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DADDY ISSUE

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the DADDY ISSUE

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COVER ART

“The Hand of John the Bachelor”
by Anna Kirby

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“We realized that the version of the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in, and that for all their caretaking and bitching about crabgrass they didn’t give a damn about lawns.”

– Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*



the DADDY ISSUE

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Untitled, Part I

Erica Vanstone

I walked like a hurricane through my own door,
terrible and sad and with the pine needle notes I'd
accumulated tugging my eye in a gravitron.

And I grieved for my old life--the one
you gifted me, wrapped in a box with scraps
of the shipping label still stuck to the outside.

And I rained for days;
And I railed for days;
The mountains and the Boulzane swelled.

This old life washed from the foothills of my hair;
all of the people you made me into sang as I no longer
stood there but leaped from the face of La Serre.

When I woke in the shadow of Mont Ardu,
and I could no longer hear you, only then
did I know I had truly arrived in myself.

Summer's honored guest.

Offering
Anna Kirby



Here

Mo Buckley Brown

The moon watches me give birth. Watches me wail. Watches my skin split into new skin— a rare moment of true inseparability. Neither of us will ever see it again. The fluorescents hum. Scrubs rustle. A chorus.

The moon watches me give birth. It watches the quiet houses and the stream runoff and the people in bars opening and closing their mouths in an endless cycle of intake and expulsion. I stopped painting the murals when I learned that sometimes, people would stop in the street and look at them, really look at them, and remember them when they got home.

The moon watches me try to keep the baby from eating her own vomit. From picking it up in great scoops with her hands and pressing it into her mouth like birthday cake. I stopped painting the murals because the paint cans all started to look like big vats of fluid – I couldn't tell the colors apart anymore. Because after the C-section everything outside of me started to look just like inside of me. Because I didn't want anyone else to see. When the vomit gets stuck in her little blonde curls I start to think about driving thirty miles out of the city and digging a big hole for us both to lie down in. A big hole somewhere we can see the sky.

I don't dig the big hole. I put the baby to sleep and keep the window open.

The moon watches me wipe blood from my chest and smudge it across my face like rouge. I wonder who I would be if I was never more than just me. I wonder what it would be like to suck the paint from an old brush, to feel the grit of it on my teeth and tongue. My stitches are leaking. The fluid is quiet and clear like moonlight.

new jersey, 1976 | grandma says dad almost dies
Cixous LeComte

a fact is my father, when he was seven, while riding the handles of
his cousin's bike, knees plummed with summerdirt, is hit by a car

*/ that tiny body limp in the street and limp in an ambulance and
limp in a hospital bed /*

when my grandmother tells this story, its the only time she
doesn't lie and her voice is quiet.

i am frightened of these beginnings.

Lip-Balm Guy

Cheryl J. Fish

Dad, when you showed up and gave Lewis a ride, he was in danger of fainting from heat stroke. You were late for a department meeting and in a rush. It was one of those white-hot days, a result of climate change.

You first noticed Lewis along the bike path where drinkers and homeless folks congregate, rain or shine. Some live in tents off the side of the bike path, near the railroad bridge, and some appear from who knows where. Lewis wore a green baseball cap; his legs were long and skinny, his beard shaggy. He recognized you from that time you bought a three-pack of lip balm at the CVS. By the register, he asked if you'd be using all three. "Here, take one," you said, tearing open the package. He thanked you.

Lewis also sat by the woman with the open guitar case in front of an oak tree on Main Street. She'd sing about changes a coming. You dropped her a couple of bucks from time to time. In her hoarse yet not unpleasant voice, she sang songs from your youth. You hummed along. Whenever I notice those folks and happen to catch a whiff of them, I cross the street.

Recently you'd been at the cemetery where they buried Eric, your oldest friend, more like a brother. How we relished his belly laugh and frequent hugs. He listened to our gripes, gave wise advice. This loss left us all in shambles. No one could take care of his golden lab, Daisy, but we knew she must find a loving home. We hoped someone would step up, but it could not be us. Daisy, big and bright, getting old, deaf, and slow. As you were considering if any of your children or students might adopt her, you spotted Lewis in his green cap on the hottest afternoon of summer. He appeared woozy, struggling to stand.

You pulled over.

In a soft voice, he said "It's lip-balm guy." He let you guide him into your car. You handed him your water bottle and took him to a cafe for an omelet with onions and peppers, asked if he wanted a haircut and shave. He did. You told him your name and he shared his. It turned out he had been an adjunct economics professor at a college nearby. You thought of Eric's bungalow in the hills. Daisy the golden lab could use a care-taker and a companion.

Your head hurt. The heat had taken its toll on us all. Dad, you're not quite as smooth as you like to believe, but the world doesn't need smooth.

Papal Envoy
Chris Hero



The nature of things
Michael Blaine

Canadian geese
mate for life
so when my father shot one
years ago
another came back
and stayed

that is why
when you suggest
sleeping in separate beds
sick of my snoring
I see the second goose
wings spread and still
wanting for the other to rise
until sound
until silence

Let's Make Them Birds

Dawn Goulet

For much of her childhood, my wife believed Bob Ross, the painter on public television, was her father. She lived outside Muncie, Indiana, where his show, *The Joy of Painting*, was taped, and her mother had met Ross once, when he was stationed with the Air Force in Alaska. “That’s where he discovered his technique,” my wife told me. “He had to paint fast, on his half-hour breaks.”

This was enough for her, eight or nine years old at the time, to forge her own origin story. One in which her mother, a fresh-faced military nurse, had engaged in a clandestine love affair with Sergeant Robert Norman Ross. “He was the guy whose job it was to yell at you,” she said, “to tell you to make your bed or scrub the latrine. When he left the service, he vowed never to raise his voice again.”

In recordings of the show, Ross’s low baritone is immediately calming. Soporific, even. Participants in studies report lowered levels of anxiety, anger, and fatigue, just from listening to him speak. They call it “the Bob Ross Effect.”

My wife persuaded herself that Ross knew she was his daughter, that he asked after her often (a secret her mother kept from her, she was sure), and that sometimes, *sometimes*, he slipped coded messages to her into his weekly broadcasts. She tuned in religiously, studying his bushy hair and gently graying beard, watching, mesmerized, as he coaxed lonely waterfalls, cheerful country streams, and sunset-washed mountains from the canvas.

“We don’t laugh because we feel good; we feel good because we laugh,” Ross admonished, and my wife took this to heart, standing each morning before a mirror to make herself laugh, to smile convincingly, before eating store-brand cereal and walking herself to school. She was a solitary child, in those years, quiet so that her mother, who worked nights at the hospital, could sleep.

My wife’s real father left home when she was five; became a traveling auctioneer. (He preferred the term bid caller.) It sounds romantic, doesn’t it? He lived out of a beat-up old Chevy pick-up, eating fast food and showering in dirty motels, always chasing the next estate sale or cattle auction. He’d roll into town once or twice a year with inappropriate gifts, stale sweets, and hyperbolic accounts of his many adventures—tall tales to put Paul Bunyan to shame. Then he was gone, like a coward, backing down the driveway before the sun came up.

I met him, you know, when my wife and I were still dating. I never told her this. I was interviewing for a teaching job in Gainesville and happened upon his name on a flyer for a classic car auction, one of those events that draws a crowd every year. He

made everyone call him Junior, if you can believe it, though he'd come up in foster care and I'm sure could not tell you his own father's name.

Junior was on stage when I got there, starting slow, teasing the crowd with the classic run of offers and acceptances—"One-dollar bid, now two, now two, will ya give me two? Two-dollar bid, now three, now three, will ya give me three?" But soon his cadence built to a rapid-fire slurry, the filler words sliding to nonsense—"dollar bidder now" becoming "daughter now," "would you give" turning into "whoohoo give"—as he flew through his own improvised, tongue-twisting chants. Auction psychology, is all that is. Create a false sense of urgency, and the fear of missing out makes people do crazy things.

I found him later, drinking alone at a bar down the street. I told him who I was, that I was in town for business and saw his name on the flyer. The man stared at me, so long and so hard I wondered if maybe I had made a mistake; this was not her father after all. But then he slapped me on the back, hard, grinned, and pumped my hand. He was glad to meet me, he said. He wished he could buy me a drink, but he was waiting on a fella. A business deal, if I knew what he meant. He made me promise (*Promise now!*) to give his best regards to his little girl.

I guessed I was meant to leave then, and I did.
He called me back, though, just as my hand touched the door.
"You got a photo?" he asked. "Her mother used to send them."

I scrolled through the ones on my phone and spun it to show him: my wife at the beach, smiling, wearing sunglasses and a floppy hat. He tapped his fist on the bar as he studied it, real lightly. Then he nodded, and that was that.

We invited Junior to the wedding, after some debate, but he didn't show, and years passed—happy ones—in which we never once discussed him.

Then, on a sunny afternoon in October, a softspoken nurse at a hospice center near Cody, Wyoming called to say that Junior was dying. He didn't have long. He'd asked for her. My wife wrote the address on a pad of paper by the phone.

I didn't ask what she would do. I let her be.

I found her in the basement the next morning, sitting on the floor in front of the old TV/VCR combo that had been in her college dorm room. She'd made a careless swipe through the fur of dust on the screen, and there was Bob Ross, painting. In the box beside her were rows of VHS tapes, labeled in her loopy childhood hand: Cactus Sunset, Northern Lights, Meadow Road.

We sat like that, for a while. Bob Ross showed us his pet squirrel, Pea Pod, trained to hide in his shirt pocket. He told us that anything we were willing to practice, we could do. There were no mistakes, he assured us, only happy accidents. We watched him paint a range of shadowy mountains, a glassy pond, and a thicket of wildflowers.

I tried to get her to come upstairs, but my wife just shushed me away. I brought her dinner, but she left the plate untouched. She shook me awake, though, a little after midnight.

“Let’s go,” she said. “Can we go right now?”

We threw together a bag and filled a thermos with coffee, intending to drive straight through. The TV was still on in the basement, the video paused. I rewound it a few seconds and hit play.

