

# SASSAFRAS

LITERARY MAGAZINE ISSUE 5





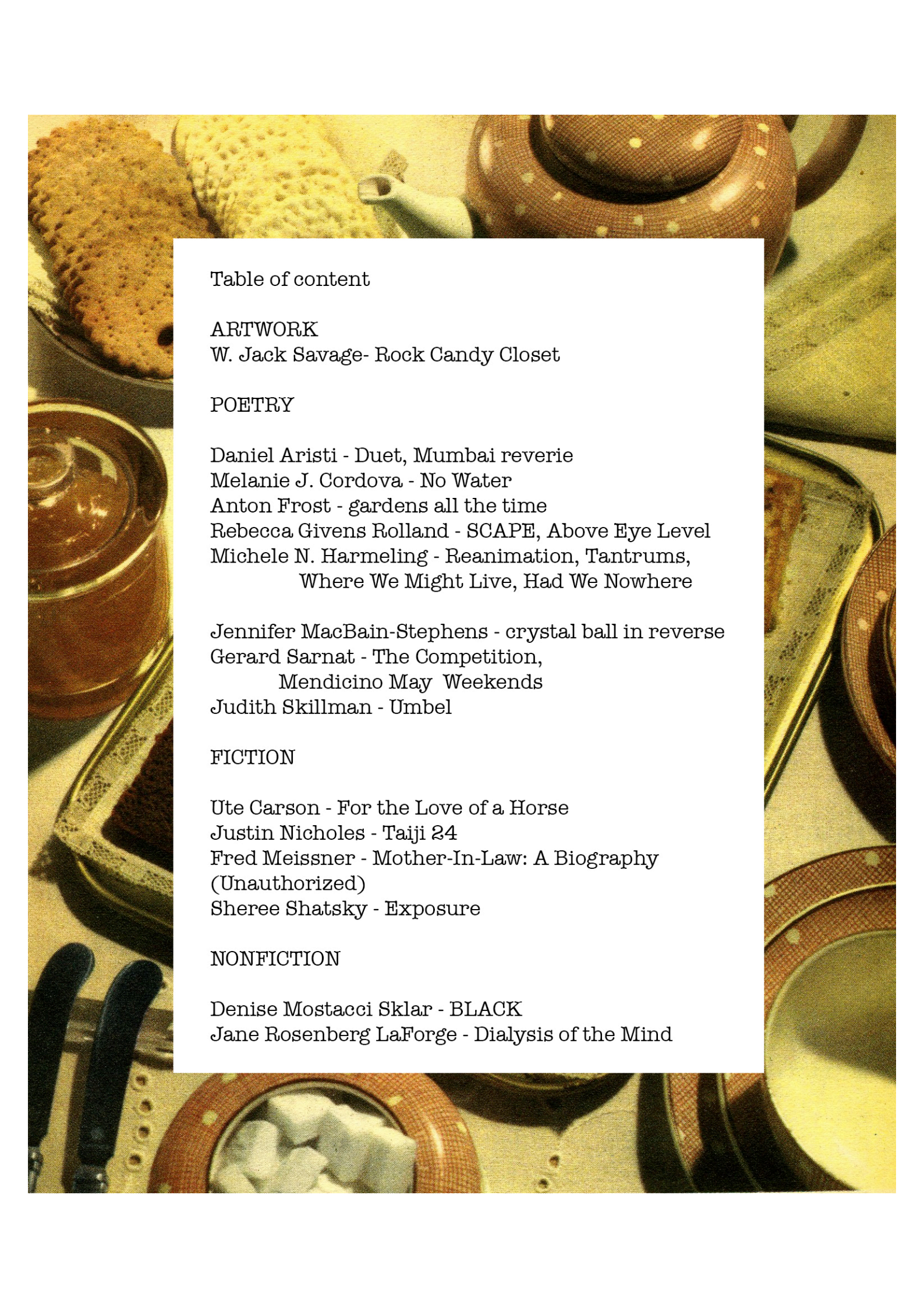


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Daniel Aristi

1-Duet

(Big Pine Mountain, Santa Barbara County – 30 June 1992)

after  
the slumber of the stone  
in June  
in July  
the boulder burning hot too hot for sidewinders awakes  
& screams back up –  
Sun rages with this shrilly close-up tune in Westerns & his wrath on  
the anvil-stone hammers out something akin to  
passion high in the Sierra  
amidst the chaparrals  
another draw.

2-Mumbai reverie

we make love then I dream myself older  
(the corridor has adopted a circular cross-section, a bit  
like a space station) I dream myself  
by a concave fireplace with broken wrists  
and wish logs will burn some more still  
so I can heal  
there are three monsoon-glazed wheelchairs out in the yard  
and no one quite knows what to read in this  
I dream myself never again  
I then dream myself aground.

