INSCAPE

WINTER 2023

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Front cover by Lisa Harbertson
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Inscape is the inward quality of objects and events as they are perceived by the joined observation and introspection of a poet, who in turn embodies them in unique poetic forms.

—*Gerard Manley Hopkins*

WINTER 2023

FICTION

S L O B *by* Shayla Frandsen / 7
Sympathy *by* Maddy Schow / 12
Burning Barns *by* Steven Fromm / 22
Slaughtered *by* Lucas Zuehl / 37
A Real Classic *by* Cosenza Hendrickson / 50

NONFICTION

Intersections *by* Bethany Jarmul / 3
Your Existence is Impolite *by* Clarissa Walker / 45

POETRY

On Eternity *by* Cosenza Hendrickson / 1
All of Them Witches *by* Erin Rhees / 10
The Dead *by* Alexandra Malouf / 17
The Casino Life *by* S.T. Brant / 21
One Piglet's Dream *by* Kenton K. Yee / 54

INTERVIEWS

Jill Christman / 55
Melanie Rae Thon / 61
Rio Cortez / 66
Matt Wickman / 76
Emily Inouye Huey / 81

ART

Quechua People of the Andes Mountains in Peru, 2022, #4 *by* Lisa Harbertson / Front Cover / 2
Into the Wilderness *by* Max Fisher / 4
Gathering *by* Berkeley Richard / 6
Observation One *by* Gabriella Warnick / 11
Beautiful Death *by* Aleta Goodwin / 16
Set Ablaze *by* Anna McIllece / 19
After Matisse *by* Aleta Goodwin / 20
Incompatibles *by* Abbigael Luchs / 36
Sitting Small in a Big Room *by* Savannah Liddicoat / 44
Empty House (de Jong) *by* Gabriella Warnick / 49
Roadside Stand *by* Berkeley Richard / 52
Fishy Lips *by* Anna McIllece/ 53

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

It took many sailors to man a pirate ship.

In the Golden Age of Pirates (approximately 1650–1726 AD), a pirate crew consisted principally of a captain, his first mate, and a quartermaster. The captain was the director of all affairs, his first mate the second in command. The quartermaster worked as liaison between captain and crew, enforcing discipline for those who broke the code, and, when necessary, officiating mutinous votes against the captain.

A crew of three could hardly man a square rigged sailing ship, though. Captain "Calico Jack" Rackam had a crew of fourteen, whereas Blackbeard boasted a crew of three hundred. Whether small or large in numbers, a crew always needed a cook, a gunner, a navigator, a carpenter, and a bosun. The common sailor was the least prestigious position on a crew, though no less important than the others. Trained to climb multiple–storied masts in both sunshine and storm, sailors were essential in minding the sails, which functioned as the engine of the ship.

I hope I haven't lost you, readers. I am aware that this is the editor's note of a literary journal, not a historical encyclopedia of pirates. But pirates and our literary journal have more in common than you may

think. The definitions of the word "masthead," after all, apply only to these three subjects:

1. Also called flag. A statement printed in all issues of a newspaper, magazine, or the like, usually on the editorial page, giving the publication's name, the names of the owner and staff, etc.

2. Also called nameplate. A line of type on the front page of a newspaper or the cover of a periodical giving the name of the publication.

3. Nautical.
    a. the head of a mast.
    b. the uppermost point of a mast. (Dictionary.com, 2023)

Across decades, pirates were unified by the notorious Jolly Roger ensign that flew from the uppermost point of their masts (definition three). Staff at our journal are unified by the title Inscape, a name representing our 40+ years of curating peculiar art and literature (definition two). Every member of a pirate crew was essential to its survival, they could not function with a captain, a first mate, and a quartermaster alone. Likewise, our journal could not survive solely on the backs of myself, my assistant, and our faculty advisor. Inscape hosts a thriving staff 44 members strong (definition one). The quality of our journal is due to the sweat of many sailors.

Our parallels continue. Contrary to the image Robert Louis Stevenson painted for us in Treasure Island, many pirates were not wealthy. Often, pirates chose their plundering lifestyle for the freedom and ample food portions it provided (a sailor pressed into His Majesty's Navy had a far more brutal existence, one with poor rations and without pay). At Inscape, we boast freedom of thought, and we're intellectually fed by rich pieces of poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, and visual art.

Pirates are often misunderstood by society, both historically and modernly. Bloody, merciless depictions of pirates run rampant in pop culture. While some pirates deserve this infamy—Henry Avery is one of them—many pirates, like Sam Bellamy and Blackbeard, abhorred bloodshed. Most just wanted to get out from under the monarchy's thumb and earn a living that kept their families fed and clothed. At Inscape journal, we toil on a work that society often misunderstands, too. Now, more than ever, our culture is turning away from the written word. At Inscape journal, we still believe in and fight for it.

Now, you may be ill at ease with the fact that I've made a comparison of this literary journal to a pack of historic criminals. Fair point. I am aware—and grateful!—that our staff doesn't "pillage and plunder and really bad eggs" (Bruns and Atencio, 1967). (In fact, you won't find a more upstanding group than our staff.) But our journal is obsessed with treasure, for we esteem quality literature and visual art as such. And all pirates—even if their first priority was freedom and food—lusted after treasure. This is what gives Inscape journal and pirates an inseparable connection.

Welcome to the good ship Inscape. I sincerely hope you enjoy the peculiar work you find within our waters.

Mikayla Johnson
April 2023

Sources Cited

Bruns, George and Atencio, Xavier. "Yo Ho (A Pirate's Life)." Disneyland Theme Parks. Disney, 1967.

"Masthead." Dictionary.com, DICTIONARY.COM UNABRIDGED, 2023, pp. 1.

ON ETERNITY

by Cosenza Hendrickson

Sundown swallows rise at the fresh of each morning.
Where children dammed the stream,
the cattle egrets pose
and the water spills over like smoothed time.

I write what I know
and the world unwrites all that I know
and the mud-brown fish keep multiplying
in their infinite dance
over dark sand.

INTERSECTIONS

by

Bethany Jarmul

A place within my memory, an intersection. A minivan full of dreams, desires. Frozen by red light. Knock, knock, knock-ity, knock. The sky cracked, hail shards cackling against metal and pavement. I'm a passenger, a child strapped in the back, ignorant of destination or direction.

I wonder: where do the birds go when the sky falls in frozen chunks? Do they hide in nests, beneath branches, leaf piles, under the wings of a lover or mother? Do they create cloaks of mud and flowers to protect their feathered heads, or rest unbothered in fluffy beds? Do they open their mouths, sipping the sky, inhaling Mother Nature's gift until it splashes into their bellies?

Thoughts, like birds, like hail, rap on the ceiling, doors, windows of this vulnerable vehicle, of my burgeoning self. They call out, crying. But I'm the only one who hears them. I have a choice—to answer or remain silent. Here in this electric place, an intersection.

2/2

'Into the

wilderness

2019

SLOB

by

Shayla Frandsen

"Slob," the cashier said.

The harried woman looked up from where she was setting a bundle of bananas on the conveyor belt. "Excuse me?"

The cashier smiled at her. He looked like he was eighteen years old, maybe not even that. Sixteen, probably working his first job.

And looking like he knew something about her that she didn't.

"Slob," he said again. He pointed at her like she shouldn't be surprised by the name.

"Stop calling me that," the harried woman said. She took a step back, and her hip bumped into the partition separating them from the next cashier stall. "That's incredibly rude. How dare you?"

His smile fell. He lowered the individually wrapped cucumber he'd been about to scan.

"It's—no, it's your necklace," he said.

Her hand shot up to her neck and covered the little letters she kept on a thin metal chain. She tried to look down, but the necklace was too short to see. A physical impossibility. She looked back up at the kid. "You better tell me what you mean, or I'm going to get your manager over here."

He held up his hands as if to say I'm innocent. "Those letters,

they spell out SLOB. Sorry, I thought you knew. I figured you were making some kind of statement."

The harried woman felt her cheeks heat. The cashier watched her, and she glared at him.

"Would you finish scanning the rest of my stuff, please?" she said.

As the groceries beeped their way into brown bags, the harried woman pulled her phone out of her purse. She pretended to be checking a text message, but she was really using her phone camera to look at her reflection. There they were across her neck, the initials she'd bought on Etsy two weeks earlier: S L O B.

S. Her husband Sonny. Met online, married almost eleven years. L. Lucy, her oldest daughter, five years old in January. O. Ozzie, her preschool son with the energy of a jackrabbit. And B. Benny the baby, now three months old.

The sixteen-year-old was right.

She stared at the total price blipping up and up, too humiliated to look at the cashier again. She hadn't even thought about the ordering of the letters when she'd named her kids. Hadn't even thought about it when she special ordered the necklace from a small business called "Dearest_Name_Jewels_1031."

Food bagged, card swiped. "Have a nice day," the cashier told her as she hauled herself away. The cart wheels squeaked across the linoleum floor. An old ballad played over the grocery store speakers but it was half-hearted, as if even the singer was tired of singing this same song over and over.

SLOB, her mind wheeled over and over. SLOB, SLOB. She had three kids under five years old and hadn't showered in three days. She couldn't even remember if she'd put on deodorant that morning. She

felt like nothing more than an animal, unable to control the scent, the flow, the fluctuation of her own being. This was the first time she'd been away from her kids all week, only because her neighbor offered to watch them for an hour.

The sky sprinkled rain on her as she loaded her groceries into the back of the car. She pressed a button, and the trunk door began to close itself. She watched her reflection ripple and distort in the rear window—her SLOB necklace going squiggly like heat waves above asphalt—before the door clicked closed and her reflection had settled into itself once more. Once it did, she gasped at what she saw: two darts of darkness on her chest.

Her nipples were leaking.

The baby would be hungry when she got home, and she would go to him. Her body would hear his cries and start to churn with milk in response. She would lift her sweatshirt, pull down her bra, and feed him with milk that she created herself. It was a feat that never, even on her third child, ceased to make her slightly dizzy with awe.

ALL OF THEM, WITCHES

by **Erin Rhees**

Who cares if you float or sink in Lake Constance?
Everyone knows you're a witch.
Conjure milk from the handle
of an ax. Grow plots rich with slippery elm
and nettle, charm the neighbor's ox
to speech. Listen, it was Mother who first
clotted cream with a glance, who,
in smothering dreams, still warns against
corners and all their gibbering shadows.
Don't sit there like an abscessed tooth.
Life purls. Like common knotweed, resist.
Look — flying ahead. A blue warbler.

SYMPATHY

by

Maddy Schow

Anise's favorite poisonous plants were delphinium, oleander, and lily of the valley. Especially lily of the valley, which she'd wanted in her wedding bouquet even before she knew the flowers could put a man into cardiac arrest. After she learned that tidbit, it had sounded even more appropriate for a wedding. A flower that could literally make your heart skip a beat? Not to mention the wicked play on "till death do you part." She didn't tell anyone about this joke after it had gone over poorly with her sister, who had always been, Anise thought, a little too sensitive about dark humor.

Anise's sister Hortensia was traditional, to say the least. Lilies for funerals, always lilies. White, like heaven: pure, innocent, sterile, like every funeral since the funeral when that first white lily had entered the folded white hands of some dead medieval maiden. Anise admitted there was Gothic charm in a traditional funeral, but people aren't all stuffy Victorians, and people aren't at all pure. Anise's passion ensured her father placed her firmly as manager of funeral arrangements upon his retirement from the flower business.

