



# The Nemadji Review

Volume 13

2024

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**2024, Volume 13**

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### **Land Acknowledgment Statement**

In honor of the Anishinaabe people, the original peoples and caretakers of this land, we would like to recognize that the University of Wisconsin-Superior inhabits the land of the Ojibwe people. We honor and celebrate ancestral Ojibwe land and the sacred lands of all Indigenous Peoples.

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Cover art by Amy Bates, *Secret Tunnel of the Willow*

### **Editor's Note**

Fellow Readers,

This year, *The Nemadji Review* is pleased to present our thirteenth volume, "Welcome to the 13th Floor." Inspired by the superstition of the number 13, we celebrate the oddities that seep into our lives from other dimensions. Artists tend to their imaginations by crossing over into a twilight realm.

Inexplicable events create exigences for mysterious insights about ourselves and the depths of reality. People often turn to superstitions, and artists are known for distorting reality to show truths about life. In "Welcome to the 13th Floor," we've curated curious and thought-provoking pieces from this year's unprecedented number of submissions.

Brought to you by a volunteer staff of University of Wisconsin-Superior students and alumni, this journal is a labor of love that represents the voices of students, staff, faculty, alumni, local artists, and friends from afar. It would not have been possible without the hard work and support of many, for which we are truly grateful. Thank you to each of our contributors, and a special thanks to our faculty advisor, Julie Gard, for all her wisdom and guidance.

Yours in art and literature,  
Justice Corpora  
Editor-in-Chief

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# The Nemadji Review

Volume 13

Welcome to the 13th Floor

# Poetry



Artwork by Chelsea Branley, *Between the Lines*

**Daniel Dow**

*Revealing 13*

The black paint  
cements itself  
to the hidden digit.  
Working away the oil-based paint,  
my hand slips,  
and my knuckles and fingertips  
meet the  
wooden door.

A splinter  
enters the knuckle  
of my forefinger.  
It hurts.  
It brings pain.  
But I continue to work  
the adhesive substance  
away.

A 1  
makes itself known.  
The golden hue  
of the aged brass  
shines beyond  
the black.

The outline  
of the 1



ripples and ruts  
with black paint.  
The silhouette  
grows clearer.

My hands cramp  
and ache.  
Blood flows  
from where the splinter  
entered my hand.  
But I push on,  
serving my home  
on the 13<sup>th</sup>  
floor.

Pouring more paint thinner  
onto the rag  
the soaked cloth  
meets the final digit.  
The liquid  
enters my wound.  
It burns, sears.  
Pain shoots up  
my arm.

Working bottom  
to top,  
the paint strips away.  
The gold tint

reveals itself,  
calling to me,  
hypnotizing me.

A single drop  
of blood,  
paint,  
and thinner  
rolls down the number.  
Its sheen glimmers  
to the world  
once more.

*13,*  
it's free.  
Its mask has been removed,  
and its fabled sequence  
mandates order  
once more.

**Sara Valentiuk**

*528 Kenosha St.*

The house peeked out  
from behind  
a spattering of pine.  
Decrepit but alive,  
its white exterior crackled  
like a thousand smiling eyes.  
Broken concrete danced  
past flowers tenderly pruned,  
and cheap lace filtered  
sunlight on the carpet,  
tired and blue.  
The bathtub sighed  
at the bottles  
and mildew crowding its ledge,  
and the kitchen's  
peel-and-stick tile  
curled up 'round the oven's legs.

The bank didn't see  
the memories etched  
into its walls  
and floors  
and heart.  
When the passing of childhood  
left it hushed  
and hollowed,  
they fed it to the flames.

Reducing those memories  
to an empty driveway.  
A slab of concrete.  
The evidence of my childhood erased.

## Madison Stevens

### *Place*

The house we lived in was cold,  
though not in the way of temperature.  
The basement was my safe place,  
there I could hide from criticism  
whose fragrance graced the air.  
I preferred the musk of mildew and aging books  
to the pain of the loud silence above.  
Memorization of the weight of the others,  
quickly deciphered the anxiety that urged  
in when the house groaned  
and breathed.  
I was safe in the cold, in the dimmed light.  
The freedom of 18 glowed like the sun.  
The weight of walking and smell  
of decay haunt the senses,  
they can send me back  
to the lack of voice and control.  
Despite the changes that come with time,  
the entire house stayed cold.

## Tim Moder

### *Initiation*

*2205 Tower Avenue, 1987*

Halloween, haunted house, padlocked at the front and  
back. Our blood 100 proof, we ripped the siding off and

fell, nudged, into a dark closet, reborn, dust in every  
corner, stagnant air, webs for trembling the house

awake. We left no footprints as we ran through empty  
rooms, our flashlight eyes stretched wide in initiation.

Basement, relics, rattles, thread; things that touched  
the things that touched the bones; tightly wound wands

of birch, copper coils, quills, cockle shells, feathers.  
On an attic shelf, a planchette, Ouija Board, necklaces

of words; hourglass sand, coins from fallen kingdoms,  
keys, a deck of colored cards, an expressionless wax

doll, a blanched wood totem. All at once we pulled a  
Scooby-Doo; our hair troll-charged, our feet already late,

we shot back to the closet where we pushed and pulled  
each other through, never to look back, never to ask.

**Sarah Royer-Stoll**

*Food for Crows*

Carrion lay scattered in the wet grass  
Decimated with wild precision  
The crows have gathered, first two, then four  
A small murder determined for their meal  
The cycle of life a messy example of  
What is revealed after the perfect storm  
What stirs our fragile comfort  
Seasons are shifting and the wind is now cold  
All around us are indications of ending  
Making its way into beauty, whether  
Brutal nourishment, or the padding of  
Leaf clumps settled under the fall's first snow  
In transition, I pull closer to my sweater  
Against my chest, tightening my wooly scarf  
The prayer sets in, holy space of lengthened  
Nights and shorter walks before my breath  
Sneaks out as visible vapor, energy expended  
Know the precious folding of this day  
Into pockets of sunrise and moments of lilt  
Your spirit is echoed within the crow's call  
Stark in the morning, afloat in the cool current  
May you find sustenance as you reflect on  
What has passed, and what will nestle itself  
  
Deep as nurturing into the earth

**Bud Brand**

*The Hands of Time*

The hands  
of time  
are busy . . .  
speeding  
up  
the clock,  
stealing  
precious  
moments  
which we  
had hoped  
to hock.

**Tina Higgins Wussow**

*Just Born*

Snails just born  
are as small as sesame seeds,  
if you don't know better  
they appear inanimate, meaningless

but busy yourself with something else  
even allow your mind to believe they never emerged  
from the safety of their pink sack,  
return hours later and marvel

at how far the seeds have traveled  
how they cling to the walls that hold them in,  
their tiny bodies like a spray of bullet holes on the glass,  
even now it seems like they aren't alive

until you choose a speck of something stationary  
like a bit of carrot mush and hold your gaze  
on the space between that and a spot of snail,  
watch the distance between them expand

notice its two miniature lashes  
grasping at the future for the first time,  
and feel how your comprehension  
of the world you once trusted blurs

into a shivering melody you've never  
heard before, how it's just you and the infant  
snail with nothing left to do but move  
forward, with or without protest

## Abigail Weber

### *Creepy Crawlies*

*a dorm room story*

Millipede  
you crawled your ass  
out of my shower drain  
scared me shitless  
at 6am

i killed you with  
chemicals

foaming bathroom spray

Spider bitch  
i came home from the weekend  
to find you  
sitting in my dishpan  
next to my Dawn™  
dish soap

i killed you with  
a sunflower flyswatter

lil bitch

## Jan Chronister

### *Blue Screen of Death*

I google to find out what it is,  
discover I've never seen one,  
redefine it to mean. . .

A sky so blue I ache,  
cornflowers along country roads,  
forget-me-nots in new places.

My daughter's ring catches the sun,  
Lake Superior glows like glass  
on the blue screen of life.

## Joel Friederich

### *New Year Burning*

How was it old man  
at the turning of the year  
when you stepped out into the dark  
walking through your breath  
the sound of your crunching steps  
moving toward the frozen grove  
arms filled with boxes of torn paper  
piling them on crusted snow  
striking a match and coaxing  
a small flame up against the wind  
and then when you rose  
to watch it rise into a blaze  
the wheels of the universe turning  
a slow arc over the trees  
outline of your house black  
against the sky window lights  
framing the woman your wife  
preparing for night forgetting  
you're no longer there  
how was it to have walked  
away for those few minutes  
and become a ghost?

## Robert Wildwood

### *Primitive Recreation*

walk into a dark bathroom and wait  
for the light to come on  
in darkness I find the doorknob and lock it  
still waiting  
this is not a smart bathroom I begin to realize  
hand reaches out for where I now remember the switch is  
new season transitional technology society  
in my modern workplace we hardly use light switches  
dark rooms illuminate as we enter like gods  
touchless world future season  
historically searching for matches in the dark  
before that stepping out into moonlight  
returning digestion results directly to soil contemplating  
like skunks and squirrels  
we call this camping  
but we could call it time travel  
into the past  
or a future  
where plumbing and toilet paper  
are gone

## Jordan Rader

### *living in the moment*

i'm sitting around a fire with 16 of my closest friends. 16 of the only people i ever talk to  
it's been 27 minutes and 14 seconds since i last said something. i like listening, but  
i do miss talking. it feels like it has been hours

"it's 12:23. it hasn't been that long, wow" someone says, almost as if he read my mind  
i want to cry. i miss talking

*this is depressing. just talk to them. what the **actual fuck**. why is it so hard for you?*

there is so much noise, (*hey*) so much opportunity, (*hey*) so many chances to speak,  
(*hey*) but yet i sit in silence, (**hey**) waiting for someone to want to talk to me first  
**(hey)**

"i'm sorry. what was that?" *please be me*

"i wasn't talking to you." with so much attitude, i shrivel back into my blanket

### **oh**

i knew it wasn't for me, but somewhere i wish it was. i just miss talking  
everyone seems to be having so much fun, but why do i feel like i'm missing out still?

*his foot is 7 inches away. she's standing 4 feet from me*

why does it feel like i'm so close, yet so far separated from everyone?

*i haven't said anything at all*

i'm so sorry

this is my fault. i can tell

"you promise?" she slurs beside me

"we're good, and soooo pretty" she mumbled back, drunk and dazed, emphasis on  
the "o" in her words

i am listening to them talk, but i won't speak up

*why can't i?*

i'm snapped back, immediately in the small red chair, right by the fire

i don't think anyone noticed me

noticed the way i was silent,

silent for over half the night,

the night i planned out

it's like dissociating on a different degree, i feel blank sitting here  
writing this instead of enjoying myself

i'm brought back again

i see *the group* talking on the bridge, bonding over their stories

while i sit alone, forcing the title of lonely onto myself

the fire is dying out and there's barely anyone left

we're getting ready to leave, peace finally

i stand up, grab the blanket i was buried under, and am ready to leave

i was really ready 4 hours ago, but i stayed

*"bye guys! it's been so so fun, we need to do this again soon!"*

silence.



**Pat Thomas**

*The moon and stars shine*

Moths find the flowers  
Fireflies communicate  
In total darkness

**Bud Brand**

*the last leaf*

the  
last  
leaf  
lies  
on  
the  
barren  
ground,  
fetal-curved  
and  
darkened  
brown....  
once  
a  
beautiful  
sight  
to  
see,  
a  
symbol  
of  
vitality...  
now  
deposited

in  
the  
dirt,  
its  
dire  
downfall  
quick  
and  
curt;  
sad  
to  
say  
that  
last  
leaf  
is  
just  
a  
plaything  
for  
the  
wind's  
next  
gust.

**Clara Gonderzik**

*Worms*

I am a tangle of screams and grease,  
with my hair draping my form.  
I crawl on all fours:  
hands, knees.  
Quiet please.

I race through the night,  
chasing the worms  
woven deep into the earthy ground.  
Their slime and blood cakes my hands.  
I drive my fingers into their homes.

I see a woman floating,  
reduced to a bag of skin,  
bloated with water and algae,  
dissolving into my cold river.  
She's unlike anything I've seen.  
I understand her tired, empty eyes.

The man's heavy footfalls stain my home,  
they ruin the earth,  
and they ruined the woman in my water.  
The worms run away, away, away.  
His presence takes up everything.  
He lumbers and staggers and tramps.

He stole my worms– he took them.  
Took them!  
Evil man. Bad man. Killer man.  
I will kill that man.

Blood and flesh pile beneath my nails  
I dig through his pores for worms.  
Give me back my worms!  
Chunks of man fly–  
a stream of screams, sweat, and blood.

He, too, floats– ugly, wet, and polluted.  
Away from the woman.  
Away from the worms.  
Away from me.

**Please note:** *This piece contains references to drug use and murder.*

## Isabelle Hoida

### *Hinge*

The street lamp flashes on and off: a pulmonary vessel thumping at pressure points. Another bus stop in the city's veins. I rub my temples and stare into bus-stop-people face. Non-compliance of hygienic standard. The heroin needle bumps into my flip-flop. Daring. Then I am forced, memory-bound, squeezed between rosehip pattern wallpaper and sickly orange biofilm on the toilet's trunk. Shooting up hours of not-feeling and slipping into my padded bodysuit. Every sharp tip in my brown arm, another layer of soft. I was fading, sordid, a heap in my father-in-law's bathroom.

*Leave here.* His voice prodded the door until the hinges unscrewed. I slumped against the toilet seat. I saw the white porcelain stained from eating so much ass. Chipping tooth enamel, a morbid smile. I saw him reappear in front of me. Hinges in hands. Was I a hinge to bend and fold at his whim? To join the rest of them? He lifted my body and threw me against the living room futon. I traveled through the fabric and joined my ancestors who wore purple face paint. GET HIM. Their yells assaulted my cadaver. GET HIM.

I emerged from recesses, and he stood over me, a phantom. I need water, I cried universally. Does life pity the dehydrated? He resurfaced with a glass. His hands reeked, cursed with motor oil. The dad & son, motor oil fanatics, car fuckers. Diving for parts, coming home drenched in oil and alcohol and women. SNAP. The neck of

the glass. I screeched for my ancestors, and his body folded over to see what remained of the cup. His pale neck stretched long and took little effort to divide with my tool. A pressure point, leaking its contents. Then there was

his pocket, soaked with human oil. In there, a coupon for Subway and thirty-seven dollars. It was enough for a bus ticket.

## Mckenzie Williams

### *Left Haunted*

She is like a specter  
that haunts my memories  
of all that ever was.  
So many could haves,  
would haves,  
and should haves.

If I could go back, I wouldn't.  
Not for a moment.  
You are frozen in time  
while I chase the future.

Flashback.  
Back to a reality  
where you aren't here anymore,  
if you were ever here at all.

### *How do I tell her?*

How do I tell her that  
she left me so long ago?  
Even when she was by my side.

No amount of candle-lighting,  
pentagram-drawing,  
or Latin-chanting  
will make her go away.

There is no way to  
exorcise her from my mind.  
Leave this home I call my conscience  
and let me *be* for once.

**Please note:** *This piece contains references to loss and death.*

## **Roxanne Lien**

### *Fix the Pain*

He thought I could fix anything: clogged drains, constipated children, and broken ceiling fans. But I couldn't fix his pain.

I could make him laugh, ease his aching muscles, and satisfy his appetite. But I couldn't fix his pain; I could not see into his brain, and now he is gone.

