



Lamp Lit

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LampLit

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A Letter from the editors

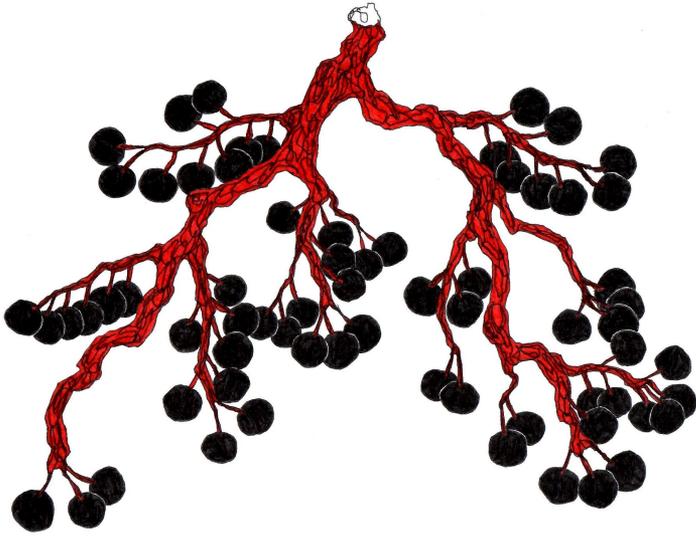
Dear contributors and readers,

As winter wanes and spring waxes, impatience for the light and the leaves seizes us, all the little joys of the world seem to be welling up like a wave on the edge of cresting. The darkness is real y'all, but light always returns.

We say it every time and it is no less true this time: we are humbled and so grateful for every single person who has sent us their work. Just the knowledge you are all out there, being humans in this climate, lights our lamps.

Thank you again and again for choosing us!

Very sincerely yours,
Jaime & Michael



Parthenocissus, hand drawn on paper with liners

Oh Robot

oh robot I wish you could see
the light of dawn buttering
buildings through the smoke
sliding up Bangkok's thighs
lemon and pink and ash
the trains like rivulets
sodden linen on a wire
a pigeon with a broken foot
air fat and sticky and hot
see the wetness of it all
undrinkable water, puddles of oil
trees sprouting green and fulgent
the disaster of human need
painted houses painted faces

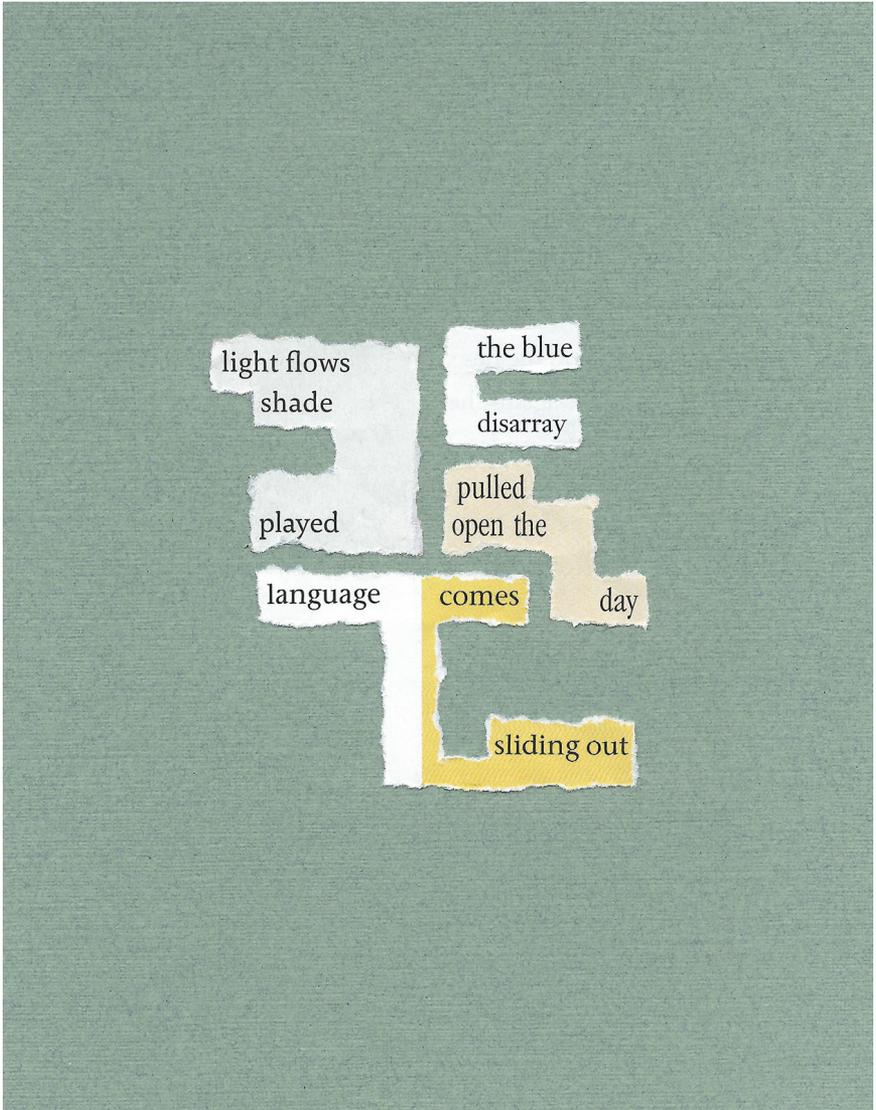
oh robot I wish you could feel
unspooling across reams of data
loosed like her long hair
the black water of her long hair
or hard like his hands signalling
there in the dawn spill, his hands
making symbols, his mouth forming
phrases of a harried day
his hands that dread to part the hair
long and black, to trace the jawline
alight on the cheek

robot do you know what I mean
have you seen the dove
dripping down from air to sidewalk
have you tasted metal, heard
the sound of eleven million hearts
breaking, every day, every day
oh robot have you seen

Tomatoes

When the first stab
of color shows
itself on the slight
ridge behind
the house, and the thin
smoke of the hunter's
fire ribbons
above the trees,
when the first glaze
of frost sings
brown the summer's
dahlias, we watch
the sun shift its
arc southward, turn our
collars high
against winter's edge
and remember: not
so long ago,
the tomatoes hung
fat on the vine,
their juice sweet as
Iðunn's apples.