Daniel was born in Spain, he studied French Literature and Economics, and then moved overseas. He now lives in Botswana, with his wife, Reshma, and their daughter, lil' Ria. Daniel's work is forthcoming in Berkeley Poetry Review and Shot Glass Journal. Daniel writes whenever Ria goes to sleep.

Melanie J. Cordova

## No Water

The handle to the shed glinted in the afternoon sun as the diapered blonde girl stared out the screen door. Heat waves floated from the concrete of the back porch and she pressed against the mesh with her fingertips, the rubbery wire indenting her skin. The glint from the shed flashed across the back fence while the grass gave up the ghost of its moisture to the sun, each blade expiring from root to tip like a frail firework popping into the air, sighing toward the sky. She could almost smell their ashy sparks. It was a blink, a flash of memory, before she knew why the doors were open and the fans were on, before she knew why she was sweating in the heat of July in central California, before she knew why the yard was silent except for the dogs panting in the shade of the neighbor's walnut tree, before she knew why she couldn't go outside in bare feet and wallow in the cool dirt beneath a garden hose that dripped hot summer water on the skin between her toes.

Melanie J. Cordova is currently a PhD student in Creative Writing Fiction at Binghamton University. She has stories out or forthcoming with Crack the Spine Literary Magazine, The Santa Fe Writers Project, The Oklahoma Review, Yamassee, Larks Fiction Magazine, and The Waterhouse Review, among others. Melanie also serves as Editor-in-Chief to Harpur Palate and as the Coordinator of Writing By Degrees 2014.



Anton Frost

gardens all the time

i. tonight

the stars make either  
oddly shaped animals

stretching out in the zoo-dark  
over the water

or they form warriors  
with misaligned brains

too far above the fields  
to have ever shed blood

or shown mercy.

ii. gardens all the time

I spend too much of my life  
not lighting candles

but I light this one  
watching its calm hot flower open

into a room around us  
while the sap in the trees

keeps rising and falling  
no blood cells just wood sounds

as the branches drum  
their leaves off into  
the dark

Anton Frost has appeared in Verdad, The Bacon Review, Parcel, and elsewhere. He lives in Michigan.

Rebecca Givens Rolland

## SCAPE

What I heard in the meadow, beyond  
the cleaved rock, startled me. I won't repeat it,  
except to say I was far off when it started  
again. Electric wire, drill saw. Agitating  
downward, barrelling at us. Our  
heavy hands. Over the earthquake a doubling  
of sound and swallow, birdsong. I was thinking of catching  
air before it splashed out. If we were to leave  
now, how would we caution each other. The paint  
of houses' insides on our sleeves. How we tried  
to cover over the wound as if it were just  
an accident. As if caring for each other had  
not made the distance go blind. She is widowed  
now and I do not see her. I'm often going  
into houses in the direction where I can't  
get out. I think it's a problem with space,  
how the floor plan won't reveal the insides. How  
the last words are never recorded and I don't notice  
till I'm on the airplane overnight, breathing  
in and moving to the right, and sound  
returns to me in a green wave. Bones clack  
on plants, survivors. I call them human. No animal  
would have been handled this way. She had  
a child that died before she held it. This is something,  
when we see her, we're supposed to ignore. This  
the panel of wood I keep knocking up  
against when I keep myself busy. Too many  
hours between takeoff and landing. The white  
noise of it makes me feel I am handling  
something. That I've stepped into the site the guide  
told me to swim into, then climb - walk left,  
swim right, pin one knee up and swing  
over - ladder one hand from reaching -



## ABOVE EYE LEVEL

I wake and it could be any century, trees  
etched into shelves of white, winter

doused in its own fragile blessings, horse  
climbing stairs in one season, dropping

down wide fields in the next. Canter,ing,  
keels of barges, leaves. If wilderness

called now, I'd say, impossible. If sirens  
siphoned a message, this city will keep

getting covered till there's nothing left –  
I turn inward to eyelashes, to a stricter

day. Let that century steal me slowly back.  
Let me steel myself. Now north wind.

You have to know when you've been beaten,  
when trying no longer proves. Cars sputter

gray noise in any case. When I walk, it's  
with the footsteps of one who watches

whole trees get downed. Horizon's been  
sunken in honey, flames. No one will tape

my mouth shut, will carry a fish and a lamp  
to feed the family, let the family go on. No

sitting in silence, traveling a hundred oceans  
through. When I wake, I find no vacancies.

No window but the one to my right, slightly  
above eye level. Man in a brown hat

cleaning his lot, blasting off flakes with his  
machine. Though snow whips his face

he keeps going. Snow slaps him, he slaps  
it back. Reckless thinking only of revenge.

'SCAPE' and 'Above Eye Level' was first published in IO Poetry <http://iopoetry.org>  
(These poems were kindly shared with Sassafra via a request from the editor)

Rebecca Givens Rolland's first book of poems, *The Wreck of Birds*, won the 2011 May Sarton New Hampshire First Book Prize and was published by Bauhan Publishing. Her poems have recently appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *American Letters & Commentary*. Currently she is a doctoral student in education at Harvard.



