3rd Wednesday

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Editor’s Note for Winter 2023

With this issue 3rd Wednesday enters its sixteenth year of publication. In this issue we feature poems and a few stories from 3W friends both old and new. Our all volunteer staff has chosen some great pieces for you.

Our winter issue also features some great visual art, including pieces by names you’ll recognize from past issues. Our art editor, Judith Jacobs, puts together an exceptional assortment of fine art pieces for every issue.

Speaking of staff, I’d like to introduce our newest addition. Dana Johnson has signed on as copy editor to help us snare those pesky typos before we go to print. In the early going, she has already proven a valuable asset. While she’s not exactly O. C. D., she’s the next best thing and she’s just the person we needed.

The next issue, Spring 2023, will be the annual contest issue and we are open for entries through February 15. This year’s judge is David James, who currently serves as the president of The Poetry Society of Michigan. David will soon retire from teaching at Oakland Community College. In 2006, David was awarded the Outstanding Faculty Award for teaching excellence.
Strangers and Angels / Alfred Fournier

Sometimes kings or angels, the storytellers say, appear in our gardens in peasant dress laden with the dust of many roads. And yes, we see them there from time to time, but we look through eyes bleary with long labor, having made do with bruised fruit and fallen grain. There may be little room at our table, and nothing worthy of a beggar, for we do not see the shine beneath their robes, though something soft lingers about their eyes.

You extend an invitation to the two in your garden, and they humbly accept a seat at your table. The fat one pulls a wooden box from his sleeve and places it between you. The slim one grins, sucking at his soup. When you open the darkwood lid, the box explodes with warblers. They flutter up to the rafters, where their song lifts the colored air. The strangers rise, and you see them now in their joy and glory. They thank you for the meal. The fat one presses a gold coin into your palm, and the slim one hands you the key to heaven’s gate.

Here, the storytellers would lecture you with morals. I will only say this. There are no kings, no gods, no angels in the garden, unless all of us are angels, bright golden warblers disappearing into light.

Alfred Fournier / Phoenix, Arizona
This is an ode to friends who drive 25 over, blaring the Mario Kart theme song
Who laugh with you as you cross the Mississippi, city lights and headlights and stoplights
blending together into an image forever etched into your mind
This is an ode to friends who drive 25 over so you won’t be late

This is an ode to friends who drive you home in a car named Mildred
Radio turned down the second you say you’ve written another poem
Open minds, memories made
with the friend who drives you home every night of tech week
without complaint
This is an ode to Mildred (and her driver too)

This is an ode to friends with self-described shitty memories
who can quote your poems back to you
Who decide your words are worth remembering
Who care for your creations, who edit and encourage and never let you give up
This is an ode to friends who commit you to memory, and never let you go

This is an ode to friends, fierce, free, fuck-ups forgiven, fears forgotten
Clueless kids soldiering through the painful awkwardness of adolescence arm-in-arm
This is an ode to friends, to youth, to the bonds it creates
This is an ode to us

Katelyn Caulder / Lakeville, Minnesota
Changing Trains in Jamaica / Jack Mackey

From the middle of Long Island
the train ride took me
for a Broadway matinee
with my grandmother,
meeting in Jamaica,
she guiding me through
the maze of platforms for a
transfer to the subway,
in my flannel suit
hair shellacked in place
all big-boy manners and shined shoes
wobbling gently
side to side in the dark
under flickering underground lights.

I would someday say
I saw Mary Martin sing
the Hills are Alive
from the nose-bleed seats,
melodies so familiar
I already knew every note
from the album, already
loved Broadway musicals
before I knew the cliché.
I was growing into
the disparity, vaguely aware,
aching not to be,
starting to regret, to implore
please make it go away,
the birthday wish I’d repeat
for decades.
A walk to Penn Station at sunset
she kissed me on the cheek,
checked the ticket in
my pocket, left me to get
back alone—finding my way,
changing trains, pleading for
the car to jump the track.

Jack Mackey / Rehoboth Beach, Delaware
Along the Edge / Tyrean Martinson

Along the edge of sea
Under rolling waves, from the wet sand,
A jet of water comes from under my feet,
    A shock of wet
Warning to step away from an oyster’s home.

I do not dig, because I didn’t come for dinner.
I leave him there and wade
    Out further
Until the waves crash against my thighs.

My toes are nearly numb
But I can feel the grit of sand
    Sifting and wearing,
Promising to smooth my goosebumps and troubles away.

I hear and know the thrumming rumble-crash
Of all the sea all around me, against me,
    piercing and persistent,
Tugging and pulling, even as I resist, for a moment more.

But I see a sailboat, drifting as if the ocean is tamed,
Sails out, boat upright, slowly crossing line of sight,
    As if the sea is a playground of ease,
When it is untamable power and might.

I envy their moment, their peace. I wonder at it. Wonder if I could
have it, again.

I haul my heavy legs against the current,
My feet sinking into the sand as the water
    Yanks it away,
Leaving sinkholes that cause me to stumble.
I break free of the water into the biting cold of the air,  
Sand and saltwater clinging to my legs,  
A reminder  
That the sea leaves a mark, the temptation of its embrace.

Tyrean Martinson / Gig Harbor, Washington
Brooks Bay / Lucy Mitchem

Drawing by Lucy Mitchem / Portland, Oregon
The Stoop / Lisa Taylor

A fresh coat of white paint made the old door gleam. The paint covered, but did not erase the years, decades even, of older colors and prior lives. There was a bit of street grime on the edges of the decorative panels that she would have cleaned off, but still, it looked nice. The brass of the mail slot and the doorbell was clean and polished.

