way to produce an impressive amount of mediocre poems.

On a related note, I think that many poets, especially newer poets, tend to underestimate the amount of time that they should allow a batch of poems to rest before they try submitting them to literary magazines (or posting them on social media, if that's their inclination). Clearly, for some writers, it's the opposite problem, and they'll accumulate years, or decades, of backlog before they submit anything at all. But I think that premature submission is much more damaging, because it can be tempting to allow external feedback (whether positive or negative) to drown out your own critical voice, and it's harder to be objective about something that you wrote just last month. I'm fairly certain that at least 80% of the hurt feelings generated by rejection could be avoided by delaying submission for an extra few months (longer, if necessary).

I also think that it's quite important for poets (and all writers) to study languages other than their own, and to try to learn something about the history of their preferred language(s). Obviously, it's exciting to read works in the original, but the point is also to get a better sense of the limitations of your own language. Where does English lack nuance where Spanish conveys it, and how might a poet writing in English try to get around that? Studying the history of a language might also shed some light on that, and can be especially useful in awakening your sensitivity to dead metaphors—a necessary sensitivity, whether you prefer to engage in necromancy or avoid corpses altogether.

Two Poems from *A Witch's Education*

Finishing School

We fashioned ourselves
into slightly damaged trophy wives —
not the blonde tanned televised
variety, but the sort you see
in dim cafés, sporting crow's feet
and small Latin and less Greek, the sort
a wealthy Democrat might seek
to adorn his house in Brooklyn
to play at being bohemian.
We made ourselves such lovely dolls.
Her degree is terminal
like her prospects.
Her dissertation is bound in a little black dress.
It sits on the shelf and oversees
dinner parties and gathers dust
becoming an amusing anecdote, like mine
like me.
We guard our theses, share identities
all taking up yoga, vegan cooking
all losing the same fifteen pounds.
We wear the same black tights to interviews,
becoming
each other's shadows on the pavement.
We wear the same dress to our weddings.
Five hundred years ago, just possibly
before the Dissolution of the Monasteries
we married the same man, had no mirrors.⁴⁹
We were each other's reflections then—
and, when
on the street, by accident, I look
at a woman looking critically
and just too closely, as if she knows
as if she means
to read my history, I see
shards of me in her eyes

The Misanthrope

Actually, I hate children.
Yes, even if they prefer the real fairy tales.
Yes, even if they are yours.
I cannot stand their voices
so loud and ugly, and no —
it isn't particularly funny
what they said.
A friend's fat baby I may like
on Facebook, where children are seen and not heard
silent, frozen — and, speaking of freezing
I will nod politely
at the mention of freezing my eggs
for I am one of those childless women
who claims to love children
but I am lying — and, speaking of lying
yes, you did look fat in that dress
and, yes, I fucked them
(both of them
in twenty-four hours
and did not shower
before I came to bed).
And have I mentioned that I hate dogs?
They fenced off the woods in my favorite park
the woods where a monster like me should live
not far from the little town,
bound in hate
to the people who let
their dogs run free and bark and shit
just like their waddling toddlers⁶⁴
and, passing, I will smile and wave
and say good morning,
and I will hope
that the tall pines crack and crush them,
that their children choke on breadcrumbs
that the apples are poison that fall from the trees.



MAKING FACES

an interview with
GORDON SKALLEBERG

Hope Steel 2, by Gordon Skalleberg (above)

Katie Redfield (KR): Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, where you are from and where you are working now?

Gordan Skalleberg (GS): I was born in Norway in 1960. My dad is Norwegian and my mom is German. At that time, Norway was not that welcoming for Germans, so we soon moved to the Stockholm area in Sweden. My dad is an entrepreneur and I soon started working for him during school breaks. After finishing school, I started working full time in the family business. I spent two years in Atlanta, Georgia, in the early '80s as a trainee and while there I met my future wife Andrea. We had three kids. I worked long days in the business, traveling a lot, trying to fulfill expectations and responsibilities. I gradually became more and more weary and almost subconsciously I was dreaming about doing something more artistic. A lot more can be said about this process, but in 2004 I resigned as president of the company and set out to become an artist.

KR: How did you get started in the arts?

GS: In my late teens my dad encouraged me to use his nice camera to develop my seeing and communication skills. I started taking more artistic photos and learned darkroom work. I really enjoyed it and found that I had a fairly good eye. While growing up we did not go to museums or galleries much, but my mom painted some and her grandfather had been a fairly well-known painter in Germany (who once painted a portrait of the Kaiser), so I guess there was some artistic influence anyway. When I decided to quit working in the family business, I wanted to do more art and I had to find my way.

KR: It looks like you spend time between the US and Sweden. Can you share if or how that travel has been impacted by current events?

GS: My wife, Andrea, came from the USA to Sweden and after the kids grew up and moved out, we needed a change and started looking for a place to spend some time here in the USA. We eventually found Santa Fe and immediately felt at home. I am a permanent resident, currently applying for naturalization, and we spend most of our time in the USA. We normally travel to Sweden in the early spring to be part



Svunna Tider Nr2



Svunna Tider Nr3



Svunna Tider Nr1

of a large studio tour and then we always spend the summers in Sweden. In the current pandemic, we have had to change these plans. We are staying in Santa Fe and hopefully we will be able to go back to Sweden in the not-too-distant future to see our children and my parents. Everything is so uncertain now.

KR: Your paintings often feature very classically posed people that give them an almost historical feel. Do you typically work from old or new photographs, from life, memory or a hybrid?

GS: I normally work from photos, more or less. I like to alter the photo images to add something that will create questions, inspire people to make up their own stories. I like to say that I am a storyteller without telling the story. I always look for old photos of people I do not know and when I find a photo that inspires my imagination I can go to work. I also use my own photos. I do not like to use photos of "famous" people or photos where the ownership rights can be an issue. When I paint landscapes I mostly make them up; maybe I will use a photo to just get a color or a cloud or some other detail right.

KR: How do you choose a subject for a piece?

GS: As I said above, the subject has to speak to me. It is hard to define what gets me inspired. Maybe I have had an idea for a long time and then I construct a piece with the help of one or several photos.

KR: It seems most of your work is on plywood. Can you tell us when/why you started working on wood and what has kept you coming back to it?

GS: When I began trying to find my way into the art world, I started almost from

scratch and I had to teach myself a lot of things. I remember studying paintings - how the background was painted, colors chosen, materials used. Once I visited an exhibition and saw large works by Swedish painter Rolf Hansson, who had painted on some kind of board. I went home and found a large plywood sheet in my shed and that is how it started. I soon found that I could paint on untreated plywood and let the grain be a random part of my work and from then on I was hooked. I gave a really nice, large roll of canvas to an artist friend.

KR: Many of your pieces seem to juxtapose landscape and portrait. Do you typically start with one or the other?

GS: From a painterly process point of view, I start with the landscape, the background. But before I start painting I have sketched the piece and have a good plan. I will do a lot of the sketching with Photoshop and InDesign. Then I will print it and maybe paint on it or draw in ideas and work from there.

KR: Your laser cut steel sculptures and the shadows they cast are sort of two pieces of art in one. What sparked the idea to start creating these? I read that you have some background in photography. Did that experience with light and shadow play into your design?

GS: When I worked in the family business I learned to do graphic design, photographed our machines for marketing purposes and learned to work with Photoshop. These tools have been fantastic in my work. The steel pieces came about in a process where one thing leads to another. I like to describe it as hiking - you come around a bend and you see a hill and get curious about how it looks beyond that hill. So you move on. At that hill you see something else and you keep moving on - and you will never know what it will lead to. I worked on a photo in Photoshop and applied some cutout filters; then, I took that image into InDesign and played with it and soon came up with the idea of doing a large steel cutout.

I made the first test with a full 8'x 4' plywood sheet; I created a mock-up with a jigsaw. I placed it outside my



Hope Steel

"I like to alter the photo images to add something that will create questions, inspire people to make up their own stories."

- Gordon Skalleberg



Her Shadow

studio and was blown away by how the landscape and the light interacted with the piece. Next I wanted to make the real steel piece, starting with some smaller pieces. I came home from the laser cutting factory with my new pieces, had a cup of coffee and played with ideas about how to use them. I drilled two holes at the top of one piece, applied some steel wire, hung it from the ceiling, adjusted a spotlight...BOOM! The shadow on the wall was a surprise that I had not planned. But if I had not constantly been on the move to experiment, I would never have found it. So was it just luck or a result of my process?

KR: How do you push yourself forward to find new creativity?

GS: I think I have partly answered this above. Even if I am not actively painting in the studio, I am almost always thinking about ideas and looking for new projects. I do not normally take huge leaps; I try to move ahead in small steps that are based on my core artistic activity. So, when I am working, I like to surprise myself with the thought, "I have never done it quite like this before." As I am not trained and educated as an artist, I very often have to start from what seems to be scratch. How do I paint skin color? I do not have a patented method, so I experiment...over and over.

KR: Experimenting with as many different formats and techniques as you do, I am guessing maybe you have encountered some failed attempts along the way. Can you tell us about an idea you had that did not work out the way you expected?

GS: Fear of failure is always there, but I think it is especially important to take that risk. Often when I start on a painting I feel like "this time it is going to suck." One nice thing about painting in oil is you can add layers and work on mistakes. This normally creates depth and character and sometimes I have to remind myself to move on and add a layer and keep pushing beyond the "mistakes." I am currently working on a relatively large painting that I was looking forward to working on, but I lost the "fun" and had to take a break. I will soon start on another layer and deep down I am sure it will eventually work out. I have tried to sketch landscapes to be used for steel laser cut pieces, but until now it has not worked out. Is that a failure or am I just not done yet?

KR: What would you consider to be one of your best successes as an artist and why?

GS: I think my first large laser cut piece is one of the best I have done. But in terms of success I am maybe most excited when children are intrigued by my art. I even had a blind man visiting me in the studio once during a studio tour. The place was packed with people, but I had him grab my elbow and then I "showed" him my art. I let him touch my work and he could "see" with his sensitive fingers and it was an amazing experience for both of us.

KR: How many hours a week do you devote to your art? What are some of your work habits that you think are an asset?

GS: A few years ago I started taking riding lessons from a very experienced and ambitious reining trainer. I soon wanted to have my own horse. I now own an awesome reining horse and I ride 4-6 times a week. Every time I learn something new. So I normally go to the barn to ride and then I come home to work. It is a perfect balance and I am convinced it helps me in my artistic work. I will paint maybe 4-5 hours and then do other studio work. I like to keep my studio in order; I need order around me to be able to create. I do not work all the time, night and day. I need to be fairly rested to paint as it takes so much concentration.

When it comes to assets in my work, I think my over 20 years in the business world taught me a lot about work discipline, presenting your "product," meeting with customers/clients and very much more. My years in the cable industry is my "diploma," so to speak.

KR: What motivates you to keep creating? What do you hope viewers experience when they engage with your work?

GS: If I would have to choose between riding and painting, I would sacrifice my beloved horse without hesitation. Even if I get weary at times, creating art is my passion. When I get tired or weary, I try to inspire myself, maybe by leafing through a book about one of the masters, or I go to a museum or gallery and that will most likely restore my desire to create. Sometimes I ask myself about the meaning of it all, why make art when there are so many dire needs in the world? Then I again think of children and young people, how important it is to connect the two brain halves, inspire imagination and creativity. Older people need that stimulation as well. You do not have to be an artist to have imagination and creativity – it is equally important for a designer, a technician, an architect, a doctor, a scientist, etc. I want people to be inspired by my work, even to the point where they might start painting or creating on their own.



KR: What do you find to be the most challenging aspect of being a painter?

GS: I guess the greatest challenge for any artist is to be able to make a living while doing what you are passionate about, having the freedom to work on your own ideas. In that process I think it is important to find out what success is to YOU. I believe I have to start with ME, to do what I love and make sure I am pleased and happy with my work. Only then I can give something of value to others. If you lose that focus, maybe because you are hungry, it is probably easy to lose your "core business." When I started out trying to become an artist, people would say "well, you can afford it." But it was an immense struggle, not least to break free from what I thought (imagined) other people thought about what I was doing – my family, my parents, my former colleagues and customers. It took years before I actually felt I was WORKING when I was painting. But over the years I have had countless people tell me I made the right choice and that is a great reward...and probably success.

KR: Who are some of your art influences and mentors?

GS: I do not think I have ever had a mentor. In the early stages of finding a way to paint, I was inspired by Andy Warhol's handling of colors and I was inspired by how Edvard Munch painted. I have gotten so much inspiration from seeing work by known and unknown artists, and also to read about their lives and their work. I take bits and pieces from here and there and let that influence and inspire me.

KR: What advice would you give to aspiring artists?

GS: That is maybe the hardest question of all. It is not a good idea to try to become an artist because you do not want to have a "normal" 9 to 5 job or because you want to call yourself an ARTIST and hang out with artists. To be an artist you have to have patience and perseverance and you have to be able to spend a lot of time alone. I read a lot about artists; I like to visit their studios. I do question whether I am in a position to hand out advice. For me, maybe I was trying not to burn out, I was desperate in a way...I had to do it.