Michele N. Harmeling

Reanimation

"I'm grateful to you, you see. I wanted to tell you."

– Raymond Carver

I.

Once, we fished with my father on a lake with no end—or no end our young eyes could see. My brother cast too far backwards.

To unhook and release, sometimes you must force tiny barbs up and through while your catch sits quietly, and dares not move.

II.

As kids, playing dead was just something we did—like possums or tricks dogs did for bits of smoked salmon; there was always a fight scene.

There was always a wake.

III.

Sometimes, you see, it all catches up with you:

hooks and bait, silver scales that won't be washed from your boots.

Late at night, when he was young, my brother woke us all  
with his splashing and quiet chatter in the bathroom

IV.

where he'd taken a whole string of grayling—their stiff, rigor-curved  
tails in his hands. He was giving them a bath, he said,  
so they would feel a little better. Would feel like  
swimming again.

Tantrums

I.

When we hear about the destruction—tornadoes  
leaving little behind but rubble, sorrow  
-we are shocked, then pensive:

we've imagined it, too, you see—sudden  
disaster, emergence from cellar  
to ruin,



searching endlessly in tattered dressing gowns

for signs of the family cat.

II.

They are called “The Jumpers”,

for that’s what they did: hurled bodies from upper

stories, plummeted to sidewalk.

Do we really believe we’d have done

any different?

We’ve imagined that, too:

martyrdom, that is.

The symbolism of flight, ash-caked faces

pointed directly at the ground.

III.

For who hasn’t, at least once,

envisioned a plane crash, from which one emerges

as the only survivor.

Who hasn't surmised that they too, would live  
through it, subsisting on broken-open  
packets of peanuts,

drinking, perhaps, one's own urine,  
patching wounds with cocktail  
napkins and spit.

IV.

From day to day, I survive  
any number of deaths,  
catalog them

according to perceived glamour:  
terrible illness, the wrath of nature,  
anaphylaxis,  
broken fuselage upon snow.

Where We Might Live, Had We Nowhere

At first light, when the wind is stronger  
than dawn, there are no bird calls.

There is only the sound of a tide  
that does not ebb, but only grows,  
carries with it fragments:

birch bark, dried alder cones, mats of black  
fur clipped from the dog's tail.

There are nests in the willows  
held together with that fur,  
round little shrouds, that are now  
homes, too.

Michele N. Harmeling is a poet and essayist residing in picturesque Palmer, Alaska. Her work has appeared in such publications as the Alaska Quarterly Review, Juked Magazine, Reed Magazine, and the Adirondack Review; she is the recipient of the 2009 Whiskey Island Poetry Prize. Her spare time is generally spent foraging for wild edibles, backpacking, fishing, reading and lavishing attention on her husband and dog, Puck. Her writing can also be found at [sundaymorningpoems.wordpress.com](http://sundaymorningpoems.wordpress.com).

Jennifer MacBain–Stephens

crystal ball in reverse

Wanting to nap but then I feel your small head weighing on my shoulder. On this cramped night flight, 29,000 feet high with civilizations' electric stars bursting below, I put my palm on your forehead, feeling eight pounds of exhaustion, buzzing remnants of excitement from seeing San Francisco and touching a stingray for the first time, the giddiness of wearing a gold dress to your cousin's wedding, and the soon to be sweet relief of sleeping in your own bed. Cradling your head in my hand like a crystal ball in reverse, I see you when your whole body fitted on my forearm. I see you at two years old, half naked with chocolate on your nose, laughing with me just because I was laughing. I see you at four, dumping a pound of colored sprinkles on a homemade birthday cake. I see you at eight, sashaying home from school alone for the first time on pajama day. I see you always moving because you are never still– except now. Me, feeling your warm hair and skin, braced against a hard skull.

Jennifer MacBain–Stephens received a B.A. and a B.F.A. from New York University and currently calls the Midwest home. She has poems published in Superstition Review, Emerge Literary Journal, Red Savina Review, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Burningwood Literary Journal, The Apeiron Review, Dead Flowers: A Poetry Rag, Star 82 Review, Thirteen Myna Birds, Rufous City Review, Squalor Review, Stirring: A Literary Collection, Untitled with Passengers, Gravel Magazine, Sein und Werden, The New Poet, Scapegoat Review, and Iowa City's 2013 Poetry in Public Project.

Gerard Sarnat

## The Competition

One forty over ninety, not bad for a sixty-three year-old  
rising from the can, glancing back to look hard for red;  
jealous of a man dying of leukemia, my wife's first lover  
some time before I met and wed her four decades past;

she reads his website each night before bed to be certain  
if he still is (not sure what to make of his not answering  
emails since last week); I scan the newspapers every day  
for MR's obit, which I imagine will lead with the sentence:

"Died at seventy-three, LZ's Teaching Assistant at Berkeley,  
a charismatic bookish fellow and ne'er-do-well cradle robber.

