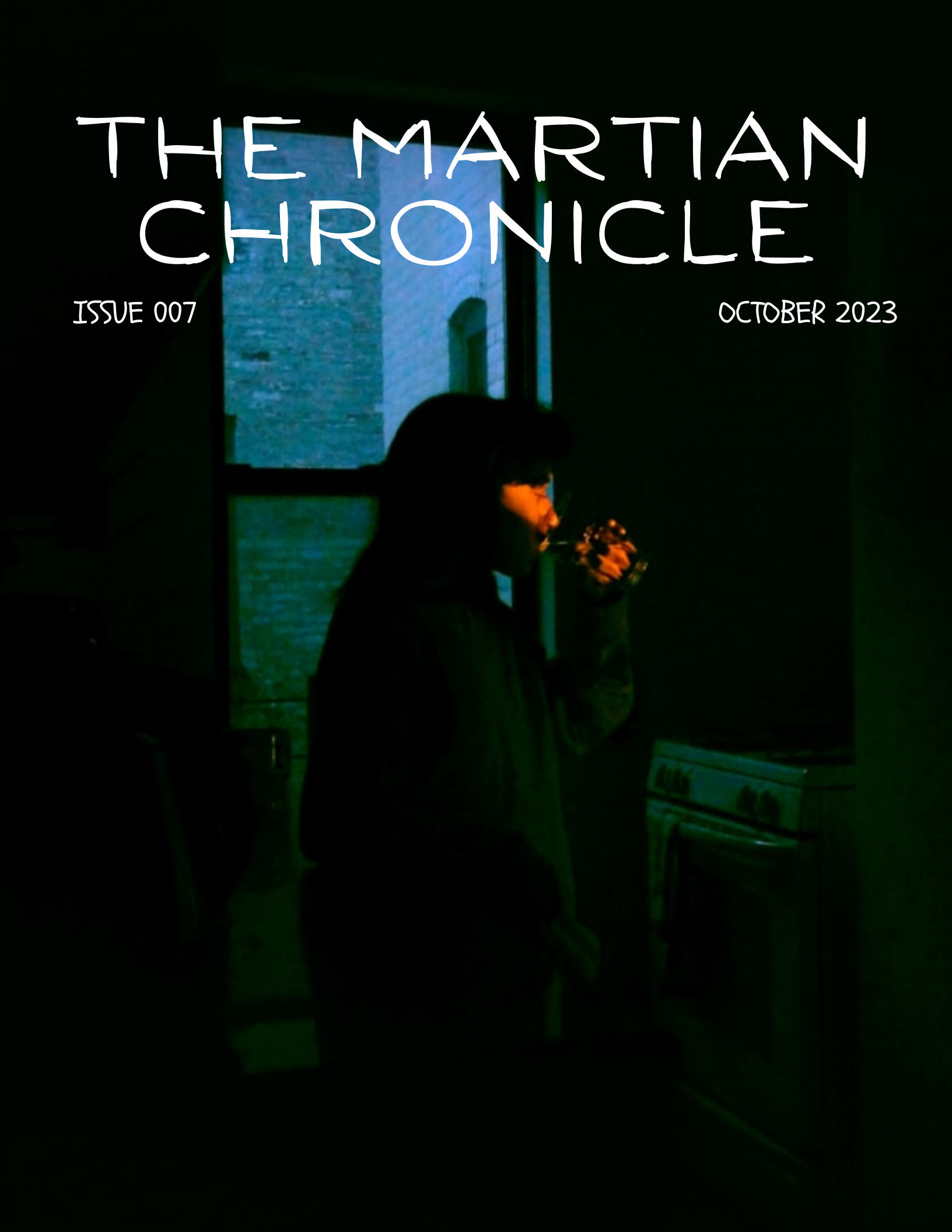


THE MARTIAN CHRONICLE

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THE MARTIAN CHRONICLE

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As we celebrate the arrival of Halloween, we are thrilled to introduce you to the seventh issue of The Martian Chronicle! We invite you to embark on a journey into the eerie and mysterious. Within these pages, you'll find a spine-tingling collection of brilliant and uniquely crafted works of art. From haunting, thought-provoking poetry, chilling prose, and mysterious photographs and paintings, this edition features a curated selection of artists from around the world.

This edition of The Martian Chronicle has not only surpassed our usual standards but has ventured into the eerie, as we proudly introduce emerging post-modern artists who reshape the art world into a realm more mysterious and unsettling than ever before.

In my second year as Editor-in-Chief, I remain deeply appreciative of the ongoing support extended by our board of directors, staff, and community. This edition continues to be made possible through their unwavering guidance, patience, and backing. I am already excited to create next year's edition, which I promise will be even more extraordinary.

Finally, I want to express our heartfelt appreciation to our dedicated community of readers for their unwavering support in ensuring the vitality of this magazine. Without any more delay, we are thrilled to introduce the seventh edition of The Martian Chronicle to you!

With immense gratitude,



Milan Vu
Editor-in-Chief | MVu@pharmacytheatre.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Unicorn.....	by Dmitry Bliznyuk
Refrigerated Major Watermelon Mountain.....	by Mercury-Marvin Sunderland
Ache to Ashe.....	by Leila Farjami
Scrolling.....	by Zachary Howatt
The Metaphor that Wished He Was a Simile.....	by CLS Sandoval
The Day the Man Made of Blood Entered My Garden.....	by Oliver J. Brooks
Against the Excruciating Halo Effects.....	by David M. Alper
Poetic Injustice.....	by Loren Mayshark
Assume for a Minute.....	by Richard Rauch
Between.....	by Laura Schulkind
Counting Truths.....	by Sreyash Sarkar

UNICORN

BY DMITRY BLIZNYUK

A cloudy autumn morning.
Streetlights, like giraffes, quietly roam in the fog.
Oblique clots of shadows quiver
behind the trees -
the small fish of the last night
got caught in the weeds while low tide.
It smells of burnt felt and rotten plums.
The light-boned autumn trembles
like a rickety foal
on the crooked legs of the branches.
An old woman drags a hand cart of apples.
Some leaves still glow, with the color of bile and blood.
Suddenly it starts to drizzle.
Hands of hundreds of ghosts rub the wet branches,
making fog thicker.
Two girls, students, hid from the rain in a pavilion.
They smoke and gently feed each other with pieces of chocolate
like birds feed their gaping chicks with worms,
trying not to smudge the lipstick.
A tipsy janitor stands at the front door.
He's sad; he misses his father's apple orchard.
Barely a month later,
the thoroughbred winter will come,
and you'll see the snowfall
plodding along outside the window
like a pureblooded unicorn,
white horseflies stinging its sides,
and it will fan them off
with its tail of drift-snow.

