

WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE

ISSUE FIVE

WINTERGREEN





**Wild Willow
Magazine**

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Cover Art inspired by Julia Biggs – “*Wintergreen Colour Chart*”

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Content Warnings

Some of our pieces may include some of the following themes:

Grief

Anxiety

Loneliness

Mild Decay Imagery

Addiction

Overdose

Death

Wintergreen in Dead Man's Season

May Garner

The forest told me
nothing survives this far north.
Not the birds,
nor the promises,
or the names carved into bark
that no longer stands.

Yet here it grows:
wintergreen.
A bruised leaf
breaking through ice
that could swallow a body whole
and silence it for centuries.

I kneel beside it,
breath stinging the air,
and think of all the things
I buried young –
my father's voice,
the last fire in our home,
the girl I was before the snow
started calling me by name.

This herb should not be alive,
not in a season that eats its own shadows.
And yet it reaches upward,
slow, stubborn,
refusing the grave
the world keeps offering.

I touch it once,
and it shivers,
reminding me
that even the smallest thing
can haunt the winter
that tried to kill it.

possibilities of grace

V. Bray

sharp light glances

off glossy holly leaves

my vision splinters

and prised rainbows bounce

off dark green

I am overwhelmed

with possibilities of grace

Pearly Everlasting

Jackie McClure

Cold comfort

it can be,

surrounded by

deciduous detritus

and insisting on enduring –

sepals, petals remain plastered until

paperlike

on stalwart stems

as if Emily Dickinson

herself had willed them

to stay put, and well,

in spite of the compelling

sloughing of nearby

blossom-droppers,

who could argue with Emily?

Distant Winter Star

Bridget Houlihan

The sun is at its coldest
a most distant
unreachable
unfathomable
star
in December
rays that come late and barely linger
long enough for a brief kiss of light
it is enough for this snow enfolded space
to welcome illumination
no matter how transient

//

The winter sun gleams through the undressed maples, ashes, and oaks
from its place low in the purple hued sky
flickering through the frosted air it penetrates the dense evergreen yew
finds the eye of the cardinal before she lifts off
the branch still waving, disrupting the morning repose

Snow (II)

Bridget Houlihan

Out my window the snowflakes dance.
From my tower I watch them fleet,
float,
fly -
on the frosty back of the Western Wind.
Their mistress is fickle and cold, not caring where they blow.
Chaos
wonderful, unchecked, to the ground below.



1. Stamina Green



2. Forbearing Green



3. Resolute Green



4. Steadfast Green



5. Pertinacious Green



6. Hardy Green



7. Indefatigable Green



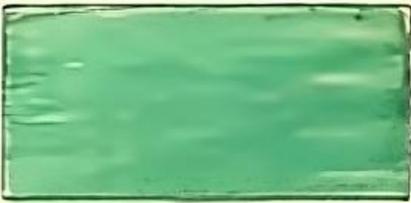
8. Determined Green



9. Grit Green



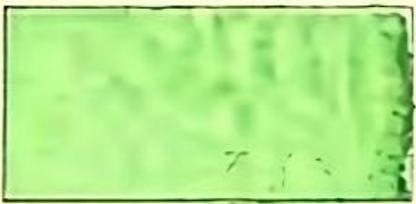
10. Enduring Green



11. Sedulous Green



12. Resilient Green



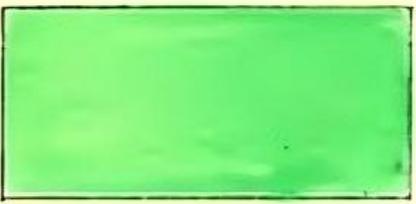
13. Assiduous Green



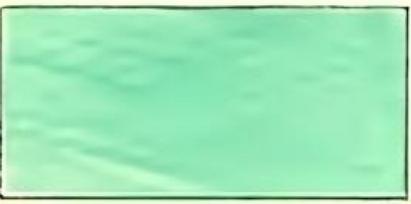
14. Patient Green



15. Dogged Green



16. Guts Green



17. Persevering Green



18. Tireless Green



19. Tenacious Green



20. Fortitudinous Green



21. Staying Power Green

My Persimmon Problem
Travis Jeffrey Gonzalez

In Los Angeles, I no longer mark the arrival of winter with the weather. The slow slip towards breezier mornings does little to show the passage of time. I don't count on the appearance of holiday lights, and I have long tuned out the never-ending medley of festive music blasted throughout the city. To know when I am, I've learned to mark my calendar with persimmons.

I watch them form from tiny springtime flowers to green bulbs the Dodgers could use in a summer series. They grow high above my head, the tree from which they bloom having long matured past its beginnings as a meek shrub. Either through neglect from a previous resident or some powerful spell, it now looms over my home, threatening to consume power lines and house every raccoon in Hollywood.

And when the last of the SoCal heatwaves dies down, the fruit seems to absorb the energy, warming to a fiery orange I've come to fear. Fall is here, winter is arriving, and it's persimmon season: God help us all.

Like most of what lives here, persimmons came to California seeking new soils. In Japan, they built a reputation for cultivating wealth, prosperity, and good fortune for their planters. I was cultivated in New York and uprooted myself for the West Coast; I symbolize neuroticism, cynicism, and a penchant for aggressive sidewalk passing. Blame the climate: infamous fruit nickname, but the city often bears none.

Los Angeles to me was an orchard, and this tree affirmed that belief on our first meeting. It was late summer when it made its offer of prosperity, large flat leaves rustling in the wind, new fruit visible on the branches. My dog rested under the shade, and hummingbirds picked at the last few flowers. My partner imagined the future garden we'd build over the years to come. I looked back at the tree. It was healthy, and the harvest seemed easy.

