

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 magazine are completely free to anyone and print issues can be purchased at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Find us on the web at thirdwednesdaymagazine.org where you can download free digital issues, read the fine poems we have published in the past and find the link to our portal at *Submittable* where you can submit your work and subscribe to the magazine. You can also find us on Facebook, YouTube & Instagram

Masthead

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Editor's Note

Here is our fall issue which includes the winning stories of our annual George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest, judged this year by Ron Koertge. It has been pleasure working with Ron. The issue leads off with a story by Mr. K. himself.

We also want to thank Phillip Sterling for his sponsorship of this year's contest. Phil is one of our poetry editors, who writes some fine flash fiction himself, and who is dedicated to keeping fiction in our magazine.

I thought it might be interesting to talk a little more about our publishing model and how some of the changes we've made have impacted readership. Just to remind you, we publish each accepted piece on our website when we accept it. That way the author can immediately share the link on his or her social media. Next, we print and mail out copies of the magazine to contributors and subscribers. Finally, we make a digital copy of the magazine available for free to anyone who wants to read it.

For individual poems, it's not unusual for a poem to get a couple of hundred readings within the first few days of its posting. Readings taper off slowly after that, but continue indefinitely. Your poem is always there, always accessible.

The same is true for complete copies of the magazine as they become available, but the numbers are larger and tend to continue longer as more people discover 3rd Wednesday and may download several issues per visit. Over time each issue accumulates hundreds of downloads. Poetry doesn't go out of date. An issue that's 2 or 3 years old is just as desirable as the most recent one.

This is 21st century publishing. As writers, aren't we lucky we live in the future? Now flip the page or scroll down. Let's get to the good stuff.

David Jibson, Edito

Sedona Vortex: A Love Story / Ron Koertge

In my middle twenties I had to find another place to live. I didn't mind music that came through the thin walls. I didn't mind nodding to my neighbors. If they were there, it meant I was there. After awhile I thought I could try something that involved my heart but not in a calamitous way. I went to the local animal shelter and adopted an older cat, one who was not playful or cute but instead sat stoically in the back of the cage. The new guest roamed around suspiciously, ate a can of inexpensive food, went to sleep. Pretty soon he found the balcony, dropped onto the flat roof next door. He came back the same way. I liked hearing his paws hit the floor at midnight. Liked the warmth at the foot of my bed. Then he was gone. I never saw a body on the tree-lined street. He wasn't returned to the shelter. So I got another cat. After a week, he disappeared. When I went back to the humane society, a young woman looked at her records and said, "Maybe I should take a look at your living arrangements." That evening after work, she roamed around in her knee-length khaki shorts like an explorer. She stared out the double doors. "The entrance to another world," she said.

I managed, "I thought speeding cars or coyotes."

She shook her head. "More like a Sedona Vortex." I wanted to say something arresting, but I'd been alone a little too long. She helped me out. "I'm usually the girl at parties who doesn't do anything so she can drive people home. Do you have something sensational to drink?"

Ron Koertge / Pasadena, California

That Stage of Life / Robert Lowes

“I don’t want to,” the toddler says.
His “no” is atomic and blubbery.
He goes limp when you try to lift him,
a heavy sack of refusing.

Don’t want to eat or nap or bathe.
Don’t want my soggy diaper changed.
He is the most oppressed of humans,
his eyes damp with accusing.

Father of insurrection and strife,
he declares himself lawless and free,
yet appeals to any court he can find,
a nana, some benefactor.

Bend to his will, his urgent whim,
hand over the withheld cookie or toy,
and his pout quickens to the grin
of a consummate actor.

Robert Lowes / St. Louis, Missouri

Étude: Prose Poem / Robert Lowes

A prose poem fizzes like a burning fuse, and ends with a faint pop. It doesn’t want to slap people in the face with beauty. It’s suspicious of light and night and right. It trains a feral gaze at ballroom dancers.

It wears a pair of jeans every day of the year—gray, black, but mostly blue. If a prose poem doesn’t get published, it’s hospitalized and medicated. Where the psychiatrists wear jeans. It’s a very small world.

Robert Lowes / St. Louis, Missouri

Boulders / John Loree



John Loree (deceased)

Sharing the Kitchen / Andrea Weiser

Turns out my hours on the keyboard,
Day after day,
Have made me a bread-maker—
Better than ever.

Knead until smooth
The recipe says.
I remember my grandfather's hands,
Manhandling dough,
Swirling, folding, shoving it down
With the heel of his hand.
Quarter-turn, shove, quarter-turn, shove.
It looked like a wrestling match
He was going to win.
His motions said one thing –
Submit.

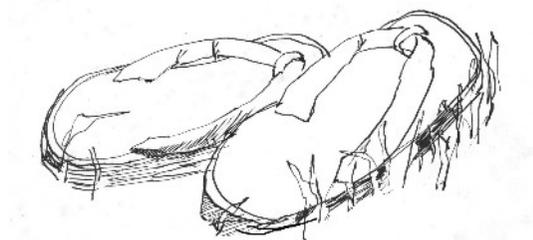
Try it, he said,
And I did – feeble in comparison
My small hands pressing in,
Folding, pushing, turning, folding,
My arms quaking with the strain.
Minutes felt like days.

He cracked a smile and showed me how -
Smooth as a baby's bottom, he said,
As he rolled the round of dough
Upside down in the proofing bowl.
We laughed.

My favorite bread,
From a recipe in his head,
A New England staple it seems
Delivered by wagon cart, still warm.

How many mouths have been fed on this history?
Cornmeal, molasses, and wheat in one bite,
Blending two homelands, no, three,
Right in my kitchen.

Andrea Weiser / Marblemount, Washington



Town / Don Williams

No one's bothered to shatter
The storefront windows—

Dusty, lifeless eyes.
Put your own eyes to the glass

And see some of used-to-be's
Leftovers. Not much here now,

Except a grim, die-hard bar
Dying hard, famous

Once for ice-cold beer—
Back when that mattered.

Don Williams / Buttonwillow, California

Maria, you own Miami Beach / David Colodney

you hold the mortgage
on its sun-drenched skyline,
tattooing sunset with lipstick
swirls. I see your cigarette
tip shimmer in summer like late-night
traffic signals on Ocean Drive.
I feel your heat, your humidity,
we flirt like Tanqueray & tonic,
midnight magic.

Maria,
your windblown kisses land
like reckless bombardier breezes
exploding through jalousie windows
& the flapping shades of sand-crust
beach-side cabanas. Send one my way,
my landmine baby, & we'll samba barefoot
on the pink sidewalks singing
Miami es magia en la noche. But we already know,

Maria,
we feel it when I pull you close
& I taste your air-raid lips.
Power lines crackle & electric
surges from vacant Lincoln Road
high-rises, reverberating off white-capped shores.
It was only the neon burst of the Clevelander Hotel's sign
flashing off a flickering lamppost, but I thought
I saw heat lightning when we kissed.

David Colodney / Boynton Beach, Florida

Trees / John Loree



John Loree (deceased)

Crow Song / Mary McCarthy

It's too late to cooperate
or pretend I agree
with my own embarrassment
an old crow who still
steals shiny things
just because I like
their broken shapes
the lines of fracture
making sense
of what they wanted most
of how they failed
bright things broken

Like glass thrown
against a wall
falling in shards
of diamond
glittering beneath
the soles of boots
too thick to notice
how they shatter light
a million prisms
making rainbows
out of sacrifice.

Call me thief, I only steal
what you would throw away
turn your back on
deaf to every raucous squawk
that raises an objection
refuses to obey
chooses its own splendor
its black and rusty
cape of feathers
before all your gaudy promises
ready for anyone
who keeps their head down
heart close, tongue
reined in, behaving
the way you think they should.

