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WESTVIEW

Westview

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Westview Staff

A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

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W E S T V I E W

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Westview is published semiannually by the Department of Language and Literature at Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

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Stylesheet

1. **Electronic submissions are preferred via www.dc.swosu.edu/westview/.** To help facilitate the journal's blind review process, authors should exclude identification information from manuscripts.
2. **Electronic submissions are also preferred for artwork via www.dc.swosu.edu/westview/.** Artwork submitted should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5" x 14". However, photographs of larger works may be submitted.
3. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.
4. Subscriptions and correspondence may be sent to Amanda Smith at westview@swosu.edu.
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Foreword

The *Westview* editorial board is thrilled to bring you this new issue, featuring artwork and creative writing from beloved members of the Weatherford community and beyond. We first wish to welcome Dr. Nolan Meditz, a poet and professor in SWOSU's Department of Language and Literature as Co-Editor of the journal. His expertise in the field of creative writing has already proven invaluable. This issue is quite special as it heralds a resurrection of the journal after a publishing hiatus. The pieces presented here represent the fine work that *Westview* has always featured with an emphasis on this theme of resilience and renewal.

For instance, we are proud to feature the artwork of Ashley Underwood Arganbright on our cover. Ashley says she began her love affair with painting in 2015 when she began doing set artistry at Southwest Playhouse in Clinton, OK. She loves to paint oil landscapes, like her grandmother did before her, but has also enjoyed venturing into a more abstract realm and her landscapes tend to have a more fantastical feel to them. Ashley believes in exploring different styles, and never limiting herself to just one genre. Ashley's social media platforms include her Facebook page, Arganwood Art, as well as her Instagram, @ashleyu9819. She accepts commissions and also keeps a current inventory. She states, "My goal with my art will always be to elicit some emotion in the viewer. I love those moments when someone may look at my art and see something completely different than I may have intended. I believe those moments both define our uniqueness and connect us through our interpretations of the piece."

We also have the unique honor of featuring brilliant selections from a local group of poets, including Yvonne Carpenter, Jill Jones, Cathy McCraw, and Viki Craig. When asked to provide insight into this special writing group, Yvonne Carpenter offered the following details:

"In 2004, after taking Fred Alsberg's class, Cathy McCraw, Pat Sturm and a couple of others began to meet to support each other in writing poetry. Cathy invited Yvonne Carpenter to the second meeting. Yvonne invited Nancy Goodwin and Carol Waters and later Clynell Reinschmiedt. They met in various places—a coffee shop, Tracy Adams hearing clinic, and the Cherokee Restaurant (hence the name, Custer County Truck Stop Poets). Currently they meet monthly on Zoom.

Constructive criticism is the focus of their work. Comments are to find the strongest and weakest points of the writing. 'I liked it,' was not sufficient. This combined wisdom and the shared expertise has polished, strengthened, and sustained the work through grief, loss, pain, and COVID.

In 2013, pleased with the poems they were writing, and having Ms. Goodwin's experience as an editor, they decided on a theme and published a book, *Red Dirt Roads*, the winner of 2014 Oklahoma Poetry Book of the Year.

As life does, the group membership changed. While some members left, others joined.

Current members are Cathy McCraw, Yvonne Carpenter, Viki Craig, Jill Jones, Carol Waters, Janet Moore, and Terry House. They continue to read at festivals and community events as well as place poems in journals including *Concho River Review, Red Earth Review, Dragon Poet Review. Blood and Thunder, Atlanta Review, California Quarterly* and *Descant*."

We are, indeed, fortunate to include such fine art and writing within these pages. We also acknowledge the dedication and hard work of recent SWOSU graduate, Jackie Bell, who served the journal well as our Publications Assistant. We are indebted to your service, Jackie, and wish you every success.

-- Amanda Smith
Editor

WESTVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Something About Fire

by Yvonne Carpenter

Two times a week,
wind at low velocity,
we gathered the house trash
and carried it to the rusty
fifty-gallon barrel sitting
alone in a circle trod bare,
except in April when
winter grass springs lush.
We dumped the sacks of refuse:
mails, empty envelopes, school papers,
into the barrel, keeping some of the
thinnest, most flammable for the top.
From our pockets came the match box,
soggy with use, with sandpaper strip
scarred and patchy. When no
grit remained, we struck the match
on the barrel's skin. (My cool, older cousin
could ignite the match by flicking
the head off with his thumb nail.) We held
flame to thin paper and watched blazes
grow and dance. Most interesting
flames, iridescent yet timid,
came from dyes in slick advertisements.

Catalogues consigned to trash
when the new edition arrived, we ripped
into smaller, digestible parts and
fed them into the fire. Occasionally,
a fiery page lifted from the barrel
and floated to be chased down and stomped.
While waiting for the fire to burn down,
we pushed a pencil-grubby homework sheet
in the ant hill and lit it to see what
the insects would do. By age eight, we knew
power; we changed trash to ash
and flirted with destruction. Often
we blistered our fingers and sometimes
singed our bangs. We knew the horror
stories of those neighbor kids who
shirked their patrol and burned a wheat field.
And the delinquents who snuck some matches
into the barn, destroying barn and hay.
But we responsible children
burned the trash.
Only a few of us became
intentional arsonists
or serial killers.

Pioneer Woman

by Yvonne Carpenter

She lives on a frontier,
a place sparsely settled,
that land of the superannuated.
Like the pioneers who rolled out
across the prairies,
some come well prepared
with family training:
how much flour and lard to pack,
what not to carry, how to cook over a fire.
Some hire guides for details like
which trail to follow,
how many oxen to harness,
where to find game.
Others stumble forth, relying on
gossip gleaned at the local market.

That vast domain of old age
has opened for settlement.
When she was a child,
few folk lived there,
a hard place of bent and wrinkled citizens
who scattered snuff,
whittled, and soiled their bibs.

She hopes she brought the right equipment.

The Invisible City

by Jill Jones Tourian

I walk with my friend through Nicosia.
All is new and exotic to me.
Strolling along the cobbled thoroughfare,
I see a vibrant, cosmopolitan city
with countless coffee shops and stylish boutiques.
I hear German, Greek, Armenian, English,
see tourists from all over the world.
Amongst the Venetian and medieval structures,
near the ancient moat and the old city walls,
I find a McDonalds, a KFC, and NYX cosmetics store.

My friend sees it differently.
He repeats time and again the phrases,
"In the day. . . , " "When I was young . . . ," "Back then. . . ,"
"All this is new to me," he says.
The city he sees is invisible to me.
There was where his father's fabric/tailor shop
stood on the corner.
There was the park he played in as a boy,
closed now and designated as a military area.
He remembers almost every shop and who owned it.
The overlay of his memories color this twenty-first century scene
and create a city I cannot know.

Giovani Mattista Martini's 'Gavotte'

by Jill Jones Touria

At first a scribble of notations on the sheet of music,
then a cautious picking out of individual notes.
But no tune. Practice the right hand; practice the left.
Put them together. Gradually comes a melody
and with a hundred repetitions
finally a sense of Martini's creation.
The same awkwardness to mastery
characterizes so many things in life.
We persevere through the agony of "no tune"
until the lovely melody of whatever effort comes.

The Sun

by Jill Jones Tourian

In my personal mythology, the sun is a “she”
possessed of warmth, beauty, and power.
On most mornings, I am awake to greet her and to delight
in all her varieties: from muted glimmer behind cloud cover,
to Homer’s “rose-fingered” dawn, to the brilliant reds of the sailors’ warning.
For a couple of days in late October,
in her seasonal movement, she peeks through my bathroom window
at just the right angle to send a sharp, narrow beam into the next room
onto my bed and onto my pillow,
bestowing an annual kiss—also a part of my personal mythology.

To My Great-Niece Sylvia

by Catherine McCraw

You are being born
the fall I'm turning sixty.

When you are sixty,
I'll be long gone

along with my contemporaries.
Maybe one robust baby-boomer

will be enjoying a candle-laden cake
in a nursing home

if they still have nursing homes
in 2076.

Your world at sixty
will be a science fiction version

of my world at sixty.
It's late October here

with temperatures in the nineties—
global warming, sweetheart.

The seasons still turn,
but they turn

on rusty, creaking hinges.
The sunset tonight

was blazing orange,
mimicking an autumn bonfire.

A foreboding of starlings swooped down
and lined the telephone wires

in long, long rows,
saying a last goodbye before

migrating for the winter.
My generation is beginning

its long goodbye.
We have become the starlings.

Here are my wishes for you, Sylvia,
when you are sixty:

four distinct seasons,
flaming sunsets,
breathable air,
luminous stars,

and rows and rows
of starlings.

Shades of Green

by Catherine McCraw

When I'm an old woman,
I shall wear green—
not pear, nor lime,
for those would sour
my pale, lined face.

