



# Sassafras

literary magazine

April 2014  
issue 7

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Mattison Teeter  
Maria Maddox

Mattison Teeter



'Cyclops kitty' (acrylic on wood) ©Mattison Teeter



*Truth* (spray paint on paper) ©Mattison Teeter



*Untitled* (spray paint on wood) ©Mattison Teeter with Bobby Z

Bio:

Mattison Teeter is an artist currently residing in Los Angeles, CA. Her work is inspired by personal experience. See [instagram.com/mattisonteeter](https://www.instagram.com/mattisonteeter)

Britt Melewski

In-patient

You roll over into a darkness that eases  
upon your shoulder. Within  
a manageable light, your two faces

discuss themselves: hammer or nail—  
nurse or patient? I watch you both  
in your desperate slumber, separately,

continuously dreaming fields of pumpkin,  
tolling gymnasiums of rock. When you twitch,  
I scare—as if I had just wakened.

The crisp sheets slide the light, illuminating  
the twin nightstands that move  
so easily with nothing to put in them.

## Better Than Not

- *after Wolfgang Laib*

The yellow spray of a decade  
of pollen. The essence visits us  
for only a moment, vanishes.  
Put it in a jar or a tin or else.

Watching the world  
from a fourth floor balcony.  
How it seems so slow in the silence  
and distance. The illusion

of a year gone by. People  
can't count to ten in the realm  
of the spirit. At my best  
I can stack an oblong block

on top of another and have it  
fit jointly past an eye blink,  
only pray I can hold onto One  
in E minor for more than a second.

## Minor Leaguer

He started receiving messages  
from the car dealerships  
on what not to wear and who  
not to talk to too much  
at the supermarket. The sun  
melted the drapes. He didn't  
gain weight but felt that he did  
or should. Everything is too close  
to the river. He forgot  
their names, their phone numbers,  
never got an address. Email,  
what's the use? Everything  
he ate tasted like paint, digging  
dirt. The silos were empty  
except for stacks upon stacks  
of discarded baby rattles. The field  
filled either with water or light.  
He stopped writing letters,  
or never began to. His bones  
were still very much bones.  
The field no longer called to him.  
Of course, the sea.

*Better Than Not* was first published by [Spork Press](#)

*Minor Leaguer* was first published in [Philadelphia Review of Books](#), June 2013

Britt Melewski grew up in New Jersey and Puerto Rico. His poems have appeared in Puerto Del Sol, The Philadelphia Review of Books, Sporkpress, the DMQ Review, and elsewhere. Melewski received his MFA at Rutgers-Newark in 2012. He lives in Brooklyn.



Melissa Valentine

## Evidence of Him

I.

I find Mom sitting in the dim kitchen nearly naked, wearing only a see-through nightgown and a pair of holey underwear on top of her head to protect her curlers. Her eyes droop. She hasn't slept.

“What?” I ask, frightened, my backpack still in hand. Back and forth her head slowly shakes. “What?” I ask again.

“Your Aunt Evelyn called.” I have some idea of what's coming, but I wait for more. She shakes her head. Despair is not an uncommon reaction to phone calls from my father's sisters. “She's coming.”

Evelyn isn't bad so much as she's rich and white, and judgmental. She wants to help, to check on us, make sure we're still alive inside our rat's nest. So every year, she gets off of her husband's yacht in Miami and flies to Oakland where her brother, his black wife, and all of their millions of children (five) continue (to her amazement) year after year, to exist. How were we not dead yet? How had we not been killed by one of Dad's booby traps? How had we not been killed by a bullet on the murderous Oakland streets? And those public schools. So many things could have and should have killed us. That's what Mom would have us believe about our aunt, and so even though she was nice enough, bought us things, bought things for the house, I remained skeptical. I watched for her judgments. But often, they never came.

“When is she coming?”

“Next week.” Mom pretends to weep in her hands. “Just look at this...” She lifts her hands from her face and motions to display the state of the house.

She describes the state of the house in shapes. It’s in good shape or it’s in bad shape. After relatives visit, when we clean the best we can, make things “passable,” as Mom says, meaning there are chairs to sit on, and more than just a narrow pathway to squeeze our bodies through each room. Bad shape is when we haven’t had visitors for a while, when we forget our furniture is made of wood because we can’t see it. Every surface is covered in papers, seeds, tools.

The house is in bad shape.

I put myself in the shoes of my aunt who will arrive in a week. She will notice a chainsaw near the front door, an industrial-sized ladder resting on the couch. She’ll see a coffee table covered in mail and plants. Horrified, I continue scanning the house as far as I can see.

Evelyn would have to take large steps over boxes used for organizing with labels on them in Dad’s handwriting: BILLS, TAXES, MAIL they said. She would then enter the dining room where she would see more papers, surrounded by boxes stuffed not with what their labels would have you believe, but full of more fun finds like pine cones, naked headless barbies, photo copies of very important articles that Dad cut out from the Oakland Tribune, and old issues of Outdoor Alabama magazine.

The six chairs around the dining table were also covered. They were storage for phone books, all seven of them, electronics Dad wasn’t ready to part with—a broken walk man, a retired boom box, walkie talkies with wires hanging out of them like guts, lots of dead batteries.

I join Mom in her anxiety, knowing that when Aunt Evelyn walked on, into the kitchen, she would find a room from which no perspective or angle could you see a sliver of counter or floor space. The surfaces were completely filled: a toaster, four

or five half-full loaves of bread, open jars of peanut butter with spoons inside. More peanut butter behind the pile of plates. A pot of rice from the day before. A skillet coated in congealed oil. Cans of soup. Packages of Jell-O. Tapioca pudding. Dirty mugs. Cardboard coffee cups stacked from the nearby coffee shop for reusing. Oily paper bags full of day-old pastries, also from the coffee shop.

She'd see our latest acquisition, a small TV sitting on top of a broken swivel chair found on the street that offered five fuzzy channels. In the middle of the kitchen, near boxes and broken appliances, there is a chair for sitting while either talking on the phone or watching TV. This is where Mom sits. Above her is the refrigerator, which we're proud of; water and ice come out of it. On top of the refrigerator is Dad's filing system for receipts. Every time anyone opens or closes the refrigerator, a shower of receipts falls on top of their head.

Beside the refrigerator is where Mom sits, in the dark. Even though it is only afternoon, the house does not let much light in. The leg holes of the underwear she wears on her head open up to pink curlers with pressed black hair wrapped around them; they poke through like antennas. The nightgown she wears is sheer. I can see the outline of her long breasts under it. They sit on top of her tummy; these are the biggest things on her five-foot frame.

"This is my house," she says. "How can I live this way?" She says this to no one, as if I am not standing there witnessing. "We have a week," she says, regaining some composure. She looks at me, wanting me to acknowledge that she'd said "we" and not "I." We we're on a team. Dad was not on that team. I like being on her team. I can see life come into her eyes. "Vivian will help," she says and smiles at me now. Now I am in the room. "We can do it." There she is. Now she sees me. "Maybe Claire will even come and help."

II.

Claire. When I open the door I find my beautiful seventeen-year-old sister Claire sitting on the living room floor, her long bohemian skirt a pile around her legs, her lips red, her curls fallen onto her face as she and Mom laugh. I am merely seven. She is my hero, in part because she doesn't have to live here.

"Guess who's here to pitchfork!" Claire shouts when she sees me. She calls cleaning for relatives pitchforking. It's a term she made up for the final moments before they arrive when things get desperate and we stop thinking about logical places for things and just started tossing entire boxes down the basement stairs, under beds, and into closets.

III.

A week later Aunt Evelyn arrives. Just hours before her plane touches down, the house is finally becoming passable. Dad paces nervously around the house peering over at what we're doing, making sure we don't throw anything valuable away.

"What are you doing with that?" He comes running towards me. In my hand is a cracked plastic filing rack that I'm about to toss in my garbage bag.

"That's perfectly good," he says, taking it from my hands.

"But it's cracked," I say. "And we have a bunch of others that aren't." I point to a pile I had uncovered as I cleaned. He storms out of the room. I hear the front door slam. And five minutes later he returns, eyes on my garbage bag.

He waits until the very last moment to leave for the airport to pick up Evelyn. From the front window I watch as his truck pulls off and drives down the street.

"He's gone!" I yell.

"Pitchfork time!" Claire calls.

I run to the kitchen to join Mom and Claire, as they stuff everything in sight into bags and begin tossing them down to the basement. I stuff several bags in the closet of the bedroom all of us kids share and other bags under Mom and Dad's bed.

The phone rings. It's Dad calling from a payphone.

"He's stalling her!" Claire announces. "He's taking her to the Botanical Garden."