Despairingly unsuccessful, I reach back to remember his smiling face and hear his laughter, but memories break, too. With only my love for him to sustain me, I cannot fix my pain.

For my brother Craig  
1955 - 2023

## **Christel Maass**

### *Messages*

*November 15, 2023. In Memory of Jeanette and Joe*

I'd been thinking about my friend's parents recently,  
how after her mom passed,  
she sent her daughter a sign—  
dainty wood violets flowering in the off-season,  
like ones ringing their teacup collections.

While raking mid-November's fallen leaves  
in my own yard today, I exposed  
a single deep-purple violet in bloom.

It had to be my friend's mother  
letting me know  
she knew I'd been thinking about her.

When I told my friend I'd had a visit, she replied  
it was her parents' wedding anniversary.

As a tear rolled down my face I wondered,  
was it any coincidence  
I had earlier greeted  
that messenger oak,  
the one with the exposed heart  
that had previously revealed another anniversary  
tucked deep within my soul?

## Colleen Beron

### *Mortuary*

The hallway to door 42, for the most part, remains silent even though it is always full.

There is a constant flow of people walking through it.

A steady stream from dusk 'til dawn.

A woman walks cautiously, as if needing directions.

She tilts her head to one side, confused.

An elderly man struggles to put one foot in front of the other.

She gives a gentle smile as he creeps by. He nods as if to say, "Hello."

She hears the splash of a bouncing ball.

She turns to see the boy,  
playing as if he doesn't know,  
as if he's still in the game.

"Keep it movin', lady," a voice calls from behind.

The woman looks over her shoulder to see a thirty-something man. Dark hair in a suit. Hands in his pockets, all the confidence in the world.

"Don't worry, only the good ones go through here." He winks as he saunters past.

She finds the wall behind her.

The coldness of the brick prods at her back.

Pondering his comment, she silently observes.

Then she sees.

The light beyond the corner.

It stretches like branches on a dead tree, poking through a winter sky.

Skinny and bony are the beams as they almost touch her feet. She isn't ready yet.

She remains frozen. Perplexed.

Not sure what to do.

They all just keep coming.

The people, down the hall, to door 42.

**Pat Thomas**

*Crow and Me*

Lightning strikes crow's tree  
Spinning him into the air  
My arm becomes branch

**Neve Andre**

*13th Floor*

Like four four-stories  
One on top of another  
And then three floor down

## Christel Maass

### *Friends*

*For Joette*

I got so lucky  
when I left home  
for college.

I was unpacking  
and hadn't even had time  
to feel deserted by my parents,  
who had just dropped me off,  
when you walked into our room  
in that high-rise dorm—  
full of cheer,  
ready to meet your roommate  
who you knew  
was already your friend.

Behind the scenes,  
someone had paired us well.

## Matthew Tredinnick

### *Why Do You Exist?*

The elder, the smartest.  
The youngest, the princess.  
What are you?  
You are Forgotten.  
No. Worse.  
Unwanted edition.  
Your name announced only after  
Running down the roster.  
The syllables synthesized  
With those around you.  
The prefixes of predecessors  
Become your present.  
Feeling left out,  
A floor no one visits.  
The distance between, forever.  
Unwanted addition.  
Your kin are beyond your ken.



## Mel Delbridge

### *Dark Matter*

There is a black hole in my living room.  
Its solar winds shake my hands,  
and make it difficult to hear  
when people include me  
in the conversation.  
My sister can see it,  
but she pretends she doesn't,  
for good manners' sake.  
My mouth gapes  
as my mother drops the dustpan in it.  
It hisses from its yawning maw  
as she stoops over it to sweep  
up the mess I am ignoring.  
I want to tell her, "Be careful,  
It isn't safe to get that close"  
but instead, I complain about the cold.  
My husband can hear the hiss  
but sees nothing  
past his reflection  
in the morning mirror.  
My friends can hear the sunspot static,  
over my too-bright tone  
on our less and less frequent calls.  
I tiptoe carefully, avoiding the edge,  
while I dress for work,  
but I keep losing my shoes and socks  
to its irresistible pull.

And maybe, someday,  
I will dive in  
and look for  
all the things I have lost.

**Ava Arrigo**

*The Kiss of Judas*

I did not refuse you  
though I suppose  
it would have been wise  
had I turned my head  
and averted my eyes

but betrayal is something  
a stranger is incapable of—  
it takes two;  
a lover and a beloved.  
Is that what I am to you?

Judas.  
Judas Judas Judas,  
you are my friend,  
you could never be unknown by me.

So maybe that is why  
when your lips were so close to mine  
I did not turn away.  
No,  
instead, by choice, I lean in.

The poison takes hold.

I take a breath in and think:  
It tastes like home.

**Jordan Rader**

*little snippets*

“her tattoos peak from under her sleeves,  
like glimpses of small stories,  
portals into her confusing and complicated life  
wishing to be told  
or maybe—”

“she flips her phone over while he sleeps peacefully next to her.  
*my little timekeeper*  
she likes to think he would call her,  
that is, if he called her  
but he’s probably—”

“she writes down another thing on her notepad,  
*things that make me real*  
small things typically, like starry nights  
or hand holding  
but no one really understands it,  
they always say it’s too—”

little snippets of little poems that i keep in my mind  
small things i don’t ever let get fully thought out,  
so they remain short and unfinished.  
like pieces of me, never fully developed  
into what i wanted to be.

**Elizabeth Olson**

*Reflection of Self*

I am a mess of things in my soul,  
bits and pieces floating around.  
I stretch my arms out wide  
but I can't seem to grasp onto any of them.

Trying to capture milk shards of shell  
in the viscous whites,  
my yellow center is soft and exposed  
the mucus coating tearing.

I am spilling out,  
spreading  
until I am so thin, I do not remember what it  
was like to be whole.

Who was I before?

Before what?  
Before everything.  
Before nothing.  
Was I always who I am,  
or just a stranger with the same face?

When I die  
will I still be me,  
if I am given a new body?

My memories purged,  
a spiritual factory reset,  
then, will I truly be me?

I am not who I was when I was six,  
nor who I was a year ago.  
In the mornings I become no more than a familiar stranger.

How many memories have I already forgotten?  
But I am still me.

Right?

**Charlie Lydon**

*Mind's Eye*

i enter the door  
of my mind's eye  
memories are  
the past in the present  
nothing to reminisce  
but only to know

mistakes made manifest  
in consequence  
circumstances and reaction  
yellow turned blue  
from green  
and pink to crimson red

boy playing with  
his brothers—  
lives on  
forever young  
and the other—  
my brothers  
complain about work  
aches and pains

memories float  
ships that sank  
long ago and  
with them haunting  
visions of those  
lost but can't be forgotten  
a curse of those  
who witness

poignant calls for  
peace and  
brotherly love  
go unheeded  
needed is the call  
heeded resolve but  
the young still fall

others too will find  
memories and haunts  
their future's pasts  
mind's eyes to what  
can't be unseen

and never forgotten

**Abigail Weber**

*Oliver*

It's raining in Oliver.  
The fog drifts,  
The simple pitter-patter  
of rain  
makes music on the car roof  
the wheels

I started this poem on the road  
I reached the end of the road  
but not the end of the poem

But it's about the journey  
Not the destination  
isn't it?

**Jess Waldbillig**

*There's an Old Man Who Lives on North Road*

There's an old man who lives on North Road  
who I've only ever seen dressed in red long underwear  
garments that oftentimes make his blushed cheeks  
visible from my driver's seat.

He has a white beard,  
hair that matches,  
and a dog.

Sometimes when driving to work in the morning,  
I'll see him walking down his driveway,  
maybe getting the mail from the day  
before.

His dog circles him;  
his dog's tail circles the air in turn.

I think about this man  
and his dog  
and his unstacked piles of wood in his tiny yard,  
and the tamaracks that grow yellow behind his house in the fall,  
and the goose couple that returns to the ditch streams every spring.

I wonder if he's given the goose couple names,  
if he's walked along the tree line,  
why the wood isn't and has never been stacked;  
I wonder if his dog will die before him.

Tonight, I drove past his little wood cabin around eleven.  
I could see him through the window, his red back facing me.  
I wanted to knock on his door,  
introduce myself,  
and tell him that there is someone who is not a dog who thinks about  
    him nearly every day.  
I hope his dog does not die before him.

### **Samantha Tunan**

*Come One, Come All, the League of Forest Bards  
Welcomes You*

Please, put your wings together!  
We know you  
have waited all this time.  
Thundering into spring,  
hear the rhythm  
in our soul  
beat two billion strong.  
Whizzing wisely  
in all directions,  
our buzzing battery  
simply cannot disappoint!  
We are esteemed  
to keep reminding you  
every thirteen years,  
we sing to bring the rain  
and make the sun rise.  
Cicada.

## **Jax Kobielus**

### *designer chest*

designer chest  
carved out of the flesh  
like a marble statue

a David partly of your own making

the surgeon, a Michelangelo  
she chipped away the pieces  
sculpting out the body of your dreams

she leaves thick scars on your tender skin  
and they will never fully heal  
but why would you want them to?

cracks in the body's flesh  
only show the journey it has taken  
and what an adventure yours has had

climbing the tallest mountains  
braving the deepest valleys  
never letting the world beat you back into the dirt

now, you feel the smooth fabric of your shirt  
as it rests gently on your skin  
the barrier finally broken

feel the warmth of the sun  
and the gentle breeze  
how it welcomes you



Artwork by Cyrus Carlson, *Geography*

**William Carlson**

*A Brand New Day*

The sun is up  
The sky is blue  
The birds are singing  
The trees have bloomed

It's time to rise  
It's time to sing  
Up for the brand new day

It's a new era  
It's a new day  
It's a new time to say  
Wake love, darling love  
See the new day.



## Jess Morgan

### *Market Solutions for the Plant Placed in a Dark Closet*

The plant is sold vitamins and a new pot with patterns outlined in gold leaf, made (mostly) of recycled materials. Told it can prevent wilting by being more confident, practicing leaf rustling, and deep-stem yoga twice a week—classes are only 300 dollars. The plant undergoes nutrient-rich soil therapy to cope with the microplastics and poisons seeped into its soil, and the fruit flies that don't contain as much protein and iron anymore. Hard to be a carnivorous plant in 2024, amiright? And is told NO, *anything* but

basking,  
breathing,  
slowing down,  
and wading  
in gentle breeze  
beneath the sun.

## Elizebeth Olson

### *The Proletariat's Cry*

In a country of temporarily embarrassed millionaires,  
poor is the worst thing you can be.

A moral failing,  
might as well take your bootstraps and tie them  
in a noose.

Too bad they snap under all that weight, thinned from too many years  
of use.

My mother always told me that you don't get two first impressions.

Wintertime and we lived in my mother's friend's parent's cabin—  
say that ten times fast.

In the summer, you can pretend it's a vacation,  
something you never really had,

but in the winter, the mice come inside  
to hide from the cold.

Still, looking at the lake, frozen over,

like living in a fairytale,

if you tilt your head and squint.

There is a myth that poverty is a personal choice.

When I told my coworker that it was just luck  
that landed me this job,

which paid far more than anyone in my family had ever seen,  
he tried to assure me it was because I worked harder.

He listed the things I've done,  
the reason I *deserved* to be there.  
He didn't understand.  
So many people work harder than me.  
He didn't understand it's  
not a choice,  
working that hard.  
*I have to work that hard.*

We are told that  
if we are virtuous enough,  
hard-working enough,  
anyone can make money.

Just don't have starbucksavacadoastoranythingthatmakeslifefun,  
then you're sure to make it through the pearly gates  
to middle-class purgatory.  
Be your own boss.  
Uberlyftdoordashinstacart!  
For the low price of actually living your life, you too  
can have the illusion of getting your golden ticket.

The exploited exploiting the exploited,  
the ruling class even found a way to outsource that job.  
You too can join the bourgeoisie!  
Just without the benefits.

I try not to think about that cabin.  
The uncanniness  
of being surrounded by strangers' things,  
old board games, labels faded and corners peeling up,  
blue and white rosmålning closing in around you.  
So unfamiliar,  
yet strangely comforting.  
If I close my eyes, I can still find my way back there,  
to that girl sitting on the worn couch, or looking out at the lake.  
I want to assure her that it will be okay,  
but I am still not sure if that is true.

**Jade Marielan Wong**

*An Irish Blessing*

Manual labor  
Desperately seeks four-leaf clover  
As an opportunity to quit  
Four-leaf clover tattooed on my uncles,  
Bagpipes played at all of their funerals  
Four-leaf clover,  
Sealed in stained-glass window clings  
Given out at Christmas,  
Received ecstatically

During my worst days  
Grandma Leary comes to me in a dream  
She knows this pain all so well  
Hands me the largest four-leaf clover  
I've ever seen  
Gifts it to me

I wake knowing today is going to be a good day  
My ancestors are guiding me  
Shortly after I wake,  
I get the call  
Everything is going to be fine  
Crying  
Knowing  
I've received an Irish Blessing today

**Taylor Brockmeier**

*Encapsulating Blue*

Bulky waves stagger to shore,  
and I find myself begging for more.  
The water wraps around my feet,  
and with a steady heart I prepare to sink.  
Sink down below—  
to a place where everything seems to slow.  
Where my heart and mind are one—  
smooth and steady as the water continues to run.  
Run  
Run  
Run over my body and through my hair,  
enveloping me deeper into the beryl depths—  
completely unaware of what's to bear.  
I flip and thrash through the body of water,  
battling the current until faced with a fight much broader.  
An addiction to the chaos and danger is what I desire,  
and an addiction to the encapsulating blue was all that I entire.  
I prepare to give up my last breath, to become one with the black  
unknown around me—  
But it's not that easy, you see.  
As it isn't until the last release  
that my body falls to ease.  
With a quiet mind I sink deeper, watching the light fade in and out.  
Knowing I am finally at home, no doubt.  
Above me I can see the storm circling above,  
but here below I lie complacent, encapsulated by the comfort of love.

The love of the sea runs through my veins—  
a fixation to the current and the dangers that arise is all that remains.  
My body drifts further below as my thoughts drown out in the  
deafening silence.  
And reality is where I come back to compliance.

His gaze is strong,  
features panning over my own in search of what's wrong.  
But he is the culprit of my lucid reaction,  
completely and undyingly unaware of his unrequited transaction.  
One look into the waves of his eyes is all it takes,  
for the walls of my hard exterior begin to break.  
Drawn towards the storm,  
I come back every time in search of more.  
For the sea in his eyes is all that I knew,  
and every time I find myself getting pulled back into the  
encapsulating blue.

## Rhiannon Giguere

### *Update/Takedown*

Tonight I'm at my kitchen counter thinking:  
*oh, I used to know you. I did.*

Didn't I?

Didn't you?

I read you for years.  
I should have.

Well, what went wrong?  
I thought I did just fine.

To a point, yeah. I guess so.  
But then I thought more,  
and wrote you down.  
I figured you out too well,  
plotted you as  
an outline on my screen,  
and now?

Yikes.

That's all you have to say? *Yikes?*

Of course not.  
I wouldn't type you into existence if I were capable of shutting up.  
Stay over there  
and let me think.

(Not as if you're giving me a choice...)

Here's what's up:

I don't read between your lines the same.

I *can't*.

I'm glad you mean something to yourself,

because you sure won't stop hearing rave reviews from everyone and

I'll surely see *every word* of it—

You could close your eyes, you know.

