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Published 22 May 2025 by *Lodestar Lit*.

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Lodestar Lit is co-owned and co-edited by Brenna Alyse Walch, Keenan Travis Robinson, and William Grey Cashwell. Visit us on Instagram **@lodestarlit** and our new website, **lodestarlit.ink**.

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Stephen Mead

The Mailless Mail Driver

Hundreds of letters and packages
Dispensed every hour
At doorsteps and strep-throated doctor's offices
Where no news is typically good news.

There's a Buddha bobblehead on her dashboard
Gifted by an ex-wannabe monk
Who put CliffsNotes nuggets of Eastern wisdom
Into a Home Depot blender.

Yet her nervousness fails to become nirvana
As she drives the truck down one-way streets
Cluttered with signs of domestic satisfaction,
Garden gnomes and two-story homes.

Tries to dissociate herself
From the heaps of birthday cards and get-well-soons,
Stoic as a priest in the confessional
Listening to another masturbation description.

But once she returns to her studio apartment
Deprived of salutations and pocket vibrations,
Desert eyes become seas of blue
Desperate for some message in a bottle.

Sam Hendrian (he/his) is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker and poet striving to foster empathy through art. Every Sunday, he writes personalized poems for passersby outside of Chevalier's Books, LA's oldest independent bookstore. You can find his poetry and film links on Instagram at [@samhendrian143](#).

Eyes That Paint The Sky

The world there stays quiet and deep-rooted through shifting seasons. It holds the weight of our first steps.

A September wind curled over the leaves, spinning sycamore seeds through the air like miniature turbines. Snow frosted the dirt, a gentle dust rolling over the Lomond hills. Silver bark warmed under golden sun. Chaffinch sang above. It was sometime in the afternoon.

A sunbeam bathed you as if picked out by heaven—a sweet thing. By your side, you held a book with a handwritten note marking the page. I wondered what those pages contained, and if we were searching for the same words. We stopped on that willow bridge and looked into the rumbling water. A minute or so passed.

‘The days are getting shorter now,’ you said in a soft voice—melodic and refined—a voice as soft as the tumbling river, as soft as champagne pouring over the edge of a glass. My words felt coarse in reflection. Strands of autumn caught on the breeze and feathered over your cheek, like burnt rose and winter berries. A sigh that danced like butterflies. The water was deep and clear.

Across the den, a couple of wood pigeons bobbed lazily on a dry-stone wall, and beyond, over the farmland, was the Harvest Moon Cafe near the deer sanctuary. The black swing-coat jacket you wore seemed delicate against the wilderness. You wore that same coat the first night we kissed, letting it fall to the fireside before you held me warmly. Light sparkled in your champagne eyes.

There are times, under a shallow moon, when the night is a deep murky ocean, I find a sliver of light—a shattered memory—a shiver of a smile. I could live forever in that dream.

Nights, we danced in the kitchen, music filling the spaces, our bodies two notes in an unfinished symphony, creating something simple. The radio settled and Anstruther mussels simmered on the stove in a broth of garlic and white wine. We spoke in restraint, the world laying still—lightly muted static.

‘Have you ever considered’, you asked, pausing with a glass of *Blanc de noir* only touched to your lips, ‘the miracle of life? A future of tiny heartbeats and soft ignis glow.’

So, there we stayed, held by the honey of a child’s laughter, an unwavering love that said—you are my world.

In this room shadows dance, a single bulb glowing overhead like a weary moon. I find myself tracing the arches of yesterday, moments waxed and waned. Stillness. Three a.m. dark. In these hours small enough to bear. *Like the moon, we go through phases of emptiness just to feel full again.*

The painting you hung on the wall—Fishermen at Sea—looks different now, it’s chaos no longer a question, but a statement. I would trade these still voyages, these silent stormy seas, for just one word with God. I would ask that they look into the eyes of our only child—eyes that search like lost lonely planets—and declare themselves worthy.

The electric light flickered through phases, empty, then piercingly bright. Time was suspended there in that waiting room, my shoe like a ticking clock on the hard floor. Out through the window, streetlights fractured the night as ambulance sirens trailed and grew nearer again. One by one the visitors left, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, shaking their heads in quiet resolve. Some never returned.

I rang the buzzer another time, and stared at the camera, smiling—hope met with silence. Perhaps now I understand that the nurses, watching the monitor, urged me to give up. People have drowned there a thousand times and a thousand times over. But hope held out—a well inside me. I walked that endless corridor, eyes searching, reaching you and never reaching you, endlessly. The well is bottomless.

I lean into the dark, into the night sky, its contracted pupils staring back. I ask, ‘Tell me one secret, and I’ll lend you one of mine, a trade, a truth for a truth.’

The stars whisper, almost hesitantly, ‘We are hands letting go, a family of scattered constellations, each point a light of longing—writing letters on comets’ tails, messages sent, but never returned—dying stars that turn to dust.

‘I understand’, I say, ‘we share the same fate. I too, am a constellation—in fragments, parts of me dying, parts of me reborn in someone else’s eyes.’

My love—I break apart every day, tectonic shifts, colliding, sliding, edges jagged and undefined.

