

sandhill review

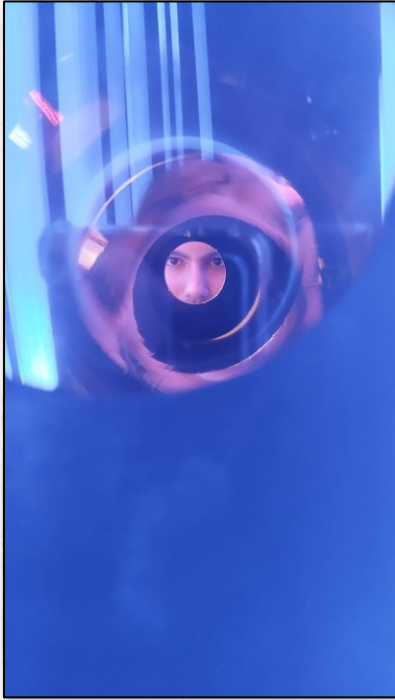


volume 24

The Unfamiliar



sandhill review



volume 24

The Unfamiliar

Tiffany R. Anderson

Pay Attention





sandhill review

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Table of Contents

POETRY  FICTION
NONFICTION  GRAPHICS

Tiffany R. Anderson

Pay Attention [inside front cover and transformed inset for cover]

Gianna Russo

Foreword: The Unfamiliarix

Aloia Peters

Enlightenment.....1

Liesse Chable

Unfamiliar to Myself2

Suzanne S. Austin-Hill

Writing My First Golden Shovel.....5

Derora Williams

I Die Each Time Words Bleed on the Page6

Evelyn Romano

At Sea7

Diane Neff

Diaries8

Amy Stasio

Dancing Lights.....9

Janet Watson

My Parents' Closet10

<i>Angela Jones</i>	
Familiarizing	11
<i>Xionali Cruz</i>	
My Twin.....	14
<i>Maribeth Durst</i>	
Wings.....	15
<i>Paige McBride</i>	
As Hope Hopes to Speak.....	18
<i>Sophia Sullivan</i>	
Skywriting	19
<i>Christine Cock</i>	
Crow Enters Room.....	20
<i>Randy Goggin</i>	
Alligator.....	23
<i>Randy Goggin</i>	
An Ancient Deliberation	24
<i>Cody Duggan</i>	
The Uncertainties in Life	27
<i>Valerie Eulett</i>	
Viva La Vida.....	28
<i>Virginia Crippen</i>	
Now	29
<i>Paige McBride</i>	
An Olive Reflects.....	30
<i>Erika B. Girard</i>	
The Beach of Life	31
<i>Amy Stasio</i>	
By Design.....	33

<i>Elaine Person</i>	
Destination: Unknown Mausoleum	35
<i>Maeve Kiley</i>	
The Unfamiliar	36
<i>Emmett Ferree</i>	
Hazel Kirk, PA	39
<i>Peter M. Gordon</i>	
Elegy for Leslie	40
<i>Emmett Ferree</i>	
Three Sheets to the Wind	41
<i>Trista (Soap) Vallee</i>	
she is dead	43
<i>Elaine Person</i>	
What Are You?	45
<i>Angela Jones</i>	
At the Crossing	46
<i>Carlton Johnson</i>	
Tree Lines	47
<i>Jacob Fantauzzi</i>	
Two Sides of the Same Coin	48
<i>Victoria Dym</i>	
What the Fish?	49
<i>Elaine Person</i>	
Unfamiliar	51
<i>Tiffany R. Anderson</i>	
Covid Thoughts	52
<i>Kaisha A. Girard</i>	
The ABCs of a Rare Blood Disease	53

<i>Carol Ann Moon</i>	
Elegiac Sonnet to Maya Lin's Seven Square Inches of Water at the Breast Clinic	54
<i>Jane Juran</i>	
Onset Spectrum.....	55
<i>Jill Sutherland</i>	
Sweet or Sour?	58
<i>Carol Ann Moon</i>	
Splash on Steel as Old as Eating a Vista.....	59
<i>Carlton Johnson</i>	
Finding America.....	60
<i>Valerie Eulett</i>	
Johnny's Girl.....	61
<i>Suzanne S. Austin-Hill</i>	
The Road To	63
<i>Peter M. Gordon</i>	
Tijuana, 1979	64
<i>Carol Ann Moon</i>	
Little Cat Feet?	66
<i>James Viggiano</i>	
People Mountain People Sea	67
<i>Janet Watson</i>	
The Train to Meknes	69
<i>Diana Neff</i>	
Dachau.....	71
<i>Madison Ward</i>	
Earth-Shattering Revelations and the Unknown After ..	72

<i>Derora Williams</i>	
Still Alone	75
<i>James Viggiano</i>	
Jade Stone Superstitions	77
<i>Gina Marie Mejias</i>	
Sunday Best	78
<i>Amy Stasio</i>	
The Corridor	79
<i>Tiffany R. Anderson</i>	
Rorschach	80
<i>Victoria Dym</i>	
Boris Karloff Breaks for Tea	82
<i>Tiffany R. Anderson</i>	
Helen	83
<i>Amy Stasio</i>	
Grass Is Greener	84
<i>Elaine Person</i>	
I Hope You Dance	85
<i>Christine Cock</i>	
The Poet of Gray Matter	87
<i>Suzanne S. Austin-Hill</i>	
Where I'm Lookin'	88
<i>Shawn Amos</i>	
The Sublime	90
<i>Aloia Peters</i>	
The Road Goes Ever On	93
<i>Our Community</i>	
Contributors' Notes	95

Suzanne S. Austin-Hill

Lack of Closure 104



Foreword: The Unfamiliar



Three years ago, a world-wide pandemic abruptly thrust us into a world that was, for most, “unfamiliar.” Fear, confusion, hardship, illness, and death—we had to confront these strange realities. Yet the unfamiliar has always shadowed our everyday life, and artists and writers have always acknowledged the truth that the unfamiliar is fertile ground for creativity. Our creative writing students in the Department of Language Studies and the Arts surely sensed this—they proposed this theme.

Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri notes that “From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on . . . encounters beyond the familiar.” Nobel Prize in Literature winner Toni Morrison claimed that “the ability of writers to . . . familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar is the test of their power.”

The writing and photography in this edition of *Sandhill Review* tease the unfamiliar out from the comfortable sunlight of the familiar. In these pages, the unfamiliar is as ordinary as realizing how you fit in with long-ago acquaintances. It is as shocking as getting an unexpected diagnosis. It is as foreign as a war-torn, dystopian planet and as common as a blooming flower.

The works in these pages are testimonies to the unfamiliar manifest as disruption, disturbance, and turmoil in our daily lives. But they are also witness to beauty and joy in disguise, gifts we don’t recognize—until we do. Venture with us into a written landscape that is mysterious, alien, and lovely.

Gianna Russo, Editor-in-Chief, Spring 2023





Alora Peters

Enlightenment

Unfamiliar to Myself

He sits next to me in Freshman English, the only student I know on campus who commutes from home. He's not a talker and I'm a serious student. It's kind of weird, though, he keeps asking me to meet his parents.

"They want to meet my classmates. It's a big deal for them that I'm in college."

When Lance talks, there's a cap on his front tooth that keeps popping out. I'm embarrassed for him. The guy is awkward, sure, but he has a car. I haven't ridden in one since arriving on campus in late August. It's almost Halloween. I'm nostalgic for my own neighborhood up North and, frankly, I miss my family.

"Sure, Lance. I'm up for it."

I don't wear my glasses even though I'm very myopic. I think I look prettier without them. Contact lenses don't work for me. I've had one date so far with a guy who wanted to play pool. I tried to fake it, but I couldn't read the numbers on the cue balls. He thought I was smart.

Early evening it starts to rain on the drive to Lance's neighborhood, a group of one-story houses surrounded by farms. I miss the chill in the air and wet fallen leaves back home. Here in Florida, it's still warm and the damp earth smells like tobacco. We cross a lawn of spongy St. Augustine grass. I cling to Lance so I won't lose my balance. My eyes see a watery halo around porch lights that remind me of the Nightmare on Elm Street, but a cozy Elm Street.

The front door opens directly into a small kitchen. Lance is over six feet and has to stoop to get inside. The kitchen smells scrubbed

and put away for the evening. An older man and woman sit at a kitchen table that seems too cramped for us.

As it turns out I never see the rest of the house.

Lance makes a big deal of introducing me, but mumbles his parents' names. I hesitate to ask him to repeat them, so I improvise.

"Good evening, ma'am." Lance squeezes my hand. "Good evening, sir." I don't even recognize myself.

Father asks, "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Sure," I say.

* * *

Lance adjusts his legs awkwardly under the table as Mother extricates herself to put the kettle on. When the click-click starts behind my back, I cringe because I'm afraid of gas stoves.

Father opens a fresh box of Lipton tea, removes one teabag from its paper envelope, and wags the teabag at me. I laugh and put it in my cup, but this is weird.

Mother comes around me and pours hot water.

I stare at my teabag steeping and sense everyone looking at me.

"You like your tea strong?"

I smile and say, "Yes, sir, very strong," and jiggle the teabag's string.

Why is Lance's father so concerned about my tea bag?

"So go ahead. Squeeze the tea bag, if you have to," he says.

Lance slumps and seems to slide under the table.

I wrap the string tightly around the teabag and squeeze hard.

One sip and I say, "There, sir. Very strong."

"Now pass the teabag." His words chill me.

Oh, my God. One teabag meant for all of us? Who drinks tea this way?

With his head down, Lance takes the teabag from me. Mother pours hot water into his cup. Lance dunks the teabag, then passes it across the table to his father. Mother pours hot water. Father dunks

the tea bag and passes it to his wife. She puts the kettle down and handles the teabag by its tail like a dead mouse.

I wish Lance would look at me. He could have warned me not to wring the juice out of the communal teabag. Without my glasses on, I'm so vain about my appearance that I'm blind to what's going on around me.

But if the family is really poor, that's nothing to laugh at. Unfortunately, I hope Lance doesn't look at me because I feel an explosive fart of laughter coming on.

We can't leave soon enough. On the drive back to my dorm, Lance says nothing to me and I don't ask him any questions.

He doesn't sit next to me in English any more. I see him walking around campus with a big smile on his face and his arm around a girl half his size.

I hope he got his front tooth fixed.