Light Flows



Anaphora

In replacing an earlier subject, words can't entirely bring
Semantic peace to discourse. Besides, repetition's no
Burden among well-informed persons else cows.

What's more, it remains impossible for a melitz yosher
To appeal on behalf of the living; only G-d can decide
Whether deeds have merit or something else.

Saying "booya" doesn't really mean that I've won.
Rather, it's a verbal involtini, a wrapper of sense
That precludes miscalculations about intent.



Reflections, *digital photograph*

The Best Man Does Not Always Win Because

behind the line of tall man pines breaking wind
we played cornhole and you got ahead fast
your body rocking like the rolling flutes on a seeder,
picking up one seed after another and carrying each
to its certain drop point.

Your red bean bags hit the spot. My blue ones sprouted
in the grass like thistle weed here and there. The soybeans
in the field were our fans in the stands, we thought, blazing
in the setting sun, but the color of their team was yellow.

Maybe we were at the wrong game? Weeks ago, sixty migrant
machete-wielding field hands marched through the rows
swinging and singing and laughing to beat the band and disappeared
into the shadows. What did it matter? The field itself would soon
disappear to brown dust.

The beans, meant to make tofu, would carry a scar.
It's called the hilum, you explained, holding a seed
between your fingers. This is where they once were attached
to the pod. You explained to me the difference between beans
for food and beans for feed.

You told me how you liked to wade into the field for hours
before sundown and pull the horseweed and foxtail and be alone
like the champion who after he has changed in the locker room
goes to stand in the middle of an empty stadium
and bow his head.

You told me you were getting old and were ready to retire.
You said it was because you needed routines and there were no
routines in farming. You showed me how to change my stance
and rock forward on my other foot as I let the bean bag fly.
You showed me how to beat you.



Corn Snake Maze, mixed media: pen and ink, acrylic paint, ink wash, and colored pencil on wood panels

Old Man Writing Poems

Black skid-marks across
I-25 / a yellow
origami crane /

an old man writing poems
on the surface of a pond.

Portrait of Old Man in Camo Hat and Bermuda Shorts

For Max Adler

A white crane about
the size of a small single-
prop airplane is just

now dropping down out
of the big blue nowhere and
coming to a rest

upon what appears
to be an old road sign that's
poking up at a

slight angle from a
an eight-acre pond on a
farm, just outside of

Lyons, KS, where
a shirtless old man with an
ancient rod and reel

and a tall-boy of
Hamms, is immersed up to his
bony, Bermuda-

shorted knees (looking
positively Hemingway-
esque in his fashion-

ably floppy old
camo boonie-hat), shouting,
Hey, you boys, look at

that great, big son-of-
a-bitch!, while a cat chases
moths through the tall grass.

Road Dog

There's a coyote in town that likes to sit and watch traffic go by
He's not content with the boulevard or any of our shady side streets
Despite their ample hiding spots and freshly loaded trash cans.
Instead he waits until the pulse of evening traffic has receded
Then he trots up the freeway on-ramp near the deeper hills
Walks in the grass beside the shoulder and takes a seat.

I've never seen him challenge speeding cars or rumbling trucks
And he doesn't seem to be longing for something on the other side;
After all, if that's what he wanted he could just use the underpass
And pop up in the safe dry brush opposite the eight noisy lanes.

Those who've spotted him, his matted gray/brown fur lit by headlights
Wonder what's behind those eyes, following cars like a tennis match.
An ex- once suggested he'd had a mate who stepped into traffic;
She then turned and asked why I still felt an urge to work a high-risk job
And the discussion wasn't about our friendly local traffic dog anymore.
We broke up the following night, though I wonder what she'd say
If she knew that I still look for him every night when I drive by
And love seeing him there, gray body tucked into the weeds
And wonder if it'd be OK if I joined him sometime.

"Why Seclude Yourself and Make Life Hard?"

question asked by Savannah Dudley

Fear is the beige curtain
pulled between halves
of a hospital room.
We don't care to see
the other dying
from heartache, bullets, rot.
We want to pass alone &
at peace, bored & at peace,
cranky but at peace.
The other side forces
our facing our mortality,
not like sharks or jackals
that dine on their wounded,
thrive. It's death
that terrifies. Not ours;
theirs—those that enter &
exit our lives
like spiders.
Even to see them happy
leads to reckoning,
a type of revenge
we perpetrate
against our interests
like staring into a fire
where everything that burns
was part of us.