Your voice in my memory is frail yet clear like crystal, like the ring of a champagne glass, ‘We must find the beauty in drifting, in falling away.’

M.F. Higgs is an author from Edinburgh with a deep connection to the Highlands, having spent years exploring its landscapes, climbing Munros, and studying its rich folklore. Higgs has published a few stories in other literary magazines.

Remaking Our Everyday World

In the darkness, the sprawl is finally bearable
as the moonlight briefly grazes the built-up edges,
no need to lament about what we have erected
and amassed as a floating sepulcher over old tribes

At times, it does not feel this counts as real estate,
without a horizon, the land might as well be the sea,
and the lights rolling by are friendly beacons
given off by other vessels docked in the distance

Until commerce rudely interrupts at intersections,
these neon kingdoms make it impossible to ignore
the concrete circus spreading and choking out
the roots of trees uncovered by blinking turn signals

Ben Nardolilli is a theoretical MFA candidate at Long Island University. He writes poetry, prose, and the occasional political flotsam and jetsam. In his spare time, he likes to go to a law firm and edit documents related to asbestos litigation. Occasionally they pay him for this. Follow his publishing journey at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com.

Hotel Brecht

No one is reading Bertolt Brecht
in the Brecht Hotel. Most of the guests
haven't even heard of him, though they've heard
of the famous complimentary full breakfast,
the comfortable rooms, the luxurious amenities,
and the convenient location—just a short walk
to the Theater District, the Brandenburg Gate, the Memorial
to the Murdered Jews of Europe. And there's bacon
and sausage and eggs any way you like them,
and muffins and croissants and Danish pastries,
and pancakes and waffles and a veritable cornucopia
of apples, oranges, grapefruit, watermelon,
green grapes, red grapes, concord grapes, pineapple,
cantaloupe, honeydew, strawberries, blueberries and kiwi,
a bank of coffee urns and hot water, an assortment
of teas, milk and honey, cream and sugar and an array
of sugar substitutes. As for the murdered Jews of Europe,
many of them had likely heard of Bertolt Brecht,
perhaps read one of his poems, or hummed a song
from one of his plays as they went about doing
what the living do. And though he wasn't a Jew,
he fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and didn't come back
until after the war. In his poem "Die Bücherverbrennung,"
a banished poet discovers his works are not on the list
of books to be burned by the fascist regime, and cries out:
"Burn me! I order you to burn me!" For the sake of appearances
there's a framed photograph in the eponymous hotel lobby
of the bespectacled, unsmiling Brecht—a poet and playwright
who rejected the comfortable, the convenient, the easy,
who wanted to leave his audiences hungry, and uncomfortable
with what he showed them—injustice, exploitation,
complacency—so they would be moved to go forth
and make change in the world. He didn't want them satisfied,
sated. He wanted them hungry. Uncomfortable. Burning.

Flight

Have you noticed
that birds on the ground usually walk or hop
instead of fly?
But they will fly if you get inside their
flight initiation path,
which is just a fancy way of saying
too close for comfort.
Humans like to say things in fancy ways
that can usually be said simpler.
This is used to distance other humans.
Birds, like humans, will keep a certain distance
between one another.
If you look at birds on a wire,
if you look at humans hanging out together,
the ones with smaller spaces between them
are usually mates or offspring or really good buds.
Birds would rather walk or hop than fly because
flight takes way more energy—
you wouldn't do it if you didn't have to.
But you'll do it to escape predators,
and also when life over there is a better option
than life over here. This is called migration.
Humans would rather fly than walk, but mostly
they walk. Sometimes they walk very long distances
and when they finally arrive they are told to turn back.
The humans are told to turn back.
As if there weren't enough nesting materials to go around.
Humans have learned a lot from birds,
but we still don't fathom—(*fathom* from the Old English:
to measure with a distance of outstretched arms,
to encircle with the arms, to embrace)—
we still don't fathom flight.

Paul Hostovsky's poems and essays appear widely online and in print. He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter.

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Room 101

* * *

Winston must have been ten or eleven when his father, John Smith, told him, “You should read Orwell’s *1984*. You have the same name as the protagonist.”

Winston knew that he owed his name not to *that* Winston but to Churchill, whom John described as “the greatest statesman of all times.”

“The lion who roared when Britain needed him the most,” said John, who was fond of clichés. And although he’d never set foot on British soil, he was a staunch supporter of the isle his ancestors had come from more than a century before.

“I hope you grow up to be like him—a stand-up man with solid values,” John hammered into his son throughout childhood.

Although he was willing to oblige, Winston realized he’d never be able to match Churchill’s virtues, no matter how hard he tried. And anyway, he preferred the other *Winston*, the one from the book, although he knew he was not a role model to follow.

He was weak. He betrayed the only person who genuinely cared about him. He cracked under pressure. Well, under torture, to be fair, but crack he did. Even before he was taken to the infamous Room 101 in the Ministry of Love, from where convicts emerged broken, betraying principles such as loyalty, dignity, and integrity. And, as in Winston Smith’s case, love. But it made him more human. More relatable. More flesh, bones, and blood. Less like the Winston his father admired.

