




The Big Windows Review

Issue 21 Fall 2020



The Big Windows Review is a publication of the Writing Center at Washtenaw Community College, Ann Arbor, MI, USA. We publish poems and short (500 words or less) prose.

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Pieced Together

Born from the
after-light, examined by the
distant star.

Caressed and forgotten by
the once-winter nightfall.

Guard myself and tinker
with it until
jigsawed with a chainsaw.

I've been tampered with by
some unknown
god or wizard or
chance, spit up here
where gold
crackles piece me together.

I am holding. I am stronger
than before.

Mystic

I hang my head in shame. “I’m not a mystic.” I raise my head. I look her full in the eyes.

Jazmin lowers her gaze. “I,” she begins. “I didn’t mean to . . .” She turns away. “Tankeen will be here soon. Then: “He – would you like to meet him?”

Tankeen is Jazmin’s Shaykh. I do not want to meet Tankeen.

Sanjay is there. He is a professor of Urdu. He has two children. He says he is spiritually drowning. “I will wait for Tankeen,” he says. “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

“I had a premonition that I would meet him,” Jazmin says “I was in class. Suddenly, my head was completely enveloped with a purple color. Like a scarf. Or a haze. The next day I met him. Purple is the color of his *tariqah*.”

I feel nauseated.

“When Takeen took the *bayah* in Senegal. The Grandshaykh served oatmeal for breakfast. Tankeen did not want to eat it. The Grandshayk’s son kept saying: ‘you eat it you eat it you eat it’ until Tankeen ate it. Tankeen had a bad back. That night, he had a dream that a zipper zipped up his back and made it better. Some people think that the Grandshaykh put something in the oatmeal. But Tankeen—”

Tankeen breezes into the wood-paneled room. It is the lobby of a century-old dormitory hall at Columbia University. He sports a jazz goatee. His dark skin melds with the aged wood all around. A red scarf hangs over his shoulders. His face beams.

“Here he is,” says Sanjay. Sanjay steps back and then forward.

“Is this—” begins Tankeen.

“This is Sanjay,” Jazmin flutters. Tankeen thrusts out his hand, grabs Sanjay’s hand and pulls Sanjay to him. Sanjay sighs. “And this is Tom.” Tankeen takes my hand, lets it go and then places his hand against his heart.

“It is nice to meet you,” I say.

Tankeen and Sanjay sit down on the hard bench, face to face. Sanjay hopes that Tankeen might be able to save him.

I move with Jazmin to the side. “I want to go,” I say.

“I’ll escort you home,” she says, her voice a scattering of butterflies.

“I don’t want to go home.”

“I’ll take you where you want to go and then come back.”

“I want to go to a bar. To sketch. But I need a sketchbook.” Am I spiritually drowning, as well? I frown. “Take me to a drugstore.” A drugstore might have a sketchbook and a pen. “I didn’t bring my sketchbook,” I apologize.



Self-Regarding

He taught me how selfish I could be
Not because I wanted a lot
But because I took it all
Betrayal is breathtaking done deliberately
He didn't make me worse
He showed me I was no better
Did it with me, would do it to me
So do it, I'm done

Stingrays

Colorless as the water where they prey,
their venom lives long after myth.
This is one way our love can decay,
colorless as the water where we prey.
Odysseus' son speared Odysseus that way.
A rich sting to rule beyond my death,
colorless as the water where I prey,
if venom is all I leave to spell our myth.

If Everything Is Fine

Then please
explain to me how
that blameless boy
came to be allergic
to his own blood

Taco Bell Bathroom Sutra

I drink
from the same fountain as you trash
I take
the well-guarded key
I see
the toilet seat, and
I pee,
in total consciousness,
atop your careless pee

Deposit

A woman
so poor and godly
that a dollar in a dodderer's
outstretched hat
is a bank deposit

I didn't think
the train goes
to heaven
I thought it goes
to Queens

One of us
misread
the signs

A Giraffe in My Back Yard

I often see deer and wild turkeys
in my back yard, but this morning
a nebbishy-looking giraffe appeared
with baleful eyes, a downcast mouth
and a plodding gait.
He looked like he might be an incarnation
of my old friend who was also very tall
and had the same gawky walk.
It must have escaped from the Bronx Zoo
and swam across the Hudson looking for me.
When we interned at Jacobi Hospital,
a paranoid patient once remarked:
“That Doctor looks like he never
had a gay day in his life.”
My friend had a depressed mother
who spent days in the bathtub—
requiring her son to keep checking
to make sure she hadn’t drowned.
My friend grew up across the street
from the Bronx Zoo and identified
with the loneliness of the giraffes.
We went hiking every weekend.
He loved to roast marinated shish-kabob
with chocolate-covered halvah for dessert.
When I fed the giraffe the same meal,
he smiled for the first time.

