



Wild Roof Journal | Issue 7  
March 2021

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Cover artwork is “Beauty Persists” by Jocelyn Ulevicus

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## Note from the Editor

Welcome to Issue 7 of *Wild Roof Journal*! Inevitably, as the previous six issues have been released over the past year, there are certain themes that emerge to complement the cycle of the seasons. Whether it is through a direct engagement with themes such as rebirth, renewal, and growth or through a more suggestive use of language and imagery, it's difficult not to read some of the pieces contained in this issue in the context of the seasonal shift into early spring. Perhaps this is a bit of an anticipatory reading on my part, as many of the pieces included in this issue were submitted in the depths of winter; however, they emerge now in published form on the cusp of the vernal days that lay ahead.

Given this context, the artwork selected for the cover of this issue was quite a remarkable fit. It is titled "Beauty Persists," and it is by Jocelyn Ulevicus. Of course, the connection to natural themes is only one "layer of the onion" in my analysis here, which I highlight as a brief introduction to the issue. There is such a richness and depth to the selection of visual art, poetry, and prose that is included, and I will pass the remainder of the analytical possibilities to you, the reader, as you spend some time with the issue.

In addition, a new roundtable discussion is released as a complement to the issue. You can [listen in here](#). Roundtable regular Chris Vogt and I are joined by Anna Schechter and Phoebe Phelps, who are both integral members of the *WRJ* submission review team. In this discussion, we focus in on some favorites from the recent January issue and give some of our thoughts about what makes these pieces so appealing.

Speaking of the previous issue, I have also released an interview with one of the artists featured in the January issue, Ashley Pryor Geiger. I encourage you to [check it out](#), especially if you have an interest in digital art, photography, or philosophy, which all intersect in Ashley's work.

As for the art and writing contained in this issue, I hope you find it entertaining, engaging, and inspirational!

Aaron Lelito – Founder and editor in chief



## **Audio Feature: Wild Roof Roundtable**

[Click here to listen](#)

**All works discussed appear in Issue 6 of *Wild Roof Journal***

Micaela Edelson, “Fallen Firs”

Olivia Lee Stogner, “The Woods Inside”

Victoria Hattersley, “The Goldfish”

Scout Roux, “The Sandwich that Luck Bought”

Andrew Martin, “I like the thought of being a lighthouse keeper”

## **Stella Reed**

### **Myth from the field where the fox runs with its tail on fire**

When I say run, I mean outrun  
your existence, the tongue of the holy  
hot on your heels. I say fox

I mean fourteen and nowhere  
to go. Tender grapes, a vineyard,  
flames sputtering with each footstep.  
I mean fourteen and no one anywhere

tender as the grapes. Bad circumstances  
bottled and relief like curling vines,  
the earth soft, falling away  
with each footstep. I say fox

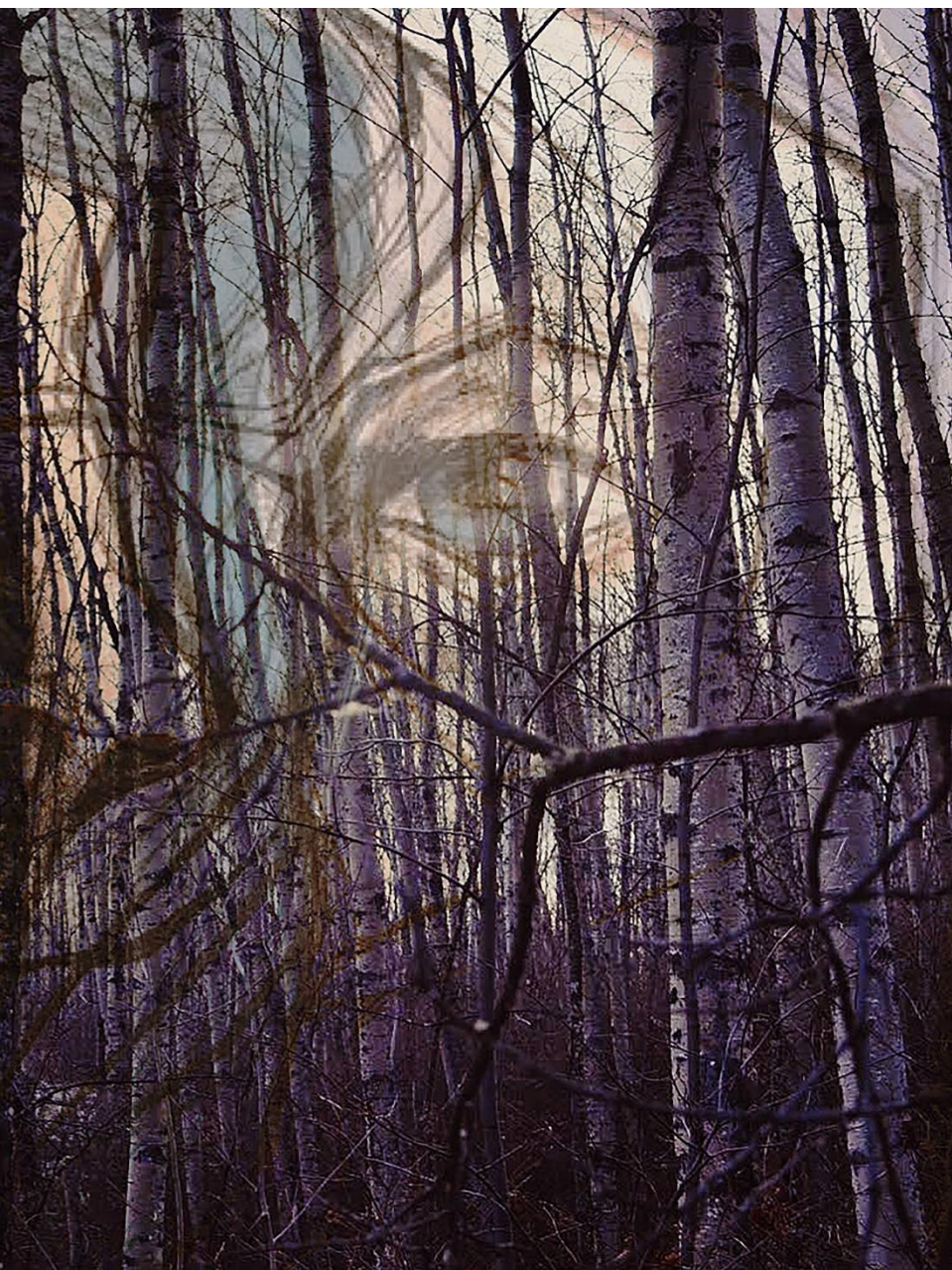
but vixen is what they said,  
the tods, the reynards. Who gave her  
the torch anyway? Skulk of foxes  
in their bad circumstances.

Follow the tail. This is a myth  
I say and mean this field  
could be anywhere  
you fight fire with fire.



## Hide and Seek





Olivia Loccisano

## **Colette Tennant**

### **She was Braided Ivy**

But here is what I'm trying to tell you.  
Not at first – at first she sent out green feelers  
that inched their way through hedgerow shadows,  
bashful of too much shine.  
Eventually, she fell in love  
with the number three –  
Pluto's three moons, for instance,  
or the three fingers visible when you hold a pen just right,  
the three pipes her father loved,  
even Cerberus.  
She understood the folly of his three thirsty tongues.  
So one day she gathered herself into strands of ivy –  
turned her long thoughts into beautiful complications  
intertwined so tight no one could take apart the twisted threads.

### **My New Clock**

is the lilac out back.  
Its leaves clutch at time  
the best they can.

They remind me of the way my grandmother's  
needles clicked doilies into being  
out of almost nothing but slender thread.

They looked like little nets trying to catch the  
minutes and hours and days that flitted  
like the hummingbird I see

whose visits to the lilac are  
faithful as minute hands,  
the quick-circle wings of it,

while small angels in the branches

wait in its green complications  
to catch what slips through.



Hands Theater

Mane Hovhannisyan



White Dream





Mane Hovhannisyan





In-between      Mane Hovhannisyan

**J. M. Eisenbrey**

**When a Bee Bounced Off the Window I Asked**

Is the practice of joy  
forgetting  
or is it remembering what  
we are

less bound by postal code  
than by the purpose beyond purpose

Today, let's not accumulate comforts  
for a cell  
when the need is for the soul of another  
to pierce the distance

We can cite the evidence  
for dismay  
in cacophony  
in infection  
or species lost  
and can count ourselves culpable

How much plenty accrues  
before the flood erodes each priceless breath  
our mindful moments tainted by cringing

And the skulking sense of futility  
it's a dodge  
We are born to suffer the poisonous  
and to get our pleasure where we can  
within the resistance  
our broken sofas aflame atop the barricade

But don't  
Just for today

Grow lettuce, a maple tree, random acts  
of art

smile and wave  
make some repair  
reverse the invasion in any small way  
sing  
shake that thing  
place your shining grain upon the scale

**Lara Velede Vesta**

**Fire Ecology: Enduring Somatic Threat and a Theory of Infinite Loss**

*“For people who are chronically ill, the losses are multiple and permanent and therefore difficult to resolve. Because these losses are unending, they’re known as infinite losses...” –Social Work Today*

*“Life will return to burned areas in short order. Fungi are already crawling around in the ashes of the fire, laying the foundation for soil that will support the plants that will constitute the early stage of the forest’s re-growth...And ash is nature’s fertilizer. Plant blight, disease and insects are reduced or eliminated by burns. Mineral soil is the compost that Douglas fir seedling roots need to grow. ‘Dead trees’ or snags are full of life.” –Bill Weiler, wildlife habitat expert*

*Six Weeks Before*

The face in the waterfall is clear.

I stand at the base of Wahclella Falls, one of the most powerful in the Columbia Gorge, my feet to basalt 15 million years old, a memory of time before humans, the Miocene era of liquid stone. I’ve just made an offering, an object of great value to me, tossed into the pool of the falls. In my bones is a memory of this, gold at the base of a waterfall, a spirit’s hoard. My partner snapped the photo without my knowing, and there an image, a face emerging from the water.

I am an animist because it makes life more interesting. Animism holds the simultaneous: that things can be real and not real at the same time. We don’t really know much at all about how nature works, the whys of evolution, the function of ecosystems both within and without our bodies. Believing in consciousness and reciprocal relationship has supported me in the not knowing, for mystery is inherent in any student of magic and myth.

In graduate school my research interests included the myths of Northern Europe, how mythic consciousness teaches us new ways of viewing time. These models have disappeared from most dominant systems of thought, but they exist still (in the complex of spiral eternity that is myth itself) in indigenous spiritualities. As a person of European descent, the indigenous spirituality of my forebearers (Celtic, Slavic,

Nordic, Germanic) is largely fragmented, and I am separated by oceans and hundreds of years from earth-based ancestral home<sup>1</sup>. So I choose to live where I live, to learn about these traditional lands of the “Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Cowlitz bands of Chinook, Tualatin, Kalapuya, Molalla and many other Tribes who made their homes along the Columbia River.” Here I weave fabric into existence by studying the severed threads.

When I pray to the waterfall spirit my own threads are severed, life fragmented by a diagnosis as mysterious as myth, as improbable as animism in a capitalist culture. Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Six months ago my health collapsed after a semester of teaching. I had been in decline for years but rationalized my ailments as stress related—divorce, long distance parenting, a child abandoned by a parent, a child on the autism spectrum, homeschooling, moving, financial instability, professional insecurity...and on... I lost my job, could not return to complete my doctorate, spent weeks, then months, in bed. As the weather improved in the spring so did my health, enough that I could walk to the waterfall, enough that I could pray. But in chronic, cyclic illness, respite is temporary and improvement is only half the norm.

#### *Four Weeks Before*

The trail is shaded by dripping moss and the fertile, loamy smell of needled dirt drifts up, balsam. Even in these ideal conditions—seventy degrees in Eagle Creek Canyon, good sleep, a respite from symptoms this week as the air is sunny and dry—I am not feeling well. Also I don’t really understand this illness, not yet. I keep trying to do these things I have always done easily, like take my three children on a hike. But I’m shaky less than a mile in and the sheer drop cliff, the narrow trail 120 feet up with cable lines for security, is prohibitive. We will never see Punch Bowl Falls, Loowit Falls, the High Bridge unburned. On the way back to the car I drift into trance, children far ahead. In another photo from this time, air gold, backdrop green, I levitate in a pool of sun a foot above the ground.

One month later, a child the same age as my daughter, in that same stretch of hike, lobes a smoke bomb into the tinder woods. The canyon explodes in flame, the start of a burn that will last two months, charring 50,000 acres.

One year later, my ME/CFS has cycled from moderate to severe.

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<sup>1</sup> [ljist.com/featured/acknowledging-native-land](http://ljist.com/featured/acknowledging-native-land)



I spend my days in a darkened room. I can't rise without shaking, run fevers daily, have symptoms resembling the worst, most endless flu. I wait until my family is at home before bathing for fear of falling, drowning. I lie on my side, my pillow constantly wet with tears. I make a video, which I later delete.

"Is this a life?" I sob into the dusk of the screen.

"This is not a life? I must be dying. This is not a life."

Within days I will receive a phone call from the specialist at Stanford, confirming that my brain is on fire, my body inflamed, my immune system unable to function in the midst of so much internal heat. My body is working, inefficiently, to suppress the fires that smolder at the edges of my consciousness.

In that moon the fires swept through my body. I became charred earth.

### *Rainfall*

Here in the Pacific Northwest the rains—persistent, continual—come in November. In November of 2017 the rains extinguished the Gorge fire. For the next year hotspots would crop up, fire deep in a root ball or soil duff preserved over winter to emerge in the new light of spring.

In November of 2018 I finally learned what was making me so ill: viruses, five at least, smoldering low grade in my body, jacking up levels of an inflammatory protein—C4a, one most doctors don't even know to test for—to three times what they should be. I began a course of treatment both conventional and naturopathic and within two days I was able to walk without assistance.

Now, two years later, in spite of some flare ups and the persistent threat of a viral pandemic, my health is stable. But I walk the world changed, trail not recognizable, a new self, or maybe a cyclic self. Self dead and reborn.

### *Cycles*

In all myth there are cycles. In the myths of my Norwegian ancestors, shared with me by my grandfather, Sigurd, the end of the world is the beginning of the world. At Ragnarok all is devastated, the sun turns dark, the earth is submerged, fire giants emerge from Muspelheim and steam fills the air, even gods are doomed to die. But in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, Ragnarok represents a necessary ending. After the death, a rebirth. Some gods survive, along with two humans, Ask and Embla (tree names, Ash and Elm), the fields sprout without needing to be sown, and the gold game pieces of the gods are retrieved from grass newly green.

In his work *Sacred and Profane*, Mircea Eliade introduced the idea of Eternal Return, that through a mythic/religious consciousness, certain acts could bring us into relationship with divine cycles through symbolic action and ritual.

“One essential difference between these two qualities of (profane and sacred) time strikes us immediately: *by its very nature sacred time is reversible* in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a *primordial mythical time made present*.”<sup>2</sup>

Profane time is time without meaning, whereas mythic time is time made meaningful. In a culture so firmly subscribed to the model of profane, linear time, any thing or person existing outside this model is an aberration, monstrous. For example, I cannot work...not because I don't want to work, but because my cyclic illness precludes a linear progression through an academic year. Reasonable accommodation for disability doesn't allow absence, and I can't with any accuracy predict when I may need a week of rest or year to heal.

Written in my journal when I was deeply ill:

“I thought that when you became sick there was help for you. I thought there were doctors, systems, people who could hold your hand, offer education, support. I thought there was a financial safety net, social security disability, automatically enacted. Instead I have existed for years without a doctor who knows anything about my illness, therefore I have no ability to access services, or disability insurance. I have flatlined in a culture of independent expectation and no one seems to notice. No one seems to care.”

In profane, linear, socially acceptable time my experience is without meaning. It becomes what the Journal of Social Work calls a litany of “infinite loss.” There is no end to the losses: loss of status, identity, profession, ability both physical and mental, friends, connections, possibility, security, opportunities, belief, trust, hope. People with chronic illness can't properly grieve these losses in linear time, because they perpetuate, become an inescapable story of endless death. The losses stack and threaten, for with a self so firmly dissolved and no support in sight, is this a life?

