



PAPER DRAGON

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Letter From the Editors

MFA class of 2024 is proud to bring you our final *Paper Dragon* volume. Volume 7 submissions surpassed all previous volumes, and we couldn't be more pleased that so many writers, poets, and artists are seeking publication for their work and choosing to submit to *Paper Dragon*!

For this volume, we asked for longer works of fiction and writers delivered. Our editors and readers worked hard to deliver a selection of pieces that not only showcased the wonderful talent around us but also embodied *Paper Dragon's* mission of publishing high-quality creative work from authors in underrepresented communities.

This volume is bittersweet for our class, but we leave *Paper Dragon* in the capable and talented hands of MFA class of 2025. We can't wait to see where they take the journal. Thank you for reading *Paper Dragon* and we wish continued creativity and success to all the writers, poets, and artists.

~Tori Chase and Seth Kazmar, Co-editors

FICTION

Assorted Tales from the North American Corps of Climate Engineers

Christopher R. Muscato

Company 84 (Santa Clara Valley, California)

The snapping of poppers marked a simple but joyful celebration. Not the most practical way to spread seeds, but by far the most fun.

“To Finley!” The members of Company 84 cheered their captain. She bowed with comic theatricality, but in truth the completion of her fiftieth wildlife crossing was a big deal.

While Company 84 dismantled camp and packed their mobile bunker, soon to depart to their next project, Finley inspected the bridge. Dense foliage drowned out traffic below, flowering plants attracted pollinators, tall trees and carpet-like shrubbery offered sanctuary or food, and poison oak discouraged human use.

The crossing would restore migration paths, reverse habitat fragmentation, and reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions (an unfortunate byproduct of all those new EVs on the roads). Just like her previous forty-nine.

But the significance of this bridge was more than numerical.

Finley could hear her grandfather’s voice as they counted the dwindling herds, describing sprawling elk migrations of yore. Before a concrete river split the land.

Finley removed the urn from her backpack. The wind did most of the scattering. Maybe her grandfather’s spirit would witness great migrations again.

She rubbed her rounding belly. Maybe her child would see them one day too.

Company 17 (Lethbridge, Alberta)

Liam’s childhood had been spent racing flames. Every year, the fires came. He fled, choking on ash.

The elder passed him the smoldering bundle of grass. He took it in both hands and lowered

it to the ground. Liam's heart pounded like the drums nearby. The fire was moving. He felt the urge to run.

A hand on his shoulder held him. The elder smiled. She took the bundle and passed it to her granddaughter. The child took the fire and set it to the ground, following it as it burned.

Liam watched the child shadow the burning path. Cousins and aunts and uncles lit fires, letting them burn cool and slow. They wore coats and blankets in the spring air, laughed and danced.

Learning cultural burning was one of the Corps' many efforts to foster indigenous partnerships. Liam joined the NACCE to help others flee the dry-season fires, to help them race the flames. But here, people worked as friends alongside the very thing that haunted his childhood.

The elder took Liam's trembling hand, and together they walked with the fire.

Company 47 (Pinar del Río, Cuba)

Another kite went missing. The culprit was quickly identified as six-year-old Ernesto Acosta. A repeat offender.

Iriye rubbed her temples. As he had the previous three times, the child scowled through the interrogation. In fact, he wouldn't even look her in the eye.

All of this for one little boy, when they were trying to prepare for the oncoming hurricane, the sixth already this year. That meant reinforcing the power grid, stabilizing homes, distributing supplies, and loading up evacuees onto NACCE airships. And now their kites kept disappearing. Their very expensive, hurricane-gale-tested kinetic energy kites that powered the mobile command station.

Iriye asked community leaders about the boy after he stormed off. He moved with such anger, such destructive impulse. They asked if she'd never suffered loss in her youth, and she had to admit she'd been fortunate. Most hurricanes turned north before hitting her part of Jamaica. She'd never been through the brunt of it. Never stood in its center.

There was a lot of work that needed to be done before the hurricane arrived. But even as time ran short, Iriye was collecting string and paper.

She found Ernesto in the middle of an intersection, knees to his chest. She pulled two kites from behind her back.

The two sat on the roof of a boarded-up house, tugging on strings fighting the wind. He still didn't meet her gaze, but he seemed somewhat more at ease. Iriye hoped if she weathered the storm, she might reach his center and find peace in his eyes.

Company 239 (Douglas, Wyoming)

Cody handed out water bottles, blankets, warm food. The blizzard hit hard, and fast. Generators hummed life into the NACCE emergency shelter. Wind rumbled outside. People huddled together. An old man in a broad hat strummed his guitar and sang to the children gathering around him. The prairie was once filled with the songs of jackalopes, he sang. They accompanied the choirs of cowboys around their campfires.

Cody signaled that he was taking his coffee break. He held the steaming drink and peered out into the snowstorm. It was beautiful in its own way. He tried to focus on that feeling.

He'd seen so much grief in his time working with disaster response. It was hard to find joy. It was hard not to get lost in the weight of catastrophe.

Jackalopes only imitate human voices, the old man sang. Nobody hears them anymore because nobody sings.

Cody took a sip of his warm coffee, then quietly slipped outside. He closed his eyes. He felt the stinging cold and sang to the prairie, listening for voices singing back through the blizzard.

Company 112 (Poza Rica, Veracruz)

Juaquin could tell he was losing them. The audience, mostly men, middle aged, grumbled in their seats, whispering to each other in a Spanish infused with words Juaquin didn't know. It wasn't the Spanish he grew up with in Texas.

Juaquin finished his presentation and stomped sullenly back to the NACCE mobile bunker. Home sweet home.

Some of the others asked how it was going. Their training groups seemed to be faring much better.

Juaquin fell into his bunk, looked at the pictures taped to his wall. Five years. All the benefits of military service but he never had to touch a gun. Building not destroying.

He rolled over. Training roughnecks to build and maintain the new green infrastructure

wasn't going to be easy. Working oil rigs was all these men had ever known. And he'd caught enough of their grumbling to know they saw him as an outsider, just some transient climate engineer. What could they learn from someone who bounced from assignment to assignment? Someone who was a master of nothing.

Juaquin looked at the wall, his pictures of those assignments. Building mangrove habitats. Evacuating flood zones. Rewilding prairie. Installing wind turbines. He sat up.

Weeks later, as Company 112 was preparing to deploy to its next assignment assisting a crew that built wildlife crossings, somewhat short staffed as their captain was on maternity leave, corps members congratulated Juaquin on the success of his training group. They asked his secret, how he got through to his trainees. Juaquin smiled. The language of the future was adaptability, and none were more fluent than those who moved from place to place, project to project, skill to skill. Not a master of one trade, was he, but a Juaquin of all.

About the Author

Christopher R. Muscato is a writer from Colorado, USA. He is the former writer-in-residence of the High Plains Library District and a graduate of the Terra.do climate activism fellowship. His fiction can be found in *Nonprofit Quarterly*, *House of Zolo*, and *Solarpunk Magazine*, among other places.

The Fae Witch of the Grove

Rachel Racette

Deep within a forest, beneath a sky of emerald leaves, sits a woman with dark hair that pours down her back and hangs between the great twin horns atop her head, casting her eyes in shadow. She is young with pale skin and long slender limbs, with pointed ears and sharp black nails. Chains of various precious metals hang from her bare neck and various pieces of gold and silver jewelry resting beneath her feet along with many a small smooth stone, and around her fingers are tied ribbons of various colors and sizes.

