

The editors of Shapes invite you to submit your poetry, prose and artwork for consideration for publication in the Spring 2019 issue. Poetry should be typed and single-spaced. Please keep a copy of any poetry or prose that you submit. We promise to handle all artwork with care.

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SHAPES



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Spring 2018

Shapes

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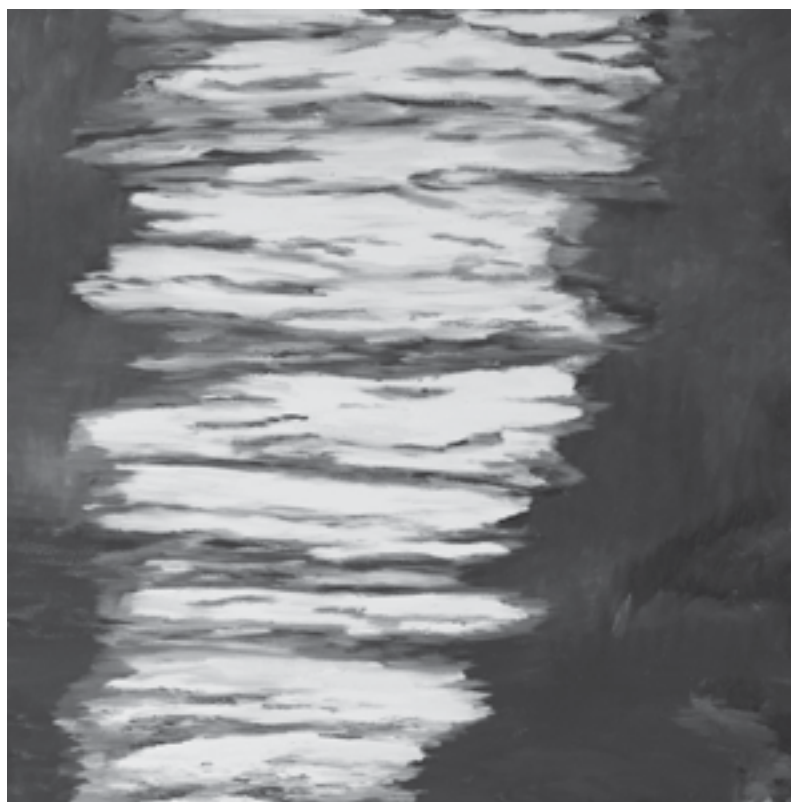
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art by Zack Gardner



art by Alexander Huertas

John Thomas Wetmore

Curriculum Vitae

Today's poetry lesson is that the cigarette-scented
sweatshirt you wear is the mantle of a superhero,
that the seventeen years of poverty it cloaks
are talismans—that the body beneath is a phylactery
containing all the essential truths I cannot teach you:
that your conscience is as invisible as every
bolt-throwing god, that your obedience to it can
pull you like a chariot across cloudless heavens.

I know nothing, except that the heart holds on to hurt
like a blood-slick murder weapon—that getting over
grief is like standing in the shallows of a river waiting
for your leg irons to rust—that you must cry when the body
demands it and ignore the bloodhounds prowling
your perimeter—that the salt-scented pain dogs pursue
is no more you than a denim patch torn from your jeans—
though the wood they chase you to is always lonely.

I know as a poet there are a few laws you must obey:
the second law of motion, which reasons that because
hope and prayer have no mass, we can hold onto them
even at the edge of a black hole. The law of time that
dictates Nana will only die once and they won't dig
her up and play bagpipes when you are ready to mourn.

Finally, the law of comic books, which outlines
our duty to let ourselves be saved by a humble

secret identity and the occasional word of praise.

Jeanine DeRusha

How to Go Back in Time

Go back years ago. Stop when he asks
if you want to be together. Instead,
say no and drive to the Vermont inn
where you will sleep alone and relieved.
Maybe further back, out west with a packed truck,
you crying somewhere in Idaho, scared you made
the wrong choice to move back east.
Go to that strip of road, climb into the truck's cab
and stop crying. Turn around and drive back
to the city you left, to the garden you didn't plant.
It's raining there, as it always is. Further back,
but another city, also in rain, go to the cafe
where you tell him where you've been sleeping,
which is not at your home, and not with him.
Leave him at the table, his face not hurt enough,
and walk up the hill above the college,
where traffic lights shine on the bridges, where the city blinks.
Take this ball of thread and find your way
out of each memory, all of those that haunt you now,
backwards, where you will always find another night,
another talk gone wrong, another person to walk out on,
some moment you can change or make right.
Every scene has a door or sidewalk.
There are stations with trains leaving
that exact point. Why do you sit there, instead, stunned?
Some cold caryatid, a face without expression,
a body without arms.
Suit yourself. Change nothing.



photo by Anonymous

Hugh Murray

Hard Times

On every day in the last 25 years there could have been a newspaper headline saying “the number of people in extreme poverty fell by 137,000 yesterday.”
—Max Roser

Word is that they are planning some cutbacks. A few smart-ass Ivy-league types came in with their laptops and their spreadsheets and their PowerPoints to show that they don’t need all four of us; they could do it all with three. What bullshit.

I know my job, I’ve got a record. China in the early ‘60s? 30 million. And remember Ethiopia? They still play that song every Christmas. Sure, I’ve had a slow time recently, but I’m working this new project in South Sudan that shows a lot of promise.

And it’s not like any of the others can step in and do my work; this is specialized stuff. Just like I couldn’t do War’s job. Well, I probably could, but still.

I wonder who they will decide to can. Death is probably safe, so that leaves three of us, just waiting for the axe.

Anyway, who am I to gripe; times are tough all over. Or, I guess, maybe not – that’s our problem.

I think Pestilence and I might just open a little bistro somewhere.