Mary McCarthy / Edgewater, Florida

Twilight / Brian Kates

birds tuck their heads under
thousand-mile wings
and sing a lullaby of silence,
tree branches dance
with their shadows

Brian Kates / Pomona, New York



Beneath the Clock Tower, Main Gate / Greg Rappleye

-Pepperell Cotton Mill , Biddeford, Maine

Through the shattered windows,
the cotton bays echo, dark as tubercular lungs.
Here, the looms were chanted to bid;
trolleyed in shimmering rows across the dock
and loaded, Free-on-Board, for Bangkok
and Taipei. Now, not sure they are dead,
their work forever gone, my uncles, aunts,
cousins, grandfather—all look up,
check their vacant wrists against the clock
and report through the slide-away door.
Who can I name among these photographs?
Little Andre, the Coté boys, and Willie,
I'm sure of. Is that Norah Burke? It could be.
Night-knocker, help me name the others.
Who among these split open
the cotton bales, who loaded the hopper?
Whose barefoot child wept quietly and re-tied
the broken threads? Who oiled, who
swept, and who took down the battens,
ran calloused fingers along each worn edge,
jig-cut the same old shapes, and working on
through 5 AM, reset the looms?
Who bull-racked the finished cloth? Who cut?
Who packed and loaded and shipped?
And who can say where each one stood
their ten hour days, calves and soles aching,
shifting from one foot to the other,
and the names of the mill bosses they once cursed,
their grievances, and what was left unsaid?
Should I not stand at the gate and hand out lyrics
to Wobbly songs as, single and double-file,
my dead report for work—old Seamus,
pressing a lunch pail to his chest,
those Killarney girls, hair braided back,
smiling and holding hands—announce them in song
as I check off their names, insert their cards

and clock them in, perhaps brighten
Benny's cup with a splash of *Early Times*?
If banished from this gate, at which great door,
along which chain-link fence—
at dawn or at dusk—should I wait?
The river is all flood-tide snags,
the clatter of box cars crossing iron
and a tumble of seabirds—frantic in the sky, feeding.
If the mill race is frozen, must I walk across?
If not where the dead gather,
from which shore of the estuary, only now
beginning to swirl with these milky glass eels
must I stand away and sing?

Greg Rappleye / Grand Haven, Michigan



trptych for our times / Laurence W. Thomas

1. sit by the fire with me
as the kindling catches.
time stretches out beside us
with no place to go.
be glad for the wind clearing a path
for our needs
in the snow.

think of those with heavy boots
the cumbersomeness of coats
and appointments.

let us talk
philosophy and poetry
spread our thoughts out
like blankets over lovers
of culture and comforts
the boar turning on its spit at a luau
on safari in the grasslands of Africa.

be grateful for the security of numbers
the somnolent flapping of canvas
no clock ticking.

2. harvest bargains
await our partaking of them
in the markets
in shops
windows aglow.
the gold
is not in them thar hills
nor neatly packaged meats
from stockyards.
we can pass as customers
marking time for opportunities
among sellers of watches

providers of t-shirts and jeans
and purveyors of produce.

let our feast be frugal —
no canapés of caviar
tables laden
set with candles and lavish linen
our table talk
confined to romantic adventuring
to narrow escapes and fences.

3. when the moon is filling
with the souls of the dead
the pock-marked shadows
and stars dart behind
racing after the sun
beneath the horizon

shades cover pieces
torn off
in an illusion of love-like offerings

as the watch changes —
your fidelity unchallenged
so long as the mares' tails of clouds
sing our whispers

the owl woos the mouse
cats hold court
like lovers making music.

Laurence W. Thomas / Ypsilanti, Michigan

All the Queen's Horses / Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier



Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier / Stittsville, Ontario

Maguey, by Lola Cueto, 1948 / John Heath

In the study of your home in Mexico
hung a painting of three figures
overshadowed by a towering plant.
—*ma-Gay*, you said to me,
sounding it out the first time. *This is the picture
that haunted my childhood.*

A gray-green plant erupts from the mountain,
serrated edges reaching out to you,
waving like the tentacles of a squid,
one limb hacked off,
sap at the severed edge long dry.
The mother is a blue shawled Madonna,
her two sons dressed
in loose-fitting cotton whites, carrying
panniers on their backs
—one of corn cobs, one of firewood—
heads bent toward the ground
inching up a steep slope,
under a blue-black sky portending thunder.
Will they get home before the storm?

Sixty years on
the painting hangs in our home,
your childhood question
still unanswered,
that path up the hillside
no less steep.

War in the desert / John Heath

—*In memory of Keith Douglas (1920-1944)*

Rain came and the wadis filled
guns and men washed away
the surviving men huddled
in the turrets of tanks
disconsolate listless
reading pulp the books pulpy
tinned cheese runny
biscuits damp as a Bank Holiday
weekend too wet to get a brew on
commander gunner loader
housed in a hoop of steel
crowded in the turret's rim
knee to elbow the goaty smell
of an Arab farwa nuzzled
against the wet wool of another's
British 'warm' the men
dozing one dreaming
of the olive skin of a girl glimpsed
in the bazaar at Alex while
another's wife weeps
from a soggy letter
stuffed ruefully in his breast pocket
while the commander's jaw
clenches his empty pipe
puffing on nothing
as he fingers a trophy Biretta remembering
the Italians lying about like
trippers taken ill
not a mark on them except
the dust on their clown-like faces then
recalling how later they cruised
by a derelict German tank
looking down vacantly on a man
with a wild stare
who had covered his wounds
with towels to keep the flies off—flies

in a cloud towels dark
with dried blood.

John Heath / Washington, D. C.

Mowing Down / Jeremiah Durick

Of course, I mowed
did the whole thing
up and back
around and around.
It's as if the mower
knows the way
learned it, faithful beast
learned it over
the years we have spent
doing this, spring, summer
even into the fall.
The pattern is set –
grass grows and
the same sense of obligation
hits us, gets us out here.
the same steps
leading us on into time.
Of all the things I have done
in my life
this one has followed me
from my early teens
to this, this afternoon,
what is it – sixty years later,
and of course, I mowed
did the whole thing
up and back
around and around.

Jeremiah Durick / South Burlington, Vermont

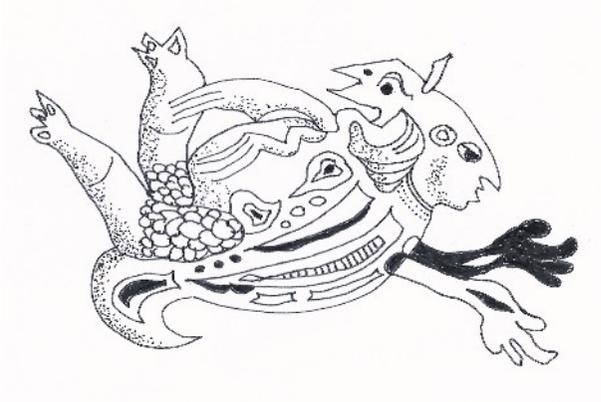
October Windstorm / Katie Kalisz

Thin shouldered, the house shudders
while darkness outside cloaks the bricks
in a lace shawl. Things snap:
tree branches, the water clicking the large rock,
a tongue of wet leaves licking the gutter.

At the window, tree silhouettes stretch and twist
around shadows of themselves, freed
from a bondage of calm and released into chaos.
Closer to the house, a dusky rabbit squats beneath
the birdfeeder, filling herself on spilled seed,

windblown ears pinned close to her head,
pressed fur waving welcome, warning.