In this time of remote love

I shall wrap my finger around your wrist,
and lift it gently towards my lips,
politely not asking if you have washed,
for love must not wear too much gauze,
and romance kept at a safe distance
went out with the troubadours.
It's spring and we are roadkill anyway.
Let's take the path of least resistance
and fill our desires while we still have them.

Other Wars

1

It was a very bright hat. It was mostly black, but it was a very bright black. Same for the gold that spelled out the words RETIRED ARMY. You probably had to pay extra for such bright colors, even though it was only a baseball cap. It was the first thing he'd noticed after he pulled in next to this car in the bank parking lot, the bright hat sitting on the dashboard. That and, on the passenger seat, letters from the VA. Then, as he began to walk toward the bank, the vanity license plate identifying the driver as an ARMY VETERAN and the bumper sticker of a US flag in the shape of the US, with the words Land of the Brave. Inside, the lobby copy of the newspaper said the famous Silverdome was slated to be torn down. After a moment he set the paper down and moved to the counter to cash his Social Security check, noticing the old veteran from the patriot car at a desk off to the left trying to get a loan.

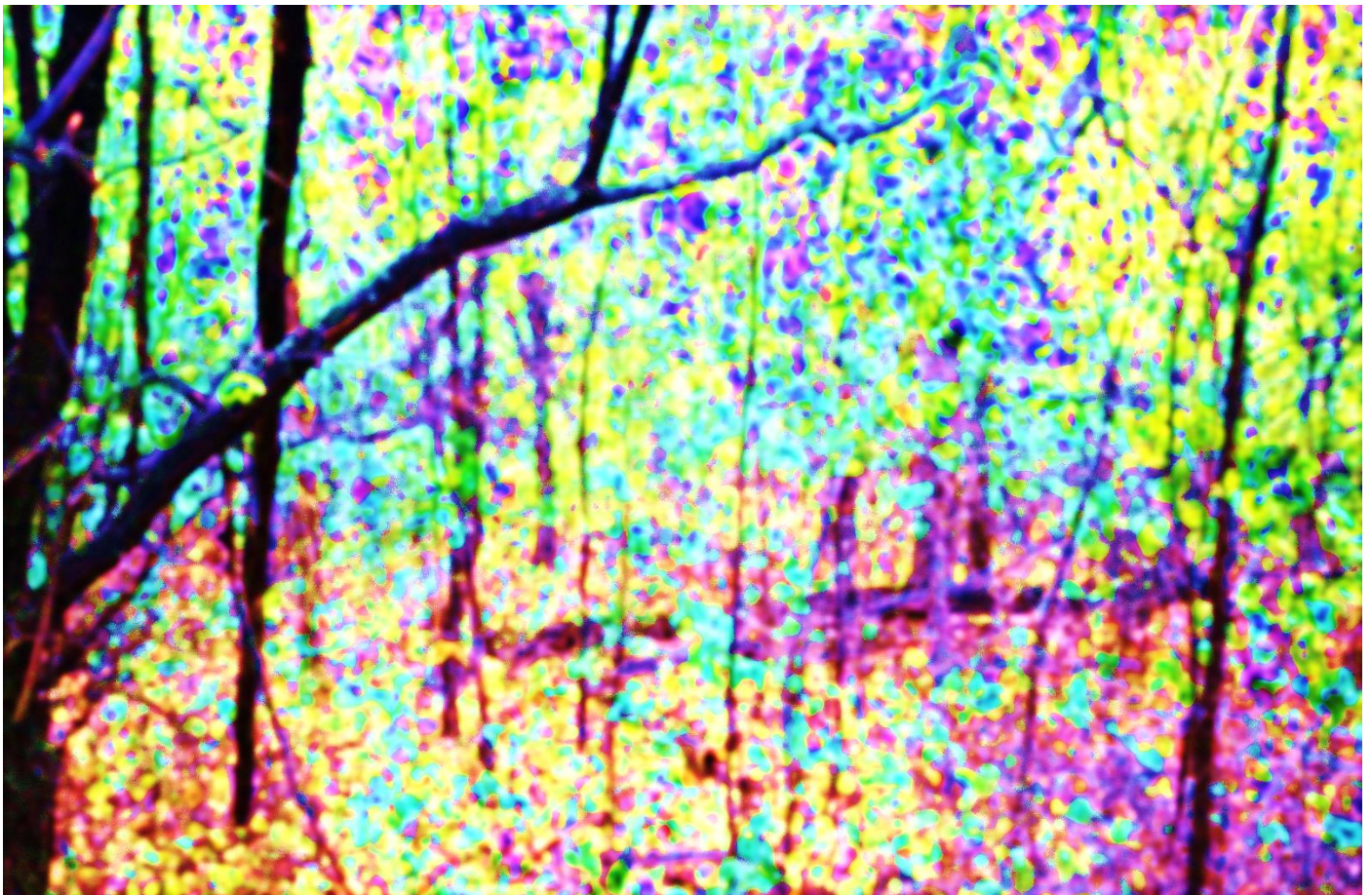
2

The food pantry was crowded when we arrived. You were allowed to visit the place once a month. This was the first day in August that they were open, one of the few days they would be open this month because they'd be shutting down in the second half of the month to give their volunteers a late summer break, so the people who used the place -- the "clients" -- had jammed the waiting room and all the chairs were taken. I leaned against a wall and Mike went outside for a cigarette. Eventually, though, as some of the people ahead of me were processed and left, I was able to sit down...just in time to hear a guy in a Vietnam Veteran hat explain about the war. His stories -- the usual sort of old codger Vietnam vet bullshit -- met with a receptive audience. It seemed he'd gotten back about six months before I did and I was tempted to ask him where he'd been -- maybe like me he'd been in the Americal Division -- but decided not to interject myself in the conversation when he started to explain history. As many people were killed in the Korean War as in the Vietnam War he told his fellow clients, even though the Korean War lasted for two years and the Vietnam War lasted for seven. Wrong, of course, on all counts. Of course the audience didn't know any better, but I didn't

expect them to. But if you're going to wear your little hat and hold forth on war, and wars, you should at least get some of your facts straight. At that moment the history lesson ended when they called his name. He rose to claim his box of free food and take it out to his car. As he did someone called out "Thank you for your service."