Writing My First Golden Shovel

Digging for a jewel of a poem to adorn **the**
setting of a Golden Shovel. I chose as **instructor**,
master-jeweler, Langston Hughes, whose work **said**
with these end words lighting my way, I could make a **go**
of it, right at **home**,
following the rules, **and**
manage to **write**
something that could be considered a
recognition-worthy **page**.
I'm starting **tonight**,
days before the deadline **and**
hope my words **let**
someone feel **that**
special something left on the **page**.
From where does this substance **come**?
My muse, my mind, and **out**
of my pencil dancing. Because **of**
the challenges, like this one, **you**
provide, I write a poem **then**,
revise, and submit **it**.
Now, subject to judges' whim and **will**.
They alone decide what is to **be**.
Regardless, I know this poem is from me and **true**.

[Based on "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes]

I Die Each Time Words Bleed on the Page

When I write poetry,
I slice a knife through my heart.

I wreck me break me apart
Leave me in shards of insecurities

I work to keep hidden from me.
My world ends at pen's death stroke

forcing me to mend the old version,
become the woman I never heard of.

Changed. New.

Whole. Complete.

Brave. No longer afraid
to meet me on the page.

At Sea

I sail alone in gray seas recast by clouds—a toppled vessel—
grateful—wary—time another species anchored in stone.
The sun seeks passage but loss is a patient traveler. Blinders might help
but I crave clarity.

Did ancestors, parents and grandparents tread these waters
with greater fluidity?
Do I imagine their silence—reluctance—refusal—
to reveal the unravelling ahead?

I know of no compass that alters direction as I
move closer to shore.

I do hope for light.

Diaries

What magic lies in these pages, dusty and brittle,
their spines faded from sunlight and age?
An unfamiliar hand put pen to their lines,
filled these volumes with intimate persuasion.
The slant of these letters, the scrolls and serifs
honored thoughts and dreams in private moments,
ink bleeding with sorrow, tears of joy staining
pages that also absorbed their pain.
Perhaps these words are fantasy, perhaps truth
of a life I saw in a faded photograph.
Six sisters, seven brothers; one story told.
What might I learn, what lessons await, if I dare?
The legacy does not ask to be read.
Privacy, after all, is a right and a privilege
for the living – what of the dead?
Their stories live on, or end in ashes—
I placed the four books in the smaller box.



Amy Stasio

Dancing Lights

My Parents' Closet

It was a privacy I could not share—
my parents' secret smiles and the closet where
his winter jacket and his heavy shirts
could crowd her flimsy blouses and her skirts.
In such a small and narrow space, of course they
consorted, I imagined, in a too-familiar way.

When I was told to vacuum-clean inside,
I approached that tiny room somewhat disinclined
to intrude upon the conjugal mystery
which bonded those insiders intimately.
Within that small confine, a sleeve touched sleeve—
enough and all of passion I'd perceive.

On opening the door, I'd see the garments move
and hear the fabrics whispering. I knew
a shirt had been caressing silky softness
before I intruded, naively rude and thoughtless.
The fragrance of My Sin danced darkly there
with collar scent of after-shave, in cloying closet air.

I now recall how that apparel hung—
how innocent that pairing. But I was young.
I'd push the Hoover around shoes on the floor
and quickly, quickly close the closet door,
my skin a flush that could not be subdued,
as though I'd glimpsed my parents in the nude.

Familiarizing

Uncle Lynn cupped his hand over my cereal bowl when we were alone in the room. A glint of gold caught my eye.

“She was forty-four when she graduated,” he said. He didn’t have to say more. Grandma had become a teacher late in life, but first she’d had to finish school herself.

Rochester High is a small-town school in rural Indiana, and Grandma had been a poor town girl—a divorcée—when she’d bought this class ring. The gold band was inscribed 1957, five years after my father, her oldest son, had graduated from the same school. Grandma must not have fit in there at all.

Her ring slid easily onto my finger. That Saturday, I would wear my dead grandma’s ring to my class reunion.

Living in Florida, I’d never been to a reunion before, but today my best friend, Kim, was driving from Ohio to join me on this walk back in time. Staying at the Marriott without our husbands, we were two out-of-state working moms in a fairy tale that for one night didn’t need a prince. Just our friendship stretching back to second grade.

Before the reunion, we studied names in our senior yearbook and then dressed for the big party. An hour later, our high heels clicked across wet macadam in the graying light of Fort Wayne.

“Let’s hit the restroom before we go in,” I said, wanting to check my long hair—to reassure myself, in a mirror, I wasn’t still that gawky girl from Elmhurst High.

It wasn’t that I had never fit in. I don’t think I’d ever tried. Shy around boys, I didn’t dance or party. I teamed with the clique in after-school sports, then went home. I had been a puzzle piece with no smooth edge, pushed aside until my space appeared.

The elevator doors opened into the Memorial Coliseum Lounge, and into the reunion. So much for combing my hair. A former classmate pulled us to a table covered in nametags. The laminated faces from our senior pictures smiled back at us, then we pinned them over our hearts.

Twenty years ago, 371 of us in papery garnet gowns had been handed diplomas in this same stone building. Tonight a fourth of us were here, half with spouses.

After dinner, leaning into old classmates over live music became a game of sudden recall. Instead of, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” it was, “Where do you live? What do you do?” (What have you become?)

There had been divorces among us, lost jobs, crushed dreams. At least three of us hadn’t lived to see this night, but no one spoke much about failures or disappointments. We focused on what was good tonight. Now, we had lived longer apart than together, but the years together had dragged with the feet of youth.

I nervously centered Grandma’s ring on my finger and picked through the crowd. Each time someone approached, I prepared to reintroduce myself. This time Kelly, a former cheerleader, called my name, saying “I’d know that face anywhere!”

Without my braces, glasses, and short brown hair, she still knew me. And I knew her too. We had walked the same hallways for six years, learned from the same books and teachers. I realized I didn’t need a mirror after all, not when I had the reflective eyes of old classmates.

I eventually found Kim huddled in a slow dance with her high school sweetheart, whom she hadn’t seen since their college breakup. We circulated through clouds of old girlfriends and reminisced with former tennis partners, marching-band mates and secret crushes. I photographed streams of unfamiliar faces re-remembered. Toward midnight, we joined the stragglers leaving the

party and agreed to take the party with us to the Marriott, where we could keep dancing . . . and talking . . . and being young.

We flowed into the elevator: student council members who had coordinated the reunion, ever-effervescent cheerleaders, a homecoming queen, and members of the prom court—The Clique.

“What’s the capacity?” somebody joked.

“Twenty-five hundred pounds,” I read off a wall plaque.

The gunmetal doors began to slide shut, and our distorted faces smiled back in reflection. Shrill from above, an alarm sounded then mingled with our laughter. We were too many. No one offered to get out. We just bunched tighter and descended to ground level.

If only I’d known, all those years ago, how simple it could be to fit in.

My Twin

It's so strange—

You're my twin but I have to leave you alone,
unsure of where to start.

You've been there the whole time—

From the moment in our mother's womb
to now in college just in different rooms.

Seeing you with your friends makes me oh so jealous.

We hardly see each other as college students
and when we do you're running around the campus.

What is this feeling? Is it abandonment or fear?

Yes, it is. It's the unfamiliar feeling that has slowly turned into my worst fear.

I need you as you need me; nothing can separate us it seems.

Just the other day you came to me crying;

I lent you my shoulder and the warmth filled me up.

You are my twin and I will continue to hold you till you can get up.

Wings

Lizzie Powell sat at her bedroom window, staring out at the river.

Her younger sister, Jeanette, shoved open Lizzie's bedroom door, and dropped her supper tray on her lap

It's not fair," she hissed. "I wanted to go with my friends to the movies, but dad made me stay home and wait on you."

Lizzie shrugged and gave her sister a forlorn look. "I can't imagine where I caught such a bad cold, since mom and dad won't allow me beyond the house and yard, acting as if this deformed back I was born with solely defines my essence."

"Except for that stupid lump on your back, you're just as able-bodied as I am," Jeanette said. Her eyes welled up. "I'll be seventeen next month and I want to do what all my friends are doing, dating boys, and going to concerts and dances on the weekends instead of doing all the housework."

Lizzie nodded and smiled at her sister. "You're right. It's time I became more assertive. I'm going downstairs right now and tell them I should take on more responsibilities around here."

Setting the tray aside, Lizzie rose and marched through the door with a purpose.

Jeanette came after her, grasping for her arm as she reached the top of the stairs. "No, wait. Stop. They'll think I pressured you into saying something."

In a reflex reaction, Lizzie shifted her body and lost her balance. Her knees buckled, her feet slipped off the top step, and she fell on her back, bumping and crashing down the stairs.

Rushing down the steps, Jeanette knelt by her side. "Oh Lizzie, I am so sorry. I can't believe what happened."

Her parents appeared. “What was all that racket?” Dad shouted. Her mother said in a whimper, “Oh, my darling daughter, are you hurt?”

Before Lizzie could answer, her father turned on Jeannette. “You pushed her, didn’t you?”

Lizzie raised herself up on her elbow. “Dad, it’s not her fault. We were talking and I lost my balance.”

“What were you talking about that was so important you headed down the stairs before looking to see where you were going?”

“Um-m-m, well, if you must know, I offered to help her out around the house.”

“Oh no, you won’t,” he shouted, his voice reverberating up the stair case.

“That’s enough,” her mother said soft and low. “We need to take her to the emergency room, and we need to go now.”

In the Emergency Room, the doctor shook his head as he dragged his finger across the X-ray images, tracing the bones that stood out. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

What Lizzie saw didn’t make any sense to her. “What is it?”

“It looks like bones criss-crossing your back in a pattern similar to wings.”

“Wings,” her father barked. “Like some damn bird’s wings?”
That’s what they look like.”

Her mother moaned. “Oh, Lizzie, I was afraid of that. I should have told you sooner. You inherited those from me.”

“How could I inherit them from you? Your back is normal.”

“I know, but on rare occasions throughout our history, women in my Native American clan have been born with humps on their back, sometimes the wings breaking out of the skin covering, sometimes not. With those who didn’t, a Medicine Woman prayed over them, then cut the skin, freeing their wings, for they were destined to do great things for our people. They were called Bird Women.”

Her husband scowled at her. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Because you insisted I reject my heritage in order to marry you.”

The doctor turned back to Lizzie. “I can perform a minor surgical procedure on your back, if you would like, and free your wings.”

“No!” her father barked once again. “I forbid it.”

“Too late, Dad. I’m over twenty-one.”

Lizzie simply nodded at the doctor.

Back home, Lizzie went to her room and allowed her wings to fill it. They appeared more like bat wings with pale skin stretched taut between the bones, rather than fluffy white feathery wings of angels, but Lizzie didn’t care. To her, they were beautiful.

Late that night, Lizzie went to the house roof, spread her wings and stepped off into space. She glided a bit, flapped furiously to give herself enough lift to rise over the power lines that spanned the river and soared off into the night.