“I can’t afford to hate people,” Ross mused. “I just don’t have that kind of time.”

We drove through five states in eighteen hours, watched the sun burn the mist off the green hills in Wisconsin and set, in its full glory, behind the desert sagebrush and gumweed. Visiting hours were over, but when they heard we were there for Junior, they let us right in.

We were too late. Of course.

It’s what we’d both been thinking, during the whole long drive. I’m not superstitious, but I do wonder, sometimes, if it was our thinking that made it so.

“I’m sorry for your loss, dear” the nurse said.

“I would have come, you know,” my wife said bitterly, arms crossed against her chest, “before it got so bad.” The nurse put her hand on my wife’s arm.

“I’m not the sort of person who would have abandoned him,” she added, wiping her face with a tissue.

“I know, sweetie,” the nurse said.

“My father was a thankless man,” my wife continued, drawing herself up and blinking back her tears. “Nothing good ever happened to him that was not his own doing; and nothing bad that was not someone else’s damned fault.”

I found her later, on the patio off the visitor’s lounge, watching the sunrise paint the mountains the colors of her childhood: yellow ochre, cadmium red, phthalo blue. A goshawk stirred a chatter of starlings into flight against the lightening sky. “Ever make mistakes in life?” Bob Ross often asked. “Let’s make them birds.” And with a flick of his wrist, he would turn a wayward splatter or smudge of paint into a flock of gulls or an arrow of geese. “See, they’re birds now,” he’d say.

We drove to the address listed on Junior’s intake forms, a falling-down trailer home on a scrubby stretch of land, but with mountains on all sides that took your breath away. We’d made plans to stay the week, to sell his truck and sort out his affairs, but I

could see it would take no more than a day or two; the man had little of anything and none of it worth fussing over.

I was sliding rancid take-out containers into a Hefty bag when there was a clatter and crash from the tiny bedroom.

“You alright?” I hollered.

My wife sat on the bed, a brown-paper package in her lap, to her, from her father, but bearing no postage. He forgot to send it, maybe, or just ran out of time.

She glanced at me, fearful.
I nodded.

Inside was a painting: Bob Ross’s “Black Seascape.” A certificate of authenticity from an auction house in Minnesota confirmed it was an original, the one Ross painted, on television, during the episode that ran on May 27, 1987. A letter addressed to Junior confirmed that receipt of the painting should, per their agreement, be considered payment in full for his services that season—three months in the summer of 2012.

Something you should know: It is all but impossible to buy an original Bob Ross painting. Although he painted thousands, on screen and off, Ross was famously opposed to profiting from his art. A handful given as gifts or donated to charities have surfaced over the years, fetching five figures or more, but most lie in storage somewhere, his successors having no plans to sell.

Something else: “Black Seascape” was my wife’s first painting. She’d received a set of paints and brushes that year for her birthday and, when the half-hour program was over, had never been prouder of anything in her life. Her version—a beginner’s attempt, to be sure, but with all the right deep blues and blacks of the sea at night, the luminous sprays of water struck by moonlight—hung in her childhood home for years. It lives now in the studio above our garage.

It’s a funny word, thankless. A contranym, almost, like buckle, which can mean to fasten together or to break apart. If you have a thankless job, you receive no thanks. If you’re a thankless person, you give none. It’s the sort of thing Ross himself might have commented on, as he painted a row of his happy little trees.

Taped to the back of the painting was a folded sheet of notebook paper; inside of that, a photograph. “Thank you for being my daughter,” Junior had written in his shaky hand, each letter three lines high. The photo, of my wife at eight years old, all overalls and pigtails and glasses, an ecstatic smile as she held her “Black Seascape” to the camera, was terribly faded, everywhere except for one corner where, I’m sure, it had been tucked into the visor of Junior’s old red Chevy.

I go in and out of sleep to pass the time.
Anna Kirby



PRIETA

Dahlia Aguilar

I remember when I was my brownness. Skin darkens at my knees and elbows. Why? They ask. White kid questions. New to me. Prieta at Abuelo's house. Negra to my uncles. At school, no one.

Way back school bus seats with Ashley. Fourth graders play girlfriends to sixth graders. Because Fonzie. Because Grease. Go ahead, put your arm around her. The blonde prods the brunet with braces. (Daddy says only rich Mexicans can afford braces.) No, he replies, her hair is long and scraggly. Was that the word? Scraggly. Horse thick silk straight hair, long beyond my waist. He switches seats. Me, jolted. Bouncing on green pigmented leather, listening to Ashley giggle like she thinks she is supposed to.

The year I turn 14, I have sex with the first kid who asks. Call him Boyfriend. Brown boy who folds my hair behind my ear. Says you are beautiful. You are so hot. A lot. I remember Kentucky Fried Chicken. Crossed legged on our sofa watching Miami Vice. Papi says something about thighs. The cardboard bucket holds no answers. My father speaks of me. Slow down there, your thighs are getting big.

I remember my boyfriend's embrace, my face nuzzled in a pocket of boy deodorant. Mirror love. I hear Phil Collins. I can feel it coming in the air at night, oh Lord. I've been waiting for this moment for all my life. Corpus Christ chicharras so loud they drown out the whimpering of us.

Elephant's Foot

MuZeTrigger

Inevitably, all conversations on Grandma Yin's birthday turned towards death. It may have been due to the family's work in the Parlor, or maybe it was because Grandma Yin had just turned 94 and was clearly not in her right mind anymore. Unfortunately, the rest of the family didn't have the heart to take her across the River like they had so many other souls outside of the family, so as tradition dictated, Ken's mother sent the boys out to order food and dressed up the Parlor's tables for another feast.

Currently, Aunt Su-ahn was gnawing on a chicken's foot and Uncle Badger was spooning himself another plate of fish fried rice. Ken's mother heaped baby back ribs and roast duck into Grandma Yin's rice bowl, and Ken's dad sat at the foot of the table taking pictures of the gathering. He was the cameraman, *memento mori* and all that, even though, as Ken's mother had put it, none of them ever looked at the photos he took.

"All I ask is that they clear a spot for me on the mantle. You know, a framed picture of me and a vase of fresh flowers. I think that's much better than going down to the cemetery every three months to burn incense and paper money."

Aunt Su-ahn rolled her eyes at her sister. "You can get her plastic flowers, Ken. They're just as nice and you won't have to replace them every two weeks."

"What? I'm not being unreasonable, am I?" Ken's mom pinched another rib between her chopsticks and hoisted it into Grandma Yin's bowl. "I mean fresh flowers! Is that so much to ask?"

Ken scooted back in his seat. "It might be hard in the winter."

"Honestly!" Ken's mom would have thrown her arms up in the air if she wasn't serving Yin more gai-lan. "It's much less work than what your father is doing."

"That's right, you have your family plot," Uncle Badger nodded.

"Yes, right on top of his parents," Ken's mom shook her head. "Goodness, don't you find that morbid?" Her tone betrayed how long it had been since she had retired. Death was no longer a part of her life but something to spurn. Truthfully though, none of the parents at the table were rightly employed. Grandma Yin for obvious reasons, but the other adults had all retired early. Only Ken was still willing to light his lantern and guide the dead over the River, but he had just returned from across the Plains and had yet to inherit the family business.

"Well, no." Ken's dad shrugged the question off by standing up from the table and walking into the kitchen, returning only once he had a bottle of champagne clutched in his hands. "It's not so odd. All kinds of families have mausoleums."

"It's not a mausoleum, it's in the ground."

"Some people have underground mausoleums," Aunt Su-ahn chirped.

“No, it’s literally on top of their caskets. That’s not a mausoleum.”
Ken swallowed and juggled his gaze between his parents.

“Champagne?” Ken’s dad gestured for Uncle Badger and Aunt Su-ahn’s glasses.
“At least it’s efficient. You wouldn’t believe how much land plots cost nowadays. I have no idea what Ken is going to do.”

“If you’re worried about that, you could always try cremation. My folks were scattered off of a cliff into the coast.” Uncle Badger tipped back his champagne flute.

Ken’s mother wrinkled her nose. “Ugh, but that’s terrible for the environment.”
Aunt Su-ahn hummed. “Well, what about aquamation? I hear that’s more environmentally friendly.”

“Is that what they call water burials these days?” Ken’s dad inserted the plastic cork back into the champagne bottle and walked off to bury it in the fridge. “They were even more expensive than the other plots I was looking at.”

“And I still want my kids to have something to remember me by.”
“You can always have them turn your ashes into an ornament or some jewelry,”
Su-ahn pointed out.
“But that’s still cremation!”

Ken kept his mouth shut about air burials or the casket-less option. His mother was willing to let go of the traditional ways, but there were limits to her tolerance.

Outsiders would have been shocked at how picky the family was. After all, these were the people who dealt with people’s souls. But maybe because of that, the body had become a sacred object and it wouldn’t do to burn it like a common grave offering, much less leave it to the scavengers. That was why Grandma Yin had always disapproved of Uncle Badger’s family.

No, Grandma Yin had always been the one to remind them all of Grandpa Luo and shepherd the whole family to his grave. They made the pilgrimage three times a year: on his birthday, on his death day, and on New Year’s, and they always brought the brazier. Grandma Yin would bend low over the metal bowl and light the incense, nine sticks, then gather it with the wads of cash and bow.

Once, twice, three times.
They all did that. Once, twice, three times.

Then, she would grab the top few bills and light them on fire while they stuck the incense in the ground and tossed the rest of the notes into the brazier.
“Burn it all. Make sure there’s nothing left. We want it all to reach heaven. It wouldn’t do for Grandpa to only get half a bill.”
Now Yin wasn’t even here, not really.

Ken watched as she weakly shuffled some of the rice out of her bowl and into her chin. She was already waiting to cross over.

Aunt Su-ahn and Ken's mother continued to spar over their remains while their husbands shared the rest of the champagne, leaving Ken to wonder about his grandmother. What would Grandma Yin think of all this? He didn't know, and maybe that was his biggest regret. He had been away for a long time, and when he had returned to the Parlor, Grandma Yin was already like this.