The doorbell was original to the building. It made that unique sound that lies somewhere between a bell and a buzzer. The woman didn’t press it, but she knew its sound. In fact, she used a similar one as her text message notification. It was a familiar, reassuring sound—though lately, it often belied the news it delivered.

Hoping that she wasn’t attracting anyone’s attention, the woman paused, vaguely remembering a short story she’d once read, “El recado.” In the story, a woman spends an entire day waiting on the doorstep of a man she loves. Was it a wasted day? A cathartic day? She didn’t know. She, however, did not have the day to waste. She wondered if she should simply slip a note through the mail slot and be on her way. She recalled the satisfying click of the mail slot flap as it closed, and the soft whisper of cards and letters swishing through the tiny opening into the delicate waiting basket below—each delivery filled with the promise of good news or fortune. It was quaint and comforting in the days before text messages began bringing their cold, truncated news. Was the basket still there? She couldn’t tell, but she thought she might be able to see the courtyard. It used to have a pear tree. It seldom bore much fruit, but the pears it produced were sweet and juicy, as if the tree were making up for in taste what it lacked in size and abundance. She peeked over the edge of the wrought iron railing on the side of the porch. She could see the tree, and she spotted a ripe pear on a higher branch. Perhaps no one had been able to reach it, or perhaps no one cared about the tiny Seckel pears anymore.

She contemplated the door again and pressed her finger into the doorbell. She heard the familiar buzz in the distance. She waited, hungrily.

Lisa Taylor / St. Augustine, Florida
Ancestry cries out from the pavement where hopes were dashed like skulls

when freedom was exchanged for civil rights. We never knew we were bound

until we realized what we struggled against was a noose.

Every twitch pulled the knot tighter until the ground cried out for justice

and we met it with our best efforts not to look as dead as we felt.

But we were thwarted, our bodies twerking side by side
to the amplified treble of self-deprecation. The bass became our base,
drawing us closer to the break beat, beating and breaking us into submission.

Our mothers' prayers become the chorus leading to the refrain of the soft thud

of mounds of earth tossed against our crowd-funded caskets

as we are interred in the family crypt. We keep crypts rather than our brothers

privilege pain over peace and the beat goes on.

Denise Ervin / Detroit, Michigan
Face / Ken Weichel

Collage by Ken Weichel / Benicia, California
Wonder Dog / Richard Luftig

Technically, she’s sixteen
if you believe the folks
at the local pound
who said she was a year old.
Trouble is they always say
that every dog there is a year old

unless you say in advance
you’re looking for an older
dog and then they’re always ten.
Anyway, we’ve had her
for fifteen years and if Lucia
actually knows how old

she is she’s not talking.
Maybe it’s because she can’t
count that high but doing the math
I figure she somewhere between
115 and 122 in people years
which my daughter quips

is also my age—but that
is a subject for a whole other poem.
My daughter also says
that Lucia has completely given
up her will to die. Anyway,
the pound people also told us

she’s a chocolate lab.
But when I looked up the breed
it said that labs are highly intelligent,
ferocious watchdogs
and great hunters. If that’s
the case, then Lucia

is definitely not a lab.
I’ve searched high and low
but somehow have not found
a specific breed whose traits
are to sleep all day, sniff
and pee. Her favorite activity

seems to be sniffing
telephone poles in order
to learn the latest poop
going on in our dog
neighborhood. Think of her
as a canine National Enquirer.

And she sleeps, God knows,
she loves to sleep,
right through mailmen,
cats fighting and skunks
in the backyard. And then,
just like Rip Van Winkle

after her twenty-hour nap,
she drinks something like
a gallon of water and is ready
for her walk to pee again.
But still, she perseveres,
getting up each morning,

walking, sniffing,
doing her business
and making me smile
as I leave each morning
on my drive to work
preparing to do mine.

Richard Luftig / Pomona, California
It was new when we lived there, decades ago. My brother tells me everything looks just the same, a note of awe in his voice. I search, surprised to recall the street address. Up comes an image of that family of five’s home: brick three bedroom, one-and-a-half bath ranch. I find the differences first—gone the rambling roses on a redwood trellis shielding the small front entry; these shutters, white as dental veneers, post-date us. Still, he’s right: there’s an eerie sameness. No doubt in back I’d find the square gray slab of concrete. I think of my mother crying over the coral raw silk curtains, custom-made for the picture window. Despite their thick lining, at night the color showed red on the street side. I think of Mother telling new people to call her “Angie,” which sounded more fun/lively than Ann or Angela. I see her crying once more, in my father’s arms, the two of them stretched out full-length on the living room couch, a shock since they didn’t normally show affection. The bruise on Mother’s arm from the same day, that she said was a burst blood vessel. It was summer when my father told me if he had it to do over, he would marry someone not blonde. As if hair color measured worth. As if my mother’s blondness were a mark against her. I was too young to be outraged. He looked so sad. Being thirteen, I thought: I would do anything for you. I guessed my mother had done something wrong. Not something with other men. More like not keeping a nice house for him, as Aunt Virginia sniffed. Virginia who ran away at seventeen to New Orleans and put store in women being “vivacious,” who kept her Garden District home in perfect order with help twice a week. Who was defensive about never finishing high school. On Evans Drive East, I shared a bedroom with my older sister. Dad went with her to buy a prom dress. It was blue, with a sheer lace overlay.
I have no other memory of her during those three years, none at all of my brother, only five when we moved there. On Evans Drive East, all the houses are in good repair. Block after block, lawns are tidy, hedges sparse and clipped. There are no trees.

