

The Lindenwood Review

a journal of literary prose

Issue 13

2023

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Lindenwood University

209 S. Kingshighway

St. Charles, Missouri 63301

www.lindenwood.edu

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Creative Nonfiction

Ars Longa, Vita Brevis

I detested that refrigerator. It sat in Gram's garage, clunking and humming its confident pledge. We move through time, distinguishably, with changes and forward progress. The newness that keeps life interesting. But not this fridge. It was old, and the way it stood, so proud of itself, working and keeping the glass bottled milk cold after all its years.

It was cerulean. She painted it that specific shade and decorated it with her imperfect, asymmetrical white stars, pirouetting as if wearing high-heeled doll shoes, the way she often did. Glissading back and forth, individual brush strokes kicked their five-pointed legs.

Whenever I pulled down the vertical handle, my thirteen-year-old hands blocked my body. I braced myself for attack. An entity surely would spill from cold depths, finally free. A misty wind dropping chill bumps over my skin.

It is still alive. It breathes crisp air. Even now, with its same thumping anthem pulsing its rhythm, that icebox remains. Not at her house, but in mine.

The call came as I stared into fire. Orange and blue flames lapped over lava rock, warming my fingers. In the woods around me, trees bowed. My sister said two words, and we sat in silence, accepting the new absence. Ninety-two years lifted and released.

She had called me earlier that day, too. "Hurry," Rachel had said. Grabbing my keys and then my shoes, driving to the facility, circling around Gram, lifting tissues to my eyes, reading her memories in poem form, watching her labored and shaky inhales, hoping she could hear, I hurried. I didn't take anything of hers. I left. Empty handed.

When I drove to her house, for the last time, I knew I would make the find. Rachel and Mom had been searching. They had looked in her jewelry boxes, her drawers, even under the kitchen sink, which is where I would

have checked. Gram always set that unusual ring on a wooden hand-shaped stand beside the white ceramic sink.

Long silver prongs enclosed a round brilliant aquamarine. In my plethora of recollections, Gram was wearing it on her right hand. It was there as she set down homemade birthday cakes before the wishmaker. There, every December thirteenth when she wore a crown of flaming candles and walked into my morning bedroom, the light on her head more vibrant than the rising sun. There, when she pulled from the oven our clay-baked baby figurines, wrapped in striped blankets. There, under gloved hands, as she packed pieces of winter, building a snow rabbit. She garlanded him with a purple, checkered tie.

“It’s gone for good,” my mom said when I walked inside. A desk drawer open beside her, a dusty photo album on her lap, she didn’t look up. Cardboard boxes filled the disheveled rooms. It was the first time I had thought about all that is left behind, all that remains, afterwards.

Because I felt a pulling, as if a child were nagging at my sleeve, I entered her bedroom first. Mom had the jewelry displayed on the bed as if to prove she had tried.

“It’ll forever be a mystery. I bet it vanished years ago,” she said as I eyed the pixelated mosaic of beads and costume baubles.

“No.” A petite voice whispered, tickling my ear. By the way her focused stare did not break, I knew Mom hadn’t heard. The breath tugged my elbow, and I tripped, catching myself on the sock drawer.

“I’ve already looked through there,” Mom said, but I slid the door open anyway. Betty Boop socks greeted me, so I picked them up, smiling. There, in the vacated space sat a red and gold silk pouch. Mom only noticed my movements when I gasped, dropping the socks to the floor.

“I found it,” I said.

Ars longa, vita brevis. Caligraphed in her curvy, cursive handwriting, she signed every piece of her art with the phrase and her initials: FGR. Each one Latin-inscribed: Five granddaughters she painted on the wall, the headboard she crafted with angel bunnies ribboning pink blossom trees—an aurulent banner between their paws, all drawings of her penned Gamma Alpha Rho newsletter collection.

As I turn pages of the printed edition, the fifty-nine remaining bulletins, I realize she's only partially correct because she's alive in the black-and-white sketch of Mom pouring tea by the heart chair while Gram sat on the floor, holding a pencil, working the crossword. Because she's present in Newsletter Number 30, watching her two eldest granddaughters hang Easter eggs on a thin, bare sapling. Because she breathes in her self portrait, gazing into a treasure box and holding a bird house, while her parents smile down from a colored-pencil heaven bubble.

Within her ink, her intricate lines, her stripes of paint, she whispers, "*Ars longa, vita brevis.*" I hear her harmonious voice when I open the fridge, her blue ring on my finger. The most important remains: I take her words with me.

What Rises to the Surface

The third time my mother and I are at the clinic waiting for her name to be called, I realize that what we will talk about from now on are the three miscarriages she had before I was born and her trip to Europe before that.

I know about the trip—those two months in a VW Bug in the 60s, how she and her friend, Patty, accidentally rented a room in a brothel, how the castles all began to look alike. I had sat and looked at the slides projected on a white sheet stretched across a room years ago. Those same years when I slouched in my desk, viewing murky maps of Africa and Asia displayed on a screen in my geography class.

But the miscarriages are new to me, suddenly mentioned for the first time. She almost lost me early in the second month; I had heard about how her doctor had prescribed a medication to help the placenta better attach, how I was her “miracle.” But the other lost children had not been discussed. Now they are a topic of conversation, the only one besides Europe that she falls back on.

I try discussing anything else, even the weather, and how the two recent ice storms have forced all of us to tread carefully. But nothing works. She gives a curt reply and then pauses and then returns to one of these two stories.

I wonder about what matters.

My mother has been diagnosed with MCI—Mild Cognitive Impairment. We have been told that 50% of those diagnosed with it will remain as they are while the other half will progress into Alzheimer’s. Progress used to possess positive connotations for me. Now, not so much.

The diagnosis came after two years of her struggling with memory. She wouldn’t know what day it was and at least twice she had gotten lost going from here to there, there to here. I encouraged her, sometimes nagged her, to talk with her general practitioner and she said she had. But it wasn’t until she was hospitalized for an infection in the cartilage of her ear, that

appointments with specialists were made. Four days spent in Short Stay convinced both her nurses and doctors that something wasn't right.

A CT Scan, an MRI, cognitive tests were done. And this is what they found: that parts of my mother's brain are shrinking, pulling away from the skull, going dark.

Despite the news, she asserts she recalls everything from years ago, but when I phone her, asking for the name of a neighbor we had when I was a girl—the one who kept chickens in her kitchen—she has to ask my stepfather. Most of it is flotsam—short term and long term. It makes a brief appearance and then disappears.

I have to remind her that she went to Colorado at least twice—once with her cousin, well before me. And Nashville with her parents. And what that one doctor instructed her to do that one day she went to Urgent Care because she “didn't feel quite right.”

I am told not to grow impatient and chastise her for repeating herself. I should never say, “You said that already.” I am to keep an eye on her and mark if she mentions getting lost again. Keeping notes—for both her benefit and mine—is fine; it isn't cheating.

I am waiting for the day when she doesn't remember who I am.

I find that my own memory catches on the miscarriages. Why is it that out of all my mother's memories from her nearly 75 years of life, they surface again and again? Because she cannot recall that she already told me about them? Across a small table in the hospital over lunch, between appointments. In a waiting area with a view of two parking lots. In an examination room, seated side by side one another, as we wait for the neurologist. And so, even if I talk with her about the pain of those losses, that conversation never really happened for her. The story has to be told again, like that of her trip to Europe.

Which I get. It was the only time she left the United States. She set out before marriage, before motherhood, and tooled around six countries with no set itinerary. Just the first reservation and the last. And my mother was not wild. She had no time for the counter culture, for hippies with their unwashed hair and beads. She was more like Don Draper, minus the

alcohol and infidelity. Touring Europe for two months would leave a mark. And the trip was a success, and so it stands as a good memory.

The loss of three children? Is that recollection some kind of balance, counter weight?

Something that keeps her from tipping into happy nostalgia?

I have a tendency to recall the bad, which isn't good. Maybe I inherited this from her, although I don't think so. When she used to talk of her childhood and adolescence in rural Minnesota, the tales were cheerful. There was ice skating in the flooded field near her house, playing hide and go seek, boisterous Christmas gatherings at her grandmother's, dances at the VW club.

The death of her father when she was two years old was mentioned, but not dwelled on. Those dances with the veterans because she wasn't pretty enough to be asked by the cute guys, glossed over. If there was unhappiness and it was recalled, one didn't grouse about it.

