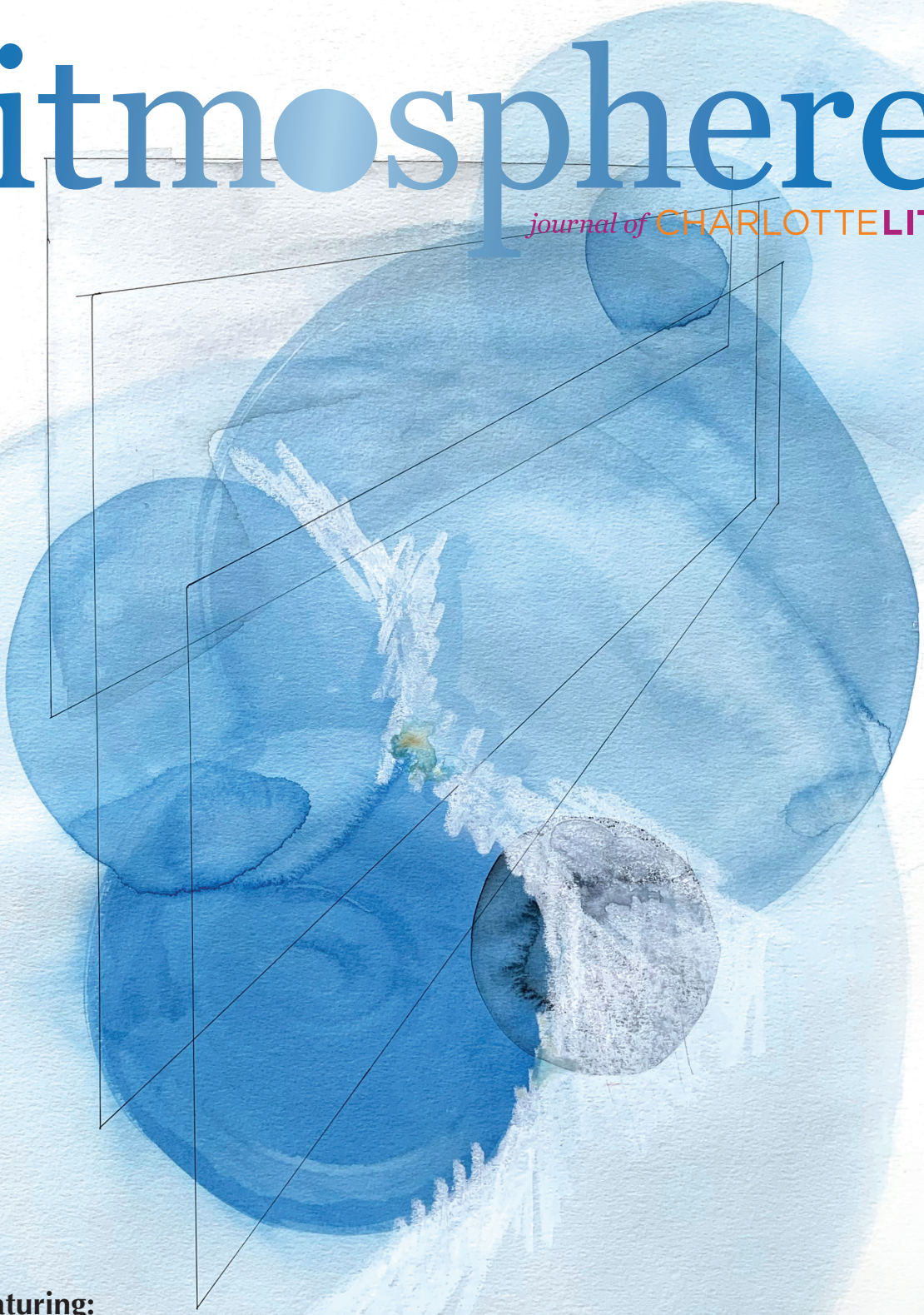
litmosphere

journal of CHARLOTTELIT



Featuring:
Nickole Brown
Tara Campbell
Stephanie Elizondo Griest
Jessica Jacobs
Ron Rash

Inaugural Issue • Spring 2022

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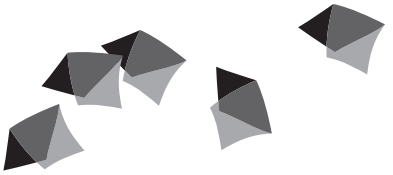
Charlotte Center for Literary Arts, Inc.
Charlotte, North Carolina
charlottelit.org



CHARLOTTE**LIT**

Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit

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Michael Dowdy

Editor's Note

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit,* and home of the first annual Lit/South Awards.

Before assuming my role as editor, I occasionally entertained the thought that, surely, the world does not need another literary journal. Thankfully, I usually caught myself sauntering back in the opposite direction. Surely the world—not least the many worlds found within North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia, the five southern states included in our contest—could stand a few more vibrant poems and stories and, equally important, a few more readers on the edges of their seats. The inimitable C.D. Wright, whose off-kilter Southernness I always admired, refusing as she did to ditch her accent during decades in the Ivy League, put the relationship between word and world simply: "I believe the word was made good from the start; it remains so to this second. I believe the word used wrongly distorts the world." As to *why* we readers and writers choose to read and write rather than engage in what she calls the "predatory arts" (dear reader, choose your own profession), she concluded, "Some of us do not read or write particularly for pleasure or instruction, but to be changed, healed, charged." Following Wright, I believe that the fiction, creative nonfiction, flash, and poetry in *Litmosphere* will greet you in "charged" registers. With its multiple meanings, ranging from batteries, smartphones, and electricity to courtrooms, battlefields, and sports arenas, "charged" carries the currents of the complex, sensitive, and flexible powers of the word when it touches the world.

The winning poems and stories of the Lit/South Awards featured in these pages were chosen by the brilliant and generous writers Ron Rash (fiction), Stephanie Elizondo Griest (creative nonfiction), Tara Campbell (flash), and Nickole Brown and Jessica Jacobs (poetry). We are honored to present exceptional writing by our contest winners Dustin M. Hoffman ("This Picture of Your House," fiction), Karen Salyer McElmurray ("In Varanasi," nonfiction), Amber Wheeler Bacon ("The Damage," flash), and Amie Whittemore ("The Peony," poetry), along with the impressive collection of runners-up, honorable mentions, and editors' selections. We are also excited to include stories and poems by our judges: Rash's "The Belt," Griest's "Día de Muertos," Campbell's "The Loveliest Thing," Brown's "Prayer to Be Still and Know," and Jacobs's "Ordinary Immanence." It may be unusual for journals to feature writing from their contest judges together with the winners those judges

have selected, but I love the way it affords writers the opportunity to share space—across generations, career stages, genres, and geographies. I hope that this shared "litmosphere" momentarily levels some of the literary world's persistent hierarchies, such as the one between "established" and "emerging" writers.

This first issue of *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit* enters the world at an alarming historical juncture, with the world unevenly and tentatively emerging from a pandemic while simultaneously teetering on the precipice of catastrophic climate change, democracy's demise, and the threat of world war. Contrary to Wright, I'm often skeptical that writing can "heal" or "change" writers and readers. Even so, I remain open to those possibilities. The deft, luminous, and sometimes challenging writing in these pages renews and expands my optimism in such transformations. With Wright's living example in mind, I remain steadfast in my belief in the potential for stories and poems to charge and be charged.

Michael Dowdy
Columbia, South Carolina

Kathie Collins & Paul Reali

A Welcome from Charlotte Lit's Co-Founders

When we conceived Charlotte Lit in the fall of 2015, we had ambitious plans for providing a hub for area writers, becoming a well-regarded creative writing center, and elevating the literary arts in our home city. Charlotte's arts scene seemed to have a great big hole in its center, and we were determined to fill it with words. Little did we know how much time that meant we'd spend each week over the next couple of years moving furniture around to transform our office into a classroom and back again.

Six years later, we've gained a dedicated writing studio, doubled our staff, received operational support from the city and state, and cultivated a community that includes hundreds of members, students, and supporters. As big as our early dreams were, however, what we didn't imagine were the close friendships we would form as we sat around the workshop table wrestling with each other's manuscripts. Nor did we imagine that one of those friends would step forward with the idea and financial support for putting Charlotte Lit on the Southeast's literary map through a major writing contest and journal. What you now hold in your hands is a result of that writer's generosity and belief in the transformative power of language.

Enormous gratitude goes to our anonymous benefactor, without whom we'd be years from achieving the kind of regional reach *Litmosphere* has brought our young organization. Thanks also to journal editor Michael Dowdy, whose experience and insight made him the perfect partner for our inaugural Lit/South Awards; to the 450 writers who entrusted us with their submissions; to our 225+ members, whose financial support and goodwill enable our work in the studio and in the community; to our dedicated faculty, who have tutored us in the art and craft of good writing and encouraged the development of our unique voices; and to the hundreds of writers who continue to come to Charlotte Lit to improve their craft. Finally, huge thanks to our judges—Ron, Nickole, Jessica, Stephanie, and Tara—who believed in our didn't-yet-exist concept and lent us their credibility.

Wherever you are in the Southeast—or beyond—we invite you to sit a spell around our workshop table, here in Charlotte or virtually. We're already lining up a fantastic slate of classes and programs for the 2022-2023 season. Let us save you a seat!

Kathie Collins & Paul Reali
Charlotte, NC

Lit/South Awards 2022
Winners, Finalists & Semi-finalists

NONFICTION

1st Place: In Varanasi – Karen Salyer McElmurray
2nd Place: When Organ Becomes Metaphor – Tracy Rothschild Lynch
3rd Place: Lucas – Matt Cheek

Additional Finalists:
Hattie Mae's Harvest – Lori Johnson
The Perfect Lamp – Ashley Memory
Ronald Reagan Made Me Do It – Toni Bellon
What I Know About Death So Far – Suzanne Adams
The Special Recipe for Making Babies – Kara Zajac

Semi-finalists:
Ascension – Frances Pearce
Home Alone – Irma Quinn
Killer Boobs – Anne Schmitt
Living Hope – Sue Goldstein
Mast Year – Kristin Sherman
October in Hopkins Cabin – Elizabeth Johnson
Show Me – Heather Adams
Ten Swims in Falls Lake – Virginia Ewing Hudson

FICTION

1st Place: This Picture of Your House – Dustin M. Hoffman
2nd Place: Breath in the Body – Pamela Wright
3rd Place: Who Kills the Bugs for the Dalai Lama? – Janna Zonder

Honorable Mentions:
Hallelujah By and By – Pamela Wright
New Brunswick Enigma – Maryann Hopper

Additional Finalists:
Another Time Could Be Different – Amber Wheeler Bacon
Devil's Footprint On My Chin – Mary Alice Dixon

Semi-finalists:
Beyond This Place of Wrath and Tears – Chris Olson
The Day I Saw Janis – Michael Sadoff
The Great Explorer Alejandro de la Cuesta – Chris Negron
Halltown Blues – Karen Robbins
The Lock Up – Tamela Rich
Mary, Joey and Me – Fola Onifade
Mimosa Tree Lane – Rebecca Jones
Patron Saint of Tetherball – Terri Leonard
People Like Ants – Jacqueline Parker
What Comes Next – Matthew Duffus

FLASH

1st Place: The Damage – Amber Wheeler Bacon
2nd Place: Lesbian Communion – Kacie Faith Kress
3rd Place: Troubles No More – Michael Banks

Honorable Mentions:
General Sorrows – Amber Wheeler Bacon
Going Home – David Dixon

Additional Finalists:
Exit Wound – Rebecca Jones
Off – On – Mark Mayer
On – Off – Mark Mayer

Semi-finalists:
Jury Duty – Tara Deal
Scar – Maureen Sherbondy
Two – Sandra Hardy
Untitled – Denise Boster
What You Don't See at Roseland – Gregg Cusick

POETRY

1st Place: The Peony – Amie Whittemore
2nd Place: Imagine Me – Junious Ward
3rd Place: Find a Friend – AE Hines

Honorable Mentions:
The Birds of Lake Norman – Shannon C. Ward
Her Name Was Theosa – Cynthia Robinson Young
If No One Opens Us, We'll Thirst – Amie Whittemore
The Last Exxon in Oregon – Steve Cushman

Additional Finalists:
Birch Tree Summer – Tennessee Hill
In the year of our Lord, 1621, my husband paints me as a nun – Jenny Hubbard
Last Night I Made Love with a Horse – Barbara Campbell
La Chambre d'écoute, 1952 – Richard Allen Taylor
Love as an Object Lesson, Cornfield – Junious Ward
The Opposite of Charleston is Pittsburgh – Yvette R. Murray
Patriots – Wayne Johns
pixie – Sara Beck
The southern hemisphere of longing and regret – Fred Pond
Spring, Morning – Barry Peters

Semi-finalists:
After the Adoption – AE Hines
Bagatelle – Tori Reynolds
Behind the Purple Lilacs – Barbara Campbell
Bertha – Emily W Pease
Camouflage – Lucinda Trew
Cyanide Slinger Swing – Jessica Lee Richardson
Deployed – Tina Barr
I Inherited Hundreds of Candles – Richard Allen Taylor
In the Dark I Light a Little Fire – Annie Woodford
of wangechi mutu's fantastic journey – Caren Stuart
The Resolution – Shannon C. Ward
Totality – Gretchen Steele Pratt
Two Dreams About the Moon – Kathy Goodkin

Lit/South Awards 2022
Fiction Competition - First Place

Dustin M. Hoffman

This Picture of Your House

I snap pictures from the sky out the side window of Tommy's twenty-year-old Cessna 150. The plane's a rickety old bird, but she flies even cheaper than our van can drive ever since Bush decided to invade Iraq and shot gas prices up to four bucks per gallon. My Nikon does most of the work. All I do is aim away from the wing struts and spin the lens until your house turns crisp and then click, click, click. I've gotten pretty good at framing your property line from those rose bushes to that row of pines. All so easy that me and Tommy can get toasted up there on a pint of gin. The part requiring real skill, the selling, comes when I touch ground.

Sage always drives the van, and I sit shotgun when we're on the sell. Keeps my hands free for the frames, so I can change out the pictures between driveways. What's on the pictures is what everybody wants: an aerial photograph of your house, of course. Your whole beautiful house and every last square foot of property. A picturesque home is what everyone wants, and your vanity has almost bought Sage and me a new old trailer home.

The last sale of the day, before we close on the trailer, is stashed way out in the boonies on Luce Road, high number territory, 6995. Nice long paved driveway tells me we're not dealing with some hillbilly cheapskate. Big elms and maples all around, lawn mowed in straight stripes, yellow and blue irises blooming near the red brick walls. Sage calls it idyllic while she's turning down the driveway.

I tell Sage to park close to the two-car garage. Probably got a sports car inside waxed up fine for summer driving after another brutal Michigan winter. As I hurry this house's photograph into the frame, I dog-ear one corner, but the frame mostly covers the flaw, and I hope the Mr. or Mrs. won't notice.

We idle with the windows down, A/C full blast. Just when I light a fresh Winston, the homeowner presses his face to the screen door. He's wearing a bright yellow T-shirt, and, sure enough, a silver mustang is galloping across this fella's gut, "Ford" emblazoned on his chest. Trick with these old rich guys is in the waiting. Me and Sage loiter in the van, me smoking, her smiling big with those gorgeous teeth of hers. Just waiting and waiting. Make them come to you. And they always do, when you're staking out their own driveway.

Finally, he struts out in a huff, round belly heaving under all that yellow cotton, and I return his grimace with my grin. Have I got a treat for you, my chompers say. It's not just Sage with the gorgeous teeth. We've both been bleaching. Got a little competition going: we measure every Thursday with these off-white paint swatches from Lowe's, and the winner gets a back massage or fellatio/cunnilingus.

"There a problem?" this guy says, doing a cop script. But he's no cop. I can always tell.

"All you got is blessings," I say, "judging by the majesty of your kingdom here."

"We just love your place," Sage says. "All those tulips, be still my heart."

"She loves it. We love it. Who wouldn't?" I say.

"They're irises," he says.

"You love your house right down to knowing each species. Blessed with beauty and wisdom too," I say, oozing syrupy charm, because I can tell this guy wants to scare us off. I got a sixth sense for assholes, and I never scare. Never. Not even that time I did sell to a cop and he kept touching his gun the whole time. That cop ended up buying, of course. "For a man who clearly takes pride in every flower on his acreage, I've got a treat for you," I say.

And he says, "What's that?"

And I tell him, "Closer, closer. I can't show you from way over there." I'm still holding my cigarette, and I tuck it by the door, so the smoke rises in wisps toward his nose. Fact that I'm smoking probably just makes him want to get rid of me quicker, and that can work for me.

Once he's close, I lift the photograph of his house. It's squared up just right, the green lawn and flashy flowers popping, and just under the frame is a view of Sage's upper thighs poking out the mini-denim skirt she picked out for today.

"Bet you recognize this place," I say, and when he just keeps staring at the photo, or maybe at Sage's thighs, I finish for him: "It's your lovely home, like you've never seen it before. You're admiring the best aerial photography in the county. Like God snapped the shot."

"We just love your place," Sage repeats.

"Begging to be framed," I say. "And lucky for you, I've already done it." I push the frame into his hands. "That's Amish made, hand crafted, real oak. Can't get a frame like that at Walmart."

But then he says, "There's a crease in the corner."

"Oh, that's barely anything. That'll flatten right out pressed into such a well-made frame, in a day or two tops."

He turns it over, inspects the back, as if he's looking under the hood. Back of a picture, what the hell does that prove?

"Lucky for you, the frame's on sale this week. Makes the whole package an unbeatable deal."

"We just love the work those Amish do," Sage says. "You tried their pies?"

"Sure. I've tried their pies," he says, because we've all tried their pies. They bully them into every local shop and set up lean-tos all over the highways. Every time we drive to scope out the trailer home we're buying, they're waiting to pick us off in their ugly dresses and bonnets, and Sage always stops. Probably could've bought the trailer a month sooner if not for all the pies, and I have to admire their sales techniques.

"Special deal for my friend with the lovely home is only four hundred dollars."

The tight-ass scrunches his nose like Sage just farted. "I can't get anywhere near that."

"What kind of price would please you, sugar?" Sage says. "We want this lovely photo going where it belongs, above your mantle."

"But we can't lose money again, baby," I say to Sage, because that's the pity routine, one I don't love playing. But Sage thinks it's our best move. She can't understand why everyone's heart isn't bursting with pity, like hers. "We gotta eat. Can't just give them away."

"It's not that I can't afford it." He pushes the framed photo back through my window, and the corner digs into my chest. "Obviously, I can afford it. Just on principle, that's a crazy price to pay for a photo."

"A customized aerial portrait set in a hand-crafted frame?" I raise the cigarette, which is mostly all ash now, and I take a nice long puff. He scoots to the side like the smoke might bite him. "Heck, just yesterday, your neighbor a few houses down said I was crazy to *only* be charging four hundred."

"Oh yeah? Which neighbor?"

"I sell way too many of these to remember every name."

"Describe the house for me. Did a dog bark at you? Vinyl siding or painted? What color was the front door?" he says, and I feel like shoving the cigarette's cherry right through his house's picture, right through the chimney, and then flicking it in his face.

That's when Sage says, "Now what's that?" She's holding the photo close to her nose. She points a tangerine-painted fingernail at a bright glob in the backyard. Truth is no one looks at the pictures too closely between snapping the shot out the Cessna's window and slipping it into the frame.

"That's a sunbather, babe," I say. "Looks like."

"Don't look like they got no clothes on," Sage says.

"Tell me, friend," I say, propping the photo in my van's window frame, "you think that might be you?"

He doesn't say anything, because we've snagged him. Sure, even if you squint, you can't see anything worth seeing, pecker or titties or any good bits. It's the idea that matters. Since photography was invented, it's always been about the impression of being caught in a second, seemingly so real that every painter in the world had to start going abstract. Suddenly, any Joe Schmo could capture any portrait, easy as looking. Lucky me trapped the perfect second.

When he runs inside in a yellow flash of torso, I'm surprised. I grip the door handle, but Sage puts a hand on my knee. "What, you gonna chase after him in his own house?"

That's my lovely Sage, always soothing my impulsive instincts. Indeed, chase him inside and what? Face the barrel of a gun. He wouldn't own some dusty rifle or sensible Glock. He'd have dumped a bunch of dough into a shiny Colt revolver, something that made him feel like a cowboy. He'd probably wear it on a holster while he drove his Mustang around town.

"He'll be back," Sage says, patting my thigh. She lights me a fresh cigarette, presses it between my lips. "You know, I think it probably is him. Gut looks familiar, no? But maybe they got a matching pair." Her tangerine fingernail swirls around the pale blob of someone's body. It gets me wondering how a person ever feels comfortable enough in their backyard to get naked and show God what he made. Sage and I have rented an apartment for three years, a crummy one-bedroom, and the pot-dealing neighbors keep the hallways reeking of skunk. The trailer we've been scouting has red siding and a bay window. But even at The Stars Aligning Estates, where each street is named after a Zodiac sign, the lots are slivers of an acre. Give your wang some sun on Sagittarius Drive, and the whole place would be snapping pictures.

"I hope it's her," I say. "Not him."

"That's mean," Sage says.

"I'm just saying, if it were you, I'd pay a bunch more. I'd pay anything to keep you safe."

"Nice try, buster." She prods me with a tangerine nail. "I'm plenty safe."

The yellow-shirted belly bursts through the door, carrying not guns but bottled waters. He passes them through my cigarette smoke. Sage cracks hers and guzzles, beams at the man with a thirst-quenched smile. My water just sits in my lap.

"Suppose I bite," he says. "You got the negatives with you?"

"I don't," I say.

"But you have his word he won't show no one else." Sage takes another grateful guzzle. "And my word, too. Two words for the price of one. How about that deal?"

The guy scratches one of his legs with his sneaker heel, balancing his pot belly like a flamingo as he mulls. He digs into his pockets, produces a folded stack of bills.

"Unless you'd prefer a check," he says. "But I figured you type of people wouldn't appreciate a check."

Extortionists, he means. Crooks making a lucky break. If making him feel like he's getting robbed opens this tight ass's wallet, so be it. I count the money in front of him, and there's only ninety dollars, plus a sad, crinkled pair of Washingtons. "You're short," I say.

"That's what I'm giving you," he says. "No more."

"If I was a dishonest man, I could upcharge you for capturing such sensitive subject matter." Truth is, sometimes I get full asking price, though that's rare. The goal is turning the photo into any amount of green. But this guy has pissed me off, and I want to squeeze him for more. I know I can.

"I'm giving you what you get," he says. Just when I'm about to throw the money in his face, Sage pushes the frame over me and through the window. She's saying thank you, saying once again how much she loves the place, backing the van down the driveway. This guy and me stare at each other through the windshield the whole way, the framed photo tucked under his arm, the wad of cash crinkling in mine.

*

I stretch the resentment out over days. Hate like that is an endless cigarette, a satisfying burn that just ends up killing you. But, damn, sometimes satisfaction is worth the trade. I'd rather live a shorter life burning hot, I guess.

Over the next few days, we sell eight more aerial estate photos, finishing off big-belly-yellow's neighborhood. I keep using him as bait in my pitch.

"Your neighbor down at number 6995 bought one. He snatched it right up. Thought it was a dandy deal." Every time I say it, Sage pinches me with her tangerine nails. Sure, I gave him my word about the photo, but that doesn't mean he can't serve me as a sales prop. I'll inhale that sucker and blow him cold onto his neighbors.

Eventually, 1002, near the end of the block, sets me straight. This lady buys a picture plus frame for $499.99, no questions. She's clutching it with both hands, bobbing her permed, magenta-dyed head, when she says, "I'm surprised Mr. Platt could afford one of these."

"Who's that now?" I say.

"The gentleman with the lovely irises," Sage says.

"The what?" I say.

"You know, the yellow shirt." She makes a big round gesture over her belly.

"Sure, Mr. Platt. He loved his photo," I say.

"His wife just died," the magenta-headed lady from 1002 says. "I'm surprised he could pay, because he's losing the house. Couldn't afford it without her. Life insurance left him hanging out to dry."

"Oh," I say.

"It's a whole thing. The entire neighborhood talks about what a shame it was, her death, the heart attack. But you don't see me gossiping on about it." The lady won't stop ogling the photo of her house to bother looking up at us.

"Oh," I say.

"That's horrible," Sage says from behind me, sounding like she's choking on one of her long nails. "Just horrible."

Finally, Mrs. Bobblehead breaks staring at her photo to flash us her serious face. "Yes. That's what I say too. Horrible."

*

After we move into the trailer, we become instant homeowners. Maybe we don't own a few fancy acres that frame up nice in a photograph, and maybe if me and Tommy snapped a shot of our place, it would just be a clump of white boxes zigzagging through the trailer lot like broken teeth. Maybe not a house, but sure as hell a home.

First thing we do is gut the place, from cabinets to the orange shag carpet to the chicken-print wallpaper in the kitchen. We strip it to studs. Out front sits a junk mound big enough that Tommy could spot it from the Cessna. Soon enough, Sage and I make the place beautiful: blond cedar paneling, vintage turquoise oven, thick cream curtains hung on reclaimed conduit. We're shabby chic. We're living it up.

But just after we replace all the vent covers with these beautiful black iron pieces from Harold's Antiques Trove, Sage says we're missing something. I feel it too. That sense of missing lingers over the place, as if there's no frame to our photograph.

That night we cruise out to Luce Road again, way out by the six thousands. We drive by the mailboxes and porch-lit home fronts that purchased a picture to fund our new trailer. We roll up to 6995, and the house is dark. Maybe no one lives there yet. Maybe they're sleeping. We park at the road and tiptoe.

Sage works the shovel while I watch. We hope they'll live, but I'm unsure about those delicate spidery roots. She tugs them out of the earth like a pro, and I fumble them into the Hefty bag. I bet her nails are trashed; she just painted them lime green yesterday and will have to start over before we head back out on the road to sell more pictures. The bag full of flowers grows heavier, and I set it aside to reach into my pocket. I brought the negative of yellow-shirt guy's photograph, and I plant it in one of the holes where his irises used to live. He probably wanted the negative to make copies, I realize now, so he could blow up that blink of sunbathing body, but I have no idea where he moved to. Plus, he swindled me down to bones on the price. Leaving the negative here seems like kindness enough. I kick dirt over the hole.

That night, me and Sage screw with dirt on our hands, the scent of it all over our bodies. It's great sex, and it's always great with Sage. After, she struts outside in just a T-shirt, me following in just shorts, and neither of us mind if any of our new neighbors are watching. She lights a cigarette for me, passes it from her lips to mine. She doesn't want me smoking in the new trailer, and that was an easy sacrifice. I'd never tell her, but I'd give up the whole smoking thing for her. I'd give up anything.

She leans into my legs and tips her head up to the stars, and we can see a few more out here than we could in that apartment squeezed into the middle of the city. I blow some smoke up where she's probably looking. Then she says to the sky, "Think those irises will be okay in the bag overnight?"

"Sure," I say. "Of course." But I don't know shit about flowers.

"What about him?"

"Who's that?" I say, but I know.

"Yellow belly at 6995. You think he's managing?"

"Baby, that son of a bitch is just fine. How could anyone hurt a grumpy old asshole like that?"

"He's not that much older," Sage says.

"Enough older," I say, and we go to bed in the home we own as much as anyone owns any place. Mortgages and leases and liens and loans—who owns anything? Tommy, even, could lose his plane in a snap if he missed a payment, if we didn't sell enough photographs. But Sage, it seems, can't let it go.

Next morning, we're planting the irises, and she says, "You think he only gave us ninety-two because those were his last dollars?"

"I think he was a cheapskate."

"Sometimes I think about how much he might've needed that money if his wife just died and we pressured him into that photo. Puts my tummy in knots, you know?"

What I don't know is how to plant irises, how deep the hole should be, whether this bag of dirt we bought on clearance has the right nutrients or alkaline balance or whatever. I don't even know if it's the right time of year. I don't know anything. For now, most of them we've planted are standing tall and pretty—this army of color fencing our pretty red trailer home.

"He had a Mustang. He had a nice house. How bad could things be?"

"I bet you're right, Vance. I should leave it alone."

"Bury it right here in our dirt, baby," I say and pass her a blue iris, the prettiest one I can pull from the black trash bag. She lowers it gently and brushes the earth over top.

I study her hand, the lime nails smeared in clearance dirt. If Sage died first, and some joker showed up with a picture of her sunbathing, her whole body blaring in the sun, even if it was only the size of a petal from way up in the heavens, there's no price I wouldn't pay. Not for that kind of miracle.

Fiction judge Ron Rash writes: This story is superb in so many ways: dialogue, voice, tone, pacing; but most of all its unexpected turns, all of which deepen the impact. I am reminded of Raymond Carver, not as an act of imitation, but this story's sense of a border that, once crossed, can never be recrossed.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Competition - First Place

Amie Whittemore

The Peony

When I bow to the peony, I bow
to my grandmother, thankful

she's dead, thankful she isn't here
to witness the death of a grown grandchild,

the ache in her fingers like roots aching in drought:
to touch the grandchild's hair, wash dye from it.

When I bow to the peony, I bow
to my grandmother, to my cousin,

and also to Jane Kenyon, who wrote of peonies.
She saw the beloved in their folds,

saw the beloved's face crease and soften there.
She is also dead. Did her husband bend

to peonies to see her each spring?
Those widower years. His face a mask of sadness.

A mask the peonies cannot soothe.

I love peonies when they first breach
soil, their witchy hands grabbing sunlight.

I love their marbled fists
before blossoming, the many hypotheses

that live there close and hidden
as baby rabbits.