Anne Starling / Jacksonville, Florida

Sleepover, Seventh Grade / Anne Starling

I don’t play with dolls anymore, I say when she wants to get Barbie and Ken out of the closet. We’re in the cool attic bedroom her father built: only children have all the luck. June says she doesn’t play with dolls that way. In fact, her mother hates the new game she caught her playing. Lightly, like everything she says is a commercial for it doesn’t matter. I’m not swayed, so she leaves the dolls closeted. Lightly says her mother tried to run her over in the garage. Floored the car so hard, June had to jump out of the way. I picture the pretty woman in the faded pink robe who sat with us in the kitchen while we scarfed Oreos. Twelve-year-olds with new training bras under our nightshirts, rosettes centered between cups. Little swells. One time, we rubbed against each other to see how they’d feel to a boy. June and her mother don’t worry me, exactly. I’m missing too many pieces of that puzzle. Still, I know what my father meant when he called me “unconscious”— intuitively— like I know what might make a mother want to murder you. I sleep soundly, leave in the morning before pancakes. Once I give up on something, I’m done.

Anne Starling / Jacksonville, Florida
Old Sycamore / Ann Privateer

Photograph by Ann Privateer / Davis, California
He folds his crisp white shorts and tucks his socks into themselves for storage in a lower drawer. He won’t be needing his twenty-three spare rackets anymore, or his over-grip tapes or terrycloth wrist-bands. He is done. He can lose track of his electrolytes now and stop worrying about string tension. He will soon drop the training ethic and the pre-match visualization of opponents’ serve-and-volley strategies. No longer will he experience the nightmares that have plagued him since adolescence of standing mid-court in nothing but red bikini underpants and holding not a racket but a length of limp garden hose with a black tulip in its mouth, a disturbing detail even his therapist never quite explained to his satisfaction. Fear of court “death”?

He checks his schedule and finds he has no trips on the horizon, no hard plans at all, and his ego reminds him that he’s more than a tennis-playing machine even if his coaches drove that into his head for thirty years, since he was a child who happened to have a knack for backhand spin. You’re a tennis-playing machine, kiddo, now charge that net.

In the dark he yearns for a tourney. He is wired to play. Nobody told him before retirement that retirement is mentally impossible when your brain has been programmed to coordinate with the extremities in a way just not called for in real life. He can smell his trophies from here.

How to train himself not to mime the pre-serve bouncing of the ball five times as he approaches an ATM? How not to work his fingers on the steering wheel the way he did on his racket handle before every point? The rocking from foot to foot while standing in line at Starbucks? The forceful vocalized exhale during sex? It’s upsetting, his girlfriend says. She doesn’t know what he means when he cries out “Fault!” at the moment of climax. Adjustments have to be made.
It will take time to be a man who occasionally plays tennis and not a tennis player who now and then behaves like a man.

He isn’t sure he’s up to it. He has considered un-retiring, like Tom Brady, but his mother cautions him that he’ll never be twenty-five again, he’ll never dominate the U. S. Open like he did in ’07, and she hates to break it to him but he might not survive the first round. Put that in your pipe, laddie. Think it through.

And yet.

He is, through and through, a tennis pro, and what is a tennis pro if he isn’t togged in whites and smashing winners? What is he inside if his insides aren’t laser-focused on the game, which is to say this moment, this serve, this point, this breath? And what is he if he allows himself to simply … fade … away?

No. He will save himself. He will do this. He’ll coach. He’ll take young tennis-playing machines and he’ll teach them everything he knows, but the one thing he will not teach them—now he gets it—is how to win. Every talented young tennis-playing machine knows how to win.

His gift, now that he knows the truth, is to teach them how to lose.

Kevin Brennan / Cool, California
The last matriarch, I inherited
the family treasures: photographs,
my uncle’s WWII medals, heirloom
hobnail cruets, gold-rimmed plates
from my mother’s life as a young wife.

Now what to keep, what to pass
onto my nieces? Antique perfume
bottles have gone to Mary, toy soldiers
from the 1940s to a nephew,
the Madame Alexander doll to Tessa.

Foolish to keep my pets’ ashes.
I study the sealed white boxes,
rabies tags taped to the front.
Where to inter their ashes?
The garden is overgrown
with weeds, the yard uneven.

I sit for hours, study a picture
of the Morganza Spillway, unsure
who will want this image of Louisiana
or the canvas with shattered branches
painted by a former student.

Perhaps I will save the German plate
my friend Josie Mae gave me, and the dish
specially formed to hold deviled eggs,
scooped sections to shelter the halves.

Stella Nesanovich / Lake Charles, Louisiana
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 Yaremko / New Haven, Connecticut
Turf / Annette Sisson

“[grass is] a shag rug laid over the scuffed floors of history.”
Danusha Laméris, The Grass, Bonfire Opera

My daughter nudges the praying mantis marooned high on the storefront window, its body a tapered spear of celery.

Below—cliffs of glass, rivers of cement, prairies of asphalt. She rifles through her bag, pulls out a bank deposit slip, slides it under the mantis, the sagging paper on the checkbook, glide-steps away, mindful as a bride processing. When she reports the tiny corner of green she found behind Target, I nod, tell her a story—the iniquities of grass.

Dazzled by Europe’s fussy lawns the Founding Fathers imported carpets of emerald: Monticello, Mount Vernon,
golf courses green as cash, diamond-cut suburbs, the decadence of irrigation. Grass, an invasive, sniffs out weeds and wildflowers, then pollen, bees, flies—the feasts of predator insects. Perhaps this history of lawns
is redeemed by its sweet blades, *fibers from the hair of the dead*. But our loves, strewn about us in acres of green, might have become mantises, feeding on pollinators, cavorting on dappled rugs of meadow, part bluestar, part dandelion.

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**Croque Madame a lá vierge / Annette Sisson**

A croque madame without Dijon—ham and cheese with no edge of tang. As joyless as a kiss without insinuation of tongue, no lover’s mouth—twang of peanut butter, zest of bright naval orange, the deep pungency of plum. Just a pile of bread and meat, a dry smooch beggared of lust, crumbs on a white cloth, stainless and flat.

