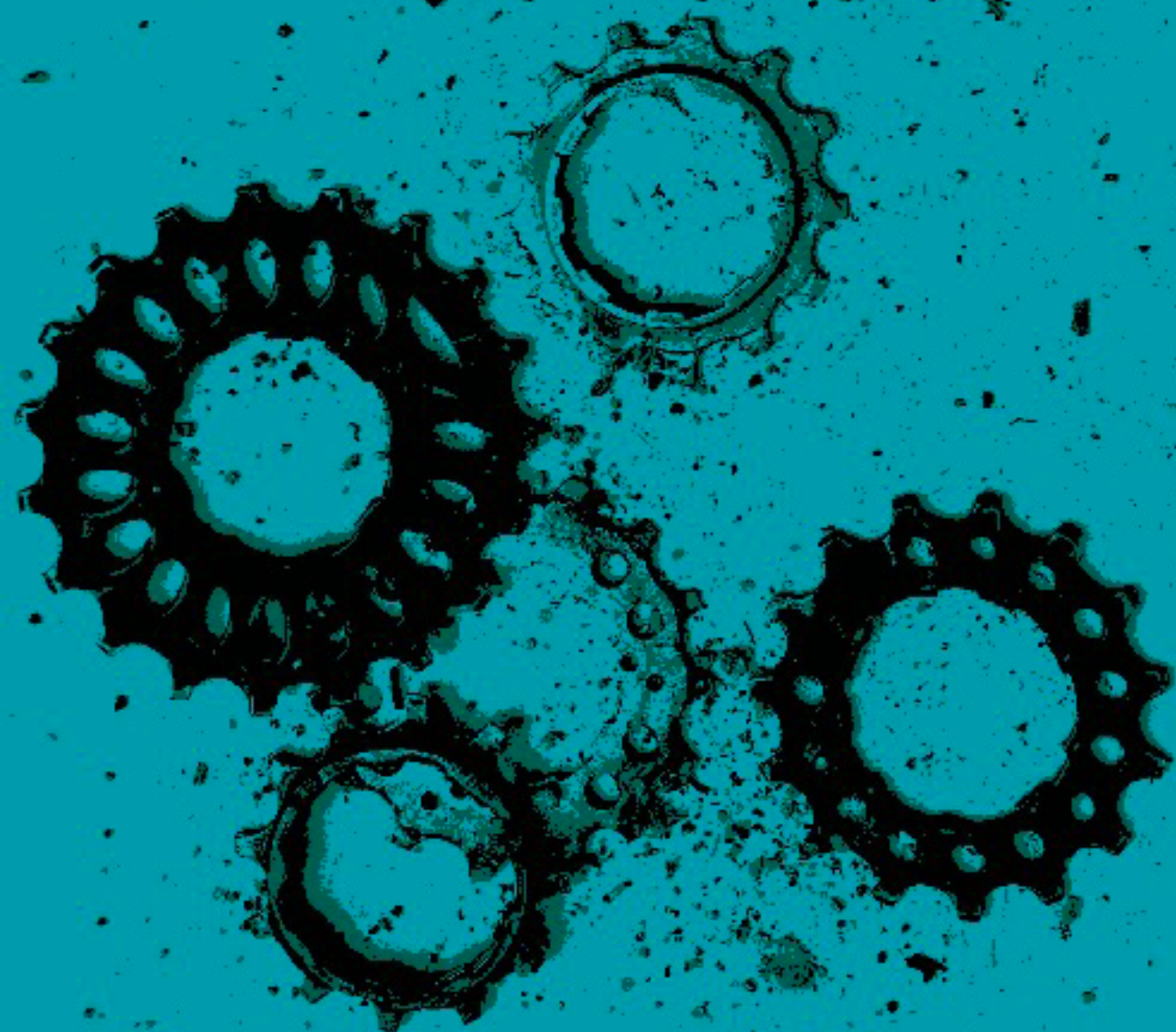
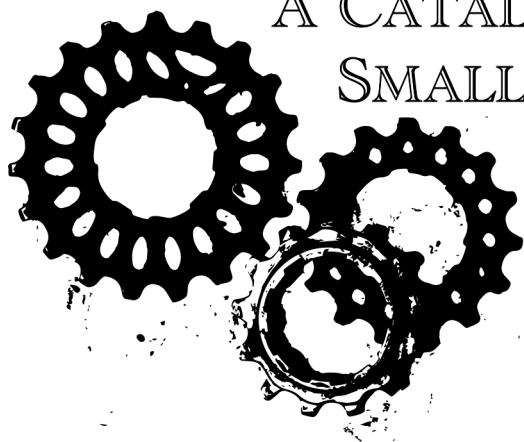


A CATALOG OF
SMALL MACHINES



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A Catalog Of Small Machines

**A joint publication of the Driftless Writing Center
and the Arts+Literature Laboratory**

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*We are grateful to **Charlie Hankin** for design help and to **The Broken Spoke**
in Santa Fe for the small machines.*



A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words.

— William Carlos Williams

How Did We Get Here?

Jessica Gilkison, Arts+Literature Laboratory

One of the first events I attended in the early days of Madison's Arts+Literature Laboratory was a "Write-In." The concept was new to me, but the announcement said something about *doing the solitary work of writing in community with others*. That was all I needed to hear. I showed up at the small building on Winnebago Street one evening to find mismatched tables, folding chairs, and an assortment of people working quietly, pens scratching in notebooks and fingers click-clacking on small keyboards. There were snacks, hot beverages, and a welcoming vibe. I got some words on the page and got a peek into what a writing community could look like. I was hooked. Over the next few years I attended as many Write-Ins as possible, the monthly gatherings becoming a staple in my fledgling writing life.

Then, in March 2020, in-person events of all types stopped. We needed to find new ways to connect around our writing. The Literary Arts team, where I'd begun volunteering, decided to try hosting a Write-In online. Inspired by sessions I'd attended with the author Tammy Delatorre using the Pomodoro Technique, we settled on the structure of a brief check-in, 25-minutes of writing, a five-minute break, another 25-minute writing session, and a brief checkout. We spread the news on social media, sent out a Zoom link to folks who expressed interest, and hosted our first session on the evening of April 28th, 2020. The best part: you showed up! And you've been showing up ever since.

To our good fortune, folks from the Driftless Writing Center attended some of the early online Write-In sessions and were soon hosting their own sessions, too, called "Connect & Write." Now we had opportunities to gather and write together a few days a week, then several days a week, and eventually every day but Fridays. We long ago lost track which organization brought a particular person into the fold of this shared community.

A Catalog Of Small Machines grew out of the enthusiasm and support of this community. During one of the five-minute breaks earlier this year, someone suggested we publish a collection of writing we've worked on in the online sessions. We get glimpses into each other's writing lives and writing practices, they pointed out, but rarely have an opportunity to share what makes it on the page.

It has been a true delight to see this publication come together. Big thanks to each of you for being part of it.

But What's The Point?

Lisa Henner, Driftless Writing Center

As one of the frequent hosts of the Driftless Writing Center's "Connect & Write" sessions, I'm often asked:

But what's the point?

Some folks, writers and non-writers alike, can't see the merit in logging into a Zoom room to perform what is usually a solo activity. There's no application or fee, no established curriculum. There are no writing prompts or assignments to give direction. And we gather ignorant of one another's credentials or background. Heck, we aren't even in the same room!

So why have we tuned-in several times a week, since the spring of 2020, to write together apart? It's all about the work.

These sessions provide us with consistency and accountability in our writing. We tune-in from our offices, backyards, kitchens, and even our beds. In the mornings we drink coffee and, in the evenings, we slurp soup. We arrive when we can and stay for as long as we like.

We are professional and fledgling writers, teachers, dads, retirees. We are fundraisers and lawyers, academics and dropouts. We are peers and cheerleaders, who show up for the act of writing, and find motivation in seeing our writing peers do the same.

We work on poems or short stories, newspaper articles, chapbooks or novels. Sometimes we craft beginnings, sometimes reel in endings. We submit our work to publishers or write a letter to a friend. Sometimes we simply journal about writing. Occasionally we even organize our desktops (the real and the virtual) to create space for the act of writing. We let our own muses guide us to whatever writing feels vital during that hour. At the close of each session we share our progress. We congratulate ourselves and one another for doing what work we could on that given day, in community. That's the point: the group makes us braver and more focused than we might be on our own.

This anthology was compiled in that spirit. It's a collection of works in progress created during our sessions—completed poems that may yet undergo revision, paragraphs of prose that describe a moment, or a slapdash of an essay that is being shared for the very first time.

We welcome you to our community, without reservation or judgment. Please enjoy our work.

The Driftless Writing Center, Inc., is a volunteer-led nonprofit organization based in Viroqua, Wisconsin, that provides literary and educational opportunities, readings and discussions, writing classes and workshops, and an outlet for the presentation of original writing by area writers. We believe everyone has a story to tell and operate in a spirit of cooperation.

Why *Small Machines*?

Mark MacAllister

It's true that the William Carlos Williams statement that informs the title of this anthology specifically mentions *poems*, but I don't believe it requires a huge leap to understand that his insight applies equally well to fiction, to memoir, to book reviews—to anything written imaginatively.

I appreciate the “small (or large) machine” image because it helps me understand that a piece of creative writing is envisioned and then purposefully built, piece by intricate piece, labored over and tested, its components replaced and re-tooled along the way.

Since I grew up in a family of mechanics and engineers and tinkerers, of farmers and fixers, it is also not a big leap for me to consider each piece of writing—each small (or large) machine, that is—to be an actual *engine*, rather than some electronic box with no moving parts, another device that merely and anonymously hums away on my desk.

A person who knows engines will, in turn, remind you that three things are necessary to make them run: *fuel*, *air*, and *spark*. Remove any of these three and any engine will sit there lifeless and all but useless.

The same applies to what we write. There must be *fuel*—this is the writer's vocabulary, the words that best fit the piece, that land correctly both in the ear and in the mouth, that challenge the reader's definitions and expectations. Williams made this point clear.

Likewise, there must be *air*—the writer's breath that forms the piece's rhythm, the cadence of each line or sentence, the use of white space, lines breaks, paragraph breaks and punctuation. The writer's breath should be evident and heard throughout the piece.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there needs to be *spark*—the big idea, the subtle idea, the leap in the narrative, that thing revealed or learned. Spark is what makes the combination of air and the fuel explode and thus drive the piece forward.

Without the correct mix of air, fuel and spark, the machine may run lean and hesitate until it stalls. Or it may run rich and sluggish, black smoke billowing behind it, until it ultimately floods and chokes out. While still technically a machine, a poorly-designed or -made one is actually something else. It is perhaps valuable in its own way, but it definitely is not the machine we need or deserve.

Whereas there are, at least for me, few things in this world more perfect than a machine that runs gracefully, quietly and powerfully—especially when it does so forever.

— Adapted from an essay first published online by North Carolina Writers' Morning Out

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The Baby Leaves

Maureen Adams

In the tiny greenhouse after the lone bee departed,
I knelt to pull spinach that had bolted, too,
an act that always feels like giving up.
The tender plants came easily in the loose loam
making space for three celery crowns
now ready to move outside from the windowsill.

When growing things
the more effort expended early,
the less oversight needed later.

I took the pile of pulled plants
and sat in the clover to harvest
the baby leaves.
The sun warmed each vertebra,
and loosened those aging joints.
Tears surface more easily in repose.

Our leavings overlapped a bit --
pulling up roots, relocating to new spaces,
finding room to refresh and renew --
all part of the cycles of life.
Without movement we grow rootbound.

So I embrace the season's path,
yet the bottom drops from my heart
when you fly back to your own gardens
more separate and distinct
than distance and latitude alone bear blame.

Our lives were once so tightly meshed,
pry to daily details,
finishing each other's sentences even.
There's a void that phone calls and
occasional visits can never fill.

In parenting well, like strategic gardening,
we sadly work ourselves out of a job.

