

Volume 10

The
Fall
Issue

Paper Dragon

The literary journal of
Drexel University's MFA in
Creative Writing program

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

The Drexel University MFA class of 2026 is proud to bring you the latest volume of Paper Dragon. Submissions were voluminous following our call for the best-in-breed flash fiction and nonfiction. The result? A choice selection of thought-provoking writings that dive directly into the essence of circumstance.

This volume features works carefully selected among hundreds of submissions, as our editors sought the strongest offerings that delivered voice and theme. So too were the poetry and art selections chosen for their elevated and nuanced messaging. We are proud to present these to you.

Thank you to the artists, writers and poets who saw our publication as fertile ground to feature their works.

And thank you for reading Paper Dragon.

Ron Harris
Editor-in-Chief

Volume 10 Masthead

Volume 10 of Paper Dragon is reviewed and produced by students of Drexel University's low-residency Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program, Class of 2026.

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THE FALL ISSUE

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ART THROUGHOUT

So What

By Charles Jacobson

There's a new statue of Miles Davis outside Marilyn's Bar in downtown Alton, an old river town twenty miles north of St. Louis. Arlene, me and 300 others were awaiting the reveal on a cool October afternoon. After the dedication, it was time for Arlene to pursue her instincts:

"When was his birthday?"

"May 26, 1926."

"Five plus two and six, a thirteen—one and three, he's a four. A box has four sides. He's feeling confined."

A raspy whisper floated through the air. "What's that, man? I'm not in a box."

Arlene turned. "Oh, hi Miles. You're late or we're early."

"Ghosts are always late. They come so quiet, you never hear them."

"I love your indigo and turquoise brocade frock and stunna shades."

Was he here through the miracle of cryopreservation? He didn't smell bad.

Miles raised his ghostly voice. "May 25th, dammit!"

Someone screamed. The crowd fell back. Arlene recalculated. "That's five plus two and five, a twelve—you're a three. I'm a three! We're both threes. Ella's a three."

"Ella sings like someone's standing on her feet."

"One plus nine plus eight; thirty. A seven of clubs like Bill Clinton. You have a strong sense of creativity and self-expression, a worldly entertainer. When hurt, you retreat into a shell for extended periods."

"That's right. Sometimes I wake up and I don't know where I am. I don't talk to nobody."

"You have two fives; lots of five energy. You have issues with your past but you explore the future without fear. 'Five' is an 'f'—flight, fear, fantasy."

"I haven't understood a mother-fuckin' word. I'm a six, a perfect six, and six is the number of the Devil. I have a lot of the devil in me."

Off came the tarp on the sinewy statue. The crowd was creeping back. Miles lifted his shades. He limped over to the imposing bronze work and glared at Preston Jackson, the sculptor.

Jackson stepped aside: "I didn't get you right?"

"Who the hell you think you're looking at? I'm five-eight. Does it stand? I always did."

"Had to balance. 'S' curve. Praxiteles. You dig?"

"No tea, no shade."

"The drapery is carved with meticulous delicacy," I added.

Miles stared at Arlene. "That white boy with you?"

"Yeah—"

"I was gonna choke him nice and slow, but now I'll let him go. I didn't come here to rescue him from you. I came here to rescue you from him. Why don't you come back with me?"

"Arlene! Miles is dangerous!"

Her eyes glittered, her breathing loud.

"What's wrong?"

Her features began to waste, a terrible smile came to her lips: "Don't touch me," she said in the most remarkable rumbling low noises.

"No!"

Miles tapped his cane on the street. "Gotta dip. When I say later, I mean later!"

I reached across the dark space for her former self.

She was Miles away.

About the Author

Charles Jacobson has an abiding interest in philosophy and the arts, and lives across the river from St. Louis in Alton, Illinois, with a cat who doesn't like him. His stories and poems have appeared in over twenty publications, radio and Story Collider.

He Was Leo

By Toshiya Kamei

The first hair was a secret. A single, dark strand, wiry and defiant, sprouting below his jawline. Leo found it by accident, his fingers tracing the new, sharper angle of his face in the bathroom mirror. A jolt, pure and electric, shot through him. It was real. This was real. He was real.

He leaned closer, fogging the glass with his breath. It wasn't much, just one tiny anchor in the vast sea of change, but it was his. A promise.

From the living room downstairs, the muffled drone of the evening news sharpened. A new voice, sharp and confident, sliced through the domestic hum.

"...an epidemic among impressionable young girls," the voice said. "A social contagion. These clinics are seeing an unprecedented flood, a ten-to-one ratio, of girls wanting to become boys."

The joy in Leo's chest curdled. The blood drain from his face, leaving his skin cold. *Girls*. The word was a slap. He wasn't a girl. He had never been a girl, just a boy trapped in the wrong story.

He stepped back from the mirror, the single, precious hair suddenly feeling like a lie. Was he a contagion? A trend? His hard-won reality, the one he'd fought for through tears and terror and tentative hope, was being debated by a stranger on television as a symptom of societal sickness.

He thought of the waiting room at the clinic. The air always hummed with a quiet, fluorescent tension. He remembered the faces. The quiet boy with the sketchbook, the chatty kid who showed everyone their new binder. And he remembered *her*. A girl with long, dark hair and nails painted a shimmering galaxy-blue. She'd been talking to her mom, her voice low but bright, about choosing the name Luna. She was transfeminine. She was there. Right there. They all were.

The critic on the TV didn't see Luna. He only saw a legion of lost girls. He saw a problem to be solved, a tide to be turned back. He didn't see the painstaking, terrifying, beautiful process of becoming.

Leo's hand went back to his jaw. His fingers found the hair again. It was still there. Scratchy. Stubborn. Undeniable. It wasn't a symptom. It was a beginning. He thought of Luna, with her galaxy nails and her hopeful smile. They weren't a ratio. They weren't a headline.

They were just kids, trying to find their way home in their own skin.

He looked back into the mirror, past the doubt, past the critic's venomous words. He saw his own eyes, tired but clear. He saw the single dark hair. And for the first time, he saw the faint, downy shadow of more to come.

He wasn't an epidemic. He was Leo.