When I was growing up, she would assert, "Life isn't fair and then you die." I once used that line in a story, commenting on how hearing it repeatedly might shape a person.

What I understand of the assertion in relation to her now, is that she may not have been happy much and that her mortality loomed. But she dealt with both. She made a conscious decision to recall the memories that brought her joy and forged on. Some of us call that compartmentalizing.

Maybe, then, there are other memories for her. Ones she doesn't discuss in waiting rooms. But how am I to know? All I have to go on is what she says—what she elects to share and what answers she gives to the questions we ask.

The first and second cognitive tests are administered by one of the nicest RNs I have ever met, Melissa. Her patience is admirable, even more so when I see it start to fracture the second time she meets with my mother and me.

There is a worksheet. Follow a convoluted path of numbers and letters. Draw a three dimensional cube. Tell me what this animal is, here. Repeat back to me the words truck, desk, violin, green...

My mother's score is half what it should be the first time. A giraffe is a zebra. That shade of a Granny Smith lost.

And then come the questions I think unfair.

Do you like to go out and socialize? Do you feel that life is hopeless? (Depends on what novel I'm currently reading and who I might socialize with.) (Yes, given the news.) But, she can't answer in these ways, the ways I would. There are only two options: yes or no. Talk about binaries.

The first time, her answers were always positive, showing little signs of depression, while the second time, they aren't. Come to find out, yes, she regretted some of her past decisions. She wasn't asked to elaborate, but that score comes out differently, as do the results of her worksheet.

This second time, her score has improved by four points. Melissa says the medication is probably helping my mother focus better. Maybe, too, she is less tired than she was the first time.

Melissa leaves the room to consult with someone on the team. My mother and I sit, staring at the door. She tells me she probably should not have married my stepfather. They married in 1978. It is now 2017. Do the math regarding that particular regret. What is the appropriate response? No wonder the answers can only be yes or no.

Call it self-absorption, but it's difficult to not walk away from these visits and consider your own life. Age, too, matters. Even with our continual increased life expectancy, I am middle aged.

I silently and quickly rattle off answers to those more difficult questions posed to my mother as I sit beside her in the examination room. Later, I mull them over. And wonder what my responses would say about me, what score I would receive. Is there anything I regret that would wipe out as many years as hers? If I had taken that job instead of this job? Move there instead of here? The whole landscape of the last twenty years of my life would look different. How could it not? There's nothing new in this. And what good does it do?

And, here, in those lines, I recognize I sound just like my mother.

This is where I tell you that my mother and I have always had a strained relationship, particularly strained when I did/do not act as she wished/wishes. There's something called conditional love and I know something about it.

Even before the MCI diagnosis, she would initially get very angry and then pretend as if whatever I had done that made her unhappy or disappointed in me had not happened. Another form of compartmentalizing.

All this matters because I am now collecting my mother from where she lives twenty minutes from where I do and driving her to her appointments and sitting in on those appointments and trying to come to some understanding with her of what her future will look like. I am her only child and her relationship with my stepfather is strained, as well. I am on deck.

When it happens to come up that we share the same birthday, nurses and doctors alike ooh and aah. They see a bond that exists, yes, but not to the extent they assume. We do not correct their assumptions.

We may love our parents and our children, but we may not always like them. We may do what we do partly out of duty. Not entirely, no. Also, a memory of more.

Six months later, on her birthday, I give her a bouquet of cut *Alstroemeria*. She talks of planting it in her garden, once the ground warms and softens.

One month after that, I am sitting across from her, after having waited in line for two salads and two bottles of water. She says, “I had three miscarriages before you.” And I say, “That must have been awful.” She asks, “Have I told you about when Patty and I ended up accidentally renting a room in a brothel?” And I say, “You did? Really?”

Six months later—after my stepfather has died—her scores drop enough that her neurology team diagnoses her with mild dementia—the first stage of Alzheimer’s.

Wednesday afternoons are now filled with errands: taking her to get her hair cut, pushing the grocery cart while she mulls over the ground coffee options, helping her balance her checkbook.

Sundays I take her to and pick her up from church and then have her over for dinner. Most days include her calling and then hanging up on me.

I read that we are on “the cusp of an epidemic,” although the social worker on my mother’s team, Barb, says we’re already in it. She recommends I

begin touring memory care units and put my mother's name on a couple waiting lists. Everything begins to shift again.

Here is a memory: My mother and I are driving back from western Minnesota, after visiting her parents. I am six years old. She has had a migraine for two days. Over the five-hour drive, I have regularly crawled into the back seat and rubbed her shoulders to alleviate the pain. The repetitive action makes my hands ache, but I continue. As we near the Minnesota-Wisconsin border, the bluffs rear their heads. We descend into the valley and recognize we are nearly home.

Nostalgia By The Pint

They look disconcertingly like tombstones, the buildings that line the road leading back to my apartment. It's the shape, yes, but also how dark they are—an oddity for residences at such an hour. Investment vehicles, perhaps—big concrete and steel banks housing speculative investment properties in the form of apartments that will change hands but never host occupants. It's a business practice that's going to sink China one of these days and everyone knows it, but the allure of easy *yuan* is too sweet.

All those giant tombstones, yet I'm still alive—slightly drunk, a little disappointed perhaps, but the blood still flows as best as I can tell. Tired, though, more asleep than awake despite the early hour. In moments like this, I envy the stiffs for being able to secure a tolerable night's sleep. I'll be up another three hours once I'm home, pacing my tiny patch and relitigating the evening's conversations in my head.

But I love the place behind me all the same. Really, I need it. Everyone requires some immovable spot where they can ground themselves when the world decides to whip around too fast.

A good expat bar is equal parts local and foreign. It slots well into the neighborhood, even as it beckons to the outsider. It is apart from the surrounding culture, but not above it. Cross the threshold and you enter a place that's almost familiar, where one can imagine being back home but with touches here and there to keep anchored—the world map with pins marking the home nations of the owners and patrons, the framed photographs of people from scores of countries, signage in a smattering of languages. The chintzy Christmas lights glint in the whiskey glass just like they do back home, but back home they don't have posters for Mid-Autumn Festival events.

I resisted the lure of the expat bar for a long time—the Yard is the first one I frequented, in fact, and only at the prodding of my coworkers. I wanted to appease them—pure pragmatism on my part. I'm a big enough boy to understand the ways of the world, to know the importance of being

seen and recognized, of having people who will miss you when you're gone. Honestly, I sat in judgment of the banished souls who haunted these places, who made their daily bread on the curious awe that the Chinese hold for pale faces but wouldn't lower themselves to walk among them and partake in their culture.

This was always an unfair assessment. People don't go to places like the Yard to forget where they are. They don't go for business, nor do they go for the desperate get-wasted get-laid weekend routine of the college town bars back home. No, people go to these places to remember who they are.

That's a piece of information that's easy to forget, you know. Wear the white monkey's little outfit and you can just about lose your own name. We all need an occasional reminder that we had lives before this.

Who the hell am I, anyway? The fifteen minute drive through those rows of mammoth tombstones provides just enough time to reflect. This is the same road I took when I first landed in this city, riding to parts unknown at two in the morning in a questionable cab whose driver was brazenly picking my pockets. He played the same song on a loop the whole way. At least this driver provides me the mercy of silence.

The streets are dark when he lets me off, all the businesses closed save a few tiny stores defying the hours. I probably shouldn't go looking for more liquor, but the \$0.80 giant bottle of beer is a temptation too far. There was a time in my life when I sat in judgment of drinkers, too, but time and circumstance have a way of shaping you in unexpected ways.

I still know who I am. Break it down to the essence and I'm no different than any of the people in the Yard or any of those other watering holes I made a point of passing by. We're all people with needs, people whom curious times have driven to a place that obsesses over us even as it regards our presence with suspicion.

More than that, I'm alive and I'm awake, and as long as I'm still conscious, there's time to enjoy one more glass, one more song, one more dance, one more romantic interlude. It's a reminder well worth the next-day sorrows.

The Front Porch

There once was a beloved and useful space called the Front Porch. It existed most profoundly in the small towns and sprawling farmhouses of the rural South. In the days before air-conditioning ran us off the porch and into the barren bowels of television, the front porch was the family room. Without air-conditioning, folks automatically gathered in that shaded, cooling space to connect with neighbors, friends, and families.