It was oddly fitting. Grandma Yin had been against him going across the Plains in the first place. She had told Ken that they were all losing themselves, their ways of life and traditions. Why was he seeking out foreign customs when his own family was just as removed?

"We are strangers, with no common tongue. How will you honor me?"
How indeed. Death didn't mean anything. It wasn't even dying.

"Come on, Maman," Ken whispered finally. "Let's go." He took her by the arm, gently lifting her elbow and helping her out of her chair while the rest of his family tossed graves between them.

Outside, the late summer whispered, discontented. The sun had already laid its head down on the horizon, sinking into sleep and somewhat agitated it had to provide light for more people.

"Sorry," Ken mumbled, but Grandma Yin didn't reply. Instead, she clutched his arm for support as they worked their way down from the Parlor, past the sun's rays, and into the shallow valley of shadows that had formed in the dusk.

Ken lit his lantern and they stumbled, together, uneasily to the riverbank. Grandma Yin grunted as her grandson helped her onto the family boat, and Ken took one last look at the Parlor.

Why was he so nervous? This was in his blood.

But it had been a long time since Ken had ferried anyone over. He didn't even know if the Parlor still made trips like this anymore. It was so old fashioned, wading into the River from a family dock. He supposed his dad had bought a motorized boat or a whole ferry to bus people over now. In and across the Plains, they didn't even use boats.

"Are you ready?" Ken tore his eyes away from the hill and looked to his grandmother for one final sign.

But Grandma Yin remained silent.

Ken took a deep breath. "I love you, Maman."

And with one last hug and kiss on the forehead, he untethered the boat.

Men of E-wing
Sean BW Parker



Joe Dickies Last Hallowe'en

Eric Paul Shaffer

The last time I saw my father, he was dressed
as George Washington, wearing the grand, white curls
of a powdered wig, a broad, black belt, with knee socks

and polished, silver-buckled shoes. His greatcoat
was red, white, and blue, a blue the same faded shade

as sky. The white had weathered to gold, but the red
was right. He carried a thick D.C. phone directory
he had covered with a brown grocery bag as I once did

my schoolbooks. With Magic Marker, he had lettered
the cover with the legend *U.S.S. Constitution*.
I didn't bother to correct him. I just watched him walk

into the windy darkness of sidewalks and bare branches
with an empty pillowcase swinging from his other hand.

Snow Angels

Em Palugh

On the First Anniversary of My Father's Death

Fallen crabapples, like velvet purses, split open
by the tires of passing cars: we like to line up

the year with a human life: spring=birth
winter=death. After all, it's November and

I am reading and rereading *End of Life Signs*
on WebMD at three AM in the bathroom,

just me and some copywriter in the icy light
of my phone screen: it has been a year and still

I think of her midnight deadline, her editing,
how she revises *pain* into *tenderness*.

When I smell vomit, I think of my father
sprawled in it, a morbid snow angel,

and the writer still going, *ice chips, breathing*,
and I don't think winter is the season of death,

but fall, when it is still hot enough to rot. I am
never getting over this, I am, like leaves,

crushed satisfyingly beneath it, I am becoming
a stain on a sidewalk, and I still count breaths

per minute: six is not great and four is worse. Yes,
the freelance writer agrees, that is a sign

that it is time to sleep. When the southern snow
hits the ground, yellow like apple flesh,

she lies on her back in it. Lets her body heat,
a byproduct of living, carve out her shape.

Came 2
Mia Martelli



Watch this dance piece by clicking the image above or visiting [our YouTube channel](#).

Holding Pattern

John Schneider

Overhead, a war between gulls and
a blustery sea wind. Everything

blown in endless circles. Muffled
attempts at conversation. Feathers

always ruffled. That last time we were civil,
small talk filled the silences like asphalt.

Like strangers again, one skiff
returning to shore, the other leaning

harder into the wind. Gone. I reach to turn
down the heater—one of us has always

liked it warmer. Before me, a backhoe
struggles to fill in so many holes. A yellow-

vested man, face creamed in bitumen,
tells me to stop: the road ahead hammered

by unexpected thunderheads. My impulse
is to curse while wanting to be open-

minded. So, I wait here between two kinds
of falling, between meadow-tumbled hills

and frothing waves, nothing open ahead
yet nowhere to return to. Finally,

the man, squinting into the storm, yelling
something I cannot hear, holds up a diamond-

shaped sign, waves me on.

The Hand of John the Bachelor

Anna Kirby



Monday Mornings

Wendy BooydeGraaff

My dad drives me to school. His car smells and I sneeze, but he doesn't have any Kleenexes in it. No hand sanitizer. No first aid kit. Just some crumbs from lunch. "I don't sneeze in my car," he says.

The next Monday, he sneezes, and I hand him a Kleenex from the stash I hid in the glove box. "It's you," he says. "I don't sneeze when you aren't around."

"If a tree falls in the forest, it still falls," I say.

"Huh?" Dad says. "I think the saying is: *If a tree falls in the forest, does anyone hear it?*"

"Yup, that's the saying," I say, "but that's not what I said." The saying is actually *If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?* and we spent an hour discussing it in Humanities.

Dad doesn't respond. He's preoccupied with the bottleneck of parent cars around us.

I get out of the car, swing my backpack over my shoulders, join the throng of kids shuffling through the double glass doors. I turn back to wave.

He doesn't see me. I figure he's got a big meeting or something. He's sneezing into his elbow while driving around the cars still spitting out kids.

That night I call him. "Did you sneeze today?" I ask.

"Nope," he says.

Helping With The School Project

James Joaquin Brewer

click

Hi, Danny!

As we discussed on the phone, here's proof I'm committed to participating in your 1999 Memorial Day assignment for Journalism 101. By the way, if you got this cassette in the overnight delivery and are listening to it now, it's obvious I hauled out my trusty college-vintage "basically analog" recorder. You still have the little cassette player we gave you a couple of years ago so you could listen to those live-concert Grateful Dead tapes Mom and I made in the late 'sixties California. Again, my suggested game plan for this project is for you to listen to this tape all the way through to get some core background ideas—key context—and then give me a call to do our quote-unquote "official interview." I'm hoping some of this info about your grandfather will provide you with some fresh biographical framework to help you round out the profile you are being asked to write. My intention is to provide you with enough background info to help make our telephone interview practical and productive.

I understand that your Professor specified a minimum-maximum word-count for the article you eventually turn in. I suspect you won't have trouble meeting the minimum; but if you have inherited any of what your mother calls my verbal DNA, you might have to make expert use of the editing skills she is no doubt teaching you to bring it in coherently under the maximum. You know my reputation, Danny—once I start talking . . .

Speaking of that . . . And it may apply as well to the tape I am about ready to find myself in the middle of making . . .

Yes . . . Having called attention to *that* . . . Well, here are a couple of oddly relevant contextual comments—not for your article, of course . . . just a bit of Rooks family history you might find more-or-less amusing.

The first reference is super-short. Way back in 1954, one autumn night your grandmother came home from parents' open-house at the school in Grapewood and told me she had mentioned to Mrs. Kost, my first-grade teacher, that when I was getting my baby vaccinations the doctor used a long-play phonograph needle. This bit of attempted wit relies, of course, on an understanding of an analog technology probably older than that of the tape recorder I am talking into right now. And by the way, should I perhaps take just a moment to admit that I am still not up-to-date regarding whatever latest-and-greatest voice-recording products have taken the place of my still-good-enough-for-me devices? I'm guessing you and your campus mates are totally technical and knowledgeable about the state-of-the-art for such things. Maybe you'll have to teach me . . . But I warn you, Son: some of my academic colleagues poke sharp-edged fun at me for being far from what they call an early adopter. I confess I might be content to just become a late adapter!

Back to the anecdote: the whole time your Grandmother Luiza was telling me what she had said to Mrs. Kost about my vaccination with an LP phonograph needle, she was winking and smiling and basically laughing. So I laughed too. I knew she was only joking, using her own type of “needling” now that I think about it—with pride, actually, just poking a little affectionate fun at her young son.

The footnote to that amusing moment is more complicated. When I told my father a couple of days later what your grandmother had said, he did not laugh. In fact, Dad claimed Mom had it all wrong. He told me that after I was first vaccinated, I was a silent infant for days afterwards. He said that for a couple of years my language and speech skills lagged noticeably behind developmental norms. He told me that he and my mother were both worried I might never learn to talk properly. *Seriously*, Danny.

But then, at least as I seem to recall your Grandfather Manny describing it, on the first verdant morning of some miraculously verbose spring, apparently I awakened from my silent winter’s sleep and began speaking complete sentences as though I had been a technically skilled talker all my life. Good news, right? Except for the fact that with regard to minimum and maximum word counts, I wouldn’t—as the saying goes—shut up.

click

But about a year or so later, in another autumn, as you were getting ready to go off to a fresh year of primary school, your father re-visited the topic. He said something so strange that at first you could not decide if he were being serious or frivolous. Unlike your mother making a wisecrack about phonograph needles for long-playing albums, he was not winking or grinning or laughing. He was neither literally nor figuratively nudging your skinny ribs. He was looking solemnly at your face, his gaze locked directly onto your eyes as he offered the following warning: “Now, Sonny, it’s time that I told you something that might be important to your future happiness and success. When a baby is born, God assigns a certain number of words that this new little person will be allowed to speak aloud in its lifetime. There’s a limit. When people speak out loud the last word of their allotted limits, even though they might be in mid-sentence, and even though their lips might still be moving—well, no more words will come out. And it’s not like taking empty pop bottles back to the store for a returned deposit. Those people won’t be able to *un-say* the things they have already said. In *other* words . . . hmmm . . . well, they won’t be able to trade back—return old words in exchange for others to be able to say something new or better—more truthful, perhaps. They will simply become mute and will no longer have a voice that anyone can hear, even someone with totally healthy ears or having super-sensitive hearing. From then on, they might have to rely on pencil and paper, or maybe sign language, for communicating with other people.”

