



IN THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

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“There is comfort, even among strangers, when people find something they are equally passionate about.”

Joyce Rachelle

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WITH GRATITUDE

As we celebrate our 10th issue, In the Company of Strangers, we want to thank every contributor, reader, and supporter who has walked with us over the past three years. What began as a small idea has grown into a shared space for voices, stories, and connections we couldn't have imagined. Your words, your time, and your belief in this project have meant the world. Here's to the journey so far—and to the strangers who've become something more.

With love,

Madisen & Kelly

Dining Alone

I grit my teeth and fight
The impulse to run; face the eyes
Of the whole restaurant:

Watch as each table tries
And convicts me.
I plough on: chew, swallow.

With every bite
I am drowning in the shadow
Of the absent -

Strangers On The Subway

I was riding the 6 train from 23rd St to Wall St, trying to catch the last ferry home to Rockaway Beach, lost in thought, processing the group therapy session I had just left. Would Wanda be okay after that breakdown? Had I said too much and alienated Harry?

Leaning against the subway doors, listening to Passion Pit to try and stop ruminating, I become aware of a woman gesticulating wildly and coming closer to me. I pause the music right as she gets in my face, and she yells, "You fucking bitch, you fucking slut," she mumbles something quietly and then goes back to yelling the initial two lines. I'm trapped in the doorway, her long arms holding the metal poles to further launch her body toward mine. I'm pushed up against the doors, caged in, and starting to sweat in my puffy winter coat. I feel her breath on my face and close my eyes.

I'm 4 stops away, and I wonder if I can duck under her arms. Can I... my thought is interrupted when she stops calling me names long enough to launch a hot, wet loogie onto my right cheek. I instantly begin to cry and shake uncontrollably. This only incites more rage, and she gets louder and seemingly grows taller in front of my reddened, wet eyes. Suddenly, I felt someone grab my arm, and I looked up through my tears. Standing in front of me is a young black man no older than 20. I see his mouth moving, but I can't hear him. There is a high-pitched thrumming in my ears; I know it is my brain going offline, I'm having a panic attack.

Strangers On The Subway

He places me gently on the orange plastic seat. I see him creating a protective circle around me with his body as the woman who has just spit on my face continues to try to claw her way towards me.

I look down, and tears bounce off my jacket onto my lap, making a wet stain. I try to breathe and listen to what he says. "You are okay. I got you." He repeats it like a mantra or a prayer.

We pulled up to the stop before mine, and suddenly, the woman who had been yelling was gone. As the doors close and I watch her walk away, I find my voice.

"The next stop is mine. Thank you. Thank you."

"I'm going to get off with you, okay?" I nod yes, but the tears still make it hard to talk.

He gently guided me up and out as we pulled into the station. We pause off to the side against the tile wall, out of the way of the stream of strangers trying to get where they are going.

"Are you good?"

I can feel the air on my neck coming down the stairway from the outside, and the breeze helps me feel calmer.

Strangers On The Subway

"Yes. Thank you again. You really saved me there."

He shrugs and says, "No problem, get home safe."

As I walk down the hill to catch the boat, I feel the skin on my arms grow cooler. I know my cheeks are returning to their usual color after burning as red as the cherry on the tip of my cigarette. My mind darts between two thoughts, "How awful!" And "How extraordinary."

In less than 20 minutes, I had met two strangers I would never be able to forget. One for their ability to hurt and the other for their kindness. Only in NYC.

Waking Up

I have awoken in a place that I find unfamiliar and unsettling. It's cold and very quiet, apart from a faint ticking sound that fills me with unease.

Last time I could hear soothing sounds from a radio, a lot of beeps and people's chatter in the background, as well as somebody repeatedly calling my name.

But now it's so different. I can see now that I'm lying on a metal slab with a ticket attached to my pale foot.

Evidently the operation had not been a success.

I didn't imagine that death would be like this.

Suddenly blackness smothers, covering me like an inky blanket.

Someone's calling me. I look around and just make out the pallid outline of another occupant in this strange room sitting up and staring at me with sorrowful eyes. I can just make out the faint outline of a smile.

“Are you dead too?”, it asks.

“Well, I guess I must be”, I reply.

“What were you in for?”

“Prostate.”

Waking Up

“Ahh. I had gallstones removed. Should have been easy, but those loose teeth messed everything up. All of us who died in this building end up here. Welcome to the mortuary.”

I looked around this dismal room. The other slabs' shadowy occupants were slowly stirring and making moaning noises. I'm scared and filled with dread. Will they come and get me? Then a thick blackness washes over me.

I reawakened. I can hear a ticking. The room is still once more. All the bodies are as they were. All lifeless and silent. The slab that was occupied by the one talking to me is now empty. The silence is shattered by the outlines of two figures barging into the room. One of them carries a syringe. They appear agitated and anxious, talking quickly. I snatch pieces of their conversation.

“Massive mistake, someone will pay, keep stum. Remember what happened before. Which slab is it? Over there I think. Find it, bloody quick! If it stirs, give it a screwdriver to send it into silence.”

And once more blackness rushes over to embrace me.

Waking Up

I can hear ticking sounds. It's bright. Then the low tones of a radio playing a country and western tune curling around me, "Galveston" I think.

Then a reassuring voice. "I think he's coming round"

I catch sight of a smiling face, "Hello Tommy. You're in the recovery room. Your operation was a complete success. Someone will be along shortly to take you back up to the ward."

I look at the clock on the wall. It shows an hour and twenty minutes has passed since I went into the operating theatre.

I shuddered when thinking of that other room. I put my head on the pillow and wonder if what I saw before was a dream or shock.

I yawn contentedly as the Galveston song sails and fades away into a distant room.

The ticking grows louder and echoes.

Aware now that something else is present.

I'm not alone.

Fear has crept in and filled this room.

I freeze as somewhere in the room I hear a voice that I've heard before, in that other place. An outline of a faceless figure advances towards me.

The ticking fills my head and darkness once more descends.

At the Base of the Falls

To Them, A Pair

I tied bells to my backpack to avoid being mauled by a Massachusetts black bear. The jingle was insufferable but filled the silence as I brushed through the asters and thistles of Mount Greylock. At 3,489 feet, it's the state's highest peak, measly compared to the West. But on a sweltering August day, that many feet felt like plenty much. At the summit, my PB&J tasted like heaven. I watched boy scouts huddle together for a picture with a sprawling New England vista far below. I stared at my own foot dangling over the edge.

On my way down, I paused at an overlook. A woman in hiking pants sat perched atop a picnic table, feet on the bench, gazing out. We waved. It was the most I'd engaged with anyone all day.

The modicum of human interaction put a buoyance in my step through the final descent. In the parking lot, I leaned sweaty against my Subaru and yearned for a cold plunge. The woman from the picnic table emerged from the woods. We both smiled. She was tall and twice my age and beautiful in a windswept way, residual smile lines creased into her resting face.

I asked her if she knew of any swimming spots. There was a pause filled just with the hum of mosquitoes. Eventually: she couldn't

At the Base of the Falls

believe I'd asked her that, had been just about to tell me of a watering hole. She was heading there herself. A right on the big road, she said, a hairpin turn at the bridge.

This is how I, caked in crystallized sweat with high-octane Joanna Newsom blasting from my stereo, wound up following a stranger to a swimming hole in Williamstown on the first of August.

The sound of rushing water boomed in the parking lot. I followed the woman down a wooded slope, and there we were at the river, water pooling in little rocky enclaves. Shedding of hiking shoes, the bliss feeling peeling off sweaty socks and salted shirt. Plunging with a stranger in an icy watering hole on a hot day is in a way as denuding as it gets. Re-emerge with less sweat and more ice on the face. Extreme change of state.

We bobbed in the river, volleying questions punctuated by wren call-lulls and the water's stentorian rush. She was a writer — a poet, essayist, regular hiker of the summit we'd both just climbed. Working on a book. About her commitment to relationships and to nature, whole-hearted and risky. Oh so risky. Pregnant with the possibility of loss. She had lost someone close to her years back. She found solace in the mountains, realized then that the closest relationship to the one she'd lost was the

At the Base of the Falls

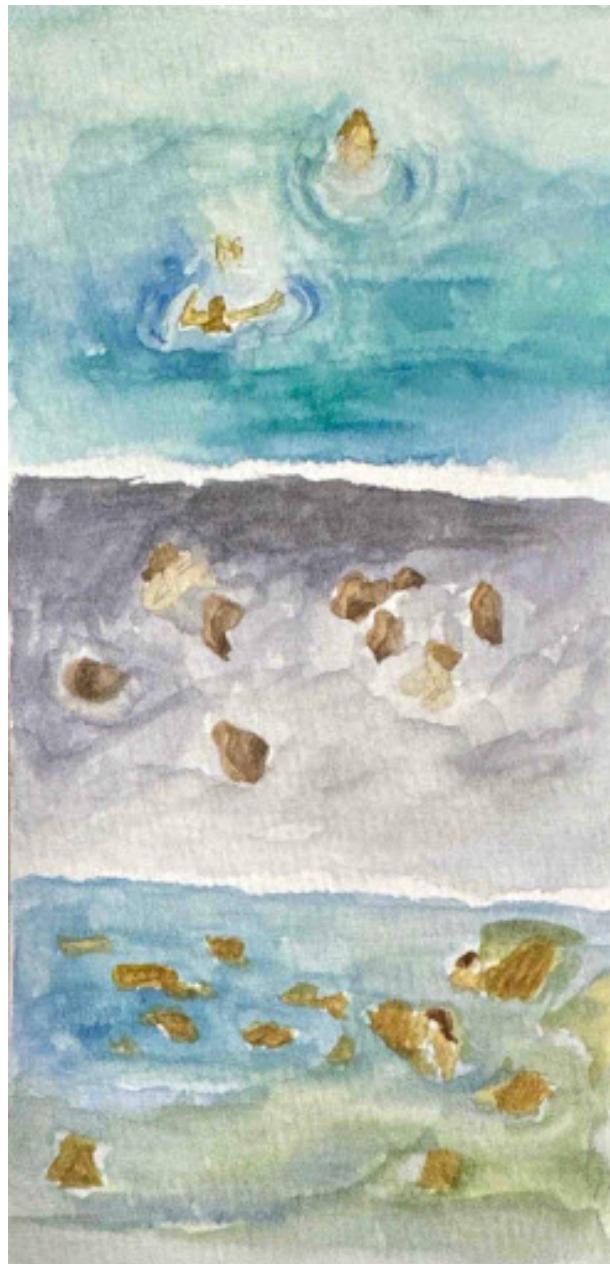
one she shared with the natural world.

