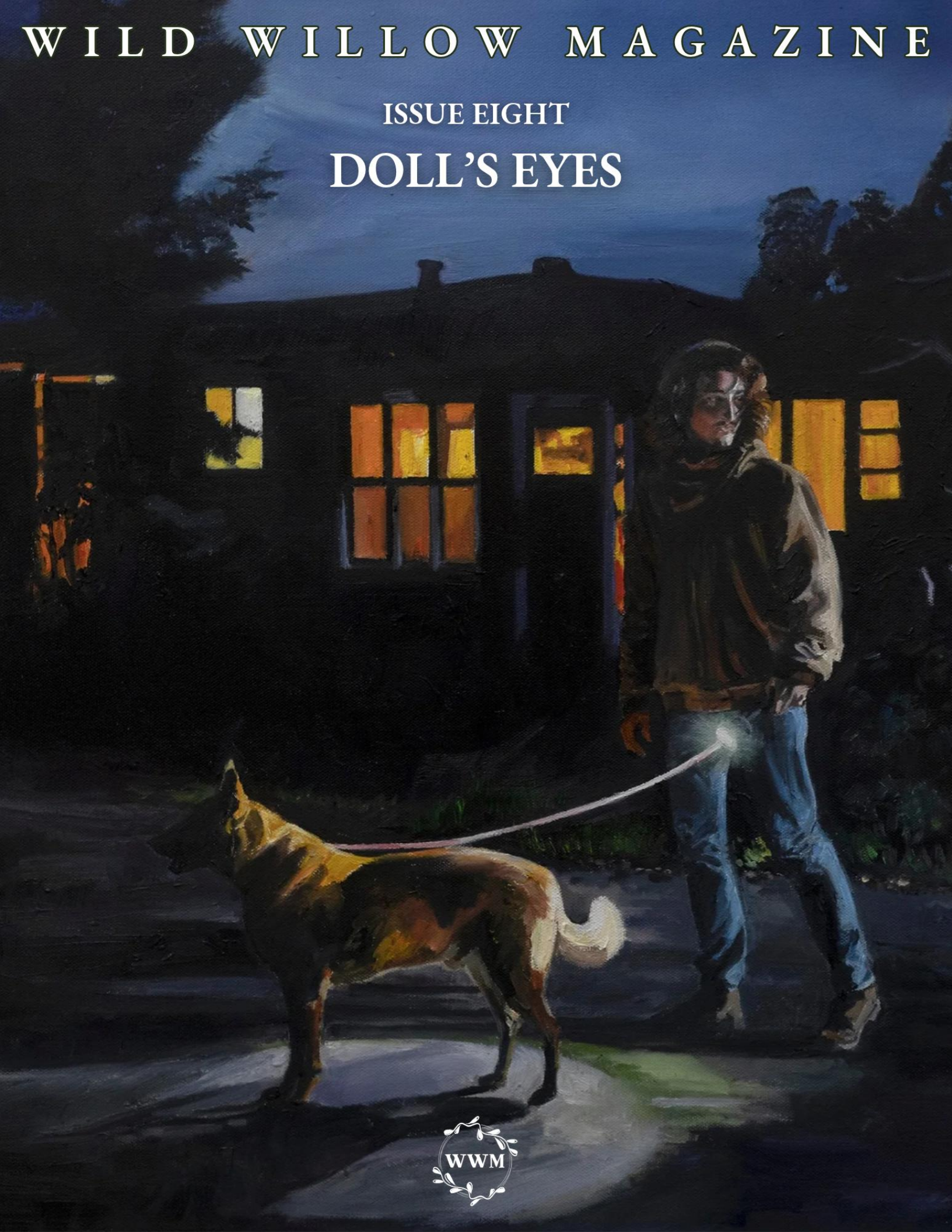
WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE

ISSUE EIGHT

DOLL'S EYES



Wild Willow Magazine

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Content Warnings

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

Dagger Imagery

Death

Depression

Emotional Childhood Abuse

Gender Dysphoria

Generational Trauma

Ghosts

High-Risk Pregnancy

Homicide

Illness

Infertility

Murder

References to Human Remains

Scopophobia

Sexual Violence

Syringe Imagery

Violence

War

Letter from the Editor

Dearest readers,

Our everyday lives are filled with mystery. Where did I leave my keys? Why is my car making that sound? Why am I thirty-one and still having dreams about taking the PSAT's?

These are some of the simple things we can ask ourselves, and most have a simple answer: in the key bowl, emergency brakes are still on, work is too stressful and you should probably quit already.

But sometimes there are mysteries that we are unable to resolve. Questions shrouded in darkness. Answers beyond the veil. The mysteries of the unknown.

This theme seemed to inspire the masses, and with over 300 submissions of poetry, prose, and visual art, we have quite the doozy of an issue for you! So, curl up wherever you feel cozy, and experience the stories of the things that cannot be explained away.

Melissa Ashley Hernandez
EIC, Wild Willow Magazine

At The King's Arms

Michael C. Paul

As I sat drinking on the pier,
A Mason jar of rum,
I felt somebody standing near,
Though I'd not heard him come.

A man stood there, peacoat and cap,
His shirt a sailor's twill.
He smiled at me and gave a tap
Upon his old Dunhill.

He blew a ring from his old pipe,
And dropped his duffel bag.
He mopped his head with one great swipe,
Then put away his rag.

The bag was old and weatherworn,
A ship's name stitched in thread;
Though battered long and badly torn,
"The Rachel" could be read.

He gave a nod and touched his peak:
"Does lovely Clara Hill,
With her red lips and rosy cheeks,
Live by the old church still?"

I'd never heard that name before,
And did not go to church.
He lingered there beside the shore,
But I couldn't help his search.

I motioned down along the pier:
"*The King's Arm's* where to go;
They'll get you chowder and a beer,
And your Clare, they might know."

He tamped his pipe and nodded slow:
"Aye, that sounds about right.
I'll ask around and have some chow,
And find a bed tonight."

He slung his bag across his back,
And wandered on past me.
The gulls cried out, the wind fell slack,
The tide rolled out to sea.

I lingered there and sipped my rum,
The stars began to show;
The air grew chill, my fingers numb,
I thought I'd better go.

I drank my rum, down to the dregs,
And staggered toward the bar.
I was unstable on my legs,
Not safe to drive a car.

The bar was packed, smoke filled the air,
The bums all spilled their drinks;
I sought my sailor everywhere,
But never caught a glimpse.

The floor was strewn with broken glass,
The ceiling stuck with knives;
Each man held in his arms a lass:
"A woman not his wife."

Through drunken fights and vulgar songs,
I searched the dismal lair.
Yet in those tattooed, salty throngs,
My sailor wasn't there.

I asked the barman if he'd seen
A man in coat and cap.
He shook his head and turned to clean

The brass upon the tap.

In passing, I asked of the ship,
Its name stitched on the sack.
The blood drained from the barman's lips,
He stiffened up his back.

His face had turned a deathly white:
"That ship was lost at sea,
Some fifty years ago this night."
He whispered, hoarse, to me.

"She foundered in a raging gale,
All hands were lost, they say;
They found a single spar and sail,
All else was swept away."

I made my way home up the hill,
The sky a bloody red;
The *Rachel's* fate stays with me still,
Her thought fills me with dread.



The City Below

Sheila Thadani

They carry tales of love,
all beneath the dusty loam.
Smiling faces in sunny skies
wake up yellow and purple
blossoms of languid earth.

In shades of silent dreams.
they unite and team below;
echos sound of whispers
from veins of humid roots,
sharing gifts of sweet juices.

A network of exchange
each in its own quiet space;
a vibrant, pulsing city
of trails and twisting yarns
that preserve its enclave.

Murmurs in the stillness-
the discourse of filaments
in crevices deep in the earth;
sounds from the underground
of soft and gentle nature.

A contrast to the world above;
the frantic voices, hectic pace
of humans, lost and alone,
captured in their tangled web
of chaotic wilderness.



Hydrology

Aden Thomas

When thunder turns to rain
think about regrets you've had. Think
about a place the water
wishes it could run.

We lose parts of ourselves
along the way
to rivers and the rising streams.
It's the ocean that remembers.

Some part of us is always lifting,
returning to the clouds.
We spend our lives evaporating
into the things we thought we'd lost.

Listen to the thunder
still yelling at the mountains.
It's not angry,
it just wants to be the rain.

The Verge

Angi Lewis

Blueberry Hill was named for the fat berries that grow in furrows on the south side of the town. Every July we put on a festival with the invitation, "Come Find Your Thrill," a line adapted from the song made famous by Fats Domino in the 1950's.

The summer I turned seventeen I signed up to work in one of the booths selling pies. The Saturday morning of the festival was already hot when I wove through the crowds to the tent. Sweat pooled under my arms, under the waistband of my cutoff shorts.

I had just cinched an apron around my hips when, above the buzz of the crowd, a thud reverberated through the air. The pies in their tins jumped. The ground beneath me shuddered. Moments later, word traveled through that a tree on the edge of the field had fallen. It appeared no one was hurt.

The festival was over on Sunday, all the tents and booths packed up. On Monday, a dog running through the field where the tree lay stopped, his hackles raised in a ridge along his back. The owner gave these details to the officer. Also that the dog would not leave the site. Soon chainsaws roared and the giant rounds were moved. It was then they found her body.

There was no crime for the police to solve, no foul play. It was obvious the tree had done it, in an act of nature or God or whatever you wanted to call it. There was no way she could have survived, even if someone had been there to witness it and run for help. Still, it pained me to think she'd been lying there all alone for days, the weight of that tree upon her, no way to find the sky.

I'd overheard my mother's friend say once that energy can linger in a place. Though her body had been removed, I felt a presence. I stopped by with flowers, told her I was sorry we weren't aware she was there. I asked if she'd known, if somehow there was a pause in time before the tree fell, a beat between beats where she could come to terms with her end. I don't know if this was her answer but a peace came over me then as if she had. That summer, I was on the verge of big change, filled with

questions about my life ahead. Over the coming weeks, she became in my mind the older sister I'd always wanted.

This was in the time before DNA so it was several months before we learned who she was. Through public appeals and dental records, the police had gotten information about a missing woman from Newport who had hitchhiked out our way. At first, her family had not been alarmed when they hadn't heard from her. Meg Harris was prone to drifting, her mother said, threading through the landscape and through other people's lives.

Now she had a name and people who loved her, a place she came from. I felt her energy disperse then, as if in us knowing more about her, she needed to move on again. This was not something I understood. I'd lived in Blueberry Hill my whole life and couldn't think of leaving people I loved, who loved me.

I finished high school, went on to college. The summer I graduated, I drove to Newport, still haunted by her life and how it had ended. I didn't know what I was looking for. I found her mother's address and drove past the house. There was a sprawling oak in the front yard that I wondered if Meg had climbed as a young girl. I lingered for a few minutes but couldn't bring myself to go up and knock. It had been five years. What would I say? That I was there on behalf of the tree?

I told my mother I was leaving but not when I'd be back. I didn't know. Driving by myself, I felt weightless at times, untethered and it felt good. I imagine this is how Meg felt, why she never stayed anywhere long. I couldn't have lived as a stranger forever though; something in me needed to be known. But for a month. I shed my old life and flew up and down hills, along creeks, over rivers, sleeping in fields, back when you still could.

There were many mysteries in the air that day that her body was found. Who was she and what caused the tree to fall and how had it fallen on her? And then there was the great mystery of *WHY*. Why her? Why a tree? At the center of it all, the question that left a ringing in my ears, could it be me?

I am now in my sixth decade, roughly three times the age Meg was when she died. I find myself talking to her again when I haven't thought of her for years. She never married or had kids. I must have thought she couldn't help me with any of that. But now, timeworn and feeling my age, the question of my own death emerges from shadows. I find myself talking to her again or talking to some version of myself I am becoming. In either case, I find comfort. It is like there is someone just a little ahead of me, reaching back a hand, leading me through this strange forest towards some slim shaft of light at the verge.


BE
TRUE
TO
YOURSELF
MAGYAR
POSTA
2Ft
3
I must be a
mermaid,
I have no
fear of
depths,
and a great
fear of
shallow
living.
7996796
7996796

My Soul Untethered

Mark LaMonda

The moon is low tonight,
so low it is resting on my house,

a thin crescent
caressing my eaves.

There is a blue rabbit
sitting at my kitchen table,

an ancient man singing nursery rhymes
showering with my hose out back.

Hey diddle, diddle.
The cat and the fiddle.

My soul floating
on the high tide.

The rabbit whispers lyrics of a song
my father sang every night.

I sit down at the table with father's
cribbage board and cards.

My body moves to the rabbit counting –
15-2, 15-4, 15-6, 15-8 9-10-11-12.

The body knows what the blue rabbit knows,
knows what the old man will be singing --

my father taught me to play cribbage,
and the dish ran away with the spoon.

Grandad

Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

Like clockwork
At 12 midday
On my work from home days

The toys played their
Recorded music
Songs and phrases

It wasn't the
Cockroaches
The kids or our dog

In the sunlit playroom
Sat my
Father-in-law's ashes

Was it the ghost of
Grandad Shaun
Making mischief?

He was a larrikin
The life of the party
But taken too soon

It comforted
My partner
Thinking it could be him

When we packed the toys away
Ready for renos
The sounds stopped

Will grandad
Return when
We unpack them?


YOU CAN'T IMAGINE
HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU
change
Send to
Cut
Copy
Edit
Delete
Properties
Your body
Your brain
Your heart
Your soul
to be patien
to be happier
With money.
With fame.
With the small things.
With success.
POISON

My Father's Ashes are in the Linen Closet

Mark LaMonda

It is dusk and my mother's towels are filthy,
perpetually filthy and I know why.

My mother's towels are weeping --
black midnight rolling through cotton fiber.

Streams of liquid charcoal on each hand towel,
in every bathroom, the same rivers of distress that
won't come clean no matter the times washed.

