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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# Table of Contents

*Editor’s Note for Autumn 2021* ................................................................. 5  
*Old Folks* / Joanne Durham ................................................................. 6  
*Christmas Tree Recycled in the Dunes* / Joanne Durham ...................... 6  
*Bush On Fire* / Leslie Moore ................................................................. 7  
*Dentist Appointment* / Claire Rubin ..................................................... 8  
*It Is Never So Simple* / Claire Rubin ..................................................... 9  
*For Helen Frankenthaler* / K. Carlton Johnson .................................... 10  
*Evening in Late Summer* / K. Carlton Johnson ..................................... 11  
*Black and White 2* / Weining Wang ..................................................... 12  
2021 George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest ................................ 13  
*Elemental* / Claire Bateman ................................................................. 14  
*Gourmand* / Karen Tardiff ................................................................. 17  
*Frequency* / Shelly Jones ................................................................. 19  
*Sunday Noir* / Ron Czerwien ............................................................... 24  
*The Old Masonic Cemetery* / Janice Rubin .......................................... 24  
*Sonny Liston Looking Vulnerable* / Guinotte Wise ............................... 25  
*The Things They Left Behind* / Terry Allen ......................................... 26  
*10* / Robert L. Penick ................................................................. 27  
*Thinking of Instinct* / Abriana Jette .................................................... 28  
*Frequent Flyer* / Michael Caylo-Baradi ............................................. 29  
*Ceasefire in Gaza* / Michael Caylo-Baradi ......................................... 30  
*Face on the Street* / Gary Wadley ...................................................... 31  
*Letters* / David Chorton ................................................................. 32  
*The Beyond* / Daniel Hudon ............................................................... 33  
*Is This How Meeting God Will Be?* / Kevin Shyne ................................. 34  
*Autumn Speculations* / Robert Lowes ................................................ 35  
*Ferris Wheel and Statue, Tuilleries, Paris* / Roger Camp ....................... 36  
*Picking Blackberries* / Jack Ridl ....................................................... 37  
*Dandelion* / Nancy Carol Moody ....................................................... 38  
*Gospel* / Richard Solomon ............................................................... 39  
*Nest* / Richard Solomon ................................................................. 40  
*Western Illinois* / James Robinson ..................................................... 41  
*When the Baby Wakes* / Garrett Stack ............................................. 42  
*Obol for the Boatman* / Garrett Stack .............................................. 43  
*Garden Dance* / Gary Wadley ......................................................... 44  
*Sonnet for 2020* / Colleen Alles ......................................................... 45
A Mercy / Colleen Alles.................................................................46
Grief is an Item on a Menu I Don’t Want / Colleen Alles........47
My Caretaker / John Grey.............................................................48
Set Fire to the Moon / John Tustin.............................................49
La Luna / Lisa Yount.................................................................50
As Always / Laura Ann Reed.....................................................51
The Owlet and the Turtle / Greg Sendi.....................................52
Sharp / Ranney Campbell..........................................................53
Girl in the Field / Rana Williams.............................................54
The Birth of the Artist / Ruth Bardon......................................55
Sunset Storm / Christopher Woods.........................................56
My Garden is a Thesaurus for Sadness / Emily Franklin........57
Thrifting for Clothes My Friend and I Find Feelings / Emily
Franklin......................................................................................59
The Dead / Marjorie Stelmach..................................................60
The Naiad / David Harris...........................................................61
Like Falling Over / D.S. Maolalai..............................................62
All Rainbows / D.S. Maolalai....................................................63
A Master Craftsman Lives in the City in a House He Didn’t Build / Nan Jackson.................................64
Gull Lake / Nan Jackson..............................................................65
A Bumbling Team / Kimberly Shyu........................................66
INSIDE/OUT LITERARY ARTS PROJECT FEATURE..............67
I Am / Meadow May.................................................................68
I Am / Natalia Whitley...............................................................68
I Am / Archeea Thoms...............................................................69
I Am / Antonye Arnold...............................................................69
Black Girl / Erynn Miller...........................................................70
Haiku / Elle Hubbard...............................................................71
Dear Poetry / De’ja Jones...........................................................71
If Anxiety Were a Person / Christian Hooper........................72
Ode to Target / Gabrielle Pryor...............................................73
Pretty Girls Don’t Cry / Azia Harris........................................74
This Republic is Doomed! / Anthony Acri................................75
Editor’s Note for Autumn 2021

The autumn issue of 3rd Wednesday means fiction in the form of our annual George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest, judged this year by Elizabeth Kerlikowske. You’ll find her note on judging the contest and the three winners of this year’s contest beginning on page 12. In addition to the three winning stories, Elizabeth cited two additional stories for special merit. We are happy to say that both of those stories are slated for publication in a later issue of the magazine.

We lead off the poetry in this issue with two poems by Joanne Durham of Kure Beach, North Carolina. The first of those, Old Folks, is the winner (by the narrowest of margins) of this issue’s 50/50 poetry contest. Joanne receives a check for half the entry fees and a one year subscription to 3rd Wednesday. Close contenders were Obol for the Boatman by Garrett Stack and Dandelion by Nancy Carol Moody.

Our issue closes out with a fine suite of student poems from Inside/Out, curated, as always by Peter Marcus. Peter brings us poems ten Detroit area 5th and 10th grade poets.

Big changes are coming to 3rd Wednesday. Beginning with the winter issue, work will be published on our website at the time it is selected. This means you can share your success with friends, family and on your social media right away. Be sure to visit thirdwednesdaymagazine.org and follow by email to receive updates as work is published.
Old Folks / Joanne Durham

weather things. We hold our tongues
when young women bemoan their first
gray hairs, we doze off to dream
mid-afternoons on worn, cushioned couches,
then lie with unclosed eyes through the deep holes
of night. There’s a haze that hovers above
dates, faces, places – when was the summer
of the beach house in Ocracoke? Which snow rose
over the sills? Memory no longer chirrs
like an eager bird easing into morning wings, sipping
on rain that drips from every rafter. Time stretches
like an accordion, stores lullabies, love songs
and funeral chords between its folds. We are
thirsty still, but drink from a wider bowl.

Christmas Tree Recycled in the Dunes / Joanne Durham

Stripped of angels
that haloed its crown, the tree
lies bare and awkward, shaved trunk
shoved into sparse remains of a dune lost
to last year’s storms. Tourists laugh at its odd,
prone position, but soon its parched arms catch
swirls of sand and settle them gently on the rising
slope. The tree blends with beach elder and sea
oats, mingles with dwarf fountain grass
to become the dune’s spine, its fragile
hold on integrity. Grown from the
deep emerald energy of the forest
the tree shines as the graced
do, even now re-imagined.

Joanne Durham / Kure Beach, North Carolina
Bush On Fire / Leslie Moore

The red-twig dogwood crackles crimson on this March morning, spirited, like the snow-fed stream below.

I almost miss the flock of birds gorging on berries in its midst, each masked like a bandit.

Bohemian Waxwings: *Bombycilla garrulus*: silk-tailed, talkative, circumpolar nomads in search of fruit.

These cheeky vagabonds pay me no mind, so busy feasting, drunk on plunder.

I have time to admire their lush plumage, belly to breast to crested crown, buff grey to sepia to cinnamon.

The air fills with trills. My heart rings at this manifest thing—a bush aflame with waxy wings.

