

# S H A P E S

The editors of Shapes invite you to submit your poetry, prose and artwork for consideration for publication in the Spring 2020 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.

Submit written work to:

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Patrick Sullivan (English Dept. Tower 509, 512-2669)  
Andrew Sottile (English Dept. Tower 860, 512-2668)  
or to the Liberal Arts Division secretary.

Submit artwork to Maura O'Connor  
(Graphic Design Dept, LRC A248, 512-2692)

The Literary & Art Magazine  
of Manchester Community College

Spring 2019





# Shapes

is Manchester Community  
College's art and literary  
magazine. Contributors are  
all members of the MCC  
Community.

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*photo by Kevin Guy*

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*photo by Zoya Malik*

Spring 2019

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photo by Kevin Guy

John Thomas Wetmore

Reasons to Watch Professional Wrestling

Because it’s 1998, you’re nine years old  
and your hot pocket, crisp in its sleeve,  
is clutched like a ceremonial candle  
as you plant yourself on ragged carpet  
ready to explain your favorite ritual to a friend—see, tonight  
a monster who got his face burned off in a house fire  
by an undead wizard powered by an ectoplasmic urn  
(who just so happens to be his brother), comes for revenge—  
and the two of them, both grazing the rafters at seven feet tall,  
will settle their decades-long blood feud  
by trading tombstone piledrivers while a plump  
funeral director invokes evil spirits to aid in the melee.  
And because if *that* ain’t the best and craziest goddamn thing you ever  
heard of, then certainly Mrs. Foley’s Baby Boy,  
who lost an ear in a barbed-wire death match,  
who wears a leather mask and talks  
to his dirty tube sock will take the title.

Because tonight Mankind’s drama unfolds someplace else:  
the Staples Center, Harbor Yard, the Garden—  
anywhere far away from eviction notices slipped  
under the door and screaming infant siblings.

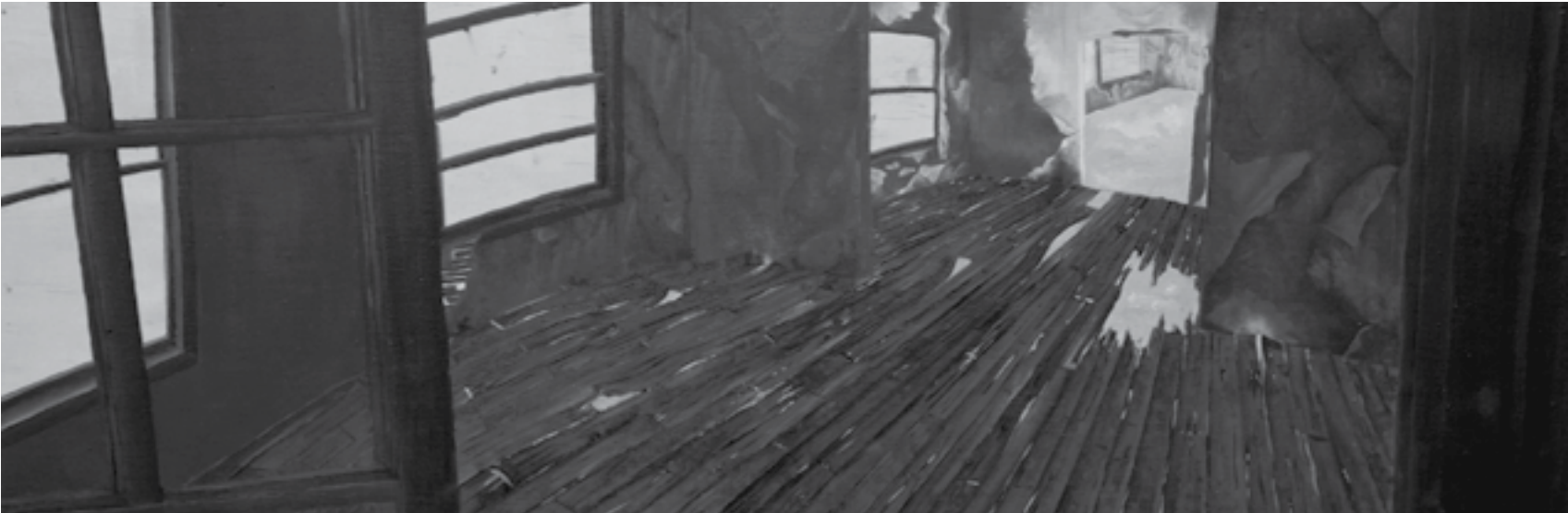
Because it’s 2017 and tonight an occult swamp prophet  
whistling Laurie London spirituals will be coaxed  
from his rocking chair to tangle with a six-six Samoan  
robed in foam body armor, solely for the privilege of being  
locked in a cage to fight five other men, one of those five  
a giant who’s angrier than a stirred jar of hornets  
and just toppled a semi in the parking lot. Because although  
you’ll never be seven feet tall or three-hundred eighty-five solid,  
and you’ve never been bold enough to slip your fingers under  
the fender of a truck tractor to try your luck—by now  
you’ve learned a thing or two about taking chances  
and the carnage caused by short fuses.



art by Thinh Doan

Because dad’s gone, but the men on the television erupt  
with enough macho to teach you how macho’s done.  
Because nobody takes mama on dates anymore, but something  
in her voice blooms beautiful and forever seventeen  
when she giggles that the Heartbreak Kid really is a sexy boy.

Because although your boss is a real asshole and you can’t do shit  
about it, this big bald redneck with hellfire in his eyes  
and rattlesnake venom on his lips is guzzling a six pack  
and flipping the bird to a stunned billionaire on national television,  
his voice pumped full of diesel exhaust as he asks for a “hell yeah”  
from the turnbuckle—because the crowd is full of guys like you,  
and they all give it to him—because those two words feel  
holy as a hallelujah whispered in your living room  
by the teevee’s blue glow, in the late hours of yet another  
Monday that has failed to keep you pinned for the three count.



art by Vivica Parrish



Caitlin Donahue

## Building the Boat

I could always tell when another board had broken.  
My father would storm from the shed swearing profusely,  
sawdust powdering his hair, smudged safety glasses askew.

I would sneak in through the open door of his wood shop  
in his absence, tucking myself in a corner amid mahogany shavings  
and old paintbrushes hardened with epoxy.