Not grass-blade green, for that's
a spring and summer shade,
nor shamrock, too gaudy,
nor apple, too tart.

Not emerald, that's for the long, cool years
of middle age, when the sun is slowly
gliding westward.

Maybe teal, a green dipped in
the shade of blue that edges snow,
portending winter chill.

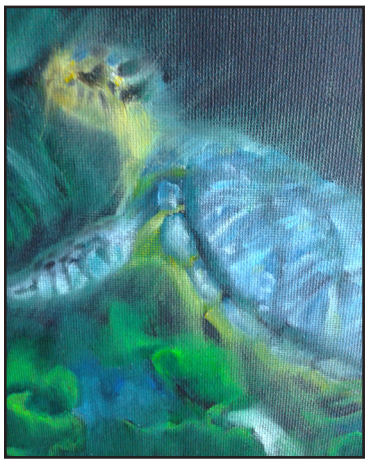
Or, perhaps sea green,
a pastel ocean lapping at the shore,
calling me to cast my boat
into the deep, slice the water
with the oars, and row toward
the Technicolor twilight.

Final Dispensation

by Viki Pettijohn Craig

for Myra Luten Coghill

Well, the whole earth is a cemetery.
We walk on piles of bones,
Memories of bones, and hints of even
Earlier bones.
All resting places eventually are
Disturbed. We are all blended by
Plows, streams, the digging of stones
To make houses and fences.
We free-float in the earth.
Thus, I do not crave a final resting place.
Give me purging by fire;
Distribute me through the air
To waters below,
And finally to shifting sands
Beneath the waters,
Where I may eddy freely
For whatever eternity may be.



Love Song of the Vampire

by Viki Pettijohn Craig

To be as a god
I flow into your heart,
Coil around it, snugly fit,
Feeling your breath in my lungs,
Your heartbeat thrusting through
My arteries.
To be as a god
I am cell of your cells,
Bone of your bone,
Wine-dark, clotted blood
And flowing scarlet aqua vitae—
Hearts' exchange at capillaries' end.
To be as a god is
To know you
With no parameters
To the knowledge.

Hair

by Matt Koch

When Amanda Jenkins first met her father-in-law to be six years ago, she was terrified by his baldness. Not thinning. Bald, with only an alabaster dome atop that sturdy neck. A year later, when her husband awoke on his thirtieth birthday with his garish mane of curls fully intact, she silently welcomed the occasion with an apoplectic rush of relief. In college, she had boasted frequently to her Tri-Delt sisters about never, EVER, being a party to the proliferation of the baldness gene. And, of course, such proclamations were easily made and received back then because none of them had ever dated a balding man (save for "Big" Bernice, who didn't count), and each of them had considered herself immune to the stooping that was suggestive of physical compromise in a mate.

It's not as if she would have loved her husband any less over something so superficial. Surely she wouldn't have, Amanda told herself on that fortuitous birthday morning. To evade over-analysis, she abruptly shifted her image to that of a martyr—the beautiful bride who unflinchingly stands by her kind, homely husband. Yes, Amanda thought, if she had had to love a bald man, she would have salvaged admiration as the adroitly evolved woman with enough humanistic compassion to see the whole person beyond the flesh. "Mature"—they would have called her.

Lately, however, Tim's thick coif of auburn curls irked her. All the other men in his family were either balding or bald, and who did he think he was to circumvent genetics? Harold, her father-in-law, was such a halcyon of a husband that it seemed to her that Tim's insolent follicles were flouting not just sebum but the very prototype of his father as a man. Really the unadorned scalp and doughy white face were only minor flaws easily eclipsed by his character. After all, stout provider that he was, Harold had put four children through college. More importantly to Amanda, though,

was Harold's abstinence from alcohol. He didn't go out with lowlife friends the way Tim continued to. One night, she dreamed she was passionately kissing her husband when his hair began shedding, sloughing off until the starkness of Harold's head morphed before her and continued probing her mouth with his tongue. She awoke with a shiver that morning, but by midday she was texting Mary Catherine about it with giggly emojis.

On the morning of Tim's thirty-fifth birthday, Amanda awoke with anxiety. Wifely birthday expectations, she felt, were merely nostalgic reprisals of gawky teenage roles for a couple in their thirties. No one really had the time to build a cake from scratch at that age—except for those showy DIY bitches on Instagram—and buying one from the Whole Foods bakery didn't prove much when the money was plucked from their joint checking account. And then there's the matter of birthday sex. How awkward and stilted for an arbitrarily designated day to dictate her hormonal moods? When DID oral sex become the prescription for marital bliss? Amanda thought about it for a minute and then blamed Bill Clinton. How exactly was straining one's neck first thing in the day, before even her morning cup of coffee, a pronouncement of spontaneous devotion?

As for this birthday morning, however, Amanda awoke not to an entreating erection beside her but to the vacancy of crumpled sheets. Probably running. Tim was always running these days. Running to the corner bodega for kombucha tea. Running not just to meet his douche-y friends at whatever-that-place's-name-is with the cheap beer served in grooved plastic pitchers, but sometimes after work off to the Bedford L and under the silent churning of the East River to God-knows-where. Or, just jogging.

It began as a clumsy flirtation with heart health: no more than 15 or 20 minutes in the cool mornings and wearing, if you can fathom it, those ghastly gray sweats that Lady had visibly chewed through when she was teething. That she was ambivalent about Tim's physician-recommended regimen gripped Amanda with guilt. He had padded his lower abdomen in the years since college with a soft, squishy mound that gently wrapped around his torso like a

child's hug. Then that all melted away, and those early morning schlepps around the block became 30, 40 minute, sometimes hour-long sojourns clad in a black matching Under Armour outfit with some damn moisture-reduction technology. Of the two of them, Amanda had been the one to run cross country in college, and in fact, she was the one who nudged him to buy his first legitimate distance running shoes (they had taken three trains and a bus to reach the New Balance outlet in Long Island that carried the model she had picked for him—a something v3, which was supposed to promote stability). Back then, she had needed a companion for her own morning runs and was surprised at how eagerly he took to it, despite his bulky frame. Then, once she breached her early thirties, Amanda's energy waned, and her formerly languid mornings felt cracked into tiny flaccid parts, each submerged under the daily minutia of yanking Lady down to the far corner of the park to poop or grinding Tim's Arabica beans that he just as easily could have ground in the grocery store's machine.

Amanda ran, too, she often reassured herself—only in the opposite direction. Her purge began by sloughing off first CrossFit classes followed shortly thereafter by her Bikram Yoga membership. Her friends universally attributed the latter move to either some hushed financial downturn or else a sign of depression—likely both. Among them, only Mary Catherine offered a dissenting opinion, loyally pronouncing that the couple was just fine. In reality, Amanda had simply trimmed her morning routine—subbing yoga videos on YouTube in place of the stinky studio of taut, grunting bodies. By contrast to Tim's increasingly messy and truncated morning exits, she was mechanizing. She knew precisely where to find each nighttime clothing item he had strewn across the living room before changing into his running gear. Before even looking, she brought to the kitchen table a sopping wet paper towel, ready to erase the tepid little puddles of splashed coffee that had oxidized into tarry black swamps. Preserving the edges of her morning awarded precious extra moments to perfect her poses or to elongate her stretches. True, her glamor muscles weren't as toned as they once had been, but her core was stronger. She even brushed aside the more agitated pleas from her friends when she chopped her tangled

waves of hair into a more manageable pixie. It was a throwback look that reminded her of childhood summers upstate—skinned knees, dirty fingernails, fluorescent grass stains, climbing tree trunks late into the humid evenings that were illuminated by the spectral flash of lightning bugs. Somehow, though, it stung when Tim compared her, not unlovingly, to Peter Pan. A glancing blow, but it was enough to knock her off balance, as she swore off the look, facing first an even more unwieldy intermediate stage of hair reclamation.

Still awaiting Tim's hulking, dripping body to trudge through her door, Amanda rolled over to her side and snatched at her scuffed phone from the decorative wicker box, which she had flipped upside down to serve as a makeshift night stand. Extending her probing digits without focusing on the slick target, she succeeded only in fumbling the phone with an echoing clack onto the distressed bamboo flooring that superficially coated the apartment.

"Fucking great!" yelled Amanda, inspiring Lady to spring erect, arching her blond back and cocking her head dumbly at the agitated human face and its foreign missive.

"Cracked. Damn it! Why can nothing ever be easy for me?" Lady probed at the compromised phone with her comically wide snout. "Stop, just stop it, Lady!" Accustomed to loud rebuke by her mother, the dog regarded it, as always, with irritability rather than submission—shrieking her head back and forth with a volley of barks.

"Please, Lady!" Amanda had begun a nearly tearless, gyrating cry. "I have nothing for him. He'll be home, and I've done nothing!" After a couple abortive attempts, she finally steadied her hand sufficiently to place a call. The name "Mary Catherine" illuminated across the screen, and after only three or four rings the maddeningly serene voicemail message switched on.