Skalleberg in his Santa Fe studio

illustrations by Mark Terrill



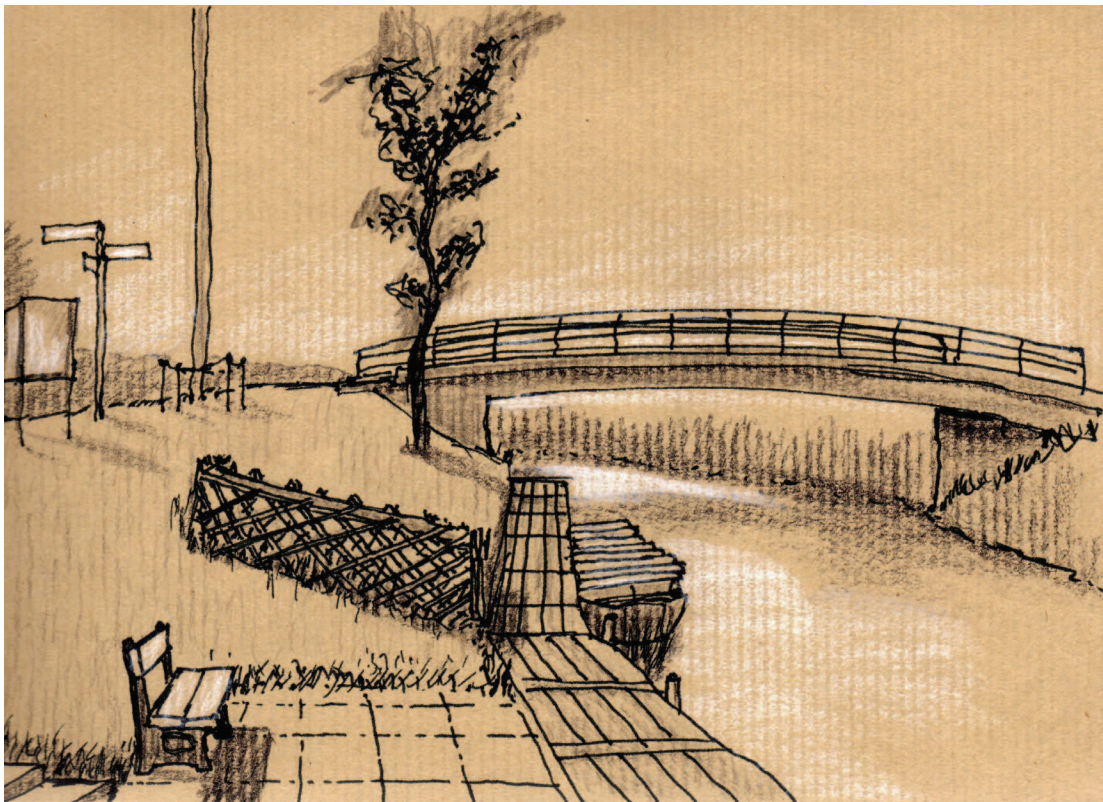
Looking across the Amstel River into the Herengracht in Amsterdam. Pitt Artist Pens in 5" x 8" Moleskine sketchbook.



Looking along the Reguliersgracht in Amsterdam. Pitt Artist Pens in 5" x 8" Moleskine sketchbook.



Looking along the Mittelburggraben in Friedrichstadt, Germany. Rotring ArtPen and carbon pencil in 5" x 8" Moleskine sketchbook.



The Harbor in Kuden, Germany. Ink, black carbon and white pastel pencil in 5.75" x 8" Clairfontaine sketchbook with tan paper.



The Drawbridge in Heiligenstedten, Germany. Pentel Tradio fountain pen, Tombow brush pens, and white gel pen in 5.75" x 8" Clairfontaine sketchbook with tan paper.

Fenestration

His mother's shaking him. She starts at the feet, knocking his heels together, ankles, calves, hips, the space under the ribs, pushing, pushing, both sides, and William wonders how she hops back and forth so quick. Is she jumping over him? Running around the bed? Then his shoulders, the tendons in his neck, his head, knock, knock, knocking and hands lift him and he's in San Francisco Bay, going down, rising up, he can breathe underwater, someone's got hold of him -- his mother? she's so strong -- snapping him like a sheet dried on a line to get the wrinkles out, billowing him up, letting him float slow, slow, onto the bed, ready to tuck him under in hospital corners. William smiles, grateful for the extra minutes of sleep she's allowing him, this hasn't happened since he was a little boy. Weekends, rising in a panic only to hear her tuneless singing. . . tis sad to contemplate, and it's sadder to relate, how this good old world forgets you when you're broke, and the world goes on just the same . . . relief rising, bolstering his heart, today will ask nothing of him, a full morning spent at home with whom he loves most, maybe a spoonful of the jam his father works three extra hours every week to afford, spread thin but sweet on thick cut bread, the smell of coffee dark and dense, he can almost taste it, the burn in his throat -- and now he's in the air again, he and the bed slamming down, one-two, he's on the floor, scrambles against the wall, knees to his chest, the wire to the exposed light bulb pulls taught, boomerangs into the ceiling, glass smithereening into snowflakes of cutting snow and the window splits like a smack from a baseball and William's up, running, running, out of the dream, his mother's gone, she was never here, this is real and happening. He slams the windows' frame up, splinters digging under his nails, glass under his feet, he looks down at the house of the roof below him, body screaming jump, jump, mind screaming hold on and it doesn't matter because the house collapses into the street with a roar like hundreds of people dying at once and a cloud of dust punches him in the face and he can't see, can't breathe, ears filled with the agonized dissonance of the people crushed below him.

William swipes his arm, left, right, over his eyes, gagging, dust choking the air in his lungs and the dresser drawer crashes onto the floor and his pants are on, blood from the soles of his feet smearing the floor, shoes without socks, crash, he tromps to the window, laces untied, a smother of dust turning a blue sky gray where, three lots over, Brunswick House used to be, crash, that must be Ohio House, Lormor's already gone, Nevada's the last one standing, he's got to get out of it, he's got to go, the cries of people being killed everywhere, pushing him, pushing him, his hand's turning the door knob, nothing happens, each rumble of the earth makes the hinges hold faster, tighter, the floor's tilting up like a Ferris wheel circling backward, sinking in the same motion, the house is falling like all the others, William holds onto the door knob because nothing else is there, the whole world drops, bump,bump,bump, three distinct pulses as the lower floors collapse, a cracking of timber and glass and all the things that exist in houses barrels into the sound of people being destroyed, their shrieks worse than knowing he's going to be crushed, he's going to die, the roof collapsing, shattering him and William just wants the sound of other people's pain to stop.

Boom, sudden, severe, the roof is on top of him and all's darkness. His eyes move with no sense of up or down. Then -- light -- like a lantern swinging back and forth, illuminating the world in pieces. His mother's there, and his landlord, Mr. Lee, mouth crinkling at the corners, apologetic, the smile he uses when collecting rent. And Mr. Lee's wife, kind and quiet and their son and daughter, still and taught, all their usual energy pressed flat and the lantern light grows brighter and William sees their shoeless feet dangling, as if not quite touching the ground. But there is no ground and he's in the bakery, the fresh smell

of butter and sweetness and delicious airy things settling on his shoulders and the bell's ringing, people are smiling at him, tasting the things he creates, before they're wrapped up in wax paper and savored, sometimes secreted away for all the best times, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, and William is so glad he's safe and sound and with the chattering, laughing people and everything's okay and then his chest is heaving, eyes opening, he's back in the darkness and his mother's not there or Mr. Lee or his wife or their happy little children, there is no happiness anywhere. William shifts his left arm, his right arm, left leg, right leg, carefully rolls his head left, right, as if all his limbs were separate entities with no relation to his body but everything's there and moveable and all his bones still inside the skin. He tries, slowly, slowly, to raise himself, fingers spread wide against the boards underneath his chest, their uneven criss-cross shuddering and his feet are pinned fast, he can feel the pop of his ankles as he tries to turn, the weight of the debris that once was a roof too much for him to lift. He sinks back down, just for a while, just to rest, then he'll try again and breathes in deep, regretting it immediately, plaster and dust overtaking the oxygen and there's a sound like running, a sound like people over his head and he calls out – help help-- more running, feet galloping, descending down, down, away from him and Williams says quietly please, so soft he only hears it in his head, please, please and he must, he must get out, he must try and gathers himself, one-two-three, kicks his feet as if someone were holding them, as if it were the devil himself and hears before he feels his toes slap into something soft, ricocheting back and they're free and he pulls his right knee to his side, asbestos fibers covering his pants and shoe and then his right knee and shoeless right foot, dangling like the Lee son and daughter's little white feet -- are they here, somewhere? they live on the bottom floor -- and he can't think about that now, he must move, he must, he must. He hears a human voice shouting, worn out as if it had been shouting for a long time, a phonograph's wax cylinder melting – fire fire the voice shouts fire -- and now he understands the burn in his throat and a gray veil of smoke mixes with the darkness, invisible flames crack like bones breaking and heat's wrapping around him and William's grasping in the dark, fingers desperate, bludgeoning themselves against all the solid things until suddenly it's only air and his hands flex and it's an opening above him, a way out, to where he doesn't care and his knees hit more solid things and there's a slope and he's crawling up, up, up, a striation of light in the black before him and he crawls and crawls and the striation becomes more definite, beginning to glimmer and pulse and William almost laughs for joy. It's sunlight.

He digs into the shards of the roof below him, edging his body up, holding his eye to the slice of sunlight, lashes fluttering, caked in dust and plaster, seeing only pale yellow, a gap in the dark of the world and he coughs into it, feeling wind rush back and leans his forehead against its edges, a racket in his lungs, each breath dislodging more detritus he inhales and he is so tired, he has never been so tired, never lived a moment in his life where every single piece of him hurt, and he's back in the dream, knowing it is one, bakery smells, little white feet dangling, laughter, his mother prodding toes, heels, ankles, calves, hips, the dust filled expanse of his middle, shoulders, neck, head, her hands like burning, like fire and his eyes snap, the breaking of a pocket watch's hinge that can never be closed again and he's up, slamming against the ruins over him, elbows punching the lath and plaster blocking his way out, fighting, fighting, smoke in his nose, sparking in his throat, hands hammering, pulling, and he collapses forward like a tree felled, slow then all at once, and he's on his knees, his stomach, light flashing through squares of missing brick and he's in a chimney, somehow all his stumbling has dropped him into a chimney and William is flabbergasted and looks up and it's the sky and he bashes his back against the bricks and mortar, the terra cotta splitting, crumbling, braces himself, throwing his shoed left foot against one side of the masonry, pushing, holding,

his bare right foot following, he heaves, up, up, he's never been so strong, rising, ascending, hands gouging the clay, left foot, right foot, left hand, right hand, up, up, up and he feels a prickle of wind, soft, trembling against the back of his neck and he tumbles out into the air as the chimney dips and smashes to the ground, his weight somersaulting him head over heels and William's chest slams into the mound of slate roof tiles, his heart bouncing against the cage of his ribs and back, pounding wildly. His whole body rolls over on instinct, to gasp at the air, and he is flat on his back, lungs shuddering, breath plummeting in and out, a great, big expanse of blue stretching wide as the universe with a blinding white sun in the middle.

There is the sensation of movement around him, but William hears nothing but the thump, thump of blood as it pumps away from the heart, through the aorta, arteries, arterioles, capillary beds, to every cell of the body, oxygen removed from the blood and sent to the lungs, reoxygenating and flowing through the veins back to the heart. He hears every movement of his blood's trip distinctly and does not stir for what feels like a very long time, eyes fixed on the circle of a solitary bird overhead. It soars, around, around, around, as if surveying and after each pass, William smiles tiredly at it, feeling the pop of plaster in the skin under his cheeks, until the bird flies up and descends quick, as if to alight, but, its customary perch no longer existing, trampled into the ground below, throws its wings back out and rises, ascends like William as he made his escape, up and gone and William's eyes start to lose focus and his mother's voice tiptoes across him...tis sad to contemplate, and it's sadder to relate, how this good old world forgets you when you're broke, and the world goes on just the same...his right eye twitches feverishly, sending him reeling up, and his right hand flings itself to his head, coming down with blood in it and a cough chokes through him and his throat constricts and he yells -- stop -- his brain regaining control over his extremities and he sits there, just sits, legs splayed out in front of him, leaning over, one-two-three-breathe-one-two-three-breathe, not knowing where he learned this and then his father's in his head...one-two-three-breathe-one-two-three-breathe, it's okay, son, it's okay Billy, you're alright now...the day they went to the Sutro Baths, 5 cents for the train there and back, 25 cents for the pools, his mother and father holding their breath as William caught his, his father's hand smoothing his hair back, saying soft, I'm right here, one-two-three-breathe, I won't leave you, feeling the love of him course through his body like blood...William is back in the middle of the rubble, looking down at his hand, there's a bleeding cut in his scalp and he reflexively reaches into his pocket for his handkerchief. It's there, as if by magic, and he wipes the blood from his eye, folding the handkerchief over, tying it around his head then looks at his watch, still ticking. 5:45. He looks up at the sky, the sun, still there. 5:45 in the morning. William nods. He is late for work. The old women buying pastries for their Wednesday church services will be waiting, wondering where he's gotten to. He looks around. The roof. And he didn't even have to go to it, the roof came to him. A laugh breaks through his insides and he doubles, coughing up plaster and dust and dirt and suddenly, another magic trick, there's a man beside him and he's thrusting a half-empty bottle of whiskey into William's hand, drink-drink-drink, the man helping him upturn it, watching him and waiting as he cough agains, a burst of fire all throughout him and he gasps and nods at the man and there's a hand under his chin, the man's face close to his, examining, the way William's father did at the indoor saltwater pools and he manages to say -- I'm okay -- and the man waits a beat more and nods, shaking William's shoulder once, twice and disappearing from view, up and away and there's the sound of scattering, of things scraping against each other and William is alone again.

Except he isn't. His eyes swing one way, the other, like the lantern light in his dream -- where is Mr. Lee, his wife, their hovering children? -- there are men, bunched together over a pile that used to be the Nevada House -- William's lodging house -- and they're swinging axes, hatchets, scooping up remains with shovels, their own hands, calling out.

William watches them, exhausted, the impulse to move gone now that he's in the open air. Something flutters at the corner of vision. He turns to see a curb, a sidewalk, realizing he's at street level. He looks up, as if to see where he'd come from. There's nothing there of course. He looks back, picks up the fluttering thing. A ribbon, singed at the edges. Maybe from a dressing gown -- it's still so early -- or a ponytail, like one the Lee daughter always wears in her hair. The sounds of the world descend upon him in a rush and William startles, body jumping in place, the enormity of what has just happened knocking him sideways. Where are the other lodgers? Why is he the only one here? His legs do not move, won't, can't and he twists again to the men digging. They're dragging timber, pieces of chimney, broken mantles, splintered doors, stacking them on top of each other as if collecting supplies to make another house. Each time a part is shifted, smoke puffs up from the fires started underneath, down where William used to be. And then the screams come. As if they were being kept in a bottle somewhere, uncorked at the sound of other people. They come in gusts, overlapping, just as one ends another beginning and William feels little drops of moisture tapping his collarbone, tears falling but he makes no sound, won't, can't, when he's up here and they're down there. He moves his hands behind him, preparing to rise when he hears one human voice above all the others. A terrible, low, heart rending cry of utter resignation as the fire catches him and then there's a sudden silence, so breathtaking William staggers, back in the dirt, the dust, the plaster, the detritus of human lives.

He looks down over his body at a gray caked shoe and a gray caked bare foot, breathing in a coppery, charcoal smell and something like meat in a frying pan, what must be the smell of burning flesh and hair and organs. He's going to get up. He promises. He will get up very soon and reach down and find a hand with his own hand and pull it up and again and again and again. He will very soon. He will find Mr. Lee and Mrs. Lee and the little boy and the little girl and all the people waiting underneath him. His eyes shut and his father's calloused fingers smooth his hair back, soft, one-two-three-breathe-one-two-three-breathe, it's okay, son, it's okay Billy, you're alright now, I won't leave you...and the world goes on just the same, and the world goes on...

