

ALL THE SHADOWS
ARE BLUE

ISSUE 01
Fall 2026



**cloud clad &
sunflowers**

Cloud Clad & Sunflowers

ISSUE 01

Fall 2026

Cloud Clad & Sunflowers

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Issue 01

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SLOW

LONG

AND

A BIT

Slugmail

BORING

Oh, it's you—

You're here. I've been thinking about this place for a long time.

Cloud Clad & Sunflowers is the title of a poem I wrote years ago, when I just started experimenting with imagery. I sent it out to some magazines, and got rejected everywhere. And I wholeheartedly believe that the editors did a good job by rejecting it. The poem was actually terrible. But the title was pretty enough to be thought of sometimes.

Later, when I started this magazine, I had no idea why this magazine needed to exist. In fact, I made this magazine out of rage. I was angry at myself for choosing the safer path, taking the easy way out.

Growing up, I thought I'd do something creative. But there I was, pushing myself into a crowd of alien bodies.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the wrong places. We keep fawning, dissolving, making ourselves part of the background. I've made myself smaller, turned down opportunities because I thought I was somewhere different.

But life makes us do some things out of necessity. We have responsibilities. We don't always get what we want. And that is a very ordinary experience, almost human. But don't we catch ourselves looking back, grieving the unlived life?

Our very first issue, *all the shadows are blue*, is about existing in grief, letting grief be a part of yourself even when there is light. It is about living with regrets, blending into a crowd of alien bodies— mourning and taking comfort in the camouflage at the same time.

No, this isn't all negative. For me, this is about taking something back from life. But this magazine is no longer mine alone. It has become a tiny container, carrying fragments of people's imaginations.

And perhaps this is a little space for all of us to be loud, without anyone telling us we aren't loud enough.

Now, this little magazine has found its own space in the world. Thank you to my wonderful team and my dearest contributors for making this issue breathe. Thank you all for sitting in the shade with me.

Happy reading!

Varshini
Founder & EIC
Cloud Clad & Sunflowers

All the
Shadows
are Blue

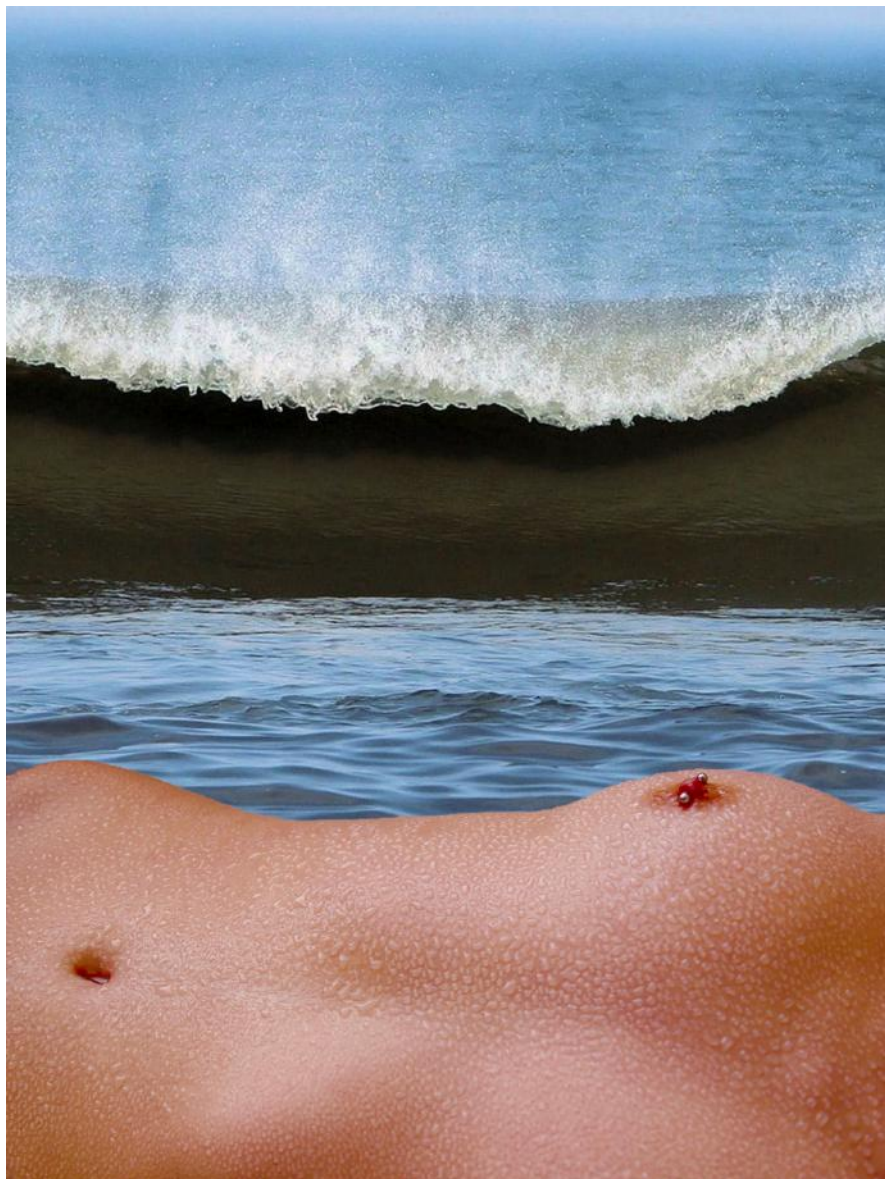
summer night—
my window frame marks
another constellation

By Martina Matijević



by Anaxiformings

My first memories are of water. A lone fishing cabin off the coast of a lake on a cold high-winded December morning. Above, purple geese dot the sky. On the horizon, something dissolves. A man speaks to me from below the water, then broken glass scatters green all over the shore and an eye stares back at another eye. A mother cuts up her son. A father turns blood into water. Shrimpers work their trawls pulling up six-legged garfish, only mildly human. A cormorant dries its wings on a wharf. An explosion, its eye unraveling, leaves a residue of gold. Then another image of my losing arms and legs and regaining them momentarily...dolphins begin to sing and take me out far into the sea, to the very edge of the sea.



BETWEEN THE WAVES AND DAYLIGHT

By Bill Wolak

Allagi And The Sea

by Henry Larkin

Allagi's breath steamed into the cold night air, his jacket thin against a chill that wormed its way beneath his skin. He stared into the starless night, swaying as the deck beneath his feet rocked like a cradle over a dark sea.

He shivered, stuffing shaking hands into his pockets as music thumped into the night air.

There was a party behind him. Allagi couldn't remember if he'd been invited. Men and women clutched at each other behind a glass door, feverish in their exultation. He saw a man dancing on his hands as other revelers laughed at him, whispering secrets into each other's ears between grinding teeth. Sweat ran down their faces as they contorted in ecstasy, wild eyes rolling with electric delight.

Allagi wondered what that fever felt like as he watched them dance. Their voices blared like car horns, fierce and loud until they were swallowed by the waves.

Had he ever danced like that? It was hard to imagine.

He reached for the door, drawn to the noise. Drawn to the light, and the heat, and the tortured euphoria on the faces of the dancers. He tugged the handle, but it wouldn't move.

Locked.

Allagi frowned, stowing his hands back into his jacket as icy wind

cut around him. He tore his eyes from the party, turning instead to the restless night.

The moonlight shone a dark blue against obsidian waves.

“Do you know where we’re headed?”

Allagi jumped at the high voice behind him. He turned, but saw nothing.

“It’s not safe to turn your back to the water,” the voice said, behind him again.

He spun, confused. A figure perched on a guardrail with their back to the waves. An unlit cigarette twirled between thin fingers that led to hands swirling with tattoos. Black ink painted her black skin, rising up long, sleeveless arms.

He could’ve sworn he’d been alone on the deck, but here she was.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked. “Get off the guardrail. It isn’t safe.”

She raised her eyebrows, bemused.

“Got a light?”

Allagi’s eyes rose past the stranger’s shoulders, trying to meet a gaze that stared out from behind red sunglasses. Frowning, he peered at the thick lenses. Behind each one was a large coin that glinted in the moonlight, embossed with a grinning skull.

He fumbled in his jacket, looking for a lighter with shaking fingers as he stared at her glasses.

“Can you see out of those?”

The stranger scoffed, leaning back dangerously over the waves. Black hair captured her face in a halo that didn’t move with the wind.

“More than you can out of those.” She pointed at Allagi’s eyes as he finally found a lighter. He handed it over, and the cold tips of her fingers lingered against his as she took it from him. She smiled.

Her teeth were white, and the moonlight glinted off her sharp canines.

“Cold?” she asked. “That jacket looks awfully thin.”

Allagi shivered, glancing at her exposed arms.

“Not as cold as you.”

“I’m plenty warm.”

She lit her cigarette, a finger of smoke curling in the air between them as she turned back to the waves. Allagi stepped closer to the guardrail without thinking, squinting as sea spray reached for her.

“You’ll fall if you’re not careful.”

She shrugged.

“I’m always careful.”

She flicked the lighter, flames dancing on her palm as she shielded her cigarette from the wind. “Not that it matters. We’re all going to fall eventually. It will have been worth it to see the water like this.”

Allagi frowned.