Out, damned spot! out, I say!

Your husband's ashes are in the linen closet mom,
tucked away in a plastic Ziploc bag
in a Talavera canister,
taped shut.

My father knows where he is mom,
and his feelings of eternal neglect,
his weeping, can't be stemmed with packing tape
on an ill fitted lid.

The sun is gone now. Dusk gone too.
Deepest midnight is weeping
thick tears that will keep the dawn at bay.

The plastic will no longer contain him, mom.
Your towels, bedsheets and pillows roil in his disgust.

The Ganymedes

Jawn Van Jacobs

John Does, bird clothes,

details of muscle, tendon & bone –

Wise Men, Shepherd boys,

peculiar harmonies of lilac, sissy pink & lemon.

they hold dovetails in their hands,

open-minded, but somehow menacing animals –

sprinkling fresh herbs & pouring over all

weapons, jewelry & gold!

they can tar & feather a face

after using a mouth as vase

for a firmly harvested Fennel –

that they brew down into a honeyed tea

that Men drink of as Mead.

For they are the Son,

analogous to noon,

& to lead

God borrows their throats!


EARTH AS IF SEEN FROM THE MOON
TAKE ME WITH YOU
wish
go away
WITH NO CONFLICT, THERE IS NO INTIMACY
NOTHING LASTS FOREVER
ILLUSION OF CONTROL
Favorite Person

Terminus

John Dorroh

I spit river on clavicle,
design tendon sculptures, ravenous
mandible

jaw line grotesque
feature, relic of animoids that slink
among

normal creatures, eye
sockets melted from solar flare,
dilated pupils

look back on its body
shares space with no other like it.
Stumped.

I Check My Insides Like You Check the Mailbox

Heather Cadenhead

When there's a good rain, I rush to it
(breathless, important-letter-in-the-mailbox
rushing), letting each cloud soak me to the bone
with its milk (a good-luck dance, say the Sioux).

The china dish on my nightstand is lined
with zinc and manganese, a gala apple
that is replaced each morning after pressing
a thermometer to the base of my mouth.

You tell me of a doctor who crafts cobwebs,
like E.B. White's spider, into something readable.
He'll translate the foreign language of my body
into something known, marking my errors in red.

You recommend gathering data—like an astronaut
logging an Apollo mission, citing every fractured crater.
I press pencil to pad, but all I see is starless night:



Blue Moon Boy

Abbie Shanahan

I fell hard on my knees
and crawled into bed
curling around the sharp hope of you

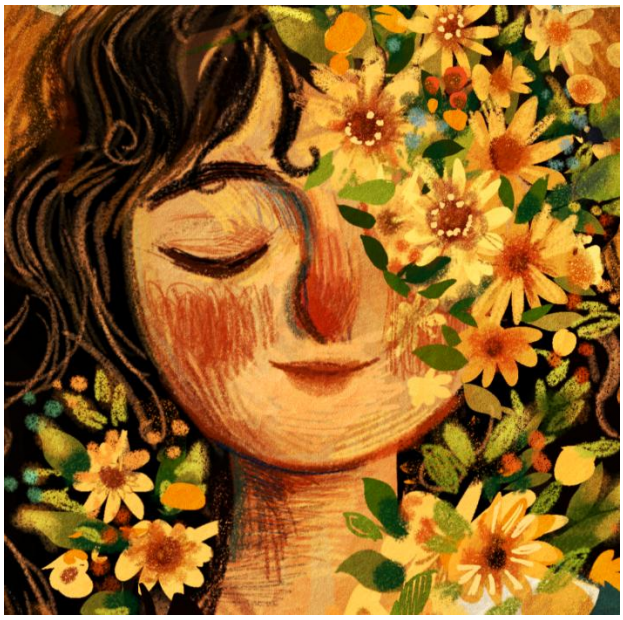
Long before the stick turned color
I knew that you had made it earthside,
beginning to meld stardust
into form

We would not catch a clear glimpse
in the coming days, already you were a mystery
that blood would not speak of,
moon-skulled and dreaming
pressed tight against my back

The way that you still do
as we lay in your bed
to recount the day—
the very spine of me

Interview with Shiiiaaaseeds

by Melissa Ashley Hernandez



Keyshia Salazar (known as Shia) is a 17-year-old artist based in the Philippines. She has soulfully created digital and gouache illustrations inspired by her love for folkloric art, decorative storybook illustrations, otherworldly themes, classic literature and searching for warmth, whimsy and magic. She has created illustrations for local exhibits, school organizations such as "UST SHS Music, Arts, and Design Society", and fundraisers such as "Cats Around Town ph" and was notably featured in the local online art magazine "NovicePh", most recently in their "Design100 Poster Exhibit." She is currently working on a solo narrative passion project titled *Light of the Lost.*

With every little world in her illustration, from floating castles, sentient mountains, giant birds, dancing flowers, and magical heroines, her art has become her own form of communication and connection, an irreplaceable "magic" that she finds in illustrating.

I came across Shia on a regular day, just scrolling Bluesky catching up with contributors. While looking over her pieces, I was struck by how deeply her art called to me: its warmth of the colors, how the story unfolded through details, the clarity of emotion. I reached out and asked if she would be interested in submitting her art to the magazine, and she agreed! After some discussion, the idea came about to interview her about her process, and we both quickly became excited about getting her perspective out into the world.

While interviewing Shia, I was enlightened to how she views the world of art and how she approaches her ideas. Throughout this interview, you, dear reader, will find it difficult not to be charmed by her wholesome sense of the world and her aspirations of creating something that brings us back to when stories were filled with darkness, whimsy, and *magic*.

***

Shiiiaaaseeds on "Art and Preservation of Self"

WILD WILLOW MAGAZINE: In your bio, you say your illustrations draw inspiration from folklore and classic literature. What first drew you to these kinds of stories and imagery?

KEYSHIA SALAZAR: I like to think that almost everything we do as artists, all traces back to what we love as kids. As a kid, I was always drawn to books and animated movies, and classic fairytales and myths of my own hometown. I always loved it's odd yet wistful feel, aside from the fact it looked pretty, I was especially intrigued that these weren't just cozy, cute stories. They had a sense of weariness of the unknown, and depth in each character, just like the real world, which is something I wish to reflect in my illustrations. As I got older, I also began to appreciate the process and history behind those illustrations and animations from my childhood. In reality, finding that sense of wonder and whimsy in simple moments is what keeps me going as an artist. There's just so much more to mention, but a few more pieces of media that come to mind that shaped my style, and me personally, as a whole: Pre-Disney fairytale books, *Coraline*, *Castle in the Sky*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *The Little Prince*, *Anne of Green Gables*, the *Wildwood* Books, and *Witch Hat Atelier*.

WWM: Could you walk us through your creative process, from the first spark of an idea to the finished illustration?

KS: Of course. If we're talking about how I get my "inspirations," I love looking at my journal entries and photos from my gallery, like photos or sceneries or museum trips, or even unused sketches that I can use for "unexpected" inspirations. I also love looking at art books online, and similar artists I admire, there's so much more to discover in art outside of Pinterest! As for my literal process, I usually start with a rough sketch, mostly consisting of shapes of the figures I want, then I either go straight to color blocking or improve the sketch further. Because I often don't want to spend too much time doing inking or lineart, I love using textured digital pens in ibisPaint, and I often use paper overlays before coloring. If it helps, limited color palettes and consistent hatching also keep my art look coherent. The rendering stage and "near completion" stage is my favorite part because I get to play around with even more details and colors.

WWM: Your pieces are so intricate — each one contains a plethora of careful details spread around the scene, and it feels like different pieces of a story you're trying to tell. Do you plan the story you want to tell before you start a piece? Or do you start the piece and let the story unfold on its own?

KS: Ooh, now that's interesting... I'd like to say it's both sides for me. Whenever I work on an illustration, its story eventually expands the more I add on details. If I find that it has potential for different interpretations and different worlds, like the "Headspace" portrait series from months ago, I begin to work on artworks with a similar composition but set in a different theme or perspective.





Some works on the other hand also have stories that have been planned in the back of my mind, but those also expanded as the details went on. It's like when you have written a whole page of words in a book, but you can't help but add a plot twist to make it more enticing. I've worked on a sequence of connected narrative art before where it is an anthology of different characters all set in the same forest.

WWM: Speaking of narrative art, let's talk a bit about your project, *Light of the Lost*.

KS: Oh, about that! *Light of the Lost* is a picture book project! It is soon to be published online, possibly on Webtoon, and eventually published physically next year. It is a project that began in my earlier months at college and has been ongoing ever since. At the time, I was interested in myths and stories about moons and galaxies. There's so much you can get from crafting children's stories about it; stories about the comfort of moonlight, or even the fear of moonlight. *Light of the Lost* was also inspired by how, as kids, we would see things beyond the usual "grown-up" lens – similar to how the story *The Little Prince* was written. It came from something that I missed seeing in children's picture books today, specifically in the more fairytale-ish genre, is that even if it had a sense of whimsy and wonder with its adorable and childlike characters, there was still a sense of darkness and warning in both its illustration and writing.

WWM: Oh, I'd like to come back to that darkness comment, but first, how did this project come to be?

KS: It began as characters from a sketchbook, with a bunch of messy drafts of a story akin to "*Ponyo*, but make it galactic...and lightly apocalyptic but in a way both a child and a child at heart can tackle." The final manuscript itself is TBA, but I truly want it to be themed around facing one's fears, specifically the fear of losing a friend and losing a home you were once attached to. There is still so much more I'd like to expand on from there, but I'll eventually post



updates in an Instagram post or two. However, I'd also like to prevent spoiling too much... but still, stay tuned!

WWM: I know the manuscript is still a work in progress, but could we get a little taste of the story so far?

KS: Sure! The story follows a girl named Lua, who lives in a town trapped in an eternal night. The moon above them moves closer and closer each day, almost nearly atop the town. Lonely and terrified by the darkness around her, she discovers that she can see creatures made from the candlelight in her home, finding comfort and warmth. Eventually, she meets a new friend, a little fairy kid she named Tala from her candlelight visions, and takes flight with her to the moon. The moon is its own world of wondrous sentient stars and the ominous outer space, a world that she never knew existed. No one before Lua has discovered why her quaint town is trapped in an eternal night, and why she alone was the one to have these strange visions from candlelight in the first place, but perhaps her journey with Tala on the moon will help her figure out why.

WWM: I can't wait to see where the story goes! You know, at seventeen years old, you're extraordinarily ambitious! That's a wonderful quality to have. How long have you been doing art? Do you feel like you found your artistic style or do you feel like you're still searching for your "voice"?

KS: Thank you! I've been doing art for as long as I can remember, but I didn't find my voice immediately. Surprisingly, when I was a preteen, I was into characters from cartoons and anime and that's what brought me to take art seriously. I was shifting between 90's anime and comic style cartoons, and I would say drawing in notebooks definitely made me feel saner during my preteenhood in early 2020's lockdown. I used to love participating in school poster contests back in elementary and high school, and it surely wasn't the same style that I had now. I feel like discovering art accounts on sites like Tumblr helped me to grow my interests and find my people. It was such a different environment that it inspired me to try out as many styles as I could! It hit me that I was interested in intricate illustrations when I realized that I needed something "cozy" in a time when I found everything to be chaotic. I didn't really jump into making an art account for the purpose of viewership if I'm being honest, it was more of a journal and then I let things happen in their own time.

WWM: Has sharing your work with others online changed your relationship with your art, if at all?

KS: It has shown me so much about the art community today (for better or for worse if I'm being honest.) For one, I got to meet the most important friends in my life through sharing my art, and my interactions with communities I felt connected to were the best part of it. It saved me from my inner turmoil and anxiety back in middle school, because I knew I found my passion and my people. On the other hand, I felt like I had this obligation to perform: an online identity where I'm a fully rounded whimsical artist. I actually had to get to the point where I felt like nothing I made fully belonged to me before I separated my online routine with how I used to draw. I had to teach myself to divide the online personality from who I really am. No matter the skill, even the artists you admire can be flawed as people, and we, as artists, are still learning and never stop learning. I hope young artists can understand that, too.



WWM: Since so much of your work is rooted in storytelling, how do you approach communicating a character's emotions or a story's atmosphere through imagery alone? Are there things you find

easier to express visually than through words?

KS: There are a lot of reasons why I find illustrations easier to portray than words, or perhaps even more impactful. You actually get to see a piece of intricate story come to life, and it is a powerful medium. When a character feels frustrated or in fear for example, I like to portray that with muted colors and motifs like dried flowers. I love portraying emotions through expressions, colors, strange motifs, it's like taking a hyperbole literally and making it visual.



WWM: You said earlier about missing something in contemporary children's picture books, stories that combine childlike wonder with a sense of darkness or warning. What do you think adults sometimes forget about the way children experience the world, and how do you try to preserve that perspective in your work?

KS: This question is rather personal to me. What's interesting about working in a creative field, like for me currently, a book illustrator and an advertising arts student, is that you really need to think and feel like a child somehow. You create something you want to see, rather than what you already see. For example, you may see a roll of paper as just that, but for a child it's a telescope, or a tower perhaps. The carefree feeling of wandering too far from your neighborhood, the smell of a new coloring book and crayons and drawing like you didn't care, and staying at your grandma's house. I feel like that kind of wonder is what we've forgotten as we get older, because now we get a sense that we need to take things at face value.

WWM: What else do you think we lose as we grow up, and do you feel art can help us find some of that wonder again?