Maureen Adams is a retired public school teacher who has lived her whole life in the upper Midwest. She has great gratitude for family, friends, and health insurance. She spends her leisure time gardening, hiking, and working to tell small stories of life and death and many points in-between.



my brain protects me from suicide

Debra Ahrens

snippets of memory bob up
squeaks of narration by Harry Caray
regaling Cub fans with play by play

of my childhood

without having access to the view

from my child's eye

the orb is muted and wound tightly
thick layers of sterile gauze
speckled where the blood seeps

red blotches on a field of white

I call it a memory, but
it is simply evidence
that a memory exists
blood inferring a wound

follow these breadcrumbs
your child left for you

she wants to be found

Debra Ahrens lives in Madison, WI in quiet companionship with her cat. Her poetry has been published by *World Enough Writers*, an imprint of *Concrete Wolf*, and her essays have appeared in *Catholic Digest* and *The Lookout*.



At the Periodontist

Jane Barnard

Dental hygienist (perusing my three-page intake form, including my sobriety date): Will it be a problem if the mouth rinse has alcohol in it?

Me (holding the plastic cup): Honey if I were going to fall off the wagon it wouldn't be from Listerine.

Today I made my next four appointments with Dr. Whoozit the Periodontist, hair like the Fonz and face like an 11-year-old Jonas Brother. I said—after all the bad numbers, after all his poking sharp instruments in my mouth and his pointing to my deep ravines on the x-rays and all his talk of gum disease and bone loss (in spite of my mostly rigorous Sonicare routine which, may I say, is the longest 3 minutes in the world)—I said well golly that was fun. And he kind-of...well—it might've been a laugh.

Driving home I thought, oh good just what I wanted: Tuesdays with Morrie, Wednesdays with Perio and Fridays, how about I pick out my grave? Implants? For that price Doctor you could at least put the implants somewhere I can get a little mileage out of them, if you get my drift.

You've seen a red hot poker haven't you? A putter-length metal prod, the red-orange tip glowing, a baleful tool brandished by some thug in a cheap sci-fi film? You surely don't envision a starchy youngster with a shock of hair falling over his unwrinkled forehead, using that poker-needle-weapon to slide between your squishy sensitive gum tissue and—(darling will you be done soon? I've got a beheading to attend).

I lean back in the plastic chair, the neck rest of which is designed for no human anatomy. An egret, perhaps. I pray to St Jude, Patron of Hopeless Causes, that the doc be done soon, or die of cholera right now. He pokes on, undaunted by my grimaces and polite moans (I save my impolite moans for the gyno and Whats-his-name). He calls out the dreaded numbers to his scribe. He's gleeful. You can always tell.

Here's a suggestion Dr: (and by the way you're not a real doctor are you): instead of announcing the Gum Numbers of Judgment (FOUR! SIX! God-forbid-TEN!) on how deep my pockets are, why couldn't you juice it up a bit? Bicuspid: "deep oh deep like the well of my true love's whatsit." Or Canine: "that one's quite a woofier innit?"

And speaking of Latin vs. Greek I might note that gum originates from old high German (may I once again say I'd like to meet an old high German) and what a lovely monosyllable it is. Even "gum disease" sounds nice if you take away the disease part, doesn't it? Whereas—stop right now—gingivitis? It's even ugly looking. Even before you open your Loser bone-loss Mouth to pronounce it. It's wrong wrong all wrong. Is not one G enough? But no. And are they hard G's or soft G's? And then after you glottal-stop on Gingi-, you are slapped with -itis which any five year-old knows is always trouble. Four syllables with no redeeming poetic value, instead of a nice round gum, with that mmm sound at the end so comforting to your ears and

to your soon-to-be-savaged-bloody poor old mouth. And speaking of deep pockets, I'll surely need them to pay his bill. (Darling, I saw that one coming.)

Jane Barnard is a Madison, Wisconsin writer. She has a Master's Degree in English and is also a visual artist and teacher. Her mini-essays in this hybrid memoir reflect her long love affair with writers and writing. She imagines a reader both erudite and tender, a reader who enjoys irreverent wit and riffs on language. And who's also moved by a journey of surviving depression and addiction with hard-won grace. The work is her spiritual punctuation in this earthly sentence, an intimate summing up of a long creative life. With punchlines.



Warner Park, early spring

Heidi Brandon

In summer and fall, the high grasses corral me into the shaved-down pathways. Today only snow crust marks the faint trail. Morning gold slants through bare branches. Ahead, a spotlight illuminates a footprint where the earth and sun melt a crater, exposing last fall's grass. Within the pool of light lies perfect death.

Wind ruffles impossible white down. I fight the instinct to look away. I remember my practice. Then, slow my breath and inch closer. I kneel on ice. The sun heats from above. I brace myself for truth.

In the warmth of the fairies shelter, wind stirs the illusion of breath.
A heaviness harnesses my lungs and settles in.
I blink once,
then open to sunlit grass and
emptiness.

Faster than thought,
The earth tilts sideways
and my eye catches an explosion of movement

Once still as death
the mass of feathers, beaks, and interlocked claws rises,
levitates,
splits in two.
And zips away from me
Raucous chirrup fill my ears.

Ms. Brandon lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her family.



Structural Violence

Damita Brown

Structured inequities produce suffering and death as often as direct violence does, though the damage is slower, more subtle, more common, and more difficult to repair.
—*Structural Violence*, Deborah DuNann Winter and Dana Leighton, 1999

In Madison, Wisconsin, the structural violence* represented in racial disparities is difficult to deny. Comparative studies consistently document drastically different outcomes in housing, education, healthcare, employment, and other areas.** When I began to provide transformative justice leadership for a small nonprofit working with a local school I found punitive approaches, policing Black youth, racism (along with other “isms”). Black youth report in high numbers that they do not feel they belong in these schools. Do they belong in schools that have yet to hire the teaching staff that reflects their cultural background, provide the curriculum that adequately includes their history and contributions or practices that acknowledge the power of Black youth voices or the depth of their brilliance?

Our organization’s approach is abolitionist transformative justice. In addition to empowering the whole community to address all types of harmful disparities, it works to eliminate specific practices of structural violence like denial, gas-lighting and policing and challenges the ways we blindly accept the impact of this violence. Fortunately, youth have been fighting to rid their schools of police and after several years of protesting at school board meetings and rallies and walkouts, they succeeded. Transformative justice is an excellent alternative. But administrators wanted us to police the halls. When we refused, they wanted us to be silent as they herded our young people through the halls. We were not. During his first day of school a “restorative justice coach” not affiliated with our team or our approach, came out of an altercation with a student with a torn and bloodied shirt. He had accepted his policing duties and had been patrolling the halls with the other new Black staff in the building. We cried foul. And for that we were dismissed from our partnership with the school.

We had offered them a clear and effective path to transformative justice. We had done the right thing. And yet it did not matter how many contemplative practice or restorative conversation scenarios we offered in our professional development sessions. It did not matter how many “democracy in the classroom” lesson plans we invited them to co-create, or how many toolkits we developed. It did not matter which modifications to the punitive practices of the behavioral education plan we suggested.

The institution we found ourselves in was one run by violence, undeniable structural violence, and it sustained itself by operating that way. We had to ask, what are the teachable moments from this horrific brush with business as usual that can benefit all – students, parents, concerned community, and abolitionists alike? As Africans in the West, we have been relating to this kind of violence for a very long time and it persists in every key public institution.

Our work defines accountability as a decision and a choice to show up for each other in ways that align with high value for human dignity, well-being and worth. It recognizes that no one is beyond the reach and care of the community and therefore enjoys an open invitation to

help make the agreements and decisions that create it. This valued input must come from students and adults alike.

The high value of mutual respect at the center of our practice is at odds with the way Black youth are policed, punished, pushed out and stigmatized. So no, we were not a good fit for this school.

We witnessed first-hand how structural violence led to physical violence. We all have to decide if we are willing to play the roles we are assigned. We all know that hiring and keeping Black educators is not a top priority. However, no matter what title is given to them, Blacks are expected to police Black youth as part of their duties in that building. When the person performing the violence is a Black administrator, should we look the other way? All mindsets that subscribe to violence are causing harm. I imagine our young people have a hard time knowing who to trust or what to believe. I think the best thing we can do is to make sure they can trust and believe in themselves. Homeschool anyone?

* Structural violence is a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. The term was coined by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, who introduced it in his 1969 article *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*.

** *Race in the Heartland: Equity, Opportunity, and Public Policy in the Midwest*, Colin Gordon, October 2019 Colin Gordon

Damita Brown is a painter, poet, dharma teacher, and activist. She spends her time creating and contributing to sustainable alternatives to systemic abuse and violence. Her education and community work focus on understanding and transforming power through introspection, creativity and collaboration. She holds a doctorate in History of Consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Currently she leads transformative action and immersive justice workshops with Flywheel Skill Share and is leading its efforts to become an independent co-op.





Signals

Paula Christiansen

I hear the man who tells me
he's drifting away
into the thin air
of pointlessness.
Anger loses its ballast.
Entire histories blow away.
But here is the plan,
I tell him.
Beauty and humor.
Beauty and humor and still,
human kindness,
the absurd devotion of small dogs,
Prufrock, the paintings of Vermeer,
Joseph Cornell boxes,
and a red-tailed hawk
circling over a pine covered ridge.
A poorly made fire
built with the pages of newspapers
that you will not read
and logs from your favorite tree
that fell on your birthday,
the tree with the white swing.
The bad fire sends smoke signals
for miles to say that you
intend to live fully
in this half-assed world.

Paula Christiansen is a therapist and private poet in Chicago who escapes to a tiny cabin in the woods near Soldier's Grove. She may never learn how to build a decent fire, but that doesn't stop her.



Wax Worms

Carl Fuerst

Dad was in hospice. He'd been sleeping peacefully, and the nurse said it was unlikely that anything would change soon, so I drove three hours back to Madison to spend a night with my wife and kids. It seemed like a safe bet. But while I was home, Mom called to say that Dad was about to die.

As I spoke with Mom on the phone, I occasionally heard Dad in the background. "Help me," he'd say

"He doesn't know we're here," said Mom. "He doesn't know what's happening."

"Help me."

A year and a half later, at six in the morning, I was awakened by a phone call. My friend was parked in front of my house. He was there to pick me up for an ice fishing tournament.

It was dark as midnight and the windchill was negative twenty-five.

"The tournament is tomorrow," I said. "You got it switched."

But I was wrong. I'd planned for the wrong date.

I got dressed and loaded equipment into my friend's car.

The last time I'd seen my friend was the previous summer, when he visited with his fourteen-year-old son. During that visit, we ate cheeseburgers at the picnic table in my backyard. We watched my friend's son teach my kids how to play basketball.

Not long before Dad died, I'd taken my kids to the nursing home. We found him sitting up in bed, alert. The TV was off. He'd been looking out the window. His view included a small drainage pond that was used by birds.

I wheeled Dad outside, to a well-kept, colorful garden. In the garden, it seemed like dementia had replaced Dad's organs with helium-filled balloons. He was fascinated by the flowers blooming in pots. He was captivated by my two-year old daughter—his only granddaughter.

"You gotta see her to believe her," he kept saying.

As the visit ended, I wheeled Dad back to his room and helped him into bed. I asked if he wanted to watch TV.

"Nah," he said. "I got my window."

I gave him a long hug.

“I love you,” he said. Then, as I walked out the door: “You gotta see her to believe her.”

Those were the last words I heard Dad say, except for “Help me,” in a strangled croak, repeated in the background of my mom’s phone on the night he died.

My friend and I trudged through the knee-deep snow on the lake. We bored a hole and arranged a collapsible shanty over it. I drove bolts into the ice to keep the shanty from blowing away in the wind. We arranged our seats, started the heater, opened our beers, and discovered that we’d positioned ourselves over less than one-foot of water. We had to move the whole rig.

By noon, we hadn’t caught anything. But the shanty was dim and cozy and we were drunk.

I asked my friend about his son.

