3rd Wednesday

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Third Wednesday is a quarterly journal of literary and visual arts. Though we manage the magazine from Michigan, 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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Cover Art:
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Special Thanks
Phillip Sterling for his sponsorship of the George Dila Memorial Fiction Contest.
Editors Note for Autumn, 2020

This final issue of our 13th year of publication features the winners of the 4th Annual George Dila Flash Fiction Contest.

This year’s contest judge, Lisa Lenzo, is the author of Unblinking, a collection of Detroit stories, Strange Love, a novel-in-stories, and a story collection, Within the Lighted City. You can find more about her at lisalenzo.com.

We continue to feature a guest poetry editor. For this issue it was Jude Dippold of Concrete, Washington. Jude has graced past issues with both fine poetry and some stunning photographs. Jude is the author of the poetry collection, Crossings from Finishing Line Press.

We are back with another suite of student poems from InsideOut Literary arts curated by Peter Marcus.

Additional highlights in this issue: A flash piece by Ron Koertge, poems by Raymond Byrnes, Claire Rubin, James Crews and many others.

One of the poems in this issue is by a Pulitzer Prize winning writer (not for poetry) I’ll leave that as a mystery for you readers to ponder and maybe solve.

The winning poem in our 50/50 Poetry Contest is Notes from the Field. Alexandra Wade wins half of the entry fees from this contest and a one year subscription to the print magazine. The contest for the winter issue is underway.

- David Jibson, Editor
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Mannequin / Ron Koertge

Anyone can do anything they want with me. Caress me here and there. Carry me under their sweaty arms past the security guard who likes to feel me up. My job on this side of the big plate glass window is to inspire yearning. Women want to look like me — endlessly effortlessly thin with a hundred outfits. I am the most seductive in the rain. Safe and warm with somebody to dress me. Speaking of Luis and Teddy, they talk as they work: a disappointing movie, a mother ill in Minneapolis, gold in an underground river, the myth of love. Behind the scenes, stock boys like me in nothing but a fox fur hat, head titled like I’m daring somebody to slap me around. In the show window, I am chic though my arms are often at odd angles like I am trying to deflect a meteorite.

Ron Koertge / South Pasadena, California
That spring
when the promise
of the dogwoods and redbuds
was cut short
and fear reminded us
how fragile and porous
our lives were,
she retreated into
her rambling house,
mourning the loss
of the baseball season
and the joyful abandon
the summer game represented.
Rather than dwell in loss,
she found a daily broadcast
of the 2011 St, Louis Cardinals’
comeback stretch run
to an improbable World Series win.
Each day,
she listened to another game,
unsure of the outcome
but secure in the knowledge
that the season would end in joy
for her beloved Cardinals.
In an uncertain time,
that proved to be
promise enough.
Saint Sebastian / Carla Sarett

Only a few hours left, enough to catch an exhibit at the Met. Packed, as usual, impossible.

But one gallery was empty. A work by Andrea Mantegna, of Saint Sebastian, or so I recall.

Although I confess all saints look the same to me (give or take a stigmata or a horse.)

I sat for a long time with Mantegna’s sky, ruins, arrows,

incandescent pain and I do think I felt what arrows meant, what faith could mean, inflamed by reason.

I wept, knowing on the bus down Fifth, I’d think of dinner, bread and wine, and ordinary skies. I’d soon forget flesh pierced by arrows.

All I’d have left was my departure.

Carla Sarett / San Francisco, California
Canzone For My Dead Beagle / Samuel Swauger

You’ve exhausted your clumsy old kidneys and
from across the road
it’s no secret that our house looks empty,
a little lonelier this breakfast than last

The ratty Navajo blanket of yours is neater and
colder than you left it,
where you played your galloping dreams
of nimble cottontail rabbits and steak and eggs.

O Macy, whose ramshackle heart howls at the road,
who dreams she could run,
you’re often quieter and harder to understand
than the labradors are when you bay for pancakes,
cold orange juice, or the syrup glazing our empty
plates! How mysterious,
you recite a recipe or a poem to bewildered me
in the ancient tongue of yours that I don’t know.

like a skeletal Chevrolet truck rusting out its last
days among the trees,
you munch on all the nifty pancakes
between your vague last words.

Samuel Swauger / Baltimore, Maryland
The end is there
for all of us. We all
get there eventually,
so please, you
at the back,
stop pushing,
and you, directly behind me,
stop standing on my heels,
these shoes are new
and meant to last me for years.

Stop, all of you,
you'll get there,
in the end, when it is
the end, possibly before me,
possibly after, possibly
while my new shoes still shine,
possibly when they are long
past their prime,

but you will get there,
no matter where you stand
in this line.

Edward Lee / Coill Fada Longwood, Ireland
Crosswalk / J. Ray Paradiso

Photograph / J. Ray Paradiso / Chicago, Illinois
Laughter / Lisa Timpf

News headline: ‘Disgusting’ video of boys beating coyote to death condemned by Alberta hunters

didn't see it coming, the coyote chased by two boys on a snowmobile— video showed them whack him on the head a few times then laugh as he huddled, stunned, in the snow

the snow, the killing snow, and in this winter of the human spirit empathy might wither and die crawl away without a whimper

the coyote tried to hobble away so they grabbed him by the tail hauled him back and gave him a final blow— bad enough, for sure

but it's the laughter, the laughter that echoes on after rendering the scene even less humane— it’s the laughter, the laughter in the face of pain

Lisa Timpf / Simcoe, Ontario Canada
Invasives / Barbara Daniels

Blade rhymes with light. Leaves rhyme with rain. Some trees escape from gardens and thrive at the roadside—Norway maples, black locusts, mimosas with blooms that burst with rosy pink furbelows. In the wet wastewood, purple loosestrife crowds out cattails. Trees of heaven bolt into the air. They’re all at their best in bad weather. Bare branches form nets that darkness can swim through. Out past the woods, meadow still rhymes with clover, sunlight and starlight with grace.

What survives blue night’s amnesia? Douglas firs gather like overdressed guests in their frilled cones. They’ll never leave you. They’re here for the long haul, pulling their weight up out of the ground, lofting themselves, needling, frilling. Rain is their language. In this language, spring rhymes with white dogwoods and red tulips.

Trees guard a street like a quiet black river. Someone set out a row of red lanterns. Robins and finches ecstatically sing.

Barbara Daniels / Sicklerville, New Jersey
I tell you it was bloody hot in that kitchen
with its open fires and great pots
of bean stew steaming, unleavened bread
baking over hot coals, the pungent smell of roasting lamb
sweat dripped between my breasts, my arms exhausted
from kneading and chopping and mixing and stirring
my dress dusted in flour
they said thirteen for supper that night
an unlucky number I whispered in my sleeve
later I poured wine and passed bread
put out more olives and dates
slipping silently between men talking of betrayal
but there is no sign of me in the famous painting
sometimes I look again to be sure, maybe
I missed it on the lower left, on hands and knees
sweeping up the crumbs
no, not even there

Claire Rubin / Oakland, California
We tried, god knows
to find one that worked for both of us,
that would hold us together like Elmer’s glue
holds our daughter’s cutouts on a page
of bright blue construction paper.
Something we could do together insists our therapist,
scowling over her glasses,
silently reminding herself that she is getting paid
despite the fact that we are a Lost Cause.
We tried music, but I like classical, he prefers rock.
No possible watered down version that would please us both,
no Yo Yo Ma playing Bruce Springsteen,
no Van Morrison singing *che gelida manina.*
We took Spanish and he was awesome at it,
conjugating the past perfect *me había ido. *
I struggled with *yo soy. *
The teacher adored him. I skipped the homework,
too busy sulking and spewing epithets at Señorita Garcia.
We cancelled our trip to Madrid.
What of hiking suggests our therapist, sounding spiritless,
focused on painting her nails the color of Cajun shrimp.
So off we go with our two hundred dollar Merrell boots,
our Ultralight Collapsible water bottles and
brand new Osprey backpacks filled with tuna sandwiches,
feeling optimistic about our future for the first time.
Hours later, both with blisters and sunburn, both reeking of fish,
and hoping we can get a full refund for our useless gear,
we snuggle together stink-breathed and sweaty
in our lowest common denominator.