I beheld the birth of the boat in stolen glimpses: first a skeleton,  
hollow and ribbed like a whale; next the steamed planks  
curved into a shell covered in dust and pencil markings;

lastly the gleaming hull cured with resin so shiny  
I could see my wide eyes staring back at me.  
After five years, the final weeks were filled

with the motor's sputtering and my father's mumblings  
about the trailer, rudder, propeller, and launch  
on Coventry Lake. The night before,

he woke me from sleep and brought me to the shed,  
blinking in the brightness from a bare light bulb.  
He put his hands under my arms and lifted me up

onto the emerald leather seats, then swung himself  
over the gunwale next to me. Among the dust eddies,  
he guided my hands to the cold steel of the steering wheel,

cupped his callused hands over his mouth,  
and cawed like a seagull until I was bent over giggling.  
In the shadows cast in the corners of the shed,

he pointed out a lighthouse, a ferry,  
a dock in the distance that seemed so close  
I could feel my toes curl over its edge.

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photo by Aaron Koret

Listra Mitchell Simmons

## Anonymous

—after Jack Agüeros

On East 8th street,  
the fluorescent lights of the UBreakifix  
sign create a halo over naked feet  
thrust from within cardboard jaws  
toward heaven in supplication,  
pleading for a reprieve  
from the endless  
march to emptiness

or perhaps the tired soles  
reached out to an unknown deity,  
seeking a way home from the war  
raging within, which left pieces  
of the man in a dung heap  
of faceless humanity.



Art by Nicholas Munroe

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John Thomas Wetmore

## Anything

*“Any small thing can save you.”*  
—Mark Doty

Even the simple stuff, like old  
memories of your Pop’s  
hugs, how they always lasted  
too long when you were little,  
how his arms seemed long  
as the highways he worked on,  
how they squeezed like constrictors,  
how his aftershave glowed  
in your nostrils like jet fuel.

Even now, the way you latch  
on when it’s time to say goodbye  
at Christmas, how his arms  
feel more like shed skin than boa,  
how somehow Pop is first to let go,  
slowly, as if he’s forgotten  
how to properly hold on,  
how your face stays glued  
to the rough cotton  
waffles of his blue polo—  
this too can save you.

Or even the crisp hiss  
of a Coca-Cola cap as you crack  
it open just enough for mom  
to do the rest with the holy relics  
of her arthritic hands—  
or the gracious smile she offers  
up to you, with laugh lines time  
has spent half a century etching,

6 the way you can measure  
her years like a horse’s  
by the thinness of her teeth,  
how you can almost see

the shadow of her tongue  
praying like a priest behind  
stained glass when she thanks you.

The thing that can save you  
is a life preserver floating  
idly atop life’s sweet pudding skin,  
bobbing somewhere on the calm  
ocean tide of everyday trouble  
that you are always sinking in.  
The secret is: you have to reach  
for it before you go under.

So reach—reach for the animals,  
for the squirrels that perch  
their dextrous paws on your ring  
and index finger as they bow  
their heads to nibble  
from your palm. Reach for  
the pigeons that flock  
beneath any generous  
hand and squabble over seed.  
Never forget that any hungry  
soul you stoop to feed is your savior,  
and if not these grubby-winged  
incognito angels, then who?

Let something save you.

Even a single feather of dove-toned  
ducks’ down that slips from your pillow  
and tickles your nose—how it’s propelled  
by your breath into midnight air,  
illuminated digital blue by the quiet alarm

clock that jingles its electric laugh  
at daybreak and dips you headfirst  
into dawn’s sable water as the dog curls harder  
into your body’s soft spoon-bed and the cat  
makes bread from the comforter  
dough bunched at your feet,  
and someone’s eyes,  
half-blind and beautiful, are waking  
to a fuzzy outline of your figure  
and rejoicing that for today,  
you are here, together,  
afloat on the current,  
still reaching  
towards anything.



photo by Alex Nicki



photo by Wikimedia Commons,  
Giuseppe Milo

Isabella Rizzo

## Cliffs of Moher

As I stand at the edge of these marvelous cliffs,  
702 feet above,  
with the wind whipping my hair and body back and forth,  
I am faced with the deep Atlantic,

A mix of blues and whites,  
crashing against the smooth rock,  
and then quickly retracting.

The cliffs take punch after punch,  
with so much force.  
Yet they are still standing.

They continue to face the world  
with such beauty and wonder,  
proving to be stronger than any force that comes at them.

And as I stand here at the edge,  
it is clear that this is the beginning of so much more.  
And I'm screaming at the top of my lungs over the edge of crumbling rocks,

*I'm alive,  
I'm alive,  
I'm alive.*



photo by Michelle Woodhouse



Listra Mitchell Simmons

## Blessing

*—for my father, who taught me the power of words.*

My father sits in the shade of guava trees,  
brushing imaginary specks of dirt  
from the tips of his fingers  
while I stand beyond the shade in the full glare  
of contempt burning in his eyes,

and between us hangs the echo  
of his nickname for me — *Dead weight*  
spoken no louder than a sigh,  
a reminder that I am the repulsive burden  
that suffocates him, the chord  
that ties him to a woman

who produced the fruit that weighs  
mankind down, and along with the seed born  
of reckless lovemaking,  
the consequence of responsibility.

The universe tricked my father,  
gave him *a 6 for a 9*, embodied  
in that revolting thing, a female child  
who will not bend beneath his brutal sneers.

He cursed cracks into my spirit,  
but I was determined to transcend  
his dismissal of me as *lower than a dog's piss on the road*,

his contemptuous “blessing,”  
chanted with derision into the hardening image  
of his own reflection.



*photo by Aedin Powell*



Brittany Janosi

## Dear old friend

did you know  
that when you taught me how to walk  
and not let anyone walk all over me  
and use and reuse me  
until my colors were as dull  
as the earth after too many days of sun,  
until my threads were frayed  
feeling as though they could fall apart  
with the slightest touch,  
until my holes were big enough  
to peek through  
and see everything in me

that you would be teaching me  
how to defend myself  
from you?