That's a thing you could do.

You said so.

*A lot.*

Not likely, actually.

I don't think you picked up on much of me at all.

We aren't talking now—

never have, really. In hindsight, barely more than a nod in passing.

But I shot first and didn't tell you.

And I feel like I *should* have told you—but *how*?

A voicemail? A skywriter?

Anything but paper would have worked.

And yet

I went anyway:

spent fiber in a blender,

pulverized and hung out to dry

for an audience of none,

and then the scratching of a gifted nib.

Do you have to be so wordy?

That's not my style.

I think—

I *had* to break you down.

I had to work through you line by line

or I would have exploded

black walnut on my walls.

Where are you going with all this?,

What's the point?

You're *mad*. Just *say* it,

stop pouring words in *my* mouth—

Listen. *You* put them in *mine* first.

I figured out that I hate how they taste

now that I know what it all built up to.

I'm spitting them out.

I don't *want* them.

Fine. Hand them over.

No need to make me look bad.

What else?

Well, *then*

you found the bloodied quill

on the floor weeks after the fact

and said nothing in reply.

Which was fine, I guess.

But if I wanted you to react...

why didn't I aim *at* you to begin with?

You tell me.

... I can't.

Shame.

You are your own several thousand words  
and I am mine.

We occupy the same page,

but no, not really—

I clawed out of that story right about the same time you sunk  
deeper in,

embracing expired ink like a soft pile of ash  
and letting crowded nods tug you deeper—

What?

No.

*I wanted to go there—*

After you promised me

*you never would.*

Anyway.

Go on with your bad self,

as my mother would probably say.

I'm onto better things

but the test strokes haven't faded

from the heels of the hands

I wring into my eyes.

That's a little melodramatic,  
don't you think?  
Again with the *words*.

What, like *you're* any better?

Just let me fold you over and crinkle you

like you creased me,

and then we'll both step away from the writing desk.

I'm through with you.

Burn the bookmarks and back away.

I'll even lend you the lighter,

but I don't think that you need one.

Okay?

Fine.

Goodbye.

I hope this helped you some.

Shame on you.

## Jan Chronister

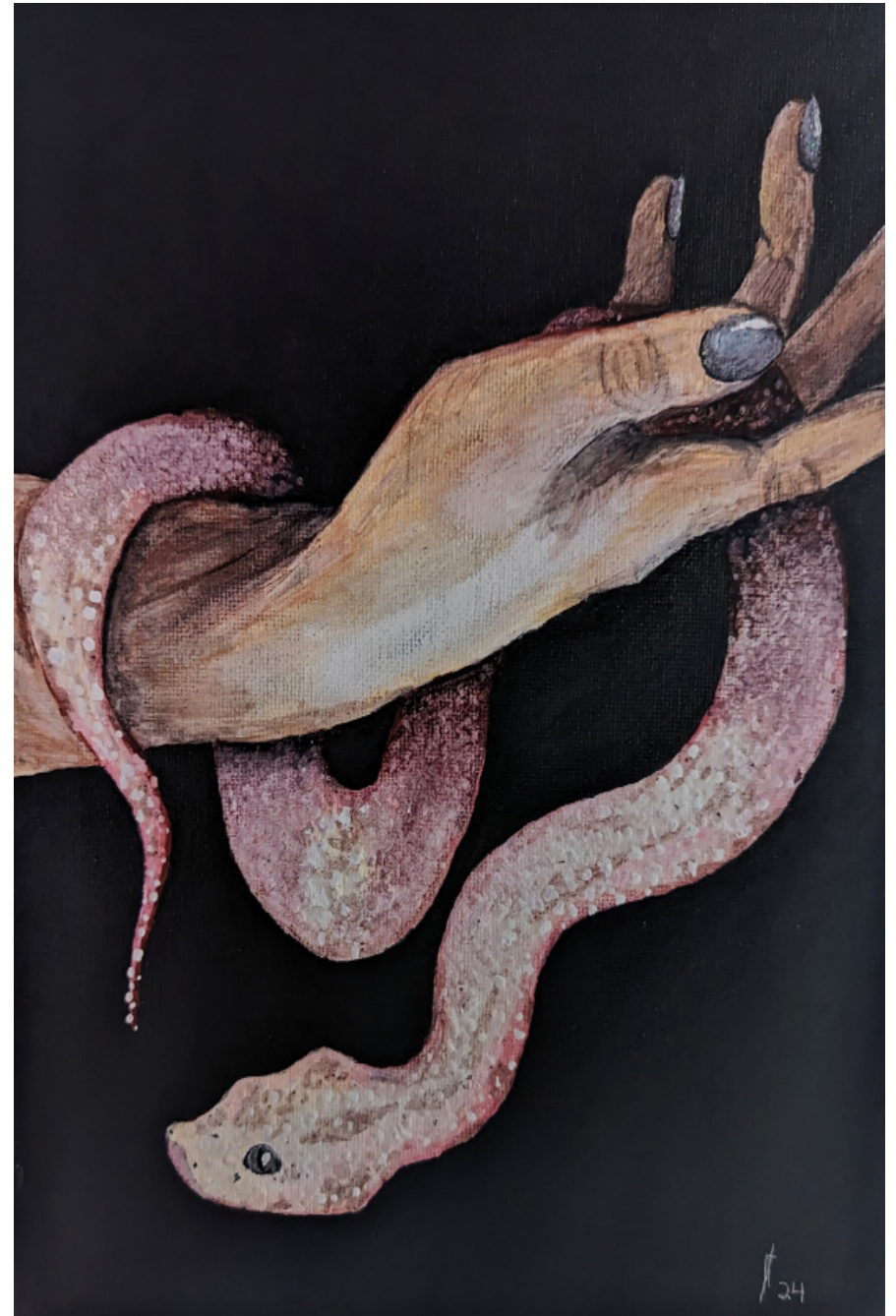
### *Bookworm*

I immerse myself in murder,  
stand behind coroners,  
learn a few basics.  
From British detectives I pick up  
words like “bloody” and “bangers.”  
Inspectors in Quebec teach me  
colorful language—  
*merde, tabernac.*

I read lengthy series  
with recurring characters,  
spend months with them.  
They become so familiar  
I hear their comments  
as I go through my day.

Sometimes between tasks  
I get a chance to relax,  
brew a cup of tea,  
catch up with my companions.

Most of the time  
I have to wait until bed.  
When sleep arrives  
I close the book and dream.



Artwork by Jillian R. Thorne, *Designer Clutch*

**Jillian R. Thorne**

*Death Wish*

Let me be ugly when I go.  
Give me a death that's unequivocal,  
bloated and terrifying.

Leave the structures of my body,  
let them spoil and spill.  
Leave the blood in my veins  
and the rot in my stomach,  
the void of my eyes and  
the blues of my fingers.

Leave my face unpainted,  
and keep your velvet pillow.  
Wrap me in a linen sheath  
and lay alfalfa on my chest.

Bury me shallow,  
and let the insects find a home in me.  
Let me become their soil.  
Let me be nourishing,  
after all that I've done here.

**Thomas Noack**

*Tien Ax*

A traveler walks through a marsh.  
Its black shadows beckon him in.  
The black night sky overpowers him,  
its blanket devoid of stars.  
The path before him is narrow—  
filled with holes, shards of rock, and dead roots.  
One wrong step could send him over the  
edge.

Off in the distance lies a light—  
at last!

A beacon to save him  
from the darkness.  
He runs towards it,  
fixated on it.  
His one goal,

escape.

It's so close now.  
He can feel the warmth radiating from the end of the path—  
but no good things are built to last.  
While focused on the light,  
our traveler trips on a root—



f  
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n  
g into the blackness beneath him.

The air is thick as tar,  
suffocating him as he falls  
    and falls  
        and falls—  
            until there is nothing left.  
            No path. No light.  
            He crashes into water  
            as thick as the sky is black.  
            He sinks  
                and sinks  
                and sinks—  
                into the water.

He tries to escape,  
but something keeps dragging him down—  
deep into the black.  
The water fills his lungs.  
He grabs his chest,  
gasping.

As he accepts his fate,  
he closes his eyes and descends into the darkness,  
becoming one with the murk

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**Joel Friederich**

*Game Boy*

You leave me in corners,  
in drawers, in pockets,  
and my face grows dark  
waiting for you. The heat  
in my body drains out  
through the hours of day.

Where do you go—to think,  
to read, to play in the sun?  
Do you run with your friends,  
learn to hold a book or pen?

I have seen your face  
grow longer, your eyes brighten.  
Your fingers have stretched out,  
grown thin, your hands, strong.

While you were away,  
the games inside me died.  
Heroes fell silent; villains  
stared vacantly into the air  
and had no hands.

What do you do with so much life?

**Lynn Watson**

*Dreamtime Walkabout*

Always the same — each time — changing

snow danced this morning  
outside my window  
designed around DNA  
bits blown skyward from  
plants and animals until clouds  
fell as weighted water  
crystals of white lace

Changing always — the same — each time

young ice walked away  
from the cattail shore  
beneath the yellow branches  
willow leaves shoaled like silver  
fish under the clarity of winter  
stilled water mirror for the moon

Each time — changing always — the same

slowed to heart ticked rhythm  
muffled steps, frosted breath  
loud in cold swept silence  
alert to survive the simple  
landscape stitched with purple  
my mind writes like stars forming

bright intensities of thought  
flare and glimmer with stories  
poems and songs fill my sky  
with constellations of lines  
chapters and rhymes that overflow  
marked by patterns of the present  
tree shadows and mouse trails  
between the doors of birth and death  
proceed into the before and after

The same — each time — changing always

## **Jasen Bruzek**

### *My, How the Swing Had Swung*

The swing had swung, to weightless thought  
bodiless and complete,  
between every swing I took, with every pass back I made,  
freedom had come between every breath of relief.  
Man, have I missed those nostalgic days.

Surrounded by old friends and foes alike,  
A clear view from the clouds above. Below me, the sounds  
of merry children's laughter, seeing everyone smiling  
chasing each other down, with such delight.  
Man, have I missed those nostalgic days.

Other memories flood my mind now,  
from the playgrounds to fields to trails around.  
Like a mindless wave, running from trees, to ground, and all around.  
But an inevitable curse comes to bear, then with no time left to spare,  
joyous be the bygone days.  
Man, have I missed those nostalgic days.

Now present day, much alone,  
clouded be my mind, heavy now be my body.  
Struggling with where I may be.  
Am I the one I hoped to be, have I reached my self-congruency?  
Doubtfulness and terror eat at my soul, should I  
Feel this numb? Should I feel this down?  
Now ambitionless and stale, did I really used to be so bold?  
I sit on this couch now, day by day, thinking—

joyous must truly be, those nostalgic days.

But even so, the old me is but a distant memory.

Is it really so sad if I am not who I used to be?

New and changed, confident and renewed.

I think my old self would be envious to see, the man I am soon to be.

## Robert Wildwood

### *Big To-Do List*

emerge

survive

get big

do everything

get smart

kiss

travel

party

make friends

avoid evil

get therapy

gain skills

produce

create

move into love

reproduce

nurture family

be happy

stay happy

maintain friendships

maintain family

become wise

share knowledge

uplift people

share love

reach out

do good

be courageous

defeat evil

let go

invent

create

be truth

recreate

be love

inspire

let go again

give

die

**Tim Moder**

*I Missed the Bus and Walked to Work*

I missed the bus and walked to work.  
Level measured blocks ticked by  
behind muted traffic fumes and sounds,  
to temper my frustration for a while.

At the community college, orange cones  
disrupt the second parking lot where  
motorcycles test and semi's practice  
backing into strict white lines.

At the empty field where the Burlington  
Northern roundhouse used to aim  
long trains into the world, the song they  
coaxed from rails cannot be heard.

Choked with invisible history, the Faxon  
Creek flows so small it goes unnoticed  
behind the YMCA, through a city park lined  
with well-developed paths for frisbee golf.

I passed the empty corner lot where that kid  
burned down the Baptist church. Now  
there is a day camp for unhappy, smiling kids.  
One lone shed must hold the plates and flags.

At the greenhouse they have the freshest,  
kindest, bunched tomatoes that ever were.  
They are uniform in shape. A perfect red.  
When you cut them, they don't fold.

What used to be the mall is now the business  
center. Inside I see the ghosts of two middle-aged  
men walking off divorces. Shopping for approval,  
our hollow echoes bounce on freshly waxed floors.

## Mel Delbridge

### *Elegy for a Japanese Red Maple*

When my father died,  
we didn't have a funeral.  
He hated spectacle,  
preferring the quiet  
newfallen snow on pines.

I didn't cry; there was work and art  
he needed me to do. And I love  
works of art, like my father  
did.

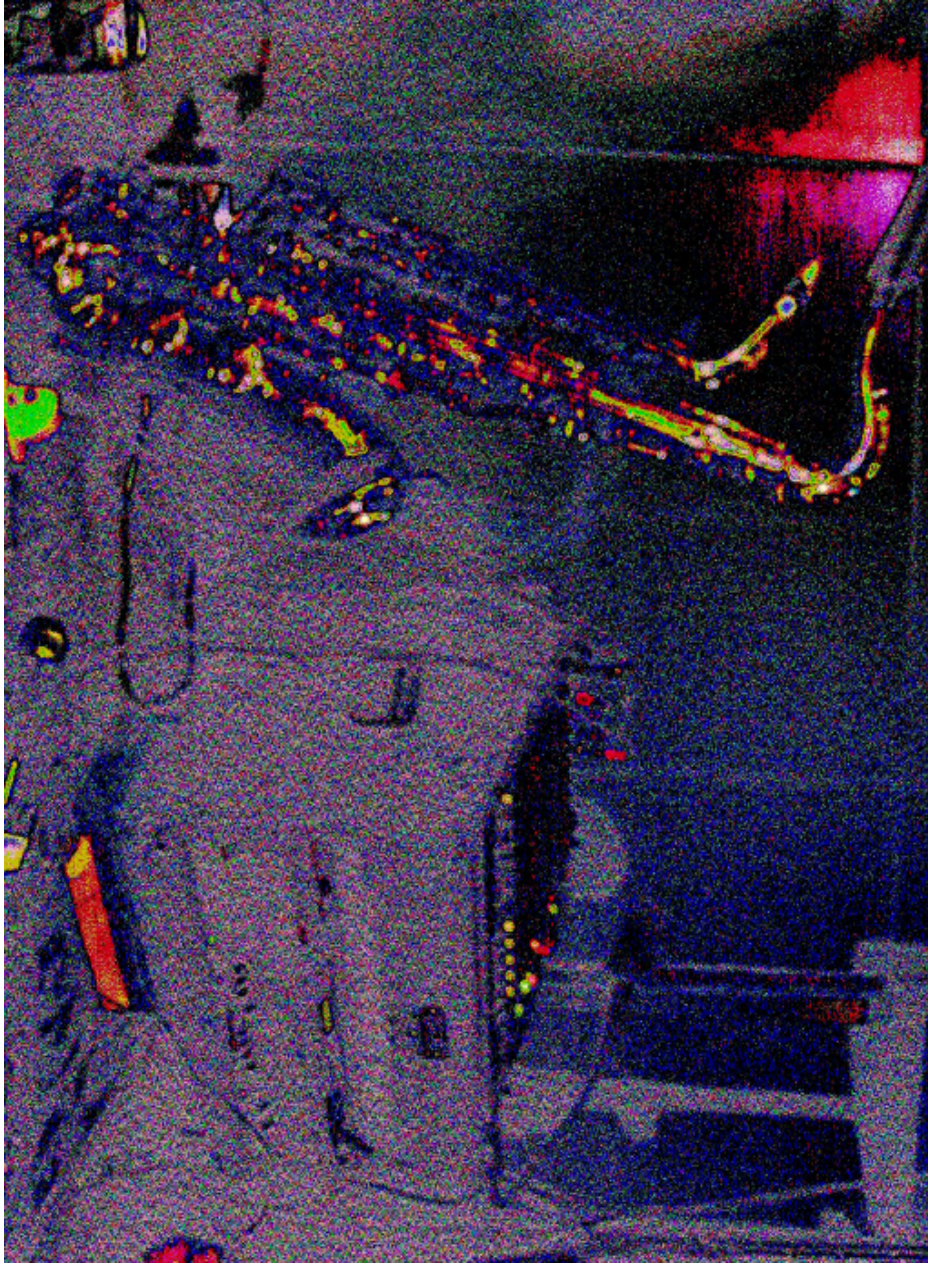
We planted a maple  
to hover over us,  
red-fingered silvery arms  
encircling us  
in cool summer shade.