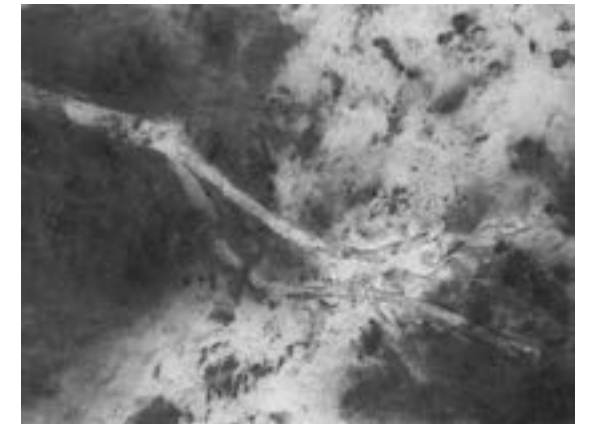


art by Jacqueline Reiss

Meghan DePeau

Ashes

I’m staring into the flames dancing in the woodstove at a quarter to midnight on a Thursday, everyone else sawing logs, and it hits me. I know what I want. I want to know this fine gray dust—all that remains of those who came before me, all that will remain of my one life—will be completely spent. Every breath, every stretch toward light, every scar will all come to this, these hot embers ebbing to this quiet glow.



art by Mary Talbot



photo by Maura O’Connor

Jeanine DeRusha

Once Were Wolves

We're a lot alike. You with your black fur,
me wrapped in dark fleece. We could nap all day
curled head-to-toe on the same stretch of couch.
I've got a thing, as well, for digging dirt
and hate being held back. But we're clean now,
pedicured and leashed. We sit together
in the yard with that same shrunk look: is this
all there is? We're boxed in by the same fence,
weighed down by the same strange ideas of home.
No more fight, fuck, no more hunt or howl.
That doe reminds us of our far-gone pasts.
As she grazes, we only half-recall
some old want to chase her down. Our canines,
once razor-sharp, dull now. We sit. We stay.



art by Lucy Sauder Sceery

John Thomas Wetmore

On the River

The Willimantic river threading past
the old mill reminds me how life
imitates nature in endless ways—
how there is a river inside of us
washing us clean, how the rivers
outside are so fast we cannot catch
up, how even on the current the water
outstrips our prow. Time is just
another river. If I am keeping pace,
then why am I now on my knees
in front of my grandmother, serving
her roasted herb potatoes, crawling
along, dabbing at the dirty trail
she leaves as she drags her feet behind
her aluminum walker? Why am I gently
lifting her neuropathy-stricken foot
in its pink slipper to check if the sole
is clean? Why again? By the time I return
to my body, standing over the river,
listening to its liquid cadence instruct
stones to smoothness, a certain measure
of the present has stretched its neck
past me, peeking from its tortoise
shell, its steady legs not forgetting

the race. I am the hare taking solstice,
half my body in the past. In one long ear
Nana is whispering that her kidneys
are failing, that she is dying,
her voice escaping almost as a whine,
her first, perhaps, in eighty-four
stoic years. I try to shake her memory,
so that I can be here, above the river,
but I remember the smell, the sound
of her scratching her scaled back
against the couch fabric. My nose
is wrinkling, my eyes are wet, the water
is in my other ear—reminding me that
if we dirty our hands caring for anyone,
the river is washing that away too.



photo by Aaron Koret



photo by Sarah Pasqualini



photo by Sarah Pasqualini

Hugh Murray

She Stomps Her Feet

The day is still
as a pond at dawn.

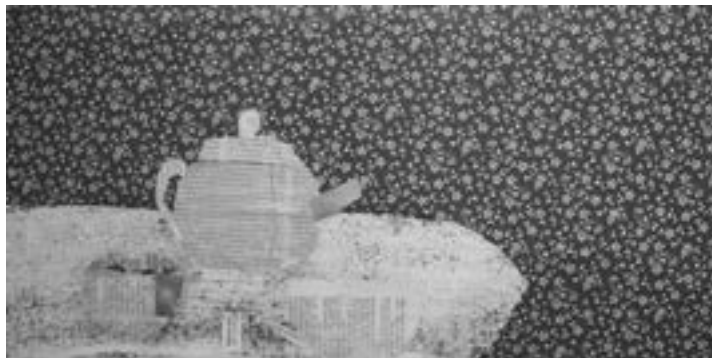
Agitated after a social morning,
adjusting to the quiet of just us two,
my mother sits across from me at the table,
staring through the bouquet of pencils and pens.

Fewer and fewer words and phrases are
in her quiver.

She stomps her feet, out of time,
as she sings “Old MacDonald,”
or a version of it.

I sit at the table, muscles warm from
a morning run, and laugh with her
as she dances, and we sing her song.

It sounds like her.



art by Melissa Fisher

Meghan DePeau

Anniversary

—*May 6, 2016*

This is the day I lost you—
a year ago today. I thought
the world had stopped, but
I’ve since realized that it
never does. Nature
evolves. Forests, sea
grass, seeds. It flows. Rain
fills rivers, swirls in deltas,
slips into the grand
solution of the ocean.

It wasn’t the world; it was me.
I needed to stop—to recognize
lungs, heart, feet, hands;
they still knew everything
they’d known before they knew
they would have to go on
without you. They can
do the work, hold
the space you’d held
for me, as knobbed roots
secure an oak while
slowly stretching
wider, deeper
into rocky soil,
reaching for water.



photo by Emily Tyrol

Esther McCune

On Caring for Orchids

It arrived on Christmas Eve—an orchid which rose on a stem two-feet high, curving to one side with a graceful flow of purple, deep blue, violet and fuchsia petals. A card stated all it needed was two ice cubes a week. But I recalled how complex orchids were.

When I was eight or nine, Aunt Mary, an able gardener, taught me about orchids, showing me displays in colorful picture books. Several times that summer we drove in her Studebaker to nurseries for lectures by experts in Orchid-lore. We learned of their devious, determined nature.

When winds scatter seeds they cling to branches so that sprouts and petals thrive, floating mid-air. Blossoms lure wasps, entrapping them, and then sending the pollen-bearing wasps on their way. To lure bees, flowers fire pollen darts to their lips to ensure pollen will be spread.

After the lectures we toured nurseries and green houses to view the exotic, luminescent plants. I was always overwhelmed by the beauty of the orchids and more than a little frightened by their vast powers. And now there was an orchid standing by the Christmas Tree.

I placed the gift on the coffee table across from a pot of philodendron where both could capture sunlight each day. All went well until I witnessed a horrific scene one morning. An orchid leaf had reached fourteen inches across the table to give the philodendron an unladylike whack.