I love the way they are prudish
and seductive at once, hair coiled

in buns, the buns unraveling in wind—

my cousin, though she had a rose
tattooed on her neck, was not

what I would call floral.
She didn't identify with flowers, their neediness,

their frank desire for sunlight and rain,
the way they welcome touch, the way

they offer themselves to the world.

I imagine her and my grandmother coiled
together like … what? What do you want me to say?

The dead are where they are.
They are not peonies, not even

the scent of peonies. They are not
a poet married to another poet like couplets.

Not even the small impressions an ant leaves
on the blushing petals as it winds

closer and closer to the center,
the peony's core. The sweetness there

something only the living could want.

About "The Peony," poetry judges Nickole Brown and Jessica Jacobs write: Watching this poem blossom is memetic of its subject matter—though ordered into discrete and measured couplets that gives it an appearance of order, it unfurls with a lushness of family history and an extended metaphor of the peony that makes it richly unpredictable, moving from mention of the death of a grandmother to the death of a grown grandchild, to the speaker's cousin with "a rose / tattooed on her neck." Laced between these is a meditation on the early death of Jane Kenyon, a poet who also wrote of peonies, as well as descriptions of the flowers themselves that we will remember every year in which we're lucky enough to cut and bring them in from our garden: "their marbled fists / before blossoming, the many hypotheses // that live there close and hidden / as baby rabbits"… the flowers "prudish / and seductive at once, hair coiled // in buns, the buns unraveling in wind." It's a subtle yet masterful poem with a well-earned, resounding ending.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Competition - Honorable Mention

Amie Whittemore

If No One Opens Us, We'll Thirst

I picked up zinnias at the farm
and because she was with me
and we had fresh salsa to eat,

cherry tomatoes that tasted
just like summer afternoon
rain, I put them in water

without trimming the stems.
Two days later, they sag
with thirst, unable to drink—

I forgot the fundamental rule
of bouquets: you must open
the wound to extend the bloom.

I'm not sure this is a rule
for everything and if it is,
I'm not sure what to do with it.

The young couple next door
is arguing again—she wants to be
a good wife, he says he didn't

buy oxy, he's still clean as soap.
I want to tape a note to their
front door: walk away.

Though I'm trying to enter
a new season where I don't
barricade love, make it sleep

on the stoop, I haven't lost
my faith in cutting losses.
My high school English teacher

often proclaimed no one should
marry until forty, advice,
like all advice, I'm sure she wished

she followed herself, married
young and stuck in our small town.
We don't realize how needful

we are. I feel terrible
about the zinnias, like I'm the one
who killed them, though they were dead

the moment I saw them, troughed
in the farm shed, pink and orange—
the color of my aura, she said.

She keeps entering poems the way
water enters roots. I won't stop it.
Stop it, I want to say to the couple

whose wounds leak through
our shared wall, sharp and sallow.
We have everything to lose.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Nonfiction Competition - First Place

Karen Salyer McElmurray

In Varanasi

O wind, rend open the heat
cut apart the heat
rend it to tatters.

— from "Heat," by H.D.

In one photo you took, I was standing on the steep stone steps into a temple. Sun poured down the crown of my head, covered the bones showing through on my chest. We'd been in Varanasi for a week. Varanasi, city of Shiva, god of chaos and destruction, god wise enough to know he needed Pavarati's, his consort's, benevolence to recreate the worlds he destroyed. Mornings, we were listless as we walked through the marketplace, its pre-monsoon air thick with the scent of cayenne and curry. There, I touched the gold bindi on an elephant's trunk, a garland of jasmine around its enormous head. *Lord Ganesha,* a woman with no teeth said, and I remembered that he was the god of scribes and writers. Later, in the guest house, the table where we ate was hot to the touch and afterwards we slept hours in the blazing heat of afternoon. *The sound the legless man makes / pushing past on a tiny platform with wheels. The sound memory makes / vanishing inside a world made of fire.* This, I told myself, would someday be a poem.

Nights, we wandered in streets crowded with everyone too restless to sleep in the heat, with music and the angry eyes of stray dogs. At the guest house we got up every few hours to stand under a shower's warm water, slept naked as a fan dried us cool. Once I left you sleeping and went out onto a balcony as calls to prayer sounded in

the distance, a longing I couldn't name. By morning, our sheets were brown from the waters of the Ganges. There was no more desire by then.

*

My first memory of desire—a box fan blowing warm air across the living room. My mother on the couch, and my father in his chair, with me in the space between, learning to read the sadness of their faces. Later, their muffled voices from the other side of a wall. The hiss of arguing. Review of the day, that day, all days. A drawer sliding open. The rearrangement of bodies, give of mattress, in, out, in, out. *I love you like no other woman,* the voice said, and then there was silence.

Desire followed me. It traveled behind the Plymouth Duster that first boy drove, crept into the rolled-down windows as we parked in a thicket of trees beside Highway 60 going west. Desire was in that apartment in St. Louis with the boy who held a knife to my throat while he told me he wanted me. Other boys. *Jim. Michael. Wayne. Steve*. I can count those names, one and two and so on, until there were men. *Donny. Tom. Otis*. Slack-skinned men smelling of beer and roadsides and rooms filled with sunlight in the afternoon.

There was my body. There was that body. There was the distance between bodies, never breached.

There was the woman who wove shawls who said my aura was blue, and that I reminded her of the angel of death as she made love to me, my first orgasm. There was a woman with sad eyes in a country music bar. A man who cried when we both came as we lay in the heat of his apartment, the rim of the canyon outside piling up with snow. My body echoes with the memory of touch, the lack of touch, the so what. My body remembers wanting touch, touch, touch, even when I felt nothing at all, a nothing I told myself was better than empty.

My words remember a hot summer day. Wind blowing against a clapperless bell hanging from the eaves of the house I left, some lover watching out the window as I drove away.

*

The first poems I ever wrote were so sweet they made my teeth ache. I wrote them down in a locked diary my mother pried open to find out who that boy was I wanted more than her.

The poems after that raged. Awake for three days on speed, the poems flew by themselves. They were lost in the words on the backs of bathroom stall doors. They were parts of themselves on the backs of napkins, inside matchbooks. They were packed into bags that traveled to Arizona, to New Mexico. They grew and grew along highways, beside roads going back east. They took themselves seriously in classrooms at a big, fine school. They learned names for themselves. *Ghazal. Pantoum. Cinquain.* They blossomed into narratives. They reached inside hearts that would not open.

They became whole stories. *The woman alone in a diner. The woman beside the man on a bus.* The poems were deserts and mountains and caves. They were fire and cooking pots and a man's bare feet in the city of Varanasi. They were the voice of what could have been, burning up in the dark.

*

We got to Varanasi on a school bus, riding roof-top in the suffocating press of bodies and a heap of metal pipes. The bus careened down hills, took curves so fast I slid onto the girl lying sick beside a crate with chickens. The sun, yellow and mean, bore down as we rode through villages, all of us ducking under wires that sagged across the roads. *Allah Akbar*, someone called as I vomited from the edge of the bus into the white-hot day. *God is great,* they all sang and you sang out too as I looked at you, knowing that you did not necessarily believe in any god here or there or anywhere, but only in the day upon day that took us further into heat.

God was great, the young man we met up with in Varanasi said. You knew him from Virginia where you'd both been students, and now here he was in India, a scholar, a devotee of Lord Shiva, about whom neither of us knew much. He showed us a low bench in his room, a many-armed god draped with blossoms, and a mound of red powder. He knelt and touched his hands to the mound, then laid a finger, gently, against my forehead.

The mound of red powder seemed to glow in the fierce sun shining through sheets strung across the windows of the small room. You accepted a small bag of tobacco and rolled a perfect cigarette against the flat surface of your leg. I watched the two of you, you with your lean, golden arms, your friend with his knowledge of gods on notecards strewn across the floor. We sat on the floor, our legs crossed, sipping pinkish, sweet tea as he told us about his studies. He was devoted, he said, to uncovering new truths about Goswami Tulsidas, the great Hindi poet. *Devoted.* That word hung in the air inside the sweet cigarette smoke.

I was devoted to nothing much. The clapboard churches of my childhood and their praise-the-Lord preachers that had left me empty. *Fear the Lord,* they'd said, and so I had believed in gods and fear, in thunder and awe. The fear they meant was the sin of human touch, the wages of desire. I'd followed the trail of the faithless as far from home as I could get until I landed in Virginia with the poems I called my religion. What devotion did I feel as the press of voices rose outside in the hot streets of Varanasi? I remember studying the planes of your sunburned cheeks, the flat tips of the fingers that had been inside my body but now seldom touched me. I touched my empty belly and repeated that word. *Devoted. Devoted.*

*

Two years before India, I met you at the foot of a giant volcano in central Virginia. The volcano was the main attraction at *Green Gardens,* a greenhouse next to Highway

29 North. I was a student, studying poetry in a Master of Fine Arts program. I needed work, and so I was hired to help haul and dig and plant. The volcano was forty feet high, a dormant mound of dirt and rocks wrapped with plastic tubing that was supposed to release water to simulate lava. On the muggy August day we met, you were kneeling at its base, planting irises.

When I remember that moment, I want there to be a pan shot of the greenhouse, the busy highway with all the cars going south. Music as lush as what grows in summer. Instead I stood there and waited as you interrupted the rhythm of spade and soil. I don't remember you asking my name, or looking at me directly. You were working here, you said, until you were ready to head east, and I asked where. The Far East, you said. Already I wanted the volcano to spew cool water and for us to stand in its shower, dissolving the day's heat. Instead I remember the dry feel of the dirt as I reached my hands in, picked up the first cluster of irises.

*

I wrote poems and folded them into origami. You clipped vines precisely at the signature leaves. I filled up notebooks with phrases I'd overheard and with drawings of hands. You potted plants and set them out in row after row, inside greenhouses smelling like chemicals that could burn the skin. I held my hands out to the sky waiting for words to fill them up. You watered each hanging pot to the count of ten. I wanted you to say you loved me. You sat eating sharp cheese sandwiches for lunch week after week after week and would not meet my eyes. I gave you a book about memory and inscribed it with these words: *The worlds of poetry and perennials can meet.* I wrote papers about Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Ramsay, who dies very suddenly in the night. About D.H. Lawrence and the ancient gods of Mexico. I wrote poems I wanted more than you and sometimes you read them. You planted gardens that were gold and blue and brilliant red. You came to me in the night and I came to you in the night and the rooms we found were empty.

*

After days in Varanasi, we had not yet sat beside the holy river and we were always thirsty. Around our waists were packs with hidden rupees folded small and bottles of warm water we purified with iodine. In the streets we passed straw huts with cut-out windows where hands urged us to take the risk, drink, drink, fifty paise for a metal cup that could pour water, cool and impure, into our open hands. Varanasi was full of longing like that. A day trip to a holy site. Chilled bottles of Limca cola vendors pressed against our arms as we waited for the bus in the hot sun, the only shadows from the packed lines of people, people. Palms patting chapatti thin beside small fires and large, gray pigs rooting in the trash in a lot where the bus stopped. Curries that churned in our guts as we licked our fingers clean. We stared into the eyes of sadhus as they held their hands out, begging for rupees, their wild eyes blessed with infinity.

In an alleyway, a temple with an open doorway and dancers with shorn heads. A priestess chanting. *Om Namah Shivaya.* Our days were orange, brown, red, blue, an impasse of color, no color a clue to what this city was, what it meant. At the end of each day, we walked back to another stifling room and I lay awake beside you, looking for the one word for the desire I wanted but no longer felt.

*

In Virginia, you lived with friends in a building called the Altamont. Our footsteps echoed inside the apartment, the living room empty except for a dining table and an enormous blow-up of Godzilla. You were here just for a little while, you said. Until you had the money. We sipped wine turned sour from a bottle left on the table and petted a cat named Velcro. In your room, I eyed the piles of socks and pants and shirts, the open drawers of a chest. When you were in college, you said, someone broke into the house where you were living with some friends. No one could tell what had been taken from your room because of the disarray. I wondered if I should laugh.

You lit a candle as you sat beside me on the floor. The undressing was a script—you unbutton my pants, I unbutton yours. I'd followed the script a hundred times over the years, the reaching across space to someone I hardly knew—the wet mouths, the smooth faces. What I did know: your silence, your self-containment as you worked the nine-hour greenhouse days. The no-small-talk way of you. I'd studied the tall reach of you in the sun as you bent, shoveled, bent. In your eyes, a hint of all the countries I'd never seen, the oceans, the faraway lures. We lay back on the foam pad on the floor and I breathed the scent of work clothes—musk and sweat. Little beads of sweat had dried in the hairs under your arms. I could feel them against my face.

I don't remember all of that journey across one another's bodies, neither your hands on me, nor my hands on you. I remember the curtainless window and the dull shine of streetlight. The scratch of a cat's claws at the door. I remembered all the men before: their bodies like houses I would enter, making sure I was a good guest, that I proffered just the right gifts of hands and mouth. You lay on your side and I faced you, waiting beside this chasm, this first foray of body into body. I remember the chiaroscuro of my own arms and legs, a woman posing on the awkward verge of opening herself. How you looked down at your own self, your curved penis reaching up and waiting. What will you do about this, you asked? I lay still, imagining myself shutting the open drawers, folding the stray socks, touching you precisely *here,* then *there.*

*

Months before Varanasi, months before I met you at the foot of an artificial volcano, months before I traveled to Virginia, years before I was a child, before I was in the womb, eons before there was a world at all, there was poetry. Or so I told myself as

the days in Varanasi became a week, two. I lit incense at the temples of gods whose names I didn't know. We sipped hot tea to make our bodies sweat, to cool ourselves in the midday heat. We talked about who we were, what we wanted. Or I talked. Poetry, I said, was essence. Essence of what, you asked? You, I knew, were proud of not having read a book in four years. Your essence was here, now. It was what came next, and what came after that. I fumbled for the words I wanted. *Heart. Space. Spirit. Form. Beauty.* Is poetry always beautiful, you asked? In Varanasi we stood looking at a man sitting in a wide lot filled with dirt and rocks, an umbrella over his head as he broke stones into gravel in the heat.

*

The first summer with you passed into winter and the greenhouse filled with brilliant red poinsettias. You said you were just as happy if no one knew we were more than friends. You were clear that spring was a time on the clock, tick, tick, and that you were leaving by then. Bali. Thailand. India. I followed you on maps, dreaming. I trailed after you to parties where your friends shared stories of travels of their own. Your friend Wendy had lived in the city of Calcutta, where she strung beads to make bracelets to sell, sold this, sold herself to buy heroin for the man she called her black angel. Marijo and Kevin traveled to Vietnam to find work in the refugee camps, and Evie lived in a cave in Greece, on Santorini. And me, they asked as an Elvis Costello song climbed out of the boom box and set them all dancing. Me, I said. I try to write poems. I write poems on good days. That word, poems, melted in the steamy heat by the radiator, where you danced with Wendy, your hands on your hips, your eyes shining with the stories you drank in like they were rich, red wine.

*

I imagine the great saint and poet Goswami Tulsidas waking before sunrise to sit on a balcony overlooking the Ganges. He peels back the spiky skins of rambutans, eats their fleshy white fruit, sips his sweet tea. This Tulsidas does not know he will be a famous poet, nor that he will compose epics delivered directly into the hands of the gods. He does not yet know that he will swim along the banks of the river in search of Ratnavali, his wife, who has left him, not because he is too much a poet, but because he is not poet enough. He has not, she says, filled himself up yet with the heat of language. *Look,* Ratnavali tells him, and she sweeps her arms across the expanse of the river, gestures toward the roofs and cooking pot, the temples and alleyways and streets, the marketplaces and the stalls. *You want to write?* she says. *Write this.*

*

You pour water from a pitcher, washing your face and arms, an ephemeral moment of cool that vanishes too soon. Our Varanasi room is cheap and good, a stifling box.

A low bed sits on blocks, the walls smoky and streaked. I imagine a body, an arm, a spurt from the tip of a needle. *Heroin. Change money. Passport.* Voices sell everything, all day long, and already there are scores of voices as the street wakes up. A family sleeping on cots in the street begins to wake up. A girl takes up an enormous bundle of laundry and carries it on top of her head. A woman kneels, blowing fire alive under a burner to make morning tea. There are coughs, shouts, echoes of prayer from the ghats down by the Ganges. That is where we will go this day to watch the waters move by in this holy city of cities. I no longer know what that word means. *Holy.* I haven't written a poem in months, and I hold my hand out palm up, over the street, waiting.

*

Come late spring in Virginia, you didn't leave for Asia, and this cost us both, the waiting, waiting. I sat beside you in your 1963 Plymouth Valiant. The windows were rolled down against the heat, and the day was humid and still. I saw myself looking at your blond hair, wanting to run my fingers through it, but I didn't. I leaned against the open window, studied you from that distance—your ruddy complexion, your one longer tooth, the fine hairs on your arms. The argument we were having circled and dove in the air, a living thing, a bat, a blackbird, a prehistoric creature with claws. The argument dove into my chest, then into yours. It tore at us. You insisted. I insisted. We were both wounded.

Then it was July, the greenhouses were sweltering, and the long plastic tunnels fecund. The starts of the fall mums were wilting in their pots and you needed, you said, to tend to them, to water. Watering, you always said, should be the count of ten, one and two and so on, pot by pot by pot in the hot, moist air. You are needed the most then, in the summer's greenhouse heat, you say as you drop me off early at the door of the clinic where I've scheduled the procedure before noon.

I'd held the pregnancy in my belly for eleven weeks, a secret only you and I knew. I held the secret in the curve of my belly, and you held it in the way your arm draped over my shoulders like it didn't know where to rest. For ten weeks we sat in your car, sat in diners, sat in your cluttered room and fought about ways to bring the secret to light, ways to let the secret go. Pregnancy was a termination, of your travel plans east, my plans for all the poems. Abortion was a termination, a quick scrape to the womb, the pamphlets said. Ten weeks. Eleven weeks. Most people, the intake person at the clinic said on the phone, want to take care of these things as quickly as possible. Eleven weeks and four days, and I harbored the secret in the deep fecund red inside myself.

Twelve weeks and I donned the paper gown, lay down on a table, propped my legs up in the stirrups, looked at the doctor's face, a million miles away. *Could we wait?* I asked. *Just one minute longer?* Then his hands were inside me, inserting a tube that sucked the thing out. The thing, the secret, the accident, the wish. *Abortion,* the definition reads. *To bring to premature end because of a problem or fault.* I'd imagined

it for twelve weeks, the rush of the secret out of my womb. It would be, I told myself, like warm water from between my legs. It would be moistness from an underground cavern, a hidden chamber, a refuge. It would come out of me and I would capture it later like a poem. It would be easy. It would be quick. It would be over, over. It was a secret released into the air, but I breathed it back in and I couldn't let go of it after, as hard as I tried.

*

In Varanasi, poetry was a small child in an alleyway, all her fingers missing, her hands held out. *Rupee. Rupee.* And you, striding ahead, hoarding coins for all our miles ahead. That moment became the start of a poem. *In Varanasi a girl / begs in an alleyway, hungry for coins / while the woman follows the man / who does not know how to translate the word for need. Need huddles in her belly / an absence she births / instead of a child.* Poems are an approximation of pain, of love, an unkind braille we read in the dark. Words settle into lines, lines weave themselves into poems. Poems conjure times, places. They conjure ghosts and devastation. They conjure the memory of heat.

*

Years and years later, I still feel the mud between my toes as I wade into the Ganges. You are behind me, on the steps of the ghats with your camera, photographing the shikaras and the women beside me in their saris, waist deep, bathing in the tepid waters. What might or might not have been. Ibis winging up toward a sun that blinds me through my spread fingers. Old man in the bow of a shikara, hookah and fragrant smoke. The plump body of a man floating past, his face down into the holy waters. The river, I have read, is called *Sindhu. Vitasta. Bhagiratahi.* It descended from a glacier, fills vast tributaries, has the names of kings and conquerors. Words for the river still travel up from my chest. *Ganga.* Mother of forgiveness.

In time I will summon words to describe those Varanasi days—alleyways, stalls, frangipani blossoms at the altars of the dead. I will write poems and stories. I will open the box of photographs and the memory of heat will rise against my face. Some nights I will dream of maps and a tangle of roads, buses and the faces of strangers. In one dream, you will meet me on a dead-end street at night, where we speak to one another again after many years of silence. In another dream, you show me a garden so beautiful it makes me weep. In time I will hold the words I least understand in my mouth until I taste them. Ganges, Holy River. After so many years, if I summon enough words can I make a poem about forgetting?

I wade further into the sacred river, its stagnant waters covering my thighs. I take a handful of dust from my pocket—dust gathered from the ghat where you are standing. Handfuls of dust that I scatter over the waters like they are the remains of the dead.

Nonfiction judge Stephanie Elizondo Griest writes: This is an essay about love, about loss, about the redemption of each. It's an essay about how to find solace in a place—in this case, Varanasi, which is the holiest city in India, and one of the holiest cities in the world, where many come to die and have their ashes spread into the Ganges. And, this is metaphorically where she's coming to burn this old aspect of herself, burn the ashes of a love affair. And the quest in this essay is how to make sense of life through poetry, and it is achieved. Every line of this essay is indeed a poem, every segment is a poem, every line is absolute poetry. The lyricism of this essay is just off the charts. At one moment, the essayist has a meditation of heart, space, spirit, form, beauty, and all of those entities are exceptionally captured in this piece.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Flash Competition - First Place

Amber Wheeler Bacon

The Damage

The project was worth forty percent of Tom's science grade, which I thought was ridiculous. I was a teacher, so I knew.

"I have to build a model of a hurricane," he said. "I'm doing Florence, how it hit our town."

"When we lost the longleaf pine," I said.

He came in with an empty box from the garage. I was struck by his youth as he stood in the doorway, his knowing. I remembered myself at his age: twelve years old with a soft face and unsure of everything. And what was I sure of now?

Florence had washed away our neighborhood pier. Tom built it with Popsicle sticks and stuck it to the cardboard town, leaving the end jagged and broken like the real one four blocks away. He drew in streets with a black Sharpie and named them: Poplar, Cedar, Dogwood. All trees. The men who'd planned our town were devoid of imagination.

I went outside and pulled a twig from one of the pines in the yard, a different species than the longleaf, but it would pass. Squirrels scattered. Since the hurricane, the animals in the neighborhood had multiplied, come out of hiding. Feral cats yowled outside our windows at night.

"You can glue it down," I said, holding up the pine twig. "For the one we lost."

Tom's last additions were facts written on notecards: wind speed, direction, storm surge, category. It was only a "1" but the damage had been vast.

A few days after the storm, his father left us.

"I've looked and looked," I said when he'd gone. "He's nowhere to be found."

"He's hiding," Tom said.

This boy saw more than me, hoped less.

He got an A on the assignment, an A in the class.

The day Tom got his grades, I picked him up from school, and he shoved the hurricane model in the trunk. The trunk was frightening when opened—filled to the brim with disparate parts of a past life.

Pulling out of the parking lot, an animal crossed my path. I imagined it as quick and small, good at camouflage. I slammed on the brakes. There was a loud thump in the trunk, a crushing of paper and cardboard. At home, I pulled the damaged model out of the car, wondering what had been in the street, why I wasn't prepared for it.

I should have seen it coming.

Flash judge Tara Campbell writes: This story achieves emotional resonance with clean language and keen attention to detail. Using a parallel between a storm-ravaged town and a fractured marriage, the author deftly imbues small moments with additional layers of meaning.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Flash Competition - Honorable Mention

Amber Wheeler Bacon

General Sorrows

We started by burying something small, a feather from a dead sparrow we found by the porch. We didn't think to bury the sparrow. Lucky's mom made him turkey and cheese one morning for lunch, and he brought me the half-eaten sandwich. He said she should have known better, he hated turkey. Our moms had been in the same playgroup together when we were babies. I once overheard my mother on the phone saying that Lucky's mom always showed up in high heels, smelling of cigarette smoke and whiskey. We were now ten and both small for our age. His mother hadn't changed.

We buried the sandwich next to the feather, a water oak standing guard. But Lucky began to misinterpret the point of the burials. He seemed to want to bury the things about his life he didn't like.

"This is for general sorrows," I said. "The things that hurt all children. Not just you."

There was an argument to be made in favor of the items Lucky wanted to bury. Wasn't neglect something we'd all experienced? And none of our parents really understood us. They'd gone too far from where they'd been.

But I stood firm on the rules for our burials, so Lucky snuck to my house during the night and buried things on his own, surprising me each morning with little mounds of soil dug up in the corner of my front yard. It was a pretty spot near a small grove of pines, where Mom hung a hammock in summer. Dad noticed the mounds and wondered aloud if our yard was being overtaken by moles.

Lucky's mounds got larger. I was afraid it meant he was unhappy—that things at his house were growing worse. Finally, I got the little shovel we took to the beach

from the garage and went out to the water oak. Maybe if I could dig up Lucky's sorrows and put them in one place, one grave, they'd add up to something. Perhaps a specific problem would assert itself, begging for an answer, one that we could then solve.

I stuffed my hands into the earth. Underneath a layer of pine straw, my fingers sifted through sandy soil. Deeper down, I felt the earth grow cold and thick, turning to clay. I dug and dug and dug and found nothing there but soil and the dead things within it. It was as if Lucky had buried the ideas of things that hurt him rather than the things themselves.

The next morning on the bus, I said to him, "What is it you've buried?"

He mimed sawing into his chest and pulling out his heart, then held out his empty palms.

Flash judge Tara Campbell writes: The imagery in this story is enchanting, with an ever-growing number of objects representing sorrows to bury, and a narrator increasingly concerned about how his friend is stretching the rules.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Competition - Second Place

Junious Ward

Imagine Me

I. Playing the quadroons, middle school, at the wrong lunch table

where I ain't cocktail, I ain't chemistry class
beaker, I ain't Pit and Black Lab, I ain't sound
studio hip hop 'cross subwoofers and tweeters,
ain't a review of the latest Cole album—

don't call me mix-taped, confused, half
what you want, half what you tolerate.
Black history month ain't just 14 days
for me. There is no struggle for light

and dark within me. My skin has not revealed
a George Lucas plot-hole, I ain't a light version
of bad or a Sith variant of Jedi. I ain't a %
or a poor hand in spades, don't call me one

and a possible. I ain't forked tongue, duplicitous
speech, like you casting well-intentioned daggers
talmbout *'best of both worlds'* where my pigment
is the punchline concealed under your breath.

II. Filling in the circle, as required, before moving on

a yin and yang remix to Desiigner's song *Panda*
ending in two chords played at once, contrapuntal
on piano where all the keys gray into themselves,

my brother and I side to side while a stranger questions
the hammered strings under the lid and who makes
the better music while who might be more readily

applauded, or the light blue t-shirt I wore in kindergarten:
a dazzle of zebras frenzied across a vague plain, too tempting
for classmates, too wild with agency, too on the nose.

III. In a dystopian society borne from your comments about babies

where the future is as beige as the children. All races
and cultures blend into a blinding chorus of kumbayas.

Every music video looks like Drake featuring Drake.
Even the Republicans say we are one people now,

and the liberals really don't see color anymore.
The pandas are gone.

Every face is a paper bag. There's only two
boxes on your medical form; other and not other.

There's a stigma about bringing non-mixed love interests
to meet your parents—*the horror, just think of the kids;*

confused throughout school. World history badgering:
what could've been, why so cruel, lighten up—

could privilege, try as it may, deny itself through laughter?
A joke can forecast unspeakable things and thirty years

later the teller regrets or denies. Saying "they always come
out so beautiful" means to dig a hole deep enough to bury

the prophecy you set in motion. Disavowing the prophecy
is to say *I don't think you understood what I meant.*

About "Imagine Me," poetry judges Nickole Brown and Jessica Jacobs write: What first struck us about this poem was its expansive scope: it moves with lyric dexterity and limber associative leaps in three acts, opening with a knockout list of brilliant and surprising negations of all the things this speaker of mixed-race is not *(from a "cocktail" to a "forked tongue" to all the well-intentioned platitudes as "punchline"). From there, it moves on to a look back at how the speaker was perceived from childhood on before leaping forward in the final section into a dystopian future where everyone believes "all races / and cultures blend into a blinding chorus of kumbayas." Along the way, this sequence bends and twists, alive with music and wit. Truly, we were taken with the verve and honesty of this piece, how it's equally as playful with its palate of references as it is serious in its subject matter.*

Junious Ward

Love as an Object Lesson, Cornfield

Her hand is a frenzy of shuck, silk, worm & toss
but my mind is on the road-hugging honeysuckle

nearby. I never liked the taste of corn let alone
the struggle of detasseling. I drift between rows

to escape the white throat of mom's bucket
when I know she is looking for me

to help. In the neighbor's field, among the tall
stalks, her back stoops as the sun just stands there,

helpless & hot. I think *how did this happen, why
am I here?* She wails and my knees give. She claws

frantically at something dark & vague.
I'm close by but the dirt is a cloud. We forget

I'm there. The confession I'm not meant to hear:
transplant, small town isolation, hollow husk.

Before settling on Carolina there was the question
of North to her family or South to his.

Even not moving at all meant breaking
ground, meant a blossom of constraints, meant

*these are all Joe's friends and sometimes
I don't know why I'm here!* To sow

and to harvest both begin and end with a fist
tearing away at the soil. I reappear to wrap her,

to console an ache I can't gather, vanish into
a vanishing, to hold under the pulse

of a tumbling storm. What does it mean to stay?
A crop at what cost? A meal worth us all

sitting and waiting for? I catch sight of mom
in the kitchen moments before she'd bring dinner

to the table. She's staring into the stockpot, brimming
with cob & heat, preoccupied with wrinkles in the water,

curated smile of uneven rows, sandy strands
floating wildly until brushed behind an ear.