Katie Kalisz / Belmont, Michigan



Eggs / Donald Wheelock

When my father made me scrambled eggs
I was surprised to see him set them down
before me with such pride. I'd rarely seen
him cook, or, thinking of it now, enjoyed
the man alone.

as new as staying overnight for me,
a boy, refusing, still, to understand
the rift that made this visit necessary?
I doubt I even thanked him for the eggs.
The toast—why, even I could butter toast—
was burned a little bit around the edge—
“Just the way I like it,” I might have said,
though silence was the order of the day.
I learned to cook for my kids just this way.

Donald Wheelock / South Deerfield, Massachusetts

Humidity / Alan Perry

In the heat of summer
water vapor lingers,
fills the wood of the shed door
I struggle to open.
Our annual tug-of-war
signals I'm late
to level weeds who enjoy
the sultry damp of mid-afternoon,
showing off their dandelions,
clover and quack grass –
attempts to reclaim native prairie.
Like the door, they know
I'm coming for the scythe
locked up with other yard arms –
mowers, edgers, weed whips.
But this year, the door
is especially swollen, engorged
by a heat index that stifles
my ambition. Which gives me
pause to notice weeds
have overgrown my path,
inviting me to sit down
among the ground cover –
let the future swell.

Alan Perry / Maple Grove, Minnesota

Magic Hour / Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier



Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier / Stittsville, Ontario

Dead Standing / Andrea Janelle Dickens

June's storm throws limbs across
our lawn, but they aren't the real
damage, the damage that continues
to fester. Tree cutters inform you the core
has been rotten for years, the tree
unsalvageable. Dead standing. You pretend
you have to wait for my approval.
Ask them to return next week. If it were
in the overgrown edge of the yard,
we could let vines engulf it, imagine
the sycamore still alive. You want to stake
out a place with no loss. Come fall,
a few branches falling in each wind,
I ask if you're ready to let go.

Andrea Janelle Dickens / Mesa, Arizona



Roadrunner Afternoon / David Chorlton

Three o'clock is easy time
at the backyard feeding station, even
on the warmest day so far
this year, a day
of such stillness on the streets
that yesterday's footprints have peeled
themselves off the pavement
and keep moving along.
This afternoon the traffic can't stop
arguing and tonight's late
parties in the distant strip malls
of the city will probably end
in gunfire with a little romance
left over from the Old West.
Lucky are the doves
who never hear about how
the arguments begin, and lucky
the rabbits on a friendly patch of lawn
where they dig themselves
a dust bath and lie down
without the local news to make them nervous.
It has been a quite predictable
afternoon with hummingbirds, finches
and tranquility spreading
from every shadow's edge; except
for the crested shock wave when
that Roadrunner stopped in mid-stride
before running through the heat
and making it look as miraculous
as walking on water.

David Chorlton / Phoenix, Arizona

Welcome to the World / Cameron Brooks

You will not remember how she cradled
you beneath the budding maple tree
your first week on Glendale. How she
turned her back on the horizon to keep
the day's sharp last-light from waking you.

Yes, you will sleep for some time yet.
You will not remember the chickadees
in the bush nor the swell of the wind
nor the sound of your sister conjuring
things in the cut grass. I am writing to

remind you of that day she found a
castle in the front yard, and the wind
smelled like a glass of water, and there
were chickadees chattering in the bush.
She held you in the shade of the maple
tree like an antique vase, yet you were
astoundingly new and sound asleep.

Will you believe me? One day you may
think it a dream. Just remember, I was
there. I am writing to remind you that
you were too.

Cameron Brooks / Sioux Falls, South Dakota

The Funnies / V. P. Loggins

They come on Sunday mornings
when we hear the slap outside
against the boards of the porch
as the paperboy on his bicycle,
engaging all his easy strength,

tosses the paper spinning with
a helicopter's whorl that drops
into our day. The first thing we do
is unroll the tube until we find
the funnies and spread them open

across the table like stained glass
windows, their reds and yellows
and blues the colors of delight,
filling the breakfast time before
our mother drags us to church.

Beetle Bailey, Peanuts, Pogo,
B.C., Dick Tracy: the happy
counter to the fundamental fires
of the preacher we know will
condemn us to a circle of hell

where nothing seems funny—
no jokes, no puns, no irony,
no love without suffering—all
some shade of a dreadful gray.
Leaving our father at home alone,

we hear his familiar refrain
as we slide out the screen door,
See you in the funny papers, boys,
while he stands behind us waving
and begins to open the windows.

V. P. Loggins / Annapolis, Maryland

Blunden Harbor / Lucy Mitchem



Lucy Mitchem / Portland, Oregon

Little Library on Birdfoot Ridge / Eugene Stevenson

The backdrop, this time of year, is dark green: rhododendron, pine, oak, bamboo, azalea, oak, poplar, cactus.

The shades of green change subtly, dependent on direction, downhill or uphill, there in the dogleg of the curve.

Primary colors in the crook of the road: red, blue, yellow, stark in togetherness, call out to passing vehicles, *Notice me*.

In reward for a brief stop, books, books as painted as their house, color-wheel dust jackets facing out to lure, to tempt.

Within, hand-me-down volumes from readers, from Amazon Prime, from remainder tables at Barnes & Noble.

A rarity: the one-owner book, sourced from a hometown bookstore, read once, then admired on custom-built shelves.

Like the passers-by, the contents come, singles go, after a long sojourn or with barely enough time to feel raw wood.

The generous few take a book, & with some thought leave a book, to give to others what has been given to them.

Others can only take, or leave copies of *The Watchtower*, driving away satisfied that the little library got the better deal.

Eugene Stevenson / Brasstown, North Carolina

Persephone Admits / Mary McCarthy

There was no pomegranate.
That was just mother
lying to make me seem
more respectable.
No, a bride of hard changes
I turn on my own lathe
from grief to exaltation.
It was my black mood
took me down
in one long smooth swallow
into the arms of my own
dark shadow,

Where I was at home
in the underworld,
with its peculiar comforts—
Where the trees remember me
Because in my glory days
I went so fast
I could count the steps
in their long dance
and hear them singing
their names to the sun.
Where their roots reach down
to comb through my hair
and lick the tears from my face
like salty rain.
Where death is King
And I am his Queen,
yearning for his deep embrace,
my words like dry husks
whispering our secrets
to the dark.

No one else keeps me here.
There was no need
to swallow seeds
or spit them out.
I will rise again
and again
triumphant,
like a rocket
consuming air,
bright as the sun's corona
turning on the wheels
of my own engine--
dark and light
ice and fire
death and glory
burning too fast to care
such wild rejoicing always comes
with Hell to pay.

Mary McCarthy / Edgewater, Florida

The House / Beth Paulson

In the attic bedroom
 of a house built in 1905
two windows still face east
 into the perch of the morning sun
where my three young granddaughters
 lie asleep under their puffy duvets
the color of summer sherbets.

One, the oldest, stirs and turns,
 first to step out onto
the old hardwood
 to search for school clothes
in a closet under the eaves,
 stoops to fit under its doorway.

The youngest follows next,

chattering barefoot down
 then back up the creaky stairs.

Sunlight's moved far as the pillow
 of their sleepy sister who rouses
reluctant from an alcove nest,
 head a blonde tousle.

Who shared this room before them?
 Young boys or taller ones in twin beds
who went off to war, those luckier
 to universities? Other bright-eyed
girls grown older now or gone to graves,
 their faces in a brass-framed mirror
they shared braiding each other's hair?

One night I watched Blake at fourteen
 kneel on her bed,
gently pull back one white curtain
 to look at the new moon
through a big sycamore.
 Same moon, same window.