She has been here a very long time. Sitting in her grove beneath a large, ancient, twisted tree, kingdoms have risen and fallen beyond her sight. The only breaks in the monotone are the people who come, desperate and scared, seeking the salvation they believe she can bring.

She is of the Fae, the people in the village just at the edge of the wood say. Old yet forever young. She is a witch of dark and powerful magic who never leaves her grove. Who grins with sharp teeth when a deal is made.

Her fee to ask something of her is always the same, no matter the wish; a stone smoothed by water, a piece of gold or silver jewelry, and a ribbon.

Still, despite warnings, people still come, falling before her on dirty and scrapped knees, clothes torn from the thorn-ridden path to her home. Each starting similarly; begging or demanding or sobbing for things. They want power, they want to be beautiful forever, they want riches, they want to be strong, they want to fight monsters.

She grants their wishes without complaint, but what these people bring her is not the price for the spells and powers she gives them, simply the price to ask. She warns them every time, tells them in her soft musical voice, that magic and power does not come without a price, even though she knows they will never listen. Always, her words are brushed off, dismissed until the shadows and powers that be come knocking for the real payment.

"Why?!" The weaker cry, weeping for lost loved ones or well-loved forgotten memories, for the children stolen from their arms.

"How dare you!" The bolder shout, trembling under the weight of their actions, the lives they could never return to and the tomorrows they had given up.

"Take it back!" The greedy beg, dropping gold and gems at her feet, pressing their faces into the dirt. Crying for the years stolen from their flesh, for the death that follows at their heels.

"I told you." She always replies, with her unnaturally echoing voice. "I do not decide the price. You asked for terrible things, so wonderful things will be taken. The fault lies not with me."

Then they scream or rush her or weep at her feet, and she pulls at the ribbons, or scrapes a nail across the stones and banishes the humans from her home. And even if they should try, they will never find her grove again.

So the cycle continued, until one day, a child stumbled into her arms.

* * *

I stare. The child blinks back, copper eyes wide and ringed in red. She trembles, this mortal who can be no older than seven summers, but she stays, hands twirling my price in small sickly thin hands, she does not flee or turn away.

This is new. Not the situation, people come almost every day to my grove, but one so young, one so scared and determined... this was different. I can feel it down in my soul.

I hold out a hand, waiting patiently until she steps, bare feet caked in mud, toward me, handing me the offerings and backing up quickly, nearly slipping on the hoard I sit upon. Her hands are cold.

"What is it you come to wish for?" I whisper, tying the short and dirty green ribbon around a finger.

"I-I have a uh, a question? You-you can answer it, can't you? No-no one else will." She stutters, wringing her hands.

I pause, head tilting, my thumb rubbing the smoothest side of the stone; it's still damp. She must have run from the river, which is not a short distance. Still, questions were a difficult wish for me to grant, sometimes I didn't have an answer, or the truths I told were ones my wishers didn't want. Not that it mattered much to me.

I nod in reply and gesture for her to continue.

"Am I a monster?" She whispers. I freeze, and with my magic, I reach out and *really* look at the child before me. I taste the magic of her blood and gasp at the familiarity. She is a child of

both human and Fae, and she is terrified. I look deeper, and see the tears and stains dulling her soul, some self-inflicted. I have only one answer for her. For the first time, I curse my inability to lie.

"You are not fully human like those in your village." I say slowly, watching the remaining color drain from her face, watch her eyes grow dark and dull. Now, with a second look, a *real* look – I see what I hadn't before; she is pretty, even covered in grime, even tired and starved. Past her greasy stringy hair, her ears are slightly curved, one day they will be sharpened to a point. One day, she will look like a goddess. She will be able to call upon powers mortals can only dream of – one day, she will be loved and hated and feared.

But today, she is a frightened child who only wants a question to be answered, who wants comfort, who wants someone to chase her fears away. But the truth – that is all I can offer.

"You are only half human, on your father's side if I had to guess." She nods, probably only for the sake of doing *something*, I'm sure, given how she seems to crumble with every word.

"Human men have always been easy for our kind to tempt. Not that woman are any more difficult but..." I trail off, hands immediately going for the chains around my throat, remembering a time when I was young, when I was weak too, and I say the words I would have needed. The words that would hopefully give her the strength to live for herself, and know she is allowed to be herself. Not a lie, but a ... *different* truth.

"No." I say, reaching out and raising her head with a hand beneath her chin. "You are not a monster. You are a halfling child of the Fae. You are pretty and strong. You are powerful and wonderful and do *not* let anyone ever tell you otherwise. Your heritage only means where you're from, not who you are, not who you will be." Her eyes shine with unshed tears, her lower lip wobbles.

"But – But the adults say--"

"Adults lie." I growl, cutting her off, dropping my hand. Spitting words I'd wished I'd been told when I was young. "Humans, for all their creativeness, their love and compassion and bravery, can also be cruel. They can be terrible, they can be manipulated or manipulative, their anger or sorrow can overtake them, and they are more than willing to hurt or kill what frightens them." I stop, heart pounding under the fire of my emotions. I breathe, deep and slow, and return to my previous calm. I smile, and a wave of warm magic flows out of me and through her, calming her enough to sit just as the edge of my hoard. She breathes with me, blinking away the

wetness of her doe eyes. She offers a shaky smile.

"I'm not a monster?" I nod, pride welling in my chest at the honest belief in her voice. Her question had been answered, her request completed, but I had no idea what the *real* price would be, no one had ever just asked a question before, and... and I did not want her to go back to where she will be hurt. She did not deserve the fate the price of my magic generally brought.

"...What's your name?" the child asks, startling me from my thoughts. *She was still here?* "I-if I can ask?" She stutters, biting her lip. I blink, hands stilling, curled tight in the chains dangling from my throat. I stare, eyes wide behind the silk curtain of my dark hair.

No one had ever asked for my name before. No one had ever wanted the name of the Fae Witch of the Grove. Titles and curses were all I was ever given. What had I been before? Who had I been before? Did I even have a name? Had I ever been given one?

"...I..." *What was my name? What was my name? I had one – didn't I? Didn't I?!* "...I don't know." I admit. I raise my head and blink. *When had the child moved so close?* Her eyes are ringed a brighter red, glazing over while her lips tremble, though she holds her head high, peering up at me.

"Well, I- I could give you one. If—if you want." Her hands curl tightly into the dirty worn fabric of her clothes. She is terrified, I see it clearly in her bright wide eyes, yet she still tries to meet my eye. For the first time, someone tries to stand as my equal, tries to see *me*.

I smile, softly, this one *not* a dark smirk, and pull back the curtain of my hair, seeing unhindered for the first time in a long time. Her eyes glimmer with a different light now.

"I would like that very much." I say, warmth blooming in my chest as she smiles, color brightening her face.

* * *

Deep within the forest, there is a grove beneath a canopy of emerald leaves, where a woman and a child live. The woman sits under an ancient twisting tree, atop a hoard of jewelry and smooth stones, with ribbons tied around her slender fingers. Her hair is long and dark, tangled across the two great twisting horns atop her head. She is young with pale hair and sharp nails, with chains dangling from her neck.