People with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis are six times more likely than the general population to kill themselves. We have an illness that is not just widely misunderstood by the medical community, but actively

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<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959: CourseWorks Columbia University), chap. I, [www.columbia.edu/itc/religion/f2001/edit/docs/Eliade1.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/religion/f2001/edit/docs/Eliade1.html)

maligned, dismissed and disbelieved. Without experts, like medical doctors, who can advocate for us in the twisted system of disability insurance and resources, many of us go without financial support or services. I've had doctors make me worse with treatments, I've been told I had depression instead of an incurable chronic illness and an adjustment disorder instead of medical PTSD, and most recently I was told by the determination arm of Social Security that I could return to work full time as a university professor because my illness was not considered severe enough to warrant benefits.

There is no way to prove severity with ME/CFS, no tests to confirm physical abilities, and to the outside world, I look fine. My specialist at Stanford, the only MD who will treat me, is overwhelmed and won't complete any patient's Residual Functional Capacity forms. My primary care physician is a FNP and can't speak to ME/CFS and the necessary limits it imposes on my physical and cognitive abilities. If I exceed those limits, I am at risk for relapse.

There is an emotion attached to this equation. In linear time, some may call it hopelessness. In linear time, I call it despair.

But in mythic time, obstacles are opportunities, and losses are offerings to the sacred, to the potentiate of a unique and potent whole.

### *Illness as a Rite of Passage*

Last year my family and I returned to Wahclella Falls. I carried an Oregon sunstone in my mouth for the hike, a gift infused with words I can't yet speak.

The trail was different. Rock and slip, ash and dust, what was once a partial loop is now an out and back. The forest burned in pastiche, a quilt of char, some trees down and dead, some elder firs blackened but still alive. And everywhere in the woods, a wealth of green, herbaceous stands of mugwort and queen Anne's lace remembered and re-seeded from two years ago, alive. On the path, a yellow woolly bear, nibbling its way to chrysalis.

In the canyon I stood again on the ancient stone to commune with the spirits.

"You are still here!" I wave, hands reaching.

"Of course we are." The water rushes, deafening. It sounds like a roaring laugh.

The canyon walls drip vines the same as before, there is no easy path to the waterfall pool. I tiptoe over flotsam and throw in the sunstone. Behind me, my partner takes a photo.

In the waterfall, eyes emerge.

In mythic time, we make meaning from essential devastations, we see the cycles of death and birth as necessary, we move from linear, infinite losses into regenerative growth.

In a mythic life, the cycles of trial and loss become initiatory, patterned after ancient stories, after the natural world, where fire is not enemy but ally, where death nourishes new growth.

We are a part of nature, not apart. My ecological systems, immune, respiratory, cardiovascular, digestive, are dependent on an infinitude of mysterious processes and beings, connected to a greater story of waterfall, fire, ash and tree. We acknowledge each other, this knowing that is more than I, this truth greater than any contemporary, human awareness. Through the eyes of natural cycles we learn to surrender; with meaning we grow.

In the past years I have begun a journey through the nonlinear, to seeing my illness and its subsequent losses as a death transition, a rite of passage with initiatory power. In death transitions we move out of the known and into the liminal, the underworld, where the work of transformation can occur. Storyteller Martin Shaw says that in order for an initiatory process to be mythic, effective, something has to die in the underworld, an offering to the goddess of death, the dark mother in Joseph Campbell's hero's journey cycle. So the losses of illness become an offering, and in every myth cycle, a bastion of return.

On return the world is changed. There is absence. And fertility. There is transformation. And new growth.

### *Good Ecological Fire*

"Easily two-thirds or more of the Gorge fire is really good ecological fire."<sup>3</sup>

In a world of profane time, we run from death. In a capitalist culture, profiting from fear of death is the norm. Transitions that lead us close to death—the controlled burn of messy, physical transformations like birthing, illness, old age, and the decline to death itself—are hidden from view. Sanitized, unseen, relegated to the underworld, never to emerge.

Denial of death is a kind of fire suppression in the soul of a culture. Looking to the mythologies points the way toward a potential embrace of passage, fire, flood, cataclysm, through ritual. When meaning is made from deaths, an alliance begins. We return to a source on the loom, a warp and woof ever woven: in cyclic time, in natural time, in mythic space, we gain perspective, we re-member.

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<sup>3</sup> [iafi.org/the-columbia-river-gorge-eagle-creek-fire-ruin-or-renewal](http://iafi.org/the-columbia-river-gorge-eagle-creek-fire-ruin-or-renewal)

Denial of death and the attendant fear of anything resembling it puts us on the run. We tamp down flares in the wilderness of our collective consciousness, the tinder builds, with the potential for great destruction.

Do you see where I am headed? Capitalism, rampant consumerism, climate change, all invaded with a persistent, insidious and helpless fear of what is, in fact, a natural part of life.

Most of us in the US will die from some form of chronic illness. Could that be why invisible disabilities are themselves so unpalatable, so easy to disbelieve? By denying illness, we deny our own fates. The threat, extinguished. For a time.

For those of us living with chronic illness we live with what psychologists are just beginning to understand as Enduring Somatic Threat. Much like our grief, which cannot be quantified because it has no end, this threat also is persistent. This is the root of my trauma, embedded deep in my body. That every time I become sick, it is an ember, ready to strike the fire of my immune system again. Ignition can happen at any time, for any reason. Already in this past year of relative health I have experienced symptomatic relapses due to viruses, bacterial infections, environmental toxins and stress. I have wakened with the old ache in head, joints and eyes. I fear starting anything—a job, a project—as I know it is likely I will be unable to complete it due to necessary vigilance around my health. The vigilance is exhausting.

Or is it? In the model of mythic time, aren't my relapses just another cycle? We know from Campbell's work that it is possible to be in multiple rites of passage at one time. What if these periodic relapses are somehow essential to my growth, to the new green emerging from my soil, to the habitat in me, so specific, so rare?

What if relapse is, in fact, good ecological fire?

### *Ancestors*

"...researchers speculate that more than 100 million years ago a viral infection in a primitive mammal uploaded a gene that helped the placenta evolve."<sup>4</sup>

My illness was caused by viruses.

Viruses evolved billions of years ago. In my meditations and rituals, I have found it useful to see viruses not as adversaries, but as ancestors.

There is a collaborative nature to the ancient myths, a nonbinary complexity of relationship. The goddess Gullveig appears in the *Völuspá* as a victim, kidnapped by a warring faction of gods, burned three times

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<sup>4</sup> [cosmosmagazine.com/biology/what-came-first-cells-or-viruses](http://cosmosmagazine.com/biology/what-came-first-cells-or-viruses)



and stabbed with spears. But she emerges powerful, a survivor, infused with gifts, a healer, a teacher. She brings a magic into the world that is later shared with the same gods that harmed her. Soon the pantheon is interwoven by marriage and shared parentage, the old wrongs forgiven in the service of community growth. In these myths the world is challenging; the natural powers, often embodied as giants, are wild and unpredictable. Yet they are not demonized; their roles are essential to a wholeness, which benefits everyone.

Wholeness. The etymological root of the word healing is *heal*, meaning whole. In an integrative mythos, all parts are essential to the collective.

In the mythic, we are whole. However the pain, however the infinite losses and enduring threats, the reality is that beneath the scorched earth of our death transitions, another cycle has already begun.

Even now in the burned-out vistas of the west, just weeks after fire, seeds sprout in soil rich with ash.

## **Reilly Cook**

### **The Message in Silence**

The silent and beautiful St. Mary's river  
flows forth in its own knowing  
exactly what it has done to me.

It has made me vain;  
every day I walk outside  
and do not bother to thank the river  
with a kiss.

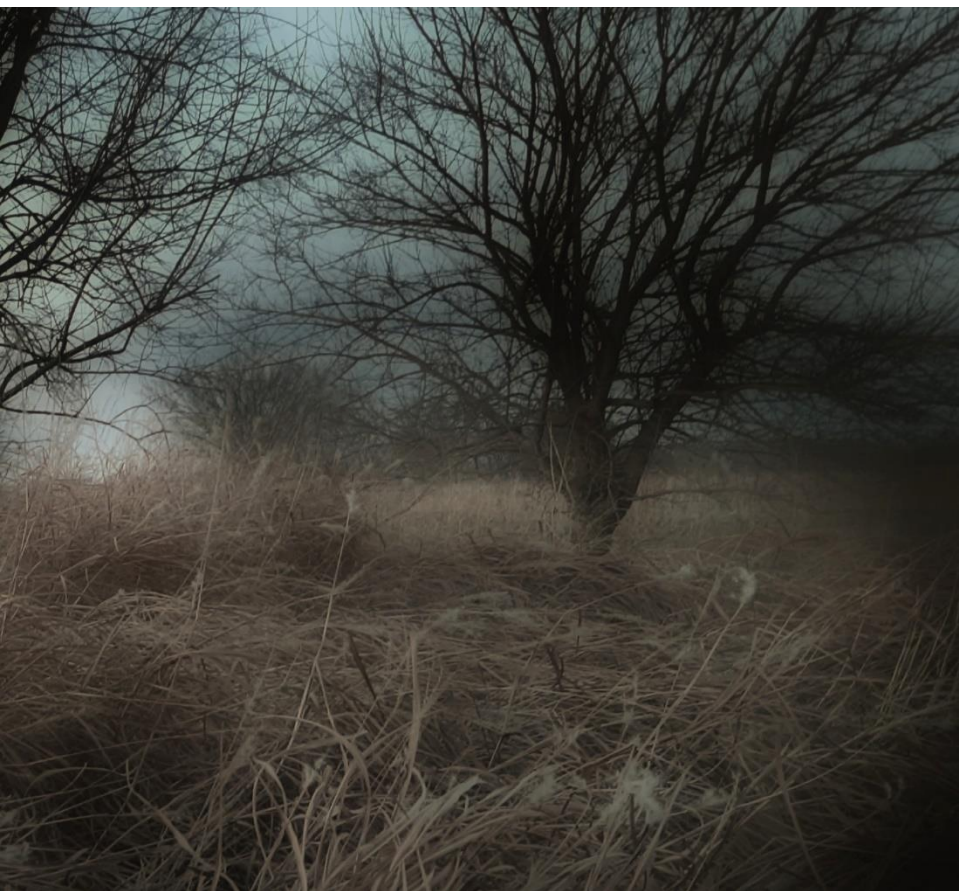
My face hugs the strong Wind  
as it journeys to and from the water;  
again, I refrain from asking it  
to thank the river for me,  
for being there through it all.  
For this I am ashamed.

When will this place feel foreign again?  
When will I feel regret that this place  
is no longer my home?  
Will the excitement in newness return yet again—  
can I return to that ignorance?

I hope that once I set sail  
I remember to embrace the Wind  
who pushes me forth.



Softly, Moving Toward Winter



Judy Bales



Edge of Winter, Looking Eastward





Judy Bales

## **Jasmine Khaliq**

### **Invierno I**

what is there to say / I washed my hair in the kitchen sink all december /  
fished it halved from the disposal and told myself / jagged suited my face  
more / I orphaned groceries on the porch for weeks / bundles of brown  
cloth stork-dropped / rancid / and all I have to say / I could never bring  
them in. / there are things that cannot be transformed. / the pets I've  
buried rubberneck to regard me. shriveled / bushels of jasmine left belly  
up / hair fanned out long for spiderwebs / gossamer highlights fruit fly  
barrettes / and all I wanted a cracked window / you open / buds with your  
nail / you have to see the weeping / your voice / a bark, a dream—I don't  
understand the things you say to me. room of mountains. you interpret  
this as you please. I see the deer in the woods; it means nothing to me.

## Karen Lethlean

### Catch and Release

The first time I saw him he couldn't have been more than twelve, a little ferret of a kid, sharp and quick. Caleb Johnson, haloed in the eager light of a hunter-gatherer, was first to talk to me on the wharf that afternoon.

"What kind of rod is that, Mister?"

"Old one, sonny, automatic caster."

"And that float, never seen one like that before."

"It's a bubble, used to use it for trout fishing. Watch. When there is a bite, it goes under and then I just put pressure on, not too sharp. Here we go."

Onto estuary edge grass came an undersized Bream, not the first I've hooked today. Caleb reached out with skinny, scabby arms to grab our extracted aquatic life.

"Wait a minute, lad, let the flipping die down a bit. See, now I run my hand down fishing line and firmly hold the thing around its belly—that way it can't spike you. Not everything out of ocean waters is trying to hurt us."

He watched eagerly while I disengaged a tiny hook, but then frowned as I went to toss my fish back into the channel. "What's wrong? It's undersize and has to go back."

"Yes, I know it's small, but can you put it back gently? Fish must get a shock when they're dropped or tossed back."

"Sure, I can do that."

We squatted and watched textured, scaled silver—so evident on grass—dull to a mercury-like grey; tiny fish creature gasped a few times and orientated itself again into liquid surrounds. Promptly disappeared into depths, maybe to grow and present a meal-sized catch after holiday crowds were packed up and gone.

"Want to try?"

"Can I?"

Caleb rode a bike with a bashed-about seat that wasn't at the correct angle, with a dirty semi-rusted chain but swanky wheels. I wondered if he nicked them from somewhere.

Reminded myself I should stop being so judgemental, that all kids aren't rotten to the core. Just like all old men fishing near summer holiday caravan parks aren't paedophiles.



“How long you down here for?”

“Couple of weeks; my dad tries to bring us to an ocean location every year, says it’s cleansing.”

“He’s right, great place to spend school holidays.”

“You live here?”

“Yes, got a shack up the hill; used to be more fun when my wife was alive, but she’s been gone for a few years.”

“My mum’s dead too—car accident, or so dad says.”

Before Caleb could give any details, my bubble vanished, and we repeated the same catch and release.

“Better to be getting bites, even if they’re undersized, eh?”

“Yer, this is fun.”

“You never been fishing before?”

“Dad has heaps of times.”

As typical a small crowd gathered and I was reminded that fishing, particularly someone with different gear or having caught something, could quickly become a centre of attention. People were gathering like ancients coming together to celebrate a hunt. I’d be asked about what type of rod, significance of the bubble, my catch. Whole time Caleb beamed and lapped up attention. Smiled with emerging celebrity status associated with his success, as if some cultural secrets will magically appear.

I noticed a beer-gutted, large man looming, stubby holder-cloaked bottle in hand. Leer of ownership evident as he rested a gaze on Caleb, and up to me. A changed expression captured pure disdain. As Caleb noticed our inspection he jumped on his bike and vanished.

Skinny arms sticking out of oversized, in need of wash, t-shirt. Hair dishevelled, poorly trimmed, worse than a beach holiday look from too much salt water. Caleb fronted up every day for a whole fortnight, and I have to tell you I looked forward to his arrival during the next long holiday season, after his dad promised they’d return. Kid was dead keen and great company. Sort of grandson I always wished for, probably even nicer, due to a lack of family obligation. Caleb kept me company because he wanted.

One year he tapped me on the shoulder while I read newspapers, struggling with crossword clues. Snuck up outside our village post office shop. I noticed he’d been caught in grips of a growth spurt, seeming to have gained spider arms and legs since the last time I saw him.

“You still got that rod and bubble, Dennis?”

Once as I wandered back up to my shack through crowded Lakeside Caravan Park, population swollen with holiday makers again, must have been four years later when I spied a dreadful exchange.

Caleb is dragged off his bike, lots of shouting, and a king-sized whack across the poor kid's ear. Caleb goes down, but his father doesn't let up, puts boots in for a few kicks. I'm thinking this is more than discipline. His tiny frame spreadeagle as if a long-dead carcass of seagull-picked-over fish body. I've never known Caleb to ever do anything marginally close to warranting any sort of admonishment, at least while he's been with me.

"What are you looking at, you old perve? I seen ya, think it's OK to touch up little boys? That's right bugger off, ya old weakling."

My hand hovered over the phone, not too difficult to find a number. Right in the first page of telephone directories, under abuse and assault, but then I thought about potential conversations I might have. *So, you are? And how do you know the boy? You spend time fishing with him, you talk to the kid, and sure, that's all you do?* What possible connections and links could I make? Only detail I know is a surname, Johnson...too common. Stays in Lakeside Caravan Park, so do numerous families. I need more information, like where they normally live and where is his mum?

"What happened to your face?"

"Slipped and fell off me bike."

"No you didn't. Your Dad did this, didn't he?"

Caleb clammed up, just stared out into tiny swells, mini jostled waves, tossed up by a nor-easterly. Early breeze today, bringing the promise of a thunderstorm. Then he turned tear-brimming eyes to me, so much spilling out I can barely stop my own eyes from watering.

"I think it is great how when we catch small fish they get thrown back, don't you?"

"You're 16 now aren't you?"

"Yer, why?"

