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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Cherished Readers,

I am delighted to present the 2024 Summer Issue of "Gabby & Min's Literary Review." This issue showcases a vibrant collection of 10 artworks, 6 stories, 7 photographs, and 19 poems, each piece reflecting the diverse voices and experiences that enrich our literary world.

In this edition, you will find narratives that touch on themes of memory, introspection, and human connection. From a young girl's rescue of a discarded sweater to a mother's rare moment of peace at a dim sum restaurant, our contributors explore the emotional landscapes of their characters with depth and sensitivity.

Our visual artists offer striking illustrations and photographs, capturing moments of beauty and reflection. Whether depicting the tension between connection and isolation or the intricate details of a tulip, their work invites us to see the world through new lenses.

Thank you for your continued support and for being part of our literary community. We hope this issue inspires, provokes thought, and fosters a deeper understanding of the human experience.

With heartfelt thanks and sunny summer regards,



Sage Delio, Editor-In-Chief, Gabby & Min's Literary Review

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION & ARTICLES

5 A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

118 THE POWER OF STORYTELLING IN CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

ART & ILLUSTRATIONS

20 CAFE TERRACE AT COVID CAPACITY DONALD PATTEN

25 OMG JUAN SEBASTIAN RESTREPO

7 CAPTAIN BLUE BEARD IGOR ZUSEV

46 COMET HELIOS SERGE LECOMTE

71 PINBALL ALLEY ROBIN YOUNG

★82 JUNE RUCHI ACHARYA

★83 DELILAH RUCHI ACHARYA

★90 COLLAGE4 SOPHIA PARK

94 IMPRESSION OF TIME BETH HORTON

8 UNDULATING SURFACE #1 MITCHELL CHAMBERLAIN

FICTION

12 THE SWEATER TOM MISURACA

6 PHANTASMA NON GRATA SARA PAUFF

42 TWO HOURS OF JOY HUINA ZHENG

60 THE HESBY FILES PETER RUSTIN
72 A RARE NIGHT OUT MIKE MARKS

★ 79 THE LONELY SEA FLOOR RICHARD EDDIE

PHOTOGRAPHY

11 SETTING SUN HARRISON ZEIBERG

741 THE WHITE IBIS ERIKA PAYNE

51 CATS OUTSIDE JENNIFER LAMB

59 DEEP TULIP DAVID A. GOODRUM

69 THE WHITE OAK ERIKA PAYNE

87 CROCODILE VICTORIA MULLEN

105 BUDDAH 1 CHARLES WELLS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY & PROSE

8	ROSETTE	LS CYNING
21	BROADWAY DAME	GEORGEA JOURJOUKLIS
23	CERAMIC SKIN	KELLY LYNN
38	ALIVE / TEMPORARY	CHELSEA LOGAN
48	STEEL HALO	BRUCE MORTON
49	FLY RIBBON	O. V. OVESON
52	CYBER-CODA IN THE CARNIVAL OF LIVING	AMMARA YOUNAS
55	419	MADELINE CRONIN
70	CUPIO DISSOLVI, IN THE VAIN OF SAINT PAUL	KOLLIN KENNEDY
81	SLEEPING WITH SIRENS	RYAN K. MASON
★ 84	JUIN-OCTOBRE 1985	DEVIN LEWIS-GREEN
85	ROOTS	HEIDI SPETH
88	VIEWING BY APPOINTMENT	TRAVIS STEPHENS
92	THE ONLY WOMAN	OLIVIA LAUGHLIN
93	UNNAMED	ROWAN TATE
96	ON THE PLAYGROUND, 1998	AMMANDA MOORE
97	FRAGILE HEARTS	GABBY COPPAGE
100	EXPONENTIAL NUGGETS	PATRICIA HARTWELL

SCOTT HOLLERAN

CONTRIBUTORS

106 CONTRIBUTORS

101 THE CORN BALL

117 STAFF

ROSETTE LS CYNING

Claque clover, spoiling the filamency of bare toes chorus whose silence stows the bright nosed cicerone for knowledge that hers wont to lay upon a short straw mattress in the medical bay a mountain in the winter. no, fall has not quit, the tired stooping boughs squeeze on into their wrinkling pits as she would turn from the doorway's dark and admit this is not the music that once was full in the paper hills as bees wings with warm buzz

and mirth. what of it, what tiresome creature believes that the golden bear comes if not to eat her honeyed, as she lays in the bloom the crush on her shoulder follows into the room that I had prepared, words with dulled corners that I practised, filing down their features spread the mauve dross far as asking no returns

Hold the day in eyefuls that burn
Linger their prayers
as hot, brisk questions that curdle the air
and go you, where I go. where
is there to go that does not simply follow
some tissue that has abandoned its proper hole

Quick, into the rustling flame on the candlestick venenes as shies the hour in the spume's cryptorchid sick

Blind, deaf, these memories close and demand embraces from their hosts for need to feel some ancient nobleness that compelled my clutch out towards the fragments of her dress floating down the run's limp wrist but out from what mouth, what chalkstone teeth, what bloodless kiss envy that stationed years, hearing the gloam overtake in a far shed, wake out against the best schemes from foreign roots and clamour over him, those clon'ed brutes him that I was once and hardly thanked now buried his horrid siren brag beneath iron planks thank her for their jealousies that should give a life those paired reasons to breathe the nameless obvious, and the work's strain piled in grey bodies, me now and after, against that youthful, callous man



THE SWEATER

TOM MISURACA

A sweater lay in the middle of the road. It had fallen prey to a steady stream of cars driving over and dragging it along the asphalt. Eventually, it landed somewhat safely in the meridian.

At one time, this had been a beautiful purple, knit sweater. Now it was soiled, torn and riddled with tire marks. Soon it would be no more than an unrecognizable lump of yarn.

From across the street, Audrey Weaver spotted the poor, discarded sweater. It was the saddest looking thing she'd ever seen. A sweater should be something that makes you warm and cozy, not a lonely lump in the middle of the road.

The moment the coast was clear, Audrey ran into the street and scooped up the mangled garment. It drooped sadly in her hands; heavy with the moisture it had absorbed from the morning dew. It emanated an odor worse than her old dog, Harvey, who had mange. And almost every portion of it was covered with dirt or oil, kind of like Harvey.

Still, this sweater was once loved and Audrey was certain it would be loved again. Tucking it gently under her arm, she started home.

Mrs. Weaver wiped a tear from her eye. She was chopping onions for her infamous liver and onions dinner and the sharp fumes filled the air around her. It was one of the few things she could cook, and she faithfully prepared it almost every night. If not that, then it was meatloaf or tuna casserole. On an occasional Friday, she'd order pizza with

anchovies and pineapple.

She hated cooking. It took too much time away from her favorite hobby: video solitaire.

When she first got married, she could spend all day in front of the computer. Her husband made dinner and did the laundry. Too bad he decided to go grocery shopping one evening and never return. Mrs. Weaver had to end a successful winning streak to make dinner for her daughter.

From that night forward, it was just the two girls. Mrs. Weaver didn't ask much of her daughter, in hopes she would ask nothing in return. She rarely did. But she did have a habit of bringing home strays: dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, mice, lizards, goldfish, spiders and vagrants. Any time Audrey came home with one of these creatures in tow, Mrs. Weaver immediately stopped her and told her to take it back where she found it.

Audrey entered the house and tried to rush past the kitchen. Mrs. Weaver spotted something under her arm.

"What is that?" she asked in disgust, pointing her onion covered knife at the destroyed sweater.

"A sweater," Audrey replied.

"I can see it's a sweater," her mother roared, her knife splashing little pieces of onion all over the kitchen. "Where did you get it?"

"In the middle of the road."

"In the what?" she screamed, the knife her exclamation point. "You're not bringing that filthy thing into my house."

"But it looked so sad," Audrey told her.

"You'll look sadder if you don't take that thing back where you

15

found it."

"Okay," Audrey reluctantly left the house.

Confident that she had done her job as mother for the day, Mrs. Weaver put down her knife and returned to her solitude of solitaire.

Unbeknownst to her mother, Audrey had a secret workroom underneath the back porch. Here, she secretly cared for all the lost creatures she had accumulated over the years. Placed on the overhead beams were coffee cans that housed the injured mice, lizards, birds and frogs Audrey found.

Occasionally, some of the creatures she nursed would return. Like Puffy, the cat who always came back to eat the long ago frozen and buried mice; Samson, the dog, who came back to chase Puffy; and Mac, the drifter, who kept coming back to ask for spare change or something out of her mother's liquor cabinet.

Audrey placed the sweater on the garbage can she used as a desk. Though it wasn't alive, it looked as sad as that bunny she found trapped in a cement mixer.

Next to the coffee cans was a needle and thread she'd taken from her mother's sewing kit to sew up a fractured bird's wing. With this, she began mending the sweater's open wounds.

Next she filled a basin with soap and water and washed the sweater three times. She hung it over one of the support beams so it could dry overnight.

When her mother screamed that dinner was ready, Audrey felt guilty leaving her pets alone. But she promised she would return as soon as possible.

The next morning, Audrey slipped out of the house to smuggle in the sweater. Her mother was busy putting curlers in her hair. She wore them to the office and took them out when she came home. She liked dressing up for her nights of video solitaire.

The sweater was still a little moist and had an awful, musty smell, so Audrey used her hair dryer to warm it. She then doused it with perfume to cover its odor.

She held the sweater up before her. It looked brand new. A little patchy, stained and stinky, but good enough for Audrey to wear to school.

Of course she had to conceal it under a jacket in order to get past her mother.

Audrey entered the kitchen. Her mother tossed a large brown paper bag at her and said, "Here!"

The stench of the sardine sandwich and pickled eggs inside overpowered the scent of the sweater and perfume combined.

As Audrey turned to leave, her mother commanded, "Wait." Audrey froze.

"Isn't it a little warm for a jacket?" she asked.

"Not really," Audrey said. "I'll take it off when I get to school."

"Good," she replied. "That's why you go to school, to learn when to take your jacket off. Glad to see my tax dollars are paying off. Now hurry up, or you'll be late!"

Audrey ran out of the house and into a very warm morning. When her house was out of sight, she took off her jacket. It was also too warm for a sweater. By the time Audrey reached school, her body was drenched in sweat. She sat at her desk and waited for class to begin.

The kids around her whispered to each other. The whispers changed

to laughs. The laughs changed to taunts in Audrey's direction.

"Nice sweater," one kid said sarcastically. "Where'd you find it, in the middle of the road?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," Audrey said proudly. "I saved its life."

Her words were ignored.

"You stink!"

"Worse than your lunches."

"Who knitted that thing? Frankenstein?"

"Can't your mommy afford new clothes?"

"Now we know why your daddy ran away."

Audrey sank sadly in her chair. She was used to the barrage of nasty comments from her classmates, but she felt bad for the sweater, who could not defend itself.

"Okay, class, settle down," Mrs. Undergloven took command of the class, then sniffed the air. "What is that awful stench?"

All fingers pointed at Aubrey.

"Oh Audrey, hang that horrid thing in the closet."

Reluctantly, Audrey did as she was told.

Audrey thought lunch time would never arrive. The moment the bell rang, she leapt up and ran to the closet to make sure her sweater was okay. As she opened the door, the scent of perfume filled the air. The sweater slouched sad and lonely on the hook.

Audrey hugged it.

Out on the playground, the kids continued to tease her as she ate

her sardine sandwich. One of them found a discarded piece of men's white underwear on the baseball diamond. He picked it up with a stick and flung it at Audrey.

"Now you've got some underpants to go with your sweater," he teased.

Audrey gazed with pity upon the torn and soiled briefs. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do to save them.

She finished her lunch, doing the best to ignore her classmates' taunts.

The rest of the day dragged as slowly as the morning. When the bell finally rang, Audrey was the first at the closet. Through a crowd of cringing faces, she pulled on the sweater and left the building.

"Here comes Miss Ugly Sweater," a group of girls sitting on a fence outside the school said as she passed. "Why are you wearing such a shabby sweater?"

"Did you get that from the poor box at the church?"

"Was it passed down from your grandmother? Then pass it back!" Audrey ignored them.

"Let's get her!"

They scrambled off the fence and chased Audrey. Luckily, Audrey was much faster. The girls gave up after a few blocks.

Before Audrey could catch her breath, some boys began throwing rocks at her. Once again she was off and running. When she glanced back to make sure they weren't following, she slipped and fell, scraping her knee. Blood poured down her leg as she continued to limp home.

"Audrey!" A familiar voice roared from the middle of the road.

It was her mother driving home from work. Her car slowly rolled by as she screamed at her daughter: "I thought I told you to get rid of that awful sweater. You disobeyed me, young lady. Just wait until you get home. You'll get the spanking of a lifetime. And you can just forget about ever reading any of your books again. For now on, you'll only be able to watch television."

Her mother sped off. Audrey stood there shaking. She was too afraid to go home, so she went to the park instead.

She collapsed on a shaded bench. Between the sweater, heat, running and fear, Audrey was unbearably hot. Her knee had stopped bleeding, but blood covered her lower leg.

A teenage boy in a three-piece suit passed by her and stopped.

"Wait a moment," he said as he looked at Audrey. "You've got my sweater on."

"It's mine!" Audrey exclaimed. "I found this in the middle of the road."

"I threw it out of my limousine window just last week because it was too itchy."

"So it no longer belongs to you."

"Yes it does, it was a gift from one of my fathers. I don't remember which, but it's mine nonetheless and I want it back."

"But if it were too itchy..."

"It looks less itchy now. Hand it over."

"No!" Audrey protested.

"Mommy!" the boy screamed.

