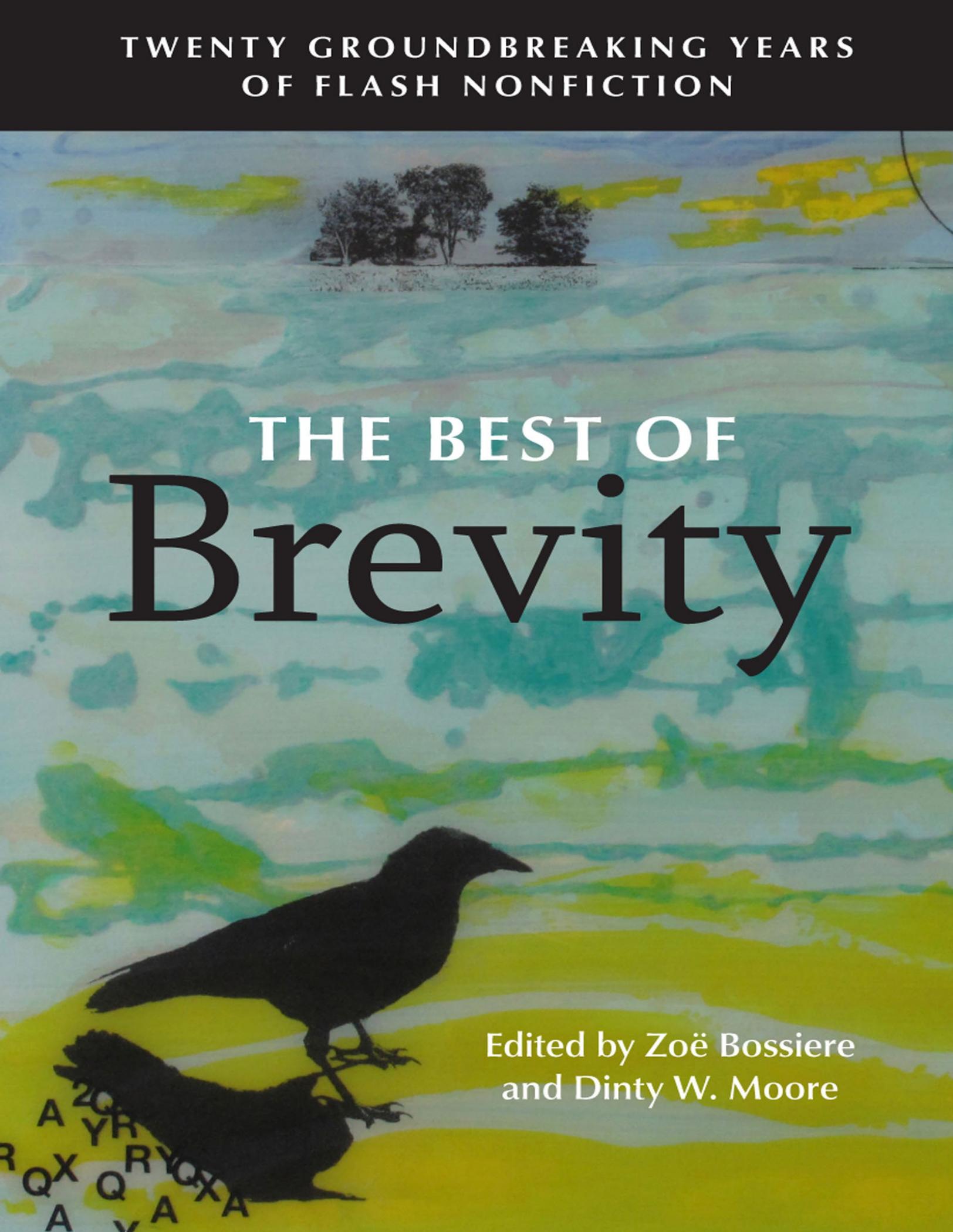


TWENTY GROUNDBREAKING YEARS
OF FLASH NONFICTION



THE BEST OF
Brevity

Edited by Zoë Bossiere
and Dinty W. Moore

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THE BEST OF
Brevity

Featuring Flash Essays By

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Brian Arundel
Samuel Autman
Julie Hakim Azzam
Krys Malcolm Belc
Jenny Bouilly
Nina Boutsikaris
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Christine Byl
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TWENTY GROUNDBREAKING YEARS
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THE BEST OF
Brevity



Edited by Zoë Bossiere and Dinty W. Moore

Rose Metal Press

2020

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• INTRODUCTION •

On Voice, Concision, and 20 Years of Flash Nonfiction

By Dinty W. Moore

When *Brevity* celebrated its recent 20th anniversary, I took time to reflect on what I had learned as founder and editor of the journal. The key lesson, perhaps, is that editing a magazine is an unpredictable path lined with a series of happy surprises.

When I began this venture back in 1997, I expected *Brevity* to last maybe a year or two. The idea of an online magazine was untested, and few of my literary friends were active on what we then called “The World Wide Web.”

The idea of flash nonfiction was new as well. I chose the brief essay form because I admired the work in various flash fiction anthologies that were popping up at the time, and the word count that I chose—750 or fewer—split the difference between those fiction venues that limited authors to 500 words and those that allowed up to 1,000.

To be honest, *Brevity* was more an experiment than a commitment. The inaugural issue had five essays and an embarrassingly rudimentary design. The second issue didn’t look much better, and I made the naïve editorial gaffe of publishing my own work. In short, I didn’t know what I was doing, and my motivation was as much about learning how to code HTML as it was to build a lasting literary presence.

But *Brevity* limped along, and though submissions trickled in slowly at first, the number grew steadily with each issue. Soon enough we were publishing award-winning writers such as Brian Doyle, Brenda Miller, Debra Marquart, Lee Martin, and Rebecca McClanahan. In many cases, it turned out, writers were crafting short pieces specifically for *Brevity*, intrigued by the possibilities of this new form.

In addition to learning what it means to edit a successful magazine, I've been granted a continuing education in what is possible in the extremely concise nonfiction essay. At the start, my thinking was that any true story limited to 750 words would need to be scene-based, and that the scene itself should cover the smallest period of time possible, maybe only a few minutes. That strategy works of course (read, for instance, Joey Franklin's "Girl Fight," included in this anthology), but as the magazine grew over time, the inventive writers who submitted their work challenged my initial assumptions, obliging me to stretch my expectations, and then stretch them again.

To see what I mean, consider Randon Billings Noble's "The Heart as a Torn Muscle," an essay on heartbreak in the form of a WebMD page, or Jill Talbot's "All or Nothing, Self-Portrait at 27," which manages to encapsulate an entire year in just over 400 words.

I'm done predicting what is possible—and what is not—in the flash form because each issue brings along the unexpected. But I do still believe there are a few basics that apply to the brief essay, no matter how expansive one's idea of plot, story, or form might become.

The first basic, of course, is a quick entry. In such a small allotment of words, there is no time to clear one's throat, to gently introduce the story before moving leisurely along to the point of tension, the moment the reader's curiosity is piqued. The water is fine, in other words, so jump right in.

And though it may go without saying, there is no time for redundancy in a flash essay. Say what you have to say once and move along.

What I've also come to realize is that the compression necessary to tell a story in a package this small means that every sentence should accomplish more than one task. While a simple prose sentence might merely introduce a character trait, or carry someone across the room, or inform us of the weather, a sentence in a flash piece is most effective when it introduces a character, while she walks across the room, during a summer heatwave. Better still if that sentence adds something else: metaphor, image, mood, or voice.

That latter element—voice—seems to me most important, the one for

which my editor sensors are always busily scanning. The late Tony Hoagland wrote that what readers want to feel is that “we are encountering a speaker ‘in person,’ a speaker who presents a convincingly complex version of the world and of human nature.” Hoagland had it exactly right. What *I* want is the sense that someone particular has experienced the circumstances of the flash story, and that someone is telling the story, and telling it as only they can, different than you might tell it, and different from the way any other author in that issue of the magazine might tell it. A particular voice on the page.

That’s no easy task, but the authors in *The Best of Brevity: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction* have done so, in amazing and unexpected ways.

I continue to marvel at the literary resumés of the accomplished authors we have published over the years, but equally important to me is that we continue our mission to seek out new talent: writers at the beginning of their literary careers, and often writers who are publishing for the first time. I am proud that every issue over the past 20 years, as well as this *Best of Brevity* anthology, offers new voices, gifted writers at the on-ramp of what I expect will be an outstanding, lasting literary presence.

This is not an obituary, by the way. *Brevity* continues, and with luck, there will be a 50th anniversary anthology someday. My co-editor, Zoë Bossiere, has been the magazine’s managing editor since 2018, and I am grateful for her help on *Brevity* and in making the hard choices of who and what to include here. I am grateful, as well, for the many devoted volunteers who have helped keep our unlikely enterprise afloat.

I believe the future is bright for the flash essay, am excited to see newer magazines enter the brief nonfiction field, and marvel at the extent to which *Brevity*’s readership continues to expand. Thanks to the ease-of-access provided by the online format, we now regularly draw readers and submissions from North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Australia, and across Asia. We are working on Antarctica.

As the world grows more complex, flash nonfiction offers the opportunity for a great diversity of voices and viewpoints to be represented. Moreover, flash nonfiction allows us as readers to visit many worlds, many realities, many perspectives, in brief succession. For that reason alone, I feel strongly about the future of the form and the writers who work to craft these powerful but concise true stories.

I hope you enjoy the work included in these pages, learn from these authors and their stories, and that you are perhaps inspired to write your own flash essays, possibly forcing me someday soon to stretch my definition even further.

• INTRODUCTION •

Flash, Present, and Future: A Brevity Retrospective

By Zoë Bossiere

Brevity was not only one of the first literary magazines I'd ever heard of, but also my first introduction to the art of flash nonfiction. This was back in 2011, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Arizona. My then-professor, Fenton Johnson, would use *Brevity* to show our class contemporary examples of flash nonfiction in the same tradition as classics like Joan Didion's "At the Dam" and Bernard Cooper's "Maps to Anywhere," two literary names I was still learning to recognize. Even during those early classroom discussions, I loved the experience of reading *Brevity*—the way such essays could be consumed quickly but linger in the mind, bittersweet like a square of chocolate. I loved how we could spend an entire class period discussing a single 750-word piece. Best of all, *Brevity's* essays represented perspectives from many different backgrounds and experience levels. Some, I noticed, had been written by other undergraduates. The realization that I was not too young for my work to be taken seriously is a big part of what encouraged me to continue my pursuit of writing as a lifestyle and a profession.

After that semester, I became a dedicated reader. In turn, *Brevity* was highly formative in my development as a writer. The journal was an accessible resource with plenty of models to study and from which to base my own creative work as I continued to improve my craft. I particularly admired and wrote after the raw devastation in Jenny Bouilly's "I Remain Very Sorry for What I Did to the Little Black Kitten," and the musicality of Ander Monson's prose in "Letter to a Future Lover," among so many other brilliant essays. My earliest publications were all flash pieces, which I attribute almost exclusively

to *Brevity's* influence. Its daily blog became my first portal to engagement with the greater literary world beyond the writing classroom. In 2017, during the final year of my MFA program, I submitted a piece written specifically for the *Brevity* blog, responding to Jia Tolentino's *New Yorker* article, "The Personal-Essay Boom Is Over" (Tolentino's *Brevity* essay, "Five from Kyrgyzstan," is included in this volume), and felt, for the first time, like an active member of the writing community.

When I began teaching in my MFA, *Brevity* was a godsend. The flash essay form is an excellent pedagogical tool for introducing students to the creative essay, a concept many first-year writers struggle to divorce from long, boring term papers. With flash, one can examine the structural skeleton of a piece and track the progressive work of each individual sentence—details which one can easily lose track of in a longer piece. For example, Diane Seuss's "I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess that's what they were," does this work with one long, lyrical sentence to illustrate the surreal nature of her experience as the mother of an addict, while Debra Marquart's more staccato "Some Things about That Day" makes use of short, direct sentences that work to slowly build a scene, and to mirror, matter-of-factly, the state of mind the writer was in on the day of her abortion.

I loved using *Brevity* for its many diverse examples of the flash essay, but also for its lessons in, well, the art of writing briefly. For this, one of my favorites to assign students remains Josey Foo's "So Little." Foo's piece is the perfect embodiment of the range an essay can encapsulate with a single short sentence—melding scene and exposition to capture the moment "she" moves from the chair to the window, and every thought in between, all using less than 150 words. Most semesters, I would use Foo's essay to challenge my students' conceptions of how to tell a story as well as to teach them the value (and necessity) of the revision process. Students would begin with 1200 words or more of material and slowly edit away the excess until they had an essay of 600 words, then 100 words, then, sometimes, just six. The results of this exercise were often amazing, and more than once over the years I have encouraged students to submit their work

to *Brevity* and elsewhere.

Though I continued to read and teach *Brevity* long after graduation, I never imagined I would one day become an editor of my favorite literary publication, let alone co-editor of its first anthology. When I received my acceptance letter to Ohio University for my PhD, it was difficult to believe that I would not only have the opportunity to work with Dinty W. Moore, a writer whom I greatly admired, but also to read submissions for his magazine. I started working for *Brevity* as an assistant editor in my first year and later became its managing editor. That's when I first proposed the idea of a *Brevity* anthology to Dinty. My pitch was simple: an anthology was long overdue for a magazine as respected in the writing community as *Brevity*. Plus, flash is fast becoming one of the most popular nonfiction forms to teach, and I thought a *Brevity*-specific anthology might work to complement the existing *Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, of which Dinty was editor and which has seen wide classroom use. The result of our conversation is the book you hold in your hands today.

However, *The Best of Brevity* is more than just a collection of entertaining and insightful essays. One of our hopes for this book is to create an easy-to-use teaching resource from the vast archives of *Brevity*, which is why this volume includes a number of tools for students and teachers of flash nonfiction alike. These include an alternate table of contents by essay subject for ease of navigation and lesson planning; an essay on teaching work from this anthology alongside material from our *Brevity* website and blog, which is updated with new material almost every day; and an index linking many of the essays found here in *The Best of Brevity* to lessons, craft essays, and prompts in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*.

As we enter a new decade in 2020, the flash essay is more popular than ever, thanks in large part to *Brevity*, the first literary journal to offer a home exclusively to short works of nonfiction. In the age of tweets, text messages, and memes, the concept of writing short is powerful. One can sum up their life story in a six-word memoir or share a revelatory experience to millions of people across the globe in

280 characters or less. In the years since its inception, writers have also turned to *Brevity* with their reactions to the concerns of the day. From the #MeToo movement, we get Amy Butcher's quietly devastating "Women These Days." Both "On the Occurrence of March 20, 1981..." by B.J. Hollars and "Hairy Credentials" by Nicole Cyrus engage with national conversations about racism started by #BlackLivesMatter. Over time, *Brevity* has become a place where writers engage with both the personal and the political.

In recent years we've also begun to focus more editorial attention on greater diversity among our contributors, and the unique experiences each brings to the page. The amazing Sarah Einstein, who served as managing editor from 2011 to 2014, pioneered two special themed issues focused on "Race, Racism, and Racialization" and "The Experience of Gender," respectively. Since then, we have continued our commitment to publishing underrepresented perspectives. *Brevity's* most recent themed issue, "The Experience of Disability," led by *Brevity* editor Elizabeth Hilts along with guest editors Sonya Huber, Sarah Fawn Montgomery, and Keah Brown, was published in September 2020. Though we regularly publish essays that examine themes like race, gender, disability, and more in our standard issues of *Brevity*, our themed issues make additional space for important voices and experiences. Not coincidentally, the pieces published in *Brevity's* special issues also tend to be some of our most popular, such as Julie Hakim Azzam's "How to Erase an Arab," Danielle Geller's "Blood; Quantum," and Torrey Peters's "Transgender Day of Remembrance: A Found Essay," among others, many of which are included in this volume.

Though the landscape of the writing world has undoubtedly changed in the more than 20 years since *Brevity's* first issue, the flash essay endures as a perennial beacon of small truths. In this volume we highlight just 84 of our favorite essays from the first 60 issues, chosen from more than 800 excellent, memorable works. Through our selections, we have attempted to capture a broad sample of the richness the flash essay has to offer. Thank you for reading with us, and we sincerely hope you enjoy *The Best of Brevity*.

• ISSUE 56, 2017 •

The Shape of Emptiness

by Brenda Miller

His mother dies three weeks before the end of the quarter. A boy, a good student: he emails me to tell me the news, asks permission to be absent. *Of course*, I say, *take as much time as you need*. I tell him he can withdraw, take an incomplete, but he promises to be back in class next week. And he is.

I see him settled into his accustomed seat, his wire-rimmed glasses nestled securely on his nose, his khaki shirt buttoned, his feet encased in battered running shoes. I catch his eye, and we nod to one another, understanding. He needs to be here. The students flanking him know he needs to be here. A bright thread of tenderness coils around us.

We've been talking about white space. About the necessity of pause, of absence. The power of the gap. Of what is unsaid and unspeakable. I have nothing much more to tell them, these students who are winding their way toward their final projects, so I allow them to work with each other, to mull and brainstorm while I walk among them.

The boy sits attentively in his circle, making astute comments to the others. He leans forward on the small desk, crosses his forearms, tilts his head. I've told the students to be playful in this project, to use other media, to see it as a performance of all we've been learning about lyric forms. As a professor, I rarely feel in control, always feel like an imposter, that there's been a mistake. But with this particular class, there's a give and take in our discussions, an ease to our camaraderie; we've somehow become teachers to one another.

When the time comes for the presentations, the students rise to the task. One girl unfurls a quilt with sections of her essay printed on each square; she tells us she and her mom and her sisters stitched together this story of family over Thanksgiving. One girl has made her own

soap and buried scraps of her essay inside the rough-hewn cakes. She brings in bowls of water and towels, asks us to wash our hands with her essay while she reads about shame, about wanting to be cleansed. She begins to cry, and I finish the recital for her.

The boy has brought in playdough, small cans of it that he drops on each desk. He asks us to take the lump and squeeze it in our fists. That's all, just squeeze, then he gathers them up and puts these little sculptures on display at the front table. Each lump looks different, unique, modeling the individual shapes of our palms, the ridges from our inner knuckles.

The boy stands aside and begins to read, his voice soft at first then growing more forceful. He asks us: *What is the shape of emptiness?* Then he pauses, allows the question to remain unanswered. We gaze at our playdough impressions, see how we all have different ways to hang on. He made visible the air we never see. The shape of our holding, our hollow spaces pressed into clay. The form of the word, *please*.

Years from now, this boy will become a man. He'll marry and have two children, and I'll see the pictures on Facebook. He'll be my friend in the way many of us are friends these days: through screens and updates and thumbs-up. On the anniversary of his mother's death, he posts pictures, her face so like his own. I wonder if he remembers our classroom, the large windows that looked out toward the bay, the way light filtered in and made us all pause. I'll watch his hands as he carries one baby, then another, and see how full they have become.

But for now, when he finishes reading, he gathers our hands and gives them back to us one by one. We take them from him carefully, so we can carry our emptiness into the day. We compare them, showing off the shapes of our grasping. Curled like prayers. Like anger. Like love.

• ISSUE 17, 2005 •

Thumb-Sucking Girl

by Sonja Livingston

Look at me.

At me, over here.

Look and shake your head all you want. At my uneven bangs, these broken-down shoes, my momma, all us kids, and all our belongings shoved into just one car. Whisper and sigh all you want because I have something better than good clothes and a permanent address. I've got my thumb. My right thumb to be precise—and the soft pink underside of its arch. Forget that the nail on that thumb grows smooth and flat as the inside of a seashell on account of all that sucking. Forget that my mother has tried everything (except hot pepper and mustard on my thumb like my cousin Judith suggests, because my mother—though determined to rid me of my disgusting habit—thinks pepper and mustard too cruel for a child). Forget that I once deprived myself of the luxury of my thumb for a whole month just to show I could. Forget that my teeth have begun to split down the front, that the space will stretch wide eventually, will ruin my permanent teeth according to my mother. Forget all that and understand that the plug of it in my mouth is what brings me sleep and until you've plopped a thumb into your mouth and sucked on it while using the index finger of that same hand to cradle the line of bone under your eye, to rub up and down the fleshy valley of your nose—until you have done such a thing, you know nothing of comfort.

• ISSUE 44, 2013 •

The Cruelty We Delivered: An Apology

by Ira Sukrungruang

I.

We didn't know what to do—your rocket energy sending Thai monks into fits, as they chased you through the Chicago temple, hands hiking robes like dresses, flip flops slapping calloused heels. Your trouble made us roll our eyes and turn our back when you wanted nothing more than to pal around with us. You were a boy after all. So were we. But boys are cruel with neglect, crueler than the violence our hands are capable of.

II.

We said cruel things, too. In our secret circle. In the temple library, where dust coated books about suffering, where furniture went to rot in the damp back room. Someone said, *He smells like barf*. Someone said, *Thai white trash*. I said, *No wonder his parents dumped him*. How could we know you hid behind a shelf of Buddhist books, patting a stray cat that made a nest in the hollow of a cabinet? How could we know what was to follow? If we did, would we have stopped our tongues?

III.

He's lonely, your grandmother told us. She sold curry-grilled chicken and sticky rice on Sundays, like food carts in Thailand. After Buddhism class, we handed her crisp bills for sustenance. *Play with him*, she said, flipping drumsticks over on the grill, her hair kept under a shower cap. *Free food*, she said.

We were working class boys. Free was free.

IV.

But your play was different. *Watch*, you said and launched a rock through a temple window. *Watch*, you said and trampled through the monks' vegetable garden, tomatoes staining your Converse. The monks would come then, your name a battle cry from exasperated mouths. What vows might they have broken if they caught you? You were, I'm sure, the thought that stirred them out of meditative moments.

We won't lie. It was funny: robed men in a mad dash after a sliver of a boy bounding bushes and Benzes. But your laughter—how can we forget that cackle that scattered crows?

V.

Once, you showed us a kitten, a ball of grey in your dark hands. We circled you. We cooed. We tried to touch it, but you yanked it away, held it to your chest. *It misses its mother*, you said and delivered it back to its litter.

VI.

Our parents said you hanged yourself. This was years later when we got married and we had children and we lived in other parts of the world. We weren't surprised. We nodded. But I bet we thought about our cruelty and shrunk into ourselves.

I can't shake this image though: the time you stole holy water and dumped it over your head, the dripping glee on your face, your grin a half moon, your teeth blinding white. I remember that, my head hanging low, wishing forgiveness in the form of rain.

• ISSUE 50, 2015 •

I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess
that's what they were,

by Diane Seuss

crackheads, I exiled them is what I did, from my son's basement apartment, they'd come to feast off of what was left of him, his entrails I guess, he'd moved into that apartment with such high hopes even though it was on the bottom floor, and no light, or very little light, there was a girlfriend, she moved in with her two dogs and then they picked up a stray pit bull they named Svetlana, they were into all things Russian, and the girlfriend didn't believe in housetraining dogs, like making them go outside in the yard was hurting their feelings or something, well she'd moved out, took the few things of value and left behind a concrete floor full of dog shit, and he, my son, I gave birth to him in 1985, it was a hard labor in a small town hospital and they had to cut me open, don't knock me out I yelled, after all this I want to be awake when you lift out the kid, and I was, I was awake and they lifted him out, his skin painted with blood, his hands looked too large for his body, and he spread them out, and his arms, well, all babies wail so he wailed, and I hoisted those two dealers, I excised them, I pulled them like two bad teeth, and I didn't have to use my hands, the smoke from the crack draped in their hair like cobwebs, I knocked on that black metal door, I knocked and they answered like it was their house, half-smiling like I was selling Girl Scout cookies, but what the hell they were fucked up, they didn't know any better, and with my voice alone, with my eyes that I intentionally made keen like a hawk's, I ordered them out, I threw their stuff out in the yard, in the rain, dog shit was everywhere, like pinecones or apples in an abandoned orchard at the end of summer, they rode away on bikes like children, like my sister and me when we were kids after a big

storm and the drains were clogged on the streets so the water was up to our knees, riding our bikes through that water which must have been full of shit, my son, he was nowhere to be found, I didn't see him until, what was it, later that night or the next day, he showed up at my house and put his hands on me, he didn't hurt me but it was moving in that direction, and something in me rose up, like a deer I once saw that stood up on its back legs and roared, I ex-communicated him, hoisted him, my will by then was like a jackhammer or a God, or one of those queens who wears a dress made of stone, so don't ask for my touch is what I'm saying, don't ask me to now walk among the people.

• ISSUE 54, 2017 •

Wings

by Daisy Hernández

It is the early 1980s, the start of the civil war in El Salvador, and Maira is a child of the raindrops that come early in the summer. Thousands of raindrops. Maybe millions. *Las lluvias*. Desperate raindrops that smash into the mountains and the treetops, prod the soil, and also the pebbles and *flores*, the earth forced into a river moving downward.

Maira lives in the mountains, in a village named for flowers, in a house made of mud bricks with her grandmother and younger sister and two uncles and a grandfather she does not like. All around her is the forest and further off, the fields of café. The raindrops arrive in May, and Maira, who is not yet eight years old, slips off her handmade dress and barefoot chases her sister into a clearing outside their home. In the rain, the girls wearing only panties run in circles.

Maira tells me now how happy she was back then. She did not have toys, not the way we think of *juguetes* here in Southern California where she lives now, but she had the *lluvias* and her baby sister, and afterwards, she had the second rain when the raindrops courted magic and turned into wings.

It is easy to make up this part of the story, and I find myself wanting to believe that in El Salvador when Maira was a child the raindrops stretched in the cocoon of hydrogen molecules and dreamt of wings, translucent veins, fluttering.

But what Maira says is true.

She did witness a second rain—that time in El Salvador and so many countries in Latin America and also in Texas, when 30 or 40 minutes after the early summer rains, the sky is suffused with the *zompopos de mayo*, the leafcutter ants. The *zompopos* fly in search of love, all of them virgins with wings almost too large for their heads. They find each

other in that moist sky of El Salvador's early summers and make what I imagine is a furious and rushed love.

Picture Maira sitting on the wet earth. How the wings of the *zompopos de mayo* kiss her black hair and her dark eyelashes, her elbows and toes and also her baby sister next to her. Everywhere Maira looks—in front of her, behind her, to the side—the wings hover, hundreds or thousands of tiny virgin queens and their beloveds until Maira reaches out and plucks one from the air. A large queen ant with flapping wings.

See Maira's hands: the knuckles, the fingertips, the blank slates of her palms. Holding the insect, Maira catches the wings. She tugs once, maybe twice, finally plucks the wings from the leafcutter ant and drops the queen *zompopo* to the ground. Dismembered, forgotten. Maira snatches another *zompopo* from the air. Her baby sister does the same. They spend entire afternoons like this, each girl tugging at the sky, rich with the quivering of a thousand wings.

The word in Spanish for wing (*ala*) is one letter away from the word for soul (*alma*). *Ala y alma*, the sister words so close in sound to the divine, to Allah.

Ala y alma. The words Maira and her baby sister need when the ground trembles not with raindrops but with the boots of military men. Girls like Maira and her baby sister would feel the earth shake and know it was time to grow wings themselves. Off they flew into the woods with Maira guiding her younger sister, the two of them dashing behind bushes, squeezing under tree branches, anywhere that leaves and twigs might cover their girl faces, their arms and toes and belly buttons.

The forest hid them, but it could do nothing for the inside of Maira's ears. From where she and her sister buried themselves for hours, she heard the screams of women and children as the soldiers plucked boys and girls from their homes, dragged the little ones through the mountains to enact the horrors we would one day read in newspapers: raping the children, throwing them onto trucks, into helicopters, into mass graves, and sometimes, yes sometimes, selling the children to childless couples, making infants and toddlers and

older children, too, gifts from the mountains to military wives. *Ala y Alma.*

When the boots moved away, when the earth beneath them stopped its shivering, Maira and her baby sister would emerge from the forest, two girls in bare feet, waiting for the next storm.

• ISSUE 41, 2013 •

Imagining Foxes

by Brian Doyle

One time, many years ago, when the world and I were young, I spent a day in a tiny cedar forest with my sister and brother. This was in the marshlands of an island the first people there called Paumanok. This little cedar forest was 12 city blocks long by two blocks wide, for a total of 84 acres, and there was a roaring highway at the northern end, and a seriously busy artery road at the southern end, but when you were in Tackapausha Preserve you were, no kidding, deep in the woods, and you couldn't hear cars and sirens and radios no matter how hard you tried. We tried hard, my kid brother and I; we sat silently for probably the longest time we ever had, up to that point, but our sister was right, and we *were* deep in the wild.

We saw woodpeckers and an owl and *lots* of warblers—this was spring, and there were more warblers than there were taxicabs on Fifth Avenue. We saw what we thought was a possum, but which may have been a squirrel with a glandular problem. We saw muskrats in the two little ponds. We saw a hummingbird, or one of us *said* he saw a hummingbird, but this was the brother who claimed that saints and angels talked to him in the attic, so I am not sure we saw a hummingbird, technically. We did not see deer, although we did see mats of grass, which sure looked like places where deer would nap, like uncles after big meals, sprawled on their sides with their vests unbuttoned, snoring like heroes. We saw holes among the roots of the white cedars, which were so clearly the dens of animals like foxes and weasels and badgers that one of us looked for mail addressed to them outside their doors. We saw scratch marks in the bark of trees that one of us was sure were made by bears, although our sister said she was not sure there were bears registered in the Seaford School District, not

to mention badgers either.

We saw many other amazing small things that are not small, and we wandered so thoroughly and so energetically all afternoon, that my kid brother and I slept all the way home in the back seat of the car with our mouths hanging open like trout or puppies, sleeping so soundly that we both drooled on the Naugahyde seat, and our sister had to mop up after us with the beach towel she always carried in the trunk for just such droolery, but my point here is not what we saw, or even the excellence of gentle patient generous older sisters; it's about what we did not see. We did not see a fox. I can assure you we did not see a fox. I could trot out my brother and sister today to testify that we did not see a fox. With all my mature and adult and reasonable and sensible old heart, I bet there were zero foxes then resident in Tackapausha Preserve, between Sunrise Highway and Merrick Road, in the county of Nassau, in the great state of New York. But I tell you we *smelled* Old Reynard, his scent of old blood and new honey, and we heard his sharp cough and bark, and if you looked just right you could see his wry paw prints in the dust by his den, and if we never take our kids to the little strips of forests, the tiny shards of beaches, the ragged forgotten corner thickets with beer bottles glinting in the duff, they'll never even *imagine* a fox, and what kind of world is that, where kids don't imagine foxes? We spend so much time mourning and battling for a world where kids can *see* foxes that we forget you don't have to see foxes. You have to imagine them, though. If you stop imagining them then they are all dead, and what kind of world is that, where all the foxes are dead?

• ISSUE 58, 2018 •

Women These Days

by Amy Butcher

[Compiled and arranged by searching “woman + [verb]” (walking) in national news outlets over the 12 months of 2017]

An Ohio woman was shot dead while cooking Thanksgiving dinner; witnesses report that at the time of the shooting, she was standing at a kitchen table, preparing macaroni and cheese. The body of a North Carolina woman was found in a shopping center parking lot at dawn. A Texas woman was grabbed from behind and attacked in a “bear hug” after finishing several laps at the Austin High School track. A California woman was found dead and stuffed in a trash bag on a sidewalk. A Pennsylvania woman was found dead in the suspect’s grandmother’s home. A Michigan woman was groped and urinated on while shopping in Kohl’s; a breast cancer survivor who had recently undergone a double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, she was shopping for new bras when Troy Police say the assailant attacked her, urinating on her back and into her incisions, which were still healing. An 18-year-old Pennsylvania teen was shot in the head several hours after her high school graduation by a white male while merging into traffic 10 miles from her home and mine. A Michigan woman walked into a hospital and reported to nurses that she’d been sexually assaulted, beaten with brass knuckles, imprisoned for three days and transported to have sex with a man for money; the woman reported that she thought the man was a friend. Police would later describe hers as some of the worst bruising they’d ever seen.

A woman in her 50s was knocked to the ground, dragged into a field and raped in populated Rosental Park; during the assault, she was kicked and punched so hard in her face that she had to undergo

emergency surgery, and police responded to the crime by telling a local newspaper that women should reduce their personal freedoms by jogging in pairs rather than assume they will be protected. A 63-year-old woman was found dead in her bedroom at 11 a.m.; police report her head was bashed in and her husband, who had bite marks on his hand, told a neighbor, "I know I'm going to jail." A 33-year-old woman was on her way to work when a man pushed her into oncoming traffic, sending her sprawling headfirst into the road as a bus was heading towards her; the driver, traveling at about 12 mph, swerved at the last second, narrowly missing the victim's head as she lay inches from the bus' wheels. A woman out for a walk was forced into a car by a man with a Caribbean-sounding accent; he drove her to a secluded parking lot at gunpoint and then sexually assaulted her. A woman was thrown to the ground and kicked by two men in a parking lot. A 22-year-old girl from my hometown was murdered by strangulation and blunt force trauma one week after transferring to Temple University; she was moved to three separate locations via Lyft first in a blue plastic storage container and then a duffel bag before police identified her attacker, a 29-year-old male who was found cleaning blood from his apartment, his cousin later testified.

Police are still searching for the suspected rapist. Police are still searching for the suspected murderer. Police are still searching for the suspected assailants. The suspect is reported to be a tan, white male in his mid-50s with no facial hair. The suspect was last seen shirtless and in work boots with shorts. The suspect is between 25 and 35 and was wearing grey knee-length trousers and a blue-green checkered shirt. The suspect drives an older model small car that is dark green or maybe blue. The suspect denies ever seeing the victim before. The suspect denies being at the bridge at the time of her murder. The suspect alleges he was at the mall at the time of the shooting. The suspect denies being in the park that morning. The suspect reports he was grocery shopping at the time of the murder. The suspect remains at large. Police ask for anyone with information about the suspect to come forward.

I hate feminists, he says to me. *The love of my life. I hate that you count*

yourself among them. A bunch of angry women who hate men. You're hurting an entire gender.

• ISSUE 57, 2018 •

Forgetting

by Abigail Thomas

You know how you find yourself in the kitchen and you can't remember what you're doing there so maybe you put your hands on the cold sink and look out the window but it doesn't help? What works is to go back to the living room, sit down again on the chair you got up from, then retrace your steps back to the kitchen and somewhere in the hall you remember oh! Cheetos! Of course! Then there are the times you get in the car to go somewhere and even before you put the key in the ignition you get this funny physical feeling, and it means you're forgetting something. Amazing! Where does it come from? What part of our body remembers we are forgetting something? I love it! Maybe you forgot to put water down for the dogs. You left your wallet on the mantel. You didn't bring your passport, checkbook, credit card, birthday present for the party. You can't proceed until it comes back to you, but it almost always does.

But now how about dying? Dying is no longer a never or even a when, but a how, because maybe you're 75, like me. What if I get that funny feeling just before I make my final exit? Then what if I have to come back, because if I've forgotten something, it means I'm not done, and I don't want to return, at least not as a human being. I'd rather be a tree, or a bunch of kudzu, or even a moth. I'd rather be a school of fish. "A whole school?" I can hear my sister asking. "Why not just one fish?" Because one fish in a school is the same as the whole school, but different, and I want to know what that feels like. Plus I love the way they swim in gestures.

• ISSUE 46, 2014 •

Poster Children

by Sandra Gail Lambert

1.

We're in single file, led by an American flag with stars in the shape of a wheelchair, and headed to the convention hotel that I still think we're going to picket. I can't keep up. Someone steps behind me and pushes. I'm jealous of Eleanor on her scooter. We arrive and the driveways are blocked by police and hotel security. I wonder where it is we're going to picket. Everyone starts moving fast. A police van screeches to an angled stop in front of me. The man pushing my wheelchair jumps me over a curb and steps back. I whip around, and my footrests bump into a waiting police officer. "Excuse me," I say automatically. I move to the left. He does as well. There's a shout beyond us. The police officer and I look toward the front of the hotel. Some people are being handcuffed, but a bunch of us have made it through. I see Eleanor headed for the front door. Her scooter must be on its power-surge setting because her hair is blown back by the speed. My cop goes after them. He leaves the way open, and I know I have to follow Eleanor. I grip my wheels and lunge forward. I feel wind in my hair.