(translated by Sergey Gerasimov from Russian)



REFRIGERATED MAJOR WATERMELON MOUNTAIN DEW BY MERCURY-MARVIN SUNDERLAND

It's 9:53 AM.

You're listening to Buzzwing by Pogo on your brand-new Android. Next will come Toyz Noise by the same artist. Both are bizarrely good remixes of the Toy Story movies. That's kind of Pogo's whole thing, really. Well, not just Toy Story, more that he just really loves to make bizarrely good remixes of TV classics. Usually cartoons, which is fantastic because you absolutely hate live-action TV.

The wifi has really been cutting out today. That's to be expected because this is your second year where you've spent your birthday in the pandemic. You turned the big twenty-one the summer after the pandemic started. You turned twenty-two just a few months ago and it was Pandemic Birthday Part Two: Electric Boogaloo. You also have bad wifi because you literally live in a college dorm in a college campus which is in the literal smack dab middle of an Evergreen forest. It's legally considered a national park, and you live in the actually official 70's style concrete buildings in the center.

Right now there are guys with tools painting the entire outside wall of your third-floor bedroom window. There's a big sheet of plastic or whatever covering your window. You haven't been able to open it to ventilate your room in nearly a full week now. It means that you haven't been able to do your Hellenistic rituals or smoke weed in your room for quite a bit of time now. Even if you do open your window, the room doesn't ventilate. The whole place gets stuffy at night, but freezing cold the moment you attempt to change that..

You're running on refrigerated Major Watermelon Mountain Dew from a dollar store pink water bottle. And only less than four hours of sleep. Last night you stayed up until past four AM so you You're running on refrigerated Major Watermelon Mountain Dew from a dollar store pink water bottle. And only less than four hours of sleep. Last night you stayed up until past four AM so you could read 400+ pages of Problem Sleuth before going to bed. You actually ended up reading more than 600+ and finished the whole thing. Provided, Problem Sleuth isn't a difficult read and it's just one out of the many highly complex subplots of a certain 8000+ page avant garde multimedia internet story about zodiac space trolls, but you're in your twenties and you don't

give a shit if your interests are considered cringy anymore. Besides, you grew up having highly restricted internet access and just hadn't been able to realistically finish Homestuck in high school, even though you dearly loved it even then.

You're tired. There's a Zoom class with choppy connection coming up. You're in your last year of college. Your happy lamp is turned on. You have a full beard as well as perfect winged eyeliner and a psychedelic miniskirt. You're drinking water for an appropriate amount for the first time in your life.

You're tired but not unhappy.

You are living your wildest dreams.

ACHE TO ASH

BY LEILA FARJAMI

In the dream,
you ride a chestnut horse by the shore,
your black tousled hair,
silken as a mane,
unleashed and wind-swayed—
your body
sturdy,
immortal.

The gray clouds
roam in, hover.
Light punctures them into sieves,
soft bellyfuls of beams.

Underneath, water emerges
like a thousand silverfish—
glistening
God-spirit.

Nighttime arrives with its primrose and ghosts,
mountains become as untouchable as the exiled,
weariest ravens curl their shadows
between the willow branches.

Your fingers rise to touch the moon,
the northern star falls from the sky,
turns into a ball of cotton,
lands at your feet.

Bring your heartbreak here!

I scream at you from a distance.

*Let your blue flames run wild
and burn the bones of Earth,
turn your ache into ash,
scatter it with love
beyond these savage constellations.*

SCROLLING

BY ZACHARY HOWATT

I'm face to face with another woman I've never seen before. She's naked, as we all are. This was difficult to cope with at the beginning. My own nakedness was only briefly a concern; once I realized I would never be able to see my own body again, I didn't care what was exposed. Restrained at the forehead, the wrists, the ankles, and the pelvis, we don't have options. Let them see what I can't keep tabs on. Aside from our fingers and toes, which we wriggle feebly, our eyes are all we have at our disposal. It used to be insolent to look down at our partners' bodies. After many turns of the dials that pin us by our backs, setting us in countless combinations, man against woman, we soon lost the facility to care what the other thought of the impious gesture. It's delectable—the freedom of rolling our gaze up and down the curves, protrusions, crevices, hairs, over each and every cell in the delicate collage of skin that defies disintegration, hour by hour. There is nothing sexy about it. Maybe there are some here who still hold out hope for that prospect in the future. If so, I haven't met them. Most of us understand we have no future.

When the dials turn and we click into place, we know we will only see the other for a few minutes before the machines that restrain us pair us with someone new. In the little time we have, we search the other's body, hungry for the content it provides. It's entertainment. On a more basic level, it is the only dynamic part of our lives—what has become of them..

We don't know what is expected of us. First, we were imprisoned in isolating cells. We were then moved from the round room to the exteriors of these cylindrical towers. Now we hang with our goosebumps bristling to climate-controlled air, in what I assume is a deep warehouse, a place where the sun doesn't show its face. There must be a reason for it. Although we're stuck here in the darkness, they didn't want us to be blind. Lights display us for our partners to see. It's clear, then, that they want us looking. That's important for whatever purpose they have. To smell, hear, speak, and see are all allowed. We can't move or touch or taste—our bodies are fed intravenously. They must think these freedoms are dangerous to them. Or at the very least, inconvenient.

The woman across from me lets her senses droop as soon as she's had her fill of me. She disappears without having spoken a word. The dial moves her one slot to

the left, so I see her give the same silent treatment to the man beside me. This man told me his name once, but our introductions happened long enough ago to mean nothing to me now. Of his features, I only know the color of his skin—tanned like mine, racially ambiguous. I hardly struck up a conversation with him. I never asked him about his friends, his family. Questions like those tend to drag our spirits down. While he takes his turn with the woman, the men to my right and I float in the void, waiting vacantly to be brought back around to face a woman on the neighboring dial. I take this time to rest. The woman who just passed between us must be falling asleep, too. The dials don't stop turning for periods of sleep. I suspect our captors don't understand how we crave our dreams, or how the unblinking lights confuse and force us to rest more frequently than we had in our past life. There is little else to do but rest.