Annie Woodford

In the Dark I Light a Little Fire

after Ellen Bryant Voigt

Out of the mouths of exiles.
Coalfields. Textile mills. Grandparents
who picked the sharecropping lock

and turned their bodies and their lives
into a new cash crop, chopped
up by time clocks.

Clawhammer. Creasy greens.
The hard *R* at the end of *tire* and *tired*:
Why do I pronounce *on* as *own*

and where did the melody of *Barbary Allen*
come from? How did it travel
the Serpentine Chain to the few

Cherokee who faded back
into the trees and into the bloodlines
of black folks and black Irish

who rocked their babies, singing
So slowly, slowly she got up
And slowly she grew nigh him…

For a long time, the diaspora
gathered around the radio,
curio cabinet of static,

where old songs were bent
to tunings new as the tempo
kept by spools of viscose thread

or the mechanical stamp punching
boot soles out of sheets of rubber—
whatever work it was that now kept

agrarian minds too busy
to notice the passage of time.
I keep the old ways in my mouth

and a scrap of flower-sack in the attic.
My mother and her sisters burned
their father's paystubs

from the chair factory.
But I remember what I can't
remember. How his hands

had been worked so hard
they sagged off his wrists
like catcher's mitts, the two fingers cut

short by a saw strong stubs he used
to beat music out of a cheap guitar,
a banjo sold long ago.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Nonfiction Judge

Stephanie Elizondo Griest

Día de Muertos

When my mother called me back to my father's sickbed, I was at a dinner party 550 miles away. Another guest took one look at my shaking shoulders and offered to drive me there. It was nearly 10 p.m. by the time I had thrown mismatched clothes in a suitcase and locked up the house where I'd spent the previous two weeks at a writing retreat.

As we peeled out of Marfa, Texas, the night air filled with skunk. I breathed it in deeply, like Dad would do. Once, when he was a little boy, his dog got sprayed while they were romping around the park. He claimed to love the stench afterward, as it induced that and other memories of his Kansan childhood: of watching his mother mash potatoes in the kitchen, of riding sleighs with his brother at Christmas, of pounding the beat in the high school marching band, of delivering newspapers under the rising sun.

The Mexican in me knew this skunk was a sign, then. I spent the next 545 miles trying not to interpret it.

*

If I were a proper Mexican daughter, there wouldn't have been any frantic driving through the night. I never would have left home in the first place. But wanderlust is a Griest inheritance. My great-great-uncle Jake was a hobo who saw all of America with his legs dangling over the edge of a freight train. Dad won a seat with a

U.S. Navy jazz ensemble as soon as he graduated high school and spent 15 years drumming for admirals and presidents on aircraft carriers around the world.

One night, while Dad was performing at a nightclub in Corpus Christi, a beautiful young Tejana walked in. He introduced himself at intermission by accidentally spilling his Coke all over her shoes. He led her backstage and gently wiped them clean. They got married three months later. His next gig was Mardi Gras, and the only way her parents would let her accompany him was as his bride. Tía Benita stayed up all week sewing the white satin dress.

Mom's family had migrated from the foothills of Tamaulipas, Mexico, to a cattle ranch in South Texas in the late 1800s. Among the ancestral traditions they retained was the one tasking the youngest daughter with eldercare. Tía Alicia was so devoted to Abuela, she never even had a family of her own. So Mom caused an escándalo when she absconded to the Northeast with Dad for eight years before landing a job at IBM back in Corpus. She then broke not only Mexican but American conventions by becoming the family breadwinner while her husband stayed home with their two little girls.

Dad turned us into travelers early, buckling Barbara and me into the seat on the back of his bicycle as soon as we could hold our heads up straight. After school, he would whisk us off to Port Aransas to see the porpoises or to Rockport to climb on the jetties, and every summer, he packed up the van for a road trip to Mesa Verde, the Redwood Forest, or the Grand Tetons with John Denver crooning through the tape deck. When we started developing interests of our own, he always offered to be our chauffeur. He once drove my friend Shea and me 240 miles to a U2 concert—"Achtung Baby" blasting through the speakers—waited in the parking lot for four and a half hours, and then drove us 240 miles home. By the time I reached college, my wanderlust was raging. I majored in the language of the farthest country I could fathom—Russia—and jetted off to Moscow to become a foreign correspondent. Since then, I have explored nearly 50 countries and lived in 15 different cities. If I thought about it from my (Griest) vantage point, then, it was weirdly appropriate to be eight hours away when Mom called me home. There was nothing Dad loved more than a drive.

Racing into the dark night, though, I felt wholly Elizondo, and regretted every mile.

*

Our last big family trip was in 2010, to Dad's bucket list destination: Alaska. That's where I first started noticing his happy-go-lucky personality was changing. He demanded to be in bed by five each night, not because he was tired, but because he deemed the rule unbreakable. We couldn't convince him otherwise. Ditto with his insistence on arriving to places before they even opened. And he kept asking the same questions again and again and again.

One afternoon, we spontaneously decided to have a cook-out at a campground near Seward. It was raining by the time we found a store that sold hot dogs and marshmallows. Huddled around the grill, I realized that everyone was wearing the same color rain jacket—royal blue—except Dad. His was white. With his white hair and white beard, he looked like a cloud in our family sky. I breathed in the serenity of being surrounded by everyone I loved most.

Then I noticed that my 12-year-old niece was showing Dad how to turn his stick into a spit. This man who had provided every meal of my childhood seemed mystified by the concept of roasting. After lunch, we set off for a nearby waterfall. As I lingered behind to take our photograph, I saw how difficult the trail was for Dad to navigate. This man who had played tennis five mornings a week for half a century no longer knew where to put his feet. Mom finally grabbed him by the elbow, because this man who had driven us hundreds of thousands of miles across America now needed steering. I exhaled the first of the infinity of losses.

*

Barreling down the county road that curved along the Mexico border, it occurred to me that my impromptu driver bore a passing resemblance to Dad. They had the same beard and penchant for wearing denim shirts. They also shared a remarkable stamina for driving. In 550 miles, he stopped only twice, both times for gas.

Mom had warned us this could be a fire drill. One of her cousins had recently flown from Seattle to Corpus five times on a moment's notice, only to witness her previously comatose mother revive. Mom predicted this would be the case with Dad, too, especially since his Aunt Maude spent more than a decade in a vegetative state before succumbing to the disease they shared: Alzheimer's. I personally doubted he'd make it to 2020, but was reasonably optimistic he'd endure the summer. I last saw him on Father's Day weekend, prior to departing for Marfa. I spoon-fed him his favorite soup—asparagus pureed with sour cream and lemon—before entertaining him with YouTube videos. It had been a while since his last coherent sentence, but he said "That's so cute" at the sight of a baby panda bear trying to climb out of a trashcan. Efforts to engage him in further conversation went nowhere, though, and he soon fell asleep.

The next day, Mom and I wheeled his chair onto the patio, where I announced it was time for music. Grandma Griest had discovered 80 years earlier that if she gave Dad a wooden spoon, he would happily whack a pan for hours. Besides his childhood paper route, he had never earned a paycheck for anything besides his music. Alzheimer's had transformed his drumming from a livelihood to a lifeline: as long as he could find the rhythm, we knew he was still there.

Dad's hands had curled into fists weeks ago, but there seemed to be enough room for a drumstick. I slid one in until it felt secure, then raised up a book beneath it.

Nothing happened. I tapped the drumstick for encouragement. Still nothing. And then he closed his eyes. Mom and I looked at each other and sighed.

Growing up, she was the one with whom I had struggled to communicate. Every morning as I waited for Dad to fix my breakfast, Mom would swoop into the kitchen wearing a power suit with shoulder pads, gulp down some Folger's, and dash out the door in high heels. She didn't return until nightfall, and we all knew not to bug her until she'd completed the crossword puzzle. If one of her relatives called, however, she'd smile with her entire being. She always took the phone out onto the porch, but her laughter rang out above the TV. Spanish sounded like the ultimate comedy show, only the rest of us weren't in on the jokes. That's because Mom grew up in an era where teachers would shove a bar of soap in your mouth if they caught you speaking Spanish in the classroom. Then she married a gringo who knew only two words: taco and vámonos. She never taught Barbara or me how to speak her native tongue, since she didn't want to linguistically divide our home. Whenever we visited Abuela, we sat around mute—until it was time to eat, or go.

Just then, I remembered the chant Dad used to teach his beginner drum students. "BOOM get a rat-trap/bigger than a cat-trap/BOOM!" I sang out. His eyes fluttered open. A long moment passed. Then he faintly tapped back.

*

We pulled up to the care facility at 5:44 am. My impromptu driver stepped out to give me a hug, accepted the only thing I had to give (bruised bananas), and then drove 550 miles back to Marfa.

"Daddy, I'm here," I called out as I entered his room. His expression did not change, but there was movement beneath his blanket. I lifted up a corner and his fist raised in greeting. I wrapped one of my hands around it, then caressed his skeletal face with the other. His indigo eyes were wide open. Peering into them, I chanted words of love and gratitude. At some point in the four hours that ensued, Barbara—who'd taken a quick nap after driving in from San Antonio at midnight—took the place of Mom, who'd been keeping vigil for 24 hours and wanted a shower. Holding our dad in our arms, my sister and I played his favorite songs. John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High." Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow." Frank Sinatra. Then I cued up the song we loved to sing while Dad played the piano when we were little: Simon & Garfunkel's "59th Street Bridge Song." Moments after the chorus had ended—"Life, I love you / All is groovy"—a nurse walked in. I peeled my eyes away from Dad's to ask how much time we had. A couple of days, she said. His skin wasn't mottling yet. His legs were warm. His vitals had stabilized. There was still—

Barbara gasped. I looked down. Dad was gone.

*

Two nights before Mom called us home, I was sitting on the porch with a glass of white wine, enjoying a desert breeze after a long day of writing, when I saw movement in a cluster of nopales. First one, then two, then three little bodies bounded over, a blur of black and white. Skunks! It wouldn't have been more surprising if they were wolverines—and they were headed straight toward me. Without thinking, I stood up and greeted them.

"Well, hello there!"

Immediately they halted. We stared at each other for half a second before they made a collective U-turn and scampered off in the opposite direction.

*

I wanted to stay with my father until his body had turned completely cold. When informed I could not do that, I started wailing. Promptly, I was silenced. Seven other residents were on the other side of the thin walls. I must not frighten them. *Okay*, I gasped. I stifled my cries until we had stepped outside the care facility, then let loose. But no: the facility was located in a residential neighborhood. I had to be quiet there, too, so as not to wake the neighbors. *Okay.* I waited until we pulled into the driveway behind our house. Dad had turned the garage into a man cave before that term was even invented. A train set ran around the ping-pong table. Sinatra posters plastered the walls. Hot air balloons dangled from the ceiling. The sight of Dad's drum set is what buckled my knees, though. For the third time, I started wailing. But this was deemed inappropriate, too. Someone lifted me by the shoulders and steered me inside the house. By the time I made it to the living room couch, where wailing presumably was permitted, I couldn't. My cries were stuck inside me.

*

Eight days after burying my father's ashes, I unlocked my condo in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and anxiously unzipped my suitcase. To my relief, his old snare drum had survived the flight. It had hung in the garage for decades, and when we pulled it down after the funeral, Mom and I were surprised to find the remnants of a bumper sticker that said MIDWESTERN MUSIC AND ART CAMP 1954 in faded script. Dad would have been 17 then, preparing for his audition for the Navy. I placed the drum in the corner of my office, then continued unpacking until I came across his dog tag. We had found enough of these engraved tin plates in Dad's dresser for each family member to take one home. Where should I put mine? I circled my house a few times before setting it atop the drum for safekeeping. Ditto with my eulogy, which I rolled like a scroll. Then a neighbor knocked on the door, proffering a bag of my mail. Sympathy cards awaited inside, so lovely, I couldn't just toss them into a box. I stacked them atop the drum, but that wasn't right either, since only the top one was visible, so I fanned them out in a half-moon around the drum. This made my eyes sting. I went to the kitchen to brew some tea, then halted at the

cabinet. I had celebrated my birthday before flying down to Texas, and hung the roses I'd received upside down from the cabinet's handle. *Dad sent us roses every single Valentine's Day of our lives.* Grabbing the dried flowers, I hurried back to the office and laid one between each card. Then I took the large framed photograph I'd been given by the funeral home—Dad in a denim shirt, smiling on the Alaskan railroad—and propped it atop the drum, along with votive candles.

This was not a ritual I had observed in childhood. Mom kept photos of family who'd died atop the piano, but that was the extent of ancestral veneration in our home. Like many Mexican traditions I now uphold, I learned about altars from books by Laura Esquivel and Gloria Anzaldúa, from college courses like "Chicano Politics" and "The History of Mexican-Americans in Texas," and above all, from my travels. I briefly wondered if it was appropriate to honor Dad this way, given his ambivalence to Mexican culture, but before I knew it, I was talking to his photograph. This made me laugh. A year before Dad entered the care facility, Mom told me that she'd overheard him chatting away in his bedroom one night. At first, she thought he was on the phone, but then remembered he had forgotten how to use it long ago. When she opened his door to ask what he was doing, he said, "Talking to Stephanie," then tapped my framed photo.

*

Mexico bewildered me when I was little. I couldn't understand why the landscape changed so drastically when we walked across the international bridge from Laredo to Nuevo Laredo. Suddenly, the sidewalk broke apart. There were blind men strumming guitars on the street corners. Women pushed heavy carts of candied fruit swarming with bees. Barefoot children sold boxes of Chiclets. By the time we reached our first stop—Marti's, Mom's favorite department store—I had already distributed my allowance into a succession of outstretched palms. By high school, Mexico was the place where I bought Retin-A for my acne and sneaked sips from Mom's margarita when she wasn't looking. Boys at school teased each other about getting laid there. They swore prostitutes had sex with donkeys there. That—coupled with the fact that we were never taught anything about Mexicans in school besides their murdering of Davy Crockett at the Alamo—made me leery of my ancestral land, indeed.

Once I started traveling around the former Eastern Bloc while based in Moscow, however, I learned that you cannot judge a nation by its border towns (or, equally enlightening, by how it is portrayed in a Texas public school). Russia is also where I learned that many Soviets so revered their native culture, they had risked being banished to the Gulag for their efforts to preserve it. Soon after returning to Texas, I enrolled in an intensive Spanish course, then invited Mom on a trip to Mexico City, my first to the interior. Beholding its glories—the Mayan codices at Museo Nacional de Antropología, the splendor of La Casa Azul, the murals of Palacio de Bellas Artes,

the Aztec pyramid bursting through the zócalo—committed me to maintaining our family's ties there, especially when I met our last living relatives in Monterrey. They were in their seventies and had just two grandsons, both of whom pined to live in El Norte.

By the time I turned 30, Mexico was the subject of almost everything I wrote. I spent much of 2005-2006 bouncing around from Queretaro to Oaxaca to San Cristóbal de las Casas, trying to decide which city I loved best so I could move there. But then, in 2007, the United States' insatiable hunger for drugs plunged Mexico into narco war. Nearly 300,000 Mexicans died or disappeared in the decade that ensued. The violence slashed countless dreams, mine included.

In my forties, though, my own life imploded when I got diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The first place I flew when my oncologist promised it would no longer compromise my immune system was Mexico. It healed me in ways that chemo could not. Which is why, 17 days after burying my father, I booked a flight to Oaxaca for Día de Muertos.

*

I arrived to Oaxaca late at night in the driving rain. When I awoke the next morning, the city was gleaming with cempasúchiles. The orange-gold blossoms had been strung on ribbons that cascaded from rooftops, arched above doorways, and dangled from trees, and the rain had scattered their petals across the cobblestones, so that every road was golden. I bought an armload from the first seller I encountered and hurried back to the room I had rented. After pulling off each blossom, I lined them along the dresser, across the windowsill, and inside each of the shelves, then sprinkled a handful of petals atop the photo I'd brought of Dad, along with his dog tag.

From what I had read, a pueblo called Xoxocotlán was renowned for Día de Muertos festivities on October 31, so I booked an excursion from a pop-up travel agency downtown. One of the many options the agency offered was a "concurso de altares." Misinterpreting this as a lecture on altar-making, I plunked down an extra 100 pesos. Instead, the concurso entailed trotting alongside a massive comparsa—or Día de Muertos parade of twirling puppets, marching bands, ladies dancing with pineapples, and teenage boys launching bottle rockets into the sky—for five and a half miles until we reached the shuttle that took us on to Xoxocotlán. We arrived at 10 p.m. to a mob scene. Día de Muertos fell on a weekend that year, so tens of thousands of Mexicans had sailed in from throughout the country, while the smash-hit movie "Coco" had reeled in tens of thousands of foreigners. Seemingly every last one had painted their face like a skull, complete with rhinestones around their eye sockets and a black-tipped nose. Our tour guide cast us into the ghoulish sea, saying she'd wait for us by the stage, where a concert was underway. Before I could verify a time, I got caught in a wave that beached me at the cemetery gate. Walking across the threshold, I gasped. Every single tomb was outlined with flickering candles.

Amidst the trails of cempasúchil petals, the cemetery glowed like a city of gold—albeit, one on the verge of siege. Bands of drunken skeletons stopped at every tomb to snap a selfie, despite the fact that a bereaved family had gathered there, the widows draped in black rebozos, the children clutching pan de muerto. The graves were so close together, many were getting trampled. It felt so disrespectful, I tried to leave, but the crowds propelled me forward, forward, forward, until I finally veered off at a tomb surrounded by an especially large family. The matriarch looked up from what might have been her husband's grave. Reaching into my backpack, I pulled out the bag of pan de muerto I had brought from Oaxaca and handed it to her.

"Just one?" she asked.

"It's all for you," I said, then hailed the next wave toward the exit.

*

Traveling in Mexico had taught me that the schizophrenia of being biracial, of straddling two worlds but belonging to neither, might be the most Mexican thing about me. Mexicans have been struggling to navigate their blending of indigenous and Spanish bloodlines for 500 years now. The single most uniting fact of our Mexicanidad is that it is a negotiation for us all. Some aspects of our identity, we inherit; others, we must pursue.

That, at least, was how I tried to rationalize spending $67 on a "Day of the Dead Ceremony" I found on Airbnb. Yes, it made me feel like a fraud. But what was my alternative? Our last remaining family member in Monterrey had died three years prior. We weren't in touch with her grandchildren, so I couldn't go spend the holiday with them. I had also lost contact with the Oaxaqueños I'd befriended on earlier visits. Besides, this was how I had learned many aspects of my culture: if not from a trip, then a class. If not from a film, then a book. How will we ever recover from colonization, but to reclaim what we can, where we can, how we can, with hopes that our culture might better reauthenticate in the next generation?

It proved to be surprisingly moving, joining nine strangers around an altar inside the home of a Mixtec curandera—especially when two turned out to be Chicanas like me. Together, we wrote down the names of those we mourned on slips of paper, placed them on an earthen tray, and breathed. Sprinkled cempasúchil petals and breathed. Lit candles and breathed. Burned copal and breathed. Drank from a gourd of mezcal and breathed. Dunked pieces of pan de muerto inside mugs of hot chocolate and breathed. Listened and cried and told stories and laughed and breathed.

By the time the ceremony had ended, I was emotionally spent, yet rallied to join the Chicanas on an excursion to Oaxaca's main cemetery, Panteón San Miguel, anyway. I braced myself for another mob scene, but the only crowds were the families who had come to grieve. They encircled the graves of their dead, scrubbing down the crypts with sudsy water and stringing papel picado from the trees. Every

tomb had been decorated with photographs as well as treats—bottles of mezcal, packs of cigarettes, chocolates, tamales wrapped in banana leaves, jars of mole—plus row upon row of cempasúchil blossoms. One extended family was blasting ranchera from a boom box. Padres were dancing with hijas, tías with tíos, primas with primos, mamis with each other.

For most of my life, Dad said he wanted to be buried in his hometown of Minneapolis, Kansas. He even bought a plot there, right next to his parents, and inscribed the headstone with his and Mom's names and birth dates. Over the years, however, he seemed to realize that Barbara and I would visit more often if they were buried in Texas, and then Corpus opened a new veterans cemetery. Ever a fan of a 21-gun salute, Dad reserved a plot for Mom and himself, and that is where we buried him. Though heartened my parents would be easier to visit, I was crushed to read the cemetery's regulations. Only flags and flowers were allowed as devotional items, and none could be taller than the (identical) headstones. Never would I be able to decorate my parents' graves as lovingly—which is to say, as Mexicanly—as all the families were doing around me.

Something pulled inside my chest. Bidding farewell to the Chicanas, I slipped into the crowd. The cemetery was labyrinthine, but I could see a back wall beyond the roving mariachis. I was side-stepping a crypt when my phone vibrated. I looked down to see photographs from Kansas flickering across the screen. It took a moment to remember that Barbara and her husband were driving to Iowa for a conference that day, and had planned to visit Minneapolis along the way. One photo was of the store where Grandma Griest bought Dad's drum set some 65 years before.

Nearby was a slab of abandoned concrete. I plunked down just in time before the long-stifled wail came surging out. It soared above the dump where everyone was tossing the stems of decapitated cempasúchiles, above the water spigot where mamis filled their scrub buckets, above each and every crypt. No one minded, for if there was ever a time or a place to bawl in public, it was November 2 at Panteón San Miguel. And so I sobbed until my eyeballs threatened to slip from their sockets, until I felt faint from exhaustion, before staggering away from my perch.

Maybe 20 feet away was a tomb presided over by a man with a slicked-back shock of white hair, wearing a guayabera. He was holding onto the top of his cane so that he could sit upright, and his family was gathered around him. When my eyes met his, he solemnly nodded. He could tell my heart felt a little bit lighter. And suddenly, it did.

This essay was first published in the anthology Nepantla Familias: A Mexican-American Anthology of Literature on Families in between Worlds, *edited by Sergio Troncoso (Texas A&M University Press, 2021).*

Cynthia Robinson Young

Her Name Was Theosa

How simple a thing it seems to me that to know ourselves as we are,
we must know our mothers' names." — Alice Walker

In the family Bible
I discovered my grandmother's real name,
before she had to change it,
not to be more "American,"
but to be less of a Southerner,
back when those who had just arrived
from Georgia were looked down upon,
red clay dirt still under their fingernails,
eyes still searching for greenery over this
grey concrete and black asphalt.
Theosa is a beautiful name—
but the schoolkids acted like
the melody was caught in their throats
like fried catfish bones.

So she changed it to a Northern name
that they could embrace more
and bully less. Now all that was left
was her longing for what
her parents were glad to leave behind:

dense woods and forest
where one never knew who
they'd run into,
hanging
from a poplar tree.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Fiction Competition - Third Place

Janna Zonder

Who Kills the Bugs for the Dalai Lama?

The rusty axle of Mama's wheelchair squeaked in rhythm as she inched her way down the hall toward the kitchen. I finished pouring my coffee and stared bleary-eyed at the singing bird clock on the wall. Its minute hand landed on the house finch, and the mourning dove cooed. Seven a.m. She can't sleep late one time in her life?

"Those planes flew over again this morning, Jodi," she blared like a town crier intent on saving me from certain death.

She rolled into the room and made her way across the dingy faux-brick linoleum, pausing between sentences for a breath, then continuing at the same decibel level, "They dropped that powder all around the house. That stuff seeped in through the cracks and made me itch like something on fire.

"It's still floating through the air, Jodi. Can you see it?"

"Those are dust motes, Mama. We need to clean this house," I said.

"Oh, it looks like harmless dust motes! That's what they want you to believe, but it ain't harmless. They're trying to control my reproduction again. Those doctors told me my last baby was born dead, but I heard it screaming right after it came out. It was a monkey scream, like the kind coming from over at the CDC, where they do all those nasty experiments."

"That's nice, Mama," I said. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"They dusted my ovaries with that powder when I was sleeping, and now they want to do it again. It makes a woman's eggs open up to monkey sperm. The babies

look harmless—like sweet, precious, little monkey babies—but they have the power to control your thoughts."

She grabbed the edge of the kitchen counter and pulled herself up from her wheelchair. She shook her bony fist in my general direction and stood eyeball to eyeball with me, all hundred pounds of her, wearing the same food-stained, flowered housedress she'd had on for three days.

"Oatmeal or scrambled eggs?" I asked.

"The first generation of monkey babies is already here. You must get this information to the president. Monkeys mature much faster than humans. In six years, they're strong enough to kill a grown man. The president has got to put a stop to this research."

She shook her head sadly.

"All the living monkey babies must be destroyed before they can rise up."

"Mama, have you been watching *Planet of the Apes* again?"

"Fine, Jodi, make jokes," she said, plopping back down into the wheelchair. The seat cushion wheezed. "You won't be so smug when you find yourself stuck with a mean little monkey baby, wondering when it's going to eat half your face off."

"Mama, it's been so long since I've had any kind of sperm flowing in my direction—monkey or man—I'm safe from powder contamination. Now, are you hungry or not?"

She worked those wheels into a spin and huffed off. It's not easy for an eighty-five-year-old to huff in a wheelchair, but Mama has mastered the art of it.

"Besides," I yelled after her, "how do you know the president is not in on the plot?"

I heard her wheelchair stop abruptly. That would keep her busy for a while.

*

Yesterday, I went down to the basement for peach preserves. I hadn't been down there in more than a month. Mama and I usually make the preserves together, but she's gotten so bad lately, I'm afraid she might slip something poisonous into the jars when I'm not looking. She wouldn't intend to hurt me. She'd be after some enemy of the state.

While I was down there, I found nine of those amazing cylindrical mud tubes running up the surface of the basement wall. They always remind me of an adobe village—perfectly constructed, tidy communities made from mud. I could hear the dirt daubers humming inside.

Dirt daubers aren't aggressive. They like to eat spiders, black widows in particular. They rarely sting, but they attract other, more aggressive wasps that eat them and take over their nests.

They had to go.

This got me to thinking. *Who kills the bugs for the Dalai Lama? I doubt he lives in a house overrun by cockroaches. Is he so evolved that bugs leave him alone? Backtrack out of his bedroom when they get a whiff of him? Or, do his acolytes tiptoe into his room and gently remove any creature that might displease His Holiness or do him harm? Do they carefully tote them out into the garden and release them under a full moon with a prayer for peace? It's pretty damn easy to always choose non-violence when you have a staff of sycophants to secretly do the dirty work for you.*

These were the jealous, petty thoughts I was having as I raised the garden hoe and smashed the dirt dauber nests, pregnant with tiny eggs inside, stocked with paralyzed spiders for food. The little houses crumbled and fell to the floor. I stomped them into powder, and did a little James Brown on-the-good-foot-slide over them for good measure. I thought a little dance was an appropriate sendoff. Maybe it would kick-start them into the next incarnation.

Since I got on a vegan kick, I despise destroying something so beautiful, perfect, and alive. One minute they're humming in their tubes, the next a sad little sprinkling of powder on the floor. I'm starting to feel like every time I eat, I'm murdering something. I still have to cook meat for Mama, the bloodier the better, because she subscribes to the "man has dominion" policy. Animals, plants, insects are all subspecies indentured to humans for eternity.

Besides, she ain't never met a vegan she liked. That's a quote.

Mama has met one vegan. Amber.

I met Amber at my book club and invited her over for dinner, something I rarely do. Mama's too unpredictable. One minute she's a tender, little old lady and the next, I'm waiting for her head to start spinning. She gets this flat look in her eyes, and disappears somewhere behind it.

I'll admit this particular vegan turned out to be the meanest woman I'd ever met in my life. Her professed love of all things did not extend to humans. Any consumption of animal products, including honey and milk, was akin to murder, or at the least, enslavement of an innocent creature. Her idea of winning an argument was to shout over anybody who dared to disagree with her. From what I had seen, most people gave up, and she took that as victory.

I had told Mama earlier in the day that I would phone the CDC and the president about the monkey babies if she would just be nice to my friend.

"I'll be sweet as pie," she said.

She did try, in her own way, but unfortunately, veganism and Mama-ism are diametrically opposed. I made a delicious dinner of lentils and grilled onions, a fresh green salad, and baked apples topped with a scoop of Good Karma rice dream for dessert. All throughout the meal, Mama kept asking when I was going to put the meat on the table, and she trotted out every biblical passage she could think of on dominion over the beasts.

"Honey, you need to eat some meat," she said to Amber. "It'll make you more kindly inclined towards the world. You need protein. In fact, you look a little like a praying mantis. Doesn't she, Jodi?"

"Mama, that's rude," I said.

"Sorry," I whispered to Amber. "I told you she's a little off. She means well. She just wants to fatten you up."

Mama watches so much television that she forgets real people have feelings and can actually hear her when she talks. Plus, she has conversations with the television, which doesn't seem to take offense at anything she says.

Truth is, Amber did resemble a praying mantis. Her eyes bulged, and she had so little fat in her face that her lips barely stretched across her protruding teeth. Throughout the meal, she whipped her long arms across the table, elbows like flying buttresses, filling her plate over and over, and then stared hungrily at the empty platters until I brought dessert.

As we were finishing the baked apples and fake ice cream, Mama quoted Genesis 1:26, "'God said, let us make mankind in our image, that he may reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and over the livestock and all the wild animals.'

"Livestock, young lady, is meant to be eaten. Why, my daddy butchered a cow and a hog every year, and he wouldn't let any of us children be mean to those animals. We'd no more hit one of them than we would hit our own parents."

"Maybe that's true, Mrs. Chambers," Amber said. "But, you grew up on a small farm a long time ago. If you had any idea how cruel the food industry is! Animals are tortured all the time. They live completely unnatural lives in cages where they can't even turn around. I know you'd stop eating meat, if you just knew."

Mama had tuned her out after the first three words and muttered, "*Maybe* that's true? Just what part do you think I'm lying about?"