Winston knew that fear was a vital mechanism to keep people safe and navigate the treacherous waters of potential hazards even before he read the book. Many war heroes admitted to being scared in extreme situations. Fear compelled them to choose between the standard fight-or-flight scenarios. At the same time, fear, real or imagined, could break a person, and Winston Smith’s terror in the confines of Room 101 was something he could neither fight nor flee from; the only thing he could do was surrender and betray.

“What would my deepest fear be?” Winston wondered.

As much as he tried to think of something that would terrify him out of his wits, he couldn’t come up with one single thing. True, he disliked spiders and heights, but not to the extent that would stop him from functioning. He didn’t panic when he saw a creepy-crawly. And when he was sixteen, he climbed Mount Adams on a school trip and had a great time. Nothing could

compare with his namesake's dread and his reaction to being told that caged rodents would destroy his face.

At first, Winston did not particularly like the novel, but he read it out of a sense of obligation.

"You've got to read a book where the main character shares your name, right?" he told himself.

"Check out what's similar and what's not, and maybe pick up a thing or two from the blunders. But that's the extent of it."

For the next ten years or so, the book sat on a shelf in his room between *The Great Gatsby*, which he read for a school assignment, and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which he read for pleasure several times.

But his interest was piqued again when, during the long summer before entering university, he had more time on his hands than he could fill. The novel drew him in. When he picked it up, he was met with the omnipresent Big Brother, who stared at people from four-meter-high billboards and trees, proclaiming, "Big Brother Is Watching You!"

It was more or less at the same time, but in a completely different context, that Winston came upon Big Brother's name in a TV program where a group of contestants, known as "housemates," inhabited a place called the BB House. The contenders spied on each other for financial gain and the chance to stay on the program under the watchful eye of ever-present cameras, much like the inhabitants of the novel's Oceania. Winston couldn't understand why somebody would deliberately lock himself up with fifteen other people to be live-fed twenty-four hours a day, doing things people generally did in privacy for millions of viewers to scrutinize. Those who were voted out were removed from the registers, and their one-time presence was forgotten, at least in the eyes of the audience, just as it was in the book. In other words, they were abolished, annihilated, and returned to the obscurity they had initially come from. It must have hurt a lot because when they decided to participate in the program it was to seek the spotlight and the attention of others.

The program was a hit, and the winners became instant celebrities who earned big bucks and their fans' adoration by exposing their most intimate secrets.

Apart from Big Brother's figure, Winston specifically paid attention to the three slogans from the novel's opening chapter: *War is Peace, Ignorance is Strength, Freedom is Slavery*. The

exact opposite of what he'd been taught by his parents, teachers, and leaders, including his father's idol. And what he usually accepted as the truth. Or, at least, A TRUTH.

"Maybe," he said, "there isn't just one universal truth, but something in the middle, balancing between the slogans and all the stuff we've been taught through years of school, Christian values, and just regular life."

"Perhaps this is how society keeps us in check and pulls the strings. How it changes or tweaks our mindset. When we hear that education is a strength, we buy into it. But if our leaders ever decide to switch things up and say that ignorance is the way to be, we'll let ourselves believe it's the only truth and nothing but the truth, so help us God."

After reading the book for the second time, he put it back on the shelf and out of his mind again. At least until the moment that the dilemma of Room 101 came back to haunt him some years later.

Time passed, and Winston's life was nothing like the dystopian world of Orwell's protagonist. He graduated high school, dated, went to college, did a three-month internship in a local newspaper, and then realized that his degree would not land him a job to pay off his student loans. By age twenty-six, he was convinced that his education failed to prepare him for real life. At least, not for a prosperous professional life permitting him to buy a thirdhand Chevy, rent a one-bedroom apartment in Missoula, and go on holiday in Hawai'i every second year. Not to mention daycare for kids, a wife's manicure, and weekly shopping at Costco. He had to find a job that would not only pay his bills but that would also give him a sense of direction.

That was when fate led him to a neighborhood coffee shop. While eating a crispy chicken sandwich with French fries, he noticed a banner quietly announcing, *"Halliburton wants you. Provide the logistical backbone to US construction operations around the world."*

Just like that. There was nothing about serving the homeland, appealing to patriotism, flags, or images of brave John Waynesque soldiers with pistols that would stir all kinds of internal fervors in a potential recruit. Only plain text with basic information and a phone number. Below, along a white-and-blue stripe, a list of exotic-sounding countries where the company operated: Somalia, Guyana, Nigeria, Serbia, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. Places Winston had only seen on maps, in NatGeo documentaries, and in holiday brochures he could only dream of visiting. Unless he joined Halliburton.

So he did. A few months later, dressed in a khaki uniform and steel-capped boots, equipped

with a pump-action Remington 870 and a grenade-studded belt, he crawled into the belly of an EADS/Northrop Grumman KC-45 that would take him to Afghanistan.

Without realizing it, Winston was thrust into the sphere of influence of the first of the three slogans from the novel that had lain dormant in his memory: WAR IS PEACE from the beginning of his new adventure.