The man to my right, sloped slightly behind my peripheral vision on this rounded wall, looks down at all times. In the first days, he let himself get aroused, then pissed so that his stream missed the bag designed to collect his waste. He did it more than once, sprinkling the heads of those bound below and across from us. It entertained him. I was glad nothing of the sort happened to me. His folly doomed him, as the men adjacent to him began to warn every woman we came across of his subhuman nature. The time came for one of the women he watered to see him face to face. She tore into him, starting with his dick, highlighting its inadequacy. She moved her way up his body, devouring each detail and grinding her teeth on what she could observe. Out spat her vitriol. At the end, she spat for real, just managing to land a knotted glob of mucus somewhere on his leg. I couldn't quite see from my angle, but I don't think it was far off from his overgrown bush, which was visible even at my disadvantage. When the dial clicked away, setting the woman across from me now, he grumbled his excuses hoarsely. To tell the truth, I think he was grateful for her words. They were the last words he would receive for a long time. The piss was an accident, he claimed. But none of us have come close to making the same mistake. If for no other reason, Piss Guy's ostracism scared the possibility out of us.

I'm face to face with a woman who looks familiar. When I first caught a glimpse of her on the horizon of the dial, she struck an emotion that I thought had atrophied out of me. I expected familiarity to come sooner than this. With each successive click, I shouted for her to wake up and tell me who she was to me in our past life. Even looking at her at an angle dumped a trunk of memories over my mind. It occurs to me that I used to be a student teacher. I stood in a classroom with Mr.

Horschorn and Ms. Wells. It occurs to me that she could have attended my college, or she may have been a faculty member at the school. I went to church as well—not often, but enough to let my eyes wander over to the faces on the other side of the altar. Mass at St. Thomas's always felt like a stadium event, with the oldest patrons pushing past the college students to get in the bishop's own communion line. She could have been in the choir. They performed at morning mass, so I only saw them a few times. I used to like going to parties on Saturday nights, sleeping through until noon on Sunday, going to evening mass instead of the morning. She could have wandered into a party, into the kitchens where I preferred to hang out and have fascinating conversations with the uninhibited drunk. She could be one of the girls that liked to bake taquitos and pizza rolls at 1 a.m. They were the best.

By the time she stops in front of me, I see the gray in her skin and the odd purple blotches that have settled in her ankles. Her waist has sunk below the metal bar meant to hold her pelvis in place. Her forehead is exposed—the band that held her skull is loose, but not quite loose enough to free her head. She tried her best. But now the IV is dangling, no longer feeding her bloodstream. It's the price she paid for attempting to break free. She can't have been gone long—our captors surely don't intend to keep a corpse here to rot. A frosty plastic bag crinkles out from a mechanical drawer above her waste bin, just below her feet. Two whirring rods hold the bag wide and steady. A waterfall of pale yellow liquid dribbles out of a spout above her head—we all have one. It pours over her and wets her scalp and begins to sizzle once the trails have snaked down her arms and pooled into her belly button. She turns red like a candied apple. The bag catches the remnants of flesh still attached to the bones that slip through the restraints. The liquid in the spout switches to something blue. It sprays in a cone like a showerhead, washing the blood and acid off the restraints.

The topic of her replacement spreads. Would our captors find someone to fill that woman's spot now that she's gone? Where would they find the replacement? I run under the suspicion that we were all contained here at the same time, but the man to my left speculates that we may not all be in the same location yet. Like a pantry to a refrigerator, there may be a second location where the rest of us wait before being put in restraints to scroll endlessly. I ask him what he means by "the rest of us"—just how many does that include? He reminds me that the majority of those we've encountered here speak the same language. I say we might just be organized regionally.

He's adamant that the only ones trapped here, the only ones meant to be trapped here, are citizens of our country. The rest of the world lives freely.

He remains adamant for as long as I'm listening, or as long as he himself cares to argue about it. Then he falls away, closing himself off to his own theories. He's embarrassed for being affected once again by questions that we've long kicked under the rug, questions that have had their way with our sanity since the beginning. He sings to himself in an intentionally off-tune mutter, quietly, so that I know I'm not supposed to talk to him anymore.

The dials click. Piss Guy pleads with the woman set across from him.

"Look at me."

The woman, a withered slump of protruding lip, ignores him. The elderly have that look that normally pulls you out of the present, withdraws your attention. It has never been easy to meet their eyes. But Piss Guy stares intently. "Can't you hear me?" He is hardly assertive. She is resigned to her situation. It seems nothing can persuade her to listen.

We scroll around the dial until he meets the eyes of another girl—younger than most of us. "Talk to me," he says. She's confused by his petition. "Please," he says. "Tell me something."

Either she doesn't want to talk to him, or she has nothing to say. I rise to tell her this is Piss Guy, because it occurs to me that we've gone ages without warning anyone. He speaks again before I can get a word in.

"I see brown eyes," he says. "Eyes of someone who's focused. You used to be a good student?"

She's disturbed. I feel sorry for these young ones. They were meant to spend these years growing, exploring, limbering their social skills. Their determination to survive is dulled. Some of them can't imagine a life beyond objectification. They're startled by our anguish and offended by the frustration we show while trying to get them to see things our way.

"Just tell me your name," he says. He's already approaching defeat.

She groans, growing in volume as he keeps trying, as though it's belaboring her to be spoken to.

"Or just look at me."

She already is, pressing her gaze on him with the concentrated force of someone smoothing air bubbles out of a screen protector.

"What do I look like?"

The bareness of his question breaks my heart, but I don't have enough room in my chest to sympathize with Piss Guy.

"Manthy," says the girl.

He and I are momentarily lost. He can't believe she gave him anything to bite. But he catches on.

"Manthy. Manthy. Manthy—"

He doubles down like it's his sworn job to speak her name. He's laughing in a way that sinks in my stomach. I'm locked between the urge to protect Manthy and the impulse to laugh at Piss Guy's timely plunge into madness. I look at her for a clue. She's all wide eyes, delighted. What beautiful curves become of her cheeks. Smiling, smiling. It's contagious, and I don't do a thing to suppress my own glee from climbing up.

"Manthy! Manthy!" He's shouting in all directions although his head is fixed in place. His joy resounds. She laughs with him.

The dial clicks, and now I'm face to face with Manthy. We're both still relishing the inexplicable afterglow.

"Wait," she says, her voice going rigid. She tells him, "Your eyes are blue."

Startled, he voices his appreciation—a meager gurgle.

"You look scared," she adds. "And you're hairy. More hairy than a lot of you—"

"...Than a lot of us." He nods, excited by the comparison to the other men.

"What's your name?"

"Brandon." He's breathless.

She doesn't miss a beat: "Brandon! Brandon! Brandon!"