Leslie Moore / Belfast, Maine
Dentist Appointment / Claire Rubin

What does your son do? Myra asks, leaning into my wide open mouth with its gold crowns and silver fillings. I realize I forgot to floss. I picture his torqued and twisted body, his crystal-blue eyes pleading, his life a long cringe. But by god there is a smile, strained, yes, forced, yes, but still there is a smile. And I see the love in his heart as wide as Copper Canyon despite everything.

he is disabled

The words hard to form with a metal something or other shooting freezing water on my gums and a noisy plastic sucking tube that sounds like the last gasps of a stranded seal.

I’m so sorry

that’s OK

But of course it isn’t.

It isn’t at all OK.

None of this is OK.

Not this super chipper hygienist scraping my teeth with a medieval torture instrument, chattering about her son, the author of We Manifest Our Minds.

have you read it?

Not the sharp pain when her instrument slips and I taste blood, which is sucked out by the spit sucker, as though it never happened.

Not the bill for four hundred fifty dollars.

Not another appointment to replace a filling that fell out while eating a bag of caramels, piles of plastic wrappers scattered on the floor.
And certainly not my son.
Especially not my son.
Myra hands me an appointment card
for next Tuesday. I will cancel it.
That’s something I can do.

Claire Rubin / Oakland, California

*It Is Never So Simple* / Claire Rubin

Because the Ceanothus is failing. Leaves drooping, frail branches breaking, roots thinning, pulling away from the earth. I send photos to an arborist who says these shrubs don’t last that long. Ours has been growing against the side of our house for over twenty years. Blue lace flowers bring solace in spring, drawing pale green swallowtails. Last week the gardener eased the dried bush from the ground, chopped it up and threw it in his truck. Is it really so simple?

Because I do not have the gift of happiness. My happiness is wrestled and worked and worried, not easy like a dove settling on her nest or lilac buds opening in the lift of early light. The time we have too short to master love, to have compassion be our first response. Judgment is quicker, sharp and cutting like a sword, maiming and mauling and mangling, and my love I am sorry but I am tired of myself, of my menacing mind with its thinning roots. I am ready to be loaded into a truck, tossed in a coffin, covered with crusty earth.

Because there must be a string. That will ring
a bell in case I change my mind, in case I miss
the first pale crocus pushing through sooty snow,
the grace of spiders spinning hope, the slouch
and slow of summer’s pace. In case I miss
our almost love and want to let you
warm this soulless place, lying heavy in my heart.

Claire Rubin / Oakland, California

For Helen Frankenthaler / K. Carlton Johnson

I have brought Helen Frankenthaler
into the house, her whole length
enclosed in glass. She stands rigid
as I sleep, while blues saturate
in my dreams; small slathers
of pink rotate in the sun.

We enjoy the presence of the other.

When you get to sixty, if you sit
down to write of love’s disaster,
you need only your eyes and heart,
Dear Reader, to be made sweet.

K. Carlton Johnson / Lake Linden, Michigan
It happens in summer sometimes, stillness where the clouds like bread for ducks have been thrown on the sky; perfection suspending us in the universal pond where small fish watch a humid moon, riding in the clouds, rising in thunderheads to the west.

Trees are breath between bodies pressing hollow bark, dark brown and gray as an owl. We have forgotten, though, winter ice or prison rains that ruin seed. We have to travel far to see a painting, and wonder if outrage is still appropriate for slaughter, as we click our tongues at a slit earth, root packed, headed for darkness.

K. Carlton Johnson / Lake Linden, Michigan
Black and White 2 / Weining Wang

Sculpture, Weining Wang / Beijing, China
2021 George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest

Notes from the contest judge:

I read the stories in batches of three or four. That way I could weigh them against each other, and by the next day, see which stayed with me. One of the winning stories was there almost from the beginning and became a sort of yardstick. Several pieces I eliminated had fantastic voices that I could have read all day but the plots were flimsy, and fiction needs some plot, even if implied.

The winning pieces are very different kinds of writing and represent a good cross-section of the entries: first or faux-first person narratives, allegories, and fiction incorporating historical figures. I value fresh ideas. The winning pieces compelled me to continue reading them after the first paragraph and not just rush to the end to see how problems were resolved. Rest assured, I read every word of every story. Thanks to all the writers who provided such interesting insights into human nature, and especially those of you who used food as metaphors!

— Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Note from the editor:

In our contests we don’t award stories 1st, 2nd or 3rd places. No gold, silver and bronze. The three winning stories are each contest winners and each will receive the top prize of $100. This year’s selected winners are Elemental by Claire Bateman, Gourmand by Karen Tardiff and Frequency by Shelly Jones. We congratulate these winners and thank all of the 128 entrants for their support.

Elizabeth has cited two additional writers for honorable mention; Sinclair Buckstaff for Salade Nicoise, 2019 and Gary Wadley for Banana Wars. Unfortunately we don’t have room to print them in this issue, but both writers have given permission for us to publish them in a future issue of 3rd Wednesday.

— David Jibson, Editor
Not long after texting surpassed cell phone and email conversations, we realized it wasn’t the content of the messages which mattered, but only the small bright tone confirming that we were still embedded in the social network.

What a relief! Now nobody had to waste time keying in actual words. Instead, empty bubbles proliferated, and everyone experienced relief as inflammation of the thumb’s long-abused flexor muscle began to subside.

The logic of this change was soon applied to conversations as well. We jettisoned social rituals—“How was your day?,” remarks about the weather, etc. And even beyond these niceties, the more we thought about it, the more unnecessary almost all our daily utterances had been. Why exhaust ourselves spinning out all that conversational filigree when we could simply say, “Present,” which in just two syllables covered all the realms of discourse, negotiation, intrigue, rhetorical display, and verbal clutter by acknowledging Existence Itself?

Thus, except for in rare logistically complex situations, we intoned only “Present” back and forth to each other in pairs and clusters and groups all day long, and everything moved along so smoothly that soon even that one word was deemed excessive, replaced with a simple, fluid hand gesture as the city filled up with silence except for the “talk” zones designated for education and child-rearing where the young toiled at their studies in hopes of an early graduation into adult muteness.

Advertisers hired actors to merely point to their products on TV. Radios broadcast a velvety spreading hush. Even politicians refrained from oration—in town halls and rotary club meetings, they performed the gesture, their audiences did the same, and then the aides rolled out the refreshment trays, a blessedly early evening for all. And consider the class reunion—didn’t everyone already
know that destinies rise and plummet except for when they’re sliding and skidding in ambiguous lateral motions? Because the details are always more or less interchangeable, there was no need to recount them; how much more gratifying the choreography of hands and the feast of faces. For this, full attendance was guaranteed.

In the absence of human babble, we began to notice sounds rising over the threshold of awareness so unobtrusively it was as though they’d always been there, which, was, in fact, the case—all along, everything had been murmuring, whispering, lilting, sibilating, crooning, humming. Spoons chattered continuously in the dishwasher; behind the refrigerator door, eggs in their carton waxed loquacious; a steady flow of hissing colloquy rose from the stack of mail on the low glass side table in the hallway; in the backyard shed, shears emitted a quiet buzzing commentary; and in the yard, weeds and grasses together exuded an almost subsonic reverberation. Some of the sounds were pleasant to hear, others irritating or even painful. The salt shaker’s speech tingled like a multitude of tiny chimes and the garden hose gurgled melodiously, but the paper birch tree seemed to suffer from a raw, perpetually scratchy throat.

