Third Wednesday Magazine  
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Third Wednesday is an independent quarterly journal of literary and visual arts. We welcome submissions from all over the world. Digital issues of the magazines are completely free to anyone and print issues can be purchased at Amazon.com.

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Editors Note for Spring 2020.

Our Spring issue features the winning poems and honorable mentions from our annual poetry contest, judged this year by Marilyn L. Taylor. Dr. Taylor is a teacher and well-published poet with 8 poetry collections to her credit. She was poet laureate of The State of Wisconsin (2009-10).

A number of other poems that were originally entered in the contest have been published as regular submissions with permission of the poets. We give writers in our contests a second chance at publication when they elect that as an option.

This issue sees the return of the popular InsideOut Literary Arts Project, featuring five poems by Detroit area students in the 3rd through 5th grades. We owe the usual thanks to Peter Markus for curating them.

Since we began publication 13 years ago, 3rd Wednesday has been a token paying market, offering payment of $3 per accepted piece. We have noticed that many of our contributors choose to opt out of payment, thus contributing in their small way to the cause of literature.

In the summer 2020 issue the poems of each submitter who chooses to waive payment and contribute $3 to a contest pool will be eligible for a contest prize payout of 50% of the prize pool or $50, which ever is larger, plus a one year subscription to the print edition of the magazine (a $28 value). The winner will be chosen by the 3rd Wednesday poetry editors from among the poets who choose to enter. The option is available until May 15, 2020 in the Regular Poetry Submission form at Submittable. This is an opportunity to support both the magazine and fellow poets.

David Jibson, Co-editor
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He was a funny kid in high school. Not odd. Funny. Although he
did like to read *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. Still, he had a certain
charm. He was playful and he had a keen sense of humor, which
has nothing to do with being able to laugh at other people’s jokes.
It has to do with being able to write the jokes, which also has to do
with comic timing. In other words, he was perfectly cast as any one
of Shakespeare’s fools...maybe Dogberry in *Much Ado About
Nothing* or Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* or one of
the Gravediggers in *Hamlet*. In fact, I once did cast him as Grumio
in *The Taming of the Shrew* and he was great in rehearsals as
Petruchio's all too clever manservant who used his wits to outdo
people of higher social standing until he informed me before one
rehearsal that he would not be able to do the role because his
parents objected to one of his lines where Grumio refers to a half-
witted suitor in the play as an “ass” and it really did no good to
explain that the word did not mean someone’s backside, but was
speaking of an animal...meaning an extremely stupid or foolish
person, like the word asinine derived from the Latin asinus,
meaning ass or donkey. But that was that. He didn’t do the role
once his parents said that it didn’t matter what the word meant. It
only mattered what some people thought it meant. I’ve wondered
from time to time what happened to him. The last I knew; he was
torn in his ambition to either become a missionary or a mercenary.

Terry Allen / Columbia, Missouri
He marks out a piece of the sky with his thumb. “There’s something up there,” he says, and behind him, a woman nods. “I can see it,” he says, and she nods again. “It’s not an airplane,” he says, and she turns a page in her book and nods again.

He lets his arm go limp. “I don’t know what’s up there,” he says. She looks up for the first time, and he realizes that every time she looks up, it’s for the first time. Her eyes are dulled, shorn of any comprehension of this moment, of what he’s seeing. “Does it matter?” she asks.

His lungs fill with concrete. He needs to sit down. “Yes, it matters,” he says. “It always does.”

She shrugs and looks down at the book again. “If it’s not down here, with us, then it doesn’t matter. Not to me.”

His mind burns, but he nods anyway. “Yeah, you’re probably right,” he says, “It’s not important.”

He wants to sit next to her, put his arm around her, but she’s a ghost who cools the atmosphere.

He glances back up at the sky. His bones are magnetized, getting pulled upwards, one by one. He’s a gently stacked set of planks. They click in his ears. He’s a piece of metal sticking up at a right angle in a junkyard. He can feel the rust in his knees.

“I think there’s something up there,” he says, not waiting for a response. “If I could float, just hold my breath and take in every ounce of air into my pores, I would probably just get up there and find out it’s a smudge on the lenses of the clouds. Don’t you think so?”
This time, she doesn’t nod, but she does turn the page of the book, a soft but prolonged flip. It’s like a dog growling.

Later, she looks up from her book when the sudden silence of the wind presses on her ears. He isn’t there.

She tilts her chin to the ground, tells herself over and over again: don’t look up, never look up.

Jason Barr / Harrisonburg, Virginia
Old Man / Paul Bluestein

The Assisted Living application has boxes waiting for his Xs to move in.

Retired  

Widowed  

Friends/family nearby? No  

Interests: SCRABBLE on Wednesdays (with the neighbor’s son)

He’s decided not to play this crazy game anymore.
The Colt Viper snuggles in his right hand and a fat-neck bottle of wine in his left.
Not much remains.

The SCRABBLE game is missing letters an way.

G me ov r

Paul Bluestein / Bridgeport, Connecticut
Neil Young got old when I wasn’t looking. So did Andrew Young, Steve Young, and all four Youngbloods, although only one was named Young. Despite Dylan’s directive to stay forever young, soon enough they’ll join fellow Youngs Cy, Lester and Loretta – their names slowly fading from memory in blatant contravention of Carl Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious.

Barry White was Black. Lewis Black is White. Pink is not pink – except after a quick run in the sun. Pink Anderson sang the blues to escape Carolina’s red-hot rays. Vida Blue threw nothing but red-hot heat before flaming out on white lady.

Joe McCarthy made his name demanding others name names. His name turned to mud. Donald Trump, who rode into town on a gilded escalator, is now mudslinger-in-chief … an apt appellation for a collusion-denying quisling.
Maybe Beto, or Bernie, 
or Biden, or Booker can clean 
Trump’s crud-filled clock 
using just high oratory. But if it takes 
a few low-rent names along the way, like Dirty-Dealing Don, or President Peacock, 
I’m down with that.

Rick Blum / Bedford, Massachusetts

Crowded Beach / Chris Boesel

Photograph

Chris Boesel / Toledo, Ohio
The true subject of poetry is the loss of the beloved.
Dropping their tiny crosses,
the dogwoods know it,
and I’ve come to see

what they mean, and what they mean is this:
a sentence fires up,
and already its ending looms
somewhere down the line.

Begin one, as I do now, and watch its cavalcade,
as it swerves away from the ruin
of your neighborhood, skirts
the gaping schoolyard where love

first went bad, then comes to rest, moth-like, by the candle
you lit in the church you’ve not visited
in years. See? Structure and choice
go hand-in-hand, one thing taken,

one left behind—the ghost in every sentence is the ghost
of loss, nothing could have been other
than it was, but still the implication
that more is there for the taking,

a blossom-fall within the sentence that cannot contain it:
this is what the dogwoods mean when they tell us
the loss of the beloved
is the true subject of poetry.

Sidney Burris / Fayetteville, Arkansas
When my sister and I were young, 
Mom and Dad threw cocktail parties 
where the grownups would dance 
in the living room, some twirling 
with drinks still in their hands.

Banished to an early bedtime, 
we slithered out onto the hall floor 
and laid low in that hallway. 
On our bellies we watched moving feet 
and what we remember most are shoes,

especially Aunt Fran’s pumps, 
their fairy princess sparkles shooting 
glitter into our enchanted eyes. 
Our favorite pair had crystal Lucite straps 
across the tops, decorated with flowers 
in neon pink. How we loved those shoes. 
I think of them on days when gray skies 
threaten to oppress, and all the universe 
seems a mess. Sparkly party shoes, 
still twinkling in my sixty-year-old mind.