"Great. Decline my call just when I really need to talk to someone. My friends suck." She then tossed the phone onto the bed, instigating a second string of shrieking barks from the yellow lab.

"What the hell's Lady bitching about?" Tim stood, wet but

not quite exhausted, in the doorway. His complexion, ruddy, was beaded with moisture, and the locks at his temples tucked into regal curls.

"Oh, hi there. Nothing, she's been crazy all morning. Happy birthday, handsome man!"

"Thanks. Did you take her out yet? Or feed her?" Not exhausted, but what was it? Smug, Amanda thought—and who completes a morning run with such—conceit, yes that was the word. She felt mocked by his simpering composure.

"That's probably it," Tim continued. "She just wants us to get up and get going. Don't you, pretty girl!" Lady voraciously lapped up the sweat from his wrists and hands while he scratched her domed head and behind her floppy ears.

"What do you wanna do for your birthday? I—I had this whole thing planned, but, well, I don't know—let's just do whatever you want. That OK?"

Tim chuckled and took a step toward his wife. "Whatever I want, huh?"

Amanda instinctively staggered backward before squeezing out a wry laughing smile. "Oh, come on, I haven't even dressed or brushed my teeth," and before he could attempt to iron out her loose hygienic trepidations, she ducked under his outstretched arm that had been steadying him against the wall and darted deftly to the bathroom, surprising even herself with the burst of agility.

The next morning, Amanda woke up like a half-wracked goddess—that is, her head pounded and her left arm was asleep, but she was pleased by her navigation through the scummy waters where expectation flows into desire. She had, Amanda reasoned, maintained her balance while dangerously maneuvering atop the question of sex and conjugal need.

It had been brilliant—an icy platter of Little Neck oysters followed by plates of steamed mussels, flaky white scallops, and lobster tail accompanied by an unctuous pool of garlic-infused butter the color of motor oil that men poured from black plastic canisters on those commercials. Amanda imagined these supple, viscous indulgences

as a sensual extension—or, rather, even a surrogate. The best part of her plan, though, was the free flow of the claret. Not the most natural pairing with shell fish, but Amanda loved the light body and squarely clean finish. It evaded the weighty maroon of Burgundy in favor of a soft airy hue, like fresh blood. To her it seemed to possess a playful carnality that they each lapped up from one bottle a piece.

After stumbling the four blocks home, Amanda and Tim clunked through the stern iron gate, over a few cold concrete steps, and then up a single internal staircase to their sheet metal door on the left. Once they had breached the apartment entrance, Amanda thrust an open-mouthed kiss upon her husband, teasing the hair on the back of his neck with her spindly fingers. His lips, encircling hers, felt like home for the first time in ages, and his breath, gently sweetened by the wine into almost a tangy ginger, tasted carelessly exotic. For a minute, she lost herself in the confident guiding motions of his mouth while the hypnotic circling of his hands on her shoulders and back interacted blissfully with the warm alcoholic tingle throughout her body.

Just as she was about to step joyfully from her familiar precipice of restraint into the dark wading pools of connubial abandon, her overactive mind switched on with the jarring punch of a refrigerator compressor. She worried that she would disappoint him—that he would press up against her naked body and feel scratchy hairs that didn't belong or lumpy deposits of fat—that Lady would poke her wet nose at their entwined bodies and bark at them—or, simply, her husband would recognize that she wasn't enough for him. Feeling a chilly pall descend upon her body, she excused herself to the restroom. There she deliberately peeled out of her evening dress, scrubbed her face, brushed her teeth, flossed, applied white globs of lotion to her legs, then lighter moisturizer to her face, and finally sat on the toilet for several minutes. When she returned to the bedroom, Tim lay supine atop the bed in his Oxford shirt, having managed, apparently, to have undone three additional buttons and to have kicked his loafers to the wall before he had given up. Hearing the soft rumblings of a snore escape his lips, Amanda sighed, serenely embracing her reprieve.

Several days after his birthday, Tim rushed down the whitewashed concrete steps, fingering tenderly the cast iron banister that stood roughly indifferent to his roaming hands. Forgetting the upturned patch of busted sidewalk that buffeted besieged tenants at the gate, he tripped and staggered forward until redirecting his gifted inertia into a bursting sprint. He always jogged this stretch of the block, even when scrapping the run, at least until rounding the corner toward the subway station—just in case Amanda in all her neuroses were to stare out the window after him.

Before dropping down into the dark mouth of the L station, he plucked his phone from his shorts, checking once more for a message from Mary Catherine. Instead, he found only a stale series of morning texts from Amanda—reminders, forwarded memes, and finally her refrain: "Do you love me?!!" He felt his fingers typing back "yes" but neglected to affix his requisite parenthetical, "of course!"

He considered his next move, splaying apart his broad hand and whisking aside a tuft of auburn hair that had fallen limp past his temple, having succumbed to mid-summer humidity. It didn't appear that Mary Catherine would reach out to him momentarily, and Tim was loathe to commit to a subway ride under the East River without a plan for his deposit in Manhattan, especially while caught in his mesh shorts. As for actually running, this was a wholesome plausibility—an act that would notch one more blot of ink on the truthful side of his ethical ledger with Amanda. But, this path would preclude him from seeing Mary Catherine even if she did text him since there simply would be no time for a shower at her place.

Instead, Tim began to walk. For several blocks he marched,

vaguely seeking a secluded spot to think. It didn't really need to be secluded. In fact, Tim often enjoyed watching young families at the park on blankets or old patriarchs gesturing to one another on benches and matching conversational crescendos in foreign tongues. When he and Amanda had first moved to the neighborhood, the park had been a peaceful urban island that reminded them, as they often both remarked, of the dreamy idleness of college life. Recently, however, the park had become the setting of fights. Often there were tears. And shrill shouts—the kind that inspire tanning prone millennials to jut upward their smooshed sideways faces with a sudden visible clenching of the trapezius.

"We should buy a picnic basket!" suggested Amanda upon their first dedicated summer evening at the park.

"That would be fun! And next time, we'll bring Lady."

"It feels so much better now that the sun's disappeared." Amanda swatted at first one leg, then the other, and began clawing wildly up and down her calves. "I just wish the mosquitos would disappear with it." Amanda's mauve lips attempted a pacifying smile that stalled halfway across her pretty mouth and manifested instead as an unsettling crook at the corner. Seeking and not finding approbation on Tim's face, she began to feel the unctuous effects of the day's lingering humidity. She scanned the women atop blankets, many of them younger, contented within taut, careless bodies exuding a swirling amalgam of gently simmering flesh and sweet coconut lotions.

"We'll remember bug spray next time. Come on, let's just plop down on the grass here and hangout for a bit."

"Here? Do you not see that giant ant hill right there?" Immediately she regretted her choice of words, which had come out more as an unconscious twitch than a directed verbalization.

"OK, Amanda," Tim hissed. "It doesn't have to literally be right here. I just meant in general that we could sit and chill out for a minute."

"I'm sorry! Jesus!" howled back Amanda. "It's just that these damn mosquitos won't leave me alone." Through a failed attempt

to block out an importunate itch on her ankle she managed only to delay responding until the sensation had built up into a monstrous attack. Doubling over unceremoniously she frantically scraped at her ankle with large blunt nails. In this position she felt a bunched band of flesh protruding around her midsection. Suddenly she became aware of a droplet of sweat that, originating at the apex of her legs, ran down her thigh. Her bangs were sticking in patches to her greasy forehead. Tim's overgrown coif, she noticed, petulantly reached upward all around his rounded skull, granting her already tall husband even more height.

"No, I'm sorry," exhaled Tim. "You're uncomfortable. Let's just leave." He slinked up next to her and attempted to rub a hand against her back. She balked at the gesture.

"Don't. I—I feel gross. Sorry, that's not your fault. Please, I want to leave, that's all. Do you love me? You're probably so annoyed with me right now. You still love me, right?"

"Of course I love you, little girl!"

Tim passed a dimly lit bodega without a soul inhabitant save for the scowling face of the aging Korean proprietor. Even the orange long-haired bodega tomcat had strayed out to the sidewalk nearer the bus stop where he lay, nuzzling his furry cheeks into the palm of a stranger's warm hand.

"Hi, Seamus!" whispered Tim as he passed, scratching the cat's lower back, which perked up in response.

