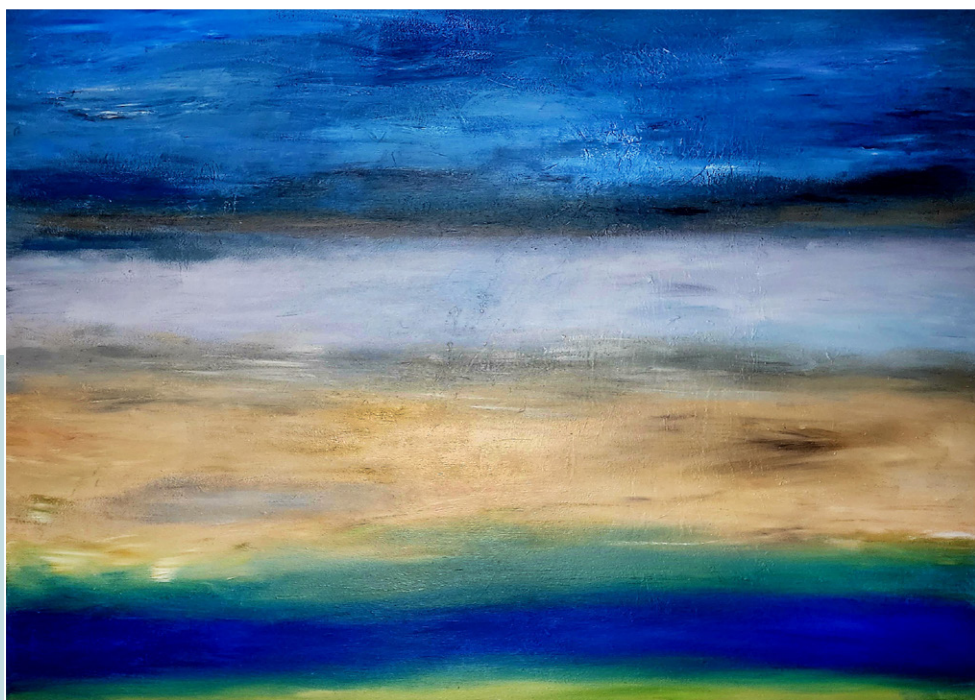




MOSAIC

UVA School of Continuing and Professional Studies
Art & Literary Journal



2024-25 EDITION



**MOSAIC
ART & LITERARY
JOURNAL**

UVA School of Continuing
and Professional Studies

2024-25 EDITION

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FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

In this issue of *Mosaic*, our writers and artists have shared many of their personal stories, observations, and explorations. It is with gratitude that we celebrate our readers and contributors who make this literary journal possible.

This 2024-25 edition is a celebration of the talent and voices within the BIS/BPHM program. We encourage you to dive into the journal with curiosity and to engage with openness and a creative heart, especially given the challenges that we are all currently navigating in these precarious times. If you find inspiration in these pages, we encourage you to engage with future issues and share your work with your peers.

It's fair to say that this is a time of transition and uncertainty around our world. With this edition of *Mosaic*, we hope to provide a touch of hope and light. After all, writers are still crafting, artists are still making, and our creative community matters, perhaps now more than ever.

It is in that spirit that we offer up this edition of *Mosaic*.
Ever onward.

Thank you for joining us on this artistic journey.

Proudly edited from the UVA SCPS Writing Center,
Vivian, Charlotte, and Aimee

ALEXIS GUSCHEL

Standing in Garden on a Windy Evening

Under the gazebo in my mom's backyard, I stare at the stars and listen to her garden pond. The light reflects off of the giant metal dragonflies hanging on the blue vinyl siding of her house. Most of her plants have fallen dormant for the winter time, but the magic of her garden remains timeless as it will throughout every season. Here, they have an actual fall with the orange leaves, crispy cool breeze, and everything! Everyone in town is preparing for Halloween and adorning their houses with spooky lights and skeletons in compromising positions. It's my favorite time of year to be here, but I somehow always forget how beautiful it is until I'm once again in the middle of it.

I'm in Michigan helping my mom prepare for a second knee surgery and savoring every moment we have together. These visits are increasingly rare and almost never for leisure anymore. And even when they are, I don't dare deprive my daughter of her treasured time with grandma. She's nodding off in her chair watching a scary movie, so I slip out back and take in as much of the magic as I can. I do my best reflecting here at night with the company of the crickets and the occasional rogue headlight.

In this spot, I experienced some of the most profound realizations of my life. Under this gazebo, my dreams were backlit by the soft glow of the light from the kitchen window. Years ago, unknown to me at the time, I set upon my life's path in this very place. It's in these quiet moments that my real transformations take place. And I can think of nowhere more fitting than in my mom's garden, surrounded by the living embodiment of her time and care. It's really just another backyard, but to me, this place is magic.



BRITTANY TOTH

Lunar Light Show

As the summer sun says goodnight, my family's facial features fade in the moon's glow, darkness absorbing wide smiles. Dusk blows a gentle, warming breeze that cools sweat from naked arms speckled with perspiring dew and legs sparsely covered with hand-me-down, knee-length shorts. The air serves our nostrils a heaping portion of paper-plated, barbecued hotdogs, ketchup, and hamburgers, grilled with a side of bug spray, suntan lotion, and mowed grass. In summer ritual, each of us hop and lunge in the fenceless backyard, our stubby arms outstretched with nets collecting fireflies whose bioluminescent bodies flicker through the night air above our heads between whispering trees.

Covering a hand over the net, my small fingers cusp neon between tiny, shaking hands. Feeling a tickle between my palms, I softly lower the green-glowing enigma into a clear container before slamming a hole-covered lid over my new friend. Swirling questions inundate logic. Does my companion possess the sorcery that roller rinks infuse into green glow sticks? Am I holding magical moon fragments?

From the adjacent patio, chattering chuckles of grown-ups escape my notice as the flashing container captivates my thoughts. Transfixed, I plop cross-legged on prickly, emerald blades, momentarily confining the sporadic sparkler on my lap. As the night wears on, more lightning bugs dance in the night sky like tiny, twinkling stars while I sit "feeding" my friend the ground's chartreuse split ends before releasing him back into the June air.

AIMEE BELSER

The Pastor's Son

The boy played quietly in the sun. His mother, in her threadbare house dress and low-heeled pumps, finished cleaning up after hosting another ladies' church circle in the parlor. She instructed him to play outside but not go far. If she looked through the window from the small front room and couldn't see him, she would scold him for not minding and tell Father; then Billy would be in for it. He picked up a red maple branch that lay on the ground. The bark felt dry and rough in his barely chubby hand. At the opposite end, leafy offshoots splayed outward like veiny fingers.

Stolidly he stood in the middle of the gray-flecked sidewalk wearing a wool flat cap. Billy closed his eyes and tilted his chin toward the sun. He could feel the contrast of mild warmth on his cheeks to that of the brisk winter air. Barely casting a shadow, he lightly bounced the far end of the limb against the concrete. It sprung gently up and down followed by a short raspy syncopated *thwack* when it scraped fleetingly on the cement walkway under his feet.

Bundled in a midweight coat of coarse tweed, Billy gingerly touched the brown Naugahyde-covered buttons that hung snugly against the front of his torso. His jacket, though modest, would need to last a few more winters. Mother worked hard within limited means to keep her husband in spotlessly pressed suits, as appropriate for a post-seminarian, and son in clean—if not slightly large—clothes that were ironed each day. She, on the other hand, wore thin dresses she had sewn herself and, underneath, she rotated wearing one of three inexpensive nylon slips she owned. Father, the epitome of a stalwart scholarly servant of God, soon led his own congregation. His wife's dutiful dedication and sacrifice went mostly unnoticed.