Sheryl Clough / Clinton, Washington
New Testaments / Katherine DeGilio

My fingers studied your body like a child in Sunday school,
eager to please, yet inept when it came to history,
I reached out my hands, laxity skimming over ink,
then flipped your pages, an impoverished student,
making my way from the old to the new testament.
I noticed how your aesthetic changed between page flips and
fatigued breath,
there is a line difference between the old and the new,
between the top of your head and the bottom of your thigh,

but I never became invested in the lack of continuity,
I read the obvious, memorized the moles on your back,
rather than exchange skin types and debate theology,
I dotted stars along your complexion with invisible watercolors,
painting over earlier interpretation, creating newer testaments.

Katherine DeGilio / Newport News, Virginia
Awaiting the Hatch / Katherine Edgren

Everyone’s waiting for the eggs to hatch, 
the way you wait for summer, 
the way you wait for anything,

for Godot, for release. 
   Are our hopes merely fond? 
We’ve lost track of how many weeks

she’s been sitting on them. 
   Perhaps they’re infertile. 
At what point will the parents give up?

Along with pen and cob 
   we’re eager 
to greet the cygnets.

Walking the wetland, I snap photographs 
   of the swan puddle 
on the nest of cattail stems, and wonder:

has the Goose Lady with her kayak and her barking dogs— 
   hired to rid the place of geese— 
provoked some unintended consequence?

Katherine Edgren / Dexter, Michigan
My mother observed to Hilary about “Bob’s women” (meaning the four I’d brought to meet her over the years):
“All good-looking, and not a dumb one in the bunch.”
Which is true.
But there’s something else—all laughed out loud a lot; and not in a silly, manic, or drunken way.
No. Easily, heartily they laughed. Man, that helps. The way Music does. OK, maybe they cried some too, but nowhere near as much.
On Finding the Virgin Mary / Katherine Fallon

It was twenty years ago that I dropped that sandwich—oozing cheese and dripping butter—from the worn skillet. Chomping, I looked down my nose to find her, face lifted, so what I saw were her nostrils, the darkness up inside holy, and her eyes, like moons suspended above the ocean’s frothing. Lashes dark, thick, enviable.

I saw her neck, too: even that tender notch between her collar bones. Always thought of that place as the sanctum of the body, still do. I couldn’t stand to think of her inside me, looking up like from a pit of suffering into what light there might be beyond the confines of me, so I did not take another bite. What I don’t talk about is the grease specter in bloom beneath her on the paper plate: a lesser Shroud of Turin, made of fat, which I discarded. I praised Mary, kept her in my nightstand until she became a problem. Shame on me, not knowing the ghost garment would outlast her.

Katherine Fallon / Statesboro, Georgia
slips in front of us too close
for our velocity and my wife catches breath and stamps
solid on the pedal as JESUS CHRIST sprays from my mouth
and chests strain against seatbelts and she shouts YOU IDIOT

and car moves away and our vehicle starts again
and she asks are you ok? to our daughter yes
just my shoulder hurts from the seatbelt
and wife and i look at each other

thankful but wondering how the driver
didn’t see us and i glance down at my phone
and there are several glowing depictions of jesus
on the screen

google must have thought i needed to see his luminance
with azure cloaking and bright smock bleeding and halo
moonring and cartoon heart pulsing and bleached
hair floating and gray eyes glaciering

i laugh and show my wife and she laughs at the irony:
the ethernet pale lipped savior came to us today delivering
wisps of grace which surely quickened my wife’s reflexes
but my phone my phone spied on us

even in our glory

Scott Ferry / Renton, Washington
The Escape / Chris Boesel

Photograph Chris Boesel / Toledo, Ohio
A Mother Story / Joy Gaines-Friedler

1.
Begins with hands – long, stunning
nails polished night smooth.
You run your fingertips over their firm surety.
Woman sequined, all curve and body.
Woman as Redbud, wide, full of flower.

2.
She is a tree beside a grove of trees.
When the sky closes around her
she becomes solemn, blameful - as if a deer
has snapped a branch from her.

3.
A birthday party. The knotty pine basement.
A blue circus cake. Pin-The-Tail-On-The-Donkey.
Disoriented by the spin. No one finds the proper spot.
No one can. She never notices
the donkey taped too high.

4.
You try but you can't escape her. Nor can you make her
crave what the sea infuses into the air, the bell whistle
of waves, the communal sound of muted birds.
She has no need for the sweetness of a child's mouth,
no craving for their voices. Hers is the night trains, cars
stuffed with human cargo. You point her to the clouds.
You ask her to find an image in them she can name.
She claims, It's all so terrible, leaving you dispersed and shapeless.
5. Your father moves her to Florida where the sun acts on behalf of warmth. You move to California, find you miss the wail and siren of storms.

6. Dementia. You watch the long hands of the clock confuse her days. You pay her bills, talk to doctors, find her a companion. You find ways to make your mother safe. She wants her mother now. They have taken away her phone. She asks you, How will I get home?

Joy Gaines-Friedler / Farmington Hills, Michigan
In my world
Something is always hidden

I’m a thief. A coyote.
I have stolen fire from the sun.

See how I chased the feral cat
onto the porch?

You might say a glow of madness
radiates hard muscled beneath

my ember hide
and that’s the thing

under my strange light nothing
but impenetrable rock – empty seas

the impossible flotations of space
and phases of time which serve

to make all things – insignificant.

Because no light actually emits from me—
what seems luminous is merely perception.

I am the wolf-eyed coyote
the masked impersonator.

I keep a thirsty eye on the feral cat
then turn and run into the dark.

Joy Gaines-Friedler / Farmington Hills, Michigan
3rd WEDNESDAY ANNUAL POETRY CONTEST:

THE THREE WINNING POEMS:
  With annotation by contest judge, Marilyn Taylor

...Next-to-Last Visit With My Father / Charles Hughes

A splendid, well-constructed example of deep emotion, quietly but vividly expressed. Each of the poem’s six 6-line stanzas feature carefully selected details from a particularly difficult farewell, making them indelible—causing the reader to sense the speaker’s dwindling hope while simultaneously cherishing the best of what remains of it.

Next-To-Last Visit With My Father

A big round table, big enough for eight,
All to ourselves, my father and me. It’s my
First time in his new home,
And he’s saying he usually gets the cherry pie,
That there isn’t a lot to salivate
About. We’ll both have some.

Mid-summer days expand the universe.
Mid-summer heat turns Minnesota air
Into a triumph won
Over recalcitrant cold, as someone can despair,
Then sense a surging radiance coerce
An impulse to move on.

Baseball, the weather . . . still available.
Much easier to know where not to go.
Long, hard experience
Has taken pains to teach us the punctilio
Of conversational caution—the bleak skill
Of wary reticence
We’re practicing now. Twins-Yankees game today,  
My father is saying, when two men arrive  
In wheelchairs steered by staff.  
My father’s highly social instincts come alive,  
Priming the foursome clinched by Phil and Ray  
To eat, talk Twins  even laugh.

Back in my father’s room, more baseball talk,  
Nothing to do but watch the game play out.  
My mind’s eye holds in view  
Phil’s face upturned, as unreservedly devout  
As a bird’s, while he was being fed, Ray’s caulk-  
Like lunch of ground-beef stew.

What has to happen happens in this place:  
Fresh oxygen tanks, parsed meds, hot meals. We  
Don’t think in terms of gains;  
July’s flown off to cheer another galaxy.  
It’s human, though, to tend, fear for, embrace  
Whatever warmth remains.

