

MULESKINNER JOURNAL



Journal Four - October 2022

Our Theme for Journal Four is Grit



When we face adversity with passion and persistence, that is grit.

Grit is guts, moxie, backbone, gumption, sand, and fortitude.

It is determination and resilience, courage and endurance.

*Grit is measured as firmness of character, as indomitable spirit,
and, if I dare, as a kind of hope, a brand of optimism.*

Grit is also a grinder, an irritant, a generator of pearls.

*For Journal Four, Muleskinner explores the making and meaning
of grit, where it lives or where it lacks, where it sings and dances,
and where it stands stolidly on a corner, waiting for a bus in the
wind and rain.*

*"They told me you had true grit and that is why I came to you. I
am not paying for talk." Charles Portis*

Grit your teeth and read on

MULESKINNER JOURNAL

JOURNAL FOUR: GRIT

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ARUNI WIJESINGHE

EXTRA TEETH

I find your teeth in the medicine cabinet
when we empty the house for renters.
I unearth a grimace in a plastic dish,
tucked behind empty prescription bottles
and Irish Spring. I'm startled
by the bubblegum pink acrylic palate,
the yellowing pearl of incisors.

When did a manufactured smile replace
your original one? Did your teeth depart
one by one, like strangers leaving
a party, or en masse, passengers
on the same subway train?

A childhood of migrant farm work
and poor nutrition finally caught up
with your adult mouth.

I search memory for the day
your words changed, filtered
through a cave paved with new stones.
That day in the Good Samaritan ICU,
spring blushing outside the windows,
was the last time I saw you.

My final words –

see you soon, Pop –
trying to make myself believe
we would talk again.

I refused to see your body returning to womb,
baby-bird curled in hospital sheets.

I blinded myself to IV lines snaking
the rails of your hospital bed, denied
gastric feeding tubes sprouting
umbilical.

you, reverting to a form
when teeth, bone or resin,
were unnecessary



AMALIA HERREN-LAGE

PLUTO AND CHARON

When at 16 I crashed my mama's car
a witch told me it was
because she missed me,

calling me home too soon.
The car crumpled around me like
a shield, an impact that smelled

of airbags and burning stars.
This is how I know
the dead feel grief too.

Here she was, pulling me,
with her heavy magic into
the face of a maple tree.

Nine years later and sometimes
I still violently fling myself
towards my mother.

How embarrassing, a woman my age
seeking her voice so piously,
stuck in an orbit of bruises.

I want to say, Death made you a God
of whom I am not permitted to speak ill,
forearm stippled with some cosmic stigmata.



STEVE BRISENDINE

PBOOM BOOM ROOM WITHOUT WALLS

There's a kid (then again,
everyone's a kid when you

hit my age) behind a beat-up
trap set in a doorway on 19th

and he's channeling Krupa,
big beats straight out of some

blue-aired Manhattan nightclub,
calling up ghosts of Bogota

and the Middle Passage -
and if you need something

beyond that, some nugget
of significance in any great

grand God-schematic way,
then maybe you should groove

more and think less; your hips
just might be smarter than

your head, and a quicksnap
fill can give you more

wisdom than any proverb
or metered rumination.



Photograph by Michael Loderstedt

MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

CAT SCRATCH FEVER

*When the soul suffers too much,
it develops a taste for misfortune.*

—The First Man, Albert Camus

My stepfather Hallie Johnson kept his fingernails long, which I always thought odd for a grown man. At first, I felt sorry for him. I thought maybe his family hadn't taught him good personal hygiene skills like mine had. I knew he could barely read, I'd watch my mother open all his mail and read it to him. He didn't play guitar, some boys I knew who did might keep longer nails on their right hand for fingerpicking. All of Hallie's fingernails were long and dirty; how could my mother like that I thought?

But the night he reached across the dinner table and grabbed me by my long hair, feeling the burning of it ripping out, the sound like pulling two pieces of Velcro apart; it started to make sense. And as he had me down on the linoleum, my mother screaming to let me go, digging those dirty fingernails into my face and pulling downward, tearing pieces of my cheeks so they dangled like bloody flaps. I finally got it. Those long fingernails were weapons for fighting.

Hallie was not a particularly athletic man. He once stopped his Olds 98 next to the island's only basketball court near the pier and took a couple of shots with us. His jump shot was pathetic, balancing the ball on one hand and missing the rim completely. Hallie was almost comically uncoordinated, and would never beat another man in a fight who could stand and throw a punch. But in close quarters, against a young boy half his size, he could rip up your flesh like a wildcat.

When I ran to the neighbor's house, Junior's mother Roberta cleaned up the blood with a cool wet dishrag. I looked a mess, patches of bare scalp bleeding, my cheeks nearly cut through, skin flaps hanging open and raw. She said she was calling the police. I was always a little afraid of her, she was Cherokee and drank a lot. It was rumored she had a bad temper and once cut two fingers off the hand of her own sister with a hatchet on a dare.

When the police showed up, they asked what I wanted to do. I didn't understand, but they explained because I'd just turned sixteen I was no longer a minor and could press charges against my stepfather for assault. After a little consideration, I filled out the paperwork with the officers. The officers walked me back to my house, Hallie had left in a drunken rage; my mother was crying.

The police asked me if there was anyone else I could stay with, I told them my grandparents

lived nearby. I went to stay with them for a couple of days. When I came back home to get some clothes, bandages were still wrapped across my face like a mummy. My mother asked me to sit down, she wanted to talk. She started to cry and asked if I'd consider dropping the assault charges against Hallie. She said he was sorry, and that he was going to quit drinking. I didn't want to do it. He'd beaten us all so many times over the years since she'd let him into her life. This was my chance to end it, to maybe put him behind bars, other people had seen it all along-- my friends, their parents, school teachers, and now the police.

But in the back of my mind, I knew he'd never serve any time and would most likely come back to kill me, or hurt my brother and sister. I'd suspected there would be more hell in our house, maybe something worse would happen to our family if I took him to court? I couldn't risk it, so with my mother looking over my shoulder, I signed the papers to drop all charges.

A wrecking ball only has one function, and that is what Hallie brought to our island home. The beatings continued, more frequently including my mother. But I was growing bigger, stronger and less afraid of Hallie. He'd stopped paying the loans on his paving equipment and our house, so it all went into foreclosure. A dump truck here, a road grader there would disappear, having gotten repossessed. Amazingly, he'd go to another lender and buy them back again.

I started spending much more time away from home, working in restaurants until late at night. I stayed high all the time. Somehow, I'd managed to complete the SAT, driving to my high school hungover to take it one Saturday. When I got the letter of acceptance to the only college I applied, I thought it a sign. It was time to leave the island.

When I think about all the turmoil we faced back then, it's a miracle that me, my brother and sister have survived to this day. No one ever thinks; I think I'll get my ass kicked so I can write a good story later. Forever will be the nagging remorse; could I have done more to stop it? And for this, I have no good answer. I keep coming back to the fact we were kids. We were kids abused by a horrible man my mother brought into our home, for reasons I'll never understand. But I continue to speculate-- was it her loneliness, her deep desire for some financial security, a long-held vision she held that being a wife made her complete? I'll never know, she can no longer answer, and we were just kids.



ROBERT NISBET

JULY, JULY, JULY

Term trickling hotly to a close,
shirt sticking, sun on summer desk.
And then the evenings, spud picking
as part of Winston's casual gang.
Potato drills, the sudden creamy glow.
The older women, cookie-tough,
who'd squat down for a leak as soon
as look at you. Bad backache too,
but we were near three bob an hour.
Five Woodbines, chips in Dev's for that.

School over, cricket. Down front paths,
against the walls, in streets, on greens.
The concentration deep. Slow spin
with a tennis ball, dobbed fatly down.

Our camp a six-day interlude
in a field of cow pats black with flies.
Sausages hacked and dragged from tins
but hungry, we got to the local dance,
girls vivid in our wonderment.

August, that cloudburst, rain for days.
And that was it. Next year exams.



MICHAEL TYLER

DESPERATE MYSTIC FALLACY

Every movement a flash cut. Every moment an eternity. Every fiber of my being a delicate multiverse of which I am most aware. I sweat though I am seated. Breathe. What the fuck am I doing? Fifty grand. Why the fuck am I here? Fifty grand. This is fucking insane. Fifty grand.