“He won’t talk to me,” said my friend. “My best friend is gone.”

As a way of offering encouragement, I said that, when I was a sullen teenager, my dad did small things that demonstrated his interest in me. I said those things mattered a lot.

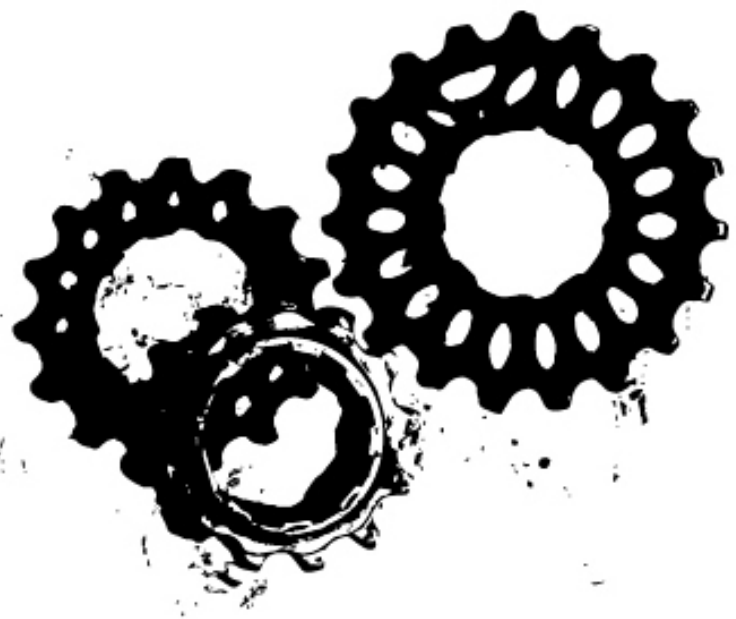
“Talking to a teenager is like talking to someone in a coma,” I said. “You just hope they hear you.”

I talked about Dad’s nursing home. The pond outside his window. You gotta see her to believe her. Help me. I talked about him for five minutes straight, the longest I’d ever talked about Dad’s death with anyone.

My friend and I had spent all day squishing grubs onto hooks, dropping them into a hole, and watching them fade into the black water, and each word we spoke was another cold, pale worm pitched into the ice, sinking in the black water, settling onto the lake’s bottom, where they spelled the name of the only thing we wanted, which is the only thing anyone wants, which is for everything to always be different, and for nothing to ever change.

Carl Fuerst's fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including *Entropy*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *F(r)iction*. His novel *The Upright Dog* was published by Alien Buddha Press in February of 2022, and his novel *The Falling Crystal Palace* is forthcoming from Planet Bizarro Press. He is one of the creators of the *Deadfall, Wisconsin* podcast, scheduled to premiere in 2023. He teaches writing and literature at Kishwaukee College, and lives in Madison, Wisconsin. He can be found on Twitter: [@fuerst_carl](https://twitter.com/fuerst_carl)





NYC, Summer 1955

Jessica Gilkison

— *Excerpt from a family history project*

Nothing could have prepared Laurie for New York City. The blazing July heat, the unfamiliar sounds and smells, and the bodies pressing forward as she and her mother Bernice exited the overnight train into Grand Central Station. Her chest thrummed with excitement.

The duo squeezed into the back seat of a hot cab and were whisked into traffic. Riding in a cab, a first for Laurie. The driver muttered obscenities at other vehicles for the entire fifteen-minute ride as he swerved in and out of lanes, his tanned arm hanging out the open window. Laurie, age seven, didn't recognize many of the words he used, but knew she would get her mouth washed out with soap if she tried saying even one of them back home.

The cab stopped in front of the Barbizon, a women-only hotel on the Upper East Side. Laurie had never spent the night in a hotel, never even been inside one before. She smoothed out her pleated skirt and took it all in, mesmerized. First, the doorman who wore a fancy double-breasted suit with gold buttons and trim and a tall hat. Next, a check-in station, followed by a bellhop who carried their luggage to an air-conditioned room. Their house back in Wisconsin did not have air conditioning. Another first.

Laurie and her mother unpacked before heading down for breakfast at the coffee shop on the ground floor of the building. Then, Bernice made arrangements through the hotel's porter for a bus tour of popular attractions that afternoon. They had just enough time to take a nap, get cleaned up, and catch a cab to the pick-up spot. In two hours, they rode through Times Square and Chinatown, and got a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Brooklyn Bridge, and other places they'd only known to exist on television or in the pages of an encyclopedia. Laurie couldn't wait to tell everyone back home that it was all real.

Then, as if the day hadn't been magical enough, Bernice surprised Laurie with a stop at Macy's department store to pick out a doll, an extravagance typically reserved for Christmas. Laurie had no idea why she was so lucky, why she had been chosen from her siblings to take this trip.

Bernice spotted a Catholic Church on the way back to the hotel. They entered the cool, dark silence, lit candles, and pressed their knees onto the hard wooden kneelers to pray. Laurie had prayers of gratitude for her good fortune. Her mother's prayers were surely different.

Back in their room, bedtime approached on the most exciting day of Laurie's life. After changing into nightgowns and brushing teeth, Bernice asked her daughter to sit down. "I made an appointment for you to see a doctor tomorrow," she said, "someone who can give us information about the problem you're having with your eye."

Confused, Laurie tilted her head. "I'm not having any problem with my eye."

Stop for a minute. Imagine. This is the last moment of normalcy this girl might know. A turning point, the intersection of before and after.

Bernice explained, “Well, honey, the white dot Mrs. Holzemer found in your eye might be serious. We came to New York to meet with a special doctor because he knows a lot about how to take care of these kinds of white dots.”

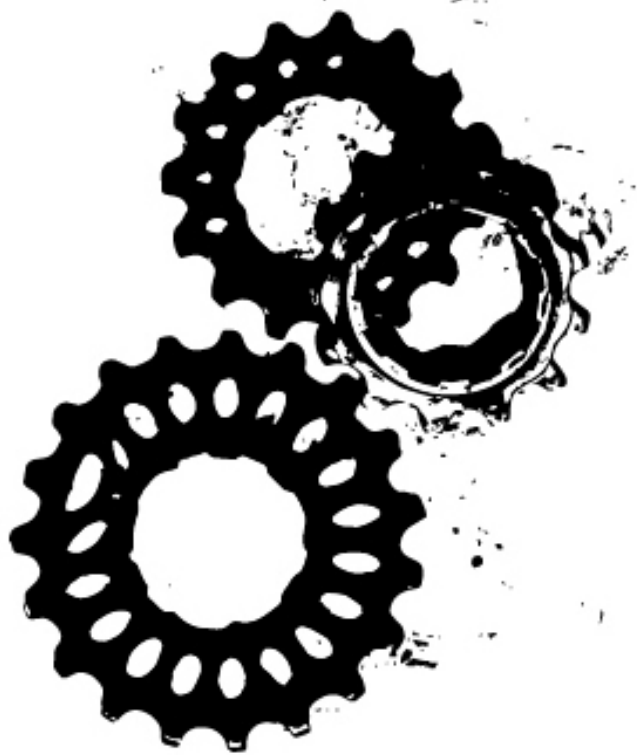
Laurie was silent as she climbed into bed. Bernice pulled the covers up over her daughter’s small body and tucked them gently below her chin. Uncertainty hung thick in the night air leaving little room for sleep.

The cab ride to the hospital the next morning felt different than the day before. Laurie didn’t notice the temperature or whether this driver was speeding or swearing. She was thinking about the special doctor and the white dot in her eye. She stared out the window and noticed how the tall buildings sliced into the sky, covering the ground in shadows. She felt small and intimidated by the city now, no longer excited. She wanted to get back on the train and go home. She was ready for this adventure to be over.

At the end of the appointment, the doctor told Laurie she had to return to the hospital the next morning for surgery to remove the white dot. He would actually remove her entire eye and also treat the cancer he’d found in her other eye, but nobody explained this to her right then. Nobody explained any of it.

Jessica Gilkison was born in Madison to a mom who showed her it was never too late to start writing. First, though, she drove the Wienermobile, went to law school, worked in health and disability advocacy, and taught graduate and professional students. Now, Jessica volunteers on the Literary Team at Arts+Literature Laboratory where she hosts online Write-Ins. She writes personal essays, flash nonfiction, and is working on her first book, a memoir. Jessica's work has appeared in the anthology, *The Walls Between Us: Essays In Search of Truth*. She and her husband have two dogs and a kid in college.





A Warm Welcome to Your All-Inclusive Library

Rose Grokwick

I struggled through my own front door, leaping into the treacherous dungeon outside: the real world. I meandered to the plaza of Vanillaton, where an epic sword fight had sprung into action like a chaos spirit released by the pop of a balloon. The local white knight brandished his weapon in the light of the midday sun and confronted the local masked lesbian. Once again, she had plagued the town's elite with persistent robberies and gifted the spoils to the peasantry. She, of course, slung a string of curses at him and all his descendants. Then, a herd of elephants paraded through. Dung littered the square. The white knight tried to arrest the elephants for desecration of public property, but their legal team argued that, by technicality, Vanillaton is privately owned by one dignitary, and that she'll have to take it up in court of her own accord. I haven't a clue what happened after that because litigation is boring.

#

I walked down Indigo Road, quiet save for the clickety clack of my shiny new black combat boots. The sun, always quick to turn its back on us, was already nearing the horizon. Even so, I held out the purple pamphlet in my hands and scanned it by the growing moonlight. The writing on it was a mess of plum-colored ink, so I kept stopping to check the address and ensure I hadn't yet passed my destination: the Great Library of Accordance, established by Duchess Dusk herself.

"Pardon me, do you know where I can find the Great Library of Accordance?" asked an unrefined, piercing voice.

I turned around to see a young girl clad in an amalgamation of cartoonish memorabilia, from a ninja's headband to striped, thigh-high socks. No way are those back in fashion. I can't be THAT old. Her stark pink sundress was impressive for just how luminescent it was under the retreating sun.

"A-actually, I was wondering that myself," a defiant voice crack sneaking out from my otherwise controlled contralto tones. "Did you get a pamphlet, too?"

"Pamphlet? No, my uncle told me a vague direction to go in and I started walking. I've been wandering up and down this lane for who knows how long looking for the place. And here we are," she answered while juggling six bananas, taking a bite out of each as they passed between her hands, until she threw the empty peels over her shoulder.

It was odd that her uncle of all people directed her here; the new building wasn't exactly public knowledge. "He must be well connected," I stated.

"Not really. He's a funny man, my uncle Jaune. He calls himself a bookworm, yet he doesn't eat any of those books collecting dust in his house!"

"Clear the road, ya little wickets!" a sallow-faced Englishman cried out in falsetto. I ignored him, frowning. I looked back down at the pamphlet, however the thunder of

approaching hooves was warning enough for the girl and I to jump to the side of Indigo Road, landing in the lone pair of begonia bushes around. I looked up to see a twilight carriage gilded with white and gold. The Englishman sat up front, manning the horses, only bothering to shoot a swift glare of indignation at us. Inside was a woman dressed in a fuchsia rococo garb. She clutched a gilded hand mirror, applying shining twilight lip-gloss, when she saw us in the reflection and shifted her gaze.

“Stop!” she commanded. The Englishman tugged on the reins and the carriage halted. “Cornelius, how rude of you to plow these two aside like some raging Spanish bull!” she admonished in her exquisite Versailles accent.