Beth Paulson / Ouray, Colorado

*My Father Meets My Old Brown Labrador in the Elysian
Fields* / Jeffrey Bernstein

Gossamer flakes whirl at dusk
Dad wears summer-white & green

with tiny sea-blue Martha's Vineyards

He stands oblivious to the cold

Snow moon rises over far hills
tries in vain to pierce the low ceiling

Crystals glint & younger dogs race
happily through deep powder

Isabelle sweet Isabelle
please don't leave his side

as he surveys meadow & birches
the vast unbroken expanse of winter

You know yes you know

Jeffrey Bernstein / Woodstock, Vermont

She Chooses to Die in Her Bed / Jim Tilley

—in memory of my sister-in-law, 1965–2016

The doctors honored your request to stay at home in your own bed. You chose the side you've always slept on, near the window through which, when you are conscious for moments that no longer linger, you can watch the remaining leaves—everything else just branches and twigs—detach in the wind. Now you hear wings, the birds also on their way. It's the passing of fall, this final falling away, leaf by leaf, bird by bird, your body nearly weightless, skin drawn tight over bones almost porous, you light enough to be able, at last, to fly.

Jim Tilley / Bedford Corners, New York



Death Is Not Expecting a Friend but Finds One in This Poem / Roy Bentley

“A poem about death is actually a celebration of life.”
—Craig Morgan Teacher, *Poetry*

A mannequin in a spacesuit, inside a cherry-red Tesla, is cruising through space with David Bowie’s “Life on Mars” playing in a loop as soundtrack, and you still think Death showing up in person in a poem is outlandish. All right. But the scaring-the-bejesus-out-of-folks business isn’t what it used to be and so here I am sashaying around in this right-before-your-eyes arrangement of words.

The writer of this thinks he knows me. Maybe he does. If you count seeing the light dimming in his father’s eyes when I took him that November after the years with cancer. But I might as well be the visored dummy in the Tesla, a gift to the Void, for all the success he’s had so far trying to guess my weight. Somewhere in his heart he remembers the father who fixed broken things; who loved hearing Bill Anderson—

“Bright Lights and Country Music”—Ray Price yodeling or a rough-voiced Merle Haggard. He remembers the guy’s music. He remembers standing by the opened hoods of cars. Watching. The long, spiraling trails of exhaust behind and reverberations of a motor revved after repairs. Remembers being looked at like he was me—black-robed Death—if he dared speak up with questions or call out over the thunder of shared life.

I do hate inserting myself into his memories. This poem. But if he aspires to see the world, he has to start with me. Chalk up my entrance here to the art of not giving a fuck. If you believe that, you trust that Elon Musk and I know the same people. Work different sides of the same street. Me, I go around fervently pissed off at having to do this. But relax. I left my scythe and judge’s robe in the Jeep.

Roy Bentley / Pataskala, Ohio

La Femme / Gary Wadley



Gary Wadley / Louisville, Kentucky

Step Up / Bill Griffin

Sometimes when I've made you mad I step back
into the corner beside the bookcase
and watch the two of us eating supper,
the minutes elongating as if our little conflict

is approaching the speed of light,
fork clinks dopplered, dubious red-shifted
sun peering in at the window, silence until
that me sitting across from you

clears my throat and mentions
something inane I heard on the news that makes you
purse your lips, point out the fallacy,
and from over here in the corner I wait to see

if you will push on with the argument
over there between bites while beside me I notice
your *OED* and Latin primers, my *Wildflowers*
of the Southeast in two 5-pound volumes,

photos of all the dogs we used to love and
all the grandchildren we still do
and when I look back again
you are telling me something funny

that 3-year old Mia said this afternoon
so I step away from my corner and sit back down
with myself and let me out to join us
because it's not just your ounce of Riesling

that has us laughing now in real-time
but the subtle joke of forty years
plus just about every other crooked thing
we've shared and poked and wrangled

even if it sometimes seems in different languages
and genres and species and I hadn't forgotten
when I stepped apart there's no one else
I'd rather have mad at me than you.

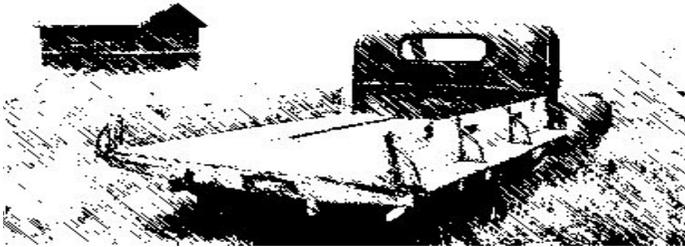
Bill Griffin / Elkin, North Carolina



Luce Divina / John Muro

A summer day of rain has ended and
the sun's dissolved into a smudge of
halo, otherworldly colors swelling
then extending into chromatic wisps
that curl back into the softer folds and
back-lit channels of cloud while birds,
heart-plucked, fall to a breathless silence
as if in awe and the trees, dew-kindled,
dream of flight and seem to glisten as they
stretch upwards to gather, draw down and
don the last of this divine light that has
somehow been swept through an opening
at the bottom of heaven's door or else drifted,
like incense, through an unlatched window.

John Muro / Guilford, Connecticut



Midnight Prayer / Lisa Yount



Lisa Yount / El Cerrito, California

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. To this end, we proudly announce the Fourth Annual George Dila Memorial Flash Fiction Contest.

We are thrilled this year to have as our contest judge, Ron Koertge. Ron grew up in an agricultural area in an old mining town in Illinois, just across the Mississippi from St. Louis, Missouri. He received a BA from the University of Illinois and an MA from the University of Arizona.

A prolific writer, Ron began publishing poetry in the sixties and seventies in such seminal magazines as *Kayak*, *Poetry Now*, and *The Wormwood Review*. He has published more than twenty books of poetry so far, and his poems continue to appear in independent poetry journals. His recent books include *Yellow Moving Van* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), *Olympusville* (Red Hen Press, 2018), and *Vampire Planet* (Red Hen Press, 2016). His collection of flash fiction pieces, *Sex World*, was published in 2014 (Red Hen Press).

Mr. Koertge was a faculty member for more than 35 years at Pasadena City College. He also taught in the MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults program at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Ron is the author of many celebrated novels for young adults, including *Coaltown Jesus*, *Stoner & Spaz*, and *Shakespeare Bats Cleanup*.

Ron and his wife live in Pasadena, California, in a house featured in one of the most famous horror movies of all time.

Ed Note: Mr. Koertge's selected winning stories are followed by three stories he cited for Honorable Mention.

Judges Commentary / Ron Koertge

In a workshop decades ago, the teacher wrote three words on the board: vitality, wit, and surprise. “These,” he said, “are what you need to keep in mind when you’re writing fiction, and especially Flash Fiction.”

Well, yes and no. As I read dozens and dozens of short pieces, the ones that relied heavily on surprise quickly faded away compared to flash fiction that was vital and witty.

If I had to pick one quality that draws me to the best of micro-fiction, it would be this: unforgettable details. I’d also add that usually the best Flash pieces for me are -- and I forget who said this -- “true to the pacing and music of daily life.”

The three pieces that captured and held my attention during weeks of reading and re-reading all stayed with me whether I went to the store or made a g& t for my wife. I was glad to see pieces that were -- as David Kirby once said -- seriously funny, since humor is sometimes brushed off as glib or merely entertaining.

I admired “Ursula K. Le Guin’s Relationship with Legos” for its intriguing and quirky investigation into a speculative fiction icon and I hope the author will write about more authors’ relationship with Legos, a “toy” that encourages imaginative thinking.

“Uncle Grendel” made me laugh out loud every time I read it. I love to see classics turned on their heads and shaken to see what will fall out.