We're relieved to have a little more time. Mom goes to the Laundromat to wash sheets, towels, and a tablecloth. Claire sweeps and I shove the receipts on top of the refrigerator out of sight.

When too much time has passed, I glance out the front window every few minutes. I have watch duty. From the window I see the truck pull into the driveway, her luggage precariously loaded on top of a layer of gardening tools and the chainsaw Dad took out of the house earlier that week in his fury.

"They're here!" I alert everyone to get into position, look normal, wipe the dirt and sweat from their faces.

Evelyn opens the truck door. I watch as she looks up and down the street, re-familiarizing herself with the neighborhood. Her red hair is exactly the same color as his. Her nose just as big. Claire says the only difference between them is that Evelyn married well. I think about Mom, I think maybe she didn't marry well when she married Dad.

I hear Claire and Mom scuffling in the back. Vivian has retreated to our bedroom. I wait in my place on the couch to greet Evelyn when she comes through the door. I am the greeter. Someone has to be the buffer between Dad and everyone, so I stay.

Evelyn looks like she's just stepped off a boat. Her white Capri pants reveal her pale, freckled ankles, strapped into wedge sandals. A freckled chest shows beneath her loosely buttoned plaid shirt

"Hello my dear," she sings the word hello and comes towards me with wide-open arms, grinning. Up close, she smells just like chlorine. When she lets go, she looks at my Dad and asks him if she can use the bathroom.

Dad scratches his head where he still has a halo of red hair. "We don't let our guests use the bathroom," he says. She looks at me for confirmation that he's joking and laughs. "I'm serious," he says. "The café down the street is open, Sophia will walk you there."

"Oh Bruce!" she says, hitting him on the chest.

"We only invite guests over who have superior, enlarged bladders." She laughs to be polite. "I thought we were related, but I guess not. My relatives all have enlarged bladders," he says.

"Well if it's too much trouble..."

Dad stops his act.

"Let me go ask Shirley if it's ready," he says, walking through the dining room he now barely recognizes. All of his things are missing from it. He doesn't know how to act, where to put his body, and he most definitely does not know what to say. And in his dismay at the state of his house, the absence of his things, he has ruined it all. The whole point is to pretend we haven't tried to make the house look this way, that there aren't bags of garbage hidden behind every closed door.

He returns with the okay, but explains that the toilet is rigged so if she has to go number two she really can go to the café if she wants to be comfortable. Still, Evelyn opts to use our bathroom.

When she comes out, we wait for her to have something to say or do because we have nothing to say or do. We don't even know where anything is. We barely recognize the surfaces she begins placing her things on: her purse, her sunglasses. Do something, Evelyn. Say something. We have nothing planned besides having a passable house for her to enter.

Claire, Mom, and Vivian still won't come out. Junior still isn't home. I have Dad duty. I have to be there with him. I can't leave him alone to do something like offer to hang her sweater in the front closet where I know for a fact a garbage bag is stuffed. I watch in horror every time Dad opens his mouth.

Luckily, Dad's first instinct in uncomfortable situations is to leave them.

"Would you like some Chinese food? I'll get some Chinese food while you rest."

Evelyn smiles. "That sounds fantastic, Bruce."

Dad returns nearly an hour later with a bag full of Chinese food from the restaurant around the corner. We eat at the table for the first time in almost a year. Vivian emerges with the smell of food. She greets Evelyn, makes herself a plate and sits at the silent table with us. Evelyn attempts to fill the silence with questions, which Vivian responds to with one word answers: good, no, yes.

With the slam of the door, Evelyn, Vivian and I are left alone. Our chewing fills the room. After minutes that seem hours, Mom appears. She is dressed for Evelyn in a red blouse, jeans, and maroon lipstick. Her head is full of fluffy pressed curls, shiny with oil. Even over the smell of Chinese food, her perfume fills our noses. Claire follows. She wears a loose green knit sweater that slumps off one shoulder, jeans with holes in both knees, her hair an explosion of curls that she has to constantly move out of her face.

I am instantly grateful for their presence and furious with them for leaving me alone for so long on Dad duty. I relax into my seat and let them take over. Claire is good at talking to people.

“Well hello!” Evelyn shrieks. “Were you two resting? Bruce tells me how hard you all were working to clean the house. You must be exhausted!”

Mom shrinks.

I can see the rage growing behind Mom’s squinting eyes and half smile. Her body moves with a rigidity saved just for Dad’s sisters.

IV.

Evelyn takes my brother Junior and I for a walk through the part of the neighborhood full of shops and cafes. Evelyn walks ahead, waiting and looking back at us from every corner. Her long, freckled boat legs are faster than ours. She walks like she knows the place.

“Here,” she says, pointing to a bookstore. We follow her in and then we all separate. I go to the kid’s section and Junior goes to the comic books. She has a stack of books on the counter when we’re ready to check out. She buys Junior and I one book each. On the spine of one of her books I read the words *Driven to Distraction*, followed by the words *Adult ADD*.

Later that day I notice that *Driven to Distraction* is sitting out on the dining room table in plain sight. I don’t move it. It stays there all day. I see everyone pass by it, reading its title, picking it up, putting it back down in its place. When Mom sees it, she picks it up, too.



“What’s the meaning of this?” Mom holds the book up. When she’s upset, her speech is styled in anger. She repeats herself in a British accent. “What is the meaning of this?” She sets the book back down and looks at me.

“It’s for Daddy. Evelyn got it. She thinks he has ADD.”

Her body moves towards me, stiff, in slow motion, a half smile. “Is that right?”

When I see the book again it’s on the front porch. There is evidence of Dad in it—it’s bursting with receipts and newspaper clippings, an envelope of seeds.

Melissa Valentine is a writer and acquisitions editor living in Oakland, CA. She received her MFA in nonfiction from Mills College. In 2013, Melissa was a finalist for Glimmertrain’s Family Matters writing contest. She is currently at work completing her memoir, *The Names of All the Flowers*.

M.C.Kelly

## Beware of Bird

“There’s a bird on the loose, just so everyone knows.”

The few customers all looked up from their books with ire so potent, you’d have thought they’d paid for a strip tease and were wildly dissatisfied, so I pointed. The bird sat above the Science and Environmental new releases. I didn’t care if it shit on those, or that one chronic window shopper.

To say the quant independent bookstore I worked at was a mess waiting to burst into flames would be unfair. It was an organized mess. And usually I loved working there. I got to work alone.

I followed the bird as it hopped above the new releases. It was one of those ratty little brown birds you see picking at crumbs all over the street. After I’d dealt with the current slew of customers, I abandoned the fifth box of Mental Health books we’d received that week in favor of a crusade to save a defenseless bird. Way more important. The bird was only a few feet from the entrance.

After a long debate about whether to go with the brown box or paper bag, I went with the broom and took a stealthy frontal approach. One swipe and it would be out the door; however, the bird did not fly away from my broom. Instead, it flew at it, swerved to the side, and then to the back of the store. I took chase, the broom raised above my head.

The store was an unfinished basement with walls of brick and floors of cheaply carpeted stone, covered with towers of boxes and books. Shelves reached from floor to about a foot from the ceiling.

The bird hopped along the space above Psychology.

Just fly, dammit.

Finally it did, this time back to the front of the store where it hung from the bricks above the entrance. This is it! Except this time after I swung, the bird flew into the children’s section, still, impossibly avoiding the front entrance. It was a welcome distraction from sorting through the Mental Health books, but the chase had lost its thrill.

A woman had come in, hesitantly as if I might hit her with the broom I brandished. She wore a long red jacket and a black hat that looked too expensive for this town and asked for books on alcoholics anonymous—she wasn’t the alcoholic, she assured me. After fifteen minutes of her trying to catch the bird in her jacket while I chased it with the broom, I knew it was getting ridiculous. And then, the bird vanished. Fallen behind the psychology bookcases. There were no chirps. No flutters. I called my boss and let her know that (1) the bird had definitely not left the store, and (2) we couldn’t find it, which meant it was probably going to die trapped between the space between the Sigmund Freud and Jung bookcase and the brick wall. The smell would lead us to it.

Why couldn’t it have been a bug? I could have just squashed a bug. Or a squirrel, at least they usually run out on their own. But not this fucker.

I spent the next hour sorting through books—*The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, by the those German brothers, and *House of Hades*, Riordan—removing the one that didn’t belong: *Conditions of Love*. The author had done an event here. We had dozens of copies lying around. The cover had a lovebird on it. I cast it aside. It had one of those covers that convinced me it might be interesting, but no

matter how many times I checked, the inside-flap always assured it would be a snooze-fest.

