

Spire Light

Spire Light

A Journal of Creative Expression



2021

Andrew College
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***Spire Light:
A Journal of
Creative
Expression***



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Editor's Notes



Penny Dearmin
Editor-in-Chief

To produce or curate art in this time is an act of service—to ourselves and the world who all need to believe again. We decided to say yes when there is a no at every corner. Yes, we will have our very first contest for the Illumination Prose Prize. Yes, we will accept an ekphrasis prose poem collaboration. Rather than place limits with a themed call for submissions, we did our best to remain open.

These pieces should carry you to the hypothetical, a place where there are possibilities to unsee what you think you know. Isn't that what we have done this year? Escaped? You can be grounded, too. As long as the life where you are is as big as you make it in the smallest of things.

We are proud of this collection of students alongside seasoned writers, poets, and artists. There are few full-color print literary magazines left, and I am well pleased with the stories this allows us to tell. There is always more work to be done to be fully inclusive—this is a call for all of us to love one another, and I do mean ALL of us!

I am indebted to my student editors, whose passion for creative writing and art kept me reading and seeking just the right work for this issue. I hope they are proud of their curation and own creations. Whether you are a gatherer or a maker, there is space for you in these pages.

History



In roughly 1983, Andrew faculty member Herbert Shippey started *Tiger Tales*, which soon became *The Menagerie* under the direction of Professor Lela Phillips, a printed art and literary journal featuring the work of the Andrew College community. It ran for 21 years, with its last issue in 2004.

Then, in 2011, *The Menagerie* was re-envisioned by Professor Amanda Knight as an online literary magazine called *The Welkin Ring*, borrowing a phrase from our Alma Mater, which showcased work of Andrew College students, faculty, and staff.

In the 2016-17 academic year, new faculty advisors and a new group of students relaunched the print form, while maintaining an online presence as well, under yet another new moniker: *Spire Light: A Journal of Creative Expression*.

We value the vision of Lela Phillips and Amanda Knight to print both a traditional hard copy as well as an online edition that can be widely shared, so we are also producing both, and also seek submissions from outside our campus community so that each issue reflects not only what we create but that opens our view of the world beyond the campus walls.

"Spire" also draws from our Alma Mater, in a line that reads, "The spires of Old Cuthbert," referring to the unique architecture of Old Main. The spires stand tall over Cuthbert as some of the first and most recognizable features of our college and town, just as we intend for our journal to represent, to a variety of audiences, the artistic talents as well as values of our historic institution.

Moreover, our spires have recently been illuminated with exterior lights, and Spire Light acknowledges our interest in illuminating others with art, poetry, and prose, from however small our corner of the world.

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Joe Baumann

Illumination Prose Prize

THERE IS LOVE UNDER THIS MOUNTAIN

"Turn on the television," Clyde said when he burst into my apartment. I'd given him a key two weeks ago over dinner.

I was working on a jigsaw puzzle, sitting in the crook between my couch and the coffee table, legs tucked up beneath me. Clyde liked to laugh at the fact that I still sat like a child, but at thirty, I thought it was a fashionable display of flexibility and youthful bones.

"The remote's over there," I said, pointing to the recliner. "What's up?"

"Something's happening."

I was about to tell him that this was not a movie, that whatever he wanted me to see wouldn't magically be on screen because he needed it to, but lo and behold: when he clicked the television on, the very story Clyde was concerned about was being discussed on CNN. A shaky camera was panning over blurry footage of Leh-Malani Highway in the Indian Himalayas. Rain was pelting down, and the lens was fuzzy.

"What the heck am I looking at?" I said. Clyde didn't answer. He stared at the television, tapping his left foot on the carpet, hugging himself, the remote up near his face like a telephone.

On screen, the side of a cliff had been blown away, demolition that was meant to be the opening phase of a construction project. I could tell immediately what the subject of the ruckus was: from the depth-charged mountain was oozing some cartoonishly purple substance. It made me think of chewed bubble gum. "What is that?" I said.

Finally, Clyde turned to me. He was grinning. "That, David, is love."

*

Clyde and I went out to dinner that night, and he couldn't shut up about the discovery in India. He asked our server if she'd heard about it before ordering the chicken Kiev. She nodded with manufactured enthusiasm.

"Please stop that," I said before diving into my Cobb salad, which they'd forgotten to leave the blue cheese off of. I shoveled it into a corner and ate around it.

"Stop what?"

"Asking people about India. You're freaking them out."

"I am not."

"Well, you're freaking me out."

He frowned, bit into his chicken, and said, with his mouth still half-full, "Sounds like someone needs a dose of love."

"That sounds like a bad song lyric. The kind of thing a hair band would scream into a microphone."

Clyde swallowed. I liked watching him eat because he had a strong, long neck and his Adam's apple moved like it was dancing with each bite. He always shook out his hair, black and floppy and a mess over his eyes, before cutting into his food again. When he didn't say anything after one, two, three bites, I sighed and leaned back, resisting the urge to press my thumbs into my eye sockets.

"Okay," I said. "So what do you think it means?"

"What does what mean?"

I waved my hand at a television near our booth even though it was airing a baseball game. "The love business."

"I'm not sure."

"But what does it mean that it's love? How can love be a substance?"

Clyde shrugged and blinked. His eyes were a sapphic blue that reminded me of something from a cologne commercial.

All he needed was a sandy beach and a Speedo.

"What's it supposed to do?" I said.

He set down his utensils, crossing them over his half-eaten chicken breast. I looked down at my own plate, where my salad was a minefield of ham cubes and hard-boiled egg.

"The kinds of things love does," he said, as if that was an answer that would make any sense to me.

*

I woke in the middle of the night, emerging from a dream I immediately forgot except for a flashing feeling that I was drowning. Clyde was curled away from me, his body in a tight C. This always happened, and I tried not to blame him that his unconscious comfort was moving away. Most nights, I found myself staring up at the ceiling, one shoulder pressed into his back like a lance. His body was always warm and slick with sweat no matter how far down I plunged the thermostat or whether I peeled off the comforters and top sheets. He slept in boxer briefs, solid colors that hooked high on his thighs and low on his hips, the fabric bunching at his crotch. Getting through the night without interruption was hard for me, so when I jolted awake I always spent some time looking over Clyde's body in the dark. His legs were lean but strong, muscle drooping around his knees like a tennis player's. He had a hard stomach covered in the smallest film of fat, a pesky cling-on he couldn't seem to get rid of no matter how many carbs he cut or miles he ran. I liked this little imperfection of his; it made him feel more accessible and human, and I enjoyed the way my hand slid across his stomach: I could feel the rocky muscle beneath a just-mobile layer of flesh. Clyde smiled when he slept, his lips wet and ruby-red, as if he'd been sucking on them to bring the blood to the surface.

More than once I'd found my hand heading toward the

band of his underwear while he slept, a hard, sexual urge floating between my ears in the middle of the night, but instead of molesting him, I would slide closer. He would often mumble in his sleep but never wake, his body shrinking into an even tighter ball, as if protecting himself from an assailant he couldn't see.

*

How did they know it was love under that mountain? Well: two of the workers on site when the detonation was cleared had seen the oil-viscous liquid oozing from the broken earth and, in the spirit of idiotic, nameless victims in a slasher film, had marched straight up to it, letting it soak into their hard-soled boots. One of them reached out a gloved hand, clearly mesmerized by its color, convinced that nothing the hue of clematis or wisteria could possibly be harmful. Neither man touched the stuff directly, but it glommed into their clothing and then diffused across their skin. Hours later, they were madly in love with one another.

All of this Clyde told me over breakfast.

"So it's like a potion?" I said. "Something from an old witchy story?"

He shook his head and bit into a piece of sourdough toast. "No, you don't get it. It's, like, pure."

"How can something that makes people feel things they didn't previously feel be pure? Isn't it manipulative?"

The men in question, Clyde went on, had apparently both felt attraction for one another but had been unwilling to verbalize their feelings.

"The love just allowed them to verbalize what was inside," Clyde said.

"So how do you know it's not just a truth serum then?"

Clyde yowled in frustration and grabbed back of my neck. He pulled me up, kissing me.

"You're so annoying," he said, smiling.

"What if someone tries to weaponize it?"

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Like, what if the U.S. makes Putin fall in love with us or something?"

Clyde shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Only you, David. Only you could imagine weaponizing love."

*

Clyde smelled of borax and tanners. He was apprenticing to be a taxidermist, and even though he insisted that he wore gloves and washed his hands up to his elbows at least half a dozen times at work, he still carried a sharp chemical odor with him. It seeped into my bedsheets. He tried to cover it up with heavy colognes and smears of deodorant not only under his arms but across his chest and stomach, but the tart bitterness of formaldehyde and degreaser and the earthy, queasy aroma of intestines and blood always loomed beneath arctic blasts and spritzes of Curve.

"You're like a slaughterhouse," I said when he appeared at my door with takeout Korean barbecue. The bag was soggy but I welcomed the zinging smells that made my eyes water.

A week had passed since the discovery in India, and although Clyde had stopped talking about it every other minute, he still insisted we watch the news while we ate, just in case there was anything breaking.

"I read online that a company wants to bottle it up and sell it," he said as he slid onto the floor next to me.

"Sell it?" I said, licking a smudge of sauce from my thumb. "They think it's safe to do that?"

"No one has cancer yet. No one who's been near it has died or anything."

I think cancer takes more than seven days."

He chewed a strip of bulgogi, his eyes closed.

"Stuff anything interesting today?" I said.

"A woman brought in a peacock," he said, eyes blinking open.

"A peacock?"

"We didn't ask questions."

I gnawed at a piece of spicy pork. I looked at Clyde's hands. Despite where they'd been, rubbing through animal carcasses and marinating in embalming chemicals and hair cleansers, his cuticles were carefully trimmed and clean aside from the dribbets of ssamjang on his knuckles. He took good care of himself.