The author of “Product Review # 9, 235 Vacuums All-Day Long” addresses our ambivalent feelings about electronic devices by concentrating on a robotic household appliance to treat the classic themes of sadness and loss in a memorable and affecting way.

Ron Koertge / Pasadena, California

Ed Note: The three stories are equal winners. We do not award first, second or third places in our contests.

Ursula K. Le Guin's Relationship with Legos / Connor Dalton

Ursula at the Typewriter

Ursula believes in the power of stories.

Stories offer ways of exercising empathy and discovering profundity in the quotidian. She wakes early, rife with anxiety, and sits down at her desk, for that is the hardest part. She takes a deep breath and types the most ridiculous sentence she can conjure.

“Because you can only go up from there!” she says. “And afterwards, regardless of the quality of the work, I always feel more settled.”

#

On Lao Tzu

“Lao Tzu’s approach was to ‘be like water.’ This way is not to be mistaken for being passive but as a mindset for accepting reality as it is. You know when you force things, and you kind of know you’re trying to force things? Well, that is the opposite of what Lao Tzu means when he says to ‘be like water,’ because water wouldn’t try to force things. Water is just water.

“Along the same vein, he also said, ‘the Master acts by letting things take their course.’ This idea of action via inaction has always fascinated me. I find paradoxes to be the clearest indication of the truth of the nature of life.”

#

Ursula’s Relationship with Legos

Ursula asks her son, Zach, while handing him a dish to dry, what he does to cheer himself up when he is sad. He dries the plate with two rags, as if turning a car’s steering wheel, and replies that it is funny, but he buys a Lego set, builds it, and that seems to cheer him up. Usually.

“It’s funny, but I buy a Lego set and build it. That seems to cheer me up. Usually.”

#

A Friend on Ursula

“Ursula Kroeber was the life of the party! One memory that stands out: unfortunately, we’d lost touch over the years, but I remember on the Saturday before my seventieth birthday, she showed up, out of nowhere, with a group of our high school girlfriends and a bottle of champagne, tequila, and a crock pot on my doorstep. Hah!”

#

Another Friend on Ursula

“She was austere. Quiet. Thoughtful. Not one for parties.”

#

Ursula at Breakfast with her Husband, Charles

Ursula enjoys her toast burnt and her coffee black. Rye is preferable. She scans the newspaper. One headline grabs her: AUDIE MURPHY AND 5 KILLED IN PLANE CRASH.

“Oh, goodness.”

“What, dear?”

“Audie Murphy and 5 dead in a plane crash!”

“Horrible! Such a hero.”

Ursula, nods, butters her toast, and takes a bite. She sips coffee

.

A Walk with her Dog, Molly

Ursula pulls up to the park near her house. As she gets out of the car, she notices a young man struggle to move from his wheelchair into a car, with the inadequate assistance of an older woman. Two short stumps flail out of the passenger seat while the older woman, presumably his mother, assists him. After the woman helps the man into the car, Ursula sees her grimace, maybe from exerting energy to help her son into the seat. The kind of grimace made only by a woman who has lived a hard life and who, as caretaker, is reminded by the absence of her son's legs how hard life will continue to be.

Ursula continues down the path with Molly, who zigzags like a lightning bolt, tail flipping to and fro, ahead of Ursula. The smell of pine is ubiquitous, and Ursula breathes in deeply the rich oxygen. She and Molly approach a bench with a view of a green pond where Ursula sits and unleashes the dog, who chases dragonflies around as frogs jump from one lily pad to another. Not a human soul save Ursula is around.

She feels the beauty of the present moment.

Ursula Grieving the Death of Her Husband

Each night Ursula watches the light in Charles's eyes go dimmer and dimmer.

"It's like watching the tide go out."

She breathes in the stale air of the beige room and holds his hands and studies his face for traces of life, traces of the man. She sighs and thinks that nobody and nothing prepares you for the day in day out night in night out grind of watching the ones you love most die meekly while you try to accept the inevitability of mortality.

At the funeral it doesn't rain, and Ursula is irritated because she wants to provoke the sadness, embrace the cliché so her tears are indistinguishable from rain droplets on her face. At seventy-five, she is still embarrassed to be seen crying in public. Instead, she and everyone else watch each other cry and stifle sobs as Charles's coffin is lowered six feet under.

The next day Ursula buys a Lego set and assembles it in her living room with her son and afterwards they observe the completed project in silence. It is a fleeting monument to the fleeting life of Charles and all lives that are fleeting, fleeting, fleeting.

#

Her Son on Ursula's Love of Adventure

"She loved the Japanese gardens in Portland, but when I asked her if she ever wanted to explore Asia, she told me she'd never cared to visit. I found this puzzling because of the adventurer I'd always figured Mom to be, and, of course, there was her lifelong fascination with Taoism. So, I pressed her. She said as she got older, sometimes she preferred to imagine what she hadn't seen."

#

Family Portrait

The photographer is still preoccupied with his camera. Ursula grabs Charles's hand, squeezes it, and smiles at him. He winks back. Young Zach is laughing, wriggling in front of them. The rain drums on the studio's rooftop. She thinks of how pleasurable the experience is. The collective family mood is content and grateful. There is nothing more to ask for.

This, only this.

Connor Dalton / Brooklyn, New York

Contest Winner

Uncle Grendel / Kevin Broccoli

We're supposed to call him Uncle Grendel, but my sister will not.

"He is not an uncle. He is a monster who has taken over our house."

I tell my sister that while I see her point, that doesn't change the fact that our mother has fallen for a descendant of Cain, and we should try to support her.

"I mean, we're technically *all* descendants of Cain, aren't we," my mother asks me on Thanksgiving as I'm shoveling dead frogs onto a plate for Grendel, "So I really don't think any of us are in a place to *judge*. Your father was a distant relative of Ted Bundy and I still loved him--until he left. Grendel has been such a comfort to me. What with my two children never visiting or calling or--"

One of the frogs lets out a croak, and my mother hits it hard on the head with a rolling pin. My mother who once nearly fainted because a spider crawled up her arm at a barbecue is expertly impaling an amphibian right in front of me with a smile on her face.

My sister isn't the only one irritated by Uncle Grendel's position at the head of the table. My grandfather grumbles about how *he* used to sit there before my father came along, and now that Dad has fled, he should get it back. My mother explains to him that Grendel *has* to sit at the head of the table, because if an Anglo-Saxon warrior bursts in and tries seeking vengeance, we need someone with experience to protect us.

"And what if we side with the Anglo-Saxon," my sister asks, letting me know this holiday will not be a peaceful one.

Mother informs her that invaders are no laughing matter--even on days that are devoted to the pilgrims. My sister says that the pilgrims were invaders, and my mother gets mad and tells my sister to go to her room, but she can't, because it's been turned into a skin-shedding module for Grendel, and so my sister takes off in her old Ford F-Series. My mother retrieves her plate and asks if anyone would like an extra frog.

Grandfather is asleep at this point, so he misses the grand entrance of Uncle Grendel's mother, who apparently was *not* invited to Thanksgiving after she and my mother got into it on the phone over who would be throwing Uncle Grendel a surprise birthday party this year. Yet here she is, and none too ashamed to be crashing our holiday.

"That woman thinks she can do whatever she wants just because she's been alive for thousands of years," my mother complains to me in the kitchen while she wrestles the miniature sea monster Uncle Grendel's mother brought for dessert onto a platter and cleavers it into submission.

Uncle Grendel's mother comments on the decor of the house by setting the parts of it she doesn't like on fire using the dragon she's brought along with her. Once after-dinner cocktails have been served, we all put on some home movies. An annual favorite of my mother's is my third grade birthday party, wherein I went to Chuck E. Cheese and wet my pants in the ballpit.

