

DEAL JAM MAGAZINE



ISSUE 3

MAY 2024



DEAL JAM
M A G A Z I N E

MAY 2024

DEAL JAM MAGAZINE # 3

MAY 2024

Deer/Dear

front cover by Eriana Ktistakis
“Self-Portrait with Antlers”

Design and Layout by Devin Reeves and Eriana Ktistakis

Printed by Deal Jam Writing Group

All rights reserved

www.dealjammagazine.com

*Death isn't just an idea. When we die the body breaks open
like a river; the old body goes on, climbing the hill.*

– Mary Oliver,
The Deer

MAY 2024

FICTION

Sour *by* Milla Reed / 5

Doe Eyes *by* Addie White / 7

Dead Animals *by* Nicole Brogdon / 8

Caught in the Headlights *by* Anna W. / 9

A Labor in Dissolution *by* Reece Ludwig / 13

The Other Woman *by* Julian Gallo / 18

Scenery *by* Blanka Pillár / 24

NON-FICTION

All Around the Poolside *by* Jake Williams / 28

An Interview *by* C.W. Bryan / 31

Ode to Limbo *by* Sophy Drouin / 34

Two (Or Maybe One) Armed Destruction *by* Emelia Gauch / 37

Collected Thoughts on Firsts and Feelings and Findings *by* Owen Lewis / 42

POETRY

Dear Deer *by* Linda M. Crate / 48

Macarons for Wildlife *by* Kendra Whitfield / 50

Still Life With Thunderstorm *by* W.C. Perry / 52

To a Dear Friend Dealing with Acute Anxiety *by* Carolyn Martin / 54

Why I Choose to Waken First *by* John Muro / 55

Astronaut *by* Jonathan Fletcher / 58

Rite *by* W.C. Perry / 60

Dulce de Ego *by* M F Drummy / 61

Kicked *by* John Grey / 62

Anemone *by* Claudia Wysocky / 64

Pervigilium *by* Kelly White Arnold / 65

MAY 2024

ART

Velvets #1 *by* Addie White / 6

Velvets #2 *by* Addie White / 12

When I gather my doubts, it will rain *by* Irina Tall Novikova / 17

Dear Blue Skies *by* Owen Lewis / 23

Portrait On Film #1 *by* Eriana Ktistakis / 23

Dear Blue Ties *by* Owen Lewis / 26

Growing Pains *by* Milla Reed / 30

In Kambos *by* Eriana Ktistakis / 36

Girl and Flowers *by* Irina Tall Novikova / 41

Dear Blue Eyes *by* Owen Lewis / 46

Velvets #3 *by* Addie White / 49

Two Deer *by* Milla Reed / 51

Portrait On Film #2 *by* Eriana Ktistakis / 57

Untitled #1 *by* Irina Tall Novikova / 59

Untitled #2 *by* Irina Tall Novikova / 63

Velvets #4 *by* Addie White / 66

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

From the deepest parts of my soul, I want to thank you for being part of this journey with us. Deal Jam started as a writing group filled with (current and former) students of The Ohio State University. It has since bloomed into a thriving literary magazine with incredible submissions from around the world.

As Deal Jam grows, we, the editors, grow with it. That is why, for the first time ever, we implemented an optional theme: deer/dear. We wanted to see your creativity channeled into the animals we see in nature and the dedications you could create to others. As always, we were blown away by the work we received.

This edition showcases seven works of stunning fiction, five works of creative nonfiction, and eleven gorgeous poems, all interlaced with evocative artwork. We are so incredibly proud of this edition, and hope it brings you as much joy, awe, unease, and questioning as it did for us.

So to everyone who contributed to this edition, thank you for trusting us with your work. And to all our readers, thank you for your support. We are so excited to continue to grow with you.

Eriana Ktistakis, EIC
May 2024



FICTION

SOUR

by

Milla Reed

I always use the knives drying on the rack before pulling clean ones from the block. It feels grown up to be efficient like that. The apple sitting on top of my stove is a brilliant yellow green. Edging chartreuse. It looks sour. I salivate. Turning it over in my hand, it feels sour. You can feel it sometimes in the weight. The gloss of the skin—the tension. I still don't have a fruit bowl for this place. Not very grown up. My mother has beautiful fruit bowls. Wooden ones and deep blue ceramic ones with wavy white edges. I love how lemons look in the blue one. I used to cut apples cleanly down the center, through the core and the seeds, and then I'd cut the halves in half, and then half again. Now I cut around the core, down one side, then the next. Four times, until it is a perfectly long square shape of the bad stuff. "A wedge-shaped core of darkness." This phrase returns to me constantly. To the Lighthouse is my favorite book but I can't bring myself to read any of her other ones. Clean cut from the top of the green to the bottom; you have to gauge how close to the stem to go and not every apple is the same. It has to be close enough to the stem to maximize the size of the slices but far enough out so as not to hit the seeds. A fourth becomes an eighth. I guess I'm scared they won't make me feel the same as that first one did. Mrs. Dalloway and The Voyage collect dust on the windowsill in my room that has the beehive in the top left corner of it. It grows like a resentment. Every time I remember to look at it it's larger, but I feel no need to remove it. They can live their lives between my rented panes of glass. If anything, I like that they're there. It makes me feel like I'm sharing something vital and necessary with the world. Sometimes I think about how they could hurt me. The window is never open, though; it only stays up when I prop it with a paint stirrer and I haven't been able to find that for a while. Long enough for the hive process to unfold I suppose. There's a lot that doesn't work in my house. The bottom hinge of my bedroom door has been broken since we moved in. It only opens or closes if I lift with my shoulder slightly to keep it balanced all the way through. If I'm not gentle, the hinge will drop and let out a harsh groan. I always try to be gentle though. Like a doe. I like deer for how powerful and breakable they are at the same time. Their delicate legs seem too fragile to support the weight of their bodies. All that muscle and sinew. The massive, searching eyes.



Velvets #1 by Addie White

DOE EYES

by

Addie White

The sky reflected nothing in the river as the creature floated gently downstream. It created its own soft ripples as it cut a path through the water. All around it, moss clung to trees, hyper-saturated green lighting the way in the darkness of the post-rain world. Redbud branches arched over the water, dropping raspberry petals onto the creature's soft belly and into the eddies of water around it. Gentle, brown eyes watched patiently as the world around it passed by. Its journey was long, silent, and solitary. Until the geese flew in from the east and began to call.

“Repent! Repent! Repent!” They screamed at the thing.

They followed closely behind, slipping in and out of the wake opening up behind it as they chanted. The creature did not question the order of nature, and although it did not know what it had done wrong, it felt the shame it was told to. It drifted with no purpose but to feel remorse for nameless things done and left undone.

It bobbed with the breath of the river, no longer able to summon its own. Further down the river it flowed, held up by the filled space within its chest and abdomen. It grazed the barbs of the honey locust. Flesh stung, but not a sound was made by the creature. The doctrine of the geese echoed down the length of the river, disturbing the soft ripples, turning them into shivers.

“Repent! Repent! Repent!” The geese chased.

Somewhere on the bank, another creature watched through a blind of leaves, its white-spotted body looking on as the creature drifted by. It cried out, a whistling, bleating sound that echoed through the woods.

The bloat of the animal began to sag under the gaze of the other. It bumped and stumbled into the walls of the river bank, until its four legs caught in the mess of weeds. It clung there for days, its body giving out to the elements. Fungi and fly tasted its sorrow, marking the end of its journey.

Eventually it will re-enter the cycle of nature. And maybe in that life it will grow old, maybe it will die with some traces of it left in the world. But for now it will continue to rot, doe eyes staring up at the world.

DEAD ANIMALS

by

Nicole Brogdon

This suburb is full of dead animals. Vultures watch on posts along the thin silver highway. Go ahead, Bird, remind these suburbanites—who buy braces for blonde children—about death. Traffic-savvy vultures, with long necks and beaks, burrow furtively into carcasses—skunk, raccoon, twisted wayward dog—drilling for entrails. We drive past.

Another miscarriage for me this morning. Sticky mass nearly like an eye looking up from inside the white toilet. A splotch of red evil-eye. Bull's-eye goal, that my body just can't hit. I accelerate away from our home.

A deer hurls itself like a suicide against my bumper, crash, is thrown sideways. I slow the car, pull over, step out. The deer lies on its side in gravel, leg bent in broken L-shapes. A lean elfin head, delicate chin. The deer reminds me of my 12-year-old niece, Taylor. That fey little face, throat panting. One eye, a large white-brown marble, rolls in the head, staring. My sister, Taylor's mother, has four children. More kids than she needs, popping out of the camel hump on her belly, one after the next.

A vulture lands nearby in the grass, talons touching deer blood. Some creature will clean up the mess we've made, and we'll go on. I nudge the deer's head with my foot. I'm suddenly tired—there's got to be a Starbucks around here. I'll drive there now. I'll sit in the good chairs, where no one knows me, sipping my latte.

CAUGHT IN THE HEADLIGHTS

by
Anna W.

Turning off the lights and swinging the door shut, I can finally leave work and begin my twenty-minute drive home. I will have to cook something for dinner and take the dogs out as soon as I get there, but for now I have twenty minutes of peace. It's late in the summer. The weather is still in the eighties, but my office requires formal clothes. When I get seated in my car I take a moment to tie my hair up, roll down the windows, and reveal the sun roof. It may not seem like much of a game changer, but the sun roof sold me on the car. The dogs love it, and though my armrest is scratched to all hell, I find it's worth the joy it brings them—and the joy it brings me on days like this when the extra breeze is appreciated greatly.

My fingers glide over to change the station to my CD player. The disc is a mystery to me; I can't remember the last time I listened to a CD. It finally plays a greatest hits track from a favorite band of mine from when I was in high school. My love is still there, but the songs hold more nostalgia than the passion I held years ago. The first song rolls over me as I take in the back beats and the autotuned high notes. The song washes away the eight hours of stiff tension in my shoulders, and the overwhelming urge to scream from corporate headaches that have been piling on the past few weeks. And not to mention the social drama from my co-workers about their children starting highschool, and why did you not have kids, you love kids, your children would be so cute. Except I have never wanted kids, and now I have the time and money to do the things I want.