About the Author

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

Tombless

By Emad Jafari

The jolts grew more violent, and a scent began to filter in, a mix of damp sand and something like a sharp, coppery tang. We probably were almost there. Again, my eyes found him. His rifle's buttstock stood rooted between his legs, his palms burrowed over the barrel, his forehead pressed heavy against them. It was unclear if he was sleeping or lost in thought. It didn't matter. A few wisps of his pale blond hair struggled to escape the helmet's rigid brim, barely visible at the sides. I pictured him from Nashville, likely with blue eyes—one of those boys whose mothers had dreamed them destined for anything, anything at all, but to be nothing more than a body thrown into a landing craft, cannon fodder for the first wave of an amphibious operation. As the commander barked, 'Ready up!' and the clicks of guns rang through the craft, his forehead never stirred from the barrel.

About the Author

Emad Jafari is a writer and translator from Iran. He has published several award-winning short stories in Persian, recognized in national competitions and featured in anthologies. In addition to his original works, he translates literary pieces from English and Arabic. A fan of short stories, his favorite writer is Mary Robison. In his spare time, he enjoys reading fiction, writing stories, and translating works to share with others.

save breathe

By Nathaniel Lachenmeyer

I am sorry but I have decided to do absolutely nothing save breathe today you will not find me doing chores nor will I watch the boob tube no today I have reserved only for breathing the fact is I don't do enough of it some days entire hours go by before I breathe once last month after receiving bad news of a personal nature remember I forgot to breathe for three days straight and I don't know if you know this but whenever we argue I also sometimes forget to breathe I know I told you once my chest can start to hurt too and you said better go to the doctor but apparently it isn't a heart attack it's stress the doctor said I have too much of it which is also why I think I forget to breathe so today I have set aside for breathing if I breathe today the whole day not just parts of it but the entire day from start to finish starting now because I'm pretty sure I already forgot to breathe a few times today mostly during that talk we had over breakfast which according to you was not an argument but a discussion although it seemed like one to me maybe then it will become a habit again the way it was when I was a kid when it was effortless to breathe and to do so many things but I will start with breathing if I get that down maybe I can move on to other things like laughter and sleeping through the night again and what about playing games I miss that I think more than I realize but I will start with breathing that is the first step which is why I have decided to do absolutely nothing maybe then I will be able to survive the next twenty years together save breathe starting now since I think I also forgot to breathe while thinking about this

About the Author

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer is a disabled author of books for children and adults. His first book, *The Outsider*, which takes as its subject his late father's struggles with schizophrenia and homelessness, was published by Broadway Books. Nathaniel has forthcoming/recently published poems, stories and essays with ANMLY, Subtropics, The American Poetry Review, Poetry International Online, The Louisville Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Red Rock Review, Reed Magazine, Blue Unicorn, Potomac Review, Permafrost and DIAGRAM. Nathaniel lives outside Atlanta with his family.

One-Two Combination

By Travis Flatt

"Stand like this," I say, and turn sideways to my stepson.

When his mother showed me the video, I wished I hadn't asked.

The video, which one of my stepson's friends shot on his iPhone, is of my stepson fighting in the high school cafeteria. And watching it, I'm back thirty years, watching two boys on my junior high's football team fight in our cafeteria. Aaron Coleman bashes Mikey Whitlack's face with a combination lock, cracking his orbital bone, splattering tiles with blood. I cheer, although I know neither of them; it's exciting, fun.

But now, these two boys fighting on my wife's phone—my stepson and some bigger kid—make my chest tighten. I feel breathless and panicky.

The principal showed this to my wife in a meeting I wasn't invited to, because me and my stepson aren't blood-related.

Now that I've seen it, two boys flailing wildly, King Kong haymakers, ineffective punches that slap off the shoulder; I think about my dad, and technique.

My dad took me to a boxing gym downtown once, but when we saw how much older (and rougher) the other boys were, we never went back. My dad learned how to throw a one-two combination in college gym class, and was proud he knew how. Taught me when I was in, maybe, fifth grade.

I've never been in a fight. Neither had he.

In the garage, where I hung a heavy bag I bought this afternoon on the way home from work, I stand with my stepson, who I had to drag away from the Xbox—the Xbox where, up until a year ago, we played Minecraft together for hours.

"Stand like this," I say, again. He frowns, stays standing straight on, shoulders squared with mine. He's taller. And handsomer. Like his real dad.

"Why?"

"So you're a smaller target."

"I know," he says.

"Do you know how to box?" I say, getting frustrated.

"Yes," he says, likewise annoyed.

I know that he doesn't. I don't want him to fight. It's just the principle of the thing.

"Hit my hand," I say.

Half-heartedly, he jabs my hand, then makes to walk inside.

"I bought this bag," I say, "to show you a one-two combination."

He says, "Mm-hm," walking.

I follow.

"My dad," I say, chest tightening at that word, "taught me how to throw a one-two. It's easy."

"I know how," he says. He opens the door to the kitchen.

"Then why didn't you do it yesterday?" I say, and, of course, wish I hadn't. Low blow. One point deduction.

Two years ago, I taught him to draw Iron Man. He'd told me he was swapping drawings with his girlfriend. A girlfriend he hadn't even told his mother about. Now we might go two weeks without talking, except grunts in the hallway for "Hello," or, "Excuse me," when squeezing past each other.

"I did," he says, halting and looking back. "My dad taught me how to fight," he says, and shuts the door in my face.

About the Author

Travis Flatt (he/him) is an epileptic teacher living in Cookeville, Tennessee. His stories appear in *Fractured*, *Variant Lit*, *Prime Number*, *Gone Lawn*, *Flash Frog*, and other places. He enjoys theater, dogs, and theatrical dogs, often with his wife and son.

mahogany
By Justis Ward

The head of our daughter crowns, pressing out into the white-walled hospital room. I scream. Something guttural. Something animal. And my strong-as-mahogany husband grips my hand, his fingertips digging into my palm, breaking through my concrete pretense. "Almost there," says the white coat. "Just a little more." According to him, this is the worst part. But he's wrong.

Her shoulders rip me open, though I don't feel it. I only feel him, my husband, and his strong brown fingers holding mine. And before I know it, our daughter is with us. Weak, wishful, wanting. The white coat places her on my chest. She burrows into me, searching for warmth, but my bosom is cold and wet. She wails. I wait. My husband just stands there. The way he always does. Because he is mahogany.

Meconium and vernix streak across our daughter's wrinkled skin like cheap paint. Black and white, tar and wax, my husband and me. A nurse offers to wash her. Yes. No. My husband. Me. The white coat gets called out of the room, and the nurse looks... uncomfortable. Then, my husband sees her, our daughter. Her pale skin, her blue-as-ocean eyes, her hair the color and texture of duckling fluff. He sees her, and his strong brown fingers go slack. Even then, he is mahogany. Strong. Stoic. Steadfast. So, I don't expect him to crumble, to fall, to crack his knees on the white tile floor, to do anything but stand there. Because that's what he has always done. And maybe he would have, if only I had held him up. But I didn't. And I never have.