I was a journalist, on one of my two weeks off, one month out from leaving my job and moving across the world. Nervous. “You seem ready for a lot,” she told me, a vote of confidence I’ve reminded myself of many a time these months since.

Strangers appeared at the river’s edge with a rambunctious dog who splashed water on the clothes we’d left piled up on shoreline rocks. We said no big deal, whooped and hollered as the newcomers jumped into the babbling chill. They were strangers, we a pair in their eyes.

Forty-five minutes later we floated our way out of the water and up towards the parking lot, and realized we didn’t know each other’s names.

At the Base of the Falls



I took no photos, that day; don't remember the precise color of the river. So I paint swatches, like angles of a thumbprint, the combination of which may hopefully lead to some kind of whole.

In a Company of Strangers

Everyone knew what was expected
Trained yet disobedient within
Acceptable limits
A traveling theater troupe,
They recognized each other
Even in stage makeup

But I didn't get the script
Or maybe one was already imprinted
Before I got there
DNA as a cattle-brand
Permanent, unalterable

Like the stain on the
Concrete outside my building
Following a trickle of water from
A source unknown, gathering
Leaf stencils and stones the size of buttons:
The maintenance man can't get it out

The company I was born into
Dissolved right after my arrival
Not enough box office draw?
Subject matter too uninspiring?
But it was the only script I had

In a Company of Strangers

Plopped down, then, in a company
Of what I considered strangers
No sets were blocked so I
Couldn't figure out the relations
Between mother and child or the
Strangers and the rest of the world
Surely, this woman playing the mother
Was an understudy

Because I still carried the intact
Version of how the story was supposed
To play out
How the strangers I was born to were
Supposed to stick around for three acts
And a bang-up ending

Heart Split Open

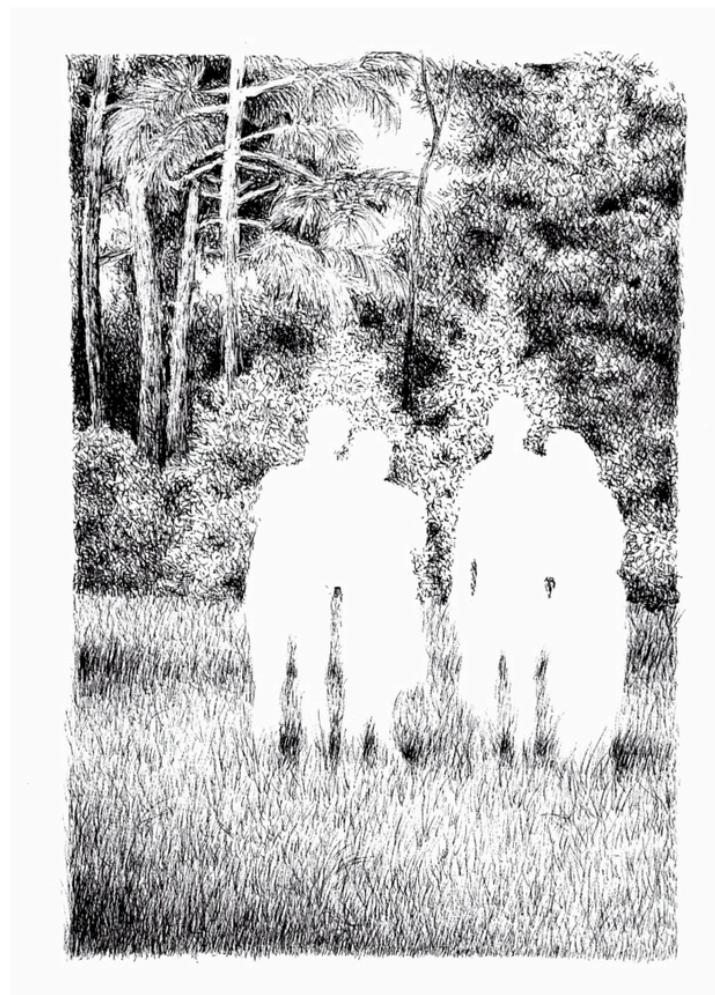
after mounted piano casing in King's Arms Pub, Oxford

and if I felt your calloused palms
brush against the bend of my elbow
when you asked if I wanted another pint
knowing already that I was done
as we felt the rhythm of a crowded pub
dim around our conversation
and you left several notes on the bar,
closing our tab

and if we caught the next train back
wind-chilled hands crashing together
like hammers in an old piano,
so all I could do was lean into the motion
nudge my limbs into yours,
unbutton your thrifted oxford shirt,
prop you open to study
your hitch pins and bridges

and if I had let you play music all night
'till the headboards and soundboards
fuse together as they like to do
after a certain amount of liquor,
would I still be comparing
our withered romance to an aged casing,
an old piece of wall art?

strangers in the forest



Unspoken Geography

We weren't sure if the BBQ restaurant we found in Queens had outdoor seating, so after ordering at the counter, we walked further into the dining room. A thin lady wearing a faded baseball cap and a white apron was speaking quietly, nearly whispering, in another language into her cell phone. She pointed to the patio.

"You can sit out," she said, interrupting her conversation.

We thanked her and found a table. It seemed unseasonably warm in early March. I wanted to stay in the sunlight, but my partner had not applied sunscreen. Even in the shade I didn't wear a jacket. The other diners chose to remain indoors. Perhaps they were tired of the noise, from work on one of many construction projects.

Minutes later, she came by the table.

"Where are you from?" she asked me in a soft voice, pointing at my two gold bracelets.

I smiled, though I never know how to answer this question. I've always detested this question from white Americans and Europeans. I make an exception for others as I've discovered that immigrants tend to ask me this very question. The words may be the same, but the emotions conveyed in the question are different.

"My mother is Vietnamese," I explained. A seemingly innocent but quite mangled non-answer.

"We like gold jewelry," she said. "Very gold. Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Vietnam." She didn't wear any jewelry, except for a delicate

Unspoken Geography

gold stud on her nose.

Like me, she didn't reveal where she was born or where she grew up. She and I chose to rely on inference.

When she returned to the table again, she set down our order of mac and cheese, a quarter of BBQ chicken, fries, and collard greens.

"I came to say bye to you," she explained as she began to place the bottle of hot sauces on the table. "I'm off. Maybe we see each other again." She didn't know we were fleeting visitors. She began rearranging the plates onto the table, but I gently swatted her hand away, telling her there was no need for her to do that when she was off the clock.

"I hope to see you again. Take care and enjoy the day." I pointed at the clear sky.

She gave me one more smile and waved. I watched her walk off and felt a recurring emotion, neither defined sadness nor true joy, whenever I shared brief exchanges with friends of the diaspora.

In Germany, these farewells were even more difficult and were tinged with guilt. Germany is a place I hate with all of my being and never wish to live or ever visit again. My diasporic friends there expressed genuine happiness for us when we said goodbye. They were joyous I was able to leave. One man from Syria said he wished he could leave but had no country to return to.

"I'm glad you can get out," he said.

I didn't tell them I hoped to see them again. I'm uncertain if I would

Unspoken Geography

and I didn't want to say something that resembled a promise.

Once my partner came back with another glass of water, he explained that he had offered to take the tray from the aunty. She insisted that she could do it.

She had really wanted to say farewell to me, a stranger.

Polished

Bianca, you promised.

His voice rises as he speaks, with an accent I can't place, and my eyes glance in his direction. What did Bianca promise? I imagine it's something banal, picking up a kid from school, but as I look across to him, I realize he doesn't look like a dad, or at least not like one who goes to parents' meetings or sits on collapsible chairs for student theatre productions. He's definitely paid full price for the first-class compartment and probably resents me – or would if he even noticed my presence.

You did.

His suit's made of material that only the best silkworms were allowed to contribute to. I can't see his shoes – not that I know much about men's shoes – but I bet they're leather from the sort of cows that are fed beer and massaged.

If I did your teeth for free, you'd go to dinner with me, that's what you said. And a root canal isn't cheap, you know.

His teeth are hidden behind his cell phone but I bet they're perfect. His eyebrows are. Not that I'm interested in him. Lucky I don't need a root canal: trading dentistry for a date is creepy. It's a truth universally acknowledged that a single dentist is bound to be a weirdo.

I'm probably too old for him anyway. He has nice hands – or at least the one I see holding the phone looks nice: tanned, the veins elegant, the nails – that may be a job requirement – neat and not too long.

Polished

Yes, you get to choose the location to meet.

Ooh. This is interesting. I wonder if she's going to pick a place with unpronounceable ingredients and an impossible waiting list.

Xanadu? Is that even real? One of his perfect eyebrows has lifted.

It was a song. Never heard of the restaurant. I'll have to google it. I reach for my phone.

You'd accept Shangri-la? That's no better. Are you joking?