You, to be sure, did not reply. And then he capped this amazing assertion with what you should refer to as a true *punch* line: “I don’t want to *alarm* you, Nicolas, but I think I should at least try to *caution* you. If I were *you*, Son, I would start saving up my

words the way smart people save up money for a rainy day.” You nodded your head in some sort of acknowledgement. In doing so, you were careful not to make a sound—or even move your lips.

Your father turned his back, and you could not see his face to allow you to gauge whether he was smiling or frowning or communicating something in-between. Maybe he *was* trying to make a joke—something said in “good fun.” (His sense of humor never verged on anything “cruel”—you could even argue that this was some sort of key to his personality.) Maybe he was just taking the comedic concept of “dead pan” way too far.

A truly strange day . . .

You stayed silent all the way through dinner. You didn’t even say good night to your parents at bedtime. Under your bed-covers, instead of thinking about baseball as you usually did before dropping off to sleep, you kept thinking about what your father had said, and wondering why he had gone to the trouble of saying it to you so seriously. But it didn’t take much longer, a day or so, for you to decide to go ask your mother what it might have meant. She told you he was just saying something silly. Pulling a little prank. She assured you that you wouldn’t be running out of words any time soon. For the most part, that was all you needed to hear to set your little mind at ease. But every so often that little memory re-inserts itself into your consciousness and you consider trying to be more . . . concise . . .

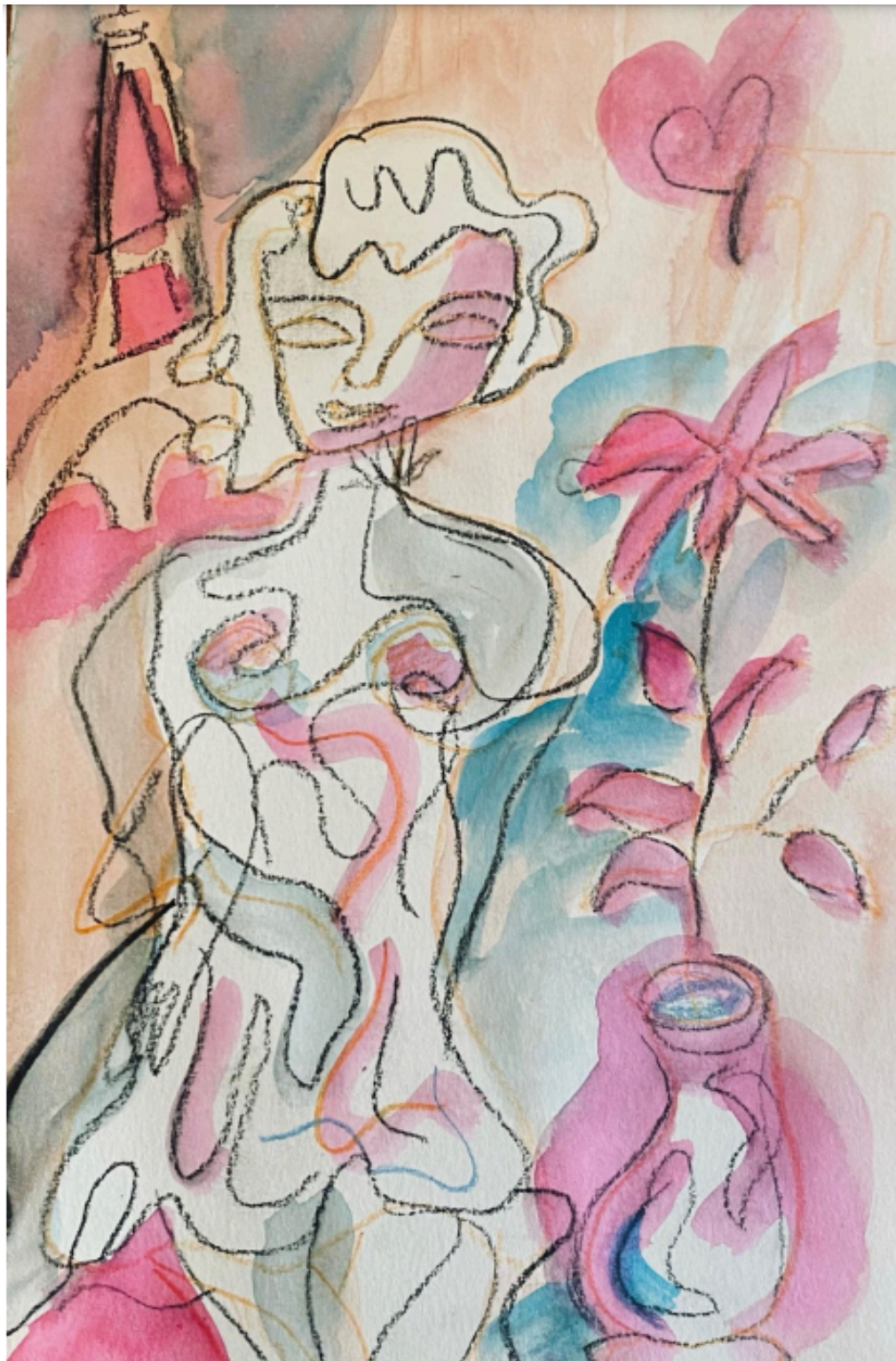
From time to time throughout your life, however, people—or odd circumstances—have found ways to encourage you to shut up.

click

So sorry, Danny—don’t think I’m getting off to a good start with this tape thing. Maybe I need a “Take Two.” Maybe I’ll rewind to the start and tape over most of this. Fresh material and all th—

click

Inner Conflict
Susan Pollet



Everyone Knows The Desert is Haunted

Carissa Jean

I hold her down and whisper in her ear. It is our nightly ritual. Leaning, my mouth opens and in one long, silken string my story pours out—seeping into her depths. Fingers turn to claws and her mouth contorts into a hollow and horrified growl.

Tonight, I will tell her of when I am twelve. Abandoned and afraid, the desert sun putrid, my feet perpetually covered in dirt and bruises. Juniper trees crack and spiral up and out, their smell heavy from recent rains. I am not supposed to be here. No one is supposed to be here.

Forgetting what youth ever felt like, I will remember my mother twisting my head back and placing honey on my tongue before telling me to go play outside. But the burrs stick to my feet and the dirt crawls up my skin. Our father, who is not in heaven, takes a wooden rod and places it upon me when I return.

If I am not careful, twelve-year-old me will walk in front of cars at night and terrify the passengers. The girl I am holding down has seen it happen. She can still remember the feeling of being in the back seat and making eye contact with me as the headlights illuminated my doe eyes and I bared my teeth in her direction. The night we found each other.

Everyone knows the desert is full of ghosts like me. We wander and bump into each other and slowly become obsessed with petulant teens who tempt themselves with disobedience. Our souls tethered to the sunburnt earth. My bones ache, wherever they are. And my eyes have seen it all.

She twists and turns under her covers. I have to keep watch and make sure she doesn't accidentally choke herself. Stupid creature—she is not meant to be here, either.

Transplanted like a seedling told to grow on nothing but good faith, she finds the dirt under her fingernails both misplaced and beloved. Her heart tumbles low on the musings of what home feels like to her, it's a word she's never said but knows desperately. A finger circling her knuckles, a thread snipped perfectly, dishes with someone else's memories.

Being alive is a punishment for having been born her father's daughter. Her stomach feels like a pomegranate full of too many dripping seeds, she can tell she contains something gruesome and desirable.

The first time she felt the stain of blood seep between her legs, the aching womb with a terrified howl trapped inside, he suddenly changed towards her. No longer could she wander barefoot in the open grass of the back yard, shirt off and skinned knees. There was only the enforced and strict regimen of no boys allowed. Not in her thoughts,

not in her room, not in her mouth. Trapped like a caged tiger, she paces during the day—her bed staring at her like a threat.

#

Her mother is beginning to open up like an iris blossom that has survived the winter. We are both surprised. She feels like a stranger to us, but one we've always known.

It used to be her mother was dirty dish water, trying as hard as she might to be heard and seen. And then, with a powerful clenching of her fist she pointed to the door and ushered the father out. Taking a stand, rearranging the family.

The peace that settled upon the household after he left was unlike any that had been there before. Nightmares ceased, pains no longer ached, I hid in the closet for two weeks trying to figure out my next move. All the daughters ate their cereal in tandem every morning, small grins on their faces as the milk dribbled down their chins.

But then the father returned and the girl and I both felt it. The creeping monster full of fur and sharp teeth had come back to its cave. Everything in the house grew dark blue and black like a bruise. All at once he walked inside, resumed his place at the head of the table and folded his hands in prayer. The iris bulb of the mother withered.

On the night of his return I knelt down beside the frail girl and felt my knees crack. The carpet beginning to get grooves from this ritual. With a deep breath, I lifted my hands and placed them on her shoulders, pressing her so firmly into the bed her eyes popped open. She can see my crooked tooth smile as I hop on top of her, loving how she feels beneath as her body earthquakes in fear.

Good. Now let's talk about my mother.

Her hair was long and dark and stick straight and no one ever told her they liked it. Her face was sallow and her skin always looked sickly. Everyone was convinced there was something wrong with her. She kept to herself and swallowed every sharp object that was handed to her. Sometimes the boys would give her things they were certain would kill her and she would stare them in the eyes and take it all inside her out of spite. I loved her.

She was pregnant with me when she was young. Very young. Her bones cracked apart and her hips couldn't recover after me. I dislodged her womb and it never came back together. When I emerged out of her, she tried to eat me—to keep me safe and put me back inside her. But I wasn't sharp enough.

Other men tried to get her pregnant again. The distillate thought of a woman without a husband seemed to infect the whole desert. She just swallowed all of them whole. After the fifth man disappeared between her teeth, people stopped coming around our house. I loved her very much.