Claire Rubin / Oakland, California
Earth Goddess / Lisa Yount

Photo Collage / Lisa Yount / El Cerrito, California
Checking in too late for room service, 
our daughters ice beer, lock our common door, 
head for the Jacuzzi. We raid the minibar, 
climb into queen beds; next to my sister’s pillow, 
her husband’s cell phone. It comes to life, off and on, 
vibrates, emits an eerie phosphorescent glow. 
All night, its restlessness sifts through our sleep, 
as his dear voice, still speaking in the ether, 
communicates with those who don’t yet know, 
promising to return calls. Maybe she hopes 
he’ll text, spell a message, letter by letter, 
like a Ouija board’s heart-shaped planchette, 
drifting across the alphabet, to tell her 
what he didn’t know how to say before.

Janis Harrington / Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Star Gazing / Mary Anna Scenga Kruch

These days stretch out slowly
as night appears starless at times
even soundless as we gaze
at what the Greeks named Boötes
meaning ox driver or plowman
and it seems suitable for both
sowing seeds and for sickness that has worked
so many into the ground or into patients
barely breathing conscious at times
pondering light past hospice halogen.
Some could look to windows
and conjure the constellations
like Libra’s scales that can balance seasons
of light when the night moves moaning
lifts the lifeless onto gurneys in death
as the fight goes on for another breath.
We the living go on, complain
of staying home and of masks
as real saints work bedside
with the sick and dying
stand shields for woeful shifts that never end
just to send mothers home to children
to hold them close
to locate Ursa Minor rotating
around the north celestial pole
offering major light to days
that had once stretched slowly
into dark months of night.

Mary Anna Scenga Kruch / Williamston, Michigan
Questions and Dreams / Ben Sloan

Stopping to study their palms
for the first time in years,
they’re saddened by what they see there:
a pile of broken rakes and pitchforks.
Even so, they are unable to question
their lives until someone named Voltaire
comes along and teaches them

how to have dreams.
Charging out the door and glancing up
into the sky, noticing its sharp
indigo contours, angry questions
start to eat at them,
and soon they are using guillotines
to remove their landlords’ heads.

Two short centuries later
jammed into tight neat rows
sipping complimentary cups
of hot coffee, they crisscross the globe
in jet-propelled dreams.
At the same time, somewhere near Paris,
or maybe Copenhagen,

people wearing chartreuse vests
wander about and stare
and scowl into the smoke
leaking from scattered debris fields,
all that remains of dreams
that have fallen out of the sky,
as some inevitably do.

Which ones will fall,
and on what days, and where?
These are excellent questions.

Ben Sloan / Charlottesville, Virginia
I know potatoes—
the sting of barn air

after the rough-dusted,
pock-marked, giant pearls

are piled, hauled and stacked
in late November. I know

the semi-soft, clumped dirt
of chewed-up fields, days

after my anchor-shaped root
digger, its finned cast-iron

blade, is laid to rest. To shake
and kick crops, hard, quick

into my rake-fingered basket,
sifting soil for the strongest,

wearies the soul. I know
the unharvested, too, lying

sideways in the ridged
ground—odd, stray half-stubs

sticking up—like a toe
or finger unclaimed.

Alexandra Wade / Locust Valley, New York

Alexandra wins half the entry fees from our 50/50 Contest and a one year subscription to the print magazine.
The way our two teachers arrived
in late summer is the way miracles
happen. Unannounced, nuns hugged
us in their light-grey habits as if we
were the chosen ones—I wondered
if the Reverend Mother had granted
permission for the visit. Our mother,
smiling, whispered, the church is changing,
as she cut sandwiches into triangles,
never looking up. They’ve come to say
goodbye before we move. After lunch,
we played baseball in the open field
behind the potato barn. I’d seen nuns
play hopscotch on the school playground,
slightly lifting their black robes,
careful not to expose thick stockings
anchored in heavy black shoes,
but I’d never imagined baseball
in summer with Sister St. Mark
who swung the bat twice in the air
for warm-up. Anxious for a good pitch,
she twisted her whole body back
and under with the power, the pleasure of a grown child. Our mother stayed at the picnic table to play umpire. Hands restless, she twisted her wedding ring back and forth, watched the crack and release, must have heard the rhythmic feral-cry the Sister made, our claps and shrieks, the flapping echo of Sister St. Mark’s white veil swallowing up the uneven hum of Mr. Rose’s tractor next door, as she ran toward the worn-out cushion we used for home base. Slumped in high grass, eyes half-closed, our mom threw her head back, almost laughing, relaxed. When supper ended, we waved goodbye from the porch to the Sisters driving into dusk. I wanted to ask about the strange terror-sound Sister St Mark made as she ran the bases, if God heard—God must have heard—if God was furious, blamed us, if He forgave them for the game, if they made a vow of silence driving back to the convent, or giggled about the day, and being married to Him.

Alexandra Wade / Locust Valley, New York
George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest

The editors of Third Wednesday are pleased to honor the memory of George Dila, friend of Third Wednesday and the editor who originally brought fiction to 3W. We are proud to have called him friend and colleague.

Each winning author receives a prize of $100.

Three winning stories selected by Lisa Lenzo

This was fun and very interesting, but it made me a little sad to set aside some of the contest stories.

These winning stories are all so good, in different ways, and I can tell the writers put a lot of work, love, talent and craft into them. Judging is subjective but I wish it wasn't. The difference between a winner and a non-winner was sometimes slight. I know that when the editors or judges of contests I’ve entered say “there were so many excellent entries, it was hard to choose,” that they aren’t just saying that to be nice. I feel very much the same.

Here are my choices:

Concession Girl by Diana Spechler
Handling This by Susan Rodgers
The Last Love Song of Johnny Mascerone by Gordon Brown

Four additional authors worthy of Honorable Mention: Damon Macias Moreno, Alan Sincic, Nancy Quinn & Julie Gard.

Thanks for the opportunity! I enjoyed this.

— Lisa
Kathy is approaching. Even in the semi-dark her beauty makes me want to give up, just lie down on the grass behind the concession stand and play dead Kathy is a woman who gets to consume buttered popcorn and Milk Duds and a large Coke every Saturday night at the drive-in and definitely doesn’t get desperate like I do at 3 am. and impulse-purchase weird infomercial fitness equipment like the Sauna Suit.

I’m a sucker for a false promise.

Every weekend Kathy takes the hot bag of popcorn from me, flashes her piano-key smile, and hits up the stainless-steel butter warmer with the pump that we keep by the straws and napkins. She pokes a straw all the way into her popcorn and pumps butter straight to the bottom of the bag. Then she gives the bag a few shakes and voila! Full coverage. And still she has a waist that resembles sucked-in cheeks, limbs so slender she can pull off that one-piece spaghetti-strap jumpsuit she’s wearing tonight, and that gold upper arm cuff shaped like a delicate snake. I imagine Ray gently kissing each tiny snake eye.