It was 1940 and the United States had imposed an embargo on oil shipments to Japan. Tensions heightened. The very next year, things were taken a step further, and the U.S. had frozen Japanese assets to prevent them from accessing the U.S. oil they needed for their military. As Britain followed suit, Japan furthered her expansion efforts in Southeast Asia. Americans everywhere sat on pins and needles as the escalation of international conflict grew palpably.

A few days later, Billy was walking to elementary school, which was in downtown Chicago. He came upon a group of boys a little bigger than him. Jeeringly, one of them hissed: *Preacher's kid! Preacher's kid!* followed by epithets from the others who threw pebbles. He quickened his pace all the way to school. During class both boys and girls would clasp their hands together at Billy as if in prayer and then laugh mockingly when the teacher turned her back. They tittered in triumph as he shrunk in his seat.

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Billy, who excelled in math, felt alone at Public School #12 despite the constant bustling onslaught of fellow students. They seemed to hate him, especially the Catholic kids. However, there was one girl who never joined in the fray. She wasn't pretty but had a pleasant enough countenance with an upturned button nose sprinkled lightly with the faintest of freckles and burnt umber eyes. He wondered what she thought of him. Once the school day ended, he was subjected to more harassment as he walked back.

Upon entering their modest well-kept home, the boy's ears were quickly inundated by the sound of his mother's insistent voice: *William don't just stand there in the cold with the door open. Are you paying for the heating oil?* His head drooped a bit accompanied by the rounding of his shoulders. Little comfort could be found at home, which was needed after a day filled with name-calling and taunting.

It was close to suppertime. On occasion the reverend could be found at his desk sorting through correspondence and bills before his son got home. Mealtime would often be delayed depending on when Father returned from ministry. His brooding dinner chair sat bleak and imposing. William and Mother listened for the sound of brisk solid footfalls that would accompany the reverend's arrival. A stern Austrian immigrant with deceptively kind pale-blue eyes, Father embodied the conservative values of traditional, Bible-as-final-authority Northern Baptist doctrine. He commanded an unyielding presence that demanded both compliance and respect.

The faint aroma of bland bubbling vegetable soup simmered on the stove. Billy envisioned cold, firm, puce-colored slices of Braunschweiger sandwiched between two pieces of rye bread, which allowed him to ignore his hunger pangs a bit longer. Mother's cooking provided occasional hot nourishment even if it lacked flavor and warmth.

The reverend's wife set a modest, neatly ordered table draped with a starched almost-pilling, almond-colored tablecloth covered in tiny pink roses complete with sharply creased matching cloth napkins. Thin flour sack towels hung stiffly in the kitchen awaiting an accumulation of dirty dishes on the counter. After a hot sudsy soak and thorough scrubbing, it would be the boy's job to dry the dinner plates and put them away.

William, take your bath! The demand of his mother's small voice revealed a trace of old Dutch while her delicate peony-scented presence wafted up the stairs to his room. Father would be delayed again. The soup would form a thin skin on its surface and the sausage sandwiches would turn slightly leathery, but eventually supper would come.

KATIE HITT

A Quest for Identity

In class the other day, my professor told us to just be ourselves when we are writing. This weighed on my mind. Who am I? I've never known. I've always felt like I have one foot in one world and the other foot in another. My identity has never been tied to one thing fully because I am always at odds with myself.

As a young child, I got roped into building intricate racetracks for my brother's *Hot Wheels*. I put so much time and effort into designing new layouts that my brother encouraged me to continue so he could come through and enjoy the fruits of my labor by racing his cars on them. One day, my brother was not home, and I wanted to try the car for myself—a privilege my brother had previously denied me. I went into his room, grabbed his box of *Hot Wheels*, but when I opened the lid I found a pack of cigarettes. What is a younger sister to do? Tell, of course. From that moment forward, I wore the scarlet letter of being a goody-goody. Even as I got older, and started to bend the rules myself, my brother never let me in on his secrets out of fear I'd run to my mom and tell.

In school I used to stare longingly at the group of girls that were so effortlessly cool. They always dressed so well and things seemed to magically fall into place for them. I thought, if I could just say the right things, do my hair the right way, I may win acceptance. That never happened for me. I spent my time after school racing to the library. Discovering Sylvia Plath and Anne Rice was so much more fun than joining cheerleading practice and trying to date.

As I got older, I found myself in a small town that takes pride in its residents who are “from here.” If you are born and raised here, you are instantly better, but it comes with stipulations. One of those stipulations is to never question how things have always been done. I once dared to shake things up and request that we include everyone—even newcomers, the come-heres—I earned a few side-eye glances. I may be from here and I belong in one sense because I can trace family lines back five generations, but in another sense I'm different, so I will never fit in.

Is this my identity? Being half-in and half-out and never truly fitting in anywhere? Have I just not found my people? Are they out there waiting for me? I hope so. I hope I can be the one to listen, to include, and to accept but I also hope the same grace is extended to me. Maybe then, one day, I can feel like I am not torn between two—no longer needing to hide.

Meditation: Just Do It

“How can one gain the fruit of enlightenment?”

Not through rigorous debates. Not through fiery rhetoric. Not through prodigious sessions of Sutta study. Not through endless consumption of Dhamma talks, online or offline. Not through the sheer force of intellectualization. Although these are all wonderful starting points that cannot be discounted in the journey to Nibbana, none of these serve as an adequately strong precipitating factor as to how and why a person can achieve the first or last stage of sainthood. There is something else, something insanely obvious going on that most lay, even experienced Buddhists ignore and gripe about: the discomfort of meditation.

“Oh, how sore it is to stay rooted in the lotus or half-lotus position.”

“Oh, how painful my back is.”

“Oh, how my thighs are killing me.”

“Oh, how boring the breath is.”

“Oh, how predictable my diaphragm swells and expands.”

“Oh, how frustrating it is to dwell in my own monotonous headspace.”

It all boils down to sitting quietly in a corner, finding a comfortable space. Ultimately, the Buddha’s teachings are the Dhammic law of cause and effect. If we seek the fruit of enlightenment, we must surely create favorable causes and conditions. We must sow the seeds of meditation daily, in order to effectuate it.

The bottom-line: meditation is indispensable and Sutta study is not a replacement for meditation.

GIL SOMERS

I'm Being Followed

I'm being followed. In the grocery store, something sweeps on the periphery of my vision: a dark shape, a swirl of black smoke like a cloak in the wind. I turn around and nothing's there, just the twisted, judging face from someone's grandmother thinking I'm on drugs. In the parking lot, I push the creaky, delustered chrome cart over poorly filled cracks in the pavement. Someone says my name, softly, like a whisper, but pervasive. I feel it in my toes and up to my spine at my nape. Tingles and sparks flee to my fingertips. I look around, but again, no one's there, only the host of empty carts huddled outside their corral like a murder of crows looking for scraps.

The wind picks up. A string cheese wrapper whips into the car parked next to mine, the cheese-person on its front smiling right at me. It's starting to rain, not heavy, but enough to mist my windshield and make me manually switch the wiper blades on and off. It's my favorite weather: cool, wet, and quiet. Everyone else is already home. In the rearview mirror, dull yellow headlights follow me through the streets. I take an egregious left turn out of my way and park. The car continues forward, splashing puddles of gray water in my direction. There's an old man on the corner. I've never seen him before, but it's weird that he's writing in a notebook standing in the rain. My car starts to warm up. It hums as the heat defogs my breath from the windshield.