Anise had a flair for casket flower sprays, and she loved making them, to the point that she had planned arrangements for herself, her parents, and Hortensia (who, upon finding the scratch paper

plans, tore them up and threw them out). Anise imagined the flowers she would choose to complement every body that walked into the shop—purple roses for that red-haired woman, chrysanthemums for that man who whistled "Jingle Bells" in the middle of May, orange gladioli for the girl with the guitar. Everyone thought it was so nice how the flowers looked like they represented the person. Anise liked the compliments, and she liked the irony in the flowers being so full of life and personality while the person whose personality they represented was just a shell in a wooden box. She liked the fragility of flowers, the burst of color and life cut for a display that would only kill them, to decorate a party for a person who was only dead.

When the ice cream man came in to buy daffodils for his wife, she imagined what an ice cream man's funeral would be like. Would the pallbearers all wear white ice cream man uniforms? Would the organist play a solemn version of the ice cream truck's tinkling song? Anise imagined the flower display: cattails as popsicles, dyed daisies sprinkled among vanilla white and strawberry pink roses . . . maybe she could even use strawberry flowers, depending on the season the ice cream man died. It would have to be at the start of spring.

Anise bought a knife with cash and killed him in his driveway when he parked in the evening. She stole some money from his truck to make it look like that's what she'd wanted. And she provided the funeral flowers to his widow for free. He was always giving free little treats to the kiddos, after all. It was the least her family's shop could do.

Over the next few years, Anise waited and waited for the next time inspiration would strike so fiercely that she would kill to execute her design. There was an ornithologist. She had a vision of birds of paradise, blackbird lilies, parrot tulips. She sketched ideas. She tested

arrangements in the back room. She interviewed him to find out if she should emphasize the intense tropical colors or mute them with lighter plants. He was very soft-spoken. She would use a whiter variety of tulips. She killed him three summers after the ice cream man.

Then there was a beautiful, luxuriously dressed woman who came into the shop to buy herself a Valentine's bouquet. Anise pictured a devastating display of black roses, white lilies, and poppies. Dark, dignified, and scandalous. She killed her a few Januarys after the bird watcher. Her days became exhilarating. Waiting for her next project to walk in to buy flowers, watching for anyone who might be suspicious of her. Each time she pricked her finger on a rose she watched the blood bloom from her skin like a flower opening to the sun, and she reminisced, and she anticipated. Each wound she inflicted expressed the dark roses trapped within the body.

Anise met her late husband when she was thirty. He was a botanist and a romantic, with a wicked sense of humor, just like Anise was. The only difference between the two of them was that her sister seemed to like him. He and Anise were married in six months. Hortensia was suspicious of the wedding decorations, but not surprised by them, because she was a little too familiar with Anise's tastes. Delphinium, oleander, and, of course, lily of the valley strewn all over the rented ballroom. All out of reach of children and all away from the food because they were all "a little toxic," Anise and her fiancé said.

Anise's sister would not stop writing to Anise's husband. He showed her the letters, and laughed at them, because Anise laughed at them. "She doesn't like you much," he said.

"No, she doesn't. I can't recall what she even has a grudge against me for anymore."

"In this one she says you're conniving."

"How flattering."

"She calls you murderous."

Anise curled in close to her husband and looked at the letter in his hand.

Anise expressed to me a long time ago that she enjoyed the thought of planning a murder. I don't know what side of her you know and trust, but I know the most important side of Anise. She's never made friends with anyone without them being a tool, without them having some use, artistic or utilitarian. You're a trophy to a woman who plays at funeral planning.

Anise noticed that soon he stopped showing her the letters. Soon, he stopped even quoting them to her. For their one-year anniversary, Anise cut her husband's throat. "You sure do spend a lot of time reading what she has to say about me," Anise said, staring firmly into his eyes as he choked on blood.

She arranged the flowers for his funeral. Delphinium, oleander, and lily of the valley. She picked herself a bouquet before leaving, and she nibbled on the flowers in the car. At home, she couldn't stop herself. She ate until her heart stopped beating.

[THE DEAD, FLOATING TOWARDS SYRIA]

by Alexandra Malouf

My father's father, Hakob, was forcibly deported with his parents in the days of the Armenian Genocide from the village of Karmounj, near Yedessia. Going on foot, hungry and thirsty, sun-scorched and exhausted, they had reached Der-Zor. There the Turks had started to cut off the heads of the Armenians with axes and to throw them in the Euphrates River. It is said that the water of the Euphrates River was colored red by the Armenians' blood. My grandfather Hakob had miraculously escaped the slaughter. An Arab desert man had taken him as a shepherd to graze his sheep. After many years Hakob had married a girl, an orphan like him, and they had had three sons and two daughters. The three sons had named their firstborn sons Hakob in honor of their father. So, my name is also Hakob after my grandfather.

Our large Moutafian family, numbering 25 souls, lives up till now in Der-Zor and is well-known here by its prosperous situation.

There are also 10-15 other Armenian or semi-Armenian families in Der-Zor. The Armenians are in good friendly relations with the local Arabs. The latter are very kind and hospitable people. The Arab desert tribal chiefs often visit us. They always remember and tell us the narratives about the Armenian deportees they have heard from their fathers and grandfathers, about how the Turkish gendarmes had brought the poor Armenian exiles in groups to Der-Zor; they had massacred them and had thrown their corpses in the Euphrates River. That is why the Armenians erected, in 1991, right in the center of today's Der-Zor the Saint Martyrs' Church-Memorial complex

dedicated to the memory of one and a half million innocent Armenian martyrs...

[T]there is a large cave called "Sheddadié." Again, according to the testimony of Arab desert men, that name derives from the Arabic word "Shedda," which means "a place of terribly great tragic event." The elderly Arab desert men relate that the Turk gendarmes had brought the Armenian deportees, had packed them into that large cave, had shut its entrance and had set fire to it. There remained only the bones of the Armenians reduced to ashes...

Those, who come to Der-Zor, do not go back without seeing these places. But during the past few years, petroleum was found near Sheddadié, consequently the Syrian government has forbidden the visits to those places. But the names of these two localities, Markadé and Sheddadié, were given by the desert Arabs, who had witnessed the massacre of the Armenians with their own eyes.

Hagop Hovhannes Moutafian's testimony 1980, Deir ez-Zor, The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, www.genocide-museum.am/eng/Hakob-Moutafian-eng.php.

THE CASINO LIFE

by S. T. Brant

I have suffered all in thought, and set that sun of pain within the heart
to flame and flame and flame and burn the happy expectancies of life
that I may show the Sovereign Chance, the mean shadow of sweet Caprice,
Demiurge and Diceman, the dealer in the desert that knows the deck,
Shuffler of the gusto of pain and pleasure, the unevener coldly even-ing,
so that I may not endure the repetitions in the flesh these woes.

> We played our cards as every silver day grayed;
> so we'll play our parts as the world fades.
> When we met the savior in the desert on the 37th day,
> did you have any expectation the world would end this way?

BURNING BARNS

by

Steven Fromm

Even before Hall settled into his chair he looked out his window and saw that Mary Tyler Moore's office was dark. He called me in. I didn't feel any honor in that. I was just about the only one left.

"She's not there," he said.

"Maybe she's late."

"She's never late," Hall said. "In at 7:45. Sharp." He didn't turn to look at me, but sat hunched forward in his chair, elbows on knees and staring straight ahead as if willing her lights to come on.

"Maybe she took the day off," I offered.

"On Wednesday?"

"Right," I said, "she only takes off Fridays or one week at a time for vacation."

"And vacations are the first week in July and Christmas week," Hall said with the conviction of a priest citing a few lines from Exodus on the construction of the Tabernacle.

It wasn't Mary Tyler Moore's office, and it wasn't Mary Tyler Moore. It was an office on the 8th floor of the building across 30th Street from ours, a replica built by the same firm some 20 years ago. We were on the 8th floor as well, directly across. It was as if we had an unobstructed view into a parallel universe.

The woman we called Mary Tyler Moore had moved into the office across from Hall's about 18 months ago. No one could remember who she replaced, and we really didn't care. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, with straight, dark blonde hair, more than enough to transform a bunch of bored, middle-aged male office workers into voyeurs.

Hall started it off, of course, then clued me in. McNichol was next, followed by Sullivan, Peitras, Saidt, Weissman, Mullins and Perkins.

We were like a fan club, but with a different purpose. We didn't try to find out anything: her name, position, circumstances. Nothing. There was just an outline, and it was up to us to fill in the narrative. I guess the purpose was distraction.

Starting with the name. You'd think we would have made the connection straight off. We were all old enough to remember the series, or at least the reruns of the reruns. But we had help from Eight-Week Emma, a kid fresh out of Rutgers who started in the News Division of our office a few weeks before Covid triggered the quarantine. When we finally returned to the office, she lasted six weeks before getting caught in the cutbacks. She received her pre-ordered box of official business cards on the very same day she was summoned to HR for her official termination.

Emma hadn't yet learned the unwritten commandments of the laid off, and showed up at the office about three weeks later to visit office friends who had almost forgotten she'd worked there. Amid the aimless chatter about exhausted severance, unemployment checks, unanswered resumes and the nauseating realm of daytime TV, she mentioned that she'd joined the She Just Might Make it After All Club, a group of recently-axed young women who banded together

for support in the despairing wasteland of the jobless.

No one could figure out what to say to her as she chattered away, a ghost among the living, but we did know what to do with the accidental inspiration.

After she had a name, MTM came alive through a kind of daily pantomime that we recorded and debated: her breakfast ritual of herbal tea and a raspberry Yoplait (we could see the packaging); the way her posture went rigid when talking to a client on the phone, but slumped back in her chair, one leg tucked under her, twirling her hair as she chatted with a friend.

There was the brief infatuation with yoga, her little yoga matt sticking jauntily out of her back pack as she marched out the door. Then there was the mid-week pub crawling that led to hangovers so palpable Mullins alleged he felt woozy as he watched her delicately sit down at her desk, pasty white, blouse uncharacteristically untucked in back.

We even catalogued her wall art, which seemed to change every few months. She started with two large Thomas Hart Benton prints: People of Chilmark and Burlesque. Then she went through a feminist phase, a mini-Mount Rushmore of portraits: Martha Gellhorn, Susan Sontag and Gertrude Stein. These were eventually replaced by urban photography, which were tougher to identify, but Perkins finally tagged them as works by Zhou HanShun, Fernando Sanchez and Andrew Mace.

"Zhou HanShun?" Peitras asked. "Our young lady is growing up."

All of it bits and pieces, hieroglyphics of movement and idiosyncrasy gathered like warm matter and sculpted by our hands.

Two of MTM's office mates, women about the same age from

down the hall—Mullins called them The Rhodas, named after Mary Richards' sidekick on the show--would stop by on Friday mornings, coffee mugs in hand. They were no doubt exploring the potential of the approaching weekend: bar hopping, brunch, strolls through the produce stalls along Union Square. Sometimes the talk was clearly animated, all of them laughing and leaning in close.

This triggered speculation of a different sort.

"It's a boyfriend," Perkins declared.

"You think she dates?" Mullin asked dryly. He seemed offended.

"I think she does a lot of things," Perkins said.

"You always think everybody does a lot of things," Sullivan said.

"Mary Tyler Moore didn't," Peitras said.

"You mean the real Mary Tyler Moore or Mary Richards?" I asked.

"Mary Richards," Mullin said. "She never dated."

"That's bullshit," Perkins said. "She dated plenty."

"I didn't mean she didn't date," Mullin said, "I mean she didn't date, if you know what I mean."

"Aren't we being delicate," McNichol said.

"What's wrong with a little delicacy?" Sullivan asked.

"Nothing's wrong with a little delicacy," Perkins said. "She's a little delicacy."

"Watch your mouth," Sullivan warned.

There was at least one breakup.