What? I think she's playing hard to get.

Wakanda? Oh, please. Is he grinning? There's a smile in his voice.

I'm liking her more and more.

And, I have to confess, he's becoming interesting. Good hands, good suit, good salary – those aren't enough for me, but a smile in the voice? A man with a sense of humor?

Timbuktu? That is real, but have you read the travel warnings? It might be our last dinner ever.

I imagine him getting on the plane and then realizing she's ditched him and not boarded. Solo dinner with a camel, inspecting its gnashers, while she sits at home polishing her new grin.

Santa's grotto in Lapland? That's not real either. How about Santa's grotto in Hamley's in Regent Street? We can eat in Chinatown after.

Cheapskate.

Santa's grotto in Tiffany's is fine.

OK, girl. Well-played. Bling before you swing.

Polished

And, yes, I'll get us a table at the Ivy after. I did his teeth too. He laughs, but it's not boastful. It's warm.

My teeth are fine, my dentist tells me, and I won't need to see her for another year, but I wonder if I shouldn't take off my travel fleece, straighten my blouse and cross over to my neighbor. I could ask his advice about a throbbing pain in a molar. Or just smile at him.

Topophobia

Maybe [*I/ you/ we*] will never belong,
maybe this world wasn't meant for a
stranger like [*me/ you/ us*]

Two Too Many Martinis

It was August in Houston. The air was a thick stew of humidity and pollution. The bar was dark as a moonless midnight and my state of mind. The a/c blew as icy as the love I once felt for Mr. A for asshole. He was the last in a long line of assholes, but he won a trophy, in the shape of a tiny flaccid dick, for being the first one to punch me.

Hi, Otto, gin martini, one olive, very, very cold.

Yes, ma'am. The grizzled bartender frowned at my swollen purple lip but stayed silent. He had worked here since 1985, when Aunt Betty drank away her nights on a stool, and had seen his share of bruised women. Aunt Betty was the only relative I had left in Houston. Hell, she was the only relative I had left who spoke to me. Unless you count my mom, who died when I was 27, and still gave me a piece of her mind now and then about taking better care of myself. *You should have learned from my bad example, Rae.*

My dad—her bad example—was god knew where and I didn't care. He was the first man to give me jack shit instead of love. Well, he gave me that phrase and taught me the art of swearing. When I tried swearing though, he gave me a hard slap. *Ladies don't do that.*

Two Too Many Martinis

I swiveled from Otto to the jukebox, shoved coins into it for “Goodbye, Earl,” “Crazy,” and “My Give A Damn’s Busted.” Busted, booted, and broke, as far as I was concerned. Sipping the martini and thinking about the next one, I made a list on the bar napkin of what I was over, so far over I planned to bury the napkin and mark the gravestone with “Get the hell away from me”:

1. Men who tell me I don’t know what I’m talking about
2. Men with excuses like *the perfume smell in my car is from when I took Mama’s Shitzu for a hair cut*
3. Men who come over every night for dinner, don’t clean up after, and then stay for breakfast
4. Men with a big old grin and a big old misogynistic streak
5. Men who like to “borrow” my credit card

When I was done, I looked toward the end of the bar where a woman with her hair piled in sprayed-stiff curls on top of her head sat alone. Bouffant hair? Was this a cosplay leftover? She had a Pearl beer bottle in front of her, cap popped off, no glass. As I watched, she took a swig, leaving a ring of cherry red lipstick on the bottle.

Two Too Many Martinis

When “Crazy” came on, Bouffant Woman came over to sit on the empty stool next to mine. *Hey, honey, you want some company?*

No. I pulled the martini glass close and looked deep into what was going to get me through the night and into a hangover that might make me forget Mr. A. Thing is I had a job I loved, plenty of money in the bank, and a pint-sized house that Aunt Betty rented to me. Alone sounded less like heartbreak and more like heaven the more I thought about it.

I can tell just by looking at you that you are here to soak your sad, sad heart in liquor and regret. It's the hot mess man who gave you that swollen lip who oughta be sorry. You hear me?

Who are you?

A woman who's had her share of hot mess men and is sorry she didn't give them all a hard kick a lot sooner. She nudged my stool with her bright yellow cowboy boot. She reminded me of my mama, the only one who wanted the best for me and told me so when I kept taking in every mangy stray male who came along.

Two Too Many Martinis

I sipped the last of the first martini and gestured to Otto for another. I looked at my new friend. *You want a drink? Another beer?*

Thanks, I'll have a Coke and keep you company.

I woke up the next morning with a stinking trash can on the floor next to the bed and a head that felt like a fire engine sounds. I lay there for a while, trying to recall last night, but it had rafted on down a rough gin river. Then I saw the napkin on the floor with the done and dead list. I smiled, stretched across the bed, and thought about how I could get used to taking up all the space I was entitled to.

When I made it to the kitchen for coffee, the pot was hot and a plate with two Shipley donuts and a greasy sausage and cheese kolache sat nearby. I read the note written on a piece of junk mail, held down by a bottle of ibuprofen, “Dear Rae, Give up the assholes and maybe lay off the booze for a while. Love, Patsy.”

Actaeon's Diana

Well,
what was I to do?
The foolish boy barged so
blindly through the forest
of pines and cypresses right
into my secret grotto. Bathing in
the cool crystal waters in the heat
of the day and feeling completely at
ease with the world, with the fresh
disturbance suddenly I was very
exposed. I suppose I could
possibly have forgiven
him or even in more
lax laid-back times
have flashed a warm
welcoming, come right
over and join us, smile.
Instead, anxious, incited
by the effrontery of those
astounded eyes eyeballing
me, I flung handfuls of
water at them, said a
few words. In a jiffy,
spreading antlers grew
from his brow, hooves
evolved rapidly from
feet. He flew off.
Of course hearing
later that he'd
been ripped to
bits by dogs
I did feel
a little
sorrow

A Chance Encounter

As José was leaving the store, he noticed an older woman in back of him. He opened the door and stepped aside, allowing her to pass through before him. She hesitated ... before accepting his offer. Once outside, she turned.

“Do you live in this area?” she smiled.

“Yes,” José told her. “I have a home nearby.”

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“I was born in Cuba, but I live in Miami and here.”

“You’re a very handsome man,” she said, cocking her head on an angle. “You may give me a kiss,” and she offered José her cheek.

“Can I give you a kiss?” she asked.

José held out his cheek onto which she gently placed her lips.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “I’m engaged.” She turned and slowly walked to her car.

The Werewolf

It was in the brief moments after midnight when one day silently merged with another. I took my dog for a walk to the nearby forest. We walked slowly and enjoyed each other's company. My dog was already old, sixteen years of age. Everybody says it's a good age for a dog. I disagree. The dog's soul remains young, but its body is frail with age.

Our forest had a small path with lanterns, but only for a hundred metres or so. It transitioned from park into forest very smoothly. It almost seemed that the path was unfinished. As I walked, the lamps suddenly disappeared. And then the pavement ended, so the path became narrow and made of slightly compacted earth and sand.

And then there was no path at all. Just the trees.

I sensed a peculiar presence at the end of the path. I wasn't afraid. I didn't have anything of value—only my life and my dog. And even if to me my pet was something that I valued more than even life, for other people an old, slightly sick mongrel didn't seem valuable.

'Hello,' said the Presence.

'Good evening,' I said back. Good manners never hurt.

'Just walking a dog, eh?' asked the Presence.

'Seems so,' I answered.

'Pity—for the dog. I'm going to eat you,' said the Presence.

The Werewolf

‘And why is that?’ I asked.

‘Because it’s my nature,’ said the Presence with low, sharp voice.

‘Maybe you don’t have to eat me on the spot?’ I asked.

‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe I can invite you to a late dinner? I have some food in my place. I can share.’

‘I don’t suppose that you have human flesh?’ asked the Presence.

‘Not really, no,’ I answered.

‘Pity. I can eat only meat.’

‘I have some.’

‘Maybe so... but, you see...’

The Presence hesitated.

‘Do you see me?’ asked the Presence.

‘No.’

‘Let’s walk to the light so you can take a look at me.’

After a moment of hesitation, I turned my back and started walking down the path. I didn’t even think of escaping. I was too curious.

It seemed that the Presence thought the same.

‘Why aren’t you running?’ asked the Presence.

‘I figured you’re probably going to outrun me anyway. But...’

The Werewolf

‘But?’

‘But the real reason is that I won’t leave my dog, especially not alone here at night. And he’s a bit old, so he can’t run quickly enough.’

‘You could carry him.’

‘I could, but he’s a bit heavy. Also, he doesn’t like being carried. And I don’t want to cause him any discomfort.’

‘That’s odd.’

‘Maybe. But I just love my dog.’

The Presence got silent.

‘Fine, you can now turn,’ said the Presence.

I turned. I saw a hybrid between a human and a wolf. Tall posture, about two meters high. Fur in the colour of chocolate and cinnamon, with amber reflections where the lantern’s light kissed it.

But his eyes were just a void. I could stare at them endlessly. But I didn’t think he’d like it.

And the rest of him looked just like a regular werewolf. You’ve probably seen dozens of them in TV shows, games or movies. Maybe even hundreds, if you’re into that kind of stuff.

The silence lengthened, so I decided to say something.

‘You’re a werewolf,’ I said. ‘So... you, as a werewolf, can eat only human flesh?’

The Werewolf

‘Not really. I have to eat meat. And that’s all. But I’ve decided to eat only human flesh.’

‘May I ask why?’

The werewolf stretched.

‘You see, I’m a well-educated werewolf. And I know that meat is associated with a lot of bad stuff. I’m afraid of the climate change... ozone hole... not being ecological enough. And my organism, which is forced to eat only meat, is a curse.’