Nebraska Gale

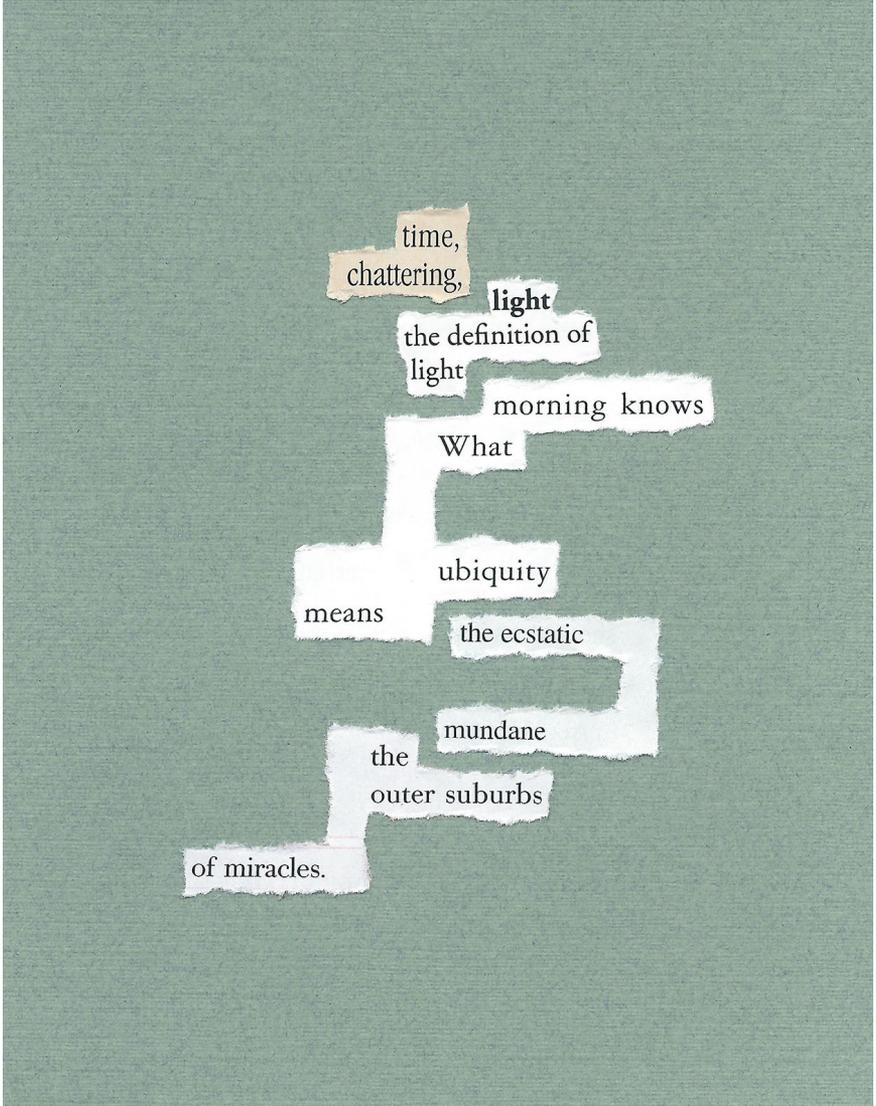
I am trading whispers with the Nebraska gale,
come-ons and classic rock and co-opted benedictions.
This sky rent and mist-gray translates each aspired desire
from its original language.

She tells me there is a time before time,
a place beyond place, to meet her there.
Now. Not five hours from now.

So I am off rereading the sacred texts,
comparing across page and volume,
praying like a thirsty penitent,
asking God if we got it wrong,
if heaven is already here. If heaven is the secret
place where she converts still air into electric wavelets.

I don't know what I don't know.
But when some word, brash and holy, tears itself from the page,
asks to be acclaimed, I wrap my voice around it.
I send it back to her along the blessed edge of the wind.

Time



Dinner for One

I read an article recently that said
people who eat alone are attuned
to some romantic ideal of either solitude
or self-love. The metaphor extends. Either
you stand against the tide of the world
or risk drowning beneath it.

Thus, either I am lonely or composed
the way nuns are composed, of stone and vigor
and solitary ways. This is the paradox, our

American road. No one can exist without some
referendum of the self. There is no neutral turn
on the path of us. Something must be consumed
in the process. A shard of the self must
be defined in the doing.

Let it be known, then, that I am hungry. That
I have never been alone in the ways that matter.

The Book Burglar

i envy who i was
before my uncle died
now i hide inside
my mattress springs
and hold onto bitterness
entirely too long
my family misses me
enough

when i was younger
i used to steal books
and never read them
whisper words in the dark
because i always talk
about myself
and i want to give them
room to breathe

We Haven't Met

They are good memories, imagined and sincere. We wonder about the spaces between things but dip through them instead on our way down below to the forest of other people's dreams and we call this travel. The signified and the soul of the jeweled unseen flapping around without a home. We build a hole, we know nothing of its contours, yet still we don't crumble to bits. Still we breathe.

*

You've never met the stranger who weekly leaves miniature cans of tomato juice in your bicycle basket. You conjure his childhood with great zeal: how your bike reminds him of seaside summer vacations. You get more specific. He was 12. He used to bully his younger brother thinking it was playing. There aren't enough food stalls or girls for his liking. Was it American music wafting over the airwaves, was he that close to the army base?

*

Your industrial strength basket a womb that white-winged-creatures he's always believed in brought to save him from drowning. He keeps the juice can in your webbed porous space where it can be seen. He has already learned that being seen can save you. He was a great swimmer, a regular fish, but he had a deep terror of salty water sloshing into the recesses of his small gasping lungs and spent hours wondering which parent would come for him first.

*

The tomato juice is a salve for his current day hangover but in its rich saltiness it also reminds him of the almost happenings of his boyhood

self, in its deep red effect a sea filled with the blood of the slaughtered unseen. Who weren't seen soon enough.

*

You stand there on the curb and leap into someone else's childhood featuring a secret basement, the precious treasure of a woman you've never met, who sends you her innermost feelings for grammar check. You send her back your slow-growing love for her country built on a fragile bed of cherry blossoms, a flower and food for every season and dangling participles.