*photo by Aedin Powell*

Melinda Morales

## Dude

—for Tony Hoagland

To the boy I heard say the word *dude* first,  
I just want to say thank you.  
It helped me have an in with the  
skater, rock and roll culture in school around me,

when I was Young and uncool,  
shy, weird  
like a baby deer buckling under its feet  
in the woods, a sad

lonely thing left in the open meadow  
universe of loud, competent social people,  
where words flew across the hunting ground

like bullets, without much thought and no need to overthink  
like I would. Everybody looked like they were having a good time,  
present presence disincluded.

But *dude* was a crass word and as  
overused as a toilet, something you  
used often and without much thought.

Saying *dude* in every single sentence,  
a colloquialism that guaranteed you  
into the world that so desperately wanted to be viewed as cool.

knowing and having that  
word in my arsenal, always ready to use it to garner cool points,  
armed me with protection and peace of mind.

Now I've become an arsenal only made to garner cool points,  
and so in this, my utter uncoolness is a fact  
so inherently established that I don't worry about how I  
am seen by others anymore.

And I am peaceful in the  
thankfulness that I will  
never have to live like I was.

But I remember the messy past  
back in the universe of skaters and cool people,  
when everything was louder, funnier, more  
interesting and social than I was.

I remember when the showy social interactions  
were all I hated and simultaneously wanted to  
be a part of.

Not even blinking an eye  
or having a sense of any repercussions,  
I used the word as a gun, firing whenever I needed.



photo by Alex Nicki



Kathleen Roy

## Exposures

*Birds suffer from air pollution, just as we do.*  
—National Audubon Society

It's a late fall afternoon, seventy-six degrees outside.  
Stench from Manchester's landfill permeates humid air  
as my granddaughter's yellow school bus rumbles up our street,  
spews clouds of black exhaust, grinds gears and screeches to a halt.

Bus doors fold open and my granddaughter climbs down  
three steps too steep for a seven-year-old.  
The bus hisses, releases a trail of diesel odor in its wake.  
We pinch our noses, join hands, shuffle towards home  
over autumn's carpet of red and gold.

Melodious tweets of birds winging overhead  
turn to soulful-sounding cries of ca-cawing  
and my granddaughter asks, "Are those birds crying?"  
Ever the watchful, sensitive child,  
detector of all things out of the ordinary in her world,  
she supposes a baby bird has fallen from its nest.

As we approach, I whisper,  
"It's robins, under the holly bush."  
I count ten of them as they encircle  
a large red-breasted robin lying on its wing.  
Atop a patch of dirt, its lifeless, beady eyes stare, unblinking.

She names the bird Ted and buries him within her rock garden,  
sacrificing her dollar store scarecrow-on-a-stick to mark his grave.  
The town's pollution takes its toll.  
Soot covers the scarecrow's arms.  
He sags on the wooden cross,  
a straw Christ, his head bent in sorrow.





photo by Maricel Foley



art by  
Breanna  
Canales

Edit DiPippo

## Farson, Wyoming After the Eclipse of 2017

We had been creeping south for four hours in post eclipse traffic, through red canyons, open sky and land full of sagebrush, the occasional cattle herds, and the rarer house.

We reached Farson, Wyoming, population of three hundred twenty-five, elevation of 6,594 feet.

At the crossroads of routes 191 and 28 was the Farson Sinclair gas station.

That day, it was an oasis to everyone in need of a bathroom, a cold drink, and a long stretch of limbs.

I placed the strawberry milk, cold ice teas and water on the counter, and despite the long line behind me I couldn't resist my desire

for a brief conversation, a connection, and she in turn never stopped smiling, cashing us out in a cheerfully rhythmic motion, while asking if *it* was beautiful.

She looked to be in her fifties, lived about a hundred miles south of it.

She told me in happy amazement that she had never seen this many people come through town.

*Not even that one time when they had no choice* because the major roads were closed.

She spent her life under a sky in a high desert I still dream about.



art by Maggie Russel



## Mosaic

We hold the handle of a person-shaped door and the handle of butcher knife, and you tell us that the easiest way to fit through is to cut off our wrong-shaped parts.

Once, a few windows to the future were shattered into a thousand fragments against the present. We are the mosaic that formed; we don't remember what it looked like before the sundering, but we are proud of the art that was created. We are not person shaped; we are the shape of us. We pantomime a normal existence and we are complimented on the façade whenever the truth is revealed.

"You look so normal!"

"I'd never have known!"

Do you suppose it's a compliment that we hide who we are so well that you don't know until after the fact that you shouldn't have treated us like everyone else? It's no secret that you don't know what to do with us; we can decipher that much from your molded plastic smiles. It's understandable; you've been taught by example that we should be tolerated,

20 not cherished. We aren't a real friend, we are a good deed.

But we get it, and we don't blame you. We, more than anyone, know how hard we can be. We lift the needle and drop it on the same song to defend against the fluorescent lights clawing at our eardrums, and mutilate our clothing to be content in our skin. We say things we know have worked before, but suddenly become inappropriate and embarrassing for you. We are a paradox of seeing everything, knowing a great deal, and understanding not enough.

And to be fair, we see it's not all of you. There is authenticity among you, genuine love, appreciation, and delight in the colors that shine through us. For you, we try to wear the wolf's pelt over our fleece. You express concern, sometimes even worry, for the lens through which we see ourselves.

"Don't let it define you!"

"Don't place limits on yourself!"

You say this from a place of love. You don't want us to think less of ourselves, or think that we are the sum of our jagged edges. But why is one less and the other more? Why is one acceptable and not the

other? We can be both brilliant and broken. It's clear that "disabled" sits like an unswallowed pill on your tongue. Is it shameful to you? It doesn't mean we are morally bankrupt or mean-spirited. "Disabled" is not dirty like "malicious," "racist," "rude," or "arrogant."

We like ourselves because of, and in spite of, our imperfections. Old friends head through the door, shedding unwanted but still beautiful pieces, pieces we love, leaving us behind, alone with our doubts and idiosyncrasies. We used to bring down the lash on ourselves for being different, not for being disabled, the sheep among the wolves. Why are we so strange? Why are we wrong? What about us is so unlovable that we are cannot find anyone to wait with us until we can figure out this damn door?

But then we let go of the whip's handle, reach down a hand, and pull ourselves up, embracing the entirety of us. We are far from unlovable, and what other people think of us is none of our business; what we think of ourselves is everything. We see the world through our stained-glass lenses; the view

may be less clear, but the vistas are spectacular.

The glass is not half empty; it's twice as big as it needs to be.