That first fall, I eagerly watched the transformation. The persimmons had hardly turned a reddish yellow before I was climbing up a ladder to collect. I held one in my hand; the fruit was shaped like a large acorn, hard like a rock, with streaks of black from where it had gotten too much sun. For a moment, I remembered my freezing annual trips to the Hudson Valley, where I'd hastily pick a bushel of thirty-dollar Apples to avoid midtown traffic on the way home. The warmth of the LA November sun broke the spell, and I was grateful.

Basket full and anticipating good fortune, I bit into a persimmon. I felt all the saliva in my mouth leave, the astringency of its pulp overtaking my mouth. I was Tantalus during his first night in hell, rushing to the kitchen sink to quench my thirst. But no matter how much I drank, my mouth remained dry.

The tree got me on a technicality. You can eat Fuyu persimmons off the branch like an apple; Hachiyas, their larger, black sheep sibling, not so much. To make Hachiyas truly edible, they must sit on your counter until they fall apart. My eyes darted to the window. The tree shrugged in the wind, dangling the remaining dozens of fruit out to me, bowed branches like crossed fingers.

Against my wishes, I let the excess fruit rot. I watched as one by one, each persimmon could no longer support its weight, falling to Earth and exploding on impact, orange entrails splattered across the lawn. This would happen daily, the sun cooking the remains, making the yard smell of vinegar. What was left on the tree rotted in place, picked apart by wildlife.

Soon, the tree started flowering again. A second cycle beginning, I hatched plans for how I might find a way to make this fruit useful. I bought a dehydrator, and educated myself in the art of turning citrus into strips of jerky. I experimented first with lemons, then with apple slices. So when the weather once again shifted, and the fruit turned orange, I would be ready.

I collected my basket shortly after the first cold morning, when the fog hangs in the LA basin a little too long. I carefully sliced each persimmon, revealing a star pattern. The fruit was translucent and almost glowing. From just two, I had produced multiple trays of slices. Like a mad scientist, I slid them into the dehydrator, face pressed to the glass, eager for my experiment to pay off. I watched the slices

shrink, the light orange color turning ruddy and opaque. I smiled smugly at the tree from my window, it watching me take its miserable work and perfect it.

Hours slipped by, but soon it was time to test. I pulled out the trays, the slices desiccated. I took a bite. It was sweet and mild, a little too chewy, but not altogether unpleasant. And then I felt it, that small, slight tingle of numbness. I slumped back against the wall, counting the trays of slices I was now stuck with. My eyes went back to the kitchen window, where the persimmon tree shook in the fall breeze. Or was it laughing? In defiance of my work, it sent a persimmon rocketing to the ground. It cracked in half, a gaggle of birds flying for cover.

That winter, every cocktail served to guests and holiday visitors had a festive slice of persimmon wedged into the glass. Everyone would comment on the novelty and compliment the effort. But when every evening ended, the slices stayed at the bottom of the glass. The yard again smelled of mead.

Years go by, the cycle of birth and decay repeats, and each time I think I will best it. I comb through ancient texts on edible plants, and watch expert after expert share their successes transforming persimmons into palatable dishes. But the battle ends the same, and the cycle completes; more fruit rots on the branch, wasted, and the tree looms larger and farther out of reach.

Was it me? I'd watch the tree each season, performing its routine under an endless cloudless sky, each day the same, save for the growth of persimmons. Plenty of sunshine and potential, the right growing conditions, and yet the good fortune I expected remained elusive. All I wanted was to take a bite and be satisfied.

Last year, I let it all rot. The fruit lived and died on the branch. When the tree lost its leaves and showed its bare trunk, dozens of orange orbs remained, otherworldly. I reveled in the decay from the window, glaring at times at a bird or squirrel who'd taste the fruit and enjoy it.

Later that winter, the sky turned orange. A dark and muddy color, bruised and blackened in parts with smoke. For two days, it snowed a light ash. I found pieces of burnt books in the yard, blown

14 miles west from where they came. A few pieces of fruit remained on the tree, now indistinguishable from the sky. The cycle seemed to stop, and I found myself longing for it.

It took only a few days for the blue skies to return, but weeks to feel safe enough to breathe the air and step outside. I stood under my tree, staring up at the branches. If I squinted, I could make out the small bumps that would soon become its leaves. My mind wandered through time, seeing the flowers, the green bulbs, and the new, fresh persimmons, threatening me with a concussion should the branches no longer hold them. For the first time in weeks, or maybe even years, I laughed at it all.

This winter, I began my cycle anew. When those orange menaces appeared, I picked a small armful of the most unblemished. I patiently washed and hid them in a covered pot, and threw in an apple to control their ripening. And when they were softer than late summer tomatoes and ready to burst, I split their skin and turned the custard-like pulp into a jam, with some cardamom for good measure.

It's a simple jam; you taste the sugar more than anything else. You'd probably get a more interesting flavor out of an apricot glaze. But it's good on a piece of toast or a homemade buttered roll. It doesn't make your mouth drier than sand. It's getting better. Winter has officially arrived.

Mourning Star

Bridget Houlihan

The pink sky and the mourning star
gaze coldly at us below
so catch your breath
before it freezes
while standing in the snow
that lingers
in the cold garden
the cardinal perches
on the yew tree branch
providing shelter
from the frost, but not the kind
that gathers around my heart
and makes it hard to see the dawn's dim glow
twinkle in through my lids
now heavy, now slow, now closed.

Ditch Lilies Only Look Delicate

Suzanna de Baca

(For Hemerocallis fulva)

A breeze picks up
and grasses stir.

You react,
your tawny yellowish throat,
red-streaked,
swaying
on tall stalks,
straight as a spine.

Lurching left
and right
like a newborn giraffe.

Bending,
almost stumbling,
but recalibrating.

It is as if
you are insisting
you can stand.

The wind argues.
“No,” it says,
and pushes
and pulls you

back and forth.

Petals and sepals,
crinkly and curled
at the edges,
long, strap-like leaves,
in dense, green clumps
all in motion.

Storm clouds stew
on the horizon.
The wind whips you,
but you pay no mind.
You have not endured
year after year
by giving in
to the gales.