So he falls, crashing through our home, dividing his side from mine, fifty-fifty, while his questions puddle on the tile beneath him. And our daughter stares blankly at the gaping hole between us, where the answers to his questions live and where the truth of her life hides. She can see them. I'm sure of it. And he can, too. But strangely, I can't. So, I'm left with only maybes. Maybe he'll come back. Maybe he was never mahogany to begin with. Or maybe I simply deserve this. Either way, he now knows our daughter isn't his. And he gets up. And he walks out.

About the Author

Justis Ward is a Georgia native whose writing, more often than not, speaks to the agonizing beauty of suffering. He has work forthcoming in *Lullwater Review* and *Past Ten*. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from Lindenwood University and hopes to teach at the collegiate level following his graduation.

Polaroid Snapshot: Rte 61—Graffiti Highway, Centralia, Pennsylvania
By Patrick Thomas Henry

You promise me we're on the cusp of the real fun, despite the coyote hunting us around Centralia's vacant, overgrown plots. The coyote has the same idea: real fun. For him. And he's parading with half a grouse in his jaw.

Something smells like cordite, spent shotgun shells. The underground mine fire, maybe. Burning in Centralia since the 1960s, when someone purged a garbage dump with kerosene, so it wouldn't reek for Memorial Day. But the fire burrowed into the abandoned mine tunnels, caught a coal seam. By the '80s, the earth was collapsing and the government was razing the lots.

Now there's knee-high grass, wild turkeys, grouses, the odd rat. We pass a pair of squirrel skeletons, a robin skull, a roadkill jay. No stray cats—happy hunting for other predators.

The coyote whimpers. He's still loping after us, grouse-in-jaw.

I say, "You and Balto have the same smirk." You adjust your backpack and fang some words about the sandwiches and the Thermos of iced tea you've packed for us.

The coyote stalks us to an embankment at the edge of St. Ignatius Cemetery. There, steel pipes emit smoke from the smoldering coal vein. The ground could give at any minute. You offer me a sandwich. That's when you say it—that you brought her here, the one I'd "replaced." I shove your shoulder. You try the sandwich again. But I've already started climbing, scrabbling the embankment. The earth gives in my fingers, the texture of dryer lint.

You crest the knoll before I do.

When I make it, you're already pointing to something. A turkey carcass, its ribcage fileted open, festers beside a rock. Someone spray-tagged the stone with pink block letters: Help. Whiffs of sulfur, meaty as truck-stop egg salad, feather the air. We're two Lycra-upholstered souls watching the burning heart of earth wheeze. You slap my forearm with one of the flaccid sandwiches. "C'mon," you say. "Oven-roasted turkey. Spicy mustard. Pepper jack. Your favorite."

Her favorite. But I take the turkey sandwich. Our hands graze. I strip the sandwich of its cellophane, drop the wrapping. The mustard burns my chapped lips and I imagine the coyote slurping marrow from the grouse's bones. Steam seeps from the fissures in Old 61, the pavement bright with neon tags left by tourists like us, and I imagine you drive-shafting into the earth, into the slow-cooker hell of the endless seam of coal, and me leaving you there.

About the Author

Patrick Thomas Henry is the author of *Practice for Becoming a Ghost: Stories* (Susquehanna University Press, 2024), which was long listed for The Story Prize. His work has previously appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *West Branch Online*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He currently teaches creative writing at the University of North Dakota, where he also directs the annual UND Writers Conference. He also serves as the fiction and poetry editor for *Modern Language Studies*.

Meadville

By Sean Dougherty

Tony wanted to punch the guy wearing the shirt from the local college when he insulted Dina the bartender but I said Dina could handle herself, and she told them next time its last call for you. The young guys are eyeing the girl playing pool who has unbuttoned her collared shirt to the navel to show off her ample bosom, but I tell them to calm down and I'm pretty sure she doesn't like boys, with her short hair and tattoos, she's Butch and I buy her a whiskey and whisper to her, I know you can handle yourself sister but maybe tell her friends to bring it down. And she just nods a thanks, and I go back to sipping my Jack and Coke. Now the boy with the college shirt is posturing and punching the electronic punching machine and daring the men with his high power number, and I know this is going to go bad. They already tilted the pinball machine and one of them, whose pool game is just average, sank the eight on the break and bragged and waved the five dollars he won in Al's face. Of course he doesn't know Al just got out of another six month stint for assault. Not the I killed someone kind of assault, just your basic I one punch knocked you on your ass kind of assault. And maybe the worst part is it's a Tuesday night, the kind of night where everyone is just drinking slowly and quietly after working second shift, so we can sleep till we get up again. Now the college boy and his three friends have said something to Tony who has had enough and looking at the two of them this could probably be a fair fight as Tony talks big but can't fight for shit. I'd put my money more on the Butch girl who looks like she can use a pool stick like a Karate weapon. Maybe MMA trained. Dina has stepped in and tells the college kids, it's long past your last call. Time to go. I tell the Butch girl, my names Hank. I can tell you grew up in places like this but your friends got to leave. She nods, says Jagoffs, I know. Her tone says maybe Conneaut, the kind of girl whose old man took her bow hunting, and these boys are big houses and Shadyside. They won't know shit till finally they wake up one night counting stars from their backs and not knowing how they got there. They walk out giving Tony the finger and Dina and I keep everyone from following them out. Then Al kicks the pinball machine and gets it to ring again. I put a dollar in the old time jukebox, and Dina is pouring Tony a double as Lucinda Williams pours her heart out.

About the Author

Sean Thomas Dougherty's most recent book is the memoir in prose and prose poems *Death Prefers the Minor Keys* from BOA Editions.

How to Talk to Your Mother After the Thing That Happened in the Hospital By Ya Lan Chang

Mutely

George says only boys wearing blue can play with him. He looks at the navy stripe on your grey shorts and says, *Only light blue counts*. Hotness stings your eyes. You'll tell your mother later; Ahma said she's leaving the hospital today. But Daddy shows up after everyone else has gone, prickles all over his chin, wearing the t-shirt he sleeps in. *Mama's resting*, he says. *Don't whine, okay? Now's not the time*. Once home, you shout *Mama*, but Ahma patters out of the kitchen while Daddy disappears upstairs. Over dinner, Ahma strokes your hair when you tell her about George. *You can play with other friends*, she says. You push your dinner away, stick out your lower lip. You want to play only with George, as your mother would've known. Before the thing in the hospital, she'd listened all the other times George said you weren't wearing the right colour, and wrapped you in her cocoon, smelling really nice, like flowers.