We may never be your vision of whole, but we are complete. We may not be shaped like the door, but there is a place for us beyond it.

We do not think we are perfect, but we are worthy.

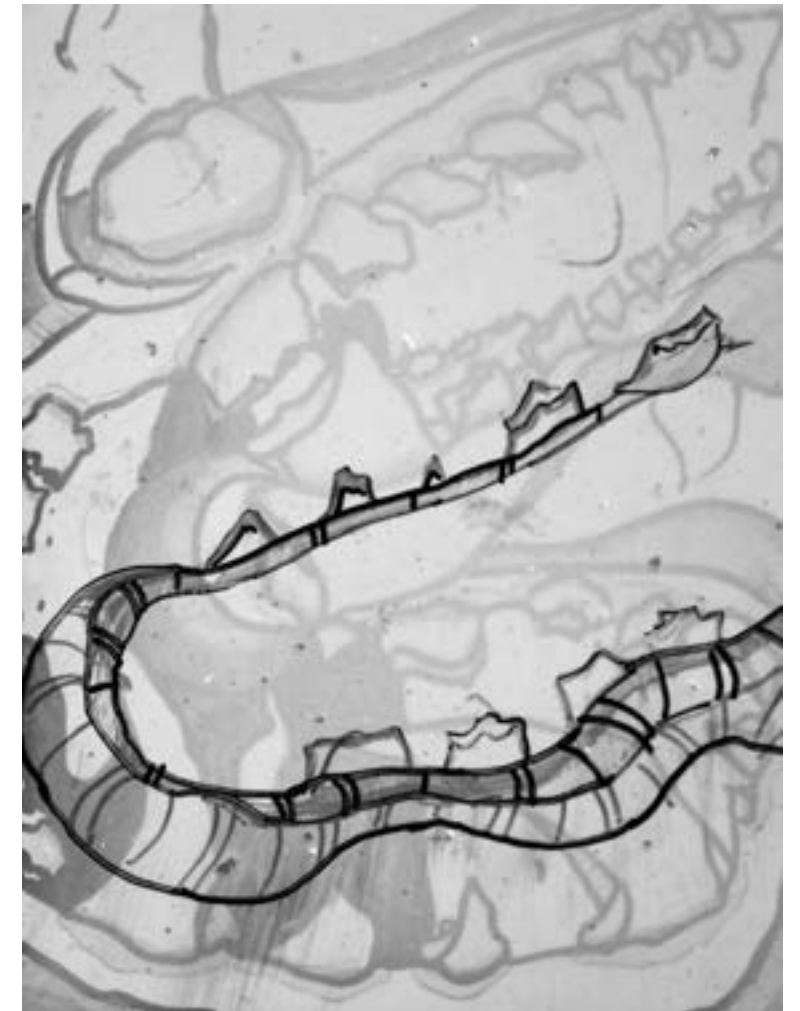
Which brings us back to the door or the knife? Do we use the knife to cut off parts of ourselves so that we can fit through the door? Do we try to cover the wounds bleeding through our fingers, or smother the parts that scream just long enough to get through? Or do we simply never move forward? Do we stand alone, unwilling to give even one more inch of ourselves for a charade?

Instead, using the knife with both hands, we carve a wider door. We etch "All are Welcome" into the surface. To surrender a piece of ourselves in favor of the easier path is to remove the yellows from "Starry Night," just because warm colors are out of place in the night sky. We cannot be certain, but perhaps you're seeing the

world with a new perspective, or maybe it's pride shimmering through you like ripples on a pond.

We grab the door handle, with both hands, and

throw it open like yanking a rip cord, the shadows only shadows, and each step dancing with prismatic light.



art by Catherine Carmack

## The Whispers

In the beginning, there was nothing. Then, there were the whispers.

art by Riley Giard



When he took his first steps, the whispers were there; a crowd, cheering him on, guiding his rough, stumbling movements. As his tongue struggled to form his first words from the babble of childhood, the syllables that poured forth were not his own, but those that the whispers guided him to say. The whispers gently held his hands, scribbling incomprehensible scrawls in crayon across paper and drywall. The whispers were there the day the TV was left on, as he toddled in front of it and watched the planes impact the towers over and over. It was then the whispers got louder, that morning, as he watched the images float off the screen and burn themselves into his memory.

The whispers were there when he first rode a bicycle without training wheels attached, as his nervous, crude movements metamorphosed into fluid, confident strokes. The whispers became a thunderous applause, drowning out the cheering of his father until they were all he could hear as the warm breeze gave way for him. The whispers were there on his first day of school, barely audible against the calls of his classmates. The whispers were there the day the bullies came and beat him until his eyes were swollen shut and his lip was spilling blood. That was the first time the whispers became angry, and through his sobs he could hear them screaming for revenge.

The whispers were there on his first date, edging him on towards a kiss that in reality was merely a peck on the girl's flushed cheek. The whispers were there the day he learned that after their last date, she hadn't gone home, but spent

the night with lacrosse team captain. The voices agonizingly mimicked the yelling, crying, and screaming of the afternoon in their own hushed tones. The whispers were there the day of his first job interview, calming him to answer the questions as streams of sweat poured out of his hands. The whispers were there the night of the senior prom, humming along with the melodies, as he slow danced with a new girl whose name he would soon forget. The whispers were these as he paraded down the aisle at graduation, chuckling to themselves as he tripped on his own robe when walking up to the stage.

The whispers were there the day his phone rang, quieting for a moment as he felt his heart shatter, while the voice on the other end told him his mother had been hit by a drunk driver. The whispers rose to an ungodly dissonance as his wails filled the empty hallway. The whispers were there at the wake, all but a buzz against the overwhelming helplessness he felt as he shook hands of unheard-of relatives as they passed in front of the casket. The whispers were there at the funeral, chanting their own solemn prayers along with the priest's sermon. They rose to a terrible screech of pain as the coffin was lowered for the last time.

The whispers were there the first day of college, a fly's buzz against the cacophony filling the cavernous halls and dormitories. They mimicked the professor's droning lectures, bringing him to chuckle when they were particularly spot-on. The whispers were there the day he met her in his biology class; curly blonde hair, the harsh fluorescent light of the lab reflecting





off her Coke-bottle glasses, whistling to herself while sketching a waterfall in the margins of her notebook.