*

Her dream: to live on a deserted island with her friends. Yes! You cry to the screen, and I wanted to live in the narrow shrub passageways between the backyards of my youth! I never managed more than an hour or two, and she and her friends couldn't get to the island, she says, though this country is one giant conglomerate of islands, many unoccupied and perfect for fantasy settlements. Anyway, a basement is more exotic than an island in a country that can dip into the ocean and completely disappear anytime, and is understandably focused on being above ground.

*

So they'd find a field or a clearing and pretended it was a secret basement. They'd bring snacks, comic books, something to drink. These are good memories. The escape from everything we spend the rest of our lives wishing to reclaim, family swapped for solitude, kinship for freedom. What did we trade the future for? Now, missing childhood with inhuman, comic book-like strength. Freedom beyond the word, our emancipation from longing.

Bumfuzzled

When stricken by confusion caused by backronyms, else
Forced rhymes, many would-be poets tend toward
Pretentious nonsense.

All in all, those taradiddles lack not just spine but also
Mother wit. They missed our original distribution of
Verbal prudence.

Consequently, allied souls lollygag among parts of
Speech. Additionally, they tarry while completing
Thoughts.

Writing's a pother to such types, a Herculean task
Meant for lesser lights with resources for "odd
Works."



Watcher of the Watchmen, digital collage

A Question for the Octopus

I wonder if the octopus ever gets confused,
down there in its coral apartment,
when one arm is busy prying open a clam,
another is tasting the water for tiger sharks,
and a third is rearranging the pebbles outside its den,
just for a better view.

It must be like trying to read eight books at once,
or carry on a conversation in eight languages
while simultaneously knitting a sweater.

Scientists say each arm has its own mind,
a mini-brain that knows how to taste,
touch and decide on its own
whether to hold on, or let go.

The central brain,
the one behind the eyes,
just whispers the general objective:
"Find food. Hide. Don't die."

The *how* is up to the committee of arms.

It trusts the arms to know their own business,
to feel their own way through the dark.

And so it moves—
each part autonomous, intelligent, and free,
yet still crawling as one fluid thought
through this deep and mysterious water.

Digs

One by one,
We watched
His gnarled compartments

Open out
Onto such suites
Of bristle and grace;

They sang not in unison,
But as if they would all be buried
In the same place.

Birdy

Make it possible to use my talents
to help the poor. Or make it possible
to reveal my poverty to others,

as I might to the ruddy woman
who feeds birds at the garnet post
with two swaying feeders.

Which birds do you have?
And she says, *Woodpeckers,*
cardinals, blue jays, sparrows.

The poor sparrows love you.
And she laughs. But now
I don't know if I told her,

or if she spoke, or if
words simply scattered
their poverty onto me

as hand-thrown seed.

Burst, Henderson Lake

for Frank Relle

Light holds an urgency at marsh's edge
only a photographer could understand.

In seconds the horizon line goes
from purple to gold to pure

blue. Bug whine fades to bird call,
waves to fin splash. Only what's

left of these cypress trees holds
steady. You have to prepare yourself

to receive this place's kindness,
or be ready to enjoy the breeze

coming off the water if you've
blinked at the wrong time

and opened your eyes
to bright, bright sun.



Thaw, digital photograph

Slip Them On

Another man forms fingers
and thumbs cut and skinned
from rear legs.

One wears
on you
like a coat

of hide. Three sisters take sin
into rolling half-moons, hearing,
I confess under all this sorrow.

Joyful the one who exhales
wisdom from the book, licking
fingering pages of landscape

quill-written as Longtalk Trail,
Soil-Sit Plateau, Wholly Heart:
wisdom God stripped from hide.

God left God's own fingers
by the fence. You can
slip them on.



Boys 'n Girls, digital photograph

Crusty

There's a photograph of me at three or four years old all bundled up for winter in a navy blue snowsuit. I have a white winter hat pulled down over my eyebrows and a matching scarf cinched tight at the neck. My head is tilted back a little as I face the camera, to showcase the cigarette I'm holding in my mouth. We'd just returned from a doctor's appointment. As was the custom, the first thing my parents did after such a trip was to grab a cigarette. This time I had beaten them to it. I rushed into the house, ran to the counter, and stuffed one in my mouth. This is what we do. It was so cute, my parents had to get a picture. Relax. It wasn't lit.

A few years later my father would remove the partially smoked cigarette from his mouth as we walked up the stairs to our front door and flick it, still lit onto the lawn. There was a good inch of it left. I thought this was wasteful, and I wanted to know what this whole smoking thing was all about, so I trotted over to the smoldering thing, stuck it in my mouth, and sucked on it. I didn't get the appeal.

I thought you should try everything once. It seemed to me that I wouldn't be a very well rounded person if I hadn't experienced as much as I possibly could. Maybe that comes from my mom and her philosophy about food. Her rule was that before you could refuse to eat something, you had to at least taste it. If you didn't like it, that was OK. My brother and I really took this to heart, ordering the weirdest things we could find on menus so that we could try them; escargot, which was basically rubber soaked in butter, and frog legs at the Lavender Inn, a fancy restaurant in a nearby town where we went for special occasions. We devoured the entire order, announcing that they tasted like skinny little chicken wings that had been marinated in mud.

My father was more of the mindset that you needed to finish whatever he put in front of you before you were allowed to get up from the table, dammit. This led to a stand-off one night over a bowl of split pea soup, which cooled and solidified in front of me for four hours while I glared at it with my arms folded. Mom was at the laundromat. She was not happy to find me scowling at a cold green block of goo when she returned long after my bed time. I still hate pea soup.