The child, a pretty little thing, thin but healthy, with flowers tangled in her pale hair, skips around the clearing, sometimes disappearing into the greenery, coming and going at her leisure but always returning. She too, bears string upon her small fingers.

They are of the Fae, the people say. Offering deals with twin sweet grins or matching dark smirks. Beware those inhuman children. Calling favors and granting wishes with their magic, but this time, they give care to the kind and lost, they do not allow the darker powers to hurt the good who come their way.

For the elder, you must bring a ribbon, a stone smoothed by water, and a piece of precious jewelry.

For the younger, a piece of string, the softest and well-worn the better, and a hand-picked flower, but not one from their forest.

They sit, laughing and singing in their grove as kingdoms rise and fall, as battles are fought and won and lost, as humans live and die. Disturbed only when someone comes crawling down the thorn path to their home, with wishes upon their tongues. Cursing the cruel and greedy to their fate and saving the kind and broken from the harshness of their blood.

About the Author

Rachel Racette, born 1999, in Balcarres, Saskatchewan. Interested in creating her own world and characters and loves writing science-fiction and fantasy. She has always loved books of fantasy and science fiction as well as comics. Lives with her supportive family and cat, Cheshire. Lives vicariously in fantasy settings of her own making. Published in: *Poet's Choice - Free Spirit*, *Arthropod Literary Journal Issue 1*, *Underwood Press*, *Coffin Bell*.

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My First Tattoo

Toshiya Kamei

Still hazy with sleep, I dodged around half-unpacked boxes and headed for the bathroom. I stood in front of the mirror, and I tilted my neck to get a better look at my new tattoo; she looked back at me with beady eyes under familiar bushy eyebrows.

The tattoo had once been an elaborate portrait of saffron in full bloom, something to commemorate my independence and recovery from self-harm, but I now stared at pre-transition me. Saffron distorted and bulging from her hair, the girl wrinkled our angular nose. Anxiety stirred in the pit of my stomach.

“I’m starving,” she said with my old, girlish voice. “Can I have something to eat?”

Did the girl have a digestive system of her own? I pondered this before concluding that that was beside the point. I ran to the kitchen, and with a trembling hand, spoon-fed her milk-drenched cereal. I asked the girl her name, but she said she didn’t have one, so I dubbed her Chris, short for Christina, my deadname.

Despite being alarmed, I decided against seeking medical care for fear of attracting unwanted attention. What was ailing me? Was Chris some kind of mutation? I plugged talking tattoos and similar phrases into my phone, but my search came up empty. Chris never said anything about the subject, but when she thought I wasn’t paying attention, I caught the smug curl of her lips. As if she won the point of some game I didn’t know we were playing.

To my surprise, though, Chris wasn’t terrible company. We were both horror aficionados, and she loved movie-theater popcorn. The kind with extra butter. It was nice, too, to have someone to talk to, despite the awkward nature of talking to my own neck. When Mrs. Barberi in 3B yelled at her husband in Italian, Chris and I laughed at his dry, monosyllabic answers in the face of her flurry of words. At night, staring up at the bedroom ceiling, I had almost considered us friends.

As days turned to weeks, however, I became frustrated by the lack of privacy. I missed my alone time, for one, and her snoring deprived me of good sleep. Moreover, what would people

think if they found out about Chris? I wore a scarf to hide her whenever I went out.

I researched tattoo removal while taking a bite of my chicken taco on my lunch break.

“Saline solution?” she said. “Oh, come on, you know better than that. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Why are you even here, Christina?” I raised my voice. “Why can’t you just leave me alone for once?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Chris said. “We’re stuck with each other.”

I threw up my hands and sighed. She was right. I had no choice but to learn to live with her.

Soon after I began working at a little Chinese takeout place called Mr. Lin’s, I met Mateo, an olive-skinned young man with deep-set brown eyes. He stopped by like clockwork every evening.

“Hi, Finn,” Mateo said as he walked in, wearing an easy smile, one that made my legs feel weak. He had a clean-shaven, masculine jaw.

“Hey there.” I feigned a casual air, trying to ignore the fluttering in my stomach.

Meanwhile, I kept my gaze on him, trying to read him.

“The usual?” I said.

He nodded, and I scooped chow mein and beef fried rice into a plastic container. I covertly ogled him, admiring his runner’s body.

“Anything else?” I asked.

He pointed toward the tray of orange chicken, and I scooped a large portion into the container and placed extra spring rolls on top of the rice.

He smacked his lips as if trying to muster his courage.

“Finn,” Mateo said as he paid for his takeout. “What are you doing Sunday morning?” He glanced at me before looking away. A faint blush reddened his cheeks.

“Sorry, but we’re really busy,” Chris said in a muffled voice through the scarf.

“Excuse me?” he said, surprised.

“Nothing.” I nodded, urging him on.

“Some friends and I are playing soccer in Johnson Park.” He smiled. “Do you want to join us?”

“Sure,” I said before Chris could interrupt. “What time?”

“Is nine-ish okay with you?”

“See you then.” I’d never played soccer, but that wouldn’t stop me.

When Mateo was out of earshot, I said, “Oh God, he must think I’m crazy.”

Chris snorted. Saturday couldn’t come fast enough.

* * *

It was a cloudless day, and Brandi Carlile crooned on the car stereo. A cool breeze caressed my face as I stepped out of the pickup and walked toward the crowded park. A half-dozen elderly Asian women in loose cotton pants practiced tai chi by the main gate, and several children set off running and overtook me. I smelled earth, flowers, and fresh-cut grass.

When I arrived, Mateo and his friends were warming up on the field. He introduced me to everyone, including his sister, Isabela.

“Mateo, who are you going to pick first?” Isabela said, and the rest let out jovial laughs.

“Finn,” Mateo said, crossing his arms in feigned self-importance. Everyone hooted and cheered. I mock-flexed my bicep and high-fived the people around me.

We played for forty-five minutes. There were no heroics on my part, but Mateo passed me the ball through the legs of the last defender and let me score an easy goal.

Afterward, Mateo’s friends dispersed, leaving me and Mateo alone. I led him to an empty bench nearby, and we ate the brunch I’d brought from work.

“I’m hungry, too,” Chris said.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“What’s going on, Finn?” Mateo’s voice was soft, and the concern on his face almost had me explaining everything. Almost. I kept quiet, looking at my shoes.

“I didn’t know you were a ventriloquist.”

I laughed.

“Seriously though, you can tell me anything.” Mateo grabbed my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “If things get serious between us—”

“It’s a good time to let the cat out of the bag,” Chris mumbled.

“Excuse me.” I got up, my cheeks burning. “I have to go.”

“Wait!”

I quickened my pace without looking back. My eyes stung with unshed tears.

“It’s your fault, Chris!” I cried. “Who would go out with a freak like me?”

“Just tell him the truth,” Chris protested. “There’s no other way.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Pardon?” an old woman said as I passed her in the parking lot.

“Never mind,” I said, waving at her. I climbed into the pickup and shut the door. Chris and I argued for the rest of the ride.

When I arrived home, I took off my scarf and dropped it on the floor. I flew straight to the kitchen and grabbed a knife out of the drawer. I remembered how I used to cut myself.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Chris said.