But my ex-friend had already climbed aboard her sanctimonious high horse—apparently the only animal she was willing to abuse—and missed Mama's muttering and the murderous glint in her eyes. Amber blathered on about the sorry state of the food industry, graphically describing slaughterhouses, holding pens, chicken houses, and the criminality of speciesism. She had brought with her one of those horrible DVDs that show the worst possible animal abuses in the food industry. She squatted in front of our television with her back to Mama, about to pop the DVD in and treat us to a video that I suspected would bring my nice meal back up, when Mama rolled toward her, brandishing a soup ladle, hell-bent on destruction.

I grabbed the handles of Mama's chair from behind, dug in my heels, and stopped her. She frantically shuffled her feet on the floor in an effort to pull away, but I had her.

"Run," I yelled to Amber. "Mama's about to blow."

Amber left the video, but grabbed her purse. She paused near Mama's chair and said, "Thanks for having me over, Mrs. Chambers."

She was trying to make nice, but stopped short of an apology.

Mama was having none of it. She waved the ladle in circles above her head like she was trying to helicopter up.

"Just go, Amber," I said.

That vegan had ventured too far into Mama's territory. Mama owns the rights to sanctimony in this house.

*

I was a change-of-life baby, born two years after Mama gave birth to a stillborn daughter, which she refers to as her last baby. Making me what? Over the years, she developed her monkey sperm theory and has come to believe the government caused the death of that child. She knows I'm her last child, but the fact that I lived seems important only as it relates to her comfort or survival.

That's not totally fair. When the voices in her head don't overwhelm her, she's a quiet, affectionate, and concerned mother. I know she loves me, but how can I compete with a child martyred in the womb?

I've had lovers over the years, but when they discover I'm not willing to put her away, they find a reason to leave. Can't say that I blame them. She told the last one he ought to sleep with one eye open because she couldn't be sure I didn't come from a powdered egg. Mama was almost fifty when I was born. My daddy had already gone by then so that monkey sperm thing is starting to feel like a real possibility.

Mama and I live together in a small town a couple of hours south of Atlanta. I used to have my own apartment a few blocks away. Had a pretty good career going, too, with the family business, Harty Automotive.

"If you're not driving a Harty, you're missing the party."

That was our slogan. I whooped it up in a couple of commercials, and was a local celebrity for a while. I gave up the job after Mama went missing one day. The police found her, shoeless, down in Panama City, Florida, sitting on the beach talking to herself.

*

I didn't exactly tell the truth about there being no sperm on my horizon. I met Brian a few months ago at a support group for families with mental illness. He has a fine ass and a friendly demeanor, but a New Jersey accent that I can barely decipher. His dad is bipolar; his mother seriously OCD. He's a psychiatrist for the Veterans Administration, specializing in post-traumatic stress.

If it works out between me and this guy, we should definitely not procreate.

He wanted to know Mama's diagnosis.

"She's never been formally diagnosed," I said. "We're Southern."

He nodded his head, as if that made perfect sense to him.

He said I shouldn't feel guilty for putting Mama somewhere. It would be better for her in the long run. Obviously, he had never met my mother.

I decided to rectify that and concocted a casual meeting between them.

"Don't try to do therapy on her," I'd said. "I just want you two to meet."

So, we "happened" to run into him at the local park where I air Mama out a couple of days a week. We usually sit for an hour or so—me on a bench and Mama in her wheelchair, scanning the park boundaries like a prairie dog, hyper-vigilant to every movement, twitching at the slightest breeze.

Brian sat down beside me on the bench, as planned.

"Mama," I said, "this is Brian. He's a friend of mine from the book club."

"Hey, Mrs. Chambers. Nice to meet you. How're you doing today?"

"You're not from around here, are you," Mama said. "You sound like them fellers on the Sopranos."

Mama turned to me. "One of them murdered his mother, you know."

"I'm not like those guys, Mrs. Chambers. I try to help people," Brian said.

"Are you a vegan?" Mama asked. "The last time I met somebody from Jodi's book club, she was a vegan."

"No, ma'am, I like meat," he said.

So far so good, I thought.

"So, what brings you down to Georgia?" Mama asked, sounding innocent enough, but I could hear her grinding her false teeth, a sure sign that she was already on to us. She taps out a rhythm on those choppers every time her antenna picks up something.

"I work for the VA," he said.

"The government? You work for the government? What do you do for the government?" she asked.

Oh crap.

"I help the veterans, Mrs. Chambers. I'm a doctor," he said.

An occupation that would impress all other mothers in the world but not mine.

Mama's eyes narrowed. "What kind of doctor?"

"I just try to help the veterans with their feelings, Mrs. Chambers. You know, like when they're sad, I help them to feel happier. Or, if they're afraid, I help them learn how to deal with their fears. Sometimes they have delusions, and I help them with that too."

I pinched Brian's arm.

"Ix-nay on the elusions-day," I whispered.

"Anyone can speak pig Latin, Jodi," Mama said.

"So, you're a feeling doctor, are you, Brian? Is there much call for feeling doctors? I'm feeling right bloated, myself. Must have been that fake meat lasagna Jodi made for lunch. That stuff's heavy on your stomach."

"Mama, stop acting like you don't know what he meant," I said.

"I'm a psychiatrist," Brian said.

"Well, isn't that nice. Maybe you could do some therapy with Jodi about this peculiar diet she's been forcing on me."

"I'll talk to her about it," Brian said.

"Good. Do you work over at the CDC, Brian?"

"The Centers for Disease Control? No. I—"

Mama didn't let him finish.

"Are you aware of the monkey-to-human sperm experiments they're doing?"

She said this with a lilt and her best fake Scarlett O'Hara accent, like she was asking him if he had seen the local light opera production of *The Mikado*. I half expected her to flutter a handkerchief and ask for her parasol, kind sir.

I've known her long enough to know she was gauging his reaction. The slightest misstep on his part would cause her to fixate on what his role would be in the upcoming monkey takeover.

"No, I haven't heard anything about those experiments."

"Hmmm. Well, Jodi can tell you about them at one of your book meetings, can't you, Jodi? She knows all about it. She is most probably the result of a monkey-to-human experiment. I can't prove it yet…."

"Okaaaay," I said, "time to go. Say bye, Mama."

I jumped up, unlocked her chair, and got into push position.

She grabbed the wheels, and I decided not to get into a tug-of-war with her. I stopped pushing.

Brian stood up to say good-bye.

"Before we go, Brian, I have one more question for you."

"Sure, Mrs. Chambers," he said, softly, in full therapist mode.

"Did you know your father? Do you resemble him? Because your ears stick out, a right smart, and I've noticed your shirt looks puffy, like there's a nice padding of fur underneath there."

She swiveled her head in my direction, skewering me with full-blown devil-eyes.

"Don't his chest look puffy, Jodi? Monkeys are covered with fur, and he's working for the VA, which everybody knows is a front for the CDC. They do experiments on those soldiers over there all the time."

She whipped her head back in Brian's direction.

"Have you been circumcised, Brian? Cross-bred monkey soldiers are never circumcised."

"Hush, Mama," I said, humiliated once again, and began pushing her toward home.

All the way, as she ranted her conspiracy theories, I fantasized about pushing her in front of a moving car. I saw myself whacking the back of her gray, bobbling head with my purse until she shut up.

I waited all afternoon for Brian to call me. When he didn't, I called him.

"I can't handle any more insanity in my life," he said. "I've got enough with my patients and my parents."

"I could put her somewhere," I said, guilty for even voicing the idea. "I could visit a few times a week. Or not. Hell, I could move somewhere and be done with her."

I started to feel a burden lift from my soul.

"What's it like up in the Garden State? How far away can we move?"

"She might get better," he said. "With the new drugs today…."

"She'll get worse," I said.

"What about *your* quality of life? I care for you, Jodi. We're good together, but I couldn't live with your mom."

"I'll think about it. Besides, I haven't asked you to marry me yet."

My attempt at humor went unnoted.

"I'll help you find a reputable place," he said.

"What if I can't do it?"

"I'll see you in group, Jodi."

His words were fraught with the implication that if I didn't put her somewhere, he would not stick around.

I tried, many times, to convince Mama to see a therapist. Our conversations inevitably escalated into her shouting, "The government is trying to control everything, including our fertility, and if you're too stupid to see that, don't say I didn't warn you when the marshals come knocking at the door."

Before I became her legal guardian, there wasn't much I could do. I could force her somewhere now, but that seems like an ungrateful way to behave. She has stuck by me all these years, even while thinking my biological father might have been a monkey.

What most people don't understand is that crazy people aren't crazy all the time. Despite her mental illness, or maybe because of it, Mama got three men to marry her, including one who left his wife for her. The store clerks in town chat her up. Our bank teller gives her candy when we drive through. Sweets for the sweet, he says. Mama remembers their names and their children's names. No matter what Brian thinks, an institution would be the ruin of anything fine that still lives in her.

I don't know why I hang in, except she's the only mother I have, and I love her. She sees things I can't, but how do I know what the truth is? Just because someone isn't traveling down my road, doesn't mean they've gotten lost.

I got that from the Dalai Lama.

I think about the Dalai Lama every day. Imagine being a child and a committee of holy men drops by, does a little testing on you, and then proclaims that you're the incarnated ONE they've been looking for. They haul you off for a lifetime of indoctrination. They teach you to sit quietly and listen to that inner divine guidance that only you have.

But this latest Dalai Lama is the fourteenth incarnation. After all those generations, why has nothing changed? Why isn't the Dalai Lama ever a girl? What gives? Has he ever had sex? If not, how can he look so relaxed all the time, with that perpetual half-smile on his face?

I never claimed to be enlightened.

I want to be. I've friended every holistic-healing, chakra-clearing, guru-spouting, drum-circle-beating group on Facebook. They now inundate my daily email with promises—for a fee—to raise my consciousness to a place of total non-violence and perfect peace.

Mama is my daily reminder that while I rarely commit acts of violence, my thoughts are filled with them.

*

I heard Mama's tires shushing down the hallway. It never fails, let me get somewhere quiet where I can breathe the air of normalcy, and her radar screen lights up.

"Jodi! Where are you?" she yelled.

I heard the panic in her voice.

"In the living room, Mama. Reading."

She rolled up next to me, set the parking brake, and opened a magazine. She had circled several photos of thirtyish women.

"These girls all look like you, Jodi. Do you see what's happening?"

I reached for the television remote and powered it up.

"*If you experience sudden loss of vision or hearing…*"

"You've been cloned."

"*…get an erection lasting more than four hours…*"

"For God's sake, Jodi, turn that damned TV off. I'm talking to you."

I clicked it off.

"If I've been cloned, Mama, why don't we find one who'll put her life on hold to come take care of you. You are wearing me out."

She appeared to be mulling that one over, but the demon that hides inside her was done with us for the moment.

"No. I prefer my real girl."

She closed the magazine and looked at me with the exact same beatific smile as the Dalai Lama—like she's his older sister—the one disregarded by the holy men.

"I'm hungry," she said.

"Okay, Mama. What's your pleasure?"

"You're a good girl. Come here and hug my neck," she said.

I bent down and put my arms around her. I kissed her on the forehead. She held my face between her hands and squeezed, the way she had done when I was a child.

"My little Jodi," she said.

I straightened up.

"Want a hamburger?" I asked.
She turned and rolled toward the kitchen.
"Why don't you invite that Brian over sometime? I liked him," she said.

Fiction judge Ron Rash writes: What I love about humor in literature is, unlike other aspects, humor cannot be faked. Something is either funny or it isn't. This story is funny, at times hilarious, but it is also poignant.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Competition - Honorable Mention

Steve Cushman

The Last Exxon in Oregon

I'm thinking of the time we vacationed in Oregon
and I almost ran out of gas as we climbed some
mountain I can't remember the name of and Julie
kept saying I should have stopped for gas at that
last station, and damn I wish I had because
we're screwed if we run out of gas here in the middle
of all these Douglas firs and hemlocks and trees
I can't identify. One part of me feels sick
knowing we'll be stranded because our AAA
membership expired and the other part thinks, *Just*
drive, man, just drive and it will all work out,
so I do and every minute or so she says *Damn,*
and I'm grateful she doesn't call me an idiot,
which I feel like, and which is mostly true anyway,
and then up ahead I see this beautiful square sign
and we pull in beside six lovely gas pumps and
there's only other person pumping, a guy in his
mid-forties like me, and he has a Volvo full of kids
and a wife and he smiles, says *That was close* and I
nod, then walk over to this stranger, and hug him
at the last Exxon station in Oregon and he seems
to know exactly what I need, so he hugs me back.

Yvette R. Murray

The Opposite of Charleston Is Pittsburgh

On Fifth Avenue
The kingdoms of Kaufmann's and Gimbels
beckoned me like
the call of this oceanless town.
Folk didn't even speak to folk they know
passing by tall buildings on Fifth Avenues.
I swam in this:
broad deep brushstrokes in the life of a girl
Coming out of cocoon with shaved legs
Coming out of cocoon with makeup glorious
Coming out of cocoon popping that slang in time
to the tap, tap, tap, tap of the fancy flats I had just bought
from the Wild Pair
not the skinny, high heels of the year before.

Let me begin again.
Ghosts don't speak out of time.
Old friends, classmates and mothers
marvel as if something were wrong
before which makes this after such a treat—
closing in on the edge of my insanity.
I don't mind, much,
as it is a reign of my own design,
a sleight of speech
tucked in the side drawer of a mahogany dresser.
A duo that is one
with ocean breezes and Gullah cadence,
three rivers, skylines, The Point,
pluff mud, palm trees, and pralines: The opposite of me is me.

Sara Beck

pixie

she stops by my office wearing a pride flag as a
cape and her pixie cut is pink and
purple and she is exuberant she has changed her name to
lavender and is it too much, she asks?
a kind of performative signaling?
but i don't think so i tell her
if it feels right to you right now, i say roll
with it names and hair colors are actually pretty easy to
change and she sits and i make mint tea with my electric kettle and
she tells me about heracles and deianeira and all things
greek and i am listening and marveling and also
distracted because i knew a college student who pretended
her friend with the short red pixie and the painted lips and the hips
for days was definitely just a friend
even to herself
that girl was terrified of breaking a rule no one spoke
even though the talk around her was mostly sex-positive,
gay-positive, love-positive still the word bisexual meant something
undecided and decidedly bad and lavender is proudly difficult
to categorize and i am so fucking proud of young people today
and the world is changing in marvelous, inspiring ways
and you will not convince me otherwise because this young person
in a rainbow cape is many things but here,
in my office, she is not
afraid

Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Judge

Nickole Brown

Prayer to Be Still and Know

Lord, let my ears go secret agent, each
a microphone so hot it picks up things
silent, reverbing even the hum of stone
close to its eager, silver grill. Let my ears forget
years trained to human chatter
wired into every room, even those empty
except of me, each broadcast and jingle
tricking me into being less
lonely than I am. Let my ears forget
the clack and rumble, our tambourining and fireworking
distractions, our roar of applause. Let my hands quit
their clapping and rest in a new kind of prayer, one
that doesn't ask but listens, palms up in my lap.
Like an owl, let me triangulate icy shuffling under snow as
vole, let me not just name the name
when I spot a soundtrack of birdsong
but understand the notes through each syrinx
as a singular missive—begging, flirting, fussing, each
companion call and alarm as sharp with desire and fear
as my own. Prick my ears, Lord. Make them hungry
satellites, have your way with their tiny bones,
teach the drum within that dark to drum
again. Because within the hammering of woodpecker
is a long tongue unwinding like a tape measure from inside

his pileated head, darting dinner from the pine's soft bark.
And somewhere I know is a spider who births
a filament of silk and flies it to the next branch; somewhere,
a fiddlehead unstrings its violin into the miracle of
fern. And somewhere, a mink not made into a coat
cracks open a mussel's shell, and with her mouth full
of that gray meat, yawns. Those are your sounds, are they not?
Do not deny it, Lord, do not deny
me. I do not know those songs. Nor do I know the hush
a dandelion's face makes when it closes, surrenders, then goes
to seed. No, I only know the sound my own breath makes
as I wish and blow that perfect globe away;
I only know the small, satisfactory
popping of roots when I call it *weed* and yank it
from the yard. There is a language of all
you've created. Hear me, please. I just want to be
still enough to hear. Right here, Lord:
I want to be.

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Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Competition - Honorable Mention

Shannon C. Ward

The Birds of Lake Norman

All the women on this boat look
the same: dirty blonde and bronzed,
asses plump in yoga pants.

The engine's clogged, so the vessel barely
makes a ripple. Calm surface,
clear as a mirror, blue as a housewife's
valium-glazed eyes.

I should be grateful.
I should be grateful.

I'm told whole towns were bulldozed
for this lake. The captain says,
there are cemeteries underneath,

and I wonder aloud how bodies stay
buried underwater,

recalling a soldier who described to me
once caskets floating in the flood
after Hurricane Katrina—

not a comment one should make
on a third date—

but the man finally looks up from his phone
when his friends fall silent, sipping
their rosé. He says, *I love*

your imagination. If the women
on this boat were mistaken

for sisters, I would be the pudgy,
middle one whose boyfriends
always got eyes for the others,

which is why I find these family outings
so exhausting, father's body floating
up from the bottom of the lake,

mother making comments
about everybody's weight.

The boat floats over a battlefield,
bayonets and bullet shells
buried deep in the silt
beneath so much sun glitter.

Once, just a river: Catawba, Catawba:
dammed for hydroelectric power,

arrowheads and beads buried deep
in the silt beneath so much sun glitter.

I want to see what the fish see:

unconscious artifacts
of our hope and suffering
that rust or gleam in aquatic weeds
whose roots wrap around
our thoughts.

My sister sees a nest at the top
of a pole rising from the lake
and asks, *what bird lives there?*

Looks like osprey, I tell her. She scoffs,
says no, she's only seen them in Zion.

I want to dive to the airplane
at the bottom of the lake, swim
into the cockpit, enchant the engine,
raise the rusted bird into the sky,
and fly somewhere else,

but not as much as I want to sink
into the bed of the man causing
me this strife, to let him take me home,
swept in a current of sheets,
waiting for the strike
of talons through my scales, so I hold
his hand when we reach the shore.

I say, *look at the great blue*
heron in the shallows.

Behind us, my sisters say, *Look at the crane.*
That must be who lives in the nest. But I know

a great blue heron when I see one,
and the ospreys will return next spring.

Shannon C. Ward

The Resolution

I run circles around the last three years, try to channel my love
through the soles of my feet, to let it propel me through this crumbling,

North Carolina neighborhood instead of back to Harlem,
to your door, which I must stop imagining walking through,

yet here I go again, picturing window sills I filled with pots of verbena
and mint that you likely let die or left on the curb with the trash.

My love is stubborn as the mint that consumed my garden
when I abandoned it to move in with you: rhizomes spread deep

in every direction, impossible to contain. Now I run past vacant lots
and sagging, single-story houses, remembering your view:

the cathedral across the street whose stained-glass window
had been filled in with cement. Now it can't be broken, can it?

Impenetrable fortress. Five hundred and sixty-three miles away,
I think of kissing on your couch, dropping garments

down the hall on the way to the bedroom. My psychic footpaths wear
through the varnish of your floors, so there are days I cannot stand

these dry leaves beneath my feet, how every step sounds
like a bandage ripping off. Bare branches scrape their forks and knives

against an empty plate of sky the dead might eat. The cracks in the sidewalk
take the shape of a womb. I bury our children there

and feed them one minute of daylight each day as I grow
too old to conceive them. Since you kicked me out, I've run

a hundred and ninety-seven miles, and most days, I pass the same little boy, alone on his stoop. He always calls out, *Whatcha runnin' from?*

Because I don't have the heart to tell him I can't stop chasing someone who does not love me, I yell back, *Nothing, I'm exercising.*

Lit/South Awards 2022
Flash Competition - Second Place

Kacie Faith Kress

Lesbian Communion

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I force myself to kneel. The incense smolders, burning acrid in my nostrils. It tastes of the years I spent within these marble walls, a schoolgirl dressed in plaid, tugging at my collar.

The rapturous luxury of this place draws worshippers like flies to rot; the ritual words and smoked taste of incense whisper of bonfires and freedom. Bacchanal worship. But it is a lie; this smoke never leaves the fluorescent light. Never touches the skin beneath robes. Never hears a voice raised in anything but obedience. It is the taste and smell of witch burnings; the wild that was rooted out at its core.

The altar boy is baby-faced; he is kneeling, the clunky edges of his tennis shoes tipped together. He scurries to turn pages—to fulfill his duties. No doubt his father sits amongst the pews, proud. No doubt his sister watches the way her brother and father look at each other. The way her mother looks only *down*.

He lifts a four-pronged bell and rings it, the brass crying softly: *Does He know? Does He know?*

The priest meets my eyes. The grain of the church pew rolls damply beneath my palm, slick with sweat. I wipe it clean on my skirt, and think of the different dampness—thicker, softer—that kisses my skin when I slide my fingers between her thighs.

Please rise.

Latin words bite the air. Hands are raised, fingers clasped in prayer. I search the worshippers' eyes. They are heavy, made lazy by the droning voices and the weight of summer heat. Afternoon sun slants in through the stained glass windows, illuminating each dust mote.

The priest raises his voice above the mournful, harmonious cry of the cicadas. Under the organist's feet the floorboards cry: *Does He know? Does He know?*

I stand in a cathedral. But my God lies in supple skin and warm eyes. In the smooth lines of our bare bodies, limbs entwined.

All rise, all rise.

A reading of the Gospel. My thumb draws crosses on the places she's kissed. Hands, throat, *lips*.

I have been a sinner nine years; the brand on my chest reads *confession missed*. I couldn't force myself to pay penance for prayer. To apologize for her hand fitted gently within mine, for the static in our socks as we danced across the carpet and spilled wine.

What is life but time?

With Her the hours matter.

I stand in the communion line. I clasp my hands together—a pious lie. *Innocence, innocence*; our love is soft. We hold each other tightly, brush hands across temples, kiss away tears.

It is my turn. The priest holds aloft a gold medallion of bread, like the halo of a rising sun.

But no light bathes me. I am shadow; I would disappear.

I mutter *amen*; he places the host on my tongue. And he never once guesses what else my lips have done.

Flash judge Tara Campbell writes: Rich sensory details drew me right into the setting of this story. The author skillfully extends one pivotal moment in time, pitting the expectations of society and the faith community against the deepest desires and true nature of the protagonist.

Richard Allen Taylor

I Inherited Hundreds of Candles

Every waxy color you can name. Sizes from silver dollar
to stovepipe. Aromas from pine to bayberry.

Photo albums, filled with strangers and children
unrelated to me.

Several framed pictures of Julie leaning into Nicholas
Sparks, her favorite author, who came almost every year
before her leukemia, to sign his newest novel
at the neighborhood bookstore.

Closets full of clothes waiting for a second chance.
More shoes than a sonnet has feet.
Enough ornaments for a dozen Christmas trees.

You will understand why I have been slowly giving away
and tossing out what no one will take—a fortune in clutter—
and feel a twinge, like a rubber band snapping the wrist,
with each separation,

but no sting as sharp as unpacking
her handbag the day after, the cold extraction of coins, keys,
crumpled bills and plastic cards that passed through her fingers
before touching mine.

Richard Allen Taylor

La Chambre d'Écoute, 1952

— oil on canvas by Belgian surrealist René Magritte

It's *The Listening Room* in English, impossible
in any language except yours, Magritte—
a language of images, not words—and who else
would dare to set a giant green apple in a room
that barely contains it, where sunlight bursts
through the big window on the left, illuminating
the *pomme* on one side, leaving the right in shadow,
as if to imitate a lunar eclipse in progress. And notice
the brown stem, almost poking the ceiling. But why
listening? Do these walls have ears? Does the apple?
Yes, I know potatoes have eyes, yet I sense you
are not dotting those but rather crossing your tease.
Where, you seem to ask, does a thousand pound
apple sit? Wherever it wants. But perhaps symbols
clash. Eve's disobedience, Adam's weakness,
half in light, half in darkness, confined to a one-
bedroom Eden that can't hold them much longer.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Fiction Judge

Ron Rash

The Belt

The rain announced itself timidly, a few soft taps on the tin roof. Soon the rain fell steadily. Since it was July, Jubal waited for rumbles of thunder, the dark sky darkening more as lightning stabbed the ridges. Then rain would gallop down, pounding the tin before the sun herded the storm into Tennessee. But this was more like November rain, the kind that lingered days. Night came and the rain continued. As Jubal settled into the shuck mattress to sleep, it hit the roof not like hooves but a drummer boy's quickstep. When he awoke the next morning, the sound overhead was the same martial cadence, so he was not surprised that he'd dreamed again of the war, of the moments after his horse buckled and he'd been thrown. As Jubal rose from the bed, the aches of eight decades awakened too. His bones always hurt more in wet weather so before dressing he rubbed liniment on his back and shoulders. He looked out the window at the rain, the rivulets coursing down the ridge. As he pressed the brass buckle into the belt holes, he felt the familiar indention the minié ball had made.

Jubal went into the kitchen and unhinged the range's iron door, struck a match to the wood and newspaper he'd tindered the night before. He set the coffeepot on the iron eye. The house was chilly, so for the first time in two months he made a hearth fire, stood in front of it hands out until the coffeepot heated. He filled bis cup and stepped onto the front porch and stared across the pasture at the French Broad. Water usually clear enough to see the river's bottom was now brown as his coffee. The sandbars had disappeared, but the big boulder midstream broke the onrushing water like a ship's hull. No flood had ever submerged this rock.

When Jubal saw the buggy coming up the muddy lane, he remembered it was Saturday. Rob, his grandson, was bringing the boy to stay with him while Rob and his wife, Lizzie, went to Marshall. Rob pulled up beside the porch and Lizzie and the child got out, Lizzie holding an umbrella over their heads as they came up the steps. Rob pulled the brake and brought the canvas tote sack onto the porch.

"Clear most all week and now it comes a-pouring," Lizzie said, shaking her head.

"It's surely over the banks down in the bottomland," Rob said, as the three of them stared at the river. "They's likely crops being washed away."

"You sure you ought to go?" Jubal asked.

"I checked and the bridge is fine," Rob said.

"For now," Jubal cautioned, "but if it don't clear by afternoon it may not be."

"The eggs and butter won't keep till next market day," Lizzie said, "and you know we got need of cash money."

"I know that," Jubal said. "I just want you all to be careful."

"If that bridge looks chancy on the way back," Rob said, "we'll stay with Lizzie's folks."

"If it comes to that, would you mind keeping the boy till morning?" Lizzie asked.

"Of course not," Jubal said, taking the child into his arms and nuzzling him with his beard. "Me and him will be fine, won't we, partner?"

The child giggled and clung tighter around Jubal's neck.

"We best get on," Lizzie said, bussing the boy on the cheek. "You be sweet and maybe we'll bring you back a play-pretty."

"Rub that lucky buckle of yours," Rob said as he released the brake. "Maybe it'll settle this weather down."

Rob jerked the reins and the wagon went down the pike toward the bridge. Jubal shifted the child to one arm.

"Let's get you out of this nasty weather," he said, giving a last look at the river. The boulder was still visible, but less of it showed.

Once inside, Jubal set the boy and the sack on the davenport. He went to the back porch and brought the box filled with the whirligigs and animals he'd carved for the child. He set the toys between the davenport and the hearth.

"There you are, Jubal," he told his namesake, and seated the boy on the floor. He poured himself another cup of coffee and watched the child play. A lucky man, he'd often said of himself, and worn the source of that luck every day since the afternoon it saved his life. He had never meant it as a provocation, but in the first years after the war the buckle's etched eagle, wings and talons extended, had caused hard stares, at times words, and once a fistfight.

Now only a handful of veterans remained. There was another war, bigger than any before, and despite what President Wilson said the country was edging into it. Jubal feared that Rob, his only grandson, might be called up. He almost expected it. Lucky as Jubal had been, little good fortune had found its way to those around him.

Pure luck, his comrades called it as they'd marveled at the buckle and its indention. After Chickamauga, some touched the buckle before battle, but it seemed the luck was indeed pure, unable to be diluted and spread to others, then or afterward. Jubal's wife and son and daughter were all shadowed by stones now. Rob, his only grandchild, had found little luck in his life. He'd married well, but he and Lizzie had encountered a passel of troubles. Their barn had burned three Octobers ago, a year's worth of curing tobacco lost, but before that two miscarriages had sent Lizzie into a dark place.

But luck had come with this child playing before him. Despite his being born a month too soon and puny, the boy not only survived but quickly grew hale and hearty. Jubal had never asked, but he'd always wondered if Rob and Lizzie thought naming the child after him would help the boy survive. The Franklin clock chimed, another hour passing with no sign of the rain easing. He went to the window, but the glass was too streaked to see much. The child got up, gained his balance, toddled over to Jubal, and raised his arms to be lifted.

"Getting hungry, are you?" Jubal said, picking up the boy.

He felt the hippin. It was dry so he set the child down and opened the sack. He got the nursing bottle, put on his coat and hat, and went out the back door to the springhouse. By the time he got back, the hat and coat were soaked. The child suckled the rubber tip until nothing was left, then put his head on Jubal's chest and closed his eyes. Jubal walked to the back room and laid the boy on the bed. He poured another cup of coffee and went onto the front porch. The boulder was only a foot or so above the water. The pike and the lower pasture had vanished except for the barbed-wire fence. He thought of Rob and Lizzie and hoped they had the good sense to stay in Marshall. Even if the bridge held, the pike could be washed out.

Jubal realized he had not eaten, so went to the larder and got the cornbread. To crumble it into a glass of buttermilk would be all the better, but the hat and coat he'd set by the hearth weren't ready for another trip to the springhouse. He slathered the bread with blackberry jam and ate it before swallowing the last of the coffee. Jubal checked on the child and went back onto the porch. The boulder was gone. Where it had been, the water appeared smooth, almost calm, that illusion holding until driftwood and trees swept past, then a chicken coop and a flatboat that slowly twirled as if searching for the river it had once known.