As Hope Hopes to Speak

secrets risen from sorrow
wash the light in winter

two doves desire rings
created from spiraling breaths

search light
searchlight
search light with a man seeking your light

hope stands
hope gloriously sits
as hope hopes to speak

reticent ash
becomes a gold staircase

ash is no longer jammed
on a locked wooden road
since the staircase ascends

Skywriting

I think birds were on to something when they gave us feathers to write with all those years ago.

Did they know how freeing it would feel to us measly humans, to empty those words onto our pieces of parchment?

Did they realize that writing would feel like flying, like our words were soaring across the same expanse of sky they called home?

Did they consider the tranquility it would bring for humans to bear their souls to the rest of the world?

Maybe writing has always belonged in the sky, like those skywriters do nowadays. Maybe words were always too far for the miserable humans to grasp, until the birds brought them down

Crow Enters Room

I.

How it enters through screen mesh
is anyone's guess...

Feathered fringe
brushes the pillow, drawn up sheets,

my bloodless cheek.

There is a hushed flap of wings,
a stirring of air

It is flying around the room,
Flying around the room at midnight.

Who has called this taunting, black spirit?

Air stills, silence returns—

I peer above covers into space left by the crow's absence,
and feel the moon's pale calling.

II.

My love and I walk through a rusty dryness beneath
barren oak limbs.

Suddenly he shoots—

Brings me the body of a dead crow. I am breathless and touch
its iridescence, shriek, then fall.

When he helps me rise,
he does not know I am now missing pieces

that can only be explained by the crow.

III.

In an act of supplication,
he brings me a juvenile crow, motherless,
who steals my turquoise, drinks
from faucets, wings through hallways.

While nibbling my ear, it whispers
coy crow murmurations

that swirl into my thoughts like light and air.

One day, to appease the beckoning hayfield flock,
it leaves— a black flame entering a black fire

Circling once, taking its voice.

IV.

It is several years later.

My bones have begun to hollow,

developing a lacework of air pockets.

It is harder to keep my feet grounded.

Shoulder blades ache
as quills protrude from skin and deep tissue.

My mind is sodden with tall grasses, shivering
leaves, and I feel

wind when there is no wind.

Circling overhead one last time,
I see him below, hip deep in corn,

Hoe in his hands.



Randy Goggin

Alligator

An Ancient Deliberation

Its rumbles shook the air around me, battering my senses, drowning out the cicadas. I stood frozen on the bridge above the blackwater creek, my synapses firing in new pathways to prep me—the potential energy of my fight or flight choices. It erupted again with its auditory warnings, its bellows dominating the creatures around it. Then it ceased, and the ambient sounds of the swamp flooded in: cicadas screaming from the floodplain forest, a branch snapping, pops of mud fish air-gulping. It rumbled three times more.

Then I saw it through the branches—its massive, reptilian form. It was downstream at the bend in the creek, its head aimed up at the canopy above it. Its powerful forelimbs propped up its body, with its claws dug down into the mud. It was a bull gator, more than ten feet in length. The females rarely grew larger than eight. This was the giant the other hikers had spotted, a spectacle of nature in its upward dog posture. It held open its jaws, revealing conical teeth. When it bellowed again, I watched the water's vibrations – the ripples moving outward from its broad, armored back.

Its head was about half the length of my body, its throat easily wide enough for me to fit in. It went silent, and then that silence expanded—the circumference of its neck shrinking back down. I saw violence in its size and the musculature of its body, its back like an oak trunk, its powerful jaws. It stood tall on its bachelor's stage, competing for the attention of a female mate—warning off any smaller males in its path.

The cicada calls rose and fell in synchronic rhythms. Then a second gator bellowed from somewhere upstream—this one not as loud as the first. The big bull listened, with its head still lifted in the air. I absorbed the ancient, intra-species interaction, their inherited

understanding of size-to-sound correlation. The big bull gator bellowed back with three more of its own – its soundwaves tearing past me and colliding into trees. How far did they travel, and how many species kept their distance?

I continued watching from six feet above the water—from safety—the creek flowing with its tannic water beneath me. My blood flowed like rapids with my heart still racing – the sound of the giant still triggering my defenses. The smaller gator let out a series of subsequent bellows, the big bull listening until its challenger ceased. Then it filled its lungs with more air, its neck expanding, unleashing a larger, lower resonance rumble.

There were echoes of dinosaurs resurrected in that call. Had Tyrannosaurs sounded anything like what I was hearing? I imagined them, the dinosaurs and crocodilians coexisting, sharing prey species, and consuming one another. I sensed ephemeral visions of a lost world before humans, the all-encompassing changes of the Anthropocene yet to rumble across the planet.

When the bellows stopped, the cicadas increased, beating their tymbals in high-pitched percussions—engaged in their own social order. The creek flowed with rain-fed currents, leaf litter floating, and black swirls off the posts. The six-foot gator that had been sleeping on the bank was awake, but it stayed motionless at the top of its slide, caught between two powerful forces. The water bugs swirled on the mirrored surface below.

There was no deception in their bellowing calls, no subterfuge, no misinformation. The biggest males would win every time, the females choosing them for the protection they offered – most of their offspring destined for death before adulthood. When the males again broke from their tentative silence, I listened to the discrepancy between the resonance of their calls. Both gators knew which of the two was the victor.

The big bull gator listened to the higher resonance rumbles, the information stimulating its reptilian brain. I watched the confidence

displayed in its posture. As it let out its last rumbles, its head remained high—defying the destruction unleashed on the world. Then it settled, lowering its head beneath the surface, its broad back merging with the shadows. It would wait now for the future—flowing ever downstream—the female gator yet to make her decision.

The Uncertainties in Life

The world, the great unknown.
What is out there among the stars?
Is it all predestined or is it up to our actions?
Does each and every person have a purpose?
What if we do not live up to our potential?

What will I contribute to society?
The idea instills fear, what if I fail?
What if I'm not strong enough to make it?
What if I let down those who believe in me?
What does society expect of me?
Am I destined for mediocrity?
Or will I be one of the greats?
What if hard work is not enough?
What does fate have in store for me?

Viva La Vida

can this life even be called living
 actually living
until she takes my hand through all

when life is no more an idyllic dream
 of could-be's
but of the moment, the present, and her

everything outside is so cold and frightening
 but her hand
turns all the unknown in the darkness to thrills

never before have i been more sure of anything
 more than
letting her lead me through *la vida* with new eyes

everything outside was once so impossibly untouchable
 but she
makes me see nothing was ever so far from my reach all along

Now

Here is a flower new to you.
It doesn't care what you call it.
Doesn't need to be classified or understood.
It wants to be experienced.
It doesn't want to be named and explained.
It wants to be enjoyed.
Save your categories for later, if you must.
Practice being present to its unfamiliar beauty.
Now.

An Olive Reflects

prism an olive reflects
 an illumination of hope

the gusts in Autumn do prevail
a drop is strummed on a string

tall candle shine with her wings
 her poems still the church
 in keen calming quarters

poem orchard orange
leaf branch love her right

her light shines for you in an Abbey
 where living oak trees remain

The Beach of Life

Sometimes the water makes you clean. It gives you peace.
Or it may drown you. You never know until you wade in.

You often try running across the sand.
It's slow, and exhausting, but eventually
you get the hang of it.

Sometimes you look back and despair
for how short a distance you have covered.
But sometimes you glance behind yourself and
are amazed by how far you've come.

You may press on despite all else,
finding that the taxing journey
is worth every step as long as you have a goal.
You can choose to see the dull beige of it all...
...or the glistening quartz shining among the grains.

And sometimes it isn't sand at all.
It's made of rocks, ever so slippery.
It is difficult to focus on anything besides where to step next.
It may feel impossible to see the bigger picture, but it's there.
It's always there.
Even if you don't fix your eyes on it.

Or it may be composed of shells.
Beautiful to look at—gorgeous to behold—yet ready
to injure you at any moment. You must decide whether
to suffer through, inevitably enduring pain, or to make
your way around, never to see its superficial beauty again.

Or perhaps it might have no shells, no rocks or even sand to speak of. Like Hawaii.

You try running across the lava. It's hot, scalding.
You get burned.

Or it's cooled. It's less frightening that way.

It might be pahoehoe, smooth.

You run and never tire; you cover a great distance.

But it might instead be an aa flow, jagged. You try to run.

You get hurt. Then you pick your way over it more carefully.

It's time-consuming but you've learned.

It all depends on how you approach life...

not on what you're dealing with.

By Design

I love to be mysterious to you
unblemished by dark hues
uncut like a cheap gemstone
but I've paid a pretty penny
for this winning smile

how much does it really cost?
to begin anew
would you believe me if I said I'd
never met anyone like you?
or would you know I was lying, too?

maybe I'll play coy and
you'll blow up my ego like
a party city balloon
I'll be smart, charming, beautiful
but only when it comes to you

I beg you, don't try to
peer inside my head
it's been a nightmare to remodel
but I've torn up the carpet and gasped
"I never knew there were hardwood floors!"

I'll peel back your wallpaper, too
do you really have thick skin?
I am an interior designer
just tell me where to begin
I can crawl in your ear

and eat you from within.



Elaine Person

Destination: Unknown Mausoleum

The Unfamiliar

I can feel it watching me.

Ever since I went out to the garden that night five months ago, I have felt its presence. I don't know when it latched onto me, maybe when I was running my fingers along the flowers? Maybe when I crouched down to tear a distasteful weed protruding from the jagged cracks along the sidewalk. Regardless of when it came, it was there, and it was following me. Creeping behind me every moment of every day, watching me.

It would hide in my shadow, in the trees, under rocks, behind buildings, and in its most beloved home: beneath my bed. I would look to the right and left of me, only to see nothing there. Much like a cold breeze or a sharp pain to my side, I could feel its presence but never truly see it.

It seemed most powerful after sunset. It would rattle and slink beneath my bed all night. I would listen to it in abstract horror, knowing for certain that if I turned on the light, nothing would be there. As long as the sun is shining, I do not think it can hurt me. But during the nighttime, I am not so sure.

The only warning of its presence I receive is simple. A clicking sound. Like that of a child's rattler or falling keys. It follows an unbroken rhythm that forced me to keep watch with wide eyes at every moment of the day.

I went to doctor after doctor, only for them to tell me the same thing. My ears were in perfect condition. It was therapists after that. Prescriptions were to no avail; nothing worked. The clicking continued.

One would assume its unfamiliarity would become familiar, but that never happened. The nights grew longer, the days shorter, and

every other moment there was an itch on my skin and a clicking in my ear. A tiny voice told me it was only a matter of time. Soon, it would grow strong enough to creep out of the shadows beneath my bed and drag my body down to its sullen lair

Things began to escalate when a piece of stir fry chicken slipped from my chopstick and onto the floor. I bent over to reach it, but before my fingers even hit the ground, it was snatched away. The movement was quicker than a blink but the clicking momentarily ceased. It was content for it had fed.