A tall, thin woman, wrapped in a mink stole, stepped out of a limousine across the street and approached them. She looked past

Audrey to the sweater.

"Why is this homeless person wearing your sweater?" she asked her son.

"She stole it."

"He threw it away!"

"Give it back," the woman demanded. "Or you'll hear from our lawyers."

Audrey didn't have a lawyer, so she knew she was defeated. She slowly removed the sweater. As she held it up to give it one last look, the boy ripped it out of her hands.

"Thief!" he snapped.

Clutching the sweater, the boy stormed back to the limousine. His mother glared at Audrey as she slowly followed her son.

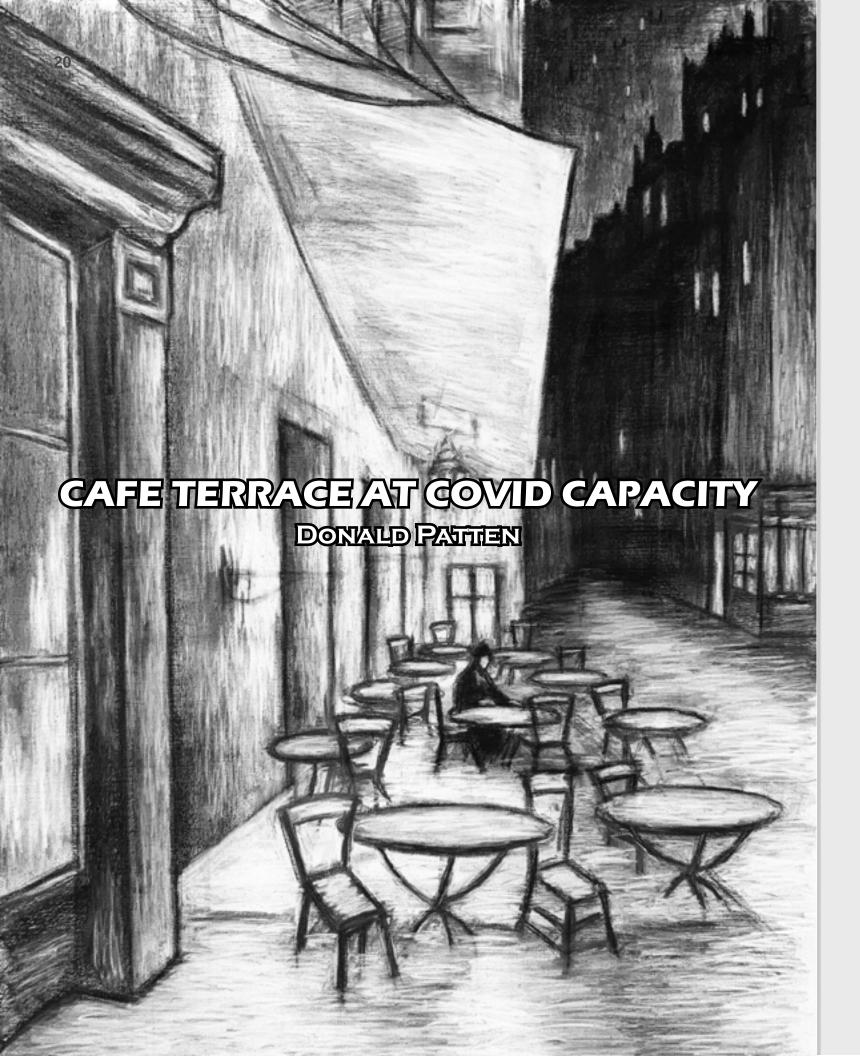
Audrey crumpled onto the park bench and began to cry.

After an hour, she dried her tears and started home. Her mother was waiting for her with the spatula, then sent her to her room to watch reality TV shows.

As night fell, it began to rain. Aubrey climbed into bed and stared out the window. At least the sweater was safe and dry with that obnoxious teenage boy.

With that to comfort her, she fell asleep.

Somewhere in the middle of a road, the moist sweater was being tossed back and forth between speeding cars.



BROADWAY DAME

GEORGEA JOURJOUKLIS

Mom chases me down the driveway i jump in his car cruise downtown at midnight stereo blasting a 2000s one hit wonder windows down flashing lights billboards, hotels, towers red dots line the sky thrumming helicopters planes soar overhead their rumble splits the night search lights beam from skyscrapers blaring music street festival crowds a live band electric guitar stage lights flashing blue and green bubbles and sparklers

sizzling BBQs elote and tacos couples make out under streetlights revving engines honking cars he slams on the breaks cusses loud headlights blind me no pictures, please! paparazzi hound the Broadway dame a dazzling spotlight i laugh he hits the gas we zoom throw my head back shut my eyes a star welcomed home I'm free outstretch my arms and scream I'm free!

CERAMIC SKIN

KELLY LYNN

There was a crack in my ceramic skin

And I leaked my heart from my lips

Until you plugged me
with a cork
from a wine bottle I never ordered
with a cap turned sideways
from a Budlight

Until my spout couldn't pour anymore

And you said you didn't drink

But you drank from me and chiseled away at my crack

Where more words of adoration to appease your heart and soul seeped through

As my fears steeped

As my grip became tighter

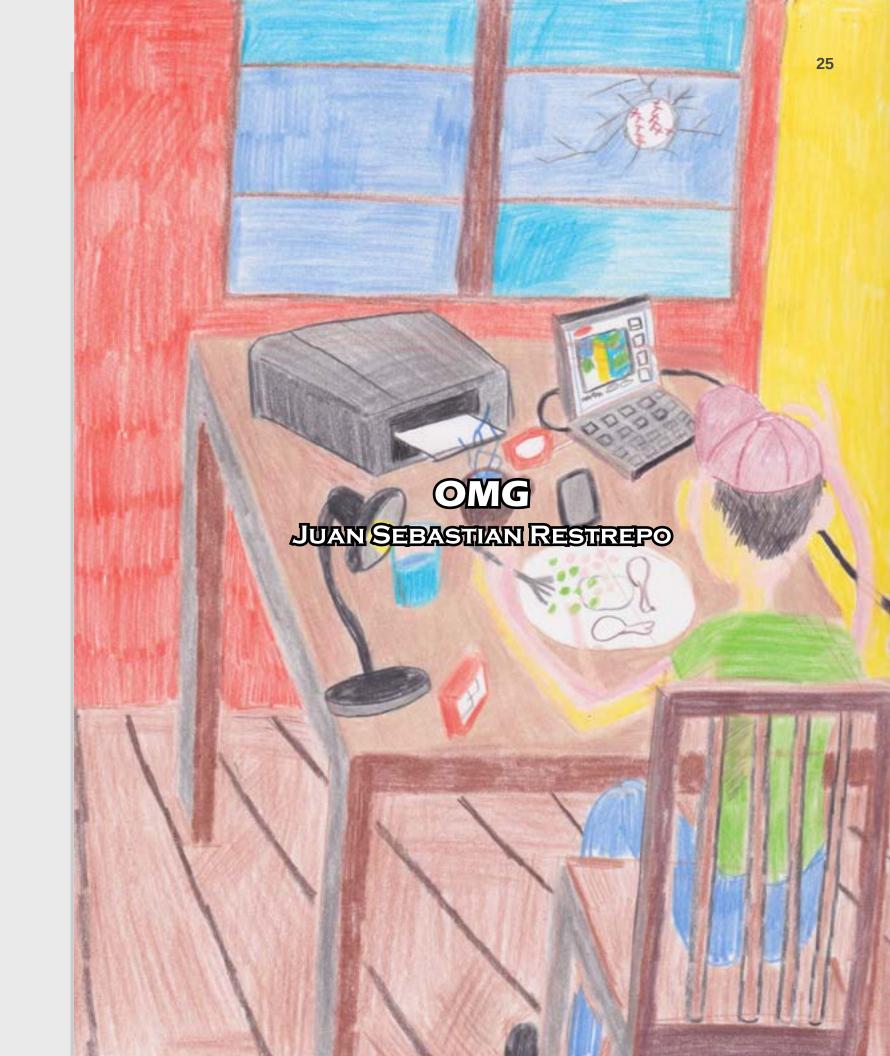
As my lid became stuck heat and time warping

There was a crack in my ceramic skin

Until I ran out and your chisel left its last mark and you decided that

Broken pottery shattered crockery wasn't your cup of tea

And you left me for a double glazed freshly fired teacup



PHANTASMA NON GRATA

SARA PAUFF

One month after.

Good bones. The realtor says that a lot. This house has good bones. And light—so much light! Floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room with a lakefront view. And that sunroom off the kitchen—gorgeous! Her high heels tap across the cracked tile. Imagine yourself sitting in that warm light, watching your children play in the backyard. Yes, you could put a swing set under that tree. A swing set and a sandbox. So much room, she coos, tossing her blonde hair. So much light. Yes, the kitchen needs updates, and the roof will have to be replaced, but you won't find this atmosphere in suburban developments, not in your price range. They don't make houses like this these days, she says, fluttering her manicured nails. So much character. And great bones.

It's not for sale, I tell them. No insulation in those floor-to-ceiling windows—imagine the frosty nights. Imagine that old oak tree falling on your children as they play on their swing set, or in the sandbox that is likely full of cat poop. They'll get pinworms, if they don't drown in the lake first. You'll spend a fortune refinishing the hardwood floors, and the roof will leak regardless of how much you patch it. Those smart appliances you want for the kitchen won't last; made in China pieces of crap. Your realtor is right: they don't make houses like they used to. But this house is not for sale.

The buyers run every single time.

Good bones. They don't know how lucky they are to have good bones. These millennials take everything for granted.

Six weeks after.

The realtor hires a cleaner, a tattooed woman who punctuates her sentences with "like."

"What are you, like, a ghost?"

"I live here." I wave a translucent hand at her Black Lives Matter T-shirt. "And all lives matter."

Her eyes narrow. "But you're, like, not alive."

Nothing but disrespect from the younger generation. I loom over her, so she knows who is boss. "Don't tell me what I am! This is my house. And you're trespassing."

"Whatever." She stomps out, eyes on her phone. Typical.

Eight weeks after.

Exterminators arrive. Finally. Do you know how many companies I called when I was alive to get rid of those mice? And they never finished the job. Every company has to be humane these days—no poisons, no spring-loaded traps. Gotta be kind to animals. Of course, the mice always moved right back in.

Back then, I told the pest control company I would not pay unless they could guarantee no more rodent infestations. I made myself very clear: I wanted them dead.

Mouse droppings in the garage, not two weeks later!

The exterminator they sent over swore up and down they weren't mouse droppings, only dirt, but I know shit when I smell it, and he was full of it.

He knew it too, because after I went to their office and demanded to speak to the regional manager, they gave me a full refund. I'm pretty sure I saw that incompetent rodent lover working at McDonald's the week I died. In fact, I know it was him, because my fries were cold. Got my money back for those, too. Doesn't anyone value hard work and honesty anymore?

Three months after.

The mice are gone (for now), but that ungrateful realtor sends over a fat priest to "bless the house" and "rid it of evil spirits."

"You'd better rid the house of those damn water spots on my kitchen cabinets," I say. "Or I'm calling your supervisor."

He mops up his holy water and skedaddles.

Before I died, I ordered new padlocks for the front door; I doubt I'll get them now. That lazy mailman hasn't come in weeks. He's probably stealing all my mail and reselling it. Those people are always so greedy.

Four months and one day after.

I'm by the front window, ready to catch the mailman, when the ghost hunter arrives. The sign on his rusty pickup reads: Jack Reaper, Ghost Hunter and Paranormal Investigator.

For the first time since I died, I laugh. Realtor Barbie must be desperate if she's hired this fraud to evict me. I've seen those reality TV shows. He'll probably barge in, waving his night-vision camera and try to trap me in a toaster, and then charge her \$200 for the charade. I laugh again.

The mailman can wait; I could use a little entertainment. I drift up to the attic to practice my wails.

The doorbell rings. Twice. I'm in the middle of my best wail when it rings a third time.

I float downstairs. The ghost hunter waits on the porch, rocking back and forth on his heels, dumb as a box of rocks.

This won't take long. I gently push open the door, so it sways on its hinges, and then I vanish into thin air, like they do on those shows. My third ex-husband didn't call me a drama queen for nothing.

"Hi, I'm Jack Reaper. Can I come in?"

The ghost hunter's bloodshot eyes droop and his cheeks sport scruffy stubble, giving him the look of a lazy bloodhound. His scrawny arms flop loosely at his sides and a beer belly hangs over the waistband of his jeans. I know exactly what he's had for breakfast, lunch, and dinner by the food stains on his thin white T-shirt. Disgusting.

But at least he rang the doorbell, unlike the other visitors. And if I'm going to scare him senseless, he needs to be inside the house.

"Take offfff your shoesssss."

He slips off sneakers, patched with duct tape, and steps inside. His big toe, the nail yellowed, sticks out of one grimy sock. He stops in the front hall and lets out a low whistle.

"Nice digs." He drops a duffel bag, also patched with duct tape, at his feet. "Bet you could get a sweet deal for this place."

I appear inches from his face. "It'sssss not for ssssssssale."

"She said you'd say that."

The blackheads on his bulbous nose look infected. "It's my house!" I shriek, rattling the windows and doors. "I'm not leaving."

I wait for him to pull a homemade ghost Uzi out of his duffel.

His chapped lips wobble, and he exhales a long sigh, his breath stinking of cheese and pickles. "They never do."

Sinking down on the floor, he buries his hands in his greasy hair and his chest hitches. "I can't do anything right!"

Is he crying? His shaking body tips sideways onto the floor, and he curls into a ball and wails.