A man opens the door to this dour concrete cell. "Um minuto," he says taking a moment longer to look at me than is necessary. 'It's that obvious.' I think, 'It's that obvious I'm fucking scared to death.'

And I'm nine and short and a little round about the waist and the boys cry 'Fatty, fatty fat, fat!' as I run up the hill and I'm grabbed and lifted and thrown down and I roll and I do not cry and I stand and run up the hill and the boys cry 'Fatty, fatty, fat, fat!' and I will be king of the mountain and there's a grass stain on my shorts and Mom'll be mad and I stand once more and run up the hill ...

I begin to dry wretch. I buckle forward, the stomach revolts but there's nothing to regurgitate. I haven't eaten a scrap all day, and now one minute ... thirty seconds ... the man reappears. "Me siga," as he points for me to follow behind.

And I'm thirteen and my older brother throws a cushion at me and boys will be boys and Mom and Dad back away as we roll in the living room and he gains a mount and slaps and I cry out and he slaps again and I cover up and Dad chuckles as big brother reigns down blows and I name him Lord and he stands up and smiles.

I stand and stutter-step down the long corridor toward the noise, toward the mob, toward the cheers of blood lust pure and simple.

And I'm nineteen and it's one a.m. and he's been eyeing me for a good ten minutes and he looks back at his boys then back at me and here he comes, and his nose is broken and his eyes alight, and he calls me 'wrestling bitch' and all heads turn and all conversation halts and I grab my beer and leave the party.

A burst of light hits as I enter the auditorium. I recognize my name over the loudspeaker as a cheer rises and fades to grey. There I am on the big screen. I am twenty two years old, six foot two, two hundred and forty five pounds of lean muscle, nude but for lycra shorts and tape around each hand. I am twenty two years old, an American in Brazil. I am twenty two

years old and I have a single finely honed talent that's brought me scholarships and medals galore, but no money. And so I look elsewhere and that's when Vale Tudo call and offer \$50,000 for the big American to fly to Brazil, strip down and fight. Not wrestle. Fight. No strikes to the groin, no eye gouges, that's it, end of rules. I've wrestled all my life. I've never been in a fight.

I am twenty two years old and I am terrified as I look to my opponent.

My opponent is experienced, a street fighter, taller and a bit heavier. This is a man born with a bent toward violence. 'Motherfucker,' he mouths while pointing in my direction. My knees begin to buckle but the bell rings and all fades to the singular.

We meet in the middle and grapple. I throw a knee to his stomach then release him and step forward to shoot and take him to the ground. He attempts to throw me off but it's obvious he's never wrestled - there's no rhythm, no shift of weight, he's a street fighter, no technique. I make a fist and throw once, twice, move to the side, hold his head to the mat and knee him twice to the bridge of the nose. Blood spurts. Hammer fist to the side of the head, four more knees to the face. Something atavistic has overcome and I continue to knee and knee and feel bone retreat at each collision. I close my eyes and throw my head forward and our skulls collide, and I lean back and he's cut and I keep my eyes open for the next one.

There is no more face, simply blood and matted hair.

I headbutt again.

Someone grabs me from behind and just as I turn to strike. I recognize the uniform and relent. Raising myself to my feet, I look down as the referee shouts at the man on the floor.

Love, sex, these are pittance compared to this. The crowd roars, I raise both arms and dripping the blood of the defeated, my hands are raised toward the sky.



NATHAN LESLIE

THREE CROOKED LOPES

People believe what they want to believe. You present them with a certain, specific image and they see it, accept it, register it. They can't blame you. They bought it.

I'm at Melbourne Avenue and Wheat Street. It's a leafy little intersection and in the afternoon it presents the potential buyer with a wide expanse of shade from about half a mile away leading North-South. The other way is not bad either.

I have my rusted out old 90's red Ford truck clunker piece of shit parked askew with my corn tomatoes peaches sign on the roof, double-sided. I even painted an off-kilter asymmetrical tomato on each side--a little splash of color. I'm wearing my same-old-same-old straw hat with a little chunk missing from the right brim--perfect. The produce is arrayed in the bed in baskets and crates--neon boxes. Prices in crayon on a piece of old cardboard box. Everything calculated rustic.

The super skinny blonde lady in her Lexus pulls up, inspecting the peaches, sniffing at the tomatoes.

"Where are you from?"

"Chicago, Illinois," I say, not taking the bait.

"No, not you you. I mean, where is your farm located?"

"Oh, my bad," I say. Everybody likes 'my bad.' "Jefferson County, West Virginia."

She's probably forty years old--horse face, large teeth that she most likely views as one of her lesser attributes. I bet she put her hand up to partially cover her face when she smiled middle through high school. She's wearing those skin-tight yoga pants and tank top and little flip flops with leather thongs. Her toes are painted purple and blue, in a little umbrella pattern which must've been an expensive-assed pedicure.

"I've been through Jefferson County," she says. "Which part are we talking about?"

"Do you know where the old courthouse is?"

"I've heard of it."

Now I'm burying her with the very fake-specifics.

"We're back that way, down the road about twelve miles as the crow flies." People like that expression also. Confirms their stereotyped notion of what a bucolic guy selling green beans from the back of his truck should and would sound like if he was talking to a suburban sophisticate like them. Takes them back to a simpler time. Even if I really live in their neighborhood.

This woman is the type who has to know exactly which fucking plot of land each ear of corn originates, what its species is, who its parents are and the scientific name of the exact hybrid she's about to purchase for fifty cents a pop.

I can't wait to be rid of her. She haggles a bit and I accept just so I don't have to look at her again--I hope.

The rest of the afternoon is easy-peasy. Families, couples, nannies, men in suit and tie heading home for dinner. They just want fresh food and aren't overly picky. They don't ask questions or give me a pain in the ass.

I pack everything up under the tarp, tight, and drive ten minutes towards the city, park the truck in back, take the second tarp and throw that over, tie it down and go inside. I never eat from the truck.

The truck is my safety box, as long as it runs--which is not always a certainty. I do a special knock, finger cross and point to the sky every time I start it up. I've had to learn some basic mechanical skills since about once a week it clunks out for one reason or another.

I have my little Mazda for regular things, but I wouldn't sell a single cantaloupe from that.

You don't always have control over everything; I've learned that. When your parents decide to do an around-the-world trip and leave you with your two younger brothers, Ted and Billy, ten and twelve, until they return four months down the line, what are you supposed to do? It's not right but since I'm twenty-three they appointed me with temporary legal guardianship. So they can scratch this thing off their bucket list. I haven't heard from them in two weeks. Last peep they were in some remote Pacific island. I just hope they haven't been digested by a shark.

I return home from selling fruit and I make mac and cheese and hot dogs. I even toss a little salad, which Billy frowns at but eats anyway. Ted pushes it away. I clean up and then they play Halo Three until two in the morning. They sleep on the couches downstairs, with the television on mute.

In the morning it's pop tarts and chocolate milk and then back to the video games. Something has to occupy them while I'm at Whitlow and Burden Street, my Tuesday spot.

I worry about Billy the most. His skin doesn't look right. I doubt he ever goes outside unless he has to attend school. He needs to eat fruit and get sunshine. I tell him about the sailors with scurvy. Ted at least helps out with yard work though that's only on Sundays when I kick his butt.

They left us with a list of phone numbers.

"Do little get-togethers," Mom said. Little winking emoticon. "Life doesn't have to always be so lonely."

Both feet on the ground, I think. Concentrate on your surroundings. Watch the wind. I tell myself things. Little mantras.

They paid the mortgage but told me I have to cover the rest. That's my rent. Their house is five bedrooms. Theirs, not ours.

But before I can drive to Whitlow and Burden I need to swing by Safeway. In back I have a guy. Before, I had to text him ahead of time, but now he knows--every morning at eight thirty. Cash payment and I load them up. Today its watermelons, tomatoes, corn, peppers, plums, green beans and broccoli.

His name is Pat--floppy hair, classic Jerry Garcia look.

"No peaches today?"

"No, sorry, we're low."

"Isn't broccoli out of season now?"

"Maybe. Just, you know, make some shit up--you're good at that."

It's all seconds. The whole lot for twenty five bucks--everything was going into the Dumpster if it wasn't for me.

Then it's tomatoes for a dollar per, plums fifty cents, green beans--one clump for two bucks (I use rubber bands), corn fifty cents per, watermelon five bucks, peppers a buck per and a broccoli a buck a head (daily special). New cardboard, blue crayon. Perfect.