## Mendicino May Weekends

Spring after spring    redwoods and ocean  
look unchanged    but not our bodies  
now in their sixties    which    stuffed  
in the same skintight bike shorts & wetsuits  
as decades past    shamelessly    no regrets  
still cycle    boogie-board    &    hot tub  
bare-assed    feeling a bit stiffer each year.

Gerard Sarnat is the author of two critically acclaimed poetry collections, HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man, and Disputes. A Stanford and Harvard-trained physician, CEO of healthcare organizations and Stanford professor, Gerard's been published in over seventy journals and anthologies. For Huffington Post's review and more, visit [Gerard Sarnat.com](http://GerardSarnat.com).



Judith Skillman

Umbel

Framework of wild carrot,  
cluster of stars,  
obsolete sunshade,  
diminutive of autumn

harbor us now  
as we wander  
into darkness--  
far from the sun,  
its ray and disc.

Inside out  
umbrella, keep us  
in this winter  
and from straying

toward those others  
where the snow berried  
grandmother  
feathers a nest  
for the mole.

Judith Skillman's new collections are *Broken Lines—The Art & Craft of Poetry* (Lummox Press, 2013), and *The Phoenix—New and Selected Poems 2007 - 2013* (Dream Horse Press). Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *FIELD*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Southern Review*, *A Cadence of Hooves*, and other journals and anthologies. She is the recipient of grants from the Academy of American Poets, the Washington State Arts Commission, the Centrum Foundation, and the King County Arts Commission. She teaches for Yellow Wood Academy. See [judithskillman.com](http://judithskillman.com)

## For the Love of a Horse

Children run away from home for various reasons, often neglect or fear. I was neither neglected nor fearful, and knew myself loved. There was no money. My mother starved herself instead of letting me go hungry. She was also a magician at crafting things. When I wished for a hobbyhorse, she made one from brown sackcloth with black buttons as eyes. Bridle and reigns were braided, the nostrils stitched so the toy horse could neigh. My stepfather was mostly jobless and a womanizer but indifferent to me.

I was horse crazy. A stable where I helped with chores in exchange for riding lessons became my castle. I relished the scent of leather, manure and steamy hides. I buried my nose in the windblown mane of Sport, a spirited gelding that belonged to the wealthy sheepherding Harrison family. Sport became my first love. He was intelligent and responsive to my touch and soft voice. I was devoted to him and considered him my own. He was ridden by others only on weekends.

I saw Sport's owners from afar, a couple with three teenagers and a son who arrived at the stables in his sports car in elegant equestrian attire. I fantasized about the family, and when I got a lime-green bicycle with a Bismarck insignia for my 12th birthday I pedaled around the neighborhood to find out where they lived.

The Tudor mansion with a blooming manicured lawn and two friendly German shepherds matched to what I had imagined, a life without sadness and worries, and horses of your own. When I saw an old woman rocking under a canopy, I thought of my grandmother whom I adored. Once, watching Mrs. Harrison join the grandmother with her fine knitting basket, I thought of my mother knitting beautiful garments with left-over yarn. On the spot I decided to move there.

I packed my rucksack with clothes and all my school supplies and late one afternoon rode out to the Harrison's estate. I peeked through the thick ivy covering the wrought iron fence and when I was sure everyone was home, I rang the doorbell, "I have come to live with you," I announced. If they were surprised they didn't show it. I was invited to dinner and then they made up a bed in one of the upstairs rooms with a view over the lush garden. They only made me promise that I would go to school the next morning.

We had no telephone, so one of the Harrisons must have driven over to my house to inform my parents. When I left school the next afternoon I ran and fell into the arms of my sobbing mother. There were no accusations, only floods of tears. I became a frequent visitor at the Harrison's and befriended them all. This was a friendship that lasted for the entire life of Sport, the horse, spanning 32 years.

A writer from youth, German-born Ute Carson's first story was published in 1977. Her story "The Fall" won the Grand Prize for Prose and was published in the short story and poetry anthology, *A Walk Through My Garden*, Outrider Press, Chicago 2007. Her novel "Colt Tailing," was published in September 2004 and was a finalist for the Peter Taylor Book Award Prize for the Novel. Her second novel "In Transit" was published in 2008. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and magazines here and abroad. Carson's poetry was featured on the televised Spoken Word Showcase 2009 and 2010, 2011 Channel Austin, TX. Her poetry collection "Just a Few Feathers" was published in 2011. Her poem "A Tangled Nest of Moments" won second place in the Eleventh International Poetry Competition 2012. Her poetry chapbook "Folding Washing" has been published in 2013 by the Willet Press. An Advanced Certified Clinical Hypnotist, Ute Carson resides in Austin, TX with her husband. They have three daughters, five grandchildren, two horses and a number of cats. [www.utecarson.com](http://www.utecarson.com)

Justin Nicholes

Taiji 24

This is going to be painful. This is going to hurt. Taiji traps in miniature the passing of a day. A day's a lifetime, but tomorrow's no redo. This is real.