Annette Sisson / Brentwood, Tennessee
Last Love Note / Mark Madigan

By the time you find this little note tucked inside your favorite Austen book,
I will, finally, have been called home.
Perhaps, for a moment, you’ll be shocked—
and will, in a fluster, snap the book shut—
but soon you’ll know this is only a brief hello left in a place I knew you’d return to
to say how much I loved our simple lives together the days we spent
doing small jobs about the house or reading away a late summer’s day and the comfort I found in the sound of your footsteps treading the floors of some other room when we were the only two at home.

Mark Madigan / Springfield, Virginia
Puffin Rock / Phyllis Green

Drawing by Phyllis Green / Portland, Oregon
Everything I Need / Julia Knowlton

I have an unread book
made of soft cotton,
leather and thread.

I have the black ink
of unwritten words,
unscented white wax,
smoky candle wicks.

Every day I have a sky
wider and wilder
than any idea of sky,

my very own broken stone
of love, and keys of memory
made out of cloud.

Julia Knowlton / Decatur, Georgia
My Move / Richard Widerkehr

Our father grows old and walks slowly now, so I let him set the pace. He says, *Soon you’ll be beating me at chess*. The night is cold, and I am thinking how the force of combinations drives his steps, as his left foot strikes the pavement like the weighted chess piece on stone tables in the city park, where as a child I watched him and the old men play. Now he drags his right foot up as though reminding me that it’s my move.

*My end-game isn’t good enough, I say.*

*It takes time, which you’ve got plenty of.* The winter stars are brilliant in the bitter air. Through dark branches years are blowing. Someday they will rise and sweep the stars like chessmen from the edge of the sky. Still our father walks one step ahead, and I keep time. Under arched elm trees in brilliant air, I make my quiet move, do not accept his gambit.

Richard Widerkehr / Bellingham, Washington
Water warmer than the air, the mist
swirling as you dip the paddle in
to navigate the narrow bend, and then

comes the throaty *check-check-oak-a-lee*
rising from the cattails. You imagine
the red and golden epaulets aflame,

like the leaves whirlpooling in your wake,
but only see a shadow flitting through
the reeds. His song will soon be gone for months,

lost to snow and ice. It is important
now to lift the paddle, let it rest
across your lap. This is the time to glide.

Richard Jordan / Littleton, Massachusetts
Race Day / Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier

Photograph by Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier / Stittsville, Ontario
in a ZIP code you’ve never heard of,  
planting Shenandoah switchgrass, smoke bush,  
and red shrub roses. Me, single-minded,  
pushing old sighs into the air, kneeling  
to help the grass seat itself around  
the stonework cottage. I plant at night.  
Me, remembering to tell you  
I don’t have the stomach for remarkable sunrises  
anymore. Me, wishing life moved even faster  
at the end: how long till the switchgrass honors  
its great height? Leaves dipped in burgundy  
rise upright even in winter, they will grow  
until by an act of force they are cut. That  
I will not do again. I want to be swallowed  
by something. Let these hipbones hide  
within the wilds I’ve willed into the last years  
of my life. The seed heads flirting openly  
with the skin of my forearms.  
Their feathered panicles suspended  
in slow-motion against a pale sky.  
I can’t tell you what it will be like,  
looking back on all the times I quit  
tenderness. Yielding nothing  
that lasts. Me, too late—  
as it goes—  
a gardener.
he clutches my wrist as we climb out into république, his arm wrapped around my canvas tote bag that read Shakespeare & Company because he tells me, repeatedly, of the thieves, the gypsies, the immigrants that ruin his paris, who seek refuge in the shadowy corners of the metro looking to exploit people who look like me, who share the strange, angular lines of my eyes.

tonight, the city looms over our figures, interlaced fingers doing little to soothe the gazes that run over my face, the angled eyeliner he always suggested i soften, because it was not tendance, because it made me seem even more like them, he would say, pointing at les chinois on the television. i’ll take care of you, he says, it’s not easy to hold a face as beautiful as yours in a city like this.

Julia Onking / Quezon City, Philippines
Learning to Cook / Alan Abrams

Ridiculous, how many wives that I’ve run from. And surrogate wives, and surrogate-surrogate wives, as Cogs would say, speaking from experience, and who, it’s worth mentioning, could drink circles around me, and moreover, could hold his piss like the truck that siphons out porta-potties. Cogs was not so much interested in me as my ragged out BMW, only marginally bad-ass, even with its unbaffled exhausts. He asked me to take him for a ride, which I did, but I took it real easy. For one thing, he was pretty bulky, and I’d already had a few wrecks with a passenger on board. One, which should have killed us both, and the other with a woman named Ilene, who I was certain I was going to bed with, before I ran us off the road. Not to mention that the bike didn’t have much oomph, even with one rider, particularly compared to the crotch rockets of recent years, with power an ordinary rider can only dream of tapping. Furthermore, my permit had been revoked. But Cogs was pleased enough to return the favor, and took me for a screamer in his bathtub Porsche, drifting all four through sharp curves at redline; me, bracing myself with my feet on the dash. Soon after, I moved in with Cheryl. It breaks my heart to look at her photo. Her only flaw was a ragged scar above her left knee (see,
I even remember which side), from when a truck ran her into a ditch. She, too, rode a Beemer, but a late model Slash Five, which I worked on at Cycle City. That’s how we met. Cheryl lived hard by the tracks, in an old building clad with asbestos shingles. To me, the freight trains passing in the night were as soothing as my mother’s lullabye, I guess because we lived in Ivy City just after I was born. You wouldn’t think to look at me back then,

that I was seeking some sort of respectability, which is why I invited Cogs to dinner. Steak, I thought, was the way to go, but I bought chuck, being not only cheap but clueless about meat. I could have served my Red Wing boots with as much success. And talk about clueless— I knew even less about making good love than cooking a good meal; that you can’t get by on your meat alone. What’s more is that my own engine—like my bike—lacked a lot of oomph. In the shame of failing to please her, I drifted away. And from many others after her, before I figured things out. Cheryl, who had by far the nicest pair I’d ever beheld—much less, held—died of breast cancer,

proving that even if there is a god, he is an SOB. Coughlin, for all I know, is still careening around in the Porsche. Me, like that lucky blind hog, finally found an acorn. And I’m learning to be a decent cook.