Seven Winters

Karina Ten

It has been seven cold winters that you're not with us.

I was never meant to be older than you — time passed by fast.

The window's showing me snow for the first time in eight months.

You will never come back — so lies the forecast.

I don't trust their predictions; they always say it won't rain,
and then it pours cats and dogs for a week every day.

I still have your gifts from seven winters ago.

(Your friends keep telling me I should try moving on.)

Your room is untouched; I will give back your shirt.

I'm old enough now — you can tell me what hurt.

We'll share a cup of mulled wine at your place by the fire.

Don't believe the forecasts — they are all liars.

The Secret Garden: The Labyrinth at Lichgate

Alessandra Nysether-Santos

My hair is pink

so my friends can find me in the woods

My hair is pink

so when my enemies find me in the woods

they know I am venomous

and poisonous—

Danger to bite and be bitten by

I am more creature than woman

more woman than I have ever been before

more being than I have ever been

more before than I ever

In these woods

distant alarm

a prayer

unpenetrating

the dappled light

Mycelium

creeping out

of autumn soil

in conversation with 500 years

of roots and roots and roots and

roots—

The flowers that remain
in the almost cold
of an almost winter
blaze the same pink promise

Sunday

Benjamin Parker

Numbing hands spark shades of crimson,
amidst droplets, raincoats, and umbrellas.

Brown leather boots turn black in deep pools,
as I wander unoccupied streets.

Clutching the warmth of takeaway coffees,
longing for sweet echoes of spring.

We waddle on cobbles and speak of the day,
laughter entwined with caffeine.

A rare comfort in blistering winds,
the company shared in the cold.

Welcome the Light

Cindy Rinne

I.

Chilled to the bone. I am far
from home with the spirits
of the graves. Elaborate ice
flowers fold at my feet
like stone. Life-size
hand-carved woman cradles
a bird in winter sun. Ancestor
branches whisper a frozen song.

II.

My guide gives each tree a name—
Eternal Rest Serenity Peace
Recites their lineage stories.
Knows when the last leaves fell.
oak gingko pitch pine beech
owl fox black swans geese
She explains the conversations
of animals and how this is home.
She wants her ashes spread
in secret, not alone in the valley.

Pink Baby Blanket

Huina Zheng

When her husband's curses finally dissolved into snores, Ling didn't bother fixing her torn collar, smoothing her hair, or checking the fresh bruises. She ran to the crib in the living room corner and scooped up Lan, who had cried herself hoarse.

In her tiny fists, Lan clutched a pink baby blanket, now soaked through sweat, tears, and saliva. It was the same blanket that had swaddled her at birth. Every time Ling rocked her to sleep, she would press its fibers to her nose, breathing in the faint trace of milk.

Ling lifted her shirt, and Lan latched on greedily. A warm trickle slid down her neck, mingling with her daughter's suckling. Blood from a shallow, stinging gash on her forehead, likely from when her husband smashed the bottle at her. Her body had long adapted to pain, but her heart still ached.

Would Lan, besides hunger, also remember fear? Would she grow up numb, or wrapped tight in despair, as Ling once was, watching her father's fists slam into her mother while she hid in a corner, sobbing?

She thought back to her mother's words when she was sixteen, the feel of ten fingers digging into her shoulders more vivid than any blow: "Go! Go far, far away!"

She did. She fled to the coastal city of Dongguan, working at a garment factory where the roar of machines drowned out her father's curses. But the past followed her, wherever she went.

Two years ago, she met her current husband: the boy with the crooked smile, the young man who brewed her ginger tea when cramps left her pale, the one who promised her a whole family. She believed him, and followed him back to his village, a place like her hometown, where women had no inheritance rights and only sons carried the family line. She was swallowed into housework, her mother-in-law's cold stares, the neighbors' taunts of "can't bear a son." When her husband's fists fell, the flaring nostrils of the onlookers reminded her of villagers watching her mother's beatings.

The gears had turned back.

She looked down at her daughter. Lan was asleep, still clutching the blanket. Ling pressed her face to her forehead and whispered, “Mama won’t let you live my misfortune.”

Lan’s small mouth twitched. Ling thought of her own mother, dead in an “accident” the year after she left home.

“I’ll take you away,” she murmured.

But where? How? With what money? Who would help her care for Lan?

She rose, carrying her into the bedroom. Her husband’s snores filled the air. She opened the wardrobe. Beneath the heavy winter quilts lay a canvas travel bag.

Lan was her everything. Like the pink baby blanket, warmth, safety, belonging. She noticed a dandelion seed in its fibers, perhaps blown in when she hung it out to dry.

IN A CIRCLE OF TIME

Rick K. Reut

...if you want to go on
walking through a white wall.
The year is almost gone.
Winter follows the fall
in a circle of time.
There is plenty of space
on the paling face
of the earth glazed with rime...

...if you want to go on walking through a white wall. The year is almost gone. Winter follows the fall in a circle of time. There is plenty of space on the paling face of the earth glazed with rime...

Evergreen

Gordan Struić

The cold learns my name
But cannot keep it.

What endures
Does not shine.
It stays.

Needle by needle,
The tree refuses disappearance,
Breathing resin
Into the white air.

Even cut,
It carries its scent.

Even broken,
It remembers how.



Quiet Winter Morning

Allister Nelson

Emerald eyes and locks of fern flowers
just cradled against the moon of my limbs
you breathe, I breathe, inhale as one,
exhale stardust and setting pink suns.

I press my back against your firm faith
Our hands clasp in prayer, in quiet hours
What a beautiful winter awakening, when I
can taste your dreams and hear your sighs.

Stillness morning musing, rose vines curling
barren of thorns, full of rushing water that
flows as lifeblood between us, all I want
is to hold your hand, know your wanderings.

Sun creeps in but I am not ready to rise
so I lay here with you, blessed with joy.

I can hear and see and hold you, but truly
it is you who holds me up, aloft to heaven
to drink the dew of dawn, fly, and sing.