“Oh, shut up!”

My phone’s ringing startled me. Mateo’s name flashed across the screen.

“What is it, Mateo?” My voice trembled.

“Finn, I’m down here, in front of your apartment. Let me up. I need to talk to you.”

“Leave me alone, please.” I hung up. My heart pounded against my ribs. I heard Chris trying to talk to me, but the static in my head was too loud for me to make out any of her words.

I slid down the wall until I sat on the floor, legs out before me. I was cold, shaking with cold, but torturous memories welled up inside me like hot blood: a chilly razor blade against my skin.

A sudden knock on the door startled me. I waited, remaining frozen, until another knock thudded. The door swung open; I’d forgotten to lock it in my haste. Before I could put my scarf back on, Mateo stepped in, looking worried. I lifted myself off the floor.

“What are you doing?” Mateo said, alarm in his voice, when he saw me with the knife.

“I’m such a freak!” I cried. The walls suddenly closed in, and I could hardly breathe. My hand trembled as I tightened my grip on the knife.

“No, you’re not.” Mateo’s dark eyes were still and steady. “Even if you are, it doesn’t matter. Put the knife down, Finn.”

I remained silent, searching for words.

Mateo stepped toward me, and I dropped the knife. He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed tight. I wished his embrace would last forever.

Minutes passed, but it felt like days in Mateo’s arms. Eventually, though, I pulled away when Chris sniffled, breaking my reverie. Mateo’s gentle eyes soothed my fears. I’d wanted a

tattoo to honor my survival. I knew I could survive this too.

“Mateo, I want you to meet someone,” I said as I turned my neck toward him. “This is Chris.”

About the Author

Toshiya Kamei (they/them) is an Asian writer who takes inspiration from fairy tales, folklore, and mythology.

Notes in a Catastrophe

Fannie H. Gray

The end of the world is not the hellscape I imagined. Flowers bloom everywhere. Volunteer tomato plants erupt from between the cracks in the sidewalk, loaded with fruit—they look like jungle Christmas trees. The topiaries at the city park, the boxwoods once carved into submission, have outgrown their forms. Swollen teddy bears with mohawks flank the path to the Children's Garden.

I don't know what happened to all the people, and if I'm honest, I mostly don't care. One night, pickled in gin, I passed out in my basement, and the next morning, I staggered into an unpopulated world. Purses and hats lay in the gutters like seashells in the trash line on the shore. I've never been much of a people person; all the posturing and preening irritate me. I stayed in our little ass-backward town even after the school closed and the Piggly Wiggly went tits up and was happy when most of the townsfolk left. The Kwik-E Mart has more canned food than I could eat in years; the library doors are unlocked, and Bud's Garden Shack is full of seeds and useful tools. I don't spend too much time wondering why the power is still on, but I am damn glad it is. Occasionally, though, I do admit, I think it is a right bit strange to never hear a human voice.

It's so damn quiet I can hear myself swallow but only at night. Daytime is a cacophony of birdsong. Were there always so many birds? Jays shriek like angry housewives, and mourning doves pitifully protest as the sun sets and again when it rises. The cardinals' incessant pips are like smoke detectors bleating for batteries. Yet, my lower octave is eschewed if I try to join the chorus. I stand next to a dogwood, riotous with blooms and try to serenade the robins. They wing off, affronted by my humanity.

But birds be damned, I am going to sing, though I've never been musically inclined. In fact, Ms. Parchewski paid me a dollar to just mouth the words during our third-grade holiday recital. And it's hard to remember lyrics, so I do a lot of humming. Mom was a Beatle-maniac, so a few songs have come back to me.

Today, I took myself to the playground. I had forgotten how much I like to swing. A grown person couldn't just commandeer a swing back when the world was peopled. Why should children have all the fun? Christ knows, we adults could use a lot more joy. So, there I was, sailing through the air, caterwauling *Here Comes the Sun*, and as the swing came to a stop, I spied a ginger tail spring up amongst the tall grass, like a beacon. A meow sweeter than any tune I've heard. Lonely hearts find each other.

So here I am, sitting in a sandbox, a cerulean sky unsullied by either clouds or contrails, the only sound a rhythmic, heartwarming purr.

I'm calling her Sunshine.

About the Author

Fannie H. Gray writes fiction inspired by a southern American childhood and dark fairy tales. She is a 2022 Gotham Writers Josie Rubio Scholarship recipient and a 2024 Key West Writers Workshop participant with Jonathan Escoffery. Her first published piece, *Last Damsel*, was nominated for a Best of The Net. Her work *Incendies* received Honorable Mention in *Clever Magazine's* 10th Anniversary Anthology Flash Contest and was nominated for Best Microfiction. All published work can be found at www.thefhgraymatter.com.

Sweet Bitter

Mark Keane

Music filled the car, honey-rich mandolin and plaintive uilleann pipes. He rolled to a stop at a traffic light and turned up the volume.

The sun shone bright on old Scariff town

“Scariff, that’s where we’re headed, Lucy,” he said. The black edged clouds looked ominous. “But I doubt we’ll see much sunshine.”

Memories so precious to me now

There was enough in the tank to take them fifty miles, no need to pull in for petrol before Naas. They had started late and lost an hour getting Lucy's things together.

Finally free of the Dublin traffic, he turned onto the motorway. Though he preferred the less travelled back-roads, he wanted to get to his mother’s house before dark.

At the petrol station, he took a walk to stretch his legs. Lucy stayed in the car. Two men unloaded bags of coal and pallets of peat briquettes. The middle of September, no hint yet of an autumnal nip in the air. He knew what his mother would say when the topic of Canada came up.

“It must get very cold there.”

Cold beyond her understanding, wind chill and frostbite, ice storms coating tree branches with sparkling sleeves. A sharp, life-affirming dry cold, hard blue skies, and fleecy snow. Not the winters she knew, drizzle and downpour under an unforgiving grey awning.

What time is it there now, she was bound to ask.

He would tell her, investing no significance in the five-hour difference and what it meant in terms of physical separation.

They passed a sign welcoming visitors to County Clare and continued on a narrow road that would take them into Scariff. Barbed wire on timber posts provided a slack fence line. The shifting clouds released a blinding burst of sunlight, broken into dazzling shards by overhanging branches. He pulled down the sunshade.

“Not far to go.”

It started to rain when they rounded the final bend.

Heavy raindrops spattered his shirt as he crunched the gravel to the front door and announced his arrival. "Almost beat the rain."

His mother stood in the hallway. He handed her the bunch of flowers he had bought in the petrol station shop. She took it without a word, and he went back to the car to get his bag.

"This is Lucy."

The dog, freed from the confines of the car, circled his legs, tail wagging vigorously.

"Take it easy Lucy, no need to get so excited."

He followed his mother into the kitchen. She filled a vase with water for the flowers. Music played on the radio, traditional airs, fiddle and concertina. Jesus looked down from his station on the wall, plump external heart wrapped in thorns and dripping blood. One of the good white plates sat on the hob, half-covered by a tea towel. She had prepared him something to eat.

"Why have you brought the dog?"

"I'm leaving her here. Lucy will be company for you," he said, matter of fact, not allowing her the opportunity to protest.

The dog pawed his knee, quick brown eyes fixed on him. His mother frowned.