Alan Abrams / Silver Spring, Maryland
The Midnight Sons / Phyllis Green

Drawing by Phyllis Green / Portland, Oregon
Contemplating Frost / Terry Allen

Organizations love this poem, teachers’ workshops, business’ breakout sessions, support groups, car manufacturers, love this poem, or maybe it’s just one line of this poem that they love, the only line they actually remember or that they’ve heard from someone else because they never read the poem in the first place or were only forced to read it once in high school, under great protest, since, after all, it is a poem. And when someone says the magic line out loud, the line about taking the road less traveled, sometimes, just sometimes a choral response spontaneously sings out loud the lyrics of I Did it My Way, while attempting to sound more like Sinatra than Sinatra and still even when that happens, they don’t seem to remember, or they never knew that the poem is not about the road less traveled, because, as the poet tells us, the traveling down one road or another has really worn them about the same, but it’s really about what the title of the poem says it’s about. It’s about
the road not taken.
It’s about the decisions
great and small that one makes
to turn left or right,
to go one way or the other,
to do this instead of that,
and it’s about the “what if,”
or even the sigh of regret
that one might feel
years later about the road
that was not taken,
and maybe it’s even about
the little voice that says in one’s ear,
Perhaps I should have read the poem
and written the paper myself
instead of having my friend
Clara write it for me.

Terry Allen / Columbia, Missouri
Natural Causes / Phil Huffy

I open the window slightly, admitting a languid breeze and the opinions of a vocal meadowlark.

With unspoken resolve, Dad awaits his juice and pills; balm to both patient and caretaker.

He is now the waning crescent of a moon once brightly bold. I stroke a withered hand as the birdsongs continue.

Phil Huffy / Rochester, New York
My Late Mother Drinking Apple Martinis With J. S. Bach / Christine Potter

She’d have never admitted this is what she’d want Heaven to be, but maybe Heaven’s what you can’t admit wanting, and are simply granted. Maybe her

Heaven looks like her kitchen before we tried to fix it up so much. The drinks she’s poured into two tiny crystal cocktail glasses burn emerald in the window’s autumn light. My old friend Bea showed me how to make these, she tells Johann. He lifts one in silent toast to her, then sips. They are so...smooth, he says.

I don’t know what language they are speaking, but he does have a German accent. She’s just played The Magnetic Rag by Scott Joplin on her old baby grand—made two mistakes—but he just laughed and said Go on, go on. She opened her mouth to apologize but realized there was no need to. He says he’s met Scott Joplin—a fine gentleman—would she like an introduction? She rests her wedding ring hand on the old Formica counter with its fake gold veins, and everything sparkles in the sun. These taste just like fruit juice, Johann says. Might I have another? Mom chuckles. Just a little healthy fruit juice. I’d love to meet Scott Joplin. Ice cubes clatter in the shaker. My father’s in the living room, talking politics with somebody important and not yelling. My sister and I are in the lovely background. I’ve even managed to stay married. My mother has forgotten needing our help—or anyone else’s. She has forgotten forgetting.

Christine Potter / Valley Cottage, New York
Upstairs apartment creaky floors tilted toward the church across the back-alley scent of pipe smoke and lavender. The four of us girl cousins pack up dishes two weeks after Mémère’s death and one week after the president was shot everyone else downstairs at Aunt Dot’s our mothers making soup from Thanksgiving turkey boy cousins and uncles in the front room with TV and checkerboard too many of us all together and yet we always fit this table filled now with the dishes we are wrapping in newspaper and handing to Jane who nests them into boxes her lips fire engine red her heels kicked off as she sits on the throw rug skirt billowing a queen on her little island Bea and I in our school jumpers and knee socks Tee in flats and a blue sweater I love though it will be years before I learn the word cashmere. Rain rattles the windows voices rise from below and we are all of us here in this house as though everything is the same but I don’t even know where these embroidered towels will go or the sampler full of tulips or the tea cozy crocheted
with little red hearts as the church bells ring
for Friday Mass and Jane gives us Bazooka gum
and Tee lets us try on her pink lip gloss.
Mèmère’s plates won’t turn up again
until forty years from now when Bea and I
empty our mother’s trailer to find them
wrapped in news of assassination.

Jeri Theriault / South Portland, Maine

Skating Backwards / Henry Stimpson

fast on smooth ice that sunny morning,
pumping hard, leaning into turns
joyously defying friction and the idea
that a person must march face-forward
into the future, which eventually dead-ends…
But I wasn’t thinking of that as the pond
reeled out behind me like a movie
when my blade snagged a crack
and I flew up, slammed down
and slid on my back twenty feet.
Swaddled in thick winter layers
and tingling from my toes to my scalp,
I lay there marveling about my good luck
and the cirrus streaking the pastel sky.