Ode To My Red Maple

Nolo Segundo

She lives just outside
my bedroom window,
ever loyal, ever faithful--
always in the same spot,
day after day,
season after season--
she's there to give
comfort, even joy,
especially in November,
the sloughing month
when the leaves fall
in sad splendor, with
grace—but my tree,
my Japanese Maple,
holds out, turns scarlet
with the blood of life,
its leaves dancing
little dances of love
in the autumnal winds
as though it were
laughing at death....

Rain

Maria Odessky Rosen

It wasn't supposed to rain today.

Sunny and clear skies. That's what they said. You were supposed to come home today. I arranged the pillows on the couch the way you like, in size order. I'm sorry I always gave you such a hard time. So silly, really. They're just pillows and it's so easy to line them up. I don't know why I didn't. I'm sorry.

Oh, I bought the milk you like, the oat one. I shouldn't have teased you that it has more water than milk. You were right all along. Oat milk is so very hydrating. I promise I will never argue with you again.

Will you come home?

I cleaned the garage like you've been asking me to. Gave away all the clothes that don't fit. Cooked that dinner I promised to cook for you, the roast lamb and mint jelly so you could feel like royalty, like you said. I even set the table with the white linen tablecloth and matching napkins you bought me for our anniversary.

You were getting better. That's what they said. That you'd be coming home on a beautiful clear day. It wasn't supposed to rain today.

Lone Wolf

adonis alegre

A lone wolf to return to.
A season had fought its due.
It is winter here—
and I could no longer foster
the remains of my longing unless
I have a good fire left,
the chance to get aligned
with my wishing
but the stars that I wanted
had a thick, wide smoke covering them,
and the boats were too many
to carry a part of me.

I may sound something similar but

I longed for change,

I called for no return.

And if a siren speaks like symphony
and little poetry,
I will wear a new, shiny shoe,
showing formality and remedy.
And for war
and for comfort,
there is no coming back to the troubles
of my old, festered graveyard.

Beneath The Clouds

Benjamin Parker

My coat resides in a pile by the dresser
as I unravel both arms in the rain.

A canvas painted with droplets of doubt
that well in the soles of worn shoes.

With each step, I hope that the shower will scald,
eroding the root of each blemish.

To cast out fear in the blur of the wash
and relinquish the hooks of a smile.

As the shivers awaken a rattling of keys,
I follow the flight of black feathers.

A pathway unmoved by the will of the storm,
runways sculpted by vapour.

Wings that tunnel beyond the white cliffs
to soften the grey with a song.

When all that remains is damp clothing,
I must wade through the bite of the dark.
To cherish the ripples that hide in plain sight,
the tears that nourish the soil.

A symbol of promise entwined with a quill
that graces a puddle with kindness.

WITHDRAWAL IN WINTER

Rajat Chandra Sarmah

He shivers under the thin hospital blanket.
skin as pale as the snow gathered on the sill.
His eyes are half open, full of nervous energy.

I've seen this before.
The body wants and refuses at the same time.
a hunger no one admits aloud,
not even the doctors who soften their voices at dawn.

He says he's ready.
Then he curses the ceiling.
Then he asks for water.
as if each request might steady the shaking in his bones.

His veins shrink from the needle.
hiding deeper, ashamed of being found.
Outside, winter is having its own hard season—
trees stripped clean,
The Earth tightened by cold.

Snow keeps falling without sound.
The way certain truths arrive—quiet but impossible to ignore.

I adjust the IV.
Watch a bead of fluid slide its way into the line.

For a moment, the room settles.

just breathe.

just a small thaw beginning somewhere inside him,

as if the body hasn't given up completely.

In that fragile pause,

Winter leans close to the glass,

frost spreading like a question it refuses to ask out loud—

Is he staying?

Or slipping further into the season, none of us can follow?

After Finish

Merridawn Duckler

A black cat padded the yard where lozenge of white snow
remained steadfast between mud sienna patches of green slough.

The animal gave me a look, but had better things to do,
weight held unconcerned on the silver crust slippery with dew.

I didn't even know a cat lived here! I am the stranger.

It is a brilliant, sunny day, rays bless even the ugly houses broken screens.

I sent you an image of a little paw reaching toward a great arrangement
and wrote *it's all proportions, babe* for our uncovering is ever evergreen.

I thought I was prolific and then I saw snow

Merridawn Duckler

Above the winter swollen storm river
rivulets tumble pell-mell
over banks in white flecks, in patterns
I can't translate
having studied the wrong brooks.

Driving here, discussing men and women
we're level with the mist-obsessed bog,
sticks poke through the slurry surface
each wearing rain circles, a jade necklace,
around us the soft dragged down boughs.

Back home you drove chained tires on our street
to make friction from ice
whilst our competitive neighbor asked
why do you insist on being first
posing the argument of all snow.

Where the Kudzu Grows

Melanie Maggard

All your exes are kudzu vines sprawling across the shoulders of your hometown. They wave at you as you leave after your yearly visit to your parents. Their long tendrils reaching out a foot farther each day, hoping to grasp the back bumper and catch a ride out of town with you, the one they let slip away. You see them huddling together in your rear-view mirror, knowing they'll be there when you return. Their deep green turns brown in the cold winter months, when they lie limp and lazy, swearing at the snow that seems to start falling later each year.

Your sister says your first ex still sulks in the back of the abandoned mall parking lot, where he's consumed the cinder blocks and trash bins, the electrical poles that you once made out under while your best friend kept watch. You haven't seen him since you split up under the bleachers at a Friday night football game, where you left him shifting his feet in the gravel, trying to take root to the spot where you broke him, where he wanted to be left alone so he could remember the good times.