When the plane flew over Afghanistan, the guy whom Winston and the rest of the men only knew as Farrel said, “What you see down there are the Hindu Kush mountains. In Persian, Hindu Kush means Hindu Killer. You’ll see a lot of killing once we land. Don’t let anybody fool you into thinking this is a peace mission.”

Winston’s heart froze. Weren’t they meant to provide the “logistical backbone” for the US construction teams? They’d been told their task would be to ensure the safety of the new barracks, airstrips, and roadways. The recruiter didn’t mention any killings. But if there were to be no killings, why had they been given such intimidating-looking weapons?

“For your protection,” the Halliburton instructor had explained.

“You never know who’ll be hiding in the bushes. Your role is to watch and inform. The army will do the rest.”

“What rest?” Steve Dryden, a young buck-toothed farm boy from Alabama who’d joined at the same time as Winston, asked.

“None of your business,” the instructor snapped.

“You do your thing, and the military will do theirs. You don’t need to know, or rather, what you don’t know won’t hurt you!”

So even before leaving American soil, Winston had learned the meaning of the second slogan: IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.

After a week, Winston discovered that things weren’t that bad after all. There were no killings. The Halliburton team, mounted on enormous Humvees, patrolled the fertile valleys, deep gorges, and high plateaus in amazingly rich auburns, caramels, and ambers. They kept a close check on anything that moved and could endanger the convoys transporting construction materials and other supplies, reporting anything that could be noteworthy.

The work was not hard but quite intense on the mind. For eight hours, they focused on their surroundings, trying to spot potential sharpshooters or other sources of danger, such as Afghan peasants wearing grenade garlands hidden by their baggy shalwar kameez outfits.

“Avoid using your weapons or getting into any fracas with the locals. It’s not your job,” they were told, and they mostly obeyed.

In the evenings, they stayed in the camp, played cards and dominoes, read week-old newspapers and letters from their families (digital communications were restricted because the Taliban blew up transmitters near the headquarters), and talked just about anything. But most of all, they spoke about why they were there and what they’d do once they went back to Mancos, Colorado, where Bob Jensen was from, or to Fairhope, Dryden’s hometown.

"When the military finishes their job here and frees the people from the Taliban, ah will get a quiet job driving a cart at the Grand Hotel Golf Resort A whole mess of land, a hundred and sixty acres of pure grass! After drivin' a Humvee on a road full of bombs, ah reckon ah deserve a break," Dryden sing-sang in his Alabama accent. He drew long and deep on his roll-up and released a perfect smoke circle.

“Well, all ah gotta do is steer clear of them golf balls. Ain't nothin' to it. Well, let me tell ya, if ah happen to drive over a cluster mine 'round these parts, there won't be enough of you or me left to send back home. We're fixin' to be blown to bits like confetti...”

His voice trailed off as he stomped on the cigarette butt with the heel of his boot.

“Free the people?” Jackson Greenberg, a university student from the Midwest, laughed. Jackson had been kicked out shortly before graduating because of his radical views, which did not sit well with the university’s conservative administration. Jobless and adrift, he joined Halliburton on a lark.

“You think we are here to free the people? You’re off your rocker, man.”

Dryden’s face flushed with anger.

“Well, bless our hearts, we're here to set the people free. Y'all reckon they wanna be ruled by them Taliban fellas? Do y'all reckon they enjoy havin' their arms chopped off for stealin'? Do y'all reckon Afghan women wear burkas 'cause they think it's cool? Well, that's the reason we're here! To liberate the Afghans and rid themselves of the Taliban!”

“You stupid Alabama country bumpkin! You’ve no idea what you’re talking about!” Greenberg snorted, spittle flying from his mouth like miniature bullets.

“Don’t they have newspapers in Fairhope? Or perhaps they don’t teach you to read at all. We are here because the country has oil reserves and strategic minerals and because of the country’s location. Afghanistan is a transit place for energy resources that the Taliban want to

control. And so do we. And lots of other nations. But no one cares about the people! For all we care, they can keep being slaves, wear burkas, and have their hands and feet chopped off. That's how much we care!"

Winston recognized at that moment that he had encountered the third slogan- FREEDOM IS SLAVERY.

The group's tour of duty was supposed to last six months, but they only had two weeks before being shipped back to the Halliburton base in Houston for rest before being assigned to a new task. Their contract lasted an entire year, and Winston hoped to go somewhere more peaceful. Like Guyana, for example.

"It's not a war zone, and the gig is all about monitoring oil pipe drilling, plus there's a lot of nightlife, drinks, and some fun to be had with hookers," Carl Hamilton, who was on his third contract, explained.

In two weeks, Winston would be able to forget Afghanistan's windswept landscape, where red dust snuck into every crack, and people were hostile and eyed them with resentment.

"Yes, Greenberg's right," he thought.

"We don't give a rat's ass about the Afghans, and they hate our guts. It'll be a relief to be somewhere I can talk to the locals without worrying that one of them will knife me in the back or torpedo me to the moon."

Two more weeks, and they'd be out of Charikar, where Haliburton was overseeing the construction of an airstrip.

"Out of the hellhole and back on US soil, God damn it."