KS: When we begin to grow up, and this applies as well to me as a teen, we get the feeling of wanting to conform to something, wanting to adjust in a loud world and as a result, we let go of “silly” things. Childlike interests, especially for girls like me, are sadly not taken seriously. There are times when I also feel like I have to think about the marketability and technicalities of my art whether I want to or not, and part of that is that feeling of wanting to conform. However, I've come to realize that you never really lose the “spark” in you. Or rather, it was never lost, but overshadowed by burdens, and

that viewing and making art brings back that spark and wonder in so many ways. After seeing comments of my art, other artists' art, and media surrounding art over the years, the type of "spark" that art gives us is so vastly different for each person. Art is more diverse than ever, so people can feel calm from a painting, comfort from a crocheted sweater, or be nostalgic about how an illustration reminds them of an old folktale. It's moments like those where we become like our younger selves for a while. Wonder in art for me is like approaching life in a more whimsical way, rather than fully escaping from reality.



WWM: That's a beautiful way of viewing that. Is there anything else you'd like to say that I haven't asked about?

KS: I just want to tell other young and aspiring artists that your beautiful works are important, even in times of uncertainty. There is always time for growth, and please, never lose what made you love art in the first place.

Rider

Bainapalli Vishal

A film of haze on my glasses,
thoughts snagged between the asphalt
and my grandmother—
a sudden call past midnight.

The engine stutters in the cold.
Knuckles white against the grips,
rubber grinding loose pebbles.
Stars dead. Streetlights dead.
Only a single beam ahead.

The phone rings. Again.
Again.
A smell of iron.
The sound of anklets from the back.
My mother's voice, warning me
not to look behind.

To my left, a temple lit by a diya
and the phone stops.

The Last Great Tree

S.S. Deva

Black branches spread
Against endless sky
Memories of silver leaves
Echo through the minds
Of two ancient ravens
They are mute now.

Deep shapes in shadow and bough
'Papa, a man is hanging!'
A boy's voice rings out.
'It is just an old tree', Magnus.'
His father laughs.
Magnus turns away
He believes a little.
Not really. Not enough.

His sister is at the well.
Her blue eyes
reflect hollow and void
She tosses a silver coin
with her name on it.
It drops into endless dark
She waits a moment
Hears nothing
turns to join her brother

If she had waited longer

She may have heard

A tiny splash

A token sailing across silver water

Beneath earth to still living roots

Spread like maps of worlds

They leave together laughing

Looking at pictures on a screen

Time sighs and is whole again

There are no more voices

Just a deep well

and an old tree

That can’t quite touch the sky.



Doll

Wing Yau

I. A Love Story?

I found her in her old age claimed a place
on her lap let her call me Doll
Warning: I have no care label and I cast no shadow on her bed
I smiled my face
a manufactured curved slit which no one needs to
know Young carers came rolled her every
4 hours (*Hello Doll!*)
as if to expect me to absolve their manicured
fingers or perfumed necks. I smiled you are too human
for me She smiled endlessly back at them to hide
what she could do (so willful!). (*Bye Doll!)*
And she'd spit the cold gravy they scooped to her mouth
I lapped at the goo from her marionette lines
I ate and ate but never grew bigger

never big enough to break my own stiff joints anyway
they turned her on her side *hello doll*
the sound came from her behind
visceral a sloppy squelch I never saw what happened
to the wettest part of her back
she'd learned to focus on my plasticky—thus unwavering—blue eyes
and my lipless mouth-hole—thus perpetually dry —so she could roll
her opaque eyes
all the way up inside her head
& show me who she was this quenches my thirst

Hello Doll, the vibration
from her needle-like windpipe was
a song from home.
I moved my neck 35 degrees left and right to say "Hello"
in 6 languages in one mechanical breath.

ii. A Final Goodbye?

To be a possessed doll or
a genderless one? I wanted to touch myself
sitting on her lap a warmth exchanged
between my doll-sized belly and her distended constipated
one a thermal kind of telepathic heat
between us is kindness it sets her
prosthetic leg on fire we were set free—
two discarnate entities the leg
whirled and a-clacking rat-a-tat-tat on its own
heating up the hidden frozen meat pies
we watch them melt in the amber flame
it smelt like food smoky and purifying
we were still giggling like maniacs when they came
in. I could only spin my head
around and around to make up tales about hosting parties
for a fallen church in this ghostless city.

On her last birthday, they granted me
the wish to look at her burned back
I was no better now bald when I walked
my arms and legs scattered easily mistaken
for an orphan in a plotless story I am telling you now

By the window a lingering scent of a reheated corpse
I should've known the dead, no matter
how sad and friendly are inured to seduction from another
doll.



Soul Machine

Star Galasyn

We always had issues
Securing the oxygen.

She fought with it
The foggy tubes
Getting stuck in her
Whispey hair.

When she was in the
Drunken, violent stage
Of her medicated high
She would yank it out
Of her nostrils.

Oh, how loud
That damn machine was.

It leaked into my dreams
Like spilt milk
Filled the house with
The wicked reminder:
I am all that is
Keeping her here
The very soul I create
I breathe into her.

Without me,
She is dead.

It kept her here
Until it couldn't.

I suppose
I still blame it
For not saving her.

When she left us
When the snow came,
We shut it off.

Its absence scared us.

“I’m so used to that thing.”
My mother said.

Its dormancy was unsettling
But it fulfilled its purpose
It had done its job.

Churning the sick
Twisting the heart
Running through her body
In nonstop marathons.

I don’t remember when
We cut off the oxygen
Wind bellowing into
Sheets on a wire
A soul machine
Feeding something that's
Already left.

What the Sea Does Not Owe

Saeid Pakan

There is no ledger. No hand
weighing the salt against the wound,
no eye counting what the tide
takes back without asking.

The crab does not forgive the trap.
It simply stops arriving.
This is not punishment. This is not mercy.
This is the shape of a world
that was never keeping score.

I used to think the water remembered me -
that if I gave it enough years
it would give something back.
It gave nothing back.
It only, patiently, left.

And still I built the boat again.
Not because the sea would notice.
Not because building undoes the leaving.
But because my hands, empty,
needed something to be for.

That is the whole of it, I think:
no one is coming to explain the absence.
No one owes us the reason.
What we get instead
is the wood, the nail, the second boat -
proof that a person can go on
making, in a world that makes no promises,
simply because making
is the only answer
that was ever ours to give.



Unanswered

Justin Alcala

There was nothing left of me now. Residency's drudgery tore a gaping hole in my will, but the promise of a big girl job swore to mend it. But the ICU was a conjunction of the cyclical algorithm, clearing beds and charting notes while I buried my autonomy in the backyard. The four-bedroom house and luxury car were veneers for a worn soul struggling to recover.

The sky opened a week ago and didn't stop out of common decency. I was on call, so I couldn't be too far from my phone. I spent my time away from work between the pages of a book, zombie-reading while my mind wandered to the clinical uncertainty of whether I missed a subtle symptom that lost yesterday's direct admit. The tactile beats on the roof and hiss of friction in the air cut short to the abrupt buzz of my cellphone on the kitchen island. The display told me it was the hospital.

"Hello?" I greeted in a singsong.

Static crackled through the speaker before heavy breaths accompanied a voice, a metallic ticking in the background.

"Martha?" asked a man's voice I didn't recognize. "Martha, they're keeping me here."

My mind blanked as if anesthesia had taken effect. Mumbling in the background told me the patient wasn't alone.

"Sir?" I asked. "Is there a nurse I can talk to?"

"Martha, are you there?" said the man, panic wilting behind his words. "Help."

The phone call cut off. I dialed back, but Emma, the shift nurse, informed me that the inclement weather had led to a rainy-day slump and that we were without patients. There was no one there who matched my description.

***

Whatever lull the ICU enjoyed last night was short-lived. Two codes and a stroke admission kept me busy throughout my shift. The strange phone call faded like an apparition. There wasn't any reason to suspect anything beyond a crossed room line in another part of the hospital.

I came home with a headache from caffeine and a call for early pajamas. I plopped in front of the television with a Lean Cuisine and turned on a crime drama, but didn't make it past the first episode before sinking into the quicksand of sleep. It was a half-slumber that drew the show's audio into my dream. But a buzz from my phone cut my investigation short before I could catch the killer, jolting me awake. The screen read a call from the hospital.

I wasn't on call, but picked up the phone anyway, clearing the thistles from my throat. "Hello?"

"Who is this?" whispered a woman, words so delicate the wind could've taken them.

"Ma'am, this is Dr. Azagra," I said. "Are you looking for your nurse?"

There was static, then a distant man's scream cut through the fuzz of white noise.

"Who *were* you?" the woman whispered again.

There was a squeal like a rusty gurney tire before the phone clicked off. I hurried to call back, but Emma didn't have a clue, more eager to tell me about code from today that passed away. A celestial discharge, she called it, before wishing me a goodnight.

***

This morning, everything was bleeding together like the fog's blurred lines. I couldn't remember the last time I ate a cooked meal or had a genuine conversation beyond last night's call. *Who*

were you? I didn't know, but a dull burden on my shoulders from the weight of the life I stopped living wore me out.

The beds kept filling up, from a sepsis patient to the burn victim we'd transfer to the BICU in the morning. But between the erratic lines, I broke free to talk to the telecom team to report my after-shift calls. It went as expected—a *we'll look into it* followed by a rush to get me off the phone. I wondered if the behavioral health floor had somehow saved my number in their speed dial registry during onboarding, but didn't have time today to check.

I returned home like a passing apparition, leaving my keys and phone at the door. The house rested like a watercolor painting, blurs of storm gray brushing up against my windows. A shower baptized me, followed by a sanctuary of soft, plush pajamas. The days were falling into a cruel pattern, but this calming part, the one where I still had a choice, was the most seductive of all.

Exhaustion towed me into another couch-and-pajama sleep, this time deep and sequestering. I'd hardly noticed the ring of my phone until it vibrated off the key stand, slapping onto tiles. The crash sent me to my feet, ungainly trekking across the front room to retrieve it. My display told me I'd missed sixteen calls from the hospital.

I answered, the paramnesia of it all coming back to haunt me as crackling static. "Hello?"

"I made my choices, right or wrong," said a man with an accent, his words hacked off at the edges.

"Sir, what floor are you on?" I meant to stop there, but the words kept coming out. "What is your name?"

The ubiquitous white noise filled the pause. "They look like you or me, but their eyes are empty."

"Sir, where are you?"

"I'm in the basement," he trailed off, and then the line went dead.

There were only labs in the basement, no patients. I wondered if the new wings they were building already had phone lines, or if someone had broken into the offsite outpatient department. Were these mad ravings, a dark prank, or something else? I didn't know, but the questions kept tumbling out of me, and I grew determined to understand it come tomorrow.

***

My life chased a strange melody, flawed but keeping form and tune. Another gray day tried to lull me into its grave ballet, but whim dragged me off the stage. After rounds, I made my way to the CMO, who was in her office.

"I wish you would've come to me sooner," said Adalia, no judgment in her voice, only grim resolve. "I'd have made this right."

"I'd reached out to telecom, but the calls keep coming," I said, but my words had no bite. "Think I was just hoping it would go away on its own."

She tried wrestling her features into stern order and lost, a frown crossing her lips. "Things don't go away, Dr. Azagra. But rest assured, I'll get to the bottom of it. There's only pathology and micro in the basement."

"Pathology?" My mind wandered back to the calls. "There are gurneys in the morgue, right?"

Adalia's features went slack. "I assure you no one is calling from in there."

"No, I know. It's just..." I trailed off.

Adalia pursed her lips. "It's just the fridge for the DC to JC, Dr. Azagra. Please, let me handle it."

The room suddenly became too small for two people. “Yeah. Of course.”

“Anyhow,” she said. “I’ll update you as soon as I can. Meanwhile, keep up the good work.”

The rest of the day went as familiarly as breathing. I followed through the motions, but by the end of the shift, my curiosity grew too big for me. While in the elevator, I noticed the special button on the panel labeled for the basement. My fingers hovered over it, and as they did, the lights flickered. But when I grew bold enough to press the button, nothing happened. The red display above the control panel read *Restricted, Key Required.* A porridge of exhaustion and apprehension wiped my mind from remembering that I’d need to use my key.

Adalia’s voice returned to me. *Please let me handle it.*

I retreated from the elevator to the parking lot, tail between my legs, and headed home. Passing the security booth, my eyes locked on the hospital, crowned with a pair of blinking red lights on the roof and a grin of glowing white windows. I stared at it as my car rolled out of the lot, but the ring of my cellphone in my purse grabbed my attention. I dug it out, reading a display I’d already predicted. It was the hospital.

I clicked to answer, hearing the familiar static, followed by distant mumbling.

“Hello?” I called into the phone. “I’m sorry, but I can’t hear you.”

“These charts can’t be right,” said a rickety voice, a mechanical hum behind her. “Can you come read them?”

“Are you in the basement?”

A pregnant pause filled the line before the static cut short. “The morgue.”

Then, as before, the line went dead.

I spent the rest of the evening mystified. I didn't know how to get to the restricted floor without using my key card. And if I did that, there'd be questions from Adalia. That night, though, my deliverance came as one of my patients. I would need to do a lumbar puncture in the morning, and could walk the results to micro. So, while the thought of it kept me up all night, it came with the promise of discovery in the morning.

***

I woke worn but excited, cutting through the dark fog into the hospital. While most of the wasps buzzed mindlessly to the day's daily duties, I prepped in excitement to see my patients. Once my lumbar puncture ended near lunchtime, I rushed to the basement, eager for answers. It was just me, cold air, and opportunity in the basement, and as I reached pathology, I found it just as vacant.

I dropped off the labs, then made my way to the connecting morgue. The entrance to post-mortem was a steel barrier marked with a small, worn placard. I pushed its heavy handle and met with a frigid chill waiting to get out. The room was larger than expected, with outdated colors and deterioration, signs that there hadn't been renovations since the hospital's construction. Rhythmic ticking from old copper heating pipes kept the room busy, and an outdated gurney between myself and a wall of refrigerators blocked my path. I pushed it, the screech of its rusty wheels screaming through the hum of the body bay's condenser fans. At the corner, an empty admin's desk sat with a blocky computer, printer, and receptionist phone.