3

It was so unfair, the old veteran explained to his daughter -- We were paying their soldiers and they were using our rifles and then... and then he seemed to switch to a different war. "They bombed the marine barracks and killed 221 marines. So we bombed them and killed some of their civilians and oh, they were so mad we had to promise to be more careful in our bombing." And then it was time to go. He rose carefully to his feet and, with his daughter leading the way, slowly pushed his walker towards the door.



Another Day

She's breaking twigs.
Each snap grows softer,
echoes down a river to the sea.
"I'll meet you there," her eyes whisper.
And here comes tomorrow:
there is a sunrise,
a baby girl, a trip to Paris.
We are still in bed at noon,
hiding between hotel covers,
and waiting for the world to disappear.
We wake up to sunsets.
Matchstick piers.
We kiss—these dreams belong to her
and another day.

Father in a Drawer

After father's funeral, after the food,
the daughter opened the drawer
next to his bed. What is this:
an expired passport, a bag of
French coins, Air France playing
Cards, 4 corks from
Domaine Matrot Bourgagne,
three photos of an unknown woman
on a beach, on a balcony, at a
sidewalk café, four Valentines
signed Sandrine, the name he
had suggested for her daughter.

The Glassblower's Wife

When they're young, he plies her with crystal roses and hummingbirds. He even promises a life-size unicorn, but quits after fashioning the horn. The years break the fragile things, some glass, some bone. But she manages to protect the horn.

The last time he tells her not to wait up, she tries to calm her thoughts by doing laundry. But when she folds his sweaters, she's twisting his arms, breaking his ankles as she does his socks.

The minute hand pounds cracks in the face of her wristwatch. Dishes and cups slide from kitchen wallpaper tables, pile jagged grins on the floor. Moonlight caves in the picture window, leaves long spears lounging on the couch.

Sometime before dawn, headlights flood the bedroom. A car door thunks. She hears him plodding up the steps, feigns sleep.

He's quickly a pile of snores in the dark. She takes the horn from under her pillow, her heart a fist opening and closing around a shard of glass.

there's a way to be an Indian woman

we are always told to respect our elders; ah they are
old, their perspectives obsolete.

perhaps you agree that we are meant to be
the homemakers: “make” children whenever best for man, because only they can
be
the breadwinners: who “win” dowries as preliminary payments for
the “care”: the minimal pleasure with half thrust and lips distant from
the skin: they use to display their reproductive fitness.