Or maybe my quest for experience came from my dad. He was always showing up with weird new things for us to explore; a computer, a VCR, a block of tofu, which in the late 1970s rural midwest was an incredibly exotic substance. The circles we moved in added canned fruit to jello and called it salad. This stuff was so alien, it might as well have been crafted on the moon. None of us had ever even heard of tofu, but he brought some home one night so we could all taste bizarre food from a far off land. We didn't know how to begin to prepare it, just sort of heated it up and took bites. It was bland and slippery and seemed utterly pointless, but now we knew.

When my parents announced that they were sending me away to summer camp for two weeks, I figured this was something I needed to try. I'd seen the movies. Summer camp was a genre all its own. People sent their kids there to become more well rounded or socialized or... rustic, I guess. The kids learned valuable skills, like canoeing and how to start a fire with the bones of dead animals and suck out the venom of poisonous snakes. They made lasting friendships and had epic rival battles with the other camp across the lake which had some bastardized Native American-sounding name. Racial insensitivity was really trendy back then.

At nine years old, my parents were sending me off. It occurred to me that they might want to get rid of me. Whatever. Those two were volatile heavy drinkers. Maybe I'd actually like camping if there wasn't so much screaming. And I'd make new friends, learn useful stuff, and be more prepared to make it in the wild should my mom and dad ever drive me out to the country and leave me there like they did the cats they didn't want. Unlike those cats, I didn't have a supernatural

built in homing mechanism that would lead me back to our house. Julio actually showed up on our back porch two days after they'd dumped him like fifteen miles away. I wouldn't be able to do that. I needed survivalist skills.

Camp Pepin was on a lake by the same name in Wisconsin. It was just like you see in those cheesy movies, except the girls were less busty (because we were nine) and the dining area carried a shockingly large selection of cold cereal. I had no idea there even *were* that many kinds of cereal. The place had a central campfire, a series of living cabins, a canoe armada, and a main building for meals, activities, and cereal storage. There was even the stereotypical hot camp counsellor named Elliot.

When I arrived, I was assigned to a cabin with a group of other girls. I introduced myself to all of them. I was a really friendly kid. I figured everyone deserved a chance until they proved themselves unworthy, at which point they would be dead to me. All the girls seemed eager to be my buddies. This camp thing was looking like it was going to be alright. But as soon as our assigned resident counsellor left, things got ugly.

There was a girl in my cabin, let's call her Marcy. I'm not protecting any identities here. It's just that I never saw these people again, so I've forgotten all of their names. Except for Elliot. His name was Elliot. Marcy was grateful that I'd offered my friendship. She was a shy, skittish girl, one of those people who gives the impression they are always looking over their shoulder. Maybe that's why she was singled out. Amy and Kelly (even if I knew their names, I wouldn't use them. They probably grew up to be litigious hedge fund managers) announced that they were the coolest and most popular girls in the cabin. This was a great honor, as there were like ten of us, even though they'd bestowed it upon themselves; sort of a king of the mountain kind of thing, I guess.

Our camp counsellor wouldn't be back for a while, so Amy and Kelly decided to test their newfound power. They got their hands on a pair of Marcy's underwear and threw it into the rafters above the door,

announcing that it was crusty. This would be Marcy's new name. They found all sorts of creative accents and intonations with which to hiss "Crusty" at Marcy. They invited us all to join in, and everyone did. Every single girl in that cabin started chanting "CRUSTY, CRUSTY, CRUSTY!" Every single girl except me. I've never been much of a follower.

I'd tried the bullying thing once, to see the what all the fuss was about. I terrorized a friend in our grade school gym. It was tedious and unpleasant and I gave up after five minutes. Thankfully we both acted like it hadn't happened and never spoke of it again. I also once tried to rip the wings off a fly, because it seemed like a stereotypical bad kid thing to do. I accidentally ripped the fly in half and felt terrible about it for years. I still do. Evil was just never for me.

I can not attest to the consistency of Marcy's underwear. I had not investigated it, and at this point I would need a stepladder or wings to do so. But it seemed beside the point. I had told this girl mere moments before that I wanted to be her friend. Calling her Crusty would be a definite breach of contract. I'm not claiming to be a hero. I did not create a barrier with my four foot frame between Marcy and her assailants, fists raised, ready to die for her honor. But I did wait with her, collapsed in tears on her bunk, until all the other girls had left for activities. I freed her undergarment from the rafters with a stick while I assured her that they were all a bunch of jerks.

Seriously. I figured those girls' parents must beat them or keep them locked in the basement or *something* for them to decide the very first thing they'd do on their vacation was arbitrarily humiliate someone else. Maybe their fathers were power brokers with trophy wives, who weighed their daughters weekly to keep up aesthetics. Or maybe they were homespun commando types whose last words to their daughters as they dropped them off at the gates were Take No Prisoners! Or maybe Amy and Kelly had just watched too many summer camp movies. Whatever the reason, I found it pretty pathetic.

My kind gesture did not go unnoticed by the self-appointed queens of the cabin. The next day Amy and Kelly were

melodramatically chummy with Marcy, as if nothing had happened, and she was their new best friend. I was puzzled at this U-turn until one of them smugly pointed to the rafters above the door. A new pair of underwear had replaced Marcy's. They were mine. In a great demonstration of innovation and originality Amy and Kelly announced my new nickname.

It was Crusty.

The chanting resumed, now directed at me

This was getting ridiculous. They were like a pack of little girl zombies or invasion of the body snatchers, all mindlessly stabbing their fingers in my direction and chanting the same damned word as the day before. She's crusty. No, *you're* crusty. It was so stupid. I'm not saying I wasn't bothered by this. These girls were downright creepy, and it was obviously unpleasant to have them all jeering at me in unison, not to mention the implication that I had some sort of alarming gynecological issue or poor hygiene. But these were *temporary* people. They weren't part of my regular life. After two weeks, we'd all go our separate ways and they'd evaporate into the mist as far as I was concerned. So I was definitely not taking this as hard as Marcy.