Gliding to the desk phone, I checked the call history to confirm the calls were coming from here. Not only were there no outgoing numbers dialed, but the last incoming call somehow came from tomorrow morning. Chalking it up to bad maintenance, I flipped through a stack of release forms needing pen-and-paper sign-offs. Next to them were ID bands, wristbands, and toe tags, with one drawn out. What I was searching for was proof of my caller, but what I found split me open with a scalpel.

I crumbled the piece of paper, then ripped up the toe tag. The ticking from the pipes grew louder, a tapping as if someone were repeating Morse code to get my attention. There was a bitter taste in my mouth like formaldehyde, and as I backed out of the room, I tripped onto the rusty gurney, sending me to my backside. A thumping from one of the body coolers echoed meat-on-metal against the door. It was followed by a second, then third cooler, until a crescendo of blows beat in rhythm like a heart in a rib cage.

Then, slowly, one of the cooler doors stretched open, and the sheeted body tray drew out. I stood up and hurried to the door, jiggling the handle, but it wouldn't budge. Bare skin pressed on the slip-resistant flooring behind me as if a barefooted drunk were trying to walk. I wouldn't look back, couldn't look back, as my body pressed against the door as if being buried alive. The footsteps cut towards me as a woman's voice mumbled like a stroke victim relearning how to speak. My nerves unraveled like a spool of wet wool, and as a voice pressed to make out words reached but a foot from me, a million thoughts flooded in at one time.

But a sudden release from the door sent me tumbling out like an overfilled closet. I never looked back as I rushed from pathology to the elevator, my curiosity sated, my imagination finishing the story. As I hurried into the elevator, my salvation delivered me in the form of closing doors, shutting away a hallway filled with the echoes of someone still trying to get out words. I sat in silence as the elevator took me up, and in that brief moment, realization woke me from my stupor. So, when the elevator returned me to the ICU, I made my way straight to Adalia with my badge in hand.

***

What a difference a single day makes. I slept in until the storms made off, the sky drawing a blue sheet tight behind the sun. I sipped mint tea from the porch while watching commuters plot their ways to early graves out of fear of losing what they'd earned. For some people, the nerve of what dreams may come hides in a book, travels, or a chance encounter with a friend. For me, it started with phone calls from the morgue, and had everything to do with where I'd end up.

The Abyss

Kit Sibert

a maw of yearning where things
cry out moan lurch
howl

but wait I see levity

as if the ritual of Día de los Muertos
comes to imbue the place
with a playfulness

phantom here phantom there

grinning skeletons naked to the bone
some big-hatted wide-skirted
so colorful banging on typewriters
cooking tortillas jerkily riding bicycles
whirling dancing

the abyss is so vast

look past the howling
past the ghoulish phantoms

there

stars
and stars
forever



Rustwood Gothic

Chloe Crawford La Vada

I am from somewhere
that is nowhere
you would know—
where the last generation's shoes
still swing from telephone wires,
a ghost-town
hemmed by hemlock
forests and farmlands
in the Adirondack foothills,
where the rivers have run
red since the town was named,
before it strangled itself
with its own rust-belt,
factories and tanneries
closing up like caskets,
until the entire town
was a crypt.

I learned young
how to make a tomb
my home.

Where He Has Been

Abraham Kedong Ali

In this dream,
He walks into the compound

and sits beside me
as if nothing has changed.

The tuk is warm,
the soup is right,

and so is the conversation.

He is there,
passing me the meat,

asking ordinary questions
as if nothing has changed.

I wait in silence
to say what has happened,

my words stuck
in my throat.

His laughter sounds
exactly as my mother describes it.

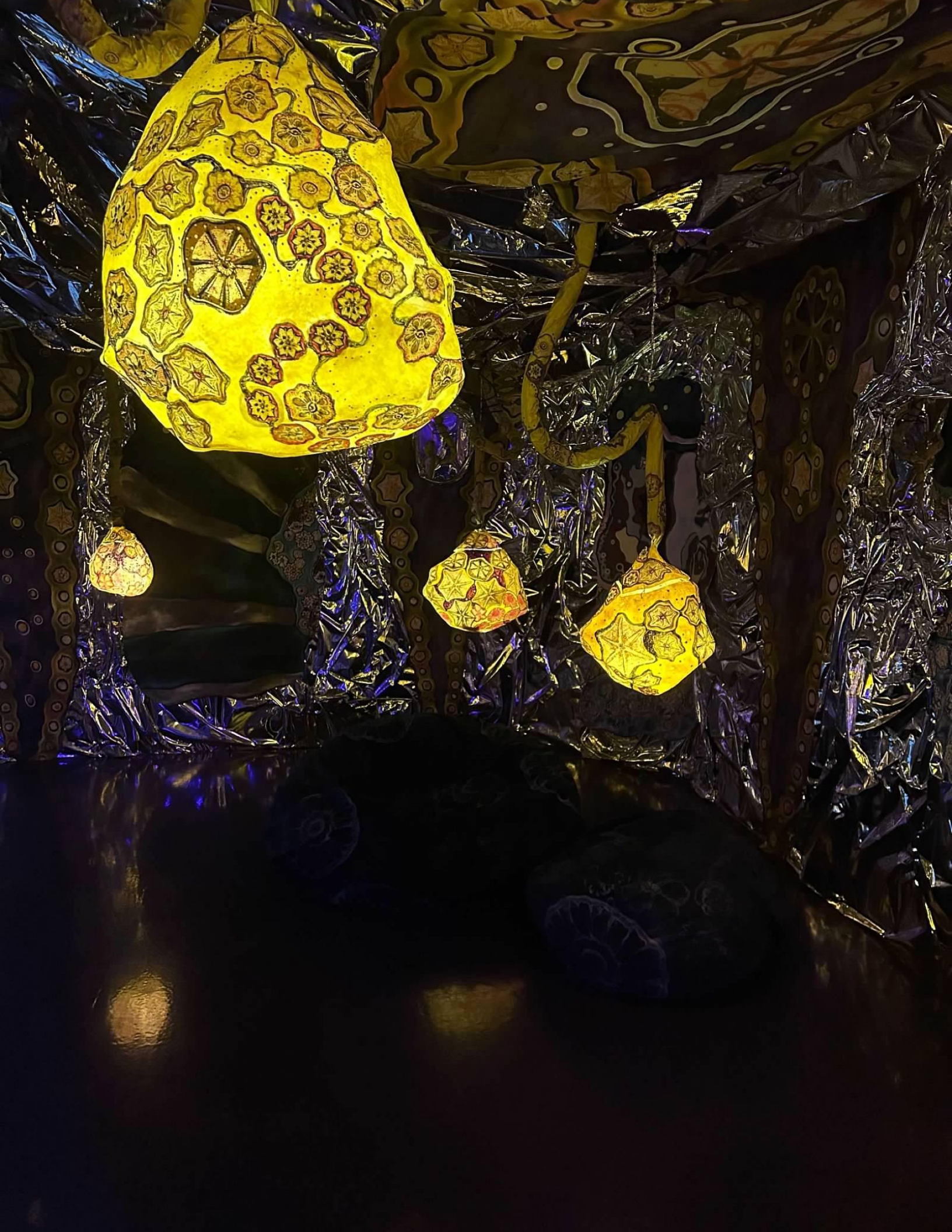
I keep the dream
in my throat,

scared that if I chew too quickly,
it will end.

Then he looks at me
like he knows the dream too.

And I realize:

this is not a visit.
This is where he has been.



Time

Oleg Daugovish

Openings in the fog reveal scenes at the train station. Men in dark coats carry suitcases. A girl with a gladiolus bouquet twirls, clinging to mom's hand. A beagle strains his leash; his curious nose explores myriads of smells. The owner - still hidden in fog behind the dog -clucks her heels in a hurry. A newspaper boy in a cap yells headlines in Swedish over the canned voice of the loudspeaker grinding yet another destination unknown to me.

The black hands of the wall clock form a straight angle at nine. I swing my backpack on my shoulder and climb into a green railroad car.

Compartment two, seat four. The numbers on my ticket have the same black font as the ones on the metal plate by the sliding door. Noone is inside, just a gray twirl of smoke rises from a cigarette leaning against an ash tray.

What? I was sure I booked a non-smoking compartment.

A circle with crossed-out joint on the wall affirms it.

I step out and peer into an open door of the neighbors. The seats inside have sweaters bundled on them. A half-eaten muffin sits on a plate next to a coffee cup, wafting a faint scent of vanilla.

Maybe there's a seat elsewhere?

I walk the narrow corridor, poking my head through every doorway. In one compartment, a pen rests on an unsolved crossword puzzle. In another, Lego pieces and popcorn litter the vacant seats and the floor. A deck of cards and two face-down piles frame an unopen bottle of Absolut on a table of the next one.

I rush from one car to the next through the emptiness. The passengers who were here just a minute ago seem to have vanished. Slamming one metal door after another, I run toward the engine car. It is locked and so are the doors to the outside. Frazzled, I rub the misted window with both hands

and press my forehead into it. The figures in the fog continue to go about their business. Condensation on the glass mixes with my cold sweat.

"Chooooo!" the long train horn jolts me as the car shakes forward.

I wake up and focus on familiar shapes in the attic room that I share with my friend, Roma.

A chair draped with my flannel farm shirt, the round IKEA table, and the beige wallpaper with flowers bring me back into reality. Yet, the horn tooting continues, except now it sounds like "Mooooo!" and comes from Roma's bed.

I get up and shake my friend's shoulder until he stops lowing and opens his eyes. While he stares at me, I tell him about my dream.

"Can you imagine how fast all the train station details formed during the few seconds of your *moo*?"

Roma, who's been milking cows every morning except this Sunday, dissolves in a smile.

"Wasn't there a French guy who was dragged to a guillotine?"

"Quite a few of them were, so what?" I interrupt.

"He stood on a platform, listening to the verdict and the cheering crowd." Roma continues.

"Then he waited for the executioner to pull on the rope and for the whistle of the heavy blade flying towards his throat. And then he woke up, and realized that a shelf above his bed had fallen off the wall onto his neck!"

"That's even faster than your mooing," I note. "Damn, it's good we have a day off! You've been spending too much time with cows!"

"And you with pigs!" Roma points to a brown stain on my shirt. "You may want to wear something else today, we're going to Malmo, remember?" Then he looks at his watch. "We have to hurry to catch the train. It's at nine o'clock."


Ponn. Pavadai



Static

Regine Jackson

The radio wakes itself in twilight.
A wash of silver noise spills into the room,
soft as moth dust,
persistent as rain working through limestone.

I lie still.
The sound thickens.

Voices almost form within it,
half-syllables,
broken vowels,
a language caught between stations.

Moonlight pools across the dresser,
turning the varnish blue-white.

The room acquires depth.
Corners drift further away.

Something in the static begins arranging itself.
The feeling that arrives
seconds before a phone call,
before a knock at the door,
before bad news learns your address.

When silence finally returns,
it leaves a pale residue behind,
the way river water leaves minerals
after the flood recedes.

The Roofer

KB Ballentine

He was a dancer
who could have been in ballet.
Moving from board to board,
ridgeline to gutter on tiptoe,
walking upright even on the slope.
He was king of the world –
every day a different rooftop
to conquer.
Until the view called to him.
Across the valley, peaks topped
with frost, air blue and crisp.
River shimmering with sun,
the same warm rays on his face.
Eyes closed he breathed deep,
turned back to hammer and nail.
Then the earth called him,
like Icarus falling from the sky.
Rock and gravel embraced
and needled his back.
Forget the wings.
Would he dance again?

The Dream I Cannot Explain

Adaina

Last night I had a dream
I still cannot understand.
I was walking through a small town
I had never seen before.
Nobody spoke to me.
Every house had its lights on,
but every window was empty.
Then I saw a little boy with red eyes
standing in the middle of the road.
He looked at me and said,
"You are not supposed to be here."
I asked him where I was.
He pointed at a house.
"It is your home."
I walked inside.
There was a picture on the wall.
It was a picture of me.
But I was much older.
Then I woke up.
My room was dark.
For a moment,
I thought it had all been a dream.
Then I looked at my wall.
There was a picture hanging there
that I had never seen before.
It was me.
And in the picture,
I was standing in that strange town.



The Bones Under Candle Lane

A Allan Chibi

The frost clung to Candle Lane long after the sun had set, but it was thin as a breath on glass. It seemed to trace the seams between the cobbles, pooling in the mortar, as if reluctant to loosen its grip on the night. Even the gas lamps seemed dimmed by it; the light was blunted, as though the cold had learned how to drink it in.

When Eòin MacCailleach stepped onto the stones, the ground answered him.

Not with sound but with pressure. A slow, damp pulse that rose through his boots and settled behind his eyes. Wrongness, oldness, and method. This was not the clean cold of winter's approach, nor the sharp warning of sudden frost. It was residual. The kind that remained after purpose had passed on.

Eòin paused, letting the sensation move through him. Centuries had taught him that resistance blurred meaning. You listened first. You named later.

The *geas* lay thick here. It ran beneath the street like a buried nerve, sensitive to every footfall, every breath taken above it. Each pulse echoed an ancient bargain, one older than the city's stones, older than the language now used to record it. Kinship bound him to the Winter King of Ireland—not by loyalty, nor affection, but by shared culpability. Where the King passed, frost followed. Where frost lingered, life thinned, bent, and finally broke.

Eòin was born in the Summer Court, shaped by warmth and growth and fire. His nature pulled toward cultivation, toward continuance. His inheritance did not. It drew him always toward aftermath.

Balance, the sages called it.

Accounting, he named it.

He followed the pressure along Candle Lane until it narrowed and tightened, funneling him toward a low door and a shuttered window. Inside, a single candle burned. Inside, the consequences were waiting.

***

Tomas had built his life on accumulation.

Not wealth, reputation, but knowledge. Roots that eased pain. Tinctures that slowed death. Poultices that coaxed flesh back toward coherence. He believed—had always believed—that the human

body, for all its fragility, obeyed rules. Even decay followed patterns if one was patient enough to observe them.