"I think you can leave home if it's not safe to remain." He still stares at ocean, as if somehow it's sending out messages only Caleb is privy to. No way I can read secrets the boy appears to understand.

"Then where would I go?"

"Come down here, I have plenty of room."

"Get real, how would I afford bus fare on my own?"

"Couldn't you get a paper run; deliver catalogues to letter boxes from your bike, some odd jobs and save up the cash?"

“Nice ideas, Dennis, but there just aren’t those kinds of chances for a kid like me. Everyone always thinks I’m going to nick something, or only want money to buy smokes.”

Now I’m hopelessly staring at my hands.

“Look I know Dad’s like he is, but if I’m not there he might lash out at something that will get him into real trouble. I’m sort of like a small fish taking bait, getting pulled in and then released compared to shit we’d be in if some giant Marlin or Shark took our hook.”



Winter Into Spring      Owen Brown

## Jessica Manack

### Preparations

*They say it's gonna be a big one, I gasp*  
at Neil on the long trudge up the hill to my place,  
sherpa, burdened with toilet roll and cereal.  
Neil sits on his porch with a Yuengling, the bottle  
the only thing green as far as the eye can see.  
*Yep.* Neil answers back, almost all there is to say.  
*Stocked up. Liquid bread,* he laughs,  
raising it in salute. It is not until then  
that I wonder if all the things I have done to prepare  
were the wrong things,  
all the sustenance I hoarded the wrong sustenance.  
I wonder if, on the second or third day,  
hair matting, the cold suppressing my scent,  
I will feel up to wandering out to scavenge,  
wonder what I will bring myself to do to acquire  
what other people smartly thought to procure,  
Wielding a shovel, chipping a path through the ice.  
And will it be worth it, that taste of tart wheat,  
sharp and sweet on the tongue?

## **Cecilia Stancell**

### **Saint Martin's Cross**

Where is Saint Martin's Cross?  
Where are the animals? The veal calves?

I've run the length of the land  
And found nothing to sustain me,  
Not even the forlorn or tragic.

Only the old, indifferent  
Air of the mound-dwellers  
Moves with any purpose.

More than once, amidst devastation,  
Sorrow found us side by side,  
And may yet again, I know,

Permeating time, as it does,  
Like mycelium beneath soil as still and  
Black as the space between stars.

I forgot that such stillness may cover  
These long threads of loss knotted  
Tightly with roots of joy and wonder,

But here they are. I hadn't seen the  
White gannet that now streaks upwards  
Like a comet from the dark sea

Nor the black sails climbing the  
Far side of the horizon, piercing the thin  
Dividing line that keeps the sea from the sky.

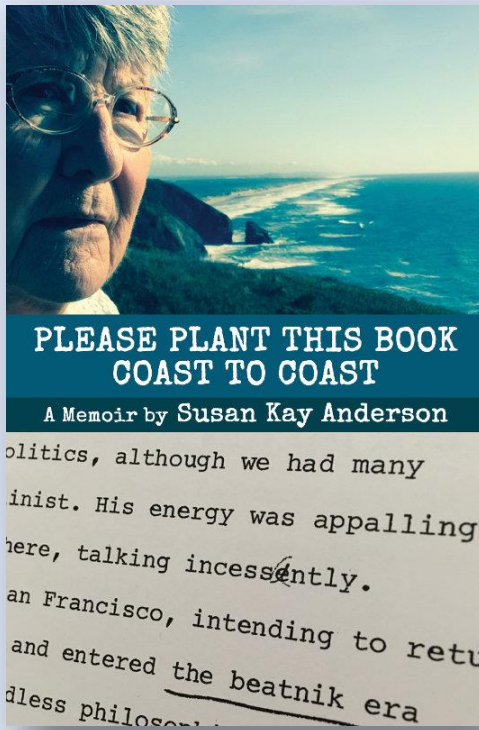


Below the Rapids

Bonnie Matthews Brock



**Available for pre-order from Finishing Line Press**



## Please Plant This Book Coast to Coast

Susan Kay Anderson

In this startling and fascinating book, **Susan Kay Anderson** takes the reader on a journey from California to Oaxaca to Hawaii, through the life and words of Virginia Brautigan Aste—married to Richard Brautigan for a decade—in a series of interviews that reveal Ms. Aste’s courage, creativity and sheer survival instinct. With original Linoleum cut prints by the author and photographs that bring Ms. Aste to life, this book “takes you to places you’ve never been before.” As Ms. Aste says, “Everyone wants to feel they had something to add to human consciousness.” In *Please Plant This Book Coast to Coast*, **Susan Kay Anderson** does just that.

—**Erica Bodwell**, author of *Crown of Wild*

**Alice B. Fogel**

Om

maybe the mystic by prayer goes where  
the painter goes by paint and blackness  
goes by shades                      maybe it's discretionary  
how we render our personal tabernacles  
the dubious by its lights and not by reason  
fears another's hesitation                      and the greyed  
submerged is envious of flames                      we lift off  
where the brush touched down  
where is your edge                      what else burns  
in the sanctuaries of darkened rooms                      and what is  
that pregnant silence                      maybe another thought  
not yet mortal nor yet ambiguous                      soon  
into the material                      will be born



## Logos

what could you mean			
by avalanche by moss or mildew		by window	
our thoughts weep through			
so many frames to a vanishing		we'll fall in love	
and falling		reconcile	
everything ravishing		with a replica of gestures	
the form the body makes as it divides			
the sky	a line	a sine wave	a flaw
repeated in the architecture			of recovery
why you mean		it's all in your mind	
well	so	everything	
and nothing is		priceless crisis	
of yearning	pure dirt		
glazed with weightless trespass		all the returning	
innocence	and endless	depths of glass	

**Author’s note:** The poems published here are part of a series titled *Nothing But: A Series of Indirect Considerations on Art & Consciousness*. Each is an indirect consideration of a single work of contemporary abstract expressionist art and a meditation upon the disruption that happens to our consciousness or cognition when we are confronted by the nonrepresentational.

“Om”: Justin R. Lytle: “Looming,” unaltered photograph of light sculpture (shown below). [www.justinrlytle.com](http://www.justinrlytle.com)

“Logos”: Peter Wegner: “Mineral Logic III,” mica, staples, pins. View at [peterwegner.com/detail.asp?id=570](http://peterwegner.com/detail.asp?id=570).



**M. A. H. Hinton**

**Unkempt**

you lay the words down  
like a mason would stones  
for the wall of a small cathedral

*no*  
*not a cathedral*

a small gatehouse then  
at the edge of a little frontier town  
where a road comes out of a forest  
and up and over an old wooden bridge

*again*  
*no*

how about this  
a small garden  
where stones are set randomly  
as a border between wild roses  
and an unkempt yard

*yes*

## Sam Schramski

### Direct to Somewhere

Rogozno is not your typical stopping point on a European rail system. Especially in the twilight period of December, when the festiveness of Christmas is nigh but melancholy begins to sink in alignment with the setting sun. It is, like numerous nondescript train stations in Eastern Europe, in the middle of a railyard-cum-industrial quarter-cum-city park. Passengers are only likely to stay long enough to look up from Sudoku or texting, unless of course they must disembark.

But disembark I do, the dankness and typical pallor of Poland in the winter unabated. Indeed, my fondness would grow disproportionate to any gratifying results. My connection to a not-so-distant ancestry would remain as tenuous as the sun's rays. The same ambivalence is in store for anyone who spits in a vial and squirrels it away in a FedEx envelope.

#

When the entire human genome was revealed in 2001 (completely, two years later), it was declared one of the singular achievements in the history of science. Some members of the scientific community adjured that it was as significant as the achievements of Watson and Crick, the discoverers of DNA, or at least more important than putting a man on the moon. Headlines flooded the pages and grainy web pages, such as *The Daily Telegraph*, which breathlessly reported, "All human life is here: This picture marks a milestone in man's knowledge of himself . . . for good or evil."

But superlatives only started to wrap their double strands around the public once new technologies surfaced, managing to translate, simplify, and economize formerly expensive and bulky exams designed for individuals with rare diseases (or who somehow possessed seven-figure salaries and trust funds to spend down). The explosion in personal genomic testing, often known as DTC (direct-to-consumer), has not only charted the rise of accessible genetic science but has evolved into the most "data-driven" means of measuring one's ancestry. In the far-flung cyclotrons of the world, there are even exams specialized for paternity, diet, and improving athletic performance. In a curious and perhaps insidious example, there are even infidelity exams, which have a wide following and sport names like "She Cheated" and "All About Truth." Even marginal civil libertarians are wary of these options.

Like any classic tech parable, the boundless enthusiasm early promoters in medicine and genealogy felt about DTC has turned dystopian. This is clearest in the health and medical fields. The same sentiments that led those working on the Human Genome Project to declare their work an unparalleled accomplishment now find themselves plagued by partially informed consumers (or patients) often hell-bent on proving a personal agenda, informed only by a sample—of a variant—in a patient’s genome. Furthermore, not only are all the current methods utilized by top DTC services sample-based, but the outputted raw data is as well. They represent a minute fragment of genetic material. While Alexander Pope taught us that a “little learning is a dangerous thing,” he never fathomed a situation where physicians, anthropologists, and lawyers—not to mention the hoi polloi—would be at each other’s collective throats over alleles.

As Anelka Phillips, a scholar who studies the legal and ethical implications of DTC, explains: even many of the more reputable firms consumers use—23andme for medical testing, Ancestry.com for lineage, as examples of the top two businesses in their respective fields—have terms of use that are inequitable, to speak the least of it.

“The privacy law surrounding DTC is paltry compared to what exists for consumers even in other technologies. Regulation has not come up to speed as it has with other technologies. So, there’s a distinct opportunity for these data to be used or sold without the consumer ever really being aware of it.”

Buyers could, and may well now, include insurance companies or government agencies—entities who, while not prima facie willing to use genetic results for nefarious aims, might be more than willing if given an opportunity. There is already a cottage industry of cases in which individuals have submitted genetic data, only to then be haunted by their imprudence.

“Depending on the goodwill of companies gathering personal data has not turned out well for those allowing their genetic information to be harvested,” Phillips notes, “and there’s no real reason to indicate this will be significantly different now even with DTC being more sophisticated.”

This premise stands for the most reputable firms. For those services, both the actual scientific precision of the results, as well as the fate of one’s digital DNA, is unknown at best. With these equivocal services, it’s possible to sign away your personal information in a way in which neither the Federal Trade Commission nor the Federal Drug Administration can provide recourse or any official grievance at all. There simply isn’t a regulation on the books that applies in the USA, nor,

arguably, even in much more consumer-protective regimes like those in the European Union, which have made strides in online and social media privacy law that forced Big Tech to institute policy changes.

Personal information and privacy concerns may seem like a tired concern of digital activists and civil liberty advocates, but infringements on these very personal matters may in fact rank secondary to the science behind DTC testing. Consumers seem to be broken down by those who are interested in their ancestry, congenital health risks, or some admixture of both. Others—including those to determine a perfect ancestral diet or the aforementioned paternity kits—form a small portion of market share, perhaps less than 10%. Even with the most reputable tests, the sampling necessary to bring the genetic results of your Sicilian ancestry at a price equivalent to a pasta dinner are not insignificant.

“The problem with DTC testing is not that people are doing it,” says Stephany Tandy-Connor, a genetics counselor at Ambry, “it’s that they come to believe the results to be 100% accurate. What folks need to understand when they look at these results is that they are an incomplete picture. They’re not a puzzle with all the pieces filled in by any means.”

Tandy-Connor has been on the frontlines of this debate with those seeking to better understand their risk factors for disease. In a clinical setting, a geneticist, for no small price, may offer a patient a full and complete sequencing of a patient’s genome or exome to root (or less-than-desirable) traits. Even if they were to somehow choose instead to only run a confirmatory exam on the output of a previous DTC test, that too would require the operation of a more advanced genome sequencer.

Barring these options, DTC results come from microarrays or outputs from biochips. Both are scans over vast arrays of minute genetic material, which produce little “chips” or fragmented samples for consumers to efficiently acquire and transit. But by their very efficiency, including the cost variety, they pale in comparison to what one wields with the raw data from a full sequence.

“These tests are fun, no doubt about it,” assures Tandy-Connor, “but a lot of the data are incomplete. Some people call it dirty. Even the raw [uninterpreted DTC] outputs aren’t nearly as complete as you’d get in a clinical lab setting—that’s why they’re ‘unclean.’”

Indeed, the cost of a full genome sequence ranges from \$700-5,000, depending on the level of precision and insurance coverage. A similarly complete exome exam, which measures the genome’s minuscule proteins and peptides—its exons—comes in at between \$400-15,000. A confirmatory test, solicited after rushing over to your nearest physician in a disease-induced pique, costs roughly the same; the operation of the

equipment and materials would be only marginally different. For the satisfaction engendered after ruling out a propensity for a specific breast cancer or Alzheimer's, this undertaking may be worth the trouble.

The question remains, though: Why would you start with a DTC kit to begin with if you're not troubled by the cost of a full sequencing?

#

In Rogoźno, my first serious interaction with a local in broken Polish and then a more broken German-English pidgin, was with the proprietor of our motel. He was an older gentleman, a little surprised to see my wife and I stumble into his lobby with backpacks and the appearance of adventurous spring breakers. When I asked him if he knew any Schramskis (or Śramskis or Szramskis...), or perhaps somebody who might, he grew ashen.

"The only person who knows would be the priest. The Church has all the historical records."

The next two days saw us trudging along muddy roads, hopelessly scanning gravestones and speaking with the local priest. I had copies of baptisms and marriage records in my possession dating back to the early 18th century, both for Rogoźno and the hamlet adjacent, Gościejewo, where my great-great-grandfather was born. The father was amiable, although terribly busy with a coterie of shawled *babcie* in his foyer, many of whom likely had more pressing concerns than those of a genealogical hobbyist. Regardless, when we did speak, he suggested I check into the regional curia's archives.

"We don't keep anything before 1970," the priest informed me. As fond as the Roman Catholic Church is of tradition and ritual, it's perhaps fonder still of centralizing documents and policy.

Even though European history was never my strength, I was reasonably sure that 1970 did not coincide with the reign of the Prussian Empire. Even in rustic Greater Poland, the best sleuthing was already performed by a distant cousin in Michigan. She had already obtained the documents the Church kept in storage hundreds of miles away, having beaten the cleric to the communion cup by months.

The use of DNA for determining ancestry is not new. Anthropological genetics is a field that came of age in the 1970s at a time when physical anthropology (including forensics) and genetics intertwined for the first time. After the human genome had been sequenced, calls from both the medical community and the public—not to mention clever entrepreneurs—to use it to unwrap everyone's ancestral migrations appeared within days. But the basis for determining ancestry via one's

genetic makeup, whether via mtDNA, Y chromosome, or single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), is wrapped up in a series of often-subjective decisions about race and ethnicity. Ancestry.com and MyHeritage, which are more commonly referred to as “genetic genealogy” rather than anthropological these days, are premised on data held within their own corporate coffers. Such repositories, while ample, are contingent upon matching incoming samples to preexisting data built upon over the last decade.

Initiatives such as the National Geographic and National HapMap Projects have helped connect modern samples in a way that might better provide an understanding of historical human migration not tied to direct consumer demand, but they are also limited in their reach. While information on the exact growth of databases of genetic information held by DTC companies is not publicly available, keep in mind that 330,000 people utilized these services by the end of 2012. More than 8 million people purchased these kits in 2019 alone. That is a staggering number of our chromosomes in storage.

When I first received an email from an outmost relative in the steppes of the Midwest, a landscape that would have been uncannily familiar to a 19th-century Pole, I could only assume it was from a shirt-tail cousin who wished to chat about a shared great-great-grandfather. Or perhaps it was an adoptee hoping to gain better insight into their current existential crisis: could I provide more information about a wayward father or uncontacted mother? Cindy was neither; just a very eager and persistent genealogist who contacted me with documents out of the blue. Our shared great-great-grandfather was kindle for my eventual exploration, one which saw me traipsing around the cobblestones of a (restored) 13th-century Catholic church in pursuit of an 18th-century patriarch whose name at the very least sounded royal (“Valentyń”) to untrained ears.

The joy of being able to affirm a speculative claim to an imagined ethnic identity is exhilarating. Especially when, not unlike Elizabeth Warren, my family lore about apocryphal Native American ancestry refused to fully materialize from my saliva.

“But that’s not the experience everyone has,” argues Wendy Roth, Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia.

She recently co-authored a research paper based on 100 qualitative interviews of DTC ancestry recipients in which she demonstrated that the often-fluid notions of race and ethnicity provide multiple valences for people to perceive their backgrounds. These identities fit into a theory of



“genetic options,” which, like many currencies, may be more available to some than others.