I sit on top of the girl and scream this at her. My mouth opens wide and she can see all my sunken gums and I want her to know that I hate her for being weak. But we make eye contact and we both know that we love our mothers very much.

#

Weak and timid, she lets me hold her down. I hate her when she's like this and want to claw her eyes out. I hope she can feel my fingers curling around her clavicles, if I'm not careful I could snap them like the bones of a bird.

She is having a fitful sleep and my head has been aching with her melancholic thoughts. She wants to have a real relationship with her father. She wants the boy she has a crush on to like her back. She wants to kill herself.

In a bout of rage, I release a real, live mouse into her bed. She wakes up screaming. Her mother bursts into the room, disheveled and weary as she flips on the light wanting to know what on earth is going on. The girl is up, jumping and swearing on her life. Gently, her mother searches and finds nothing. I smile from outside the window, hovering and watching.

Her father, perturbed that his child has a need he doesn't understand, asks if she has done anything to invite in an evil spirit. She puts her head down and admits to having entertained thoughts of lust. He tells her this is all her fault and decisively shuts the door.

I scream from outside the window and she sees me. She has not known rage. She has not known sin. Reaching through the panes, I rip her shirt and pull her close to me. How dare she eat the glass her father has provided for her. How dare she cut her teeth and rip her gums on desires she has barely entertained.

If she is going to commit lust, may she do it with her whole being. May she erupt into a massive blaze and consume everything in her midst. May she lay her hands upon every pound of flesh she could ever want and then grab more. Open her mouth and swallow the juices that taste like yeast, taste like grapefruit, taste like salt. May she grow eyes that are bigger than her stomach and find mouths that want to consume her just as badly. Ignite a flame and burn down a lover's house. Consume all the meat and leave the refrigerator door open. Sift powdered sugar onto crackling and sizzling sausages that burst between her teeth and fill her lungs with glee.

She does not want to hear me howl this at her. She begins to pray, but that's never been any help. I will torment her until morning. She can feel me pacing around her room, seething in her direction. I am somehow stronger than her own hate for herself. She is such a feeble thing. I want to stick my hand in her stomach and violently rearrange her organs and I tell her as much.

I tell her she isn't cut out for a life in the desert. She crosses her arms and huffs. I tell her no one will love her the way she wants to be loved—not here. And she starts to cry, she already knows that. I tell her the world will crush her if she keeps herself on this path. She says she's sorry, she's really trying her hardest to be good and she doesn't know what it is she's doing wrong. I throw all her books off the shelf.

I scream at her in vivid detail how I envision gouging out her eyes and feeding them to the barn swallows that have taken nest upon her family home. They at least appreciate the gift of freedom. Their spit mounds hanging from the ledges of the roof a constant reminder of what is out there.

Her fingernails full of dirt scoop around her vascular layer, finally ready to be obedient. Silently, she simply turns to me and gently hands over both orbs, white and viscous. The pupils pulse and shimmer as I feel them in my wretched palms and look up at her with glee. Her face is dripping, crimson sludge oozing from vacant orbitals. I feel an overwhelming sense of triumph and pride grip the back of my throat. Soon, I will have to wander the open dirt roads and hope for a sunset to swallow me whole. Soon, she will be ready to leave the nest of spittle and brambles her father has constructed. Soon, she will be released into the wild.

We both throw our heads back and laugh, filling the desert with that which it could never contain.

desert haibun: swimming

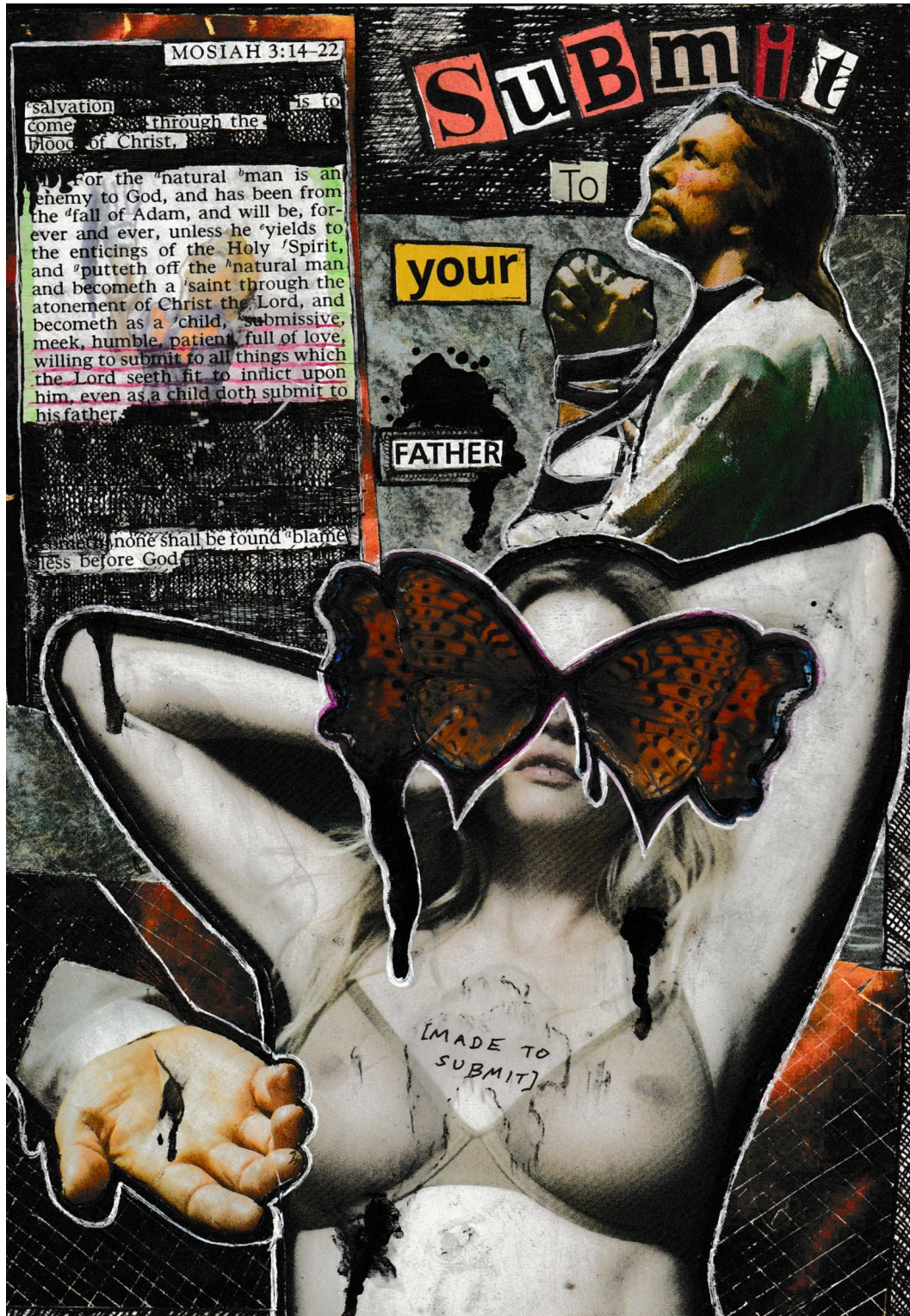
Cixous LeComte

my father built a pool in the backyard, built that which i float in,
built somewhere for the bees and hornets and darkling beetles to
drink. he wanted to give me a watering hole. one morning, while
skimming, i fish a dead cricket. i did not kill it but still feel the
badluck in its little body. i try to lay it gently to the ground but it's
impossible. this is the desert, where animals die in desperation of
water, where my grandfather died too full of water. we know the
pool turns green in winter, yet still we find it shocking. there is a
marsh across the street from my childhood home, a wet meadow,
sedges i want to live in.

near this floating mass, a dead grandfather
within a fingertip
between wateredge, between a ripple

Submit To Your Father

Morgan Jenson



Prodigal

John A. deSouza

I am as closed as a barn door, like Dürer's swineherd on my knees,
you know, the *obvious* door that's so hard to open.

My mother has trouble with analogies, unless they're very clear,
you know, crystal, a door you can *actually* see through,

(which she's really very good at). As for me, my blindness,
my wife says, is in forgiving—(She provides examples).

It's taken a long time to understand she doesn't mean the *grand* kind,
like in that engraving of the Prodigal Son, I just mentioned.

(I have no sons, must play dual roles, am mercifully oblique).
There's the Rembrandt print, returned from profligate death

to kindness offered at the doorstep, that well-worn embrace—
Or the Dürer again, with the pigs, like that moment of clarity

when the truth is revealed and breaks off, becomes a knot in a tree.
I have done the death-bed one several times, but, well, he keeps living.

(I had wondered about the forgiving). They said he wouldn't make it
past 60 when I was 26, now that I'm the same age I realize

he survived, stubbornly, waiting, past his new wife, with that tattered
heart of his, not even grief could break. I *never* forgave her

for taking his love from me. I just couldn't let it rest after she was dead,
criticizing her to him on her funeral day *for Christ's sake*—

The years slipped by. Until last year, Christmas time in the ICU.
After waiting winter afternoons drained of sunlight, he asked for a shave,

and I felt the folds of his skin and coarse grain of stubble scrape
under the razor, and he said afterward "thank you, you've been great".

I see now the moment is everything, makes us what we become,
that it's right to be kind with it, to let yourself forgive.

Dad visits

Gabby Mijalski-Fahim

I point at every flamboyant storefront, naming each “my favorite” on the slim chance it means more to you. I end my sentences sooner than usual. Search for movement behind your eyes. Above you, a crow chases a squirrel off of a power line. I watch the wires shudder in their wake. The last bits of daylight tip toe up your neck and cradle your scalp.