You saw your last ex by the train tracks on your visit last year, lounging on the roof of a rusted railcar. When you told him you'd rather be friends, he swore he was going to shoot by the ice cream parlor where you'd served him free scoops all summer, by the mountain holler where you'd parked on Saturday nights, and hurtle himself into the pit of the flooded rock quarry. He said you'd regret trying to weed him out of your life. Though his face bloomed when you said *Hi* and asked, *How've you been?*, he didn't say anything. He rippled in the breeze, trailing you as you walked away. For a moment, you wondered if you should go back, nurture him into being the man he could be. But then a sprout curled around your ankle, and you knew you needed to leave.

The others cling together as cars fly by, stalk you through town while they wilt with the memory of what they miss. They whisper to the katydids born every year that you were the one they should have stuck with, covered and kept for themselves. You were always leaving, but their roots went too deep. The town was their anchor point, where they would rise, coiling and curling their fingers into any girl that wanted to be gone, blossoming when they won at keeping one there.

You could eat them all if you wanted. Take a sickle to the vines and steam the leaves, bake the roots. Let their grape-scented blossoms rest on your tongue before swallowing. Anything to keep them from invading everything around. However, you let them grow, let them watch you reappear, year after year. You hate that you pity them, planted and pining for elsewhere. But their wanting feeds you. You breathe in their oxygen as you leave, reminded again that you are free.



WINTER FIELD

Rajat Chandra Sarmah

The field behind my house
looks emptied by winter—
grass pressed flat,
The last stalks stiff enough
to snap between two fingers.

Nothing moves out there.

But when I stand long enough,
I hear small, stubborn sounds
working under the frost—
roots shifting,
a faint settling of soil
that refuses to sleep completely.

Winter hides its effort well.

It looks like stillness,
But everything is holding on
the only way it knows—
quietly, without promise,
without asking to be seen.

A single leaf skids
across the frozen ground,

circles once,
Then stops near my boot
as if considering its next step.

I don't touch it.

Some journeys,
even the smallest ones,
are meant to be finished alone.

Light thins over the field,
a pale brightness
reaching in from the edges—
not warmth,
not yet,
but the kind of light
that makes you wait
a little longer.

Red Exoskeleton

Sean Wang

First, the compression layer.

Then the black sweater

from the first cold of autumn, worn straight
through one long winter into early spring,
its wrinkles stiff as ridges, wind caught in the knit,
arthritis ground in like grit along the seams,
a stain no sink or soap can reach. Over that

the sea-blue sweater, heavy as a lifted trash bag,
cloth dragging at my shoulders, last year's damp
dried into its wool. Last of all, my body
in the red exoskeleton zipped over everything,
tight at the knees, heat stitched into each joint.

In the narrow room I push myself upright,
each step a scrape across the tiles toward you waiting
in the doorway, asking why I move so slowly
while each layer rustles and sags around me,
heavy as wet fabric braced against a tear.

Our Winter Getaway

William Ross

It's the middle of February, and the sky is carpet
bombing with its payload of snow. We're looking
at the black-and-white tv that is our kitchen window,
the dark sky streaked with winter's fallout,
piling on our streets, drifting in driveways.

My arms ache from shovelling
but there's souvlaki bubbling in the oven
and a half-litre of Retsina in the fridge,

enough Aleppo pine resin to bolster us,
to remind us of the heat- and drought-resistant
tree that endures, thrusting its slender needles
at the sky, as we sit at the kitchen table, turn
away from the window and let the turquoise
water at Lalaria wash over our toes,
the sun, holy mother of all goodness,
melting our troubles.

Green Thread Channel

Sean Wang

That old long river lies quiet now,
current thinned to a pale ribbon
threaded green along the town's edge.

We set small eyes into its banks,
clear glass mouths that fogged with runoff.
I pressed my palm to their surface
to feel the shiver under the glaze,
dark green wheeling as the river shut its eyes.

It slipped the skin we poured around it,
green forcing through its gut,
and went on as a green snake, eating
sardines and whatever moved beneath:
a cracked wooden puppet, the cans
we left half-buried in its silt.

By winter the snake slackened, rotting in place,
braided with fish bones until snow came,
a clean sheet pulled over the cut,
leaving only a blurred dark silhouette
of what once moved here.

Years later I bring my son to the cut channel.
I point to where it would not keep the line.

He kneels, tracing the fallen outline
we left for him; his pencil cannot fix a single shape.

That winter, on the living-room floor,
my son stands in a thin blue river round his boots.
I reach to lift him; my hands close on water,
a thread of green still unwinding there.

Under snow

Gordan Struić

Nothing moves
where the field looks finished.

Roots practice patience.
Seeds rehearse silence.

The ground keeps its vows
in the dark.

Winter is not an ending,
only a longer sentence
spoken slowly
until the thaw understands.

She Could Finally Breathe

Huina Zheng

She stared at the TV screen, watching her ex-husband Lin embrace their son Ming, lost for twenty-two years, under the glare of flashing cameras. In that moment, the invisible hand that had gripped her throat for decades seemed to loosen, just slightly.

This was the reunion banquet Lin held after finding Ming. Along with the live audience, media reporters, and countless strangers turned into the livestream, she watched as Lin handed Ming a set of Mercedes keys, his first gift to the son he had just found. The camera swept past her two daughters, poised and polite, while Lin, arm in arm with his wife, Yulan, introduced her as “Mom” to the cameras and the crowd.

Their happiness stabbed like ice.

She stared at Yulan’s perfectly maintained face: forty, yet glowing with the radiance of thirty. The sapphire gown traced her elegant figure, and the diamond magnolia brooch on her chest gleamed under the lights. Lin stood beside her in a tailored suit, waving at the media, confident, composed, a man with four companies, seven properties, and not a trace of the past weighing him down.

She curled her rough, dark hands, the knuckles deformed from years of labor. She didn’t need a mirror to know how she must look outside that frame, an unpainted face spotted with age, silver strands at her temples winding like cobwebs around her guilt.