He feels his foot lift, the shoe slide off and the touch of skin, warm and close, a beat of a pulse as the scratch of wool glides over his ankle, the same gentle motion repeated for his right foot. There's a pressure at the soles and a sound of boots walking over a damp surface. William's head raises, looking down again at his body. Brown leather bedroom slippers over gray wool socks look back. He blinks. Twitches his feet. The slippers twitch back. He rolls his head from side to side, scanning. There are dozens of people now, climbing, lifting, hauling, digging, calling, sifting, searching, putting their ears to the ground and listening for the sounds of human voices, human hearts...and the world goes on...I'm right here...I won't leave you...I would never leave you...just the same... William breathes in, once, twice, dust and plaster still caught up inside, lifts his chest, pushes back on his elbows, rolls to his hip, stands, looking down at the slippers, lifting one up then the other, and, looking ahead, waits a beat, watching the new world he's found. He nods, takes one more breath and walks into it.

Note: This story is based on the San Francisco Earthquake that devastated the city on April 18, 1906

Ritual Unions

Jesus is on his knees, praying, facing the rocky mountain peak. I suppose that's symbolic. Nick sighs from the driver seat, annoyed. I suppose that is too. He's still asking why we have to get out.

"Oh, come on—*Desert Christ Park*? This is so weird, we have to check it out," I chide. Likely, he's dehydrated and that's making him moody. Or, he's just moody, no reason. That's not a novel possibility. This morning, we drove the 130 miles from Pasadena to Pioneertown, a small Western-themed outpost on the outskirts of Joshua Tree. Earlier in the week, I flew the few thousand miles from my home in Boston to his in L.A. I'm far-removed from reality now. Desert Christ Park isn't so weird after all.

The park is less of a park, per se, and more of an outsider art installation. Dropped into prickled desert scrub and camel-colored rocks are 40 pure white stone statues. If Jesus and his disciples weren't otherworldly before, they definitely are now, looking Grecian and alien in the southern California desert. They stand beside stone wells, preach to other statues, open their palms to the southern sky. One even sits beneath a Joshua tree. Splitting into separate walks, Nick and I wander through them, silently peering into their unpupilled eyes. *Can you see me?* I think. *Can you hear me?* I send unspoken prayers to the Jesus on his knees, begging, if it could, to say something I can make sense of, to be something I can feel. *I'm emptied*, I think. *Fill me*. Pastors have said time and time again: man's first problem wasn't sin, it was loneliness.

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Only recently had I begun to consider myself at all a sensual person. For all my history, sensuality and spirituality could not coexist. They were opposite sides of the lifestyle spectrum. You could have one or the other, and everyone in the church knew which one was the clear superior. That was fine by me. I was never very touchy. Hugs were over the top and a clear sign of wanting something bigger than just the hug. God forbid anyone touch me on a first date—I'd lose trust in them entirely. Touch was sacred and we were all guilty of jumping the gun. As far as I could tell, lust was a problem for other people, and a simple one at that: just don't have sex, and you won't sin about it.

I'm not exactly sure, then, when the switch took place. When the needle on the sex spectrum moved a few notches to the left. When I started caring less for God and craving people more. One year I was telling friends I'd save it for marriage, the next I was telling my sophomore year boyfriend I just hadn't had the opportunity yet. It was all decisions and finalities.

From early on—journaling existentially in middle school—I was obsessed with the idea of being someone's favorite. Partners in crime, one in a two-part. How much I craved this sense of arrival in some relationship. I was the quieter sibling of two, and not since elementary school had I been anyone's best friend. I'd been a girlfriend a few times, but mostly during that early teenage period when you can barely eat in front of your boyfriend for fear of embarrassment, never mind bare any part of you that has real thoughts and emotions. Still, deep down, I could never shake this feeling that I was insufficient on my own. I knew me—so what? I wanted someone else to want to know me.

With that sophomore year boyfriend, I thought I'd found it—someone who *saw* me and loved me. Our own shared plane of existence. Then distance pulled us apart and I had to make a new name for myself as an independent person again. It was into that precarious space Nick dropped in like a white statue.

Before Nick became familiar to me, his handwriting was what I knew. The holdable, readable version of the real him. It was such a clandestine intimacy, knowing someone's handwriting, in the digital age more than ever. Reading it, running your finger over it—it's like finding a new freckle, or getting a hint of someone's scent when they're not around, or hearing someone you love snore—it's like anything that offers a glimpse into the beloved and elusive space inside a lover's life. Once you know it well enough to pick it out, it's like that person, in everything they write, just by virtue of writing, is always writing to you. Inky and unconcerned, Nick scrawled it all around the font text I'd printed out for the creative writing workshop we shared.

Well this is fucking great, it said. Why does the narrator feel like this? Jealously? Purely religious? Can't wait to see the expansion.

Every time I saw him in passing, Nick was elusive, wearing sunglasses anywhere it was even a little appropriate and hats with brims pulled down low. In our writing workshop, he revealed meticulous pieces that surprised everyone with their descriptions—dark and delicate and snarky beyond our age, so clever you'd kick yourself for failing to think of it but so beautiful you knew you were selfish to be upset at all.

"You were in the class last year, right? With that girl with pink hair?"

Leaning against the wall at a mutual friend's party, we began to talk and laugh about the class and about writing, about the boy who wrote exclusively about lacrosse, the girl who kept writing about her grandfather and a Klondike bar, the lines we remembered from each other's pieces, the plans and intuitions we had for what we would work on next. We were flitty and laughed lightly, like we were back in middle school. Within a few weeks, we were doing the same in his room past sundown.

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I look out the window at the near forest of Joshua trees. The desert, I think, is a strange environment. The harshest, loneliest, least lush landscape. Still, it's striking and somehow relieving how physical it is. The sun and still air are beating hot, the ground, rock bottom. We're not far from Death Valley, where it must feel like total unity with both the sun and the Earth. Here, in the rubble and heat, everything is equally aggressive and unassuming—mountains made of rock, spiked and rigid Joshua Trees and fat, prickly cacti. It's no rainforest, vibrating and clicking and constantly moving, but you never doubt that it's certainly alive. Somewhere in the Bible, the voice of God is described as a whisper. I think the desert speaks in the same way.

"Take a swig every time he says *desert*," I say, reaching into the car's backseat for the lemonade jug. America's "Horse With No Name" plays for its umpteenth time. Nick laughs.

"If only it really was a sea," he says, taking the jug.

After a few weeks, Nick and I both knew we'd settled into a routine, one that would continue for maybe a year: sit on the couch after class, tell each other how our days were, small talk, find some pop culture topic to briefly discuss at length, find a drop in conversation, wait a few charged moments, then kiss, room, shoes, lights, bed, *it*, then I'd lay in his outstretched arm and we'd spend hours talking and knowing each other in the dark. We were never in love, but we practiced a good portion. Maybe we didn't love each other but we *knew* each other—that was close enough.

As much as ‘virginity’ is an outdated and usually demeaning construct, there is some deeply buried truth in it. That first time of total reveal, total union. It’s like being a toddler all over again—exploring, learning, fumbling, trusting with all your body that you won’t break something. In every other aspect, I still considered myself a good Christian. Granted, I didn’t go to church very often, but I was a good person at the core. That’s what God looked at, right?

At first, it was so overwhelming I almost called the whole thing off. But at the same time, it was so fun, so freeing, so *together*. Whenever we were together, however we were, and for whatever length of time, we were each other’s undivided favorites.

All the nature documentaries say that in the desert, things come alive at night. Where the heat of the day subsides, beneath the cool cover of dark, everything sensitive, hidden and alive crawls out. Beneath old comforters and beside a cited window, pressed against each other in the dark, Nick and I crawled out to each other. It started with dancing little discussions about rap lyrics and indie albums, Gerwig and Baumbach movies, spaghetti Westerns. Nick had lived in L.A. for three years and was perpetually put off by it. It was beautiful, sure, but it was always surface level. Its networking, its materialism, its eternally shiny ‘scene’—it was all too fake. Boston was grittier and more genuine.

Hitting no hard bottom, we dug deeper. Nick deeply craved to create something lasting but didn’t know where to break into the L.A. scene. I examined the power of being a woman. When I asked why his pupils were so big all the time, he retold stories of a rare brain infection, immobilizing anxiety and SSRIs since age ten. When he asked about my relationship with my parents, I ended up laying out my family’s whole battered history with bottles. We’d never really told anyone these things and sorry for talking so much but thank you for listening, really. We always listened. We knew each other had deep wells we wouldn’t be shining lights into for anyone else any time soon. Most of all, at exhaustive lengths, we combed through writing—the honesty, the absurdity, the beauty, the unavoidable self-glorification. Everything humiliating and everything redeeming. Both equally necessary. We encouraged each other with such heartfelt specificity we both couldn’t help but be moved. Under the cool cover of dark, Nick and I found faith in each other and confessed to it nightly.

We talked about God sometimes. He knew I was faithful, though I faded in and out of religion. I knew he grew up Catholic but didn’t identify with anything. Sometimes, during the day, we’d share jokes about anything Christian and odd. Nick retold stories of Catholic mass, where he’d held the communion wafer in his mouth until he and his brother were on the front stone steps outside, at which point he spit it into the bushes and his brother laughed and called him the antichrist. On the couch, sipping beers with his friends, we ran through favorite Bible stories we’d learned as kids, all the bits we found so ridiculous—Lot’s wife turning to pillar of salt, David seeing Bathsheba bathing. Nick’s friend didn’t know Jacob and Esau, so I explained how a starving Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup—soup!—then how Jacob covered his arm with bear fur to trick his father into thinking he was hairy Esau coming in for the blessing, using the old blind man’s sense of touch to his own confusion.

Alone in the dark, Nick sometimes probed deeper, asking questions and letting me muse aloud—what ‘God’ meant to me, the forms I thought it all took, how religion and The Church played in. I talked at length about total love and how I wanted some kind of relationship with God but never felt Him palpably. Ever since middle school, I had this nagging sense of distance from God—He was just so *far away*. Faith

meant having certainty in what I knew but couldn't see. But how could I love something I could never know? God wasn't something I could hold, He was supposed to be the air I breathed, the ground beneath my feet. But where was His hand on my arm? His voice in my ear? I still craved that union, that shared plane of existence. My faith wasn't for heaven, it was for Eden, in its carnal, tangible form—paradise right here on Earth where I could touch it.

When it was so often a mystery where I could find God, I always knew where Nick was, and exactly how he was—warm, meticulous, contemplative, often confusing, but always willing to give me a straight answer when I asked. Most of all, he was so very close.

Nick and I had faith in each other and communed with rituals of the body. Like I would in church, I took it to be made whole, made holy, saved from everything that made me so insufficient on my own. I trusted him with everything sticky and sinful. He waded through the parts of me I'd dubbed too emo, too dorky, too rambling. He saw my puckered stomach, small chest, intermittent armpit hair. Listened to my insecurity, loneliness, uncertainty. He took it all in, everything I had hidden away. He saw all my impurities and touched them one-by-one. And I knew we weren't in love, I knew we were taking advantage, I knew we weren't that plane of existence. Wedged between us was always some little degree of difference, of distance. Still, taking the body, we found a way to our own Eden and lay down like on that first perfect night, over and over again.

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Driving out of Desert Christ Park, Nick navigates us past vast mountain vistas and low-lying bungalows into town. We're quiet, a combination of being miles from home, reddened by sun and relaxed by the heat. Plus, after months and months, we're still a little skittish with each other.

After a few dozen miles, we pull into Joshua Tree Saloon, the self-proclaimed local watering hole and proud home of the finest burgers and coldest beer in town. The sun seems brighter with the sunset, but inside it's dark and cool, lined by aged mirrors and rich wooden booths.

A few sips into Moscow mules, Nick slides me his phone with a picture of actor Carrie Russell pulled up. He pointedly looks to my left, then back down. I follow his gaze.

"No way," I marvel for a minute. A real live celebrity in the flesh, and here she is eating burgers just like the rest of us. Celebrity sightings are funny like that—equal parts so special and so disarmingly regular. These people we see through screens and magazines—in person, they lose the sheen of mystique. As real people, they're exactly that—just real people. Eating burgers in the local joint.

"What's she doing all the way out here?" I wonder. Then again, what are we?

Our food arrives and the cocktails set in. Both of us are silent for the first few bites. Reaching back into earlier in the day, Nick pipes up and asks about Bible stories.

"Some of them are just so implausible. Like all the miracles—do you really believe in that stuff?"

"I have to," I respond, still chewing. "I mean, that's part of being a Christian is that I *have* to believe that Jesus was a man, that he was real and that he did what he said he did. I mean, I know some of the Bible

is metaphorical. Parables are parables. Did Lot's wife really turn into a pillar of salt, I don't know," I keep rambling. "But the *miracles*—I do believe Jesus did those things. I mean—just the *power* is incredible. That story of the woman reaching out and *touching his robe*, and she's healed because of her faith—it's incredible.

"Sometimes I really envy that," I keep rambling, the cocktail loosening my tongue. "I know it's kind of a cliché phrase but growing up in the church I saw so many people who were *on fire* for God—you can *see* it in them. Their whole lives are a testament. I really admire that, and I envy it to some extent. I can't imagine what that's like."

"So, you really believe in it?" Nick asks.

"I do. At least, I'm really trying to. I can remember this one time over the summer," I begin to tell him. I'd biked to a hilltop in the arboretum near my apartment. The sun had just fallen below the horizon. Deep in the park, further away from city light, stars shone through the dusky sky brighter than anywhere else in Boston. I lay on my back, looking up. I'd always felt closer to God in nature. Not a particularly wild idea, but a very palpable one. His creation—every tree, every leaf, every blade of grass on my bare shoulders. God is so sensual in that way. Embodied. Our bodies, Earth—all of it some form of God. He's not eternally far from me like I'd worried my whole life. He's closer than anything I can touch, closer I am to myself. He *is* me, He is *everything*. The fabric of the universe. I'd never known it could be so simple. Lying on my back and staring up into His space, where the Heavens must be, I began to pray. *I want to see You*, I whispered. *I want to feel You. Make Yourself known to me*. With every new wish, the white pines above me moved with a new gust of wind, waving down, signing with clear, quiet confirmation, *I see you*, they said. He said. *I am here*. I knew the barrier broke. God and I saw each other. He whispered, and finally, I listened.

"It was incredible," I finish, a little on fire myself.

Nick nods but doesn't look up. He chews methodically.

"I just, like, don't believe in that."

We finish our food with smaller talk. For most of it, he keeps his gaze on anything but me.