Charles Hughes / Park Ridge, Illinois
I Am Not / The Woman I Was / In That House

This deeply moving haibun (the Japanese form that combines prose poetry and haiku) fearlessly delves into the darker side of domesticity. Unlike traditional haibun, this one involves a first-person speaker—a wife and mother recalling four arduous, loosely related events in her life—and resolving them on a powerful, incantatory note in the final haiku.

I Am Not / The Woman I Was / In That House

1. Our last house burned. Anything not consumed by flames was buried in toxic ash. Everything: clothes, furniture, wooden spoons, kitchen mugs & throw rugs, my dead father’s blue cardigan; my daughter’s pink soft blanket, stuffed toys, board books. “It’s just stuff,” he said. “Everything else is logistics.” We salvaged six boxes of Christmas ornaments shelved beneath the cellar stairs. We moved on.

I am no longer
the woman I was back then.

2. Mornings came early. I was usually tired. Coming down the crooked staircase to the farm kitchen with my toddler, we forage for breakfast. There is cooked rice in the old white fridge that grumbles and hums. What to mix in? Sweet sticky raisins from a box, tart blackberries from the bush by the bulkhead, cinnamon, no sugar; we are making healthy food. We can’t afford store-bought cereal. Payday is two days away. There’s an open bottle of wine my daughter and I can’t eat. It burns the back of my throat to see it standing tall and alone on the center shelf.

Paws scritch in the walls.
The outside was encroaching,
invading our space.
3.
The ghost of my mother stopped by. Really dear, she whispered. I know you work and the house is old, but perhaps if it was cleaner you would all be a smidge brighter? The sun is nearly set and the beds are not yet made. She passed through the walls where critters nibble at night. The sun slid lower and the cold crept closer.

A woman
losing her mother
fills the space.

4.
Tucking my daughter into bed, I read three library books and sang three sleepy songs. I went back down the creaky stairs. My husband had not joined us for dinner or puzzles or hide-and-seek. “I didn’t make those calls today. The dog was barking,” he said. He sat rigid at the computer, clicking clicking clicking on the virtual cards of solitaire. His jaw was clenched and tense: the tell. He was high. He did not look at my face. My reflection haunts the office window. The panes make a quaint frame. My back is warrior straight but I cannot find my eyes.

Feathers, once clipped, will grow back.
A phoenix can fly.

Elizabeth Wolf / Merrimac, Massachusetts
...**Acting Class** / Sam Robertson  
A highly enlightening overview of the psychological, intellectual and emotional terrain that confronts young actors. Not only is the poem a delight to read, it also boasts the singular attribute of having been written entirely in rhymed iambic couplets.

**Acting Class**

We knew we were off I-91, six hours from Broadway, generations from the powers who cast their fairy dust on Lana Turner. Our teachers performed, taught that one cut corner told on us, that should the thought of happiness occur to us in something — anything — less than the greener grass of some cobbled set of O’Neill, Miller, Shepard, even Mamet, well, then, this meant we must escape, clap-clap! (was Lana dreaming over soda pop?) Of course, no one broke the phalanx, instead accused another inside of his head while campus life went on outside our barracks. If James Dean had struck it rich with his derricks so would we. We clutched “An Actor Prepares,” our little yellow book with its faceless stare of Boleslavsky bullying some ingenue from the provinces. Doubtlessly, the master drew a girl’s talent out: humility there, and deference, but craft might begin to shear a weakness into essence, her undoing transformed to thunder steeping, crescendoing in claps and curtsies, the curtain yawning for roses arcing up like salmon spawning. For each role dies, demands we start again – vanity’s abnegation obsesses the vain.

Sam Robertson / Forest Hills, New York

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THREE HONORABLE MENTIONS:

...Creeping Bellflower / Brianna Van Dyke

Prose-poetry is an elusive thing—lurking, as it does, in that dubious space between unembellished poetry and highly evocative prose. “Creeping Bellflower” materializes effortlessly from this ambiguous zone, featuring poetry’s lyricism along with the narrative momentum of prose. A superbly readable piece, full of tactile details of the freshest kind.

Creeping Bellflower

There was a June in which my soul was asking me to know something I wasn’t ready to know and so I waged a tedious war against the creeping bellflower that crept the perimeter of our patio—despite all my efforts to kill it—and each morning and afternoon I dug in the dirt for roots and the jackpot rhizomes, a kind of skinny, pale, turnip-carrot-looking-thing, and I hooted with glee, gotcha little fucker, each time I found one, each time my fingers followed the shockingly white shoots and roots deep enough into the dark soil, past the earthworms and millipedes and even into my dreams where I dreamed of the rhizomes, wanting so desperately to peel them out of the ground, fingers groping through the earth and my brain lighting up each time I found one, until I overheard a whisper, perhaps from the creeping bellflower, and the whisper said come close and do not stand or sit but fall here on the ground where your limbs have brought you and pinch between thumb and index finger a thin tangle of roots—a coaxing of the palest truth.

Brianna Van Dyke / Fort Collins, Colorado
...*After Bad News* / Katherine Edgren

*By employing the unlikely imperative voice throughout, this firm but gentle poem instructs the reader in the art of dealing with sorrow, loss, and similar ordeals that fate has a way of doling out. The seven anaphoric stanzas tend to acknowledge nearly every human hardship imaginable, but in such a way that we are comforted by having read them.*

*After Bad News*

Steep in it. Let it grow more and more astringent.
Watch it thicken, gather richness and consistency,
then sit with it until it boils over or away.

Sit with it like hunger: you won’t expire.
Sit with it like thirst: you won’t faint.
Sit with it the way you’d sit with a child with a tummy ache.

Sit with it like a scar that fades but never vanishes,
like joint pain when a storm is coming, or
when what’s broken takes its own sweet time to heal.
Even when it scrapes and hollows you out, sit with it.

Sit with it the way the old sufferers did,
practicing patience instead of panic.
Consider randomness, confront chaos,
vines draping shoulders like a mourning shawl.

Sit with the shame of it.
Without plotting revenge, sit with it and be curious.
Sit with it and forgive.
Sit with it the way you sit with someone
when there’s nothing left to say.

Practically speaking, if you don’t sit with it,
it will sit on you, wake you in the small hours.
If you need to, tell yourself it has great potential.
If you need to, tell yourself there’s beauty in it.

Sit with it like the bud of an idea, and see if it blooms.  
Open your fist, hold its hand.  
Sit with it until you believe it.  
Because every bit of what you sit with  
is your precious life.

Katherine Edgren / Dexter, Michigan
...A Welcoming / Mark Hamilton

The natural world as seen from a rowboat—close up, beneath us, and all around—achieves a stunning presence in this simple, straightforward poem, made all the more effective by way of its uncontrived diction, brilliant imagery, and a certain sense of understatement connecting the reader to something undeniably spiritual.

A Welcoming

Short Creek swells
into a bay with the new depth of rain—
a fresh, enchanted world all its own.

Within two hundred yards we’re amid geese, sedges, and meadow grasses. The breeze lulls with its metronome of blackbirds.

And there are water bugs!
and the soft webbings of feet.

So I row upstream, off the map
into rural backyards, then turn to float
through the ponds and grasses again,
carried by reflections—by the musings of the gods in the marsh.

At midnight, the bass begin to rise,
tails and fins bristling like castanets
then flapping against the hull in reckless turns,
the plankton, copepods, and water fleas
bursting right up into the stars.