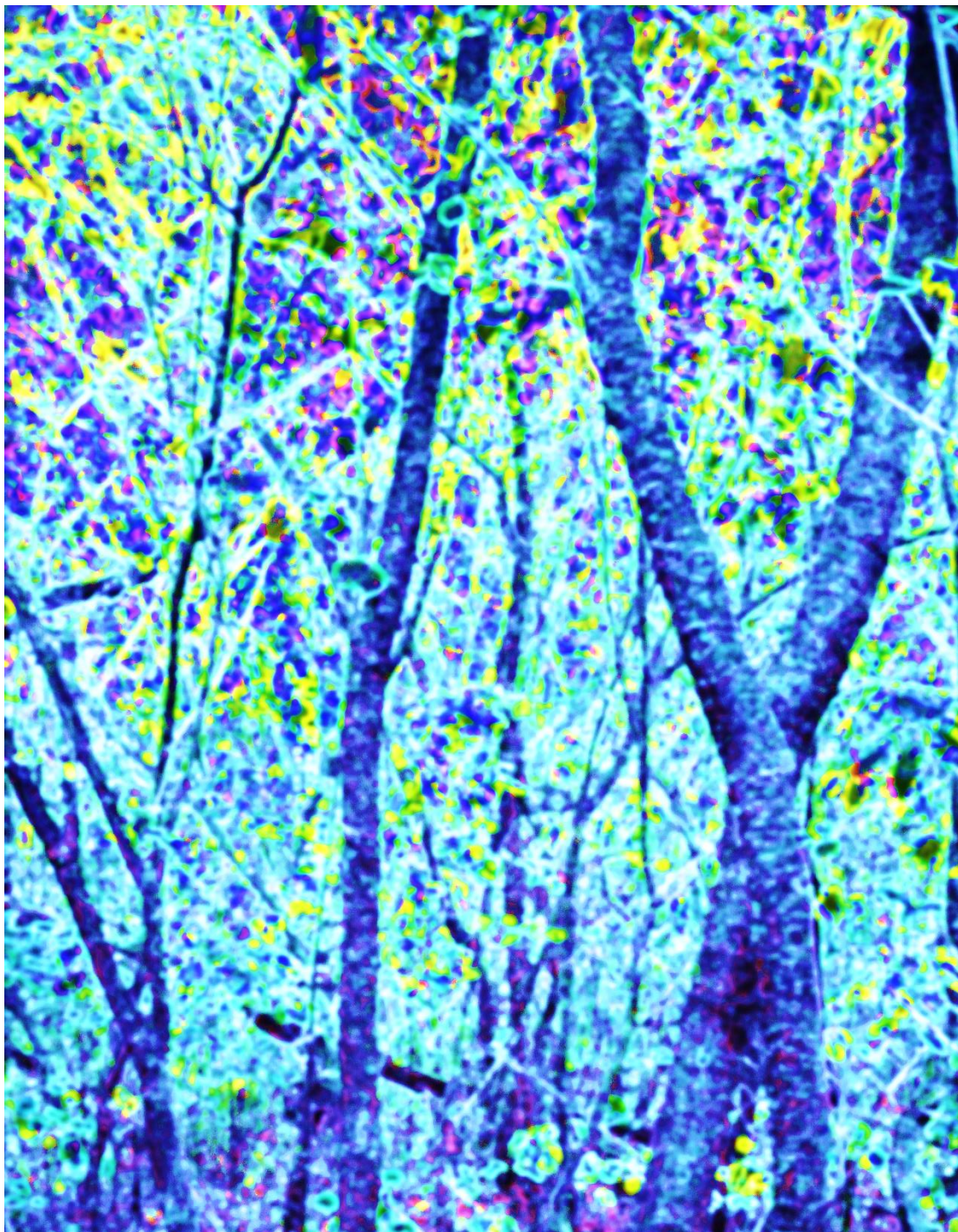
i don't like their rules but i am told to be small and obey now
that i am a woman: gold
bangles gifted to me when red stained the sheets and my body became
lush green. my garden is for
another to tend. that's why they gave me beauty—seen when they decided, the
men
without the “wo” I have.

why can't we be touched first? after all,
they pick us for the way our saris outline our hips
(our breeding plumage). we must impress them...not even for love!
imagine if our bodies had never bled red. we wouldn't be women.
imagine if we never birthed a child. we wouldn't be women.
why must a woman be a mother?
or else just a weed in the lawn?
why are transgender men who give birth still women
when they don't want the “wo”?

there's a way to be an Indian woman without me
defining our roles as mothers—by imagining
that they don't care to patiently aerate our soil.

i have been taught that gender is a doing, so
i have fought to *do* shit: own my body
the way all of us must till
we are no longer restricted like an orgasm.

panathey!



After Midnight

I love this city when darkness falls and takes the houses
hostage until morning.

The night here is different from the night
above the sea, it's more civilized;
the small streetlamp outside
burns a hole in the flesh of the dark,
murmuring deep in its bones,
cradling it to sleep.

And then I live again;
the books on the shelves, hundreds
and hundreds of them, start to burn, just like this good
twilight in my room deserves,
every word I scribble in my notebook
starts to shine with a starry glow--
think of Van Gogh, think of Hopper--
and even if I drink a glass of water
it feels like it is full of promises for
a certain part of the night emptied of nightmares.

I look out the window and I see
a cab with squeamish passengers sleeping inside,
I see the dozing trees with their leaves
trembling slightly inside the wooden dreams
and I even can hear the music, coming from the sky,
where the night's scraping on its anthracite
violin.

And then I see the first hints of daybreak coming
from the horizon.

That's why I light a cigarette to force this horrible
darkness to take a step back.

Driving to Thom Young's House

I heard there were no gun laws in Texas
so I rented a Taurus and drove
to Thom Young's house,
running over prairie dogs and singing the new
Blake Shelton Christmas song.
And when I got there
I bought a rifle and some nightcrawlers
and we fished in a puddle behind the Allsup's.
But the fish didn't want any worms
and on the drive back
Thom said Led Zeppelin wouldn't make it today.
And I remembered the music
and how it had lived in me once
and in my dreams
I can still hear my mother sing it like
she's hanging over my crib.
And sometimes the college radio
comes in clear from Amarillo
and Thom finds an old box of tobacco
and we smoke like kings without a throne,
flicking ash at the coyotes circling the porch.
Once upon a time betting on
whether it would be them
or us
but we don't play that game as much anymore.
And on cold Sundays after Christmas
we leave burritos outside for the dogs.