My lovely desk job alongside the most sincere and well-meaning upper middle class, white, and vaguely xenophobic co-workers builds up like an emotional gunk that muddies my day. The sludge of it all washes off me with the breeze and splatters to the pavement in my rearview, leaving a nasty stain on the crumbling roadside. My mostly off-key voice can be heard by the brief views of tree lines and cornfields. Luckily enough, my drive home lines up with the sunset. That means a beautiful view for 90 percent of the trip, and the last five minutes with the sun directly in my eyes. The light blinds me as I go uphill and reminds me to pray at least once a day. Not to any particular being, but I do beg and plead to not be roadkill this time of year.

Existing in my limited, blissful state, I spot deer in the fields. They are gentle and majestic beasts if they stay away from my car and don't get too adventurous. They are a little close, but it should be fine as long as they don't get too curious or too quick. I ease into a coasting speed, just in case, ya know? There's a car up ahead that seems to spot them, too. The car flashes its headlights at me, and I do it back. When the deer approach the road, the opposing car and I slow to a crawl. A deer steps onto the pavement, a young fawn it seems, with its mother behind. Our cars and the deer are too close for comfort, we slow to a practical stop. We pull off to the side of the road, and I roll down my window. I could holler at the other car if I wanted.

The fawn sits in the middle of the road, our cars loosely sandwiching the poor thing. The deer watch me carefully, and I watch them back. The sun is still high, but the fawn is paralyzed between metal walls. I can see the driver of the other car clearly: another woman in her mid thirties with dark brown hair, a blue blouse with white flowers. She is watching the deer and me. Putting my car in park, I look up to her and catch her attention with a wave.

"Should we do something?" I call out my window. She shrugs and looks back to the deer. I watch as she reaches for her seatbelt and gets out of her car. I follow suit and check both directions for other cars, putting my hazards on just in case we are out until dark. Considering the deer's pace right now, it's a likely scenario. My dress boots hit the pavement, and I approach the fawn. I hold out my hand flat and let the creature sniff till it allows me to pet it once, then again. She goes to the other deer; she seems to be herding them towards the road. She has more courage than I do. She gently shoos them. My curiosity is taking over, and it will likely get the best of me.

"Do you have anything we could use to lead them to the other side or do you think what you're doing will be enough?" I say in her direction. Not too loudly though, I don't want to scare the fawn.

"There's some blueberries in my lunchbox. That might work." She continues shoos the other deer forward. There's about five deer here, yet she seems the most natural thing in the field. "It's in my front seat if you wanna grab 'em."

I rush the five paces to her car. Finding the lunchbox, I rifle through and grab the glass container half-full of blueberries. I take a few in my hand as I approach the fawn, offering them. The poor little guy takes them gladly. I take a few more berries, then walk the container over to the other woman.

"This doesn't happen everyday," I say, passing the container over. Her hands are warm. I have to take a breath to focus myself.

"No, it really doesn't, but I don't mind. As long as we don't get hit," she says with

a crooked smile. Her eyes sparkle a little and I see how rich they are, a deep brown. “I’m Cristine,” she says effortlessly. She knows how much it fits her.

“Winona,” I say as I head back over to the fawn, which now watches me with those big eyes that know I hold berries in my hand.

“Like Win—”

“Yes, like Winona Ryder, but no, not the inspiration,” I interrupt her. The fawn follows my lead as I walk backwards off the road with my hand open, revealing the blueberries. Pleading not to trip and fall on my ass, I look up to the other woman. The blue of her blouse and the deep brown of her hair paints her as a warrior of air and gentle charisma in this open stretch of road and cornfields. I feel my cheeks heat, and so I look back at the fawn. I smile when I see we’ve made it into the field, and the creature gladly eats the rest of the blueberries from my hand.

Cristine is following my lead. The rest of the deer are clearing the road, walking into the field on the other side. They stare as if asking, Any more berries? We shrug at them, and when I look back to Cristine, her eyes are already on me.

“Hi,” I say a little sheepishly.

“Hi,” she says back with that crooked smile. “Do you herd deer often?”

“No, I definitely do not.” I laugh through the words and look back to the deer, needing to break eye contact. “Why? Do you?” A smile grows on my face, I can’t seem to stop myself from smiling and laughing, considering the situation.

“Not at all.” We both laugh at that. “We’ll have to do it again sometime soon,” she says, eyeing me again. I meet her eyes, and that sparkle is there.

“I suppose we will, but maybe we should get coffee first next time?”

“I’d love to,” she says with that crooked grin, and I know I am in for some trouble. a crooked smile. Her eyes sparkle a little and I see how rich they are, a deep brown. “I’m Cristine,” she says effortlessly. She knows how much it fits her.

“Winona,” I say as I head back over to the fawn, which now watches me with those big eyes that know I hold berries in my hand.

“Like Win—”

“Yes, like Winona Ryder, but no, not the inspiration,” I interrupt her. The fawn follows my lead as I walk backwards off the road with my hand open, revealing the blueberries. Pleading not to trip and fall on my ass, I look up to the other woman. The blue of her blouse and the deep brown of her hair paints her as a warrior of air and gentle charisma in this open stretch of road and cornfields. I feel my cheeks heat, and so I look back at the fawn. I smile when I see we’ve made it into the field, and the creature gladly eats the rest of the blueberries from my hand.



Velvets #2 by Addie White

A LABOR IN DISSOLUTION

by

Reece Ludwig

“**Y**ou’re a brat, I hope you know that.” My cousin reaches over my hand to grab a handful of M&M’s from the pouch in my lap. I watch her shovel each one into her mouth with dry hands turned orange in the fluorescent light of the hospital. I give her a vacant stare, trying my best to make my eyes look a little too big for my face, like they did when I was little. The hum of the air conditioner fills my ears as she squints at me, running her eyes over each feature on my face. “Don’t try that bullshit with me.”

“What bullshit?” I can feel my mouth twisting with my false ignorance; I try my best to freeze it in place. She lets her expression fall, accusing me of lying with each twitch of her lips.

“You’re pissing me off.” She crosses her arms, self-tanner rubbing onto her tank top. “Your tan is horrible.”

“Is it possible to stop scrutinizing me for one second?” She inspects her arms and the splotches covering them. I inspect them along with her, wishing it was possible for me to stop scrutinizing her for one second.

I scoop a few candies into my palm, letting the waxy colors melt onto my skin. I lift my arm, only one blue piece finding its way into my mouth, the rest spilling down my chest and clattering down to the floor.

I pause, noticing the lack of chocolate in my mouth and the tingling sensation in my hand. I look down to see a hole opening in my palm, a grey mist taking the place of my flesh. I watch as the blue in my veins begins to fade, a plague running through my blood. My heart picks up. I was afraid this would happen. When the pregnancy was announced, I felt something shift, the tether between my sister and I tightening as the baby grew. Like there wasn’t room for both of us in her. I thought this was a myth. An inverse birth.

“Girls.” My mom stands in the doorway, her breath heavy. “She is almost ready to start and if she gets any sort of bad energy from you, she’ll freak out and you’ll ruin this for her.” She walks over to us, each step bigger than the last and snatches the empty candy wrapper from my hands. “Seriously?” I keep my head down, knowing if I look up and see

her expression there's no way I won't laugh. I don't know why I do that. "You're such a brat, you know that? I asked you to do one thing for her." She strides to the vending machine, the row holding my sister's favorite candy now empty. I don't have the heart to tell her how they all got on the floor. I don't have the heart to tell her why my stomach is starting to hurt. I look down at the hole in my hand that each chocolate slipped through.

My stomach tightens. "I think she's pushing."

My mom bangs her hand on the glass, the machine rattling with the impact. I look down at the shape resembling what used to be my hand, false fingers weaving together and swirling through the air. I can't feel a thing.

"Stay here. I have to go be with her. Keep your phones handy." She glides through the empty room, working seamlessly through the shitty wooden chairs like a maze on the back of a cereal box. I watch the door swing behind her, offering short glimpses of the hall beyond.

I look over at my cousin's hands once more, studying the smudges of color staining her palms. I think this makes her look even more orange than before. My throat is scratchy as I speak. "I don't feel good."

She looks over at me, a smug expression on her face. I wait for her to ask me what's wrong, but instead I lurch forward, the chocolate I managed to get in my mouth threatening to find a new home on the tile. I reach to dig through her purse, searching for water or a bag, but my fingers only dissipate. The mist swirls into the air and returns to its place on the ends of my arms after I stop trying. I can hear the screams of my sister through the door with my mom behind it. I picture her face red and sweaty, the baby's body working its way out of her.

I notice a trash can placed at the bottom of my feet; I didn't realize I was still hunched over. My throat fills with heat; saliva coats every inch of my mouth. I close my eyes and let the endlessly tightening knot in my stomach take hold. I feel it all empty itself from me. I don't know what it is. I open my eyes to see a black soup stirring, swaying as if it has its own sense of life. Its own heartbeat.

"What the fuck is that?" My cousin's eyes light up with something I can't quite place as she takes in the sight of what I created.

"I don't know." I take a deep breath, the soup still swaying. "I need water."

She digs through her purse, fingers shaking as she hands me a half-empty bottle. She flinches back as the container crashes to the floor, slipping through what should have been my arms. The new mist dips down with the bottle and leaps back into place where my arms would have been. Each particle swaying in motion with the sludge at my feet.

"Get in here!" My mom's voice rings through the hall. My cousin straightens her

legs and stands tall, making my curled posture even more noticeable.

“I should get some help.” My cousin starts toward the door, and sneaks a look back at me in my chair. I can only imagine the sight. The mess at what used to be my feet. I meet her eyes and shake my head. She knows what’s happening, at least as much as I know. I just thought this only happened to twins in movies and faraway places.

I sit alone in the waiting room now. The light shines on the white tile through the mist below me. It’s above where my knees were now. I try to stand but the particles break apart with the pressure. They scatter across the floor, snapping back to their shape after a moment.