“Like what?”

“Endless. Peaceful.”

The boat rocked beneath them, nearly throwing Allagi off his feet.

“It doesn’t seem very peaceful.”

The stranger reached a hand back without looking.

“Come and see.”

Allagi took another step, hesitating as the boat rolled over a quarrelsome wave. The party roared behind him, but its noise faded fast in the night air as he drew closer to the sea.

“What’s your name?”

The stranger only curled her fingers, beckoning.

Allagi took her hand.

He clambered onto the guardrail, one hand around hers and the other clutching the rail itself. His heart pounded as he stared down into the black water, the stranger’s cold grip wrapped around his clammy palm.

He could’ve sworn he saw something moving beneath the black surface, but he blinked and it was gone.

“I’ll ask you again,” she said, legs swinging over empty air. “Do you know where we’re going?”

Allagi frowned, trying not to think about how close he was to falling into the sea.

“I can’t remember,” he said slowly as he tried to recollect, memories slipping through his fingers like drops of rain. “Do you?”

The stranger nodded, eyes fixed on the water.

“Mind telling me?”

She looked at him, and Allagi shivered as the skulls behind her glasses grinned.

“You’ll figure it out when we arrive.”

Smoke rose from her cigarette as silence stretched between them, neither of her hands on the guardrail to which Allagi clung.

“Were you at the party?” he asked as the churning sea grasped for him.

“I was,” the stranger said. “I won’t be again.”

“Why not?”

She turned to face him.

“Does it look like somewhere you’d want to go back to?”

Allagi remembered the sticky ecstasy of the party, how its attendees swayed and pawed at each other like beasts. It revolted him, disgusted him, made him feel unclean.

Yes, he thought. More than anything, yes.

He remembered the locked door.

“I don’t think it matters. I can’t get in.”

“Then you know why not.”

The boat rolled into a wave, and Allagi nearly fell overboard. The spray soaked his jacket, chilling him to the bone.

“We should get down.” He swallowed as he peered into the water, seeing his reflection broken across its glassy surface. An unfamiliar face stared back at him. When had he grown so thin? “At least hold onto the railing. You could fall.”

The stranger looked at him from behind her glasses, a wry smile on her lips.

“Planning on pushing me in?”

He shook his head.

“Then I’m not going to fall. It’s you who should watch out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shrugged, turning back to the waves.

“The water takes what you give it.” She sighed, smoke leaving her mouth in a whisper.

“You have a lot to give.”

Allagi looked back into the roiling sea. Waves rose like blades of grass, and all around him the lawn of God stretched endlessly.

“Will you tell me your name?”

The stranger shook her head.

“No need. You know my name. Everyone does.”

Allagi swallowed, his teeth chattering.

“I don’t,” he said through a violent shiver. “I think I’d remember if I knew you.”

“Like how you remember getting on this boat?”

“Don’t mock me,” he said, growing angry. “Give me a straight answer.”

“If you don’t like my answers, don’t ask me questions. You’re out here with me. You have only yourself to blame.”

“That’s not how I remember it.”

“What do you remember?”

A beat of silence passed between them as Allagi probed his memory, dark clouds looming as if to caress the violent waves.

He didn’t remember getting on this boat. He didn’t remember being at the party. Most of all, he didn’t remember the stranger. She was familiar, but he couldn’t place her. He looked at her hair, her tattoos, her glasses, and felt as though he was on the cusp of a memory. The whisper of a name ran through his mind, but never reached his tongue.

A chill ran up his spine. He told himself it was the cold and swallowed his fear.

“Please tell me your name.”

“You asked me that already.”

“I’m called Allagi, if that helps.”

The waves whispered his name back to him. A thousand voices, rising and falling in a hushed chorus. There was something comforting about the sound, something welcoming.

Allagi, Allagi.

“Allagi,” the stranger said. “The sea is calling you.”

“It’s just the wind. We hear what we want to hear.”

“You don’t believe that.”

He didn’t.

“Why are you out here?”

She shrugged.

“You have to get where you’re going. Shouldn’t be long now. The sea already has your name.”

A door slammed open on the ship, shrieking laughter pouring out of the party as its lights illuminated the water. A heavy miasma of perfume, sweat, and spilled alcohol wafted from the room, thick and nauseating. Like breathing syrup.

Allagi turned toward the door, surprised, and felt the stranger let go of his hand.

He whipped his head back around just in time to see her disappear beneath the waves.

He froze. Feverish chatter boiled out from the party. The sea churned, the wind blew, and Allagi sat on the guardrail, staring wide-eyed where the stranger had been only a moment ago. Smoke from her cigarette still curled there, calling him. The sea still whispered his name.

The door to the party slammed shut. The lock clicked into place. Allagi was alone.

Could he be alone?

A spike of fear. He thought of running to the party, to the suffocating pleasure that lay just behind the door. The anarchic, bestial decadence of its acolytes called to him, just as he yearned to bear the stigmata of their joy.

But the door was still locked. He couldn’t go that way, and he couldn’t stay on the deck. Not as the night closed in around him.

Not as the sea reached for him.

He cried out, leaping into the water before he could talk himself out of it.

The stranger was far beneath him already, and sinking fast.

Her red glasses bloomed in the dark like floodlights, drawing him into the angry currents. The water was cold. Salt stung his eyes as the stranger sank like a stone, abyssal depths yawning as he dove for her.

His head hurt. His ears hurt. Did he know how to swim? It was hard to remember, but he could certainly sink. Voices echoed around him in the dark, calling him deeper into the water. Strange shapes flitted through the impenetrable black, their faces human but their gazes empty.

They watched him descend with dead eyes.

He thought his lungs might burst as he swam for the stranger. The sea fought him for every inch, icy hands wrapping themselves around his throat as he plummeted into the dark. He could see the stranger, could nearly touch her.

What would he do if he reached her? Drown together, in some macabre embrace?

The water pushed him back, slapping him away as it thundered his name.

Allagi! Allagi!

His fingers brushed her ankle, her leg just out of reach as the sea swallowed her. He stretched, pushing his fingers into the void.

The water seized him, roaring in his ears, forcing him away from the stranger as she plummeted. Allagi's lungs screamed as he fought, muscles straining uselessly as the tides pummeled him back.

He broke the surface of the water, sputtering for air as waves lashed at him like whips. The boat was still there, waiting for him.

He looked back into the depths, but saw nothing. No red lights. No strange shapes.

Only him.

He shivered, the water slowing him as he dragged himself up a ladder and back onto the deck. He flopped flat on his back, panting and drenched as he stared wide-eyed into the dark sky.

The party raged behind the glass door, feverish as ever.

He stood on shaky legs and hammered at the glass, calling out for help in a voice choked with saltwater as his soaked jacket froze around him.

Nobody answered. Nobody cared.

How could they not care?

"Still trying to get in?" a voice purred.

Allagi froze. He knew that voice.

He turned back to face the guardrail.

The stranger sat there, smiling with her back to the dark sea.

"They're never going to let you in, you know." She flicked his lighter to life, drawing a cigarette from nowhere and shielding it from the wind. Smoke curled from her lips as she crooned, and Allagi stumbled

back against the glass.

“Poor Allagi,” she mused, voice dripping with faux sympathy.

“There’s nothing to fear. You’ll get where you’re going.”

She exhaled, head tilted to the side. Smoke blossomed from her mouth.

“No matter how many tries it takes... you’ll get there.”

MEET HENRY LARKIN

AUTHOR OF *ALLAGI AND THE SEA*

CC&S: Could you introduce yourself and tell us something about yourself that would surprise our readers?

Henry Larkin: Hi everyone! My name is Henry Larkin, and I'm a writer of speculative fiction originally from Oakland, California. I just moved to NYC for law school, and I live with my fiancé and our two cats. As far as something that might surprise readers, I was a team captain for the men's track and field team at UC Berkeley, where I specialized in the four hundred meter dash. I used to be pretty quick!

CC&S: What does a perfect writing day look like to you?

Henry Larkin: A perfect writing day is a stormy one. Dark clouds, cracking thunder, sheets of rain. The kind of weather your mother wouldn't want you to drive a car in. I like to write facing a window, ideally starting before 9 in the morning and not stopping until 5-6 in the evening. Those days are pretty rare, but that's part of what makes them special.

CC&S: What drew me in right away was the name Allagi. Why did you choose that name, and is there an underlying meaning?

Henry Larkin: Allagi is the Greek word for change, or transformation. *Allagi and the Sea* is, at the metaphorical level, a story about a person trying and failing to change. Allagi is rejected by the sea, and the end of the story gives us the impression that he's

going to be at this for some time. There's a broader understanding of what it means to be alive, and to overcome, that can be drawn from that impression. Allagi's circumstances compel him to be different, to transform. I thought it only fitting to name him after the concept for change.

CC&S: *Allagi and the Sea* is so heavily atmospheric. Were there any books, visual media, or music that influenced the ambience of this piece?