This body did not follow the rules.

The merchant lay upon the slab in the apothecary's back room, stripped of dignity but not of strangeness. His skin was pale and drawn tight as an over-stretched parchment. Tomas pressed two gloved fingers to the chest out of habit alone. No heartbeat. No residual warmth. The flesh felt oddly light beneath his touch, as though substance itself had been removed rather than destroyed.

He adjusted the lantern and leaned closer. The veins beneath the skin had collapsed inward, blackened and brittle, like channels long deprived of water. There was no sign of rupture, no bruising, no hemorrhaging. Where the heart should have rested, there was instead a puckered cavity; it was smooth-edged, precise. Not torn. Not cut.

Excised.

Cold radiated from the wound, subtle but persistent. A fine frost clung to Tomas's fingertips despite the brazier glowing behind him. He rubbed his thumb against his forefinger. The ice resisted warmth in a way condensation did not.

The cold could be explained. Certain alkaloids produce paradoxical chills. Environmental exposure could do strange things to tissue. Tomas catalogued possibilities even as unease pressed in at the edges. Panic, he reminded himself, was not a method.

Memory intruded anyway.

His grandmother's voice, roughened by age and peat smoke, murmuring in the Gaelic of winter spirits and stolen breath. Of beings that feed not from hunger but from obligation. Tales meant to keep children close to the hearth and adults wary of the dark.

Tomas had dismissed such stories years ago.

Yet he found himself listening for echoes of her cadence in the silence.

***

Eòin crossed the threshold without opening the door.

The boundary yielded to him as it always did—wood and stone remembering older permissions. Candlelight shifted as he entered, flame bending as though under pressure. Shadows lengthened,

uncertain how to hold him. The corpse responded at once. Frost brightened along the dead man's skin, attentive, almost eager.

Eòin knelt beside the body. He did not touch it. Touch implied uncertainty.

The absence was unmistakable. Where warmth should have pooled, there was only a hollowed quiet, like a field after harvest. Feeding left excess, left imbalance in the opposite direction. This was not feeding.

This was a settlement.

"Atonement," Eòin murmured, the word dry and heavy.

The frost answered with a faint creak along the stones.

He closed his eyes and followed the residue backward—not through space, but through intent. The Winter King had not lingered. He never did. Lingering implied choice, and the *geas* allowed none. It demanded motion. It demanded repetition. It demanded that ancient debts be paid in careful, incremental withdrawals.

Scotland was not the King's domain. That, too, was part of the punishment.

Mortal attention pressed against the edge of the room.

Eòin opened his eyes.

***

Tomas sensed the change before he understood it. The candle guttered, wick bending under its own weight. The air thickened, weighted, as though the room had inhaled and refused to exhale.

He turned.

A man stood near the door where no man had stood a moment before. Not a thief. Not a watchman. The stranger's presence was wrong in a quieter way than the corpse—too still, too complete. Candlelight caught in amber eyes that reflected fire older than coal or wick.

"You should stop," the man said. His voice carried no threat. Only certainty. "What you are studying was never meant for mortal hands."

Fear rose sharp and immediate, then steadied into something harder. Tomas straightened.

"If you know something of this death," he said, "then speak plainly. I will not be warned off by riddles and shadows."

A faint smile touched the stranger's mouth. Not mockery. Regret.

"You already feel it," he replied. "The frost that lingers where it should not. The silence where a rhythm once lived. You call it anomaly. I call it an inheritance. We are describing the same wound."

"Myth," Tomas said, "is what we name explanations that fail scrutiny."

"And science," the stranger answered, "is what you name truths after you have stripped them of memory."

They regarded one another across the narrow space—the fae bound by obligation, the mortal armed with method. Tomas realized, with a jolt of clarity, that this man was not attempting deception. Whatever he was, he believed himself accountable.

"You cannot fix this," the stranger continued. "The balance it serves predates your remedies."

"Then the balance is corrupt," Tomas said. "Anything that demands this price should be challenged."

The man's composure faltered. Only slightly. Enough.

"That," he said quietly, "is why you are dangerous."

***

Silence settled between them, thick as frost. The candle crackled, wick bending.

"You speak of balance as if it were law," Tomas said. "Gravity. Heat. Decay. But balance that requires secrecy and corpses is not law. It is governance."

"And governance," Eòin replied, "exists because consequence does not negotiate."

"Governance can be resisted."

Eòin studied him. Mortals often protested suffering. Fewer questioned the structure that demanded it.

"You believe intervention is virtue," Eòin said. "That a wrong observed is a wrong owed correction."

"If it can be corrected," Tomas said.

"And if correction fractures something older?"

"Then perhaps it deserves to break." Tomas gestured toward the body. "This man did not consent to your accounting."

Images stirred behind Eòin's eyes; fields burned to end famine, cities drowned to halt plague, choices delayed until permission became catastrophe.

"Stewardship," Eòin said at last, "is knowing when not to act."

"Or" Tomas replied, "it is choosing who suffers so you do not."

The words landed with quiet precision.

"You see the single life," Eòin said. "I see the collapse that follows when debts are ignored."

"And I," Tomas said, "see what happens when debts outlive justice."

They stood as opposing custodians of incompatible truths.

At length, Eòin stepped back, his outline thinning as shadow reclaimed him. "The frost will fade," he said. "Your doubts may not. Choose carefully which burden you claim."

He was gone.

***

Tomas stood alone, breathing unsteadily. He turned back to the body. The frost along the merchant's skin had thinned, retreating until it might have been mistaken for ordinary cold. Reason rushed in to occupy the space myth had vacated.

It did not settle cleanly.

He washed his hands. Then again. The cold lingered.

***

Eòin watched from the far end of the lane as Tomas extinguished the shop lights and locked the door. The mortal carried uncertainty now. Not confusion, but responsibility. Eòin felt the weight of it settle upon him: another burden layered atop the old ones.

Stewardship demanded silence. Intervention tempted disaster.

He turned away before doubt could harden into rebellion.

The harvest was hidden. The balance is preserved.

For now.

The frost clung to Candle Lane. Tomas turned away, but Eòin knew the silence was only borrowed.



There's A Skeleton Down There

and its bones are the final dancefloor
for mauve stingers, armorheads - lumpfish, ratfish, snipefish –
ten thousand small and lovely creatures,
and ten thousand more, the creatures that no one
has ever seen, no one has ever named.

their legions are thoughtless, formless,
jelly-in-the-dark, grins that glow sans humor,
simply the puppets of electric impulse,
yet still so much happier
than anything living has a right to be.

they waltz through brown-furred femurs,
sway and sashay through rotten ribs,
tarantelle along the lines of the skeleton's smashed skull,
highlighting that spiderweb-sharp crack
where my baseball bat
made final contact.

there's a skeleton down there,
down deep, at least 660 feet.

I weighed it with an anchor, but
no matter where I go,
I know it's waiting for me.

the dance is incomplete.

C. C. Rayne

Cat Scan

Bruce McRae

This machine will turn you inside out.
They'll explore your inner jungles,
steamy and Ireland-green, the animals within
complaining of our presence.
Harnessing solar frequencies,
they'll shine a light clean through you,
exposing your innards, its map
of bile and bones, your iffy waterworks,
the fleshy seed of all corruption.

Here's your rat nest of a heart.
Here's a tangled soul
and a mind like a pirate's treasure.
People you don't know
will be studying your handsome wreckage,
its clews and abandoned temples,
the treehouse of your abdomen,
that brain of soggy newspapers,
all those junk drawers and moistened crevasses.

They won't know what it is
they'll be looking for until they find it —
perhaps a dead-end street
or the source of all time.
Perhaps a life's dark houses.

Whispers in the Fog

Ramesh Dohan

The streetlamps glow in halos pale,

Wrapped tight inside a cotton veil.

A sudden step upon the stone,

Where moments past you walked alone.

You turn to look, but nothing stands

Except the mist with silver hands,

Tracing secrets on the glass,

And waiting for the night to pass.



Child Eater

Jawn Van Jacobs

"The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth."

- Revelation 17:5

i have spider-shaped moles marking my body
& been accused by neighbors of stealing husbands.
i've flown high off a pipe into pitch-black nights
meeting with others for a fire to divine.

i have a cauldron for a brain,
brewing foxglove, mandrake & wolfsbane –
don't get close enough to smell my breath
or i'll show the difference between venom & nightshade.

i have body unlike the statues i worship
& when my insecurity begins to surface
i self-medicate with potions to bury emotions –
mixing spirits, concocting a commotion.

Now God will make me drink blood –
in traps of Textual terror,
but I am growing in material –
sticking razor blades inside Apples.

Does it thwart "God" to remember
the clays in which he too dabbled?
that which creates must also destroy –
& Appalling has become more Appealing.

Gott Steh Mir Bei!

Heather Cadenhead

Behind flowered lips, I hide a set of peristome teeth,
existing solely for prey retention. I gather enemies in
my mouth, choking them down accidentally.

I keep them all in the pit of my stomach, tucked into
the margins. I hear weeping from my pockets—
now a neighborhood of marrow and ghost.

You claw and scratch at my ribcage, the bones
or jail bars shaking. I am a casket for people
of every age, income, and ethnicity.

They are all buried alive and I, their unwilling
host, only hear the *aide-moi,* the *giúp tôi,*
the *hjælp mig* and the *help me.*



The Red Dot

Mary Upton

My little fists pawed at my eyelids when Papa woke me from sleep. My fingers were soft and curled, pliable from the safety of my sweet, innocent dreams. It was the very early hours of a Sunday morning in the middle of spring. Speaking fast and a little breathlessly, Papa told me we needed to go. "Go where?" I remember asking. My voice was coarse and quiet. In my sleep-crusted daze, I don't remember his response.

The bags were already packed and stood waiting by my bedroom door. Papa helped me get dressed and asked me to put the five toys I loved most into my backpack. My lamby, Poco, was still tucked up under my arm. There was no question of our being separated. Fern the ballerina mouse would have to come as well. She was Poco's best friend. I picked up my dinosaur egg because it hadn't hatched yet, my colouring book and pencils, and my beloved copy of the *Flower Fairies.* It was my favourite book in the world. Sometimes, I would sleep with it under my pillow, hoping the fairies would come and visit me.

The book used to belong to Mama. She told me it was given to her when she was a few years older than I am now. It's hard to imagine that my Mama was once a little girl, too. On my last birthday, she told me I was old enough to take care of the book as my own. On the inside page is a happy birthday message made out to Mama from someone I don't know. "Just someone from the past," she'd said when I asked her. I didn't like that Mama had stories I wasn't a part of.

There was room left in my backpack, so I packed my Hello Kitty stickers and the beaded bracelets I had made that week, too. I was sure Papa wouldn't mind. Before I left the room, something caught my eye on the windowsill. A wisp, dancing like a fairy beneath the moonlight. It flickered and then vanished. I blinked rapidly, willing it back, but it had gone. That was the first time I saw the red dot.

Papa made us leave through the back door and out of the garden gate, which backed onto the fields. He gripped my hand tightly as we walked off into the night. I had never seen the world so still,

or so dark. Papa and I were the only ones. The silence startled me; not even the birds were singing to keep us company. A little frightened, I tugged on Papa's arm. When he looked down, I opened my arms out wide and waited to be picked up. I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck as he carried me with his free arm. A bag of our stuff was held in the other hand, and he had a larger bag on his back. I asked if we were going on an adventure. "Yes, that's right," he said, "an adventure just you and me." His breath was deep and ragged against my cheek.

We continued over the fields, where a few roads away was a car that Papa said we were borrowing from a friend. Papa said there was a car seat ready in the back for me. It wasn't until we were driving that I dared to ask, "Where's Mama?" There was no reply. I tried again. "Are we going to find her?"

He sighed, "I don't know, Kid. Try to get some sleep, now." He met my eye in the rearview mirror. It had been three days since I last saw Mama. She walked me to school on Wednesday morning, and I haven't seen her since. At the gates, she kissed me from my head to my nose to my chin. With my face held in her hands, she said, "I love you, little bug. I'll see you later", just like she always did.

Papa didn't know where she was. Normally, he had the answers to all my questions. Like, how many carrots would I have to eat before I turned orange? Where do flies go to sleep? If I dug a hole and kept digging, would I reach Australia? For Mama's absence, there was no explanation.

I nodded off but woke up when my head lolled forward as the car came to a stop. My eyes rolled around, heavy in their sockets, before catching sight of the red dot again. My eyes opened wide, and I watched the red dot flashing on the car radio. *Blink, blink, blink*. I knew then the red dot was for me, a special message sent from Mama. *Find me, little bug*, I imagined her saying.

***

Weeks went by and Papa let his hair get longer. It was a change to his usual short, neat style. Without a cut, his hair grew thick and wavy, just like mine. There were new things I was learning about my Papa in the time we were spending together. He let a moustache sit above his top lip, too, and it tickled my forehead each time he kissed me goodnight. Most days, his blue eyes looked tired,

ringed with puffy silver circles. Small red lines sprouted from corners. Some nights, he had bad dreams. Once, I woke to see his back heaving and heard small sobs escape from his mouth. “Papa?” I whispered, tapping him on the back. He turned and embraced me in a hug. I told him that when I had nightmares, Mama would read to me, and I handed him the *Flower Fairies* from under my pillow.

“One story to help us get back to sleep,” he said. I closed my eyes, snuggled up to Poco and dreamt of Mama.

Papa made sure I was having fun on our adventure. We played a lot of hide-and-seek and he taught me all kinds of different versions. There was hiding in plain sight to trick other people, with straight faces and heads in the air. Sometimes we would run as fast as we could, like lions chasing their prey. Or we would pretend we had different names. “Hello, I am Amara Perdida”, I told the woman in the supermarket who was scanning our shopping. *Packets of ramen, beep, apples, beep, hot chocolate, beep, instant porridge, beep.* She smiled kindly, clueless. These games were only for Papa and me.