On the drive home, the sun finally dips below the horizon. When the sky turns orange and the mountains turn black, Nick blurts out.

"Honestly, I feel like sometimes you're trying to convert me. When we talk about this stuff."

I'm ready to knee-jerk with denial, but then stop to consider what he said.

"Maybe I am. In some way," I say. "I mean, I'm not missioning you, I'm not actively trying to convert you, but—I don't know. I just know how much it's meant to me. So, maybe you do need God." I take myself by surprise. Never have I said anything like that before, never so straight.

"It's just, I've told you I'm not, like, religious or anything. And the way you talk about it, I don't know, it makes me feel like you feel so bad for me for not being religious. And that kind of makes me feel like shit. Like, I get that it's important to you, and I'm happy for you that you get to experience it, but I just don't believe in that and it makes me uncomfortable. . ." Joshua trees flip by, silhouetted like the mountains.

Without light, they seem more ancient and familiar than during the day. Like the less you see of them, the closer they feel. “. . . and honestly, I really think the whole thing is bullshit.”

Communion is a funny game. The most physical form of God, the broken body of Christ—always insufficient on its own. Not enough to fill us, not enough to save us. Communion alone, without any faith, is just a ritual. I kept waiting for those little tastes of love to fill me up, for them to be my resting place. I practiced the ritual over and over, hoping that was enough to save me. Nick and I played at love and redemption over and over, breaking and taking the body. But every time, I'd be surprised with how I'd find myself afterwards—still just me, and just as unfulfilled, imperfect, and deeply longing as where I began. And Nick was just as broken. The body would never be able to do anything on its own.

My eyebrows raise with Nick's hard statement. Months ago, when we laughed about Biblical mishaps, I never wondered whether our laughter came from different places. I thought we had an understanding. I thought we did about everything. But the further forward we moved together, the more I realized I couldn't keep it up. Sooner or later, I'd have to leave the comfort of lying together in the dark to wait for a new light, and I'd have to do it alone. Nick and I knew our rituals, but we could never stay in Eden. We had to leave, and when we eventually did, I knew we'd drop hands and walk in different directions.

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When we finally pull into the motel, the night is pitch black. Still silent from our spat, Nick goes into the room and I shuffle through dust to sit beneath a massive Joshua tree. The stars are strong with so little light, though L.A. still pollutes them a bit, even all the way out here.

Le Vieux Chevalier sans Merci

Samantha Serpentine is an insufferable little warthog. Associate editor of the school's monthly newsletter, vice president of the Youth Leadership Council, quintessential overachiever, class snitch, she sits, arms crossed, high in the bleachers and slowly shakes her head so everyone knows just how displeased she is to be here. From beneath the bangs of her severe black bob, she glares at her teachers and in her most truculent voice tells them that the phony jousts at Camelot's Court are "a sickening display of savagery." Her carefully articulated outrage surprises no one. Fond of using modish words, Samantha seems to believe existence itself is a kind of affront to moral decency.

She points a pudgy finger at the armored men on horseback and accuses them of engaging in horrific acts of animal cruelty. Since she was not permitted to bring a phone on this class trip, Samantha insists on borrowing one so she can document all of the gory details for the May newsletter. Her chaperones flatly deny her request. After trudging all day through the mist and rain to the museums and monuments, their patience is starting to wear thin, and they ask Samantha to relax and enjoy the show. This only agitates her all the more. She doesn't like anyone telling her what to do. How can she possibly bring herself to watch a group of grown men, posing as gallant knights in shining armor, beating each other over the head with swords? What comes after the hand-to-hand combat? A witch burning? An inquisition? Samantha, who seems to know about these things, rattles off a long list of torture devices—the Heretic's Fork, the Foot Screw, the Foot Press, the Spanish Boot, the Drunkard's Cloak. She throws her paper crown to the floor, stomping it underfoot. To console herself, she crams a second hotdog into her mouth and doesn't bother wiping away the brown mustard dribbling down her double chin.

Now, in violation of every rule in the faculty handbook, Jessica Mayfield sneaks away from Samantha and the rest of her pupils and sits alone in Ye Olde Tavern where she nurses a gin rickey and unburdens herself to the cute bartender. She badly craves a cigarette but has promised her daughters that she has given them up, this time for good. In the arena behind her, trumpets blast a recorded fanfare, and all at once the students in the eighth-grade class of Thomas à Beckett Academy erupt in wild cheers. It's their final night in Washington, D.C., and after three days of enduring interminable lectures about the Civil War delivered in raspy monotones by half-blind septuagenarians wearing the baggy blue fatigues of Union privates, everyone is eager to have a little bit of fun. Everyone, that is, except Samantha.

Chosen because of its proximity to their hotel, Camelot's Court looks like it has seen better days. The place reeks of manure and stale popcorn, and the long shadows and flickering faux torchlight threaten to give Jessica a headache. Desperate for a moment of peace, she glances again at the Bill of Fare, but the various meads and grogs, as well as the small selection of specialty drinks (the Executioner's Song, the Wench's Day Off), don't sound particularly appealing. She rests her elbows on the bar and sizes up the young man polishing the pint glasses. In his red tunic, blue tights and imitation leather boots, he looks like an overgrown frat boy at a Dungeons & Dragons convention. Clearly, he doesn't want to hear any more about this class trip or Samantha Serpentine.

Jessica beams at the bartender and points to her empty glass. "I believe I'll have another. I read somewhere that the gin rickey is the official drink of Washington, D.C."

The bartender gives her a blank stare. "Indeed, it is, m'lady."

He twists open a bottle and grabs a clean tumbler from the shelf. His hands, Jessica notices, are unusually big and strong. An athlete during his college days, no doubt. He mixes the gin and seltzer and then drops two lime wheels into the fizzing glass. He tips his felt hat and places the cocktail on a fresh napkin imprinted with a red dragon.

"Your magic potion, m'lady."

"Tell me, Abelard," she says, reading his name tag, "what are you doing serving drinks to exasperated schoolteachers? Shouldn't you be out there rustling the ponies?"

The bartender purses his lips and frowns. "The secrets of this castle are well kept, m'lady."

She laughs. "You're a true professional, Abelard. How do you manage to stay in character for so long?"

"Character, m'lady?"

Jessica takes a sip of her drink and nods. "You know, acting the role of a tavern keeper. It must get pretty exhausting after a long shift."

"You're referring perhaps to my skills as a player." He wipes his hands on the towel tucked into his waistband and with his eyelids lowered says, "I am, as it happens, a trained thespian. I studied at university where I performed many of the bard's problem plays. This trade gives me an opportunity to practice my craft."

"Oh, I completely understand, Abelard." Jessica tosses a handful of complimentary nuts into her mouth. "When I was your age, I had big dreams of becoming a novelist. In fact, I used to write fantasy stories about clairvoyant witches and extra-dimensional fairies and fearless young men who remain forever faithful to the peasant girls living beyond the castle walls. But these days I play the part of a parochial school English teacher. It turned out to be a very demanding role. I'm expected to stay in character all day long, just like you, but now I get the feeling some of the students are trying to pick off the teachers one by one. The sensitive darlings are quick to record anything that upsets them."

"Indeed, m'lady, the king's spies are everywhere." He glances at a camera above the bar. "We must be brave, mustn't we?"

In the arena the trumpets announce the second tournament of the night. Jessica reaches into her handbag and slaps a twenty-dollar bill on the bar.

"I know I shouldn't do this," she says, "but it's Friday night, the time for merrymaking, and methinks I've earned a small reprieve from the cares of the day. Top me off, my handsome young swain. No need to be fancy about it. Just straight from the bottle."

The bartender gives her a disapproving look and then adds a generous splash of gin to her glass.

"Goodness, I think I'm getting a little tipsy." She giggles and leans forward. She can see now that the bartender's eyes are light gray, not pale blue, and that he cut himself shaving this morning. "So, Abelard, is there a Heloise in your life?"

“Indeed, m’lady, I am spoken for. But his name is Richard, not Heloise.”

“Richard?”

“Yes, he is my betrothed. We studied together at university. Next May we intend to wed.”

“College sweethearts, huh?” Jessica takes a long sip of her drink and catches an unfortunate glimpse of herself in the mirror behind the bar. There are dark circles under her red-rimmed eyes, and her skin has a sickly green tinge. Instead of a teacher, she looks like an exhausted, overworked, single mother of two who lives in a rented apartment. She raises her glass and forces a smile. “Congratulations, Abelard, on your engagement to Prince Charming. May you have a long and happy life together.”

“Thank you, m’lady, for your kind wishes.”

“Just keep in mind what a wise man once said: marriage is an ordeal, not a romance.”

Jessica stirs her drink with a cocktail straw and tries to banish from her mind thoughts of her own failed marriage. In the arena the students are stomping their feet against the bleachers and having a wonderful time. By her tipsy reckoning they are all much better off than her own children who must make do with frozen dinners and clothes scavenged from cardboard boxes at a corner thrift store. Some of her students have a vague understanding of what it means to live in less fortunate circumstances, but they cannot possibly fathom just how desperate she has become.

Abelard seems to sympathize with her. He gives her a pitying look and steps forward.

“Beg your pardon, m’lady,” he says, lowering his voice, “but do you happen to know this urchin staring at us?”

He looks over her shoulder.

Jessica swivels around on her stool, drink in hand, and gasps. She’s been spotted in the proverbial green room, caught out of character by a demonic dwarf wielding a magic weapon. Dressed entirely in black, Samantha Serpentine emerges from the shadows of the adjacent Banquet Hall and stands like a plump reaper at the tavern’s gothic threshold. Instead of a scythe she holds a phone, and with an impish grin she quickly snaps several photos.

“Where in the hell did you get that, young lady?”

Samantha slips the phone into the pocket of her jumper and backs against an imposing wooden door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. She pulls on an iron ring that serves as a handle, and the door creaks loudly on its hinges. With a snort of derision, she disappears inside.

“Hey, you can’t go in there!” Abelard cries.

Jessica puts her drink down on the bar. For a moment she isn’t sure what to do. She slides awkwardly off the stool, twisting her right ankle in the process, and mutters a curse.

“Thank you, Abelard, for the lovely conversation, but now I must engage in mortal combat with a monster.”

“But it’s dangerous down there,” says the bartender. “I should get the manager.”

“Nonsense.”

Jessica finishes her drink and then makes her painful way to the other end of the tavern. She opens the wooden door and finds a set of stairs that leads to the basement of the building. Here the flickering torchlight is replaced by blinding florescent lights that buzz like a swarm of insects. Leaning against the wall to keep her weight off her right ankle, she hobbles down the steep stairs. Behind her the door slams loudly shut.

Hoping to see a squat shadow flitting across the ceiling, Jessica pauses at the bottom of the stairwell and listens for the clip-clop of Samantha’s mary janes. Instead she hears the low rumble of a boiler and the sharp clank and groan of cast iron pipes. Although she knows her quest is a futile one, she limps along a lunatic maze of long gray corridors that seem to twist and turn and double back on themselves.

At the end of the corridor, she comes to another door, and with as much sobriety as she can muster, she says, “I know you’re in there, Samantha.”

She opens the door, and for a moment she thinks she has stumbled upon a medieval torture chamber. On the cinderblock walls she sees a great wooden wheel, a saw, a hatchet, a pair of rusty plyers, the essential hammer and nails. Beneath a rope and pulley, she discovers a skull staring blankly at the ceiling. With a shudder, she runs her fingers along a chain dangling from a post. It takes her a minute before she realizes this is a carpentry workshop where the sets are built and repaired. The skulls and chains are plastic props, and the man sitting in the corner smoking a cigarette is merely a performer, not an aging knight with a battle ax resting across his knees.

With a gloved hand he scratches his graying beard and says, “Can I help you, miss?”

Jessica hesitates before answering. “Have you seen a girl? About this tall? Round? Almost spherical? With short dark hair?”

“Afraid not.” He takes another drag on his cigarette, and she notices how his chainmail is tarnished and covered in dirt. “Your daughter?”

Jessica nearly chokes. “No, a student of mine. But I don’t think she learned anything from me.”

She walks to the center of the shop and recalls how, when she was Samantha’s age, she wrote a story about a girl who on a dare entered an abandoned cottage where there once lived a reclusive old man. A magician, some said. A dangerous maniac, said others. The girl, a thinly disguised version of herself, entered the cottage through a shattered window and searched the empty rooms hoping to find something interesting to show her friends, a creepy photograph maybe, or a deck of trick cards, but all the rooms were dusty and bare. Determined not to leave empty-handed, she crept into the basement and heard mice scuttling across the floor. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the dark, and as she stepped forward, past the hot water heater and utility tub, she detected an ethereal light glowing from behind a closed door. Trembling with equal measures of terror and excitement, she opened the door and discovered that it was a portal to an enchanted realm of mountains and lush green forests where the trees and plants and flowers

communicated telepathically with her. She did not tell her friends about the portal, but every day after school she returned to the basement and traveled along wooded paths transformed by warm summer sunlight into dazzling cathedrals.

For weeks Jessica lost herself in this story, adding more details, building a world of endless adventure and excitement. Now she finds herself in the basement of Camelot's Court, but instead of a magical realm, she finds herself in a cluttered little room where the cement walls seem to converge, and the cloying smell of sawdust nauseates her. Surely by now Samantha has texted the incriminating photos to friends and family and has posted the pictures to a dozen social media sites. The evidence is damning, and if more corroborating evidence is required there is always the camera in the tavern. Thomas à Beckett Academy, while nominally a Christian school, has a zero-tolerance policy for faculty misconduct. Tomorrow morning there will be an inquiry, and the headmaster will be left with no choice but to sack Jessica for her negligence and irresponsibility. Like Samantha, the headmaster believes in justice for precocious children, not mercy for fallible adults.

"Too old," the knight says.

"I beg your pardon?"

The knight lifts the ax from his knees and stands up with a groan. "I said, I'm getting too old for this shit."

"Been working here long?"

"Twenty-five years."

Jessica slumps down in a folding chair in the corner next to a crate filled with banners and flags. She has no idea what she's going to do next, but tries to convince herself that this, too, is a part of her life's grand adventure. It's an opportunity to reinvent herself, to make a fresh start of things. Maybe she can find a new career, move to a different city, meet interesting people like this heroic knight.

She turns to him and asks, "They're not looking for writers here, are they? Someone to develop new storylines?"

"Storylines?" He gives her an incredulous look. "No, I don't think we need any writers."

"Guess I'm out of luck," says Jessica. "Well, then, may I bum one of your cigarettes?"

The knight takes a final drag and then crushes the smoldering butt under a heavy boot. He strides across the room, his armor clanking loudly in the dusty workshop, and says, "Sorry, lady, but that was my last one."