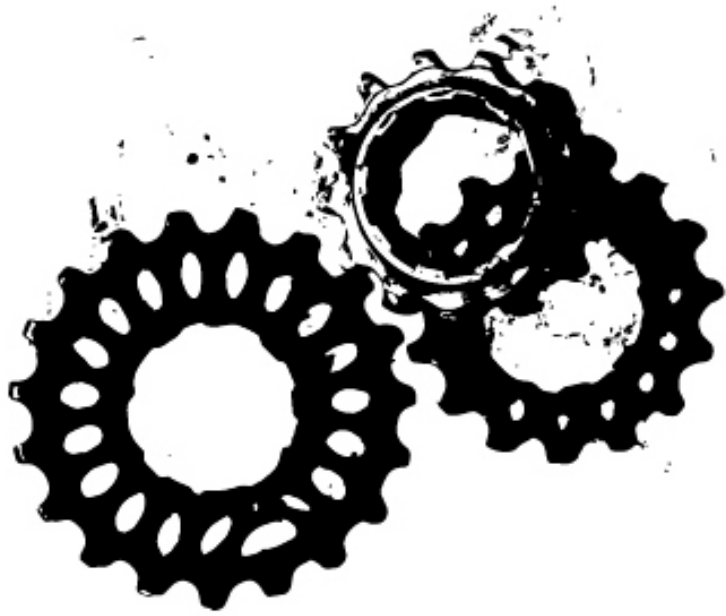
“It will not happen again, Duchess. You have my sincerest apologies,” he replied as he dipped into a demur bow. He glanced at the girl and I with a furrowed brow, his silly mustache twitching.

Then, he hopped off the driver’s seat and opened the passenger door with a flourish. The woman took his outstretched hand in her plum-gloved palm and descended onto Indigo Road. She held her free hand to her pearl necklace and proclaimed, “I expect better from you in the future, my faithful servant man.” Addressing us, she said, “normally I introduce myself under more civil arrangements. But at the very least, I owe you my acquaintance.” She nodded to Cornelius, who was doing handstands.

He turned to us and announced, “Duchess Dusk, the great benefactor of this territory, honors you with her presence.”

Rose Grokwick is a novice speculative fiction novelist and short story absurdist writer interrogating issues like climate change, community, gender, spirituality, and found family. They recently moved to Madison, WI, and are working on a novel in a world where the climate is strangified by magic, myths, and monsters.





Fishers of Men

Lisa Henner

Harlan dangled his left arm out the window of the pickup. The thick July air couldn't cut the acrid odor of day-old and fresh alcohol emanating from the man slumped in the passenger seat, the Ruger still holstered on his side.

"Picked up some spinner baits the other day," Harlan said.

"Bet you still don't catch anything."

Harlan let the insult roll off. It was an ill-conceived plan, taking the guy fishing. But it was the only rescue he could come up with.

They slid down the embankment into a dry swamp of jewelweed and marsh marigold. The river cut low and lazy. Harlan carried the tacklebox and a six pack and led the way downstream to a strip of sand that bordered the nature reserve. How far they had come since the days when the football team used to wander these banks, pretending to fish, looking for hiding places to practice chugging beer.

"Been a long time since I come down here," Jared said, his voice grainy and gruff from breathing in barn dust and feed chaff, and too many Marlboros.

Waves of heat rippled above the rocky riverbed.

Jared pulled a couple of sinkers from the tacklebox. He rewound the fishing line with patience and precision, mouth curled in self-satisfaction.

Harlan went through the motions of casting, relieved to have something to do with his hands, but kept one eye on the other man. A man who took such care rigging a fishing pole couldn't be ready to leave his life.

"Drought's killing us," Jared said, casting further into the water.

His wiry tension had lessened, and he moved in synch with the river.

To the west, in what had once been oak savannah, a woodpecker hammered to call his ladylove home. Cattails along the streambank hummed with insect life and chattered with wrens in flight; a pair of blue swallowtails chased around a clump of swamp milkweed just past Harlan's boots. They dipped into the stream, propelled up and forward by the flexibility of their wings. The laws of physics, thrust, pressure, quieted his uncertainty about whether Lauren would come back. He popped a Miller Lite and tossed one to Jared.

The cool of the water refreshed Harlan's optimism. His Grammy had had an affinity for butterflies even as his dad, and Papa before him, had tried to eradicate milkweed from their cropland. She'd taught that some swallowtails give off a scent to deter predation. He sniffed like a hound but couldn't smell butterfly, only mud and his own musky odor.

A thick strip of clouds shadowed the sun.

A flare of heat lightning shot across the afternoon sky. Jared lit a cigarette then blew out a spiral of smoke, added a layer of tobacco to the stagnant air. Thunder cracked in the distance. But when the clouds moved on, the sky was thick blue, and the sun scorched down hotter than ever.

“You motherfucker!” Jared whooped and reeled in a fifteen-inch brown trout. He removed the flapping fish from his line and looped his hand through the fish’s mouth. “Take a picture!”

“A picture?”

“With your phone.”

“My phone don’t do that.”

“Jesus Harlan, you’re like someone’s goddamn grandpa.” He handed over his late model iPhone.

Harlan snapped a photo of the man—transformed by the afternoon and his catch. He looked young again, like he had in high school, eyes wide and unlined, hair a bit scruffy, and a fuzz across his chin that never quite matured into a beard. Harlan tried to recollect how Jared had ended up running the farm and supporting a flock of kids.

The rumble of weather came from all sides now.

“Gotta send this to my brother.” Jared said.

“Where’s your brother at?”

“Ft. McClean.”

“I always wondered why he left the farm.”

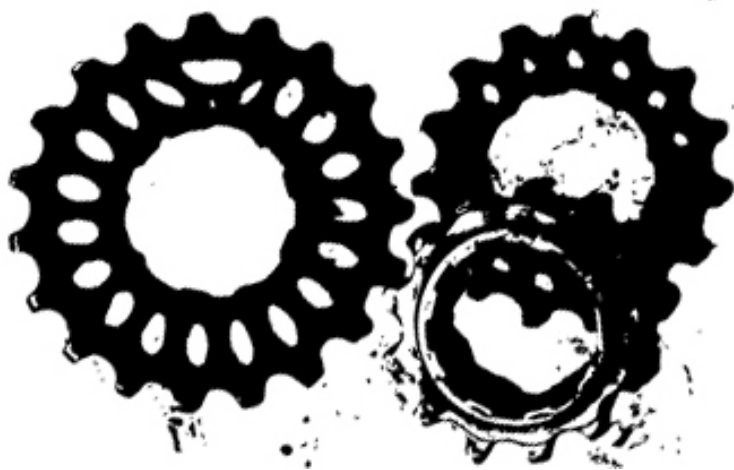
“Kuwait. Said fighting was easier than farming. Everyone was smart enough to get the hell out. ‘Cept us.”

Before they could gather their gear, the sky opened up and raindrops spattered their heads and wet their shirts. Jared let out a feral howl and turned his face up to the now black sky. Harlan felt the knot of worry in his gut loosen and rise in an unselfconscious roar.

After days of scorching heat, the rain revitalized them. They trudged up the embankment to the bridge. By the time they reached the truck, they were cool and washed clean.

Lisa Henner prepared to write fiction by working as a hotel desk clerk, a hog futures trader, an English teacher, a wealth manager, an organic chicken farmer, and by raising two children. Originally from the Chicago area, Lisa now makes her home in Viroqua, Wisconsin where she co-founded the Driftless Writing Center. The support of the A+LL Write-In and Connect & Write communities has helped her to complete her first novel.





Postcard From the Pandemic

July 3, 2020

Catherine Jagoe

One hundred days in lockdown, the sky today studded with white clouds like the smoke rising in so many cities. The other night protesters toppled “Lady Forward,” the white woman in a revealing robe saluting Manifest Destiny in front of the white-domed capitol downtown. Here in our white neighborhood the air is perfumed. Oh the generosity of trees—right now lindens are flowering, sweet as jasmine. And looking up, the air is filled with specks of white—motes, one might say: cotton-wood fluff floating free, ubiquitous as snow. And I’m out cycling, maskless, free, white, in the green hill country south of town. The cops don’t stop me, toiling in my voluntary sweat up slopes and swooping down them, savoring the fresh air in my face, breathing it deep into my lungs. The wind’s from the northeast today, off the Atlantic. I pass a barracoon of cattle clanking in their stanchions. The smell and the sound of their chains bring to mind coffles, the human chattel driven south to feed King Cotton like so many head of stock, creating capital that lit the smelting fires in Shropshire, drove the mills in Manchester, built the vaulted capitols and even the White House, wealth that begat white wealth, a violence so intricate and ancient its roots seem inextirpable, malevolent and many-tentacled, stubborn as cancer, relentless as the wind powering me home.

Catherine Jagoe is a translator, poet and essayist. Her most recent books are the translations *Voice & Shadow: New & Selected Poems* by Luis Bravo (Lavender Ink Press, 2020) and *Reborn in Ink* by Laura Cesarco Eglin (Word Works, 2019), and the poetry book *Bloodroot* (Settlement House, 2016). Author of numerous essays, she won a Pushcart Prize in 2016 and a citation in *Best American Essays*. Her website is catherinejagoe.com.



Dusk at The Manor

Michael Kalinosky

Sun plays on green leaves
Dances
Illuminating multicolored petals
Untroubled
In a flowered scene from her youth
She takes tea with Donna, Betty, Joe
and Nurse Cathy

Music on Tuesday
His rich baritone
Leads a singalong
With Sunday school serenity

Nightfall wind scatters
Her jigsawed presence
Pieces askew
Boundaries unreconciled
If she could assemble what remains
She could say what is missing

Approach him
Hiding my dread at
Attending to his needs
The herd must be milked, chores done
Time bent
Assure him the cows have been milked
The chores completed a decade ago

Michael Kalinosky lives in Viroqua with wife Pam and two dogs. He writes mostly short fiction and travel stories, but will sometimes dabble in poetry. In addition to reading and writing, his hobbies include art, music, and motorcycles. He hopes to be a full time writer after he retires from a career in medicine.



This dusty room is my self-portrait. I have a dog and a book of maps, each blue page a brilliant landscape. I have a religion based on books and also being kind. My favorite map is the Pacific Ocean—deep enough for all the hells and heavens so I don't have to keep them in my pockets. I am wearing pink pajamas and a pair of reading glasses—in case you need that level of detail. I have a radio but rarely turn it on—its full of English words and I have shelves and shelves of those. I prefer the Spanish language stations moving in waves through the dark night to my study. I hear *te amo*. I hear *el presidente esta muerto*. I hear the world of difference creak between the two like the earth's crust underneath my slippers. I have a sleepy terrier lying at those same feet. I have a longing to find God, but am uncertain how to reach him. Someday, I may come across a map that tells me. I've been looking but I may have to go before I find one without even my good dog along to help me, but I have my unspent kindness. I keep it in a jar. With it, I illuminate this page. It will help me know where I must go. According to my books there may be music and all-consuming angels with their tongues aflame. Or there may be nothing breathing nothing—and then again, the two may be the same.

Jesse Lee Kercheval's latest poetry collections include *America that island off the coast of France* (Tupelo Press, 2019), winner of the Dorset Prize and *La crisis es el cuerpo* (Editorial Bajo la luna, Argentina, 2020). Her poetry book, *I Want to Tell You*, is forthcoming from the University of Pittsburgh Press.



In My Childhood

Chuck Kernler

In my childhood, I never dreamed that I would live without running water and central heat. But during my education at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, our environmental design class assumed the assignment of designing Utopia. On one of our three field trips to choose a site, I laid the foundation for a new lifestyle.

My classmate, Dean Hanson, grew up in St. Charles, Minnesota. He showed us the remnants of Beaver, Minnesota, and the abandoned Marnach House. Beaver was a shadow of its glorious past. Ravaged by floods, due in large part to careless farming practices, Beaver had largely been abandoned. Some parts of town were covered by fifteen feet of silt. But the Marnach House, built by Luxembourgers, sat on a plateau protected from flooding. Sadly, the adjoining fields lay low enough to be flooded and unproductive. The farm had been sold to the State of Minnesota to become part of the Whitewater Wildlife Management Area (WWMA.) I was naive enough to want to live there!

The Marnach House was one and a half miles off graveled State Highway 74, with a hand pump for water but no plumbing or electricity. What was I thinking? What was my fiancé, Diane, thinking when she agreed to visit the house with the unrealistic assumed, if unspoken, goal of “living off the land?” It was 1973. Luckily, we stopped to meet George Meyer, the supervisor of the WWMA. He suggested we talk to Dr. Louis Younger, the Director of the Winona County Historical Society (WCHS,) who knew of another abandoned house, the Kieffer-Hemmelberg House, on a black top road a mile east of Elba, Minnesota.