What could the world be saying? Frantic to know, we commissioned a team of scientists and linguists to create an omni-translational device. Anticipation remained high during those excruciating decades of calculation and assembly; surely the result would prove to be nothing other than the secret of the universe—who would expect less from the combined utterances of everything that had been constructed by our ingenuity and everything that had arisen so variously and spontaneously from the primal elements of creation?

At last, the day arrived. Holding our breath together in great crowds, we watched on enormous public screens as the device finally ejected its printout, displaying just one small word. What the world had been uttering, each entity in its own language, turned out to be merely “Present.”
Our collective disappointment was almost palpable. We’d so counted on everything to be ontologically different from ourselves! We’d so needed to be told something we hadn’t already known! We’d craved—and paid for!—a revelation, but what had we gotten? Only old news!

Following disappointment came anger, swift and retaliatory. Some people growled and made threatening gestures toward images of the translational device and the research team; others pointed to the borders, opting for a sentence of exile. But most experienced a sudden aversion to, and distrust of, the ritual hand gesture and the word it signified. What was “present,” anyway? What did it even mean?

Everywhere, people spontaneously began to dismantle that word, breaking it open to see what was inside. Lo and behold, there was the entire language, crushed and massively compacted, but still usable after a long, awkward period of airing, untangling, and sorting, despite an initial shyness on our part as we filled our mouths with actual words and sent them out into the air: Hello, How are you? My name is ___, and then phrases and sentences of increasing length and complexity until from our drawers and closet shelves came the cell phones lighting up with imperatives, conjunctions, interjections, gerund and participial clauses, and so on, even the hesitation forms, such as uh and um and er, which we now cherish like star rubies and cultured pearls.

Claire Bateman / Greenville, South Carolina
I’ll go days without eating. My mind forgets to tell me, my stomach doesn’t talk. Only when I bend down to pick up a pen or a stray notecard and my head spins do I begin to count backwards, tick off the hours, question if I slept before or after I ate last.

Eating takes too long. I waited 6 days for the peppers to dry in the window until they left the perfect husk. Only then could I slice them, gently toss the seeds into the bin, soak them in water and boil until soft. After the softened peppers were cool to the touch I would add them to the blender, along with the juice from a freshly cut pineapple, carefully selected seasonings, garlic cloves I had roasted 3 weeks earlier.

Food takes too long to prepare. Time which could have been spent writing. I have not learned to balance survival (eating) with breathing (words).

I remember fast food. Buns covered in Swirl and run through the toaster, frozen patties covered in salt and pepper, flipped by a teenager who never learned to wash his hands properly, fries which were potatoes in a former life, before all of the preservatives and extra sugars were added. I also remember upset stomachs, sleepless nights, bad skin, itchy gums, bloat. My mind could never focus and my writing read like it was sponsored by a soda company.

Cholesterol, glucose, a metabolic panel, enzymes, thyroid. The doctors told me I had to change my diet or I would die. I hate needles and vowed to never be poked again. I researched where all my food came from, aghast at the preservatives, sodium, added minerals, high fructose corn syrup. I bought old cookbooks with no recipes including “1 can of cream soup” or bags of frozen peas as part of the ingredients list. I broke down my food to its purest elements. I began to create.
I would read the word “tomato” and stop to write a poem about the soil being prepared for the seed, the rain required to bring the seedling through the earth. The green of the stalk and leaves each got their own poem. By the time I had written about the tomato, it had begun to turn from first flowering to fruit growth. I had forgotten to eat the tomato, had become subsumed by the poetry of vegetative birth. How could I consume that which had the essence of life in every seed?

One extreme to the other. One convenient vice for an inconvenient survival mode. I once passed out in front of the stove, stirring peppers in vinegar for hot sauce to use in a spicy barbecue sauce. It was 3 ½ days away from being a delicious meal. I woke up with my arm extended into the air, wooden spoon swirling the air above me, now 4 days away from eating.

I had to lay in bed half a day, surrounded by pens and paper, waiting for the hungry muse to quiet so the writing muse would return. I shut my eyes and napped. Dreamed of writing with a pepper on a focaccia crust. When I awoke I forgot to eat for 5 more days. I considered changing the menu, but the sauce was almost done. The poem was almost complete.

Karen Tardiff / Rockport, Texas
“Your designs are poor,” she observes, looking over the blueprints. “Unnatural.” She lays on silk sheets, knees tucked, propping up the oversized drawings.

“That’s not what my engineers say,” he calls from the bathroom. Toweling his body dry, he stands in the doorway, watching her. “But who are they? Just the best Hollywood money can buy from Bell Labs. Who’s that compared to Hedy Lamaar?” He smirks and starts to dress.

She ignores his jab and continues to study the plans before her. “But have you ever seen a bird with a nose like this, Howard? Or square wings? Come look at this.” Hedy kneels on the bed, spreading the blueprints wide.

“Not this again, Hedy. I have a meeting. Leave the plans on the desk before you go. The maid will get you whatever you need and my car will take you home.”

****

HH,

Your chauffeur took me to the library and was kind enough to wait while I talked with a Mrs. Finch (funnily enough). She knew just what I was looking for and within a half hour she found these books that I’m leaving for your engineers. I’ve marked the important pages for you - in particular the peregrine. Note the shape of its beak and head, the angle of its wings. It is the fastest bird in the world, Howard, and its wings are far from square. I’m
sure the shape must affect the aerodynamics of its flight. Think about it as you tinker with your design.

~ HL

*****

Hedy dives into the in-ground pool, her pastel green bathing suit clinging to her body. She swims the length of the pool in one breath, turns, gasps for air, and glides the length back to the shallow end. A shadow spreads across the water above her and she begrudgingly emerges.

“Howard called. He has to cancel,” a beleaguered man reports, holding a towel out for her.

“Did he say why?”

“Would you believe him if he did?”

She ignores the towel, melts back into the water. “Probably not.”

“He said something about meeting with the execs. He said he’d make it up to you.”

She nods, sucks in pool water and holds it in her mouth before spitting it out again. “Thanks for the message.”

“He shouldn’t treat you like that, Hed. Hopping from your bed to another woman’s. You’ve seen the photos in the news rags. There’ll be another tomorrow.” Hedy is silent, her eyes focused on the tessellating tile pattern on the pool floor, mesmerized by its reflection in the water. “Hedy, are you listening?”
She shakes her head, the formula for refraction slipping from her mind. “Let me swim, Paul. And leave the paper if you’re done. I want to see the news from Europe.”

“Bad. Always bad,” he sighs. “Don’t stay out here too long. Can’t have you all wrinkled for the camera tomorrow. I’d be a terrible agent if you came to rehearsal all pruney with puffy eyes.”

Hedy floats in the pool, her toes fluttering skyward. A plane roars above and she wonders if it is one of Howard’s planes. She imagines him leaping out, bounding down the runway and into the cockpit of another plane awaiting his arrival. As she studies the smokey wake, Paul’s words come back to her: Howard slipping beneath the sheets of Katharine’s bed, and then Jane’s, and Ava’s. She kicks errantly, creating waves, and watches as the water rolls across the length of the pool. Howard straddles the wavelengths, riding up and down them like a seesaw that skips, catapulting him from one crest to the next, from one bed to another, skimming through the air in his plane to avoid detection. She looks up once more at an empty sky.