On Seeing Manchester at Dawn

The sky is charmless as a filthy rag -
as daylight breaks, the traffic shuffles filed;
indifferent roads are littered, bins are piled,
the clay-like Sun's first smiles with sadness sag.
The city's ragged as a vagrant hag,
and seems a lightless land for souls exiled -
yet somehow by this sight I am beguiled,
my spirits roused that in dejection drag.
I did not see - so hushful in the stone -
this loveliness I unexpected meet -
see these subtle charms all of their own,
that play around each weather-beaten street -
see in these buildings - that like flesh and bone
stir and wake - the city's hidden beat.

On Seeing the Aosta Valley

To add more notes to birdsongs would – I know -
only mar the passing hearer's bliss,
more hues just cloy the glory of the rainbow;
monarchs crowned would little gain or miss
if crowned once more for show – while here below
this scene is such that art I can dismiss.
Tranquil it sits in winter's parting chill:
the shops and cafes of the village seem
drowsy with sleep; surrounding mountains gleam
with fading snow; only the churchbells fill
the alleys hushed and calm; all life is still,
ruled by the rhythm of the gentle stream -
low clouds enfold the valley in a dream,
as we stand and watch it from the hill.

Elegy (i.)

i'm told that if you
fold a piece of paper in half 42 times,

the result is long enough
to reach the moon. somewhere

you hover between 33 and 34 folds.
i pleat the first crease.

you enfold me in your arms
divided by the delicate murmur of

electricity and hushed breaths.
the city unfolds

from daylight to dusk.
a car whizzes by.

we never speak of this moment.
i seal the fourth crease.

we are engulfed by the gentle
hiss of the radiator,

the muted hum of the TV screen. you reach for the
power button. i grab your hand.

after seven creases
the paper is too thick to fold further.

i unravel it and see a boy tango
with the gravity between static and saltwater.

in the margins, i scribble your name
Luka. Luka. Luka.

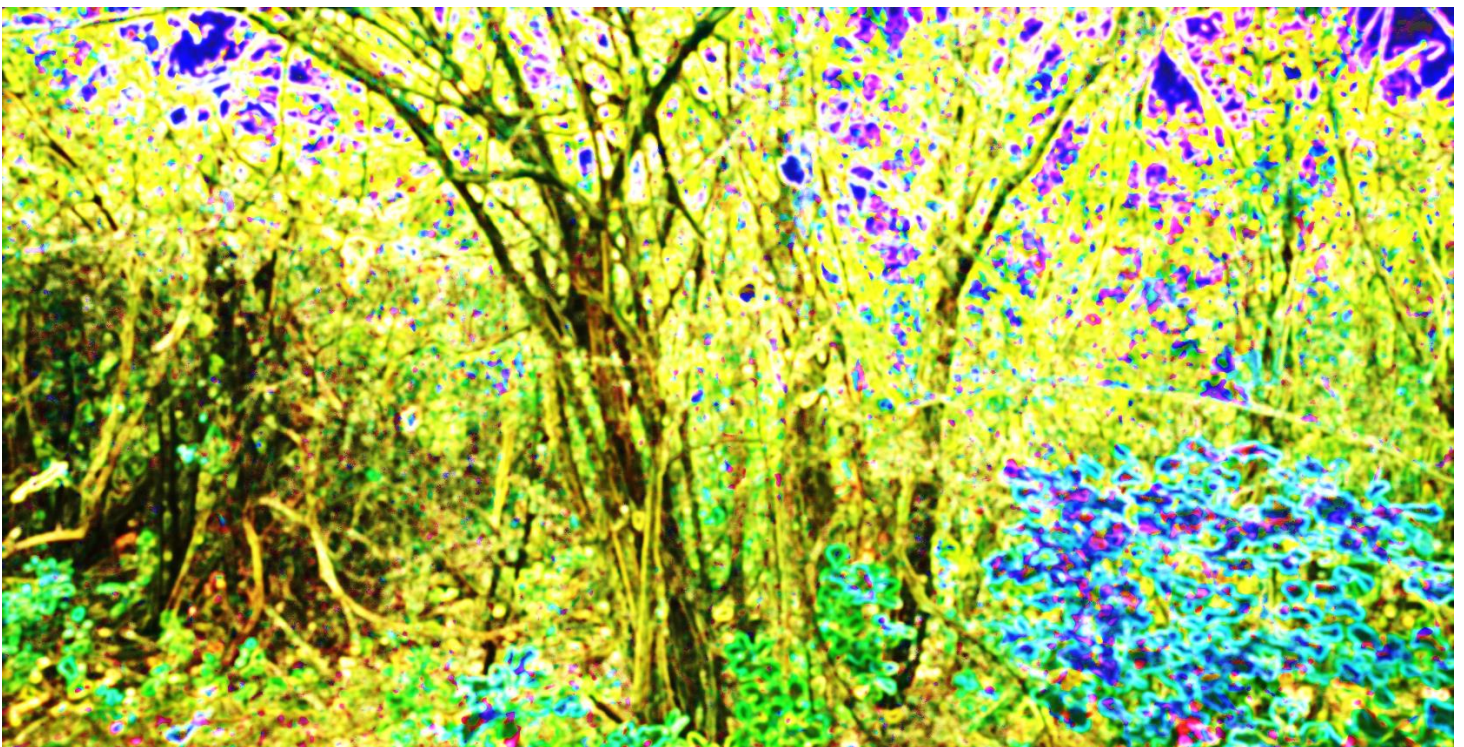
the bridge unwinds into music
and then nothing. the car