He loved nature  
like he loved me.

When that tree died,  
killed by the cold winter,  
I heard my heart crack,  
the snap of a dry branch underfoot  
as you walk through the forest.  
The weight of Death doubled  
bending my mother's already bent shoulders.

Grief is always waiting...

A coiled, mottled cottonmouth invisible  
against the desiccated leaves,  
rattling a warning  
of sharp fangs longing to puncture  
tender ankles.



Artwork by Jess Morgan, *Yet We Still Play*

Lynn Watson

*Musica Universalis*

(Please read from the bottom up)

Causing concerts of color, lime, violet, and rose radiating across northern nights  
Vibrant vortex streets or join solar winds streaming chirps and screams  
Conscious energy free to hum strings of Aeolian harps in  
Of spirit free to love to please oh beloved  
Unbinds your soul-self freed to the realm  
In order and gravity until death  
Biofields are tethered  
Your human  
-Balancing-  
Flexible skin  
Beneath your taut  
A Kinetic-interplay quivers  
Jiggle your unique molecule's dancing  
In concert with others rhythmic moves spin-  
From inside out each type of cell sings its own song  
Out of silence into the light you shimmer awake in small wonders  
Quantum Uncertainty won't tell when energy's Big-Bang became human

## Liz Minette

### *Welcome to the 13th Floor*

The 13th Floor Elevators,

a psychedelic rock  
band from Austin,  
Texas,

profess in their  
song

“You’re Gonna Miss Me”

that as a new day  
dawns, what you  
took for granted,  
what you thought  
would always be  
there, and didn’t  
care if it was or  
not, is no longer

there.

No doubling  
back, no  
apologies,

a profession  
of change or  
love,

baby, there  
is none

no welcome  
home.

## Charlie Lydon

*thirteen*

bing bing bing  
numbers cascading as reminders  
time is not forever but a linear  
countdown to the final stop

when the double door opens  
i wander every floor but  
one, that last button pushed and  
the doorman has called to open

who will be the one who opens  
that last floor door to exist  
to enter that great unknown  
finding my last question answered

adventures have to be had  
and time must be spent alone  
to know that tree of knowledge  
planted in wisdom alone

that door has not yet opened  
the doorman hasn’t called me  
by my name and i haven’t yet  
pushed button number thirteen



## Liz Minette

### *Triskaidekaphobia*

There is no 13th floor.

There is a 12a or M,

or no access at all:  
(mechanical room—

a room that only  
building main-  
tenance workers  
enter and maybe  
think only of  
the 13th letter  
of the alphabet).

There are no fires,  
street congestion,  
or shadows thrown—

the superstitious  
sleeping tenants  
can actually  
sleep.

# Fiction



Artwork by Chelsea Branley, *Spiritual Awakening*

Daniel Dow

*Lucky 13*

The paint thinner runs down the door, the clear droplets taking on a tinge of black. The doused rag dries out my skin, and I am unsure if the lack of feeling in my fingertips is from my firm efforts or the chemicals that are penetrating my pores. I continue on, the thick smell beginning to fill the air, burning my nostrils. I cough, and realize I am unable to hear myself over the volume of my headset.

The thick paint begins to abate, and a shimmering golden hue begins to show. The viscous liquid of oil-based paint and thinner melts down my hand and onto my wrist, traveling farther and farther. Its sticky nature draws my attention as I take a moment to relieve the stress in my hands. I drop the rag, and I move my fingertips together, forming two claws, tips meeting thumbs. *I should have worn gloves*, I think to myself.

I step back, and above the splatters and drips of thin black liquid, the first polished brass number on the door begins to take on a shine: 1.

I grab the rag, and my hand moves over to the right. I apply more pressure this time, wanting to make quick work of the final number. I breathe in deep, and I cough again. The fumes start to go to my head. I feel dizzy. My eyes water. I'm not sure if I am truly seeing the luster of the flickering hall light reflecting off the brass. I blink, straining my eyes through my tears. *Am I done?* I say to myself.

I feel a breath on the back of my neck. The weight of a hand on my shoulder. I fling around, ready to throw my headset at the intruder. To distract so I can make my escape.

An unphased delivery driver meets my shocked gaze.

"Apartment 13?" he says, with no interest or appreciation for

the given predicament.

“Umm...Yes, sir. Lucky 13 here.” In a strange winded fashion, trying to catch my breath, to calm my nerves.

“The 13th apartment on the 13th floor, nothing lucky about that. Sign here, please.” He holds out his device for me to sign. There is no smile or joke in his voice.

“I just found the place online and was lucky enough to get in the door right after speaking with the landlord. Moved in today, actually. Got a good rate, too. I don’t know, feels lucky to me.” I try to show a slight smile and meet his eye as I make my mark on his device.

He takes the device back into his hands, looks at the mess of paint and thinner I left on his tablet, and angrily taps the screen. He lets out a loud hack and sniffs in loudly. I can hear him swallowing. He meets my eyes.

“You don’t find the number 13; the number 13 finds you.” His gaze then leaves my eyes, and for a moment, I see them drawn to the 1 and the 3 behind me. The golden hue of the brass reflecting in his gleaming, glossy eyes.

He then turns and walks away.

I turn back to the door. Just then the hall light begins to flicker, and the red light of the exit sign illuminates the beads of diluted water that run down the door. The 1 and 3 cast a candescent, even glow with the droplets. I stand there, acknowledging that the door has become a beacon of red reckoning.

My hand grabs the door, and as my pace begins to quicken, I feel my palm briefly stick to the knob, for an instant, slowing me down. The paint that was once pliable is beginning to dry. After I open the door, I flex my hand, open and close in rapid succession. I feel the drying paint flex against my skin.

I refuse to take a moment longer. I enter the apartment, close

the door and lock the knob and dead bolt all in rapid succession. Not slowing, I move across the stained, white linoleum floor, dodging unopened boxes as I go. I meet the sink, find my cleaning brush, turn on the water, and scrub. Repeatedly, tipping the store brand dish soap onto my hands, expecting it to complete a task the orange detergent came unequipped to accomplish.

*Crash!*

I come to. I look beside me and see the microwave. The digital numbers read 1:00 AM. Pain. I feel the bristles of the scrub brush piecing through my skin. I look down and find the usual, white, sudsy soap, red.

A shriek meets my lips and my eyes move away from the sight. They want to be anywhere else. I do not want to acknowledge the damage done. My eyes find the container that was once full of orange detergent near empty.

My mind races for answers. *What is going on?* I ask myself, trying to make sense of the lost time.

I close my eyes and bring my hands to my chest. They throb, burn. I feel the suds beginning to melt down the front of my shirt. I try to remember where my phone is so I can call for help. I remember it’s in my pocket. The thought of having to work my fingers into the tight space terrifies me. The only thing that comes to mind is pain.

My teeth meet my lower lip, I brace myself and move my right hand into my pocket. I bite hard, trying to distract myself from the torment. Tears begin to flow from my eyes. I taste blood.

Finally, my hand loosely grabs my phone, and I am able to remove the device from my pocket. And this is the first moment I truly see it, my hand. My right hand. There is no skin left to my fingertips.

The sight brings me to a frenzy, I want nothing more than

access to my phone so I can dial 911. In a quick thrust I jam my finger to my phone, applying it to the phone screen. For a brief moment, the action feels normal, regular. I forget about the pain, and my finger repeatedly rests against the screen.

9, 10, 11, 12, 13 times, my finger meets the screen. The glass becomes a mixture of blood and foam, no longer acknowledging my touch. Only acknowledging the residual of small, red bubbles that I leave behind. The screen begins to flash off and on. On the seventh flash, and after repeated attempts to clean the screen, I realize my attempts are useless.

My focus leaves my phone, and with it the actions that brought on brief distraction. The feeling of immense pain returns. A sense of reeling in my stomach joins the pain, and I vomit. I am unable to save myself from the mess.

I fall onto the floor, into the pile of sick that lay beneath me. My back leans against the kitchen counter, and I want there to be an easy answer. I close my eyes, wanting to scream out to someone, maybe God.

*Crash!*

Looking over to where the sound came from, I see two towers of boxes turned over. One of these towers falls not too far from where I sit now, and looking at its discards, I see the very top box now spilling onto the floor. Picture frames present themselves, and I see a familiar chrome frame, a gift from my mother. Lying face down, I take the frame off the ground expecting to see my mother's young face, some hope, but as I lift it the glass falls away from the frame. The photo, flops forward with the glass, trying to escape from the frame as well.

I bring the frame closer to me, to save the picture, but as I pull the picture from the frame a second photo comes with it. What seems to be a hidden treasure, a long-lost photo presents itself. My mother's

smile meets me, and next to her, I see an apartment door: 13. The red of the emergency exit sign reflects in her eyes.

I whip the photo away but the heavy acrylic material moves as if all life has left it, and as it meets the air, it falls straight down between my legs. The 13 looks back at me, meeting my eyes.

*No more*, I say to myself. A moment of adrenaline hits me. I wipe away the sweat from my face, and I can feel whatever mess is on my hands parting way onto my face. I bring myself to my feet, and though it's a struggle, I kick the boxes that fell in front of the door away. I bear all my weight onto the door and begin my struggle with the little dexterity that I have left to unlock the deadbolt and knob. My hands shake, and with all the sense of feeling, except pain, having left my fingers, a task that was once easy becomes a struggle.

The sweat continues to pour down my face, and I can see the button on the doorknob turn. Next, I turn the deadbolt, and with all my weight against the door, it moves with ease. I use both my hands to turn the knob and the door moves open. I am free. I run down the hall to my neighbor's door and that's when I see it. There's no number. Just a door. Nothing even painted over. I move to the next door down the hallway, and again, the same. No number.

I sprint to the elevator and push my finger against the upside-down triangle. My finger sticks for a moment, and I quiver as the pain over-shadows my moment of adrenaline. I pull my finger away, and instead of an expected bloody fingerprint, there's just a smudge of red.

*Ding.*

I look up and see the glowing 13 and the door opens. I enter the elevator and hit the "ground floor" button. The elevator moves, inching along, trapping me. I begin to breathe hard, losing my breath. The panic takes over.

*Ding.* The elevator opens to the ground floor.

I break into a run and look about the lobby and remember it's sometime in the predawn hours. I make for the door and burst outside my building. The air meets me, and the bitter cold makes the hairs on my body stand up straight. Goosebumps build instantly. A man walking towards me looks my way, no doubt shocked by the abrupt noise. He sees me, cries out, and breaks out in a run in the opposite direction.

My adrenaline begins to die down, and I take a moment to focus. *A phone*, I tell myself. *I need to find a phone.* I look around and realize there's nothing around me open at this hour. I turn back toward the apartment door and stare. *Maybe there is a phone in the lobby?*

My teeth begin to chatter, and I realize I have no choice. The bitter New England night would not be forgiving. I grit my teeth, trying to stop the chatter and begin to open the door.

*Thunk.* It's locked.

"Hey mista, are you alright?" I hear the voice behind me and turn around. There's a yellow cab sitting there.

"No." I answer.

"Get in. I'll take ya down to BMC."

A tear begins to fall down my cheek, but before it freezes, I am in the back seat.

"Thanks for stopping ..." I hesitate, trying to rationalize the night's chain of events.

"Yah, no worries. You're a sight, man. This ain't my usual route. These cabs, sometimes have a mind of their own. I have to say, you're lucky."

That's when I see it, on cab card form, on the back of the driver's seat. Cab number 13.



Artwork by Neve Andre, *Cats in Sweaters, a Tribute*

## Victoria Lynn Smith

### *Dog Down the Stairs*

“Debra, you’re far too pregnant to be carrying that god-damned dog down the stairs.” Hank’s words swaggered from the bedroom into the hallway. Her husband didn’t like her to indulge the dog.

She placed her cheek against the six-month-old German Shepherd’s cheek, her mouth facing one of his sable-colored, pointed ears, which struck her as comically too big for his head, and she softly dribbled words into it. “Come on, Fritz, you can do it. It’s just like climbing up, except your nose points down.” She stood and walked down the faded floral runner. “How fitting,” her mother had said when she’d seen the worn-out house Hank and her only child had rented, “an old-lady pattern.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Debra motioned her hands toward herself like a traffic cop, directing cars through an intersection, past an accident. Fritz didn’t move. Eight-months pregnant, she folded her arms on top of her protruding belly, catching her breath before she could go back up to carry him down. He was nearly full-grown, but with a skinny build like a fourteen-year-old boy. It would be another year or so before the dog filled out, broadening through his shoulders like a boy becoming a man.

Just nineteen, Debra was small-breasted with slight hips; otherwise, she was nearly the shape of a skinny teenage boy herself. From behind she didn’t look a month away from giving birth. Years of figure skating had made her strong, contradicting her thinness, and she had no problem lifting Fritz. The only obstacle to carrying him down the stairs was her growing belly. It got in the way of so much. Her skating competition days were over, and her audition for a

traveling ice dancing show had been canceled. She now suspected Hank had done it on purpose, forgetting to bring the condom then lying about pulling out before he came. Without hesitation he’d offered to marry her.

She had begged him for a dog. Afraid she wouldn’t know how to raise a baby, she wanted to practice with a puppy. Could she teach it to listen? Would she remember to feed it and walk it? Keep it alive? Avoid spoiling it? Mold it into a well-behaved animal that her family and friends could admire? Her husband, three years older, considered himself wiser, and he mocked her, “A puppy is not a baby.” But he agreed to a dog, as long as it was a German Shepherd, something to put the seedy residents in the neighborhood on notice.

Fritz had been two months old when he came to live with them. They’d spent the same as a whole month’s rent on him and his puppy shots. He went up the stairs but refused to go down. “Maybe he doesn’t like his ass being higher than his head,” Hank said. The stairs were steep. “Maybe,” she answered back, “he looks down and sees an abyss.”

Every morning Fritz sat at the top of the stairs as she and her husband descended without him. “Ignore the shithead dog,” Hank would say. “He’ll figure it out.” Still, she always climbed back up the stairs and lifted him into her arms.