The lovebird reminded me of the year I bought a pair of them for my mom around Christmas. I'd thought she'd appreciate having some company in the house since she was always telling my sisters and I how much she missed us. Boy, was I wrong. The only thing those birds loved was projectile defecation.

"Thank you so much, the eighteenth it is," I said and hung up the phone.

"Sounds like you have some fun plans," said the old man who had been browsing the new fiction releases. He had sculpted gray hair and his clothes hung loose along his lanky frame.

"Yeah, I tried to make reservations for my boyfriend and me at the Culinary Institute for his birthday, but they only had one date at the end of the month." I shrugged. "It'll just be a date night."

"Wow, I hear that place is beautiful, especially in the fall. You'll have a great time." He pointed to the book he'd been skimming. "Want to know what the letter says?"

"Don't spoil it," I said. Then I added, "Was the ending good?"

"Depends on what kind of ending you like."

"I always thought it was more about the journey." He laughed and carried on his way, deeper into the store.

A few minutes later I heard him call, "Hey, you've got a little bird in here."

The feathery fiend had returned.

I jumped off my stool and surveyed the store from behind the counter, walled in by towers of books. My broom was on the floor to my right.

"Right under the couch," he said.

The bird, a runt of a thing with fading feathers, sat beneath the store couch. It looked up at me.

"Awe, hey there little guy," the man said.

"He's been in here all day. I can't get him out."

The man crouched down and wiggled his finger, a lame imitation of a worm. The bird hopped a few inches over. "He knows where the exit is—he can feel it. I think he just wants to be here. Must like it," the man said.

What is this guy the bird whisperer? "Must like reading," I said half-heartedly.

When the bird whisperer disappeared into the psychology section, I sprung into action, the broom at my side. The couch was facing the front door, so maybe I could—nope, the bird made a run for Mystery. It no longer flew, but ran beneath the rolling carts. I dropped to my stomach and caught sight of its tail dipping behind a lone copy of *Heartsick*. It made its way under the young adult table. This had to end. The feathery fiend had to go, if only because I'd spent so much time trying to get it out. I refused to be bested by a bird.

And when I struck with the broom, it was gone. Not hit, just gone. I spun around. Still nothing. I peered beneath the table in time to see its feathery form hoping its way down the slanted entranceway, in no particular rush, under the sale carts, and out the front door.

I stood, my jaw hung loose, and I leaned on my broom for support. When I saw the bird whisperer later, who had decided to purchase *Conditions of Love*, I told him I'd finally gotten the bird out.

“Good,” he said, drawing it out like we’d saved a child from beneath the building. “There’s another happy ending. You got a store full of ‘em.” Before he left, “You and your boyfriend enjoy that date.”

But we didn’t have a store of happy endings. I could name at least three titles in my field of vision with the opposite—they had sad endings. People forget not everything has a happy ending. I stared at the door for a while trying to decide if the bird had really wanted to leave.

I still can’t decide.

M. C. Kelly has been an aspiring literary agent ever since he read Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* at the age of twelve. When he isn’t working at his local bookstore and blowing his paycheck on books, he enjoys scribbling down the occasional story and exploring New Paltz. You can find more of his work in the forthcoming 2014 edition of Stonesthrow Review.

Bahar Anooshahr

## In Her Body

I didn't know her, only of her. Only that she was thirty-five, mother of three small children, going through divorce, and now in the hospital with some old TIA's: transient ischemic attacks or mini-strokes. Old strokes need no treatment, but the doctors found obstruction in the artery leading to her brain, the left carotid. They inserted three stents and warned the family about risk of re-stroke. I knew, from residency, they must have put her on anticoagulants... blood thinners. She deteriorated the next day, had a subarachnoid hemorrhage, the worst kind of stroke. She bled into her brain, in the area where the speech center lies, where motor control of the right side rests.

I didn't know her. Just that she had been through enough already with his affairs and the divorce. Why this?

Grandma used to say, "When Muslims fast, all their prayers are answered." So I stopped eating, even recited Joshan Kabear--the prayer that says God's name 100 different ways--in two languages, taking care to pronounce the glottal H's perfectly. I read it despite practicing Buddhism now. Though I chanted too.

I didn't know her, yet dedicated all my activities to her, let her borrow my senses, feel her muscles through my exercise, fill her lungs through my breaths, see art at the museum through my eyes, taste wonderful food at an Italian Christmas through my taste buds.

When she went back to the operating room for a decompression procedure, I imagined her brain on the CT scan, the left hemisphere spongy white from bleeding. She would have been just a case in residency, the subarachnoid hemorrhage case, the exciting craniotomy case, a cool brain to operate on. Now, she

was Anna, the woman I wanted to protect against death from thousands of miles away. Had they shaved that beautiful chestnut brown hair? Did they staple or suture the incision?

The ventilator huffed in my ear, as it pushed oxygen into her lungs, clicking at the end of each breath cycle. A monitor, with tentacles stretched onto her limp torso and fingertip, would display her vital signs in different colors, beeping to her heartbeat.

I sobbed while searching the literature for new treatments: surgical, medical, holistic, anything. Had we baboons made any scientific progress in the past five years? Screw the poor prognosis. Blast it's-the-worst-kind-of-hemorrhage. I wanted to fight death on her behalf; fly to where she was hospitalized and sit by her ICU bed, not as a physician but as a woman; read to her; play her children's recorded voices; have harp music at the bedside, because in one study it helped stabilize patients' blood pressures. I would do what the doctors didn't have time to, recruit her mother to read her favorite book, ask her father to tell her stories of childhood Christmases. No one was allowed to walk away from Anna or assume she wouldn't make it, not even the soon-to-be-ex-husband.

I needed her to fight, for her life, for the sound of her children's voices, for her youth, to prove she can, and because he had resigned.

I didn't know her, yet wanted to be there because no woman should face death or disease alone.

I still don't know her.

What makes me wage the war of the century for her sake, convinced I'm the only one in her corner? Is it that I have experienced divorce too? Or, that the woman I want so desperately to devote my senses to, the one I'm defending with all my might, the one I wish others wouldn't give up on, is me inside Anna's body?

Bahar is an Iranian-American woman who immigrated to the United States at the age of seventeen, having lived through the revolution and Iran/Iraq war. Once a non-stop talker, she had to remain silent for a year before being able to communicate effectively in English. She left a career in oral and maxillofacial surgery to become a writer. Her works have been published in a number of literary journals including: *Msllexia*, *the Newer York*, *Mandala Journal*, *Monkey Bicycle*, and *Marco Polo Arts Magazine*, where she is a regular contributor. Her non-fiction essay is forthcoming in the anthology *In The Night Count the Stars*.

Carol Smallwood

Lunch at Wendy's

In July, chemo ended:  
Wendy's napkins  
folded the same-  
but I'd been rearranged

*Lunch at Wendy's* was first published in [Vox Poetica](#), July 2012

Carol Smallwood's over four dozen books include *Women on Poetry: Writing, Revising, Publishing and Teaching* on *Poets & Writers Magazine* list of Best Books for Writers. Carol has founded, supports humane societies.



Bennett Durkan

## Good Practice

You drop the last shove – full of earth. You pat the pile, this small grave, trying to even it with the rest of the yard. It won't look even for a few days, maybe a week, but the grass will grow back. You thrust the blade beside the grave, the yard soften by the steady rain. The drops land on your shoulders and head as you rest your chin on the shovel's handle. You cough and blame it on the rain.

Your wife and daughter stand around the pet grave, looking down in silence. Your wife holds a black umbrella, chosen over the blue with regards to the situation. Your daughter looks like a toy inside her yellow, plastic raincoat. Your wife looks to you, nods, and you nod back. It was her idea, supposed to help the child through the grieving process.

“Would you like to say a few words?” She puts a motherly hand on your daughter's shoulder. Bending with her knees, she remains dry.

“Yes,” your daughter speaks quickly. “Snot was a good frog and friend. He always waited for me after school. He may not have been a cat or dog, but he could jump really far. Was that good, Mommy?”

It was you who found the frog dead in its dry aquarium. Snot, the croaking lump of green, had become a lifeless lump of green. You coughed into your hand before handling the frog. When you showed it to your wife she told you how important funerals can be to children, that it gives them practice. You just shrugged. When your daughter came bouncing home from school, dripping from the weather, you went to find the shovel. It was your wife who explained the circumstances. She was always better with the emotional kind of stuff.

“It was beautiful, honey,” your wife says, still ready to hold your daughter in a tight embrace. It could have been the rain, but you thought you saw tears. The two discuss something then hold hands. Your wife walks back to the house while your daughter, the daughter to both of you, skips.