‘I see. Did you try eating something else?’

He was a bit embarrassed. If he was a human, I think he would blush.

‘I tried to eat vegetables.’

‘And?’

‘Worst stomach disorder in my life,’ he said reluctantly.

‘Sorry to hear that.’

‘So,’ he added, ‘I decided to eat only humans. It’s a perfectly sane decision, don’t you think? This way I’m not to be blamed for the pollution and the cruelty of the meat industry. It’s the opposite, because with every human I eat carbon footprints gets slightly smaller.’

‘I admire that,’ I said.

‘Even though I’m going to eat you?’

The Werewolf

‘Well, it seems my death is going to be in the name of the noble cause. I don’t want to die, but for what it’s worth I think it’ll be better that way.’

‘And what about your dog?’ asked werewolf.

‘I’m sorry to abandon him. But you’re a werewolf. He’s a dog. You’re distant cousins. I think he’ll be in good hands... sorry, paws... not for long, I’m afraid, because he’s a bit old.’

‘Oh,’ said werewolf. ‘Didn’t you think of putting him to sleep?’

‘Why would I? Because he’s old? It’s not a real reason. As long as he walks, eats, and enjoys life he should be alive.’

Werewolf nodded.

‘I decided I’m not going to eat you after all,’ he said.

‘That’s okay. Don’t feel obligated.’

‘I’m not. You seem like a good person.’

‘I can’t judge that.’

‘But I can. See you around. Hope to talk to you soon.’

The werewolf left.

I wandered through the forest with my dog. I thought how the werewolf turned out to be a wonderful chap. And he was so right about the carbon footprint and ecology.

The Werewolf

The next day, I started to plan on taking out some of my neighbours. My dog needs to eat meat, but it could be human as well. And I'm not going to support the cruelty of the meat industry.

And I heard that human flesh tastes good. Maybe I should try some too?

the kindness of strangers in the city

there is nowhere left
to be alone in anymore

the tenements are full
parks all dammed
with men and all the men
they struggle with to live

we do our best
avoiding intimacy, cringe
when shoulders brush
in cattle-car closeness

if anyone I know saw me
like this, sidewalk sobbing
they'd reach and I'd scream
don't touch me

no one here would dare
we all pretend we're not here

painful realizations

It was an interaction that no one should think twice about. It wasn't even an interaction that I was a part of, I was simply a standerby. As I stepped along the sidewalk, a brisk pace, I glanced over at a woman on the phone. She was clearly stressed, pulling her hair back before letting it fall onto her back. She was dressed in a sweater and a black skirt, dark tights and leather.. no, pleather ankle boots, along with a scarf and a beret. I'm captivated by her. I can tell that her conversation has been going on for a while, weighing heavy on her small frame. It's a very personal conversation, she seems agitated with the other caller. Despite the many conversations fleeting by, as she passes me, one sentence rings clearly through my head. "I can't keep making you happy at my own expense."

I nearly stop in my tracks hearing it, but I continue walking as the streets are extremely busy. It repeats in my head countless times, playing like a broken record in my brain. Everything I've been struggling with recently suddenly falls into place at the simplest of things. I pull my phone out, staying aware of my surroundings, and message him hesitantly. It's terrifying, what I'm about to do. Six years of my life, and I'm throwing it away because of what? A sentence I heard on the sidewalk? This has been an open-ended conversation for ages, and it's

painful realizations

high time I end it, finally, despite my fears. He knows how I feel and I know how he feels, but we've dealt with it long enough. I can't spend the rest of my life with him, not like this. I suck in a breath, squeezing my eyes shut as I send it. The thing I've been searching for this entire time. The statement I could never put into words, that someone seems to have had figured out all along. The solution that will send my life into its new chapter.

“I can't keep making you happy at my own expense.”

Strangers

You're sitting with someone you love,
or once loved,
and his words punish you.

(I wondered at your red eyes when I came in the café.)

He leans forward,
emphasizing his speech.
Your head is in your hands.

I wish I could touch your shoulder,
offer a smile
and ease your pain.

We all deserve that much kindness,
but as a stranger, I can't.

Sitting across the café, I can't even approach you.
People you know have that freedom,
but strangers are forbidden such expressions.

You've both left now,
and perhaps he's driven you from his thoughts.
But I won't be able to.
I cradle my mug of coffee,
knowing I'll spend the night emersed in your suffering,
frustrated at the invisible barriers that keep us all apart.

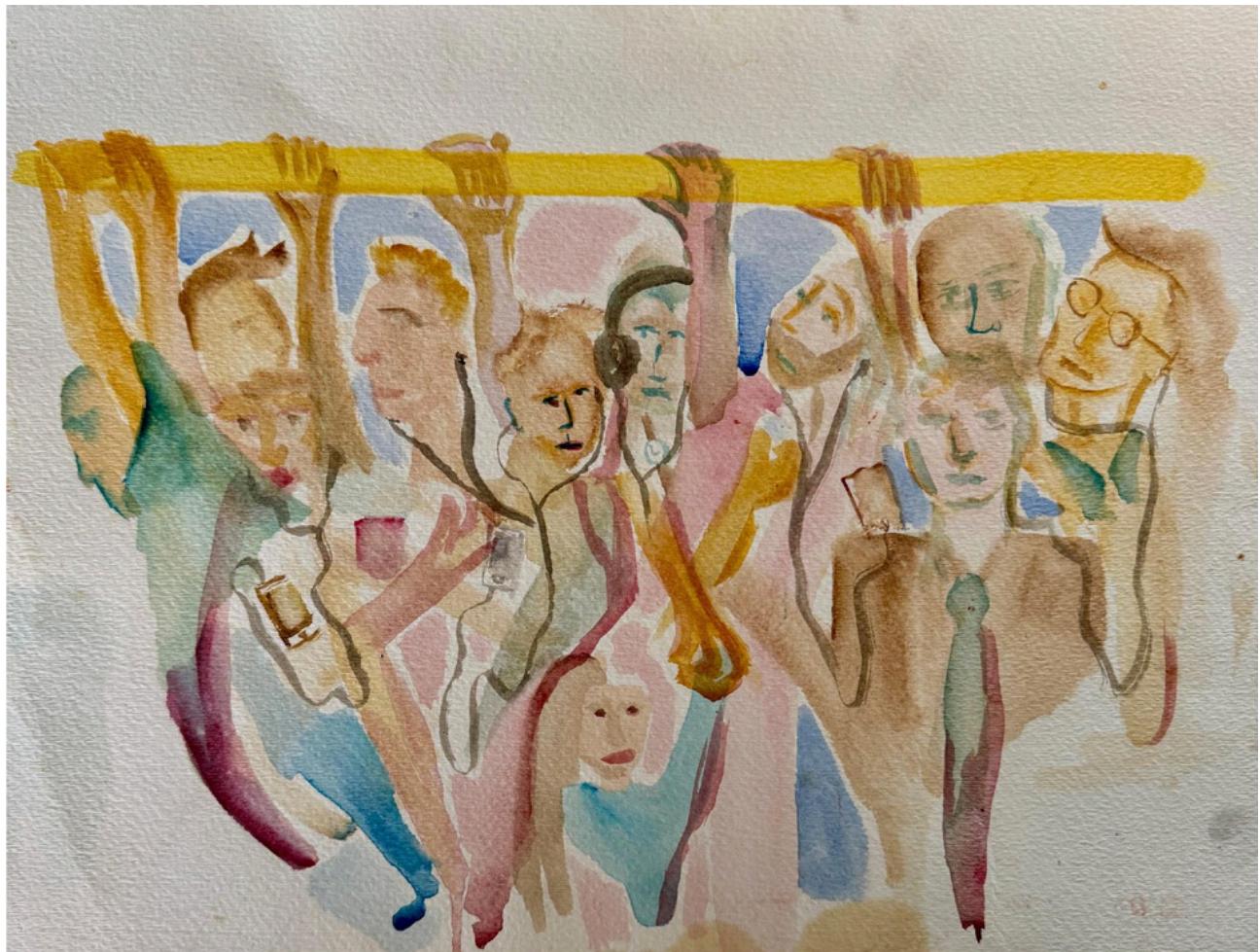
The Break In

I parked in our garage, grabbed the grocery bag and headed for the house. I still had enough time to take Elly for a walk before returning to work. As I approached, I noticed the back door was open. I looked up into the kitchen and saw a dark-haired young woman staring blankly at me. Was she part of the cleaning crew from the day before? Had they forgotten something? My eyes dropped from her to the door handle. The wood was splintered above and below the lock. I heard the rise and fall of voices deeper in the house. Realization dawned slowly. I backed up a step out of her line of sight. A metallic taste filled my mouth. I had to get away. I dug in my purse for my phone and dialled 911 as I backed out of the gate at the side of the house, terrified they would come after me. I watched my backdoor, wondering where Elly was. Did she get out? Is she hurt? I stood on the sidewalk and spoke quietly, urgently into my hand as if I had a secret. The woman I saw in the kitchen walked out with one of our reusable shopping bags. It looked heavy. What had she taken? Our computer? I shouted STOP! but she ran to the back fence and jumped over it. A tall, lanky man in a beige windbreaker came out next. He had a bulging pillowcase. He didn't run but took long, confident strides to the back fence--like he had every right to be there. STOP! I followed them along the yard to the back alley, seeing where they went, and reported their movement to the phone. I yelled again and followed them down the alley though the voice in my hand told me not to. They were getting away! I could feel the burn in my throat as if I'd already

The Break In

thrown up. I shuffle-ran in short heels, breathlessly begging for help, weighed down with the shopping bag, keeping the voice updated. But they were too far ahead. I turned the corner at the end of the alley, and they were gone, evaporated. I returned to our house with a warning not to go inside. Two cruisers pulled up. *Please, find my dog.* The police stormed our home, and minutes later, an officer came out with our cocker spaniel safe in his arms.

