



# THE NOMAD



2024

ISSUE 1

## THE NOMAD

Welcome to the first issue of *THE NOMAD*!

I bumped into Ken Waldman, “Alaska’s Fiddling Poet” in 2021 at a reading by Michael Branch in Boulder, Utah where Ken handed me a card printed with his “New Orleans Villanelle,” a poem I was astonished to learn had never found its place in a literary magazine. We wondered what other treasures might be out there, perhaps not entirely in step with trends of the moment but in conversation with a larger tradition.

We invited writers we knew to send us a pair of their favorite pieces, one published and one unpublished, and we thank them wholeheartedly for supporting our endeavor to create a center of community around what can be conveyed through words. Our title, *THE NOMAD* is a nod to Ken, who has lived life more or less on the road since 2001, and to the avant-garde Beat Generation magazine, *Nomad*, published from 1959 to 1962. In a time of accelerating change, it is a title with increasing resonance. Published in the Mountain West, we envision a space that both embraces and transcends geography.

Writing is a special kind of reading, and we hope that these pieces that hold significance for the generous authors featured in *THE NOMAD* will inspire you to engage with what matters most. We would be honored to receive your poetry, prose, book reviews, letters, and essays that consider the meaningful. Write us at [nomadlitmag@gmail.com](mailto:nomadlitmag@gmail.com). And coming in October, the annual print edition!

~ RACHEL WHITE & KEN WALDMAN  
FOUNDERS

# THE NOMAD

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## SIREN

AMY GERSTLER

I have a fish's tail, so I'm not qualified to love you.  
But I do. Pale as an August sky, pale as flour milled  
a thousand times, pale as the icebergs I have never seen,  
and twice as numb—my skin is such a contrast to the rough  
rocks I lie on, that from far away it looks like I'm a baby  
riding a dinosaur. The turn of centuries or the turn  
of a page means the same to me, little or nothing.  
I have teeth in places you'd never suspect. Come. Kiss me  
and die soon. I slap my tail in the shallows—which is to say  
I appreciate nature. You see my sisters and me perched  
on rocks and tiny islands here and there for miles:  
untangling our hair with our fingers, eating seaweed.

From *Bitter Angel*, (North Point Press, 1990).

"Siren" is an older poem that still has a place in my heart because it dates from a time in my life when I was first realizing I wanted to write about women's lives: even mythical women, my obsession with the archetype of mermaids, etc. and I was trying to work out ways to do that in poems.

THE LURE OF THE UNFINISHED

*for Elise Cowen*

AMY GERSTLER

intercepted mid brush stroke  
those who die young or trun-  
cated loom still wet with potential

those who elude us who fled into death  
their echoes gnaw at our future  
and we the abandoned

remain unfinished too  
friends/lovers/ interrupted  
mid gesture or caress

given the slip  
by loves gone to fossil or scholars' fodder  
or life-size paper dolls we chase through dreams

we cast them in roles they never auditioned for  
blurred wrecks at rest on the sea floor  
fish flit through their dissipating hulls

sentiment clouds the water  
their incompleteness = infinite possibility  
how ravenously I wish her back

during nights spent struggling  
(without success) to decipher  
her handwriting—

This is a recent poem, sparked by reading the work of Elise Cowen, a female Beat poet whose small but intriguing body of work was a revelation. She died at 28, so I was left wanting more, troubled by regret about those who die young, wishing it could have been different. My excitement about her work was inextricable from an elegiac feeling. I'm fond of the poem because it's a document in which I try to contemplate and honor the effect her work had on me, and my sadness re: lives cut short.

## READING

NATASHA SAJÉ

I'm bundled in another mind  
as if it were a down coat

the world thick and quiet

neurons coax  
words like insects

grant them legs and wings

a swarm that rouses me

on the train or the plane  
in the meadow on the beach or in bed

words riddle a raft  
full of tiny holes

so I can float

I love to read! Silent reading (which began in the sixth century) especially changes the brain. This poem is my attempt to understand how it feels.



## GRADUAL

“Just one word....plastics.” *The Graduate*, 1967

NATASHA SAJÉ

I wrench and cut the clear thick film—  
 envisioning its path to trash. And next?  
*The hiding place where no one ever goes.*  
 This stuff gets smaller and smaller...  
 micro to nano to who knows what.  
*Every way you look at it you lose.*  
 1% of me is probably it  
 already, seeding cells with particles,  
 through infinitesimal scissor-teeth.  
 The vision that was planted in my brain.  
 In Latin, *sapiens* means wise.  
 The future will call us something else.

First published in *The NonBinary Review*. From *The Future Will Call You Something Else* (Tupelo Press, 2023). The poem “Gradual” began about ten years ago with my thinking about the micro-plastics humans ingest. I recalled the scene in the 1967 film *The Graduate* where Mr. McGuire says to Benjamin, “One word: plastics...there’s a great future in plastics.” He was right: in the 60s we still used wax paper and foil, glass and ceramic. Today it’s hard to buy anything edible that isn’t wrapped in plastic. The film uses Simon and Garfunkel songs, so I spliced in lines from “Mrs. Robinson” and “The Sound of Silence.” The last line of the poem, with a switch, became the title of my book.

## YOU OUGHTA KNOW

BROCK DETHIER

Addiction fools  
the best of us:  
you smell the bait,  
acknowledge the hook,  
sniff it, flick it,  
tongue the steel point,  
but can't guess  
how sharp the barb,  
how stealth its set.

A short poem with a hook. I like to have a single metaphor carry the poem's meanings, and I like to write poems that might affect readers' lives. I targeted the arrogance of young people who think they are too smart and aware to get addicted. I'm proud to say that the teenage daughter I wrote the poem for is now almost 30 and almost completely clean and sober... though I'm sure the bad examples around her influenced her more than my poem. *Sugar House Review* published this poem and reprinted it on a promotional card.

## THE BLACK FLIES OF HOME

BROCK DETHIER

Black flies dance in the air  
between my head and my brother's,  
distorting the view. We sit on pinkish granite  
smoothed and sloped by retreating glaciers  
ten millennia ago. Below us,  
the Rocky Branch of the Saco River,  
then the ridge that leads from Stanton and Pickering  
all the way up to Davis, Isolation, and Washington itself.  
Farther west, the ski trail scars of Mt. Attitash,  
still the new ski area,  
though it opened in 1965.

Black flies are small, hard to see, quiet.  
They like warm sheltered places--  
behind your ear or knee.  
They follow the blood  
others have left. And bite.  
I react with large hard itchy welts  
that I scratch bloody in my sleep.  
Mosquitoes are everywhere but I've never seen black flies  
outside New England,  
so their presence is a special "welcome home!" to the region.

Around us, blueberry bushes with subtle flowers--  
little cream bells that will become  
the fruit of the New Hampshire gods--  
rhodora about to brighten the ledges  
with cerise blossoms,  
grus eroded from the ledges  
filling the cracks between them,  
sweet fern. I wasn't aware of being bitten  
but I find blood behind my ear.

Within our view, we've skied  
both downhill and cross country,  
canoed, floated, kayaked, swam,  
hiked of course. We were born  
just out of sight to the left.

We've come in search of iron mines  
and leave with sparkly ore,  
black fly bumps starting to itch,  
and a few crystals  
to take back west to what still seems after 26 years  
a temporary home.

Few who have experienced New England's black flies would argue that they make the world a better place, yet for people who have grown up with them, the flies mean home. Having spent half my life in New England and half in Utah, I'm interested in how we think about "home," and this unpublished, personal poem tries to illuminate the complexities of the concept and to highlight the irony that sometimes what bugs you may come to signify home for you.

## FIREFLIES

KEVIN PRUFER

He was fifteen  
and feeling hassled  
and he asked his mother to  
please fuck off,  
so she slapped him  
hard  
and told him to get out of the car  
because he could  
walk home.

+

As he walked,  
his anger smoldered.  
He imagined her car  
crushed against a tree,  
he imagined her pleading  
for help  
as he strode right past  
toward home  
exactly as she'd commanded—

+

and half an hour later,  
as he rounded the corner  
to their yellow house,  
he saw her blue Honda  
in the driveway,  
and knew  
she was already at her desk  
because

+

it was evening,  
because she had homework,  
because  
she had her accounting class  
early in the morning  
at the college

and still he was angry,  
though his anger  
had lost its focus—

+

why had he said  
what he'd said?  
Why had she slapped  
her own son?  
Anyway,  
he wanted to hate her

+

but it was a beautiful summer evening,  
the chirring of crickets,  
the fireflies—

he would remember the fireflies years later  
rising and falling  
in the gloom,

+

his old gray cat  
uncurling on the porch steps,  
walking  
up to him, purring  
and rubbing her cheek  
against his leg  
there beneath the streetlamp.

+

The cat was long dead,  
but his mother was still alive.  
Just today  
he'd brought her another mystery novel,  
then sat with her in her  
hot little apartment





## AUTOMOTIVE

KEVIN PRUFER

I keep returning to the image of a kitten  
asleep in the engine

as a way of understanding  
the history of my country.

So warm under the car's hood,  
the hidden sweetness in the dark machinery.

+

Start the car.

+

[The sound the kitten makes.]

+

Happy slaves on a lazy afternoon  
sleeping in the shadow of haybales.

A banjo lying in the sun.  
Stolen apples.

A lithograph on the wall in my father's office:  
"The sweet ol' summuh time."

+

My mother bought me a kitten.  
I brought it home in a cardboard box  
and how I loved that kitten,  
the way it purred in my arms  
and pressed its cold wet nose against my cheek.

+

Start the car.

+

In a poem by Jorie Graham,  
history is a hand grenade lodged in the pulp of a young tree.  
The tree grows, the tree grows.

One day, a farmer chops it down for firewood.  
Imagine his surprise when the grenade—

+

[The sound the kitten made.]