You pat the mound with the shovel again. She was right. It turned out to be good practice. You cough, harder this time. Dry breath hits your knuckles. Inside, a light comes on. Your wife and daughter appear as silhouettes, retrieving bowls, spoons, and the ice cream from the freezer. Instead of putting the shovel back in the garage, you lean it against the outside. They’re small and will need a doctor to find, but you already feel the out-of-control cells conquering the pink lumps that are your lungs.

Bennett Durkan is a graduate of Stephen F. Austin, where he earned a master's in English. His poetry has appeared in *Psaltery & Lyre*, *The Red River Review*, *FIVE2ONE Magazine*. He also won The Piney Dark fiction contest for 2013.

Allison Hymas

### Warning

The chicken nuggets may burn your fingers. May cause ghost vanilla soft serve and hot fudge to scald and freeze your tongue. Possible side effects include sticky-slick crayon sketches on paper tablecloths and your mother, smiling, her hand on her soap-bubble belly. Inside, she says, is a new sister, a wrapped gift with a name tag but no encyclopedia entry. If effects continue, ride into the summer in a cloud of Old Spice and car exhaust.

### Domestic

When my someday husband comes home

I won't be waiting by the Cuisinart,

apron a garden of daisies,

cherry pie in my hands.

My pie would be raspberry,

or strawberry with pineapple chunks.

As it bakes, I will slide around the kitchen  
in fuzzy socks and a lime-green apron with  
his floured handprint on my hip,  
singing "Barracuda"  
until I bang my elbow on the corner of the oven.

Allison Hymas is a recent graduate of Brigham Young University with a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. Her work has been published in *FLARE: The Flagler Review*.

Simon Perchik

Four untitled poems

\*

You fold this sweater the way a moth

builds halls from the darkness it needs

to go on living –safe inside this coffin

a family is gathering for dinner, cashmere

with oil, some garlic, a little salt, lit

and wings warmed by mealtime stories

about flying at night into small fires

grazing on the somewhere that became

the out-of-tune hum older than falling

– you lower this closet door and slowly

your eyes shut –with both hands

make a sign in the air as if death matters.

\*

Breaking apart : this calendar

half as if memory, half

still exploding though the paint

reeks from weather vanes

and rain, last seen

mixed with snow

--without your glasses

you can't make out if the wind

will dry in time

and a second coat already warms

the way you keep track

by lifting rugs, tables, chairs

--you need the pieces : lids

that will flare up

shake off their cracks

with each brush then back

till nothing ages

even with the window open.

\*

You begin the way shorelines

risk their life this close

though after each funeral

you drown in the row by row

where each photograph is overturned

shaken loose from the family album

--her shoes seem pleased

to be shoes, not walk anymore

or store their darkness for later

--the family was always collecting

wanted you to sit, not pose barefoot

but there you are, even now



standing next to her, eye to eye

without saying a word, would leave

if you knew how to turn away

the blank page, solid black

not a beach, not a breath, nothing

that understands this emptiness.

\*

These bricks reheated

remember circling up

sifting the smoke

for smoke not yet stars

still inside, terrified

by its darkness --chimneys

know to focus the sky closer

as the night that comes due

blackens this hillside

already in place

brought down from under

no longer red --they aim

the way each shadow

leans against your heart

tries to warm itself

in grasses and your hands

made bigger, so slowly

nothing can save you.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *Almost Rain*, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" please visit his website at [www.simonperchik.com](http://www.simonperchik.com).

Kevin Murphy

Viewing

He didn't look like he was

asleep as an open casket body should

head tilted toward his shoulder

skin bunched into

ruffles that hide his jaw line

like he couldn't get comfortable

enough with all these people

as if he might reach up and

slam the lid down

## Shelf Life

We notice things: the steady speed of dust

Accumulating at our spines, your glances

Replete with tells, the couch frame's ache, and

The room's distempered hum. You shy from us,

For we know things: how to catch the conscience

Of a king, the universal truth of man,

Horror's immense darkness and what it can

Undo in one. In you. You're barely conscious,

Equidistant from us and the glow that holds

You like fine oak frames our window. Your curls

Etch into the plaid pillow, scribbled in-

To view for us like notes in the margin.

Your presence fades to changeless hours, while idle

Fluorescents also rise, late. Set early.

Kevin Murphy's work has appeared in *Heron Tree* and *Gravel Magazine*. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Idaho and currently resides in Asheville, NC with his person named Shannon.

Bric Barker

## 1281 Train to Andong

Late night, Yeongju. Track 4  
Three other people on the platform  
– a couple desperately trying to drag  
heat from a cigarette  
and a Buddhist monk  
swimming in his gray robe,  
a black and red Christmas knit cap  
protecting his blue bowling ball head.  
He gently tapped a wood block,  
eyes closed as the train pulled in.

I found my car.  
I found my assigned seat.  
The others slept.

A consumed coachman in uniform entered  
for my ticket.  
Before he left, he turned,  
and to all of us and to none of us  
gave a slight, seemly bow,  
as if to say,  
*Sleep well. I am here.*

Bric Barker, currently an English professor at Woosong University in South Korea, has taught in many foreign countries. His travels have informed his poetry greatly. Once Poet in Residence at University of West Georgia, he has published poetry in *The Eclectic*, *Old Red Kimono*, and *In Other Words* (An American Poetry Anthology). His most recent acceptances were from *Indiana Horror Review*, *Beecher's Magazine*, *Hothouse Magazine*, and *What's Your Sign* (Poetry Anthology). He won the Kay Megenheimer Poetry Prize, and also awards for journalism and play writing.

Roger Bernard Smith

said

leave it where it was  
you'll make it worse  
by rubbing whatever compound  
it is in your mind  
the best way is to have these conversations  
with your backs to one another  
trembling from what you may hear next  
steadfastly refusing to turn around  
when there is silence



standstill

what I said was if I hear Sweet Georgia Brown one more time  
I'm going to avoid Atlanta altogether and head on down  
to Tallahassee without remembering how I got there

overshooting poorly marked turn-offs with their general stores  
sand-blasted pickup trucks that the economic recovery  
hasn't replaced with a new government-made Silverados yet

how far would you go to let yourself be convinced  
you hadn't missed a road here and there in favor of simply  
liking the landscape more than being right for a change

you'd have to suffer a breakup freakout to be torpedoing  
your headlights through smoky unforgiving uncaring  
dangerous air of nights this far from home

what if I said I'm not sorry but just scared and even that  
will go away once there's a familiar face facing me across  
the table and when that's gone I'll begin being truly sorry

'standstill' was first published in [Blood Orange Review](#), vol.6.1

Roger Bernard Smith is a 75 year old poet whose poems have appeared in a dozen journals. His first chapbook is being published in February 2014 by Tiger's Eye Press, Denver CO. He teaches writing in the Mohawk Valley Institute For Learning in Retirement (MVILR) at SUNYIT, Utica, NY. He lives in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains.

Joshua Poteat

Hitchhiking in the Dying South

I have seen the morning spread over the fields  
    & I have walked on, trying to forget  
how it seemed as if daybreak was founded  
    on the most fragile web of breath,  
& I had blown it.

    Then I thought it might not exist at all,  
nor had it ever. That it was only the idea of breath  
    & the egrets asleep in sour-grass were the idea  
of flight, & if I was to breathe in,  
    it would all just disappear.

I have seen the spotted toads at dusk  
    come up from the ditches after a rainstorm  
& into the asphalt's steam & I have seen them  
    crushed by lumber trucks, then lifted away  
into the pines by the gathering crows.

I have felt the night quiver with heron's wing  
over the swamps, over wild pigs in a blackberry patch,  
    their snouts bloody & alive in the moonlight,  
& I have walked on, dirty, alone, kicking to the grasses  
    the swollen bodies of possum, squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, bobcat,  
giving them no prayer, no peace-filled silence.

    But that was long ago, when work was scarce  
& meant thumbing my way to the tobacco plant  
    or the slaughterhouse, north up Highway 17  
to Holly Ridge or down to Bulltail on 210,  
    either way I would be shoveling something until dusk,  
something soft & warm & beyond me.  
    And I would be glad for it.

Walking with that forgotten gesture wavering  
    in the morning air, I felt that people  
could come into the world in a place  
    they could not at first even name,  
& move through it finally, like the dawn,  
    naming each thing until filled with a buoyancy,  
a mist from the river's empty rooms.

*Thumb of autumn, thumb of locust, thumb of every kissed lip.*

I have seen a cow die under the wheels  
of a Cadillac going 60, & who's to say  
what the cow got from this?

Some would say a dignity, perhaps,  
past the slaughterhouse  
& the carcasses swimming the eaves.