I'm about to drive off when Pat lumbers out with a box of cantaloupes. Perfect.

On the house, he says.

"Really ripe."

Three bucks per.

This little arrangement is so easy and so simple--it's a work of art, really. The buyers see me and my truck and think fresh produce, home grown with tenderness. All I have to do is drive to the Safeway.

It's all California.

As if they can really taste the difference. They only think they can.

As if they would know.

Whitlow and Burden is mostly sun-baked nannies and housewives from the pool--usually after and the usual array of business men and women between four and six thirty. By seven the action is dead and I drive home.

Mostly, today with an empty truck bed. I pull in two hundred and fifteen bucks--not too shabby. And I have a chance to read Crime and Punishment during the down times.

My ex thinks I lack a conscience. She used to berate me saying that I had the ethical parameters of a five year old.

"No, most five year olds are innocent," I'd say.

She says we didn't work mostly because she decided she liked girls better. I say, no, it's because she wasn't creative enough, brave enough to handle me. She says I'm cocky and deluded. I say she is depressed and lacking in self-confidence. She texts me asking how I like ripping off old ladies.

"They pay for produce and that's what they get," I say.

"Produce that was about to go in the Dumpster."

"It tastes good," I say. "I don't see a wrong."

The cantaloupes are perfect. If I can frame the produce away with three crooked lopes it's

perfect. The more lopsided and ugly the lopes are the better. It smacks of authenticity.

I'm at Main and Third downtown today. It's a location which leads itself to a lot of walk-by traffic—guys at lunch who want some fruit or something to surprise the wife (corn, a pretty watermelon).

For hours it's near perfect. The shade is slight so I have my major brellly out but overall sales are perky and the homeless guys are leaving me alone.

But then who shows up but blonde yoga pants. Except she's wearing a sundress thing and carries a casual brief-case.

"Oh, hello," she says. "I thought you were at Wheat Street."

Here we go with the questions again.

"I'm here on Wednesdays. I go to five different locations each week," I say.

I feel as if my voice is polite but no-nonsense, which is exactly the vibe I want to give off.

I don't feel like another inquisition.

"Kinda far for us from Jefferson County," she says.

"Yes, it is," I say. "I go where my customers are." This, I realize, I shouldn't have said.

"You mean where you can make more money."

I bring my straw hat down over my eyes slightly in hopes that if I don't see her perhaps she will vanish.

"Maybe I should buy something," she says, shuffling closer. She asks if I accept PayPal or Square. I point around to the invisible computer that she is clearly missing.

"Cash only," I say. "Sorry."

"That's the Jefferson County way, is it?"

I don't respond. She sniffs the tomatoes, squeezes the peppers, knocks on the watermelons and cantaloupes.

"The produce seems a bit, um, old," she says. "I do a lot of cooking—I know."

"Well, nobody is forcing you to buy anything."

"That's very true," she says, narrowing her vision. "The tomatoes look like hot house crap. You are too nice of a guy--I'm sure you wouldn't be selling grocery store produce and calling it home grown, would you?"

I tell her I have no idea what she is talking about. My legs are firm on the ground.

"I've never seen a mealy homegrown tomato. Ever."

"Why don't you go on your way then," I say, but she's eyeballing the cab of my truck, looking for evidence to support her theory.

"We'll see," she says. "I'm going to take another look."

I have no idea what this means, but I wave her off.

When I get home my brothers are zombified in front of the television, reclined on separate couches.

I hit the breaker in the utility room.

Dinner time.

Everything is fine, and when everything is fine I'm worried. Soon it won't be fine. Reversion to the mean.

It's Monday again and I know this means Blonde Yoga Pants. I'm almost looking forward to the slow down.

All day it is sweltering, sweat dribbling down my back as I fan myself with an old newspaper. Sales are slow--everyone is inside the A/C blasting on their cool, pampered faces.

Five o'clock, no Blonde Yoga Pants.

Five thirty, no Blonde Yoga Pants.

Six thirty, no Blonde Yoga Pants.

But just as I'm packing up and about to drive away, there she is in her Lexus. And this time she has someone else in the passenger seat. It's a girl but I can tell right away she's a bit, um, mentally deficient. Her eyes fish in different directions and she barks to herself.

"Can I still get some corn and a cantaloupe?"

I say nothing. I nod. I bag up six ears of corn for her and the best cantaloupe I have left. She hands me a ten dollar bill and tells me to keep the change. She's in a hurry.

I have nothing. No real worries.

I drive home a void. I fix Billy and Ted a real pasta dish and we eat it together. I even let them watch television while we eat. On the television, pirates are chasing a smaller boat and they are firing a cannon at the smaller boat. This seems like overkill, but I suppose they don't trust their ships' speed or want to end it right away.

But the small boat gets away and the pirates curse each other.

In the morning our parents text. They are in Japan, Kyoto specifically. They send a virtual postcard. We huddle around Ted's laptop to see it.



TOHM BAKELAS

THE NONHUMAN FROM POLARIS

he was deemed no longer a danger
to himself, others and property,
and therefore he was eligible for discharge

i referred him for group home placement
and prepped him on all the things
he should and shouldn't say

he placed his hand over mine
and said "tohm i love ya"

during his intake meeting he said
"i don't need no group home, i'm
going to israel to be crucified... you
see, i'm not human, i'm from polaris"

they looked at me,
then he looked at me,
i put my hand on his shoulder
and said "i understand"

"what do you do for fun?" they asked

"hang myself" he said and laughed

"umm, what?" they asked

"that's a joke," he said, "i think..."

after the meeting we took our time
walking back to the ward

CONTINUED...

"tohm i think that went well" he told me

"yeah, we'll see what they say" i said

i let him inside the ward
and waited until the door locked

after that i went for a short walk
and stared outside a window for a while



GREG SENDI

MEMENTO MORI

Caucasian Nazarene—old triune lord,
who on the lizard-wingèd dog through hell
rode dance-hall drunk, clutching an iron bell
when you were young—let pass another word

of love impossible submerged. Let pass
again within the soiled, alkali-
expiring, beer- and corn- and sausage pie-
and blood- and borscht- and cabbage-fed cuirass

which girds the city at the lake—this snout-
piece of the Great and Modern Swine-o-Drome
of nations; bring to pass what she has shown
me yet again to live without.

Regret

may out and yet, by every lurid steel-
ribbed underpass that God may still forget

or government forswear, I swear I feel
I love what we have almost done when I
remember it. And if the days repeal

what's left (if vestiges there are), when I
have lost the thread of it, I know, beneath
forgetting, that the kiss will sanctify

itself and that the vapor which, like death,
ascends from out the solvent-hollowed skin
of Wacker Drive at night is holy breath

since we at Christmas loved therein.



MARCY RAE HENRY

THE BETWEEN

novel excerpt. synopsis:

*After the narrator's former lover dies, she reads *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to her for forty-nine nights, the recommended time to help the dead get through what is called the bardo period, an intermediary state between life and death; between death and rebirth. The ritual allows the narrator to unravel the story of how two strangers became lovers, then strangers again.*

the between

Gram

'You're trying to kill me!' my grandmother shouted, running out the front door without a walker or a cane.

She made it to the elevator before I could catch her and the doors closed in my face. I didn't go back to grab the keys or lock the door to her apartment; I just took off running down the stairs. They were carpeted and I took them two at a time, sure I would beat her to the first floor that used to be the lobby of a fancy hotel, but by the time I got there, she was telling Mrs. López, 'She wants to murder me.'

'Who?' Mrs. López asked as I rounded the corner.

'Her!' She pointed at me.

'Your granddaughter?'

'Yes.'

It was unclear if she recognized I was, in fact, her granddaughter.

'Sorry,' I told Mrs. López and reached for my grandma's hand.

'Don't you touch me!' she shouted.

'Gram, it's me. Why do you think someone is trying to hurt you?'

'Why do you want me dead?' Her big eyes filled with anger and confusion.

I sighed deeply. 'I'm going to have to call my mom.'

'Come in,' Mrs. López waved me into her place, 'you can use my phone.'

My grandma stayed outside of the apartment as I rang my mom at work. 'You better come and calm her down. She thinks I'm trying to kill her.'

'What? What happened?'

'Nothing. After I gave her the second dose of meds this morning, she started looking at me suspiciously.'