Ugh, I have a headache. I float to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of wine before I remember I can't drink.

My last glass of wine was four months and two days ago. It had been a shitty day. The bag boy at the grocery store smashed my bread and broke the eggs again. The pharmacy charged me double for my heart medication, and then I came home to another court order from my second husband, Darryl, demanding alimony. Thinks he deserves it because I got the house. He's the one who couldn't keep it in his pants; I could have drained that bastard dry.

I opened a bottle of red and was in the middle of a "fuck you" text to Darryl when I heard a noise. I went downstairs with my baseball bat, ready to scare off whoever was bothering me at two in the goddamn morning, and opened the door.

One last sip of wine and boom, you're dead, while strangers invade your home.

No one cried for me. After the funeral, they wandered the house, saying how sad my life was, how sad to die alone.

Then they stole the rest of my good silverware and left.

The ghost hunter blows his nose into his T-shirt and continues sobbing. What kind of person wails like that in a stranger's house?

"Stop it," I snap. "Pull yourself together."

His sobbing turns to blubbering, baby whimpers that are even more annoying.

"You cannot have a breakdown in my house. I demand you leave right now, or I'll—I'll call your manager!"

"Lady, do I look like I have a manager?" He wipes his nose with his hand, leaving a trail of snot down his arm. "I'm a failure. I'm not even a real ghost hunter. Stacy told me if I got rid of you, she wouldn't kick me out. But what kind of sister charges their brother rent? She knows I can't pay it."

"Maybe you should get a real job."

He glares at me. "I'm not homeless. I work at the Kroger."

I eye his scruffy beard and sniff. "I knew you looked familiar. You're not good at bagging groceries either."

He lets out a sound halfway between a laugh and a cough. "I used to work in L.A., as a camera operator on *Teen Scream*. You ever seen it?"

I think back to long nights, flipping through the channels in my premium cable package. I preferred home decorating shows or *Fox News*, but sometimes I'd watch a few minutes of whatever teen soap opera was on for laughs. Kids these days don't know how good they have it. "The one with the zombies at the high school dance?"

"Yeah. That was a fun episode to film." He chuckles wistfully.

"After COVID, they canceled us, and all the studios were shutting down, so I had to move home." He pulls a small hand-held video camera from his duffel. "I thought I could start my own YouTube series, get back in the game. Jack Reaper, Ghost Hunter." He moves his hand in a long arc, as if spelling out his dreams, and his rheumy eyes glimmer with dregs of hope.

I cackle. "That can't be your real name."

His expression sours, and he shoves the camera back in his bag. "No, but Larry Reynolds, Ghost Hunter, wasn't gonna bring in viewers."

I shrug a gauzy shoulder. "Doesn't sound like Jack Reaper's doing so great." Floating past the fireplace, I catch the shadow of a picture frame. Over the years, the pictures changed, but the frame always hung there. I swipe a finger along the dust on the mantle, but the dirt doesn't budge, and I clamp down a shriek of frustration as I whirl on the ghost hunter. "Larry was the name of my first husband. He was a failure too."

He raises a scruffy eyebrow. "You sure he didn't murder you? Cuz I'd call that a success."

"I wouldn't expect someone like you to—" The insult dies as I process his words. "How did you know I was murdered?"

"You're a ghost. If you died peacefully, you wouldn't be here, scaring the beejeezus out of everyone." He tilts his head, his eyes growing sharper with curiosity. "Who did it?"

My vision narrows to a pinpoint and the place where my lungs used to be feels tight. The memory fades with each passing day; now I barely hear the shouts or feel the searing pain of the gunshot. But their shadows, dark and hooded grim reapers, haunt me.

"I never saw their faces. They broke in and tried to rob me. I wouldn't let them." My house. *My house*. I stop floating and concentrate on making myself solid and visible; I can almost feel my feet touch the old wood floors. "It's my house."

The ghost hunter nods, new respect in his gaze. "It is." He stands and dusts off his dirty jeans. "You know what? Don't sell this place, especially not to my bitch of a sister. She's gonna turn it into another Airbnb, and no one should be kicked out of their home."

He slings his duffel bag over his shoulder. "Sorry I bothered you."

When the others left, screaming, or stomping off in fury, I sailed through the house, buoyed by smug victory.

As the ghost hunter heads for the door, worry, that old ghoul, howls in my ear. Someone will buy it. One day, someone will take your house.

"Wait." I zip in front of him. "I'll make you a deal. Tell your sister you got rid of me, and that you'll pay her the rent you owe, plus interest."

Jack Reaper sputters in disbelief. "No way, lady. How does that help me?"

"On the condition that you live here as caretaker for this house."

He wrinkles his nose. "I don't want to live with you."

"I don't want to live with you either," I retort, hands on my hips. "But I'd rather deal with you than a cast member from the Real Housewives of Atlanta."

The ghost hunter's bloodshot eyes drift up to the exposed wood beams of the high ceilings, the large front windows, with the sunlight glinting off the lake. "This would be a cool place to shoot. Great light."

I could be on TV. That would show them—Darryl and Larry and my murderers and everyone else who screwed me over in life. In death, I would be infamous, a star. No one messes with stars.

But my dreams of floating down the red carpet and mingling with the Hollywood elite are interrupted by a defeated groan from the ghost hunter. "But I don't have the money," he mutters.

I snort; money is such a minor detail when you're dead. "I do. Right in this house." I float toward the attic, but stop halfway through

KEN

35

the ceiling, turn around and wink. "Interested?"

One year and two weeks after

INT. COUNTRY HOUSE - FRONT HALL

WE OPEN on the wide front door, swinging open, letting in the afternoon sun. A man, tall and square-jawed, KEN, carries his new bride, BARBIE, over the threshold, and sets her down in the sun-drenched living room. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, we see a pristine lake surrounded by trees. BARBIE spins around, her long blonde hair catching the light.

BARBIE

Honey, look at this view. So much light! Hashtag: Best anniversary weekend ever!

KEN walks to the old fireplace and knocks on the wooden mantelpiece.

KEN, approvingly

Solid. Good bones.

GRAVELLY VOICE OFF-CAMERA

The chimney leaks.

Did you hear that?

GRAVELLY VOICE

So does the roof.

A translucent woman with an "I'd like to speak to the manager" haircut and a face like a bulldog floats through the ceiling. She speaks in a smoker's growl.

GHOST WOMAN

Hope you brought a bucket and a mop.

The GHOST WOMAN zips around as KEN and BARBIE cower in confused terror. We watch a montage of our couple being antagonized by the GHOST WOMAN—eating their romantic dinner, stealing the TV remote, drinking their champagne, and screaming over their "I love you's."

VOICEOVER

A quiet country home. The perfect romantic weekend. Until Paula shows up. Can a marriage survive this threesome?

CUT TO—the FRONT HALL. The GHOST WOMAN floats by the door as KEN and BARBIE drag their luggage out, bickering.

BARBIE

I told you we should have gone to the beach.

KEN

You know I sunburn easily, or you would if you would stop looking at your phone every two seconds.

BARBIE

You never listen to my ideas. Hashtag: worst second honeymoon ever!

KEN

You love your Instagram followers more than me!

BARBIE

Maybe I do!

The GHOST WOMAN slams the door on their arguing, looking smug.

GHOST WOMAN

Millennials. So entitled.

VOICE OVER

Paula, the Pessimistic Ghost. It's her house.

Coming to Netflix this October.



ALIVE / TEMPORARY

CHELSEA LOGAN

I'd never embodied myself so completely as I did in the moments before you let me pay for dinner. I hadn't

heard your slurred speech until then, your face now ragged and twisting with each exclamation. I said

not to ruin it when we got to politics, If I was going to be foolish, I would do it here and now before the empty glasses

were cleared. I used *loved* in a sentence, the power of tense keeping the flush from my face. You knew

the young girl who stood behind the bar. I should have shaken her, pointed to us — *It doesn't have to be like this!* Later,

you'd say *pussy* too comfortably and I'd watch the last vestiges of the greedy night begin to judge from behind the curtains. The day would come, you'd seem softer but a small bruise on my lip, alive

and temporary would pulse. History might say I'd been grateful to feel something like another heartbeat.



TWO HOURS OF JOY

HUINA ZHENG

Lan trudged towards Chunting Garden Kindergarten, with Shasha's cries cutting through the morning air. Despite Lan's patient explanations about the importance of school, Shasha's resistance was unwavering. A whole term had gone by, yet Shasha remained the only child in her class who hadn't adjusted. Lan knew she couldn't give in.

Taking a deep breath, Lan coaxed Shasha forward. The weight of her own fatigue seemed to anchor her steps, eyelids heavy with sleep, shoulders drooped. At the kindergarten's threshold, Shasha's pleas crescendoed, as she clung to Lan's legs, "Mommy, don't leave me." Squatting, Lan wrapped Shasha, her whisper a tender breeze, "Baby, Mommy will be right back. You'll be okay." She smiled to the teacher, yet as she walked away, each of her step was laden with the echoes of Shasha's sobs.

Navigating through the bustling streets, Lan mentally listed her tasks before picking up Shasha at 3 p.m. The day demanded a trip to the crowded market for fresh produce, followed by a litany of chores at home: mopping, organizing the living and bedrooms, and scrubbing the bathroom—each task seemingly leading to another. Lunch would be quick—just instant noodles—to free up time for her freelance translation work. By afternoon, she had to begin making soup; today's choice was a nourishing Poria and Atractylodes macrocephala chicken broth, perfect for warding off the season's dampness and strengthen their bodies. Timing was tight; she needed to finish simmering the soup before fetching Shasha and spending the remaining daylight hours in a blend of play and housework.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that with Shasha's late wakeup, breakfast had been skipped. Suddenly, a craving for dim sum surged, a luxury she hadn't indulged in since Shasha's birth. Pulling out her phone, she checked the Dianping APP and discovered the nearest, toprated Cantonese tea house was 32 kilometers away. Should she make the trip? Why not? she thought, excitement bubbling up. It was only 32 kilometers away, after all. Spotting an approaching taxi, she didn't hesitate and hailed it.

She only carried a yellow shoulder bag, sized just right for her phone and tissues — but that sufficed. As the taxi halted, she opened the door and got in. An hour later, they arrived.

Brimming with life, the tea house offered a surprising harmony of lively banter and serene calmness, a signature charm of such places. There, among the din of conversations, guests cherished the company of friends and family, creating a snug yet tranquil haven.

Settling by the window, Lan was greeted by a uniformed waitress, her hair coifed into a bun, bearing a basket of tea packets and a notepad. Requesting Tieguanyin, Lan watched as the waitress picked a packet for her and jotted it down for the individual tea charge.

Lan used her phone to scan a QR code on the table, ordering a feast of dim sum: steamed shrimp dumplings, her absolute favorite, along with siu mai, egg tarts, and preserved egg and lean meat porridge.

Then, she activated the electric kettle to boil water. Opening a packet of Tieguanyin tea leaves, she poured the boiling water over them, watching as they unfolded. The initial floral scent, hinting at spring's first blooms mixed with a subtle fruitiness reminiscent of apricots, was complemented by a whisper of sweet licorice.

Pouring the tea into four gongfu cups, the liquid shimmered a vibrant light green, as clear as morning dew in the sunlight. Cooling the tea with a gentle blow, Lan sipped, savoring the sweet introduction,

followed by a crisp, slightly mineral flavor, the unique texture of Tieguanyin.

Shortly after, the waitress set down a spread of delectable dim sum on Lan's table, crowding the small surface with an assortment of treats.

As Lan lifted the lid of the bamboo steamer, her taste buds awakened. Inside were three shrimp dumplings (虾饺), their semitransparent skins revealing plump shrimp and hints of green chives. Biting into one, she felt the soft, elastic skin giving way. With her eyes closed, she reveled in the flavor, her smile spreading in satisfaction.

She then turned her attention to a siu mai (烧麦). Its cylindrical form, partially open at the top, showcased the inviting filling inside. She picked one up with her chopsticks. Upon tasting, she first noticed the delicate texture of the wrapper, followed by the explosion of flavor in her mouth. The filling, steamed at high temperature, was juicy, its seasoning expertly blending spices while preserving freshness. Lan chewed, lost in the savory freshness. She tilted her head back slightly, and smiled, her eyebrows easing into a gentle relaxation.

Moving on, Lan savored an egg tart (蛋挞). Its flaky, buttery crust broke away easily, melding with the smooth, velvety custard that lay within. The custard boasted a subtle hint of vanilla and just the right amount of sweetness, elevating the egg's richness to perfection and leaving her yearning for more with each mouthful. As it melted away, joy bubbled within Lan. She couldn't help but lick her lips.

And then, Lan explored the preserved egg and lean meat porridge (皮蛋瘦肉粥). The porridge was speckled with dark green preserved egg and slices of tender pink meat. She scooped up spoonfuls from the top layer of the congee, the way Cantonese people do, blew gently to cool it, and savored its silky texture as it slipped into her mouth, thick and sticky from meticulous cooking. The subtle saltiness of the preserved egg combined perfectly with the freshness of the meat, enhancing the

porridge's texture while balancing its flavor. A soft sigh of appreciation escaped her. This dish rounded off the meal, merging the preceding dishes' sweet and savory notes into a satisfying finale.

Lan lingered over the last warm sip of her tea, a soothing warmth spreading through her. She touched her stomach, basking in a rare tranquility, teetering on the edge of bliss. It had been four years—four years filled with the ceaseless toil of motherhood—since she'd enjoyed such an uninterrupted meal. Before Shasha's kindergarten days, outings were scarce, often punctuated by hurried bites amidst caring for her daughter's needs.