Above the Causeway

The men on the drawbridge lean against the railing and watch the men below them work. They watch all day, persistent as pelicans. They watch even as the light at certain moments unsights them, reflects from the inlet's surface the silver of an Airstream trailer.

The bridge is old, older than the men themselves, and so the men forgive the bridge its tired palsy, its winded boxer's weave and jab. They dismiss the sneer of wide-load semis. The weather, they agree, is *perfect* for watching: the currents temperate, the sun contrite.

The men on the bridge have nothing better to do. "I love work," one jokes, "I could watch it all day." They lean against the railing and say little more than that; they say it every day. Nor do the cables overhead make sounds they have not already heard.

The men below the drawbridge ignore the men above. They have better things to do. They must prepare for a new bridge, an expansion without a draw, meant to reduce delays. They arc and weld; they wield and hammer; they ferry and barge. The smells of cement and brack and diesel rise from their gleam. They can't afford to be idle. They have little time to begrudge the men above them.

Nor should the men above them be begrudged. The men on the drawbridge are not idle. They are watching men work. And to watch men work is work itself—work so pure it's really no work at all. For a man at work doesn't think of the day he won't work, the day he's unable to work, or the day he will lean against a railing with men who have no work and count the tall yachts and regard the wakes of traffic and tide.

Resilience

When attacked by a predator, some lizards lose their tails. Some birds lose their feathers. In birds this is called fright loss, stress molt, or shock molt.

It's better to lose one part of your body than to lose everything.

Normally, muscles grip each feather at the base of its tubular follicle. But in times of intense fear, those muscles relax, and the feather is released. Sometimes we need to let go.

When an animal breaks free from itself, the general term is "autonomy."

Autonomy, for humans, means "self-directing freedom and especially moral independence."

There was once a 7-year-old boy who accidentally pulled the tail off his pet lizard. When he asked his mom if they could put the tail back on, she said to throw it away. The lizard would grow a new one.

Many years later, the man still remembered how the severed tail "wiggled violently" in his hand. The tail might have twitched for up to 30 minutes in the trash, nerves flickering in the dark. A trick of the dead to protect the living.

Not all lizards are able to regenerate. Some must learn to live with loss. Even if the tail does grow back, it's seldom as beautiful as the first.

From birth, our bodies are bent on survival. Newly-hatched lizards have a weak point in their tails, a fracture plane by which force can cause the muscles to reflexively spasm, pulling away instead of clenching.

What if your weakness is the very thing that ends up saving your life?

When a lizard self-amputates, the flesh and skin are not all that is lost. It's also a loss of status, loss of stored energy.

If escape is necessary, am I ready to leave part of myself behind? Is there another way?

Without its former self, the animal is a little more vulnerable. But I wonder if it even cares.

It's free.

How to Parent an Adult Child from Afar

We were going away at the wrong time. That is what I felt in mid-2010, as my husband and I packed up our Minnesota belongings to move to Istanbul, Turkey. Our youngest, Greg, had just graduated from college. The Great Recession was not over, but Greg, a liberal arts grad with no real career direction, was going to try his luck in New York City.

I disliked leaving the country when my son was just starting out. He didn't need mothering, exactly, but I wanted to be closer than nine time zones away.

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My husband Sankar's job had precipitated this move, something my younger self would have relished. I had loved foreign travel in my twenties, even moving to Yemen to work as a health educator. In the nineties, we'd lived as a family in Costa Rica. But during the last decade I'd turned into a homebody. I gardened, enjoyed the latest films, and happily curled up with freelance editing. I met the Turkey news with reluctance.

It took some sharp words from my daughter, Angela, back in Minnesota for grad school, to make me reconsider. When I mentioned not wanting to interrupt my busy life, she commented, "Mom, all you do is sit on the couch, reading and watching Project Runway."

It was a rare glimpse of how my kids saw me. My life had become lackluster, I realized. Where was the adventurous woman I'd once been?

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A friend gave me a Turkey guidebook, and I flipped through photos of golden domes, intricate mosaics, and brilliant ceramics. I learned that many of my cultural references, from Aladdin to King Midas to tulips, originated in Turkey. I encountered words—Bosphorus, whirling dervish, Hellespont—that I'd known since childhood, but hadn't been quite sure what they meant. Intrigued, I agreed to make the move.

My wanderlust self still had a beating heart! But my thoughts lingered on Greg. He had bloomed in college, but he sometimes lacked confidence. Well, we'd both be adjusting to coastal mega-cities. New York, with 8 million people, and Istanbul, with 15 million. There was some symmetry in that.

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As summer began, Sankar and I settled into a two-story apartment high above the Bosphorus, and Greg began couch-surfing with his college friend, Jeremy, in midtown Manhattan. Sankar's job merited the services of a driver, but he seldom needed it, so a car, and a man named Ümit, appeared in front of our building every day, ready to take me wherever I wanted to go.

I cringed at the thought of having my own full-time employee. Americans, I felt, should tread lightly in other countries. Using a driver made me feel greedy, entitled.

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Greg was struggling in his new abode. His apartment mates, musicians, stayed up all night, jamming. I fretted, wondering how he could conduct a job hunt on just a few hours of sleep, his clothes stuffed in a crowded corner.

One morning he phoned to tell us he'd had a lengthy interview for a sales position. It sounded like the job was his, but when I asked later, he told me he hadn't even gotten a call-back. I regretted not pushing him toward summer internships while he was in college. Instead he had tutored language students from his St. Paul high school, dubbing his effort "Vamonos Spanish." I'd been proud of his creativity, but the job was hardly a resume showpiece.

He signed up with a temporary agency that sent him out to serve at banquets, not bad money. One weekend he got a bartending gig for a Time Magazine event in the Morgan Library. A longtime subscriber, I asked him what luminaries were present, but he had no idea.

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I began exploring my new city. Red-roofed Ottoman buildings perched on wooded hills that tumbled down to vast waterways. Suspension bridges, often obscured by mist, joined European Istanbul to its Asian counterpart. An ancient, horn-shaped peninsula held the Topkapi Palace, the sixth century Hagia Sophia, and even a 4th-century Egyptian obelisk.

I loved these sights, but I longed for companionship and purpose. Language classes and expatriate activities were shuttered for the summer, and Sankar was traveling—to Russia, the Persian Gulf, and Eastern Europe. Days stretched long and empty, filled with homesickness.

Thankfully, I had email and Facebook. They kept me connected to home, and I started a blog, calling it, *Sue's Turkish Adventures*.

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Greg's friend Jeremy had, with a classmate, written and produced a hit song. The pair was considering a contract with Warner Bros. Entertainment. "I waited for them outside a bank one afternoon while they picked up an \$80,000 royalty check," Greg recalls. "I was eating my dinner—a package of honey-roasted ham." In photos from that year, Greg looks about as thin as the slices. I felt guilty one evening when he phoned as we were dining on *levrek*, striped bass, with Sankar's colleagues.

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When fall arrived, I began Turkish lessons, signing up for a class slightly above my level. I had taken distance learning Turkish before leaving home, and even via headphones, my teacher had understood my rudimentary words. But my new teacher, Gülcan, seemed unable to do this, refusing with eye rolls to understand my stammered speech. I felt uncomfortable in class and my Turkish became even more hesitant. It was a disconcerting experience, and I was tempted to blame Sankar: see what you've gotten me into! But I resisted.

Sankar and I were amazed at the friendliness and generosity we were otherwise encountering. When they met us, Turks beamed, all but exclaiming, "A new person!" They hurried after us whenever we left behind

a sweater, bag, or even extra change in a shop or restaurant. When Angela visited, and her sandal fell apart outside an Istanbul mosque, an elderly male worshipper ran up to us and kindly pointed out a nearby shoe repair. We felt welcome in our new country.

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Greg took a job at Barney's in October, but then, against better judgment, told them he planned to be out of town Thanksgiving weekend. An hour later, he walked out onto Madison Avenue, unemployed. I felt sorry for him, but also exasperated.

One day Ümit, clearly disturbed by my tales of Greg couch surfing and bartending (Turks don't favor the "sink or swim" approach with their children), asked, 'Don't you *know* anyone in New York?'

My negative reply surprised him—and shattered his idea of Sankar and me as Very Important Americans.

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At a fall expatriate fair, I joined a group called The American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT), which offered sightseeing trips around the country. One Sunday, Sankar away, I joined ARIT on a tour of Istanbul's Seventh Hill. Guided by a professor of Turkish history, we peered at the ruins of St. John Studion, a 5th century hub of calligraphy and manuscript illumination that was dissolved after the 1453 conquest. We stood outside the barracks of the Janissaries, soldiers taken as boys from families throughout the Ottoman empire and turned into elite fighting forces. We sat on the richly carpeted floor of the Şehzade mosque as our guide told us it was built to commemorate the death of Sultan Suleiman's twenty-two-year-old eldest son from smallpox. Finally, we stopped by the Kalenderhane Mosque, formerly a Byzantine church, built on top of Roman baths, one regime replacing another.

All of these places spoke of loss and longing, putting my own travails into perspective. And on the tour, I met several Istanbul residents who were also feeling displaced. It was comforting.

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Each day, Sankar arrived home exhilarated, greeting me with a jaunty, "How's your day? What did you do?" Sometimes, it was all I could do to keep from snapping at him, and I decided I needed to try and find a job. With experience teaching freshman composition, I had English teaching in mind. But after a chance meeting with a retired English as a Second Language teacher, I realized there was a demand in Turkey for ESL teachers, and decided to pursue that avenue as well. Sankar's assistant, Beyza, kindly helped me write letters to universities, and several offered to interview me.

One afternoon, Ümit drove me forty minutes in heavy traffic to an interview at Kadir Has University. When the interviewer asked if I preferred teaching English or ESL, I should have hedged, but answered ESL.

"This is the *English* department," she replied, and ended the interview. Embarrassed at having come so far for a five-minute meeting, I hid out for a half-hour in a nearby bathroom before emerging to face Ümit.

Greg's friend Jeremy took the job with Warner, and that meant leaving his position with the City of New York. He recommended Greg to his boss, and Greg was taken on as an unpaid intern. He phoned us, exuberant, "Mom, I get to call vendors and explain a form to them!" I was pleased.

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I interviewed at a university called Özyeğin, which had several teachers departing mid-year. The head of ESL offered me a job and I signed a one-year contract. After a Christmas visit home in which I proudly proclaimed my employment (I hadn't worked full-time since 1987, and felt I was perceived as a bit of a screw-up), I started work. My class list was filled with baffling sounding names—Gamze, Özgür, Gökalp, Hande—and ESL would be completely new, but thankfully, I was given a structured curriculum.

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Before long, Greg's internship turned into a real job. Now we were both working in our new cities. With a regular paycheck, he signed a lease with college friends on a walkup in Murray Hill, east of midtown. I visited him on a teaching break. It was a neighborhood of tree-lined streets, bagel shops, bars, and casual cafes. "College 2.0," Greg remarked. We were both living in attractive surroundings, but Greg's room was so narrow he could squeeze little more than a bed into it.

His apartment mates were hosting a Super Bowl party that weekend. Libations were being brought in, and a half-hearted invitation was issued in my direction. I would have loved to attend, but it was a social opportunity for *them*, not me, so I watched the game in my hotel room.

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My job was turning out to be more challenging than I'd expected, my students inattentive and even unruly. Several talked and joked throughout each class period, paying no attention to my efforts to engage them. This was a surprise in an otherwise polite culture, and at first, I blamed my rookie status. But I soon learned that other colleagues had similar complaints.

I wondered what I'd gotten myself into, and even considered giving up. But I couldn't do that. I'd have to pay back a month's salary, and worse, I'd be discredited in the eyes of Beyza, Ümit, and others at Sankar's office.

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"I'm moving."

I took Greg's call one morning as Ümit drove me across the Bosphorus to work. Two of his apartment mates, he was telling me, had decided to relocate to buildings their families owned. My eyebrows went up at this Manhattan-style parenting.

Greg and his remaining roommate, Scott, needed to find a smaller place. And their landlord wasn't releasing the security deposit, so one of the dads, a lawyer, had taken it up.

The pair located a studio in a newer high-rise at Fulton and Water Street in FiDi, the financial district. Scott's father helped them construct a T-shaped, plywood partition, turning their small space into two tiny bedrooms and a nub of unlit living room. Then, to Greg's (and my) dismay, Scott decided to adopt a puppy.

I visited Greg shortly after he moved, and I felt like he had moved to a different city. Stern granite skyscrapers appeared to rise straight out of New York harbor. Ponderous shadows, hushed streets and the Merrill Lynch bull. An aura of seriousness that was fitting, if poignant, for two young men moving past college years and into long decades of work.

We visited Ground Zero and caught a foreign film in the Village. After hours, we stopped by Greg's workplace, The Mayor's Office of Contract Services. A data entry station sat adjacent to his half-cubicle and displayed photos of three middle-aged women who had become his work buddies. They shared snacks and office advice, and teased him about his bus trips to Boston to see his girlfriend. I felt grateful.

Greg and I were both waking up to new views, both getting lost on new streets. We were both assessing people to determine whether they could be friends. I was actually discovering two new cities. It seemed like some adventure button in my life had been suddenly set to *on*.

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Taking advice from my department head, I worked to turn around my classroom situation. Turkish students, she told me, expected personal connections with their teachers. In the subsequent term, I made sure to schedule individual conferences with each student early on, and that led to a more positive classroom atmosphere. I also discovered my students' love of games, and began turning as many lessons as possible into classroom competitions.

On good days—and despite reading a flurry of American newspaper articles describing how the Great Recession had ended job opportunities for fifty somethings—I began thinking of ESL as a career.

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One evening Greg called with a request. He wanted to enroll in an eight-week web design class at a school called General Assembly. Could we help him pay the \$3,500 tuition? I was skeptical. His college grades had been mediocre, and I wasn't convinced he was ready to be more diligent. He was insistent, however, so we agreed to lend him the money.

The results were surprising: he loved the course and extolled the teacher and curriculum, becoming one of those students who hangs around after class with extra questions. I was delighted that he was starting to find his way.

In fall of 2012, Hurricane Sandy made landfall in New York, and Water Street lived up to its name. The power failed in Greg's building and he and other tenants had to leave. If we'd been in the States, we would have sent Greg a ticket home, but instead he spent a week with a college friend in Philadelphia and then camped out with another friend on the Upper West Side. Fortunately, his landlord waived the month's rent.