Born in 1940, I grew up in a very small town built around a perfectly circular lake ringed with Victorian homes with massive front porches. The porches of those houses were like small kingdoms ruled by a Monarch Mama and her army of female soldiers. In those days, intergenerational living was not a new concept or excuse for the fact little Johnny couldn't get a job, despite his expensive college degree. It was the simple fact that families expected to look after their own. The porch was littered with maiden aunts, an old granny or two, plus an occasional derelict of the family who was "just down on his luck." That usually meant Uncle Earl liked liquor more than he liked labor. But all were useful in some kind of semi-forced labor—whether it be gardening, laundry, housecleaning, childminding, or cooking. They were particularly helpful as the communications committee, and no tidbit of information was too small to repeat.

The porch was the useful setting for observing the ebb and flow of small-town life, and the gossip generated was far more reliable than the local newspaper. In fact, the motto "we are our brother's keepers" could have been altered to "we are our brother's peepers." Little went on in the community that was not observed, reported, and enhanced by the front porch police squad.

Social media could never compete with the speed and force of local gossip, which provided not only the scenario but opinions and solutions with lightning speed. The casual comment "I saw Lou Ann at the Piggly Wiggly yesterday, and she said her new neighbors had a teenage son about the same age as her Catherine" would become, within hours, a saga of epic

proportions translated into “Lou Ann doesn’t like her new neighbors. They have a son who’s just all over Catherine. Why, they have already had to run him off the porch twice at night. You know Catherine’s always been a good girl, but it won’t last long if that keeps up. They’d better get a new porch light and keep those living room curtains open at night.”

Children were never out of sight because Granny or Aunt Mary or someone from the squad was always on the lookout. It was virtually impossible to misbehave without getting caught and punishment promptly meted out. The entire front porch squad had spanking privileges, which included not only their own but neighbors’ kids as well. Sometimes it got to be a little like a competition between porches when dusk began to fall and the chatter of adults was interrupted by “Little Johnny, you get on home now” or “Get off Miss Helen’s porch because supper’s ready and you need to get washed up.”

Supper was usually early because there were several mountains of dishes that had to be washed and dried by hand since dishwashers had not yet invaded kitchens. Dishwashing was still an affair of the assembly line, with someone needed to scrape plates and others to wash, rinse, dry, and then store. There was plenty of conversation along the assembly line consisting of “You didn’t get this one clean” or “What the washer doesn’t get the dryer has to.” The anguished cry of “I’ve got to unload the dishwasher” was a far cry into the future.

Soft summer evenings were the perfect respite after supper. The entire household gathered on the porch in the dwindling light to share the day’s events and watch the children chase fireflies or shell peas or butterbeans for the next day’s meals. Gallons of sweet tea were consumed while ladies sat in their rockers with an apron covering outspread legs to catch the peas or beans. But those same legs could come together as quickly as a lightning bolt if a visitor approached. Small children were useful in crawling around between legs, gathering any stray peas that might have suffered from such quick action. “Waste not, want not” was a mantra practiced every day, and not a single pea escaped rescue.

It was a time of quiet contentment as crickets chirped amidst the laughter and cries of the little ones begging to stay up “just a little bit longer.” Some evenings a piano could be heard trilling light tunes or, more often, hymns. There was usually somebody in the family who played the piano for the

church, and depending on their ability, the evening was either enhanced or shattered by their need to practice. Aunt Ethel was one of those. She could just about manage “Amazing Grace,” but when she thundered into “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” it turned into a rout by the front porch crowd, who headed for the exit like squirrels hunting for nuts. All the while muttering things under their breath, like “She’s certainly enthusiastic, but maybe the Spirit won’t keep her at it too long. I don’t think she understands flats and sharps too well.” In louder voices, comments like “I’ve got a pot of beans on the stove I need to tend to” or “I promised my wife I’d fix that screen door before dark” covered their hasty escape.

All the while, the men smoked their pipes of Prince Albert tobacco, deftly tapped from the popular bright red tin can with a picture of a handsome Victorian man on the front. Cigarette smokers with deeply tobacco-stained fingers hand-rolled their own, as filtered cigarettes were yet to come. Rolling cigarettes was an art form requiring a snakelike tongue to send a river of saliva down the carefully half-curved, almost transparent white paper. Cigarettes could be fat or thin, depending on the purse of the smoker. Each man carried his own tobacco pouch and a roll of papers. The papers were usually kept in a shirt pocket, whereas the pouch was carefully secured in deep pants pockets. Common courtesy required them to always offer, “Would you like a smoke” before they took their own cigarette.

Only men were allowed to smoke, as it was absolutely scandalous for a woman to light up. That act would put her in the realm of a social pariah and a “loose” woman. She’d be quickly dropped from her Sunday School class and snubbed by the Woman’s Club with great piety and satisfaction. Yet deep in the countryside, farm women often chewed tobacco or dipped snuff with impunity. They might have been liberated women with tobacco, but they were still confined to hard labor at home.

The women chattered as they swayed back and forth in their rocking chairs, drinking large glasses of cold, sweet tea while mending socks or indulging in a simple version of the beauty shop—brushing their hair. Beauty shops were a luxury and home hair dryers unknown, so women washed their own hair and brushed it vigorously to dry it as quickly as possible. Most women wore their hair long, making the drying process lengthy. They cut their own hair as well as each other’s when fashion decreed a new style.

While men dismissed beauty aids, they still went to the barbershop once a month. That was more for recreation than necessity, as they liked to gossip as well as the women, though never admitting it. There they picked up tidbits such as “Fred got a new car, but he’s having a hard time paying for it. That new wife of his is spending too much money on curtains and clothes.” Others would lament, “Business is bad. I’ve sold just about everyone in town all the insurance they can use and some they can’t.”

Every porch had a swing, and its gentle creaking was a constant and reassuring note in the sounds that came with the evening symphony of sundown. Soon the time would come for someone to call out, “Time for bed and prayers,” and there would be an immediate and complete evacuation of that sacred spot to make way for the coming of the next day.

The only thing left on the porch was Midnight. She was the sneaky, old black cat who stole her way onto the porch swing as soon as it was vacated. She leapt up with the agility known only to cats and proceeded to rule from her mobile perch. She could twist her fat tail around one of the chains and move the swing just enough to rock herself gently to sleep. She was rudely awakened with the coming dawn and the brisk brush of a busy housewife shouting, “Get down from there, you ole hairy thing, before I sweep you off that swing along with the porch floor, or I let that old yard dog in to chase you. He needs the exercise anyway.”

I miss that old porch and the contentment that came with it.

If I Can't Swim There, I Don't Want to Go

I remember water, immersive. I remember diving, jumping, splashing. Vaguely, I remember learning to swim. I was never good at the choreography of the strokes. This is a metaphor for life. I can do as I want, but rarely can I do as I am told, and float. I am not a water sign, which I always forget. It would make so much more sense, as I might be a mermaid. A mythical creature, no doubt. Highly irregular in practice and in presentation.

Water. Life. Spirit. Connected, intertwined. What propels me into the ocean, sharks and all. Compulsion to return to the source.

Weeki Watchee Springs has been in continuous operation since 1947, open every day, whereas I only began in 1975 and have shut down several times. Weeki Watchee offers diving in the deepest freshwater cave system in the United States, as well as kayaks, paddle boats, and a riverboat cruise. A state park, it offers a wealth of entertainment. I, too, am funded by the State of Florida, and like to have my fun. Weeki Watchee means Little Spring, or Winding River in the Seminole language. Cool, crystal-clear waters host mermaids (of the human variety) who swim gracefully for your pleasure. I swim for my pleasure, though inelegantly at times.

Like me, mermaids are well-traveled. Haitian mermaids are a water spirit called LaSiren. An ocean queen, she plays an important part in Haitian Vodou. She is the Spirit of love and beauty. LaSiren symbolizes the mystical and spiritual aspects of a woman. Long a traditional deity in Haiti, she has roots in both African and European spirituality. Yemaya, of the Nigerian Yoruba, is often depicted as a mermaid and is associated with the feminine mysteries. (I am a feminine mystery.) Cowrie shells represent her wealth. She is worshiped at streams, creeks, springs, and wells.