The assault left half the plant dead. I screamed and quickly moved the orchid across the room to the dining table. Stamen and pistil seemed to vibrate, glare, as I delivered a speech on pantheism and the need to respect other living beings.

Since then, I've adopted a regimen of placing ice cubes on the orchid each Sunday before church, predicated by reverence, and, let's face it, fear.



art by Diana Lemcoff



art by Anonymous

Jeanine DeRusha

Protest

On the day you buried your best friend,
you punched a man so hard
he stumbled backwards and held his face.
I suppose you heard men yelling
from the lawn across the street.
Knowing something of your ways,
I imagine how you walked over with stern purpose,
how you spoke to them, a soldier's way
of clearing things up, how one of the younger men,
his anger too boiling to settle, lunged
and you struck, thirty minutes before you stepped into your suit,
an hour before young Marines with white gloves
handed a folded flag to your best friend's wife,
a month before you drove her north to the Marian Monastery
to pray for what you lost.

Maybe you'd have had more patience
if you hadn't been with your friend the night before,
urging him still, yelling at medical staff for morphine.
Maybe if you hadn't sat every night for a month
bedside with another friend before this,
as he died in his house, his wife exhausted,
you lifting what was left of him onto the commode,
all his vigor bones, all his pride flagged.
Maybe if you hadn't seen what this life comes to,
what your life is coming to,
and felt what's gone and what will be lost.
Grief coiled, torqued until what's tight
cuts loose and sends out its force,
this feeling that the body is too small to hold such pain
without protest.



photo by Laith Al-Mazraawy

John Thomas Wetmore

Red Beards

The guy at the liquor store and I are content
to pretend we're happy to see each other.
He smiles through his wild red beard, the black stump
of a dead tooth gleaming like rough diamond
in his gum. We say whattup—slap hands, step
into the back cooler. He's telling me about the
tweets he sent to Trump about tax laws...Mexico...
the usual. He unburies his stash of hipster beers
for me to examine. He takes one out, cradles it
like a waiter at the French Laundry presenting
a vintage, lets it rest gently against the pale,
blue-veined marble of his forearm.

This makes me feel important, somehow, as I read
the label, thoughtfully stroking my ginger stubble.
Imperial Mexican Biscotti Cake Break.
I poke my index finger into the sweat-soured
leather of my wallet, counting notes to see if I've
got enough to live deliciously on a Friday night.
He shows me others—the Blaecorn Unidragon,
the No Hero, the Maple Jesus. I nod, playing
the field poker-faced as I listen to him talk.
He swaggers around his liquid horde like a pirate—
tells me it's not all bad with Trump, lists off
the reasons, indifferent as a mercenary as he does:
for one, he's gonna federally legalize weed
because the fuckin' FBI can't enforce legislation
disparately between states...or something. He asks
me if I'm going to the gun-owners' march, says
non-violent drug offenders will finally be able
to own guns in their homes legally—thank God.

He says at the march, he's going to be fucking strapped,
camel-bone Bowie knife on each thigh, ten blades
in his belt. Nunchaku around your neck? I add.

Fuck yeah brother, I'll bring my fuckin' katana—
tons of gun laws in D.C., but they don't care about
blades. He shows me another craft brew, draws
my attention to the bottle date with a knuckle
striped white with box-cutter scars. Fuck it,
I think, who cares about expiration? Why not buy
them all, drink enough to convince myself the gun
march is a good idea—hell, maybe even the Juggalo march
will be fun. After all, everybody needs a cause,
but maybe not reason. As if to assure my thoughts,
my beer guy says, Ah, fuck it—all of it. Just politics man.
And he's right. Washington can sit and spin,
me and the beer store guy are gonna swig and swagger
all the way down the Post Road, smile behind our
wild red beards like gentlemen, gunslingers, pirates—
anything besides two drunks worrying over

expiration dates in the back cooler of the liquor store.



art by Trae Brooks

Edit Dipippo

Dreams 1982

The day Ticketmaster deflated months
of my anticipation, its endless busy tones
piercing my heart then crushing it with *sold out*,
you came home before dark.
It was your night off from your second job,
where you traded bookkeeping skills
and the rhythmic roll of adding machine numbers
for the driving hum of a vacuum cleaner
across wall-to-wall carpet in the kind of house
for which you were saving.

I imagine that while you climbed the four flights
to our one-bedroom apartment, you envisioned
something besides my breathless sobs of injustice,
posters of Rick Springfield taunting me from my pink walls.
You probably hoped for easy conversation
over a hot meal with Dad and me,
to pull out the living-room sleeper early,
let your dreams render you weightless on the thin mattress
before waking in the dark
to turn more numbers in overtime hours.

Some may remember the concert,
but I only remember this: Briefly
you bend close to make out my words.
Slumped by my phone, tears now receded,
I vow to strip my walls bare
after the rejection from Carnegie Hall.
And then, with your spring jacket still on,
you sweep Dad, along with his protests to stay home,
back to the seven train, back to the city
to find Carnegie Hall.
The street light casts a soft glow
on your smiling eyes
when you bend low to my bed
with our tickets in your hand.



art by Jennifer Lotstein



art by Lauren Peoples

Ailish and Bronagh - A Love Story



art by Ita Segal

The two-bedroom home in Laguna Beach was to be bequeathed to their daughters upon their deaths. The sisters' wills had been drawn up one hour after the closing on the Florida property, before the ink was dry.

Ailish (I'-lish) and her sister Bronagh (Bro'-nah) had seen to it. In fact, they'd always made it their priority to stay sharply focused; to never let anyone get one over on them, especially when legal matters were involved. They were eighty years old, still sound of mind and body. Together, they continued making wise moves, protecting their rights, securing assets, insuring that loved ones would be able to reap the benefits from years of their hard work. They'd made out living wills, along with a rather lengthy manifesto regarding end of life decisions. These documents were signed, notarized, and stored in the sisters' fire-proof, triple-locked safe.

Although they were the same age, they were not twins. Born only 11 months apart, they were as different as nice and naughty. Ailish hated hearing the expression, Irish twins. She always spoke right up if anyone mentioned it. She ex-

plained why it was mostly an insult; that when the Irish came to live in America and had children close in age, they were scorned. It was said the Irish had no self-control. No morals. They were ostracized in their new communities. Still, the sisters had always been very close, and at times, when they were very young, their mother would dress them alike. Brought up in an Irish household with several younger siblings, they'd stuck together.