The opening . . . *imagine rising suns*. It takes balance. Her voice wavers when she calls. Since her brother's deformed hand (bone-whittled thumb unfit for rifles) would have kept him from the People's National Army, her father bribed. A recruitment officer now owns shares in the highway-paving project through the city. He'll be a career soldier, her father said, but a foreigner in the family would stall promotion.

Next: *parting the wild horse's mane*. You do that by making a rule, one that answers that self-pitying question you've asked your whole adult life—whether you're too selfish to love someone else—and the next time she writhes from family pressure, those late-night calls from mom, uncles, aunts, not to marry a foreigner, you will take her up on it. Nobody knows you're already married. Her family, you thought, would come around. It's been a year. She does bring it up, you do follow through, and possessed by some urge to really tear things down, you follow that red, arching sign down the alley to the bathhouse with no showers, the room with low beds, and make sure the whole thing's done.

*Brush the knee*. It will get out, so go ahead and tell a few friends. The first one might be a colleague you're sometimes friends with, but who you mostly just compete with—for overload money, empty titles, and access to the provost who visits the country once a year around graduation. He will hide signs of joy, trusty old schadenfreude. He has been sleeping with students and sees this as handy blackmail. Maybe unable to sleep, maybe hands numb from worry, he uses it in a text when your supervisor comes to observe classes (don't let the word get out about the split, and more about awkward questions from colleagues), to make sure you won't tell what you know while contract renewals are up in the air.

*Catch-the-dove's-tail* simulates something graceful, but in the end these are methods of attack. Tail catching trains pinning wrists, bending elbows, and shifting qi. Don't really do this to anybody.

*Cloud hands*, and keep your knees straight when you step sideways, because a few months later, you meet her at the bureau in the city. You screen your face with your shirt against the bitumen smell of road-paving construction. You come to the place that will translate and stamp the agreement. No kids, no shared property—it takes one afternoon. She's grown her hair longer, could use sun. You realize how young she is.

*Inspect the horse, kick*. You sit next to each other and soon are called in. After small talk and laughs, she tries and says she's okay but cannot stop crying. The guy wearing jeans and a flannel shirt sits at a desk among papers. His desktop bleeps with chat requests. Who the fuck is this guy, you think, to be playing marriage counselor? He says he can't when she's like that. She says it's ok. He asks why. We just want to, she says, but he makes you go to the waiting room and talk about it first. She needs to calm down or he won't.

*Snake slips through, golden rooster*. You say, to maybe keep it alive, Call your father. She says the money's gone too far. Not only her brother. They are getting her promotions now, and raises.

After parrying, punching, plunging a fan through one's back, a final gesture mimics doors closing. And the one you close tomorrow resembles but is not the same door as today's. She hugs you outside the building and asks you to lunch.

You get a taxi by yourself, because there are no new days, just balance and nimbleness, muscle memory, practice for reshaping past patterns. Stand and meditate. Let the right ones in. From now until the next time, it's not like you're not living—or, a little later, like the nothing that's before. It's more an enclosure, a place of perspective. It takes a long time.

Justin Nicholes is the author of the novels *River Dragon Sky* (2012) and *Ash Dogs* (2008). His stories have appeared in *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Stickman Review*, *Slice*, *The Medulla Review*, and elsewhere. He is the chief editor of *The Pavilion* and lives in Xinzheng City, China.



Fred Meissner

Mother-In-Law: A Biography

(Unauthorized)

1

“Well, you can’t thread a moving needle,” was my soon-to-be mother-in-law’s aphoristic response in her accented English to our announcement that we were pregnant and about to get married.

I felt immediate admiration for this woman who I would soon be calling “mom.”

2

Even though many of her stories take place in Romania, she is German and will correct you if you say otherwise. Her roots are firmly embedded in the chaos of a war-torn Europe. She comes from good peasant stock. She has that Old World knack for telling stories of the past, stories she tells over and over again like the strange mythic tales of Hesiod, the repetition making myth a part of our collective unconsciousness.

Sometimes, while she tells us one of her stories, I find myself nodding knowingly.

3

When she was very young, she watched her mother die. She’ll tell you that her mother suffered from an inexplicable illness that confined her to her bed where she sipped, continuously, opium tea. One quiet night, her mother called her into the bedroom, held her close awhile, and died.

She said her screams brought the other tenants in the building running.

4

After her mother’s death, she became the mother of the house—she tried her best to care for her father and for her older brother. Sometimes her father slipped away into sudden fits of anger and depression and he would send her from the

house, afraid that he might kill her. Sometimes her brother beat her if he caught her doing things he thought she ought not to do—smoking cigarettes, staying out too late, talking to boys.

She will tell you that she has no use for men.