2.

Eleanor had called to say the ADAPT action was happening, and I should drive the two hours to join them. ADAPT is a group of disability rights activists. Eleanor said the plan was to picket a nursing home convention, disrupt a bunch of CEOs using their monopoly on Medicare funding to guzzle poolside parasoled drinks. I found the Orlando hotel where ADAPT was staying. The lobby glittered with chandeliers as if to greet heads of state. Under the glow were 200 people in wheelchairs. Electric models with space-age controls

scurried past hospital clunkers. Some were manuals exactly like mine. There were electric scooters of all sorts. People moved themselves all sorts of ways. Palms leaned on a pad, mouths moved a stick, gloved hands gripped wheels, fingers clutched a bar, elbows shoved against a plate, or maybe someone was pushing the wheelchair, but they were all moving. A grizzled, sullen, toothless old man with what hair he had left pulled back into a grey string of a ponytail drooled without shame. He wore the same red "Free Our People" T-shirt that Eleanor did. "We sprung him from a nursing home and into home care just before they killed him," she said. "He's our poster child." We laughed. She and I both had polio young and were once the adorable girl type of poster child. A bull-horned shout told us to line-up.

3.

Our cell is bright. Fluorescent tubes hang from the ceiling. They and the cameras stay on all night. The bunks are a freshly painted yellow. The vinyl mattresses are green, and the toilet in the corner is a silvered chrome. The blankets are shades of gray. So are the sheets. We are all in blue, the guards in beige, and the nurse in white. Jennifer's wheelchair is Day-Glo pink.

Caroline is telling her jailers how to touch her, how to put her in bed. Her body is small. Her chest bone is large and bowed. She has movie-star eyes, and her arms make delicate gestures. I'm watching from the next bunk.

"Don't lift me by my arms or shoulders. Reach around my middle and then under my rear end." Her fingers point around her body to emphasize her instructions.

The guards shift this way and that to search for a less awkward angle. Their legs set in place, and Caroline's body disappears into their arms as they reach over her wheelchair with great care and lift. They step to the bed and lay her down. From behind them, I hear her.

"On my side," she says. "I need pillows to brace my legs."

"No pillows in jail," one of them states and then folds a blanket and holds it up.

"That will work." Caroline's voice reaches out of the sheets. "Put that one between my legs and get another for behind my knees."

The rest of her instructions are quiet and practiced. The guards bend lower over her bed.

“I’ll need to be re-positioned later.”

The women cover her with a blanket and turn toward me to leave. Their faces, one brown and one white, are wide open with emotion. Not pity or disgust or resentment—I can recognize those. This is less familiar.

• ISSUE 39, 2012 •

Letter to a Future Lover

by Ander Monson

You were my birthday present; you came to the door—no one else was home; you said “let’s celebrate.” We dropped acid and went to the friend with the nocturnal monkey-like animal and made love for hours. I fell totally, naively in love, so when you took me home in the morning I cried. I thought—but did not say—how could you walk away from perfect love? —Inscribed in Gary Snyder’s Turtle Island

Handwritten, it goes without saying, this inscription to an unnamed lover goes on for three pages before arriving at a final sorrow at the lover’s loss: “today we are with different lovers” but no regrets. Was it ever sent? Ever read? One thing is sure: It was inscribed and meant. Such passion cannot be shrugged off until it can. I found the book in Casa de los Niños on Prince and Mountain, a thrift shop stuffed with this stuff, the stuffing escaping the chewed-on animals packed in the discount bin. Take six for a buck. Doll heads are free. They stare at your future, our future, maybe, lover, if we ever come together, if we’re ever more than ink and paper, chiaroscuro, one transparency transposed upon another.

Dear future lover, every time it feels like forever when it’s new: bright colors, fabric softener, calliopes that were once terrifying softening into daylight as it fades. You know, your lovers surely number more than mine; that’s fine, but when I fall, it’s Ditch Witch hitting electric line, the whole world alive and lit in amperes for a moment. It might be gone again a nanosecond later, the body aching with or for or from the jolt; and perhaps it’s fever dream; and who cares where it comes from as long as it’s fast and seems like it might last until we’re rusting into dust. We are always dying for the future.

Otherwise it couldn't ever come. That it might split ever's seams apart, that it might bring down the lights until forever's in the mirror, and the book is given up for thrift: it doesn't matter. Maybe this book was never sent. I can imagine that, an inscription toward the future. Maybe the lover's dead. Maybe the lover's dead. Maybe we all are like those who had their laughs recorded into tracks for television shows years before, who continue to laugh now a lifetime a lifeline a phone-a-friend later, disembodied, at jokes that are no longer funny. Perhaps they never were.

We are all in wires eventually, reduced to what we said, or didn't say, and what we wrote or didn't write, whom we loved or didn't love, or loved and lost and never told it except writing in or to a book. We are all discarded, discordant, disobedient, and so I salute your bravery, book-inscriber. Your heart is big enough for both of us, so that there is no room for mockery in me. Anyone willing to strip themselves this bare this fast this way deserves our breathlessness and our hearts' attention. Let us spend an hour, then longer, in contemplation. If you open, open all the way, or as much as you can bear, or else there's nothing here at all.

The inscription goes on to quote from Duras's *The Lover*, then "I cried when I was with you this time more than twenty years later...it was the reason for life and yet I knew it would end."

A codex is a door, future lover. You can put whatever through it for a reader you imagine coming to your words in a day, a decade, a daze of centuries, entries in a future book. Codices have histories. They are leafed, spined, embodied, read by future lovers I imagine in bodices in just this kind of light at night. The future is a mystery, lover, a memory. The scent of wisteria coming up from somewhere.

Or, a codex is a hole through which we might not communicate, but instead be transformed entirely, through which we might descend without notice or equipment and not want or be able to return.

• ISSUE 56, 2017 •

The Birthday Place

by Rebecca McClanahan

“You know, Mother, today is my birthday.” I have reported this three times in the past hour. Across the room, on the sofa where she leans beside my father, Mother smiles.

“That’s wonderful, dear.” The *dear* is generic, a term she employs when she forgets who I am. “And where is your birthday place?”

“You mean where I was born, Mother?”

She shakes her head and frowns in frustration. “The place where you *can have* your birthday.”

Experts say if you listen carefully, dementia patients actually make sense. There is logic beneath their words, a logic of feeling. You’d think after four years of caregiving I would have cracked the code, but it’s still a struggle to follow where she leads.

“That’s the great thing about birthdays,” I say. “You can take them with you anywhere.”

This perks her up. “Anywhere? Well, that’s amazing.”

“You’re right, Mother.”

This repetition of *Mother* is becoming tiresome. It is bad form, in dialogue scenes between intimates, for speakers to keep addressing each other by name. I teach this to my writing students: There is an assumed knowledge between the two, I say; both know who they are in relation to the other.

But this is not the case in scenes with my mother. The knowledge I once assumed—that she knows who I am—exists in a faraway world. A world I am homesick for, that I grieve. I want my mother back, in relation to me. Thus, the repetition of *Mother*.

On good days, she connects the dots: my name to my face. The aging face of this woman sitting across from her, steadying her down the

hall, toweling her dry after a bath. In her best moments, all the dots connect: my name, to my face, to *my daughter*. Second daughter. Third, if you count Baby Sylvia, who died the year before I was born.

“Rebecca was not a replacement child,” Mother once wrote for a memoir class assignment, “although I worry that she thought she was.” It’s true, I did believe, in my darkest moments, that I was conceived to fill the place of a girl who would have been stronger than I, kinder, more patient. It took years to bury the thought, but this morning, on the anniversary of my birth, it dug itself up, and I found myself imagining what Sylvia would have done if she’d been the caregiver. Certainly she wouldn’t have hidden out in my parents’ bathroom, as I did that first year, to fume and stomp and cry out to the heavens to take them, take them both now, because I can’t do this, I am not up to the task. And Sylvia wouldn’t have broken down in front of them—how could I have done this?—when exhaustion broke into words I wish I could take back.

Mother leans forward on the sofa. “If I’d known,” she says, “I would have gotten you something. I may have a card somewhere. Where did you say you were born?”

“Indiana.”

“Really. What town?”

“Lafayette. Lafayette, Indiana.”

“Why, I’ve been to Lafayette! What a coincidence! Paul,” she says, nudging my father’s arm. “This girl knows Lafayette!”

“Home Hospital,” I say. “That’s what it was called.”

At the name of the hospital, recognition flickers across her eyes. I want to hear the whole story, as she always told it. How, the morning of what would become my birthday, she canned tomatoes, fed laundry through the wringer washer and hung it on the line, and, when the pains came, corralled Jenny and Tom into the farmhouse to wait for Dad to return from the livestock auction. “We had no phone, you know,” she had told me. “I thought he’d never get back. I didn’t think we would make it.” And then, my favorite part: “You were an easy birth. The easiest I ever had.”

She looks across the room at the birthday girl, studying me hard. But

nothing ignites in her eyes. "Home Hospital!" she says. She lifts her hands to her cheeks and shakes her head in astonishment. "I just can't get over it."

"Me neither, Mother," I say. "I mean, what are the odds?" That out of all the birthday places in the world, a mother and her daughter happened to arrive at the same one. At the very same moment. And that the daughter can carry that birthday with her wherever she goes, for the rest of her life. "Truly amazing," I say.

• ISSUE 37, 2011 •

A Most Dangerous Game

by Alexis Wiggins

You read the story in Mr. Trebor's class and guessed the ending before you got there. You remember the teacher's monotone voice almost made excited by the finale: the man hunts other *men*. You were bored. You chewed gum in your 13-year-old mouth and drew on your desk as Mr. Trebor read aloud.

That same year you and Marnie bought tight Lycra dresses at The Limited, bright tropical flowers blooming over your non-existent breasts. When your mother picked you up, Marnie's mom turned to her. "You have to *see* what the girls bought today," she said in a sing-songy voice that tried to be like bluebirds but was more like tin cans on pavement.

You tried on that dress at home in your bedroom, walked around in your mother's high-heels and a stuffed bra, practicing. Practicing for a future that couldn't come any sooner.

When it came, you thought: only this? You thought maybe there was more. More than just grabbing each other in someone's parents' guest bedroom while the party thumped downstairs like a weak heartbeat.

And then you were out on your own, a big girl now. You were 18, but you felt 30. You worked a night job, paid rent, and kept picking men up like stray cats. Or lint.

Antonio, a college boy who worked nights with you, let it be known with his wicked brown eyes that he wanted you. You let him think it might just happen, though you knew it never would. You let him walk you home some nights after work, let him come all the way to your apartment door and then left him there like a sweet fool. His wicked gazes at work made you flush, like catching glimpses of yourself in the Lycra dress from The Limited, wobbling back and forth

in front of the full-length mirror.

One night in the basement warehouse, Antonio beckoned you with a finger: "Come here," it said coyly.

You brushed him off, had work to do, but he insisted, pulled you by the hand—surprisingly soft—into a windowless room with a metal door that banged shut.

"There's nothing in here," you said, bored.

"Yes there is," he said, pointing to a dark corner. Your eyes grew accustomed to the low light, and you saw what was there: an old, stained sink. And before you could laugh at how dumb he was being, he put both hands on your shoulders, turned you around to face him, and breathed into your face, "Someday I'm gonna rape somebody." He paused, waiting for you to get it. "Maybe it'll be you."

You saw in his drill-bit eyes he wasn't kidding.

You spun out of there as if it were all a big, stupid joke. But inside you were trembling.

On the short walk home that night, you ran. You locked your apartment door with a loud thwack, and took the phone off the hook. Crawling onto the old sofa in the dark, you remembered that story from Mr. Trebor's eighth-grade class. Only now, watching headlights flash across the bare wall, did you realize that you had been wrong about the ending.

It wasn't men who were hunted.

And you felt lighter fluid flames of anger rise in you at the teacher who taught the wrong lesson. Or at the girl in the back row, in her cheap dress and scuffed heels, drawing hearts around boys' names, hoping.

• ISSUE 49, 2015 •

Mother's Tongue

by Samuel Autman

As the teenager stepped through the first set of automatic doors at Target, I was entering from the parking lot. For a few seconds we stood in the foyer area between the sets of double doors.

"Aren't you? Aren't you?" he asked, his lips quivering with joyful anticipation.

In the mid 1990s, the sight of a 6-foot-4, 210-pound black man in Salt Lake City caused many strange reactions. His, however, mimicked the excitement of recognizing someone he had hoped was a famous athlete. The dribbling motion his downward palms made gave it away. "Whoever you think I am, I am not," I sighed. "I don't play for anybody's basketball team."

This was a phrase I had on a save/get key in my brain. I dreamed instead of someone stopping me on the streets and saying, "Aren't you that guy who does those great front-page articles for *The Salt Lake Tribune*?" I would have gladly owned that kind of recognition.

Between the ages of nine and 16, my shoe size and my age corresponded. Neighborhood kids called me "feets."

In the summer of 1980, right before I turned 14, I stretched up to a gangly six feet. The world expected this body to have a certain agility with a basketball.

I didn't.

For weeks my Uncle Tan and I stood outside on the black tar playground at Scullin Elementary School and practiced stealing, dribbling and slam dunking an orange ball. "Now, let's me show you how to do this *again*," he would say over and over.

I couldn't hide my ambivalence. Eventually we agreed to drop these practice sessions. My relief was enormous.

Neither my uncle nor anyone else could undo my mother's incantations.

"Any fool can dribble a damned ball! If you break your leg, then what? You take your ass to school. With your mind you can become a genius. Forget a damned ball."

I hated these long verbal rants. For 30 years as a schoolteacher in the St. Louis Public Schools, she saw hoards of young boys, often without fathers in the home, sidelined when basketball, football and baseball dreams evaporated. Life's path hadn't provided those boys with many options. Too many of them wound up incarcerated or in cemeteries early.

"I'll tell you one thing, when you turn 18 you've got two choices," my mother said. "You're either going into the Army or you're going to college, but you're gonna get your ass out of my house."

I knew she meant it. Our parents split when my sister and I were small children. With no daddy in the picture, my mother's tongue fathered me.

By the time I got onto the University of Missouri's campus where I studied journalism and fell in love with Victorian literature, I had developed a retort for the basketball question, "Do you play miniature golf?"

And it took me 13 years of working as a newspaper writer and another 10 years of teaching college before I realized something.

My mother was right.

• ISSUE 44, 2013 •

Wide Open Spaces

by Kathryn Miller

The policewoman, let's call her Ann Marie, doesn't stop talking as she shows me the crime scene photographs of the woman who shot me when I was seven years old. This is the first time I've seen the photos of her suicide, though I was seven a long time ago. Twenty-four years.

These are my scars: two bullet holes on my left arm; one bullet hole on my left breast alongside my nipple; one long, badly healed incision down the center of my stomach; one incision the shape of an x next to my left breast where they inserted a tube in my collapsed lung so I could breathe. And hidden beneath my pale, freckled skin, my blue eyes, my brown hair: a bullet I carry in my back next to my spine.

I will have them, my five scars, my one bullet, until I really die, not almost die, or was supposed to die, like that day. *If you drew a line from where the bullet went in, to where it ended up, it should've gone straight through her heart. We don't know why it didn't.* That's what the surgeon said to my waiting parents. I've imagined that diagram of my death often, the bullet's path drawn on white paper, my heart exploding in a pencil's gray lines.

Mostly I don't mind them, my five scars, my one bullet, because minding them doesn't do anything. It doesn't make them go anywhere. But sometimes, I can't help wishing I didn't have them. That I could run my hand along a smooth, uninterrupted stomach. That a stranger didn't try to kill me for no reason at all.

These are the other things she did that day: set off a bomb in an elementary school that didn't explode trying to kill her two nephews; locked two children whom she babysat and their mother in a basement and lit the house on fire; shot five other kids she didn't know in my elementary school, killing one boy, eight years old; held

hostage a young man home for the summer from college and shot him.

In the police station, Ann Marie and I sit under fluorescent lighting in an overly air-conditioned conference room done in shades of blue. Her talking is nervous chatter of the bubbly, meaningless sort. The sort designed to fill awkward spaces. Ann Marie seems afraid that seeing the photos will make me cry and keeps talking, hoping to keep it from happening. I'm afraid of crying too. I want to ask her to please be quiet, to let me have this moment to myself, but I don't.

And so as she talks and talks, I mostly don't listen. I look at the square, yellowed photographs of the woman, after she committed suicide, shot herself in her mouth. They are in a binder, in plastic sleeves, four to a page, numbered. She's in a bedroom of the house where she held the young man hostage. She's lying on her stomach on lime green, shag carpeting. Next to her is a twin bed neatly made with frilly cream bedding that looks like a wedding cake. There are clothes and books strewn about the floor and a pair of white patent leather shoes. Her face rests on its side on her right arm. Her left arm is pulled in at an angle by her cheek. She's wearing yellow sweatpants cut off just past her knees and an off-white short-sleeved t-shirt and black slip on shoes with rubber soles. Her lips are slightly parted. Blood pools behind her head and is splattered on her pale face, her arms, her fingertips. The slender hand she used to shoot me and the other children and the young man, and then finally herself, is extended. And though her hand is empty—no longer holding a gun—her trigger finger is bent. Her eyes now emptied of their rage are not like I remember at all. They are blank. A wide open space.

• ISSUE 53, 2016 •

Blood; Quantum

by Danielle Geller

A few days before I turned three years old, my mother and my father packed my younger sister, my cat, and me into a car to drive from Florida to Window Rock, Arizona, to visit my mother's family on the reservation, and to register me and my sister with the Navajo Nation. The cat jumped out of the car somewhere in Texas, and my father was bitten on the leg by a brown recluse spider, and he was arrested on an old warrant and did a stint in jail, but we made it to the reservation otherwise intact. My few memories of that visit have been pieced together from stories I've been told, but I do have two lasting artifacts from our only trip home: a photograph of my mother, my grandfather, her two brothers, and me, standing in the yard behind my mother's childhood home, and my Certificate of Indian Blood.

What the certificate proves is that I have 1/2 degree Navajo Indian blood, and my Census Roll Number is 636,234. If the records were public information, you could find my name on page 557 of the Southern Navajo Indian Census Roll, and below it, my sister's. The only thing the Census Roll got wrong was my birthdate: not July 28th but the 29th, though it's unclear if the mistake was the technician's or my mother's.

What the certificate proves is almost nothing.

Nearly two years later, on May 3, 1991, Florida's Office of Vital Statistics issued me a new birth certificate, 40 days after the courts granted my white grandmother legal custody of my sister and me. It wasn't much of a court battle—my parents, separated and alcoholics both, agreed to surrender their parental rights before the case ever saw a judge. The only thing Florida's vital statistic clerk got wrong was my name: not Danielle April Geller but Danielle Geller, though I

know for certain it was my grandmother who forgot the name my mother gave me.

When people asked me, over the years, if I had a secret Indian name, I should have given them my middle: April, T'ááchil, when wind blows life back into the desert.

But a few years after the adoption, my grandmother moved us to a little town called Yoe, in central Pennsylvania, the whitest place on earth. My mother was hundreds of miles away, and her family even farther.

I did not know my blood clans; I did not know my family, not by name or by sight or by laugh; I did not know their traditions; I did not know their language; I did not know what portion of history to call my own.

But once, as I sat in the empty hallway of my middle school, an older man stopped in front of me and said: Are you Native American? I'd bet anything you are. When I said yes, he just smiled and moved on. And once, when I was 15 and cleaning tables at Hardee's, a white-haired man in a baseball cap looked up from his biscuits and gravy and said hello in my mother's language, in words I didn't recognize. I stared at him in confusion until he told me he had worked on the reservation and married a Navajo woman many years back. And once, when I was 16 and cleaning the snow off my grandmother's car, my Hopi neighbor walked down the driveway and announced: You must be a Navajo woman. Weeks later, as he showed me through his two-bedroom apartment, he confided that he had always wanted an Indian mother for his sons. And once, when I told the Mexican man on the bus that I was not Latina but Native American, he asked me to what degree, and when I said half, he said: Good. That means the blood isn't too thick. But once, when I came home with a barbell through my tongue and a ring through my nose, my white grandmother said, in disgust, "It must be the *Indian* in you," which was always cheerlessly funny to me because I never felt Indian at all.

• ISSUE 45, 2014 •

Girl Fight

by Joey Franklin

Marty Manzoni's mother was fat. We all knew it, and we all knew better than to ever mention it, but that day in the school hall before basketball practice we were waiting for Coach to show up, and we got to talking about girls, as boys do, and someone mentioned Heather, a girl with sandy blond hair who carried her bulk around on ballerina tip-toes and told me just yesterday, above the noise of the bus, that she liked me—a girl with whom, against my better sixth-grade-judgment, I had secretly agreed to “go out.”

Marty Manzoni, whose mother we all knew was fat, had been bouncing a ball in the hallway when he turned to me, smiling.

“She’s a fat girl,” he said. “Why do you like a fat girl?” And the boys around us laughed because my secret had gotten out that day, as secrets do, and they had all been wondering the same thing.

I might have said that Heather and I rode the same bus for years, that we both liked football and sang along with Boys II Men, that we shared the kind of easy, endless conversations that later in my life I would recognize as the first signs of a good, healthy crush. I could have said I liked the idea of a girl liking me and I could have said that he was ruining it all with his questions.

Instead I chased him, as he must have known I would. I chased him down the hall and out the school’s large double doors. I chased him for Heather and for my stupid, boyish pride. But mostly I chased him for the giggling boys around us who left me no other choice, for making clear what I’d already figured out, that I couldn’t love a fat girl, that no one can love a fat girl.

Marty ran across the parking lot and onto the school’s large, green lawn, finally stopping beneath the flagpole, basketball tucked under

his arm. I stayed at the curb and watched him standing there, his chest heaving, and then I opened my mouth and said the only thing a sixth-grade boy could say in a moment like that. And before the words —“Not as fat as your mom!”—left my mouth I knew that insult would hang in the air, as insults do, and make the other boys gasp and shudder as it slowly settled into the ground around us.

Marty stood by the flagpole. Boys who'd spilled out of the double doors to watch chuckled. I turned, still breathing hard myself, and rejoined my teammates as if nothing had happened at all, as if my girlfriend wasn't fat, and I hadn't just breached some sacred boys' club boundary. But Marty inched forward to the edge of the asphalt and lifted the basketball. It hit me on the ear so hard I fell to the ground, my head ringing, and I cried louder than I have ever cried anywhere—an indignant, fearful cry, a where-is-my-mother-cry—and the boys around me backed away, as if afraid they might catch something.

Then Coach pulled up in his car and stepped out, looked at me sprawled and bawling on the concrete, and then at Marty who walked past us both, picked up his basketball, and disappeared into the school. The other boys followed Marty in a mute procession past my body, and Coach held the door open to follow behind them. “Get up,” he said in a voice that meant, “You're acting like a girl.”

I lay on the ground, half hoping that Heather might drive up with her mom and see me on the ground and screech to a halt, jump out of the car and come kneel at my side and take my head in her arms; and the other half of me was hoping she would never come to school again, that I might die right there on the asphalt, and this story along with me.

• ISSUE 33, 2010 •

White Lies

by Erin Murphy

Arpi, a Lebanese girl who pronounced *ask* as *ax* no matter how many times the teacher corrected her, must have been delighted by the arrival of Connie, the new girl in our fifth grade class. Connie was albino, exceptionally white even by the ultra-Caucasian standards of our southern suburb. Only her eyelids had color: mouse-nose pink, framed by moth-white lashes and brows.

We had been taught that there was no comparative or superlative for *different*. Things were either different or the same, the teacher said. Likewise for *perfect*—something was either perfect or not. But surely Arpi thought of Connie as *more different* than herself. Arpi may have had a name that sounded all too close to Alpo, a brand of dog food, but at least she had a family whose skin and hair and eyes looked like hers. Connie, by comparison, was alone in her difference. She was, perhaps, *most different*. *Differentest*.

This was confirmed by the ridicule, which was immediate and unrelenting: *Casper*, *Chalk Face*, *Q-Tip*. Connie, whose shoulders hunched in a permanent parenthesis, pretended not to hear the names or the taunting questions: *What'd ya do, take a bath in bleach? Who's your boyfriend—Frosty the Snowman?* She sat in the front of the classroom, and if she felt the boys plucking white hairs from her scalp, she didn't react. The teacher, who was serving the last nine months of a 30-year sentence in the public school system, spent the bulk of each day perusing magazines and L.L. Bean catalogs in the back of the room. As far as I know, she never intervened.

All of this changed in mid-October when Connie's father got a job at a candy factory, news Connie announced tentatively one rainy day during indoor recess.

Can he get us candy?

Yes.

Any kind? As much as we want? For free?

Yes, yes, yes.

And so the daily ritual began. Kids placed orders for Reese's Cups, Baby Ruth bars, Hubba-Bubba bubble gum. Connie kept a log of the requests in a pocket-sized notebook. The next day, she would tote a box full of candy into the classroom and distribute the promised sweets to eager hands. Overnight, Connie became the center of attention. Girls—even Marcia Miller, the first in our class to wear mascara—would beg to sit by Connie at lunch so they could update their orders.

And what about me? What was my role? Did I request my favorites—Three Musketeers and coconut-centered Mounds bars? Or did I, as I have told myself and others in the years since, refuse to contribute to such cruelty? Or, in a more likely scenario, did I dump out my loot triumphantly at home one afternoon, only to be scolded by my mother? I don't remember, my memory obscured, I'm sure, by the wishful image of myself as a precocious champion of social justice. And I don't remember if I actually witnessed—or just imagined—Connie and her mother at the 7-Eleven one day after school. They were in the candy aisle. Her mother was filling a cardboard box. And Connie, bathed in unflinching fluorescence, was curved over her notebook making small, careful check marks.

• ISSUE 48, 2015 •

I Remain Very Sorry for What I Did to the Little Black Kitten

by Jenny Bouilly

I remain very sorry for what I did to the little black kitten.

The woman who lived at the end of the cul-de-sac had a litter of cats, and she was looking for people to take them. She said that they would be dead in five days because she was going to take the unclaimed ones to the animal shelter, where they would just kill them. Although I did not have my father's permission, after school one day, I saw the woman on her porch and told her that my father said I could have one. So I picked up a little black kitten and took her home to my room with the green and yellow speckled carpeting and placed her on a bed of newspapers.

I cannot say that my treatment of her had to do with not yet knowing about tenderness and love and care, because there had been family dogs that had passed that I felt very sad for. We already had a family cat, and I had loved that cat and let it knead my tummy after school when I was younger. That cat, however, ventured outdoors, so we did not have a litter box. I was not prepared then for the little black kitten's poop, tarry and pungent and loose, or her pee that ran off the newspaper in rivulets into the carpet. My father heard her crying, and that is how he knew. He did not think we should keep it.

I went across the street to my older sister's friend's house to ask her if it was true that Nancy of Sid and Nancy had a cat that she had named Fuck You in French. She said, yes, and she told me that Fuck You in French was *FuToi*. So I too named my black kitten *FuToi*. I posed for a photo with *FuToi*. I was all dressed in black. I feel extremely sorry that I used the little black cat for an accessory to my burgeoning wannabe preteen identity.

My father, who was prepared to keep the cat, did not know that I lied when I said that a friend was going to take her in. I do not know why I said that. My mother was away, a new circumstance that we did not talk about, and I think I recognized that my father, who gave us a \$20 bill each week, for lunch and bus fare and sundries, and who bought us maxipads and pimple soap, did not really want to keep the cat, so I wanted to free him of that burden of another thing to care for.

My mother did something similar: she drove around our neighborhood and threw one of our housecats out the window. I was supposed to have been too young to have remembered, but I remembered.

And so my older sister and a friend and I went on that exact street, the scene of a previous abandonment, and I opened the door and pushed out the little cat. We drove off, but we could still hear her crying. She had jumped into the underside of the car, an act that signaled her very helplessness, her desire to stay with us. She clung to us in the only way her little baby self knew how. And because I wanted to exude a tough-girl personality, I myself got out of the car and pried her off.

I remain very sorry for what I did to that cat, and although I entertained thoughts that someone found her and treated her nicely until she got old, I know that no one did.

She had been a mere handful of preciousness. That much merely, and I had not allowed her to become more. She remains merely as green eyes, little animal feet, tiny pink toe pads, needle thin claws, the rosebud tongue, the wet pearl nose, thin iridescent ear flesh, the lightness of herself when she balanced her feet on my skin.

Last night, the catch of grief came hard and quick. It stung my bones. My three-year-old daughter walked up to me—we had not been talking about cats—and said that little cats like milk, they like to lick it from their little milk bowls.

• ISSUE 55, 2017 •

Shower Songs

by Brian Trapp

When we were 23, I gave my twin brother a shower for the last time. “Lift with your legs,” my mother always said, but I never did. My brother Danny also had an electric lift, a hydraulic crane that cradled him in the air, but I never used it. I stood over his bed, wedged my arms behind his neck and knees, and lifted his naked body to my bare chest. He weighed less than a hundred pounds.

I laid him in his shower chair, a wheeled recliner with a frame of PVC pipes and a blue mesh backing, which creaked as it received him. He was already shivering, his arms curved and his hands flexed down. His biceps were toned, little ropes. “It’s not that cold,” I said with my extra layers of fat and muscle. I was barefoot and in my boxers. I spread a towel on his bed for when he came out wet.

His bedroom was on the first floor, and six feet from his door was a bathroom with a walk-in shower. I had warmed it up with built-in floor heaters, but as I rolled Danny from carpet to tile, he was still cold. “Momma,” he chattered.

“Momma yourself,” I said. “Say ‘Brian.’” I rolled him into the shower and tested the water temp with the inside of my wrist: too hot. I adjusted the nozzle and closed the glass door behind us. Danny moaned until I aimed the stream and let the warm water rush over him.

“Momma,” he said.

“Shut up about Momma.” He was teasing me, like he did when I tried to feed him, and he shut his mouth until our mother sat down. “Momma,” like *You’re not good enough. You’re not her.*

I built a green lather with the bar of Irish Spring soap and rubbed my hands across his chest and nipples with wisps of black hair, his taut

abdomen with the Baclofen button under his skin, the small device that pumped muscle relaxers into his spine to relieve his spasticity. His belly was not yet pierced with the plastic feeding tube that would kill him five years later, when during a readjustment, a doctor poked a hole in his intestine.

I washed his hairy chicken legs, the soft flesh of his hamstring, his warped feet with their yellow, layered toenails, the skin puckered from his tube socks. I washed his splayed hands, the crook of his collarbone. I sang, "Danny Trapp is ugly...the ugliest man in the world. He'd rather love his mother...than any other girls."

My brother smiled. "I-an," he said. *Brian*.

"No," I sang. "In fact, it's you. And you smell and stink to boot."

"Eh-eh," he said. *No*. I grasped his neck and tilted him up to soap his back, sweaty and pimples from sitting in his wheelchair all day, and then I sprayed him off through the mesh. His arms were so tight that I had to jerk them loose to get inside his armpits.

Now it was time for our special song. For this, I used the loofah. His penis was matted with black pubic hair from being crushed inside his diaper. Bits of crystallized urine were caked to the hair. As I scrubbed, I started the bass line, a sort of march. I sang, "It's not gay...It's not gay...cause I'm wa-shing my bro-ther's penis."

My brother smiled again and yelled, "Ahhhhh" as his teeth chattered, a complicated heckle, a *You're such an idiot* that doubled for *It's freaking cold*.

I wetted his hair with the shower nozzle, lathered on the Johnson & Johnson No More Tears Shampoo and as I sprayed it off, I sealed my hand over his caterpillar brow, keeping the water from his eyes and mouth, so he didn't think he was drowning.

I looked at his body, the warm water rushing over him. Soon I would move three hours away. Soon I would be just a voice on the phone. Soon my brother would move to his group home, and his care would be out of our control. We were growing up. His body had scars. It had red patches of irritated skin that threatened to break down if we let them. But right then his body was pink and complete, with no holes, not yet. The water was warm and so was he.

I dropped the nozzle, and it hung by the hose. I leaned in and pressed myself to my brother, chest to chest. We did not shiver.

• ISSUE 40, 2012 •

My Cousin's Backyard

by Deborah Taffa

Leonard thinks he's a bad-ass walking behind the casino, making his way over to the party. I'm the female answer to him and his Sioux style wrapped up cool in black boots. The music pumps loud and my feet want to fly, but I stay on the earth when I see him coming. He drives a red Ford Escort with tinted windows and has a tiny water drum hanging from the rearview mirror like the kind they sell at Shush Yaz in Gallup.

They built a casino in my cousin Jess's backyard with blue-neon lights and machines making promises. Included in your neighborhood ticket: a view of the traffic coming across the bridge from Yuma, and a Kenny Rogers concert you don't have to pay to hear. All our friends come and we stand around the fire in the cool Sonoran night, laughing and talking.

They built a casino in my cousin's backyard. The government gave us neat HUD houses all in a row and we call it Easter Egg Lane with pasty pastel colors lining the street. It's ugly and we figure they want us to be happy but not too happy. I got the shell of a cool blue and no one fights in my home but my cousin has the sick pale green of envy covering his walls and she likes to get a running start when she punches him.

They built a casino in my cousin's backyard. As a little boy, Jess had ear infections and a soft fat face. I squeezed his sweaty palm in mine and thought I would always take care of him. Then he grew into an Indian Paul Bunyan and took care of me. He left once for college in Kansas on a football scholarship—but he liked to beat people off the field for practice. They said it was against the rule book and sent him home.

They built a casino in my cousin's backyard and the gamblers or drinkers may have been the ones. No one knows for sure. She was just a little girl. Coming home, crying but refusing to say who. We knew right away what was wrong. She hid under her bed for hours. I tried to hold Jess back but he bucked, his long black hair in my hands like reins, and I couldn't stop him.

They built the casino in my cousin's backyard and he went down the street with a rifle in his hand. We shouted for him to come home and sit his chubby butt down. He's still a little boy to me. He really is gentle despite his size, big hands balled and fierce dark eyes. Don't let his disposition for unhappiness scare you. He won't sit sweat with any white man and talks a lot of bullshit but underneath he's still the kid with the earache and bright crow-like gaze.

They built the casino in my cousin's backyard but he can't see it from his prison cell in Southern California. He can't see how her boyfriend rakes broken glass before parties so a game of tag can be played without the kids getting hurt. He can't see the old barrel cut in half to make a grill or guess that Isaiah has started hunting again. He can't know that we're eating dove as we stare at the blue-neon lights or that we're listening to Kenny Rogers bang on the Sonoran desert ceiling.

At least he gets his per capita check.

"When's Jess getting out?" Ray asks every time we get together. His memory is short as a marine's haircut.

Leonard arrives to distract us. He shrugs with that goofy smile and gives the official Fort Yuma handshake to everyone. He's a serious kid; I noticed when we met at Arizona Western College. We started the same Rhetoric section last week.

"We'll learn to argue like experts," I say, throwing my napkin onto the heat. We watch as the bright lipstick in the shape of my mouth catches fire on the red-hot grill. The kids yell—"Not it!"—and I imagine what I thought I'd never imagine again: something right coming from this blue-lit backyard with its star-muffled sky.

• ISSUE 54, 2017 •

Holy

by Lori Jakiela

My mother worries about my soul. She tells me so at her kitchen table, 6 a.m. We're making nut-roll, even though it's not a holiday, nothing to celebrate.

My mother believes bread rises only in the morning. I'm not good with mornings. Last night I stayed up late, reading, worrying.

"Ruining your eyes," my mother says.

Drinking.

I'm hung over.

My mother is dying.