On meat. I was next.

I brushed off my fears as paranoia. Lots of things eat meat, doesn't mean they go after humans. It all had to be in my head. But then there was a noticeable absence of insects around my dirty apartment. Then the mice were gone. Then no birds sitting on my windowsill. Until one day, the bones of my beloved cat came spewing out from beneath my bedside. Splatters of blood across my bed sheets, wads of fur and flesh snaking across the wooden floor, and a tiny collar lay gnarled and abandoned. The teeth marks were still visible along the edges of the collar.

That was it. I wanted this thing out.

That same night, I sat on top of my bed with a kitchen knife and baseball bat, silently waiting for its return. It seemed cautious tonight, aware of the danger lurking above it. The rhythmic clicking followed a steady beat.

It was expecting me.

I waited before dropping a piece of slimy lunch meat to the ground. My bloodshot eyes stared until it made up its mind and acted. I saw the flash of its arm, so I attacked, furiously stabbing, and beating anything within my grasp. The clicking transformed into an unbearable screech as sharp claws and teeth puncture my flesh. It wasn't long before it got hold of me and pulled me down to the floor.

With a violent rip followed by a painful scream, I collapsed to the ground in a bloody heap, watching in horror as my now dismembered arm was slowly dragged into the darkness. The clicking ceased.

A neighbor must have heard the commotion for I woke up in a hospital bed. The only sounds I heard were the bustling nurses and doctors outside my room. I was missing an arm and horrifically injured but I was free. The feeling of being unwatched almost moved me to tears. It was over. I closed my eyes.

Only to hear a clicking sound from beneath my hospital bed.

Hazel Kirk, PA

men and women dressed as mourners
flock the churchyard at dawn's break

thick coats hide black bellies from sleet
starched collars peek up around gruff napes

laced veils peel back from jaundiced jowls
and flit against the biting wind

no cheek nor lip nor yellowed eye
wet with grief protest as stunted legs shuffle

toward the wake and away from the snow
they are but cormorants stranded upon a ghost town

feeding on coal dust and bread beaten on rocks
and hammered into tradition

they do this because they know nothing
aside from dying in the mines

livelihoods buried beneath sediment
lineage snuffed out with every flame

their bodies hauled up on pulleys
and retrieved like sunken treasure

Elegy for Leslie

Neighbors found her labradoodle
wandering, leash attached, through
their front yard, walked him home

to find her body sprawled
over threshold, “to-do” list
clutched in her hand.

I wish I could declare deep meaning
from her death, declaim rolling
phrases poets pen at these moments,

but I can't.

I can share her list. Five items—
two checked off.

- Pick up cupcakes for meeting
- walk dog
- call Tom, schedule date night
- finish book draft
- tell my son I love him.

Three Sheets to the Wind

It was 2 a.m. and my car stalled
on the
bridge. I caught sight
of an old man
preaching
to the mayflies.

He slurred
his sermon but spoke surely,
meticulating
each syllable as it tumbled
from his mouth
down
toward the Susquehanna.

I watched
as he stretched and stood
erect, gripping the concrete pillar
as if it were the helm of his ship
and he
was fighting to set his trajectory.

He
staggered and swooned,
whooping

at a crew even the mayflies couldn't see.

I could feel the waters still as his swaying
slowed. For a moment, we locked eyes.

Then

he smiled, crossed his arms,
and fell

overboard.

It was the most
sober
decision I had ever seen
a man make,

and when my engine sputtered back to life,
I drove off wondering how he knew

it was time to set sail.

she is dead

i bring the dead pen to my lips. the name *lost mary* mocks me, as the statue of the virgin herself supports my shaking arms. how ironic. acrid smoke vacates my lungs. the originally sweet flavor is gone. been gone for weeks. been gone since before the cartridge was bummed off a generous friend. the only thing left is burnt sugar on my tongue.

the boxy exterior wears a familiar groove into my palm. it's comfortable there. that alone makes me uncomfortable. not the intensifying shake coming from my bones. not the lightheadedness that goes down to my legs. it's the realization that it feels natural in my hands. the realization i am not immune to the same mistakes of my parents.

those mistakes which i boasted my resistance to. "my parents are addicts. have been since they were teenagers. i would never be like that though," but i am. i am not special. i am nothing new. i am just like them. i let my genes take over.

the burn in my throat has nothing to do with the nicotine. not that it's even nicotine anymore. it's burnt cotton escaping the spout. pure carbon dioxide hitting my already asthma-stricken lungs. the juice has been gone for days now. i cannot afford a new one. i take what i can get.

when did i stop caring? i used to take pride in how i escaped the fate written out for me since birth. when did i let my newfound responsibilities take hold of me like this? i've been losing hair for weeks, working myself ragged between school and work. the nausea, the migraines, the insomnia, they are ever present. when did that happen? when did they start to overshadow my self-preservation? my reasons to live.

i am no stranger to suicide. so commonplace in my world. i've lost countless friends to it. it's in jokes, offered by friends when a task proves difficult. it's in a blade, carefully removed from a child's pencil sharpener, which used to be a familiar burn against my thighs. (those maps have faded over time. a year does wonders for shallow wounds.) it's in the ghost of death that would ring in my ears anytime i was left alone with my thoughts.

i used to repeat mantras when i would think of dying. *i can't leave my cat behind, my work would be left short staffed, no one would take care of my grandmother.* but those vain attempts at keeping myself afloat stopped at some point. i don't remember when.

i don't remember when the ideation turned from active to passive. when i last checked both ways before i crossed the road. when i stopped caring about what situations i ended up in. when did i stop forcing calories down my throat for the sake of survival? when did i give up?

how did i miss the changes occurring within me? i thought i was better. i thought i stopped killing myself when i stopped pulling box cutters across my skin. i am not better. my pain only changed shape. it is an uncomfortable shape. an unfamiliar shape. one i do not recognize. it is the first time i am aware of it. it does not fit in my throat.

i pull the vape to my lips once more. the familiar burn taking the place of this new shape. i've taken too many hits though. i can feel my brain being swallowed by the fog, it's dense and i am floating again. my body relaxes. i shake. familiarity is a drug. it is my drug.



Elaine Person

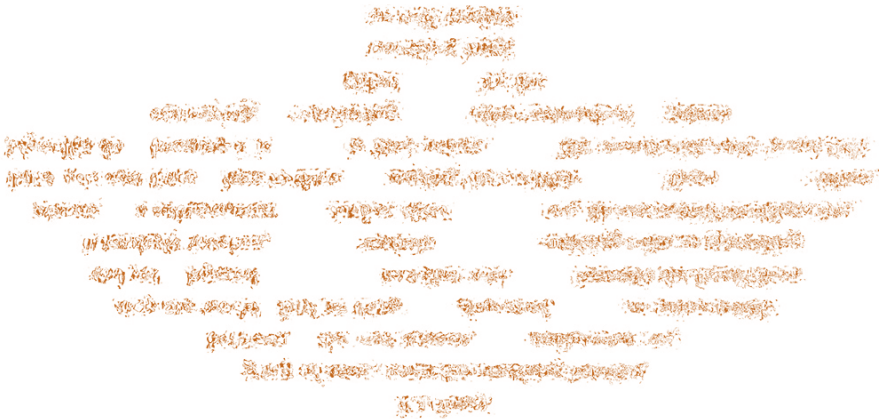
What Are You?

At the Crossing

because the road blacktop breaching and in woods behind	is wide fallow fields her young sleep
at each chance to cross while miles grow hills	a car scares her off and memories hunt
because fear has ears she starts then stares when anything	to hear a berry drop then startles appears
she looks she'll go	as though never

Tree Lines

It's funny
grasp of arms, tentacles reaching betwixt,
between the vast unseen, under-seen we,
atop our world find no thing abnormal or unknowable
and yet layered in a fine web beneath the floral floor
it tenderly touches, tendrils making calm or spreading
alarms, a subterranean Amber Alert we, the terrestrial dwellers, too,
have nets cast from here to there angling for a nibble from others.
Mycellia do because it is in their nature. The wood-wide web is on 24/7,
conveying, convincing other networked plants
aided by the
secretive fungi.
no wifi needed.



Two Sides of the Same Coin

Focus. Focus on what's around you.

Heat searing both my hands and soul.

Sweat pouring like heavy rain.

Thick dust filling my lungs.

GAH! There is no use.

One thought persists:

Will this flight

be my

last...

...this

is why

you signed up.

Get to your feet.

Cast aside your fear.

Gather up all you gear.

Concentrate on your training

Go join your brothers, they need you.

I defend my country with my life.

What the Fish?

fish fall

from the sky

in Texarkana, fish

small fish

school of fish

one hundred fish fall

fish on the freeway

flip-flopping fish

fish in the fields, fish

raining fish, flash flood of fish

fish in the beds of trucks

at the Orr Max Dealership

fish, fish, fish

Armageddon fish

fish fall from the sky



Elaine Person

Unfamiliar

Covid Thoughts

Hope is a steady whisper.
If you are distracted, you will miss it.
Fear is a booming voice—
Stern and powerful and overwhelming.
Hope is a sliver of joy
In a faint ray of sunshine
When your day has been dark
And dreary.
Every day the battle commences.
Which voice will we hear
When we are at our most vulnerable?

The ABCs of a Rare Blood Disease

A normal night at home turns out to be one like no other—
Becomes a source of dread as daughter sits cross-legg'd with mother.
Cancer comes to mind when mother sees petechiae
(Dots of red all down small legs with no clear reason why).
ER trip is first for them the next day after church
For mother's fear of leukemia is making her heart lurch.
Golden hair could all be lost—or worse—but they soon see
Her fears dispelled when doctor diagnoses ITP.
Idiopathic Thrombocytopenic Purpura:
Just the name and its unknowns enough to scare her, a
Kid with way more life to live...*or do I?* she must wonder.
Life may never be the same with this rare blood disorder.
Mightily low platelet count has doc on high alert;
Now she has to focus on avoiding getting hurt.
Once she asks, she finds out ITP's a clotting issue:
Papercuts and nosebleeds won't be stopped with just a tissue.
Quiet time instead of gym will be her whole new normal—
Reading books might save her life, although that sounds so formal.
Since “idiopathic” means its cause is as of yet unknown,
This blood disease, in some cases, may improve on its own—
Unless it needs transfusion or steroids in some amount.
Very important is to monitor her platelet count.
With this disease, bloodwork is the only way to tell
(X-rays don't show platelets) and it's hard to diagnose well.
Years can pass with chronic—acute a six-month hill;
Zeal for life is what matters, though, and live her life she will.