Reporters asked about Ming’s upbringing. Her nails dug deep into her palms. She feared hearing any hint of abuse by his adoptive parents. Every detail from that afternoon twenty-two years ago was etched into her bones: the mall’s air conditioning had been too cold, so she told three-year-old Ming to wait by the entrance while she rushed home, just across the street, to grab a jacket. The mall was quiet, with a security guard on duty. She thought it would take five minutes at most. She remembered glancing back and seeing him crouch by the revolving door, spinning a toy. But when she came back, only the toppled top remained.

Even after giving birth to two daughters, even with Lin never raising his voice, even after she'd plastered missing-person posters across half of China, the image of that mall entrance never left her. It split her life into Before and After.

When she discovered Lin's affair, she didn't fight, didn't plead. She signed the divorce papers and let him go, to be with Yulan, younger, more capable. Their final meeting was wordless. They looked at each other, both seeing Ming's shadow in the other's face.

She didn't mind walking away with almost nothing, as long as Lin and Yulan treated her daughters well. She knew only with their father could the girls be well-fed, well-educated. With her, they'd have grown up in cheap rental flats, watching her come home soaked from deliveries. And only by leaving Lin could she stop reminding herself she was the mother who had lost her son.

Now, she watched Lin on TV, arm around Yulan and the three children, smiling as if posing for a perfect family photo. She felt no regret. Tears slid down her cheeks, seeping into the corner of her mouth, tasting of salt and something sharper.

She made herself a promise: If Ming truly lived well, if he didn't hate her, then in the long years ahead, she would try to forgive herself. Try to live again. She would let herself sleep in for another hour on rainy mornings. She would brew a cup of jasmine tea and savor it under a moonlit sky. When her daughters visited, she'd stop refusing the new clothes and lipsticks they brought. She would try to believe what her friend Mei always said, "It's not your fault. You didn't lose Ming. Those damn traffickers took him."

On the screen, Ming was answering questions. He said his adoptive parents had raised him with love, sent him to the best university, and now he was in medical school, hoping to become a doctor. He loved them. But he also loved his birth parents. Then, looking directly into the camera, he said, "Mom, I miss you. I wish you were here."

Her lips trembled. Lin hadn't told her about the reunion banquet, and she understood. He didn't want to see her, didn't want to revisit the pain. Ming had never contacted her, and she'd once believed he must despise her.

But now, looking at Ming's face, his monolid eyes and high cheekbones so much like hers, her throat tightened. The hand that had gripped her for over twenty years finally let go.

Tears blurred her vision, but she didn't wipe them away. She stood, ready to head to her shift at the delivery depot.

She inhaled, like someone coming up for air.



Sitting with a friend's mother in the hospital

Alessandra Nysether-Santos

beneath that walled ticking plastic moon,
the room is clinical:

 varying shades of white,
 sheets of ice
 blanketing this sleeping city
passersby slip quietly through,
 muffled footsteps haunt tiled avenues
 echo in the corners & warped mirrors

the beeps of the machines sing
 a cheerless round with the
 click click click of some pump
 that will not save a life.
 volleying the tick of the clock
 orchestrating assonance
 to underscore that endless slow circling of the short hand—

the ghosts linger with us
 in the well-worn
 wooden arms of the chair beside the bed
 where fingers sank into
 the disappearing line between sickness and quietus
 in the well-worn
 sternness of the nurse—
 how the corners of her mouth stay stuck
 in the rusted track, good personal boundaries
 showing how far she is willing to love
 the dead and their living

dry air rippling with our mingled sighs
and if you listen
really listen
to the song,
 it is sweet,
 it is gentle, loving
 with a simple chorus
 something like *hold them*
 while they are
 here

this time around.

First Snow
Allister Nelson

Strings of bruises iced in blue.
frozen wells with copper koi.

Scales of snow, bound in glass.

Crystal flakes
of dreams
in bloom.

The Smallest Vein

Gordan Struić

Beneath the frost,
something stays green
without asking permission.

Not brave.
Just persistent.

The leaf does not remember
last summer.
It holds
what is necessary.

Snow presses down,
then lets go.

In the smallest vein,
green remembers
how to stay.

Stacking Chairs

Raymond Brunell

At my ten-year sobriety meeting, someone asks what the hardest day was.

I don't say Ethan's overdose. I say: the afternoon before, when I knew he wasn't coming but didn't know why yet.

That afternoon at Riverside Outpatient, I sat in my office at 2 PM. Ethan's appointment. The chair across from me stayed empty. Three months clean, his longest streak. His brother's wedding that weekend—open bar, family dynamics, all the usual triggers. I knew he wasn't coming. The way you know.

I waited the full thirty minutes anyway. Policy requires it. I watched the clock: 2:15, 2:20, 2:25. The chair stayed empty. At 2:30, I marked him as a no-show on my tablet. Fourth client this year. I didn't let myself think about that yet.

My next client arrived on time. We talked about cravings, about riding them out. I said the things counselors say: one day at a time, call your sponsor, remember why you got clean. I meant all of it. I've been on both sides of this desk. Three years sober when Ethan should have been there. I knew the math—most people relapse. Statistics don't care how much you want it to be different.

At 3:30, I left for dialysis. I spend four hours in the chair three times a week while they clean my blood. The clinic smells like antiseptic and old magazines. I brought my phone, charger, and paperwork I could do one-handed while the machine hummed. The needle ache in my arm hardly registered now. Other patients slept or watched TV. I worked. I always work.

The nurse asked how I was doing. "Fine," I said. My blood pressure was up. She didn't mention it. She didn't believe me either, but she had learned not to push. Helpers don't like it when others help them. We sat there together, her monitoring my vitals, and me monitoring my phone for messages that wouldn't come.

I thought about Ethan's chair, still empty back at my office. I thought about the three others this year—Michelle in February, Jorge in May, Amanda in August. I don't usually let myself count. Counting makes it harder to walk into work on Monday.

I got back to Riverside at 4:30. The building was quiet, most counselors gone for the day. I did paperwork at my desk. Ethan's intake form is still in his file. Date of first use: age 14. Substance: opioids, started with prescription after a football injury. The story I'd heard a hundred times. The story ends a hundred different ways, most of them bad.