“You may have had a good experience interpreting your results. And that’s great—many people feel this from these [DTC] tests—but they can confirm biases that people already have, partially feed into others, or be completely disbelieved by the person taking them. People choose selectively how they want to be represented.”

Given the high rate of imprecision in DTC testing to date, the consequences may be twofold: the information transmitted to the recipient and the interpretation of the recipient may be incongruent. But it’s not always as simple as you might think, say, with white respondents hiding their black ancestry out of concerns over social desirability, or non-white populations explicitly desirous of a single, homogenized racial identity. In fact, interviewees of diverse backgrounds accepted or discarded identities based on their specific contexts. A Latino respondent had a test returned with Celtic ancestry, which he was less favorable toward, but there were other Latino or black respondents who were comfortable with their European influences.

Part of the dilemma for white respondents, Roth notes, is that they may seek a “costless” whiteness after viewing their results.

“A White respondent may seek to optimize their distinctiveness, their exoticness, to be less boring. But doing so comes from a place of privilege where now, at this moment, that is possible—as is being free of stigma and prejudice, which would have defined a non-white person who wasn’t so able to choose freely.”

One method in doing this for whites, of course, is to focus on ethnicity. After all, many black and Latino folks will never be able to identify with exact precision from where their ancestors hailed, using DTC or the resources of historians like Henry Louis Gates and the producers on his *Finding Your Roots* series. Chattel slavery of Africans, and slavery and political-economic control close to it over indigenous people, not to mention the dearth of written records from either of these populations, ensures this.

Yulia Egorova, an anthropology professor at Durham University, touched on this in a recent commentary about the empowering wonders of DTC ancestry, albeit in a non-American example:

“[T]he very agenda of constructing national or community-specific genomes has been exposed as highly problematic, as the genetic uniqueness of any population proved to be impossible to delimit. For instance, scientists involved in the Mexican genome diversity project themselves asserted that the so-called ‘Mexican genome’

could not be either defined or separated from other populations of the world.”

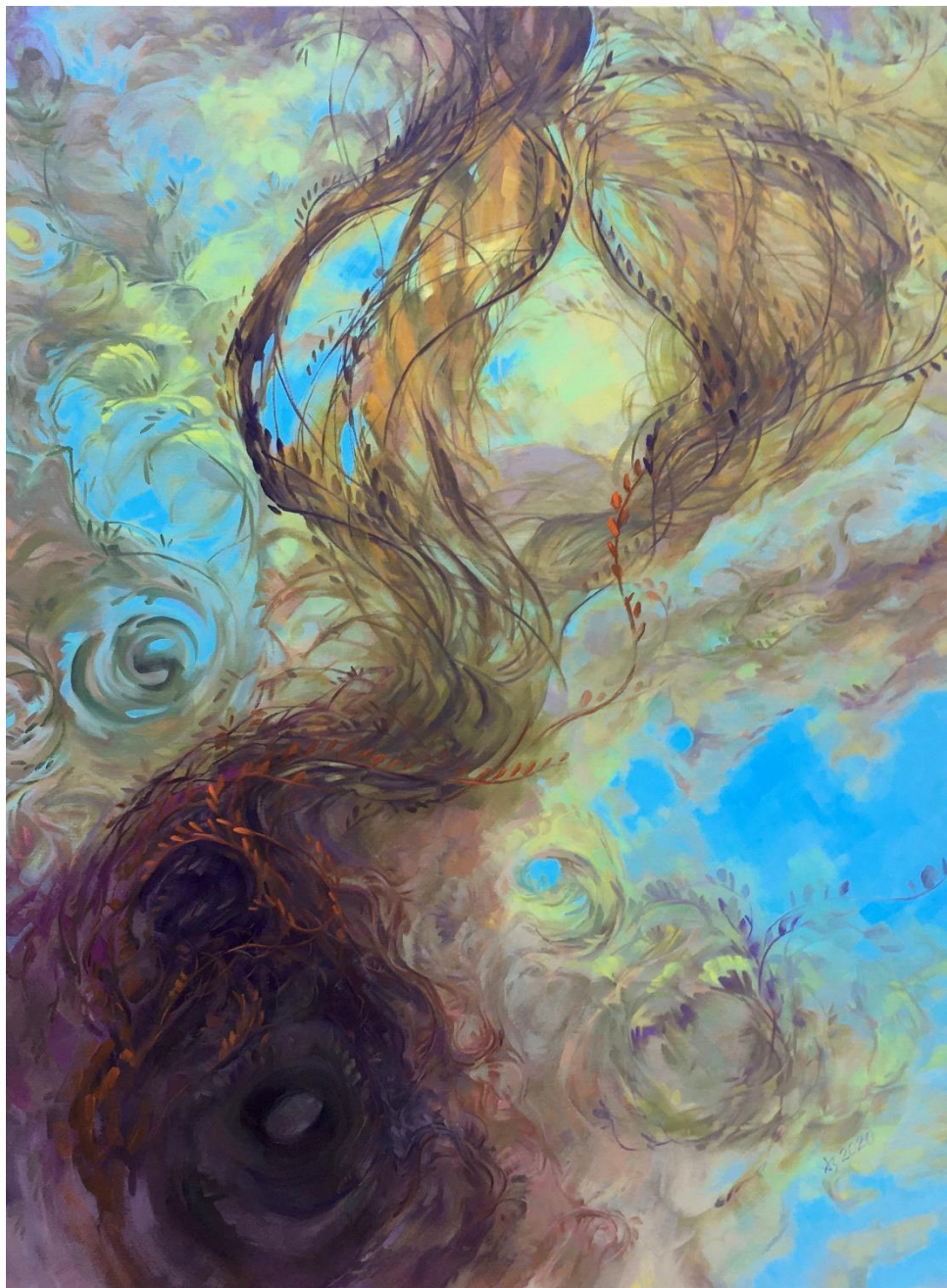
This is notable given that the results are from the Human Genome Diversity Project, whose analyses are more systematic than a typical DTC test. That and the Mexican nation-state affirms its distinctive mestizo or “mixed” racial history at every turn. Or perhaps the population is so decidedly intermixed and that is the point.

#

My last few remaining hours in the village of Gościejewo and nearby town of Rogoźno were spent seeking out gravestones with some approximation of my last name etched into the tombstone, punctuated by browsing the regional museum with a guide whose English was confident but still unintelligible. In the latter, I encountered references to country cousins who found themselves in the swirl of the 20th century’s most important historical events all in one lifetime: World War I, Poland’s first independence, World War II, Soviet occupation, Poland’s second independence. Two of these long-lost uncles, neither Jewish but still threatening to the Third Reich, met their demise in concentration camps for “political insubordination,” as it was artfully described.

It seems telling that genetics provided me the avenue to this smart little historical center on the plains of Eastern Europe. I took far more interest in it compared to the other features of my disremembered spit kit: the disease risk we shared in common, the degree to which some of my ancestors were from Northern and Western Europe rather than Eastern, even their lack of statistical precision.

Those concerns were trivial. Just like any claims I have to being a line-bred Pole.



Whirling Mass II

Kwok Wai Walter Kwong

## Amanda Hartzell

### X's

This ends with fire but first—backseat,  
brownstones and moonlit alleys.  
Clothes soaked by an early snow  
coming down over unsuspecting  
foothill towns. Easy to believe people  
we love are set on fire  
or glow despite.

Twirl through night just to be deposited  
at a door, touching your new body but  
still  
begging the young ghosts under skin:  
*Give me a chance to tear a forest apart  
with my teeth.* Small animal, bright-eyed.  
Soil in matted paws. Nitrogen hovers  
above a warming den.

A thousand years later,  
not so long, and after  
the strangest  
and most delicate dream  
where the body belongs  
to itself, wake up hungry, ember  
under each shredded claw.

**Michelle L. Mowery**

**Glass and Black**

Weightless  
is what  
we become when  
the darkness of  
lonely turns  
bright

Everything  
shifts downward  
Every tiny thing  
moves to cover  
what was  
once

all life's packets  
tucked away  
full of microscopic  
miracles  
spill into continua



The Beauty of Trees: Watertree

Iris Koffijberg





The Beauty of Trees: Watertree

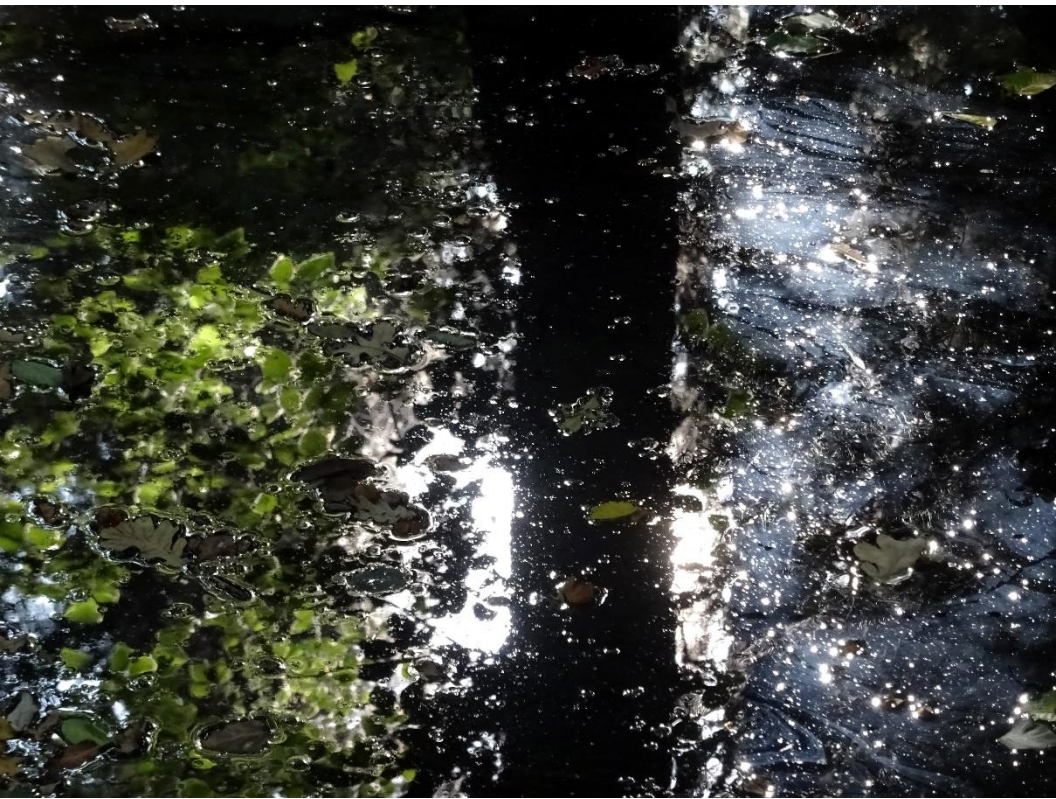
Iris Koffijberg





The Beauty of Trees: Watertree

Iris Koffijberg



The Beauty of Trees: Watertree

Iris Koffijberg

## Paul Smit

### The Water Fall

A second cigarette docked perfectly into Jackson's chiseled mouth. He was quite content to suck on his ashy pacifier while I rambled on about the funeral, as we sat, strangely, in a park with slides and swings. Neither of us were particularly close with Robert, but we were both close, at different points in time, with his suspected killers.

"Of course those bitches killed him!" he suddenly interjected. "Hell hath no fury like a tall, rail-thin Asian furniture designer." Jackson had fallen out with Robert's best friends – the suspected killers – a few months prior.

"I agree. Something happened the weekend before he died..."

"Well?! What do you think it was?" he asked, his smoldering cigarette almost connecting with a nosy child.

I sat upright; unveiling a conspiracy theory was always a great thrill for me. "Okay, here's what I think happened: They did Molly all weekend and Robert came home on Tuesday, took something to deal with the comedown, and whatever he took killed him that night."

"Have you spoken with them?" Jackson's nasal tone conveyed how disgusted he was that I maintained contact.

"I have."

"Andddd?" He waved his hand around in the air like a propeller, urging me to hurry up with the details.

"Well, I'll say this: when I asked what he died of, their answer was very rehearsed."

His eyes rolled right up into his skull, leaving me with marshmallow sockets to stare at. "Of course it was. Death himself would say a prayer before visiting them – more skeletons in their fucking closet than a graveyard!" We both cackled.

Only a year later, Jackson would also find himself knocking on Heaven's door. A slew of health issues had crept up on him. With missing enzymes, spontaneous headaches, and a throat burnt to smithereens by vodka, his prospects of making it to thirty-five had begun to diminish.

We were sitting in Long Island City for our weekly catch up, eating sushi by the water. He'd just finished telling me a story about a mysterious lump on his penis. "You're a mess," I said casually.

"You say mess, I say opportunity," he drawled in return.

Jackson changed the topic to my upcoming Mexico trip, smack bang in the middle of the Covid pandemic.

“I thought you couldn’t get in. Isn’t their border closed?” he asked.

“Only the land border is closed. I’m flying.”

Jackson nodded and inhaled. Smoking aggravated his headaches but he refused to scale back.

“Stop smoking you shipwreck!”

“IT’S NOT THE CIGARETTES YOU STUPID BITCH!” he wailed, shaking his smokey fists at me and then taking a sip of water.

“Well, something’s not right.”

“Obviously. Every doctor in Manhattan knows that. Why are you going to Mexico again?”

“To find love...or die trying.”

“Is this the guy you met a few weeks ago?”

“Si.”

“Huh?”

“It means yes in Spanish. I speak Spanish now.”

Those boney, Tim Burton-esque fingers of Jackson shot up and dug into his temples. “I don’t know what gives me more of a headache, your ridiculous escapades or the cigarettes.”

“Why not? He’s hot, the flight’s cheap, we’re staying at a palatial hacienda all by ourselves – what’s keeping me here? New York? Please; my odds of dying of Covid are just as high if I stay put in this cesspool.”

My flight to Merida had only six other passengers on board. Was I being reckless? I asked myself, many, many times. Eventually I concluded that I was seeking something else, a bigger beast than Covid. It was calling out to me, and I wanted to face it head on. Was it love, self-sabotage, variety, change? Did I want it to defeat me? Perhaps. Besides, a dystopian mood had spread throughout New York; I wanted to unravel in a location that wasn’t so close to representing human purgatory. The short drive from the airport to the address I’d been given, past widespread poverty and eerie stillness, nevertheless made me keep doubting why I came.

And then I arrived at the hacienda. Think Princess Jasmine and Aladdin if they had a small holiday palace in Mexico, complete with a bloodred clay outer wall, white curtains billowing out of swooping arches, and an imperial clock tower attached to the main house. I knew that Christian had called in a favor to get us in; we were the only guests for the next few days. A prominent member of the Bank of Mexico maintained the hacienda for diplomatic events. As far as places to die go, this was high on the list of exotic final resting places. *Find love...or die*

*trying*. The thought felt poetic as the staff scurried away with my luggage.

Christian moseyed down the limestone stairs of the main house to greet me. His flip flops made themselves heard with each step in the enshrined luxury. His bronze skin, that NY-casual outfit, his peak cap he always wore to hide his thinning hair, that back swollen with authority, his lofty gait; it all seemed amplified in Mexico. I could tell he'd walked those stairs many times – it spoke of old-world luxury that had risen to conquer the new. I opened my arms.

A kiss hello. His eyes panned across my face and body, like a tiger's would sizing some delicacy up. It was the promise of a wild night to come. Or was it an obvious warning sign I chose to ignore? His meaty arm wove around mine and led me to an outdoor dining area on the other side of the hacienda. A marble table had been set for two, with colorful plates and serviettes presented as swans. Fans blew gently overhead on the ceiling high above us. The table looked out onto a grove of trees shooting out from a carpet of evergreen shrubs. High up in the canopy of that menagerie, birds sang of winds and the seven skies. In the moments of silence between Christian and myself, when the chatter of the birds reminded me there are corners of the earth still lush with secret magic, the poverty around the hacienda whispered a warning to me: *You're only a grandiose wall away from misery. Few belong here.*

The rest of the afternoon blended into swimming pools and bike rides, drone-flying lessons and kissing adventures. Day folded into night as the hacienda lit up with lamps, while the shrill cry of nature swarming around its walls rose into a chant. The other humans – they were out there – stayed quiet. They had nothing to gain from making any sound, and not enough to lose to warrant making any. Even in the grabs and twists of foreplay, I knew the hacienda was the tombstone of a bygone era. Those who still existed around it were nothing more than grave keepers.