Her shrill voice fills the cavern. The women in the row below us cackle and chatter.

"Manthy! Brandon! Manthy! Brandon!"

The echoes come from just one woman until voices of all kinds join in the chorus.

She asks me this time, "What's your name?"

I grapple with a strange terror. Somehow, my concern now is disappointing her. Although I can feel it too, the joy the others feel makes little sense to me. I'm mortified by the possibility of losing track of this new anomaly, this happiness. As I begin to question myself, the laughter tapers. Only by being in the presence of my pause, these people can sense a return to the gloom, the monotony.

"Isaiah," I say. An apology. Releasing this information puts into perspective how

little it matters. I brace myself for the others to hate me, to see how I've poked a ghastly hole in the silliness of this game.

"Isaiah! Isaiah! Isaiah!"

Manthy lets it out with gusto. Her feet flick from side to side in their restraints. Many others above and below me, and even some on dials far away—people I may never meet—repeat my name. I can't help but smile. My face grows sore from the strain in my cheeks.

I hear other names, too. When I get one, it becomes the next thing out of my mouth. I'm hungry for them, like it would be fatally rude to let one slip from my notice.

The dials click. I am face to face with someone who is, for the first time, not a woman at all. Cricket is their name. I've never been more excited to meet a new face. I shout for everyone to hear, "Cricket! Cricket! Cricket!"

The echoes of the name come in reply, but there's something else that surfaces. In the distance, an impassioned voice wails, "Love! Cricket, sweetheart! My love!"

Cricket's eyes flick frantically. "Telly?"

"You're alive!"

"Telly!"

We join in readily: "Telly! Telly! Telly!"

"That's my boyfriend's mom," says Cricket. Their look hardens. "Kenny? Kenny!"
"Kenny! Kenny! Kenny!"

We call his name for many minutes, but when we fall silent to listen, there is no answer.

"I don't know where he is, sweetheart."

When Telly replies, the sentence comes through twice. Someone elected themselves to be the intermediary, faithfully repeating the speaker so that the far-away listener can hear.

"I'm happy you're okay," says Cricket. They add ironically, "...alive."

A man several spots away from me repeats their message so that Telly can hear. Telly gives a reply. Soon, others in the cavern are talking with each other, garnering attention with their names and using intermediaries to make the message ring clear. New names rise into prominence.

"Logan!"

"Margaret! Have you seen your father?"

"Janet!"

"Bruce! Tell your neighbors what I always say!"

"Wendy!"

"Lexi! It's so good to hear your voice!"

The dials click. I am face to face with a man for the first time.

I saw him when he locked in place across from Brandon, who was bewildered enough to recoil into awkward silence. Their eyes remained indiscriminate, scrubbing the content on the other's body. When he comes to me, I participate the same way I have for the others. I repeat his name, "Fernando! Fernando!" until it is sufficiently celebrated. The dials click.

The man to my left hasn't been speaking, but being face to face with Fernando sets him into a fit.

"What do they want from us, then?"

Fernando can't make sense of his grumbling. He offers, "What's your name?"

"This is dangerous," says my neighbor. "They don't want us touching each other, moving around, or seeing the sun, but they let us look and talk. Look and talk. Why? What do they gain?"

Theorizing again. It seems he was set on it all being an experiment. It makes sense to me. If we were only prisoners, there would be no sense in having us scroll by on the dials. Whoever is keeping us here is pairing us up in different combinations intentionally.

"What do you think they're testing?" I ask.

"Not compatibility, apparently."

He spits it out like I have thrown years of research into the fire. By compatibility, I know what he means. But his theory still stands, even if our captors are experimenting with same-sex pairings. Who said any of this had anything to do with mating?

"They want to see something. Hear something. Our words matter—what we do matters."

Fernando is paying him polite attention, but it isn't clear to me if he's onboard. As for myself, I've had enough. In all the time we've been here, he hasn't been privileged with exclusive knowledge. He has been its victim, just like the rest of us, and he still treats it like an uncooperative partner. Something personal.

"I was just coming to terms with it," he says.

"Terms?"

"Just when I thought there was a reason for all this."

It occurs to me that my reaction to him comes down to more than just boredom. It infuriates me. I'm not prone to outbursts here where my opinions don't matter, but I'm overcome with fury. I want to lay my hands on him. The more I think about it, the more violently the desire bubbles inside me, exacerbated by my inability to move at all. To think that he believes he could eventually be subdued into silence, into compliance, if he only saw the noble purpose our captors have for putting us through irrevocable trauma. To think that he was allowing his reasoning to lead him anywhere near the possibility of forgiving those who put us here.

"What's your name?" says Fernando.

"What does it matter to you?"

Fernando shakes his head, dismayed. "It's for you, sad sack."

"Sad Sack! Sad Sack!"

A few people attempt to chirp, but the sound dies swiftly.

"Whatever it is they want out of us," says Fernando, "They've already done it. What are you gonna do to stop it now?"

"Just leave me alone," says Sad Sack. "Let me do nothing. I'll screw up their research. It's the least I can do."

There's no arguing with him, nor is there any wish to. The dial clicks, and he and I are turned to face the black expanse. Meanwhile, Fernando moves on to the next man. Noah's his name. "Noah! Noah! Noah!"

Even while facing the darkness, Brandon and I keep up our responsorial hymn. Strangers across the void give us names to chirp. When we can no longer distinguish the names, we squawk our own. We shout the names of people we knew before coming here—those who raised us, those who died. At times, the air is thick with the rolling drone of constant noise. Distinct names come through the fog for us to bounce back. It occurs to me what this must look like to those watching, if they're watching. We are song birds. We fill our cage with this song.