****

Hedy sits on the floor, legs stretched out before her, back leaning against a cream-colored couch. Her eyes are closed as she listens to the radio, a Baroque piece punctuating the silence.

George sits opposite her on the rug, papers splayed all around him.

“I don’t think this will work,” he says, pushing a drawing away.

Hedy’s eyes flutter open as the violins glissando.
“I should call Howard. Maybe he’d have a good idea.”

George looks up at her, brow furrowed. “Who’s he with tonight?”

Hedy shrugs. “Ginger maybe?”

“She’ll say he isn’t there.”

“It’s getting late,” she reminds him, looking at her watch, a present from the industrial tycoon. A gift after another fight, after another mysterious hang up when she answered the phone. George nods, disappointment drooping his shoulders. He picks up his hat and heads for the door. Hedy turns up the radio, a Tschaikovsky overture commencing. “Tschaikovsky was a civil servant, you know. Before dedicating himself to music.”

“Perhaps someday they will say of you: Hedy Lamarr was an actress before she dedicated herself to her inventions.”

Hedy smiles wearily. “Perhaps. Good night, George.” She settles back on the floor, eyes closed in concentration once more.

*****

HL,

Board meeting ran late. Here is a little something to keep you amused in my absence.

~ HH

*****
Hedy watches as the pianola spins its perforated roll, the cut lines repeating in waves over the length of paper. The phone rings in the bedroom, but she ignores it, letting it drone on. Her mind is absorbed in the darting notes of the instrument before her. She watches as Howard leaps from one frequency to the next, swimming across the stretch of dissonant code, performing a new composition of his own ill design.

“I can see you,” she whispers. “But will the others?”

She lets the roll run to the end, until Howard is exhausted and shudders to a halt.

*****

“This could work, Hedy,” George murmurs, studying her sketches intently.

Hedy smiles weakly as she turns on the radio. A news bulletin concludes, the war giving way to a swarming Chopin sonata. She stands there, lets the music wash over her, and imagines diving, undetected, into darkness.

Shelly Jones / Oneonta, New York
Sunday Noir / Ron Czerwien

Here’s a black sock. Companionless on the church lawn. A crime scene would prompt fewer questions.

Inside the congregants are singing hymns and offering up prayers for an answer to a different mystery.

Private investigators, the neighborhood dogs stop and sniff around before moving on, satisfied with their findings.

Ron Czerwien / Madison, Wisconsin

The Old Masonic Cemetery / Janice Rubin

I forge my way from the bottom of the hill past overgrown ferns, green weeds, yellow dandelions and puffs. The worn gravestones scattered lonely on the side of the paths, a hot day in July, stop on the trail, drink deeply from my water bottle. The city founders buried here. On the other side of the hill, on the downward slope, the mausoleum stands, built of solid white stone, an Egyptian motif, a pharaoh and a winged dog guard the arched doorway. Steel bars prevent anyone from leaving or entering.

honeybee flies past
close to my ear, glad buzzing
wild flowers blooming

Janice Rubin / Eugene, Oregon
They call them tear-sheets in advertising or used to; magazine pages torn out and filed for reference. I’ve kept a stack from the sixties. Frank Sinatra, Malcolm X, photos of anonymous people, one of a hopeless, stricken old man holding a dog that is looking up at his lined face. I kept these because they spoke to me, these momentary fragments of life, photos I would never use except to restart the feeling machine inside me, spark the motor to life. Sonny Liston stands awkwardly, one hand to his side, the other holding an ornate French phone to his ear, his huge paw engulfing the toy-like telephone for LIFE’s photographer. He looks curiously meek, this powerful legend. Another shows a very old woman beating an eagle with her umbrella to make him drop her small dog. He did.

My favorite tear sheet though: a drum major high-stepping in full uniform across a deserted football field, practicing I’d guess, with a line of little kids behind him, shakoless but nevertheless equal in energy and in full show-off joy, high-stepping as to drums each one hears and stealing thunder. They will remember this day.

Guinotte Wise / LaCygne, Kansas
Have you heard anything about Lon Chaney? My wife asks and in the split second before I answer, pictures of Lon Chaney came to my mind and I realize that I am thinking immediately of Lon Chaney, Jr. and not his father, who famously starred in the silent film version of *The Phantom of the Opera* in the 1920s, and I’m not sure which one she is asking me about, but really it’s Junior that has made the biggest impression on me and I can clearly see him as if he’s still with us as Lenny talking to George about the rabbits in *Of Mice and Men* and as the retired sheriff with the crippled, arthritic hands in *High Noon* who tells Will Kane that he can’t help him because he can’t even hold a gun anymore and Will would only be worrying about him if there is any trouble, and then, of course, I see Lon Chaney as the Wolfman, a role that changed his acting career forever. And I also think of Tim O’Brien who wrote the collection of Vietnam war stories *The Things They Carried* and I say to myself yes that’s right. That’s true, but it’s also the things they left behind like these wonderful characters. And being a little confused at this point, I ask my wife to repeat what she asked me. *What?* I say. *Have you heard anything about Liz Cheney?* She asks again. *No,* I reply.
Here is your perfect moment:
Eating lunch on the bank of
the Ohio. Rolled oysters,
twist of lemon, diet soda
off to the side.
It’s fifty-eight degrees,
overcast, the wind tousling
the napkins. Your hoodie is up
to protect your ears and pate.

Above hangs an Edvard Munch sky.

When we said, ‘your perfect moment,’
we didn’t mean perfect perfect,
like a dream date with a gymnast
or a vacation in Elysium,
but the best you will get
in this incarnation.
The hair isn’t growing back
and the scars won’t wash off.
Every moment is bartered.

So enjoy this early March,
with its breeze that chills
but does not freeze head and heart.
There are days coming, both
warmer and colder, a snake
following its own tail.

Robert L. Penick / Louisville, Kentucky
Thinking of Instinct / Abriana Jette

Some geese just won’t leave.  
Beaks dipped beneath snow and sleet  
even when their beloved lake freezes  
they don’t leave. They find some unfrozen piece  
of water and land, picking at winter wheat  
or whatever is left for them to eat.  
They learn to survive, he says, thinking it sweet  
how they stick around. Not me.

It’s not sweet, I say, but instinct. Or lack thereof.  
No flight or fight when you can’t perceive leaving.  
Sure, they survive, but is that really enough?  
We walk in circles around the park. It’s sweet  
until it isn’t. Some things are worth quitting.  
These geese don’t know what they’re missing.

Abriana Jette / Sayrevelle, New Jersey
Frequent Flyer / Michael Caylo-Baradi

Facing the runway, a boy decides to make a plane out of his hand, to free the skies he sees inside its wings.

Then his voice invents an engine for its flight, until he’s way above the ground, and all alone.

Up there, he glides into the calm of clouds, the way he mumbles nights in bed, while listening to a storm of voices in another room, inside a house of doors they slam to hush the darkness in the moon

Michael Caylo-Baradi / Pacoima, California
**Ceasefire in Gaza** / Michael Caylo-Baradi

Maybe we can sleep again. I can hear the birds. We want their tweets to hush the sound of bombs in recent memory, sounds that swallowed lives, the young, the future of this land.

We’ve lost the tears to cry, these days. Our tears are piled around in rubbles, remnants of apartment buildings, schools, and other places we commune. Prayer is all we have.