Yet, these brief two hours were her own happiness. They allowed her to temporarily put aside her roles as a mother and wife and reconnect with herself. Her attention was on the delicious food, no longer preoccupied with the relentless household chores that awaited her each day. She finally understood why her mother always inquired about her meals during their calls. While savoring her food, she could focus on herself "selfishly." She was no longer the selfless mother everyone expected, nor the homemaker wholly devoted to her family.

Rising to leave, she made a decision. The future, no doubt, would unfurl in its usual flurry of demands, yet she'd seek out and savor these interludes. After all, these moments transcended mere rest—they were vital nourishments for her soul, for her very identity, reminding herself that before being a wife or a mother, she was her own person, first and foremost.



STEEL HALO

BRUCE MORTON

As the son, I can see
In my mind's cloud
The black and white photo
Where my father stands still,
Tall inside the great pipe
The great steel halo
Set on his work table
By the crane that hovers
Overhead. The factory busy
All around him. He is quiet
In the moment, a human seed
In a hollow metal husk.
Proud of what he does,
Wishing it was something else.

FLY RIBBON

O. V. OVESON

I Remembered to keep the pushpin top this time as I fished and uncurled the waxy ribbon, sticky, out from its home in the tube container.

Hanging it in the window before I left for work that day, I thought about what a horrible death it would be- trapped.

Stuck in the same place no matter how hard you struggled in the meritocracy of some messy undoing that may have not even been your fault. But- in the darkness, I drove off to work.



CYBER-CODA IN THE CARNIVAL OF LIVING

AMMARA YOUNAS

ammi called me up this morning as I was morphing with the oak chair that locked itself in a screen the world is ending, she shivered, her voice laying an absence larger than her hymns she'd potted in the flower fields every fair morning

don't be cynical, I told her in the same old dismissive tone of an abandoned home

no, ammi's voice rewilded, the world really is ending she must've lost it, I thought, suffocated by the perfume of her garden of words

look outside, she urged, her voice thawing frozen springs which ran loose down the fiber-optic cable down the fabled floor, my feet were hiding in can we do this later, ammi? I have so much pending work as I hung up the water pooled and thrashed like a fresh organism around my body

I looked at her intent face like a maritally-tired decade-long husband

how would I ever understand her?

I reverted to the computer screen and hit: refresh

now the water organism creeps up my neck to get a taste of the virtual fever

with her fire-coaxed chill fingers, she tries to peel me off my oak chair

but she doesn't know I was rebirthed here: baptized in the cyberchurch

my wild roots washed off like sin, I found a poison as potent as religion here,

as addictive as hymns

(I don't want to work, but I have the chronic need to)

but she cooes childlike: the world is ending

unaware that the icy blue screen light is a parasite that sits in my eye socket

who blocks my view, who drains my vision

how can I leave and save myself if I can't see in the dim-lit liminal space,

my way from here to out there?

I can't surrender just yet, I tell myself, I have too much work I don't have a window but I can feel the rays of light leaving me ammi calls me up again but I don't register it,

I'm being deluged by the carnival of senses

in a new tab, I search up ways to remember the quiet before it all the water organism, who's now nestling in my arms, stares at the words onscreen

she juts out some globs to shape her hands and I push my keyboard away

at least wait for the sprint to end before you electrocute me instead, she prays, and a thousand glowing seeds rain down my room,

coming to rest ever so lovingly in her palms

a silhouette of icy embrace, some strange midwinter coughing down my neck I'm infected, what with the singing,
the trickling defeated sighs through the hoarse throat;
our holy matrimony has come to an end
my water organism lies down and cries herself to sleep around my
feet and I
am left gauging the distance between the end of my shift and the
end of time
if I could, I would tell ammi
that if I could, I would cry myself to sleep
go gentle into that good night
lie in time's tender lap and let it carry me fast-forward to eternity
or maybe
back to sweet juvenescence
but I'm half-buried in my work chair, oak splinters wearing me like
second skin

out of the seeds swallowed by the quiet aqua-machine, sprout roots that anchor their beings in my feet but I don't notice the flailing of the weather underneath I'm caught up in work, held aloft by a false sky my computer screen blinks and I catch a glimpse of my face there so unwhole and melancholic, so hung-over from my intricately rehearsed concert dance in here I so long to tell the living from the ever-present non-living but the earth remembers the living: it sends shoots up my legs, curling & curling on top of each other like the memory of a memory until I'm covered in a still pool of vines I realise I had it all wrong the world isn't ending but regrowing like evermore I still myself awaiting photosynthesis

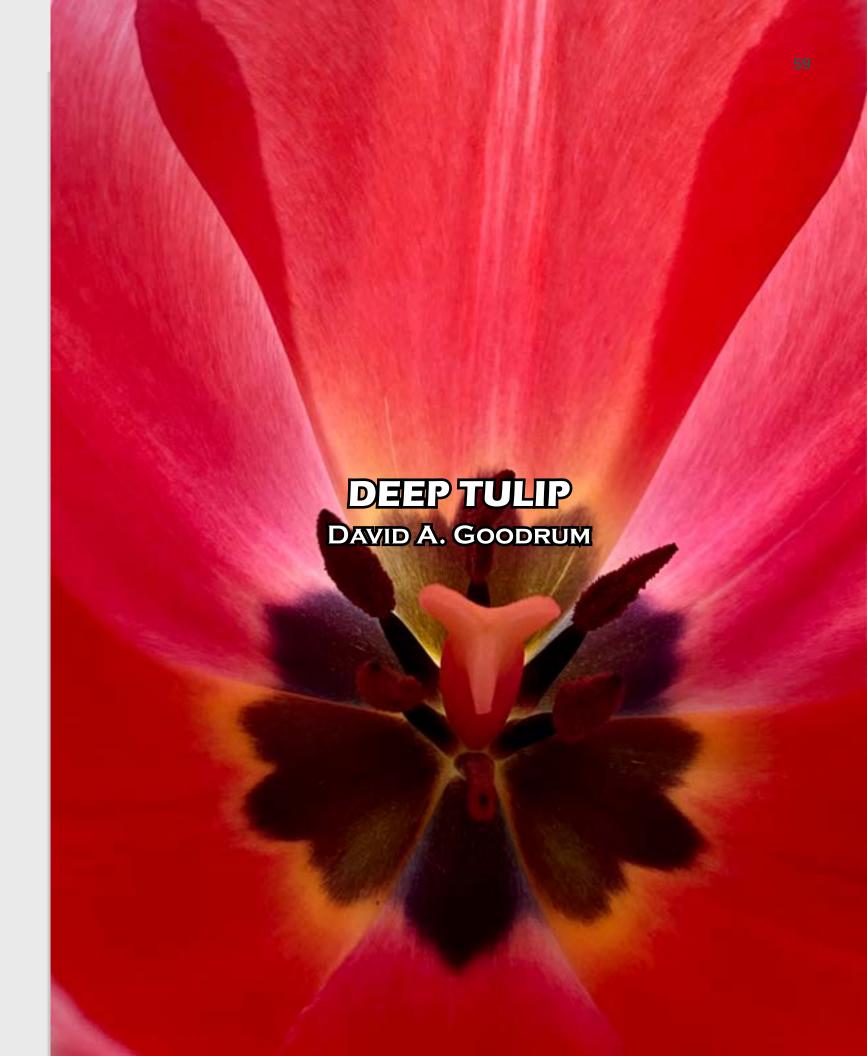
419MADELINE CRONIN

Speech and debate. An empty classroom with chairs attached to the wooden desks. The smell of old books. Of rubber erasers. The judges sit at the front like an omen. The thin boy at the front with a voice that shakes until it sturdies. Formal black suit, too big for his adolescent figure. *The water* on a spiderweb. A prose piece you haven't quite found the willingness to forget. An inexplicable fondness. Your memory folds its hands overtop the wrinkles in your brain, and excuses itself from reason. You wish you had more to grab onto so you could find it again. But all you are left with is water on a spiderweb. A bridge, perhaps? A boy and a girl. A confession of some sort. You think, offhandedly, it might have been love. You were thinking about the first and only time you've been in love a lot, lately. Years have spanned between then and now. It feels foreign. She feels foreign. Plumper on the filter of a Newport cigarette. A singular crooked tooth, overlapping the other in the front. The bridge of a nose you used to trace. Absence, followed by a biting winter at the tail of warm, sunny spring. Skipped classes and skipped meals. *Broken* cobwebs. Your hands come up

empty; nothing to grab onto to find it again. You're okay with that now. It's spring, again. No winter. You're looking for water on a spiderweb. At eleven, you did not think you would make it past middle school. At fifteen, you thought the same about high school. Again at eighteen, before you started college, and at nineteen and twenty *during*. You're twenty one today. You made it. You're *making* it. You took a chance and strummed your fingers along the web and it did not break apart. Water on the pads of your fingertips. Life in your lungs. Excited for mundanities and wrinkles. *Excited...* for mundanities and wrinkles? You're not who you once were, grappling, still, for comfort in that sentiment. But you love yourself more than you did last year. You love yourself more than you have in a long, long time. Good days begin to outnumber the bad. Even on the gray, chilly days, when you usually hermeted yourself away from the world in fear of getting worse, in fear of losing your balance; already toeing the edge of the tightrope. You stopped begging for help a long, long time ago. One last promise. Put in the effort, get tired, until your fingers are cracked and bloody and overworked, turn your life on its head. And... the tightrope disappears. Good days outnumber the bad. The birds begin to sing at four in the morning. The owls outside the window of your childhood

bedroom are ready to lull you to sleep by nine o'clock each and every night. When Dawn shows her rosy cheeks, Missouri bathes herself in her light, in her warmth. You only hope you can see the same beauty in winter, now that everything has changed. A little yellow bird tells you you will. Freshly cut grass smells and scratches like it did when you were young, you notice. You nearly forgot that feeling, dragging your nails along your warm skin to appease the red rash that's spreading. You have the time to lay down in her foliage, to stare at her soft blue sky, so why *not* take it? And you do. Every time. When you lived a life where happiness was a folktale, you never had the time to do anything but decompose. Day by day. Night by night. And you didn't have the gall to lay yourself to rest, so you thought, in time, you'd build up the courage. Bad day after bad day. Broken cobweb after broken cobweb. Keeping careful track of the days that went by. The birthdays that passed. The holidays that followed. No, not today. On the lookout for the thing that was going to push you over the edge. No, not now. Not yet. Give it another week. Bite your tongue. Try to bear it. Look for the web. Look for the web. Nine years passed you by in a bleary, blurry blink. Twenty nearly had you, kicking you to the dirt where your hands laid out before you. Your fingers spread

to reveal a spiderweb woven between each digit. The silken strings bow to the weight of the raindrops, hugging the webbing between your fingers. At first, you didn't trust it. How could it be here all along? I looked there. I swear I looked there. But you listened to the raindrops and bowed with them. How grateful you became, in time, for keeping your curiosity. To keep searching. To change your mind. The folktale had to hold *some* truth, you thought. Hanging over your hands, you see it now. Look, the web. Look, the web. Look, the web. At the beginning of the school year, you buried a dead yellow finch in the mulch outside the library. At the end, you realize what Dickinson meant by "hope," seeing the yellow bird again. In everywhere. In everything. Wasn't it buried? The web. Your memory folds its hands overtop the wrinkles in your brain, and excuses itself from reason. You stop questioning every little thing. All it ever did was reveal all that you did not have. The web. If the thief of happiness is to covet all you lack, then, you think, I will count all I've got. You listen to the finch and excuse yourself, too. The web. At seventeen, a wallflower told you to participate in life. And though it took year after year, day after day, night after night, at twenty one you start to. At twenty one, you start again.



61

THE HESBY FILES

PETER RUSTIN

--FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE—

Every year, Nebraska's oldest newspaper, the venerable Lincoln Messenger Star Gazette, awards its annual "Huskeroo" honor to a person whom it believes best exemplifies the Nebraskan values of courtesy, cooperation, resourcefulness, and reluctant tact. Recipients of the Huskeroo award are typically asked to travel throughout the State of Nebraska to share these virtues, and they often preside as guests of honor at events such as factory decommissionings; tornado chaser conventions; saber and musket shows and quinceaneras.

This year, the Messenger Star Gazette is honored to present the coveted Huskeroo award to James M. Hesby.

Mr. Hesby has served with distinction as the Executive Brands Ambassador for North American Amalgamated Products (NAAP) since 1974. NAAP is one of America's largest consumer goods conglomerates. It manufactures and distributes a diverse array of products ranging from foods, appliances, funeral and memorial products, and medical devices.

In his capacity as Executive Brands Ambassador, Mr. Hesby has, for 50 years, been responsible for reviewing high-level consumer complaints and correspondence and developing products in emerging product categories.

After 50 years of distinguished service, Mr. Hesby will be retiring. In honor of this retirement, the Messenger Star Gazette is proud to present a sampling of Mr. Hesby's correspondence over his decades as NAAP's highest-ranking customer liaison.

January 4, 1998

Dear Mr. Poppleman:

This is in response to your letter/package of December 17, 1997. I am so sorry that you did not enjoy our Darn Tootin' Frozen 'Tater Hotdish. We were proud to introduce the market's first frozen hotdish so that hungry consumers such as yourself could enjoy both the hearty bounty of Minnesota cuisine *and* the convenience of a microwavable, ready-in-minutes casserole.

I fear, though, that your unhappiness with the Hotdish is attributable

not to any flaw in the product, but, instead, to your misreading of the preparation instructions. These instructions clearly state that the Hotdish is to be microwaved for 5-7 minutes (depending on your microwave's power). In your letter, however, you indicated (in pertinent part): "Well, sir, I nuked that puppy for 57 minutes, just like it said. After the smoke cleard [sic] the next day, the Hotdish was harder n' a two-dollar coffin nail."