Or at least it looked like a breakup: her office door closed as she held lengthy conversations on her cell phone—not her office phone—followed by quick hang ups and long, still silences, elbows on desk.

"Is she crying?" Weissman asked.

"Maybe. Are there shoulder shudders?" Hall asked.

"What's a shoulder shudder?" I asked.

"You know: get angry, get ready to cry, try and suppress it, then you see the shoulders kind of shudder. It's a shoulder shudder."

"This isn't Bette Davis," Mullins said, "this is Mary Tyler Moore."

The three of us stood at Hall's window, not directly in the center but a bit to the side—we weren't complete fools—and watched in silence. It took about 90 seconds, but we saw a slight movement of her shoulders, something more like a shiver that seemed to start on her left side and shimmer over to her right.

"I'll be damned," I said.

"And you," Hall said, glaring at Mullins, "owe Bette Davis an apology."

I can't say exactly how long this went on. I sure can't say how much we got right and how much was the flotsam of imaginations churning away day after day. But I do know it worked. Or at least it helped. We all knew what was creeping up on us. Every ring of Hall's phone added to the cluster of empty cubicles and desktops that spread out like trenches deserted after battle, littered with abandoned company calendars, stained coffee mugs and scattered constellations of yellow Post-Its. We were journalists, and journalists were going extinct. Covid had transformed a steadily eroding situation into an outright conflagration. The layoffs kept coming. Round after round. Members of our little clique were spared in the early going, but we knew it was just a matter of time. There was no place to go and nothing we could do. So we took turns loitering in Hall's office, gazing out his window. It was a great diversion, until it wasn't. Hall noticed it first. One of the windows at the end of MTM's floor suddenly went dark.

"I think it's Rhoda One," Mullins said.

"Which one was One?" I asked.

"The blonde," Mullins said

"Shit," Perkins said. "I liked the blonde."

It indeed was Rhoda One. Rhoda Two, the brunette, the one fond of tiny floral cardigans, still made the daily pilgrimages to MTM's office. But the light, giggly atmosphere was gone, and Rhoda One's office stayed dark.

It spread at an exponential pace from there. Next was the window directly above Mary Tyler Moore's office, on the 9th floor. We had no idea who had been there, but there always had been a light burning from 8 til 5. Now it was like the dark side of the moon. Then it was one below, on the 7th floor, and two offices over.

Another office on 8 was next, three down from MTM. We all knew the choices were narrowing, so we hoped for something that seemed unimaginable just two weeks ago: for Rhoda Two to go under the bus. I guess it's a reflex that comes with survival. At least that's what we told ourselves as we fought the self-loathing.

Rhoda Two's office went dark the next Monday.

Every week brought with it another Friday massacre. The window next to MTM's, then another two doors down from the other direction lost their light in quick succession. We all stood there, the dry, bemused comments thinning out to silence. It was like some kind of distorted mirror reflecting back our own world.

And then it hit home.

The first to go in our group was Mullins. Peitras was next, followed by McNichol. Saidt and Sullivan were called in at the same time. Perkins saw the handwriting on the wall and quit, sacrificing the unemployment checks and severance for a sure thing at his

father-in-law's printing shop.

The dirty work was left to Hall. His phone would ring and he'd be summoned up the internal staircase to the 9th floor where some VP from HR would give him the names. No one knew how they were chosen. We were just names on a list.

Hall, accompanied by someone from HR, would call the latest victim into his office, mumble his way through a corporate script and watch the pall creep across their stunned faces. He ended each one by sliding an HR packet across the table. At that point it was the only noise in the room. They were like toe tags for the corpses.

I was just about the last man standing. I have no idea why. And there Hall and I stood, staring across 30th Street at MTM's dark office.

"Did you check out what she had on her wall the last week?" Hall asked.

"Not really," I said. "Mullins was the guy who usually tracked the art."

"She went back to Benton," Hall said, looking up at me. "Just one. I Googled it. The title was Burning Barn."

"Quite appropriate," I said. I peered back into her office. From what I could make out, the walls were bare.

"Do you think she was sending us a signal?" Hall asked. He wasn't looking at me anymore, but back across the street.

"A signal?"

"You know," Hall said. "Her way of making some kind of joke out of it, like a gallows humor kind of thing. But sending it over to us."

I looked down at him. Hall had never been much on sentimentalizing. That's why the VPs chose him to do the dirty work. I guess things can change when the circumstances get bad enough.

"I don't know," I said. "It's possible." Even though I knew it wasn't. But I could tell it was something Hall wanted out there, and he wanted it left alone. So I left it alone.

We were silent for a few minutes, and then Hall mumbled something.

"What?" I asked.

"Her name," he said.

"What about it?"

"I know it," he said, looking up at me from his seat. "I found it out."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just looked at him, waiting.

"Do you want to know it?" he asked.

"No," I said. I didn't even have to think about it.

Hall didn't say anything else. He sat at his desk, chair swiveled toward the window. I'm not sure he was even looking at MTM's office anymore. He just seemed to be staring through the glass.

I went back to my desk and started sorting through papers, though it didn't seem to matter much. McNichol had been my boss, followed by Perkins. Hall was the only one left in a supervisory position in my little division, and my productivity didn't seem to be a priority.

I was surrounded by empty cubicles. The nearest live human being, beside Hall, was Gibbons, a copy editor, but he was well beyond ear shot. I gave him a little wave, but he didn't nod back. It was like I was invisible.

I decided to chew up more time by playing Wikipedia Drift. I'd just let my mind wander until a name popped up, then look him or her or it up on Wikipedia. Yesterday it was Frederick March, Myrna Loy and Dana Andrews, because I'd recently seen the end of The Best Years of Their Lives on public TV. Today maybe I'd concentrate on

people who'd died suddenly or mysteriously, like Pete Duel, James Dean or Joe Kennedy Jr.

I was five minutes into Pete Duel when I sensed someone reading over my shoulder. I thought it might be Hall, but it was Gibbons. That made sense. Gibbons was the quiet type. He didn't enter a space, but just seemed to appear. He was so close his protruding belly was nearly touching my elbow as he peered over his smeared spectacles at my screen. He knew what I was doing. Just about everyone in the office was doing the same.

"Pete Duel?" he asked.

"The one and only," I said. "Bet you a buck you can't name the series he was in."

"Alias Smith and Jones," Gibbons said. He didn't miss a beat. That's the thing with copy editors. They know the oddest stuff.

"You are correct, sir."

"But why are you reading about him?"

"He died mysteriously."

"Not really," Gibbons said. "He shot himself."

"There you go."

"But that's not mysterious. He was depressed or something. So he shot himself."

"He had a hit series, was doing quite well, and then all of a sudden on Dec. 31, 1971, he just caps himself?"

"That's still not mysterious," Gibbons said. Gibbons was the type who didn't care much for any interpretations other than his own. Gibbons was not a popular man.

I deleted the page, turned and looked up at him. "Is there anything I can do for you?" My tone was as dry as parchment, but such theatrics

were lost on Gibbons.

"Hall," he said. "I need him to look over the Bateman column."

"Hall is most likely in Hall's office."

"Hall is not in Hall's office," Gibbons said.

"Maybe Hall is in the can, or maybe Hall is getting a cup of coffee," I suggested.

"Hall is doing neither. I think Hall is gone."

"Then wait 'til Hall gets back."

"No. I don't mean gone. I mean gone."

We looked at each other for a moment, Gibbons still hovering close. I knew what he meant. Gone as in gone.

"I'll take a look," I said, getting up.

"What about the Bateman column?" Gibbons asked, stepping back to give me room.

"Send it to me," I said as I walked toward Hall's office.

"And what about my dollar?" Gibbons said.

"What?"

"We bet a dollar. On Alias Smith and Jones."

"I'll send it to Pete Duel's widow. She needs it more than you do."

"He wasn't married," Gibbons called after me. "He only had a girlfriend."

Copy editors. You can't get anything past them.

Gibbons was right. Hall's office was empty. It was more than empty. It was vacant. His coat was gone, along with all of the personal artifacts and detritus that collects on someone's desk over the years like substrata from an archeological dig. The photos of his wife and children, the paper clip puppy made by his youngest girl in art class, the miniature baseball bat that some intern had bought for him after

a visit to Cooperstown. All gone.

It took me a little less than a minute to take all this in, and maybe 90 seconds to realize that I'd probably never see Hall again. I wasn't surprised. If you have anything remotely resembling normal DNA there's only so much you can take. You pack your paper clip puppy and head for home.

I walked to the window and looked down at the intersection of 30th and Madison and the steady stream of people passing through. There were always so many, an inexhaustible flow no matter what time of day. I only got to see them for about 200 feet or so before they disappeared from my view, disappeared forever, but that didn't stop me from wondering where they were headed, what they were carrying in all of those bloated backpacks and most importantly what they were thinking. Not generally, but just within those 200 feet. What would their thoughts sound like? Would we hear splinters of bedlam or some kind of unified melody? I'd vote for a melody, a sound that lit up the spheres. Something soft and intricate, a sound we'd never heard before but instantly knew was smoothed and sculpted by the hands of some creator. It would give us the feeling that we were part of some plan, some design, some kind of direction that would eventually give us good reasons for why we have to live in fear, for why we're stripped down to nothing but one urgent little prayer, like some kind of mantra for the new century: Please don't push the button that sends me out onto the very street I'm looking down at from Hall's desolate office.

I just stood there and let the thoughts coast through my head. It was kind of a relief. I didn't have to answer anything or make any decisions, and I didn't have to leave Hall's office and go back

to my useless little cubicle and a room filled with echoes. Echoes and Gibbons.

That's when I saw a shadow in MTM's office, a quiver of movement. I moved closer to the window and peered across 30th. There was someone in there. At first I thought it was a secretary or intern sent in to clean out the last remnants of MTM's existence. It wouldn't be a replacement. No one was hiring that fast.

It was a man in a blue shirt. He eased himself behind MTM's desk and sat, his back to me. He was motionless for a full minute or more, seeming to stare into the dark screen of MTM's cold computer. Then he reached out and touched it with his fingertips.

It was Hall. As soon as his fingertips hit the screen, I knew. He'd somehow conned his way past the building security to get up to her office. I moved into center view of Hall's window and tapped on the glass with my knuckles. It was more out of instinct than any real expectation that he would hear me. I thought of opening the window, but remembered they'd been sealed shut for as long as anyone could remember.

I didn't move from the middle of the window. Hall would eventually turn around. He'd want to know what his window looked like from MTM's vantage point. That's what I'd want to see. I'd stare over from the opposite side of 30th Street and think of how Perkins or Sullivan or Mullins looked all those months ago as they peered through our little portal and waited for some tiny detail to be rationed out by the happenstance of MTM's life. It wouldn't matter if they had no idea what was going on. It never did.

Hall turned and noticed something to his right. He stood up from the chair and walked out of view, then came back a few moments

later, moving in front of MTM's desk toward the far wall near the door. He was carrying something. His arms were raised up and out, and then went slightly down. Hall was hanging something up. When he was done he sat back in MTM's chair and looked straight ahead, as if surveying his handiwork. Then he suddenly swiveled around and faced me. Our eyes locked. Just like that. I waited a beat, then did the only thing I could think of: I smiled and gave him an anemic little wave.

He shot back a full grin and spread out his arms in a ta-da kind of way, like he was a magician who'd suddenly materialized from a puff of stage smoke. I hadn't seen Hall smile like that in months. He was really pleased with himself.

I pantomimed a call-me-on-the-phone gesture by placing my hand near my face and shaping it like a phone, the little finger and thumb stretched out. He shook his head no. I did a little inward-arcing wave, the universal come-on-back gesture. He did the head shake again. I tried again, but a bit more emphatically. He shook me off one more time. I didn't know what to do, so I gave him a shrug and as confused a look as I could muster. He held up his index finger, got to his feet, bent over and pulled MTM's window wide open. It was like peeling back some kind of murky film. His light blue shirt popped in the sudden light, starkly contrasting with his pale face.