Henry Stimpson / Wayland, Massachusetts
Uncaged / Lisa Yount

Digital Collage by Lisa Yount / El Cerrito, California
In The Movie / Charles Brice

It’s not truth that keeps us alive
but invention.
Jim Harrison

My father was a great novelist and philanderer who loved me deeply and died young. I knew I’d never live up to his standards. Mother was a joyful woman devoted to my sister and to me. My much older brother, Robert, left our home to pursue a career as a flautist in an orchestra. Mother always had a plate of cookies ready for my sister and me when we returned from school to our upper east side apartment in Manhattan.

When mother played the Bach Suites her string crossings were flawless and her fingers sang on vibrato, although she hinted at embarrassing familiarities with her cello teacher. My sister expressed her abstractions with a squeegee that slathered bright swaths of acrylics across her canvases. She gained the eye of De Kooning and lived, for a time, with Frankenthaler. I was a musical prodigy, performed the Saint-Sans piano concerto in Cleveland at age 12, and became close to Van Cliburn, my mentor, during my student days at Julliard.

While attending a performance of The Messiah, I fell in love with the soprano who sang, “I Know My Redeemer Liveth.” We married, but thought the world too dissonant to bring children into it due, in part, to my brother Robert’s death from a stroke during the second movement of Khachaturian’s Piano Concerto. I was the soloist and can no longer listen to that stirring piece.
It could have been otherwise. I might have been born in a desolate dusty town in Wyoming, become a prisoner of the prairie and the wind, spent my life drinking Budweiser and fixing my truck. In the long run we all end up in the ground or as a particle of ash in some pedestrian’s eye.

Now, only my sister and I remain. My soprano, silenced in her crypt, awaits her redeemer, while I, a blanket spread over legs I can’t feel, sit in this lost place without melody or rhyme, this space that assists what some insist is my living. My sister visits on occasion. Her newest painting so dark only its hidden shapes are visible.

Charles Brice / Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Tiny flowers on the plant
by my study window suggest
an exotic variety, but this

is alyssum, the ordinary white
that grew under the hedge
by my grandmother’s gravel

driveway when I was a child,
running from my yard to hers
through the gate in our redwood fence,

a long drive where I learned to ride
my bike, or crossed to go into her orchard
and climb my favorite tree,

or to visit her tenant, Aunt Grace,
who grew a marvelous fuchsia
in a hanging basket, or once in a while

to reach for a leaf from the small
bay tree opposite Grammy’s door
for my mother’s cooking, never

stopping to count all these gifts:
driveway, trees, grandmother and aunt,
and beneath tall bushes, white alyssum.

Ellen Roberts Young / Las Cruces, New Mexico
The Guru’s Response / Ben Sloan

After I asked the question, she said
your mistake is to stand there waiting
until you think you know which way to go.
At that point she stopped and stared at me,
an impossible-to-read blank look on her face.
An eternity passed before she spoke again.
What you do not seem to understand is
it does not matter which way you go since
all directions lead in the same direction.

Pausing / Ben Sloan

Taking a leisurely walk and looking up at
the high arching cavern of the night sky,
I am reminded of seeing an angry drag queen
pausing in the doorway of a shadowy, smoky bar
in New Orleans just before it is set to close,
and how, like on other nights, too many to count,
he glances back over his shoulder and wonders,
on what basis has it come to be ordained
none of us will ever be able to leave
the gated community of our frozen desires?
It’s a lovely, calm evening. His face is the moon.

Ben Sloan / Charlottesville, Virginia
All this talk about the end of the world
seems like a good idea to me. You say
superglue will do the trick, but I’m not
so sure. Sometimes when things get broken
they stay broken. You can see the evidence
of that all around us. No reason for it,
that’s just the way it is. I mean what time is it
where you are? My watch says shrapnel
in the heart muscle. My watch says
every scar is a memory. My watch says
look Ma, no hands. There is a time
for the laying down of burdens but this
is not it. Long before there were astrologers
there were stars. Get too close to a painting
and all you will see are the brushstrokes.
When you pluck a string tightened
to a specific tension it produces a note.
Play a sequence of notes and it becomes
a melody. None of this is secret, none of this
is mystery. What was dead yesterday
is still dead today.

Patrick Meeds / Syracuse, New York
There she was.

Patti, wearing an emerald green jumpsuit, entered the busy restaurant. Grayson gasped a bit, waved a hand, faked a big smile, concealing his nerves.

“Have a seat,” he said before saying hello. He stood to give Patti a hug, then changed his mind halfway, offering his awkward hand across the table, backside hovering over the chair.

Her handshake was strong, but soft.

“This is different,” Grayson said, returning his napkin to his lap.

“Not that different,” she said, “You’re still Mr. Handsome.”

Grayson blushed foolishly as Patti smiled, ordered a beer, pushed a lock of platinum hair behind her ear. Her shimmering face contrasted with a flat red lip. His gaze moved from her face to her neck, to breasts, to hands, then back to her blue eyes. Those eyes. He repressed his bubbling questions: *When did you know? Are you just on hormones? Did you get the big snip snip?* His groin throbbed in discomfort just thinking of it.

They ordered cheeseburgers, laughing over their same boring food choices.

“Remember the burgers at Sid’s?” Grayson asked, squirting ketchup on his plate.

“I remember what we did in your car outside of Sid’s!” Patti said, leaning in, biting into her burger with subtle feminine grace. Grayson wondered how long it took to perfect such things, small movements and gestures-the way one eats, sits, laughs, even the way one pushes a grocery cart or walks a dog.

“Do you still like men?” he blurted.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”
“I don’t know,” he shrugged, “When we were together, did you want to be — like this?”

“Yes.”

Grayson allowed a pause. He sat back, hyper aware of his parted legs, the squareness of his fingertips, the stubble covering his angular jaw.

“I gotta tell ya, you were a better looking man,” he said suddenly, folding his arms across his chest. Patti’s face darkened, her now faded lips pursed. They finished the meal mechanically discussing work, family. Long pauses between conversation threads. Grayson tried to fill them, realizing his mistake. Damage control.