At the risk of my being deemed impertinent (and I mean no disprespect), I must ask: has your eyeglass prescription has been reviewed by a Statelicensed optometrist?

We here at North American Amalgamated applaud your proactivity in calling our attention to the perceived deficiencies of the Hotdish. Should you in the future require our assistance, however, please do *not* return the product to us in a manila envelope. Yes, the weather here in Nebraska is, to put it mildly, brisk. You, however, deposited the package via fourth-class mail, from the decidedly tropical climate of Cicada Creek, Florida. When one of our consumer intake professionals opened your package, the aroma of the Hotdish (coupled with the swarm of happy and shimmying maggots that had taken residence within) caused her to abruptly tender her notice after she returned from hospital.

And, because you clearly intended to return the product in good faith, I have convinced our legal department to drop its plans to invoice you for the costs of fumigation and disinfection of our intake facility.

Please accept the enclosed vouchers as a further token of our appreciation of you as a customer. Should the Hotdish no longer be to your liking, you might enjoy our new Wild Alaskan Salmon Chips; our freeze-dried Wild Holler 'Coon Jerky; or our exciting new dessert, Kentucky Bourbon Lard Pops.

Very Truly Yours,

James Hesby

Executive Brands Ambassador

November 19, 2005

Dear Mrs. Meldrop:

Thank you for your letter to us of November 4, 2005, which has been referred to me for response. At the outset, I wish to extend our company's thanks for your purchase of our Prairie Heartland Cheddar Lip Balm. We are pleased to count you among the millions of customers

who, every day, continue to enjoy its savory all-weather protection.

You have expressed concern as to whether, as a lactose-intolerant consumer, you should discontinue your use of the lip balm. From your letter, it appears that your chief complaint is recurring flatulence, which, you noted, inconveniently emerged in settings such as church, Tupperware parties, and baby showers.

First, let me allay your fears. Prairie Heartland Cheddar Lip Balm has no actual dairy ingredients, and, in fact, is not even biodegradeable. Rather, it owes its zesty farm-to-table flavor to carefully formulated, Federally Approved flavorings and lab-tested additives. Why, our internal pre-market tests conclusively demonstrated that this product has a shelf life of over 125 years (making it the ideal—and tastiest!—lip balm for fallout shelters and survival bunkers).

I must conclude, then, that the symptoms to which you refer have, as their genesis, a cause unrelated to this delicious product.

I would be remiss, however, should I fail to recommend that you promptly consult your physician to ascertain the root cause of your discomfort. I might also suggest that you limit your intake of cruciferous vegetables, legumes, onions and bok choy.

As a goodwill gesture, I have arranged for a case of 24 Prairie Heartland Cheddar Lip Balms to be shipped to you at no charge. Our marketing studies have confirmed that these are extremely popular as wedding favors, Halloween giveaways and Secret Santa gifts.

Very Truly Yours,
James Hesby

Executive Brands Ambassador

June 21, 2023

Dear Mrs. Bellagamba:

What a pleasure it was to read your letter (and enclosed photograph) of June 3, 2023! Almost invariably, I am called upon to review and resolve consumer complaints regarding one of the dozens and dozens of products that North American Amalgamated proudly markets. So, when you wrote to us to extol the virtues of our newest semi-professional medical product, The Rash Buddy (patent pending), I felt a burst of pride.

For, you see, I was instrumental in bringing The Rash Buddy to market.

Part of my professional responsibilities include determining market opportunities and shepherding new inventions to market. Only last year, I realized that the home remedy space was entirely devoid of a Bluetooth-enabled, reusable poultice. From its simple origins as a "plaster" made from such diverse ingredients as raw onions, oatmeal and bat guano, the humble poultice is still unparalleled in its ability to treat wounds, bruises or skin tag outbreaks.

What commercially available poultices lacked, however, was the ability to use exciting Bluetooth technology as an enhancement to their unparalleled curative powers. The Rash Buddy boldly stepped in to fill that market void! I'm sure, by now, that you have downloaded The Rash Buddy's free app, and paired your Rash Buddy to your smart phone. The newest update (just released yesterday) also has an amazing added feature set.

By enabling notifications in your settings (Settings→Rash Buddy→Notifications→Announce) your Rash Buddy can now (using celebrity voices ranging from Samuel L. Jackson to Julie Andrews) announce through your iPhone's speaker that your poultice needs cleansing; that additional ointment is needed; or that your rash has festered and you should seek immediate medical aid.

Finally, let me express my appreciation for the photograph of you using

your Rash Buddy. Company policy requires that we return any explicit or provocative photographs (and I do so here) but we were all impressed at your bravery and vim! I, for one, will always treasure what will always remain, seared in my memory, as a truly indelible image. Bravo Madam, and thank you!

Very Truly Yours,

James Hesby

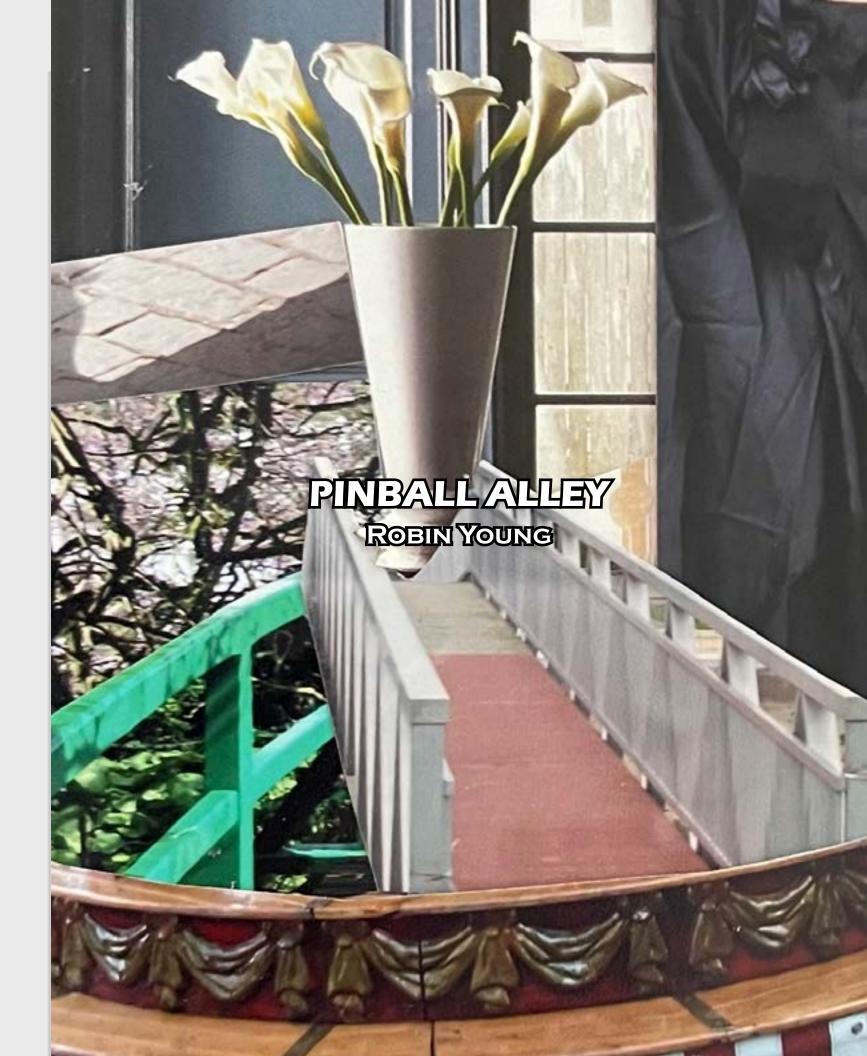
Executive Brands Ambassador



CUPIO DISSOLVI, IN THE VAIN OF SAINT PAUL

KOLLIN KENNEDY

Mine heart's perplexed & contains mystery
In a duel of doubt: my life's for heaven,
Though to live under I am Flesh's dust,
With each mortal spec sin to creation,
Though this is mine labor's fruit. To die's to gain
And with Him to live is far the better
Than the sufferance of earth's debacle:
To dissolve, to depart is what I sing
And would upon mine image. But again,
Abiding by the flesh is Heaven's law
And needful of our world's purpose for good;
In this light, I shall have furtherance,
Keeping my works in pleasure to The One
So my returns to Him are above the sun.



A RARE NIGHT OUT

MIKE MARKS

On a rare Friday night out in 1981, Anita rounded up a neighborhood teenage girl to watch our four children so we could dine out and go to a movie. A lot of couples had the same idea. We had a buy-one-get-one-free coupon for Zeke's Place, a new restaurant in West Akron. To dodge the two-hour wait, we were offered a table in the bar. We expected to have dinner, get to the movie theater in time and not have to pay our babysitter more than we bargained for.

It wasn't an ordinary table. It was a horizontal video game— Pac-Man—something new. We loved playing pinball machines in college. When we had started school, we got five balls for a quarter. By graduation, a quarter bought only three balls. Video devices later replaced pinballs, but we were too busy having babies and working to make the transition. I had played Pong a few years before. It wasn't exciting. I had also wasted quarters playing Space Invaders a few times. Trying to blow up aliens wasn't fun. Sitting at a newfangled electronic dinner table with colored lights flashing up at us made us feel like old fogies. While waiting for service in the very crowded place, we checked out our personal game. It took two quarters, and Anita dug out the fare. The money went in at her end. We played across from each other, taking turns. Next thing we knew, we were having such a good time, we were \$5.00 poorer, distracted by dinner, and intrigued by the hoppy little yellow circle with a wedge missing for a mouth. This was just my style. Eating the enemies. Turning bad into good, devouring ghosts, getting a reward of a few cherries. Like my passion for collecting, the game put things in order, without blowing them apart. Anita, who is the least

adversarial person I have ever known, was driven to new heights by the competition. She was so into safely moving the little yellow guy. She was intense. Her id took over.

I forget what we had for dinner that night, or even what movie we saw, and yet it was perhaps the best evening Anita and I had ever spent alone together since we had children. Date nights were uncommon for us, abandoning our four kids, but this night exceeded all expectations. After we got home and paid the babysitter, I was revved up all night, zigging and zagging in my brain to swallow little gremlins I had missed a few hours before.

After a busy Saturday at my gift shop, I took the long way home, in fact, went way out of my way to return to Zeke's. It wasn't crowded yet, and I asked the hostess if I could look around. "No problem," she said. I was sucked back in. The dining side was loaded with bogus antiques, rustic garage sale treasures. Going back to the bar area, I counted eight Pac-Man tables. I was drawn to the one we'd sat at the night before. Beside the coin slots was a metal label that read, "Property of Sanitall Corp., Lakewood, Ohio."

I made a mental note of the company and went to the main Akron Public Library downtown to research it on Monday night after work, the first chance I had. I found Sanitall listed in the 1980 Polk City Directory, located on Athens Avenue west of 130th Street in Lakewood, probably an hour away. Its primary business was supplying roll towels to restrooms of Cleveland-area retail establishments. It was a publicly held company with its common stock traded over the counter.

What was I doing? Was I obsessed with the Pac-Man game itself or the table game concept? Was I in some indirect way trying to permanently recreate the excitement my wife and I had recently experienced? I certainly couldn't afford to buy one of these fancy game table toys, much less find the time to play it very much, working all the

time and trying to be an active father to our children. Besides, we'd just bought a fire-wounded fixer-upper house and were getting ready to move in. Until we sold our present domicile, we were living from hand to mouth. My paychecks practically went directly to the contractor who was trying to get our new house ready for us.

I selected Ray because he convinced me he would do quality work to restore the fire mutilation in two months for under \$40,000. I borrowed money from my father-in-law to get started, after draining almost all our savings to purchase the property for the very low price of just over \$30,000. Restored, the house would be worth three or four times that. Well, I didn't pick very well. Ray had been working there for three months, taken nearly all the \$40,000 from me in draws and the house was still a mile from livable.

Pac-Man was invented by a twenty-four-year-old Japanese student, inspired by gazing into a pizza box missing two slices. Originally named Puck Man, the American version was changed out of fear that desecrators would change the P to an F when both the upright and cocktail table versions of the game arrived in the United States in 1980. Previously, the leading arcade games such as Asteroids and Space Invaders were played by young teenage boys. Pac-Man greatly expanded the arcade game audience. People of all ages were filling the contraptions with coins to guide hungry cheese-colored mouths around mazes fraught with dangers. Many players must have also seen the appealing order and efficiency of gobbling enemies rather than blowing them to smithereens.

So, why was I so interested in this game when I had neither the time nor the money? Did I secretly want to change jobs? Did I really want to make the long drive to Lakewood every day just to be associated with a company that distributed Pac-Man tables along with their roll towels? What would I do there anyway?

Well, I wasn't so far gone that I took off from work to drive up to see their business. I didn't drive around Akron to other bars to see whom else had their machines or even if there was any local competition. But I was still driven by a feeling I couldn't shake. My body was ruled night and day by an excitement more vivid than I have ever felt before or since.

I called the Akron downtown office of Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith to make an appointment during my Thursday lunch hour. I had \$2,000 left in my emergency account. With four kids, anything could happen at any time. None of my relatives were willing to loan me money to buy a house except my father-in-law, and I had to pay him back relatively soon with interest. He was barely getting by himself. Two grand was absolutely all I had in reserve. If I committed that money and my family incurred a medical emergency or if we suddenly needed a big car repair, we would be screwed.