The red dot continued to find me wherever we went. On the TV and telephone cradle of every motel room we stayed in, on the watches and headphones of strangers, and on the top of high-rise buildings in the city. Mama lit up the sky with her messages for me. We travelled from town to town because Papa had friends all over. They were friends I hadn’t met before, he said. But they all let him borrow their cars for our adventure. Most of the time, they forgot to leave the keys. It was safer this way, Papa said. His friends were often busy or at work. So instead, he would fiddle with the wires under the steering wheel to turn the engine on. He had gotten much quicker at it.

At the beginning of our adventure, it was in the car that I felt safest. It’s also where I saw the red dot the most. Every time we stopped at a traffic light, I pointed it out to Papa. I let my eyes glaze over into a soft focus until the red dot glistened and glowed. Mama’s request remained unanswered. *Find me, Little Bug*, *find me!*

Papa seemed most relaxed in the car. We would listen to the radio, and he would sing old songs to me. He’d tell me about people the songs reminded him of, or moments that his mind was making

links back to. I was thrilled to be entrusted with his stories and would listen open-mouthed, absorbing every word like a fresh piece of cloth taken to a spill.
The music and stories came to an abrupt stop in the end. One of our songs was playing, the one Papa said made him feel like a young boy, care-free and riding his bike across the grass with his friends. An announcement cut in- *we're appealing for any information on him, or his daughter and their whereabouts. The police say he should not be approached, and is considered to be dangerous-* Papa switched it off. His brow furrowed into deep grooves.

He reached out an arm behind to pat my leg on the backseat, "Don't be worried, little one." The final weeks of our drives were spent mostly in silence.

It got even worse a few days later, when he let me sit up front with him. A special treat, because I was still sad about the music. The view was expansive out of the windscreen, and I liked being able to see what Papa saw. In the wing mirror, I looked at the cars behind us and wondered if they were on adventures too, like Papa and me? Was Mama there somewhere, trying to catch up with us? A red dot in the distance began to flash furiously. "Look, Papa, the red dot is coming for us!" I said with excitement. Papa stiffened. "It's a police car, and you're not supposed to be sitting in the front". He unbuckled my seatbelt and told me to hide down in the footwell. He put his hand on my shoulder, guiding my body to the floor. "Quick, or we'll get in trouble," he said. The sound of the sirens increased and faded away. My heart thumped, making my tongue pulse inside my mouth. I stayed down there in the footwell until Papa said it was safe to come back up. After that, Papa told me I needed to hide in the boot. It was like one of our games, he said. But I didn't want to, and protested against Papa with teary cries and pleas. I missed Mama dearly.

***

Desperate for a small slice of joy, a distraction presented itself to me. My first wobbly tooth. From the moment it first loosened, I couldn't keep my tongue from moving it back and forth, obsessively. Papa was pleased for my mouth to be occupied with something other than asking questions about Mama. He said I was growing up. I told him I didn't want to change; I wanted to stay

small. When it happened, I was brushing my teeth. I felt the root come away from my gums, and I spat my tooth out into my hand. Droplets of bloodied saliva leaked from my mouth and splashed into the white porcelain sink. One red dot after another.

Delight morphed into hope, longing, and then sadness. Mama wasn't there to see it fall, or see the new gap in my smile. I wanted to be back at her side, clinging to her arm with all the strength I had. "I miss Mama," I cried.

"The tooth fairy will still find you", Papa said as he stroked my hair out of my face, but it made no difference. I said nothing in return and sniffled, waiting for my breathing to return to normal. He dabbed at my wet cheeks and I refused to look at him.

Papa had given me an idea, though. I would appeal to the fairies for help. I carefully wrapped my tooth in tissue and placed it under my pillow. That night, they came just as he said they would. In place of my tooth was a £1 coin, twinkling at me with opportunity. Without telling Papa, I replaced the coin with a drawing under my pillow for Mama. It was of us together, sitting under a toadstool, weathering a storm. The fairies of the garden were dancing all around us. *Where are you Mama? My tooth fell out. I love you xxx*, I wrote underneath. We left that morning, and I knew we'd never go back. We had never stayed in the same place more than once. Papa would never discover my letter, but in my tummy I felt a curdling, something separating inside of me.

Still, Mama did not come. The fairies must have been struggling to find her too, I reasoned. It had been months since I saw her last, and since Papa and I left on our adventure. Maybe the drawings weren't enough. Perhaps the fairies needed something bigger for their magic to conjure Mama. Papa and I woke right after dawn, as usual. I stared intently at his back while he repacked our bags and slipped the *Flower Fairies* under my pillow. With the book, the fairies could prove themselves to Mama. She would recognise the inscription on the first page and know the fairies had got it from me. "All set?" Papa asked, turning to look over his shoulder. I nodded, hands cupped on top of each other stiffly in front of me.

We ate bananas for breakfast and began walking to wherever we were headed next. I could no longer distinguish one town from the next, if I ever could. I only knew that we kept moving. Everywhere we stayed or journeyed through looked the same to me. Throughout our adventure, places had blurred like landscapes beyond the glass window of a fast-moving train. I had stopped paying attention, consumed by my thoughts of Mama.

It was warmer that day than it had been over the last week. Autumn was approaching. We stopped late morning for a drink and a little rest at a cafe. I turned my face towards the sun. With my eyelids closed, big red dots appeared. We sat outside and I swung my legs, looking forward to my fresh orange juice. A woman brought over a tray with our drinks, setting Papa's coffee down first. She put the juice in front of me, and I turned to say thank you, with a big, open-mouth grin.

"Oh, look at that, you've lost a tooth!" The woman said, "Did the tooth fairy come and visit you, honey?"

"Yes, the fairies came last night and they left me £1," I told her.

"I bet your Mum wept at sight!"

I tilted my head to the side. "She wasn't there when it fell out. I haven't seen my Mama for a very long time."

My Papa's head veered rapidly from the table to the woman. "Her Mama's not been very well," he said, frowning slightly and wrinkling his nose. "Just the bill when you're ready". He tipped his head. The lie Papa told sat between us, a ghost. "Okay, we're off, little bear." He left cash on the table, picked up our bags and started walking. I hurried along behind, running to catch up. It took twenty minutes for me to realise that in our rush to leave, I had left Poco behind.

Papa promised we would go back tomorrow. I reminded him that we never went to the same place twice. He stayed silent. The lie he told the waitress fluttered to the forefront of my mind. I refused to move until we went back. With fists clenched, I stood and imagined the roots of a tree

coming out from my feet and into the ground. I knew Papa couldn't carry me and the bags without my surrender. My bottom lip shivered with nerves, but I wouldn't leave without Poco.

"You need to run ahead," Papa said, gesturing with a nod to the path we had just walked. His jaw was set in a way that made him look angry, though he spoke gently. I turned without hesitation and raced in Poco's direction. I waited for Papa to catch up before crossing the road near the cafe. Rounding the corner, a police car came into view, parked on the side of the road with its lights flashing. A police officer was speaking to the waitress in front of the table Papa and I had sat at. The woman was holding Poco.

Papa yanked my arm and dragged me out of view. He chucked the bag he was holding in the bin and swept me up into his chest. "What about Poco?" I shouted.

"I'm so sorry, little one," he said. "I'm so sorry". Over and over, he said he was sorry, chanting it in whispers. Tears bloomed in his eyes and mine, fear stopping them from flowing freely. I tried to ask questions about where we were going and what would happen to Poco. It was useless. Papa was spellbound, vacant and unreachable. His mind had travelled to some other place without me. Eventually, he put me down and told me we had to keep running. My hand was clammy inside his gripped fists. We ran through the trees, not as lions this time but as gazelles leaping and bounding away. I told Papa I was tired. He said we couldn't stop. The sound of sirens grew louder. Still, Papa urged us onward. I struggled to keep up and tripped over, separating me from Papa's clasp. He stood out of reach, panting with resignation. Shouts came from a distance. They told my Papa to put his hands up in the air. He did.

That was when the red dot found my Papa. It travelled from his head to his nose to his chin, the places where Mama would plant kisses on me. The red dot carried on down his neck and came to a stop right by his heart. He let his eyes drop from mine to see the red dot for himself.


I am sorry
my love
what have I done

Do the dead hold funerals?

Sriyukta Misra

Do the dead mourn the living?
Do they hold funerals,
rituals,
so the living may be at peace?

Do they light incense
while discussing our deeds?
Do they pray to gods?

Do they watch on with pity,
or with hope?
Amusement, perhaps.

The living toiling on, hungry for meaning,
thirsting for peace.

Do they leave gifts of fruit
to feed our hunger,
jewels
to see us through our lives?

What do the dead bury?

Do they stand together,
looking down at life,
and wonder
if the living will ever find peace?

Do they care?
Should they?

Do the free birds
wonder about their cage?

Magical Mysteries

Sarah Das Gupta

Bunches of ripe elder berries,
touched by moonlight,
wait for unseen hands.
On bare briars, red hips
hang like pinpricks of blood.
The East wind stirs
and loosens the cones
on frowning pines
along the brambly headland.

Circles of mushrooms,
atomic clouds, explode
at night to trace the steps
of unseen spirit dancers.
Wild strawberries, hidden
among banks of thyme,
are gathered in acorn goblets
to swell Queen Mab's feast.

Wreathes of honeysuckle
and sweet eglantine
decorate the ancient halls,
deep in the greenwood
where birch, oak and elm,
whisper the old secrets.
A face high in the canopy,
a hare's print in the first frost,
a tiny beech nut slipper,
lost on a mossy bank.
Mysteries – mysteries.



Emily's Ghost

Alisa Lindfield-Pratt

In historic
Bungunyah Manor
Once surrounded
By rainforest

While making
A tourist video
My parents
Had an experience

Their friends
Wayne and Jo
Sat at the dining table
As the camera rolled

Wayne joked about
The ghost of
Emily Franklin
The manor's 'lady'

Suddenly
His glass of red wine
Tipped down his
White shirt

Behind him

French doors

To the verandah

Flew open

Dad said ‘cut’

In a state of disbelief

Rewound the tape

Had they captured it?

No ghostly hand

No accident or trick

The glass had

Moved on its own

No evidence

Yet no explanation

30 years on

They still wonder

But when Mum

Tells the tale

She speculates

It was Emily’s ghost

Ocotillo

Ricardo Moran

in the winter, the gravel, the rock
do not burn. the old hippies
live in casitas of corrugated iron
next to defunct train tracks,
along chunks of old highway 80.

the pencil thin ocotillo, its thorns
point to a mountain range rumbling
awake. it releases in rock, in boulder,
in wind-

faint words, undulated wails

scaling forth, pushing past an embroidered
plain of pebbles, stones in hues
of yellow, rust, green, and purple.

sharp tips, sharp words ascend
the martian landscape,
glimpse the promise land-

mountains of green, rain, water,
so much water.

but, in 1915 a young man disappeared
under desert stars. motorcycle sputtered
boulders awake, their exhalations filled
Devil's Canyon. his mother convinced
of foul play. his body
never found



Out Walking After Storms, I Think of You

Aden Thomas

The rain holds dear its old lovers
in the dark where streetlights chase the light.
Tonight, a cold and solemn night,
there's crayon in the blood of storms.

Years ago our shadows lost their names,
They slipped their chains and followed us
home to find us at your doorstep
kissing in the rain, our lips like water.

We touched like clouds.
We thought in halcyon.
In the morning
the sky was gone.

And now the memory of your voice
waits beyond the passing cars.
I would follow those headwaters
forever until they remembered us.



The Inheritors of Sambyal Haveli

Sudha Kerketta

The dust in the grand foyer of the Sambyal Haveli did not dance; it hung suspended, frozen in the heavy, humid air of the Jammu plains. Dr. Sudha adjusted her headlamp, her camera strap cutting into her shoulder. As an architectural historian, she had spent years tracking down the lost estates of local Dogra landlords. But this haveli—hidden deep behind overgrown thorny brush—was not just abandoned. It felt entirely scrubbed from local memory, as if time itself had decided to quarantine the grounds.

She stepped over shattered glass, her boots crunching against broken terracotta floor tiles. The walls were covered in peeling, damp frescoes of royal hunting parties, the faces of the old kings intentionally scratched out by long-forgotten hands.

"You shouldn't touch the north pillars," a clear, youthful voice echoed through the courtyard. "The plaster is completely rotted from the 1994 monsoon."

Sudha spun around, dropping her notebook.

Standing beneath an arched veranda were two children, a boy and a girl. They looked no older than ten, wearing matching white linen tunics that seemed entirely untouched by the filth around them. They had identical high cheekbones and striking, sharp postures that belonged to old military portraits. But it was their eyes that gripped her—unnatural, unblinking hazel-brown eyes that held the chilling stillness of antique porcelain dolls.

"Who are you?" Sudha breathed, her heart hammering against her ribs. "How did you get in here? This place is restricted."

"We live here," the girl said calmly, stepping forward into a beam of sunlight. "Well, we will live here. I am Vidushi. And this is Rivaan."

"The Sambyal twins," Rivaan added, a polite but eerie smile touching his lips. "The perfect ones, according to grandfather's letters."

Sudha's mind scrambled for logical explanations. A local caretaker's children playing a prank? But their diction was flawless, completely mismatched with the rural surroundings. More unsettlingly, she recognized the names. In the land tax registries from 1920, the last landlord had left the estate to his descendants, but the lineage had mysteriously vanished.

"Where are your parents?" Sudha asked, slowly reaching for her phone, though her fingers were trembling too much to unlock the screen.

"You're looking right at us," Vidushi said, tilting her head.

Rivaan stepped closer, pointing a small finger toward the silver locket hanging around Sudha's neck—an heirloom from her grandmother. "You still wear it. You always told us it brought you luck during your university digs."

Sudha froze. Her breath caught in her throat. Her grandmother had passed that unique, custom-engraved locket down only to her. She had taken a strict, personal vow years ago never to marry, choosing to dedicate her entire life to the quiet isolation of history. She wasn't ever going to have children, let alone a pair of identical twins.