I ran up three flights of stairs to lock my grandma's door and rushed back down to the first floor, hoping Mrs. López wasn't too troubled. I stood just inside the open door, where I could see my grandma, but she couldn't see me. My mom arrived after a few minutes and asked, 'Mom, what's going on?'

'That girl, she wants me dead.'

'That girl is your granddaughter. She adores you and she's actually keeping you alive.'

When they went upstairs, I borrowed my mom's car and drove off to see Angela. I was fuzzy from lack of sleep and filled with the desire that accompanies death and a new lover. We spent an hour together before I figured I should return to my grandmother's beautiful building in downtown Alto Rio. It sat where the river was at its widest and, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the center of town had flooded, people smashed into the mezzanine area to smoke and play cards for hours. My grandma and her neighbors still played cards there, beneath black and white pictures of people dressed up and waiting out a flood.

I walked into her small, clean apartment cautiously. 'Everything alright?' She gave me the side eye. 'Gram, do you recognize me?'

'She's your granddaughter,' my mom repeated.

She'd quit work for the day and stayed with us a few hours, until her mother returned to 'normal.' Then, it was as if it never happened. My mom left and my grandma was joking with me about who was sleeping with whom in her building. We never spoke about that day again. I'm not sure she remembered it.

I woke every three hours to administer morphine to her through a pale yellow tube attached

'to her stomach. The cancer was in her throat, but everything hurt. One day I stood behind her and wrapped my arms around her, barely touching her. I imagined squeezing. She tossed my arms off and said, 'Stop that. You remind me of Tatiana.'

'I am Tatiana.' I walked around and stood in front of her. She looked confused for a moment and waved me off.

Most nights I would tuck her in, rub her back or her brow, tell her how much I loved her. I imagined that's how it was to have a child. At night, after her meds, she was always affectionate. 'Your husband is letting you stay here with me all summer?'

'I don't have a husband, Gram.'

'Really? You're such a lovely girl.'

I would rub her, the way she did me when I was a child, until she fell into a morphine-Ambien induced sleep. 'Tatiana,' she would remind me just before she started breathing deeply, 'I want a rosary and a funeral.'

'Yes, of course.'

'Don't let your Aunt Patricia cremate me.'

'I promise, I won't.'

My aunt had told her, 'We're going to put you on the barbeque and sprinkle you over the garden.'

I had to hold my tongue around my aunt all summer. Death brings out the worst in some people. Especially those who can't admit their own fears. All I wanted to do was get more than a couple hours of sleep. And have lots of furtive, furious sex.

Angela

She was about to step out of the elevator. The woman I'd heard so much about but had only seen in pictures. I wanted to hear her voice.

When she'd called, my mom told her to take the elevator to the third floor, that I'd meet her there. As I walked down the hall, I heard the ding just before the doors opened and hoped I didn't look as sleep deprived as I felt.

When she stepped out, she was a lot to take in. The femininity of black eyeliner around soft

'brown eyes, light summer clothes, no jewelry other than earrings. Strong and confident, though not butch. Not yet. She smiled the smile I'd seen in photos. Perfectly straight white teeth. Full lips lipsticked in a nude, mid-tone shade. We scanned each other quickly. I hadn't accounted for age and she was older than I imagined. When our eyes locked, there was the acknowledgment where kind recognizes kind. Maybe I'm inserting memories of other looks outside that same elevator. But in this story, there was a curiosity from the start and after a perfunctory, Nice to finally meet you... I led the way, feeling her eyes on me from behind.

In my grandma's apartment, Angela spoke about her photography shop. 'It's just up the street.'

'Do you print photos for the biannual art show?' I asked.

'Sometimes. Mostly it's senior pictures, family pictures, pregnant pictures, baby pictures.'
'Nothing for divorce?'

She laughed. 'We've done dance troupes, sports teams and even funerals. But no divorces.'
'You're so lucky to not have an annoying boss.'

'I am the annoying boss.'

'How many employees?'

'Six. All women.'

I glanced at my mom. Once, when my dentist was out of town—celebrating with his boyfriend on Fire Island—I had a tooth emergency and went to see a woman up the street from me. She did a piss poor job and when my dentist got back, he had to fix her fuck up. My mom said, 'That's what you get for going to a woman.'

Angela talked about her house in the mountains. 'I designed it myself. Every window has views of the mountains.'

'That sounds amazing. Let us know if you're up for a visit some time.' I tried not to look at my mom. 'I'm hoping to walk in the woods at least once while in Alto Rio.'

Angela said, 'I'm sponsoring a golf tournament this summer. It's a fundraiser to expand the course out there. You guys will have to come.'

I hated golf and said, 'I'm happy to help.' My mom nodded.

Before she left, Angela said, 'Let's all go for a drink soon.'

My mom didn't drink, so did she just mean me? I wrote her number in my journal. I still have it

memorized. Anything else I wrote about Angela was written in code.

Even now I have to be careful. Even now I feel constricted. I'm trying to come as close to the truth as possible. Perhaps it's the last thing I can do for her in the forty-nine days in the between.

the between

In the Nyingma tradition, the Tibetan Book of the Dead is read to the deceased for forty-nine days. This is the time Tibetan Buddhists believe a consciousness, or mind-stream, will remain in the intermediary state known as the Bardo. The Tibetan Book of the Dead is the Western name for bar do thos grol, usually translated as 'Liberation through hearing during the intermediate state.' The Bardo is the state between life and death, between death and rebirth; it is to be between.

We hadn't spoken to each other in nearly a decade, but when you died, I found out in a matter of hours. I think about that moment so much I wonder if I made it up. How could you do something so quotidian as die?

I was taught Bardo teachings originated in the 8th century with Padmasambhava. He was Indian but played a major role in transmitting Buddhist philosophy to Tibet, a cultural adaptation that started in the early 7th century. Buddhism would merge with facets of the Bon religion being practiced in Tibet. Today Tibetan Buddhists practice rituals, recite mantras and consult oracles.

The day you died I'd just taken the dog out for a walk when my mom called. We were three or four buildings from mine, close enough to turn around. My mom asked, 'Are you alone?' It's what she asked when my grandma died a dozen years ago. I'd just returned home, to work, after spending the summer with her. And I lied then. 'Yes, I'm alone,' I said, because you were there. Lying about you was a habit I had gotten used to.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a funerary text, recited more than read, to ease a recently deceased person's consciousness. To calm it. The person, 'they,' becomes consciousness, 'it.' The recitation helps as it exits, waits and finds a favorable rebirth.

The day you died fall was falling all around. I hadn't thought of you at all that day. In fact, I hadn't thought of you in ages. When my mom asked if I was alone, I said, 'Yup, just me and the pup and a bunch of leaves.'

She said, 'I thought you should know Angela died this morning.'

I stopped in my tracks. 'Angela D'Amato?'

'Yes,' my mother said over the phone.

We spoke for a few minutes. Better said, she answered my questions, but didn't offer any extra information.

After I found out you died, I did nothing unusual. No prayers or rituals. I let the dog lead. He sniffed, peed and pooped. I bent over to pick up poop with a colored bag, so I didn't have to look at the poop longer than necessary. I deposited it in a receptacle and we made our way around a number of city blocks. I'd seen them so many times, they didn't look any different.

The air was crisp and cool, smells of moist earth, wet leaves before they started to rot. I took the dog back inside then went for a walk by myself, which I never really do. Sure, I walk to stores to buy stuff as well as to bars and restaurants to meet people, but those walks always have a purpose. I'd be lying if I said I didn't plan to pass by the liquor store. I had my mask in one pocket and my wallet in the other. As I meandered around slowly, I didn't cry. I couldn't cry. I was between emotions.



KEVIN RIDGEWAY

ONE-ARMED POEM

He stands in front of you
in line at the supermarket,
slowly bagging Jack Daniels
& Marlboro Reds
at seven in the morning
with one arm, the other one
missing. The cashier waits
for you to pay for your coffee,
but you're still waiting for
the one-armed man to
finish bagging his items.
He thanks you for your
patience, having to do
everything with one arm
is hard & you simply
tell him you can't imagine
before he disappears
like his arm did before him,
leaving you to wake up
& realize you haven't
lost a damn thing yet.