THE METAPHOR THAT WISHED HE WAS A SIMILE BY CLS SANDOVAL

Just as I have selected a blank page
I discover a big black ink blot
We're only separated by a table and two coffee mugs
And we're oceans apart
The photos record each look, every hidden glance
Between my audio and your visual, there is a reality we will both manage to miss
You're sitting back, delicately observing
As if I'm perfectly pirouetting on Pointe
I'm actually an elephant in high heels
Attempting to sit on a tiny red footstool
My tutu is sagging and you keep complimenting my sense of style
I could just say, "you're everything"
But I must protect my heart
You're taking these moments too lightly or maybe a little too deep
We're speaking so smoothly
Flawlessly articulating a performance that can never actually sustain
My heart is a pile of glass shards
Yours might be, too
All we need is to find the one with the matching jagged edges
To make ourselves whole once more
I opened one more wound
Just to prove I'm willing to love again
The tornados are churning and all you suggest is we close the blinds
We're reaching for each other and you're threatening to just walk away
The last thing I want to do waste your time
The anticipation built as I combed my hair
Chatted nervously about you with my best friend
Carefully selected the outfit that would never reveal that I carefully selected it
And I waited
You never came
Behind your smiling and my razor-sharp wit
There are magnets locking, and you keep forcing them apart
I deleted your words just in time for you to invade my dreams once more
I want nothing more than for you to earn your second chance
Of course, I never stick with a metaphor long enough to warrant a response



303

THE DAY THE MAN MADE OF BLOOD ENTERED MY GARDEN BY OLIVER J. BROOKS

I couldn't get my new electric kettle to work.
I'd followed all the instructions to a T
but when I plugged it in—nothing. Not even
a whimper. I thought I'd ought
to get my electrical outlets checked or else
compose a handwritten letter to the kettle manufacturer,
but upon exiting and rounding the side of my house to inspect
the circuit breaker, I found the uninvited guest
in the vegetable patch. As he didn't seem to have
any visible mouth, I hesitated to ask his name or shout;
instead, I gave an awkward half-wave
through the thinning gray mist. His left foot,
I noticed, was dangerously close to
my row of carrots, which I'd struggled with all of last season
and at last hoped to have hit upon the perfect balance of
soil, water, and shade, and I must have cast
a dagger-throwing glance at the foot
because he slowly but reflexively moved away,
like a gelatinous self-propelled machine. It started
with a wet tug from the top of his head
that shivered down his body to the left foot
before the tremulous wave was sent back to the head,
each successive pass of the tremor imitating the bending
of the knee, the shifting of the hips, until he was well away
from the nearest carrot sprout. Again, I opened
my mouth and again I hesitated. What do you say
to something so fully and terribly human?
The haze shifted, and it seemed the man was
less an intact cardiovascular system and more an outline
of red. A mirage, yes, it had to be. But what mirage
dares raise its hand, strenuously, to wave back?
He came from the fog, I later imagined, and so back into
the fog he went. A blood fog, dyed by the piercing sun
above the bleary tree line.

In the distance, a kettle shrieked.

AGAINST THE EXCRUCIATING
HALO EFFECTS
BY DAVID M. ALPER

Of these dusky skies
as you look down at this city on the pier
and the moon hangs low
in its purple gorge
its silken celestial nipple
wagging its salt-scented tongue
over the arrant waves
all around you
as if it's coming to life
there is not one rooftop lighted
or a bare bulb
or a flicker of emergency lights
on the island of Manhattan
or the sandy streets of Staten Island
that teem with mystery
as we,
fiercely exposed
to these stars
dance in the dark
above our heads
and tell us
*wake up, there is magic
within you
right there.*

POETIC INJUSTICE

BY LOREN MAYSHARK

Albert Camus said that there is really only one important fundamental philosophical question: whether or not to commit suicide. As Jerry was walking home after third shift on an assembly line making car engines, he began to consider his escape plan. He had another quarter-century to go until retirement, and his mind kept settling on one thought: Today is the end of humiliation and all the pain in this mistake of an existence.

Jerry figured that Gina would still be asleep. He'd go home and make the biggest goddamn BLT he could fit his mouth around, then leisurely drink his customary pair of manhattans, extra cherries, before going to the garage and putting his late old man's pearl-handled Colt .45 revolver to his temple. Then he'd let Gina try to decipher the abstract painting his brains left on the wall.

As usual, he was cutting through St. Michael's Cemetery, passing leaning gravestones greened with moss and gnarled old maples with dangling leaves beginning to yellow in the crisp September breeze. A scruffy drunk was passed out on a bench. The guy looked to be in his mid-fifties, a couple of decades older than Jerry. He had an overgrown, gray beard and a skin tone that was not quite swarthy but made Jerry certain that his ancestors had not come on the Mayflower. A ratty, marbled composition notebook lay on the man's chest. Feeling there was nothing to lose, Jerry snatched it up. The man grumbled and made a little stab at where the notebook had been before letting out a snort. An empty bottle of Night Train that was sitting next to him clattered to the ground. As Jerry hustled away the man settled back into his booze-soaked dream.

When Jerry got home he peeked into the only bedroom of their row house. Gina still looked hours from being upright. So he fried the shit out of a pound of bacon, which had never smelled richer. The greasy scent mingled with the sweetness of the manhattan he quaffed as bars of sunlight filtered through the kitchen window.

Astoria, Queens, was still waking up. His landlady, Peta, a stone-faced old Greek broad, was going out for the paper. The rent was due Friday, which normally triggered a bout of anxiety, but now he felt relieved as he sipped the manhattan. He would never have to say another word to Peta...or anyone else, for that matter.

Everyone thinks a death row inmate's last meal is one of the best ever, but few are able to properly review it. Once the dark-brown bacon was transferred onto toasted rye,

he devoured it with hothouse tomatoes, romaine lettuce, and a half jar of mayo. As he sipped his second manhattan, he idly opened the stolen notebook, running his long, artistic fingers through his charcoal beard with only a few dots of white.

Jerry had always fancied himself a bit of a misunderstood poet thrust into a factory worker's mold. After dropping out of tenth grade and drifting for a couple of years with a volume of Rimbaud under his arm, he got a GED. The degree was about as important as a swatch of toilet paper to him. He was a self-styled bohemian vagabond who loved to wander through lower Manhattan fueled on coffee, cheap beer, and rotgut booze as he puffed unfiltered Lucky Strikes. Somehow he caught the eye of Gina, who worked as a barmaid at the Back Fence in the West Village. Jerry would go in there with his beat-up acoustic guitar, with which he would be allowed to occupy the stage on off hours, just long enough to play the half-dozen Rolling Stones covers he had managed to learn. He could usually sneak in an original composition at the end—one of his poems set to music.

He'd hustle up enough dough in the tip bucket to sit at the bar for a couple of beers beyond his one performer freebie, taking the opportunity to sheepishly flirt with Gina, who would coyly rebuff his advances. But his penetrating green eyes looked like emerald infinity pools to her, and eventually the 21-year-old began to yearn for them when she wasn't slinging drinks. As he gained confidence his staring seemed to penetrate her very soul. She was tallish at five-nine, a natural beauty who looked as if she'd been transported from a bygone era, like a cigarette girl who had walked through a magical door in a turn-of-the-century cabaret and was dropped into the West Village in the early nineties. She had mother-of-pearl skin and shoulder-length onyx hair that she curled up to the nape of her neck. He considered her an uncut gem, aching to be polished by someone quirky like Jerry. Jerry was no lapidary; however, he made up for his lack of ability with persistence.