It was probably one of their last missions, perhaps even the last one. They'd been ordered to survey the ditches around the construction site that carried no water but a trickle of crimson-colored mud. Plus, the building that once must have been a farmhouse but was now a heap of crumpled adobe bricks, contorted iron pipes, and red dust.

It was Winston's turn to take the frontline position. The remainder of the crew was lined up behind him in four rows of three individuals, four meters apart, in case they trod on a mine and were blown to the sky.

"Like confetti," Winston remembered Dryden saying.

He pushed forward, his Remington aimed at the structure, his feet shuffling in the rust-colored earth, sending thick clouds of loose soil into the air. Even though the building was nothing

but debris, a wooden gate with symbols whose meanings were known only to those who had left them there and who had most likely long since vanished swung from one remaining hinge.

“Perhaps they mean *war is peace*,” Winston muttered, moving closer to the building, his chin shaking with unsuppressed nervousness.

It was a strange feeling to walk in the footsteps of so many lives now long gone and forgotten, not knowing what had become of those who’d spent their lives there, who’d painted the signs on the door, and who, most probably, were dead.

“Just this one mission, and I’ll be out of the Killing Fields of Hindu Kush. One mission and a nice fat check will be yours, Winston Smith. And now, just focus because Big Brother might be watching you.”

Behind him, he felt the others’ movements. Four of his steps meant four steps forward for the team.

“Easy. Easy. There is no one there,” he said in his head, although he sensed someone was watching him.

“It’s a deserted farmhouse. Just that. No one’s watching you. There’s no Big Brother.”

He was now practically touching the door. With his outstretched arm, he pushed it. The hinge swayed and groaned open. Even though the roof had collapsed upon the splintered wooden rafters, it was still there, casting enough shadow to make it difficult to see inside.

Two more steps. One more. He was nearly inside now.

And then he saw her—a girl of no more than sixteen standing in a sunbeam. She wore a bright blue scarf around her neck, wrapping her face and covering her chin. What was once a pair of baggy pants was nothing more than pieces of fabric held together by a bulky belt. With one arm, she was clutching a child to her breast. In the other, she was holding something.

“Holy cow, it’s not a belt,” a voice inside his head called, but there was still no panic.

“It’s a bomb, and she’s holding the trigger.”

She looked straight into his eyes. Hers were two green gems, strangely resembling the eyes of the lovely teenager National Geographic made famous in the eighties. There was the same defiance in her, the same look of determination, and Winston knew she was ready to press the trigger. He was aware that there was probably a circle of mines surrounding them, and if set off, they would destroy the ruins, the entire area around the house, and the thirteen Halliburton men, including Winston.

Time stood still. They watched each other for what seemed like an eternity but could not have been more than seconds. Winston lifted his Remington and aimed it at the girl's forehead. She did not move, and the child in her arms was eerily quiet as if trained from an early age to keep silent under any circumstances.

At that moment, Winston understood where he was. He was in the Ministry of Love's Room 101, facing his worst fear: kill or die. Kill a teenager and a baby or die together with the rest of the men who relied on him. He had to decide quickly whether to become the Winston of the novel or the Winston with an unbreakable character his dad had wanted him to be. Press the trigger before she pressed the button in her hand. His life or hers... And the child's...

The fear was indescribable. He wanted to throw the rifle on the floor, cover his eyes, stop everything, and simply nurse his fright. But he knew he didn't have the time.

The image of a cage full of rats flashed through his mind. The image, however, was not the source of the terror. He dreaded having to work out in a split second what to do next. It paralyzed him. He tried to focus on every sensation in his body: the sweat flowing into the creases of his palms, the pulse throbbing in his temple, the heart beating so hard against his ribs that he could feel it directly beneath the skin. He focused on where the fear came from, thinking how much it hurt and how desperately he wanted it to stop. Time was running out. He had to decide. And he did...

* * *

JB Polk is Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. Her first story was short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 100 of her stories, flash fiction and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication. She has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement literary contest.

Ceremonialist

Blade pierces rose
Holy levee breaks
Drum penetrates bone,
A secret cauldron.
Trace the perimeter
Eyes shut tight,
Burning sage wafts
Weighted power words.
Time folds forward,
Backwards, and again,
A thousand incarnations
Eclipse the gateway:
Faces, also facets.
Crimson, ochre, black
Fade, also focus
Triangulate the moon.
Fluid-rimmed chalice
Blackberry-bruised lips
Animal and spiritual
Invoking alchemy
Through bared teeth.
Moaning, sighs syncopate
With heady chanting.
Drink, thirsty pilgrim
Steep in wisdom,
Revel, even.

Vines' spell binds
Fissured hearts crack
Spilling release.
Tears that transport
Silent, yet deafening
Perfect stillness
Save for seven sisters singing.
Then dawn breaks
And I sleep.

F.T. Rose (they/them) is a queer psychotherapist, writer, and retired professional dominatrix from Toronto, Canada. They live for the psyche's dark dusty corners and opportunities to transmute figurative base metals to gold.