Henry Larkin: I wouldn't say that there was a particular form of media that really inspired the imagery here. What was more informative for me was the drive between the San Francisco Bay Area and Eugene, Oregon. If you ever make that drive in rainy weather, you'll see some of the most beautiful land in the world. On the border between Oregon and California, the land is broken up by rolling hills slick with rain. Small towns huddle under cloudy skies, and the road snakes through a great sea of wet grass. I imagined what that vast, rainy countryside would look like at night, all cast in darkness, and thought about how it would feel to wander through it. The details of *Allagi and the Sea* are quite different from that experience, of course, but the feeling I was trying to evoke is the same.

CC&S: Finally, where can our readers find more of your work, and are you currently working on something new?

Henry Larkin: I'm currently working on an adult fantasy manuscript! This is the first short story I've published, so if you're reading this interview then you've found the totality of my work. Congratulations! As I continue to publish I'll open up a website where more of my work can be seen, and ideally I'll have a book to circulate in the next couple of years. Right now the focus is very much on developing my craft, but as I continue to refine my writing style I'll be able to put more work out into the world. For now, stay tuned.

the first bee of spring
I ask him where he is from
and he says the world



butterfly chrysalis
a form of prayer
shaking to life

by Luke Levi

NIGHT ORCHIDS

By Sean Hughes

Night knew me well,
running her dark violet thumb under my eyes,
leaving the pollen of her touch as she went.

Thoughts were gnats biting eyelashes,
crawling on skin.
Lulled and lost to a heavy amber;
their wings frozen mid-beat.

Shadow blooms into delicate orchids;
their petals cupping eyelids;
guiding them closed.

Nonetheless the pupils saw.

Rushed reeds and sun-soaked water,
dapple and breeze.

Yet the face felt none of it.



GRACE IN BLUE
By Michael C. Roberts

LET ME BIRTH A STREAM

By Sabrina Green

These dry bones are good
for little else. Let me

call forth water from dark
crevasses deep. Let me

draw it up from the well, hold
the bucket close. Let me

bless it with my tongue, forked
paths dripping sweet off my chin. Let me

water the earth- find the tender
shoots of mountain flowers. Let me

care for them. Shoo off the hurtful insects,
make clear the choking weeds. Let me

sing to the flow, winding down,
twisting slow along tree roots. Let me

scrape free ditches with humble
dirty and chipped blunt nails. Let me

welcome the creek flow, embrace
the river, coax the water. Let me

guide it home, let me
return it to the ocean. Let me

float in her body.



PETALS IN BLUE DRIFT

By Kelsey

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL AND ROTTEN

by Calla Smith

It was spring, and the Jacarandas were blooming all over the city. Everywhere I went, I could smell the crushed flowers carpeting the roads and sidewalks, ripe and rotten like everything else there. I lay in bed, unable to sleep as sweat pooled on the sheets, outlining the shape of my body in the white cotton. I didn't want to give up, but hours had passed since I had first lain down, and I couldn't stay there. Even my legs were twitching, demanding movement.

I forced myself out of bed and paced the living room. I tried the couch. I tried the floor. But my blood still demanded movement. So I slipped on a pair of pants and took the keys and nothing else out into the night.

Outside, my body cut through the air like a knife through butter. There was a heaviness to everything that hit me harder in the early morning, with no other living things to help me absorb the impact. I followed the smell of something rotten, like fruit thrown out from the vegetable stands after it could not be sold anymore, not even to someone making jam, as my father and I had done in our kitchen for so many years.

I kept walking, and I thought that the echo of my steps was so loud that everyone would hear it, and whole neighborhoods would awake. A few dogs barked, but nothing else happened, so I kept going wherever the smell took me, farther and farther away from home until I finally arrived at the parks that were filled to bursting with purple-flowered trees.

I took off my shoes and carried them as soon as I touched the grass, and the relief of my skin on the ground was almost instantaneous. The air smelled different, and I could feel the water nearby. There had always been rumors about those parks and those lakes. There was something sinister about the way that the stones from the sidewalk around the shore descended into the water. How far exactly would the people who lived in that city go to avoid feeling the mud squash between their toes?

In the heat of that spring night, I suddenly needed to know. There could be no other comfort than the cool water against my skin, so I reached the shore and the sidewalk that never stopped, even as I got deeper and deeper into the water. Flowers floated around me, and I could feel the ripples generated by fish as they passed closely by without actually touching my skin. The hard edges of the stone pavement never stopped, not even when almost my entire body was submerged, and I was ready to start swimming. I paused there, waiting for something I couldn't define.

The air was clear, and there was no smell out there other than the wetness and the hint of earth. I stood even as my blood cooled with the water and goosebumps formed on my arms. A calm I hadn't known in what seemed like forever overtook me. I closed my eyes and thought that there, I might finally be able to sleep.

W HIMSIGOTH SOLSTICE

By Brittany Redd

overgrown weeds like open doorways to feywild tea parties under full moons and unknown stars like lunar moths parading in a v formation like melted tapers at twilight illuminating the last crumbs of lavender scones and sparkling mead like damp moss under a cloudless blue sky like the smell of honeysuckle clinging to fishnet stockings like bonfires burning away what no longer serves you like butterfly clips and velvet chokers like chainmail earrings like pressed flowers stuffed into unfinished drafts of old fairy tales like fireflies at your window like black lipstick and watermelon like offerings of milk and blackberry at the foot of a willow tree like fleeting days of endless daylight like sunflowers at dusk like wishes still too new to speak out loud.

rain soon

a sway of long field grass
attempts to tickle
underbelly of sky

By Dan Sicoli

A landscape photograph showing a river winding through a valley. The foreground is filled with dense, green and yellowish-brown vegetation. The river flows from the bottom left towards the right, curving slightly. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains, some of which are partially covered in mist or low clouds. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. A tree branch with dark leaves hangs down from the top left corner of the frame.

DIL AWEZ

By Sheezah

SUBURBAN PARLANCE

By John Grey

The lawn is a grim and brittle brown.
The mower's blade is the final insult.

Down the block, a father teaches his son
how to put a car in drive, in reverse,
how to steer the length of the driveway.

There's rhythm here, in the repetition –
the back-and-forth of wheels and wind,
for the kid, what counts as a lesson
in the classroom of suburbia.

The west wind arrives half-hearted,
searching for something to stir in my yard.

It's me that's scattered –
a beer here, a tune there,
the one I can't stop humming,
and idle talk of course:

“Hey Ray - your kid's got the look
of a NASCAR racer in waiting.
We could use a little rain.
That tune? Just something stuck. No title.”

We don't reach for stars here.
When it's dark enough.
We're happy with streetlamps, porch lights.
That's our illumination.
Now about this damn tune...

CLOSE TO THE EDGE

By John Grey

There's a reckoning in the backbend –
vertebrae leaning toward their ancestry:
bark, humus, fibrous memory.
Skin will let go its gleam,
shrug into the gravity of October,
lie down beside the hush of dead marigolds.

You may sleep beneath the flipped bloom,
where the wild dirt does its arithmetic.
There, in the unpronounced, a benediction grows –
not heralded, but every passerby
feels its weight in the soles.

MIDO POEM

By Ophelia Guerdad

The songs are for the men, you say
As you prepare to meet them in Berkeley
These sacred gatherings where you lose yourself
In the music of your homeland
Amongst the other men of your community
All of you so far away here in California
From your villages in Algeria

I know you are remembering other nights
Wandering the mountains of Tizi-Ouzou
Olive trees grey green against an amber backdrop
Azure ocean beyond sheer cliffs
The stars must be so much brighter
During those warm North African nights

You send me a video
Men grasp beer glasses with eyes closed
Musicians stand on a small platform
Fingers swift over mandolin strings
Notes twining upwards like smoke in moonlight
Undulating voices lithe snake tracks in sand

Kabyle is an ancient language, you say
The mother tongue of all words
I can hear the history in the rhythm
Gravelly voices sing desert poetry
Love and politics often meld together
The pride of the Amazigh stronger than all

You come home to me with cigarettes on your breath
Body cold and shivering
Music still echoing in your voice as though
You had drunk it down like water turning you
Into a wild river current
And I am a rock you crash against
Keeping you stable

You fall onto me
Skin to warm skin
When I close my eyes
I see the stars of Tizi-Ouzou

snow men
shiver—
summering

By Alexandra Varkarotas



RAIN CHECK

By Vishaal

A LITTLE SKETCH AS THE LANDSCAPE IS WHITED OUT

by Jonathan Burkhalter

Outside the kitchen window, a stranger blows snow off of the sidewalks by walking his little machine and a cloud hovers beside him like a patient dog too old to care about squirrels and too familiar with the scents on their routine walk. And just like an old dog, it's suddenly gone. The man walks his quiet machine back toward his house, his hi-vis jacket sinking against the horizon.