"Come on Lucy, outside."

He attached the lead to the dog's collar, brought her into the yard and tied her to some metal piping. The same piping had served as a goalpost for his solitary games of football as a boy.

His mother waited in the kitchen, standing by the dresser. She reached over and turned off the music. "What made you get a dog?"

He stopped himself from saying anything about the walks they took with Lucy on Dollymount Strand. Instead, he said, "Border collies are very intelligent animals."

"I suppose it was Helen's choice."

"We both chose Lucy."

"Has she finally gone then?"

Helen had left him. They weren't able to find sufficient cause to bridge their differences. She said she couldn't live with his brooding.

"Helen can't look after Lucy. That's why I brought her here, she'll be a good guard dog."

"There hasn't been a dog in this house for years." His mother started putting things out on the table, a knife and fork, salt and brown sauce. "I'm too old for a dog like that."

She handed him the plate. Potatoes on one side with a cut of meat, either lamb or pork, dry and gristly. Over-boiled tinned peas filled the rest of the plate along with two sausages. He poured milk from a carton into the cup he always used in this house. When she wasn't looking, he wrapped a sausage in the napkin on his lap.

"Are you staying long?"

"I have to leave tomorrow. I need to clean up the flat, so I get back my deposit," He said it, knowing she wasn't interested in his flat or the deposit, "I'm flying out on Saturday."

Rather than sit at the table, she busied herself, cleaning the hob and organising cutlery in a drawer. "

What time is it there now?"

He looked at his watch. "Ten past two."

She took away his plate and cup and washed them in the sink. He stood up from the table.

"I should check on Lucy."

The dog was digging under some bushes. He held out the sausage, which she sniffed, and then accepted.

Twilight, the moon clouded over, too late for a walk. Tomorrow, he would take Lucy for a jaunt across the fields.

He got her bowls from the car, filled one with water and the other with food. Back in the house, he left three bags of dog food by the door.

"This is what Lucy eats but you can give her whatever leftovers you have. She's not fussy."

His mother looked at the bags with apparent indifference.

He went into the front room. Nothing had changed, the same haphazard arrangement of books on the shelves. He pulled out a copy of Richard Yates' *Disturbing the Peace* and thumbed through pages dotted with mildew. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked loudly.

His PhD thesis, wrapped in protective plastic, stood prominently on display in the cabinet with the China dogs, souvenir mugs and sad gewgaws. His mother was the curator of this abject collection. He looked at the familiar furniture, the velour couch and three armchairs with their covers of needlework daisies.

In two or five or ten years, he would be back, emptying the shelves and clearing everything away.

She appeared in the doorway. "You'll have a drop of whiskey? There's some left in the bottle. I keep it for callers but there are few of them now."

The first time he had visited with Helen, he bought a bottle of wine, forgetting there was no corkscrew in the house. Attempting to extract the cork with a kitchen knife, he forced it into the bottle and had to put up with gritty fragments in the wine. Helen refused to have any, and they had sat at the table in silence. Later, as he got the bedding together, his mother delivered her judgement. "You'll have a hard time with her."

She handed him whiskey in the glass that had been part of a gift set. "Do you want me to turn on the heat? It can get chilly in the evenings."

"There's no need for that."

She remained standing and adjusted the cover on one of the armchairs. "Is the job permanent?"

"As permanent as anything is these days." He didn't say it was a new start, that there was no going back and nothing for him here.

"Will you be able to manage?"

How well he knew that casual undermining, and how much he hated her for it. Capable of hating this frail woman, her face faded with age, tissues poking from under her sleeve. She had no curiosity about anything beyond her ken and used the weapons available to her, none more so than her meekness. He could feel no tenderness for her. She was the wronged party, he the offender.

"It must get very cold there."

"Yes, it does."

He spent the night in his old room. The pattern of rings on the bedside table reminded him of nights with cups of instant coffee as he read into the early hours. The drawer in the bedside table contained a key for a bicycle lock long since lost and a pocket-sized German dictionary he had once used for an unremembered purpose.

Lying awake in the soft bed, he watched the dawn through a gap in the curtains and fell asleep.

* * *

An overcast morning, mottled sky pressing down remorselessly. Identical stone houses hunkered down in distant fields. A misty wind from the west combed the long grass.

He found Lucy tied to a post under metal sheeting that provided shelter from the rain. His mother had put a large plastic basin lined with an old towel beside the bowls. Lucy would adapt, life in the country was better for a border collie.

He fixed a leaking tap, turned the mattresses and rehung the blinds in the bathroom. There were forms to fill relating to his mother's pension. She handed him a pile of bank statements, and he was surprised to see how much was in her account. He cut the hedges and weeded the flower beds.

"Do you need anything else?"

"There's a local man I can get to do odd jobs," she said, withdrawing into her martyrdom. A last meal, sausages with home-made brown bread.

"You'll hardly be back for Christmas?"

"You never know." But he did know; he wouldn't be back at Christmas, or the following Christmas.

He retreated to the bedroom, repacked his bag, and took a final look into the front room. The empty glass from the night before stood on the coffee table.

It was time to leave. He returned to the kitchen. The door to the pantry stood ajar.

"It's getting late," he called out.

She emerged from the pantry, carrying a plate with a slice of Swiss roll. Her resignation was a scourging reproach, but he couldn't summon any empathy.

She held out her farewell offering. "Have some cake."

He sat in silence as she poured tea. There was nothing left for him to say, no words that would make any difference. She spoke about a neighbour in hospital and two others who had died. He nodded and added more milk to cool the tea so he could drink it quickly.

"I need to get a move on."

No goodbyes or parting embrace. He left her with her corrosive loneliness.

The gravel underfoot sounded unnaturally loud. It took forever to get the key in the car door. He dropped the bag on the passenger seat.

As he drove away, he waved to the front door, his head averted but he knew she was there. At the bottom of the road, he stopped the car to attach his seat belt. Looking in the rearview

mirror, the house was hidden from view.

Back on the main road, he pushed the CD into its slot.

Long ago but the memories linger

Four days from now, he would be in Toronto, taking in his new surroundings. A walk along the lakefront to get his bearings, everything new and unencumbered, the urban skyline replete with promise.

My mind keeps running back to those days in County Clare

Something caught his eye on the floor of the passenger side. A well-chewed rubber bone, Lucy's favourite toy. In his rush to leave, he hadn't taken her for a walk.

He had gone more than twenty miles, passing signs for Nenagh. Too far to turn back. He pulled over at a gateway and stared at the road ahead. Reaching for the controls, he ejected the CD. The car was silent, but the song continued.

The sun shone bright on old Scariff town

All that remains is sweet bitter

About the Author

Mark Keane has taught for many years in universities in North America and the UK. Recent short story fiction has appeared in *Midsummer Dream House*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Cape Magazine*, *Empyrean Literary Magazine*, *Seppuku*, *Shooter*, *untethered*, *Night Picnic*, *upstreet*, *Granfalloon*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Into the Void*, *Firewords*, and *Dog and Vile Short Fiction*. He lives in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Made With Love

Carolyn Fay

Arletta's hands stiffened like claws and she dropped another gosh darn stitch. She threw the knitting down. The needles clattered like bones on the hearthstone. If Betty Alvarez could knit with fingers thick as sausages, surely Arletta could knit with the gosh darn arthritis. Betty had said it was important. Hats for preemies at the hospital.