"Here," I said, pulling a napkin from the bag. "You've got a smudge on your lip."

Clyde leaned toward me. "Why don't you take care of it." But when I reached out with the napkin, he grabbed at my wrist, darting his hand in the air to cut me off. "No, no." He grinned, the saucy splotch widening. "Not with that."

I squirmed from my seated position and ran my tongue across his skin.

"Better?" he said.

"You know," I said. "It's not like leukemia or radiation poisoning show up in a week or less. That stuff could really be anything."

He bit down on his last bite of meat. "Oh, David," he said, shaking his head.

*

Clyde did not like his apartment, a grizzled little efficiency in an old building. Everything creaked: the stairs leading to his second-story unit, the floor covered in carpet that reminded me of a golf green that had been worn down by thousands of cleated shoes, the refrigerator and the two cabinets that held his tiny cadre of plastic plates and bowls. If you weren't careful in the coffin of a shower, a stray elbow could knock one of the handles or the showerhead right off the wall, sending hard

sprays against your back or chest.

"You need to move out," I said. We were at his place because Clyde had fallen ill, perhaps from the Korean barbecue but more likely the flu, even though it was summer and I never thought of the hot months as a time when anyone would really get sick.

Clyde was curled in his bed, sweating. His mattress was on a low platform he'd built himself from scraps he scrounged from a lumberyard owned by a friend of a friend. He'd messed up one of the sides, facing it the wrong way so pink and orange graffiti announced half a cuss word when he lifted up his comforter.

"What can I get you?" I said. "Soup? Medicine?"

"Just be here," he said.

"I don't think that will help you feel better."

"David."

"And I could get sick."

"Please."

I sighed but did what he asked, but not before insisting I lie down outside the blankets. I also told him to keep his mouth and nose safely within the confines of his duvet.

"Okay," he said, voice snotty. "It's not supposed to be a hardship."

"Sorry."

He held me tight, slipping one lizard-clammy hand out from the blankets and shoving it over my shoulder like a heavy pashmina.

"TV?" he said.

"You want to see what's going on in India, don't you?"

"I've been too messed up to track."

"You won't even be able to see the screen," I said, but I picked up the remote from the floor anyway.

“Just turn up the volume.”

For once, the daytime news channels weren't focused on the Leh-Manali. Clyde groaned. I could feel his breath on my neck. Eventually it leveled out and his arm went dead-heavy. I wanted to slither away but stayed still. His body was weighty and warm, and the apartment was cooled only by a tiny window unit. Soon I felt sweat building behind my knees and wallowing under my arms, which were slick and seal-like. Clyde's breath was ragged, doggy. I turned up the volume on the television a few clicks, wondering if this would wake him, but he slept on, breath hitching and catching. He started snoring.

The news did circle back, as it always did, to the love under the mountain, as it was now being called. This always made me roll my eyes; it sounded like the name of cheap, off-brand perfume or some terrible sex toy. The most recent development was that everyday citizens were scrambling toward the mysterious goop, young men and women—mostly men, and mostly stupid, I thought—who were convinced a slopped-up handful of the stuff would make their greatest romantic wishes come true. The authorities were trying to keep people at bay with armed guards and complicated construction equipment that formed a makeshift perimeter, but desperate people were, well, desperate. Tricky. They kept slipping in, and the love-goo kept slipping out.

It took Clyde three days to get well. He dipped in and out of fogs of sweat and nausea, his body thrumming with chills while it emanated uncomfortable heat. More than once I suggested he needed to go to the hospital, but he swatted that idea away, moaned about his shitty insurance and crazy deductible. His apartment stank worse than usual, and I imagined all the chemicals that had seeped into his skin, all the dead, eviscerated insides of the animals he'd gutted and pelted spreading their miasma across his blankets and boxer

briefs and his tiny writing desk where he paid bills the old-fashioned way. I had to hold my nose at one point and trundled out to a nearby pharmacy for heavy-duty air fresheners that I sprayed until I felt dizzy.

When he was better, Clyde thanked me for my caretaking. We were once again in my apartment; he had once again let himself in.

"What have I missed?" he said.

I turned on the TV.

"You could just tell me," he said.

"You just care so much about the love. I don't want to misinform you."

He leaned in close; I felt his breath against my ear. "I trust you."

"I know you do," I said. "But maybe you shouldn't."

He pulled back. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just that I don't care about all this love stuff."

Clyde slung his arm over my shoulder. I could still smell his chemical odor, which he'd tried to mask it with a heavy dose of some new cologne that reminded me of fermentation and rainwater.

"I just find it all very suspicious," I said.

He kissed the side of my head. "It makes me think."

"About what?"

"What love even means."

I turned to look at him. Clyde's eyes were like the wavery bottom of a public pool. "I wish I could tell you," I said.

★

"This is for you," Clyde said. He held out a small bird, frozen in time, one tiny clawed foot attached to a six-inch length of cypress. "A songbird."

I didn't know he'd been doing mounts on his own. I said so.

"First one."

"How did you get the bird?"

He shoved it forward. The bird was fat, its chest puffed out like a swollen weightlifter. The breast was a hot yellow, the head and wings the gray of an overcast sky.

"It looks alive," I said, holding it up close. The eyes were marbled and tiny, the size of peas.

"That's the idea," Clyde said. He cupped his hands beneath mine, his thumbs working at the cords of my wrist, pushing against the veins worming toward my hands.

"What do I do with it?"

He shrugged. "It's yours. You do whatever you want with it."

I didn't like the bird. I could appreciate the craftsmanship—I couldn't see any sutures or any signs that Clyde had done a single thing; the bird looked like it could fly up into my ceiling fan at any moment—but the idea of keeping a dead thing somewhere in my apartment made my stomach flip-flop.

"There's something else," Clyde said. He released my hands and rummaged in his jeans pocket, wrestling with whatever was in there. His belt buckle jiggled. He produced a small, glinting key.

"What's this?"

"To my apartment. A key."

"Oh." I took it in my free hand, letting the jagged side bite into my tender palm.

"You're the one who gets to decide what to do with it."

"I assume I'll use it to get in and out of your place."

Clyde shrugged. "That depends, I guess."

"On what?"

"On how you feel about barging in on strangers."

I frowned. "Now I'm confused."

Clyde smiled. The look on his face was the one he used when he explained things to me that I didn't understand, like the causes of World War II or trigonometric functions or the difference between stewing and braising.

"I'm going to move out, David," he said. He took a step closer to me. I could smell aftershave, cologne, chemicals: the boiling cauldron of Clyde's various smells. Intoxicants, repellents, and pleasures all rolled into one.

"Okay."

Clyde's fingers gobbled at my fist closed around the key. I opened it, and he poked at the key, which was pressed against my palm, its harsh edges still chewing at my tender skin.

"The question," he said, "is whether I should go somewhere else."

"Or?"

He squinted, then sighed. I closed my fingers around his. "Or whether you should come here," I said before he could.

"Yes, that's the question."

"You're inviting yourself to live with me?"

"David."

"That's what it sounds like, is all."

"I'm asking if you want to live with me. Whether that's here or not."

"Will you try to poison me with that love juice if I say no?"

He wilted and I felt a salty sting in the back of my throat. I never said the right things, I realized. Not once had I ever done that.

"Of course you should live here, with me," I said. I looked around the room: my walls were bare. Between two end tables there was only one picture frame, a snapshot of my

mother. "But I'm not sure what to do with your bed."

Clyde smiled, but I saw a shadow behind his eyes.

"Those are the easy questions."

"You can get rid of a bed just like that?"

"Please stop," he said. Then he pulled me to him, the bird, still in my hand, squashed between our thighs. I could feel its little feathers bending against my jeans. "Please, no more talking."

*

I kept waiting for something to go wrong. Clyde, as he started boxing up his meager possessions and plopping them in the various rooms of my apartment, would realize he'd made a terrible mistake; he would accidentally lop off his thumb or forefinger at the taxidermy shop, or burn his palms or face with some skin-melting acid while trying to clean a pelt, leaving him horrifically mutilated and convinced that he should never see me again; the love-substance would prove to be some ancient evil that would eat away at people's insides or turn them into zombies or sociopaths and he would have a mental breakdown.

But nothing happened.

We marched through summer. Clyde spent time on my tiny patio with his shirt off. We had lots of sex. He brought home another stuffed animal, this time a small, white rabbit that he set on the entertainment center next to the television. It looked ready to hop down at a moment's notice. When Clyde was at work I stuffed it in one of the closed cabinets below the tv so I didn't have to look at it, but I was always careful to pull it back out before he came home. Its eyes were black with a little hue of ruby, just enough for me to think the thing was demonically possessed and waiting for an opportunity to come to life

and chew at my jugular vein while I slept.

On the news, the story in India petered to a stop. Clyde took to the internet, gobbling up whatever manic conspiracies and fake stories he could find; one website claimed that its bloggers had gone to the mountain and there wasn't anything, that the whole story about the love was faked, some kind of publicity stunt for some movie. Another stated that those who had come into close contact with the substance had started disappearing. Yet another claimed that the gooey liquid was, in fact, caused by nuclear radiation thanks to the dropping of the atom bombs during World War II.

"Wasn't that Japan?" I said when Clyde read that one aloud. We were lounging in my bed on a Sunday morning. Clyde's skin was sticky; we'd opened a window and left off the air conditioning. The room smelled salty.

"Could have been from fallout."

"That has to be thousands of miles."

"I don't know what to tell you."

I swatted at the phone. "Maybe stop reading those things. They rile you up."

"They do not," he said, holding his phone away. But then he darkened the screen and set the phone down. Clyde swung toward me and kissed my neck. My body tingled. His fingers tickled toward the elastic band of my underwear, my hips pushing upward at his touch. I couldn't help this; he knew it.

"Seems like someone else is getting riled up," he said. His fingers pressed into my pubic hair. I let out a hot, shuddered breath.

"Not fair, Clyde," I said.