Everything is urgent now.

My mother wants me to know things, like where she keeps the silver, how to shut off the water, how to make a decent nut-roll.

"Who will teach you when I'm dead?" she says, and pounds the dough so hard it makes death seem impossible.

This morning she wants to talk religion, something I've refused to do for years. She brushes flour off her velour pantsuit. She punches the dough like it's a face, mine.

She says, "You can't believe in nothing."

She says, "If you don't believe in anything, what is there?"

She says, "You idiot."

I clutch the coffee she's made, instant, too much cream and sugar, the way my father liked it, not me. He's dead five years. I sit in his chair. The mug I'm holding was his, Batman, the image faded from my father's hands. My mother's mug, full of lemon tea, is Robin, faded to a mask and cape and the word "Holy!"

My mother would kiss my father's bald head.

She'd say, "The dynamic duo."

“First one goes, then the other,” the funeral director said.

My dying mother wants to talk about God and faith over a pastry I’ll never master no matter how important it is for her to hand this down.

A good daughter would say the words.

A good daughter would ease things.

“It’s private,” I say about my beliefs.

My mother says, “I changed your diapers and you talk about private.”

She works the rolling pin like a threat. It was my grandmother’s, then my mother’s. Now it will come to me. The wood is worn to a honeyed shine, maple, like the trees my mother and I planted in the yard when I was a child.

My mother rolls the dough in a circle thin enough to see through, a lens to another dimension where she’s still young, a Kool cigarette between her pink-tipped fingers, smoke rings rising from her lips, messages to decode.

The skin on my mother’s hands is thin enough to see through, a lens to bone.

“I can’t,” I say about rolling dough that thin.

“Patience, jackass, patience,” my mother says.

I’m trying.

“You’ll go to hell,” she says. “You know that.”

On the table rests a blue prayer book, a tiny paperback my father carried in his pocket when he was sick, *Daily Devotions*, a Jesus fish in a circle on the cover. The fish is drawn in one line—no beginning, no end.

My mother doles out ground nuts and sugar, cinnamon and warm milk, four spoonfuls to make the sign of the cross. I spread the mixture evenly, as thin as the dough, thinner, out to the edges because it’s expensive and has to last.

Once at a wedding, my mother brought nut-roll for the cookie table. Someone else brought nut-roll too, but it wasn’t pretty, the layers and

dough too thick.

“What asshole brings a nut-roll like that?” my mother said, then put her perfect nut-rolls on a tray. She carried them table to table to be sure people knew which ones were hers.

All my life, I’ve loved my mother.

All my life, I’ve disappointed her.

I’m not the daughter I want to be. I’m not the daughter my mother wants.

“You have to believe or you’ll burn,” my mother is saying.

The nut-roll spreads between us, a black hole, a universe pocked with stars.

Once I got stoned with a scientist who tried to explain Einstein’s theory of time and space. He held up a Taco Bell burrito he’d split in two. He showed me the layers. He said time was like that, a tortilla folded in on itself, now and not now, forever, amen.

“Time is not a clock and we are not second hands,” he said, and swallowed the burrito down.

“It’s all a horrible day-mare,” Robin said to Batman.

It’s been 13 years since my mother died.

She said, “You have to try to believe.”

She said, “Do it for me.”

She said, “Where will you be when I’m gone?”

• ISSUE 58, 2018 •

Fluency

by Jamila Osman

*What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world
would split open —Muriel Rukeyser*

We learned English faster than our parents, their tongues too old to take a new shape. Our tongues still coated in milk, this meant we didn't pray like they did, and God didn't answer when we called. English teachers *tskedtskedtsked* when our words lost letters: when ending became endin became the end. English was a world we rebuilt with our small hands. I was a girl, small and dark skinned. Nothing belonged to me except what came out of this mouth of mine.

When my cousin put his _____ in my _____ or when my uncle _____ed me in the living room of my own home and the strange man grabbed my _____ last summer on the train I wanted to say stop but didn't know what language to say it in.

In Somalia we speak Somali, in America we speak English, or sometimes we speak nothing at all. All the women I know speak in whispers. When I try and tell some stories language turns to iron, heavy and rusting in the back of my throat. I bite my tongue and taste blood.

Silence was my first language. I am fluent in its cadences. I know the way quiet can pour out of a mouth like a rush of water in a season of drought.

• ISSUE 43, 2013 •

Cheekbones

by Patricia Park

A beautiful woman once told me she thought she'd do well here, in America, since no one back there appreciated her strong, distinct features.

This woman had deep-set eyes, high cheekbones, and a pronounced jaw; she looked like a younger version of my mother, right down to the over steamed dumpling of a nose. She also looked like the women I met in the capital of the North, and Kim Jong-il, they say, handpicked all of the women of Pyongyang. These women had cheekbones threatening to break the surface of their skin. I found this striking, lovely. (My brother pointed out it was probably a side effect of starvation.)

Paljaga seda, my mother once explained to me. *Destiny is strong*. A woman with strong cheekbones is bound to have a hard life. "Her husband gonna die. Her children giving her the hard time. She has to do laundry and it's so hard work."

Namnambuknyeo, or basically: North Korean women got it goin' on.

Did you know in South Korea there are now matchmaking agencies pairing North Korean women with South Korean men? It is said to be the ideal match. Again: *namnambuknyeo*.

In the late 1980s there was a North Korean female terrorist who blew up a plane. The police got to her before she could pop her cyanide pill. During her trial in Seoul, she was offered countless proposals of marriage from South Korean men.

My mother is North Korean, but no one has ever told her she's beautiful—not her father, who parted and combed her hair each morning until she was married; and, after, not my father.

Everyone in my family has high cheekbones, mine being the lowest

of the high. My sister, people tell us, looks exactly like my mother. When I show American people pictures of my sister, they say, “She is beautiful.” But she has never once been complimented by a single member of our extended family, which has always felt like an extension of Korea.

Who gets the compliments? My father and brother. “So handsome, so *meosisseo!*” they say of both.

“In America, people appreciate strong, distinct features. In South Korea, no—they don’t like it. Especially not in their women.”

In South Korea, you are required to upload your photo alongside your resume. Sometimes you must fill in your measurements. Jobs are very competitive. In Seoul there are many photo-retouching shops. There are also many (perhaps more) *seonghyeongsusul* or “aesthetic” surgery clinics. You see the ads posted all the time in subways, on the sides of buses.

When I lived in South Korea, I looked like the “before” shots in the *seonghyeongsusul* ads. The “after”: double-lidded doe-eyes; long, skinny nose; round, pale cheeks; and a V-shaped chin. Handpicked features like paint by the numbers.

I’m coming to think that North Koreans and South Koreans and ex-Koreans have different standards of beauty.

Shortly after my mother immigrated to the States, but before she was match-made to my father, she ran away from her family’s apartment on West 96th. When she answered an ad in the paper, the janitor led her to a storage closet and locked her in. He was American; she was not. Maybe that was why he found her attractive. But how could he know about *namnambuknyeo*? *Paljaga seda*? Did my mother mean to say she thought she had a hard life? But she escaped the closet with her *cheonyeoseong* intact. When she returned home, her brother threw a chair and it hit her.

Paljaga seda. But my mother says now, “Look, so much easier for women, life not so hard anymore. We have washing machines now and everything.”

If You Find a Mouse on a Glue Trap

by Suzanne Farrell Smith

If you find a mouse on a glue trap, he'll eyeball you with one black shiny eye while breathing in and out faster than you have ever seen anything breathe. You will panic, though you know the mouse is panicking harder. When your husband points out that the mouse is not alone in the furnace room, you will notice a second glue trap, stuck with the coiled carcass of a garter snake. When the mouse starts to struggle, you will tell your husband to kill it, no save it, and you will run to your phone and search "how to remove a mouse from a glue trap." Articles will tell you to use oil, so while your husband brings the glued mouse out to the back walkway so that your three young sons, in jammies and waiting with popcorn bowls for a Saturday-night Christmas movie, don't see it, you will hunt for the carafe. Outside, the mouse will sniff and stretch from the trap. Wearing snow boots over your own jammies, you will, for a moment, think he can free himself. But he won't. You will cover his body with an old tri-fold cloth diaper and douse his legs with olive oil. Your husband will say, "He's going to smell too good to predators," and you will tell the mouse, in all honesty, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry you smell delicious." You will dig under his legs with a plastic paint scraper. When his front feet clear the glue and hit the cold slate, the mouse will yank his back legs so hard you'll think he's pulling them clear off. The rear left foot will pop free. When the mouse stops reaching for a moment to rest, you and your husband will peer at his rear right leg, which is now bent like a wishbone. You will dig under it with gusto. The leg will stretch again, like nylon. You will sob and apologize to the mouse, because you knew the glue trap was left in the furnace room by your home's previous owner, but by the time you

remembered to remove it, it will have served its purpose, *her* purpose. You will tell your husband, the mouse, and yourself, that you are the kind of person who rescues stinkbugs, who found a hopping frog in the kitchen and talked it into a cup, who feeds the chipmunks and squirrels and made friends with the garter snake before finding it perished. Resolved, you will say to your husband, we have to kill the mouse, it's only humane, and he will say, "I'm not a person who kills things!" And yet here you are, two people who don't believe in glue traps and who don't kill things, kneeling on their new walkway and killing something, killing it slowly. You will free the mouse's back right leg. He will try to scurry on the mangled stick, land in a hump of snow, and spin round and round, toiling to get somewhere but too broken to go. You will collect yourself. The mouse will stop circling and lie still. You will dig a hole around him and say, "The furnace room is so warm, isn't it? That's why you found your way in there." You will hope for hypothermia. Your husband will throw out the paint scraper, the diaper, and the entire bottle of olive oil. You will retrieve from the kitchen pretzels, granola, chia seeds, and a piece of cheese and sprinkle a snack circle around the mouse. You will say goodbye, then tell him to surrender. You will return to your family and watch a holiday movie as the boys munch on popcorn and ask for more. When they are in bed, you will not take any more chances and will search the furnace room, garage, and crawlspace for more glue traps. In the morning, you will find the mouse's frozen body, graying and covered in frost, still in the snow grave, all the snacks gone except for the seeds.

• ISSUE 33, 2010 •

Lag Time

by Steven Church

It doesn't thunderstorm in California. Not like those from my memory of home. I listen for them at night when the sky half-promises, but it rarely delivers the noise I need. This I know: If you count the time it takes between the flash of a Kansas lightning bolt and the crack before the roll and peel of thunder—*If you time the lag*, Dad would say, *you can tell how close you are to the lightning*. He and I often lingered in the pre-storm, beneath a green-soup sky, dwelling in the pause between cause and effect. The neighbors too. All of us gawking at our potential demise, counting intervals between what was and what will be. And if there is an objective measure of a “split second” it would have to be close to the time between the flash of intimate lightning and the sound of its ear-stunning crack, a noise that tingles up from your toes, and ripples through your belly—a sound the body hears before the ears; or maybe it is similar to that time I sat on the porch swing at the lake, and heard the lodge dinner bell ring itself, the clapper vibrating like an ear-bone, a split second after a flash and strike to the metal tower; or the time between a blue racquetball's jump off the wall and the sound of its impact; or the gap between when your ear hears a noise in the house at night and the second your brain registers it as normal and safe (the sound of a dog dreaming, the rattle of the refrigerator) or something different, maybe dangerous (the wheezing croup cough of your baby, the jiggling of a doorknob, a simple phone call in the middle of the night); or perhaps a split second is a more subjective measurement, the kind of tiny gap where I lose myself again and again in memory. Finally untethered, I drop this loss into the space between my father and me. I try to let go of that rip in his voice over the telephone almost 20 years ago, and the interminable pause after

the words rolled out, *It's Matt. Your brother. There was an accident*, and just before the crack of the plastic phone settling into its cradle, because in that lag, that brief second between what he said and the impact of what it meant, it was possible that things would always sound the same between us.

• ISSUE 26, 2008 •

The Sloth

by Jill Christman

There is a nothingness of temperature, a point on the body's mercury where our blood feels neither hot nor cold. I remember a morning swim on the black sand eastern coast of Costa Rica four months after my 22-year-old fiancé was killed in a car accident. Walking into the sea, disembodied by grief, I felt no barriers between my skin, the air, and the water.

Later, standing under a trickle of water in the wooden outdoor shower, I heard a rustle, almost soundless, and looking up, expecting something small, I saw my first three-toed sloth. Mottled and filthy, he hung by his meat-hook claws not five feet above my head in the cecropia tree. He peered down at me, his flattened head turned backwards on his neck. Here is a fact: a sloth cannot regulate the temperature of his blood. He must live near the equator.

I thought I knew slow, but this guy, this guy was *slow*. The sound I heard was his wiry-haired blond elbow, brushed green with living algae, stirring a leaf as he reached for the next branch. Pressing my wet palms onto the rough wooden walls, I watched the sloth move in the shadows of the canopy. Still reaching. And then still reaching.

What else is this slow? Those famous creatures of slow—the snail, the tortoise—they move faster. Much. This slow seemed impossible, not real, like a trick of my sad head. Dripping and naked in the jungle, I thought, *That sloth is as slow as grief*. We were numb to the speed of the world. We were one temperature.

• ISSUE 8, 2000 •

Place

by Robert Root

I have been in this place before, in spirit if not in form.

Perhaps I have been beneath white pine towers, the lowest limbs high overhead and an interwoven parquet of needles below. Only prickles of remote sunlight penetrate the branches to the ground and, without underbrush, the forest opens to gray vista and silence. I know enough of forest growth to guess that the trees are ancient, survivors of some loggers' massacre only by chance, only by the severity of winter, shifts in the profit margin, inadvertence. Somehow the trees remain, closing out even sun and wind from its solitude and silence, leaving the white pine forest to people like me.

Or perhaps the shoreline of a little lake is ringed with birches and cedars, cattails and marsh grasses filling the shallows, the deeps dark open water. Perhaps somewhere I hear the cry of a loon, haunting and mysterious, or the deep tunk of a bullfrog. Looking across the lake, I see waves roiling in the wind, reeds swaying and rustling, the flight of red-winged blackbirds and dragonflies, the promise of a heron in the shallows. Behind me the maples and birches of the forest scrape each other in the breeze and their leaves molder in ageless layers as far as the eye can see. The wind and I are the only ones watching.

Or perhaps the waters of a great broad lake rush rhythmically across the beach, tossing sand and pebbles at my feet, dragging sand and pebbles from the shore until the tide grows shallow and weak. Perhaps the sun makes the sand too hot for my naked feet to bear, the air too heavy for my body to endure without being naked and submerged in the lake. The sound of the sand beneath my feet is like no other sound; the sound of the wind stroking the shoreline is like no other sound; the feel of the lake air against my skin is like no other

feeling; the sensation of submergence is both bracing and sensuous. For a moment I want to merge my existence with the sand, become one with the water. For the moment I am the lake, I am the beach.

I have been here before. I have had these feelings, I have moved in these landscapes, I have been lost in my longing to be lost in these places. I have tried to lose myself in the skittish behavior of ground squirrels, or the erratic flight of nuthatches, or the implacability of pines. I have escaped my kind, evaded my obligation, eluded the pursuit of my anxieties.

And in my longing to be lost I have become a grain of sand, a darkness beside distant stars, a dragonfly's wing, a fleck of foam on the whitecap of a lake, nothing, everything. I have been the fear of wildness and the lust for wildness and the wildness itself. I have lost my identity, submerged it in the lake, scattered it across the forest, disintegrated it into the universe. I have been weightless, timeless, only a molecule, an atom of existence, nothing more.

And yet— And yet—

I have felt my atoms reassembling. I have felt my isolation touching the boundaries of other isolations. I have felt my senses sharpen, known the keen alertness to other lives, to life itself. I have been swept up by the wind as a grain of sand and landed as granite; I have been blown away like a curled, crumbling leaf and touched ground as oak. I have shriveled into nothingness and swelled into entity its very self.

I have plunged into wilderness in hopes of solidifying my separateness and evading bonds of community, and yet I have emerged from it more connected, more committed, more aware of my involvement in the cosmos than when I retreated. I have come away knowing better what matters and what doesn't matter, what will grow and what will decay; I have understood that impermanence and insignificance are the allotment of all creatures, of all life, and have welcomed the understanding. To know at last what I am a part of—that what I am a part of matters—is to know what I am.

I have been here before, in this place where losing myself is the same as finding myself. I return whenever I can, to be in this place and, before I leave, to restore this place within me.

• ISSUE 49, 2015 •

Transgender Day of Remembrance: A Found Essay

by Torrey Peters

Compiled and arranged from the "Remarks" section of Transphobia vs. Transrespect research project (2014) "Trans Murder Monitoring results: TMM TDOR 2014 Update."

Brunete was beaten to death with a stick. The victim was shot by two men on a motorcycle in front of a motel. The victim was shot in the head. The suspected murderer is a former military police man. A neighbor heard the victim scream at night and saw two men walking out of the victim's room but could not remember their faces. The case is under investigation. The victim was found tied to a chair with multiple stab wounds in her abdomen. Police reported that the trans person was well known and admired and murdered by her lover with seven stabs. A 14-year-old trans person was found strangled. The victim was stabbed eight times. The victim was shot by a man on a motorbike. The victim was shot two times by two men on a motorbike. The victim was found in a lake. She was a Romani person. The body of the victim was found handcuffed. The body of the victim was found dismembered. The body of the victim was found handcuffed. The victim was a person of color. The undignified way her burned body was dumped in a trash bin indicates transgender hostility. Rosa was a person of color and of Indonesian descent. Police is investigating a possible hate crime. Police is investigating the crime as a possible homophobic hate crime. Alondra was a person of color. Police suspect that more than one person was involved in what they describe as a barbaric murder. The victim was slaughtered, beaten and stoned; the corpse was found half naked in a wasteland. The face of

the victim was smashed by the client with a stone after having sexual intercourse. The victim's body was found with tied hands in plastic bag on the road. Investigations revealed that several cars had run over the corpse. Noe Lopez was attacked at a sex worker's place, forced into a vehicle by a group of armed men wearing bulletproof vests and balaclavas. Amnesty International see this murder in connection with a series of murders of sex workers in San Pedro Sula. The note in the newspaper reports that the homicide is the product of insecurity and violence lived in the city. Sanchez was on her way to a party dressed in a skirt, when she was attacked by two men who stabbed her to death. Belizean LGBT NGO UNIBAM called the murder a hate crime. Sanchez had been harassed and received death threats before in the days leading to her murder. The victim was killed with an axe after having a dispute with a young man in a bar. Witnesses reported that the victim was verbally assaulted and later shot. The victim was set on fire by four persons, and died from burn injuries in a hospital. Buxexa was a person of color. The body of the victim showed signs of torture. The police believe that the murder took place because the victim was a trans person. Strangers shot towards the victim's house, causing her death. According to a newspaper report the victim was tortured and beaten to death by a lawmaker and four of his assistants accusing the victim of theft of a mobile phone. The murder is described as a barbaric crime. The victim was dismembered and her face totally destroyed with a knife. The victim was killed by a 14-year-old minor. The police is investigating the crime as a possible hate crime as this is the second stabbing of a trans person within one month and under similar circumstances. The victim was beaten to death by a group of people and found hanged. The victim was a person of color. Raissa was shot six times on the head and thorax. The victim was using a public phone when she was shot to death with 10 shots by two men on a motorbike. Denise was tortured with the peak of a bottle. The victim was stabbed 11 times. She was attacked by a man in a group of five men. The murderer claimed that the victim criticized him on the unimpressive sex they just had. He was angry and then beat her with a hardwood and stole her valuables. The victim was found wrapped

in a black plastic bag. The NGO Red Umbrella reports that Sevda's murderer was her boyfriend, who fled to Serbia from where he called the police and confessed the murder. Police reports that the murder was the result of fights between trans people. "Alex," an eight-year-old child moved six months ago to Rio de Janeiro to live with the father. The father has beaten the child to death to "teach him to behave like a man," as the child did belly dancing, wore female clothing, and loved dishwashing. Camila was executed with 15 shots. CCTV footage shows how a trans sex worker is approached by a man sitting in a car and then shot from the inside of the car. The victim was stabbed to death and her personal belongings were stolen such as her laptop computer. The murderer is still unknown and the case is under investigation. The victim's body showed signs of torture. Andressa was attacked by several persons at a cemetery and stabbed 15 times. Rose Maria was stabbed 12 times. The murder happened several weeks after the implementation of the so-called Anti-Gay-Bill in Uganda. Queen, a trans sex worker, has been attacked by a guy, whom her friends believe she met at a bar. During the attack she called her friend's by phone saying "the guy is beating me, the guy is killing me." She was found later by her friends with severe wounds and signs of torture (cuts from a bottle on her body and in her anus). Queen was hospitalized and died several days later. Coco was a well known drag queen. The victim's body was thrown to the street, allegedly the police saw the event and did not intervene. Vanessa received death threats before she was murdered. Paulete was executed with 15 shots, when she approached a client in a car at night. The murder was reported as homophobic hate murder. Dani was beaten in the face, before she was shot to death. Parts of the body of the victim have been found in different garbage bags at a cemetery. The skin of the torso was torn off. The suspect is a special force police officer, who wanted to pay less for a service and killed Jade Esmeralda inside his car when she didn't agree. Giovana was a person of color. The victim was found stabbed to death in her condominium unit. The victim was beaten to death by a group of people in the middle of a street at night. The victim was hit in the head. Giovanna was stabbed

11 times. The victim presented stabs all around the body. She was murdered by two clients in her own apartment due to an argument over the price for the sexual service. The victim's body showed signs of physical violence and was hit on the head. The victim's body showed multiple wounds on its body. The victim was stoned. Nicole was shot five times in the head. The victim was found stabbed four times and her body was burned. The victim was a person of color. The arrested suspect offended Jenifer and two other trans women who were sex workers. Later he returned with another man in a car and stabbed Jenifer to death. The victim was a person of color. She was shot by two men. The victim was found tied up and showed signs of torture, with her face burnt on purpose. Marcia was executed with a shot in the head. The victim's body was found in a pit and showed signs of torture, plus a shot to the head. Other bodies were found in the pit. The victim was a person of color. The victim was found tied with multiple stab wounds and with her genitals exposed. The victim was a person of color. Shayara was found beaten to death with a stick on a hill in Rio de Janeiro in the morning. A news magazine reported that she provided sexual services to a policeman the night before. The victim was a person of color. She was found burned behind a garbage bin. The victim was a person of color. The victim was raped before she was beaten to death with a stick. The victim's body was beaten multiple times on the face. The suspected murderer strangled Kellen and threw her body into the swimming pool of the hotel. Makelly was found naked and with signs of hanging. Police is searching for a man who is chasing and killing trans persons. Two men in a car approached Dennysi and shot four times at her. Dafine was walking in the street with another trans person, when two men on a motorbike approached them and shot Dafine to death. They also tried to shoot the other trans person, but failed. The victim was having a drink in a bar when two men on motorcycles passed by and shot her in the head. The victim was suffocated with a plastic bag. The victim's body was found with both hands and feet tied-up. The victim was stabbed 15 times. The victim's body was found in female underwear and as a newspaper reports "without eyes." Two other trans women in Detroit

were shot within days of the murder inside Palmer Park. Geovana was stabbed six times. The victim was found inside of her own apartment. The suspected murderer had an argument with Alexandra in the street and shot her in the back only steps away from her home. Karen was seriously injured and thrown out of a moving car by a client. Cris was shot four times by a man passing by in a car. The Police affirm that the victim was raped before being killed. The victim was walking with another person and was stoned, causing her to die. The victim's body was found in her apartment. Her body presented 18 stab wounds. Mahadevi was impaired and pushed out of a moving train by two adolescents. It seems to be that the aggressors harassed the victim, who tried to hide, but they killed her with a shotgun. Bili was standing with two other trans people near a bus stand, when a man named Raja started misbehaving with Bili and got annoyed and stabbed and injured her. Bili died in the hospital. The body of the victim was found floating in a creek. Bruna was shot by a man on a motorbike, when talking with a client in front of a motel. A local LGBT NGO speculates that the motive could have been "transmisogyny."

• ISSUE 34, 2010 •

Intro to Creative Writing

by Dani Johannesen

Professor Stevens dislikes donuts; the icing gets stuck in his beard. Fridays he breakfasts at Burger King before heading out to the lake, where he smokes cigarettes on the shore and ignores his wife's phone calls. He idolizes James Dickey. He's no good at fiction. The Department Chair's out to get him.

He strolls into his classroom wearing his uniform—faded black jeans that sag in the rear and a worn fleece pullover. He slings his bag onto the table up front and checks his watch—he's five minutes late, as usual. The students are already seated, and he surveys the assembly. In the back row a girl scribbles furiously in a fancy journal. Against the far wall a young man in sweatpants and a Minnesota Twins hat snores quietly—his desk empty, except for his head. In the front row Stevens spots Dana, the notorious overachiever, pretending to read *Finnegans Wake*.

Plastering on a smile, he welcomes the students to Intro to Creative Writing and orders them to take out a pencil and notebook. The kid in the Twins hat scrambles to borrow a pen from the girl sitting next to him.

"Write down the name of your favorite poet and five things you know something about," Stevens commands. "You have five minutes."

He watches the assortment of faces—some intently focused on their lists, others panicked, staring at blank sheets of paper. A girl near the door smacks her gum and gazes up at the clock.

After five minutes, he asks for volunteers to share their lists. Dana's hand shoots up. She's happy to be there.

"My favorite poet is T.S. Eliot," she says. "He's so wonderfully

complicated.”

Stevens scowls and shakes his head, stuffs his hands in his pockets, and mutters something under his breath about the “catastrophe of modernism” before turning toward the chalkboard. He digs a piece of yellow chalk from his bag and scrawls on the board: WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW. He knows Sioux City, Iowa. Pole Vaulting. Cattle and blonde bank tellers. Another hand emerges.

“Professor Stevens, uh, I grew up on a farm. No one wants to read about that. My hero is Hunter S. Thompson.”

Stevens spots the voice’s owner—a skinny young man in a Bob Dylan t-shirt, skin-tight jeans, and checkerboard-patterned Vans sneakers. Stevens looks down at his class roster.

“Bobby Jorgenson?”

“Yeah.”

“You grew up on a farm?”

“Yeah. Over by Bowdle. *Fear and Loathing* changed my life.”

“Uh-huh. Have you ever dropped acid, Bobby?”

“Uh, no.”

“Ever been on a road trip?”

“Uh, just to Rapid City.”

“Any plans to one day have your cremated ashes shot from a cannon?”

“Huh. Uh, hadn’t really thought about it. That’d be pretty sweet though.”

The kid in the Twins hat smiles and nods at Bobby approvingly.

“What else is on your list Bobby?”

“Okay, so, for stuff I know something about I put ‘post-modernism,’ ‘*Family Guy*,’ I’m taking a class in logic so I put ‘deductive reasoning,’ uh, ‘poetry,’ and ‘asstetics.’”

“What was that last one?”

“Asstetics. You know, beauty and stuff.”

Dumbfounded but hardly surprised, Stevens shuffles back to the table in front of the room, noisily pulls the chair out, and plops down into it. He stares out the window that faces the street; it’s a still December night—no traffic, no sirens, no obnoxious noise or light.

Across the street, a string of colored Christmas lights wrapped around a porch railing glow beneath a blanket of thick snow. He'd rather be on the can reading Richard Wilbur. He turns back to the class.

"Your first assignment is to write a poem about corn."

The girl in the back looks up from her journal. Bobby furrows his eyebrows. The kid in the Twins hat quickly writes down the assignment, CORN, at the top of his single sheet of paper.

Dana's hand shoots up.

"But Professor Stevens, I want to write complicated poems."

Stevens picks up his chalk and turns back to the board: CORN IS COMPLICATED.

"You can go ahead and get started."

• ISSUE 51, 2016 •

A Brief Atmospheric Future

by Matthew Gavin Frank

If we're to believe the neuroscientist Professor Marcus Pembrey, from University College London, who concluded that "Behaviour can be affected by events in previous generations which have been passed on through a form of genetic memory...phobias, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders... [even] sensitivity to [a] cherry blossom scent..." then the pigeon knows of its ancestors' lives as Genghis Khan's messengers, as carriers of Tipu Sultan's poetry, silk plantation blueprints, and schematics for the advancement of rocket artillery.

The pigeon knows that it was once used to announce the winners of the Olympics, the beginnings and the ends of wars; that Paul Reuter, founder of the Reuters press agency, compelled its progenitors to transport information about stock prices from one telegraph line terminus to another. That apothecaries depended on them for the delivery of medicine. That rival armies trained hawks to eviscerate the pigeons of their enemies, causing a communication breakdown. That we've given to them our voices, that we've made of their bodies the earliest and most organic of radio waves; that when we place our faith in the tenacity of the carrier pigeon, our lives and our loves and our heartaches and our deaths can float above us, and the most important parts of our self-narratives are on-air.

I nose deeply into the feathers of my pillow, know that a feather stripped of barbs is bone. The code of the body. The positioning system in the synapses, the electric impulses, the capillaries, the heart. My wife takes another pain pill and says something about trying again in the new year, that some couples—like her sister-in-law and brother—successfully conceive only after losing a half-dozen, and when they're—like us—in their low forties. Like all of us, the pigeon

roosting in our eaves knows something but does not know how it knows it. The bird does not even coo. The bird, in fact, shows no outward signs of pleasure, or affection, at all.

The carrier pigeon's life is one of servitude, and thereby, mutilation. Of flight girdled. Trainers have designed tiny backpacks, fitted to the pigeon's bodies, and filled with anything from confidential blueprints for spacecraft meant to land on Mars, to heroin meant for prison inmates, to declarations of love and war, to blood samples, to heart tissue, to diamonds—anything we secretly desire, or desire to keep secret. Our underbellies, our interior lives, our fetishes, our wishes—some clandestine network mapping, ethnographically, the diagrams and fluctuations of our ids, tied to bird-backs and bird-feet, twining the air above us—the air we're so busy trying to dominate, bring down to our level. Perhaps it's not God or god who has the answers to our seemingly unanswerable questions about ourselves, but the loaded-up pigeons, some of whom, in a crisis of weight, will randomly land, offer us a clue into the circulatory map of all the things we wish to hide from the rest of our race.

The pigeons slither along shafts of air, shafts within shafts. Wormholes. They don't eat worms so much as French fries, pretzel salt, hand-me-down popcorn. Anatomy dictates: when the pigeon steps forward, its head, for just a moment, is briefly left behind. There's something buried both in their little backpacks and their anatomy. Diamonds, blood samples, bloodlines, codes. They aim to deliver all of these things to our waiting hands. My wife and I sit up in bed, stretch our hands out in front of us, fingers splayed. We do these exercises together to increase, as the OB-GYN said, blood flow, to decrease the chance of her cramping in sleep. Our hands enjoying a brief atmospheric future, waiting for rest of our bodies to catch up. Our hands are the empty nests, the eggless zeros, reddening only because our hearts are beating with so many old sadnesses. We are ever circling our losses, trying to find the way into them, so we can find the way out. Always getting over, always recovering. We need salve. Medicine and diamonds. We need to convince ourselves that we are strong enough to carry the weight of a pigeon—their soft 9.3 to

13.4-ounce bodies. They come to us as we've trained them to do. They have popcorn skins in their throats. Ketchup in their feathers. We've trained them well, and they slither in the air above us, recalling their serpentine ancestors, counting the seconds until they can land.

• ISSUE 40, 2012 •

Counting Bats

by Thao Thai

I tell you we've got bats.

Not just one, which might be extraordinary—or two, which could be cute—not even three, a vaguely threatening almost-gang. But four. Four of them perch on the mosquito netting above me, claws gripping the fine, flossy strands that wind protectively around my head.

Four are points on a pirate compass, ready to plunder.

You should know that these bats are not even a little ordinary. They came from the deep recesses of my childhood home in Vietnam, a thin, rectangular house on stilts, with rushing sewage below. My grandparents hired a man from the village to remove the squat toilet so that they could install a new, Western-style one for my benefit. For my convenience.

I find this place terribly inconvenient.

With the last clank of sledgehammer on porcelain, the bats emerged from beneath, angry and whitened by cement particles, their wings stuck together from lack of use. They took to the walls, they took to the ceilings. They fled into the dark.

My family gaped at one other. We thought we knew everything about this place.

The four bats are so close now I could reach out to touch their furry bodies, to poke them each in a beady eye. Bats can't bully *me*. Instead, I shake the mosquito netting. I create myself a little tempest. They rollick back and forth and still they stay fastened. Their eyes bore.

Is this blame? Is this retribution? I told them my comfort was more important than their home and now they are here to get me. Sweat gathers in the crease of my elbow. I'm feverish.

Beyond my makeshift bed, my grandparents sleep in their tightly

enclosed bedroom. Beyond that, my village sleeps, and beyond that—the entire country of Vietnam. There's no sound except for the bats' slow progress across the netting. They switch positions. They're trying to find a break.

There is none, I say, shaking the netting a little more. Don't you know this house has no windows. They lose grip. Or I lose grip.

Count with me now.

Three days ago, I was in Saigon, city of honking mopeds and steaming street food. City of distended stomachs and rats and the damp heat of tropical summer. Seven days ago, I was in the States, typing frantically at a coffee shop in the cooling Midwest. Twenty years ago, I was here, in this house—wasn't I?—with bats scrambling beneath the bed where I slept. Now the bats are on top.

My grandfather promised that he would kill them in the morning, when they'd least suspect it. He said I could help. I imagine us with torches and nets, the flap of a wing close to my ear. What drives a bat out of hiding?

What drives a woman out of hiding?

The bats cross one another overhead, dignified, almost prancing in their delicacy. They think they are on their way to the opera. Hello, how are you. Hello, excuse me.

I'm the ground upon which bats tread. They aren't trying to get *at* me. They're trying to get *past* me. That difference is riveting. I am suspended between terror and its accompanying shadow, wonder.

Let's start again.

Four bats. Three days in the village. Two hours of sleeplessness. One woman in one small country one whole ocean away from one home that sits calm and safe and quiet at the bottom of one green, blessedly familiar hill.

What comes before one?

Without warning, the bats loosen their claws and take flight.

I could unhinge myself too and fly with them, already hollow and high, in another place, another plane of unfettered existence. Somewhere along the way, I might ask, Where is the sky, that dark, dimpled ceiling of my world?

Nowhere, I tell you. Nowhere comes before one.

• ISSUE 24, 2007 •

Openings

by Jennifer Sinor

You cannot open the pickles, so you ask your father, who is visiting for the holidays and hunched at the dining room table playing solitaire. Only moments before he announced that he had accomplished the impossible by winning back-to-back hands, the sound of triumph in his voice wafting into the kitchen like a forgotten smell.

My thumbs, he mutters, staring at his hands as if does not recognize them. And then he tries to open the jar.

As a child, in church, while the priest droned on about Peter and Paul and the children in front of you drove dented cars along the kelp-green kneelers, you held your father's hands, rubbed the wire-thin scabs left by errant two-by-fours or nails that popped when hammered askew, and wound your own slender fingers in between his, measuring their girth. He had his mother's hands, hands that could withstand blistering temperatures, move logs in the fireplace without tongs, take casseroles from the oven without mitts, brand the back of your legs with a swat. Covered with freckles and marbled by dryness, his hands could hold you hard to the floor as you fought to get free of his tickling. Small hands for such a large man, he always said. Large hands to such a small girl.

The jar won't open even after he bangs the top against the tiled floor. When he moves to the kitchen for a hammer and screwdriver, you head in the other direction, toward your bedroom, imagining the shattered glass and the visit to the emergency room, unwilling to witness the quiet desperation with which he confronts the jar, shutting the door behind you.

Days later, he will carry your infant son into the desert, hold the tiny

body against his stomach, watch his feet along the trail, the cactus, the tiny pebbles that threaten to roll beneath them. Every five minutes, you will offer to take your son, remember the pickles, the thumbs, the way his eyes flickered at the prospect of failure, but he declines. Maybe he, too, recalls the moment, the way you left the room. Rattlesnake Trail refuses to end, the pitch of the land becoming steeper, the saguaro, taller. When he finally relinquishes your son, both their foreheads are slick with sweat; he will have carried him for miles.