ESSIE MARTIN

AFTER THE RIVER

Bean came back last night.
Told me he's planning
his dad's funeral after four years
of watching stones sink
in the river.
After finding half a dozen dead minks
on the island I know how bones rot
in the woods, how their edges chalk
and peel away. I don't like to think
about it, but I know that's how
your dad must have escaped himself.
Bean is doing well, he's dating
a beautiful girl, and is tall and
strong like he's always been.
And the truth is, Bean has been losing
his whole life. He punched a hole
in the wall, lost four years to regret,
and now has to grieve for a man
who was possessed by something
large and dark. Something that drags
bones to the edge of the woods,
and leaves them there for Sons.



LYNN TAIT

AFTER A TALL DRINK WITH THE SHORT-SIGHTED

and though she be but little she is fierce.
Midsummer Night's Dream, William Shakespeare

Lord knows I see red
the moment someone calls me cute.
Fire ignites in a flash
fuelled by cute little sticks.
I keep it to myself.

No one's interested in what this little elf has to say.
No one. That's a little over the top;
like self as elf bounding over flames in my brain,
sailing over the slow burn with a smirk
that says it knows more than it lets on.

Little but fierce by age ten,
taller at thirty than now,
with shrinkage comes wisdom.
Smoldering past senior moments,

I'm dismissed by these strange beings
itching to pat me on the head.
My baby blues roll like dice,
snake eyes on a table I can barely see over.

My intensity filters through my comedy routines,
my self-absorbed life—cute little feet up—
cute little audience in a vast world of vaudeville,

acutely aware of actors falling all over themselves,
fighting to get on stage,
yanking on doors of opportunity without knocking.

I don't want to tell people what to do,
but you seldom get through doors big head first.
But what do I know?
I slipped through the keyhole hours ago.



WILLIAM TAYLOR, JR.

SOME THINGS THAT HAPPENED AFTER ANNA WENT BACK TO OHIO

It was 7:18 in San Francisco on a Sunday evening and Tommy was well on his way to being properly drunk. It was his third day of existing in a world that no longer included Anna, and he was ill-equipped for it. The best he could think to do was hit the downtown bars with abandon, in search of some new doom to distract him from his present circumstances.

He eventually ended up at the Brown Jug, finding it as dreary and slow as everywhere else. Bartender Frank looked haggard and tired. He wordlessly served Tommy a beer, then went back to cradling his head in his hands, elbows propped upon the bar. There were a couple of old guys to the left of Tommy's stool and a woman to the right. The woman looked far gone, drinking something clear from a pint glass that sat on the bar in front of her. She was middle-aged and gaunt, but not completely devoid of some kind of decrepit charm. Tommy sat next to her and halfheartedly attempted to engage her in some nonsensical conversation, but had no idea what he was saying, not that she would have cared if he did. They sat there in their own separate miseries, sipping their drinks in silence. Even the jukebox was dead.

Bartender Frank was crumpled upon the bar like a broken puppet, snoring and moaning like something haunted. Nobody was immediately in need of a drink, so they let him be. A group of young Filipino men stood outside smoking, sneering, and drinking beer from tall cans in paper bags. They glanced in now and then at Frank, whispering to each other with mocking voices. One of them, tall, lanky and cruel eyed, walked in and stood leering over the bartender's inert form, making obscene gestures as his friends took pictures with their phones. The man poked Bartender Frank's temple with his finger, calling him a sad ass motherfucker as he did so, until one of the old guys at the end of the bar got up and waved his cane. The Filipino man grabbed a six pack of something from behind the bar, made a grand obscene gesture meant for everyone in the room, then ran off into the night with his friends, their laughter fading into the darkness. A few minutes later, Bartender Frank stirred, coughed, shook himself off a bit, and started wiping down the bar as if all were right with the world.

It was around then that Tommy felt drunk and weary enough to go home and dissolve into sleep. He stepped out into the dark and walked up Hyde Street, making his way through the gauntlet of night people that crowded the sidewalks. Dreck peddlers on every corner, hawking useless, broken things, women selling whatever was left of themselves, some with nothing much to offer, but demanding compensation nonetheless. Tommy stopped at a corner, waiting for the light. A group of Mexicans stood smoking and drinking from paper bags. A pickup truck was parked at the curb, a woman in the driver's seat chatting with those assembled. She raised her tallboy in Tommy's direction, cigarette dangling from her lips. Tommy gave her a tired smile and a nod. The light changed and he continued on.

A couple corners later Tommy was stopped again. To his left the woman from a few blocks back was idling there in her truck. He gave her a weary little wave. "Where you going, baby?" the woman asked.

"Home," Tommy said.

"Home? Why home?"

"Bed," he replied.

"Lemme give you a ride."

"It's just a few blocks."

"Lemme give you a ride anyway."

"Why?"

"I'm lonely," the woman said. Tommy considered a moment. That was one of the few things in life people tended not to lie about. He stood there weaving on the sidewalk for a moment and then climbed into the passenger seat.

The woman looked over at him and smiled. She looked to be somewhere between forty and fifty years old, weathered, but attractive enough in such a way. She held out her hand and Tommy took it in his own. "I'm Heidi", she said.

"Tommy," Tommy said.

"I'm drunk," Heidi said.

"Me, too."

"Where am I taking you?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, where do you live?"

"Oh. Just on Bush. Halfway between Polk and Larkin."

Two minutes later Heidi's truck was in front of the building. "Thanks," Tommy said, reaching for the passenger door handle.

"Look," Heidi said, "I got nothing to do. I could use some company."

Tommy paused.

"I got a place we can go," she said, "no big deal."

Most of Tommy knew it would be best to follow through with his plan of sleep, but the relentless little part of him that felt the need to ruin any possibility of a peaceful end to the night was powerful. "How far?" he asked.

"Only a couple minutes across the freeway."

"Freeway?"

"Yeah, I got a room in Daly City. Dude gives me a deal at his hotel."

"Daly City's a little ways out there."

"I'll get you back in one piece, baby. There's a guy I gotta meet around here in a few hours anyway, so I gotta come back." Heidi placed her hand on Tommy's leg, caressing it through his jeans, her hand eventually coming to rest on his inner thigh. "I'll make it worth your while." "Well, you know, I don't have a lot of, you know, money right now," Tommy said.

"How much is not a lot?"

Tommy made a fuzzy attempt to take stock of his current financial situation. "Like sixty bucks, maybe."

"We'll make it work, honey." And then they were on the 280 headed South. Heidi handed Tommy her beer as she caressed his thigh. Tommy took a drink and returned it to its place between her legs.

Heidi's phone played a Jay-Z song and she answered it. Tommy heard a man's voice, harsh and impatient, but couldn't make out any of the words. "Yeah, baby, I know, I know. I'm with someone right now," Heidi said to the phone. "We're gonna hang out a bit and then I'll head back over there. Gimme like an hour, okay?" She ended the call. "See?" she said to Tommy, caressing his leg, "I gotta be back in your hood in just a little bit."

Tommy nodded, unconvinced, and gazed out the passenger window at the lights flashing through the darkness; cars, buildings, parking lots. Heidi turned the radio to a country station, and George Jones sang about living and dying by the choices he'd made. The whole world suddenly felt like a sad country song. Tommy felt lonely, in spite of Heidi's hand on his leg and the musky smell of her filling the space around him. The great sadness of everything seemed too big and impossible to comprehend or overcome. He thought of Anna and wondered what she was doing and who she was doing it with.

"What's your story, babe?" Heidi asked.

"My story?"

"You look kinda forlorn."

Tommy kept his face to the window.

"Where's your girl?"

Tommy made a noise like a broken laugh. "Ohio, I guess. But she's not my girl anymore."

Heidi lit a cigarette. Tommy hoped she would offer him one, but she didn't. "What happened?" she asked.

"I didn't want to move to Ohio."

"Ohio? What would you do in Ohio?"

"That's what I said."

Heidi laughed a little laugh and squeezed his thigh. "Yer alright, baby. Don't you worry about no bitches. They ain't worth it."

"Yeah," Tommy said, taking the beer from between her legs and finishing it off.

A few minutes later they pulled off the freeway and they were somewhere Tommy didn't

recognize. Daly City or South San Francisco, he guessed. Everything felt particularly desolate. The world was reduced to parking lots and abandoned-looking buildings. Rows of sad hotels and lonely gas stations. He didn't see any people anywhere. "Almost there," Heidi said.

"Can we stop by a liquor store or something?" Tommy asked.

"I got booze in the room."

"I need an ATM."

"Well shit, you coulda told me that earlier."