“Have you seen this one before?” Kathy asks me. I can smell her perfume even though we’re outside. It smells like a gift.

The film is some boy movie. Motorcycles and bikinis. “No,” I say, passing her the popcorn, the Milk Duds, the large Coke.

I struggle to remember that I’m a stranger to her: the concession girl who exists only from the waist up, for the sole purpose of handing her snacks to share with her husband. She doesn’t have me memorized in grand detail. She couldn’t describe my Christmas pictures from two years ago, the way I could hers. She doesn’t even know my first name. I move my eyes above her head to the screen.
She performs her gross butter ritual and then comes back and says, “I don’t even care about the movie. Does that make sense? I just love being here.” She adds, “This is my happy place,” and giggles.

My heart thumps in my ears as she hip-swishes back to Ray’s Jeep Gladiator with the cactus air freshener dangling from the rear view mirror. Once she’s disappeared into the passenger seat, I plunk the CLOSED sign up on the counter and race to the projection booth. I fling the door open on Jaclyn, my best friend since the first grade, who’s sitting on an overturned bucket and scrolling through her phone.

“You scared the crap out of me,” she says. She’s wearing too much blue eye makeup. I probably am, too.

“I need a favor.”

“Thank Jesus,” she says. “I’m bored out of my skull.”

The thing about married men is they’re exactly the same as single men. You make the right kind of eye contact while they’re smoking by the concession stand and soon they’re asking what a girl like you is doing slinging Twizzlers at the drive-in. They ask you what you really want out of life and maybe you answer, even though you know, deep in the fibers of your DNA, where the grandmothers and great-grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers have encoded their hard-earned wisdom, that men ask women what they want only to get what they want. And then you’re in his bed while his wife is out of town, and you’re mesmerized by her vanity with the light bulbs encircling the mirror, as if she’s an old-timey movie star, or you’re in his car singing country music with him, harmonizing (how many couples can harmonize well?), and your hand rests on his on the stick shift and you like how that feels, how his hand moves this way and that but never escapes yours. And maybe he has you programmed into his phone as Bob, but he calls every night while he’s outside smoking, more than any other boy has ever called, so you think if you just hang on and don’t make any false moves and never ask for a single thing, one day he’ll
leave Kathy and her snake jewelry and her light bulb vanity and her bottle-blond hair. But then one morning out of nowhere, he texts you, “I can’t do this anymore, sorry,” and he doesn’t answer when you call and call and call but he shows up that night with his wife to see a movie and she buys popcorn and Milk Duds and a Coke, while you haven’t been able to eat a thing all day.

When the screen goes suddenly dark, I’m selling M&Ms to an old man with a transparent cane. I know what’s happening, I made this happen, but still I want to vomit, want to back-track, the way suicide survivors describe the moment they jump off the bridge—the terrifying truth of the void beneath their feet. It’s the only selfie he ever let me take of us. We’re lying in their bed together, my head on his chest, and I look so happy, we look so good together, a perfectly harmonized song.

The image is projected for only a minute or so before Jaclyn restarts the movie. Since this isn’t a theater, I can’t hear the gasp ripple through the audience, and that’s the real injustice: the world seems unchanged.

Diana Spechler / Dallas, Texas
Handling This / Susan Rodgers

Objects had a way, now, of slipping from her fingers—here, gone. Or they changed properties: from dry to wet. Soft to rough. Fraying, frayed, threadbare, thread-like. She could be holding something, a spoon, a glove, a ribbon, an earring, a pair of scissors, a pair of socks, a pair of sunglasses. A book, for example, that she holds on her lap, might become so heavy that she lifts it (with both hands) and places it on the table, a low coffee table with curved wooden legs. A table that seems to slant, level surface suddenly unleveled, and the book will surely slide off, so she reaches out to catch it and in reaching forward reaches too far, hands held out, and she loses her balance at the edge of the chair where she’s been sitting with one leg curled under her, how she always sits, except that the leg beneath her has fallen asleep. In this way, she tips over and falls, once again, to the floor.

Or she could be holding a banister, a porch railing, a doorknob. On her way somewhere, on her way back. Steering wheel, radio dial, cell phone. Door handle, suitcase handle, pan handle. She handles everything with care. Handling it: I’m handling it. I can’t quite get a handle on this. Flying off the handle: “into a state of sudden and violent anger.” Not handling this well. She’s not handling this well. Managing: The lawyer “handles her affairs.” Put up with: as in, can’t handle the heat. Middle English handles “touch with the hands, hold in the hands, fondle, pet,” also “deal with, discuss.”

This is what happens next: tests are run. Of the neurological sort. She is asked a series of questions and she understands that the questions are the same, over and over, that they are testing her, this is part of the test, and even though she knows what the questions are before they are asked, the questions, too, seem to change properties, change shape and weight and volume, become liquids (if solid) or angled (if soft-edged and dog-eared, like a frequently handled, beloved object).
Her old letters. She keeps them in a trunk, leather straps peeling and flaking. The trunk itself is too heavy to lift or move to another part of the house without first emptying its considerable contents, so she visits the trunk in the closed-up room, that musty attic-like (but not attic) place. What is an atelier? She must look it up. She always wanted a bay window. A view of the ocean. Why are there things that we’ve always wanted but don’t yet have? At this age? She should have those things by now. She perches on a wooden three-legged stool, painted black with red poppies—the flowers look wet so she always wipes the seat with a rag, just in case. That time when she bled on her mother-in-law-to-be’s couch, that old leaky feeling and then you stand up and there it is, as feared, blood blooming on the cushion, on the back of your skirt. The mother-in-law herself is long dead, and the fiancé/husband off with some other wife, or a third or fourth one by now. But that old humiliation endures.

People used to write and save letters, letters written in blue or black ink on onionskin paper that you folded in thirds and inserted into special airmail envelopes. Par Avion. You could almost see through that paper. You numbered the pages in the righthand corner, 1, 2, 3, so if the pages somehow ended up out of order, the recipient could make it right again. You’d read and reread the letters. The words meant something. You’d save them in a box or trunk, letters from the same correspondent tied with a special ribbon or a piece of string or old shoelace, depending. Letters from X. You could open any of these letters, over and over again. Smooth out the creases and run your fingers over sentences, and as the decades unfold, you watch the writing itself change, how things appeared to stay the same but they were not the same, even the way the words themselves were made changed over time, and gradually, as she reads, the inked shapes start to soften and fatten and glisten, like oleaginous little puddles, or else the cursive curves begin to stretch and extend into wavy lines as if the letters in each word are being pulled apart and straightened out until they become long strings, or threads.
She blows a puff of air at the page and watches the space around her fill with fine filament like bits of black spiderweb, like eye floaters in her peripheral vision, which occur because the vitreous, that jelly-like substance inside your eyes, becomes more liquid, and microscopic fibers in the vitreous tend to clump and cast tiny shadows on your retina*. Her fingers reach into the air to grasp the ends of the fibers drifting by; she pinches strands between thumb and index finger, plucks them from the air and drops them into an envelope marked Handle With Care. Everything tilts again, the floor, the world, the window high and small in the odd room—the light bending and twisting at a strange angle like a broken limb, like her forearm that time (“your arm isn’t supposed to look like that,” her sister said, right before fainting). This work takes her many hours, and this work takes the rest of the afternoon, and this afternoon swerves into dusk, and this dusk slides into darkness, into seamless nightsky, into motes of space dust, particles from ground-up chunks of asteroids, pinpricks of starlight pulsing, then fading, from view.