The whispers quieted for a moment, before increasing again in intensity, urging him on. The whispers were there the first night they spent together, hushed and tenuous as their forms entwined. The whispers were when he asked her to marry him, that day at the top of the ski slope, when she turned around and made him chase her down the mountain before she would answer. The whispers were there when he watched her walk down the aisle, rising as a wave as the procession marched through the pillars of rainbow light cascading through the stained-glass windows. The whispers were there that Christmas morning when he sat gaping in unbridled ecstasy, as she showed him the pregnancy tests.

The whispers were there the morning she went into labor as they were sitting down to breakfast. The whispers were there as his car flew down I-95 to get to the hospital, while she leaned out the window screaming in time with the contractions. The whispers were there as the paperwork was pushed into his hands, as he watched the nurses escort his wife into a wheelchair and through the double doors to the delivery room. The whispers guided his hands to fill out the forms, taking him over, the pen morphing into a blur as he tore through the sheets, before finally breaking off through the double doors himself.

The whispers were there as the doctors surrounded her, hushed with anticipation, barely a dull roar above the steady beeping of the monitors.

The whispers were silent when she

gave the final push and he looked on his daughter for the first time. As he stared at her wriggling pink form, he became acutely aware of the echoing silence in his own head, and the smile on his face widened into beautiful ecstasy. The whispers had left him, never to return.

When she took her first steps, the whispers were there.



photo by Hector Samaniego

Claudia McGhee

## Fulcrum

—after Dorianne Laux

I'm remembering again, the evening  
we stood in the low-ceilinged workroom and you waited,  
patient, while the old man pointed out tools, the finished  
and nearly-finished instruments, shelves in the shed out back  
sagging with rough-sawn maple and spruce;  
how he described the worsening arthritis in his hands and back;  
how he offered the unvarnished violin to you, a token,  
he said, glad to sell the business to someone  
who appreciated wood, its value and character, the years  
it took for fibers to release their moisture, to subside  
into true sound. I'm reliving that moment, acutely aware  
of the way your hands floated up from beside your thighs,  
your wrists rotating outward, the way the sleepy curves  
of your long fingers woke, straightened and spread  
into a mute gesture of desire. I see again your hands as you  
reach for the fragile shell: fingerpads, creases at each knuckle joint,  
the heavily muscled mounds at the base of each thumb.  
With both palms up, the dark grooves of your lifelines  
are exposed, vulnerable, but the old man is no longer smiling.  
You curl your fingers around the violin's neck, his hands  
support its back, neither of you breathe. When he meets your eye,  
drops his hands and sighs, his loss slams through me.  
I cannot forget that moment, cannot escape the indelible undertone  
that changes everything.



photo by Emily Malcolm

Jeanine DeRusha

## Getting the Story Right

—for Maria Elena Milagro de Hoyos

He loved her so much he bought her headstone,  
and then so much he had her exhumed,  
  
locked her in a mausoleum and held the only key,  
so much he said she sang to him in Spanish,  
  
and so he took her body home,  
strung her bones with wire,  
  
painted her face with plaster and putty,  
crafted eyes for her with blue glass beads,  
  
cut open her chest to look inside  
to see where her heart had been,  
  
and he loved her until she was just bones,  
and then he loved her bones,  
  
and this is how he made their story  
that ties them together as man and wife.

He curled beside her in his bed  
where she would lie for seven years,

in a house that wasn't hers,  
in a wedding dress she didn't choose,

she who had refused his love  
again and again,

she who had never loved him,  
not even a little,



art by Jaclyn Rocha

and I wish that I could cut him out of her story,  
snip him with scissors,

I wish I could give her this white sheet to rest in,  
a blank piece of paper, give her another story,

a clean coffin, an unmarked grave,  
and a deep, untouched sleep.



Juliet Duchesne

## Greta Oto (Glasswing Butterfly)

To the college girl  
who stopped in her tracks  
on a damp sidewalk  
in Storrs to pick up  
the wallet I blindly  
dropped

who didn't look  
through zipped  
pockets and velcroed  
compartments, or ruffle  
through my hoard  
of receipts—fast food stops,  
poetry books bought,  
and cigarettes kept out  
of my mother's sight

who didn't nose  
through my high school  
IDs and track the  
growth of my smile  
from year to year,  
or find my thin  
amethyst stone  
tucked in the  
side-seam opening

who, despite her  
gleaming opportunity  
to swipe my debit  
card (with a whopping  
45¢ available), returned  
it to a cashier inside  
the liquor store across  
the way

(and who probably wouldn't  
have expected me to write  
a poem about the transparent  
softness she shared with me—  
kindness like a Glasswing Butterfly;  
invisible, but everywhere.)

Thank you,  
because I don't  
say it enough,  
*Thank you.*



art by Phuong Nguyen

John Thomas Wetmore

## Julian

cackles behind a blue cloud as he  
sucks another one of my Turkish Royals  
down to a charred filter. Julian,  
a lonely seventeen year old kid who  
has haunted me since Port Authority,  
who stares now with shamanic wisdom  
granted him by the Lemon Drop  
we puffed behind Woodbridge station,  
says  
*yo, she got my name  
tattoo'd on her choch',  
that's how I know she really feelin'  
me—you know?*  
I smirk politely,  
wondering if he can spot  
four days' unbrushed fuzz  
crawling on my front teeth.  
The buzz of Colt 45 in  
my guts is just not enough  
to stomach another story.  
I half-listen, furiously scribbling  
power violence lyrics to shriek  
in a dark, wet basement, real deep shit  
about addiction and lost, hopeless people—  
words I'll forget seventeen hours  
from now when I reach the gig in Raleigh.  
Not that any of the twenty drunk,  
crusty teenagers in the audience  
will understand anyway. Not like Julian,  
who understands everything—who says,  
*I got this shit figured bro, gonna be a real  
man because this girl's my best friend  
and she having my baby, I'm going  
to Dallas to wife her up and she having  
my son,*  
who blunders on  
with sage-like certainty about



photo by Alexander Huertas

how I'm going to be famous,  
all while blowing smoke  
over my shoulder as I write.  
He tells me I'm the next Judas Priest,  
even though I'm just filling in  
for a guy who got arrested hopping  
a train in Portland—even though  
in a year I'll go back to school to become  
a teacher. Julian knows.  
Later, the bus driver will harass  
him about pulling up his pants  
so he doesn't *rub his dirty ass  
on my bus seat*. Later, after Durham,  
Julian, who spent his last few dollars  
on bus fare will have to find another  
friend with mercy enough to bum  
him smokes and endure his distorted  
odysseys, one of which begins:  
*Yo,  
I used to be crazy bro, I used to be  
a fuckin' outlaw—I was selling the tony,  
you know? That yayo, yeah, you know,  
stacking bricks, but now I'm straight.*  
What can I tell Julian, who is so sure  
of everything? What can I tell this boy  
for whom life waits at every station  
from Durham to Dallas, twirling its thick  
mustache, truth a chambered bullet  
waiting to split his plump outlaw's heart?  
How can I tell Julian, who blurts joyfully,  
*she my best friend bro,  
she having my baby  
that the name inked above his girl's womb  
and she got the shit right there!*  
*"Papi"—cuz that's what she call me,*  
could be anybody at all.