"I forgot."

Heidi looked annoyed as she lit a cigarette. She made a few sharp lefts, pulled into a gas station, screeching to a stop near the entrance. "Hurry up then," she said.

"Can I get you anything?" Tommy asked as he stepped out of the car.

"A pack of smokes. And matches. And a few extra twenties for the room. For the deposit." Tommy nodded and entered the little store. A large bald man with a great black beard stood behind the counter, watching a tiny television. He greeted Tommy with an unfriendly stare and watched as he pulled a hundred dollars out of the ATM. Tommy was now forty bucks short for rent, but he figured he could transfer some money from one of his credit cards that wasn't maxed out. He grabbed a bottle of red wine with a screw off cap and bought it along with a pack of cigarettes. When he got back in the truck, Heidi was talking heatedly on her phone. "Yeah, I know, I know. Look, he's back." Heidi tossed her phone on the dashboard and snatched the pack of cigarettes from Tommy's hand. She ripped it open, lit one up and they hurtled out of the parking lot.

They drove another few blocks and turned into the parking lot of a particularly beaten down hotel. The lot was dark, only a few cars were scattered about. Light shone through the thin curtains of a few rooms. The hotel sign was broken, so Tommy couldn't figure out the name of the place. Only a neon "E" blinked into existence at random intervals. They came to a stop in a dark corner of the lot. Heidi reached into her bag and pulled out a joint. She lit the thing, took a long drag and offered it to Tommy. "Here, baby," she said, "have some of this." Tommy took it and had a few big drags. He felt immediately lighter, a kind of empty peace welled up within him. "You like that, baby?" Heidi asked. Tommy nodded in the dark. "Have another hit." He obeyed and was filled with a welcome numbness.

"What is that?" he asked.

"The good stuff," Heidi laughed and took another drag, then returned what remained to her bag. "Look," she said, "my room's right there!" Tommy looked to where he finger pointed, some undetermined spot on the second floor of the building.

"Okay," he said.

Heidi got out of the truck and Tommy followed, though he would have preferred to just sit in the warm darkness, smoking whatever it was she had in her bag. "Alright, I need the money now," Heidi said. "Sixty for me and another forty for the room." Tommy pulled out his wallet and rummaged for the bills. "And a credit card."

"Credit card?"

"For the deposit. No big deal, you get it back when we leave. They don't charge nothing to it." Tommy gave Heidi the wad of bills and his ATM card. She counted the money and pushed in deep into the pocket of her shorts. "Alright," she said, "I'll pay for the room and we'll be all set." She pulled a ragged five-dollar bill from her bag and handed it to Tommy. "Hey," she said, "there's a 7-11 down on the corner over there. Could you go get me a Diet Coke?"

"Diet Coke?"

"Yeah, the Cherry kind if they got it. Meet me back here at the truck."

"Okay," Tommy said, gazing uncertainly about the vast parking lot, seeing only dark. "Which way?"

"There," Heidi pointed, "on the corner."

Tommy did his best to walk in that general direction. He got through the parking lot, reached the sidewalk and didn't know which way to go. All directions looked equally pointless. He chose one that he felt was slightly less hopeless and lucked out. When he reached the end of the block there was a shabby little 7-11. He went in, bought a Diet Cherry Coke and headed back.

When Tommy returned, the hotel somehow felt even more desolate than before. He wandered about the parking lot and couldn't find Heidi's truck. He crisscrossed it a few times over to no avail. He managed to find the office, but it was as abandoned as everything else. A sign in the window said, "Closed. Back at 6 a.m." Tommy turned and scanned the empty parking lot once more, standing there with the Diet Cherry Coke in his hand, understanding that Heidi's truck wasn't there and wasn't going to be.

Tommy stood there, stupid, helpless, and alone. He walked to the sidewalk and sat down. He pulled out his wallet. He had three dollars. He'd left the wine he bought in the seat of the truck. He was at least ten miles from home in a neighborhood he didn't know. He felt sorry for himself and cried a bit. He pulled his phone from his pocket and the battery was all but dead. He punched in Anna's number. She didn't answer, but he knew she was up. She was always up. She had night terrors and never slept until the sun rose. He listened to the recording on her voice mail. It was the first time he'd heard it, as it was the first time he'd called her and she didn't pick up. Listening to her voice telling him she wasn't available right then was lonelier than anything he imagined could exist in the world. "Hey," he said after the beep, "it's me. I'd just really like to talk to you, is all. If you'd give me a call when you get this, I'd appreciate it. It doesn't matter what time it is." Tommy ended the call, knowing it wouldn't be returned. He figured he'd try and get a cab, despite the fact of his three dollars. He imagined they could work something out. The battery on his phone gave out as he searched for a number. He walked back to the 7-11, went inside and asked the man behind the counter if there was a phone he could use to call a cab.

The man shook his head.

"You have to have some kind of phone," Tommy said. "I just need a cab."

"Employees only," the man said.

"Okay, well, can you call me a cab, then?" The man looked at Tommy as if he were orchestrating some kind of scam.

"No. You have to buy something or leave."

"Look, man, I'm kind of stranded here."

"Leave or I call police."

"You can't call a cab but you can call police?"

"Yes."

"That's fucked up," Tommy said, turning away.

"You fucked up!" the man shouted after him, as if he were casting a curse. "You fucked up!"

Tommy walked back to the sidewalk. He stood there listening to the absolute silence of things. He looked in all directions, and none seemed any better than the rest. He looked out across the sea of dark and stepped into it.



JOHN MACKER

WALKING WITH WILEY AND ZOEY

she clasps her hands behind her for each
daily walk with wiley and zoey seems as though
her ritual is devotion but as an intruder I'd only be guessing
her days of roaring at deities probably done
her shadow on the dry land won't betray her
as faithful as a nun her fate now more companionable
is fixed to the horizon, a compass point, a closed book
a point of rocks somewhere

she doesn't seem interested in grandmothering
the earth or any point blank religiosity but maybe
she swam with sperm whales maybe she pursued
for one night in Paris the stuff of dreams
she doesn't leave a trace on the trail
if not for the dogs she'd probably walk alone
maybe her last breath will be first do no harm
just as her first one was

I'd only be guessing sometimes I'm not as
devoted to ritual no she doesn't offer her
name, affiliation or persuasion, no need to follow
her to the ends of where so many have gone before
her short white hair belongs to no eternal order
she's slightly bent, sprightly, contemplative
seems patient with time like a river yesterday
she said, "What a lovely day, just the good dogs are here."



LEANNE HUNT

THE BODY HOLDS SMALL REVOLTS

I lost my first—and only— engagement ring
trying to recapture my throwing arm
in a park.

My—then—husband refused
to replace it. You don't take care of things.
And I don't.

I misplace phones, keys, purses
or leave them at a restaurant
and circle back.

I rely on the kindness of strangers
to help me find
what I've lost in this world.

They run after me, Ma'am, I think you left this.
I bless them for their kindness.
And mean it.

I must exist to raise the goodness in others,
the way yeast consumes sweetness
to create what's needed to survive.

I've left so much of my life behind,
deliberately or not. But anxiety
will remind me at 2 am from a dead sleep.

My first husband gave me an engagement ring
with a protruding diamond that scratched me
if I were careless.

CONTINUED...

I decided against a wedding band—
my ring finger would swell
after only a few hours.