In a different lifetime, you’d settle at the edge of my bed, glasses shrouded with light from the Bible app. Each verse of Psalm 23 shadowed by my yawn, then your deeper yawn. At 13, nightly prayer would be traded in for afternoon mass. With bent knees and supinated palms, Father Damien would plead with the ceiling of our gymnasium. *Come Lord, I need you. Your unchanging mercy and grace.* At recess, I’d perform Father’s beseechment to an audience of my closest classmates. Kneeling, I’d raise a Goldfish eucharist in one hand and a cross of plastic forks in the other. *Cover me in your precious blood! Satisfy me with your love!* When their laughter would recede, I’d rise from the asphalt and wipe the ash from my knees.

A few weeks ago, I hiked with a friend from high school and caught myself performing a retired identity. My voice, several octaves higher in desperation. She exhumed memories from a decade-long burial. Kevin’s backyard. *Third period anatomy. Miss Thompson hated you for talking so much. Remember how loud you were Remember how needy?*

At dinner, I stare at the mold of a cross through your polo. You fidget with your fork, as a young boy would, and for a moment I understand your hunger. A priest’s surrender to an opaque sky. A child’s desire to be seen. I want to know if you, too, met God through your father. I want to ask, do you wear that cross because you’ve found him, or because you’re still looking? *I can see our food approaching*, I say instead.

The next night I walk home in the dark and catch myself repeating, *fear no evil: for thou art with me.*

Dead Jesuits (Detail)
Chris Hero



Hard to stomach

Bryce O'Tierney

We used to shell peas before they were ready,
tear the pods from their stalks at the shed doorway.
The door hung off its hinges besides,
there was no need to knock, there was nothing lost on us.

When our father spoke her name,
it was seldom & sex. Few others
can chase a sentence with a woman like he can.

Tonight, he cringes at our mother,
as she gnaws and crunches her way through
peapod after peapod.

I hear both their voices then— how this love
it makes me sick,

it makes me lick my wounds
in front of you.

Stew

Charlie M. Case

Years-long slow squeeze / frog in pot boiling / inarticulate
violence: forgetting with deliberacy. The light can't
throw itself any harsher against the doorstep. The last thing
you take while I watch is the television.

I didn't even think to call it trust. My mother is lactose
intolerant; you make asparagus with cheese. I want it to be
bright—you fog / you miasma—so I run. I run in place.
& re-runs are playing—and salad-spinner commercials,
and home-before-dark PSAs—but you aren't watching them.
Couch-snorer. I'm tallying up years' worth of summer.

Twist my seven-year-old arm behind my back
and drive up on the liquor store curb. There are the years—
there's where sun staggers—and for dinner are mashed potatoes
with milk. Come on. You've noticed my eyes skirt away.
It's a game; it's the silent treatment. We don't meet eyes
over the dining room table. You drive me to the bus stop
with the radio off. For dinner is frog-in-a-pot, and it's a slow-cooker.
Turn up the heat. Walk away from it. Put the TV on.

Self Portrait June 2024
Sean Bw Parker



Blueberries

Anne Schuchman

2022

My brother texts:
Dad says you took a painting off the wall.
He says you said it was yours and poof it was gone.
I'm guessing that didn't happen.

That didn't happen.

My dad's dementia leaves him confused, but cheerful. As long as there are cookies in the bread box, maybe a cup of Lipton's tea, things are as they always have been. Small issues arise, but poof, they're gone. He snaps a bit sometimes, especially when he is hungry or things are not where he is expecting them to be. He looks for the sugar bowl, gently bangs a fist on the table and says, "What the heck?" After a moment he looks down, chuckles, loosens his fist and says, "I'm being silly."

2007

"Where *Blueberry for Sal* go?"

My son is two, maybe even three. His little sister—born eighteen months and one day after him—wriggles in my arms. I can see him at this age—always wearing rainboots, no socks. He can almost dress himself if the shorts have an elastic waist, but rarely remembers underpants, and never puts on socks—they're tricky. The t-shirt is often backwards or inside-out, sometimes both. But rainboots are easy. He has green dragon boots with eyes and a tiny horn that juts up in the front. Someone must have given them to us, I don't remember buying them and they don't seem like the kind of thing I would have spent money on, but who knows. He wore them inside and out, summer and winter, rain and shine. When he wet his pants the urine would trickle into his boots, and I wouldn't realize until I took them off, when the smell became overpowering, like someone in the subway, the reason you go to the other end of the car.

He is looking for one of his three favorite books: *Blueberries for Sal*, the other two being *The Little Engine That Could*, and *Wacky Wednesday*, which he pronounces Vacky Vennsday, like pre-k Bela Lugosi. During that period when he was still a toddler, his little sister an infant, he became fixated on these three books, distraught if they couldn't be found. I had my hands full, as so many people reminded me when they saw me in the supermarket with four children eight and under, like monkeys, hanging from the shopping cart, hanging from the store shelves, hanging from me. By the end of the day I just wanted to scrape the children off and go to bed forever. I don't think I had a decent night's sleep for ten years, and I am not exaggerating. I was giving so much I was empty. But I kept reading. That was one thing I could do, even when I felt like falling asleep. I read those three favorite books over and over and even now, years later, if you start a sentence from one of them, I could probably finish the rest of the book.

There were so many moments, even entire years, where I just had to be “on” and always present that it seems like they should be etched in their vividness. Instead it’s a blur—so much I can’t remember. Maybe having young children is itself like a form of dementia. At some point when the kids were playing hide-and-seek this same child of the dragon rainboots knocked over and cracked the computer hard drive where the majority of our photos were stored. The estimate was two thousand dollars to try and recovery what was on it. We hesitated for the duration of a breath, then said the hell with it, bought a new hard drive, and committed to backing up more regularly. My brain feels like that hard drive, filled with sporadic moments and images, many of them lost, perhaps forever. Yet the words to those books have stayed with me. It’s like they narrated years of my children’s lives.

“Where *Blueberry for Sal* go?” He asks again because he knows I can find it. I can find anything. And I do. The book is on the floor by the side of his bed, where I must have read it to him the night before, lying next to him. Maybe he leaned an arm over and gently patted my shoulder as he would sometimes do. And here is Sal dropping the blueberries in her pail, eating as many as she gathers, getting closer and closer to the other side of the mountain where Little Bear is eating berries with his mother. *Kerplink, Kerplank, Kerplunk*. The blueberries fall into the pail. When Sal and Little Bear finally meet they are startled at first and then sit side by side eating blueberries, until their mothers discover them, and quietly, but hurriedly, pull their darlings away.

But forget being “on” and being present, all the while I was reading *Blueberries for Sal*, I was thinking about everything else: the academic career dissolving, the baby needing changing, my father-in-law dying. When you have a book committed to memory you can read it aloud while at the same time thinking entirely different thoughts, even engaging in whole conversations with yourself in your head. So I would read and think about dinner, was that the dryer coming to an end, and maybe I’ll go online. And I thought losing my in-laws would somehow prepare me for my parents’ own deaths, like a dress rehearsal for *King Lear*. Nothing prepares you for playing Cordelia.

2016

It was funny when my mother woke up and saw my brother’s dog running around her bedroom. “I said to myself, Trooper can’t have gotten in here, he doesn’t have a key! Isn’t that funny?” It removes some of the horror: *I’m seeing things that aren’t real, but at least they’re funny!*

There was also the little red-haired woman, the one on the sofa next to my sister, only my sister couldn’t see her. The little red-haired woman smiled at my mother in a friendly way, maybe even conspiratorially, like they shared an inside joke. I can see dementia as the parent of Leprechauns, sprites and will-o-wisps, the good fairies who share their pots of gold—mischievous maybe, but not malicious. But sometimes dementia gives birth to demons and imps that lure you out of bed, trip you, knock you down. *Play with us! Now!* My father leaning over my mother, pulling on her arms, pulling, pulling, “You need to get *up!*” “I can’t!” Later her wrists are stained with bruises, and her eyes are filled with tears, always tears now even when she’s not crying.

Sundowning they call it. But sundowns are beautiful, richly-colored scenes that spread across the sky like love. We're at the hospital now, and we realize this is it, hospice is the next step—the second-to-last step. When I ask her if she understands what hospice is she says, yes, of course, her wishes are clear in her advanced directive, she has affirmed and reaffirmed “no extraordinary measures.” When I ask if she wants to start hospice she says...*I don't know.*

About seven in the evening something joins us in that hospital room. I don't know what my mother sees, but whatever it is is terrifying. She stares into that space across the room and opens and closes her mouth. *I'm a terrible person.* Like I'm talking to a child, I say, no, you're a wonderful person, and then she turns from this unknown, looks me in the eye, and says quietly, again like a child, *No, I'm bad.*

And then I tell her I have to go—*now*—will see her tomorrow, and I don't look back as I leave the room, not at my mother, not at the something in the room that's telling her she's bad. I ask the nurse to please go check on her, thank you and goodnight. I cry in the car in the oppressive August night, but clean up before going into the house to my dad, my kids.

The next morning when I go back to her hospital room, my mother is sitting up in bed and facing away from the doorway. I'm afraid of who she might be.

“Hi, Mom,” I say, and she turns and smiles. “Hi there, honey!”

Actually, there isn't anything funny about this at all.

2018

After four days of induced sedation, my father is awake. He is still intubated, an IV threaded into his bruised arm. Electrodes dot his pale, speckled chest. The monitor shows a big spike, then a tiny spike, atrial fibrillation, a-fib, the heart going through its normal routine then suddenly confused and beating erratically.

My sister has arrived from out of state. She's a physician and his health care proxy. She has already wondered aloud to me if a Do-Not-Intubate (DNI) should be added to his advanced directive along with the existing Do-Not-Resuscitate (DNR) so that he never has to go through what he went through the last five days, his wild-eyed confusion, the life-giving lines pulled out, the restraints on his arms and legs. She explains to him what has happened. Pneumonia weakened his heart causing a heart attack. My brother's wife found him on his kitchen floor, his t-shirt soaked with sweat, trying to pull himself up onto a chair.

My dad can't speak because of the tube in his throat, and instead makes a small waving motion with his hand, which is covered with what looks like an oven mitt to keep him from pulling out his tubes. *Aw, go on.* One of his favorite phrases. Everyone makes too much of everything. *Aw, go on.* He doesn't believe he has had a heart attack. Despite the fact a machine is breathing for him, he also doesn't believe he has pneumonia.