When you return from the bedroom, the jar is sitting on the kitchen counter, the pickles bobbing in the briny water, the yellow lid resting to the side.

Sometimes you think you notice a trace of the Parkinson's that took your uncle in your father's hands, a tremor, a tremble, a casual shaking. The more you look for it, the more you notice the way your father hides his hands, buries them in pockets, keeps them fisted. He spread the same chemicals over the acres of farmland, handled the same poisons, breathed the same fertilizers as his older brother. The legacy of nerve damage cuts as true a line as any Nebraska country road.

Thanks for the pickles, you call to your father who has resumed his card game in hopes of winning a third before the evening is over. Your mother opened it, he says, the cards pausing for a second, perhaps the eight of clubs not yet played, winning still possible, while you stand in the kitchen, out of his sight, holding the open jar in your hands.

How to Leave a Room

by Marcia Aldrich

When you leave a room, my mother taught me, leave no trace behind. She trained me to be in a room without making it dirty.

And yet, to my confusion, she wore lipstick, applied in a thick style that changed little from year to year, a signature of sorts. In the bathroom she had her own sink, mirror, and cabinet. Out of the top drawer of the vanity she'd pull her single tube of lipstick—Revlon's Mercy, a buoyant shade of red, a bit shrill. Leaning in close to the mirror, she puckered her lips and applied her Mercy, careful to stay inside the lines. At the end of the application, she'd brusquely rip a tissue from a nearby box and blot. And there would be the telltale red imprint of a kiss.

Now I have my own favored lipstick, a shade called Black Honey, more stain than matte rouge, and it is one of the mysteries about me my daughter cannot unravel. She belongs to a different generation, one addicted to all manner of exotic lubrication for the lips, carried in the pocket of the jeans, flavored in mango, and applied copiously. But she resists lipstick as cosmetic. The motto is Pierce, Don't Paint, spoken with a lisp on studded tongues.

Not long ago I overheard my daughter extolling the virtues of the natural look to her friend. They disapproved of my lips of dark honey.

"My mother wears lipstick to rake leaves," my daughter said, smacking her gum. "She puts lipstick on to take out the trash. To go swimming. She's got to have it on to open presents on Christmas morning."

"I don't get it," her friend chimed in. "Who is she putting lipstick on for?" her pierced eyebrows, no doubt, were raised in bafflement.

"She doesn't *need* lipstick," concluded my daughter. I suppose she

meant that my face was not such a diminished thing as to require the uplift. The words were solemnly spoken, without a trace of irony, as if she had settled a world conflict.

Does anyone need lipstick? It will not shelter me in a windstorm, nor feed me when I'm hungry. It can't perform miracles. Looked at from a certain angle, it can be dispensed with, thrown in the trash.

The Black Honey is, I admit, too noir for the norms of my professional class, which prefers the illusion of transparency. The attention drawn to my mouth is a little nervous. But then I am a little nervous, lurking about in alleys in the rain. Could I not dispense with this excess and simplify my life, or at least my face?

Why, then, do I wear it? I cannot justify it by naming any purpose but pleasure. I wear lipstick as some women wear high heels—defiantly. It's a mark I leave behind on cheeks, on glasses, on pillowcases, on memory. It throws people off. Lipstick is my excess, a mark of twisted allegiance to my mother.

After my mother died, I sorted through the mountains of details she left behind. In the vanity I found her familiar tube of red, worn down to the nub. I was overcome with a desire to smear my lips with her color, to be enamored with all her accoutrements and accessories. But there was no color left to apply.

Imagine going through your mother's purse and finding a tissue on which she had blotted her lips, leaving a perfect imprint. I don't know what you would do, but I would hold onto that tissue for eternity.

• ISSUE 58, 2018 •

Sunrise

by Joe Oestreich

Try not to think about the dog, Jack, the 10-pound mutt that won't sit still in the back. He's nervous, jitterbugging from window to window. Feels like *trip to the vet*. He pauses to bother with a flea. First teeth. Then raking with a hind leg. Then bounding over the gear shifter to check out the view from the passenger seat. You're driving. You want to elbow him out of there. But this is your mom's car, and Jack is your mom's dog. If this is his last ride, it ought to be shotgun.

Try not to think about the lies you told her this morning. Lies she asked you to repeat. And explain. And explain again. About the vet. About the vaccinations. About how Jack will be joining her in a few days, after she has settled into the assisted living facility.

"You mean the old folks' home," she said.

Today is moving day. You've flown in to help. Right now, while you're dealing with Jack, your sister is lugging suitcases and a nightstand up to your mom's room. She doesn't want to do this, trade independence for assistance. Who would? *Sunrise*, the place is called. You and your sister appreciate the irony.

The doctor has diagnosed dementia, probably Alzheimer's. For years your mom has laughed it off, saying she's "just getting diddly." She's 80. Long divorced. An ex-nun. Ex-ESL teacher who worked in refugee settlement for Catholic Social Services. PhD in Adult Education. Opera lover. Well read, with stacks of Victorian novels and Agatha Christie mysteries and all 54 volumes of the *Great Books of the Western World* series. Writer of sharp, concise letters to the editor. And so proud of the books you've written.

Now she forgets to bathe. She forgets to eat the groceries your sister buys for her. And because she can't remember what she read

yesterday, she'll read the same passages again today. And tomorrow. That's the silver lining. When your memory's shot, every sentence is a first sentence. Cracking open a book—even one you've read 10 times—is a small sunrise. Every page new and clean.

Maybe this move will be equally sunny, a daybreak, unironically. If so, it's got to happen without Jack, even though he's been a singular source of joy. Your mom can no longer remember your kids' names, what your wife does for a living, or which state you live in. But she remembers to feed Jack every day and walk him every night. And she's never gotten lost on the way home. Her room at Sunrise is just too small. She can't manage the fleas. She has scratched her calves bloody.

You can't take Jack because you live 600 miles away, and you're busy with two kids and a teaching job, trying to squeeze in some writing when you can. Your sister lives walking distance, but she already has a dog and a cat and a career and travel-team soccer twins. Still, she feels guilty.

You feel guilty because she's done nearly all the work. She selected the facility, broke the news to your mom, found buyers for the house and the car. Plus the medical appointments. Plus the banking and bill paying. Plus going to Cat Welfare to pick out a pet that can live comfortably in an old folks' home. But your mom doesn't want a cat; she wants Jack.

Your sister recruited you to do one job. Just one. And when that job is done, after you've driven alone back to Sunrise and the three of you are sitting down for coffee and cake in the cafeteria, it will be sad if your mom forgets to ask about Jack.

It will be sadder if she remembers.

Because there's no vet. No vaccinations. There's just this drive to the animal shelter. You're hoping for adoption, but when you look over at Jack—10-plus years old and flea-bitten—you know better.

So try not to think about the dog. Or the lies. Instead consider a different betrayal: What happens if your mom ever finds a printout of this essay sitting on her nightstand? *Hey, what's this?* she'll think. *Something my son wrote.* She'll be so excited to read it. And when she

does, Jack and so much else will come back. For a moment. But the pain of what's lost won't cut once and be done. Every day it will cut new and clean.

• ISSUE 50, 2015 •

Post-Mortem

by Traci Brimhall

In the Arctic, there is very little predation. The cold and lack of scavengers or insects keeps death on pause. The puffin with wet wings will lay on the beach for months. A washed up narwhal must wait for a polar bear. If he dies north of the tundra, a polar bear must wait for the slow erosion of wind and time.

When they found my friend's body 36 days after he went missing, they identified him by his teeth. He was not bleached bones in a field, but neither was he the man who went missing one April night. The medical examiner built the story backwards from skull fractures and broken ribs, to the miles of highway between death and vanishing, to the security camera at the ATM, to saying goodnight to his friends before he walked home. Though of course the police had already found the bloody knife wrapped in receipts, his stolen wallet in a motel in Miami, his picture in a stranger's pocket. They didn't need the autopsy to tell the whole story, only that last chapter.

My mother died whole, her last hours accounted for—weakness, blood drawn, seizure. The nurses closed her eyes but forgot her mouth. Before they wheeled her away, my sister pulled the rings from her swollen knuckles. Her hands were already stiffening. We hired someone to cut her open and explain what happened. Their story had only guesses and the weight and dimensions of her organs. Then we hired someone else to glue her eyes closed, secure her jaw with a wire, sew her mouth shut as naturally as possible. Then, moisturize her eyelids and lips. They massaged her body to break the rigor mortis. Then, a cut in her femoral artery, an IV, a pump, a drain for the blood

the embalming fluid pushes through. Suture. Aspirate. Put her in the outfit she wore to my wedding. Friends volunteered to paint her nails and fix her hair. We learned you can't dye a dead person's hair. It's also hard to curl it. The soft gel lights in the viewing room betrayed the stiff gray spokes of her roots.

It was my friend's students who reported him missing. It was days before the search began. He was dead before anyone thought to look for him. I'm sorry my imagination wonders, but it does—what happens to a body in a Florida field for 36 days? How many people drove by and saw dark birds haloing the sky above him and thought, *Armadillo, or maybe a deer.*

To preserve the dead, ancient Egyptians invented embalming. Bodies were washed with palm wine and water from the Nile. They made an incision on the left side of the body to pull out the organs. These are always the first to decompose. In canopic jars they preserved the liver, lungs, stomach, and intestines. The body was stuffed with natron, linens, and sawdust, and then rubbed with oil. The unnecessary brain was pulled through the nose with a hook. Because it is the seat of intelligence and feeling and would therefore be needed in the afterlife, the heart was left inside.

On a hike my friend tells me that lightning struck a bison in that field a few years ago. By the time she got out to see it, vultures were already feasting. *The eyes and the ass*, she says. And when I look over confused, she says, *That's how they get in.* That's where the body is most tender. That's where nature hollows the dead clean.

My mother's will was neat. In order. All her belongings divided. Each loved one thought of. Each dollar assigned to a name. Witnessed. Notarized. She'd told us for years where to find it, hinted at the hymn and flowers she wanted at her funeral. My husband and I say we have to make a plan, see a lawyer, get documents drawn up. When it was just the two of us, it didn't matter. We didn't have much to leave to

anyone, but now we have a son to think of. I used to imagine countries my husband and I would visit. Now I imagine the tomb I would build if we lived somewhere a body could last.

• ISSUE 60, 2019 •

An Indian in Yoga Class: Finding Imbalance

by Rajpreet Heir

Sukhasana

My intent for the day's practice: become more Indian. As an Indian from Indiana who has never been to India, I want to get in touch with my roots and doing yoga seems like a fun way to do that.

Ommmmmm

As we flutter our eyelids open, Brittany, the instructor, says, "Today we're going to focus on our third chakra, where Ganesh lives and Buddha sometimes visits. Unleash your Kali!" I'm Sikh and don't know my Hindu gods that well, except for a couple lessons from history classes, but I'm not sure Buddha is supposed to be included with them. But what do I know? Brittany is the authority on this stuff. Also, she has Sanskrit tattoos and I don't.

Vinyasa

As everyone raises prayer hands to the ceiling for a sun salutation in time to Major Lazer, Kyle from the front desk sneaks in to photograph the class for the studio's Instagram page, just like the Indians did thousands of years ago. #YouAreEnough #BeHereNow #StrengthGoals #yogaeverygoddamnday #Namaslay #MadRelax #GoodVibes #NamasteAF

Tadasana

"Pick a *dristi*—I know, such an exotic word," says Brittany. Would the name Kristy be exotic in India? Or Misty? Rice Krispie? We only have

distant relatives left in India, but I suppose I could ask my British relatives who go to India more frequently than my American side.

Bakasana

“I’m so happy I got a spot in this class,” the woman next to me says as we wait for Brittany to get us blocks. “Brittany discovered yoga in 2009 and brought it to America. She knows everyone in India by name and the color of their aura. *And* she was asked to star in *Slumdog Millionaire* but turned it down because the title made it seem like a movie on consumerism.” I think about the \$300 I paid for a 10-class card. Maybe the classes are expensive because the studio has exceptional instructors?

Ardha Matsyendrasana

As I twist toward the wall, I see a poster for a sari draping class taking place in the studio later that week. I could ask my mom to teach me the next time I’m home, but Brittany probably knows more. Brittany has henna on her hands and a nose piercing, neither of which my mom has.

Virabhadrasana

“Stand strong in this pose, one hand reaching into the future toward Juice Generation, and another reaching back toward the past, Starbucks. Stay in the present and think about how good you look in your Lululemons,” Brittany instructs. “Concentration is key here...or karma will *not* lead us to nirvana.”

An interruption

Kyle opens the door and walks down the center of the room. He announces, “Yoga—it’s a way of life” then throws clouds of turmeric into the air. People around me raise their hands to it in devotion, swaying side to side on their sitz bones, while other yogis start snorting it off the hardwood floor. #bliss

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

“Rameshwaria, move your hands closer to the backs of your heels.”
“My name is actually Rajpreet,” I reply. “It’s Rameshwaria since I knew a Rameshwaria once.” “But my name is Rajpreet.” “No.”

Shavasana

Brittany explains this is the hardest pose and it really does feel like it. I don’t feel relaxed, in fact, I feel more stressed than when I arrived. A white woman is teaching me about yoga, an ancient Indian practice, and she thinks she’s an expert on Indian culture too, but I don’t know exactly which ways I can be mad because I don’t know enough about India or yoga myself, partly because I feel a pressure to assimilate. But darn it if Brittany’s playlist isn’t fun.

Namaste

(The cultural appropriation in me bows to the Indian in you.)

Putting away mats

“What other instructors would you recommend?” I ask Brittany.
“Katie, Jenny, Julie, Courtney, Zoey, Christy, Mary, Lucy, Hayley Ashley, Natalie, Lindsey, Kaylee, Lizzy, and Audrey are amaze.”

Exit

I follow the trail of organic quinoa down the hall to the door and leave feeling very Indian American.

• ISSUE 13, 2003 •

Genesis

by Bret Lott

I am sitting in the sanctuary, a few rows from the front, to my left my mom and dad, my little brother Timmy in Mom's lap and sleeping, to my right my older brother Brad. Brad and I have just received these thin blue books, every kid in the service passed a brand new copy by men in gray or black suits standing at either end of the pews, stacks of these books in hand.

The blue paper cover is bordered with green grapevines, tendrils working up and down either side with bunches of grapes here and there; at the top and bottom of the cover those tendrils meet sheaves of wheat in the same green ink.

The pastor says it is the book of *somms*, and I wonder what that is, look at the words in black ink centered a little high on the cover. I sound out the words to myself, The Book of, and stop.

P-S-A-L-M-S. How does that, I wonder, spell out *Somms*?

But even if I don't understand, this is the first Bible—or piece of it—I have ever gotten, and I don't want to lose this book. I want to keep it.

So I take one of the nubby pencils from the back of the pew in front of me, nestled in its tiny wooden hole beside the wooden shelf where attendance forms are kept, and beside the larger holes where the tiny glass cups are placed once we've emptied them of grape juice.

And I begin, for the first time in my life, to write my name by myself.

I start at the upper left hand corner, just below the border, but the first word trails off, falls toward that centered title in black as though that title is a magnet, the letters I make iron filings. They fall that way because there are no lines for me to balance them upon, as I am able to do with the paper given me by my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Pasley.

I finish that first word, feel in my hand the cramp of so much

strenuous, focused work, and hold the book away from me, look at it while the pastor rolls on.

There is no place for the second word, I see, the last letter of my first name too near the first of the title.

This is a problem. I know the second word must follow the first on the same line, a little space needed between them. Mrs. Pasley would not approve. This is a problem.

But there is space above my name due to its falling away, a wedge of blue field that might, if I am careful enough, be able to hold that second word, and I write, work out the riddle of letters without lines, letters that will line up to mark this book as mine, and mine only.

Then I am finished, and here is my name. Me.

The first time I have ever written my name myself, alone.

Later, on the way home, my older brother Brad will look at the book, say, "Lott Bret. Who's that?" and laugh at my ill-spaced effort. Later still I will write my name again on the cover, this time with a blue pen and holding the book upside down. The words will be a little more jaunty, full of themselves and the confidence of a kid who knows how to write his name, no problem at all. Beneath this second round, though, will be the lone letter B, a practice swing at making that capital letter as good as I can make it.

Later, I will be baptized into the church at age 14, a ritual it seems to me is the right thing to do.

Later still, in college, I will be born again, as Christ instructed Nicodemus.

And later even still, I will have written entire books of my own, created lives out of the whole cloth of the imagination. I will have created, and created in my name.

But on this Sunday, the pastor still rolling on, these two words themselves are enough.

Only a kid's scrawl. My own small imitation of God.

• ISSUE 35, 2011 •

The Blind Prophets of Easter Island

by Tessa Fontaine

Jacques Cousteau and his son, Philippe, circle the 30-foot stone Moai heads of Easter Island. I sit on the matted carpet of my Oakland apartment. He squints and purses his lips and nods towards each elongated face in some ritual of recognition he usually reserves for communing with aquatic life.

I bounce somebody else's baby on my knee. In Oakland, it's afternoon. Winter. The baby and I have watched the video three times in a row.

The first thing I learned about Jacques Cousteau was a lie. A fairytale. It didn't matter. I've been madly in love with him since. It doesn't matter that he's dead and his son is dead and his wife is dead and the *Calypso*, his vessel, is dead. It's somehow preferable. The baby spits up on my calf. She cries the whole time she's away from her mom, which is the whole time she's here in the drafty, brown apartment I share with my boyfriend.

Jacques Cousteau confers with Philippe, who wears the standard red wool cap high on his forehead. I can't hear what they say because the baby is howling, but they laugh and throw their arms into the air like little arches from a water fountain. Behind and all around them the hundreds of big-nosed faces watch from their ancient necks. They don't have any legs. They've been stuck on this island for 900 years.

I shake a rattle for the baby, increase the vigor of my knee bounce. She has lovely, thick eyelashes coated in tears and, I wonder, sometimes, when I look at her face for a long, long time, if I will ever be able to love her in the way I'm supposed to. I'm not sure. I'm only 24, I tell myself often. I could be an aquatic explorer. I watch Philippe and Jacques Cousteau clasp hands on either side of a head. The baby

burp-smiles.

Jacques Cousteau is the master and commander of everything in his kingdom. If Jacques Cousteau had been me one year ago, and Jacques Cousteau had entered the conversation I should not have entered, I imagine it would have gone like this:

Boyfriend: I have something to tell you.

Jacques Cousteau: *Mon Dieu!*

Boyfriend: I'm going to be a father.

Jacques Cousteau: *Adieu!*

And Jacques Cousteau would have hooked his full, dumb, bleating heart to the end of a fishing line, taken it to the furthest reaches of the abyss and caught a shark. A tiger shark. Great white. Something wild and fierce.

• ISSUE 47, 2014 •

I Go Back to Berryman's

by Vincent Scarpa

All of the streets in the trailer park are named for fruits or for dead presidents—Cherry, Lincoln, Peach, Garfield—and if you walk them and peer through windows with parted curtains, you will see love being made, hate being made, bodies being discovered, bodies being forgotten, smoking and drinking and swearing and Bible reading, you will see people doing their best, and you will see that sometimes their best is *not that good*, and you will see rooms where welfare mothers rock babies and sing *If I needed you/would you come to me?*, and you will see double-wide lawns where men like my best friend's father try to exorcise the gay out of their sons by placing a bat in their hands and lobbing underhanded tosses when what their sons really want is to bring the stereo on the front porch and choreograph intricate and well-intentioned routines to top 40 pop, and you will see Renee apply tanning oil to her frail leather body as she sprawls across the driveway from where she has moved her dented pick-up pocked with bullet scars, you will see her repositioning her beach chair to follow the sun in a circle and rotate 20-20 front and back, her body so crisp and even in next week's open casket, you will see sober fathers and drunk fathers and belt-bearing fathers and fathers who hide child pornography in secret folders on their computer, you will see mothers like mine knocking over patio furniture in fits of manic rage, or mothers who hang confederate flags alongside American flags, or mothers who pray for drunk drivers and who pray for terrorists and who pray for their own recovery from afflictions of the mind and heart and body and soul, mothers who erect roadside memorials across town for sons and daughters squished between liquored tires, you will see old women whose children do not call or do not call often

on hold with phone psychics from whom they seek guidance and answers but also sheer company, you will see old men who think of the rifles in their closets when a black or a Puerto Rican walks by but also when they catch themselves in the mirror or have too much time to think or drink, you will see motherless children riding rusted bikes and scooters and falling on cracked pavement, their knees and elbows scuffed and skinned like the scratch-off lottery tickets their fathers allow them at the liquor store checkout, you will see teenagers who consider themselves to be much older pass loosely rolled joints in the woods, the girls flashing their tits to the guys who ask nicely or who only ask or who simply insist, guys with acne on their backs which you could connect to resemble an outline of the continental 48, guys who claim they're allergic to latex, and you will see their younger brothers and younger sisters who sneak through the woods trying to find the hiding spot, and you will hear the older siblings yell, *Get outta here you retards, go home*, and you will see a pool the size of a postage stamp in the middle of the park where children are taught to swim, to dive, to walk don't run walk don't run walk don't run, where these children compete to see who can hold their breath the longest but also to see who has the most bruises, kid fears, war stories, dead cousins, and you will see me leaving the pool despite having just arrived because I'll never be comfortable taking my shirt off in front of anyone who isn't a doctor, and even then, and you will see me walk back to my trailer on Lot 252, my dry towel dragging behind me like a tail that collects gravel and cigarette butts, and you will follow me into my house where my mother is having sex with her boyfriend, you will see their door close as I take off my sandals, you will see me contemplate going to the fridge—I am so thirsty—and decide against it because the kitchen is too close to my mother's bedroom, and I don't want to prevent her or interrupt her or make her think of me, and so instead you will see me walk into my room, where I will write in my journal on a blank page: *I feel homesick but I'm writing this at home.*

• ISSUE 53, 2016 •

l'in-english

by Christina Tang-Bernas

I learned to speak English in preschool, at two and a half years old, still young enough to do away with any lingering Chinese accent. Though, sometimes, I wonder if every trace had been scrubbed away, listening intently to my own voice rattling around in my skull for signs of foreignness.

The cheery teachers sang little songs about teapots and taught us how to read, painstaking letter by letter.

The real instructors, though, were the kids on the playground. "Did you hear that?" a boy once said about me. "She said, 'I axed you a question'." They laughed, and I pocketed that piece of knowledge away, determined never to make the same mistake.

"How high are you?" I asked in primary school. One of the kids climbed up the jungle gym. "I'm this high," she laughed. I smiled, playing along. But inside was a mass of frustration. "Tall," I told myself. "It's how tall you are. Stupid."

More rules to memorize. "Saaa-mon," I repeated to myself. "Not salmon."

"I-earn," not "I-ron."

But these verbal pitfalls popped up everywhere. And soon it became easier not to say too much to start with.

"I remember when we were in first grade together," a friend from high school told me much later. "I don't think you said anything at all."

We used to spend Thanksgiving at my uncle's house, my mother's brother.

"Say boat, Mom," my cousin goaded, one year. "Say it. Say boat."

My aunt sighed, put-upon in a practiced sort of way. "Boat," she

said.

My cousin turned triumphant, "Didn't I tell you? She said butt." My sisters and I giggled. "Butt," he repeated, as if he couldn't get over how hilarious it was. "Mom, say ship. Ship." My aunt walked away from our laughter.

"Boat," I pronounced carefully once we'd returned home, under my breath, alone in the bathroom. "Ship."

At 16, I decided to take a college-level Calculus class during the summer.

When I walked into the community college testing center, the bored boy manning the front desk looked up at me. I swallowed and approached him. "I'm here to take the placement exams, math and English."

"ESL, then?"

"No," I said, noticing he hadn't asked about my math aptitude, only my language. And why did he assume ESL? Was it the way I looked? Or the way I'd said the earlier sentence? "I think I'll try the regular English exam."

When I received my results, college-level placement, I felt no satisfaction, only vindication.

One of my managers once asked me, "Why don't you give them a call? It's harder for them to ignore a direct phone call than all the e-mails you keep sending."

I didn't know how to explain to her that e-mails are easier. E-mails can be edited, spell-checked, and proofread. The moment I dial a phone number, anxiety swamps every available brain cell as I frantically try to pull together my hard-learned scripts.

"Hello."

"Hello, how are you?" I asked.

"Good. How are you?"

"Good," I said, automatic, "how are you?"

I cringed, knowing I'm going to be replaying that mistake over and over again that night.

The therapist was kind, young, earnest, and white.

“Social anxiety,” she said, “comes from our mind sending out a constant series of false alarms.” She leaned closer, “What you have to realize is that people tend to focus only on themselves. Most of the time they’re not paying attention to what you say and do. And if you make a small mistake, or even what to you seems like a big mistake, they likely won’t even notice, much less mock you for it.”

I wanted to disagree with her. But I couldn’t find the right words, and it would’ve looked silly writing it down, so instead I nodded.

Much easier this way.

• ISSUE 42, 2013 •

Before Sunrise

by Erika Dreifus

A taxi, its driver silent at the bruised and bandaged sight of you, navigates the 10 blocks to your apartment building. You exit from the cab slowly and stiffly, a parent grasping each arm. In the lobby, the doorman nods. Other tenants stand there, watching. What you don't know is that all this time you've been at the hospital, others have come to your building. Police. Reporters.

The elevator brings you to your tiny one-bedroom on the 29th floor that somehow still feels bare and new and temporary two years after you signed the lease. Most of the belongings that remained after you gave away the hundreds of books and the furniture that would overwhelm any Manhattan residence—but had suited your place in Massachusetts just fine—are still stored in your parents' suburban basement. You haven't even decorated the rental-grade white walls.

Your answering machine blinks. The reporters really want to talk to you.

You haven't eaten for hours. You'd planned a late lunch after the midday run, never anticipating the encounter with what the police shorthand as an "EDP," an "emotionally disturbed person," or the ensuing trip via ambulance to the ER. You agree to some plain spaghetti.

Your father heads out to the drugstore, so that you can begin taking the antibiotics you've been prescribed. Your head throbs. As the doctors warned, the bruises beneath your eyes are deepening. Your mother bustles around, preparing an ice pack. That's what the ER discharge instructions advise.

Your mother insists, too, on staying overnight. Just in case. In case you need anything. In case you find yourself in more pain. In case the

bleeding—oh, that bleeding!—recommences and you need to be rushed back to the hospital. Also, she points out, the reporters keep calling. She's so polite, answering the phone for you and thanking them kindly, but explaining that you have no comment.

You'll end up in the newspapers anyway. It's quite a story, when a privileged white woman is slashed across the forehead in broad daylight on the East River jogging path, footsteps from the mayor's official residence, and the "EDP" remains at-large.

After the spaghetti, and the antibiotics, you swallow a Percocet. Another. You try to sleep. You try for hours.

You realize you have never in your 39 years passed an entirely sleepless night. You've taken pride in the fact that your academic and professional assignments were always completed in time to avoid what you considered the catastrophe of an "all-nighter"; not even the adrenaline of a romantic encounter could keep you from catching at least 40 winks. But now, with almost as many stitches holding together the skin between your hairline and the corner of your left eye, and a broken nose, your nerves are sufficiently jangled. Probably 10 Percocets wouldn't do the trick.

While your mother sleeps, you relocate to the computer. Back in Massachusetts, you wrote in a dedicated home office overlooking the treetops. Here, high above the river, the table that serves as your desk offers a view of the water. Across its quiet surface the lights of Queens—and an enormous COSTCO sign—sparkle against the sky.

It's true that you don't want to speak to the reporters. But you do have things to say. In the predawn hours you say them here, at your computer, drafting and revising a message to those you hold dear.

You tell them what happened, that they shouldn't worry, that you'll recover. But the key words are buried in the seventh paragraph, when you tell them, maudlin as it may sound, that you feel blessed to be alive. That all of them, every one behind the anonymous wall of the blind carbon copy, have been and remain so important to you. That you are grateful.

You hit "send." Above the river, the sun emerges.

• ISSUE 39, 2012 •

Dropping Babies

by J.D. Schraffenberger

Newborns can only see as far as the distance between their mother's nipples and her face. For weeks, touch is how they understand this bright new world. They feel the warm and the cold. They feel the suck of air scouring their flesh. Until the 1980s it was believed that babies didn't feel pain. When they required surgery, instead of anesthesia they were given muscle relaxers. They'd lie still and quiet, unable to move or cry as scalpels slipped their bodies open to the light of medical wisdom, a revelation of human anatomy in miniature.

In the Musti village of Solapur in western India, babies are dropped from the top of the temple's 50-foot tower and then caught on an outstretched bed sheet held taut by a throng of dutiful and worshipful men below. The babies feel the quick, curious tug of gravity shift their newly churning organs. They feel the abrupt impact and rebound, the hard hands of men lifting and passing them back through the crowd toward their grateful mothers. It's a blessing, say the villagers, of good health and good luck.

The night my own baby cried through all my ritual efforts at rocking and bouncing and shushing and singing, she wouldn't take a bottle and wouldn't fall asleep. I shouted and shook her a little too forcefully and dropped her hard onto the new pink sheets of her crib.

I want to say it was only a few inches. I want to say I wasn't myself, but babies, especially your own, have a way of showing you exactly who you are, or at least what you're capable of in the middle of the night.

Every spring the villagers march together toward the temple tower singing and frantically playing their frame drums. It's a celebration, a festive moment for everyone. They've been dropping babies here for 500 years, and it's said that not one of them has ever been hurt. They hold their babies out solemnly and let go. They offer them up, as we all must do, to the airy laws of chance.

The truth is I hadn't slept much. The truth is I just wanted to get some sleep.

When Michael Jackson dangled his new baby over a crowd of fans gathered below his hotel balcony in Berlin, he was laughing like a child himself, like it was a joke, just some silly dare. No one could see the baby's face hidden under the blanket, but his tiny, panicked legs kicked like a frog's before Michael hurried back inside. It was all so sudden and awkward. People chanted, "Hey Michael, meet the family!" until he emerged once more, hid his own face behind a sheer white curtain, and tossed the baby blanket down into the baffled crowd.

I hum another song into the warm, furled blossom of her left ear. I let the cool white noise of the vacuum cleaner crash over us like insistent waves. I rock in the chair until it seems we might lift into the inevitable flight of dreams.

Imagine the falling faces of these villagers' babies as their eyes go wild, and they open their writhing mouths to the faraway meaninglessness of the sky to make the only noise they know how.

I want to say the villagers are culturally backward. I want to say they're barbarous and superstitious. I want to say this ritual is another example of the stupid things a belief in god or gods compels otherwise reasonable people to do. But I know the truth is something else.

I swear it shut her up for a second, the shock of landing in the crib, but

the surprise hovering in her eyes, like a sudden illumination of this dark new world, stripped all the hush of its silence.

• ISSUE 58, 2018 •

Solving for X

by Pam Durban

She's never been good at word problems. She remembers hours of agony at the kitchen table, her father trying to help her wrench the variables of time, speed, and distance into solvable equations. "A freight train left San Diego and traveled east at an average speed of 28 mph. A diesel train left one hour later and traveled in the same direction but with an average speed of 33 mph. Find the number of hours the freight train traveled before the diesel train caught up." No matter how long she stared at the problem, she couldn't find a way in. Her father liked to think he was a patient man, but the longer he explained how to solve the problem, the more impatient he became, and the dumber she felt, until finally her brain froze and she stabbed the tabletop with her pencil until the point broke, and he shoved back his chair and walked outside to calm himself.

Now, at 70, she can manage the simpler calculations. She knows she won't be around to replace the 30-year roof she's just put on her house. She doesn't need a dental implant that lasts 50 years. When she comes across a future date—the next total solar eclipse in 2052, for instance—she subtracts the present year from it to see whether she'll be there, and the answer is usually no.

Other calculations are riskier. The word problems of life, she calls them. If a 70-year-old woman owns two boxes of 5,000 staples and her stapler holds 210 staples per strip, how many staples must she use every day in order to empty both boxes before she dies? How long will it take her to *write* the pages she'll staple, because even though she's sometimes over-tired of the great harvest that she herself desired, she keeps harvesting, but slowly, so slowly, as if she still has all the time in the world?

What troubles her is that while those earlier word problems *had* answers, even if she couldn't find them, these new problems always end with an unsolvable X—the date of her death. What troubles her is that those unsolvable Xs keep changing. One morning last winter she left her house to talk to a group of writers about memoir—notes folded in her purse, directions entered in the GPS—and came to in the emergency room, asking her son and her partner: What am I doing here? Who's sick? Where's the dog? For hours she asked those questions and for hours they patiently answered, but the answers wouldn't stick. Transient Global Amnesia, the neurologist called it, a blown fuse in the brain that wipes out short-term memory and the ability to form new memories. And even though she jokes now that her brain just went to Jamaica for the day, the world seems full of Xs and holes she could fall into anytime.

Thinking about those changing Xs makes her feel the way she felt, long ago in Catholic school, when the children were told to imagine eternity. Close your eyes, the nuns said, and imagine time flowing endlessly on and on, imagine *forever*, the place your immortal souls will go and stay. The exercise always made her feel hopeless and small. Eternity is not like wind; you can't feel it on your face or see it in clouds and trees, flags, grass and sails. No earthly mirror can reflect eternity so how can our senses grasp it?

She hopes she still has time to stop breaking her heart with problems that can't be solved. Sometimes she thinks she sees a way. She remembers returning to her father's grave on the morning after his funeral. Over the last two terrible years of his life, she'd spoken to him or seen him almost every day, so going where he was seemed like the natural thing to do. It had rained overnight and pockets of water had collected in all four corners of the blue tent the funeral home had raised. She remembers how she pushed each sagging pocket, watched the water pour out and splash on the ground. She doesn't know why it made her happy to spill the water that morning or why it makes her happy to remember it now, in spite of the grave.

• ISSUE 46, 2014 •

So Little

by Josey Foo

She moved from the chair to the window (thinking about explaining something, but not sure what it should be. There were bottomless things to explain, like why she thought of herself as one thing, yet acted opposite; yearned for the chair yet moved to the window, felt like a giant cockroach head, resulting in being able to make it no further than the window wall. Leaning on the wall, she held her shoulders pulled into her chest like a woman of whom so little is expected that nothing at all is performed. She wanted to say a few things at once. Maybe if she flung her eyes to the right and her mouth to the left she might be able to say it all).

• ISSUE 29, 2009 •

Suspended

by Kyle Minor

The locker room walls were painted puke green and lined like a cage with metal hooks, and red mesh equipment bags hung from the hooks like meat. One of the bags was swinging, and I was swinging in it, and Drew McKinnick slapped at it and did his punching, and the janitor got me down.

What did my father say to the principal, and how many times had he said how many things? My boy is not 80 pounds yet. My boy is in the seventh grade. My boy is not a linebacker. Can't you see I love my boy? If you had a boy to love what would you not do?

What did the principal say to my father? Did he say he had a boy and the boy got caught drinking in the 10th grade and he kicked his own boy out of school, same as anybody else? Did he tell my father what he told us once a year when they brought the boys into the gymnasium and left the girls away? *I loved and love my wife, and she is not my ex-wife, not praise Jesus in the eyes of God, despite her running off with the Navy captain, despite it all I wait and wait and one day she will be restored to me. I know it in my heart of faith, I wait as Hosea waited, now let us pray.*

Whatever passed or did not pass between them, this once it did not matter how much money McKinnick's father gave the school, or how many animals he had veterinaried to health, or how many ordinances he had sealed with his mayor's seal. This once I came home beaten and bruised and told my father, "They suspended him for three days."

That night I slept and dreamt of three days free of red ears flicked blood red and slapped until I heard the ocean. The bathroom was mine to piss in, free of fear of footsteps from behind, one hand in my

hair and the other on my belt, the painful lifting, then my head beneath the commode water.