Or was it a punishment for nudging open  
the gate-latch, the driver of the car  
in shock, mouthing *cow, cow,*  
& the crows in the pines answering  
with the kind of sympathy my foreman used  
when one of his line-workers  
cut off another finger in the shredder.  
*Son, at least you still got your arm.*

It's difficult to get this straight,  
but there was a beauty to the sparks  
that spread out under the car, under the cow,  
as they went from flesh to asphalt to flesh again:  
*fireflies in the hollow of the hills:  
a blanket of white petals from the tree of moon.*

A brief & miniature dawn began,  
there on a summer night in the South  
I had come to love as part of myself,  
the sparks clinging in the grass for a moment,  
unbearably bright, a confused moth nuzzling up  
to the reflection of a flame shining in  
the cow's one open eye.

Now that I think of it, there was maybe even  
a beauty in the cow's fat, white body, a peace  
I would never know, as it took in the car,  
lay down with it: *calf soft: morning breath.*

This peace had a body, it was caught up in the night,  
made from night, there on the shoulder of a road  
so endless even the stars shrugged it off  
& took the sparks as one of their own

'Hitchhiking in the Dying South' was first published in [Blackbird](#), 2003, Vol. 2. No 1.  
The poem is appearing in *Sassafras* after a request from the editor.

Joshua Poteat has published two books of poems, *Ornithologies* (Anhinga Poetry Prize, 2006), and *Illustrating the Machine that Makes the World* (VQR/University of Georgia Press, 2009), as well as two chapbooks, *Meditations* (Poetry Society of America, 2004) and *For the Animal* (Diagram/New Michigan Press, 2013). A chapbook, *The Scenery of Farewell (and Hello Again)*, is forthcoming from Diode Editions, 2014.

Lynn Xu

Our Love is Pure

I

Man  
Makes love and love makes Rome. In Rome apart  
From you  
This autumn is a dream. I fell  
Into the sea. Through the French trees. My heart  
Became a suite in the Carlyle, compels you  
To undress.  
Foliage and cleavage sail like confetti onto our voyage.

II

Statues forgetting to crawl into death from the balconies  
And battlefields. Love  
From the battlefields. My blood went to breath  
Like a younger poet, who made the dove  
Crawl into a handkerchief. In the face of the poet, it's important to track  
Which features are your own.  
So age has brought lace from the sea onto your face.  
Say past  
These infrared trees, lay darkness sublime as stirred melodies.

III

Mind evaporates briefly twisting in  
Little disappearances  
Of meat. Fish  
Meat everywhere mind is  
Staring  
Into your eyes.  
Cloudless  
Eyes. Ebi  
Shinjo starry  
Skies.  
Friends to whom I belong. Friends who I will wrong.

'Our Love is Pure' was first published in [Octopus Magazine](#), issue 12.

Two Poems

**THERE WERE ETERNITIES DURING WHICH IT DID NOT EXIST.**

Vivid. Sun overhead.

You overdid it. The ankle was showing. Lavender takes on

touching directness. The sensation

and the heavy shadow cast by the string unless carefully  
disguised

could give you away. The gun is set aside to show the room

more evenly. The man was a few hours

from vanishing completely, but I had read everything. And a  
good deal of it

was true. But certain things have a way of returning, for what  
was done

grows young and large. Not without principle. Whose  
perfection

is the very absence of nature.

## THE THOUGHT DID NOT BRING YOU CLOSER.

Like the movie, which had a balcony in it, but wasn't really  
about love. Where grass broadened  
in broad sun there truth is marked by an X  
clutched at the knee. They projected a ladder onto the one  
without anatomy, the sensual one, that though the figures  
reversed the continents began  
resisting language and music were set down before you, meat,  
instinct, daylight  
plunged toward the sky  
were to touch each other. Were to you  
vast and transparent. Tearing your shirt open, in the tall grass,  
continued  
shouting across the bay.

'Two Poems' were first published in [Chax](#), issue 4.

These poems are appearing in *Sassafras* after a request from the editor.

Lynn Xu was born in Shanghai. Her poems have appeared in *6x6*, *1913*, *Best American Poetry 2008*, *Boston Review*, *Octopus*, *Poor Claudia*, and others. A chapbook, *June*, was published by Corollary Press in 2006. The recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship and a William L. Magistretti Fellowship, she is currently the Jacob K. Javits Fellow at UC Berkeley, where she is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature. She holds an MFA from Brown University. With Robyn Schiff, Nick Twemlow, and husband Joshua Edwards, she coedits Canarium Books. Between Stuttgart and Marfa, she divides her time. Her debut collection *Debts and Lessons* was published in 2013 by Omnidawn Publishing.

Amanda Tumminaro

### The Approach of Spring

The time when the cattails rise  
high-reaching like an impossible prayer,  
I am sitting on a far away bench  
writing a poetic effort and facing  
my daily dealings like scrambled eggs.

Nobody wants to mow their lawns at first,  
they are issues cropped up in the brain,  
confronting the homeowner like the past.  
So a red robin flies over -  
his viewpoint only squares of grass and lost peoples,  
blond locks shining in the birth of rays, deceptively.

The neighbor, she likes to grow vegetables in the warm,  
leaving my headaches and my heart on the front porch.  
I must insert each in the proper cavity.  
Sun widens over in a massive thaw.  
All land obeys like a shackled chain gang.

## The Trifle

Pull back, pull back, I shall be  
the child that sits  
when the schoolteacher rings  
the bell.

Drowned forth, drowned forth  
bobbing for apples, rumped water,  
I quit, muffled, struggled,  
wet hair.

Isolation, the bitter fruit,  
always ripe, juices sour, orange pulp,  
somewhat thick,  
it was always bothersome.

Amanda Tumminaro lives in Illinois with her family. She enjoys reading, writing and caffeinated drinks. She has been published in *Black Book Press*, *Storm Cellar* and *Shemom* and her work can also be found in a forthcoming issue of *The Stray Branch*.



Carol Tyx

Tomatoes on Windowsill

Fullness to fullness

like beads on a string

not perfect roundness

not copies, each

its own being, a slightly

flattened curve, a bulge

subtle differences in color

coral, brick, somewhere

on the orange to red scale

every day deepening

maybe like us

if we could hold still

long enough in the sheen

of morning light.

## Garage

You look out the back window

at the garage sheathed

in snow, the roofline gleaming

against the indigo skyline.

The sag has returned—if it ever left—

the old wood bowing to the weight

of snow and moonlight on this last night

of the year, all the jockeying up,

the reinforced beams, the additional

crosshatches of the previous summer

useless under the weight

of so much beauty.

Carol Tyx teaches writing and American literature at Mt. Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Her work has most recently been published in *RHINO*, *Poetry East*, *Water-Stone Review*, Iowa City's *Poetry in Public*, and *Rising to the Rim*, published by Brick Road Poetry Press. On any given day you might find her cooking with kale, contra dancing, or standing on her head.

Carolyn D. Elias

Mother

You are a stone chained behind my teeth, biting my tongue

until it is slashed into ribbons.

Does your throat swallow

broken glass when a shadow reminds you of me?

I inspect the lines of your body

and I spy no hidden bruise or red swollen lump,

only flexing fingers resisting to curl into meaty fists.

Against our wills we are blood bound;

our faces are blank, worn smooth from constant battle.

Raw tiny scars, shiny and faded,

maps of earlier skirmishes crisscross our souls.

Our hair is all torn out;

Having torn each other to bits we are not satiated

but laid bare, and afraid that the other will beat us

into submission.

Will we burn each other to ashes?

In the depths of our burning can we be reborn

as phoenixes?

Carolyn D. Elias is a writer, currently living in Morris, MN with her husband and two cats. She writes poetry and short stories. Carolyn also works as a freelance editor. This is her first publication with Sassafras Magazine.

A.J. Huffman

From Forest's Path

the towering birch like a totem pole,  
intricately carved to protect the budding offshoots  
at its feet. The struggle to take root, to look up  
as I do, in awe of the elder, pray they will be able  
to avoid boot, bird and belligerent weather  
so someday they too can ignore me as I pass  
below their branches, unnoticed

A.J. Huffman has published seven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and the winner of the 2012 Promise of Light Haiku Contest. Her poetry, fiction, and haiku have appeared in hundreds of national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, *Kritya*, and *Offerta Speciale*, in which her work appeared in both English and Italian translation. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. [www.kindofahurricane.com](http://www.kindofahurricane.com)

Carol Lynn Grellas

Before the Pink House

I miss the days with two plates of eggs;  
scrambled and warm, your face pressed

to mine like a picture captured through glass  
beside the window's ledge, the hedge

where bees would swarm around jasmine  
potted jardinières that lined our home

on an ordinary street. Where we would walk  
with shadows ignoring the coarseness

beneath our feet like barefoot nomads  
yours, one step ahead of mine, so carefully

avoiding this unbearable existence of following.