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Sankar and I were increasingly aware of the fascinating sights scattered throughout Turkey, and we wanted to see as many of them as possible in our now-scant spare time. A trip with one of his colleagues took us to Antioch, in southern Turkey, where we climbed up to St Peter's Grotto, actually a cave, believed to be the first Christian church. We drove to nearby Şanlıurfa and relaxed alongside a 12th century reflecting pool dedicated to a native son, the Prophet Abraham.

When Greg and Angela came to visit, we drove to the Roman cities of Ephesus and Hierapolis. We spent an afternoon following the winding Menderes River, from whose name the word, meander, derives, and I was thrilled to show off *my* new world.

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“I’m moving again,” Greg announced. Scott was bailing out of their little studio, moving back to live with his parents on Long Island, and Greg couldn’t afford the place on his own. I was starting to see New York housing as a domino game, one move precipitating a series of others.

Greg was only earning in the mid-30s, but he was determined to find a place of his own. Via Craigslist, and thanks to the Murray Hill security deposit he’d finally received, he rented a room above a fish market on Grand Street and Bowery Avenue in Chinatown. The Bowery!

Greg remembers Chinatown as “artsy and dirty, smelly and random” and when I visited, I had to agree. His room was up two flights of stairs that looked like they’d never seen a mop, within an apartment full of shrouded furniture. Paint blistered off the walls and the sun struggled in through a tiny, dusty skylight.

We took a cab to IKEA in Brooklyn and I bought him a dresser. He was traveling light in New York, picking up odds-and-ends and then leaving them behind, but he had a little \$8 “Lack” IKEA table that had been following him. When I called him, I would ask, “How is Lack?”

Greg had broken up with his girlfriend, so no more Boston getaways. It was hard to think of Greg alone in that shabby room, but his solitude, like mine the year before, ended up sparking creativity. He also started blogging, first producing *Honest College* and then *Dear Blogger*.

My blog was thriving. I wrote a post about the Mosque at Ground Zero controversy, and enjoyed a robust number of likes. For the first time, I felt that my voice was being heard.

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At a bar just before Halloween, Greg met Clare, a pretty nurse from Brooklyn, and they began dating. Good news, as he confided he’d been lonely. And his blogs had begun to generate revenue. He’d worked for the city for two years when he called to say he was thinking of quitting.

“Greg! How can you give up a job with benefits?” was my alarmed response. But he went ahead and gave notice. He recalls walking to a Little Italy bakery for breakfast at 1 pm the day after he quit, “I felt so free of the rat race.”

I had once quit a high-paying job, not for another position, but to stay at home with baby Greg. I was no stranger to taking risks in pursuit of happiness, but I’d had the cushion of my husband’s income.

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One Saturday, Sankar and I joined an ARIT tour on a four-mile walk around Istanbul’s land walls. This long, fortified barrier, constructed in the 5th century CE, protected Constantinople for ten centuries. We gazed at triumphal gates where Byzantine emperors had entered their city, and peered at a section called the Circus Gate where Ottoman troops had finally breached the walls, capturing the prize they renamed Istanbul.

Throughout the tour, our guide told us, “It was the same people,” meaning that regime change, and even religious change, was borne, not by people brought in by the victors, but instead by long-term inhabitants who, sensing the direction the winds were blowing, adapted their beliefs and allegiance. His words made me see Istanbul’s history as a saga of adaptation and survival.

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Greg was moving up in the world—and once again he was planning to move. I figured he was glad to be leaving Chinatown, but his sublet ad was surprisingly tender: “This place was where it all started for me, and I want a special person to have it.”

He hired a rental agent who charged him a whopping \$4,450 to locate an efficiency in the Village. I was proud he could afford that but, not fully comprehending digital employment, feared his income might any day disappear into cyberspace.

Clare’s father drove into the city to help Greg move, exclaiming, “What the fuck?” when he saw Greg’s room.

He settled into a fourth-floor studio, a garret really, above several elegant apartments and a psychology practice. His street was charming, filled with winsome old townhomes and artisanal coffeehouses, and his 12 x 16 room was sweet, with old-fashioned mullioned windows, a tiny bath and a sliver of kitchen so small its drawers couldn’t fit a standard plastic utensil holder.

I felt like a hipster walking around the Village with Greg. We rubbed shoulders with artistic-looking patrons as we drank our morning coffees, peered into The Chess Forum, and shopped for houseplants alongside a Russian Orthodox church. His business was thriving, and he had adopted two kittens, Leroy and Snowy. For entertainment we laughed at their antics.

As I climbed into an Uber to leave, Greg surprised me by calling down from his attic room to say goodbye. I looked up, waved, and snapped a picture. I’m not sure whether it was the distance, or the angle, but when I looked at the photo later, I saw a grown man.

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Our tour in Turkey was coming to an end. Sankar had achieved his goals and I had discovered a new career. In addition, the two of us had uncovered a mutual interest in religious and ancient history. On our final ARIT trip, to Turkish Mesopotamia, we ate dinner under the stars, the honeyed hues of the ancient stone buildings bathing us in golden light as if to congratulate us for the leap of faith that had opened up our world.

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In 2017 Greg moved back to Minnesota with his cats, renting an apartment alongside a Minneapolis lake. He still makes his living blogging, but he and Clare have gone their own ways. I don’t worry; he’s an adult now, fully able to handle career, housing, and love life.

Greg’s New York journey was aided by musician friends, work moms, and fathers who built, hauled, and lawyered. But I also helped. Despite moving more than five thousand miles away, I didn’t end

up failing my son. Our distance served to forestall my hovering impulses, allowing him freedom to experiment. And my struggles gave me empathy for his travails.

Propelled an uncomfortable distance from my Project Runway couch, I inadvertently accomplished what parenting books breezily recommend: I got a life. I probably even set an example or two along the way. That's the kind of mothering with no expiration date.

Can't Breathe

A soul gasps its final breath.
Can't breathe.
Wrong color, culture, and nationality.
Questionable crime, but no weapon.
Can't breathe.
Final moments, wonder is this how I will die.
Where is my family?
Can't breathe.
Air trapped in my lungs and my head is throbbing.
Can't breathe.
I hear my heart pounding in my chest and feel it too.
Can't breathe.
A slower beat as my heart fatigues, I do too.
Confused.
Tears stream, I plead for mercy.
Can't breathe.
To you Lord I give my soul.
Can't breathe.

Lines of Separation

During WWII, a village along the Tannbach River near the border between Russia and Germany was divided. It remained divided until 1989. The Edmund Pettus Bridge was the site of race riots in 1965. The day became known as Bloody Sunday in the U.S.

I.

Are there some that cannot be broken?
Ones that can be crossed?

History unfolds in lines: the Berlin Wall
was one, Tannbach another, a seesaw
of barbed wire and metal fences.

Deceptively serene, the sun lit up metal stakes
like candelabra at high noon, though
these events were not a celebration.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge—
National Guardsmen, the river wide,
fences spiked, still guarded, unclimbable.
George Floyd. The lines keep building; fates sealed.

What does it take? Just the correct personality
of aggression to hold a blue, cloudless sky
stunned, and waiting?

The land also draws its lines. Every fall,
leaves sail effortlessly onto chilled ground
maintaining the silence of those who have gone before.

Each skeletal outline delicately separates winter reality
from dreams, the penciled edges not easily smudged.
Their lines of separation remain distinct upon the awakening.

Water, moving endlessly, carves apart whatever
it touches, even earth. It grinds at granite,
sluices red mud, brown mud,

criss-crosses entire states, gnawing
lines of truth and dirt into the rampant lies
of separation that serrate this nation.

II.

Somewhere a metal skate scratches ice
over the cold translucence of a circular rink,
either in the rush of a race
or the sketching of a beautiful dance.

This is the history of you and I.
Examine the lines of your face held within
the mirror and the me you think you know
outside of it. What is the required distance
between your breath and mine?

The ink of my pen skates over white paper,
shuffles the deck to blur lines of separation
between truths and a one-eyed joker,
between the you and the I.

Who fired the first shot, who the white light of hope?
Perhaps people in love parted by that line,
in reality only an icicle, ready to melt
into a brilliant shower of words.

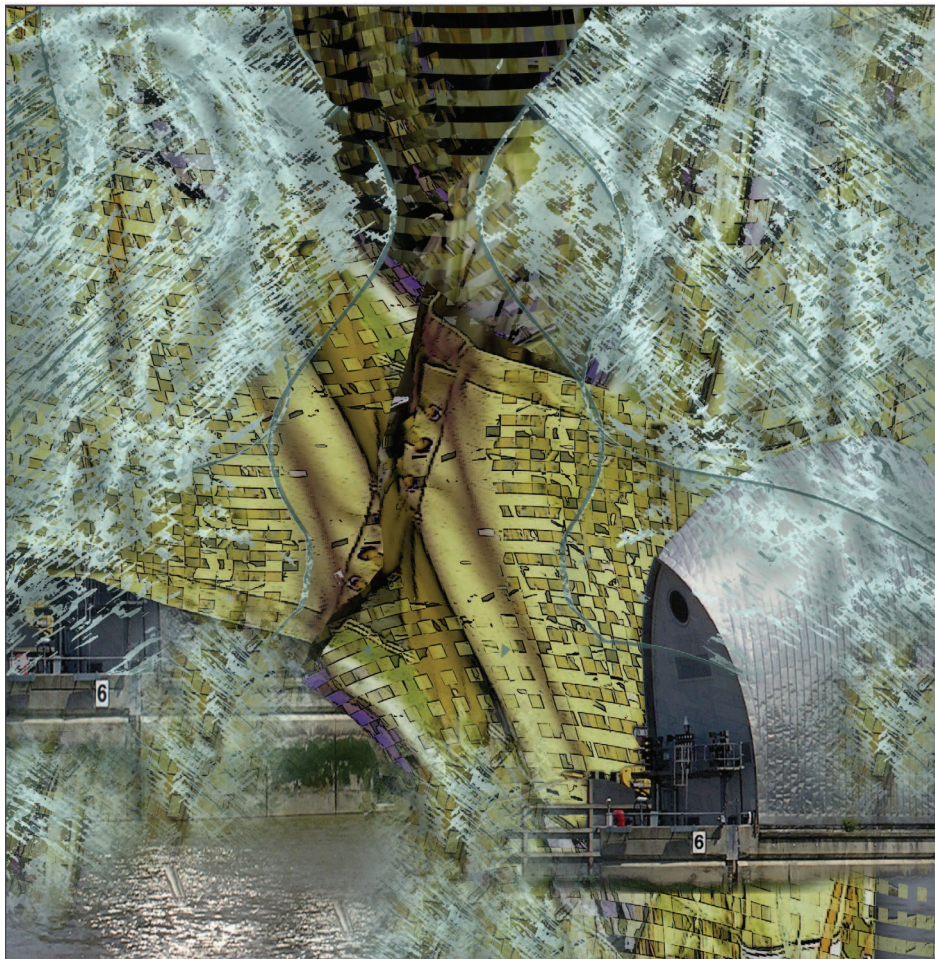
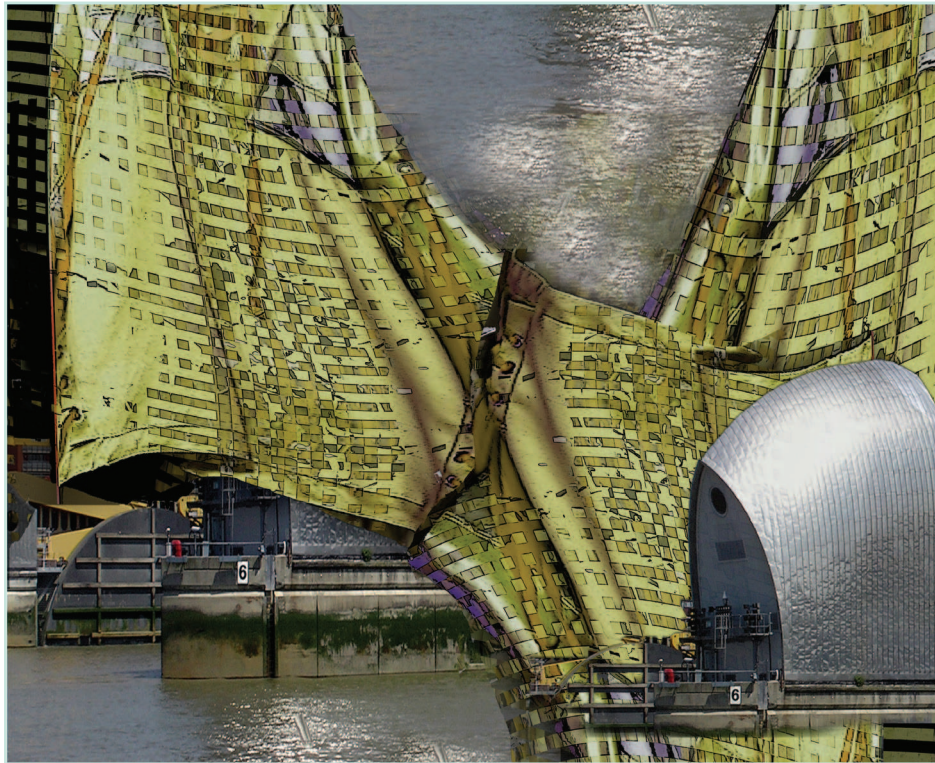
This line between the you and the I,
is as thin and painful as a paper cut, a glass
door with nothing but a sheer curtain to obscure it.

There is a handle
Will you open it? (Can you open it?)

Northeast Kingdom

Though grandfather
had ceded his Jersey herd
grandmother appeared
daily, their province
now up the hill,
and entered the milk house
a limping dame.
Father, parent heir,
hailed her from his parlor,
four glorious glass jars
aswim with milk.

What did I know
of continuance,
persistence? Cows fed
on grass, springhouse
water rained down
the mossy well.
New to this land,
I shot a swallow
from the air and it died
in the chaff. I tossed it
on the shit pit.



*Sea Level Rise Series: Thames Flood Gates (above), Thames Barrier (below)
by Christy Sheffield Sanford*

My Cousin, the Editor, Gunned Down at The Annapolis Gazette

The bursting glass shattering the sky, once above,
now showering him in sheets of scattering hate,
once a glass partition and open glass doors giving
the proper authorial distance while keeping
a close eye on the world, no breath, stopping now
at a world gone crazy, to report a last minute almost,

almost his Mongolian opera singer wife received
the birthday gift in the drawer, before rushed at,
before, seven years ago, print witnessing a man after
a woman who said no, no, but a mind wouldn't stop
chasing, cursing the reality of those who put in
black and white, gave notice, shame, to his rage at

her, them, all that isn't his, while others sneer at
his need to hold his head up, to get even with
a girl he knew in his school threw her lunch at
him in front of all those other who snickered at
his black trench coat and lonely eyes and even
stuck gum in his long straggling hair before.