She probably had a stable nuclear family with grandparents who doted on her. I bet when *her* family went camping they didn't scour all the neighboring campsites for leftover firewood so they wouldn't have to buy any. She probably never listened from the living room below while her mother tried to throw her father out the second story bedroom window, screaming "I'm going to kill you" as he hollered "Stay away from me, you bitch!" If she had, nothing would have really mattered all that much. This wasn't *that* big of a deal. But maybe it was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. I didn't care. I'd lost my sympathy at this point, because she was chanting along with the rest of them, the spineless little bitch.

What if they just kept going after I left the room, unable to stop until one of them broke the spell and they all blinked and looked at each other in confusion? Then someone would quick point at

someone else, and they'd all start crusty-ing her. What if they were just locked in on me and every time I returned to the cabin their little heads swivelled and their arms rose in unison and the chanting resumed and continued into the night? I had to get ahead of this thing.

I approached it like I did most issues I faced, as a puzzle or a project with a desired outcome. I stood there pelted by a rain of crusties, running various scenarios in my mind until I came up with a three-step plan I was sure would free me from Amy and Kelly's wrath.

Step one: leave. There was no reason for me to stay in the cabin and listen to this, and I was pretty sure it wouldn't follow me outside, like the little monsters were only activated within these walls. They could keep my underwear, which was crust free, thank you very much. This was just a temporary fix, of course. I knew that avoiding them wouldn't ultimately solve the issue. I needed to do more to stamp this thing out.

Step Two: Find Elliot. Not a problem. It wasn't that big of a camp. There he was.

Step Three: Make friends. I considered myself to be quite charming. This would be a snap. I proceeded to follow him around making small talk until we were the best of pals. Or maybe not. Maybe he was just tolerating the little girl chatting him up. He was a full grown adult, or maybe just a teenager. These things are hard to gauge when you're nine. It didn't matter. I wasn't looking for a roommate, just wanted to be on friendly terms and a first name basis. It worked.

That night Amy, Kelly and their pack of minions sat down at the campfire to find me already there, reclined in the glow from the flames, using Elliot's thigh as a pillow. Amy and Kelly gaped in wide-eyed delectable jealousy as I smiled and waved innocently, snuggling down to emphasize that I was really comfy. Crusty *that*, bitches.

Honestly, I didn't even like Elliot. Not that he wasn't a perfectly nice guy, I just didn't think he was especially attractive. My tastes leaned more towards John Travolta or Denzel Washington or Darth

Vader. Amy and Kelly, however hadn't shut up about him since we'd arrived. Between underwear relocation projects they'd been all Elliot this and Elliot that, so I buddied up to him at the campfire not for me, but at them. I actually didn't find his thigh all that comfortable. I wasn't even sleepy.

Amy and Kelly were stuck. Picking on Elliot's new BFF would ruin their dreams of becoming his child brides. And since they thought he was so cool, I had just planted myself smack in the middle of the cool kids. Tormenting me any further would be social suicide. I considered this a masterstroke, which paid off when I returned to the cabin at the end of the night to find Amy and Kelly being ridiculously friendly and not a single zombie in sight.

Crusty died that night, and I was the last one. I suppose the game lost its flavor when they realized they could only think of the one nickname. Perhaps given enough time they would have thought of a new one and set their sights on a fresh victim, but we only had two weeks, and those two didn't seem terribly inventive. They shifted their focus to general camp life; their reign of terror, while unpleasant, was brief, like a herpes flare-up, with no real lasting effects. I suppose I shouldn't assume that. Maybe Marcy was scarred for life. I did not keep in touch with the little traitor. Or maybe she'd tasted the sweet rush of bullying, and there was no going back. Maybe she went home and started snapping bras in the locker room and sticking gum in hair, mad with power.

But before she did, we all came to an underwear-on-the-ground truce, and things settled into a basic congenial summer camp routine. It wasn't overly memorable. I've never been much of an outdoorsy person. I learned some skills that I would never use again, like how to tie weird knots and how to un-capsize a canoe. The *real* lesson I learned was that other kids suck just as much as the ones at home; maybe more, since *these* kids could bank on the anonymity of never seeing each other again. What struck me most was how quickly the other girls had mindlessly joined in with barely any encouragement at all, and then stopped on a dime when they lost their leaders. It's like all

you had to do was flip a switch to turn them on and off. I filed this information. It could be useful some day.

Camp Pepin was my last summer camp. I'd given it a chance, but it wasn't for me. Too risky. You never knew what kind of deviants you'd be trapped with. Perhaps other kids relished the freedom they experienced away from their parents, but this wasn't an issue for me. Between my mother's work and my father's incessant unexplained absences, I was usually left to my own devices. I returned home to my private bedroom and my cat and my warring parents more jaded, if that's even possible. While it was good to be home, I found nothing had improved in my absence. At least my underwear was safe.



Rock & Roll in my Soul, *digital photograph*

Pressure

Last night I was lying nude on my spiky mat browsing for toilet seats. That's one thing you can invest in and then take with you as a renter: the toilet seat.

But then Lorelai called, and I had to close my Amazon window because she was actually Facetiming me. I didn't mind that I was nude, but she seemed to.

"What are you doing?" she asked, raising a hand to block either her eyes or the camera.

"Acupressure," I said. "I'm trying to reset my nervous system."

"In this economy?"

I didn't reply.

"Naked?"

"It helps create more pressure from the contact points; otherwise, it's really not worth it for me."

"It looks like a torture device."

I didn't mention what having two kids looked like to me.

"Well, people have been using it forever. Through the ages, like before science. And the acupressure and mats are still around because they work."