空から降りてくるまどろみ

by Liu Yuniang

English translation on Page 47

ここに初めて足を運んで以来の初秋、自分が変わったと気づいた。

何が変わったかという、空を眺めるようになったことだ。隅のない晴れた空とか、綿飴の海のような曇る空。ずっと手が届かない空。

放課後に、踏切のすぐ一歩前でしばらく立ち止まった。危ないとわかっていたが、足が思わず止まって空に手を伸ばした。その薄いオレンジ色の空。

「空を眺めると生き甲斐を見つけられるはず」と、どこかで読んだことがある。賛成できるかどうか迷っていた。境界から境界へと広がる空を見るたびに、自分が生きてても死んでも構わないくらい小さく感じた。

さわめて残酷だ。その美しさに感動していた詩人たちの涙を無視し、沈黙のままでただ雲の漂うを見張っている空。永遠に残る美しさなんてない。けれども、いつか私が死んで腐ってゆくのだろうが、空は永遠に近い程静かに変わらず存在する。さみしい思いた。幽玄の本質である空は生き甲斐になるわけがない。

母国にいた時、あちこちに車で行ったからゆっくり空を眺める機会はそんなに多くなかった。でも、夕日が沈む時間になると、自分の部屋からの景色は紫色の天国だった。いつも写真を撮らずにいられなかった。まず、部屋の電気を消した。それから窓を開けて、いくつかの写真を撮ってから優しい風と一緒に空を鑑賞した。恋に落ちた少女みたいな私は顎に手を当てて暈色の空を仰いだ。

やはり、東京の夕日は負けている。東京の日暮なんて、光と闇のあいだの色が薄すぎる。ときにはオレンジ色さえなく、ただ空の青さが薄まって知らず知らずに暗くなる。憧れの人に取り残されたかのように、東京の夕日をちゃんと愛するチャンスをくれなかった。残念ながら。

その圧倒的な広さと戯れたように、歩きながら何回も空をちらっと見た。そしてオレンジ色が濃く紺に色を変えたら、身体とより近い灰色のコンクリートに目を逸らした。

で、踏切から離れて、自分もまどろみから離れた。曇ひとつない空が怖くなった。空はただ上にある穴だと意識したからだ。だから「空が落ちる」より、「空に落ちる」のほうが可能のだろう、と頭がぐるぐる訝た。

空、よ。明日も巡り会えると願った。

SLUMBER, LIKE DRIPPING SKY

Self-translated from Japanese
by Liu Yuniang

In early autumn 4 years ago, when I first came here, I realized that I had changed.

I had begun to look at the sky. An infinite, clear sky, or a cloudy sky resembling a sea of cotton candy. A sky that was forever out of reach.

One day after school, I stopped for a moment just a step away from the railroad crossing. I knew it was dangerous, but my feet instinctively stopped and I reached out to the sky. That pale orange sky.

I once read somewhere that “looking at the sky should help you find a reason to live.” I wondered if that was true. Every time I looked at the sky that stretched from border to border, I felt so small that it didn’t matter if I lived or died.

What unjust cruelty. The sky ignored the tears of poets who were moved by its beauty, and silently watched the clouds drift by. There is no beauty that lasts forever. But one day I will die and I will rot, but the sky will exist so quietly and unchanging that it is close to eternity. How miserable. The sky, which is the essence of mystery, cannot be a reason to live.

When I was in my home country, I drove everywhere, so I didn't have the opportunity to look at the sky. But when the sun was setting, the view from my bedroom was a purple heaven. I couldn't help taking pictures. First, I would turn off the lights in the room. Then I would open the window, took pictures, and then admired the sky with the gentle breeze. Like a maiden in love, I put my hand on my chin and looked up at the violet sky.

After all, Tokyo's sunsets are no match. The color between light and darkness in Tokyo's sunsets is too pale. Sometimes there's not even a tinge of orange; the blue of the sky just fades and it becomes dark. It was as if I was left behind by the person I loved. I wasn't given a chance to love the Tokyo sunset properly.

So I left the railroad crossing and left my slumber, and suddenly became afraid of the clear sky. I was hyperaware that the sky was just a hole above. My head spun around, realizing that it was more possible to fall into the sky than for the sky to fall.

As I walked, I glanced up at the sky many times, as if flirting with the overwhelming vastness of the place. Then, as the orange turned to a deep navy blue, I looked away to the grey concrete that was closer to my body.

Dearest sky. I hoped I would encounter you again tomorrow.



CYANOTYPE LILY ARRANGEMENT

By Rose Sophia

AIR SWIMMERS

By Miles Hilton

We are mostly air,
The first fogged word of winter -
A gust of late fall

A leaf trapped in ice
Leaves a ghostly socket -
We are mostly air

A gust of late fall:
Trains bellow in the blank night
Outside my window

These churning rapids
Tumble merrily - but look:
A leaf trapped in ice

Outside my window
A cotton moon is bulging
Stitched with lines of Geese

Stitched with lines of Geese
The rain-pocked river waters
These churning rapids

The Husk was made to highlight the erasure of human identity. There are no eyes, nose, hair, eyebrows, or ears, and therefore no conventionally attractive features to identify with, forcing viewers to move past these conventions and either immerse themselves in the textile work or accept that their standards stand no chance against the reality of age and weathering. Every beautiful person our eyes fall upon will eventually carry the burns, scars, and wrinkles that the Husk is burdened with. And it is only in that moment of acceptance that we can truly assess humanity.

—*Oskar Callahan*



THE HUSK

By Oskar Callahan

surface of water
kissing her cheeks
a lifetime through the scrying glass



dance hall stage
tangle of limbs
I see your face but not

By Rachel Kelly

THE GREY BAG

By Abhishek Mukherjee

I can tell without even looking back that he is constantly—no, doggedly—following me. Never ceasing, never stopping, or even pausing to remind me, at every turn, of the snippets and slices I keep shedding behind, half consciously, half compulsively. But they weigh me down, don't you see that!

You see, I am no Mephistopheles, for then I would have believed the whole to be weightier than the sum of its parts. Nor am I some Venetian merchant involved in piecemeal trade. What I am is merely a collector. I clean up after your litter. This little grey bag here is my sole possession. My job is merely to salvage. A salvation, though, I can't promise you.

Why, if I see that little grey bag of yours growing in size and weight, don't I feel any lighter? Why do I have to almost drag myself through this shape-shifting maze? Or rather, why drag myself at all? Oh, please, hack away at me if you must, without ceasing or stopping or ever pausing. Rid me of all that unmakes me. For all I desire is to feel whole.

The maze you speak of is of your own making; the bits you lose, your own doing. Even without looking back, you stake your claim over what you've so vainly forsaken. And so, they unfailingly find their way back to you, only colder and heavier. Never quite the same. There's hardly

much I can do to stop them.

What if I don't leave any space at all for those to latch onto? What if I strip myself—and everything that makes me—faster than they can make their way back? Yes, I hear what you think. I must consciously—no, compulsively—make the lunge!

Peel! Strip! Dig!

Dig fast. Dig hard. Dig deep.

Faster. Harder. Deeper.

Snip!

There goes some.

Snap! There's some more.

Scoop! Scrape!

Even more.

Go deeper still. Keep at it. No stops. No restraints. More. Just a bit more. That's right. It's almost in sight.

Are we there yet? Do we see it now? Yes...that's it! It's laid bare now. Palpably bare. Hush now and listen. Nothing less to conceal, nothing more to reveal. Nothing but a solitary, metallic throbbing, reverberating through passages, trodden or written. Come. See it. Collect it. Embrace it.

But how do we go about preserving it, though, given our dire dearth of space?

Simple. Toss it in the grey little bag.

*T*HE CONDUCT OF THE LEG

By Colin James

When entering a room
one shouldn't goose-step,
rather glide or float
if having reached finally
the seventh stage of bliss
after a terrible time of it
with the sanctimonious glitters.
Just now alighting at the bar
discussing the merits of Jamaican rum.
Standing straight, bow tied and suspender clad,
expert in psychological poses.
Legs can reveal more than the eyes
if one takes the time to curts, lasso, bend.



By Cithara Patra

if I could see my soul, I'd wish it were darkened
burnt to a crisp
smoldering every corner
seasoned heavy in spices
basic salt and pepper
flavorful cayenne and garlic
a little lemon juice squeezed on top
dress it up in sauce
tossed onto the grill
flames licking every corner
till it cooked inside

then I'd cut it into pieces
and savor every bite
I'd love it because it lifts me
gives me a little kick
show me a thrill
like my soul used to do
when it was worth more than a meal
to fill my aching and empty stomach



DOOMED WINGS

By Nasta Martyn

GHOST THANKSGIVING

By Michael Fowler

In an ancient and unmarked graveyard in rural Ohio, tucked between a river and a soybean field, twelve or more deceased members of the local Fogge family gathered underground for their annual Thanksgiving dinner. Undisturbed by them, the still living Fogges, twenty feet overhead, celebrated the same holiday with scarcely a thought of their departed brethren below. In their dry house, the living Fogges didn't pay much notice, either, to the heavy rain that began to fall outside.

The twelve or more souls below ground included an old farmer and his wife who had died at home of natural causes in their eighties, some of their sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, and grandchildren, including two young men killed in a foreign war and shipped home under flags on a transport ship, an outdoorsman who died in a hunting accident, two teenage girls who drowned in the nearby river, and two kids killed in a school bus crash in 1967—a typical extended family, only dead. The twelve or more sat around an old oaken table, laden with steaming food, holey linen napkins, and old encrusted metallic flatware. Some items didn't translate well into the netherworld, but most came through in usable shape.

Naturally the table, food, and utensils weren't properly present at all, but, like the spirits themselves, stood in for more substantial bodies, filling a subterranean dining room that was itself largely imaginary but perfectly suitable to the occasion. The room and its objects were all that the shades required for a festive holiday, such as they had celebrated each November in this space for now ten years running. Beneath them, Fogges who had been dead far longer than they celebrated too, and ancestors more remote below those, and so on in a descending line back to the first or primordial Fogges, deep within the Earth's crust. The national holiday knew no bounds.