At 4:47, my phone rang. Hospital number on the screen. My stomach dropped. Ethan was in the ER. Critical. Overdose in his hotel room after the wedding reception. They found him when he didn't answer his door for checkout.

I stood there, keys biting into my palm. I could go home. I should go home. Professional boundaries exist for a reason—I can't save everyone, can't be everyone's emergency contact, can't show up every time. My supervisor's words: "You have to protect your capacity to keep doing this work."

The hospital was fifteen minutes away. He was critical. Critical didn't mean savable. It meant someone should be there when he stopped being savable.

I went anyway.

At the meeting, I take a breath. Someone in the back shifts in their chair. The kind of small movement people make when they're uncomfortable, when a story gets too close.

"He died anyway," I say. "Three hours after I got there. I sat with him. His mother came. She thanked me for being there."

I went back to work on Monday. I saw my 9 AM, 10:30, and afternoon group. Someone asked how my weekend was. I said fine.

Seven years later, I'm still at Riverside. Still marking no-shows on my tablet. Still going to dialysis three times a week. Ten years sober now. The math keeps changing, but the work stays the same.

Someone in the circle says, "Thank you for your story." They mean it. Not because it has a happy ending.

I nod. I remember Ethan's mother calling six months after he died, just to check in. She said she was glad I had been there, even though it didn't change anything. She said it mattered that someone tried, that he wasn't alone.

I don't know if she's right. I know I went back to work. I know I'm still going. I know I mark no-shows and wonder, every time, if this is the call I'll get next week.

The meeting ends. People get up, stack chairs, and make coffee for the next group. Someone touches my shoulder as they pass. I stay seated for a minute, looking at the empty chairs against the wall, waiting for someone to fill them.

That's all we can do. Keep showing up. Keep stacking the chairs.

Meet the Editor-in-Chief

Melissa Ashley Hernandez is a Latinx writer, editor, and performer from the South Jersey/Philadelphia area. She has her BA in Acting and Directing, and two MFAs in Creative Writing and Publishing from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She is also the founder and Editor-in-Chief of Wild Willow Magazine, formerly The Minison Project!

Her prose can be found in two short stories published in 2021, “The Rum Keg Girl” in the Cemetery Gates Media collection, *Paranormal Contact: A Quiet Horror Confessional*, and “Lady Killer” in Volume 4 of Kandisha Press’ Women of Horror Anthology, *Don’t Break the Oath*.

Her poetry can be found in *the minison zine*, The Daily Drunk Magazine, Fahmidan Journal, and Bandit Fiction, among others.

Wild Willow Magazine

Formerly The Minison Project, Wild Willow Magazine is a literary magazine founded by Melissa Ashley Hernandez that intertwines nature and the human experience, showcasing the wonderful, weird, and wild aspects of the human condition.



Contributor Bios

adonis alegre is a filipino poet from bacnotan, la union. he took his bachelor's degree in ab english at don mariano marcos memorial state university, philippines. you can read his poems in panitikan ph, levitate magazine, redamancy magazine, everscribe magazine, querencia press, livina press, bakunawa press, among others.

Alessandra Nysether-Santos (they/she) is a Brazilian American and Jersey Italian writer, artist, and educator living in north Florida with her sweet lil' family. Alessandra was a winner of the 2025 Garden Party Collective Chapbook Contest with their first published book, *fat magic*. They have poems in places like Monarca: the Zine, SoFloPoJo, North Carolina Literary Review, and Até Mais: An Anthology of Latinx Futurisms. Alessandra facilitates community offerings like creative workshops, faith exploration programs at her local Unitarian Universalist church, and moon circles.

Allister Nelson (she/her) is a queer, neurodivergent, multiple Pushcart-nominated author appearing in The British Fantasy Society, Apex Magazine, Eternal Haunted Summer, Renewable Energy World, Frontiers in Health Communication, The National Science Foundation, Luna Station Quarterly, Coffin Bell, etc. Her work has been translated into Polish and Spanish, curated by Kevin J. Anderson, and nominated for Poland's top fantasy prize. Her chapbooks include: *Southern Saints and Southern Sinners* (Laughing Man House), *Jethro's Daughter* (Blood + Honey), *Sinners of the South* (Alien Buddha Press), and *Earth Girls Aren't Easy* (PULP). Her debut novella, *Holy Diver*, will release with Rebel Satori Press in 2027.

Angela Patera is a published artist, writer, and poet. Her short stories and poems have appeared in publications such as Livina Press, Bitterleaf Books, and Haunted Words Press. Her art has appeared in numerous publications, as well as on the cover of Small Wonders Magazine, Indie Bites Magazine, The Ophelia Gazette, and more. When Angela isn't creating she likes to spend much of her time in the woods, cemeteries, and museums.

Benjamin Parker is a poet based in North Wales, with work published in journals such as Blue Unicorn, The Purposeful Mayonnaise, and Nawr Mag, and was recently nominated for Oatleaf Poetry's Pushcart Prize. Benjamin's debut poetry chapbook, *Perishing Thoughts*, was released in 2025.

Bridget Houlihan is a writer of short stories and poetry, who likes to dabble in music, painting, and sketching living in Pittsburgh, PA. Her work has been featured in Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Livina Press, & Anomaly among others.

Cindy Rinne creates fiber art, zines, and poetry in San Bernardino, CA. Rinne is an interdisciplinary creative in poetry, performance, zines, fiber art, and collaborates with musicians. Cindy is the author of several books: *Structures Break Down*, (Cyberwit.net), *Dancing Through the Fire Door* (Nauset Press), *Today on Two Planets* (Written by Veterans), and more. Her poetry and visual poetry appeared in: The Closed Eye Open, Mythos Magazine, Unpsychology, and others.