But Fritz was no longer a baby, so this morning she left him at the top of the stairs. He whimpered then sobbed. Below, Debra spun around as if wearing skates on smooth ice instead of wool socks on a nicked vinyl floor. She peered up into Fritz’s brown eyes, bereft that she would leave him. She’d ruined him, and she would ruin her child by giving into its whims when it cried. Debra clasped the railing, drawing herself up the steps, spreading her feet apart on the treads to make room for her belly between her thighs as she lifted her legs

one at a time, ascending.

Footfalls thudded above her, and Fritz's oversized ears cowered. Hank appeared at the top of the stairs, and she stopped climbing. He hadn't finished dressing. A white short-sleeved T-shirt clung to his broad shoulders and tight abdomen, a man's build. Tighty-whities outlined his privates, and Debra's privates stirred. White crew socks covered his feet. Her shining knight in white underwear; he would carry the dog for her.

She waited on a step, and Fritz turned toward her. Hank planted his foot on Fritz's behind and pushed. The dog slid down the first several steps, his legs splaying like Bambi's on ice.

She let go of the railing, and stepped in front of Fritz to catch him, to keep him from breaking a leg or his neck. She would save him, and she would be a good mother. She would save her baby from future dangers: speeding cars, slippery stairs, small choking hazards, spiking fevers.

Fritz regained stability, and his feet settled on the treads but momentum propelled him down the precipitous stairs, barreling toward her, almost upon her. She could save no one, not herself, not her baby. Her back would slam against the steps. She would slide to the bottom. Fritz would land on her belly.

Then she side-stepped him, clutching the railing with both hands as he careened past, landed on all four paws, and trotted toward the kitchen.

Debra looked up. Hank had already left the scene, not bothering to bear witness to the near catastrophe that had almost occurred.



Artwork by Amy Bates, *Ruxy*

## Lindsey Switzer

### *PPV... Postpartum Vampire*

The dishwasher was dirty. There were no clean spoons in the drawer and the dishwasher was dirty. Again. I was going to have to eat my ice cream with a fork. Again. The house could use a thorough cleaning and the yard desperately needed to be raked. Fall came out of nowhere this year. Thankfully, we didn't have the most unruly yard in the neighborhood. Our neighbors consisted of working-class families and retirees on fixed incomes. There wasn't extra time for landscaping or extra funds to hire someone else to do it. Most of the jobs here are blue-collar. My husband, Jason, works as a mechanic. I teach at the local high school. Well I did, until we had our fourth kid and couldn't afford daycare. So I stay home with the three little kids.

Our house is a bungalow, with a small front porch and cracked stucco siding. The three bedrooms are all packed with clothes that need to get put away and beds that are never made. Don't even get me started on the kitchen. It feels like I spend 20 hours a day making snacks and washing dishes, which brings me back to my current dilemma. The kids were finally asleep and I was going to have a little bit of ice cream before bed. I absolutely was not about to spend a single minute of my free time washing another dish. The fork would have to do.

I heard the basement door open and sighed. My husband decided that we could make a little extra income by renting out the basement. It hadn't even been a month, and I already regretted agreeing to it. I have enough on my plate, and the tenant and I don't exactly get along. The fact that he was a vampire wasn't even the worst part. He always seemed to be critiquing me, and I couldn't do anything right when he was around.

I sighed heavily as I heard the basement door open. I knew my moment of peace was going to be ruined.

"What the hell happened today?" he half yelled at me as he came into the kitchen.

I so did not want to have this conversation now. I was having a week from hell, and I knew the vampire was about to make it worse. I couldn't believe I let my husband talk me into getting a roommate, and then an honest-to-God, actual vampire answered the Craigslist ad. He'd been a nightmare since he moved in.

"Did you even check double-check with the mom that she knew about the allergy?" he asked me.

I had sent my six-year-old to a birthday party today where something he ate set off an allergic reaction.

"Of course I did, I've been doing this long before you showed up, and have been managing just fine." This was how we interacted. He usually hounded me about my worst fears. Any sort of insecurity I had, he knew about and just dug and dug until I was fully exposed.

"What if he went into full out anaphylaxis? What if you forgot to leave his EpiPen behind? What would you have done if you got a call he was in the ER? Was your phone even on you? How would you have felt if he died because you were careless?" The vampire rambled on and on, following me through the house as I carried a laundry basket on my hip and my ice cream in my free hand.

I had been trying to get him to move out since he got here.

"When is your lease up again?" I asked him as I slammed the basket at his feet.

"You need me here, Miranda. How else are you going to manage this house and those kids?"

I laughed dryly, rolling my eyes. No one in this house seemed to be bothered by him except me. It was like he let everyone else



just carry on, and for some reason decided that I was going to be the object of his attention. It was a constant barrage of questions and worst-case scenarios. I was having a hard enough time adjusting to four kids as it was, and I really didn't need the extra criticism or input. He promised when he moved in that we would all be off the menu, but most days I still felt like he was sucking the life out of me.

He left the house in a huff, to go do whatever it was he did for the night. I shuddered and tried hard not to think about it. I was excited about my ice cream, but now I was biting the tongs of the fork between my teeth, replaying what the vampire had said to me. I absolutely should have been more careful. James was only six years old; he was too young to be able to go to a birthday party alone. I sank back into the couch feeling like the worst mom in the world.

I was wallowing in guilt when my husband got home. After a quick hug and a brief rundown of each of our days, we folded laundry together in silence and were in bed before midnight.

I woke up before the sun was fully poking through the trees. I went downstairs to start the coffee only to find a fresh pot waiting for me. Unfortunately, the vampire was also waiting for me.

"You have a lot of things to get done today," he stated matter-of-factly as I sat down.

Here it comes, I thought, still not saying a word to him.

"Don't forget it's pajama day at pre-school for Lily. She wanted to wear the pink ones, but you didn't wash them. James' lunch didn't get packed last night, and I'm not sure if sending him with a bologna sandwich again is good for his health. You're running low on diapers and formula. You haven't called your mom in way too long, and your parents aren't going to be around forever. The dog should get on a walk today and the floors are due for a mop."

I knew all these things; they seemed to play in a loop in my

brain for every waking moment. I never felt adequate, and I was constantly playing catch up on chores, bills, sleep. I always pretended to have a good handle on things, but the vampire knew exactly what I was worried about and seemed to magnify the thought. His voice felt like it was reverberating through my skull, a slight pounding with each of his statements. My throat started to burn as I fought back tears.

He kept going.

"Are you creating the best childhood for the kids? Did you pay the gas bill on time? Can you even afford to pay the gas bill? When was the last time you saw your friends? I wonder if Jason is still happy with you? Do you think you should dress up and wear makeup? Do your kids love you? Can you even say—"

"SHUT UP," I yelled as I slammed my hands on the table, not caring that I most likely just woke up the rest of my family. But I had had enough. This had been going on too long, and I wasn't going to let this vampire ruin things. I was done letting him take any more joy out of my life.

"I spend every waking moment putting my all into loving and raising this family. You could never understand the sacrifices and energy that goes into being a mom. I love my kids more than anything, and I know they love me. My husband loves me, and I know we have a great marriage." I was seething.

The vampire stared at me in shock; I normally let him just berate me. I was aware that Jason was standing behind me, staring.

I was feeling a slight buzz throughout my body, hands shaking as I tried to figure out what else I was going to say to him.

The vampire stood up and took a step closer to me. I was sure I had pushed him too far. Before he could say another word, Jason opened the curtains, letting in the orange morning light.

The vampire was caught in the beams, eyes widening as he

realized what was happening. He didn't even have time to raise his arms in defense before he was nothing but a pile of ashes on my dining room floor.

Jason stood staring at me. He crossed the room and wrapped me up in his arms.

I felt a mixture of slight horror and relief as I pulled back to look at what was left of the vampire. That was one mess I was going to be happy to clean up.

## Hailie Evans

### "Solitude"

Echoes. Dark and trembling walls.

Echoes of sounds rang just as loud as the echoes of silence.

Silence filled the space now, splitting through the man's skull.

So loud, the silence.

"Where do you think they went?" he asked.

"To the man in red."

*Drip... Drip... Drip...*

*The man in red...* "Not here, then. They wouldn't find him here." *Not where his color would be swallowed whole—by the darkness.*

He felt the weight of the darkness. Thousands of years and lives lay in it.

It was empty... so empty. So many had come; so many had gone. They had all left him for the man in red—they must have.

"I am not the man in red."

*Of course not.* Red did not exist here.

*Thud.*

*Thud-thud.*

Suffocating—he was suffocating, punched by an invisible force, air and sound ripped from his throat in a harsh, repeating gasp... The motion was familiar; the experience foreign.

*Thud-thud.*

Warm wetness spidered its way across his face. Cold, moist mulch pressed his hand. He gripped it tightly, refusing to relinquish the intimate protection of its grasp. The rocky sounds split his skull. He clung to the hand.

*Thud-thud. Thud-thud.* A sound he knew intrinsically.

*“Thud... thud... thud... thud—that is the sound you will hear when the man in red comes for you,” the soft but weathered voice recited as she tapped the spot over his heart. The scent of spiced honey drifted about his head, the vapors of the warm liquid condensing on his face as he leaned over the steaming cup. The lap he sat on shifted with a breath, enough to send his yet-half-sized body spilling toward the edge of the chair. Before the cold chill of fright could wash over his mind, large hands—soft and leathery—scooped him back to safety. He gripped the cup tightly, not wanting to spill the drink, still yearning to soak in its warmth. A strong finger caught his chin. “When you hear the thudding, that is your heart. It knows he comes. You cannot run from the man in red. You can only hope, in good times, that he will find you slow, and in the worst of times, that he will make quick work of his search.”*

*Thud-thud. Thud-thud.* Clumps of dirt cascaded around him, dusting him in thick, black snow. His memory deceived him. It was not the *thud... thud... thud... thud* of his past.

*Where did they go?*

*Thud.*

Veins of darkness, caressing his head. Twisting veins. Ripping voice.

*“Silence.”*

The gravelly, damp voice wrenched away his fear, emptying him.

Silence...

The steady *drip... drip... drip...* of the voice rolled down his mangled skull... caressing his vertebrae... settling on dirt.

He stared into the darkness—breathed in its wet decay. Choked on it. No spiced honey sheltered his now-full-sized body. No leathery hand scooped him up to safety.

He stared into his cell.

The smallest unit of life.

So miniscule, often forgotten.

The man in red was not there. Just the darkness.

It stared back at him.

*“Where did they go?”*

## Shannon Kirk

### *The Fairytale Conundrum*

In the stillness of the night, when the day succumbs to the quiet of slumber, I slip into the in-between. I close the door of my eyes and rush through the winding streets as the darkness starts to unravel and the world beyond comes alive.

It is here, in the night, that I exist. It is here where the world loses its grip on the forced definition of who I am. The faster I run, the constructs of who I should be begin to shed from my being. I am lighter, freer, and bolder. Wings begin to form where the burdens on my back have taken hold, and I soar into the unending possibility. I race through the sky, darting around the stars as the mist that encircles the Earth calls to me. I dive into the unknown, the thing that others define by their fears. I find beauty in the monsters that are misunderstood.

It is in this moment, in this dream, that I run free. I can exist without being caged by the fears of others, forced into hiding. The complexities of what has made me who I am are understood. I am not condemned for the cruelties that life has inflicted upon me. I am given the chance to exist beyond the trauma that has defined me.

I descend upon the Earth, the bats guiding me down through the darkness that they teach me to thrive in. There is no shame here in darkness; it is only those who have tasted it that can appreciate the true nature of light. Darkness defines light, and it is in the shadows that I was formed. This is where the broken, the misunderstood, the bizarre, and the ugly can reach beyond to the possibilities the world did not grant us.

There are no princes or princesses here; we are the dragons, the gargoyles, and the awkward children in the corner. The fairytales

have reduced us to sacrificial fodder for the heroic tales. The need for the simplicity of black and white negates the existence of gray. We are the gray, and we exist in the in-between.

It is here in the night that we find our wings, and once we are strong enough, we will fly out of this moment, this dream, into the light. This is not because we need to escape the darkness, but so that we can redefine the fairytales that tell us who we must be. We live happily ever after because we learn to retell the stories that we have been trapped inside of.

That is the magic of the in-between, where we learn to dream.



Artwork by Bailey L. BeBeau, *Summer Day*

## Ava Arrigo

### *Your Place Is Empty*

Mary slips through the veil of slumber into wakefulness. Her eyes strain against the sunlight that pours in through the window, bathing the room in a soft amber glow. She must have forgotten to close the blinds last night. Stretching her aching limbs, Mary turns to face the left side of the bed, her eyes drawn to the tucked, unrumpled comforter and fluffed pillow. There's dust covering the nightstand, and a half-finished book lying atop the surface, sticky tabs protruding from its pages. The sounds of birds, their lightsome chirps muted through the pane of glass, fill Mary's ears. There's voices too, faint and indistinguishable from the next. The world is still spinning.

Her gaze shifts to the dust motes floating lazily through the air, highlighted by the morning sun, and for one aching second, she allows herself to pretend. She pretends that any second she'll hear the shower turn on in the adjoining bathroom. That the scent of coffee will drift in from the kitchen and fill her nose with its rich, dark scent. But the shower remains off and the only thing Mary smells is her day-old perfume. She rises from her bed, comforter wrinkled and pillow flat. Life continues.

She makes her way towards the kitchen, her bare feet padding softly against the cool wood floor of the hallway. The walls are lined with frames of all different shapes and sizes, pictures of smiling faces, two lives closely intertwined. Mary doesn't dare meet their gaze. Her feet switch from cool wood to cool tile as she walks through the archway into the kitchen. The sunlight continues to follow her, its light bleeding into the kitchen through the sheer drapes that cover the window above the sink. Mary walks towards the old coffee maker in the corner of the counter by the fridge. An eclectic array of mugs

in the corner of the counter by the fridge. An eclectic array of mugs hang from the mug tree that is meant to resemble a cactus. It has always been an eyesore, not matching the rest of the decor in the kitchen, but she can't bear to part with it.

Mary opens the cupboard above the coffee machine and digs past boxes of tea that remain unused to find the last bag of coffee grounds. She's mechanical in her movements as she doles out two tablespoons of grounds into the white filter and watches as the coffee drips into the pot. Once done brewing, she grabs a mug at random and sits at the small round table with two mismatched chairs in the kitchen. The chair across from her remains empty as she sips her coffee quietly, even though it tastes like ash on her tongue.

An interminable amount of time passes; it could have been three minutes or three hours. Mary doesn't know. What she does know for certain is that her coffee has grown cold, and the silence permeating the still air has become deafening. She stands abruptly, the legs of the chair she was sitting in only a moment before scraping harshly against the tile. Grabbing her cup she goes to pour the remainder of her coffee in the sink, feeling the weight of the silence begin to consume her. As she sets it down in the porcelain basin, she freezes abruptly at the sight of a mug already in there. A yellow mug with delicately painted flowers. There's a tea bag at the bottom of the cup; in the dregs of water at the bottom floats mold, fuzzy and green. It's a sight so familiar, one that used to bring a feeling of fond exasperation, but now only brings a feeling of tremendous agony that blooms in her chest like the lily of the valley that grows in the backyard. She leaves the kitchen immediately, her mug dropping into the sink with a loud clunk, coffee splashing upwards and clinging stickily to Mary's brown skin.