Mark Hamiton / Dunedin, Florida
THREE FINALIST POEMS THAT IT BROKE MY HEART NOT TO CITE AS WINNERS OR HONORABLE MENTIONS: (Poems of Special Merit)

...Night in the Four Bunk / Dana Dever

In shadows cast by moonlight, veiled in clouds, I lie awake and listen to the moaning of the trees, autumn-shrouded sentinels stark against the night, frost-laden, dropping leaves from limbs grown numb and overburdened in the cold. Heat has fled the fireplace, with all the wood grown old, crumbling first to ashes, then to dust. Sleep has wrapped the others in their dreams, drifting in a stream of sighs and rustling of cloth. Shadows softly rumble, and even the fire has burrowed deep into a bed of ashes. But I, I cannot sleep, for fear that once I close my eyes a north wind will descend like a morning chill to change my blankets into snow, and take this autumn from me to a winter's camp, bleached white and colder than a grave.

Dana Dever / Saline, Michigan
The recycling center is a joke from the start. A few shining sheds, a Potemkin-effort at cleaning, sorting, salvaging; but if you want to know where it all goes, you need only see the smelly endless treeless waste around it. No one, of course, ever visits. The company pays off the city, county, every level up to the top, in each successive iteration. The workers (there was never a question of a real union) sit around beside their shovels and bulldozers, waiting for trucks and trains. (You’d assume a clockwork schedule. You’d be wrong.) Sometimes one sickens of what could be the same bullshit about the same game, binge, adultery, or war, and sits alone to ask what it’s all for till thought arrives at the same place as apathy. Then the trains come and trucks, container trucks and open hopper cars full of gray, fractal clinkers, noxious to look at, some with memory or hope still writhing in them.

Frederick Pollack /Washington, D.C.
Five a.m. he comes and lays his head by mine
smelling the fields, woods or swamps
I’ve been dreaming in. Sometimes I whisper
*Go lay down*—and he does. Sometimes he stares
harder and I get up.

While the water heats for coffee, we step out
into the dark fenced yard, take in the stars,
moon, the sound of trucks humming on the
highway, mallards on the lake.
Often we linger, other times go quickly back in.

I open the curtains, sit on the couch
and invite him up. Not as easy as it used to be,
his left back leg with its torn ligament
is more for balance than propulsion. He nestles
in on the other end of the couch and I rest
my foot on his rump, pet him with my toes.

When the sky lightens, we get up. He eats a bowl
of dry food and I eat a bowl of Frosted Mini-wheats
then place the bowl on the floor by the door
and he laps up the remaining sweetened milk.
After my shower, we go for our morning walk.

Gimping down the cement steps, we come out
between the lilac bush and the overgrown yew.
We look both ways for deer or rabbit and their enticing
white flag tails that got us into breaks and tears before.
Nose to the ground, we walk out into another blessed day.

Jill Marcusse / Grand Rapid, Michigan
Scott’s Ranch / Ann Privateer

Photograph                               Ann Privateer / Davis California
“Chuckleheads,” the old man calls them. “Ugliest fish that ever was. Not good for much of anything.” He tells me how he cut down and sunk some trees in this slow and turgid backwater. “They like to feel at home before they die,” he adds.

He shows me the bait. It smells foul and drips with some kind of oil. It’s all down to the whiskers, I learn. They’ve more sensors than his bloodhound Pooch’s nose.

His hook is round and almost comes full circle. “Fish gets this caught in his mouth and it’s harder to shake than a state trooper,” he says. Of course, he brandishes a sturdy rod. In his mind, the catfish in these parts are as ornery and big as sharks.

He says the fish tastes foul no matter what you rub into it. He reckons beer is best, like four or five before you sit down and sink your teeth into the fish’s putrid flesh.
But his father caught chuckleheads
and his father before him.
And he’d rather spend time on the river
than anyplace else.
But he can’t just hang out and admire the scenery.
And he never takes anything
that nature would miss.

John Grey / Johnston, Rhode Island

To No End / Fabrice Poussin

Photograph Fabrice Poussin / Rome Georgia
An Abecedarian of Artifice / Ken Gosse

Artifice: a type of art—deception on one person’s part, a brash and cold intended interception of a heart to cultivate, ingratiate another’s trust, to navigate conditioned reflex of their hope in hoping they’ll impart some evidence of faithful trust, a strong assurance that they must prove faithful to your gentle plea because your cause is just; you’re good and kind and speak your mind with sole intent that they will find a road to heaven by your side, which means they must entrust dreadful insecurities, retirement securities, interim adjustments fighting ambiguities should they lack what they may need to stay on track as they’ve agreed, follow you in love while wand’ring through obscurities with you, their mentor—guardian against impurities.

Their confidence must be applied to you alone, their one true guide, assuring any offering of selfishness denied, and by fully proffering themselves, they will be coffering a treasure, quickly building while they’re walking by your side, aiming for a future in the place where you’ll abide.

But even so, you must be clear: yours are the only words they’ll hear and want to hear—they must evolve a deep and biased fear that but for you their life is through, and it’s because of what you do in love for them that they’ll get through and you’ll be always near.
The way it’s done (which some find fun), deceitful ways that trust is won,
boxing minds so they can’t see the process has begun.
By stealth and lies you blind their eyes, ensuring that your vision plies
zealous and attentive flies into the web you’ve spun.

Ken Gosse / Mesa, Arizona

_He Decided It Must Be_ / Ken Gosse
(a reverse Fibonacci Spiral verse)

The tale was of kings and a queen; a castle and ghost; of young love and old adultery; power and fratricide; deception and madness;
of childhood friends, now spies in disguise, and the skull of a jester who once brought gladness;
of intense sadness. The story of a damned spot.
How would Shakespeare forward the plot?
He chose to propose this question:
to be,
or
not.

Ken Gosse / Mesa, Arizona
Small towns pass into
the rear view mirror
from Anvil Lake to Iron River.

Shuttered hardware stores
and two-pump gas stations
recede into pine-thick forests.

Telephone poles come staggering
along the road, crossbars
broken, no pole straight.

At the last bend before
Michigan a weedy
field surrounds a silo,
sagging and roofless.
Suddenly an intersection
of gray abandonment:

shadows of buildings, rusted
pickups, a trailer home with broken
windows of somebody’s life.

Solitary at the end of a vanishing
perspective, the failing neon
of the Triangle Tavern blinks

“open” in the old language.

Fredric Hildebrand / Neenah, Wisconsin
An Ear from Otranto / Ruth Holzer

The curved body of the pitcher
has vanished entirely
into the labyrinth of ages,

its daily burden of water
spilled and lost.
But I have found the handle,

rough and undecorated,
cool in my palm,
the calm color of dust.

Ruth Holzer / Herndon, Virginia

Waxwings / Ruth Holzer

Taking out the gross domestic product
to the garbage this evening
I spot a little flock of cedar waxwings
rising from the junipers: winter nomads,
eryalding transition.

Three times they circle in close formation,
black-masked, lemon yellow
beneath the wing, calling together
insistently—
*ease, ease, ease.*

Ruth Holzer / Herndon, Virginia
How to Triolet / Zebulon Huset

Line one comes back seventh and fourth, 
line two is how the poem will end. 
Line three's free but rhymes with one: north. 
Line one comes back seventh and fourth. 
Line five's your choice but rhymes that 'orth' 
from one and three—six rhymes two, and 
line one comes back seventh and fourth. 
Line two is how the poem will end. 