After checking his phone once more, Tim assessed the situation. Still no text from Mary Catherine and instead a barrage of missed calls from Amanda—plus a recent text that scrolled across the top of the screen reading, "Why won't you answer?!! Tim, why are you ignoring me?!!!" Sighing, he clicked the lower button on the side of his phone until the slash appeared across the volume symbol and released the phone down into the smooth polyester cocoon of his shorts. Onward he traipsed, passing along his improvisational path uniformed auxiliary police, giggling Polish girls who seemed to share some adolescent confidence, sweaty parcel delivery men who cringed behind the weight of their packages while nodding fraternally to Tim as he passed. All of them performed their jobs,

vocationally or socially, with either neutral or smiling faces. The whole city, it seemed to Tim, was functioning as it should—as a continuous symbiotic flow, like disparate organs in the body.

Before long, he found himself edging up against the Newtown

Creek as café patios and buzzing storefronts had given way to shuddered windows and "Retail Space For Lease" signs where the meandering road limped to a finish at the water bank with cracked, jagged pavement beneath the shattered green glass of beer bottles. Tim paused. From this vantage point he could see to his left the towering cluster of Manhattan's Midtown East that stood, imposing, almost like a manmade counterpart to the Redwoods of the Pacific Northwest. Straight ahead was the Pulaski Bridge that led over the creek and into Queens. On the verge of pivoting and slinking the several blocks back to his apartment and Amanda, he remembered the phone sagging, weighty, in his front pocket, and he mounted the steps to the bridge.

Halfway across the water was a landing with a chipped wooden bench that had originally been painted a cardinal red before fading into a fallow brown. Tim sat. He stared off not at the Manhattan skyscrapers but at the laughing gulls circling across the sky. How odd, he mused, that they've found their way up from their usual home in the Rockaways to this apex of Brooklyn-Manhattan-Queens. Seizing upon a random impulse, Tim began to yank upward at each calf to position himself in a meditation pose. Before fully crisscrossing his trunk-like legs, however, he imagined having to explain himself to one of Amanda's friends, were one to chance upon him in this compromising position. So, midway through his awkward contortion, he gave up and lost himself instead in the swirling birds above that swooped in sensuous circles.

Then, a preternatural howl pierced the wind at his back, startling Tim from his coiled repose.

"Tim," barked Amanda, stomping toward him, her face stained with tears.

Without thinking he sprang up, arched his back and wordlessly turned away from his crying wife. Compelled by some animal response, by a chemical reaction of the adrenal cortex, he ran. Not quite a sprint, but close—a confident stride. Behind him he could hear the slapping of Amanda's leathery sandals on the pavement, the cadence quickly escalating to an allegro. Tim's flesh responded admirably, as thrusts of blood rushed through his veins, coaxing his

muscles to extend and flex.

"Tim, please! Wait for me!" yelped Amanda at his back. "Please, why are you doing this to me?"

Her cries reached his ears soon only as the distant whimpers of a child as he had achieved a sizable separation between them. Some faraway twinge of filial nostalgia seized upon his chest, nearly arresting his flight. But then he saw just up ahead a pillar hoisting a green sign that read, "Welcome to Queens," and as he approached this threshold, he felt from far atop his thick buoyant stacks of hair a droplet of salty sweat that fell into his open mouth. He resolved that he could never again turn back to Amanda. So, he crossed into the borough of Queens, still running, and Amanda's voice was lost with the wind.

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Winter's Chill

by Ethan Blakley

Whispered words of love long lost
Lying silently as frost.
Winter's breath has stolen them,

As it does the flower'd stem,
Stilled it there within the breast
Ever now in final rest.
Out of sight as like the root,
Ne'er to grow the smallest fruit

That comes to bloom at Summer's height.
Newest victim of man's plight.
Whither then what wither'd be,
To follow her across the sea.

Move-In

by Kaila Lancaster

He's gotten fatter since I last saw him. His sunburn on his head looks awful, but he wears the crusty residue of damage like a crown. Sunspots tattoo his arms and his legs. Strawberry-blond hair, coated in August sweat, clings to thick appendages.

Mom says to wear sunscreen and to moisturize, or I'll end up like him. Just like Dad.

Dad's stomach distends due to piss-yellow pints, but his arms bulge as the result of P90X DVDs; he's a walking contradiction. He's been working out, he says. Getting in shape. His goatee is as horrible as ever—red wires streaked with silver, worn with hypermasculinity. He strokes his chin and clutches the tuft of hair between clean, neat fingernails.

"Do you like the place?" I ask.

Dad examines my new apartment, studies its crevices, and surveys the faux hardwood. Then he looks at me, eyes scanning. He hasn't seen me like this yet—grown and moved away. On my own. He visited me in college once, but he came to my dorm with its twin bed draped in teal polka dots, photos of my high-school prom still tacked to my headboard. I was still a kid. He saw—sees—me as that eleven year old he left twelve years ago. I stood in our driveway, watched his white truck wheel out of our neighborhood. The pebbled cement prickled the bottom of my bare feet.

Now, his hands gently rake the surface of my kitchen countertop. He studies his palm, seems to hope for some sort of residue, longs for some sort of an excuse to perform like fathers do. Give advice, counsel. That kind of performance.

I think I pass his test. He moves on.

"You sure it's a safe neighborhood?" he asks.

"It has good reviews online."

He accepts the answer and studies some photos I've already hung on my fridge: Mom and I on my twenty-third birthday, a cake resting on a table in front of us, the surface poked with pink candles. Mom and I at Disney World in matching mouse ears, our shoulders bare, burned. I'm in my cap and gown in one 4 x 6, the cap tilted, too big for my head. Mom stands beside me, her blonde curls whipping around her face, her eyes still red from crying.

Christine saunters through my front door. Christine—Christine with her pointed nose and her perpetually pursed lips, like she's always just eaten something rancid. My stepmother.

I still hate her. I shouldn't. I'm grown, the deed's done, it's over, and it's fine.

But I do. I hate her.

She says, "Nice place, Olivia." Her southern accent chokes the sincerity from her voice. I can't associate the accent with its stereotypical sweetness—when they slip from those lips, words drip with resentment. I've been a burden to her since I was a kid.

"Where's your mom? She wouldn't miss the big move, would she?" she asks.

She doesn't really care. She called my mom a fat bitch once when I was younger, over the phone. She doesn't care.

"Doing errands," I respond. "Doing errands" is code for waiting in the parking lot of the Walgreens down the street for my "all-clear" text.

Dad changes the subject. "Let's unload that couch. It's a long drive home."

The couch is almost brand new, but they're replacing it for a new one, giving this one to me. They want something "bigger" to "accommodate the whole family." The Fixer Upper craze has swept the South and clutched my father and his dearly beloved by the throats.

"This will look great," they say as we lift the sofa from the truck bed. We position it against the wall opposite the cable hookup. The sofa is ugly—brown with tan-and-orange floral cushions—but I can

sit on it. Christine says the sofa makes my apartment look like a home.

Dad says, "It looks good," and he walks to my bedroom, my restroom, continues his inspection.

He emerges and says something about the dusty vent above my toilet. "Pay attention," he says. "Clean," he says. Dad looks like some sort of bird, his chest puffed, his eyes bright against sunburned flesh.

With this piece of advice—clean, Olivia, pay attention, Olivia—he's done his duty as a father. Now he can post about his daddy-of-the-year deed on Facebook. The caption will read, "Moved my oldest daughter into her new place. Happy to lend a sofa. Welcome to the real world, kid! So proud!" The post will garner twenty-three likes at most. Most of his "friends" don't really know me, haven't met me. His most current photo/caption combo—a portrait of his stepdaughter Halle, a junior in high school—has already earned eighty-two likes.

Dad's friends know Halle. Halle's a gem.

By now, he's lived with Halle longer. He knows her favorite color, favorite food. Purple, chicken fajitas. He attends her school functions, volleyball games, the works. When he calls me, he calls to talk about Halle, about Christine.

He asked me once, over the phone, if I knew how much prom dresses were. "Can you believe it, Olivia? Five-hundred bucks for a damn dress," he laughed. "But Halle's excited."

"I'm sure she is, Dad," I said. Then I added, "Mom only paid ninety for mine," but he didn't take the bait. He avoids confrontation like he avoids admitting his adultery.

Mom and I will make fun of his comments, posts, and shallow gestures when she gets back.

When they leave.

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After an hour of small talk, Christine coaxes Dad toward the front door. "Halle's texting me, Paul. She's bored at home," she says.

I walk them to Dad's truck; I think I see Mom's Escape in a space on the other side of the complex, three buildings down.

Christine pats my shoulder. Dad pulls me into his solid body and hugs me. I smell his deodorant and his house on his shirt. Musk. All-purpose masculine spice. He says, "I love you, kid."

I tell him to drive safe.

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Mom and I eat cheeseburgers and fries on the couch. We wait for the cable guy and listen to talk radio with her phone.

"Your dad was okay?" Mom asks. Her hair is pulled into a knot at the nape of her neck. She's tan; sunspots freckle her soft arms.

I think she's so beautiful.

"He was fine." I lick salt off my fingers; I wipe the residue on my athletic shorts.