I can still hear my sister’s screams; I feel my own rising from my throat. My body lurches forward once more, my false legs unable to stop the force of what remains of my body. I fall to the ground, splashing in the endless black now covering the floor. I turn my head, my cheek soaking in the soup and thrumming with its motion. I feel it sway with my heart. What’s left of my body beats with power, rocking as my sister’s wailing grows. I can see her in my mind, her body ripping itself apart.

My body moves with my heart, stronger this time. I flip to my false back. I stand on my false feet, the particles staying in place. There is no more flesh to weigh it down.

I begin to walk, if it can even be called that. The particles hovering over the sludge, never making contact but still swaying along. I watch as the sludge begins to change shape, the cries of my sister’s baby filling my ears.

It clumps as it continues to sway, a new shape taking form. A new heartbeat making itself heard, a makeshift infant lies at my feet. The no-longer-liquid black struggles to keep the new dimensions, bits and pieces melt to the floor as if it were wax from a burning candle. I watch as its mouth twists, the goop fighting to keep shape as air fights its way into the lungs. No screams come out, instead only the amplified beat of its heart. I know the beat used to be mine.

I make my way to the door where my mom, sister, and cousin wait. I move to grab the handle, but what used to be my hand pushes its way through. I try my luck and make to step through the door, and I do. My mom is on the phone talking to her brother. She tells him it’s a girl. My splotchy-tanned cousin has her phone out, her social media flooding with images of the baby. In the bed lies my sister, holding a new piece of herself in her arms. She looks right through me, as if I’m not there. She does not ask where I am, and my cousin, who once went to get help, does not tell her.

I lean in towards the baby, my false fingers wrapping around her tiny body. I look at her eyes and mouth behaving as if they are glued shut. Her skin is pink and wet, with wisps of blonde hair peeking from her scalp. I want to tell the baby what she is. An ugly,

wet, sad creature, but I cannot seem to make any noise.



When I gather my doubts, it will rain by Irina Tall Novikova

THE OTHER WOMAN

by
Julian Gallo

It's strange to see another woman sitting beside his father, her long black hair pulled back and fastened with an orange butterfly hair clip, loose tendrils blowing in the wind coming through the half opened window. Neil Sedaka's *Bad Blood* is on the radio, tuned to WNBC, which obviously wasn't his father's choice.

The ride to Long Island seems endless, and Victor doesn't want to be there, already missing his friends and the ball game they were set to play that morning. He's uncomfortable, agitated, and the song on the radio isn't helping matters any.

Victor's sister Alicia seems a bit more settled. She's pensive as she stares out the window, her hair also blowing in the wind as the car rockets down the expressway now that traffic has finally cleared. Alicia always seems to take things in stride, accepting how things were now. She displays no bitterness, no animosity, and just goes along trying to make the best of a bad situation.

The other woman—Yvonne—sings along with the Neil Sedaka song, her voice high-pitched and horribly off-key, her Puerto Rican accent coming through on particular words. Though his parents had separated a few months earlier, Victor still couldn't get used to seeing this other woman in his mother's seat. Who was she to replace his mother, to take his father away from him? How did this happen? Why did this happen?

Yvonne looks back at them, her eyes hidden by a pair of dark Ray-Bans, her little button nose scrunched up in an attempt to look cute. It makes Victor sick, and he turns his eyes downward, stares at the flaking iron-on decal on his yellow T-shirt—*Streakin' On Down The Line*—its Robert Crumb-styled drawing rather humorous to Yvonne as she stares at it. She turns away and pushes a strand of hair behind her ear, looks out the window towards the now near rural landscape, seemingly a million miles from home.

This was Lou's weekend to take the kids, only this time he had something special in mind—a beach house in the Hamptons, which he didn't own but was allowed use of by one of his co-workers. He jumped at the chance to get out of the city, this time bringing Yvonne along, who he'd promised a nice weekend to since they'd moved in together. Yvonne didn't mind the kids being there. She assumed they would be off on their own,

playing on the beach, allowing plenty of alone time with her new man. It was a welcome reprieve for her as well, having been working virtually non-stop for weeks. Besides, she liked Victor and Alicia, and had taken a particular shine to Alicia, who seemed more willing to accept her than her younger brother had.

After another hour on the two lane highway leading out to the Hamptons—and with Victor being at wit's end with the bad music emanating from the radio—they finally reach their destination. Lou pulls the car onto the lawn, for there's no driveway to speak of, and the house doesn't look like much either—small, rather ramshackle—more a cabin than a proper house. However it sits right on the beach with a small deck overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Victor is the first to exit the vehicle, stretching his legs and breathing in the sea air. The sun is hot on his face and the wind is kicking up a bit of sand which made its way from the beach onto the lawn. Lou opens the trunk and begins removing their luggage, snapping his fingers at Victor for him to stop standing around and offer some help. Victor grudgingly takes possession of the beach chairs, hooking the folded aluminum legs over both his arms, and follows his father towards the house, leaving Yvonne and Alicia behind to gather the remaining belongings.

“You've been rather quiet,” Lou says. “Is everything all right?”

“I guess so...”

Lou doesn't say anything. He understands. He watches his son struggling with the chairs over his arm, then musses his hair in an attempt to comfort him.

The house is small, cozy, with a fireplace, a couch, a glass coffee table which holds a large conch shell, a glass vase full of sand and seashells, a Life Magazine coffee table book, and a TV Guide. The TV is a small color set with rabbit ears sitting atop a cheap wooden entertainment center, next to a simple stereo and speakers, and a handful of albums. The dark-paneled walls are adorned with generic beach photos, now faded by time, along with shelving containing more beach-related items. A framed poster of fisherman's knots against a sky blue background hangs on the wall above the entertainment center. There's a small kitchen and dining table, all of which exist within the same space, and adjacent to the kitchen, a hallway leading to the two bedrooms. Victor and Alicia are going to have to bunk together, which doesn't thrill Victor. Off the living room, a set of sliding doors which leads out to the deck and a magnificent view of the beach.

It's hot, and there is no air conditioning, only a wooden ceiling fan and mother nature offering any reprieve from the heat.

Victor sets the beach chairs down on the floor and immediately starts towards the record collection, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He

doesn't know his father's co-worker who owns the house but he certainly has terrible taste in music—Perry Como, Englebert Humperdinck, Andy Williams, The Carpenters, Doris Day, and a few other crooners he'd never heard of before. Nothing remotely appeals to his own musical tastes.

Yvonne and Alicia enter the house and place the two brown paper shopping bags full of canned food on the kitchen table, then unpack the cooler filled with frankfurters and hamburger patties and place them in the freezer. Yvonne removes a cold pitcher of water from the refrigerator and begins looking for glasses in the cabinets.

Victor watches her, her slim figure beneath her flowing orange, flower-print summer dress, and as she reaches for the glasses adorned with orange flowers, he stares at the back of her shapely legs. He thinks she's very pretty but will be damned if he ever admitted it aloud. He loves her long Marlo Thomas hairstyle, her big dark eyes, her full sensuous mouth, and how her orange summer dress clings to the curves of her waist. She's so different from his mother, who he also thinks is pretty, but in a way he can't really explain. He never looked at his mother this way, wouldn't look at her that way, and he wonders if the feelings beginning to bubble inside him are the same ones his father has whenever he looks at her.

Yvonne pours herself a glass of water, then offers some to the kids. Only Alicia happily accepts it. Yvonne watches Victor over the rim of her glass, her eyes no longer hidden behind her Ray-Bans. They're big, dark, and beautiful.

Victor turns away, ill at ease, and looks through the windows of the sliding doors at the waves crashing along the beach.

Lou opens the sliding doors in order to allow the sea air in to cool off the house.

"Victor, come with me," he says.

Victor follows his father out to the deck.

"Look, there's a barbecue," his father says.

Victor runs a finger along the surface of the black iron Hibachi propped up on a pile of bricks, then looks at his father leaning against the deck's railing, lighting a cigarette, gazing out towards the ocean.

"I know this is difficult and uncomfortable but try to make the best of it, all right? Yvonne likes you. Don't you like her?"

Victor shrugs, doesn't say anything, focuses his attention on the seagulls circling over the shoreline. He'd never dare admit he finds her pretty, that he can't stop looking at her, that he wants to like her but feels he can't.

"Work with me, huh? This isn't easy for me either."

Victor doesn't know what to say, confused and agitated now, but his father

understands perfectly well, which doesn't make it easier for him. Lou doesn't say anything either, puffs on his cigarette, lost in thought as he watches the waves kiss the beach.

Finally, Victor says, "It's not that I don't like her but..."

"I know, I know," his father says. "It's uncomfortable for you, I understand. One day you'll understand too but I can't expect you to right now. It's not like I still don't love your mother... it's just..."

He doesn't know what else to say. He takes one last drag from his cigarette and flicks it into the sand below.

Yvonne appears in the threshold of the sliding doors, still holding her glass of water. Victor looks at her well toned thighs peering out of the hem of her summer dress, allows his eyes to follow the curve of her hips and linger there before tracing the shape of her legs again. Lou looks at him, a bit of an amused smile tugging at his lips, then motions for Yvonne to go back inside.

"I know this is difficult, but your mother and I tried to make you understand the night we told you we were getting a divorce," Lou says. "It's not easy for any of us. All I ask you is for a little patience. We're all going to get through this all right. Whatever happens, just remember I'm not going anywhere. I'm still your father and I always will be. I also ask you to treat Yvonne with respect. She has feelings too, you know. She's not your enemy, nor is she replacing your mother. Like I said, one day you'll understand."

Respect, his father says. How much respect did he show his mother? How much respect did he show his children? This is not how his young mind articulates it, but the feelings are there, within his guts, a churning inside him building to a rolling boil, seeking the release valve. All he can do is stare out at the ocean and try his hardest not to cry. Big boys don't cry, his father always said, and he has to be a big boy now.

"Maybe you need a little time to yourself," Lou says.

Lou musses his son's hair then disappears into the house.

Victor dares not look back, dares not betray any further emotions. He just stares out at the sea, the waves lapping the beach, the seagulls swooping down from the sky to pluck a fish from the ocean.