Both liked to tease their younger siblings. They often got into fist fights with neighborhood kids. Consequently, they were given a whipping from their quick-tempered father and sent to their shared bedroom, without supper. This punishment meant that he had to die. The sisters conspired and planned. A slow and tortuous death for him. Maybe poison.

Late nights, they'd sneak beneath the covers in one or the others' twin bed, whispering secrets; things they'd heard in school, things of a sexual nature. Their mother forbade such talk. So they'd planned to push their mother from the top of the hall stairs, which were at least one flight down. They'd do it when she'd least expect it.

Of course they never did murder their parents. The talk of it was just enough to soothe their psyches and the

stinging welts from the leather belt. This was the beginning of how the sisters came to habitually hatch plans together.

As years passed, the sisters grew older and moved apart; to opposite ends of the east coast. Each got on with the marrying of husbands and raising of children.

But the sisters' ties could not be broken: not by time, neither love nor money and certainly not by distance. Their extended visits and telephone conversations tended to turn into marathons, as together they continued to plan birthday parties, vacations and eventually for their old age. They acquired membership in The Hemlock Society and squirreled away various medications, enough to supply a small country. They studied the book *Final Exit*; both found it deeply spiritual and comforting, as if it were a religion.

Their children grew up and got married. Grandchildren were born as the years passed. Husbands passed; Ailish's in 1980, Bronagh's three years later. New plans went into effect. The sisters sold their houses. According to their pre-arranged agreement, they combined their profits to purchase what they both understood and accepted would be their final home. They moved pre-approved belongings into their new house.

The combination of their possessions made their two-bedroom home cozy and cottage-like. Bronagh, with her gentle ways and soft spoken demeanor, brought pastels and peace into the home, while Ailish embellished the rooms with quaint plaques and signs, of poetic nature. She'd always had a love and an appreciation of the written word.

Their combination of furniture was not unlike the sisters; mismatched, frugal and outdated. The pieces had been purchased at thrift shops. A faded plaid sofa and matching love seat took up most of the space in the living room. Crochet doilies lay like bandages over tears in the arms of the furniture. Pink marble-top end tables, marred with ancient coffee cup stains, exposed their ages, like the growth rings on a tree.

Although they'd cared (back in the day) for make-up and dress, the sisters didn't have much use anymore for what they called primping. They'd quit dyeing their hair. On any given day you'd find them wearing a simple, long gray braid down their backs or a tightly wound bun, knotted on the top of their heads. Once they'd reached a certain age, comfort and no-fussing had replaced make-up and vanity.

“Let’s just always wear bathing suits and robes. Maybe a long shift and flip-flops when we have to go out?” Bronagh suggested.

Ailish shrugged. She was in a funk. Silently, she skimmed the in-ground pool, dipping and dragging the long pole over the surface of the turquoise water. The sun glinted and shimmered over the water as she scooped dead beetles, one brown widow spider, a live salamander and errant palm fronds into her net, then dumped the whole shebang over the fence rail with a thud and a plop. Orange and pink sponge noodles and plastic arm floaties bobbed on top of the water like abandoned buoys, adding to Ailish’s melancholy mood. Her granddaughter Melanie had left that morning, returned to Connecticut. Her summer vacation was over.

“I miss her already.” Ailish sighed heavily, as she placed the skimmer back on its hook. “Do you think they’ve boarded the plane yet? Maybe she’ll miss her flight and come back to me.”

“Well, I don’t suppose she will, Ailish. You know Melanie has to start school next week.” Bronagh was sweet, kind and patient. She always had been.

Now, looking up from her book, she pushed her sunglasses up over her forehead and peered at Ailish.

“Ailish honey, you showed her one terrific time. You’re a terrific grandmother. Mel is taking lasting memories with her. Write to her. She loves your poems. We can visit her, too, you know. It’ll be okay. You’ll adjust. Florida is our cup



art by Ita Segal

of tea.”

Bronagh’s attempts to always soothe her older sister were self-serving, for when Ailish was pissy or sad, there went Bronagh’s mood. Their friends used to tease them, sing-singing, “Ike and Mike, they both think alike.” It was true.

Ailish was the elder sister by one month. She was prone to doldrums and tantrums, but motherhood had mellowed

her temperament and old age had made her wiser. Secretly, she believed her intellect was superior to her sister’s. She gave herself kudos for her writing talent. Her keen sense of style, exquisite penmanship, her eye for nature’s beauty; all these talents were Ailish’s alone. But lately, Bronagh had noticed some troubling signs from her sister, beginning the day after her five-year old granddaughter had left.

She’d flown in to Florida via Southeast Airlines, as an unaccompanied minor, for a two-week stay with her great aunt and grandmother. After a busy two weeks that included touring Disney theme parks, Sea World, and playing in the sun, sand and surf in Orlando and Key West, it was time for Melanie to leave. As the Uber driver pulled away, little Mel had waved, smiled and blew kisses to Ailish from the suv’s back window.

Ailish was the one who’d cried.

Then, for three days straight she moped in silence, slept on the chaise lounge in the lanai. She refused to eat anything but strained baby food, which she asked Bronagh to buy for her, claiming she was too embarrassed. She lost interest in watching Jeopardy. That was their favorite show, their routine, with Ailish calling out answers

before the contestants could say, “What is....”

“I can’t go in my room, Bronagh. It’s too isolate.”

“You mean isolated?”

“You know what I mean. Oh well, maybe you don’t. Sometimes I don’t even know what I mean.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, fingernails strumming the kitchen table, Bronagh stared at Ailish. She’d come to this conclusion: Ailish was different, in subtle and non-specific ways. Her clothing was a tad more garish. Recently, at the local thrift store, she’d chosen to buy striped housecoats and house slippers, embellished with multi-colored rhinestones. Ailish had always been the conservative one. Worse than that, Bronagh noticed Ailish had put the housecoat on inside out and backwards.

“Are you okay?” she questioned Ailish.

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m concerned, that’s all,” Bronagh answered softly, looking directly into her sister’s eyes.

Ailish faced her sister; arms akimbo, a grin on her face,

“Oh what now? You’re such a warrior, I meant worrier.”