He kissed my throat.

"I love you, David," he said, but then he wasn't listening to me, his mouth suctioned to my collar bone.

*

I woke one morning way before Clyde; we'd had Gin Rickeys the night before while we sat on the patio and swatted away mosquitos. Clyde drank too many too fast in celebration of the end of his apprenticeship. He could now take his own orders and work his own mounts. His eyes went glossy fast, gummy and stupid with joy. He kept leaning over and pressing his weight against my right knee, threatening to cant over onto the concrete. I had to sling him into bed on his stomach, a trash can nearby. Even though he didn't puke, the bedroom smelled like a locker room the next morning. Clyde was snoring, head pressed sideways into the pillow.

I turned on the television in the living room, the volume low, while I drank a glass of water. That was when I saw it: in Illinois, near Decatur, a highway construction team demolishing part of I-72 for rebuilding had taken out a small mound of rock, too tiny to have a name. When the small boom settled, there it was, seething beneath the surface: the same purple substance.

"Love," the news anchor said. "Closer than ever."

His co-anchor nodded and let out a satisfied noise. She leaned back and closed her eyes for a second, hand pressed to her solar plexus. Her eyeshadow was an overpowering green, like seaweed. She blew a noiseless raspberry with her painted lips before sitting up straight and moving on to the next story.

I walked, dazed, to the bedroom door and looked in. Clyde was still twisted in the sheets, his back billowing up and down as he took snoozy breaths. I looked toward the bedroom window where the light was bright and powerful. Somewhere out there, so close—just a few hours' drive—

was the substance that had captivated him. Love, his voice said. The physical manifestation of love. I imagined his joy, the rebirth of his obsession. He would want to go and see for himself, and I would have to go with him. It would be the ultimate test, my willingness to get up close to it if we could. To slingshot down the highway, our hearts beating to the rhythm of the rolling road. He would look at me, clamp a hand on my leg in excitement, and wonder aloud what it would mean for us to be near it.

My stomach roiled as though I was the hungover one. Then Clyde groaned. He turned onto his back and blinked at me, his face bleary.

"Good morning," I said.

He smiled and rubbed his eyes, then said, "I feel terrible." He patted my empty half of the bed. "Will you come here?"

I took a deep breath and glanced out the window one more time. "Of course," I said, and to Clyde I went.

Chris Johnson

Two Chicks



Amanda Knight

Exam

The silence is shattered by an explosive sneeze
From the brunette with the blue-spiked hair.
A chair creaks its complaint
Of the fat kid's shifting squirm.
Paper rustles;
Pencils scratch quietly;
Pens softly tip-tap across the white expanse.
A cough echoes through the room.

Oblivious to the others,
The football player digs at his crotch;
The soccer player snorts and sucks snot
While wiping his sleeve across his face.
The sorority blonde in the pink mini-skirt
Shifts and splays her legs,
Unknowingly flashing her purple panties.
The Baptist Student Union president prays soundlessly,
Lips moving in silent supplication.

An atmosphere of pressure and purpose permeates the
room...
From my vantage point,
I peruse the group, and I am pressured too—
I want to pass their test.

Zeke Jarvis

The Terrible Brother

Let me tell you about a kingdom. The kingdom's aging king had two sons. The older son was strong and cunning in matters of battle. He was feared by many. The younger son was kind, thoughtful. He was very well liked, the kind of person you might want running a kingdom. Unfortunately for the people of the kingdom, all tradition and right would lead to the older son taking over for the king when the king died. Nobody wanted this. Even the older son had no interest in things like diplomacy or the basic day-to-day ruling of a kingdom. But tradition was tradition.

The king called his sons to talk to him. He was distraught, explaining the problem that both sons already understood perfectly. The older son interrupted. "It's obvious what we need to do."

The king was surprised, but he was eager to hear a possible solution. "Tell me, then. What must we do?"

"When the end of your life nears, you should send me away to battle. I will be gone, so my brother will ascend. When I return, he will have ruled well for a time, and I can request that I maintain my military position, keeping him on the throne."

The king and the younger brother agreed with this plan. When the end came near, the father did indeed send his older son away. There was always a reasonable set of battles that could be fought. While the older son was away, the king died, the people grieved, and the younger son ascended. He ruled wisely and justly for many months, and the people loved him.

Eventually, the older brother came back. As he rode back into the kingdom, he saw how well things were going. He saw how happy the people were. When the older brother went

back to his brother, now the king, the new king saw a man who was returning from many hard-fought battles. The new king was not fully sure that his old brother had come back the same man that he was when he'd left. And herein lies the problem.

"The problem" does not just refer to the younger brother's dilemma. It also refers to mine, to the storyteller's. If I say, for instance, that the younger brother saw the man who returned from battle, and he had his guards slay his brother there, then I tell you that you should look at the threat that people present. That you must be suspicious, even of those you once knew and loved, and this lesson is not good. Alternatively, if I tell you that the younger brother believed in his family bond, that he trusted his brother because of their childhood, then I might tell you to always trust your family, even if they present a danger. This lesson has flaws as well. And imagine if I told you that the older brother suspected that he was in danger, so he had his soldiers dethrone and execute the new king. It makes it impossible to finish the story and impossible not to dwell on it.

Hasani VibeZ

Atlanta Renaissance



John Grey

WHEE!

On the highway at night,
I'm doing seventy.
Why not?
There's nothing but darkness ahead of me.
And the road is as flat as a desktop.

With any luck,
the wildlife is at rest.
And it won't rain.
And the wind will stay calm.
And the songs on the radio
will keep me awake.
And the news,
when it cuts in,
won't be all bad.

For I'm driving on behalf
of animals sleeping,
fine weather, still air,
good music,
my continued attention
and some widowed waitress
with three young kids
who just won the lottery.

Seventy miles an hour should do it.

John Grey

I HAVE SO MUCH OF NOTHING TO SAY TO YOU

Already dusk
and I pick off the day
like lint from a sweater,
but, roll threads together as I might,
nothing will twist
into a skein of words.

And the couple next door,
two children in tow,
return from an afternoon
in the park.

Their lives are so cleanly woven.
And their message is clear –
there's much more to life
than what ails me.

Night's just begun
and it's already late.
Strung out on the keyboard,
not knowing what letters to tap,
my fingers crawl back into
the cave of my wrist.

Then I sit here and stare at blank pages.
Having nothing to say
is a cold but necessary task.

John Grey

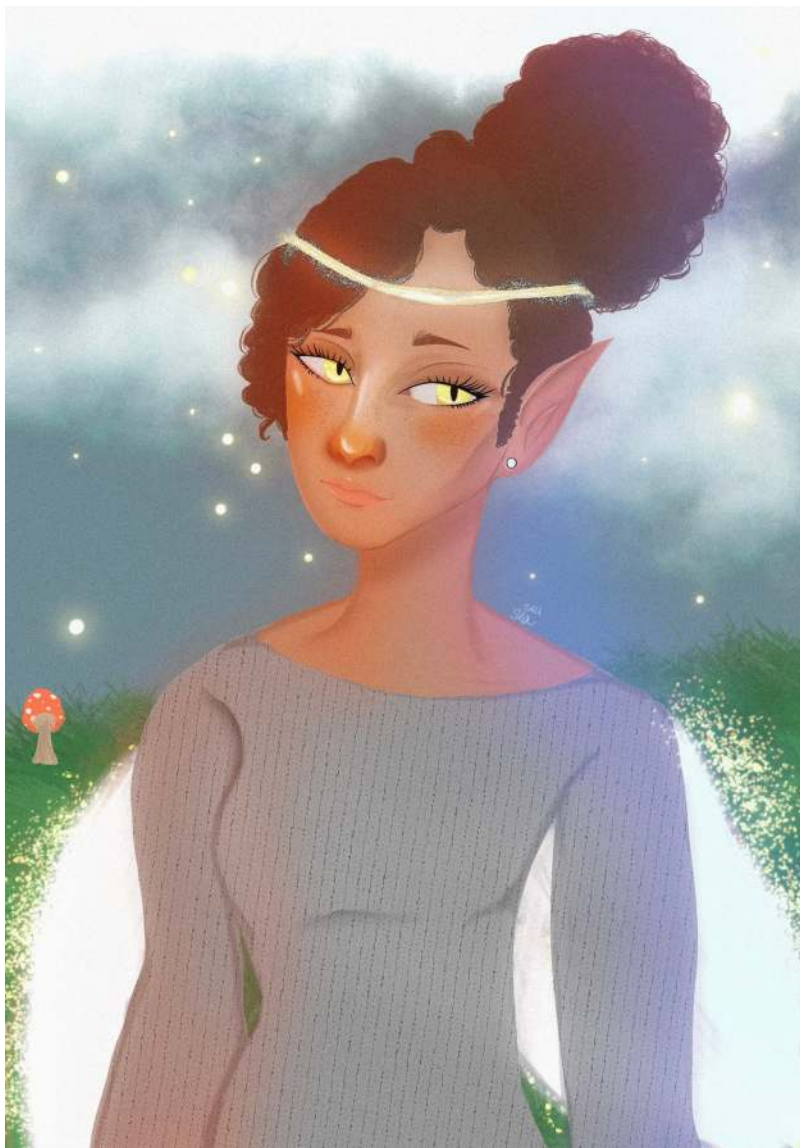
BIG CITY BE DAMNED

I'm taking out my anger on big cities.
I'm damning Manhattan
though it hasn't done a thing to me.
And I'm cursing Los Angeles
I haven't been there in years.
but still I'm cursing Los Angeles.
As for Chicago — nothing good can come of it.
Even Philadelphia, city of brotherly love,
is severely lacking in both siblings and affection.
You see I'm in a big city and there's nobody I know.
I can't find this place I'm looking for.
And the natives come off as too unfriendly to ask.
Apart from that, my cell phone needs recharging
and I left the cord at home.
Sol can't call. And how was I to know
that particular museum is closed on Wednesdays.
I cuss out big cities because
their dimensions are cruel-size.
They're zoned for frustration and indifference.
All these buildings, all this traffic,
and I can't manipulate them,
can't get them to work solely on my behalf.
It's this being one of so many
that I can't get my head around.
What if there were a million of us wanting you?
Or my mother gave birth to numbers on that scale?
Or if I went anywhere, the other 999,999 people showed up?