+

My mother promised me a kitten,

but it escaped,  
scurrying into the distant past.

+

I used to think history moved inexorably forward  
from villainy into truth,

but the kitten was nowhere to be seen.  
I stood on the porch and called into the wind.

Only the car cooled in the driveway,  
its engine ticking.

+

All those kittens asleep by the haybales—  
they had had too much to eat,

and now they wanted a warm place to relax.

The sun bore down upon them.

+

The grenade explodes as resentment, as rage,  
as the final expression

of unredressed wrong.

When the kitten licked my ear  
I laughed and fed it treats.

+

Start the car.

+

What did I know of evil?

My father worked long evenings in his study  
so I could go to school.

I had a safe childhood. Don't make me feel guilty  
about that.

I'm not guilty of anything here.

+

[That sound.]

+

They had stolen the apples and the time,  
but in the distance you could see

their master walking from the barn,  
scowling—

Lazy, lazy. Oh, you lazy....

+

Anyway, I loved that kitten  
and when I couldn't find it,  
I panicked

not because it was a metaphor for the history of my country

but because I loved its little pink tongue,  
the way it washed its paws—

+

The engraving hung upstairs, in his study.

In the early evenings, the sunlight hit it,  
a bright red square

before I was born.

+

The grenade keeps exploding  
into my adulthood.

+

I'm just going to run to the store for groceries,  
my mother said.

You kids behave.  
You kids be good until I get back.

Its little pink tongue. Its cold nose.

The jangle of car keys.

Automotive appears in my newest books of poems, *The Fears* (Copper Canyon Press, 2024). It's the only poem in that book not to see magazine publication, partly because it was a last-minute addition to the collection. Its origin comes from two seemingly unlike memories. First, a memory of a 19th century engraving I saw as a child, a troublingly sentimental image of enslaved people apparently happily sleeping and dancing instead of working. That print bothered me and stayed with me in memory. Second, a friend who, not knowing a kitten had crawled into his truck's warm engine, killed the kitten when he started the truck. I felt sparks between these two memories. Somehow, the fact of slavery made anodyne (and comic) in the engraving felt like that kitten curled inside the engine of American history—a false image of joy and sentimentality paired with its own cry of pain and death. I suppose, finally, the poem is (partly) about the persistence of historic evil in the mind of the state, though we may have sometimes tried to diminish it through sentimentality or willful blindness.

# 11/8/16

JOE SACKSTEDER

God called to our fathers,  
*Take your children, the ones whom you love,  
and offer them as burnt sacrifices.*

We walked with our fathers to the mountain,  
performed the chores they set us  
—fetched wood, built an altar—  
though we'd guessed the reason  
for our fathers' silence before we caught  
the glint of silver.

God campaigning elsewhere, his messenger called out,  
*Do not reach your hand against your children,  
for I know now that you fear God.*

Hearing wrong, fearing wrong  
—or just angry at the wasted day—  
our fathers killed us anyway.



Soon after the 2016 election, my PhD exam reading list sent me to the Rare Books Department at the University of Utah's Marriott Library to leaf white-gloved through the Book of Genesis. My mentor Melanie Rae Thon had suggested it, the Robert Alter translation. I'd held the Bible in great esteem as a young person but was feeling at a low point of charity toward a text that so many voting Americans were warping and being warped by. This poem, always a grim favorite of mine, popped into my head fully formed, a kind of revenge.

## TUESDAY NIGHT BIEBER

JOE SACKSTEDER

We'd been scrimmaging for ten or fifteen minutes, and so far no Biebs. But his bodyguards were watching the game, so there was still hope. Tuesday night, Park City, Utah. I'd positioned myself in the net closest to the lobby, trying to catch glimpses. The lobby did seem to be hosting an unusual accumulation of very attractive people. A potential posse.

When Eli, the other goalie, lugged his bag into the locker room and made the announcement, I'd assumed that Bieber was the nickname of some local hockey player everybody except me knew. He needed gear, Eli said. The only hockey store was down in Salt Lake and had been closed for a few hours.

"I can't focus," I told Tommy after sucking in warm-ups. "I can't stop thinking about Justin."

I'd subbed in net on Sunday for the bar league team most of the good Park City guys play on—so I'd been looking forward to an asterisk of flattery on their usual shit-talking. I mean, in addition to what Park City Tuesday night drop-in usually does for me. How it gets me away from slogging through grad school reading and reminds me that I have a body. How I feel like I'm in a space shuttle some nights as I drive up a mountain and leave behind Salt Lake's smog. How just getting on the ice regularly is more

and more important as I enter my mid-thirties. How for now I know that, yes, my competitive career is probably behind me, but give me three months and I could still be as good as I ever was.

I write mostly fiction, but I recently realized that almost all the nonfiction I've put out into the world concerns my few minor brushes with celebrity, as if life isn't worth much unless it's happening proximal to someone famous. I'll further interrogate what this tendency says about me—but later, and privately. This essay is about the moment I heard a gloved fist pounding on the plexiglass behind my net, and I turned around, and there was Justin Bieber.

I didn't know how to act. I was kind of impressed that we didn't have to sign any papers or get a lecture from the bodyguard detailing what would happen to us if we damaged one of the world's most precious commodities. I was tending net for the dark jerseys, so Justin would be on my team until Eli and I switched sides halfway through. I saw him introduce himself to the two guys sitting on my team's bench, bump gloves.

A buddy from Justin's crew was playing on the other team. Their gear was brand new, the nicest stuff. I would later find out that his handler called the owner of the Player's Bench in Salt Lake and convinced him to drive two sets of new gear up a mountain at 9 PM. Justin sort of had a baby Bambi thing going on with his ankles. He started off mostly on defense, hanging back, occupying relatively deserted sectors of ice surface. He

slapped his stick on the ice frequently, calling for passes when he shouldn't have.

Were they avoiding passing him the puck?

*Guys... Pass Justin the puck.*

I'm always looking for circuitous routes into the NHL that don't involve me having played Division One hockey a decade ago. I was entertaining fantasies that Justin would see how good I was and tweet a picture of the two of us with the caption: "Best goalee eva," after which I'd receive an invitation to practice with the Maple Leafs just as, like, a joke.

The human mind exposed on the page is a sick and pitiful thing. (I'm also very brave.)

Same reason why when Tommy got a breakaway, I was telepathically blasting at him *YOU WOULDN'T DARE SCORE ON ME IN FRONT OF JUSTIN!* Tommy hit the crossbar, but someone soon fired one past my glove, and immediately I looked up expecting to see Justin crestfallen and speechless. He was skating to the bench. I couldn't say for sure whether or not he even knew his team had been scored on.

Every time Justin leapt over the boards, his bodyguard would pull out his iPhone and start filming. Then, when he returned to the bench, he would curate the footage. His posse had dispersed throughout the rink. Two stylish guys were sitting in the stands, a stunning blonde/porcelain wisp of girl was hanging

out by the doors that led to the locker rooms, and a half dozen or so Beliebers were keeping warm in the lobby.

He slashed someone really hard in the shins, which alarmed me until I realized it was his buddy.

Finally, Eli and I switched sides.

Justin had not scored on Eli, and by now he had abandoned any attempt to play defense. Drop-in hockey is not usually a showcase of defensive skills, but a few of the guys were taking extra special care to keep the Biebs from getting any good chances. Every time the puck got poked away from him, he would slam his stick on the ice and kind of, like, puff up. Like a territorial bird. I'm not sure that he ever even breached his team's defensive zone in the second half of the scrimmage. He spent all his time "cherry-picking" up by the red line. *Come on, let him get past you just once.* He dealt Hagn a beachball-strength check in the corner, perhaps only half realizing that drop-in, where most of the guys don't wear shoulder pads, is pretty no-check.

"He wasn't even looking..." I said to one of my defensemen after a particularly fine save.

At one point, Justin's stick got swatted and went flying. He hesitated for a moment, before strut-skating to the bench. This is not something a hockey player would normally do, just leave an unbroken stick on the ice during a noncompetitive game. Someone eventually pushed the stick over to the dark team's

bench. “Pick it up,” Tony heard him say. For a second, Tony thought Justin was talking to him. No: his bodyguard.

Look, I’m being hard on the Biebs. Yes, he bought thousands of dollars of equipment that he might never use again. Yes, he refused photographs and signatures with the very few non-posse people in the lobby. Yes, he was obviously image conscious. But he was basically friendly, and he was probably having as normal a night among strangers as is possible in his world.

Oh, and he really wanted a goal. In my head I’d been revising over and over the status update I would post immediately upon arriving home that night (and of course whether or not he got a shot on me would have significant bearings). I was thinking about that ridiculous story a few months back where Vladimir Putin scored seven goals on his birthday in a game against former NHL-ers. Was I going to *let* Bieber score? Maybe if he scored a goal we’d take a photo afterwards, just the Biebs and me.

In the end, I didn’t have a choice. In the end—if a heartthrob pop icon scoring a goal on you is shameful—the actual goal was as unhumiliating as it could have been. Sometimes the assist is the real goal, and I think it was Heimo who ended up feeding him what was basically a backdoor tap-in. I lunged over to my glove side, but the Biebs had a lot of net to shoot at.

A hyperbolic analogy seems to be called for, but none are really game-ready. All the air left the rink? My life divided into two?

Nope. They call it drop-in hockey, and sometimes it's Justin Bieber who drops in. And scores a goal on you.

He was very excited. He threw his hands up in the air, shouted, "That's what I *needed!*"

If my dignity needs preserving, I can at least report that I stopped him on a half-break a minute later. Left pad save. But, as his posse immediately rolled out after that shift was over, it was clear that his work was done. If the incident was reported by some desperate news outlet, the report would be that he scored a goal. That's what he needed.