Carefully

For Show and Tell, you bring the picture that you, Daddy, Ahma and your mother took in front of the big tower called Taipei 101 to show where you went on holiday. Mrs Fox says how wonderful, and asks whether you have a brother or sister. You look at your mother touching her round belly. *I don't know*, you reply. Later, you watch Mrs Fox talk to Daddy. Watch him lower his head, cover his face. Watch her pat his back. At home, you yawp when you see your mother in the kitchen, her hands around a mug. She smiles, but it looks different from before the thing that happened in the hospital. You chatter about your new friends, new teacher, how she asked about your photo, the one in front of – *Hey, let's tell Mama about the playground*, Daddy says. *But why did my sis* – and your mother's chair makes a loud noise against the floor. *Mama*, you say, but she doesn't look back.

Forcefully

It's the morning of your fifth birthday. You run into your parents' room, shouting, *Yay, we're taking the train to see the T-Rex in London!* Your mother's curled up on one side, duvet pulled tight around her. Daddy's in front of the bed, hands on his waist, staring at your mother, unsmiling. *Mama's not coming*, he says. You freeze. Something rises up in you, making your heart gallop. You ball your fists, stamp your foot. *No! It's my birthday! I want Mama to come!* You dash to her, yank off the duvet. *This is so unfair! It's my birthday! I want you to come!* It's been a gazillion years since the thing in the hospital. *I want you to come!* and you throw yourself at her, clinging to her as if she'd evaporate. *I want you!* and her cheek and ear are damp. *I want you!* and you feel her trembling, shuddering. *I want you!* and Mama tightens her arms around you, melding into your cocoon.

About the Author

Originally from Singapore, **Ya Lan Chang** (Yalan) lives in Cambridge, United Kingdom with her husband and son. Her work has been published in The Argyle Literary Magazine, SoFloPoJo, Northern Gravy, Every Day Fiction, Litro Magazine, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, and Quarterly Literary Review Singapore. She works as a law lecturer and is a writer at heart.

My Dad

By Roger D'Agostin

I asked Darrel at the diner.

"My mom went food shopping in her nightgown," he answered. "My dad got lost and we had to call the police. It's funny, you convince yourself it's not what it is. I don't know how. I mean, she went to the grocery store in her nightgown. Not even a robe. My dad got lost in the neighborhood he's lived in for forty something years. It's like their dementia triggers some chemical reaction in your brain."

"I think my Dad's in the early stages." I lied. He hasn't gotten lost or left the house in his pajamas but he doesn't know who I am. I'm also pretty sure he can't read although he's been reading the newspaper for the last two weeks. My sister thinks he's reading the same paragraphs. I think he just stares and this makes him tired.

"How did you tell them?" I ask.

"I didn't. I mean I couldn't. I couldn't get myself to explain to them what was happening and I waited, trying to figure out what to do, but then it was too late. My mom complained about static in her head. Said she's in between channels. Then everything that made her her, left.

Dad, he became confused and anxious and then angrier and angrier. He threatened the neighbors with a shovel; walked up to their house in the middle of the night and demanded they leave his house."

He stops. I've heard everything he's told me before.

Fortunately, Dad doesn't threaten people. Nor does he leave the house in his pajamas. The past two weeks he's actually been wearing suits. That's new. I remind him while he's getting dressed that he's working from home today and he should get the newspapers off the driveway and see what happened in Asia.

He starts reading in the kitchen. After his cup of coffee I tell him the light's better in the living room which is another lie. He dozes. I wake him for lunch and take him to the diner. This would be a perfect time to tell him. Or at least begin to tell him. But we never get past the part where he talks about his parents and their mental descent. I've never heard these stories. He tells me over and over as if he's really trying to tell me something

About the Author

Roger D'Agostin is a writer living in Connecticut. His most recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in Dunes Review, Bookends Review, and Assignment Literary Magazine.
About the Artist

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, sculpture, video and writing. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, sociopolitical discourse, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards.



The Red String

Kiera Fisher is a Columbus-based muralist/mixed media artist who embraces bold colors, and imagery to create art inspired from her surroundings; incorporating her lived experiences into her work, which frequently depicts figures and their relationship to people, places and things.



Still

Denver Boxleitner is a university fine arts student whose art, fiction and poetry have been published.

Ugly/Sacred By Rich Tombeno

"A close observation of nature cannot help but yield a poetic sensibility, and who observes nature more closely than a hunter?" – Rick Bass, from A Thousand Deer

I hunt in some ugly places. Fetid, buggy swamps. Former military installations littered with abandoned storage bunkers and piles of concrete and rusting metal and wires and God-knows-what. Weed-choked briar patches and scrubby woods in suburbia where I can't tune out the cars and barking dogs and leaf blowers. But over time these places have become sacred to me. Sure, some of it has to do with sentimentality: *That big six point I thought I made a bad shot on piled up right here in the tall grass by the heap of derelict concrete.* But part of it is that in places where there's evidence of human intrusion and "development," Nature's coming back, reclaiming space. And in these places of reclamation and litter and ugliness, I often find solitude. Few other hunters, and far fewer hikers and dog-walkers and woodsy drug users or copulators want to be where I sit. And that's how I like it.

It always surprises me when I see a woodland creature amidst debris and litter and evidence of human development. Once, when I lived in a small city Northwest of Boston known for its rough neighborhoods and historic mills, I went to meditate in a small strip of woods near my apartment. There was trash everywhere—empty bottles and cans and wrappers, a weathered tarp, a stolen (and subsequently abandoned) shopping cart—but it also had trees and rocks and dirt, and it was more secluded than the tiny yard in front of my building, so it worked. At one point I felt something was off and opened my eyes to see a big, yellowy coyote looking at me from twenty yards away. I held still and it trotted off, but it blew my mind that there was a wild animal in such an ugly, desecrated bit of nature.