Zebulon Huset / Santee, California

How Bright the Moon Shines Tonight / M. J. Iuppa

Years past, I consumed an apple seed, tear-shaped arsenic, in one bite; and since I opened the Empire’s secret tomb, I knew that everything I did from that point on would turn to stone if I were to reveal what this seed bore was the music of stargazers, bandits, paramours—whose lilting tune called to those who were listening beneath winter’s burning dark— the lure of 7 minutes in Heaven, or the soft nuzzle of snow that transformed those who had fallen backwards into angels in the meadow; and I wanted to go back to be with them before their warmth disappeared like low-ceiling clouds erasing this path of moonlight.

M. J. Iuppa / Hamlin, New York
Lately, when I find myself outside, 
and moving slowly, I watch my steps, 
careful not to lose my footing in my 
preoccupation, which makes me stop 
to remember where I’m going, what 
small task I need to finish before 
coming back into the warmth of 
the kitchen, the smells of Sunday 
roast, the sounds of logs shifting 
their weight in the wood stove. 

I pause, knowing I have lost my center, my point of 
purpose, and I look up and see the 
trees, naked and unnatural, in winter’s 
waning light—a silhouette that could 
be a mirror reflection, an image of 
poverty that’s nearly invisible, only 
I’ll see it deeply, with so many clouds 
moving into a stillness— waiting 
to comfort me. 

M. J. Iuppa / Hamlin, New York
Mario’s / J. Ray Paradisio

Photograph  J. Ray Pardisio / Chicago, Illinois
Leaving the Hospital / Judy Kaber

The only time I drive, I know I had better make it good. A nurse helps you over the ledge of sidewalk into the back seat, your body tight with hard-lived years. I clench the wheel. Outside the air sears everything, maple trees feral with green. Nervous as hell, my whole body glows, waiting for your tongue to lash out, slice a deep welt across my neck, but it doesn’t happen today. You are lost in your own pain, eyes flat as pavement, villainous cells stealing breath, my own criminal negligence excused for once. I pull out onto Montauk Highway, take a left, cars like demons change lanes to get around me. I am out of my element, out of time for saying anything. We meet in a space where we are both vulnerable. There metal and tar prevail, deep gray notes of the unsaid stop our ears. In July you will be dead, but I don’t know this yet. I am still watching my step, still hoping to measure up. All over the earth, seeds have already sprouted. Traffic moves too rapidly, pushing more sound than I can take.

Judy Kaber / Belfast, Maine
Hands / Summer Koester

Turn a wrench, turn
the engine, smells like money
fix ‘em an’ flip ‘em
hard earned, profit turned
rough on the edges hands
turnin’ valves, fish-slingin’
hard like my old man
says a ten year old can
do it better, real man’s
work blood sweat tears
not like them
made up jobs, I'd rather
fifteen more years
turnin’ hydrants and
flippin’ cars than
flip the script, ‘cause
let’s face it, money’s just
numbers on paper
I'll tell u what’s real:
these hands, calloused,
old-man strong
holdin’ on to something
that I can feel.

Summer Koester / Juneau, Alaska
The wind was making a puppet show
with the weeds in my neighbor's backyard.

The weeds laughed and danced
like happy dragons.

They knew everything
about the end of time,

and they were celebrating.
Our orange cat watched this, fascinated.

He gripped the back of a chair
and stared with moon eyes.

I went about my task of making morning coffee,
but I was happy the dragons had returned,

for I had not seen them since I was
a very small child.

Rustin Larson / Fairfield, Iowa
Venetian Room / Diane Martin

Photograph

Diane Martin / Bangor Maine
This morning we close and lock the windows, set the thermostat, flip the furnace on.

We remove summer sheets, cover the pillows with flannel, spread a comforter billowy with down.

Our bushes blaze before losing their leaves. Our cats stalk stink bugs that want indoors, hunting less of their nights and daily lives, more of it dozing on warmer floors.

 Darkness, unwelcome, arrives before dinner. Dawn takes its sweet time re-entering the room.

We grow fat like bears, while day grows thinner; the basement, the couch, becoming home.

Reluctantly, in layers, we leave our lairs. We travel less often up and down the stairs.

Larry Levy / Midland, Michigan
That Blessed Arrangement / Larry Levy

The strangest newspaper item yet:  
a man keeping an alligator for a pet.

He claimed she alleviated his anxiety  
at home, if not in polite society.

He enjoyed the music when she hissed,  
wanted cheaper than a psychiatrist.

But what his condo manager fears  
is when a neighbor disappears.

Colleagues, over for a shot and a song,  
never linger very long.

I ask Why not a pup or parakeet?  
One can pounce, the other tweet.

Can’t other creatures be of service  
addressing your nature to be nervous?

Gossips could not comprehend  
such devotion to his reptilian friend,

her shining claws and sighing snout.  
An uncommon marriage I do not doubt.

But as they say One person’s meat,  
well-done or rare, is another’s mate.

Why should he care what people suppose?  
Love may be wiser than anyone knows.

Larry Levy / Midland, Michigan
Barbershop / Mark Madigan

It’s midday, Friday, middle of the summer and both the barbers in the small shop are asleep in their chairs when I walk in.

An electric fan is gently humming, rotating slowly across the wide room where Venetians are drawn to keep the room cool.

A cowboy movie with a young Jack Lemmon is on TV. I know one of the barbers a bit—he’s cut my hair for the last ten years—so rather than cough, or blurt some sharp Hello? into the room, I sit and wait for him to wake up—

it takes just a minute—while I remember just how tired I felt running errands, sticky and suffering out in the heat.

Mark Madigan / Springfield, Virginia
Last night her father held her close to his chest so that the silk of his flaming red sherwani teased and caressed her cheeks. She smiles and remembers how he feigned protest with his wizard’s hands as they sang and counted his forty years (those hands that could conjure, from the thin winter air, sapphire pendants and silken birds with buttons for eyes); how she smeared his face with a dollop of cake so that flecks of icing mottled his beard; how she dropped to the earth and leaped on his feet to dance his silly two-step dance, back and forth, back and forth, in the verandah strewn with confetti and streamers.

And where can he be? She climbs over presents and heaps of wrapping to find his bedroom empty; then runs to the study where a cursor blinks silently from a desktop screen; bounds out of the house through a patch of chickweed to an empty garage gathering leaves and dusty goodwill bags.

This is a dream that frequently recurs. He died a month after this party, twenty years ago. It’s funny what stays with you: The warmth of your cheek against your father’s beating heart; the flecks of icing mottling his beard; the longing to leap from the cold, hardened earth to dance his silly two-step dance -- back and forth, back and forth.
"Girls go to the barn and find me some eggs," Grandma says. My sister Kate and I had woken up early in the freezing guest room, jumped down from the antique bed and, according to Grandma, “been underfoot” all morning.”

She doesn’t need us standing around in her big kitchen, with the gas heaters cranked up and a bowl of dough on the table with a cloth over it. She won’t start the bacon and eggs until Granddaddy and Uncle Carl finish feeding the cows, but Kate and I are in her morning space and she wants us gone.

We are here because Mama was pregnant and lost a baby sister of ours yesterday. Her name was going to be Mary Carl, named after Uncle Carl who never had kids. My name is Mary Elise and my sister is Mary Kate. I didn’t like the name Mary Carl until Mom told us we would call her Carlie. I already thought of a bunch of things to do with Carlie. When she didn’t get born, Daddy brought us to the farm to stay a few weeks so Mama could rest.

“Shoo you two,” Grandma says, swishing her hands at us as though we are flies on the hind end of a horse. “Pull on your boots and fetch me some eggs.”

“Can’t we have cereal Grandma?” I ask. “I don’t want bacon and eggs.”