As I would joke later, "After he left... what was the point?" We still had another twenty or so minutes of drop-in, and maybe it was mental exhaustion that caused me to basically turn into a garage door.

In the locker room afterwards, we tried to decompress. We had to navigate a tricky situation: be starstruck—but not too starstruck. Make light of the fact that every single one of us would regale future family members and friends and strangers with the story of tonight for the rest of our lives. A few of the guys hid their obvious celebrity crushes behind tough words about what a little shit he was. "At least you guys didn't get *scored on* by him," I groaned, mortified-proud.

We were all pretty sure that the bodyguard had accidentally stowed his phone during the shift Justin scored—which is the

reason why several thousand people did not watch footage of me getting scored on by Justin Bieber that night. Thankfully?

At the Boneyard (yes, that's the name of the bar where we go to jerk each other off), we tried to drink the night real. I splurged on a seven-dollar Unibroue because that's how I roll now. We looked at Justin's Instagram account. Tommy's girlfriend can be seen sitting in the stands in one of the photos. *That girl totally thinks she's got a shot at the Biebs*, was one comment. I attacked an abandoned plate of fries. An "extra" beer was put in my hand by the waiter. The Sabres game was on replay. I didn't care one iota about the forty-pages of George Herbert poems I wasn't going to read for *Genealogies of the Lyric* the next day.

I'm a referee too, and I like to complain about how often the scheduler sends me up to Park City. Six percent grade is rough on my roller skate of a car. "Once you accept a Park City game," other refs have told me, "you're screwed." So I gripe, but I never do anything about it. Maybe it's my hibernating Hollywood ambitions drawing me to the home of Sundance. Or the other life I might have led where I go skiing more than once every five years. Or maybe it's because, on the way home, I can put my car in neutral from Parley's Way all the way to Foothill. Ten miles. And, at the late-night / very-early-morning hour we say goodbye to the Boneyard, I can ease off the brakes, slaloming the inside lane on every twist and turn.

Just the feeling of heading west—



If I have a "Freebird," it's this short essay, which appeared on *Hobart* soon after December 1st, 2015, the night that Justin Bieber scored a goal on me at drop-in hockey in Park City, Utah. It remains meaningful to me, not just because of the novelty of the event it depicts, but because it seemed to get at something about the sense of promise that accompanied the difficulties of a PhD program, with a final two paragraphs (cut by *Hobart*'s editors) that likewise best encapsulated my weird, sudden infatuation with the West.

## HIROSHI TANAHASHI

JERRY VANIEPEREN

echoes travel across the icy sea foam  
in cherry blossom sundown the Dome crowd quakes  
Hiroshi Tanahashi leaps from the top rope  
falling in love, frog-splashed against the mat in magnitudes

in cherry blossom sundown the Dome crowd quakes  
Tanahashi wasn't born a constellation  
falling in love, frog-splashed against the mat in magnitudes  
all the neon signs illuminate the borders of ropes

Tanahashi never born a constellation  
when the world swoons in uncharted patterns of lava and stars  
all the neon signs illuminate the borders of ropes  
the sweat and spectacle captured in a camera's eye

when the world swoons in uncharted patterns of lava and stars  
Hiroshi Tanahashi leaps from the top rope  
the sweat and spectacle captured in a camera's eye  
Tanahashi echoes a constellation over the icy sea

I arrived at a point of liberation where I decided I was going to write poetry about pro wrestling—former Utah Poet Laureate David Lee said that may be the greatest oxymoron of his time, which I took as encouragement. I watched wrestling with my grandpa, it was the topic that got me back in touch with a dear friend after years apart, and it was also common ground, for a time, I shared with my son. So, it's fairly meaningful to me, and I'm especially proud of how this poem about a Japanese pro wrestler turned out.

## PISSING TOWARD THE SKY

JERRYVANIEPEREN

We're watching the eclipse  
though we don't know our astronomy.  
And it's not warm enough  
to try kissing  
even in breezy May.

I cannot sit  
bladder full of movie soda.  
Step out, look down ridge,  
unzip, without  
car lights or street lamps.  
Just our stillborn shadow  
on the moon above.

Published in *Black Rock & Sage*, Idaho State University's creative writing journal. It has since become an ISU-enrolled student publication, but 1000 years ago, it was open to anybody. A few months before this poem was accepted, I had won the undergrad creative writing contest for poetry at Utah State University, and it felt like I was on a roll and it was a special time, which I didn't appreciate until the benefit of hindsight.

## ALIEN EXCHANGE PROGRAM - HOST APPLICATION

NAOMI ULSTED

It's extremely important that we choose a good host match for our aliens. This is the inaugural year of our Alien Exchange Program where we hope to facilitate mutual learning and understanding of these new neighbors we've discovered.

Please answer the following questions honestly.

1. *Do you plan to turn over your exchange student to the Federal government or any other for-profit or not-for-profit organization planning to conduct experimental exploration on our exchange student?*

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Yes (you may turn in your application now)

No (go on to the next question)

2. *Even if they offer you extremely large sums of money?*

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Yes (you may turn in your application now)

No (go on to the next question)

3. *How did you hear about the Alien Exchange Program?*

It was at the mall. Which is odd because I hardly ever go to the mall. I find the mall suffocating, with the cloying Cinnabon scent, the crowds of women flocking Bath and Body Works, the teenage boys cruising the walkways with slouching bravado. Not to mention that since our species

have taken to using semi-automatic weapons with bump stocks to gun down large numbers of each other in public spaces, I've been especially reluctant to visit the mall, a concert, a movie, or any other crowded area. If I had the money, I'd pay for the virtual reality mall, where I could turn off the Cinnabon smell and if someone gunned down my avatar, I could just respawn somewhere else. But like most people in my social circles, I can't afford that luxury.

I won't tell my alien how we like to kill each other here.

That day I was in desperate need of a new pair of sand boots, so I threw my Glock in my purse, hefted myself into my bullet proof vest and headed out to the mall. I found the Alien Exchange Kiosk right next to the kiosks where young, beautiful men call out to middle-aged women like myself, offering samples of lotion and salt scrub. They'll apply it themselves if you let them, rubbing your skin with their smooth hands. They can always sense their customer. We're the ones wearing jeans from a decade ago. Our faces show we haven't grasped the concept of contouring. We're the ones with credit cards with high limits. If I could afford the virtual reality mall, I'd use a male avatar carrying a broadsword. Those lotion guys wouldn't mess with me then. As it is, I try to walk in the aisle far from them, pretending I don't hear them targeting me.

As I passed by the Alien Exchange Kiosk, it placed images of the aliens' planet into my mind. The planet's surface was iridescent green and lush, not parched and withered like this one. As I came closer, the Kiosk's smooth marketing voice resonated in my head asking, *Do you have*

*a thirst for adventure? Do you want to connect with another world? I thought about the words. I wanted to connect.*

4. *Have you experienced inter-stellar travel? (We know that only the top 1% of the country can afford inter-stellar travel. Or a house in the suburbs. Or post-secondary education. So if you choose, you can speak to international travel in your response to this question, as opposed to inter-stellar travel.)*

I have not experienced inter-stellar travel. When I was in college, I took out extra student loans so I could drink my way through a series of European pubs, but since I've grown older and more mature, I've redistributed my debt to involve less travel. Not less alcohol, mind you, but expenses in the form of living quarters, an iPhone, elementary curriculum feeds for the kids. Every day is planned and routine. When I traveled, I didn't have plans. I woke up and perused a map over coffee. I shouldered my backpack and delved into the unknown. Now, when my alien comes to stay with me, we'll have coffee in the morning. I don't know if my alien wants scrambled egg protein for breakfast. I don't know if my alien will even eat or if she'll have an enlarged forehead and horizontal ovals for eyes, like in the old science fiction movies. I hope my alien isn't slimy, but if she is, I'll put a towel down on the kitchen chair. Come to think of it, I don't even if know if my alien is female. Even we are evolving past binary constructs, but still, part of me hopes she's female, like I'm still identifying. But I do know that as we regard one another in my kitchen, it will be like looking at that map in

the morning, shouldering my backpack and hiking into the world of possibility.

5. *While your alien is staying with you, we'd like him/her/them to feel as though he/she/they are a part of the family. Unless your family is completely dysfunctional, which may cause the alien to deliver a negative report about humans to his/her/their superiors. In what family events do you plan to involve your alien?*

In my extended family, there are no more weddings. The siblings have been married at least once, sometimes twice. Actually, we're excited about a pretty big divorce happening soon. I'm hoping my alien can attend our divorce party after the trial. She can help me roll canapés and pour champagne to celebrate a new beginning. She can give us an alien blessing of some kind. A special symbol from her culture of a new start. She can stand or hover or whatever she does, in the circle with us, exchanging hugs.

Of course, if the trial doesn't go well for us, then I'll keep my alien away from that function. My sister will return home to seek solace in one of her many online worlds. She'll don her dragon slayer skin or a pull up her sexy spy avatar and forget about what just happened. My other siblings will sit and scroll through their phones like normal. But I will come home to my alien to see her playing Connect 4 with my children. We'll make root beer floats and play charades and I will laugh and laugh, and forget the world is burning around me.



6. *We want our alien participants to enjoy their time with you and the wonderful attractions our world has to offer, although we don't want them to enjoy our world so much that they decide to come down here and colonize us. Can you speak to the types of attractions you plan to show your alien?*

Over a decade ago, I spent many afternoons downtown. I rode the city bus to the bookstore where I worked alongside the bookstore collie dog, re-organizing the New Age section and looking for attractive book covers to face out. For my lunch, I brought my cheese and pickle sandwich out to the park square. The benches were shiny burnished metal. The water from a bronze fountain depicting two leaping salmon sparkled in the sunlight. A pigeon gave me the side eye and cooed questioningly at my sandwich. Across the street, the theater marquis advertised the current production. I only made minimum wage at the bookstore and couldn't afford shows, but being downtown in front of the theater, in the midst of the park blocks surrounded by sharply dressed business professionals made me feel like I was a part of something important.