"That's impossible," Sudha whispered, backing away until her spine hit a stone pillar. "This is a hallucination. Heatstroke. I am never getting married."

"Anomalies don't care about vows, Mother," Vidushi countered matter-of-factly, gesturing to the shimmering air around the central courtyard pool.

Sudha looked. The stagnant rainwater in the pool wasn't reflecting the gray sky or the broken stone arches above. Instead, it reflected a beautifully restored, vibrant version of the haveli, filled with

yellow marigold garlands and the sound of distant laughter. Time was folding tightest right where her future blood line met the history she was excavating.

"You come back here next winter with the restoration team," Rivaan said, his voice dropping to a gentle, knowing whisper. He tilted his face upward, the afternoon sun catching the golden flecks in his stare. "The lead architect taking over this site will be a fierce, unyielding man who guards his work and his people like a fortress. We have his hazel-brown eyes, you see. He doesn't know it yet, but he has spent his whole life waiting to protect you."

Vidushi smiled, her glass-like eyes softening. "You think your vow keeps you safe from the world, Sudha. But his quiet, protective shadow will match yours perfectly. You will cross thresholds you swore you'd never touch, and you will become the daughter-in-law of Sambyal. That is how we finally get to come home."

"We came to give you this," Rivaan added, stepping into the dust between them. He reached out, his small hand perfectly warm against her cold palm, and dropped a heavy, metallic object into her fingers. "You lose it next month during the monsoon dig in Hampi. You wept for weeks. We didn't want you to be sad anymore."

Before Sudha could speak, the courtyard gate outside rattled violently. Her local guide had finally arrived, shouting her name through the brush. Sudha blinked, instinctively looking away for a fraction of a second toward the entrance.

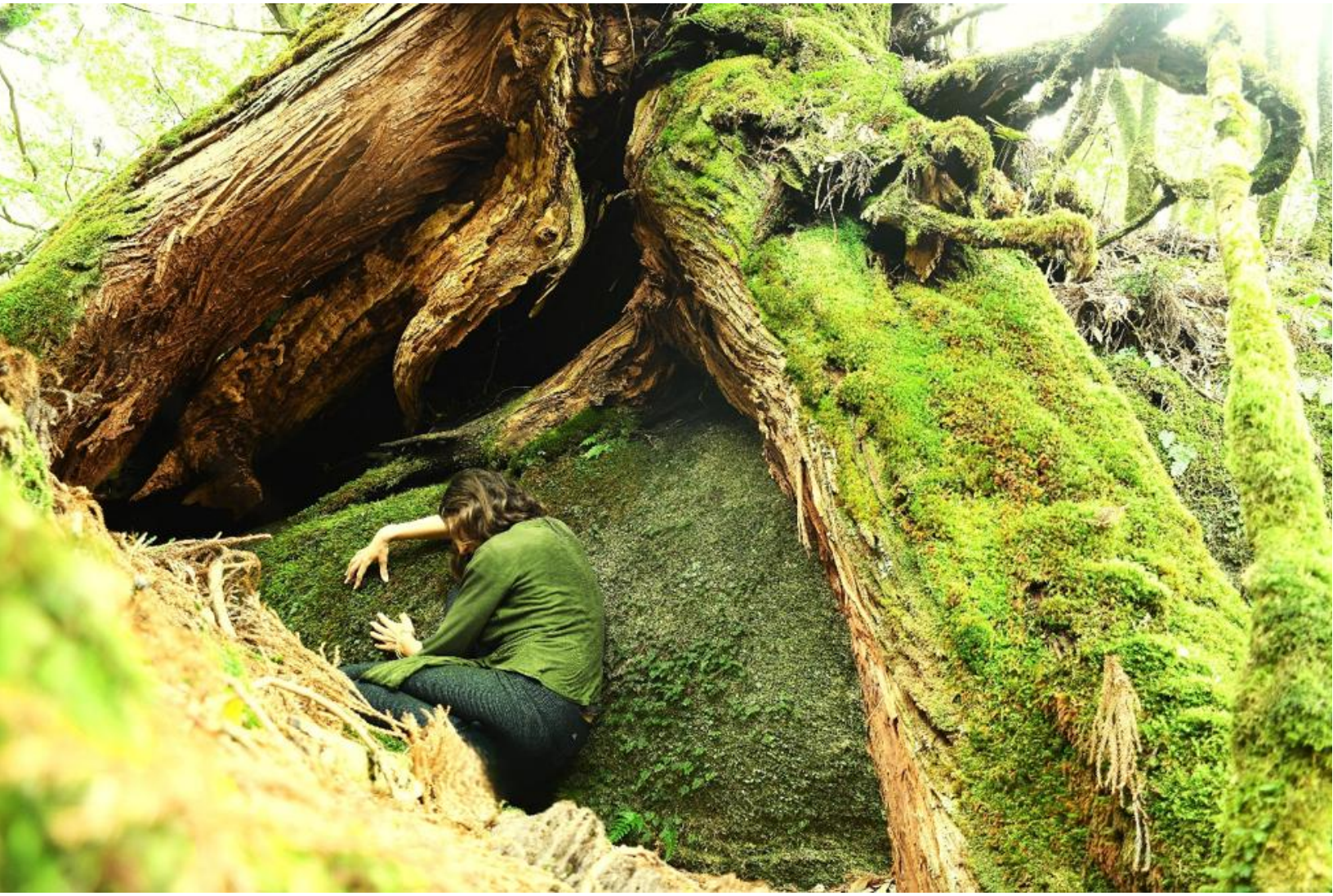
When she turned back, the veranda was empty.

Only two small, clean pairs of footprints remained in the thick dust of the Sambyal foyer. Sudha looked down at her hand, expecting it to be empty—the classic trick of a heat-induced daydream.

Instead, resting in her palm was a beautifully polished, intricate gold ring set with a deep blue sapphire. She recognized it instantly. It was her mother's wedding ring, currently locked away in a

bank safety deposit box three hundred miles away in Delhi, completely safe, and completely unreachable.

Sudha closed her fist around the cold metal, looking up at the empty veranda as the ancient house settled back into a heavy, watchful silence.

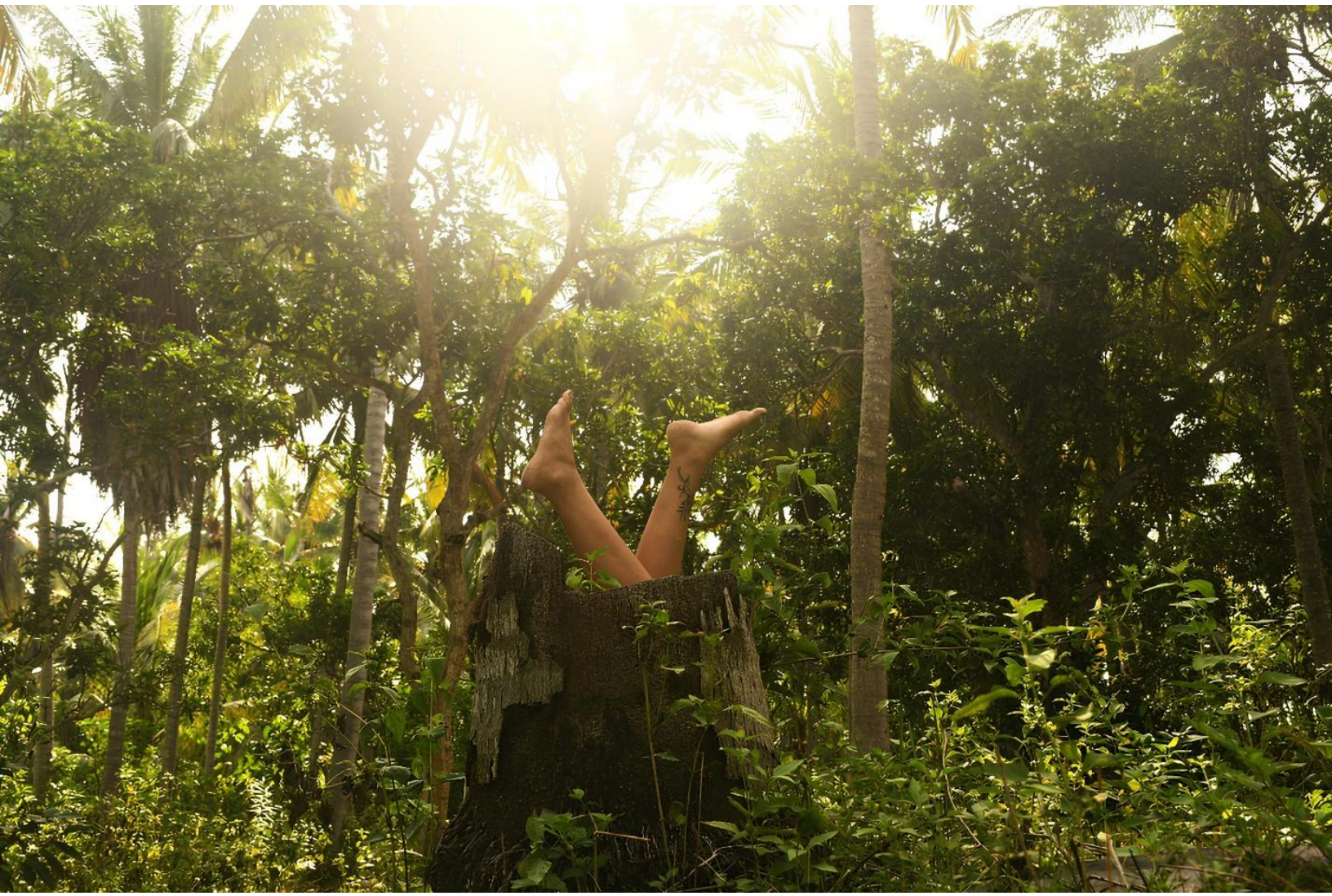


The Woman in the Woods

Adaina

We were seven around the fire
when Leo began to speak.
He told us about an old lady
who vanished in the woods
seventy years ago.
They said she carried a doll.
They said that every Halloween night
someone heard an old lady singing
between the trees.
We laughed at him.
Then the fire went out.
Nobody moved.
From somewhere beyond the darkness
came the sound of a music box.
One tiny note.
Then another.
Leo whispered,
“That isn't part of the story.”
Something stepped into the firelight.
An old lady.
Bare feet.
Long white dress.
Mud on her hands.
And in her arms
was a white doll.
She looked at all of us.
Then she smiled at Leo.
“You finally finished my story.”
Leo went pale.
“What do you mean?”
The old lady raised the doll.
The doll had seven painted faces
across its white body.

She pointed to the first.
Then the second.
Then the third.
By the time she reached the seventh,
the fire had returned.
But there were only six of us.
Leo was gone.
And on the empty log beside us
sat the doll
wearing his face.



Until Dawn

Erika MacNeil

She witnesses
sky swallow sun
before liquid darkness
bleeds into night

Breathless with bright eyes
she wades into water
fingertips tapping lily pads
uncurled toes sinking into

Soft mud sucking
heels digging deep
lean limbs slicing surface
chin dipped in defiance

Throat full
eyes welling
slick taste of tongue
against crooked teeth

Caught in tailwinds of
wavering voices entwined
as they weave with the willows
bending broken blades

Twitching temples of
milkweed silks
tucking their heads
in delicate deference

Clustered burrs cling to threaded twig
buried in cascades of crystal
bursting with brightness then
fading from the firelight

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

A. Allan Chibi is a Canadian writer living in Windsor, Ontario. His short fiction has appeared in House of Long Shadows, Altered Reality Magazine, Infinity Wonders, The Wise Owl, and elsewhere. He is also the author of two historical fiction novels, two fantasy novels, and several academic books on Tudor and Reformation history.

Abbie Shanahan is a lifelong lover of words and their particular kind of magic. She holds an Ed.S in Reading & Language. She is a sensitive soul whose writing tends to center around nature and emergence. She resides in Western Massachusetts with her family where she teaches literacy to elementary-aged children. Her work can be found, or is forthcoming in Eunoia Review, Odd Pocket Press, and Lemon Jelly Press among others. She is hard at work on her first poetry manuscript.

Abraham Kedong Ali is an emerging poet from Atyap land in Nigeria's Middle Belt. He holds an MA in English and Literary Studies from the University of Jos and is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he works as a teaching assistant. He is the recipient of the Vreeland Graduate Award for Poetry. His work explores memory, displacement, family, conflict, and resilience, with a particular interest in absence and silence. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Isele Magazine, Streetlight Magazine, Ultramarine Literary Review, Gently Mad Literary Magazine, The Shallow Tales Review, and several anthologies

Adaina is an author living in Norway whose writing explores love, loss, resilience, identity, and hope. She is a recipient of the Literary Titan Book Award and the International Impact Book Award, and has received an Honourable Mention in the BookFest Awards. When she is not writing, she enjoys praying, spending time alone, and appreciating the simple things in life.

Aden Thomas is the author of What Those Light Years Carry (2017) and a Pushcart Prize nominee. Deeply influenced by his roots in the American West and his current home in Central Texas, his poetry explores the textures of changing landscapes. His work has appeared widely in print and digital journals, including The Madrid Review, Brevity, Rust + Moth, Stonecoast Review, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Third Wednesday, Common Ground Review, The Avalon Literary Review, and Gyroscope Review, among many others.

Alisa Lindfield-Pratt is a queer writer of short fiction and poetry. Her work has been featured in Wild Willow Magazine, The Expressionist Literary Magazine, The Selkie, ionosphere, Moss Puppy Magazine, Moth Eaten Magazine, and collections of JMS Books, Romance Writers of Australia and Romance Writers of New Zealand. She lives in Australia with her partner, dog and two kids.