The best time I was a mermaid was in Aruba. I was under the ocean, shallow, but at a depth sufficient to glide. I could flip and dip, wander below waves. There is an eloquence missing from words, present only in the water. The best time I was a mermaid, I didn't worry for air, catching the ocean's rhythm and using it for breath. In some Medieval stories, mermaids have serpent tails, but I am thoroughly modern and aquatic.

Lately, I've been deep, in the weeds deep. In the seaweed? Maybe, though that's usually right at the shoreline. I wouldn't know if there is deep ocean seaweed, because I'm scared to go out there. I don't think I'm a boat sort of person. Nor am I a land person. I guess if I can't swim there, I don't want to go.

Goddess, creature, legend, myth. I might be a mermaid, but the most implausible idea is that I am an ordinary woman. I don't relate to that, at all.

Prose Poems

floridian: for terra

You offer me a slice of the orange you've been carefully sucking on. The creamsicle Sunday sun is going down, the day suddenly hazy behind us like a dream, and we remember it like looking at a furnished room through a layer of gauze. I am sprawled out with a book on the floor, you lie above me on the couch. Your long legs are so close to me I can smell the cigarette you had earlier; it lingers on the cuffs of your pants from where you pitched the smoldering butt down by your shoes. There is nothing between us but the silence and the turning of pages that sounds like the beatings of birds' wings. You bend your arm towards me, holding an offering of something out near my cheek—I glimpse the vivid shock of orange, the juices that quiver inside delicate droplets, the erotic rind your fingers picked off like ticks and cast aside on the floor, the bright clean scent at my nose. You drop a perfect crescent between my teeth; your fingertips linger for a moment on my lips while I chew. I have fallen in love with a Floridian: errant oranges everywhere.

Creating an I.E.P. for my Son

In the preschool breakroom pictures of rainbow homes and stick figures line the walls, each the same in a different way. Across the table a post-nominal title tells my wife and I *he qualifies*, though I don't remember entering him into anything. *Emotional disturbance and risk of depression* he finishes. He tells us it's nobody's fault, which I translate as my own and why I begin to notice how small I am. In my head I hear my wife, like so many times before, *why can't you tell me how you feel?* I get that way sometimes, afraid of my voice. No one mentions the walls we can quietly erect within ourselves, how thick and high they can become. I wear my emotions like feet, always covered. See, I can't even properly use a simile. What I really mean to say is I panic when my son plays copy-cat. People say they see a lot of me in him, but he'll never understand when I tell him sorry. Selfishly, what I hope for by the end of this meeting is a plan to save myself, a neat diagram or infographic explaining the line between responsibility and abdication, between learning and ignorance. But there is no magic spell, no wand or silver bullet. The answer is always small and gradual, something barely registered in the mind. *We just need him to use his words.* Yes, let's start there.

And Joy

I passed the morning with checkers and watched the dogs wander in their solid black spots, the roundness of which I could take in my mouth like a strawberry. Beautiful *O*, not spacious but seeming to be. A letter lost in its charm. I always tried to be not what I was called, or not what I was. The early evening air is pierced with shrieks from the park. I do not remember when I shrieked with joy last. Joy is a thing kept to yourself. Someone will tell you why it doesn't belong. But it is morning now. The evening is slow to wander its shoes across the day, as though it has blocked your path like an invariable rabbit. Was this your path, with the cypress ditch and a trickle of water beside the mud? We all knew men who walked into the marsh and never came back. Whether this was literally or figuratively, it swallowed them until the green-blue swollen sediment smell and salt dipped all of their heads for a third and final time.

Elegy for mental illness

Wild sarsaparilla on the bank, sprouting with abandon, sass and sweetness on the tongue, devil may care, ne'er do well, that here we come, like it or not. The vigor and the fervor. We are young and know no better.

This drowsy hatching of the cinnamon fern, its duckling-pose there all in down. The way the baby ducks moved in waves when we were small. Grandpa lifts the cage. One shift, the batch of them undulated like a wave, in/out of it, the roll and drift. Different direction, another tide.

But now here comes the wind off the lake. What was once soft and humid, chill and almost sharp. Rebuke of weather, no settling in. You close your eyes, and gone, gone the spring, here is summer. Such heated resin, scent of balsam poplar, honeybees gathering glue to seal the hive. The pollen in the air, faint, faint, and here was sweetness. Here the swelling of the belly, full. And all was languid on the grasses, all at once.

My parents in their love all night young under the stars, how fluid language moved them forward. Letters back and forth—they thought words would save them. Until they didn't. And with the death of words came the death of them. The death of my mother's words first, buried in her buried mind.

Oh mother, how I miss your words, their simple resurrection. When your words came back, they were all blunted. But still you had them in their plainness and their strength. Words like these trees. Balm of Gilead, healing ooze. Oh syrup, oh tincture—give me the wild cherry bark, licorice and honey for what ails the chest, willow and rosemary for our fevers and our bruises. Plants to heal the body, plants to keep the soul from seeping further.

You said you might come back a bird, so here I am whistling to the blue jay cocking its head out on the porch. Or butterfly—maybe you are a West Virginia white there on the two leafed toothwort, crinkleroot. Do I look for you in early spring, all white, black dots and edging on the forewing with stippling on the hind? The color of a blazer you would like. Are you perched there on the lakeshore posing? Gone in to dinner or for tea.

I am lost—for all this time, those years when you were gone, you still were on the earth. And now I am not sure, just know I seem to need a rooted gesture here to find you, bracken underneath the beech, its structured spine, fiddleheads, an eagle's claw, leaflets delicate, fronds so broad they could be thatch. I need a home until you're back. Underneath the trees, I'll fold into the fern and ride the seasons like a song that patters in the leaves, a rhythm pocked and simple, as thick as memory and just as long.

i step inside myself

& find an orchard. trees hollow with rot. apples littering the ground. small bodies of fruit bruising, coring themselves open. this is not the orchard i want to live inside myself, but we do not choose what we are made of. unless we do & i'm offering myself an excuse. how would i know? what is the secret to learning? i haven't been to an orchard since my body was small enough to be called *my body*. i can reach only the edges of the memory, loose threads unseaming further with each grasp. the orchard. the trees lush with life. the apples littering the ground, whole. the wagon. the hay. the starch-stained fingers. the teeth before stain. the sweet before sick. the life before life. i remember the pale wooden boxes or barrels filled to the brim with all the different apples. this is surely a different memory than the orchard. sour green pucker. surely this was Clare, the drive up or back down from visiting the brother. the gas station pizza. decades later & still it is recalled as the best. how did we get so far? there is an orchard inside of me full of rot. i am trying to misremember. i am trying to find my way out.

when kids leave behind blank father's day worksheets

please don't make a scene and ask them to defend their act of defiance or rebellion or empty spaces because they will cry even if only in the stairway no one wanders through while the other children play football and hopscotch and return to the places they can't wait to show the details their brains have remembered and not reimagined into something forgivable like traffic jams on a highway nearby or astronauts lost in the outer realm or spontaneous combustion because kids are loveable miniature wizards training to be loveable people picking up salamanders trying to make it back home

Why I Didn't Leave

I was infatuated. I was trauma bonded after being love bombed. I was isolated. I was scared for my life. I didn't think anyone would believe me. I thought I deserved it. I didn't want another victim to take my place. I was invisible. I was broken down. I was shattered. I had no sense of self. I was brainwashed. It's everywhere. It's a bigger network than you could imagine. I thought I could leave at first. I couldn't leave. It was my fault. I didn't want to die. I didn't want my family to die. I believed him. I didn't think anyone could ever love me after what I had lived through. I couldn't love myself. There were eyes everywhere. There was nowhere to run to. No human involved. Dead hooker jokes. Society says I'm worthless and I deserved it. It's what girls like me get. I was an empty shell. I was good at it. I was a robot. I thought I could pay my way out but no amount was enough. I wanted to die. I was scared of the guns. I believed I was going to die every time he beat me. I lived in fear 24/7. It's the most primal emotion. My mental functions eroded. The hotels were complacent, sometimes accomplices. My brain disassociated weeks and months to protect me. My brain tried to protect me from the trauma. My brain created parts. Some parts were loyal to him. Most parts were loyal to him. Those parts told on myself. I wasn't allowed thoughts of my own. There was no planning. There was no hiding. Leaving and getting caught was so much worse. Once I jumped out a moving car. I interacted with the police over and over throughout the years. No one helped me. I didn't think I'd live past 30 years of age anyways. I couldn't see past a minute, an hour, a day. There was no where to run. I became a part of him. There was no self. I was a parrot. I tried my best. I stayed alive. I stayed alive. I stayed alive.