Ailish had always been the grammarian in the family, a walking Webster’s Dictionary, but recently, she’d been at a loss for words.

Bronagh reflected on the past. Although Ailish could be high-strung and bossy, she had always been fiercely protective of her. Bronagh remembered how Ailish had often lied to their father, taking the blame and beatings for what Bronagh had done. Ailish would crack jokes that made them both laugh through their tears. Like a turtle, retracting into its shell for protection, Ailish’s rough exterior, sarcasm and edgy sense of humor were defense mechanisms used to preserve her own dignity. In return, Bronagh gave her sister respect and support.

Bronagh averted her gaze from her sister and stared down at her own thin gold wedding band. As she nervously twisted it around her boney arthritic finger, she thought about how she’d made it known that when it was her time to go, this ring was going with her. Suddenly, she felt alone. She was an iceberg, broken loose, bobbing around lost and beginning to melt, surrounded by vast, south Florida waters that had seemed so warm, so tranquil. She’d always had her sister to lean on.

Ailish had always been the outspoken one, the leader of their pack and the chief decision maker. Bronagh felt a role reversal coming on. She wasn’t ready for the challenge, the carrying out of wishes, the fulfilling of promises she and Ailish had made to each other. She needed to find inner strength now. She was determined to keep their secrets and carry out the plans they’d put into place so many years ago.

But Bronagh was still so full of life. She loved being able to breathe in and out effortlessly. There’d been a time she’d felt pain with each breath, when she had her double mastectomy. Ailish had been there for her, after the surgery. She’d left her own children, flown across the miles, bringing Bronagh comfort and care. They’d cried, then laughed together during Bronagh’s convalescence. Ailish had driven her to the ocean and helped her to walk along the shore barefoot, on All Saints Day. This was a belief, handed down by their grandmother; that blessed be the faithful who entered to touch the ocean water on this holy day.

Just thinking about her grandmother brought strong and steadfast Bronagh to tears. Oh how she wished she could ask her what she should do for Ailish, what would be best. Then she thought of that manifesto in the safe. Wasn’t that a life plan? Hadn’t she and Ailish made arrangements, agreements? Reading these documents over again renewed her convictions. She’d be okay. When

the time came, they'd both be okay.

So they lived in retirement from day-to-day, soothing their aching joints on the warm sandy beach, which was a short walk from their back yard. At night the ocean waves lulled them to sleep. Until it didn't.

Ailish began having insomnia and restlessness. Neighbors had seen her pacing the sidewalks at 3 a.m. in her nightgown. Then there was the night she lit the sofa on fire. The commotion of sirens and concern for the sisters' safety brought worried neighbors to Bronagh's door. The fire department called on social services. They recommended a nursing home for Ailish, telling Bronagh that around-the-clock care would be the safest solution. They brought commitment papers and placed them on the kitchen table for Bronagh to sign. They advised her not to wait any longer.

Bronagh took a deep breath and replied,

"I won't. You have my word on it. I will always keep my sister safe." And she kept that promise, not to the Department of Social Services or the ombuds-

man; these folks were just doing their jobs, but to her sister.

Gathering every item on the list Ailish had written, Bronagh packed a wicker picnic basket including: two empty china teacups, one hand-stitched quilt (folded and stored in two plastic freezer-size bags) one box of Kleenex tissues and one 9" by 12" manila envelope containing legal matters. Then she sat up in her grandmother's rocking chair all night watching Ailish twitch



photo by Maura O'Connor

and call out from tortuous sleep. She read poetry as the hours passed, until she fell into a peaceful slumber.

Bronagh awoke early and walked to the lanai. She saw the sun rising as she looked to the east, toward the ocean. All was still outside, until the pool's pump kicked on. The backyard flood light blinked off. A lone

seagull circled against a gray, overcast sky. Bronagh smiled. The beach would be deserted.

Bronagh crushed a potpourri of pills the sisters had hidden away, brewed a kettle of orange tea and funneled the mix into a thermos. Next, she woke Ailish and took her by the hand, whispering,

"Time now to come with me."

Still in their nightgowns, arm-in-arm, the sisters walked a short distance to the deserted beach. Bronagh carried their basket. Their bare feet slipping into powder-soft white sand, left no footprints. The two walked on until they reached a secluded sand dune. Bronagh spread their quilt down atop warm sand. The sisters sat down. Bronagh poured

hot tea and honey, laced with a lethal overdose into a fine china cup. The only sounds; the ocean's calm waves, lapping rhythmically ashore, and the whispery rustling of tall green sea grass, as gentle morning breezes passed through.

Bronagh tipped the tea cup to Ailish's lips, holding it for her, murmuring words of encouragement until Ailish had

sipped the last drop. She watched calmly as Ailish's eyes rolled back in her head. Her body slumped against her sister, like a limp ragdoll. Bronagh sang an old Irish

lullaby to her as she slipped a plastic bag over Ailish's head and tied it with silk ribbons. Then Bronagh held Ailish. Even when she'd gasped her final breath and

Bronagh could not feel a pulse, she continued to hold, rock and sing to her sister. Even as with one hand, Bronagh poured a second cup of tea.



photo by Alexander Huertas



photo by Shannon Gerrity

B.P. Greenbaum

Lessons From Grandpa

My grandfather once taught me how to find kin in the marble orchard near his home. He'd hold my hand, with me a step behind; we'd walk on Aunt Minn, Uncle Al, black loam on our shoes. In rain, small stone lambs melted above all the baby bones. He would point, say typhoid, scarlet fever, men who dealt with mumps, died of measles, and so anoint graves for so many of our good people. He taught me to cool coffee in saucers, fold our hands, make fingers into steeples, how to bear the love of lonely daughters, and, when he died, where to put him in the ground, how life bears us all, irreparably, down.



photo by Aymee Perdomo

Edit DiPippo

Six and Up

I don't get why the card game Uno is recommended for seven and up. Colors, shapes and numbers one to ten start hammering the young brain at age two. Our six-year-old is an old pro strategically fanning the cards in her small hands. Tonight she slams them palm down onto the kitchen table when after three rounds the adults call an end to the game and a beginning to bed-time routine. She refuses to get up until she wins one round.