5

Her first (of seven) was such a difficult birth she thought that she would die or he would die before the end, but the midwife there said that the frog that she had put into the water basin had not drowned—everything would be alright—keep bearing down. The midwife, it turned out, was right. She doesn't talk a lot about the man who helped create this child. Her silence, I like to think, locks away a dusty memory that, possibly, might resemble love.

When pressed, she will tell you that this man, like so many others, perished in the war.

6

I met her brother once when he was visiting from Windsor, a quiet, diabetic man. They didn't talk a lot, but she brought him water glasses full of rye, lightly coloured with ginger ale and ice. Eventually, the diabetes killed him. In the war (as she tells it) he had a commander who was going to take the troop on a suicide mission, but something "happened" to that commander (something that her brother never talks about) and the mission never went.

Some men, I suppose, lived somehow through all that madness.

7

She remembers that her brother came home one day on leave and when he visited, he found her pregnant and without a man, and he beat her black and blue. She also tells of the times when as children, she slept together in the same bed as her brother, and he'd fart and pull the covers over her head.

She laughs when she tells you this, love floating in her laughter like the bubbles from her boiling pea soup.

8

After her brother's funeral, she slept like an exhausted child in the back of the car on the drive back from Windsor. She was seventy years old. I don't remember seeing her cry, but her sorrow, like interminable waves from a sea of tears, rolled and crashed on the shores of our perception.

We kept watch for her, alone out there in all of that sadness.

9

After the war, she met a man who had a daughter but no wife; she had a son but no husband. Conveniently, they married. Two children later, they sailed for Canada. Four children after that, he had his first stroke. He was in his mid-thirties, but was like a child himself. We have a crumpled black-and-white photo of him poised, mid-stride, among some trees, smiling sheepishly. After he died, she will explain, her life was very hard.

I realize that I lose something in the transcription.

10

We make fun of her sometimes. She likes to read the "People" magazine that Terry brings her once a week or so. She'll say, "Ach, that Jerry Sprinkler," or "I don't like Bruce Willie," or "that Shannon Stone plays such dirty parts," or "Patrick Shvantsig, he's good looking." I have a feeling that she makes some of these little blunders on purpose. When we leave, she sometimes lets me kiss her on her soft, soft wrinkled cheek; she tells her daughter that she loves her.

One time, recently, Terry cried when we left her mother's place; I think I understand what she was feeling.

'Mother-In-Law: A Biography' was first published in [paperplates.org](http://paperplates.org)

Fred Meissner is published in *Ascent Aspirations*, *Electro-Twaddle*, *Armada Quarterly*, *Poetry Canada*, and had a broadside selected for *Rubicon Press*. He has also had personal essays appearing in *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Toward the Light*, *Inscribed*, and *The Fieldstone Review*, and he was invited to read some of his poems at the *Eden Mills Writers Festival*.

Sheree Shatsky

## Exposure

My mother hates the front door to our house.

It's not the red peeling paint or the fact the door is warped making it hard to open and close, it's about what the door represents, the function of access and in her opinion, far too much access. "Anyone standing in the doorway can see directly into the bathroom," she says to anyone who will listen, "and with two kids who refuse to conduct their business in private, well, that's a peep show in the making, a real birds-eye view."

I watch her iron sheets in the living room, spritzing each with water before pressing out the wrinkles in a haze of steam. The television is on and she listens to her stories play out on the screen that rolls black and white vertical more often than not. She plucks at the top of her blouse to cool her sticky self, pulling a tissue from the box to dab away sweat collecting under her arms. The front door stands open to let in any semblance of a breeze while she works, ironing sheets in our tiny clapboard house.

She must be plenty hot to leave that door open and risk a potential look-and-see by strangers into our house, I think, slipping into the bathroom.

I stand on the toilet to reach the sink and turn the water on cold. Black slimy insects spill out the faucet, tumbling one upon another to skitter about the wet basin and disappear down the drain. I discovered the bugs the first time I turned on the tap and have been fascinated every since, learning cold water typically results in more bugs swimming out the faucet than hot, although my mother says that makes no sense, the pipes all stem from the same place. My brother, on the other hand, learned quick there's nothing more gruesome than Alabama water bugs after he stumbled into the dark bathroom half asleep and lapped a drink from the running water without the benefit of a cup. He swallowed two bugs whole that night, screaming himself awake after one landed on his face and tried to scramble up his nose.

The telephone rings. "Shirley," my mother yells, "I hear you in the bathroom! Stop playing with those damn water cockroaches and go check on your brother!"

I trap the bugs inside the pipes with a rubber stopper, its metal chain chinking against the porcelain. I can hear them thumping underneath, trying to escape. "He's still taking a nap!" I yell back, but she's on the phone and doesn't hear me. Otherwise, I say to myself, he'd be screaming his fool head off over these crazy water bugs. Always let the water run clear, I'd tell him, before taking a drink from the sink.