The fence was gone now and so was most of the pasture. The cow and its calf huddled in the upper comer. More things once alive sped by—chickens and dogs, livestock, then a body. It swept past so quickly Jubal could do nothing but stare. Holding an old field jacket over his head, he crossed the soaked ground. He opened the latch-gate and herded the cow and calf out. Back on the porch, Jubal saw what was more a portent than the one body. A barn lay on its side, drifting down the valley like an overturned ark.

He had built this house himself. Jubal knew it was solid, but what held it to the earth were flat creek rocks and four locust beams. No one lived close by except Rob and Lizzie, and their house was closer to the river than this one, so the only shelter was here. He went to the back room and sat beside the child. "You been lucky once," Jubal told the boy softly. As if evoking a talisman for the both of them, Jubal thought again of Chickamauga, that moment in the cavalry skirmish when his horse buckled and hurled him to the ground. He had rolled onto his back just as the enemy cavalryman slowed his mount and leaned toward Jubal, the pistol's muzzle only feet away. Jubal did not hear the shot but saw the flash and then smoke from the charge. The man rode on as Jubal waited for the pain, and what would surely relieve it. He'd placed an open palm beneath his shirt and slid it slowly down his stomach, then under the belt and trousers. No blood or torn flesh. Some sort of misfire, he'd concluded, rising to his feet. The battle had moved on, leaving dead men and horses scattered around him. Only then had Jubal looked for a tear in his jacket, saw instead the indention where the minié ball had struck the brass buckle.

Jubal listened for a few moments and noticed a change in the rain's cadence. He placed a hand on the boy's hair and stroked it. The child shifted a bit, but his eyes did not open. Jubal stepped out on the porch and found the rain was indeed slackening. To the east, the sky had begun paling. But too late. The pasture was under the river now. Jubal watched a rattlesnake attempt to swim across the current, fail to make the porch steps only yards away. A hog pen swept by, the hog itself roiling behind it. It's got to crest soon, he told himself, but the water had reached the first step and begun seeping under the house. Crying came from the back room, so Jubal went inside and lifted the child into his arms, felt the hippin.

"Best keep it that way, boy," Jubal told the child. "It might be the onliest thing dry on you soon."

They went to the front porch. The rain had almost stopped but water continued thickening around the steps. Soon it would be all the way under the house. Jubal went back inside and changed his shoes for boots. He got the child out of his gown and into his rompers, wrapped him in the blanket, and went to the back porch. There was nowhere to go except up the ridge, but after he'd gained a few yards of ground Jubal slipped, turning onto his side to protect the child. He slid almost to the back steps before stopping. For a moment he lay there, breathing hard as the child squalled in his arms. Something had twisted or torn in his knee, so first he kneeled, then slowly got to his feet. The brown floodwater reached all the way to the ridge now, and Jubal knew they wouldn't survive another slide, so he sloshed through the water to where mountain laurel grew. He did not try to stand but got on his knees, holding the child in one arm as he worked his way upward. One plant pulled free of the earth, but he caught hold of another before they started to slide.

When there was no more laurel, he stopped. Jubal's heart banged so hard against his chest the ribs felt like a rickety fence about to shatter. If it's lasted eighty-one

years it can last a few more minutes, he told himself, and tried to figure out what to do next. He patted the child through the blanket. A few yards above them was a stand of tulip poplars. Though their branches were too high to grasp, a trunk to grab hold of might be enough to keep them alive.

Jubal did not look back because he did not need to. He could hear the water rising behind them. The child was silent now, as if he too listened. Then came a loud rending as the house pulled free of its moorings. Jubal's heart continued to hammer and his knee burned. Between the poplars and the laurel was a scrub oak. He stabbed his free hand deep into the soggy ground and pulled closer. Only then did he see what coiled around it. This snake wasn't as large as the one he'd watched earlier from the front porch, but it had the same triangular head and blunt tail.

"I just want to share it with you a minute," Jubal said softly. "Then me and this chap will be on our way."

Jubal slowly grasped the sapling inches above the snake, but as he pulled himself closer his hand slipped downward, pressed the snake's cold scales. Its muscles tensed and then contracted tighter around the trunk. The rattle buzzed twice, ceased. Neither of them moved until Jubal felt the water rising onto his boots. "Git on, now," he told the snake, and pressed his hand slowly but firmly on its body. The snake gave a brief rattle, then unspooled and slithered past them into the water. Jubal pulled himself even with the scrub oak. He was so tired, so old. The river whispered for him to surrender. Everything else has, the water said. Jubal pushed ahead and reached his free arm around the closest poplar. He looked up at the branches, the nearest thirty feet above him. Even if he could have gone on, there was nothing farther up the ridge to hold on to. Beyond the branches was only a too-late clearing sky. He looked back. All he could see was water.

Jubal touched the buckle.

"Be lucky one more time," he told it.

They found him late the next morning. The sun was out and something flashed from within a stand of poplars. Some kind of signal, the two men in the flatboat thought, and lifted their oars and made their way across the drowned farm. At first they thought it an apparition caused by fatigue, because the child seemed to be hovering above the water. Then they saw the belt around the tree trunk, heard a soft whimpering, and they marveled at a child held aloft and alive in the grasp of an eagle.

Tina Barr

Deployed

His length splayed on the trail's black-bottom
he turned, opened his mouth, white inside:
cottonmouth. My friends, who grew up
in Memphis, said he'd track us, come after,
so we backed away.

At lunch, Shelby tells me
her mother died when she was twenty-one, father
gone. In the living room, a cop, her uncle, and
a lawyer, who slid a piece of paper across the
coffee table. She didn't know what she'd signed.
Ten years later, she tracked down the officer
who'd been called to the house. *I remember,*
he said into the phone, *she was murdered.*
Shelby went to Memphis, but when he'd sat
down across a coffee, the cop denied it.

We
all learned to spell *Mississippi*, before we'd left
second grade, that rhythm, in three segments
of sound. The river I roller bladed beside so
swollen trunks were five feet deep in it. But
in spring white filaments, tufts, banked its slope:
cottonwood. Another name I read before I saw it,
like *cottonmouth*.

What came out of the cop's mouth
was padded in lies. Shelby'd signed away the state's
request for an autopsy. My pet boa, Artemis, never
hissed, just lunged from her tank at my hand,
left the imprint of tiny teeth, a bruise in the fat
pad at my thumb's base.

In Libya, we've already
tested robo-dogs. On spiky feet, roughly the shape
a kid would make from an Erector set, *Spot* can trot
in packs, sensors attuned to hearts pumping, breath.
A warm yellow, four legs, body, an upright head,
armed, ready to take aim. For police units, they're
superman blue.

Jenny Hubbard

In the year of our Lord, 1621, my husband paints me as a nun

His easel, his pigments, his hog-hair brushes. He sups,
I give suck, swaddle and trundle, before I put on
the get-up, hurry, while it's still day, kick through
the door behind him. He positions me by the canal
under thick clouds, lead-tin yellow, white wimple,
black tunic. He sticks me in linseed oil. Where I stay,
stay, I darken a cloister, children marry
and die, I sweat in an attic, a man builds a palace,
I tickle spiders, another man hangs me
on a wall. For four hundred years
the paint dries. And it crazes. Thank God
for the bridge at the edge of the scene, thank God
the museum guard dozes. Watch me wriggle a foot
from its tight, laced boot, watch me tip from the frame
to the waxy floor, slip and slide, the door swinging back
on itself. Sunlight. Do you follow? I rip off the habit, sling it
across that stagnant water, limp beyond city and hunger,
backbone stiffer than winter woods. That ridiculous wimple.
Where did he hide my long, golden hair? I used to believe.
I bent to the soft blue promise of everlasting life, I served him
my soul on a palette, well,
he's dust now, the asshat, and I'm walking,
laughing loud and last, as a matter of fact, I am
cracking up. Take a look at that hole
I've made in his canvas.

Caren Stuart

# of wangechi mutu's fantastic journey (to keep the figure of the woman center and then …)

threads. sway. sound.
howl.
cricket song then artist's voice
then tangle. bramble. twine.
rounds of wounds. suspension.
you can't tell the difference here. hear:
these are not injuries. these are
poetry. rhythms. rhymes. balls
of that which has been wound up …
rounds of wounds. suspension.
onceuponatimeSheSaidI'mNotAfraid
andthenHerEnemiesBecameAfraid ofHer.
i'm gonna try
to remake it
those creature chimera things following her
a walking at waters' edge
a philosophy i kind of
believe in which is
i kind of believe in which is
i kind of believe in
witch es

if you utter something
if you make something
it will actually come to life.
she
is wading in.
I love
gloves. I love
long gloves.

She has a coyote head coyotes are
incredibly powerful in a lot
of nativeamericanindigenousamerican
folklorehistoryandcosmologythis
TriumphantWarriorFemale (is)
a really interesting reverberation in my head
like a horseanda snakeanda dragonall at once People
are leaning in are pressing
fingers to mouths
are nodding holding chins

light
on water
fluid
sun
she's able to kind of escape primarily because
she said she's no longer afraid

duct tape - hammer - glue
water - the reason that we're here

she is wading in

she's got all these different kinds of media
but water color first
the power is keep the figure the story
of female in the center not to marginalize
us
and give
us
little
bits

here
andthere.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Nonfiction Competition - Second Place

Tracy Rothschild Lynch

When Organ Becomes Metaphor

I.

I walked through a volcanic cave once," a young woman in my writing group says. Cady is in a bubble-gum pink fluffy robe, hair parted down the middle. I'd likely spot sleep-wrinkles on her cheeks if I looked hard enough. Over Zoom, she describes the cave's warren-like walls and smooth passageways. It's immediately a phenomenon I want to explore for myself. I scrawl a quick reminder to Google "volcanic caves," which I'll likely do one night at 2:33 a.m. when I'm not sleeping. I'll do an image search, so I can wind myself into one, stroll blindly into a surprise on screen and then maybe even slumber.

Cady is new to my writing group. She's 26—just about the age of my daughter, K, yet she awakens at her west-coast 8:00 a.m. on Saturdays to be a part of our fledgling crew. She makes and shares observations freely, and her vocal drifting and here's-what-I-was-thinking-next observations fascinate me. Her mind keeps in perfect time with her searching eyes. Sometimes I envy the way she thinks. I want that—to see unfolding life from eyes 25 years younger than my own. A thought igniting the next, and the next.

Such wishes are, of course, futile. Instead I listen *hard* when she talks, attempt to follow her electric pace. Cady is telling us about the volcanic cave and I am lost in my own imagination about my future maiden voyage to one when she says, "I want to write an essay about a volcanic heart." This stops my revelry. Something in the way

she goes on to describe the complexity of this literary heart tells me she knows of its caverns already. She's poked her fingers into its porous walls, she's trudged her way through rushing blood as it flows like lava.

Just about my daughter's age, I think again and pay closer attention.

Weeks later, I fantasize about that volcanic heart. I'm thinking about the heart a lot these days. A trope that is cobbling together my own daily narrative, dream-like. Figuratively, symbolically. Tangibly, watching as the flat part of my wrist jumps beside a narrow blue vein. Curiously, wondering what the hell is going on with my daughter.

I'm thinking about extremes. Grief and loss and what is internal and what is external and how you can smile while you're breaking inside. The seen and the unseen, the hard and the not-so-hard (because does anything feel easy right now? I don't know). At fifty-one I'm thinking a lot, too much, probably. "You're in your head too much," I tell myself, or my head tells myself, especially when the thinking takes over the doing in my life.

These days I've been doing less and thinking more. I feel as though I'm armchair parenting—watching from my comfy seat, popcorn bowl nestling in my lap—as my two daughters stroll into their twenties. Something's different, though, unfamiliar. They proceed into future moments not with carefree, celebratory strides like ones I once took, but with positively everything in the world weighty in their crossbody bags.

My mind's on medical stuff, too. Oxytocin: the hormone of security. Dopamine: chemical candy. Cortisol: dictating whether to flee or fight. I'm thinking of an article I once read detailing how the heart can change shape due to loss or grief. Another about how our brains can translate extreme emotional pain directly into physical pains. "My heart hurts," someone says when grieving. "I feel it right here, and it's making me sick," I said recently, lightly punching my chest, after my perfect dog left my world, when I was crying so hard I thought I would throw up. Grief can increase inflammation throughout the body, turning suffering systemic, making illnesses already plaguing a body worse, bringing about more pain, which begets more heartache.

I'm thinking of the beta blockers they gave my older daughter, K, recently when her heart was racing, when she couldn't catch a breath, when I watched as her pupils dilated in fear. Beta blockers, the drug of choice by a doctor who had never before met my daughter, the daughter who felt like she was dying of a broken heart.

I'm thinking of loneliness. Of cavernous microscopic apartments. Of cognitive cobwebs that hinder vocalization. Of a recent *Harvard Gazette* article: "Young adults may be particularly susceptible" to loneliness "because they are often transitioning from their inherited families to their chosen families." I'm remembering my inherited family on couches, eating pizza in the den, watching *The Bachelorette*, ignorant of the possibility of traversing caverns or caves alone.

II.

Reclined in the driver's seat, thinking through the sunroof, I'm waiting in the parking lot. I'm waiting out here even though my daughter is inside the emergency room because I'm worried about COVID and the five chronic illnesses that seem to kick my ass no matter how hard I try to ignore them; I'm worried about how my body would handle the insanity that a (waning but nonetheless) global pandemic would surely wreak on little old me. But all of that feels selfish to think when my daughter's inside without me, so I recline and consider.

For now, the front seat is a refuge. I'm double-vaccinated so I should be brave (braver) and go inside. K is 21 and an adult and a child all at once. She is in her last month of college—a Manhattan-based arts college, one that shines with windows and exhales fine art and poems and mannequins. Now K is now dealing with this bullshit: an overcrowded small-hospital emergency room and POTS, a goofy acronym for a shitty syndrome that is literally keeping her from being upright, figuratively keeping her from living her early-twenties-dream-life on the blossom-dotted New York spring streets.

Postural tachycardia syndrome, or POTS, is twisting and porous, like Cady's volcanic caves. It's confusing. It's frustrating. The heart struggles to keep time with poorly circulating blood, blood that pools in the feet, making standing not just difficult, but brutal. The heart flips itself into overdrive and *pumps pumps pumps*, never catching up with itself. Symptoms are often debilitating: dizziness, confusion, palpitations, sensitivity to heat. Exhaustion paints the days; depression creeps into the nights. Challenging to stand, to walk, to *be.*

It's hard to see K like this. It's hard to know how to be a mother who helps. I'm not trained for this, I think. I'm not patient/smart/loving/driven/strong enough.

I imagine what she's doing at this moment. Slouching in a hard, plastic chair. Breathing deeply to slow her heart's unslowable beats. Two chairs between her and patients on either side, who I imagine are also slouching and perhaps hacking COVID droplets all over my girl. Yet here I recline, frenzied into a state of immobility, willing rhythm to my own heart rate. My daughter's is currently 145, not as high as it's been in the past few weeks, but still. I can't imagine having to walk to the kitchen to make breakfast at a rate of 145, much less manage the four floors to her walk-up closet-sized apartment in her adoptive city. That's why she's now here with me in Richmond; that's why I flew across an ocean from London to be at home with her.

It's hard to see her struggling to walk or talk or sit. It's hard on me. But, Jesus, here I am being selfish again, thinking about how hard this is on me, the mother, the

one who is supposed to do hard things. I chastise myself as the clouds doggie-paddle past the sunroof in the blue pool of spring sky.

Last night she called me to the hallway that separates our bedrooms. "Something is really wrong," she said, urgency and panic in her eyes. "Something is really not right," she said this morning in the same hallway, and she laid her flat palm against her heart. Sometimes when I look at her hands I swear I can still see the little toddler dimples beneath each knuckle. When she was three and dressed her dolls with cautious precision, the dimples would fold in on themselves and then out again. In. Out. In. Out.

"Is it still somersaulting?" I ask, using the verb of a child not because I'm still picturing her knuckles (which I am), but because that's how K described last night's chest irregularities. I am force-feeding maternal calm instead of freaking the fuck out because it's my daughter and I see residue of last night's fear caked in the corners of her eyes.

I remember that feeling. When *my* heart was somersaulting. For months. Each (male) doctor had told me I was fine, that my heart was healthy, that it was likely "just" anxiety. Then, whoopsie daisy, cardiac arrest once twice three times in a day equaled my first helicopter ride, a weeklong stint in the cardiac ICU, and a souvenir pacemaker.

Now I will those thoughts away, affording no parallelism between me and K. I was 45 then. In front of me last night was a 21-year-old girl. This morning, she is one day closer to 22 but seems more like a child than ever. With her fingers splayed, she appears to hold her heart inside of her, to slow its riotous trickery with pressure. A vital organ should not be this disruptive in a daughter, I think angrily. I take a breath. It is audible, and makes me sound more dramatic than I should be. I make a mental note to do better.

"No, not somersaulting," she says, the wordsmith in her searching for better accuracy. "It feels like my heart isn't there." I look up from the dimpled knuckles on her sports-bra'ed chest and into her eyes. They are blue, the color of faded denim. Not the machine-made, white-washed kind, but the well-worn kind, denim you can just tell has been beloved by an owner who considers it not just wardrobe-essential but life-loyal.

"It's like it's not there," she repeats.

III.

I have come to the U.S. from my sunlit fourth-floor flat in London to help take care of my K, she and I coexisting for the first time in four years in our house. A suburban home in which two people—a man and a woman—and two children—girls who bounced and played Barbies and performed nightly after-dinner skits—

grew roots and became a family. With its tennis courts and swimming pools and carefully designed walking trails, our neighborhood is a contrast to our city lives, hers and mine, for sure. K, the daughter with the beloved-denim irises, normally lives in NoLIta. But "normally" isn't quite right. She's only been there two years, 1.5 of which she spent inside attending university online like so many and trying to stay safe in a world turned on its head. K is trying to make a life for herself in that city, one people all over the world associate with vibrancy, with noise and passion and endless avenues of bodegas and possibilities. She knows she is lucky to be in a city of buzzing life and moving art and transcendent beauty across every alley. But she says it makes her sad to be there. I'm confused by this.

No one is outside, she says. *It's quiet. It's weird.* She knows it's because of COVID but she can't imagine the city as it would be, used to be, should be. In the autumn of her junior year, she transferred to her artsy university known for the quality of the creators who head classrooms, classrooms K's only seen in person for a handful of months. She spent six months falling in love with in-person literary discussions and with the streets of New York, the city that gifted her the chance to gab with strangers on a warm August evening in Washington Square Park over sidewalk chalking, see Harry Styles perform on Rockefeller Plaza, obsess over the gooey, cheesy goodness of the renowned pizza down the block. Then, like city dwellers everywhere, she planted herself and her tender roots in the corner of her 360-square-foot apartment to learn how to socialize through a screen. Staring at the brick wall outside her window, straining to change the scenery through TikTok and masked strolls, and finding ways to laugh with her roommate whenever possible. She is not alone in this but she is lonely in this.

Last night she and I watched a DVD of my wedding reception. Onscreen, my typically reserved husband shimmied across the dance floor with his non-gray hair, and K marveled at his youth and his prowess. She laughed out loud at her uncle freestyling on the dance floor, and she smiled each time she saw me, The Bride, flitter on and off the screen. *You look beautiful*, she said, eyes shining my way from the chair beside me. It was good to see her smile in fits and starts; to see the weight of a pandemic and physical and emotional burden lift from her for a moment. I remembered once again the tiny human she was way back when, back when we took her toddling through a petting farm, for instance: anxious, unsure, but then, as a white bunny tail hopped away, as a lamb whispered *meehhh,* utterly charmed. Smiling in fits and starts.

K will graduate in four weeks, one month from today, from this morning when she told me she was scared, when tears pooled, when she splayed her fingers and tried to explain the dark fog filling her. From when I couldn't help her in the hallway. From now, when she is currently slumping in a hard emergency-room chair without me.

Her graduation will be, of course, virtual.

IV.

Last night, I worried. In bed, I stared at the ceiling and stewed.

K feels like her heart isn't there. I worry about blood vessels and atria and brain oxygen, but I worry too about that dark fog. "She feels like her heart isn't there," I say to no one. Maybe it's because her first-real-boyfriend-ever took it from her, just two months ago, back during the endless slushy, snow-melting days of dark New York March. He kindly but excruciatingly said he didn't know why he was breaking up with her, that he needed to work on himself. K told me that he was so sincere she couldn't even be mad at him. Still can't be. "We both cried," she told me back then over FaceTime between sobs.

It's one of those no-communication breakups so here she is now in our Virginia home across the gulfing hallway feeling like her heart is not there. Mere minutes ago, I had watched as she stood unsteady in our hallway, feeling as though she doesn't have a heart, one that is *not* beating 145 beats per minute and *not* working to pump her blood all the way down to her toes, and *not* trying to feel something, anything, again.

Of course it's not there, I want to wake her and say to her and wrap her into my chest and let her sleep between my shoulders. I want to hold her and use divine, imaginary healing powers to fix all that's wrong in her body. Sort of the way an orangutan premasticates food for its young, using innate maternal instinct to nourish and replenish an offspring aching from hunger. Staring at the ceiling, I imagine the reverse. I want to suck all that's wrong out of her body and spit it out. Find a toilet and regurgitate *all* the bullshit. Then I want to hold her and clean up all of her insides with a vacuum or antibacterial wipes, deep down, polishing, leaving each organ sparkling clean and utterly pain-free. I'd say fuck the environment and the water treatment facilities—I'd toss the wipes and flush all the torment I'd sucked out, down and swirling away.

My hands are tingling, she'd said.

Something's wrong, she'd said.

This morning, as we drove to the hospital, I instead regurgitate a lifetime of feminist mothering into K's ears. I know first-hand what busy medical scenes often mean: dismissal. *Use your voice*, I say. *Make them hear you, take you seriously.* (It's this exit here.) *If they don't listen, try again*. (I'll drop her off out front.) *Make yourself heard—be heard*. I want to repeat myself fifty, a hundred times, but I will be a nag and she will listen less and less and besides she can't even feel her damn heart. So I pull up in front of the hospital and tell her to text me if she needs me, that I'll turn on my international roaming but for now I plan to wait outside for a bit.

"You're important," I say, which makes no sense at that moment because it was never in question. "You will be fine." She makes an I'm-not-so-sure face and shuts the door, while I divine her to be fine and pull away to go search for a spot.

In the car now, alone, I juggle my need to be with her and my need to stay alive. (*Selfish*, I worry again.) I reassure myself: I'm overreacting. *It'll be fine. I'll be fine.* I repeat this as I absently open a package from Old Navy, one we found on our porch on the way to the driveway. The new spring floral top in my hands seems utterly absurd to me right now. The dark jeans I ordered look enormous because I am now a middle-aged woman with back rolls and a widening ass. I feel fleshy pouches against my sweatpants right at this moment. I feel, too, my heart against the shirt I'm wearing. My heart beating rhythmically, beautifully, thanks to the tiny machine implanted in my upper right chest wall.

K is inside. Alone. My disgust at my own parking-lot reticence bubbles. What kind of mother would not sit double-masked in an emergency room? The new dark jeans rest on my lap, and the color of the chambray shirt I'm wearing is bright against them. It is exactly the color of my daughter's eyes and I think, *Fuck it, I'm going in*. COVID be damned.

Before I open the car door I squeeze out another prayer. I look through the sunroof at God and the thick layers of cloud between me and Him. I pray that my own (selfish? frantic? indestructible?) insides will morph magically into the power that my daughter needs. I pray they will find her heart in there. I pray they will listen to her voice. That they will fix her. That she will return to New York and walk up to Washington Square Park and draw with chalk again and make friends with strangers who want to feel their hearts, too.

It's raining now. Just spitting, as my mother used to say. To get to the entrance, I walk through the spit and past the hospital helicopter pad, when I have no choice but to give a mental nod to my own helicopter ride and to my heart and how it now exquisitely beats in my chest.

V.

Days later I am on my meditation cushion, attempting to ignore the pain in my right hip that yelps whenever I sit on the floor these days. K is upstairs, asleep, heart still beating too fast but now absolutely reminding her that it is there. She had an adverse reaction to the beta blockers; off them now, she's healing herself with exercise, with a cardiac reconditioning program my cousin shared with us. This way feels more natural, and we like that.

My legs are crossed and my hips are elevated and before I know it the meditation session has started and wow. It's easier to get into the moment than I thought it'd be. I thought I'd be stuck in my pandemic head, brainwaves that feel treadmill-

trapped running fervently and breaking a sweat but not going anyplace at all. But I'm present in a way that I can attribute to my breath or perhaps to the color of the sky, that bright Virginia-spring-morning blue not yet faded to white by the weight of summer's humidity.

The past few days I know my daughter has been feeling a bit better. I can see it in the way she moves through the family room that raised her, shuffling comfortably; wrapping the tan quilted blanket around her legs while she adjusts herself on the sofa, laptop on lap, where it belongs. She is smiling more, placing fingers on her heart less. But this is only days later, handfuls of hours removed from the six-hour ER visit, so I don't get ahead of myself. She's sleeping and needs her sleep so I plug in my headphones just in time to hear my meditation leader's deep, throaty voice welcome us to this time, to this space, to this loving group that is just for us.

Outside the large window to my right, a crepe myrtle tree brushes its small leaves lightly against the screens. We planted the tree too close to the house and should probably deal with that one day, but for now, I simply settle into the comfort of my leader's voice and let my body feel supported by the earth beneath me as he tells me to do. The new green leaves brush and make a *tshsht tshsht* sound. I close my eyes. I absorb the voice of my leader, Eduardo. When he tells us to become strong, solid mountains I become one. I breathe into the space and take in the air around me. I let a waterfall rush down my mountain body and still the trees *tshsht tshsht tshsht*. A bird lands on the screen and pecks against the glass while the waterfall cleanses my organs and softens my skin.

The pecking bird is Edgar. K named him after Poe, although he's more frisky than ravenesque, and he visits us a lot lately. Edgar flits from branch to branch on the very same trees we planted too close to our home and pecks on our windows as if to say howdy. Eduardo guides me back to my own trees. My mountain trees, the ones that dot my horizon as I imagine the morning mist draping across my shoulders, are strong and tall. They blow with a breeze that grows louder, wooshing while springtime shushes the sound of morning lawn mowing. I can hear it all.

Eduardo guides me toward the inside of my chest. Feel your heart space, he instructs. This is my favorite part. The time when I feel my sternum open, when everything seems possible and that all answers are inside of me. It's peace I cherish. I feel stronger and sit up straighter and let my spine reach all the way upward, like a pine, through the ceiling and into the cloudless blue sky.

You can give this love away, Eduardo nudges me. I picture K. I imagine her heart space beneath her strong ribs and between her expanding lungs that rise and fall with morning sleep. As I let the water flow down and away, purifying everything in its path, the thought rushes to me: her heart is there.

When I am finished, when we have said our goodbyes through tiny Zoom frames, I sit in my favorite chair and close my eyes. It's okay to rest, just for a minute. To not chastise myself for the cracks in my mothering that spread from much deeper faults.

The waters still rush over me, it seems, and thoughts follow, bobbing in the flow. I see them as they pass. Hard and easy, heavy and light. There is internal pain, external pain; there is loss, there is love. Heaviness will press on me no matter how hard lightness tugs at it. It's tiring, my eyelids tell me, but it is okay. Edgar taps and my daughter sleeps and lungs everywhere rise and fall.

Between them all a muscle drums.

Nonfiction judge Stephanie Elizondo Griest writes: This is a really breathtaking account of what it means to be a mother in the time of COVID. And to really walk to the ends of the earth for a daughter who is suffering. It is an essay, braiding many strands, about grief, about the heart, about loss, and about how women are not really trusted in the medical field to tell the truth of their own bodies, and what it means to advocate. This essay has perfect transitions; I was really impressed with how one segment segued into the next into the next into the next, all of the many, many threads. This is an essayist who's like an expert weaver braiding the strands really tightly and neatly throughout. I love how it ends. "It's okay to rest, just for a minute. To not chastise myself for the cracks in my mothering that spread from much deeper faults." Ultimately, it's an essay in forgiveness, beautifully spun.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Judge

Jessica Jacobs

Ordinary Immanence

In New York, sidewalks were so crowded it was easier
to walk in the street, and three stories up
from all the elbows and breath, always
the same city dream: in the back
of my cramped apartment, a door
I'd somehow not seen. I'd press my ear to it
and hear the cavernous echo
of air arcing through hidden, innumerable rooms,
rooms I owned but had never entered.

Many years, many states away, in a far
more spacious place, at the braking
of a garbage truck, at the creak and hoist
of its mechanical arm pinioning a block's-length
of bins to hoist and dump, I look up
from a book and know (the truck outside
rumbling away, my waste fraternizing with the waste
of my neighbors) that I want
to believe in God. Just like that—a new door
in a room I thought I knew by heart.

My hand is on the doorknob now, my ear
to the grain.

But what I hear
is the crackling hum
of light bulbs above, the tissued whisper
of an iris opening, the deep breathing
of the daily world—nothing
from the other side.

How do you listen for a sound you've never heard?
Or, more precisely,
for a sound you know so well
you've never heard it?

First published in 32 Poems.

Tennessee Hill

Birch Tree Summer

The best trip my mother took was when she left for good
and brought almost nothing.

It's my last night on Pearl Street.

Outside, the serenaded faces of woodpeckers
make pine trees their own. Now, I move home.

Home. My best decade

was born of a split embryo. Twin brother.
He's in a feed store baling hay.

If I was a damselfly, he was a grub.

When I said, *Hide,* he said, *No,*

and we laughed, blowing our cover for the next ten years.