We know our God is testing us. But we’ve lost the energy to interrogate his plans for us.

The point of language seems so hollow and banal. We want to hear it from our young again.

They’re paving streets with happiness and hopes tonight, to stretch this interval of days into an interval of weeks, of months, and years without the messengers of death approaching, coming from a sky we’ve learned to fear. Indeed, this interval is pregnant with revolt to simply see the sky again the way it should be seen after a restful sleep, the way it swallows you into its vast expanse, and makes you feel at home

Michael Caylo-Baradi / Pacoima, California
Face on the Street / Gary Wadley

Photograph, Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky
The letters in the drawer have woken up
after forty, fifty, sixty years asleep
with their secrets in old
fashioned typewriter script, or
hand written in the rhythm of an easy time.
The ridgeline

as the sun goes down
becomes a signature when the mountain
signs off for the day. The paper rustles
as pages open. It feels good
not to be forgotten. The envelopes
are smiling. There’s a search
here for a god, but
no certainty; and a good health recipe
from when it was eccentric
to be a vegetarian. Dear Daughter,
Here’s a prayer for salad greens,
Dear Father, Here’s a cook book for the spirit.
And Dear Mountain,

Watch over us tonight,
when the sky pulls on its coat
of stars and mouse bones,
and the owl is father
of the dark.

David Chorlton / Phoenix, Arizona
The Beyond / Daniel Hudon

The sun shines down like a round of applause vast as a promise vast as solitude

The sand runs on ten thousand gongs still as now still as forever

Where is your box of forgotten memories? Your cabinet of saltimbanques?

Whose it is no one knows Time is a tomb with an exquisite view of the horizon.

Daniel Hudon / Boston, Massachusetts
After the heat of the day
after the last pitch,
after the players clear the field
we rise to join the slow moving crowd
dazed from a day in the sun
shuffling through the concourse
pennants limp from waving
programs left behind
no matter who cheered or booed
or caught a foul
or won or lost.

What matters is the God
who gave us tickets and said
“Look for me after the game.”

We forgot, of course,
swept up in baseball’s fever
the meteor streak to the plate
the infield hops, the pick-off plays
the arms like cannons
firing from the outfield
their shells exploding at home
until the sun-baked ushers
coaxed us toward the gates
which was where we saw Him
seeing us first
tipping His cap
the game ball in His glove.
Is this what He meant
by a God whose play
is to catch us by surprise
waving us in
at the end of game
right before our eyes?

Kevin Shyne / Princeton, Illinois

*Autumn Speculations* / Robert Lowes

Leaves twirl down to the grass
and I scan the obituary page

over scrambled eggs and coffee.
The mounting curiosity—

who has crossed over?
They’re indisputable pioneers,

these motionless bodies
who perhaps in some new physics

now trek at outrageous speed
past our outermost galaxies

to a lush black pasture
where they float and flash

like fireflies, and just beyond them,
the angels I’ve read about.

Robert Lowes / St. Louis, Missouri
Photograph, Roger Camp / Seal Beach, California
Sometimes in the early morning
I wander back to the days I picked
blackberries in a tangled field
that languished along the creek
that appeared from behind a stand
of hemlocks and disappeared
around a bend after passing
the shed shattered by years,
its roof fallen in, mustard plant
thriving within the rotting floor.
I had a silver bucket. The thorns
were thick, the brambles knotted
into one another. I wore a flannel shirt
long-sleeved. I wore a hat. Still,
reaching in to take a berry I would feel
the thorns, sometimes tear a sleeve
within the branches. Walking home,
my scratched right hand began its burn.

Jack Ridl / Saugatuck, Michigan
Dandelion / Nancy Carol Moody

After a block print by Robert W. Jensen

The artist who hovered his chisel
and blade above the hardwood block
understood that moment between work-up
and carve, knew

there must be lift
    before there is soar.

See here the yet-anchored tufts,
    starburst aftermath of the yellowed yellow
bloom, daytime sparklers, an infinitude
of arms in aching stasis, arcing out
    and arcing still, uneasy
possibility in every inflection.
And what of the ones already freed?
    No nuance
defines their flight—blunted
kite tails poised to rudder, shuttlecocks
fleeing the smack of racket.
    Open field, what they’re aiming for.
Or stranded nest or pasture fence.
    Wind shift or instinct or sheer
happenstance—it really doesn’t matter how:
    one puff of unbidden air and they’re gone.
    Without you this is how I would go on.

Nancy Carol Moody / Eugene Oregon
My day begins in the nursery
    where birth is “but a sleep and a forgetting”.
It’s romantic, in theory: Little bones,
    back from trudging among the stars,
take flesh. Lips to nipple. Breath
    to baby’s breath. Star dust
still between his toes.
    But this little piggy’s hooked on cocaine
and this little piggy can’t breathe.

I catch myself singing gospel—
    listening to a little heart, feeling a fontanelle
running a finger down their spines.
    —“I’m tired of this life I’m living
I’m tired of this world of sin. . .”
    —birth days of the innocents
tucked into the sadness of the world.

    Richard Solomon / Ann Arbor, Michigan
My day ends, up here in the tower,
    tenth floor, Allegheny General
in the darkening cave of my office. I’m tired
    of the rotten stench of perfection,
unimpressed by the smashing of atoms,
    the telescoping of stars, the invention of zero.
When I stare out at the dim tenement roofs
    parched with decades of steel mill soot
and the bass of gangsta rap rises up from North Avenue,
    I think of Torrie. Pregnant. Killed
in a drive-by shooting in the projects.
    The baby died too. Pigeons flutter
to nests among the tenement eaves.
    Above the Life Flight heliport,
beyond Three Rivers Stadium,
    half hidden in the western hills:
A brilliant orange sun sets and flares
    pink and red. The horizon’s S–shaped clouds
catch on fire. My face, reflected
    in the window, fades with sunset,
eyes the last to go.

Richard Solomon / Ann Arbor, Michigan
Snow settles like cream between chopped blond stalks and whiskers left from wheat on the dirt brown skin of Illinois. In six more months another beard will gleam and shimmer in summer sun that now we only imagine.

Disc harrows will comb the surface of the earth and plows turn its flesh inside out to make ready for new seed to be planted and sewn. The hand that controls rain will be graceful and generous to a new generation of green and contain the force that can destroy as well as nourish.

Droplets will fall in gentle sheets and rivers flow with mercy between their banks and not flood fields erasing the geometry of so much seasonal labor.

Wheat, barley, oats, and corn will glisten and glow sharing their wealth with the birds of the air and rodents who gather and store wherever they can.

Grain will stand with uplifted heads, turn from green to gold as yet another season unfolds, then surrender again to the whirl of combine blades to fill silo, elevator, truck bed, train car, barge, and cargo ship container. It will trespass the boundaries and borders of the world, traveling over highways, rivers, the oceans, and find its way onto tables in palaces, houses, huts, and camps. None will be empty, but abundant with bread dispersed and shared.

James Robinson / Huntsville, Alabama
When the Baby Wakes / Garrett Stack

The grackle song
of his fluting lungs
is unformed by anything

but need and our lurch
to wakefulness
is old as being prey

and startling natural in the air conditioned bedroom.
This last vestige

a spark of feral stimuli
traversing synapse and system
thundering down

the line of time
to rouse us
like ancient horses

whickering awake in a dawn dark field so that we lie
staring at the ceiling

engaged in this softened parlance whispering,
I think it’s your turn.