Susan Rodgers / Corvallis, Oregon
Nobody cares about Johnny Mascerone.

Not the dead-eyed tourists around the craps table, grumbling about the dice and swaying under the weight of their highballs. Not the girls in the backless dresses, tumbling off their bar stools and giggling about all kinds of nothing. Not the Vegas old-timers, superstitiously rubbing their costume-jewelry and pinky rings, sucking down menthols as they migrate from one end of the casino to the other. Not me, bloodshot and aching, dragging leaning towers of dirty dishes from the buffet to the kitchen.

Not even Johnny, who still sings like he did in ’65.

They’ve got a picture of him outside the club – back when he had slick, shining black hair. He tells me that before they re-routed the airplanes, these birds outside the parking lot would dive bomb his head, trying to pick at his pompadour. What are those birds called? The ones that go after shiny things?

I say I think it’s magpies but I don’t think he’s listening.

He says it used to be that the gardeners could go up into the trees where they nested and find old room keys, fountain pens, money clips, bracelets, and earrings. Real ones – made of real gold and real diamonds.

But that was before they rerouted the airplanes. Now the birds don’t nest there anymore. I’m not sure why he told me that story. I don’t think he knows why he told it either. But he cries into his Rob Roy when he thinks nobody’s looking. Sometimes before he goes on stage. Sometimes after.

He sings all the old songs nobody cares about by people who nobody remembers. The Sugarbeets, Art Gellepsie, the Walter Rivers Band. He asks for requests but nobody has any. He cracks
jokes which are funny but don’t make anybody laugh. Like the one about the gambler and the nun. Or the one about the psychiatrist and the housewife. Or the one about why Congress is like two pigs in a cornfield. He tells stories about times he was with Dino and Jack and Joey.

He says thank you, you’ve all been great. One of the best. Old Vegas would be proud. You folks are the greatest, you really are. He tells everyone that he doesn’t just tell that to everyone.

He gets all his meals for free. He complains that they don’t do the cornbread right. He tells me to tell that to the kitchen. I did once but nobody listened. I told that to Johnny but he didn’t hear me. He was arguing with one of the pit bosses about something he said to one of the guests. I didn’t really catch it.

He goes up on stage and sings about that girl he knew once by that river. The banditos who shot him and left him under the old cotton tree. About how he’s making it big, and how he wants everyone to know. How sweet it is. Go spread the word.

He was supposed to go on at six, but didn’t show.

At seven, someone says they know he’s here because they saw his car in the garage. Someone tells me to go look for him, so I start there.

He’s at C5 in the parking complex. I look inside and I think he’s just sleeping. I knock on the window but he doesn’t move. He’s just not moving at all.

I come back in and tell everyone that Johnny Mascerone is dead.

But like I said, nobody cares.

Gordon Brown / Las Vegas, Nevada
Texting from the Afterlife / Michael Steffen

A person’s digital being continues to evolve after the physical being has passed on. —Adrienne Matei

You slip my cell phone, fully charged, into the pocket of my pressed, blue serge,

before you kiss my cold forehead, and the casket lid is closed.

The somber march of mourners ends with my lowering, rain descending with me,

blooming umbrellas. If I could, My Love, I would chat with you again,

just to let you know that I am—
OMG, on my way 2 hell

MSTB (Must see to believe)
IJK (I’m Just kidding)

ILUMTP (I Love you more than pie)— and maybe you’d pick up your phone and gasp.

Luv U 2, you’d quickly type, just like old times.

Michael Steffen / Buffalo, New York
The house is an old man: creaking edges, hunched on its sides, a lingering smell of cinder block and ash when it exhales. *Ba* cared for it, the way it fostered him like the shell of a tortoise. He painted the walls red, which scared off visits from the white neighbors - they thought the inside looked like the gaping maw of an exotic animal. Scratch marks still remained, dulled with dust, from when *ba* would carve our heights every autumn. The long redwood table was still there, too heavy to move out, and I wonder how he managed to place it, much less bring it over from China. Sometimes, I think that he might’ve disappeared and become one with the turpentine, if it weren’t for the ceramic urn that sits perched on the sill like a bird. The house has become ripe with silence, infused with the *meng* of another man. Someone might still buy the house. But they won’t be able to live there.

Sarah Zhang / Manila, Philippines
Symphony / James Crews

A gift in the form of a silent morning
on this day before Thanksgiving—
no downstairs neighbor slamming doors
or flipping on the exhaust fan
in her bathroom, no dull roar waking me.
No jackhammer ripping up the street
outside my building or workmen
shouting to each other over the noise
of dump trucks full of gravel
rattling the icy window panes.
For now, only the thunk of my knife
on the cutting board as I slice
a honeycrisp apple. Only the sound
of my own measured breathing
a lover once told me was beautiful
while we were kissing. As I slide
the pieces of apple into a bowl,
put a pot of water on the stove to boil,
I know not every day can be like this,
attention paid to every small thing—
scooping coffee into the filter,
turning the faucet that sends
hot water over the knife I'm rinsing.
But before I forget, I want to say
thank you to whatever force
 gives us these moments of reprieve
like the pauses in a symphony
that cause us to listen even harder
once the music resumes.

James Crews / Shaftsbury, Vermont
We are gods who are also human. Each a divine being who reaches into murky gray dishwater, through the orange scrim of swirling grease to wash the last saucepan before bed. I don't know what to call the force that flows through our veins, makes us a conduit for flashes of insight, jolts of knowing there are no borders between us. But I know the names of neighborhoods, can read the color-coded maps of subway systems. I can insert my card in a machine, take the twenty-dollar bill it spits out and buy a lunch of cold noodles with sesame, scallions and broccoli, which I know how to spear with the tines of my plastic fork. I can sit on a bench outside the cathedral and eat while pigeons swoop between steeples, landing on the concrete at my feet, and looking up at me like a deity they can't help but disdain as they beg for crumbs.
Morning Commute / James Crews

I know I'm awake by the grace of whatever makes it so.
The bedside lamp throws its glow across the carpet,
lighting my rented room on the top floor of a building
from which I can see the red buds of sugar maples
whose wood, a friend told me, burns brightest in winter,
making a happy flame that dances in the fireplace
and laughs itself alive with each crackle and spark.
No fire for me today as I make my way to the train
with a cup of coffee warming the bare hand
that brings it to my lips so I can keep kissing this morning hello, wishing
that the silence of these sleeping row houses and rain-slick sidewalks might never end. Before going into the station, I stop
and take a photo of the sun like a smoldering coal burning through clouds banked above a block of condos whose windows have all turned to gold.

James Crews / Shaftbury, Vermont
The music is furious, it swoops through the open window, rattling the blinds, slips through the veins of flapping birch leaves, skips over the sea, then comes back and settles on my toes and around the folds of my ears. It's the jazz I like: piano, bass and drums, a trinity of grappling instruments, each with its own proclaiming role, sort of like three voices of John the Baptist, but all traveling on the same surfboard:

they profess to know where they're going, then you think they're in over their heads. When the wind blows, the ripples begin to scintillate, and one plucks his fishing line, the other whacks his paddles in heady syncopation, while the smiley one keeps ringing the tackle box with quick nervous fingers. The weather is changing, the fish are numerous but well behaved. Then, holding hands, the three jump off and dance like Jesus, Fred and Ginger.