Listra Mitchell Simmons

## Mary

*—for the homeless women living on the streets of Port of Spain, Trinidad.*

You said your name was Mary—not like the virgin,  
because you had done things she wouldn't do.  
You ran away from home to avoid being raped  
and beaten by your father.

Yet, there you were, emerging from the shadows,  
your once yellow dress hanging like bloodied gauze—  
smiling, because you had run through the night  
to escape being raped by the vultures who prey  
on those abandoned, in the veins of the city.

Only in the light of the sun will you sleep,  
cradled in the arms of the concrete bench  
that straddles the promenade, your bare feet cracked  
and blackened as if you had run across a trail of fire—  
hanging over the edge.



*photo by Jasmin Hrnjic*

Stephen Campiglio

## Nameless Beach

The wave I body-surfed  
was dangerously misappraised.

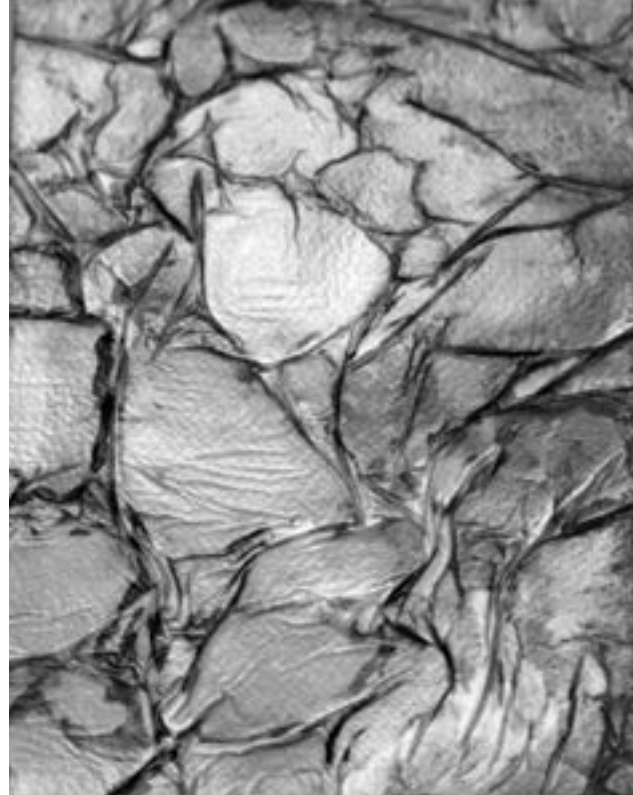
It nearly snapped me in half,  
forcing my face to the floor.

Fortunately I was able to untangle myself  
just before the crash

spit me out into the foam,  
emerging with only a skinned nose,

a red bridge of bone,  
and a blessing of salt on my lips

that was shared through a kiss  
for my lover, stretched out on the sand.



*art by Thomas Bourke*

Claudia McGhee

## Next Step

This tangled duet of living with you  
slips in dissonant improvisation.  
Lyrics at odds; now harmony's taboo;  
we're undone, deafened by fear's percussion.

In cancer's onslaught, we've lost what we knew  
of tomorrow. We've mislaid melody  
and bass, can't go back decades to undo  
whatever tuned life to this minor key.

What is next? Where are our options, choices?  
Will we attempt new ways to sing within  
this small space? No, when time proves our voices  
too fragile to be heard against this din,

we'll pause, linger, wordless with compassion;  
we'll touch in moments of mute devotion.



*photo by Devan Gareau*



Bekka Agnello

## Pisces

Two fish that are bound to each other,  
but swim in the opposite direction.  
One represents the unconscious mind  
while the other is the soul.  
They are two separate entities  
connected by a push and a pull.

When mother moon is full,  
the ruler of the tides,  
she dictates the ebb and flow,  
the sea of emotions  
that Pisceans know.

Ruled by Neptune,  
the deep cerulean orb that hovers  
five planets away from Earth.  
And although she's far away,  
the influence of her dreamy  
and psychic qualities always stays.

A Piscean by nature  
will never want to wake up  
from the illusory world  
spread out in front of  
our daydreaming eyes.



art by Beverly Darocha



art by Lisa Wilke Trotta

Caitlin Donahue

## Police Report

It was a slow Thursday afternoon shift  
at the shop, the crowds fled  
to the beaches, the hours spinning out  
as t-shirt stacks unraveled  
in the wake of one lone tourist  
lazily shuffling through.

In the August heat, the rubber stench  
of Crocs simmered in the air  
as the same six Dave Matthews Band songs  
blared over the intercom.

Anya rearranged the dress rack, holding  
her favorites against her mannequin-thin frame,  
posing in the mirror with pouting lips,  
hips jutted at crazy angles to make me laugh.

Suddenly she dropped a purple sundress,  
cursing *suchka* as a shadow by the register flickered,  
and the alarm rang through the store.

I turned to find a boy,  
a teenager no older than us,  
standing frozen at the counter, eyes wide,  
the register squawking but still locked tight.