The sparks and tingles in my fingertips dissipate. My phone rings. It's Mom. "Where are you, honey?" she asks. Her voice gives off the static of a recorded message on a cassette tape. "On my way home," I lie. The rain is coming down harder now. The drops sound like bullets on the roof of the rusted banana-yellow '87 Volvo. The man on the corner is still standing there, soaked by the rain. Torn pages from his notebook litter the stream rolling past my car tires into the storm drain. I crack open the door to grab one. Water pours in and soaks the tan fabric seats. The wrinkled white paper sticks together as I unfurl it—flopping in my hands. The ink runs outward, the message barely legible: "Get. Out." I look in the rearview mirror. The man is gone. Lightning streaks the sky, and there's a low and terrible groan of thunder. I think, "I'm lost."

My phone dings in the front seat. It's a message. Mom again. "Honey, I'm worried about you. Please call me." On the sidewalk, a couple is walking toward me. I slink down in my seat, lock the doors, and watch them over the top of the steering wheel. It's really pouring now. I can smell bleach, burning feathers, and oatmeal. The storm sounds like explosions and electricity, but I can hear them talking about me between crackles and beeps. I turn the key, but the Volvo whines in rebuttal. They have flashlights now. They're pointing them into my windows.

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Shadows lurch in the seats. The phone keeps ringing on the floorboards. I can see my mother's smiling face peeking up through the grocery bags and empty, discarded, stained styrofoam coffee cups. Flashing blue lights dance across the street. Suddenly, I'm facedown on the gritty asphalt. Tiny stones dig into my chest and cheeks as cold steel binds my hands together tightly behind my back. I'm screaming for help. I want to go home.

ANNE MOORE

The First Haitian Baptist Church Driver

Michale sat behind the wheel in the next to farthest right lane and let his van roll down the interstate. Sometimes he wondered if people would think he's the neighborhood pedophile going around for an evening spin if the white fifteen year-old Econoline didn't have "First Haitian Baptist Church" plastered in dark blue stuck-on letters on its side. He didn't let that thought linger and instead laughed it off. He liked this time best, however, when he was heading back to church on the freeway to drop the empty van off, away from the side streets where he'd have to slow down and frequently stop.

It wasn't just the First Haitian Baptist Church, it was the only Haitian Baptist church out here, Michale thought to himself. It would be one thing if he were in south Florida, but Michale found himself nestled in the westernmost corner of southern California, living amongst the immigrant population that grew larger after the 2010 earthquake that shook his homeland, and then eventually waned. Michale wasn't even affected by the natural disaster. He had an aunt who was, though, and had emigrated to the States at the soonest opportunity. She sent for Michale as he approached thirty and still hadn't done much with his life. His family knew, as well as anyone who met him, that he had a strong mind—and body, despite his thin frame. He was capable of computing details or doing manual labor; he was neither limited nor lazy. He could've built houses on the island and worked his way up to some kind of engineer, his family imagined.

They didn't have the money to put him through school, but they figured with his capabilities he'd find a way to do so if he put his mind to it. The thing is, he never felt the need to. His mom, as she neared sixty, worried he wouldn't be able to sustain himself in the future when she wasn't around. She could keep the roof of their humble house over their heads, but she couldn't do much more than that. She worked at a local restaurant frying foods up and sometimes would cater birthday parties and the like for friends or friends of friends who got her info passed along to them after attending one of her catered events. She liked to nourish people and this was her chosen way of doing it—the way she was good at. It pained her like an itch she couldn't scratch that she was not able to nourish her son in a way that would get him headed in the right direction. It wasn't everyday someone had a child who was as capable as he was, but when they did, in a place like this, those children took their wit and ran with it. Michale simply sat with his wit and used it as a companion he never leaned on.

It has been said that some people have to die in order for others to live, and Michale's mother had to believe that this is what happened when the deadly earthquake occurred that took her sister stateside. She especially believed this when her sister called her saying she had a job for Michale that would hopefully allow him to go and live with her.

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Michale was nonchalant about it; he went because he had nothing to lose here. He would miss his mom in a typical way, but figured between up-and-coming technology and the same airplane that would get him to the land of liberty, he'd have no trouble seeing her again.

He wasn't one for stagnancy but he wasn't one for putting much effort into making things happen, either. Just like he had sat on that flight years ago, fellow passengers unable to tell if it was his first or one of his first hundred flights, he just took to doing whatever was asked of him without hesitancy or angst. After three years of setting up for events at the church and tending to its custodial needs, he was asked to drive the church van. He didn't worry that he had only driven one of his uncle's cars for a few blocks after a celebration where his uncle had had too much to drink. Between the leniency for Haitian immigrants due to the disaster and the job his aunt had for him being at a church, he had little trouble getting residency granted. He didn't fret over the DMV test in a foreign country. Michale was mathematical and pragmatic. He didn't philosophize over what-if after what-if. He got a copy of the handbook from the nearest DMV off the bus route to his aunt's apartment and the rest was history.

Just like that, some nine years came and went. Here he was, still driving the same van, carting the elders around who never had enough English skills to even bother with getting their license, let alone a car. Most of them had worked as housekeepers, the few men who were part of the pickup group worked as dishwashers or in the loading dock of grocery stores.

Michale wasn't the religious type. He was raised in the church, but his attendance was a byproduct of his family's devotion. He believed in the word but his pragmatism led him more toward the belief that your actions lead to your results, not your adherence to an ancient book's texts. While he didn't write his family's prayers off as all for naught, he felt making sure not to merge into a lane that another car from the other side could also merge into at the same time contributed to his stellar driving record and thus continual employment. As he drives he ponders: maybe they pray for me to be aware, he thought, and that is what makes me the person I am.

ALEXIS GUSCHEL

They

“They,” I gently correct, suppressing my grief and impatience at the never-ending emotional labor I have to perform. We all experience the pain of feeling invisible, like the world at large sees in you only what is palatable and fits a predetermined mold. For most of us, it’s quiet and occasional, but every day I arm myself to battle the barrage of questions and strange looks that come with being visibly queer in southern Virginia. I haven’t always stood up for my right to be seen as the person I truly am, but over the past few years, the singular “they” has become my most uttered word.

I am agender, not a man or a woman, but simply a person. Yet as I type this, the red squiggly line underneath serves as a reminder that even my word processor doesn’t see me as acceptable. It is joined, of course, by various family members, former friends, well-meaning convenience store clerks, and possibly even some of you. Every day, I see questions bubble up and lay to rest on the tongues of people who are afraid to ask them. Whether this fear is of the questions themselves or the answers that accompany them, I don’t know.

But I do understand the fear. I came out slowly, hesitantly, afraid of both the questions that would be asked of me, and the answers I had to give. No one asked more questions than my then six year old, who pondered my responses and exclaimed, “I know! You’re not a girl, you’re an in-between!” And no one asked fewer questions than my nephew, who whispered, “I’m trans too, but don’t tell my dad.” There is strength in visibility, and in being your true and authentic self. Over the years, my singular “they” has grown from barely a whisper to a proud declaration. I am here, and I am visible for those who can’t be.



BRITTANY TOTH

Dismissed

With thighs pressed tightly against lacquered oak pew and spine stretched to schoolgirl posture, I dreaded the inevitable belting of my name. “Toth versus....”

To hear that phrase, anywhere but here, would remind me of playing Smash Brothers Melee on GameCube. As my solemnly-dressed legs mechanically relocated thumping heart to the front of the courtroom, I wished these words regarded something silly, but the gravity of the situation elicited similar emotions I would feel hearing a eulogy.