Alone Surrounded by Bodies



Dissolution

It started with a flicker,
a spark, quicksilver in the dark.
I held my breath, as if stillness
could tether light,
could make it linger,
could turn a moment into permanence.

But moments aren't meant for keeping.
They slip, dissolve like a sugar cube
in a tide of bitter coffee,
leaving you with the aftertaste of
almosts and not-quites.

I saw promise in that first glance,
a glimmer tucked behind a half-smile—
like a postcard sunset
for a place you'll never visit.
You were a bright thread
woven into my gray,
just long enough
to fray the edges when you pulled away.

Dissolution

It's cruel how quickly
the day can betray you,
turn sunlight into shadow,
leave you standing
with empty hands and open wounds,
blinking away the burn
of a disappearing dream.

The spark is gone,
but its ghost lingers—
a faint glow behind my eyes,
a bruise too tender to press.

I tell myself it wasn't real,
just a trick of the light,
a borrowed warmth
never meant to stay.

But my hands ache
from trying so hard to hold it.

Squashed Ambitions

When the weather's nice and the ground is dry, I'll sit on the bank of the creek behind my house and watch the water. Sometimes, I'll smoke a joint and blow smoke downstream. If there's no wind, the smoke will hover, spreading out to dance like morning fog. I leave my phone behind, and at last, it's quiet.

The last time I went there, I didn't bring my kit. I laid back on the grass and took in the world, dry and sober. The sun moved through the leaves and tickled my closed eyelids.

Something tapped at my shoulder, and I opened my eyes. A wild squash was laying next to me, dappled yellow. Its vine was still attached, trailing back into the undergrowth.

“You’re in my spot.”

I have never spoken with a squash before, and for a moment I thought I had brought my weed with me after all.

“Sorry?”

“You’re in my spot. I need that sun.”

“Technically, your leaves need the sun.”

“Technically, you don’t need the sun at all.”

I opened my mouth to reply, to tell the squash that it was being rather rude, but the squash was wiggling expectantly, rubbing its bulbous base against my elbow. Shrugging, I moved aside, and the squash rolled into my spot.

Squashed Ambitions

“Thanks.”

“Sure.”

The squash reached out a vine, wrapping it around my finger.

“Is this all you do?”

“Mostly.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It is.”

After that, we sat in silence and let the stream roll by.

Gardening on the Observation Ward

They don't know what is wrong with us. Weeds or flowers? That is why we are here in the untamed garden. Under the microscope. Blood drawn. Cuttings sent down to some basement where they lose all things. The ivied tubes growing into us. Rooting us to the hospital walls.

There is a woman across from me. Not enough water, lack of sunlight, withering away. I ask my sister to bring her the lipstick she can't find. She puts it on, smiles, but it can't cover the decay. We'll be okay she says but some things never bloom again.

The wild garden needs to be pared back. They cut some of us free and plant us in other wards. We are all strangers but we are the same: genus unknown. When they can name us, then we will part.

Butterbean

I wonder what Butterbean makes of me. He may be distressed to know how much I make of him, to say nothing of his name, which I could not explain if he put a pistol to my head.

But he would do no such thing, because he is a meek legume employed as a postal carrier. He circles Summit Ridge without leaving footprints. He is high in fiber and humility. If you make eye contact, he recedes entirely into his mustache.

Butterbean looks like my uncle, although this can be said of a solid 67% of male humans. I have encountered Uncle Jeffreys of every race, ranging in age from eleven to ninety. They notarize documents and bag Cocoa Krispies. They run for Congress and deliver my *Real Simple*. I once caught Butterbean by the petunias and contemplated congratulating him on being my favorite of the Uncle Jeffreys. But he caught my eye and hid inside his mustache, so I let him escape.

Beholding Butterbean for six years, I have collected certainties. He has an IQ of over 180, although he has never been tested and considers himself average. He considers it an honor to be average. Butterbean dislikes when television characters make fun of each other. He keeps a notebook of amusing word origins. He was never big on sweets, not even as a kid. He always gave a friend the fondant rose on the corner of his own birthday cake. He does like Fig Newtons.

Butterbean

Butterbean gives squirrels a wide berth so they can go about their business uninterrupted. He knows, as well as I do, that they have been genetically modified to eliminate fear. They have been altered at the molecular level by my upstairs neighbor, who feeds them vulgar vegan hot dogs and ziggurats of pretzel nuggets. The squirrels are reverse Beatitudes with boa tails. Blessed are the vain, the brazen, the gluttons and imperialists. Butterbean knows the squirrels are despots, but he could not live with the thought of scaring them.

I wonder what Butterbean makes of me, because I make his job harder. If our mailboxes were not so small, I would wrap him a sleeve of Fig Newtons for Christmas. Butterbean's satchel sags with my correspondence. We are expected to stack our outgoing mail on top of the box, so I present a rainbow every Monday morning.

My upstairs neighbor comments on "all them Valentines of yours," but Butterbean knows they are birthday cards. There are pink envelopes with cat stickers for Hermine Smucker and oversized mint mailers for Pappy O'Neal. Butterbean has never seen a flag stamp in my heap. He is the only one who notices that I use manatees, and Pete Seegers, and Waterfalls of The Pacific Northwest.

When I am as honest as a birthday, I want Butterbean to notice. I want him to know that the hermit of condo 33 has purple veins across the

Butterbean

continent. I want him to count the incoming cards around March 17th and realize that I am loved.

I work from home and choose “writing in my sweatpants” over “socializing with God’s children” ninety-nine times out of a hundred. I send my cats to the window to confirm my upstairs neighbor isn’t coming before running down the recycling. I email love across the landscape until I am breathless, and then I send birthday cards.

My mother worries that postage expenditures will delay my retirement. My mother scolds me for sending her so many dancing hamsters and “just because” daffodils. Butterbean knows my mother’s legal name is Grace, but her card name is Mamalula. I hope Butterbean has never seen anyone else address cards to a Mamalula. He and I both know I am filling the planet’s quota.

I believe we may be made of similar fibers. Butterbean is much alone but not lonely. I believe he stops what he is doing to dance when he hears Pitbull’s song “Fireball,” so long as he happens to be in his kitchen. He has a favorite pair of sweat socks. He believes he is the plainest brown sparrow in the yard. He considers it an honor to be in the yard. He sings along with on-hold music, making up the lyrics as he goes, so long as the box is locked.

Once, Butterbean caught me wearing a rhinestone shamrock on my jean jacket. Just as he began to recede, he smiled.

Birds of Paradise Lost

This week has been a time-warped slumber, the end of a week in Haiti that feels like a year.

A hushed peace has fallen on us, missionaries who arrived with malaria pills and gifts for the orphanage. We explore plantain jungles with lush plantings of sweet potato vines, beans, avocados, mangos and papayas. Along the way, we pass horses and goats with sharp bones protruding at their hips, tied to trees, no water in sight. We see bone-thin puppies and people living under tarps, boiling milk on open fires. Everywhere there is a lack, a deficit, a need. Yet the puppies wag their tails, and the people never stop singing.

Up on the mountaintop under a mango tree, our translator is turning our attention to something in his hands. A sack of seeds. In his French Creole-thick accent, he tells us how the millet seeds provide nourishment for a starved nation.

“Do you know this seed in America?” We clutch our bags, bow our heads, kick the dirt. No one wants to be the one saying the words. We feed it to our birds.

His eyes are kind. Full of grace. The moment is unbearable.

I cry on the ride down the mountain. I do not lift my camera once to take a single photo of the emerald velvety folds in the hills or the

Birds of Paradise Lost

diamonds dancing on the turquoise water. And of course we sing all the way.

Today, as I watch the birds from my porch, I remember Haiti. The thwack thwack of women washing clothes in the river with one shared bar of soap. Children with jaundice and fever, no medicine, braiding our hair, singing.

I hear wings beating furiously, two purple finches watching me from the branch of a tulip poplar as I lift the heavy bag, spilling seed onto the railing as I refill empty feeders. I watch them watching me. I remember Haiti—the dignity, the suffering, and the glory of it all. And then I feed the birds.

The Echo of a Moment

The train slid into the station with a metallic sigh, its doors hissing open. Amelia stepped inside, shaking raindrops from her coat. The early evening rush had passed, leaving the car sparsely populated. She took a seat by the window, her reflection faint against the dark glass. The train lurched forward, the rhythmic clatter filling the silence.

She pulled a worn notebook from her bag, fingers tracing the frayed edges. The pages were filled with half-finished stories and fleeting thoughts attempts to capture the weight of moments that often slipped away unnoticed. The city lights blurred past, each glowing window a tiny life she'd never know.

Across the aisle, a man in a navy peacoat flipped through a weathered paperback. His brow furrowed in concentration, and every so often, he underlined a passage. Amelia found herself watching him, drawn to the quiet intensity in his expression. He seemed at ease, as if the world outside the train existed only in passing, while the book in his hands held something eternal.

Suddenly, he looked up. Their eyes met.

Amelia quickly glanced down at her notebook, heart quickening. When she dared to look again, he was smiling a small, curious smile that felt like a secret shared between strangers. She managed a nervous nod

The Echo of a Moment

before burying her face in the page.

The train rumbled on, the stations emptying more of their passengers. The man's presence became a quiet weight, grounding the space between them. Amelia felt it tugging at her, a strange gravity she couldn't explain.

A sharp jolt shook the train, and her pen slipped from her fingers, rolling across the floor. She reached for it just as he did. Their hands brushed — a fleeting warmth.