Francis Fernandes / Frankfurt Am Main, Germany
Setting off on my walk, I’d see him, on the bench by the roundabout, looking away to Milford and the sea. A clouded-looking sort of bloke, shabby, mufflered, too warmly dressed for comfort, I’d have thought, and grumpy. When I’d overhear him, talking to anyone, he’d be moaning, about the price of cigs, dud footballers and vagaries of weather.

Anyway, you nod to people. Our conversations grew. Okay?, All right?, How’s tricks?, Cheers, boss. And he became a part of my new life, part of a re-establishing home.

He was a veteran, I later learned. Falklands. There when they sank the Belgrano.

So stop and think of that.

Maybe he looked and thought .. .. flames and screams? .. what would you think?

So if he sits there now, on his bench, looking away to Milford and the sea, well, O.K. I sit with him, most days. We talk of this and that, then I move on.

Robert Nisbet / Haverfordwest, Wales
So It Goes / Gary Wadley

Photograph / Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky
Weatherford, Texas / Robert Eastwood

Today again into my inward ear
sounds the drum of rain & smack of water
in the fender-well below me
Everything was gray Texas was gray
unending country then as if colors washed away
beyond click-clack of wipers

A black sedan strayed from its lane then
& Dad honked the Hudson’s horn
& the black car lurched back as if chastened
& we passed it

I could see a man’s mouth open
his head jerk back & forth toward a woman
her eyes scrunched beneath her dark brow
in an ugly way her teeth bare
as if to tear open her lips

But we were now beyond
& I settled into the back seat’s corner
with tottering boxes & my brother
The trailer rumbled behind us canvas flapping

Then the black car was everywhere
It hit & I felt the tire blow
& the window cave & rain thrilled my face
The man with the angry mouth passed
swift by the window eyes ablaze He looked back
frantic His whirl of wheel
& Dad struggled but the car trundled left
& still wouldn’t stop Then down into a ditch
& the trailer loosed & rammed the back
Not gray anymore but raw gas-stink & everything changed black as fear can be Mom’s face implored of us & when we’d stopped Dad reached back & pulled us over the seat & we all stood in wonder looking at the ruined car Gas dripping in puddled mud & we could hardly see the black car A rooster tail diminished to black & all we did was reach & touch each other Waiting for what or wasn’t fire

Robert Eastwood / San Ramon, California

Shopping / Ronald Pelius

Years had passed when I saw her making a decision based on date and feel beside the bread and when she spotted me and called out my name loud enough to be heard by the chips and Cheetos and said, grabbing my hand, she still thinks about our class and the assignments that were like candy, which I believe can be found on aisle six, and she asks if I remember her and I say, I do, of course I do, my mind raced trying to bring her back, but what I found was that I’m touched, right there, next to the soft rolls.

Ronald Pelius / Lafayette, Lousiana
When a student asks if he missed anything, I say: Well, after lamenting your absence and after working our way through our sorrow, we found ourselves engaged in conversation, one that changed how we understand our place in the world, where oranges were no longer oranges, where the skin of the apple became our skin and we were able to feel its bruises, the damage to its soul, and in that moment, we felt all the bruises we ever had, those that came to our skin and those that made their way to our hearts, which surprised us since you weren’t here, but as we carried on, our words turned into songs and we found ourselves as one, sensing love’s deep power making all of humanity present in its pain and beauty, and some thought that we were blessed, that we were seeing the face of God, and some of us believed the universe appeared, revealed itself when we joined hands, and our bodies shook with this deep vibrant sound coming from the center of the earth or perhaps it was from the energy of our circle that gave birth to a new language for each other and for all living things, and we knew we would never again be the same, but other than that, you didn’t miss anything.

Ronald Pelius / Lafayette, Lousiana
**Reading Li Yu** / Max Ekstrom

If I could drink with you,  
emperor of fine lyric and gross  
mismanagement—kingdom and heart—  
we'd be locked in a high tower to gaze  
over the moonlit charm of another man's  
empire and soon to be poisoned to death.  
Let's toast, knowing exactly what  
sunrise bears. No regrets  
for my consummate mentor  
as we count pavilion after pavilion,  
courts whose rose-cheeked women  
now regard us as strangers—  
how your poems seem to endure  
these little tyrannies unscathed.

**Ancient Wall** / Max Ekstrom

Through night avenue  
you sink like a ship,  
an eroding rampart  
vast and foreshortened.  
Yards-thick parapet  
once blocked vandals  
who now skit atop scooter  
and radio wave, their jets  
scraping out your sky.  
Hold the Roman in  
and bar his legions out—  
you are unmoored,  
drifting through bitumen  
shouldering cargo of grass  
and wild thyme.

Max Ekstrom / Essex Junction, Vermont
Walking Down Parkridge / Richard Solomon

to the River During the Plague

Headphones on
singing to the
Doors’
Strange Days and
The End
The trees’ very first
babygren
leaflets!
Red husks litter
the dirt road

The dead accumulate
April snow!
tiny Styrofoam balls
Forsythia so
yellow hair on fire!

The dead accumulate
I go downhill
Feel that wind
on Maple Road bridge!
Turtle logs underwater

The dead accumulate
Dead egret feathers on the
piling
only left

I return home sobbing

The dead accumulate

Richard Solomon / Ann Arbor, Michigan
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**Rain / Katherine Williams**

An Old Fashioned in one hand, fly rod
in the other, my father heads
to the lawn to cast for shadows
in the lingering afternoon. Sun
on the bottom step turns
the waiting whiskey amber
as he steps away from us to gain
his rhythm. We dance just outside
the circumference of his reach.
When it rains, the indentations
in the lawn become little lakes
beckoning bare feet. Other mothers
call their children in — mine, her longing
parched from twenty years of Texas dust,
stands at the door and waves me out
to run through the soft, submerged grass.

These days the sky is as flat
as a blank page. Shadow-less, all
becomes shadow. The air, a tight
sweater. Lavender lies down with sage.
Water tumbles down our street
bearing an oily wrapper, sticks,
the arm of a small plastic doll. Breathing
brings me back beside the respirator
at my mother's end. Everything is greyed
down as though a cosmic artist
stroked a neutral wash across our picture
of the world. Fungus blooming
on the woodpile mirrors some dark
growth within me. I remember
swimming through a storm
on Caspian Lake, surface dissolving into fog,
the sound of water hitting water,
the danger of lightning.

Katherine Williams / Washington, D.C.
Like shooting stars the margarine powder falls on snowy oleo in the bowl below.

My father returns from checking the blackout, his glasses frosted over so I can’t find his eyes.

In Utica the Savage Arms factory clangs away while tired lovers bury into familiar flesh.

You can quench a thirst, a flame, or a fear for a moment.

One week my mother squanders her ration to feed me my first taste of chocolate.

To be a child in a time of war is a metaphor for an old woman getting out of bed in the morning.

The sign on the Clinton Food Market reads Closed the day their telegram comes.

Beneath the ground where bleeding hearts used to grow carrots slowly curl their way toward the light.

Katherine Williams / Washington, D.C.
Her eyes find me long  
before I see her, the weight  
of her gaze pulling me toward  
her still presence, foreshortened  
so only her head and a circle  
of girth are visible. Slowly,  
she leaves the black mare,  
ambles toward a fence and a stranger  
on a road disappearing  
to darkness. I stroke her muzzle,  
whisper regrets for bringing  
no sugar, no slice of orange.

I know the words for need, and want,  
and hope, but have no language  
to discover what she longed for  
as she crossed the rutted pasture –  
maybe not orange but apple,  
my fingers, but with a different stroke.