I can't be loved in return, that's the problem.
I can't feel that closeness of belonging.
Or even the freedom of removing myself
from everything and yet still being
connected to what matters.
Here, there are only crowds, no people.
And traffic but no cars.
I can remember being in that small town
in Ohio for hardly five minutes or so
before running into someone
I really wanted to know.
In the big city,
five minutes never has the time.

Sierra Albritton

Modern Day Fairy



Hollie Dugas

The Conformity of a Pork Chop in a Box of Letters

You'll die alone, you said once. I've got to tell you about the day I left, why your pork chop looked so unusually small— the boiling down and bubbling over of our relationship. Work let out early that day and when I got home, I could hear your dad spitting chewing tobacco into a cheap plastic water bottle from behind the closed door to the room we shared, per usual. We were only living with them for a short period of time to get back on our feet.

The noise was unnerving, in that roundabout sort of way, and all I could think to do was cook. While at the store, I thought to make enough food for the family, your family. So, I called your mom and asked her if I should buy enough pork chops to feed everyone. She told me that she wasn't very hungry, but she would ask her husband, your dad, if he wanted dinner. She called back minutes later and said, "John's down with chops." Now, maybe I'm an idiot or maybe I just don't get the entanglement that comes along with marriage and how when one party of the commitment is down with something it automatically includes the other but, I brought home a pack of three pork chops. Just enough, I thought.

Imagine me, there, in your mom's kitchen carrying out my most wifely abilities. And let's face it, I have the domestic capabilities of a tire swing. So, don't flinch too hard at the thought. But, picture it. No, try to feel it. Feel your mom standing over me while I'm baking pork chops. She's saying, "Wow, I'm really hungry now. Looks good." Feel me realize exactly what your mom meant when she said, "John's down with chops." I bet it doesn't seem like such a big deal to you, just a glitch, one hiccup in a life, but, quite frankly, I panicked. My initial thought was to throw away the three cuts of meat,

give up on them, pretend they never existed. Because that's what you do when you're wounded. But, being accustomed to such slow steady aches as these, I responded like I didn't care at all. Unapologetically, I said, "I didn't know that you wanted chops too." When I replay it in my mind, I sounded like a sociopath. I only know how to really care or not care at all. It makes trouble.

I should have figured it wouldn't work out before the pork chop incident though. Like when you would roll down the car window after I sneezed. Or when you wouldn't drink milk from a glass after me. To come clean though, I took gulps right out of the carton late at night when you were sleeping. You may have trusted me not to do something like that. Surprise.

Eventually, what I ended up doing was cutting off the excess parts of the three pork chops, the most undesirable pieces, those extra chewy gritty pieces. And not to sound self-sacrificing in the least, but I ate them, those extra gritty pieces. And you made it home late.

The truth is, I'm not great at finding the harmony in middle ground. And when it comes down to it, I don't know what people want. I guess you wanted something you could put in a box of keepsakes; the way my father kept his old empty wallets like small leather folders holding his memories, memories that had already been consumed by the present. Perhaps, learning harmony is half of the battle.

And, perhaps, there is harmony in the words *John's down with chops*. I wouldn't know. You see I, too, have these little metaphorical wallets. Filled with nothing.

Sarah Kate Merrill

IWILLNOTBESHAKEN



IWILLNOTBESHAKEN

TAK Erzinger

Abscission

Alight, I let myself go like
the leaves of our gingko tree

I can no longer hang on
to the season before

although its stories will
remain dormant in my limbs.

Rings around my trunk
that no one will see

like stretch marks or cellulite
I keep them buried

under layers. Here
before autumn succumbs

to winter I thirst for
the last drops of sunshine

lean into its warmth
lingering like a tourist

whose holiday is ending
I wonder if I'll have

a second spring as
silver threads spread

across my head. I feel
empowered by the climate

but let down by the
environment

unsure about
what I'll leave behind.

It's funny how when
I'm finally naked, exposed

I'm the most invisible
I hope I can continue

to grow, knowing
I'm the last of this line.

The Starlet's Curse

The most expensive piece of land in Los Angeles sits no larger than eight feet long. This small piece of property is surrounded by hundreds of others just like it and they are all resting with the Starlet's Curse. The curse lays on a place with rockstars, movie stars, and anyone worth a bit of notoriety in between. 1218 Glendon Ave, Westwood, Los Angeles, California lays dormant for 364 obsolete days in the year.

However, after sundown on October 31st Hollywood's hottest hoedown comes alive. The moon lays just above the horizon on a cloudy night when a beautiful blonde girl stands twirling in an ivory white dress. She is followed by a man in a crisp dark suit who had average size, stature, and face; but his smile had a charm to it. His voice held a sort of olive oil relaxation when he said, "how you been, Marilyn?"

The girl replied, "Dean, I gotta say this year has been dull, are you ready to get this thing started?"

The man was the one and only, or at the very least the ghost of, Dean Martin. He gave a sly look to the deceased Ms. Marilyn Monroe whilst at the same time saying, "Darlin' I died ready for this. Good evening residents of Pierce Brothers Westwood Village Memorial Park and Mortuary. I'm ready for the ghoul gala to begin, what about the rest of youse?"

Opaque apparitions of the stars from The Golden Age of Movies rose up with a tired groan. At first, the ghosts seem to

be mingling like old friends at their 182nd high school reunion, however, they soon begin to cut themselves off from anything they considered “lower socialization.” The rockers with a platinum record drank with any filmmakers with the coveted Hollywood star. Everyone else was left to figure out their places in the cemetery when the Specter Electi traveled to the V.I.P. crypt, this year hosted by Frank Zappa.

“How do they get to do this every year?” Whit Bissell spoke up. He was an old man with a body frame no bigger than a thimble. He appeared to be the type of man to live a poignant unbothered lifestyle. From the looks of it, this was the first time he was outspoken about anything in his life and the continuation of thereafter.

“It’s just the way it is hon, you know I loved your movies, but face it you’re just not a star.” A young and beautiful Farrah Fawcett said in passing. It began to rain, so she was happy with her timing, just past fashionably late and just before unfashionably wet. She walked up to the well-lit VIP crypt when out of nowhere appeared Burt Landcaster to lift a red velvet rope and escort her in. As soon as they walked through the door of Zappa’s burial place the crypt reverted back to a dull concrete structure.

“We shouldn’t stand for this,” Whit spoke up to the other ghosts wandering around.

“Logically speaking, we’re ghosts and cannot technically stand,” said chess player Jacqueline Piatigorsky in a conceited and overall condescending sort of manner.

You know what I meant, we should send someone to go talk to the Specter Electi. Somebody who can convince them that we don't need these childish cliques anymore. We have all died, we are all cursed, we all decided with that curse we should throw a party. It's just unnecessary at this point, don't you think?" Whit proclaimed.

"You should go, It's evident that you're the one who can change their minds," Jacqueline said. All the ghosts seemed to be in agreement that this cemetery was ready for a change. They also seemed to agree that the representative should be none other than, Whit Bissel. Whit mustered up all the courage from the deepest part of his stomach and marched over to that red velvet rope.

A large man sat behind the rope smoking a cigar, the man asked, "what can I do ya for?"

"I'm sorry Mr. Dangerfield sir, but I'd like to speak with Dean Martin please." Whit dipped his head down a little while talking.

"Give me a minute... Dean! Door!" The man called out.

"What do you need now Rod? I got a party to run!" a sense of urgency tinged Dean Martin's voice.

"The shrimp wants to talk." Rodney Dangerfield gestured to Whit. Rodney stuck a cigar in his mouth and silently offered one to Dean; he graciously accepted with a nod of the head.

"Yes?" Asked Dean Martin.

Whit straightened his posture and spoke up, "I think we should do away with the Specter Electi. I mean we have the Starlet's Curse put on us so that we must roam the earth every Halloween. We all had this curse put on us and what you decide to do? Throw a party. Those of us that 'aren't cool enough' are left to wander the gravestones. We all had red blood, oxygen in our lungs, thoughts in our heads. We all died the same, nobody's death was better, worse, more classy, cordial, or flattering than others. We are all the same. I, and

everyone else who is unworthy, ask you to be done with this and make all ghosts equal."

"You done?" Dangerfield asked.

"That's all I have to say. However, I truly do think you should take it into consideration—"

"He's done." Dangerfield cut Whit's statement short and blew out a billowing puff of smoke.

"Listen to me, what's your name again? Dean said as he wrapped his arm around Whit's feeble shoulder and started walking. "Brit Whistle, isn't it? I'm going to be straight up with you as not to waste anyone here's time. I, nor anyone else in there, nor anyone who's still kicking around with some skin on 'em remember who you are old man. Face reality: you and all the bookless authors, failed bandleaders, chess players, and sob-story starlets don't deserve to be in here. We may have died the same, but we get to decide what to do when we get here and we, as in me, have decided that you're not a star. There's nothing you can do to change that."

After about six minutes of walking and Dean whistling *Pretty Woman*, they arrived to the fence and looked down. Dean Martin had walked Whit to an unmarked grave in the corner of the cemetery. At this point, the grave marker was weathered down to an over-glorified stepping stone. Dean Martin and Whit Bissell had walked all the way across the cemetery. However, it went relatively unnoticed to Whit because of the unbelievable amount of charm that resonated from Mr. Martin.

“Old man, I’m going to let you in on something.” Dean Martin leaned over as to be louder because the rain was picking up. “You have no idea who this is, but he’s in there. He’s just got a pebble for a headstone and guess what. People remember him, he’s better than you.”