Every day before exiting my apartment door, I scan the adjacent parking lot from my bedroom window, wistful for the absence of either a bile-colored Volvo or a mom-said-never-to-accept-candy-from white van. Then, I scroll my phone’s settings, granting my device permission to access both my microphone and camera. With phone in one hand, I remove my Taser from its charger with unsteady fingers. Pre-purchased, while the hot pink Taser had caught my eye, I reluctantly settled for the “Stay away! I mean it!” black Taser during checkout. This sacrifice seemed worth the possible payoff of being taken more seriously.

As I precariously step outside, nature’s shifting fragrances of dewy mornings, blossoming flowers, decaying leaves, and clean scent of snowfall remain unappreciated as my pupils expand and breaths become irregular. My eyes routinely prioritize scanning the yard and the road before heading to work, bracing myself for unwanted encounters.

As I swear to tell the truth, I accept that court hearings too, have become routine, as I take a breath and explain what happened.

ALEXIS GUSCHEL

When I Forgot I Could Swim

When I met him, I was 15 and invincible. Both a sophomore in high school and a freshman in college, I'd traveled the world and tackled problems far greater than myself. If you'd said I didn't know everything, I'd tell you every reason you were wrong. I've always known who I was. Headstrong, they called me—headstrong, independent, driven and determined. I could never drown. Yet when the oceans of his irises came to swallow me up, I plummeted into their depths and sank to the sea floor. I emerged five years later tattered by the stormy seas with a baby in one arm and my broken pride in the other.

I've focused a lot on the plunge, thinking that if I could analyze exactly how it happened I could prevent it from ever happening again. But that's the thing about the ocean: the storm comes when you least expect it, and never from the direction you think it will. The harrowed captain tells you that you can never master the seas, so the only option is to master yourself. You learn to hold your breath. You learn to float. You learn to swim, to kick your arms and swing your legs as fast and hard as you can. Because your life depends on it. And if you're lucky, you'll make it to the surface before Neptune chews you up and spits you back out.

From the bottom of the ocean and the bottom of my heart, I begged the question, "How much is enough?" How much of myself would I sacrifice? How much violence would I endure? How much of this brine would I allow to fill my lungs? I realized that "enough" was subjective, and I was done subjecting myself. It's been ten years since I crawled my way onto dry land. I still feel the weight of the water when I sense a storm approaching. And I still have to remind myself I'm allowed to say when I've had enough.

Wired Spheres

“Memory is the diary that we all carry about with us.”

—Oscar Wilde

Some memories I wish were written in Sharpie are penned in smudged pencil, and some memories I wish were never logged are singed into the pages.

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing treatment. It seems convoluted, but the pills never work, so here I am. Sweat pools between my unshaven legs and the key lime vinyl. Why anyone would put a fluorescent plastic couch in a place of supposed healing, I will never know. The therapist seems nice enough. Brown, greying, wavy hair frizzed by the rain blends into her sweater. I wonder if it's itchy? She hands me two wired spheres, one to hold in each hand, and explains the process. I don't listen. I can't stop thinking about how uncomfortable her sweater must be. She tells me we should start.

I recount the weekend. I am home on break visiting my best friend. The therapist tells me to set the scene. Be very detailed. The leaves have already fallen, but the weather is confused. The bare trees seem out of place because of the warmth on my skin. Good enough? I tell the story while the cylinders buzz in my hands. The familiar feeling of nausea joins me. She tells me that's normal.

I've always had a shoddy memory. I started to take fish oil after I forgot my best friend's birthday. It didn't help. But I remember every pore on that face. I remember the overwhelming stench of Polo Blue. For Christmas as a child, I got an Etch-A-Sketch. I hated how easily my hard work was erased. I wish those spheres reverberated up my arms into my brain. Wish they shook it like an Etch-A-Sketch. But they didn't. I had to spend twelve sessions with a kind woman I despised for no reason. She just had a vinyl couch and wore wool in June.

MEGAN JOHNSON

Ode to Knuckles that Ache When the Seasons Change

I don't think I realized my body could change.
Or rather, I think I thought my body would change slowly,
like the totality of a tree, branching over decades or centuries.
Not the season of a tree—flowering, fruiting, fading.
My body changed abruptly from a growing one to an aging one.
It seems silly, I suppose, for a thirty-something to say.
The halting-screech of my metabolism, though.
And my first gray hair, plucked on the very day of my thirty-second birthday.
And my knuckles.
The pointer finger and the middle.
I first noticed the characteristic protrusions of arthritis
—inherited—
a week after my thirtieth.
I no longer know my body like the back of my hand.

It's not just that I don't know the body but that I don't really know the hand,
sun-freckled and lined,
swollen fingers that won't tolerate my wedding band,
and knuckles that predict the weather.
My mother never aged, did she?
Those pictures of her young exist, but maybe that was someone else?
An alternate reality.
Was she not born the same day as me?
Born mother, and mother still.
I'm older now than she was, the day she was born, Mother.
But is it not the skin of her born-mother hands now stretched across mine?
Her hands, too, have the hallmark swollen knuckles.
She tells me they appeared not long after her thirtieth birthday.
Did this happen to my Grandmother, too?
This body, my aging body, now wears her dresses
—inherited.
I still remember the way her hands moved,
Stiff, knobbed, delicate fingers combing born-grandmother-gray hair,
covering varicose-streaked skin in Covergirl beige.
Her dresses don't fit, not quite.

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But they fit this new, branching body
much better than they would have that other body,
that born-daughter, ageless, pain-free body,
that flowering body that did not yet resemble
the fruiting mother
the fading grandmother.
I think maybe this me, this aging me,
was born the day my Grandmother died.
The day the hourglass cracked and the sand started spilling,
that was the day the world,
and I,
became mortal.

MEGAN WOOLMAN

The Loss That is Left Behind

I used to live off-grid in the mountains of Colorado. On a high elevation plane, our property sat facing five fifteen-thousand feet mountain peaks. The Sangre De Cristo mountain range towered overhead, a permanent fixture across the snowy landscape riddled with tumbleweeds, cactus, and elk. We moved to a small town at the foothills of the mountains named Creston. Creston was no more than a speck of sand in the desert. We dwelled in a micro community of healers, artists, and farmers. A humble town with no stoplights, nestled along the sleeping giants posed as mountains. The town was home to a butcher shop, an organic market, a post office and a brewery; no more, no less.

We purchased a few acres in the desert. The White Sand Dunes National Park to our south, the Sangre to our east and endless rolling desert-ridden lands towards our north and west. It was desolate, isolative, and harsh. My husband and I loved rural living. We enjoyed how the trees outnumbered the neighbors. We basked in the starlight filled nights in awe of the vastness of the sky. With so many stars above and with so few lights below, we could see the curvature of the earth just by gazing towards the heavens.

For many years it had been my husband and myself. Vagabonds at heart, we held off as long as we could before we invited a four-legged friend to join our pack. We traveled the world, from country to country then from state to state. We settled into the mountains to take a pause, to slow down and to build a cabin.

The foundation had been poured and we began stacking the logs. With no roof on the cabin, we called a fifth wheel trailer our home. We had no well, no running water, no electricity. On the cold nights we would run a Honda 2000 generator to warm our bones.

The community we resided in was small, but active. We heard rumors at the local market of Anatolian mutts that had been born a few weeks prior. We went back and forth on whether or not to get a pup. To grow our family from two into three. My husband was starkly opposed, knowing our impulsivity ran deep in our veins, knowing travel called to us on the wind. One day that all changed after speaking to the owner of the puppies. He called me to say we should at least, "Go look at the pups, see if one calls to us."