That afternoon I skip-stepped to the bus, the Florida sun high and hot, and this once thinking the heat balmy and tropical rather than stalking and oppressive. Then, somewhere between the Route 7 and the Route 8, somebody grabbed me by the collar and slammed me against the black bumper. At first I thought it was him, because it looked like him, same dog teeth, same mocking smile, but bigger somehow, and how had it been kept from me he had an older brother?

“You think you’re something,” he said, and lifted me until my feet were off the ground. He was as big as my father. “You ever run crying on my brother again, I’ll beat you within an inch of your life, you hear me? I wouldn’t mind breaking you.”

He had me up against the back of the bus, and somewhere somebody had taught him how to do it, and his brother, too. I can see their faces now, but younger, fleshier, their father pressing their bodies to the wall, and then, older, leaner, their sons looking down at their fathers in their fear, learning.

• ISSUE 19, 2005 •

Fish

by Nicole Walker

1.

The fish jumped a ladder built of electricity and concrete. Swimming up the Columbia is a lesson in progress. Even before the dam, the waterfalls would have battered her forefathers. The rocks would have packed a wallop, broken the skin, bruised the flesh. Now the flesh starts bruised, already whaled on by 40-pounds-per-inch spray kept narrow and forceful by the steel holes boring through 200 feet of cement. The water directs her toward the spillway. She directs her body against the current. All the roe she had to hoe.

Eggs were flying out of her tubes like baseballs out of a firing range. Follicular. Funicular. She looked at the cables of fire streaming above her. Follicles polishing those little apples.

Apple of her eye. Her silver skin turning apple-skin—ripening. Dying.

Water polishing the concrete to a smooth, slippery, no holds, no nook, no rub step.

She flipped her body up the next.

Ten more flights to go.

Share a step with another salmon.

She had swum by him a while ago.

Now he swims in circles.

She has to jump over him as well as the stair.

Head over fin.

2.

I am 11 years old and holding on to a fishing pole, trolling for big fish in the deep water off Florida's coast. I must have been beautiful then. Three grown men stand around me. One with a stubbly beard lifts my

feet and places them in the hold. To hold on. To get leverage. To bear down.

The other man, with a pair of sunglasses on his face and another on a pair of chums around his neck, holds my hand, folds it around the handle of the reel.

My father stands to my left, cheering me on.

Don't let it go. It's huge. Hold on tight.

Sunglass man pulls my hand toward my body, then out to sea. Following the turbines of the engine. Circling.

The fish, as it jumps out of the water, arches its back. It looks stubbly-faced man in the eyes.

Sunglass man holds the fish. Stubbly man hits it over the head.

No one eats 48-inch barracuda.

They throw it in the cooler anyway.

3.

Cooking filets of fish is not complicated. Salt and pepper the fish. Press the water out of the skin with a knife. Slide it across at a 20 degree angle. In the pan, in some oil, two minutes on the skin side, one minute on the flesh.

It's the sauce that's difficult.

First you need an herb rarely paired with food, like rue or lavender or chamomile.

Sometimes green tea. Or use demi glace.

Then you need an emulsion. One stick of butter per dinner party. OK, maybe two.

Reduce the green tea or lobster body fish stock. Or warm the demi glace.

Strain through a chinois. Strain through cheese cloth. Strain one more time for good measure.

With a steel whip, turn in a cube of butter. Don't let it melt. Emulsify means "to make one."

Make the reduction open up and hook elbows with a molecule of the fat. Water and oil don't mix, my ass. Water and oil are the same thing, if you whisk fast enough and if you add the butter slowly.

Puddle the emulsion in the middle of the plate.

Pile under the fish some truffled risotto, some roasted potatoes, some chard wilted in wine.

For color add citrus or tomatoes or little dices of carrot, strewn around the plate.

Let the fish rest for a minute or so. To re-distribute the juices. To firm the flesh. Do not let the fish get cold.

• ISSUE 57, 2018 •

When a 17-Year-Old Checkout Clerk in Small Town Michigan Hits on Me, I Think about the Girl I Loved at 17

by Krys Malcolm Belc

When it opened in 1908, *The New York Times* called the PATH train *one of the greatest engineering feats that has ever been accomplished*: perhaps greater than, they noted, the ongoing Panama Canal project, which wouldn't be up and running for six more years. Spanning only three and a half miles, the PATH train from Hoboken to Manhattan took about 10 minutes to cover the unimaginable distance between New York and New Jersey, and drew crowds numbering in the thousands: to see it take off into the black unknown; to see it appear in another state, as if by magic, minutes later; to ride. President Roosevelt, who'd taken an interest in the project, flipped a switch in the White House to turn on the lights inside the PATH tunnel. It was a national thrill, being able to get out of New Jersey so easily.

When I was 17, on a spring Saturday, she and I took a NJ Transit train to the PATH station in Hoboken, and then the PATH to New York, though we could have come more directly by bus. Buses are decidedly less sexy than trains. On a park bench in a park whose name we didn't know, we ate chicken parm sandwiches half-wrapped in foil, cheese and hot grease sliding between our fingers and onto the concrete between our legs. Nobody we knew knew where we were; we had told no one we were leaving our cars at the train station by a Starbucks in a neighboring small town, that we were on our way somewhere nobody would talk about two girls who never allowed more than a few inches of space between them.

This young woman at the small-town Walgreens check out thinks I

am 17, like her, though I will turn 30 in two months. Transitioning is like that: in some ways you regret the adolescence you never had, and in other ways you get to have it. In the eyes of the world I have turned from an adult woman into a teenage boy. A modern engineering marvel, a human aging rapidly in the wrong direction. The checkout girl looks me dead in my face, smiles big, says, *I like your hat*. She laughs a little when I say *Thanks*. The girl I loved at 17 and I did not kiss that day or any other day for the years we pretended we were best friends. We never spoke about what it was. Nobody that I can remember ever flirted with me without secrecy or shame, then.

The PATH train was quiet—Saturday morning empty—when we took it that day. When the PATH opened, the demand to ride was so great that Cornelius Vanderbilt had to stand. Reportedly, his friends made fun of him. In response, he said: *I would rather ride under the Hudson today hanging to a strap than ride to Albany in a private car.*

Everyone, after all, just wants to feel like everybody else.

• ISSUE 52, 2016 •

Bear Fragments

by Christine Byl

1. In the High Sierra, her first time sleeping in a tent, my friend Pilar from Barcelona is terrified. She is afraid of bears. She wipes toothpaste from the corners of her mouth, tucks her hair into her sleeping bag, and cinches the hood against cool alpine air. She stares at the nylon ceiling. She lies still as a log, attuned to any noise outside. All night she hears it—*rustle rustle*—a bear in the bushes, edging closer to her, closer. She freezes. Holds her breath. The noise stops. She relaxes. The noise begins, rhythmic: *rustle rustle*. At 5 a.m., exhausted, her eyes drift shut and—quiet. The sound is her eyelashes against the silky polyester of her sleeping bag. *Open, shut. Open, shut.* She blinks, stops the rustle, starts it again, stops, starts. The bear is in her bag. She sleeps.

2. A Lingit story tells of a woman who married a bear. From territory to region, village to clan to family, the story moves. Once, I heard this: if you are a woman and a bear comes close, lift your shirt and show him your breasts. He will see you are a woman and remember your kinship. He won't hurt you. I have never had to try.

3. Northern Rockies grizzlies mate in early summer, lumbering towards lowlands in May, meeting up in meadows of glacier lilies just pushed up through snow. For weeks, they do little more than loll and hump and goose each other, frisky or dutiful as aging lovers. The boar gives sperm in great jets. But a sow does not become pregnant then. Her body protects a fertilized egg, un-implanted, for months while she feeds, grows fat and slow on grub-moth-root-fish-beetle-seed. A bear cannot be pregnant before she is full. By late September, when food is leaving and the bear tires of gorging, the egg burrows into her uterine wall. The bear dens up. The cubs circle and twist inside of her;

she breaths once, twice every few hours, her heart nearly stopped. Mid-winter, cubs are born. For months in the den, they suck the sow's milk-grub-moth-root-fish-beetle-seed while she lies on her side dreaming of glacier-liliated fields.

4. Bear a grudge bear fruit bear your burdens bear down bear out bear arms bear the cost bear scrutiny bear left at the corner bear my grief bear a child bear up under pressure bear in mind bear witness bear north.

5. In Glacier National Park, I knew a photographer. One morning in an alpine meadow Lester saw a bear across the hill, a dot on the horizon. "It looked pretty far away. I had to squint to see it," he said. Lester photographed the bear as it came closer and closer, steady and steady. He yelled, but it came up to him and stood and looked at him, and Lester fell down and played dead like you are supposed to, if a bear gets that close. The bear sniffed him and turned him over (ripped his skin open in long tears on his back) and licked him and sat on his leg (blew out his knee) and shit on his middle, a wet pile. The bear moved on. Lester can still hike, the wrecked knee fixed with metal plates. He still takes pictures in the mountains, awake to territory and perimeter. "I don't blame that bear for a thing it did," he said.

6. While his sister wasn't watching, a young boy wandered off. His village was in a mountainous area in Pakistan, and the family worried. The boy was only two. A search party looked for days without a sign. They were about to give up when one man found footprints outside a cave. Inside, the searchers saw the boy nestled with a bear, curled close to her side, both asleep. The men entering the cave woke the bear, and they shot her and returned the boy to his family. At a hospital, he was examined. The boy had no scratches on him, not a single mark. In the boy's belly? The milk of a bear.

7. The scent of a bear is a thick, greased wind. Close, you can smell it right away. It precedes any other trace in the air: blueberry or saw exhaust, spruce needle or wood smoke. Old and sharp. It brings to mind adrenaline and rot and sex, and everything I've ever known that's wild.

• ISSUE 49, 2015 •

Recesses

by Mark Stricker

Some girls wrap a jump rope around my neck and drag me across the asphalt of the St. Bruno's School parking lot. Jackie has been pinning me to the ground with the stones of her knees so she could kiss me... and now this. "They were trying to kiss me!" I tell the nun, as she rubs salve on the red ring around my neck.

On the school bus, I sit next to some older boys. They push me out of my seat. I think it is funny. My mother tells me I should not sit with them. I have made a mistake. They are not my friends. Quentin is also older, but in my grade because he was held back. He invites me to his house for Halloween. His father tells us a story about a woman who rises from the dead, and another about a man with a golden arm. Years later, Quentin hangs himself with a pair of jeans in a temporary holding cell.

One day our teacher tells me that I am now a "peer counselor." Instead of going out for recess, I have to stay inside and talk to kids who are having problems, as though I have answers. "My brother hates me," says Nicole. My entire knowledge of sibling relationships is gleaned from watching *Family Ties*. I tell her that Zach is probably just jealous of her. The Challenger explodes.

We are singing *O Little Town of Bethlehem* when one of the twins faints, his mouth still rounding "O" in the back row of students. His brother stands as if he'd sloughed off a skin of himself. We've learned this somewhere—a brother standing above his brother. For a long moment no one moves. Then someone kneels to pick him up, a crumpled boy lost in deep, dreamless sleep.

If the kickball goes over the fence into the woods, someone must get it. Rumors emerge from the trees: people having sex, a satanic cult

sacrificing blonde girls. Tree roots jut from the dirt like femurs. I pick up the largest rocks I can find and throw them at Marc's head. I'm not a good aim. I'm not sure what will happen if I hit him. All I know is that I want it to hurt. Marc is a liar. Valerie, the quietest girl in class, kicks the ball. It hits Doug in the face. Blood explodes from his nose.

When I turn 12, I receive a lot of horrible misinformation about sex from the usual source: Catechism class. The important thing, as always, is that we feel ashamed and afraid. Our instructor warns us that premarital sex will make us yell out other women's names when we tried to make love to the one we will eventually marry. "You know how it feels good when you poop?" he asks us. We don't. Well, anal sex could lead to a ruptured something-or-other, and the girl could bleed to death. "How would you like to explain that to her parents?" he asks.

During Mass, I scan the pews for Melissa's golden hair. One day in art class, she talks to me. Something like hope grows inside. But then I hear the rumors: She let Kevin touch her breasts. Years later, Kevin pleads guilty to robbing an 81-year-old woman of her life savings and is sentenced to five to 10 years in prison. "These kids," the woman tells a reporter, "they want money or whatever they can get to sell for money, and they're too lazy to work for it." Though that doesn't explain why he'd smashed her statue of the Virgin Mary.

I'm a *faggot* on the bus ride home from school. I eavesdrop on girls in Algebra as they complain about their boyfriends. Mostly I wear headphones, spend time silent, daydream violence. It could be worse. I could be the girl whose face one guy smacked with his dick in the back seat of the bus. He can dunk, is great on the baseline, plucks rebounds deftly from the backboard.

• ISSUE 59, 2018 •

Katy Perry Is Crooning and Won't Stop Just Because I Did

by Shuly Xóchitl Cawood

Because this is a small village and people tell other people's news, I already know when I walk past your mother's house, and the garage door is flung open wide as if it got stopped mid-scream, and you are lining up the contents on the lawn (an artificial Christmas tree, boards that once belonged to shelves) that your brother died 15 hours ago in the early hours of morning, that he had trouble breathing because of the flu or because of some other condition the coroner will discover—I will learn about that, too, surely, when the news comes, because this is how a village runs: on private information, on what really happened, on what maybe happened, and especially if it's bad news, we pass it along like hot potatoes so it won't burn our knowing hands, and in this way perhaps it might not happen to us, not in the same way, or not so badly.

I pause at the edge of your lawn and pull out my earbuds—Katy Perry is crooning and won't stop just because I did—and tell you I heard about what happened and I'm sorry, and you are startled because we have never talked to one another but as happens in a small town, I know who you are and you know who I am, by name anyway, and you have forgotten for a moment the way a village runs: on recognition and proximity. We must look each other in the eye if we are to ever look at ourselves. You don't know what crises I have lived through, for I moved away and am only back now, and it isn't really fair that I know about your brother today, and it isn't fair that we are both alive and that his silver Grand Marquis sits with a cold engine on the side of the street and it isn't fair that after I have expressed my sorrow for your loss I can step back on the sidewalk

and off your lawn. I can slip the earbuds back in, and there will be Katy Perry, still singing, and if I want her to start up again all I have to do is push rewind which I won't—but I could—while you are left with the contents of the garage laid out on the lawn and you won't be able to put any of it back but you can't leave it out either in the rain that is coming down already.

• ISSUE 43, 2013 •

Five from Kyrgyzstan

by Jia Tolentino

One:

At sunrise I've packed myself onto a tiny rumbling minibus headed for the capital. Outside the ground is frozen and the sky casts the mountains in pale pink and gold. In the back, a live goat stuffed into a plastic bag bleats gently.

It's Halloween weekend. I'm wearing a school uniform that I borrowed from one of the students in the class I am teaching, both a costume and an attempt to pass unmarked, to control the whole lookalike situation. The fat Kyrgyz grandmother sitting next to me peers at my book. "You must have studied very hard in school to read English so easily," she tells me, her face a big round prune. "*Molodetz, jakshe kyzm.*"

Congratulations, good daughter, she says, mixing her two languages, patting me on the head. I reply quietly as to not give myself away.

Two:

Just a week earlier, our plane from Moscow descended over the expanse of darkness that was Bishkek, the capital, at night. I was heartbroken and thinking only of myself, and I cried silently when I saw that there were no lights at night in the city, not in any part of the country at all. Now it's newly April and Bishkek is burning. The mobs are pulling down the president's house.

We've been evacuated to the Air Force base that launches United States efforts in Afghanistan. The soldiers are black and white country boys who all seem to be 19, strong-jawed, out of America for the first time. The volunteer girls can't wear tank tops; we've caused more disruption here than in our Muslim villages. "The things I'd do to

those Peace Corps bitches," one of them said, walking by.

Right now they're doing karaoke. Letting off steam. They're stuck here just like us. The throng screams the chorus: Let the Bodies Hit the Floor.

Three:

The winding road up the mountain removes us from the sweltering heat of the valley. In this rickety taxi there's a man next to me with stubble and pale blue eyes. "A journalist reporting on the genocide," I said to Peace Corps, but he's my boyfriend. A month later, I'll almost get kicked out for this and other lies.

In Kyrgyz, I ask the driver if he has any hash. He shakes his head, taps his inner elbow with two fingers. "Oh, that's okay," I say. "We don't need that. But thank you so much."

Four:

We're stumbling back from a Halloween party at an expat club full of Russian strippers. I'm still wearing that uniform. The Kyrgyz schoolgirl looks like a modest cartoon housemaid in space: a black dress, a ruffled white apron, bangs and two pigtails, and a fluffy white hydrangea-sized bow behind each ear. One of my friends has been bopping my bows all night, and they're crooked. The sun is coming up, a dull haze lightening the polluted air over the Soviet high-rises.

Behind the dumpster of our rented flophouse, the volunteers are smoking hash from Tajikistan off a soda can, laughing. Then we hear screams from the side street and run toward the noise. A Roman centurion and a Statue of Liberty lie on the asphalt, their faces bloody and torn.

"We got jumped while we were making out," the girl says. She's from Jersey, unflappable. "It's fine. Is there any hash left?"

Five:

It's late November, my 22nd birthday, a school day. I get up in the blue darkness, and the cow outside moans; my host mom is hung over, she must have slept in. My toddler host brother waddles into the

kitchen while I'm making oatmeal and takes a shit in the nearest bowl. With that, I decide not to make him the breakfast that he won't have otherwise. I am selfish all the time here, but that morning I call it my birthday present.

At school, little boys in black fourth-hand suits play tag with their backpacks on, crunching frost on the soccer field. In the unheated concrete building I go to my eighth-grade class, all girls, my first each morning. Then I see my desk, arrayed with handmade riches, each trinket and toy and purse and potholder sewn carefully from felt, embroidered with my name. Hearts are scattered across these precious little objects, miniature yurts, cards that say "I love you." My students smile at me shyly in their maid costumes and big round red cheeks. They're just years away from marriage, and I cannot remake their world for them, I fail them every day.

• ISSUE 53, 2016 •

How to Discuss Race as a White Person

by Sam Stokley

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¹ See: sweet-tooth; AriZona Beverages

² A Peruvian-American

³ Did you read the whole article?

⁴ In all ways but name, slavery still existed nearly 70 years later in 1930 when Hamer daily picked three times her weight in cotton. She was 13.

⁵ Crime is geographic. Why do people live where they live?

⁶ Is this the longest you've gone without inserting your voice?

⁷ Oppression is not a choice.

⁸ Approx. 240 minutes, or 14400 seconds.

⁹ See: "Strange Fruit."

¹⁰ You have access to Google(dot)com.

¹¹ Waiting isn't listening.

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¹²What gives me the right?

¹³ Hamer was one of thousands of poor women of color to be sterilized without their knowledge or consent. This still happens today. This is violence.

¹⁴ Their names were Sandra Bland, Kindra Chapman, Joyce Curnell, Ralkina Jones & Raynette Turner.

¹⁵What if you'd called those cops?

¹⁶What if you hadn't?

¹⁷ "2015 may be one of the safest years for law enforcement in a quarter century." *The Guardian*.

¹⁸ The number of people killed by cops this year will surpass the number of American soldiers killed in any single year since 2003. This is also true of last year.

¹⁹ "Good cop" presupposes a baseline of annihilation.

• ISSUE 58, 2018 •

Hairy Credentials

by Nicole Cyrus

Summary of Qualifications

Nicole is a professional woman who wants to rock her Afro in business settings and still command respect. Her career includes 10 years of camouflaging her true self to stay marketable and frying her mane to avoid frightening employers with her real hair texture. The consequences of her cover-up—a bald spot and thinning strands—recently forced her to chop off her long bob and come out of hiding. But her natural hair is not an impediment. Her curls in no way diminish her IQ, performance, or ability to speak in an articulate manner.

Areas of Expertise

- **Planning:** efficient at scheduling work meetings before 3 p.m. to allow herself plenty of time to cut through rush hour traffic in Washington, D.C., to keep a weekly appointment to straighten the kinks out of her hair.
- **Budgeting:** experienced in allocating and spending thousands of personal dollars every year to have silky tresses like Oprah Winfrey to avoid questions about her professionalism and discourage management from branding her as a radical.
- **Communications:** adept at politely but firmly asking colleagues to stop sniffing or playing with her hair, all while staying calm and maintaining camaraderie among her teammates.
- **Training:** skilled at leading discussions on a range of topics unrelated to her job or the company's mission, including but not limited to: black hair textures, black hairstyles, and black hair etiquette to mostly white male audiences.

Accomplishments

- Received positive feedback from colleagues on her brown-bag meetings, despite her refusal to repeat or expand her talk on black hair textures.
- Recovered from chest pains and stomach cramps after she cropped her hair into a pixie, thanks to a mishap with a flatiron.
- Taught black women inside and outside the company how to explain dramatic transformations in their appearance—such as haircuts, use of wigs and hair weaves, and, in extreme cases, headscarves—because of bad relaxers or overheated hair styling tools.

Education

A master's and bachelor's degree from a top 50 university.

Special Skills

- Proven ability to write and edit financial reports while sitting under a hooded dryer in a crowded beauty salon.
- Demonstrated success in reducing the volume of exasperating, personal questions asked by coworkers such as “Why is your hair flat on your head?” or “How do you make your hair so soft?”

Presentations and Workshops

“What Not to Ask a Black Woman about Her Hair on a Rainy Day.”
Company A, Washington, D.C.

“No, I Didn't Over-Condition My Hair. I Got a Fresh Relaxer.”
Company B, Washington, D.C.

“How to Stand Next to a Black Woman and Hold Yourself Back from Touching or Staring at Her Hair.” Company B, Washington, D.C.

“The Fundamentals of Black Hair Textures for Diverse Audiences (Part I).” Company C. Washington, D.C.

Honors and Awards

Multiple awards for actual job performance.

Affiliations

Member, Black Professional Women Tired of Natural Hair Bias

Former Member, Black Women Straightening Their Hair to Stay Employed

• ISSUE 13, 2003 •

Alive

by Laurie Lynn Drummond

There is a serial killer at work in Baton Rouge, and so, as I drive into the city on this rainy mid-August afternoon to visit family, I move from simply alert to hyper alert. In addition to the three murdered women, there have been four attempted abductions in the past two weeks; the last woman fought her attacker off with a machete. Yesterday, a line of women snaked out the door of a police supply store, waiting to purchase pepper spray. The store sold out by noon.

For once, I am not in the minority. Alert is a natural state for me, and the quick transition to hyper alert is easy. I worked as a police officer in this city in the 1980s. I know, intimately, what one human being can do to another. And I've seen crime scene pictures of the serial killer's first victim, examined the evidence, learned details withheld from the press.

I stop at City Newstand to pick up a newspaper. A nice-looking man—bald, early 30s, dark shirt—in a green Chevy Blazer is backing out of the space across from mine. His car stops, and I feel his gaze as I retrieve my wallet, open the car door. Our eyes meet, and he smiles. I keep my face blank and walk briskly into the store. *Creep*, I think. And then I'm ashamed. I've worked hard since I left police work to cultivate tolerance and gentleness, to not live suspicious 24-7.

I grab my newspaper and glance at magazines in the rack beside me. When I look up, the bald man is in the store. He smiles again. My throat constricts. *Don't be a silly panicked female*, I chide, *it's just coincidence*. He leaves as I pay for my newspaper and hovers outside, head down as though he's reading, but his eyes are on me.

And I know, deep in my gut knowing, old habit knowing, that this isn't coincidence. This man is stalking me. That's when the minuscule

tremble in my knee kicks in, the tremble I haven't felt since I wore a uniform. If I were still a cop, this wouldn't make my knee tremble. But I am simply a civilian. A female civilian.

I track right, pretend to study a magazine. Five minutes later, when an older gentleman leaves the store, I am right on his heels, walking tough to my car. The bald man paces me step by step to his own car four spaces down.

My hands tremble, my mouth is dry, and I hate, with every screaming fiber of my being, that I gave up all guns two years ago.

I wait for the bald man to leave first. He drives to the far exit, turns right. I expel a deep breath and turn left at the nearest exit, stop at the traffic light. When I look in my rearview mirror, he is behind me. Fear flutters frantic against the walls of my body.

I reach for a pen and piece of paper, jot down a detailed description of him, his car, curse Louisiana for not requiring front bumper license plates.

He follows me through five intersections. Resolve tightens in my gut. *Okay, buddy, I think, you've picked the wrong woman.* I will stop at a convenience store, call my friend Ike, a homicide detective. I'll get the whole damn department out here.

We approach the interstate, and he suddenly veers up the entrance ramp.

And he is gone.

For the next two days, I'm well beyond hyper alert. I hate being this way and cut my visit short. Tension dissipates as Baton Rouge disappears in my rearview mirror. I turn on the radio, roll down the window, smile.

Thirty minutes later I am crossing the Atchafalaya Swamp, headed toward my home in Texas. When the Whiskey Bay exit sign appears, every particle in my body constricts. This is where the third victim was found, naked, with her throat cut.

And that's when I finally get, really get, what I have always known. Alertness, tolerance, compassion, suspicion: none of it matters. I am vulnerable simply because I'm alive.

• ISSUE 40, 2012 •

Perdition

by Kristen Radtke



• ISSUE 51, 2016 •

Success and Prosperity

by Bouiyan Chen, translated by Jennie Chia-Hui
Chu

A car hit our dog Prosperity not too long ago. The vet took out the staples in his body recently, and it looks like Prosperity has his health back.

Prosperity's big brother is Success.

No one remembers when we started to call Success Success, as my grandma named him. (Grandma's last name is Zheng, same as Zheng Chenggong, the Chinese military leader who successfully ended the Dutch ruling of Taiwan in the 1660s.) Grandma always says: "You see, every day I will call out, 'come here Success; come here Success'; and then success will come."

Smart as Grandma is, she has been a farmer all her life—willingly. Our impoverished family could only afford an education for the youngest son; everyone else went to work in the factories or picked bananas after graduating from elementary school. You have to give the boy credit; he went to the best university in Taiwan, majored in Physics, and eventually became the president of a college and a National Policy Adviser. But we only learned about him from the newspaper.

Grandma loves to ride her bike in the pleasant breeze and hums the melody of the song, "I have to be successful." She also loves to sing it to me over the phone: "You must love success." And every time we go back to Grandma's house in Gao Su, we hear her praying in the morning: "Protect us... gods and goddesses... come success and prosperity...."

Success had a twisted life. He was a guard dog at Uncle's factory in Tai Chung. A mentally ill worker took an iron bar and beat him

several times. He was bruised everywhere and didn't even dare to whimper. He shed his fur like crazy. Uncle took Success to Gao Su, and it was at Grandma's that Success got back on his feet.

Success always sat in the passenger side of the truck, accompanying my grandfather to work at the eggplant farm. Even Grandma, who disliked dogs previously, started to spoil Success, letting him sleep in the house. But Success could be mischievous. He killed many chickens and bit the neighbor's Chihuahua. His fighting nature got him into trouble many times.

One day, by mistake, Success ate dog food put out by a neighbor who used pesticide in it that was meant for street dogs. White foam came out of Success's mouth as his body gradually turned stiff and cold. We buried him on the eggplant farm. My grandfather blamed himself, though no one thought it was his fault. After Success died, we got another dog. Grandma named him Prosperity. She had given up the idea of being successful herself a long time ago; she only hoped that her descendants would prosper somehow.

I thought Grandma would never get old. She always has things to do and stories to tell. But she passed out in the field not long ago, and we were told she had cervical cancer. I saw the X-ray. The tumor resembled a small, curved eggplant. I thought Grandma used her own body to fertilize the eggplant, and to fertilize her family. The eggplant matured while Grandma withered.

The day of the operation, her grandchildren gathered around the hospital bed, bawling. Grandma looked thin and pallid. But she grinned, waving her hand: "No problem! It will be a success! Success!" We were crying rivers of tears, yet she was the one who comforted us. Maybe her heirs, like me, will never be successful or prosperous, but on bitter days, it becomes clear to me how grand and courageous her earnest yearning was for her descendants to succeed.

• ISSUE 27, 2008 •

Quinto Sol

by Michelle Otero

“All grants of land made by the Mexican government...shall be respected as valid...” —ARTICLE X, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed by representatives of Mexican and U.S. governments in February 1848; stricken from treaty ratified by US Congress in May 1848

“Our people were kings,” your father would whisper after handing over the day’s corn and chile verde to El Lagartijo, a man with one polished star to hold up his pants and another to cover his heart. A man whose boots were never dusty, even when he sat at a table in the fields, a scale beside him, the harvest stacked in burlap behind him, a ledger opened before him, the curandera holding an umbrella over him. A man with thick hands and skin so clear you could almost see his blood run. It made him seem more real, more alive somehow, than you, your father or any of the Mexicans on the new border.

Now you must ask permission to pull chile verde or tomatoes from the vines. So many for them. Sometimes there is enough for you.

El Lagartijo’s doctor opens your father’s mouth, tapping his teeth with a silver spike, the way your father once inspected horses. “This one can work,” he says.

One day the curandera is gone. Before Lagartijo and his doctor, the people paid her to heal. She was the first to hold you as the afterbirth and too much blood gushed from between your mother’s legs. Your father gave her the calf he’d smoked in a desert pit, eggs to cleanse your blood and spirit, rosemary to sweep away el susto. Susto. A fright so great it sends the soul into hiding. Now the calves belong to the company—a mine, a railroad, a ranch. The eggs and even the herbs belong to the town, which is just another name for mine or

railroad or ranch.

You imagine the curandera becomes wind.

El Lagartijo will take you one night. His boys will take your daughters. You are property here. This one can work.

They make your father sign a parchment littered with a language he can't read, and the next day they come to collect. You learn a new phrase that day. Water rights. You never knew a man could own what so clearly belongs to the earth.

You will sign with an X, the only letter you write, the same in either language, on either side.

Now there are sides. Us. Them. (And you don't know which you are.) Up. Down. Here. There. They will come up here from down there. They won't stop. No matter how many fences, how many Rangers tracking them through crosshairs, how hot the sun that spirits of dead mothers blow across the sky. No matter how strong la migra, how many signs on this side reading "No dogs or Mexicans allowed."

They will come.

You bury your father on the plot set aside for "you people," mark his grave with an agate you place face-down and lift only in those silent moments when you whisper to him, squatting on what must be his feet. Tracing your dark finger along concentric bands of color, you imagine a heart cracked open must look the same.

Our people were kings.

You will forget that your people built Paquimé and Tenochtitlán. You will never climb the steps leading to the moon at Teotihuacán. Your children will learn half of two languages and that will never equal one. This new country will hand them uniforms—soldier, miner, waitress, mechanic. Their names stitched in red over their hearts, your children will wander across these lands, thirsting beneath the Fifth Sun.

• ISSUE 33, 2010 •

Devotion

by Sarah J. Lin

Where I grew up in Queens, New York City, there was a boy living in the house across the street. His name was Sherman. Somewhere, there is a photo of the two of us from the day I turned seven: I am in a yellow dress and a yellow birthday hat, running down the driveway with friends; he is standing in the background, watching. He is tall, lurching, awkward; his small, sloped eyes are magnified behind the thick lenses of his brown glasses. On his face is a gummy and lopsided smile.

All through my childhood and adolescence, Sherman called my family's house two or three times a day, hoping to engage whomever picked up the receiver in conversation. He never wanted to hang up. He invited my family to his birthday party every year, came hurrying up our driveway whenever he saw one of us outside, and once a week he asked my older brother and me to come over for microwaved White Castle cheeseburgers and to hang out in his bedroom. Sometimes we went, and sometimes we didn't.

When I was 12 years old, a boy named Sherman decided he loved me. Sherman was nine years older than me and had been born with Down syndrome, an unfortunate effect of his father's exposure to the chemical Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. For nearly all of his life, Sherman wore a hearing aid and depended on crutches and a wheelchair for mobility.

Puberty had thickened his body and turned his belly into a potbelly; his skin had inflamed with red pustules of acne and then scarred. Sherman's laugh was guttural and so was his speech. He repulsed me, but my feelings did not sway his devotion. Whenever he saw me he

gripped me in a number of uncomfortable, humiliating embraces, and no matter what I told him, he stubbornly insisted that I was his girlfriend. The very idea made me indignant. But Sherman thought I was his; he believed this for years.

I was 28 years old when my neighbor Sherman passed away. His body had weakened from strokes and organ failure until, on a sunny morning in early October, his heart gave out for good. He was 37.

I had last seen Sherman a year earlier, as he lay in a metal bed resembling a crib, his body wasted, his eyes blind. His skin was soft and swollen from medications and lack of exercise; his fingers were pale and groping. Since I moved out of my parents' house, I had not gone to see him, so I had not understood or witnessed his deterioration. But now I entered his bedroom, moving gingerly around the stacks of adult diapers and pill bottles. I breathed through my mouth to avoid the smell of disinfectant that permeated the room.

I stayed for an hour, and during that time a live-in nurse assisted him with defecation. I waited in the living room, pretending I couldn't hear him. When I went to say goodbye, his hand reached up from the crib, seeking contact with mine. "I love you," he said. He wanted me to stay. Would I?

"It was nice to see you," I said. I ignored his words. I took my hand away from his and went up the stairs and out of his house.

I've narrated exactly what happened and still I am not absolved.

This is what I wish were true: I treated his affection for me with grace and humility. I did not embarrass him; I was not embarrassed. I made him feel respected and whole. During an afternoon in his bedroom, I ignored the smells and my discomfort, came close enough to the bed so that Sherman could reach me. I held his hand until he fell asleep. I was not a monster, no.

• ISSUE 37, 2011 •

Girl/Thing

by Anna Vodicka

Because I needed the cash, because it seemed like the girl thing to do, I took a certification course in babysitting to learn the essentials of diaper changing, of getting a baby to take the Gerber's off the spoon, and of infant CPR, which we practiced on naked, rubbery dolls. But they didn't teach us what to do when the job is done—when the littlest one, who screamed all night, is finally asleep in the crib, and the baby's father drives you home slurry at the wheel, and he slides a roving hand across the divide and onto the space that used to be known, seconds ago, as your innocuous upper thigh. "You're growing up so fast," he says. And sitting in the car—now a vehicle for ugly things like upper thighs, glassy eyes, and the rot-breath of intoxication—you think about how bullshit this all is, that you're growing up at the same rate as every other goddamned girl in that babysitting class who paid 25 bucks to have adults critique her in the art of child-rearing. A certified screw. But you can't do anything, because they've already taken your money, and this man is at the wheel, and your body *is* changing fast, so fast you don't know anymore if you are a girl, and if that noun means you are a person, place, or thing.

• ISSUE 59, 2018 •

Ace of Spades

by Julie Marie Wade

Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “It is a sad truth, but we have lost the faculty of giving lovely names to things. The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for.”

I wanted to be a poet so I could give lovely names to things. I wanted to be Anne of Green Gables, an orphan who disputed Shakespeare when she said, “I don’t believe a rose *would* be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage.”

Someone had coined the word for rose, had captured the soft essence of the flower in sound. But I didn’t know this other word, this harsh slab of syllable that tasted like copper, that rubbed off on my fingers like coal.

“What is a spade?” I asked my mother.

She pointed to a small shovel in her gardening bin. “It has sharp edges,” she said, “to cut deeper into the earth.”

We were a board game family, not a card game family, but once I opened a drawer in the slender table behind the couch and found at least a dozen packs of playing cards. Some were still shrink-wrapped, others coffee-stained and smelling of the world after bedtime, the world inhabited only by adults.

These were for my father’s poker club, my mother explained, along with the bucket of chips in the basement and the pipes that no one actually lit anymore. “It makes them feel good to gamble,” she said, “even though the winner only leaves with a cup of change.”

I mulled on this image—*a cup of change*. She meant pennies and nickels, but I thought of witch’s brew, drinking a potion that could alter your constitution, refashion the way your skin draped over your

bones. What if, in other words, I had always been a rose, trapped in this cabbage body, answering my whole life to the wrong name?