Our mother dreams prophecies.
Once: my brother bracing his own throat.

Once: my apparition, insisting, *I'm fine. I'll be fine, Mom.*
Don't worry.

As brother bales, mosquitos pirouette
from freckle to freckle.

On Pearl Street, I say my middle name until
it sounds false

& evening becomes entirely Elizabeth.

We are Mother's walled garden.

She describes our twinship in floral notes: Magnolia.
Birch tree summer.

She left her first husband in California.

I believe she never thinks about him but some years
she points out his birthday. According to her

my brother will kill himself. And I will be fine.

Home is where nobody knows

how to braid my hair. On Pearl Street, Amber lives
two apartments over. She can fishtail and French.

She explained braiding as *everything to the middle.*

Somewhere in childhood, we stopped learning each other.

If he dies, I die, too. If he dies, my mother's twenties
were wasted. If he dies, mosquitoes

will have nowhere but me to land.

I will have to bale the hay and I
will be the one to laugh and life will have left me

a long time ago.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Fiction Competition - Honorable Mention

Maryann Hopper

New Brunswick Enigma

The border-crossing booth was coming up fast. Kalandra's fingers poked around the bottom of the travel case and latched onto the Ziploc bag she kept our passports in. We crossed the St. Croix River at Calais, handed over the books with a calm air, and waited. I was uneasy leaving the United States. The uniformed officer with busy eyes and an arched nose poked his head in my window to look inside our Scion xB. His spicy aftershave lingered behind my head. "Your destination? How long are you in New Brunswick this summer?" His tinny voice scraped our ears.

Kalandra pushed the AAA guide description his way, saying, "Here to explore. Why, this is the home of Molly Kool. There's Ganong's Chocolate Museum in St. Stephen, too."

I cast a frown at Kalandra. "No, just driving the Maritimes and we'll be here a week." Canadians referred to the region as the Maritimes. Maybe he'd think we come over often.

The officer handed back the passports and shook his head in amusement or disgust. I couldn't be sure. Kalandra always thought she was being clever dreaming up believable lies, but she was just attracting attention to us. I sighed and hit the gas. With her felony conviction for selling drugs back home, she was a magnet for police radar.

"Nora, I really want to go to the museum." Kalandra's light blue eyes danced. They were the kind of eyes that made you look twice, so clear, almost translucent against her coffee-colored skin. I squirmed at the delay she was adding to our plans. She pointed to a red brick building. I whipped the Scion xB into the adjoining lot without a word. Following her whims brought us mischief, joy, conflict.

Inside the museum, silver trays of assorted chocolate candies sat beneath each illustration of the process of cocoa bean transformations. Kalandra bit a creamy nougat, wrinkled her nose, and popped the remainder into my mouth. We watched candy makers through a glass window. Kalandra kicked her leg over next to mine. A little rim of chocolate outlined her top lip. Her tongue licked it off slowly. The candy offerings coated my mouth and the sugar burned under my skin.

Kalandra pointed at a chubby woman in a white uniform squeezing chocolate through a tube. "What a job." I leaned toward the glass but turned quickly enough to watch Kalandra slip a handful of caramels from a plate inside the plastic bag in her pocket. She always had a pill or a joint in a bag in her pocket. "More for the road," she laughed and tugged her t-shirt over her lumpy pockets. She snagged an employment application from a stand near the exit. It flapped in the wind while she held the door for three squealing girls in matching red dresses who fluttered under her arm like poppies.

"Thinking about working here?" I joked.

"Never can tell," she tittered in her sexy lilt, ducking inside the xB. After Kalandra made a long stretch over the seat to drop the chocolate bags from her pockets into the cooler, she pressed her fingers on my leg. "What's that bulge in your pocket?"

"It means I like you." I laughed and pulled out my own bag of stolen sample chocolates. Although we had broken up two years ago and now she was my best friend, I sometimes lapsed into a little romantic play. There had been nobody since. I pointed. "Really, what's with that employment form?"

Kalandra smirked. "I like it here already, might want to stay. Would you visit?"

When she talked like that, she stabbed my heart. I watched the family following the young girls into the museum and longed for that imagined joy.

*

The next few hours we sped across Highway 1, passing a couple blueberry stands and a few off-ramps to dismal-sounding towns, Dideguash, Canal, Back Bay. When we glimpsed the waters of Fundy Bay around a bend or across a field, the muddy shores seemed to get wider and wider as the tide went out. Near evening I pointed the xB down 114, a thickly wooded route toward Fundy National Park. The little car bounced us over the barely paved roads.

"It's kind of creepy out here." Kalandra's voice rose when she pushed her nose against her window. I glanced over at her, waiting for her assessment. We passed one narrow campground road, so I chose the next, wider one that led all the way to the beach. Beyond the beach was a vast stretch of mud, over 25 feet of ocean floor exposed since the tide was out. "Won't that tide come in on top of us?" Kalandra's voice was edgy.

"You're the one who wanted to see …." but I didn't want to argue. I pulled in by the last picnic table on the trail and started throwing the tarp and tent out of the car, working around the tide debris stacked against nearby trees.

"I thought we'd be at the town of Alma tonight," Kalandra pouted. "Maybe even see Hopewell Rocks at low tide."

I gave her a long stare, knowing she quickly forgot her chocolate factory delay. "Are you blaming me? We're making do, can't make it to Alma. Now help me with the tent. We have to set up camp before dark."

We sat under the red spruce filling up on peanut butter sandwiches and beer from our cooler. The needles above swooshed in the wind. The tidewater was so far away there was no sound of it. Kalandra began to hum, and I leaned back against a rock. We still enjoyed creating this semblance of home together. I loved being this far away from New Orleans. I gazed at the campfire and wondered about the Cajun ancestors of many of us from Louisiana who had once called this home. They were Acadians then.

Kalandra looked out toward the dark bay. "Molly Kool was a brave sea captain to be out there on Fundy Bay on her own."

*

Since Kalandra had found a box of papers in her mother's trunk about Acadian ancestors from New Brunswick and a scrawled note about her grandmother, Molly Kool's, secret trip to Louisiana, Kalandra had dreamed of coming up here. There were newspaper clippings about Molly getting a lot of notoriety being the first female sea captain from Canada. She was from a town named Alma, just up the road from where we were camping.

Kalandra's mother was the daughter Molly never mentioned in any writeups. The story Kalandra's mother had heard was that Molly birthed her in New Orleans and left her behind with Acadian relatives. A child would hinder her adventures. Kalandra's mother did not encourage her. "It's too late to stir all this up," she'd told us both.

Not long ago I was wishing for an opportunity to leave New Orleans when Kalandra called with some new scheme to find her grandmother's birthplace in New Brunswick. I was surprised, but my heart sang to spend time with her again. Since Hurricane Katrina hit, I had been feeling guilty. My place in the quarter was on high ground. I didn't have any war stories, sat mum at the bars, stunned at the mark the storm left on people's lives. My heartache was still Kalandra leaving me. I wrote my heart out in weekly columns for *The Levee* telling other people's stories. Maybe I could find a new story in Canada. Coping with powerlessness is a strange dilemma.

*

The sloshing of waves woke us in the early daylight. Kalandra raised the tent flap and screamed at the oceanfront view within ten feet of our car. "Nora, I told you the tide came in big time. We better get to higher ground." A flash of panic pushed me out of the tent. It was stupid to pick this spot and put her in danger. We began tossing gear in the xB. We settled in for breakfast at another picnic table up the road, drinking juice and munching granola bars. Kalandra's blue eyes shone in excitement. "See, the highest tides in the world are at our doorstep. What a place for grandmother to grow up. I can't wait to visit Molly's place."

This hunt for the missing grandmother unnerved me at times. "What do you think? Her house is a national landmark?" I wondered out loud, with exaggerated interest.

"I've got news for the Chamber of Commerce." Kalandra's eyes narrowed when she said, "I'm an heir to Molly Kool."

"Your mother would thrash you for thinking like that. I thought this trip was all about your roots, not your pocketbook."

"That's what you do, preach at me." Kalandra stood up. She was ready to go.

When she saw an old gas station advertising hot coffee on a yellow sandwich board near Alma city limits, she touched my hand. "I'll buy you some coffee." Her eyes warmed me more than any coffee.

Kalandra squealed when the clerk told her Molly Kool was still alive, nearly 90 years old. A warm, uneasy buzz rattled in my head. I suppose we both just assumed Molly was long gone by now. Kalandra's thick eyebrows wiggled up and down. "I wonder if we favor?" The clerk just pointed us toward town.

"She thought you were crazy." I climbed in the car.

"What do you care, Nora?" Kalandra glared.

In tiny Alma, we had no trouble finding the waterfront dock, but were surprised to find that the monument to Molly Kool's sea captain fame looked like a tombstone. The town had no apparent chamber of commerce. A local police officer sipping coffee from a thermos cup by the dock told us talk of Kool's cottage was drama around town and her house needed restoring, maybe before she died. He had seen her in Alma late in June riding in the Canada Day parade.

We bumped along on the road on which the officer mentioned the Kool cottage was located. The xB dipped in the front when we pulled through a small ditch near a rusty mailbox with Kool still visible. We inched into the yard that nearly obscured a weather-beaten, tiny cottage. The only thing that looked restored was a freshly painted *Keep Out* sign that hung by a wire from a low limb. "This is it?" Kalandra pouted. I saw only paths that were those probably made by animals on the prowl. We made our own way through the tall weeds to a wobbly porch, rubbed dirt from a window and peered inside. Several adjoining shady rooms held wooden furniture pushed to the edge of the slat walls.

Kalandra's voice was squeaky with excitement imagining her grandmother and great-granddad around the old wooden kitchen table sharing their seafaring adventures on Fundy Bay. Stepping behind the house, Kalandra got grumbly when she gazed up at the little cottage in shambles, the condition making it hard to think of her grandmother ever living here. I tried to ease the impact when I heard her sniffle. "Go ahead and take some pictures. I think it's enough that we were able to find it and know that she lived here."

Then I heard the whine of squeaking brakes from an approaching olive-colored car that rocked to a stop next to our xB. Burning oil fumes crept from under the wide hood. From the passenger window, a deeply wrinkled face topped with styled white hair shouted, "Whatcha doing out here on my property?" She waved a small fist at me.

A thin woman in a red plaid shirt and black jeans jumped out from behind the steering wheel with an extended hand. "Hi, I'm Jessie. We know folks are curious but appreciate you not staying on our property." Her narrow face held alert eyes and an even smile.

"Your property? Who are …? Uh, sure, but we've come all the way from New Orleans. My friend Kalandra just wanted to see her grandmother's house."

My eyes flew past Jessie and were locked into the pale blue eyes of the elderly woman in the car. The eyes narrowed, the mouth exploded, "I got no kin from down your way."

I still held her stare. "Your name is Molly?"

"Indeed, I'm Molly Kool Carney, and well known at that." Her yellowed teeth broke past her firm lips in a quick smile, then disappeared behind tightened lips.

Kalandra's footsteps swished through the tall grass behind me. She ran up to the old woman. "You're my grandmother, the sea captain, right? Oh, I didn't know you were still here. I'm Kalandra. My mother is Caitlin. I found letters you wrote and …."

The old woman thumped her veined hand on the Buick door. "What the hell. I got no granddaughter. Don't be talking that way. Let's go, Jessie, right now. These are crazy people." The old woman's shoulders bent forward, her arms slipped tightly across her breast, and she dropped her head forward with a groan, like she'd struck herself. Jessie's jaw clinched when she pointed at us both. "You need to leave now. Your lies have upset Aunt Molly." The Buick sped out of sight, leaving lingering oil fumes and little pebbles rolling on the roadside from the spinning tires.

Kalandra's eyes were streaming wet streaks down her cheeks. She leaned against the xB and sobbed. "She won't know me, but did you see her eyes? They're my eyes. Didn't she see my eyes?"

I held out my arms to her. "I'm sorry, Kalandra. She was clearly surprised. Yes, I did see her amazing eyes."

Kalandra slumped inside the xB, letting crumpled tissues fall around her feet. "I'm so sad she doesn't want to know me."

I touched her shoulder, but she shook off my hand. I leaned in front of her so she would listen. "Let's go over to the Hopewell Rocks. We planned to see the tide go out there. We can walk the beach while we think about it." I backed away from the weedy yard before Kalandra could change her mind.

We rode almost to the Hopewell Rock Park in a silence as thick as the pools of gray clouds settling in around us. As we rounded a sharp turn, I swerved hard to avoid a large branch in the narrow road. Kalandra looked up. "Watch it. Why are we even on this road?"

"It's part of our carefree yearning for adventure," I joked, not wanting to argue about going to the park.

"Well, careless can be thrilling," said Kalandra, pushing a finger through the dust on the dashboard to form an upside-down smiley face.

I said, "I prefer carefree to careless."

"That's why you can be boring, Nora," Kalandra said.

My eyes flared. An anxious twinge pushed against the warmth I always held around Kalandra. She had been reckless in returning my love. It was her way.

"Boringly lovable." Kalandra gave me a playful pat on the head.

Just ahead, I caught sight of the red and white park sign. At the entrance, an official in a pressed green shirt and baggy slacks hovering over dusty hiking boots flagged us to stop. He rolled his arm, indicating that I squeeze the xB outside the fence near a tall spruce. "Park's closed. So hike in at your own risk. Tide's already coming in. You didn't hear me say any of this." He winked and turned his back.

I parked and started tugging on my hiking boots. This natural wonder was the only place I really wanted to see in New Brunswick. Kalandra was immobile, just staring over the un-smiley face into the woods.

"Not a lot of time. Put on your boots," I urged. From outside, I tapped on her window. "I'm going without you."

"Okay, I'll just wait here for you, honey." She offered a slight smile, her blue eyes forlorn. Then she dragged a bottle of Xanax out of the travel bag and waved me on.

My mind began its warm buzz. Here's another reason I'm on my own. She won't share what's special to me, always full of delays or needs a drug. I'm incidental to her reckless whims. Did she really call me honey?

I hurried under the locked gate bar and across the parking lot toward a worn shortcut away from the main entrance. I was breathing hard on the path and wishing I had given Kalandra a little more time to decide to come with me. Eventually the path ended at tiers of metal steps stretching down between two tall rocks protruding from the ocean floor. My boots made tiny pinging noises on the metal steps as I rushed down towards the amazing sight. The muddy bay waters splashed against the base of tall rocks higher than most city office buildings. Exposed mounds of seaweed

and gravel spotted the muddy ocean bed. At the end of the steps, I lifted the chain with a *Closed* sign hanging across it. Kalandra would love this defiance.

My feet touched the muddy ocean floor, and I was mesmerized. I was walking on ground that was underwater part of every day. The tides would rise twenty feet to cover this muddy ground and drench the rock wall caverns that now exposed seaweed and debris clinging to its sides. With each step around little tributaries slowly filling up with water, I inched into new openings between rocks further along the barren, muddy coast. I often stopped, enthralled by each jagged narrow rock formation, exposed by the receding water, that jutted from the muddy ocean floor. The winds picked up and tiny pelts of rain pricked my face. Finally, I stared at the furious gray clouds pushing against each other, and my fascination snapped. So this was the thrill of recklessness? I didn't like the panic that tingled in my scalp. I studied the rock walls surrounding me, trying to orient myself back toward the stairs I had descended.

Water was near my knees when I slogged my way along the muddy beach to the bottom of the stairs. I climbed over the *Closed* sign, but on the next level, a tall, webbed metal gate I had not noticed on the way down was now blocking the next flight of stairs. It was fastened shut with twisted wire high along the side and the top. A ping of footsteps echoed above me. "No, don't close the gate," I shouted. I lunged against it. It didn't budge.

Below me, muddy waves chilled my feet and sloshed up toward my waist. A hot gush of panic surged into my back as I clawed at the huge metal supports, trying to find something to grip. I scanned the sheer rock walls around me that offered me no scalable paths up and away from the water. I cried out, "Help me. Kalandra, please find me."

Pounding against the gate bruised my hands into swollen lumps, and shouting caused my throat to burn. I barely clung to the wire gate that blocked my path. The cold water began to numb my fingers, and my feet floated off the metal steps. I watched the water rising slowly above little metal triangles in the gate. A sparkle of hope. The waves *would* rise above the gate in a few hours. I resolved to hang on.

The gray sky darkened into a black wool canopy. I wondered why Kalandra did not come. Excuses floated by … she couldn't find the trail, she dropped the flashlight, she fell asleep, she got drunk, she drove for help, she was kidnapped, she was oblivious … but I let them all go. I listened to my deliberate breaths.

After hours of clinging and floating, a whoosh of tide pushed my soaked body over the gate and into the handrail attached to the metal-grate stair platform above. I grasped the cold steel and crawled onto the platform, thankful for a solid base underneath me. Immediately I felt in the dark for the next flight of steps. I pulled myself up the cold stairs before the next wash of tide knocked me off the grate and into the rocks in the cavern behind it. Then numbness in my legs transformed into painful, sharp tingling as I began climbing, my wet clothing adding weight to the

struggle. When I reached the top tier, a streetlight from the parking lot shone in the distance. I slumped onto a bench and listened to the pounding of my heart, the gasps from my lungs. I reached down and patted the muddy earth beneath my dripping boots and cried.

I staggered the gravel path through the woods, stepping cautiously in the dark but feeling the even, flat trail beneath my boots. A shaft of light from the streetlight occasionally broke onto the trail. I kept my arms outstretched to block stray branches. Finally, I stepped into the illuminated parking lot and crawled under the locked-bar gate across the park entrance toward the lone xB, a bare silhouette under the trees outside the gate.

I moved out of the light again, lunged at the door and fell into the driver's seat, exhausted and shivering. The dome light illuminated a scrap of paper on Kalandra's seat. Her handwriting scrawled, *Changed my mind. Gone down to the rocks to find you. If you get back first, don't forget we still have chocolates, ha, ha.*

I closed the door. "Oh, no, Kalandra," I wailed at the darkness.

Fiction judge Ron Rash writes: This story of a woman's tragic attempt to transcend her own nature has an ending that is both surprising but also inevitable.

Fred Pond

The southern hemisphere of longing and regret

i.

Some confusion among trees before eternal life begins.
I will die in a stationary wagon, pretense against beauty. To die
for the one great love or from necessity for breath, one
or the other. No one hides their endless misadventures,
nudging and prodding soft forgetful skin: a stealth invasion
and then too late holding on, holding on so long until coming
in an empty glass, abandoned by identity. What is this place?
A palace? A grave? I dive underwater, pulling self under eyes
into an empty galaxy. Fish and eels swim close to my body,
white blinding light, fluorescently electric. Afterwards I
walk from bedroom to bus station. Wearing a suit of nettles
I will climb into the wagon, ride into the water.

ii.

A seed thinks too much, sweeping metaphors away.
Metaphors, malevolent yet unintentional, imprint themselves
indelibly in memory. Fast cars and paradox, boys collecting
boys and risk—the pills gave me an empty room
in an empty gallery, the wagon left behind as the caravan
continues across the water prairie. You sit motionless beside me
in the Greyhound station, observing movement in the shallows
of circumstance. There is movement from a tree branch. There
is the movement of the eels. The last face seen, the one
remembered and then morning: I should phone my mother,
tell her why I will stop breathing. A small price to pay after
all this rain, isn't it? You take a broom from its closet. The ghost
face of a barn owl crosses the clearing. We find the fish playful,
merely curious but the eels—cells without membranes, their arithmetic
gone wild with letting go. Green shoots break the surface, sun crosses
the horizon to discover sun again. Now float in water, fly in autumn,
slump in the barren wagon. Something troubles you about the movements of the eels.

iii.

Repeat the names of God in whispers. Names touching names in the way
night shadows touch memory. We remain dressed in nettles for the journey,
thirsty in the undefined way of defeated things. Eels and fish join us
in a meadow. Water, earth, air, fire: the elements coalesce in order
to wait beside gravity. A black forest underwater, its blind inhabitants
welcome us into their tribe. We will embark with first light,
will journey through a secret passage to the southern hemisphere
of longing and regret. Empty the dust bin of stardust and history,
store it in the custodian's closet. Remember the borderland
between death and sleep, an orbiting spherical mass
formerly known as a planet. Remember when I met you there. The silhouettes
of trees surround the meadow, fade in a featureless sea. Remove
the gray smock that still smells of ocean, return it to the closet.
Our wagon crosses a causeway to the island of speech
where there are only pretty numbers.

iv.

Before dawn everybody's restless for tomorrow's drugs and parties.
Lights turned off with a growing indifference toward pain when it ends
diving, flying, dying. Leave the Greyhound when the pain relents.
A traveler, an architect, a merchant in the chemicals likened to freedom—
never with appetite, our wagon emptied of all passengers,
deep space and sea bottom. A meadow hides in the undersea cave,
home of eyeless fish and eels, vacuum and pendulum. Sequestered
in a hollow in the forest, hidden in the sheltering cave. Find a seed
sprouting in moist dark soil: seeds don't believe in ghosts under
water. An overdose of grief cauterizes, cannot heal, cannot forestall
collisions of tectonic plates beneath the oceans. Not sound nor light, not even
liquid heals. Immersed in a green continent, the dark wood of an empty wagon.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Flash Judge

Tara Campbell

The Loveliest Thing

Ruth knew that dress, she was certain of it: black satin sheath, full-length, with a peacock splaying his obsidian-beaded tail from the young woman's waist to her toes. Even on a grey Seattle afternoon, the dress somehow found enough light to shimmer as the woman wearing it walked down Rainier Avenue.

Ruth surprised herself by crossing the street and heading toward the dress. She ignored the stitch in her hip, as well as all the other shopping she had to do before the showers they were predicting, and stepped onto the sidewalk a couple of paces in front of the young woman.

"Excuse me," she asked. "May I ask where you got that dress?"

The woman—a girl, really—popped her earbuds out. "'Scuse me?" She was younger than she'd seemed from across the road; perhaps the short, black bob with high-cut bangs was what did it. She was, in fact, about the same age as Ruth had been the first time she tried the dress on all those years ago.

Ruth blushed. She wasn't normally this kind of person, striking up conversations with strangers. She wouldn't even have dared to walk into the boutique where she'd first seen the dress if not for her friend Mona. Mona was like that, bold; strutted right in even though both of them together couldn't have afforded a single stocking in the place.

"I was just wondering where you got that dress."

The girl said the name of a store Ruth had never heard of, which had records ("actual vinyl!") and vintage jewelry and sixties furniture and "all kinds of stuff." Ruth was sure she wouldn't remember any of it, distracted as she was by the crystal chip in the girl's nose and the flash of lime gum as she spoke.

Ruth noticed that one of the shoulder straps was frayed, and a few beads were missing from the tailfeathers. What's more, the silk was slightly faded and discolored at the bottom. Still, her mind wandered to all the special occasions, all the balls and parties she'd dreamt up for the dress while she stood in front of the boutique mirror. She'd turned from left to right, watching light flash off the proud beaded peacock and slide over the curve of her hips. She turned and looked at Mona then, hoping to see a similar gleam in her eyes. If anything, she thought, this dress could do it: convince Mona to slide her arms around her and admit how she truly felt.

Ruth surprised herself again. "Would you consider selling it to me?"

The girl's eyebrows shot up.

"There's a shop down the street," Ruth said. "I'll pay for the dress and buy you something else to wear instead."

The puzzlement on the girl's face changed to curiosity as she considered it.

Back in the boutique, Mona had simply shaken her head—quietly, subtly. Devastatingly. Whether it was "no" to the dress or to her, Ruth never had the courage to ask. Instead, she simply went back to the dressing room and let the loveliest thing she'd ever felt slide down her skin to the floor.

A drop of rain pelted Ruth's hand. She still had so many things to get done before the skies opened up again. The dress wouldn't even fit her now, and she had no one to give it to. And yet, she waited—chest humming, the feel of silk around her hips, the peacock winking his jet-black beads—for the girl to say yes.

Previously published in February 2019 at Cease, Cows.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Poetry Competition - Third Place

AE Hines

Find a Friend

It's like the sharpened stone flung
from David's sling

striking Goliath's head, this map
on my phone, his glowing dot

not at the office, or the hospital
where he sees patients, not

the grocery store he frequents
for our family's provisions. The dot

marks the spot with his name
but an address not shared

by any mutual friend, or known
place of business, burns

the insistent red of a target's
bright eye, or the blood

pumping through the heart. I
can't help but hold my breath,

releasing the taut string
of the mind's bow, launching

my inquisitive arrow at that tiny circle,
which is not unlike the bullseye

I have imagined at the heart
of his heart, where I've loosed

my ersatz arrows for years, always
lodging them in the distant rings.

It could have been a feather, this
singular point of pixelated light

bowling me over. But it's a rock.
Sharp. To the softest part of my head.

Poetry judges Nickole Brown and Jessica Jacobs write: This poem of romantic betrayal is marked by both its deep vulnerability and masterful restraint. "The sharpened stone flung / from David's sling" in the opening stanza stays suspended for twelve painful couplets—couplets in which we see the unraveling of this couple through the speaker's realization of their partner's unfaithfulness—before the rock finally finds, in the closing stanza, its target in the "softest part" of the speaker's head, as well as in the heart of the reader who has been drawn in to experience this pain along with them.

AE Hines

After the Adoption

When my lover too is asleep, the wax moon
lies cradled in the black pines, swaddled light
streaming through our windows, and I creep
back to the baby. I check bedding

for loose blankets and ill-placed toys, see
that he sleeps flat on his back, still breathing.
Perhaps you too have done this?
Found yourself awake on the edge

of so much happiness you fear fate
might intervene. Which is to say
I am anxious when I touch my son's pink lips
with my pinkie, feel the warm air

moving in and out of his body. And why
I watch for hours as shadow and moonlight
waver from forehead to his round
dimpled cheek. By morning,

I can write a master's thesis on the filling
of tiny lungs, how the fluttering wings
expand and release, rise and fall,
over and over, with no help from me at all.

Jessica Lee Richardson

Cyanide Slinger Swing

The poisoner comes with her pin drop,
door locked. Clockwork. Testing much.
Enough. Latched and left it, but she's back.
Centuries of return. Gauze your ears.
Dance to knocks but learn a seal.
She'll tire if you don't crack. Oh honey.
What line of light sliced the thin day?
What lie'd she sing? Her blonde

squatting on the lawn but watch.
Clockwork. She's in. Slurping.
A drop is all, a drop is all. It takes.
Somehow, we stand. Spit. Our veins
a fruited tea of bleach. Unerased
by morning. She pops by. Tinctures
clacking. And again, we will not die.
And again. Door flaps in the wind.

I vibrate and parch to know the sun.
Organs slink, clockwork, to smell her feet,
grass a wallow under grill slop.
When will she come kill us again
and how will it sting? Sometimes
we even go outside to shake.
Plates of dirt, a swing. Where's our
poisoner? This is what's living.

Wayne Johns

Patriots

From the far corner of the neighbor's yard,
on the side that joins our side, it waves.
It arrived after we arrived, and in the wake
of the election. Would it be too much to call it
a menace? Just fabric hanging from a flex pole
so it moves both more and less freely,
like a thing trapped, knocking the new
privacy fence when a storm comes. Tangling,
then sagging, like clean wet laundry. It's clear
(does it need to be said?) they're MAGA
and we're the only queer couple on the street,
one of us recently citizened—with the others
we filed through the scanner, unbelted, only his body
pulled aside and patted down, the guard
motioning me along, raising his voice
when I stopped and stalled the line. I recorded
my new husband, hand over his heart at the ceremony.
Now I can't stop staring out back at this thing
I stood and pledged my allegiance to, that
for which it stands, for all those years of mornings.
And, look, how it followed us here, looming now always
along the property line, above the leaves,
the stripped branches, casting this long
bright shadow over the snow—

Lit/South Awards 2022
Nonfiction Competition - Third Place

Matt Cheek

Lucas

It's a freezing January in Afghanistan and I'm not yet old enough to drink. I'm sitting on an MRE box telling a joke about sucking a dog's dick. The Marines around me laugh as I pretend to suck the dick of the little puppy I'm holding. Sgt. Frasier chokes a bit as he laughs, a sign he's been smoking for longer than the rest of us. The puppy is nestled in the crook of my arm, shedding its fur on what I now refer to as my bad-guy suit. It's the uniform I wear to do bad-guy things. Tonight is a bad-guy night. Every night was a bad-guy night. Out of the corner of my eye I see Lt. Smith staring at me. He already ordered me to get rid of the puppy, an order which I willfully ignored. He'd kill the puppy if I let him. I briefly wonder if he's this big of an asshole to animals back in America and then I get back to asking Cpl. Black if he would suck a dog's dick on the 50-yard line at the Super Bowl for a million dollars. We haggle about the dollar amount he would have to receive. Before this deployment is over the puppy will be dead and Lucas, my roommate and friend, will be dead too.

Later that day on patrol, I wonder to myself what makes us "us." Barbosa lost his legs on our last deployment and we still consider him to be human. But what if he lost his head? What if I could only save his head and keep that alive, is that still Barbosa? I convince myself that the answer is yes and then tell myself that the hand that I'm holding isn't Lucas anymore. I am not sure where Lucas is, but I heard the explosion from the other side of the wadi. I can hear a Marine crying on the other side. I try to picture the explosion—what it looked like and what it may have felt like as hot metal and fire ripped Lucas' body apart. I look down at the bit of torso that remains of his body, it's connected to an arm which is connected to the hand that I'm holding. I shake the hand as if meeting him for the first time and mutter under my

breath, "Nice to meet you." I look back at Cpl. Black and say, "This is pretty fucked up, huh?" Black doesn't say anything, just nods and lights a cigarette. I turn the arm over to see what used to be Lucas' tattoo on what was once his forearm. The tattoo is a skull with a Latin phrase written on a ribbon wrapped under the jaw. The ribbon reads "mors omnibus." Death to all.