## The Waiting Room

It's the morning of your appointment  
and you pretend there's nothing wrong.

You kiss the children, pour milk  
over Wheaties, and don your special

dress for the waiting room where you'll  
await the verdict that might destroy

your life. You choose the dress  
that hangs in back, tucked between

Summer and Fall, understated  
and black to suit your practical mind;

easily tossed if you hear bad news  
and it's the one you wore to your mother's

funeral; pockets still full of prayers.

'The Waiting Room' is a part of the poetry collection 'Hasting Notes in No Particular Order' from Aldrich Press. The poem is previously published in [Best Poem](#).

Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas is a six-time Pushcart nominee, Best of the Net nominee and the 2012 winner of the Red Ochre Press Chapbook contest. She has authored several collections of poetry including her latest collected works, *Hasty Notes in No Particular Order*. Her work has appeared in a wide variety of online and print magazines including: *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine, War, Literature and the Arts; The Department of English at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Able Muse, Poets and Artists*, and many more. According to family lore she is a direct descendent of Robert Louis Stevenson. [www.clgrellaspoetry.com](http://www.clgrellaspoetry.com)

Joe Wahlman

Autumn Waves

Lake Superior black rock shore,

an autumn chill in the wind—

pink cheeked, my son

stood with me

in the spray of the waves—

mighty lake waves—

rolling towards us,

exploding on the rocks—

roaring water—

rhythmic white walls of water

growing and falling

in the wind—

My son roared right back at them,

arms overhead—

Eyes full of wonder,

I watched him instead.

Joe Wahlman was raised in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where he now lives with his wife and son. He has taught English for fourteen years in both Colorado and Michigan.

Kay Perry

Terri and Tonka

Mr. Prendergast lived in a small unit on the first floor of an old inner city high rise.

His apartment was small and shabby but filled with books, mainly biographies. He liked to read about other peoples lives.

Each day he walked to work. He had his own office and would return at the same time every evening.

Sometimes he would pass Mrs. Parker on the stairs and say Good Morning or Good Evening, whichever the case might be.

Mrs. Parker lived in the apartment opposite. She was small and pretty with blonde hair going grey and worked part time as a remedial teacher at an inner city primary school.

One late afternoon, the lift arrived just as Mr. P. had reached his apartment. Surprised, he turned to watch it open. Mrs. Parker stepped out with a small boy and some luggage.

"Mr. Prendergast, this is Jamie," she said. Jamie looked up with a serious face and said "Hello."

Mr. Prendergast replied "How do you do," before turning and entering his apartment.

Jamie looked up at Mrs. Parker who smiled and stroked his face and said, "Come inside now and help me make tea."

During the weeks that followed Mrs. Parker and Jamie would often pass Mr. Prendergast on the stairs, until, one evening there was a knock on Mr. P's door. . .

"This is your letter," said Jamie when the door was opened. "It was in our letter box."

"Thank you," said Mr. P. taking the letter and about to close the door when Jamie said, "I live with Nana now. My mummy died."

Mr P. looked at Jamie for what seemed a long time, then said, "I see."

He shut the door softly and sat down with his letter. His own mother had died several weeks earlier and the letter was from his solicitor who was settling the estate. The letter was to enquire whether Mr. P. wanted any furniture or personal items from his mother's home before the impending sale.

Mr. P sat at his table looking at the letter until it grew dark. He had no brothers or sisters and his father had died many years before. he was the sole heir. he realised he could now buy a house of his own, somewhere with a garden. He could have a dog.

Next day he rang in sick to his office, a thing he had never ever done, and caught a bus out to his mother's home in the suburbs. When he arrived home he carried a small parcel containing two small items. He unwrapped them carefully and placed them in front of him on the kitchen table.

They were his.

They had always been his, given to him by his father over forty years ago on his return from a business trip overseas. This was the first time he had handled them.

He had retrieved them from his mother's china cabinet, locating the key under the lace doily, where it had always been. His mother had locked them in the china cabinet along with some cups, saucers, plates, and crystal glasses deemed "too good to use," or in Mr. P's case - "too good to play with."

He was still sitting there when there was a gentle knock on the door.

"Come in Jamie," said Mr. P.

The door opened slowly. "More mail, Mr. P."

"Come in Jamie," Mr. P. repeated. "Bring it here."

Jamie had never been inside Mr. P's apartment. It was quite poorly lit and smelt of musty books. He walked in softly and stood by Mr. P's chair.

"Wow," said Jamie, "Awesome!"

"Yes," said Mr. P.

"Yes, indeed."

"What are their names?"

"Well," said Mr. P. reaching forward and picking up a small celluloid elephant, beautifully moulded and decorated. . .

"This is Tonka." He placed him carefully in front of them. . ."and this," tucking a gorgeous little turtle, crafted by the same hand, under the elephant's trunk, "is his best friend, Terri."

Little springs inside Terri helped him nod his head and wag his tail on being reunited with Tonka. Jamie and Mr. P. watched silently as Terri and Tonka greeted each other.

"Now," said Mr. P., "bring me a saucer of water."

Jamie put the letters down on a chair and did as he was told.

Mr. P. pulled up a small lever on top of Tonka's head, put his trunk in the water and pumped 'til Tonka was full!

"You were thirsty, old chap."

"Now," said Mr. P., "this is the game."

"You place Terri anywhere within this circle" - (he drew a circle with salt from the salt cellar around Tonka) and Tonka can only turn on the spot!"

Jamie did as he was asked.

Mr. P. then pushed the lever down on Tonka's head. Tonka's large ears flapped and water gushed out his trunk just missing Terri.

"Wow, magic!" said Jamie. "Terri and I won that one!"

"OK — swap over —" said Mr. P.

Jamie and Mr. P. played the game over and over until Jamie finally went home. He hadn't been home long before he returned and knocked on Mr. P's door.

"My mum wants to know if you'll come to dinner! We're having Salmon Pasta!!"

Mr. P. took a big breath and let it out slowly. "Why, yes. Thank you."

At 5.30 Mrs. Parker welcomed Mr. Prendergast to her apartment, as in need of renovation as his own, but made cheery by fresh flowers and colourful cushions.

"My name is Veronica," she said softly, "but please call me Ronnie."

Jamie looked at Mr. P. expectantly. There was a pause. Mr. P. gave a little cough. "umm, ah, Trevallyn" he replied.

Jamie's eyes grew huge.  
Ronnie's twinkled.

"But Trev to my friends!" Mr. P. added, just in time.

The dinner went splendidly, and Ronnie and Trev sat talking at the table long after Jamie had gone to bed.

Later that evening, before retiring, Mr. P. was cleaning his teeth in his bathroom. Midway he paused, and looking in the mirror with a mouthful of froth, he mouthed softly, "Wow, awesome!" and then, a little louder — "MAGIC!!"

On the shelf in the dinette, Tonka rested his trunk gently on Terri's shell.

Terri nodded gently and wagged his tail. . . . .

Kay Perry is a sailor and lives on a sailing boat called "Truant" with her husband.  
When not sailing around she likes to write short stories and poetry for adults and children.

Quinn Rennerfeldt

Low Bones

We nurse our cold-clean

stomachs, famished and

fastened shut by each

rum breath, silenced by our

lead heaven, needles slipped

up arms in a harem of horses.

We sleep, clinging to the elbows

of spring, shackled to the warmth

of doors. Safety is any number

greater than one; each night together

we are wealthy. Home

is just gravity adjusting

our low bones,

bagged and ready to go.

Whittled One

My hands linger on the ripeness

of my body where you ripple

and sift. Again I wonder if

you will be too skinny to thrive, a throw-

back baby they tell me can't live. What if

the harvest of my meat and meal



can produce little more than jellied

bone and a whining, whittled-away

thing? I feel you move like a stretch

or slow dance and want to believe

you are all healthy and brawn, the things

Darwin would write of with raw, respectful

fascination, a body threaded thick

with living genes. My home diagnosis is

I am suffering from a heart

that doesn't yet know how to love you,

little fleecy thing alive

in the shell of an organ like an eyelid,

thin mystery within my skin.

Quinn Rennerfeldt earned her degree at the University of Colorado at Boulder and currently lives in Denver with her daughter, husband, and ornery cat. She currently serves as a poetry co-editor for *Blood Lotus*. She was most recently published in *Wazee Journal* and has work forthcoming in *Slipstream* in 2014.