He is given a small whiteboard and dry-erase marker to communicate, and once he understands what they're for, he writes a few spidery letters: Mom?

Dad, she stops herself from crying—just. Mom died...two years ago...remember?

He sets down the whiteboard, quiet. He doesn't cry. He never cries. He raises his oven mitt hands again, but this time he isn't trying to pull out the iv or ventilator, and he isn't saying, *Aw go on*. This time he understands. His mouth forms a shape through the ventilator, a word he can't even write on the whiteboard, *Why?* He gestures to the ventilator in his neck, the tubes, the beeping machines, raises his hands and lets them fall. *Why?*

My sister blinks the tears away, clears her throat. *You're doing much better, Dad, and in a few days you'll be able to go to a rehabilitation center and then home.*

He glances around again, between sadness and panic. *Why?*

2022

He doesn't remember that hospital stay. It was forgotten by the time he got home. He listens to music, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, and sometimes talk radio that I turn off whenever I'm there, because I hate the hate, switch to a station that plays oldies. He asks what year is this—1961? That was the year they were married.

A recent study suggests that blueberries help you stave off dementia. I think it's nonsense. But still, I'm eating more blueberries, remembering the wild huckleberries in the woods behind our house. Someone must have showed me where to find the tiny, tart berries we would pick and eat before the birds got them. Was it him? Or did I find them on my own?

I make a smoothie: banana, kale, yogurt, almond milk, peanut butter, cocoa, and drop the blueberries in one-by-one: *kerplink, kerplank, kerplunk*.

Last Visit

Kevin Grauuke

Granddad always wore the same thing to church—
Western-cut suit the brown of a wet saddle,

dress boots shined up nice, and a cowboy hat
(pale straw in summer, dark felt in winter)

promptly shucked once inside the chapel.
Though always gone by Sunday, I knew this

just as I knew never to act a fool while there,
no matter how little he weighed or bent he stood.

(Hardness lives in bodies of all sizes.
My father learned this well as a boy.)

Though Granddad grew more frail, his thumbnails
stayed gnarled and black, hardened by a life of blows.

At what would be his final Thanksgiving, I stared
at them uneasily as he brought his hands together

to thank Jesus for the safe journey of his son's family.
His voice, though thin, was thick with a shocking love.

The City and a Dream

Anna Kirby



Boxford

Sophie Jefferies

My cavity tooth had a hook like an arm
plunging into my gums. It was a hidden
vampire fang. When they removed it
I felt them crushing my bone.
I was ten when I had my first drug-
induced hallucination. I saw myself
in the X-ray box and a voice told me,
This isn't really you. This isn't
really you. To my surprise,
my tooth was returned to me uncrushed,
in a red plastic box with a smiling molar on it.

There's an ocean in the body. You can hear it
when you cup your hand over your ear.
All I could hear was the sound of soccer
ball static, a crowd of men yelling
distantly like in a seashell. In the TV,
there was a flat green field and a flat
voice. There was my father,
pulled from the couch by an invisible
puppet string. OH WHAT A SAVE!
he'd say gleefully, and I could see bits
of dust illuminated by the sunlight through
the window. My brother felt it too.
When America lost the World Cup he cried.

We were the worst 11-year-old girls'
team in town. When there were puffy
dandelions on the field we'd lean down to wish.
This did not please the coach. Once my foot
was hurting and the coach said If I stomp
really hard on your other foot then it will balance it out.
I only knew to smile. I still do not understand
what it means to be off-sides. I'd be assigned a role
like "sprinter" and that meant I ran down the field.
We'd run down the field and the referee would whistle
OFF SIDES! and then I'd get to do a drop kick.

On the sidelines we played games with each other.
A girl slipped her hand into mine. Count to ten, she said.
Next to the bench, a girl was puking up the flower-shaped
ginger cookies my mom had brought for the team.

Our hands moistened but I didn't let go.
You're gay! she announced. I wanted to protest but
it wasn't the kind of thing you could argue.
We took our cleats and socks off and our coach
ran over angrily. What are you doing!
The game isn't over yet. He seemed frustrated
as we stripped off our shin guards,
my hand still sticky with her sweat.

We went to play against Boxford once
and they were even worse than us.
It was the only game our team ever tied.
I disliked Boxford because I found the name
very ugly. It felt claustrophobic there,
being in a box and all. After the game we got
Boxford Pizza and there were nice red
leather booths. I kept imagining myself
inside of a pizza box, with pepperonis
for private parts.

Loving Penny

Mary Rodriguez

He recites Shakespeare's 18th sonnet. Penny cocks her head. Fills his cup. Hands him a menu.

He orders pancakes. Offers up an early Rita Dove. Road time he memorizes poems. An environmental hypocrite driving truck to distribute organic product.

Her Lilliputian home, perfect for the two of them and all the love poems they can mine. He quotes Walt Whitman: "We were in love. I forget the rest."

Leeches attach themselves, sucking out poisons in the guise of verse. No longer able to memorize poems. Too busy writing them. His sanctimonious victimization. Her guilt. Her sanctimonious victimization. His guilt. As interchangeable as they are irrelevant.

A pink photo album filled with portraits of boy and man. The f-stops of her life. He jokes she eats men for breakfast. She quotes Ethel Livingston: "Unending sameness of questionable quality."

A James Dean lookalike. Short leather jacket. Cowboy boots. A road shrinking to a point on the horizon. Her dad walking out of her life.

A young teenager at her Mom's third wedding. Told it was her fault. The way she dressed. The signals she gave off. After therapy. Her razor cuts. Perfect circles. Obliterating his head and genitals. From wedding party photo.

A reminder of the magic she could conjure. Sitting on and leaning over. The tallest branch of an old oak. She captured him floating in deepest shade. Everything else out of focus.

Looking wistfully out a window. Her crown, a halo of gold. The sunset brilliantly reflected. In the uppermost pane.

The witches were all singing
Mia Martelli



Watch this dance piece by clicking the image above, or visiting [our YouTube channel](#).

Night market

Erica Vanstone

Stalls of the market at dusk: an arcade of stained barrows
where men stand like herons against the river bank;
like bent herons, necks articulated and turning.
Blue herons as I walk past sweet verbena, past dahlia,
towards sweeter incense, musk, and oil.

For hours, men stand, blending afternoon to night's brim;
for hours, fish in baskets that would rush to us in shallows,
our bones mounting gold-green then receding to sapphire.
Now, they lie flat against the woven wicker's cradle,
against the nape of mollusk, cray, or eel.

Men in laudanum, in petroleum, in fermented hemlock;
even as I walk, recognized for my tall skin in widest milk,
for my eyelash, raking sunset as black sea anemone.
Now, I step to the pulsed neon of your flickering sight;
a white-hot edge, a petal blooming, but only at night.



the DADDY ISSUE *contributors*

Dahlia Aguilar is an emergent Chicana writer and daughter of Corpus Christi, Texas. An educator of over 28 years, she now works as a consultant and writer. She has completed three manuscripts of poetry *Of Medicine and Monsters*, *Tidal Range* and *Cosmic Fire*, *Sacred War*. She is an alum of *Under the Volcano* 2024 and 2025- a writing residency held in Tepoztlán, Mexico. Her poems appear in *Naugatuck River Review*, *Somos Xicanas*, *Boundless* 2024, *The Skinny Poetry Journal* and *The Acentos Review*. She lives in the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington, D.C. with her son, two dogs and menopause.

Michael Blaine was born in Oxford, Mississippi in 1968 but grew up on the Eastern Shore in the mostly agricultural town of Laurel. He returned Oxford to study English at Ole Miss and holds a Master's Degree in English from Salisbury University. He taught high school English for over twenty years and currently teaches English at Delaware Technical Community College. He lives in Seaford, Delaware with his family of five.

Wendy BooydeGraaff's short fiction, poems, and essays have been included in *Stanchion*, *Slag Glass City*, *CutLeaf*, *Ninth Letter* online, and elsewhere. Her middle grade horror story is anthologized in *The Haunted States of America* (Godwin Books, 2024). Born and raised in Ontario, Canada, she now lives in Michigan, United States.

Raised on the rural coast of Oregon, *James Joaquin Brewer* currently shelters in West Hartford, Connecticut while working on a novel about political protests on college campuses. Among other places, his writing in a variety of genres has appeared in *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *The Write Launch*, *LitBreak*, *The Hartford Courant*, *Aethlon*, *Jeopardy*, *Rosebud*, *The Poetry Society of New York*, *Closed Eye Open*, *The Manifest-Station*, *Quibble*, *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Blazevox*.

Mo Buckley Brown is a writer and visual artist based in Seattle, Washington. She is most inspired by dreams, buildings, visions, public transit, good movies, bad movies, quilts, craigslist, seawater, and neon signs. Her work has most recently appeared in *Wasteland Review* and *the engine(idling)*. She likes making lists.

Charlie M. Case is an author of fiction and poetry. He has previously been published in *Long River Review*, *Blue Muse Magazine*, and *Unmagnolia Magazine*, and more of his work can be found on his web portfolio: <https://cmcase.neocities.org/>

John A. deSouza lives with his wife, Oksana, and their terrier, Mr. Darcy, in Jersey City, NJ. He is the author of the chapbook *'Hidden'* (Bottlecap Press 2025). His book, *'Unimaginable Hardship'*, was short-listed for *'The Letter Review Prize'* (2024). He has recently been/will be published in *'The Writing Disorder'*, *'the engine(idling)'*, *'Neologism'*, *'In Parentheses'*, *'The Dalhousie Review'*, *'WayWords'*, *'Shot Glass Journal'*, *'The Orchards'*, *'All Existing'*, *'Half-Eaten Mouth'* and others.