Most improbably, an uninvited guest turned up, appearing next to Father Fogge at the head of the table. A plate of food materialized in front of him, but it wasn't what the Fogges were serving. The surprise visitor had brought along his own provender, including chestnuts.

"Why Marshall Perkins," exclaimed Mother Fogge, recognizing her neighbor who along with his wife had died in a tractor accident four years back. "What brings you to our humble dining room? Ruthie kick you out again?"

"Nah, nah," mumbled Perkins, his incorporeal mouth still masticating Ruthie's shadowy holiday victuals. "Haven't you heard? The river's overflowing and washing out a lot of gravesites. Headstones and old bones are tumbling and mixing together underground where the water is flowing like it's a river. Before I knowed it, I washed up here. I do beg your pardon."

As Perkins spoke, a tiny pine coffin, streaked with mud and engraved with the initials LL, settled on the table before him with a clack, drawing his attention.

"Yep," said Perkins. "That there's Little Leroy. My brother's grandbaby just passed last weekend of a fever, and was interred with the family on my place. But looks like he's flowed here tonight. Again, sorry for the intrusion."

Mother Fogge rose from her seat opposite Father and took the tiny container in her hands. "Still in his original wooden box, the poor thing. I'll put it with the others." She carried the container to a side room off the dining area where there was a shelf lined with infants'

coffins. They represented the almost countless infant mortalities in the Fogge family going back to whenever, the days before vaccines and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Most of the little boxes were as ethereal as her dining room, but some, like Infant Leroy's, were recent enough to still be genuine hardwood. She then returned to the table, helping herself to a crescent roll and giblet gravy.

"Tarnation," said Father Fogge. "I haven't stepped above ground in, I don't know, going on two or three years, and I've lost contact with all what's happening up there. The river, you say, well I'll be. It has grown clammy down here of late."

But the underground tumult was just beginning, and unknown to the gathered party, tombs dating back to prehistory were tossing and tumbling close by. A new and unnamable guest, a man who had to be a pure baboon, rose from the end of the table where he had suddenly shown up and helped himself to the corn. He gnawed at it ferociously, then threw a cob into the sink and departed.

"What was that?" called out Aunt Anne, startled by the creature's appearance. As everyone watched, the missing links in evolution and ancient history began to gather in a corner of the room, beasts that were half fish and half fowl, corpses hacked and dismembered, witches drowned and burned. Some of the throwbacks looked familiar, though, and Mother Fogge recognized a few persons from old family portraits and photos.

"Lookit!" she cried, rushing to her desk and returning with an old daguerreotype that showed a Civil War veteran. She held the picture up to a dusty old coot who stood at attention by the table, and the resemblance was unmistakable. "It's great-great-however-many-greats grandfather Willis Fogge, a drummer in General Lee's army," she added, then cleared her throat. "Our people hail from the deep South, you know, Mississippi in fact, before we come north to Ohio. Nothing I can do about it."

But all eyes turned to the marriage bed that suddenly thrust itself into the kitchen and dining room. Appearing beside the food-laden table, the creaking bed supported the cavorting newlyweds Dennis and Sally Wilkins, neighbors of the Foggies who had burned to their death on their wedding night six years ago after misplacing a lit cigarette.

“Babe, when you hold me, I ignite!” cried Dennis, the eager groom.

“I’m pregnant, babe, I can feel it,” cried Sally, his ecstatic bride.

Suddenly aware of their new surroundings, the disheveled pair pulled their bedclothes up around them to preserve their modesty.

The kitchen and the bed now shook and with a great slurp the entire household descended into the moist interior of hell, falling bum-over-kettle through dark, water-filled caverns, and past scabrous multi-tailed cats and scrofulous multi-headed dogs that set up a continuous whine and howl in the murky depths.

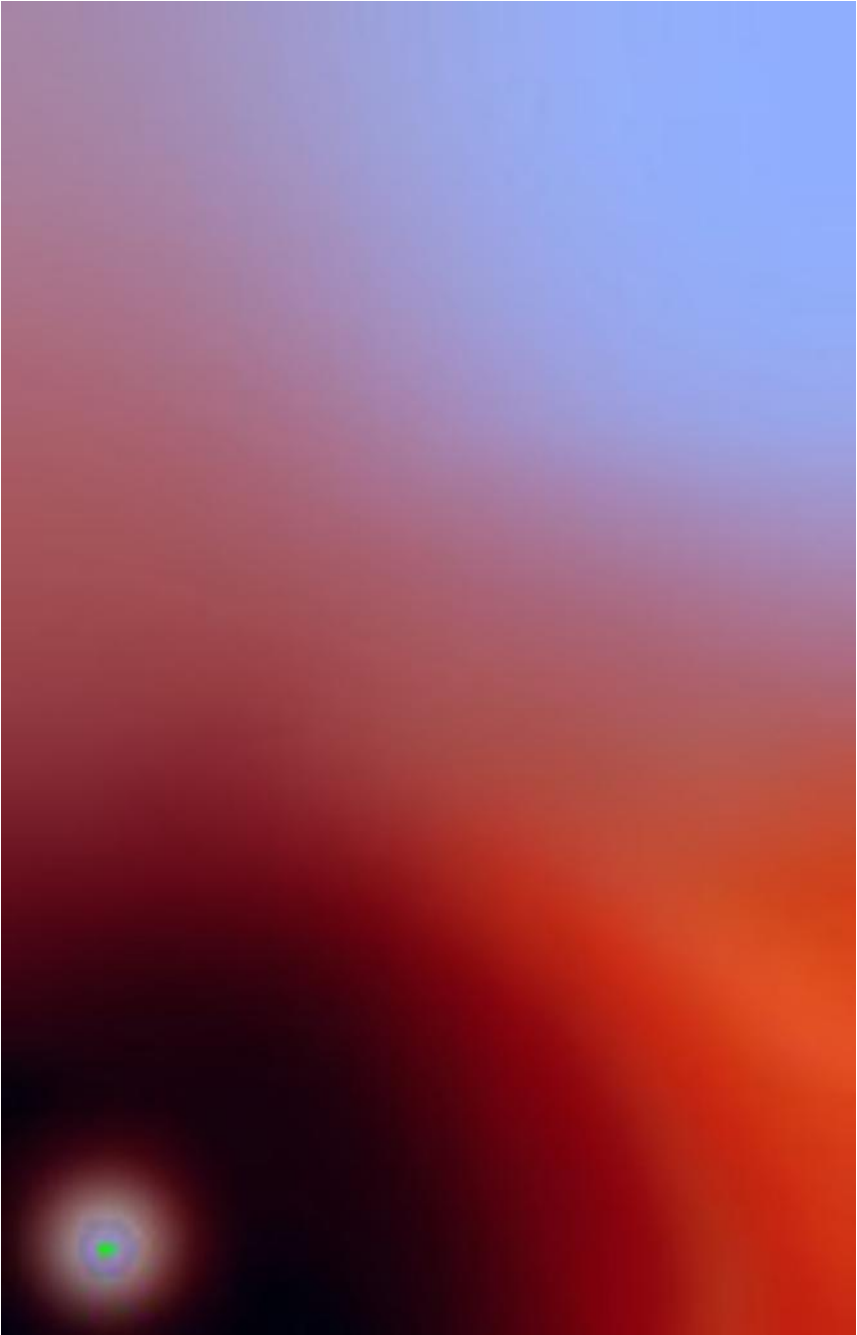
“All right,” called out Mother Fogge over everyone’s churning stomachs, “who saved room for Memaw’s apple pan dowdy?”



By Gabriella Garofalo

Shall we go out for dinner and a walk downtown
With sleepless nights, or a silent moon?
A tough call indeed, you'd better skirt both-
By the by, tonight the moon feels so rebel
Against the staunch old patriarch, the sky,
Against chancers and chorus girls,
Stars swooning at light, the sun, her bro
With his hungry eyes set on a dead elsewhere,
Such a lousy family, I know-
Look, it all started with a push, the tender hugs
Of pewter lights, rain, hasty hectic people,
The soul they chose for you among blasts of lonely winds
And now a redemption left with no options
Waits for God to walk with us over bruised fields
Of prayers, she waits for God to paint
Our dawns in reckless shades, a blue so deep
It wolfs life down leaving only shards of light,
So deep it looks like God's breath a sec before the fall-
So get a grip, soul, don't freeze under a no-name sky,
A bloody shade leaning at the edge of your blue-

Don't play around with chick lit and romance novels,
No promise here that the sky will stay blue,
Or leaves go back to trees, in a lost garden
Where God, clad in blue dreams and hope,
Whispers in the dusk and blue echoes of love
Break upon you, yes, time's final surrender
And your life a poem written in words of leaves
As you trace the source of silence,
Or stare at a worn-out blue, a cheap scenario
God cobbled together on a bad day, so very sick and tired
Of hopes, dreams, the sorry blue of distrust.