Because so much is adorable at six we grant her one more game. Big sister distracts her while father shuffles the cards, but they can't fool her with the improbability of her good luck. I expect my daughter's pride to demand an honest hand after she loudly proclaims *You did that on purpose!* But she instantly settles into the bounty of her seven *Wild* and *Wild-Plus Four* cards.

No twists in this happy-ending story, we trade secret glances that bad cards shall not fall her way and we watch her eyes shine on the center stack with every turn of hand. She says little, smiles often, and to assure her victory remembers to say *Uno*.

We think we need to fake surprise, then exalt in her triumph, but she repeats what she's known all along: *You did that on purpose!* She holds her smile and basks in the good fortune that came her way.



art by Chris Rogowski



photo by Heidi Campbell

Kate Kobs

Elizabeth Park in Winter

No one else braved the blizzard
 so we share the expanse with each other,
 bundled up to beat the cold,
 wool hats, rubber boots, cozy gloves.
 The falling snow mutes all noise,
 but inside this garden, there is no sound to muffle.
 No birds or squirrels, no children or music
 that the summer months attract in droves.
 From the footbridge view, the frozen pond
 where mammoth goldfish glide beneath the ice,
 biding time until the thaw.
 The snowflakes waft through the air
 landing gently on the trellises that border the paths,
 which wait for the spring roses to envelop them
 in a psychedelic explosion, every pigment in bloom.
 But for now, all is white.
 The world is on pause, it only exists
 outside the edges of the park.
 Inside, only me, and you, and our honey-hued dog
 whose legs are too short for the snow.
 Tomorrow we can shovel, and pay the bills.
 Someday we'll have a mortgage, kids, life, stress.
 Today it's just us and the sleeping rose garden in the snow.

photo by Maura O'Connor



Maura O'Connor

For Loss

"Some things cannot be fixed, they can only be carried."
 —Grief Counselor

Back when my son was innocent
 and I was just a mother
 driving boys to their practice,
 to their sports, and first dances,
 bearing witness to the sweetness
 of a carload of changing voices
 singing along with the radio
 "Hey There Delilah," and
 "Oh, it's what you do to me"
 marveling that they knew every word
 full of promise and abandon with each verse
 louder and surer than the last
 as if the world could not be torn in two
 nor the heart ever ache.



photo by Emily Tyrol

John Thomas Wetmore

Ode to the Shower Spider

We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us...

—Gene Wolfe

I wasn't afraid when I first saw you—
I just felt bad, thinking you must have
the worst real estate agent in history
to end up wedged between the plastic
overhang of my shower
and the dull, beige wall.

You have endured much in your tenure:
toneless renditions of death metal
echoing at disturbing volumes,
mornings after I've binged on ghost
pepper tacos and Mexican coffee,
plus the unexpected thud of wet
towel that shakes you in your web—
just to name a few.

Sometimes I like to pretend you
are happy there, that the steam from a hot
shower transforms my apartment
bathroom into a tropical resort,
that the tiny, scuttling ants who
creep up from the molding contain
coconut milk in their hard,
succulent abdomens.
Remember when you adventured
into the shower and I turned on the faucet
without noticing you? You must have
felt immortal when your silk caught
my finger and I lifted you out
from the deluge—maybe you felt
like a god was on your side.

photo by Sarah Pasqualini



Still, I know one day you will teach me
that we can weave care into anything,
when I find you on your back, curled legs
making you look so small, cradled
by the soft threads that have come
from your body.

Nancy C Murray

Prayer for Remembrance

Truly,
on the Camino
walking from Castañeda to O Pino
I encounter so many pilgrims
giving such love—
the American sharing food with the
Lithuanian, the Frenchman helping the
injured German, the farmer providing
a freshly grown snack, the business woman
stopping to give directions,
the prophet offering
all in need a wise word or a hug, everyone
singing and laughing and crying together as we walk—
that I ask myself
how can people forget our connection
to each other?

Truly,
does the flower guard against
the kiss of the bee?

art by Nicole Aspinale



B.P. Greenbaum

Songs

I like beautiful melodies telling me terrible things.
—Tom Waits

I can't hear the Irish shanty
that told of rotted boats pulled down,
or the bagpipes of the skirted men
who rode the waves here,
only to surrender to the tide.

The Vikings in their long boats
sang while drowning.
African voices bled through the hulls
of slave ships, their shackled songs
escaping to the open ocean air.

It is said that all songs ever sung
still exist. Countless melodies ride waves
that could be heard if only
we found the right frequency,
if we knew how to tune our ears.

But for tonight, you and I can float
on the length of our breath,
coast on the faint rhythmic rush
of blood through veins.

Rest your head on my chest.
Listen. Please,
tell me if you hear
a song worth singing.



photo by Madison Sullivan



photo by Ronald Simmons

Nancy C Murray

Concussion



photo by Ally Margelony

Lying on the couch, hour after hour,
waiting for the pain to stop and the mind
to reboot, I am amazed at how much there
is to see out the living room window.

Today, a gnat makes his path across the window:
a tiny companion hopping and walking down the glass.
Yesterday, it was a bright red cardinal on the
spare branches of the dogwood tree, and
another day, a still, majestic hawk in the distant oak.

Hours spent staring at the long cones drooping off
the tall pine tree. The wind stirs the branches
but the cones never let go—tenaciously holding fast to their
sustenance. I, too, remain unmoving.

Sometimes I hear voices or the sound of a basketball
bouncing—neighborhood boys blissfully unaware of their
lumpish audience peering over the back of the couch
two houses away. I don't notice when they leave.

The roof of the garage: snow covered dazzling
white, then dappled grey shingles appear.
Finally, today, I watch as the last of the snow melts,
slow like a moving tide. Perhaps my mind is melting too.

The sky sometimes blue, sometimes grey: did the sun
shine on me today, or was it yesterday?