Shingletown Gap

On the snow-covered ridgeline, she found herself thinking about bears, how her partner casually mentioned their predatory nature on the drive to the trail entrance. He calmed her concerns with a *hush, hush, now* and claimed no bears would hurt her. At the top of the ridgeline, she glanced at their path down the mountain, grown over with slick ice and devoid of branches. Avoiding the ice, they opted for snow. She glided down the mountain's blanketed-white sea, snow packing into her boots like a moving truck headed south. She tried to step in the deep holes her partner carved for her ahead, but soon they grew too far apart, and she could barely see his imprints but only the crystallized snow on her eyelashes framing a wooded scene. On her next step, she saw it—a paw print the size of her head. Bending down, she inspected the sharp claw indents, the carvings so pure in their crater. She flattened her gloved hand inside the print, aligning her fingers with each unforgiving claw. *You coming or what?* She heard a voice yell from far below her—her partner. But for a moment, she imagined it was the bear, communicating through the impacted snow. *Yes, she wanted to say. I'll follow you anywhere.*

fiction

Rowing in the Dark

The summer we moved to Horseshoe Pond, we had no money for electricity. Daddy built a bonfire every night to cook our hotdogs, potatoes, and coco. Justin played the harmonica, and we sang favorites like “Michael Row Your Boat,” “Kumbaya,” and “Jacob’s Ladder.”

Everyone went to bed early. Mama, Daddy, and baby Gretta in one bed and me, Justin, and Sandra in another. So snug was I between my older brother and sister that I almost wished we would never get electricity. I knew Mama wanted it bad, though, when she kissed us goodnight, the set of her jaw flickering with the candle she carried, leaving a trace of cinnamon as she closed the door behind her.

One day in late fall, before morning, I woke to a loon calling out on the pond, sad like they do. Sandra knelt on a chair in front of the window, her thick brown ponytail askew on the back of her white nightdress. I took her hand. “Looking for the loons?” Daddy said they’d soon be heading to the ocean for winter. I would miss them.

“You should be asleep,” she said. Then Justin was awake and all three of us peered out the window. We could just make out the old abandoned rowboat. In it sat a small, hunched figure. I shivered.

“Is it Mama?” Justin asked.

Sandra nodded, eyes never leaving the window. As the sky lightened, we could hear Daddy downstairs rattling the woodstove and the thunk of a log he tossed in. The back door slammed and there was Daddy outside, almost like he was in two places at once. Baby Gretta bounced on his shoulder.

Mama had drifted out from shore a little ways. Daddy sat down at the pond edge with baby Gretta between his knees and took off his boots and socks. Gretta was wearing Daddy’s black watch cap—it hid her whole face. Daddy stood up with her and waded in knee-deep until he was close enough to hold her out to Mama. She didn’t take her at first but finally reached out and snuggled Gretta against her chest and buttoned her camel

hair coat up around her. It was the nicest clothes Mama owned, and we knew it came from a life before us. Daddy had no coat, just the flannel shirt. His legs must've froze while he sat in the boat, facing Mama.

They looked up to the sky, gazing at the sunrise. After the full sun showed herself, Daddy got out and pulled the boat up onto the shore, giving Mama and Gretta a bumpy ride. In no particular hurry, they headed back up to the house, Gretta on Mama's hip, Mama and Daddy leaning into each other.

"Where was she going?" Justin asked.

"Don't be silly," Sandra said. "There's no oars."

Sandra got into bed and I climbed in beside her, then Justin. I drifted off to sleep, half-dreaming that I was the one buttoned up inside Mama's coat.

Day at the Beach

While Alice swam out to the tethered red buoys, Joyce read a trashy romance novel on the beach as she swatted gnats away from her coconut-drenched skin. She was blonde and fair. Alice, who worked for a plastic surgeon, insisted she wear protection.

Nearby, a radio blared classic rock. Down by the shore, kids scooped up moist sand with paper cups and plastic shovels, building a sandcastle.

Alice wasn't the only one in the water. A couple of kids waded in the surf. An old woman in a yellow swim cap doggie-paddled. A bald man side-stroked toward the ropes. The water was choppy, the buoys rode the waves up and down.

They were nurses at the hospital and, in a rare turn of events, both had the day off. Alice had packed a lunch of cheese, French bread, Bosch pears and a half-carafe of white wine, as well as wine glasses, a serrated knife, and a small vase with a red plastic tulip.

Even though Alice was a good swimmer, Joyce looked up from time to time to check on her friend's progress. She herself was deathly afraid of water.

She was starving and several times eyed the tote bag. For breakfast, she'd eaten a bowl of oatmeal, for her cholesterol, but it never held her for long. Thinking Alice wouldn't mind if she took a thin slice of cheese, she cut off an edge and nibbled.

Alice had made it to the buoys. She was waving. Joyce waved back.

Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" carried on the wind. Joyce hated the song. It reminded her of an uncomfortable time years ago, in high school, when she'd gone to the prom with a boy for whom she'd had no real interest. The following Monday, she'd ignored him, and he'd cried at her locker, an awful scene, she'd had no intention of upsetting him. Yet neither had she wanted to lead him on, which seemed cruel and heartless.

She and Alice lived alone. At the hospital, they had seen things that made them want to live their lives on their own terms.

A seagull squawked overhead. She looked up, saw it hanging in midair. Her stomach growled. She took out the loaf of bread, sliced off the heel. Unlike Alice, she was a large-boned woman, with a passionate appetite. Alice, a gourmand, did all the cooking. Joyce gazed out at the water, scanned heads—the bald man, the teenager, the old woman swimming laps. She didn't see Alice, couldn't locate her pale blue swimsuit.

She ripped off her sunglasses, squinted back the sun.

The bald man swam furiously toward the buoys and dove under the water. He came up waving. Joyce started for the shore, her bare feet kicking up sand. When she got to the water, her first instinct was to run out to her friend, but instead turned to the man with the radio. "Please, can you help! They need help!"

He opened his eyes, looked out, and sprinted into the water, reaching the buoys in no time. He and the bald man pulled Alice to the shore, dragging her lifeless body onto the beach.

Trembling, Joyce knelt down and grabbed her friend's ice-cold hand. The men stood back.

"Alice," she said using an evenly-tempered voice.

She had worked the ER many years ago and knew how to stay cool and calm, but now, her heart throbbed in her ears and she hovered over Alice, not moving, until something in her said *Now!* and her nursing instincts kicked in. She felt for a pulse; there was none. Then she tilted Alice's head back, pinched her nose, and covered her mouth with her own. She breathed a few steady breaths and started chest compressions. Alice didn't respond. More breaths, more compressions. The whole time Joyce's heart jack-hammered in her ears. *C'mon Alice, please, don't do this to me.* She listened to Alice's chest; nothing.

That morning, they'd debated: red or white wine. Alice had wanted to make an angel food cake but had run out of time—besides which, she'd groaned, they had no icing. "And I don't have time to make homemade," she'd said.

The only time Joyce had actually performed CPR was years ago, on a child who'd fallen at the grocery store and had knocked the wind out of himself. She'd rushed over, got down on her knees, and worked on him until he came to. The anxious mother, tears in her eyes, thanked her,

offered money, but Joyce refused. “I’m a nurse,” she’d told the woman, as if that explained everything.

Still, no pulse. The men’s faces swirled above Joyce. She kept breathing, compressing, moving mechanically. Her thoughts scrambled. She left her body momentarily, hovered above, watching herself work on her friend.

“Hey, I think her eyes just moved!” the bald man said.

“What?” Joyce stopped.

“Look!” the other man said. “She’s trying to open them!”

Alice’s eyes fluttered. Joyce turned her on her side and pounded her back. Water gushed out. Then Alice vomited the Eggs Benedict and mimosas they’d had that morning for breakfast.

That night, watching their favorite reality TV show—the young couples sitting around an in-ground pool drinking shots of tequila—neither woman derided the participants’ stupid lives as they normally did. They didn’t try to guess who would be the next one voted off.