"I'll take your word for it," she said.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Everyone's fine," Lorelai said.

After the year we'd had, it was an important way to start the conversation.

"But did you see Tracy's post?"

I had been setting limits on my social media since the New Year, which meant I was getting to bed before 2 am, but also meant that no, I had not seen Tracy's post.

"Well, she and her husband went on a cruise, and literally none of her pictures are of them together."

"It must be on purpose," I said. "If anyone knows how that will look, it's Tracy."

Tracy was our one remaining married friend. Aisha was already divorced, and Lorelai had never walked down the aisle.

"Maybe she's finally getting wise," I said, inching down my mat to readjust the pressure on my shoulders. The relentless jab of the mat wasn't necessarily comfortable; it was more like a thousand tiny tacks prodding my skin at the same time. It was very present and very grounding. The discomfort was its own kind of therapy.

"Took her long enough," Lorelai whispered.

I guess she must've heard one of her boys roll over on the baby monitor and didn't want to contribute to a possible wake window. It was dark, but it still felt early for anyone to be asleep. I had to remind myself how young the boys were. "Take a cue from Aisha. Girl has finally been living her best life."

"Trace should have known he was a psycho when he requested the middle seat on that first flight to visit her parents."

I laughed. That story never got old. Lorelai, Aisha, and I had been recounting it for over a decade by then. Which is, of course, why we were surprised Walter was still in Tracy's life, never mind ours.

"We'll see what she has to say once she checks in."

Lorelai nodded her understanding. She usually fielded Tracy's calls.

"We never should have split up for college," I said.

Lorelai again nodded in understanding. This part of our conversation was not new.

Despite Tracy's husband's psychotic airplane behavior, none of us were ever in a position to comment on it. The pair had met in college and, unfortunately, that meant the rest of us had missed the window to cut the relationship off at the knees.

When we'd all first met Walter the winter break of our sophomore year, he had been very vanilla. He wasn't pushy, or mean, or loud, or violent, or talkative, or very much of anything at all. He certainly wasn't enough for Tracy, who had always been the most vibrant and outspoken of our group. She led our plan making and party going. It had been easier with Tracy in the lead, far more fun before we all had to make space for a man; only one of us had any say in bringing him to the group. It was technically an addition, but it always felt like a loss. We would never again just be the four of us. Even when Walter wasn't in the room, his presence was as constant as our friendship had always been

I remember asking him what his favorite movie was, and his not having an answer. He wasn't a reader; that was obvious, but no movie preferences meant a real lack of interest overall. He didn't even throw the inquiry back. He was not interested in learning about any of us. I thought about mentioning it, saying something. I knew how important we were to Tracy; that never changed. But, despite the tightness in my jaw, I thought the smile on her face as she threw an arm around her beau was more important than the tightness in my jaw and the pointlessness of this man's social skills.

But when she asked us, "Isn't he great?" We had to nod. Because maybe he was nervous. Maybe they were so much more back on campus. There was a year and a half that none of us had seen. And if he wasn't robbing her bling or leaving bruises, what could we say? What right did we have, as her best friends? How could we advise her? Pressure her into anything when it surrounded a relationship, we told ourselves we just didn't understand. Who wanted to be "that" woman? We were supposed to support one another. I don't know that lying was as supportive back then as we thought it was.

"Well, at least she's finally coming to her senses," Lorelai sighed.

I still can't believe she got married in her twenties. "We hope," I added.

"She won't get her cruise money back," Lorelai continued.

"What?"

"She covered the whole trip. Just like she does every year."

"She always made more than he did."

"Exactly," Lorelai shook her head.

I knew she was thinking of the dollars she put away every month in her boy's college funds and the mortgage on her house.

I couldn't save at the moment, but I did cover my rent. It's hard to imagine how I'd feel if I, at one time, had possessed disposable income and wasted it on a mortal enemy.

"I'm so glad I don't date men," I sighed. It had taken me long enough to realize that the opposite sex wasn't what it was all about, but I felt like a real human being, perhaps for the first time, having made the realization at last. Better late than never; it was certainly what I believed.

"I'm glad I'm not dating anyone," Lorelai said.

"What happened to what's his face?"

"Oh, he's -" she made a sputtering noise through her lips.

"He didn't think I could buy my own car. Like, my uncle is a mechanic. He knew that."

"He didn't care that you were smart because he was an idiot."

She smiles at me. It's important to remind people of their strengths. Lorelai outscored all of us in high school.

I sat up and let the skin on my back tingle beyond the red punch marks I knew were there.

"Finally, I don't have to look at your boobs."

I pulled my phone back to give Lorelai a final shot of my breasts and laughed before centering my face again. "You should be so lucky," I grin. "You should get a mat," I say. "You don't have to use it nude."

"Duly noted."

"Just trying to help take care of you," I wink.

"Much better than Tracy always trying to set me up," she laughs.

"That's just her trying to take care of you. We take care of each other in the ways we know how." Tracy means well, but she just hasn't caught up with the times. "Maybe, if Walter exits, she'll stop worrying about whether or not you're sleeping with anyone."

"Why is that still an expectation?" she groans.

"Just like Walter always expected a handout."

"Right? We've known the man a decade, and he only texts or reaches out when he needs something."

"Not my problem," I say, reaching back to run a hand over the indents near my shoulder blade.

"If he had expectations of handouts from us, I can only imagine what he's been expecting from Tracy all these years. He's supposed to be her husband, not her child."

I laugh, glad, in the moment, not to have either. Despite how the rom coms on Netflix like to depict thirty-somethings on screen, for once, I am fully aware of their fiction.

I suck a long breath in through my nose. Controlling my breathing. Letting my tension ease as I leave the mat behind.