Our Interstate Elegy

Mangled deer legs like tree branches poking
out from the carpet of snow, robins like
dead dahlias littering unending aisles
of asphalt, skunks neatly unzipped right down
the center, paralyzed squirrels with pursuits
interrupted, empty-handed raccoons
coiled around their invisible treasures—
you and me on a corpse-lined interstate,
tearing down the loveless black ribbon while
I'm half-asleep, counting white fists of light
that slowly devour us then pass, zooming
like scorned angels under billboards for the

apocalypse. Are we there already?

The end times, exes, exhale and exit?

Spring Nocturne for Midnight Women

Flowering dogwood,
please baptize the twilight babes
teetering back home

to lay their sequined
ribs to rest. The women slip
through Fate's curled fingers,

daring viscous shades
with their shrieking, feral laughs.
They seem seraphic,

sighing smoke, puffing
dandelion clouds into
May's oblivion.

Some will heed the wind's way home, mistaking its breath for their mother's arms.
Some will fall into night's white punctures, confusing the stars for doorways.

Suzi Peter (she/her) is a Sudanese American poet from Knoxville, Tennessee. Some of her other work has appeared in *Short Vine*, *Blue Marble Review*, and *The Mockingbird*. When she's not writing, she enjoys running, taking long walks, watching films, and, of course, reading.

On Dandelions and Storms

My mom is less of a mother than a manager. A *momager* if you will. She plans concisely, establishes clear expectations, and keeps emotions separate from her goals – as well as her goals for me. That is not to diminish our relationship to a transactional one – she is also like a god I worship. I make sacrifices to Her like an altar. If my offerings are not adequate, it storms. The sun does not come out. Some days I break sacred promises. I forget to pray. I curse. I do not refrain from substances that intoxicate me. I crave sensual pleasures. But I do not do so without shame. Shame, in my room with the door locked. In a lover's basement or an old friend's backyard. I become shame. I hold its hand, I meet its gaze, I offer it a ride. I stuff it in my jean pocket, hoping She will not notice. Mostly, She doesn't. She tells me of the dangers that befriend shame. The chaos, the sins. I tell her I understand the color of blood, but really I do not mind red. I jump between time and tarot cards. Between daisies, lilies, and tulips, rooted next to patches of poison ivy. I do not mind a week of itching; so long as I can forget it. She does not like blemishes, though. Her eyes tighten at their sight. There is no tenderness in Her hazel pools. Today it storms.

Ezekiel 16:44, "Behold, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb against you: 'Like mother, like daughter.'"

In the sixth grade, she wrote the word 'PENIS' across the back of a school bus with a sharpie because two older boys told her to. Because there were assigned seats, she was caught and forced to stay after school to scrub the leather clean. Her parents were both embarrassed and

disappointed, and her older brother made sure to point out he had never – and would never even think of – doing such a thing (which may have been exactly why she did ‘such a thing’).

She couldn’t hear anything but her own heartbeat. It was a month after her nineteenth birthday, and she was sure she wouldn’t live to see another after this conversation. Her parents, devoted Baptists from the South, sat in front of her at the kitchen table with their arms crossed tightly. Her throat gripped her swallows, her thoughts joined the pace of her heartbeat. *I’m going to lose my scholarships. I made a mistake. I don’t know what to do. Everyone is going to know,*

“I’m pregnant.”

I sat in the backseat of their Silverado, an ancient iPhone in my grandmother’s left hand;

2:37 127

hrs mi

The heavily cracked screen protector caught different pieces of the sunlight. Silence filled the thick air previously occupied by scuttle between my grandparents about their third missed exit. I was eager for noise, for mountains. Starved of stimulation.

“What’d you do when you found out Mom was pregnant?”

“Well... We didn’t know what to do. It was hard.”

As if being interviewed for a documentary, my grandma made no hesitation to get right into the details.

“You know... Before Haley, we really didn’t know what to do. We thought something was wrong with her. We thought about taking her to see someone.”

My sister and I snickered thinking about our grandparents, who blame anxiety on deviation from *the Word*, considering mental health.

“I’m serious! I mean she did not care about anything! We were worried. And then she had Haley. And she cared.”

Her stomach hung over her waist like a ripe papaya. Her left hand supported her belly as her feet creaked on tarnished tiles that suggested a cream color. Her right hand opened the refrigerator, which regretfully presented few ingredients. A Deli Rotisserie chicken package read:

Keep Refrigerated

Best Used By 06/19/1997

She would have one more mouth to feed by then, and even less energy than now. She took out the package, along with cheese slices, toasted wheat bread, and mayo, and made two chicken sandwiches placed on brown ceramic plates. The front door shut behind her husband as he peeled off his shoes and hung his jacket over the wooden banister. A May breeze slipped in, as he mumbled hello. In the same duration the door opened and shut, the plate held nothing but crumbs of wheat bread and he was in his office. She ate her sandwich alone in the kitchen, with her right hand. Later, she referenced the lack of acknowledgement. For dinner. In general. Her husband passively explained to her he did not ask for the sandwich, therefore he should not have to thank her. He made no comment about the minimal attention to her. A forced sigh concluded the conversation.

“It’s your mom’s fault, you know. She committed adultery.”