"I've knit five already." Arletta had begged off, but Betty thrust yarn and needles into her arms.

"Arletta, you need something in your life besides feeding stray animals."

Maybe so. Firelight gleamed through the half-knit hat. When it was finished, she'd sew a label in it. "Made with love by Arletta."

The clock struck five. Arletta got up, coaxed her feet into tall, mud-caked boots, and stepped outside. Time to feed the critters.

There hadn't always been so many. Birds and squirrels. Deer prancing at dusk. They devoured the seeds, nuts, and corn she scattered in the yard. Her all-you-can-eat buffet ticked the neighbors off something fierce because the deer chewed their fancypants hostas, but the way she figured it, all God's critters gotta eat.

Arletta weaved around the yard, filling feeders and food troughs. Raccoon eyes flashed in the dusky gray. Melon rinds for them. The groundhogs would get carrot greens.

Mealworms for the foxes. Flies for the bats.

Stray cats slunk out of the shadows. They trailed her like smoke until she scraped some chopped liver into their bowls. She listened as they licked and lapped. She loved it when the critters enjoyed their meals.

The coyote was looking sluggish. Probably still digesting yesterday's dinner.

How Betty had stared at the coyote, lips pursed. She'd come uninvited with a bag full of yarn and a mouth full of opinions about how Arletta should get out more, find a purpose. Knit hats.

Arletta scooped a cupful of grubs for the skunk. The plastic cup was just the size of the hat she was trying to finish. She cradled the cup in her palm. Such a little thing. A hat. A purpose.

She tipped the cup over. The grubs fell in a mound, writhing and crawling all over one another as the skunk pushed her soft black snout into them.

She had to finish that gosh darn hat. Then knit another and another. Each one a purpose. She lined them up on a shelf in her mind. If only she could get her fingers to behave.

The opossum had gnawed on Betty's fingers for days. Thick as sausages. How had she kept her stitches so neat?

Arletta dished up the last of the brains for the chipmunks. Maybe Betty had lied about knitting five hats. Arletta dug in the freezer chest for blood ice cubes for the mountain lion. The little cats mewled as though they hadn't already had their supper.

"Everybody wants to be important," she said to the cats.

Everything Arletta did for the critters was important. She'd shown Betty. The food bins. The freezer stocked with blood ice and popsicles. The cold storage room filled with hanging carcasses. Only Betty hadn't said a word. Not a gosh darn word as her eyes rounded like O's, rounded like her big lipsticked-mouth that screamed and screamed. She hollered the dogs to barking, the wolves to howling, the birds to screeching. All God's critters beat and flapped and growled. Arletta shook so bad her vision blurred. Her fingers stiffened like claws. Like gosh darn claws around Betty's neck.

Now the cold of the blood ice cube bit into her palm. She sat down hard on an overturned bucket.

All that remained of Betty was the half-finished premie hat. Arletta might as well admit it. She'd never finish that gosh darn hat. Not with her stiff, achy fingers.

The blood ice cube slickened in her hand. She dropped it onto the ground. The cats sniffed the cube, batted at it, like it was a stunned bird.

A question snagged in her mind. Was Betty Alvarez any different from a stray critter? She'd swaggered into the yard with her arms full of knitting to give Arletta a purpose. Arletta had taken it. Shaken it out of her.

But hadn't she given Betty something back? A new purpose. The highest purpose. To be needed. Loved.

The cats licked Betty's frozen blood.

Betty was important.

Arletta sat on the bucket as dusk deepened to dark. The bats flew off. The skunk snuffled away. The mountain lion padded into the woods and the little cats melted into the black. One by one, the night absorbed the critters. She knew that one day, she, too, would be absorbed into the darkness.

She tramped back inside and threw Betty's knitting into the fire. The half-finished hat came to life for a moment, sparking, jumping, glowing orange before it dissolved into a blackened lump. She rubbed her achy hands over the misplaced purpose, letting the warmth seep into her skin, loosen her stiff joints, fill her with love. With gosh darn love.

About the Author

Carolyn Fay is a writer and teacher currently based in Charlottesville, VA. Her short works of fiction have appeared in *Orca* and *Dime Show Review*.

NON-FICTION

At the Movies

Erika Dreifus

There came a moment, early in that screening of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, when, seated beside my sister in the theater, something shot straight through my synapses and neurons, vaulting me back to a certain summer day in the late 1970s when, like the new movie's protagonist, I sat in the back seat of the family car, my head turned and my eyes fastened on the rapidly-receding view of what had been, as long as I remembered, my home block. But standing in place of Margaret's sadly-waving paternal grandmother, Sylvia Simon in Manhattan, were my own father's parents, outside our neighboring apartment buildings on our quieter South Brooklyn street.

This moment was, of course, what they wanted; what they had hoped and worked and struggled for from the time they were young, lonely, twenty-somethings who'd each fled Nazi Germany for New York. They'd met in their new city, married there, became parents, and raised their son—like Herb Simon, an only child—to become the family's first college graduate; the first to work a white-collar job; the first, now, to purchase a small house in the New Jersey suburbs—in a town that no less estimable a source than *The New York Times* had pronounced home to one of the area's very best public-school districts—a house where the moving van was already headed and now, as the car carried us down the block and the turn signal began to click, where my parents, sister, and I were headed, too. It was what they wanted; what we all wanted. (My sister and I would have our own rooms! And a backyard, complete with a promised playhouse!)

And yet, like Sylvia Simon, our grandparents had been infinitely more than just our neighbors. Something precious was lost that day, even as much was gained. Our lives were opening, yes. But a chapter was closing, too. As with Sylvia and Margaret, the not-vast distance could be managed, and would be managed, even in that era long before FaceTime, and even if, like Sylvia, my grandparents didn't drive. But in that on-screen moment, my heart hurt, again; pressure built behind my eyes; and, forty-five years after we shared that backseat and drove

away, I nearly reached across the armrest to grab my sister's hand.

About the Author

Erika Dreifus is the author of *Birthright: Poems* and *Quiet Americans: Stories*, which was named an American Library Association/Sophie Brody Medal Honor Title for outstanding achievement in Jewish literature. She lives in New York City. Visit her website at ErikaDreifus.com.

POETRY

After Dorothea Tanning's painting Birthday

Calista Malone

This room leads to all other rooms which leads to only another inside. You are opening the doors with your bare toes and closing them all with your heels. You try scraping the white paint off the molding and find flecks underneath your nailbeds.

There are so many knobs that turn either way, never locked and never going anywhere. You have collected the seaweed from the walls, furnished your hips with green and wet, trailing drops of salt water behind you as you go from room to room, hoping to feel the damp and remember the last time you were here or there or somewhere more specific.

The monkey has been here for so long; he's grown wings like a bird and occasionally caws at you in another language. He leads you from this room to that room and you wonder if his little yellow eyes see something you never will. Something other than the lint he fishes out of your dress pockets and the tiny bugs he picks from the floorboards. He nestles the dried bodies and spare fuzz into your hair. You think he's making a crown for your birthday.

About the Author

Calista Malone is a poet from the Florida Panhandle. She is an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. She has an MA from Auburn University and has poems featured in the *Naugatuck River Review*, *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Saw Palm*, and other places.