Repetition and familiarity also get me attached to a place, regardless of its aesthetic qualities. It takes time to really see a place, to understand how it lays out and to notice its nuances. You suddenly become aware of the murmur of running water and realize that there's a very slow trickle of a brook running through the swamp. Or you feel the breeze breaking against a copse of dense pines like waves against a cliff and it swirls back to you in your treestand. Or maybe it's just the emerald patch of moss growing on the concrete rubble. But it's there. And my attachment to a place grows very quickly if I harvest an animal or see something cool (like an owl perching on a nearby branch or a particularly vivid sunrise), or if I don't get disturbed there. It takes time and sometimes perseverance to see past the ugliness, the flaws, and to recognize the hidden (or at least less obvious) beauty of a place.

About the Author

Rich Tombeno is an English teacher at a public high school in a distant suburb of Boston. He is a graduate of the Solstice MFA program at Lasell University, and his work has been published at Rathalla Review and Creative Nonfiction.

Suspension Of Disbelief

By Gary Zenker

"Because he looked at me funny."

That's the reason I get when I show up at my son's school in the middle of the day as requested by the guidance counselor and ask my son why he punched his best friend in the face during Social Studies.

I consider his answer before continuing. "Haha funny or strange funny," I ask.

"Strange funny," he replies in a voice without any anger. "Funny like 'you're a freak and I am going to embarrass you in front of the entire class'. Funny like..." His voice trails off and we sit at the table in silence. My son is twelve with the normal maturity quirks, but this is way out of character. They say boys are easier to raise, but at this moment, I wonder whether it's actually true.

"There's a three-day required suspension for fighting," the counselor notes. "Since the punch was unprovoked..." he stares at my son while speaking, "the other boy will not be subject to the suspension but will be sent home for the day." I nod. "And you may want to get your son some counseling for his anger issue."

That last comment irks me. Yes, my son is emotional, always has been. But he doesn't have anger issues. I'm not one of those parents who believe that his child can do no wrong, but I know my son. His actions are confusing.

Back in the car, there is no talking. I start to play with the radio a bit, changing stations, then turn it off completely. "So why did you REALLY punch him in the face?" I ask, still staring straight ahead at the road.

There's a pause. In my peripheral vision, I see him make a quarter turn in his seat to me.

"Jimmy forgot about the test we had today. It was a big one, worth half our grade. If he failed, they would hold him back." He turns back in the seat to face front.

“So you punched him in the face? Knowing he would get a bloody nose in front of the whole class and you would get a three-day suspension? Was he cheating off your work?” I ask.

“No. He would never do that. Neither would I. I figured that if I did something, he would be excused from the test for today and get another day to study. He’s my best friend. I don’t want to go to eighth grade without him.”

I sat silent for a minute. I think about all the life lessons this brings forward. Honesty and hard work and trust and following the rules. And what friendship really means.

I decide that today’s lesson had already been learned.

By me.

I press the button on the car dashboard to call work and tell them I won’t be back in today.

“Let’s go get some ice cream. And catch a movie.”

About the Author

Gary Zenker is a marketing strategist who creates flash fiction tales that cross genre and focus on revealing facets of human nature. His stories have been selected for various anthologies, including *Chicken Soup For The Soul: Laughter*. He founded and continues to lead two writers groups in southeastern PA, assisting writers to develop their skills and achieve their writing goals. He is also the creator of *Writers Bloxx*, a storytelling game.

Build-A-Sister **By Haley Mattes**

Build-A-Sister means fun for everyone, especially the youngest. Watch her play video games, be prohibited from touching the TV remote, get bitten on the arm when you try to touch her Barbies! All created in a place that inspires you—your childhood home, with her room just across the hall, not across state lines just yet—to build memories that last a lifetime.

Before getting started, you'll be greeted by a SIBLING BUILDER Associate—a mother that looks like you, a father that looks like her—who will walk you through these seven simple steps.

Choose Me: Be born second, thrust into a world already made for her. Neither of you chooses the other; something else, some God or deity or other cosmic force brings you together forever, whether you enjoy it or not.

Hear Me: Hear her yell at you to leave her alone. Hear her whisper the curse word she learned in school that day into the bedroom pillow. "Okay, get ready...*fuck*," she says so quietly you almost can't hear. Hear her laugh with your cousins at a joke that she describes as something you "just wouldn't get." Hear her have her very adult conversations with her very adult friends when they come over to eat pizza downstairs, these at-home celebrities you're so curious about. One single basement door severs you from the precious teenaged life she lives.

Stuff Me: Stuffing scented with the Warm Vanilla Sugar body spray from Bath & Body Works and Crystal Light made by your grandmother. Stuff in a heart with DNA you both share, the blood and beating pulse that will tie you together for all time. Sleep on her floor for an entire summer. Eat the Tums and salt she keeps under her bed and offers you as a "light snack."

Hug Me: Hug for family photos, after the school musical, when she comes back from college to see you in *The Little Mermaid*. Hug when she leaves to go back to college, where her room is no longer across the hall from yours.

Dress Me: Steal her clothes. Get mad when she steals yours.

Name Me: Watch as she starts describing you to her friends as her little sister, no longer pretending you don't exist. See her start calling you her best friend in Facebook posts. Read the letter adorned with flowers where she asks you to be Maid of Honor in her wedding.

Take Me Home: Watch her move up the East coast, to the city with the large tree you used to see each Christmas, only she's there year-round. Where you used to see her every morning, shoving each other to take turns in the bathroom mirror, now she's a train ride away, the tracks stretching so far it feels like she's on Saturn. Hear her say she missed you. Feel the hugs she now gives you with her own free will. Keep stealing each other's clothes, think about the word "sister," and how it feels different from "sibling."

About the Author

Haley Mattes (she/they) is a writer and editor living in the woods of Pennsylvania. She is a graduate of West Chester University of Pennsylvania, where she received a B.A. in English and Philosophy. Her creative nonfiction has been featured in *Rathalla Review*, and her one act play, *Fun And Cool And Normal And Nice*, was performed as a part of the Student Written One Act Festival at West Chester University. Her favorite color is green, and she once came in second place at a Sally Rooney Trivia Night at a bookstore.

Detassel

By Kathryn Ganfield

When my husband was a boy, he bused to a farmer's fields to detassel corn for a few dollars a day.

What did he spend his money on? Hubba Bubba bubble gum, Big League Chew, candy cigarettes, arcade games (Pac-Man can't help but die and needs countless quarters to keep chomping and alive), 2-liter pop bottles of Mountain Dew, and canisters of Pringles potato chips...Nothing that lasted long but gave him the sugars, salts, and fats he sweated away in the corn rows.