He can hear Yvonne and Alicia talking about the latest fashion trends as if they are best of friends, and he peers through the open doors. He again stares at Yvonne's thighs as she sits cross legged on the sofa, brushing her hair away from her eyes. He doesn't hear his father's voice and his silence makes him curious. He sees his father by the stove spooning coffee grinds into the basket of the percolator, a ray of sunshine through the kitchen window on his back, another cigarette dangling from his mustachioed lips. Yvonne rises from the couch and walks over to Lou, comes up behind him and slides her hands over

his back, rests her head on his shoulders. Victor just stares, his eyes darting from his father to Yvonne's beautiful legs and lingering there for a long moment before turning away to watch the waves roll across the shoreline.

New York City, May 2022



Dear Blue Skies *by* Owen Lewis



Portrait on Film #1 *by* Eriana Ktistakis

SCENERY

by

Blanka Pillár

I forgive him for the little lies. The little fibs that slip away and the broken promises that go unkept. He always tells the same lies, and sometimes I believe him because the story paints itself like a vivid oil portrait. First, the figures are painted, then the background, then the corners, edges, contours, and finally, it becomes as if it were a real scene on the canvas of life, but only the immensity of human imagination has made what could never be real. It tells me what I most desire, so I reach for it with all my heart, stretching out my soul's arms to preserve all his lips whisper and hold it within me for eternity. I love him with all my heart, but when my reality is keen-eyed, it sometimes smells like the scratch of jagged-edged infidelities in the dawning light or the wistful night. The cold realization slips into bed beside me or touches me as I walk.

Today we take it into our heads to walk around the riverbank. We get caught in the cool January breeze, and he starts coughing. I take off my thin, pink cotton scarf and wrap it around his neck with careful movements. He gives me a weak half-smile and walks on. My chest gets hot, even though my whole body is shivering from the winter's minus temperatures. Sometimes we stop. We look at the broken-legged seagulls on the slippery waterfront stones, the sloppy sidewalk ahead, and the footprints of giddy pedestrians. He rubs his hand as we spy on one of the old buildings covered in melted snow. His fingertips are almost purple, so I tug off my black fabric gloves and slip them on his frosty palms. He thanks me quietly. His silent words creep into my consciousness like angelically soft notes, wrapping my trembling body in a gentle embrace.

Barely perceptible, the milky-white sky opens, and it drizzles, but we are unperturbed. We sit on a stinging bench and stare silently at the glistening toes of our wet boots as they tread the snowy ground before us. Somewhere in the distance, expensive hand-painted plates clink, light pages of newspapers crinkle in the city breeze, the iron bells of a dilapidated church jingle, and a delicious golden-skinned duck in a warm oven is being prepared. I feel him move beside me, and I put my head down. He sways back and forth with folded arms while tiny particles of dripping snow fall on his knitted, flame-red Angora sweater. I slip my thin arms out of my expensive loden-lined coat and place them

on his back. He looks me in the eye. My tongue curls and confesses at seeing his delicately delineated perfect face. It humbly admits the truth it has admitted so many times before and hopes. It hopes that, for once, its love's answer will not be a lie. But once again, he replies, I love you too. I-love-you. He utters this gracious lie delicately. The first syllable is trust, the second is passion, and the third is loyalty. He feels none of these, yet he testifies to them. He savours the shape of the voice. First bitter, then sour, then finally swallowed. After all, it's only one word. But for me, it's so much more: I put myself in his hands.

Maybe that's not how it all happened. I've been sick for a while now; my lungs are weak from the January freeze. Every time I close my eyes, I try to remember our last story. Embellish it, add to it, rearrange it, change it. Maybe one day I'll grind it to perfection, and that word won't ring so false. Or the memory will turn yellow, like old letterhead, and no longer matter. Or maybe "I love you" will become just another fluffy word to be whispered in the harsh winter, bored, picked up by the wind, carried far away, across the world, to where it means nothing. Far from the eager, greedy arms of my soul.



Dear Blue Ties *by* Owen Lewis



NON-FICTION

ALL AROUND THE POOLSIDE

by
Jake Williams

Perhaps nothing much needs to happen, whether in our creative lives or in the wider world. This is part of what might be found by that Winter pond in the woods. Right now, I'm practising being intently focused on my writing, on the words slowly taking shape on the blank page in front of me, of raindrops slowly trickling down the windows, of life flowing past, of reflections glimpsed in a Deer's dark eye, of random snatches of conversation. Like the archetypal Trickster, the Shaman breaking down barriers, you move between worlds. In the month of Winter Solstice, the barriers seem thinner, a time to reflect on how we move on this earth, and how we might move on it in the year to come. It's a cure for the Winter blues (at this very moment listening to the Cure, sitting outside Teuchter's Landing in Leith...just like heaven). The last echoes of the Autumn rut die away.

My pond is fed by unseen springs and Cumbrian rain, which tends to fall frequently-it keeps everything green and growing and makes the colours glow. Painters have always loved the play of light and weather, especially Turner of course, with his famous 'Storm Over Buttermere'. Sometimes it's not just four seasons in one day, in the words of Crowded House, but four seasons in five minutes. Eternities live within one glance exchanged amongst sunlit leaves, while bleached white antlers return to grateful earth.

Take a trip to weatherland. Rain and mist can transform a landscape in the same way that snow does, taking you out of the everyday world into the imaginal one, where all you might hear is the patter of raindrops on leaves, on ground, on water. You might smell Spring's freshness, Summer's fullness, Autumn's loaminess.

A whole year passed slowly during one short spell of reflection-searching for something else just beyond the everyday, the hush beneath the trees, exploring small spaces but travelling far in spirit. Ideas start to incubate, along with the life of the pond. Last year prepared the ground for the new one to come, as daylight grows little by little. Amongst the Bracken, new fronds will grow where Fauns once sheltered.

That peace of wild things remains, like the layered leaves on the woodland floor, nurturing our creative seeds, if we choose to stop and look around for a little while. All

that is gone led us to that present moment at the pondside, as a Robin perches on a Hawthorn and fluffs up its feathers against the cold. Five Roe Deer Hinds quietly crop whatever winter grass they can find.



I'M BECOMING A NEW CREATURE

AN INTERVIEW

by

C. W. Bryan

I have always been upset at the difficulty of describing the sensation, the phenomenon, of walking through a field of dead grass. I do not mean wild grass. For me, there is simply a profound loss, paired with a semblance of hope there. There is a hope in the knowledge that the grass, the wild kind, will grow back better, and different, and the generational cycle will continue.

The cognitive dissonance I experience exclusively revolves around the cultivated kind of grass. In the park near my house there is a lot of wildlife. A lot of trees were planted so long ago that I have forgotten about their cultivation. I wonder if each seed was placed there very intentionally by some grand architect. Maybe some PhDs first job. Maybe he wrote his thesis on terraforming. Maybe he read Frank Herbert's *Dune* and was inspired. Probably not, though. I imagine the trees here are much older than that.

In recent years, ones that I can remember, they started construction on a park immediately adjacent to Grant Park. The one they built has almost no trees save for a few that line the edges. The kind of trees you see in tree lawns in places like Brooklyn or small suburbs in Ohio. These trees tend to lose their leaves faster than any others. I wonder why that is. I think maybe it was their sheltered childhood that has not prepared them for the reality of winter.

In this new park, the one they built only a couple years ago, there is a large, large plot of cultivated grass. If I were a better writer, or a more involved one, I would look up what kind of grass it is. It reminds me of Bermuda grass. It has the look of a golf course about it. It is always trimmed thin. Maybe each stalk grows an inch tall before they cut it back. Before the blades of a lawnmower pare it into some respectable aesthetic.

The park's existence is interesting to me. Interesting might not be the right word, but again, I am not the most involved writer. I thought this park was silly at first, but now I find it troubling. On days when I don't feel like walking the concrete roads of Grant Park, I will come up here. I walk generally alone, in the fall and winter time, when all of the people who would throw frisbees or footballs, have somehow decided that some arbitrary metric like 45 degrees is too cold to continue their games. I appreciate this, though,

the loneliness. It gives me time to walk every inch of the large plot. It gives me time to think, to formulate thoughts without ever being interrupted by an errant throw.

The part that I don't like is the difficulty I have in describing the sensation of walking among this inch-tall, dead, cultivated grass. I cannot find the words to adequately describe it. It accepts each footfall. It bows graciously like a good host. But it is not spongy, like a cake, or, even more so, like a sponge. Those likenesses are too damp or too wet, and the grass, if it is anything other than so yellow it is near white, is dry.

It is so dry I imagine if I were to drop my lit cigarette among its stalks, it would catch instantly, and before I could even understand it, the whole thing would be up in flames. Despite this, I still smoke when I walk among it, knowing that burning is not the worst thing that can happen to grass. How else to describe it, though? It is somehow firm, resilient, even. It snaps back into place. My footsteps barely leave a trace. I don't know what it is like, really. The first image that always comes to mind is walking through sand. While sand is more accepting of the shape of my foot, the wind or tide always pushes the grains back together. Pushed back to where there is no trace I have ever been there.

I cannot think of a good description. Perhaps I will read one eventually, and this minor, unbelievably minor, existential crisis will be solved. I hope this is not the case. I want to come to the conclusion on my own.

When my thoughts tire of digging around in the wordbank, when my mind needs a break from sifting through metaphors, I like to think about the future. Occasionally, I like to think that someday I will be giving some near useless interview about my writing routine, or how I got started writing. What inspires you? The kinds of interviews you listen to hoping to glean some information on what it means to be an artist. Some advice that you try to implement, that simply will not take. So I would try to avoid giving real advice and instead use the opportunity to lie.

The interviewer is well dressed in a suit, though she has removed her coat because, after all, I am a writer and not someone serious, like a businessman. She will try to embrace an informality, while maintaining that cadence, that professional cadence when video cameras and microphones are on. I will admire her effort. She will ask me, "Why did you start writing poetry?" and I will tell her this story. About the park they built near my house. I will date it 10 years earlier than it happened—an age young enough to be believable. The story will go like this:

"They built a park immediately next to another park, which I found to be incredibly silly. I still went. Who could stay away? There was a large patch of cultivated grass that died every winter. I would go, when the park was empty, and walk through it. Each time, coming away with the sensation of having walked every inch of the grass, and having no

describe what it was like other than to say, 'It is like walking through the dead grass.'