“You still like football?” he said weakly, knee bouncing. “Remember how we watched the games?”

“I’m basically the same person, Gray.” Patti lifted a hand to wave down the waiter.

“I’ll get this,” he said. He reached for his wallet, acting out his father’s chivalric gestures toward women, holding the door for Patti as they exited.

“Give the family my regards,” she said, walking away decisively, heels clicking.

Grayson slouched to the subway, hands in pockets, ran to catch the incoming train, slipping through the closing doors just in time.

He turned to face the window and observed her, his Patrick, his first love.

Patti perched on the bench as the platform diminished. Grayson held her in his gaze for the brief second he could. She held a compact mirror, purposefully refilling her lips with a slash of vibrant color.

Maggie Iribarne / DeWitt, New York
On a walk through any community park with racquetball sports, if it’s still morning, you can’t miss it, the pickleball courts all taken by seniors getting their daily exercise. I often stop and watch, applauding the skill these older folk display. They’re a competitive lot, the ladies especially. This morning I saw a pretty woman with a red ponytail grin as she smashed a high ball away for a point. My wife tells me I should take up the game, too much time on my hands, she says, it would be a good way for you to meet new people. I would need a lot of practice first, I say—it’s been thirty years since I’ve played tennis, and I stopped because my ex-wife finally beat me when I developed what might now recur as chronic pickleball elbow. But you claim they’re ancient, she counters, and you aren’t quite there yet. Aren’t you concerned that I’ll latch onto a sexy single woman to teach me to play, I ask. We might be so good together she’d want me as her permanent partner. Don’t get carried away, she says. You’re not that young.

Jim Tilley / Bedford Corners, New York
Yellow Crowned Heron Lagoon / Phyllis Green

Drawing by Phyllis Green / Portland, Oregon
Emergence / J. S. Absher

The thunder growls as it has for hours. Distracted by the screen at first I think Tom is rolling his trash bin to the curb. But then the thunder reveals itself, rumbling too far, too high to be ours—miles up and out and still it can be heard.

Mama remembers the day my daddy-to-be stepped out of the dense undergrowth of neighbors and kin—they were cousins twice over—to become himself. She was 9, he was 16. Was it heaven’s part to know how to devise love from murder, depression, suicide?

Such was their life. But most of it was small cruelties and kindness, accidents and grace, the done to and done by making our character, a history, an art of living, a putting down on paper what we remember fondly after all.

Out of the flowers purposely planted, the uninvited weeds, the happy chance of wildflowers, the ignorant choice that turns out divinely perfect, the vagaries of weather and commitment, at last emerges the garden that chooses you. It is you.

J. S. Absher / Raleigh, North Carolina
More and Still More / J. S. Absher

I’m on my knees digging holes for new plants. The morning provides company: the trowel unearths worms from once poor soil; a millipede waddles off, black trimmed in yellow signaling danger in its dragon world: I’m beautiful—don’t eat.

Two yellow jackets shadow me unaggressively, though they, too, are marked beautiful and risky in yellow and black. They’re mesmerized perhaps into a trance of live-and-let-live by hands that dig and plant. I keep them under my eye.

The blooms of the mint are buzzing with bees. As I rise to stretch my back and wipe the sweat from my eyes, the sun clears the treetops. The garden gleams. The bees’ wings glitter among silvery leaves that can soothe the pain of a sting.

J. S. Absher / Raleigh, North Carolina
Some autumn mornings, dreamy and elusive, pull me inside out, and I feel light, heading to our pond tucked in the woods that glow yellow, even in shadows. I walk with my head down, planting each step with the ghost of balance, keeping me steady on this narrow path that snakes its way to water waiting behind a blind of red osier. The gift of water rippling in this twitching light, and I stare for a long time, seeing but not seeing the swans sleeping with their heads tucked under wings — perceiving a white feather that floats before me, drifting to graze this reflection without turning in err — not to appear more than it is, only my wish to fly as a bird does, unexpectedly.

M. J. Iuppa / Hamlin, New York
Justin tells her she does not need to look at the monitor all night. Alyssa knows he is wrong about this and right about this at the same time. There is a word for this, but she’s too tired to look it up.

He was not the one who grew the baby for nine and a half months. He was not the one who pushed her out through some combination of evolutionary instinct and sheer luck.

He was not the one who had experienced the phantom symptoms for years, the subtle ones she’d learned from friends, lightheadedness, leg pains, dry mouth. He was not the one who had felt betrayed each time she found blood in her underwear.

And now he is not the one who lies awake while the baby sleeps, watching the grainy black and white footage on the monitor, feeling like the strangest type of voyeur, letting her own breath mirror the rise and fall of the baby’s chest.

‘Sleep when the baby sleeps.’ People had said this to her like it was a miracle drug, a secret they were letting her in on for free, a life preserver for the days and months ahead.

Instead, she waits and watches. She catalogs the slightest shift, the baby’s mitt swiping the side of her face. The coughs are terrifying; some are phlegmy, but how? No new germs enter the closed-loop environment that is their home. Some seem to come from a place deep inside the baby. It is incongruent to Alyssa that such a slight creature can produce such a racking, world-weary cough after only days on this earth.

Incongruent. Maybe that is the word, but again, she is too bone-tired, too depleted to move except to push the button on the monitor when the display goes to sleep. It is at the highest setting, five minutes, and even that stretch of time goes by too fast. She is constantly clicking the little plastic panel, waiting for the display to light up again, holding her breath until it does.
Sometimes the baby is so still in sleep she panics. She wishes the monitor had higher definition. The rise and fall of the chest is so slight, nothing more than a ripple of whale-patterned swaddle.