I would like to show my alien that place. She could relax in the bookstore, the dog sniffing her curiously. I'd buy her a book on chakras. She could reach her hand, or her appendage or appendages, out to the water in the fountain and splash with the children who wouldn't be afraid of her, because they're children who don't fear things yet.

I'd like to take her there, but it's different now. I unplugged my children from their entertainment feeds recently and dragged them down there to see an actual show with real human actors in that theater I can now afford because most people prefer to escape home through their virtual reality systems. Bookstores are long gone and only Outside Dwellers have real dogs, since most people can afford a virtual pet. After the show, a nostalgic production that featured an old-style public school before institutionalized public education put children's lives at risk, my children dragged me toward the salmon fountain. The water hasn't run in it since the shortage years ago. Pigeons scavenged through the cracked and grimy tiles of the fountain without giving us a second thought. There were several Outside Dwellers lounging around the park square.

Most Outside Dwellers are harmless. Scruffy and stinky for lack of water or dry soap, bare feet black with city filth, muttering stories that make sense only to themselves. That day several of them shared a six pack of 4 Loco. But you never know when a group of Outside Dwellers may be shooting up, not just smoking weed. Or when the story one of them is living in his mind may paint you as a threat. My kids wanted to play with the pigeons and my boy jumped from bench to bench, until I dragged them both away from the city square and the Outside Dwellers. We went back home where I hooked them up to their entertainment feeds again, nice and safe.

If I took my alien there, she probably wouldn't be afraid, like I am. She'd likely even sit down next to one of those Outside Dwellers, joining him on the grungy bench and

sharing a 4 Loco. Maybe with her next to me, I'd be brave enough to hang out with the Dwellers, sharing stories and watching the light change as the sun dipped down into the smoggy sky and then dropped behind the towering skyscrapers. Twilight would fall like it's fallen every evening, regardless of who is sitting in the city square, be it an Outside Dweller, an alien, or me.

7. *There are hundreds of applicants for the Alien Exchange Program. In what way are you an especially good fit for this program?*

As I sit here in my living quarters, inputting these answers, I guess I can think of lots of people who might be a better fit. The families with money to take the alien to the places in our world that are still beautiful. Places with waterfalls, lakes, and piped in rain. I've heard they still exist in some areas and the top 1% get to immerse themselves in those lakes, feel the spray of the waterfall on their bare arms. But when I was 13, I watched *E.T.* in the movie theater. Later, I watched more gruesome depictions of extraterrestrials, like those in *Aliens*, but my heart stayed with that waddling big-eyed, neck-stretching *E.T.* At night, even though I was 13 and knew better, I held up my finger to the window and searched the sky. I imagined my finger lighting up like Elliot's and I reached it up toward the stars in search of an alien. Decades later, I know she's up there, her own finger shining brightly. Please send me my alien. I need to meet her.

*Your application will be reviewed, and you will hear from us in four to six weeks. Should your application be selected for further consideration, alien placement will be contingent upon a home visit to ensure you can provide adequate facilities. This includes a fully functioning hydration pod, as aliens cannot adjust to our arid climate. You will also need to demonstrate bandwidth and networking links capable of reaching the alien's home planet. Your signature will be required on our "Liability Waiver Contract" where you will agree to indemnify and hold harmless the Alien Exchange Program should you personally befall any harm from or as a result of actions taken by the alien. Thank you for your interest in the Alien Exchange Program.*

Originally published in *The New Guard*.

I love this piece because even though it's been five years since its original publication, it still feels just as relevant, both to the state of our society and to me personally, as it did then. It still feels as though we are searching for a connection that has proven difficult to find in this environment of fear and distrust. I had so much fun diving into this darker theme using the format of an application.

## A TWIST OF THE VINE

NAOMI ULSTED

We seemed to be stopped in the middle of the road for no reason. I leaned over my baby brother Adrian's chubby legs to peer out the window while he shoved at me. Outside, just past the dirt road where our wood-paneled station wagon sat motionless, was a wall of forest. The air smelled of recent rain, but late spring sun dried the droplets trying to cling to the dense mass of underbrush leading into the damp darkness of the forest. *Well*, Mom said, turning around in the front seat to face me. *What do you think?*

*Think of what?* I asked.

Mom's long brown hair was fixed in my favorite style, with two sections pulled into a gold clip at the back of her head. The remaining strands fell over her shoulders. Adrian, who had been clambering around the back seat during the thirty-minute drive from my grandmother's house, reached hands smeared with teething biscuit toward her hair. She absentmindedly pushed them away. *This!* she announced, gesturing her arm out the window toward dense woods. *The property for our new home!*

I thought of my grandmother's tidy lawn with its perfectly rounded shrubs and straight mowed lines in the grass. I suspected the surprise Mom had been promising me today was not going to be a fun surprise, like a trip to The Farmette for an ice cream cone. This was going to be one of those grown-up surprises that are kind of boring until they are kind of complicated, like when my brother came along or when I got

my new dad. Even though I thought Mom and I had been doing just fine on our own.

*You see?* she went on, smiling back at me while Dad leaned over the steering wheel, trying to distance himself from the gooey teething biscuit my brother was waving. *I told you we'd get our new place before you started second grade.*

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be seeing. There were only trees and dusty road, but my mom was happy in a way she usually wasn't. We had moved from Nebraska a few months after she and my brother came home from the hospital. After barely surviving Adrian's birth, Mom may have wanted the extra support from her parents, who lived here on Camano Island, in Washington.

Camano Island is a large island located in the Puget Sound and, at the time we moved there, was populated primarily by people who wanted to live off the beaten track. People who didn't want close neighbors, people who lived in log cabins or A-frame houses, surrounded by towering trees and deep moss. Nearly equidistant between Seattle and the Canadian border, both seemed equally foreign to me, as Camano was pretty much our whole world. Although we lived on an island, as I grew older I found I often needed to explain we didn't get there by ferry or some other kind of boat. Rather, there was one road off the island that crossed a bridge into the town of Stanwood. Even the bridge wasn't particularly stunning. Although Port Susan was to the south of the bridge and Skagit Bay to the right, the bridge itself basically crossed over a large cow ditch of stagnant water. Although Stanwood was home to a population less than 2000, it was our hub for shopping, school, and supplies. Nonetheless, Camano was a small and as of yet, undiscovered oasis. A short drive from anywhere on the island would take us to the edge of the Sound, where we could play in the placid waves, gather driftwood and look for tiny crabs.

Although I'd been born in Seattle and coming back to Washington meant coming home, it didn't feel like it to me. Mom and I had moved from Washington to Oregon, then to California where I got my new dad, then back to Oregon, and then to Nebraska where my new brother was born. So for us no state felt like home. For me, only Mom and her yellow Volkswagen Beetle felt like home, and the Beetle had been sold to help pay for Mom's wedding.

I tried to muster more enthusiasm than I felt. *Great!* I offered. I had to pee, and I hoped we could just appreciate the trees through the car windows and go home.

*Out!* Adrian demanded, fiddling with the door handle where he'd been riding on my mother's lap.

*Come on, Chuck,* Mom said. *Let's explore.*

I almost asked to stay in the car, but didn't think that would go over well, so I got out and we all stood at the side of the road, dwarfed by an imposing wall of ferns, pine and fir trees, nettles, wildflowers, and blackberry bushes. Although it was still warm, as days in June were long, the sun dipped low in the sky. *Follow me,* Dad said. Blackberry bushes rose thick and imperious, although the berries were only hard green nubs. As I stepped onto a trail leading into the woods, a loud buzzing from inside the bushes that towered over all of us, even Dad.

Mom picked huckleberries from bushy clusters of tiny leaves as she held Adrian's hand and he toddled along until he toddled into a stinging nettle and shrieked in pain. She picked him up and continued to chatter about the five acres they'd just purchased. *We just have to decide where to build our house,* she said. *We thought we would build on the south side of the property, but if we built a little farther from the*

*road, we'd get more sun. We'll need to put in a nice long driveway. Her hair caught in a blackberry bush, and I helped her untangle it as she went on. Besides, a long driveway will keep us away from the noise of the road. It will be nice and quiet.*

Although the drive from my grandmother's was only around thirty minutes, for the last fifteen we'd swapped the smooth pavement for a series of dirt roads that became dirtier and bumpier as we went along, passing fewer and fewer cars. As I would find, the school bus wouldn't even drive all the way back into those woods. Instead, I would walk the two miles to the junction where the dirt roads met the paved roads, my sneakers streaked with dust in the early fall, or mud the rest of the school season. When a truck passed by me, clouds of dirt billowed behind it, swirling like a mini version of the tornadoes we'd seen in Nebraska.

I bent down to pick a stem of wild peppermint. I crushed its leaves and breathed it in, then popped it into my mouth. When we lived in Oregon the first time, Mom and I had eaten greens we gathered from wooded areas surrounding whatever apartment we were staying in at the time. Mom hadn't had any kind of traditional job since I was born. She forced me to attend daycare for three weeks once, so she could go to work as an administrative assistant. However, after paying for rent and day care, where I sobbed at each drop off, there was barely enough left to buy food. So she quit her job and went back to receiving her monthly welfare check, which gave us lots of time together to search for herbs. She made tea from the tiny yellow chamomile buds, which I would drink after stirring in large spoonfuls of honey. I once picked some from my grandmother's driveway and brought a handful to her to make for tea, but she just asked me why I was dragging weeds into the house.