“You need a warm breakfast Elise. Now get on out of here.” A dusting of flour coats her apron and arms, a bit on her face, like fine snow.

“Momma lets us have cereal.” I twist the ropes of fringe on the kitchen table-cloth and she smacks my hand.

“Get,” she says, turning to her biscuits.
We grab our sweaters and boots and head to the barn. Our feet crunch on the frost as we take in the sweet, musty smells of hay and cows. We forgot gloves, so we walk with our arms crossed in front of us and hands under armpits, hugging ourselves, looking down for snakes.

I glance up and catch the sun glinting off the bright white steeple of the country church across the road from Granddaddy’s barn. On the drive here, I asked Daddy about all the tiny crosses in the church yard, set out in straight rows like fences. How could so many people be buried there? We hadn’t noticed the crosses on previous trips. Daddy looked straight ahead at the road and exhaled.

“Some churches put those out to show how many babies were killed before they were born. It’s a political thing Elise. No one is really buried there.”

“Is one for Carlie?” I asked

“No,” Dad says, “of course one is not for Carlie,” but a tear streaks his face. I was in Mom’s seat up front, Kate in back due to a coin toss. “Those crosses are for abortions. Carlie just didn’t live,” he said.

Our family doesn’t talk about things that make people sad. It’s not a rule, just something we know. I start to change the subject but don’t have to, because we pull into the drive.

“We’re here,” Dad says. “I hope Grandma made peach cobbler.”

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Kate and I know the spots the hens lay. One is in Susie Sweet's stable, but we can't get those unless Susie, the show horse, is out of the barn. There is another in an empty stable, and two spots in the loft.

The loft is scary because it is covered with hay. Granddaddy
pushes the hay down from up top into the horse's stables. If you aren't careful you will fall through the open spots where he pushes the hay, and end up in Susie Sweet's feeding trough.

"You go to the empty stable," I tell Kate. "I'll go up top."

"I'm coming up top too," she says, because we both know it's fun up there, looking down on the horses.

We start our way up the straight ladder to the loft. At the top I find a treasure of a different sort — a bottle of brown liquid. "What is it?" asks Kate, halfway up the ladder, her face right at my blue-jeaned butt, so close she could bite me.

"Don't know. Looks like tobacco juice." I hold it up and sunlight falls on the amber liquid.

"Can't be his tobacco juice. He couldn't spit in that." Kate says. "He can't aim."

"True," I say. "Maybe it's horse medicine?"

"Medicine for what?"

"I don't know, whatever horses need."

I unscrew the top and sniff. Sure enough it smells like the Jack Daniels cough syrup Daddy gives us when we can't sleep. I turn my head at the odor.

"Let's just get the eggs and go," Kate says.

I find a batch of eggs in a haphazard assortment of straw in a corner, a nest hurriedly made but a home just the same to the mother hen and her babies. I stamp my foot as taught to scare away snakes, then pick up one of the freshly-laid eggs and place it to my ear like a conch shell. It feels warm. No mighty ocean
sounds in this little egg, though, no rushing wind, no tiny heartbeat of a baby check. It makes me sad.

Kate and I find twelve brown eggs; round and warm like dinner rolls, and carry them back carefully, wrapped in the tails of our flannel shirts.

On the walk back I think of Carlie again, and all the crosses we saw in front of that church.

“Wonder if one of those crosses really is for Carlie?” I say out loud, thinking I will find out more about it from Grandma. She knows more about church things than Dad.

“No,” Kate says. “Didn’t you hear Dad? Those are abortions. Carlie wasn’t an abortion.”

“You don’t know about it,” I say. “She didn’t get born, so she got aborted from being born.”

“Yes I do know about it, Elise,” Kate says. “Carlie wasn’t an abortion because an abortion is something you do on purpose. Carlie just died.”

“She was aborted, somehow,” I said. “Maybe God aborted her?”

“No He didn’t,” Kate said. She stamped her foot, and I thought she would break her six eggs. “I know he didn’t, and you shouldn’t say that.”

“You don’t know,” I say. But I felt bad saying God aborted Carlie.

“God doesn’t do abortion,” Kate said.

“But she didn’t get born,” I argue. I’m going to have to think about this later tonight when Kate isn’t blabbing.

We take the eggs inside and Grandma scrambles them for breakfast. I don't eat them for thinking of the unborn baby chicks. I
say this and Granddaddy lets out a big laugh, tipping back in his chair.

"Oh darling," he says. "Those eggs weren't fertilized."

"Oh," I say, but I don't know what fertilized means.

“Did we abort them?” I ask.

Granddaddy keeps laughing so hard his face grows red and he coughs on his food. I don’t see what’s funny, and am angry at him for laughing at me, angry at Daddy for dropping me and Kate off here when we just lost our sister, and for Mom shutting the door to her room on us.

"We found your horse medicine today," I say.

"Horse medicine?"

"The brown stuff in the bottle in the loft."

"Oh you girls don't need to be up in the loft," Granddaddy says. “You can fall right through.”

"We were getting eggs."

"Hum," Granddaddy says.

The table goes quiet. Grandma moves eggs on her plate with her fork. Uncle Carl looks down at his plate. Kate kicks me under the table. “It’s not Granddaddy’s fault about the abortions,” she whispers.

“We all cope with things in different ways,” Granddaddy says, looking across the table at Grandma. I see him catch her brown eye with his blue ones. He isn’t paying attention to us.

"Yep that medicine was up there," I say. “About half full."
“Carl,” Grandma says in a whisper. “You’re drinking again? And with the children here?” She flings her napkin on the table and trounces away. Granddaddy tips his face toward his plate, hands in his face like he is praying, and sighs.

I somehow knew when I found that bottle I had a secret on Granddaddy. I guess he won't laugh at me anymore. No one should laugh at a girl for not wanting to eat eggs for the sake of unborn chicks. No one should send a girl away and think she doesn’t care, or just brush her off, shoo her away like a fly, or close the door on her. Not when she has lost a baby sister.

I pick at my bacon and eggs and ask to be excused.

Lisa McCormack / Juliet, Tennessee
Frida Levitating a Water Bear / Ray Legans

Manipulated Photograph  Ray Legans / Albuquerque, New Mexico
I am not yet born. My parents sit on the porch of their newly purchased house, watch the fires across the tracks.

_They told me the fire’s glow stained the oleander bushes crimson, as if white blossoms burst into flame._

Smoke, sodden and steely in twilight, drifts across the cobalt sky.

_Mother thought she could hear voices, crying in the night, but my father thought it was still, crickets all that could be heard in the half-light._

When I imagine the moment, I hear the crackle of flame, smell harsh vapor that somehow recalls lapsang souchong.

_My mother said it was the end of an era, and my father said nothing changed at all._

Laura McRae / Toronto, Ontario
Ladder Crash / Edward Morin

The sun in February shrinks snow banks along the driveway, and ice dams drip from rain gutters. On wet, steamy asphalt I ratchet the extension ladder high between dormer eaves on either side that keep the ladder from lurching sideways. One foot over the other up the rungs, with a hammer and star-drill chisel I chip ice slabs off the clogged gutter.

They crack, fall, and splatter below me as dusk begins to settle. The Tao says, “Know when to stop and you will meet with no danger.” I haven’t listened. The ladder top slides down past the ice dam. The bottom clatters away from the house, pulls the rung from my grasp. I fall feet first, bend my knees for recoil, meet the ground. One ankle explodes, the other knee rips, and a forearm slaps hard on the pavement.