Previously, it had been enjoyed by several Plainview families as a weekend getaway, under the auspices of the WCHS. Sadly, they couldn't keep ahead of the vandalism. It was a popular “party house.” The next occupants were a group of students from Winona State University, under a lease written by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR.) It, too, was within the boundaries of the WWMA. The students had left in September, after the first frost, two months before we signed our lease.

The lease required that we mow four pioneer cemeteries in the Whitewater Valley. In a piece of legislation related to land acquisition for the WWMA, an astute legislator had written into law the requirement that the State maintain these cemeteries. We had to provide the mowing equipment, fuel and labor. The DNR had no funds allotted to maintenance of the Kieffer-Hemmelberg House. But it was cheap rent. We thought so, as we had more time than money.

The Stonehouse had no water. The previous residents had driven a sandpoint in the basement, but the well was inoperable. A hand pump can only draw water roughly twenty-five feet and the basement floor wasn't close enough to the water table. We installed a rain barrel, for wash water, and hauled drinking water from town for two years. Then we drove a sandpoint from the bottom of a hole dug outside the kitchen. We conserved water by sharing bath water in the tin tub on the kitchen floor. The kitchen sink drained into a bucket, which had to be hauled out of the house to empty it. Several years after we moved in, we ran a

drainpipe under the stone wall and to the side hill where the grey water could be absorbed into the soil.

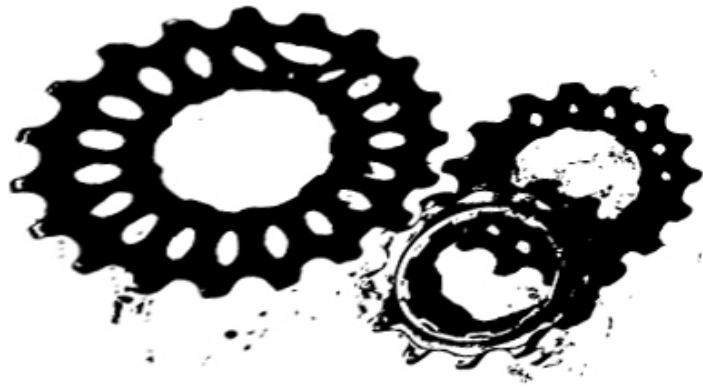
Since we had no running water, we had an outhouse. It was a two-holer, located a short walk behind the garage. There were several depressions nearby, likely sites of previous outhouses. Our waste management plan included removing accumulated waste from the outhouse and spreading it in the woods. It seemed easier than moving the structure. Critters visited the outhouse. We protected the toilet paper from mice with a coffee can. The most dramatic visitor was a woodchuck which startled Diane when he left the outhouse.

We heated the house with wood. We burned a lot of it. We burned slab wood, the scraps from sawing logs into lumber. We had woodlots on state land, every year. That first winter we burned green walnut, from storm-damaged trees, because we were unprepared and learning the hard way.

All this changed when we completed a land exchange and owned the Kieffer-Hemmelberg House. We purchased a furnace, hired a well driller and paid to have a septic system installed. We then felt that we were living in the twentieth century!

Chuck Kernler is a retired Fisheries Specialist from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. A man of many talents, he is eager to point out that he was the only Fisheries Specialist with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. In his retirement he enjoys writing, gardening and toy making, to list a few.





Bones: On the periphery

Lamia Kosovic

In between (my)self and (O)ther, there is my mother.
An invisible force
Facing her canvas,
Painting her fracturing, morphing
Her virtual differing
In the horror of silence,
In true Conradian style
Defying familiar, with a stroke of a brush.

There was no mirror
No Oedipal baggage, no transcendental signifier.
(M)other is a complex shapeshifter,
A swirling dervish, skin-walker
Actualizing herself only in duration.

Pure sensation.

They stole your pies,
They served you bones,
They wrapped your body in white sheets,
They dropped it in the wet ground.
Oh, Mother!
You always already had a smile of lightness,
Altering past, deluding present.

Cut from the screen of re/presentation,
Cartesian thought,
Swirling, metamorphing on a periphery,
There is my (M)other,
Facing her canvas,
Painting her imperceptible territory,
My fractal engineering of life in the postapocalyptic periphery.

Lamia Kosovic is a writer living with her daughter Hana in Madison, WI. Born in Sarajevo, Bosnia, she moved to the US after the war in Sarajevo in 1995. She received her PhD in Arts and Philosophy and published *Re-imag(in)ing of Posthuman* (2003) and *Violence of Sensation* (2017).



Existing as a Contronym: An Adoptee's Review of Tiana Nobile's *Cleave*

Kayla Kuo

As I read Tiana Nobile's debut poetry collection, *Cleave*, I was captured by her incisive ability to reckon with her identity as a Korean American adoptee, a practice that I continue to navigate as a fellow transracial and transnational adoptee. What makes this collection exceptionally notable is how Nobile bridges her adoption, not as an isolated incident but rather, as the excavation of broader structures, historical patterns, and geographical sites that allow mass adoption to occur in virulent and violent ways.

As an adoptee who has legally changed (parts of) my name to better represent and honor my racial identity, I know the weight and the freedom that names can carry, the power to distinguish from, to belong to, and to be known as. The naming conventions, of both the collection itself and its contents, are a powerful reclamation of agency and intentionality.

The opening poem "Moon Yeong Shin" symbolizes the tense relationship that adoptees have to our birth names and the learning that is required to understand the cultural significance of order and meaning. Nobile reflects how "[m]any years passed before I learned / surnames come first in Korea." There is a familiar foreignness of learning about my birth culture and feeling like an outsider. Similarly, in this poem, she writes about the silence and erasure that adoptees experience. Nobile notes, "I've spent my whole / life in orbit of other people's light, celestial satellites / in ceaseless wane." This speaks to the ways in which adoption narratives too often revolve around adoptive parents and their feelings, simultaneously dismissing, undermining, and invalidating adoptees' feelings because they should be grateful for being "rescued."

It is significant then how the moon makes another appearance in her last poem, "Revisionist History." This time, however, Nobile is not in the shadow of anyone else's orbit. She is the moon and she is an eclipse, demanding to be known, seen, and recognized. By visiting and altering her adoption story, she writes herself into existence and this time, she centers the adoption story on herself and her birth family.

The title of this collection, *Cleave*, is defined as two contradictions: to divide, split; to stand by, stick together. *Cleave* exemplifies the tension within opposition and embraces holding multiple truths. For me, there is a familiar strain that manifests: the fracturing of my racial and cultural identity and a piecing together as I learn to heal from this life-long process. Similarly, because adoption does not exist in a vacuum, there is another form of cleavage that occurs: the separation of one set of families/parental rights only for a new family to be formed through legality and saviorism.

Justified under the guise of care, safety, and protection for *children*, Nobile illuminates the historical patterns of governmental child removal policies, orphanages and adoption agencies, social services, and church missionaries that bolstered the mass adoption of children of color by white families in the US and abroad. With references to the 1869 Aboriginal Protection Act in Australia and the 1975 Operation Babylift in South Vietnam, *Cleave* is a visceral

embodiment of global violence, dislocation, and death. These events explicitly illuminate how children of color experienced multiple displacements, removed from their home/homeland, their families, and their culture.

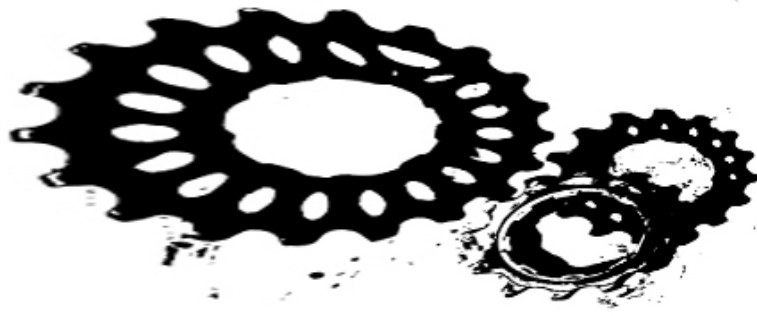
As an adoptee and a PIC (prison industrial complex) abolitionist, it is necessary to interrogate the interconnected systems that allow mass adoption and family separation to occur in the US and around the globe and to imagine and build something extraordinarily different. I dream of a world where Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx families are not torn apart due to poverty, imperialism, criminalization, and white supremacy, but rather a world where they have ample access to life-affirming resources to keep their families together and thrive.

And, thinking about the meaning of cleave in an abolitionist context, it is imperative to embrace contradictions because it allows for expansive possibilities. I dream of a world where anyone who wants to be a parent has the ability and support to do so. I dream of a galaxy where we collectively nurture and care for each other, where love is abundant, where agency is centered, and where everyone feels an authentic sense of belonging.

Content Notes: *Cleave* contains mentions of family separation, Indigenous genocide and child kidnapping, death, deportation, and scientific experiments on animals (monkeys).

Kayla Kuo is a queer Taiwanese American adoptee who reads and writes for joy, liberation, freedom, and healing. For more book reviews, reflections, and recommendations, visit her Instagram account: [@thatbookbinch](#).





Untitled

Stacey Langheim

Happiness is a lock that the key of contentment opens and somewhere along the way I've mislaid my key. I try in earnest to reconcile my situation by considering my life a barter of room and board for daily household and farm chores. This mindset has helped me endure three years of marriage that have passed as slowly as a watched clock. Enduring is not living and my soul breathes like a neglected plant, root-bound and thirsty.

The children are off to their grandparents today, a habit that began when Mr. Birch's mother overheard me scolding John, Jr. for sneaking off with a pie. An entire morning of berry picking wasted. He had eaten every last crumb dodging any consequence or apology. For a start, she pointed out, I'm not the children's real mother nor a suitable rod for discipline. Since Mr. Birch is seldom home, she felt that the children were fine during school but on the weekends they would stay with her and we would collect them on Sunday. In this family, I am already an overstayed stranger, an intruder. Any hopes I had ever held of being a mother figure or even friend to the children are gone, any gains made are now lost. Sundays are very long and arduous days, anchoring the weight of a week.

Not long after, things took another turn when Mr. Birch found my hidden journals in the pantry. In a demonstration of his unwavering rule over everything that goes on in his house, he burned them. It was a thick humid summer night in July. He sat resolutely beside the fireplace, my journals stacked in a careless pile on the floor in front of him. Page by page he dismantled them, crumpling the papers, squeezing so tightly that I expected to see the words dripping from his hand. The fire raged with him and the bright light of the flames flickered against the sweat running down the side of his face. His jaw was set as he clenched his teeth rendering the cruelest smile I had ever seen.

I didn't have to ask if he had read them and I couldn't honestly blame him for being angry. The things I had written were terrible things because I know no other side of him to warrant any kindness. Numb through and through, I watched the papers catch fire, their corners quickly curling in as the monstrous flame swallowed them up. I stood frozen against the heat, damning the tears I knew he so desperately wanted to see. Self-preservation is too often a necessary and bitter medicine. While the last book burned, he took me in that sweltering smoky room. His unfeeling grip leaving their mark. Frailty laid my body down in front of the fireplace and I fell asleep staring at the gray and orange smoldering within the ashes.

Since that awful day, I only write on the invisible papers in my mind where they remain bound and sheltered. When the children go to bed and Mr. Birch and I sit in the last hours of the day, I can thoughtfully write, freely and without fear. Those journals were a mirror, capturing only the inky reflections of my feelings. He hadn't taken anything from me, not really. Some nights I will look up at him and silently scream long and loud releasing my braver self to pack my belongings in that precious leather bag of his, giddy with a sense of satisfaction as each item is placed carefully inside, crying and laughing in the relief of it all. And then, with dogged determination, I walk out, feeling no claw of temptation at my back. My only sense of direction is Gwyn. Gwyn is where I am going. Wherever that is.