I noticed the visitor's decal on his left shirt pocket, his official visa to MTM Land. He shouted something over. I pointed to his window. He shouted some more. I guess he didn't remember, so I acted out trying to open it, giving it a few exaggerated, ineffectual tugs before he raised his chin and nodded. Then he snapped the fingers of his right hand as if remembering something, took a few steps to the

side so I could see into MTM's office, and pointed to the far wall. I stooped down and looked straight ahead. He was pointing to the picture he'd hung. It was Benton's Burning Barn. I guess MTM had left it behind. I flashed Hall a thumbs up, then started clapping. It wasn't any gesture. I was really clapping. Gibbons could probably hear it. I didn't want him coming in, so I stopped.

For a few moments we stood still, looking at one another, two mimes at a loss. I was about to give him another come-back wave when he made his move. It was so fluid and sudden it was like he was on one of those old 8-millimeter films that skipped a few frames. One second he was standing in MTM's office, the next he was on the ledge, his shirt and hair rippling with the wind.

He gave me another ta-da gesture, but tighter to keep his balance. I don't know what my face looked like to him. All I could do was watch and wonder what it was like to be out on that little window ledge, the generations of dry pigeon shit crackling under your shoes, the noise from the unwitting street below like some kind of rushing river. Just you and merciless gravity. Just you and the delicate, humming skin of your own existence.

All stripped and bare and down to that, as simple and clean as it can get.

I wanted to ask him all about it, to get all the details, all the sensations. I had so many questions. I was lining them all up when Hall smiled at me, gave me a playful salute, closed his eyes and leaned forward.

SLAUGHTERED

by

Lucas Zuehl

It's August, and I am thinking of old friends. I count the house numbers, my shoulders sweating under the guitar case strapped to my back. Even in this Minnesotan neighborhood, which tries very hard to be an antithesis of the South, the wet air steers my thoughts to Nashville.

We shared two meals a day. We slept until noon. Caroline would spend days strumming her deep black Taylor guitar from her bed. I would fall asleep to the light chords and wake up to those strings still ringing. Henry would kneel on the carpet between our beds, writing stanzas in his pocket journal. I strung his lines into melodies. I left the window open so that the sparrows could sing with us. And then we made songs about them. We played our songs barefoot in the grass. We played strolling down the shore of the Cumberland River. We played in coffee shops where no one was getting coffee. We played in cramped bars where no one knew what we were saying.

I see the clouds, still the rain catches me out

I'm praying for a drought

We were in our early 20s, and the sun rose and set for us.

Until we had finished a gig one muggy night in spring. The crowd that night was really into it, and a few familiar faces sang along with

our originals. I felt the cloudy image of my dreams come into focus.

"I have to tell you guys something," Caroline said. She stopped under the light on the street corner, even though the walk sign was on. I recognized a water-stained poster from another local band peeling off the metal pole. "My mom isn't getting better. I have to move back home and be with her."

"Can't she move here?" Henry asked.

She shook her head and explained how much she had thought this through. Her mom's cancer was back. No one could predict what would happen to her. She had talked on the phone with her dad that morning—the decision was already made.

"You lived with your mom for eighteen years. Wasn't that enough?" I said.

"That's different, Faye, and you know that. That was me living with her. *She* needs to live with *me* now. I can't be so selfish."

A week later, her side of the room was empty except for the black guitar she had left on her mattress.

I still felt like she would come back; she'd change her mind or her mom would die quickly. But we could make it for the better. Henry taught me guitar. I realized friends didn't look at each other the way we did. He moved into Caroline's bed, though we soon ended up sharing my twin. I fell in love with running my hand through his wavy black hair, his breathy voice in my ear. He wrote me songs and I sang them back to him while he folded our clothes. We danced to Big Thief on the linoleum floor between the fridge and the TV. For five hours a day, I took calls at a phone company, and all the rest—gigs at night and morning walks and my dreams—I was with him. He

was my obsession. He had pierced my life and filled it with his lyrics.

We drew our biggest crowd yet at a festival on the city's outskirts. Hundreds of short-sleeved people holding tote bags and plastic cups swayed and smiled at our music. A wave of bliss drifted over me, and I didn't think about how I looked, how my voice sounded, or even how well I could hide my guitar playing under Henry's. After all the years alone, I could share something with this many people. I had dreamt of this since I was a little girl. We were all alive together, and I dissolved into the crowd.

Sound it out to this empty house, was it just like you had before?
Savior fell from an open mouth, could you want to be something more?

After a rainstorm, Henry and I walked to an abandoned bridge. The wet cracks in the pavement were dark like his veins. We sat with our legs hanging over the edge, in between tufts of grass, and I wondered how weeds could grow on something that's not even connected to the ground.

"Do you think you were meant to do this?" he said.

"To sit on the edge of this bridge?" He didn't smile back. The brown river below us swirled, and I sighed. "Yes. I mean, there's nothing else."

"Even though you couldn't make it without me?"

I laughed, but his face stayed blank. A hole slowly opened inside my ribs.

He went on. "I got offered to play for a band in LA. I'm starting in a week or so."

That was worse than I had expected. I had so many questions,

but couldn't make myself ask them.

"I thought . . . we're doing so well, though."

"Maybe for you."

I gripped the rough corner of the pavement, watching the muscles in his face do nothing. "Why didn't you tell me about this before you agreed to do it?"

He paused, his eyes empty. "I didn't think you would care that much. You're just not as into it as me. You don't play an instrument, and you don't write songs. You sell your mind to a company, taking the same calls from different worthless people over and over again. While you're at work, I'm still writing. I'm doing things that matter."

I didn't recognize his voice. "Do you even know me? Everything I do is for us and this dream," I said, the air choking me. "What have I been to you all this time, a pretty face to sing your fake, absurd lyrics up the octave?"

He hit me so suddenly it felt soft, like the wind. He hit me and I couldn't breathe.

I took Caroline's guitar and left on a train headed north that night.

That was last September.

For months I wanted to go back, or for him to come to me, even in a dream. I wanted to call him and ask how things were with the new band, but I didn't because I didn't want to know. I found a place with five other roommates in Minneapolis. I wrote songs about him and I got better at guitar. I practiced on the third-floor balcony, the only place I could be alone. But it was like starting back at zero. I played at open mics in restaurants, I played on the street in the freezing rain, I called bars and begged them to let me play

in exchange for a discounted meal. Still no one offered me gigs. No one noticed me. October, November, and December passed, and a part-time secretary job wasn't enough to cover the rent increase, so I took the night shift in a meat-packing factory a couple of blocks from my apartment. Five nights a week, I got into a white suit to lift raw hunks of beef onto scales and wrap them in plastic. I carried the smell of bleach home with me at 5 am, too tired to shower. On the weekends, I tried to perform or write or at least practice my songs, but I'd spend more time in bed, staring at the ceiling.

One day at work, I thrusted the stainless steel shear through my finger instead of the plastic wrap. The blade split through my latex glove, and my blood seeped into the red meat crevices, mixing with the cow's blood. I bandaged it, but when I peeled it off the next morning my finger had swollen and turned white. I couldn't afford a trip to the doctor. My walks to work were fleeting moments of relief when the lump would freeze and become numb. The next few days it stung so bad that my tears spilled down my suit and pooled up around my ankles. When my coworkers went on their break and I had the room to myself, I collapsed onto the metal floor. Machines rattled against the greasy tile. I clutched my pulsing hand, staring back up at the skinned cows hanging from the ceiling. I didn't feel bad for them, even though I knew their pain. To get through the slicing and handling and packaging, I always had to tell myself that they were just beef, not cows.

I was just Faye, not a singer. This was real life.

I trudged through the dark, frozen months remembering and forgetting. After my finger healed enough to play again, I strummed the same chords over and over and couldn't think of any new tunes

or words. I floated to work and back.

In May, the office where I was a secretary offered me a marketing internship. It was my first real opportunity, but it was unpaid, so I had to take on more hours at the factory. Every morning I put on a skirt and blazer to make PowerPoints and sit in meetings, then changed into sweats to wear under my suit at the factory. Breathe in networking. Breathe out resumés. Spreadsheets. Promotional campaign designs in 32-size font—make sure it's a sans serif; those are less threatening. Grab a drink at Velvet Pub with the other interns and complain about our supervisor. On the weekend, apply for jobs. Scroll through TikTok. Play the free version of Candy Crush and count it as productive because I can analyze the popup ads. No more time to waste singing songs for no one to hear. Henry was right.

The radiant early summer months rotted into August, and my bank account bottomed out. I turned to my only possession worth anything.

I stop at #162. This is the house. Potted plants hang from the top of the porch, draping vines onto woven chairs. I hope to God this woman isn't buying my guitar to sit on a wall as house decor.

I knock on the door, and she comes out with a smile.

"Could I test it out before you go?" she says. I tell her yes, and watch her fumble with the latches on the case. She slips the guitar over her head, and I realize it's been a year since I've seen this guitar in another's hands. The scuff right below the neck isn't visible at this angle.

She begins plucking and I see the sparrows outside my Nashville window. Warm memories of friends and carpet and journals and

dancing and chords surround me. It's gone now, I know, but for a moment I feel like I'm back.

Heat floods my cheeks, and I laugh."Can you keep playing? I love this song."

We sit next to each other on the porch and I sing along. The familiar words, the familiar place where those notes sit in my throat. I let the music out one more time.

Corduroy lines, black and silver lies
Show me the ending, show me while I sing

I know this is for the better, it's just letting the lasts go. There was a last time I fed my pet fish. There was a last song I listened to on my iPod Shuffle. There was a last breakfast I made for Caroline. There was a last time Henry breathed in my open mouth. There was a last time my father tucked me in at night. There was a last time I cried in my mother's lap. There was a last time I prayed to a blank bedroom wall. And there is now.


SL 22

YOUR EXISTENCE IS IMPOLITE

by

Clarissa Walker

I have an extra tear duct. You can see the little hole in my face, like a pin prick, just below its working counterpart. Every time I show someone they ask if it works. I feel a little reluctant to tell them, "No. It doesn't work." I don't know if it ever has. I believe it never did, but I know it doesn't work now. They say "huh," as if my extra nonfunctioning body part has just disappointed them. I don't like to dwell on that.

I want to make you as aware as I am of my broken tear duct that there are highways in your face. Inside of your face, just below the very polite layer of skin that makes your lover blush and your great aunt coo, there are tubes and tunnels, bustling right there. We call them veins. They pulse and flow and clot without your permission. You have no idea what they're doing; they just function. They're a secret. When a person looks at your face, there is a hushed understanding that beneath your surface, your sinuses sit. It would be impolite to point out, but we know it to be true. The insides of us hold scandals. A woman's uterus, your blood, urine, and excrement. Say anything and it's potty talk. Sweat seeps from your pores and we do not bring it up. We don't talk about these things because grandma would glare from across the table, and you'd sink in your wooden chair with a

deep regret that only the elderly have authority to call. When you're a kid you know very few things, but you know that you do not own anything except yourself; your parents own everything. Jokes about bodies are only funny to kids and Dad, and being disappointing is worse than being anything else, except maybe being bored. Here I am, reminding you that you are not to remember that your nose is not an extension of your skull. Do not remember it's not bone marrow. Do not think about how when you die, your skull will sit with an empty echo of a nose, like a morbid Mr. Potato Head. If you do think about it, you most certainly shouldn't say it out loud, so as not to be impolite.