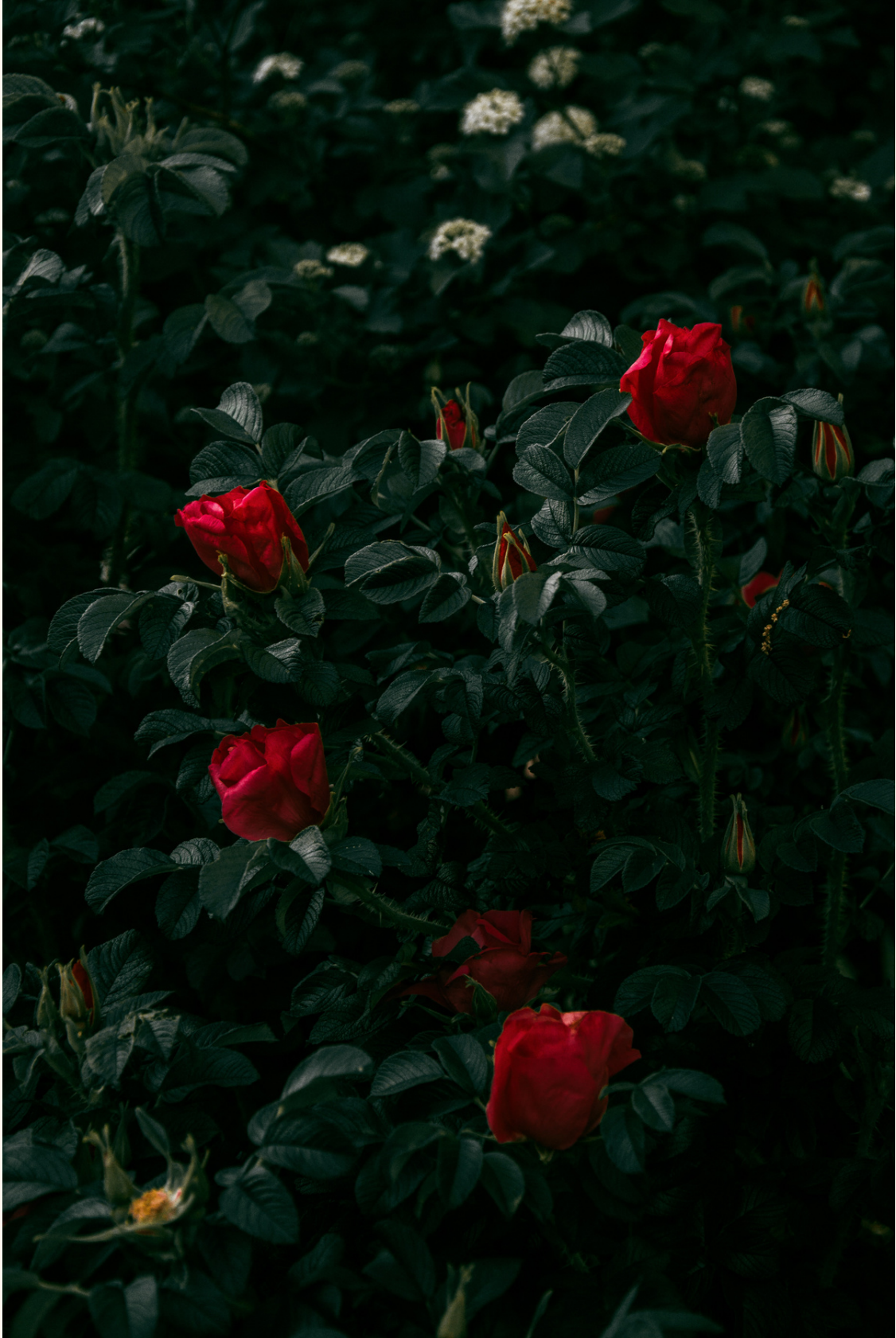
So I lost both engagement and wedding ring that day,
but a small white circle remained
on my finger for years.

I've since replaced the husband,
and the skin has tanned him away,
though I have nightmares.

I have a wedding band now and a better man,
although I still don't wear rings—
my flesh will rise to encircle any band.

I keep the ring safe in a box in a home,
and in a carryon when I travel.
I don't leave it behind.

I am careful for kindness.



BECCA ROSE HALL

FLOWERS BUT NOT ONLY FLOWERS, DUSK BUT NOT ONLY DUSK

I used to be a rosebud on tea party china but now I'm a fuchsia
splurge of rhododendron and a red one and I don't care who sees.

I used to think gray rain fell freely, but how much it asks, the earth
losing all moderation. And I thought once I was born

of a simple family, weaned, raised, sent out, but now I know
I arrived on a high tide wearing the colors dusk gives the sea.

Tossed in the wash and hush,
I was damp as a milk-sweet mouth and mad as salt.

So I want you to know you have not made me lonely,
only shown me the loneliness already mine.

See, I am the shade of a child's singing
in the upstairs of an empty house.

I am the smell of lilacs spilling down all the long avenues of evening.
I am the moment they are no longer enough.



KRISTEN BAUM DEBEASI

BERRIES IN WINTER

What was it he said about black bears in Alaska this December—
how they can't sleep—insomnia rumbling their stomachs like missing berries
and I wonder—how hard can it be to find berries? That's their primary job—
finding food. That and raising cubs until they can survive on their own.

I think of the strange temps in California, of the way
our apple tree doesn't know when to bloom anymore
or when to make fruit. The apples grow randomly; sometimes not at all.

I remember the year I traveled to cold country to spend the New Year
with a college friend bereft at the loss of a teen child. We went to the local Ralph's
for berries and other groceries, then to her place to talk out all the things.

Her kids came home after the weekend at their dad's, wanting pizza—
the four-dollar kind—but when they came into the kitchen
and saw what we had set out, the oldest said berries in winter?

To me, it seemed mundane. In California everything is within reach. But to him?
Strawberries in snow was like a moose at the equator or the Christmas Star
come back eight hundred years later; those insomniac bears waiting up to see it,
and looking for berries so they can have their fill before bed.



JOHN ROMAGNA

GUMPTION

In a room that looked large,
With wide armchairs, amber-colored light
From standing lamps, hardcover books
On deep shelves,

She asked me not to call her 'Aunt Mary.'
I ran, six flights up for toast and eggs,
Sat on a window ledge, watching trolleys,

Listened.
She named every building on the long walk
To the Lincoln Memorial. We got there
Before the crowds.

Leaving home in Iowa to work for FDR,
She never went back. 'Gumption,'
She called it. Strange word
For courage.

My mom kept her necklace, and a diary
From her summer out west, after the war:
Long rides, dusty days, waiting in line
To see Old Faithful. A Mr. Walton drove,
Fixed flat tires, knew where to get gas
Or a fine lunch.

She never married. What a catch!
She'd have worn her blue hat with a feather
And a veil she never pulled down, shoes
With thick heels that clumped, clumped
On her hardwood floors.

No one else could call me 'Johnny.'
Entering my mind the way an artist
Signs a painting with a brushstroke. Mary!
I will have my own logical city, and a pathway
To far off mountains, canyons, red sun
Bleeding out on a wide ocean.



SAM CAMPANELLA

YOU NEVER GOT ME AT ALL

A TIRE MARKED DIRGE

You think you know punch-drunk? I'll tell you what punch-drunk is.

7am this morning I throw my uniform on, take a look in the mirror, and walk out the door. Take no more than five steps forward. Air feels different. Look over my shoulder... motherfucker's waitin' for me right on my porch. I take two steps back.

"What do you want?" I says, hopin' he scurries off. He never does.

"At this point," he says, "laws just ain't no good. Your daddy fought it. He was weak." He's walkin' towards me. He was limp'in' like crazy, and I knew why by his breath. "This town ate you alive, man. Look at you. Five-foot-nothin', walkin' around cold-cocked like you own the place. It ate you alive. It chewed your dirty ass up and spat you back out, and you landed face first on the dirt..."

I am ready to keep trailin' on forward like the mad sumbitch never showed up. But he doesn't stop.

"I know what it's like to snap the chains that tied me to my past. You never needed to."

"The fuck you think I am?" I says.

"You work every day to make sure your little reputation ain't tainted. I work every day to make sure my brain don't give up on my heart yet. I know nothing but how to force down a meal, tie my shoes, and keep walkin'. You don't know dick about shit. You don't know what freedom is, and you never will."

Freedom? My hand was hurtin', but his teeth was hurtin' worse.

AUTHOR BIOS

Aruni Wijesinghe is a project manager, ESL teacher, occasional sous chef and erstwhile belly dance instructor. A Pushcart Prize-nominated poet, her work has been published in journals and anthologies both nationally and internationally. Her debut poetry collection, *2 Revere Place*, is currently available through Moon Tide Press. She lives a quiet life in Orange County, California with her husband Jeff and their cats Jack and Josie. You can follow her writing at www.aruniwrites.com and on Instagram @aruniwrites.

Steve Brisendine is a writer, poet, occasional artist and recovering journalist living and working in Mission, KS. He is the author of two collections from Spartan Press: *The Words We Do Not Have* (2021) and the upcoming *Salt Holds No Secret But This* (2022). He was a finalist for the 2021 Derick Burleson Poetry Prize.