Mom and I discuss the essentials of surviving my first few weeks—what I should wear to the first day of my new job, when she'll come for a weekend. Cheeseburger grease coats our chins, and a glob of ketchup plops on the couch. It's a crimson pancake, circular and shiny, and it begins to harden on the brown fabric.

"I'll clean it up," Mom says. "You still have me for a day."

"No. Leave it," I say. "I'll clean it later. I'm saving for a new one."

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Visiting Hours

by Richard Dinges, Jr.

From a high ceiling,
Long, bright fluorescent
tubes sterilize air
between flat, large-paned windows, one a view
of a parking lot,
another a white clapboard
house with a wide empty
porch. We sit in four
vinyl cushioned chairs,
a square with room
to twitch legs.
We soon run low
on words, and she
returns through a door
that latches shut
with a dull metallic click.

Open Doors

by Richard Dinges, Jr.

Breeze blows doors
open, a light,
noiseless touch
from fresh spring air.
I feel my home
respire. I sit
still. A soft
caress soothes
me into a false
sense—I can sit
forever, ignore
this offer of
an open door.
Nothing bad
will ever happen
again in this
cool, quiet room.

Dining

by Marc DiPaolo

2003. Taste of India II, New Dorp Lane, State Island

"This is one of my favorite Indian restaurants. I'm really hoping you like it," Vincent said, excitedly, to his mom and dad. He was twenty-seven and still living with his parents after returning home a college graduate.

"I can't believe we went to an Indian restaurant," Luigi said.

A wistful, nostalgic expression settled upon Carmella's face. "You know, I had Indian food once, when I was in London. It was right around the time of the Kennedy assassination. I had some kind of curry. It was too spicy. I haven't had any Indian food since."

Vincent smiled, sympathetically. "Well, different restaurants put different amounts of spices in their food. I think Indian restaurants in America now expect Americans to have a low threshold for seasoning, so they don't make the dishes too spicy. I bet if they had their druthers, they'd add tons of spices. But they know who they're dealing with. So, it should be less spicy than what you had in England."

Luigi flipped through the menu multiple times, looking frantically for a dish he recognized and not finding one. "Do they serve any hot open-faced sandwiches?" For some reason, whenever dad decided that he hated a restaurant, he usually felt a craving for hot open-faced sandwiches that weren't actually on the menu. There were no other situations in life in which dad expressed any interest at all in hot open-faced sandwiches.

Vincent pointed at one of the pictures on the menu his father held. "I love chicken saag myself. Also, lamb vindaloo and lemon rice. Wait. No vindaloo for you. Too spicy. I'd recommend mango lassis for drinks and a serving of naan. The saag is my favorite. I could eat that every day. But any of those I mentioned are good options. Oh! I forgot chicken tikka masala. That's fabulous. And we

don't have to order from the menu. If we go up to the buffet, we can sample a variety of dishes, and you can figure out for yourself what speaks to you."

"I've been worried about coming here for weeks," Carmella admitted. "I just wasn't sure I'd like it. I thought it would be too spicy."

"Well, isn't it time you tried it again? Fifty years is a very long time. Maybe your tastes have changed. I don't like the same foods now I did as a kid. I remember when we ate cake together one time, and you said it was too rich. I thought at the time, 'Only an adult with think any kind of cake is too rich.' Sadly, these days, I'm always bumping into cake that's too rich."

"I really think that I'll always find all Indian food too spicy."

"So, you avoided trying it a second time for fifty years? That's intense, Ma. What is that, 'Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me?'"

"It is way too cold in this place," Vincent's dad declared. He waved the waiter over.

"Oh, Dad, it isn't that cold," Vincent said, embarrassed already.

The waiter appeared by Dad's side. "Yes, sir?"

"What are you trying to do, freeze us to death?" Luigi asked a shocked and confused waiter.

Vincent provided a translation. "Can you adjust the air conditioning? It is too cold."

The waiter cleared his throat. "Ah, yes, sir. I will see what I can do." He walked off.

Vincent tried not to let the incident shake him up too much, but

he was already not enjoying the meal at all. “Listen, Ma, it took me three tries to figure out that I liked Indian food. The first time, I got something I didn’t like and still don’t like. The second time, I tried lamb vindaloo and thought that maybe I liked it. That was when I was almost about to decide to never have Indian food again. Then I met Anne, and she encouraged me to try again. She loves this.”

“We have Anne to thank for this,” Luigi muttered.

“When I tried lamb vindaloo again with Anne, I realized I liked on the second try. I had chicken saag for the first time, and it was love at first bite. And a mango lassi, which was sweet and not spicy and just magical. If I had given up on all Indian food after the first try, I’d have never met chicken saag and gone my whole life without knowing it even existed. And it would have been a big loss because chicken saag and I have had a passionate, many-years-long love affair. My life is all the richer for my torrid relationship with chicken saag. And if I had waited fifty years between each Indian meal, it would have taken me one-hundred-and-fifty years to discover chicken saag. And there would have been no affair.”

Carmella looked furtively in the direction of the buffet. “I guess we should go up?”

The three went up to the buffet looking for food. Luigi got lots of nan, some white rice, and some chicken korma. Carmella decided to try the chicken saag, lamb vindaloo, and the lemon rice. Vincent got a sampling of all of his favorites. They sat down and found that the waiter had left three pint glasses of water and three mango lassis on the table. Carmella stared down at her plate, frightened.

“It is really good for you,” Vincent said. “It has beta carotene.”

Luigi tried his first. He ate a piece of chicken and chewed it slowly. “This is good,” he declared. “Very, very good. But I never want to have it again.”

Carmella bit into the chicken saag.

“Oh!” Vincent leaned forward. “What do you think?”

“Too spicy.”

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My Parents' House

by Jackie Bell

Five feet from the porch, I catch a glimpse of
cigarette smoke seeping through the holes of the screen door. I see it so clearly I start to smell it.
When I walk in, I see mom sleeping—
hunched over on the couch, snoring.
She's always tired.
I see dad wandering around in the kitchen,
deciding which liquor bottle he will open next.
It's not fentanyl patches anymore that are
feeding his addiction.
I hear his heavy breathing and see the sweat dripping.
He's always in pain.
How I wish I could take their pain away,
even though they caused mine.
The same razor blade that once crossed my dad's arm
is the blade I keep in my drawer
but never use because
I learned from them.

Fall Walk

by Dennis Ross

We amble along in the woods
with each golden leaf,
a fluttering sun,
and reds splashed about
as in a modern painting.
The little crick, not quite
a creek, bubbles its way
under the old wooden bridge,
boards rotten or missing,
a tricky crossing.

So many walks—my son and I
through the years,
each a sparkling jewel
lying amidst the drabber moss
of everyday life,
telepathic reconnection,
problems rotated about.

Dave, the quicker now,
I, creakier and in all ways
a bit slower, still trying to grow
toward a more illumined life,
more reds and yellows,
laying down my heaviness
one rock at a time.

My mother, a great walker,
accompanied us today,
though she would have been
one hundred and eight.

Landscapes

by Dennis Ross

I do not appreciate a mega city,
folks in herds on sidewalks,
cars lined up snouts to tails
like cattle in loading chutes,
or even the midwestern small town
where most knew my angular
grandmother, my alternative-reality
mother, me as a shy ghost.

Farmland with houses and barns
a half mile apart, with corn
in rows or wheat waving goodbye
to the horizon brightens my heart,

but I sail away on the wings
of a meadow lark in sparse grass
country with the occasional steer,
a woman in a pickup headed
to a distant town for groceries,

human population spread almost
transparently thin, miles of gravel
roads or asphalt with weeds growing
in the cracks and cars once an hour.

Lessons

by Dennis Ross

I need to take lessons
from this ancient cottonwood:
patience,
standing firm in times of danger,
giving up any semblance of control,
letting my hopes fly on the breeze,
doing my job of living as best I can
without worry of outcomes.

Later, I can take the graduate course
from my reprobate dog, Spot:
complete joy in simple things
like the smell of a mushroom,
making new friends easily,
loving unconditionally,
being completely present
in my own rather scruffy skin.

Lainey

by Gerald Irving

As Hank was leaving the CVS pharmacy one evening after his shift, he noticed a pretty woman with short black hair putting a $4.99 can of hairspray into her large, black pocketbook. She didn't seem dull or stupid, and she didn't have that distracted look he had seen on other shoplifters. When he told her everything was on the security cameras, she looked at him a moment, seemed to realize he worked there, and handed him the hairspray, saying, "Here, you got it back. Let's just forget it." As soon as she spoke, he knew from her accent she wasn't local, and the idea that she came from outside the Lehigh Valley made her more attractive to him, made him imagine she had new ways of looking at things, new attitudes. He said, "I'll buy it for you," and he did. Outside, in the parking lot, though, she fished a $5 bill from her pocketbook and insisted he take it so they were "even." "If you had the money all along, why didn't you just buy the thing?" Hank asked. "What fun is that?" she said.