Dean Martin walked off still whistling that same song. Whit was left looking at some dingy rock in the rain. He stood for hours until he saw the hints of dawn peeking over the rows of graves. Falling back into his eight-foot piece of land Whit finally knew what the Starlet’s Curse truly was.

Noah Varsalona

Ride or Die



Blake V. Rose

Microcosm

There has always been a door
Hanging dispossessed against a gentle glow
And its hinges have always wailed in tones
Like waterphones that conspire with the dark

There has always been a bulb
Stretching out with a blackened touch
Its fingers always distort the view
Like a thumbscrew dampened in the dirt

And a curtain
Burning for the gibbous night
Its folds wishing to pirouette
Like a silhouette backlit by the moon

A mug
Filled to the brim with scorching oolong
And its steam always curls and laps
Like ancient maps leading out to liminal spaces

There have always been the taps
Of footsteps receding into the shaded hall
which echoes and explodes like a sore
Down the corridor back towards an empty room

At a desolate table
Shining with scarlet veneer
All the possibilities are made apparent
By how conspicuously empty the table is

Jean Feingold

Deadland

"Unfortunately, there is no mistake," the woman said, closing the file on the desk in front of her. "Our records say Mindy Norman is dead. Therefore, you cannot be Mindy Norman. Good day."

Mindy Norman sat in stunned silence as the stone-faced government administrator stood up and directed her to the door. Mindy rose to her feet and walked out slowly, clutching her own large envelope full of documents. She had brought everything with her, her birth certificate, her school transcripts, her marriage license and divorce decree, her drivers license, the deed to her house, her health insurance card, every 1040 she had ever filed, her life insurance policy, her passport, and her automobile registration. She even had a fingerprint card and a DNA test report. Each piece of information verified she was Mindy Norman. Just looking at her made clear she was alive. She was who she said she was, but this woman denied it. The administrator had refused to look at her documents, saying with the new law, none of that mattered. If the government said you were dead, you were dead, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

As Mindy waited for the elevator, she pondered why the government had singled her out for elimination. She was an upstanding citizen. She had voted in every election since she became old enough to do so. She taught third grade at a public school and had been nominated for teacher of the year several times. She paid her bills on time. Her house and car were always clean. She drove the speed limit. She treated everyone with respect even when they might not deserve it. Anyone who knew her would have described Mindy as a nice person who never did anything wrong. There was nothing bad

about her, although perhaps her life was a tad boring.

She wondered what to do now. Mindy suspected her car would be gone by the time she got downstairs because dead people did not own cars. She knew even if she managed to get back to her house, the key would no longer work and someone else would be living there, some stranger put there by the government. She knew her ATM card would be confiscated by the bank machine without letting her have any cash because dead people had no bank accounts.

When Mindy got the notice to report to the government office, her friend David told her not to go. "Other people I know got that letter," he said. "They went there and I never saw them again."

"What do you mean? Were they arrested?" Mindy asked.

"I don't know what happened. I just know it wasn't good. After my brother got the notice and went in, he disappeared. When he didn't meet me for dinner, I called his number and his phone was disconnected. Then I went to his house to find him and some people I didn't know were living there. I asked for him and they said they had no idea who he was."

"Why isn't the media reporting this? I've never heard anything about this before."

"Because the government owns all the newspapers and the TV and radio stations now. They control the news. The notices like the one you got have something to do with a new law that took effect six months ago."

"No one told me about any new law. How can I be expected to follow a law I don't know about? This is terrible. The letter says if I don't report, they'll pick me up and bring me in. I don't have

a choice. If I don't go, I'm afraid they'll put me in jail. Look, I'll take all my proof of life documents with me and I'll be OK."

David shook his head sadly. "Running away would be better."

Now Mindy knew David had been right. Until she was officially told she was dead, maybe she could have kept using her car, could have withdrawn her money, could have packed her stuff and gone somewhere with a bit of comfort. Her current options were much more limited.

Anticipating the worst, she checked the building's parking lot. Her car was gone. She felt dizzy and wanted to sit down. There was a park right next to the building; it looked like a good place to think. She found a secluded bench and took inventory. In her purse she had \$89.57 in cash, a pack of gum, some tissues, an energy bar, eye drops, a pen, an address book, and a bus pass. Everything else was useless – credit cards, gift certificates, her ATM card, and a checkbook. She tried her cellphone, but it didn't connect. She looked around and saw a few other people sitting on benches, each one alone, who seemed to be doing the same thing she was and trying to hide their activities as she had.

There was one guy who looked a little familiar or at least had a kind face. Mindy walked over to his bench. "Did you get the notice too?" she asked.

He nodded "yes." "I'm not sure it's OK to talk about it," he said.

"What more can they do to us now? We already don't exist."

"I guess you're right," he said.

"Why did this happen? How did they pick us?"

"It's all because of that new law. It says people over 40 who are single and have no children living with them are automatically considered detrimental to the goals of the government. It's sort of the opposite of the law China used to have limiting families to one child. Big families are prized; single people are worthless."

"But I have a useful job! I teach school for those children. I provide a valuable service."

"And now some married person with kids has your job and your house and your car and everything else of value you thought was yours. Anyone who looks for you will reach repeated dead ends until they give up."

Mindy was incredulous. "How could they pass a law like that? It's so wrong!"

"The economy went south and unemployment soared. The new administration came up with this law as a way of giving all the jobs to the people it decided were the most valuable."

"What now?" Mindy asked. "We can't stay here. It will be dark in a few hours. They close all parks at sunset and run off anyone inside them."

"I heard a rumor about a place we can go. It's called Deadland. The entrance is about 150 miles away. They let people with bus passes ride to the edge of town. From there, there's supposed to be a shuttle train every hour. No charge for the shuttle, or that's what I heard."

"And what's in Deadland?"

"Dead people like us. Beyond that, I don't know."

"You mean zombies?" Mindy was afraid to hear the answer.

"Isn't that what we are now? The government says we're dead, but we're still walking and talking."

"But I don't want to eat human flesh!"

"Maybe not yet, but that could change after we get to Deadland." The man seemed oddly pleased saying this. The enormity of what had happened to her and what few alternatives she had swirled around Mindy's brain. "I don't even know your name," she said. "Why should I trust you?"

"No names, please. If you have a better idea, go for it. If you've got a pass, I'll walk you to the bus station, find the right bus, and ride with you on the shuttle. Shall we go?"

Mindy felt as though she was making a deal with the devil, but she had no other ideas. Before meeting this man, she had considered finding a phone she could use and calling David to see if she could stay with him and his family until she figured things out. She had changed her mind, fearing her call would put them at risk of sharing her unfortunate fate. The small amount of cash she had might buy her a few nights at a bad motel and a little food — if anyone would even let her in. The only ways she could think of making money without a job were illegal and even those were likely closed to officially dead people.

"OK," she said. "Bus station it is."

They walked a few blocks and got on a bus labelled "Edge of Town." Mindy wondered why her bus pass still worked when it had been issued in her now non-existent name. But she didn't question it, figuring one bit of luck was owed her for all the misfortune. None of the maybe two dozen other passengers spoke and neither did Mindy and the man from the park. After 20 minutes, the bus stopped. "End of the line," said the driver. All the passengers got off.

Mindy could see the train station a block away. All the bus people walked toward it. They waited about 10 minutes before hearing the train approach. When it stopped, a single door opened. A conductor stuck his head out and shouted, "All aboard!"

The others lined up and began boarding. Mindy hesitated. Everything that was happening seemed crazy, but if she didn't get on the train, she'd be alone here at a train station where a metal bench was the only amenity. "Come on," her companion said. "They don't wait for stragglers."

Once on board, Mindy settled into a window seat next to her new acquaintance. She wanted to ask him more questions, but he pulled his hat over his eyes and promptly went to sleep. The train whistle blew as they traveled over small town railroad crossings without stopping.

Mindy looked out the window as they rode through a pleasant landscape of fields and woods. Her anxiety about what the future held prevented her from enjoying the view. The bleak possibilities for the rest of her life came at her like a nightmare. She had visions of fighting off other zombies, of watching people being eaten, of ultimately craving flesh herself. She started shivering and could not stop.

It was dark when they arrived at their destination. As the train pulled into the station, Mindy saw a large billboard. It

said, "Welcome to Deadland!" A second billboard farther down, reading, "You've been pranked!!!" became visible when the train stopped.

A few dozen people were standing on the platform to greet the arriving passengers. Among them, Mindy was shocked to see, was her friend David. She pushed her way to the door and was the first person off the train.

"David!" she cried. "What are you doing here? Did the government eliminate you, too?"

David and the guy Mindy had traveled with started laughing hysterically. "No, Mindy," David said. "You still don't get it. You and these other people on the train have been pranked. You are all victims of the latest Internet hoax. Deadland is an online game that plays out in the real world."

"Players organize themselves into teams and identify which of their friends are gullible people who don't use social media to target as victims for the game," Mindy's travel companion explained. "David, the government lady, and all the people you saw in the park are on my team. While you were in the 'government' office, David used your spare key to move your car so you couldn't see it when you exited the building. "No matter who you had spoken to in the park, you would have gotten the same information I gave you about the bus and the shuttle train to Deadland," he continued. "The park is a cellphone dead zone; that's why your phone didn't work. If you try it now, you'll see it's fine. We always gamble that you and our other victims will be so convinced by the official looking notice you'll go to the office. After your visit there, we figure you'll be so traumatized by the stern government lady, you won't try to use your phone anywhere but the park or

attempt to use an ATM, as actually cutting off those services violates the game rules. Anyone who is a regular user of chat rooms or social media is well aware of the game and may even be a player. You never heard anything about the 'new law' because there isn't one, and you never heard about the game because it's a secret shared only online. Talking to conventional media people about the game is also against the rules. The game is supposed to stay outside normal news channels."