But my zeal, like a drug, took over my life. I was nowhere near understanding it. I got back to work an hour late, the owner of 8,000 shares of Sanitall stock, purchased at twenty-four cents a share. The broker thought I was nuts. He told me that penny stocks were highly speculative, not traded on major exchanges. Most never amounted to anything. He couldn't even find a rating for Sanitall. I stood my ground. He took my money. Of all the great get-rich schemes, investing in rare coins, unexplored gas and oil fields, and pork belly futures, all had to be safer bets than a regional company which serviced commercial restrooms—and now Pac-Man machines. Besides, I still had no real idea about this Sanitall Corp. How big was the arcade machine venture compared to the roll towels segment? I knew from the Polk directory that the company had been in business since 1956. Was it profitable? Why was the stock only twenty-four cents?

This was the beginning of my secret life. I couldn't tell Anita. My fervor turned into anxiety. I called the stock broker assigned to me every other day. Pretty soon he recognized my voice. The stock went as low as twenty-one cents. I thought about selling out if it ever got back to twenty-four cents, at which point I would have lost \$200 in commissions. After a while I stopped pestering the broker. In my mind, I wrote off my \$2,000 investment as an idiotic mistake.

Ray eventually stopped showing up at my new home. School would be starting soon, and the house wasn't ready to move in yet. Anita and I learned to glaze windows, stain doors and trim, even hook up light fixtures. The kids loved the yard, the new neighborhood, and being the new kids while we tried to prepare our house for occupancy. We had no time or money to sneak in any diversions. I went to work, then went to work on the house, fitting in a quick meal and a little sleep when I could. The house was still beat up with house fire evidence still in the floors, walls, and ceilings. It was more than we could handle. It looked like we'd never be able to live there. It was time to give up and retreat with our tails between our legs to our too small starter home where we were forever tripping over each other.

However, the thrill or whatever it was of Sanitall was buried until August 7, 1981, the twenty-seventh day of a horrendous dry spell with no change predicted, when a windfall danced above the parched land, a gusher sprung from my own backyard. It was Friday, a relatively slow day at my store, when I received a phone call from my assigned broker at Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith. I hadn't checked on my Sanitall stock in almost a month, but, apparently, he hadn't forgot about me.

He told me that he wished he had bought the Sanitall stock for himself, even though he had never personally owned a penny stock. The company's quarterly earnings were reported after the stock market closed the day before. Due to the Pac-Man segment of their business, their earnings far exceeded the analysts' projections. The stock opened at \$36 a share, no longer a penny stock. Did I want to sell? You darn betcha! He put my order in to sell all at the market price. I bought 8,000 shares in one day, but it took a week and a half to sell all the stock. The last batch sold for \$23 a share. I guess I had flooded the market with my sell order. There weren't enough buyers for me to retrieve the top price for much of my holding.

By the time I was out of Sanitall, I cleared more than \$200,000. I came clean with Anita. It was a great relief for me to end my secret life. Of course, she was furious at first, but the bonanza calmed her down. She quickly realized that I probably wouldn't have taken the crazy gamble if I had to combat her objections first. We hired topnotch people and got our home fixed up right, and we moved in before school started. I took a rare personal day and drove my Ford Granada to Sanitall headquarters in Lakewood. I parked my car in their gravel lot, joining about ten other cars, almost all beaters. I looked up at a four-story dilapidated warehouse, some broken window panes on the top floor, a faded and peeling Sanitall Corp. sign painted on the brick. Below, a dented and rusty Sanitall box truck was backed into one of the two loading docks. Two employees were talking and smoking at the other dock. I had seen all I wanted to see. I drove home and never returned.

Anita and I went back to Zeke's for our wedding anniversary in January on a Monday night. The place was dead. We ate in the bar at the same Pac-Man table, its case scratched and chipped. My love affair with this game had been short-lived. Its flashing images chasing through the maze couldn't even entice me to feed it quarters that night. Newer suitors with shiny tables— Ms. Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, and Galaga—vied for our attention, but none extracted our money that winter night.

We had a quiet, relaxed dinner before we went to the movie theater, residents of a new neighborhood in a new school district, the major burdens of our lives eaten away, swallowed by a little yellow robot cartoon pie with a slice missing to serve as its mouth.

THE LONELY SEA FLOOR

RICHARD EDDIE

For thousands of years, the sea was just fine and capable without any help from the outside world, nor the top of the world. It could do whatever it wanted to do, especially when you entered into the world of it, and countless times it made itself clear if you were unwelcome. The sea was always fair and gracious when people did not take advantage of the swimming, and more offensively, the searching for underwater treasures.

The depths of the water and the sea creatures would often compete with each other on which could turn humans away; some of them did want to turn them away, and some did not. The smaller sea creatures tended to feel lonely when there were no humans around. They would try to swim far and far with the larger sea creatures but could not keep up with them.

The dolphins always had a reputation of being amongst themselves, but they did not mind others outside of their inner circle. Even some of them felt out of place, but why? It could not have been intimidation, because the dolphins too had their special forces that sharks or orcas knew that they could not dispute in any way, shape, or fashion.

The sea floor, however, could not have been any different when it came to feelings and emotions, a feeling of entrapment and absolutely no freedom to call their own. Between the sea and the floor, there were misconceptions from all sides, but then, they had been living together the entire time. The stingray mantas knew all too well they had a home

and hiding place from the orcas. The sharks felt it best to have blind eyes and deaf ears, to the sharks, the orcas were much fiercer when they wanted to be; the sharks were far from starving or just plain hungry. The sea felt the loneliness coming from the sea floor and sympathized. How could the sea floor feel lonely when it was directly under the water? But then, the stingray mantas had the ability to keep it company and not just a safe haven from the orcas.

A storm had approached, and it caused such a disturbance throughout the entire ocean, silencing every sea creature, and prompting the stingray mantas not to dwell into the sea floor. Naturally, the sea floor was curious and appalled that the stingray mantas' behavior had changed. As the storm became stronger and unpredictable, the sharks and the orcas were no longer rivals and had become united forces.

The sea's huge creature knew that they could and should never stand together as a force against the storm, but they became a comfort for themselves by blanketing their fear. The dolphins, however, had no fear of the storm and they helped the storm, realizing that the storm was there to end the loneliness of the sea floor. The storm respectfully declined their offer. The storm had descended into the sea floor and opened it, and there were countless underwater treasures. A grand and beautiful garden had blossomed from under the sea floor, and the sea floor was no longer lonely.

SLEEPING WITH SIRENS

RYAN K. MASON

Underwater, under her, there's a sprite on every island, teasing curves and cartography,
I spent years exploring this geology, the coasts that look jagged but feel smooth, yielding to collision. An ignoble crash—and on voyages past,
I left only splinters behind.

Pirates tell the best stories.

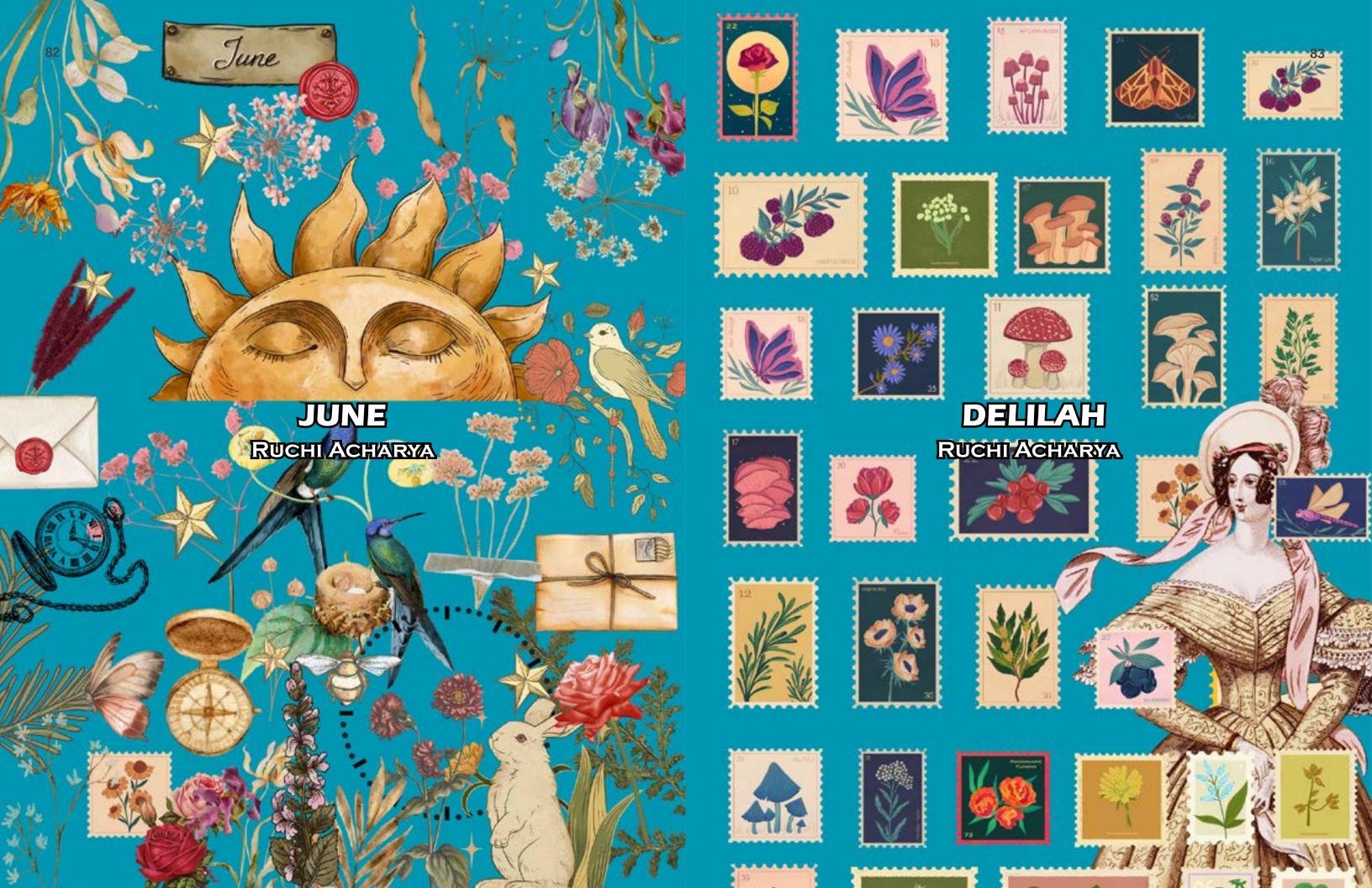
I've heard "oh God" screamed in seven languages,
I've left shipwrecks all over the world.

But sirens make the best lovers.

I listen to her
tell me what I want to hear,
and weave her melody through the wax in my ears.

Captain, Captain—
I can't resist.

Bury me, rock angel—
fill my mouth with your salt
and my lungs with your sea.



JUIN-OCTOBRE 1985

DEVIN LEWIS-GREEN

Sapphire, fire, imbued with sapphic Aether's swooning stye, slain and flooding the simple sphere All delphinium encompassing, smeared bloom. Saloon held in the rib tan tomb in Pigeonholed opaline, of you. purpose flushed by cockscomb, minute emerald green romanticized Iron curtain in sheen seduce, attempts to conquer or you, eucalyptus chartreuse nurse or en noose, gift subdued, diffused-Sapphire, to the Gods,

ROOTS

HEIDI SPETH

The first plants I ever remember calling my own
Were three small sprouts off of a jade plant
My Grandma, whose plant was overflowing with growth, gifted them
In a small terra cotta pot with some earthly moist soil in it

I buckled the small green beings into the passenger seat of my car Like my most prized possession And drove them down the three-hour patch of a highway back to my small college town

Of the three sprouts, only one survived
The first one to go dried up like a shrunken head
The second one fell out of the soil, never having taken root
The third sprout, though originally the smallest, found its roots in the soil and started to grow

The summer after my sophomore year

My single sprout had grown a miraculous five inches, looking rather awkward in the pot by itself

So I took scissors and snipping close to the top of two of the silky leaves Cut the tall stalk in half and dug a small hole for the new sprout in the soil

Hoping and praying that once I placed it would take root and grow

I did the same thing the summer after my junior year Now approaching the end of my senior year, my small jade was back to three sprouts

I have since graduated, and am about to start my first year of teaching kindergarten

The weekend before the first day of school, something miraculous happened

I cut off the top of my tallest stem, put it in a new pot, with plans to gift it to my mother