This was all before my mom met my new dad, who married her last year and adopted me. Up until then, it was just us two, gathering herbs in the woods, selling crafts at outdoor markets, moving from one apartment to another. I didn't think about the empty space where a "dad" was supposed to be. My mother and I had grown from the rich dirt of the forest together, all at once. We were like one organism, flitting from place to place, spinning in our homemade skirts, drinking in the sun and the rain as though that were all we needed.

Then Mom told me she was marrying Dad because I needed stability. Because I needed two parents and Mom was not enough for me. I pleaded with her to let us keep just being one thing together, but I knew the real truth.

I was not enough for her.

Dad stopped abruptly, causing me to nearly run straight into his backside. *Here*, he said, waving his arm in front of him. *Linda*, he put his arm around Mom. *This is the perfect place for a new house.*

The tiny trail continued ahead, flanked on both sides with deep woods. There was a scurrying sound in one of the bushes near me. *Where?* I asked, confused.

*It will be perfect!* Mom said. *We just have to clear it.*

As we stood peering into the bushes at nothing I could recognize as house-worthy, Dad reached around and tugged me close to him. He pressed my face into the scratchy denim of his jacket for a moment, until I pulled away. I reached around Mom's middle to hold her tightly. My head was now just past her waist. Leaning into her soft side, I breathed in chamomile and sunshine. She shifted Adrian over to her other hip where he kicked me solidly in the head. *Let go*, she said,

barked at me. *I've told you I can't have you clinging to me when I'm carrying the baby.*

*Chuck, she said, what do you think about putting in a nice deck? Looking out over the garden?*

I was ready to go back to my grandma's house. She was making my favorite tonight - fried chicken.

*Should we have the garden on the south side? Dad asked. Where should we put the greenhouse?*

It was also Tuesday night and we always watched "Happy Days" and "Laverne and Shirley" on Tuesday nights.

*Well, don't forget we need to have a space for cows and sheep, Mom replied. I want them to have lots of space to exercise and be comfortable.*

As they continued to talk about houses, animals and gardens that didn't exist, I felt my own needs becoming more pressing. *Mom, I said, I have to go to the bathroom.*

*Honey, it's the woods – go ahead and go.*

*Where?*

*Go behind a tree. If you have to go number two, wipe with a leaf.*

Although we had spent time gathering plants in the woods, I still wasn't used to just dropping my pants in the middle of nowhere. In first grade, I'd held my bladder all day once because I couldn't go to the bathroom if there was a girl in a neighboring stall. I'd just sit there

on the toilet, panicking until I gave up, my face reddening as I washed my hands for no reason. I walked a few feet off the trail into the woods. Adrian sat on the trail poking at the ground with a stick. He lifted it toward me, waving. Finding a tree I thought might be large enough to hide behind, I squatted down, feeling exposed, thinking of snakes and centipedes and spiders. I tried to relax. And peed all over my shoe. Shifting my feet, I snagged my sneaker on a vine, lost my balance, and toppled over, landing stomach first on a sharp snag poking up from the ground. The vine that had entangled my foot spread across the forest floor, sending tendrils up and around the tree trunk. I lifted my shirt to see a spot of blood right above my belly button. I wailed.

Dad appeared, shoving his way through the underbrush. *What happened?* he demanded, examining the large welt on my skin and the tiny drops of blood. I tried to pull up my underpants, but Dad picked me up and hauled me toward the trail.

*What's wrong?* Mom said, annoyed.

*She just took a spill,* Dad said before I could respond.

*You're fine,* she said. *Pull up your pants.*

Dad set me down and I pulled up my pants. I picked a large leaf and wiped at my wet shoe. *Can we go home now?* I asked.

*This IS your home,* Mom snapped.

*I meant Grandma's house,* I said, lamely. I really hadn't meant to say "home."

We had been living with my grandparents for two months we'd been back in Washington. In Nebraska my new dad had been doing public

relations for a friend's non-profit. Although it was better money than working as a stringer with the newspaper in Santa Cruz, California, where he was paid by the line, it wasn't enough to support a family of four. So when Mom's parents offered to let us live with them while Dad found a job, we crammed everything we could into our station wagon, gave the puppy I'd only had for a few months to the neighbor, and drove away from the flat yellow of the Midwest to the tangled woods of Washington. Dad had just gotten word he'd be starting his new job as a draftsman. My grandma had nodded approvingly at him and the house seemed a little less crowded after that. Although our noise and dirt and clutter clashed with my grandparent's perfectly color-coordinated home, I loved being there and wasn't in a hurry to leave.

But now I saw the two lines form between Mom's eyes that always appeared when she was angry. *Grandma's house is NOT your home. Now, stop whining and act your age.*

She turned and walked deeper into the wood. I sat down with a plop in the dirt. I'd make her turn around and come get me. But when I peeked up, I saw only their backs, Mom holding Adrian on her hip. They were talking again, already forgetting me. I dug in the dirt with a twig, then touched the swollen welt on my belly gingerly. Finally, I got up and scuffed over to join them. Mom reached out and stroked my hair as we all gazed at our imaginary new home.

This is the first chapter of my memoir, *A Bouquet of Weeds: Growing Up Wild in the Pacific Northwest* (High Frequency Press, forthcoming in 2026). Although part of a larger work, it stands alone as well. I love this piece because of the child narrator's voice used. I really enjoyed telling the story of my mother's attempt to transition from a wandering lifestyle to one that would be more settled and stable, albeit the wild environment she and my stepdad selected doesn't feel either settled or stable.

## SOMETHING TO SURRENDER TO

AUSTIN HOLMES

fear vibrates between flesh  
ricocheting off bone  
nothing is truly inviolable  
upon recollection

time reveals the seams  
and how to split them

every year  
I seem to unlearn  
my understanding of life  
the residue of memory  
clinging to me  
like cosmic dust mingling to new forms  
without purpose

yet at night  
I stare upward  
at the damselflies  
like dark strands of vitreous  
on the retina of the clouds  
darting away  
as the eyes chase them

before the sun  
arrives from the unwinding dark  
the old notes of night's world fade  
as though lightly fallen  
upon the skin of a dream  
and I give myself to it

The last few years have increasingly taught me that acceptance of human fragility and the ability to be vulnerable is an immense strength, and that often, when feeling crushed by the weight of things we cannot control, it is the intimacy of small moments that bring me back to Earth.

## BONE SUITE

AUSTIN HOLMES

Staring at these bones  
in the utter rhythm of sun  
they seem inevitable,  
but only might have been.  
In the Montana mountains  
scanning a meadow for barbed wire  
I stumble upon a half-devoured carcass  
a meal not yet completed.  
I suddenly feel  
not so alone in that vastness.  
I look to the spaces between the trees  
for eyes in the dark night,  
there is rain  
and mud,  
obscure shapes  
of their parietal art  
hovering in scorched shadows,  
jackrabbit jawbones  
not quite half-moons.  
The underside of pelvis bones  
shaped like owls,



these bones and bones and bones,  
bleached fragments on the edge,  
stillier than the breath  
of stone.

First published in *Columbia Journal*.

I've always had a fascination with bones and wrote this after some time spent in Centennial Valley. There were many moments of vulnerability in that land, both physical and emotional. Sometimes it takes feeling small in vast spaces to understand that, as Jim Harrison said, "To have reverence for life, you must have reverence for death."

## VILLAGE FIDDLE

KEN WALDMAN

I toted my junker, side seam already cracked,  
an old cheap box of wood that would take  
the steep banks of small planes aiming  
for runways, the bumps and jostles of sleds  
hooked to snowmachines, the ice, the wind,  
nights in the villages. Higher education  
missionary, I made rounds to students' homes  
(where I visited, but never fit), to liaisons'  
offices (where the state-issued equipment  
sometimes worked), to the local high schools  
and elementaries (where I volunteered service)—  
fiddle closer to my heart than the backpack  
full of books. Indeed, closer to my heart  
than the frozen broken truth: a bloody pump  
buried in utter darkness. Quick to unsnap  
the case, I scratched tunes where no one had,  
played real-life old-time music to Eskimos  
and the odd whites in that weathered land.  
The Pied Fiddler, I might have been, gently  
placing the beat-up instrument in others' hands,  
giving up the bow . Good for smiles and laughs.  
Random questions and comments. A third-grader:

*It must be like having a dog making noise—  
you must never get lonely. A high-schooler:  
Is it hard to learn? One of my college students:  
Why are you out here? Where is your family?*

First published in *High Plains Literary Review*, and *Nome Poems* (West End Press, 2000).

From 1990-1992 I was the one-person English Department at the Nome Campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where I taught mostly over the phone, and occasionally flew to Native villages to encourage my students to keep at it. Each village also had a school, which I'd visit as part of my service. In classrooms, I'd share both my fiddling and writing exercises. I can't emphasize enough how distant these communities are. In one, a teacher mentioned how her students had never seen a violin before, a remark which led to me writing this, my all-time favorite.

## NEW ORLEANS VILLANELLE

KEN WALDMAN

Decadence and humidity, New Orleans  
midnights might as well be 9 A.M.,  
the hour to rise up and get to it, see friends,

practice soul-making, and like occupations.  
Jazz and funk. Sundry drug-taking. Orgasm.  
Decadence and humidity, New Orleans,

magnetic crescent of extremes. The big fish wins.  
Schools lose. It's all a game,  
our race to rise up and get to it, see friends,

better inhabit this peculiar, insular maze of action,  
our magnificent and gigantic terrarium.  
Shadiness and stupidity? New Orleans

teaches us ecstasy and frustration.  
We expect change without change. It's always the same,  
always the hour to rise up and get to it, see friends,

vow to begin anew. And yet we daily spin  
out of control. One more pothole? No problem!  
Shadiness, stupidity, decadence, humidity. That's New Orleans  
by the hour. So let's rise up and get to it, my friends.