Finally, we were in our room with some time to kill before dinner. After showering we both stood in the bedroom with thick, white towels around our waists. I pushed Christian up against a wall. He smiled and struggled before pushing me back into the adjacent one, ripping my towel off in one quick movement. I laughed and yanked his off, stepping back quickly to wind it up and whip him with it. Christian yelped and jumped away. I moved in swiftly to give him more of the same. He caught the towel and pulled me towards him. Our right arms locked in a tug-of-war over the weapon; his left arm slid around my waist and dug his fingers into my obliques. Those tiger's eyes bored into mine as Christian started

nudging me towards the bed. I walked back slowly on the wet floor, unsure of exactly where the bed was. When he suddenly applied more strength to pull the towel, I assumed he was pushing me onto the bed; my foot slipped and my arms found nothing to grab onto as I fell backwards. My head smashed into the thick wooden frame of the bed and shortly thereafter I felt my back hit the frame too. Flashes of black followed. Then my head bounced off the concrete floor. A quick glimpse of Christian's face in distress, and finally my cheek planted firmly into the floor. When my sight returned, all I could see was a power socket. His voice cried out faintly in the background.

My arms shot out and I pushed myself up off the floor. His eyes were swimming in alarm. I smiled and laughed, trying to downplay the whole thing. My back ached and my skull burned. I pulled him towards me and threw us both onto the four-poster bed. A growing heat slithered across my body. My mind raced towards my end, eloping with superstition, leaving my uninhabited body to finish up on earth. We tossed and turned and each time his lips locked with mine I tried to reel my mind back in, to connect it with the present. *Find love...or die trying.*

The next few days my head throbbed all day and all night. I made one or two jokes about it, but largely kept the magnitude of the pain to myself. Why make a scene when you're rocking in a hammock, with a tiger lying in your arms? Or when you're making whimsical videos with him in an old Spanish chapel using the drone he loves to play with? We stand at the altar holding hands – glowing with sweat and reincarnated dreams – and the drone backs out of the chapel slowly, the interior turning black once the drone exits into the radiant sunlight outside. Why make a scene when you're both lying nude by the pool and he's trying to make a video using the 'rocket' setting on his toy, or when he's brimming with excitement as he tells you about the cactus being served in the breakfast omelette? You don't make a scene. Not when you really like someone. But in the moments where the tiger lay purring on my chest, when the bright red flowers around the pool swayed in the light Mexican breeze, the hacienda whispered to me once more: *You will not return here. This is the best you will ever know.* I chalked it up to years of self-loathing, to garden-variety insecurity, and muted the whispers by wrapping my arms tighter around Christian's chest, forcing him to squirm and wheeze. I'd never smelled someone's hair before and been intoxicated by it, or felt the urge to bury my face in a man's neck, or lick every inch of his body. As the weekend progressed and my head pounded harder, so did my heart for Christian. Could it be? I hadn't died, so I must have found love.



Christian stayed on in Merida when I left. All the employees at his company were permitted to work remotely, which people like Christian fully embraced. He'd see me in New York in a week's time, he promised. Waiting for my flight, I called Jackson.

"Buenos Días!"

That familiar drawl greeted me. "Yessssss?"

"Cómo estás?"

"I'm Asian. What makes you think I speak Spanish?"

"Everybody should speak Spanish."

"I'm surprised you're even coming home. Those pictures you sent me...that place is gorgeous!"

"I know right. He's – "

"A druglord. Yes, we all thought so."

"I don't care if he is. We could live happily ever after at that hacienda."

Jackson coughed, a dry, raspy smoker's cough. "Well, I'm happy for you. But did you get my text about picking me up from the hospital on Wednesday?"

"I did, yes. What are you having fixed? That shredded throat of yours? Do they just put a plastic pipe in?"

"Nooooo. My throat's a whole other story. This is for the bump."

"Which bump?"

"On my penis."

"I knew that. Just wanted to hear you say it."

"I hope it's contagious and you get it from holding my hand."

"Isn't your throat more serious?"

"A doctor is going to examine that as well and give me another opinion."

"How did you get this appointment? I thought the doctors weren't doing elective surgeries?"

"This is serious. They don't know what it is. Could be a tumor."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure it's not. I'll be there to pick you up, don't worry. I have a virtual appointment on Tuesday with a doctor too. Bumped my head real hard in Mexico. Will tell you the full story when I wheel you outta there on Wednesday."

"Okay Boo. See you soon."

Monday was a mix of work and discreet text messaging – Christian's name flashing on my phone made the pain in my head seem less. That night I took three Advil pills to help me sleep. The virtual appointment with my doctor on Tuesday morning was a waste of time. The connection was poor and all he did was emphasize how serious a head injury can be,

and advised that I should call back in a day or two if I suffered any confusion, fainting or disorientation. I took two sleeping pills that night.

I left work at 10am on Wednesday to make my way to Jackson, who was at Mount Sinai on the Upper East Side. The K-95 mask swelled with my hot breath as the cab driver breezed through the once-congested streets of Manhattan. It was my first time in a cab since lockdown started. No honking, no pedestrians swarming the sidewalks like locusts. The shadows of civilization seemed soothed. Tall grey buildings seemed less hostile, almost as if they too knew the times were changing. My phone rang.

“I’m on my way. How are you?”

“You’ll never guess what.”

“What?”

“They cut me open and then wouldn’t do anything.”

“Why not?”

“They say it’s an enlarged blood vessel and that it’s too close to my nerves to operate on.”

“What?! You just have to keep it?!” I’d seen pictures: Jackson’s penis was the camel of the shlong world.

“Believe me,” he said loudly, to the benefit of the staff around him I suspect, “I kicked and screamed about it. They’re not doing it.”

“And the throat?”

“Well, we have news on that front. Finally, a diagnosis.”

“And?!”

“Barrett’s esophagus.”

“Who? What? Where?”

“Massive acid reflux damage...in a nutshell.” I’d seen Jackson knock back ten vodka soda’s in one sitting; the diagnosis was not surprising.

“You’re a mess!” I yelled playfully.

“You say mess, I say in transition.” We both laughed.

“Hang on lady. I’ll be there in a few.”

Poor Jackson, I thought. So much character, in such a fragile body. Unlucky.

“It’s very common you know,” said the Indian driver suddenly, making no qualms about the fact that he’d been listening to our conversation. Since the outbreak, I’d taken to answering all my calls using speakerphone in order to keep the cellphone from touching my face.

“What is?”

“Barrett’s esophagus.”

“Really? What makes you say that?”



“My son also has it.”

“Does he also drink too much vodka?”

“Nooo sir. My son is fourteen.”

I laughed. “Well, tell him not to drink. It’ll only make things worse.”

The driver’s eyes met mine in the rearview mirror as he began to speak. “My son is very good. He would – ”

“WATCH OUT!!!” I screamed, as my hand bolted outwards to point at a cyclist jumping a light. The cab driver slammed on the brakes and swerved to miss the bicycle. THUMP! The cab ramped up the curb and came to a screeching halt in front of a shop window.

He turned to face me and let out an incredulous gasp. My gaping mouth – mask around my neck – gave no response.

“This has never happened before!” he protested. “Never!”

“It’s okay,” I said. “At least nobody got hurt. Is your car okay?”

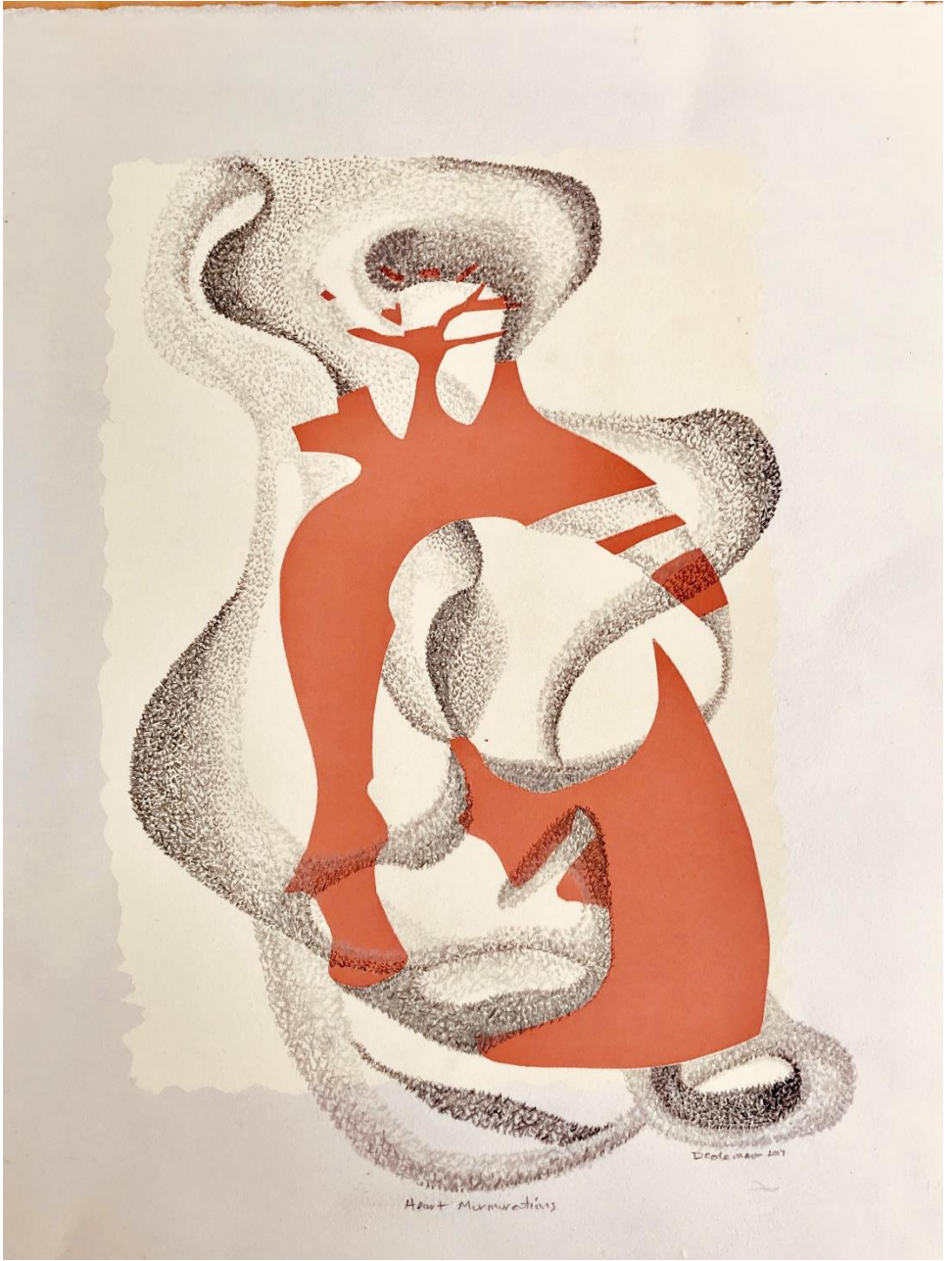
The driver turned to face his dashboard, put the cab in reverse, and backed out onto Park Avenue. Thirty seconds after moving in the right direction again, he turned to me and said, “It’s always better to be moving forwards than backwards, don’t you think?” *Face the front!* I just grinned with sarcasm, annoyed that he would even consider turning around to face me again after what had just happened.

I stared up at his rearview mirror to see where he was looking. *Eyes on the road; good.* When the road ahead went black and then reappeared, I knew something was wrong. I turned to look out my window and suddenly I could feel everything inside my head. A warm goo was travelling, flooding places that were meant to be sealed. My sight began to wax and wane. I knew I was dying. *Not here. Not like this.* I begged my heart: *Please, show me something profound.* My mother appeared, her head bowed in church, her tired knees sunken into a pew cushion. Then Christian stood above me at the pool, smiling; he asked me to stay, and seemed sad when he realized that I couldn’t. Jackson arched his eyebrows like a benign villain, smirking, chuffed that I was the real mess and that he was the Humpty Dumpty heading towards successful reconstruction. My sisters waved apprehensively from the rustic farm table of an old apartment none of us had lived in for years. My dad ruffled my hair before setting off for a walk with his dog. An old friend from my childhood, a boy I used to climb trees with, clapped his hands with delight and beckoned to me to join him back in the trees. The shadows around invited me to sleep, promising me rest and restoration somewhere else, somewhere nothing like I’d ever imagined.

*Not like this. In the back of a cab. I tried to laugh, but my tongue lay unmoved. It's not so bad, I told myself. You always knew you'd die before forty.*

Christian's smile came to me again and this time covered my heart with an afterlife salve. *Find love...or die trying.*

When consciousness suddenly flowed through me with the weight of concrete, I expected to be part of a new world. To be soaring through the untouched corners of the ether, towards ancient truths and cosmic treasures. But instead I saw Jackson in his baby blue hospital gown and oversized mask, hovering over me like an overprotective mother. When he was sure I was aware of his presence, Jackson glared at me and whispered, with smoky disdain, "You selfish bitch. You would make my operation all about you."



Heart Murmurations Darleen Coleman

## Nadine Klassen

### Yolk-Soft Sobs

The blood of an apple is so well-contained  
under its tightly stretched skin. How controlled  
it must feel its bitter seeds. I like the feeling

of control more than I like being held  
accountable for the things I am in control of.  
The chin-dripping prayer, the peeling

poem. But I have seen the bruises like you and I,  
like you, have seen how an apple bleeds through  
pressed pulp. Pretentious; there's no excrete

of soul. No exodus of heart. The rot is predestined.  
When I was younger – and this is a theory my friend  
proposed – my bitter seeds would dissolve

whenever I laughed, until my vocal cords drowned  
in their juice. To me, it was more of a plague. I lost  
all control. I made it a habit to set a timer

for my laughter. When I had a bruise the size  
of a lover, I pressed a thumb to it  
to make sure I didn't leak. This is how I grew sour

from the inside out. But I have sold my soul  
to my body, apple for egg. Click-skin,  
all or nothing. I don't put a stopwatch

to my laughter anymore. The loudest liaison  
of soul and body is my loss of control  
when crack into laughter of biblical

proportions. My old testament lungs,  
a list of walking fathers who are sons to joy  
and birth their sons in yolk-soft sobs.

## **Laurel Benjamin**

### **A Fuzzy Dot Like a Dandelion**

My mother started sentences  
with the word “no”

not disagreeing with anyone  
stepped into flowers

attempted to reverse poison  
in the stinging tree—

like boxcars she kept coming—  
yet I cannot plant three billion trees

in my backyard  
global warming reversible.

Visiting Betsy in St.-Germain-en-Laye  
walking paths of Versailles

now part of the town  
I only thought of goat cheese

raw unpasteurized with ash  
a box shape

impossible to us, but cheesemakers  
like palace pathmakers

even with heavy lifting  
or dripping candlewax

know  
things change

know  
of continuance.

They did not carry mountains  
up hills—

did not measure too much  
whey—

like a damsel fly they  
engineered perfect intentions

for laws not understood.  
I would like to put the burned forests

back together, stumps to leaves,  
give the gibbon an extra arm

a rope bridge to swing through  
the arboreal highway.

I would crawl towards  
loneliness if I had the choice

a dwarf maple  
tollgate to the desert

what we will become

if violins loudly playing  
are not stopped.



Beauty Persists

Jocelyn Ulevicus



**Eugene Franklin**

**Cover Letter Beta Test #(God Knows)**

Sunday, October 4, 2020

Dear Sir or Madam,

Years ago, I created a utilitarian document titled Application Info. because job applications ask for the kind of information I can't possibly recall in detail. Life has not been simple enough to recite my escapades from memory. The document lists places I've lived, schools I've attended, and work experiences. It tells me I've lived in ten different homes, moved eleven times (having returned to one address), attended nine schools, and held fourteen jobs. I'm thirty-six years old.

The unending quest for fulfilling employment necessitates such a document, and it causes me to circle the question of whether there's something *wrong* with me. I dislike this mode of thought because I've decided that the premise— that there's a standard of behavior that qualifies as normal— is unfounded. The human brain is too complicated a mechanism to be precisely categorized as normal and abnormal or healthy and unhealthy. We can only make guesses in these directions. A person deeply troubled by one set of circumstances adapts perfectly to another.

But most people don't accept this. Eccentrics have always been viewed with scorn. The people who review my job history harbor this same tendency to see my past as a sign that I need to be fixed. No thirty-six-year-old should have fourteen jobs under his belt resulting in an average of 1.28 years spent at each. There's obviously a problem there. Why should they invest in bringing someone like that onboard? And the more I move around, the worse it looks. My lily pads are running out.