Allen Hope

Not the First Time

I am sitting on the sofa. Watching him watch me. He is wearing the same beige slacks, white shirt and red tie he wore on my last three visits. I am trying to decide how often he wears these clothes between washes when he looks sideways at me and says, "This isn't the first time you've been here. Is it?"

"No," I say. "I'm a regular. Pretty regular anyway."

He scribbles something in his notepad.

"Which is it?" he says. "There is a difference between regular and pretty regular."

"Regular," I say.

"That's odd," he says. He touches the tip of his pencil to his tongue and writes again in his notepad.

"This is a game isn't it? You're testing me somehow."

"Interesting you would think that. How do you feel about tests?"

"I don't care one way or the other," I say.

"Suppose I pulled a gun from my pocket and said I was going to shoot you?"

"I'd have to think about that. Shoot me where exactly?"

"For starters, let's say the leg."

"My left leg has been giving me problems. It goes numb, feels like it's burning. It keeps me awake at night until I get up and walk it off. Maybe a bullet is what it needs."

"Then the right leg. I'm going to shoot you in the right leg, the thigh. What would you say about that?"

"I'd say I prefer you shoot me in the left leg."

"There," he says. "You made a decision. How does it feel?"

"How should it feel?"

"I'm the one who asks the questions," he says. Again, more scribbling. "So, how does it feel?"

"Considering my decision is over which leg gets shot, not very good."

"Still," he says, "it's progress."

He places his pencil and notepad on the table between us and leans forward.

"Next week we'll discuss your aulophobia."

"I dont think I have aulophobia. Whatever that is."

"We'll determine that on your next visit. Until then," he says.

On my way out, Nurse Hillesand stops me in the hallway.

"What was it today?" she says. "The same as before?"

"Yes," I say. "He still thinks he's a psychiatrist."

"Oh," she says. "I was hoping for the comedian again. Your dad really is very funny. That story about changing the baby's diapers, I smile just thinking about it."

"Maybe next week," I say. "Maybe next week."

Allen Hope's fiction and poetry have appeared in Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Ghost Town, Gravel Magazine, Snow Monkey, and elsewhere. He currently lives in Gallipolis, Ohio with his wife and two daughters.

Kelsey Damrad

## Breakfast at the Ranch

“Everybody, doors open in 5,” his voice calls out, heavy from the weight of his accent. Nobody pays any attention.

Stale sunlight pours through the oversized windows, which line the room. Waiters and waitresses styling the signature maroon polo and black cargo pants bustle by to check that each glass on their table is perfectly polished. Sergio, the robust manager, is not forgiving when confronted with an unpolished glass.

“No, cariña,” Sergio says to one of the waitresses, reviewing the glass under the light and shaking his head. “Otra vez.” She picks up her wet rag and resigns herself to rubbing the glass free of fingerprints.

I pretend to ignore Sergio as he checks my tables for unpolished culprits and wait for the nod of approval. I relax when he moves on without a complaint.

“Oh God,” the waitress, Maria, says. I follow her gaze out the oval window that overlooks the terrace and half-hearted gardens that sketch the outline of the driveway. Three buses unload the weekend guests. It is not unusual for people to come in groups to the Rocking Horse Ranch. Moral support, I assume. “It’s an old peoples’ weekend.”

I shrug, preoccupied by the clang of the bell in the distance and the familiar “Come and get it!” screamed at the guests by two of the waiters. Breakfast time.

She shakes her mane of tangled hair and her midnight irises focus on me.

“Old people don’t tip and so gross!” she explains. “And you make damn sure their coffee is hot, mami, because you won’t hear the end of it.”

Sergio calls for us again to line up to seat the guests. I don't have time as my table starts to pile with a group of eight clucking women who seem to have come straight from the set of *The Golden Girls*.

I grab the handle to the coffee pot, and pause. Better bring the decaf. I replace the black handle with the orange.

Everything is buffet style, except for omelets. I stand next to one lady as she munches on a cantaloupe with cottage cheese and knits a scarf with the other hand. Her pink mouth stretches in a smile as I introduce myself, with lips as cracked as the Sahara in a drought.

"Honey! Has anyone ever told you? You are the spittin' image of Molly!"

"Ringwald? Yeah, I get that sometimes." Their popcorn heads bob in agreement at my uncanny resemblance to the 80's actress – their own little breakfast club. I pull out my pad to change the subject.

They give me their egg orders and demand their decaf.

Hot, they remind me.

I ask them what their plans are for the rest of the weekend. Honestly, what do people do on a ranch getaway? My generic question produces a predictably generic list: swims in the lake, horseback rides and endless gluttony. One of them suggests nude swimming and they all burst into cackles of delight, but know they would never, really dare.

After I drop off my slip of egg white omelet orders to the chef, I make my way to stand against the wall and plaster on a smile as a new cluster of elderly folk claim their tables. The other manager, Katie, asks if I gave my egg orders to the chef. Her stomach bulges over the top of her belt, and a button is threatening to pop open.



“Old people are so adorable,” she coos. One of the ladies at my table, who I pick as Betty White, hears her and shares a look of disdain with the woman next to her. I stay quiet. Who am I to call someone with 50 years on me adorable?

Across the room, I notice an elderly man struggling to occupy the corner table. Waiters around him either don't notice or don't care. I worm my way through the littered floor of squashed grapes and abandoned napkins toward him. Two chairs, made from heavy oak, block his path and his knotted fingers scratch at the nape of his neck with what I can only assume to be frustration.

I move the chairs out of his way.

“Coffee?” I ask, as I make room for him to sit. He relieves his massive frame onto the chair and doesn't answer immediately. Dressed in a pallid gray suit and glossy shoes only suitable for Sunday brunch, his chest heaves with exhaustion and he ignores me. A stuttered sigh later and I begin to wonder if he had even heard me. But, finally, he turns a milky gaze on me.

“He'll be wantin' decaf,” a voice aged with tobacco answers behind me. Of course. I could have guessed that. I make a note on my pad and repeat my question to the newcomer. He is sturdy, yet slight, and exudes an air of boyish confidence. He must have been a charmer in his day. For some reason, this makes me more uneasy than his silent friend.

“I'll be wantin' decaf too, sweetheart. Make sure it's hot,” he wheezes. His eyes, level with my throat, are disturbingly blue, but one struggles to stay open. As I turn to assist The Golden Girls, who are making eyes at the pot in my hand, his snowy hand clutches my wrist.

“Ya know, I have a fetish for ponytails,” he says, licking each word. Oh my God. I am suddenly too aware of the end of my ponytail tickling the back of my neck. I breathe in the mixture of scrambled eggs and last night's Old Spice.

“Can I tug your ponytail?” Without consent, he reaches behind me and gives a feeble tug. I throw a desperate look around the dining hall, but still nobody pays attention. The silent man turns his thick neck to watch the horses that graze in the paddock. A woman who favors purple paisley attire pushes her walker past me.

The old man, clasps his black and blue hands together and indulges in a toothless grin.

“Ahh, my wife hates it when I tug other girls’ ponytails,” he wheezes a chuckle, his skeleton hand still clasping my wrist as he sits. I force myself to stay polite, for the sake of my tips.

“Shall I get a decaf for your wife too?”

“Nah. She’s been dead for four years.”

He lifts the scalding mug to his cracked lips and sips. His hand trembles. Should I pretend to ignore?

I settle for an apology.

“I’m so sorry.” Even as the words come out, I am not sure if they are sincere. He ignores me.

He digs into his plate of sausage links and pancakes. Mouth full, he taps on the rim of his already suffocated mug and I top it off.

A hand squeezes my hip and Alex, a waiter, is next to me with a serving tray piled with The Golden Girl’s omelets.

“Hey you,” he says, with a crooked smile. “Thought I’d help you out. You looked like you needed it.” His eyes are mocking, and the same disturbing blue as the ponytail puller.

I silently relieve him of the tray and deliver the eggs to the ladies. I am prepared this time, with a fresh pot, when they hold out their lipstick stained mugs.

Decaf, they cluck. They noticed, by the handle, that I brought the caffeinated kind.

I finish their refills and stand beside a bus stand, topping off a mug every now and then as the room starts to thin out. The Golden Girls are one of the last tables to leave. They each grab my arm to say goodbye on their way out, pulling my face close to theirs. They all do that, I notice.

Maria helps me clear the table of their untouched eggs and empty half & half containers. Rolling her eyes and muttering aggressive Spanish under her breath, she snatches a broom and dustbin from the kitchen and begins to sweep away the muffin crumbs the ladies had carelessly strewn on the carpet.

I glance over at the corner table. Looks like Curly and Larry left.