The excitement was palpable in the air as we drove our Subaru through the snow, up the pinned lined roads and passed over the now frozen creeks. Naturally, there was a sleepy little pup, just waking up. He looked like a baby bear, chubby and fluffy. He gnawed at his siblings and moved with a clumsy gait. He emanated a playful and laid-back aura. He was drawn to us, as we were drawn to him. It took all of twenty minutes to decide

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we would take him home. And home we took him to our little trailer in the mountains. As an herbalist and plant enthusiast, we settled on the name Kava, because he was easygoing and laid-back, exactly how the herb Kava makes you feel.

Our first family trip was to Taos, New Mexico when Kava was just nine weeks old. It was the weekend of Christmas and our small mountain town had little to no Christmas spirit. So we ventured south to Taos. As we drove into town, Daniel and I beamed as we saw Christmas lights on roofs and paper lanterns adorning the sidewalks. We found a quintessential New Mexican style hotel at which to spend the night. Adobe cased the walls, an earthen fireplace neatly placed in the corner of the room and southwestern blankets laid atop our bed. I'll never forget spending Christmas in that hotel, as we sipped wine at the bar while Kava laid at our feet. We had gotten him a little Santa hat to wear and present themed chew toys. To say it was joyous would be an understatement. For that trip cracked my heart open, and in that crevasse that was cleaved apart by love, Kava now rested. It was our family's first and only Christmas together.

That winter was spent with desert hikes overlooking sand dunes and rocky mountain snow-capped peaks. We spent the winter snuggled up in our trailer, living off-grid and for that moment it was the happiest I had ever been. I was happy with my little family, my companions I kept so close to me. It allowed me time to form a deep connection with Kava.

As we spent our winter days together, Kava became the guardian of my heart and of our trailer. We lived a simple life and having Kava amongst the family enhanced our daily dwellings. As spring approached we made the tough decision to leave Colorado. We thought our departure would be temporary, to take a job in California for the summer and then return to our little cabin in the mountains that we were slowly building, log by log, day by day. But our family never returned together, we never went back to the cabin and Kava never saw the Rocky Mountains again.

We moved back to Northern California, to the Sierra Mountains. Before Colorado, we'd spent years living in the northernmost part of the Golden State. That was the year that broke something inside of me. It wasn't the scraping together of pennies to buy food, it wasn't the off-grid living, it wasn't buying ice for our cooler to keep our food cold or filling up a generator with gas to grace us with a few hours of electricity.

It was because in that fall, on a sleepy Sunday afternoon, I lost Kava.

I was napping in bed, when a house guest let Kava out of the home and onto the farm. He raced for the road that winded through the mountains and was ultimately struck by a truck.

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My fur-soulmate.

My heart.

My everything ceased to be.

My heart had cleaved open that day in Taos, Kava unknowingly nuzzled his bear-like face into my soul. And when we lost him, when he no longer took a breath in that beautiful body of his, I shattered. The crack I felt was palpable, the pain was a living, breathing beast that overtook me when he lost his life.

When I think about my time with Kava, I often think about the array of emotions that are bundled in my heart and in my bones. I was throttled into a red-eyed, puffy faced stupor where all I felt was anguish and despair. Kava was only 11 months old, he'd been in our life for less than a year and I felt as though life ceased to exist without him.

I wondered how a creature, so pure and so kind, could sever my world in two. Though my heart was shattered, and my soul felt broken, when I was with Kava, I was living in the moment. There was life with Kava. Now there was life without Kava.

There is no denying that depression beckoned at my door. I stepped through the threshold and allowed it to swallow me whole. Kava had been the guardian of the door, he had kept me on the other side, tethered to joy. Without him though, it brought about years of sadness.

I think about how his loss rattled me to my core. I had lost family members from cancer and friends from overdoses, but I had never experienced physical pain like I did when I lost Kava. Kava brought me joy, like an endless release of oxytocin when I was in his presence.

The only shining light and sliver of hope came when Kava's best friend, a dog named Pacha, needed a home. Our roommate from that year in the California mountains needed to rehome a husky named Pacha. Pacha was Kava's twin to his soul. His opposite in every way, from his black fur to her coppery golden coat. His brown eyes to her blue. They were inseparable those few months they had together.

As I sit here writing this piece, in memory of the dog that taught me to love deeply, I have Pacha at my side and I know that together, we can help fill a void that has been left in each of our hearts, since we lost him. Now, my home is filled with three dogs, Pacha the husky, Cali the Cane Corso, Blackberry the hound mutt, and Kita, an ancient rescue cat. My home is loving and my animals bring me such joy, but there will always be a piece of my heart that is missing, a piece I gave away to the bear-like pup in the mountains of Colorado.

RICHARD SMITH

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

As I enter the second half of my life, I find myself wanting different things from time. The loves of our youth dissolve into memories and our aging bodies can't keep up as they once did. Our minds are still sharp if not sharper than in days long gone filled with the knowledge of a life half-lived and loved. We've all heard the term midlife crisis. I wonder if we all in some way go through this tumultuous stage.

I recall times in my youth mocking middle-aged men buying red convertible sports cars or going through sordid divorces from scandalous affairs. Am I destined for the same Hollywood path? Perhaps, but just following a more suburban script. Maybe settling for a sporty sedan that is still able to accommodate kids, pets, and all the extracurriculars that accompany the role of being a dad.

Looking back through photo albums it is easy to see the change in myself—individual shots that tell a story of a moment frozen in time. Online photo dumps from Facebook or Instagram become a blur of *when was that?* and *in what year did that happen?* We now take photos and videos—hundreds and thousands of shots fired off like they have no expiration date. I love the old disposable cameras; just twenty-four opportunities to create a memory. A finite number of chances to capture that perfect moment. A moment that couldn't be wasted, cropped, or enhanced. Looking back at those glossy shots of my younger self, I couldn't imagine where I would end up. I'm certain the last time I used a real camera was the year I was married. We purchased a small silver Nikon for our honeymoon. This camera had a physical zoom lens, which didn't take fast shots or possess the sweeping panoramic technology of modern cell phones, but it captured memories with depth and thought with each one of those twenty-four clicks carrying the indescribable weight of promise to the future.

I think it is funny how the saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” holds deeper meaning the older you get. I'm sure the generations after me have taken more photos in their short lives than I ever will but I can still look at a photo of my high school class and tell a thousand stories over twenty years later. If I was the one behind the camera, I get flooded with a whole other set of memories from a different perspective. The responsibility of when to click the button and not wanting to be too early or too late. I adore those special instances when searching for some missing or long forgotten item and stumbling across forgotten prints. Carefully developed at some time in the past and placed in a dog-eared album or still in the pouch from the processing shop (I miss that most—the fun of the unknown—of how the pictures would come out). Negatives included, carefully tucked away, just in case. I want to believe that I'd keep

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those negatives in hopes that sometime someone might ask for a copy. A copy of a memory that can magically be reproduced and physically shared. In reality, the chances are probably slim-to-none.

Growing up, my parents used to have their photos turned into slides. Tiny color copies of the pictures, no bigger than a large postage stamp would be affixed into a row of six on a plastic slide or individually and placed into a wheel of what felt like hundreds. They were then viewed using a projector. Today, I still remember the smell of that old Kodak projector; the hot projection lamp singeing dust on a sizzling bulb and warming the melamine plastic casing. The *chik-chik* sound of the projector moving to the next slide barely audible over the whirring internal fan trying to keep everything cool and prevent disaster. My brothers and I would fight over who got to control the wired remote control during the infrequent family slide viewing; my parents narrating shots of their honeymoon and from the early years of my brothers' childhoods. Slides would fall out of fashion as I came into the picture.