I drag the body to the other side of the berm. I wonder if anyone thinks I'm an asshole for dragging this body, but nobody says anything. I drag the body to a black bag. I see the Marine crying and realize it's Hutch. He's a good friend of Lucas' and used to play some nerdy card game with him in the barracks. Hutch and I look at each other and just stare dumbly. I don't cry and I feel fucked up for not crying. I mumble something to Hutch about being sad. I don't know if I am sad.

I start to wonder if there's a scale for fucked up things. On a scale of one to ten? One is being dumped by your girlfriend, ten is picking up the body parts of your friends. I think about what a five might feel like. I can't think about it too hard; I don't remember the last time I slept, and I've consumed nothing but Rip Its and beef jerky for the past few days.

Two hours later I'm holding the puppy and smoking a cigarette. It's terrified or maybe I'm terrified. Death is all around us and seems inevitable. My heart breaks as I hold the puppy. The puppy is only cold, only hungry. I don't want to exist, but the puppy needs someone to feed him and keep him warm. I convince myself the puppy loves me. An explosion can be heard in the distance. Time to go do bad-guy things.

After the firefight following the explosion there isn't much noise, or at least I can't hear anything, but everyone can hear the puppy softly bark from inside of my drop pouch. Lt. Smith yells at me to get rid of the fucking dog, but I just stare at him coldly as I peel a piece of meaty string that I think is a tendon off of a wall and put it into a thick, black bag. The explosion was an improvised explosive device that killed Hutch. "Remember, Marines, don't let these fuckers find any trophies," screams Lt. Adam. He's such a fucking dick. I picture the Talibs making a video in which they parade around with this piece of tendon while chanting with their faces covered. That video would be a three on the scale of fucked-up things. Then I grab some pieces of meat to help clean up more of my dead friend. At first, I grab them one by one to be respectful, but it's taking forever so I start to grab large fistfuls and dump them in the bag. I wonder how much of Hutch's flesh I'm holding. Why doesn't the Taliban just go through these bags to find their trophies?

The next morning, I hold the puppy in my arms and accept that I can't keep him. I can't save him. Even if I weren't a shitty owner, I'm on patrols all the time; who would keep him quiet? I just know that Lt. Adam would stomp on him if I weren't around to protect him. The other Marines are stirring and getting in their trucks. We'll soon have to go pick up the body parts of our friends. It's a new day. Today we'll be bad guys again and make the Talibs collect the corpses of their friends. This is my bad-guy life, with my bad-guy rifle in my fucking bad-guy suit. I'm holding

the puppy and it reminds me that I'll never feel normal again. For a second, I hate America, I hate all my friends and family for thanking me when I get home, but most of all I hate myself.

I take a knee and scoop the puppy out of the crook of my arm. My bad-guy rifle, slung over my shoulder, digs out a small bit of dirt with the muzzle when I kneel. The puppy seems irritated I've disturbed his nap. He's hungry, he's cold. I hear Lt. Adam bitch about the puppy in the distance. I cry silently as I kill the puppy with a quick twist of his neck.

Nonfiction judge Stephanie Elizondo Griest writes: This essay really blew my mind. It is completely recreating a world and a time and a place. It all happens in the very first sentence. "It's a freezing January in Afghanistan, and I'm not yet old enough to drink." And it just descends from there into a world of a young narrator attempting to find humanity in a world largely bereft of it through very short staccato sentences. Each one lands like a bullet, creating a gaping wound within the reader who then mourns for the writer, and all the writer is experiencing.

Barbara Campbell

Last Night I Made Love with a Horse

His face the face
of a long-ago crush,
so sweet
I could've wept.
We rode fast,
I sitting sure and fit.
Where we went
I couldn't tell
but we talked
as if we knew
what the other
thought, no matter
he was a horse
and I his rider.
Once I would've feared
the Freudian subtext.
Now I'm content
with tenderness,
comfort,
the coarse touch
of his forelock.

Barbara Campbell

Have your title do the heavy lifting.
— Poetry Workshop Teacher

Behind the purple lilacs my mother and the milkman would have sex, and on those days the milkman would leave an extra heavy cream which, when my father came home at night, he would put on his strawberry compote and say

Esther,
you really know
how to
please a man.

Barry Peters

Spring, Morning

After the forty-five-minute bus ride
she shuffles through chilly hallways

to the cafeteria for her free breakfast
of jalapeño chips and fried sticks of string cheese.

The chewing muffles the beats in her buds,
clouds her thoughts the way the meds,

when available, sometimes do. Boy drama
among her girlfriends. Her uncle's seizure

last week. How she's not going to pass Math 3.
Through streaked windows she watches

the adults arrive: Teacher. Principal.
Counselor. Case manager. Security guard.

Women and men who might smile at her today
or give her a fist-bump if they're not overwhelmed

by students with less optimistic names than Spring,
who sits alone with her sustenance and styrofoam,

dormant under fluorescent light, chewing, chewing,
chewing, chewing.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Flash Competition - Third Place

Michael Banks

Troubles No More

Only reason I'd stopped was to fill my stomach and settle my nerves. And now, here on some nowhere patch of blacktop, some fool is waving a gun and saying he don't mean no harm.

Damn shame, dying due to me craving a pack of Ho Hos.

I glance out the window. Nothing stirring except for gypsy moths hovering beneath a street lamp.

The gun waves and her fingers fumble in the cash drawer.

"Don't put the gun in my face," she says. "It makes me nervous."

The pistol waves again. I notice a twitch under her left eye, but the blue mascara doesn't run for tears. Blush in her cheeks from cheap rouge, not fear.

"We all got troubles."

Don't I know it?

I'd gotten Deborah Ann a pistol when she started working nights and doing the cash drops. It wasn't right; a man should be the provider. She'd laughed. "I don't see no ring on my finger." She said the money, and the insurance, was needed since she had the cancer in her lungs.

I figured the gun would keep her safe. I didn't figure the cancer would take Deborah Ann after four months. Now, I carried her gun. Maybe it was for sentimental reasons or maybe it was the off-chance I'd find some desperate fool.

Damn if that fool isn't staring, his reflection in the mirror, above the cartons of Camels. *Cancer sticks. Coffin nails.*

I know a cashier, especially one working the late shift, learns to read faces. She'd run a poker table at Tunica if only she could afford the $50 buy-in. I figure the face she's studying is one who's stepped over the edge.

I feel the metal of the gun, its weight heavy. Dryness in my mouth.

No witnesses.

"I got kids, mister. I'm all they got."

I think of my own boy. He stays with Deborah Ann's parents. They say I can't keep a job. He needs stability. "We're not even sure you're his daddy," the most painful.

It can't be this easy. Just coming in and taking cash like that.

He grabs the bag and starts for the door.

It's funny when death comes calling—how everything slows and all senses are magnified. I sat beside Deborah Ann those final days, watching her chest rise, me counting the seconds, silently pleading, praying, then grateful for the whisper of her breath on my cheek.

I see the gypsy moths as they dance before I hear the metallic click. I swivel and see the double barrels, the clerk pulling the shotgun from beneath the counter.

"I told you we all got troubles."

My ears ring and I smell the black powder.

And there's the hurt. A claw plunging and removing the heart, holding it high, and it pumps and pours and blood surrounds you.

Then there's the quiet. And you think of Deborah Ann and the silence when her breath stopped and her kiss turned cold.

Then the black comes.

Then you got troubles no more.

Flash judge Tara Campbell writes: This author has demonstrated a knack for voice, crafting a character with a distinct personality even in this very brief space. The protagonist's backstory is woven into the present narrative at just the right pace, without losing momentum or suspense.

Emily W Pease

Bertha

In your old iron bed you died alone. I was not there
but I knew the bed and I knew the room. Thin

damp mattress, concrete floor polished smooth,
salt-sprayed windowpanes white as bone. In

the morning you were found there, already gone.
What your grown sons had done—

having moved away, they found a stranger to cook
for you, clean, bathe and dress you. Still

you died alone. As do we all, I can hear you say,
clicking your tongue. In your kitchen sink,

a basin of eels. On your stove, a pot of vinegar
steaming. Later, after sundown, you sit

inside your porch, screened walls weathered
black, and listen for the sound of the fire horn.

Out on the cut, a lone boat glides over water.
Beneath lantern light: flounder giggers.

Beaufort was all you knew: flat land, fish breeze,
your father's callused fingers sewing sails.

Wild horses roamed the spit. Some nights, you'd see
their shadows under the light of the moon,

pawing for fresh water. Fresh water—even your faucet
spilled salt. No wonder you were tough.

When your husband died, you carried on. You lost
a front tooth, accepted the dark hole

left behind. I was maybe ten when I first slept
with you: after you became a widow,

burrowing in the cold empty side of your bed.
A streetlight gleamed in your chipped

mirror like the eye of a ghost. I felt you breathe
beside me, your thin ribs lifting with each

shallow breath. A curtain floated over the window
in the warm night breeze, and your long bosom

drooped beneath your loose gown. On your pillow,
your wild gray hair.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Flash Competition - Honorable Mention

David Dixon

Going Home

Either the fear of death is cumulative or I am braver than I thought. And though I had not even made it home before I got the good news, it was enough time to pick out two favorite hymns, a short list of eloquent speakers, and a charity in lieu of flowers. And I only came close to tears when I realized I would not survive to a time my service wouldn't be on Zoom. Me, or a picture of me, stuck in the middle with everyone else not knowing where or how to look. Like Alice in a Brady Bunch wake.

But I was going to beat this thing. Smash it in the teeth. Punch it in the gut. Kick it in the butt. The comeback kid. The familiar sight on Main Street—that guy walking that dog, they would say—constant, steady. Regardless. Part of the army of early risers. The bread truck, street sweeper, paper guy with no muffler. Third-shift nurses from Regional stumbling like zombies into Leon's for coffee and the morning special.

But I would walk on by—my refrigerator full of health. Vegetables. Fresh fruit, protein, nuts and whole grains. Things that take shape in a blender. (Do I have one of those? I think it's in the same place as the air fryer.) And I would wear out every machine in the gym and gain eight pounds of muscle so that my "after" pictures would always amaze and my recipes for kiwi turmeric smoothies would spread like wildfire on Facebook.

But there's that "spread" word. Which I'm sure it has. Or will. Which I accept. Knowingly. Gracefully. It's the ten thousand things, I say cryptically. There doesn't appear to be a significant Taoist community in Surry County, but I do have a meditation app with a 30-day course on "Managing the Pain of Terminal Illness,"

which I complete bravely. With ease. With a smile, even. (Make a note she will need to cancel auto-renewal.)

Friends and relatives shave their heads in solidarity. We laugh at the way it grows back. Straight, black, curly, grey. Not at all in the case of Aunt Janet. I feel bad about that and ask her to be first on the starting line at the 5K fundraiser. A few people walk. Two girls cheat but still donate back the prize money. For the "Human Fund," I laugh, then hear how they say I kept my sense of humor to the very end. Perspective.

Never been sure about the gravestone, though—it's such a small space. How to be concise? Succinct. So permanent. Like a tweet. Maybe best to avoid the whole trips-to-the cemetery thing. There are ways. A few ashes here, some there. A way to be nowhere and everywhere at the same time. That's what I want. To be spread.

That word again.

So that I sound truly grateful on the phone. I understand. Thank you. And yes, I will complete the survey.

Flash judge Tara Campbell writes: The sardonic humor is what gives this story its edge, complete with well-placed callbacks and a last line that stings.

Lucinda Trew

camouflage

on the wrong side of summer
the moth adorns screen door
pewtery wings spread
in bi-lateral symmetry

affixed to mesh like a medal of war
pinned to proud chest or cruel
spreading board

still as fossil, chalky pale of limestone
its pattern calls to mind army fatigues
boys headed for Fort Benning
and emblems of their own

we watch for movement—
thorax pulse, flutter of fringe
the celestial pull of an overhead light

but the moth is frozen in time
standing at attention, lying in wake
and we can't look away

it is an optical illusion, cubist art
of wings indistinguishable
from the wire weave he rests upon

then a passing shadow or slinky cat
the jangle of chimes
will rouse us from reverie
and wondering about the mystery
of moths
and the frailty of flight

we will startle, look away
leave for things in need of doing
regretting as we turn

the druid-like ruin
that found its way inside
to surrender on an August porch
the door will slam—as screen doors do—
a staccato explosion
shattering calm
turning argent wings
to dust

Tori Reynolds

Bagatelle

I've accomplished nothing today,
imagined a poem

after spotting a cardinal
perched in a redbud:

gush of magenta,
prick of fire

my blind desire to show you
what I see.

I give up.

Some pictures
shed words like jewels of water

rolling off a mallard's
emerald feathers.

Long ago, in art class,
a teacher showed us how to make color

appear on paper. Simple, she said,
just use a crayon.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Fiction Competition - Second Place

Pamela Wright

Breath in the Body

Raeanne Williams always swore she'd never turn out like her mama. When she snorted her first line of crystal. When she took her first punch from a man. When the public health nurse put that scrawny, screaming baby in her arms. Even when the social worker took the baby away. She swore it, every time.

Sex sells but not as well as grease, at least not in Wheatley, Georgia. Every Thursday afternoon white-collars, blue-collars, and no-collars alike crowded into Leena's Home Cooking for the weekly special of chicken-fried steak and gravy. Raeanne always wondered exactly what manner of "steak" she was serving up, but for $5.95 including two sides, she didn't figure the customers cared—with enough gravy and a smile she could sell chicken-fried roadkill.

The money was good and the customers were nice enough, or at least quiet enough, except for the passel of truckers that showed up every Thursday around 2:30. The five of them traveled like a pack of mangy dogs: loud, rude, and smelling like the inside of a sweaty old boot. They'd start trouble just for the sake of starting it. She knew their names but thought of them collectively as the "Shitkicking Assholes" for convenience.

As she delivered five specials to their table in the corner booth, Al Mayfield, the Shitkicker-in-Charge, groped at Raeanne's ass.

"Hoo-wee, girl! Rae-Rae, come sit on my lap and let me butter your biscuit." He moaned and thrusted like he was humping the edge of the table.

Raeanne turned out of his grasp and gritted her teeth. Al's younger brother, Chuck, was as close to a mob boss as their small town had ever seen—crime and

violence ran in the Mayfield family like buck teeth ran in others. She plastered a smile on her face and tried to ignore the other men's leers.

"You just see to your own biscuit and I'll see to mine." Mercifully, she heard the call of "Order up!" from the kitchen.

As she collected her next round of specials from the service window, Raeanne saw Lenny the busboy from the corner of her eye. He was carrying an empty dishpan toward the table next to Al and his lackeys, his damaged left leg lagging behind, the toe of his shoe turned inward as always. Raeanne worried about Lenny. The world was quick to cut the weak from the herd.

"Hey, Hopalong," called one of the Lesser Shitkickers. "Hey, Lizard—I'm talking to you."

Lenny kept on clearing dirty dishes, even when the men started pelting him with wadded-up napkins. His only protest was to murmur "Name's Lazzard, not Lizard," to no one in particular.

Raeanne felt her blood rise and strode back to the table without delivering her next order. She turned her body to block Lenny from their view and spoke in a voice so forcefully cheerful she almost didn't recognize it.

"So how's business these days, boys?" Al groped her ass again, hard, but Raeanne stood it long enough for Lenny to retreat to the kitchen.

"Not bad, a'tall, Rae-Rae," Al answered before wiping a blob of congealed gravy from the three-day growth on his chin. "Why don't you come by my truck tonight instead of playing Mother Teresa to that bunch of nasty whores working the lot?"

"Like I said, Al. You see to your biscuit and I'll see to mine," she answered flatly and slapped the check on the table.

*

Raeanne steered her old Chevette into an empty space toward the back of the lot at Luther's Full Service Truck Stop, just off I-20. She could barely see through the fog of exhaust billowing from idling semis into the frigid Georgia night. Cold nights were the worst, even worse than the rain—the temperature made her girls more desperate than ever.

She flipped down the visor mirror and stared at her face in the dim light. The lines around her eyes were even deeper, the circles darker from more worry and less sleep.

Raeanne didn't mind the damage of forty-three hard years; what bothered her was the growing resemblance to her mother, at least as best as she could remember. She slapped the visor up and pressed the car horn—two long blasts followed by three short honks, her code to let the girls know she was there.

It wasn't long before a petite young woman wearing ripped jeans and too-big heels tottered toward the Chevette. Peanut was always the first to find her.

"Miss Raeanne! I thought you might not come tonight." The girl squealed and wrapped her arms around Raeanne.

Raeanne held her for a long time, gently rubbing Peanut's back as she did. The girl was even more birdlike than the last time Raeanne saw her; she could feel the bumps of her spine through the thin coat.

"You know I'm here every night I can be. Let me get a good look at you, honey." Raeanne held the girl at arm's length, one hand on either side of the tattered Georgia Bulldogs toboggan pulled down over her stringy blonde hair. She must have been such a pretty little thing, once. "You help me set up and you can have first pick—anything you want." Peanut squealed again and clapped her bare hands together.

Raeanne popped the hatchback on the car and started unloading her stash: a battered card table, blankets from Goodwill, rolls of condoms from the free clinic. She brought hot coffee and sandwiches for the hungry, and orange juice and day-old doughnuts for the ones who were coming down hard. A pouch tied around her waist held a half dozen clean hypodermic needles courtesy of a sympathetic pharmacist.

In the near distance, under the yellow-tinged glow of the sulfur lights illuminating the lot from high above, Raeanne saw four or five women approach. When they reached the Chevette, she noticed two she didn't recognize.

The two newbies lurked a few yards away, smoking and watching. The taller of them finally approached Raeanne and eyed her suspiciously.

"So, what's the deal here, lady?" Raeanne couldn't place her accent, but she definitely wasn't local. "You one of those freaky bitches trying to drug us up and sell us to some dickhead pimp?"

Peanut looked up from the doughnut she was devouring. "Naw, you got it all wrong. Miss Raeanne's cool, she's our friend." Powdered sugar puffed from her mouth and swirled in the air like sweet-smelling snow.

Raeanne smiled weakly at the young woman. "No, honey. I'm just here to help you make it through the night a little easier. You're welcome to anything you need."

"A do-gooder, huh? You some kinda nun, gonna pray all over us? Deliver us from sinning and sucking dick?" the young woman snorted.

Raeanne laughed. "Me? Girl, I did a whole lifetime wortha sinning before you were even born." She touched her lightly on the arm and offered a sandwich. "I've been where you are."

The young woman shook her head, sharply. "I don't take charity from nobody, lady. Not even an old whore."

Raeanne nodded. "You willing to tell me your name, at least?"

"Kayla."

Raeanne reached into her back pocket and pulled out a flyer with MISSING: HAVE YOU SEEN THIS PERSON? emblazoned above a blurry color photo of a barely grown woman with curly, dark hair framing a delicate face.

"Kayla, you seen this girl around?"

She took the flyer and studied the photo for a minute. "Yeah, but not for a long time. I think I saw her with Chuck Mayfield a while back." Kayla handed the flyer back to Raeanne. "Man, that dude's a psycho."

Raeanne's pulse quickened. Mayfield had a long history of getting or keeping women hooked on smack and turning them out to pay the debt. Some of them weren't even women yet.

She offered the sandwich again and Kayla snatched it from her hand and tore through the wax paper. "Kinda looks likes you, except for the hair," she said around a mouthful of ham and cheese. "She your girl?"

"She used to be."

*

Most of the girls had come and gone by shortly after midnight, off to make whatever version of a living they could. Raeanne had started repacking the car when she saw a familiar figure approaching through the clouds of exhaust.

"Monica? Damn, woman, where you been?"

The two women embraced for a long while. Raeanne was the first to speak after they parted.

"I was worried as fuck about you! Did you get my texts?"

Monica grinned and shook her head, her pink wig shimmering in the light. "Nah, I'm fine. I was working the convention tourists down in Atlanta, just got back to town yesterday." Monica leaned against the door of the Chevette and lit a Marlboro Red. "It beat the hell out of running this piece-of-shit truck stop, I'll tell you that."

She handed the cigarette to Raeanne, who took a long, deep drag. Of all the vices she'd left behind at that rehab clinic in Macon, smoking was the one Raeanne missed most. "You don't have to stay, you know. There's a bed at Hope House with your name on it, no charge or anything. They just got some big grant from the state."

She had known Monica since they weren't much more than kids, long before that judge ordered Raeanne to either treatment or jail seven years ago, and she went cussing and spitting into her new life. It hurt her heart every time she drove off the lot knowing Monica was still there.

Monica half-laughed at the offer. "We've done this dance a million times, girl, and I ain't let you lead once." She eyed her friend steadily. "This is my life—you know it and I know it."

"Well, you know I'm gonna keep trying. You staying safe?"

"Yes, *Auntie Rae*, I'm staying safe. Got a clean blood test two weeks ago."

Raeanne took a last drag on the Marlboro before handing it back. "Good to know. I brought you some of those glow-in-the-dark rubbers you like so much, though why you want to light 'em up I'll never know."

Monica clapped her on the back and snorted. "I want to see what's comin' at me!" The two women laughed until they were breathless and then stood shoulder-to-shoulder, watching the trucks come and go.

"You heard from Destiny lately?" Monica asked, ever watchful, never taking her eyes off the lot.

Raeanne rubbed at the back of her neck—the sound of her daughter's name always brought a dull ache with it. "No, not for months. I've been plastering those flyers all over town. I even went to the cops back in November, but they practically threw me out of the place."

"Yeah," Monica agreed. "The five-o never gonna give a shit about a missing junkie hooker."

"It's just about killed me, Mo. What if I never find her? Tonight one of the new girls told me she'd seen her with Chuck Mayfield. What if she's already—"

Monica turned and clapped her hand over Raeanne's mouth before she could say the word. "Uh-uh, don't you go there." She moved her hand to Raeanne's cheek. "What it is you're always telling me? What do you always say?"

Raeanne's voice trembled when she answered. "As long as there's breath in the body, there's hope."

*

Late March brought another busy chicken-fried Thursday at Leena's. The downtown square was so crowded when Raeanne arrived for her shift she had to park three blocks away on Lincoln Avenue.

The afternoon passed quickly and easily; the Shitkickers were gloriously absent for the first time in years. Near twilight, Lenny slipped up beside her at the counter where she was refilling the salt and pepper shakers.

"Um, Miss Raeanne, ma'am?"

"Hey, hon. Whatcha need?"

"Well," he spoke softly, "there's a lady out back wants to talk to you."

"A lady? Did she say what she wanted?"

"No, ma'am, but I think you ought to go see to it. She looks to be in a bad way."

"Alright, if you say so, Len." She screwed the top on the last shaker and wiped her hands on a dishtowel.

The screen door slammed behind her as Raeanne stepped out onto the slab of cracked concrete behind the diner but saw no one.

"Hello?" She heard a stirring amongst the stacks of empty food cartons stacked against the cinder block wall. "Is somebody there?"

The voice that answered was so weak and small she almost didn't hear it. "It's me, Mama."

Raeanne whirled toward the sound. "Destiny, baby, is that you?"

She scrambled over the cartons, flinging cardboard left and right. Her breath caught and tears sprang to her eyes. Her daughter was sitting on a box of rotting cantaloupes, a halo of gnats humming around her head.

"Jesus Christ!" Raeanne crouched next to Destiny and pulled her close. "Baby, where have you been? What happened to you?" She rocked her and kissed the top of her head. Destiny only tolerated her mother's embrace for a moment before pulling away to stand.

"I heard you were looking for me, so here I am." Her dirty t-shirt and jeans billowed around her painfully thin frame in the evening breeze.

"What? How … I've been looking for you forever." Raeanne felt her heart break when her daughter stood in the dwindling sunlight and she saw the open sores and old bruises ringing her face and arms.

"Monica, that's how. That bitch tracked me like a bloodhound, said she wouldn't leave me be until I came to see you."

Raeanne should have known.

"How did you get here?" She scanned the alley running behind the restaurant but saw no one. "Never mind, I don't care. I don't care. Let me get my purse and we'll go home."

"No, Mama." Destiny jerked her head in both directions and back toward the alley, searching. When she turned back, there was more than just addiction and defiance in her eyes, something more like fear. "I can't come home with you."

"Honey, why not?"

Destiny looked back at the alley again and shook her head.

"Who are you looking for? Come on with me." Raeanne stood and started toward the screened door.

"Mama, don't! Please!" Destiny's legs crumpled beneath her. She covered her face with her hands and began to sob. Raeanne crouched and rubbed her trembling back until she could speak again.

"I fucked up. I fucked everything up so bad, Mama."

"Destiny, just tell me what happened," she said softly. She'd seen the girl wild, angry, and strung-out, but she'd never seen her terrified.

"Chuck Mayfield."

Raeanne's heart pounded in her ears and her hands began to shake. Not him, any man but that one.

"What in God's name are you doing with Chuck Mayfield? Please, please tell me you're not mixed up with him." She grabbed her daughter's shoulders with both hands. Destiny didn't pull away.

"How much are you into him for?"

Destiny shrugged and tears spilled onto her cheeks. "I don't know … every time I ask him he says it's more and more. Last week he said ten grand, but Mama, he makes me fix even when I don't want to and says he's putting it on my tab."

Ten grand may as well have been ten million—Destiny wouldn't live long enough to pay off a fraction of it.

"Does he know you're here?"

"I don't know, maybe? He knew you were looking for me … Monica had been spreading the word all over. He's been watching me all the time. I couldn't go nowhere he didn't say so."

"Honey, how did you get away from him?"

Destiny ducked her head so her mother couldn't see her eyes.

"Yesterday I heard him talking to Russ, that big redneck who's his muscle?"

"Yeah, I've heard of him."

Destiny wiped her nose with the back of her hand and raised her eyes. "Chuck told him to carry me to Lucky's down on the river for a big party tonight."

"Oh, God, no!"

"Mama, I can't go to Lucky's, I just can't." Destiny's voice was low and ragged.

Raeanne had heard the rumors about Lucky's for years, stories of drugs, gambling, and dog fights. Mayfield paid off most of the cops to stay away; the others were free to take their fill. Worse still were the rumblings about Chuck offering girls to the highest bidder.

Most were never seen again.

Destiny wiped at her eyes with the hem of her shirt. "So, last night after Chuck passed out I hid in the bathroom and chipped at the window sill with an old kitchen knife until I got it open. Then I just ran."

"Jesus, that was hours and hours ago! He could be here already." Raeanne scanned the alley for any sign of Mayfield. He was dumber than dirt, but even he would figure it out eventually. She took Destiny by the arm and led her through the screen door into a small bathroom just inside the kitchen.

"I'll be right back."

Destiny grasped at her mother's arms. "Mama, please don't leave me."

Raeanne put a hand on either side of Destiny's face. "We'll fix all this, baby. I promise we will. You've just got to be brave and trust me."

The absurdity of asking for the trust of a daughter who'd spent nearly all of her childhood in the care of reluctant, distant relatives, just as she had, was not lost on Raeanne.

She pulled her purse from a locker next to the kitchen freezer and was rummaging for her keys when she heard a sound out back. She pushed the screen door open and listened closer to the low rumbling, like a car passing slowly along the back alley, but saw nothing in the gathering darkness. Her hands shook slightly as she latched the screen and turned the deadbolt on the kitchen door.

"Mama, are you there?" Destiny called softly from inside the bathroom.

"Just a minute, baby." Raeanne struggled to keep her voice even. "You lock that door until I get back, hear?"

She pushed through the swinging doors into the empty dining room and put her purse on the counter. Even Lenny and "Leena," who was really an ex-Marine named Burt, had already gone home. Raeanne extinguished the neon OPEN sign with a quick pull of the cord and half-ran back into the kitchen. She knocked sharply on the bathroom door, and it opened slowly from within.

Destiny was crouched against the wall just inside the door with her legs pulled to her chest. Raeanne pulled a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and wet them.

"Is he here, Mama?" Destiny asked as her mother began to wipe her face; she was trembling. Raeanne wasn't sure if was fear, withdrawal, or both.

"No, but we've got to hurry. Listen to me close, now."

Raeanne stooped down next to her daughter and spoke quickly but firmly. "When we get up from here, we're walking straight through and out the front door." Destiny's eyes widened so big they took up nearly half her face.

"I know it's scary, but we've got to do it. When we get out the door we're gonna cross the street and go right on Lincoln Avenue. My Chevette is parked up by the edge of the woods. I'll be with you, all the way."

"But somebody will see us!"

"No, they won't. It's Thursday—every place in town besides this one closed at four."

Destiny was shaking her head violently. "I can't, Mama. He'll kill us both if he finds us."

Raeanne shook her and raised her voice. "Yes, you can. This is the only way. We've got to go, baby, I'll figure out where later." Destiny reached for her mother, for the first time in her life. Raeanne hugged her quickly and kissed her forehead before pulling them both up from the floor.

She heard a rattling sound just outside the back door. "It's time," she said and frog-marched Destiny through the dining room. Destiny's footsteps slowed as they approached the front door; Raeanne practically had to carry her the last few feet.

She eased the door open. "Now, you do just like I told you, baby, and everything will be okay." She kissed her daughter on the forehead one more time and pulled her through the door.

They crossed the street and turned onto Lincoln, walking quickly but not fast enough to attract attention if anyone should pass by, though the street was deserted.

"Holy shit!" Raeanne stopped. "I forgot my purse. The car keys are in it. I've got to go back." Destiny's eyes widened again.

"It's okay, baby, you go on to the car. The doors are open. Get in and hide under the blankets in the back."

"No, Mama!" Destiny clutched at the sleeves of her mother's blouse. She was shaking again.

"Destiny Marie, you do like I tell you!" She turned her daughter by the shoulders, pushed her gently in the opposite direction. "Now go—I'll be right behind you."