By Andrew Graber

Dragonflies above
I think of fairies flying
Their private airline

By Bee Smith



By Nicholas Starr Kellogg

Max

It started in my hometown. Whatever this is, it started with me and my best friend, Thomas, to be more exact. We were riding our bikes to Cumby's to get something cold to drink. Thomas was always trying to beat me there; for some reason, everything was a race to him. My eyes, I didn't know why, but they began to burn. No matter how much I rubbed them, they wouldn't stop. A sting. A glare. Everything was suddenly too bright as though I were staring directly into the sun's lens. I stopped pedaling and pulled over to the side of the road. I lay down in the warm grass, covering my eyes because they were beginning to sting even worse. A razor blade slicing little bits of my cornea away at a time, paper-thin cuts that worsened the longer I rubbed them while screaming bloody murder in the dirt.

"Max!" I heard Thomas yell my name; he was standing over me, somewhere close but I didn't want to open my eyes and look at him because I didn't want the pain to amplify. "What's wrong, Max? What hurts?"

"It's my eyes. There's something in my eyes!" I screamed it. I could hear others gathering down the road. A woman, older, she was asking if she should call 911 but he told her that he didn't know. How could he know? Only seconds before we were laughing in the summer sun. The wind was blowing through our hair and there was nothing to worry about.

"Let me see, Max." Thomas asked, he was practically begging to see them. I swear, he was begging me to show him my eyes. I didn't know ... how could I have known at the time?

I opened my eyes and saw Thomas standing over me. He looked concerned, worried, quite possibly on the verge of crying himself over his best friend's pain. A sweet boy, that's what my buddy Thomas was. I blinked a few times before realizing that he'd stopped moving. I don't mean that he was shocked about what he'd seen—I quite literally mean he didn't move any longer. But he didn't fall over, he remained leaning over to see my eyes with the look of fear on his face. His heart, not beating. His breath, not existing. He just stood there, a moment in time, frozen, trapped. And on the side of the road is where he will remain in perpetuity, he will remain there, until someone finds him, and seals him up.

News Team 8

Breaking News: "We'd like to take the viewers and listeners live to East Street, just off Lefleur and Montauk in the town of Stonington, Connecticut, where the residents have apparently stopped ... I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure exactly how to explain it. Have they stopped moving?"

She's wearing a blue dress, it's beautiful, and if your television was nice enough, you'd have been able to see her eyes popping out of her skull like glistening sapphires. She looks to be in complete stupefaction, and yet relentless while trying to remain composed. There isn't a hair misplaced on her head, and all the straight men that watch the news team secretly or not so secretly fantasize about Jane Summers, a name clearly fake and mimicking a star from the past.

"That's right, Jane, I'm here on the edge of the street where the police have barricaded the block. No one is allowed in or out."

The man is sweating profusely, his hair in thinner than the audience has ever noticed because it's damp and the wind isn't doing him any favors. The women who watch the program think he doesn't have the same effect as the exquisite Jane Summers and a few of them pray that one day the news network will hire someone of a higher caliber to quench their thirsty eyes.

"It's really led to an uproar considering school is out and many of the people standing around me are parents trying to get in to see their children. There have been reports of parents trying desperately to cross the barricade. As of this moment, we've only been able to see a lone person moving in there. A little boy, and we are doing our best to identify him."

“Be careful, James, we don’t know what could be going in in there. We have scientists speculating about some sort of biological weapon that’s been released. China. Russia. Even Iran, given the current political climate. If anyone lives close to East Street, we are getting word from the highest level of CDC, medical, and government officials that you should evacuate your home immediately. They are currently deciding the radius in which these mandatory evacuations will occur. And if you are listening to this broadcast from inside of the infected zone ...” She pauses, this is her time to shine. The kind of story she dreamed of telling when she was a little girl sitting in front of a green screen giving the children of her middle and high school their morning news. “Stay safe. Don’t go outside. And for God’s sake, shut your blinds.”

Max

I touched him.

He was stiff.

His body didn’t move an inch.

The good news is that the pain in my eyes has subsided. I can get Thomas help without being in horrible pain. That old woman, I know her, I think she’s been saying hello to me since I first learned how to walk. I looked her way to make sure she was calling 911, but not for me any longer. I look back at Thomas and expect his skin to have turned a different shade of pale, blue, or even purple considering I put my finger in front of his nose and didn’t feel any breath. But he just looks a little bit white. That’s all. A little bit of red but not much because our summer has just begun. He looks normal. He’s just frozen. Rigid.

I turn back towards the old woman, “Debbie!” I remembered her name. It was easy when I thought about it considering how many times my mother had given me gruff about not being nice to her. “You called the police, righ—” I stopped myself short. It was her eyes, and the fact that her body ceased to sway. Those eyes were gone, somewhere else caught amidst or long gone in a different time zone. There was a look of concern that’s permanently been stapled to her cheeks, chin, and raptly anemic eyes. She still looked fierce through her degeneration, as though she planned this to be her last heroic deed before the man downstairs knocked on her door and took her soul:

Calling 911 to help a little boy that was in pain. The phone call had gone through; I can hear the police dispatch asking her questions while the phone is permanently glued to her right ear.

"We are sending someone immediately, Ma'am, can you see what's wrong with the boy? What's the boy's name? Ma'am? Ma'am? Are you still with us, Ma'am? Is everything alright, Ma'am?" The way the woman on the dispatch says the name 'Ma'am' sounds like she's saying 'mom'

I try crying ... I don't know why it just seems like the right thing to do considering two people had ... I don't know, been frozen. I'm doing my best not to touch my eyes. I've never had the urge to touch them before but for some reason they are calling for me to do so. I hear my mother in my ear telling me not to rub my eyes ... maybe that's what got me into this mess in the first place. They feel like stones rather than eyes. Like someone has scooped out my corneas without my knowledge and replaced them with calcified gems rather than the membrane of sight. It doesn't hurt anymore. It just feels strange. And for some reason it feels natural. Evolution. It's as if I've evolved into something other than human.

My bike is still sitting in the grass, and I decided to get on and ride home. Wait it out. Hide away until my mother and father come home. They'll know what to do ... mommy and daddy always know what to do. But as I'm riding home, I feel this horrible atrabilious sense that I'm being watched by everyone inside of their homes. They're afraid of me. They know what I've done. Suddenly a car comes down the road, and I do my best to wave them down.

"Hey!" I call out, and when I do something impossible happens. The car keeps going. But the metal bends and the windshield explodes, and the next thing I know I'm staring at a family suspended midair. Their bodies are mangled; the glass and serrated metal had turned them into stringy bits and puddles of guts and scarlet stains. The car kept going, flying down the hill while the street screamed. I'd be worried about the car killing someone else if I wasn't so hung up over the hanging bodies. I cowered, falling to my knees and trying to get a glimpse of the road at the screamers but when I looked they all went silent. A beautiful woman who was walking her dog; she was frozen now. The same as Thomas. The same as Mrs. Debbie. Same as the mother, father, and

their children who'd been ripped in half, frozen and hanging by invisible strings that were too small for my recently calcified eyes to perceive. I felt like crying, but nothing came—it felt like the holes and pipes that used to work had been clogged. The woman's dog was still barking, attached to a leash and connected to her hip. I walked over; it growled at me as I approached. The little beast recognized the culprit. "Sorry," I whispered it because I didn't want anyone that was watching to hear my recognition of guilt.

Guilty.

It's me.

I'm guilty.

"Hey, what's going on!" A man yelled. I recognized the voice: Mr. Kenny. A real prick. An older gentleman who screams at little kids when they lose their balls on his property. I didn't feel bad when I looked in his direction and the screen paused again. A game. It feels like I'm playing a game. A glitch. I'm starting to understand how my new eyes are working now. I knew before I froze him and can't help but wonder if it makes me a bad person, or worse, a murderer. It's like my eyes are a pause button but as far as I know there isn't a play. I feel like I'm going to shit myself. I walk back up the hill, towards my empty home. Away from that beautiful woman who will forever be walking an invisible dog until her body degenerates or they find a cure. I've become some virulent disease and I don't know how to stop myself from spreading.

I passed the mother and father when I reached the top of the hill. Their visceral organs are splayed, pendulating like chains or loose wires below their hanging torsos. I've already begun to grieve their ending. But I haven't yet been able to properly grieve those hanging children behind them. One boy. One girl. Their legs cut below their knees exposing their yellowish bones and leaking insides. Their innards are scintillating under the sun's sharp rays. For some reason, everything in my head is telling me not to look at the sun, because if I do, it might just freeze. A cold rock. Everything we ever knew ended by a boy that just wanted to get a cold drink with his best friend, Thomas. Poor Thomas. He's still frozen by his bike and I desperately want to give him a hug. There are two more cars that've crashed at the

end of the street, they've created a barricade. I don't even remember looking over there. I didn't know I froze others ...

The road that leads to my house is covered by frozen people. Some are hanging from their windows; others are suspended mid-air while their bikes are lying in the dirt of the middle of the road. One man, caught in a dead sprint in the center of the road. His face, fear, there's fear engrained like intricate artwork within the muscles in his cheeks. As I approach, I realize the fear is worse than I previously perceived. This is the fear of recognition. The fear that everyone knows that they are frozen. They know they've been immobilized, they're somehow cognitive. You can tell by looking into their eyes.