She floats through the house like a ghost, walking in and out

of rooms full of memories. One room had remained empty, a room Mary could barely bring herself to acknowledge, as it was meant to be filled one day. She traces her steps, walks back and forth down the halls, drags her palms along the walls. She touches and smells and feels the ache in her chest grow poisonous. She winds up in the sitting room, sunlight once again spilling in through the windows. Her feet step onto the thick carpets and her eyes trace the forest green wallpaper. The fireplace is full of ash and burnt logs, ready to be lit. Soft sofas and chairs surround the fireplace, a plush rug between them, and on the far wall to her right, nestled between two tall bookcases, sits her desk. Papers, pens and various items are scattered across the surface. It's the same as it always has been.

Feeling drawn to her desk for the first time in a long while, she makes her way across the carpeted floor and sits down. Almost unconsciously she picks up a pen and finds a blank sheet of paper among the mess. She begins to write, her hand taking care with her words.

*Dear Lils,*

*Do you remember the Greek myth I told you about? The one about humans originally having four arms and four legs? That we were one with each other until Zeus, fearing our power, had separated us forever, forcing us to scour the earth for our other half so we may walk on four legs and touch with four hands once more. I never told you this, as I was too scared to admit such a thing out loud, but I felt as though I had found that with you. That I no longer had to roam the earth searching because I had finally found you. No longer did I walk with two legs or feel with two hands, but somehow I have found myself stuck with two legs and two arms again. It has been so long, I no*

*longer know how. Where is it that you end and I begin? I don't know, but I do know this. Lilly. My Lilly. I am afraid it will take me entire years trying to untangle you from my soul.*

*Yours forever,  
Mary*

After that, there is nothing left to say. That's a lie, there will always be words left to say. Mary doesn't think she will ever run out of things to say to her.

She folds the letter in half and seals it in an envelope. She writes in her lilting script *For Lilly* across the top but doesn't put an address. There's nowhere to send it to. Mary leaves the sitting room, letter in hand, and goes to their bedroom. There she sifts through her closet until she finds an old, beat-up box. She opens it, trying her best to ignore the contents inside. Old Polaroid pictures, scraps of paper with chicken scratch handwriting that used to bring a smile to Mary's lips, and a figurine of two gnomes holding hands sit amongst all the mementos of days long since passed. It's fitting, Mary thinks as she puts the letter in there and tucks the box into the back of her closet, out of sight. It will remain there, collecting dust for many years before she can bear to look at it again.

## Clara Gonderzik

### *The Garden*

My wife is a woman named Charmian, and she's smiling at me from the kitchen window. I'm sitting in our garden, which makes up our entire yard. The garden was Charmian's baby; she was born with a permanent green thumb and refused to live in a world without dahlias. My part in the matter of the garden was situating it so that whoever washed dishes could always look out the window and have a view. Charmian is utilizing that window right now, but she's looking at me more lovingly than she's ever looked at her plants. I really am lucky to have my wife and our life together. The garden bench I'm resting on is cold and beautiful and I think it can read my mind. I glance behind me to ensure the window is shut. Charmian has presumably finished the dishes and gone back to her crossword.

"Whore," the bench hisses at me. I knew it could read my mind.

"I didn't do it!" I protest.

"The only reason you didn't was because of that phone call."

What a profound bench.

"I didn't do it."

"Whore," it replies simply.

---

Charmian is staring at me again, from across the dinner table. We've never sat like this, on opposite ends, but my little brother and his wife, Carmella, are visiting us. I think Henry is trying to tell a joke, but Carmella keeps shooting me telling glances, and I'm scared of what they mean.

"Cecilia?" Henry finally notices my discontent.

“Sorry, I was thinking about work,” I reply and Charmian shoots me a smile.

“Work! At this time of day?” Carmella laughs and shakes her head at me.

“Cecilia’s been working on a very important case, it means a lot to her,” Charmian tells Henry and Carmella, beaming with pride.

“You have? Enough about my boring life! I want to hear all about it!” exclaims Henry.

“Oh it’s not that special, there’s just more filing work than normal and the defense is pretty decent. We’re just preparing for trial and all that, so... uh, yeah...” I trail off, clearing my throat.

Carmella laughs and shakes her head a little, allowing her shiny hair to fall around her shoulders like a princess. “Oh come on, Cecilia, you have to tell us more than that! I know you have secrets that you’re not telling us!”

I bare my eyes into the hardwood of the table. It’s not your typical dining room table—we painted it together on a wine-soaked summer’s day. When we were first married, Charmian wanted to cultivate the perfect house. She declared that modern homes were too sterile and hospitalized. Her solution to this issue was to create a wild dream from a child’s mind. Our cabinets are dark green and Charmian painstakingly hand-painted a flock of white lilies over them. And our table—it’s a swirl of flowers and wind and weather. Charmian painted each of our eyes on each end of the table, and I drew the waves surrounding them. It’s Charmian’s painted eyes that I stare into currently. *You have secrets that you’re not telling us.* Carmella always knows too much for her own good. It’s why Henry and I have grown apart over the years. She unsettles me.

“My sister’s always been super into work.” Henry rolls his eyes as he explains to his wife, “She takes HIPAA, or whatever the

lawyer-y version of it is, annoyingly seriously.” He then shoots me a soft smile.

“Thanks Hen,” I murmur.

Carmella asks to speak with my wife in private.

---

When my father left my mother, she told us that he was most certainly the devil and we were never to speak with him again. She talked about the devil a lot, actually. She claimed to be a Jesus loving individual but always spoke of devils and sin more than our supposed savior. To me and Henry, she was a statue of Athena riding into war—spear and everything. Compared to her, my father was a sorry excuse for a man. He was meek and knew it, and tried to be mean to compensate. He would take Henry into his bedroom every night and lecture him about what his duty was as a man, and how he must be a protector of women. I don’t know where he is now—I listened to my mother religiously. He cheated and left before the Big Reveal of the Homosexual in the Warren Family Homestead, and I still wonder what he would’ve done to me. But he was a cheater and the devil and I don’t remember his name.

I’ve done a lot of bad things that I’ve almost never been hurt by. It’s always the others that suffer. But as I sit in our garden, again, I wonder if they’ve finally caught up with me. I suppose I should clarify that I’m not a cheater. You probably think that I am, if you’ve read up to this point. I’m not used to being viewed this way. Charmian was wrong, I don’t have a big case. I don’t have anything anymore.

Marriage has been hard on me. I promised my mother before she died that I would be happy, but I don’t think I ever kept that vow. Charmian lights up every room she floats through and I am just... the shadow following with my tail tucked in. I don’t know what Carmella’s



saying to her right now, but I can't imagine it's anything good. She couldn't have seen me, could she? No, they live an hour away, and only come into town when they visit.

A twig cracks on the ground, and I glance to my left to see my brother plodding towards me. He seems uncomfortable with all of the plants, and is walking painfully slow in an effort to avoid stepping on the succulents that bleed onto the path. I look away as I feel him sit next to me on the bench.

Henry sighs and looks into the distance. "I started a new job last month."

"What?"

"It's actually a five-minute drive from here. Mella and I are looking at houses nearby."

"What's the job?"

"Oh you know, same old."

"And what's that?" I never did bother to ask what Henry did for a living.

"What I've been doing for the past 15 years." His eyes seem cold as they look into mine.

---

I should probably tell you that I do have a secret. Her name is Violet. She's quiet and soft spoken. Two months ago, she stumbled into my office looking for the bathroom. She's twenty-six and an intern at my firm. I don't have feelings for her, I pinky swear, but she looks at me like I'm the wisest being she's ever known. Perhaps I am, her father was more of a failure than mine, and her mother threw herself off the Golden Gate Bridge seventeen years ago. I took her under my wing, allowing her to sit in on my meetings with clients and judges. Violet never said much more than a few words, but she stared at my writing with a kind of awe I hadn't seen in a while. I began to

take her out for lunches and dinners, teaching her about the world. She'd been poor growing up and never spent any time at the movie theaters. I took her to a showing one day, and it was there I learned of her virginity. Like her name, Violet is fragile and pure, and I'd never do anything to ruin that. Charmian would never understand our relationship, she'd never understand the love we have for each other. She's never been a mentor in this way.

Three days ago, I took Violet to a Finnish bistro on the East side of town. We discussed law school and her internship, and I gave her numbers of old friends in the field. It was sunny outside, and the warmth made us feel drunk.

"Ms. Cecilia?" At first, Violet had refused to refer to me in any way but formal, and it eventually transformed into a term of endearment.

"Yes, flower?" I smiled, noticing the pink in her soft cheeks.

"Will you come back to my apartment with me?" She must've been feeling brave.

"Whatever for?" I took her hand from under the table.

"A drink or two?"

---

"You cheated on me." My wife speaks plainly, and once again, I can't escape her gaze. Henry and Carmella left an hour ago, but Charmian and I are still in our unnatural seats at the painted table.

"I told you. I didn't. We ate lunch, and she held my hand and then you called and that was it."

"And if I hadn't called?"

"But you did." I don't know why Charmian can't understand this. I'm *not* my father.

"What were you going to do?"

“Charmian...” I don’t want to go there.

She stares at me for a long time before asking, “Are you happy with this, with our life?”

“I should be,” I sigh.

“Are you going to leave me, Cecilia?” Charmian finally asks the question I’ve been pondering for years.

“Probably.” I don’t want it to end this way.

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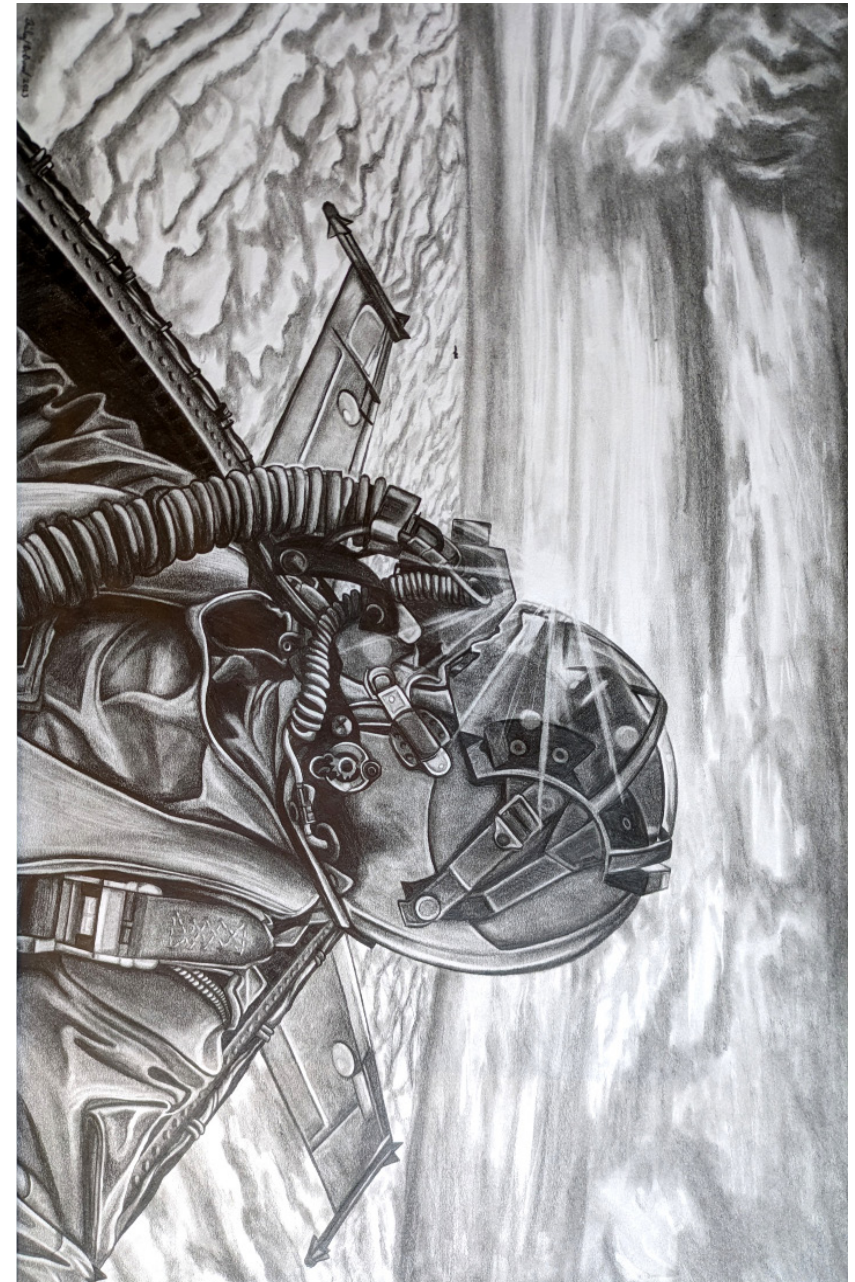
Charmian stands up and walks to the corner of the room. She stretches her arms and takes a breath. I keep thinking that she’s going to say something, but she never does. Is this it? Is this how marriages end? My parents were an explosion. My mom screamed and my dad cowered. I held Henry under my covers and we sang songs to hide the noise. But this... this is just stale air and resignation. It feels no different than our relationship yesterday or the day before. Can relationships really just exist until they don’t anymore? I love Charmian just like I’m supposed to and she does to me as well. We have a nice house and are on track to have the loan paid off in the next ten years. We go on double-dates with friends and look beautiful dancing together at the club.

Charmian is still staring at the wall. I don’t know why she does that. I don’t know why she does anything anymore. I tell her this, and she laughs.

“You never ask. You never care.” It’s true.

I think back to Henry and I’s conversation in the garden. I guess he was trying to warn me that Carmella had seen Violet and I at the cafe while getting coffee to surprise him on his lunch break. I really never ask about him either.

Charmian glances back at me, and then leaves the room. I don’t think she’s coming back.



Artwork by Bailey L. BeBeau, *Pilot*

## Thomas Noack

### *Bellhop*

Working as a bellhop in a hotel leads you to see a variety of things. From rock stars to the homeless, you never know what the day holds. A typical day is short, but that doesn't mean you don't get to see everything.

Here's my itinerary from today.

At 9:00, a mother and father, carrying their newborn, needed to get to the eighth floor. They all seemed so happy. I wished them the best. From floors one to eight, the journey was quite quick.

At 9:30, a family with a young boy dressed in baseball gear needed to get to the second floor. Upon asking, they were headed to his first t-ball game.

At 9:45, a boy and his father needed to get to the third floor. They were just getting back from a football game. They lost, but the dad still got him ice cream. A bit early, but who am I to judge.

At 10:00, I took my first break, which got cut short by a group of high schoolers who needed to get to the fourth floor. The hotel just installed a new gaming space, so that makes sense.

At 10:40, a single boy needed to get to the fifth floor. It was his birthday and his parents were taking him to choose his first car. Such an exciting day.

At 11:15, a man wearing a gown sprinted into the elevator. He was brimming with joy. After asking what was so great, he told me he'd just finished college. I wished him luck as he sprinted over to his family once he got out.

From 11:30 to 11:45, I dropped off various businessmen on the seventh to eleventh floors. There must have been a lot of conferences. None of them looked overjoyed to be there, I will say that.

At 11:50, an elderly couple needed to get up to the twelfth floor. That is our penthouse layout. Retirement seems to be treating them nicely. They wished me a good day and even tipped me, which is something I never ask for.

At 11:55, I got a call up to the thirteenth floor. This was odd, because I could have sworn it was under construction still. No matter. At around 12:00, I made my way up and stepped out. The walls were strangely white, and there was nobody up there. Maybe it was just going to be a while until they got here. Maybe they were old. So I waited outside the elevator.