The hole in your skull, stuffed with cartilage, is blanketed by skin. Your skin has holes too. An average adult has about 20,000 porous openings on their face alone. Of course, most people also have two nostrils, a mouth, two eye sockets, and four tear ducts. That's about 20,009 pits in your face. Some animals don't have any tear ducts; humans have four. Rabbits and goats, as well as every single aquatic mammal, do not have tear ducts. Even then, animals with tear ducts do not produce emotional tears. Their ducts are used to clear out dirt and debris so that their eyes might remain healthy. But we cry. If all is well, from the moment we exit the comfort of our mother's womb, we scream. Our tear ducts are one of the first parts of our body to perform their function. Under the light of the flickering fluorescent in the maternity ward, your tear ducts are bursting within milliseconds of your first breath. It goes: your heart, your lungs, your eyes, tear ducts, then vocal cords. If you were to imagine yourself in the position of a newborn, you might dare to say that crying is ecclesiastical. Jesus wept. His lacrimal glands, lined by

stratified columnar epithelium, which houses mucus-oozing goblet cells and is hugged by encompassing connective tissue, take up the space of the head of a sewing pin in the corner of His pretty eyes, so that He might cry.

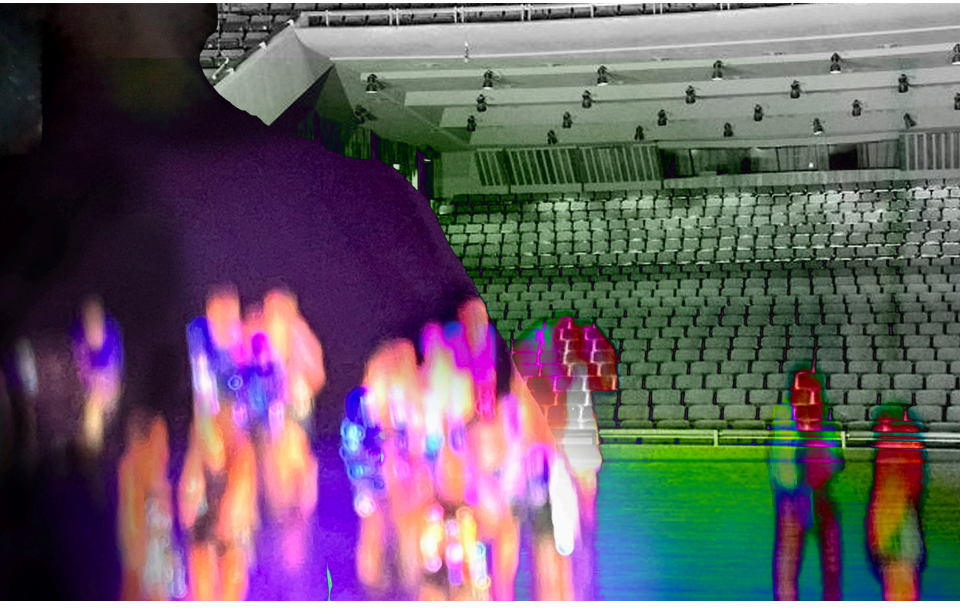
And when you force your tear ducts shut, when you close them off, your tears travel still. Inside of you they move. They make their way down your nasal passages and your throat. Your face's concealed freeways are traversed by swallowed-back saltwater pride. Echoing the water cycle that nourishes every living creature in the world, your tears follow their own cycle. Where you hold your nervous chuckles and biting words, on the inside, at the bottom of your neck, tears have already laced the way so that your secrets might sit as an uncomfortable lump in your throat. Which makes some sort of sense. If you are to refuse access to something's entire purpose, it would be uncomfortable. It should be. It should be painful. And it is.

To stand on the indented carpet, slamming the ducts shut and staring as blankly as you can muster into your disappointed father's eyes, is pain. Smiling at your best friend while the words happier than I have ever been ring at a decibel comparable to a train whistle in your head, is pain. Your older sister icing her knees every night, your mother staying home on Sunday mornings, you laughing with your brother's friends at the size of your gut, you stumbling on a Facebook post about your cousin's baby dying while you were trying to look busy on your phone as you wait for your date to come back from the bathroom, is pain. And to firmly say "No" to your body's right at release, is pain. It is unnatural and excruciating.

You were born with open tear ducts; you will die with open tear ducts. When your body lies soft in the earth, you will have no control

of them just as you didn't at the beginning. The weeping willow that is nourished by your bones will bow her head in prayer over you, and you will weep with her. That is pain finished. To laugh so hard you fold in the middle is to cry. To wipe dust from your eye is to cry. To place a contact. To blow on an eyelash. To remove a beam from your eye is to cry. And each of these is to be a person. Tear ducts, so integrated into the bones of your face, open and prayerful, make you a person.

Sometimes I wonder if I practiced slamming shut my tear duct with such ferocity that it gave up on me. Maybe that's why God gave me a second chance? So that I might weep as Jesus did. Or maybe, much like our Mr. Potato Head skull buried under the dirt, it is a funny side effect of life that I shouldn't talk about anymore—so as not to be impolite.



A REAL CLASSIC

by

Cosenza Hendrickson

Something happened when he recommended *Anna Karenina*. They were sitting on her grandmother's rickety porch swing one evening in May. Fields of corn and alfalfa stretched out before them in the gold light like a frayed heirloom quilt. She was leaning her head back, waaaay back—craning it till it hurt—because she was trying to watch a little spider who was fastening its nylon web to the board-and-baton behind the swing.

"I thought of a book for you to read," he said, "once you're done with *Emma*—*Anna Karenina*. I read it in that international literature class I had to take as a GE. It's one of those real classics, you know? The kind that makes you think. About life. And stuff."

She frowned. The spider had just made a daring leap towards the next baton but had missed and was now dangling from its thread, swaying slightly back and forth.

"But isn't that book, like, really sad?" she asked.

"Oh yeah. I mean, it's one of the great Russian novels, so I think a sad ending is basically a requirement."

"But I don't want to be sad right now. I want to be happy! I am happy. Really, really happy. And I don't want *Anna* messing that up for me," she laughed.

"Are you happy?" He glanced at her. "That's good. I'm glad. I'm really glad."

"I mean, of course I'm happy! How could I not be?"

He was quiet for a moment, then said, "I don't know. That was silly. Of course, you're happy."

She craned her neck back again to look at the spider. It had shimmied its way back up to its original position and was now mechanically winding a fly in its silvery thread. The fly waved one unwrapped leg in some kind of desperate appeal to the unknown fly god. Suddenly she thought, *He's not happy*. Her brain felt as small and empty as the spider's. She kept her head tilted back. She knew she looked ridiculous, and she knew he thought she looked ridiculous. And what could she do? What could she possibly do in this moment, sitting next to her fiancé, contorting herself like some sort of circus freak, and knowing he was unhappy?

Slowly she lifted her head and asked, as casually as she could, "Babe, are you happy? You're happy, right?"

He leaned over and kissed her, hard and hollow, and said, "How could I not be happy? How on earth could I not be happy?"

She tilted her head back again. The fly had stopped struggling. After a while he went inside. She stayed on the swing and let it creeeeeak creak while the sky darkened, and the wind wrapped itself around her like silky thread.

She read *Anna Karenina* on their honeymoon while he went running on the beachfront road.

ONE PIGLET'S DREAM

by Kenton K. Yee

The game is surprisingly red,
like sunrise, fallen leaves, fire ants.
Passes aren't pigskins but comets or shooting
stars. Every spiral not deflected is deemed
a success. The players have obsessions:
energy drinks, tape, getting a faster jump
on the snap. When tackling starts,
sunlight glitters with the electricity
of splashing water. Yes, peel me. Wrap my skin
into an oblong ball and spiral me deep
into the blue sky till I'm an eagle
making a kamikaze dive
into the long arms of the fastest player
sprinting away from the fray. Let him kick
me high, flopping end-over-end
into the loud garden of tubby jumping beans.

INTERVIEW WITH JILL CHRISTMAN

by

Tricia Cope

Writer, editor, and activist Jill Christman is the author of *If This Were Fiction: A Love Story in Essays*, and two memoirs. She currently resides in Muncie, Indiana, where she teaches creative nonfiction writing and literary editing and Ball State University.

Inscape: Can you tell us about the title of your collection?

JC: The title, *If This Were Fiction*, was not the original title. When the book was accepted and contracted, the title was, in fact, *Life is Not a Paragraph: Essays,* pulled from the E.E. Cummings poem, "since feeling is first." But then, my husband's mom, who is a Shakespearean literary critic, thought it sounded like the title of a writing guide, and that was not what I was after. Not at all. So I went through the book again and wrote a list of approximately 50 titles that were possibilities, essentially pulling them from phrases I liked and seeing if they had multiple resonances. In an essay called *"The River Cave"* the phrase "if this were fiction" jumped out at me and I realized it spoke to both the genre of essay writing with its inherent possibilities, and the way in which stories and our shaping of them can change our lives.

Inscape: The epigraph to the collection is a poem by E.E. Cummings. Can you talk about its meaning and history and why you included it?

JC: Yes, the poem is both the heart of the essay collection and the structuring concept of the collection. It has narrative underpinning that is central to one of the stories I tell in the book about meeting my husband. He was a student in the MFA program at Alabama (as was I—he was a poet and I was a fiction writer), and he's a memorizer of poems. On an early date, he said, "Would you like me to say a poem for you?" and I said, "Yes, please." And then he recited "since feeling is first" right into my ear. I was completely undone. And so, that's part of our story, for real. Happily, and incredibly, the Cummings poem became public domain the very year that I wanted to publish this book, and so I was able to use the whole poem at the beginning and then think about how different phrases from the poem could begin each of the three sections in the book. So, it was both a story from my marriage and a structuring device.

Inscape: Tell us about your daily writing practice.

JC: Optimally, my daily writing practice is first thing in the morning, no internet. I learned this from going to my mom's house in Washington. She has no wireless. It's fantastic because there is no temptation—if I want to look something up, I have a list of things to look up later. The world is so full of distractions and things are just waiting to suck us down a rabbit hole. So, yeah, I like to write first thing in the morning before I've checked email or invited the

rest of the world into my head. I do enjoy a cup of coffee—first cup of the day. And quiet. I don't like people around (I like a dog, just no people and no noise), and I don't write to music or anything. I like quiet because I often say my work out loud—I have to hear the sentences, and even if I'm not saying them out loud, I need to hear them in my head. During the summer it's an hour a day for six days a week, which often grows into more. And then lately, in the thick of a busy semester, I'm at 15 minutes a day, and I report this to a partner who reports to me also, so we're accountable.

Inscape: You seem to have mastered a really vulnerable and humble way of addressing hard and even controversial topics, and you do so without preaching or skirting around issues. Can you tell me about how writing has influenced the way you deal with grief loss and fear in your life?

JC: Thank you, Tricia. And thank you for that question. It means a lot to me. The answer, I think, is that I really live through writing. Writing helps me deal with hard feelings because I know it—the process of writing—will always be there for me. Recently someone asked me a similar question: "How do you write this stuff? It's too scary. How do you go to that dark place?" And I realized that writing does not feel like a dark place to me, no matter how hard the material. Writing feels to me—and I know this is not true for everybody—safe. Writing feels like the safest place I've got, because I'm aware that I can go back to trauma or loss or grief and know I'm not there, I'm here, and I now have this chance to think about it. Of course, there's always fresh loss and grief, and I've done this work long enough that

I know the grace of writing will shine on me. I know the tools I can use to move through the hard stuff and I use my past experiences as reference points. I know I can go through the middle and come out the other side.