Finally, Alice turned the TV off and said, “You know, everyone says this, but out there today I really did see my life flash before my eyes.” She looked blankly at Joyce. “I was sure I was leaving you.”

Joyce wanted to ask what else she’d seen. But all she could think of was how cold her friend’s lips had been.

The Vandal

Young Marjorie Claremont, who until that evening had never caused anyone a moment's trouble, keyed one-hundred and twenty-six and a half cars and pickups parked bumper to bumper down the hillside from the amphitheater. In the last car at the corner sat a man who had felt ill during the concert and, thinking he might be having a heart attack, had left in case he needed to drive himself to the hospital. As he wondered whether he was simply suffering from severe gas pangs and agoraphobia, he saw the girl in his rearview mirror. She was walking downhill and scraping the side of a car with a silver key. He thought she was perhaps getting back at a boyfriend, but then she keyed the next car, and then the one immediately behind him, and it was then, realizing her mindless destruction would soon reach him, that he stepped from his car.

Marjorie didn't know the last car was occupied until the man stepped from it. She halted, the key making it to the seam of his fuel door cover, but no further, the bow hot between her fingers. She and the man eyed each other. He was thin, pale. She was thin, paler. She wanted to bolt to the intersection beyond him, but his open door nearly touched the second lane of cars stack-parked in a cascade down from the amphitheater. She scrambled over the bumpers where two cars met, but the man caught her by a belt loop and pulled her back. He grabbed her wrist next and swung her arm around to her back, pushing her so forcefully up the hill that she did not resist. Marjorie didn't know if the bloom of heat she felt within her was from being caught or if it was merely the pure charge of being bad.

As he led her uphill, the man watched the silver scrape wind from car to car. He was so shocked by her act of destruction that he forgot all about his chest pains. "What you do this for?" he said, but she wouldn't satisfy him with an answer.

She didn't know why she'd keyed the cars. It started as a simple self-dare, seeing all that waxed and polished paint sluicing down the gentle curve of the hillside. Marjorie had held out her house key and half-closed

her eyes, seeing how close she could come without causing damage. It wasn't completely out of character: she sometimes bicycled with her eyes closed for long seconds at a time, particularly when crossing intersections; she held her breath in class and tried to run out of air without anyone else noticing; and she'd started waiting to use the bathroom at home until she reached a titillating desperation. But there'd never been any consequence to these private acts of daring, just a private little thrill.

While walking home from a friend's house that evening, Marjorie had taken the longer way home, past the amphitheater. She'd been to shows there plenty of times, but without a ticket it always felt like a place she didn't know at all. She'd taken out her house key and closed her eyes. There'd been that stumble, if one could call it that, and once she'd made her first mark, she continued, reaching the virgin steel of one car, then another and another, each surface adding a new entry in her library of sounds and sensations. Some cars made little curlicues of carnauba, others spat paint, a few even gave way beneath the tip of her key to the surprise of rust-eaten hollows. If she'd had a second key, she'd have done the cars parked on her left side, too. She could have reached that far, easily.

The man's hand made something in her fingers crack. Marjorie cried out and realized she could run faster uphill than the man could push her. He yanked her back but she ran again. She could hear music from the amphitheater now, drums and a baseline and a general diaphanous applause mixed with what sounded like jeering. She managed to twist free from the man and kept on running, there alongside her handiwork, all the way to where she'd begun, just below the security guards at the entrance gate. Breathless, she pointed to the man chasing after her, but she didn't stop running until she was laughing and truly free, lost in the neighborhood. She flexed her hand and was fine. Of all nights, she hadn't expected this evening to be the one when she discovered she possessed the adult illicitness with which she'd only flirted. Sixteen and a half years of goodness, gone at once. She arrived at home feeling rich, but had to wait for her mother to get off work to let her in; a third of her key had worn away and couldn't reach the deepest pins in the lock. She expected the police to come that night, but of course none came, that night or ever.

For years afterwards, whenever she saw a keyed car on the streets, she wondered if it was one she'd done, even long after any of those cars could

possibly be still on the road. The first car Marjorie went on to personally own—and every car she owned after that one—she keyed herself, the day she drove it home. The first time someone saw the scratches on her car she was given more sympathy than such a thin groove deserved to elicit. She said nothing; such self-harm was unimaginable to others. From then on, she began to wonder if keying all one-hundred and twenty-six and a half cars—apart from that last half one—was, in its own peculiar way, the first act of kindness she'd given to the world.

Dandelions

Not long after retirement, a dad hosts a family barbecue on a flawless lawn with diagonal mow patterns. His granddaughter toddles barefoot, her pink soles cushioned against an endless sea of green, but he is too distracted to notice. He is disappointed with his son. *You can't quit a job because you're frustrated*—he says. *You don't understand what it's like to be trapped in an environment where nothing you do makes a difference*—the son says.

Over the next several weeks, dandelions sprout across town, indiscriminately infiltrating well-manicured and overgrown lawns alike. No one is spared. The once joyous act of mowing, laboring, toiling over the dad's lush space becomes a Sisyphean task. Fertilizer with weed killer and direct sprays, they only last for a moment. A slight breeze carries new dandelion seeds, and the battle begins anew. The only way to overcome the dandelion epidemic would be a concerted attack from every homeowner on his street. And the next one. And, maybe, the next. But many don't care about the invasion, accepting things as they are and always will be. His lawn is his domain, but he has no authority to tell anyone else what to do with theirs.

No longer does the dad look forward to early summer mornings, the air sticky and sweet, perfect for mowing. Driveway chats about the best products and yard rivalry are just a memory. He averts his eyes when he walks past an open window. It no longer brings him joy.

Years later, when he is no longer able to give his home the care it deserves, the dad packs up his things. His son, older and wiser, comes over to help. The dad gazes at his lawn, traces of its former beauty still evident despite the over-chemicalization that has led to yellowed patches and bare earth spots. *I'll be glad to let someone else take care of this yard for once*—he says. *You did your best*—the son says.

The son will never tell him who spread the first dandelion seeds all those years ago, as a lesson in how devastating futility can be. He had been a fool to believe his father didn't already know.

Saxophone Prayer

On our neighborhood walks, Jen and I had occasionally spotted a litter of kittens spooning in a cardboard box. On those days, I had to talk her off the ledge of bringing one home. Since we have no kids, she'd say.

Today, waddling across the alley behind my apartment is a pregnant street cat with a stubby tail. I follow her to the end of the alley, where we go our separate ways. She squeezes under a supermarket vending machine, and I continue down a trail that leads to a peach orchard nestled in a hillside. The peach trees are in bloom. Thousands of fragile blossoms form thick canopies, the orchard a beach shaded by pink and white swirled parasols.

Jen and I had made a ritual of pausing here. We would slow our breath and get as quiet as we could, and wait. If we were lucky, a family of deer would emerge, weaving through the trees.

Exercise machines line the path. Late middle-aged men and women, some in hiking gear, some in pajamas, use the equipment to rotate their shoulders and pinch their obliques. I hang from a horizontal bar, unlocking my spine. I'm in a masculine mood, so I bang out five pull-ups.

The path opens to a creek. Walking and bike lanes span both sides of the water. Above the creek bank a dirt road runs along a string of cabbage fields and unmanned tractors. This is where I run. From the dilapidated warehouse, the front of which is decorated with dozens of shattered toilets, I jog a half-mile until I reach a house on the edge of a small rice paddy. Sunflowers, ten feet tall, stand sentry before their home. Their heavy necks droop, their faces wide, assessing all who pass by. Along the second-floor balcony fence are melons fastened in hand-twined nets, wombs for the growing fruit. This is where I had waited for Jen to straggle in, kicking up dust with her stubby legs.

As a reward for my exercise, I head to the creek's edge and watch the ducks. They land with a splash, taxi, and take off. Further upstream workers are building an overpass. Oil and construction runoff glitters the water and

dyes it shimmery yellow and pink. I remind myself these pretty colors are bad for my ducks.

I stay a while, pretending I'm an air traffic controller directing the fowl. The sun is a ripe peach, round and orange and heavy, falling off its branch and landing somewhere over the horizon.