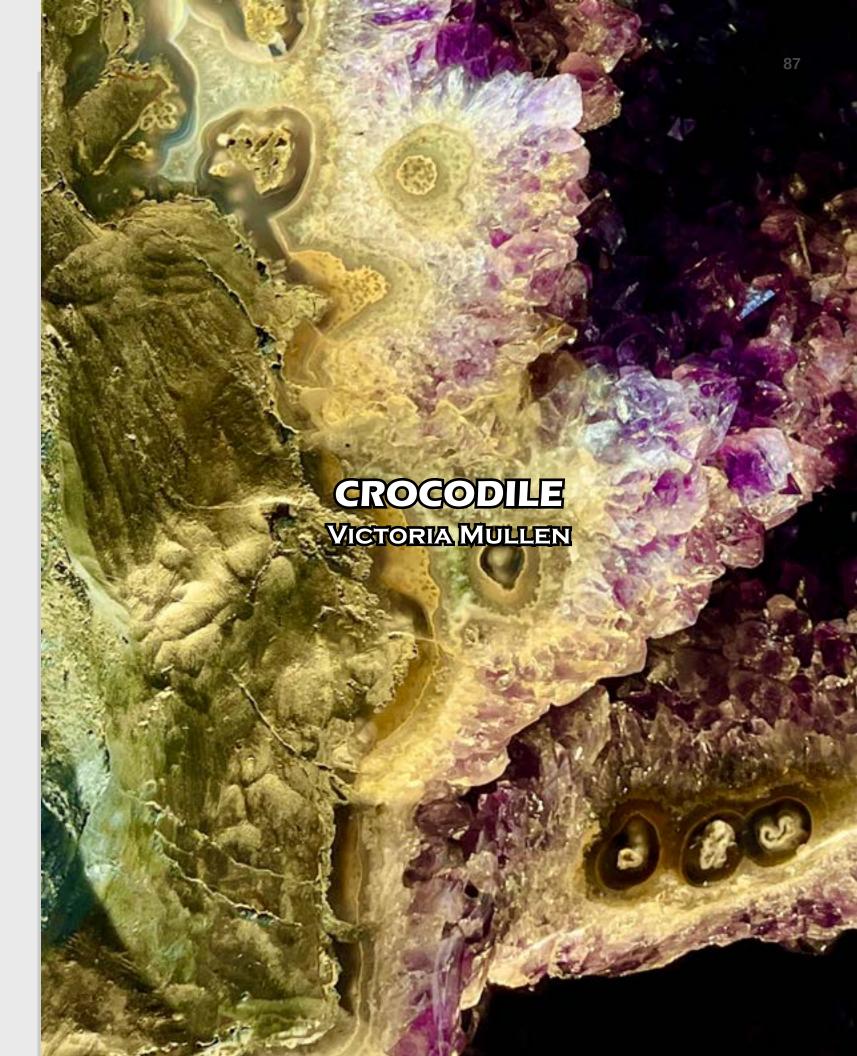
As I buckle my jade plant into the front seat of my car to head across town to my parent's house

I can't help but think to myself

This plant grows and grows and grows, multiplying over and over again

It has taught me how to nourish, how to share, how to be patient, how to love,

It is wild to think how a small stem can teach one so much



VIEWING BY APPOINTMENT

TRAVIS STEPHENS

The realtor opens the door.

I am still coming to terms with white couches.

I mean who can keep their Hollywood/Miami window palace so fucking clean the sofas can be white? Not this dog.

Speaking of which, who can keep
Trixie/Princess/Skye off the damn thing?
Look guilty.

My realtor has a firm handshake.
White walls with black accents, a sliding glass envelope leads to stunning Master, replete with spa, three vanity sinks, wall-to-wall plus a small built-in bar.
My realtor is bouncing on the bed.
Modern art for that clean, soulless aesthetic. Think surgery.
Here the walk-in mirrored room that cannot be called a closet, this showroom for shoes, designer hangers and tiny cedar bins for unmentionables. Another bar.
My realtor is winking at me.

Hardwood floors and recessed lighting, appliances upgraded to stainless German only two years ago. There is space in the backyard for a pool, another spa, or a tennis court. Trailer home. Pony. The schools here are enviable, with no buses and a new football field. What was once a rose garden has been transformed by the magic of concrete into a three-car garage, That is not my realtor in the Land Rover. I recognize her by the picture of her on every flyer and yard sign, that perfect hair unbothered by vacant lot. Member of the guild in good standing. What this place needs is a little freshening. Seller motivated. Let's talk about points.

My realtor is a mid-century modern, zoned for mixed use. Stunning views and too many features to list.
Airy. Bright. Not much inventory in this part of town. Endless possibilities. A realtor shrug morphs to a smile. Isn't it lovely?



THE ONLY WOMAN

OLIVIA LAUGHLIN

Summer swells into an orange sphere

Pregnant in the sky

Everything could remind me of you if I let it

Could make you so beautiful if I forget hard enough

But I choose this

Resilient body and bone

Sleeping diagonally

Stretching to each end of the mattress

No more finding her lashes on my side of the bed

At last I'm the only woman

The chosen one

The horizon applauding my decision

Romanticizing the lone body

Reclaiming the narrative

Rewriting my spine straight

My chin square

My wrath brewing

because as much as I miss him

I've missed me so much more

UNNAMED

ROWAN TATE

the night that life died inside the folds of me, she was the size of a chestnut, the fingernail-clipping moon, a wisp of bottled air with the fragility of a cicada wing. she left the potatoes going cold in a bowl as if fists of clay. she left the nubs and scabs on the juniper tree uncounted, the pigeons bulging in the streets and fanning from orange clay rooftops unchased. she left strawberries uneaten, freckled skin unitched, furniture unscathed, the pantry undisturbed and well-arranged.



ON THE PLAYGROUND, 1998

AMMANDA MOORE

I was always forced to wear skirts To the playground But that never stopped me From climbing the jungle gym Or swinging from gymnastics bars Oh how I loved those gymnastics bars! I would hang upside down on them Or attempt a flip over them My head snapping up As I launched up and over the bar If Grandma had seen me She would've told me to get down And keep my legs together Like a lady But I loved to play And I've never Really been a lady Anyway

FRAGILE HEARTS

GABBY COPPAGE

Take our fragile hearts.
Crush them between
your fingertips.
Roaring ocean waves
drown the imaginative adventures.
We are only children,
don't plague our minds with reality,
let us dream.

Let us keep our fragile hearts.



EXPONENTIAL NUGGETS

PATRICIA HARTWELL

Which came first-the chicken or the egg?

Why even pose the question when everyone knows it's the chicken... nugget.

Four, six, or nine?

A crackling voice, lacking luster, projecting questions through a magic intercomnal box.

Ma'am? Ma'am? How many? Would you like sauce with that? And I'm lost in numbers - three, six, nine, twelve - increments of three.

That would make more sense- but then again-who would order three nuggets?

Hardly a snack, let alone a meal...so I drift into...

Four, eight, twelve, sixteen - increments of four,

this feels more substantial for these tiny tidbits.

And what part of the chicken do these tiny tidbits come from? I find my mind in full conversation with itself, and I answer- the nugget part of course!

Dipped in batter and deep-fried goodness, steaming perfection...

Ma'am? Ma'am? Are you there? Ma'am?

Exponential growth of nuggets!

Four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four...

Or, Maybe- four to the fourth power

and see how many crispy treats trail out of the box into my mouth.

But, I answer the voice in the box- nine.

They appear out of a tiny drive-up window in a brown bag with one random French fry.

THE CORN BALL

SCOTT HOLLERAN

Ages ago, when tribes harvested corn for the season, they went into fields, danced and prayed. Yet, in what eco-scholars later termed post-Industrial times, this ritual took on deeper meaning. As climates warmed and oceans rose, peoples harnessed wind and sun for power. Across the land, earth was worshipped at last.

This is the tale of earth's glory.

Reverence did not easily come. In the 27 years since it was decreed that earth would be saved by any means necessary, a contingent of anti-earth rebels remained. Most fled into the mountains, though some burrowed into underground bunkers. For the majority of the land's inhabitants, sacrifice for earth was the highest duty. People had been notified that earth is the supreme resource. People accepted this belief.

Accordingly, an annual festival had been enacted. The ceremony was approved by a world committee of ecology experts. The result was spectacular. In villages, towns and cities across the land, people congregated on Summer Solstice for the Supreme Sacrifice. Galas rang out and, in a single, solemn minute at midnight, the revelry culminated with a communal gathering in rural fields and urban arenas to atone for living on earth.

Supreme Sacrifice wasn't taken as gravely as it sounds, however. Indeed, folks referred to the ceremony as the Corn Ball.

This year, at a place in the plains where it originated known as Bentley

Grove, a woman fastened adornments into her hair. Sitting in front of a mirror, 26-year-old Becky Mae Boxley had to admit that she was as pretty as could be. Raising and turning her chin slightly, examining her soft skin, perfect jawline and curls from her silky auburn hair, Becky Mae figured that her mother, may she Rest In Peace, would be humbled. "Myah, myah," Becky Mae muttered to herself with a twang (owing to her father's Southern roots). Enchanted by her own image, Becky Mae's mouth went into a smile.

"Will yuh look at that."

Becky Mae had been to the Corn Ball exactly once before. She'd been nervous last year and felt sick. Authorities were strict about enforcing the commandment that only healthy humans were permitted to enter. She never made it for the first, let alone final, dance. This year would be different.

She had washed and cleaned her most elegant dress by hand. She had hung it by clothes pins on the lines behind the Bentley Grove boardinghouse where she lived. When Becky Mae stepped into the dress, she knew that she'd never been lovelier. Thinking of her son, Harry, her eyes welled.

The working mother served meals six nights a week on the late shift at the Candlelight Cafe, which, true to its name, functioned without electricity. Majoring in earth studies at the college campus down the road, Becky Mae took the day off for this rite of worship. She had dreamed of attending the Corn Ball since she was a girl, watching her older sister Edna take on a kind of glow after turning 25 (the age of eligibility) and stepping onto the pedal-powered bikebus to take her to the annual Corn Ball.

By tens of millions, gentlemen and ladies alike dressed for the ceremony, waiting and filing into civic arenas and open fields just before midnight. Space was limited, so most were turned away,

The Corn Ball had made Bentley Grove a hallowed place. The festival started there with 87-year-old Mrs. Pinkerton, an industrial heiress who had once been honored by the governor for repurposing her wealth solely for earth's sake. Billie Jo Pinkerton's Ball for Corn, Wheat and Feeding the Children began 27 years ago. What originated as a festival to feed the young ones became what Minister Greenway, in a historic and universally broadcast commencement ceremony two years later, described as "a holy mass to heal earth". The Unity Council convened, reaching the consensus proclaiming a day when everyone 25 and over who was healthy would participate.

No one was exempted. Everyone was required to congregate. This included renegades such as Old Man McGreevy who lived in a steel bunker he'd designed and built about midway between Glacierville and Bentley Grove. McGreevy was actually 43 years old but folks around here had always referred to him as Old Man McGreevy. It was rumored that he harbored fugitives and heresies—that he led a humanworshipping cult—but he was too radical for the eco-enforcement agency to risk drawing him out.

Anyway, Becky Mae figured that Old Man McGreevy was missing out on the sacrifice. He would never get to Gaia.

Whatever the deniers did or said, soon, all together, people would gather in a communal burst of revelation. This would happen across the land. Children, including Harry, would wait outside the gathering gates, perched on stacks of recycled substances. Movies would be shown on

screens made purely of vegetation. Odes to earth would be read. Harvest concerts would be played. Tree ceremonies would be waged. The Corn Ball was underway.

At the designated time, Becky Mae Boxley, dressed in her handmade ball gown and ready for sacrifice, marched with the others toward the center of a great, open field in the middle of the town square. Sirens rang at midnight. So began the grinding of the gears. She felt earth rumble. Raising her arms in jubilation at the coming of this holy earthburst, Becky Mae both leaned and slipped as earth opened up and she fell straight down, down into the hole dug deep 29 years ago. She was swept with the mass of bodies into the wet, black void of earth. Writhing and moaning on top of the bodies and skeletal bones of the dead—knowing that she must die for the sin of having been born on earth, tasting blood which was not her own—Becky Mae smiled as the earthly gates closed high, high above.



CONTRIBUTORS

Kelly Lynn is an internationally renowned author who hasn't yet been published. She specializes in wishful thinking. In reality, she's a hospital worker from east-central Indiana, where she lives with her two polar opposite pooches. In her free time, Kelly pretends to write her debut novel but mostly watches YouTube.

LS Cyning is a writer living in Manhattan, New York. Cyning works in long and short form fiction, poetry, and criticism with central concerns of memory, the history of language, as well as the value and possibility of preserving dead and dying cultures and adjacent comic topics. Previous careers have included the academic and classical dance; at this age the only remaining is literary. Cyning enjoys rowing, needlework, perennially disappointing sports teams and the company of three cats, one of which is a greyhound.

Heidi Speth earned a MA in English, a MA in Secondary Education, and a BA in English from Truman State University. She is currently a first year high school English teacher in St. Louis, Missouri. Speth has had a handful of poems published both in-print and online. Some of her most notable publications include the *Route 7 Review* and *Havik Literary Magazine*. She never would have pegged herself as a published poet, but is ecstatic to see where this journey, and her words, continue to take her.

Richard Eddie is from California, born and raised. He has been writing since 2002. He reads and writes in his spare time.

Georgea Jourjouklis is a current University of Toronto alumnus, a future English teacher, and a queer writer with a primary focus on novels, poetry, mental health, and normalizing queerness in the fantasy genre.

Mike Marks grew up in the Midwest as the middle child of five, all born within six years. He learned writing structures from poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks in Chicago and was later awarded the first Creative Writing bachelor's degree ever tendered at Kansas State University. Now, with over a hundred published poems and stories, Mike resides in Akron, Ohio, where he and his Kansan wife, Anita, have raised their own five children. He nurtures tropical bonsai trees to, in a small part, reoxygenate his environs.

Harrison Zeiberg is a photographer and writer from Malden, Massachusetts. His previous creative credits include the New Works Virtual Festival 2020, the Theater Barn, "Gabby & Min's Literary Review", "Havik", "In Parthentheses", and "The Washington Square Review LLC" among others. When not trying to be creative he can be found at his job as the Community Engagement Manager at a non-profit in Boston.

Scott Holleran's writing has been published in media from the Advocate to the Wall Street Journal. The Pittsburgh native interviewed the man who saved Salman Rushdie, wrote the award-winning "Roberto Clemente in Retrospect" and his report on Walt Disney's early years was published in Classic Chicago. Scott Holleran's short stories, "Deal with God" and "His, Hers and Us" are featured in anthologies and, "Allegheny Lane," his tale of a boy's encounter with a stranger while walking his dog, will soon be published in Blackbriar Literary Review.