After the film, Uncle Grendel suggests that we all go around and share our gratitudes.

My mother listed him as the main thing she was grateful for this year. There was no mention of her children.

Grandfather said he was grateful that he won't have many more Thanksgivings left, as he's never cared for them--both because turkey gives him heinous gas and his daughter is now throwing her life away on a walking curse from God as opposed to just the putz known as my father.

Uncle Grendel listed my mother as the person he was most grateful for this year. He mentioned their fortuitous meeting at a local swamp where she was cleaning up litter as part of a beautification program started by her French Cookbook Club. He had contemplated unhinging his jaw and swallowing her whole before he noticed how soft her hands looked, and the next thing he knew, he had slithered out of the water and asked her out for coffee. She was taken by him right away. The sheen on his scales. The way his matted fur curled up around his eyes. The poor duck still trying to wriggle free from his back teeth. She had never met anything like him, and upon

hearing their meet-cute told by him for the fortieth time, she found herself getting misty-eyed all over again and had to leave the room to go cry at her own good fortune in the skin-shedding module.

When it was my turn, I had a hard time thinking of what to be grateful for, but I settled on the food we had eaten that was sufficiently, if not lovingly, prepared. I said I was grateful for how happy my mother seemed, and how lucky I was to be able to come home for Thanksgiving this year.

When I finished, I turned to Uncle Grendel's mother and indicated that it was her turn to share what it is she's appreciative of this year.

In response, she let out a belch that covered most of the couch in what appeared to be an acidic blue venom, and her dragon, acting quickly, set the liquid aflame, while we all looked on awkwardly. The couch was my father's favorite place to sit. I could see the heat overtake the dent where his posterior had rested so many nights after a long day's work at the trampoline park.

"I think I'll pass," said Uncle Grendel's mother, seeming to enjoy the lovely crackle of the fire now spreading out steadily in front of her.

We all sat there basking in the light of the fire. I felt what I thought might be indigestion, but I didn't say anything.

It would have been rude to ruin such a lovely moment.

Kevin Broccoli / Johnston, Rhode Island

Contest Winner

Product Review # 9,235: Vacuums All-day Long / Shelly Jones

Vacuums All-day Long

Reviewed in the United States on January 12, 2017

Verified Purchase

My wife bought me this vacuum for Christmas. It took us a while to get it out of the box and read the instruction booklet. Val and I were impressed as the vacuum wandered around the house, mapping out the table, radiator, and bookshelves. Eventually it seemed to sniff us out in our usual spots on the couch, slowing down as it made its way closer, so as to not run over Val's toes. We let it run as long as it can before needing to return to its nest to recharge. Do dodododo do DO! The robot sounds triumphantly, proud it has found its way to the docking station in the dining room. When it's ready again, it will resume its path throughout the house, learning our trouble spots, avoiding them in the future.

Update: January 30, 2017: What a marvel this robot is! Especially as we've grown older, stiffer with our aches, unable to clean up as much as we used to. Val is particularly relieved and takes the opportunity to nap while the robot cleans around her. Occasionally she'll reach out from the couch and pet it as it comes near. The cat hisses in jealousy and sulks in another room until the robot is done.

Update: May 27, 2017: Sometimes I sit with the robot on my lap and clean its bristles while we watch Jeopardy. The cat's hair or a stray piece of Val's yarn tangles up the roller and I have to cut it gently with her sewing scissors. We wait for the hospital to call with an update, but the phone never rings. I plunk the robot in its dock and fall asleep in my recliner - the robot's blue battery indicator lights flashing, filling the darkness.

Update: December 18, 2017: The robot picks up everything: dust, crumbs, cat hair, the browning lily petals that have fallen from the arrangements covering the dining room table. Occasionally it will accidentally eat some of the blanket ends that dangle from the couch, and then it growls until I come untangle the wool from its teeth. It's even swept away some pieces of mail, hiding them under the sofa or behind the bookcase as if saving me from having to read another sympathy card. I watch it weave along the floor and wish it were casting a spell, an incantation, that could magically bring Val back.

Update: December 26, 2017: I wake up to a crash in the middle of the night. The microwave flashes an impossible time of 00:00; a snowstorm must have knocked out the power. The cat is growling at the vacuum wandering around in the dark, bumping into furniture. It can't seem to sleep either now that Val's gone. I tuck it back in its cradle, fix the time on the microwave, and stumble back to bed.

Update: February 10, 2018: Sometimes I sit on the floor next to its docking station, and see my house from a totally new perspective. There's cobwebs in between the chair rails in the dining room, a few inches of bare drywall where we never finished the molding, a cat toy stuck beneath the refrigerator that the vacuum can't reach. I tap my fingers lightly on its casing, and think of Val. How often did she ask if we could do something new, take a different route home from the store, or explore those streets we've never once been down even though we've lived here all our lives? What would she say if she saw me here now on the floor? The robot sighs, its battery fully charged, and I stand up once more, unsure what to do next.

Update: April 27, 2018: In my efforts to downsize, I've been cleaning out the attic. I found an old home video of Val from when we were first married. Val laughs on the television, head thrown back, eyes shimmering. She hands me a dust rag as I hold the video camera, telling me to start cleaning before guests visit. At the sound of her command, the robot chimes and comes scurrying into the living room, expecting to see Val there. It slows, searching beneath the coffee table and chair. Eventually, it whines and spins in the room, empty of Val, disappointed.

Update: June 12, 2019: Doo doo do DOOOO, the robot cries, spinning in the middle of the living room, unsure where it is. Sometimes, I stand behind it, trying to give it a sense of place, my body reminding it of where it is, what it was doing, what path through the house it had intended on traveling. It purrs in recognition, charging forward, its bristles sweeping cat hair and dust under it. But a few minutes later it is whining again, lost. We return to the couch and watch Jeopardy together, but somehow the questions seem harder, more obscure. I shout out to Val for help, but she doesn't seem to hear me, probably busy sewing something, my voice drowned out by the thrum of her machine. I pluck the dust

from the robot's bristles as we continue to watch. I'll ask Val tomorrow about the questions.

Update: October 24, 2019: The vacuum died in the night. This morning it won't budge. I place it on the docking station, but it just falls into place with a sickening thud. No melody plays. No lights greet me. We sit on the couch once more and wait for Val to come home. She will know what to do, I promise the robot. She always does.

307 People Found This Helpful

Shelly Jones / Oneonta, New York

Contest Winner

This Alien Body / Doina Tonner

It's July and the air is heavy with the shadow of the walnut tree swaying outside your window. You are nine or ten, and your body is growing in all the wrong directions. Your waist is getting thicker, and your breasts are spreading downwards and under your arms, and your thighs rub together raw when you wear dresses or chew holes through your pants when you give up trying to look like a girl.

You are taller than most of your friends and, in photos, you look like a different species. Most of the time, you feel like you are from a different place, an alien looking for a way back to its world. Even though your skin and hair are similar in color to everyone else's around you, inside you carry a heaviness that in your mind makes you stand apart. You feel out of place and foreign and odd and this heaviness spills out in your growing body

So when boys yell things at you as you pass them in the street, when men begin to look at your chest while talking to you, when girls ask you questions you don't know how to answer, and when you are afraid to go home by yourself because, under the stairs, you might run into your neighbor, the one who put his hand down your pants and pressed his lips so hard against yours that his tongue escaped into your mouth, you are relieved that your parents don't notice anything and have no idea that at night, you bury your head deep under the covers and hum the only prayer that your grandma has taught you loudly enough to drown the jeers that follow you from the school yard all the way home and are waiting for you whenever you step out in the street as if to remind you that you are not of this place *whale, whale, whale*. Maybe you do belong under water where sounds are muffled and bodies glide weightlessly and words don't slice through flesh.