*

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Each week the decision to walk into the village to pick up needed staples at Ainsley's takes considerable effort. On this Saturday, the clouds pull their blanket away from a sleeping sun, and walking is a joy until the road demands its toll as always, forcing me through memories that hang like heavy curtains. Picnics at Sutter's pond, swaying fields full of wildflowers and wheat, Gwyn painting beside the willow tree. Trudging through them feels like running through mud, messy and exhausting. Just as fatigue begins to settle in, the road at last climbs up to the High street and the shingled roofs of the village emerge against an indifferent morning sky.

— Excerpted from a novel in progress

Stacey Langheim is working on her first fictional novel. She lives in Waunakee, Wisconsin with family.



Veterinarian's Text

Mark MacAllister

— for Floyd Nale, 1902-1993

By turning over the acetate leaves
of this many-paged guide
to Guernsey and Angus

first the ruby red circulatory system
the next page blue digestive tract
my grandfather learned to lay organs
into the outline of a cow

and did he while working at their sides
imagine them transparent
nerves arcing the cud moving
from gullet to rumen
the hum of blood
while behind the bones
calves flowed legs folded under
like cots

by daybreak each
would be hard at the udder
tagged and inoculated
birth slick washed away

and did he know that for each
the first swipe of his damp rag
across their eyes
brought forward the forgetting

warm wet suck of muscle gone
placenta music grown everquiet
one stringy harp after another
left singing drying in the trees
outside the barn

Mark MacAllister grew up in northern Illinois, spent a great deal of time on his grandparents' dairy farm in Wisconsin's Driftless region, and learned to write at Oberlin College. Mark now lives in Pittsboro, North Carolina and takes frequent hiking trips to the Wisconsin Northwoods and to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He is a member of the Driftless Writing Center board, as well as of his community's emergency response team and a red wolf conservation organization.



Waning

Erin Ruth Malone

I miss the crashing throes of grief,
how its surf would push me under,
pound me into the sand,
drag me out toward the deep blue,
bruise and scrape me.
Breathing was a moment-to-moment chore.
Each wildlife sighting a clanging sign.
Every reaching arm of a glimpsed and glowing sunset
a fresh agony.
I wish someone would have told me
to enjoy it while it lasts,
that soon the seagull's anguished cry
would soften to a vague screech,
that the reverent deer on shore
would once again return
to the mechanical business of munching.
That one day I would be spit back onto dry ground
and feel numb to orange-eyed skies.
That the cold moon would eventually find me
and pinion me to the blanking dunes
with its silvery hands,
my eyes absently scouring
that long, thin line
between ocean and sky.

Erin Ruth Malone has a graduate degree in English literature with a creative writing concentration, and she serves on the board of the Driftless Writing Center. She has been short-listed in fiction contests at *Third Coast* magazine as well *The Writer* magazine. Her short story “Vulture Culture” was published by *Third Coast*. Currently, she is working on a short story collection and a novel.



A few months after Jade and I moved to Florida...

Freesia McKee

A few months after Jade and I moved to Florida, a solar eclipse crossed a wide swath of the United States. The morning it was visible, I took the bus to the university to teach.

On my campus of 55,000, anonymity was nearly inescapable. Between classes, some students spent their free time listening to music in the cramped, dimly lit chambers of their parked cars. I guess being alone was preferable to sitting in the library among strangers.

The more time I spent walking through breezeways or sitting in the food courts, the more frequently I began to spot my students, people I remembered because I got to teach small cohorts. But often, my students would pretend they didn't recognize me because, maybe, the professors from the lecture halls were never able to learn all the students' faces or names. Or maybe my students thought it would be awkward or just didn't feel like talking.

On our campus, the solar eclipse was a rare vertex of connectivity. Hundreds of students spread out across the lawn, some on blankets like in a stock photo or movie. The transitive bustle lulled as everyone with eye protection looked up. Near the physics building, someone I can't remember anything about except that he was a stranger lent me his special eclipse glasses so I could gaze at the corona directly. That day, I talked to more people I didn't know than I would for the rest of the semester.

A campus survey found that some students weren't just listening to music in their cars but taking naps. For instance, students who arrived at morning classes after working third shift. In one of the windowless classrooms where I was stationed a few hours a week to teach writing, a student sat in the back corner in sunglasses and leaned his head against the wall. It was 9:00 am; he'd just gotten off work. I was a new teacher who did not yet know how to facilitate a discussion, so I was thankful to him and the few others who volunteered when I asked the class ill-crafted questions.

A couple days before the eclipse, my aunt, my dad, and their brothers gathered in the Rocky Mountains and drove up high to get an excellent view. My dad said that someone he didn't know began sobbing during the totality. They were up there with strangers, everyone chattering.

There was a big run on eclipse glasses in the United States in 2017. I think people wanted to rally around something beautiful. By that time, we were already hungry for it. To make a natural pilgrimage, we only had to find a way to experience the sun safely.

Freesia McKee (she/her) writes about the influence of personal and collective histories on how we experience place. She practices poetry, creative prose, book reviews, and literary criticism. Freesia's work has appeared in *Foglifter*, *Tinderbox*, *Yes Poetry*, and *The Ploughshares Blog*. This piece is excerpted from Freesia's unpublished hybrid memoir, *Water Study*.



Heights of Madness

Karen Milstein

My worst point was somewhere 39,000 feet above sea level between Madras, India and Frankfurt, West Germany. My clothes were rags. I'd been wearing the same flimsy purple salwar kameze pants and a ripped white cotton shirt since I left India that would be my only guard against the fierce winter storms of Germany, and later, Chicago.

I was Madness embodied.

I did not wear that name falsely.

I looked over at Markie, my keeper, on the plane ride home, miles above the Near East—Afghanistan? Iran? Simply land. Markie looked, with an attempt at depth, only shallowly into my eyes. Where are you, her innocent eyes asked. Oh, if I could only begin to tell you. In a world that has no innocence. Pure, raw life. Some find it in war, others in famine, others in grief. Life is short. And so unrelenting in disappointment. The only answers are, at best, a mantra in the Eastern portion of the world, philosophy in the West. Reason is a dream, technology a hope for insanity. Words—those sacred tools—mystify. A glance explains but cannot bridge here from there. Insanity cries for explanation. I try to tell you. I'm not sure I can.

Here, at 39,000 feet, in the dark of the night, I looked upward, in front of me, from left to right. I was ensconced on a giant ball of surging sewage green snot. Then I had it in a ball, and I carried it. Holding it up. Sometimes Markie took it—for an instant—sometimes the neighbor to my right. In effect, the ball tossed from passenger to passenger, but somehow I always held it, too. We shared the weight of this, our world; no longer a stitch of sanity, just complete, phlegm-like chaos. I passed this seething globe from neighbor to neighbor, scarcely having time to look away to any distractions in the aisle. I was aware of the constant humming darkness. Children ran through the aisles, up and down the plane, out of control from their parents. The prettiest child would go to the highest bidder. Don't the stewards wander through here ever to bring order? We looked out on the lights below. This was Germany.

Below, when I could take a bit of a look, I saw candles—menorahs—glowing for Jews killed. Were my own ancestors below? I watched, as the ball rocked slowly, then forward and disintegrated into the cool, vacuum-packed darkness. One by one, the candles were extinguished. We landed. I did not see any signs of stewards or even a pilot. In my 23rd year, this was me on no medication.

This is what people think Madness is. People do not trust me off drugs. Those who claim mental illness journey to a place, the depths of which many of you will never see. It is not so easily classified as horrific, like the plane ride. The worst parts do look like Hell; the rest embodies the bad days we all have.

We've all seen Madness in one form or another: in the movies, on our streets, perhaps in our families. A glazed, distant look in the eyes, nonsensical soliloquies, unkempt hair and body, paucity or complete lack of sleep, rash binges of spending money, no money at all,

unemployment. What you don't see from outside are the visions that actually guide one into the other world: a world light years away from this one. Insanity. Miles from nowhere, but right within myself.

I was in a very different place than my chaperone. Stop taking the medications and you travel to that place. It doesn't happen in an hour, or a day or a week, or on a train or jet. It takes several weeks; caught up in a lifetime that stretches back to your birth, which you find in your expansive purpose of life upon this earth. It is a certain belonging. Grasping tightly, to the memories—or lack of them; trying to pin them down, like the flaps of a frog's belly as the scalpel slits the frog in 8th grade biology. Simple. It's an animal thing. In my psychosis, I watch the talking humans and I see animals.

I always keep in mind that “genius” is only Latin for “time and place.” We are all but products of these two factors. We are all mad. We are all our own geniuses. We all hold the ball of snot. Never put it down.

Karen Milstein has been writing for as long as she can remember, wishing from about the age of eight that she could write a screenplay for the *Narnia* series. Karen now splits her time between working as a Peer Specialist—using her lived experience to help mental health clients strive towards their recovery—and writing a memoir. Her memoir crosses boundaries of culture, language, and mental health that show the fragility and brilliance of the human condition.





Meditation

Gillian Nevers

And some time make the time to head down the hill
to the Park and Pleasure Drive and from there
follow the trail through the woods until you reach
the boardwalk at the marsh end of the lake.

Go in March when ice patches still flow
and cattails haven't flowered and male Red-wing blackbirds
are returning to stake out territory.
Go before the sun is up, when the lake is hidden

in mist, when the morning is flat and gray.
If you can, take a dog, who will run ahead,
drawn by the scent of muskrat, coyote; sometimes, deer.
Sit on a bench on the pier. Invite

the dog to sit next to you. Then,
close your ears to rush-hour traffic
on the far side of the arboretum.
Close your eyes.
Try not to think

about yesterday, last night, the day ahead.
When you open your eyes, if you time it right,
the dog's head will be resting in your lap,
the sun will be up, the mist burned away.

Gillian Nevers, a Pushcart-nominated and award-winning poet, has been published in several online and print journals. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her husband Dan and their rescue dog, Luckydog, who they are lucky to have found.



What Price Love?

Alex Newman

It's the place we hate but are grateful to have. There's no parking, and prices are insane. But it trades in hope for miracles the vets can work on sick old dogs, or the young who cannot resist a fight or a car chase.

The clientele is rich, poor and in between. They are well dressed, shabbily dressed or not dressed, arriving in pyjamas dragged out of bed by seizures, or the sudden eruption of advancing illness.

I haul in my immobile 80-pound dog on a wagon. Others mill about, brushing away tears as they reach for wallets. Some stand outside, clinging to each other as they make difficult decisions.

I am there because Emma's laboured breathing of the previous summer has turned to gasping. My vet suspected even then it was laryngeal paralysis, a condition that paralyzes the larynx muscles so that during exertion or heat they don't reopen and the dog basically suffocates.

She warned me it would require surgery.

"On an 11-year-old dog?" I countered. "Never."

And yet here I am. To see Dr. LarPar, whose success rate equals his fees.

After a five-figure surgery and a week of recovery, Emma comes home with rules: no exertion, no hard food. We exchange her collar for a harness that fits her like a big pink bra.

A spleen tumour is discovered nine months later. The surgery for that takes its toll.

One day she can't stand and it takes two of us to lift her into the car. My vet says she needs to go to emerg.

"What's the point?" I ask.

"You don't want to wake up in the middle of the night with a paralyzed dog," he says.

It feels like the same people are there – the guy with resignation on his face as he pulls out his wallet, two women on the sidewalk sobbing, the jubilant click-click of heels as one woman leads her healed pooch out.

Tests reveal a ruptured disc, which I'm told is "easy-peasy" to remove. What they don't tell me is the week in clinic for recovery, then the weeks I must lift her up and down steps to get her out to pee. I trade the "pink bra" halter for a super-hauler harness contraption.

I tell myself it's not about the money. But in some ways, it is—investors call it the sunk-cost dilemma—with the money, time and effort already spent pushing you forward. Many pet

parents are caught up in this dilemma – consider that in the US, pets are a \$100-billion business.