I have heard it once said by some T.S. Eliot scholar, I cannot remember his name, that despite the complexity of some of Eliot's works, poetry's intention is not to hide or complicate the language. Rather, its purpose is to distill it. Down, down to its perfect essence. And that is why I had to start. I had to distill the language down to its perfect essence. Only one essence could matter—the essence of dead grass. And my entire life, my entire body of work, the hours of writing I have done, the cramps in my hands, the listening and transcribing of voice memos will all be for one singular purpose. It will be to have mastered the art just enough to reach the peak. To find the words to describe the sensation of walking through inch-long dead grass."

John Ashbery was once prompted with one of the most arbitrary interview questions ever crafted: "What does your poetry do?" He did not say anything about distilling, and he didn't say anything about the idea of perfection. He simply said that his poetry perhaps gives a blue rinse to the language. And this is so beautiful to me, even though I do not understand it. Sometimes I feel that the sensation of walking through dead grass is so beautiful to me because I do not understand it. Now, in reality, not a fake, imagined interview, I do not want to understand it. I simply want to take my shoes off and walk through it.

ODE TO LIMBO

by

Sophy Drouin

Content Warning: Sexual Violence

You're detached from your body but you are still in it, I swear. Don't take it. That you've been naked here before doesn't matter. He'll do this and wake up the next morning and text you he's sorry. You're the one who will have to change jobs, carry both your bruises on your body, smell the rage of your shame on your sticky underwear. You will get on buses and bicycles and eat boiled carrots while trying not to scratch at the space you think is empty. You will go quiet not believing yourself.

He'll be having sex, their spirits hovering above you, recounting the way he grunted. The way he looked and made you want to take your clothes off despite knowing all you shared was a lack of concern for your pleasure.

Am I telling you to stay away from him? No. He's delicious. He's unashamed of his desire for girls and can you blame him for taking home what throws itself into his grocery basket? Games will be played and your heart will flutter at the thought of seeing him and all this is fun and exciting and the heartbroken nights will be worth it because you'll sleep deeply after crying with your girlfriends while folding your fucking laundry. He'll make you feel like a girl, the way you can't feel yourself.

But when he flips you over you will realize you'd been saving certain things for someone special. Say no with more than your dry throat. You'll glimpse at a hidden hope as plump and juicy as a California orange hibernating deep within your conscience: don't let his pillow swallow it.

When it happens, and the hope becomes distilled pixelations of an old life, it's not too late not to give in. Scratch him not the sheets, bite him not your lips. One hand is on your head and your hair crinkles like a burning sap tree but his other hand is balancing him on the bed. Think of that.

Because after there won't be sirens or Dad's jeep, there'll be a distant offer of water when he sees you paralyzed on his bed: all you've been able to do is partly cover your own cadaver. When crystals have formed of his evidence on your thighs he'll be snoring while you crawl his floor like a deer on ice. You'll gather clothes in the

dark, waiting for the bludgeon that will finally kill you but it's not coming. He's not interested in killing you that way, there was an easier way to do it. There will be a cold hallway not holding your body. Chipped green metal stairs and their railings will rattle against your teeth. You'll assume it's their smell but what you'll be tasting is blood. You'll not be able to weave a story out of this because nothing blooms from pure evil.

An ever expanding series of blank frames will replace the memories of how you got back to your own bed. Things like going to the bathroom will be more complicated. You will teach yourself how to make love but your body won't forget. And some days it will remember for thirteen seconds and other days for hours on end it will be back in that room, limp, and cold, and penetrated.

I'm not telling you to love this body. But remember that believing you're expensive only benefits those who commodify you: you become worried how to spend yourself: you need a middle man to help. Instead ask yourself how to be your own customer. Be bored for so long that the risk of your own company is more engaging than that of disappointing him. You don't have to be eaten to be a juicy orange, and enough to be home.

And I'm telling you this now, being alive, having lived, after all this. I'm telling you to fight as if you weren't being killed, never so threatened as there, under him. I'm telling you this removed but most importantly, I'm telling you, who survived, that you could have done better, which you did anyway once you got out from under him. You did fine, you did what you thought you could do, which was save your life by going quiet. And you did: you saved our life. So thank you. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to keep going.



In Kambos by Eriana Ktistakis

TWO (OR MAYBE ONE) ARMED DESTRUCTION

by
Emelia Gauch

A pinch of pain appears every second, disappears, then reappears, as Let's-Call-Him-Jacob pokes me again and again and again and again in the arm. Over and over. Poke. Gone. Poke. Gone. Poke.

He's been doing this for forty minutes, and I've started to numb.

It's hard to eat lunch with one arm.

Mom packed me a good one today, too. Leftover pasta from dinner last night.

Still, I keep my head forward, my mouth straight, and my legs crossed, ignoring him. Sweat pools under my arms as I squeeze them close to my sides.

(If I turned smaller, maybe he'd go away.)

I didn't give Jacob the pleasure of a response when he first started bothering me, so he's made it his mission to elicit one. I think it's alright. Jacob isn't hurting me, not badly anyway. At least, I don't think so. I am thirteen and I can't always tell what hurts. I've pressed down on my bruises for as long as I can remember, wincing through the pain until it fades into a gentle throb.

Until it becomes a whisper on my body.

the green-purple mark looks worse but feels natural.

my pain tolerance is high.

My eyes flick to the clock. Only a few minutes left until recess. I begin to bounce my right leg. I grit my teeth and imagine white dust forming under my tongue. I can barely remember why he started touching me. At first, I was horrified. Then, pleased at being chosen. Now, I'm uncomfortable and tired of this game.

Maybe he likes me.

My cheeks grow hot at the idea, and I hope I blush prettily.

Maybe that's why he does this, a crush.

I focus on everything around me to distract myself from the thought of Jacob liking me. From the discomfort he currently inflicts upon my body. The two feel identical.

Look, it's a cafeteria full of acne-prone Jewish pre-teens. Look, a few tables over, a girl steals a popular boy's hat and puts it on her head. Look, he flirts back, swiping at it,

his growing palm pawing gently at her blonde curls. The large windows from behind me light the two of them up like a spotlight. I want to steal someone's hat.

When I am older, this want will become so large I can barely speak. Can barely swallow. I will want someone to touch my arm with careful fingertips, run a thumb over my knuckles. I will want someone to ask first. I will want to say yes.

I will want to be spoken to and touched gently
but will worry that these soft acts might break me.

Look, a seventh grader throws away a sandwich and the cafeteria is cold. A girl ties her hair back into a ponytail. I focus on the curve of her neck.

My friends sit with me, having their own conversation across the table. I don't know what they are talking about anymore. I've tuned out. I try to re-pay attention, focus on the words, but my brain and body separated half an hour ago. I'm floating, I'm watching the scene (Jacob, me, cafeteria, girl, boy, hat, lunch, table) unfold in front of me.

Pride swells momentarily for the me I watch, for not flinching.

She views this as a skill, withstanding, preparing.

A clap.

I jolt.

A teacher waves her wrinkled hands together in front of us, announcing that it's time to start cleaning up. Soon, we will head outside. Jacob takes his final poke, grins horribly. He looks so proud of himself. When he turns away and I am free of his gaze, I rub my arm and move it up and down. It weighs me down right now, my raw and tender skin.

The next week or year, Jacob grabs my ponytail and drags me down the tiled hallway. He chooses the area by the restrooms, the one midway between the cafeteria and playground. Other students pour through the hallway around us. Actions purposely put on display: they are not meant to be hidden, but known and publicized for an audience.

When he lets go, he looks me in the eye.

"Are you a domestically abused woman?" he asks, pleased.

(He goes and laughs with his friends.)

I guess I will try to sew the plucked hair pieces back into my scalp.

My mom bought me *Bad Behavior* by Mary Gaitskill for my birthday in March. I decided to pick it up in May, and I finished it a day later.

The book made my skin crawl and itch - bugs were crawling into me and pouring through my eyes. It made me uncomfortable. I liked that. I think I read horrible things to help prepare myself for something looming. For the danger of the future. The

book

spoke to a (my) desire for pain, a (my) desire to avoid pain, a (my) desire to protect myself, and a (my) larger desire to punish myself for a failure that occurred, only I don't know when I failed or how or with what or why.

I think about Jacob a lot, more than I want to. His behavior circles in my mind. His horribleness and, worse, my okayness with it. The attention was good because it was not sweet. It did not require anything from me except a high pain tolerance and patience.

I did not like Jacob, but I would overlook his cruelty since boys are taught that women serve roles in their lives but are not people in them.

What I cannot overlook is where were the teachers in the cafeteria? In the hallway? Where were my friends?

In one chapter of *Bad Behavior*, my least and most favorite one, "A Romantic Weekend," a man and woman go to Washington D.C. together. Their supposedly "romantic" weekend quickly falls apart as their opposing understandings of sex and sexual pleasure clash. The story is a gritty and dark look at our failures at romantic connections and the shortcomings of romantic fantasy. It is also a stark and distilled snapshot of how sexism manifests itself in heterosexual relationships.

The man thinks, mid-way through the story, "He was beginning to see her as a locked garden that he could sneak into and sit in for days, tearing the heads off the flowers." She is untouchable so he needs to touch. No, tear. Not just the petals, the heads too.

If he (man, friend, lover, all of the above) isn't kind, for him I will eat myself. Eat the hair he rips out too. Or I can stitch it all back together.

(I want to beg for this but hope to die before I can.)

The allure of her is that he cannot have her. Not without violating a physical boundary. He fantasizes about ruining parts of her that were supposed to be protected. Distance between women and men (physical or emotional) sparks a desire for her destruction. He feels entitled to causing hers.

Creating a boundary means having, utilizing, or retaining power.

The man thinks, mid-way through the story, "I shouldn't be doing this, he thought. She is actually a nice person." The man thinks, mid-way through the story, "For a moment he had an impulse to embrace her. He had a stronger impulse to beat her."

Boys hit girls. Boys hit us and slap us and pull our hair because they know no one will stop them. They choke, as their brains slide gooey and warm down their throats, and

they don't know how to deal with that, so they act out. Then they grow up and they still want to hit girls, so they throw phones or words or food or bombs or they find other ways to act on repressed urges, suppressed anger.