Pain stabs my right foot. I roll and sit up. The ladder lies intact, spanning debris. Splinted and sedated by the kind EMS crew, I tour Emergency, believing I am a torpedo propelled back and forth through body-scan chambers. The talus bone in my ankle was split like a piece of firewood. The surgeon told me to keep my weight off that foot in the cast for three months.
With six weeks gone, I have six more to wait while the world greens outside my window. How well will I be walking? in pain? or with a limp? None of us knows yet. I mull my folly and the last things, admire the beauty of my one good foot, even file my tax return early.

Lao Tzu says, “He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be entrusted with the empire.” Let mine be plants and grass in the yard, having the health to cultivate them. Smell the flowers. Listen to the birds.

Edward Morin / Ann Arbor, Michigan
Dust Motes / Stella Nesanovich

Like miniature stars
amid far galaxies,
dust motes circle
in sunlight. I whistle
to watch them swirl.

Caught as they are
in moving air,
weightless, there
is nothing to grasp,
to touch my fingertips.

Just light, like souls,
or musical notes
afloat in the universe
played so softly
only the angels hear.

Stella Nesanovich / Lake Charles, Louisianna
Climbing the Wall / Robert Nisbet
A village school in Wales in the 1960s

It’s lovely stone, whole building’s solid.
You get odd draughts, cold days,
but those high windows catch the sky.
Outside I like the yard’s colours,
hopscotch and numbered squares.
But here’s a fabled spot. Just where
the playground reaches the back wall,
there’s a tilting brick, and boys
and girls of six and seven and eight can
prise themselves up, look out. They’ll see
it all: down the valley, the mist of the town,
reflecting the sun maybe, and on to the road,
the London road, running out and on.
It’s like a ceremony for them: to climb
the wall some day. Then back, quietly,
the end of playtime, back to class,
excited, curious still.

Robert Nisbet / Haverfordwest, United Kingdom
Faith / Deonte Osayande

At first I believed
in that simple
schoolyard fact

if you stepped
on a crack you

would break
your mother's
back, and over
time I learned

not to have faith
in playground

sayings, but now
as an elder man
so many decades
later I've noticed how

fragile her back
has become.

Deonte Osayande / Detroit, Michigan
Familiar Strangers / Deonte Osayande

I didn't know you
had a daughter,
didn't know you

had a wife, sorry,
ex-wife, didn't know

and I get to thinking
maybe if I had been
better at being a friend

you might not have done
what you did but then I go

well I also didn't know that
you served in the war,
almost like I didn't
know you anymore

Deonte Osayande / Detroit, Michigan
The Waiting / Barry Peters

I want to pack your dying in a box, a shipshape suitcase for a long vacation: the underwear here, over there the socks, the silver latches clicking a benediction to best-laid plans: calendar squares clearly marked with birthdays and doctor appointments; pill bottles arranged in rows so austerely, the fridge shelved by supplements and oxidants. But as much as I want your death to fit predictable rhythm and time, it’s not going to happen that way. Not this cold spring when snow falls on foolish pines well into April, the drifting pollen dust looking for a warm place to land.

Barry Peters / Durham, North Carolina

Whale, West Virginia / Barry Peters

We round the bend and watch it ascending mountainously above the interstate: an actual mountain shaped like the great white whale, humped and blunt, but dyed red yellow and orange, this being fall in the prettiest state, some people say. Then we spy a shirtless man, cadaverous, scuffling in the shoulder, trucks and cars hauling ass narrowly past, a backpacked Ishmael fleeing the whale and its sea of leaves. On we drive toward the darkness, a tunnel hollowed into its belly, one hand on the wheel, the other clutching quarters to pay the toll for autumn brilliance, November in the distance.

Barry Peters / Durham, North Carolina
Genes / Donna Pucciani

My nonna had cheekbones high as the Amalfi cliffs.
A saver of boxed Christmas gifts, she never used new copper pots but cooked cavatelli in her old chipped white-enameled aluminum.
Plaster saints flickered in her bedroom near chests of mothballed muslin.
She trestled an old Singer sewing machine like an Olympic runner, her black nunlike shoes laced tight.

My nonno was short, bald, muscular, wore white shirts and suspenders, loved his chianti and his carpenter’s tools.
One day, at eighty years old, he came home with a gash on his head.  
“I fell off the scaffold.”

My father had dark hair, black eyes, and a head for mathematics.  He was a gentle soul, not meant for the New York dog-eat-dog business on Third Avenue.
When my sister and I would cry at the door as he left in the morning, mother told us: “Daddy’s gone to make nickels.”

My mother had deep brown eyes and lustrous hair, which eventually fell out from radiation.
She smoked Lucky Strikes from the age of thirteen, later added Gordon’s Gin and sleeping pills.
I do not want her beautiful Southern madness, which did her in young.
I can’t hammer a nail straight, almost failed algebra, don’t pray or store presents in a closet for decades. Unlike my father, I am blondish, with blue eyes that gray when I remember the Parkinson’s that carried him off to a trembling sky. I want only his kindness, my grandfather’s wine, and nonna’s dark Italian cloth.

Donna Pucciani / Wheaton, Illinois
Her breasts swayed inside her blouse as she moved around behind the bar, wiping things with a dirty rag and telling me “You know...they say the best way to get over a man is to get under another one.”

We laughed at that, and before I could say, “you know....” (wink, wink) “I could help you out there...” I said instead, “Isn’t that like drinking to cure a hangover?”

And she laughed, said “Maybe so. It works, though, right?” I smiled, nodded, and slid my empty glass across the bar. She took it, with a flourish and a twirl, broke out the vodka, the tomato juice, the Worcestershire...

She mixed us two spicy, bloody ones, and our eyes met as we clinked glasses in a silent toast to getting over, or under. That was all that ever happened, but how beautifully the smoke from our cigarettes rose and intertwined in the too-bright flood of morning sun pouring in through the window.

Brian Rihlmann / Reno, Nevada
With our children grown and living far away, we sort our old life into piles for Goodwill and boxes for the van. Lugging a full-length mirror, I pause to look into our son’s room.

It echoes with emptiness. I’m reading him a story as I lie on the rug by his bed where I will awake late to let out into the yard the dog whose ashes we scattered there.

Down the hall, our one-year old wobbles after her sister who dashed by trailing blonde hair and laughter past battered suitcases full of unwanted clothes.

In the family room, my wife’s sitting on the blue armchair we gave away making lesson plans and here she is beside me ten, twenty, thirty years later when we find, marking the place near the end of a novel, a snapshot of our house with a for-sale sign. Things look much the same, but the birch still lives, the setting for back-to-school photos, that huge tree gone to firewood and smoke and hearth ash turned into garden soil in the yard of the house whose mailbox bears the fading letters of our name.

James Schneider / Brunswick, Maine
The Pine Stairs / Laurence W. Thomas

Photograph Laurence W. Thomas / Ypsilanti, Michigan
The owner, leaning across the counter, finished telling a story to a man busy chewing a toothpick and tilting his chair back. When at last he turned to look at me, I held up the wrong-sized handlebars for my bike and handed him a receipt.

He scowled at the paper, glanced at his friend, and then paused, staring at me. *We don't sell sweaters here, kid,* he said, and they snickered and hawed the sounds that echo in fear and dreams. I took the handlebars and receipt to my mother waiting in the car. She grabbed the handlebars and marched in and gave it to the man. Gave it in words and metal clattering on the glass counter. The man lowered his unshaven face and nodded, his mouth tight. He opened the register and handed over cash. When we walked out I didn’t have to look back to know
they were watching my mother in her red sundress. As the door swung shut,

I heard the man’s low tones. It was up to him to make a comment, not about the transaction, but about her, to win another laugh.