"Sorry," I say, because I believe that the frozen man can hear me. I believe that he still knows who he is, and what has been done. His skin tightens when I touch his chest, and a little bit of vitreous humor begins to leak from his eyes as though the whites are melting away from the center yolk.

"Hey, kid!" She's younger, maybe only a few years older than me. She lives five houses down from my own, I've had a crush on her for a while. I picture her in my head, and when I do, I imagine that face is frozen over the same as the others. I don't want her to die. I put my head down, only looking into the pavement when I need to because I don't want to kill someone else. I don't want that burden. I can't stand knowing that I've caused all of this. "Where you going? Max! It's me, Mary! Max! It's me! It's only me." It's like she's begging to die but doesn't even know it.

"Look away!" I scream at her because I don't want her to follow. She listened, because he didn't call after me.

I reach my house, my parents won't be home for another few hours, and hopefully, by then, my eyes will have reverted back to their normal selves. I think I might be dreaming, these sorts of things happen when you're dreaming all the time. And if I could just reach my bed, I'll be able to wake up. The world will start moving again. We'll be ok. All of us will be ok.

"Hey, Max!" I look up without thinking, Gary, the mailman, he's frozen. Sitting in his seat, hanging over the door and placing mail in the mailbox forever. I want to cry again.

“Sorry!” I realize that I’ve only been saying sorry, and when I look over, Mrs. Shelley, she’s frozen in her garden, down on one knee, holding a purple flower in her hand. She’s smiling. Permanently. Forever. At least she was frozen doing something that she loves. I hate myself for it, “Sorry!” I ran into my house, up the stairs, into my bedroom and then hid under the covers.

News Team 8

“The ‘Freeze Disease,’ has been contained to East Street, edge of the Stonington Borough. No one is allowed in or out. We are getting word that this issue is being investigated federally, and they are deliberating on whether the National Guard will be sent. The street and its occupants appear frozen in time. We have shots from our News Team 8 helicopters, a frozen landscape. Stay tuned and we’ll show you the carnage when the images have been processed. For the ones trapped in the freeze zone, know that we are praying for you all. Know that you are not alone.” There’s a brief pause in the news cast, if the audience could see the camera operator, they’d see a pallid face trying to process the information given.

“I’m getting word that a few people outside of the frozen zone are breaking in. They’ve rushed the barrier; our team has been sent away. We are going live,” A live shot appears on screen. Civilians fighting with the police, shots have been fired, there’s a woman, she’s holding her frozen son on the side of the road. She is crying. There are others that’ve passed into the frozen zone, rushing down the street and screaming for their loved ones. Parents. They all look like parents. “Godspeed,” The immaculate Jane Summers says it, she’ll get away with it because she’s got the clout and it’s the right thing to do. “Godspeed.”

Max

I couldn’t sleep.

This isn’t a dream. I’m hungry, but I can hear something or someone moving across the neighbor’s yard. I really don’t want to hurt anyone else. I never wanted to hurt anyone... you have to believe me.

It’s the sirens. The screaming. The world is crumbling around me because people are laying witness to what I’ve done. I’d hoped I was

dreaming, but now I know that there's only one thing left to do ...

The bathroom. The window is open, but I make sure not to look outside. I opened the cabinet under the mirror and grabbed my father's unused razor blades. They are still shiny and silver.

I finally look into the mirror.

My eyes ... they are large, amethyst, purple, blue, they appear as stones rather than iris. I'd thought when looking at my own reflection that I might freeze myself and end this whole mess right then and there. It would've been alright; I'd have taken away the ability to freeze my parents who will undoubtedly find me. The only thing I care about now is making sure that I don't hurt my mother and father.

I don't want to hurt them.

I take the razor and begin digging behind my eye. I don't even think about it, and if I'm being honest it really doesn't hurt as much as I believed it would. They are hard, and instead of digging with the razor I use it as a spoon and disconnect the ball of purplish blue by severing my optic nerve with the edge of the blade. The world goes black on my right side, then I do the same to the left, cutting deeper, this one hurts more but before I know it, I'm sitting in a dark theatre, a place where there will never be light. I'm alone.

I place both the balls into a paper towel and stomp on them, shattering them like glass or brittle stone. I don't want to think about someone else coming along and dying because of my eyes. I flush them down in the toilet when I'm done.

I can hear the door downstairs slam open, "Son!" It's my father, he's distraught, screaming and I wonder what he had to do to get into this home.

"Maxy!" My mother screams. Those helicopters in the sky are whirling, and the sirens now sound like they've finally been released onto our tiny street. I miss Thomas. I just wanted to get a drink, and now he's frozen, and I'm blind.

They rush up the stairs, they're in the doorway and I can sense them looking at me frozen on the floor. "Maxy!" My mother says, cradling me in her arms and kissing the side of my cheek." I can tell they are horrified by the holes in my head. Those cadaverous caves that I will never see but always feel.

“Baby, what happened to your eyes?” I can hear my father grabbing something and then a towel saturated with warm water has wiped my gauged caves and it stings but feels soothing at the same time. I don’t know what to say. “Did you do this to yourself?” My father, he’s upset, he doesn’t understand why. I guess he never will.

“It’s ok, baby, just tell us why.” My mother, saccharine, delicate, the word perfection emblazoned on a mantle above her head wherever she went. “Just tell us why.”

I took a deep breath and let it go. “I had to, Mom; it was my eyes. My eyes did this. If I didn’t get rid of them, they’d hurt more people ... I had to cut them out. I had to stomp them away. Please don’t be mad. Please don’t be mad.” When I was done talking, I was met with silence. “Mom? Dad?” I said it, my mother’s hand was attached to my shoulder, and when I pushed myself away, my shirt ripped and remained in her hand. I touched their bodies, stiff, rigor, frozen the same as the others.

I immediately grabbed the razor and placed it at the base of my tongue. If this doesn’t work, then the next thing I cut will be my throat.

THE YEW TREE TELLS YOU ITS NAMES.

By Nomi McLeod

Bone-keeper

It tells you through needle-leaf, bark-scale and berry as you sit on the edge of a tomb.

Sweet-poisoner

You receive this name and think of the Yew's fruit, hanging like little bells above you.

Lay back onto the flat of the tomb, legs hanging.

Your spine curves uncomfortably upwards as your shoulder blades press down.

Part of you wants to sink, part of you wants to fly.

Long-Rememberer

This tree is thousands of years old.

You try to picture all the things it has seen but your mind can only produce pantomime Roman soldiers, the misty forms of imagined druids, Victorians from ghost stories.

The Yews age makes your own seem laughable.

Imagine yourself as a mushroom, your fruiting body appearing

briefly above ground before
turning to ink and rot and vanishing back into itself.

Silent-Listener,

The sunlight makes star-bursts between the dark, sharp leaves of the
yew.

Unseen jackdaws shout out their echoing calls, surely too loud to come
from such small bodies.

Dotted between the gravestones, ramsons and Lords and Ladies grow,
playing a deadly game
of spot the difference with the new sweet, crisp, wild garlic leaves.

You've learnt to listen and now the yew tells you its names;

Bone-Keeper,

Sweet-Poisoner,

Long-Rememberer,

Silent-Listener,

Composter,

Begin-Again.



By August Straumanis

The last doves delivered me on trembling wheels through the black meadow. Five hands took turns dragging me by the teeth. The counties are all named after gods whose effigies we melted down for our candles during the flood. There is a cathedral in each one; the arrangements of spires and windows are like the skulls of horses floating above the ground. I counted the buildings as the road jostled me around on my platform, tearing feathers from my wings. I have heard fireworks beyond the mountain, blooming into thousands of diamonds, salting the land with sparks. From here the explosions sound like the crinkling of paper bags.



CONTRIBUTORS

MARTINA MATIJEVIĆ

Martina Matijević is an artist and poet from Croatia.

ANAXIFORMINGS

Louis Bourgeois is a translator for VOX PRESS.

BILL WOLAK

Bill Wolak has just published his nineteenth book of poetry entitled *What Love Calms Only With Nakedness with Expeditions* International Publishing House. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Inside Voice*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

HENRY LARKIN

Henry Larkin is an amateur writer from Oakland, CA, though he now resides in North Carolina with his fiancée and their two cats as he waits for law school to begin with growing anxiety. He has a full manuscript under consideration with an independent publisher, and this is his first published piece.

LUKE LEVI

Luke Levi is the author of *Windswept Leaves: New and Selected Haiku*. His poems can be found in more than 20 magazines in the US and UK. He currently lives in the Texas Hill Country outside of Austin.

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Sean Hughes is an Irish student heading into college. He finds it odd to write in the third person but hopes any readers find value in his work. He enjoys the seaside and listening to music.

MICHAEL C. ROBERTS

Michael C. Roberts incorporates both digital photography and retro-analogue film formats. His images have appeared in literary magazines and on journal covers. He tries to portray the essence of the world through glimpses and details of nature and human-made environment. Although he often photographs with color images, recently, he has embraced minimalism to capture grace and complexity.