Also, I hope my writing creates a place where the reader can feel my vulnerability but doesn't feel in danger being in that place—that the pain has been somehow curated enough so that you can trust I'm not going to leave you there in the middle of the trauma without anybody, like I'm going to reach out for your hand and we're going to walk through it together. Because literature is a place where we heal our wounds—those that are our own, and those that are not our own.

Inscape: One of my favorite things about the essay genre, in particular, is how it takes mundane and everyday scenes and experiences and elevates them into something really reflective and beautiful. Virginia Woolf said, "For it would seem that we write not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fiber of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver" (*Orlando*). Your writing feels very holistic—like the whole essence of each experience comes through in your words. I want to hear more about your process of transforming the everyday into something beautiful—even the suffering and the hard things. Is it that you narrate your life like that? Do you feel yourself sort of narrating in your mind when you look at a scene, or does the writing come later, when you sit down and reflect on an experience?

JC: I love that description of it. It does kind of fill my mind like that,

and then I want to replay a situation. Sometimes I write sentences in my head as I walk and I look at things, you know, just to see if I were to try to describe such a thing, how would I do it? So, in that way, I guess I'm always practicing. I think writing reminds me to be present as much as I can with the people I'm with and the places I'm in and the books I'm reading—and to approach those things with the kind of curiosity and tenderness they deserve. So, I think writing helps in that way too, and just with the way I choose to live my life.

I'm always writing through or toward questions. I leave this opportunity for surprise open. I can't imagine outlining an essay—I would never know what to put on the page! I would have no idea. I will often have a list of things that feel somehow as if they're going to go together someday. But the magic comes from being open to moments of surprise. That's a question I often ask writers when I interview them: where was this moment? Because you know when you're reading, you can kind of feel the moment of the surprise for the writer. And it's also, of course, exhilarating for the reader—that moment when it feels not as if it were planned or manufactured, but that you got to arrive there with the writer inside the essay.

Inscape: So, you're saying that writing is the process of arriving at what you want to say, rather than the process of knowing what you want to say and then putting it onto the page?

JC: Yes, but that said, I do think that constraints can help us write really interesting things, because they can protect us, giving our minds something to attend to while whatever it is that lies beneath

is bubbling up. Our minds are busy places! So, for me, it's both of those things—questions and lists—but never an outline.

Inscape: Tell me more about what it means to write toward questions.

JC: I had been writing towards questions for years, but the person who helped me to understand my own process was the journalist and writer Pico Iyer. He told a story about how he starts out with a question and then he follows that question, and then, if he gets an answer, he knows he's not done. He keeps writing. He writes until the question is unanswerable, and then he knows he's getting there—he's almost there. So, Iyer is the one who articulated this for me, and ever since, I've always thought in terms of writing toward the unanswerable. There's a temptation to arrive at an answer or a conclusion, but I think we need to do some unlearning when it comes to the writing of essays, giving ourselves permission to write towards questions so real and true they'll never have answers. That said, I confess it's not uncommon for me to get to the end of an essay and sneak in a species of answer. And in those cases? It's love. Just love.

INTERVIEW WITH MELANIE RAE THON

by Whitnee Forest

A native of Montana, Melanie Rae Thon is an award-winning short story and novel writer who lives in Salt Lake City and teaches at the University of Utah.

Inscape: I love your view, expressed in "The Gospel of Grief & Grace & Gratitude," of writing as a practice of recognizing and restoring the things we love. In your piece, you give some examples of things you've recorded in your daily "Book of Wonders"/"Gospel." What advice would you have for writers looking to keep their own "Book[s] of Wonder"?

Melanie Rae Thon: In A River Runs Through It, Paul Maclean, Norman's brother, expresses the importance and magic of attention beautifully: "All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren't noticing which makes you see something that isn't even visible."
Writing, like prayer, must be a daily practice. By practice, I also mean ritual. For more than thirty years I've kept what I once called "Image Notebooks" and then "Books of Wonders." Later, during a period of severe illness, I found a new name: "The Gospel of Grief & Grace & Gratitude." Now I am simple and call this work "The Notebooks." My students often prefer to call their books "Trash Diaries" (a nod to Lance Olsen). You can google "Junk

Journals" and find gorgeous artistic interpretations.
I have no rules or purpose: my apocryphal gospel includes songs of loons and visions of owls, flowering saguaros, hungry grizzlies—the last words of my father's last days—my sister Wendy playing Beethoven on our grandmother's piano. A hurricane splits trees, opening a smell deep and dense as the earth's consciousness cracked open. My brother kneels to wash and bandage the open sores on my father's feet. At twilight, soft copper light holds my sister Laurie as if it has chosen her above all others. Yes, we are safe now. A grasshopper leaps in the lake, and my mother calls me down to the dock to save him.

The key is to pay attention to anything that delights or scares or mystifies or astonishes or exhilarates you—and then try to bring this observation into vivid, evocative, communicative language. You might also wish to include photographs, collages, drawings—poems by yourself or others—news or science articles—anything at all that sparks and amplifies and intensifies your experiences—anything that deepens your engagement with the vast, animate, absolutely miraculous environment everywhere around and within you. Even in our short span of years, evolution is possible! May our spirits evolve through the enlivening of our senses!

Inscape: You've published novels, short fiction, poems, and essays. How do you know when a story or meditation has the potential to turn into a more sustained narrative versus a piece of short fiction?

MRT: As long as a piece of work sustains my curiosity and

passion, I know it can continue to blossom—and I can continue to flourish—through research, imagination, and exploration. This does not necessarily mean the piece will be larger in the end—it may grow into several separate pieces in disparate forms or shrink back into something much smaller because my contemplations and investigations help me understand what is essential. The thirty-page story "Necessary Angels" began with more than four hundred pages of exploratory notes. Many times, I've composed an entire story to gain enough understanding to write one paragraph.

Inscape: Your writing does a lovely job of looking "through and beyond" the body. I've noticed that the acknowledgment/awareness of our bodies can be something we tend to shy away from as writers and academics. How do you maintain the body as a present force in your writing, and what does that do for your work?

MRT: We all have utterly unique ways of knowing the world—the cosmos—through our singular bodies. No two people see or hear or taste the same things. One friend tells me cilantro tastes like gasoline to her. Another says that when she takes off her glasses and looks at Christmas lights, they prism into spectacular shapes and colors. Some bodies are caught in constant pain; some move lightly through the world. One friend learns to fly on the trapeze, another eats fire. And those are just human beings! Imagine the ways an octopus or bee or saguaro knows its world through a particular body in a specific environment. Learning

about different bodies has been one of the most thrilling aspects of my research and my life.

We may have twenty or more senses, including "thermoception," the sense of heat (or its absence) on our skin; "equilibrioception," our sense of balance, which is determined by the fluid-containing cavities and crystals in the inner ear. (Ask anyone with vertigo how important this is!) We experience "interoception," any awareness originating from a sensory receptor inside the body: flutter in belly, twist in the bowel, muscles tightening after a surge of adrenaline, a flood of internal warmth from throat to toe after eating spicy food.

Animals sense things we usually don't: sharks have electroception, which allows them to sense electric fields. Birds and insects use magnetoception to navigate using magnetic fields. Fish deploy echolocation and the lateral line (a system of sensory organs) to perceive pressure, motion, and vibration. Owls and deer hunt or feed at night using infrared vision. The blind sometimes have "facial vision," an awareness of the shape and size and weight and movement of objects based on the shifting pressure they feel against their faces and skin and bodies.

What about "kinetic empathy," the sense that when you witness something, you "feel" as if it is happening to you? This may be physical (you watch someone fall and scrape skin on gravel and you flinch in pain), or emotional (you see a teacher ridicule a classmate and feel the burn of humiliation, a feeling that has physical and spiritual components). We all have mirror neurons in our brains that give us access to these sensations.

I am always asking myself how I and the living beings I love

and all the beings I imagine might be knowing themselves and their worlds through nonverbal or pre-verbal languages.

Inscape: This is a somewhat selfish question because it's something I'm very curious about right now: What does the process of revision/rewriting look like for you? How do you know when you need to let go of a piece (either to lay it aside or try to publish it)?

MRT: I think of my dear friend and former student Mark Robbins who describes the process of writing as prayer: "for isn't this what prayer is: the dedicated concentration of your being on that which will help you become the person you know you should be?"

As long as I continue to learn from my explorations of a piece, as long as I believe they are helping me become more aware and compassionate, more curious and kind—more joyful—more alive and enlivened, awed and bewildered, I know the piece is not yet done finding its way through me.

Our work can always be different, but not always better. At a certain point, I realize I need to remember, imagine, research, and experience other beings and the worlds they inhabit in order to discover new ways to crack consciousness open and love with ever greater abandon.

INTERVIEW WITH RIO CORTEZ

by Ellie Smith

Originally from Salt Lake City, *New York Times* bestselling author Rio Cortez currently resides in Harlem, where she writes poetry and picture books.

Inscape: Who are some of your favorite authors or the authors who've inspired your work?

Rio Cortez: One of my favorite contemporary writers is a poet called Robin Coste Lewis. She's writing in a way that feels really timeless, totally unique, and I've never read anything quite like it. She uses mixed media, and her newest collection is paired with her family's collection of photographs. It's genre bending and really exciting. And then more classically, my canon, I really like the science fiction writing of Octavia Butler. That was really transformational for me when I was a teenager. I think of that as part of my personal canon. A French poet and writer named Aimé Césaire who is from Martinique. He coined the term Negritude. I feel like I could go on, but those are three really foundational writers for me.

Inscape: I'll have to look them up. I don't know all of them.

RC: Yeah, definitely. Octavia Butler might be the most extreme of those three. They just adopted one of her books, *Kindred*, into

television for the first time. It's worth checking out if you want to do a reading and then a viewing.

Inscape: Yes. I love to see how things transform from medium to medium. Speaking of which, you've written in a couple of different mediums—poetry and children's books. Why those two genres? And why the switch between them?

RC: I think of it as all poetry in a way, but for different audiences. I studied poetry in graduate school and before that I was interested in writing poetry as early as eight years old. But I never thought about writing for kids until I became a mom. I was in a unique position, working in an archive library called the Schomburg Center here in Harlem. It has an incredible collection of artifacts related to black culture and experience. The combination of becoming a new mother and being in that archive was the inspiration for *The ABCs of Black History*. *The ABCs of Black History* is a rhyming poem in verse. It's a really friendly medium to write as a poet, picture books. If you're interested in writing for the audience of children, a lot of picture books use poetry as a device to speak to children. All the picture books I've written so far, I think of as just poems, but for younger people.

Inscape: WThat's really cool. Have you had to do a lot of adapting since those poems are for younger people, like maybe changing your vocabulary?

RC: Yes, totally. If you've read *Golden Ax*, my adult collection, it's not very child friendly. So yeah, absolutely. It's very important

to speak to kids where they're at. So, it's really important to me in writing picture books that I'm talking in a language that children feel is direct, clear, and truthful. In my adult poetry, I think those words would not describe the way that I'm writing at all. I'm writing in a lot more of an ambiguous way. I'm giving adult readers a lot more trust to find the truth in the language somewhere else. So totally different approaches.

Inscape: Do you think you'll ever experiment with other genres of writing?

RC: I am right now, actually. I'm writing prose for the first time. I'm working on a memoir, but it's a lyrical memoir. So I would say that there's still poetry hidden in there. It's my first time really having to pull together complete sentences and paragraphs, and it is very hard work. I admire people who do it. I have a new respect for the discipline you have to have to do that type of writing. This memoir is my first foray into prose writing. I haven't tried writing fiction, which is one of the genres I love to read. I can't imagine how challenging fiction would be as a writer. It would be very different for me.