"He's sleeping," I said again, rounding the corner. She shushes me, irritated, her face twisted in reprimand. She mouths the words, I'm on the phone, and gestures wildly at the receiver as if playing charades. "I can't get five minutes peace, is that too much to ask?" she asks the person on the other end of the line.

The iron is up, propped back, still hot. Steam puffs out the vents. I smooth out the sheet left draping the ironing board and remember my mother purchased the iron with thirty books of S&H Green Stamps. My tongue tasted gummy for hours after licking all those stamps.

She sees what I'm doing and shoots me a look, a glance some kids might take as a glare meaning get away from there this instant while others like myself might consider with more soulful interpretation, perhaps as a maternal plea for help with ironing the thankless, unforgiving fiber known as one hundred percent cotton.

A voice at the front door startles me. I swing around and knock the iron off balance. It falls on my forearm. I yank back and the iron clatters to the floor.

I sway, but give pause before the faint, thinking how funny my brother must be awake because I hear my grandmother screaming at him to shut the bathroom door now, that she could see his naked fanny propped up on the commode the very minute she stepped foot into the house.

Grand is a nurse who lives a couple of houses down the street, which is the single reason my mother agreed to live in a place where a bathroom stood in direct sight of a front door and more likely than not, could be seen from the neighbor's yard across the street, if someone really tried. I sit at the table and she dresses my burn. It looks like melted vanilla ice cream, only bubbly.

She turns away to snip a piece of medical tape off the spool and I take a peek. Stop that, she says, popping me with the handle of her scissors square in the center of the gauze-covered wound. I flinch. Sit still, she hisses, raising the



scissors like a cobra ready to strike. This is what you get for not listening to your mother.

I'm afraid to ask where my mother is, so I don't.

My father curses more often than not and I consider this as good a time as any to let one rip. I try to think of a good cuss to say in my head, but I'm only six years old and I'm afraid God might hear me. Worse, my grandmother might hear me or worse yet, read my mind or maybe even do both. Be it her own flesh and blood kin or the captive students attending her weekly Sunday School class, she can always detect when children think wicked thoughts. For those Grand caught stepping off the path of socially acceptable casual register, she relished dish soap on the offender's profanity-ridden tongue, slick with drool in mighty effort to fight past the bitter aftertaste. Once certain the punished had swallowed, she offered a glass of water and said, Consider yourself lucky. My grandfather's mother snipped off the tip of his tongue when he swore.

Rather than confront her with a how dare you or hands of my child, mind you, the parents of the church kids as well as my own mother and father would instead thank her very much for washing the filth from our dirty little heathen mouths. I recall one lady threatened to call the police, but she was up from Florida visiting family with her son (who was as brown as a mole, my grandmother called it a tan) and left town soon after without stirring up the promised trouble.

My arm smells cooked. It throbs fingertips to shoulder. I squeeze my eyes shut and think of Mighty Mouse. The caped cartoon crusader swoops through my thoughts to save my day anytime I feel scared and need help. He waited with me in the dark after I fell into a heating grate and flew circular patterns around my bed when I woke one night to see a shadow man on my bedroom wall. He lands on my shoulder when I get a shot and doesn't care when I run from the doctor because I'm so afraid of the needle. Mighty Mouse is with me when I need him and he's with me now, puncturing Grand's poking, prodding fingers with his sharp rodent teeth. His red cape snaps with each bite.

"Well, that's that," she says, packing up the first aid kit. "Should leave a nice fat scar that will always remind you of what happened here today." I hear my brother yelling my name. I look out the front door still open wide and there he is, running down the sidewalk, waving a couple of what were once frozen fudge bars at me. "Shirley! Shirley! Grand sent us to the store for something special, she said it

would make you feel better!” He stops to lick a trail of melting chocolate from the elbow up. Our mother catches up with him and pulls a wadded up tissue from her pocket to wipe up the mess. She notices me leaning against the red peeling door she despises so, backlit by the light of our peek-a-boo house, cradling my bandaged arm. I can tell she’s been crying.

“With them both screaming and carrying on, I couldn’t concentrate on nursing your foolishness, so I sent them both up to the Piggly Wiggly,” my grandmother says, massaging her hands and turning her back on me. Mighty Mouse gives me a wink and flies off towards the bathroom where the water bugs have pushed free from the darkness of the plumbing and into the light of the pastel sink.

Sheree Shatsky has called Florida home for fifty years. She writes short fiction believing much can be conveyed with a few simple words. Her work as an opinion writer has appeared in print and online. Ms. Shatsky's forthcoming story "Florida Sightings" will be published by the Journal of Microliterature December 2013.