Ah. Finally. A deep breath, a chest-rising event, a wave that crests and falls and now Alyssa breathes again, too. She wants to close her eyes but they are still glued to the monitor, still taking in this pulsing, peaceful life they created.

Justin stirs and she shifts onto her side. She glances at her phone, then back to the monitor. Twenty three minutes until the next feeding. At this point, it’s not worth the cat nap that will leave her even more drained.

The monitor clicks off and she pushes the button again.

Elyse Forbes / Eden Prairie, Minnesota
My grandmother told me
she would bounce her baby Hugh on her knee
and his eyes would shine.

Uncle Hugh
has driven the dishes
two thousand miles in his pickup truck,
carries them in with huge, callused hands,
a gruff bear in cowboy boots,
powder-blue plates and bowls
with indigo rim and a dainty sprig in the middle,
on which we ate, my grandmother and I,
that year I stayed with her.
I was twenty-six.

She was ancient.
Born before the creation
of dish-washing liquid.

She’d do the dishes by rubbing them
with her fingers, under lukewarm water.
At dawn I’d rewash them.

She reached ninety-seven despite the germs,
was gentle and stubborn,
would put her hand on your thigh
like a little comforter.

I don’t remember asking for the set,
but Hugh, with his luminous blue eyes,
says it’s mine.

Betsy Martin / Newton, Massachusetts
...and while bears were away a little girl called Goldilocks, who lived at the other side of the wood and had been sent on an errand by her mother, passed by the house, and looked in at the window.

Goldilocks isn’t even her real name. She uses it as a cover. She has a variety of other names, too…like Stefanie and Abigail. You might have just passed her on your walk earlier today.

What is clear after sifting through the versions of the story which have surfaced over time is that there was indeed a house with three bears and there was in fact a woman with needs. It might be helpful to understand why she decided to enter, and what led her to try so many different things in her search for an ending that is just right.

First she tasted the porridge of the Great Big Bear, and that was too hot for her. Next she tasted the porridge of the Middle-sized Bear, but that was too cold for her. And then she went to the porridge of the Little Wee Bear, and tasted it, and that was neither too hot nor too cold, but just right, and she liked it so well that she ate it all up, every bit!

It’s not so strange that she would hesitate with the first two bowls. She rarely posts anything herself. She mostly uses her phone to stay in touch with her mother. Her father is more talkative and calls her regularly. Her mom posts pictures of what food she ate that day. Stefanie-Abigail is torn between feelings of guilt because she is often bored with her father’s calls and oddly jealous of her mother.

Then Goldilocks, who was tired, for she had been catching butterflies instead of running on her errand, sate down in the chair of the Great Big Bear, but that was too hard for her.
Some body discomfort began when she was 13 when in gym class she heard the low voice of Susan whispering to Pamela about Stefanie-Abigail. Susan was no twig herself but seemed to be more comfortable in her own skin, or at least portrayed herself as such. Stefanie-Abigail recalled the two-size-too-small shorts Susan was wearing that day. Actually, many people noticed, including David.

It is probably worth asking which bed she will choose for herself. In fact, in the original English folk tale, the original reasons given for Goldilocks’ rejection of the first two beds was that one was too high at the head and one was too high at the foot. One man might take great care in how he dresses and in the kind of car he drives. He may be well off but she is interested in more than just that, so she will reject him as being too high at the head. Neither is she drawn to someone just because he is handy around the house or successful with promotions. If she were to agree to this then she would be settling for a mate who was high at the foot.

So frightened little Goldilocks jumped; and whether she broke her neck in the fall, or ran into the wood and was lost there, or found her way out of the wood and got whipped for being a bad girl and playing truant, no one can say. But the Three Bears never saw anything more of her.

Stefanie-Abigail wants something in particular in life. Observe her this Thursday afternoon as she enters the coffeeshop/bookstore on the far side of the campus mall. She usually spends her Thursday’s there because that is where her best friend Marcia works. After chatting with Marcia, She goes to the poetry translation section of the store to consider again whether she might pick up the new English translation of Renee Erdos’ Hungarian “Leanyalmok” poems; less for the poet’s designation of being the first Hungarian female poet to earn an independent living as a writer, and more for Erdos’ ability in that particular poem collection to get at what Stefanie-Abigail has been increasingly discovering in her own writing: a desire to catalogue and layer the female experience.
He is also in the Hungarian section, and, possibly because of their mutual poetic interest, it doesn’t take them long to strike up a conversation. We’ll leave them to it at this point. Why wouldn’t she have tried the porridge and sat in the chairs and entered the house to begin with? That’s where the good things are, for God’s sake. Shouldn’t we let her have her coffee with him in private? Doesn’t she deserve to be left alone?

Zary Fekete / Dassel, Minnesota
I’ve been walking the same paths for two years
and I see the same red-tailed hawk –
I see her often, flying from tree to tree
or occasionally swooping down and coming up empty.
Always in the same few places.

Last week I saw she wasn’t alone –
another red-tailed hawk flew to the tree where she was perched,
surveying her landscape like usual,
her head bobbing at small movements below.
That’s nice, I thought to myself,
the red-tailed hawk has a boyfriend.
Someone to fly around with.
Maybe marry.
She’ll lay her eggs
and when they hatch
they will be half her
and half him.
It’s good that she has someone to call to
through the thick branches of summer
and the bare chill of winter.
Maybe the great-horned owl I see sometimes
will follow suit and settle down, as well.

I think about the red-tailed hawk and her mate
a little too often.
I hope their eggs hatch
and the crows don’t get them.
I hope they make it to the next spring
and the next
and I hope every time she calls for him,
her man swoops in with his wings
strong as embrace
and they fly away together,
in near silence,
side by side.