I write lots of occasional poems and lots of formal poems. But this unpublished villanelle, written for my 2015 New Orleans fringe festival run, remains a favorite since I felt it captured something essential of my New Orleans experience. I'm always a bit nervous when sharing place poems with people who live full-time where I'm writing about. But New Orleans readers and listeners took to this one. Me, I'm partial how I could interchange "decadence and humidity" with "shadiness and stupidity" and how I found room for pothole, orgasm, and an always slippery time of day.

## I'D RATHER BE INFLUENCED

PATRICK RAMSAY

to send more postcards.  
To kiss with more tongue  
and let cantaloupe juice  
run all the way down  
to my elbows. I'd rather  
be influenced to cook  
more quiche and make cold brew  
at home. To wake up early and stay  
in bed. To be better at remembering  
my friends' birthdays.  
To vote early. I want an algorithm  
that worships heirloom tomatoes.  
The sound of that one summer  
cricket outside my window.  
Peach sorbet with tiny spoons.  
The way the mountains go copper at dusk.  
The chatter of your dog laughing  
in a dream across the room.

First published in *Gwarlingo*, The Sunday Poem.

This poem marked the beginning of a new season in my writing. It emerged when I felt like I was finally settling into my life in Utah after years away. More importantly, I was settling into my own voice as a poet. I was slowing down. Whispering instead of yawping. I was making the case for a slower life, one where influencers focus their attention on unsellable glimmers of life beyond the algorithm. James Crews featured it as The Sunday Poem on *Gwarlingo* and it went viral. Funny enough: many folks sharing it online were the influencer-type who inspired it.

## BEFORE THIRTY

PATRICK RAMSAY

I streak through a golf course in nectarine light and self-destruct a little bit. Not in a Salamander Letter type of way, but like an old truck whose engine blows right after the warranty is up. I cancel the party. Detonate my relationship. Call in sick. Call my old therapist with the tattoos. Ask him if he's still engaged. Send up a flare. Can't believe it's taken me this long to realize the word hello and help are one autocorrect away from twinhood. I kiss everyone. Kiss goodbye to my savings account. Greet one thousand new hobbies with the fervor of a young dog. Tongue out. I only have so much time left to be reckless in my twenties. I was twenty-eight the first time a twink told me he loves older guys. This. This is why all the queens call thirty *gay death*. I feel too young, too childless, too cut loose to be someone's *daddy*. But maybe he was right. My mortgage, the chicken coop, the poodle-mutt rescue dog. I used to be stupid. Gloriously, aimlessly stupid. But at some point along the way: A bungalow, a career, a real live-with-me, go-to-weddings- and-farmers-markets-together partner. Someone must have tricked me. Tricked me into learning what a 401k is. What a deductible is. How to become interested in interest rates. I'm going to be sick. Sick and grown up forever.



And thirty is a perfectly fine age. It's the death of the *I did this in my twenties* thing that I'm mourning. Who damned me to grow up this fast? To man before I really was done boying. This is the part where I'm supposed to assure you that a job can be a dream, and mowing your own lawn, also a dream. But gut laughs, mushroom trips, occasional sex with strangers—also, also a dream. I know I know, that growing older grows on you, but youth is a temporary meadow with soft scruff, and I guess this is the long way of saying I'm afraid of losing something I didn't know was worth anything. Anyway, call me when you get this. Need to borrow your drill again.

This unpublished poem came out fully formed, like a platypus frog or a nervous confession. I was one week from turning thirty and wrestling with what that meant. As a gay man, aging is such a prickly arena, and many men treat thirty like a sunset of their dewy youth. This poem reflects on all the glorious stupidities of my twenties and what it means to realize (maybe a little too late) that you might just have become a man before you were really done boying. And I still don't own a drill.

## STILL LIFE WITH MORMONS IN MY LIVING ROOM

PAUL FERICANO

I can plainly see they are grateful and relieved  
to be inside off the streets where most

of the neighbors are cautious suspicious  
troubled by their persistence their

appearance their door-to-door politeness  
these two young gentlemen barely adult

dressed in handsome dark blue suits slightly  
larger than their almost grown-man bodies

clear sweet-voiced messengers  
who sit close to one another on my sofa

enjoying the cookies I just baked  
the familiar aroma hanging in the air drifting

into conversation like a memorable prayer  
in truth they can't quite believe their good

fortune their luck in finding me someone who  
really wants to hear what they have to say

in this cozy container a refuge from the cold  
biblical ambiguities of this day

thrilled actually to share their knowledge  
of God's chosen plan for his people

and so I bring it up I serve it up like holy  
communion: I want to know about men who

marry other men I want to understand exactly  
what it is what it really means when we

choose to be with one another without  
complaint I want to hear from these eager

young missionaries I want to know  
what the question is but first I coax them

to try the oatmeal raisin foolishly boasting  
that I use only the best ingredients just

the right amount of sugar no coconut  
pointing out that when it comes to oatmeal

cookies or anything else for that matter  
using coconut is the real sin here

and I smile and I give them a wink  
and suddenly they both stand as if on cue

startled these two sweet melodic  
declarations of truth on fire rapidly turning

the pages of ancient texts in their heads  
searching for cautious pronouncements

that arrive without warning these visiting  
angels who now ask in unison:

*Are you gay?*

Of course this is hardly the question I was

expecting to hear and equally surprised  
I also stand now wiping my hands on

my flowered apron and reply:

*Aren't you?*

This favorite unpublished poem of mine was written way back in 1980. Since it's always been a lot of fun to perform, I've particularly enjoyed sharing it at a number of public readings over the years. For some reason I never felt compelled to submit it for publication anywhere (until now). It was initially written a few days after an unexpected visit to my apartment by the two young missionaries mentioned in the poem. It wasn't until much later that I happened to learn that they had apparently tracked me down after following up on a tip from an old girlfriend of mine.

## SINATRA, SINATRA

PAUL FERICANO

Sexual reference:  
a protruding sinatra  
is often laughed at by serious women.

Medical procedure:  
a malignant sinatra  
must be cut out by a skilled surgeon.

Violent persuasion:  
a sawed-off sinatra  
is a dangerous weapon at close range.

Congressional question:  
Do you deny the charge of ever being  
involved in organized sinatra?

Prepared statement:  
Kiss my sinatra.  
Blow it out your sinatra.

Financial question:  
Will supply-side sinatra halt inflation?

Empty expression:

The sinatra stops here.

The sinatra is quicker than the eye.

Strategic question:

Do you think it's possible to win  
a limited nuclear sinatra?

Stupid assertion:

Eat sinatra.

Hail Mary full of sinatra.

Serious reflection:

Sinatra this, sinatra that.

Sinatra do, sinatra don't.

Sinatra come, sinatra go.

There's no sinatra like show sinatra.

Historical question:

Is the poet who wrote this poem  
still alive?

Biblical fact:

Man does not live by sinatra alone.

"Sinatra, Sinatra" was responsible for cementing (pun intended) my so-called reputation as a social and political satirist. Being an outlaw member of a poetry scene that seemed to have little interest in, or understanding of, the art of satire, I was constantly pushing myself and the envelope. The poem, a takedown of extreme conservative politics that used Sinatra's name in vain, was completed in early 1982 after many drafts. The poem actually managed to attract the attention of Frank Sinatra and get under his skin (again, pun intended). It provoked some poetry lovers to dismiss me and the poem outright (this was, after all, the Reagan era). But it also motivated many others who didn't really read poems to actually read mine. This favorite was the lynchpin for the 1982 Howitzer Prize, a literary hoax that mocked the absurdity of all competitive awards. After the intended target (*Poets & Writers*) was hit dead center, I dutifully exposed the hoax myself. This caused the usual righteous indignation and predictable blacklisting. But the overwhelming support of those who clearly got the message (and the joke) was all the more satisfying.

## SACRAMENT MEETING STARTED THE THREE HOURS OF CHURCH ON SUNDAY

NATALIE PADILLA YOUNG

A friend taught her how to pass the time: flip through  
the hymn book and add “in the bathtub”  
after any song title: *How Great Thou Art...in the Bathtub*  
*Now Let Us Rejoice...in the Bathtub*

*Did You Think to Pray in the Bathtub? Know This,  
That Every Soul Is Free in the Bathtub.*

An hour of speeches broken up by hymns,  
prayers and eating Christ’s blood and body (blessed,

white Wonder Bread and a doll’s cup  
of water for each worthy member).

She no longer sits through church meetings or questions  
her questioning, though often hums those hymns

around the house, slips holy  
ingrained choruses into a tub of hot water.  
Ears immersed, she can hear the sounds  
of her own choir. The heart’s bahdum, bah-dum



bahdum, too fast for its own good. *Rejoice a Glorious Sound Is Heard...in the Bathtub.* From a gurgle to a shout, rustling empty stomach. Whooshes of breath tunnel in and out. Hard enough

to simply sit still, then left to a porcelain amphitheater—*Where Can I Turn for Peace?* In the bathtub thoughts thud and whirl. *Come Along, Come Along With All the Power of Heart and Tongue.*

Maintenance of this submerged body too tough, too much *Master the Tempest Is Raging.* Not enough still, small whisper: *Ye Simple Souls Who Stray*

*Let Us All Press On.*

First published in *The Wax Paper* and *All of This Was Once Under Water* (Quarter Press, 2023).

I'm terrible at picking a favorite of almost anything, so I chose this previously published because I am proud of the craft. It does a lot of lifting to fill what was a gap in the manuscript/book, combining humor and religion, while helping to flesh out one of the main characters.

## TEDDY THOMPSON CROONS LEONARD COHEN

NATALIE PADILLA YOUNG

*tonight will be fine, will be fine, will be fine*

It's not even a love song,  
it's the last drop of milk on dry cereal: the I that knows small  
windows, bare walls, a finale of *soft*  
*naked lady*: a sighing stripped, a woman.