whizzes by and the city unfolds
from gentle whispers to muted static

and you reach for the power button
but no one grabs your hand. if i were to

fold this into an airplane and
throw it off the Golden Gate,

i wonder how far it would fly.



Paranormal Paranoia

As a thrice-divorced, somewhat bald and possibly paunchy forty-seven-year-old man living in a basement, I'm proof cancer doesn't always kill (in spite of a lack of maternal love) with proper vigilance put in place.

Early detection, and the help of an Asian pedicurist and her Tao cheese grater, conquered carbuncular carcinoma of both my big toes. Contracted weekly visits: \$43.99 (cash only).

Last year, a genticulated sarcoma burrowed into me with the determination of a one-armed well-digger. Cure? Hoffa-style yoga and onanism. This, of course, my mother did not appreciate despite WebMD documentation that success skyrockets if self-flagellation is performed before a priest during Easter Mass—which most certainly occurred. Twice.

Two months ago, I expected to perish from pineal gland obnubilation, a clouding of that testicular-like nub perched atop my amygdala—that scrotal blob, when locked and loaded, causes otherwise well-adjusted white males, like myself, to spray lead and mayhem throughout movie theaters, usually matinees, and across gay bars, long after Happy Hour. Prevention? Percolated free-range coffee enemas.

Until last night, I thought my long-term prognosis was excellent.

Around ten, not one minute after plopping down in my Yoda jammies and party hat, bottle of Gray Goose squeezed betwixt my loins, just as a tightee-whitee'd-look-a-like Joel Osteen charged across a rented big screen TV toward a Brazilian jujitsu submission demon, my mother goes ape-shit. Yes, I *may* have used her credit card for this once-in-a-lifetime-pay-for-view cage fight, but she's the one who left her purse wide open.

However you look at it—and I've looked at it all day through the lens of weed—she had *no* right to yank open the door to her basement and scream, "I'm gonna kill you, you motherfucker."

Something's amiss.

Vigilance is to be increased—followed by purchase of a Taser.

El Paso

Before Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald went off to Hollywood in the winter of '27, they left their daughter, Frances Scottie, in the care of Scott's parents, who lived in Washington, DC.; on their last afternoon in town Scott took his mother, Mollie, to a matinee. Scott was never sure whose idea it was to see *Flesh and the Devil*, though Mrs. Fitzgerald adored John Gilbert, and Greta Garbo was one of those secrets Scott managed to keep to himself. Gilbert gave his mother a lot to think about that day, and even though she annoyed Scott with questions about a cartoon they watched before the movie began, her warm thank-you afterwards surprised and touched her son in a way that made him think he'd never see her again, and at the same time knowing this wasn't true. On the train the next morning, relieved that his daughter seemed content to stay behind, he was still sad that in the last reel Garbo fell through the ice and drowned. Then somewhere in Kentucky, feeling a little tight and dozing off, he kept breathing Zelda's perfume and dreamed he was rescuing his idol.

It was his first trip to the west coast, and Scott was convinced he could write a feature for United Artists, and go home with easy money. They were introduced to Lois Moran, an up-and-coming 17-year-old actress, and Scott couldn't believe how beautiful and intelligent she was, then made the mistake of describing her in similar terms to Lois's mother, all within earshot of Zelda, who went back to the couple's hotel room, where the evening clothes intended for their first Hollywood party were laid out on the bed, and used Scott's straight razor on them.

In the end United Artists passed on his flapper comedy, about a magic lipstick that made its wearer irresistible to men. He and Zelda took screen tests and quickly grew bored with the process. Zelda ended up making faces, and Scott hated how he looked: too pale, too old. On the long trip back East, they were going through El Paso when they again quarreled about Lois, and in the club car that night, his wife removed the platinum wrist watch Scott gave her when he was courting Miss Sayre of Montgomery; Zelda opened the nearest window and tossed it out. The train gave a long, mournful whistle. In the Texas dark, Lois, or maybe Garbo, found it in the deep grass.