I think of the first meeting  
of unfamiliar bodies, how long  
it takes to learn the touch that feeds  
our hungry places. Yet we are here,  
two old souls in this slanting light,  
offering what we can – my hesitant  
hand, her eye, taking my measure,  
not looking away.

Katherine Williams / Washington, D.C.
Watching, Listening / Rustin Larson

Mulberry leaves shine. Laertes
   barks from across
   the lake. Girls with a dragon kite.

An old man in a blue shirt and suspenders
   walks by the shoreline.
   I stay inside and watch movies.

A soldier swims to an island.
   The old man takes off his hat and waddles
   into the swimming area.

A bird cries from a palm tree.
   It's hot, but it's also a butterfly
day. I walk outside. A cicada shell

   clings to an old oak tree.
   The man has waded
   (fully clothed) neck high
into the silvery water.

       Rustin Larson / Fairfield, Iowa
I can't stop the hand of the angel
who holds the scythe,
the later summer days in September,
the hive of bees droning
in the locust's trunk,
the shadow of the stairway
creating a stairway into the earth.

My wife has thick, long brown hair
to her shoulders. (I always liked
her hair long.) She smiles
at our sleeping baby. She holds
our 3 year old in her lap.

Whatever we were in time's slow
movement, and in time's
quick passage, I am sorry sparrow.
I return you to your branches. I forgive
and befriend myself and sit inside
where it is quiet and wind
blows the candles shut.

Rustin Larson / Fairfield, Iowa
Friendly Reminder / Kristin Fouquet

Photograph / Kristin Fouquet / New Orleans, Louisianna
Birds don’t sing in rain. Nor do I.
In this strange time of quarantine, days bleed
together, weeks smear. The grass has grown high
enough to cut. Dandelions bloom, seed,
scatter. Pink and white bleeding hearts dangle
on their curved green stems. Ferns burst from their whorled
roots, leave orange smut when I cut and angle
them into homemade bouquets, curled like coiled
springs. I am making them for my friend’s grave,
for the faded graves of her in-laws. Oaklawn
Cemetery, filled with old trees, once gave
me a sense of peace. Yet my friend is gone.
I remember that every day. No show
of tears or flowers will change what I know.

Leslie Schultz / Northfield, Minnesota
Through Something Radiant
in Our Lives We Dream of Paradise / Beth Paulson
after Galway Kinnell

In the morning a few clouds hovered
over the red mountain when I was walking
where the aspen trees grow.
Bird song drifted down from the firs,
in their needles a scuffle, a scurry
as wind began to shift the heart-shaped
leaves tossed all-trembling.
Or was it water moving pebbles
in the shallow creek?

I kept awhile beneath them,
gilded, erotic, a painting by Klimpt
hung on thin boughs, slender trunks, supple
as the limbs of the young girl
I was once.
No studio here nor gallery, myself the lone patron,
I stepped closer where speckled light
entered its gnarled eye, touched
its papery bandages.

Then the wind blew hard and a hundred bright coins
spilled out from the purse of the blue sky.
I knelt down in the wet fragrant earth
and gathered up a handful of gold.

Beth Paulson / Ouray, Colorado
She said every yard should have roses so that
January after we settled in, I dug up a sunny corner
of the front lawn out of the shadow of
our tall house in Pasadena. Bare-rooted,
on their thorny stock, I planted them, names
wired on—deep red *Mr. Lincoln*, pink *Helen Trauble*,
pale orange *Peace*, white *Iceberg*. I watered
them hot summers, pruned them each winter
so they thrived, bloomed three times a year
for fifteen years. How all our rooms held
their scent and vibrance. And each time
she visited I cut a few for Mother to take home.

She probably placed them in this fat glass vase,
sketched at the kitchen table the small still life,

later painted them in oils on her back porch.
At Christmas when she gave us the framed painting,
their blooms were full opened, leaves new-green.
I wonder if the new owners cut and tend them.

All these years later the sun still casts light on
her small bouquet. I listen as they sip the silver water.

Beth Paulson / Ouray, Colorado
Before the Bus Stops / Ralph Earle

You will see a man
tearing corrugated iron,
you will see children
you wish you had not seen,
you will see colorful flags
trambled in mud.

This travel is harder
than you imagined.
Behind your shoulder
sunlight slices the window.

Before the bus stops, ask
the man with the bad back
about the news from home.
Maybe he will say It is fine,
maybe There is no home.

Offer to share your dinner.
Ask about the people
he left behind.
Maybe you remind him
of someone he knows.
You and he are traveling
in the same great sorrow.

Ralph Earle / Cary, North Carolina
Shadowlands – St. Petersburg, Russia / Diane Martin

Photograph / Diane Martin / Bangor, Maine
An Arkansas farm woman, Boby loves
Sunday drives after church to see what folks
are planting and to tidy up the family graves.

In spring, when the fields are ripe
with fresh manure, Boby takes a deep breath.
“Smells like money,” she says.

Honesty is her virtue. She told me once,
“You’re not exactly what we hoped for.”

No corsages for Boby. “Give me something
I can put in the ground.” Eight flowerbeds
pay tribute with lilies, gardenias, azaleas, roses.

She made ten Sunbonnet Sue quilts
for granddaughters and great-grands,
pieced from a lifetime of scraps. “They look
pretty good from the road,” she says.

Boby’s mother lived on the next farm over,
her uncles just beyond, ripples of family
for a thousand acres, bickering, loving,
gossiping, mourning.

Boby buried two husbands. The first was hers
for a quarter century. The second just four years—
“a bonus,” she said after forty years a widow.
She spends evenings shelling wash tubs of pecans—300 pounds some years—fingers raw and stained dark as the delta loam.

Always a stray underfoot—cat or mongrel dog. They show up on her doorstep. Boby shrugs and takes them in. The cats are all called Katie.

She played piano at church as the congregation dwindled to a half-dozen stooped, gray forms. She never cared much for the preacher.

The year she turned 90, Boby announced she would give up driving October 1st. Took us awhile to figure out her birthday was the 6th, and she knew she’d flunk the eye test.

She killed a rabid skunk in a neighbor’s driveway with the shotgun she keeps under the bed.
“Sorry I can’t stay to visit,” Boby told her.
“I’ve got a cake in the oven.”

Now 96, Boby lives alone, as bent, stubborn and fragile as wisteria, on the homestead bought a century ago.
“They’ll carry me away from here in a pine box.”

Sarah Russell / State College, Pennsylvania
Yes, his name is Jim, and he speaks in plain flat Midwestern. No, he wouldn’t know an affectation if one hit him like a truckload of tuxedos. He’s a regular guy: humble, loyal, stable as a railroad tie.

It’s just that he loves the tunes he hears inside certain strings of syllables, like “Maurizio.” Maybe it all began when he was 9, and Dad, grinning in his Ford said, “Let’s gap that damn Lamborghini!”

Lamborghini; Lamborghini…

Maybe it was when an announcer said, “and now, Placido Domingo, Jose’ Carreras and Luciano Pavarotti” or the time a waiter recited offerings like “fettuccini alfredo ragu alla bolognese, arancini, saltimbocca.”

He wouldn’t be caught dead in Gucci slip-ons hates that name, but wears his father’s old fedora just so he can say it, and wouldn’t it be fun if he could tell a dealer he wants to trade in his old Dodge for a Maserati or Ferrari?

Jim cannot get enough of words that chime like “…Andrea Bocelli, live from Duomo di Milano.” He wishes he could take music lessons and learn to play a piece by Tomaso Giovanni Albinoni or hear Rigoletto at la Scala.