“Here,” he said, holding the pen out to her. His voice was soft, like a page-turning.

“Thanks.” Amelia tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She hesitated before asking, “What are you reading?”

He held up the book. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

“Any good?” she asked.

He considered the question, thumb resting on the spine. “Depends. Do you believe life is shaped by grand choices or tiny moments?”

Amelia blinked. “I... I’m not sure.”

The train slowed. Her stop. She stood, gripping her bag. The man watched her, something unreadable in his eyes.

“Maybe both,” she said as the doors slid open. “Thanks again.”

The Echo of a Moment

She stepped onto the platform, feeling the pull of the train as it continued into the night. The encounter left her unsettled as if a thread had been cut before it could be woven into the fabric of her life.

A week later, Amelia sat in her favorite café, the rain tapping softly against the window. She sipped her coffee, flipping through her notebook. The words felt empty as if they belonged to someone else.

The door chimed. She glanced up – and froze.

There he was. Peacoat, paperback, and all. He ordered a coffee, then turned, scanning the room. Their eyes met, and he hesitated before making his way over.

“Mind if I sit?” he asked.

She gestured to the chair. “Sure.”

He set his book on the table. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Small city,” she replied.

They sat in silence for a moment. Finally, she asked, “So, grand choices or tiny moments?”

He chuckled. “Still undecided. You?”

She thought for a moment. “Tiny moments. They sneak up on you.”

He nodded. “Like catching someone’s pen on a train.”

“Exactly.”

The Echo of a Moment

They talked until the sky darkened, weaving stories from their lives. He was Oliver – a teacher, a traveler, a collector of small moments. She told him about her writing, her search for meaning in fleeting things.

As the café emptied, they exchanged numbers. A promise of coffee. Maybe more.

In the weeks that followed, they drifted in and out of each other's lives. Coffee turned into walks through the park, long conversations beneath the changing leaves. Oliver spoke of cities he'd visited, of students who taught him more than he taught them. Amelia read him fragments of her stories, the ones she'd never shown anyone.

She began writing differently. Her words grew bolder as if his presence had opened a door inside her. The weight of the past, the fear of what came next – they didn't press so heavily anymore. She found herself noticing things she'd overlooked before: the way light pooled on cobblestones after rain, the hush of the city before dawn.

One evening, as they stood on the riverbank, watching the lights shimmer on the water, Oliver turned to her. “You ever think about the moments that shape us?”

“All the time,” she said softly. “I think they’re the ones we don’t see coming.”

The Echo of a Moment

He smiled. "Like meeting a stranger on a train."

She laughed, the sound light in the cool night air. "Exactly."

As they walked home, their hands brushed. This time, neither pulled away.

Years later, Amelia would remember that rainy evening in the café as the first chapter of their story. She'd write about it the chance encounter, the brief interaction, the quiet moments that changed everything. She would write about how Oliver taught her to embrace uncertainty, to savor the weight of each fleeting second.

One day, long after their paths had diverged, Amelia would find herself on another train, notebook in hand. The city lights would blur past, just as they had that first night. And she would remember Oliver the man who had shown her that even the smallest moments could echo through a lifetime.

She would smile, pen poised over the page, and begin to write.

Because sometimes, the smallest moments echo the loudest.

to the straight guy

to the straight guy who handed me a note asking me to suck his dick

the crosses tattooed by your tear ducts
are perhaps cries for help
and if life made you fearful to be yourself
then i am sorry

i watch you from behind my computer
screen as you check Facebook
wondering what tipped you off to
my queerness

was it the pink hair
it was the pink hair wasn't it
my painted nails too maybe
my jaw unsettles
lips part
i'm in shock still

on another day someone hands me
a bible verse:

Luke 10:18
18) He replied, “I saw Satan
Fall like lightening from
heaven.”

to the straight guy

and i think of you again
why was this given to me
to reassure me
threaten me
ambiguity strikes reason on the chin
and i give up on figuring out why

all i think is poor angel
kind of like Paradise Lost
and it is your skinny frame
instead that tumbles from an extraordinary
height into a deep chasm

i empathize
and cringe
i tear up that note you gave me
and watch your ask wither away
right into the trash

End of the Line

The train was heaving with people. It was heading far out of London on a Friday evening. After about five stops, the carriages grew emptier. A couple more and she could finally breathe. She took her hair out of its large clip, set her bag on the floor and took a deep breath. That's when she caught him looking at her. As soon as their eyes met, he looked away and his cheeks flushed red. He had been looking at her for the entire journey, despite the sea of bodies that always seemed to separate them. They had been taking the same train for months, boarding and alighting at the same stops. He usually avoided the carriages where she sat, anxious not to look at her too much.

There was so much he liked about her. She was striking, though it was obvious she didn't realise it. She always seemed to be smiling in a small way, unlike the rest of the commuters, faces drawn and closed. He decided today was the day, he had to finally speak to her. What did he have to lose? His dignity on every train he got for the foreseeable future? But on the other hand, he could lose her - or the idea of her - if someone else came along. "I like your scarf," he said, gesturing towards the green checkered scarf that weaved through the handles of her bag on the floor. "Oh, thanks," she smiled at him, reaching for her phone.

End of the Line

He settled back into his seat, his heart hammering in his chest. His face flushed again, uncontrollably. There was nothing he could do; the moment had passed. “I like your scarf, too,” he heard her say. She was referring to the charcoal grey scarf that his grandmother had made for him. It was entirely nondescript, but maybe that was the point of her comment.

He thinks now of their scarves. The years they spent travelling to and from each other’s houses, hanging on bannisters, lying on bedroom floors. He wishes he could go back to that first day, the first time he spoke to her. Perhaps he never would have commented on her scarf, and they would have stayed as they were: two people on a train, heading to the same destination. Perhaps that would have been easier. Yes, that would have been much easier.

Fifteen Minutes

You never feel safe / not quite / but safe enough to do this walk / through this wood / after dropping off your daughter / this is a safe city / you tell yourself

corridoring through golden beeches / veils of moss / draped from branches / *The Last List of Mabel Beaumont* on Audible

springing towards you / an Alsatian, off the lead / the owner / hair a nest of white / 'Morning' / you breathe out

nature has the power / to decrease stress levels / the *Guardian* told you

you think about / your daughter / safe at school / you try not to think / about the girl / her age / who died / playing British Bulldog / was her name Freya? / at school / where you used to live

fungi in the leaf litter / a clay-coloured body / of water / fifteen minutes of solitude can induce calmness / said the researchers

a sudden scrawl of black / in the sky / mourners / leaving a funeral

a man

walking towards you

no one else here

in your ear / Mabel says / 'It felt like something had shifted infinitesimally'

a violescent shirt / an electric-green laminate / he is so close / you could touch / he could / no one would hear

'You're a woman' / says Mabel / 'everyone's interested in you'

neon awareness / no eye-contact / chiselled aftershave / for a second / you are everything / to each other / and then / again

strangers

Note: 'The Last List of Mabel Beaumont' is a novel by Laura Pearson (Boldwood, 2023)

Down the Rabbit Hole

The thick scent of sandalwood envelops you, and you cough, eyes watering, but do not falter. All around you, people are tittering, laughing, but you pay them no heed. Of course they will laugh, will stand around and heckle and mock. It is expected of them. This, too, is part of the ritual, just as much as the offerings of fruit and flowers that you left on the altar.

This is your year. They cannot take that from you. This year, the Goddess will fulfil your prayers at last. This year she will finally hear your pleas, you who have been her most faithful of devotees, and you will no longer be alone.

“I see it,” you breathe, as the smoke takes form, and you do, suddenly. It is a rabbit, and the path it hops down is marked by moonlight throwing the world into harsh relief. The mid-autumn night is muggy and humid on your skin, but you find yourself shivering as you walk forward, taking the first step that will put you on the path to your destiny.

It’s the story that they tell all the children, when they are young enough to still believe in magic. If you pay your dues to the Goddess on the Moon, the incense smoke from your joss sticks will lead you to your destiny. Your true love, some say. Be it a glimpse, or even a chance meeting, the Goddess has never steered anyone wrong yet. In fact, everyone you know has a smoke-walking story, even your parents. Your mother had walked

Down the Rabbit Hole

as a young girl flush with the romantic whimsy of adolescence; your father, as a young man yearning for deeper companionship. They had found each other, then, at the park they'd both seen in their visions. Love at first sight, they had told you.

You had scoffed at their stories in your youth. What use did you have for a soulmate? But it has been so long, and what childhood whimsy had not accomplished the crushing reality of adulthood has. You are weary, and your solitude eats at your bones.

The other festival-goers cheer, and someone slaps you hard on the back as you set off, joss sticks held firmly in your hands, but you pay them no heed. Everything dies away as you press onward. Your thoughts are far away, even as the rabbit's path twists and turns its way through the gardens. Somewhere, at the end of this walk, someone is waiting for you.

You wonder what he'll look like, when you find him. Will he have fair skin, black hair? Will he be tall? Will his face be sharp or round? Will he be worth the walk, the wait? No—that's silly. Of course he will. He's your true love, after all. Your fated partner. Your other half.

You could walk forever, if you needed to.

The rabbit passes under an arch, decorated with chrysanthemums and lit lanterns. You follow after.

Down the Rabbit Hole

Abruptly, the smoke vanishes, and you find yourself—
Alone.

Alone, again, as you always are. You’re in a different part of the gardens than you were when you started smoke-walking, the flowers here more subdued but just as sweet-smelling, and the revelry and laughter are distant and muted now. Panic rises to your throat as you whirl around, looking for someone, *anyone*—but there is no one, and you are alone, save for the night music of the cicadas and crickets performing their evening arias. There is no one, nothing, not even a snatch of memory or a half-remembered whisper.