I've never been fired, though I've come close once or twice. In fact, I've always been exemplary in attendance, punctuality, diligence, and productivity. I often get promoted shortly after starting somewhere. I've also never been laid off. I left every one of my jobs of my own volition.

Each experience has been different, but by the time I leave, I usually have at least three or four compelling reasons to go. Now, as I step back, I look for a common theme so I can break the habit. Why can't I tolerate a job for any longer than my maximum stint of four years?



Am I just restless? Is it that I can't tolerate doing the same rote tasks over and over? That may play a role, but I don't think it's the lead actor. Having never earned a degree, I think the largest factor is how many doors have been closed to me from the beginning. I floundered from the outset of my working life because— due to events too complex to explain here— I never got a ticket to ride the train reserved for smart people. I've had to run alongside it waving my hands in the hope that some sympathetic passenger at a window seat will call for a stop to let me on. Even then I only get menial assignments. I don't get to use my gifts because society has adopted a tiered work structure that requires tokens to signify certain levels of knowledge in order to do work that seldom makes use of that knowledge. Meeting arbitrary requirements is more important than the abilities they're supposed to confirm. I'm like a pitcher who can regularly throw an accurate fastball a hundred miles per hour, yet they tell me I can't play in the major leagues because I never spent time in the minors. This would strike me as an arrogant claim had I not gone through hell over the last eighteen years just to regain some of the confidence I had when I graduated high school. I have climbed out of the inferno and can again admit that I have worth.

But it doesn't help me to express all that. It does no good to write cover letters explaining it because it draws attention to my lacking degree, makes me look like a supercilious ass, and paints me as someone who complains about the status quo— something no one feels they can alter. It also amounts to asking someone to make an exception to a rule that's so firmly embedded in the modern American psyche that doing so would take an immoral guise. To ask that an employer look at me as an intelligent autodidact with an education every bit as impressive as that symbolized by a bachelor's degree is, in virtually every opinion, a request to be snuck in the back door. It's cheating. It's against the rules to treat me as a *person*— a life form with a unique story, special charisms, and developed insight. Hiring turns people into Scantron machines that only review credentials on paper. So I rarely get the chance to interview.

Lacking formal education is only part of the story, though. I suffer the additional curse of having a philosophical mind, which has to be the worst possible kind for a person with access only to entry-level jobs. Mine is the ceaselessly logical mode of operation that annoys people. If I had a dime for every time someone looked at me and said, "You think too much" or "You're overthinking," I wouldn't need a job at all. That, of course, irritates me ineffably. While in school I had been among the sharpest students, at work I'm surrounded by those who regard intelligence as a nuisance. I invariably end up disgusted at the

discrepancy between the depth of my thoughts and the cursory considerations of everyone around me.

I always seem to *care* more, too. It floors me how sloppy people are with their livelihood, how willing they are to accept mediocrity and collect a paycheck. I have to coach myself to care *less*, which is depressing for a passionate person with high ideals. How can I respect myself if I ease up on my efforts in order to blend in? It gets to a point where I'm so ashamed of what I belong to that I become desperate to escape.

It might seem the obvious solution is to finish school, but because I'll be paying off the college loans I already have until I'm at least forty-nine, I can't see plunging even deeper into debt only to get a degree that has an excellent chance of doing nothing to solve my problem. Philosophy is one of those majors that does nothing for you unless you go all the way to a graduate degree. There's no way I have the time or the money for that.

Or the patience. That's another factor that holds me back. I've always found myself in the Epicurean camp regarding time management. I readily admit what I don't know, so I believe in seizing today. I believe in the urgency of *now*. I don't like to plan far into the future because I have no assurance that I'll live to see whatever I dream up, or that the conditions necessary to make it possible will continue. Yet I engage with a society that routinely takes the future for granted. Planning is all we do. Planning is how we get ahead. I left college largely because I couldn't take all the projecting into the future. I wanted to live my life *now*.

I'll never forget an interview I had once for a position as a service advisor at a body shop. The hiring manager and I got waylaid by a spirited chat about various philosophical and religious topics (which happens to me a lot), and he asked, "If that's what you're all about, why are you applying here?" I felt like saying, "As opposed to all the *philosophy* jobs out there?" But I didn't want to make an ass of the guy. I stammered some response about my interest in cars to avoid morosely declaring that there's no point in pursuing what I truly love. I didn't get the job.

Everything I've ever done has required settling for something that could never make me happy. Whenever an interview goes well enough to result in a job offer, the phrasing always throws me: "Do you want the job?" My honest answer is no. It has always been no. I've never been able to consider a role that could even *slightly* budge me from *no*. Yet I have to eat. I have to contribute to my marriage. So I lie. I lie to the company making the offer and I lie to myself, hoisting myself off the mat once again with the manufactured encouragement that "Maybe I can learn to

like it. Maybe this time will be different.” Every day is a new opportunity, right?

So how about this: instead of being disappointed by the included resume because you expect to find things that aren't there, why not let yourself be pleasantly surprised by what *is*? Why not read between the lines to imagine what it's like to be me? Not the piece of paper, the *person*. Put yourself in my shoes and experience the struggle to overcome my challenges. Think about the valuable lessons that are only taught *outside* of school, what it's like to learn the hard way about humility and fortitude and perseverance and patience by getting repeatedly knocked down. Or about the toughness it takes to keep reinventing myself, to achieve goals no matter what my circumstances or how well I fit a role. Think about the conviction required for someone like me to soldier on when everyone undervalues him. Or think about what Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises, they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is *ruined*. If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened, and in complaining the rest of his life. A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams it, farms it, peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks abreast with his days and feels no shame in not “studying a profession,” for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances.<sup>i</sup>

What do you think might happen if you shut down the Scantron for once and actually thought about that? About what it is you're doing when you screen candidates through the college requirement? That maybe there's a dangerous assumption beneath it all, that for one reason or another not every person of value comes with academia's seal of approval? That there's something incredibly precious about a person who pushes through failure, whose motivation isn't to simply jump through hoops to

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<sup>i</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993. Digital.

satisfy others but to accomplish something that meets internal standards, to achieve not for mere survival or personal comfort but to bring about something truly worthwhile?

Isn't that rarer and far more valuable?

Sincerely,  
Eugene Franklin  
efpreference@gmail.com



Gamla Stan, Stockholm

Jeremiah Gilbert





Backseat Driver

Igor Zusev

## **Brittany N. Jaekel**

### **commute**

at first i needed my little signs — the field of solar panels — the blown-out barn — the strange, fake teepee — but as the weeks passed the corn grew too tall, and i had to learn my way all over again.

now the machines have roared through, lights burning ferociously, tearing holes in the night-fabric. the old landscape emerges dark, barren, and wet with snow. my long-lost friends: grids of black glass — the wounded flower of wood — the skin of the teepee, looking worse for wear:

clutter in the map.

### **commute (tonight)**

the clouds crawl toward the moon like a rush of seawater  
the sky is taller than it should be  
the forest has lost its fullness.  
the souls tumble in ragged wind,  
crushing grass, rushing  
to the edges of  
this night,  
this night  
when the membrane  
weakens, when the ghosts  
can press their faces against  
the glass, and maybe see their breath.

## **Andi Myles**

### **The Cannibal**

“Take. Eat.  
This is My body.”  
That’s gross motherfucker.

Unless you are talking about  
the delicious sensation that shivered across my skin  
when I first learned the wolf devoured Little Red.

When I was young, I gloried  
in the privilege of swallowing you  
after we registered my every sin.

I don’t trust your meat  
or the seed it implanted in me as a child—  
now full term.

Let’s see what we birth.

Shall we?





Lethe's Water

Matina Vossou

## Rachel Eban

### The Fruit Cage

#### Bicep

I dug a hole in the soil with my hands, and it stuck darkly under my nails. The earth in my fruit cage was wet and warm, red from the juice of crushed raspberries and fertile with the bodies of little dead things. I buried you there to grow tall and strong. When you were sturdier than me and your head came up higher than the plum tree by your patch, you tore your feet from your roots and came into my kitchen. Your muddy soles got dirt all over my clean floors. I didn't mind, that first time.

It was good for a bit. You didn't smell like soap and, when you held me, your beard scratched at my chin when we kissed. All my friends loved you and congratulated me on finding such a strong and handsome husband.

But you forgot my birthday. You never took the garbage out when I had asked you a thousand times and it brought the smell of rot into our home. When you walked through the door, slick with your work sweat, and I didn't have dinner ready, well, you could be quite mean.

So, I fixed you a drink. Garnished with homegrown orange peel and sleeping nightshade. While you were asleep, I cut off the hand you hit me with. I chopped it into a salad. We ate it for lunch the next day. You were delicious, and I felt better after that. When you were rude to my mother, I cut out your tongue and baked it into a pie. When you started going for those long drives without me, I severed your legs and froze most of them for later. I spread your liver on crackers and gave it to my friends, who were less impressed with you now that you weren't much more than a torso.

I took you to bed one last time. I balanced you on a tray, with a knife and fork and the TV on, and I chewed through the last of you. Except for the bit which I needed to plant. Last time, I had grown you from tough muscle, so you'd come out all wrong. The next time, I knew, would be different.

#### Liver

My mother was surprised to hear my handsome husband wasn't around anymore, but she understood when she saw your wide, wet eyes and the way you trotted after me. When I touched you, I felt your pulse dance from fingertip to fingertip. I tingled and tensed in return, at the

power I held over you. You always took out the garbage without being asked.

You agreed that my friend Zara was trying to undermine me so she could feel better about herself. We stopped inviting her to parties. When I said I missed her, you frowned. I stopped telling you that. I started lying to you about the time I spent with her.

She and I scurried around hotel bars like drunk mice. It worked for a while. But the lying, the late nights and the smell of liquor helped you think I had a problem. I woke one morning to find you'd taken every bottle out of the house.

I laughed a lot. But I was a little scared you'd been able to do that in the night without my hearing. The next time you went to sleep, I chewed off a bit of your foot so you'd limp and be a little louder. Just to be safe.

Things really were fine for a while after that. Then I complained about my boss one too many times, and you started to talk to me about quitting my job. You made enough money for both of us, you said. And, some days, I really wanted to quit my job, I did. But, other days, I wanted to be there just to get away from you.

You made the decision for me. You called Zara, too. You had my mother fooled. And I knew you were only trying to take care of me, to keep all the bad things out, but either your shadow was growing larger or the walls were coming closer, and there wasn't enough oxygen left to breathe.

I didn't have a choice. Even though you loved me, I asked you to lie down on the table. I got out my carving knife and fork. You looked up lovingly into my eyes as I pared flesh from bone. Chunks of you came off, some tender, some all gristle. I slid them into the oven. The kitchen was in rapture with the smells of burning hair and roasting meat. I'm ashamed to admit, I gorged myself that night. After you were finished, I found room for ice cream. That's what single girls do though, no?

And that was when I realised the problem. You were a man, and men could never work.

## Rib

You slipped between the sheets in the early hours. The sound of your skin against satin was a rustle and a vibration. I shook in fear of your beauty when I put my face to your breast. But you smiled like you couldn't be more pleased and slipped your head between my legs like you had found nirvana there.

You came to drinks with my work colleagues one crisp Thursday evening and charmed everyone. You listened to me talk about the men

who had hurt me and drew circles with your thumb across the palm of my hand. You saw under my smiles and my skin, to the pain in my gut. We curled up under one blanket on rainy nights, hands intertwined, and fell asleep on the sofa watching telly with three glasses of wine finished between us.

Yours was a gentle, romantic love and I hoped it would last forever. But you couldn't help yourself. You needed to know where you stood, too scared of falling to stay kind. You whispered things to my friends beyond my hearing. The house stayed big but I began to shrink under the weight of your words, whispers, impressions. Then I caught you looking at her like you could see under her skin, under her dress.

I tore the tongue from your mouth with my teeth the next time we made love. The men tasted like savoury things, vegetables and dirt. You tasted like fruit, sweet and juicy. When I'd finished, you were a pink stain on the sheets and the last part of you I needed.

I swore off partners after that. It was a foolish thing to do. You can't grow an equal out of the ground.

### Ovary

You ran through the house with muddy feet and threw yourself into the bed beside me. You left rust brown stains everywhere and bounced me awake shrieking, "Mummy, mummy!" You smelled like a chemical pina colada after I washed your hair with 'no tears' shampoo. You didn't know it was my birthday until I told you. You drew me a card where I was a big dog and you were a puppy sitting on my back.

My friends got used to parties winding up early because I had no intention of keeping you awake late with the chatter of our drinking. And there was less of that, too. Your grandmother spoiled you silly. You ran away from home to her once, and I couldn't even be angry with you because I was just so glad you were safe and sound when I found you there.

You made up the most creative stories and you said such funny things. You had your face painted like a butterfly at the fair and refused to let me wash it off for two days. Your love was my bread and your appetite for my love was unending. Our love was so big it ate my hunger up.

When you got too old for face painting and 'no tears', I took you into the garden and showed you how to grow green things. You were a natural and soon you knew all the secrets of my fruit cage.

When you were older still, you stopped eating the things we grew in our garden, and I'm afraid I took it rather badly. You'd stopped eating

everything by then, and I wasn't sure what to do or say. You weren't all that thin. I didn't see all that much harm in it. Every girl goes through that phase, doesn't she? And you did eat a lot sometimes. All at once. Which was a relief.

The morning after one of those times, you refused to leave the stretch of bed to bathroom that you'd claimed as your territory. Even though we had friends staying and you were almost an adult. You wouldn't shower, move or let me turn your bedroom lights on. Our friends avoided mentioning it when you'd still failed to emerge by four o' clock.

I got you to the table and asked you what was wrong. You looked at your hands, twisting your fingers into knots. Eventually, you told me. I couldn't bear how stupid it was. For this, you'd made our friends cringe and left them lonely and mystified? I told you to get your head on straight, to think about how you made other people feel.

You cried and got angry. I knew it hadn't gone well, but I'd expected we'd forget about this little tiff, like so many others. It was not to be.

Two nights after our friends left, I awoke to a strange pressure, your knees on either side of my chest as you worked a bread knife across the place where my shoulder met my torso. Your dark coils, so like my own, brushed my face as you performed the grisly deed. Your lips and chin were red and wet. There was something pink caught beneath your teeth. I thought about trying to stand up, or push you off, or hold you one last time, but I realised, when I tried to move them, that my legs and arms were already gone. Separated smartly, I suspected, with the meat cleaver on the chest of drawers.

Next to the cleaver sat a green plastic plate, the kind we used for picnics and weighing slices of butter. I thought at first that the yellowish thing on the plate was butter. But it wasn't. It was my ear, carefully cut away and placed to one side.

You'd already started on my jaw and my tongue. It was difficult to speak. Still, I think you understood when I told you to remember, you had to dig the hole with your hands, just like I'd taught you.

## **Kurt Luchs**

### **Behind or Beyond**

Is there anything behind or beyond?

Unknown. Insufficient data.

Most of the cerebral cortex is devoted to visual processing,  
and perhaps our natural bent for pattern recognition  
leads us to look for purpose and meaning  
where our eyes cannot reach, in the invisible heart of things.

The year is turning, the leaves are turning, I am turning.