You'd think pet parents are rich.

But we're not.

You'd at least expect the animals to be expensive purebreds. But you'd be wrong.

For the week after Emma's third surgery, I sit with her a couple of hours a day, a ringside seat to the parade of pets and their people.

Even before illness struck them down, these dogs would have been incredibly ugly. With wonky eyes (or no eyes); tongues stuck out sideways; bristly hair; massive body lumps that undulate with every move; splayed feet; these are faces only a mother could love.

Some are miserable. Take Ira, the female border-collie-wolfhound who gives the gimlet eye and bared teeth to any feet coming too close as she lies on the floor. No doubt she's someone's beloved companion, but she is one ugly mutt with a surly temperament to boot.

Recovering at the clinic, Emma isn't the prettiest dog either – she can't move much, and the vet can't guarantee she ever will. After a week, she walks shakily on her own, and we go home to the harness and sling, rubber mats, and a new mesh bed four inches off the tile floor so she can pee right through.

It's this utter dependency on me that is both appealing and appalling, imprisoning me with this animal who requires so much care. Well-meaning friends, neighbours, family offer opinions: "there's still some life left in the old girl;" "this is cruel, put her down."

The vet isn't much better as he nods sagely and says: "You'll know when the time has come."

Well, I don't. So, I decide to just enjoy the time that's left.

One spectacular summer day we drive to the lake, and slowly make our way to the water's edge, plop down on the sand and squint into the sun. Emma's mouth is half-open, taking in the fresh breeze, as small waves lap lazily and seagulls call out.

The time will come, does come, when we must take action. But not now.

Alex Newman is a Toronto writer and editor. She shares her home and life with an old cat, a puppy, and grown children when they occasionally come home to roost. Falling in with the Driftless Writing Center was a happy accident; the write-ins have provided the discipline to complete work like this piece on Emma, which was published in the *Globe and Mail* in 2021.





The Mangrove Roots

Rebecca Ressler

I.

Father put his palm to the shoreline, an upwelling of salt and crabs undertow. He runs into the current, the waves pulling him under into fallen clouds, fish scales, shipwrecks. Coldblooded and gilled, he returns with seaweed so Mother can taste the water's depths. He tells bedtime stories of the seals he dives with. Sleek tails and dark skin, fast and lovely.

II.

Mother's shoreline ballet starts with arms raised, hands shifting the horizon. Slowly, her legs bow, pointe, repeat, gathering momentum and spinning into a gyre. As she swirls she is held in each moment by the air surrounding her body, the gravity tactile.

Father finds his daughter hidden behind the sedges in a clumsy attempt to imitate Mother's dance. Kneeling beside his stumbled daughter he explains that only when in the ocean, buoyed by seawater, can they feel the poise that Mother carries always. *She is of the earth*, he says.

III.

Rock erodes into sand that builds into dunes, orchestrated by the wind tilting the earth. Waves like stanzas. An andante lull or an allegro of storms, a staccato of sea nettle tendrils.

Father's disappearance fell into this song. Nothing jarring. The echo of a conch shell and then a hush that sunk into his last footsteps down the beach to the water edge until the evening tide soothed away the last hint of his existence.

Everyone leaves, Mother sighs. The village sailed away to forget the beauty of the ocean's ebb and flow. Father left to remember where he came from.

IV.

Everything in nature is distinctly one or another.

Taxonomy: Clamshell ridges curl, layered crescents, versus scallop lines stretched into vertical rays.

Architecture: A spider tightropes outwards on a safety line strong. Spinnerets cascade silk spirals, adhesive snares.

V.

Our village's story is like sea glass, mysterious, made beautiful by years clouding its origins. Translucent, but not enough to see the truth through its frosted surface.

In the beginning though, the story was clear. Freshwater filled the ocean and hundreds of mermaids and mermen wove through seafan filtered sunlight beams. Underwater there were no words, only the crepitating construction of coral reef castles. The currents directed the mermaids' and men's fates. Whenever hunger, sadness, or apathy found a place in their lives, they knew that with time, the ocean would dilute the emotion and wash it ashore.

Aerwynna, in the dark of the new moon, mistook a man of the mainland for a lover. When she felt the two kicking feet in her womb, she cried, leaving the ocean filled with her salted tears. She nestled her child, Muirfinn, in the shallow seagrass beds. Upon abandoning her child, all the mermaids and men morphed into fish, hovering in the brackish inlets.

The descendents of Muirfinn lived along the ocean, content to sing and run. Whenever worldly troubles brought pain though, the salty tears reminded the village that they still had the blood of Aerwynna. Only once a descendent of her son chose life within the ocean, would the inlet fish swim to the open ocean and transform back to mermaids and men.

VI.

Father fulfilled the story. Mother attempted to continue as usual, collecting rainwater and weaving nets. The daughter found signs of the extraordinary; Mother found the explanation, her trepidation apparent.

The first sign: A whale eye, risen from the deep, heavy from its sleepless existence guarding the village from afar. In the bay, Mother shows the daughter the beached whale, sinewy carcass. Mother places the eye back in the black hole.

The second sign: A sea serpent at dawn. Mother identifies the synchronized movements, a dolphin pod, dorsal fins like hands skimming piano keys.

The third sign: Sadness, etched into the daughter's movements. A void too large for currents to move, for Mother's reasoning. Mother wavers at the precipice of her daughter's abyss, the balance of her ballet shaken.

VII.

One morning, Mother feels the sadness dissipate. Running to the shore, she sees her daughter's silhouette flickering in and out of the view among the waves until the shadow slips entirely below the surface. Whispers of a conch shell's song, a hymn for Mother's dance. Tear streaked and weathered, Mother remains, landbound. A mangrove tree, gnarled roots exposed.

(Originally published in *Second Chance Lit*)

Rebecca Ressler is nonprofit grant writer, poet, and prose writer, amongst other things. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *Second Chance Lit*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Masque & Spectacle*, and *Lily Poetry Review*. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her partner, child, rambunctious dog, very old cat, and piles of books.





On the Road to Richland County

Christine Rundblad

Hunched over its roadside kill
the vulture startled at the speeding truck.
It rose, was struck, then flung
in an ascending arch over the road
where, frozen in an eternal moment,
its feathers fanned against the pearly sky,
each perfect feather precisely cut,
a black silhouette against white paper.
Released, the vulture tumbled and crumpled
into the shadowed roadside ditch,
death rolling in slow motion.
The sky turned violet down the road.

Christine Rundblad happily travels between her home in Milwaukee near Lake Michigan and a small cabin on a Driftless ridgetop. She brings along her poets notebook and her classical guitar.



Thrifting

Alex Sawyer

I have a positive association with getting things second-hand. I was the first child in my family, but most of my clothes over the years, or at least the clothes that I remember, came as hand-me-downs from my cousins. There would always be several bags full of clothing and I could try on everything and just keep what I wanted! It was almost better than Christmas. Then, when we were done with the clothing, it was donated to Goodwill or other charity. Yes, the use of second-hand items was out of necessity for my family, but I didn't view it as just a necessity. It was one of the only times, besides food around the holidays, that there was so much that I could gorge myself on it. The bounty of clothing made me feel rich. However, since items came from family and friends, I didn't actually know how to thrift.

In college, I started going to Goodwill. There was a Goodwill close to my college campus that I could get to by bus. It was my favorite. Since that time, the majority of my clothes have been thrifted from Goodwill. I didn't know what my style was yet, I was on a budget, and Goodwill was cheap. Further, if I bought something new, I saved instead of wearing it, because I worried. What if I spilled something on it, or fell and tore the knee, and then I would have to replace the clothing item, and it cost so much money! I didn't have this same worry with items from Goodwill, because while it might take time to find a suitable replacement, the price was right.

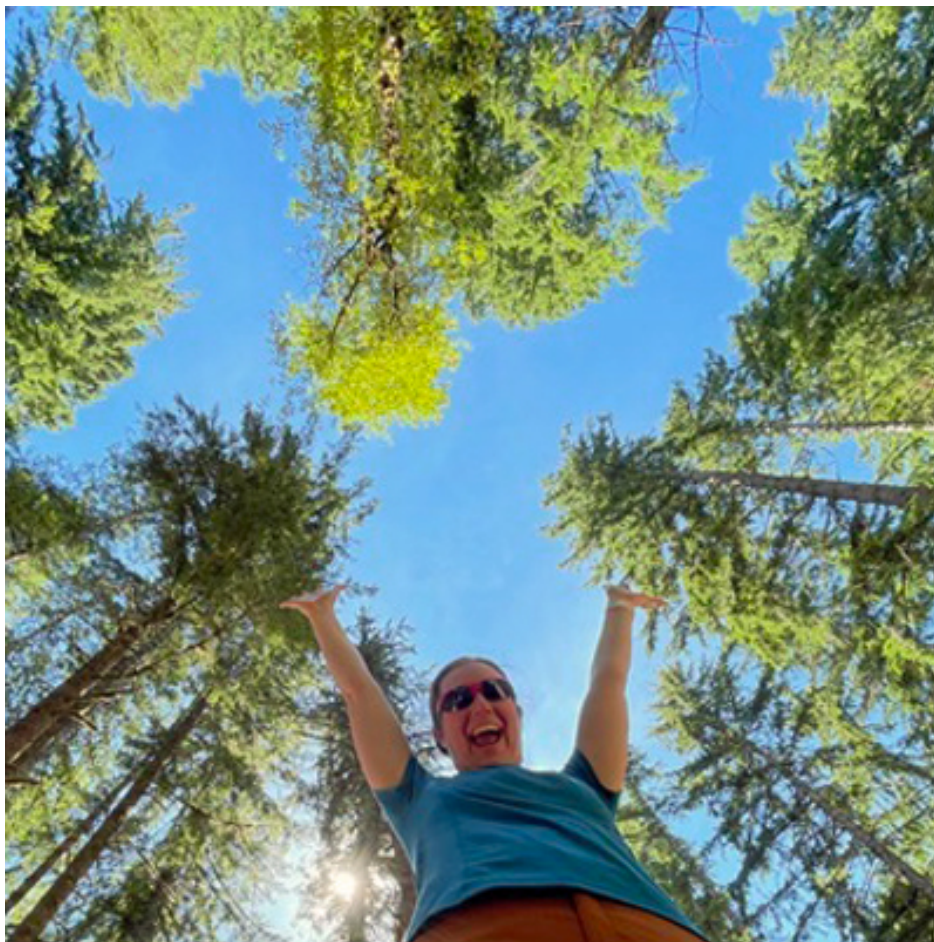
I loved looking at each individual item and determining whether I liked it or not. This meant that all my attention was taken by observing every characteristic of the item that I could for a second and then going on to the next. My mom observed that I needed to touch every item of clothing in my size in a Goodwill store. I can tell by touching clothing whether it is wool, silk, or cotton. It is a sensory experience that I have complete control over. I learned that not everyone shared my joy. When I would ask friends to go thrifting with me, they would agree that the prices were good, but mention that they hated hunting through all the clothing. I volunteered to look for them if they would go with me. I always felt good wearing what I found there, and I wanted others to share my joy.

The other thing I learned is that shopping at Goodwill decreased my anxiety. At first, I didn't know why, but when I started therapy, I learned that orienting myself to time and place calms the fight or flight response signals from my brain. Therefore, while evaluating each piece of clothing I came across, noting the color, brand, size, and material, I was calming my brain by loading it with new information. I struggled with anxiety for years, and here I was, subconsciously using shopping at Goodwill to help manage my anxiety as I oriented myself to clothing item after clothing item. I replicate this feeling at home by having an extensive wardrobe of clothing that I can sort through whenever I want.