A few days later, Hank sat on the couch in his apartment on 12th Street in Easton, PA with the woman, whose name was Lainey. She was in the apartment for the first time. She pointed to the front room, which was in shadows from the street lamp and the light from the living room, and asked, "Who sleeps in there?"

In that front room, as Hank was well aware, the bed was covered with a pink and white bedspread, the windows were shaded by white curtains, and perfume bottles and little boxes stood on a vanity table that had a matching stool and an attached mirror.

"That's my mother's room," Hank said.

"You still live with her?"

"She's dead. I just haven't put all her things away."

It's weird to leave the room like that, the last woman who had come to his apartment told him. He expected Lainey to say

something similar, but she didn't seem to have any bad reaction.

"When my mother died," Lainey said, "my sister and I asked our cousin to box up everything. That way we didn't have to go through it item by item."

"I don't have any cousins who could help," Hank said. He looked at Lainey. "Would you do something like that?"

"Pack up all your mother's things? I hardly know you." "It's better that way."

She seemed to consider the idea. "Maybe sometime," she said. "How come you didn't leave after she died?"

"Who knows? Rent here's cheap. Besides, moving takes too much energy."

"I wouldn't have stayed, not with all those memories," Lainey said. She looked around the room. "You need something here to make the place more your own."

The place isn't mine, he thought but kept quiet. He didn't want to explain everything to Lainey. Hank had lived there alone with his mother ever since he was 4, and his father had walked out. Hank's duty, as he saw it, was to his mother because she had not abandoned him. Just up and leaving the apartment, which was filled with her, would be like breaking faith with her. But he did not imagine that he would always be there. He just had to find an acceptable way to go.

He had tried gambling, thinking he could win big enough to carry him away, like some giant, unstoppable wave, but, after a while, gambling seemed like a roller coaster ride—ups and downs but always arriving back at the place he started. He had told Lainey he used to gamble but had never told her why.

"You could use some paintings here. They'd put your stamp on this place," Lainey said. "In Queens, I had paintings all over my apartment. The other day, I saw a painting that would be good here. A black flower—there's no such thing as a black flower, really. I Googled all this after I saw it. I want to buy it, but I'm sure they won't let me hang it at my sister's, and I don't want it sitting in their

garage. It would go great here, though."

Hank knew that Lainey lived in her married sister's house in Palmer Township, having left Queens, as she had told him, after she lost her job but also after she called off at the last minute her wedding to a guy she had gone out with for seven years, since they were both seventeen.

"Is the painting modern art?" Hank asked. "Maybe I won't even understand it."

"You don't have to understand it, just enjoy it."

And he knew he would enjoy having something of Lainey's in the apartment.

The art gallery was one of two businesses on 2nd Street off Northampton. The other business, a dusty-looking store that repaired vacuum cleaners and TVs, fit the city better, Hank thought.

The painting, on an easel surrounded by a white cloth, and alone in one of the gallery's two display windows, showed a dark black flower in a vase on a table near a window. The flower was the only thing on the table. The wall behind the flower was bare. Through the window near the flower, there were only clouds. Everything except the shiny, dark black flower was one shade or another of

grey.

"Isn't it something?" Lainey said, staring at the painting. "It's gloomy," Hank said.

"Not at all," Lainey said. "That black flower shines above all that grey."

Inside the gallery, Hank stood next to Lainey as she asked the salesman how much the powerful picture in the window cost. "We don't have any pictures in the window," the salesman, dressed in a tailored dark brown suit, pink shirt, and pink silk tie, said, flashing a smile.

"Do you mean the painting?" When he told her it cost $2,000, she asked if there were any lay-away terms available. "You do realize this is an art gallery, not a department store," the salesman said.

"Stuck-up bastard," Lainey said as they walked outside where she stared into the display window again.

"Come on, Lainey. Find another painting." "I want this one."

"You have credit cards?"

"They're all maxed out."

"Then wait till you save up."

"I have no patience to wait."

She stepped away from the window and began walking with Hank toward Northampton Street.

"Too bad you don't gamble anymore," she said. "I could stake you, and you could win the money for the painting."

She paused. Hank sensed she was waiting to see what he would say about that idea of gambling for the $2,000. He said nothing. He didn't want to stir up all the good memories of gambling, especially memories of the times it was so easy to win. He thought instead of all the discipline he had to use to stop gambling, all the substitute activities that took off the edge but never equaled the thrill of a blackjack hand.

"How did you get money when you were gambling?" Lainey asked.

"There was somebody I borrowed from."

"Can I do that, too?"

"I wouldn't do it unless you can't live without that painting. It'll cost you double, and you'll have to give him something every week."

"How much?"

"He'll tell you. But how could you afford any payment, no matter what it is?"

"Let me worry about that. You don't even like the painting."

They crossed at Centre Square and walked down 3rd Street to the parking lot.

"Thing is," Hank said, "if I take you to meet Wilfredo, I'm involved. Two thou is not such a big deal, but I wouldn't like those guys coming to the cash machine with me again every week."

"I'll keep you out of it. I promise. I transferred unemployment from New York. I can make payments."

"You'd be better off with a bank loan."

"My credit's zip."

"Can't you borrow from your sister?"

"She wouldn't lend me a dime for a painting. As it is, she doesn't think I make good decisions. Will you at least let me talk to this guy?"

He looked at her face. It was serious and intense.

"You really should find some other way," he said.

"Just let me meet him."

"Alright, next time I see him…"

"Can't you find him and tell him I'll come speak to him."

"It's less of a big deal if I run into him and mention it. Don't

worry. He's always around."

As Hank drove uptown on Northampton Street toward his apartment, Lainey said, "Let's go to Home Depot. We'll get boxes, and I'll start on what you asked me to do."

"You mean with my mother's stuff?"

"Yup. I'll do it while you're at work."

And she did. When Hank returned to his apartment that evening, Lainey was sitting in the living room, watching TV. The boxes they had bought that afternoon were standing in his mother's bedroom, filled.

"What's next?" Laney asked. "You move into the front bedroom?"

"Oh no," he said quickly.

He realized he sounded strange. The logical thing would be to use that large, front bedroom. But that was his mother's room, even though her things were now packed up.

He felt Lainey looking at him. He was aware she was waiting for some explanation.

"I mean, I couldn't just start sleeping in her bed," he said.

"You could take down her bed and put your own in there."

"That's an idea," he said.

To his relief, Lainey dropped the subject.

While Hank restocked the baby powder, Wilfredo, short and muscular with curly black hair, came into CVS and asked Hank for allergy tablets. After Hank told him where to find them, Hank mentioned Lainey and said she wanted to talk business with Wilfredo. "Send her around," Wilfredo said, "but I don't change the way I do business for a woman, and I don't do charity." Then, Hank watched him look around with a sneer at the wide aisles, the well-kempt shelves of toiletries, and cold medicines under the high ceilings and bright fluorescent lights. The store was clean and orderly, and part of Hank's job was to keep it that way. "Working here…" Wilfredo said. "Can't tell me you don't miss the action."

Hank smiled and wished him good luck with the allergies.

Driving Lainey along Washington Street, Hank saw Wilfredo in front of the bar that was his usual hang-out. Wilfredo stood in the middle of a half circle of guys who could have come out of a muscle magazine. Wilfredo owned a moving company that had an office above the bar, and Hank knew that when these guys weren't collecting debts for Wilfredo, they were lifting furniture and refrigerators in and out of the moving trucks.

Hank's car was at a stop sign, a block from the bar. He pointed Wilfredo out to Lainey, who immediately unclipped her seat belt and opened the door, insisting she go by herself because she wanted to keep Hank out of it. She was on the street before Hank could say another word.

Hank pulled the car along the curb and sat, waiting. In the shadowy light of the street lamps, he regretted he had ever mentioned Wilfredo to her. When Lainey returned, she sat heavily and forcefully pulled the seatbelt around her.

"Come on, let's go," she said. "Little creep starts asking me my life story," she continued, as Hank pulled the car away from the curb. "'Don't worry,' I tell him. 'I'll pay you back.' 'I'm a banker,' he tells me. 'I don't want to make a bad investment.' 'Double what you're lending sounds like a good investment to me,' I say. 'You know, you got a shitty attitude,' he says, and he tells me if it wasn't for you, he wouldn't even talk to me. I said I didn't want you mixed up in this. That's when he says I need collateral."

"OK, so that's done," Hank said, relieved she wouldn't be borrowing money from Wilfredo.

"I have collateral," Lainey said. "My mother's diamond ring. She left it to my sister with the provision that she couldn't sell it. I'll borrow it for a while. My sister won't know it's gone."

"Why not just pawn the ring?"

"Too much like selling."