(Remember that first side sway, first spinning hug  
with someone of possibility? A lot of sweaty skins ago.)

Not just ooh-la-la slow stuff, also others  
with beats, a call to feet, to hips,  
to who must swing, must knock the head back  
in time—not century time, music time—4:4, two-step, whatever.

(Try not to remember. You still feel  
a grapefruit clenched in your chest.)

Maybe it's a full room in coordinated sigh. *I know*  
*from your eyes, and I know from your smile*  
An exhale in, out of  
that mouth. Maybe things will work, maybe just fine.

(A lot of things conjure craving,  
but he's only a man, a man too thin singing sweetly.)

At the end, there is plenty and not enough  
to be     *so brave and so free*     In this place without  
explanation, put Teddy on repeat. Teddy repeats  
Leonard and someone hums along  
       *for a while*

I must admit I have no clarity with this one—is it the poem or the song that I'm attached to? I wrote this when I heard Teddy Thompson cover Leonard Cohen's "Tonight Will Be Fine," initially thinking the lyrics were "tonight we'll be fine." I sent this little guy out quite a few times and then benched it for years, until a few months ago when I decided to revive and revise. Maybe go listen to Teddy sing Leonard and see what you think.

## THE WORRIER

*silent film star*

NANCY TAKACS

*Now that you are her, what will you do?*

I'll walk across the swinging bridge  
and light a clove cigarette.

*How will you roam?*

I'll drive a Packard convertible,  
my man in a long dark coat beside me.

*In the countryside, where will you land, and what will you eat?*

We'll find a bar in northern Wisconsin.  
We won't eat.

*What are you wearing, and what do you look like?*

An indigo dress, a little black cloche.

I've outlined my lips

to look like a sweet maroon bow.

*What songs will you sing?*

"Heart of My Heart"

And "I Don't Want to Play in Your Yard."

*Who will know you better than anyone?*

My silk chemise.

*What undergarments do you wear?*

None.

*What tree do you wear instead?*

The plum.

*Why?*

Because it's a palm full of dusk.

*What word will you use?*

Flagrant. It's time for this.

*Where does the word go?*

It rises from under my bare feet when I leave the beach.

*What is strange about you now?*

There is nothing strange.

*What is common?*

I have loved the first light.

*Where does the light go?*

It goes under the letters in captions of what I say.

*Where does the scent go?*

It goes into my eyes, my mouth, the way I turn my head  
so that you will imagine lilacs.

Initially printed in *The Tampa Review* and *The Worrier: Poems* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2017).

I guess this poem is a favorite of mine, as it's the first Worrier poem I wrote, and it called me back to write more Worriers, that became a book. I like the film star because she is strong, even though she is, in a sense, voiceless. However, in the poem, she has a voice. She takes charge of where she is going, is confident about her choices, and plays with the reader a bit.

## JUNK EMAIL

NANCYTAKACS

A Robert J. Smith  
wants to give me a free  
\$500 shopping card at Costco,  
me and a million others.

I picture him eating  
an everything pizza  
alone, sleeping with  
a book of passwords,  
pressing a white shirt  
before going to his church,  
The Truth Seekers.

I don't respond to his offer.  
But this Sunday my record  
skips in the background  
on the turntable, Mick Jagger  
cawing *Hey, you* over and over,  
when I notice that my bank  
balance is gone.

I change all passwords  
named for my former dogs  
to names of old hurricanes,  
call the credit union,  
the card company,  
leave urgent voice mails.

A blue beetle crawls  
across my screen's blank  
statement to my right finger.  
I lift her onto a thyme leaf  
so she'll live in its fragrance  
away from today's winds.

This is a desert town  
where wind never really dies.  
I like feeling swept.  
But then there are garbage bags  
from neighbors  
plastered to my fence,  
dangling on my trees,  
until they whoosh  
into the atmosphere  
like black balloons.



Now we're getting a snow squall.  
I open the door,  
step outside. Visibility zero.

This poem is a recent one. After losing my money (which could not be returned), I had to write this poem. After letting it sit for a few months, I kind of like it because the speaker is like most of us - vulnerable to hacking, without being aware of how easily it can be done with the touch of a key. In my case, which hasn't been resolved, the bank said a good hacker got hold of my password because I used the same one on another site. I now change passwords at least once a week.

BELIEF

MIKE WHITE

Flowers fitted  
into the shape  
of a cross.

Organ music  
with no known point  
of origin.

The arrangement  
of his coarse hands  
in the casket.

The too-white shirt.

The little touches  
he taught us  
you better believe  
show up on the bill.

This is a poem built up of fragments that I hope still manages to coalesce into a micro-narrative and, in some sense, a cameo portrait of an individual personality. That the personality in question is shown lying in a casket is rather typical of my work.

WITHOUT QUESTION I AM

MIKE WHITE

The blind man  
on the crowded night bus,

tap-tapping his way  
toward a dark window

mirroring the lot of us,  
refusing

with a brisk wave  
of his hand my hand,

which he knows  
without question I am

offering.

First published in *One*.

I thought this to be a suitable poem to (re)publish in a magazine dedicated to the nomadic life. True, the distance traveled in the poem is modest, but I was interested in the ways that we often discover ourselves in strange places (like a bus in the middle of the night!), places where the familiar boundaries separating inside and outside, self and other, are wonderfully permeable.

## THE FIRST TIME I SAW SNOW

JEFF TALMADGE

It was the day I turned five and winter in Texas.

My mother woke and walked me to the window  
at the front of the house, pointing outside, smiling.

*Look*, she said.

I asked her what it was we saw,  
thinking she had brought it for my birthday.

She was thirty-eight.

*Snow*, she said. *Snow*.

First published in *Miramar*.

I'm partial to short poems, which this certainly is, and I was happy with how much information and sense are conveyed in such a few lines. Only two words are quoted (one of them said twice). I wanted to convey a sense of the relationship without directly describing it. The scene, short though it is, captures that moment for me.

## THE LITTLE HOUSE: CRYSTAL CITY, TEXAS

JEFF TALMADGE

By the time my parents arrived at the prison

after the War and with their first son,  
the 10-foot barbed wire fence was down,  
the towers and corner spotlights gone.

The rifle-carrying guards who, around the clock,

circled the perimeter on horseback,  
had returned to their old day jobs in that  
desolate place, not quite Mexico, not quite

America, thirty-five miles from the border.

When the Alien Enemy Detention Facility closed

in the War's shadow, the school district got most  
of it, opening the houses to others  
like that young couple and their toddler,

who arrived from central Texas on a teacher's pay,

probably surprised that he, my father,  
was alive—and grateful, having come from nothing,  
to be living in what they called The Little House.

If I could wish someone well who is in the past,

I would wish it for them—that at least  
for that moment, they know some happiness  
in this life, believing, as they must have, inside

someone else's prison, that the worst was over,  
and they survived.



After World War II, my family lived in what had been part of an internment camp for people of Japanese, German, and Italian descent in Crystal City, Texas. This was before I was born, but my brother remembers it well, and always referred to it as “the little house.” It must have seemed like a miracle for my father to have returned alive. Here they were, having come from nothing, with a young child, starting a new life in that dry and distant place. I have few memories of them being happy and like to imagine that this was a happy time for them. Some of my description is indebted to Jan Jarboe Russell’s book, *The Train to Crystal City: FDR’s Secret Prisoner Exchange and America’s Only Family Internment Camp During World War II* (Scribner, 2015) and her related article in *Texas Monthly*.

## THE DREAM

SHANAN BALLAM

the shiny taste  
of rain when I inhale

love leads  
us back to the things  
of this world

the pink roses unfurl  
perfume

the moon is a white lily  
about to bloom

having a stroke erases half  
the world half

your working  
body and your

voice

the owl in the willow  
is a ghost  
it calls to me through the open  
night window, calls  
to me in my dreams  
in smeared colors

it sounds  
like windchimes

my lips taste like lilies—

the cold scent of rain on stones—

a dark curtain embroidered  
with light

the owl is a prophetess  
singing to me in my sleep

the owl is a part of the willow tree  
is a part of my heart  
whispering  
you will recover

fragrance of lilies in a glass vase  
the crabapple tree is dotted  
with pearls of rain

my lips taste like water  
that is: they have no taste

the rain has turned to snow  
it floats down in swirling spirals  
like falling  
into a dream

the windchime speaks  
in the voice of god  
like a waterfall,  
fluid,

like the song  
of a canyon wren  
tumbling down  
the canyon

last night I dreamed

I could walk again

First published in *Wordgathering: A Journal of Disability Poetry and Literature*. From *first poems after the stroke* (Finishing Line Press, 2024).

I survived a massive stroke on January 9, 2022. I had expressive aphasia—an inability to speak. This is one of my favorite poems because my speech therapist told me to observe what was around me and to focus on details. I used an exercise called “20 Little Poetry Projects” to get me started, and it asks you to focus on the five senses and to add synesthesia, mixing the senses.

## JULY

*for Dylan, April 20, 1989 – July 7, 2013*

SHANAN BALLAM

April isn't the cruelest month.

That would be July,  
the month you died,  
when asphalt gleamed heat  
and construction cones lined

the lanes on the break-neck  
freeway—

I slumped  
in the back like a sack  
of trash as our sisters and I raced  
tear-blind to the scene,

bodies flung  
side-to-side  
as we whipped in

and out of traffic, tires  
screeching,

only to stand stunned,  
worthless,

gagged with Dad's cigarette smoke—  
oh—I can still hear him sobbing  
in the scorching garage.

In April, crocus spear  
through soil, open pale purple,  
thin as tissue paper,  
lacewings luxuriating  
in the saffron  
like cats rolling  
on their backs in the sun.