Octopus's Lips

Kenton K. Yee

We jurors had to wait outside twice a day.
Each time, we gathered at the poster
depicting an octopus's beak,
like a lobster claw, protruding from
the white shirtsleeve lip of its mouth.

And each time, one of us pointed out
its metaphor to the long tentacles
and hard claw of the legal system
and its legions of mouthy bureaucrats
in white shirts.

I once asked my dog's vet
how to locate an octopus's three hearts,
its orchestra, keeper
of its rhythm and jazz, blues
not ours to hear. And once I saw

a trevally rise out of waves
to swallow a seagull and its beak full
of fish in midflight, leaving
only feathers bobbing on the foam
to warn of what lies below.

And maybe the poster's saying

that justice lurks out of reach,
waiting in the watery depths
with the shirt-sleeved beaks
and leaping trevallies.

About the Author

Kenton K. Yee's recent poems appear (or will soon) in *Plume Poetry*, *Threepenny*, *TAB*, *Constellations*, *I-70*, *Hawaii Pacific*, *Indianapolis*, *Terrain.org*, *Grain Magazine*, *OxMag*, *McNeese Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Eco-poetry Anthology: Volume II*, and *Rattle*, among others. Kenton writes from Northern California.

What I Should Have Said

William Meinert

The smaller questions: the *what's-ups*
and the *how's-it-goings* of the day:
these, I believe, are best answered
precisely. So when you asked me

do you like it here? — I had no reply.

I searched for answers: “It’s clean,”

I said. “It’s pretty. The buses

always run on time.” But that

was not right to say,

not precise.

Here, you surmise—trust—that

I might seem unnatural

—that

as I adjust to your vernacular,

I hold my tongue to hide its blunders

—that

since my homeland is overseas—that—*that*

is why I look away and shift

in my seat. But,

you don’t know

I never spoke, where I come from—

you don’t know

I never felt any feeling of home.

Where I come from, they found me to be
alien: unrobed and sick.

The odor
of my sequestration

was foul.

Do I
like it here? I answer, now,
precisely:

it is preferable. This, I prefer:

to be an outsider
in another country, than
an interloper
in the land
of my birth.

About the Author

William Meinert is an American poet currently living and working in Geneva, Switzerland. As a professional operatic bass, he has spent far more time, up to this point, singing poetry than writing it, but now intends to balance the scales.

Dime Bags

Jawn Van Jacobs

startin from snake_shaped Jersey,
where i was raised in the art
of dealing, unlike

my old man who peddled
opioids, i instead
push prosody.

i weigh each verse,
put a little extra
rhythm in for my regulars.

some need it to forget,
some need it to remember,
some don't even need

an upper or downer,
they just need a few lines
to get by, so i

stash it in dime bags
to exchange it
underneath the shoefiti.

give the market

a more permanent prescription
than Percocet and Oxy.

About the Author

Jawn Van Jacobs is a South Jersey poet, currently in his last semester of Rowan University's MA in Writing program. Jawn's work delves into the raw and untamed narratives of outlaws, illuminating the lives and perspectives of those living on the outskirts of society.

the gift of slow cruxifiction

John Sweet

tell the angel of
thirst that you love her

give her your dreams of
starving crows

give her wars that have
moved beyond the need for names,
that exist only in terms of
statistics and dollar amounts

the truth is a fist here

the cities are on fire

you will choke to death,
but at least your life
is filled with choices

ignorance, maybe, or fear,
or hatred, and
what else were you expecting?

surf the internet

get drunk and get stoned and
fall asleep on the couch
in the blue glow of reality tv

the golden age of oblivion
is upon us

About the Author

John Sweet sends greetings from the rural wastelands of upstate NY. He is a firm believer in writing as catharsis, and in compassionate nihilism which, as luck would have it, has all the best bands. His published collections include *No One Starves in a Nation of Corpses* (2020 Analog Submission Press) and *There's Only One Way This Is Going To End* (Cyberwit, 2023).

ART

I Close My Eyes and Still Hear the Screams

Matthew McCain

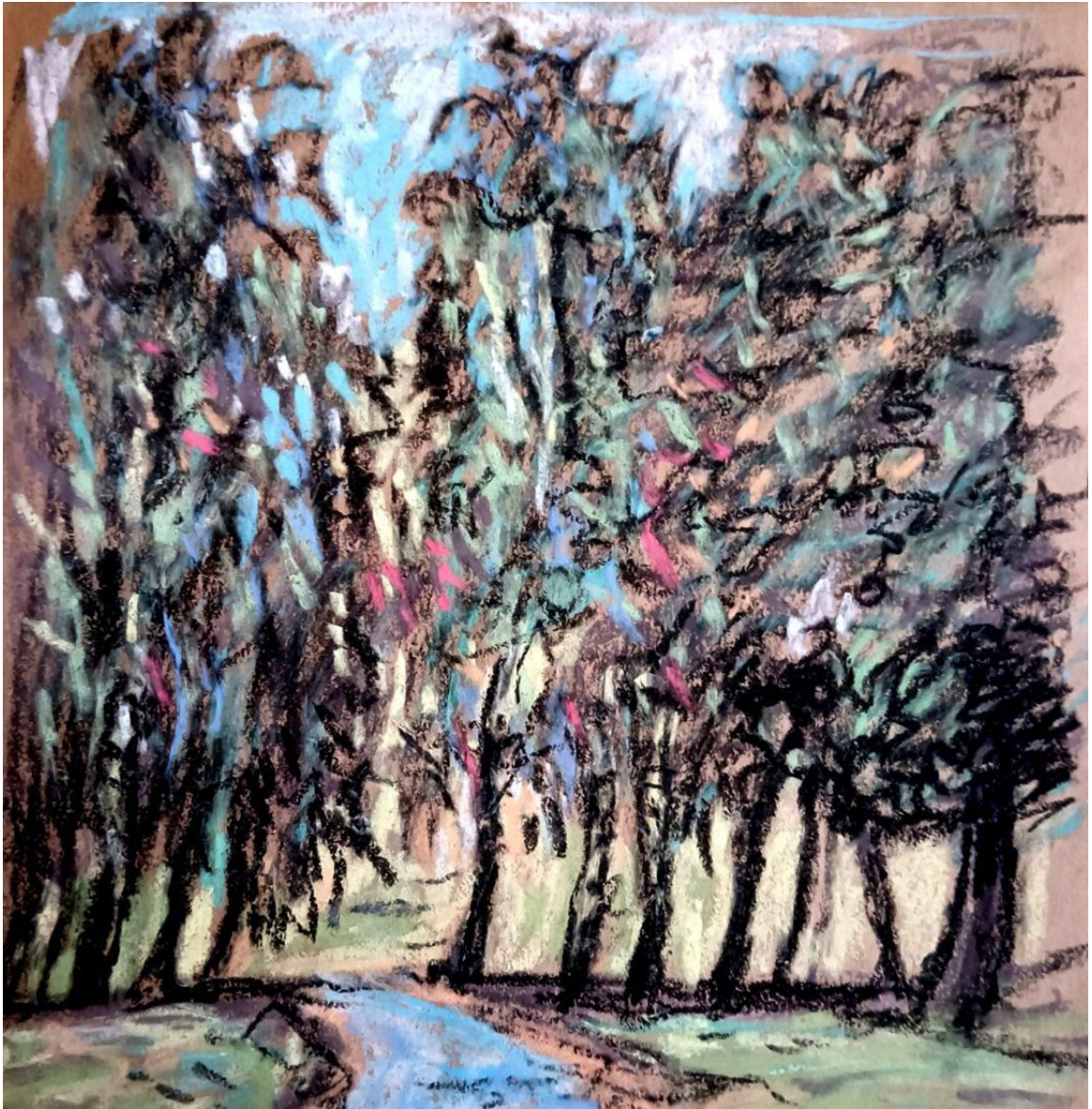


About the Artist

Matthew McCain is an author and fine artist with 3 of his novels reaching the top #10 on Amazon Kindle Unlimited. His work can be found all around the world from London to Alice Cooper's Teen Youth Rock Center in Phoenix, Arizona. He's currently represented by the Bilotta Gallery in Florida.