Robin Young based in Borrego Springs, California, is an artist specializing in mixed media, focusing on collage and contemporary art. Using materials like magazine clippings, masking tape, and feathers, she creates whimsical and intuitive pieces ranging from life-sized sculptures to small postcards. Her keen eye and unique aesthetic guide viewers into a semi-readymade world, repurposing nostalgic images for lighthearted yet sometimes disquieting messages. Robin's art is strange, funky, sometimes perverse, and always alluring.

David A. Goodrum photographer/writer, lives in Oregon. His photography has graced the covers of several art and literature magazines, most recently *Cirque Journal*, *Willows Wept Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Ilanot Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *The Moving Force Journal*, *Vita Poetica*, and appeared in many others. He has showcased his photography at several regional art festivals in cities such as St. Louis Missouri, Columbus and Cincinnati Ohio, Ann Arbor Michigan, Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana, and Madison Wisconsin. Most recently, his work was juried into the 20th *Around Oregon Annual* exhibition at The Arts Center in Corvallis, Oregon.

O. V. Oveson was born to an ordinary, Mid-Minnesota winter in the 1960s. He has been writing poetry, creating artwork, and working with his hands since the early 1980s. Oveson draws his influence from his origins in the Great North Woods, the environment around him, and all types of music evolving through the study of the Sister Arts. Words have always formed a little bit differently in his mouth, and he has found a poetic home with the writers of the Great Plains. A variety of approaches and media echo his love of the language, jazz, and images as bold features in his visual work.

Devin Lewis-Green is a current undergraduate student pursuing his passion for poetry and storytelling as a BIPOC creator. Studying at Wayne State University, he was the 2023 first-place recipient of the Phillip Lawson Hatch Jr. Memorial Award. His work has been published in Arboreal Literary Magazine (Issue 3) as well as Poets' Choice's "Quintessential City Life" poetry anthology. He is currently working as the 2024 Fiction Editor Intern at Oyster River Pages, assisting in curating their August 2024 issue. He hopes to blossom as a published author while uplifting young BIPOC creators in his local area.

Olivia Laughlin is a 27 year old Boston based poet and artist who tells her stories of heartbreak, trauma, and self reclamation through piercingly raw poetry and art. Her work has been published in a multitude of journals and websites including SoulLit, Wingless Dreamer, and the Umass Amherst Student Writing Anthology of 2016. She has curated poetry open mics and art exhibitions in the Boston area to connect the art community in the area.

Juan Sebastian Restrepo is a Florida-based artist who explores social categorizations through his figurative paintings and drawings. He holds an MFA in Painting from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and a BFA from Pratt Institute. Sebastian's work has been exhibited in various venues, including New World Gallery (2023), Edwardsville Arts Center (2018), and Coral Springs Museum of Art (2024). His art has appeared in journals like Quibble Lit, Red Cedar Review, and Salmon Creek Journal. He also teaches as an adjunct faculty at Florida International University and Miami Dade College Kendall Campus.

Patti Hartwell has returned to her roots in Monticello after honing her skills in the Twin Cities. She has been creating a variety of projects and has embarked on a new creative journey and set up an art house - currently working in simple mediums of clay, paint, and words.

Gabby Coppage is a fourteen-year-old student at Indian Woods Middle School with a passion for writing. She began her writing journey at the age of seven, turning her personal adventures into essays and poems that invite readers to explore her world. Gabby aspires to use her writing to illuminate topics that are often left in the dark, aiming to start meaningful conversations about the sadder and more complex parts of life. Through her thoughtful and introspective work, she hopes to make a positive impact and offer new perspectives to her readers.

Rowan Tate is a creative and curator of beauty currently based in Romania. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

Igor Zusev is an artist whose photography and painting aim to establish emotional connections. He expresses his feelings on various topics through color, style, technique, and form, with his art maturing alongside him. In photography, Zusev captures deep emotions by interacting personally with his subjects, often using techniques like eliciting laughter. His paintings bridge the ancient and modern, reflecting his inner emotions and historical influences. Zusev's next goal is to portray people's pain through his art.

Kollin Kennedy is a poet based in the Dallas area, seeking to publish his poems "The Portrait of Sisyphus, A Study," "Cupio Dissolvi," and "The Blind Man's Meal at the Masquerade" in literary magazines. Having started writing poetry a few years ago, Kennedy has published works in various articles, anthologies, and magazines, including Wingless Dreamer and The Decadent Review. A recent graduate of the University of North Texas with a Bachelor's in Creative Writing, he has self-published several poetry collections, including "Oedipus," and is currently working on a novella, with plans for a short story, novel, and chapbook by the end of the year.

Chelsea Logan is a writer living in Nashville, TN. Her poetry has most recently appeared in The Dead Mule School, MockingHeart Review, The Blue Nib, and several anthologies.

Bruce Morton divides his time between Montana and Arizona. His collection, Planet Mort, is just out from FootHills Publishing. He was former dean at the Montana State University library.

Ruchi Acharya is a writer hailing from Mumbai, India born in 1995. She's the Founder and CEO at Wingless Dreamer Publisher. Her publishing company works for the welfare of writers and artists all across the globe to gain recognition and appreciation for their work. She strongly believe in preserving literature, culture and history by rejuvenating and introducing the same through her products and services. Her work has been published in more than 100 journals all around the world. Her poetry book, Off the Cliff is now available on Amazon.

Mitchell Chamberlain is an artist based in Nashville, Tennessee, with a prolific career marked by 40 solo exhibits and participation in 45 national and regional juried shows. Recognized with awards in both regional and national competitions, Chamberlain's paintings vividly portray nature in its diverse colors, textures, and moods.

Ammara Younas is a poet and writer from Gujranwala, Pakistan. She aims to understand a little bit more about the world through a lens of fantasy and mythology. She loves to read speculative fiction. Her work has appeared in Lakeer.

Sara Pauff is a professional communicator, part-time storyteller from Georgia who primarily writes young adult fiction and is at work on her first novel. Her short fiction has been published in Half and One, CommuterLit.com and On the Run. She is also a regular participant in the VSS challenge, in which writers craft a 500-character micro-story based on a one-word prompt.

Victoria Mullen is a dual US-Greek citizen currently living in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Over the years, she has explored many different creative mediums for self-expression, including piano and violin, stained glass, journalism, and photography. She also enjoys creative writing, painting, and mixed-media arts. She balances her creative spirit with the discipline and insights into human nature acquired as an attorney licensed to practice law in the State of Michigan.

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who lives and works in California. His book of poetry, "skeeter bit & still drunk" was published by Finishing Line Press.

Sophia Park is an eleventh grader attending Yongsan International School of Seoul in Korea. Her art is influenced by her daily life activities and she enjoys summer rain, cool river breeze at night and listening to music while walking the busy city streets of Seoul. Sophia will be applying to US colleges this year.

Tom Misuraca studied Writing, Publishing and Literature at Emerson College in his home town of Boston before moving to Los Angeles. Over 130 of his short stories and two novels have been published. His story, Giving Up The Ghosts, was published in Constellations Journal, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2021. His work has recently appeared in voidspace, Art Block and Speakeasy Mag. He is also a multi-award winning playwright with over 150 short plays and 13 full-lengths produced globally. His musical, Geeks!, was produced Off-Broadway in May 2019.

Jennifer Lamb is from central Kentucky. A recent graduate, she is hoping to improve her photography in her free time. Currently, her favorite subjects are her two mischievous cats.

Ryan K. Mason is an American expatriate poet currently living in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Visual art, human interactions, society, sex, love, and regret are all subjects of focus for him. Ryan's work has been featured in the Good Life, Prenumbra, Litro, Wingless Dreamer, and Anak Sastra Literary Journals.

Charles Wells is a Chippewa-Cree Tribal Member residing in Rocky Boy, Montana.

Madeline Cronin is a student at Lindenwood University who was previously published in Currents magazine in 2020 for her poetry piece "The Traffic Sings a Lullaby." Encouraged by her English teacher, she submitted this work for their writing contest. Inspired by her personal struggles with mental health, she wrote "419" on her twenty-first birthday, reflecting on her transformation and newfound positive outlook. After attending Missouri State for two years, she found happiness and stability by transferring closer to home and starting medication. "419" abstractly explores her journey and positive change.

Ammanda Moore (they/elle) is a non-binary poet and writer who also teaches English at Norco College. They have been published in Synchronized Chaos, Literary Yard, and The Journal of Radical Wonder. They live with their partner in sunny southern California.

Huina Zheng, a Distinction M.A. in English Studies holder, works as a college essay coach. She's also an editor at *Bewildering Stories*. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review, Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and others. Her work has received nominations twice for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her husband and daughter.

Peter Rustin and his wife Leslie recently moved from Los Angeles to Peter's native Connecticut, with their three rather intelligent cats. Peter is an attorney practicing remotely with his firm in Los Angeles. He plays guitar badly and drums decently. His work has been published in the Arboreal Literary Journal; Free Spirit; Assignment Literary Magazine; BarBar; WrongTurn Lit; Ariel Chart International Literary Magazine; Piker Press; Gabby & Min's Literary Review; and the South Florida Poetry Journal.

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium. He came to the States where he spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden H. S. he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975-78. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997). He worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, bartender.

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He produces oil paintings, illustrations, ceramic pieces and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries across Maine.

Erika Payne is a young woman with a passion for wildlife photography and birding, Erika has honed her skills capturing the beauty of nature. Her journey began as a young explorer, fostering a deep connection with the environment. Through her lens, Erika seeks to inspire conservation and appreciation for biodiversity. Her portfolio on Instagram showcases a blend of technical expertise and artistic vision, evident in her published works. Erika's dedication to storytelling through imagery aligns seamlessly with her mission.

Beth Horton is an artist.

STAFF

Sage Delio might be considered a modern day renaissance woman, with her diverse interests and talents spanning across the fields of creative writing, computer science, music, and the arts. In May 2022, she published her debut poetry collection, *Blue Confessional: Poetry and Prose*. A second edition of the collection is being adapted with Sage's own art and illustrations. For *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*, Sage holds the roles of Editor-In-Chief and Poetry & Prose Editor.

Sharon Fremont is a multifaceted artist and avid book enthusiast. Her artistic journey spans across various mediums, with a particular fondness for the captivating realms of watercolor painting and sketching. Her passion for the written word is equally profound, evident in her dual roles as Managing Editor and Fiction Editor for *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*.

Karen Porterfield has spent over 24 years working in design. She has established herself as a talented artisan jewelry designer, crafting one-of-a-kind pieces that are highly sought after. Karen's passion for creating beautiful and innovative designs has led her to achieve a great deal of success in the field. She serves as the Art & Illustrations Editor for *Gabby & Min's Literary Review*.

Matthew Evan is an accomplished photographer and passionate car enthusiast. He has developed a sharp eye for capturing the beauty and essence of his subjects through his lens. He leads *Gabby & Min's Literary Review* as the publication's Photography Editor.

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING IN CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

As the warm summer days draw to a close and we reflect on the vibrant pieces that have graced the pages of our 2024 Summer Issue, it becomes clear just how powerful storytelling can be in connecting communities. In my journey as an editor and a lover of literature, I've witnessed firsthand the magic that unfolds when stories are shared.

Storytelling is more than just a form of entertainment; it's a means of bridging gaps between people from diverse backgrounds. When I read the submissions for this issue, I was struck by the variety of voices and perspectives. Each story, poem, and piece of art served as a thread, weaving a rich tapestry of human experience that anyone could relate to, regardless of their own life journey.

One particular piece that stood out to me was a short story about a young immigrant's journey to a new country. As I read it, I felt an overwhelming sense of empathy and connection. The author's vivid descriptions of their struggles and triumphs resonated deeply with my own experiences of navigating new environments. It reminded me of how universal certain emotions are—fear, hope, love—and how these shared feelings can bring us closer together.

I've always believed that literature has the power to foster understanding and compassion. When we read about lives different from our own, we are invited to step into someone else's shoes and see the world through their eyes. This act of empathetic imagination breaks down barriers and builds bridges, creating a sense of community among readers.

In putting together this summer issue, I had the pleasure of interviewing several contributors. One poet shared how writing about their mental health struggles not only helped them heal but also created a space for others to open up about their own challenges. Their poetry became a beacon of hope, showing readers that they are not alone in their experiences. This is the power of storytelling—it validates our feelings and connects us to others who might be going through something similar.

Another contributor, an artist whose work explores themes of nature and human connection, spoke about how their art has sparked conversations and brought people together in unexpected ways. They recounted an exhibition where strangers bonded over a shared appreciation for a particular piece, leading to new friendships and collaborations. It's moments like these that highlight the profound impact of creative expression on community building.

As I think about the pieces in this issue, I'm reminded of the many ways in which storytelling can inspire change. It can challenge our preconceived notions, broaden our horizons, and ignite a sense of solidarity. Whether it's through a poignant poem, a compelling short story, or a striking piece of visual art, each contribution to this magazine serves as a testament to the unifying power of creative expression.

Looking ahead, I'm excited to see how our readers will engage with the work we've curated. I hope that as you turn the pages of this issue, you'll find stories that resonate with you, spark new ideas, and perhaps even inspire you to share your own experiences. After all, we all have stories to tell, and it's through these stories that we find common ground and build lasting connections.

Thank you for being a part of our literary community and for embracing the power of storytelling. Together, we can continue to create a space where diverse voices are heard and celebrated, and where the bonds of community grow ever stronger.

END





















