"And our team has done well," David said proudly. "We're way ahead in the rankings by bringing more 'dead' people here than any other team."

Mindy was both relieved and furious. "So the law didn't change? I still own my house, my car, my stuff, and I can go back to teaching school without getting married and having a baby? What's wrong with you? Why did you do this to me? Is terrifying me your idea of fun?"

The two men looked down and said nothing for a few minutes. Their earlier targets had instantly seen the humor in the game and shrugged off their pretend victimization as an unexpected, unusual, and even funny experience. David had forgotten how sensitive Mindy was to being taken advantage of or he might not have chosen her as a game victim.

"I tried to warn you, remember?" David said. "I told you to ignore the notice and not to go to the 'government' office. I guess what we put in the letter was too convincing or you're too much of a rule follower to ignore official looking things like that. Look, Mindy, we're really sorry. I didn't think you'd be upset once you learned nothing that happened to you today was real. We have a nice dinner planned at the hotel here and there's a lovely room with a hot tub reserved for "you. We'll

take you home in the morning.”

I’ll have room service deliver my meal and I’ll arrange my own way home,” Mindy said as she cried softly. “This guy is a stranger, so I can’t blame him, but you, David? I don’t think we’re friends anymore. I’m calling my friend Jennifer who is a reporter at the Times and giving her an exclusive. The Deadland game is over forever.”

Allan Lake

Foto Sicily: Smoke

In the ironically named al fresco area,
mother, father, adult son and daughter
(there's no mistaking it) smoke,
unconsciously as breathing as they stare
silently at nothing in particular.

The family tobacco ritual.

They partake before, during and after
shots of espresso, say little – no need
for small talk – as they create
momentary meaningless signals
on an otherwise blue sky day.

Memory clouds of my cloudy childhood
begin to engulf so I move further off,
which is not an option for a child.

Over my newspaper I watch them
smoke – as one might sit through
a plotless play that serves to reflect
someone's view of reality.

Like smoke, the melancholy
of it can choke you up,
bring a pointless tear.

Noah Varsalona

Marlboro Madness!



God is at the Mall

God, I hate the mall. But I have to go; my daughter needs to meet her friends at a restaurant.

God, I hate driving to this mall. First, it's hot even with air conditioning. Second, my directions are wrong. Then there's no parking. I drive around and every spot is taken. "Why is your friend such a mall rat?" I rage. We've come to the edge where parking is reserved for an animal hospital and other worthy enterprises. I'm tempted, but drive back to the main road. We go for the parking structure. Up levels two, three, four. There's only one left, and I'm getting ready to swear. "God, I hate this mall!" At the very, very top, we find a spot. Out in the baking sun. The temperature: 102 degrees. After all that driving, I've completely lost track of the restaurant's location.

We wait a long time for an elevator. And then take an escalator. But we find Target, the meeting place. At the top of the Target escalator, my daughter spots her friends and runs up for hugs and a joyous reunion.

"I'll just wait at Starbucks until you're done," I grump. "I'm not coming back to fight for parking again." Sourly, I head down the escalator and walk through toys, children's clothing, maternity clothing, trying to leave the store, but I can't. Exit from this level doesn't exist. I have to go back to the escalator and up. Is this hell or purgatory?

I find a Starbucks+generic fast-food place and sit at a plastic table. What is America doing at this god-awful place at 7 PM on a Tuesday night? What urgency propels them to the red letters, "Eats" and "Drinks," the white words "Enter" and "Exit"?

I know, theoretically, people can fall in love at the mall. People can celebrate. Indeed, it's a birthday that brought my

daughter here. But I don't get it.

I sit under fluorescent tubes set in boxes of six on the ceiling. The picture on the ICEE machine, proffers two cones, red, almost breastlike in blue and red paper cups. But today's heat was too much for the ICEE machine. A hand-printed paper says, "Out of order. Sorry for the inconvenience." Mall words, I think. No one means them. A sign says, "Snacks." A sign says, "Closed." The floor's an orangey-tan in some spots, off-cream by the drink machine. All those curved labels, Pepsi, Coke, A&W root beer. God, they're hideous. Could they ever represent nostalgia someday? Could people collect them? I sit at this slightly sticky table. I sit and I think. Many people spend a big part of their lives at the mall, working; a big part of their holidays here, working overtime.

A girl behind me says, "They're hella Christian. They have a baby almost every year."

While I am pondering that, a man asks, "Can I get...?" "Yes!" the girl behind the counter yips. Her cheerful politeness seems sincere.

It's not even eight o'clock yet. I imagine my daughter having fun, only now ordering dinner while I wait and wait. I think of something my new pal said: the one thing she regretted about child rearing was how she harassed her daughter for spending so much time at the mall. It was normal to go there, my pal said. Harmless and convenient. I hear laughs. A young man holds a young woman close, near a storage closet full of paper towels and cleaning supplies. People at other tables talk quietly, except the nice barista who needs to call out, "venti white!" and "tall latte!" Ice cubes roar and tumble into a paper cup. People stand in line patiently, carrying red and white plastic bags. Eventually the barista takes a break, looks at her phone.

Three pre-teen girls with sweet faces sit at a table. Here come the preteen boys to join them. The boys are wearing

hats, leaning forward, taking bites of jerky. They all look like nice people. The mothers sit nearby, speaking Tagalog, I think.

My back starts to hurt, so I move outside to a different set of tables and chairs in a hallway. The mall is a spookhouse of music, crying, singing, not-quite-heard mutters. Machines display faux comfort: "Touch here to begin." "Need help?" "Refreshing ways to pay" "Enjoy" "Thank you" "Designed to make a difference."

Many couples pass, holding hands. A kind guard points out the bathroom. A dad carries a large box of diapers. A woman wheels a cart loaded with toilet paper. A very short lady in high heels and her tall husband walk by with two short kids.

One by one, the stores close. Behind grills, solitary clerks set tubes of lipstick straight. Nothing protects the Orange Julius station, no grated gates. Someone could leap the counter and steal the paper cups. No one does.

It's not a bad place to write, quiet-ish tables even though they are only feet away from coin-operated ponies, spaceships, and race cars. One could even do homework here. I read poetry. Realistic banana leaves grow in a pot with unrealistic flowers. Even after touching them, I'm uncertain. Could manufacturers master realism to the extent of including flaws? Swedish ivy feels a little plastic even when it's real. At a certain point, everything I notice is profound, no longer annoying.

Under subterranean lights, a mother lifts her child onto a plastic machine and plastic music begins. A canned horn blows. This mother loves her little girl, lets her go on every ride and never loses patience. Maybe she's a mom who works late. Maybe she lives in a single room, and the mall is so big

and spacious, clean, a large living room. Maybe she feels like this is a safe time for her, a haven. Yes, love is at the mall. Thoughtfulness is at the mall. Friendship is at the mall.

It's nearly nine thirty. My daughter hurries to my table with apologies, later than she said she'd be. I look up with a smile. We walk back to the car which is not hot anymore. The sun is gone. The lot is nearly empty. A starry night follows us home.

Greetings from Albany



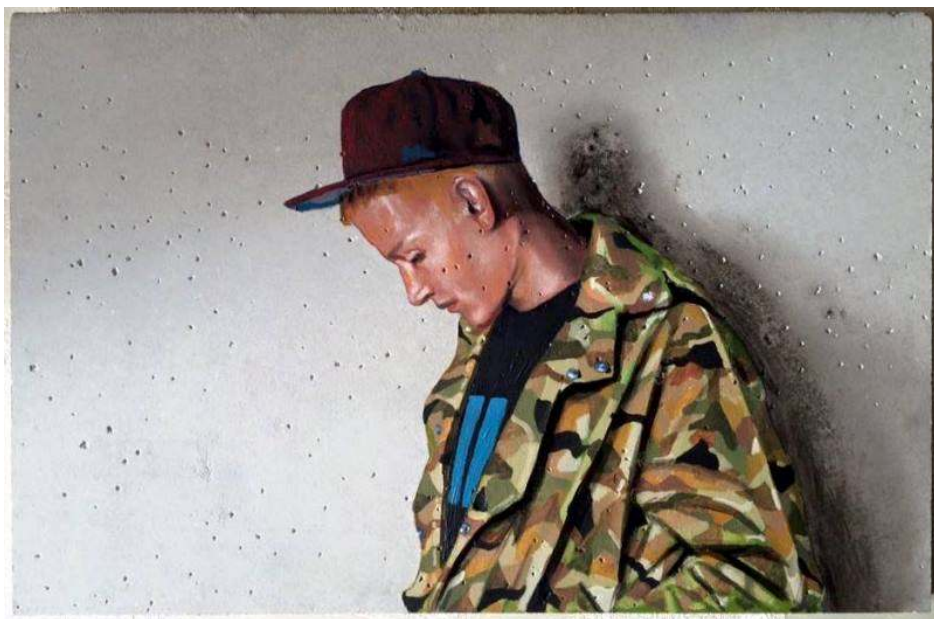
Hasani VibeZ

"I speak for"

I speak for the land like the lorax
Yes he's orange and I'm black
But I speak for the land
For the hands and plans
That were broken
That were treasured like tokens
And sway upon conqueror's minds like an ocean
Moved and shifted their compassion was drifted
But held upon the measure of my heart
Their pain goes unlified
The black mother she weeps while she yells
Yes things fall apart but your actions drift you closer to your
cell
Conflict is deep
But war is hell
The enemy tries to step into my shell
JFK Ghandi MLK it rings a bell
Corrupt governments cast a spell
That spreads like water is a well ...

Mario Loprete

b-boy



Christina Hoag

Becoming an American

I was the first in my family to take out American citizenship. My parents and two siblings decided they didn't want to give up being Australian and were fine with their green cards. Undaunted, I forged ahead with my application. After a simple test with questions such as "name three rights of U.S. citizens"—I was aided by the examiner's discreet glance at a framed copy of the Bill of Rights hanging on the wall, I received notice that I had passed and the date and place of my swearing in.