Once he'd knocked her up, the young idealist had no choice but to settle into the factory gig. He was oddly relieved when the baby came out stillborn. It was a miracle that he was still with her all these years later, but the charm had long since worn off for both of them.

* * *

He skimmed the first couple of pages, then set down his drink, turned back to the beginning of the notebook, and read more slowly, truly focusing for the first time. After reading the fourth poem, he felt a twinge of sadness, for he knew he couldn't create anything in the same league if he wrote every day for the next century. He

decided he'd drink a third manhattan while scouring the Internet to see if he could find a trace of these poems published anywhere. After checking seven poems and finding nothing, he gulped the final three-quarters of his cocktail. He had an idea.

Instead of grabbing the pearl-handled revolver, he poured himself another cocktail and began transcribing the poems onto the computer. By the time Gina rolled out of bed, it was noon, and he had half a dozen manhattans under his belt. He had sent out the first seven poems to various highfalutin magazines, some of which had rejected his own drivel (107 poems, to be exact).

After a couple more excruciating weeks of putting doohickeys in engines—the same rote motions over and over, his angst dulled by manhattans at dawn—something happened. He received a letter from the most prestigious publication. It was a letter of acceptance with publication details and a check enclosed for \$500. He felt a swelling of pride in his chest, followed by a brief twinge of mingled embarrassment and dread. He buried that feeling under a cloak of amber booze.

The next day two more letters came. Within a month all seven poems had been accepted, to the tune of \$2,100. The first was to be published in two weeks, with the rest coming within the next quarter. Jerome B. Arlington was having a moment. After the publication of poem number four, "Frivolity of the Wind," he was receiving phone calls from small presses and the kind of milquetoast junior literary agents who dealt with emerging poets, inquiring about a chapbook, saying that if they liked what they saw, there could be an "unprecedented advance" for a debut poetry collection.

Seeing high six figures dancing in his head, Jerry walked into work, unzipped his fly, and took a leak on the assembly line. When his manager said, "Have you lost your fucking mind?" Jerry replied, "A long time ago. And if you say another word to me, you'll lose your head." Thus he gave his resignation, effective immediately.

Finally, Jerry thought as he met the cool night, heading for Mel's Pub to indulge in some celebratory drinks. He uncharacteristically bought a round for the bar and toasted, "To the sweet taste of success."

Jerry did receive an obscenely generous advance that was nearly six figures. He used the lion's share to buy his dream car, a pink Cadillac de Ville. He put the balance away for the inevitable ebb of the flow he was in. But his new occupation of poet had him frequently dipping into the emergency fund to keep Peta off his back when rent was due. Gina was always the practical one: she kept all four of her shifts as a server at the Neptune Diner as if nothing had changed because, in her mind, so little had.

* * *

One day, as he was heading out to cruise around the neighborhood in the new Caddy, which he parked on the street to show off and to not disturb his man cave in the garage, he noticed a note on the windshield. It was in a looping script that reminded him of the poems that were remaking his previously hopeless existence.

For those scorned,

Looking for relief,

Death is sweet nectar,

Never mind grief.

When the secret is known,

You WILL be exposed.

Then you'll pray for the reaper to come,

For nothing can save you until the case is

Fatally closed.

A year later, when the New York Times Book Review piece on his debut collection came out, the title read: "The Next Great American Poet Has Arrived." This was no outlier; the praise was almost uniformly gushing over this talent who had emerged from the assembly line of an engine plant in outer Queens. Soon the phone was jangling around the clock for readings from San Francisco to Boston and every literary outpost in between. He was getting \$20,000 speaking fees to give keynote speeches and to tie a literary bow on Ivy League commencements. His fifteen minutes was turning into something much more sustained and surprising. About a year into this new life, the whispers began: How will he top this debut? Is there anything in the works?

Jerry was thrilled, milking his newfound glory for every delicious drop. He was boozing as hard as ever and bagging women on the road who would have never looked twice at him on the streets of New York. And Gina? Well, she was dumbstruck by the whole thing, but as the dollars flowed in, he handed her stacks to go shopping, which numbed the guilty twinges he occasionally got as he kissed her upon returning from his latest tour.

Secretly he was growing increasingly terrified because, aside from the debut and the few poems he'd sold here and there, he only had about five poems left from the notebook. Even Jerry could see that the golden words he'd lifted from that derelict made his best poems read like iron pyrite in comparison.

He needed to find a way to stay in the game and keep the checks flowing in.

He was sitting at the breakfast table, drinking Johnnie Walker Black and eating fatback with marble rye toast to sop up the grease, when Gina walked in with the mail. On the bottom of the stack was an envelope with his name and address in the looping handwriting he recognized. Polishing off two fingers of the blended scotch to steady his nerves, he opened the envelope.

Dear Mr. Arlington,

How sweet is the nectar of unearned success?

How many know our little secret?

Not only have you fraudulently flaunted something you don't own,

but you've created buffoonery from high art.

Hand shaking, Jerry slopped more Johnnie Walker Black into his glass, drinking it in one tremulous swig. The letter continued:

I see everything you do, from your incessant boozing to your adulterous trusts. I bet you thought that your time has come, and it has. Now begins your undoing.

You'll never know where I'll be, always close—you may never flee.

For I am the last one you should have crossed...

You'll see.

Your nemesis,

Poet X

That night Jerry tossed in bed. He looked over at Gina, angelic. He needed a way out. What could he do? Find this guy and offer to buy more poems? That would be crazy, as it seemed pretty clear the man wanted to murder him. Could he use the money he was making to commission some budding young poet to ghostwrite a few more winners?

He felt trapped and alone. Eventually, after hours of writhing in the sheets, he fell into a sort of half-dream where he felt a flitting tongue tickling his foot and then a powerful arm-like creature slithering its cold body up his thigh. A giant yellow python wrapped around his body and constricted, immobilizing him.

He had the notion that he must escape before he suffocated to death. As he lay there, helpless, he sensed something powerful in the room—a dark figure standing there, holding the pearl-handled Colt, contemplating Jerry's existence. Then: *Bam!*

He opened his eyes. There was no snake and he was drenched in sweat. He wasn't sure he was alive until he looked over at Gina, who was sitting up with her hand pressed to her breastbone. "Oh my God!" she said. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Sounded like a gunshot."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and I have this weird feeling." She was starting to tear up. "I think it came from...from the garage!"