Girls become conditioned to ignore and withstand pain. Doubt their bodies' cues. Doubt the messages it sends. Before we learn to ignore boys, we learn to ignore ourselves. Nothing I want or am is mine anymore.

Perhaps violence is also a desperate and misplaced attempt at intimacy because boys/men primarily understand intimacy through the lens of power. To flirt is to antagonize. To get attention is to bother. To love is to weaponize incompetence, to take care of, to control.

We had a moment there, right? When I hurt you?

Today, if someone poked me over and over, how long could I take it? Five minutes? Ten? Forty? I'd like to think I would get up and move, stand up. I worry I'd sit there for longer, view it as a challenge against myself. Today, the biggest motivation for my movement would not be my own wellbeing, but other people's future wellbeing. I can't help but wonder if I said something, would one less woman be hurt? Is it my job to stand up and tell someone? Or maybe, should someone else sitting at the table call a teacher over?



Girl and Flowers by Irina Tall Novikova

COLLECTED THOUGHTS ON FIRSTS AND FEELINGS AND FINDINGS

by
Owen Lewis

I can now recognize that it was immature to believe that in my early twenties I ever had (or maybe that I ever will have) a nuanced understanding of what it means to feel.

~~I don't typically struggle this much with writing out my emotions.~~

~~I guess this is a first, as well.~~

I'm not a stranger to investigating the way hands dance. I'm not a stranger to memorizing people like chemical compounds on flash cards. (They're not all that different.) I'm not a stranger to the process of breaking my bones and rearranging them into the shape of an arrow, and then becoming an anchor, and then becoming a blister.

Throughout the first two decades of my life, I constructed a narrative ~~that if I learned to feel~~ that if I learned to fall that if I learned to fall too fast, I would get thicker skin. I would know when to brace for impact. I would know what it felt like to crack my tooth on the cement.

I thought I knew what it felt like to nosedive, and I was wrong.

The truth is:

Something about the way your brown eyes look set behind your glasses makes me feel like I'm staring at a derailed train. Or a forest fire. (I couldn't possibly look away, no matter how hard I tried. No matter how much I needed to get away. To run to safety).

The truth is:

I want you with me in every elevator I ride. I want to kiss you like the universe is exploding into a trillion tiny pieces and we are the last things being undone, and then wipe the lipstick off my mouth when the bell dings and we go back to being strangers. I want to hear you whisper my name, and I want to hold your hand, and I want you to spit in my mouth, and I want to watch you cry. I want to know you.

The truth is:

Everything I'm feeling has been written about in a book, or drawn on a church ceiling, or filmed in a movie starring Ethan Hawke. Does that change its meaning? The momentary connection, that has no way to be, no right to be, no sense to be. Maybe it has no meaning. Maybe it just is.

The truth is:

I have always thought that 'soulmates' and 'twin flames' were bullshit. I think it's more romantic to imply that any instance of wanting is visceral, and momentary, and molecular. I have no expectations of anything ~~except for failure~~ ~~except for a few months~~ except for fireworks. I think it's more romantic to believe there is no grand operator informing the ways we find each other, and the ways we unwind. There is no net waiting to catch me.

The truth is:

I'm terrified. I'm terrified of coming on too strong, or too fast, or too slow. I'm terrified of making you a specimen, and I'm terrified of not letting you know how every inch of you sets me on fire. I'm terrified of whiplash. I'm terrified of spiders. I'm terrified of what it's going to do to me when you leave.

The truth is:

I'm thinking about all of the times I've thought I found love before. I don't know if I believe it's something that you can find anymore. I think it may be the prose, and the promise, and the practice, and the way the words taste. (It doesn't matter whether they're written, or spat, or spent as wishes.) Don't worry: I'm not saying that I'm in love with you. What I'm saying is that I've felt my heart stretch a few times. (Imagine it's a slinky. Or a rubber band. Or a solar system.) I'm scared that this time, it won't collapse back. I'll be stuck with these fringes and margins that fold back on themselves in odd ways, and that if I ever have to stretch again, I won't be the same.

You hate it when I compliment your smile.

I think it's just easier than saying that

~~I want you to stay here, with me, now~~

~~I want to see you burn~~

~~I want to see you let go~~

I want to know if you'll be left with the same folds.

The truth is:

We sat in the park that day and I asked you thirty-six questions designed by Yale scientists to make you fall in love. I remember moving closer and closer to you until just a few inches separated our lips. I felt like the whole planet was pulling me into you. But I waited.

The truth is:

You concern yourself with finding my firsts. You tell me you want to mean something new. I stumble over my words each time I try to explain that the firsts aren't what matter to me: it's the findings. It's in the way I become decomposed and reconstructed as the product of a million words and photos and moments as we unravel. It's the way I'm someone new for you. It's the way your hands feel when your nails rip through my skin. Like I've never been touched before. Like the rest was just practice.

Did you know the average person meets eighty thousand people throughout their life?

(That's a lot of baristas, and friends' mothers, and doctors, and third cousins.)

The words they write on my chart drop the expected values down by half.

So, forty-thousand.

This next question isn't rhetorical:

~~How many times have you felt this?~~

~~How many people make you feel this?~~

How many times will you feel this?

The truth is:

I think I want to hurt you. I don't want to make you cry, but I want to make you scar, because if there's one thing I've learned from this game, it's that words lie, but bodies don't.

The truth is:

I knew I was a lost cause that moment we sat down in that coffee shop. It became painfully evident as we posed across from each other that I wanted to hear your thoughts on joints and fathers and books and longing and the colour yellow for as long as possible.

The truth is:

I don't know if 'for as long as possible' is going to be long enough.

The truth is:

I don't know how to move past that.

~~It can't be healthy to stalk the clock like this.~~

~~I am trying to channel my inner Kurt Vonnegut:~~

~~To slow the moments down as best as I can using
the divine powers of heartbreak and prose and
whatever else.~~

The truth is:

I cannot stop feeling my hands drifting over your rib cage. Looseleaf tobacco in the spine of your favorite book. Your eyes tracing the designs etched into my arms. Variety vegan chocolate. Kissing where you've never been kissed before. Ink on skin. Skin on ink.

The truth is:

You asked if the feeling is a symptom of the sickness. You weren't sure if it was real, or if it was just the byproduct of overactive neurotransmitters in my brain. Do you see me that way? Like a shattered clock ticking too fast? (I promise the cracks are voluntary, and the ticking is too.)

The truth is:

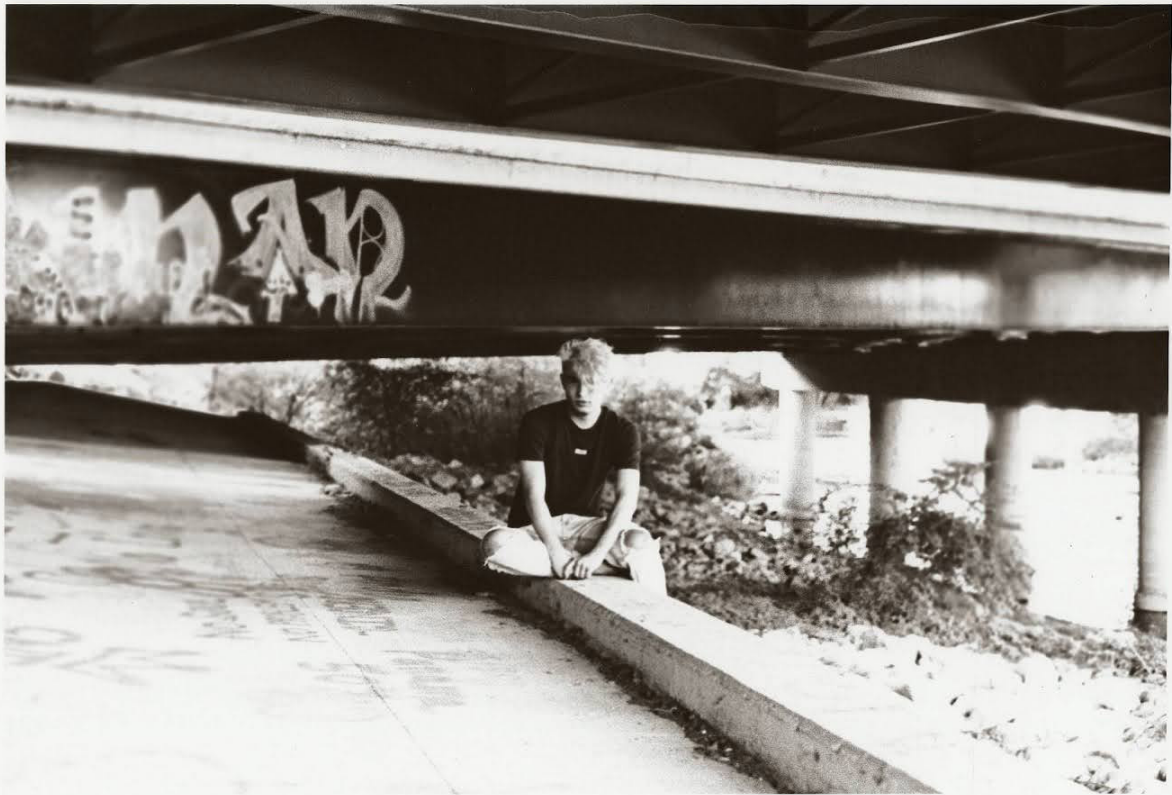
I'm getting my passport. I'm learning how to roll my Rs so I can say your name in every language. I'm reading poetry in different ways. I'm recording each moment we have left until you leave on the notes app in my phone. (You know the words aren't the same, though.)

I'm trying to hold myself back. To stay with you. To not rush.

I'm trying to make the most of the falling, because, chances are, it's all we'll get.

I've felt my heart stretch a few times.

(Imagine it's a slinky. Or a rubber band. Or a solar system.)



Dear Blue Eyes *by* Owen Lewis



POETRY

DEAR DEER

by

Linda M. Crate

i was only taking
a walk in
the wood,
my body isn't a
weapon of war;

you need not be
startled of my
flesh and bone—

i remember once one of
you was curious and we
stared at one another,
until i saw the white tail
disappearing into
the trees;

consider some of us are
not hunters just lovers
of nature passing through—

you eat the crab apples
in our backyard,
am i terrifying to you?