Garrett Stack, Rockford, Michigan
Obol for the Boatman / Garrett Stack

Just this once, fair Charon, let’s skip the ferry. Come fetch me in a pickup truck too big for the task. Point that silver grill west into the great green sea of tasseled stalks and for god sake take this child lock off my window. Oh psychopomp, omit the recitation from the scroll of my sins, these bible belting billboards already have them covered. Pull in there to the Midway Bar, I’ve coin enough for one last round and they’ll give us whisky cokes to go. Please accept this styrofoam cup as payment for my passage. If it’s not too much trouble, will you ask your mother Night to wait just for a moment so the sun and moon may hang even in the dusk while we cross the dying creek. I’m no hero, I won’t be back this way again.

Garrett Stack / Rockford, Michigan
Garden Dance / Gary Wadley

Drawing, Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky
Sonnet for 2020 / Colleen Alles

Never mind—
she just said she doesn’t have the energy
to conform to a rhyme scheme.

Don’t tell her what
to be about, either. She hasn’t

hugged her father in nearly
a year, & it shows, & so she

aches in ways she won’t say
except in the pages of her diary.

But she asks you not to worry.
Like a good sonnet, she’ll try still
to make order from chaos, leave you
with the impression of

Love.

She remembers
she is lucky to hold
close a heart—& to have stolen time
in a time of so much extra time. Now,
there’s laundry to fold, a hound who
begs with his eyes. Someone’s made paper
airplanes, a mess on the kitchen floor,
stolen gingerbread from the cookie jar.
That’s the stove. Pretty soon,
nap time, bath time, quiet time—

time for a walk at twilight
with the hound, & later,
forgetting she ever tried to be
something she isn’t,
there’s time
for this sonnet to have a rich,
full glass of sweet red wine.

Coleen Alles / Grand Rapids, Michigan

**A Mercy / Colleen Alles**

It’s like when a dream
tells you you’re dreaming.

Let the nightmare dissolve,
it says.
This is a mirage. Your worst fears
are works
of fiction.

And you realize
your dream could have let you
keep on dreaming.
You realize a dream never owed you
anything.

A dream doesn’t have to tell
you you’re dreaming.

Just as
tonight, you didn’t need
to pick up the phone

even though I kept her
ringing.

Coleen Alles / Grand Rapids, Michigan
Grief is an Item on a Menu I Don’t Want / Colleen Alles

at a restaurant I didn’t ask to go to in the first place. But here we are. We can’t leave until I’ve ordered, & don’t ask how, but this I understand without being told, & every choice is wrong. Every choice is wrong. We are not supposed to be here. I shred the napkin in my lap. Then I shred yours. I spy a straw wrapper by your fork. Time to rip the thin white paper, & as I do, I remember an old friend used to tie knots in her straw wrappers. Then, she’d pull. If the knot was undone in the pulling—if it came apart in a gentle way, the paper able to let go of the knot that had been holding it together—then the person she most admired loved her, too. So then instead of ripping, I worry the straw wrapper in my fingers until it’s worn & ragged & crinkled—so used up now & frail & delicate & so overwhelmed by the tidal wave of heartbreak that when I finally tie a knot and then pull hard on both ends, it has absolutely no choice but to break in my hands

Colleen Alles / Grand Rapids, Michigan
Finally, shreds of gold from zinc veins,
a fresh start for my throat,
a scratchy voice but clear enough
to make absurd comparisons between sickness and death,
al comes from the killing of influenza
as a new mountain rises from the bottom of the bed
and a bird I had only previously known medicinally
is at the tip of the oak branch, singing a sweet riff.

You watch me awaken like I've resurfaced from near-drowning.
Ten years married and you're willing to keep company
with a nose like fire and a cough louder than trash pickup.
A morning, the last of a dirty four or five,
and your eyes are a kind of applause.
You bring coffee, the steam begs my attention.
You can't remember ever caring so much.

You realize you didn't just marry a man
but the whole of his body.
You soothed his sweaty brow like you might pet a cat.
You could have caught the very same thing I had
but you moved in and out of my messy tissues,
half-eaten soup bowls, as if nothing could harm you.
On hot feverish nights, I remember your touch most of all.
Your hand was like a starfish, calm in my rough seas.

John Grey / Johnston, Rhode Island
He went around on horseback,
With nothing but his bedroll and the money
For food and rice wine –
Searching for old friends in the day,
Laughing drunk with the rabbit in the moon
At night.
He thought about you and the children you had together
When he closed his eyes in the field
And fell to sleep.
It was the only time he allowed himself to contemplate you

Although he thought often about finding you,
About finding them –
Sitting for hours as the day fell to darkness,
Memorizing the gargle of the stream
And the contented nickering of his mare upon being fed.
The crickets and frogs not devoured in the night
All chirping or croaking their contentment
As he sits propped against a tree
In his reliable agony –

Thinking about all of you and
Writing his poems that extinguish the sun,
Set fire to the moon and
Drown the river in topaz and
Jade.

John Tustin / Myrtle Beach, South Carolina
La Luna / Lisa Yount

Digital Collage, Lisa Yount / El Cerito, California
As Always / Laura Ann Reed

when I first get out of bed I raise the shade
to see if the light holds some kind of sign
and there she is, our neighbor across the tree,
plugging in that old leaf-blower
to round up the needles under her pines.
She’s eighty-five, tiny as a hummingbird.
She doesn’t know how much we count on her
to be out there, my husband and I—
if not dealing with the needles
then climbing a high ladder
to clean the debris from her rain gutters
or hosing down her aging car or gossiping
with passers-by—our own spry, feisty
slice of eternity. She smiles, waves,
and as I lift my hand a man drives up
and hefts a For Sale sign from his truck.
When he plants it between the yellow roses
and the bed of iris alongside her tidy driveway
I find myself saying to no one in particular,
It’s been twenty years since my father died.

Laura Ann Reed / Mill Creek, Washington
The Owlet and the Turtle / Greg Sendi

Come up into my nesty bed,
the Owlet to the Turtle said.

Here will I feed you nuts and mice,
here cosset you in wings and twice
each day, at sunrise and at gloam,
lay kisses dewed with honeycomb

and stainy crush of thicket grape
upon your ancient leathery nape.

Here talon you behind the ears,
here hold your riddles years and years,

and guerdon you with balmy myrtle,
so fiercely do I love you, Turtle.

Together we may bless a nesty bed
the Owlet to her darling Turtle said.

In fervid yawp to roost above
rejoined the Turtle to his love:

Dear treasured caller, windfall Owl,
here overhear my rapt avowal

receive from quaggy mat below
my moon-rinsed consort song and know

but for your feathery sylvan art
(beloved, gaze in your own heart!)

no rest might mend the blemishes
that cram these shell-hulled premises,

no other soul my secrets keep.
Thus, straining as he might to leap
in turtle vaults toward the roost above,
rejoined the Turtle to his Owlet love.

Greg Sendi / Chicago, Illinois

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*Sharp* / Ranney Campbell

winds shifted, sky
blue again, smoke blown
out over the ocean
I can see the hills
make out the detail
of sage and the lichen
spreading. home,

from my porch
can see clearly
the cut lines

of the shadows
of the pergola, fallen

onto the concrete walk

Ranney Campbell / Jurupa Valley, California
Girl in the Field / Rana Williams

Photograph, Rana Williams / Hayesville, North Carolina
The thick smoke on the battlefield made it hard to see exactly what was happening onstage: the director’s idea, planned and carried out by three of the AP chemistry students.