Inscape: How soon can we expect to see your memoir?

RC: It is a longer project, so maybe in 2025.

Inscape: I also noticed you've got another children's book coming out this year. Can you tell us about that?

RC: It's coming out next spring. But children's books take a long time to develop because of the art. So, the picture book has been done for over a year, but the illustrator is working on the design and the art for the book. It's called *The River is my Sea* and it's set in New York. It's about a grandmother and her granddaughter taking a walk on the Hudson River and spotting an Orisha named Yemayá. So yeah, it's fun. I have a couple of books that have been written where the art is being done now and the book will come out in the future. It's a long wait, but it's really satisfying as the writer to just sit back and see those words come literally to life through someone else's incredible illustration. It's one of the more fun parts of writing picture books.

Inscape: You write a lot of poetry and you use a lot of different forms, like sonnet and free verse. What's your favorite poetic form?

RC: I really like the sonnet. I would say that's one of my favorite forms of poetry. There are a lot of sonnets in *Golden Ax*. I like it, because I'm not a very long form writer. Even in writing in the format of poetry, I tend to write pretty short, economical poems, and a sonnet pushes me a little bit outside of my instincts as a poet to write even shorter than 14 lines. But it's within what feels natural to my writing style. So, I really like sonnets. I'm also interested in all kinds of new forms when I'm reading. In terms of writing, I don't usually write in form other than the sonnet. Sometimes I write in a ghazal. It's an Arabic poetic form. Free verse in lyricism is also just wonderful to read.

Inscape: Those are some of my favorites to write and read, because

they're a bit easier, but the sonnet does force you to do some cool things.

RC: Yeah. It's not too regulated a form, so you still have a little bit of freedom.

Inscape: Yeah, there are some much harder ones, if you've ever tried like a villanelle.

RC: Yeah, I've tried the villanelle, not a big fan. I've tried the pantoum also. I think they're fun to get you out of like a rut, like a writer's block—they can be helpful in that way. Even if you start following the rules of the form, once you know them, you can break the rules and make the poem fit more instinctually to how the poem itself wants to be. I appreciate that about forms.

Inscape: You've done a lot of writing about heritage—it features very heavily into your writing. Why is that such an important subject to you?

RC: I think it's just part of my identity. It's hard for me not to write what I know, actually. A lot of *Golden Ax* has to do with heritage, specifically my family's lineage, ancestry, and genealogy. That is an important question that a lot of people ask. Most people ask themselves about where they come from and why they are the way they are and why they are where they are. That's why I write about that in *Golden Ax*. It's just important to me, my identity, and where I came from.

Inscape: You spent about 10 years researching and working on

Golden Ax, discussing black pioneerism. Are there other aspects of black history in Utah that you want to research and then write more about?

RC: There's probably a lot of fascinating stuff about black history in Utah that I would like to know. I don't have anything specifically. Right now, I'm still focused on my family's story. I think what's interesting is thinking about the context of my family. The context for them being the story of other black communities within Utah, and how they saw themselves. I didn't grow up in Utah with a black community, though I know other people had different experiences. The question of community and black community in Utah is something that's been really interesting to me over the years. I think there's probably a lot more to know, and I love that.

Inscape: With that in mind, there is a lack of diversity in some ways in Utah, but we want to help promote and make people feel welcome so that no one feels lonely when they're growing up in Utah, especially if they are a little bit different. What advice do you have for people who want to help do something about that?

RC: Yeah, that's a really nice question. It's a very friendly question. It's probably got a lot of different answers, depending on the person that you're thinking about making feel included. When I think about when I was younger, and about some loneliness that I felt in terms of Utah not being a very racially diverse place, what would have helped was some acknowledgement of that from my peers. And for people to do their own kinds of education. I think sometimes it can

unduly fall on the shoulders of a marginalized person to educate other people about who they are. If folks around them proactively found ways to expose themselves to different types of people and didn't put that burden on the one marginalized person in their community, it would go a long way.

Inscape: Sure. Are there any books or media that people can look at specifically to help educate themselves about this?

RC: Yeah, there are all kinds of really great nonfiction writers and journalists who are writing on the subject of race that might be worth checking out. And there are some really fantastic documentaries out there. You know, a lot of people talk about Ava DuVernay's *13th* or Nikole Hannah Jones's *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story.* If you'd like different media formats, there's a book of *The 1619 Project,* there's a Hulu series, and then my favorite version is the podcast. It started at the *New York Times* and it has really excellent interview footage and sound qualities. Those are two quick places, but I feel like any library or school library should have some sort of curation around these types of writers that you would be able to check out.

Inscape: That's awesome. I know I want to educate myself, and I don't know as much as I wish I did. Are there any other things that people can do that might have helped you as you were growing up to feel less alone? Or to help with the community?

RC: That's so sweet. There are probably things that I wished I had more from my teachers, such as specifically assigning

books by different authors of color. If I had the opportunity to read books by black writers in middle school or high school that might have made a difference in terms of how I saw myself in the world. But not just me reading those books, my peers and classmates being exposed to work by different writers of color would have been really helpful. Things like that. I feel like I'll probably sit with that question and think a lot about how things might have been different. But it's hard. I think the biggest service is obviously helping somebody find a community of people that look like them. But if you don't have that then it's a really challenging question. I think the best you can do is to be a bright community that's exposing yourself to the art, culture, and history of other people as much as possible.

Inscape: You did grow up in Salt Lake, so I have to ask, has the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints been a part of your life? And if so, what role has it played?

RC: No, I didn't grow up in the church. I went to Catholic school mostly, but I'm not Catholic either. It seemed like a non-secular place because Salt Lake has such a ubiquitous LDS population. The Catholic school I went to had a lot of faith diversity. It felt different than the public school system there, which didn't have as much faith diversity. The LDS church played a role in my life because it's part of the culture of Salt Lake City and of Utah. I feel like it was always around me. I felt very aware of the beliefs since a lot of my neighbors were LDS, so I was exposed to some of their church teachings and practices when I was a kid

growing up. They were very welcoming; I would go over to my LDS neighbor's house on Sundays for their family home evening. I have early memories like that of the LDS faith being part of my cultural community. Then I have one relative who I write a little bit about in *Golden Ax*, and who I'm writing a lot more about now: Abner Howell. He is my great, great grandfather and he's a well-known LDS person in our family. Otherwise, not a lot of LDS members. I grew up thinking a lot about his conversion to the LDS faith, his testimony, and what that did for him—how that served him as a black man at that time in Utah. Those are the ways that I've worked around the faith in Salt Lake but it's definitely new for me. I've never been to BYU, and there are a lot of things I've been on the outside of.

Inscape: So, you're not quite Catholic, not quite LDS—do you have a faith? Or has faith in general been something that you have had in your life or want in your life?

RC: Yeah, I do. I have a belief in God, but I don't think of myself as a religious person. I think of myself as more of a faithful, spiritual person. My dad's Puerto Rican, he's from New York, and he was raised Catholic. My mom was raised by a former LDS father. My parents were happy in whatever I believed. I always had that understanding and was able to explore God and religion and spirituality, which was a really big gift for me as a young person. And now, I have a faith in God that isn't rooted in one specific religion, which is important to me.

Inscape: I love that. Do you have a favorite line from the poetry that you've written?

RC: Oh my gosh, that's impossible. I don't know. I feel I can't answer that because it's my poetry. I feel like it would be a weird thing to say. There are some poems that I'm really proud of that took longer to arrive than others. Sometimes you write something where you feel like, that's exactly what you meant to say. And that's the best feeling as a writer. Other times you're trying to get to something, and even if you can't quite name it, you know it's not there yet. And then there are the times when you arrive at language in exactly the right way, the exact right order of words that you need to say something and that's the best feeling ever.

INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW WICKMAN

by Jennifer Chriss

Matthew Wickman is a literary scholar and professor of English at BYU. He specializes in Enlightenment and Scottish literary and intellectual history, as well as postsecular theory and criticism, and has published over forty articles and book chapters, two monographs, and a memoir.

Inscape: Were there any books that inspired you to write your memoir, *Life to the Whole Being: The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor*?

Matthew Wickman: 20th-century Welsh poet R. S. Thomas talks about forgetting most of the books that he read. I, too, would say my experience with other books has been largely one of forgetting, at least as they pertain to writing my memoir. A necessary forgetting, I'd call it. There are classic spiritual memoirs by people like Thomas Merton, for example, but when it came down to actually writing my own, I tried to forget a lot of those sources as paradigms for how I should write and think instead about how best to respond to the spiritual questions that I was trying to articulate. The literary texts I discussed in the chapters had a natural way of helping me mediate some of these questions and create some kind of rhythm or shape. The writing process was more organic in that respect than it was emulative.

Inscape: Going off of that, what do you want your readers to take from this memoir?

MW: Couple things, hopefully. For readers who are accustomed to or familiar with spiritual struggle or the blessings of spiritual life, I want them to feel like they have good company in my book. For Latter-day Saints who want a richer spiritual life, I hope the book helps them acquire a larger vocabulary of spiritual experience. For members of the Church who are happy in the fold, I hope they see their faith affirmed in ways they appreciate. For those who are not Latter-day Saints, I hope they get a fuller sense of Latter-day Saint spiritual life through times of struggle as well as times when they feel closeness to God.

Inscape: Has this memoir brought you different kinds of readers?

MW: Yes, not all of whom relate to all the experiences in it. I have had people read it who are not believers in God and who tell me that they found parts of it resonating with them. Other people who belong to Christian faiths other than ours who have also told me that my book has resonated with them. Some have said they read it meditatively, as part of their own spiritual practice. And most have been Latter-day Saints who have been generous in how they responded and say that it rings true for them and who appreciate the language the book gives to certain complexities of spiritual life.

Inscape: Do you think your book can help those that have had spiritual experiences?

MW: Perhaps to appreciate how widespread such experiences are. Spiritual experiences connect us to God but also to other people. And this is true not just within a particular faith community or tradition but across different communities.

Inscape: What was your journey in writing this book?

MW: When I first had the inspiration to teach the class that led to this book, I was freaked out by the thought of writing about it: the subject seemed vulnerable, threateningly so. But one of my colleagues told me she could imagine me writing (and not only teaching) on the subject, and that inspired me at least to consider it. I began writing about this topic in a scholarly way—analytically and in the third person. (Scholarship is wonderful, but it allows you to hide behind others' words and big ideas.) But then I thought I should really take some of the things we'd been studying in class and capture them in book form. I had a student who was working with me on this project, a research assistant, and she convinced me that I would need to write much more personally if I wanted to say anything of substance to her generation. So, I realized I needed to open myself more—be more vulnerable, more personal—in what I was writing. And, as it turns out, this has been the most meaningful experience I have ever had in writing, by far.

Inscape: Did you have a plan for the book, or did you just write as the journey went on?

MW: I began working on it and came back to it multiple times; the shape of it kept evolving. Many of the things came to me as a surprise as I was writing, like some stories from my journal or even those that had eluded my journal because they had been so subtle.

Inscape: Would you say there is a different process of writing between creative and spiritual work?

MW: I would say that these things feed each other; I am a believer that when a creative person seeks inspiration, they inherently open themselves up to things that are spiritual, whether or not they recognize that spiritual impetus as religious. By the same token, anybody that is really seeking a richer spiritual life opens themself to a God who is a creative being and who made us as creative beings. So, for me, the creative process and the process of spiritual growth are linked in profound ways.

Inscape: What advice would you give to writers hoping to access the creative parts of themselves?