James Schneider / Brunswick, Maine
Like a Hydra, the Past Has Many Heads / Angela Spring

Read about a beheading while on vacation in Halifax with my boyfriend. At first we laugh

at the image of a man who walks up to a stranger, rends head from neck in less a minute, seconds

sluggish as the driver hits the brake and panicked passengers spill from the bus. We guess weapons,

causes. Most likely a psychotic break. In another article, the man, locked away, only says, I am guilty.

What happens the second before the mind breaks, as each brain synapse misfires at once, body jerking

into life to follow a brutal darkness? My brother still walks stiffly, unable to scrape loose whatever he hid

those months spent in the mental hospital as a teen. He broke out once; threw a chair through the window,

jumped two stories. Went home to tell our mother she was right. We do not speak of that time. Instead,

each morning we greet our past, swords in hand.

Angela Spring / Albuquerque, New Mexico
At the Last Minute / Charles Springer

When I was this kid in grade school I asked Junie who sat cattycorner to me where she got the purple fruit I saw in her lunch pail and she said it came with the lunch pail and that she was going to keep it until her mother returned the lunch pail because of the purple fruit that came in it and when I suggested we just go ahead and eat the purple fruit, she suggested I ask my own mother to buy me a lunch pail with a purple fruit in it and I told her I have no mother or even a mother-in-law and Junie said I could have hers if that was okay and I said I'd have to ask my dad as I did have a dad, then Junie said she wasn't sure what a dad was because apparently she didn't have one of those so we decided at the last minute to eat the purple fruit after all and I split it nicely down the middle with my pocket knife and her lunch pail, well, of course we had to flatten it now the purple fruit was gone and so we did, taking turns with the little sledge hammer she carried in her book bag.

Charles Springer / Lock Haven, Pennsylvania
So much depends upon the order of things, 
the resoluteness of aleph 
to precede the letter bet -- 
    the breathing in before the breathing 
out -- 
the unfolding of crocus before hyacinth, 
bearded iris before hardy gladiolus. 
Is anything harder to break than the chain 
of generational violence? 
Trauma passes through the bloodline, 
an epigenetic inheritance of horror. 
Dad’s violent outbursts scream themselves 
    through son’s throat four decades later, 
one fist balling itself into another. 
Red-faced foreknowledge worms away at the apple, 
    chewing away all other possibilities. 
    How different 
it would be if Time’s embrace 
of the Earth had found its first fruit 
in Demeter, 
not Hestia, 
the spray of daffodils 
ahead of the raging hearth, 
the quick thaw of Spring 
ahead of winter’s stark punctuation 
in the embers of the Oracle’s foreordaining.

Cash Toklas / Leesburg, Virginia
After his daughter spoke, he lay and wept
in the field of deep grass, thinking about her words.
When he departed they wondered at the impression that remained,
a hole there in the grass, which seemed alive to them.
They gathered around and discussed its meaning,
the way the blades bent down and his body heat lingered.
Then one of them repeated the daughter’s words:
*I know I love you, I know I love her, that’s all I know.*
They saw that the words had altered the shape of his grief,
even the shape that remained, the presence of his absence.
They could not smell the rain rising or the horses’ hides.
They could not understand the patience of equine minds,
though they knew the horses in the field beheld them,
just as the man beheld the stars, and cried.

Ken White / Livonia, Michigan
Cruise Ship / Peter Yaremko

She’s slipping by just now, white bride, incandescent almost, against the horizon’s line. Too early to call it evening. Too late for afternoon. Too close by our island, by my reckoning, just so starboard passengers get a look. Heading must be due west, or close to it. Helmsman in Bono wraparounds against the sliding sun. First seating soon. White-linened women with talc down there, for eventualities. Full ahead.

Peter Yaremko / Viques, Puerto Rico

American Landscape / Gary Wadley

Photograph                        Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky
InsideOut works with a variety of schools, partner organizations, and artists to help inner-city schoolchildren find their inner voices with which to express themselves and share their stories, which they then do at performances and events presented by InsideOut.

InsideOut places professional writers and poets in Detroit schools to help children give voice to their often turbulent lives through poetry and writing. Since 1995, the organization has served tens of thousands of Detroit students grades K-12 in over 100 different schools. This year they are serving 27 different schools.

By immersing students in the joy and power of poetry and literary self-expression, InsideOut inspires them to think broadly, create bravely and share their voices with the wider world. Guided by professional writers and celebrated by publications and performances, youth learn that their stories and ideas matter and that their pens can launch off the page into extraordinary lives.

The Project is supported by gifts of corporations and people who hope to light the creative spark in our youth. Readers of Third Wednesday who see the fire burning in these young poets can help with donations sent to:

You can help give Detroit’s children the joys of reading, writing and bringing their creative spirit into the world by supporting InsideOut, a 501(c)(3) corporation.

Visit InsideOut online at: www.insideoutdetroit.org

InsideOut Literary Arts Project
5143 Cass Ave., Room #225
WSU — State Hall
Detroit, MI  48202
...*We Share the Sky* / Anwar Saleh

The sky sees a little boy
with a blue balloon under a tree.
The sky hears everyone
talking about it
and writing about it.
The sky thinks of a huge tree
that gets cut down.
The sky wonders if an earthquake
is happening in the middle
of the ocean. The sky
wants to go to sleep early today.

Anwar Saleh (Grade 3)

...*We Share the Sky* / Sarah Ahmed

The sky sees 800 people around the White House.
The sky hears big birds chirping in their nests.
The sky thinks that a poem keeps going on and on.
The sky wonders what does a poem sound like.
The sky wants to eat popcorn and see a movie.
The sky believes that she can sing a song.
The sky loves the whole world.

Sarah Ahmed (Grade 3)

...*This Is a Poem* / Jaeron Shanahan-Poellnitz

This isn't just a circle.
This is a hula-hoop that spins around a dinosaur's belly.

This isn't just a hula-hoop that spins around a dinosaur's belly.
This is a moon that can drive a car.

This isn't just a moon that can drive a car.
This is a planet that is trying to break out of jail.
This isn't just a planet that is trying to break out of jail. 
This is a poem that a dinosaur ate for breakfast.

Jaeron Shanahan-Poellnitz (Grade 3)

...Love Is a Star / Jason De La Torre

Love is a star that can't control itself.
Love is not just a star that can't control itself.
Love is a sunflower that can spread happiness.
Love is not just a sunflower that can spread happiness.
Love is a rose that can hurt you.
Love is not just a rose that can hurt you.
Love is ice cream that melts.
Love is not just ice cream that melts.
Love is paper that easily rips.
Love is not just paper that easily rips.
Love is a blender of mixed emotions.

Jason De La Torre (Grade 5)

...Love Me! / Marisol Pate-Castro

Love me like the birds love the morning.
Don't just love me like the birds love the morning.
Love me like the owls love the night.
Don't just love me like the owls love the night.
Love me like flowers love water.
Don't just love me like flowers love water.
Love me like the pencil loves the paper.
Don't just love me like the pencil loves the paper.
Love me like Peppa Pig loves muddy puddles.
Don't just love me like Peppa Pig loves muddy puddles.
Love me like Kobe Bryant loved basketball.
Don't just love me like Kobe Bryant loved basketball.
Love me like the world is ending.

Marisol Pate-Castro (Grade 5)
Y Tower Y Sentry / Denny Marshall

Drawing Denny Marshall / Lincoln, Nebraska