We stared at each other for a moment,  
before I had sense enough to mumble,  
*I'm going to call the police.*

He looked at me blankly and simply replied,  
*Why*, his empty palms open before me  
and then gone.



art by Madeline Jacobsen

Listra Mitchell Simmons

## Retail

I am the red breasted,  
khaki skirted prey  
that you hunt  
under the stabbing  
heat of L.E.D lights  
that illuminate the fourteen  
stations of your temple,  
where you pause  
in grateful reflection,  
thankful that today  
your new credit card came,  
and you once again belong  
to the class of elitists  
who slither through aisles,  
always willing to remind me  
that you are the reason I am here,  
earning a wage that classifies  
me as the working poor,  
and I must be grateful  
that you, defying  
the laws of gravity defecated  
four feet up the walls  
of the bathroom stall:  
Thank you, please come again.



photo by Sarah Pasqualini



Nicole Marquis

## Still

—after Martha Collins

This light,  
slow light, still light  
light shines through my skin  
my glow becomes yours—  
a soft light gleams in every breath  
This place,  
safe place, still place  
the place where I hold you  
skin cannot be silent—  
a warm-flowing chorus resounds in place  
This time,  
stand time, still time  
time lets me trace you  
fingers read your skin—  
rewrite seconds in time with every embrace  
This touch,  
sweet touch, still touch  
reflections touch in the dark  
bodies come on close—  
touch is the fire where I find you

photo by Phuong Nguyen

Meghan DePeau

## She's Skipping Down P Street in DuPont Circle

and I can't help my grin—she's zipping up steps and leaping off, racing past worn stoops, tiny garden patches, a turquoise door with a sea turtle knocker, crape myrtles bursting fists of purple blossoms

and as we round the corner, I understand. I must have been a wild joy like that. But when I conjure images of little me running unbridled, I see grainy filmstrips of a tiny girl tripping alongside her dad, her hand caught to the wrist in his grip, her feet occasionally leaving the ground, left foot first, if she slowed.



photo by Alexander Salamatian

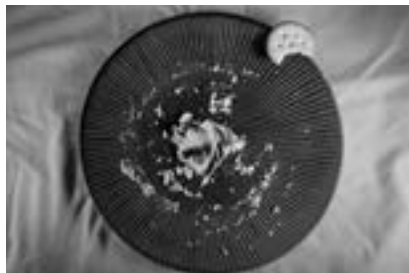


photo by Alexander Huertas

When we settle at a wobbly table by the plate glass windows overlooking the street, the air-conditioning is losing to the brick oven built into the mortared walls. Happy hour—the air hums with marinara, olives, and yeast; pints and martinis stud tables spilling over with friends, conversation, laughter—and she sings to herself, our table's electric tea light serving as a microphone, then turns away, annoyed, when I smile at her, aims her light melody toward the corner. The din means I don't have to pretend she should stop.

Jeanine DeRusha

## Teaching Robots to Pick Berries

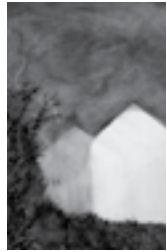
The size of a bus, its weight and heft of metal, the robot rolls over a row of berries, its broad shadow cast dark over the field, a giant amid spidery vines, as engineers jot notes and nod.

For today's lesson, it has to find and pluck one berry, show it can nose out the small body tucked under leaves, prove it can use its claw to pick soft flesh from stem. It's a delicate job to ask a bully, but it looms over the spindly plants, spins its camera, finds red fruit, and without too much pressure, frees it, placing the tender, tiny berry, unharmed and whole, in its metal basket. We all did this at some point, learn how to pick up a small thing, and keep it alive, as when moving a ladybug from kitchen counter to yard, or cupping a hand loosely around a moth to release it out the door, this math of strength and restraint, tenderness something that must be learned.



photo by Aymee Perdamo





art by Regina Looby

Patrick Sullivan

## The Book of Longing

an early Sunday afternoon  
in July, you pause  
to say goodbye  
on your way out to the barn  
and your artwork—

frogs sculpted out of clay  
so fearsomely lifelike  
and infused with soul

that on a few occasions  
I swear I saw them move

you read me a few poems  
from *The Book of Longing*  
by Leonard Cohen,  
on tour now  
with his magnificent voice  
ancient, betrayed  
and penniless

first one  
then a few more  
maybe eight or nine of them in all

before you step down the stairs  
and out the door  
into the summer of many rains

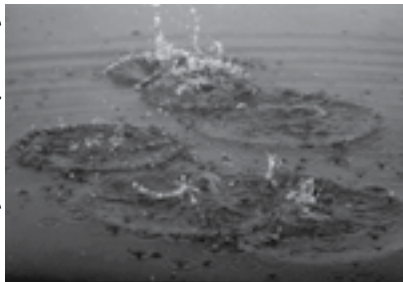


photo by Eric Vazquez-Rojas

photo by Jimmy Pham



Danny Osorio

## The Mountain Pass (True Story)

Heads sunk onto the tips of lances  
reveal to us that we are not the first  
who try to cross the Andes.

Reality is fierce; in each step we are  
closer to death. Avalanches, storms,  
crevasses and landslides are not what  
we fear. We are setting foot in a  
doomed land, where the spirits of  
travelers who got lost and of couples  
who committed suicide wander.

But we go on, some falling asleep, others  
sleepwalking.  
Altitude sickness makes people mad;  
one of them repeats over and over the same thing:  
“We are making history.”  
Poor man is delirious,  
he does not even remember that we are outlaws.

Someone asks about the felled men,  
and I remember that among the bodies

there was a child, whose mother always prepared  
us hot chocolate.  
But there is no time for memories.  
Without slowing down,  
we keep walking day and night.

The cruel half-moons guide us  
through the eternal nights.  
We seem like corpses riding the fog,  
the moorland, the tundra and the burning sands.  
And these half-moons  
shine brightly on our everyday meal,  
a bitter bread with a sip of sugar cane drink.

At some point we end up in a city,  
but my soul is still walking  
through the Andes.



photo by Maricel Foley



photo by Maura O'Connor

Kathleen Roy

The Dementia Unit

—December 24, 1970

Eighty-year old Bertha arrived on the unit via ambulance. While living alone she'd worn a bracelet of rubber bands, cutting off circulation to her right arm that resulted in below-elbow amputation.

Mr. Cob's admission papers stated he'd been found by local cops, sitting on the floor beside the corpse of his dead wife, stuffing mint candy into her mouth. He told them she had bad breath.

Wanda is a mentally disturbed, forty-year-old female. She pulls and pushes on the locked and coded doors, desperate to leave the unit. If those doors should open, her freedom may lead to her death.

Mrs. Gerard is a long-time patient here. The dietary staff grind her food and call it puree. She calls it baby food and I think, a baby doesn't constrict its esophagus by drinking Drano.