So, play along if he stops by. Call him Maurizio. Maurizio Marco Benson, just a regular guy born and raised right here in Minot.

Raymond Byrnes / Leesburg, Virginia
The home inspector says it has good bones but some things need attention soon, like the HVAC system, replaced at least 20 years ago and breathing now with intermittent gasps.

Like a doctor striking arthritic knees with his little rubber hammer, he flips each wall and appliance switch, documenting room to room any nerve endings that no longer jump to life.

He examines the vascular system before and after turning on the flow, noting slight seepage at junctions of main arteries, then finds the under-sink disposal in need of some new teeth.

He says the recent roof is sound, so liver spots on the ceiling may be harmless marks of age, but windows painted in place, eyes that cannot blink, must be cut free and made to move easily as new.

Raymond Byrnes / Leesburg, Virginia
Mopeds – Sorrento / Joe Ferrari

Photograph / Joe Ferrari / Redford, Michigan

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We are a nomadic species, built to leave home regularly for quests of all kinds.

Helen Fisher, biological anthropologist

In this enforced moment of quiet, commerce stilled, coyotes on city streets, swans in the canals of Venice, goats in the gardens of Wales freed from an unsteady universe return home.

Restricted to our interiors, separated from loved ones, there is still the star magnolia, the sweet juice of an orange a great book finally read: the shrunken world enlarged by the shadow of time on fire.

In this enforced moment of quiet, nomads in a bounded world may return home to Ithaca, floating on the near horizon, blue green in the distance, its high peak rising from the sea guiding you home to all who recognize you.

Your trials behind you, before you a landfall of longed-for return, your imprint still on your marriage bed, your chair by a whitewashed window open to wisteria, Cephalonia beyond, breeze drifting over an old desk where paper awaits your pen; above the Ionian, spread on a weathered table generous with children, good friends, lamb clothed in rosemary, loaves from a village oven, wildflowers in an earthen pitcher, tomatoes in green-gold oil of olives from ancient trees. Bold reds, yeasty retsina in glasses crimson- and honey-hued remain raised high.

Lily Jarman-Reisch /Baltimore, Maryland
**Diagnostics / Joe Mills**

At some point, the body simply doesn’t move as supplely or as solidly. It happens bit by bit, so you may not even notice and then at a concert, or wedding reception or just someone’s living room, it’s as if you’re reaching for something and think “Huh, I thought that was closer,” but it’s just as far away the next time and the next, until you realize, “Oh, that’s where we are now,” and you adjust. That’s why doctor’s offices should play Ray Charles, and along with the scales and blood pressure cuffs, there should be dancing shoes and a staff trained in swing. “Here,” they would say, “Put these on. Now rock step. Good. Now spin. Good. Again please.”

Joe Mills / Winston-Salem, North Carolina

**This Was It And It Was / Frank Stehno**

... all of a sudden it was the night of the end and we knew it and had to play our parts like running against the cold current of a stream in the dusk of summer or the fog of love and knowing that soon it would be over soon we would be caught where we most feared being caught and I asked you to stay and you stayed even though you knew … you felt … you sensed that this was it and it was and she came home early and that was it that was it and we all fell to some insane inside darkness deep darkness crying unlike anything any of us had ever known before this … was … inevitable…

Frank Stehno / Herriman, Utah
The Little Tangle / Jeanie Tomasko

Each day the earth spins, twice a day
the sea rises, most everywhere

there is a bit of wind, or more:
a lace-window sky, a steep rise

upon which totter a few crooked houses
painted in the colors of sea-glass.

Given the right amount of faith
the tiny tangle of worry subsides.

There are little mirrors in the world
I cannot explain.

So, memorize this now:
the light as soft as rabbit fur,

the early morning mourning dove,
the multitude of lovely shadows.

Thinking of you I open a jar of wings.

Jeanie Tomasko / Middleton, Wisconsin
This morning I sit down to write.  
I have my coffee, steaming, and a cat 
sleeping, and the buses go by like always.  
A small wind blows. Squirrels and 
cardinals have eaten almost all 
of the fruit on the dwarf crabapple.  
It is December. It might snow today.  
And you are sleeping somewhere 
near the sea. There is a foghorn 
in the air. It will make sure that nothing 
bad will ever happen. And while 
it does that, here are the words 
for how when you don’t quite hear 
what I say on the phone, 
you say, what? in that little way you do 
like you want to put your ear as close to me 
as close, so I can tell you again.

Jeanie Tomasko / Middleton, Wisconsin
The Search / Laurence Thomas

Digital Collage / Laurence Thomas / Ypsilanti, Michigan
Dark Cars Moving / Jeremiah Durick

It begins with them moving up the street. It’s dark, it’s always dark when they come, the middle of the night, earliest mornings the part of the night you only see if you are an insomniac, are ill, or waiting for your last child to come home this late. They come up the street in their dark car, tinted windows and all, an old car, years, decades, could be centuries old. They move slowly, seem to pause in front of a house now and then, but continue, till they stop in front of one house, a house across the street, a few doors up. The car stops and waits for a bit. You picture them in the car getting the story straight and carefully checking their list. It’s a few minutes before they get out, the four of them, dark quiet figures walk up to the door, no locks stop them, no lights go on. You picture them going room to room, always certain, never stumbling, they finish their work, then leave. The car waits a few moments before starting, perhaps they are checking off the names, filling in the blanks, proper bookkeeping is essential, even for them. Done for the night they drive off. It will be dark again when they come for you, it’s always that dark when they come.

Jeremiah Durick / South Burlington, Vermont
Someone forgot to tell the robins that the world was ending. They keep chasing each other through the boxwood, moving low across the mulch in a swift game of let’s make some more of us.

The squirrels are spiraling up the oak as if everything hadn’t changed, oblivious to empty streets with cars idled in driveways and window blinds shut. The city said everyone come out at six

and say hi from your porch, and to let them know please if anyone goes missing. Now we sleep in separate rooms and don’t dare hug. We did find a way to sort of nuzzle back-to-back. I’ve decided he is a good husband.

Caroline Maun / Detroit, Michigan
Tour / Caroline Maun

If I was showing you the house, I’d be sure to mention the century cactus, no longer there, that sent up its flagpole-sized stamen before collapsing under its own weight. I’d point out the royal palm that started to fruit in 1973, and how we had to axe open the hulls on a stump. We’d walk to the dock where you could watch schooling fish dart between mangrove roots. I’d tell you about how, in winter, the tides would go so low you could walk across the oyster beds in your worst pair of tennis shoes, saved just for that. I’d say that I sat in the center of the yard, where the Bermuda grass was thickest, and played with the dog that didn’t live a year. I’d let you know that there were some afternoons the sky would turn from cerulean to purple and how the loblolly pine needles would get vivid green in surreal contrast. The sky before a storm would turn everything sepia as the pressure fell. How we would find rhinoceros beetles making their slow way up the sandy drive, and how the punk tree bark would have made good paper if you’d needed some. How I knew those trees. The side lot had an oleander that my dad removed because of the risk, since I made mud pies, baked, and ate them. How that same shady side lot was full of Boston fern, how I sat cross-legged in that glade among the snakes.

Caroline Maun / Detroit, Michigan
Between Us / Brian Kates

thoughts balance on air
breath in the void
carried off by the wind
before words can take shape
ghosts on the threshold

Brian Kates / Pomona, New York

The Better Part of the Man / Brian Kates

The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost.”--Henry David Thoreau, “Walden”

We rode our bikes to school each day
past a long-abandoned family grave plot
where cattle grazed amid time-etched tombstones over forgotten farmers who cleared trees and pried up rocks for a place their bones could wait ‘til Judgment Day.