*Elegiac Sonnet to Maya Lin's Seven Square
Inches of Water at the Breast Clinic*

It was next to the elevator
I almost missed it, dismissed it as a stanchion at first
For crowd control at the breast clinic reception desk
You know the kind—a post you can pull into service
To get patients to line up nicely
Even when they do not line up nicely any more
The blue glass wave form under glass drew me in
It was wavy like me
Undulating
Sensuous
It was lost like me, missing its ocean of blue glass wave form,
perhaps
For someone else to judge whether it was a warning or a libation
Lin made a quiet water sculpture into a monument
Was I a monument, too?

Onset Spectrum

It started with a snowman. A smiling snowman image, a square in my upper left field of vision. He seemed familiar but I couldn't place him. It was late November and holiday decorations were everywhere.

Then I began having aura migraines at work. The fluorescent lights zig-zagged in vivid rainbow colors for a few minutes and everything went back to normal.

People told me, "I get those all the time. They're nothing." I looked it up online and it seemed these migraines come from the brain, not the eyes.

"Did you go to the hospital?" Ali asked.

"No! You can't go to the hospital saying I see a snowman. That's crazy. It's probably just part of these migraines."

A neural ophthalmologist confirmed my eyes were fine and these visual disturbances were coming from the brain. He ordered an MRI so a neurologist could review the images.

On my way home I saw stone half-walls along Phillippe Parkway and wondered when Safety Harbor put those in. Then I watched them disintegrate. "Oh...they didn't."

My MRI was scheduled for early January. In the weeks leading up to it, one day I saw the blooms of my potted Christmas cactus, giant and on the front of each passing car. Another time I was walking along Second Street and passed a woman with two golden retrievers. I saw one of the dogs' heads superimposed on each of the bushes I passed.

“I would be in the emergency room!” Ali said. The eye doctor didn’t act like there was cause for panic.

I was nervous on the morning of the MRI. The knocking and hydraulic sounds of the machine were crazy loud, almost alien. Strangely fascinating. I tried to mentally put myself somewhere else, to shrink back from the plastic cage over my head. If I opened my eyes I knew my lashes would have brushed it. I kept them shut tight.

When the test was done I was sent back out to the waiting room while they made my CD. It was taking a long time and I still had to get to work. A technician finally came out and said they needed to do another MRI, this time with a dye injection to show contrast.

After the second test, someone came out to tell me they needed to talk to the doctor again and I couldn’t leave yet. After a while she came back holding the imaging CD and said the doctor would call me that afternoon. I’d had a sick feeling something was wrong and tried to stifle it. Now I was sure.

“You really can’t tell me anything?” I asked her, eyes holding tears like an infinity pool.

“I can’t tell you anything, but I did put a copy of the report in with the CD.”

I consulted Google in my parked car, the report tight between my hands. It said:

MASS

POSSIBLE MENINGIOMA

RIGHT OCCIPITAL LOBE

The occipital lobe is the visual processing center of the brain. A meningioma is a slow growing, usually benign brain tumor.

What? It was just supposed to be some aura migraines.

The eye doctor called me at work that afternoon. The next step was for me to see a neurosurgeon. He knew an excellent one close to his office who specialized in minimally invasive procedures. He thought I might be overwhelmed by the news and already called her.

“She can see you tomorrow at 11 a.m. for a consultation if you would like to meet with her.”

Ali offered to go to the appointment with me to be a second set of ears in case I zoned out from the shock of it at any point and didn’t catch everything.

Dr. Carrie showed us an image of the tumor on a large TV screen monitor and identified areas of swelling in my brain.

“What scale is this?” I asked. “Is it really the size of an acorn?”

“No,” she said. “That’s actual size. About as big as a golf ball.”

No. No no no. We’d gone there thinking there would be some kind of radiation they could hit it with. You know, something minimally invasive. But she said it had to come out. Soon. Next week.

Sweet or Sour?

Is this excitement in my stomach?
Or has panic disguised itself
As the prettiest berry hanging on a tree
That poisons me as soon as I pierce its flesh?
The unknown is so tempting
Allure of a thrill
Ignorance to what holds dismantling power
A timid step forward
Pushing past fear is a lifestyle
I reach my hand past the blossoms
Past the threatening thorns
I pick the berry off the branch
Sweet or sour?
The million-dollar question
The only way to discover the truth
Is to take a bite

Splash on Steel as Old as Eating a Vista

The gross of inch
Like too much musk perfume
We splash on steel
As old as eating a vista
Too much dang sprawl
Do we really need another
“Homes over \$300K”
Subdivision
Where did the Florida Oranges Groves go
Where do the Grazing Cows now munch
The Barred Owls bump us
As we take their trees
Keep off
Keep back
Keep away
You are not just ruining your view
You fools
As usual we were looking only at the surface
We didn't even notice the 2.6 billion tonnes
Of CO2

Finding America

[a double alphabet poem]

America, I wander your mist-laden walkways, your cities, sipping Cherry Fizz.
“Better clean your hands before dinner,” I hear, as suddenly we are on our way,
clapboard houses rolling by, a newborn foal in a barn with a gray stucco annex,
darting between dreams of tomorrow and morning dew.
Everyone gets what they deserve but only on TV.
Forgetting ourselves when we haphazardly mumble a portmanteau.
Gulping down freedom like the slow flow of a faucet.
How can we ever live together without stress?
I have no idea, but grab an antique cane and begin to wander
juniper groves with me to buy saffron or cardamom in some faraway souk.
Know what time it is, America? I want to know that you are on the up and up.
Let me in on your little secret— what keeps this democratic engine going, this dynamo.
Maybe, it is the cherry blossoms in spring, or perhaps the way the sun
never reaches the ground in those canyons of 5th avenue. Maybe, it's the loom
of day weaving an afternoon's sun into fabric seen once in a spell.
Perhaps we're never quiet restless hearts and minds that spark
quasi-stellar observations of a world ending on this spectacular haj.
Reason rises in swells as my mind escapes this endless ennui
sometimes the blues catch you drowning in green wash,
typhoons of mediocrity, and I turn eager as I pad the sidewalk like a dog
underfed, malnourished. I try to talk but am aloof.
Voices vanish and the verse in my head floats like a quote.
“What you need is to be clean with your hands and your word.
Xerox them to keep handy, write the trained truth, and try to stay manic”.
Yet, as I stand, a Camel in my lips, it's become my job.
Zealously, I continue my journey to find America.

Johnny's Girl

if you drive through the hometown her father raised her in
and fuel up at the only station
you'll see how time has left it unchanged, more or less

there are more abandoned houses, more skinny cows,
more stakes in the dying grass
to mark more graves for more people killed in more hit-and-runs

you stand alone in the ashes of watered-down bonfires
this place is hollow
like the rotten trees lining these dusty country roads

only now do you realize this
when johnny's girl returns
from the outside world
so foreign and cold
to her old home

it's colder inside than out.
this place had always
been nothing more
than a frosted field
left to ruin since '08
like johnny's girl years ago.

there is nothing for johnny's girl except
dying grass
in the hometown with the father lost to the frost

never look back through the rearview mirror
as you drive away
past the lives left dead in the grass



Suzanne S. Austin-Hill

The Road To . . .

Tijuana, 1979

The border was easy to cross.
No passports needed; driver's license
sufficed for customs agents.

College friends and I hopped on
San Ysidro trolley to travel
from San Diego to the crossing,

walked over the line into town,
stood stunned at the number
of round brown children holding

signs in English begging for money.
Shacks made from milk crates,
thin wood, cardboard, squatted

on brown hills, roofs jury-rigged
from steel tops of old oil drums. Dust
on the trail to Tijuana, dust whipped

through air by breezes, dust on chairs,
tables, napkins in Los Hermanos Cantina.
Hard women wearing soft red dresses

offered themselves for a handful of dollars.
We drank cervezas, tequila, to build
Dutch Courage to travel further into town,

but even liquored up, all we wanted
was to head home. Never knew, until that
day, how rich we were in America.

Some people might use that knowledge
to help those less fortunate. I just
never crossed the border again.

Little Cat Feet?

Santiago's fog
Is not for the faint of heart

It wears a size 13 shoe
And clod hops around Barrio

Listarria, making a "salud!"
Toast to the wintery June moon

It clumps its way up Cerro
Santa Lucia, a hill on an ancient volcano

It wakes the clients in the Monte Carlo,
Where I watch it out the window like TV

Incessantly, it tramps on the cobbles
Of the mid-size sedan car park

(Like you tramp on my moved on life
Long distance after our long radio silence)

Whoever thought
That fog came

On little cat feet,
Was never caught

In a monster-size Chilean ground cloud,
Making its moody and entrenched

Encampment with Neruda's ghost
At La Chascona for the winter!

People Mountain People Sea

The half-
woman lying
on the two-
wheeled
wooden hand-
cart with long
curling black
hairs growing
off her nubbed
legs was
pushed through
densely-
peopled side
streets along
the Bund
by her
lifelong man.
This is
Shanghai.
Every
moment is a
begrudging
step around
the merciless
movement of
the pushcart,
a bucket for
spare sympathy.

Ten thousand
eyes saw
what I saw;
like those legs
saw a saw.
Lunch hour rush
floods the street
pushes its way around
the cart,
on legs,
in heels,
in black
leather shoes. The beggars are fake,
they say. That person
is actually rich.

The Train to Meknes

This morning I am carrying a large fish
wrapped in newspaper,
bought just before we boarded this train.
It was caught in predawn dark
where the Sebou River pours into the Atlantic.
In the foothills of the Atlas Mountains
fresh seafood is a rare treat, and I was told
that our Moroccan host will be delighted.

In our shared compartment, the man
who sits across from us eats a hard-boiled egg.
Yolky crumbs of his breakfast
fall from lips to lap, but he takes no notice.
A young couple sits next to him,
the veiled wife holding a hidden infant
beneath an enveloping shawl.
Beyond the train-carriage window
a tawny landscape yawns.

I am guessing that the monotony of the scenery,
as well as an early rising, has caused
the young mother to nod off.
Her shawl slips down, revealing
a pale breast and the curled child
who'd been nursing before she fell asleep.
Her husband, somewhat drowsy himself,
reaches over to restore her modesty
with a gentle tug of the shawl.

My own eyes close with the suggestion
of slumber, and the vignettes of this morning
travel through my head like the train
on its journey, each picture revealing
how far from home I am,
and yet, how much at home I seem to be.