Concussion II

When we are at war,
I feel as though the land
is hardening beneath our feet,
ground cracking, earth splitting
into shards that separate me from you.
But then a fully bloomed moon
beams through the windows
as you lean in toward me,
as spring rain still sweet
slides down the half-closed panes.
A cathedral of sheets over our heads;
sanctuary is what you are,
if I had to limit you.
I have marked up the lunar
calendar, so as to follow
your animalistic movements
through the nights. You—
passionate, elusive; Me—
captivated, undaunted. I pursue,
and then you come to kiss me,
promising a primal blush
of blood.



photo by Andre Clay

photo by Maura O'Connor



Concussion III

Crosswords, logic problems, brain benders,
word finds—puzzle books were my childhood
friends. However, I would occasionally turn the
page and, with dread, find a maze. “Help Sally get
from school to home, but don't run into
the big bad wolf.” Impatience would always set in
two tries ending in the woods, or, even worse,
with the wolf—and I would just go backwards
through the maze. Always easier, and I could
move on to something fun, like a crostic or,
if lucky, a math puzzle.

Now, trying to speak is like a maze, but there's
no way to circumvent it. I'll start a
sentence and it will

Then, I try again, that way didn't work, and
I'm glad about that thingy dinner. What was
I saying? Right, there's my good friend. Crap,
what is her name?? Please don't come over here!

And then, without any way of knowing when
it will happen, I convey a thought, start to finish,
without a single misstep. At least that one time,
I avoid the wolf, am safe at home.



photo by Aymee Perdomo

Maura O'Connor

The Constant Engineer

I chuckle today when I hear that “wind turbine technologist” is the best new job, thinking of your plan to put a windmill on our roof back in the ‘70s, during the first wave of gas lines and skyrocketing inflation. All those fan patents, air movement systems and blade designs you happily tucked away in wooden chests for safe-keeping, ever the pragmatist, the constant engineer, but Mom said “No,” and “What would the neighbors think?” as if they had a thought for us.

“We’re not in Holland,” passed my sibling’s lips. Only I saw your vision—a tall wooden tower rising up over our white colonial, with a head of spinning blades, cutting the air directly above us. I was unsure of the details—how circulation would create energy, being a kid and not in possession of a logical mind, but I believed in you and I believed you could make heaven and earth move— not just the wind.



art by Maggie Gammell

Kathleen Roy

Ode to Carrion

On the 55 mph road
black velvet wings swoop down
to chance having a meal—
country road fast food.

With beak sharp and precise
as a surgeon’s scalpel,
she extracts a tiny field mouse
splayed tire-tread flat
on the cold black asphalt.

Stiff brown fluff secure,
she takes flight,
escaping the cycle of life
seconds before I speed by.



art by Elisa Donovan

Stephen Campiglio

Strata

City trash a foot deep
inches along,
as if with many feet.

A hand inside of me tugs at the root of my brain.
The other hand tries the lock on a door in vain,
then another, and several more,
but for what or to see whom, I'm not sure.

Entertaining the sick thought that earth's been infested
by two-legged rodents and that I'm one of them,
isolated from the pack,
I prick my nose to the wind
and follow the smell of the subway,
wafting up to the street.

Taking the stairs down to the station,
but for which train or to go where, I'm not sure,
I wait on the platform
for such a timeless stretch
that I begin to embody the emptiness.
At last, from the dark mouth of the tunnel,

a train arrives,
passenger-less
and without a sign
of destination,
but humming efficiently
and with an air
of running on time.



photo by Madison Sullivan

As I step inside, it departs;
the car, strewn with old newspapers,
the walls, thick with graffiti,
and all lit by a soiled light.

Pawing through the piles for something to read,
I think the only way out is to write.

Bill Moorhead

The Manager

You cannot grip the club too tight.
I watch our cagey manager.
He knows who to ride, who to stroke,
whose heritage he can deride.

I hear him razzle the slowpokes
like a morning snarling chainsaw
but then just flips a smile at me,
“Kid, you bring your good stuff today.”

His game is keep the flow of calm,
tighten focus, loosen muscles,
raise the threshold of attention.
He will grasp a pitcher's jersey

just above his hummingbird heart,
watch for darting eyes that worry.
He won't try to cram down courage
but he can find it if it's there.

All of baseball is just like this.
Hold a little bird in your hand.
Squeeze too hard and you can kill it.
Not enough and it flies away.



photo by Maura O'Connor

Listra Mitchell Simmons

Illegal

*Alberto
left for Denver a Greyhound bus he said
where they don't check you*

*walking working
under the silver darkness
walking working
with our mind
our life*

—Juan Felipe Herrera
from “Everyday We Get More Illegal”



art by Maggie Gammell

Juan's words fell with a prize fighter's precision
onto my withered consciousness.
The issues of the world were nothing
compared to the focus of my self-pity.

Every day we do get more illegal!
Shaken awake
by the plight of illegals
I thought of mother
leaving behind her nine young children,
fleeing abuse,
her single desire
to forge an escape route,
a road away
from poverty and mental stagnation.

My mother walked and worked,
always praying that the law
would not crush her dream,
her children's dreams,
laws that ripped them apart
with the claws of a presidential order.



art by Maggie Gammell

Who will be next?
Was it not enough
to herd mothers, fathers, and children
into detention centers
where they waited to be discarded,
while the refuge of their cities
was threatened, robbed?

Brutal laws suffocate the dreamers,
throw them into the streets.
The cry *Make America Great Again*
screams ethnic cleansing,
and I hear the shrill sound
of transport trains whistling in the distance.

Bill Moorhead

On the Field at Dawn

The field has shed the overweight
of Winter's last snow
it so patiently abided.

The smoky white breath of dawn mist
wisps in the hollow.
An older man in a threadbare
warmup jacket walks the circle

of the muddled mound and his child
walks over foul lines
too faded to halve this cosmos
of the within from the without.

The family pup rambles behind
the wooded backstop
and finds a worn and tattered old ball
that he drops at the father's feet.

The old man muses over Spring's
coming dogwoods—so many balls
released in the air as if doves
in celebration.



photo by Quora.com

B.P. Greenbaum

Just Like That

It was dark when we moved to the farm.
My father drove the GMC pickup
pulling the two-horse Rice trailer filled with boxes,
hay bales, my mother's kitchen chairs,
and a Black Angus steer, a year old,
who never had a name.

As headlights lit the flat gravel drive,
my brother dropped the tailgate. Just like that
the steer slipped under the back chain
and walked out into the humid, mosquitoed air.

The night moonless, the steer black as pitch,
he looked at us, as if we were the stupid ones,
and ambled toward the black.