Think of how he sweated and sunburned on the tips of his ears where they poked out from his baseball cap. What did he hear in those ears? Restless wind, rustling leaves, maybe a motor—other teenagers talking, joking. Maybe someone wore a Walkman and pop music spilled out from the headphones.

I read him this imagined memory.

"Well, that's romantic," he says.

"Want to know what I saved that money for?"

Of course he was saver. I should know better after knowing him since he was barely more than a boy.

The blue backpack in our basement, he tells me. That's what he bought with his \$4.25 an hour earned in the cornfield. His first frame backpacking backpack bought though he had never been backpacking and had no specific plans to go. His aspiration in that hot, perspiring summer was in a plasticky blue backpack, one that he's saved to this day. All his hopes stored inside.

Though very tall, he was not even thirteen. Just a boy under cloudless blue skies, with a blue backpack thick in his dreams. I ache so tender for him, hearing this was his first job. I don't know why it nibbles at me so. Children have always helped on farms ever since they were invented and detasseling is common-enough summer work for teens. But something slips in my heart for a skinny school boy bused to where the suburbs ended and farm fields stretched on and on. Is it that his hopes were so small — or that they're saved forever?

Use of "backpack" Do you want to let this go or should I insert different words?

About the Author

Kathryn Ganfield is a nature writer and teaching artist in the river town of St. Paul, Minnesota. Her work focuses on family, environment, and the climate in crisis. She is a past Loft Literary Center Mentor Series Fellow, Paul Gruchow Essay Contest winner, and two-time Pushcart nominee. Her prose appears in Hippocampus, Water~Stone Review, Creative Nonfiction, and River Teeth, among other literary journals.

First
By Cindy Zhao

You have no idea how practiced you will become.

The first thing you used: purple child-sized craft scissors, their half-moon tips ribbed with hot glue. The first place was the inside of your left wrist perpendicular the stone-blue pulse.

These steps are a drumbeat you give yourself to, hypnosis in the click of the bathroom lock, socks whispered off, into the bathtub shivering. You, nearly thirteen, a naked offering to a silver god.

//

You dig. As if buried in the hook of your ulna was a red scepter, a moon-bright shore.

You don't know what you are creating, pulled into you like the whimper of childhood's basement stair. In those halls flooded an ocean – you dreamed it would swell at dusk and swallow you.

The crescent between your fingers holds a maple burn, a pale slice of fall.

//

No, you don't know.

The dazed reunion with which your forehead meets stained tile.

That X-Actos grate with the sound of struck matches – your veins open best to Wilkinsons.

That at the ER you prefer arrowroots to saltines, sutures to staples, and doctors who remember to ask if it hurts.

The way your mother's tears will give you a sun to hide under.

The shape of the empty room your mouth makes when you say no.

That the word for the harbour under your skin is *subcutaneous*. Or *power*. Or *ritual*.

//

Litres – the amount you can lose each day and still have breath to lose.

That stomach acid braided with clotted blood in the drain is only ablution.

Tasting salt, you run the water over your hands until the colours pale and numb.

//

The first time you cut yourself, you string a spider line of blood moons. You stand, wrist lifted, watching them tug at ancient, gaping tides.

//

Only the drops in the sink. The face in the mirror — how you chase the moment it contains you. Only the purple scissors and the plastic flaking like dry sand.

Only the waves' breaking — if only.

Wounding. You have mastered this, too.

About the Author

Cindy Zhao lives in Vancouver, Canada. Their work has previously appeared in Lunch Ticket, BreakBread Review, Cape Code Poetry Review, and elsewhere.

Housed unHoused

By Melissent Zumwalt

Keys jangling in my palm, I stumble upon a man plugging a microwave in to the exterior of my condo complex. He crouches low to the ground, to reach the outlet, concealing himself behind his rusted-out sedan. Preparing to cook his ready-to-eat dinner in the 12 by 18-inch box. Which makes me wonder: Without something as standard and underappreciated as four walls and electricity, how would a person make a warm meal?

My presence elicits a skittish energy from him, like a feral cat. He must know his actions could be construed as unseemly, illicit. That he needs to watch out for me. That I possess a certain power in my new status as a homeowner.

When I was a kid, my parents used to argue, voices yelling, about the very real possibility of “losing our house.” My biggest fear was that if the house was repossessed, my parents might be seen as unfit. I eventually worked up the nerve to ask my mom: “If they take our house away, will they take me away from you and Dad?”

“Of course not,” she hissed, her embarrassment and fear masquerading as anger. “Look at all those kids who end up living in cars with their parents.”

Even now, safely in adulthood, being housed still feels like a precarious blessing.

So, I simply nod, say *hey there* to the man and keep walking, enter my unit as he grunts in response. Hoping his meal does not taste like shame.

About the Author

Melissent Zumwalt is an artist and administrator who lives in Portland, Oregon. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Arkana*, *Harpur Palate*, *Hippocampus*, *Mud Season Review*, *Variant Literature* and elsewhere. A Best of the Net finalist and Pushcart Prize nominee, her work has been supported by the Fishtrap Writers Conference.



Euforia Abstracta en la Ciudad de Invisible

Vivian Calderón Bogoslavsky is a Colombian artist with Argentine roots who has dedicated more than 25 years to exploring art as a space of emotion, color, and connection. With a background in Anthropology, History, and Journalism, she combines artistic sensitivity with a deep understanding of the human experience. Her work brings to life invisible cities and abstract landscapes, places that invite viewers to lose themselves in the balance between chaos and harmony. She primarily works with mixed media on paper and canvas, using water, pigments, sand, and stucco to shape universes born from spontaneity.



I Am Also You (above) & Open The Gates

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium in 1946. He came to the United States where he spent his teens in South Philadelphia and later Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden H. S., he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned an M.A. and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975–78. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska from 1978 to 1997.

When Minimum Wage was \$1.10
By Nancy Hastings

A few city girls betray us,
blow smoke rings with Camels,

choke back laughter
in a corn row.

Those of us counting on a paycheck
pick up the slack, pull tassels
in rows of female white corn
for hybrid varieties.

The next morning at first light
we wade up to our knees

in icy well water
in a field that has been flooded all night.

Our punishment's a sinking feeling
of numbness,

something we mock
by naming it *quick mud*.

There's nowhere to step
in a quagmire.

Some quit; some stay on.
Some never come back.

We pray for dry land to appear,
for a mile-long row to end.

We live to never wish
field work on another.