Bemused by the chance to be part of a play, they’d thrown themselves into this business with gusto. Offstage, I was in love with the acrid smell of gunpowder,

with “Appalachian Spring” trickling out of the speakers, with knowing the tableau the two actors formed under the spotlight was called “Pieta,” something vaguely Italian that made the audience quiet, the senior girl closing her eyes as she lowered her head and stayed still, the freshman boy letting her hold him as the notes rose together alone and then joined at the top, almost crying, then the strobe light that made me shiver, and the wonderful swirl of the smoke—

oh, beauty, oh art, science and death, music and light, while I clutched my props, waiting in the wings, eager to drop them into anybody’s outstretched hands.

Ruth Bardon / Durham, North Carolina
Sunset Storm / Christopher Woods

Photograph, Christopher Woods / Chappell Hill, Texas
My Garden is a Thesaurus for Sadness / Emily Franklin

with its creeping phlox, bean shoots breaking through, soil I tried to better with coffee grounds, banana peels, crusts too tough for my father to chew, scraps no one wants back into the garden in a disgusting heap someone would try to market as gourmet compost—but which is really just gross, the shitty ends of meals we can’t get back, the way I wish for one afternoon with my children

as toddlers. This is not only because they are now driving, legal now, troubled or complicated or because their faces have all the same expressions but because I want back small them and the me of then. I want to say save the crusts then, too. I want to harvest my youngest’s belly overhanging his diaper and I want my daughter’s wild hair, gesticulating arms, her vocabulary doubling, tripling overnight the way bean shoots and cucumber vine climb the stalks of bamboo I stole from myself.

This is what gardens do, make us entrepreneurs and thieves, too, dividing irises and stonecrop as gifts or digging up Hosta to fill holes left by things that don’t make it, slumped blanket flower or downy lambs ear gone brown at the edges, tufts of carrot stems which suggest they have actual carrots growing underneath but—and here is the thesaurus—we don’t know there is nothing underneath until it is too late. It’s almost always too late in the garden—you didn’t take the time to water properly or you did it too much, thinking you were a hydration expert now, understood roots the way the radiologist details cranial nerves. Who am I to know when to thin the beans or how the mole chewed the hardiest of the tomato plants? And there’s no time this season to correct, only banking knowledge for next April, next July, the next fall crop which is another form of hope, and that is what it all—the seeds, this netting each row and fence, each support trellis, pod collecting
in the autumn as it all ends—is, a form of productive worrying the way my grandmother sketched what to plant where and when—when one of her kids was posted to die, each rhythmic watering, pruning, reseeding so we get up to check what’s happened overnight, pulled into growth, into the next day’s weather as though it might become another word for hope.

Emily Franklin / Newton, Massachusetts
Thrifting for Clothes My Friend and I Find Feelings / Emily Franklin

discarded, weighed price per pound—I tuck someone’s pink sweater into a brown bag along with the fantasy that I am someone who would wear a pink sweater and I recall the boy in college who wore a cape and wonder if he is still an astrophysicist and if the cape is on a hook in his closet like some shadow former self or if it’s in this very store and I might find it if I looked harder, plunged my hands into boa piles those snakes of celebration, looked in the revelry of sequins, the sadness of loose silk pajamas my grandfather hitched past his waist and which I thought I would keep later, after, in that great clothing purge we do for the dead lucky enough to amass a wardrobe gone out-of-fashion, obsolete.

My friend and I assign a voice to each article—her bowling shoes in a drawl, the tweed jacket patched with faux-Hepburn aloof—and in my mind there’s a heap of old me-s, each voice different but the same, each holding oversized ache in the sweaters, a skirt I wore once to cover bruises and right now I want to thank it, that linen - was it linen?- for absorbing whatever I was then so that I can be here now, prowling through each garment row, digging like my dog certain there’s something underneath worth saving.

Emily Franklin / Newton, Massachusetts
The dead wear cloaks
the color
of shadow on snow.

They stand
among winter trees
in the easement,

nearly unseen,

and thin
in the lowering sun,
toward tomorrow.

They had wanted
to last.

They still want to last,
want it harder
each day

of their absence.

And we want it, too.

But less and less.

Only their vestments
betray
time’s passage, paling

from salt to bone.

Come snow-melt,

they will need
to find a new means
of concealment,
sifting themselves

into the tangle

of the understory,

when it will become

our part

to stand watch

until

our part is over.

Then we can rest,

though

we’ll still feel

their presence—

settling,

like snowfall,

just here,
in that hidden place

close
to the heart

where we store

our own

future ashes.

Marjorie Stelmach / Manchester, Missouri
That night, Tom would take all his guests out to the country road and turn off the flashlight so we city people could see real darkness, as the pre-electric gods experienced it. But now he and Charlie were collecting people at the bus station, and I was alone, sitting on a rock in the brook that ran past the house. The country can be dark, but never silent: birds, wind, water, even with no people near. And I heard voices. One voice? Many? Human voices? Gods? In Greece, every rivulet had its nymph, whispering and muttering that only the sacred few could understand.

The next day Tom heard the call, retired to the kitchen, and came back with a sonnet. But the nymph speaks only Greek to me.
Like Falling Over / D.S. Maolalai

so rare anymore
that one must feel
heartbreak. I especially
don't – my girlfriend
living in my place now
and in love
as much with me
as the apartment. perhaps
it will never happen again,
though you hardly
ever intend it; just
like falling over

and that wonderful
shifting of floorboards –
going on a date
with nothing much
in mind. admiring
the way someone's head
tilts at your questions. the way
someone steps
and how their body
leans against yours
as you walk after coffee
through the park over Grafton St.

the way life can trip you
up without warning
to a wonderful situation;
cracking your kneecaps.
changing your gait.
changing your gait.

D.S. Maolalai / Dublin, Ireland
All Rainbows / D.S. Maolalai

after a rainstorm,
a late sunny evening
and driving from work
on the N4 to Dublin
which breaks like a biscuit
at the M50 junction
where it takes you to Dublin
as well. cars toss
fallen waterfalls, falling up
into the sunlight
like a conjurer’s string
of all bright colored flags
in a prism which spangles
ahead and around me.
and the angles are perfect
and clouds have come down;
now the world is immersed
and feels bright as an oil slick.
all rainbows like pencils
pushed through the clouds
of hung water thrown upward
by wheels. these strung-
about colors, this grayness,
these half-controlled cars.

D.S. Maolalai / Dublin, Ireland
The screen door sits a little tilted in its frame
    In a restless wind, a too-tight shoe
    It takes an extra tug to pull it shut
The simple hook and eye just good enough
    To tame the clatter and the rap.

Don’t fix it, the master craftsman says,
    Holding on to other days
A cottage, a lake, a child-size boat
The gentle thud and rub, the click and catch
The sound of heading out to play
Echo: the sound of coming back

Nan Jackson / East Lansing, Michigan
I was the brave one that summer, rowing the boat out to the middle of the lake, my older brother my passenger.
In the grasses near the shore I let the snakes tickle my feet, even when I couldn’t see them.
I led the way up the fire tower rung by rung by rung.
We looked down at the tops of the trees.
I laughed toward the far away lake.