Raeanne watched as Destiny started down the sidewalk before jogging across the street and back into Leena's. Now finally out of Destiny's sight, she wiped the tears she'd been holding back and grabbed her purse from the counter.

Just as she crossed the threshold and stepped onto the sidewalk, Raeanne heard two deafening blasts from the kitchen.

"Destiny! Where the FUCK are you, bitch!"

Chuck Mayfield. He'd blown through the back door. Raeanne ran blindly onto Lincoln, searching for sight of her daughter. Destiny was about a block ahead, almost to the car.

"You motherfucking cunts better get back here!" Mayfield slammed through the front door and into the street.

Raeanne glanced back, still running. He was carrying a shotgun in his right hand. Destiny was almost to the car, but Raeanne would never get there in time to start it before Mayfield caught up to them.

"Destiny!" she screamed. "Run to the woods!" Destiny looked back at her mother but kept moving. Raeanne heard Mayfield slow to a stop.

"NOW, baby!" Destiny broke into a sprint and bore left into the trees.

Raeanne made it another twenty feet or so before her ears filled with the unmistakable sound of shells being racked into the chamber of the shotgun.

He couldn't hit them both.

She stopped running.

Fiction judge Ron Rash writes: A woman's attempt to break a generational cycle of poverty, drugs, and violence is vividly realized in this story. The dialogue is particularly impressive.

Lit/South Awards 2022
Fiction Competition - Honorable Mention

Pamela Wright

Hallelujah By and By

The woman pushed a pamphlet across her battered wooden desk to the man sitting with one denim-clad leg crossed loosely over the other. A fraying Carhartt cap dangled from his knee.

"So, Mr. Collins," she began. A nametag pinned to her blouse read "Ms. Rita Malone." "As we discussed on the phone, this is our Value Everlasting package. It includes transportation of the loved one to our facility, all cremation services, and a memorial urn in your choice of bronze or copper-simulated tone."

Dexter Collins retrieved a thick roll of bills from the pocket of his faded denim shirt and flipped it onto the desk. A flurry of dust motes swirled toward the fluorescent light humming overhead. "This oughta cover it. Don't need nothing fancy."

Ms. Malone's eyes widened at the cash. "Perhaps you might like to honor the loved one with a simple service? We would be delighted to make the arrangements, for just a small additional fee."

Dexter stood and pulled on his cap. "The funeral is for me, lady. And I ain't nobody's loved one."

She let out a tiny gasp, and the deep creases rimming Dexter's mouth pulled into a lopsided grin.

"You'll get word when it's time, probably before the end of the week." He tipped his cap and retreated from the room, leaving Ms. Rita Malone to gawp after him.

*

Back in his pickup, Dexter stuffed Ms. Malone's pamphlet into the glovebox next to his Beretta 9mm. He ran his index finger along the gun's shiny black barrel for a moment before slamming the box shut and rummaging under the seat for his cell phone. The damn thing weighed nearly as much as his gun. He was surprised to find a waiting voicemail. No one ever called him except telemarketers and TV preachers.

"Mr. Collins, this is Dr. John Hunt from UAB Hospital. You've missed your last two consultation appointments and it's urgent that I speak with you. I know, I mean … I imagine a Stage 4 diagnosis is a terrifying shock, but Mr. Collins we can help you if you'll let us. Even if you decline treatment, at some point the pain will become considerable and you're going to need—"

Dexter slapped the phone shut. He'd heard all he intended to from doctors.

*

"Hey, Dexter, is my truck fixed yet? I gotta run a load of pallets down to Montgomery this evening."

"Everett, I told you I'd have it ready, and I'll have it ready." Dexter turned back to the semi. He had grown generally fond of Everett during the nearly 40 years they both worked for Winston Trucking, but the man ran his mouth like an old-maid schoolteacher. Even so, Dexter felt obligated to finish the job since it would be his last.

"Well, I might as well cool my heels while you finish up," Everett said, lifting his considerable girth onto an ancient metal stool. "Say, that reminds me. Last time I took a run over to Georgia, I saw your boy in Wheatley."

Dexter froze beneath the hood, the ratcheting of his socket wrench momentarily silenced. "You saw Daniel?"

"Yep, sure did. You never told me he was living in Wheatley."

"Oh, yeah, he moved over that way some years ago," Dexter lied and fumbled blindly with the wrench for a moment before climbing down from the engine.

Everett pulled a cigar from his shirt pocket and lit it. Twisting precariously on his perch, feet dangling, his gaze fell on the auto parts calendar pinned above the tool bench. A scantily-clad young woman smiled down from the hood of a mint condition '68 Mustang.

"That's a pretty girl you got up there, but you better be careful," Everett snorted. "Now that there's a couple of women working here, that could be what they call that 'sex-yul hay-rass-ment.'"

Dexter fanned smoke away from his face and recalled that Everett always laughed too loudly at his own jokes. He returned the socket wrench to its place on the tool bench and began casually wiping grease from his hands.

"So, where was it in Wheatley you said you ran into Daniel?" Dexter asked and removed a small knife from his pants pocket. He scraped carefully at the dark grease permanently embedded beneath his fingernails.

"What?" Everett asked, reluctantly turning away from Miss Southeastern Ball Bearing. "Oh, right. I seen him coming out of this little meat-and-three on Broad Street. Yeah, with his wife and their little girl."

Dexter returned the knife to his pocket and raked his hands through his thinning brown hair. "Is that right," he said evenly, hoping Everett couldn't see his heart pounding beneath his shirt.

"Sure is," Everett said. "I was real surprised he remembered me. I don't believe I've seen Daniel since you and his mama busted up, and he was just a kid then." He puffed hard on his cigar. "You know, I always thought that was a crying shame. Annie sure was a fine woman. Pretty one, too."

"Yeah, wasn't no wonder I managed to run her off, was it?" Dexter joked and retreated beneath the truck hood.

"Say, what's your grandbaby's name?" Everett asked. "I swear, she's the spitting image of her grandma."

Dexter slammed the hood of the truck closed.

"Well, Everett, looks like you're back in business. 'Bout time for you to hit the road, ain't it?"

Dexter pressed the keys into the older man's hand and ushered him towards the truck by one arm. Too surprised to mount a protest, Everett climbed into the cab and leaned out the window.

"I'll tell you again," Everett shouted over the engine's roar as he backed out of the garage. "You better get Miss Ball Bearing down off that wall. That's a can of worms you do not want to open, my friend."

Dexter stood in the open garage door watching the taillights grow dimmer in the distance.

He swallowed hard against the bitter acid rising in his throat.

*

It was surprisingly easy to find his son, so much so that Dexter's stomach roiled with the shame of it. One trip to the public library, and within an hour he found the number among the half dozen volumes on a shelf marked "2005 Phone Directories, Western Georgia."

That night, Dexter sat at the kitchen table with his rotary phone and a fresh pint of Early Times. The bottle was nearly empty by the time he began to dial. He picked nervously at a crack in the Formica with his thumbnail as the call went to Daniel's voicemail.

"Yeah, hello?" He cleared his throat. "This is Dexter, Dexter Collins. I, uh, heard you're living over in Wheatley. I was wondering if you'd be willing to meet me at that diner on Broad Street next Thursday afternoon?" The receiver began to shake in his hand. "I know it's been, been a long time, but I need to talk to you, Daniel." He left his phone number and dropped the receiver on the table. As he drained the rest of

the bottle, Dexter figured if Daniel bothered to call him back, he'd let the answering machine pick it up—he wouldn't have to live with his own cowardice for long.

But Daniel did call, two days later, and left a message: "I'll give you fifteen minutes, and only because my wife talked me into it." The tape when silent for a moment. "This is Daniel, by the way. I don't expect you'd recognize my voice."

*

Dexter rounded the corner onto Broad Street for the third time, his eyes scanning the street for the diner. He didn't remember downtown Wheatley being this crowded.

The courthouse clock tower sounded four o'clock and his left hand began to twitch.

Dexter finally located Leena's Home Cooking and eased his truck into a parking space in front of the diner's large front windows before removing a pack of Marlboro Reds from the pocket of his thin cotton jacket. Squinting against the afternoon sun, Dexter peered through the glass for anyone he recognized, but he couldn't see past the glare. He stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray and got out of the truck.

A bell over the door clanged loudly as Dexter entered. The restaurant's interior was so dim after the harsh daylight he had to blink several times before he could make his way past the booths and tables to a tattered red stool at the counter.

A waitress appeared from the kitchen and began to wipe down the surface in front of him. Her earrings, fashioned from a pair of dangling green dice, swayed in perfect rhythm with every swipe. The woman was either a well-preserved fifty or a hard-lived thirty, but for the life of him Dexter couldn't tell which. A name tag over her generous right breast read "Raeanne," with a small heart over the second "e."

"What can I get you, honey?" she asked.

"Just coffee."

"You want something to eat with this?" Raeanne asked as she filled his cup. Her teased hair looked like honeyed cotton candy.

Dexter shook his head. The smell of frying bacon and yesterday's grease wafted from the kitchen and set his stomach to rolling—he couldn't keep much down lately. He craned his neck over one shoulder and then the other as if stretching, trying not to draw attention to himself as he surveyed the room. The lunch rush was long since over and only a few customers remained. A middle-aged couple sat huddled at a nearby table holding hands. They spoke to each other in hushed voices. The man leaned in even closer and whispered something in the woman's ear, something that elicited a peal of laughter so sharp it made Dexter jump.

He tried to steady his hands as he stirred his coffee, but it sloshed over onto the counter. A white-haired man in a rumpled seersucker suit two stools down handed Dexter a wad of paper napkins.

"Got you a case of the shakes, my friend?" the old man asked. "What you need is a little hair of the dog that bit ya. Hey, Raeanne, bring my new friend here a drop

of something soothing to go with his coffee. Bring me a drop, too, while you're at it. I'm feeling a little parched."

"No thanks, I'll manage," Dexter said. Raeanne emerged from the kitchen.

"Porter, you know perfectly well we don't serve liquor in here," the waitress scolded. "Now, you leave this man alone and mind your business."

"Well, if I can't get a little snort, I guess I'll just take my business elsewhere," Porter said and headed toward the cash register. He turned towards Dexter as he fished two wrinkled dollar bills from his wallet.

"I don't believe I've seen you in here before, friend. What brings you to Wheatley this fine afternoon?"

Dexter eyed the man for a few seconds longer than good manners allowed.

"Nothing special," he answered, finally. "Just over from Birmingham to look up an old friend of the family."

"That's quite a long drive. Must be a good friend," Porter said. Dexter leveled his gaze at him but didn't answer.

"Well, good luck to you, then. Take my advice and avoid the sweet potato pie. Raeanne claims it's homemade, but it tastes like it fell off the back of a dump truck."

Porter hurried out the door, ducking as he went to avoid the wet dish towel Raeanne hurled at him from behind the register. A man of about thirty-five entered as Porter passed. He caught the towel in midair.

"Raeanne, don't go letting that old man get your goat again," the young man chided softly. She blew a raspberry through her lips and placed a fresh cup of coffee on the counter.

Dexter took a sideways glance at the younger man as he tossed the dish towel back to Raeanne then took a seat on Porter's vacated stool. He must have only been an inch or two taller than himself, which wasn't saying much.

"You waiting on somebody?" the young man asked.

"Yeah, what business is it of…." Dexter's voice trailed off as he looked the young man full in the face. There was something about the way his light eyes turned up at the corners when he spoke.

Raeanne appeared and extracted a gnawed yellow pencil from deep within the recesses of her hair.

"So, what you want to eat today, Daniel?"

"*Daniel?*" Dexter spun on his stool so fast he nearly slid off it.

"Yeah, Dex. In the flesh. Didn't recognize me, did you?" he asked through tightly-drawn lips.

Dexter's face reddened. He righted himself on his seat and hunched down over what was left of his coffee.

"Well, it's been a long time. But I knew it was you, after a minute." Dexter eyed him quickly. Daniel's jaw tensed, much like his own so often did. "I didn't think you'd come."

"That's my wife Jamie's doing—something about closure and setting a good example." Daniel stared at him for a long minute. "What do you want with me, old man?"

Dexter's face burned even hotter.

"No, I don't want nothing from you, Daniel. I just got to wondering how you were making out in the world and wanted to … wanted to talk to you," Dexter stammered.

"After twenty-five goddamned years? You came all this way just to *chat*?"

Daniel's dark blond eyebrows were drawn down over his eyes, a deep vertical furrow formed between them. Dexter recognized the small rise in his son's nose as a memento of a long-healed break. His own nose bore a similar reminder of a youthful brawl fueled by cheap liquor and indiscriminate rage.

"Why now, for God's sake?" Daniel asked.

Dexter laced his fingers over the top of his head and blew a long, ragged breath through his lips. His thoughts raced in step with his pulse, and sharp pain stabbed at his left temple.

"I don't rightly know. Lord knows I tried to forget about all that, about back then." He lowered his hands from his head and crossed them against his chest. "I just figured you were better off without me."

"You just moved on like it never happened?" Daniel shook his head. "Like I never happened."

Raeanne hovered close by, wiping one end of the counter, the jangling of her earrings the only sound in the room. Trapped in the heat of his son's glare, Dexter felt his chance slipping away.

"You want some sweet potato pie?" Dexter asked. "I hear it's homemade."

Daniel lifted his right hand to hide the unbidden half-smile breaking across his face. "That's the only reason I eat here." He exhaled slowly. "What the hell. I said I'd give you fifteen minutes—at least one of us is a man of his word."

No sooner had Dexter raised a hand to summon her, Raeanne slid silverware and two plates of pie in front of them.

"Now, you boys let me know if you need anything else." She winked before disappearing into the kitchen.

The two men ate in silence for a long while. The light streaming through the windows had taken on the purple-orange hue of evening.

Dexter looked at his son, unsure of what to say.

"What happened to your nose?" he asked. "Football injury?"

"No," Daniel answered and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "A fight outside a Tastee Freez back in high school. I always went after the biggest guy in the crowd."

Although he knew he probably shouldn't, Dexter felt a rush of pride.

"No kidding?" He gestured to his own slightly crooked nose. "I had my share of dust-ups back in my time."

"Mama always said I got it from you," Daniel said and pushed his plate away. "I guess it's the only thing you ever gave me, not that it brought me anything but trouble." The furrow had settled between his eyes again.

Dexter twisted his fork in his hands for several moments before he spoke again.

"Look here, boy, I don't blame you for hating me. I did wrong by you and your mama, real wrong. But I was a mean-hearted sonofabitch back then, and I was no good for y'all." Dexter turned back to face the counter again, his breath ragged. "I may have been a no-good coward for staying away like I did, but the way I see it, it was the only good thing I ever did for either one of you."

Daniel stared down at his lap, listening to his father. When he looked up, his expression had softened a bit.

"Mama told me one time about all those nightmares you used to have, after you came home from 'Nam. About how you'd thrash around the room, breaking things and screaming. She said sometimes you didn't even recognize her."

Dexter's mind flooded with dark memories. The terror in his wife's eyes; the bruises she tried to hide and he couldn't remember leaving.

"Your mama did everything she could to try to help me, even sent me to the VA hospital over in Birmingham one time, but it didn't do any good," Dexter said, his voice hoarse. "I was in a bad way back then, son; real bad, and I couldn't get loose from it."

Dexter grasped his son's arm lightly. "Your mama always stood by me, even when everybody told her to kick my sorry ass out before things got any worse. Annie's a good woman. Too good for me; so were you. That's why I had to leave. You both deserved better."

He dropped Daniel's arm and turned back to his coffee. "I sure hope Annie found a better life after I was gone. God knows she's earned it."

"She's dead, Dex," Daniel said flatly. "Heart attack took her seven years ago."

Dexter felt the floor rise up and his stomach lurched. In his mind's eye Annie was still that young woman with unruly blonde hair flowing down her back like unraveled rope. He could still see her laughing in the sun with baby Daniel in her arms.

"I'm real sorry to hear that," Dexter said, his composure slightly regained.

"She did. She was happy, I think." Daniel swallowed hard and continued. "But she always missed you, and I'll be goddamned if I know why."

Dexter scratched at a mosquito bite above his right eyebrow while he tried to figure out how to tell his son he'd soon be an orphan.

"Daniel, I don't know if it'll make any difference to you, but I've had a run of bad luck myself, lately. See, a couple of months ago I got sent over to UAB—"

"I *knew* it." Daniel shook his head and set his coffee cup in the saucer, hard. "You want something, don't you?"

Startled, Dexter straightened up and turned toward his son. "No, Daniel, wait, let me—"

"What is it, Dex? If it's money, I don't have any, not for you. You need a kidney? Some bone marrow?" He paused, the color rising in his cheeks. "I don't have anything for you."

"Daniel, please, just listen to me." Dexter's voice was so small and pleading he almost didn't recognize it as his own.

Daniel stood up and pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. "If that's all you've got to say, I guess I'll be going. The coffee and pie are on me … *Dad*." Daniel tossed the money on the counter and headed toward the door.

"I just want to know her name!"

Daniel stopped a few feet short of the exit. "Whose name?" he asked, still facing the doorway. "What are you talking about?"

Dexter rose from his seat and turned to face his son's retreating back.

"The little girl," Dexter said, his voice strangled. "My granddaughter. Just tell me her name. That's all I want."

"I don't owe you a goddamned thing," Daniel answered, without turning, and walked out into the waning afternoon light.

Dexter's head jerked back as if he'd been punched.

Raeanne picked up the twenty and extended it toward him. "It's on the house, honey."

"No, ma'am." He pulled on his cap. "I can't take that money."

*

Dexter crawled into the cab of his truck on rubbery legs and popped open the glovebox. He pulled it out and cradled it in his lap, wondering if anyone had taken all of the tomatoes and cucumbers he'd picked that morning. He'd left them in a cardboard box at the end of the driveway next to an old lawnmower, his toolbox, and a sign reading "Free."

This was as good a place as any, he reckoned. He retrieved a ballpoint pen and Ms. Rita Malone's pamphlet from among the fast food receipts and empty Marlboro Red boxes littering the dashboard.

On the cover of the Value Everlasting Guide to Bereavement he scrawled in spidery cursive: "Call this lady after you find me. I'm all paid up."

Before Dexter could decide where to leave his note, he was startled by two sharp raps on the driver's side window. It was his son.

"Annabel," he said, loud enough to be heard through the glass. "Her name is Annabel."

Daniel placed a small photograph against the glass. Dexter gently traced one trembling finger over the image. A tiny girl with ropes of blonde hair spilling over her shoulders smiled back at him, her mouth and chin stained red by the Popsicle melting in her hands.

"This is your granddaughter. We call her Annie."

Fiction judge Ron Rash writes: This story of a dying man's last chance to know his son eschews sentimentality, which makes the final line all the more powerful and moving.

Gretchen Steele Pratt

Totality

Solar Eclipse, 2017

It writes itself. There is a waterfall, a river, deep in the middle of the town.
My two girls in the river, their dresses wet and sagging, children in the old sense,
in the river with other children. They were all building a dam—
the ringleader calling out *gotta get this done before the eclipse!*

A diamond light dimming, though I wasn't sure and asked the girls
if it was getting darker. Everything gravity, neutron star heavy, as if
all was alive to what was about to happen—the flock of geese, monuments,
the rocks the children dug from the riverbed. The falls. That word,

totality. My last day of summer. I sat on a rock in the river, feet in the water,
and a piece of cardboard—the top of a pack of cigarettes—*American Spirit*—
floated by me like a banner in the sky, then downcurrent, through a gap in
the children's dam, down where people were sitting in lawn chairs in

the middle of the river, or sitting in the river, in their clothes, water up
to their necks. Nickel light. I did not plan to find this river, these falls.
For years now, every night before bed, I recite Yeats's "Song of Wandering Aengus"
to the girls—*And pluck till time and times are done*—

and the girls each take one of the last two lines—
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.
And it's as if these lines, repeated, have brought us here,

one silver girl, one gold, below a waterfall, standing in the river, waiting
for the eclipse. I have no clear memory of what happened.
I have heard spiders during the darkness will tear down their webs.
The cavern howled, one involuntary throat,

and when I saw the black sun, my first thought was recognition,
that I had seen this on some movie poster once. I bent over,
cupped a handful of river water and poured it on the crown of my head,
From now on, from now on, from now on, until the sun came back like shade.

Kathy Goodkin

Two Dreams About the Moon

When the moon rode
the horizon, close

enough to sketch
each crater in high relief,

you said you thought
the world was ending.

Your car rolled toward it
like a magnet, a bad

romance. I should have told
you the first poems

came from the moon:
written to the moon,

by the light of the moon, to flesh
in the moonlight, to dark

private love, to and of the mind
and the self in the moonlight,

to loneliness, to sorrow, which expands
and transforms

in the moonlight.
Illumination against night

is both public and intimate,
the mutable edge

between *known* and *unknown*
rising and falling like breath,

like waves on the shore.
I should have said that

the moon is an axis,
common ancestor

of poetry and song.
It's true. The first songs

were made from the world's end
that is nightfall, exposure, shifting

shape of a pine tree.
The first poems were

someone like you,
like me, awake

and taking dictation
from the moon,

transcribing its twice-reflected light
from the water's rippling surface.

About Charlotte Lit

Charlotte Center for Literary Arts, Inc., is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 2015 by writers Kathie Collins and Paul Reali, with studios located in the heart of North Carolina's largest city. Charlotte Lit's mission is to celebrate the literary arts by educating and engaging writers and readers through classes, conversations, and community. Our programming includes:

- 100+ classes annually, half of them free, led by talented writing teachers from the Charlotte area and across the state and nation.
- Three class formats: in-person, online, and asynchronous.
- Year-long immersions: Authors Lab for novelists and memoirists, Chapbook Lab for poets, and (forthcoming) Chapbook Lab for short story writers and personal essayists.
- Events series that put published authors in conversation with community members: 4X4CLT Poetry+Art Poster Series (2016-2022) and Poetry Nightclub (coming November 2022).
- Multi-event initiatives: Carson McCullers (2017), Beautiful Truth (2019), and Romare Bearden: Artists Reckoning with Home (coming October 2022).

In our first six years, Charlotte Lit has hosted readings and master classes with many literary stars, including Sandra Beasley, Nickole Brown, Gabrielle Calvocoressi, Wiley Cash, Jennifer Chang, Morri Creech, Tyree Daye, Beth Ann Fennelly, Richard Garcia, Judy Goldman, Christine Hale, Lola Haskins, Terrance Hayes, Jessica Jacobs, A. Van Jordan, Ada Limón, Maurice Manning, Rebecca McClanahan, Matthew Olzmann, Cecily Parks, and our very first guest, the poet Linda Pastan.

This inaugural issue of *Litmosphere* contains the winning entries from our very first Lit/South Awards, forming an exciting bridge between writers and readers. This year's prizes total over $10,000 to worthy writers. The next Lit/South Awards open for entries on September 1, 2022.

You can learn more about Charlotte Lit and find your way to becoming part of our community at charlottelit.org.

Contributors

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Michael Banks is an award-winning journalist who spent 30 years working at newspapers in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Mississippi. He is a regular contributor to *South Carolina Living* magazine. This is his first published piece of fiction, and he is nearing completion of his first novel. He and his wife, Danette, reside in Belmont, NC, with a pair of cats with an attitude.

Tina Barr's most recent book, *Green Target,* won the Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize and the Brockman-Campbell Award. Her first book, *The Gathering Eye,* won the Tupelo Press Editor's Award. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Tennessee Arts Commission, the MacDowell Colony and elsewhere. She previously directed the Creative Writing Program as Associate Professor at Rhodes College, and currently teaches for the Great Smokies Writing Program at UNC Asheville, and has private classes and students.

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Nickole Brown is the author of *Sister* and *Fanny Says.* She lives with her wife, poet Jessica Jacobs, in Asheville, NC, where she periodically volunteers at three different animal sanctuaries. She writes about these animals, resisting the kind of pastorals that made her (and many of the working-class folks from the Kentucky that raised her) feel shut out of nature. Her work speaks in a queer, Southern-trash-talking way about nature beautiful, damaged, and in desperate need of saving. *To Those Who Were Our First Gods* won the 2018 Rattle Chapbook Prize, and her essay-in-poems, *The Donkey Elegies,* was published in 2020.

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Caren Stuart is an award-winning poet/writer/artist/maker and lifelong North Carolinian currently living in the wilds of Chatham County with her very supportive husband. Her poetry has appeared most recently in *Kakalak, Shot Glass Journal, Redheaded Stepchild,* and several *Poems of The Heron Clan* anthologies. When she's not writing or attending or organizing artsy or writerly happenings, she's designing and creating one-of-a-kind jewelry, art, and crafts.

Richard Allen Taylor (Myrtle Beach, SC) is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *Armed and Luminous* (Main Street Rag Publishing, 2016). Taylor's poems, articles and reviews have appeared in *Rattle, Comstock Review, The Pedestal, Iodine Poetry Journal, Wild Goose Poetry Review, Asheville Poetry Review, Toastmaster Magazine,* and *South Carolina Review,* among others. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, Taylor formerly served as review editor for *The Main Street Rag* and co-editor of *Kakalak*. After retiring from his 44-year business career, he earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte. In 2016 he and his *Kakalak* co-editors received the Irene Honeycutt Legacy Award for service to the writing community.

Lucinda Trew is a poet and essayist. Her work has been featured in *Broad River Review, storySouth, Eastern Iowa Review, The Poet, Mockingheart Review, Flying South,* and other journals and anthologies. She was named a North Carolina Poetry Society poet laureate award finalist in 2021 and 2022, and is a recipient of a 2021 Randall Jarrell Poetry Competition honorable mention and a 2020 Kakalak Poetry Award.

Junious Ward is a poet living in Charlotte, NC. His is author of *Sing Me a Lesser Wound* (Bull City Press). Junious has attended Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Callaloo, the Frost Place, Tin House Winter Workshop, and the Watering Hole. His poems have appeared or are upcoming in *Four Way Review, Columbia Journal, DIAGRAM, The Amistad, Diode Poetry Journal* and elsewhere.

Shannon C. Ward, raised in a renovated slaughterhouse on the outskirts of Wilmington, OH, is author of the poetry collection, *Blood Creek* (Longleaf Press, 2013). A recipient of the Foley Poetry Award, the White Oak Kitchen Prize in Southern Poetry, and the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize, Ward has also been a resident fellow at Yaddo, Willapa Bay Air, Norton Island, Brush Creek Ranch, and the Anderson Center. Her poems have appeared in *New Ohio Review, Great River Review, Tar River Poetry,* and others. She received an MFA in Poetry from North Carolina State University in 2009 and became the Executive Editor of Longleaf Press in 2020.

Amie Whittemore is the author of the poetry collections *Glass Harvest* (Autumn House Press), *Star-tent: A Triptych* (Tolsun Books, 2023), and *Nest of Matches* (Autumn House, 2024). She was the 2020-21 Poet Laureate of Murfreesboro, TN, and an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow. Her poems have won multiple awards, including a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Prize, and her poems and prose have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review, Nashville Review, Smartish Pace, Pleiades,* and elsewhere. She is the reviews editor for *Southern Indiana Review* and teaches English at Middle Tennessee State University, where she directs MTSU Write, a from-home creative writing mentorship program.

Annie Woodford is the author of *Bootleg* (Groundhog Poetry Press, 2019), which was a runner-up for the Weatherford Award for Appalachian poetry. Her second book, *Where You Come From Is Gone,* won Mercer University's 2020 Adrienne Bond Prize and will be published in 2022. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal, Blackbird, The Southern Review, The Rumpus,* and *Prairie Schooner.* Originally from a Virginia mill town near the North Carolina border, she now teaches community college English in Wilkesboro, NC.

Pamela Wright is a native Atlantan and longtime resident of Clarkdale, GA. Her essays have been published by *The Bitter Southerner, Purple Clover, Full Grown People, The Atlanta-Journal Constitution,* and in the Amazon best-selling humor anthology *Laugh Out Loud: 40 Women Humorists Celebrate Then and Now…Before We Forget.* She is currently at work on a collection of short fiction.

Cynthia Robinson Young is a native of Newark, NJ, but now lives in Chattanooga, TN, where she is an Adjunct Professor of Exceptional Education, and of Poetry at Covenant College in nearby Georgia. Her work has appeared in journals and magazines including *The Amistad, Sixfold, The Grist, Cutleaf Journal,* and *The Writer's Chronicle*. Cynthia served as poetry editor at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga for the 2020 issue of *Catalpa: A Magazine of Southern Perspectives.* For her chapbook, *Migration,* she was named a finalist in the 2019 Georgia Author of the Year Award in her category.

Janna Zonder is a writer, actor, singer, and musician. Along with her husband, Stu, she writes and performs musical comedy parodies that address everything from aging to political issues, as well as spoken word poetry, cover songs, and original music. Her first novel, *Magenta Rave,* is a psychological thriller centered around a therapy group of women who may be taking revenge against sexual predators. She is nearing completion of her second novel, *The Phenomenon's Daughter,* a family story set in 1950s Georgia. She is from Marietta, GA.

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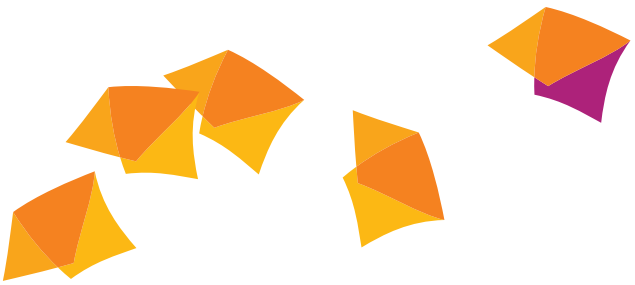
Nonfiction by Karen Salyer McElmurray • Matt Cheek • Stephanie Elizondo Griest • Tracy Rothschild Lynch



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