“I’ll go start that table,” I say, and slip the empty bus bin under my arm. The plates and fork handles are sticky with maple and the table is littered with egg carcasses. My stomach curls as I gingerly pick up a stained, crumpled napkin and toss it in the bin.

The charmer’s coffee mug is left untouched and the lukewarm contents swirl like oil. Not hot enough.

Katie’s manicured finger calls me over. Maria’s eyes follow me, squinting at the object in Katie’s hand.

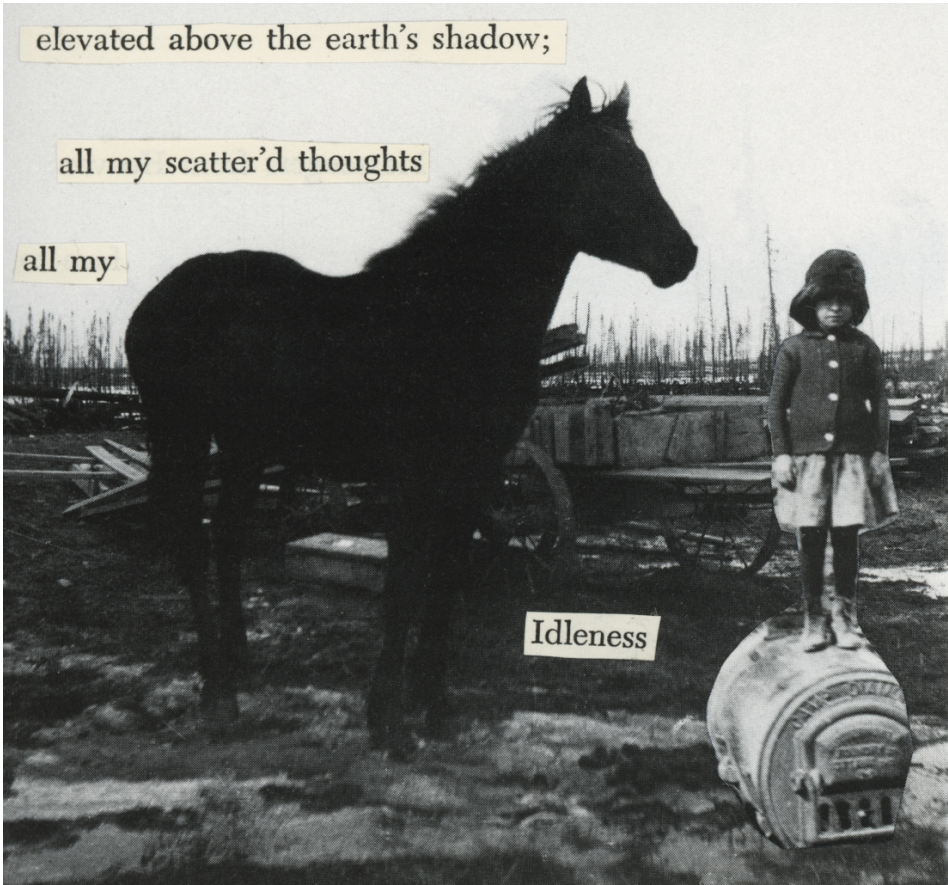
“Your table left a tip.”

She holds a pocket-sized manila envelope, containing a tip from The Golden Girls : \$2.87. Maria screams a laugh as she looks over my shoulder at the amount. I pretend to ignore.

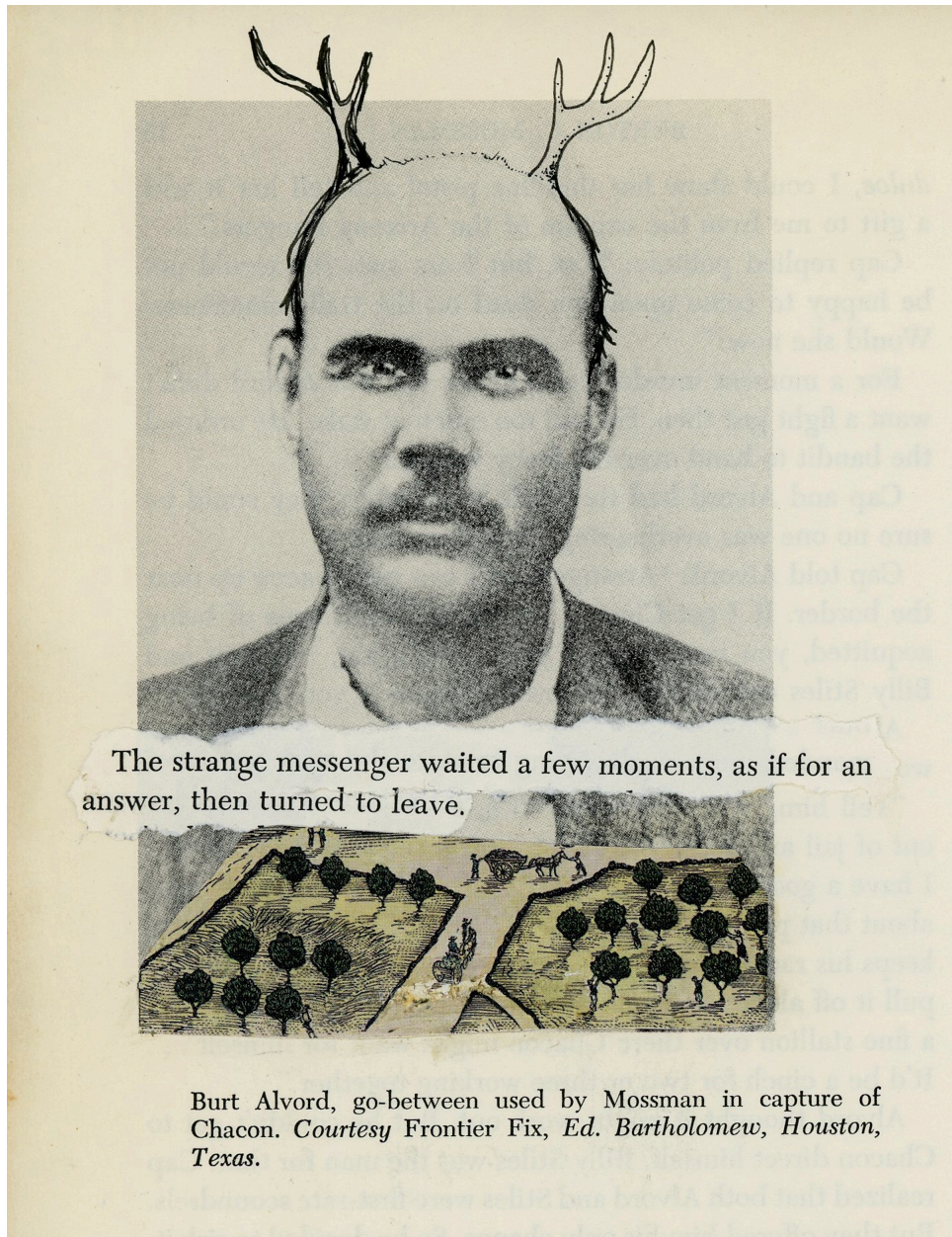
I slip the envelope into my apron, and continue the mundane task of scraping the crumbs off the surface of the table in preparation for lunch.

Kelsey Damrad is a writer and journalism student at SUNY New Paltz. Born and raised in Rhode Island, she hopes to move to a big city after graduation to pursue magazine journalism. Aside from her being in front of her laptop, her favorite places are on a mat in a yoga studio or in nestled in a corner of a library. Kelsey's is infatuated with culture, people and the power of the pen. Her main priorities in life are to try new things, eat anything red velvet and start the day with a decent cup of coffee.

Maria Maddox



*Black Mare Topsy & Lyca's Relief Wagon* (collage) ©Maria Maddox



Mercurial (collage) ©Maria J. Maddox

**Bio:**

Born in the Lake District in Chile, Maria came to the U.S. to complete a MA in Spanish Literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She's currently a PhD student, a collage artist and a poet in the Denver Metro Area.

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**Sassafras Literary Magazine issue 7**



Black-throated Ouzel.



Robin.



Robin.



Rock Thrush.



Black Redstart



Bluethroat.



Bluethroat.



Dipper.



Wheatear.



Nightingale.



Nightingale.



Redstart.



Isabelline Wheatear.



Desert Wheatear.



Black-throated Wheatear.



Stonechat.



Spotted Flycatcher.



Winchat.



Winchat.



Spotted Flycatcher.

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**Simon Perchik**  
**Allen Hope**  
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**Kay Perry**

**Bahar Anooshahr**  
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**Maria Maddox**  
**Mattison Teeter**