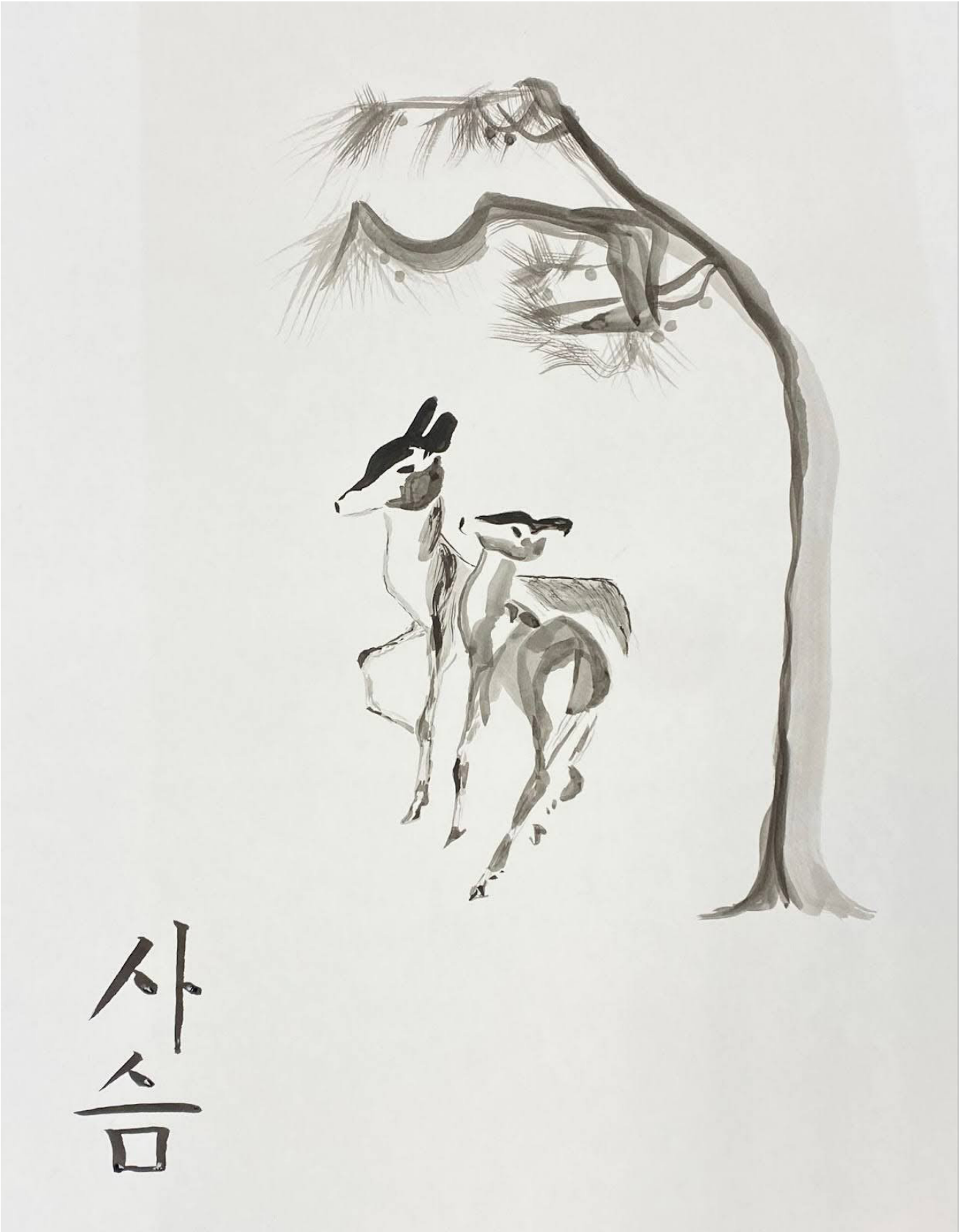
Velvets #3 by Addie White

MACARONS FOR WILDLIFE

by

Kendra Whitfield

I'm the deer who eats the sunflower seeds from the birdfeeder between the blue spruce trees behind your house. I see you watching me from the yellow Adirondack chair on the deck and I want to say thank you but my mouth is full. Sometimes, I wish you'd leave strawberry macarons for us. Is that rude? I'm sorry. I adore French pastry but I rarely get to eat it, living as I do, in the woods behind your blue house in this town that is so very small and far from France.



Two Deer by Milla Reed

STILL LIFE WITH THUNDERSTORM

by
W. C. Perry

Quietly, the creek across the
street carries away branches

blown apart by a storm
the night before.

Through the gentle-fingered sedge
at the water's edge, headlights tear into focus.

Be wide-eyed. Be smart.
Like a deer disappearing into itself.

In the foreground: a thin shadow
with back turned. Waiting patiently

to be known. The sky, empty
& black. Impatient omen.

In any other shape, the car would be
discovered as a hearse in disguise.

Your funeral clothes would be his,
nothing more. Stillness of panic.

There would have been plenty of time
to run. But you loved him, didn't you?

You beggar of borrowed things.
Stolen body. Pink-painted future

dissolving in water. Rootless trees.
Pieces of a broken apple, floating.

TO A DEAR FRIEND DEALING WITH ACUTE ANXIETY

by

Carolyn Martin

Your call yesterday was a relief.
Two good days, you said. Back pain eased,
heart settled down, and the doe you've tracked
through flower beds and trees befriended you.
A spirit guide, I laughed, and you agreed.
Now, you share, you're lost in a forest of grief—
family, friends, colleagues gone—and losses devastate.
I hesitate to tell you this for it's mine to own:
I've held grief in my arms and walked it up
and down city streets. I've stood at gravesides
as it crumbled to the ground. I've learned
from betrayal and hurt, cruelty and loss,
there is no grief like ours and earth is rich with it.
So what to do, dear friend, when your grief consumes?
Go outside and find your guide. She's waiting for you.
She'll probably advise that grief is a mystery
that can't solve itself. Ask her how to befriend
emptiness until the joy chasing you catches up.
Ask her to confirm it takes eternities to fill voids
and, in all that space and time, blessings are yours to give.
If you listen deeper than you thought you could,
you might hear that love is another name for grief.

WHY I CHOSE TO WAKEN FIRST

by
John Muro

Because I know how much life
has already taken from you and
how difficult each night's descent
into sleep has been, while, eager
for refuge, you lie down beside me,
still trying to live with an other-
worldly pain and burrowed in
blankets that insulate your body
from the ache and frenzy of this
world, and how a few times each
night I waken to your fitful dance
with dream and the sound of
your breathing, rising and falling
in a dull, draped-in-cloud purr,
finding it near impossible to pull
away from the warm bond of
our bodies, as I rise before day-
break, dragging despair and
the past behind me, and prepare
the house for your solitary
arrival, ever mindful to breathe
deeply and pray before setting
aside the medicines and tea,
opening the threadbare curtains
and adjusting the window
frame in such a way that it
betrays the brighter bounty
of bird-song and helps to make

the endless expanse of blue
bearable, while allowing the
walls and what little is left
of the darkness to fall away
at least until the day I waken,
god-forsaken and heart-emptied,
to a life without you.



Portrait on Film #2 *by* Eriana Ktistakis

ASTRONAUT

by

Jonathan Fletcher

January 28, 1986

In my dreams,
I always catch you
before you fall
back toward Earth,
flame and smoke behind you.

In reality, I was two years old.

I didn't yet know about rockets,
hadn't seen photos of outer space.
I hadn't yet heard about O-rings,
hadn't seen an explosion on TV.

Even so, I was a universe.
My mother revolved around my needs.
A mobile hung above my crib,
rotated like planets around the sun.

Tucked in tight
like an astronaut, I reached
out to touch the moving bodies
above. I dreamt
of floating upwards,

unaware you'd dreamt so long before



Untitled #1 by Irina Tall Novikova

RITE

by
W. C. Perry

Do not waste your precious notebooks on such wisdom:
dreams have killed before & will again.

Another holographic apple is halved & halved & halved
each time you dream of the emptiness as holy.

Become your own kindling. It is no dream, this course by which doubt,
folding forms, misaligns the mind. Origami. Sandpaper. Glasswork.

Is this the lifetime of blossoms you said you'd kill for? The convention
of intentional insomniacs in leather & feather boas fetch another round.

Pareidolia harbors on the banks of solitude, counting gentle, white blossoms
along the garden path on fingers nonexistent. Lingering taste of kerosene.

Flames bloom from your opened palm in the garden's periphery: the endstop
of all outpouring things. Holding boiled water. Holding summer breeze. Holding –

Such vivid, yet peripheral things! the rising bodies simply said.
These dear drowned devotees were never built for such labor.

The slow collision of corpses in the dark, waterways rising while
sunfish sleepwalk against the amber current. Smash all the clocks!

Those other bodies, yeah, they're nothing. Lamps without oil, now.
Vivid & rippling backwards, truth still scouring to find truth.

DULCE DE EGO

by

M F Drummy

I am the blackened,
happy fig, swimming
in a pool of dark
sweetness with my
fellow figs, waiting
for the moment after
you spoon me into
one of those upmarket
cut glass bowls of
yours reserved for
special occasions like
carnaval, umbrellaed
by a few pieces of
common *queso*, when
you slice me open,
my tiny seeds exposed,
& place me, ever
so gently, onto your
anticipating tongue.

KICKED

by
John Grey

Guys kicked me
for something or other.-
maybe an accident,
maybe to do with the civil war –
my knee wrecked,
face like spaghetti and meatball
leftovers,
arms as painful
as wrong notes
in a symphony -
had to make certain accommodations
for lying sprawled on the sidewalk –
like looking up at the street lamp,
trying to massage
my aching groin muscles
with the insides of my thighs –
across the street,
I could see people too afraid
to cross over and help –
or maybe they didn't like
my wine-red smile,
or the way my hair
flopped in the gutter –
they were only people after all –
they had their own lives to deal with –
maybe they'd been kicked also
but in different ways –
and seeing me like this
wasn't helping.