I return to the dirt road and follow it to the end, until the church. I've never stepped inside this prefabricated building, the size and shape of a barn. It's made of metal siding but adorned with stained glass windows, portraying blurry biblical scenes. The church is a mother's day gift from a young child: substandard work, but from the heart.

A statue of Mary and a statue of Jesus loom on opposite ends of the church grounds. At first we had only prayed to Mary, who was closer to the entrance, but Jen had been worried about isolating Jesus.

I'm alone now. No service is in session. The candles flickering at Mary's feet are the only source of light. To her, I pray for the members of Jen's family and my family, the ones living and the ones dead. I walk over to Jesus. Spiders had spun webs in his ears. Us being men, I figure I can be honest with him. I don't pray for her to come back or ask that she be miserable. I pray for her to be happy. I know that's what I'm supposed to do. You can't pray for destruction anyway. Those prayers get shredded as soon as they get faxed in.

When I turn to leave, I notice a gray compact car idling in the parking lot. The windows are cracked open, and from them come music. Marvelous music. Bright and jazzy and then somber. All of it full of soul. The type of music you listen to with your eyes closed. But I force my eyes open.

Under the car's interior light I make out the glint of a gold instrument. A saxophone. The riff he's playing draws me in like a smell to the kitchen.

He's reclined in the driver's seat, almost supine, playing, rocking side to side. His instrument clangs against the window. I move closer, sinking into cool, sweet quicksand.

The sounds have texture. Genius flavors the air. The realization covers my neck in goosebumps: this is sacred.

I have to preserve this experience. Does he have an album? CDs or cassettes locked in the trunk? I'll sprint to the nearest ATM and buy everything he's selling.

Just then the man tosses his instrument into the back like a hamburger wrapper and takes off. I give chase, flapping my arms and shouting, but he doesn't stop. All I'm left with is a parting view of his car: a bumper secured with crisscrossed strips of red duct tape.

I look around for someone to share this moment with. But the dirt road is empty, the church deserted. The ducks have all flown away.

I hum the tunes on my walk home, keeping the earworms alive. Back in my apartment, I dig through the recycling for two plastic bottles and funnel them half-full with almonds and granola. I rattle off "We Will Rock You" with the nut-filled maracas. My memory unearths another elementary school project, and I rip out the tissues from a Kleenex box. They float to the ground like mini parachutes. From a drawer, I collect Jen's old hair ties. I string them over the tissue box, but when I pluck them there's no sound. They're dead. Because there's no . . . vibration! I snap a pencil in two and shove the ends between the ties and the box. I flick the strings of my makeshift guitar and produce . . . noise. It's alive. For a flute, I unscrew the back of a pen, extracting the ink. I wipe it with a fallen tissue, stick it in my mouth, and half-puff, half-whistle "Jingle Bells."

By blowing air through a brass cone, the saxophone man had created hypnosis. In a movie, world powers would vie for his music-making ability, lethal in the wrong hands.

But in my hands . . . I try to recreate the beat, the rhythm, any facsimile of that man's art. Frustrated, I shelve the instruments and binge saxophone videos. While I watch, I jam to bebop and saxophone solos, but I can't recognize anything from the church. This makes sense. What I had heard was creation in real time. Music like that doesn't come from memorizing chords. It comes from a place far deeper than where conscious knowledge is stored.

I take the next day off work and swing by the hardware store for the tools and materials I need to make a PVC pipe saxophone.

As evening approaches I leave my apartment, my DIY instrument, which I name Charlie, in hand. At the orchard, fallen blossoms blanket the ground. I play a few notes. But the deer are immune to my enchantments. I'm in a musical mood so I skip the exercise machines.

Mass is in progress. The congregation is singing a hymn, backed by the guttural whine of a pipe organ. This musician has no soul, adding to the world nothing more than stilted noise.

During my prayers, I ask Jesus to expel my judgment of mortal musicians. Sound takes up no space after all; there's always room for more music.

I perch myself at a picnic table and wait for the saxophone man. I blow long Es and Cs, building up my endurance. Parishioners depart in their automobiles. When they pass by I stop playing. The pastor exits the church with his clerical vestments in a garment bag. I jog home.

Over the next few months, I kiss Charlie more times than I had ever kissed Jen. Under the tutelage of online courses, my mind and mouth and fingers grasp the fundamentals.

I change my route and run directly to the church, increasing my chances of meeting the saxophone man. The peaches at the supermarket are always plump; and if I want, I can see deer roaming the nature channels.

One night at the church I have a blackout of consciousness. The backup generator flips on and my subconscious takes over. Hot breath bursts through Charlie, who filters my air into music. Eyes close. My fingers move on their own accord. I'm playing. Not following, not remembering, not copying, not doing a rendition. But playing. My soul's first contribution to the world.

When I open my eyes, an elderly couple is clapping. I unlock my jaw and wipe the spit from my lips. A man shuffles up to me, proffering a dollar bill. I wish I was the type of person to refuse it, but god it feels good to sell out.

The next morning I visit a local music shop. The owner suggests a used alto student sax. I pay in cash and he throws in a case for free.

Before I leave, the owner motions to a flier on a bulletin board. "Interested in lessons?"

What starts out as twice a week increases to three and then five times a week. I replace studying online with learning from a professional. My instructor is patient and teaches simply.

After months of training together, he says I'm progressing nicely. It's a mild enough compliment to know he's not bullshitting me. He then asks what brought on my late but intense interest in music. I know I should

mention the cognitive benefits or how I am planning to perform “Moon River” for my parents’ anniversary. But I can’t lie to him. And I can’t tell him the truth. About the saxophone man or Jen or how playing keeps my thoughts from bubbling up out of my ears.

“To play is enough,” my teacher says when I don’t reply.

I return to the church for the first time since taking lessons. I play my sax when pedestrians walk by. They smile at me. Some linger. Their toes tap.

The next day I arrive early for my lesson and put my sax in the practice room. While I wait for my teacher, the owner chats with me about his upcoming gig. A man enters the shop and hoists a saxophone case onto the counter. He’s older, mid-fifties, with graying black roots and a dyed-blond ponytail. The buttons of his flannel shirt are undone. Beneath he has on a sweaty tank top. The owner gives him a professional greeting, and I drift to the background, giving them room to do business.

The window magnifies the heat. I stand in the light, my back to the glass. Perspiration clings to my undershirt too. I glance out to the parking lot and look for my teacher’s SUV. A small gray car sits crooked in a parking spot.

I hurry over to the counter. The case is open, revealing the saxophone that had transfixed me so many months ago. I don’t know what to admire: the musician or his instrument. Can one exist without the other?

To my disbelief, they are in the middle of a negotiation. Their haggling concludes with a handshake. The owner opens the till and counts big bills, double-checking the math before announcing he needs to grab more cash from the safe.

“You’re really selling your horn?” I say when we’re alone.

“She’s tormented me long enough.”

“I heard you play once.” I describe the night at the church. “You were in that.” I point to his duct-taped compact.

“I’ll have to sell that next.” He isn’t smiling.

“You don’t perform or give lessons?”

“I’m not the teaching type. And I don’t enjoy playing with or in front of others.”

“Did you ever record your stuff?”

“I saved up the dough to cut an album once. But not enough people pay to hear a saxophone.”

“Your music moved me. You’re meant to play.”

“Then it’s time I outmaneuver destiny. This instrument has held me back from . . . more practical pursuits.”

The owner returns with a thick envelope. The sax man pockets it and nods in my direction.

If he hangs it up, what right do I have to play?

“But you’re a genius,” I blurt out.

He laughs, his teeth the color of his just-sold instrument. “I was good. That’s it.”

“But I *felt* it.”

“Maybe I had genius, but I’m no genius. It was a gift. And it will be given to someone else. Maybe even to you.”

The owner takes the instrument to the back once he leaves. I retreat to the practice room. A cluster of guitars leans against their stands. I choke the neck of a cherry wood acoustic.

I’ll sell my sax too. As a demonstration of solidarity. No. As a fuck you to Fate. The world is a lesser place now. If the universe doesn’t allow that man to play that instrument, what’s the point?

I’m not a genius or talented or even good, but I play. I contribute. Fate gets what it deserves. And the world will lose two players today. I can go back to my walks. The stray cats and the ducks and my prayers. Or I’ll find another distraction. Anything to—

“Sorry, I’m late. Did you warm up?”