Cheryl J. Fish published her debut novel *Off the Yoga Mat*, with Livingston Press in 2022. A new edition of her poetry collection *Crater & Tower*, poems reflecting on the Mount St. Helens Volcanic eruption and the terrorist attack of 9/11/01 will be reissued in August 2025. Fish's short fiction has appeared in *Cheap Pop*, *Iron Horse*, *Liars League*, *Spank the Carp*, *Gargoyle*, *KGB BarLit*. She was nominated for a 2024 Pushcart Prize for her fiction. Fish is a creative writing editor at the journal *Ecocene* and co-curates the new prose reading series *VillageStorySalon* at NYPL, Hudson Park branch.

Dawn Goulet is a Chicago-area writer whose work has appeared in *Hypertext Review* and the *Bryant Literary Review*. She is currently at work on her first novel.

Kevin Grauke has published work in such places as *The Threepenny Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Quarterly West*. His collection, *Shadows of Men* (Queen's Ferry), won the Steven Turner Award from the Texas Institute of Letters. Originally from Texas, he teaches at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

Chris Hero is a painter living in Los Angeles, by way of New Orleans. He works out of Studio 2 in the Helms Bakery building, since 1986. His paintings and drawings are figurative, expressionistic, and often political. This body of work is titled *"Difficult Authority Figures,"* responding to issues of hypocrisy and political violence.

Carissa Jean is a screenwriter, sensitive poet, and maker of zines. She is a graduate from the IPRC and has the honor of her work appearing in *Devastation Baby*, *Girls Like Us*, and *West Trade Review*. She was proudly a Willamette Writers FilmLab 2024 cohort. But, more than anything, you can find her haunting downtown Petaluma, California.

Sophie Jefferies is a poet from Swampscott, Massachusetts. She studied poetry and French at Bennington College, and is now pursuing a MFA in poetry from Columbia University.

Morgan Jenson is a 20 year old disabled, non binary artist living in Utah. They specialize in collage work, both digital and physical, but also enjoys mixed media, and jewelry making. Morgan has been previously published in New Words Press Issue 5.

Anna Kirby is a community college English instructor living in North Carolina, USA. Her collages have been selected for juried exhibitions across the country. She makes her collages using second-hand books, scissors, and glue dots, and she accents her pieces with oil paints. Anna Kirby's collages are sensory poems that express the complex emotions surrounding child loss, infertility, and female identity. She is inspired by the harmony of complementary colors.

Cixous LeComte is a Chicana writer from Southern California. She currently lives in the Mojave Desert and is working on her first novel. Her family, both found and blood, keeps her rooted. She is a graduate from University California Riverside, and holds an MFA in Creative Writing.

Mia Martelli is an artist based in Brooklyn, NY. She creates time-based work that implements dance, poetry, and video collage. Her performances have been presented with PAGEANT, Performance Mix Festival, AUNTS, and The Brick Theater. She has created site-specific, multi-media dances on Rockaway Beach and on Governors Island. Her videos and poems have been presented with Millenium Film Workshop, MONO NO AWARE, GRRL Haus Cinema, Skurt Cobain Zine, and SplashLand Magazine. Mia has been an artist in residence with the West Harlem Art Fund, New Dance Alliance, and The Monira Foundation.

Gabby Mijalski-Fahim is a disgruntled policy student and a lesbian poet. She lives at the mercy of her cat, Duchess, in Portland, Oregon. Over the past decade, Gabby has served as an organizer in a range of local and state campaigns within Oregon politics. Outside of work, she likes to run around large bodies of water. Her words can be found in *Pioneertown*, *Passengers Journal*, *West Trade Review* and elsewhere.

Nathan Chu (MuZeTrigger) is a Washington State writer and teacher. When they're not doing either of those things, they enjoy cooking, flailing around on the bass guitar, and practicing Japanese. You can find them on BlueSky @muzetrigger.bsky.social where they write the fantasy flash serial #DiaryOfNana.

Bryce O'Tierney is a queer, interdisciplinary artist from Anchorage, Alaska, currently an Instructor in the English Dept. at Colorado State U. Previous and forthcoming publications include: *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Anchorage Daily News*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *RHINO Poetry*, *Common Ground Review*, *About Place Journal*. She composes, records, and performs in musical duo maeve & quinn, with her twin.

Em Palughi is a queer poet from South Alabama. You can find her work in Gulf Coast, Black Warrior Review, Foglifter, The Southern Poetry Anthology: Alabama, and elsewhere. She was a finalist in the 2023 Saints and Sinners Poetry Prize, the 2023 Tennessee Williams Literary Festival Poetry Prize, and the 2024 Lit/South Awards. She has an MFA in Poetry from Vanderbilt University where she was awarded the 2024 Kathryn Sedberry Prize.

Sean Bw Parker (MA) is a writer, artist and musician based in Worthing, West Sussex. He lived in Istanbul for ten years, has written or contributed to a number of books and albums, and given a TED talk. He was born in Exeter in 1975.

Susan Pollet is a visual artist whose works have appeared in multiple art shows and literary publications. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC. She is also a published author in multiple genres.

Mary Rodriguez has had poetry and short fiction published in various periodicals and anthologies. She lives outside of Madison, WI, with her husband.

John Schneider's *Swallowing the Light* (2022), is a Pinnacle Best Book Poetry winner, NYC Big Book Distinguished Favorite, International Book Awards winner. His collection *And Our Bodies Again Make Sense* is forthcoming. His non-fiction book, *Dreaming and Being Dreamt*, was published by Routledge in 2023. He is a multiple award winning poet, most recently winner of the Milton J. Kessler Prize for Poetry. John's recent poems have appeared in Harpur Palate, Willow Strings, Notre Dame Review, Cider Press Review, Catamaran. He is also a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee. He resides in Berkeley, California.

Anne Schuchman is a writer and translator in northern New Jersey. Her work has been published in academic and literary journals, most recently *The Southern Review*, *The Saranac Review*, and *The Journal of Italian Translation*. Anne is the recipient of awards from the Fulbright, NEH, and Folger Library, among others. She holds a PhD in Italian Studies from NYU and a MFA in Creative Nonfiction and Literary Translation from Fairleigh Dickinson University. In addition to her writing, she works as a birth and bereavement doula.

Eric Paul Shaffer is author of eight volumes of poetry, most recently *Green Leaves: Selected & New Poems*. Others include *Even Further West*; *A Million-Dollar Bill*; *Lāhaina Noon*; and *Portable Planet*. More than 650 individual poems appear in more than 300 reviews in the USA, Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Nicaragua, India, Iran, Scotland, Singapore, and Wales. *Free Speech*, a new volume of poetry, will appear in 2025. Shaffer lives on O'ahu.

Erica Vanstone has been published in Philadelphia Magazine, Chill Subs' Write or Die Magazine, Heritage Local Magazine, as well as in Black Bough Poetry's "2023 Winter Anthology," Open Shutter Press' "Flora/Fauna." Her most recent work, "When we weren't broken," is featured in Intangible Press' October 2024 issue, "Kintsugi." Erica is represented by Belcastro Agency and lives in Philadelphia, PA with her son, two dogs, and overly opinionated cat.



the DADDY ISSUE *editors*

Mira Mason-Reader is the founder and editor-in-chief of Apricity Press. She has a B.A. in English, Creative Writing and Dance from Mills College and has an M.A. in Creative Writing from University College Cork in Ireland. Mira is currently based in Oregon. Mira is a poet and a dancer whose writing has been published in a variety of publications including, The New York Quarterly, Shō Poetry Journal, Grand Little Things, Cordella Magazine, and ELKE "A Little Journal". As a dancer, Mira has performed both her own work and other choreographers' for over twenty years. Mira is a resident artist with Fermata Ballet Collective, whose ongoing mission is to diversify ballet and deviate from the many deeply held norms within dance.

Eden Julia Sugay is the poetry editor for Apricity Press. Eden received their B.A. in Creative Writing from Mills College and is pursuing their MFA in Writing at University of San Francisco. Their writing highlights their voice as a queer person of color; navigating identity and relationships, and their constantly evolving natures. Eden is inspired by the sun and the pink-faced, glossy-eyed details of honesty (read: they are a Cancer sun-Gemini rising-Aries moon, and a huge advocate of crying). Their work has appeared in The Walrus, Kissing Dynamite, and Folkways Press. When Eden isn't frantically jotting half-formed thoughts on the edges of napkins or their phone's notes app, they like to fill their time dancing, baking, and exploring new ways love can manifest.

Megan Jacobs is the fiction editor for Apricity Press. She received her B.A. in Literature with an emphasis in Creative Writing from Mills College. Her work has appeared in *The Walrus*, *Voices and Visions*, and Apricity Press's inaugural issue. She is the founder of *Cultivate Happiness Now*, a lifestyle blog that aims to provide tools and inspiration to help women create the happier lives they crave using a small step approach. She was recently a resident at Art Farm in Marquette, NE. She currently lives in Oakland and is working on a collection of short stories.

Rae Matagora is the visual arts editor for Apricity Press. Rae is an illustrator and designer based in Eugene, Oregon. Specializing in screen printing and painting, Rae works across various mediums and canvas types. Rae's vibrant, playful style offers a colorful escape from the everyday, blending bold shapes and delightful absurdity into each piece. Just like with Apricity, Rae's work invites viewers into a world where creativity doesn't just thrive—it refuses to take itself too seriously.

Marcelo Kuna is the dance editor for Apricity Press. Marcelo holds a Master of Arts in Cultural History and Theory from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication of the Arts of the Body from PUC-SP in Brazil, having studied with Brazilian contemporary dance pioneers such as Gaby Imparato, Vera Sala, Zélia Monteiro, among others. A classically trained singer, Marcelo became an émigré in 2018, choosing Berlin as a creative home, in order to flee the unrepentant neofascism in Brazil. As a migrant in Europe, the interest has been especially in investigating and researching the fissures between western European modernity and the knowledge of the Epistemologies of the South, often times disregarded by hegemonic scholarship as “unscientific”, and sometimes even as “dangerous”. The artist lives and works in Berlin as an occultural scholar, practicing esotericist and performing artist.