Denise Bossarte is an award-winning writer, photographer, and artist based in Texas, USA. When she's not immersed in writing, she turns her lens to the world around her, exploring visual spaces with a keen eye for the unexpected. Her photography captures the powerful imagery that can be found in unusual places. She enjoys writing, exploring new art forms, and teaching contemplative photography workshops. She lives in Texas with her husband and literary cat, Za' Ji.

Gordan Struić is a Croatian poet, lawyer, and musician. Writing in both Croatian and English, his work explores silence, memory, and the fragility of the body. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals including Ink, Sweat & Tears, Lana Turner Journal, and Beyond Words.

Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her creative work has been published in Baltimore Review, Variant Literature, Midway Journal, and other literary journals. She has received multiple honors, including nominations for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and Best Microfiction. She lives in Guangzhou, China, with her family.

Jackie McClure writes poetry and fiction aiming to illuminate the commonplace in our shared landscapes. Recent poetry can be found in Split Rock Review, Penumbra, The Nature Of Our Times, and on her Substack site, Pouring Word Tea. She lives near the Salish Sea in the Cascadia bioregion of Washington State.

Julia Biggs is a poet, writer, collage artist and freelance art historian. She lives in Cambridge, UK. Her micro-chapbook ROLES was published by Ghost City Press in 2025, and her work has appeared in Osmosis Press, Ink Sweat & Tears, Streetcake Magazine, RIC Journal and elsewhere.

Karina Ten (she/her) is a queer and neurodivergent poet from Kazakhstan, currently studying medicine in Milan, Italy. Her work centers on themes of mental health, belonging, and identity.

Maria Odessky Rosen works her daily 8-10 hour shift in New York City and spends her remaining time writing, reading, and dancing. Maria's poems, short stories, and essays have appeared in newspapers and magazines, including the Beyond Words Anthology. She has received writing awards as well as a competitive mentorship in the Gordon Square Review. Her poems, short stories and essays have appeared in Beyond Words Anthology and Gordon Square Review.

May Garner is an author and poet based out of Dayton, Ohio. She has been writing for nearly fifteen years and has been sharing her writing online for over a decade. She is the author of two poetry collections, *Withered Rising* and *Melancholic Muse*. Her work has appeared in Querencia Press, Cozy Ink Press, Arcana Poetry Press, Speckled Trout Review, and others.

Melanie Maggard is a flash and poetic prose writer who loves dribbles and drabbles. She has published in Cotton Xenomorph, Ghost Parachute, X-R-A-Y Magazine, Peatsmoke Journal, The Mackinaw, The Dribble Drabble Review, Five Minute Lit, and others.

Merridawn Duckler is a writer and visual artist from Oregon and author of *INTERSTATE* (dancing girl press), *IDIOM* (Washburn Prize, Harbor Review), *MISSPENT YOUTH* (rinky dink press), and *ARRANGEMENT* (Southernmost Books). She won the Beullah Rose Poetry Contest from Smartish Pace. Work in *Seneca Review*, *Interim*, *Posit*, *Ninth Letter*, *Ploughshares*. Best Small Fictions 2025.

Nolo Segundo is the pen name of a retired teacher who became a published poet in his 70s in over 260 literary journals in 21 countries, was nominated for the Pushcart, and thrice for Best of the Net. He has 3 collections published in softcover by Cyberwit.net: *THE ENORMITY OF EXISTENCE*; *OF ETHER AND EARTH*; and *SOUL SONGS*. These titles reflect awareness gained over 50 years ago when he had an NDE whilst nearly drowning: that he has--is--a consciousness predating birth and surviving death, what poets since Plato have called the soul.

Rajat Chandra Sarmah is a poet from India whose work explores memory, emotional landscapes, and the quiet endurance found in everyday life. His writing has appeared in *The New Verse News*, *The Assam Tribune*, and over thirty-five anthologies. A Fellow of LEAD International and IEI, he is the author of seven books, including three Amazon bestsellers.

Raymond Brunell writes literary fiction and flash that explores persistence in the face of futility, examining how people continue showing up even when showing up doesn't save anyone. His work often features helping professionals, people in recovery, and those who carry impossible knowledge about how little control we have over outcomes. His flash and short fiction has appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Skeleton Flowers Press*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Across the Margin*, *Literary Garage*, *TrashLight Press*, and over thirty other venues. He lives in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Rick K. Reut was born in 1984. He studied philosophy at EHU in Minsk, Belarus, and Vilnius, Lithuania, and literature at SPSU in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Since graduating, he has worked mostly as a translator and a tutor of English as a foreign language.

Sean Wang is a Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions nominated poet and PhD candidate. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *West Trade Review*, *ONE ART*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Stone Poetry Quarterly*, and *O:JA&L*, among others.

Suzanna C. de Baca, a native Iowan and proud Latina, is an advisor, teacher, author, and artist exploring change and transformation. Her poetry has appeared in national and international magazines, literary journals and anthologies. A Derick Burleson Poetry Award recipient and Pushcart Prize nominee, she lives in the small rural town of Huxley, Iowa.

Travis Jeffrey Gonzalez is a writer and creative strategist based in Los Angeles, California. While his day job is helping brands tell better stories, by night, he writes screenplays and narrative fiction. He also regularly contributes film criticism pieces to *MovieJawn* and has his own film-related substack, *Cinema Social Hour*. When he isn't writing, he loves hiking in the Los Angeles mountains and spending time with his dog, Sancho.

V. Bray has been a writer since childhood and still has a box filled with her first “books,” usually illustrated with markers and bound with yarn. She writes in many genres, from speculative and historical fiction to poetry. Her work has been published in About Place Journal, Halfway Down the Stairs, Multiplicity Magazine, and The Writer. Learn more at authorvbray.com.

William Ross is a Canadian writer and visual artist living in Toronto. His poems have appeared in Rattle, The New Quarterly, The Write Launch, Heavy Feather Review, Bicoastal Review, The Hooghly Review, Amethyst Review, Bindweed Magazine Anthology, Anti-Heroin Chic, and others.