In the distance, I see a man, who can be no older than sixty, approach me. I prepare to greet him, but he stops just outside the elevator.

*It's time for me to go*, I say, as I get up towards the elevator. The man nods. Upon getting back to the elevator, there is no longer a down button. The man comes up next to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. *Let another bellhop do the work for now. Up here you can relax.* A sense of calm washes over me as I sit in one of the tables in the corner of the room.

# Non-Fiction



Photograph by Pat Thomas, *Moon Mimic*

**Please note:** *This piece contains references to relationship abuse and murder.*

**Roxanne Lien**

*Why Murder?*

A cup of coffee, my cat, and soft jazz are the ingredients I require for writing. Given this lovely, calming recipe, my family and friends constantly ask, “Why is there a dead body in all your stories?” They know I’m a peaceful woman; I never fight; I flee, and my heart and soul gravitate toward beauty, not evil. So why is there always a dead body after I write a few pages? Again, the question, “Why murder?”

I don’t have to search too deep for the answer; it is no great mystery to me. It was a man; he had been a passenger on my flight when I was based in Washington, D.C., in the 1970s. Charles Blake was involved in the dirty politics of money, power, and lobbying. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. Exclusive doors in New York and Washington opened for him, and invitations to private parties arrived at his Georgetown town like junk mail. One evening, at a party at the British Embassy, he confiscated a young valet employed by the Ambassador, and from then on, it was Vincent who drove me to and from National Airport in the Lincoln town car. He’d make me a vodka martini when I returned from a flight while I showered, and when it was time for my next flight, my uniforms appeared, cleaned, and pressed from the dry cleaners, and my shoes shined.

I fell hook, line, and sinker for Charles Blake and his lifestyle, not to mention the pampering services of Vincent, and Charles’s spacious, well-appointed Georgian house on N Street beat my three-flight walk-up studio in Alexandria with no air conditioning and street parking.

I was young and had no experience with conscienceless con men, and I hadn’t been in Washington very long when we met.

The world of power and prestige for a girl from Wisconsin was like a big shiny diamond, and I soon found my values compromised. In other words, I sold my soul to the devil. I'm not ready to dive into the dark details of our relationship except to say it left me more mentally than physically scared. The physical abuse didn't start until I tried to leave him. Men like Charles Blake don't let you leave; if they do, they ensure you leave as damaged goods.

Some think the relationship with Charles is why I never married, but marriage and children had never appealed to me; my independence and feminism were just two of the many problems in our relationship. Controllers like to control; when they can't control, they punish. At least, that was my experience. I will leave the labels narcissist and sociopath to the clinicians, except to say that no matter the labels, he was destructive. But I stayed, and I take responsibility for allowing it to continue. I remember being at a party on Capitol Hill, retired Congressman Andrew Davis approached me privately and said, "Get away from him; everything Charles touches turns to shit." But by then, I was addicted to the lifestyle and money. I didn't listen.

The dysfunctional merry-go-round of our relationship was disorienting, and every time I found the courage to leave, generous gifts and flowers arrived with long letters begging for forgiveness. I always wonder why I never ask Charles the million-dollar question. "If you love me, why treat me like this?"

When I finally did leave, it was an evacuation. My father flew my brother to Washington to help me pack my things, and we went in a rental car hours later. I felt like I was running for my life. Charles's abuse, stalking, and stealing of my mail had reduced me to extremes of deep anxiety, fear, and no self-esteem. I went home to my parents in New Richmond, Wisconsin, to heal, and the airlines gave me an emergency transfer to Chicago. My case was far from the first time a

passenger-turned-lover had threatened a flight attendant's life, and it wouldn't be the last.

For many years, Charles Blake's evil occupied my mind; a woman never forgets her abuser. Every year, I googled his name, followed by the word obituary, thinking I could escape his psychological hold over me if I read his obituary. But evil is hard to take down, and forty years later, he is still alive and well in Washington, DC.

So now I'll share my dirty little 'literary' secret with you. Since Charles hasn't died naturally, I make him the victim on paper. There are little clues to his identity in every murder mystery I write; no one else could identify them, but I know, and he would know, too, if he were to read my stories.

Since becoming my muse, Charles is no longer my psychological tormentor. I hope he lives to a ripe old age because even though a cup of coffee, my cat, and soft jazz start the pen across the page, I never underestimate the power of my muse.

So, to those who still wonder, why murder?

Why not?

## Lynn Watson

### *Morning Circle*

The labyrinth beckons just ahead as the stones curve toward me. Fingers of light trace pathways, twining around this illuminated, sacred ground. A cross at the center extends its arms through the labyrinth's concentric rings. The cross overlaying a circle represents male and female united. Together in ritual, planetary wholeness, they are an ancient symbol used worldwide, for centuries.

Under the bluest of skies, the labyrinth lies, welcoming. A path guides footsteps, flat stone following flat stone, in serpentine coils. Folding forward, backward, forward, the winding of the labyrinth's ancestral arcs encompass the glistening meadow. Walking it will clear my mind. Labyrinths have only one way in and only one way out. It is not a maze, an avenue to confusion. It is a release from time in a rhythm of mindful steps and breathing. Hushing sounds of my feet, Shhh-Shhh, will glide from stone to stone. Serenity will begin my solitary, contemplative journey.

The doe is lying on her side. Just there. Shiny black hooves touch the labyrinth's entry stone. Her gaunt, angular body, brown on brown, sprawls in the dirt. Her front legs churn in futility. A scrabbling run takes her nowhere. Her head lies on one delicate cheek. Dirt cradles one brown eye. The one I can see is closing. No sun glints off the opaque pupil. Each deep breath is a silent struggle. Leaves on the bush above her tremble. The doe's free ear swivels and strains to hear what is no longer visible. Her breath slows. Each expansion does not make it to the last rise. She strains upward, but the pulsing flank hollows more deeply. Her usually upright, white flag of danger drags in the dust.

The doe's eye does not move. Her ear lays all the way down.

Her back legs give a final flail, then stop their crippled prance. Her joints, at shoulder and hip, relax, her taut, bounding springs unwound.

Waiting until the key turns in the lock. Within the cathedral of her ribs, her heart slows. The push for life is barely enough to pulse blood, one last time, through its circulatory orbit. Unlocking the constellation of the doe's body will allow her to dissipate into the Great Mystery. Life into death into life is the circle for all creatures. This doe enters and returns within her life's labyrinth, and effervesces into the glowing morning.

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I had taken the long tour in the stillness of this morning. The rising sun backlit the trees in gold, spangling the dew into stars. The trees had dropped rainbows of leaves that I scuffled through with my feet. The trail had encircled the lake where ducks had drifted among cattails and geese fed in flotillas of families. The calls of Sandhill Cranes had cascaded from overhead. The rim of the lake burned with the reflected orange and yellow of the season. Bright trees flamed up between the dark pines: right side up mirrored upside down. The details were perfect in the balance of the dawn.

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Now, standing here in front of this labyrinth, and this dead doe on the first stone, my heart takes me back without permission to the entrance of my mother's hospice room. A nurse says, "I think you should prepare to stay for the next few days." I stay and four more days gather. Mom's lucidities and confusions continually change places. This last morning with her is brilliant with winter. Curtains of snow glitter as they drift by the window. Her hand is cooling on the thin blanket in this too warm room. I carefully cup it between my two.

"It hurts, it hurts. Don't touch me!" she whimpers like she has for these past many months.

"We love you," I offer. "Jeannie, Lynn, Nancy and Suanne. Your daughters." She winces. There are too many words for her to hold or understand. She is deep in preparation to leave this world where everything hurts.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." I whisper. I reassure her the same as I did for my restless kids at bedtime. Like you, Mom, they were caught in between. Not able to sleep, not able to wake up. I didn't turn the lights on, but left the door open a reassuring crack, to let them know I was near.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." was the pulse of your heart above me while chambered in your womb.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." is the sound of waves as they curl ashore. Mom had a lifetime of tidal dramas. They tumble together in this last surging surf. The fetch of waves is stronger, the farther out they start. Pushed with the power of her 85 years, I sense the profound tollings of her life.

Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . . under her straining silence.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." A rush of waters, days and years, in and out. Love and joy and sorrow all breathe in . . . and out.

"Shhh . . . Shhh . . . Shhh . . ." I am old enough to share memories, Mom. I have been able to live some of your dreams. My shhh . . . voice smooths like my hand down the back of a running horse. Shhh . . . remembering all the trees and animals and wildflowers of the North Shore you taught me . . . I married and had my own babies. Shhh . . . here I am for your dying, Mom. You fade over the hours. I hold your ever-colder hand, my forehead bent to your bed.

"Shhh . . ." The sound is longer and longer as it fills in the pauses between her breathing. I watch her eyes glaze, flare, and

focus. But not on me. It's on something out beyond this room. She smiles in greeting, like the best birthday present ever. She closes her eyes, lies back and gently sets sail. She goes out, and I breathe out, too. All is still on this empty bed and shore.

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Bright bird song brings me back to today, in the meadow with the labyrinth. My mother is quickened in me, as I was once in her. The doe is lying on her side. Just there. Her shiny black hooves touch the labyrinth's entry stone.

Do I step over the doe? This doe that marks my path of spiritual welcome? The labyrinth beckons:

*You come round, now,*

*Labyrinth doe, labyrinth mother.*

*Labyrinth fawn, labyrinth daughter.*

*Labyrinth self, labyrinth all.*

*Labyrinth in, labyrinth out.*

## Elroee Hailu

### *Dad and I*

It had always been me and him, running errands, going out for walks, tasting cake, playing tennis and arguing about political regimes, for as far back as I can remember.

My dad has always been a quiet person who never speaks unless spoken to. But somehow, I manage to get him to speak, and it's like unclogging a water pipe. Despite he and I spending an endless amount of time together, and of course despite me being his daughter, I always had to find a topic that was of interest to him in order to engage him in a conversation.

For a long time, I assumed he didn't want to make conversation, but as I grew up, I realized he cared more about the company than the conversation itself. The best way to describe him is as a cleanliness-obsessed polymath who dresses like a European. He always says that living in Europe has changed the way he thinks and how he views life. This is clear from the fact that I was raised in a much less stereotypical African household. I was always allowed to speak freely on my opinions (even though they didn't conform to societal norms), and I was never pressured or compared to my peers academically. I could be open to my parents without any judgment, and I was made to feel accepted and valued for who I am.

Maybe it's because I was an only child, but he always made sure to emphasize the importance of formal education and reaching certain heights in life. I agreed but enjoyed arguing against it just because I was stubborn. He was even more so. He could spend hours arguing against me, even when I was right ... subjectively. I have to admit, he was right more than ninety-percent of the time. I would

always get frustrated and just resort to scoffing. Dad said my lips would droop, but I'm sure that was to make me feel more sour. I hate losing an argument.

My mom would always tell him to let things slide and that it was okay for me to be wrong sometimes. He'd argue that he couldn't let me believe I could say anything baselessly and have everyone accept it without any valid evidence. He always said that he couldn't live with himself knowing that I thought something that was wrong when it was substantially very wrong. I hated it every time he said that. Sometimes, I'd just start crying because I knew he was right, but I was too stubborn to admit it. He would immediately freak out when I started crying and offer to take me roller skating over the weekend to make me feel better. I might have purposely started crying after an argument every now and then to go roller skating.

He never liked apologizing—a habit I very much took from him. His form of apology is two scoops of salted buttercream ice cream and a late afternoon tennis game. Tennis was the only tangible way for us to test who was right, who was wrong, and who was better. It wasn't a subjective argument but more like something with points and a winner and a loser.

We used to play our hearts out, at least I did. A game could go back and forth for up to three hours. For a long time, I thought I was better than him at tennis. It took me until I was fourteen to figure out that he'd purposely lose points to let me win, which kind of makes me feel bad now because I'd rub it in his face every time I won. Winning was a game of stubbornness for him.

When I was eight, I asked him to teach me Serbian because I wanted to be better than him and know one more language than he did. He said he had always wanted to teach me but he wouldn't



because my intentions were not right. That's when I decided to self-learn a different language to prove that I could do things on my own. And trust me when I say learning Arabic as an eight-year-old who wasn't allowed to use the internet was not a piece of cake. I had to teach myself by spending hours watching animated shows without subtitles. It took me five years to learn how to speak and another four years, and still going, to learn how to read and write.

When I turned fifteen, I started bragging about how I knew one more language than he did, and made it my whole personality. This continued for about three months until my mom told me that he, in fact, knew two more languages than I did, but he had kept it from me so I could enjoy my success. I ended up losing a couple of tennis games on purpose so we would be even.

It took me years to realize that everything was more than just a competition of who knew more or who did things better. All these things were ways for my dad and I to connect—to understand each other in our own unique way. It wasn't about being right or wrong. It was about the bond that formed from all the conversations and tennis games we had. Winning was all about the moments we spent together, the things we learned about each other, and the love that silently flowed between the back and forths.

*In loving memory of the person who shaped my life.*



Artwork by Rachel Coyne, Hag Stone Studies

## Contributors' Notes

**Neve Andre's** true passion is drawing cats in sweaters with bright colors, but will write the occasional Haiku. She was heavily inspired by the publication's theme for her Haiku, and funny looking cats for the drawing. Neve is a triple threat Bio/Environmental Science major with a GIS minor, and enjoys having free time.

**Ava Arrigo** is a student at UW-Superior, double majoring in history and psychology with a minor in anthropology. From a young age, Ava enjoyed reading, and from this stemmed her love of writing. Finding comfort in slipping into other worlds, they wanted to create worlds for others to find comfort in as well. When they're not busy with academics, they can be found reading on the shores of Lake Superior or writing in her journal. This is their first published work.

As someone who tries to explore past the core teachings that she must strive for realism, **Amy Bates** often experiments with subjects that do not necessarily exist. Her emotions and the strange entities of her mind became her strongest inspiration, using art to express complex thoughts. Animals and the natural world also often inspire her. She primarily works with ink, colored pencils, and watercolors, but has been experimenting with smudgier mediums like pastels and charcoal. Amy is from Wisconsin and is currently working on her third year of double majors in biology and environmental science, and her visual art minor.

**Bailey L. BeBeau** is a Christian creative writer with much of her work falling into the category of science fiction/fantasy. As a current freshman at UW-Superior, she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in writing, seeking to one day use her talents to spread hope through the Gospel message. While she still has much to learn in the writing department, several mediums of her work can be found in the traditional art

scene. Her work consists of clay sculptures, pencil drawings, water-color images, colored pencil work, and pretty much anything she can get her hands on.

**Colleen Beron** will be graduating from UW-Superior in May 2024 with a degree in Writing and Business Studies. She graduated from Northwood Technical College in 2011 with an Associate Degree in Finance. She has worked in a middle school library for ten years. When it comes to writing, young adult horror is her passion. She lives in Foxboro, Wisconsin with her husband, two children and three crazy dogs.

**Bud Brand** is a 77-year-old retired government worker who believes that "some forms of poetry are just destined to rhyme... a throwback in writing to an earlier time." His works derive from divine inspiration and the love of his wife Donna, children David and Melissa, and grandchildren Dyllon, Jady, Tylar, Alexis, Samantha, and Christopher.

**Chelsea Branley** is an acrylic/mixed media artist whose art represents her own journey and how she perceives the world around her. She loves creating space for an intersection between her mind and the familiar world. Chelsea is passionate about sharing her art with those around her while encouraging others to dive into the creative process. Creativity is a love language for her.