Path

Irina Tall Novikova



About the Artist

Irina Tall Novikova is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week.

Lily Pink

Katie Hughbanks

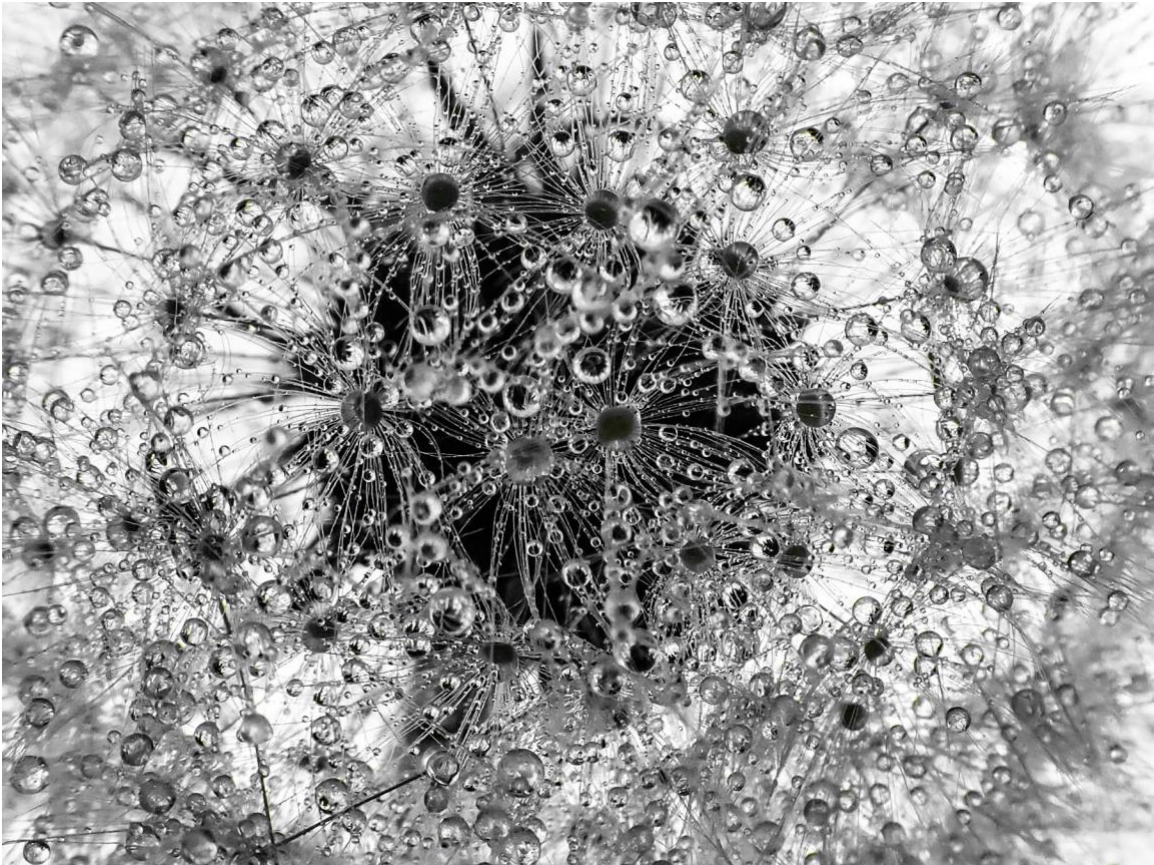


About the Artist

Katie Hughbanks is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose photography has been recognized internationally. Her photos appear in many publications, including in *Peatsmoke Journal*, *In Parentheses*, *L'Esprit Literary Review*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Glassworks Magazine*, *Azahares*, *MAYDAY*, *Moonday Mag*, and *Black Fork Review*. Her poetry chapbook, *Blackbird Songs*, was published in 2019, and her short story collection (*It's Time*) will be released by Finishing Line Press in June 2024. She teaches English and Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky.

Centering

Katie Hughbanks



About the Artist

Katie Hughbanks is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose photography has been recognized internationally. Her photos appear in many publications, including in *Peatsmoke Journal*, *In Parentheses*, *L'Esprit Literary Review*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Glassworks Magazine*, *Azahares*, *MAYDAY*, *Moonday Mag*, and *Black Fork Review*. Her poetry chapbook, *Blackbird Songs*, was published in 2019, and her short story collection (*It's Time*) will be released by Finishing Line Press in June 2024. She teaches English and Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky.

To Tread with Lightness and Depth

Aaron Lelito



About the Artist

Aaron Lelito is a visual artist and writer from Buffalo, NY. His images have been published as cover art in *Red Rock Review*, *Peatsmoke Journal*, and *The Scriblerus*. His poetry chapbook, *The Half Turn*, was published in 2023, and his work has also appeared in *Barzakh Magazine*, *Novus Literary Arts Journal*, *SPECTRA Poets*, *Peach Mag*, and *Santa Fe Review*. He is editor in chief of the art & literature website *Wild Roof Journal*.

Instagram: @aaronlelito

Eternal Bond

Danielle Charette



About the Artist

Danielle Charette is a self-taught multi-disciplinary artist, born in Pennsylvania, working in New York City for decades where she has quietly honed her craft including painting, printmaking, collage, video, and sculpture.

From her early formative years vigorously training and competing as an elite gymnast, Danielle developed a deep-seated need for repetition, precision and the expression that now define her artistic process and art.

Influenced by both her immersion in New York City's music counter-culture, periods spent living in close proximity to Pennsylvania Dutch culture in addition to her Acadian French heritage, Danielle's art reflects her love for geometric shapes, folk art, religious iconography, and diverse cultural traditions. Her paintings, characterized by unfolding repetitions of theme, elements, color, and design, create a cohesive emerging narrative that resonates with the viewer.

Her work serves as a metaphorical storytelling, drawing from her life experiences through her visual language. With a modern folk art style and iconic imagery, she paints narrative tales exploring themes of love, life, death, afterlife, dreams, and whimsy, often infused with humor, the metaphysical, intent, conceptual elements, and reflections of alternative culture.

Beyond focused time spent in art endeavors, Danielle is a serious surf casting fisherman. She finds solace on the ocean shores, fishing during the day, while nights are still reserved for involvement in NYC's live R&R music scene.