Later, in college, we drew cards to determine who went first at everything. "Ace is high!" everyone agreed, and the ace of spades was understood to be the highest.

"Didn't you ever play cards growing up?" my roommate asked, shuffling the deck in her fancy, accordion way. I shook my head. "I think you'd like them, the cards themselves. Every one has a story, a little biography."

The ace of spades: card of the black shovel, sharp and efficient, sometimes called a *spadrille*. High-ranking card, paradox card, the victor and the omen at once. Card of death. Is this a coincidence? The black shovel digs the grave. The dead escape the grief that plagues the living.

My mother, a teacher and a gardener, tended children and roses all her life. She clipped away thorns and made striking arrangements. She was good with the flowers, too. The doctor told her it was unlikely she could ever have a child of her own. Then, he paused and whispered the black-shovel word: *cancer*. She was 33, beautiful in her thistle-way. She believed the ace was high. She hedged her bets and made a wager.

In my first memories of my mother, she is weak and pale, returning from the hospital in my father's car. She is propped in bed with pillows at her back, a tray for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We put a rose in a vase and leave it on the bedside table.

I will not understand for many years how the surgeon spade—for it is a verb also—deep into her body, cutting away the tumors, razing the soft flesh of my origins. I will not understand for many years that when she says, "You are my only child," she means, *You are my only chance*; that when she laments, "I gave up everything for you," she fears I have not been a safe bet after all.

And then I will understand, like the presto moment in a card trick: When my father says, "You're killing your mother with this," he means, *You're going to be the death of her after all. We should have called you the spade you are.*

• ISSUE 36, 2011 •

Some Space

by Michael Martone

1.

A month ago I was tying a red polka-dotted, pink ribbon and white satin bow to the trunk of a cherry tree. The viewing of the cherry blossoms, sakura, was waning, the petals left on the bloom ragged, muscled aside by the surging green leaves, the sublime and melancholy image of a fall in the spring.

The orchard is in a field at the crook where the Interstate stub branches into the one-way arteries of Lurleen Wallace Boulevard, circulating into the heart of downtown Tuscaloosa.

We have a sister city, Narashino, in Japan, recovering, then and now, from the tsunami, the earthquake. The ribbons are a token, a kind of meditation on our fragile, distant connection.

Organized quickly, the group, a handful of volunteers, fanned out through the orchard. Our arms cradled the notions. It looked as if we were attempting to reattach bouquets of petals to the blown trees.

Our task complete, there were pictures to be taken, posed before the bedecked trees. Cars, trucks on either side zoomed. We stood still, better to be captured still. Around us a light breeze lifted the shimmering spotted ribbons, a kind of sigh. The air plucked more petals from the blossoms and spun them around and around. Our friends in Japan reported back to us that in the wreck of tsunami they had found a few cherry blossoms to regard.

Posed, we gazed off into that distance beyond the photographer, assessed the perspective, the cleaved road coming together pointing south.

A month later, the tornado stepped over that highway, there, just at the vanishing point, wedged its way into the city.

2.

The school where I teach advertises itself as The University of Alabama—Touching Lives. The televised graphic is a pulse generated in a classroom, an expanding circle ever-widening as the camera pulls out further and further even into outer-space, that ripple, that wave emanating from little ol' Tuscaloosa, there below, a speck of dirt on the moldy map of earth.

Teaching my students haiku, I have them consider the architecture of contrast. A minute gesture juxtaposed against the infinite. I take them out to Marrs Spring, the water source the college grew up around beginning in the 1830s. We watch frogs jump into the old pond, see the ripples ripple outward. Each composes a verse on the spot, using cell phones, texting the poem to a friend, a relative. I remind them that we live now in this electro-magnetic soup—text, data, digital dots and dashes emanating invisibly all around us until we draw them back out of the congested air. A few telling words. “Where are you now?”

They send their poems out into the world. We wait, contemplate the still water. Then their devices, a chorus, suddenly animate in their hands, begin to vibrate and croak, announcing, reverberating, the responses. From near. From far.

Last night, I had a little power at my house as the darkness settled over us all. I sent out pulses into space. My students, scattered by the storm, still clutched that rapidly diminishing charge in their hands. Their phones retained some spark. They echoed back. Outside, the thick air—still sultry, saturated, heavy—transmitted the sawing of actual frogs in nearby gullies and sloughs. “Here.” And “here.” And “here.” The box in my palm peeped. Spent, ratcheted down, one-by-one, the tiny tinny flashes fewer and fewer as the batteries elsewhere everywhere died. There and there and there. And, then, all that nothing.

3.

In Tuscaloosa, there is a woman, a neighbor, who walks every day from one side of town to the other, west to east to west. As she walks, she rants and preaches, cannot be persuaded to stop, cannot be talked to. She walks.

There was plenty of warning yesterday. Sirens. I raced home from campus, west by car into the rain wall, distant, the approaching storm working its way up the Black Warrior River.

Just blocks from both our homes, I catch up with the woman who walks, not walking, standing in the empty space on the corner of MLK and 6th. The space, there, is fallow, an open field, a ruin, still, of the 1840 tornado that cleared Newtown, Alabama, from the map. A nearby plaque attests to that disaster. The woman spreads open the folds of her poncho. Sails unfurling in the mounting wind, the cape whipping all around her. Then, her head down, into the wind, she walks the rest of the way home.

• ISSUE 45, 2014 •

An Address to My Fellow Faculty Who Have Asked Me to Speak About My Work

by Ayşe Papatya Bucak

My work is to write this sentence and revise it into that sentence. To take this word and replace it with that word.

My work is a novel I wrote from 5 to 7 a.m. for more than two years and that will never be published.

My work is to be the person you trust to tell the truth, even though I am a known liar.

My work is to see who you are and who I think you could become. To notice the slate grey night lit by a full moon half behind a cloud. To know what it is to want more from someone than they are willing to give. To see the shadows cast by your secrets. To notice an ant that has drowned in a single drop of water in my sink.

My work is to explain my heart even though I cannot explain my heart. My work is to find the right word even though there is no right word.

My work is to remember that I always wanted to be a writer and that one day my father turned to a friend of his and said, "This is my daughter, she is trying to be a writer," and then he corrected himself and said, "She is a writer."

My work is to stop everything when a student—right in front of me—writes the line, "I think I would be a better dancer if only I had wings."

My work is to believe in grace even though I don't believe in God. To realize that all of my greatest fears are things that are definitely going to come true. My father will die, my mother will die, my brother will, my niece, my nephew, me.

My work is to pay attention when my mother says, "I cried all of my

tears that first year I lived in Turkey.” To pay attention when my mother says of her freshman roommate, “It was like Tigger rooming with Owl.” To pay attention when my father says, “You should sit by my side and write down everything I say like the Prophet.” To pay attention when my father says, “Chickens are braver than us.” To pay attention when my nephew says to his sister, “All of your teeth are sweet teeth.” To pay attention when my nephew says to me, “I’d like to see how long you’d last in Azkaban without a book.”

My work is to tell you that without art we would be in a world without art.

My work is the blood on the heels of my socks in high school because I ran hard sometimes, but not always, so that my calluses came and went.

My work is to honor the glory of trash day, all of those cans lined up before dawn, an obedient nation in this one instance only.

My work is to believe in everybody’s capacity for kindness.

My work is to believe in everybody’s capacity for cruelty.

My work is the bird of dawn, the tale of my grief, the thief of love, the city of beauties, the nest of snakes, the helping animal, the animated doll, the transformative power of love, the juice of a single grape.

My work is to imagine a world without art so that there is never a world without art.

My work is to tell you this:

Years ago I was on the subway in Manhattan, and we stopped between stations, and the staticky voice came on the speaker and said there would be a delay of 20 minutes, and cursing ripped through the car, as if a tribe of the homeless mad had just swept into our presence. But then a young woman across from me took out a small pile of paper, and she started folding red origami swans, and each time she finished one, she handed it to one of us.

My work is my origami swans.

• ISSUE 22, 2006 •

Confession

by Michelle Valois

My English teacher's daughter had chestnut hair and bold eyes and what the boys in our class boisterously called breeder hips. My English teacher's daughter was one year younger than me, but seduced me in that clever way Catholic girls have of making you think it was all your fault. Being Catholic, too, I eagerly accepted the guilt for what had happened that night in Mary's double bed, the one she usually shared with her sister. It was February vacation and the snow that had fallen throughout the day bunkered against my English teacher's two-story colonial in the better part of town, hugging the porches and windows. The streetlights made crystal patterns on the icy window panes that refracted light and shadows off the walls in Mary's room.

My English teacher's daughter was a clever Catholic girl, whose long, thick hair fell onto her shoulders when she shook it out of its ponytail, and whose hips were far too big and bold for the boys in our class, and who earlier that night sat next to me in the backseat of Joe's mother's Mercury Marquis, her tight jeans pressing against my legs. The snow had stopped falling, and the streets had been plowed. Joe and Kevin and Lisa had picked us up and piled us in the back: Mary in the middle of me and Kevin; Lisa in the front; and all of us singing along to the songs on the radio as we drove to the fast food restaurant across from the plastics factory and then to the donut shop downtown.

At 10 o'clock, when there were no other places to drive to, Joe drove Mary home. When we pulled up to her house, I got out, too. I'm staying over, I explained. No one said anything as Mary closed the car door and led me inside. What was there to say? All girls have

sleepovers.

Mary's father sat in the living room reading a newspaper and listening to Woody Guthrie. Mary's mother sat at the dining room table grading tests. They looked up as we came in, glanced at their watches. Good time? They asked in unison. Mary said yes and led me upstairs. No one said anything. What was there to say?

Later, our nightgowns tangled about our bodies but not off our bodies, Mary whispered in my ear all that I could do if I wanted, and I wanted, but never would have dared if Mary had not confessed her secrets to me. Outside her big yellow house, streetlights illuminated the snow on the frozen ground but blurred out the stars in the sky above. Inside, Mary's brothers slept in rooms across the hall, Mary's sister slept on a cot in the attic, Mary's father snored so loudly no one could have heard what we were doing.

Much later, when our gowns had fallen entirely away and we were still awake, after the streetlights had blinked off, and the big yellow house had begun to yawn, my English teacher's family readied themselves for 10 o'clock mass at St. Leo's in the better part of town. I lay on top of Mary and felt my heart explode from terror and from joy.

A year later, it did explode. Mary went to confession and told the priest everything. Then she went to the bars where soldiers from the Army base drank on Saturday nights. She went through a whole regiment that year, that's what they said, or a whole regiment went through her—a penance of her own invention, an offering that would never be good enough to a god she did not even love.

My sister and her best friend offered me the details of Mary's bold hips in envious whispers and mostly fear. Good thing you stopped hanging around with her, they said. She's getting a bad reputation.

In all the neighborhoods in my hometown—the better parts and the worse parts—there were names for girls like Mary. There were names for me, too, only I didn't know them yet.

Mary went to confession.

I never did.

• ISSUE 52, 2016 •

Beach City

by Jaquira Díaz

We talked about Miami Beach like it belonged to us, convinced that the tourists who came down to swim in our ocean and dance in our nightclubs were fucking up our city. We were 17, 18, 19-year-old hoodlums, our hair in cornrows, too-tight ponytails, too much hairspray, dark brown lip liner, noses and belly buttons pierced, door-knocker earrings, jailhouse ankle tattoos. We didn't have time for boys from Hollywood or North Miami, busters who drove their hoopties with the windows down because they didn't have A/C, calling out to us trying to get phone numbers as we crossed Washington Avenue or Lincoln Road, our chanquetas slapping the sidewalk.

What did they know about surfing during hurricane winds, fucking on lifeguard stands, breathing under water? What did they know about millions of stray cats pissing in the sand dunes, entire flocks of rogue seagulls dropping shit torpedoes, about refugees and kilos of cocaine and bodies washing up on our shores?

We were the ones who knew what it meant to belong here, to be made whole during full moon drum circles, dancing, drinking, smoking it up with our homeboys. We knew what it meant to bloody our knuckles here, to break teeth here, to live and breathe these streets day in, day out, the glow of the neon hotel signs on the waterfront, the salt and sweat of this beach city.

One night we parked Brown's Mustang behind the skating rink on Collins, hoofed it to the beach. We took our bottles of Olde English and Mad Dog 20/20, the six of us passing a blunt and listening to 2Pac's "Hit Em Up" blaring from somebody's radio, and every time they sang, "Grab your Glocks when you see 2Pac," the boys grabbed

their dicks, and we all laughed our asses off. Brown danced, stripping off his clothes while we cheered him on, me and A.J. keeling over, slapping our knees. Flaca, China, and Cisco climbed to the top of the lifeguard stand, singing, "Go Brown! Go Brown!" When he was down to just boxers, Brown gave up, and we booed him, threw our balled-up socks and sneakers at him.

Me and A.J. were out behind the lifeguard stand, sand between our toes, feeling for each other in the dark. We ran around laughing and laughing, and I took his hand, danced circles around him in slow motion.

I don't remember when A.J. first told me he loved me, or even if he told me, but I knew. I felt it every time he came around, every time our thighs touched while sitting together on China's couch, or when the six of us had to squeeze into Brown's Mustang and I sat sideways on his lap, my lip brushing against his ear, his arms around my waist. Or when we stayed up all night talking even though he had to get up early for school the next morning—something I didn't have to worry about since I was a high school dropout. Or on nights when the liquor and the weed made my head spin, the heat and the high coming down on me all at once, and only A.J. around to keep me from falling.

Down by the shore, Brown was so fucked up he dropped to his knees, then lay down sideways on the sand. Later, we would all carry him back to his car. Flaca would drive us to her place a few blocks away. We would all stagger up the stairs to her little studio, put Brown to sleep in the bathtub, and smoke Newports on the balcony. He would wake up with the munchies an hour later. "You got any cheese?" he'd call out from the bathroom. Cisco would grab an entire pack of Kraft Singles from Flaca's fridge, and the two of us would toss them into the tub, slice by slice, while Brown tried to catch them in his mouth.

But before all that, the six of us dancing and running around on the beach, China chugging down Mad Dog, Flaca and Cisco kissing on the steps of the lifeguard stand, and A.J. looking at me under the moonlight, a cloud of smoke all around us, I wrapped my arms around him and said, "Don't let me go."

We were laughing, hitting the blunt.

We were the faraway waves breaking, the music and the ocean and
the heat rising rising rising, like a fever.

We were bodies made of smoke and water.

• ISSUE 34, 2010 •

On Being a Trucker

by Lia Purpura

All the stuff I don't have to say. How lucky I am.

Like "I drive a truck of cheap perfume." Of canned tomatoes, of cleaning supplies, I'm not sure it matters, or maybe it does in the trucking world: I drive tires vs. I drive milk. Oil vs. Seafood. Furniture. Toilets. A truck of cars. A truck of truck parts. Dissembled things. The proud cargoes of military stuff: training manuals, army tarps. To be in a convoy. To be the lead driver. Of arms. Of *munitions*. I don't drive much, except myself. I'm not hauling much to speak of, except bags of groceries a few times a week. Some mornings, kids with cumbersome projects. I used to talk about driving trains, metaphorically, and wrecking trains. Train-wreck as state-of-being: the induced chaos, blind curves and collisions. I still like watching junkyard magnets pick up cars and move them around or drop them into a crusher. Some trucks carry crushed cars, a dozen at a time—neat, shimmery, windowless. I like even more the wrecking ball—not the metaphor, but the thing itself—slamming, once it gets itself in motion, into the side of a building. Softening, then fully smacking the center so the top collapses and the base can be dozed. And the lot cleared up and made flat again. I'd like to ride in the wrecking ball cab and feel, along with the driver (operator, I guess it would be) how the swinging builds and builds until it's time to let the ball fly. Plan for the arcs. Count the swings. Foresee the spot, sweetened by anticipated contact, then—release.

In the book on medieval weaponry I had as a kid, the flail was my favorite. I liked the sketched concentration on the warriors' faces, but I liked the photographs of the objects best. And though I didn't visualize points of contact (there was no one I wanted to pulverize, I

didn't have any enemies), I did think it efficient to use the power that motion supplied and not have to sweat too much. The flail was a planet set in motion, those primitive, spiky rays like a ring of light if you got the thing orbiting fast enough. You stood at the center, holding the staff, swinging the ball on its chain, and whatever contact you made was neat and distant and clean.

I also liked maces. Maces were popular in the book, which sketched out many varieties. A truck of maces, from mace-supply. Manacles and morningstars, catapults and quarterstaves—over a beer, how to talk about that? What's the status-y cargo these days? Secret troop stuff, like waterboards, are out. Which, checked off on a packing slip, must've sounded pretty benign. Some kind of treated lumber. Or are those truckers way past "weird, what people will pay to transport," and just drive?

• ISSUE 53, 2016 •

How to Erase an Arab

by Julie Hakim Azzam

“Israeli General Says Mission is to Smash P.L.O. in Beirut”

Seventh grade, social studies—On the family tree, next to the names of my father’s family, I write locations of birth: Lebanon, Palestine, Syria. I trace flags from my atlas. There is no Palestinian flag in the book, but I know how to draw it. When the teacher walks around the classroom commenting, all she says about mine is: “Palestine isn’t a country.”

Palestine is a place where memories and stories are born. *Do I remember Gaza or my grandmother’s stories about Gaza?* Palestine is a phantom limb that continues to send pain signals through the nerves.

“District Starving in Beirut Battle Gets Food Aid; Early Effort Thwarted”

Seventh grade, the kitchen—Jodie’s brown eyes are open wide; her mouth opens, then abruptly shuts. My grandmother pauses from dicing onions and hands her a glass of water. When grandmother hands me a glass, I turn it and drink from the side her fingers haven’t touched. I hold the water in my mouth. Despite drinking from the other side, I can still taste the onion.

After I close the door to my room, Jodie lets escape the thing she’s been holding inside.

“Who was that brown woman in your kitchen?”

My grandparents, refugees, recently arrived at the airport after a bomb destroyed their Beirut apartment. My grandfather is so thin his skin hangs from his body. I wonder if it will slide to the floor. After establishing herself in the kitchen, grandmother begins prolific production, a *compensatory cooking*, my mother says. Out of the kitchen comes freshly baked pita bread, huge trays of kafta, overflowing

bowls of salad.

My mouth waters, but I tell her I want McDonald's. *Give me Hamburger Helper, macaroni and cheese, hot dogs.* I push her food aside.

"Palestinians Exit Lebanon in Droves"

Eighth grade, the television—My family moves the following year, and when the teacher assigns the same family ancestry project, I ask my father if I can change our ancestry. The idea comes to me while watching Brian Boitano and Brian Orser battle for the gold in the winter Olympics in Calgary.

The only way I can discern one Brian from the other is by their differently colored outfits, yet I want to be part of the Brians. I want to be so confident I kick down the door of every room, to cry proud tears of victory under a flag whose validity is neither questioned nor a metonym for violence. I am willing to offend, to jettison Palestine.

My parents exchange a glance. "All right."

Instead of drawing the green cedar tree that adorns the Lebanese flag, or the flag of a stateless people, I get out my red marker and begin to draw a maple leaf.

"Car Bomb on West Beirut Street Leaves 25 Dead and 180 Injured"

Tenth grade, the foyer—Nicole steps into the foyer to pick me up and is met by my father, who asks her if she knows what is going on in Lebanon. She squints, trying not to appear stoned.

My father points a finger and yells about *typical Americans* and *ignorance* and *privilege* and *nobody here notices*.

The day before, my uncle and his friends stood walking on a West Beirut street. A car bomb detonated and killed them all. According to the *Times*, "most of the dead were unidentified."

When we get into her large, rust-colored Impala, Nicole snorts, "The fuck was that?" No clue, I mumble, but I know that history is a house I must live in. As the ignition cranks, I imagine it. Maybe the men were talking about Amal or infighting among the Palestinians. Perhaps over cigarettes, they commiserated over the mundane: wives, kids gone stir-crazy, food shortages. They didn't notice the

unassuming Peugeot or Fiat.

Nobody ever does.

“Wrecked by Years of Civil War, Beirut is Rising from the Ashes”

University, near Lake Placid—From bare ground, my father erects a house near the site of the 1980 Winter Olympics. He selects wood, casement, granite, and marble. My Muslim father attends Catholic Mass, and makes friendly introductions with neighbors. If they ask, he tells them he is Greek. Or Italian.

It’s bad to lie your way through life. *But this is easier, better.* What’s worse is how it keeps happening. We build it—our lives, a city, a home—we break it down. Over and over.

*Note: All headlines are from the *The New York Times* between 1982–1995

• ISSUE 49, 2015 •

Milk for Free

by Deesha Philyaw

Item: “Did anybody touch you down there?”

Down there, I understood, referred to the mystery below my waist, between my legs. A place where my mother said no one should ever, ever touch me.

My mother asks me this question, nightly, as she undresses me for my bath, until I learn to bathe myself. What I learn—besides the fact that no one should ever, ever touch me down there—is that this burden is mine. I have to be the guardian of down there, as well as the giver of the daily report of any errant touching that happens down there. I don’t like it. It’s too much, and I don’t even know why.

Item: Old ladies in the neighborhood would watch us inside their spotless houses during the day while our mothers worked. Then, when we were old enough to stay home alone and play outside unsupervised, they would watch us from the shadows of their front porch, or from the slit between the curtains in their front window. One of them, Miss Maybelle, would come outside without her teeth, smack her lips, and say, “Don’t let the boys fool ya. Why they gon’ buy the cow if they can get the milk for free?”

Item: *Hide and go get it!*

The game was like hide and seek, except the boys looked for the girls and “it” was whatever a girl allowed a boy to do when he found her. And sometimes it was what he did to her whether she allowed it or not.

Item: In sixth grade, the grown men would come to Cyprana’s house while her mother was at work. One day, her mom came home and sat down on the couch next to some white stuff.

“What’s this?”

“Curl activator,” Cyprana said.

Did your mother believe you? we asked her.

Cyprana shrugged. The men sometimes gave her money. Sometimes she gave some of it to her mother.

Item: What if you want to give the milk away for free? The summer after sixth grade, I have my first real boyfriend. We do things below the waist that leave me wondering if I’m still a virgin. My sex education, courtesy of Jackie Collins novels and biology books read while sitting on the floor in the Children’s section of the public library, doesn’t offer me any clarification on the matter.

I think that this is what love is—sweaty, sticky, forever—until the next time.

Item: Go back, way, way back. At the time, I don’t have the words for all of it. But then the memory comes back, and here it is: I’m two years old. Maybe three. It’s the early 1970s. A white woman—a detective—is on our front porch asking my mother questions. My mother is sitting in the old wooden rocking chair that I like to pretend is a rocket ship. She’s crying. Her shirt is pushed up and her belly is exposed. She has stretch marks; I did that. They remind me of sun rays.

My mother was walking home from work through the field between Darnell Cookman School and our house. A shortcut.

There is a word for this. *Rape.*

Item: Mick Jagger sang, “Black girls just wanna get fucked all night...”

Item: “Old enough to bleed, old enough to breed...” Of course, the men who say filthy things to me when I walk home from the bus stop aren’t thinking about pregnancy, or any consequences really. They never cross the street to where I am, and I cling to this. As long as they don’t cross the street, I’ll be safe.

Shorty Hall, the neighborhood drunk, doesn’t cross the street. But one time, he does this thing with his tongue and his hands and I run. I run all the way home.

My mother calls the police. The officer writes down everything I say. My mother is frantic, yelling, crying. The officer keeps looking at his notepad. He asks me again if I’m 11, like he can’t believe it. I know

what he's thinking because it's what everyone says: I'm "big for my age."

"Ma'am, there's nothing we can do."

No one can protect me. If Shorty Hall doesn't rape me, it'll be because he chooses not to.

Item: When asked what the position of women was in the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, activist Stokely Carmichael replied, "Prone."

Good girls don't. Black girls will. Keep your legs closed. Don't let the boys fool ya. There's nothing we can do.

There's nothing we can do.

• ISSUE 38, 2012 •

Surrender

by Nina Boutsikaris

We set out the sugar and packets of fruit pectin and line up rows of clean glass jars on Daddy's knife-scarred butcher block in the kitchen. Then we pick blueberries for jam in the steamy July afternoon at McClan farms. My bathing suit dries under my overalls while we work. At first, each one plunk, plunks to the bottom of the bucket. But soon there is no sound. The berries hold each other while the handle of the bucket drives a deep pink groove into my palm.

It's dark in the hayloft above the McClan store, the smell is sweet and dry. If you're lucky, you might spot a barn kitten moving between the dried flower bouquets that hang from the low beams like an upside down meadow. The thick air gets me dizzy. Dust swirls in the yellow sprays of light that shoot through cracks in the walls. I like to crawl between the lavender, to feel the weight and heat of its delicious age.

Downstairs, Meg McClan weighs our bushels and ushers them into cardboard cartons using her fingers like a rake. She wears a canvas apron with gardening gloves peeking out of the front pocket. She tells my mother how she worries about her son who is still in Iraq. My mother asks about Hanks' corn stand—this is the first summer we haven't seen the green and white striped tent out on Route 22, promising the sweetest corn in Washington County. Not up this year? she says.

They lost a son to a silo accident, Meg tells her. The boy fell in and drowned.

Then she cuts a slice of crumbly cheddar off a big wheel and hands it to me in wax paper with a smile that is hard for her.

That family, that poor family, my mother keeps saying on the short

ride home. I twist in my seat and watch the berries bouncing in the back. I can't see it, the accident. Apart from friendly looking tractors and the wafts of sick-sweet manure that linger in the valley this time of year, I don't know about the mechanisms of farms. I only know the boy's brother tried to save him, and he couldn't. He had to watch him disappear into a machine that was at the heart of their family's life.

That was nearly 10 years ago, and the spot where the Hanks sold their sweet corn is still like a thumbprint on the side of the road, a patch of flattened brown grass and not much more. I suppose they simply surrendered, the Hanks; could not, would not pick up the pieces. But how can I begin to understand. Another farm stand took its place a half-mile away. Sheldon's, it's called, but my father calls it Shelducci's, like it's a gourmet Manhattan deli—the shelves are lined with fancy relishes, organic grass-fed meats, handmade sausages, and local artisan cheeses, all too expensive for actual locals to buy.

• ISSUE 54, 2017 •

The Salmon

by Charlotte Gullick

Before today, I've been my sister's helper. Last summer, I'd helped Cindy clean the Leggett Motel cabins scattered in the redwood grove just off the highway. The buildings are run down, porches sag, and the floors inside not exactly plumb. While the cleaning solutions burned our eyes, we'd scoured the bathtubs, the showers, and the sinks. We made the toilets shine, wrapped paper sashes—"Sanitized for Your Protection"—around the lids and seats. Cindy taught me how to make hospital bed corners, to fluff pillows just so.

She's started a better job at the Drive Thru Tree, and I am left alone. Even though I know what to do, I am 12 and unsure and timid. Without her, I'm less concerned with the exactness of a dusted shelf, with hanging towels precisely on a wobbly rack. It's lonely work, but her growing passion for Jehovah has made her seem far away.

On this morning, the rain grays the day out, making the redwoods less solace and more menace. I carry the cleaning tray in one hand and the clunky vacuum cleaner in the other, knowing that the rooms were used by fishermen come for the salmon runs, and the cleaners will fuse with the rank odor of fish.

In the first cabin, the heater has been left on, so the air is hot and humid. Towels and bedspreads litter the canted floor and legions of Coors line the counters. Everything about the mess—the beer and the dirty dishes and newspapers on the table—all scream "men."

I wish I had a radio, something to distract from the quiet, from the heater's cooling click.

I step into the second room. Gathering the dirty sheets and towels will be a good move—it's what Cindy would do when the rooms overwhelmed her. She's saving for the day she turns 16, when she'll

become baptized. She wants to become a full-time pioneer, witnessing 70 hours a month to Jehovah's truth.

I want to leave this town of 200. I see how trapped my mother is by the Scriptures that give my father dominion over her. Women have so few options here.

While the sound of rain mutes the air, I pull apart the towels tangled into the sheets.

A magazine falls out, revealing a shock of women's bodies. In the pages, breasts, and thighs and tongues leer. I sit, feeling my body respond with heat, to the ways these girls open themselves page after page. If Mom or Dad find out, I won't be able to keep this job—I won't be able to save toward my future away from here.

Dad's anger—at me, at the motel owners, at everyone—it will volcano into a bigger problem than the one of nude women inviting touch.

The heater clicks and I jump, sending the magazine flying. I grab a newspaper and bury the magazine deep within the newsprint then shove the bundle into the trash. I take the bag to the dumpster—hopefully, my father won't find it when he picks up the garbage.

The only stranger who's ever seen a private part of me is Jehovah—but His presence is too large, too ghostly to consider, too much like my father's. I return to the cabin and wonder if Cindy has found similar magazines. Does she look before she throws them away?

I hurry, gathering the sheets and towels. That leaves only the bathroom. In the tub, on a melting bed of ice, lies a salmon—the sheen of scales glistens, the iridescence not yet faded. Just yesterday, it was in the river, moving upstream, following an internal compass, slipping and sliding against the current.

The men must've forgotten it. It's a female, and her roe has been milked. The pale red pearls lie inside a gallon-sized bag, but a few ooze near her tail. The men must've run their hands over her, squeezing the precious roe out. It makes me sick to my stomach, to think about how these strangers had pulled her from the water, worked her over, then forgot her, distracted by the glossy pages of the magazine I've hidden from my father.

The redwoods shudder in a gust of wind, and I touch her cool skin. The scales lie in perfect symmetry, both simple and intricate. The edges have a beautiful precision, sharp and cutting. Her glinting eye watches me, witnessing.

I am slowly understanding that to get anywhere exacts a price.

• ISSUE 22, 2006 •

The Things I've Lost

by Brian Arundel

Fleece hat and gloves: in the backseat of a Boston cab in 2002, before driving back to Maine. Round, purple sunglasses: in an Atlanta pool hall over drinks with Ashby, whose wife was determined to save their marriage by having a baby. A measurable dose of self-skepticism: at about 14, when I realized I was very good at both playing violin and baseball, while not necessarily everyone else was. A school-wide presidential election in sixth grade, after I was drafted to run by Mrs. Sticoiu, the most frightening teacher in the school, while I was out of town. A copy of *The Little Prince*, in Mrs. Sticoiu's class the previous year. A floppy disk that contained my paper on ideological subversion in Wendell Berry, the first essay I'd written after returning to graduate school following a four-year respite. A black scarf from Pigalle: somewhere in Maine before moving west.

The chance to kiss Leslie Wertmann, and, later, that redhead in seventh grade with a smile that could buckle steel—Kim, Christine, or Kathleen maybe—and the blonde at the freshman dance because I couldn't recognize flirtations, even when told that I looked like Bruce Springsteen. My virginity: in 1980, a couple weeks short of 16, in a ritual so brief, awkward and forgettable that I have, in fact, forgotten it. My heart, or so I thought, in 1985, when Susie dumped me; my naiveté, three months later, when I learned that she'd slept with at least three other guys I knew while we'd been dating.

Belief that my mother was somehow more than human: in 1972, the first time I saw her fall down after getting drunk. Belief that my father was more than human: a few months beforehand, after learning that he'd had an affair and was being thrown out of the house. The belief that my sister was stable: 1976, when she began pointing at random

objects and saying their names, a few months before getting arrested, the first of many times, for disturbing the peace by refusing to leave a Western Union office until they gave her a job. A 10-dollar bill on a DC subway in 1985, on my way home to my friend Tommy's, where I was staying after leaving my father's house—after he'd moved back in, once my mother remarried and moved south.

The chance, in 1986, to meet Raymond Carver: the only person invited to sit in on an interview, I instead drank all night with friends and overslept. A quarter-inch off the tip of my left thumb, in 1987, while slicing Muenster cheese on an electric Hobart slicer. My shit, figuratively, that same summer when Bob Weir sang "Looks Like Rain" just as my acid trip was peaking at a two-night Dead stand in Roanoke, Virginia. The Buick a friend had given me as a tax write-off in 1996, which I let someone take for a test drive without holding collateral.

The thought that officials were somehow more evolved than those who elect them: in 1972, listening to my father explain the Watergate burglary. Faith in politics—particularly a two-party system relegated to fundraising contests perpetuated by shallow sound bites, mudslinging and outright lies for the Mindless American Voter so that each party can pursue a majority with which to repress the other, with complete disregard for actually trying to improve the lives of citizens: gradually over time, culminating in 2000. Fundamental hope that Americans really would overcome their vacuity, fear and greed to evolve beyond sheep determined to re-elect George W. Bush: 2004.

The ability to drink until late at night and go to work the next day without feeling like I need to be zipped inside a body bag: sometime in my early 30s. General insecurity and inadequacy: during the past seven years, as I've tried to allow myself to be loved without guilt or judgment. Self-pity and -importance, at least most days, while striving to look beyond the borders of my own desires in a steady ascent that some might refer to as maturation. The desire to remain in this country: since 2004. A black beret: in a Minneapolis bar, just a few days before relocating to Georgia in 1993. A taste for soy sausage patties: inexplicably, sometime in the past six months, leading up to a

Saturday brunch three weeks ago.

• ISSUE 59, 2018 •

The Farmers' Almanac Best Days for Breeding

by John A. McDermott

The *Farmers' Almanac* was not the first book to which we turned—there were stacks, volumes, before it. So many more up-to-date sages willing to show us the best way to make a baby. *Best* is the wrong word; the most *successful* way to make a baby. It was only after months of desperation that we turned to the *Almanac*. Considering the methods we'd already run through, gymnastic positions and thermometers, Clomid and prayer, consulting a source valued by generations intent on populating the planet with cows and sheep and corn seemed sensible. We wondered if planting human seeds was all that different.

Under Parenting, there are best days for *potty-training*—this month, the first through sixth of January, and again from the 29th through 31st— and *weaning* (oddly, the same dates as potty-training, every month of the year). Under Cooking, we consider *baking*—there are so many good days for baking!—but *brewing* appalls us. Not because we are not drinkers, we are, but because of the all-caps for January, February, and March: NO GOOD DAYS. Perhaps this is our problem, we have been trying to brew a baby, not bake one.

There are days devoted to tasks we expected: *canning; pruning; picking; hunting*. There are days we didn't: *cutting hair to retard growth; cutting hair to increase growth; washing wooden floors; waxing floors; digging postholes and entertaining friends*. There are best days to *get married*—in every month, lots of dates, no ominous NO GOOD DAYS here, folks—and there are days for castration (helpfully labeled *castrate farm animals*, spurring sighs of relief from wild animals and men alike), but no days to *breed people*. There are *best days to write* (but

only a few days of each month) and *best days to wash windows and quit smoking*. There is guidance for fishermen, columns of adjacent pages, charts marked *poor, fair, good, and best* where *poor* told us beware those days the fish steal your bait or don't even touch your line.

We have been very poor fishers. The would-be babies take our bait and flee, wiggling their miniscule tails as they slip into the shadows. Perhaps we should give up on this procreation thing. We may never get to *weening* or *potty training*, or *abc's* or *multiplication tables*, certainly not *learning to drive* or *first kisses*. But then, goddamn it, there seem to be so many other, so many more useful, rewarding chores to occupy our time. Just read it here: there are always better days for *asking for a loan* and *drying fruit*, days for *cutting firewood*, of course, for *destroying wild onions*.

• ISSUE 47, 2014 •

All or Nothing, Self-Portrait at 27

by Jill Talbot

It's all empty beer cans and skinny dipping. (Bud Light and chlorine.) A guitar player with a beard who won't let go as hard as you do. It's teasing the strings of your orange bikini while he tosses his trunks onto the stone. It's the ease of your body through dark water. The day he taped a letter to your door, when he played that same chord, asking you not to leave, to live inside yourself for a while. It's this night, when he strums the water and says, "I guess there's a little Jill Talbot in all of us." And you worry where that leaves you.