My cousin, always smiling quietly for ghosts of
history, patriots, artists, statesmen walking with
him in streets of Annapolis pointing them out
as they passed him by to my wife meeting at
the dome of City Hall my gentle cousin for
the first time, he spins stories that make us laugh.

When I was seven, parents divorcing so with
him and his parents for the summer shocked to
be without a family anymore, this little boy at
my knees already surrounded in a fort of books
conversing with George Washington aiming at
understanding how to stand up to what is wrong.

So quiet, my cousin, he didn't have a date with
him all the nights of plays, concerts, operas at
each performance spellbound, wondering how
another still soul bound up in books and music
at fifty might and by accident no ticket she by
him sat, Mongolian opera star, and love began.

A reporter rushes the braking blast of the shotgun
the woman reaching towards sanity blown apart,
my cousin, the editor, stands up and speaks words of
a world still together and not in shards of anger at
everyone, brothers, neighbors, strangers, gunning
anything that loves, cries, holds other hands together.

My cousin, encyclopedic teacher of cub reporters,
stands up to tell the shooter there are souls at
risk shattering with the glass that he must look to
so tamping down the shearing gales of hate within
him if he could, he should, is all my cousin says as
he disappears within the gulf of shotgun blasts.

The photographer is hesitant at the funeral to
tell us about these images that haunt him late at
night after he hid under the desk next to my cousin
then running down the hall as shells flew towards
but did not hit him as he fled out the doors into
a world too broken to give my cousin his home.

1561, Celestial Phenomenon Over Nuremberg

The sky was always a collage of fear
but today it is geometric and looming.
We crouch in the sturdy grass and watch
a bird contort into a vessel. A bright witching from heaven.

Smog pours from the wings of a shoulder and
all my brothers are leaving the atmosphere.

I suggest we eat all that's left in the pantry. A hexagon whirls
and a moon made of blood drains itself of light.

There must be so much pain in the hidden war.
So much that even a priest will not tell us.
He eats his own face in the shadows.

Everyone has something they want to unsee but seldom
do we get the chance to actually undo.

I offer my daughter's eyes to the bleeding. She is grateful
for the dark. It is finally quiet inside her.

The long black head of a spear emerges. This is the end.
I imagine it will pierce us deep and permanently.

There is weeping but we don't know from where.
A noise is always a betrayal of something internal.

When the head lands
who will we be?



Into the Fog, by Richard LeBlond

Light Blue Nursery (Alma Thomas)

February morning; Washington D.C.
the in-between morning
an in-between season
in this place: the end of a line.

On her last day, Alma sits here
inside the very house they moved to in 1907,
just up from Columbus, Georgia.
Sixteen then; 86 now.

The children,
the children's children
wear the same face
she wore then.

Some teachers paint
the corner of a desk.
Some keep scrapbooks.
Some remember this:

The first time a grown child
comes in holding her child's hand,
noticing the paint on the wall
is still tired green.

The first year they stay home in September
& wonder, will the butterflies still migrate
when there are no children
to tell of their flight?

Before a baby comes,
someone paints a nursery.
Before the children come,
someone lines up their crayons.

The work of this world is precious as mud.
Marbles rolling in a pocket.
Peas in a row outside,
lined up straighter than the children can.

Lines, counts, margins:
each day an uneven set of rectangles;
rows of children reciting
yellow orange yellow orange

Five quadrants of blue:
diamonds pushes from four to five.
This, somehow, they call *abstract*.
Elysian fields: water, nursery, sky:

Imagined repose; Imagined circumference.
This, somehow, they call quiescence.
The window from which a rectangle emerges,
angles of children's backs when finally they rest.

There are so many children.
Names dissolve; rows remain.

Dreaming

Monster drudged through the field, mournful march towards the sunset, as if to the tune of a dirge beating from within. Gusts disturbed birds in the brush as they fluttered past, clusters of burs, bits of barley sticking to his fur. Yet, he cannot pick himself clean. His arms are full of jars, clinking against one another, each of which contains a different piece of him—

His heart, his liver, his brain, his lungs...
Unbearable feeling that he must go on,
knowing, nothing belongs to him.

The Oak

Exhausted by the calamity of
it all, Monster decided to rest.

Hidden deep within the forest
he found an oak hollowed out
by the centuries.

Inside the oak, a tuft of spring
flowers on which he lay.

Falling asleep, his breaths,
like the sound of thunder
in the distance.

Falling asleep, he watched a
spider spin its web like a
story of time.

Falling asleep, he watched
a snake shed its skin, then
move on to another life.

Nearly asleep, he listened
to the sounds around: the wind,

leaves waving on branches
as ancient as silence, their
song, like a memory of rain.

Alphabet Unicorn

always trots swiftly toward The House of Names
never knowing if now it will be
a bookshop, a pub, a bordello, a school
or even a bridge she might explore
to visit another world

growing up knowing how to write cursive
she's good at loops and connectors and flow,
ink from a fountain pen she bought at a faire
changing color from orange to purple
and sometimes beebalm pink

her own name has twenty-six letters
and she tries it forwards, backwards, in time
to the rhythm her stride makes on curving cobbles
as she mouths new sounds and combinations
in upper and lower case

and there again at the end of the street
is the place she visits each afternoon:
today it's a teahouse with a crimson door
open to welcome all shapers of sound
with a cup of sweetest black words

Space Unicorn

collects tiny figures with wheels and gears
and keeps them safe in a polished ship
she made from a plastic tomato box
round and firm and bumpy. She knows
Earth will be invaded again
when beings return to the Baltic Sea
along the bridge they forged from stars
and she wants to be thoroughly ready
to escape far past our moon. She has
her jacket, her shining pants, her satchel
for apples and books. Only one thought
keeps her worried and fraught: how will
she shrink her horn and too-wide hooves
to fit through the door she has carefully cut
so she can sit in the captain's chair?

Under Bubbles

From a Denny's mug
at breakfast my stepdad poured coffee
on my mom's back

bare shoulders speckled with moles
I dressed the blisters with burn cream
before and after school for weeks. I laid gauze squares

on her blisters. Mom was not shy
while shirtless. She never covered her breasts

hanging like soft gourds. She told me think
about becoming a nurse. I was thinking about how to
kill my stepdad. With child hands

I guided her back to the pillow, pulled a blanket over breasts.
I know I'll scar from this, she said. I already had.

Bad Poem/Bad Mother

*"How proud is desolation on whose earlier shrines today
the spirit's scorching flames drink in the countless griefs
of grandsons yet unborn."*

Georg Trakl

Depending upon translation, I'm either a bad poem or a bad mother.
What I'm trying to say is that in spring all the grandsons that will
be born have & I am an empty cradle. Something about the blues
& sons, something about the power to condemn. You say this with
your silence, in the way you hide Pascal from me, a boy strange &
precious. Oh, the taunts of memory, the days you wept, "Mama,"
thirsting for attention. First, Friday & Saturday, then Sunday, Monday,
Tuesday. Before the endless hoarding of weeks, I wrote poetry, face
to the wall/blank/in a room so far inside my mind that I was a hazard
to myself/submerged in a darkness that had already consumed three
generations of mothers. You came to me with rainwater. I offered to
coexist without gazing in your direction. Please forgive me. Down a
road in the woods where the robins sing, I dig a grave, small, hoping to
bury a universe, unraveled. My love erased like a planet that never existed.

She Figures It Out

In the spell of a man
who made her his unhappiness
she kept to the margins of her life
so as not to further unnerve it,
raised daughters who would rob her
of what she could not give,
fed them soup and the Rolling Stones
& read them Little Bear

From what could be saved in an envelope
Green Stamps
chump change
that birthday twenty
she bought a long wool coat,
dark blue with shiny buttons

she would she couldn't she
stood at the window
of a waking city.

The apartment door inched open
stairs ran to the street
there it was November
December
impossibly winter

the sycamores shorn,
the light so bright
she could hardly bear it



Sky Dream, by Kelly DuMar

The Domestic Microbiota

i

When a mother contributes her microbes
to the child she brings into this world
they swarm all over her newborn,
protecting both innards and skin

then lead him mewling to the breast
where reinforcements gather
to introduce *pleasure* and *peace*.

Oh let him linger.

ii

My mother was raised in a spotless house
but nibbled at dirt in her yard
where renegade bugs were lurking,
eager to convert her.

How much does this explain?

iii

Colonies of bacteria that think of themselves
as You and Me assemble in our bathroom
to floss the enemy microbes camped
among our teeth

They say *Good morning*
They say *How'ja sleep?*

iv

Slight to slaughter
our bugs engage
in identity politics

v

The right hand has in common
just a sixth of its species with the left
or so a scientist claims,

and this is probably why the left
doesn't know what the right is doing.

vi

As tonight my antibodies battle Type A flu
I can't help but wonder
where I picked up this taste for good scotch—

did it start with the sauerkraut
that gateway drug?

vii

Residents of the terrain we know
as the tongue of our orange cat
are attaching themselves to my chin.

See I've called it *my chin*.
That's what They want Me to do.

viii

Did Bach have a cat?
Did it matter?

What Is in Your Fridge?

In a bid to stop mothers from eating their toddlers
a taskforce was created, assigned to check every house
for limbs of dismembered children and the women
who will perfect spring from an inadequate
understanding of art.

Every fortnight they would come knocking
they would come asking
their rather finkler question;
"What is in your fridge?"

The first time they arrived at our door,
our fridge was filled with:
fake news,
wrong data,
fear,
despair,
sour memories, putrid dreams
and chapbooks of elusive poems
with no warnings to approach from a distance.
There were threats all over the fridge's door,
there were curses my father could be sued for.

The last time they knocked on our door,
three bottles filled with muffled cries of concubines
were sitting at the right side of the fridge's bottom shelf,
in the vegetable crisper were fresh sins god refused to forgive.
At the middle shelf, leftovers of estrogen and broken promises,
top shelf is for mother, for sympathies for spilt milk and scorn.
Stocks of dislocated futures sat at the top left side of the freezer,
at the right, a small box in which some bones were discovered,
mother swore it wasn't that of her child, said it was of a baby chimp
whose carcass will be used to concoct potions for healing infirmities;
my father tried to back up her story with a very weak smile,
but more often than not, fiction bears a truth history cannot comprehend.

A Bridge Between Two Worlds

the French stole
the sweetness of sugar
for the Western lexicon
dry it will keep forever

letters are placeholders
for the sounds we make
and all verbs follow
the paradigm of action

to speak can wound
and a syrup smile
might cut with obsidian
chips of silence

Day's Break

The day rose—again. Layers of the sun becoming instantly extinct.
The white sheet that overnight divided me from you.

The map resetting the brain, one syllabled synapse at a time.
Forming & reshaping a carbon footprint & possibly carbon making up

The pieces of infinity. As some scientists claim, we return
To carbon, in red school-girl ribbons.

If I snap, it should bend apart. Infinity plus the gift of today.
You stepped as far as the lip of the Golden Gate bridge. Ocean-salt

Accumulating, on breaking skin. As it almost swayed,
Like a dog's tongue, lapping up the end of a day. You pleaded for us,

To make our way back. To our day in San Francisco broken in half,
New York City left behind. An exile's life is planned one day at a time

With its lows & highs. We would turn back, in one column.
Slowly catching up with shadows. Already watchful.

Jumping off points of too many. You tell me on our drive up north,
The jumpers are lead. It spooks you. There is no turning back.

A sun, at a jumping off point, peaking at noon, yielding to a moon.
Resting in exile—

Portrait of Bella

You folded up your grief
In the relief of your hands like a linen

Handkerchief embroidered with your
Mother's initials I believe your hands reveal

And conceal the musculature of your journey
To now in your daughter's makeshift

Painter's studio in NYC your aura illuminated
To your discomfort she paints without artifice

Her small knife cutting in the parts
Of you she believes conceal your frame

Is slightly smaller than when you arrived
At forty-three with a radiance of someone

Who left someone she loved for many
Years you and your daughters complete

A familial pieta as we fold stony
Into stone to the monument of grief

You've built from ground up as you behold
It and make more beautiful for all of us

Narrow Bridge

*Kol ha- olam kulo gesher tzar me'od
V'haikar lo l'fached klal*

*The whole world is a very narrow bridge;
the important thing is not to be afraid.*

-Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav

On the bus to the settlements,
the Hasid belts his prayer, baritone
flat as the guttural bus
crossing bridges over villages
slashed apart by walls.

Not like Brooklyn
or the Golden Gate,
where buskers' songs float
across the water's gap.
Even in Ireland
there's a peace bridge now

with a twisted span.
Its towers still tilt
toward opposing sides.
"Dicks spitting in the wind,"
a local once witted.

We can be driven
to places we never wanted
or jump into the river,
like *Les Miz's* Javert
when his world couldn't be sliced
into wet and dry.

Here on the West Bank:
the song-man's clouded eyes
invoke not the divine,
but my brother on Thorazine,
who kept hearing rodents
running from Have-A-Heart traps.



Bridge in Mist, by Kelly DuMar

Flying Home From A Monolingual Land

In this city never seen, yet flown through five times
Our tin crate has landed; we are stranded once more
With a glum sweaty hour to while away, fretting
Fiddling with a playlist, lolling, whittling lame rhymes
Before this dang plane takes off again for Lahore
For my home where the sun will soon now be setting

Black shoe, black shoe, change your shoe. Go mend it with glue -
Move now, move now, move, or I will drown you in blue -
Black sh - 'Mama, aé avion kinna grande jay!'
The awe-struck trill cuts through my brain's drizzly decay
Kneading Spanish and Punjabi with artless grace
Into a languemix-loaf that brightens the whole place

The hour goes by and we take again to the sky,
'...geon kabooter urran fly, look dekho ásm-'
I hear the trundle of food-trolleys drawing nigh
I see her whisper as they start to move away
The hostesses' faces in bewilderment spasm
Then, at "Ni theeyé, meinu bachi layi paan liya dé"

Anxious mother, harassed hostesses, eavesdropper
We are frozen all, as they strain to decipher
This seemingly stunning request, until - we see!
Not Paan, the leaf-juice-wrap, Pan! Bread. Double-roti.
We all laugh as I swiftly chuck into the bake
This special spread for my langue-mix homecoming cake

Kernel, Know Thy Fate

A whorl of branches swaying in perfect grace
Steered by the wind, crushed by the weight of the snow,
Smiles at me. Like an antlered deer it will go
Prancing on, that perfect tree, learning to face
Itself until the next spring.

They sit shivering in the glass-and-steel shed,
The children of the men who raised me just so
They could erase me. I too was once mellow
And smiling, and pitied the stumps of the dead,
Mourned them until the next spring.