Jerry hugged her. It had never felt better to be next to this woman. In that moment he knew she was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Then he had the sinking feeling that it was too late; everything was tumbling apart.

"I'm scared, Jer. Can you go check it out?"

In his leopard-print housecoat, Jerry crept out to the garage. When he hit the lights, he instantly felt a gag reflex and, retching, almost puked. A horror his mind could not compute was before him. A man lay on the floor before Jerry, blood leaking out of his head wound. Incongruously, he was wearing gloves. The air stank of urine, feces, blood, death. Next to the corpse lay his father's Colt .45. Jerry collapsed to the ground, head in hands. After what seemed like an hour, he got up, fearing that Gina—or, worse, someone else, like Peta—would come in to see the mess. He got up and that was when he saw the note on the workbench, flecked with fresh droplets of blood, a hodgepodge of cobbled-together letters cut from magazines.

"Thank you for bearing witness to the cupola on the structure of this poet's artistic life: Theodore Carmichael Aiken. You took another man's life to continue your own wretched existence. Now my spirit is free, and you carry the burden of two men. I would wish you good luck, but I know that fickle lover will vomit horror on you for the rest of your miserable days. I will see you in eternity when you come to return my words."

There was a blank space and then a poem:

Now our souls are eternally bound.

You will be tortured long after my body is placed in the ground.

When you fly by another's wing,

Consternation and sorrow life will bring.

You've had your day and now it's done.

Mine might have drawn to a close, but now you've seen how I have won.

Prepare to be incinerated by the glow of a setting sun.

Jerry put the Colt to his temple and pulled the trigger, but there was just an ominous click. With a shudder, he dropped the gun and went looking for a shovel.



ASSUME FOR A MINUTE

BY RICHARD RAUCH

the moon's a lost balloon
just hanging 'round to give
its touch of poignancy
to another featureless night;

the sun's hell-bent on fun,
burned out by another day,
leaving us in the dark to play
our next hopeless home game;

our one and only superstar
almost saves the day,
carrying the team through
another acceptable loss;

the stars are mason jars
of summer lightning bugs,
twinkling for the sake of twinkling,
a wonder from where we sit—

on an isolated spit
of an ocean planet,
a galactic backwater,
where somewhere there's

a dreamer, looking up
and wondering if time
is but a nursery rhyme
that haunts us when we sleep.

BETWEEN

BY LAURA SCHULKIND

My father floats between bedroom and living room.
Between his chair by the rented hospital bed,
bending in to her whispers,
and the sofa that faces the forested backyard,
watching the wild horses that are not there.

He wakes each night,
confused by the empty space beside him.
Demands to know, "Why was I not informed?"
And I bring him out to the couch, curtains
drawn, house still, and tell him that he has lost his memory.
That he sits beside her each day.
That there is nothing more to be done.
That we have a plan, and
he will live with his son and
watch his youngest grandchild
grow into womanhood. He says how lucky
he is to be so well loved. We both weep.
Each night the same.

He is on the couch, gazing out, when she finally lets go.
The day had started just like the days before.
I'd laid out his clothes—jeans, shirt, sweater.
Helped with the buttons and suspenders,
the Velcro sneakers.
Curtisied and called him "sir"
to make a joke of the awkward reversal.
I sit down beside him, wait for him to turn
and settle his eyes on me, and tell him.
He rises to go the bedroom, and I rise, too.
But he cups my chin in his hands, like I was six,
and tells me to stay.

He is gone a very long time. Alone with her body.
I cannot imagine the goodbye.
And when he returns, he is in dress pants and blazer,
oxfords I hadn't seen in years.
I make us gin and tonics with the jigger he always used,
and we sit side by side, looking out at the deep woods.
He points out the window, and I nod,
the wild hooves pounding in my chest.

COUNTING TRUTHS

BY SREYASH SARKAR

Variables of the day
Speak to me in tones
Of red mad flesh
As a never-setting sun
Stares back at me
And I ask
Of wings, lost
Measuring days in venom

Mahler's Sth messes
Me up

My mind goes to my body
My body to my heart
My heart to my feet
I start walking
As verdancy is paralysed
And purple pleasures, evanesce
Roots appear on my feet
Arguing how did they get there
A divan out of nowhere
Books, excruciating books
Covered in sap

A service truck
Empties corpses of
All my truths

I count them one by one
Put them to bed
Pulling the duvet covers
Except that they are short
Of complacency
I huddle closer
To tell them stories
Carpentered for eternity
Stories that remind them
Of who I am.

It is surely about what I am
It is surely about where I am at
That you are interested in,
I ask.
and not signatures of light
and not nights of neon
and not how I am.

A leaf blows in,
Nestling between me
and them

I remind myself
I rinse myself off of red
I write poems in a burning world
I plant saplings
I can grow myself

In afternoons, therefore
I
insist
That I know
How truths are.

THE WRITERS

Dmitry Blizniuk

Dmitry Blizniuk is a poet from Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared in Rattle, The Nation, Prairie Schooner, The London Magazine, Guernica, Denver Quarterly, Pleiades and many others.. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is also the author of *The Red Forest* (Fowlpox Press, 2018). His poems have been awarded RHINO 2022 Translation Prize. He lives in Kharkov, Ukraine.

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland (he/him) is a transgender autistic gay man with Borderline Personality Disorder. He's from Seattle and currently attends the Evergreen State College. He's been published by University of Amsterdam's Writer's Block, UC Davis' Open Ceilings, UC Riverside's Santa Ana River Review, UC Santa Barbara's Spectrum, and The New School's The Inquisitive Eater. His lifelong dream is to become the most banned author in human history. He's @RomanGodMercury on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Leila Farjami

Leila Farjami is a poet, literary translator, and psychotherapist. In addition to publishing seven poetry books in Persian, her work has appeared in Cathexis Northwest Press, Hey, I'm Alive, Midwest Quarterly, Nonconformist Magazine, Nimrod Journal, Pennsylvania English, Poetic Sun, Poetry Porch, Press Pause Press, and riverSedge: A Journal of Art and Literature; was published by Tupelo Press for their 30/30 Project; and has been translated into Swedish, Arabic, Turkish, and French. Leila has appeared in poetry readings and on Persian TV and radio interviews about her poetry. She studies poetry with Rachel Kann, enjoys translating sacred poetry by Rumi into English, and has translated a comprehensive volume of Sylvia Plath's poetry into Persian.