You continue to play hide and seek with the other girls although you never choose to hide inside your apartment building anymore, not since that man covered your mouth with one hand while digging between your legs with the other. You sit on the front steps with your friends and try to guess each other's crushes and talk about movies and sing songs by Bon Jovi and Oasis. You put on plays for your families and in all the photos your parents take you stand to one side staring wordlessly into another world, beyond the camera, beyond

everyone's head, beyond the rigid bars of this cage they call your body.

What you really want to do is leave this world behind and take off like a bird, higher and higher, until you are nothing, just a black dot in the sky, incorporeal and sublime, an idea, a musing. Yet the only thing you can do is let your long hair cover your face, ask your mother to buy you loose tops, tie your sweatshirts around your waist, hunch over as you walk to and from school, and feel more and more like a nothing moored to this place by your only too real corporeality.

And isn't that just the paradox of your life lived in the space between being and not-being,

feeling invisible and too seen at the same time,

intact while completely broken

voiceless, yet loudly begging, *I'm here.*

You don't know it now, but you will take all this with you into your teenage years, the haunted eyes, the harried scuttle, and a body that by now has found its shape and invited more unwanted touch from which you will only find relief in a fistful of pills that will allow you to fly like a bird and disappear into the sky, while behind you, boys' mouths will open and close, but by then you will not care that they no longer say *whale*, but *wow*.

Doina Tonner / Macau

Honorable Mention

December 15 / Julie Zimmerman

Friday, December 12

Dear Aunt Joan,

Monday is getting closer, my day of freedom! I am so sick of looking at these dirty cell walls with their chipped paint, so sick of the smell, the noise, lost property and backed up toilets. After 23 years, I'm so ready to be free of all that. You're a sweetheart to offer to drive all the way up from Galveston. Even though I told you that you didn't have to come, I'm glad you'll be here. Today I'm packing up what little there is worth keeping. Mostly I want to tell you how grateful I am that you've always been there for me when the rest of the family wrote me off. You never refused a collect call, and I'd read your weekly letters over and over.

Thank you, and I guess all I can say is – see you Monday.

All my love,

Allen

Saturday December 13

Dear Karl,

Well, the big day is almost here. I wanted to take this chance to say thanks for sticking by me. I know my Aunt Joan couldn't pay all my legal fees, but you never dropped my case even though it must've been tempting. I'm sorry for all the days I was in a pissy mood and took it out on you cause no one else was willing to listen. You must've been tempted to tell me to fuck off and go find another lawyer, but you always stayed calm. You taught me how to keep my cool. That will come in handy cause my heart will be racing Monday.

Thanks, Karl, for being a good friend as well as a good attorney.

Sincerely,

Allen Hughes

Saturday, December 13

Hey Dad,

I know you've washed your hands of me, but I want you to know I don't blame you. It's important you also know that the guilt for my crime has always been with me. The newspapers always say, "The defendant showed no remorse." That's crap. My lawyer told me not to react, but mostly, the guilt was so thick around me, it seemed that everyone in the courtroom should have been able to see it. I don't blame the victim's family for cheering the guilty verdict, and I don't blame you for not being there. I just wanted you to understand that I'm sorry, sorry for what I did and sorry for hurting you.

I'm enclosing this one picture of Mom that I've kept on my cell wall these past 23 years. Aunt Joan said it was taken the summer before she died. I thought you might like to have it.

Your son,

Allen

Sunday, December 14

Dear Father Matt,

I'll see you tomorrow, but wanted to slip you a note in case I can't express my thanks properly. For the past eight years, you've made me laugh more than pray – does the Pope know about that? Ha! That last joke you sent about how different religions would deal with a squirrel in the attic had me laughing so loud, the officers thought I was losing my mind. You never preached when we got together, which I really appreciate since I told you when we first met that I don't believe in God. The guy before you didn't want much to do with us atheists.

When you sometimes asked me if I wanted to pray with you, I always said no, I'd rather talk about things outside this hellhole. Thanks for understanding that's what I really needed. Now I wish I'd prayed with you cause it would have made YOU happy! Ha!

All the guys in here are lucky to have you. Your prodigal, grateful friend,

Allen

Monday, December 15

Sweetheart,

Today's finally the day, but I have time to write you one last letter. There's not a lot to say except I love you. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me and you've made life in this box bearable. I know you wanted to come, but that drive from Amarillo to Huntsville is just too far. Also, there's no way I want your last memory to be me strapped down on that gurney while people outside the walls celebrate my execution. My Aunt Joan will be there so I plan to keep my eyes on her face the whole time. If you're ever in the Galveston area, maybe you can look her up. I know you two would get along.

Sweetheart, it's almost time to go. Father Matt will be with me, so I'll be fine. He assures me there is no such thing as Hell, that we humans do a fine job of creating Hell here on earth. He also said that I'll be standing behind God watching out for those I love. So if you feel you're being watched --guess what!!

Smile when you remember me, dearest. Please be happy.

Your Allen

Julie Zimmerman / Topsham, Maine

Honorable Mention

In honor of Brian Baldwin, AJ Bannister, Clifford Boggess, Karl Chamberlain and Billy Hughes

Muted / Sophie Liebergall

As the cornices of the row homes grated the edge of the summer sun, I fled my parents' home. I loved them. And I loved family Sundays – with a steady, doubtless kind of love. But goddamn, they were loud.

I fled the story of cousin Mikey's new girlfriend, which they all tried to tell as a syncytium of sorts, their versions colliding in destructive interference. I fled the bad 90's music that weaved through the Phillies game broadcast on the flat screen in the den. I fled the crunching of corn chips and hard pretzels and trail mix and ice cubes. Even my mom's final goodbye echoed down the narrow house like the announcement of a royal exit.

And as I passed through the scabbing green door into the curdling summer heat, I tore out my hearing aids and shoved them in my pocket.

In my deafness, the serrated sounds of a busy block were dulled. Their constant contest, settled. This new muteness: billowing, soft, pastel. In near silence, a construction van glided over the potholed concrete. A man in an Eagles jersey screamed something across the street, unaware that I was buffing, sanding his words.

I had gotten my hearing aids at the urging of my mother when I was sixteen. "You don't know how much you're missing," she had said. "You don't know how much I'm hearing," I had said. I had dreaded the public proclamation made by the little brown box behind my ear and the little white wire in front. "I didn't know how much I was missing," I had thought, as I drove home from the audiologist, hearing the for the first time the clicking of the turn signal and the crackling of a Jolly Rancher wrapper in my palm.

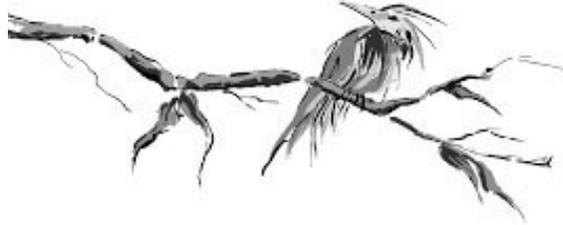
Teen girls in tattered jean shorts swept the sidewalks, arms laden with shopping bags, their high-pitched squeals of youth dulled to furtive whispers. Bocce balls ricocheted in the corner park with the softness of grapes. The heavily-inked crew from the record shop had spilled out onto the street, obscured in a cloud of stale cigarette smoke. They looked shipwrecked and strange sans their usual soundtrack of screeching metal.

“You don’t listen to the TV so loud anymore,” my brother Jordie had said. “Fuck off,” I had said. “You know, you used to really look me right in the face when you talked to me. Especially when we were in a group of people or something. You don’t really do that anymore,” my friend Mel had said. “I wish you had told me I was a total fucking weirdo before this,” I had thought.