Chinese Coffee, East 52nd St.

Half a block away it seems too busy in front of my building: neighbors, strangers, all looking like they're in the way. And there I am, about to walk into it after finishing work, ready for the bad news about the break-in, or the child found unconscious in the foyer, a hand trying to keep us back. And sure enough someone notices, turns from the others to step in front of me, though her voice tries to be friendly: "Hi, could you wait a minute? We're almost done." But what they're doing isn't police work, they're making a movie, and the short sad-faced man looking homeless in the middle of all these people is dressed for fall even though it's June, with a grimy raincoat and black beret pulled down to keep his head warm. In a low voice he explains what's going to happen next, and I realize he's talking about the brick wall two doors down, and the sunlight still on it and how well this works, and if you get rid of the coat & hat and clean him up, the poor guy could pass for Al Pacino, and with the woman next to him saying Al this and Al that, maybe I'm right, and I listen to the voice again, and yes, it's *Pacino*—louder now—"OK, let's try it."

Then everyone comes off the steps as if they know where to go and what to do, and I'm wondering who the director is and where's the rest of the cast and what are they calling this thing? "Chinese Coffee," one kid tells me like it's a password or he just made it up, but that's really the name, Pacino's directing himself, and even the title says the film's being shot quickly and cheap, though it won't be released for another three years, with Pacino as an unsuccessful New York City writer who in the scene they're filming today gets mistaken for this serial killer by a quartet of detectives jumping out from their beat-to-death undercover car.

I watch as they slam him against the wall—over & over, take after take, with Pacino each time forced to press his whole body into it, the bricks painted a rich deep red that in the finished film looks redder still. A close-up shows you his weariness, but also surprise, as though the man can't believe these things keep happening to him, while the actor once more feels the wall on his hands and face, the warmth left over from the first time.

Back Where I'm From

I'm in the backseat of my own car,
Hurtling toward my hometown
With the kids up front,
Playing too loudly the first minute
Of every song they know I do not know.
My wife, their mother, lounges beside me,
Wondering how we got back here,
Staring absently out the window at a landscape
I can trace with eyes closed, winding back to family
For afternoon cocktails,
Our portable wet bar rattling and clinking
With each twist and pothole.
It's then I recall being in my parents' backseat
Forty years earlier,
Rolling over these same roads,
Stretching out to nap on the floorboard,
Moaning 'How much longer?'
Dad would tell me forty-five minutes,
Nothing else. Then he'd offer five bucks
Not to ask anymore.

My vertical cowboy

They've continued to join this
landscape of art and revival
but sadly I slept through yours
having overindulged in cheap
wine and debauchery and the
suns of the lesser gods who led
me to bypass your scarlet soliloquy

your firework frills that now flash
dance the flower fields in their pink
panorama leaving the branch in
its home base of green, now that
your season's eclipsed,

my dogwood, my cherry tree
my vertical cowboy

your descendants have come
but your blossoms still scatter
their afterthoughts.

where the weeds grow lonely

the comeback of calico
surreys down
indiscriminately, looping
the leaves to the sycamore

blues marry blondes in the
corresponding of colors
yellow belle annuals flower
up in the festival

and south of the symmetry
on the side road of secular
dwellers of dank anonymity

creviced and cracked, deep in
the psyche, this place where
the weeds grow the lonely.

A Mountain Stream

disrupts its stones the way
a jaded player, throwing dice, makes

the same pass,
continually. In ceaseless splash, the tossed
stones buck and click,

almost to fit
the same positions once again, almost, but

not quite. I've walked a ways uphill
to find this source. Sunlight
refracts. Green plants

trail fingers in the wash. I fall asleep and dream
it carries me

the same way it will take these stones, slowly
at first, then gathering
speed

headlong down the mountain's side. And in
the tumult of its rush, I think

I hear, as I imagine they must, if a stone had
ears to claim, eventual ocean
call my name.

Zippering Between

Zippering between restaurant tables with a pencil behind my ear, I found my first lover. *You're welcome*, she said, as she pressed a napkin into my hand. XOXO, a phone number. We made love in my tent at the back of the trailer park. Vowed eternal company.

"Umbrella?" she offered me one morning as I crawled out of our tent. Too late, I was dripping cold. She wrapped me in blankets, put a cloth to my forehead.

"Remember the napkin, three years ago?" she said. Quaking. Pulling my face to hers.

Own your choices, her eyes spoke. *No one will love me if you don't.*

"May I go now?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Love you," she said.

Keep her company, that I could do. Ignore her company, that I could also do.

"Hello," the man said when he opened his trailer door. "Good to see you again."

Fingers in hair. Eyelashes on skin. Door wide. Couldn't miss us from the tent.

"Be well," she said when I returned, kissed my forehead. "Another time."