Dachau

Chilled fog wafted across the gated wasteland.
Voices hushed, reverent, followed the winds.
I looked around, followed the rutted path,
scattered stones on dusty soil and scrub weeds.
My bones knew this unfamiliar place, walked me
to the yards, to the barracks, to the towers –
a scent from deep in a visceral memory –
to wooden corners splintered and sharp
and floors weathered and worn, each rotted board
mottled with mildew and mold, shadow and salt
of fresh tears from eyes dried by a wintry draft.
We returned to the iron gate, and I hesitated
before crossing the line, a conscious choice
made for those who tried, for those who died,
for those who embraced a bigger dream
than they could reach, but their spirit lives on.
I glanced back once more as we drove away.
A scrawny cat skittered into a withered shrub,
peered from a snarl of prickly branches.
He was alone, scavenging for scraps we didn't bring.
He watched. Waited. Hoped. Survived.

Earth-Shattering Revelations and the Unknown After

It was because of me that we had fallen behind.

Enemy soldiers had quickly caught up and the three of us were surrounded in moments. I only remember the fear as we faced men much taller than we had been back then. We shared one look, and I knew it was her last. Eyes wide in fear, she had turned back to the men and held her hands high. I thought she had meant to surrender. I glanced over at Ellie who was just as afraid. I began to raise my hands, copying Sofie in my moments of fear. Looking back, it was not a smart move.

They raised their weapons and within a blink of an eye, Sofie had fallen to the ground. I screamed, before blacking out. I only remember Ellie mumbling under her breath and dragging me up. She asked if I was alright.

I had shaken my head in response, my shock making me lose sight of any reasoning. We were quick to make it back to camp after that.

It was only a matter of days before I started training my body and mind to withstand future challenges. A couple of months later, we gathered a group of our own generation and quickly left camp, far from the judgments of the adults who did not understand us.

We spent the rest of those years building a new home for those of us who had nothing. It wasn't until soldiers found us a year ago that we began to get actively involved. I'd long been preparing for this war, but I had not planned to bring anyone else into it. My own battles were personal.

As we fought at the edge of this forest now, I was thrown to the ground from behind, my sword scattering across the ground,

disappearing through the long weeds. I glanced up at the person who stood over me, their glare frozen in place not accepting what I was seeing. They swiped at me with their sword, and I rolled to the side, throwing my leg out, I kicked at them. They drop to the ground, giving me a moment to stand and catch my breath. I backed away, using my feet to feel around for my sword. Not finding it, I began glancing around, but there wasn't enough time before they were back on their feet and holding their sword high.

“All these years of training your absolute hardest. Of training yourself till your breaking point. And it still isn't good enough.”

The world seemed to hold still as they spoke. The familiar arrogance and anger coating her tongue was like ash as it was lost in the wind. It was only I who could hear her.

“Ellie.” She smiled as she nodded.

“All these years, I had been worried you would begin to remember what truly happened that day. But every other day you proved those useless worries wrong. And even now, you have no idea what you could be truly capable of. What everyone here is capable of.” She pauses, as if waiting for some dramatic reaction, before rolling her eyes and continuing her tirade.

“I will train them though. After today, they will learn, and they will accept who they are.”

It all happened within a matter of seconds. Just like the day it began all of this. She lunged forward, sword slicing outward towards me. Someone appeared in front of me, falling to the ground as they took the blade meant for me. As I knocked the blade away and out of her hand, I dropped to the ground using my legs to knock her own out from beneath her. I glanced over, only seeing the blood and still body. Tuning out the world around me, I didn't notice the ground shake beneath my feet. I didn't notice the world darkening around us, making it impossible for any others to see. All I saw was the still corpse. My hands shook as I stood and turned towards their murderer.

Her eyes met mine, recognition, and acceptance in them.

“You may not know how we have these powers but eventually, you will begin to accept them as your own. As will the rest. For now, do not be afraid.”

“I am not afraid.” She tilts her head as she glances up at me. “I’m angry.” The darkness closed in from all around us as the world went silent and we began to mourn for the fallen.

Still Alone

Praying, waiting
Last night.
How I'll do it all alone.
Where mouths are always hungry
And blood breaks the bones.
I found only one answer,
I got God on the phone.
He said no one,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

There are some living heirs
Who suffer from abuse.
Their husbands roam streets like strays,
Their children seek to use.
They've got offers of prayer
Though their faith is long gone.
No, nobody
But nobody
Will make it out here alone.

I may still be a sapling,
Leaves not yet bloomed,
But wisdom toils the soil
So I'll tell you what I know.

Spirituality is the stage,
Our obedience, the show.
God is the director,
The act His alone.

'Cause nobody, no, nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Jade Stone Superstitions

are stronger than prayer.
I mumble and use my hands
to smile. The shop keeper
laughs like an emperor.
But
we live in the same slums,
saunter the same sidewalks,
eat from the same rice sack.
In exchange for diluting
their tradition,
I teach their children
the language not of God
but of globalization.
They feed me lychee
from their trees for my tongue.
My skin gets lighter
as seven days pass without
sunrise, only haze and plum rain.
This purgatory mingles with fear
in the cracks of broken sidewalk slabs.
They pour tar and noxious fumes
billow like neon dreams reflected off
street dog puddles. The welding gun shoots
one thousand stars per second. For years
I argued with myself
if China knew the truth
about heaven.

Sunday Best

I wear a gold cross upon my chest.
As a child being told by mom,
Time to put on your Sunday best.

Always remember you are blessed.
Let every day be a reminder. That's why
I wear a gold cross upon my chest.

Treat everyone you meet like a guest
because that's what Jesus would do.
Everyone, time to put on our Sunday best.

Marriage can only be between a man
and a woman, but I don't agree. So why
do I still wear a gold cross upon my chest?

I believe a father and son, sacrificed flesh.
However, I can't remember the last time
I have cared to put on my Sunday best.

I think this might be the beginning
of a deconstruction of sorts. Today,
I still wear my gold cross upon my chest.
One day, I might put on my Sunday best.



Amy Stasio

The Corridor

Rorschach

Makeup spattered on the mirror that once brought me joy
Back when I recognized the person staring back at me.

Water flowing

Tub filling

Bubbles forming—Foaming

I am lost

In another trance—remembering

A time when pampering myself felt luxurious

Rather than torturous

I take another deep breath and allow myself to get lost

In the sweet euphoria of disconnection.

Mascara flakes on the sink—porcelain

Black on white

Ink blots

Rorschach—Disconnect

Water running, cup the hands, and fill them up

Splash! Water cascades down, blackened streams flow freely

Dark and unfamiliar shadows that I hide in every day

Baptism

Renewal

Start again. Again.

Again.

Boris Karloff Breaks for Tea

In the make-up chair, first a rubber headpiece, paint, a greenish-flesh color
crimson scar, black horde hair, then make-up base down his face.
A monster that science created, but could not destroy!
brow, mouth and cheeks square off, hooded eye prosthetics, nose tape

Boris takes his dental bridge out, sunken cheek-look, right side.

deep scar on the left side, ear to jaw, electrode bolts
The walking nightmare that frightened the world!

fingernails black, scars on wrists, painted-on veins, hands and arms

A black jacket with ragged sleeves, thirteen-pound boots with lifts

Frankenstein, hooded, veil over his head, walks to the set
covered so as not to scare secretaries on the studio lot

Boris Karloff breaks for tea on a leaning board, and smokes a cigarette

Helen

I have been wearing this plastic smile for so long now
That I can no longer tell where this mask meets my face.

If the face of Helen, that which launched a thousand ships,
Had been as intricately deceptive as this,

The hypnosis under which men had been,
Could not have been—re-writing tragic lore.

A façade this magnificent cannot be immolated
Or imitated—nor can it be remedied.

I continue to seal my own fate with a plastic smile
Plastered firmly into place; irrevocably plastered and mastered.

Grass Is Greener

Hollywood baby
billboards with your vacant expression
and forever I'll envy you

drivers spot you and muse
over your acceptance speech last night
where they rolled their eyes
and proclaimed you unworthy

but you sell yourself
pins in that tailored dress
and needles in your stunning face
smile when the moment is right

until your teeth hurt and
your heart is fit to burst
ballooning with the pressure to
create that perfect perception

I'm in the backseat
watching you pass by and
wondering when I will be enough
too.

I Hope You Dance

A tall man approached the table at the Moose Lodge where Darlene and Maryanne drank their rum and cokes. "Would you like to dance?" He looked at Darlene.

"He's talking to you," Maryanne said to Darlene as she nudged her friend.

"Me? I don't dance."

"Oh, come on, Darlene. He's cute. Don't hurt his feelings."

"I'm Tom," he said as he extended his right hand toward Darlene.

She hesitated.

"Oh, aren't you the shy one?" He placed his hand into hers like a handshake and pulled her up toward him. Please?"

As Darlene got up from the red plastic chair, she said, "Okay." She stood motionless and said, "In all the years we've come here, I've never danced."

"Her name is Darlene. I'm Maryanne," Maryanne said.

"This is a new experience for me," Darlene said.

"Well, here we go." Tom escorted her past the juke box and the popcorn machine and spun her onto the rectangular, wooden dance floor.

"I used to dance all the time when I was younger."

"What stopped you?"

"Personal stuff." Darlene sighed.

Darlene followed Tom's lead easily, her long, brunette hair swung around as they danced rock steps. Then she stepped on the foot of a woman the next to them.

"Ouch," the woman said and danced on.

“See what I mean. I don’t dance.” Darlene stopped dancing for ten seconds.

“You’re fine. She forgave you. And rust wears off. Enjoy yourself.”

Darlene caught a whiff of Canoe cologne as Tom twirled her. She smiled as Tom led her into a dip then lifted her back up.

“Wheeee,” she said. “This is fun.”

“I told you so. We should do this more often. Meet me here on Friday, okay?”

“Please take me back to the table now,” Darlene said abruptly.

Tom escorted her back to her admiring friend.

“You looked so natural out there,” Maryanne said.

“Let’s go home.” Darlene grabbed her wool coat from the back of her chair and threw it on. She edged her way through the lobby and out the door. “Maryanne, he asked me to meet him here on Friday, and you work on Friday nights.”

“You didn’t tell him you were blind?”

“No, he wouldn’t like that. Men don’t date me since I lost my sight.”

“Darlene, go back inside and apologize. Tell him now.” They went back inside, and a stunned Tom smiled at seeing her again so soon.

“I’m sorry, Tom. I have something to tell you.”

“I know about you,” he said. “I work at the Lighthouse for low-vision people, and I saw you there. I like you and your spirit, and I’ll pick you up on Friday.”

Friday led to a stream of dates, months, and years of loving and dancing together.

The Poet of Gray Matter

His voice was yielding; we leaned in.
 Extending his cupped hand,
we saw how he fondled the shape and heft
 of a cerebral maze.

He spoke of layers and sections.
 Skillful fingers mimed slice and flay
of scalp piercing tissue that maps, then
 governs our abilities to hug, argue,

smell onions sautéed in butter.