In a stifling court room in Hackensack, New Jersey, I joined 113 other foreigners, ranging from infants to octogenarians with every tint of human skin color from every corner of our vast globe. In unison, we raised our right hands and disclaimed allegiance to any "foreign prince or potentate," and thus became newly minted, full-fledged Americans. That weekend I hosted a citizenship barbecue for my friends, and my mother baked me a chocolate cake, iced to resemble the star-spangled banner.

It had been a rollercoaster of a journey to get to that point. I moved to New Jersey from Sydney, Australia, when I was thirteen for my dad's job. Like many people around the planet, what I knew of the USA came largely from TV shows, which are unwittingly the biggest propaganda machine for American culture and values. Baseball and "The Brady Bunch." Disneyland and Donald Duck. Hamburgers and French fries. The accents that stretched and flattened o's, turning "hop" into "haap" and the growling hard r's.

In preparation for the move, Dad tacked up a map of the USA onto the kitchen wall so we could study all the states in our new home country as we ate. The prospect of moving to America was exciting. We'd have two summers in a year (in the

southern hemisphere the seasons are reversed), get to eat whipped cream from a can and actually see and touch snow.

Of course, life in reality is much different than life on television.

It was rough going, above all in that first year. Although I spoke English (I thought), Americans couldn't understand me. I had to repeat everything, sometimes multiple times. Every time I opened my mouth in class, heads swiveled to see where this weird accent was coming from, which made me never want to speak. People kept asking if I was from Britain, which I found puzzling. Australian accents don't sound anything like English accents, but to Americans I guessed they did. One girl seemed to resent my way of speech when I told her in an effort to be helpful, "Your locker isn't closed properly." "Why can't you just say it isn't closed 'right'?" she snarked with undue vehemence that took me aback.

Everything about me didn't fit in. I didn't own Levi jeans or sneakers. I got marked wrong for spelling words the British way, such as "colour." No one could read my style of cursive handwriting. Every time one of my parents made a right turn in the car, my stomach lurched at what instinct told me was an impending head on collision. When winter arrived, the novelty of seeing snow quickly melted as I slipped on ice and shivered at the bus stop.

I was desperately homesick and pestered Dad no end, "When are we going back?" But when we did go back to Sydney for a visit, I didn't fit in there, either. Family and friends said I was "American," even though I didn't feel or particularly want to be American. But to them, I seemed American. I had had to adapt—my accent, my clothes—the age-old process of survival. My old friends and relatives didn't understand that, just as Americans didn't understand what it was like to live in a

new country despite their forebears, just a generation or two back in many cases, being immigrants themselves.

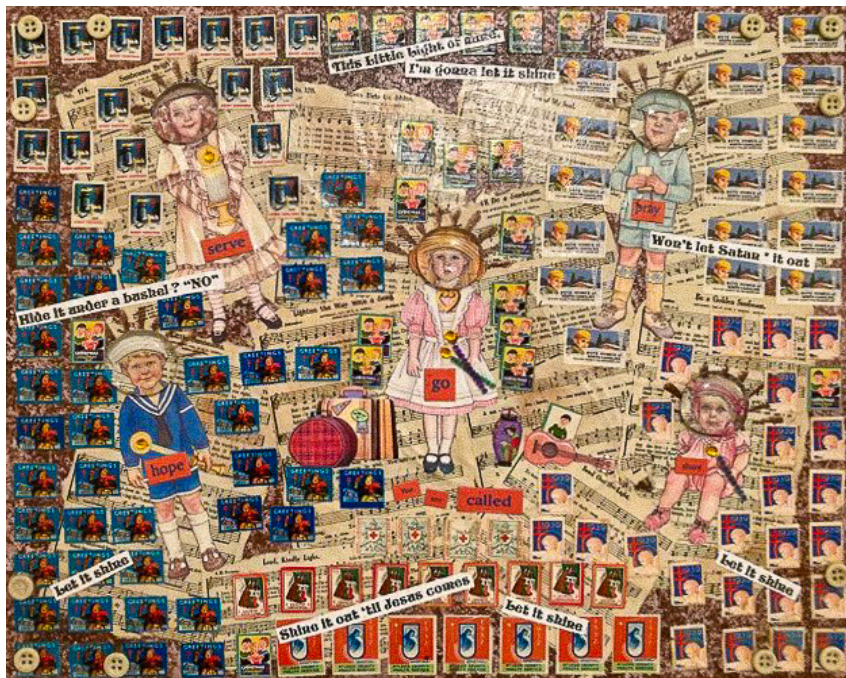
The essence of immigration is embracing the future. That's why, a few years after that painful visit, I decided to apply for U.S. citizenship. Nobody in my family joined me. To them, filing for citizenship came at a cost of their past.

But I wasn't going back to Australia, and neither were they. It seemed silly to hang on to that identity when I had to make my way in the United States. I wanted to have a say in this country, to vote. I wanted to live abroad without worrying whether I'd violated the terms of my green card and wouldn't be allowed back into America.

In that New Jersey courtroom that day, I was happy to become American, and I've never regretted that decision. Taking out citizenship didn't change me or mean that I'd forgotten or discounted my childhood in Australia, which I loved and still miss. Citizenship simply changed my circumstance. It also signaled acceptance, which I've come to realize is a deceptively simple concept. Acceptance is the first huge step into a changed future.

My family got it wrong. Becoming a citizen didn't mean eschewing where I came from. That piece of paper may declare what I am, but it doesn't come close to saying who I am, and the richness of blending the past into the present that an immigrant represents.

This Little Light of Mine



Chris Johnson & Andrew College Students

Rapid Transit



Sujash Purna

An Ode to Waiting Ten Minutes to Lunch

There was nothing
inside this claustrophobic
head at eleven
to twelve except
millions of
malfunctioning
metaphors,
a leftover pizza slice
waiting
like a quiet mouse
in a giant cat's cradle
inside a fridge
in my apartment.

Ten minutes
and I will briskly
take these shoes
that beat the behe-
moth gods, babble
of rubble orbs
of a concrete jungle,
flailing arms
civilization
in a country
obsessed with its
second amendment.

I am glad
not to have
to put on a
bulletproof backpack
this year.

Backpacks
are for books
and maybe your
neatly packed
peanut butter
sandwich in a ziploc
bag with a spiderman
sticker or a heart drawn
by somebody who
made this lunch
for you with love.

There is nothing more beautiful
than living, than breathing free
and talking, waiting, close to
your lunch time.

Image by Jana Hunterova



*"In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times."
Bertolt Brecht*

Text by Mark Blickley

City Sidewalk Christmas Eve 2020

Do my squeaks and squeals sound like frightened cries of hopeful breaths crushed inside a fabric of society that brings exhaled warmth to my facing known yet unseen dangers as I squat before an empty street of holiday cheer fear echoing in each pluck and glide of string, an aural gift of homage to missing loved ones and the magical realism of an old fat white man swathed in red bringing joy to sleeping, uncaged children dreaming of parental oversight and charity down chimney slides into cabin fevers hopefully void of dry coughs and a lack of taste that ignores the seasonal celebration of a poor babe who just three calendar months later will become a thirty-three year old who is humiliated, tortured and brutally slain because of a passionate call for change that replaces hate with love and fear with joy, so I sit on this bleak, frigid sidewalk accepting and resisting the pain of an unraveling Christmas present and uncertain Christmas future with a sweet memory of Christmas past offered up by frozen fingers fiddling musical notes I pray may tender a bit of hope and comfort as glorious attendants fight to save strangers inside the brightly lit hospital across the street.

Mother

The Revlon rollers held the hair tight underneath the hair drier, her face relaxed, a smile appearing on her face as she saw me walk through the doorway that connected the two living rooms. As she sat on the blue carpet, the dryer on top of the couch made a buzzing noise as it dried her hair. I could hear the coffee kettle rattling in the kitchen. "Nina, apagame el café, please," my mother yelled at me over the couch. Although I could barely hear her, I knew what she had said almost like an instinct. She often forgot about the coffee while she was doing other things, and I went and turned it off as I often did. I was a little annoyed when she asked me to do these simple things, and then I would think back at all the simple and not so simple things she did for me every day, and all of a sudden it wasn't a bother for me to do; in a sense, I wanted to make her happy and for all her worries to disappear. The bouquet aroma of the coffee drifted in and out of my nose with every breath I took.

My mother's coffee wasn't just like any coffee, but rather the perfect mixture of sweetness and bitterness exploding inside my mouth, as my taste buds danced with joy. Everything my mother did was like her coffee: a mixture of bitter and sweet. The hot coffee let off steam as I poured it into the small blue mug my mother loved to drink out of, the blackness of it rich and powerful. I finished preparing the coffee with the perfect amount of brown sugar and Coffee Mate creamer. As I walked back towards the living room where my mother was sitting on the carpet, her hair still drying in that obnoxiously loud dryer, I handed the mug to her

stretched hand, and she placed it on the glass coffee table where she always let her coffee sit and get cold before she took a sip. The way she sat there, calm and collected, she looked like she could conquer the world by only the lift of a finger. She looked determined and poised, but at the same time gentle and caring. These were all things that described who my mother was: in my mind she was the strongest person on earth, she could squish me like a bug if I didn't do as she said, yet she could also solve all my problems and wipe away all my tears.

"Tenga ma, esta bien?" I asked my mother as she took the first sip of her coffee. The look on her face was thoughtful, contemplating the taste of the rich black coffee in her mouth. She looked up at me, a smile playing on her lips. "Esta delicioso, Mi hija," I smiled back at her. I felt like I had accomplished the greatest task.