About the Author

Nancy Hastings' work has appeared in Poetry (Chicago), Prairie Schooner, Commonweal, Poet Lore, Puerto del Sol, and many other literary magazines. She is a professor emerita from the Department of English at New Mexico State University. For twenty-five years she was an approved artist for the National Endowment for Arts' "Artists in the Schools/Communities Program" in creative writing for grades K-12.

Sanguine promises to bury
By Iriini Patatane

Nocturne veils inked with blood cherries juice.

Half-kissed black nightshades hidden in the woods.

Playing with hand grenades crafted from monkshood.

Letting them explode right before we bloom.

Walking in the forest but the soil is wet,

so, our feet are sinking and covered with dirt.

Pitcher full with liquor made from wringed tears.

Next thing you'll remember is our sacred fears.

Carved my biggest wishes on a tree's pale skin.

Lick the salted promises off my best dream.

Foxes steal the grapes hanging by your lips.

Lighting up an incense for our finest sins.

Sneak a peek at heavens where my eyes are held.

Blue-green iris crying while brown lies ahead.

All your fruits are rotten down to their core,

is that why you want me, to repair them with my own?

About the Author

Iriini Patatane is a Greek biology student and author. Her award-winning works appear in various Greek literary magazines and book collections. She recently published her first fantasy novella, *Glass Palaces*, and co-founded a book club in Volos, Greece. When she was 15, one of her screenplays became a short film.

In The Manner Of Me
By Maudie Bryant

My face softens

inside the profile

of my son.

I promised

I'd live in the moment,

but I'm already looking back

while he taps

his chin like that.

I do the same,

finger to face

then eyes to ceiling

as if memory lurks

in corners.

I turn. The habit follows—

he's doing it again.

Not imitating.

Simply becoming.

I reach for him
to pull a shirt hem,
tug up a sock,
smooth down a curl,
but I'm touching
a former version
of myself—
still soft,
still tender.

About the Author

Maudie Bryant is a poet and multidisciplinary artist whose work explores the complexities of memory and identity. A graduate of the University of Louisiana Monroe (M.A. in English), she creates to unearth the disquiet beneath the surface of human experience. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Progenitor*, *Welter*, and *3Elements Review*. Maudie balances full-time work, motherhood, and her creative practice while living in Shreveport, Louisiana with her husband and two young sons.

Salvation

By Sarina Michel

sure there's church but then there's the Citgo on the corner of woodlawn & main
with a eucharist of packaged goods boasting life years past expiration & beer
the flavor of the aluminum can & the three men with red-rimmed eyes
who maintain the glass case of bongos with the sign *for tobacco use only*
mhiamour is crying in my arms & my son stares at a man with acrylic white skin
who tells my daughter in spanish that she is beautiful outside
his chihuahua stands guard her belly swollen & nipples
like the heads of a sprinkler am i wrong to see madonna gabriel
& the crucified three? they are half dead already & so am i probably
it has been a while since i've been to church but i still know holy ground when i see it
i push across the counter a cosmic brownie a bag of candy corn & a canned margarita
one half of a 2 for \$5 the man calls me love and offers me a lime
no charge.

About the Author

Sarina Michel writes about isolation, control, and religious manipulation –irreverently & somehow, delightfully. She is the owner of a small, independent bookstore in her town. She is a book advocate– she believes reading in community is world-changing.

Convenience
By Jayce Elliott

The corner store has everything
we've deemed necessary, plus
a couple of vagueries. Cigarettes
with a lighter, too. An assortment
of colors and a miniature option.
Highly processed beef and sugar
water, dyed. Glue, dyed, to keep
things as they are, and oil to move
them along. Following afoot our
fancy, their paw on the rat's tail.
sometimes they pick their paws up,
sometimes put them down again.

There's no oil, nor glue for this.
We've defiled the earth for more
with pine trees standing beside us,
killing themselves from the bottom
up and curious at the sweat, the loud
noise. The eels in the river thames
are coked out on our piss and going
the wrong way. We're running out
of others to blame for the confusion,
We've drained all blood to a slow tick.

About the Author

Jayce Elliott is a loafer and landscaper in the Northeast where he spends more time outside than in. His poetry appears in New Feathers Anthology, Last Leaves Magazine, The Bridge Journal, where he was also an Editor, and elsewhere, including under lots of stones.

Jewelry-box Ballerina Unwinds
By Cathy Socarras Ferrell

I perform
an endless rehearsal,
tired like the earth
repeating chaine(1) turns
around a pitch-black stage,
loop after loop after loop.

I cannot find
my spot(2). When I turn
to the mirror, my reflection is *dizzy*.
I am
out of step.

The tune winds down.
You remind me,
we are all imposters.

I leave the ends
of my ribbons loose,(3)
rest on a
rusted
coil.

—

[1] A chain-like turn in which the dancer loops from one place to another

[2] To avoid getting dizzy, a dancer fixes her focus on one secure spot

[3] Tidiness and control are a ballet dancer's signature. One must always be tucked in, neatly.

About the Author

Cathy Socarras Ferrell is a poet, writer, and educator from Central Florida. The granddaughter of Cuban immigrants, she finds inspiration in family story-telling, walking (anywhere), and the Sandhill cranes in her yard. Her work can be found at The Orchards Poetry Journal, Santa Clara Review, Compulsive Reader, and other literary journals. She is an alumna of the Tupelo Press 30/30 Project, and is an Associate Editor for table//FEAST Literary Magazine.

Kites

By Georgea Jourjouklis

you bring me to the beach

only to snip the string

i watch a piece of me

shrink in ways i've

never seen, knowing

it will return to earth

but never to me

About the Author

Georgea Jourjouklis is a University of Toronto alumnus, a future English teacher, and a queer writer with a focus on fantasy, speculative fiction, poetry, and mental health.

Common Ivy (*Hedera helix*)

By Colleen S. Harris

We damn the creeping canopy
crawl-clutching its way up walls
as though to devour what we build
given enough damp and hours.
Superstition.

Science says it serves
as thermal shield, combating cracks
by warming walls against the rapping
knuckles of winter, cooling them
against the curdle of summer, pulling
at pollutants and purifying air,
answering the perpetual prayer
for a chance to breathe easy.

Blessing or doom, *Hedera helix*
only works upon what already is:
the ivy guards good walls from salt,
immune to tears and ocean air,
but where towers already waver,
it grows into the cracks and holes,
prying.

Pulling.

Exposing the marrow.