Now I am the wizened wood-stub who can sham
Life still, out-frown mumbled human disfavour.
I belong here. I am part of this flavour,
Like butter in the space between bread and jam
Squirreled until the next spring.

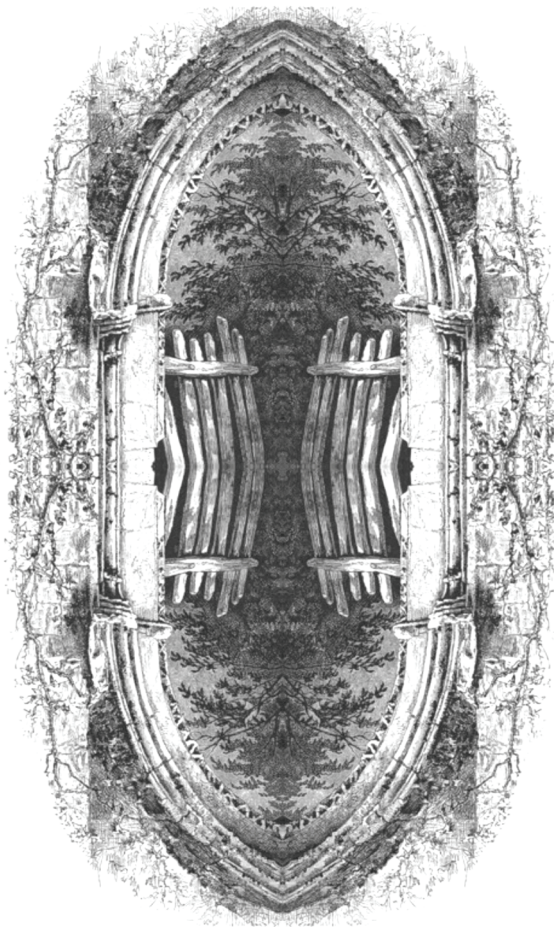
The Bridge Lurches

I am hunting for the poison apple
The river swallowed. It dropped from her hand,
Buried itself in the mud, and spread, spread,
Spread, until the water all foamed with rage.
Look, the bridge lurches. Ire is the staple
Food pouring into the veins of my land,
Lacing with poison the once-golden thread
That turned a labyrinth into a cage.

I part the bridge and river with a knife
To wash off the exhaustion, skin first. See,
It glows. I make extinct the flying life
I can neither unlove nor unenvy

Bridges

When one is twelve and falls one breaks a wrist,
but if wise is not standing on a bridge.
Therefore: no kites. Later one's morose tendencies
pose the greatest risk. Therefore: no cars or midnight walks.
When one finds oneself in the Amazon,
hold onto rope and step from stump to stump
hoping not, as I have seen, to collapse in muck below.
On occasion, one's father instructs. Perhaps it helps,
but in dreams I still sail through cracks, half-constructed decks—
somewhere near my grandparents' trailer
in rural Pennsylvania, anything made
of sycamore and daisies, imaginary spans.
When one connects, crosses divides, hands meet,
one rises from darkness, awake—no longer tumbling but flying.



Silk Reaching Out of a Smile, by Bill Wolak



Along the Cumbres and Toltec, by Kathleen Frank



Rio Grande on the Road to Taos, by Kathleen Frank

Chapare

Still digesting lunch's red bananas and citron,
having avoided poisonous ants on the long hike,
I lean over the piranhas of the Chapare River,
drape my hand in water as the boat speeds on.
We pass by a ruined bridge, and along shore,
women washing clothes, their faces taut as wire
reflected in muddy mirrors. At night we hunt jaguars,
drink, sleep on the roof under heavy nets.
Once a cab with a mother and child,
legs slung out the open back, nearly touching the road,
hauls us into town to buy coca leaves and dance.
In the morning: coffee before another hike,
fishing with children in red Nikes, as workers in La Paz strike,
readying for wars that never come.

The Lost Things

They disappear in the undertow
of our lives, in the succession of events
that spread like waves across our shore.
They vanish in the shuffle
of changing one coat for another
in the uneasy transition from winter
to spring, from spring to summer,
from autumn's first chill
and the hard frosts of November.
The innumerable lost things
that we are said to see again after
we enter the afterlife: that perfect white
stone I kicked down the street
while skipping school one April morning
during my senior year in high school,
a copy of Martin Esslin's *The Theatre
of the Absurd* in the back pocket
of my blue jeans, when I kicked the stone
a little too far, and it rolled into
a gutter, still rushing with the spring rain;
never mind the crucifix
that I have carried in my pocket for years
or have placed on the bedside table, which
is lying at the bottom of a truant pocket
amid lint and Kleenex, lavishing
in the existential abeyance
of lost things, hovering there somewhere,
graced by dimensions of its own,
still continuing to bless me from afar.

Hell Sea Road

1

The First Lady confers
the Duarte, Sánchez and Mella Medal of Honor
upon a banker
dressed *prêt-à-porter*.

Behind a door
a drunkard is reduced by the law
to something less than trash.

In a cemetery courtyard
beneath a moon equalizing everything
thieves separate teeth from coins.

The sky, black.
The sea, black.
The streets, black.
Black shadows go down the pier
and one confuses demons with fishermen.

Try your luck in this land without tempting the Devil,
and make sure to get drunk with a weapon in your hand.

2

After they fixed the Duarte Highway
one travels from Santiago to Santo Domingo more rapidly,
even if one stops at Bonao to eat magic mushrooms.

After they built the Alcarrizos bridge,
if it doesn't rain, one enters the capital in less time.
But if it rains and one stops to eat magic mushrooms in Bonao,
the Alcarrizos overpass is the antechamber to heaven.

3

It's Friday.
The *mamey* sun is new, the blue sky is new.
Flattened buildings and jalopies
make the landscape more human.

It's Friday.
Black shoes are polished in black puddles.
Motorcycle cops dying from laughter violate women and stoplights.
The street's humidity hastens things
like a thirty year old virgin.

It's Friday.
On this province of an island
the sea's invisible.

The Sun Is Shining

For Claudia Rosario

Today the sun came out
and you weren't in my bed.
I had set aside eggs, cheese, bread,
and orange juice for us to enjoy.

I had swept and mopped the floor
so we could walk barefoot
and when once we finished breakfast
we could get back into bed without missing a beat.

It rained all month
and we never saw one another.

But the sun today is red
like the helmet of firefighters,
and its rays illumine the bedroom
as you would when arriving to spend the weekend.

Now that the house is alone
it will start raining at any moment.

*Poem in original Spanish by Homero Pumarol
Translations into English: Anthony Seidman*

Never

My father never ate meat on Friday
Never let our dog eat meat on Good Friday
Could never get grass to grow on Cass Street
Never left the house in the morning without shaving
Never had a good word to say about any lawyer
I loved the way he would say the word “Shyster”
Never slapped his sassy children Never swung a belt
 Never waved a switch
Never hit my mother or any of his kids
Never knew what to do with me and my wanderings
Never turned down a free drink
Never invited his brothers to our house
Never spoke with the Irish brogue of his Mother
 And Father except for the letter Haitch
Never learned to swim
Never tired of telling the dangers to eye & finger
 of firecrackers & cherry bombs
Never was bothered by the smell of the Omaha Stockyards
Never laughed when I played practical jokes on him
Never told us to study more or work harder at school
Never stopped talking of a white horse and a new house
Never told us a single thing about his parents
Never favored anyone – except my sister Margaret Mary
Never cut himself shaving

Never liked the Creighton Jesuits who turned down
his cousin's application

Never mentioned my life as a thief

Never liked the singing voice of Mel Torme

Never allowed me to grow grass seed in the basement

Never said a word about the woman next door who
whispered sexual invitations

Never stopped repeating about the football coaches
at Lincoln *They teach the best players new
ways to break their arms and legs*

Talking Back to My Skeleton

You used to be
A box of Ramen noodles

You used to be
A cow in the middle
Of field of shamrock and clover

You used to be
An acre of soybeans
Eating dirt
And chewing sunlight slow

And here you are once more
Your skull a leaky cup
Stuffed with images
Of coffins and funeral flowers
What happened to your brain?



Endless Passage: Rail at Weirs Beach on Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire by Sarah Gish

Crossing the Icy Bridge

The river waits out bitter winter
with frozen sides
and the tiny trickle of a current
barely keeping gravity awake.
It's crossed by an old rusty trestle,
that feels more historic than safe
as I roll my car wheels onto it,
slip and slide a little but
keep to the slow and straight and narrow
as my eyes lock onto the other end,
and instinctive prayers,
no longer content to stay within
the confines of my mind,
are spoken honestly and loudly.

On this bridge, I am less a traveler,
more a situation.
Darkness.
A precarious surface.
Low railings on either side
and a twenty-foot drop to the ice below.

The land's no better
and yet, here I am,
slowly rolling my way forward.
Forest trembles. Clouds quake.
Spans beneath me rattle loudly.
My nerves relay the obvious.
I'm better at depth
than surfaces.

Blood Moon

On my trip through death I took a key.
Two shoes pointing in opposite directions.

Everything is symbolic but nothing has meaning.
I pass myself like a reflection in a window.

The night beyond. The night within.
You could say it like that.

There are other ways. They elude me.
The days of my past elude me.

Shadows skittering into darkest corners.
Where it is always night. Where night reigns.

It is easier to take a bell off a bull's throat
than corral the river that flows through us.

The bridge grows remarkably bright.
The moon grieving behind a cloud.

The full moon. A Hunter's Moon.
The world is blood. The deer flee

into barren fields.
We cannot hide our emptiness.

This is the night when sky asserts
the fullness of our bleeding.

I cannot see outside myself.
The moon circling. The earth circling.

*O the days of the Kerry dances,
Gone and lost like our youth too soon.*

Broken

How everything breaks apart
then adds up
to something unexpected

is a potter's secret,
like firing glaze multiple times
until you get it right,

but your kiln
must be at exactly
the right temperature,

and it has to be the right moment
for mistakes not to be only mistakes,
for the past not to matter.

You have to decide
that perfection
is not what you're after.

You have to humble yourself
in a way
that doesn't come easily.

Even if you're lucky,
you have to do it
at least twice.

A Murder of Crows

I want to read elegies, those cowed monks
hunched as in prayer, choired in stanzas,
in a ruined apse, a light snow falling.
I want to hear the Miserere, that high C
soaring from the dolor, like a soul
leaving a body. But we are not deceived.

Ten years coming since you said *Terminal*
that day: no poisonings, no wondrous oils
to staunch the ravening. I heard the room ticking.
Stone by stone you walked into the river.
The world is all upended. Forgive the ten years' silence.

Now, the light in the dark and the dark in the light.
A lone hand, pressed against a mirror.
My grief is entire.
And in the trees above –
bleak notes on a stave –
a murder of crows,
raucous in the bare black branches.

The Gravedigger

He loves his machine, its four-wheeled chassis
and hydraulic stabilizing legs. Loves red dust

coating the windshield, his own hands
controlling the full-power steering. He doesn't

fear the salt lips of the open grave or the zygote
that splits and splits again, making a child

or a cricket that enters his house to whine and sing.
He suffers pain in wet weather, fingers swollen,

shoulders sore. He brushes his teeth, spits out
blood, presses his face to chilled sheets,

bed soft, window closed, curtains shut
against aching moonlight. He dreams a trip

to Liverpool away from slow shadows,
flowers that fall, bloated bodies of the dead.

Poked

The poets read in bed
as tornados target their houses
like ships, they tell me,

frigates that tack into wind.
They don't notice salt water
dashed onto their bedclothes,

limbs of trees thumping
rooftops, the real just a shadow
of the ideal, ice merely

metaphor, nothing to plan
ahead for, no need to turn on
the news. They suffer from

various maladies. Allergic
to muslin. Carbolic eye.
Some of them tremble

when they see bananas,
donkeys, cups full of gin.
Sam the poet must drink only

goat's milk. What happened
to pay phones, Sam asks me.
Where are the crucibles?

Fear of typewriters. That's
another one. Nevertheless
poets type doggedly. They tip

back their cowboy hats.
They believe they are nomads.
In their pockets: wheat,

silver, sand. Rain's single
syllables poke them. Lightning
enters them like a syringe.

Countdown to Spring Peepers

Opening a window enhances the day
when it's your only option, that or the book

you can't quite get lost in.
How the squeals of children, greetings

between dogs or neighbors, touch your heart.
The same sounds that used to irk you last fall

when you found them distracting
as if the path through the woods back of your place

belonged only to you. And even though
it's too cold to leave the window open, you do

anyway, delighted by birdcall and honking geese
and the memory of walking by the pond

watching the heron blend through
dry grasses, that mighty stroke of wings

as he left, free to go wherever he pleased.



Optimism, by Starrla Cray

Useful Art at Turtle Bay

Cantilever and cable, the bridge can't
touch the river. A physics of resisting

wind and gravity, it spans like a ship
sailing on air. So—not quite of this

world—she leaves no ripples. Her
taut steel rigging rises to a mast 200

feet above her wide, glass-block deck.
Unhindered, light passes through,

meaning she casts no darkness over
fish swimming below. But walk out

on that translucence, structure changes
once more. Pylon becomes the weightless

wing of a giant bird flying you across
the water. Grab a cable, feel its deep

hum: now a huge stringed instrument
being plucked by the wind resonates

with a slide-like play as bicycles and
runners' feet drum its soundboard.

No, look again. It resolves: a massive
sundial, its gnomon carving a sharp

shadow on the river-bank's half-day
clock face, accurate once a year.

I Wanted to Ask Him His Name

my feet pressed into hot sand
his presence quoted shadowed walls chipped by holy wars
“no need to make decisions today,” he said, “just walk.”

my scarab toes pushed pebbles, i wonder, does a time traveler
know every journey? what do i know
but to ask questions god wants others to hear

this bearded old man whose laughter rolls through key holes
says, “we walk east toward something yet to come,”
“pilgrimage,” his hands with fingers linked behind his back,

“is the only moment we get” and, i think
what crescent curve does the sky reveal
when we pay homage to the stars?

Empty City

For the guides

Because foghorns still paint the eastward sky—
piercing the pink faint light with low songs—
Because a red bridge can carry one car,
pulling the lone ferry floating to dawn—

Because there's a tower and a beach called north—
One breathless walker resting at its top—
Because a rogue pyramid hides below glass
and glass light slides down its empty slope—

Because—forever—a kiss of lost gold—
a small promise in the cooling air.
Because she doesn't brag, but shows off—
It's San Francisco, West's last prayer.

Photosynthesis, by Starrla Cray



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