**Taylor Brockmeier** is completing her second year of her undergraduate program at UW-Superior. She is a Secondary Education English Major with Minors in both Writing and Instruction. She is currently in Alaska with a student exchange program studying Alaska Native literature and art. She finds inspiration for her poetry through learning about various Alaska Native cultures and exploring the values of their surrounding environment and elements.

**Jasen Bruzek** is a student at UW-Superior. After he graduates, he plans on becoming an English teacher and eventually a member of a

school board. Jasen has said that his goal in life is to bring about big and dramatic changes to our current school system. The poem “My, How the Swing Had Swung” is his first and only publication currently.

**Cyrus Carlson** is an abstract painter and public artist from the Midwest. His small works—typically 4” x 6”—are colorful and joyous, commanding moments of attention in a distracted world. Cyrus is a visual arts student at the St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Arts. His work has appeared in numerous publications and in shows such as the Arrowhead Regional Biennial by the Duluth Art Institute.

**William Carlson** is from Sandstone, Minnesota, and is a senior student at UW-Superior, currently working towards a degree in history and then a master’s in library science. He enjoys reading at the library, walking in the woods, and drawing. He has a passion for writing on his downtime, with a focus on a broad range of interests spanning fantasy to sci-fi topics to brief snippets that explore struggles of everyday life.

**Jan Chronister** is a retired English instructor, having taught at UW-Superior, Lac Courtes Oreilles Ojibwe University, and Fond du Lac Tribal & Community College along with other institutions. She has authored three full-length poetry collections and nine poetry chapbooks.

**Rachel Coyne** is a writer and a painter from Lindstrom, Minnesota. Her novels include *Whiskey Heart*, *The Patron Saint of Lost Comfort Lake* and the *Antigone Ravyn* Young Adult (YA) series. *The Patron Saint of Lost Comfort Lake* was a finalist for the Minnesota Book Award. Rachel considers her painting process to be one of imaginative grief.

**Mel Delbridge** is a former actor and director who began writing out of necessity to create material for her independent theatre company, Sugar High Theatricals. Currently, she is a senior at UW-Superior in

the online Writing Program. Mel has published poetry, plays, and short fiction in *Coil*, the literary journal of Monmouth College, where she attended before transferring to UW-Superior in the summer of 2022. Mel has lived everywhere from Key West, Florida to Venice, California, but currently resides in Galesburg, Illinois with her husband, Fred and two cats, Finn and Aine.

**Daniel Dow** lives in Central Massachusetts with his wife Brenda and his two young children, Abby and Owen. They spend their time exploring the many natural gifts of the state which includes hiking the state parks, biking the rail-trails, or just spending the day at the playground. While family time is most vital to Dow, he also enjoys building and investing in community and serving on his city’s cultural council. As a senior at UW-Superior, Dow looks forward to completing his degree and working for a local non-profit organization to continue his community-building efforts. This is his second time being published in *The Nemadji Review*.

**Hailie Evans** is a student at UW-Superior pursuing a B.A. in Writing and English. She has been writing for many years, composing works of fiction, fantasy, and poetry. Her other publications include the poems “Society’s Superheroes” and “The Light Left with You” and the short story “The Lady of the House,” all of which were published previously in *The Nemadji Review*. In her free time, she enjoys sitting down with a good fictional book, getting on the court and playing basketball, or spending time with her family in the town of Proctor, Minnesota.

**Joel Friederich** is a UW-Eau Claire – Barron County emeritus professor from northern Wisconsin. His full-length collection of poems, *Blue to Fill the Empty Heaven*, was published by Silverfish Review Press as winner of their annual Gerald Cable Book Award Series. He has also published two limited edition chapbooks along with individual poems in *Natural Bridge*, *Witness*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Paris Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Sou’wester*, *River Styx*, and other journals.

**Rhiannon Giguere** is a 2023 graduate of UW-Superior, where she majored in English with a minor in Writing. After receiving her bachelor's degree, she left her home state of Wisconsin to accept a job offer from UPS; she now works as an import operations supervisor on the border of North Dakota and Canada. When she isn't reviewing bizarre international invoices at work, Rhiannon crochets, collects alt rock records, writes whatever she feels like writing, and maxes out her Libby holds.

**Clara Gonderzik** is a first-year student at UW-Superior from Ashland, Wisconsin majoring in Legal Studies. She enjoys writing in her spare time, particularly writing humorous pieces. This is her first publication.

**Elroee Hailu** is an international student from Ethiopia and is a math and computer science major. She discovered her love for writing after taking a creative writing class. She enjoys writing poems and creative non-fiction. She enjoys the works of Emily Dickinson and Haruki Murakami. This is her first publication since she writes mainly for fun.

**Isabelle Hoida** is a poet and mystic who lives on Cape Cod. She tears up old magazines for collaging and gives endless massages to dogs that sit patiently for her. Chilly Gonzales taps on his piano keys and prods the creative muscles in Isabelle's heart. Isabelle is also rejuvenated by Latin dancing, baking vegan cookies, and hiking with her partner.

**Shannon Kirk** is a student, writer, and book hoarder. She works in human resources to sustain not only her book-buying habit, but also her growing collection of swords. She is pursuing a degree in writing and spends much of her time with her three rescue dogs named Wilson, Kona, and Tavish. Her work is both a reflection of her personal journey and her overactive imagination.

**Jax Kobielus** is a queer, trans writer and cat enthusiast from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is primarily a fiction writer and poet with interests in mental health, nature, and LGBTQ+ activism. He aspires to be a published author in several genres, and his poetry has previously appeared in *The Nemadji Review*.

**Roxanne Lien** became an International Flight Attendant in 1972. Retired, she moved to North Dakota and wrote for several county newspapers. At 65, Roxanne began a love affair with fiction as a member of the Willow River Writers in New Richmond, Wisconsin. She now resides in Roseville, Minnesota, sometimes writing under the name Penelope Page. You can find her published stories and poems in *The Willow River Anthology*, *The Nemadji Review*, *Soulmate Syndrome* (Wicked Shadow Press), *Wild Crone Wisdom*, and *Jackpine Writers Bloc*.

**Charlie Lydon** is a transwoman and MFA candidate at Lindenwood University who delves into identity, creativity, and resilience through her poetry and nuanced creative nonfiction. Her work, featured in the Duluth/Superior Pride Zine, inspires vulnerability and self-expression, while her volunteer work as a grant writer for Trans Northland strengthens the support systems within the community.

**Christel Maass** lives in southeastern Wisconsin and frequently writes about nature which inspires her work. She enjoys gardening, hiking, and exploring her beautiful home state. A retired academic archivist, Christel began writing poetry during the pandemic. Her poems appear in *Bramble*, *Portage Magazine*, and *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, among other publications.

**Liz Minette** had fun with the theme of "Welcome to the 13th Floor." She's recently back from Tucson, having been a part of a fabulous poetry co-hort led by poet Tim Z. Hernandez as a part of the Tucson Festival of Books.

**Tim Moder** is a poet writing in northern Wisconsin. He is a member of The Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. His poems have appeared in *River Mouth Review*, *Free State Review*, *Cutthroat*, and others. His chapbook was selected by Seven Kitchens Press for their 2023 Rane Arroyo Chapbook Series.

**Jess Morgan** (they/them) is a multi-disciplinary, nonbinary poet residing in Duluth, Minnesota where they juggle many hats. They currently serve as the president of the Duluth Poetry Chapter of the League of Minnesota Poets. Poems that they've written have been included in the *Thunderbird Review*, *New Verse News*, *New Note Poetry*, *Pure Slush* and more. Jess enjoys playing their clarinet or "Honk Machine" in a multi-disciplinary "Goose Circus" with their partner. Their first book, "Too Many Hats," and art can be found at [jesscribe.com](http://jesscribe.com). (Instagram: @jesscribe.the.vibe)

**Thomas Noack** is a senior at UW-Superior studying screenwriting. His works tend to focus on science fiction and fantasy, while he occasionally writes poetry and short nonfiction stories. Fantasy is a genre that he finds endlessly inspiring and appears in many of his works, whether it be written on the page or in his music projects. He hopes that his writing can inspire others to follow their writing dreams and achieve their goals.

Hailing from the frozen Northland, **Elizabeth Olson** is a poet and aspiring young adult fantasy author. Receiving her bachelor's in writing and legal studies from UW-Superior, Elizabeth focuses on interpersonal relationships, queerness, environmentalism, and economic inequality in her work. When she is not studying or writing, Elizabeth enjoys reading, chai, and long winter walks.

**Jordan Rader** is a second-year student at UW-Superior but is a few credits shy of graduation. They are from Eagle River, Alaska, but travel often. She is currently training for a half marathon, and pursuing an internship in Horticulture. They are a collector of plants, unique cups

and glassware, stuffed animals, pins and stickers, and art. You can typically find them at a plant swap, looking for a string of pearls or a monstera; or at a local coffee shop, sipping on an iced London Fog or Chai latte; or at a thrift store, rummaging through old flannels.

**Sarah Royer-Stoll** (they/she) is a queer, neurodivergent poet who weaves diverse themes into their writing, including grief, trauma, experiences of marginalization, spiritual identities and practice, queer love, and radical healing. Sarah's work has been published and featured in anthologies and events including *The Nemadji Review*, *Highland Park Poetry (Chicago)*, *Tales of Travel*, *Poetry Safari*, and selected for publishing by *The Thunderbird Review*. They are currently compiling a third full collection of poems. A Minnesota native, Sarah has also established roots in Tucson, Arizona and Portland, Oregon. She resides in Duluth.

**Victoria Lynn Smith** lives near Lake Superior, a source of inspiration, happiness, mystery, and weather worthy of gothic novels. Her work has appeared in *Brevity Blog*, *8142 Review*, *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Jenny*, *45th Parallel*, *Rathalla Literary Review*, *Bullshit Lit*, and *Mason Street Review*, among others. She is the 2023 winner of the Hal Prize fiction contest. She recently completed her first short story collection. When she travels, she loves to visit local post offices and independent bookstores. Website: <https://writingnearthelake.org/> Instagram: [VictoriaLynnSmith\\_writing](https://www.instagram.com/VictoriaLynnSmith_writing)

**Madison Stevens** is an Anishinaabe, first-generation college student at UW-Superior. She is a mother, a wife, a subpar house cleaner and an avid caffeine consumer. What she lacks in height, she makes up for with laughter and clumsiness. She supports Women's Rights, women's wrongs and barely leaving the house during winter.

**Lindsey Switzer** grew up in Northern Minnesota, and if she isn't inside daydreaming, you can find her outside with a good book. She lives with her husband, son, and dog near Duluth, Minnesota. This is her first piece of published work. Lindsey is a nontraditional student at UW-Superior who is currently enrolled in the Teacher Education Program. When she (finally) graduates, she hopes to be a high school English teacher. She is looking forward to instilling a love of literature in future generations of students.

**Pat Thomas** loves to read poetry and is always excited when a haiku comes to her. She has written gardening articles in the past for a local non-profit and for a gardening group in Southern Minnesota. She has taught insect gardening classes since the 1990s and was a professor of Spanish literature. She is working on a book to help people create habitat for insects. She enjoys photographing plants and insects in her yard and along the shores of Lake Superior.

**Jillian R. Thorne** is an author and visual artist who graduated from UW-Superior with a bachelor's degree in writing in 2017. She enjoys painting and is particularly drawn towards the various colors and textures that can be found in nature. She specializes in writing both poetry and literary fiction, and is currently in the editing phase of her first novel.

**Matthew Tredinnick** lives in Wisconsin with his wife and two children. He has been previously published in *The Nemadji Review*. He is working toward his bachelor's degree in writing and hopes to write fiction and poetry in the future, and maybe even make some money while doing it.

**Samantha Tunan** is a writer and poet living in Duluth, Minnesota. As a scientist, she incorporates a backdrop of stark fact into her work, often blending these with humorous observations about people she encounters. Sam was first published in a poetry anthology when she

was twelve and since then has published several poems in regional magazines and a short story in print.

**Sara Valentiuk** is a nontraditional undergraduate student at UW-Superior pursuing her passions for writing and English. She spent most of her childhood with her nose in a book or putting pencil to page. While she has always dreamed of becoming a novelist, she has recently discovered a love for poetry as well. Her two children, Nina and Felix, are what motivated her to hone her craft and (finally) pursue a career in the literary world.

**Jess Waldbillig** is a UW-Superior alumna and has lived in the Northland her whole life. Her poetry and prose are heavily inspired by the area and the bittersweet feelings of nostalgia she feels it emits. Jess has previous publications in *The Nemadji Review* and *The Thunderbird Review*.

**Lynn Watson** enjoys writing poetry, short stories, and flash fiction. She has written a women's fiction novel based on her experiences bush teaching in Alaska and is seeking a publisher. Her work has placed 1st and 2nd in the Lake Superior Writers Contest. She has been published in the University of Minnesota Duluth's *Roaring Muse*, with upcoming pieces appearing in the 2024 editions of *The Thunderbird Review* and *The Nemadji Review*. Lynn enjoys paddleboarding, x-c skiing, hiking, kayaking, and traveling in the family camper van with her husband, Don. Lynn grew up in Bloomington, Minnesota, and now lives in Duluth.

**Abigail Weber** is a hobby writer. She hasn't had any further education in writing, but when the ideas come, she loves to put them on paper—mostly poems and short stories. This is the first actual publication of her writing and she's very excited about it. She is a third year student at UW-Superior, majoring in Exercise Science and minoring in Psychology. Her hometown is Duluth, Minnesota.

**Robert Wildwood** creates poetry during opportunistic moments while raising two children with his partner and working as a nurse in Duluth, Minnesota. Wildwood is a graduate of Lake Superior College and enthusiastic member of the Duluth Poetry Chapter. Wildwood has been published in *Microcosm Publishing*, *The Nemadji Review*, *The Thunderbird Review*, *Duluth Superior Pride Zine*, and *New Verse News*. Wildwood's first book of poetry, *Hillside Sunrise*, was published in 2022, *Like A Leaf Love The Sun* in 2023, and *Sun Ripened Fun Ideas* in 2024.

**Mckenzie Williams** recently became a first-generation college graduate from UW-Superior. When she isn't writing, she is crocheting, hiking, or buying books. She has a ravenous love for literature. While this noble addiction is taxing on her pocketbook, it never ceases to provide her with endless inspiration. She writes in the realms of fiction and poetry, but that does not stop her from weaving magical elements into her work inspired by her love for fantasy. She has been published in previous editions of *The Nemadji Review*.

**Tina Higgins Wussow** is a writer of poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Her work has been published in a variety of local and national journals and her essays can be found on Substack. Tina is also a teacher, bookseller, and cafe owner living in Duluth, Minnesota with her husband and Clover the dog, CC the cat, and Paul the goldfish.

**Jade Marielan Wong** enjoys writing poetry and teaching piano. She's a member of the Duluth Poetry Chapter and enjoys writing about human rights and civil rights. Jade is a commissioner for the City of Superior for the Mayor's Commission on Communities of Color. She is an alum of UW-Superior and works at the UWS Center for Continuing Education. She is looking for a publisher for her first book.

I started this poem on the road  
I reached the end of the road  
but not the end of the poem

But it's about the journey  
Not the destination  
isn't it?

- Abigail Weber (from *Oliver*)

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A thick, yellow, brushstroke-style underline is positioned beneath the word "Superior" in the University of Wisconsin Superior logo.