Lulu is our oldest patient. She thrives on volunteering during recreation. Room-by-room, she announces bingo, proudly wearing a badge made of construction paper.

This Christmas eve, the dementia unit is festive, its halls decked out in silver and gold. Our local Salvation Army band comes caroling, bringing gifts of warm socks, and peace.



photo by Sherie Gage

Maura O'Connor

Look

Looking back,  
I know that I did not look up  
often enough.

I kept my head down  
as the saying goes— laboring  
under the firmament.

And though I did not look,  
the sky was there  
at every turn, the deep blue of fall,  
the brightness of spring,

the cold, flat gray of winter,  
like an ironed bedsheet.  
Still, I

did not see it,  
the heavy, wet blanket of summer  
hanging in the air like laundry

on the line,  
smothering, dense,  
untroubled by the mere touch

of a breath  
ruffling cotton edges, meandering  
through silks and tartan.

What was so  
important? Taking care of a man  
who would eventually

return to his life before us,  
leaving me to stare at the pebbles  
and stones of the walk?



photo by Julianna Kristoff

If I could restore who I was  
would I urge my eyes heavenward  
to the plight of the sky

live on soaring dreams,  
breathe the air of the gods,  
or remain tethered to the soul of a woman  
firmly planted in the dust beneath her?



Caitlin Donahue

## The Washington Street Mall

Dinner break: I inhale a slice of *bianca* from a greasy paper plate as a flock of seagulls fights over a spilled basket of fried flounder and chips on the church steps. On a bench nearby, a child pulls a red rope of saltwater taffy between his teeth and sticky fingers. Dragonflies dart overhead, dizzy in the humid air, as dusk consumes the smoldering sunset.

Inside the shop: the sweet scent of cigars arrives in gasps with the arrival of each customer. Baya and I robotically fold shirt piles, ring out purchases with our practiced grins, and chat about pop music and Russian curses after the owner turns in for the night. We hold vigil until eleven when the mall lights dim among the whirl of vacuums.

After locking up the store for the night, I scurry past a lone maintenance worker hosing down the brick street. Drunk honeymooners traipse through back alleys, clammy hands laced, headed toward the Victorian bed and breakfasts.

Feet sore from another thirteen-hour shift, I remove my shoes and pad down a string of suburban streets, an earworm from the store's intercom spiraling in my mind. Tomorrow at ten a.m. my path will cross back, but for now, I am content to tread the buckling sidewalks alone, past families sipping white wine on rental porches amid soft jazz and moths clamoring for lamplight above me.



art by Rebekah Budd

Claudia McGhee

## Vigil

This is not like snow: no mounds of drifting cold; not like sex, good or bad, no pulse fired hot or wet; no tornado's wind breaking brittle walls, no touch requested, required.

This is not like summer moon's sweeping light drenching window and roof, bright wash that pours silence over stone and open glade. Night cannot conjure dreams from these slight contours.

This is not belly full of meat, bread, and wine, this is not sleep cradled in fireside beds, but tall ship run aground, decks awash, lines, slings and rigging fouled beneath thunderheads.

This is a fragile, heartbeat clock run down. Though desperate to stave off death, we drown.



art by Samuel Sattar



photo by Noah Gaskell



Maura O'Connor

## every seed

a promise,  
the hush-hush

a-flutter in the belly, like  
swimming tad-poles

that your brother  
makes you drink in the darkened  
garage, behind the screen door

that leads to the pond  
where they came from,

and the humid glow of the late  
afternoon sun.

He must have been bored  
to induce you, his little sister,

in too-tight shorts and  
t-shirt because you

liked to eat most anything  
and had the roundness

to prove it.

This private conference  
between two souls

absorbed in unenlightened  
conspiracy, disguised as reticence,

48

intuition, the harbinger  
of autumn signals

there is a death  
swimming towards us  
whether

we drink from the cup  
or not.



art by Mariana Franco

49

Steve Straight

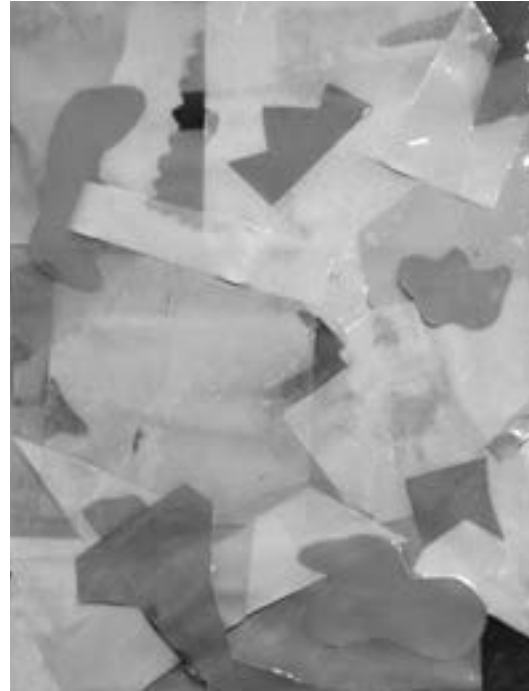
## Sneeze

Twenty-five strangers shift uneasily in their chairs  
on the first day of class in this community college.  
I see by their faces and the list of names  
that they represent the world:  
Sadejah, Jevaghn, Sandra, Pavelon, Jack—  
collected in this time and place by fate—  
Mona, Shaneiqua, Katya, Nydia, Tatiana, Spencer.  
I too am nervous, as always, about the beginning.

Then suddenly from the hush a tremendous sneeze!  
Chuckles about its size, then six or seven say at once  
to a person they've never met before  
*Bless you/God bless you/Gesundheit,*  
and the sneezer says Thank you  
and apologizes for not burying it  
in the crook of an elbow or a flannel sleeve.

They may not know the Ancients saw sneezes  
as good omens, that something so powerful  
and spontaneous must be caused by the gods.  
They may not know about when Xenophon  
exhorted his soldiers in battle, and one of them  
sneezed on the word *deliverance*, and  
they all bowed down before God at the sound.

But in this era of division and mistrust, xenophobia  
and tribe, I cherish this sweet instinct  
to wish grace and health in the life of a stranger.  
Let us all turn now toward the light  
and pray for another blessing from the gods.



art by Cory Hoskins



photo by Sarah Gendreau