You sink to your knees, defeated.

What cruel tricks the Goddess plays, to give you hope and then take it away again. What does it mean, that even the Goddess has forsaken you? That despite all of your prayers, she has looked within your heart to see the bitter rot that festers there, the desolate aching emptiness of taking chance after chance at seeking true companionship but finding only that same old detachment again and again and again?

You are alone.

Perhaps you always will be.

“I’m sorry,” someone says, placing their hand on your shoulder, and you look up from your misery to see an unfamiliar face.

Down the Rabbit Hole

She offers you her hand, and you take it, pulling yourself to your feet. There are calluses on her soft palms. Warmth lingers on your fingertips as she pulls away.

“She brought me here last year, too,” she says. “Or rather, her rabbit did. I saw the smoke take its shape, clear as day, but when I followed it here it jumped behind a tree and disappeared.”

You take her in again—tall, slender, fair of face. Her dark hair is thick, and her darker eyes are kind. She is certainly not young—neither are you—but neither is she old enough that men looking for love would pass her by. She could have anyone, if she wanted.

“I probably should have seen it coming,” she continues, oblivious to your scrutiny. “No one I asked saw a rabbit when they went smoke-walking. It was probably a sign. So I decided, this year, that I’d wait out here, in case she did it to someone else. Misery loves company, right?”

In the warm lantern light, the self-deprecating grin your new friend shoots at you holds new promise. Your gaze cannot help but be drawn to the deep rouge of her lips.

Something inside you trembles, anticipatory.

“Shall we head back to the festival?” she asks. “I have it on good authority that cassia wine is good for drowning your sorrows.”

“Why not?” you shrug, smiling up at her. Just this once more, you decide, you’ll keep the faith.

If nothing else, it is nice to have a friend who understands.

A Man and his Midnight

The man on the bus
cradles a taxidermied crow
in the small of a child's backpack,
unzipping it every few minutes,
as if checking it hasn't flown away.

He tells me "her name was Midnight,"
his fingers brushing the feathers like a prayer
"She used to say things at night
all birds say strange things at night"
and I uttered an agreeable *ah-ha*—
as if this was common knowledge.

My stop flashes red.
I prepare myself to get off—
jacket buttoned, beanie on;
and he—he hands me
a black feather.

Idris's Touch

My heart raced the moment I stepped inside, a mix of excitement and nervousness that made the air feel electric. Idris—yes, that was his name—stood by the doorway, his calm eyes and gentle smile instantly drawing me in. It was Valentine's Day, a day meant for love, yet nothing could have prepared me for the quiet magic of that evening.

The house was softly lit, and a warm, inviting scent of freshly baked cake led me deeper into the room. Idris had baked the cake himself. When he said, “Don't be shy,” his voice was soft and reassuring, easing the tremble in my voice as I accepted his unspoken invitation to join him.

We settled in a cozy corner where the low hum of conversation mingled with the soft tunes playing in the background. Between shared smiles and gentle laughter, each word exchanged felt like a small secret being shared in the dark. As we ate the delicious cake, the taste of warmth and care lingered on my tongue, a perfect complement to the tender moment.

Then, as if the mood demanded a deeper note, Idris's tone changed slightly. He confided that his father had passed away just a week before. Despite the grief that shadowed his eyes, there was a quiet strength in his calm delivery—a strength that taught me about resilience in the face of loss.

Idris's Touch

That evening, I found more than just a kind soul in the company of a stranger. In Idris, I saw a blend of joy, sorrow, and hope that transformed a simple Valentine's Day into an unexpected lesson on life and healing. Even as the night ended, the memory of his soft voice and honest eyes stayed with me, a gentle reminder that every encounter holds the power to change us.

Day 97

This woman is kind, I think, as she hands me a cup of steaming hot green tea. We talk about our feelings in the middle of exchanging recipes. It's easy to talk to her. I feel like I've known her forever.

I say something funny. Because when she laughs, her grey eyes crinkle and I like seeing that. She feels tired often these days. Me too, I think, looking down at the swelling in my feet. I can't wait for winter to be over. *But you used to love winter!* She says it with a sad smile, and I wonder how she's able to read my thoughts. My eyes droop, and she notices immediately. *Come, let's get you to bed.* She holds out her hand, and as I give it to her, I wonder why I'm letting a stranger into my home, into my bedroom. When she starts to tuck me into bed, pulling out my favorite blanket – the one with purple crocus flowers, I stop her. I don't know you, I say. Why are you here inside my house? Tears fall freely out of her eyes, the same eyes I find so comforting, and mid-sob she attempts to reassure me. *I know. I know, sweetheart. But I know you. I'm your mom.*

In the Photo, I am Smiling

On the wall, near the ceiling, a white plastic box emits scent into the room. I suppose it's necessary, considering the lack of windows and the dead body lying in the centre of the space, but it's too sweet, cloying even. It's almost as oppressive as the silence in here, both are as unwelcome as they are unnatural. Much like the sight of you, led there like that, not acknowledging my presence in the slightest.

So I have broken the silence and have begun jabbering on at you, not in spite of your indifference, but because of it. I have slid a photograph of myself into the pocket of your shirt and bombarded you with words, probably far too many of them. And yet, they will never be enough. I have held your hand, cold and spongy, within my own. Stroked your forehead and laid kisses upon its icy surface.

But I have not cried, not in here. I did that in the taxi on the way to the airport and in the fast food place while I chewed and swallowed something I didn't recall ordering. I did it on the plane with my headphones on as the man in the seat beside mine tried his best to ignore me and the hostesses brought me extra bags of snacks and bottles of water. I have done it at inconvenient moments every day since. At the till in the supermarket when the nice lady smiled at me. In the department store when the shop assistant asked if she could help me and I had to tell her that I needed something smart and black, because none of my clothes were suitable for a funeral.

In the Photo, I am Smiling

But you will never know that, because I didn't tell you. You still think I am strong and brave. Oh nonsense, what am I saying? I have no idea what you thought of me or even if you knew me at all. I barely knew you, and you have answered none of the questions I asked you today. Not that you can be blamed for that. I should have asked you all of them at the appropriate time, not now.

Here I go again, crying. Face crumpling inwards and tears falling without a care for who sees them as I walk past the rows of shops. I have become accustomed to people's reactions; the side step away, or the quick aversion of the eyes, the mouth hanging open with curiosity, or the look of pitying understanding. The last is the worst. I do not want to be seen or understood. I want to believe that no one else could possibly have ever felt this wretched. I want this suffering to be mine, not to be shared with the woman in the leather jacket who just passed me a tissue and a look of companionship.

I thought I had stayed too long with you in that room, but on the contrary, I left too soon. I would like nothing more than to come back, but it's too late now. I left you there in the dark, in that sickly sweet space, with nothing but the echoes of my ramblings and an efficient funeral director who couldn't pronounce your name properly for company.

And all I can think about is the life you lived that I'll never know, the

In the Photo, I am Smiling

parts of you that you saved for other people, people that I'll never know. All those versions of you that I'll never know.

I spoke so many words into the still air of that awful room, I let them fall into the coffin with you, pad out the spaces around your body and coat your carefully chosen clothes with a fine layer of what ifs, of reasons and excuses, of my truths.

But I will never be satisfied.

I want to bang on the door of death's home and beg for you back, if only so that I may ask you to tell me, please, what you would say to me now, given the chance.

Would you pour your heart out to me, fill in the blanks of the empty crossword puzzle that is you?

Or would you laugh it off, take my hand, and run with me through the fields to the swings where you pushed me until I flew as high as the birds above. Run with me through the fields to the time when we were free and you were a God, a Superhero.

If only you could run with me one more time, and then perhaps we would know each other once more.

Clubbing



End of Othering

The strangers are growing
familiar. As if I knew them
intimately yet not at all.
As if they might not recoil
if I touched their hair, their
skin, but would smile at me,
a little embarrassed but
persuaded, the way I'm smiling now,
telling you this, feeling a little
awkward, but ardent: the others aren't
the others. They were never
anything other than ourselves.
And it feels like I never
saw them until now. And now
that I see them, I can't stop staring.

BIOGRAPHIES

Jianna Heuer is a Psychotherapist in New York City. She writes Nonfiction and Fiction. Her work has appeared in The Hooghly Review, Months To Years, The Inquisitive Eater and other literary journals. Her flash non-fiction has appeared in two books, Fast Funny Women and Fast Fierce Women. Check out more of her work here: www.jiannaheuerwrites.com

Simon Collinson is a writer from England. He seeks solitude, sorrow and shadow.

Sophie Mann-Shafir (she/her) hails from New Jersey and lives now in Sicily, where she's working on a Fulbright research project about conscientious objection to abortion. In her spare time, she paints, reads, goes on long runs, asks strangers questions, and makes granola.

Paul Hostovsky's poems have won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, the FutureCycle Poetry Book Prize, and have been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. His newest book of poems is **PERFECT DISAPPEARANCES** (Kelsay, 2025). Website: paulhostovsky.com

Hailing from the hills of Hazard, Kentucky, **Eleni Karelis** grew up with a fascination in the tradition of Appalachian storytelling. As a poet, she is particularly interested in writing about a modern Appalachia that contradicts stereotypical depictions. She received her BA with Honors in English at the University of Kentucky and completed her MA in Creative Writing with distinction at the University of Westminster in London, England.

An avid reader of speculative fiction, **Nicole Ong** is currently working as an editor for a publishing company in Singapore. Her writing has been published in *And We Lived Happily Ever After: National Flash Fiction Day Anthology 2022*, *CafeLit*, and *A Cup of Coffee and a Suicide* (2012), an anthology by the Budding Writers' League, Singapore. She enjoys knitting and baking in her free time.