MW: One recommendation would be to have interesting conversations as you are writing. These can be conversations about what you're reading, or with other writers, or even with yourself. Ultimately, for me, it can also be conversations with

God—seeking to know, for example how to think through something differently or more expansively or to know how to judge what is working, what needs more attention, and what is missing. Those conversations, especially the prayerful ones, often generate responses you might not anticipate, so between the planning you do as a writer and the things you haven't anticipated, there is a chemistry for the creation of something carefully crafted and also authentic—even genuinely new.

Inscape: What would you say to someone who wants to read or write—to anyone in the world of literature? What would you say to people on that journey?

MW: Literature can open us to things—things we lack, things we've neglected, or things we've never imagined. Literature opens windows to how others think and imagine their worlds, whether in our own culture or from very different times and places. It can help us empathize more deeply, or find answers to problems by opening our imaginations to new ways to conceive of the things around us. It can provide us with a deeper sense of community. Literature, to me, is a way to supplement, enrich, and enliven our human experience.

INTERVIEW WITH EMILY INOUYE HUEY

by Madison Maloney

Emily writes historical fiction for children and teens. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University and is a former teacher.

Inscape: Tell us a little about you. Where are you from and what do you like to do?

EIH: I'm from Provo, Utah. I went to Brigham Young University and actually worked on Inscape while there. I love the outdoors, writing, and doing things with my family. I'm really interested in my family's stories, which influenced *Beneath the Wide Silk Sky.*

Inscape: It's said that if you want to be a good writer, you need to read a lot of books. What are your favorite books, and how have they influenced your writing?

EIH: When I was a kid, I would go through phases of reading certain series, like *The Babysitters Club* or *Goosebumps*. My mom was worried that those were all I wanted to read, so she would require that I read three books from a list she had compiled for every one book I read in whatever series I was into at the time. This list included classics like Dickens and *Black Beauty*, poetry from the likes of Robert Frost, books that had won Newbery Awards, or any literature she found was

good, important, and had variety. I also had a professor at BYU that required us to do a media fast, meaning we had to take time off from the things we were currently reading and instead choose something from a list the professor had. Reading a lot of different things that I wasn't necessarily into really influenced me and my writing style.

Inscape: Your book is inspiring, and it's made even more inspiring because it's influenced by your own family history. What advice would you give to an aspiring writer who has an important story to share but isn't sure where to start?

EIH: I started on this path that led to *Beneath the Wide Silk Sky* before I ever wanted to write a book. The novel is about Japanese Americans during World War II, but most Japanese Americans didn't speak about their experiences with discrimination until several decades later. There was an idea prevalent in the community that they needed to forget what happened and not speak about it if they wanted to move on and fit in with the rest of society. Because of that, I didn't know many details about my family's history. My grandparents would sometimes talk about how they met in a camp, but that was about it. So, my journey started because I really wanted to know more about my family's story. I began learning the stories and recording them, and I did a research project too – all of which happened before I even thought about writing a novel. The book started when I realized I wanted to give voice to all the perspectives I had researched and discovered. For anyone who wants to write about something important to them, my advice is to give yourself space to try. I think a lot of times when you want to write something important

you have a vision of the finished product, but at the beginning, it's really hard to write anything close to that vision. I see a lot of people quit – myself included – because what they're initially coming up with isn't close to their ideal. You need to give yourself space to put something on the page though, as crummy as it might be, because then you can work with it and rework it and even start again if you have to. You'll never get the vision, though, if you're always quitting because it's not perfect in the beginning.

Inscape: Do you believe there was ever a shift in the Japanese American community where people became more open to discussing what happened?

EIH: I think people have become much more open to talking about it due to a generational shift. In the 1980s, activists started agitating for redress – asking the government to admit to wrongdoing and apologize. It was a moment where people had their experience acknowledged and the wrongness of it validated, and that changed things. There's also been a generational shift in how we deal with trauma; we now acknowledge that it's not healthy to hide and internalize it. And of course, it's probably easier for the children and grandchildren to talk about it than it was for those who experienced it themselves. I think most Japanese Americans now realize incarceration camps are important to talk about, so they don't happen again. While I think it's unlikely that we would see it happen to Japanese Americans again, it could happen to another group. In fact, we have seen it get too close, several times.

Inscape: How did you choose this particular time period, before Japanese American incarceration camps rather than during them, and what did the research for it look like?

EIH: One of the main things a lot of us don't know about the history of the Japanese American experience is that Pearl Harbor was just a match that lit the flame for a barrel of gasoline already sitting there. People had wanted them out for a long time, to the point that there were politicians with election campaigns based on removing the Japanese. There are a lot of great books written about camps themselves, but I wanted to explore the before – how do we even get to a place like that? In terms of research, I always start with books, particularly children's books. They are great for understanding the simplified ideas of what I'm researching as opposed to reading deep treatises on more complex concepts. From there, I move to adult books to get a more in-depth overview, and after that I round out my research with first-hand accounts and primary sources. When possible, I do interviews too, and for *Beneath the Wide Silk Sky* I also traveled to Washington so I could really get the setting right.

Inscape: The characters in your story feel so 3-dimensional – even the side characters. Was there a character whose voice you found easiest to write or a character whose voice took more time to find?

EIH: I believe every character comes from the writer in some way. Even for characters you hate, there's still something you identify with. One of my characters is named Beau, and he's someone who doesn't stand up for his Japanese American friend. I have fears about

being someone like Beau – fears about what I could be pressured to do in dangerous and scary situations. Writing Kiki was really fun. She's not the nicest character, but she was really enjoyable to write and came to me quite easily. I loved *Little Women* as a kid, and in some ways, I enjoy Kiki the way I enjoy Amy, a character that Kiki may have come from subconsciously. My main character Sam was the easiest to write because I understand her the best, but I think there's a little of me in every character. Some are easier to access, but they all come from me.

Inscape: This book has themes of bravery and cowardice, but more compellingly, the nuances of those traits – there are characters who wish to be brave but cannot find it in themselves to be so, like Beau, and characters who are tempted by cowardice but ultimately defeat their inner doubts, like Sam. What do you think causes those different responses? And do you see any world where a character like Beau is able to make the better choice?

EIH: One of the main reasons I wrote this book was based on the question of how we define ourselves, and what causes some to make terrible decisions while others make great ones. In this period there were a whole lot of responses to what was in some ways an impossibly challenging time, so it was important to me to have white characters who made good choices and white characters who didn't, as well as Japanese characters who made good choices and Japanese characters who didn't. In terms of the choices we make, our background experiences make such a huge difference, as well as the people we've been around, but really, it all comes down to

personal choice and the things we choose to put first. At the time this novel takes place, 93% of Americans were for Japanese American incarceration – a shocking number – but those 7% who weren't in favor are the people I'm most interested in. There were many cases of people who knew a Japanese American and realized they weren't a scary, threatening "Other." Rather, they were more similar than they were different. Even with that realization though, it all still comes down to personal choice. Beau knew what was right and didn't do it, and that's what makes him a tragic character. I think in the future though, Beau will make a different choice, and that he'll eventually find the right path. He's not a bad person, he's just fearful and cowardly and made some really bad choices. But in the end, I think he'll come to himself. For me, it would be hard to be an author if I didn't believe people could change. What's the point of being an author and sharing a message if you don't believe people can change? I like to believe that we're different people today than we were yesterday.

Inscape: I was surprised how satisfied I was with the story's ending – it's poignant and devastating, yet still hopeful. What made you decide to write it that way?

EIH: I couldn't give it a Hollywood ending that didn't respect the trauma and suffering experienced because I wanted to do right by the people this really happened to. I also wanted to leave readers pondering hard questions as opposed to making the ending tidy and comfortable. But this whole book is a love letter to my grandparents and my family's experiences, so I also wanted to give Sam a triumph

– a triumph that could be shared with every kid and reader who's going through something hard. Sometimes you can't change what's happening to you, but you can still triumph in maintaining your identity.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Max Fisher is a visual artist currently residing and working between Victoria, British Colombia, and East Idaho where he currently attends school as a BFA student. Max attended Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver for a year before moving on to Brigham Young University in Utah and eventually to Brigham Young University Idaho where he now studies with an emphasis in Printmaking and 2D art. Max has experience in a variety of art making methods and often seeks to engage in multiple mediums. His work draws inspiration from personal narratives and experiences. He often presents themes surrounding identity, self, and contemporary views of spirituality.

Shayla Frandsen (she/her) is an MFA student studying fiction at BYU. She previously earned an MA in English literature at The City College of New York. Her writing has been published or is forthcoming in Blood Orange Review, JAKE, Wayfare, Dialogue Journal, Beaver Magazine, and others. She enjoys spending time with a good book and a soft cheese.

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Lisa Harbertson found her love of photography in high school after being raised on the heels of her photographer father, always fascinated by how beautifully a camera could capture life. She photographed people, scenery, and architecture worldwide through her college years, never without a camera around her neck—but in the 90's, photography as an occupation hardly crossed her mind. After 13 years of working in the nursing profession, she decided to pursue her photography business, specializing in family and portrait photography. Lisa lives in Midway, Utah with her husband and 4 children. Her photograph, "Quechua People of the Andes Mountains in Peru", was taken while working with Roam Humanitarian Group.

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Bethany Jarmul is a writer, editor, and poet. Her work has appeared in more than 40 literary magazines and been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Spiritual Literature. She earned first place in Women On Writing's Q2 2022 essay contest. Bethany enjoys chai lattes, nature walks, and memoirs. She lives near Pittsburgh with her family. Connect with her at bethanyjarmul.com or on Twitter: @BethanyJarmul.

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depictions of dissonance, generational difficulties & the contradictory feelings of longing for, yet pushing away intimacy.

Alexandra Malouf is a poet living in Texas. She is a former poetry editor of Inscape, and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Pleiades, Jabberwock Review, poets.org, Hidden in Childhood, and others. When not writing, she enjoys building miniatures and collecting antiques.

Anna McIllese says of her work Set Ablaze, "This piece is inspired by my home combined with my identity. Some parts of me are invigorated by my new college life, and some parts are embering out and letting out life. I'm in a middle ground stage in my life, a gray area, but it's all part of a healthy cycle of an organism. Change is inevitable and forgiving." Of her work Fishy Lips, she shares, "An ode to my mother, and her spirit. She is pictured with a salmon she caught back home in Kenai, Alaska. Emphasis on line and texture."

Erin Rhees has an MFA in creative non-fiction from BYU where she currently teaches writing. She writes bad magnet poetry, grocery lists, and spends as much time as possible with her dog, Dottie.

Berkeley Richard was born in 1997 in New Haven, Connecticut. She is a Utah-based artist Currently Receiving her Bachelor of Fine Art at Brigham Young University. Her work involves personal memories, family connections and identity. Much of her inspiration comes from her experiences with her family growing up on her father's strawberry farm in Southwest Virginia. Most recently, Berkeley has work on display at the Utah Cultural Celebration Center in the group exhibition Body / Land curated by Utah-based artists Rocio Vasquez Cisneros and Alejandra Ramos.

Maddy Schow is a recent BYU grad trying to establish herself as a fiction writer now that she's free from the shackles of final papers.

Clarissa Walker is an undergraduate student at BYU, hailing from a small town on the east coast, and aspiring to be a bonafide poet. She was first published in a collection of poetry at the age of 14 but does not remember the name of the collection; she is fairly certain everyone who submitted was published that year. Clarissa has since stuck to practicing her craft and hopes to be published in a notable paper that she will remember the name of.

Gabriella Warnick is currently studying studio art, sound design and Italian at Brigham Young University and is set to graduate with her BFA in 2023. With backgrounds in various creative arts such as theater and music, she approaches art through a range of mediums and interdisciplinary practices. Investigating questions stemming from or leading to observations that straddle lines of imagination and reality, she deals frequently with concepts of memory, magic, sound and time.

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