"Gram's birthday present is in the mail." I get up and make sure Lorelai only has to look at my face. I can hear the faint evening traffic beyond my apartment window. I need to pick a playlist before I start cleaning the kitchen.

"We will definitely keep an eye out for it," Lorelai says, "It better not make any noise."

I laugh with my full chest. Lorelai's eyes crinkle at the edges as she joins me. My fingers trace the indents on my back. I can feel them slowly fading.



The Sea in the City, digital collage

About our Contributors:

Jessie Atkin writes fiction, essays, and plays. Her work has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *HerStry*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Space and Time Magazine*, and elsewhere. Her full-length play, "Generation Pan," was published by Pioneer Drama. She can be found online at jessieatkin.com.

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Ace Boggess is author of eight books of poetry, most recently *Tell Us How to Live* (Fernwood Press, 2025) and *My Pandemic / Gratitude List* (Mötus Audāx Press, 2025). His writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Hanging Loose*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes, watches Criterion films, and tries to stay out of trouble. His first short-story collection, *Always One Mistake*, is forthcoming from Running Wild Press.

Mallory Ann Caloca grew up in Paso Robles, CA and graduated from California State University at San Luis Obispo with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. For the last 10 years she's been painting using mixed media, very often on wood panels. She shows frequently in the area and has been published in a number of magazines around the country. She takes commission work and has displayed in many galleries and regional museums.

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Lana Eileen is a visual artist, musician and writer. She has undertaken artist residencies as far afield as Iceland and Egypt, and exhibited her work as an artist both nationally and internationally. She has studied poetry at the prestigious International Institute of Modern Letters in Wellington, New Zealand. Her poetry has been published in *Meniscus Literary Journal*, *Sextet* and *Bear Paw Arts Journal*.

Kate Efimochkina is a writer and graphic artist. You can see her works in *Stone Circle Review*, *The Turning Leaf Journal*, *Outside the Box Poetry*, *Fixator Press*.

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Emma Johnson-Rivard is a doctoral student in creative writing at the University of Cincinnati. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Coffin Bell*, *Red Flag Poetry*, and others. She can be found @blackcattales on Bluesky and at emmajohnson-rivard.com.

J.I. Kleinberg lives in Bellingham, Washington, USA, and on Instagram @jikleinberg. Her work has been published in print and online journals and anthologies worldwide. Chapbooks of her visual poems, *How to pronounce the wind* (Paper View Books) and *Desire's Authority* (Ravenna Press Triple Series No. 23), were published in 2023; a full-length volume, *She needs the river* (Poem Atlas), was published in 2024.

Brigit Lilley is an artist/printmaker living in Somerset, UK. She does hand inked prints mainly collographs and monoprints. Lately she has been doing collages of her own hand-printed material.

Matt McGee writes in the Los Angeles area. In 2024 his work appeared in *Four Feathers*, *Last Stanza* and *Non-Binary Review*. When not typing he drives around in rented cars and plays goalie in local hockey leagues.

Mirjana M. (they / them) are an artist and writer from Belgrade, Serbia. Their work focuses on exploring the juxtaposition of various elements through mixed media of photography, double exposure, textures and light. Their work most often explores concepts of duality and has appeared in *Vocivia*, *Broken Antler*, *Spellbinder*, *New Limestone Review*, *The Fantastic Other*, *Soft Star*, *Elixir Verse Press* magazines and other places. They authored 4 poetry collections. You can see more of their work at their blog olorielmoonshadow.wordpress.com or get in touch on Twitter (@selena_oloriel) and Instagram (cyanide_cherries)

J.K. Miller is a former third grade dual language teacher. He lives on the edge of cornfields. He is the first place winner in the modern sonnet category of the 2025 Helen Schaible International Sonnet Contest. His chapbook *Bicycling Poems* was published in October, 2025. A second chapbook, *Rye & I* was published in January, 2026.

He only started submitting his poetry in 2025. His poems have been published, or will be, in shoegaze literary, Midsummer Dream House, Harrow House, Autumn Sky Poetry Daily, THEMA, Rat's Ass Review, 50-Word Stories, Verse-Virtual, Paratextos, Amethyst Review, The Poetry Lighthouse, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Up North Lit, Eunoia Review, Borderless and As Surely as the Sun. In the summer of 2025 he completed a solo 1,335-mile bicycle ride from his house to his son's house to see his newborn grandson.

Jake Price is a poet from central Pennsylvania. He spends most of his time reading his poetry to his cat - Raven - who has yet to give him any feedback. You can find his poetry and other writing at Jakepricepoetry.com or find him on Instagram at [@nolenprice](https://www.instagram.com/nolenprice)

Jason Ryberg lives part-time in Kansas City, MO with a rooster named Little Red and a Billy-goat named Giuseppe, and part-time somewhere in the Ozarks, near the Gasconade River, where there are also many strange and wonderful woodland critters.

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Tammy Stone has had her poetry published widely and internationally, and is the author and/or editor of several poetry collections and anthologies. Her most recent poetry collection is Yoga Healing Love: Poem Blessings for a Peaceful Mind and Happy Heart, and this year, she published the non-fiction work, You Are So Much More Than You Think You Are and How to Make a Movie. She's based in Canada, but her heart belongs to the world, and beyond. You can find her on Instagram [@tammytstone](https://www.instagram.com/tammytstone) and her website is tammy-stone.com.

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Kevin Winchester writes, teaches, and wanders around looking at things that he later writes about. He has an MFA from Queens University, has published a novel, *Sunflower Dog*, a short story collection, *Everybody's Gotta Eat*, and a variety of other stories, poems, and random things in a variety of other places. He lives in Waxhaw, NC.

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