So, when I think back to those early prints of my childhood, I add new memories to them like fractals splintering away from the original shot connecting to another like a spider's web. Plucking a strand sends shuddering vibrations across connection points of a web. How when my youngest son laughs he looks just like my oldest brother as a child. The shots of cousins playing dress-up, like all kids do, just like I did with my brothers and our cousins. Grinning like monkeys in the garden of a family home, a moment in time captured at the perfect instant. My father's old silver and leather Pentax camera making a resounding *click*, that would echo through time, connecting families for generations to come, preserved in some book, somewhere, with that all important negative in tow.

As I start to formulate the second half of my life and where I want it to go, I think back fondly on these memories and how they shaped who I am and who my children are today. How the shots, both spontaneous and posed, of celebrations, vacations, births, marriages, landscapes, homes, cars, pets, loved ones now lost, or a simple mistake taken of someone's shoes make us who we are and tie us to our past. Oh, how one click can reverberate over many lifetimes.

Mercy Drops Dream Center

Despite my best efforts, it was another hectic morning. It's Tuesday, which means guitar practice after school and soccer skills after that. The mental checklist is ticking along already. I make my daughter's lunch—salad with the lettuce that comes in a plastic container, cherry tomatoes, and kalamata olives, fresh strawberries (out of season) and a mandarin orange peeled and separated, a honey-smoked turkey sandwich, an extra Capri Sun so she can save a seat for her friend. She panics wheeling the garbage bin to the curb because there was a bug on it. I stop at Wawa for coffee, hiding behind the candy bars to avoid a former boss in the checkout line. She called me a few days ago; I don't know why.

On the drive out to Portsmouth, my tire light turns on (again). The Wawa free air pump is out of service; I'll worry about it later. I'm worrying about it now anyway. Arriving at Mercy Drops, I'm filled with excitement and uncertainty. I check in, and Tiffany leads me through a maze of donated appliances to a table in the back. I'm sorting through 58 pounds of bread, bagels, and baked treats donated by Panera. Why do I ask so many questions? I worry I'm annoying Tiffany who also doesn't have answers. "Is this all the cookies today? Let me have those to send out with Ron." I continue the system I created—six bagels, eight bagels, half a loaf, and a variety bag of treats. I make sure there is something chocolate in each in case they have kids. I see measured relief on Tiffany's face when I show her my boxes of baked goods, organized and labeled by type and family size.

I load the car with the other volunteers: Ron, Starr, and Nancy. We set off around Portsmouth to hand out sandwiches. Christian folk music plays in the background. We set up a table in front of a church, and Ron announces to the gathered group: "Ham, turkey, or beef, something salty, something sweet." They take turns praying over the sandwiches at every stop; I can see that it matters. I sneak someone an extra brownie. He doesn't have teeth and can't chew the crackers. It's hot even though it's October. I forgot to put on sunscreen. They know the names of the people who come; Ron talks football with some of the men. "I think it makes them feel normal," he says, "like just one of the guys." Ron is an Uber driver, stickers and charging ports in his car. He does the sandwich run every single Tuesday and Thursday. Starr too, for over three years running. "I always want to show up, even when they don't think I will, even if it's pouring rain. I'll always be there for them."

Miss Tyson has been running the second location since long before Mercy Drops. "Just let her do her thing," whispers Nancy, "it's easier than fighting with her." She lives in her car, which was recently totaled. She says she's going to use the money from the

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insurance payout to find a house. “God willing.” Starr asks how her son is doing. Ron bags up four extra waters; he knows one of the men will ask for them—he’s right.

One man rants that the government gave him monkeypox, covid, swine flu, and many other illnesses. He says he will get his payment soon. “No need for court, God is on my side!” He owes the court money anyway. Portsmouth Jack says he got his jeans out of the trash, “but don’t they look good!” He tells us how his dad used to beat him when he was a kid, his mother threatened him for fighting back, and he had to quit school and find a job. His dad gave him two weeks to move out. Ron gets his sizes and says to be there on Thursday, and he will bring him clothes. I know without a doubt he will remember.

We make an unofficial stop on one side of Queen Street; hordes of people approach the van. We form an impromptu lunch assembly out of the back of the car, slinging lunches as fast as we can bag them up. There are too many people here to let them choose what kind of sandwich. I see tears in the eyes of big, proud men as they take their lunches and quietly ask for a second pack of crackers for later. “It’s hot now, but don’t let it fool you! It’ll be *cold cold* come night.”

I meet a man who tells me he rents out the house his late mother left him to people who need it more than him. He sleeps outside still with his community. He tells me it’s all about being together, about love and community, being with your people. It’s what he knows. When we get back in the car, Ron thanks me for “being a good sport” and talking with people. I tell him all anyone really wants, housed or not, is for someone to listen to their story.

Starr agrees, “Look them in the eye and show them they’re not invisible.”
“They’re people.” There is not much separating any of us from the same situation.

A small group at a park gathers in between sites. Ron makes it a point to swing back by and drop off lunches. We take a moment to talk and joke with the people here. One man is surprised Ron remembers his name. He tells me later how he helped Jamal get mental healthcare at the free clinic. In the car, Nancy says something questionable.

“You have to be destitute to get Medicaid.”

“I must be destitute,” I quip back.

She doesn’t respond.

We return to the center and take inventory. We started with 175 sandwiches,

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and ended with less than 40. Talking with Ron before I leave, he tells me his favorite part is Christmas when he gets to play Santa and give presents to kids in the projects we drove past. He wishes he could get more businesses to donate hot meals like they used to. “Sorry to get personal,” he says, and asks if I am there because I wanted to help in my heart or because I needed community service hours. I tell him that I searched and chose Mercy Drops from my heart, but that I will write about the day for class.

He says, “Thank you for being here. Thank you for caring. I hope you’ll come back.” I will; I want to help. I know it’s important. I am so much closer to that life than I like to think about. If it wasn’t for the kindness of others, I wouldn’t have a home either.

CAROLINE MCCORMICK

A Typical Irish Kitchen

I knew the day of the week by the smells from the kitchen. Mince on Monday, lamb chops on Tuesday, bacon and cabbage on Wednesday, chicken on Thursday, fish on Friday, a fry-up on Saturday, and a roast on Sunday. It never changed. Every meal except the fry-up was served with potatoes. They were mostly boiled, with the odd mash, and my favorite, roast potatoes, on Sunday.

Each day, I raced home from school at noon, pulling my school uniform brown tie loose as I ran. Dinner was served at a quarter past. The faster I was, the sooner I'd be done, and on my way back to the playground. On Wednesdays, I dawdled a bit, because our housekeeper, Mrs. McGrath was there. She always had a few sweets in her pocket and slipped me a couple on the way out.

On my way in, I passed the big brown radio on the long countertop to the right. It was the centerpiece, and central to our lives. It lived in a polished mahogany cabinet, with a soft fabric grille. I used to put my ear against it to feel its vibrations. After Sunday dinner, we listened to international rugby games and joined in when Daddy roared at the radio, "Come on Ireland."

On quiet kitchen evenings, I played with the ivory Bakelite tuning and volume knobs. I moved the dials as if in a trance. Finding Radio Luxembourg in rural Ireland required fierce concentration. It was from that glowing, precarious line on the panel that my sister Leonie and I heard Michael Jackson for the first time. We threw off our slippers and danced on the cold, cream-colored linoleum in our bare feet. We sang "I want to rock with you, all night," at the top of our lungs. My mother shouted, "Shut up" from the sitting room.