I turn toward the door. My teacher is removing a bass guitar from its case.

“You play that?” I say.

He tunes the strings in response.

The owner enters the practice room. He scoots the bench closer to the piano and cracks his knuckles.

“What’s going on?” I say.

“I told him what happened.” the owner says. “We’ve heard him play.”

“Then how could you let him give it up?”

He stabs at the keys as if they are hot to the touch, playing staccato chords. “Sometimes the business trumps the art.”

The rumble of a funky bass line interrupts us. “No sheet music today,” my teacher says. “In memoriam.”

I open my mouth to refuse—I’m not in the mood—but the neck strap is already slung over my head, the saxophone pressing cool against my skin.

Non-Intensive Care

Everything is white. Strange. Clean. The foyer of another world.

An IV connects my hand to the stand beside my bed, connects me to *this*, to *them*, as nothing has before. My eyes sweep the warmly lit room, passing over the other beds, and fixes on the room's only real splash of colour: a diagram of a set of lungs, with labels pointing to different lobes. That's what makes me aware that I am breathing strangely. That's what makes me aware that, for everything I have survived in my life, I can't take this in.

Cruelty, I know too well. Abuse, yes. The deep dread of someone's anger.

But not this.

Are you in pain? The nurse asks, suddenly there again and seeing my tears. I shake my head and murmur something dismissive, and after checking the drip, she smiles and leaves.

I can almost see her there in front of me: my seven-year-old self, battered and broken to the point where she should have been taken to the hospital. She should have been in a place like this, but my father had only taken another beer and walked away, and my mother was always too busy. Too busy to help.

Too busy to love.

I close my eyes against the whiteness, against the peace, and press a hand to my heart.

No one will come to see me, of course. There is no one even to tell about the crash. Healing is a long weather-beaten road, and I know I have further to go.

But that isn't the point.

I remember year after year of being the only person to ever care for me. Of being unwanted. Unloved.

And I snuggle deeper into the comfort of the sheets, basking in the memory of the nurse's smile. I feel love in the hands that work this place,

the carefully cleaned floors, the button I can press to call someone for the first time in my life to ask me what is wrong.

And my heart breaks and heals together again, like bones that have mended out of alignment, finally set to right.

Contributors

Amanda Bramley earned her MFA from Lindenwood University. She has been previously published in *Natural Bridge*, *The Lindenwood Review*, *BlazeVox*, *Waccamaw*, and *THAT Literary Review* and has other publications forthcoming. For twenty years, she has been teaching English just outside of Saint Louis, Missouri where she lives with her husband, her exuberant son, and her three shedding dogs. Her students know her as “the crazy pug lady.”

Jeremy Caldwell’s writing has been published in *Comstock Review*, *Work Literary Magazine*, *Potomac Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. He has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and currently works as the Writing Center Director for Doane University.

Steve Carey-Walton grew up in San Francisco and studied journalism at San Diego State University. For the last ten years, he has lived in South Korea, where he works as a writer and editor. His short stories have appeared in the *GNU Journal*, the *Gordon Square Review*, and for *Likely Red Press*. *Where the Butterflies Sleeps*, his first book-length publication, is available through the *Waterton Publishing Company*.

Holly Cian holds a BA in Creative Writing from the College of Charleston and an MA in Literature from Western Carolina University. Her work has been published in *Pinesong*, *The Great Smokies Review*, and *The Mountain Xpress*. She lives in Asheville, North Carolina.

Jude Dexter has published both fiction and poetry in journals such as *X-R-A-Y*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Olney*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. They can be reached on Twitter @batyehudit.

Laurel Dile King began writing flash fiction in the late 90’s in the Emerson College MFA program. After many years spent as a teacher, editor, and publisher, she is back to writing flash. She lives in Massachusetts and Maine.

Elizabeth Gade is a US based bisexual writer and certified peer support worker. Her lived experience of abuse and incarceration drives her to write and serve her community. She views writing as radical way to show up in the world while connecting to fellow survivors. Her poems have been published in The View Magazine, The Elevation Review, 300 Days Of Sun, Other Worldly Women Press & The GroundUp. Elizabeth is the creator of a new online literary journal, LEO Literary Journal dedicated to showcasing the works of women writers affected by incarceration and lived experience outreach through literary expression.

Andrew Johnston is a teacher, writer and documentarian currently dividing his time between Kansas and China. He has published short fiction in 30 markets and anthologies including Daily Science Fiction, Nature: Futures and the Laughing at Shadows Anthology. He is currently producing a free serialized epistolary novel, available at empathynovel.substack.com.

Frances Koziar has published work in 80 different literary magazines and outlets including “Best Canadian Essays 2021” and “Daily Science Fiction”. She has also served as an author panelist, fiction contest judge, and a microfiction editor, and she is seeking an agent. She is a young (disabled) retiree and a social justice advocate, and she lives in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Website: <https://franceskozyar.wixsite.com/author>

BE LB is an array of letters, bound to impulse; a writer creating delicate connections. they have called any number of places home; currently, a single yellow wall in Michigan. they have been published in Revolute Lit, After the Pause, and Roanoke Review, among others. they are the 2022 winner of FOLIO’s Editor’s Prize for Poetry as well as the Bea Gonzalez Prize for Poetry. they are a poetry reader for Capsule Stories. their portfolio can be found at twinbrights.carrd.co

DS Levy lives in the Midwest. Her fiction has appeared in many journals and has been nominated for a Pushcart and Best Microfiction, and was included in Wigleaf’s Top 50 2021 and Long List 2022.

Kate McQuay is a writer of poetry and flash fiction, living in South Florida. She has been published in *Rambles*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Moonstone Arts* and *The Fledgling Rag*, among others. When not plumbing the depths of imagination, Kate can be found at the beach with friends.

Crystal McQueen lives in the suburbs of Northern Kentucky with her husband and her two teenaged boys. Crystal attends Eastern Kentucky University's Blue Grass Writer's Studio, pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing and has published work in *The Writing Disorder* and borrowed solace. Her passion for adventure and her love for her family inspires most of her writing. For more information, please visit crystalmcqueen.com.

Susan Muth is a writer originally from Burke, Virginia. She holds a BA/MA in English and world literature from the Pennsylvania State University. She is an MFA candidate at George Mason University with a focus in Creative Writing—Poetry. Her work has appeared in journals such as *The Northern Virginia Review*, *The Poet's Billow*, *As You Were: The Military Review*, and others. She is the poetry editor for *Phoebe* and recently won the 2022 Joseph A Lohman III Prize. She currently lives in Arlington, Virginia.

Franz Jørgen Neumann's stories have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Passages North*, *Fugue*, *Confrontation*, *Crab Creek Review*, and elsewhere, and can be read at storiesandnovels.com. Follow at [@storiesnovels](https://twitter.com/storiesnovels).

Diane Pickett has been published in *Country Living* magazine. Her self-published novel, *Never Isn't Long Enough*, won several awards, including the Eric Hoffer award, Indie Excellence, Florida Authors and Publishers Association, and Southern California award for best regional fiction. She attended Florida State University and enjoyed a successful career as a medical executive. She has also owned several small businesses. Diane inspired the revival of the historic Florida Chautauqua Assembly, an acclaimed cultural and educational event. She divides her time between North Carolina and northwest Florida, where she recently founded a historic preservation nonprofit organization.

Kelly R. Samuels is the author of the poetry collection *All the Time in the World* and two chapbooks.

Ellen Stone taught in public schools in Kansas and Michigan for over 30 years while raising three daughters with her husband. She advises a poetry club at Community High School and co-hosts a monthly poetry series in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ellen's poems have appeared recently in *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Great Lakes Review*, *Rust + Moth* and *River Mouth Review*. She is the author of *What Is in the Blood* (Mayapple Press, 2020) and *The Solid Living World* (Michigan Writers' Cooperative Press, 2013). Ellen's poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart prize and Best of the Net. Reach Ellen at www.ellenstone.org.

Dom Witten is a Black poet raised on the end of a one-way street in Detroit, MI. She received her MFA from the University of North Carolina Greensboro with special attention to process-based learning. She is a co-founder and program director of the Poetics Lab which facilitates inclusive spaces for communities to engage with identity through poetry and performance of the self. Dom's poems are obsessed with establishing a future with more joy, sass, naps and emotional accuracy.