One of us would break out in song:
The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,
the worms play pinochle on your snout....

Yes! Dandelions, alfalfa, clover. Worms’ work. The dead bloom in their disguise. Let me when my time comes be a corpse

who welcomes spring. I’ll make a banquet in the mouth of the clueless, cud-chewing cow who feeds my grandchildren’s children.

The resurrection and the life.

Brian Kates / Pomona, New York
At the Pool / Carol Grametbauer

Summer afternoons, the concrete beach
between water and chain link fence
a mosaic of wet footprints and beach bags,
my friends and I spread our towels,
pulled out the Coppertone, and oiled ourselves
like Thanksgiving turkeys,
Bobby Darin’s tinny voice blaring
from a plastic-case transistor radio.
This the blood and bones
of the three months linking
May to September:
the thump of diving boards,
watery explosion of cannonballs
and failed jackknifes,
bathing-capped and crew-cut heads
bobbing in the water. Boys snapping girls
with towels; shrieks and giggles,
punctuated by the lifeguard’s whistle.
The mid-day sun blazing down on us
as if it would always be high overhead
in a cloudless sky,
and we would always be fourteen,
oiled and laughing,
crawl-stroking our way toward something
our outstretched arms could not yet reach.

Carol Grametbauer / Kingston, Tennessee
In July’s mineral light, I start early, wanting to soak in the essence of summer air—scent of straw and soft earth and sunlight glistening on every leaf, every bud about to flower in another shade of yellow.

I shut my eyes, wanting my lungs to be the rinsed breath of last night’s rain—wanting to be anointed by a calculus of weather that holds me tenderly without saying a word.

M.J. Iuppa / Hamlin, New York
In my dream you stoop over the stove, 
a priestess before an altar, and pluck a morel 
from a necklace around your neck, 
drop it into the pot of stew 
you made for me the night before you died.

In your dream I sit at the kitchen table 
where I shave long strips of bark 
from a sassafras branch to find the heart 
of something at once savory, vegetal, and sweet 
you taught me to look for every spring.

You cook throughout the night. 
I whittle one branch after another until sunrise. 
You never speak. I never answer. 
Neither of us flinches when the alarm sounds.

I know that wherever it is that you exist now 
I do not yet exist.

And you?

You know that once my feet hit the floor 
when I wake you will be like the earthy fragrance 
rising from the stove:

everywhere 
and yet nowhere to be seen.

Kip Knott / Delaware, Ohio
Elegy Written for an Elegy / Kip Knott

It is a dying art
born of a desperate desire
for the living to prove to everyone
who shares the emptiness with them

that they are still alive.
And yet, every word drips with dark
honey attracting mourners
the way a corpse flower draws pollinators in

once in a blue moon
when it blooms. Its flower overwhelms
the whole plant for a time
so that its seed might be spread

like a virus that will wait,
dormant in the heart of the earth,
for a new loss to compel it to grow,
to bloom again, to fill a collective emptiness

with a pungent and overpowering sweetness.

Kip Knott / Delaware, Ohio
It is dark and I still hear the tractor
drag across the fields, tearing at the dirt
ripping free the remaining roots of corn
before planting seeds of the crops to come
breath forms a cloud before his chapped lips
it is not quite spring, winter not yet eclipsed

the spring moon, just a slice, partially eclipsed
just glistening in the sky like a lower lip
the dust biting his cheeks scratching the dirt
where we lay beneath the whispering corn
and there was passion, so much more to come
and the sound of a lonely tractor

in the distance, the slow hum of a tractor
and a corn picker, chopping, the sound comes
closer and we pick up and run through corn
our toes dig deep in the soil, the dirt
our heads hanging low enough to be eclipsed
by the blond leaves of ripe corn, lips

your lips, make every day so ripe, your lips
like fresh melon, or pineapple, never to eclipsed
we run to the orchard, safe from the tractor
but we miss the feel of flesh in the soil, smell of dirt
the whispers of the husks and the sweet smell of corn
an escape, no future, nothing ever to come

of it just sweet sex and whispering corn nothing to come
of it. It should all be left in the field of corn
but it felt so good just lying in the dirt
in the dark with the moon eclipsed
kissing those huge dark sweet lips
in the corn hearing in the distance a tractor
approach, and the sense of danger from the tractor but the touch of you, your hand, your lips in the field of whispering corn our bodies eclipsed by golden corn husks waiting for night to come as the moon rises, and steam rises from the dirt

the moan of the tractor eclipsed by smell of the dirt and the corn come ripe, come kiss my lips.

T. A. Cullen / Madison, Wisconsin

**Genuflect** / T. A. Cullen

As we would file into church, we dip our fingers in the holy water. Cross ourselves – take our finger’s wet tip to our forehead, to our heart, across from shoulder to shoulder. A gesture of reverence. One done in humility. Sometimes before a free throw, a pure prayer, to overcome our fragility before taking a shot. – In church when we arrive at a pew, we genuflect, take a knee. Cross ourselves again express our faith, veneration, and respect.

To take a knee, is a peaceful human act offered with grace, reverence and tact.

T. A. Cullen / Madison, Wisconsin
Upon Regret / Richard Luftig

It is all now
a lake-tossed
boat with both
oars broken,
sweetened by snow
are flutes that play
old tunes, now new
again, upon the water.

or the worst
of winter that hides
behind a ghost-
slice of moon.

These skies remain
low with even still
lower clouds
that only reveal
walk past houses
and skeleton barns
to the end
of town, out

themselves in this
gray season of ice
and regret. Perhaps
at our age there seems
to bare-boned fields
where last autumn’s
forgotten seeds just
bide their time to flare

again no reason
to live or even breathe.
But just outside
this house, this life,
again into flowers,
where crows, jays
and sparrows silently
rehearse songs

transparent as moonlight,
lies grass stubborn
under a foot
of Iowa freeze.
under their breaths,
and where some of us
who have forgotten
how to sing need

And not that far
from here, streams
conjoin to make
a river and clouds
only remember
when this pasture,
not too long ago
was full of birds.

Richard Luftig / Pamona, California
Escape / Lisa Yount

Photo Collage / Lisa Yount / El Cerrito, California
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I'm Wise / Janiya D.

a weary soldier howls like a prayer rug
my imagination lifts the burden like wise children

my imagination whispers no name at all
wise children howl and lift the burdens

wise children follow their paths and
dreams like me

I howl     I lift the burden     I'm wise
**Wind / Fred G.**

As the wind touches my face,  
I feel the needles. My horse  
strides like a gazelle, but has the push  
of a lion hunting for its prey.

With every breath I take in,  
every cell in my body moves with me.  
Breathes with me. Feeling the breeze  
hit my face, heading into war  
is the sickest feeling before  
taking that last step  
over the edge.

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**A New Dawn / by Trinity B.**

The tree was a lonely tiger—  
the grass glistened like stars at night.  

The sky, a blazing campfire—  
the sun fell like a king after time.

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**Welcome Home / Stanley S.**

I love you like the gravity pulling you down.  
It's hard to stand up.  
It's like hugging the earth. It's like  
sticking to the ground.

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**My Dreams Don't Die / La'Breya C.**

They lock in like a washing machine in my heart.
Southern Round – Iceland / Keith Moul

Photograph / Keith Moul / Port Angeles, Washington