Untitled #2 by Irina Tall Novikova

ANEMONE

by

Claudia Wysocky

His hands smell of anemone and mushrooms
on a spring morning.

The sea is as flat as he is silent.
He's a man who deals with silence and water, with
the weight of the stones in his pockets.

The tide has just begun to come back in, and he's on the beach,
walking toward the town where I live alone, taking pictures of angles
and shadows that look like things they aren't.

There are no waves at this time of day; there is only him.

I pretend that he is my father and I am his daughter.

I pretend that I have never been kissed.

I think about the way that he walks, and how he smells like my mother's garden
in the summertime, before it was taken away from her by the wind.

PERVIGILIUM

by

Kelly White Arnold

Washcloth wipes forehead sharp with heat, mother
murmur of soothing sounds from prayer stained
lips, sibilance itself a spell cast over slumbering
shape. Conjure what comfort you can: back scratches
and humidifiers, Vapo-Rub and an extra night light,
the double lined bedside trashcan. Marvel
at the miracle of her fevered form, the wonder of still
tiny toes and fingernails, and deep within the unguarded
features of her face— whispers, seeds, of the woman she will become



Velvets #4 by Addie White

CONTRIBUTORS

Kelly White Arnold is a mom, writer, teacher, and lover of yoga. Her work recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Walter*, *theengineidling*, *Last Leaves and Ink and Marrow*. When she's not scribbling in notebooks or wrangling teenagers, she's planning her next tattoo and daydreaming about traveling the world. Find her on social media @KArnoldTeaches.

Nicole Brogdon is an Austin TX trauma therapist interested in strugglers and stories, with fiction in *Vestal Review*, *Cleaver*, *Flash Frontier*, *Bending Genres*, *Bright Flash*, *SoFloPojo*, *Cafe Irreal*, *101Words*, *Centifictionist*, etc. *Best Microfiction 2024*, and *Smokelong Microfiction Finalist*. Twitter NBrogdonWrites!

C.W. Bryan is a student at Georgia State University. He lives in Atlanta, GA where he writes poetry, nonfiction and short fiction. He is currently writing his weekly series, Poetry is Plagiarism, with Sam Kilkenny at poetryispretentious.com. His debut chapbook *Celine* was published with Bottlecap Press in 2023. His work can be found in *Beaver Magazine*, *Door is a Jar Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Scavengers* and elsewhere.

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks the latest being: *Searching Stained Glass Windows For An Answer* (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022).

Sophy Drouin is a writer and actor from Québec now living in Brooklyn. She is published and forthcoming in 86 Logic and *Bending Genres*, and her play, *Even Ourselves*, is premiering at the New York Theater Festival this Summer. She misses her Canadian winters but goes weak in the knees for Brooklyn's cherry blossoms in the spring. Find her standing under a tree for a really long time, looking up, happy.

M F Drummy holds a PhD in historical theology from Fordham University. He is the author of numerous articles, essays, poems, reviews, and a monograph on religion and ecology. His work has appeared, or will appear, in *Allium*, [*Alternate Route*], *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Ars Sententia*, *Emerge*, *the engineidling*, *FERAL*, *Main Street Rag*, *Marbled Sigh*, *Poemeleon*, *The Rumen*, *Scarlet Dragonfly*, *Viridian Door*, *Winged Penny Review*, and many others. He and his way cool life partner of over 20 years enjoy splitting their time between the Colorado Rockies and the rest of the planet. He can be found at: Instagram @miguelito.drummalino Website <https://bespoke-poet.com>

Jonathan Fletcher is originally from San Antonio, Texas. He holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Poetry) from Columbia University School of the Arts. He has been published in *Acropolis Journal*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Arts Alive San Antonio*, *The Bayou Review*, *The BeZine*, *BigCityLit*, *Book of Matches Literary Journal*, *Catch the Next: Journal of Ideas and Pedagogy*, *Colossus Press*, *Curio Cabinet*, *Door is a Jar*, *DoubleSpeak*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Encephalon Journal*, *-ette review*, *Five South*, *Flora Fiction*, *FlowerSong Press*, *fws: a journal of literature & art*, *Glassworks*, *Half Hour to Kill*, *Heimat Review*, and *The Hemlock: A Literary Arts Journal*.

Julian Gallo is the author of 'Existential Labyrinths', 'Last Tondero in Paris', 'The Penguin and The Bird' and other novels. His short fiction has appeared in *The Sultan's Seal (Cairo)*, *Exit Strata*, *Budget Press Review*, *Indie Ink*, *Short Fiction UK*, *P.S. I Love You*, *The Dope Fiend Daily*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *Angles*, *Verdad*, *Modern Literature (India)*, *Mediterranean Poetry (St. Pierre and Miquelon)*, *Borderless Journal (Singapore)*, *Woven Tales*, *Wilderness House*, *Egophobia (Romania)*, *Plato's Caves*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *VIA: Voices in Italian America*, *The Argyle*, *Doublespeak Magazine (India)*, *Bardics Anonymous*, *Tones of Citrus*, and *The Cry Lounge*.

Emelia Gauch is an undergraduate student at Rice University studying sociology, visual arts, and creative writing. As a creator, she is interested in disruptions of form as acts of resistance against restrictive and systemically inequitable traditions within the arts. As an individual, she is a Pisces but terrified of swimming in the ocean and touching a fish. She loves to read, create art, listen to music, and spend time with loved ones. She is a queer Jewish woman and aims to discuss these elements of her identity within her work while blending and maintaining a strong personal style.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Lost Pilots*. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *California Quarterly*, *Seventh Quarry*, *La Presa* and *Doubly Mad*.

Owen Lewis is a generally unremarkable 22 year-old writer from Columbus, Ohio. He is pursuing a degree in English at the Ohio State University and plans to attend grad school to get his MFA in Creative Non- Fiction. He offers a fresh and unique perspective, given his upbringing as a middle-class straight white man living in the suburbs of Ohio.

Reece Ludwig is a current junior obtaining her BA in English at The Ohio State University. She serves as a reader for *The Journal* and has recently started working as an intern for Little Gay Bookstore in Columbus.

Carolyn Martin is blissfully retired in Clackamas, Oregon. She is a lover of gardening and snorkeling, feral cats and backyard birds, writing and photography. Her poems have appeared in more than 200 journals throughout North America, Australia, and the UK. Find out more at www.carolynmartinpoet.com.

John Muro is a resident of Connecticut and lover of all things chocolate. He has authored two volumes of poems – *In the Lilac Hour* and *Pastoral Suite* – in 2020 and 2022, respectively. He has been a three-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize, a nominee for the Best of the Net Award and, more recently, a 2023 Grantchester Award recipient. John's work has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Acumen*, *Barnstorm*, *Deal Jam*, *Delmarva*, *Grey Sparrow*, *Sky Island* and the *Valparaiso Review*.

Irina Tall Novikova is an artist, graphic artist, and illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. Her first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology. In 2005, she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, drawing on anti-war topics.

W.C. Perry (they/them) is a collection of ghosts haunting the Appalachian Mountains. To initiate contact, burn a candle on a starless night and scream into the nearest cornfield—they'll get back to you eventually— or if that's too much work, on Twitter and Instagram @remotecatalyst.

Blanka Pillár is a seventeen-year-old writer from Budapest, Hungary. She has a never-ending love for creating and an ever-lasting passion for learning. She has won several national competitions and has been an editor-in-chief of her high school's prestigious newspaper, Eötvös Diák. Today, she is not throwing away her shot.

Milla Reed (she/her) is a poet and student of the world around her. She is a fourth-year English major with a creative writing minor at The Ohio State University and works as a remote intern for Featherproof Books in Chicago. She enjoys listening to albums beginning to end, taking photos of stemless flowers on the street, and walking everywhere within a 35-minute radius. Her work can be found in *The Afterpast Review*.

Anna W. (she/they) is a second-year English Creative Writing major at OSU. She sticks to poetry, prose, and short stories, and is very fond of bittersweet endings. In their free time, Anna bakes sweet treats and the occasional sour-dough loaf, holds the title of most amateur photographer, and crochets to audiobooks, allowing the 86-year-old librarian within her to be appeased.

Addie White is a recent graduate from Ohio State, where she majored in environmental policy with a minor in creative writing. This love for the outdoors inspires much of her writing, which often leans into nature, and sometimes something spookier. She enjoys writing poetry, short stories, and, maybe one day, something longer.

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes at the southern edge of the northern boreal forest. Her poetry has been anthologized by Community Building Art Works and Beyond the Veil Press. She has work forthcoming from *Backwards Trajectory* and *The Sandy River Review*. When not writing, she can be found swimming laps at the local pool or basking in sunbeams on her back deck.

Jake Williams is a writer based in Cumbria (the North remembers!), just south of The Wall. His previous publications include *The RPS Journal*, *Pulsebeat Poetry*, *Discourse Journal*, *Scarlet Dragonfly Journal* and *To Live Here: a Haiku Anthology* (Wee Sparrow Poetry Press). Jake was born in darkest rural Dorset the year Marvin Gaye asked what's going on, in a cottage with Owls in the attic and a serious damp problem. He was Feral Kid from Mad Max 2 if he'd been a character in a Thomas Hardy novel. The woods and fields were as much his classroom as any of the schools he attended. As well as ranging across the countryside, he enjoys ranging widely across disciplines and following his creativity down paths less travelled. Not to mention eating Tofu.

Claudia Wysocky, a Polish writer based in New York, is known for her diverse literary creations, including fiction and poetry. Her poems, such as "Stargazing Love" and "Heaven and Hell," reflect her ability to capture the beauty of life through rich descriptions. Besides poetry, she authored "All Up in Smoke," published by "Anxiety Press." Claudia's work has been featured in newspapers, magazines, and literary journals like *WordCityLit* and *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*. Her writing is powered by her belief in art's potential to inspire positive change. Claudia shares her personal journey and love for writing on her blog, and expresses her literary talent as an immigrant raised in post-communism Poland.



**DEAL JAM
MAGAZINE**

Visit us online at dealjammagazine.com
Find us on Instagram @dealjammag and
Twitter @dealjammag