In order to further my goals of acquiring second-hand clothing, I organized clothing swaps, and invited friends to look through my give-away pile, if the clothing is nice enough. Passing clothing around among friends costs nothing and fosters a sense of connection. I get a thrill seeing the people I see most often looking confident in clothing I gave them. In addition, I get a thrill from knowing that I am not directly contributing to the overproduction and

overconsumption that is so prevalent in the fashion industry and also from helping others avoid doing so as well. Buying second-hand feels like a subversive act that is actually doing what is best for society and the world. For someone who usually follows all the rules, it feels good to have something I do that follows an alternative set of priorities. There are some things I buy new, but I think that I will continue to do what feels best to me, which is to buy second-hand.

Alex Sawyer received their J.D. from the University of Oklahoma College of Law. They received a bachelor's degree in molecular biology and history of science with comprehensive honors and a minor in European studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Catbird

Lynda Schaller

collecting here and there
this and that birdsong
his squeaky genius dips
into his memory jar
snips and splices
improvises something new
linking oriole's chatter
warbler phrases
stitch of chipping sparrow
interwoven through
his own shrills and slurs
a seamless jazzy mish-mash
of birds' tunes and birds' words
joining thrush's flute
sassy spike of starling
sweet medley of snippets
all with catbird accent
melodies, rhythms made his own
always changing, on and on—
gleaned music made clarion song

Lynda Schaller grew up on a Driftless region dairy farm, absorbing elders' tales and free-ranging in woods and fields. She has lived in the rural Gays Mills intentional community of Dancing Waters since its 1982 founding, where she tends gardens, critters and healthy group dynamics.



An Origin Story

Erin Schneider

Five million years strong, the Eagle Nebula spans its wings
—a pillar of creation at sway—embedded among Serpens.
And when this avian cluster flew open the night,
three thousand years hence

You came into being—a bastardized brassica by the sea.

Born hairless, origins obscure,
with a rhizomatic reach
forever at work.
You probed above silver threads of beets
mined below lead balls of radish

You bore it all, with an imprint on antiquity relegated to gold.

Through the centuries, You sauntered
—unlobed and undeterred—
across the sea, to make a stand at my great-grandma's garden gate.
Your formidable tensile strength went lateral, rooted underground
And transformed into being as the consummate condiment.

Later, the aunties would say with relish, you tasted better after a frost.

You altered states—
Your hot temperament cooled the constitution,
reformed each cell and bitter bite
that scent—a pungent grace as nasals flare
to bind us all to the place where stars are born.

And now You sit woody with age,
forever probing skyward, underground—
and every distance seemed like an opening—
to my horseradish kin.

Erin Schneider, M.Ed co-owns and stewards Hilltop Community Farm, a diversified market farm in La Valle, WI specializing in organic fruit and flowers. Alongside farming her writing and participatory art-work reflects soul and soil love, and her love for the people, plants, and “dirtscapes” in communities near and far. Currently she is a participating poet for the *Writing the Land*, Foodways Anthology. Recently, she co-edited and contributed to the *Ode to a Bean Zine* published through Ope!Publishing, contributed to the *WI Little Book Project*, and was the inaugural Farmer/Writer in Residence at Michigan State University's Kellogg Biological Research Center. Entering into relationships with the land, and writing about the possibilities for reciprocity, healing and connection, are themes she loves exploring in her poetry.



Tombstone

John Sime

There is a tombstone

Next to the road.

The cars go past, the lives

Move on.

The dead don't care.

The corn stalks across the road

Quiver.

But the tombstone resists that temptation

John H. Sime, born 1952, Viroqua, Wis.; graduated in Comparative Literature BA/MA from University of Wisconsin-Madison 74/76; served U.S. Peace Corps in Mali, West Africa, teacher at École Normale Supérieure teachers college in Bamako, Mali 76-78; graduated Kentucky School of Mortuary Science, Louisville, Kentucky 1980; funeral director in Western Wisconsin; published in: *Kickapoo Free Press*, *Wisconsin Poets Calendar*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *Lake City Lights*, *Hummingbird*, *American Funeral Director Magazine*, *Poetry Motel*, *LaFarge Epitaph News*, *Crawford County Independent*, *Kickapoo Scout*, and the *Broadcaster Censor*.



The Rock

R.B. Simon

A few years after I left, they tore down the shopping mall.
Gentrifying the glass-strewn paths along the Rock River, they placed park benches
and topiaries along its sludgy banks. Town of 36 thousand, third highest in state crime rate,
bidding for tourism.

Yet I no longer claim my hometown; I set that stone down years ago.
If I feel a *geas* pulling me back, well, I've resisted more
than these magical incantations thus far.

Across the Rock, Tracey's dad
began raping her when she was twelve.
By sixteen, she was pregnant,
her breasts proofing like two rye bread loaves.

Forty years ago, the mall was one of the town's only saving graces. Abandoned by eager
parents, you could squander a day hypnotized by Tapper and Pac-Man at the quarter arcade.
Back at home, Felicity and I would roller-skate around the block,
slowed only when the sun fell too low to illuminate the cracks in the asphalt.

Tracey confided in me, her best friend.
Trembling, I went to my mother, uttered for her those words
I couldn't yet claim for myself. Mama reported it, of course.
And by some sleight of hand, Tracey no longer lived down the road.
I stayed silent as a boulder.

After graduation, I was accepted at the liberal arts college across the river.
I stepped onto campus as if entering my Elysium, sure of leaving damnation behind.

After the birth, Tracey named me godmother,
sent pictures of her beatific babe,
serious eyes round and grey as pebbles.

I only made it through two years of college before I
fled to the big city, trailing memories of dusty basements, large hands.

They say you can never take the hometown out of a girl.
All I know is this:
you can still feel the weight of that Rock,
even once you've set it down.

R.B. Simon is a queer writer of African and European-American descent. She has been published in multiple journals, among them *Stoneboat*, *Equinox*, *Burrow Press Review*, *Sky Island Journal* and *Literary Mama*, and she has upcoming work appearing in *Strange Horizons*, *CALYX*, *pacificREVIEW*, and *Obsidian*. Her poem *Clutter* was shortlisted for the 2022 Julia Darling Memorial Poetry Prize, and her chapbook, *The Good Truth*, placed 3rd in the WI Fellowship of Poets chapbook contest. *The Good Truth* was released in July 2021 from Finishing Line Press. In her “free time” she enjoys reading and painting, and her more peculiar passions include clothing with stripes, giraffes, and coffee-flavored caffeine. She is currently living in Madison, WI with her spouse, young adult daughter, and four unruly little dogs.



Detangle

Katrin Talbot

To tell me you're fine
would be a blazon
interpretation of
your life as a
quandary,
seagull,
deacon

So let me begin
the combing, inch by
inch, upward
until you can eat
ice cream with your hair down
on a windy afternoon

Until the crows fly
south with all
your troubles,
humming

Australian-born **Katrin Talbot's** collections *The Waiting Room for the Imperfect Alibis* and *The Devil Orders a Latte* are forthcoming from Kelsay Books and Fernwood Press, respectively. She has seven chapbooks, two Pushcart Prize nominations and quite a few chickens. She also makes noise on the viola with the Madison Symphony Orchestra.



Regionalism

Grace Vosen

Geologists will call this place “Driftless”,
But it defies term, time, and space, Driftless.

A death below the ice hath no sting here,
The absence leaving its own trace: Driftless.

Knotted oak holding court upon the bluff,
Trout stream free of any millrace: Driftless.

Deep spirituality of nations
Carved into the soft sandstone face: Driftless.

Now, agricultural centers decline,
But we cultivate our home base, Driftless.

Here, we are living the examined life;
No better word for this pace than “Driftless.”

(Summer’s arrived for good this time, we think,
But we’ll split more wood just in case, Driftless.)

The city dwellers drive quixotically
Westward in their Audis to chase Driftless.

Meanwhile, I’m barefoot in the river.
With my whole being, I embrace Driftless.

Living here, I become one with these things.
I am not myself: I am Grace, Driftless.

"Driftless Grace" Vosen is a writer and conservation educator living in Spring Green, WI. She leads landscape-focused tours and hikes on the historic Taliesin estate. Grace is at work on a memoir about growing up in southern Wisconsin. Find her blog at DriftlessGrace.com. (*Regionalism* was first published in *Voice of the River Valley*.)



Thinking as a Sacred Activity!

Heather C. Williams

*Our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake
the world—as being able to remake ourselves.
— Mahatma Gandhi*

We are human beings living our lives as best we can. Today, we must do more. We must pay attention to the big problems that we have unwisely created! We created the problem of plastic bits that are now found in human cells. We created the problem of climate change. We created nuclear energy and we still DON'T KNOW how to safely dispose of nuclear waste. The question is: what blocks us from solving these problems right now? I'll get to that in a minute.

Each of us is born with a creative seed planted deep in our hearts. This little seed is an eternal, spiritual ability or gift - and is always present within us. Unfortunately most people know nothing about this and can often be heard saying, "Oh, I'm not creative!" The TRUTH is we all have a creative gift and our assignment is to express (draw out) our creative gift with practice and share it with the world. Also, we each live in a physical body and we pretty much identify ourselves as material beings in a material world filled with things that are separate from us. Everyone agrees that we also are born with a mind that thinks. Even though we know little about the mind or consciousness, we must admit that we each are creating our personal world through our thoughts, choices and decisions. It's time we learn more about the mind.

To solve the big problems today we must learn how our thinking creates our world. To do this, let's explore three very different kinds of thinking: 1) Mechanical Thinking 2) Critical Thinking and 3) Straight thinking in the Abstract. Hopefully, the image of a taxi can help us understand how these kinds of thinking actually construct our personal/cultural worlds.



1. The taxi represents mechanical thinking: The taxi is a machine. Machines perform certain tasks. Machines do not question the task. Artificial Intelligence is a machine. We are machines when we habitually blame, deny, ignore, get angry or run away from our problems. Machines can't feel. We humans FEEL love, joy, sadness and we feel the rightness or wrongness of something. This is conscience. We must wake up to our true identity as Consciousness and free ourselves from mechanical thinking. An ancient way to wake up is to practice self observation. A simple, easy-to-understand book is *Self Observation* by Red Hawk. My Ontology Book Club discusses this book every week. You are welcome to join. Check it out at <https://www.drawingtogether.com/bookclub>.

2. The driver of the taxi represents critical thinking: The driver thinks, analyzes, evaluates the road ahead, makes informed decisions and exercises control over the machine. Critical thinking is at the heart of scientific inquiry. Science makes progress when we find data that contradicts our current scientific ideas. 2,500 years ago Socrates employed critical thinking as a way to question opinions and to search for the Truth. It's a lot easier to follow a leader or a narrative that aligns with our beliefs. But to drive forward and solve problems today, we must know how to analyze social media websites, corporate advertisements and governmental policies. We must think for ourselves! Critical thinking is how we uncover the truth that lives beneath machine-like thinking.

3. The passenger inside the taxi represents “straight thinking in the abstract”: The passenger pays a price to get into the taxi. The passenger determines where the taxi goes. We're all passengers on spaceship earth. We're all capable of awakening to our true identity as consciousness - of thinking for ourselves - and working together. Work takes practice! And practice is the price we pay to sit down, relax and employ a tool like “*straight thinking in the abstract.*” This tool can help us to think critically using axioms (self-evident

truths) which connect us with the abstract, truthful, spiritual principles of life. It takes practice for us to face our current problems (plastic, climate change and nuclear energy) and to see them as opportunities to create a safer, kinder, more beautiful world. “*Straight thinking in the abstract*” is a tool I have practiced for over 50 years now.

Heather C. Williams graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh with a Bachelor Degree in Art and Humanities in 1970. She met Thane Walker, Dean of The Prosperos School of Ontology in 1970 and became a High Watch Mentor in 1978. She was an Apprentice to Master Artist, Jan Valentin Saether for five years 1980-1985. She traveled around the world and led drawing exercises with the Louise Hay International Teacher Training from 1988- 2000. She was a public middle school Art and Special Education teacher for 18 years and retired in 2017. She moved to Madison, Wisconsin in 2019, and continues to draw, paint and teach classes.



A CATALOG OF
SMALL MACHINES