Decades later, I sit at his bedside, where the gentle rise and fall of his last breath leaves me without oars, where the water’s surface rises too close to my face and the grasses at the shore slip beneath my feet.
I stare at his closed eyes, afraid of what I can’t see.
I wonder if he knows where he’s going, I wonder who’s taking him there.

Nan Jackson / East Lansing, Michigan
A Bumbling Team / Kimberly Shyu

Photograph      Kimberly Shyu
INSIDE/OUT LITERARY ARTS PROJECT FEATURE

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.

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.

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:

InsideOut Literary Arts Project
5143 Cass Ave., Room #225
WSU — State Hall
Detroit, MI 48202

Visit InsideOut online at: www.insideoutdetroit.org
**I Am / Meadow May**

I am a yellow flower  
I blow in the breeze,  
I am a yellow flower  
so I blow with ease.

I speak to the grass  
and it speaks to me  
as I get my nectar  
collected by bees.

I am small but have a big role,  
I am a flower so  
I have no soul.  
You see me a lot in fields and plains;  
sometimes I'm seen next to berries and grain.

---

**I Am / Natalia Whitley**

I am the river with the glistening moon.  
I am the bright shiny Rings on Saturn.  
I am a hard prickly Cactus in the desert.  
I am the autumn leaves brushing against the sidewalk.  
I am the navy blue of the night sky.  
I am the bright star in the twinkly night.  
I am the lion roaring in the sunset.  
I am the violin playing in the theater.  
I am my dream!
**I Am / Archeea Thoms**

I am like the sun: so light;  
like the moon: dark as day  
and sun and the sky, the birds  
and tree; the moon is non-talking  
as dark as a room; like school  
it’s so cold, colder than the moon.  
The sun is as hot as fire,  
the moon is as cold as ice  
and snow;  
how cold is the moon? As cold as ice cream.  
The sun burns like wood.  
The sun is as yellow and red  
like fire,  
and the moon is as white as snow.

Student from Oak Park Einstein Elementary, 5th Grade

**I Am / Antonye Arnold**

I am the river.  
I am wind, flowing like dust  
on a sunny day through light,  
but a slight bit of darkness  
is ahead of me;  
going through anything,  
you can see me, hear me.  
I am the one who sees light  
like a rainbow that comes through  
like pieces, like hearts,  
like wind, the river is a calm place  
to be.
Students from Lee M. Thurston High School, 10th Grade

Black Girl / Erynn Miller

Black girl, too ghetto
Black girl, too loud
Black girl, unworthy
Black girl, too proud
Black girl, disrespectful
Black girl, bad thing
Too Black, not Black enough
Black girl, don’t be seen
Black girl, don’t dream
Black girl, dream big
Black girl, be strong
Black girl, defeat hate
Black girl, keep on keeping on
Black girl, beauty
Black girl, pride
Black girl, love
Black girl, magic
Black girl, sees hate
Black girl, seems tragic
Black girl, stay strong
Black girl, stay proud
Black girl, stay ghetto
Black girl, stay loud
Black girl
Black girl
Black girl
Black girl
Don’t you know?
Black girl
Black girl
Black girl
Black girl
You glow.
Haiku / Elle Hubbard

Cocooned, talking myself into being born
Not a butterfly
yet not a caterpillar
wings still clipped to me

Took me my entire
caterpillar life to see
what you saw in me

When will I emerge
feels like I’m clipped endlessly
please help, set me free.

Dear Poetry / De’ja Jones

My best friend, reciting my deepest thoughts
mirroring my feelings with warm words,
reading me better than I know myself –
you bring clarity to my mist-covered garden
and open my deafened ears to the sound
of my own heartbeat –

Dear Poetry,

you make me alive, singing tides of my imagination.
I ride and abide your fine waves of interpretation.
I get lost in your deep watery blue, an inspiration,
and the colorful patterns and treasures

which make me a person.

De’ja Jones
If anxiety were a person,  
I think everyone would misunderstand them.  
Begin to loathe their presence. Over-exaggerating?  
Maybe that’s just what they concluded.

I think their always-impending sense of doom  
would burn a hold from within, making them watch  
all the bridges that they carefully built up burn  
before them.

Perhaps their striking apprehension and distrust  
is sharp as a blade, a blade they have  
grown used to carrying around.  
Not by choice; not by flipping some switch; it just happens.

I wonder if anxiety takes a break  
to just sit down, to try to be one  
with themselves. I certainly hope they haven’t gotten  
used to the swings – they surely try their best, after all.

Does anxiety have its own fear,  
its own stack of dread to burn? Afraid of losing the world,  
afraid of losing themselves? Judge them,  
call them illogical, or force them  
to change, but if anxiety were a human,  
maybe they’d just want to be heard.  
I wonder if anxiety also gets insecure  
if they burn with disdain for being cast away  
to the depths of the human heart. Does anxiety  
have a heart, unable to see both desire  
and hope in this world? Does anxiety constantly  
wear a mask,
one they’ve donned so tightly that they
mistake it as part of themselves?
I wonder if anxiety ever feels discouraged
if they ever want to just give up and lie still

only to be reborn when night falls again.
Does anxiety have dreams, aspirations?
Or are they stuck in an endless dream,
a false reality that they are burning to wake up from?

If anxiety were human, I would do my best to sit with them.
I’m afraid of the same sense of isolation, dread losing
myself, but to run away would isolate us both.
Even if it were to attack me from within,

to submerge me in its depths and simultaneously wrap me
in its roots, I would face the world with them by my side.

If anxiety were a human, maybe they never
got to choose to be the way they are. The fear that something
is wrong, dreading impending doom: none of that
would be their choice. Instead, they’d make a new choice:

to face themselves, face ourselves, with what we can muster
together.

Ode to Target / Gabrielle Pryor

You carry everything I need, from the latest makeup
essentials to my favorite snacks. Provider of goods
as though you are an ancient merchant.
Dripping Icee Machine taps, still not ready,
a tiny Pizza Hut right in the front that reminds you of your hunger.
Creating a section dedicated to natural hair products
-- but not as large as straight hair –
we can work on that.
Your bright red logo shining against the sunlight
as though it’s a mirror towards more spending.
A Starbucks to tell myself, “I could go for a caramel macchiato,”
even though it’s 9 p.m....
A bright and happy dog named Bullseye whose face is plastered
among the walls like a celebrity.
I see you with your body diversity recognizing that bones
aren’t always structured the same!
Look at you becoming more inclusive! Showing us that models
aren’t always slim and tall and that anyone can strut their stuff
in a bikini. Thank you, Target, for being my comfort zone.
The place I drag my mom to at night knowing darn well
I don’t need another body wash.
The place I call my second home because it’s the place that has
it all. A wonderland of color, toys, and clothes.
What better place can I ask to be my addiction
than my old, sweet Target?

Pretty Girls Don’t Cry / Azia Harris

What’s wrong with you?
Fix yourself
Pretty girls don’t cry.
Wipe your face
dry your eyes,
pretty girls don’t cry.
Never show a sign of sadness
or you’ll break out in hives.
Pretty girls don’t cry.
Figure how to stop.
Don’t be so anti-
pretty girls don’t cry.
Use your words
count to five
pretty girls don’t cry.
Talk to someone
don’t be shy;
pretty girls don’t cry.