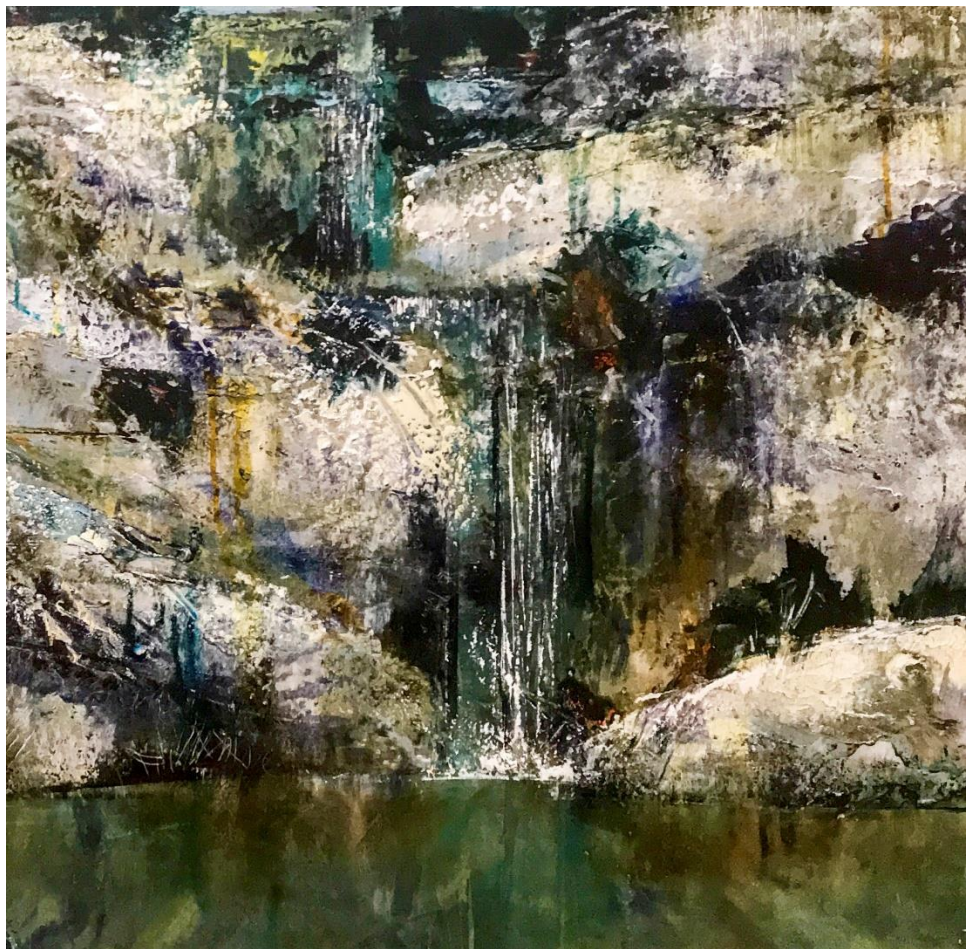
Into what? Questions many, answers none.

The least I can do is record my ignorance and confusion accurately.

On planet earth I have moved a few paces north and west,  
far enough to take me from those I love.

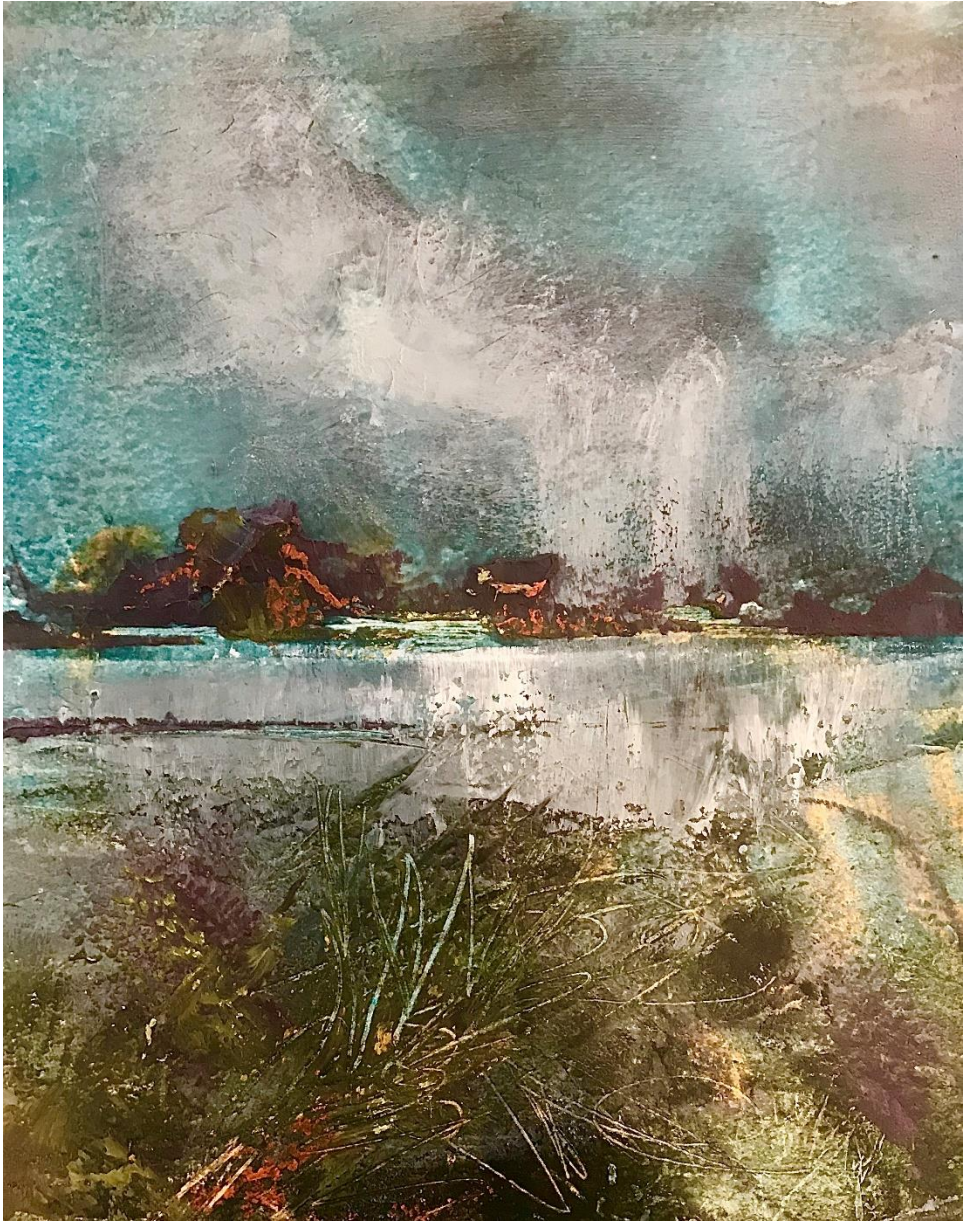
I might as well be living across the ocean

in a different century. My skills are in demand here,  
and for that I receive food and drink and a third-floor window  
from which to observe the coming of autumn to Red Wing, Minnesota,  
a bare beauty reminding me that I am alone, I always was.  
From here I can see where earth and sky appear to meet  
but not whatever might be behind or beyond them both.



The Far Country (1) Julie Fritz





The Far Country (2) Julie Fritz

## **Julie Fritz**

### **Pentimento**

The first time he brought me to his home  
there was a softness I understood;  
he had a femininity I worshipped  
and a dead wife I was thankful for.

Slowly and gently I took over  
the quietness of the rooms and  
wasn't surprised she was still there  
even a year later.

Taupe hairs caught in the dustpan,  
tiny quilting needles I didn't even know  
existed, an English china tea set  
like mother's, worn garden gloves.

I moved in fresh furniture, moved out  
foreign relatives' photos, and still there  
was always a luminance on the walls  
that didn't belong to me.

But that was fine,  
wives should remain  
in their homes after so much  
care and suffering.  
I plan to stay in all of mine,  
shining through every  
new coat of paint  
she puts on.

## Frances Koziar

### Flame in the Night

*Note: This is a work of historical fiction based on the Aztec New Fire Ceremony, last held in 1507 in what is now central Mexico.*

The Rite of New Fire. *Xiuhltlalpilli*.

We huddle on the rooftop in utter darkness. Even the stars, the lights of the *Tzitzimime*, are hidden by dense cloud. We wait.

I clutch a maguey thorn in my small brown hand. It would be the greatest gift to be able to use it on myself. To bleed my ears in thanks and love and submission and offering. To live one more year, one more epoch.

But that's not what I am thinking about.

I am thinking about grandfather, my mother's father. I am thinking of how he always smiles. I am thinking of my mother, crouched beside me now, her face calm despite everything. And I am thinking of the gods.

*The gods need us*, my mother told me once. *They need our blood, our power, our spirits after we die. Without us they would be weak, and without them—without the rain and the earth and the maize—we would die.*

But she had never said that they would need my grandfather.

I try to be as still as my mother, but my hands fiddle with my cotton shift, clench around my awl. *Take care*, I remind myself, for it is still Nenontemi, and unlike the Rite of New Fire, I have seen many Nenontemi's. They are the last five days of the year; *the dead days* are how I have always thought of them. The days when no one works and the courthouse is empty. The days when no one argues, when everyone is like a shadow of themselves. Five days of no fires. Five days of uncertainty. Five days in a time apart from time.

But this is no ordinary Nenontemi.

Four of my family members crouch on the roof around me, but I can't hear anything, not even my mother's breathing. We don't wish to draw attention, I know, but maybe too, there is nothing to say. We watch the Hill of the Star, rising up over the great capital of Tenochtitlan, and we wait.

I was taught of the first four ages. Of the Age of Earth, the Age of Air, the Age of Fire, and the Age of Water. Of their destruction by jaguars, hurricane winds, raining fire, and floods respectively. Four times a sun

died, and now we lived with a fifth, in the Age of Movement. And like all of the others, someday, maybe today, the fifth sun would no longer rise. Someday, maybe today, the end of the world was coming.

*The gods gave us life with their blood, my grandfather told me once, but nothing lasts forever.*

My mother's hand suddenly touches my own, which were twisting in my lap, and I still. She spares me only a glance, but it is enough. I obediently turn my gaze back to the hill, back to the darker patch of black against the night. And I think of my grandfather.

He is fifty-two. Fifty-two years ago, he was born during the last New Fire Rite. That was only one of the reasons he was chosen to be the sacrifice today, but that was all I had paid attention to. I understand the important parts. I understand that I will lose my grandfather, that my mother will lose her father, and I understand that that means nothing. I understand that one life is always worth many. I understand that the sun, like everything, is fragile. I understand that life is a tragedy and a dream, but that we choose to keep going until our last day because it is still worth it.

But still, my stomach churns uneasily.

There is no colour left in the night, only silver and black. It is such a contrast to the bright beauty of turquoise and quetzal feathers and all things precious. Such a contrast to the sounds and bustle of the city on most days.

I look up as a cloud parts and the light of Coyolxauhqui, the moon, streaks through. I think of how she is dismembered each night as she wanes, and wonder if that will be our fate. I think of the *Tzitzimime* beside her, marvelous and *mahuiztoc* goddesses of healing and birth, shining through the starlight. They are always present for the birth of a child, and now they are here for the birth of an age. *If that doesn't happen, my mother had explained to me as calmly as if she were correcting me on my corn-grinding technique, their power will destroy us, and that will be our end.*

My arms have goose-bumps in the cool night air of our high valley, but I ignore them, pressed firmly to my sides, my breath as slow and even as I imagine my mother's must be beside me.

I am an adult, but only newly so. Thirteen this year. Children like my younger brothers are hiding inside for their own safety. I don't know if this privilege is one I want, but it is one I bear with responsibility. We all have a part to play. We all are part of everything. And everything must die.

My eyes stray in the direction of the Great Temple. Even *it* is dark, its lights extinguished with every fire in the empire. If the priests are able to light the fire on the hill, if my grandfather's sacrifice and the procession and the everything is enough, then the fire will be carried to the temple first. It will be a long time in coming to my home, and much longer to those outside of the city, but the time would seem like nothing compared to this waiting.

I think of my grandfather again, of his death this time. Of a quick, merciful death, followed by the removal of his heart. Of flames kindled on his chest, and that heart fed into them. Of the musicians fallen silent, of the priests doing what only they have the strength to do.

I try and think of the last thing I said to my grandfather, but I can't remember. This distracts me longer than it should.

Today is also called *Toximmolpili*, the "Binding of the Years." It is Xiutecutli's day, the god of time and fire. It is the day when the 365-day solar calendar and the 260-day moving calendar of festivals end together. It is a moment of rupture. An edge of time that needs to be sewn, needs to be bound, or the cloth is finished.

I realize I am afraid. I wonder if my mother is. I wonder if my grandfather was.

I can't close my eyes, can't look away for more than a moment. There is nothing else to look at, nothing to see but other huddled silhouettes on rooftops and the stars waiting for us far above. There is nothing to hear but the gentle hush of Tezcatlipoca's—the night wind's—brooding. There is no music, no laughing, no loving. Maybe, there will never be again.

I hardly know what that means, but it makes me want to cry.

I know death. I have seen it take the friends of my childhood; I know it took my father in battle; I know it will claim me too. But a death that maintains life for everyone else is one thing. The death of everyone and everything is another.

My legs have cramped, and I shift my position slowly, carefully, quietly.

When I am settled again, I look back at the hill, but no yellow glimmer of fire has appeared.

A cool breeze brushes by me, fingering my skirt, my shift, my hair, my skin. Tezcatlipoca is the night wind, but Ehecatl, his brother, is the day wind, and Ehecatl heralds the coming of the rains each year. Would Tezcatlipoca, I wondered over the tension in my body, herald the coming of fire tonight?

But I release my hope. As I have been told so many times before, I know that this night, the future, my health, everything, is and always has

been in the hands of the gods. I can only wait, powerless, and try to emulate my mother. To look as she does—serene, quiet, powerful like the great mountains around us—and to not fear an end that I have always known was coming.

But I do not find it easy.

I clutch my awl as I think of everything I have seen in my life, of everything I want to see. I reach out a hand, tentatively, and take my mother's hand in mine.

She glances at me once—her dark brown eyes black in the night—and then refocuses on the hill, squeezing my fingers lightly. But my gaze lingers on her.

*Trust in the priests*, my mother had whispered to me earlier, before the sun had fallen for what might be the last time, lowered by the dead. *Trust in us. There is nothing we can do*, she had murmured, *and that is okay. If we live, then we live, and we must live fiercely. We must love, and hold dear what we love. We must give what we can to others and to the gods. But if we don't live, then we did our best. Death will come, my love, my beautiful, and that is okay.* And then she had hugged me tightly, for longer than she normally did, and I had not wanted her to let go.

She cannot hug me now. We dare not make noise, dare not attract attention. I lift my eyes again to the Hill of the Star. I cannot miss my grandfather now, because there is too much else at stake, but I remember his smile. I remember the things I love, because maybe that is all you can do at the end.

My mouth parts.

A spark of yellow. Yellow, the colour of maize, the colour of fire, the colour of the god Xiutecuhtli, pierces the night. Something bright and painful and beautiful and tragic flares within me like that fire on my grandfather's chest. There is a tear in my eye, but I don't believe that the world will keep going until I see my mother smile tiredly beside me. Then, I exhale sharply, and drop my head into my hands in relief.

## **Kelsi Folsom**

### **Prehistoric**

Is the earth  
just like a  
big spinning brain,  
teetering on the edge  
of panic and peace?

If I pull a bone  
from the ground  
would I steal  
from another time  
running around mine  
in concentric circles?

Maybe millions  
of years ago,  
an Allosaurus stumbles  
as a thigh bone  
is removed,  
Meticulously  
lying down  
To a studious  
future of extinction.

I am amazed by time,  
by eternity's tactile  
web of connections.

Nothing is fixed,  
but the spin  
of persistence—  
angling,  
Arching,  
hovering,  
Yearning,  
touching,  
Longing,



all for the sake of knowing  
it was.

But the miracle  
of time is  
Relevance  
and  
Remembering,  
like finding  
the hidden meaning  
Under layers and layers of dirt.



Float

Jennifer Carrier

## Holly Eva Allen

### What Have You Done

Clamoring into your Buick, your Ford,  
your hunk of drab fiberglass and stained footing,  
you set a gleeful course for somewhere once-mentioned,  
somewhere once-photographed  
and pasted to the edge of your mother's headboard  
with the foggy bloom of super glue  
and the lonely mauve of waxy lipstick leftovers.

You bring your lovers, your brothers, your so-called-friends.  
You picture them like deck boys, swabbing boys,  
cabin boys,  
all tousled hair and unwanted squawking  
while you endure fifty-five, tease sixty, down the highway.

When you park and stretch your trembling legs,  
when you first lay eyes on that postcard-place of childhood color,  
the breath goes right out of you.  
*What have they done, what have they done,*  
with their lemon-lime-soda-can and their impish indiscretions?  
The fields are parking lots, the parking lots are troughs,  
troughs filled with bubblegum hills  
and the glossy-dark stains of where-vomit-once-was.

*What have they done, what have they done,*  
with their silly photograph-hopes and their colorless cars  
just like yours.



Foggy Morning

Nina Wilson



## Contributor Information

### In alphabetical order

**Holly Eva Allen** is a writer currently living in California. She has a degree in English from the University of California. Her work has been previously published in magazines and sites such as *Rue Scribe*, *Blue Unicorn*, *The Courtship of Winds*, and *The Slanted House*. She is currently working on a Master's in English at Claremont Graduate University. You can find her work at [www.hollyevaallen.wordpress.com](http://www.hollyevaallen.wordpress.com) or follow her on Instagram by searching for [@hollyevaallen](https://www.instagram.com/hollyevaallen).