In April, the lilacs' tiny blossoms,  
hard as oysters, begin to soften,  
and when they open,  
iridescent frills  
the color of pearls,  
their fragrance drifting  
through the windows,  
sheer curtains shimmering.

Maybe if I'd called you to say  
*I'm worried, I love you,*  
You could have said  
*Help me. Dad won't.*

In the cement basement  
I saw the message  
you scrawled on the wall:

*Why won't it rain?*

I saw your self-portrait  
in black spray paint.  
You blacked-out your own  
awful eyes.

The anniversary creeps  
closer, hobbled, like a baby  
buggy with one wheel  
missing.

July is cruelest because  
I still must drive  
past the hospital where the doctor  
pronounced you dead,  
past the chapel,  
its gold and crimson windows,  
past the Wal-Mart and the Maverik  
where you bought your beer and cigarettes,  
past the woman with the dead baby's  
footprints tattooed on her breast,  
and down there near the tracks:  
sagebrush, vodka bottles,  
and a single sego lily,  
basin blushed ruby red.



Oh July—you emergency!  
July with your wildfire heart.

But I drive past the field silvered  
with sprinkler mist  
where the two painted horses bend  
their graceful faces  
to the grass, their black manes  
shining in the falling sun,  
shining like your black hair  
in the obituary picture.

This time I'll stop  
the car, and we will walk  
to horses who know  
only this emerald field,  
its musky soil,  
know only the sky spreading  
its deep indigo,  
and we'll pull up clumps  
of silky grass.  
See how they move  
toward us, bodies glistening  
as the day disintegrates.

Together we'll touch  
the sleek gloss  
of their manes,  
their velveteen noses,  
see deep into peace,  
their wet, ebony eyes.

We'll stand together  
in the lavender light  
as the horses pull  
sweet grass  
from our hands.

My youngest brother Dylan Thomas drank himself to death at age 24. This poem is my favorite unpublished piece because it takes so many surprising turns and utilizes different tones—panic and calm. It contains surprising comparisons: the anniversary of his death compared to a baby buggy with one wheel missing and comparing July to a wildfire. I like how it contrasts April and July—extreme heat and early, raw spring—and uses connotations from Eliot's famous poem, "The Wasteland."

## MISSA BREVIS

KIMBERLY JOHNSON

If I prayed harder. If I prayed  
in Latin, in its syntax a rosary chain  
of convolutions. If I learned  
all the old vocabularies  
of supplication. If strove in koine  
simplicity, if surplined  
my pleas in the psalmist's supple play.  
If I prayed harder. Prayed better.  
If I learned all the holy, ancient  
tongues of desperation.  
If I learned new ones.

This poem just never made it into any of my books. I wrote it in about 2006, when I was researching the circulation of scriptural texts before the period of formal canonization and noting the recurrence of certain figures of speech across language traditions. I like that this poem never reaches a conclusion about what might happen if it finds success, that it instead finds itself primarily focusing on the medium of the effort itself.

## FOLEY CATHETER

KIMBERLY JOHNSON

I clean its latex length three times a day  
    With kindest touch,  
    Swipe an alcohol swatch

From the tender skin at the tip of him  
    Down the lumen  
    To the drainage bag I change

Each day and flush with vinegar.  
    When I vowed for worse  
    Unwitting did I wed this

Something-other-than-a-husband, jumble  
    Of exposed plumbing  
    And euphemism. Fumble

I through my nurse's functions, upended  
    From the spare bed  
    By his every midnight sound.

Unsought inside our grand romantic  
    Intimacy  
    Another intimacy

Opens—ruthless and indecent, consuming  
All our hiddenmosts.  
In a body, immodest

Such hunger we sometimes call tumor;  
In a marriage  
It's cherish. From the Latin for cost.

Originally published in *Poem-a-Day* on January 15, 2020, by the Academy of American Poets. From *Fatal* (Persea Books, 2022).

I'm not sure this poem qualifies as a "favorite," frankly, because it deals with such difficult material. But I think that it's effective in its willingness to reflect honestly on the combination of tenderness and brutality that eventuates when we choose to enter into relationship with others. Love brings along with it the opportunity, the promise, of one party seeing the other into their death, bearing witness to the horrors of that inevitability as well as the intimacies it produces.

## AMONG

CYNTHIA HARDY

a half dozen poems:  
five about sky—darkening,  
flattening, dampered by cloud.

Gray in all varieties  
now. The dark shadow  
of bark below fir  
branches, the pale  
trim of snow edging all.

We dream of color,  
of tropical gardens, all  
red, yellow, purple, green.

You say, *Are you  
dreaming?* I say, *Not really,*  
then tell all I remember:  
a sea, deep blue, the white  
collars of foam, the motion  
and relentless sweep towards  
brown sugar sand.

The same  
water tosses a boat around  
as I wander from deck to deck,  
down dim corridors, leaning  
on tilting walls. I am looking  
for you, or someone like you,  
and ride the bounce and shift  
like a tilt-a-whirl.

You drift there—in and out  
of focus—but I find you  
in every room.

One of a series of poems I wrote during the Covid lockdown period in Zoom meetings with Hippies in the Attic, a group of writers based in Green Bay, WI included in *Rude Weather* (Salmon Poetry, Ireland, forthcoming). It's partly a reflection on a recurring theme in my poems, including the weather and the sky, snow, and the porousness of the boundary between poetry and dreams.

## INSOMNIA

CYNTHIA HARDY

The pillow has heard it all: the litany  
of undone things. The horses stamp  
the barn at night; each thump of hoof  
against board accuses. *Not nearly enough hay,*  
they tell me, and *where's all the green stuff?*  
Snow fills their paddock to their knees.  
And what about my words to you?  
Should I have said *if* instead of *when*; what then?  
The darkness spreads full and warm. Blankets  
tangle. The cat pats my cheek with her untrimmed  
paw. Should I change the litter box now?  
Call a long-lost friend?

The horses set out across the land,  
looking for the barn they deserve, red paint  
and all. A stream flows year round, its  
banks curve, green plush, to the clear  
water. There are other horses,  
none with shaggy coats or dirt-packed  
hooves. The cat wants to be in the dream. She  
perches her wiry self on the black mare's  
back and weaves, tail spiraling for balance  
as they gallop off. You rise, say, *I'm*  
*going with them. Fine*, I say.



My eyes blink; blink propagates blink.  
I sweep the blankets across my shoulders  
like some Versace robe, a gown of sleep.

From *We Tempt Our Luck*, finalist in the Astounding Beauty Ruffian Press Chapbook Contest, 2009. This poem reflects some themes I often go back to—the horses, a cat or a dog, the impact of winter on the psyche, insomnia, and dreams. It was also a response to a set of prompts I set myself from bits of found language—in this case, the word “Versace.” The “you” in these two poems may or may not be a real person.

## MĀKARA BEACH

MICHAEL MCLANE

I fall in love  
my first step  
southerly slamming  
car door  
back onto my leg  
I bleed a little  
into my sock  
a good start

the baches  
more driftwood  
than intent  
the lone café  
closed and closed  
and closed  
paint of it  
sheared  
annually a reptile  
coming into its own  
cold blood

I smell death  
from the car park  
a short distance  
to the sandbar  
hiding the sea  
lion bloated  
about to sublimate  
there is peculiar  
sweetness  
to the air  
to the stiff flipper  
over the eyes

the invasion  
began here  
as certain as tides  
as certain  
as barbed wire  
twisted into  
crumbling cliff faces  
men stormed ashore  
frigid and trembling  
funneled up  
the valley  
to Karori  
and beyond

we need monsters  
most days—  
printers' marks  
survey site  
or crosshairs—  
gun emplacements  
is a gentle term  
gift or softened  
stance  
the pedestals  
still fit the human  
form perfectly  
parallel to wind  
farm perpendicular  
to wind

these are old fears—  
Dunedin's guns  
trained on  
the 19th century  
Russians invisible  
invincible unease  
teens fucking each  
new generation  
into being

in crumbling  
batteries  
ghosts of drowned  
Cossacks  
in the harbor

each time I return  
the beach littered  
with thousands  
of bluebottle jellyfish  
their spent casings  
saturated  
and prophylactic  
as myth

This poem was another early one in the NZ work, when I was still trying to navigate the tremendous beauty of my new home, the ferocious violence both inherent to its wild places and imposed upon them by humans, as well as the myths and urban legends that arose from the intersections of these qualities.

ON THE DISEMBARKATION OF SERGEANT NATHAN E.  
COOK IN AUCKLAND, 13 JUNE 1942

MICHAEL MCLANE

the photo is insufficient—  
a crudely drawn-map  
    shows only what emerges from the depths  
    what hides within is obscured  
    here there be dragons, no  
        here there be silhouettes and mimics  
there are only the hulking islands adrift, sloughed  
    from some distant continent of steel  
    full of flightless or unfledged birds  
we do not see the sky  
    which is the same shade of grey  
    as the hull  
we do not see the greens of gear  
    the shade of pine  
        the shade of gorse  
never know of the splinter in your hand  
    from the dock end of the gangway  
    made of local wood and weather-beaten  
your baggage, the unintended weight  
    is centre-stage  
        a black hole in the image  
your face half light, half shadow, you  
    on the dark side of the moon

First published in *Dark Mountain*.

Nathan Cook was the first American soldier to set foot in New Zealand during WWII.

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/first-american-soldier-lands-nz>

This is the first poem I wrote after my move to NZ in 2019. It engages with the strata of imperialism in NZ as well as the disorientation of someone far from home and perhaps well out of their depth. As my PhD work progressed, I continued to come back to it, taken by both its prescience for what the project would eventually become and its naivete (not unlike Cook's own upon his arrival) about the history in which the new arrival is about to be immersed.

## THE NOMAD

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