Denise Mostacci Sklar

## BLACK

My mother begged me no to wear it. The little black dress with the tiny strawberries sewn on with red thread , it wasn't appropriate for a wake. My father had died just before his 49th birthday. He was cold and waxy in a coffin with flowers strewn all over in an airless room with no windows while people piled in slowly with faces stiff and broken. My father was dead, cancer ravaged his body and my mother worried about strawberries, red dots on my black dress. We had an argument, "Talk to her. It's just not right!" My aunts, grandmother tried to convince me. "No." I said. I loved the strawberries, the deep ruby color, rich fragile beauty set against the black flowing cloth that hung loose on my body made me feel protected in the coldness of the room, the static tradition, the gaudiness of the flowers glaring with their big colors and ribbons smothering, the black shoes and suits, black dresses, the black, black, black- tears streaming on tired faces, broken hearts lost, heavy sobs hushed hung in the air of this zombie room of black sadness frozen tradition. I kept waiting to feel something new and holy, my empty father propped luxurious, reclined in a box of satin. His storm had ended, he was free. Gone. I had nothing more to say so I wore the dress, the black one with strawberries.

And I stood with my mother, each of my sisters and brothers, everyone, the survivors- our feet bare in the wreckage, our hands clasped in the aftermath, falling into silence, muttering prayers.

Denise Mostacci Sklar has had a career as a dancer, teacher and is currently a personal trainer in the GYROTONIC method of bodywork. She has now discovered writing as another way to move through life and particularly enjoys the stillness...waiting for words to make an entrance. She has also had the good fortune to study with poet/teacher Marc Olmsted. Her most current work can be found in Wilderness House Literary Review, Untitled with Passengers, Almost Five[Quarterly] and forthcoming in Emerge Literary Journal, Split Infinitive and Vagabond City. Denise is from Hamilton MA, where she lives with her husband and two sons.

Jane Rosenberg LaForge

## Dialysis of the Mind

I was working out today when I thought of my mother; how she required dialysis at the end of her life. A test to determine whether she had pancreatic cancer shut down her kidneys. Before the cancer could be treated, her kidneys had to be restored. So dialysis it was, for two weeks.

I exercise because exertion requires the heart to pump more blood, and for the blood to take in more oxygen. This has an invigorating effect, as if my blood and my organs are cleansed by my movements. Exercising also occasionally settles my mind.

My mother had at several illnesses leading up to pancreatic cancer: Cervical cancer, for one, although we did not learn of it until after her death through the medical records. She also had peripheral arterial disease. This is a painful condition in which blood fails to circulate in the limbs; it stops, as though the route to nourishing knees and shins has been blinkered off; as if it no longer exists. Peripheral Arterial Disease is caused by smoking. My mother smoked for many years before quitting at age 49. Mild exercise was prescribed to deal with this illness.

My mother once exercised quite frequently, playing tennis several times a week. But at age 70 she injured her knee on the tennis court. Surgery and therapy were ineffective. She also endured terrible arthritis most of her adult life. She hid it by taking long hot showers in the morning. "She steamed herself open like a clam," my father once said.

We knew she had also experienced something like leukemia, except her body produced too many red blood cells, instead of white. The disease revealed itself through high blood pressure. She had too much blood for her vascular system. This condition was mistreated in my mother, and the result was pancreatitis. Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas, and it causes pain, weight loss, nausea, and vomiting. It also may lead to pancreatic cancer.

Pancreatitis is most often found in aging male alcoholics, although our mother did not drink. My sister drank, and she lived with our mother until our mother

died. My sister and I had a great sibling rivalry. We competed for friends, over our grades and social status, and for the affection of our parents, especially our mother's. Who knew her better, who was the most thoughtful of her, who sacrificed more of her life and time? Perhaps I just gave up, and moved out the house. Perhaps my sister actually won this competition.

For dialysis, my mother was required to lie on a table. An intravenous line was inserted in a vein in her arm to siphon out the blood. The blood was then run through a series of filters. Blood takes in everything: sugars from our food, oxygen from the air; the toxins there too. The fine silk of the filters removes excess water, nutrients, waste and detritus. The blood is returned to the body through another intravenous line in the arm. Dialysis is not perfect. It is a manual approximation of a natural process, and therefore lacks its grace, and precision.

My sister was with my mother as she was forced to do nothing but stare at a ceiling for four hours each day. She asked our mother which was worse: dialysis or the mental hospital. No one knew this at the time of our mother's mental illness, but diseases of the mind are caused by the faulty cycling of neurotransmitters in the brain. Instead of dispersing into the blood once they were used, our mother's neurotransmitters batted back and forth, over and over again, between her synapses. This can lead to obsession, mania, depression, and psychosis. These illnesses resist a dialysis of the mind.

When my sister told me she had asked our mother which was worse—the dialysis or the mental hospital—I did not say anything. My sister did not tell me the answer. Instead I thought to myself, "But did you ask her which time?"

Jane Rosenberg LaForge is the author of a full-length poetry collection, "With Apologies to Mick Jagger, Other Gods, and All Women" (The Aldrich Press 2012) and three poetry chapbooks. Her experimental novel and memoir, "An Unsuitable Princess," will be published by Jaded Ibis Press in 2014.

Ads from Mazetti, Rumford and *The Housemother* (magazine); issue 37, 1935:





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