I squeezed past my father as if his body were a closing door. The smell of eucalyptus made me nauseous. I wasn't sure what 'adultery' meant, only that it was one of ten commandments from the pamphlet I found in my stepmom's Vera Bradley. I also knew 'committed' was usually followed by 'a crime', and that my stepdad had something to do with it. I wondered what was bad enough to separate my family, but not for my mom or Jeff to go to jail. I repeated that word to myself in hopes that I could later use my mom's phone to look it up on Google. *Adultery. Adultery. Adultery.* Although, last time I looked up a word it was because my mom was laughing about something on the phone, and I very much regretted clicking "Search" after typing "Thong" into the space bar.

A tear fell as she sat on the edge of the bed. My sister and I laid beside one another.

"I'm sorry I raised my voice at you. It is not your fault. I have a lot going on, and I was feeling overwhelmed. I shouldn't have acted that way. I love you both."

This was the first of few times I have seen my mom cry. Maybe I would have been more concerned with her raising her voice at my sister and I earlier, had Jeff not quietly knocked on our doors just four minutes after to gently remind us,

"Your mom loves you guys. She's just stressed with work and trying to finish school. She does so much."

Regardless, I spent the rest of my night wrestling with this exotic experience. The humanity of my divine mother. I brought the incident up to my sister while our heads laid on a long, shared pillow, but she told me to go to sleep.

My mom does not know it, but I think of her every time I cook brussel sprouts. I think of her hair when I was a kid, how brown it was. How scrunchy it was. I think about the compact makeup set that she brought with her when she dropped me off at preschool. We would sit in her red explorer and she would let me apply my own lip gloss before telling me to have a good day. I have memories of her helping my sister and I make keychains out of beads and strings from Hobby Lobby. I remember that one time she had a bad day so I came up to her with googly-eye glasses. I also have memories of her disappointment. When my report card didn't reflect perfection. When I lied to her about hanging out with a boy at the fair. There is the memory of when I got my license suspended for three months. Sometimes it's just memories of coming home. They remind me that she is disappointed when she looks at me – maybe not right now, but she will be. I see her face when she notices a new tattoo. When I talk about wanting to be a writer. When I moved out. She didn't talk to me for days, barely looked at me. My mom doesn't know it, but I think of her every time I look in the mirror. I think of the sweet notes I would find from Jeff on her side of the bed, signed in all caps. I think of her every time I dye my hair. Every time I think about who I want to be. I think of the days she left for work at 4 am and got back at 11 am, *the next day*. I think of her grin when she eats mint chocolate chip ice cream. The green lawn chair she sat in at every single one of my softball games. I think of all the words she never said about my dad. My mom doesn't know it, but I think about the nights she spent begging the moon for what-if's, and I spend each of my dandelion wishes on her happiness.

Tears boiled down my cheek. I had no expectations of a flowery conversation. I knew better than to wish for warmth, though I hoped for a gentle spring. Instead, I was met with a harsh January storm. A stuttered laugh began my sentence. A fitting word for a conversation with my mother:

Sentence. I had committed the crime of changing my major without consulting her. I pronounced the word ‘*writing*’ with hesitation, and a frenzy of words followed until I lost my breath. As my eyes found her lips, I prepared for thunder.

“*No one is going to pay you to write.*”

Rules I had as a freshman in college, living at home: No boyfriend over unless a parent was home. No closed doors when boyfriend was over. Always answer your phone. Curfew is midnight (this means home, inside, door shut and locked behind you when the clock strikes twelve). No friends over without asking. No drinking alcohol. No exceptions. No drugs. No exceptions. Location on. No exceptions. No cussing. No exceptions. No staying at a friend's house more than 3 nights a week. Church every Sunday. Few exceptions. Must receive all A's. Few exceptions. Communicate every plan you make. Call and text often. But not when she is at work. Or on a call. Or busy otherwise. Or having a bad day. Or when she doesn't want you to. Tell her everything. But not if it's about your problems – don't have any problems. And don't tell her about any choices she did not make for you. Only tell her productive things you have done that she would have wanted you to do. But don't hide anything from her. Eat everything she buys from the grocery store – but not too fast. Don't have anxiety.

She has one tattoo. After forty-three years of virgin skin, she made the decision. “**BuT GoD.**” on the inside of her forearm. There is a small plastic tube, medically referred to as a *peripheral intravenous line* (personally known as an IV, handy for when you shotgun too many hard seltzers the night before). The IV rests to the left of the black ink, inserted into a vein at the hinge of her

forearm. It is secured with a plastic medical wrap and connects her to a clanky machine monitoring her vitals electronically. To the right of the tattoo, a hospital-gray wristband reads:

MARSH, KELLY N

DOB: 9/30/1978

Adm Date: 6/30/2024

The hospital room is an unsettlingly neutral temperature, and has the aroma of unused technology and an empty bottle of rubbing alcohol. She's sitting up in the moderately comfortable hospital bed, Macbook open displaying a Zoom meeting waiting screen. She has already preselected a virtual background titled "Brick Wall" as not to draw attention from her colleagues to the fact that she is taking this call from an emergency room.

I'm not sure if my face or my mouth said it, but my phone rang and I looked at him,

"It's my mom."