It's distracting, watching out a kitchen window while the clock hands on the wall stretch into an L. Sheets taut as a boxing canvas. Now it's 20 after. And the gravel in the drive is still, unscattered. It's a woman in a purple coat bobbing through the back gate to peer through the dusty window of your garage. And you weaving behind the curtain. It's an empty back bedroom, where the phone throws its high-pitched rings like punches.

It's all apologies. Or the ones you should offer but never do.

It's running red lights after midnight. Drinking hours before the party and tripping over a rock in the living room (this one a PhD student in Geology). It's stumbling from the back steps to find him surveying her neck with his tongue. You get to your Jeep, corraide empty streets, do that screaming crying thing you do and strike the dash with the flat of your hand. Every red light a dare.

It's all underlining words in used novels.

It's crossing borders. A two-buck boat ride across the Rio Grande and a dusty truck, a street with a corner canteen with bars on the windows (but no doors). It's straddling a swayback horse out to the edge of town to talk with a woman who left Texas when her husband

died. It's sharing an ashtray and stubbing out the afternoon. One sad story at a time. It's standing on a rock overlooking the river and seeing your life from a different country while the sun drops its orange curtain. A desert inside you.

It's all thunderstorms in the distance.

Blinking lights on the answering machine.

A pay phone on the corner.

It's running away from yourself knowing it's something you can never really do.

82 west out of Lubbock.

• ISSUE 41, 2013 •

Talk Big

by Lee Martin

Nights like this—a Friday night at last call after too much Pabst, and Jack, and Wild Turkey, and Seven and Sevens—we talk big. Why wouldn't we? We know who we are—the lowlifes, the no-accounts, the pissants, the stumblebums. All liquored up. Ten-foot-tall and bulletproof in a going-nowhere-fast town in southeastern Illinois. This oil town, this farm town, this factory town, this Walmart-fucked town. We tell ourselves we're made of steel, and then the bar shuts down the music, covers the pool tables, counts out the cash drawer, turns us out into the night.

A November night. Deer season. Shotguns on racks in pickup trucks, blood stains on bed liners, hoarfrost on the grass, moon in its last quarter, steam of our breath in the cold air, faint smell of leaf-smoke, boots scuffing over gravel in the parking lot, the Super 8 motel behind us, windows dark, travelers tucked in, not one of them thinking a thing about the likes of us.

Go home. We should go home. Sleep that drunk sleep. Sleep the sleep of the dead.

Then someone says, "Shit." Says, "Who the fuck you think you are?"

"I'm your worst nightmare, motherfucker."

Sometimes it takes a cliché for us to keep our daubers up. It takes a pack of lies and nerve and stupidity and balls hanging low. In short, it takes faith in the big hearts we swear we have. It takes faith to believe that one day we'll be set. Living the good life. Chillaxin' on easy street. Waving our dicks in the breeze.

Which is what we do on this night.

"Don't touch my truck. Did I say you could touch my truck? I mean it, dipshit. Don't fuck with my truck."

“I’ll fuck with your truck, and you can’t stop me. I’ll do whatever the fuck I want. Got it, cocksucker?”

We cuss when we talk big. We get dirty. We let the ugly words lift us up. We never know which one will take us too far, carry us over to the other side of right thinking, be the word that later we wish we hadn’t said.

Tonight, it’s this: *doubt*. Sometimes it takes so little. As in, “I doubt that, amigo. I very much doubt that you’re going to do any-fucking-thing. I really do.”

Doubt—that word a fist to the throat, a knife blade to the lip, a tire iron across the head. Doubt your nerve, doubt your worth, doubt the weight of your balls, doubt you’ll ever amount to a pinch of shit.

Then, a boot heel to a headlight. Breaking glass. It’s the sound we’ll hear when eventually we close our eyes and try to sleep.

Not the whisk of the Glock pulled from a shoulder holster; not the “fuck you, motherfucker,” before the finger squeezes the trigger; not the noise of a man, gut-shot, falling to the frozen ground; not even the ambulance siren, the clacking of the gurney, the crackle of the cop’s radio, the suction of the doors opening at the hospital, our whispers in the waiting room, the wails of grief when word finally comes: *died on the operating table, too much blood lost, nothing the doctors could do*.

Just that glass. That glass breaking. Again and again. Always breaking.

So we talk big, motherfucker. We feel the air around us turn to ice. We heat it up with our words—*Jesus Christ, holy shit, Goddamn it all to hell*. We won’t let it press against us. We put out our chests, lead with our chins. These hospital doors open, and we push through, not about to admit how close we are to dwindling down to nothing. So we keep talking. Pissed off—bat shit crazy—talking big, big, big to tell ourselves we’re alive, to convince ourselves we’re still whole.

Afraid to be alone, afraid to shut our mouths, let our tongues go dead, our words dry up.

What’ll we be then?

Scared shitless.

Scared to death.

• ISSUE 53, 2016 •

Open Season

by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher

Here they come coyote, denim sharks with earthen skin, parting the C-Building crowd to bruise blood into pale cheeks, bust orthodontic smiles, twist thumbs from scales, turn asphalt into alfalfa, the New Mexican dance with history, the springtime junior high ritual, out for revenge, out for kicks, out for you.

1: to make or prepare by combining various ingredients

- to juxtapose or put together to form a whole whose constituent parts are still distinct
- [no obj., often with negative] (of different substances) to be able to be combined in this way: oil and water

Here they come coyote, the Speedy Gonzalez cartoons, the Frito Bandito erasers, the Ricky Ricardo's "got some splainin' to do," the Chico and the Man's, "it's not my job, man," the Ricardo Montalban's "Corinthian leather," the Telly Savalas Pancho Villa, the Marlon Brando Zapata, the West Side Story switchblade, the wolf in zoot suit clothing, the low-rider steering wheel made from chrome chains.

"I don't feel comfortable calling myself that."

"It's who you are... "

"But it doesn't feel right."

"Why not?"

"Look at me."

Here they come coyote, the boys who make sandwiches with tortillas, the boys who wear "Puerto Rican fence-climber" shoes, the boys who speak with South Valley accents, the boys who fold brown paper

sacks to use again at lunch, the boys you and your blond friends point to and laugh.

Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin?

No, not of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin

Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Cuban

Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – *Print origin. For example, Argentinian, Columbian, so on*

Here they come coyote, sleepovers at friends' houses with shag carpet and color TV and Lite-Brite and milk and cookies and Pat Nixon pearls and Archie Bunker recliners and the times they invited you back and you wanted to stay.

The advantages and/or immunities certain groups benefit from based on appearance beyond those common to others: [not having to worry about being followed in a department store while shopping]; [seeing your image on television and knowing you're represented]; [people assuming you lead a constructive life free from crime, free of Welfare]; having the freedom and luxury to fight racism one day and ignore it the next.]; [never having to think about it]

Here they come coyote, the dead father you never knew, the dead father's family you never knew, the French-Scottish ghosts who left you your name and your skin and the slot-machine genes that slip through your fingers like dust.

1. originally a Spanish corruption of a Nahuatl (Aztec) word
2. rebels against social convention with deception/humor
3. [slang] a contemptible person, avaricious or dishonest
4. term for half-Spanish and half-European
5. both hunter and scavenger [opportunist]
6. trickster, transformer, shape-shifter

Here they come coyote, the eight shades of brown on your mother's families' skin, the calluses on your grandfather's hands, the worry lines on your grandmother's face, the defiance in your widowed mother's stare, the beans you eat every Friday (and Saturday and Sunday, too), the tortillas you use as a spoon, the bike you make from parts, the K-Mart shoes, shirts, pants and jackets, the tangled roots from New Mexico to Spain, the box you check on the census, the brown bag you fold at lunch, the R's you roll like dice.

"Welcome to the [] Diversity Committee. Thanks for coming. Now, tell us: Why are you here?"

Here they come coyote, the Mexican mirrors you will hang from your walls, the red-brown soil you will keep in a jar, the hand-carved *santos* that will watch over your home, the Latina you will marry in an adobe church, the Spanish names you will give to your children, the green chile enchiladas you will make to perfection, the *rancheras* songs you will play on Christmas, the Southwestern skies you swim through in sleep, your mother's name you will add to your own, your mother's words that will sting like a slap:

"You always were more Anglo."

Here they come coyote, they caught your scent at last, head down at your C-Building locker, between your brown friend and your blond friend, between one lie and another.

Time to run. Time to choose.

• ISSUE 60, 2019 •

Chronology of the Body

by Sam Kiss

Five Years

My hair is never brushed and I always forget to sit with my legs crossed, ladylike, and for the longest time my only friend is Matthew Bickle. On the first day of school, he wears a red t-shirt, which sparks a heated debate amongst my classmates.

“Matthew’s wearing a girl color!” someone says, pointing.

“Am not!” he says. “It’s red, not pink.” Some boys in my class nod in agreement.

“It’s the color of hearts!” Another boy says. My classmates look to one another, considering.

A stranger’s hand breaks through the silence and points to me. “She is wearing it, too. It’s for girls!” And the tide turns.

“That’s right!” they say. Matthew opens his mouth to protest, but they surround him.

“Girl color, girl color,” they chant.

Later that evening, while our moms discuss the Sunday school lesson plans, Matthew and I trade shirts. Mine is a little tight on him, but his fits me perfectly. The color dissolves and soon the fabric is just skin, my skin, a boy’s skin.

Seven Years

Steven Jenkins, a wiry, pigeon-faced man, is my favorite teacher because he keeps his hair in a ponytail even though men aren’t supposed to have long hair. He teaches art class and reads us Shel Silverstein poems while we push rationed lumps of clay into shapes. I try to turn my gray blob into a poem, nudging its body into line breaks and metaphors, but it always comes out looking like something

in-between. A not-circle or not-square.

One day, I make a hollow person. It is two inches tall, its clay skin stretched thin over where bones would be; the clay allotted to me is barely enough to make a body. Still, it looks regal and proud, like a figure out of a dream. When Mr. Jenkins puts it in the kiln that night, it explodes, catapulting its limbs into my classmates' works, rupturing vases and cups and figurines.

He said it was a mistake, that it was just missing a space for steam to escape, but I knew. I knew, I knew, I knew.

Thirteen Years

I check out a book from the school library so often that the librarian notices.

The book is about a boy named J who is born Jeni. His mom doesn't like it at first, but then she decides that she loves him anyway. I stay up late most nights and reread the book under my covers with a flashlight, wondering if anyone will love me anyways.

Fifteen Years

When the hairdresser cuts my hair short, she asks me if I am going to cry. I don't, but the wet strands of hair she snips from my bangs fall down my face like tears. I watch the pillowy mass of hair accumulate on the floor beneath me like water droplets condensing into a storm cloud. Later that night, I stare at myself in the mirror and think *boy*. I am a *boy*.

Seventeen Years

I buy men's underwear for the first time. They are baggy but not in a way that is uncomfortable. When the cashier rings them up, she gives me a look.

It says, "Your place in the world is best defined by how this underwear doesn't fit you, but the women's doesn't either." It says, "Your body is not a body, it is a question mark." It says, "You can't fit a belt around an idea." It says all of these things and more, only it comes out:

“Your total is \$8.95, will that be cash or credit?”

And I say, “Whatever it costs me to inhabit this body,” only it comes out:

“Cash,” and she hands me my change.

Nineteen Years

The only story they believe is one where I’ve always wanted to wear men’s underwear. They wonder who takes them off and what that makes them and what bathroom I take them off in. They ask, “Did you always know?” and I think back to the color red and clay figures and library books and say, “I have never known what it means to be a body.”

They do not know what to say to this, so they tell me I was born in the wrong body, as if there is a right body somewhere out there. They tell me this and I wonder if their souls ever feel homeless, too.

• ISSUE 41, 2013 •

On the Occurrence of March 20, 1981
and on the Occurrences of Every Night
After

by B.J. Hollars

What they did to him they did not do to him, but to his body. I'll ask you kindly to please avert your eyes. It is 1981—remember this—and we are supposed to be feeling good. Ronald Reagan asks, "Are you better than you were four years ago?" and though Michael Donald isn't, nobody ever stops to ask him. He is just some basketball-loving black kid in the projects of Mobile. Just some boy—hardly of voting age—who will grow and grow and then stop. No, he is not better, nor are the equally poor Klansmen who pull their Buick to the side of the road. It is nighttime, there are shadows, and while, allegedly, these men are in need of directions to a nightclub, in reality, they are in need of something more. It's all quite simple, really. Four hours to the north and two years in the past, a black man killed a white police officer. To the Klansmen in the car, Michael Donald was nothing if not black and breathing, so he fit the bill.

There's nothing here you haven't seen before: a Led Zeppelin belt buckle, a pair of Converse shoes. The boy in the tree is named Michael, and nobody ever stops to ask him anything. Until they do: *Can you give us directions to a nightclub? Can you come a few steps closer?*

Perhaps it's best to spare you the details. I will ask, once more, for you to please avert your eyes. Nobody need see what he saw: the clearing in the woods where they drove him, beat him, wrapped a noose around his neck. And nobody need see what he didn't: what it looks like for two men to hoist a third in a tree, tie a rope to a trunk to hold a body.

The following morning—the first day of spring—an early riser pedals past, mistaking Michael for a dummy in a tree. She thinks: *It's too early for Halloween.*

This is 1981—have I told you?

Less than two weeks later, a bullet tears through Ronald Reagan's lung, and he, too, is no longer better than he was four years ago. Later that night, as the president's body begins to heal, Indiana plays North Carolina for the NCAA basketball championship. They do not delay the game. What is the use? It was only an almost-tragedy.

Who was Michael before he was a tragedy? He was a student, a basketball player, a brick mason-in-training. He dreamed of assembling the bricks of his mother's first home, though he was missing the mortar, the trowel, and the time. Her house would come later, long after her son's death, once the courtrooms hashed out how much a black boy is worth in Mobile.

• ISSUE 57, 2018 •

Meanness

by Beverly Donofrio

One:

I awoke to my mother's weeping and walked over the jail bars' shadow the Venetian blinds made on the kitchen floor. Her chest heaved as she smoked across from me at the table, sobbing about doctor's bills and my father's lousy job, how we were going to end up in the poorhouse like she and her brothers and sisters did after their mother died: No toys to play with, no friends, rats. She'd work herself up like an opera singer, *When your mother dies you're nothing, you're nobody, you wish you were dead*. I was maybe two and three and four, and doubt that I thought to comfort her. I don't even know if I wished she'd stop waking me up with her crying. Because when her weeping petered out, I listened to the quiet of the ticking clock, watched her skirt swing as she stepped to the stove, and thought her beautiful as I hoped my brother Eddie wouldn't wake up so I could be alone, like that, with her for a while.

Two:

I sat on the metal milk box on the back porch, the towels and sheets flapping on the clothesline as my mother screamed in the house, *If I hear that goddamned, son-of-a-bitching door slam one more time, I'll murder you*. Up a slight hill on her own back porch, Patty Ryan, who was three years older and an only child, her blonde hair in long thin braids, beckoned for me to come over, which I did, running. But Patty stopped me at the border of her yard, "My mother won't let me play with you. Your mother swears too much," her freckles brightening as she tried not to smile.

Three:

Eddie pretended to be the army man shooting down a swath of enemy army men he'd amassed on the floor of his bedroom. In our bedroom, Patty pretended to be a cat, a dog, a raccoon, a skunk. In the kitchen, I pretended to be a mother, holding my newborn baby sister, Janet, who was sort of purple and completely bald with a wrinkly old man's face. Adults said she was beautiful, and I wondered if I was missing something. Still her skin was soft as a gum bubble, and she felt warm as a puppy's belly as I hugged her against my still-flat chest—my own living doll, smelling of real baby powder. My aunt Antoinette was visiting because my mother had a nervous breakdown, and Dr. Spignezzi said he would have checked her into the hospital if she didn't have four kids to take care of. In the kitchen as I warmed the bottle, my aunt stroked my hair and said I was a good little mommy. I was nine. I shook a drop onto my inner wrist to test the temperature, then watched Janet's face as she sucked and stared into my eyes as though she could see deep inside. When she made a load in her diaper, I said, P.U. you stink, and held safety pins in my mouth to change her. I did this even when my mother started to cook and mop and iron again. Evenings after dinner when the weather was good, it was my job to take my baby sister for a walk to get us out of my mother's hair. Down by the elementary school, I kicked on the stroller's brake then walked away backwards, waving, *Bye-bye, bye, Jannie, I'm leaving you.* No matter how many times I did this, she eventually scrunched her face and cried. I waited till she cried so hard she hiccupped to run back, pick her up, and hug her tiny delicious trembling bones, telling her it's okay and promising I would never ever leave her.

• ISSUE 50, 2015 •

When We Played

by Matthew Komatsu

1.

When we played war as boys, we never died. Dead was a reset button, a do-over, a quarrel over who killed who. Maybe we played fair. Maybe we dropped our toy guns and crumpled on the grass, clutching with grunts like gut-shot movie soldiers. Grimaced and closed our eyes, but only just. Through the curves of a squint, a summer sky blue and infinite, heavy with the raucous shouts of the other boys.

2.

All those close calls. That time in Afghanistan the SUV drove past the white rocks and into the red ones—white all right, red is dead—a local in the backseat jabbering jib. What did he say? Translator: “He say, WE ARE DRIVING INTO MINEFIELD.”

3.

When we played war as men, the wounded on their backs—they called our names, their mothers’ names, the names of all gods past and present. We crammed wads of cloth into gaping cavities. Wet organs slipped past blind fingers. Flesh grew purple, distal to the tourniquet. We clenched fists, held hands as warmth fled. Pounded on sullen chests.

4.

Baghdad to Balad on Route Tampa. My little white truck passing another Army supply convoy, a semi rig swerved out and sideswiped the truck. Pushed until he pinned me to the median. My driver frozen to the wheel by the sound of metal crumpling. Soldier atop the rig swiveled the .50 cal at my head. I waved a bright orange flag over the dashboard, a last ditch olly-olly in come free. The semi backed off, a breathless release. It’s all fun and games until some soldier mistakes you for a suicide bomber.

5.

The dead did not rise of their own accord. We lifted them on stretchers, and they ascended in body bags. Silent flags over sightless eyes. And in the end, it was we, the living, who took a knee in front of the soldier's cross made of boots, rifle and helmet; it was we, the living, who stood.

6.

MEDEVAC alert next to the piss tubes at Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan. The radio erupted. I ran underneath the whumping rotors into the helicopter cabin. The black night exhaled, then inhaled. The helicopter lifted off, flew through hazy darkness, arrived overhead the LZ. Down there: two patients. The pilot rolled the dice, pressed a yoke, and 176 pounds of flesh and blood plunged eight tons of metal and fuel toward the ground. The LZ responded and unleashed a mushroom envelope of dust. Nothing to see but faint stars through the spinning rotor. The ground rushed up all wrong. It moved not front-back but left-right. I thought, *five knot left drift*. The wheels hit the ground.

Helo rollover. Alarms and men screamed. Aussie medic tumbled across the cabin. Pinned my face to the door. Rotors struck and struck and struck the ground. Night vision goggles—I could see it all, explosions of light arcing across the ground.

7.

Paths of intersection—how close was close? Close enough to call; not close enough to conclude. Our hands still cool from the touch of the lifeless, life inexplicably dragged us forward. And when it placed us on the brink, it offered what we thought were our epitaphs:

This is it.

Shit.

8.

The helo tipped upright, bounced, and settled. Pilot pulled a lever and the amputated rotors screeched to a stop. Lips drawn, eyes narrowed into a grimace, I tasted chalk. Breathed dust in, then out. A brief pause, a small quiet. A call from the grass of youth: do-over.

The Heart as a Torn Muscle

by Randon Billings Noble

Overview

Your heart was already full, but then you saw him and your heart beat code, not Morse but a more insistent pulse: Oh yes. That's him. That one.

Not The One (The One you already have—and deeply love) but of all the people in that large room far from home, he was the one for you. And your heart stretched more than it should have, tore a little, and let him in.

Symptoms

- Swelling, bruising, or redness. The feeling that your lungs contain a higher percentage of oxygen and have somehow grown in their capacity to respire. A heightened sensitivity to glances, postures, gestures, attitudes, and casual remarks from observers. A propensity to blush.
- Pain at rest. General restlessness. An inability to sleep. Fever dreams. Sleepwalking. Conscious walking: out of your bedroom, out of doors, into the moonlight or an unmown field shrouded in mist and ache (or fantasies of same).
- Pain when the specific muscle is used. When your heart beats to force blood through your femoral arteries, to your iliopsoas muscles, your sartorius muscles, your peroneus muscles, each expanding and contracting to force your legs to walk away, from him, from thrill, from all the promise and potential of an alternate future.
- Inability to use the muscle at all. Lethargy. Apathy. Malaise. Especially after having walked away from the one in question.

Self-Care

- Apply ice: cool it. The early application of heat can increase swelling and pain. [Note: ice or heat should not be applied to bare skin. Always use a protective layer—latex only as a very last resort, clothing is better, or, better still, several feet, a separate piece of furniture, a wall, or a building. Ideally: a state line, a continent.]
- Try an anti-inflammatory such as herbal tea or a pro/con list. Cool showers and brisk walks in bracing air may help. Do not take depressants in the form of alcohol or otherwise. Avoid stimulants: caffeine, chocolate, Cheetos.
- Protect the strained muscle from further injury by refusing to jump into anything. Avoid the activities that caused the strain and other activities that are painful.
- Compression. Hold yourself together.
- Elevation. Rise above.

When to Seek Care

If home remedies bring no relief in 24 hours, call your youngest and most bohemian friend.

If you hear a “popping” sound, signifying a break from your primary relationship, the one (The One) you truly know and truly love, call your closest and most-trusted friend.

Exams and Tests

Your youngest and most bohemian friend asks,

Are you going to run away together, tryst in motels, meet up in Paris, open a P.O. box, wear a trench coat, give each other code names, assume another identity?

Would he be up for a threesome?

Want to use my place?

Says, It's so romantic.

Says, Tell me everything!

Your closest and most-trusted friend asks,

What do you mean, “met someone”?

Have you thought this through?

Is this choice supporting, adding to, enriching, complicating, marring, degrading, not even leaving a blip on the screen in the way in which you will see your life in the years to come?

What will you be left with? Regret? Memory? Or absolutely nothing?

Says, Time wounds all heels.

Says, Don't fuck up.

Recommended Reading

- *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy
- *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller
- *Time Will Darken It* by William Maxwell
- *The Lone Pilgrim* by Laurie Colwin
- *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf
- “The Littoral Zone” by Andrea Barrett
- *The End of the Affair* by Graham Greene

No horoscopes. No tarot cards or tea leaves. If you must, you may steep yourself in stories of passion and price. Years from now you can indulge in what-ifs. But for now, right now, put your hand to your chest and feel what beats. The only muscle you can't live without needs to stay whole.

• ISSUE 45, 2014 •

Breathless

by Heather Sellers

I was 11 almost 12 but I looked 13 when I walked across Orlando toward my father's apartment on Orange Avenue. (I told him telepathically I was on my way. *I can't stand living with her anymore!*) I was thinking: French toast, snuggling with the funnies. I tried different ways of walking: fugitive style, fancy bra wearer walk, and a walk that always provoked my mother, *Why are you sticking out your bottom like that?* There were no sidewalks. Parking lots and sandy yards, sandspurs, sandspurs, sandspurs—on my tennies like jacks. I placed one sandspur on my tongue, green, tiny pricks, not yet ripened to a constellation of swords. To balance that sharp star in my mouth *and* walk well, I had to keep the pressure inside of my mouth even, and this super hard task made me feel all the difficulty of my life was both manageable and behind me.

I held my tongue to the spur, and I walked and pretended. Pretended I was walking to church. I pretended I'd saved orphans. *Now aren't you sorry, Mother, aren't you ashamed?* I walked for miles. Men honked. I waved back politely but what I meant was *Rescue this girl!* I waved with both hands, quick. Honk honk, wave wave. I meant *Take me to your house and let's eat.* I did not know the significance of *She was found with no panties.* I didn't know what *no panties* implied other than forgetfulness, some kind of personal dirty. *Hey baby.* I waved *thank you.* I was not used to feeling powerfully pretty, traffic-affecting pretty. At school, I was dark, mute, attractive as a hairball.

This was my second arrival at my father's apartment complex. First time on foot. Holley Apartments. Why an *e*? Why holes in the sign? Gunshot holes? There were bullet holes in my house. They're the opposite of eyes. I spat my spur, galloped up the outdoor cement

stairs, ran down the corridor, dodging around the puddles on the lanai. At his door, I knocked and knocked and knocked. *It's your daughter!* I pressed my ear to the peeling blue door. Television, voices. The smell of cigarette smoke. Not that again.

That's when I remembered. In the woods behind my father's apartment complex, in the pine scrub, a girl's body was found. When? I didn't know time well. A girl from my school. Trisha. I loved that name, *Trisha*. Like tissue and winning, *tish* and *ta-da!* Trisha. Tisha? I loved her but I didn't know her. Everyone kind of knew her after she was found dead behind Holley Apts. Her dress pulled up. No panties. What? This was 1976. Standing outside my father's apartment that Saturday afternoon in July, I saw a swath of my not-knowing disappear in a bright flash.

I watched myself from outside myself so as to not be so tiny and so hopeful, and when I turned the doorknob, I fell in. Couch, table, kitchen, all one room. It didn't take much time to see in the dark. I tiptoed through the smoke, opened the little half-fridge. Six pack of beer. Liquefying head of lettuce. I pressed my hand on the card table —stacks of mail, ash trays overflowing, tumblers of liquid. Sticky. Slowly, I walked down the hall. *Was this my father's apartment?* The hall took longer than the entire walk across Orlando.

In the back room, an air conditioner up high in the window shuddering, banging. Blue-black light. My father, asleep on a bed that was half-folded, an el. My father, in the midst of being swallowed. I put my hand on his sock foot. I wagged the foot back and forth, *Hey there honey. So good to see you.* I watched the soft pink forms on the television screen. Surging synthesizer. *Uh uh.* Parts of people: a man's leg. A woman's breasts. A purse of skin. Soundtrack, urgent, dull, like pain. Was this like a murder everyone wanted to be in?

I survived, she says to herself sometimes. Not all of you survived.

Walking down Orange, pretending I was beautiful, pretending I was dead. Motorcycle guy, no helmet, at the light on Holden. *Wanna ride?* Close to home. Not that close to home. I hopped on the back and put my hands on the sides of him. He said *Where to?* I did not know because I knew he knew, and the light turned green and I held on.

• ISSUE 60, 2019 •

The Domestic Apologies

by Dustin Parsons

Apology to the Fish

If I'd known how poorly I keep fish, I'd never have allowed such a large tank.

Apology to the Dog

You have a dog bed in nearly every room, and I'm not sure what you think we are trying to tell you. I will try to walk you more often, but you'll only be searching for my wife—giver of treats and scratches.

Apology to the Monarch Caterpillar

You couldn't have known our porch was so rife with danger for a chrysalis. We planted the milkweed too close to the direct morning sun.

Apology to the Ghosts

When I walked through that cold spot in the living room, I thought you were speaking to me. I stopped to hear it. After all, I can't know how haunted this home is. There are so many different kinds of ghosts—even the ghosts of emotions. How many spirits do we acknowledge around us and why are you a cold presence? I want to feel the heat of spirit from the kitchen with its wobbly oven. I want to feel the dusky spirit from the closet and the hum from the bed still unmade but vibrating.

A Question for the Dog

How can you always know exactly when she is coming home?

Apology to the Hummingbirds

Gas-powered sea glass, sharp shards worn to smooth by your speed.
I've wished too often I could look through you like a spyglass.

Apology to Dust

"Hope is the worst of evils, for it prolongs the torments of man." —
Nietzsche

Apology to the Mirrors

You have spawned no pronouncements of beauty, and I wonder if
we've held you back. After all, we don't ask your gilded, scratched
face.

Apology to the Couch

I don't vacuum you enough, but you hold the strands of hair my wife
left there, and she is out of town for a few days.

Apology to Our Clothes

The way we treat you, we don't deserve your modesty.

A Question for the Leftovers

Do you not learn to love the cold more than the heat you were born
into?

Apology to Saplings

She is away and you are thirsty. When I planted you I hadn't taken
into account just how much sun you would gather, and how much
water would run away.

Apology to Our Books

I'm unsettled when the house is empty, and I read only small portions
of any one of you. I move to another room to read from another book.
You are scattered, left open and turned upside down like a chime of

wrens, your spines breaking, until the night before she returns.

A Question for the House

With all that electricity in your walls and water running from bathroom to kitchen to drain, with all that gas and light, with all the animals you house and the chemicals you store, is there ever a moment, just a few seconds, where you are completely still?

Apology to Personification

I've made you, too, real.

Apology to Socks

Two socks inside out in the corner of the living room, near the reading chair. One sock on the stairs. Two mismatched socks, white, hanging from the bookshelf in the boys' room. One sock, inexplicably, in the garage, lying next to a box of old cd's I can't decide if I'll ever listen to again. Until she comes home, I'm content with picking you all up only when I've decided how to deal with where you've been deposited. Until I solve the mystery of why you are there.

Apology to the House

I cannot relieve the sadness of her absence, and so I'm slow to clean. It is darker here when she is gone, perhaps because of the dust and dirt. This isn't an excuse. The spiders collect in the corners, the dog's hair beneath the chairs. Burning every light won't do any good. But I turn each one on anyway, just for a second.

• ISSUE 54, 2017 •

The Lunch Lady and Her Three-Headed Dogs

by Sonya Huber

I raise my arm to write on the chalkboard, and the skin draped over bone and muscle swings in contrapuntal melody. I am ashamed to be caught in the act of living in skin. I hope my students are not hypnotized by the distracting motion. I hope no one sees this hammock of flesh and lumps me onto a mind's-eye heap of sad discarded women. I look up the name for loose upper-arm muscle and see "bingo arms" or "lunch lady arms."

I remember women with working bodies spooning food, sorting papers in a classroom, women who did not have time, money, or desire to join a gym. As a child I didn't know this upper arm of an older female had a name. I saw a unified whole, an older woman whose flesh was a cool miracle of softness and solidity swathed in mysterious folds. You came to her with problems and she both solved them and smiled at you through layers of fondness and days, sorting like a savant all the miracles in the heart's mansion-chambers. Her hands and muscles and mind could do anything that was needed.

These twin sags of skin mean I am older, past child-bearing age. I still dress like a 12-year-old boy and yet estrogen ebbs in a patterned shift, my share expending in a justice of limitations. Everything slackens and pillows. Maybe I fear the softness and curving because it is yet another mark of the feminine, with which I have had an uneasy relationship. This container is a target, my wing-flaps a sign of vulnerability.

I am 44 and of wiry build, with muscles just starting to bow and slacken. The earth pulls and wants us all back inside her. My arms' curves trace the geometric pull of the heavy spinning planet against a

skeleton audaciously spiking outward from the Earth. We call them “flopping fish,” “turkey wings,” and “bat wings” —and yet think of a bat, its sonar navigation at night, its closed dark face with bright-pricked eyes, its durable leathery skin, its swoop, and its feather-light folded power at rest. I imagine these twin folds as the regal crest of wisdom, the monk’s hood and stole, the mark of a woman who can take imaginative flight backward in time and yet bear to return to her body.

I hold up an arm and an inch of flesh hangs, dipping inward beneath the bone, forming a hollow that runs from armpit to elbow. Its cross section would be a teardrop. The flesh has a soft substantial weight, the curve of a slackened triceps brachii, the “three-headed muscle.” Its job is to straighten the arm, so when the arm is bent, it is slack. It is composed of three bundles, called heads, and each is employed to a different strength depending on the level and duration of force required. It holds the elbow joint in place for fine movements, such as writing. This is our writing muscle.

Of three-headed beasts there is Cerberus, the three-headed dog, who guarded the gates of Hades.

And then as soon as I start thinking about praising them, I Google suggested exercises. One link is listed under “arm fat.” I put my palms flat on the couch behind me, hover in the air as if I am seated, and lower myself onto the floor, then back up. Ten times. I wonder if I might continue to do these for the feeling of being in my body. I do a few awkward movements with my elbows and feel a pleasant burn of oxygenated muscles.

I think of the upper-arm ideals: Angela Bassett, Michelle Obama.

Do I long for isolated hardness to deny what I become? It is alluring to focus on a few movements to tighten my three-headed dog, to push against the slackening. But I forget. My dogs wag their tails at me, my fierce dogs who remind me that the underworld is with me even now.

• ISSUE 27, 2008 •

Some Things About That Day

by Debra Marquart

The placards I walked through. The wet raincoat on a hook. The questionnaire on a clipboard placed before me. Couples sat around me in the waiting room. They were young. What am I saying? I was only 32.

But I remember, the men seemed the more bereft. Facing forward, their elbows resting on knees, their faces covered with hands. Or pushed back hard in the seats, gazing at a spot on the floor, legs stretched out in the aisles.

Difficult to remember the order in which things happened. The clipboard taken away, my name was called—our names were all called, the waiting room emptying and filling. Small orange pill in a tiny plastic cup. Water for washing it down. I was led to another room.

The gown that tied at the back, the bright fluorescent light, the posters with diagrams on the walls. Plenty of time to look around. The sound of vacuuming in another room.

The doctor arrives, hurried and unfriendly. Her one day in this clinic, she's flown in from another state. Death threats follow her. She asks me if I want to proceed. I tell her, yes. I lie back in the stirrups. The apparatus arrives—a silver canister on wheels with gauges and hoses attached to a long, cylindrical tube, thin like a spout. The sound of vacuuming close now. The nurse by my side, holding my shoulder. The doctor working away behind the thin film of my gown.

A blank space surrounds this moment. Sleepy from the sedative, yes, and numb. But let me not gloss over it. A feeling of tugging, mild discomfort. When the vacuum stops, the doctor asks if I want to know the sex. I tell her, *no*.

When I informed my husband I was pregnant, he said, *Is it mine?* Not the best beginning. We'd been married for a month. Married on Leap Day. Who else's could it be? He had an important meeting at work that day, some critical task. I had driven myself.

Sleep, after the procedure. (My friend tried to soften it for me afterwards. *Just say you had a procedure, dear.*) Nothing about it was procedural. I woke in a room of sleeping beauties. Afterwards, cramping, nausea. Faint, when I woke up, dizzy.

Orange juice and back down for 20 minutes. And then the odd assemblage of street clothes smoothed onto my limbs, the parting advice from the nurse, the script for a prescription pushed into my hand. Strange to walk out the door. The protesters gone. My car started just fine, slipped right into gear. I backed out, went forward. Drove light-headed to the drug store.

At the pharmacy, the man in the white coat looked at me when I handed him the script. Could he see from the prescription where I'd been? A softness dawned on his face. *Go home*, he said. They would deliver it.

Only then, in the car, did I start to cry. So stupid. Over the kindness of the pharmacist. When I got home, my husband was on the couch, watching the NBA playoffs. Even before the drugs arrived—even after—he couldn't stop telling me what a brave girl I had been.