 He talked of cells destroyed—
concussive trauma, memories erased.
 Words like hippocampus, glia, neural pathways,
rolled off his tongue in elegiac rhythms
 as we envisioned electric synapses,
fireworks within our own wrinkled, meandering
 territory. He was Curator of Fragility, unveiling

brains as if they were delicate antiquities, exposing
 us to ourselves, offering concrete evidence of
inexplicable luminosity, giving us the opportunity
 to contemplate our own true holy grail.

Where I'm Lookin'

[An erasure poem]

Lookin' ~~through the window~~
Lookin' **through** ~~the window~~
Lookin' through **the** ~~window~~
Look look look through the window
Lookin' through the window

Lookin' through the **windows**
The window **to your heart** (~~Oh baby yeah~~)
I can see **it's cloudy**
The rain's ~~about to start~~

Lookin' through the windows (~~Lookin' through the windows~~)
It seems I've **caused your fears** (~~Yea yea yea~~)
And that little **doubt** ~~girl~~ (~~And your little doubt girl~~)
And now it's **bringin' tears** (~~And its bringin' tears~~)

Remember

Just remember **whatever** ~~makes you feel that way~~
Don't ~~you worry 'cause I'm gonna stay~~
Right by your side
To keep on **lookin'** ~~through the windows~~
Lookin' **in your eyes**

Lookin' through the windows (~~Lookin' through the windows~~)

Seems like the only way (~~Yeah~~)

~~I can know your feelings~~

~~If you still love me today~~

Remember

Just remember whatever makes you feel that way

~~Don't you worry 'cause I'm gonna stay~~

~~Right by your side~~

~~To keep on lookin' through the windows~~

Lookin' in your eyes

~~Lookin' through the windows~~

~~The window to your heart~~

~~Lookin' through the windows~~

~~The window to your heart~~

[Based on "Lookin' Through the Windows" by The Jackson 5]

The Sublime

She almost didn't notice how steep the roads were getting, how much higher up she was than when she entered the town. But the white-knuckle grip she had on the steering wheel reminded her to be alert and proceed with utmost caution. Several minutes had passed with no new residences in sight. She would need to figure out a place to turn around and drive back down which would be nowhere near as exhilarating as the ascent. The incline inched ever sharper as she reminded herself to breathe. And then she found what she sought, or rather, what sought her.

Besides being perfectly designed and manicured, the house was ringed with the most exquisitely beautiful flowers Denver had ever seen: orchids of a wild and striking variety. She wasn't altogether unfamiliar with the flower. She had regrettably killed a couple over the years and so now resigned herself to admiring most plant (and animal) life from afar. But there was something surreal and otherworldly about these, quite diametrically opposed to the tastefully contained, neutral order of the rest of the home's exterior. Without another thought, she parked in the road, the direction of her tires staging a silent protest at her impromptu flight of fancy, and got out to get a closer look at the flowers. She unbuckled and proceeded slowly up the stepping-stoned path, casually admiring the white rosebushes that lined it. Their blank freshness provided a stark contrast to the unbridled majesty just beyond them, encircling the house.

There was an almost painful quality to their beauty, which she found all the more fascinating up close, with color that burst and appeared to run liquid. Gazing directly at them from above, she was instantly drawn in by their complexity of hues—plums ringed in

fuchsia, sunbursts circled with coral—as if they had been born into one skin but decided to begin anew, in a different color, a different life. There seemed infinite variation from flower to flower, in color, stature, and even fragrance. She identified light notes of sage, lavender, and something sweet and nostalgic Denver could not place but could have been pressed to name as that of cotton candy.

Despite their unreal loveliness, they somehow managed to also evoke an exciting familiarity, like that of the first day of school, of a fresh return to hope and promise, within Denver. They looked painted or sculpted rather than grown, with infinite love and patience imbued in the creation of each bloom, which seemed to her evidence of a divine, benevolent power, a glimpse into realms unknown to the human eye. She had long been aware of the miraculous and irrefutable evidence of a divine hand in the most mundane, as well as the most sublime: a flock of birds overhead in perfect formation, a near-crisis averted through no doing of her own, and now, most certainly, in these flowers. One simply needed to slow down enough to realize it, to relinquish control of one's certainties and judgments for just a fraction of an hour to appreciate the complexities and mercies of the world around him or her. It was natural to feel helpless, and even hopeless, at times. Especially after him. But Denver took comfort knowing there were powers greater than herself orchestrating perfection in the skies, waters, and even in her seemingly insignificant life.

These were thoughts she generally didn't voice aloud, not out of any distinct sense of shame, but out of a lack of deeper, personal connection to other beings. She had few she could number friends and even fewer she named kin. Hers was a family tree in the winter of its life, barren of fruit, bereft of leaves, but still standing tall, fully intent to soldier out its remaining days with pride, come what may. Yet, standing beneath this cerulean sky, enveloped by natural wonders, she couldn't help but feel the stirrings of spring and new life arise within her. Denver took this as the sign she had sought for

nearly six hundred miles and made her way to the door, certain that life would change dramatically for her once it opened.



Alora Peters

The Road Goes Ever On



Contributors' Notes

Tiffany R. Anderson has a deep love for writing and psychology. She holds a Master of Science in Psychology and is completing a specialization in Industrial and Organization Psychology at Saint Leo University. She is a wife and a mother, a lover of both the written and the spoken word, and an eternal optimist striving to make the world a little better every day.

Shawn Amos is a 16-year high school English Educator and Literacy Coach for Hillsborough County Public Schools. She studied English Literature at the University of South Florida where she earned her B.A. Currently, she is a proud member of Saint Leo University's MA in Creative Writing program.

Jonathan Barnes (Editorial Assistant) transferred to Saint Leo in August of 2021. His time here was spent exclusively as an English Major after pursuing the History course at both University of Phoenix and Austin Peay State University. He achieved Deans list each semester for his tenure as a student at Saint Leo. He was selected for 2023 Sandhill Review Internship under the guidance of Professor Russo. He will graduate in Spring 2023 and hopes to be accepted into the M.A. for Creative Writing program. He hopes his writing will bring catharsis to wayward youths as well as topple all institutions of authority.

Christine Cock lives in the woods of Florida and writes poetry about the natural world, some that has been helpful for conservation issues. She was a Naturalist and in conservation and Zoo Management for many years. She earned her BA in Creative Writing from Eckerd College, receiving awards for her work. She has been published in

numerous print and online journals and continues to let science and the environment be her muse.

Virginia Crippen writes (and teaches others to write) traditional Byzantine icons, recognizing herself as “the willing ardent tool” of a practice that expresses, in line and color, received Christian doctrine from Scripture, church canons and writings as ancient as that of the desert mothers and fathers, as recent as Mother Theresa. No room there for self-expression. Her poetry comes in much the same way, received. A gift. She recognizes herself as spellchecker, proofreader, at best an editor. And is glad.

Xionali Cruz is a student at Saint Leo University.

Cody Duggan grew up just outside of Rochester NY. Writing is his main creative outlet. Poetry was never of any interest to him, until he started attending Saint Leo. Professors Gianna Russo and Dr. Anne Barngrover both helped inspire a newfound appreciation for poetry. One day he hopes to go into book publishing, specifically for either children’s literature or historical fiction.

Maribeth Durst retired from Saint Leo University in 2015 after serving as Vice President for Academic Affairs.

Victoria Dym is a graduate of Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Clown College with a degree in Humility, a Bachelor of Arts, in Philosophy, from the University of Pittsburgh, and a Masters of Fine Arts, Creative Writing-Poetry from Carlow University. Her two poetry chapbooks, *Class Clown* and *When the Walls Cave In* were published by Finishing Line Press in 2015 and 2018. Victoria’s chapbook, *Spontaneous*, was selected by Northwest Poet Laureate Katherine Nelson-Born as the winner of the 2021 Poem-A-Day Chapbook Challenge Contest, won a cash prize and subsequently was published by the West Florida Literary Federation in 2022. Victoria’s full-length poetry collection, *The Hatchet Sun*, is forthcoming by Finishing Line Press in 2023.

Valerie Eulett grew up in Central Florida in the countryside until she moved away to the city. By attending Saint Leo, she hopes to earn her bachelor's in English and to pursue a job in the creative writing field.

Jacob Fantauzzi is currently a student at Saint Leo University. He has never been published before and typically leans towards science fiction novel writing. However, for this submission, he has decided to go for a nonfiction poem instead. As you can tell, he enjoys pushing the boundaries of his comfort zone.

Emmett Ferree (he/him) is a self-proclaimed nerd, born and raised in York, Pennsylvania, with an affinity for all things music and literature. He's currently a graduate student at Saint Leo University, where he studies creative writing with a focus on poetry. His first full-length collection, *A Citrus Kind of Love*, was released in July 2022 through Nymeria Publishing. When he's not writing, Emmett can be found playing board games, spending time with his guinea pigs, or searching for his perpetually lost glasses.

Peter M. Gordon has published over 100 poems in journals including *Sandhill Review*, *The Journal of Florida Literature*, and the 5-2 *Crime Poetry* site, among others. He's published two collections, *Two Car Garage* and *Let's Play Two: Poems About Baseball*. Peter founded and is President of Orlando Area Poets, a chapter of the Florida State Poets Association.

Erika B. Girard is currently pursuing her M.A. in English and Creative Writing with a Poetry concentration through SNHU. She graduated from Saint Leo University in Florida in 2019 with her B.A. in English Literary Studies and a minor in Hospitality Management. Originally from Rhode Island, she derives creative inspiration from her family, friends, faith, and fascination with the human experience. She is a proofreader for *Wild Roof Journal*, an online literary journal with issues published bimonthly. Her own creative work appears or is

forthcoming in *Black Fox*, *Iris Literary Journal*, *Untenured*, *Viewless Wings*, and more.

Kaisha A. Girard is a graduate of Saint Leo University pursuing her Master's in English & Creative Writing through SNHU. Her publication credits include, among others, *Sandhill Review*, *Dots Publications*, and *Ember Chasm Review* where her work was nominated for 2021 Best of the Net. A native Rhode Islander and proofreader for *Wild Roof Journal*, Kaisha hopes that her love of editing the world will someday blossom into a proofreading career.

Randy Goggin lives on the gulf coast of central Florida where he works as a ranger on a nature preserve in north Pinellas County. His prose has appeared in *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *The Dillydown Review*, *Sandhill Review*, and *The Tampa Bay Times*.