"You know, with Wilfredo there's no late payments, no partial payments. He'll send people after you. They'll make you give them anything they want."

"It's sweet that you're so concerned."

"You think this painting is worth all that?"

"Definitely."

"Why? What's the big deal about it?"

"It makes me feel strong."

"You seem pretty strong to me."

"I cover up good."

Hank propped himself on his elbow to study Lainey's pretty face and short black hair while her chest rose and fell as she took her sleep breaths. She had never slept overnight in his apartment before, saying her sister would go nuts if she didn't come home. Last night, though, when she came back to the apartment, anxious and upset, she called her sister, and Hank overheard her say, "I'm staying with that guy I told you about."

In disjointed bits, Lainey had described to Hank what happened after she left his apartment, heading to the bar to pay Wilfredo—having refused Hank's offer to drive her there. Two of Wilfredo's muscle boys had stopped her on the street in front of Hank's apartment building, yanked her pocketbook from her, searched inside it for Wilfredo's money, and handed it back to her, telling her they were just doing her a favor, saving her a trip.

"I feel like such a low-life," Lainey kept saying to Hank, "like I'm at their level. Must be some way I can get those muscle-heads off my back."

Hank assured her she was way above all of them.

Now, through the open bedroom door, Hank glanced into the living room, where the painting of the black flower hung. He still didn't like the painting, but he did like the changes it had brought. The apartment had a different feel, less sad, less of a why-bother atmosphere. And every time Hank looked at the painting, he thought of Lainey, and his spirits rose.

He was most afraid that he would lose Lainey to some art lover, someone who would understand those painting ideas—perspective and light and color—she talked about. He tried to follow what she

said, but he felt like a bystander listening to a fan. He wanted some connection with her that couldn't be easily broken. Lainey opened her eyes and looked at him. For the first time, he told her he loved her.

She touched his cheek with her finger tips. "My fiancé Steve and I used to say we loved each other all the time. Then near the end, it hit me: We didn't mean the same thing. I don't want any of that misunderstanding ever again."

"Why would I misunderstand?"

"Both of us could." She looked into his eyes. "I do have feelings for you, but I don't want to label them. Right now, we're helping each other. Why not leave it that way for the time being?"

"How am I helping you?" Hank asked.

"I feel worthwhile again with you," Lainey said.

"Without me, you don't? That doesn't sound like you."

"When I first came here, I was as low as I've ever been. Then, I met you. You kept crashing into the same rocks over and over. I thought if I could help you, it would make me feel better. And it did," she smiled.

A few days later, sitting in Shorty's, a bar/restaurant across from CVS, Hank told Lainey he went to the office of Zuniga Movers above the bar to ask Wilfredo not to send the muscle boys after Lainey. Wilfredo sat at a metal desk behind a computer terminal, in an office that surprised Hank because it was so attractive—no clutter or dust anywhere and filled with sunlight from the front and side windows. "Let her pay my guys like everybody else," Wilfredo said. Hank did not tell Lainey that Wilfredo also said, "Princess got her money. Now, she wants to forget how she got it? Cut loose from her, man. She's a user. Suck you dry and spit you out."

"He's a punk," Lainey said. "I'd like to shove the money down his throat."

"Maybe there's a way you can—if you win enough to cover it."

"Gamble?" Lainey said. "I thought you didn't do that anymore."

"I don't. I'll just get you ready. I got a thousand dollars we can

use."

"From where?"

"My boss, Bernie. I never hit him up for anything before. I had to hear his usual pitch for me to enroll in the pharm tech program at NAC, but I've heard all that before from him. He's really a good guy."

He didn't mention that he had told Bernie the money was for a friend who had gotten herself into a jam, and Bernie had said, "We live in patterns, you know. Make sure your friend's pattern isn't that you have to bail her out all the time."

No matter what anyone said, Hank thought Lainey was one of

the best things that ever happened to him. She was like a new dealer who changed the chemistry at the table in his favor.

"We're going to be financial managers, though, not gamblers," Hank smiled. "I'll give you a very conservative strategy. You game?"

"I've got nothing to lose," she smiled.

Hank noticed Lainey peering into his mother's bedroom. He had just put away everything he and Lainey used for gambling practice—cards, craps-table cloth, dice and chips. He stood next to Lainey and looked into the room himself. The furniture and curtains were all that remained from his mother. The boxes he had dropped off at Goodwill.

"You didn't put your bed in there yet," Lainey said.

"Nah, I think I want to move out completely."

"Good for you."

Wanting to move out and actually moving out, he knew, were very different. Still, he didn't feel his mother's presence so strongly in the apartment lately, and what's more, he was seeing things differently now.

One morning recently, sitting in his favorite armchair, waiting for Lainey to come to the apartment, a hairbrush of Lainey's on the end table next to him, he drank coffee and looked at the bright black flower in the gray painting, and the thought came clearly to him that his mother was gone forever. There was no reason to worry about abandoning her now.

She had died in the month of November, and soon after, the bad weather started. That winter, the apartment was especially cold, dark, and quiet as he stayed there alone. Never comfortable with people, he had no energy for them after his mother's death. He didn't think he could stand such loneliness again, a loneliness relieved only by the sense of his mother's presence in the apartment. What would it be like in a new place with no presence but his own?

"Would you come with me if I got a new apartment?" he asked now, stepping into the living room with Lainey.

"Live with you?" Lainey said, as they sat on the couch. "You

know this Lehigh Valley has never been for me."

"You're not planning to leave soon, though, right?" "I don't like making plans."

"But it's good to know what you want to do."

"You have plans?"

"General things."

He felt her eyes studying his face.

"I'm probably not the best one to fill that big void in you," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You want somebody to be your whole world. It would be flattering at first, but I couldn't do it long-term. It's too limiting."

Of course he wanted someone to care for, someone who would care back. Who didn't? He remembered his mother often saying that all they had was each other. Growing up, he believed that strongly. When he was a teenager, he started thinking there must be more in the world for both of them. Did Lainey think he wanted to recreate that whole mess with his mother again? Is that how he came across?

"I'm only asking you to share an apartment with me. You're the one making it into something else."

She looked into his eyes and then nodded. "We'll see," she said. "We won't force things one way or another. OK?"

Hank agreed.

***

Lainey entered the apartment, smiling and waving a piece of paper that she handed to Hank, who was sitting in the armchair.

"I'm done with that son-of-a-bitch," she said.

Hank read the handwritten paper, a receipt, signed by Wilfredo, for $4,000 from Lainey.

"He gave me such a hard time about that," Lainey said, pointing to the paper, "but I insisted. I wanted something to show I was out

of his hands. He wanted to get rid of me too. That's why he finally did it. But it's over now."

Lainey took the paper from Hank, carefully folded it, and put it in her pocketbook.

The evening before, Hank had gone to the Sands with Lainey. After leaving her in the casino, he walked around the Bethlehem Steel yards, past the abandoned buildings and the rusted stacks of the furnace, through areas that for decades had been the center of people's working lives but now were part of a ghost town. But because he was superstitious about gambling and didn't want the depression he felt in the steel yards to influence Lainey at the tables, he hurried back to the Sands and sat in the Food Court, drinking coffee while he waited for her.

Later, Lainey told him that at the blackjack table she followed his advice and was up $1,500, but then she got tired and switched to craps. Her energy level was so low she knew she couldn't stay much longer, and the thought of having to come back another time depressed her, so she bet a thousand dollars at 5-1 that the next throw would be a 7. It was. "Don't be angry," she had said to Hank. "I know I could have lost, but I still would have been up 500." "How angry can I be?" Hank smiled. "You won over six grand."

"He give you the ring?" Hank asked now about Wilfredo.

"I don't walk around with that ring in my pocket all day," Lainey said, trying to imitate Wilfredo's voice. "Tomorrow at 7, in front of the bar."

Next afternoon, during his shift at CVS, Hank, stocking shelves in the bandages aisle, saw Wilfredo—thick black hair, tight shirt bulging with muscles, a stone block—walking toward him.

"Can you believe it?" Wilfredo said. "I lost that damn ring."

"You're not the kind of guy who loses things."

"I know. That's why it's so weird. But that ring ain't worth what she says it is. She's talking 15 grand. More like 500 dollars. She's a sly bitch."

"Maybe, but you have to give it back. She paid you everything

she owed you."

"I don't have to do shit."

"It's not good business to hold it. Word gets around."

"You going to spread the word?"

"I talk to people. Give her the four grand back then."

"That's my money."

"It's her ring."

"Yeah, well, if I find it, I'll let you know."

"I have to get that ring back," Lainey said to Hank in his apartment after he told her about his meeting with Wilfredo. She stared at the floor a few minutes. "You know where he lives?" she asked.

"Going to his house won't do any good."

"It won't be for a visit."

Hank looked at her, and, to be sure he read her expression right, he asked, "You want to steal it?"