Dollars and Days

It's the worst of times
When you find you lack
The dollars and the days
And nobody seems to love you
Except Kris Kristofferson in the song
You are listening to just now, clinging
To your desperate hope that he really, really means
It.

A Mourning Dove, Mother's Day in the Pandemic Year

She's already been there a week,
day and night, in high winds, hail,
snow. Not one seed has passed her beak;
she's that determined not to fail.
Her nest is crude, just twigs, no more,
heaped up between my gutter's drain
and the end-board. I saw it pour
down over her, the cold hard rain,
and watched the north wind ruffle
her feathers. A red-tailed hawk
patrols above; she can't shuffle
her feet, stretch her wings, squawk.
I'd like to help, to toss a crumb,
but afraid I'll scare her off. So, I
keep watch, once in a while drum
on the window, a feckless ally
drawing her black eye, give a wave,
beam an encouraging grin.
That hawk's a worry; I want to save
her from the peril she's in.
My sympathy's useless. I can't do
more than cheer her, witness her fate,
hope it warms, pray the sky stays blue
and watch the future incubate.
Locked down by life's imperatives
—two eggs, one virus—we're both stuck fast
in our respective narratives,
unsafe and silent and harassed.

No Good

She knows Morley is no good for her. End of the world stuff. His previous girls had 1) hung herself like a spring floral in her closet and 2) threw herself off the bridge bag of old laundry style.

But still there was the sex. Oozy and tingly and down to her toes. She would find herself thinking about it everywhere. Oh yes, the way he bit her lip. And yes, his calloused fingers.

One day, she is waiting for him to come by like he promised, and she gets a phone call from his wife. She is whisper quick and tells her that Morley himself is dead. Another lovgirl shot him jealous through the head. I am going through his cell phone, the wife says. With you, I'm only halfway through.

She thinks of her place in the alphabet. Mary. M. That's only halfway through as well. She wonders about the X's. There can't possibly be an X. So maybe it isn't as bad as it seems.

She thanks the wife who, as it turns out, has already moved on to the next.

It's not pretty

leaving a man you promised to marry. Leaving him in the car as he drives you to your wedding. Leaving him in the empty parking lot near the drugstore where you pulled in that first night to pick up emergency condoms.

It's not pretty how that all means nothing now. How the guests are waiting. How the preacher is waiting, how the man you promised to marry is about to become a white oval face in your memory as you slip out of the car, out of your wedding dress and run in your underwear, into the drug store, into the backroom behind the pharmacy section, into the arms of Hector, the delivery guy, who was always smart enough to bring his own condoms those sweet achy nights behind the garage while the man you promised to marry slept right upstairs.

And it's not pretty how when you do slip into Hector's arms, and feel his warm breath on your neck, you smell the faint perfume that Lucinda the night cashier always wears.

And how you hold off his kiss just long enough to look out the window to watch as the man you promised to marry picks up your empty wedding dress, props it up sitting in the passenger seat and drives off to go home and wait for your call the way he has done a hundred times before.

On Second Thought

I decide to return her gift. It doesn't come from an honest place. It doesn't come from love.

The gift is a cashmere scarf. How very chain-y of her. If I keep it, I will have to promise to meet her for lunch.

If I keep it, she will be able to cut me into multiple me's, like a cartoon dog. I would still me, but there would be 16 me's, and smaller, much smaller. Each one smiling and inviting her to tea.

I know if I keep it, I will never be able to shake her upside down out of my life. She will be a cereal box I keep putting back on the shelf because it's not quite empty.

I know if I keep it, I will fall in love with the cool cashmereness of it, soft, like the way time softens a memory, how a friend stealing your man a time or two, can turn into a life lesson.

Like it was really a positive how she taught me how to watch for the want in other women's eyes when I bring them around my man. Thank you, I might even learn to say to her. Over lunch. Over tea. As I sit there, my thumb stroking the lying pull of the cashmere. My other fingers frozen in disgust.

Contributors

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Sarah Butchin writes, "I live in Scottsdale, Arizona, where I'm an MFA student, a wonderful mother to my five-year-old twins, a hard-working freelance writer, and a rather adequate wife. My debut novel *In the Time of Towertown* will be released through Black Rose Writing in mid-2020."

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Colin Dodds is a writer with several acclaimed novels and poetry collections to his name. He grew up in Massachusetts and lived in California briefly, before finishing his education in New York City. He's made a living as a journalist, editor, copywriter and video producer. Colin also writes screenplays, has directed a short film, and built a twelve-foot-high pyramid out of PVC pipe, plywood and zip ties. He lives in New York City, with his wife and daughter. You can find more of his work at thecolindodds.com.

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Scott Laudati's recent work has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander* and *The Columbia Journal*. He spends most of his time with a 14 y/o schnoodle named Dolly. Visit him on social media @ScottLaudati

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Alex Richardson has published poems in over thirty magazines, journals, and anthologies. His book, *Porch Night on Walnut Street*, came out on Plainview Press in 2007. He teaches English at Limestone University.

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