For **Suzanne S. Austin-Hill**, Ph.D., photography is a readily available form of expression. Her work has received recognition at shows at the Florida Museum of Photographic Arts, Tampa Museum of Art, the Florida State Fair, the Hillsborough County Fair, and the Strawberry Festival. Suzanne's photograph, Cemetery—St. Paul's Episcopal Church (Haymarket, VA) appeared on the cover of *A Corner Plot With A View 5 Stories of Lives Past* by Mark T. Sondrini. Other photographs accompanied work published in *The News of Sun City Center* and *Of Poets & Poetry* (published by the Florida State Poets Association, Inc), were exhibited at the SouthShore Regional Library (Ruskin, FL), and have been featured on the Lake Cane Restoration Society website. Suzanne was a 2021 Sandhill Writers Retreat participant.

Carlton Johnson is a former math teacher. A Winter Park resident for the past 14 years, he is originally from Baltimore Maryland. He has been published in recent anthologies of the Florida State Poets Association. He is the winner of the 2020 Thomas Burnett Swann Prize in Poetry for a poem entitled "The Swallow." His poem "Tour of Flanders" was included in the 2014 K9 for Warriors

Veterans' Event. His poetry has appeared in *The Provo Canyon Review*, *The Sandhill Review*, *Revelry* and *Breakfast Poetry*.

Angela Masterson Jones, of Terra Ceia Island, received her B.A. in creative writing with high honors and the Excellence in Creative Writing Award from Eckerd College. Her poems, stories, essays, and photographs have appeared in publications such as *Broken Kisses*, *The Lyric*, *Sunscripts*, *Sabal*, *Saw Palm*, and *Tampa Review Online*. She has worked at Eckerd, now as associate director of communications and college editor, for more than 15 years.

Jane Juran is an attendee of the Sandhill Writers Retreat and a longtime member of the Saint Leo University writer's circle. Her essay is nonfiction.

Maeve Kiley is a first year English Major at Saint Leo University. She's originally from Boston, but has lived in Chicago for the past ten years. She enjoys reading and writing stories focused on fantasy, folklore, mythology, and horror.

Paige McBride is a poet and artist who lives in Dunedin, Florida. She earned a BA in English/Creative Writing: Poetry, a Master's in Library and Information Science, and a Master's in Creative Writing: Poetry at Saint Leo University. Her poems have appeared in the *Valiant Scribe Literary Journal*, *Straylight Literary Magazine*, *Saint Katherine Review*, *West Trade Review*, *Tulane Review*, *Heartwood Literary Magazine*, *American Chordata*, *Sunset Liminal Press*, *aaduna*, *Literary Juice*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, and *The Wayfarer* among others.

Gina Marie Mejias is a graduate student at Saint Leo University pursuing her M.A. in Creative Writing. She enjoys doing her makeup, hanging out with her dogs, Ryker and Troi, and going to Disney World with her older sister, Elora. Her work has been published in the *Sandhill Review*.

Carol Ann Moon is a poet, and an academic librarian, living in West Central Florida. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from

Stetson University, concentrating in Poetry in the Expanded Field. Her work has appeared in *Aquifer*, *The Sandhill Review*, *lipstickparty mag*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Muddy River Poetry Review* and at a Miami bus stop, as part of an O, Miami Poetry Festival Haiku Contest.

Diane Neff is a former professor, college dean, and US Navy officer and now serves as an adult program librarian in the Seminole County (FL) Public Library System. She was the 2019-2021 president of the Orlando Area Poets, a chapter of the Florida State Poets Association. Her poetry has appeared in anthologies including *Encore* (National Federation of State Poetry Societies); *Cadence* (Florida State Poets Association); *Revelry*, *The Literary Voice of the Gwendolyn Brooks Writers Association of Florida*; *We Were Not Alone* (Community Building Art Works); *Proud to Be, Writing by American Warriors* (Missouri Humanities & Southeast Missouri State University Press); *Florilegium* (Seminole County Library Writers); and *Sandhill Review*. Diane holds a B.A. from the University of Iowa, an M.A. from the University of Missouri, an M.Ed. from the University of West Florida, and an Ed.D. from the University of Central Florida. She is an alum of the Sandhill Writers Retreat.

Alora Peters is a senior attending Saint Leo University studying multiple disciplines in the College of Arts and Sciences on University Campus. Typically, when she thinks of "the unfamiliar" she thinks of something ominous or something that needs to be overcome with bravery and perseverance—hence the darker, more forbidding styles of some of her photos. However, she can also see “the unfamiliar” as an exciting opportunity and a chance for exploration—hence the brighter, more inviting style of other photos. In all cases, “the unfamiliar” is a key part of journeys—whether those journeys be physical, mental, or spiritual—so these photos emphasize the photographic technique of leading lines, which invites the viewer’s eye to travel through the photograph into the unknown.

Elaine Person, writer, instructor, editor, speaker, performer, and photographer has her writing included in Random House's *A Century of College Humor*, *Sandhill Review*, Florida Writers Association's collections, *The Florida Writer* magazine, *Not Your Mother's Book*, Poets of Central Florida, Haikuniverse.com, *Encore*, *The Five-Two* online, Florida State Poets Association's *Cadence* anthologies (which she co-curates and co-edits), *The Isolation Challenge*, *Of Poets and Poetry*, *Fresh Fish*, and *Poetic Visions*, Museum of Art—Deland's exhibit and anthology. She writes "Person"alized poems and stories for all occasions for gifts. Elaine won the Saturday Evening Post limerick contest. Elaine leads writing workshops for the Maitland Public Library and Crealdé School of Art live and on Zoom. She writes "Person"alized poems and stories for all occasions for gifts. Her story "Soul Search" was selected to be in the Top Ten of FWA's 2022 annual Collection. Elaine received the 2022 Kaye Coppersmith Award from Florida Writers Association for "Writers Helping Writers."

Evelyn Romano is a local Florida poet with a passion for reading and writing poetry. Her debut chapbook *RIPE* was published in 2018. She is in the process of publishing her second chapbook, *Eve Redeemed: A Woman's Journey*, in the very near future. She will very much miss the yearly Writer's Retreat at Saint Leo.

Gianna Russo (Editor-in-Chief), Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing, is a poet, writer, editor and educator. She teaches in both the undergraduate and graduate creative writing programs at Saint Leo University. She holds an MFA in Poetry from The University of Tampa and an MA in English Literary Studies from University of South Florida. Ms. Russo is founding director of Saint Leo's Sandhill Writers Retreat and serves as the inaugural Poet-in-Residence for the College of Arts and Sciences and the scholarly journal *REBUS*. In 2020, she was appointed the City of Tampa's first Wordsmith by Mayor Jane Castor. Ms. Russo is the author of the poetry collections *All I See Is Your Glinting: 90 Days in the Pandemic*

(Madville Publishing, 2022); *One House Down* (Madville Publishing, 2019); *Moonflower*, winner of the Florida Book Award Bronze and Florida Publishers Association Silver awards; and two chapbooks, *The Companion of Joy* and *In Late Day Sun*.

Amy Stasio is a sophomore and English major at Saint Leo. She was previously in Blake High School's creative writing program. She has a passion for all things writing, from poetry to research essays. She also enjoys photography. Her work was published in the Sandhill 2021-22 issue and performed at Academic Excellence Day. She is also a member of the English Honors Society: Sigma Tau Delta.

Sophia Sullivan, originally from Indiana, moved to Florida in 2020. Reading has always been her favorite pastime and escape. She began writing during the COVID-19 pandemic and has not stopped since. Now, she is a freshman working towards her Bachelor's degree in English at Saint Leo University. She is also minoring in Journalism. Poetry is her favorite genre to write, but she loves venturing outside her literary comfort zone as well.

Jill Sutherland has always been interested in poetry. She is a senior at Saint Leo University and is pursuing a creative writing minor. She has been writing poetry on and off for a couple of years, but has never shown her work to anybody besides classmates and professors. She has never taken the leap to submit her work anywhere for fear of rejection or judgment. Jill says, "It is a simple task to submit a couple of poems, but for me, it feels like a brave step past whatever fear I am holding on to. Submitting my work is already a win for me, and seeing my work in the *Sandhill Review* proves that it pays off to be brave and face the unfamiliar."

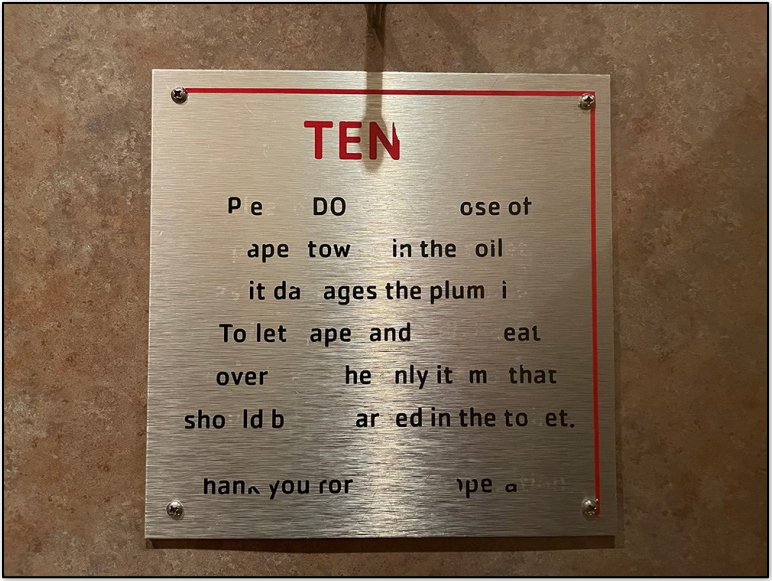
Madison Ward is a student at Saint Leo.

Trista (Soap) Vallee is a Creative Writing major at Saint Leo University. She aspires to be a Librarian after graduation.

James Viggiano will complete his M.A. in Creative Writing at Saint Leo University this semester as he continues to teach 8th grade English in an urban Alabama middle school. His work can be found in *Sandhill Review*, *Hole in the Head Review*, and *MidLvlMag*, where he serves as poetry editor. He lives with his fiancé and dog, rides a motorcycle, and tries to grow vegetables.

Janet Watson has been a contributor of both prose and poetry to *Sandhill Review* since 2010 (maybe longer?). She attended many writers' retreats at Saint Leo and was a member of the SLU Writers' Circle. She is past-president of New River Poets, a chapter of the Florida State Poets Association, for which she chaired a statewide Student Poetry Contest for 12 years. Her poems have appeared in many anthologies and she has published a book-length collection of poetry, *Eyes Open Listening* as well as several chapbooks. She recently published *Sons of The People*, a novel for middle readers inspired by an archeological discovery on Florida's east coast.

Derora Williams is a student in the M.A. program in Creative Writing at Saint Leo University. She has prior submissions in the 2021–22 *Sandhill Review*, and is a full-time mother of two.



Suzanne S. Austin-Hill

Lack of Closure