"It's not stealing if I take back what's mine."

"How do you know it's in his house? Maybe it's in a safe in the office."

"He's too damn organized to mix his moving business with his other business. It'll be in a jewelry box in his bedroom."

"So you go in, take the ring, and leave? That won't be the end of it for him. He'll get you back somehow."

"Let him. At least I'll have the ring. Will you help me?"

After Hank found Wilfredo's address on the CVS computer, he and Lainey drove by the house several times to determine when it was empty and what they would need to enter. The house was next to an empty lot at the end of a street in West Easton. Hank decided a screwdriver would open the side screen door, and his plastic Sands VIP card would open the simple lock on the wooden side door.

Once inside the neat, clean house, Hank followed Lainey upstairs to the bedroom, where, as she had guessed, she found the ring in a

jewelry box on the dresser. In less than twenty minutes, they were back in Hank's car, driving away, the ring in Lainey's pocketbook.

Hank expected the muscle boys to come for him at any time

Leaving Shorty's after dinner a few days later, Lainey told Hank she had spoken to a girlfriend from Queens who called to see how she was doing. Lainey said they talked about the people they knew and about their reactions, now that some time had passed, to Lainey's calling off the wedding.

"The conversation got me thinking," Lainey said. "I wonder if I'm strong enough to go back without falling apart."

"I thought you wanted to say goodbye to Queens," Hank said. "Not so much Queens. My old self that was there."

"Would you just up and leave here like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, after everything we've been through…"

"Hey," she said tenderly, "it's only because of you I could even consider Queens again. And I wouldn't be leaving you. No matter where I am, you and I will still be close."

"Wouldn't be the same if you're in Queens. You know it."

"You said you weren't going to force anything, remember? Here I'm talking in general, and you already want to make things come out a certain way."

Of course I do, Hank thought. What a time this would be for her to leave me! Like she put me in the lifeboat and went away. How do I steer the thing? Where do I go in it?

As they neared 12th Street, Hank smelled smoke, noticed the reflections of flashing lights, and saw yellow and black striped cones blocking the street. Stunned by the sight of the fire truck with its ladder extended into his apartment, he ran to the building entrance, but the cop stationed there wouldn't let him go in.

He saw Lainey waiting for him across the street.

"I'm so sorry," Lainey said, clutching his arm when he was next to her.

He said nothing. He looked up at the window of his mother's bedroom. There was no glass in the window anymore.

"Hey, man," he heard Wilfredo's voice and turned to see him standing calmly, looking up at the apartment. "That's your place, right? Bad luck, but maybe it's like karma. You know, you do something bad, something bad comes back to you." Wilfredo looked at Lainey. "Good thing you weren't in there, huh?" he said. "Fire's a killer." Then he walked away.

"He did it," Lainey said. "I hope the cops nail him for it."

"They won't," Hank said. "He protects himself."

Hank couldn't take his eyes off the smoke streaming through his apartment window. He no longer felt Lainey on his arm, or heard the crackling voices on the fire-engine radio, or saw the flashing lights on the police cars.

Everything's gone. He watched the smoke rise and curl. All the stuff in my room—pennants and buttons from school, yearbooks, photos—all destroyed. But maybe that's not so bad. Those things didn't hold happy memories anyway. And maybe all the melancholy from that place is gone now, spread across the sky like the smoke.

Hank's muscles relaxed, his breath came more slowly, and he felt refreshed, as if he had slept and his energy and strength had been restored.

Then, he remembered the painting in the living room. "Your black flower's gone, too," he said to Lainey.

"I know," she said, still clutching his arm.

"I'm sorry it's gone," Hank said. "It made a difference."

For a moment, the sun shone through the smoke, and Hank had the sense everything was off. The tone he had used with Lainey sounded to him like the tone you would use with an ex-girlfriend if you talked about what happened between the two of you. He didn't think things were finished with Lainey, but the current had shifted. There was less danger of crashing if he steered on his own now.

"Where will you stay tonight?" Lainey asked.

"Some hotel, I guess."

She looked at him with soft brown eyes, and he had the sense she was waiting for him to say more, to give some reaction to staying in the hotel, to complain maybe, or ask for help.

He didn't feel he needed any help, so he didn't say anything.

"Want me to stay with you?" Lainey asked.

"It's OK," Hank said.

"Don't worry about my sister. I'll just tell her what happened. She won't give me a hard time."

"No, I'll be fine on my own."

A pleasant-looking woman, wearing a Red Cross badge, approached Hank and asked, "Do you live in that front apartment?"

"I did," he said, "but not anymore."

❄❄❄

For My Grandmothers

by Lea Killian

How I ache
for the dirty feet and tangled hair
of childhood.
In the Summer,
do you not remember
how the sun set
upon our faces?
We opened our eyes
to shooting stars, hoping
to catch them on our tongues, like
snowflakes in Winter. Instead,
we settled
for wrangling fireflies
into crystal mason jars.
Springtime sprouted
clouds of dandelions
from the ground,
and we blew our wishes
into the fields
behind our house.
I do not remember what I wished for then,
but I know what I would wish for now.
Running through the Autumn leaves
of youth, grasping memories,
I realize we're all just children
who miss climbing trees.

Chasing Horses

by Lea Killian

There is a storm ambling across the fields behind my home. Rain has not yet spilled, but it fills the air with its fragrance. This morning and every morning, I open the door to let the dogs run their beaten paths into their backyard, their tails twisting into chestnut flowers, their noses tilted toward the sky. They race to the chain link fence that separates my yard from the fields and stare. Every morning, this happens.

They're waiting on the horses.

When they saunter into the field, thunder fills the air. My dogs mimic the approaching storm, their howls reverberating across the open space. They chase the horses, as best they can, along the fence. The horses nicker and clip the dirt with their black hooves, and my dogs repeat the gesture. They follow each other through the fence, wandering back and forth. It is a dance of wild animals held so deep within them; only they know the steps.

As the sun slips away and rain begins to fall, the dogs come back to me, smiling at their newfound secrets. I think about the paths they've made in the dirt and the fence that stops them every morning from bolting into the fields.

How often we, too, follow our familiar paths and stop, too quickly, just before the horizon of wild, breathless endeavors.

Someday, I will open the gate

Reading

by Lea Killian

Words lift from pages
like black birds flying
into cloudless skies.
They pepper my skin

in a forest
of freckles and scars.
I am a pearl sea,
and words sink

into me like shipwrecks.
Translucent,
I watch them float
to the ocean floor,

but they get caught
in the current of my veins.
They reshape me,
and I find that I am many things.

I am graceless, cradling the history
of land, sky, wind, and sea.

Contributors

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Yvonne Carpenter has published two books of poetry and assisted in publishing *Red Dirt Roads*, a 2014 Oklahoma Book Award for poetry. Her work has appeared in *Blood and Thunder, Grain—a Canadian poetry journal, Westview, Red Earth Review, Smoky Blue, Concho River Review, Esthetic Apostle, Dragon Poet Review,* and the Woody Guthrie anthologies.

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Richard Dinges, Jr. has an MA in literary studies from University of Iowa, and manages information systems risk at an insurance company. *Abbey, Wink, Home Planet News, Oddball Magazine,* and *Studio One* most recently accepted his poems for their publications.

Marc DiPaolo, associate professor of language and literature at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, has twenty years of college teaching experience. He has published nine books, including the monographs *Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones* (SUNY 2018) and CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title *War, Politics, and Superheroes* (McFarland 2011). DiPaolo has also (co-)edited five cultural studies anthologies, plus the Pearson composition textbook *The Conscious Reader.* A former New York reporter and consultant for the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, he has appeared on Robert Kirkman's *Secret History of Comics* (AMC), in *The Times* (UK), and on BBC4 and NPR.

Gerald Irving

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Catherine McCraw is a speech language pathologist in western Oklahoma. Her poetry group published a book entitled *Red Dirt Roads* in 2013 which won the 2014 Oklahoma Book Award for poetry.

Dennis Ross taught and did research in physics at Iowa State University. Now retired, he has gone back to his first love, writing poetry, as a second career. He has published over 200 poems and a chapbook, *Relatives and Other Strangers*.

Dr. Jill Jones Tourian is a retired English professor, who, through her long teaching career, taught literature at SWOSU, LSU at Baton Rouge, the University of Houston, and the University of Mississippi. She has published numerous biographical and critical prose works but is now enjoying finally having time to experiment with writing her own poems. She lives in Weatherford, Oklahoma.

Photos and illustrations

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table of contents Bark, 40+255 Thunderstorms

21 “Keep Running” Fey Ilyas

24 “Running Man” Transformer 18

35 “Dining” Marc DiPaolo

44 “Black Flower” Fresh Photo

51 “Paper-Life Femme Fatale” Madalena Pestana

56 “Flaming Gold” Paloetic