Amalia Herren-Lage is about to graduate from Bates College with a BA in Gender and Sexuality Studies. At Bates, she has been passionate about science and technology studies, and creative writing, culminating in a semi-creative senior thesis exploring biological citizenship and disability studies as they relate to her experience with a terminally ill mother. In her free time, she enjoys cooking, reading poetry, and visiting her family in Spain.

Michael Loderstedt was recently published in the NC Literary Review. He has also had poems published in a recent anthology entitled *neighborhood Voices* (Literary Cleveland/Cleveland Public Library) and received an Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Literature in 2020.

Michael Tyler has been published by *Takahe*, *Bravado*, *Adelaide Literary*, *PIF*, *Daily Love*, *Danse Macabre*, *Apocrypha* and *Abstractions*, *Dash*, *The Fictional Café*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Fleas On The Dog*, *Cardinal Sins* and *Mystery Tribune*. Michael writes from a shack overlooking the ocean just south of the edge of the world. He has been published in several literary magazines and plans a short story collection sometime before the *Andromeda Galaxy* collides with ours and ...

Nathan Leslie won the 2019 Washington Writers' Publishing House prize for fiction for his collection of short stories, *Hurry Up and Relax*. He is also the series editor for *Best Small Fictions*. Two of Nathan's new short story collections will be published this fall and in the spring of 2023. Nathan's nine previous books of fiction include *Three Men*, *Root and Shoot*, *Sibs*, and *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*. He is also the author of a collection of poems, *Night Sweat*. Nathan is currently the founder and organizer of the *Reston Reading Series* in Reston, Virginia, and the publisher and editor of the new online journal *Maryland Literary Review*. Previously he was series editor for *Best of the Web* and fiction editor for *Pedestal Magazine*. His fiction has been published in hundreds of literary magazines such as *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, *Boulevard*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Cimarron Review*. Nathan's nonfiction has been published in *The Washington Post*, *Kansas City Star*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. Nathan lives in Northern Virginia.

Tohm Bakelas is a social worker in a psychiatric hospital. He was born in New Jersey, resides there, and will die there. He is the author of 18 chapbooks and several collections of poetry, including *"The Ants Crawl In Circles"* (Whiskey City Press, 2022). He runs *Between Shadows Press*.

Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet, a now-retired English teacher and college lecturer, who wrote short stories for forty years (with seven collections) and has now turned to poetry, being published widely in both Britain and the USA, where he is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee.

Greg Sendi is a Chicago writer and former fiction editor at *Chicago Review*. His career has included broadcast and trade journalism as well as poetry and fiction. In the past year, his work has appeared or been accepted for publication in a number of literary magazines and online outlets, including *Apricity*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Clarion*, *CONSEQUENCE*, *Flashes of Brilliance*, *Great Lakes Review*, *The Headlight Review*, *The Masters Review*, *New American Legends*, *Plume*, *Pulp Literature*, *San Antonio Review*, *Sparks of Calliope*, and *upstreet*.

AUTHOR BIOS

Marcy Rae Henry is a multidisciplinary artist y una Latina de Los Borderlands. She is delighted by tablas, tulips and the theremin. M.R. Henry's writing has received a Chicago Community Arts Assistance Grant, an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize nomination and first prize in Suburbia's 2021 Novel Excerpt Contest. Some of the stories and the first 50 pages can be found online. Other writing and visual art appear in *The Columbia Review*, *carte blanche*, *PANK*, *The Southern Review*, *Cauldron Anthology* and *The Brooklyn Review*, among others. DoubleCross Press will publish her chapbook 'We Are Primary Colors' this year.

Kevin Ridgeway is the author of *Too Young to Know* (Stubborn Mule Press, 2019) and *Invasion of the Shadow People* (forthcoming, Luchador Press, 2022). His work has appeared in *Slipstream*, *Chiron Review*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Main Street Rag*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Trailer Park Quarterly*, *The Cape Rock*, *Plainsongs*, *Into the Void*, *Book of Matches*, *Cultural Daily* and *The American Journal of Poetry*, among others. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, he lives and writes in Long Beach, CA.

Essie Martin is a scientist by training, but a poet by nature. She loves watching the world through what we don't understand, and what we have left to learn. This summer, she wrote from Hurricane Island where she was working as an Aquaculture Researcher. Her daily life on island includes maintaining their experimental aquaculture lease, scuba diving for scallop experiments and population surveys, and general daily island maintenance (boats, washing dirty dishes, fending off hungry seagulls, etc.). She offers this poem, observing the world as a woman, a chronically ill person, a sister, a daughter, a scientist.

Lynn Tait is an award-winning poet/photographer residing in Sarnia, Ontario Canada. Her poems have appeared in *High Shelf*, *FreeFall*, *Vallum*, *CV2*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *Touchstone* and in over 100 North American anthologies. She is a member of the Ontario Poetry Society, League of Canadian Poets and the Academy of American Poets.

William Taylor, Jr. lives and writes in San Francisco. He is the author of numerous books of poetry, and a volume of fiction. His work has been published widely in literary journals, including *Rattle*, *The New York Quarterly*, and *The Chiron Review*. He was a recipient of the 2013 Kathy Acker Award, and edited *Cocky Moon: Selected Poems of Jack Micheline* (Zeitgeist Press, 2014). *Pretty Things to Say*, (Six Ft. Swells Press, 2020) is his latest collection of poetry. A new collection is forthcoming from Roadside Press.

John Macker grew up in Colorado and has lived in northern New Mexico for 25 years. He has published 13 full-length books and chapbooks of poetry, 2 audio recordings, an anthology of fiction and essays, and several broadsides over 30 years. His most recent are *Atlas of Wolves*, *The Blues Drink Your Dreams Away*, *Selected Poems 1983-2018*, (a 2019 New Mexico-Arizona Book Awards finalist), *Desert Threnody*, essays and short fiction, (winner of the 2021 New Mexico-Arizona Book Awards fiction anthology prize), *El Rialto*, a short prose memoir and *Chaco Sojourn*, short stories, (both illustrated by Leon Loughridge and published in limited edition by Dry Creek Art Press.) For several years, he was contributor to Albuquerque's *Malpais Review*. His one-act play, "Coyote Acid" was produced by Teatro Paraguas in Santa Fe in early 2022. He lives in Santa Fe with his wife Annie and two dogs.

Aruni Wijesinghe is a project manager, ESL teacher, occasional sous chef, and erstwhile belly dance instructor. A Pushcart Prize-nominated poet, her work has been published in journals and anthologies both nationally and internationally. Her debut poetry collection, *2 Revere Place*, is currently available through Moon Tide Press. She lives a quiet life in Orange County, California with her husband Jeff and their cats Jack and Josie. You can follow her writing at www.aruniwrites.com and on Instagram @aruniwrites.

LeAnne Hunt (she/her) grew up in the Midwest and now lives in Orange County, California. She is a regular at the Two Idiots Peddling Poetry reading at the Ugly Mug in Orange. She has poems published in *Cultural Weekly*, *Spillway*, *Honey & Lime*, and *Lullaby of Teeth: An Anthology of Southern California Poets*. She publishes a blog of writing prompts and apologies at leannehunt.com.

AUTHOR BIOS

Becca Rose Hall's work has appeared recently in Orion Magazine, sPARKLE and bLINK, Orion Online, Mutha Magazine, About Place, The Dark Mountain Project, SoFloPoJo, Pacifica Literary Review, and is forthcoming from Third Coast and Drunk Monkeys. Her work has been supported by Community of Writers, Writers Lighthouse, Arts Omi and Zvona i Nari, and she has been a contributor at Bread Loaf and Sewanee. She studied writing at Stanford and the University of Montana. She writes the Substack newsletter, A Few Crooked Words about helping kids love writing. She lives in Seattle with her daughter.

Kristen Baum DeBeasi is a poet, writer and composer whose poetry has appeared in Blue Heron Review, Fairy Tale Magazine, Menacing Hedge and elsewhere. She is a Best of the Net nominee and was Moon Tide Press's Poet of the Month for July 2021. A native Oregonian, she now resides in Los Angeles. When she isn't composing or writing, she loves testing new recipes, watching hummingbirds hatch, and collecting twigs for her fairy garden.

John Romagna lives in Clinton, NJ. His most recently published poem, Variation on a Poem by Yeats, was awarded Honorable Mention in the Passager Journal's 2022 Annual Poetry Contest issue, September 2022.

Sam Campanella is a New Hampshire-based writer and vegetable chef, best known for his regionally-renowned word salads.







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LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.