A Piece of Myself on the Page

I'm not feeling very inspired today. Sometimes I know what to write about the minute I hear the question. Sometimes the ideas come to me fully formed, and my duty is simply to polish them up and tie on the bow. Sometimes they don't. They don't, and I'm clawing the insides of my brain, grasping for threads worthy of weaving. These are my thoughts, served up high on a silver platter for you to peruse and the crows to pluck clean of loose bone marrow and leftover adverbs.

Such is my nature, I've come to confirm. I'm all in or all out, black or white, on or off. I don't know how to leave only a piece of myself on the page, so I pour out my heart when the muses whisper to me the moments that stand for all other moments. I never know how much of myself to let shine through my words. But I need to trust that these frustrations are integral to the art of becoming. My most profound realizations cannot be pinpointed for there is no single moment great enough to define them.

You can piece together my heart from the college-ruled paper scraps I leave like breadcrumbs when I stare into the midnight moon peeking from behind the clouds. These quiet moments are where my deepest transformations lie dormant, waiting for me to discover the words which will bring them alive. I write from the heart and process in real time, transforming before my very own eyes. Each epiphany brings to light new pieces of myself, to share or to keep, to leave on the page or to file away for when someone asks the right question. What does it mean to write from the heart?

ANGELA BOWERMAN

Reflections



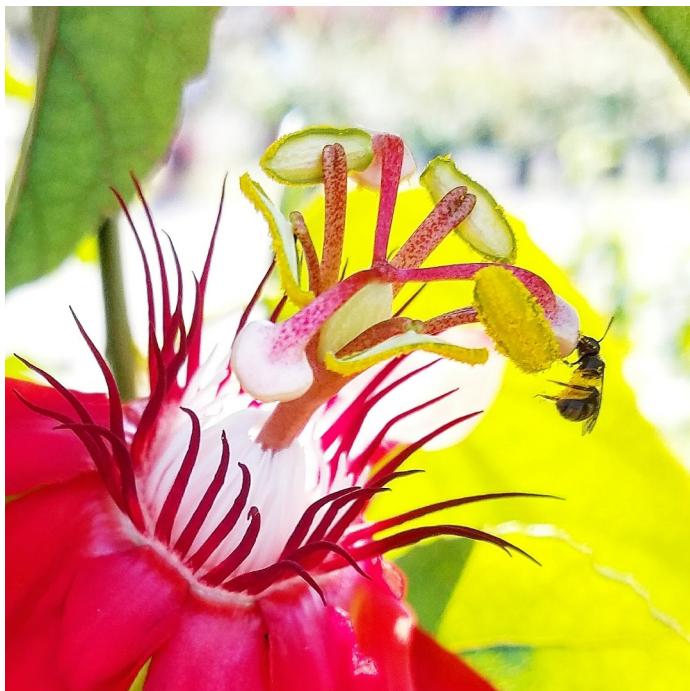
AIMEE BELSER

Nami Island



AIMEE BELSER

Red Passion Flower, Fairfax



ANGELA BOWERMAN

Moody Sea



VIVIAN PLANTE

Les Étudiants



AIMEE BELSER

Insadong



VIVIAN PLANTE

Latin Quarter at Night



AIMEE BELSER

Gyeongju



AIMEE BELSER

Light Post, Incheon



ANGELA BOWERMAN

Mystic Road



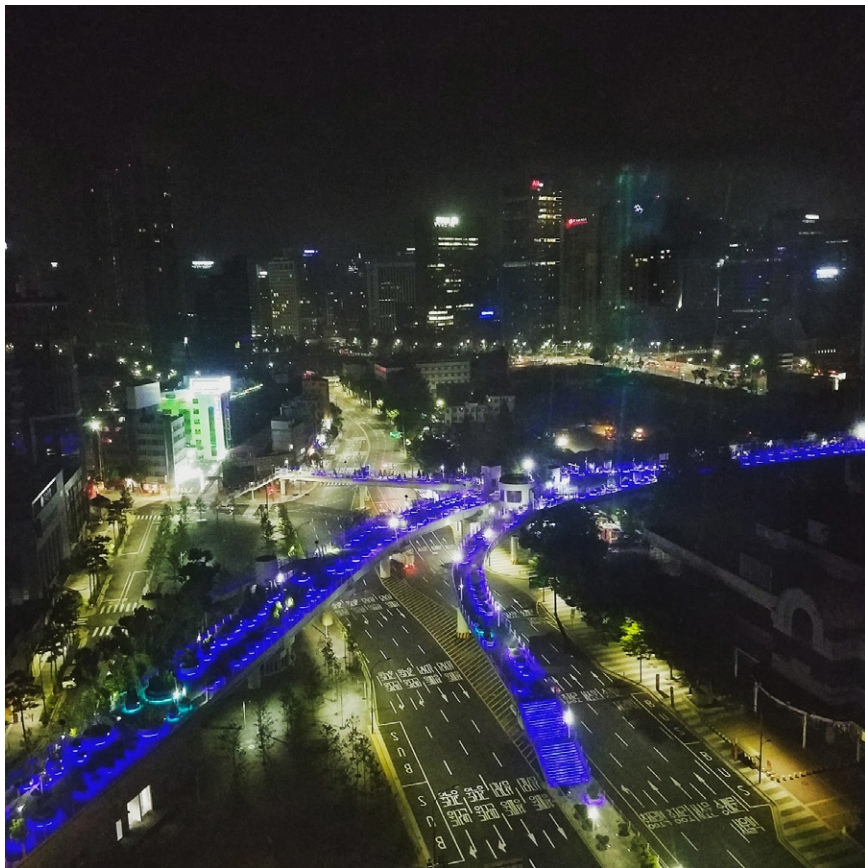
ANGELA BOWERMAN

Scarlet's Feathers



AIMEE BELSER

Seoullo, Yongsan





GIL SOMERS

I-Love-Yous

I wrote today,
on the backs of river rocks,
and hid them in your garden
So as you're sun-kissed,
planting 'forget-me-nots,'
you might find
'I-love-yous'
among them

MARY E. TODD

The Unloved Prisoner, Tulsa, OK 1980

If you listen in the silence,
and you hear a muffled cry,
it is the unloved prisoner,
wishing he could die.
If you sit and try to talk to them,
you might just hear them say,
“We have no one to love us,
so our lives we’ll waste away.”
“When we were out we really tried,
to show people we are good,
but try to make them care for us,
well I guess we never could.”
“The friends we thought we had before,
have turned against us too,
so we’ll just sit here in this jail,
and keep on feeling blue.”
Oh the unloved prisoner,
he doesn’t know you’re there,
so if you chance to talk to one,
please let him know you care.