• ISSUE 36, 2011 •

There Are Distances Between Us

by Roxane Gay

The interstate highway system in the United States is the largest and most sophisticated in the world. It is named for President Dwight D. Eisenhower. There are two points and between them, a distance between you and me. These two points are connected in ways we will never fully understand but they *are* connected. You are there and I am here. We are red stars on maps protected beneath hard plastic in highway rest areas tired travelers touch to make sense of where they are. I have counted the miles, yards, feet, and inches between us. There are too many. When I was young, my father had an atlas I liked to study, bound in leather, worn. I traced tiny lines with my fingers and said the names of cities like Waukesha and Cody and Easton and Amarillo. I once came home to a canopy bed. That summer was long, hot, terrible. Before I left, there had been an incident involving some boys who broke me right down the middle and, after, I couldn't pull myself back together. I simply stopped talking. My hair started graying. I stayed in my room. My parents fretted. A change of scenery, they decided, would be good. I went to Port-au-Prince, the city of their birth, stayed with an aunt and uncle I hardly knew. Each time we needed to flush a toilet or take a bath or brush our teeth, we carried huge buckets to a well and carried those buckets back, warm water sloshing everywhere all to wash ourselves clean in some small way. It was never enough. I never felt clean. I only felt those boys. When I returned home, I walked into a perfect bedroom. The wallpaper was covered in little cornflowers. There was a canopy bed covered in gauzy material, draped perfectly. I loved to stare into the canopy and forget about all the ways I felt broken. Whenever we went on vacation, my father would study his atlas to find his way across

America. My brothers and I sat in the back of our 1974 Grand Prix, bare legs sticking to the leather seat, hot and irritable, often bickering, forced to participate in my father's endless exploration of how far he could go. He often said the United States is a great country because with enough persistence, with enough patience, a man can travel from one end to the other. He said he never wanted to take for granted that he could not be kept from any place he wanted to be. Every morning, when I wake up, I think your name. I think, "Marry me," over and over and over. It shocks me, the clarity of those words, the intensity and depth, how the emotions behind those words defy logic, possibility. I do not say the words "I love you" often, not to anyone. Those words mean something. They shouldn't be used carelessly. In a photo album there is a faded Polaroid of my dad and my middle brother and me at the Grand Canyon before the third child came. We are painfully young, the four of us. I have no recollection of this trip. Behind us is our car and on the roof, the atlas. My father stands with one leg on a rock. My brother and I hug his other leg, hold hands. My father smiles. He is not a man who smiles easily. There is a gravity to him. When he speaks or acts, he does so with purpose and sincerity. I have spent the past several years trying to become like him so when I say, "I love you," *you* can know I mean it. My father is a civil engineer. He is always concerned with infrastructure, the strength of holding the world together. He has always filled my head with information about highways and tunnels and concrete. I've retained little. The ingratitude of children is staggering. I do know this, however: if nothing else were in the way, we would always be able to reach each other. We could close the distance between our two points. We could point to a place on a map and say, we are here.

FURTHER RESOURCES
FOR WRITERS, READERS,
AND TEACHERS OF
FLASH NONFICTION

On Brevity and Teaching the Flash Essay

In compiling this anthology—as perhaps is the case in compiling *any* anthology—there were a great number of wonderful essays we had to leave out. The brief works collected here are just 84 of the more than 800 essays *Brevity* has published across 60 issues, and those 800+ essays were selected from a pool of thousands of submissions each reading period. Given the level of competition, and the quality of the submissions we receive, we believe all *Brevity* essays are in their own ways excellent, valuable, and worth reading. The full archive of essays we have published is available at no cost on the *Brevity* website: brevitymag.com.

Learning to write the flash essay—whether in the classroom, in a writers’ group, or on one’s own—offers enormous potential for expanding the prose writer’s toolbox. By definition, the length requirements of a flash essay allow writers to tackle numerous brief nonfiction pieces, learning from both the failed attempts and the successes. The concision and precision necessary to write a complete essay in 750 words or fewer is useful when writing longer works as well; the realization that each and every sentence must carry part of the storytelling load, that no words can be wasted, is invaluable.

For those who teach short-form essays, we have designed various resources within this volume that we hope will be useful in lesson planning. The Alternate Table of Contents is intended to help teachers utilize *The Best of Brevity* more effectively in the classroom, and to allow students to quickly find essays by subject or by form. The Guide to Pairing that follows connects some of the essays featured here with the chapters on craft and helpful exercises found in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, a useful companion volume. In addition to these resources, it is our hope that teachers assigning this anthology in the classroom will encourage their students to venture beyond the book and onto our website, where they will encounter a wealth of useful content more vast than any

“best of” collection could realistically contain.

Alongside the unique flash essays that appear in every issue of *Brevity*, we also publish numerous craft essays written by creative writers on all aspects of reading, writing, and teaching creative nonfiction. Five days a week, our *Brevity* blog (brevity.wordpress.com) presents interviews, craft discussions, book reviews, publishing tips, and musings on the writing life by readers and writers alike. In this way, *Brevity* is very much alive—ever-evolving with the times and concerns of the day. To read *Brevity* is to be part of an ongoing conversation about not only flash nonfiction, but also the writing world writ large. All of this makes *Brevity* an ideal resource for writers, both in the classroom and out.

In particular, we hope that teachers will use *Brevity's* many craft essays to explore particular facets of the genre with their students, such as self-editing, use of white space, the innocent vs. experienced point-of-view, and navigating memory, to name just a few, or to address difficult questions or issues that might come up in the classroom, such as empathy, fairness, or the representation of oppressed and marginalized voices.

To this end, here is a brief list of some of our favorite and most popular *Brevity* craft essays, all of which are freely accessible online:

“Ignorance, Lies, Imagination, and Subversion in the Writing of Memoir and the Personal Essay” by Lee Martin

A consideration of why it is “a good idea for the writer to admit early on exactly what he or she doesn’t know—what’s troubling, confusing, mysterious,” and how doing so can lead to a richer essay with a truer emotional resonance.

“‘Perhapsing’: The Use of Speculation in Creative Nonfiction” by Lisa Knopp

Through nuanced “perhapsing,” writers can render incomplete or forgotten memories with more complexity and without compromising our reliability as narrator.

“Picturing the Hybrid Form” by Rebecca Fish Ewan

This essay explores the different ways that images and words can work together, both in the drafting process and in the final product. Writers are encouraged to doodle and sketch along the way, because “drawing can enrich your work. Right now. Without formal training. Regardless of internal (or external) negative criticism. The truth is simple: If you can hold a pencil, you can draw.”

“FRELECTION: The Transformative Power of Reflection in Nonfiction” by Rebecca McClanahan

An insightful look at the surprising ways that reflection can transform the experiences we recount, reconfiguring and recasting our intimate truths.

“Against Knowing” by Dinah Lenney

Lenney argues that actively grappling with the unknown can give an essay the spark and pulse that nonfiction rooted solely in known facts can lack.

“Revision Advice from the Judges’ Table” by Caitlin Horrocks

What can writers learn from watching cooking competitions? This humorous yet useful essay translates *Top Chef* judges’ food critiques into writing workshop feedback and the requisite recipes for revision.

“On Asking the Hard Questions” by Silas Hansen

Does extraordinary writing require extraordinary life experience? Hansen explains how writers can elevate the mundane through reflection, examination, and by avoiding the easy questions and digging more deeply into the hard ones.

“Three Commandments for Writing about Race” by Xu Xi

Xu Xi advises writers on tackling race in an increasingly “global, hybrid world,” including the admonition to “*stop writing about race and write about how people live instead.*”

“Beyond ‘Craft for Craft’s Sake’: Nonfiction and Social Justice” by Rachel Toliver and M. Sausan

Two writers examine the unexpected ways their work engages with conversations of social justice. This essay argues that writing nonfiction must be an act of radical empathy, and thus cannot succeed solely on aesthetics.

In addition to the above, there are dozens more craft essays currently available on our website that may be used as supplementary material while teaching the essays in this volume (and more are added all the time). For a complete updated list of all craft essays available, please visit: brevitymag.com/category/craft-essays.

Finally, we hope this anthology will encourage readers and writers to go online and participate in the *Brevity* community. Please follow us on Twitter (@brevitymag) and Facebook (*Brevity Magazine*) for daily updates on publishing opportunities, discussions of the writing life, and links to helpful writing resources.

Consider as well putting your own best ideas about teaching *Brevity* and writing flash nonfiction into words and submitting them to our blog at brevitymag+blog@gmail.com. We would love to hear from you.

—Zoë Bossiere and Dinty W. Moore

[A Guide to Pairing The Best of Brevity with The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction](#)

Many of the essays found in this *Best of Brevity* volume can be taught alongside the craft essays and writing prompts found in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction: Advice and Essential Exercises from Respected Writers, Editors, and Teachers*. Whether you are a course instructor or are looking for prompts and ideas to expand your own writing practice, we hope you'll try combining these resources for twice the inspiration and practical advice.

The section headings below come from *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, and the essays listed can be found here, in *The Best of Brevity*.

MYSTERIOUS, AMBITIOUS, AND INTIMATE: THE FLASH NONFICTION FORM

All of the essays in *The Best of Brevity* are brief, of course, but a few work particularly well when read alongside Lia Purpura's excellent craft essay "On Miniatures" and the prompt included in Carol Guess's essay "On Carnival Lights, Compression, and Mice." Try these for starters:

"Thumb-Sucking Girl" by Sonja Livingston

"So Little" by Josey Foo

"Girl/Thing" by Anna Vodicka

"NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS": THE POWER OF IMAGE AND DETAIL

Powerful detail and unforgettable imagery are cornerstones of the flash form, so you might turn to any of the essays found here in *Best of*

Brevity as illustrations. But you might consider pairing Brenda Miller's craft essay "Friendship, Intuition, and Trust: On the Importance of Detail" with her essay in this anthology "The Shape of Emptiness" to illustrate how well the author takes her own advice. Or consider teaching Philip Graham's prompt about hidden memories, "The Ant in the Water Droplet," with these *Best of Brevity* essays:

"Ace of Spades" by Julie Marie Wade

"I Remain Very Sorry for What I Did to the Little Black Kitten" by Jenny Bouilly

"Holy" by Lori Jakiela

"White Lies" by Erin Murphy

SPEAKING TO THE READER: ON FINDING YOUR VOICE

Lee Martin and Jennifer Sinor both have essays in *The Best of Brevity*, and their craft discussions about voice in *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide* are particularly illuminating alongside their flash work. You might also consider the following *Best of Brevity* essays as companions to the voice-based writing prompts offered by Sinor, Martin, and Sue William Silverman:

"Imagining Foxes" by Brian Doyle

"Open Season" by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher

"All or Nothing, Self-Portrait at 27" by Jill Talbot

"Dropping Babies" by J.D. Schraffenberger

WORDS, WONDERFUL WORDS: USING SOUND AND LANGUAGE

Writing is nothing without words, and flash nonfiction, like poetry, often takes the sounds of words into consideration alongside their literal meanings. The craft essays by Barbara Hurd, Peggy Shumaker, and Eric LeMay include prompts meant to stimulate our ears as well as our intellects, and will work very well with these essays found in *The Best of Brevity*:

"Fluency" by Jamila Osman

“\’in-lish\” by Christina Tang-Bernas

“Lag Time” by Steven Church

“Wings” by Daisy Hernández

“I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess that’s what they were,” by Diane Seuss

OF YOU AND I: THOUGHTS ON POINT-OF-VIEW

Who is telling the story, from what point in their lives, and to whom is the story being told? Is it told in first-, second-, or third-person? The three *Field Guide* essays on point-of-view, along with the prompts and examples, offer useful insight into the complexities of POV, and pair well with these essays from *The Best of Brevity*:

“Thumb-Sucking Girl” by Sonja Livingston

“Letter to a Future Lover” by Ander Monson

“The Cruelty We Delivered: An Apology” by Ira Sukrungruang

“When We Played” by Matthew Komatsu

SETTLING ON STRUCTURE: SHAPING FLASH NONFICTION

Research, lists, digression, and graphic elements are just a few of the various ways to move out of the “conventional” narrative mode in flash nonfiction. Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Judith Kitchen, and Maggie McKnight offer useful discussions, examples, and exercises to help you shake things up, and the prompts can be considered alongside these *Best of Brevity* essays:

“Bear Fragments” by Christine Byl

“A Brief Atmospheric Future” by Matthew Gavin Frank

“The Things I’ve Lost” by Brian Arundel

“The Blind Prophets of Easter Island” by Tessa Fontaine

“On the Occurrence of March 20, 1981 and on the Occurrences of Every Night After” by B.J. Hollars

“Perdition” by Kristen Radtke

THE SINGULAR MOMENT: WHERE TO BEGIN, WHERE TO END

Found forms, sometimes known as “hermit crab essays” after the hermit crab’s propensity to switch shells and inhabit odd shaped containers, offer endless opportunities to merge form and content in innovative and unexpected ways. Consider these crab-like flash nonfictions alongside the craft essays and exercises found in this section of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide*:

“The Heart as a Torn Muscle” by Randon Billings Noble

“Hairy Credentials” by Nicole Cyrus

“An Address to My Fellow Faculty Who Have Asked Me to Speak About My Work” by Ayşe Papatya Bucak

“An Indian in Yoga Class: Finding Imbalance” by Rajpreet Heir

“Chronology of the Body” by Sam Kiss

“The Domestic Apologies” by Dustin Parsons

AGAINST THE GRAIN: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO FLASH NONFICTION

Patrick Madden and Jeff Gundy close out *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide* with discussions and prompts promoting contrariness, wandering, and gathering. The following *Best of Brevity* essays offer excellent examples:

“Place” by Robert Root

“Fish” by Nicole Walker

“Mother’s Tongue” by Samuel Autman

“If You Find a Mouse on a Glue Trap” by Suzanne Farrell Smith

Alternate Table of Contents by Subject and Form

Here are the essays found in *The Best of Brevity: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction* arranged by subject area and by essay form.

SUBJECTS

Aging

"Solving for X" by Pam Durban

"The Lunch Lady and Her Three-Headed Dogs" by Sonya Huber

"Sunrise" by Joe Oestreich

"Forgetting" by Abigail Thomas

Animals

"I Remain Very Sorry for What I Did to the Little Black Kitten" by Jenny Bouilly

"Bear Fragments" by Christine Byl

"Success and Prosperity" by Bouiyan Chen, translated by Jennie Chia-Hui Chu

"The Sloth" by Jill Christman

"Imagining Foxes" by Brian Doyle

"The Salmon" by Charlotte Gullick

"Sunrise" by Joe Oestreich

"If You Find a Mouse on a Glue Trap" by Suzanne Farrell Smith

"Counting Bats" by Thao Thai

"Fish" by Nicole Walker

Childhood Memories

"I Remain Very Sorry for What I Did to the Little Black Kitten" by Jenny Bouilly

"Surrender" by Nina Boutsikaris

"Meanness" by Beverly Donofrio

"Girl Fight" by Joey Franklin

"Devotion" by Sarah J. Lin
"Thumb-Sucking Girl" by Sonja Livingston
"Genesis" by Bret Lott
"Suspended" by Kyle Minor
"Perdition" by Kristen Radtke
"Recesses" by Mark Stricker

Coming of Age

"The Things I've Lost" by Brian Arundel
"When a 17-Year-Old Checkout Clerk in Small Town Michigan Hits
on Me, I Think about the Girl I Loved at 17" by Krysl Malcolm Belc
"Beach City" by Jaquira Díaz
"Girl Fight" by Joey Franklin
"The Salmon" by Charlotte Gullick
"Chronology of the Body" by Sam Kiss
"White Lies" by Erin Murphy
"Breathless" by Heather Sellers
"Recesses" by Mark Stricker
"The Cruelty We Delivered: An Apology" by Ira Sukrungruang
"Confession" by Michelle Valois

Disability and Illness

"Success and Prosperity" by Bouiyan Chen, translated by Jennie
Chia-Hui Chu
"Solving for X" by Pam Durban
"Holy" by Lori Jakiela
"Poster Children" by Sandra Gail Lambert
"Devotion" by Sarah J. Lin
"The Birthday Place" by Rebecca McClanahan
"White Lies" by Erin Murphy
"Sunrise" by Joe Oestreich
"Openings" by Jennifer Sinor
"Shower Songs" by Brian Trapp
"Ace of Spades" by Julie Marie Wade

Family

- "How to Leave a Room" by Marcia Aldrich
"Success and Prosperity" by Bouiyan Chen, translated by Jennie Chia-Hui Chu
"Lag Time" by Steven Church
"Meanness" by Beverly Donofrio
"Holy" by Lori Jakiela
"The Birthday Place" by Rebecca McClanahan
"Sunrise" by Joe Oestreich
"Cheekbones" by Patricia Park
"I Go Back to Berryman's" by Vincent Scarpa
"Openings" by Jennifer Sinor
"My Cousin's Backyard" by Deborah Taffa
"Shower Songs" by Brian Trapp
"Ace of Spades" by Julie Marie Wade

Gender

- "How to Leave a Room" by Marcia Aldrich
"When a 17-Year-Old Checkout Clerk in Small Town Michigan Hits on Me, I Think about the Girl I Loved at 17" by Krysl Malcolm Belc
"Hairy Credentials" by Nicole Cyrus
"Alive" by Laurie Lynn Drummond
"The Salmon" by Charlotte Gullick
"Chronology of the Body" by Sam Kiss
"Some Things About That Day" by Debra Marquart
"Transgender Day of Remembrance: A Found Essay" by Torrey Peters
"Milk for Free" by Deesha Philyaw
"Breathless" by Heather Sellers
"Recesses" by Mark Stricker
"All or Nothing, Self-Portrait at 27" by Jill Talbot
"Confession" by Michelle Valois
"Girl/Thing" by Anna Vodicka

Grief and Loss

"Post-Mortem" by Traci Brimhall

"Katy Perry Is Crooning and Won't Stop Just Because I Did" by Shuly Xóchitl Cawood

"The Sloth" by Jill Christman

"The Shape of Emptiness" by Brenda Miller

"Quinto Sol" by Michelle Otero

"Ace of Spades" by Julie Marie Wade

Immigration and International Perspectives

"How to Erase an Arab" by Julie Hakim Azzam

"Success and Prosperity" by Bouiyan Chen, translated by Jennie Chia-Hui Chu

"Wings" by Daisy Hernández

"Fluency" by Jamila Osman

"Quinto Sol" by Michelle Otero

"Cheekbones" by Patricia Park

"\`in-glish\" by Christina Tang-Bernas

"Counting Bats" by Thao Thai

LGBTQIA+ Perspectives

"When a 17-Year-Old Checkout Clerk in Small Town Michigan Hits on Me, I Think about the Girl I Loved at 17" by Krys Malcolm Belc

"There Are Distances Between Us" by Roxane Gay

"Chronology of the Body" by Sam Kiss

"Transgender Day of Remembrance: A Found Essay" by Torrey Peters

"Confession" by Michelle Valois

Nature

"Bear Fragments" by Christine Byl

"The Sloth" by Jill Christman

"Lag Time" by Steven Church

"Imagining Foxes" by Brian Doyle

"A Brief Atmospheric Future" by Matthew Gavin Frank
"Some Space" by Michael Martone
"Place" by Robert Root
"Counting Bats" by Thao Thai
"Fish" by Nicole Walker

Race and Ethnicity

"Mother's Tongue" by Samuel Autman
"How to Erase an Arab" by Julie Hakim Azzam
"Hairy Credentials" by Nicole Cyrus
"Beach City" by Jaquira Díaz
"Open Season" by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher
"Blood; Quantum" by Danielle Geller
"An Indian in Yoga Class: Finding Imbalance" by Rajpreet Heir
"On the Occurrence of March 20, 1981 and on the Occurrences of
Every Night After" by B.J. Hollars
"White Lies" by Erin Murphy
"Milk for Free" by Deesha Philyaw
"How to Discuss Race as a White Person" by Sam Stokley
"\`in-english\`" by Christina Tang-Bernas
"Counting Bats" by Thao Thai

Religion

"The Salmon" by Charlotte Gullick
"Holy" by Lori Jakiela
"Genesis" by Bret Lott
"The Cruelty We Delivered: An Apology" by Ira Sukrungruang
"Confession" by Michelle Valois

Romantic Relationships

"Beach City" by Jaquira Díaz
"A Brief Atmospheric Future" by Matthew Gavin Frank
"There Are Distances Between Us" by Roxane Gay
"Some Things About That Day" by Debra Marquart

"The *Farmers' Almanac* Best Days for Breeding" by John A. McDermott
"Letter to a Future Lover" by Ander Monson
"The Heart as a Torn Muscle" by Randon Billings Noble
"The Domestic Apologies" by Dustin Parsons

Setting and Place

"Surrender" by Nina Boutsikaris
"Beach City" by Jaquira Díaz
"The Blind Prophets of Easter Island" by Tessa Fontaine
"The Salmon" by Charlotte Gullick
"Talk Big" by Lee Martin
"Some Space" by Michael Martone
"Place" by Robert Root
"I Go Back to Berryman's" by Vincent Scarpa
"Five from Kyrgyzstan" by Jia Tolentino

Teaching

"An Address to My Fellow Faculty Who Have Asked Me to Speak About My Work" by Ayşe Papatya Bucak
"The Lunch Lady and Her Three-Headed Dogs" by Sonya Huber
"Intro to Creative Writing" by Dani Johannesen
"Some Space" by Michael Martone
"The Shape of Emptiness" by Brenda Miller

Trauma

"Before Sunrise" by Erika Dreifus
"There Are Distances Between Us" by Roxane Gay
"When We Played" by Matthew Komatsu
"Wide Open Spaces" by Kathryn Miller
"Fluency" by Jamila Osman
"Milk for Free" by Deesha Philyaw
"I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess that's what they were," by Diane Seuss

"Girl/Thing" by Anna Vodicka

"A Most Dangerous Game" by Alexis Wiggins

Women's Experience

"Women These Days" by Amy Butcher

"Alive" by Laurie Lynn Drummond

"So Little" by Josey Foo

"Some Things About That Day" by Debra Marquart

"Fluency" by Jamila Osman

"Transgender Day of Remembrance: A Found Essay" by Torrey
Peters

"Girl/Thing" by Anna Vodicka

"A Most Dangerous Game" by Alexis Wiggins

FORMS

Braided Essay

- "Post-Mortem" by Traci Brimhall
- "Bear Fragments" by Christine Byl
- "The Blind Prophets of Easter Island" by Tessa Fontaine
- "When We Played" by Matthew Komatsu
- "Dropping Babies" by J.D. Schraffenberger
- "Fish" by Nicole Walker

Fragmented or Sectioned Essay

- "Mother's Tongue" by Samuel Autman
- "How to Erase an Arab" by Julie Hakim Azzam
- "Open Season" by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher
- "An Indian in Yoga Class: Finding Imbalance" by Rajpreet Heir
- "Holy" by Lori Jakiela
- "Chronology of the Body" by Sam Kiss
- "Devotion" by Sarah J. Lin
- "The Domestic Apologies" by Dustin Parsons
- "Dropping Babies" by J.D. Schraffenberger
- "\`in-english\" by Christina Tang-Bernas

Graphic Memoir

- "Perdition" by Kristen Radtke

Hermit Crab Essay

- "Hairy Credentials" by Nicole Cyrus
- "Open Season" by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher
- "The Heart as a Torn Muscle" by Randon Billings Noble

Lyric Essay

- "The Things I've Lost" by Brian Arundel

“When a 17-Year-Old Checkout Clerk in Small Town Michigan Hits on Me, I Think about the Girl I Loved at 17” by Krys Malcolm Belc
“Lag Time” by Steven Church
“A Brief Atmospheric Future” by Matthew Gavin Frank
“On the Occurrence of March 20, 1981 and on the Occurrences of Every Night After” by B.J. Hollars
“Letter to a Future Lover” by Ander Monson
“On Being a Trucker” by Lia Purpura
“I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess that’s what they were,” by Diane Seuss

Micro Essay

“So Little” by Josey Foo
“Thumb-Sucking Girl” by Sonja Livingston
“Fluency” by Jamila Osman
“Perdition” by Kristen Radtke
“Girl/Thing” by Anna Vodicka

Numbered or List Essay

“The Things I’ve Lost” by Brian Arundel
“An Address to My Fellow Faculty Who Have Asked Me to Speak About My Work” by Ayşe Papatya Bucak
“Bear Fragments” by Christine Byl
“Meanness” by Beverly Donofrio
“When We Played” by Matthew Komatsu
“Poster Children” by Sandra Gail Lambert
“Some Space” by Michael Martone
“Milk for Free” by Deesha Philyaw
“How to Discuss Race as a White Person” by Sam Stokley
“The Cruelty We Delivered: An Apology” by Ira Sukrungruang
“Five from Kyrgyzstan” by Jia Tolentino
“Fish” by Nicole Walker

Researched Essay

“When a 17-Year-Old Checkout Clerk in Small Town Michigan Hits on Me, I Think about the Girl I Loved at 17” by Krys Malcolm Belc
“Women These Days” by Amy Butcher
“Bear Fragments” by Christine Byl
“The Blind Prophets of Easter Island” by Tessa Fontaine
“A Brief Atmospheric Future” by Matthew Gavin Frank
“Wings” by Daisy Hernández
“On the Occurrence of March 20, 1981 and on the Occurrences of Every Night After” by B.J. Hollars
“Transgender Day of Remembrance: A Found Essay” by Torrey Peters
“Dropping Babies” by J.D. Schraffenberger

Contributors

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[Brian Arundel](#) received an MFA in creative writing from Louisiana State University, and his fiction and essays have appeared in publications that include *Salon*, *Mid-American Review*, *Under the Sun*, *Bryant Literary Review*, and *Buddhadharma*. He is also the author of *Sam, Sara, Etc.*, among other plays. He worked in magazine and book publishing as an editor and managing editor before transitioning to the nonprofit sector in 2014. He currently lives outside Portland, Maine with his wife, Manuela.

[Samuel Autman](#) once resided in a dimension called Print Journalism, telling stories in Tulsa, Salt Lake City, St. Louis, and San Diego. When the New Media wormhole began to subsume Print Journalism, Autman started experimenting with narrative nonfiction. With no promise of a safe landing, he defected from Print Journalism and landed on Higher Education, a parallel reality all together. Over time this Journalist morphed into a Writer-Teacher. He's now an associate professor of English at DePauw University, publishing essays in anthologies and general circulation and literary magazines, in print and online. His next frontier: video essays.

[Julie Hakim Azzam](#) is a senior academic coordinator for the MFA program in the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University. She has published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*, and is a reviewer for *The Horn Book*, a magazine about literature for children and young adults. Her current writing focuses on children's literature about the refugee and immigrant experience, as well as neurodiverse narratives of childhood.

[Krys Malcolm Belc](#) is the author of the flash nonfiction chapbook *In Transit* and the upcoming memoir, *The Natural Mother of the Child*. His essays have appeared in *Granta*, *The Rumpus*, *Black Warrior Review*, and elsewhere. His work has been listed in the *Wigleaf* Top 50 and has been anthologized in *Best of the Net 2018*. He's won contests at *Redivider* and *Pigeon Pages*. He lives in Pennsylvania with his partner and their three young children.

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[Traci Brimhall](#) is the author of the hybrid poetry and essay collection *Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod*, as well as three books of poetry: *Saudade*, *Our Lady of the Ruins*, and *Rookery*. A 2013 NEA Fellow, she's currently an associate professor of creative writing at Kansas State University.

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[Amy Butcher](#) is an essayist and author of *Mothertrucker*. Her first book, *Visiting Hours*, earned starred reviews and praise from *The New York Times Sunday Review of Books*, *NPR*, *The Star Tribune*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and others. Her essays have appeared recently in *Granta*, *Harper's*, *The New York Times's "Modern Love,"* *The Iowa Review*, *Lit Hub*, and *Guernica*, and have earned notable distinctions in the 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 editions of the *Best American Essays* series. She is

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[Shuly Xóchitl Cawood](#) is the author of the memoir *The Going and Goodbye* and the short story collection *A Small Thing to Want*. She has an MFA from Queens University, and her writing has been published in *The Rumpus*, *Zone 3*, *Santa Clara Review*, *New Madrid Journal*, and *Cider Press Review*, among others.

[Jennie Chia-Hui Chu](#) is a writer and translator based in Boston, Massachusetts. Her writing and translation have appeared in print and online with publications such as *Asymptote*, *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *Brevity*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Literary Review*, and the *World Journal*. Two of her essays were recorded by NPR's *All Things Considered*.

[Jill Christman](#) is the author of two memoirs, *Darkroom: A Family Exposure* (winner of the AWP Prize for Creative Nonfiction) and *Borrowed Babies: Apprenticing for Motherhood*, as well as essays in magazines such as *Brevity*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Fourth Genre*, *TriQuarterly*, *River Teeth*, *True Story*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. She is a senior editor of *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative* and teaches creative nonfiction writing at Ball State University.

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[Beverly Donofrio](#) is the bestselling author of three memoirs, *Astonished*, *Looking for Mary*, and *Riding in Cars with Boys*; three children's books; and many personal stories in print, online, on NPR, and on PBS. She has appeared at *The Moth* and teaches the art of memoir writing around the country.

[Brian Doyle](#) authored six collections of essays, two nonfiction books, two collections of poems, two short story collections, a novella, and three novels. His essays were published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Orion*, *The American Scholar*, *The Sun*, *The Georgia Review*, *The New York Times*, and *The Times of London*, and have been reprinted in *Best American Essays*, *Best American Science & Nature Writing*, and *Best American Spiritual Writing*. Before his death in 2017, Doyle served for many years as editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland, Oregon.

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is due out February 2021, provided our world is still in existence by then.

[Joey Franklin](#) is the author of the forthcoming essay collections *Delusions of Grandeur: American Essays* and *My Wife Wants You to Know I'm Happily Married*. His essays have appeared in many top literary magazines, including *Hunger Mountain*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Utne Reader*, and he's had work anthologized in *The Norton Reader*, *Bedford Select Custom Database*, and several other books for creative writing students. He currently directs the MFA program in creative writing at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and serves as co-editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*.

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[Charlotte Gullick](#) is a novelist, essayist, editor, educator, and chair of the Creative Writing Department at Austin Community College. In May 2016, she graduated from the Institute of American Indian Arts with an MFA in creative nonfiction. She authored the novel *By Way of Water*, and her nonfiction has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Brevity*, *Dogwood Journal*, *Pembroke*, *Pithead Chapel*, and the *LA Review*. Her other awards include a Christopher Isherwood Fellowship for Fiction, a Colorado Council on the Arts Fellowship for Poetry, a MacDowell Colony Residency, a Ragdale Residency, as well as the Evergreen State College 2012 Teacher Excellence Award.

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[Dani Johannesen](#) earned a PhD in English from the University of South Dakota and is assistant professor of composition at the University of Minnesota Crookston. She is the co-editor of *Iconic Sports Venues: Persuasion in Public Spaces*. Her creative and scholarly works have appeared in a variety of books, journals, and magazines.

[Sam Kiss](#) is a poet and essayist whose work often examines the intersections between gender, love, and the body. He has a degree in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College; this essay was born there in his freshman fiction writing workshop. Breaking the rules worked out for him then, so he plans to make a habit of it. As a transgender man, he writes to understand and to be understood, but never to explain himself.

[Matthew Komatsu](#) is a writer, graduate of the University of Alaska's MFA in creative writing, and member of the Alaska Air National Guard. He is a recipient of the Alaska Literary Award, and his work has appeared in *Brevity* and elsewhere.

[Sandra Gail Lambert](#) is the author of the Lammy-nominated memoir, *A Certain Loneliness*, and a novel, *The River's Memory*. Among the places her work has been published are *The New York Times* and *The Paris Review*. She is an NEA Creative Writing Fellow and the co-editor of the anthology *Older Queer Voices: The Intimacy of Survival*.

[Sarah J. Lin](#) works with words for a living. "Devotion" was her first published piece, and she's delighted that since its initial appearance in *Brevity*, it's made its way into anthologies like *The Prentice Hall Reader* and *Stepping Stones*. Another piece, "Zongzi," was published in *Silk Road Literary Review* and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She received her MFA in fiction from Colorado State University and lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband and daughter.

[Sonja Livingston](#) is the author of four books of literary nonfiction, including the award-winning memoir *Ghostbread*, and her latest, *The Virgin of Prince Street*. She's won awards and fellowships from the New York State Foundation for the Arts, AWP, *The Iowa Review*, *Arts & Letters*, the Deming Fund for Women, and *Ruminant Magazine*. Her

essays appear in such outlets as *Salon*, *LitHub*, and *The Kenyon Review*, and are widely anthologized in textbooks on nonfiction writing. Livingston teaches in the MFA Program at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

[Bret Lott](#) is the author of 14 books. He has served as Senior American Scholar and Writer in Residence at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, spoken on Flannery O'Connor at The White House, and was a member of the National Council on the Arts from 2006 to 2012. He is nonfiction editor for *Crazyhorse*, and teaches at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina.

[Debra Marquart](#) is a Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Iowa State University and Iowa's Poet Laureate. A memoirist, poet, and performing musician, Marquart's work has been featured on NPR and the BBC and has received over 50 grants and awards including an NEA Fellowship, a PEN USA Award, a *New York Times* Editors' Choice commendation, and *Elle Magazine's* Elle Lettres Award. The senior editor of *Flyway: Journal of Writing & Environment*, Marquart teaches in ISU's interdisciplinary MFA Program in creative writing and environment and in the Stonecoast MFA program at the University of Southern Maine.

[Lee Martin](#) has published three memoirs, most recently, *Such a Life*. He is also the author of five novels, including *The Bright Forever*, a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, and two short story collections. He teaches in the MFA program at The Ohio State University.

[Michael Martone](#) was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and is the author of a dozen books of fiction and nonfiction, including *Brooding*, *The Moon Over Wapakoneta*, and *Michael Martone*. He lives now in Tuscaloosa and is happy that, now, his computer actually counts the number of words allotted (he has been given 80) to tell his life story, like robotic Fates, measuring out the length of line, there, at the bottom of window frame, cutting him off at the exact

[Rebecca McClanahan](#) has published 11 books of poetry and nonfiction, most recently *In the Key of New York City: A Memoir in*

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[Brenda Miller](#) is the author of five essay collections, including *An Earlier Life*. She also co-authored *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining and Publishing Creative Nonfiction* and *The Pen and the Bell: Mindful Writing in a Busy World*. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Sweet*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and *Psaltery and Lyre*. Her work has received six Pushcart Prizes. She is a professor of English at Western Washington University and associate faculty at the Rainier Writing Workshop.

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Acknowledgments

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championed and supported the magazine over these 20 years: your interest in our efforts and your appreciation of the writers and work we have featured on our pages is what keeps us going into our third decade, and hopefully well beyond. Your engagement is what makes *Brevity* such a vibrant community of readers and writers. Thank you.

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HOW MUCH OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE CAN FIT INTO 750 WORDS?

A lot, it turns out. Since its founding in 1997, *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction* has published hundreds of brief nonfiction essays by writers around the world, each within that strict word count. Over the past 20 years, *Brevity* has become one of the longest-running and most popular online literary publications, a journal readers regularly return to for insightful essays from skilled writers at every stage of their careers. Featuring examples of nonfiction forms such as memoir, narrative, lyric, braided, hermit crab, and hybrid, *The Best of Brevity* brings you 84 of the best-loved and most memorable reader favorites, collected in print for the first time. Compressed to their essence, these essays glint with drama, grief, love, and anger, as well as innumerable other lived intensities, resulting in an anthology that is as varied as it is unforgettable, leaving the reader transformed.

With contributions from **Krys Malcolm Belc, Jenny Bouilly, Brian Doyle, Roxane Gay, Daisy Hernández, Michael Martone, Ander Monson, Patricia Park, Kristen Radtke, Diane Seuss, Abigail Thomas, Jia Tolentino**, and so many more, *The Best of Brevity* offers unparalleled diversity of style, form, and perspective for those interested in reading, writing, or teaching the flash nonfiction form.

“The Best of Brevity feels like the condensed energy of a coiled spring. A vibrant collection, dynamic in its exploration and celebration of the flash form.”

*—KAREN BABINE, author of **All the Wild Hungers***

*“I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead,’ Mark Twain has said. But the writers who have contributed to *The Best of Brevity* took the time and made the effort. Dinty W. Moore, a pioneer of flash and the founding editor of *Brevity*, and his colleague Zoë Bossiere have put together a marvelous collection of magic moments and concise ideas that will intrigue, delight, and inspire readers and writers. Each piece is an all-consuming instant, a thought-provoking breath of enlightenment and surprise. These flashes illustrate the power, versatility, and potential of the creative nonfiction genre.”*

*—LEE GUTKIND, editor and founder, **Creative Nonfiction Magazine***

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