Helping my mother out is one of the things I enjoy deeply. For as long as I can remember, she has been the force behind all of my accomplishments. Without her, nothing would be possible. My mother is one of the most driven people I ever had the pleasure of knowing. Like her coffee, my mother was strong, independent, a force of security. My mother instilled this sense of comfort, and safety, but I also feared her— she demanded to be understood. Young me never understood why she never let me sleep over at friend's houses, or why I couldn't go to certain events like the rest of my friends, or even why she wouldn't let me get my ears pierced. These, among many other things, made me so angry at her; I felt like an outcast not being able to fit in with all the other children around me.

As a young girl, I felt resentment towards the strong women that had raised me. I couldn't make sense of why my mother was the way she was, or why she did the things she did. Although, as I got older and things became more

exposed, such as girls on the news being murdered, kidnapped, raped, I understood all these horrible things were happening around the world, and not so far from where I lived. Shootings in places that should've been peaceful, places that should've been for learning but quickly turned into places of discomfort and fear. As the world became more apparent and more bare, it became very clear to me why my mother was so set on keeping me away from the awful world we lived in. As the world kept exposing its many layers, I started to understand why my mother wouldn't let me take part in what everyone else was doing. I felt abashed by the thought of resenting this wonderful woman who only wanted to keep me safe in the middle of all the things that were happening that I was blind to.

The more she sipped the coffee, the happier she seemed to get. She was looking out of the window now, her hair done drying and the hair dryer turned off, the buzzing no longer present. Now there was just quiet and the low ticking of the clock that sat above the TV. She looked thoughtful as she sat there on the ground, her legs crisscrossed underneath her. I was at the dining table on the other side of the living room staring at her, her soft features relaxed, as she looked out at the yard through the window—I wondered what was on her mind. She was always thinking about something, always worrying, never sleeping through the night when her thoughts kept her awake. “Ma, que piensas?” I asked from across the room. She turned abruptly towards me, as if she had forgotten I was sitting there, “Nada, mi amor, nada” she said. Her face told me she wasn't telling the truth; she looked distant like she wasn't sitting on the carpet drinking her coffee in our living room. She seemed to be in another world, a place in her mind she had created, just for herself. Sometimes I felt

guilty, looking at my mother, for everything she had to give up, and all the things she didn't accomplish for herself because of me. As I watched her take another sip of the coffee, I couldn't help but feel like I was slowly draining my mother just as she drained the coffee from the blue mug.

Contributors



Andrew College Students

Sierra Albritton

Kenyalyn Quevedo

Sarah Merrill

Noah Varsalona

Hasani Vibeze Comer

Joe Baumann's fiction and essays have appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Electric Spec*, *On Spec*, *Barrelhouse*, *Zone 3*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and many others. He is the author of *Ivory Children*, published in 2013 by Red Bird Chapbooks. He possesses a PhD in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. He has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes and was nominated for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories 2016* and was a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction. He can be reached at joebaumann.wordpress.com.

Mark Blickley is a proud member of the Dramatist Guild and PEN American Center. His latest book is the text-based art collaboration with fine arts photographer Amy Bassin, *Dream Streams*. Clare Songbirds Publishing House - Amy Bassin & Mark Blickley.

Hollie Dugas lives in New Mexico. Her work has been selected to be included in *Barrow Street*, *Reed Magazine*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Redivider*, *Pembroke*, *Salamander*, *Poet Lore*, *Watershed Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *Whiskey Island*, *Chiron Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *CALYX*. Hollie has

been a finalist twice for the Peseroff Prize at Breakwater Review, Greg Grummer Poetry Prize at Phoebe, Fugue's Annual Contest, and has received Honorable Mention in Broad River Review. Additionally, "A Woman's Confession #5,162" was selected as the winner of Western Humanities Review Mountain West Writers' Contest (2017). Recently, Hollie has been nominated for a 2020 Pushcart Prize. She is currently a member on the editorial board for Off the Coast.

TAK Erzinger is an American/Swiss poet and artist with a Colombian background. Her poetry has been featured in *Bien Acompañada* from Cornell University, *The Muse* from McMaster University, *River and South Review*, *Wilkes University* and more. Her debut poetry collection entitled, "Found: Between the Trees" was published by Grey Border Books, Canada 2019. Her latest unpublished poetry manuscript "At the Foot of the Mountain" was short-listed by the Eyelands Book Awards and has been accepted for publication by Floricanto Press out of California, 2021. Her short story *Stella's Constellation* is currently under production as an audio drama at *Alt.Stories* and *Fake Realities Podcasts*, in the UK. She lives in a Swiss valley with her husband and cats.

Jean Feingold is a Gainesville, FL-based freelance writer. She moves information from people who have it to people who need it. Her work is regularly published in trade magazines in many industries. Her story "Goodbye. Really." was short-listed in *Brilliant Flash Fiction* magazine and her micro-fiction story "A Baked Memory" was published in *Blink-Ink* Issue #41. She is author of the book "Creating a Farmers Market: Starting from Nowhere" and the Kindle ebooks "The Alien Infection and The Cats," "The Benefits of Concrete Block Homes," and "8 Common Mistakes in Rapid Prototyping."

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, Dalhousie Review and Blood And Thunder. Work upcoming in Hollins Critic, Redactions and California Quarterly.

Christina Hoag is the author of novels *Girl on the Brink*, named to Suspense Magazine's Best YA list, and *Skin of Tattoos*, Silver Falchion Award finalist. She also co-authored *Peace in the Hood: Working with Gang Members to End the Violence*. In 2020, she won prizes for essay and short story in the International Human Rights Arts Festival Literary Awards and for essay and novel excerpt for the Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition. Her short fiction and creative nonfiction have been published in literary journals including *Shooter* (UK), *San Antonio Review*, *Round Table Literary Journal* and *Lunch Ticket*.

Jana Hunterova lives in Prague and is a Czech award-winning freelance photographer and a doctoral program student at the Institute of Creative Photography of the Silesian University in Opava. Her focus is not only as a photographer but also on the history of photography as well as curatorial and lecturing activities. She has recently begun experimenting with short films, several of which have garnered acclaim. She is a member of the international art cooperative, *Urban Dialogues*. Find her at <http://janahunterova.com/>

Zeke Jarvis is a Professor of English at Eureka College. His work has appeared in *Moon City Review*, *Posit*, and *KNOCK*, among other places. His books include, *So Anyway...*, *In A Family Way*, *The Three of Them*, and *Antisocial Norms*. His website is zekedotjarvis.wordpress.com

Chris Johnson is an artist and muralist based out of Columbus, GA. Chris has been a Professor of Art at Andrew College since 2013 and has become regionally renowned for his mural work to revitalize communities through public art. In addition to painting, Professor Johnson also enjoys wood carving, printmaking, and mixed media sculpture. Prof. Johnson is currently working on another body of murals to complete throughout 2021.

Professor **Amanda Knight** has taught at Andrew College since 1999, and she currently serves as the Coordinator of Program Development and Accreditation and Director of International Travel. Professor Knight enjoys travel, reading, gardening, and creating art--both painting and making pottery.

Lita Kurth, MFA- Rainier Writers Workshop, has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and Best of the Net Awards. Her creative nonfiction won an award from Lunchticket. She co-founded a literary reading series, Flash Fiction Forum. Her novel, *The Rosa Luxemburg Socialist Strip Club* was a semi-finalist for the 2019 Faulkner-Wisdom contest. She teaches creative writing at De Anza College and CreatorSchoolCA.com

Originally from Saskatchewan, **Allan Lake** has lived in Vancouver, Cape Breton, Ibiza, Tasmania & Melbourne. Poetry Collection: *Sand in the Sole* (Xlibris, 2014). Lake won Lost Tower Publications (UK) Comp 2017 & Melbourne Spoken Word Poetry Fest 2018 & publication in *New Philosopher* 2020. Chapbook (Ginninderra Press 2020) *My Photos of Sicily*.

Mario Loprete is a graduate of Accademia of Belle Arti, Catanzaro. Mario says, "Painting for me is the first love. An important, pure love. Creating a painting, starting from the spasmodic research of a concept with which I want to send a

message to transmit my message, it's the base of my painting." See more of his work on Instagram @marioloprete.

Sarah Kate Merrill is a unique artist who expresses herself in many different ways. She aims to communicate strength, power, and beauty through putting her soul on canvas.

Bangladeshi-born **Sujash Purna** is a graduate student at Missouri State University. A poet based in Springfield, Missouri, he serves as an assistant poetry editor to the Moon City Review. His poetry appeared in Naugatuck River Review, Kansas City Voices, Poetry Salzburg Review, English Journal, Stonecoast Review, Red Earth Review, Emrys Journal, Prairie Winds, Gyroscope Review, and others. His chapbook collection *Epidemic of Nostalgia* is coming out from Finishing Line Press in July 2021.

Angela Roberts has designed costumes for The Historic Savannah Theatre, the Middlesborough Little Theatre, the Lincoln Memorial University Players, and most recently, for Andrew College's presentation of "Cuthbert Speaks." Her work has been featured on the cover of Savannah Magazine, and she is also an award-winning mixed media artist. She also enjoys calligraphy, writing, singing, and tutoring students, helping them to achieve their academic goals. She works as a Professional Tutor in the Student Success Center at Andrew College.

Blake V. Rose is currently in pursuit of an English degree at East Carolina University and will one day move home to Tennessee. He is proud to have fiction published in Alban Lakes Publishing, Hireath Books, and Adelaide Literary Magazine. Blake has poetry published in the anthology Under the Cherry Tree: 20 Great Poets in Their 20's.

Hasani "Vibez" Comer is a sophomore and triple arts major attending Andrew College. He is a member of Andrew College Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, Sigma Kappa Delta English Honor Society, was named Andrew College Academic Player of the Year (2019-20), Andrew College Men's Soccer Team Captain (2019-20) and now Andrew College Men's Soccer Student-Assistant Coach (2020-21), as well as an Andrew College Student Success center tutor. Beyond that success, Hasani is mononymously known as "Hasani Vibez" American Singer, songwriter, poet, rapper, dancer, producer, painter, actor, and artist from Decatur, Georgia.