Zachary Howatt

Zachary Howatt has been telling stories since before he could read or write, culminating in a recent award and publication history: National Silver Medal for SciFi/Fantasy (Scholastic Art & Writing Awards), Best Emerging Writer (Minnesota State University Moorhead Juried Film Exhibition), Best Storytelling (Headwaters Film Festival), and publication of stories in magazines such as Meetinghouse, The Northern Mirror, Northern Narratives, and Red Weather. After spending time in radicalizing spaces in Fargo, North Dakota, he started leaning into injustice and dystopia as the background of his speculative fiction. He now lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

CLS Sandoval

CLS Sandoval, PhD (she/her) is a pushcart nominated writer and communication professor with accolades in film, academia, and creative writing who speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches and rarely relaxes. She has presented over 50 times at communication conferences, published 15 academic articles, two academic books, three full-length literary collections: *God Bless Paul*, *Soup Stories: A Reconstructed Memoir*, and *Writing Our Love Story*, and three chapbooks: *The Way We Were*, *Tumbleweed: Against All Odds*, and *The Villain Wore a Hero's Face*. She is raising her daughter and dog with her husband in Alhambra, CA.

Oliver J. Brooks

Oliver J. Brooks is currently studying creative writing at Florida State University and is the current poetry editor of *The Kudzu Review*. Their work has appeared in *Antithesis Journal*, *Beyond Thought Journal*, *Cantilevers Journal of the Arts*, and elsewhere.

David M. Alper,

David M. Alper's latest collection of poems, *Hush*, is scheduled for publication next year. His work appears in *Meniscus*, *Unbound Brooklyn*, *Oxford Magazine*, and elsewhere. He is an educator in New York City.

Loren Mayshark

Loren Mayshark's book, *Death: An Exploration*, won the 2016 Beverly Hills Book Award in the category of Death and Dying and was selected as the honorable mention recipient for book of the year in the 2016 Foreword INDIES Awards in the category of Grief/Grieving (Adult Nonfiction). He has attended the Gotham Writers Workshop, New York Writers Workshop, and the Chautauqua Writers' Festival. Loren received a BA in world history from Manhattanville College in 2004 and attended the MA history program at Hunter College in Manhattan. His hobbies include martial arts and stand-up comedy. You can learn more about Loren at www.lorenmayshark.com.

Richard Rauch

Born and raised in the New Orleans area, Rauch lives along Bayou Lacombe in southeast Louisiana. A graduate of LSU, Rauch received their PhD in theoretical physics from Stony Brook University. Rauch has lived and worked in New York, Los Angeles, Washington DC, and currently test rockets at NASA's Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. Poetry credits include *Big Muddy*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *Brushfire Literature and Arts Journal*, *The Cape Rock*, *Confrontation*, *Crack the Spine*, *decomp*, *Edison Literary Review*, *El Portal*, *Euphony*, *Evening Street Review*, *Grey Sparrow*, *Medicine and Meaning*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *The Oxford American*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Pennsylvania English*, *The Phoenix*, *Plainsongs*, *Quiddity*, *Sheila-Na-Gig Online*, *SLAB*, *Steam Ticket*, *Whimperbang*, *Wild Violet*, the *Love Notes* anthology (Vagabondage Press), and *Down to the Dark River: An Anthology of Contemporary Poems about the Mississippi River* (Louisiana Literature Press). Flash fiction credits include *Infective Ink* and *Aspen Idea* (2012 Aspen Writers' Foundation/*Esquire Short*, *Short Fiction Contest* finalist).

Laura Schulkind

Schulkind received her JD from New York University, where she focused on public service law, and has been practicing for thirty years. Growing from her deep belief in the importance of free, public education for all, she specializes in representing public school and community college districts throughout California. She is a past president of our statewide professional organization, the California Council of School Attorneys, and is a sought-after speaker throughout the state on issues of diversity and equity in education.

She writes poetry and fiction because, lawyer that I am, she believes in the power of a well-told story. However, in law she is entrusted with others' stories. Through poetry and fiction she tells her own. She has published two chapbooks with Finishing Line Press, *The Long Arc of Grief* (2014) and *Lost in Tall Grass* (2014). Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Bluestem*, *Broad River Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *Crack the Spine*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *The Dos Passos Review*, *Eclipse*, *Ellipsis Literature and Art*, *Evening Street Press*, *Forge*, *Front Range Review*, *Good Men Project*, *Legal Studies Forum*, *Light Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *Mad River Review*, *Minetta Review*, *Mudlark*, *Origins Journal*, *OxMag*, *The Penmen Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *POETRY and Places*, *Poetry Expressed*, *Reed Magazine*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *Schuykill Valley Journal*, *Stirring: A Literary Collection*, *Talking River*, *Third Wednesday*, *Tiger's Eye*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Voices de la Luna*, and *Willow Springs*.

Sreyash Sarkar

Sreyash Sarkar, is a poet, a qualified painter, a practicing Hindustani Classical musician, and an aspiring researcher in Metamaterials and Applied Physics. Educated in Kolkata, Bangalore, and Paris, he has been a student correspondent at *The Statesman*, Kolkata from his school, South Point. In 2012, in an international poetry competition organized for the memoir of Yeats, his poem was shortlisted among 40 other poets from all over the world. Having been nominated and won a plethora of literary and art prizes, he is the youngest polymath to be featured in *Le Mauricien* for his outstanding achievements. His musical compositions have been part of cinematic scores and have been orchestrated widely. He currently divides his time between Kolkata, Paris, and Lyon, where he is currently pursuing his research. He can be reached at sreysarkar.weebly.com.

THE ARTISTS

Yannick-Robin Mirko

Yannick-Robin Mirko [they/he] is a multi-disciplinary artist and licensed deathcare worker with an educational background built up from Berklee College of Music, The City University of New York, and the Cremation Association of North America, they intend to move the world towards a more fair and impartial future.

His hope for his works is for the person reading to walk away having taken a moment for themselves to appreciate something new and consider how it makes them feel, with hopes that it'll inspire them to seek justice for others in their own life practice. even more specifically, he aims to raise awareness towards ableism faced by people with rare diseases, TGNC rights, and the de-colonization of Puerto Rico.

Rachel Coyne

Rachel Coyne is a writer and painter from rural MN.

Edward Scott

Edward is an American playwright. They hold a BA in Interdisciplinary Arts from University of Washington. Favorite foods are chicken and chicken fried rice. Their work has been produced by The Equity Library Theater in Queens.