Anna Nguyen abandoned her PhD studies and decided to rewrite her dissertation in the form of creative non-fiction as an MFA student at Stonecoast at the University of Southern Maine. She blends literary analysis, science and technology studies, and social theory to reflect on institutions, language, expertise, the role of citations, and food. She also hosts a podcast, Critical Literary Consumption.

Carsten ten Brink (he/him) is a writer, artist and photographer. He was born in Germany and educated in Australian, American and British schools, which probably did him a world of good. He lives in London and studied at the University of Cambridge. Stories have recently been published by The Coalition, the 2024 FlashFlood, Periwinkle Pelican and The Write Launch among others. His fiction has been shortlisted for prizes at Fish Publishing, Jerry Jazz Musician and the Masters Review. Carsten is currently editing a set of novels and working towards a collection of short stories.

Sherri Alms writes weird, sweet, and occasionally angry stories, poems, and essays. Her work has appeared in Dorothy Parker's Ashes, Roi Fainéant Press, Wild Greens Magazine, and other publications. She is a freelance writer who lives with her husband and two cats in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Mark Wyatt now lives in the UK after teaching in South and South-East Asia and the Middle East. His recent pattern poetry inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has appeared in *Exterminating Angel*, *Greyhound Journal*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Osmosis*, *Sontag Mag*, *Streetcake Magazine*, and *Talking About Strawberries All Of The Time*, and is forthcoming from *About Place*, *Artemis Journal*, *Full Bleed*, and *Libre*. Poems in geometrical shapes using colours as personae have appeared in *Borderless* and *Hyperbolic Review*, while map-shaped poems have appeared in *Ambit*, and *P.E.N. New Poetry II* (Arts Council/Quartet).

Marcin Bartosz Łukasiewicz primarily writes fantasy and crime, including short stories, novellas, and novels. He has published over 20 short stories in various anthologies, two novellas, and his debut novel titled *Moja Martwa Dziewczyna* (My Dead Girlfriend), which is a blend of urban fantasy, paranormal romance, and crime.

River Oandasan has been passionate about writing since elementary school. His fourth-grade teacher fostered an encouraging environment for self-expression through stories, and that stuck with him for years. He took a break from writing, but has reconnected with his passion and is ready to share his stories with the world.

Kenneth D. Reimer lives on the Canadian prairies. He enjoys travelling the world and recording its wonders. His favourite form is the short story, but he occasionally writes longer fiction. *Zero Time*, his novel of time travel, is available on Amazon. Samples of his writing can be viewed at KennethDReimer.com.

E.P. Lande, born in Montreal, has lived in the south of France and now, with his partner, in Vermont, writing and caring for more than 100 animals. Previously, as a Vice-Dean, he taught at l'Université d'Ottawa, and he has owned and managed country inns and free-standing restaurants. Since submitting less than three years ago, more than 100 his stories — many auto-fiction — and poems have found homes in publications on all continents except Antarctica. His story "Expecting" has been nominated for Best of the Net. His debut novel, "Aaron's Odyssey", a gay-romantic-psychological thriller, is to be published in 2025.

Sandy Krausnick loves to read, write and travel. Her newest passion is writing flash fiction. She has been published in FreeFall Magazine, and most recently, her stories were featured in Flash Boulevard. She lives in Alberta near the Canadian Rocky Mountains with her wife and their rescue dog, Holly.

Kafui Mawunyo Siabi is a writer who tells stories about everyday life with humor. She finds joy in small moments and turns them into tales that make readers smile and think. Her writing shows both the beauty and the funny side of life. Kafui loves noticing little details and sharing her view in a clear and warm way. She always looks for new stories around her, mixing laughter with simple truth.

Heather Kays is a storyteller passionate about writing since age 7. Her memoir, *Pieces of Us*, dissects her mother's struggles with alcoholism and addiction. Her YA novel, *Lila's Letters*, focuses on healing through unsent letters. She runs The Alchemists, an online writing group, and enjoys discussing creativity and complex narratives.

Amanda Andrews is an author, poet and artist, graduating from Brock with a degree in creative writing. You can be sure to find her scribbling poems down in her notebook. She enjoys writing either "a little too close to home" poetry or poetry that titters between fun and experimental.

M.R. Lehman Wiens is a Pushcart-nominated writer and stay-at-home dad living in Minnesota. His work has previously appeared, or is upcoming in, F(r)iction, Short Édition, The NightWriter Review, The Wild Umbrella Literary Journal, and others. More of his work can be found at lehmanwienswrites.com.

Jer Hayes is from Dublin, Ireland. He is a new (old) writer in search of his voice. His work has appeared in Poetry Potion, The Pan Haiku Review, Cosmic Daffodil Journal, Outside the Box, and AEOS Magazine.

Suze Kay is a pastry chef in New Jersey. Her poetry is published in HAD, The Hooghly Review, Acropolis Journal, and more. She's happy you found her here and hopes you'll keep up with her on Twitter @suz_chef or Bluesky @suzchef.bsky.social.

Hibah Shabkhez is a writer and photographer from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in Harpur Palate, Stirring, Forevermore, Empyrean Literary Magazine, Good River Review, and a number of other literary magazines. Studying life, languages, and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.

After commercial studies and working in marketing, **Cecile Gonneau** quit her job to start drawing full-time. She draws enigmatic black and white landscapes with fantomatique human figures emerging.

Angela Townsend (she/her) is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, seven-time Best of the Net nominee, and the 2024 winner of West Trade Review's 704 Prize for Flash Fiction. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Arts & Letters, Chautauqua, Epiphany, Five Points, Indiana Review, The Normal School, Redivider, SmokeLong Quarterly, Terrain, Under the Sun, and World Literature Today, among others. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College and works for a cat sanctuary.

Tracie Adams, a 2025 Pushcart nominee, writes from her farm in rural Virginia. Her work is featured in BULL, Frazzled Lit, Cleaver, Raw Lit, and others. Read her work at www.tracieadamswrites.com and follow her on Twitter @1funnyfarmAdams

Jezza Deep is a versatile and imaginative indie author whose works span paranormal, erotic, romance, fantasy, children's literature, and poetry. With a flair for crafting stories that enchant, inspire, and resonate, she brings a unique voice to every genre she explores (sometimes with a little help from her crazy muse).

eric morris (he/she/they) is a writer and sensitive soul currently based in Hopkinsville, KY. They hold a B.A. in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and have worked editorially with HG Literary, Prairie Schooner, and Split/Lip Press among others.

Rachel Berkowitz (b.Ohio in 1993) is a Los Angeles and London-based contemporary artist whose work explores the intersection of nature, emotion and social consciousness. A UCLA Fine Art graduate, she specializes in painting and photography, often using biophilic forms to reflect on conservation, mental awareness and the human experience. Known for her vibrant use of color, light, and movement, Berkowitz has exhibited internationally and participated in prestigious residencies. Alongside her studio practice, she is deeply committed to arts education, offering community workshops and art therapy sessions that foster connection, healing and creative empowerment across generations.

Laura Marre grew up in England, devouring books and dancing her heart out. Her dancing career took her all over the world until she settled in Italy, where she began writing. When she's not doing that, she moonlights as an English teacher in local schools. You can find her fiction in issue 2 of wildscape. literary journal and amongst the winners of Snake Bite Books' drabble and flash fiction competitions.

Sukriti Patny is a poet and writer who lives in India with her husband and her anxiety. Her work has appeared in Rogue Agent, Dogwood Alchemy, Molecule – a tiny lit mag, amongst others. When she's not making plans and overthinking them, she writes Soul Gazing – a Substack newsletter that features her personal essays and poetry. Instagram: @wordsbysu

Erwin Arroyo Pérez is the founder and Editor-in-Chief at The Poetry Lighthouse. He also teaches literature and works as a translator in Paris. He holds a Master's degree in English Literature and Linguistics from Université Paris Nanterre and King's College London, specialising in Victorian literature and poetry. Erwin's poetry has been published in Paloma Press, The Nature of Our Times, The Winged Moon, Wildscape, Respublica Politics, Nanterre University Press, and other American and British literary magazines.

Mary McAllister is a writer and a visual artist who keeps trying to retire, and yet, keeps working for no good reason. Her essays and poetry have been published in Fathom, Gypsophila, Oddball, A.C. PAPA, and Of Poets and Poetry, Pure Slush, Coin Operated Press, and Moonflake Press. She has also produced a play. In her professional life, Mary worked for more than 25 years for the Johns Hopkins University as a writer/editor and continues to work for freelance clients around the world.

Sam Szanto is an award-winning, Pushcart prize-nominated writer living in Durham (UK). Her poetry pamphlet 'This Was Your Mother' was published by Dreich Press in 2024; 'Splashing Pink' (with Annie Cowell), was published by Hedgehog Press in 2023 and was a Poetry Book Society Winter Pamphlet Choice; her debut short-story collection 'If No One Speaks' was published by Alien Buddha Press. She has won writing competitions including the 2024 Wirral Festival Poetry Prize, the Charroux Poetry Prize and the First Writer Poetry Prize and has poems in journals including 'Rialto', 'Northern Gravy', "South Carolina Review', 'The North' and 'Dust Poetry'.

Charlotte Hegley is a North London based writer who works in publishing. Her work has been published in literary magazines. She is currently working on a novel.

C. R. Resetarits is a writer and collagist. She has had writing out recently in Southern Humanities Review and Native Voices: Indigenous American Poetry, Craft and Conversations (Tupelo Press). Her collages have appeared recently in New Southern Fugitive, Midway and The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts and will soon be featured in Gasher, Sonder Review, Pretty Owl Poetry, and Nashville Review.

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With love

Madisen & Kelly