SABRINA GREEN

Sabrina is an ecopoet roaming the valleys of southwestern Montana. They write to explore where the body meets the land and where the land meets the body, always aiming to inspire readers to take a closer look at their world around them. Her work can be found on Instagram @beargrass.poetry

KELSEY

Kelsey is a freelance artist and designer based in a small suburb outside Chicago, working across digital and print mediums for over five years. With a foundation in Interior Design, earned in 2019, her creative practice blends structural sensitivity with expressive, intuitive mark-making. She has exhibited work in multiple gallery showings and has been featured in a variety of international publications. She currently maintains a residency wall at a local tattoo shop, where her evolving body of work is displayed.

Kelsey's multidisciplinary approach spans abstract painting, skateboard art, photography, and digital oil painting. Her work

often merges Impressionist sensibilities with modern digital techniques, creating pieces inspired by nature, everyday life, and a wide range of botanicals. Through soft palettes, layered textures, and symbolic storytelling, her art invites viewers into quiet emotional landscapes shaped by transformation, memory, and organic beauty.

CALLA SMITH

Calla Smith grew up in rural Colorado but now lives and writes in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home and dreaming up new things to try. Her work can be found in *The Madrid Review*, *Livina Press*, *Pulp*, and more.

BRITTANY REDD

Brittany Redd is a teacher and writer in Thailand. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Milk Candy Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Corvid Queen*, and elsewhere.

DAN SICOLI

Dan Sicoli's latest collection is entitled *Slag Alley* (Ethel Press, 2026)

SHEEZAH

Sheezah is a storyteller at heart whether through poetry, photography, or a sketchpad. A high school student diving into the worlds of psychology and sociology, she's endlessly curious about people, emotions, and the stories they carry. When she's not writing verses or capturing moments through her lens, she's probably on the field, channeling that same passion into sport.

JOHN GREY

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Midnight Mind*, *Willow Review* and the *Pennsylvania Literary*

Journal. Latest books, “Bittersweet”, “Subject Matters” and “Between Two Fires” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the MacGuffin, Touchstone and Willow Review.

OPHELIA GUERDAD

Ophelia Guerdad is a Bay Area writer who has been published under different last names (Turner, Leong) which reflect the unique phases of her life. Her story "Always Be Prepared" was one of the winners of the BART Short Story contest and her work has been published by The Arcanist, New Myths Magazine, the branches, and others. She loves Irish dancing and spending time with her kids and husband.

ALEXANDRA VARKAROTAS

Alexandra Varkarotas is a Greek-American writer, talent agent, and filmmaker based in Houston, TX, where she serves as Assistant Director of REELpoetry Film Festival. She enjoys exploring humanity's connection with nature, especially through a surrealist lens. She received her bachelor's in marketing with a certificate in creative writing from The University of Texas at Austin. Her poems have previously appeared in Apricity Magazine and Spark Magazine.

VISHAAL

A self-taught photographer, Vishaal's (he/him) work has appeared in Juste Milieu Zine, Moiramor, Arkana, Stonecoast Review, The Inquisitive Eater, Welter, Moonlit Getaway, Quibble Lit, Union Spring Literary Review, Reservoir Road Literary Review and Another Chicago Magazine.

JONATHAN BURKHALTER

jonathan burkhalter is a writer, event coordinator, teacher, and editor. they are the author of a chapbook titled, Grief and Other Four-Legged Animals (Bottlecup Press). their work has appeared in Salt

Hill Review, Nashville Review, Landfill, No, Dear, and elsewhere. they hold an mfa in poetry from sarah lawrence college. they are passionate about lighting, food that moves us, and the practice of the kitchen table as a gathering place.

LIU YUNIANG

Liu Yuniang is a student, poet, and writer based in Tokyo.

ROSE SOPHIA

Rose is a multidisciplinary visual artist from the United States, currently building her Photography and Art portfolio as a freelancer. She typically works with watercolor, oil pastel, graphic design, and photography. She enjoys using vintage photography equipment to channel the past. Common themes in her work are nostalgia and fantasy. She tries to replicate a "dream-like" sense with her work.

MILES HILTON

Miles Hilton (they/them) is a writer living in the greater Boston area.

RACHEL KELLY

Rachel Kelly, at the time they wrote this piece, lived and toiled in Southern Indiana. Perhaps they still do.

OSKAR CALLAHAN

Oskar Callahan is a multimedia artist from Rhode Island who most often blends raw human nature with social commentary. Beyond social commentary, Oskar has sought to shed light on his community's issues through activist journalism.

ABHISHEK MUKHERJEE

Based in Kolkata, India, Abhishek Mukherjee comes with a background in cross-border corporate relations, and now aspires to

break into the literary landscape. A business graduate, his passion for the written word pushed him to pursue a Master's in literature. His first publication, 'Alchemic Adjustment', is forthcoming in Hexfiled SF Magazine.

COLIN JAMES

Colin James has several chapbooks of poems, *Dreams Of The Really Annoying* from Writers Knight Press and *A Thoroughness Not Deprived Of Absurdity* from Pisces's Porch Press and book of poems, *Resisting Probability*, from Sagging Meniscus Press. He lives in Massachusetts.

CITHARA PATRA

Cithara Patra currently lives in NC. They've written for a few literary journals including *Poetries in English*, *Instant Noodles*, and *50 Word Stories*. In their spare time, they travel, solve logic puzzles, and check out local restaurants.

NASTA MARTYN

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

MICHAEL FOWLER

Michael Fowler writes humor and horror in Ohio.

GABRIELLA GAROFALO

Born in Italy some decades ago, Gabriella Garofalo fell in love with the English language at six, started writing poems (in Italian) at six and is the author of these books “Lo sguardo di Orfeo”; “L’inverno di vetro”; “Di altre stelle polari”; “Casa di erba”; “Blue Branches”; “A Blue Soul”, “After The Blue Rush”.

BEE SMITH

Bee Smith is a poet and workshop facilitator (Word Alchemy) based in Cavan, Ireland. Previous haiku have been published in Bamboo Dreams: An Anthology of Irish Haiku (Doghouse).

ANDREW GRABER

He is an artist who tries to create mysterious dreamlike visual imagery.

NICHOLAS STARR KELLOGG

Nicholas Kellogg weaves chilling tales from his home in Connecticut, where he lives with his partner and balances fatherhood, with two toddlers under five and a full-time job. Early morning prior to work, he creates nightmares while many are still having them. Drawing inspiration from the eerie realities of everyday life while exploring the darkness beneath the ordinary.

He's also recently published several shorts with Sinister Minutes, Tales to Terrify, Close to the Bone, Piker Press, Strange Vibes Anthology Issue 1, Stygian Lepus Magazine Edition #33, Black Petals, Literally Journal, theFreak Magazine, Trembling with Fear, and Exquisite Death.

He's also been offered publishing contracts for his Novella's Redman and Daisy, but aims to sell them as a 50k collection with other work. He has recently signed a traditional publishing contract

for his debut novel *Green*, with *Wicked Tales*, an Imprint of DAOwen Publications.

Nicholas Starr Kellogg - Author Website

NOMI MCLEOD

Nomi McLeod is a writer and artist. Both her visual and written work often engage with stories from the boundary between the real world and the imaginal. In the past she has worked as a circus artist, a theater dresser and an artist's model.

Nomi was shortlisted for the 2025 Bridport Prize.

Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in places such as *The Selkie*, *York Literary Review*, *Superlative Magazine*, *Gramarye Journal*, *The Ecological Citizen* and *Fairlight Books*.

She lives in Devon with her partner, daughter, twin sons and a black cat.

AUGUST STRAUMANIS

August Straumanis was born in Iowa and has spent much of his life in Northern Colorado. He is a current undergraduate creative writing student at the University of Colorado Boulder. His work has also appeared in the *Hawaii Pacific Review*.



VARSHINI FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN- CHIEF

Varshini is a nursing student based in Kerala. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Scapegoat Review, The Cove Magazine, Lacuna Vox, and Ghudsavar Literary Magazine. She loves to paint and read historical fiction.

JOHN LAYTON POETRY EDITOR

John Layton is a teacher and poet from Dharawal Country who mostly spends his creative juices writing D&D campaigns. He has published or has poems forthcoming in Cordite Poetry Review, Oystercatcher 2, Folly Journal, Going Down Swinging, York Literary Review, Jacaranda Journal and The Marrow, among others. He enjoys post-war Australian poetry, Magic the Gathering and Basketball.

AYESHA RIAZ HUSSAIN PROSE EDITOR

Ayesha Riaz Hussain is an English Literature student, author, editor, and content writer who channels her personal experiences into written art. Her work includes four internationally published poems, two compiled anthologies, and a co-authored volume with HOC Publication. Beyond her independent writing, she actively serves as an editor for literary magazines. Driven by a deep passion for the craft, she continues to refine her voice and nurture her creative growth as a poet.

KHWOAB RAMNANI ASSOCIATE PROSE EDITOR

Khwoab Ramnani is a high school student from Maharashtra, India, with a love for writing and storytelling. She enjoys putting her thoughts into words and exploring topics that matter to young people today. Interested in law, social issues, and different perspectives, she is naturally curious and always looking for opportunities to learn, grow, and make a meaningful contribution through her work.

CLOUD CLAD AND SUNFLOWERS

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WHEN BIRDS SING

by Nasta Martyn

*Materials: chalk, wax
crayons, tinted paper*

Size: 21x15 cm

Year: 2026