I had no time to line up my steps with tiles as I paced down the aisle. Hanging and Mounting. Metal Sheets and Rods. I found out my mom had cancer in the Ace Hardware parking lot. Lung cancer. Stage four. Hasn't smoked a day in her life. A breathless laugh fell out of my open jaw. I choked on the word "*What*", while the word *No* spiraled like a tornado around my mind. The rejection of my reality cut off the oxygen to my head. Tears came to a boil at my waterline. *She hates pity. And attention. And emotions.* I tried to be my words, and not my thoughts.

"How do they know?"

I traced the *H* in '*How*'. I fell into the middle of the *o*. I stumbled forward and backwards like lines of *w*. For weeks, I was *How*.

“Don’t tell Jeff!” she giggled.

My face lit up as our dog’s head popped out of my mom’s sweatshirt and I burst out laughing as I grabbed our cat and shoved him under my sweatshirt too. Jeff was in the garage, sitting in the driver’s seat of his F150. He had started the car and was waiting for us. My mom and I had bonded over having shitty days, and agreed that we deserved to go on a road trip for greasy food, Jeff as our chauffeur. She jumped into the passenger seat, and Mozzy’s curly head peeked out in excitement.

“What are you doing??” Jeff wildly questioned.

“He wanted to come!” She passed a sneaky grin to me.

Jeff knew he was relinquished of authority, especially with my mom (and the dog he “hated” yet hand fed when no one was looking). A few minutes out, a meow sprung from the backseat.

“What was that??”

“Don’t worry about it!” I shouted.

“Do not tell me you brought that cat, too.”

“He wanted to come!”

My mom and I let out a laugh and he matched it with an exaggerated sigh of defeat.

“Oh, by the way, we’re stopping at Whit’s for ice cream on the way back. Mom said!”

Another sigh of defeat.

“Thanks Jeff!”

Natalie Klenzman (she/her) has a degree from The Ohio State University in Creative Writing.

Her work aims to make others think differently and feel as much as they can. Natalie is passionate about recognizing the beauty and complexities of existence, while feeling utterly connected to our world.

Unfinished Exit

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back

and you haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
who you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude
in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.

Claudia Wysocky is a Polish poet and photographer based in New York, celebrated for her evocative creations that capture life's essence through emotional depth and rich imagery. With over five years of experience in fiction writing, her poetry has appeared in various local newspapers and literary magazines. Wysocky believes in the transformative power of art and views writing as a vital force that inspires her daily. Her works blend personal reflections with universal themes, making them relatable to a broad audience. Actively engaging with her community on social media, she fosters a shared passion for poetry and creative expression.

Cheese Danish

You are my sweet and wondrous Ophelia

driven mad by events over which

you have no control

Bones become pansies as the wormwood

twists through your soul

Where went this glorious love of ours

that rose with the moon and shone

with the stars

What words can bring your sanity back

to make you long for the warmth of

the hearth of home

Haunted Hamlet peering at Yorick's skull

called out for love but

knew it only in death

And like this driven Dane of yore

I call out to you, come home, come home

and save my heart from losing its last worldly breath

Richard Milne is a US Army veteran and former newspaper reporter and communications consultant living on Whidbey Island in Washington, USA. A graduate of Western Washington University with a degree in journalism, he is also an avid gardener, fisherman and photographer, and lives with and receives inspiration from wife Lisa and mother-in-law Margaret.

The Whispering Stones

(Thanks to Robin Wayne Bailey, *Shadowdance*)

What solace this shale has, cool under bare foot falls,
all a river of tinfoil and shadows, embrasures & slits
float through the maze of, making a face for the crossing.

Mercury-lit, eyes follow up, labyrinth-deep too
in the hollows hope makes out with each precipice climbed.

Yes, to know where these walls form the holes of a great flute
is to let one's soul become fife, reed-lean,
with the clearest melody, & astonished
by the hands as cymbals, as chiming fingers.

From above, even that moon seems to correspond,
sending its winds on eucalyptus invisibility.

Hush, hammering heart in your incarnadined corridors,
your flesh-red hearth, torched by Incas.

Isn't it a furnace for distant watch fires & listening sentinels?

They stand, antennae-true, amid driftwood horses
assembled by human hands. Yes, what the giving sea carved
they collected as sculpture under star choreography,
& some guidance, if not god's.

So, as assured, must these halls call to us, their stones whispering -
dance, you are not lost, just raise your legs, turn, lift your hands.

We do & reveal panels to move world after world.
We do & enter keyholes to thresholds
doors open onto arks from
as we board, & board again,
tumblers to the locks, infinity-bound.

Resident artist/curator for The Chroma Museum, artistic renderings of LGBTQI historical figures, organizations and allies predominantly before Stonewall

(<https://thestephenmeadchromamuseum.weebly.com/>), **Stephen Mead** is a retiree whom, throughout all his pretty non-glamorous jobs still found time for writing poetry/essays and creating art. Occasionally he even got paid of this. Currently he is trying to sell his 40-year backlog of unsold art before he pops his cogs at

<https://www.artworkarchive.com/profile/stephen-mead>.