"Cut him off," my dad shouted.
We all moved with outstretched arms,
but the steer bolted through our thin line
to become a shrinking speck in our vision,
a ghost across the field.

My father's curses followed. My mother said,
"Calm down, remember your heart,"
as if we could forget.

Weeks and sightings followed.
Mrs. Cheeseman brought us rhubarb pie.
George saw him yesterday on the far road,
as if we knew where that was.
At school, they snickered. *Oh, you're the ones,*
the FFA girls said with their intimate bovine
understandings.

My father hired the cowboys.
They came with beaten leather chaps,
tan-lined foreheads, bent elbows
and wrecked knees, listened to the story,
kept an eye out. So, when the steer
showed up in Licadello's field,
a cowhand named Heath bulldogged him
from the back of a pickup.

The steer had grown bigger,
but too thin, feral, and angry to use.
My father gave him to the man
who caught him.

Find the steer, catch him and bring him home.
It was the first thing I remember that my father
couldn't do, until four years later
when he couldn't stay alive.

Just like that
as I watched my father die,
my childhood slipped its chain,
gave the place one last look
and trotted off into the darkness
beyond the tree-lined borders
of our farm,
to become a ghost,
a shadow crossing a field.



photo by Carmen Perez

Thomas Callis

Jav

Wrap your fingers gently
around the rear end
of the woven yarn handle
so your thumb
and pointer finger
rest on
the cold metal
of the javelin.

Draw the jav back
with the tip
just grazing
your cheek.

Now
pick a spot,
a tree, a car,
a building
as far away
as you can see,
the higher
the better.



photo by Alexander Huertas

Now it's time
to let it fly.
Three crossovers
right leg pulling
the left pushing
off the ground
into the finish,
left leg straight
soft knee on the right
driving your hips forward
chest up,
arm back
until you're ready to snap,
then hit it,
torso torqueing
with the pull
of your elbow,
arm slinging
the jav
through the point.

Finish behind
the line
step back
and watch it
fly.



art by Samuel Sattar

Catherine Sklenar

Attrition

Imagine the things
that fall apart
after fixing them
like
a tea cup
that won't
stay put together
or the vase
that can't
hold the flower up.

What would you do
if the glue
you depended on
failed even once?

Would you abort
the broken—
just toss the cup
use a pickle jar
for the flowers?

Most likely.

Because glue
that doesn't work
isn't worth
the time
it took
to invest in
the hope
that it would.



art by Anonymous

Rebecca Reichenbach

Onto Him

—after Suzanne Cleary

Do you sit at your desk?
the one with the constrained little mannequin nearby,
its wrists posed upwards to pray or offer moral support

or to cut away the distraction of me
as I text and call, call and text you into submission?
Do you stab your fork into ramen noodles

saving that halved boiled egg for last
letting it swim with the basil put in
just for decoration?

Is she upstairs?
Light feet with pale pink toes
barely skidding on carpet,

her weight buoyant,
positively angelic to be
living in the apartment

above you, closer to God.
Do you know that I burned
your hoodie?

Dug a hole in the ground,
balanced store-brand logs
on top of another

to please the fire into
eating a piece of you.
Did you think of me in Utah

when you sweated and climbed
following the lead of a
long haired ex-girlfriend

and her sister into places
that I've never been?
Do you both sit on the couch

and drink only out of mason jars,
listen to sonic Philly-based bands
or do you lie on the floor like we did?

Can you believe that I spent eight months
washing and squeezing you out of me?
Rinsing the dirt of your smile off my arms,

scraping the film of uncertainty and doubt,
watching it circle the drain while the phone rang?
I think I won't forget

your inclination to dangle and twist
into buttondown plaid shirts,
the suit of 2017's every man that

blends you into yesterday,
blurs you into a package of
Unoriginal Alternative Boy.

Catherine Sklenar

Starting Over

Mom and I talk, walk and smile
down Bradford Street
past homes with cars
still sleeping under
a blanket of frost.
When she isn't looking,
I pretend to exhale
cigarette smoke.

She keeps saying this new job
is better for us, and now
we will be ok. I'm not sure
if she is talking to herself
or me. I think, I am happy
and I thought we were ok.

We say our goodbyes curbside.
I walk slowly, heel to toe
along a black tar line that
zigzags up the driveway,
stopping to crunch ant hills
that dot the path until
I'm at the door and
my Mom has driven away
in the bubble of a light blue Beetle.

My back feels the weight
of eyes watching.
As I turn, the rusted screen door
creeks loudly open,
like a mouth, and it swallows me whole.

Inside, the air smells
of old ashtrays, coffee and
overcooked things.
Looking for a place to go,
I see small patches of wallpaper
that have pulled away bit by bit.

Mrs. Not my Mother
turns to me, holding
out a lumpy pillow and
a John Deere blanket
that when dropped into
my arms, the smell
of moth balls and boy sweat
almost knocks me down.

She tilts her head funny like,
to the side and rubs at the hair
on her chin. *Where are her teeth?*
I try not to stare. Then she
does this tongue clicking thing
and points to the couch,
lisp-spitting at me
"Too early, go to shhhleepa."

Now, it feels too early
to be away
from the cocoon of my bed,
too early to have left



photo by Brittany Love

home, the smell of cinnamon incense
still in my hair,
and I know it's way too early
to listen for the Beetle's return.

Steve Straight

Seat 1A

on the Beechcraft 1900D
from Toronto to Hartford
is a serious seat, I realize
when the tall, thin copilot suddenly leans
down from the low cabin ceiling
into my face just before takeoff

and over the fever of sound
from the warming twin turboprops
asks if I am prepared
in the event of an emergency
to save all eighteen passengers,
nine on each side,
by pushing this red button
and releasing this rounded lever up—
or was it down?

He monkeys his way into his seat up front
and begins to flip indecipherable switches
almost absentmindedly,
the roar shut out by his huge headphones,
but I am so sobered by my charge
that I see I am also what stands
between the exposed, now deaf pilots
and some crazy lurching down the aisle.
My wife in 1B has a bad elbow
and may not be much help.

But then I think,
Aren't we all in Seat 1A now,
having received our instructions,
acknowledged the stakes,
sized up our fellow passengers
and vowed in any event
to save all we can.



photo by Airliners.net