About the Author

Colleen S. Harris holds an MFA in Writing from Spalding University and works as a university library dean. Author of four poetry collections and four chapbooks, her recent work includes *The Light Becomes Us* (Main Street Rag, 2025), *Toothache in the Bone* (boats against the current, 2025), and *The Girl and the Gifts* (Bottlecap, 2025). Her poems appear in Berkeley Poetry Review, The MacGuffin, Salvation South, and more than 120 others.

surviving in a world made for someone else
By Eileen Porzuczek

standing in the gallery of acceptable behaviors,
tourists photograph your discomfort like art—
curators still adjusting the lighting to
highlight your feminine *inadequacies*.

oh, isn't this exploitation spectacular,
a preservation of submission in formaldehyde—
people paying admission to fill their own cup,
while the gift shops sell miniature versions of
womanly service and compromise stuck in time.

see how they've mounted your dignity next to
the extinct wings of species passed, saying,
a contemporary adaptation of her—
documentaries of intentional drowning
playing tribute to the life designed for you.

and the gift shops still sell miniature versions
of your womanly service and compromise—
each made where survival is a national sport.

About the Author

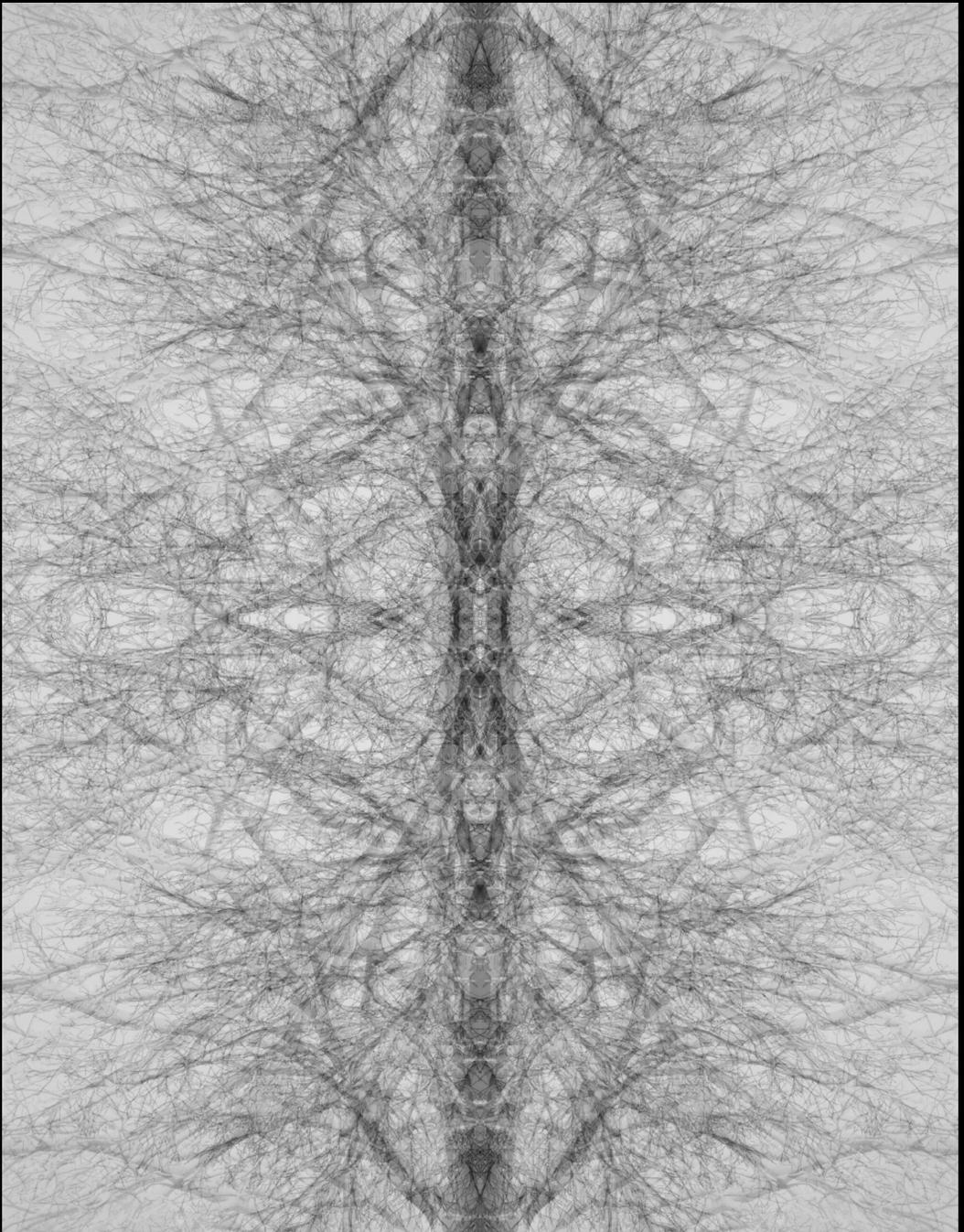
Eileen Porzuczek is the author of "Memento Mori: A Poetic Memoir in Three Parts" (Finishing Line Press, 2025). Her writing has also appeared in literary magazines such as Creation Magazine, So It Goes: The Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, New Plains Review, and Sheepshead Review, among others. Eileen has a B.A. and an M.A. from Ball State University.

A Letter to the Surnames Lost
By Nicole Dufalla

I'm sorry I don't know you. I'm sorry I don't know how your strange, smooth sounds slip across my lips or how your shapes look pressed in the curves of our family moon. Your whispers filled stomachs with remembered bread, reflected on dustless floors. Your shadows—backdrop static against *his* army heroism, *his* winding smuggler's paths, *his* travels beyond mountains. *He*. Without you. Without us. Raindrops in puddles, feeling wet streaks left across bowing leaves above. Like mustangs sense mountains, wishing they could run together.

About the Author

Nicole Dufalla is a poet living in Virginia where she enjoys writing and getting lost outside. Her poetry can be found or is forthcoming in Poetry South, the Chautauqua Institute Journal, Willows Wept Review, Sky Island Journal, and elsewhere online.



Ghosts Of Elves

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, sculpture, video and writing. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, sociopolitical discourse, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards.



Ripples On The Water



Interstice



Untitled

Melissa Jordan is a retired at-home-mom and caregiver. She is an advocate to an adult son with schizo-effective disorder, and co-conservator to another adult son who has autism and a neurological disorder, which impairs his ability to live independently. Melissa spends her time cooking and gardening at her Coachella Valley home with her husband Todd and their three cats, Ziggy, Wesker and Nico.



Untitled



Drexel
Creative
Writing