**Judy Bales** has over 30 years of experience working in diverse artistic endeavors, including as a fiber artist, avant-garde fashion designer, public art design team member and photographer. She received both her BFA and MFA degrees from the University of Georgia, majoring in painting as an undergraduate and completing her post-graduate work in fiber art. This combination of very distinct and even unlike disciplines has served her well and helps to explain her unique work. In whatever medium she chooses, she approaches her art much like an abstract painter, relying on improvisation and painterly techniques rather than the more precise, controlled approach traditionally favored by fiber artists. She has exhibited her work in over 75 group and solo exhibitions nationwide and internationally.

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**Laurel Benjamin** lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her work has appeared in *Turning a Train of Thought Upside Down: An Anthology of Women's Poetry*, *California Quarterly*, *The Midway Review*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Poetry and Places*, *WordFest Anthology*, and *Global Quarantine Museum*, among others. She is affiliated with the Bay Area Women's Poetry Salon and the Port Townsend Writers. More of her work can be found at [thebadgerpress.blogspot.com](http://thebadgerpress.blogspot.com).

**Bonnie Matthews Brock** is a Florida-based photographer, as well as a school psychologist. She enjoys capturing images of things that catch her attention, especially nature and urban scenes. Her work has been

featured in *Ibbetson Street Press*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *The Somerville Times*, and *Oddball Magazine*. You can view more of her images on Instagram @[bonniemattthewsbrock](#).

**Owen Brown** received his artistic training at Yale College and The California College of Arts. A resident of San Francisco for many years, he now lives and works in Minneapolis. He exhibits nationally. His works form part of collections of such institutions as the Minnesota Orchestra, the de Young Museum of San Francisco, the Nature Conservancy, and the Weisman Art Museum of Minneapolis. He has been the recipient of residencies in America and in France, was an invitee to ArtPrize Nine, was the subject of monographs from the Society for Art Publications of the Americas, and has collaborated with artists from other disciplines, such as poet Emily Wolahan and choreographer Anat Shinar.

Website: [www.owenbrownartist.com](http://www.owenbrownartist.com)

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**Jennifer Carrier** is a visual artist from San Jose, California. She uses art as a tool for good and finds comfort and purpose in the process of creating “chill” and unbothered atmospheres. She has painted several public murals, has shown at many venues and galleries across the Bay Area, and is a Resident Artist at KALEID Gallery in San Jose. Jennifer has been an art instructor for ten years and thrives in helping people of all ages find their voice through their creations.

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**Darleen Coleman** is an artist, writer, and incurable junk-addict. She lives on a dot along Lake Michigan’s shoreline midway between Chicago and Milwaukee along with the two lovely dogs who rescued her. She has a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has shown work at Artworks and Left of the Lake galleries in Kenosha, WI. Her stories have been published in *Great Lakes Review* and *Bird’s Thumb*.

Instagram: @[dcolewoman](#)

**Reilly Cook** lives in Southern Maryland where she writes and spends her time outdoors with friends, horses, and books. She graduated with a



B.A. in English at St. Mary's College of Maryland where she fostered strong relationships with literature and poetry.

**Rachel Eban** was born and raised in London, England. She is primarily interested in weird fiction: the surreal, fantastical, strange and eerie. When she isn't writing, she fills her time watching cartoons with her two large cats. To read another of her stories, purchase "Bathory" for Kindle [here](#).

**J. M. Eisenbrey** is a Detroit native, father, Humanities teacher, activist, survivor of—, and handyperson. Eisenbrey has an MFA, and a BA in Russian Studies. His short fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *The Nonconformist*, *Pif*, *Juxtaprose*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and other venues.

In poetry, the author often works the raw edge of news and underreported events, tapping the emotions and language at the margins of suffering and privilege. In other work his concern is the imprecise or incomplete communication between the individual and self as a setting for interaction with another. Science, history, the natural world, and metaphysics collide or collude in his work.

**Alice B. Fogel** served as the New Hampshire poet laureate from 2014 through 2019, instituting a NH Youth Poet Laureate, among other projects. Her latest book is *A Doubtful House. Interval: Poems Based on Bach's "Goldberg Variations"* won the Nicholas Schaffner Award for Music in Literature and the 2016 NH Literary Award in Poetry, and her third book, *Be That Empty*, was a national poetry bestseller. She is also the author of *Strange Terrain*, on how to appreciate poetry without necessarily "getting" it. Nominated for Best of the Web and twelve times for the Pushcart, she has been awarded a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Best American Poetry*, *Spillway*, *Hotel Amerika*, *The Inflectionist*, and *DIAGRAM*. She works one-on-one with students with learning differences at Landmark College in Vermont and hikes mountains whenever possible.

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**Kelsi Folsom** is a Texas-born writer whose work is published in *The Caribbean Writer*, *West Texas Literary Review*, *Grit & Virtue*, *Mothers Always Write*, *Voice of Eve*, *borrowed solace*, and elsewhere. She is the author of *Buried in the Margins* (Finishing Line Press, 2020) and poetry chapbook *Words the Dirt Meant to Share* (Desert Willow Press, 2018), and she was recently a featured poet for Tupelo Press's 30/30 Project. She enjoys traveling with her husband and four kids, scouring estate sales, getting lost in a good novel, occasionally putting her B.M. in Voice Performance to good use, and connecting with her readers on Instagram [@kelsifolsom](https://www.instagram.com/kelsifolsom).

**Eugene Franklin** is a happily married self-proclaimed underachiever who produces writing rather than children. He has contributed to *Christianity and Literature*, *Philosophy Now*, and *Iconoclast*. He also has a story forthcoming in *The Alembic*.

**Julie Fritz** is an abstract landscape artist working in the oil and cold wax medium. As many as thirty layers of transparent colors are applied to bring to life a specific place and a lifetime of memories. She now calls herself an emerging artist at the age of 78. Her poems choose a simple language but confront a complex set of emotions, and when you arrive at the end, there is usually a surprise but not an answer.

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**Jeremiah Gilbert** is an award-winning photographer, writer, and avid traveler based out of Southern California. He likes to travel light and shoot handheld. His travels have taken him to nearly a hundred countries and territories around the globe. His photography has been published internationally in both digital and print publications and has been exhibited worldwide, including in Leica's LFI Gallery. His hope is to inspire those who see his work to look more carefully at the world around them in order to discover beauty in unusual and unexpected places. He is also the author of *Can't Get Here from There: Fifty Tales of Travel*. He can be found on Instagram [@jg\\_travels](https://www.instagram.com/jg_travels).

**Amanda Hartzell** holds an MFA from Emerson College in Boston. Her work has appeared in *New Letters*, *Paper Darts*, *Petrichor Journal*, *The*

*Knicknackery*, and Cathexis Northwest Press among others. Her writing finished as finalists in *Glimmer Train* and won the Alexander Patterson Cappon Prize. Originally from eastern PA, she now lives in Seattle with her son, her husband, and their dog.

**M. A. H. Hinton** grew up in Montana and lives in Minnesota. His publications include poetry in *Minnesota Review*, *Into the Void*, *Temenos*, *GFT*, *West Texas Literary Review*, *Blue Heron Review*, *Aji*, *Emerald Coast Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Typishly*, and *Spitball*. He has also published several Western short stories. You can read his blog at [www.mahhinton.com](http://www.mahhinton.com).

**Mane Hovhannisyan** is a fine art photographer who reflects the state in between magic and reality. As a leading photographer of “Daily” newspaper, she collaborates with “Golden Apricot” film festival and has had exhibitions in Berlin, Cologne, Yerevan, and Gyumri. Twice she was among the winners of the Mirzoyan Library photo contest, and she has also been honored with the Multimedia Production Lab Grant in Tbilisi.

**Brittany N. Jaekel** writes from Minnesota, where she works in the medical devices industry. Her work has appeared in *RHINO*, *Bird’s Thumb*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and other places, and she has received several awards for writing and research. She earned a BA in creative writing from Northwestern University and a PhD in Hearing and Speech Sciences from the University of Maryland. Visit [www.brittanynjaekel.com](http://www.brittanynjaekel.com) to view more of her literary and scientific work.

**Jasmine Khaliq** is a Pakistani Mexican poet born and raised in Northern California. She holds an MFA from UW Seattle, where she also taught. She was a finalist in the 2019 Wabash Poetry Prize. Her recent work is found or forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *The Pinch*, and *Phoebe*.

**Nadine Klassen** is a German poet, living in her hometown with her family of a boyfriend and one dog. Her work has been published by *High Shelf Press*, *Storm of Blue Press*, *Envision Arts Magazine*, and others. It

focuses on mental health, trauma, and relationships of all sorts. When not writing, she likes to crochet sweaters with puffy sleeves.

**Iris Koffijberg** is a Dutch abstract water photographer based in a small village in the middle of a national park. Her water photography doesn't reflect the real world, but transforms it to an imaginary place. Most of her singular photos are not edited. The colours and the patterns are like she found them in nature. It's also her way of showing the beautiful variation that water offers.

“My water photos reflect the way I feel, so I can see when it's busy in my head, when I'm out of balance, when I struggle, when I'm trying to escape my daily life. They're like repeating themes. Every time I stare into water, I get enchanted. It's my flight in another world that triggers my imagination. Water is an inexhaustible source of inspiration and fascination. Always in motion, every moment different. Current, season, density, sun, time, and wind cause a continuous change of the image that I am trying to capture. If I am in the right place at the right time, it is magical. As if a gate opens to a temporary world. New patterns, images, and beings come to existence by the grace of that moment. Through water I found my own way of looking at the world.”

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**Frances Koziar** is a young, recently retired (disabled) Aztec archaeologist who specialized in human sacrifice and Aztec ontology. Her prose and poetry have appeared in 45+ literary magazines and she is seeking an agent for a diverse NA high fantasy novel. She lives in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

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Through his work, **Kwok Wai Walter Kwong** explores the nature of human existence, his relationship with memories, the wider social environment, and history. Real-life politics are utilized as raw materials to create fables in visual forms. Specific visual symbols are employed as metaphors to illustrate the politics-induced tremor inside as well as the entanglement. He has been drawing “vines” for years to designate the process in which these political knots have become a part of him.

**Karen Lethlean** is a retired English teacher. With previous fiction in the *Barbaric Yawp*, *Ken\*Again*, *Pendulum Papers*, she has also won a few awards through Australian and UK competitions. “The Almond Tree” received a commendation from the Lorian Hemingway Short Fiction competition and was published in *Pretty Owl Poetry Journal*. Karen is currently working on a memoir titled *Army Girl* about military service 1972-76. In her other life, Karen is a triathlete who has done Hawaii Ironman championships twice.

**Olivia Loccisano** is a Dramatic Arts teacher from Toronto, Canada. She is inspired by the absurd and how young women and children navigate this strange world through their own customs and rituals.

**Kurt Luchs** has poems published or forthcoming in *Plume Poetry Journal*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and *The Bitter Oleander*. He won the 2019 *Atlanta Review* International Poetry Contest, and has written humor for the *New Yorker*, the *Onion* and *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*. His books include a humor collection, *It’s Funny Until Someone Loses an Eye (Then It’s Really Funny)*, and a poetry chapbook, *One of These Things Is Not Like the Other*. His first full-length poetry collection, *Falling in the Direction of Up*, is forthcoming from Sagging Meniscus Press.

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**Jessica Manack** holds degrees from Hollins University and lives with her family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her writing has recently appeared in *High Shelf Press*, *Prime Number Magazine* and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

**Michelle L. Mowery** writes predominately from a female voice, focusing on love, loneliness, loss of innocence, and how they are all interconnected. Her most recent publication was in the Fall 2020 issue of *Zig Zag Lit Mag*. She currently resides in Vermont within the small countryside town of Panton.

**Andi Myles** is a Washington DC area science writer by day, but she nourishes her creative writing ambitions at red lights, on walks, and in pediatrician waiting rooms. She has published a lyric essay in *Alligator Juniper*, poetry in *Beyond Words*, and received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College.

**Stella Reed** is the co-author of the AZ-NM Book Award-winning collection *We Are Meant to Carry Water*, 2019, from 3: A Taos Press. She is the 2018 winner of the *Tusculum Review* chapbook contest for *Origami*, and took 3rd place in *The Baltimore Review's* 2020 writing contest. In pre-pandemic times, Stella taught poetry to women in domestic violence and homeless shelters through WingSpan Poetry Project in Santa Fe, NM. You can find her work in *The Bellingham Review*, *American Journal of Poetry*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *SWWIM*, *Psaltery & Lyre*, forthcoming in *Blue Mountain Review*, the *tiny journal* and *Terrain*. She is a Best of the Net nominee for 2020 and holds an MFA from New England College. Stella works for Audubon Southwest.

**Sam Schramski** is a writer, journalist, and researcher who lives in Silver City, NM. He has written extensively about the absurd in the Amazon, the surreal in South Africa, and ugliness in the USA. He is currently working on a haunted house devoted to scaring people into accepting climate change as fact.

**Paul Smit** grew up in South Africa and now lives in New York, where he works in the music industry. "The Water Fall" is inspired by a real trip he took to Merida earlier in the year. "The Army Nestled in our Shadows" appeared in the March 2019 edition of *The Write Launch*. Paul has completed his third novel, titled *The Secrets of Sea Cliff*, and is happily on the hunt for an agent. He has completed writing courses with the Sotheby's Institute of Fine Art and the Gotham Writers' Workshop. In January of 2020, Paul enrolled at the Gemological Institute of America (GIA), where he hopes to complete the Graduate Gemologist Program before the end of the year. Feel free to follow @[paulus\\_1](#) on Instagram if you'd like to see more.

**Cecilia Stancell** is a lover of words and writing. A life-long dancer, she holds master's degrees in photography and art history. She is deeply intrigued by the worlds of legend and myth and how these live in our minds, memories, and bodies. She lives in upstate New York.

**Colette Tennant** is an English professor in Salem, Oregon. She has two poetry books, *Commotion of Wings* and *Eden and After*. Her most recent book, *Religion in The Handmaid's Tale: A Brief Guide* was published in 2019 to coincide with the publication of Atwood's *The Testaments*. She also loves to play the piano and Scrabble.

**Jocelyn Ulevicus** is an artist and writer with work forthcoming or published in magazines such as the *Free State Review*, *The Petigru Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, and *Humana Obscura*. Working from a female speculative perspective, themes of nature and the unseen as well as exit and entry are dominantly present in her work. She resides in Amsterdam and is currently working on her first book of poems. To see her artwork and her cute cat, Pilar, visit her on Instagram @[beautystills](https://www.instagram.com/beautystills).

**Lara Velea Vesta**, MFA, is an artist, author, storyteller, and educator transforming chronic illness into a path of healing and reclaiming. She is the author of *The Moon Divas Guidebook*, and *The Moon Divas Oracle*, illustrator of *The Moon Divas Oracle Cards* and the forthcoming *Wild Soul Runes: Reawakening the Ancestral Feminine*. Her research interests currently include ancestral connection, mythtelling, and disability as initiation, and she is currently working on an illustrated guide to death transitions. She shares her path of myth, folk magic, ancestor lore, and ritual practice with her Patreon community and through donation classes at the Wild Soul School: [www.laravesta.co](http://www.laravesta.co).

**Matina Vossou** is a self-taught artist painting with acrylics and toothpicks. She is based in Athens, Greece.

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**Nina Wilson** is an author, poet, and photographer from Iowa. She enjoys hiking with her cat and exploring cemeteries. Her work has been published in over a dozen literary magazines and she is the author of two novels, *Surrender Language* and *Malady*.

**Igor Zusev** is a creator of chaos art. After a lengthy career in tech and AV project management, Igor discovered art as a way to unwind and connect with himself...and it all started with adult coloring books, shortly followed by a gifted paint set. He dove into it with enthusiasm, often scouring thrift stores for elements he could add and experiment with. Igor settled into his unique style of using rollers to paint, and layering cut-outs onto canvas. Sometimes he'll produce a deeply personal piece, and other times you'll find him exploring messages he wants to portray in his style.

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## About *Wild Roof Journal*

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## About the Editor in Chief

**Aaron Lelito** is a visual artist and writer who is primarily drawn to the patterns and imagery of nature. Some of his images can be seen at [High Shelf Press](#), [About Place Journal](#), [The Scriblerus](#), and [Alluvian](#). He is the featured artist in the Fall 2020 issue of [Peatsmoke Journal](#). He received an MA from the University at Buffalo and is a professor of English at a local college. Visit his website at [aaronlelito.com](http://aaronlelito.com).