Angi Lewis lives in a small mountain town in the Pacific Northwest where she enjoys writing and drawing for all ages. Her work has been published by Benchmark Publishing and Macmillan Publishing and has appeared in The Caterpillar, First Line Journal and on The Poet's Corner.

Assa Martin is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator, poet, and writer. She graduated from the Academy of Slavic Cultures and has a bachelor's degree in design. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in art history. In 2005, she created a series of graphics dedicated to the Chernobyl disaster, and in the same year, she wrote the series ""The Red Book."" In 2022, she participated in international exhibitions in China, Taiwan, and the United States. In 2024, she received the Jury's Special Prize for her poster in China

Bainapalli Vishal is a poet writing from the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, India. His work explores cultural landscapes and psychological realism. His poetry and micro-verse appear or are forthcoming in Scifaikuest, Patrika Aranyak, BAUXITE, Wild Willow Magazine, Wingless Dreamer, and Literary Cocktail Magazine.

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines such as Poetry, Rattle and the North American Review. His latest book 'Boxing In The Bone Orchard' is available now via Frontenac House.

C. C. Rayne is an author of speculative fiction, specializing in all things weird, wonderful, and queer. Most recently. C. C. is the author of *The Suture Cycle*, which can be purchased digitally or in print from dogleech books. C. C.'s short stories can be read in such places as The Razor, HAD, Demons & Death Drops, TRANS RITES, and The Deeps, and C. C.'s poetry can be read in such places as Strange Horizons, Rough Cut Press, Eye To The Telescope, and moth eaten mag.

Chloe Crawford La Vada is a Brooklyn-based writer, artist, and educator whose work primarily focuses on the dark side of human identity, psyche, and trans identity/experience. Her writing has appeared in a variety of publications, including Dog Water Magazine, Macabre Zine, Phantasmal Gallery, Persephone Literary, and Uncharted Magazine.

Christine Naprava is a hobby photographer and writer from South Jersey.

Dadakiz is an American artist currently residing in Berlin. She is preparing for Fashion Week and makes a collage every single day.

Erika MacNeil is a dancer by training, teacher by trade, writer on a whim. Look for her work with Neon and Smoke, Seven Magazine, Sky Island Journal, Hey Young Writer, Demitasse, and Covert Literary Magazine.

Eva Bonneville is a French artist who graduated from UAL in London in 2017 and furthered her studies in France. She graduated from ESA Dunkeque Tourcoing in 2021. Currently, she explores through photography and other mediums our interaction with space and our environment. She is interested in symbiotic relationships and our ways of inhabiting the world poetically. It is also related to the concept of ecosophy, a state of ecological harmony emphasizing the interconnection between ecology, society and human consciousness. She did group and solo exhibitions in France and the UK as

well as internationally in Turkey, Nepal, India, Indonesia, US and Taiwan. She is also author of a travel photo book 'Souvenirs from Elsewhere'.

Hannah Tomes graduated from college in 2023 and majored in Professional Writing, but she is also passionate about creative writing. She received first place in fiction in the 2023 Maier Awards, along with being a winner of the New Works Screenplay Festival in 2024 and 2025. Two of her short stories have been featured in the literary magazine “Et Cetera” and another in the anthology “The Dog Who Wooed At The World” by Laura Lee Cascada. Hannah loves animals, especially scaly ones that creep, crawl, and hop, and she lives in West Virginia with her family, including her dog, Jade, and her cat, Shema.

Heather Cadenhead, a native Tennessean, graduated from Union University with a creative writing degree. Her poems are published or forthcoming in Valley Voices, Blue Earth Review, Ad Fontes, Birmingham Arts Journal, Peacock Journal, Up the Staircase, and other journals. Her poetry has earned a New Plains Review Editorial Prize as well as Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations.

Jawn Van Jacobs is a rock n roll poet, mythmaker and soothsayer. His work has appeared in Cool Beans Lit, Underbelly Press, and Paper Dragon. This rock n roll poet lights up raw narratives, shedding light on the lives of those living on the hedges of society. His debut chapbook, bastard bee, was published by Finishing Line Press in August 2025.

John Dorroh reads poetry every day. Last count he had amassed over 400 poetry books. “I must read other poet’s work in order to hone my craft.” In doing so, he has “met” a lot of new voices: CT Salazar, Alicia Mountain, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Todd Osborne, and Katherine Pierce to name a few. His poetry has been selected six times for Best of the Net. Hundreds of others have appeared in Kissing Dynamite, River Heron, Feral, Many Nice Donkeys, North of Oxford, and Pif. He lives in Southwest Illinois and has “writing homes” in New Mexico, Asheville, Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, and a mountain cabin in East Tennessee.

John Repp is a writer, collagist, and folk photographer living in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Justin Carlos Alcala (he/him) is an award-winning Mexican-American novelist & short story writer. His works are most notable for their appearance in Publisher’s Weekly, the SLF Foundation Awards, and the University of British Columbia project archives. Justin is a folklore fanatic, a history nerd, a tabletop gamer, and a time traveler. Alcala’s sixty-plus short stories, novellas, and novels can be found in anthologies, magazines, journals, podcasts, and commercial publications. He currently resides with his dark queen, Mallory, their fey daughter, Lily, changeling son, Ronan, goblin-toddler, Asher, and hounds of Ragnarök, Fenrir and Hilda, in Bigfoot’s domain. Where his mind might be is anyone’s guess.

KB Ballentine loves to travel and practice sword fighting and Irish step dancing: those Scottish and Irish roots run deep! When not tucked in a corner reading or writing, she makes daily classroom appearances to her students.

Keyshia Salazar (known as Shia) is a 17-year-old artist based in the Philippines. She has soulfully created digital and gouache illustrations inspired by her love for folkloric art, decorative storybook illustrations, otherworldly themes, classic literature and searching for warmth, whimsy and magic. She has created illustrations for local exhibits, school organizations such as "UST SHS Music, Arts, and Design Society", and fundraisers such as "Cats Around Town ph" and was notably featured in the local online art magazine "NovicePh", most recently in their "Design100 Poster Exhibit." She is currently working on a solo narrative passion project titled *Light of the Lost.* With every little world in her illustration, from floating castles, sentient mountains, giant birds, dancing flowers, and magical heroines, her art has become her own form of communication and connection, an irreplaceable "magic" that she finds in illustrating.

Kit Sibert is largely influenced by a childhood Cuba and her years residing in New York City, Madrid, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles and the Pacific Northwest. She published Dreaming Havana Home in 2024 a hybrid book about her expat childhood during the Cuban Revolution. She has two chapbooks: Beyond Me (integral to a multimedia art show at Maud Kerns Gallery), What You Have Become (Finishing Line Press) and a book of poetry and paintings How the Light Gets In (lulu.com). Sibert's poems can be found in Passager, Cirque, Gyroscope Review among others. Artistic (poetry and visual) activity includes two solo shows: WIDOW at the PRN galleries and Beyond Me at Maude Kerns in Eugene, Oregon. She has been residing in Oregon for the past decades and spends these days leading her eclectic creative life painting, doing photography, writing poetry, participating in the Motel Guerrilla Movement and musing on the ever-fascinating existential mystery of getting old.

Mark LaMonda is an artist and writer who currently lives in Santa Clarita California. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Painted Bride Quarterly, Wilderness House Literary, Autumn Sky, San Pedro River Review, SoFloPoJo, and Blue Unicorn among others.

Mary Upton is a writer and storyteller based in London. Her stories explore relationship dynamics, the desire for connection, and fragments of the human experience. Ironclad Creative and Parracombe Press have published her writing. She's also received an Honorary Mention from Writer's Digest for her work. Her Substack, Drafting, contains humorous reflections on pop culture, thoughts on life's in-betweens and fiction writing.

Michael C. Paul is a writer, illustrator, and historian living in Virginia. His work appears in The Lyric, The Sunlight Press, Amethyst Review, and The Orchards Poetry Journal, among others. He is a four-time award winner in the 2026 Poetry Society of Virginia annual contest.

Michael C. Roberts searches to capture forms, beauty, and culture through photography. His published images range from black and white minimalist style to colorful vignettes in nature to large landscapes. He has few pretensions as an artist. He is chuffed when a literary magazine accepts his work to share with the world.

Oleg Daugovish has been researching the delicate lives of California strawberries, after completion of Ph.D. in 2001. He rushes to tell growers about his discoveries and documents them in peer-reviewed journals. Aside from writing about plants, Oleg completed a humorous 61,000-word memoir about growing up in Latvia during Soviet times and sixteen ten-minute stories of creative non-fiction he'd love to share. Thirteen of them found home in lit mags and two won contest awards.

Ralphi Burgess is a Tokyo-based visual artist exploring the esoteric through surrealism. Originally from Dallas, TX, Her artistic practice blends fantasy with the tangibility of lived experience through paintings of confronting portraits, inviting or challenging depending on the viewer. She is most known for painting You're in The Middle of the World, the cover of the Pulitzer Prize-winner "The Tradition" by Jericho Brown. She is currently working on my first long-form series about the eldritch.

Ramesh Dohan lives in the city of Toronto, Canada with his partner and an exceptionally perfect dog. When he is not writing in his favorite café, he spends his time reading, hiking and travelling the world. He has also seen his poetry published in several literary journals including Trouvaille Review (2021), Bosphorous Review of Books (2021), Painted Bride Quarterly (2024) & Eunoia Review (2025)

Regine Jackson is a poet and writer whose work spans poetry, memoir, and fiction. She was named the Straw Dog Writers Guild Emerging Writer Fellow in 2022, and her writing has appeared in the 2024 Massachusetts Bards Poetry Anthology, Meat for Tea: The Valley Review, the Reimagining New England Histories Project, and Pán•o•ply: Inaugural MultiCreative Anthology, among other publications. She leads The Flimsy Quill, an initiative offering workshops, literary events, and creative mentorship in Western Massachusetts and beyond.

Ricardo Moran is a past recipient of the Peter K. Hixson Memorial Award for Poetry. His writing has been published or is forthcoming in Beatific Magazine, Cider Press Review, Midwest Quarterly, Perceptions Magazine, East Jasmine Review, The Seattle Star, and Willa Cather Review. He is a former board member and current advisory board member for San Diego Writers, Ink. and is a former associate editor with Zoetic Press. His debut poetry anthology, Not Quite Heaven, from Broken Tribe Press, was published in 2025 and was shortlisted for the 2024 Tribe Poetry Award. He has delivered poetry readings in Albania, Ireland, and a book signing in Norway. He lives in Albania, enjoys traveling, and learning how to say "good morning" in as many languages as possible. In every timeline, you can find him reading, writing, and plotting.

Sadie Maskery lives in Scotland by the sea. Her short story collection, Overboard, is published by Acid Bath Press.

S.S.Deva is a neurodivergent writer and poet from the UK, who lives in the Czech Republic. He enjoys writing poetry set in the inbetween places of the world. He was previously a professor of English literature and culture at a Czech University.

Saeid Pakan is an Iranian writer with a PhD in Educational Management. He has published four short story collections and over twenty accepted works in Iranian and international journals, including Abundance (USA) and Feed the Holly. His poetry and fiction explore memory, body, and exile. He lives in Khorramabad.

Sarah Das Gupta is a writer from Cambridge, UK who has taught English in India, Tanzania and UK. She started writing aged 80, following a disabling accident which has seriously limited her mobility. Her work has been published in over 25 countries in magazines and anthologies. She has been nominated for Best of the Net, The Pushcart and a Dwarf Star.

Sheila Thadani is a writer and poet holding an M.A. She is an Eco poet whose work explores climate grief, environmental justice, and human relationships. Her poetry has been featured in The Kelp Journal, Tiny Seed Journal, Dissident Voice, WP Congress, LitVegan and others; the author of a column for Hi Rise Magazine, her articles also appear on Substack. She has been awarded several prizes for her poetry, including recognition for Moral Abyss, Woven Fabric, Quest for Peace, Lost Spring of Love, Weeping Earth, and others.

Sriyukta Misra is an India-based writer whose work explores identity, the inheritance of grief, and the search for selfhood through minimalist verse. Their writing appears or is forthcoming in various publications, including Parcham, Homeplace Magazine, Cosmic Daffodil Journal and Aporia Literary Journal, where their triptych, "Flesh over Flesh," was selected as an Editor's Pick.

Star Galasyn has been writing poetry since she was in middle school. Within the last eight years, she has written over a dozen poetry books and in June 2025 published her debut poetry collection, 'All The Things in The Sky', which can be found on Amazon. Her poetry explores diverse topics such as mental health, relationships, philosophical thought pieces, grief, and self-exploration. She is currently working on her next poetry collection and a novel and is active on social media. She also writes articles and has been published by Marrow Magazine, The Passionate Post, The 20-Something Files, and Poetry Nation (Eber and Wein).

Sudha Kerketta is an educator, historian, researcher, and independent Indian writer who explores profound truths through the lenses of myth, history, and feminist literature. She is the author of The Sacred Wound Trilogy and a regular magazine columnist. Driven by endless curiosity, her work beautifully blends academic insight with creative imagination.

Tamizh Ponni VP is an ambivert and a stoic art buff who loves to express her skills through literature, visual arts and music. She is an educator and sees learning as a life-long process. Tamizh's articles, poems, stories and paintings have also been published in many anthologies, digital journals

and educational blogs. Tamizh spends most of her free time painting, reading, writing articles, stories and poems, playing piano and watching documentaries/movies.

Theresa Pisani was born into a family of artists and as a child spent much of her free time drawing and perusing books on artists. As an adult, she has worked as an illustrator, animator, and muralist. Many of her murals can be seen at the Petaluma Wildlife Museum in California and at private residences. In the years 2007–2009, she was one of the artists chosen to work on the "Peanuts on Parade" statue project with Craig Schulz and completed three of the statues. She is currently focusing on studio works and divides her time between New Orleans and Northern California.

Wing Yau is a Hong Kong–born poet currently based in Australia. The Fiction of Flying is their debut poetry collection.