The sun’s fingers recoiled from the city blocks. My fingers traced the edges of the thirty-five cents in my shorts pocket. The scent of urine as it baked in the sun was oddly sweet. I popped my hearing aids back in so that I could listen to an old Swans album. At worst, they served as some really swanky Bluetooth headphones.

Sophie Liebergall / Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Honorable Mention



Dwindle / Annie Stenzel

Isn't the word almost friendly to your ear?
Maybe endearing, as though the accent
is on the diminutive? Use the word
when the blizzard *dwindles*: people are grateful.

Not so when what dwindles is hope. It's hard
to wave farewell to health, or a steady
income, or the prospect of fine times
with one's beloved, cheek by jowl, on a jaunty

walk through a world not yet marred by
the inevitable. Oh. Now you remind me: the planet
screams, spits, burns with indignation at all our
affronts. How soon will we be shown the permanent

consequences of our heedlessness? Say goodbye
to the sweet, the green. Because the inevitable
does not dwindle. Its bags are always packed
with necessity. What's unavoidable

marches through our ranks wearing a pall,
ready for anything except an alternative.
to the sweet, the green. Because the inevitable
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Annie Stenzel / Port Richmond, California

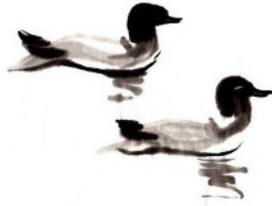
The Addendum of Color / Emily Christie

A crimson leaf pile near the street drain
has a picture of reasons for you to skip down the walk,
to continue and go with the momentum of color,
with the jolt and the bolt and the addendum of color,
the bold big blue staring from above
boasts of quadrillion pixels and a frame rate of love,
you'd buy that TV.

Good news comes walking arm in arm
like two best friends hollering your name,
they waited till you got close enough to say
they waited till you could see them to say
“Hello, we wanted to surprise you!”

And the dark, dark room
and the pile of reasons in your sink to stay away from good news
and the shudder, and the curling in on yourself like an iron,
they lose sound like those old silent movies in black and white,
and you run and go with the momentum,
the jolt and the bolt and the addendum
of the color of laughter and red, red leaves,
and you say, “You did, you surprised me.”

Emily Christie / Omaha, Nebraska



Unclothed by Death / Elya Braden

In Judaism, we are taught to name our children only
after dead relatives. This honor said to shine a light

on their thin existence in Sheol, that vague anteroom
to the Judgment Day. But superstition warns: if you name

your child after a living relative, the Angel of Death could be
confused, take the child instead of the grandparent, uncle, second

cousin once-removed. We feast on superstitions, toss salt
over shoulders, knock wood, leap over cracks, refuse to write

the name of G-d lest we raise the ire of *Blessed Be He*. And still,
cancer burrows into breast, bladder, throat; COVID rattles

its branched and many arms, tracks our breath, that tether
to the world that is, into our lungs, invites its relatives, multiples

and divides us into sick and well, believer and non, pro
and con, truth and lie. Last year erased a generation

from my chalkboard of personal history: father, mother,
beloved aunt. Now, I number their days, count the promise

of my years, unaware I wore their presence
like a mantle of forever.

Elya Braden / Oxnard, California

Treasures / John Grey

In the field,
just before sunset,
amid cricket chirr
and distant frog croak,
in the shade of a boulder
and a clump of trees,
the deer nibble on grass.

From the trail,
in a heap of shadow,
the sight of wild creatures
is a source of silent awe,
despite the number of times
I've seen the deer,
at this time,
in this place,
doing exactly what
they're doing now.

I spied a bobcat once.
It was a moment to treasure.
But treasure need not be uncommon.
It works just as well as a daily occurrence.

John Grey / Johnston, Rhode Island

She Remembers Her Sister Petting the Belgians / Lonnie
Hull DuPont

as they stood teamed, large and regal,
their harness like the pelvic bone of an ox,
the oiled leathers, noisy shoes, blinders,
Oh look, Sister, she heard, and how the duo
tossed their grand heads, snorted, twitched
their ears, everything about them in motion,
the alfalfa a sweet dry fragrance, the sun,
Oh Sister, she heard, *don't they shimmer?*



When March Roars in Like a Lion / Lonnie Hull DuPont

ice crushes the cedars,
the deer take what falls,
and yet the air is sweet,
spicy sweet, even as
she still breaks ice for the horses,
as she braces against the wind,
as she waits for the lamb.

Lonnie Hull DuPont / Jackson, Michigan



We Do What We Must / Robert Okaji

How to reconcile
the German in me

with the Irish, the Japanese,
and those birthrights I cannot claim?

Cleaning the bathroom,
I twirl the toilet brush, curse in Italian,

and consider cooking Szechuan beef.
Sponges make me laugh

in French. Rice is *gohan* in my house.
I often say potatuh instead of potato,

and then there's tomatuh. I may mispronounce
Parmesan, but never *parmigiana*.

In Hawaii everyone looked like me
but I drawled like a true Texan

to avoid a beating. I say *domani*
when putting off chores,

but dishes must be done immediately
after dinner and during meal prep.

My mustache is red, as are some of my eyebrow
hairs. I am a man of many shirts, many excuses

and contradictions. I prefer washing by hand.
Spüli, I say, when filling the sink. *Spüli*.

Robert Okaji / Indianapolis, Indiana

At Ocean's Edge / Joanne Durham

as the last lip of wave licks her feet
a twelve-year-old picks up a conch,
shows it to her grandmother, standing
close with familiar ease. Fingers linger

on its fanned smoothness. The older
woman rolls it over, jagged edges
missing their spiral core. With a sudden
jerk, the girl laughs, *Oh, it's cracked!*

and tosses it back into the sea. She's just
this week the taller of the two. Beneath
the brim of hat that used to shield
them both, the grandmother sighs,

foreseeing crashing waves
that make treasures of broken things.

Joanne Durham / Kure Beach, North Carolina



Cemetery Math / Peter Yaremko

Each time I visit her I juggle
numbers to figure out
how long she's been gone.

Even set in stone it's not
static. Addition, subtraction and
the years separating us multiply.

My own name is already chiseled
next to hers. Birth date there, then
a dash —

and the baleful space awaiting
an insertion: the fated date of
my future demise.

I was never good at math.
The dwarfed legs of the hypotenuse.
The cosmic value of pi. Numerators,
denominators, one above, the other below.
Each a mystery. And me, in my dotage,
still solving for x .

Peter Yeaemko / New Haven, Connecticut

Frankie / Peter Yaremko

His true name was Frank.
But we called him Frankie
so's not to confuse him with
his father, who also was Frank.
He was a skinny pimply kid
a lot like his dad, who was pocked
from his own bad teen complexion.
'67 and the war was coming to a boil,
with the number of guys drafted
doubling each month per Johnson's order.
Frankie, too. They called it
Selective Service but they plucked him
like you would a chicken's feathers,
mindlessly, from his first measly job
right out of high school. But Frankie was
okay with it because his dad ran
the Democratic Club in a Republican town
and it was Johnson's war after all.
We gave Frankie a sendoff because
he might not ever return although
we didn't say things like that back then
and you guessed it he didn't. Like 55,000
other Frankies, we learned later.
He was a good kid, a nice guy who's
stayed with me down the decades and
I thought of Frankie again today when
I took my new pair of Crocs from the
Amazon box and saw they were
made in Vietnam.

Peter Yaremko / New Haven, Connecticut

Rumyantsev Garden Snow Creature / Diane Martin



Diane Martin / Bangor, Maine