The Driver (A rework of “The Cowboy” by James Tate)

Somebody had started a horrible rumor about me, that my mother was a homeless drug addict, and I thought I knew who it was. It was Zachary Sovey. Zachary and his family were known to gossip and tell stories. We used to be friends when I was younger, but his new best friend didn't like me, so I knew it was probably him. All of the kids around the neighborhood made fun of me. I had to punch, kick, and fight my way through middle school. Some kids only stood up for me when they thought they had to. There were always a lot of questions. “Does she live in her car?” “Is she on meth?” “Do you have to live with her?” And I simply denied that she was my mother. And of course, they made fun of me even more. The police showed up and started driving around the neighborhood. I was worried. They were coming by my dad's house more frequently. Zackary had really outdone himself. I had to do something. Finally, I stood up for myself. I told the kids, “My mom is dead. She died in a horrible car accident last night.” “When's the funeral?” They questioned. “She burned up almost instantly,” I said. “I don't believe you,” one of them said. “There isn't going to be a funeral, she didn't want to have one,” I said. About half of them stopped hanging around after that. The rest continued to make fun of the clothes that I was wearing, but less cruelly now. I walked to the store to buy a root beer. When I came back about twenty minutes later the other half of them had gone. When I went into the backyard I almost dropped the bottle. There she was in disheveled clothing, hair a mess, with a distant look in her eye. “Why would you tell them I was dead? That was a lie,” she said. “You're not supposed to be here,” I said. “I just came through the back gate, it wasn't locked. Also, your dad isn't home. He's not going to be back for a while. I love you Terry, I'm sorry for who I am. I don't want to hurt you,” she said. “What are you doing here?” I said. “I want to teach you how to drive. I learned when I was your age. Now it's your turn,” she said. “I'm too young to drive, I don't even have my permit yet. There are so many cops around here you could get arrested. Everybody in town would find out,” I said. “You can just drive around the block. It will be okay,” she said. “I'll think about it. Driving past the library would be the safest, but somebody might see us,” I said. “Don't worry, you won't get in trouble,” she said. “I would have to practice,” I said. I finished my root beer and put the bottle away. I tried not to think about all of the bad things that could happen. Instead, I pretended like she was a normal mom. “Do you have any Mountain Dew?” she said. “No, but I can get you a glass of water. It's better for you anyway,” I said. She drank it quickly and made a satisfied sound. “I'm going to get my sweatshirt,” I said. “I'm ready to give it a try.” When I came back she was sitting on the stone wall, slumped over, almost weeping. “I got my sweatshirt,” I said. “You won't need it. I'm going to go away for a while. It's going to be okay. I want you to visit me and let me know when you get your permit,” she said. I stood there with my sweatshirt in my hand. I felt an unbearable sadness come over me. “Why do you have to leave?” I said. “The police are going to come take me. It's not your fault,” she said. “But I was going to learn how to drive,” I said. Let's pretend that I already taught you how to drive,” she said.

GIL SOMERS

What a Wonderful Time to be Alive

Do you remember that time,
When we almost died?
When we were trapped in that cave,
With our flashlights dimming?
And I was so afraid to tell you,
I was afraid of the Dark.
And it felt like the walls were closing in.
And I snagged my pants while crawling through that crevice.
I told myself that I'd never forgive myself
If I got stuck
And the only thing standing between you and escape
Was my limp and unmoving body.
And even when we finally crawled out
Of the mouth of that awful hole in the earth,
The sun beat down viciously—
mosquitos sucked at our flesh
And still,
We were so far from home.
So far from our bed.
Where we'd drop the A.C.
Pretending we'd have to huddle for warmth
In that little cave of our own.
Where you'd reach over
And grab my hands in yours.
And bring them both to your chest,
Squeezing the webbing of our fingers together.
And we'd fall asleep smiling
While I thought to myself—
What a wonderful time to be alive.



RICHARD SMITH

A Millennial's Lament

2020 was a horrible year.
Disastrous for more than a few.
Death and panic surrounded us.
Engulfed us. We grabbed at straws.
Grasping for hope, drugs, and sanitizer.

The world began anew that day.
A time filled with crazy schemes.
And crazier conspiracies.
How we devoured and hoarded it all.
In our safe houses, we applauded them.

Years waiting to recover.
A lost generation anticipating.
The skipped, the failed. We owned promise.
We declared as one generation
One of the shiny new millennia.
Years ahead of us. Where do we go from here?
I hold hope for children.
I keep none for myself.

MATTHEW MARTIN

When Through Waking Dreams We'd First Met

Two minds intertwined—before broke the sun,
Silent grace and doubt's face, disbelief of true dark
Each heart hopes, wells again, each false start acts to stun
when dusk falls on past strands, rivulets again shudder stark

Then two heard—their—voices, neither forgers nor thieves,
absolving doubt's whispers built through time's strife-filled heights
Two paths shifted, converged, despite staid beliefs
Resolving thought-echoes, gifting hues to mind's sight

Yet frequently present, their whims were no larks;
“This may be Fate's forging!” cried adepts of insight
A dyad was glimpsed with near-present souls' spark,
Relieving, inviting, aligning, alight

To unite as if plaited of Fates' favor, they'd breach,
despite strife, pain, or suffering—or masquerading time's reach
Predetermined, paired eyes' glow rends false portents to cease
While deciphering each truth's sign, in their daydreams, to seek

Once doubt was surrendered, it could not blind them from greeting
Two serendipitous souls transformed daydreams to meeting

**A Collaborative Piece by
VIVIAN PLANTE, AIMEE BELSER, and CHARLOTTE MATTHEWS**

Sound of Sea and Glimpse of Shadow

To tell one's story is no easy feat; it takes a certain sense of curiosity and bravery to explore one's inner workings. As we live our lives, we collect stories. These stories become our personal treasures—we have our own secrets and tales that we are dying to share. We can take the good, the bad, and the ugly aspects of life and craft them into an intriguing narrative. As we wander this earth, we might come across a polished pebble here, or a coarse stone there, but along the way, these found objects can be put together to assemble something special. These stories—whether big or small, shiny or worn—can fit together like tesserae to build the mosaic of our lives.

Our memories represent each tesserae—only you can be your own mosaicist. This project, though, is not for the faint of heart. Much time, care, and patience is needed when creating one's masterpiece—to create an inner mosaic is to cultivate one's mind. We might compare pieces—pondering which one we want to put on display. Some pieces are foundational, while others are decorative. No construction is like the other—we all have our own story, and our own path. Each human is unique in their own way, and so are our inner mosaics which can make

droplets melt across the window. Helios bursts through the rain.
Iridescent rainbows flicker against the wall.
In every liquid drop, a kaleidoscope of color
Swelling, welling microcosm, yet not so very small.

Shiny, resplendent refraction in every shape and every hue.
The symphony of textures; a galaxy of lights.
A sea of sound, of contrast, and shadow
reaching exquisitely synesthetic new heights.

The holographic radiance of shimmering scintillation.
Luscious, sumptuous resonance of prismatic rays.
A glimpse of splendor, a splash of wonder,
an introspective third eye; a longing, loving gaze.

(Continued)

Edenic enlightenment and celestial Nirvanic ether merge.
A palette of connection, flavor, harmony, and flow.
Vibrating particles hum with eternal energy.
Ethereal wisps; twinkling phosphenes aglow.

A bouquet of every tint and tone; lustrous gleaming spectacle.
Beams of dreams and dainty dew dance and sing and marry.
The collective influx of illuminate, ruminant souls.
Tightly clasped, grasped in my heart and hand I carry.

A nexus of togetherness; a coronal puzzle piece by piece.
Opalescent tiles of glass, and glint, and air.
Sparkling brilliant blinding reflection.
Exist we are. We, all in this mosaic, share.

And we are like rocks in the shape of hearts which, in the shallows, seem brighter,
like someone came and polished them, which just may be true. Because the world
is oxidizing, a reddish-brown corrosion that none of us seems to be able to undo.
Some of us hide, hunker down, because a fierce wind came in the night and blew
everything off kilter. But these bright rocks—granite, basalt, sandstone—are durable,
smoothed by centuries and the force of pure water. They form a mosaic, a labyrinth,
a path toward the light.

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